



Gender and Trade Coalition Statement
to the 12th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation
12-17 June 2022, Geneva, Switzerland

We are writing to you on behalf of the [Gender and Trade Coalition](https://www.gendertradecoalition.org), a network of more than 300 women's rights organisations and allies that puts forward feminist trade analysis and advocates for equitable trade policy, to share our concerns as we approach the 12th Ministerial Conference of the WTO (MC12).

We have been closely following the gender and trade initiative of the WTO, in particular the establishment of the Informal Working Group on Trade and Gender (WT/L/1095/Rev.1) on 23rd September 2020 and the "[Joint Ministerial Declaration on Gender Equality and Women's Economic Empowerment within Trade](#)" (WT/MIN(21)/4/Rev.1), which was released on 1st December 2021. Under the Declaration, the endorsing Member States agree to: 1) continue to renew, develop and improve the collection of gender-disaggregated data; 2) utilize research initiatives to inform trade policy instruments and programmes; 3) explore and analyse a gender perspective and women's economic empowerment issues in the work of the WTO; and 4) promote and highlight the collaboration on trade and gender between relevant organizations and institutions in order to mainstream a gender equality perspective into Aid for Trade. We observe that the work carried out by the Working Group is done without any consultation with women's rights and feminist constituencies. All other global multilateral institutions in which macroeconomic policy is shaped include such consultations.

We also note with similar dismay that the Gender Research Hub established by several multilateral institutions, including the WTO and UNCTAD, does not include women's rights organisations (WROs) and civil society organisations (CSOs), even though they represent diverse groups of women directly and, through their work, bring technical knowledge, expertise, as well as empirical experiences from the ground. This has been reflective of the lack of inclusion of WROs and CSOs, especially those from developing countries and working at grassroot levels, in the whole process.

Both the process and the substance of these initiatives continue to be dissociated from the realities of wider WTO agreements. Trade liberalisation promoted by the WTO has caused and exacerbated deep structural inequalities and have disproportionately marginalized constituencies, particularly women, especially in developing countries, small island developing states, and least developed countries. Redressing these harms requires a total review and reshaping of the WTO agreements. Instead, we see a group of WTO member states pushing for more liberalisation, especially in new

areas such as services, e-commerce, government procurement, and foreign investment. The discussions around gender are also being used as tools to push further liberalisation without allowing for a policy discussion on the negative gender impacts of WTO agreements.

The current proposals put forward by the Working Group do not even suggest that WTO policies and negotiations should be systematically reviewed through a gender equality lens to ensure that they address harmful impacts and do not increase and sustain the exploitation and rights abuses of women, in particular women who face multiple forms of discrimination. Instead there remains a focus on enhancing the inclusion of relatively more privileged women in trade, through promoting female entrepreneurship. This is an overly simplistic and myopic approach, and a hijacking of women rights and gender justice concerns on trade liberalisation. While data, research and analysis are critical instruments to evaluate and design new policies, currently the narrow approach is steered in a way that fits a pre-set agenda and perspective. We call on the WTO and Member states to allow a diverse group of stakeholders to shape the agenda for data collection and research in a transparent manner in order to identify genuine gaps and opportunities in the gender and trade policy paradigm.

Finally, women's rights and development issues do not operate in a vacuum. How the WTO agreements deliver on the development objectives of the global South remains a critical determinant in whether and how women across these countries are able to access sustainable livelihoods and enjoy their full range of human rights. Such considerations must be part of any discussions on gender and trade. Trade policy needs to promote domestic agriculture and food security, and ensure universal access to critical services and products related to health, education, and other areas vital to protecting the dignity and rights of women and their communities in their everyday lives, including by protecting their access to and control over natural resources.

Making developing countries open up more markets and grant further concessions in order to facilitate "gender and trade" is not part of the solution, but a way of aggravating the current problems. This is evident in the negotiations that are ongoing ahead of MC12 in which women's rights are majorly at stake. As women's rights groups and allies, we want to share our concerns related to some of these key issues.

Three of these issues are: the TRIPS Waiver and WTO Response to the pandemic, the proposed changes to fisheries subsidies, and the lack of any agricultural reform in trade policy. It is clear that not only have developing countries lost out from the inequitable access to vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics, this inequity has also resulted in a much greater constraint on women's access to such tools to fight the pandemic. Women have faced higher exposure to Covid-19 as frontline healthcare workers as well as principal providers of unpaid care work. But so far, the battle over the TRIPS waiver shows how a few developed countries, mainly the EU, the UK, Switzerland, and Germany, have repeatedly blocked efforts to establish a waiver that is needed in order to effectively counter the ongoing pandemic. The current draft negotiation text is highly inadequate as it caters only to vaccines, brings in TRIPS Plus obligations and offers nothing more than existing TRIPS flexibilities.

Rather than supporting the calls of countries for much needed improvements to this Waiver, the aforementioned developed countries are attempting to dilute the draft text even further. Moreover, the WTO's Pandemic Response is turning out to be another instrument to promote the reform agenda of the WTO, through the push for liberalisation of markets for goods and services, investment, e-commerce and trade facilitation while ignoring actual needs of developing countries, such as further flexibilities on intellectual property rights and measures to enhance food security.

At the same time, the WTO Membership is pushing to get an agreement during MC12 to discipline fisheries subsidies, apparently in an effort to deliver on the mandate of Sustainable Development Goal 14.6 to meet marine conservation objectives. But the negotiations have so far failed to address one of the core mandates of SDG 14.6, which is special and differential treatment. On the one hand, subsidies given to low-income, resource-poor fishers in developing countries are subject to heavy geographical and time limits. On the other hand, developed countries with highly subsidised industrial fishing activities get a permanent reprieve through a "sustainability" criterion. According to the FAO, around 56 million women participate in small-scale fisheries globally, accounting for over 47 per cent of fishers and fish workers in small-scale capture fisheries. Women are also often more represented in lower-paid and unpaid segments of the fisheries value chain. Any decision to discipline subsidies without adequate safeguards for them will hurt women fishers worldwide, especially across developing countries and LDCs.

The other key issue for women remains agriculture and food security. The COVID-19 pandemic, the conflict in Ukraine and the continued impacts of the climate crisis have triggered significant increases in prices of food, fertilizer, and fuel, leading to a massive global food crisis. Small women farmers are struggling to make a living after paying higher costs of production, while women consumers are facing immense challenges in meeting the food security needs of their households. Even during such a crisis, key mandated outcomes on public food-stockholding, a special safeguard mechanism (SSM) to address issues of high and unfair domestic subsidies given by developed countries, continue to languish. The pandemic and the current food crisis are being used by the EU and others to push for further opening of agricultural markets for protecting the interests of agri-business located in their countries. Even a new trade and food security initiative fails to offer policy space to developing countries for increasing and diversifying production in order to meet domestic and global needs, but attempts to extract further reforms from them.

We reaffirm our view that the WTO needs a feminist trade policy that breaks away from its current neo-liberal agenda. Such policy starts with the acknowledgement that "women's issues" cannot be separate from any key issues related to trade. As such, gender issues must not be relegated to one track within the WTO, as they are interrelated with every issue that the WTO negotiates. WTO negotiations should be inclusive, allowing women and their constituencies from all parts of the world to shape the agenda. If the WTO wants to make a genuine contribution to realizing gender equality and women's rights, it must broaden its approach and systematically develop and implement gender-transformative policies that protect and fulfil the rights of women in all their diversity.