

World Trade—What's at Stake for Women

Five reasons why women need to get involved with global policy-making at the World Trade Organization



1 To ensure women's participation and consideration of gender in global economic decision-making and governance

Global governance should be democratic, transparent, accountable, equitable, and gender sensitive. But the WTO does not measure up to these criteria, nor does it build on existing

international agreements and commitments. A more democratic WTO, integrated with other intergovernmental institutions, would produce a system for global governance where trade promotes sustainable human development rather than trade for the sake of trade.

Glossary of Terms

DSU: Dispute Settlement Understanding on rules and procedures governing the settlement of disputes

ISO: International Organization for Standardization

GATT: General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade

GATS: General Agreement on Trade in Services

GMOs: Genetically Modified Organisms

IPRS: Intellectual Property Rights, such as patents, copyrights, and trademarks.

MAI: Multilateral Agreement on Investment

MFA: Arrangement Regarding International Trade in Textiles (MultiFibre Agreement)

MFN: Most Favored Nation status

NTM or NTB: Non Tariff Measure or Non-Tariff Barrier

SPS: Sanitary and Phytosanitary Standards

Tariffs: Taxes on imported products set as a percentage of the product's value

TNCs: Transnational Corporations

TRIMs: Trade Related Investment Measures

TRIPs: Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights

2 To strengthen women's capacity to attain economic equity

Women have a right to economic equity. But women often face customary and legal barriers that limit their access to economic resources, such as land, capital, credit and technology, thereby restricting their ability to equally participate in economic activities and economic decision-making processes. Governments and local authorities must undertake initiatives to overcome these structural obstacles through programs, such as government procurement, training programs for women entrepreneurs and access for women to credit. The WTO proposal to put government procurement into the negotiations will eradicate existing government and local authority set-asides for both women and minorities.

Governments should play a more

active role in ensuring gender equity in the market as well as an equal distribution of any of the benefits of globalization.

3 To secure available and affordable food for all

In developing countries most food is produced by women within a subsistence economy. Free trade and structural adjustment has weakened this sector. The WTO now proposes to extend the agreement on agriculture removing protections and subsidies.

For women and their families in developing countries, this will deepen food insecurity, as well as contribute to environmental degradation.

4 To protect women's control over their own health and the health and safety of their families

Women should have control over their health and the health of their

QUOTE TO NOTE

"All domestic issues have been drawn into the global economy bringing women into direct collision with global patriarchal institutions."

—The Effects of WTO on Women's Rights by Vandana Shiva, WEDO Board member and Director of The Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, New Delhi

families. Women are entitled to a consumer's right to choose and to consumer protections that are enshrined in national and international legislation. The precautionary principle, as defined in Agenda 21 and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), must be upheld when health and environmental risks are unclear. The WTO proposes to extend the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS), which ignores the precautionary principle. This will eliminate relevant product labeling about health and safety standards.

An extended SPS Agreement violates international agreements already made by governments, threatens the consumer's right to know and reduces the capacity of women to care for the health of themselves and their children. Health and safety are not trade issues and should not be subsumed under an ever-expanding trade agenda.

5 To prevent TNCs exploitation of women's indigenous knowledge and plant genetic resources

Genetic resources must be shared equitably, while conserving biological diversity and utilizing biological components sustainably. Women in many countries have traditionally been the keepers of indigenous genetic resources, such as seeds for farming and medicinal plants for healing. The WTO has created rules for Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) that include plant and human genetic resources and allow international firms to appropriate and patent indigenous knowledge and life forms. International firms sell these resources for profit without sharing the benefits, and TRIPs protects the monopolies thus created.

The principles already enshrined in the CBD should be expanded to prevent plant and life forms from being appropriated and commercialized by international firms where this threatens biological diversity. More work should be done under the CBD to develop terms for equitable commercial benefits that justly compensate countries and women owners of these resources. ■

FIND THE FACTS Resources

***A Citizen's Guide to the World Trade Organization.* Published by the Working Group on the WTO/MAI of Public Citizen. July 1999. Also available on Public Citizen's website.**

This guide outlines the major issues on the WTO's agenda, laying out the ways in which it is damaging the public interest, and how corporations and some governments want to expand its power. This clear and easy to read guide includes a number of case studies on the connection between technical trade issues and the everyday life of citizens everywhere.

***The Effects of WTO on Women's Rights* by Vandana Shiva. Third World Network website: www.twinside.org**

In this insightful paper Vandana Shiva argues that the establishment of the WTO and the ensuing era of globalization necessitate a shift in gender analysis. Shiva explains how the new regime of world trade has excluded women and the environment from central concern, devalued their work and restricted their basic rights.

***Gender in the Trading System: Analysis and Strategies from a Gender Focus* by Maria Riley and Rocio Mejia, Center of Concern, Washington D.C.**

"Decisions made in closed regional and global trading meetings affect the ability of women, their families and their communities to thrive or to sink deeper into poverty and despair."

This paper highlights the link between world trade and gender in a number of areas such as the labor market, subsistence economies, migration, household management, and violence.

Women Connect

Women's Edge

A coalition of individuals and organizations that is working on giving women

and families an economic edge by promoting equitable international aid and trade policies.

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Center of Concern

Promotes social analysis, theological reflection, political advocacy and public education on the issues of global development, for a just economic system.

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Diverse Women for Diversity

A coalition of women from diverse regions and diverse movements committed to the continuation of a rich and abundant life on the planet.

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Websites

World Trade Organization:
www.wto.org

Seattle Business Welcomes WTO:
www.wtoseattle.org

European Commission:
europa.eu.int

Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy:
www.iatp.org/

International Institute for Sustainable Development:
iisd.iisd.ca/

International Coalition for Development Action:
www.icda.be

Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch:
www.tradewatch.org

International Forum on Globalization:
www.ifg.org

Third World Network
www.twinside.org.sg

50 Years is Enough:
www.50years.org

Center for International Environmental Law:
www.econet.apc.org/ciel