

Letter from the Gender and Trade Coalition
to the 13th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation

26-29 February 2024, Abu Dhabi

On the occasion of the 13th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation, the [Gender and Trade Coalition](#)— a global alliance of international and regional feminist networks and progressive allies across civil society, academia and trade unions— calls on Member States and Director General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala for an alternative approach to 'gender issues' in the WTO, one that advances feminist trade analysis and advocates for equitable trade policy.

Our Coalition was established in the wake of a strong concern with the Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment endorsed in 2017— given its narrow focus on improving opportunities for women entrepreneurs in the trade sphere— and subsequent formation of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender with 128 Members and seven observers.

Over 250 women's rights organisations and their allies reminded the Member States involved in the 2017 initiative that, for the protection of women's human rights to be met and gender equality to be reached, it is imperative that the WTO first look critically at the impact of its own agreements on the majority of the world living with a poor or low income, in particular women across the Global South. The record of trade liberalisation under the WTO has not been positive; the impact of the Agreement on Agriculture on displacing small women farmers through subsidised imports from the West; the impact of the TRIPS Agreement on women's shrinking access to medicines and vaccines; the impact of the General Agreement on Services on further constraining women's access to critical public services tell their own stories.

Proponents of the Joint Statement Initiative on gender and trade seem intent on focusing on areas such as e-commerce, government procurement and services where they want developing countries and Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to yield to further liberalisation in favour of big tech companies. These are sensitive policy areas for many countries impacting their autonomy to promote sustainable economic growth, as well as to promote and ensure democracy, human rights and gender equality. Challenges for women due to the loss in regulatory space remain unaddressed. The initiative instead seems poised to use gender in the trade arena as a condition or standard on countries to compromise them in this harsh game of unequal competition to the companies based in the US, China, and Europe. In an increasingly digitalising world, there is very little focus on local transparency and accountability of algorithms, critical to rights of women workers in the Global South. In fact, the e-commerce JSI actively seeks to restrict these measures that can enable countries to make welfare policy decisions for their workers.

Equally, instead of looking critically inward, many leaders of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender are attempting to reform the WTO in a manner that promotes more of the same ongoing liberalisation that takes the institution further away from reshaping itself for the better; for meeting the development promises to developing countries and LDCs and to women thereof in all their diversity, multiple roles, and facing discrimination based on hierarchies of gender, class, race, ethnicity, migration status, age, sexuality and gender identity, etc.

We want to emphasise that the development context is critical for women's lives across the Global South. Trade policy space for autonomous development is crucial in order to meet broader development objectives such as income, food and health security, and develop digital infrastructure capabilities without which trade cannot comprehensively benefit women. When such development pathways are blocked by WTO rules, including through the attack on special and differential treatment, any tinkering on trade and gender cannot improve women's lives in these countries.

We also want to reaffirm, as we did in 2022, that gender issues cannot be put in a box. Every issue that is being negotiated in the WTO is important for us. The WTO discourse needs to shift focus from the female entrepreneur to women's diverse roles as farmer, fisher, worker, patient, caregiver, migrant and other; and assess how the WTO Agreements and those that are being negotiated impact their lives. As in 2022, we also remain very much concerned when fishers in developing countries, in particular, small fishers get marginalized due to unfair rules being negotiated in the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement as it impacts women who are integrated into the blue economy in multiple roles. We are again concerned when key issues in agricultural negotiations such as a permanent solution on public stockholding, special safeguard mechanism, or disciplines on domestic support in cotton are repeatedly blocked by developed countries as lives of women as farmers and householders can be significantly affected by these outcomes.

We urge the WTO Membership to see women as integrated into the global economic order, for example through their formal and informal work and as providers of unpaid care work, and assess the gender impact of trade agreements through a comprehensive assessment of its impact on such an order while being mindful of women's special status within the system. This would include assessing the ability of these agreements to meet or hinder development objectives; to help countries address inequalities or inhibit them; to support developing countries in meeting sustainability challenges or alienating them. We do not want to be put in a box or in a gender chapter, we are part of the global economic and social system and we are fighting with everyone else for improving the same.