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The inaugural Gender and Development Forum at the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, Bridgetown Declaration

Preamble

Noting that the fifteenth session of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD XV), entitled, “From inequality and vulnerability to prosperity for all” held in Bridgetown, Barbados, from 3–7 October 2021, builds on the Nairobi Maafikiano adopted in 2016, which recognized that economic growth has to be inclusive to ensure the well-being of populations and that inclusiveness requires close attention to horizontal inequalities, including gender inequality,

Highlighting that UNCTAD was established with an original mandate to promote sustainable development, gender and social justice, human rights, environmental protection, and an equitable international economic order in the conduct of trade relations,

Concluding a successful three-day inaugural Gender and Development Forum spearheaded by Barbados, as host of UNCTAD XV, in collaboration with an alliance of feminist institutions and civil society organizations from the global South, the forum included government, private sector and civil society leaders, United Nations professionals, academics, activists, entrepreneurs and committed individuals to examine and make recommendations on intersecting global crises that require member States of UNCTAD to urgently rethink the models and approaches they deploy to achieve the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals,

Observing that the world is grappling with a global health crisis induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has in turn triggered a global economic crisis wreaking havoc on economies, societies, workers and households – especially low income, women-headed households – in the global South,

Recognizing that these occurrences are happening in the midst of a rapidly accelerating climate crisis which is unleashing hurricanes, typhoons, earthquakes, floods, drought, rising sea levels and food insecurity and spurring human mobility within and across borders,

Witnessing the growing digital divide in which women around the world continue to lag behind men in their access to modern technologies and therefore struggle to claim their rightful places in society and the economy, remaining, on average, poorer and more vulnerable than men, regardless of their country of origin,



We call on countries of the global North and UNCTAD member States to acknowledge that the present neoliberal growth model – which emphasizes rabid extraction and consumption and ignores the fact that the resources of the Earth are finite – exacerbates these crises, while reproducing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

Critique

We note the intergovernmental negotiations on the draft “Bridgetown Covenant: From inequality and vulnerability to prosperity for all” have been ongoing over the last year. Many women’s and feminist organizations are concerned the process has not been as inclusive as needed to ensure that the diversity of women’s and civil society perspectives on social, economic and climate justice are heard and incorporated into negotiated trade agreements.

Fundamentally, the state of the global political economy is based on inequitable and uneven power relations between States in which countries of the global South continue to experience an extractive relationship, which minimizes the value of primary commodities and reduces countries to net importers of goods and services. These extractive relations which are the basis of privatized profit by the few are at the heart of the existential climate crisis that we all face. And we recognize the parallel undervaluing of women’s labour within the household, community and national economies which mirror and reinforce the extractive and unequal relations between countries of the global North and the global South.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted these inequalities in access to vaccines and the limited political will for bases and models of concessionary financing that do not lock countries into pernicious cycles of indebtedness.

We affirm the statement of commitment in the draft Bridgetown Covenant of UNCTAD XV of respect for human rights, gender equality and women’s empowerment, and youth. We also note the call for South–South and triangular cooperation “as a complement not a substitute to North South cooperation.”¹ All these cooperation avenues have an important role in achieving our shared objective of inclusive and sustainable development.

We are concerned by the limited vision of the gender equality agenda and how it appears to be disconnected from the kind of much needed planet and people-saving reorientation. Inclusion and the empowerment of women, girls and other marginalized groupings, including indigenous and tribal women, is both a precondition and outcome of equitable development. But the world’s women are demanding a radical restructuring of multilateralism and the global political economy to ensure that the benefits of the world’s resources accrue to the majority and not the few.

Contribution

Over the past three days, we have interrogated the UNCTAD mandate against these intersecting crises to contribute to a feminist reshaping of the discourse on trade and development. UNCTAD and member States have a wider responsibility to transform trade, finance and investment policies, informed by gender and social justice analyses and consistent with the Sustainable Development Goals.

The forum necessarily charted a broad agenda, including trade; systemic macroeconomic issues, such as finance, debt, taxation; and the power imbalances of the global political economy, in which unjust relations of gender endure.

¹ Draft of the Bridgetown Covenant: From inequality and vulnerability to prosperity for all, agreed text as of 17 September 2021.

We join the Gender and Trade Coalition in calling on United Nations Member States to:²

- Restore the primacy of gender justice over the economic goals of trade and investment policies. This includes a complete transformation of global macroeconomic governance, including the current trade and investment systems, towards one that is based on human rights and respect for life and ecosystems, and that advances sustainable development. Without addressing the adverse impact of current trade and investment rules on women and gender non-conforming people, we would not be able to tackle deepening inequality and exploitation.
- Ensure the substantive and transparent inclusion of a broad group of stakeholders, including women's groups, throughout trade policy and agreement negotiations, improving the democratic engagement of all United Nations Member States in global negotiations. UNCTAD should be mandated to provide technical assistance to enhance the capacity of trade ministry officials and other stakeholders to engage in and redesign trade agreements.
- Require that trade policy measures take a gender mainstreaming perspective, whereby all trading arrangements under negotiations are assessed according to their positive and negative impacts on women and gender non-conforming people, with policy being designed accordingly. Trade policy can only be sustainable if policies are transformed to achieve economic goals based on a participatory and inclusive feminist economic paradigm. This means an economy in which care is valued and recognized as a public good, and the economy serves well-being objectives vis-à-vis growth in productivity. This paradigm ensures women's human rights are protected as part of a global vision for social justice, human rights and environmental protection.
- Pledge that UNCTAD will function from a broad mandate in which the international debt and tax structure, the ongoing digital transformation of the global economy and the changing nature of work are discussed in relation to trade policy.
- Uphold the United Nations Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean (Escazú, Costa Rica) which seeks to address extractivism in this region and its high incidence of linked threats and killings of environmental/climate justice activists, a number of whom are indigenous women.

As it relates to the negotiated text, the draft Bridgetown Covenant was made available to civil society organizations only three weeks prior to the forum, curtailing substantive engagement. While the forum and its allies welcome several promising recommendations to effectively address gender inequalities, we caution that the draft holds the threat of undercutting progress made on gender equality by promoting a more limited mandate for UNCTAD.

We call on UNCTAD to address more comprehensively the gender dimensions of trade and development. The draft Bridgetown Covenant should:

1. Facilitate the full and meaningful participation of women in the formation of policies nationally, regionally and internationally.
2. Ensure that gender justice is embedded in all policies and practices, informed by intersectional feminist analysis.
3. Promote gender justice as intrinsic to trade policy.
4. Commit to gender inclusiveness in the development of digital trade.
5. Address the persistent and emerging challenges of developing countries in pursuing stable economic growth and achieving inclusive and sustainable development

² The following comments draw on the statement released on 20 September 2021 by the Gender and Trade Coalition, a Feminist Alliance for Trade Justice. "Gender Justice Requires a Broad Mandate for UNCTAD", responding to the 17 September 2021 draft of the Bridgetown Covenant.

informed by a commitment to gender justice, and respect for the fragility of the environment and for indigenous knowledge and technologies.

We applaud UNCTAD and the host country's decision to mount this inaugural Gender and Development Forum.

We demand that UNCTAD and member States provide supportive credit facilities and physical security infrastructures and protection for women involved in cross-border trading.

We consider that there is no other time but now to focus on and redress these relations of inequalities between and within countries.

We call on UNCTAD and member States to ensure that the draft Bridgetown Covenant addresses the issue of historical and contemporary inequalities between States and strengthen processes to transform these relations on the basis of fair trade, just macroeconomic policy and reparative development transfers.

We commend the significant feminist analytical capacity that exists in civil society organizations, such as the Gender and Trade Coalition, and we recommend that UNCTAD, the International Trade Centre and the World Trade Organization institutionalize biennial consultative meetings between civil society organizations and these United Nations and international bodies.

We call on UNCTAD to incorporate a Gender and Development Forum as a standing forum of all future quadrennial conferences.
