

Activist briefing: Transform Trade for Women Campaign

This activist briefing outlines the background to ActionAid Australia’s campaign on the gendered impacts of free trade, and includes sections on messaging, strategic conversations and activist tactics for the campaign. This is part of an ActionAid Federation’s global campaign, and over the next three years we will be taking action both here in Australia as well as collaborating with other ActionAid offices and partners around the world.



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So-called “free trade” deals that are pursued by governments around the world is entrenching inequality and injustice for women. In particular, we know that these deals are undermining women’s access to decent work and public services and increasing their unpaid labour, particularly in low income countries.

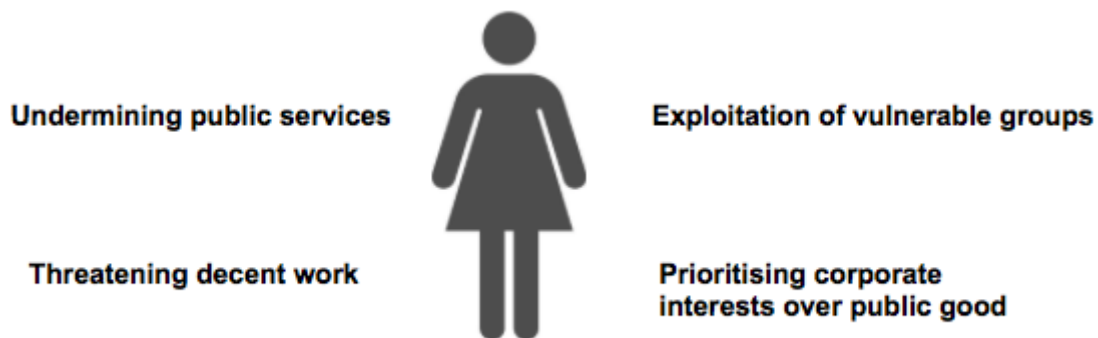
Free trade agreements are international treaties between two or more nations that set rules regarding trade and investment.

There is increasing recognition globally trade deals are almost always rigged in favour of multinational corporations. In effect, they are about increasing the rights of large corporations at the expense of everyday people. We know that free trade has significant negative impacts for women’s rights and gender equality around the world.

In Australia, we have already entered into 11 FTAs with 7 still under negotiation. One of the most high profile FTAs that Australia has recently entered into is the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was signed last year. Globally, there are more than 3000 FTAs.

Why is trade a women’s rights issue?

FTAs tip the scale in favour of the interests of corporations at the expense of women’s access to decent work and public services, particularly in low income countries. These deals do this by:



1. Undermining the government’s ability to provide public services like schools and hospitals.

Public services are a critical part of ensuring that women’s basic needs are met, and increasing gender equality. Public services reduce women’s unpaid work and increase their ability to access decent work. For example, if a family member becomes sick, having a quality public hospital nearby can mean the difference between having to take care of the family member while they are sick and being able to work.

But free trade agreements generally require a reduction of tariffs as part of the deal, which reduces government revenue available for public services. In addition, free trade agreements also encourage governments to privatise public services, which we know often lowers the quality of the service while increasing costs.

2. Threatening women's access to decent jobs.

Women in low income countries are often smallholder farmers or involved in local businesses, which are hit the hardest when free trade agreements force countries to allow these sectors to be flooded by large multinational corporations. These corporations also often threaten women's land rights as they buy up large amounts of low cost land for their operations.

At the same time, free trade agreements encourage large multinational companies to open operations in manufacturing work like the garment sector, driving down wages and undermining worker's rights. Some trade deals even create so-called "special economic zones" where normal labour rights and standards may not apply.

3. Increasing the exploitation of vulnerable groups, especially women migrant workers.

FTAs also often have chapters which increase the amount of temporary migrant workers, generally people who come from low income countries to work in countries of the global north like Australia.

While temporary migration in theory can provide an avenue for women from low income countries to earn higher salaries, in practice these women often end up in poorly paid sectors where they are more vulnerable to exploitation. Asian Women at Work have published research [SS1] [LM2] showing that migrant and refugee women working in Australia have been frequently underpaid, received incorrect leave entitlements, were unfairly dismissed, bullied and harassed and suffered from bad health due to their work. And because of the conditions of these temporary worker visas, if women want to leave their employer due to exploitation or rights violations, they often face deportation.

4. Prioritising corporate interests over public good.

If all of the above wasn't enough, there's one final way that FTAs pose a serious threat to women's access to decent work and public services. A part of FTAs called the "Investor State Dispute Settlement" (ISDS) effectively allows multinational corporations to sue governments if the government threatens their profits. We'll talk more about this below, but in terms of women's rights – UN experts have noted that governments bound by this clause are less likely to pass laws essential for women's rights for fear of being sued.

Case study: Meet Orji Theresa, one of the unpaid nurses keeping this hospital in Nigeria afloat



“A pregnant woman can come to our hospital at any time, but who will attend to her if everybody has gone? That is why we stay voluntarily, but we should be paid.”

Orji Theresa is an unpaid nurse and midwife in a local hospital in Abuja, Nigeria, with no water source, no electricity, and no government funding.

Orji’s salary was previously paid for by the government, but funding was cut when the country changed governments and faced the reality of their dwindling public funds.

Free trade agreements can play a big role in reducing government revenue – as they typically require a reduction of tariffs on imports as part of the deal. This loss of public revenue can have particularly significant impacts in low-income countries like Nigeria. With less revenue, governments struggle to fund public services like hospitals, schools and public transport.

Nurses like Orji have courageously taken it upon themselves to make sure the community has access to the care that they need, but without a salary, it is not a sustainable solution.

“It’s a great agony to work without being paid. We don’t get paid a single penny. It’s becoming unbearable,” says Orji.

When basic services like healthcare are underfunded, research shows that the burden of unpaid care on women increases. Now nurses like Orji are working long hours for free because they feel they don’t have a choice.

“If the government had the money to come in and stabilise the place by paying the staff, getting a clean water supply, getting electricity and medicines, it would make a huge difference,” says Orji.

Free trade agreements like RCEP – a large deal currently being negotiated between Australia and 15 other countries – tip the scale in favour of corporations at the expense of women’s rights. Not even governments win from these deals.

By lowering tariffs and reducing important government revenue, it can leave public services like healthcare critically underfunded. Women like Orji are left to pick up the pieces.

The opportunity

Australia is currently involved in negotiations for a large new regional FTA, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between the 10 ASEAN nations, Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand. The deal is huge: it will cover almost half of the world’s population and over 30% of total global GDP.

The RCEP negotiations are predicted to conclude by the end of this year, with one round of negotiations to be held in Melbourne from the 28th of June until the 3rd of July and others to follow later in the year.

So far the draft RCEP deal contains many of the concerning aspects outlined above which negatively impact on women’s rights. Together with activists and partners, the campaign aims to influence the government to not sign onto the RCEP deal unless it meaningfully addresses our concerns.

Messaging

The problem: The government is considering signing a dodgy new deal that would trade women’s rights for corporate rights

The solution: People power can win over corporate power if we stand together. Join the campaign to stop RCEP!

Elevator Pitch:

The Australian Government is considering signing a dodgy new deal called ‘RCEP’ that would **trade women’s rights for corporate rights**. This free trade deal would give more power to corporations while undermining women’s rights at work, increasing their unpaid labour, and threatening their access to public services. **But people power can win over corporate power if we stand together.** Join the campaign to stop RCEP and call on the government to reject this dodgy deal.

Strategic Conversations & Handling Objections

To have strategic conversations and move people to action we use a framework called **Outrage, Hope, Action**. This framework is commonly utilised by other civil society organisations and unions when campaigning.

You can use the below format when having conversations with the public and other activists in relation to this campaign:

1. Introduction: Who you are and what you want to talk about. You can foreshadow your ask here, but you don't have to be specific. E.g. 'I'm calling you about actions you can take for women's rights' or 'I'm calling to let you know about the campaign and upcoming actions you can take'.

2. Build rapport: Make a connection with them, don't rush into the serious stuff. Engage in some small talk, follow on from what you already know about them or experiences you have shared. Ask questions, be curious about them, but not too nosy! This process is about building a relationship.

3. Outrage: Introduce the issue and find out what they think about it. This is a good time to gauge their level of interest/concern, their values, and where they are coming from. This could include 'agitating' by exposing the facts and evidence about the injustice that is occurring.

4. Hope: Give them information they may be missing. You want to encourage people to feel hopeful that change can happen or about the role they can play in being part of the change.

5. Action: Introduce the ask. Leverage their concern into commitment. It could mean repeating their views back to them and linking them to ActionAid. If it is difficult to get commitment you can go back to exploring the issue or providing more information and hope.

6. Closing: Thank people for their time and say goodbye.

Gender and Trade Strategic Conversation script

Introduction	Hello, my name is X and I'm a volunteer with ActionAid Australia. Today we're talking to people in your area about our campaign on transforming trade for women and how you can be involved.
Build Rapport	Have you heard much about ActionAid's campaigns before? I got involved with ActionAid because I care about... (share your story)
Outrage	<p>Right now the Australian government is considering signing a dodgy new deal that would trade women's rights for corporate rights.</p> <p>This free trade deal is called 'RCEP', or the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).¹ Like many free trade deals, RCEP will have significant negative impacts for women's rights and gender equality - particularly in low-income countries.</p> <p>How do trade deals like RCEP boost corporate power at the expense of women's rights? (<i>pick one point to emphasise your point that you are comfortable explaining, or will resonate best with the listener</i>):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They undermine the government's ability to provide public

¹ It is between the 10 ASEAN nations, as well as Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand.

	<p>services that women rely on like schools and hospitals, by reducing tariffs and therefore government revenue.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Governments are encouraged to privatise these services instead. b. When these services aren't accessible, it increases women's burden of unpaid care. <p>2. They threaten women's access to decent jobs, by encouraging large multinational companies to open operations in highly feminised manufacturing work like the garment sector, driving down wages and undermining worker's rights.</p> <p>3. They give corporations the power to sue governments if they feel their profits are threatened.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Governments are then less likely to pass laws essential for women's rights for fear of being sued.
Hope	<p>People power can win over corporate power if we work together. This year we have an important opportunity in Australia to influence the RCEP negotiations, and make sure the Australian Government rejects this dodgy trade deal. To do this we need to grow the power of our movement and turn up the pressure on our government to take a stand for women's rights.</p>
Action	<p>Will you sign our petition to stop RCEP and make sure people power wins over corporate power?</p>
Close	<p>Thanks for taking the time to chat today.</p>

Tactics

After consulting with the activist network at the National Campaign Strategy Meet-Up in March, we have pulled together a set of tactics which will get activists into their communities to build the movement around the campaign, engage key MPs and senators across the country and mobilise people across the country around the negotiations for the RCEP deal in Melbourne in late June.

Broadly what will happen is - each state will receive a banner that they will be tasked to decorate with community images and messages. You can get your group members to write on the banner why they are passionate about gender-just trade or stick any images on it of activist activities. The idea is to create really visually beautiful banners that we can then drop outside of our MPs and Senators offices in the lead-up to the RCEP negotiations.

Finally we will ask states to send back all their banners so we can sew them together and display them out the front of the RCEP negotiations at a large rally being planned with our allies on the campaign.

At the same time, we will be supporting local groups to secure meetings with their MPs to ask them to make public commitments to not trade women's rights for this dodgy deal.

Phase 1 - Activist launch April 17th until Federal election May 18th: Movement building

In this phase activists will begin decorating their banner with messages from the community. Ways that you can get people to decorate your banner:

- Activism over dinner
- Market stalls
- Clothes swap

Many of you will be aware of the circles of commitment framework. In this phase of the campaign we are trying to increase our contributor circle, so we have a large base of interested people ready to take action on this campaign.

We will also want to be petitioning at this time, make sure you have petitions at all your events so people can sign their support.

As per usual don't forget to type of your petitions and send the data to us. A good way to do this is have one person in your group as the data guru who keep track of people who have signed up in spreadsheets.

Phase 2 - Federal election May 18th until RCEP negotiations 28th June, and then continue after RCEP negotiations finish: MP engagement

After the election results have been finalised we will have a better sense of the cabinet and we can start focusing on our key targets for the campaign. Before the election, MPs and senators will be solely focused on re-election and it is not a strategic time to make our asks, particularly as government and cabinet are likely to change after the election!

Once the election is over we will go full speed ahead with engaging our local MPs and Senators. To do this you will need to:

1. Send in a meeting request from yourself - or ask staff to do it centrally on your behalf
2. CC us in to all communications with MPs and Senators so we can log in database (you can find it here:

https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1aV2_51yjirmV9_SAv07_6H4f76jUH00KES_JzlogRT0/edit?usp=sharing)

3. Follow up over the phone A LOT

In our meetings with MPs we will be asking our politicians to make a statement that they will only support trade that put women's rights ahead of corporations. This statement could be on their social media, ActionAid's social media, to media, or in Parliament. For anyone who makes a statement, we will be awarding them a "trade trophy" award (name TBC), and nationally we'll be keeping track and sharing publicly when politicians receive our award.

Because MPs are extremely busy, **expect that some meetings will happen before the RCEP negotiations, and others after.** Throughout this time you can continue to build your movement and engage the community until your meeting with your politician.

Phase 3 - 17th and 18th June National mobilisation and RCEP negotiations 28th June to 3rd July:
National mobilisation

In this phase activists will take part in a national mobilisation that is centred around the RCEP negotiations taking place in Melbourne.

A week and a half before the RCEP negotiations, activists will drop in to their MP or senators' office with the banner decorated with messages from their community. We will take photos at the drop ins and use the images to build momentum in the lead-up to the campaign!

If you have not heard from your MP this is a good way to escalate your request. Show the MP/senator your banner with the messages and follow up in person.

Send the banners back to us after you drop into your MP/senator and we will sew them together to create a big banner to use at the RCEP negotiations in Melbourne!

Example activist journey:

- Shayma is an activist in the Wollongong group.
- She holds a clothes swap event to raise awareness of how trade deals can negatively impact on garment workers in lower-income countries by increasing the power of large manufacturing companies.
- 20 people come to the event. At the event attendees write messages onto the banner and sign the petition.
- Shayma takes photos of the attendees of the event and then sticks those onto the banner.
- After the election, Shayma sends in a request to meet with her local MP Sharon Bird.
- She doesn't hear back from Sharon, so a week later she follows up with a call.
- After two weeks Shayma drops in to Sharon's office with the rest of the Wollongong group with her decorated banner and a printed meeting request, she tells the staffer that people in the community are really interested in the issue and they've made this banner to take to the RCEP negotiations.
- Shayma takes a photo with the group and the banner outside Sharon's office.
- Shayma sends the banner back to ActionAid for the team to take down to Melbourne for the RCEP negotiations.
- Thanks to Shayma's pressure on Sharon Bird through the meeting request and banner drop at her office, Sharon Bird agrees to a meeting with the Wollongong group.
- In that meeting, Sharon Bird agrees to post a statement on her Facebook page with a quote demonstrating her support for protecting women's rights in trade deals, and receives our "trade trophy" award.

Where to get support

For more information about the campaign and how you can get involved, contact the Community Organising Manager, Liz on liz.hadjia@actionaid.org or the Campaigns and Organising Officer, Siri on siri.andersen@actionaid.org.

For a PDF version of the petition and other materials to support you to hold events, please visit the Activist Toolkit section of our website: <https://actionaid.org.au/home/take-action/activist-network/activist-toolkit/>