

WTO Public Forum, Session 37, 28 September 2016 on Women's Economic Empowerment and Trade: Contributing to the Deliberations and Recommendations of the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment

Moderators: **Katherine Hagen**, Executive Director, Global Social Observatory and

Caitlin Kraft-Buchman, CEO/Founder, Women@theTable

- Daniel Blockert, Ambassador, Permanent Representative to the WTO, Permanent Mission of Sweden
- Vanessa Erogbogbo, Head of Women & Trade Programme, International Trade Centre
- Linda Kromjong, Secretary-General, International Organization of Employers
- Yvette, Stevens, Ambassador, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Sierra Leone to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva
- Jos Verbeek, Manager and Special Representative to the UN and WTO, World Bank Group
- Manuela Tomei, Director, Conditions of Work and Equality Department International Labour Office (ILO)

Building on the 2016 focus on 'inclusive trade', this session related trade to the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel report on Women's Economic Empowerment. Panellists responded first to an opening question and then elaborated on their specific perspectives.

While many panellists agreed that getting men to invest in the gender debate is essential to overcome all the other barriers, they also agreed that the biggest barriers are the traditional norms and practices that reinforce gender inequalities in the world of work. Trade policies themselves don't necessarily discriminate on the basis of gender, but their impact can be indirectly discriminatory, as women occupy a large part of the informal economy in lower paid, lower skilled jobs that are displaced as trade and technology develops. And in some cases, the policies may even have a direct impact in areas like access to trade finance or the differential treatment of technical skills. We are a long way from gender being a natural part of trade negotiations, but a simple addendum to trade deals to gather disaggregated data on how and who trade policies impact would be a start, as suggested by Ambassador Blockert.

One of the main challenges is empowering women to operate businesses in the formal economy. Mr. Verbeek highlighted the 2016 World Bank's annual 'Women, Business and the Law' report. Of 173 countries surveyed for the report, 155 had at least one law that discriminated between women and men, and in 18 countries, men can legally prevent their wives from working. A staggering 1.5bn people lack a legal identity and 2bn adults lack a bank account: the majority of those are women. The World Bank is committed to getting 1bn more people a bank account and has set up a joint fund to help them access \$600m in credit, but legal reforms at a national level are also needed for women to be able to exercise fundamental and equal human rights.

As Ms. Kromjong explained, SMEs are identified as the biggest employers of women and the biggest growth area, but many don't have the capacity to implement policies and to set a culture that drives a better gender balance. The International Organisation of Employers is providing support to its member federations and their company members, big and small, by raising awareness of the importance of having legislation and company policies in place that support diversity, and of the business rationale behind a more diverse workforce.

Ms. Tomei described how the ILO is providing support to enterprises to improve compliance with labour provisions in trade agreements, and national labour law. The ILO is also working on helping to

raise the standards for women who are working in the informal economy, particularly for domestic workers who have traditionally lacked rights.

In discussing how women can move up the value chain, Ambassador Stevens emphasized that educational and vocational training is essential, especially in fields that are valued in the business world. Sierra Leone is providing scholarships for all women in science. Governments can also help women to increase their 1% share of the \$13trillion public procurement market, by improving their ability to compete on price and quality. Ms. Erogbogbo shared information about the International Trade Centre's 'SheTrades' as an excellent model for women to leverage e-technology and build platforms to develop and compete in export-oriented businesses.

The final but significant topic that affects everyone was the care issue. From developed economies where schools vacate every Wednesday to those where maternity and paternity benefits are lacking, the panel agreed that men and women need to share the care of the young and elderly, but better infrastructure needs to be put in place. Each of us can play our part, in our households, in our teams so that we can all 'walk the talk'.

The panel concluded that gender equality needs an inter-related and cross-sectoral approach, including in trade. This panel's insights will be shared with the High-Level Panel as it prepares a concluding report in March 2017 for the UN Commission on the Status of Women.

Click [here](#) to see a collection of photos from the event.