



# Alerts on Emerging Policy Challenges

## CAN TRADE POLICIES PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY? EXPLORING THE TRADE – GROWTH – GENDER NEXUS

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### Introduction

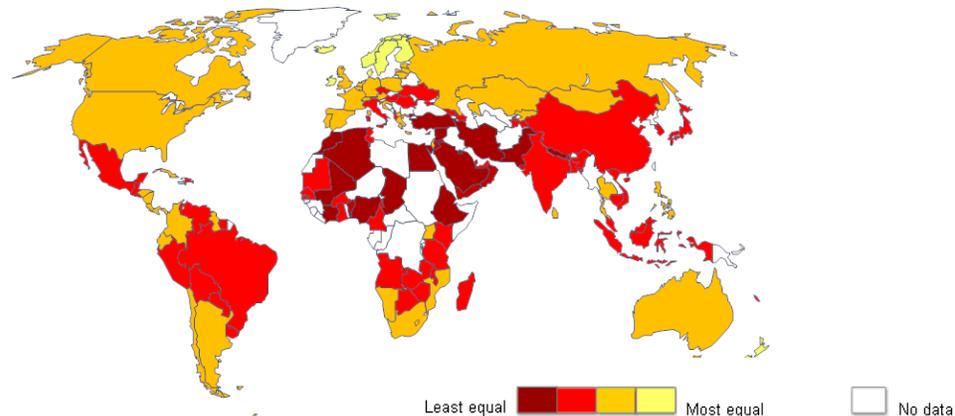
Women worldwide continue to face significant challenges in becoming equal partners to men in terms of economic power, legal rights and political representation. In particular, women have less access to paid employment, land ownership, credit and capital. They are also often paid less for their labor at comparable skill attainment, and are more frequently working in vulnerable employment, such as self-employment, or in the informal economy.

Gender inequalities are very pronounced in the Asia-Pacific region, more so than anywhere else in the world except Africa.

The map below (Figure 1) highlights these disparities (with darker shadings representing greater gender inequality) using the values of the Gender Inequality Index published by the World Economic Forum in 2010. This index is calculated based on four equally weighted sub-indexes relating to women’s (1) economic participation and opportunity, (2) educational attainment, (3) health and survival, and (4) political empowerment.<sup>1</sup>

Figure 1 also illustrates the significant differences between Asia’s sub-regions, with South Asian societies less equal than those of South-East or North-East Asia.

**Figure 1: Gender Inequalities in the World**



Source: Data from World Economic Forum (2010) (2010), p. 10-11.

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<sup>1</sup> World Economic Forum (2010), p. 3-7.

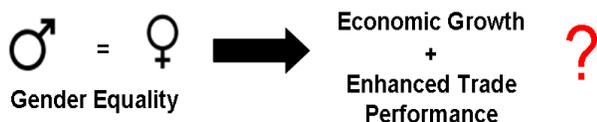
## Is there a nexus between trade, growth and gender?

An assumption often made about trade policy is that it is inherently gender-neutral because it relates to gender-neutral factors of production such as land, labor and capital. Indeed, the linkages between trade and gender have never been formally discussed in the context of the World Trade Organization negotiations, the underlying rationale being that liberalized trade will in itself result in better allocations of resources which will lead to more opportunities for all, including women. Similarly, the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals include goals relating to both gender equality (MDG 3) and a reliable and fair trading system (MDG 8), but the two goals are not explicitly linked.<sup>2</sup>

The goal of this note is to examine some stylized facts on the relationship between gender equality and trade policies, and to highlight opportunities for policymakers to consider gender-sensitive actions which can help countries reap the developmental benefits from women's participation in societies as equal citizens. The search for linkages is worth conducting in two directions, namely from gender to trade and from trade to gender:

- I. Does gender equality have a positive or negative effect on a country's growth and trade performance?
- II. Does trade liberalization have positive or negative impacts on gender equality?

### I. Does gender equality have a positive or negative effect on a country's growth and trade performance?



Abundant research and case studies<sup>3</sup> find that gender equality contributes significantly to a country's growth over the long term. Indeed, women's lack of access to education, jobs, land, credit and technology reduces women's human capital and their productivity as workers and entrepreneurs and thereby limits the output of the economy as a whole. A second equally important

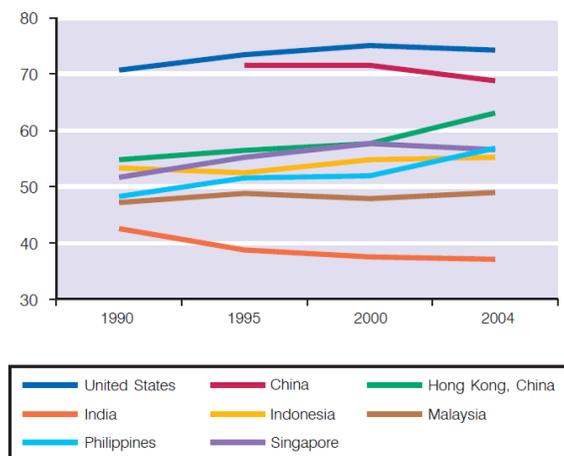
<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.  
<sup>3</sup> See literature review prepared by UNCTAD (2004), p. 8-14.

reason is that wage-earning and better-educated women tend to have more control over household income and spend more on children's education, health and nutrition than men do, thereby investing in the health and quality of a country's future labor force.<sup>4</sup>

A 2009 study<sup>5</sup> spanning a 40-year period finds that the gaps in women's education and employment had sizeable negative effects on economic growth, both by reducing the average ability of the workforce, and by limiting the broader benefits to society of women's education such as reduced child mortality and fertility levels. The study compares female to male school enrollment ratios, labour force participation rates and annual growth rates in South Asia and East Asia between 1960 and 2000, and concludes that up to 48% of the 1.96% percentage point difference between East Asian and South Asian growth rates can be explained by the direct and indirect effects of gender inequality in education and labour force participation.<sup>6</sup>

UNESCAP<sup>7</sup> draws similar conclusions from an estimation of the cost of the low female labor force participation rate to the economies of the Asia-Pacific region, illustrated in Figure 2. It finds that the region's widespread restrictions on women's access to employment result in a loss of up to US\$47 billion a year to the region. The study concludes that if India's female labor participation rate reached parity with that of the United States, its GDP would increase by 4.2% a year and its growth rate by 1.08 percentage points. Similarly impressive results would be observed in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia which still have low female labor participation rates.

Figure 2: Female labor force participation rates in selected Asian countries, 1990-2004 (in percent)



Source: UNESCAP (2007), p. 104

<sup>4</sup> Korinek (2005), p. 23.  
<sup>5</sup> Klasen and Lamanna (2009), see also Klasen (1999).  
<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 109.  
<sup>7</sup> UNESCAP (2007), p. 104-105.

While these figures cannot tell us whether a higher female labor force participation creates better societies or happier citizens, they do suggest that women's skills and labor can contribute significantly to a country's economic growth, which in turn can generate resources for human development and poverty-reduction.

**Women's labour has been essential to the high growth rates in East- and South-East Asia**

Over the past few decades, large numbers of women in North-East and South-East Asia moved from working in the informal or home-based sectors to manufacturing, enabling companies to meet the growing demand of new export markets and countries to experience high economic growth rates. Indeed, one author<sup>8</sup> has argued that in modern times, no strong export performance in manufactures has ever been secured by any developing country without reliance on female labour.

Women's labour has also been essential to the success of state-promoted export processing zones (EPZ) which contributed significantly to growth in South-East and North-East Asia. As illustrated in Table 1, women make up for over two-thirds of the work force in such zones in Bangladesh, Republic of Korea, Philippines and Sri Lanka.

**Table 1: Women's share of total employment in export processing zones**

Country	Total employment (2005-06)	Female employment (% share)
Bangladesh	3 438 394	85
India	100 650	32
Korea, Republic of	39 000	70
Malaysia	491 488	54
Philippines	1 128 197	74
Sri Lanka	410 851	78
Viet Nam	950 000	45

Source: See ILO database on export processing zones (2007), [http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2007/107B09\\_80\\_engl.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/libdoc/ilo/2007/107B09_80_engl.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Joekes (1995), p. 3.

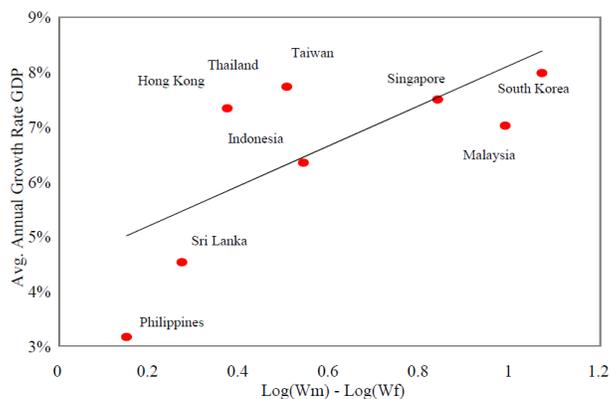
While the positive effect of women's enlarging the available labour pool is undisputed, there is a more controversial linkage between women's labour and a country's trade performance. Does the fact that women continue to earn much lower wages than men and often work under inferior working conditions (as shall be examined in Section II) affect a country's trade competitiveness?

There is relative consensus in the research community that such factors can provide an advantage over the short-term.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, for highly standardized commodities for which competition is on the basis of price alone, low wages paid to women can make the difference between a country's being competitive or not for a certain product.

Many of the sectors which yielded developing Asia's largest export gains – footwear, apparel and electronics – produce such commodities. In fact, several researchers have argued<sup>10</sup> that the success of the Asian Tigers of South-East and East Asia is due at least in part to the combination of a high female share in export sectors' employment (75%) and the high gender-wage gap in Asia (women's wages as 50-65% of men's wages at equal skill level). These researchers argue that the low female wages have reduced unit labour costs and thus freed resources, including foreign exchange, to purchase capital- and intermediate goods which raise productivity and growth rates.

Figure 3, replicated from Seguino (2000), finds a striking correlation between several Asian countries' average annual GDP growth rates between 1975 and 1995 and their male-female wage gap.

**Figure 3: Seguino (2000): Growth Rate of GDP (1975-1995) and Gender Wage Gap**



Source: Seguino (2000), p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> Busse and Spielman (2006), Seguino (2000), Mitra-Kahn and Mitra-Kahn (2009).

<sup>10</sup> Seguino (2000), Mitra-Kahn and Mitra-Kahn (2009).

Disregarding the obvious ethical implications of trade policies which rely on low wages for female workers, it is doubtful whether the competitive advantage conferred by low-cost female labour can be sustained over the long term and into the later stages of export-led growth. Countries which became middle-income countries in the 1980s and 1990s in part thanks to their success in exporting textiles and electronics now suffer from competitive pressures from lower-cost countries, in particular least developed countries. The preferred policy option is thus not to attempt to maintain low wages for either men or women, but rather to invest in increasing their productivity and skill levels so that the country's exporters to move up the value chain.

In conclusion, all evidence points to the fact that the effect of gender equality on economic growth and trade performance is very positive: investing in women's education and economic opportunities will increase a country's human capital, which will improve trade performance and yield economic growth over the long term.

The question which needs to be addressed next is whether men and women both gain from and bear the costs of trade liberalization equally, and whether trade liberalization then has an overall positive or negative effect on gender equality.

## II. Does trade liberalization have positive or negative impacts on gender equality?



Whether women benefit from a country's greater exposure to trade depends on which factors of production will experience a rise in demand as a result of economic opening, and whether it is men or women who predominantly control those factors. The following paragraphs will examine the impacts of trade liberalization on some of these factors and the result for women in developing countries.

Of course, it should be kept in mind that the effects of trade liberalization will vary significantly among women based among other things on their education, skills, age and marital status. Lesser-skilled or older women are likely to be more adversely affected than both higher-skilled women and men.

### 1. Trade liberalization's impact on women's employment opportunities

The increase in labor-intensive exports from developing countries over the past four decades has resulted in millions of new jobs for women. Most of these jobs are in sectors such as textiles, clothing, shoes and electronics.<sup>11</sup> Because these sectors typically employ more women than men per unit of production, it has been asserted that the greater the share of garments, textiles and electronics in a country's exports, the greater the employment-creating impact of trade will be for women.<sup>12</sup>

Over the last decade, the number of jobs for women in services has also increased, including in the tourism and information technology sectors. Several studies<sup>13</sup> have found that as countries become more open to international trade, their female labour force participation rises. For example, a study<sup>14</sup> of how trade affects women's job opportunities in five countries (Mauritius, Mexico, Peru, the Philippines and Sri Lanka<sup>15</sup>) found a positive correlation between exports and women's share in employment, and a negative correlation between imports and women's share in employment, suggesting that in those five countries, export-competing industries tend to employ women while import-competing industries tend to employ men.

A second study<sup>16</sup> examining the percentage of female labour force in countries having recently experienced significant market opening found a rise in the female labour force from 26-31% in Indonesia and Malaysia in 1970 to 37-40% in 1995. Similarly, the share of women engaging in regular paid work in the Republic of Korea increased from 65% in 1965 to 81% in 1992.

While the gains in terms of women's access to paid jobs are well documented, it is less clear to what extent these jobs can be maintained over the long term in the later stages of export-led growth. Countries such as Thailand, Malaysia and Viet Nam are already suffering from the displacement of their textile and electronics industries due to competition from lower-cost countries or due to a change in consumer preferences. There is also some evidence<sup>17</sup> from countries such as Singapore and Mexico that as production becomes more capital and machine-intensive, higher-skilled men are hired to replace lesser-skilled female workers.

<sup>11</sup> UNCTAD (2004), p. 17, 149; Korinek (2005), p. 8-10, Busse and Spielman (2006), p. 367.

<sup>12</sup> Fontana (2008), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Fontana (2008), p. 6-11; UNCTAD (2004), p. 17-22; Kyvik Nordås (2003), World Bank (2001).

<sup>14</sup> Kyvik Nordås (2003).

<sup>15</sup> These countries were selected based on data availability, see Kyvik Nordås (2003), p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> World Bank (2001).

<sup>17</sup> Joekes (1995), (1999).

Policymakers must therefore be aware that the gains in women's access to paid jobs in export-oriented manufacturing may be only temporary.

In addition, most researchers agree that the increase in jobs in the export sector has not resulted in any significant decrease of horizontal job segregation (i.e. women and men are assigned to certain jobs) or vertical segregation (i.e. the fact that women typically hold bottom level occupations while men take on supervisory roles).<sup>18</sup> This labor force segregation between low-skilled female jobs and higher skilled male jobs can have long-term negative effects, such as lowering women's incentives to invest in higher education. Existing gender gaps in education and skill levels may thus be reinforced.

It is therefore essential for policymakers to consider measures which will enable their countries to capitalize on the participation of women in the labour force over the long term, including by promoting secondary and vocational training opportunities for women. Equal pay and equal opportunity legislation can also help to create incentives for women to invest in their careers and perform at their highest level.

## **2. Impacts of trade liberalization on wage equality and vulnerability of employment**

At comparable skill level, women worldwide still earn significantly less than men. The World Bank calculates that women's earnings represent 73% of men's earnings in developing countries, with only 20% of this earnings gap explained by differences in educational attainment or work experience (see Table 2).

	<b>Female to male earnings ratio</b>	<b>Gender wage gap (i.e. 1 minus female to male earnings ratio)</b>	<b>Portion of gap unexplained by an individual's characteristics such as education or work experience (%)</b>
<b>Developed countries</b>	0.77	0.23	80.4
<b>Developing countries</b>	0.73	0.27	82.2

Source: World Bank (2001), p. 55.

<sup>18</sup> Fontana (2008), p. 10.

Does trade liberalization have any impact on this considerable male-female wage gap? In theory, trade liberalization should lead to competitive pressures which would lead to firms allocating resources to their most efficient uses so as to minimize costs, thus reducing the scope for discrimination in the labour market. Greater competition brought on by trade liberalization would thus provoke a decrease in all types of wage discrimination, including gender discrimination. It is also held that if countries abundant in unskilled labor specialize in unskilled labor-intensive exports, demand for unskilled labor will rise and wages for unskilled labor will increase relative to skilled labor.

Do these hypotheses prevail in practice? A number of studies have been conducted to test these hypotheses empirically, but results have been mixed. Several studies<sup>19</sup> find evidence that increasing openness is associated with a narrowing wage gap, mainly due to men's wages declining. One cross-country study that investigated the impact of trade on the gender wage gap suggests that within occupations, increasing trade is in most cases associated with narrowing gender wage gaps.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, several other studies<sup>21</sup> find that the gender wage gap is widening in some countries or sectors due to increased occupational segregation, and/or women's reduced bargaining power.

Another factor which may explain the lack of narrowing of the gender wage gap is the increased use of short-term or informal labor arrangements in export-oriented sectors. Companies resort to subcontracting and outsourcing, including to the informal sector, to serve as buffer to accommodate just-in-time ordering and fluctuations in prices.<sup>22</sup> Sub-contracted workers typically have fewer benefits, no union representation and lower wages.<sup>23</sup>

The findings on wage discrimination warrant further study. Policymakers should be sensitive to the fact that the gender wage gaps are pervasive and do not necessarily narrow solely as a result of increased competition. Rather, it seems that an increase in women's relative wages will depend on both improving women's skills to better compete in the job market as well as reducing gender-based discrimination through equal pay and equal opportunity legislation.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Nordås (2003), Oostendorp (2004); see also UNCTAD (2004), p. 22 et seq.

<sup>20</sup> Oostendorp (2004).

<sup>21</sup> Berik, Rodgers and Zveglic (2003).

<sup>22</sup> ILO (2009), p. 4

<sup>23</sup> Fontana (2008), p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> Berik, Rodgers and Zveglic (2003), p. 18.

### **3. Impacts of trade liberalization on women in agriculture**

While the numbers of jobs in export-oriented manufacturing and services have increased significantly in recent years, agriculture remains a significant employer of female workers in the Asia-Pacific region. UNESCAP<sup>25</sup> reports that 30% to 75% of women in developing Asia worked in agriculture in 2007. In many South Asian countries – in particular Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka – significantly more women than men work in agriculture.<sup>26</sup>

An examination of historical trade flows reveals that trade liberalization can lead to increased demand for certain agricultural products, for example rice, coffee or fruit, which could result in higher earnings for farmers and better jobs for agricultural workers. Where trade liberalization has led to such an increase, have women and men benefited from these opportunities equally?

The sparse evidence suggests that growth in agricultural exports is generally less favorable to women than growth in manufacturing exports. One reason for this finding is that women in low income countries tend to work in subsistence agriculture and fishing, while men tend to produce cash crops or catch for export. Because women typically lack access to activities with economies of scale, as well as to credit, technology and marketing channels, they are less able to take advantage of opportunities offered by new export markets.<sup>27</sup>

A second more fundamental reason is land rights: less than 20% of land worldwide is owned by women.<sup>28</sup> An FAO study of 11 Asian countries suggests that as little as 15% of land in the region may be owned by women,<sup>29</sup> due to the fact that in about half of the countries in Asia, women are disadvantaged by inheritance and land acquisition laws in their access to land ownership.<sup>30</sup>

The result of low rates of land ownership is that the labor women expend on farming family plots is perceived as belonging to the family unit. The earnings from farming then typically accrue to the landowner, whether husband or landlord, and is rarely shared equitably between those contributing their labour. Conversely, women are more readily perceived as “owning” the labor they invest in a

factory job and thus being entitled to at least a portion of the salary they earn from it.

For example, several studies<sup>31</sup> conducted in African countries have revealed that female farmers often refuse to invest their labour in the cash crops of their husbands because they do not share in the earnings, while also suffering the consequences of diminished food production. In such cases, women will often prefer to continue subsistence farming which enables them provide for their family's basic food needs.

In fact, some researchers<sup>32</sup> use these findings to reach the broad conclusion that trade liberalization has had a much more positive gender impact in Asia than in Africa. Because Asia's competitive advantage lies in its large pool of labour, trade liberalization has resulted in wage-earning jobs which benefited women directly. In contrast, Africa is still relatively sparsely populated; its competitive advantage lies mainly in its natural endowment, which women are less able to benefit from directly due to restrictions on land ownership.

### **4. Impacts of trade liberalization on the price of goods and access to public services**

In addition to its effects on opportunities for employment, trade liberalization affects men and women at the household level through changes in the prices of food and goods that they consume (i.e. their real wage), and through changes in the public provision of services.

In many cases, trade liberalization will have a dual effect on prices: for the consumer, trade liberalization often depresses the price of food staples due to increased competition from imports; for the producer, trade liberalization often creates new export markets and thus new sources of revenues. Because poor people, including farmers, are typically net buyers of staple foods, the impact of the lowered prices can be significant. On the other hand, trade liberalization carries a heightened risk of commodity price volatility due to exchange rate fluctuations and global price shocks, which can lead to increased food insecurity.

Trade liberalization can also have a significant impact on government revenues: when tariffs are cut, a large portion of the base for government revenues vanishes, which, if followed by a contraction of revenues, can translate into cuts in government spending and reduced availability of social services (education, health, public transport) or a rise in their price. However, when social

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<sup>25</sup> UNESCAP (2009), Table 6.3, p. 43.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> UNCTAD (2004), p. 107-108.

<sup>28</sup> FAO (2010), *Gender and Land Rights Policy Brief*, p.1, available at

<http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/a1059e/a1059e00.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> FAO Gender and Land Rights Database, see <http://www.fao.org/gender/landrights> and FAO (2010).

<sup>30</sup> UN (2010), p.169.

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<sup>31</sup> See literature review by Fontana (2008), p. 17-18; Korinek (2005), p. 13-14.

<sup>32</sup> Fontana (2008), p. 4.

services are cut, or user fees are charged, the impact falls primarily on poor people, the majority of whom are women.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, when women lose access to public services such as clean water, health care and education, the result is often that they must increase their hours of unpaid household and care labour to make up for the shortfall. Trade liberalization can therefore indirectly have heavy negative consequences on poor households even while it creates new opportunities for wage-earning.

In conclusion, it is difficult to determine whether trade liberalization helps or harms gender equality overall, mainly because impacts vary significantly both among the different economic sectors of a country, and among different countries. In most cases, however, policymakers should consider supplemental policies which can help to ensure that both women and men are able to take advantage of opportunities offered by trade liberalization, such as legislation relating to land rights, equal pay and job opportunities.

## Conclusions and policy recommendations

This note touched upon some of the links between trade and gender equality, though many more could be studied. A comprehensive study would require an examination of women's entrepreneurship, as well as of the impacts of women's higher labour force participation and wages on women's autonomy and well-being, on intra-household dynamics and on the amount of unpaid domestic work performed. Indeed, researchers have observed that women who seize new opportunities in waged employment are able to do so in part because they can rely on the presence of other female members of the household, usually mothers or daughters, to take over other unpaid work.<sup>34</sup>

A number of policy recommendations can be derived from the research outlined above:

- Awareness: Policymakers must enhance their awareness that trade policy is not gender-neutral; policymakers working towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) should treat those of gender equality (MDG 3) and a fair trading system (MDG 8) as inter-connected;
- Data: Policymakers should commission the collection of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data on wages, labor

composition in various sectors, time use, and quality of employment in both the formal and informal sectors;

- Determine gender-sensitive sectors/products:<sup>35</sup> Disaggregated data can enable policymakers to identify sectors with high female participation rates or opportunities for trade facilitation geared towards creating opportunities for women;
- Gender-sensitive trade negotiations: In trade negotiations, countries could seek special concessions for gender-sensitive sectors while developed countries could consider granting gender-sensitive trade preferences in preferential schemes;
- Gender-sensitive national policies: Governments should enact gender-sensitive policies, such as gender-responsive stimulus packages (e.g. by increasing investment in health, child- and elder-care sectors), and measures to facilitate home-based work;
- Inclusive policymaking: Instead of consulting only a narrow range of industrial interests in their trade policy deliberations, governments should consult a broad range of stakeholders, including women's representatives.
- Investment in the skill level of women and in their equal treatment in the labor force: In order to counteract horizontal and vertical job segregation, governments should invest in upgrading the skills of low-skilled women workers through secondary and vocational training, as well as by implementing equal pay and equal opportunity legislation which can help to ensure that women have equal career opportunities to men.

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<sup>33</sup> UN (2010), p. 160

<sup>34</sup> Fontana (2008), p. 9.

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<sup>35</sup> For example, Cambodia conducted a Diagnostic Trade Integration Study in 2007 which included a study on impacts on employment of women to assess opportunities for export development. It identified the garment and footwear industries, which accounted for 70% of total exports and 16% of GDP, 80% of employees are women. Similarly, the Government of India commissioned several studies to determine India's gender-sensitive sectors and products.

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