Introduction

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In most developing countries, women producers and workers in the informal economy play a key role in providing the food and income that enable their families to exist. The impact of economic globalisation and trade liberalisation on these women has varied according to who they are, where they are, which sector they are involved in and how they are integrated into global production systems. While some women have lost markets and jobs or seen a decline in working conditions, others have been able to find new markets for their products and new jobs on favourable terms.

The literature on gender and trade generally falls into two major categories: the first looks at the impact of trade policies on women and men, and how gender issues affect the outcome of these policies; and the second looks at the differential access of women and men to export promotion strategies and programmes, and how this affects the strategies' success.

The gender impacts of trade policy

Looking at the impacts of trade policy on women and men – and at the ways in which gender issues affect the outcome of trade policies and programmes – it can be seen, as noted above, that there are both winners and losers. In some cases, export-led growth has resulted in the increased inclusion of women workers in the global economy – albeit on questionable or undesirable terms and with uncertain sustainability. In other cases, the liberalisation of trade and investment has resulted in the destruction of domestic enterprises or paid jobs due to: (a) the steep rise in cheap imports/services on the market; (b) unequal terms of competition for local natural resources; and (c) changing technology and skills requirements.

Export-led manufacturing has undoubtedly led to the creation of many thousands of jobs for unskilled women – especially in south-east Asia and, while wages and working conditions have been questioned, it has enabled many young women who have not worked before to be included in the labour force on terms that are not optimal, but possibly better than alternatives elsewhere in the domestic economy. However, several factors are now having an impact on the situation of women working in export-led industries.

One of these is that markets for labour-intensive products are becoming flooded and highly competitive. As a result, one of two corporate strategies has been adopted, neither of which is helpful in improving the terms of

inclusion for women workers in the global economy. One strategy is for multinationals to try to maintain or increase their market share in existing industries by undercutting competitors – usually by cutting labour costs in a race to the bottom. In this case, women become trapped in downwardly mobile positions and economies exhibit 'immiserising' growth.[1] The other strategy is for multinationals to diversify into different types of products that yield higher profits in less crowded markets. In this case, the new industries are usually more technologically sophisticated and demand higher skill levels, which men have greater opportunities than women to acquire. As a result, unskilled female workers are excluded from the latest and more technology-intensive phase of globalisation in which there is a switch from working 'harder' to working 'smarter' (Carr and Chen, 2004).

Another factor affecting female workers in export-led industries is increased vulnerability. In global supply chains they are particularly prone to the effects of financial crises and economic recessions. These can result in the closure of export-linked factories or in industrial restructuring, resulting in factory workers being forced to work from home with much lower incomes and without any form of security or benefits. Changes in trade policy and removal of preferential treatment measures, such as the phasing out of the Multifibre Arrangement (MFA), also result in restructuring and loss of jobs and security for women workers.

The patterns experienced in the manufacturing sector are replicated in the agricultural and services export sectors. While Africa has largely been excluded from export-led industrialisation – mainly because it is more abundant in land than in unskilled labour – it has become incorporated in global value chains of a different type: those involving non-traditional agricultural exports such as fresh fruit, vegetables and cut flowers aimed mainly at the European market. Women account for up to 90 per cent of the workforce in this fast growing sector in which large corporations dominate the commodity chain and women work on large-scale 'factory farms' at very low wages, in poor working conditions and without benefits of any sort – in much the same way as women work in labour-intensive manufacturing global value chains.

The same is true for exports of services, with large numbers of young women being recruited into the emerging institutions of the digital economy – for example, call centres – that provide new opportunities for inclusion, but on terms that discourage long-term, permanent contracts and unionisation. Data entry has so far been a promising source of employment for women, although technological changes could lead to redundancies if workers lack the necessary training and skills to adapt; however, it is also becoming a 'footloose' industry, exhibiting many of the characteristics of the 'race to the

bottom' phenomenon found in export-led manufacturing industries (Carr and Chen, 2004).

While trade liberalisation has created job opportunities for some women, it has resulted in the destruction of jobs and incomes for others. For example, the construction industry has traditionally employed thousands of unskilled women in many developing countries. Under the existing World Trade Organization (WTO) regime, the essential requirement of global tendering has facilitated the entry into the domestic market of many large international companies using capital-intensive technologies. These displace the women who used to be employed in digging and carrying bricks. National governments have often responded by assisting local companies to compete through upgrading their technological capabilities – a move that leads to still further labour displacement (Jhabvala and Kanbur, 2002).

Women's traditional enterprise activities have also suffered as a result of import competition following increased trade liberalisation. In India, following the influx of cheap soya-based cooking oil from the Americas, an estimated 3 million jobs are thought to have been lost as a result of the closure of small oil mills producing mustard seed oil (Shiva, 2000); and in southern and eastern Africa, the spread of foreign-owned supermarkets is having an impact not only on local retailers, but also on small-scale food producers, who have to make investments and adopt new practices if they are to avoid exclusion from their traditional markets (Weatherspoon and Reardon, 2003). Without support from government and other agencies, thousands of traditional women's enterprises are in danger of disappearing.

Women and export markets

A second category of literature looks at the ways in which women and men have differential access to export promotion strategies and programmes, and the extent to which constraints on women's involvement affect the success of these programmes. Again, there are winners and losers. When women have access to support programmes, they are able to contribute to increasing exports, as well as benefiting themselves by linking up with the lucrative export markets opening up as a result of trade liberalisation. When barriers to entry have prevented them from taking advantage of new economic opportunities, gains from globalisation and trade liberalisation fail to be distributed as evenly as they should be and goals in terms of poverty reduction are less likely to be achieved.

In some cases, self-employed or own account workers are being absorbed into global production systems, often against their will and on terms that are not entirely favourable to them. For example, many forest dwellers who

earn a significant part of their income from gathering and selling non-timber forest products such as mushrooms, honey and medicinal plants can only access markets – even domestic ones – through a long chain of intermediaries in which they have little or no power to influence the terms of their engagement (Carr, 2008). Without the assistance of local and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), government departments and social entrepreneurs, own account workers such as these have little chance of being able to link up with export markets on their own terms. Fortunately, there are now many more examples, including those in this book, of interventions that have resulted in increased control and returns for women through better organisation and access.

Filling a gap in the literature

In general, the literature on gender and trade is short of case studies that highlight in a very practical way the issues involved and the strategies that have been implemented in an attempt to address them. The collection of case studies in this book – ten studies on the impact of trade on women and ten on linking women with export markets – seeks to fill this gap.

While there is obviously some overlap between the two sets of case studies, the first focuses mainly on the way in which trade policies can and do have a negative impact on women unless gender issues are taken into consideration by policy-makers and/or efforts are made to assist women to overcome negative effects through implementation of complementary support measures. The second set focuses more on the ways in which women producers and workers can be directly helped through government and other agencies to access export markets and become integrated into global value chains on their own terms and with a greater share of control and returns.

References

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