

# TRADE: GENDER-BLIND DOHA CRITICISED

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**A** key characteristic of the Doha meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was the effort to close a series of gaps in world trade between the industrialised and developing countries.

Arguably, one of the widest gaps—gender—was not breached, in fact not even mentioned. There was a complete absence of any gender dimension in this week's fourth ministerial conference of the WTO—not only in the substance of negotiations, but also in the glaringly unrepresentative number of women. The WTO has 145 members, yet only eight delegations were led by women. Of course, gender equity is more than just a numbers game, but representation is held to be a symbol of commitment.

The eight women-led delegations were Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Belgium, Britain, Iceland, Indonesia, Malaysia and Mali. The number of women delegates differed across the delegations, but not one country managed equity. The Arab countries had no women on their delegations, while the industrial countries had few. Africa led in the number of trade negotiators on its delegations (which were small due to financial constraints) while Asian countries fared better.

Britain, led by its secretary of state for trade and industry, Patricia Hewitt, displayed an important trend. Where there is female leadership, there is usually (though not always) a more fair representation of women—Britain brought almost as many male as female negotiators.

Compared with other international gatherings, Doha has been a remarkable and unrelenting gathering of male suits. From the opening plenary to the closing ceremony, men have dominated proceedings. Until the least developing countries complained, WTO chairman Stuart Harbinson had elected six male friends of the chair—the negotiators appointed to break the logjam between industrialised and developing countries during the five-day meeting.

Botswana's head of delegation, Tebelelo Seretse, became the seventh and only female friend of the chair. Seretse is also Botswana's Minister of Trade, Industry, Wildlife and Tourism and spoke eloquently about the levels of prejudice she has to overcome to operate and lead in the multilateral trading system.

"When you are new like myself in this set-up they're going to first think, 'well, she's black'. And secondly that she's a woman and thirdly, that she's African," she said in an interview. "I think that in (some) cultures, especially that of Africa, the custom is to be seen, and not to be heard. But we're changing faster than Europe."

Perhaps because there are so few women like Seretse taking up leading roles in the WTO system, its negotiations and agreements reflect no gender concerns. While the Doha meeting has affirmed the links between trade and development, it is still silent on gender and on how global trade exerts particular pressures on poor women. "The most disturbing feature is that nothing in the text makes mention of gender," said Zo Randriamaro, the programme manager of GERALINKS in Senegal, which studies the impact of globalisation on women. "Work needs to be done at every level from the negotiations to the national level to bring women's concerns onto the agenda."

Trade, says Mariama Williams of the Gender and Trade Network in the Caribbean, is not a technical and neutral exercise. "Policies do not impact on people in the same way," she said. She pointed out that female farmers and businesswomen were often prejudiced by patriarchal institutions that prevented them from owning land or entering into contracts. It was women who took up the slack as economies were restructured and liberalised, said Williams. When men lost formal jobs through the relocation of investment and tariff reduction, women entered the workforce or managed subsistence economies.

WTO statistics show that the past decade, a decade in which globalisation was institutionalised, labour patterns have changed—with negative impacts on female workers. "The incidence of part-time work was higher for women, they still earned lower wages and women tend to have higher unemployment rates," said the organisation. Williams puts it more frankly. "In Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, women are employed as cheap labour." She also said that studies in Kenya, Uganda and the Philippines had found women farmers were being displaced as land and services were privatised.

"All the trade agreements have gender dimensions. All we're asking is that WTO members work through the Beijing Platform for Action—to which they've pledged themselves." Williams said that the Beijing Platform was not a document that should be considered in isolation, but that it needed to work in tandem with trade negotiations.

"In trade policy," she said, "we need a different way of looking at the world."