

Nos. 13-690 and 13-822

In the Supreme Court of the United States

RACK ROOM SHOES, PETITIONER

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, ET AL.

FOREVER 21, INC. AND SKIZ IMPORTS LLC, PETITIONERS

v.

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, ET AL.

*ON PETITION AND CONDITIONAL CROSS-PETITION
FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI
TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS
FOR THE FEDERAL CIRCUIT*

BRIEF FOR THE UNITED STATES IN OPPOSITION

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether petitioner's complaint states a claim that provisions of the Harmonized Tariff Schedule of the United States (HTSUS) that impose different rates of duty upon different imported footwear, depending upon whether the product is for men, women, or children, violate the equal protection component of the Due Process Clause based on a disparate-impact theory (Question Presented in No. 13-690).

2. Whether cross-petitioners' complaints state a claim that the HTSUS provisions governing footwear, apparel, and gloves violate the equal protection component of the Due Process Clause based on a theory of facial discrimination (Question Presented in No. 13-822).

3. Whether cross-petitioners possess "first party standing" to challenge the HTSUS (Question Presented in No. 13-822).

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OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the court of appeals (Pet. App. 1a-18a) is reported at 718 F.3d 1370. The opinion of the Court of International Trade (CIT) (Pet. App. 19a-33a) is reported at 821 F. Supp. 2d 1341. The CIT's denial of a motion for reconsideration (Pet. App. 34a-39a) is reported at 856 F. Supp. 2d 1291.

JURISDICTION

The judgment of the court of appeals was entered on June 12, 2013. A petition for rehearing was denied on September 5, 2013 (Pet. App. 40a-41a). The petition for a writ of certiorari was filed on December 4, 2013, and was placed on this Court's docket on December 9, 2013. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked under 28 U.S.C. 1254(1). The conditional cross-petition was filed on January 8, 2014.

STATEMENT

1. The Harmonized Tariff Schedule of the United States (HTSUS) classifies goods imported into the United States and establishes the import duties for goods within each classification.¹ These cases (which were consolidated below) concern the HTSUS provisions that establish applicable duties on imported footwear, apparel, and gloves. For example, HTSUS Subheading 6205.20.20 imposes a 19.7% rate of duty on “[m]en’s or boy’s” cotton shirts, whereas HTSUS Subheading 6206.30.30 imposes a 15.4% rate of duty on “[w]omen’s or girl’s” cotton shirts. Conditional Cross-Pet. 2-3. The subheadings for HTSUS 6403 and 6406 impose duty rates on footwear for “men, youth[s], and boys” that are different from the rates imposed on footwear for “other persons.” Pet. App. 4a.

2. Petitioner Rack Room Shoes, Inc., a United States importer of footwear, filed suit in the United States Court of International Trade (CIT) challenging various HTSUS provisions. Petitioner argued that, by differentiating for these purposes between footwear

¹ The current version of the HTSUS is available at <http://www.usitc.gov/tata/hts>.

for “men, youth[s], and boys” and footwear for “other persons,” the relevant HTSUS provisions discriminate on the basis of gender or age, in violation of the equal protection component of the Due Process Clause. Pet. App. 4a.

Cross-petitioner Forever 21, Inc. (Forever 21) is an importer of footwear and apparel for women, men, and children. Pet. App. 5a. Cross-petitioner Skiz Imports LLC (Skiz) has no customers and was formed to import gloves, footwear, and apparel for the sole purpose of bringing this lawsuit. *Id.* at 6a, 8a; Conditional Cross-Pet. 4. Cross-petitioners filed their own suits in the CIT challenging the HTSUS provisions for footwear, gloves, and apparel. Pet. App. 5a-6a. Like petitioner, cross-petitioners argued that the different duty rates imposed by the relevant HTSUS provisions violate the equal protection component of the Due Process Clause. *Ibid.*

3. The complaint filed by petitioner was stayed during the pendency of a similar lawsuit: *Totes-Isotoner Corp. v. United States*, 594 F.3d 1346 (Fed. Cir.) (*Totes*), cert. denied, 131 S. Ct. 92 (2010).

a. In *Totes*, the plaintiff alleged that, by imposing different import duty rates for men’s gloves and gloves “[f]or other persons,” the HTSUS discriminated on the basis of gender or age in violation of the equal protection component of the Due Process Clause. 594 F.3d at 1349. The CIT dismissed the complaint, and the Federal Circuit affirmed. *Id.* at 1350, 1358.²

² The Federal Circuit rejected the government’s argument that the plaintiff in *Totes* lacked third-party standing to assert the equal-protection rights of male glove purchasers. 594 F.3d at 1351-1352.

The court of appeals held that the relevant tariff provisions were not facially discriminatory. *Totes*, 594 F.3d at 1354. The court found the plaintiff's allegations insufficient to demonstrate that men's gloves and women's gloves are property of the same class, explaining that those articles are "separate commodities, moving in different channels of trade and presenting different commercial issues with respect to domestic manufacturers." *Ibid.* The court therefore concluded that the plaintiff had failed to state a claim that the tariff classifications unconstitutionally discriminate between "items of property of the 'same class.'" *Id.* at 1354, 1357. Concurring in the result, Judge Prost agreed that the tariff schedule "is not facially discriminatory" because "[i]t distinguishes on the basis of products, not natural people." *Id.* at 1359-1360.

In addressing disparate impact, the court of appeals in *Totes* framed the relevant question as "whether the allegation of disparate impact of the tariff provisions with respect to male glove users is sufficient to create a prima facie case of sex discrimination." 594 F.3d at 1355. The court held that an allegation of disparate impact alone is insufficient in the area of taxation and tariffs, where Congress's imposition of duties is generally designed "to promote particular trade policy objectives negotiated with other countries" and is not concerned "with the characteristics of the ultimate retail users of goods." *Id.* at 1356-1357. In that context, the court continued, "something more * * * is required to establish a purpose to discriminate." *Id.* at 1357. "Absent a showing that Congress intended to discriminate against men in the tariff schedule," the court conclud-

ed that it could not “simply assume the existence of such an unusual purpose from the mere fact of disparate impact.” *Ibid.*

b. This Court denied the petition for a writ of certiorari. See *Totes-Isotoner Corp. v. United States*, 131 S. Ct. 92 (2010).

4. After *Totes*, cross-petitioners filed their complaints, and petitioner amended its complaint in an attempt to allege a discriminatory purpose. Pet. App. 3a-4a. To do so, petitioner’s amended complaint alleged that Congress could have relied on other criteria to set the tariff rates or used “non-tariff measures to effectuate governmental purposes other than the raising of revenue.” *Id.* at 51a-52a, 53a, 54a. Cross-petitioners attached to their complaints pages from a 1960 study questioning the “economic justification” for “age- and gender-based classifications of McKay-sewed leather footwear.” *Id.* at 5a-6a, 29a.

a. The CIT consolidated the three cases and dismissed the complaints. Pet. App. 6a, 20a.³ The court explained that, under *Totes*, the challenged HTSUS provisions are not “facially discriminatory,” and “an allegation of disparate impact” is “insufficient” to prove actionable discrimination. *Id.* at 25a. The court additionally found the “disparate impact pleading[s]” flawed for failing to “allege that tariff rates consistently favor goods associated with one gender or age over another,” and for failing to provide any “factual indication * * * that the tariff classifications re-

³ Relying on *Totes*, the CIT rejected the government’s argument that petitioner and Forever 21 lacked third-party standing. Pet. App. 25a n.6. The court did not resolve the standing issues regarding Skiz because it found the other complaints “sufficient” to “test the adequacy” of all of the pleadings. *Ibid.*

sult in a discriminatory application of the burdens of the tax to one particular sex or age group.” *Id.* at 26a n.8.

As for discriminatory purpose, the CIT found only two new allegations that purport to speak to Congress’s discriminatory intent: (i) the assertion that Congress could have used criteria other than gender, and (ii) the 1960 study purportedly questioning the economic justification for one of the tariff classifications. Pet. App. 28a-32a. The court explained that the first allegation is “built only upon the language of the provision” and “adds nothing to the claim, already rejected in [*Totes*], that the use of gender in tariff classifications evidences a discriminatory purpose.” *Id.* at 29a. With respect to the 1960 study, the court found that it pertained only to the “precursors to the tariff provisions” at issue and actually “reinforces the premise that such distinctions have a rational historic purpose.” *Id.* at 29a-30a. The court thus found “nothing in the Amended Complaints that can connect the tariff provisions and congressional action in a way to suggest with plausibility the existence of a governmental intent to discriminate.” *Id.* at 32a.

b. The CIT subsequently denied petitioner’s motion for reconsideration. Pet. App. 34a-39a.

5. The court of appeals affirmed. Pet. App. 1a-19a. The court first held that petitioner and Forever 21 had third-party standing under *Totes*, but that Skiz did not. *Id.* at 8a. The court explained that “Skiz’s complaint depends entirely on the rights of third parties who, by virtue of [its] decision not to sell the imported goods, simply do not exist.” *Id.* at 10a. The court also held that Skiz lacked “first-party standing” because simply paying tariffs like any other importer

is not a “concrete injury,” and because Skiz had waived any argument based on alleged discrimination in rates “on items of property within the same class of goods” by failing to raise that argument on appeal. *Ibid.*

On the merits, the court of appeals reaffirmed its prior holding in *Totes* that the HTSUS provisions are not facially discriminatory. Pet. App. 14a-16a. As for petitioner’s disparate-impact theory, the court declined to “infer from the availability of nondiscriminatory alternatives the discriminatory intent necessary [to] plead an equal protection violation.” *Id.* at 12a. The court explained that adopting such a theory would “eviscerate the requirement that claimants must plead intent to state an equal protection claim.” *Id.* at 14a. The court also found that the 1960 study, if relevant “at all,” “says nothing to suggest that such classifications were made with discriminatory intent,” and indeed “says nothing about categories other than McKay-sewed leather footwear.” *Id.* at 16a-17a. Finally, the court concluded that an 1892 treatise about “slavery-related tariffs on wool clothing” does not “make[] plausible the inference that in enacting the HTSUS some 150 years later, Congress was motivated to discriminate on the basis of age or gender.” *Id.* at 17a-18a. The court accordingly held that the complaints did not state a plausible claim that the different tariff rates were the result of a discriminatory purpose. *Id.* at 18a.

ARGUMENT

The decision of the court of appeals is correct and does not conflict with any decision of this Court or any other court of appeals. This Court recently denied certiorari in a predecessor case that raised similar

questions, see *Totes-Isotoner Corp. v. United States*, 131 S. Ct. 92 (2010) (No. 09-1360), and the same result is warranted here.

1. The court of appeals correctly held that the challenged HTSUS provisions do not facially discriminate on the basis of gender. Pet. App. 14a-16a.⁴ The court also explained that, when a “facially neutral” law is alleged to be unconstitutional, “a party pleading discrimination under equal protection must show that the law has a disparate impact on natural persons resulting from a discriminatory purpose,” *id.* at 11a, and that “[d]iscriminatory intent * * * implies that Congress enacted the contested classifications of the HTSUS ‘because of, not merely in spite of, [their] adverse effects upon an identifiable group,’” *id.* at 12a (quoting *Personnel Adm’r of Mass. v. Feeney*, 442 U.S. 256, 279 (1979)) (second brackets in original). Petitioner does not challenge either the court’s threshold determination that the HTSUS provisions are facially neutral or its legal conclusion that petitioner bears the burden of pleading “discriminatory intent.” Cf. Pet. 5, 6-7 (articulating same legal standard). Instead, petitioner contends that it adequately pleaded such a “discriminatory purpose,” and that the court of appeals erred in holding otherwise. That

⁴ Petitioner (Pet. 4 n.1) and cross-petitioners (Conditional Cross-Pet. 2 n.1) briefly suggest that the HTSUS also unconstitutionally discriminates on the basis of age. Unlike gender discrimination, however, laws that are alleged to discriminate on the basis of age are subject only to rational-basis review. See *Kimel v. Florida Bd. of Regents*, 528 U.S. 62, 83-84 (2000). Neither petitioner nor cross-petitioners contend that Congress lacks a rational basis for imposing different duty rates on children’s and adult footwear or apparel.

argument lacks merit and does not warrant further review.

a. In *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, this Court held that, to survive a motion to dismiss under Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 12(b)(6), a complaint must contain “sufficient factual matter, accepted as true, to ‘state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.’” 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (quoting *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 570 (2007)). A complaint must do more than “plead facts that are ‘merely consistent with’ a defendant’s liability.” *Ibid.* (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 557). Rather, it must “plead[] factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Ibid.* Whether a claim is plausible is “a context-specific task that requires the reviewing court to draw on its judicial experience and common sense.” *Id.* at 679. “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint * * * has not ‘show[n] * * * that the pleader is entitled to relief.’” *Ibid.* (quoting Fed. R. Civ. P. 8(a)(2)) (brackets added by Court).⁵

The court of appeals correctly held that petitioner’s complaint did not satisfy that standard. Pet. App. 12a-14a. The only “factual” allegation in petitioner’s complaint to support its claim of discriminatory intent asserted that “HTSUS allows for the differentiation of goods on the basis of standards that do not involve protected classes of persons,” and that Congress could have used such “non-gender factors” here. *Id.* at 51a,

⁵ The Federal Rules of Civil Procedure do not apply directly to the CIT, but the courts below relied on comparable standards. See Pet. 10 & n.3.

53a, 54a. According to petitioner, the fact that Congress instead chose to separate the classes of merchandise “based on gender” is by itself sufficient to create an inference of intent to discriminate. *Id.* at 51a.

As the CIT explained, the fact that Congress could have relied on factors other than gender adds little (if anything) to the rejected assertion that the classifications are *facially* discriminatory. Pet. App. 29a. References to gender in a facially neutral statute cannot by themselves give rise to an inference of discriminatory intent in this context, and a claim that Congress could have used other words fares no better. As the court of appeals explained, “discriminatory intent” cannot be inferred based on nothing more than “the government’s decision to forgo an alternative that does not mention * * * gender.” *Id.* at 14a.

b. Petitioner contends (Pet. 14, 23-28) that the court of appeals’ decision effectively bars “direct challenges to statutes alleged to offend equal protection guarantees,” and it suggests that the pleading standard should be different for “legislative challenges.” Petitioner also contends (Pet. 32-33) that the court of appeals improperly “discounted the value of circumstantial evidence in equal protection challenges.” None of those arguments is persuasive.

The court of appeals’ decision was intensely context- and case-specific, and it does not call into question the viability of equal-protection claims writ large. The court individually examined the allegations in petitioner’s and cross-petitioners’ complaints and concluded that they were each insufficient to raise a reasonable inference of discriminatory purpose. See Pet. App. 12a-14a, 16a-18a. The court did not dismiss

circumstantial evidence as irrelevant, however, nor did it suggest that the availability of nondiscriminatory alternatives can never bear on the equal-protection inquiry. Rather, the court concluded that, standing alone, “the government’s decision to forgo an alternative that does not mention * * * gender” did not raise an inference of discriminatory intent in this case. *Id.* at 14a. That case-specific holding does not suggest that plaintiffs will never be able to satisfy their pleading requirement when asserting an equal-protection challenge to a facially neutral statute.⁶

As the court of appeals recognized, a contrary holding “would eviscerate the requirement that claimants must plead intent to state an equal protection claim.” Pet. App. 14a. Petitioner takes issue with that observation (Pet. 33), but its arguments rest primarily on the assertion that an inherently suspect classification appears on the face of the HTSUS provisions. See, e.g., Pet. 27 (“[b]y virtue of the explicit language of the HTSUS”; “containing express gender-based language”); Pet. 37 (“Congress’ needless use of gender-based language”). The court of appeals held, however, that the challenged provisions are not facially discriminatory, Pet. App. 14a-15a; see *Totes-Isotoner Corp. v.*

⁶ Petitioner briefly suggests (Pet. 31 n.8) that the courts below “erred further by excluding” the 1960 study “from consideration.” In fact, neither the CIT nor the court of appeals declined to consider the study. Rather, both courts examined the study and concluded that it did not support petitioner’s equal-protection challenge. The CIT found that the study actually “reinforces the premise that [the tariff] distinctions have a rational historic purpose.” Pet. App. 29a-30a. The court of appeals observed that the study “says nothing to suggest that such classifications were made with discriminatory intent,” and indeed “says nothing about categories other than McKay-sewed leather footwear.” *Id.* at 16a-17a.

United States, 594 F.3d 1346, 1358 (Fed. Cir.) (*Totes*), cert. denied, 131 S. Ct. 92 (2010), and petitioner does not challenge that determination in this Court. Cf. pp. 14-15, *infra* (addressing facial-discrimination argument raised in conditional cross-petition). The court of appeals also held that, in this context, it could not infer discriminatory intent from disparate impact alone. Pet. App. 11a-12a; see *Totes*, 594 F.3d at 1356-1357. Petitioner does not challenge that determination in this Court either.

In any event, any disparate impact on end users resulting from the HTSUS provisions at issue here is easily explained on grounds other than intent to discriminate on the basis of gender.⁷ When Congress assigns different duty rates to different goods in its tariff schedules, it is generally concerned with “trade policy objectives negotiated with other countries,” not “the characteristics of the ultimate retail users of goods.” *Totes*, 594 F.3d at 1356. “Absent a showing that Congress intended to discriminate against men [or women] in the tariff schedule,” a court cannot “simply assume the existence of such an unusual purpose from the mere fact of disparate impact.” *Id.* at 1357. A contrary conclusion “would call into question all taxes on items which are disproportionately consumed by any identifiable group.” *Id.* at 1358. And adding a generalized allegation that Congress could have chosen an alternative basis for classifying differ-

⁷ As the CIT held, moreover, petitioner failed even to plead a disparate impact because it neither “allege[d] that tariff rates consistently favor goods associated with one gender * * * over another” nor provided any “factual indication * * * that the tariff classifications result in a discriminatory application of the burdens of the tax to one particular sex.” Pet. App. 26a n.8.

ent products adds nothing of substance to petitioner’s claim.⁸

c. Petitioner does not identify any conflict among the courts of appeals about the proper application of *Iqbal* and *Twombly* in the context of an equal-protection challenge to a legislative enactment. Although petitioner asserts (Pet. 13) that lower courts “often diverg[e] greatly to arrive at far different conclusions respecting substantially identical pleadings,” it cites no such cases. Instead, to demonstrate the purported “confusion and disagreement among the circuits,” petitioner relies (Pet. 19-21, 23) on a Seventh Circuit *dissent*. Absent any conflict among the courts of appeals, there is no sound reason for this Court’s review.⁹

2. Forever 21 and Skiz have filed a conditional cross-petition that raises two additional questions. That cross-petition is conditional only and “will not be granted unless” the petition is granted. Sup. Ct. R. 13.4. For all the reasons set forth above, the petition should be denied. In any event, neither additional question presented in the conditional cross-petition warrants the Court’s review.

⁸ Petitioner argues (Pet. 33) that this Court has “often” viewed “a failure to use available neutral alternatives * * * as significant in equal protection contexts.” The cases petitioner cites (Pet. 33-36), however, do not involve taxation or tariff classifications, and they do not suggest that the existence of a neutral alternative standing alone is sufficient to plead discriminatory intent in any and all cases.

⁹ In any event, this case would be a poor vehicle to clarify the pleading standard under the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure because those Rules do not apply to the CIT. See 28 U.S.C. 2633(b); Pet. 10 & n.3.

a. Cross-petitioners argue (Conditional Cross-Pet. 6, 11-12) that the challenged HTSUS provisions are facially discriminatory. The court of appeals correctly rejected that contention; the Court recently declined to review the same question in the predecessor case, *Totes-Isotoner Corp.*, *supra* (No. 09-1360); and the same result is warranted here.

The HTSUS provisions at issue in this case are not gender-based classifications. As the court of appeals explained, the HTSUS “distinguishes on the basis of products, not natural people.” Pet. App. 15a (quoting *Totes*, 594 F.3d at 1359-1360 (Prost, J., concurring in the result)). Although the HTSUS refers to gender, it does so not to describe a class of people, but to describe a kind of product based on the principal use for which it is designed. Imposing different duties on “men’s” cotton shirts, for example, “does not constitute the disparate treatment of actual men.” *Totes*, 594 F.3d at 1360 (Prost, J., concurring in the result). Rather, “[c]lassifications based on the intended gender of a product’s users ‘likely . . . reflect the fact that such [items] are in fact different products, manufactured by different entities in different countries with different impacts on domestic industry[, and] may be the result of trade concessions made by the United States in return for unrelated trade advantages.’” Pet. App. 15a (quoting *Totes*, 594 F.3d at 1357) (second and third brackets added by court).

Cross-petitioners alternatively argue (Conditional Cross-Pet. 12-14) that, even if the challenged HTSUS provisions do not discriminate on their face, their express use of gender-based terms raises an inference of discriminatory intent. For that proposition, cross-petitioners rely on this Court’s observation in *Bray* v.

Alexandria Women's Health Clinic, 506 U.S. 263 (1993), that “[s]ome activities may be such an irrational object of disfavor that, if they are targeted, and if they also happen to be engaged in exclusively or predominantly by a particular class of people, an intent to disfavor that class can readily be presumed. A tax on wearing yarmulkes is a tax on Jews.” *Id.* at 270. Cross-petitioners’ proposed analogy is misplaced. As the court of appeals explained in *Totes*, “[m]en’s gloves are hardly an irrational object of disfavor, and a tax on them creates no compelling inference that Congress intended to discriminate against men.” 594 F.3d at 1358. The same can be said of the other products (*e.g.*, footwear and apparel) at issue in this case. Cross-petitioners provide no reason to think that the imposition of higher import duties on certain categories of men’s shirts, for example, stands as “an irrational surrogate for opposition to” men. *Bray*, 506 U.S. at 270.

b. Cross-petitioners also argue (Conditional Cross-Pet. 15-19) that they have “first party standing” to challenge the HTSUS. That claim does not warrant this Court’s review. Because cross-petitioners are corporations rather than natural persons, and because the challenged HTSUS provisions do not differentiate based on the sex of the importer even when the importer is an individual, cross-petitioners could not plausibly contend that they have suffered discrimination based on their *own* gender.

In any event, the court of appeals concluded that petitioner and Forever 21 had third-party standing, and it addressed their constitutional challenges on the merits, ultimately dismissing those challenges for failure to state a claim. Cross-petitioners offer no

reason to think that the outcome of the case would have been different if the court of appeals had held that Forever 21 had first-party, rather than third-party, standing. Nor do they offer any reason to think that the outcome would have been different if the court of appeals had not dismissed Skiz's challenge for lack of standing. See Pet. App. 25a n.6 (declining to resolve standing issues regarding Skiz because the other complaints were "sufficient" to "test the adequacy" of all of the pleadings). This Court's review accordingly is not warranted. See *Chevron, U.S.A. Inc. v. NRDC*, 467 U.S. 837, 842 (1984) ("[T]his Court reviews judgments, not opinions.").

CONCLUSION

The petition and conditional cross-petition for a writ of certiorari should be denied.

Respectfully submitted.

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