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**Trade and Gender:
Opportunities, Challenges and the Policy Dimension**

Note by the UNCTAD secretariat

Executive summary

Gender equality is a universal goal that is enshrined in many international instruments such as the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, indicating strategic objectives and actions in a number of areas, and notably regarding women's role in the economy. The Millennium Declaration adopted by Heads of States at the Millennium Summit in 2000 reaffirmed the primacy of poverty alleviation and gender equality as development goals. While gender equality is a fundamental principle that should be respected in all societies, it is important to analyse the relationship between gender equality and development in order to ensure that the development process fully integrates gender equality concerns, and that, in turn, the pursuit of gender equality objective supports growth and development. Trade as the most important form of globalization and source of growth and development can have important implications, both positive and negative, for gender equality. Policies and measures to promote gender equality and to address any possible setbacks need to be identified, bearing in mind the development needs of developing countries. Based on an analysis of the gender impact of trade, a number of policies and measures can be suggested in the areas of export-oriented development strategy, employment conditions, trade policies, multilateral trade rules, capacity building and financial support for women entrepreneurs.

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Introduction

1. Gender equality is a universal goal that is enshrined in many international instruments such as the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979). The Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which indicated strategic objectives and actions in a number of areas, and notably regarding the role of women in the economy. The Declaration identified the need for more analysis of the impact of globalization on women's economic status. Among many actions to promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources, it was recommended that Governments seek to ensure that national policies related to international and regional trade agreements did not have an adverse impact on women's new and traditional economic activities. The Millennium Declaration adopted by Heads of State at the Millennium Summit in 2000 reaffirmed the primacy of poverty alleviation and gender equality as development goals.

2. While gender equality is a fundamental principle that should be respected in all societies, it is also important to analyse the relationship between gender equality and development in order to ensure that the development process fully integrates gender equality concerns, and that, in turn, the pursuit of the gender equality objective is supportive of growth and development. Trade as the most important form of globalization and source of growth and development can have important implications, both positive and negative, for gender equality. Policies and measures to promote gender equality and to address any possible setback need to be identified, bearing in mind the development needs of developing countries.

3. Nearly 60 years after the creation of the UN Commission on the Status of Women in 1946, significant progress has been achieved in some areas, notably with regard to women's participation in the labour force, a narrowing of the wage gap between men and women in some countries, and an improvement in women's educational level. However, in the majority of countries, women are still at a disadvantage with regard to their role and position in the economy (ILO 2004). Given the recognition of gender equality as a legitimate goal for humanity at large, why do gender inequality and discrimination against women persist in the workplace?

4. Many reasons contribute to this situation. In many societies, cultural, religious or family norms continue to confine women to certain roles and are barriers to their participation in economic life on an equal basis with men.¹ Furthermore, women perform the reproductive functions in the family, including caring for children and the elderly; the resulting division of household labour makes it difficult for women to have a full-time job in the labour market. Even if women succeed in participating in the labour market, discrimination against them may persist, even though it is not economically efficient, because the prevailing gender order gives more authority to men in society. To preserve this authority, men tend to exclude women from their decision-making networks.² Another explanation is related to employers' possible lack of information regarding their women employees; employers often underestimate the productive potential of women and consequently pay them less and confine them to lower-grade occupations. Thus, occupational segregation remains strong despite progress in women's educational attainment. Unless gender norms and perceptions are challenged, discrimination against women in the workplace will persist.

¹ See Tzannatos (1999), Dollar and Gatti (1999).

² For an economic analysis of gender inequality in the labour market, see Elson (1999).

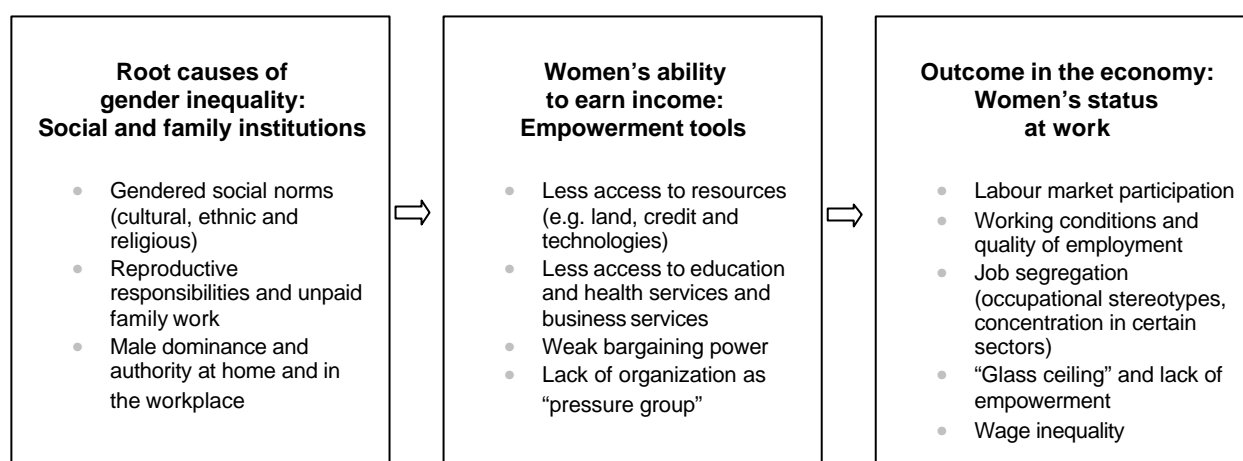
5. Thus, the root causes of gender inequality lie in social norms linked to the traditional reproductive functions of women and manifested by male dominance and authority at home and in the workplace. These factors contribute to weakening women's capacity to earn their own income, as they have difficulty accessing resources (such as land and credit) and other basic services (such as education and health care). Their inferior role in society weakens their bargaining power in the workplace, the more so when they do not have the experience of organizing among themselves as a negotiating or lobbying group. The outcome in terms of the role and status of women in the economy is reflected in insufficient participation in the formal labour market, poor work conditions and quality of employment, job segregation (occupational stereotypes), lack of empowerment, and wage inequality for given jobs also performed by men. This situation is summarized in Chart 1.

6. Gender inequality in the economy thus has many dimensions, involving inequality of opportunities (capacity to earn income) as well as outcomes. These dimensions may be expressed in terms of the following:

- Employment opportunities: opportunities to participate in the labour market in all sectors (horizontal distribution of activities) and all occupations (vertical distribution of activities in a profession)
- Returns to labour (wage equality)
- Working conditions and quality of employment³
- Access to basic services (e.g. health and education)
- Access to resources (e.g. land, credit, business services)
- Empowerment (participation in decision making)
- Distribution of income inside and outside the household (poverty levels)

7. Women are affected by the above factors whether they are wage earners, entrepreneurs or self-employed (home-based) workers. The contribution of growth and development to gender equality should be assessed against these factors. Because of its multi-dimensional character, gender equality cannot be fully achieved if progress is made in only one or a few areas.

Figure 1. Gender inequality in the economy



³ Working conditions and quality of employment include the following factors: the sustainability and regularity of employment, social protection (health, maternity, unemployment and pension benefits), working time, work intensity, occupational risks, opportunities for career advancement and skill upgrading, and the social status attached to a job.

Gender gap: The current situation

8. The proportion of women in the labour force has increased in all regions except two (see Table 1). By the year 2002, women constituted 40 per cent of the world's total economically active population, while in North Africa and West Asia, women's share has stagnated since 1960 at around a quarter of the total labour force.

Table 1. Women's share in the economically active population

Region	1960	1970	1980	1990	2002
World	36.5	37.8	39.0	40.4	40.7
Developing countries	37.5	38.4	39.1	40.0	40.1
Africa	39.8	40.1	40.2	39.7	40.5
Northern Africa	24.0	26.0	27.4	25.2	25.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	43.4	43.3	43.0	42.8	43.6
Latin America and the Caribbean	20.9	23.5	28.0	33.5	38.9
Central America and the Caribbean	20.4	23.1	28.7	31.8	35.0
South America	21.1	23.8	27.6	34.3	40.6
Asia	37.1	38.0	38.9	39.9	39.5
West Asia	28.8	27.2	26.1	23.9	26.1
Central Asia	42.5	46.9	47.8	46.1	47.0
South, East and South-East Asia	37.4	38.3	39.3	40.5	40.0
Oceania	38.4	38.5	39.3	39.5	42.9
Central and Eastern Europe	46.4	47.8	47.8	47.3	47.8
Developed countries	32.3	35.2	38.7	42.4	44.1
America	31.2	35.9	40.9	45.0	46.0
Europe	31.2	33.5	37.2	41.0	43.5
Others	37.4	38.0	38.1	40.8	41.4

Source: ILO.

9. A recent ILO survey on global employment trends for women (ILO 2004) indicates that the labour force participation rate (expressed as the share of employed plus unemployed people in comparison with the working-age population) is also high for women, except in the Middle East and North Africa and in South Asia. However, female labour force participation rates are still substantially below male participation rates.

10. Another aspect of the gender distribution of employment is job segregation, as reflected in the concentration of men and women in certain typical professional occupations. An authoritative book on gender and jobs (Anker 1998) analysed the sex segregation of occupations worldwide. Women have limited labour market choices throughout the world, as they tend to work in a small set of occupations. In addition, the leading occupations for women represent relatively poor jobs in terms of pay, status, decision-making authority and career opportunities. Women are frequently employed as nurses, secretaries/typists, maids/housekeepers, bookkeepers/cashiers, building caretakers/cleaners, caregivers and tailors/sewers. In many parts of the world, men are able and willing to work in other occupations that used to be female-dominated, such as teacher, bookkeeper/cashier and

cook/waiter/bartender. Overall, men typically work as architects, engineers and related technical workers, managers, production supervisors and general foremen, protective services workers, blacksmiths, toolmakers, bricklayers, carpenters and other construction workers.

11. The main occupations for women workers throughout the world have characteristics that are highly consistent with stereotypical qualities associated with women, such as a caring nature, honesty, manual dexterity, experience with and skill at typical household activities, and a willingness to be subservient and take orders.

Gender equality and growth

12. While social norms continue to be the root cause of discrimination, economic growth can play an important role in reducing barriers to gender equality and can eventually contribute to a change in gender social norms and perceptions. Many studies have found a strong correlation between gender equality (often measured in terms of the educational gap between men and women) and economic growth, either on a cross-country comparative basis or on a time series basis for particular countries. Correlation could indicate a causal relationship in any direction, and explanations can be found for the role of growth in closing the gender gap or for the role of gender equality in enhancing the growth process.

13. There is enough evidence of the positive impact of growth on gender equality in education and employment. The explanation is straightforward. As income grows, families are more willing to allocate resources to the education of girls, and growth also creates more jobs that can absorb the entry of more women into the labour market. The rise women's level of education also allows more women to be employed. Ultimately, more active female participation in the labour force will contribute to changing social norms and perceptions about men's and women's roles in society.

14. While the impact of growth on gender equality is well understood, what can be said about the role of gender equality in the growth process? A number of studies have pointed to the positive impact of gender equality, mostly measured in terms of education levels, on growth (Benavot 1989; Hill and King 1995; Barro and Lee 1996). The growth impact of female education is transmitted through its negative effect on fertility and the resulting increase in productivity. A drop in fertility induces a decline in the population growth rate and lowers the dependency burden, thereby increasing per-capita income and savings as well as investment in human capital. This in turn increases productivity in the economy. In addition to this effect on productivity via increased investment in human capital, gender equality in education directly affects productivity by removing the selection distortion factor: because of gender inequality, able girls do not get the chance to be educated. As a result, the innate ability of those who become educated may be lower than it would be if boys and girls received equal educational opportunities, which in turn lowers the quality and productivity of human capital. There is also an externality factor of gender equality in education, as female education is believed to promote better education of children through the enhanced support and general environment mothers can provide their children.

15. The "adverse selection" argument also applies to gender inequality in employment: competent women may be overlooked because of gender discrimination. In addition, a lack of access to other services and resources, such as land, credit and technology (including information and communication technology), in all likelihood reduces the productivity of women as small entrepreneurs and workers, and thereby reduces the output of the economy as a whole.

Trade and gender

16. This leads to the examination of the relationship between trade and gender. How can trade affect the different dimensions of gender equality? Does the multilateral system (understood as a set of multilaterally agreed rules governing trade liberalization and trade relations among states) have any impact on gender in terms of opportunities and outcome (to the extent that outcome is influenced by regulations and policies)?

17. Opening the economy to trade is often seen as bringing benefits in terms of broad-based and sustained growth, as trade will entail a more efficient allocation of resources in the world economy. Trade also allows exchange of the knowledge that is embodied in traded goods and services, as well as the spread of technology and, thereby, a significant increase in the productivity of human and physical capital. Countries will improve their welfare as the demand for goods that they can export on a competitive basis expands, and as the prices of other goods that they consume but do not have a comparative advantage in producing decrease. To the extent that, on a net balance, domestic production expands, income and employment opportunities in the economy as a whole will also increase. In contrast, when the supply capacity of countries is weak and does not allow them to benefit from international trade opportunities, rapid trade liberalization that precedes the building of this supply capacity can bring more pain than gain in terms of reduced domestic output (because of competition from cheaper imports), chronic and unsustainable balance-of-payments deficits, and capital flight (as there are no viable opportunities for domestic investment).

18. The overall effects of trade on the economy affect women in the same way that economic growth and development do, as was shown in the previous section. Economic downturns, on the other hand, may affect more women than men, because in general women constitute a more vulnerable population group.

19. Beyond the general economic impact, within the same country there are winners and losers from trade liberalization – because different sectors of production can gain or lose from international trade, because certain categories of workers or population have fewer capabilities to absorb adjustment costs, and because international competitive pressures to reduce production costs affect workers differently depending on their skills or specialization. Women can gain if the sectors in which they are most active expand, or if they have the required skills. However, especially in poor rural areas and in the urban informal sector, women have fewer assets enabling them to weather the shocks of trade liberalization, and, because of their weak bargaining power, they will often be the victims of international cost competition.

20. Integration into the multilateral trading system can also have a differential effect on the welfare of men and women in several ways. Government's sources of revenue are negatively affected by a reduction in tariff receipts. Multilateral rules may also alter domestic regulations in favour of women or restrict the options open to Governments in the pursuit of their national economic and social objectives, including the objective of gender equality.

21. In sum, trade can affect gender equality in various ways:

- through a positive or negative impact on growth and employment opportunities;
- through competitive pressures that may reduce or encourage gender discrimination (particularly wage differentials);
- by decreasing or increasing barriers to access by women to resources and services; and
- through multilateral trading rules that may make it easier or harder for Governments to apply policies or regulations to address gender inequality.

22. Trade brings new employment opportunities for women in developing countries. Export-oriented industries in developing countries have relied almost exclusively on the massive contribution of low-cost female labour. In low-income countries, there is a large pool of female surplus labour, which results in a very elastic supply of (mostly unskilled) labour. Intensified cost competition among low-income countries for labour-intensive exports could further depress wages for women employed in these industries, and could lead to worsened conditions of work. The preferential demand for female labour is generally related to perceived female characteristics such as docility, dispensability and greater amenity to discipline (Fontana, Joeques and Masika 1998). The types of jobs also tend to be precarious. Employers prefer young women without family responsibilities who are more ready to accept part-time work, flexible hours or seasonal work.

23. A strategy of developing export industries mainly or exclusively on the basis of cheap labour cannot be sustainable. While short-term gains can be reaped in terms of market shares, fierce competition among low-income countries will erode the competitive advantage of early movers in favour of countries with even cheaper female labour surpluses. Under such a scenario, neither long-term development gains nor gender equality (in terms of equal returns to labour) can be achieved. Countries need to implement a long-term strategy to increase the technological content of their exports, moving up the supply chain. This strategy should also ensure gender equality in education and training, so that women's employment qualifications rise in tandem with the increase in the exporting country's technological capabilities.

Gender aspects of multilateral trade agreements and commitments

24. Multilateral trade is governed by a set of commitments contained in multilateral agreements (primarily WTO agreements) and in regional and bilateral arrangements that generally aim at reducing barriers to trade (and investment). Such liberalization commitments can affect women and gender equality in different ways.

25. The gender aspects of agricultural production are particularly complex, and therefore the effects of various agreements on the employment of women in the agricultural sector are also complex. Men and women in developing countries have different roles: the majority of women are engaged in subsistence agriculture and are responsible for food security in the household, while men are concentrated in the sector producing export crops. The liberalization of imports of agricultural products tends to disadvantage women producing subsistence food. Today, women are also employed in the non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAE) sectors, which have benefited from the preferential access to developed-country markets provided first by the Lomé Convention and now by the Cotonou Convention between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. The erosion of these preferences after the Uruguay Round is likely to affect the prospects of NTAE and female employment in this sector in the ACP countries.

26. In the manufacturing sector, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) can have a significant impact on the employment opportunities of women in some countries. The phasing out under the ATC of the quota system of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement will lead to further liberalization of the sector, which will create winners and losers. There is a risk that female workers in this sector in some least developed countries will be particularly affected, as production will move to large countries with a huge female labour surplus.

27. Little is known about the impact of trade in services on women's access to basic services (education and health) or to resources (capital and credit) and other business services. Women, especially poor ones, are generally disadvantaged in their access to basic services (education and health care), utilities (water and energy), and other services, such as financial services,

telecommunications and information technology services, and business services. Access barriers can arise from social norms or customary laws but are often related to the high cost of services or to poor distribution networks unsuited to the small-scale activities of women. The question is whether the liberalization of trade in services reduces or increases these barriers.

28. Exports of services and enhanced access to the markets of developed countries will increase income and employment opportunities for women, thus providing the means to acquire other services. On the import side, liberalization of services can entail both benefits and costs for women as a disadvantaged group (and also for the poor in general).

29. Opening up the services sectors can certainly benefit host countries by enhancing their efficiency through additional investment, upgrading of technology and infrastructure, generation of employment and training opportunities, and improvements in the quality of services provided. The benefits may vary among sectors. In such sectors as transport, finance, communications and information technology, a country's international competitiveness depends on the adoption, acquisition and upgrading of modern infrastructure and technologies. However, the challenge for Governments is to broaden access by the poor (the majority of whom are women), especially in rural areas, to these services through appropriate regulation of pricing practices, cross-subsidization, resource transfers, and so forth.

30. In sectors such as education and health care, liberalization through foreign commercial presence can also bring benefits in terms of upgraded infrastructure and technology, better quality and specialization of services. However, this may result in prohibitive prices for the poorer segments of the population, if public subsidies for poor consumers are eliminated or public funds are used instead to finance huge initial public investments to attract foreign investment. At best, the result may be a two-tiered provision of services, with private suppliers providing higher-quality services to the affluent, while underinvested and resource-constrained public suppliers cater to the lower-income groups, which include a large number of women. Governments can address these inequities in the distribution and quality of such services by promoting linkages between the public and private segments through such means as cross-subsidization, reservation of places for the poor in private institutions, promotion of professional collaboration and exchange between public and private suppliers, and taxation of the foreign and domestic commercial segment to raise resources for the public segment (Chanda 2003).

31. Liberalization of services has the potential to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of host economies, but at the risk of creating or worsening inequities for the poor and for women. In some cases and some sectors, there is a need to protect and support domestic small-scale suppliers of services (very often female-owned small enterprises), which can respond more efficiently and flexibly to the needs of women consumers. In other cases, access by the poor and women to basic services needs to be preserved by appropriate government policies and regulations to address market failures. In the final analysis, it is generally necessary to establish strong domestic regulations before moving ahead with the liberalization of many services sectors, so as to preserve the ability to pursue development and social objectives, including gender equality, and ensure the stability of the financial and economic systems of host countries.

32. Multilateral trade rules can also affect government export promotion programmes to help firms owned by women, minorities or other disadvantaged groups through subsidies. In the goods sector, the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures may cause problems for such programmes.

33. Finally, trade liberalization, by reducing tariffs and tax revenue derived from them, may affect government social protection programmes. Countries particularly vulnerable to revenue reductions include those where customs duties and tariffs provide a significant portion of fiscal receipts. Lower government revenues may, for example, jeopardize the financing of social safety nets, which consist of pension and unemployment benefits and food transfers. These safety nets are provided to cushion the poor against the costs of adjustment as the composition of output and employment changes in response to trade liberalization. Because women constitute a vulnerable population group, they are most often the primary beneficiaries of these safety nets.

Conclusion: The policy dimension

34. International trade can influence the growth process and gender equality in different ways. Trade enlarges markets by facilitating inter-country flows of goods and services and exchange of technology and information, thereby contributing to growth and development. But trade liberalization does not always bring benefits and can entail high costs and misery if domestic production is displaced in countries with weak supply capacities that do not allow them to take advantage of opportunities to access global markets. Trade-induced growth will benefit everyone, men as well as women. However, within the same country, the benefits and costs of trade can be distributed differently between men and women, because society assigns them different roles and because, therefore, gender inequality is persistent. For reasons mentioned earlier in his paper, women constitute a vulnerable social group, and special measures are needed to allow women to advance and to shield them from excessive adjustment costs.

35. A gender analysis of trade and trade liberalization in developing countries reveals the following facts:

- (a) Increased trade and investment in the labour-intensive sectors of the goods and services markets have provided numerous employment opportunities for women in both the formal and informal segments of the labour market. In agrarian economies, however, when import expansion displaces domestic production, women often have to bear the brunt of the costs of adjustment.
- (b) A large and cheap female labour surplus has often provided a competitive edge for export-oriented and labour-intensive industries in developing countries. Working conditions for women in these sectors have not always been good. This cheap labour policy has not contributed to closing the wage gap between men and women. Global market forces have not reduced the gender-based wage differentials in almost any countries in the world. Moreover, in countries that have successfully moved up the technology ladder, the female labour force has tended to lose importance as women have become more disadvantaged in terms of technical qualifications.
- (c) Liberalization of services in particular has the potential to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of host economies, but at the risk of creating or worsening inequities in access by the poor and by women to basic resources and services.
- (d) Multilateral trade commitments and agreements can affect women and gender equality in different ways: by securing or jeopardizing market access in sectors where women are predominant; by potentially affecting government export promotion programmes to help businesses owned by women (or other disadvantaged groups); by potentially limiting the capacity of governments to regulate in support of their development and social objectives (including gender equality); and by reducing tax revenue derived from tariffs, thus potentially affecting government social protection programmes in favour of women.

36. Based on the problems identified above, a number of policies and measures can be suggested. These are outlined in the following section.

Export-oriented development strategy

37. The use of cheap female surplus labour in the context of international production networks of global value chains has allowed some countries to develop competitive export-oriented industries. However, the strategy of relying on cheap labour is not sustainable: either wages will increase with economic development, or female wages will deliberately be kept low unless women organize better as a group and gain more bargaining power. A “virtuous circle” of development would require countries to capitalize on their early successes to develop human capital and upgrade skills and technologies so as to move away from low-value-added and labour-intensive exports. This strategy should also provide opportunities for women to upgrade their skills and qualifications, thus contributing to a firm basis for increasing the productivity and competitiveness of export industries, as well as gender equality.

Employment conditions

38. Improving working conditions and ensuring equality at work should be major objectives. Proactive measures or laws to ensure non-discrimination in the employment of men and women and in the balance between work and family responsibilities could be enacted in line with the various ILO Conventions adopted in this respect. In addition, transnational corporations in producer-driven and buyer-driven commodity chains can be encouraged to adopt gender-sensitive codes of conduct leading to better working conditions for women.

Trade policies

39. The sequencing and pacing of trade liberalization should take into account the impact of such liberalization on gender equality. There is generally a need to enact adequate domestic regulations before moving ahead with liberalization, so as to preserve the ability to pursue development and social objectives, including gender equality, and the stability of the financial and economic systems of the countries concerned. In the manufacturing sector, attention needs to be given to market access issues in sectors employing mostly women.

Multilateral trade rules

40. Multilateral trade rules may sometimes have differential effects by gender. Issues such as those related to the right to food and health require particular attention if the trading system is to contribute to sustainable development in line with the Millennium Declaration objectives.

Capacity building and financial support

41. Governments can enhance women’s capacity to compete in business and in the labour market through training, provision of subsidized services and financial support. Information and communication technology services are a particularly important area because they offer women opportunities to do business more efficiently in a globalizing market. Programmes to support women entrepreneurs are also crucial for the development of small and micro-enterprises owned by women.

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