



Modern Devices, Outdated Practices

Gender Perspectives on Trade & CSR in the Electronics Supply Chain

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'Gender discussion? Not really my thing.' It is not uncommon to meet with such initial scepticism when introducing gender related issues, even among the – fairly large – portion of our population whose lifestyle would not be possible on the gender grounds which existed some decennia ago. As a means of explaining social constructions, gender has received less popular and professional attention than for instance economic ideology or religion. This is probably due to the assumption that gender is largely a reflection of a 'natural' division, that between the sexes. In this paper, it is argued that in more ways than that of the age-old nature-nurture discussion, gender perspectives and theories are a useful and lively addition to the tool box of people working in sectors related to trade and corporate social responsibility (CSR).

As we will see, gender issues – though admittedly often associated with the emancipation of women – are broader than the limited concept of offering extra opportunities to women to compensate specific forms of discrimination. Equality before the law is just a starting point. Gender constructs imply roles for men as well as for women. Moreover, it is not just about people having to deal with uneven demands posed on them by the economy, the opposite is equally the case: our economy has to work with the societal input it gets, including deeply ingrained gender divisions.

Structure

This paper highlights some possible inroads into a gender perspective by focusing on specific examples from the simplified supply chain of electronic products. The proposed perspectives and methods are intended as suggestions for further practical research and the integration of gender into corporate campaigns and strategies.

The chain described in this paper does not exclusively focus on the company level, but also on aspects of the economic, the institutional and the social environment which facilitates or surrounds the actual production chain and its interaction with gender. It thereby combines elements of the current CSR debate with macroeconomic perspectives on trade. The paper is structured as follows: After some introductory remarks on gender three relevant but not inclusive parts in this chain have been separated and approached from a gender perspective. Thereafter, sequentially we focus on international trade policy and the role of campaigning and research to conclude with some final remarks and links for further reading.



What is Gender?

'Gender' is a term used to distinguish between physical sex (sex) and the social construction based upon that division (gender). While it could be argued that even physical sex has an arbitrary and fluid edge to its definition, gender roles are evidently not solid but even very susceptible to change over time.¹ What is considered very masculine today may be seen as womanly ten years from now, and though certain themes seem to show some consistency, even relatively 'fundamental' constructs are not actually immutable. Which is the more responsible sex, to be trusted in financial affairs, for instance? While in European and Middle Eastern traditions these functions are considered the male's preserve, in Caribbean and Thai culture it is women who are seen as more practical and clear-headed.

In this paper, it is assumed that equality and freedom of choice are human rights and should be strived for, not just in economic or ethnic affairs but also in matters of gender. Social injustices have many appearances, some more visible, others more veiled. For example, economic injustice does not only come in the form of extreme exploitation or undernourishment, and ethnic injustice does not only come from the extreme right. Gender injustice exists in broader forms than overt sexism and violence against women. Our premise, then, is that gender is one of the more prominent reflections of power mechanisms of our society, including both its good and its bad sides. Therefore, one of the pillars of social initiatives should be a focus on gender justice.

Case: The supply chain of electronic consumer products

Characteristics of the electronics supply chain

During recent years a range of research has demonstrated that the production of many electronic consumer products

is characterised by major problems from the bottom of the supply chain in the mines in Congo, Zambia and Indonesia up, often passing through many links, to the production facilities of the major brand companies. Moreover, these products often end up back in the developing world as e-waste. The supply chain is no longer a classical sequence 'with one company at the top of the pyramid working down the tiers, but it more resembles a web with spiders weaving from different knots. The picture stays, however, blurred as so far there is not much transparency to be obtained from the different knots in the supply chain, and only a few companies even publish a list with their first-tier suppliers. Connecting companies to their suppliers and to working conditions thus is a conundrum worthy a Sherlock Holmes, with obvious consequences for supply chain responsibility.'² The distribution of market power, skewed towards the big brand companies as well as large manufacturers, has led to abuses where risk and cost are passed down the supply chain to those most vulnerable.³ In the following paragraphs we will look into three different phases within the supply chain of electronic consumer products (extraction, manufacturing and disposal). For each phase the main characteristics and issues from a gender perspective are described. Also, some possible solutions are put forward.

Extraction

Many electronic products contain substances that must first be extracted from the earth by a mining company. Specific metals are used for specific components, some of them very precious, such as platinum, palladium and gold.⁴ Because of their superior conducting properties these metals form a pivotal part of electronic hardware. Electronic brand companies are increasingly being held accountable for the impact of metal extraction. This extraction is associated with the destruction of local community systems and involvement in labour and human rights abuses.

Gender Impact Assessment in Mining⁵

Red Internacional 'Mujeres y Minería' (RIMM, Red International Women and Mining Network) is a platform that has brought women from different continents together on the issue of mining and gender justice. What started as an initiative to explore the gender concerns in mining took on the role of a global platform for women exploited by mining projects either as displaced communities or as workers in highly exploitative working conditions. Today RIMM has a presence in 28 countries worldwide.

To understand the gendered effects of mining, RIMM has developed a series of Gender Impact Assessments (GIAs). These assessments include:

- 1) GIA for women mine workers;
- 2) GIA for Greenfield areas where mining is proposed;
- 3) GIA for areas where mining activity exists;
- 4) GIA for areas where mines have been closed or abandoned. They cover, among many other things, the issues of free and prior informed consent, social, cultural, environmental and health impacts and company's promises vis a vis actual delivery.

Paradoxically, countries rich in natural resources may often not benefit from the revenues thereof for several reasons. Regularly, mining is destructive to the local environment, workers are underpaid, experts and owners are often from richer countries or from the privileged classes within the mining country itself, which is then where profits tend to go. Local communities may thus bear the burdens but not the profits of the extraction of metals.⁶

For women, some of these issues are acutely pressing, as they are often not hired by mining companies directly. Instead they are working in aligned, supportive, sectors and jobs, for example as artisanal miners or prostitutes, professions that are associated with precarious circumstances.⁷ They regularly have to care for the men working in the mines in the polluted and impoverished mining environment. Small-scale food production and providing for drinking water – often jobs for which women are made responsible – are not always easy in such conditions.⁸ Finally, the breakdown of traditional rural life under the pressure of an economy that does not hire women may rob them of the position that they held, while not offering a live-able substitute and making women more dependent of men.⁹

In the mining sector, we also immediately stumble upon a gender imbalance that shows how men in particular are disadvantaged. In mining, unsurprisingly, men are the most employed, and you could say most exploited. Harsh working conditions are common and brutish working regimes almost equally so. Average life expectancy for men working in mining is dramatically lower than in other sectors in the same countries, and even when corrected for overall income, differences are highly significant. Men are seen as the only people who are fit enough to work under such conditions. Though we do not wish to dispute their bigger average strength as a result of physical build, it may at the very least be concluded that though men might be fitter for the job, they are, to their own detriment, not often actually fit enough. For both sexes then mining may be called, somewhat predictably a minefield. Both men and women have much to win by a broader and more thorough focus on gender justice.

Manufacturing

Continuing globalisation has led to the feminisation of labour, especially in manufacturing for export. According to the ILO, women made up 40.5 percent of the global paid labour force in 2008.¹⁰ Globalisation also led to the emergence of global value chains, dominated by major brand and retail companies. Producers are faced with increasing pressures on lower prices, faster delivery and higher quality without long-term commitment. Producers in turn pass these pressures on to the workers at the bottom of the supply chain.

The electronics sector is a rapidly growing and highly competitive sector. Electronic companies are continuously releasing new products to maintain their market shares and margins.

Civil society initiatives in the electronics sector

MakeITfair

MakeITfair is a European campaign focusing on the electronics industry, especially on consumer electronics such as mobile phones, laptops and MP3 players. The campaign draws attention to labour and environmental problems throughout the chain of production. From the mining of the minerals in Africa to the production of the gadgets in Asia, and finally to the dumping of toxic e-waste. The campaign uses consumer leaflets, a website, teaching materials and activities to inform young people and stimulate them to get active. It also uses research reports and the organisation of international round tables to approach the electronics industry and ask it to take responsibility
www.makeitfair.org

Overview of CSR issues relevant for the electronics sector

In October 2009 the Dutch CSR Platform (MVO Platform) and GoodElectronics will launch an overview of CSR issues relevant for the global electronics sector. This publication is an elaboration of the 2007 CSR Frame of Reference by the MVO Platform. It comprises four parts: Introduction (which includes the basic operational principles that the CSR Platform and GoodElectronics consider essential for the implementation of an effective and credible CSR policy), Social Aspects, Environmental Aspects and Economic Aspects. Relevant social, environmental and economic aspects in all phases (mining, manufacturing and disposal) are discussed and concrete proposals to companies, governments and civil society are put forward. The publication also contains a chapter on gender; it is discussed as an overarching theme, relevant for the three phases. See www.mvoplatform.nl and www.goodelectronics.org

Manufacturers have to react to market changes quickly. They are dealing with insecurity of orders, falling lead times and falling prices. The abovementioned characteristics of the electronics sector have led to increased flexibility, informality and mobility of work.

The manufacturing of electronics is dominated by a few large production companies like Flextronics and Foxconn. After these firms, further down the supply chain, comes a wide range of component manufacturers that produce parts for the final product.¹¹ These component suppliers vary in size and

character; from huge factories in Special Economic Zones (SEZs) to individual home workers. Manufacturing of electronic products mainly takes place in China, with other low cost countries such as Thailand, India, the Philippines and Vietnam on the rise.¹² Workers in electronics manufacturing are mainly women, most of them migrants from poor rural areas. Manufacturing of electronic products and components predominates in Special Economic Zones.¹³ In these zones companies are offered various incentives, including exemptions from local laws (often including environmental and labour regulations), adjusted import and export duties and tax subsidies. Workers employed in SEZs can be denied the protection of national laws regarding minimum wages, hiring and firing restrictions as well as the right to unionise, bargain collectively and strike. Electronics, together with garments are the major exports from SEZs. A vast majority of workers employed in such zones are women, some 70-90%.¹⁴

Deeply rooted gender stereotypes and existing inequalities explain the preference for a female workforce. Women are seen as a cheap workforce and perceived as more docile than men, also their nimble fingers would make them fit for the job. The 'nimble-fingers thesis' argues that managers perceive women as more suitable than men for assembly work because they are seen to have 'natural' traits, such as manual dexterity ('fast fingered women'), patience, and a tendency to be meticulous. These allegedly innate feminine characteristics are required to manipulate intricate wires and repeat the same finite number of tasks all day.¹⁵ According to Fox the 'docility' of female labour can be explained by the prevalence of four interrelated components:¹⁶

- a social component (low levels of female participation in union organisations);

- a cultural component (patriarchy);
- an organisational component (bureaucratic managerial strategies); and
- a political component (repressive governmental labour policies).

The box 'Labour issues in the electronics industry from a gender perspective' discusses how women in their daily work in electronic manufacturing are affected by the above mentioned gender stereotypes.

Most of the brand companies have developed codes of conduct to address labour issues in their supply chain. Also, sector specific codes of conduct have been developed.¹⁷ However, questions can be raised as to the impact of codes of conduct on improving labour conditions – in general and specifically for women workers. Most codes of conduct do not include gender aspects. For instance, the only – very general – referral to gender to be found in the EICC is under 'non discrimination'. Barrientos (2004) states that if codes of conduct are to be effective in addressing the underlying causes of gender inequality and discrimination in the labour force in global supply chains they need to cover wider gender issues such as childcare and reproductive rights.¹⁸

Disposal

The accumulation of used and obsolete consumer electronic products has been identified as 'the largest toxic waste problem of the twenty-first century'. E-waste is exported by developed countries to developing countries, often in violation of international law. Much of it ends up in Africa and Asia. Men, women and children are engaged in the collection, dismantling and processing of e-waste.

Table 1 EPZs, employment and women share in a selected number of countries¹⁹

Company	No. of EPZs	Total employ. (2005–06)	Female share (%)
Nicaragua	33	340,000	90
El Salvador	16	76,134	85
Bangladesh	8	188,394	85
Sri Lanka	12	410,851	78
Honduras	24	353,624	75
Philippines	4 pub ez, 41 privez	1,128,197	74
Madagascar		115,000	71.1
Panama	1	18,000	70
Guatemala	16	72,000	70
Korea, Republic	3 free economic zones	39,000	70
Mauritius	Entire island	65,512	62.6
Mexico	-	1,212,125 direct + 3,100,000 indirect	60
Kenya	43	38,851	60
Malaysia	13 (FIZ) 200 (industrial & hi-tech parks)	369,488 + 122,000	54
Malawi	1	29,000	51

Labour issues in the electronics industry from a gender perspective

Wages 'Women's jobs' are typically perceived as low skilled, and thus low-paid. Women are less likely to be considered for promotion and training. Even if women perform the same tasks as men they tend to be paid less ('gender wage gap'). As stated by the ILO²⁰: 'throughout most regions and many occupations, women are paid less money than men for the same job'. Wage levels in the electronic manufacturing factories in the Special Economic Zones tend to be higher than in local factories or in the informal sector but are still not a living wage by any means. Women are found in the lowest paid jobs; when tasks get more advanced and wages higher, male engineers and technicians tend to be hired instead of women.

Insecure jobs In general, women are more likely than men to be hired on short-term, seasonal, casual or home-work contracts, thus working without the protection that comes with long-term contracts. To deal with fluctuations on orders electronics manufacturers are increasingly employing workers on a contractual basis.

Trade unions Unionisation in the electronics sector is low. Special Economic Zones are known for their anti-union policies. If unions are present they often fail to address the needs of women (women's representation in trade unions is still low, especially at the leadership level). In this respect, female workers would again be preferred, since they are seen as less prone to stand up for their rights.²¹

Health and safety issues Workers in the electronics sector suffer exposure to toxic substances posing various health risks, especially in relation to women's reproductive health. For instance, of the 700 compounds

that go into the production of one computer workstation, a large number (e.g. lead, cadmium, barium, mercury, bromine and carbon black) are toxic, exposing workers to a range of serious health risks such as cancer, miscarriage and birth defects.²² In many factories good ventilation and appropriate protective equipment is lacking. Several instances have been reported where workers are not allowed to leave to go to the toilet because of pressure to meet target goals, leading to bladder infections and menstrual pains.

Often women workers are denied maternity leave. As a result pregnant women tend to continue working for as long as possible, compromising their own health and that of their baby .

Forced overtime Electronic manufacturers are dealing with great pressure on fast delivery and low prices which they in turn pass down to the workers. Workers have to complete targets that are set unrealistically high. If workers do not complete their targets they are forced to do 'voluntary' overtime. Overtime is a particularly important gender issue, as women workers have difficulties in making arrangements for child care at short notice and have to juggle work and domestic responsibilities.

Discrimination Single women are sometimes preferred over married ones, so as to avoid having to pay maternity benefits. Instances of (forced) pregnancy testing before being hired have been reported in the Philippines, Thailand and Mexico.

(Sexual) harassment Women workers are exposed to harassment and abusive treatment, sometimes with a sexual slant, by superiors and co

Many electronic products contain countless hazardous chemicals and materials and therefore the recycling and disposal of e-waste poses a threat to the environment and to human health. In recent years various studies have been undertaken investigating the health risks associated with e-waste dumping grounds and recycling sites. In e-waste dumping grounds in Nigeria, Ghana, China and India electronic waste is taken apart at open-burning sites. Toxic metals found in soil and sediment samples in Ghana include lead in quantities as much as 100 times above levels found in uncontaminated samples.

In the Ghanaian samples other chemicals such as phthalates, which interfere with reproduction, and high levels of chlorinated dioxins, known to cause cancer, were also found. Not only people handling the waste directly are affected. A Chinese study showed that women living in the vicinity of e-waste sites had dioxine levels in their breast milk as much as 25 times higher than the World Health Organization tolerable daily limit for adults. High levels of dioxine are known to cause cancer, development defects and other health problems. Because of the informal character of e-waste handling, no data are available on the share of male and female participation in this sector. It could be interesting to focus future research on gender aspects of e-waste handling.

International trade policy

Next to above described inroads into the supply chain of electronic products, gender injustice is also rooted and can be addressed in international trade policies and practices. Trade in electronic consumer products between producer and consumer countries is smoothed by the existence of trade agreements, multilateral and bilateral. The current free trade and investment agreements negotiated between (bloks of) countries cover an expansive range of areas often with significant impacts on labour and the livelihood of workers and communities. In general, trade liberalisation can result in gain or loss of access to jobs and markets. It can create new opportunities for business and employment, but many times it is also linked to rising inequality and poverty and gender discrimination. Much has been written on trade liberalisation and its gendered effects; however, we could not find any studies specifically focusing on the electronics sector.

Trade agreements are regarded by many as highly technical and their negotiations confusing with many, often economic, interests demanding attention. Policy goals related to gender, or other social and ecological interests, are seldom incorporated in trade agreements and when they are economic goals appear to prevail. As such, it is often assumed that the effects of trade agreements are gender neutral. However, feminist economic theory instead emphasises the interaction of gender and the economy on different levels and the effects of gender inequality on international competitiveness and the impact of international competition on reshaping and reconstructing gender inequalities.

Most importantly now, the impact of trade on gender relations should be included in research that enables the identification of the effects of trade policy instruments. However, gender segregated data is rarely available. The WTO works with country specific Trade Policy Review Mechanisms, but these reviews solely look at the consistency between trade policy and WTO rules.

Trade Policy Review Mechanisms should put more effort into developing adequate indicators to measure the impact of trade liberalisation on gender constructs. As Van Staveren concludes: gender indicators such as the female share of agricultural employment or the gender wage gap 'need to be integrated into a wider set of tools, such as broader trade impact analysis, and used to inform trade negotiators and evaluations; agenda setting for WTO ministerial meetings; and civil society discussions about actual and desirable relationship between trade, on the one hand, and social issues on the other hand.'

Another important issue within this context is whether trade agreements, and particularly their *laissez-faire* aspects, diminish the power of the state to protect the rights of women in areas

such as education or health care. These issues relate to the more direct kind of impact trade agreements can have, actively banning possibilities for emancipatory intervention. A 2005 OECD study on the impacts of trade liberalisation on government revenue stated that countries that rely heavily on tariff revenue are largely low-income countries, particularly in Africa, and tax reforms are necessary in order to enhance overall welfare from trade liberalisation. However, indirect impacts on the lives of men and women, on their society and its gendered aspects also occur. As traditional communities become engaged in the logic and discipline of the global market, they are possibly emancipated or broken up, often both, and at the same time.

Campaigning and research

Alternatively and perhaps to somewhat promote introspection within the CSR sector, this focus can be directed to the many professionals working on trade and CSR from a development perspective, who have a more complex role than that of a consumer of the studied product. The rules of the economic game are set by governments, large companies and other capital driven bodies, but they are also influenced by those who critically follow them. Those, of course, are also made up of gendered structures and individuals.

From a study from 2008/9, amongst others produced by Ethical Performance, it can be concluded that even within the corporate responsibility profession, women are paid less than men for the same work and work in lower ranking jobs than men do. While it is important to stay focused on gender inequality brought about in developing countries, the question seems pressing whether we are in a good position to do so. The fact that many people living in a 'gender privileged' situation and working in a sector known for its generally critical social outlook, do not recognise this topic as vitally important, may certainly be a sombre indication of the answer to that question.

Conclusion

In the above writing, we have discussed several aspects of the electronic supply chain as a mean to introduce gender as a topic of concern in corporate campaigns and strategies. Looking at the different sequences in the chain, it appears that women and men often face the same but also very different problems and opportunities in their work. To improve the specific situations that appear, continuous attention for these issues is needed. Beside the actual supply chain, gender injustice must also be addressed in international trade policy and in civil society, including the professionals working on social justice in trade and CSR issues.

On a practical note, the above writing is meant to illustrate gender research and campaigning inlets focusing on the electronic supply chain. For people who want to start working on the issue the references (see box below) to studies and campaigns on gender issues within various economic realms can hopefully assist in finding the right direction. Some offer analysis on and clarification of the current state of affairs, others provide insights into direct ways of lobby or campaign.

It has been illustrated above that gender equality is a far cry from real life as perceived in the supply chain of consumer electronics or in general. The importance attached to that statement is a political choice, but the fact itself is indisputable.

Further Reading

The Feminist Economics of Trade

The Feminist Economics of Trade is the first book to combine the tools of economic analysis and gender analysis to examine the interaction of international trade and gender relations.

I. van Staveren, D. Elson, C. Grown, and N. Cagatay (eds.) *'Feminist Economics of Trade'*, London: Routledge, 2007

Gender equality at the heart of Decent Work – ILO Campaign 2008-2009

The International Labour Organisation has launched a global campaign on gender equality and the world of work. The campaign is built around twelve Decent Work themes. These themes will be looked at through a gender lens, showing how various issues may affect women and men differently in their access to rights, employment, social protection and social dialogue.

www.ilo.org/gender/events/campaign2008-2009

Made by Women – Gender, the Global Garment Industry and the Movement for Women Workers' Rights

This publication by the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) features articles on important themes relating to gender and labour rights and 17 profiles of women involved in different ways in the movement for garment workers' rights.

<http://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/1304-made-by-women>

Trading away our rights: Women working in global supply chains – Oxfam International

This report shows how big brand companies and retailers in the fashion and food industries are driving down employment conditions for millions of women workers around the world.

<http://www.maketradeair.com/en/assets/english/taor.pdf>

ON THE ELECTRONIC SECTOR

MakeITfair

The MakeITfair campaign is a pan-European project on consumer electronics. MakeITfair aims to inform young consumers about human rights, social and environmental issues along the supply chain. It also addresses consumer electronics companies that can contribute to change.

www.makeitfair.org

Endnotes

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This inequality can be measured, commented on and in the end, though it is difficult, as all social transformation usually is, it can be changed. Civil society organisations could play an active role in the process, probably more than it currently does. Gender justice is not merely a question of emancipating women.

As we have seen above, both men and women are judged upon their gender and both groups can benefit from informed and motivated gender specific policy taking into account their specific needs, elementary standards to be achieved for all and progressive goals for their communities on all ends of the supply chain.

GoodElectronics

GoodElectronics is an international network bringing together NGOs, trade unions, labour rights groups, environmental organisations, academics, researchers, activists, etc with as common goal to contribute to sustainability and human rights in the global electronics sector.

www.goodelectronics.org

ORGANISATIONS

International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN)

IGTN is a network of feminist gender specialists who provide technical information on gender and trade issues to women's groups, NGOs, social movements and governments and acts as a political catalyst to enlarge the space for a critical feminist perspective and global action on trade and globalisation issues.

www.igtan.org

Committee for Asian Women (CAW)

Committee for Asian Women (CAW) is a regional network of 43 women workers member groups in 14 Asian countries which aims to empower women workers to protect, advocate, and advance their rights.

www.cawinfo.org

Central American Women's Network (CAWN)

The Central America Women's Network (CAWN) is a London based organisation that supports, publicises and learns from the struggles of women in Central America in the defence of their rights.

www.cawn.org

International Women and Mining Network/ Red Internacional Mujeres y Minería (RIMM)

The International Women and Mining Network brings together women from different continents on the issues of mining and gender justice.

www.rimrights.org

Karat Coalition

KARAT is a regional coalition of organisations and individuals that works to ensure gender equality in the CEE/CIS countries, monitors the implementation of international agreements and lobbies for the needs and concerns of women in the region at all levels of decision-making fora.

www.karat.org

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Colophon

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