Reality Check: the impact of the Gender Chapter in the agreement between Chile and the European Union*

Reality Check: el impacto del Capítulo de Género en el acuerdo entre Chile y la Unión Europea

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential impact of the gender chapter in the modernised EU–Chile trade agreement through a contextualised intersectional analysis. Drawing on desk research and in-depth interviews with grassroots, rural and Indigenous women from Chile, it analyses how the chapter's commitments align with the lived realities of those most affected by trade liberalisation. While the agreement acknowledges gender-differentiated impacts of trade,

* We are grateful to the Chilean and Indigenous women leaders whose testimonies shaped this paper and made visible their lived realities that too often remain absent from trade policy debates. We thank our peer reviewer Gea Meijers for her thoughtful feedback which strengthened the analytical clarity and rigour of this paper. And we thank Isalinde Niessink and Haitske Pottinga who have supported the research with literature study and editing during their internship at WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform. We appreciate the opportunity to present our findings at the Trade and Gender Conference organised by the WTO Chairs program and the University of Chile, and we are grateful to the Count Me In! Consortium for financially supporting this research. Finally, we honour the pioneering feminist economists whose foundational work linking macroeconomic structures to gendered power relations this research heavily leans on.

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the findings reveal that it homogenises "women," overlooks intersecting inequalities, and fails to address structural barriers such as care burdens, informality, unequal access to productive resources and environmental degradation. The absence of enforceable obligations and meaningful consultation processes further weakens its potential for meaningful impact. The paper contributes to feminist political economy by demonstrating the persistent disconnect between policy narratives and on-the-ground experiences, and by showing how trade policy can inadvertently reproduce structural disadvantages. It concludes that gender chapters must be based on intersectional gender assessments, include enforceable implementation mechanisms and embed meaningful consultation with women's rights organisations to support gender-just trade outcomes.

Keywords: gender equality – trade – Chile – women's organisations – intersectionality.

Resumen

Este artículo examina el posible impacto del capítulo de género del acuerdo comercial modernizado entre la UE y Chile mediante un análisis interseccional contextualizado. Basándose en investigación documental y en entrevistas en profundidad con mujeres de base, rurales e indígenas de Chile, analiza hasta qué punto los compromisos del capítulo se alinean con las realidades vividas por quienes se ven más afectadas por la liberalización comercial. Aunque el acuerdo reconoce los impactos diferenciados por género del comercio, los resultados revelan que homogeniza a las "mujeres", pasa por alto las desigualdades interseccionales y no aborda barreras estructurales como las cargas de cuidados, la informalidad, el acceso desigual a los recursos productivos y la

degradación ambiental. La ausencia de obligaciones exigibles y de procesos significativos de consulta debilita aún más su potencial para generar un impacto sustantivo. El artículo contribuye a la economía política feminista al demostrar la persistente desconexión entre los discursos de política pública y las experiencias en los territorios, y al mostrar cómo la política comercial puede reproducir inadvertidamente desventajas estructurales. Concluye que los capítulos de género deben basarse en evaluaciones de género interseccionales, incluir mecanismos de implementación exigibles e incorporar procesos significativos de consulta con organizaciones de derechos de las mujeres para apoyar resultados comerciales con justicia de género.

Palabras clave: igualdad de género – comercio – Chile – organizaciones de mujeres – interseccionalidad.

1. Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in mainstreaming gender equality in trade agreements, through gender provisions or stand-alone gender chapters. This development was facilitated by decades of feminist macroeconomic research demonstrating the two-way relationship between gender and the economy, meaning that economic policies shape gender relations, while gender relations impact macroeconomic performance and growth (Elson and Cagatay 2000, Seguino 2013, van Staveren 2002; 2011). This groundbreaking work established that trade affects women and men differently, depending on the structural inequalities affecting their status and roles in the economy, as workers, producers, consumers, and providers of paid and unpaid care. It also contended that the economic gains generated by international trade had been unequally distributed across social groups, with disparities shaped by gender, class,

ethnicity, and geography (Fontana 2009; 2016; Bahri 2023; Klimke & Tietje 2023). Feminist scholars highlighted that trade can only lead to sustainable development when its gains are equitably distributed (Fontana 2016, UNCTAD 2020). The groundbreaking work done during these decades established a feminist macroeconomic research agenda (Seguino 2013), which has since influenced trade agreements, multilateral fora, development summits and international declarations. As this paper contends, a major weakness lies in the design and implementation of gender provisions. These are often voluntary, and lack mechanisms for implementation, monitoring and impact-assessment.

The increasing number of gender provisions and stand-alone gender chapters in free trade agreements is frequently presented as a policy innovation. As a result of their novelty, there is little research on the effectiveness of gender chapters in FTAs and the impact they have on gender equality in the countries which have included such provisions. Many scholars argue that the non-binding nature, combined with the absence of implementation, monitoring frameworks and enforcement commitments, accounts for their limited effectiveness (Cohen 2021; Bahri 2021; 2023; España 2021; Lopez et al. n/d ; Ramos Borges et al 2024; Boell et al. 2021). However, much of this research predominantly addresses policy intent, leaving a research gap in understanding their situated, intersectional impact in specific local contexts.

This paper examines the potential impact of the stand-alone gender chapter in the EU-Chile trade agreement on intersectional inequalities. A key question is whether this gender chapter has been designed to effectively address or (even) reverse the gendered distributional inequities embedded in Chile's socio-economic and trade structures. Similarly, it probes to what extent

the gender chapter has the potential to contribute to enhancing gender and intersectional equality in the country.

Chile offers a particularly relevant case study, due to the visible efforts made by the Chilean government in recent years to strengthen the policy and legal frameworks in favour of women's rights at the national level, and to relocate gender equality commitments in official trade agreement texts at the international level. These initiatives are commendable; however, as discussed in the following chapters, much remains to be done in terms of implementing these commitments and enforcing existing policies and laws at the national level.

The unique contribution of this paper lies in applying a contextualised intersectionality framework to assess the EU-Chile gender chapter. Going beyond mere gender-responsive policy analysis, the paper examines how its commitments relate to the lived realities of heterogeneous groups of women and men, thereby exposing the disconnect between policy narratives and everyday experience. It is hoped that this contextualised approach will contribute to filling in a gap in existing literature on gender and trade and contribute to ensuring fair and effective trade policies.

Our conceptual framework proposes a contextualised analysis of gender inequality in relationship with intersecting grounds of inequalities. It builds upon the recommendations by Patricia Hill Collins (2019) to i) consider social context as a site for knowledge production; and ii) to contextualise theoretical and policy insights because inequalities are not fixed, universal, or additive, but rather produced and experienced through specific local and historical circumstances. An intersectional lens

requires focusin[1]g on how power relations at work in social and economic structures shape lived experiences of intersecting inequalities at specific moments and in specific locations (Collins 2019)[1]. In the specific case of Chile, key intersecting grounds of discrimination informing equality are: socioeconomic status, age, ethnicity, geographical location (rural, urban, migrant status), disability, among other factors of social stratification. We argue that a situated intersectional approach more clearly illustrates the likely impacts of trade agreements on the livelihoods and fundamental rights of women and men who live, produce and consume in economies structured upon social and economic hierarchies.

The methodological framework includes desk research, field and semi-structured online group and individual interviews with representatives of six grassroots women's organisations (mostly rural and indigenous), and one scholar[2]. The grassroots women interviewed are members of RATMURI, a regional branch of the National Association of Rural and Indigenous women (ANAMURI). RATMURI is the association of rural and indigenous small-scale producers and self-entrepreneurs living in the northern region of Atacama (III region). Focusing on grassroots women's organisations provides situated knowledge on how trade policies and gender relations shape livelihoods, working conditions, agency and rights on the ground. In-depth individual interviews were held with those women leaders to corroborate and adjust the data collected. Data was triangulated and embedded in this paper, keeping names and identities

1 Echoing Hill Collins, McKinzie & Richards argue that context-driven intersectionality allows for a bottom-up approach to analysis while also being attentive to the systemic and structural power relations that structure daily life (2019: 4). This framework is particularly relevant for analysing how trade policies affect women and men from diverse territorial and economic realities.

2 Interview with senior university professor, and expert in trade liberalisation and impacts on women workers from the fruticulture industry in Chile.

of interviewees anonymous for safety purposes, unless they consented to certain details being mentioned.

The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 outlines the context of gender equality and trade policy. Section 2 examines key issues related to the inclusion of gender equality chapters in trade agreements and the policy context of the recently included gender chapter in the EU-Chile agreement. Section 3 maps the intersecting inequalities shaping Chile's trade architecture in connection with the policy narrative included in the gender chapter. This paper concludes with a set of policy recommendations (Section 4).

2. Chile's track record of gender chapters in trade agreements

Chile started to mainstream gender in trade policy in the early 2000s. Initially through preambles, and later through separated gender chapters in free trade agreements. This has also increased over the years at the bilateral level. These initiatives show political willingness (López et al. (n/d), but are often limited in scope, largely aspirational and structured around cooperation rather than enforceable obligations. Academic analyses of Chile's gender chapters commonly highlight two trends. Firstly, they point to template-based replication, whereby earlier gender chapters serve as models for later agreements, which results in highly similar language across agreements. López et al. (n/d) point to "an important imitation process," with the first agreement being used as template for the following ones. As a result, the legal texts look "identical in content in most parts," (p.15).

Secondly, they point to non-binding commitments, which restrict their ability to meaningfully advance gender equality in practice. In her analysis of Chile's FTAs with Canada and Argentina, Cohen (2021) concludes that these gender chapters

lack the basic elements needed to be truly effective in combating inequality. Others have argued that commitments in gender chapters appear to be just "promises" and "best endeavour commitments which are completely unenforceable (Bahri 2021; 2023). Lopez et al. contend that the provision of "non-application of dispute resolution" renders them non-enforceable, since they contain no "leverage mechanism to ensure parties' compliance" through implementation.

Table 1. Overview of Chile's inclusion of gender provisions in FTAs[3].

Table 1: Key information on participants

Entrepreneur (Entr) #	Country of origin (business)	Type of business	Business age (years)	Family status	Children	Product / Service	Export	Export Destinations	# min of recording
1	Mali (Mali)	Software Development	6	Married	Pregnant	Service	Not yet, but planning	Togo, Burkina Faso	23
2	Cameroon (Kenya)	E-commerce	10	Married	Yes	Product	Yes	US, Senegal, Cameroon	27
3	Uganda (Uganda)	Edtech	4	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	Ghana, Malawi, South Sudan	28
4	Kenya (Uganda)	Edtech	5	Single	No	Service	No		53
5	Benin (Benin)	Software Development	8	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	Mali, Ivory Coast	45
6	Kenya (Kenya)	Transport	5	Married	Yes	Service	No		58
7	Burundi (Burundi)	Education	2	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	Mali	20
8	Ghana (Ghana)	Agriculture	4	Single	No	Product	Yes	Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Kenya	46
9	Kenya (Kenya)	Tech Consultation	11	Married	Yes	Service & Product	Yes	Uganda, Sierra Leone	34
16	Uganda (Uganda)	E-commerce	7	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	Kenya, Tanzania	53
17	Cameroon (Cameroon)	Edtech	5	Married	Yes	Service	No		32
18	Kenya (Kenya)	E-commerce	9	Single	No	Product	Yes	Nigeria, Kenya	57
19	Kenya (Kenya)	E-commerce	12	Single	No	Product	Yes	US	46
20	Tanzania (Tanzania)	Software Development	3	Single	No	Product	Yes	Kenya, Nigeria, Uganda	35
21	Kenya (Kenya)	E-commerce	6	Single	No	Product	Yes	South Africa, DR Congo, US	45
22	Kenya (Kenya)	Digital Marketing Agency	15	Single	No	Service	No		53
23	Kenya (Kenya)	Jewelery	4	Married	Yes	Product	Yes	US	33
24	Nigeria (Nigeria)	Talent Marketplace	5	Single	No	Service	No		49
25	Kenya (Kenya)	Jewelery	5	Married	Yes	Product	Yes	US, Germany,	31

3 For official information on all FTAs signed by Chile see https://www.subrei.gob.cl/acuerdos-comerciales/acuerdos-comerciales-vigentes.

4 The AFA was ratified by the Chilean Parliament in 2024. The full agreement is waiting for ratification from EU member states. In the meantime, the Interim Trade Agreement (iTA) entered into force in 2025. Even though the AFA and the iTA are both legal instruments of the modernised agreement, it is worth distinguishing between them. The AFA is comprehensive, and includes three pillars, namely political dialogue (including on human rights and environmental sustainability), cooperation, and trade/investment (including investment protection). In contrast, the iTA covers those parts of the trade and investment pillar of the full agreement that are of exclusive competence of the European Union.

25	Kenya (Kenya)	Jewelery	3	Married	Yes	Product	Yes	Nigeria	31
26	Kenya (Kenya)	Job Profiling Platform	4	Divorced	Yes	Service	Yes	Zambia, Ivory Coast	51
27	Namibia (Namibia)	E-commerce	6	Widowed	Yes	Product	Yes	South Africa	51
28	Rwanda (Rwanda)	E-commerce	3	Married	Yes	Service	No		48
29	Senegal (Senegal)	Digital Services	6	Divorced	Yes	Service	Yes	Switzerland, Ivory Coast	54
30	Senegal (Senegal)	E-commerce	5	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	US	34
31	Nigeria (Nigeria)	Transport	6	Single	No	Service	Yes	Ivory Coast	59
32	Kenya (Kenya)	Fintech	7	Married	Yes	Service	Yes	Uganda	55

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2.1. Commitments of the Gender Chapter of the EU-Chile Advanced Framework Agreement - AFA

The modernised EU-Chile trade agreement, officially known as "the Advanced Framework Agreement-AFA", was signed in Brussels (December 13th, 2023), after two decades of negotiations, and includes a dedicated gender chapter (Chapter 27). Several of the commitments it makes are relevant to women's rights and gender equality.

Although the Chile-EU gender chapter identifies gender-differentiated impacts of trade, reference to the intersecting grounds of inequality affecting women's participation in trade is missing, and women are assumed as a homogenous group. For example, in chapter 27, Art. 27.1:

> The Parties aim to:
> b) facilitate cooperation and dialogue with the aim of enhancing women´s capacity, conditions and access to opportunities created by trade.

The paragraph above implies that women all have equal access to and control over the resources required to parti-

cipate in international trade. This is far from being the case in Chile, and specifically for Indigenous, rural, migrant and poor women. This homogenising approach overlooks the intersecting grounds of discrimination at work in Chile's trade architecture, and their impact on the lives, rights and livelihoods of women, including those who experience intersectional discrimination.

Close analysis of the EU-Chile gender chapter shows that efforts were taken to include barriers affecting women's empowerment and agency in trade. For example, there is reference to the work-life balance, decent work, working conditions and the gender pay gap. These inclusions reflect the parties' awareness of the fact that trade policy is not gender neutral. However, reference to, and analysis of, the intersecting grounds of inequality affecting gender relations is missing.

2.2. The policy level: an overview of the commitments

A relevant question at this stage is what is genuinely innovative about the gender chapter of the Chile-EU FTA, apart from being a good example of gender mainstreaming in policy discourse which heavily relies on "aspirational and affirmative" gender provisions? (Kuhlmann, K. & Bahri A. 2023). Table 2 presents an overview of commitments related to gender and intersectional equality in the gender chapter under discussion.

Table 2: Overview of commitments related to gender and intersectional equality (non-exhaustive)

The policy narrative / specific sections of the gender chapter	*Actions and gaps (from a gender and intersectional perspective) - Policy analysis*
Overall assessment of the gender chapter Chile-EU	■ There is textual evidence of gender equality awareness. ■ Emphasis is on women's economic empowerment, low policy attention to women's agency (their capacity to shape trade policies and their roles in the implementation of the commitments). ■ Homogenizing language: women assumed as a homogenous category, whereas gender equality in the Chilean context is informed by a complex interplay of class, age, gender, ethnicity and geographical origin.
Art. 27.1;27.2; 27.3. Recognition of women's key role in international trade and the need to improve equality of opportunity and treatment for women and men.	■ Emphasis is on removing barriers in access to international trade & markets, but low policy attention to removing systemic barriers in domestic contexts or tackling their root causes (gender & sociocultural norms causing care burden, informality trap, inequalities in access to land and other productive assets & resources. ■ Inclusion of equal treatment contained in normative frameworks (ILO, CEDAW). ■ There is reference to the principle of non-discrimination and diversity but no reference to intersectionality.
Art 27. 4/27.2.1 Reference to international frameworks/ commitments	■ There is reference to SDG Goal 5 but reference to other SDGs relevant to women's rights in trade is missing (for example; SDG1 on poverty, which includes equal rights to economic resources, ownership and control over land and property, and financial services, SDG8 on decent work and economic growth, which includes decent work for all women, eradication of forced labour and equal pay for equal value and labour rights for women migrants, and SDG10 which includes income inequality and discrimination by gender. ■ There is reference to CEDAW but specific recommendations on women with disabilities (GR 18), migrant women workers (GR26), indigenous women (GR 39) and rural women (GR 34)are overlooked. CEDAW General recommendation No 40. on the equal and inclusive representation of women in decision-making system is also missing.
Art. 27. 6, 8,/ Art. 27.2.3/ Art.273.2. Reference to human rights and women's HHRR	■ Democratic principles, human rights instruments and fundamental freedoms are mentioned. ■ There is no reference to the specific rights of indigenous peoples and women (in particular, ILO C169). ■ Labour rights, as they relate to trade policies and activities are not mentioned.
Actors and their roles in ensuring application of non-discrimination and diversity policies in corporate operations. Art. 27.9	■ There is emphasis on voluntary corporate guidelines; but no reference to the role of the state (institutions) to ensure regulatory frameworks are respected to ensure *de facto* equality on the ground. The role of the private sector is emphasised as important in "fostering gender equality by applying non-discrimination and diversity policies in their corporate operations in line with international guidelines and standards endorsed or supported by the Parties." Evidence has shown that voluntary guidelines are ineffective in bringing about substantial improvements in gender and intersectionality equality on the ground.
Monitoring mechanisms for implementation of gender commitments Art.27.7.	■ It is stated that the "Parties agree on the importance of monitoring and assessing, jointly or individually, the impact of the implementation of this Agreement." However, no monitoring mechanism, including a set of indicators to assess progress (or lack thereof) is proposed and there is no stated commitment to develop them. ■ A monitoring framework, including intersectional indicators are strongly recommended to assess impact and prevent harmful effects/risks and unintended consequences.
There is no reference to gender equality in relation to social and environmental sustainability in trade policies and operations.	■ The link is made in the Sustainable Trade and Development (TSD) section of the general text (Chapter 26). There, it is stated that a Sub-Committee will facilitate, monitor and review the implementation of the TSD Chapter. The Committee will be composed of senior officials or other levels from the institutions responsible for trade, labour, environment and gender issues.

3. The gap between policy and practice: the reality of gender and intersectional inequality in Chile's trade architecture

Many of the commitments mentioned in the gender chapter of the EU-Chile modernised agreement are in line with Chile's robust normative and policy framework[5]. At the international level, Chile has ratified several commitments and policy frameworks and translated several of them into national legislation (e.g. CEDAW, Belem do Para, ILO Conventions).

Despite progress made by the current government in poverty reduction (INE, 2024) and the expansion of social programmes targeting low-income women workers, Chile remains one of the most unequal countries in Latin America (Lecaros et al. 2023). Extreme income concentration, limited redistribution, and structural gender norms shape who benefits from trade, who has access to and control of productive assets and who is pushed into precarious or informal work. Trade liberalisation may have contributed to the economic empowerment of some groups, but its gains have been unevenly distributed. As the testimonies of grassroots women show, the distributional effects of trade are not only gender-differentiated (Ramos Borges & Vallina (2024:45); they are also intersectionally determined. As shown in section three, empirical evidence shows that many of the jobs generated by trade liberalization are precarious and do not

5 For example: Law No. 20,609 against discrimination (Zamudio Law); Law 21.015 Promotes the inclusion of persons with disabilities in employment, prohibiting discrimination; Law 21,643 (Prevention of Harassment and Violence in the Workplace; known as Karin Law); Law 21,645 (Work-Life Balance). One of the interviewees stressed the government's efforts to strengthen the normative framework for better protection of women's rights. She added that the Karin Law was particularly important for protecting and preventing violence against women workers.

comply with the Fundamental ILO Conventions[6], particularly in the fruit export sector. Grassroots women workers and producers, and in particular indigenous, rural, elderly and young women working in export-driven sectors, have been left behind.

The empirical evidence collected from the ground corroborates the contention made by scholars, that trade liberalisation has not translated into improved livelihoods, labour rights or economic and social security for all women (Muñoz Cabrera 2025; Boell et al. 2019). Moreover, focus on macroeconomic growth has reduced "policy space" for implementing policies that promote women's rights, in line with their international human rights obligations (CONCORD/WIDE+ 2018).

Inequalities are intensified for women who face intersectional forms of discrimination and whose socioeconomic status is worse than national averages. For these groups, trade liberalisation often interacts with pre-existing inequalities, deepening rather than alleviating structural vulnerabilities. The testimony below by Indigenous and rural women producers illustrates this:

> We, indigenous women entrepreneurs work to survive, not to thrive. We have little access to information on trade opportunities, we have precarious jobs in export companies, we are often exposed to violence in the fields, we have difficulties to start a business due to legal constraints … Support from the Ministry is occasional, and short termed…. We did not know that our country had signed a modernised trade agreement with the European Union…. We are never consulted on trade policies or negotiations of trade agreements …. This is why we

6 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998), as amended in 2022.

> are now working on empowering businesses led by Indigenous women and setting up a bank to support Indigenous women in trade (Interview with two anonymous indigenous and rural women producers (In-person meeting with five anonymous women leaders; Copiapo, Chile, Nov. 11, 2025).

Structural barriers continue to hamper women's ability to participate in trade-related activities and in trade policy processes on equal terms with men (OECD 2015: 6-7). These barriers manifest in multiple forms: labour market segmentation, unequal distribution of care and unpaid care work, underrepresentation in policymaking and trade negotiations, among others. Before we dive deeper into these barriers, we first take a closer look at the diversity of women who operate in Chile's trade ecosystem.

3.1 A diversity of women in Chile's trade ecosystem

A relevant question when discussing issues of empowerment and agency in trade is: who are the women engaged in trade activities in Chile? An examination of Chile's trade ecosystem shows a very heterogenous picture, where women's empowerment and agency in trade are defined by intersecting grounds of social differentiation, including class, educational level, access to technological knowledge and tools, affiliation to business networks, family background, among others. In Chile's trade ecosystem, both the glass ceiling and sticky floor prevail, as the interviewed women explained. The glass-ceiling in trade jeopardises women's mobility to high levels of decision making including leading bigger export companies. The sticky floor prevents upward mobility of women workers at lower levels of value chains.

Women in businesses are overrepresented in small and medium-sized companies and underrepresented in senior positions in large companies. They face significant barriers because of the structural challenges to gender inequality, and these barriers become even more evident when they seek to internationalize their companies. Among these barriers are the lack of access to financing, technology and information networks (OECD 2025)[7]. The low presence of women in high-level business rounds and trade negotiations appears to corroborate this fact.

Despite the glass ceiling affecting women's agency at high levels of decision making in trade, official data on women exporters (INE 2025), shows a slight increase in women leaders of export companies (29.7% of the total) and increasing participation of women in exports (23.2% of the total export). It also shows that women owners of export companies hire twice as many women workers as male owners. However, there is no information as to whether the jobs created by women comply with decent work standards. The survey also indicates that even though the number of women-led export companies has increased during the period 2019-2024, men-led companies still more than double women's.

Chile's sticky floor in trade activities largely affects women micro-entrepreneurs and women engaged in seasonal work in export companies. Women make only 40% of the micro-entrepreneurs, and are more often self-employed. Notably, the cities with intensive export activity have the highest concentration of self-employed micro-entrepreneurs. 60,8% of women micro-entrepreneurs declared they started

7 The OECD study states that in Chile, women-led firms are roughly 10 percentage points more likely to report encountering challenges with business financing than their men-led counterparts (2025: 13).

out of necessity, and mostly work in commerce, service and manufacturing industries. A large majority earned less than the minimum wage (45.7%)[8]. Women MEs do the bulk of unpaid work which has a strong impact on the time they can devote to developing their microbusinesses (INE 2025).

Indigenous women entrepreneurs

Limited data is available on the economic status of rural Indigenous women in Chile. It is important to highlight this data gap, considering that 10% of the Chilean population is Indigenous. Rural and indigenous women engaged in trade activities tend to be at the bottom of value chains in economic activities, as confirmed by the interviews with rural and Indigenous women producers and seasonal workers. They shared that they struggle to maintain decent livelihoods in an economic context which limits their agency to the realm of service providers, producers of traditional products, or workers employed in low-skilled jobs in the fruit sector of Chile's export industry.

The interviewed women deplored the historical subordination they have endured, and which has translated into unequal access to productive assets and resources, lower access to education and training in trade activities and the generalised belief which confines them to traditional jobs, such as embroidering, cooking and handicrafts. They were also critical of the terms "businesswomen" and "entrepreneurs", as they define themselves as producers, farmers, peasants or micro-entrepreneurs engaged in economic models sustained by the values of solidarity, reciprocity and individual and collective well-being (interview with leader of RATMURI).

8 The net minimum wage corresponds to the gross minimum wage at the time of the survey (CH$529,000) minus legal deductions (18.7%) INE 2025.

To them, entrepreneurship represents far more than "doing business for economic empowerment"[9]. Rather, it is a space for claiming and galvanising their social, economic, cultural and political agency, and in particular, a strategy to claim individual and collective access to and control of productive resources, such as land, water and financial assets.

3.2 Gendered labour market segmentation

As in most countries in the world, including Europe, the labour market in Chile is characterised by persistent gender and intersectional segmentation. Gender intersects with income inequality, ethnicity, age, disability and geographical origin, all of which jointly influence women's participation in labour markets and trade activities in key sectors of the export industry. These intersecting inequalities impinge differently on women, perpetuating barriers that will ultimately determine unequal degrees of multidimensional empowerment and agency between women and men, and within diverse groups of women.

Chile's labour market shows a high prevalence of gender inequality. In the domain of formal employment, 57% of men manage to access formal employment, against 43% of women[10]. Gender wage gaps remain high, at -24,4% in 2024 in detriment of women workers. In informal employment it is even higher at 31.3%. Informality in the private sector is prevalent. 85.5% of informal female employees work in a company operating in the formal economy, showing a worrying trend (ChileMujeres, 2023; ChileMujeres 2025; INE 2024). The gender wage gap affecting women workers

9 Testimony from an interviewed woman producer.

10 https://ilostat.ilo.org/es/data/country-profiles/chl/

increases with age, placing women at a higher risk of poverty as they age[11]. The precariousness of women workers from the lower quintiles is compounded by the fact that they tend to work part time more often than men, due to gender roles and norms which impose an unequal share of care responsibilities on them.

Intersectional data highlights even deeper inequalities. Indigenous women participate less in the labour market than indigenous men (-21.3 percentage points); less than non-indigenous men (-23.3. pp.) and less than non-indigenous women (-2 pp.). Indigenous women tend to work more in informal employment segments (5 pp.) (INE 2022).

Inequalities also affect retirement for women and men in Chile. Due to gender norms and sociocultural factors affecting society and labour markets, women tend to retire with lower pension benefits and face greater financial insecurity in old age (Borges & Vallina, 2024:43). Labour participation of elderly is increasing, and more women (71%) than men (62%) are motivated by economic necessity. Their work is done under conditions of structural precariousness, with negative consequences for their overall wellbeing (Observatorio 2025).

3.3 Gender norms and unpaid (care) work

Gender norms and social prejudice remain major barriers to women's socioeconomic empowerment. Official data confirms that gender stereotypes still impinge on inequalities in care work. A 2025 national survey in Chile shows that women spend over two hours more than men in unpaid care work.

11 Respectively, figures are -18,5% for women aged between 25-39 years of age; -30.9% for women between 40-59 years of age; and -34.7% for women aged 60 and older.

This includes domestic work, caring for household members, voluntary work and helping other households or community members. It also shows that inequality in unpaid labour cuts across all age groups, even though the gap is greater in the case of women of 25 to 44 years of age (INE 2025).

Gender norms define women's agency primarily as care providers (INE 2022). When asked about the reason for not participating in the labour market, 35.9% of indigenous women (vs. 4% indigenous men) responded that it was due to domestic and care work at home; whereas 40% indigenous men responded that the reason was to study (vs. 26.3% indigenous women). For non-indigenous women figures were 34.8 % (vs 2.7% men); 38% (vs. 21.3% men) respectively. Barriers are particularly adverse for women heads of household of lower socioeconomic status, as they can neither rely on the limited availability of care services nor pay for care services in the private care market.

The Chile-EU gender chapter commits both parties to facilitating "cooperation and dialogue with the aim of enhancing women's capacity, conditions and access to opportunities created by trade," and "advancing care policies and programmes as well as work-life balance measures with a gender perspective" (Art. 27.1/10/b/p.2). Although these commitments correspond to the reality of gender inequality observed on the ground, they do not tackle the root causes of gender norms and stereotypes which impinge on women, and particularly on women workers at the bottom of value chains. An interviewee's testimony explains the harsh reality of elderly seasonal workers in the grape export industry :

> I could only finish elementary education. When I enrolled in a technical high school, I had to stop schooling to take care

> of my brother. After I got married and had children, poverty made me migrate to work in the fruit export industry. I worked there for 25 years; it was hard work; I had to support a large family..... in the vineyards, we had to run to fill in as many crates of grapes as possible, since we were paid by the number of kilos collected. I worked as a seasonal worker until I retired at 60. To increase my income, I became a small farmer in 2011, but I have never been able to earn enough income. Today, I am old, poor, indebted and sick (Interview with a woman farmer from RATMURI and president of the women's network "Women seasonal workers of the desert." (Online interview Jan. 16th, 2026)

Overlooking the underlying causes of gender norms and social stereotypes in trade reduces the potential of the gender provisions to bring about any transformative change in balancing productive and reproductive work to the advantage of all women. This also requires interventions in education, since gender norms and stereotypes are taught since early childhood (OECD 2021: 48).

3.4 Limited participation and representation of women in trade policy

Women's full and equal participation and representation in trade policy is essential to ensure trade promotes gender equality and improves women's rights and livelihoods. Several scholars and civil society organisations (CSOs) have critiqued the Chile-EU Agreement for the lack of mechanisms to ensure timely and meaningful consultation with citizens, especially indigenous and rural communities (Boell 2021; Muñoz Cabrera 2025). While Article 27.5 of the Gender chapter refers to Parties' commitment to "encourage the participation of organisations promoting equality between men and women" in the context of the civil society mechanism, this measure is non-binding and does not specify selection criteria or sec-

tor of representation. In practice, encouragement without accountability will not result in women, and especially those who are marginalised, to be present or heard in the implementation of the FTA.

The interviews corroborate this gap, as all interviewees indicated that they were unaware of the existence of the gender chapter. One leader explained that she had followed the previous Association agreement between Chile and the EU until 2010 and stated that: *"After this period, my organisation started to focus more strongly on the follow up of the overuse of pesticides by the export driven agribusiness: pesticides were poisoning our bodies, our territories and ecosystems";* (online interview with indigenous women leader, expert in international relations Jan. 12th, 2026).

The lack of information and engagement that these comments show is rather concerning, as these interviewees are part of an important country-wide women's organisation working to influence policies related to rural and indigenous women producers in agriculture. The contents of the FTA are not only disconnected from the daily lives of those who very directly experience the effects of this Agreement. This also contradicts the very principle of "inclusive trade policies," that the gender chapter reaffirms (Art. 27.1.8).

3.5 Trade liberalization and the impact on women's rights to sustainable livelihoods

Agriculture is the sector with the highest rate of informal employment in Chile, at 41.5% (Fundacion SOL 2025). It is also a highly strategic sector in the Chile-EU FTA, which suggests that trade liberalisation in agricultural goods will further increase in the coming years. Official data shows a

high inequality rate in the agricultural sector, where men tend to have greater access to stable jobs than women. According to the 2023 VIII National Agricultural and Forestry Census, 90.6% of jobs occupied by women in agriculture were temporary; for men, this figure was 49.2%. Furthermore, for every 100 permanent jobs occupied by men, only 5 were occupied by women (INE, 2022).

The combined empirical and official data highlight the importance of considering multidimensional poverty and intersectional inequality as interconnected and often related to mutually reinforcing factors of discrimination (gender, ethnicity, income, geographical origins, among others) and their consequences, one of them being precarious livelihoods.

In fruit producing regions such as O'Higgins and Maule, the Chilean agro-industry has continued to expand through a production model based on the use of low-skilled, cheap labour force, largely hired via subcontracting. These regions are sites of frequent labour rights abuses by subcontractors or company owners (Tonelli 2021; Caro 2022; 2023), and show levels of multidimensional poverty which are not commensurate with the wealth generated through expansion of trade in horticulture. A household survey by the government shows that despite progress in poverty reduction in these regions, poverty levels among women, indigenous and rural workers tend to be higher (Observatorio Social 2026).

The grassroots leaders interviewed echoed the experiences of the seasonal workers in the Central regions. They criticised the government for promoting women's economic empowerment while failing to fully implement legal obligations related to rural and indigenous women's rights (ILO 169) and binding treaties on environmental protection such as the Escazu

Treaty[12]. They stated that expansion of trade in agricultural goods and minerals continues to have a negative impact on their lives, their livelihoods and their ecosystems. They referred to the lack of access to water and resources needed for their productive activities. One retired women leader deplored the loss of livelihoods caused by privatisation of water and the resulting water grabbing by mining and grape producing companies. She explained that this forced her to stop her honey production and search for seasonal work in the grape industry. Another female grassroot leader stressed the high levels of environmental damage caused by export industries that lead to depleted local ecosystems.

The precarious livelihoods of seasonal workers in the horticulture sector demonstrate that the jobs created by trade liberalisation have not substantially contributed to gender equality on the ground and may not do so in the framework of new FTAs. One of the major reasons is the lack of enforcement of labour rights, and compliance by hiring firms and recruitment agencies with decent work standards, in line with ILO recommendations, as the interviewed grassroots women leaders expressed (Group interview Nov. 25th, 2025).

The Chilean horticulture market will continue to expand to satisfy international demand, notably, from European

12 Ministerio de Medio Ambiente (last accessed Jan. 15th, 2026), ¿Que es el acuerdo de Escazú? Available at https://escazu.mma.gob.cl/acuerdo-de-escazu/que-es-el-acuerdo-de-escazu/

and Chinese markets[13][14]. However, trade expansion will not necessarily guarantee decent work conditions, sustainable livelihoods and enjoyment of the fundamental rights for all women workers. Concrete and structural measures are required to create a rights-based enabling environment in the horticulture industry.

On a broader policy level, their experiences challenge the assumption underpinning trade policies, that trade liberalization *per se* has a positive impact on women's lives and livelihoods and that trade is a "catalyst for gender equality" (World Bank 2023). The critique made by Klimke & Tietje (2023) is relevant here, since the wealth created by the horticulture sector is not distributed equitably, and many legal norms and labour standards are not enforced by the middlemen and owners. In this context, a likely scenario in the framework of the EU-Chile FTA is that the creation of new job opportunities will continue to be on the surplus side of the economy; meaning that it will drive low-skilled and high-skilled unemployed workers of different age groups and geographical origins to compete for jobs with low levels of social protection. Another risk is that due to the insufficient level of inspection, the companies that employ seasonal women may further disregard labour standards as a strategy to lower production costs and be competitive in international markets (Bahri 2021).

13 "Exportaciones chilenas de fruta a Europa crecen 22% y superan las 500 mil toneladas", Online, October 2025, accessed Feb 26th 2026. Available at https://g5noticias.cl/2025/10/03/exportaciones-chilenas-de-fruta-a-europa-crecen-22-y-superan-las-500-mil-toneladas/ Gobierno de Chile (2022), "Chile el segundo mayor exportador de fruta fresca en China". (Online article, accessed Feb. 26th. 2026. Available at https://www.chile.gob.cl/chile/blog/china/beijing/chile-el-segundo-mayor-exportador-de-fruta-fresca-en-china

14 Gobierno de Chile (2022), "Chile el segundo mayor exportador de fruta fresca en China". (Online article, accessed Feb. 26th. 2026. Available at https://www.chile.gob.cl/chile/blog/china/beijing/chile-el-segundo-mayor-exportador-de-fruta-fresca-en-china

3.6 Social and environmental sustainability: the missing link

The connection between gender equality and environmental sustainability has received little to no policy attention in gender chapters and provisions. In its assessment of the likely impact of the EU-Chile AFA on sustainability, the Sustainability Impact Assessment commissioned by the European Commission recommends looking into the "possible cumulative negative impact on the right to a clean and healthy environment and the right to health in the sites of conflict (also called 'zones of sacrifice'") (SIAS 115). During the interviews, the grassroots women leaders of RATMURI confirmed this risk, explaining that their productive units, local ecosystems (including the soil, water beds, and air) have been negatively affected by the chemicals and pesticides used in mining and the fruit growing industry, with serious consequences for their livelihoods, health and their sexual and reproductive health rights[15]. Their testimonies clearly show a direct connection between their women's rights and the environment.

In the Gender Chapter under discussion, the link between environmental sustainability and gender equality in trade is missing. In contrast, sustainability is largely approached from an economic perspective (Art. 27/para. 3) and reference to the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is limited to Goal 5 (Art. 27/para.3). There is brief reference to gender equality in the TSD chapter (Ch 26/Section 4/Art. 26.19/8), where gender equality is mentioned as a crosscutting issue, falling under the coordinating responsibilities of

15 Muñoz Cabrera et al. Forthcoming 2026, " Rural and indigenous women building caring local economies in Chile and India", will be available at https://www.femwiss.ch/fran%C3%A7ais-1/fem-f%C3%A9m-notre-revue/appel-%C3%A0-contributions/

Sub-Committees established under the Agreement. The link is made with the Gender chapter, especially Article 27.4, paragraphs 8 and 9, which corroborate the voluntary nature of the gender mainstreaming provision:

> 8. Through the TSD Sub-Committee, the Parties shall encourage efforts by the bodies established in this Agreement to integrate gender-related issues, considerations and activities in their work.
>
> 9. The Parties shall encourage inclusive participation of women in the implementation of the cooperation activities established under this article, as appropriate

This is a significant policy gap, especially considering the potential risk of escalating conflict pointed out in the SIA, and commitments by both signing parties to comply with the SDG call for gender equality in all Goals and not only Goal 5.

4. Conclusions and policy recommendations

This research shows that the gender chapter of the modernised EU–Chile Agreement, while signalling political recognition of gender-differentiated impacts of trade, remains insufficient to address the gendered inequalities that shape Chile's trade landscape. Using a contextualised intersectional approach grounded in empirical evidence from grassroots, rural and indigenous women, the analysis demonstrates disconnect between the chapter's policy narrative and the lived realities of the women who bear the costs of trade liberalisation. To mitigate these effects, domestic legal and policy frameworks guaranteeing women's economic, social and political rights need to be implemented in line with international commitments.

The findings corroborate the argument put forward by scholars based on policy discourse analysis: voluntary and cooperation-based gender provisions may create policy space and create awareness, but without enforceable commitments, monitoring mechanisms and the full participation and inclusion of diverse groups of women, they cannot generate meaningful impact. The EU–Chile gender chapter replicates common limitations of similar chapters worldwide by homogenising "women," omitting intersectional analysis, and failing to address systemic barriers such as care burdens, informality, unequal access to productive resources and the environmental pressures that disproportionately affect women in rural and indigenous communities. The absence of meaningful consultation processes further weakens its capacity to respond to the priorities and experiences of grassroots women.

Based on our findings, the following recommendations are addressed to trade policymakers, both at national and international levels:

> ***1. Gender chapters need to be based on intersectional gender assessments.*** Effective policy design begins with a robust understanding of reality on the ground. Gender chapters need to be based on thorough analyses of existing gendered and intersectional inequalities. This involves drawing from context-specific evidence, including gender-segregated micro data, and the lived experiences of heterogeneous groups of women, including grassroots, rural and indigenous women. Incorporating intersectional analysis into ex-ante and ex-post assessments enables policymakers to identify differentiated impacts and design

appropriate and targeted mitigation measures. In the Chilean context, where gender intersects with ethnicity, socioeconomic status, age and geography, such analysis is crucial for addressing inequalities linked to care burdens, land access, informality and environmental degradation.

2. Gender commitments require enforceable implementation and accountability mechanisms. Equally important is the need for enforceable implementation. Gender chapters require clear institutional responsibilities, indicators for tracking differentiated impacts, and coherence with domestic legal obligations on labour rights, non-discrimination, care and environmental protection. Without such mechanisms, gender commitments will continue to remain aspirational at best (Kuhlmann and Bahri 2023) or otherwise accentuate rather than transformative.

3. Meaningful consultation and engagement with a wide range of representative stakeholders including women's rights organisations. The absence of women's voices and perspectives in the negotiation of the EU–Chile gender chapter reflects a persistent democratic deficit in trade governance. Collecting data on the specific roles and needs of women and men in the economy and society (der Boghossian 2023), requires genuine processes of consultations with a wide range of representative stakeholders and women's organisations, rather than only businesswomen or women exporters. Sustained and inclusive consultation throughout the entire trade policy cycle, including negotiation, implementation

and monitoring, is essential for reflecting the priorities, knowledge and lived realities of those most affected by trade. Engaging a wide range of women's organisations, including from local communities, small-scale farmers, producers and traders will provide essential insights for preventing unintended consequences of trade liberalisation.

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