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Gender and Trade Think-Meeting

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New York, NY

SUMMARY REPORT

Feminist activists, trade union and NGO leaders, and academics gathered in New York, on the margins of the sixty-second UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW62), for an initial think-meeting to rekindle analysis and advocacy at the intersection of gender and trade to meet contemporary challenges. Participants surveyed the current landscape in the context of past struggles, identified critical needs and organizing strategies, and agreed to form the **Gender and Trade Coalition: A Feminist Alliance on Trade Justice**.

The idea of hosting the think-meeting and forming the Gender and Trade Coalition has percolated amongst feminist economists and activists since late 2016, gaining urgency by mid-2017. These discussions quietly coalesced into advocacy for a restart of gender and trade activism, focusing on women's rights and valuing the interlinkages between the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the climate agenda, and the recent jumpstart of the multilateral trade process at the WTO. Held at the offices of Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung New York, the think-meeting was co-convened by Regions Refocus and the South Centre, in collaboration with DIVA for Equality, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Gender and Development Network, and Public Services International.

This push for deeper engagement by feminists on trade justice has become more urgent with the recent "[Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment](#)," agreed during the 11th WTO Ministerial in Buenos Aires in December 2017. As over 160 women's rights and allied organizations elaborated in a collective [statement](#) in response to the Joint Declaration, concerted collaboration is required to both address the adverse impact of WTO rules on women and envision new ways of setting and implementing trade rules to benefit women and girls.

Feminist economic analysis is infrequently and insufficiently addressed to trade. In a geopolitical context characterized by shifting sands of mega-regional trade agreements and renegotiations of longstanding agreements, this is an important moment to catalyze the renewed momentum activated

by the Joint Declaration and build on previous generations of feminist analysis of trade policy, towards revitalizing critical analysis and advocacy on gender and trade.

This summary report distills the key reflections and resolutions from the initial think-meeting, detailing: recollections on the earlier wave of gender and trade advocacy; assessments of the present context; and the barriers facing the new coalition as well as potential strategies it has begun to outline.

Reflecting on Past Work

Many participants came to this meeting with backgrounds in earlier movements of gender and trade advocacy, in the late 1990's and early 2000's. The first task of the meeting was therefore to identify where this previous wave had faltered, and what forces undermined it. Factors mentioned included:

- The dwindling power of the Beijing Consensus, which had provided space for organizing, and policy leverage to access and engage with policymakers;
- A shift in prioritization at national and regional levels, especially towards Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), Aid for Trade, and new geopolitical dynamics such as increased China-Africa trade;
- A shift in funding priorities away from trade and towards climate change, in part due to the stalling of multilateral trade negotiations as well as the global financial crisis, which continues to contribute to economic imbalance and uncertainty surrounding possible future agreements;
- A co-optation of feminist language and issues by neoliberal forces;
- An intellectual onslaught against progressive thought, especially in academia, which has left Economics overwhelmingly conservative and male-dominated, and weakened the connection between knowledge production and progressive action; and
- The decimation of unions and deregulation of labor markets to the advantage of capital, which has increased inequality and strengthened the power of elites.

The combination of these factors, among others, presents a political challenge of uniting progressives and feminists across many regions to disrupt current macroeconomic structures and dynamics.

Assessing the Present Context

Building on this collective historical understanding, participants analyzed the new context in which gender justice for trade must be won.

Economically, the aftermath of the global financial crisis still looms large, projecting an air of uncertainty over trade agreements. In the context of gridlocked negotiations at the WTO— as was seen in previous times [at the 2001 Doha ministerial](#) over North-South conflicts on development and

new issues— “gender” agreements can be added in to salvage meetings and produce some result. Furthermore, “gender” agreements can masquerade as progressive protections while in reality using new issues (such as e-commerce or government procurement) for exploitative trade agreements and regulation as a “Trojan horse”¹.

The **political context** is shaped not just by new agreements on gender and trade, but a complex web of migration, war, and wealth disparity spun by the same neoliberal forces fought in the past, which tragically have gained political power. The accompanying rise of authoritarianism and related narrowing of political arenas has also fueled patriarchal “gender ideology” discourse and backlash against the advances of feminism.

As mentioned above, the **content** of trade agreements has mutated with the inclusion of new issues such as e-commerce and government procurement. This presents a new level of technicality, which, in combination with the ever-growing size of trade deals, has made trade discussions much more complex than in the previous era of gender and trade work. This increased complexity in concepts and language creates an additional barrier to mass organizing around trade.

At present, there are also new efforts to incorporate gender and trade issues into neoliberal schemas, which is bubbling on several fronts: from bilateral and regional initiatives such as the Canada-Chile FTA² or the European Parliament resolution³, from coalitions such as [“International Gender Champions.”](#) as well as in the WTO, as discussed. Resistance towards this neoliberal exploitation may be construed as conservatism despite domestic efforts for pro-women policy—India, for example, [opposed the ministerial declaration](#), but has implemented pro-women policies in government procurement (as have other Southern governments including Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, and Zambia⁴). These efforts connect to a deeper cooptation of feminist language and issues by neoliberal forces, which has dulled the political edge of terms like “empowerment” and “equity.”

¹ Robert Bissio, “Is ‘Gender’ a Trojan Horse to Introduce New Issues at WTO?” Third World Network, 11 December 2017. <https://twnetwork.org/wto/%E2%80%9Cgender%E2%80%9D-trojan-horse-introduce-new-issues-wto>

² Government of Canada, “Highlighting Gender in Trade: Working at the Cutting Edge of Trade and Gender in the Canada-Chile FTA,” 19 January 2018, http://web.archive.org/web/20180523132737/http://international.gc.ca/gac-amc/publications/blueprint_2020-objectif_2020/highlighting_gender_trade-mettre_accent_sur_genre_commerce.aspx?lang=eng

³ European Parliament, Resolution of 13 March 2018 on Gender Equality in EU Trade Agreements, P8_TA(2018)0066, 13 March 2018, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&reference=P8-TA-2018-0066&language=EN&ring=A8-2018-0023>

⁴ Astrid ter Wiel, “EU Case Study: Gender-smart Public Procurement – the Scope for Applying Preferential Policies” in Gender-smart Procurement: Policies for Driving Change, ed. Susan Harris Rimmer. 12-17. Chatham House, December 2017. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/Gender-smart%20Procurement%20-%2020.12.2017.pdf>

This shift repeatedly raised the question: **is it possible to secure gender justice in trade through already-compromised spaces?** What tactics can make real advances when feminist language and movements are being coopted? There was universal agreement that future work must be strategic and carefully assess where to reclaim language and infiltrate spaces, and where doing so would only impede or corrupt feminist advocacy.

Tracing a Path Towards Gender Justice in Trade

In the second day of the think-meeting, the *Gender and Trade Coalition: A Feminist Alliance on Trade Justice* was formed to carry forward previous struggle and spark a new wave of gender and trade advocacy. This coalition aims to navigate the new landscape and requirements for gender and trade justice, deploying and further developing strategies formed at this think-meeting.

Laying the groundwork for the coalition and sketching options for action, the think-meeting identified current needs for gender and trade work, and possible strategies to meet these needs. This identification branched into three realms: **advocacy, research, and resilience.**

Advocacy

For effective advocacy, the coalition needs a **focused action plan** shaped by women's rights groups and allies, to navigate the fast-moving environment surrounding trade negotiations. The coalition could set this agenda and **unite groups to overcome divisions** that might occur in the process of creating and carrying out the action plan, a danger heightened by recent cooptation of the language of gender and trade and feminism. Uniting diverse movements behind this plan may also require revealing linkages between different sectors and issues, especially for organizations that are not explicitly feminist.

Trade union participants in particular spoke to this need for unity, laying out several steps needed within their own organizations: first, shifting and persuading leadership within unions, especially to tackle issues such as sexual harassment and solidify a progressive front; then, refitting structural analyses already present in unions with a feminist lens to build an analysis that goes beyond surface-level disparities and is therefore less vulnerable to co-optation; and, conversely, putting a trade lens onto other gender-related work such as on violence and unpaid care, to **leverage existing policy spaces.**

Feminist gender and trade advocacy must **boldly claim its language** in the face of rampant cooptation of progressive terms like “women’s empowerment” or “inclusive growth.” This requires careful assessment of what terms should be reclaimed, where new language should be formed, and what terms must be defended from future distortion. Accessible, bold language will also help facilitate **education**, especially given the increasing complexity of mega-trade deals, which already presents a barrier to popular education and mobilization.

Armed with a clear vocabulary and analysis, there is then a need to tactically create interlinkages with other issues. **Climate** emerged as the principal arena to make connections with gender and trade, especially given the increase in climate-trade connections made by mainstream groups⁵. **Migration** was also emphasized, especially given the increasing control over the free flow of labor and goods to suit the interests of the capital. Connecting trade to other issues fosters powerful cross-sector and cross-regional alliances which enable truly pro-poor, pro-women analysis that can pressure governments for systemized application of gender justice on all levels. The **local level**, where much of the work on services and service implementation happens, is a particularly significant arena for linking trade and climate.

Participants also began to collect arenas and opportunities for feminist engagement in trade processes:

Advocacy Timeline (in formation)	
Arena	Opportunities
WTO (Jun 2018–Nov 2019)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhancing Women Entrepreneurs Participation in Public Procurement (June 2018, Geneva) • Connecting Women Entrepreneurs to International Value Chains (September 2018, Geneva) • Promoting Financial Inclusion for Women (November 2018, Geneva) • Women and Trade in Trade Agreements (March 2019, Geneva) • Women in Digital Trade (July 2019, Geneva) • MC12 (Nov 2019, Geneva)
United Nations (July 2018–onward)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Level Political Forum (July 2018, New York) • IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5 °C
Post-Cotonou Agreement (May–Dec 2018)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • European Council of Development Ministers to adopt the EU mandate (22 May 2018, Brussels) • ACP Council of Ministers to adopt the ACP mandate (End May 2018, Lomé) • Launch of negotiations (Jun to Aug-before 1 Sep 2018, Brussels) • EU-ACP Joint Parliamentary Assembly (JPA) (16-22 June 2018, Brussels) • EU-ACP JPA (11 October 2018, Brussels) • EU-ACP JPA (15-19 December 2018, ACP country TBD)
Regional Agreements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

⁵ For example, the Green Growth Knowledge Platform (GGKP), established in part by the World Bank and the OECD, which has a [Trade and Competitiveness Working Group](#).

Research

Grounding this work requires **bold, critical feminist economic analysis** that reveals the neoliberal violence underpinning new trade agreements. This analysis must incorporate in particular a feminist understanding of imperialism which discusses inter-imperial rivalry, the chauvinism of states, the military-industrial complex, and the role of violence in economics. This comprehensive lens must continue to be advanced in the academic sphere, which at present remains flooded with toxic masculinity and ideological hegemony. Academic work should be strengthened especially in tandem with grounded activism, both to inform the research and to work beyond the limits of technocratic management. Clear critiques and analysis may also bring unexpected allies, attracted by an intersectional lens which incorporates their respective issues.

To develop and disseminate this analysis, participants laid out a gender and trade research agenda, including the topics research must address, tools which the research should create, and tactics for improving and sharing research:

A Gender and Trade Research Agenda		
Topics	Tools	Tactics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interface between unpaid care work and climate change, migration, etc. • Foregrounding gender inside the broader trend of increasing inequality • E-commerce • Government procurement • Agriculture and manufacturing that make concrete interlinkages for a general audience, focusing on impact to women • Themes of the annual UN High Level Political Forum (see opportunity timeline) • Where/why previous gender and trade advocacy halted • Human rights framework to assess economic policy • Mega-trade deals and regional trade agreements and the eventual impact of their components on women 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A general-audience resource unpacking language being co-opted (empowerment, sustainability, equity) • Rapid response pieces (articles, collective statements) to new trade agreements, adding feminist analysis • A (re-)writing of potential trade agreements according to feminist/progressive principles • New curricula in universities that would invert neoliberal indoctrination • Time use studies (a long-standing tool) combined with a newer analytical tool of “time poverty” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop strategic partnerships with journalists to disseminate research and mainstream it • Create an “academic SWAT team” for rapid response moments • Foster greater collaboration between activists and researchers, including forums of exchange • Tailor analysis to move outside the academy and have accessible (but bold) language • Train staff of international institutions on feminist economics • Brief trade negotiators

Resilience

As one of the core themes of the meeting was re-igniting previous work which was not sustained, a central question for many was how to build resilient movements that can stand strong against internal and external challenges.

Funding was identified as a primary concern, as the lack of sufficient resources halted the previous wave of work in its tracks. In this next wave, we must work to avoid funders who micro-manage our work, compromise our values, and are only short term or withdraw unexpectedly. Where possible, multi-year funding should be secured, ideally from diverse sources including self-funding arrangements (such as membership dues).

The Gender and Trade Coalition can work together to navigate these funding politics by:

- Surveying the landscape together, of traditional and alternative sources of funding as well as media, governmental partners, etc.;
- Building a database to identify “progressive” funders;
- Cooperatively crafting a strong communications strategy that identifies the key messaging we can get out about gender and trade work;
- In a network context, rotating funding responsibilities and incorporating minimum contributions so work always continues at least on a basic level; and
- Incorporating sustainability strategies within initial funding agreement, have an alternative plan in the case funders abandon a project.

Participants also crafted strategies for building resilience **outside of funding** (and for when it fails):

- Incorporate chain models where appropriate, which use mentorship and gradually increasing roles to fully incorporate future generations and expand the work;
- Build connections between intellectuals and activists, unions, etc. both to inform the activist work (in a way that is accessible and useful) and to get out of the “ivory tower.” This should go beyond just education and workshops, incorporate partners from different sectors in the research. One participant shared an example of successfully branching out from short workshops to working with universities to build a long-term progressive curriculum, eventually forming a cadre of women, activists, etc., in a way that mirrors but challenges the neoliberal indoctrination of the Bretton Woods institutions’ programs for young leaders; and
- Organizationally, ensure multi-disciplinary teams where the knowledge does not rest in one individual (who may leave). Individuals can share knowledge they gain within organizations so it becomes integrated into the organizations work rather than a single person.

Next Steps

An initial working group formed in the meeting to craft the coalition structure as well as set of guiding principles. Members include APWLD (Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and

Development), DIVA (Diverse Voices and Action) for Equality, GADN (Gender and Development Network), ITUC (International Trade Union Confederation)-Africa, PSI (Public Services International), Regions Refocus, the South Centre, and TWN (Third World Network). Initially, Regions Refocus and the South Centre will facilitate the process of incubating the Coalition. Articulating a specifically feminist agenda on trade, the Gender and Trade Coalition is envisioned as a space for widespread participation by trade-focused NGOs, women's groups, trade unions, and other relevant stakeholders through an iterative process of development and coalescing of the coalition over the summer of 2018.

The initial working group has crafted a unity statement, which allies can sign to join the coalition at www.gendertradecoalition.org. The site also has resources and a full list of initiators, and will grow alongside the coalition itself.