



Photo: Miriam Djeordjian

For this issue, which covers the Global Week of Action by civil society and social movements against the World Trade Organization (WTO) during its 11th Ministerial Conference (MC11) in Argentina in November 2017, DAWN invited key actors and participants to contribute their reflections. The articles offer a critical overview of the global trade system, of the challenges of the G20, and of gender and trade issues, against the deep crisis in the multilateral system that has supported the advancement of human rights in the last 50 years. DAWN also shares its experience as co-organizer of the World Women's Assembly of the World Social Forum in Bahia, Brazil in March.

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## What are we talking about when we talk about gender and trade?

by Roberto Bissio  
(Uruguay)

After many years of women's, union and human rights movements campaigning against bilateral and regional agreements known as "free trade agreements" or "trade and investment agreements", the government of the United States of America has taken the opposite direction.

**"These power asymmetries account for the asymmetry in the results and shed light on why agreements, ultimately, favor the pharmaceutical and agrochemical industry..."**

President Donald Trump has imposed protective tariffs on steel and aluminum, prompting retaliatory action and sparking a "trade war" with unpredictable consequences. Trump intends to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and to withdraw from the Pacific Agreement, formerly known as the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), now renamed as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) by the eleven countries that did sign it. However, these two additional adjectives in the name do not reflect a change in the essence of the agreement pushed by Barack Obama to oppose China's advance in the region.

Since on multiple fronts the Trump presidency stands against feminist and popular demands, the temptation is to take the opposite stance mechanically. If Trump is fighting against free trade, there must be something good about it. There is still scope for criticism in the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) between the European Union and the ACP (African, Caribbean and Pacific) countries or in the agreement under negotiation between the EU and the South American trade bloc called "Mercosur," but media has lost interest in these dissident voices or barely qualifies dissidents as "populists" or "protectionists," implicitly useful for Trump's intentions.

'Market' represents a very specific moment and place for women who resort to it to buy food for their families, sell the surplus pro-

duce from their plots of land or all types of homemade products, offer services, learn the news and strengthen their social networks. "Micro-entrepreneurs" is a term that, related to "small and medium-sized enterprises," makes us forget that we are referring to women. The "entrepreneur" side is frequently a profitable extension of women's role in social reproduction and care systems. In a recent article, Barbara Adams recalls<sup>1</sup> that small plots (less than two hectares) represent 80% of the world's estimated 500 million farms. These plots of land provide 80% of the food consumed in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and most workers and managers in these farms are women. Access to market, as product and service buyers or sellers, is essential for women and barriers to this access, such as poor infrastructure or discriminatory legislation and regulations, represent a feminist cause, a human rights issue and an obstacle to sustainable development.

According to economist Dani Rodrik: "Trade agreements are the result of rent-seeking, self-interested behavior on the part of politically well-connected firms: international banks, pharmaceutical companies and multinational firms. They may result in freer, mutually beneficial trade, through exchange of market access. But they are as likely to produce purely redistributive outcomes under the guise of 'freer trade'" (to the benefit of these firms)<sup>2</sup>.

Instead of making trade "free", "free trade agreements" regulate it. The emphasis that trade agreements used to place on tariffs and quotas has been replaced by a system of rules and regulations on different themes, such as intellectual property or investors' protection. Free trade agreements are used, for example, to extend the duration of industrial patents, which is equivalent to defending a monopoly. It is the opposite of free trade and leads to rising drug prices, among other consequences. Through investment clauses included in the "new generation" of trade agreements, multinational firms have gained access to international arbitration tribunals whereby they can sue countries, beyond national laws, and citizens or governments cannot resort to the same tribunals to sue investors.

The negotiations of free trade agreements are conducted in the utmost secrecy and submitted to parliaments for approval or disapproval when they can no longer be modified. However, large corporations have easy access to the documents and the diplomats

who negotiate the agreements throughout the whole process. These power asymmetries account for the asymmetry in the results and shed light on why agreements, ultimately, favor the pharmaceutical and agrochemical industry over the sustainable agriculture of small farms managed by women. Thus, the incorporation of truthful labels describing the content of processed food can be reported as a "barrier to trade" while the provision of generic drugs (often ten times less expensive) is not praised for extending free trade, instead, it is considered a violation of "intellectual property" in a legal hierarchy where the latter has precedence over the right to health.

In this context, the old metaphor on international trade as a rising tide that lifts all boats, big and small (thus, favoring women), is no longer true. In increasingly unequal societies, some women (and many men) in five-star cruisers are lifted by trade agreements designed by themselves, while artisan fishing barges are destroyed by the storm.

Considering the absence of tools to foresee the myriad impacts of free trade agreements before they are signed, citizens and, particularly, women's rights advocates must insist on the precautionary principle (when serious risks are involved, abstain) and on transparency, throughout all negotiations. After all, the gap between neoliberal post-Cold War promises and the injustices of real globalization is one of the causes of the increasing chauvinism that alarms and concerns democratic activism.

### NOTES

1 See "Smallholder Farmers' Rights are Women's Rights," available in <https://www.globalpolicywatch.org/blog/2018/03/20/smallholder-farmers-womens-rights/>

2 See "What Do Trade Agreements Really Do?" available in <https://drodrik.scholar.harvard.edu/publications/what-do-trade-agreements-really-do>



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## More information and resources available at DAWN's website: [www.dawnnet.org](http://www.dawnnet.org)

### DECLARATION OF THE WORLD WOMEN'S ASSEMBLY "MARIELLE FRANCO"

"We are women, lesbians, trans, bisexual, non-binary, from all around the planet, with no distinction; we are a force of resistance to all forms of oppression, inequality and discrimination; and we are ready to take collective action to stop this historical process of violent domination that is subjugating us".  
Read the full Declaration::

<http://dawnnet.org/publication/declaracion-de-la-asamblea-mundial-de-mujeres-del-fsm-2018/>

### SPECIAL COVERAGE: DAWN AT THE WORLD SOCIAL FORUM 2018

As part of its engagement in the World Social Forum (WSF) 2018 that took place in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, DAWN held a two-day dialogue with feminists from around the global South on "Fundamentalisms, militarization and Corporate Power" and coordinated two self-managed workshops (14th and 15th of March) within the WSF. It also participated in the coordination of the World Women's Assembly. Check out the main pieces of information, pictures and videos shared from those days:

<http://dawnnet.org/2018/05/special-coverage-dawn-at-the-world-social-forum-2018/>

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