

Gender inequality is hampering effective trade

Gender inequality remains a global problem and although many strides are being made in levelling this disparity, sectors like the trade industry are still feeling its consequences.

“We have certainly come a long way since the 1960s, but much still needs to be done. I think that statements we have seen in the media over the course of the past year by high-profile people such as President Barack Obama and actor Patricia Arquette serves as a litmus test for how far we still have to go. In terms of how we approach gender inequality pertaining to issues such as the economy and trade, I would say that we are still very far. Mainstream economics tends to overlook these issues and the study of trade and gender specifically, for example, is quite new,” explains Carike Claassen of the Potchefstroom Campus’ School of Economics.

This was again made clear at a recent United Nations Conference on Trade Development held at the North-West University’s (NWU) Potchefstroom Campus which was attended by delegates from 25 countries. The focus of the conference was on the role of gender inequality in the trade industry.

“We often neglect to think about the ways in which gender influences our economy,” says Claassen.

“Women everywhere have to contend with the so-called glass ceiling and the fact that the majority of household chores are still done by women, meaning that business women have to deal with big trade-offs in trying to juggle trade and families.

“Looking at developing countries more specifically, female traders face many obstacles with cultural norms, and taboos about what is appropriate for a woman being only one of them. Women in a country such as South Africa, which generally has quite liberal attitudes towards females, might not even begin to understand this, but in some cultures the most basic taboo, such as women not being ‘supposed’ to ride bicycles, can severely hamper female traders’ access to transport. In many societies, women also are not as educated as men, and this of course negatively influences women’s performance as traders and business people,” she continues.

According to her especially African traders face many an obstacle.

“There is also the fact that women tend to be more vulnerable to violence and sexual exploitation, with female traders at border crossings regularly experiencing sexual violence. A World Bank study published in 2013 showed that 54% of cross-border traders in the DRC, Uganda and Rwanda had been victims of threats and sexual harassment whilst 38% had experienced rude behaviour and verbal insults while an alarming 85% had been forced to pay bribes.

In short then, female traders face huge obstacles, which are often very complex in nature with various social factors influencing ability to trade,” says Claassen.

If a more favourable balance is to be achieved, there are number of steps to be taken to eradicate discrepancies between the sexes in industry.

“Personally, I am convinced that outdated cultural norms and attitudes towards women are at the heart of these discrepancies in industry. We need to change society’s view of what men and women are ‘supposed’ to be doing, which of course is a very difficult and complex task. But even something

as basic as getting men to do a fairer share of housework will have huge impacts on how women perform in industry.”

Claassen is convinced that these imbalances are severely inhibiting optimal trade practices between countries and industry sectors: “Gender inequality is ultimately a form of inefficiency. Think, for instance, of the impact that withholding education from females has on an economy. Here is a potential source of productivity and tax revenue, if we assume that more educated women are more employable. However, they are not allowed to develop further. This of course applies to trade as well. In many developing countries, which are reliant on agriculture, female food producers are not as productive as males, since they do not have equal access to resources. This means that gender inequality keeps potential female producers from producing, and agricultural exports will not be as large or productive as they could be if everyone had equal access to resources and opportunities.”

The last 15 years have shown that South Africa have improved in leaps and bounds in ensuring greater equality between the sexes. The UN's Gender Inequality Index (GIN) shows how equal (or unequal) societies are. This is an index which takes on a value from 0 to 1; with 0 representing perfect equality between the sexes and 1 representing perfect inequality. South Africa have a gender inequality index of 0,461, in 2000 it was 0,513. The most equal country in the world is Norway, with a GIN of 0,068. The global GIN is 0,450.

Sonja Grater of the Potchefstroom Campus’ School for Economics said: “I believe that providing more substantial assistance to small and medium sized enterprises in South Africa to help increase their trade across borders, will have definite spill-over effects in terms of economic advances but also for gender equality, especially for small women-owned enterprises. These women can be empowered by an increased presence in the international market.”

Caption: The delegates who attended the United Nations Conference on Trade Development held at the North-West University’s (NWU) Potchefstroom Campus were:

Seated (from left): Evengelista Mudzonga, Zibanani Kahaka, Dawit Desta, Simone Assah Kuete, Zarau Kibwe, Hellen Seshie-Nasser, Joseph Adu and Emmanuel Orkoh.

Standing (from left): Uchenna Efobi, Tume Molete, Marlise Styger, Lorraine Steenkamp, Wilma Viviers, Sonja Grater, David Zavaleta, Angela Kiconco, Diana Nabukalu, Patrice Ongono, Elizabeth Casabianca, Hema Ramnarain, Vlasta Macku, Christian Kamala Kaghoma, Harriet Karikari, Françoise Okah-Efogo, Yao Nukunu Golo, Nkareng Letsie, Tabitha Kiriti-Nganga, Anatole Goundan and Belmondo Tanankem.

Absent: Souleymane Ouedraogo, Anani Mensah