

Free Trade, Fair Trade and Gender Inequality in Less Developed Countries

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ABSTRACT

Fair trade is often viewed as an alternative to free trade that reduces global inequality and poverty. This paper examines whether fair trade is truly an alternative to the free market, and as a consequence whether it can effectively advance gender equality and alleviate the poverty of women in less developed countries (LDCs). First, neoclassical economics and trade liberalization policies are reviewed. The paper then examines how fair trade seeks to correct market imperfections, thereby making the free market more efficient in distributing wealth. The ability of fair trade to address the central issues related to trade liberalization and women in LDCs is discussed, and the gendered structures of fair trade identified. Whether fair trade can provide gender equality within global capitalist structures is a theoretical matter that requires further empirical inquiry. Suggestions for future research, informed by feminist theories of the political economy, are provided. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd and ERP Environment.

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FAIR TRADE IS TYPICALLY VIEWED AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO FREE TRADE THAT WILL REDUCE GLOBAL INEQUALITY AND improve the quality of life for some of the poorest in less developed countries (LDCs). Today, the fair trade market continues to solidify its growth through expanding into mainstream markets, generating 2.6 billion dollars worldwide in 2006 (Fair Trade Federation, 2008).

Yet does fair trade reduce gender inequality and alleviate the poverty of women in less developed countries, who continue to be disproportionately represented among the poor? Gender inequality and the poverty of women in LDCs must be central to any social justice movement if global inequality is to be effectively addressed and development achieved. The United Nations notes that '[E]nding poverty means ending feminized poverty' (UNDP, 2006, p. 5) and the World Bank states that specifically working to include women in the economy is 'smart economics ... that raises economic productivity, and helps advance other development goals' (World Bank, 2007, p. 3). Policymakers operating under the neoliberal paradigm recognize the linkages between gender inequality and development – what about fair trade? Can fair trade address gender inequality in LDCs in its pursuit of social justice and development goals?

While the body of research assessing fair trade continues to grow, the gendered dimensions of fair trade remain obscured, a troubling omission given the feminization of poverty and its centrality to development.¹ My purpose

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¹For example, the articles within the special issue of *Sustainable Development* 13(3) addressing fair trade contain little, if any, mention of the gendered impacts of fair trade. Another prominent example of the omission of discussion related to the gendered dimensions of fair trade is the book *Fair Trade: the Challenges of Transforming Globalization*, edited by Laura T. Raynolds, Douglas Murray and John Wilkinson.

here is twofold. First, I seek to illuminate fair trade's relation to women in LDCs by examining fair trade's linkages to trade liberalization, which, coupled with patriarchal ideologies, continue to perpetuate gender inequality. Gender inequality, as discussed in this paper, encompasses both women's over-representation among the poor and other disadvantages disproportionately suffered by women as compared with men.

Due to the scarcity of research on the gendered dimensions of fair trade, this paper remains primarily at the general level. This lacuna informs the second purpose of this paper, which is to stimulate discussion and research so that we can begin to tease apart how women's experiences under fair trade vary based upon nationality, ethnicity and other historical and contextual influences. To propel this process forward, I provide some suggestions for future theoretical development and empirical inquiry that specifically address the gendered dimensions of fair trade.

This paper progresses as follows. I first briefly review how neoclassical economics and neoliberalism view the relation between trade and gender inequality. This is necessary to understand the context from which fair trade arises. I then discuss how fair trade seeks to make free trade more efficient in distributing wealth by addressing market imperfections; yet, as a result of operating within the neoclassical paradigm, fair trade is unable to address the underlying structures promoting women's poverty and gender inequality in general. I also discuss how fair trade is currently biased towards male producers in LDCs. While I provide numerous gender-based critiques of fair trade, I also discuss how fair trade has improved the lives of individual women despite these underlying structural problems.

After discussing the gendered dimensions of fair trade, I argue that whether fair trade can provide the same opportunities for women as compared with men is a theoretical matter that requires further empirical research. I conclude by providing suggestions for future research that varies based upon feminist theories of the political economy.

Neoclassical Economics and Free Trade

To better understand the assumptions of fair trade and the context in which fair trade operates it is necessary to briefly review the relation between neoclassical economics, neoliberalism and trade liberalization, and how these relate to gender inequality within LDCs. As I discuss below, women's exploitation is a primary mechanism in unequal global relationships between countries due to the use of local patriarchal relations, which are often exploited by enterprises and institutions in order to benefit capital accumulation processes that are located in industrialized countries.

Neoclassical Economics, Neoliberalism and Gender Inequality

Neoclassical economics is central to neoliberalism, the latter of which believes that competitive capitalism, in which the bulk of economic activity through private enterprise operates in a free market, is a necessary condition for political freedom (Friedman, 1982). Neoclassical economics assumes that economic development results from individuals who are free to pursue their self-interest through market transactions. The free market is seen to provide the perfect coordination mechanism to distribute wealth and other resources throughout society, which all ultimately result from the pursuit of individual self-interest. For the free market to work efficiently, government should play a non-interventionist role and should only ensure private ownership of property, enforce contracts and ensure that individuals are free to act upon their self-interest (Wolf and Resnick, 1987).

Fundamental to neoliberalism as a development theory is the belief that economic development can occur only through increased involvement with the global economy. As a consequence, LDCs are encouraged to concentrate on export-oriented activities, such as exporting raw materials and labor-intensive manufacturing, in order to engage more competitively in the global market (Gereffi and Fonda, 1992; Bacchetta and Jansen, 2003; Harvey, 2005). Given the focus upon export-oriented economic growth, free trade, or more formally trade liberalization, is seen as a key component under the neoliberal paradigm for economic growth and for alleviating poverty in developing countries (Winters, 1999). Reducing trade barriers requires policies so that investment can move freely between

countries and producers, and that exporters and importers meet few obstacles in conducting business. These policies include promoting the dismantling of structures of protection such as subsidies to local producers and taxes on imports (Pearson, 2003; WTO, 2008). Neoliberalism recognizes that government revenue is reduced as a result of reducing tariffs due to trade liberalization. However, neoliberal advocates argue that governments can implement policies that are focused upon the needs of the poor and others adversely affected by trade reform, such as workers and companies in specific sectors that have difficulty competing with foreign competitors (Winters, 1999; Bacchetta and Jansen, 2003).

While gender equality is viewed as necessary for the economic development of LDCs, the attention of the WTO and other policymakers to the direct relation between women and trade is limited due to assumptions that gender inequality is a social issue rather than an economic issue (Elson, 1999; Elson and Çağatay, 2000). This belief is consistent with the fundamental assumption of neoclassical economics – that the market is a perfect mechanism for distributing wealth by coordinating the activities of individuals as they pursue their self-interest, and that it is the role of the state to ensure that all individuals have freedom so that they may compete in the marketplace.

As a consequence of this gender-neutral assumption of the market, the WTO continues to do little to directly address gender inequality. This is because the WTO and other economic institutions are not seen as the appropriate place to address gender inequality, for to do so would distort otherwise perfect market mechanisms. This assumption is evident in the ‘gender mainstreaming’ efforts of global policymakers, in which gender inequality policies are focused upon political solutions. In defense of the assumption that the market is an inappropriate place to address gender inequality and in touting the success of a gender-neutral market to promote gender equality through trade liberalization, the increased job opportunities and increased wages that women in LDCs have experienced under trade liberalization and largely in export-competing industries are provided as evidence (Benería, 2003; Nordås, 2003).

Free Trade and Women

While neoliberalism’s gender-neutral assumption of the marketplace dismisses how trade liberalization differentially impacts women and men, research examining the gendered impacts of trade liberalization continues to grow. I focus here upon the direct impacts of trade liberalization upon women in LDCs, as providing an exhaustive account is beyond the scope of this paper. Trade liberalization creates and destroys women’s employment opportunities, and changes the costs of goods and services. These processes and their consequences disproportionately shape women’s daily lives and opportunities in LDCs, as compared with men, in the following generalized ways.

Production Structures and Employment

Trade liberalization has contributed to unprecedented levels of women entering the formal labor force in LDCs, often in export industries (Nordås, 2003; ILO, 2007). Women workers are preferred for export-oriented jobs because they are seen as ‘naturally’ inclined to excel at low-skilled, low-paying jobs; women are seen as being more docile and therefore less likely to unionize and temporary, flexible labor is justified given women’s reproductive responsibilities and the male breadwinner ideology, which views women’s income as secondary to the household. These ‘natural’ traits of women and the associated justifications make business more competitive in the global marketplace by replacing more expensive male workers with cheaper female workers (see, e.g., Fernández-Kelly, 1983; Cravey, 1998; Mies, 1998; Tallontire *et al.*, 2005; Wright, 2006; Bernadino, 2007).

Shifting Trade Preferences

Shifting trade preferences and subsequent changes in a country’s exports and imports impact women’s employment opportunities. When trade agreements are switched to other regions, new export-oriented jobs may be created for women in one nation while job opportunities in the export sector are destroyed and women disproportionately

unemployed relative to men in another nation. Even if the lost jobs impact men more than women, women may be adversely affected either by reducing household consumption or being forced to take additional paid work in either the formal or informal sector (Fontana and Wood, 2000; ILO, 2008). Examples of these impacts include trade agreements between the European Union and Africa, which are predicted to depress the cut-flower industry and sugar processing, both industries that predominantly employ women (Ulmer, 2004). Trade agreements between the European Union and the Southeast Asian Nations are predicted to lead to declines in manufacturing exports, where women make up 90 percent of the workforce and increases in the services sector (Bernadino, 2007). Further, women working in sectors other than export processing may be subject to greater difficulties finding and keeping work due to the availability of cheaper imports (Fontana and Wood, 2000; Kucera and Milberg, 2000; Nordås, 2003; Pyle and Ward, 2003; Ulmer, 2004).

Labor Discrimination

Free trade agreements do not always specifically address gender discrimination and inequality, and some free trade agreements completely neglect any mention of these issues (Ulmer, 2004; ILO, 2007). However, there is an increasing global trend to adopt fundamental principles and rights at work, including non-discrimination and equality (ILO, 2007). Efforts to address employment related discrimination are typically left to various institutions, including governments, companies, trade associations and civil society actors, to implement and enforce (Tallontire *et al.*, 2005; ILO, 2007).

Social Services and the Household

Trade taxes account for approximately one-third of government revenue in developing countries; this in turn helps fund social services such as health and education. Trade liberalization has dramatically reduced these taxes through a reduction of tariffs and the creation of export processing zones (EPZs) where foreign companies are exempt from paying taxes. The subsequent loss in government revenue likely disproportionately negatively impacts women who depend upon social services for themselves and their children (Çağatay, 2003; Pearson, 2003).

Fair Trade: Making Free Trade More Efficient

While fair trade is touted as an alternative to the free market, in reality it is a neoliberal solution to trade problems (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Fair trade advocates argue that trade liberalization does not distribute wealth equally between countries and within countries because key conditions necessary to trade liberalization are often not met (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). This insight can be extended to gender inequality, which is seen to persist because these key conditions of trade liberalization are not being met.

Fair trade directly addresses these key conditions and improves market access in a myriad of ways, including providing more perfect information to producers because remote producers have no access to radio, newspapers or the Internet, or because producers who lack the ability to read are at the mercy of middlemen; and providing access to credit. Fair trade also uses non-market measures such as price floors by setting minimum prices usually ahead of market minima (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). It is instructive to note that proponents of fair trade acknowledge that fair trade distorts the free market through prices. If fair trade continues to grow and becomes a dominant market force, this issue of distorting price-setting must be addressed, as it violates neoclassical assumptions concerning the operation of the market and the allocation of resources (Wolf and Resnick, 1987; Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Fair trade does not include any type of government regulation.

Fair trade also seeks to remedy market imperfections by applying a consumer choice trading model that operates entirely within the free market system while encouraging the expression of non-market values of solidarity at both local and global levels (Nicholls and Opal, 2005; Hayes, 2006). Consistent with the neoclassical assumption that the actions of the self-interested individual lead to societal benefits, under the fair trade rubric consumers, as independent economic actors, choose to give more money to producers in LDCs.

Fair trade advances the neoliberal development agenda by alleviating poverty in LDCs through creating market access. The objective is to empower producers in LDCs so that they develop their own businesses and communities through international trade (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Advocates argue that fair trade exemplifies how producers in LDCs can earn enough income to become rational economic actors and begin to think about diversifying their income and moving out of primary commodity production (Nicholls and Opal, 2005).

Market Trends

Until the 1990s, handicrafts and textiles dominated fair trade stores. During the 1990s continuing through today, growth is largest in agricultural products. This is largely due to marketing efforts positioning fair trade food as being premium quality rather than ethically driven, thus appealing to a broader customer base (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). In 2007, the global fair trade market grew by 47 percent from the previous year. Increases were largest in agricultural products, with sugar and bananas increasing by 72 percent, and coffee, the most established fair trade item, growing steadily at 19 percent. Cotton is a relatively new market, and 14 million individual items made from fair trade cotton were sold in 2007 (FLO, 2008).

An important component of fair trade is product certification. Today, several fair trade products are certified through one of the 19 international fair trade labeling organizations (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). However, not all fair trade products bear the fair trade label. For example, Traidcraft, the largest single fair trade company in the UK, offers the majority of its products without a certification label. This is due to the complex, expensive and difficult process of obtaining the mark (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Certification is ongoing but time consuming and only a few new products are certified every year (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Handicraft items are not yet fair trade certified, due primarily to the uniqueness of the items and the difficulty in setting a price floor (Fairtrade Foundation, 2008). Further, female empowerment and direct female income transfers are not specific requirements for fair trade certification, although fair trade standards do protect against labor discrimination in general (Nicholls and Opal, 2005).

Fair Trade and Women

Fair trade seeks to make trade more equitable and ultimately to make the structures of free-market global capitalism more equitable through consumer choice and improving market access. This is consistent with the fundamental assumptions of neoclassical economics – the pursuit of individual self-interest in a competitive market structure will lead to the collective good. Because fair trade reinforces rather than challenges trade liberalization, fair trade does little to address the structural processes that perpetuate gender inequality.

Rural Bias

Fair trade's emphasis upon agricultural products is biased towards rural producers. This is problematic because the majority of the world's population – particularly in LDCs – now live in urban areas. People living in urban slums account for nearly half of the urban population in the developing world, with Sub-Saharan Africa having the highest proportion of slum dwellers, at 71.9 percent (UN-HABITAT, 2003). The disproportionate number of women living in slums, compared with men, is an increasing problem throughout the developing world, as urbanization and urban slums in particular are growing (UN-HABITAT, 2003).² While women living in urban slums do engage in handicraft production for the fair trade market (Rosenbaum, 2000), the benefits of participating in fair trade continue to elude the most poor and marginalized women in LDCs.

²To the knowledge of this researcher, there are no reliable data available disaggregating the gendered composition of urban slums by region or country; thus I rely upon the generalized findings of the UN-HABITAT (2003) report which states that the habitants of slums are disproportionately women.

Gendered Production Structures

The emphasis upon agricultural products perpetuates and exacerbates gendered production structures that disproportionately disadvantage women. In general, throughout LDCs, agricultural production for market continues to be considered a man's job, while subsistence production for the household typically remains the domain of women. Women produce 70 percent of the food in LDCs but fair trade cash crops such as coffee and cocoa are generally controlled by male household members and male-dominated cooperatives (Nicholls and Opal, 2005).

Women dominate handicraft production, with approximately 80 percent of the artisan cooperatives with whom North American fair trade works being woman run (Grimes, 2000). However, handicraft items continue to lack fair trade certification due to difficulty in establishing a price floor for unique, handcrafted items (Fairtrade Foundation, 2008). Taken together, the over-representation of agricultural products in the market coupled with the inability of handicraft items to obtain fair trade certification impedes women's ability to fully participate in the fair trade market and reap the benefits, as compared with men. This is particularly important because, in general throughout LDCs, women's work and income provides the majority of support for themselves and their children, while men often contribute little of their income to the household (Chant and Brydon, 1993).

Production Structures Under Neoliberalism

Fair trade can benefit those women, both urban and rural, who have the social networks and resources to make handicrafts. However, for those women, particularly in urban areas, who work in low-wage, low-skilled jobs in export-oriented factory work or services, fair trade has little value as it does not address the structural dynamics leading to women being disproportionately represented in these jobs. Advocates of fair trade acknowledge that whether the principles of fair trade that have been applied to small scale production could be applied to manufacturing and service industries remains an open question (Chandler, 2006).

Gendered Allocation of Labor

Women are the primary caretakers of children and the household. As a consequence, making products for fair trade must be integrated into their daily duties, which often makes producing products slower and burdensome for women. Engaging in cooperatives is an important means of reducing this burden (Eber, 2000). Further, patriarchal ideologies are likely to persist, with women staying home and doing the productive work while men, unencumbered by childcare and other household duties, have the freedom and the ability to go into the marketplace and trade the goods and likely keep the income for themselves rather than return it to the household coffers (Lynd, 2000).

Fair trade does provide women with often their only source of cash income with which to care for themselves and their children (Eber, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2000). Yet women must make their handicrafts while juggling their daily duties as women, including caring for children, making meals and engaging in agricultural work (Eber, 2000; Milgram, 2000). Fair trade thus provides an income for women – but at a cost, with extra labor due to their household responsibilities, as compared with men.

Social Services and the State

Fair trade's solution to the diminishing social services in LDCs is to support communally led efforts to acquire social goods such as education and healthcare. While this certainly benefits the local population, at a structural level it continues to undermine the power of the state in providing social services to the population, a process being advanced through trade liberalization.

Communally led efforts to obtain social goods do benefit those most marginalized in LDCs, such as women and children living in urban slums, who otherwise would not get access to education, healthcare and other services (Rosenbaum, 2000). However, participating in the fair trade market to the degree that these services are able to be obtained and maintained is difficult for women marketing handicrafts for numerous reasons, including the

ongoing need for cash flow, the need for strong social networks and keeping informed of fickle consumer tastes (Eber, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2000). The larger structural void resulting from neoliberal policies as the state retreats remains unaddressed, thus disproportionately disadvantaging women who lack the access to communally led efforts to gain various social services.

Fair Trade Cooperatives

Fair trade does provide potential to empower women in numerous ways, as has been eloquently described by anthropological studies of women's cooperatives. In addition to earning an income, women have experienced empowerment to leave abusive husbands, take on leadership roles, discover and preserve their cultures and provide educational and health services otherwise unavailable for themselves and their children (Eber, 2000; Lynd, 2000; Rosenbaum, 2000). Further, women are empowered as decision-makers and gain access to information and microcredit. Many women have also learned how to export goods and increase their entrepreneurial skills and choices (Grimes, 2000). It is important to recognize that women's cooperatives are not infallible; rather, they are susceptible to inequalities based upon age, social class, artisan skill and other sources of status and power (Causey, 2000; Milgram, 2000). Competition between cooperatives for access to export markets is also an issue that can undermine the benefits obtained from collective work (Cohen, 2000).

Future Directions for Research

Fair trade's underlying assumption – that the individual actions of the self-interested, ethically minded consumer will benefit the collective – is consistent with the assumptions of neoclassical economics. As I have discussed in this paper, fair trade is a neoliberal solution to global inequality. As a consequence of fair trade's relation to neoliberalism, fair trade is unable to address the structural components of gender inequality resulting from trade liberalization such as gendered production structures and the retreat of the state in providing social services. Further, I have discussed how fair trade remains biased towards men due to structural issues within fair trade coupled with patriarchal ideologies within the household. In sum, fair trade in its current form remains an ineffective means of addressing women's poverty and overall gender inequality in LDCs.

Fair trade's focus upon making free-market capitalism more equitable is laudable. However, whether gender equality can be obtained under the capitalist system or whether economic alternatives must be sought is a theoretical matter. Feminist theories of the political economy provide some insight into how future research may begin approaching this issue.

For example, liberal feminist theory understands gender equality as occurring when women have access to economic activities equal to that with men; this requires supportive policies in both the economic and social realm. Applying this theoretical framework to fair trade would involve examining how fair trade policies can provide the same economic opportunities for women as for men. For example, certifying women's handicraft products would help open markets for women in LDCs, thereby making fair trade a more equitable structure for women (Nicholls and Opal, 2005). Other efforts might include promoting women's participation in decision-making processes of fair trade at the local level so that their voices and concerns may be heard and addressed, thus helping to empower women and bring awareness to patriarchal structures that exist at the level of the household and the community that impede women's involvement in fair trade.

In contrast to liberal feminist theory, socialist feminist theory focuses not on gender inequality, which assumes equality within existing economic structures, but rather upon women's liberation from the existing structures of patriarchy and capitalism. A socialist feminist perspective is thus deeply critical of fair trade given fair trade's linkages to neoliberalism. A socialist feminist analysis would examine how the nature of women's oppression is changing under fair trade through the reconfiguration of the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism. In many respects, a socialist feminist theoretical perspective informs this paper by examining how fair trade ineffectively addresses the structural processes perpetuating gender inequality in LDCs resulting from neoliberal development policies.

Future research from a socialist feminist perspective could build upon many of the issues raised in this paper, such as how the structures of fair trade exclude women with its focus upon agricultural products and its seeming lack of acknowledgement as to the role patriarchal ideologies play in household production structures. A socialist feminist perspective could also examine how fair trade appears to be developing into two strands as a result of patriarchal ideologies existing within fair trade structures. These two strands, as I view them, appear to be a 'mainstream' male-dominated strand focusing upon agricultural products and the 'artisan' strand focusing upon women's products, which has a more informal structure.³

One cannot dismiss the benefits fair trade has provided to women in LDCs, particularly through cooperatives, in which collective effort benefits the individual – effectively reversing the causal arrow of neoclassical economics, which understands self-interested individual efforts benefiting the collective. It is consistent within the socialist feminist framework to explore how cooperatives might be a stepping stone to a more truly economic alternative to free-market capitalism by addressing both the economic and patriarchal structures that currently oppress women in LDCs. It is important to recognize, however, that cooperatives are not immune to power asymmetries based upon gender, age and skill-level, and between the cooperative and the fair trade organization (Causey, 2000; Cohen, 2000; Milgram, 2000).

Standpoint theory, a strand of socialist feminist theory, also provides avenues for future research by examining the impacts of fair trade from the unique perspective of women through a qualitative methodology. This may provide insights into the complex relationship between fair trade and women in LDCs, whether fair trade from the perspective of these women is exploitative or emancipatory, and the conditions leading to each outcome.

Conclusion

My intent is to bring attention to the gendered effects of fair trade in the hope of stimulating future research into these matters, so that we can more fully identify how trade relations perpetuate inequality and what trade relations are necessary to advance global equality and gender equality in particular. After tracing the relationship between fair trade, free trade and their impacts upon women in LDCs, I have presented several theoretically informed avenues for future research. A critical examination of the gendered dimensions of fair trade is necessary if effective policies are to be made that advance goals for a more socially just world for both women and men.

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³These different strands, which I believe have explicit gendered dimensions, also raise important issues relevant to feminist theory. This involves questions such as whether women's work should be subsumed under mainstream fair trade structures, or whether women's handicraft production should create its own parallel fair trade organizational structure equivalent (or not) to that of men.

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