

International Trade and Women Workers in the Global South

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Introduction

The channels between gender equality and international trade are complex; there could be both reverse causality and adverse consequences. For example, export-oriented growth in many countries has brought new employment opportunities for women who previously were involved in very low paying or even unpaid work, often on the farm or in small-scale self-employment. However, macroeconomic forces associated with trade, including greater global competition and industrial restructuring from technological upgrades, have the potential to aggravate gender inequalities. Given these complexities, this chapter explores the links between gender equality and international trade, considering both the direction of causality and whether the effects are harmful or beneficial for women's advancement in the labor market and for societal well-being.

Export-Orientated Manufacturing and Women's Employment

Since the 1980s, export-oriented manufacturing industries in the global South experienced rapid growth by actively recruiting and employing women workers, mostly from rural areas. Women became the preferred workforce due to their higher productivity, relatively lower wages and sexist assumptions such as their "nimble fingers" and docility (Elson and Pearson 1981). Feminist economics literature has well documented the feminization of the workforce in export-oriented industries in the global South, especially in semi-industrialized countries (e.g. Ozler 2000; Baslevant and Onaran 2004; and Lechman and Kaur 2015). Countries as diverse as Mauritius,

Mexico, Peru, the Philippines and Sri Lanka exhibited a positive and statistically significant relationship between exports and female employment shares (Nordas 2003). Recent evidence has also linked exchange rate undervaluation, a macroeconomic policy strategy used to promote exports and long-term economic growth, with increasing women's employment and narrowing gender gap in labor force participation rates (Erten and Metzger 2019).

The increase in women's employment in export-oriented manufacturing is entirely consistent with a neoclassical economic framework in which higher skilled and less-skilled labor are the two main factor inputs. An expansion in less-skilled-labor-intensive exports will cause the demand in the exporting country for relatively abundant, less-skilled labor to increase. Because women in the global South tend to cluster in less-skilled jobs and men cluster in higher-skilled jobs, these changes in skill demand arising from export expansion should increase women's employment.

Women's labor has become a primary source of foreign exchange for many economies since the 1970s. Women's low wages – resulting from women's job segregation in export industries that are subject to intense price competition and downward pressure on wages (especially in garments, textiles, and electronics) – have played an instrumental role in the feminization of foreign currency earnings (Seguino 2010; Kucera and Tejani 2014). This reliance on women in export-oriented manufacturing was particularly strong in the East and Southeast Asian high-growth economies. Some economists have argued that gender wage gaps reflect patterns of competitive advantage rather than comparative advantage (Osterreich 2019). For example, in South Korea, gender wage gaps in the manufacturing sector are found to support continued export competitiveness (Seguino 1997). In this case, large gender wage gaps persisted or grew worse in the face of rapid export

growth that depended on female labor. Also contributing to the lack of relative wage gains was marked employment segregation that arose due to public and private sector hiring practices that did not favor women, exclusion of women from on-the-job training opportunities, and promotion discrepancies between men and women. The South Korean case is not unique. Also using a feminist framework that emphasizes gender wage discrimination as a driver of trade competitiveness, Busse and Spielmann (2006) find that in a sample of 29 countries around the globe, gender wage gaps are positively linked with comparative advantage in the trade of labor-intensive goods.

Agricultural Exports and Gender

While concentration of women in export manufacturing has received the most attention, what is less recognized is that in many agricultural economies, women's seasonal or daily wage labor on farms is critical to keeping costs low and export demand high (Lastarria-Cornhiel 2006; Croppenstedt *et al.* 2013). Market-oriented economic reforms and trade liberalization policies in the global South have been accompanied by strong growth in the production of cash crops. Female participation in the cultivation and sale of cash crops is particularly important given the significant positive welfare benefits this type of farming brings as compared to subsistence agriculture. Across the global South, increasing integration into world markets has brought new job opportunities for rural women in high-value agricultural export goods such as cut flowers, fruits, and vegetables (FAO/IFAD/ILO 2010). The horticultural export sector is not the only area where women have seen new paid employment opportunities; livestock keeping, fisheries, and aquaculture have also become important sectors for job creation for women (SOFA and Doss 2011). In two large fish-producing economies – India and China – women constitute close to one quarter of all fishers and

fish farmers, and in Indonesia and Vietnam, women represent 42 percent and 80 percent of the rural aquaculture workforce, respectively. Women's increasing participation in fisheries and aquaculture has also been reported in West Africa (SOFA and Doss 2011).

In a review of women's employment in high-value agriculture industries, Dolan and Sorby (2003) estimate that women form at least 64 percent of the workforce (in Colombia) and as much as 87 percent of the workforce (in Zimbabwe) in a sample of countries that export cut flowers. The range is similar for countries exporting vegetables (66 percent female in Kenya to about 85 percent female in Mexico), but somewhat lower for picked fruit (45 percent female in Chile to 65 percent female in Brazil). A number of country case studies reviewed in Quisumbing *et al.* (2012) indicate that women make up more than half of the workforce in some horticulture industries, including Senegal's French bean industry (90 percent female) and tomato agro-industry (60 percent female), Sri Lanka's tuna plant workers (more than 90 percent female), and Latin America's seafood industry (ranging from 52 percent female in Uruguay to 72 percent female in Argentina).

In most countries these women are, on average, quite young. For example, in Kenya, 85 percent of women workers in the vegetable export sector are less than 29 years old as compared to 78 percent of men who are less than this same age benchmark (Dolan and Sorby 2003). Consistent with trends in many labor-intensive manufactured export industries, horticultural export employers tend to hire young women for certain tasks because of their relatively low wages and lack of bargaining power. Gender-based assumptions about women such as having "nimble fingers" for detail-oriented tasks, and women's weaker bargaining power relative to male workers in negotiations for terms of employment related to benefits and job security (because women are less

likely to be union members), along with other gender norms related to appropriate roles for men and women in agricultural production, have contributed to high rates of occupational segregation in agribusiness enterprises. Women perform relatively labor-intensive, less-skilled jobs such as weeding and trimming in the fields, snipping and picking in the processing stage, and packaging, while men engage in jobs that are considered to require more strength and skill such as lifting heavy loads, construction, and operating and maintaining machinery (Lastarria-Cornhiel 2006). This type of segregation both reinforces socio-cultural norms and perpetuates existing employment structures in agricultural markets (Quisumbing *et al.* 2012; Oduol *et al.* 2017).

An important question is the extent to which women in agriculture have benefited from international trade and foreign investment through employment opportunities, and the extent to which these jobs help to empower women (Kabeer 2012). Some feminist scholars argue that jobs in the export sector offer better pay compared to the existing alternatives for women (Kabeer 2004; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004). According to Maertens and Swinnen (2012), though the growth of modern supply chains is characterized by gender segregation, these supply chains have been beneficial for women by reducing gender inequalities in rural areas. Specifically, production through large-scale estates and processing through agro-industries have led to greater employment generation for women, and more direct benefits (in terms of earned income and less variable income) compared to farming through smallholder contracts. However, women's relatively low wages and their crowding at the low end of the value chain have raised concerns, with feminist scholarship pointing to a structure of constraints (including less educational attainment, discrimination by gender, and women's role as caregivers) in the perpetuation of women's low status in global value chains (Osterreich 2019).

Trade, Technological Change, Gender and Employment

While export-oriented growth has facilitated feminization of the workforce in the global south, in the global north, women are often displaced from low-wage jobs in import-competing industries. This is because technological transfer through trade is skill-biased and favors higher-skilled workers who are predominantly male. Women's employment declines when trade and technological change make traditionally female jobs redundant, and as women face barriers to training for new jobs.

Recently labor markets in the global South are becoming more "polarized" due to the increasing role of technological change (World Bank 2015). That is, the share of employment in both high-paying higher-skilled jobs and low-paying less-skilled jobs is increasing, while the share of employment in mid-level jobs is decreasing. While this polarization may be beneficial globally in terms of increasing overall productivity, individuals with few skills and limited access to high-skill jobs are likely to suffer disproportionately (World Bank 2015). Women are most likely to fall in this group, and may experience job losses due to trade induced technological advances (Berik *et al.* 2009). For example, in Korea, Taiwan, and Malaysia, the female share of employment declined in the manufacturing sectors as these economies began to move up the industrial ladder and out of their niche as exporters of less-skill intensive goods (Ibid.). Temporary migrant workers were substituted for native women workers in less-skilled jobs, especially in Malaysia (Berik *et al.* 2009). Moreover, recent evidence for 30 countries (28 OECD countries plus Singapore and Cyprus) between 2011 and 2016 indicates that women's jobs may be more vulnerable to

automation as women tend to be engaged in more routine work across all occupations compared to men (Brussevich *et al.* 2018). Job losses for women can also happen in the service sector, especially in the case when jobs in information, communication, and technology are outsourced from economies of the global North such as the US to the global South (Kongar and Price 2010).

However, not all studies have found that women are hurt when countries import new knowledge and technology. For instance, Juhn *et al.* (2014) develop a neoclassical model with a gender dimension in which firms adopt new technologies when they import physical capital, and the new technology entails computerized production methods that are relatively more conducive to women's skill sets. This model is tested with establishment-level data from Mexico, and results indicate that technological improvements through trade contribute to help women in blue-collar occupations in terms of both employment and wages in absolute terms relative to men.

Trade Competition and Gender Gaps in Wages and Employment

In a neoclassical framework, discrimination is costly to employers and will not persist in a perfectly competitive market (Becker 1971). This hypothesis can be restated in an open economy context whereby firms operating in industries that face international competition will experience greater pressure to cut costs, including costs associated with discrimination. Discrimination is then expected to decline in industries that are more open to trade. However, firms in concentrated industries face less competition, and therefore experience less domestic pressure to cut costs (Borjas and Ramey 1995). In this context, any observed reduction in wage discrimination against female workers in concentrated industries may be attributed to competitive forces from international trade rather than from other domestic firms (Black and Brainerd 2004). Alternatively,

non-neoclassical theory as developed in Darity and Williams (1985) and Williams (1987) posits that discrimination is a potential tool for competition. This approach implies that trade may actually increase gender wage gaps in countries where female workers have lower bargaining power and where women are segregated into lower-paying, lower-status jobs.

Global evidence in support of these two contrasting theoretical frameworks is relatively thin and yields inconclusive evidence. Some studies have found evidence in support of the Becker hypothesis that increased competition drives out discriminatory firm behavior. In particular, increased competition from international trade is linked to narrowing gender wage gaps in the US (Black and Brainerd 2004) and in Mexico (Hazarika and Otero 2004), and tariff liberalization is associated with a relative increase in women's employment in Colombia compared to men (Ederington *et al.* 2009) and Brazil (Gaddis and Pieters 2012).

Other studies contradict these findings. Hellerstein, Neumark, and Troske (2002) find little support for the argument that more discriminatory employers with market power are punished over time through buy-outs or lower growth. Berik, Rodgers, and Zveglic (2004) find evidence that increasing trade openness is associated with higher residual wage gaps between men and women in two East Asian economies, a sign the authors interpret as increased wage discrimination. Menon and Rodgers (2009) shows that increasing openness to trade is associated with larger wage gaps in India's concentrated manufacturing industries. Kongar (2007) argues that in the US, the gender wage gap declined largely due to women's job losses in low-wage manufacturing industries that competed with rising imports. Finally, mixed evidence is found in a cross-country study that uses data for more than 80 lower- and higher-income economies: increased trade is associated with

reduced wage gaps, but the opposite result is obtained for the case of highly skilled workers in lower-income economies (Oostendorp 2009).

The finding of larger gender wage gaps in the face of growing competition from international trade are consistent with a feminist framework in which groups of workers who have relatively weak bargaining power and lower workplace status may be less able to negotiate for favorable working conditions and higher pay. In a scenario with declining rents in the more-concentrated sector post-liberalization, firms appear to have favored male workers over female workers in the wage bargaining process. Rather than competition from international trade putting pressure on firms to eliminate costly discrimination against women, studies reveal that pressures to cut costs due to international competition are hurting women's relative pay in the manufacturing sector. Reasons include a lack of enforcement of labor standards that prohibit sex-based discrimination and employer and union practices that relatively favor male workers.

Working Conditions and Terms of Employment

Production for world markets has generated employment opportunities for women in the global South, but these opportunities have not always translated into more secure jobs as firms have faced pressures in international markets to keep costs low. Employment is often casual, temporary, and flexible in nature, with poor working conditions and little easing of domestic workloads (Berik and Rodgers 2010; Barrientos 2013). Men are more likely to obtain formal sector jobs while women are more likely to enter the informal sector, contributing to labor market segregation. For example, following India's sweeping trade liberalization in the early nineties; the share of the workforce classified as casual rose relatively more for women workers than men in both rural and

urban areas (Bhaumik 2003; Williams and Gurtoo 2011). Recently the pattern of hiring young female workers in labor-intensive export sectors has been changing— at least in the manufacturing sector – where some employers see older women and married women with children as more reliable and more willing to accept poorer terms of employment. Supporting evidence based on feminist frameworks is found in Fussell (2000) for Mexico’s maquiladoras, in Dedeoğlu (2010) for Turkey, and in Domínguez *et al.* (2010) for Central America.

Across countries, increases in the proportion of the workforce classified as informal may be partly explained by the growing tendency of final-goods producers to subcontract smaller-scale, home-based operations (Gwynne and Cristobal 2014). Home-based workers are predominantly women who work on a piece-rate basis, receive few (if any) fringe benefits, pay their own utility costs, and work long hours. In view of their informal status, most home-based workers remain uncovered by labor regulations that impose additional costs on producers. These tend to be predominantly new labor-market entrants, women who have lost their formal-sector jobs, or women who need to combine paid work with childcare obligations.

A growing number of studies use Computable General Equilibrium (CGE) analyses to show that employment opportunities generated by trade liberalization increased women’s total work burden because the increase in their paid work time has not been accompanied by any reduction in their unpaid work time. The net effect is an increase in women’s total work burdens. For example, while tariff liberalization in Bangladesh raised women’s labor-market participation and wages, it also caused a reduction in their leisure time (Fontana and Wood 2000). In Nepal, trade liberalization raised women’s participation in market work hours and their relative wages, but the impact on

their domestic work time and leisure time was ambiguous (Fofana, Cockburn, and Decaluwe 2005).

Increased integration in world markets increases vulnerability to global price shocks and adverse effects on local production and labor demand and this is gendered. For example, saffron production is the major economic activity in Morocco's mountainous Taliouine-Taznakht region, and the biggest source of paid work for women. Filipski *et al.* (2015) uses a general equilibrium approach to show that saffron price volatility, which can be extreme, has large effects on saffron production and labor demand, especially for female harvest workers. Saffron price upswings promote increased labor market activity, with producers hiring more male and female workers. Yet the work is segregated – men are hired into cultivation activities while women into harvesting activities. Saffron price reductions entail effects that are more adverse for women than men in terms of wage income, largely because men have alternate opportunities for paid market work beyond saffron production while women have few other options for remunerated market work.

Gender-Aware Policy Reforms

In cases where women bear a disproportionately higher cost of trade liberalization, policy measures that build women's skills (education, firm-specific training and new programs for accreditation for workers' skills) and strengthen the social safety net may help ease the burden. Additionally, stronger enforcement of equal pay and equal opportunity legislation, which most countries have on the books, will reduce discriminatory pay practices that contribute to gender wage gaps in the face of becoming more integrated with global trade.

In this discussion on improving women's relative status, it is important to note that attempts to raise the wages of female workers may be counterproductive if firms relocate in order to avoid paying higher wages (Seguino and Grown 2006). Hence, although wage hikes may be justified in terms of the additional productivity they induce, women employed in highly mobile firms may lose from such legislation. Moreover, employees of mobile firms are unlikely to receive productivity-enhancing training, since such firms are less likely to invest in training. Alternatively, improved enforcement of labor standards and full employment policies can help provide women with more job security, and further assist women in gaining access to a wide range of better-paying jobs in occupations that have traditionally been male-dominated. Prioritizing gender equality in an open economy may also necessitate measures that slow the speed with which firms can leave locations in response to higher wage legislations (Seguino and Grown 2006). However, it is difficult no matter how great the need, to institute measures such as capital controls to prevent mobility of firms in the current policy climate, just as it is difficult to protect workers and enforce stronger labor standards in a time when labor market deregulation goes hand in hand with trade liberalization.

To the extent that productivity-enhancing policies are not enough to safeguard women who are adversely affected by trade, improved social safety nets can help to ease the burden that many low-wage women face. For example, greater public provision of day-care services for very young children, and after-school services for school-age children, can help to ease the time and budgetary constraints that women workers face. Furthermore, women employed in export-producing factories often remit high shares of their income to families in the rural sector, at potentially great personal cost. Since poor social safety nets in the rural sector contribute to the reliance on

remittances from these women, policy reforms that create a viable social infrastructure in these settings including provision of social security, will serve to lessen dependence on remittances and ease pressures on such workers.

Public and non-governmental institutions could play key roles for women. In this context, an avenue for quality jobs has been employment in local or global supply value chains that generate non-traditional agricultural exports. Although wages are relatively high, women in these occupations are at the lowest rungs of the work structure and face a plethora of challenges. Since bolstering their position in the labor market by increasing their agency and voice is likely to bring significant returns, public and NGO groups have a key role to play. Avenues to accomplish this include encouraging the creation of farmer cooperatives and unions especially among smallholders, and by fostering conditions that encourage women's active participation in them. Going beyond the agricultural sector, governments can implement legislation that enhances collective action by women coming together in various organizational forms, including women's organizations and trade unions. Making women more aware of their employment rights, and community-led strategies to enforce labor standards embedded in codes of conduct, would serve to increase overall say and power across platforms. Collective forms of agency enable women to challenge, transform and overcome gendered structures of constraint in ways that would not be possible for individual women acting in isolation (Gammage *et al.* 2016).

Conclusion

Women workers face special challenges in an integrated world resulting from international global trade linkages. The effects of trade on gender differences in employment, wages and work

conditions vary across different contexts. Specifically, women's education levels, current occupational status, the sector in which they are employed, the formal or informal nature of work, the influence of world price fluctuations on security of jobs, and household factors – especially women's relatively larger unpaid care responsibilities all affect gendered outcomes of trade expansion. Policy prescriptions need to address the multidimensional nature of gender inequalities and international trade, especially gender wage gaps, employment differentials, bargaining power, and working conditions. Given the context-dependent nature of how women are affected by international trade, it is not possible to pursue a one-size-fits-all solution. This skepticism about a standard set of policies on gender and trade also applies to some of the research output from major international financial institutions, and their focus on micro-level gender equity policies to empower women rather than scrutinization of macro-level policies that perpetuate inequality (Berik and Rodgers 2012). By highlighting feminist research on these issues and by offering some viable policy options, we aim to move the discourse on this topic in promising directions.

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