

**GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE: MAKING TRADE WORK FOR WOMEN\***

**Abstract**

*The landscape of international trade is witnessing a shift as women across the globe are challenging stereotypes and breaking barriers. The realm, once dominated by men, is now acknowledging the integral role women play in the multifaceted global economic framework. The impact of trade and trade policies is greatly influenced by the structure of markets and institutions. These structures and institutions are embedded in a myriad of gender specific barriers ranging from bias, socio-cultural factors, education, access to credit etc which have formed a myriad of obstacles for women in trade. Trade policies and Agreements influence the opportunities of women to access secure and decent employment and to benefit from international trade. In the grand scheme of international trade, women's contributions are proving to be invaluable. It appears that women continue to surmount the obstacles to their equal participation in trade. Their journey is not just about individual triumphs; it is about reshaping the global trading system to be more inclusive, equitable, and balanced. This study examines the challenges involved and charts the way forward.*

**Keywords:** Gender Inclusivity, International Trade, Women, Policies and Agreements

**1. Introduction.**

Trade plays a significant role in promoting women's equality and empowerment. Research shows that trade can create better jobs for women, leading to higher wages, improved benefits, and enhanced job security<sup>1</sup>. It also offers opportunities for women to access skills and education. Trade has the potential to expand women's role in the economy, decrease inequality, and improve their access to skills and education. The changing nature of trade as well as access to digital technologies in trade has provided unprecedented opportunities for women to compete favorably in international trade. Furthermore, women are increasingly asserting themselves in various capacities as entrepreneurs, policymakers, and leaders within international trade organizations. Their contributions are not merely adding numbers but bringing a diverse perspective, fostering innovation, and promoting sustainable and inclusive trade practices. Their leadership often brings a renewed focus on gender equality and women's economic empowerment, leading to policies and programmes that aim to level the playing field. Yet, the path for women in international trade is not without challenges. A number of barriers which include but not limited to gender bias, socio-cultural limitations, limited access to finances, under-representation in decision-making roles, lack of skills and education have restricted more women from participating in international trade. These barriers, for the most part, stem from environmental and national trade policies which are yet to foster inclusive trade policies. As society progresses towards gender equality, these barriers are gradually being dismantled.

The World Trade Organisation and International Trade Council have, in recent past, raised awareness and introduced policies which are aimed at fostering better trade inclusivity in the global trading system.

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\* **ONWUATUEGWU Chiugo, LLB, BL, LL.M, PhD Candidate**, Faculty of Law, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka; and

\* **ORAEBUNAM Ikenga K.E., PhD (Law), PhD (Phil), PhD (Rel. & Soc.), PhD (Edu. Mgt., in view), MEd, MA, BTh, BA, BPhil, BL**, Professor of Law and Applied Jurisprudence, Formerly Head, Department of International Law and Jurisprudence, Faculty of Law, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Anambra State. E-mail: ikengaken@gmail.com; ik.oraebunam@unizik.edu.ng; Phone number:+2348034711211.

<sup>1</sup>Women and Trade: The role of trade in promoting women equality, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/trade/publication/women-and-trade-the-role-of-trade-in-promoting-womens-equality>, accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2023

However, there is a snag, namely, how do we create a global legal framework that serves as a universal guide to nations, trade partners etc in fostering improved and sustained gender inclusivity in the global trading system? The world is confronting numerous, mutually reinforcing crises none of which is gender neutral. Climate change, natural disasters, financial crises and conflicts all impact women disproportionately. Women too often find themselves economically handicapped and lacking the capacity to bounce back quickly. This is why making trade work for women is so important to strengthen their economic capacity. The stronger and more economically empowered women are, the more resilient our societies will be in the face of the numerous crises it grapples with.

## 2. The World Trade Organisation, Women and Global Trade

The World Trade Organization is the principal global international organization dealing with the rules of trade between nations. The World Trade Organization is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland and was established on January 1, 1995. The WTO builds upon the organizational structure of the GATT and its secretariat—to a significant extent it formalizes and extends the structure that had gradually evolved over a period of some 50 years.<sup>2</sup> The WTO serves a myriad of purposes; administration of open trade for the benefit of all, negotiation of trade agreements, monitoring of national trade policies, technical assistance and training for developing nations and settlement of trade disputes.

On the margins of the 11th WTO Ministerial Conference which took place in Buenos Aires, Argentina, 10 – 13 December, 2017, 118 WTO Members and Observers endorsed the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women’s Economic Empowerment.<sup>3</sup> This was a significant development, as for the first time in the history of the WTO, a joint initiative supported efforts to increase the participation of women in trade and remove the barriers faced by women.<sup>4</sup> Today, 124 WTO Members and Observers, representing more than 75% of world trade and two-thirds of the WTO membership, support the Buenos Aires Declaration, as a vital element in better understanding the links between trade and women’s economic empowerment and, in turn, make trade more inclusive.<sup>5</sup>

The objective of the Buenos Aires Declaration is to find the best ways to tackle the trade barriers faced by women. A key element of the debate is the evidence that suggests that empowering women leads to economic efficiency, which in turn has a positive impact on economic growth and poverty reduction. Women’s economic empowerment is a major factor in achieving gender equality, which is one of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).<sup>6</sup> Discussions are currently being held about how to

<sup>2</sup>The Marrakech Agreement establishing the WTO charges the organization with providing the common institutional framework for the conduct of trade relations among its members in matters for which agreements and associated legal obligations apply (Article II). Four Annexes to the WTO define the substantive rights and obligations of members. Annex 1 has three parts: Annex 1A entitled Multilateral Agreements on Trade in Goods, contains the GATT 1994 (the GATT 1947 as amended by a large number of Understandings and supplementary Agreements negotiated in the Uruguay Round); Annex 1B, which contains the GATS; and Annex 1C, the Agreement on TRIPs. Annex 2 contains the Understanding on Rules and Procedures Governing the Settlement of Disputes (DSU)—the WTO’s common dispute settlement mechanism (the subject of chapter 3 below). Annex 3 contains the Trade Policy Review Mechanism (TPRM), an instrument for surveillance of members’ trade policies. Finally, Annex 4—entitled Plurilateral Trade Agreements—consists of Tokyo Round codes that were not multilateralized in the Uruguay Round, and that therefore bind only signatories.

<sup>3</sup>Marceau, Gabrielle Zoe et al. Trade and Women - Opportunities for Women in the Framework of the World Trade Organisation. *International Journal of International Economic Law*, 2019, vol. 22, No. 3, p. 323–354. DOI: 10.1093/jiel/jgz02, accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

achieve this change, with suggested action in various areas, e.g. education, healthcare, access to credit, cultural change, legal reforms, access to childcare, support to small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and other sectors where there is a predominance of women workers, to name but a few. Initiatives in this regard have been undertaken or are planned by various international organizations, NGOs, and individual governments. Additionally, increasing women's participation in trade has been identified as one of the elements to empower women around the world.<sup>7</sup> The World Trade Organisation leads the discussion on improved women involvement in the global trading system.

Making trade work for women goes to the core of the WTO's purpose because women's economic empowerment is central to achieving the WTO's founding objectives of raising living standards, creating jobs and promoting sustainable development.<sup>8</sup> WTO members have been increasingly integrating gender issues into their trade policies and negotiations. To support this trend, the WTO Secretariat created the Gender Research Hub in 2021 to foster an international network of trade and gender researchers working in academia and international organizations.<sup>9</sup>

In December 2022, the WTO and the Gender Research Hub organized the first international research conference to focus on trade and gender – the World Trade Congress on Gender. This event brought together eminent trade and gender experts to present cutting-edge research in the field. It also provided a platform for researchers and policymakers to exchange views and build partnerships for further work.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. The Challenges of Gender Inclusivity in Trade: An African Example**

Some of the unique challenges African women and young women face in intra-African and regional trade include limited access to productive resources and financing; gender wage gaps which perpetuate the concentration of women in low-productivity activities; sexual harassment and gender-based violence in economic spheres including in the work place, market places, etc.; disproportionate share of responsibilities in unpaid care and domestic work; and biased social norms that cause mobility and time constraints resulting in time poverty a limited time available to spend on economic and trade activities.<sup>11</sup> Other challenges include limited knowledge of opportunities in export markets and ways to integrate into regional value chains, limited capacity to produce value added products and services, to secure inputs at competitive prices, as well as challenges relating to compliance with regulatory requirements and safety and quality standards.<sup>12</sup> The gender digital divide is seen as a key underlying challenge that limits women's access to information and ability to engage in intra-African and regional trade.

For many women, intra-Africa and regional trade has brought economic empowerment and higher incomes. In African countries, women are actively engaged in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing (clothing and textiles) and services. Opportunities from trade have brought more household resources under women's control, which in turn has a positive effect on overall investment

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> N Okonjo-Iweala 'Making Trade work for Women: Key Findings from the 2022 World Trade Congress on Gender' [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/booksp\\_e/making\\_trade\\_work\\_for\\_women\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/booksp_e/making_trade_work_for_women_e.pdf), accessed on 29<sup>th</sup> September, 2023.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> 'Empowering Women in Trade': <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/womens-economic-empowerment/empowering-women-in-trade>, accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2023.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

in the health and education of future generations.<sup>13</sup> However, women are relatively employed in several sectors that continue to undergo adjustment and change due to trade liberalization, such as agriculture and textiles. More work is needed to understand whether there are differences in how women fare in trade adjustment.<sup>14</sup> It is estimated that 70 per cent of informal cross-border trade in Africa is conducted by women traders. Being well positioned, women are the untapped resource to be an economic growth accelerator of Africa's economy especially under the Women and Youth in Trade Protocol. Intra-African trade is currently estimated to contribute an income for about 43 per cent of the continent's entire population but intra-African trade accounts for just over 10 per cent of total continental trade. Regional trade in East Africa alone accounted for only 8.3 per cent of total trade in 2017, less than the continental average, and roughly unchanged over the past five years, according to the 2019 report by the African Development Bank.<sup>15</sup>

#### **4. Making Trade Work for Women**

In order to achieve one of the core objectives of the WTO, ensuring free and fair trade for all, there is need for an instrument which would specifically address the pathways that must be implemented to achieve and sustain gender inclusivity for women in International Trade. A number of the pathways which must be addressed in this instrument are;

##### **Education**

No substantial progress will be made towards achieving gender inclusivity in global trade until the limitations due to lack of education are surmounted. Education is critical to access to improved trading opportunities for women. This critical factor is a pointer as to why making trade work for women requires a global instrument dedicated to its cause. Proactive measures dedicated to encouraging women to engage in advanced studies and training programmes in line with occupational trajectories are crucial. Closing the gender divide in trade requires lifelong learning initiatives backed by a dedicated legal instrument.

##### **Work/Trade Environment free from Sexual Violence and Discrimination**

Discriminatory practices continue to hamper the economic empowerment of women. In order to achieve and sustain economic empowerment for women, a global framework which requires Firms and Corporations to fill the gap must be established.

##### **Access to Credit Facilities**

Economic transactions require finance to commence and sustain. Women have remained financially handicapped and such has been an impediment to trade. A global framework which is dedicated to ensuring that Credit facilities are available to women, particularly in developing countries, is very much needed.

##### **Conducive and Enabling Environment for Women Entrepreneurs**

Entrepreneurship offers an exciting avenue for women in trade. Initiatives promoting women entrepreneurship development is a matter of priority for the WTO. Steps to create a more favourable

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<sup>13</sup>9 Advocacy Messages to make the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) work for Women', <https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Africa/Attachments/Publications/2021/07/Women%20and%20AfCFTA%20Advocacy%20Brief%20-%20EN.pdf>, accessed on 27<sup>th</sup> September, 2023.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup>'Empowering Women in Trade': <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/womens-economic-empowerment/empowering-women-in-trade>, accessed on 28<sup>th</sup> September, 2023.

environment in the context of technology, innovation etc. are crucial. An integrated approach to entrepreneurship policies for women and their implementation is long overdue.

## **5. Conclusion**

Women are rising in ranks within international trade organizations. By leading these organizations, they wield the power to influence global trade rules and norms. To foster women's further and better participation in international trade, a legal framework dedicated to its actualization and sustainability is needed. A legal Framework, in this case, an additional protocol to the WTO Agreements dedicated to making trade work for women and addressing the unique barriers to trade which women face will be a game-changer in the goal to achieve gender equality and its sustainability in international trade.