



The Global Centre

for Social Justice & Advocacy Leadership

Liberation Day, but for Whom?

How Trump's Tariffs Are Undermining Gender Equality – and What Governments Can Do About It

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Jackson McDonough, Nicole Gooch, 'Alopi Latukefu

Introduction

Trump's Liberation Day tariffs have imposed steep import taxes on countries whose exports rely heavily on female-dominated sectors. These tariffs are already triggering job losses, factory closures, and social regression – disproportionately affecting women in the Global South.

This brief outlines the gendered impacts of Trump's tariffs and presents targeted policy responses to mitigate harm and support more equitable trade systems.

Trade and Gender Equality – A Complex Relationship

There is a large body of research showing that international trade has the power to reduce gender inequality by boosting women's role in the economy and expanding their access to skills and education. Trade is linked to higher female wages, increased labour force participation, and narrower gender wage gaps.¹

Trade, however, is far from a silver bullet. Women's employment often comes in precarious, low-paid jobs with poor working conditions, and women remain concentrated in low-value roles and bear a double burden when combined with unpaid care work.²

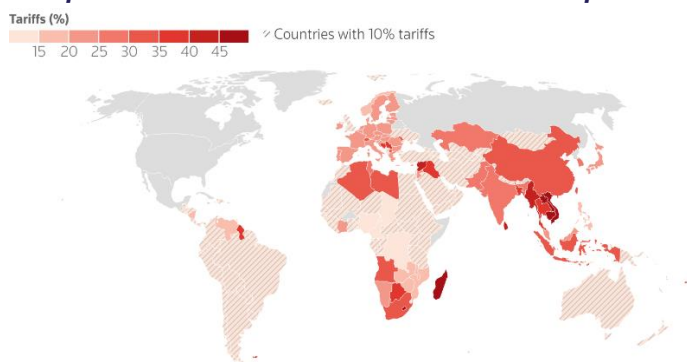
Despite these issues, for many women in the Global South, employment in export-oriented sectors that results from unrestricted global trade still presents as the best path to economic empowerment. Without the trade that enables such jobs, Global South women risk sliding back into deeper poverty, increased dependence, and reduced social agency.³

Background: Trump's Tariff Regime

On 2 April 2025, the Trump administration announced a set of reciprocal tariffs under the banner of "Liberation Day", targeted at countries with which the US runs a large trade deficit (i.e., countries from which the US imports more than it exports). The tariffs are set to come into effect on 1 July 2025, which marks the end of a 90-day pause granted to allow countries to negotiate revised trade terms.

The focus on trade deficits means that, in practice, the tariffs are targeted at low and middle-income countries with low-wage workforces, and which specialise in labour-intensive manufacturing or agriculture.⁴ Such sectors are often highly feminised – setting the stage for the tariffs to have a significant negative impact on gender equality.

Reciprocal US Tariff Rates Announced on 2 April 2025



Source: Reuters⁵

The impact on gender inequality

Global South Manufacturing: Job Losses and Reversed Progress

Many Global South countries (e.g., Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, and Cambodia) specialise in exporting manufactures that are predominately made by female workers – such as garments, textiles, and electronics.⁶ In such countries, those female workers are likely to bear the brunt of the tariff fallout.

As US orders shrink and factories respond by cutting jobs, reducing hours, or closing altogether, women are the first to go, reflecting their more precarious employment status. This not only undermines their financial independence, but threatens to reverse decades of social progress, including delayed marriage, improved educational attainment, and increased agency within households.⁷

Global South Agriculture: Shrinking Opportunities for Rural Women

In several other Global South countries – such as Colombia, Zimbabwe, Kenya and Mexico – women are

central to export crops such as flowers, coffee, and bananas.⁸

In these countries too, incoming reciprocal tariffs (of at least 10%) will reduce export earnings, risking job losses and diminishing financial independence for women.⁹

The USA: Reinforcing Domestic Gender Bias

Even at home in the US, Trump's tariffs are likely to have a disproportionate effect on women. This is because the tariffs placed on countries that export mostly women's clothes to the US are in general higher than the tariffs on countries who export mostly men's clothes.¹⁰

For instance, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam (which all export mostly women's clothes to the US) all face tariffs of at least 44%, while Ethiopia, Jordan and Pakistan (which export mostly men's clothes to the US), face an average tariff rate of only 24%.¹¹

This new tariff distribution will compound the burden of pre-existing "pink tariffs" (i.e., tariffs that disproportionately affect women's products), as American women already face higher tariffs on clothing items than do men.¹²

What Can Governments Do to Help?

Trump's tariffs have exposed deep gender vulnerabilities within global trade. Governments in the Global South and Global North must act now to mitigate the damage, protect progress, and ensure future trade frameworks promote gender equality.

Immediate Interventions for Global South Governments

In the short-term, the focus for Global South governments must be on mitigating the damage caused by the tariffs. To do so, governments should implement policies such as:

- emergency wage support for factories retaining female workers (to prevent mass layoffs);
- cash transfers or school subsidies for at-risk families (to reduce the risks of school dropout and early marriage); and
- incentives for factories to diversify exports or markets (to reduce dependence on the US).¹³

Structural and Long-Term Measures for Global South Governments

In the medium to long-term, Global South policy should focus on policies to reintegrate women into the workforce and remove structural barriers that prevent female employment. These could include:

- gender-responsive reskilling and upskilling programs; and
- reintegration pathways into formal employment (e.g. wage subsidies for women re-entering the workforce after layoffs).¹⁴

Global South governments should also look to diversify export markets away from the US, including by building

South-South trade partnerships that prioritise gender equity.

Trade Policy Suggestions for Building Back Better

As well as working to mitigate the gendered fallout of Trump's tariffs, governments across the globe should use the current situation as an opportunity to improve gender equality within the international trade system. Governments can promote including trade policy by:

- mandating gender impact assessments and minimum workplace health and safety standards in trade negotiations;
- including enforceable social protection and gender equity provisions in trade agreements (e.g. requirements for women's access to unemployment insurance and childcare support).
- phasing out pink tariffs and re-aligning tariff schedules to avoid indirect gender bias; and
- mobilising support through international development bodies for inclusive trade policy.¹⁵

Conclusion

While the fallout from Trump's Liberation Day tariffs constitutes a clear and immediate crisis for women in the Global South, it also offers an opportunity to step back and confront the deeper structural flaws in the global trade system. Gender inequality in international trade is not new - the pre-Trump system already failed to adequately value or protect women's contributions.

Rather than seeking a return to the pre-tariff status quo, this disruption should serve as a catalyst to reflect, recalibrate, and advocate for a trade model that genuinely promotes the rights, needs, and empowerment of women.

Endnotes

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