



Gendered Impacts – Blind Responses

The 2025 Tariff Crisis and the Case for Gender Transformative Reforms

Caroline Dommen

Executive Summary

This publication examines how the dramatic US tariff increases announced in April 2025 have affected women and gender justice across six Global South countries: Bangladesh, India, Madagascar, South Africa, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

Context and Purpose

The 2025 tariff shock was unprecedented in scale and occurred in the context of broader changes underway in the global trading system: declining multilateralism, growing geo-economic tensions, rising acceptance of industrial policy, and attention to distributional impacts of trade. Amidst these risks and opportunities, this publication draws on feminist political economy frameworks to identify how the tariff uncertainties affect gender justice, the extent to which governments took gender into account in their responses to the tariff shocks, and what gender transformative changes to trade policy would ensure gender justice for the future.

Focus and Relevance

The case studies focus on sectors in which the majority of workers are women: garments and textiles in Bangladesh, India, and Madagascar; export citrus in South Africa; informal cross-border trade and vending in Zimbabwe; and several export sectors in Vietnam. The gender lens is of broad relevance as it focuses attention on structural injustices in the trading system: Countries and workers dependent on labour-intensive exports are often the most vulnerable to global economic shocks, while profits flow upwards to importing countries and brands. A gender lens directs our attention to the pressing need for structural transformation of economies if gender justice and economic justice objectives are to be achieved.

Shared Findings on Impacts

Across all six countries, pre-existing structural inequalities amplified the impacts on women of the 2025 tariff uncertainties and women disproportionately bore the weight of the tariffs. The research on Bangladesh and India found that women garment workers faced job losses, reduced overtime, and the erosion of employer-provided work-related services, with factories exploiting the atmosphere of uncertainty to weaken workers' bargaining power. In Madagascar, ostensibly gender-neutral layoff procedures translated into disproportionate job losses for women, who are overrepre-

sented in short-term contractual arrangements. The South African study documented how women seasonal citrus workers in the lowest-paid, most precarious roles were the first to lose employment when export volumes fell, with this loss compounded by their structural exclusion from unemployment insurance. Research in Vietnam showed that shifts in investment and production due to geo-economic tensions can provide employment opportunities for women in some countries and some sectors, but that deliberate policy measures are needed to ensure that these translate into gender-just outcomes. Despite minimal exports to the US from Zimbabwe, women in the informal sector there suffered indirect knock-on effects, including rising prices, income loss, and heightened exposure to gender-based violence. Across the countries studied, tariff-related disruptions have compounded the pre-existing structural inequalities that leave women disproportionately exposed to trade shocks. Income loss intensified women's informal or social reproduction workload, as well as reducing household spending on food, health, and children's education; the effects of this may extend well beyond temporary income loss into longer-term economic and social harm.

Consistently Gender-blind Government Responses

None of the governments studied implemented gender-specific measures or took women into account in elaborating their responses. Policy attention focused almost exclusively on trade diplomacy, export diversification, and firm-level support. The studies uncovered no evidence that governments conducted gender impact assessments, provided worker-directed relief, or included women's organisations in negotiations. This shows that trade policy continues to overlook the needs of women in all their diversity and is treated as a technical domain that only considers a very narrow range of actors and expertise as relevant, yielding trade policy results skewed in favour of those who hold economic power.

Broader Structural Questions

The studies show that the 2025 tariffs deepened competition among countries that export to the US, as well as between sectors and workers, undermining the collective action needed to counter asymmetric trade power. They reveal how deeply entwined gender and economic inequalities are in the international division of labour, raising fundamental questions about the terms on which women and export-dependent countries are included in the global economy, and complicating the argument that trade is positive for women. Similar dynamics to those described in the country studies have played out in previous crises, from the 2008 financial crisis to the COVID-19 pandemic, showing that current efforts within trade policy fora in favour of gender equality in trade are failing to address the structural vulnerabilities that most affect women. More broadly, the studies highlight how unequal international trade and investment rules are, underscoring that gendered vulnerabilities will continue, particularly in developing countries and Least

Developed Countries (LDC) if these structural economic inequalities are not redressed.

Recommendations

The studies put forward a broad spectrum of recommendations for measures that governments, intergovernmental bodies, businesses, or unions can implement to achieve gender justice in trade. Recommendations range from short-term gender-responsive actions – such as conditioning emergency support to businesses on implementation of measures in favour of women workers – to longer-term gender-transformative proposals to address structural causes of gender inequalities – like integrating care into trade policies. Other recommendations include closing data gaps by collecting gender-disaggregated statistics; reflecting informal and social reproduction work in official trade and employment data; extending social protection to informal and seasonal workers; requiring foreign investors and other company owners to contribute to worker relief funds during crises, and broadening the scope of intergovernmental bodies' work on trade and gender to address structural factors that perpetuate inequalities between and within countries. Taken together, the studies' findings and recommendations suggest that incremental measures are insufficient: Gender justice in trade requires a fundamental rethinking of how trade policy is designed, by whom, and for whose benefit.

Access to full study



Gendered Impacts – Blind Responses

The 2025 Tariff Crisis and the Case for
Gender Transformative Reforms

➤ www.fes.de/lnk/study-gender-justice-and-global-trade

About the author

Caroline Dommen is a senior international policy expert and strategic leader working on multilateral diplomacy, economic justice, and sustainability. She advises international organisations on aligning economic policy with social and ecological goals, and supports nonprofits with governance, strategy, and organisational development. She holds leadership roles in feminist economics, trade and ➤ **human rights** advocacy, and ➤ **systems-change** initiatives.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge input and feedback on earlier drafts of this publication from Marina Durano, Marzia Fontana, Anita Nayar, Adrienne Roberts, and Gul Unal, as well as from Fahmida Khatun on the India/ Bangladesh chapter. The authors and editors bear sole responsibility for the opinions expressed in this publication and any errors.

Imprint

Publisher

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.
Godesberger Allee 149
53175 Bonn
info@fes.de

Publishing department

Division for International Cooperation |
Global and European Policy

Responsibility for content and editing

Katia Schnellecke | International Gender Justice and Feminism

Editing

Helen Ferguson

Contact

Christiane Heun
Christiane.Heun@fes.de

Design / Layout

Brendle Grafik | Design, Stefanie Brendle

Image credits

picture alliance/ Ikon Images | Stuart Kinlough

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V. (FES). Commercial use of the media published by the FES is not permitted without the written consent of the FES. FES publications may not be used for election campaign purposes.

September 2026

© Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung e.V.

Further publications of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung can be found here:

➤ www.fes.de/publikationen

