



IGTN at the 2005 WTO Public Symposium

Maria Riley, IGTN Secretariat

IGTN made a strong and effective contribution to the WTO's Annual Spring Symposium, "WTO after 10 Years: Global Problems and Multilateral Solutions," April 20 -22, 2005.

Mariama Williams (Caribbean Gender and Trade Network - CGTN) was the only woman on the two "High Level Panels" which framed the issues at the Symposium. She presented a challenging call to the reigning economic orthodoxy that is driving the current WTO agenda for ever greater trade liberalization and intensification. Introducing other heterodox economic theories, including feminist economics, she argued that if the WTO followed other economic paths it would be better able to promote development and eradicate poverty as it promises in the introduction to the Doha Development Agenda.

The IGTN panel, "Beijing +10 meets the WTO+10," co-sponsored with Action Aid, continued the Network's project of assessing how the WTO trade liberalization agenda has affected the *Beijing Platform of Action* promises to promote women's economic security and rights.

Marianne Hochuli (IGTN - Europe) focused on two topics in the GATS negotiations: financial services and tourism. She argued that the experiences of the late 1990s show that competition from foreign banks in developing countries can weaken the local banks and make them susceptible to crises. Nor do foreign banks ensure that small and medium-sized businesses have access to cheap credit, a problem for women and rural populations. She noted that the intersection of gender and financial processes have received little attention but cites a few studies that show the gender impact when economies go through financial liberalization and crisis, including an increasing number of women losing jobs, households with falling incomes and rising food prices which increases the burdens on women, cuts in social budgets, decreased access to credit and outward migration in search of jobs.

Tourism is often cited as a plus for developing countries, but recent studies have shown that without adequate domestic regulations, taxes and investment frameworks for the local population and the environment, market liberalization can be a detriment to sustainable tourism.

Women have an important role in the tourism sectors, accounting for up to 70% of the labor force in global tourism. However, their labor is often exploited and women find themselves concentrated in the casual labor force and low paying jobs. While some women may benefit, the majority of women find themselves used in the marketing of

tourist attractions as well as objects of sex tourism and prostitution. Increasing global competition in travel and tourism disadvantages many local small hotels, restaurants and tourism companies, often run by women.

The lack of protection of local populations plus the tax incentives countries offer for investment in tourism burdens local populations and national budgets.

Naty Bernardino (IGTN - Asia) analyzed the July Framework and current negotiations in relation to the need to correct the current imbalances in the Agreement on Agriculture and found them wholly inadequate. These imbalances only exacerbate the already existing burdens and discriminations against women. She concludes: "Although 'gender mainstreaming' has so often been abused, diluted and made complicated that many women's groups now find it hard to assert ownership of the concept, introducing gender into the negotiations language of the WTO at the minimum may be the first step or a good opening to demand from the multilateral trading system more concrete measures on women's economic rights. . .An inter-linked strategy is to bring local level gender and trade concerns into the global negotiating arena where governments need to be watched on the deals they make." She stated that since Governments committed themselves to the *Beijing Platform of Action*; they should be held accountable to their commitments not only in the UN Commission on the Status of Women, but also in more powerful entities such as the WTO.

Aftab Alam Khan, from Action Aid, filled out the agricultural picture by introducing the dominant role women play in agricultural production particularly in the Global South. He presented women's key roles as guardians of seed and biodiversity, producers of food and agricultural laborers and the threat WTO agricultural agreements are to them. He concluded by recommending that both at the national level and the multilateral level women-related issues must be brought into the negotiations. In response a statement made by a WTO representative who told a women's group that gender mainstreaming in the WTO is impossible without compelling economic arguments, Mr. Alam called for more research and analysis of women and trade-related issues and for NGOs and social movements to come together on these issues.

Mariama Williams (CGTN) completed the panel by countering the assertion that women are trying to bring too many issues into the WTO. In fact, nation states are responsible to gender concerns to the WTO as a result of having signed the *Beijing Platform of Action* and *CEDAW* (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women). She also cited reports from UNCTAD, the FAO, the ILO and UNDP which address women's economic rights and needs in all sectors of the economy and highlight that government institutions and NGOs see a reason to link women and the economy.

The presentations were followed by a lively discussion period.

The following presentations are available on the IGTN website:

- Mariama Williams (CGTN) on WTO High Panel: <http://www.igtan.org/page/603/1/>
- Natty Bernardino (IGTN-Asia): <http://www.igtan.org/page/599/1>
- Marianne Hochuli (IGTN-Europe): <http://www.igtan.org/page/600/1>
- Aftab Alam Khan (ActionAid International): <http://www.igtan.org/page/601/1>