

Feminist mobilization and multi-stakeholder governance structures: insights from WTO and G20 experiences

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Women's and feminist organizations are increasingly involved in economic issues and are actively participating in global resistances that challenge the implications of financialization, the concentration of wealth, the rise of inequality and the increasing power of corporations.

The advance of the women's agenda, as well as many years of advocacy work, has also permeated the agendas of multilateral institutions and the spaces of the multi-stakeholder global governance. However, both the approach that these institutions have on 'gender issues', as well as the space that they allow for the articulation of women's voices are controversial and limited.

Two recent examples illustrate why this is so. One is the Joint Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment on the occasion of the WTO Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires in December 2017.¹ This statement was presented as a sample of the

sensitivity of this institution to gender inequalities and the need to incorporate this dimension into the discussion on the global rules of regulation (or non-regulation) of world trade. However, the statement demonstrates a totally instrumentalist approach to women's rights, based on the idea that inequality gaps must be addressed only because it is economically efficient to do so.

The statement is an obvious denial of the enormous evidence already produced by feminist economics on the gender impact of trade policies, which demonstrate, in contrast to what the statement implies, that there is no possibility of producing gender-responsive trade policies within the framework promoted by WTO, which on the contrary privileges the interests of countries in the global North and of the large corporations. This inclusion of a gender agenda among their priorities is nothing more than 'pink washing' which in no way contributes to transforming the structures that reproduce inequality.

In a similar vein, the G20 included within its engagements groups one dedicated specifically to advancing proposals for the economic empowerment of women: the W20 (Women 20). This formal space for the articulation of women's voices is marginal, since it (as every other engagement group) produces non-binding recommendations to the leaders of the member states. But also, the way it operated at the last G20 summit in Buenos Aires showed the distance between the voices of women's resistance in the streets, and what these institutions are willing to accept in terms of formal engagement.

The persons appointed by Argentina to lead the W20 clearly represented the dominant view of the nature of the gender agenda. They insisted on the economic efficiency of women's economic empowerment, devaluing a rights perspective. Accordingly, they prioritize strategies such as women's financial inclusion (a refashioning of failed microcredit programmes), pushing minimalist visions that highlight, for example, that women who are small rural producers can transform their lives simply by being able

¹ See https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc11_e/genderdeclarationmc11_e.pdf.

to access e-commerce, without considering the structural roots of their exclusion.

The declaration of the W20 in Buenos Aires ended up including several of the demands of women's and feminist organizations, but much more by the persistent push of the delegates coming from the women's movement, than from the vision of those who led the process.² It goes without saying that the G20's own agenda, dominated by corporations, is in full contradiction with some of these aspirations, as indicated by women's organizations working together in the Feminist Forum against the G20 that met in parallel and on the streets.³

Ultimately, these experiences show that the institutions of global governance are adjusting to the current times and therefore permeating the inclusion of references to gender issues. However, they do so from a superficial and instrumentalist view of women's rights, through very limited mechanisms and in evident opposition to a progressive feminist agenda that systematically denounces the cooptation of these institutions by the interests of corporations and their functionality to a system that expropriates territories and people's livelihoods.

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2 See http://w20argentina.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/W20_Communicuê_eng.pdf.

3 See <http://dawnnet.org/cobertura-especial-dawn-en-el-foro-feminista-frente-al-g20/>.