

Women sit on the bottom rung of the global trade ladder

The acceleration of trade liberalisation should be halted, women's organisations argue, to assess the impact of the present round of liberalisation on gender equality, labour standards, food security and the environment.

One of the critical issues on the agenda of next month's Beijing Five conference – reviewing how far women's equality has advanced in the last five years – is the impact of free trade on women's lives.

Another international conference, the Third Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle, to be held this November, will review progress towards liberalised trade specifically in agriculture, services and intellectual property rights.

Trade policy – in opening up previously protected markets, reducing

tariffs on imports and giving foreign companies the same market access as domestic producers – is compromising governments' ability to pursue gender equality and poverty eradication objectives, says Mariama Williams, a strategic analyst for gender equity in a paper published by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex.

The gains or losses from tariff revenues are distributed unevenly between men and women.

And evidence demonstrates that trade liberalisation has a different impact on women and men in their respective employment and conditions of work. It also has consequences for women's unpaid labour.

For example, trade expansion has been associated with a rise in women's participation in export

processing industries in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean and in export agriculture in Africa. Similarly, traded services such as data entry, financial services and tourism are often feminised sectors.

Some researchers say women – particularly younger educated women – benefit more than men from employment gains in the initial stages of trade expansion.

This may have wider benefits for women's sense of autonomy, status in the household and incentives to invest in female education.

However, global restructuring of industries such as garment manufacturing has fuelled the growth of subcontracting, reducing the status



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and rights of workers. And as tariffs are reduced and competition intensifies, women workers are more vulnerable to job losses.

In 1996/97, the local clothing and textile industries lost close to 40 000 jobs, mainly held by women, when production was relocated to neighbouring states where wages were lower.

To improve the conditions of paid work in export production, trade unions and some nongovernmental organisations are lobbying for core labour standards to be incorporated by the WTO.

However, groups such as Women Working Worldwide point out that these standards do not extend to gender-related rights such as maternity

and paternity leave, freedom from sexual harassment and discrimination, or access to childcare.

Nor do labour standards prevent problems with regulating women's work in the home, in small sweatshops or in the informal sectors.

The negative impact of existing trade rules on women's livelihood is very strong in traditional agriculture. Senegalese women farmers, for instance, report stiff competition from heavily subsidised European crop imports. Meanwhile, returns are poor in casual picking work and unpaid household farming.

New research is under way which will model economy-wide impacts of trade policy on women's labour, including in the household. Meanwhile, experience shows that trade liberalisation is unlikely to be beneficial for poor women.