

## **International Trade Agreements: A Tool to Achieve Economic Empowerment of Women?**

The eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference witnessed 118 Members and observers coming together to sign the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment. The Declaration reaffirms that 'international trade and investment are engines of economic growth for both developing and developed countries, and that improving women's access to opportunities and removing barriers to their participation in national and international economies contributes to sustainable economic development'. The aim is to build a framework that will guide Members to adapt or adopt gender-responsive trade policies that will eliminate barriers to trade for women and hence increase their participation in trade. Even though it is a non-binding declaration, it marks a starting point to future deliberations and discussions on how trade can accommodate gender justice concerns.

Gender inequality is no longer a purely ethical or moral challenge; it is a significant challenge to economic development as well. The world economy will hugely suffer if women – that account for world's half working-age population – are not included in the economy and are not able to contribute in economic growth and development. Recent studies have shown how achieving economic empowerment of women has become a compelling business case. Multiple interventions are required to achieve economic empowerment, and international trade can be one of the required and effective interventions in this respect. Women empowerment and international trade share an intricate and complex relationship as the former can be achieved through an effective regulation of the latter. The WTO Declaration is a milestone development which acknowledges this relation and calls for the creation of a gender-responsive trade environment at national and international levels.

This two-hour long workshop will be divided in two parts. The first part will focus on identifying and discussing various financial, legal, regulatory and cultural barriers that women face to access trade and commerce. The second part will focus on how new generation trade agreements are trying to demolish these barriers and create a gender-responsive trade environment. Gender justice provisions in new-generation trade agreements such as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Israel-Canada Free Trade Agreement will be analyzed to see how they can contribute and whether they are adequate to achieve economic empowerment of women. The key learning outcome for the participants will be the following: (i) they will gain an understanding of the nature of barriers women face from trade aspect; (ii) they will realize how foreign trade can be used as an instrument to achieve women empowerment; (iii) they will be asked to critically analyze the legal provisions on gender justice in recent trade agreements and identify loopholes; (iv) they will be encouraged to make recommendations on how policy-makers can draft trade agreements to make them work for economic empowerment of women in the future. This workshop will be an opportunity for me to present my research for an upcoming book on gender and trade.