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TRADE AND TARIFF WARS & THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Trade can both create opportunities and exacerbate existing gender inequalities in societies and in economies.

Mariangela Linoci, BFW 2025

International trade regimes are considered to be non-gendered and non-racialised with policies based on state-market relations and the discourses around these (Mengesha 2008). Research by feminist scholars and activists establish that global markets generate imbalances, inequalities and maldistribution. These do increase vulnerabilities but at the same time can also provide opportunities to women. Economic policies including trade and tariff policies do not affect men and women in the same way and hence they are not gender neutral.

Several countries in the world today are once again adopting nationalist agendas and protectionism. This emerging trend is led by the US that announced unilateral “reciprocal tariffs” being imposed on most countries in the world. This is likely to be destructive to trade supply chains and can lead to tariff wars with devastating impacts on the people of the Global South, especially on women and girls.

How do tariffs impact countries of the Global South? What are the impacts of protectionism/trade wars on women, especially on women working in global supply chains and on women as producers and consumers in the Global South? Tariff wars are challenging for many, especially women, who are stuck in this. How can we as South feminist turn it around as an opportunity to build collectives and stronger alternatives that focus on domestic markets, domestic production and neighbourhoods? How can the Global South move out of the shadow of colonialism, neo-colonialism, green colonialism, climate colonialism is the question. The paper seeks to explore these and related questions as well as alternatives and recommendations for a just and equitable trading system globally. The paper was developed from our research and conversations with feminists in the Global South including from an online seminar hosted by BRICS Feminist Watch (BFW) in partnership with PWESCR (Programme on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), SEATINI, AWAJ Foundation, Global Afro-Descendant Climate Justice Collaborative, and with financial support from Heinrich Böll Stiftung, India Office.

Negotiations between the US and other countries are an ongoing process, so the paper is based on past as well as contemporary research and debates. In this paper we argue that as trade increased, more women joined the labour force and contributed to better livelihoods for their families but at the same time gender inequalities continued in multiple ways. We unfold the tariff package imposed as an extension of neoliberal economic policies and how these impact women at every stage of production, distribution, and consumption. The recent tariffs levied by US President Donald Trump establish the interactions between lives of ordinary women on the ground and the gendered nature of the international trade regimes. It is the poor women living in the Global South that bear the burden of trade liberalisation and tariffs. Simultaneously, these tariffs provide an opportunity to countries to reconsider trade practices to re-create gender sensitive economies and trade policies. We conclude by re-imagining and recommending how trade and tariffs can provide better opportunities for women.





Background: Failure of the Neoliberalism and Tariff Model

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Trade and tariff wars are a trap for low income developing countries, particularly in Africa, to get into high debt. Trade wars fundamentally undermine multilateralism.

Phelisa Nkomo, BFW 2025

For decades multilateral organisations sought to create rule-based regimes designed by developed Western countries and elite corporations for international trade, and by tariff policies like the General Agreement for Tariffs and Trade (GATT), established in 1948. The formation of the UN Conference for Trade and Development (UNCTAD) in 1964, talks like the Doha Round, held in 2001, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO), formed in 1995, were meant to strengthen such regimes. However, it is important to note that the global international order was rigged from the beginning regardless of the UN or the WTO. It was always set up in the interest of the powerful – the West. Even the EU no longer pretends that the rules of the game work.

Neoliberalism and trade liberalisation have led to export-based growth that has benefitted China and other Asian and Global South countries that expanded their manufacturing and service sectors. China was the first to reform from a planned to a market economy followed by other countries like India, Vietnam and Brazil. The manufacturing growth in the Global South and de-industrialisation in the US, combined with US debt to its own Federal Reserve led to rethinking of economic policies.

Tariffs are protectionist measures linked to international trade whereby countries tax imported products to reduce the competition for their own manufactured goods and agriculture and also to protect their own economies. It is a practice that is followed globally by northern and southern countries. Changes to tariff policies started in the 1980s with neoliberalism, globalisation and freer market ideologies, conceptualised as financialisation of Western economies to make them more profitable. US tariffs in this period were about 2.5% on average (Neufeld 2025). The Global South countries were induced to structurally adjust their economies, open their markets, and join globalisation. The World Bank/ IMF made globalisation conditional for loans for developing countries.

In the Global South, the enforced neoliberal model led to higher GDPs derived from manufacturing sectors based on cheap, often low skilled gendered labour, and lax environmental standards. As export producing manufacturing increased, female labour force participation increased dramatically (Lim, UN 2000). However, conditions for women workers remained poor. The WTO introduced Special and Differential Treatment (S&D) provisions that granted developing countries with favourable conditions like lower tariffs to help promote weaker economies. The Least Developed Countries (LDCs) were given preferences in trade and minimum tariffs (Haveman and Shatz). It helped many LDCs alleviate poverty and improve their economic status but at the same time also pushed these countries into debt and eroded their natural resources and environment. Behind the façade of these global policies, generally, were corporations and financial sectors setting their agendas – liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation – in the name of creating an “enabling environment”. This resulted in dumping of cheap imports, increasing primary commodity export dependence, privatisation of public goods and services and shrinking social security cover in LDCs.





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Informal economy and the global supply chains are very corrupt. There is no accountability. The US government does not monitor the US companies' responsibilities in supply chains. But they only want more profits. They do not pay tax in my country. Why do we have this kind of imbalanced business?

Nazma Akter, BFW 2025

In 2025, President Trump put tariffs on the centre stage in his bid to “Make America Great Again” (MAGA). The motive was to reduce trade deficits and imbalances and use the tariff regime as an instrument for leveraging US interests and retaining primacy globally. On 2 April 2025, tariffs between 10% and 50% were announced arbitrarily on almost a hundred countries and then the US proceeded to negotiate with each country individually. Tariffs are part of a strategic shift to re-industrialise the US through ‘reshoring’, by making imports costlier and pushing companies to relocate production. These measures are not purely economic, but economics is used to push countries and to intervene in political systems.

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Trade has always been weaponised against developing countries. For example, the US imposed heavy tariffs on Brazil to reduce former President Jair Bolsonaro's sentence by the Brazilian Supreme Court, which is an issue of national sovereignty. It is estimated that Brazil would lose US\$ 175 billion per year with these extra tariffs. The move would eliminate 1.3 million jobs and adversely impact small businesses and agriculture that are mostly led by women

Denise Dora, BFW 2025

Similarly, the US imposed high tariffs on India in retaliation to the latter purchasing Russian oil. Tariffs signify a failure of the neoliberal model that led to an increased concentration of wealth, financialisation and de-industrialisation in the West (Stiglitz 2002).

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It's important to make the case that tariffs – as we know from historic evidence that when you start manipulating tariffs in a way to benefit the elite whether it's our local elite or the global elite or in this case now the American elite – disproportionately affect the poorest among us and particularly women and have the possibility for retrograding generations of gender equality and poverty eradication programmes.

Mariama Williams, BFW 2025

But this protectionist turn is already having adverse ripple effects in the Global South with supply chain disruptions, inflationary pressures, and heightened uncertainty for sectors like garments and electronics that are highly dependent on informalised women's labour. At the same time, feminists have argued that the moment is also an opportunity for Global South countries to re-structure and diversify their trade policies with a more gender inclusive and gender sensitive approach, and to focus more on regional and domestic markets for sustainability and to reduce dependency on the West.



Trade and Tariffs: What's at Stake for Women?

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The impacts of trade and trade policies on women are very much country and context specific. So, you can have countries that benefit from trade providing a lot of employment opportunities to women where some sectors expand due to their export. But women working in other sectors in wage employment in import competing sectors within the same country may be affected negatively. Trade may create opportunities for women but it can also exacerbate some existing inequalities already present in society and in the economy.

Mariangela Linoci, BFW 2025

Economic policies including trade policies are not gender neutral and do not impact men and women in the same way. Increased trade and low tariffs did enable millions of women to join the workforce. However, trade policies continue to operate in a gender – blind framework, failing to account for the differentiated impacts on women's paid and unpaid labour, care responsibilities, and access to markets and other resources and mobility. Meanwhile, social safety nets remain threadbare. Trade and investment regimes with less government regulations for labour or environment do impact every aspect of women's lives, exacerbating and creating inequalities. The expansion of manufacturing in the Global South, therefore, has been a double-edged sword. It has increased employment, especially of women workers, helped the GDP of these countries to grow resulting in enhanced public provisioning and infrastructure for basic rights and services. These export producing units did bring many women into the workforce that sustained and improved the livelihoods of millions of households. For example, the lives of women were transformed in LDCs like Bangladesh and Lesotho as they joined the labour force. Human development reports show the increase of literacy and healthcare facilities for children as more women joined the workforce (UNDP 2023-24). The impact of greater participation of women in the workforce is often cited as an indicator of development since women support family livelihoods and are committed to educate their children.

Potential Positive Impacts of Trade on Women

Economic Empowerment: Trade can enhance women's access to better jobs, higher wages, and pathways to skilled work and entrepreneurship.

Improved Living Standards: Increased economic participation through trade can lead to broader benefits for women, including better access to education, healthcare, and technology.

Reduced Inequality: By fostering economic growth and diversification, trade can reduce economic inequalities and contribute to poverty reduction for women.

With economic empowerment, women are more likely to be in decision-making and leadership positions.



Trade and Tariff Wars and their Impact on Women in the Global South

At the same time the conditions of workers remain abysmal. Free markets with human rights violations and environmental degradation drive profits. As value chains worth trillions of dollars keep popping up, women in the Global South continue to be at the bottom of the global value chains, labour in sweatshops, make poverty wages, and risk permanent health impacts – all while performing unpaid care work that enables men's participation in the paid economy. Paradoxically, trade liberalisation necessitates the exploitation of women as sources of cheap, disposable labour, yet it is promoted as a tool of women's empowerment. Women are key drivers of the economy, in terms of both production and unpaid labour. They are systematically underpaid, occupationally segregated, and marginalised, and their domestic unpaid work is invisibilised and devalued. It is well established by feminist scholars and activists over decades that the negative impacts of trade liberalisation on women are far greater than the positive effects. Leading international finance and trade institutions such as the World Bank, IMF and WTO based in the Global North are failing to respond to the problems facing the Global South. Trade in its current form is incompatible to women's wellbeing or gender equality. Many official trade forums, international trade and financial institutions now discuss social components of trade policy and trade liberalisation. However, such debates are superficial and take place with little or no regard for women's real needs, interests, and lived realities. This is what feminists are calling "pink washing" of policy – inserting gender and stirring and calling it women's empowerment (Gender and Trade Explainer #1, 2024).

Higher tariffs impact countries of the Global South and do negatively impact women more than men. Women in the Global South, already positioned at the lower rungs of global value chains, are absorbing the first shocks. In Bangladesh, where 80% of garment workers are women, the fallout includes job losses, wage suppression, and factory closure. In India and Sri Lanka, women-led micro-enterprises and cross-border traders are squeezed by supply insecurity and inflation.

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Feminists have argued that free trade that has dominated the Washington Consensus and WTO trade liberalisation has brought women into the labour market under exploitative conditions. Certainly for some women there's been some gain, but taking the long view, women have yet to make significant gains

Mariama Williams, BFW, 2025

So ultimately for women, social protection and trade justice needs to be a priority. Women and development analysts need to get on the drawing board and look at gender impact of trade and tariff policies, at neoliberal economic policies and fill the gaps that improve women's and families' lives.

Tariff War and Women: Challenges and Vulnerabilities

Job Losses in Export Sectors: Women in the Global South are heavily concentrated in export-oriented industries like textiles and garments, which are highly sensitive to trade shocks and price changes. When tariffs are imposed or trade uncertainty increases, these industries often face cancelled orders and production cuts, and women are typically the first to be laid off, often without severance.

Increased Unpaid Care Work: Economic crises and job losses resulting from trade conflicts often lead to a dismantling of social infrastructure and shortages of basic services like water, fuel, etc. Women disproportionately absorb the burden of this crisis through increased unpaid domestic and care work, further limiting their time for paid employment, education, or political organising.

"Pink Tariffs" and Consumption Patterns: Tariffs often result in higher consumer prices on essential goods such as food and clothing. Because women in poorer households spend a larger share of their income on these necessities for their families, they are disproportionately affected by the resulting increase in the cost of living.

Barriers for Women Entrepreneurs: Women-owned businesses in the Global South are often smaller, more credit-constrained, and less able to weather disruptions caused by trade wars. They face greater difficulty in securing trade financing and are more likely to drop out of international markets during periods of volatility.



Can Tariff Wars be an Opportunity for the Global South?

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Sometimes we get caught into the dynamics of loss but we don't always see immediately the advantage that this brings for us. We need to recognise the damage and the loss, but we also need to think of this as a strategic moment. What are the positive impacts of this trade war? THINK!

Mariama Williams, BFW 2025

High tariffs imposed by major economies, particularly the US, create both significant challenges and strategic opportunities for the Global South. While hurting export dependent sectors, they disrupt established trade routes, erode developmental gains and create uncertainty, prompting developing nations to strengthen South-South trade, build regional blocs, diversify economies, move up value chains, and assert greater economic power, potentially accelerating a shift towards a multipolar world order. Such tariffs encourage deeper economic ties and trade within the Global South. They strengthen regional initiatives such as the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) and African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as nations seek alternatives to the North-led trade and push countries to adopt economic diversity to reduce dependence on single markets (like the US) and diversify their export baskets. Further, they force businesses to upgrade, innovate, move into higher-skill services (e.g., India's tech sector), and build internal capacity. They also create space for strategic recalibration for the Global South to assert interests, forge new alliances, and demand a fairer global trade system, moving away from rules set by the Global North.

Trade wars can act as a catalyst for national governments and international bodies to adopt more gender-responsive trade strategies. This includes implementing policies that address structural inequalities, improve access to education and finance for women, and strengthen social protections to mitigate trade shocks. Besides, they accelerate the shift towards multipolarity in global economic power structure in favour of emerging economies, challenging traditional dominance. In essence, while tariffs initially hurt, they also create a situation where the Global South is compelled to build self-reliance, strengthen internal markets, and create a more balanced global economic landscape.

Ultimately, a feminist analysis emphasises that while new market opportunities may arise, the existing gender inequalities within economies of the Global South mean that women are more likely to bear the negative consequences of trade wars unless specific, targeted policies are implemented to support them. It suggests that while tariff wars might seem to create potential opportunities for the Global South by causing trade diversion, the reality for women is primarily one of increased vulnerability, job insecurity, and economic hardship. Instead of viewing tariff wars as a direct opportunity for the Global South, a feminist analysis frames them as a moment of crisis that exposes the weaknesses of the current economic system



Tariff wars have a positive and inspirational effect in China, especially for business women. (Lucy Niu, BFW 2025)

- Higher tariffs have encouraged Chinese women to pay more attention to global politics and international relations and how it impacts their businesses.
- Chinese women in such a situation have become very resilient and are finding alternative ways to sell their products, including internally.
- As a responsibility to the country, Chinese business women are also taking more responsibilities to keep workers in their factories, following a “one worker, one family” motto.

Mariama Williams' expert intervention at the webinar: Trade and Tariff Wars and their Impact on Women in the Global South, BFW 2025

- This is a strategic moment. We are at the brink of it.
- For too long, many South governments have settled for the low-hanging fruit – the cheapest labour, which are women, the cheapest sectors, without planning the economy, without thinking about industrialisation, without thinking about how to diversify the economy, and how to work best with our immediate neighbours. We're always thinking of the faraway markets in Europe and America.
 - Trump has brought this consideration back and he's thrown out the rule book.
 - As feminists, for a long time, we have been saying that these talks about free trade that have dominated the Washington Consensus that dominates WTO trade liberalisation and the other values of it have been detrimental to the economic development and to the development of women in the South.
 - As women, we have tangentially, tenuously been clinging to a global market system that has not improved our lives significantly. The rule book, the rubric of the WTO, which we are now even saying that Trump is violating, has not been good for us.

For the Global South to truly gain, countries must:

Rebalance global trade by pushing for a more equitable global order that challenges the double standards and hypocrisy of the Global North's protectionist policies.

Implement gender-responsive policies that go beyond simply incorporating gender provisions into free trade agreements. Genuine change requires strong political will and investment in social protections for women.

Increase social security and support. To protect against economic shocks, policies must support women's economic rights through social security, access to finance, and collective bargaining.

Diversify markets to reduce dependency on powerful trading partners, but with a focus on improving social protections rather than simply shifting reliance from one exploitative market to another.

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In summary, a feminist analysis reveals that without a deliberate and gender-sensitive policy response, tariff wars widen existing gender gaps and increase the vulnerability of women in the Global South rather than presenting a genuine opportunity. Global South feminists also question the moral compass of BRICS. This southern group needs to really think about how to undermine a neoliberal political economy, which continues to trap the Global South economies and pushes them into poverty

Phelisa Nkomo, BFW 2025





Recommendations:

Women from the Global South have the idea that the Trump sanctions are coercive economic measures. That they are designed to keep the lesser developed economies at bay. That these tariffs will harm women unequally and harshly and negatively impact their livelihoods. They collectively believe that they need the South to go back to the drawing board of the new international economic order of South-South dialogue to mine the essence of the Bandung Conference on Afro-Asian solidarity and South solidarity. As feminists we need to question why our economies are so dependent on the US for exports and why our economies have not been diversified. We need to focus our trade with our neighbours and the region. China has managed to escape some of gendered hardship because of the development of the internal markets but most other countries have neglected internal markets and focussed on outward growth. As feminists we need our governments to rethink how we reinvent, fence and protect people at the domestic level – not just those who are in trade but also those in the agrarian and rural economy, people who are without water, adequate food and protection. We need to push our governments to go back to industrialisation, to planning our economies where gender sensitive policies are mainstreamed and women are part of all economic processes – from planning to execution. We need to bring the voices of women, the marginalised and poor on the table of policymakers so as to diversify and plan a holistic and inclusive development.

Here are some recommendations to move towards gender just trade policies:

- 1 Gender concerns need to be part of all policies and programmes. How do we move towards gender-sensitive and rights-based trade policies? Women should be imparted with skills and training. Safety concerns of women workers need to be prioritised. And the labour market should be fair and equal for both men and women (ILO).
- 2 **Gender responsive trade policy is a two-step approach:** a) Gender impact assessments are important, to tell the countries which sectors will be impacted and which measures need to be put in place to mitigate the negative impacts of trade and tariffs, especially on women. Shift analytical focus to the nature of employment created for women that is qualitative rather than simply on whether employment (quantitative) will be created. Moreover, a broad effort to collect disaggregated, qualitative data will facilitate the closing of the gender data gap. Conduct social impact and human rights assessments before (periodically during) and after the implementation of trade and investment agreements with engaged participation of civil society, women's groups and impacted communities. b) Recognising the importance of including gender considerations in trade agreements, which could be in the forms of provisions or chapters. Some countries are really advanced in this format where they have included such chapters into trade agreements. There are ways and tools that countries can leverage in the current situation. Even if there are time constraints, these tools exist.
- 3 **Include women's rights organisations** in trade and investment agreement negotiations. Feminist activists and scholars have heralded advances in understanding the specific gender impacts of trade, yet their analysis and consultation are at best tokenised and at worst ignored.
- 4 Have a gender sensitive manner to the evolving trade dynamics by **providing support for women in the affected sectors**. First of all, upskilling, reskilling, technical and vocational training need to be done to help them transition into other jobs and provide social protection (Mariangela Linoci, BFW 2025). Second, leverage existing tools by conducting gender impact assessment, gender provisions and trade agreements.



Trade and Tariff Wars and their Impact on Women in the Global South

- 5 **Leverage South-South cooperation.** Global South countries have focused their trade on long distances to the US. Most of our countries have internal markets that have been neglected. South-South cooperation helps countries to diversify with the countries in the same region. The African free trade area is an example of how this trade can be leveraged even more. It can really support even the creation of jobs for women. South Africa has a trade surplus of about US\$30 billion with the US but has a trade deficit of about more than US\$200 billion with BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) countries. It is most important to strengthen South-South cooperation. Regional organisations like Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and BRICS should develop creative policies for trade cooperation and focus on women led development. There is an opportunity to disrupt the global value chains and open new trade routes (Phelisa Nkomo, BFW 2025)
- 6 **Leveraging the rules-based trade**, which is the multilateral trading system, remains a pillar of fair and predictable and equitable trade. It plays a role in advancing development goals and some of these aspects could be leveraged by countries in terms of accessing aid for trade and technical assistance. Ensure the rules in trading systems are inclusive of Global South representation and interests.
- 7 This is a moment that, as feminists, we need to push our governments to rethink and to go back to industrialisation to planning of the economy that can reinforce the poor.
- 8 **Reform domestic industrial policies** and provide incentives to industries that genuinely focus on gender equality. Support development of a national resilient economy (Phelisa Nkomo, BFW 2025).
- 9 There also is a need for collective action and for the Global South to unite, for BRICS and Global South to come together – for women to come together, to have communication and to find mechanisms for trade collectively such as initiating **Global South Women's Trading Platform** (Lucy Niu, Anuradha Chenoy, BFW, 2025).

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