Mariama Williams on feminists engaging in trade advocacy

By Raijeli Nicole & Tesa de Vela

Isis close to " kidnapped" Mariama Williams for an interview shortly after the forum on domestic regulations sponsored by the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN), Fair Trade Alliance (FTA) and Oxfam-UK last August 2005 in Quezon City, Philippines.

In a cozy cafe aptly called "libreria," Isis executive director, Raijeli Nicole probed IGTN's Mariama Williams on the long road that feminists have journeyed in gender and trade advocacy.

After that high power forum discussion, I hope you don't mind if we go back to some basics. The readers of the Isis WIA magazine are maily members of women's organisations who may not necessarily be familiar with issues surrounding trade.

Why should we be concerned with trade?

I think one of the main things we should be alarmed about is the broad implication trade has for impacting macro and social developments and social equity policies. Trade agreements are moving beyond borders. They are looking at government regulations of goods and services as they cross borders. They are going beyond the normal domain of trade policy. Once you jump over the border and go into domestic trade, then you're impacting on local fiscal policies, on monetary policies, on market regulations. So you're actually impacting on what are called domestic regulations that may be there for health and safety, for affirmative action, for promoting women entrepreneurs, etc., etc.

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Those domestic policies and laws that governments use to regulate the flow of foreign services or foreign investments have social objectives around developmental goals. You might require that foreign investors transfer a certain amount of technology, or you might require that they hire a certain amount of locals at different levels of their workforce.

Domestic regulations are now seen as barriers to trade. What trade agreements are trying to do is say, "Governments can't do that. Governments can make recommendations but that's it." That is what we are now faced with.

A clear example is government procurement. "Government procurement" refers to government buying. So traditionally, governments have used that as a mechanism for stabilising the economy. For instance, if there's unemployment, they create road contracts, etc. Governments also use it to correct socially disadvantaged groups, like cultural minorities or women. Government procurement is a domestic regulation.

There is an agreement on government procurement, which is not yet applicable to developing countries because they refused it but applies mainly to the developed countries. Based on this government procurement agreement, if you are a government and you are going to build a road, you are no longer free to simply act on national tenders. You now have to broadcast it all over the place, be ready to accept the lowest bidder. So the lowest bidder could be from Japan. And you cannot tell the Japanese that they have to bring their engineers. They're going to use your engineers basically because they've also come for the cheap labour.

You can't tell them, "By the way I'm trying to build the capacity of women entrepreneurs so could we have a joint venture." Essentially the mechanisms that governments' use for setting restrictions is getting narrow. There's still some, but it's getting narrower and narrower. So a lot of affirmative action programs under government procurement could be under threat.

You'll also find that agreements not passed in the WTO like certain investment agreements are nevertheless being implemented by the IMF and World Bank. So in a sense the IMF and World Bank are there to plow the field. So when certain policies come up again on the trade negotiation table and you say, "You cannot do it," they'll say, "but you're already doing it!" But they still want to get it into the WTO so that it becomes binding. And that's "coherence." It is this politics of coherence that we face.

You can always say that the WTO is out there but the World Bank and the IMF are at the national levels and national economies where poor women function. They don't have a relationship with the US or with the EU, in the way they do in the South. They're in the South helping to rewrite national legislation, helping to rewrite whatever is ongoing under the music of "poverty eradication." The WTO is claiming to be a friend of the poor, the World Bank is also claiming to be a friend of the poor, everybody has declared they're allegiance to the poor. The poor have never had so many friends! Yet the poor have never been poorer.

What do you think are the fundamental issues in trade for social movements?

Well I think for most social movements involved in trade, it is the impact of trade policies and agreements on all the dimensions of life, one aspect or another. So if I were to take that apart, it would be the issue of food security, livelihoods, and access to essential services. I think those are the real starting points.

If you are doing any kind of organising at the community-based level, you will meet people who will tell you what is going on in the local market. From the Caribbean, Africa, Asia and America, wherever you go and talk with people—average people—regardless of whether or not they're farming, or they live in farms, trade policies have made an impact. For instance, you can find very lovely symmetric tomatoes not bruised or whatever, because it's coming from abroad. But if you meet poor women, their consideration will be, "I can get cheaper tomatoes...." And if they were farmers, or what we call "informal traders," then the complaint would be their losing business. Again because they're competing primarily with European and American firms, even for the most basic commodities.

And then there's the availability of food and the change in diet. People may not speak of a change in diet and nutrition directly. Instead they'll say, "I used to be able to get this type of potato and now it's no longer available... I used to be able to get this type of rice... All I can find now is the American white rice and potato."

Another fundamental issue is livelihood. I think for most people, for the average man or woman, this refers to the change in what they feel in the marketplace. Some of it is favourable—some not. It's favourable when it brings about new commodities, lower prices, etc.

But I think increasingly more people are asking questions about food security. Like, can we really be sure that if the market takes over, it will always mean that prices are right? Will it mean we lose our local producers?

I think the other way in which many people got concerned, and quite rightly so, was right after Seattle (referring to protests in Seattle held during the WTO meeting in 1999). Because they witnessed right in their living rooms this protest. If people in America who are wealthy can be protesting like this, something must be up!

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I understand the farmers were the first group who actually went out into the streets. They were complaining about the fact that they weren't able to sell their tomatoes and their onions. And then the dairy producers were complaining because they weren't able to sell their milk. So I think Seattle was a moment that galvanised the fact that maybe something can be done.

Another thing was the big crisis among the senior citizens in the US who were going to Canada for pharmaceutical drugs. They were going up the border in organised groups because they could get the medicines sold by the same pharmaceutical companies in the US at a much cheaper price in Canada. One state (I forgot which one) was thinking of making this act criminal but the idea of arresting senior citizens for trying to buy cheaper medicines was just too ridiculous. (laughs)

But that whole issue opened up sensitivity to the discussions around health care and medicines. So there was this kind of softening in the US government's position not because it altered its belief but because there was a flaw in its argument. And more importantly, the government is softening on the pharmaceuticals because they're potentially facing a public relations nightmare. And nothing bothers a firm more than its reputation. Thank God! (laughs)

What I'm explaining is the organising built around trade. More people now know that GATS is simply not just about banking services, financial services, but actually about health, education, water, energy and other basic services. And this lies at the heart of livelihood. Water for instance, is not like any other market commodity. If you don't have water, you will die. There's no substitute for water.

What are dilemmas faced by social movements when addressing trade issues?

Well in terms of agriculture, some believe that it never should have been brought in and should not be a part of trade negotiations. But then there are those of us who say, "Yeah, but it's there now! They are writing agreements on it and they are negotiating on it. So we then need to try to mitigate."

That has been a big, big conflict, for me at least. I mean what would happen if we all just went on this one big campaign (against agricultural trade negotiations). Would it work? By mitigating, are we contributing to the profit and process of liberalising agriculture, in trying to follow the facts and arguments of the WTO?

Many of us resolve this dilemma by saying, "Well it's an inside-outside strategy...." (laughs) So the inside is, you know, you understand what's going on in trade.

It's somewhat like a train moving, it's leaving the station, you either board it or not. But some would say, "Okay the train is moving, lets de-rail it!" Because you'll get nowhere if you just get off it.

I think the fundamental contradiction today is about deciding whether to say "Agriculture out of the WTO!" or to try to follow the negotiations and propose sustainable development measures for food security, food sovereignty, rural livelihood, etc.

But then again food security became a kind of football issue in many levels because some would argue that food security can be ensured by global trade. "You don't have to produce your food —you can buy it from America." Not realising this would mean that your food security, your food source is subject to another country's regulations and its own security issues.

What role have feminists played in trade advocacy?

A very trick path! (laughs) I'll give you the challenges and constraints first which you have already rightly noted as basically male-dominated. Many of us came to gender and trade because we were already organising around macro-economic issues. So we're doing that at the periphery. Back in 1995 there were also women who were following the Uruguay Round, particularly, but not solely, the issue of agriculture. There were women farmers I knew who were concerned about what was happening to family farms.

Then the WTO was created. By then we were engaged in the Social Summit. We were also in Beijing. There was some mobilising to get a little bit of language in the Beijing document on WTO trade issues but not a great deal. I guess because then we didn't really know much about it.

By the time the WTO opened its doors and had its first major ministerial meeting in 1996 in Singapore, women's groups that had been working on economic justice attended and had a women's caucus. If I remember correctly it was WEDO, DAWN, WIDE and a couple of groups from the Caribbean. But it was in this informal women's caucus where the big realisation came that women's issues were totally marginal and that the few of us who were there were completely marginalised.

You see we somewhat came from a place of empowerment—the UN. In the UN there had been a good experience with a women's caucus mechanism. There was a clear method and a framework for lobbying, we knew what we were doing. When we got to the Singapore WTO Ministerial Meeting, everything was qualitatively and quantitatively resistant to our presence. We had no access. The space was already controlled by the big NGOs who had been working on various development issues surrounding trade.

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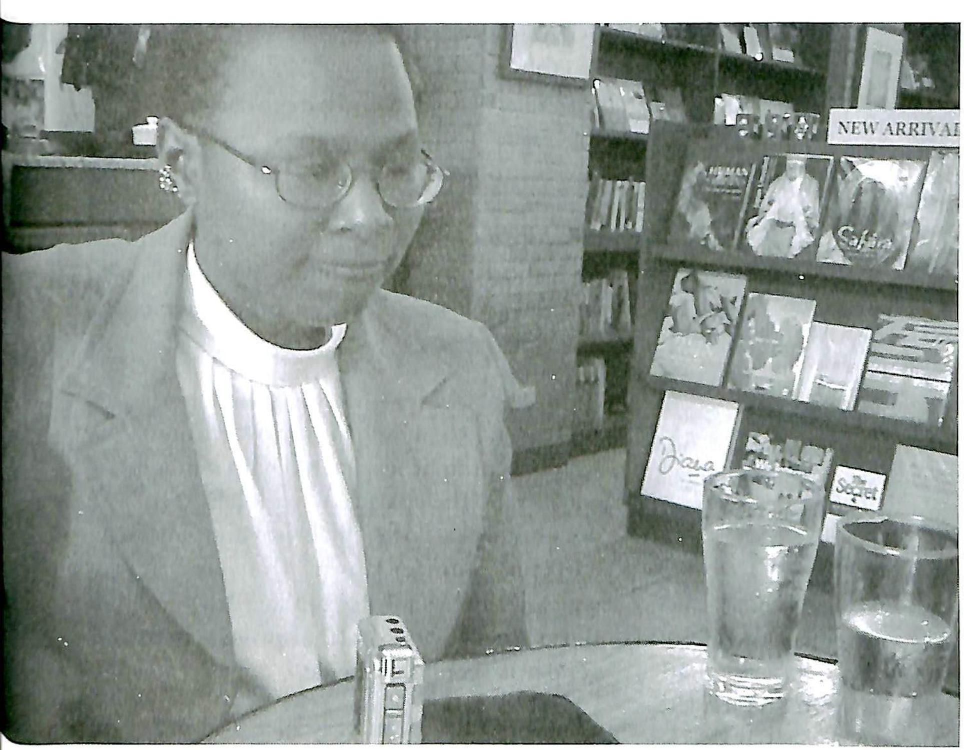

There was some institutional focus existing, like a trade and environment committee for instance, but there was no trade and gender mechanism in the WTO. Many just didn't think gender in trade was relevant. The usual argument was, since we are talking about people, we are already talking about women. We soon realised that a women's caucus as a method was not going to work in the WTO. The WTO was a different world, a different reality.

Also I think feminists didn't know the nature of the agreements, back then nobody knew. We didn't really have anything to hang on to. We realised that we ourselves did not know what was the conceptual and operational linkage between gender and trade, nor methodological. So what we needed was a conceptual paper.

After some time we would be invited by coalitions or networks to their meetings. But then at the end of the day when papers and reports would come out gender was nowhere to be found. So it meant you had to get on the writing committee or else gender would just disappear from the analysis.

It's been a long road [for feminists involved in gender and trade advocacy] for reasons that I've narrowed down to four: One, many trade negotiators believe that gender is a philosophical issue and therefore doesn't belong in the highly technical negotiation tables of trade. Two, there are those who are nervous that what is being proposed is a gender box. Three, there are also those who didn't see that they had the mandate to deal with gender issues in trade, which is simply ignoring the fact that their governments had signed and agreed to CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action and other similar agreements. Four, there are those who simply cannot see what gender has to do with economic analysis.

These for me are the challenges for feminists doing gender mainstreaming in trade.

Do you think feminists have been effective?

Yes! I really think so, given we don't have any models to follow. We're basically starting from scratch. We're still babies, only about five years old.

I think amongst ourselves, we've grown in confidence and familiarity with the trade environment, trade debate, and the trade personnel—with the WTO Secretariat and the NGOs.

We haven't managed to get a vibrant women's movement on gender and trade advocacy in the way that we have done, say in sexual health and reproductive rights.

I think another indicator would be to what extent we are naturally or normally accepted among the wide NGO movement on trade.

Now many of the big NGOs also do gender and trade. Oxfam has gender and trade, Third World Network had a gender and trade program, so I think this is a very good development. CIDA is also very strong on gender and trade. So there's not just NGOs but also inter-government institutions. There is now some level of visibility and acceptability of gender and trade.

I think on the other aspect of the trade environment, that is the WTO itself, I would say there is a small opening via the annual symposium the WTO holds, usually in June with academics and NGOs. This year I was invited on a panel to present and so I talked about feminist economics. Just a ripple of an opening really. (laughs)

How do you see other feminist groups engaging in trade advocacy?

I think it's a very tricky situation for us because it requires a very deep, deep reading of the environment. [For instance], while our long run advocacy point is say, "Agriculture out of the WTO!" we can't go to the ministerial with that because we are negotiating. So then we'd have to look at their agricultural agreements and pick up something that we can work with and develop, and make beneficial to women on a short-term or medium-term basis, and that still works within the strategic long-term advocacy.

I think the barrier—the real barrier—is the extent to which any government would want to be associated with gender equality. So the advocacy work has to be done at the level of capital. Governments will put gender in if they see it strategically has a role to play for them. But it hasn't gotten to that point where gender is seen as strategic.

The WTO has been very nice and very friendly around gender because it wants to take care of its relationships with external people, because it wants to appear legitimate. And I think the subtext is, "Wouldn't it be great if we got the women's movement saying trade is good for women?" So we would need to counter this instrumental approach. We have to be careful that gender and trade doesn't come out as the flavour of the times. You can never be quite sure if you're being used instrumentally.

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DAWN and WEDO I think have consistently been a part of this trade discussion. They were at Singapore and they were part of an informal working

group on gender and trade. By Seattle more women's groups got involved. It was shortly after Seattle when the International Gender and Trade Network was formed. A number of networks including DAWN and WIDE formed the IGTN. Since then it has been in the forefront of research, literacy, and advocacy at the WTO and on gender, trade and economic issues. By the time the Cancun Ministerial Meeting came, there was a much larger presence—in fact, a massive mobilisation of women.

Everywhere you go international trade agreements pop up. They impact on national budgets, on labour markets, etc. In fact, everything is being drawn under the trade agenda. I am aware that more women's groups from different perspectives are beginning to be aware of the trade agreements. I don't think they need to go organise on trade solely but I do think it's important that they begin to analyse the impact these agreements have on the critical areas that they are currently organised on. So if they look at sexual health and reproductive rights, they can identify the trade link.

I know the International Centre for Research on Women in Washington D.C. (ICRW) is doing a book on the impact of trade on sexual rights and reproductive health. So it's happening. I think it's important to recognise that trade isn't just out there but it's actually creeping into areas at the core of women's empowerment concerns.■

Mariama Williams is an international economics and gender consultant. She is currently the Director of the Institute for Law and Economics, Kingston, Jamaica, the Research Adviser for the ***International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN)*** *and an Adjunct Associate of the Centre of Concern, Washington, D.C. She is also a research coordinator of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN),and a member of the board of the Association for Women's Rights and Development (AWID). She has been an expert consultant for UNIFEM, the UN Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women, UNDP, the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA-Kingston) Economic Reference Group, the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat and the Commonwealth Secretariat. She has published widely and has facilitated a number of high-profile workshops on gender, development and economics issues.*