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Empowering Female Workers in the Apparel Industry

Three Areas for Business Action



About This Report

This document, prepared by BSR, summarizes and highlights key findings from in-depth research conducted by the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) for the apparel sector community. This analysis proposes three areas where apparel companies should invest to drive improvements in outcomes for women workers and promote women's economic empowerment around the world. The analysis and the underlying research conducted by ICRW were supported by C&A Foundation and the Levi Strauss Foundation.

ICRW's research was commissioned to better understand, at the sector level, how apparel sector companies can meaningfully improve the lives of garment workers across diverse contexts. ICRW conducted a literature review and analysis of current programs within the apparel sector that seek to advance the rights, opportunities, skills, voice, leadership, and agency of women who are part of the global apparel supply chain.¹ This research was global in scope, and included deeper inquiry in four countries vital to the apparel supply chain: Brazil, Mexico, India, and Bangladesh.

The research included more than 80 key informant interviews with foundation representatives, corporate social responsibility and sustainability experts, labor market analysts, unions, government, civil society, producers, producer associations, cooperatives, and worker organizations. These interviews were conducted between February and May 2016.

This analysis and the research report prepared by ICRW do not refer directly to circumstances in factories supplying goods to Levi Strauss & Co. or C&A, but rather to broad findings across the sector. To view ICRW's research and learn more, please visit www.icrw.org.

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¹ The scope of ICRW's research did not include inputs into the apparel and garment sector, such as cotton and other raw materials.

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Executive Summary

The substantial attention on women's contributions to and challenges within the global apparel sector over the last decade has spurred many initiatives seeking to improve working conditions, build skills, and promote well-being for women workers. These initiatives are led by individual brands, industry coalitions, NGOs, and international organizations. While there have been improvements as a result of these initiatives, there is still progress to be made. Apparel sector supply chains—and the demographics and everyday realities of workers within them—are changing, and initiatives need to be ready to adapt and move forward. Government initiatives and international development work remain important, but there is both an opportunity and a responsibility for business to be the main driver of lasting, meaningful improvements. These gains will enable female workers to fulfill their potential and maximize the returns of their participation in the global apparel sector.

In addition to opportunities to further bolster the success of existing initiatives, this paper proposes three critical areas for global apparel sector investment—in collaboration with other sectors—to boost the economic empowerment of women workers. These areas, emerging from the analysis of overarching trends and insights from ICRW's research, do not operate in silos, but are indeed interconnected. Work to advance one area can boost efforts in another and, on the flip side, unaddressed needs in one area may negatively impact the outcomes of efforts in another. The report strongly encourages collaboration across the whole value chain and beyond in order to tackle root causes and help improvements take hold for the long term.

- » **Address Informality:** A formal job and income are key ingredients to women's economic empowerment. The global apparel sector can offer women an opportunity—often their first—for just that. Yet significant parts of the global apparel sector operate informally, and ICRW's research affirmed the need for concerted action on informal work. It is well established that informality leads to power imbalances and other situations that disadvantage and hurt workers, but the disproportionate harm it does to women workers is less recognized. Informality poses an intricate challenge that often sits beyond a brand's direct sphere of control. However, efforts are underway to address this challenge, including initiatives to improve supply chain transparency and traceability. It is time to come together in constructive dialogue to support policies and norms that favor and promote formality in the workplace.
- » **Go Further to End Violence:** Economic empowerment is impossible in the face of gender-based violence (GBV) at work and at home, as this prevents women from realizing their full potential. There is more to be done to address sexual harassment and violence against women workers. Successful efforts should consider not only workplace interventions but should also aim to understand vulnerabilities and patterns of harassment and violence outside of the workplace, tap into public systems, and work to strengthen those systems.
- » **Join Global Efforts to Recognize Childcare Needs:** Around the world and beyond factory walls, women take on a disproportionate amount of unpaid care work. To reach gender equity and maximize economic potential, this imbalance must be reconciled. Given that apparel workers are predominantly women in their reproductive years, lack of access to affordable, quality childcare remains a barrier for effective, long-term participation at work. Apparel sector companies can reduce this barrier by supporting access to high quality, family-centered childcare.

These three interconnected avenues present opportunities for apparel companies to take meaningful action to support women's economic empowerment, and are rooted in ICRW's eight essential building blocks for women's economic empowerment.² Companies can **act** by adopting policies and making investments that bring about positive change for women. Through partnership and collaborating, companies can **enable** NGOs, community organizations, and business partners to promote women's economic empowerment in the supply chain. Finally, companies can have **influence** through research and advocacy (both directly, when appropriate, and by supporting others' activities) that seeks to better understand the factors that promote equity and contribute to creating environments conducive to gender equality.

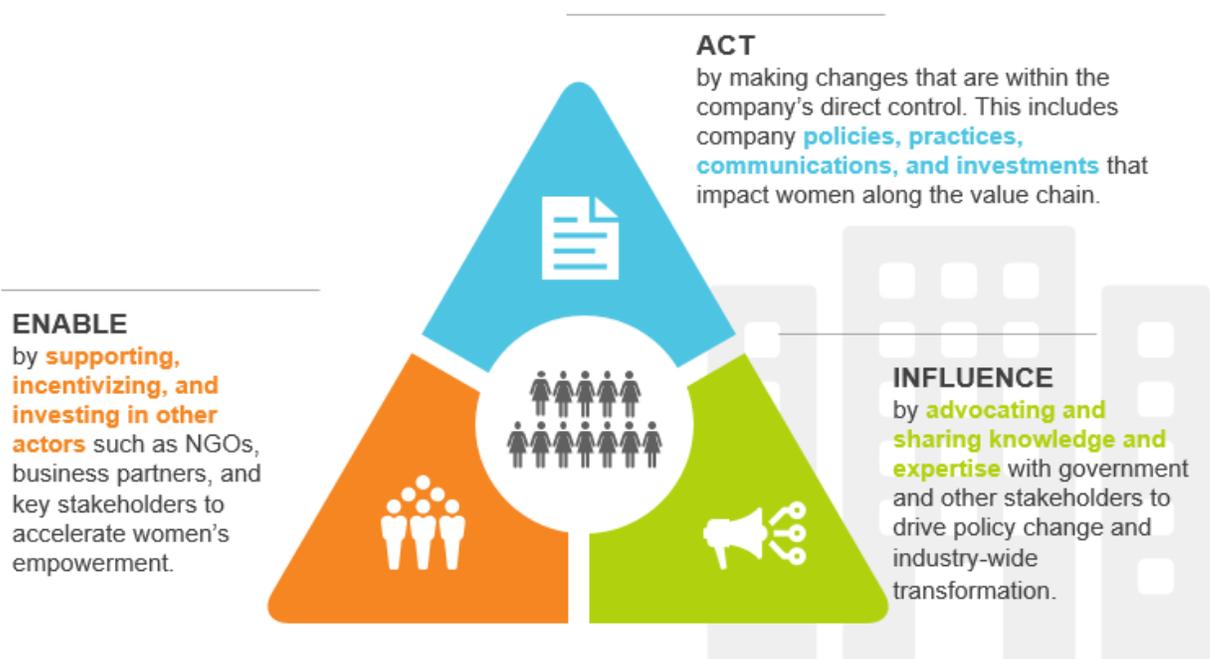
² ICRW's building blocks are based on a human rights framework developed from interviews and literature review; ICRW, 2016.

Introduction

Globally, the apparel sector is among the largest employers of women workers. The sector holds great power and potential to impact the lives of millions of women in low-income countries and, by extension, their families and communities. Making sure that impact is positive is critical. Companies can, and do, take individual action to promote women's empowerment within their value chains and are often participants in cross-sector or industry initiatives as well. However, there is an even larger opportunity for these companies to use their collective influence to champion the partnerships, programs, and policies that can create lasting, meaningful improvements in the lives of garment workers. This paper explores three areas where apparel sector companies can drive outcomes that meaningfully enhance women's economic empowerment.

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH EQUITABLE EMPLOYMENT

Women's economic empowerment is about women's ability to choose whether to work, how much to work, and how to spend or save their incomes.³ Employment in the apparel sector provides numerous opportunities to support women's empowerment; however, it also poses risks that can restrict women's empowerment. Companies that strive to prevent negative impacts, while supporting opportunities to enhance the empowerment potential of apparel sector jobs, will deliver the greatest benefits to women workers. Women's economic empowerment is multifaceted and, as identified by ICRW's eight building blocks framework, requires the convergence of economic and noneconomic factors, including safety, freedom from violence, and the opportunity to be heard at work and in society.⁴ Thus, effective approaches should be **holistic**, **integrated**, and **strategic**, such that they consider and incorporate the full spectrum of factors involved.



³ Golla, 2016.

⁴ Reller, 2014.

Every company can **act** to benefit women in owned operations and throughout their value chain. Companies can also **enable** and **influence** women's empowerment across the market by incentivizing, collaborating, and communicating clearly with other companies, partners, individuals, and policymakers across the sector and supply chains. This report presents recommendations for actions that recognize the different levers and roles companies play in gender equality and women's empowerment, and their ability to **act**, **enable**, and **influence** women's economic empowerment.

Currently, most apparel sector company activities fall in the "act" category—they seek to address barriers or issues within direct operations and Tier 1 suppliers. Expanding efforts to include strategic opportunities to enable other stakeholders and to influence the issues and actors that affect women's empowerment on a larger scale could significantly increase positive impacts and meaningfully enact change.

This paper will provide a snapshot of women in the global apparel sector and the potential of the sector for economic empowerment. It will then focus on three critical areas where we see the greatest need and potential for the sector to take action: informality, gender-based violence, and women's unpaid and care work.

The Global Apparel Sector: Women's Work?

A job in the apparel sector could be the first formal employment opportunity for many women in developing countries—an essential step toward financial independence and the start of a path out of poverty. At the same time, poor working conditions and incidents of labor rights violations within apparel factories are well documented. Apparel companies have invested a great deal to support workers around the world, and while there is much still to be done, these programs are making meaningful improvements and providing insights that can be applied to make these efforts even more effective. However, the global apparel sector is challenging, complex, and changing rapidly. The programs of the past may not be as effective today and should adapt to address the changing face of the apparel workforce and workplace.

A growing body of evidence supports the idea that gender equality, particularly in education and employment, has a positive impact on economic growth.⁵ Research indicates that garment work, as a sector that employs significant numbers of women, has an impact by delaying marriage, reducing the number of children women have, increasing education, and increasing women's decision-making powers at home and in the community.⁶ These implications are particularly important for apparel, given the degree of feminization in the sector. Globally, women represent an average of 68 percent of the garment workforce and 45 percent of the textile sector workforce.⁷ The global apparel sector faces a variety of well-documented challenges in relation to its workforce, including low pay; piece-rate pay and/or failure to pay overtime; health and safety concerns such as fire safety, exposure to chemicals, and inadequate infrastructure; highly controlled, stressful, and repetitive work environments; irregular work volume and schedules; lack of access to benefits such as health insurance and maternity leave; and instances of workplace-based harassment, violence, and discrimination.⁸

While both men and women are affected by these challenges, women workers tend to be more vulnerable to these risks than men. Women not only represent the majority of low-skilled, low-wage workers, but they also face unsupportive norms and power dynamics that place them at a disadvantage

⁵ Kabeer, 2012.

⁶ Heath and Mushfiq, 2015.

⁷ International Labour Organization, 2014.

⁸ Oxfam International, 2004; Fair Wear Foundation, 2013.

when working to change their situations. The unique gendered implications of workplace risks should be considered when supporting women's empowerment.

The Changing Face of the Apparel Workforce and Workplace

While demographics vary among countries (see Table 1 in Appendix), the modern apparel sector has always been dominated by female workers. The makeup of those female workers, however, is evolving rapidly in response to a variety of social and economic drivers. Traditionally, a large proportion of garment workers have been young women with limited or no skills, and often rural migrants for whom the apparel sector provides one of few opportunities—and likely a first opportunity—for wage-earning employment.⁹ These women were typically unmarried and childless, and tended to leave the apparel supply chain after a couple of years to return to their villages to marry and/or have children.

Today, a growing proportion of women workers are marrying, having children, and remaining in urban areas to continue working within the apparel supply chain. In Bangladesh, for example, a 2015 study by the Asian Center for Development found that 57 percent of female workers interviewed were married.¹⁰ Within this context, apparel sector companies' approaches to women's empowerment should expand to recognize and encompass a more diverse female workforce across different stages of their life cycle.

Beyond the changes within women worker demographics, factors such as the introduction of new technologies and increased automation are changing the overall gender makeup of the global apparel sector. As new technology becomes available and larger firms invest in more complete production processes, more men are being hired. While the opportunity for greater skills development and occupational growth exists for women workers, it appears that these opportunities may be going to a larger proportion of male workers and supervisors.¹¹

“The number of female factory workers is still high, but the percentage is going down. [The] industry started as cut and sew and now factories [have] transformed so in one they do everything: produce textiles, dye, wash, cut and sew. There are now more men working in factories because they can work around the clock. It's dangerous for women at night. Also there are more and more sweater factories that employ men because the work is physically difficult and they are standing all day.”—Multilateral Organization, Bangladesh.

These and other changes in the global apparel landscape have the potential to either advance or undermine gains in women worker's economic empowerment, and it is important to continuously monitor and adapt interventions to ensure continued progress.

⁹ International Labour Organization, 2014.

¹⁰ Asian Center for Development, 2015.

¹¹ International Labour Organization, 2014.

Strengthening Existing Investments to Expand Good Practice

Over the past decade, the global apparel sector, together with international organizations, donors and NGOs, has invested significantly in initiatives designed to address and bolster women's economic empowerment within the global garment sector. In fact, the global apparel sector has arguably made a greater and more concerted effort than most other sectors to support women in their supply chain. There is much to be learned from existing programs, and there are many opportunities to build toward greater success in the future by recognizing and elevating the—sometimes hidden—elements that drive and amplify positive impacts.

ICRW's research shows that the more successful initiatives—including the ILO's Better Work, BSR's HERproject, and GAP Inc.'s P.A.C.E.—share some commonalities:

- » All are based on **collaboration** between brands, suppliers, and NGOs.
- » Their central focus areas are **health** (in particular sexual and reproductive health, which is foundational for a woman's ability to fulfill her economic potential), **financial inclusion, life skills, and professional advancement**.
- » Program evaluations show these programs are also delivering **business benefits**, including increased productivity, reduced absenteeism, and improved employee satisfaction.¹²
- » And, most importantly, all share an underlying assumption that **building women's agency and voice** is a key lever for empowerment.

Altogether, the investments and results over the last decade should be considered a significant deposit in the collective knowledge bank, and a powerful platform from which the global apparel sector can go further and deeper around women's economic empowerment.

Elevating Worker Voice

¹² Joseph, 2016; Chowdhury, 2007; Nanda et al., 2013.

Whether the initiative is a health training course or a worker committee, successful programs build confidence and capabilities, such as soft skills around communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, well-being knowledge, and self-efficacy. Taken together, these soft skills better enable women to speak up and take action individually or collectively. While present across programs, this element is not always explicitly articulated, and is rarely measured. Worker voice is commonly viewed as an “indirect benefit,” but often has longer-term, and more wide-reaching, effects than other commonly measured metrics because of its ability to influence women’s behavior and their relationships within and beyond the workplace.

Go Deeper into the Supply Chain

However, much activity to date is concentrated in Tier 1 suppliers, limiting the number of female workers benefitting from these programs and leaving out the most vulnerable. The key to progress going forward will be creating, supporting, and amplifying programs that are both scalable and sustainable. To maximize investments already made and increase the number of female workers benefitting from these initiatives, the sector should seek to cascade good practice by expanding tried and tested models, including education and training, into Tier 2, Tier 3, and beyond.

This begins with helping Tier 1 suppliers recognize why these issues are worthy of investment, and will require collaboration with suppliers, donor agencies, and NGOs. Beyond Tiers 1 and 2, programs should consider adaptations for community-based solutions to reach the most dispersed and informal parts of the supply chain, including home-workers. These expanded efforts should rigorously address and measure voice and agency, so companies can better understand and further amplify effective initiatives.

Existing programs provide a strong foundation from which to build and adapt even more effective solutions in the future. However, there are additional areas that, due to both ongoing challenges in the sector and changes within the industry across the world, require additional investment and inquiry. The next sections of this paper propose three critical areas for investment—by the apparel sector and in collaboration with other sectors—to boost the economic empowerment of women workers: address informality, go further to end violence, and join global efforts to address care needs and responsibilities.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Building the Business Case

The ILO’s Better Work, BSR’s HERproject, and Gap’s P.A.C.E. program have all demonstrated significant business benefits, including:

- **ILO Better Work:** Participation in their Supervisory Skills Training (SST) program, particularly among female supervisors, increases productivity 22 percent.
- **HERproject:** Improving women’s health knowledge and access to goods and services can provide a 4:1 return on investment through cost savings from reduced absenteeism and staff turnover.
- **Gap P.A.C.E.:** Retention rates were 66 percent higher for P.A.C.E. participants compared with other workers in Cambodia. At a factory in India, productivity was 15 percent higher for P.A.C.E. participants.

See Footnote 12

1: Address Informality

Formal, regular, waged work has the potential to transform the lives of women around the world.¹³ For many women workers, a job in the apparel sector can be a first step into the formal economy. Despite the power and potential of the global apparel sector to bring millions of women into formal employment, its tendency towards subcontracting to meet the demands of fast fashion results in a high degree of informality—particularly beyond Tier 1 and Tier 2 suppliers. Informal workers—the overwhelming majority of whom are women—face some of the greatest risks and miss out on the benefits that accompany formal employment. With estimates of informality in the garment value chain ranging from 50 percent to 80 percent,¹⁴ this is a relevant issue for *all* actors in the sector. It will require an industry-wide, cross-sectoral approach to holistically address the challenges women face both in the workplace and throughout society.

Company-led initiatives to improve terms and conditions for informal workers and micro-entrepreneurs selling into the chain could have significant positive impacts on women workers. Through collective action alongside government, unions, and civil society, apparel companies can raise awareness of the dangers of informality, create and update systems that support formalization, and implement existing labor law and labor rights legislation across the supply chain.

¹³ Kabeer, 2012.

¹⁴ In countries studied for this report. ICRW 2016; IRLE (2013); Tilly et al., 2013. Additional information on informal economy rates available via the ILO's ILOSTAT database.

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We are concerned that the general trend in the industry is towards more informality. At least that is what we are seeing with the increase in temporary contracts and outsourcing.

—Global Labor Rights NGO, Canada

”

The ability to participate in and contribute to the formal economy is a significant lever for women’s economic empowerment. This is recognized by United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goal No. 8, which sets out to “promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all.” However, many of the first opportunities outside of domestic responsibilities that women encounter are informal¹⁵ or home-based roles, which often do not come with formal employment contracts. Without contracts, workers are vulnerable to poorer working conditions, including long hours, unstable work, and increased risk of violence and harassment, as well as mistreatment during wage negotiations, lack of access to benefits, and exclusion from union representation.

Given that the majority of informal and home-based workers in the apparel value chain are female, company-led initiatives to improve terms and conditions of their employment could significantly improve outcomes for vulnerable women workers. Tackling informality will also reduce instances of indentured servitude, modern slavery, and slavery-like practices, which are more likely to occur within the informal workforce.

WIEGO defines the informal economy as “the diversified set of economic activities, enterprises, jobs, and workers that are not regulated or protected by the state. The concept originally applied to self-employment in small, unregistered enterprises. It has been expanded to include wage employment in unprotected jobs.”

Diagnosing Informality

Currently, many apparel companies lack sufficient knowledge of the entire chain to identify, much less address, instances of informality beyond Tier 1 suppliers. Without this knowledge, it is impossible to ensure products are made in keeping with the company’s standards, which also poses enormous risks to a brand’s reputation and product quality. It is in the interest of every apparel sector company to pursue as much transparency within their supply chain as possible to ensure that standards are upheld and that the company can prevent and remedy violations.

¹⁵ WIEGO, 2017. The level and nature of informality varies; for the purposes of this paper, we apply the term broadly and recommend that companies consider a variety of informal or partially-informal employment situations.

While complex challenges remain, apparel companies have made significant independent and collective progress in owned facilities and Tier 1 suppliers. Now there is an opportunity for apparel companies to expand supply chain visibility beyond Tier 1, and begin to identify and remedy instances of informal work.

WHAT BUSINESS CAN DO

Informality is complex and cannot be addressed in isolation from other actors. Yet, for women's economic empowerment to be realized, women workers must be able to access the full benefits of employment, including contracts, pension rights, and social protection. There are promising examples of good practice, along with additional avenues through which apparel companies can take further action, enabling and influencing policies and initiatives that combat informality and boost formal work opportunities.

ACT

» Pursue full supply chain

visibility: All companies should strive to gain greater visibility into the nature and makeup of their supply chains by engaging in full supply chain mapping. These activities enable companies to pinpoint areas where workers may be informally employed, and where more focused efforts to increase formality can make meaningful improvements. This should include considerations of where the lack of adequate support facilities or structures such as childcare increase the risks of informality.

EXAMPLE

BRAC Supply Chain Mapping

Efforts to fully map supply chains, such as BRAC in Bangladesh, *Semillas* in Mexico, and *Papel Social* in Brazil, have brought to light the full extent of informality. In Bangladesh, the Centre for Entrepreneurship Development at BRAC University recently conducted a Participatory Mapping Research project in Mirpur (using snowball sampling) and Kaliakoir (attempting a complete census). The project collected basic information, including GPS locations, number of workers, types of products, whether they were BGMEA/BKMEA, Accord/Alliance, registered/non-registered, etc. The aim is to develop a countrywide Ready Made Garment factory mapping to give buyers and brands succinct, transparent, complete information through an interface such as Google maps.

- » **Follow guidelines set out in ILO Recommendation 204:** Companies can sign on to and implement the International Labor Organization's Recommendation 204, which concerns the transition from informal to formal economies. The Recommendation, adopted in 2015, "acknowledges that most people enter the informal economy not by choice but due to a lack of opportunities in the formal economy and an absence of any other means of livelihood." Recommendation 204 is the first international labor standard to specifically take aim at the informal economy, and it provides strategies and guidance on policies that best facilitate the transition from informal to formal economies. Under the Recommendation, signatories agree to:
- Defend freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.
 - Prevent unsafe and unhealthy working conditions (including OSH).
 - Eliminate discrimination with respect to employment and occupation (section 16(d)), which can be interpreted to include skills training for women, maternity leave, and care provisions.

- » **Implement Homeworker Guidelines:** Companies can implement guidelines like those developed by the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI). The ETI Homeworker Project studied homeworking around the world and developed principles that retailers and suppliers can use to reduce vulnerability and marginalization. The project recognizes the importance of home-based work, particularly in the apparel supply chain, and seeks to help companies identify when homeworking is present in their supply chains and to implement the ETI Base Code.

ENABLE

- » **Support and Bolster Existing Initiatives:** In some sourcing regions, such as India, there are existing initiatives designed to organize informal workers and promote formality in the apparel and other sectors. By bringing together workers and presenting a united front in negotiations, these organizations help to ensure that formal employment benefits reach small units and homeworkers.
- » **Support Digital Wages:** Digitizing wages can provide and amplify a variety of benefits that improve terms of employments and protect workers. Wage digitization can increase transparency in wage payments, social security contributions, and rights, and can potentially reduce violence and harassment in the workplace by decreasing the number of gatekeepers between a worker and their wage. Digitization can also reduce vulnerability beyond the factory walls by eliminating the need to carry cash payments home from work.

EXAMPLE

GoodWeave

Founded in 1994, the “GoodWeave System” works to leverage market influence, develop child-labor-free supply chains, create educational opportunities for children, and ensure decent work for adults. Since its founding, child labor in South Asia’s carpet industry decreased by approximately 80 percent. GoodWeave has directly rescued 3,600 young victims, and provided educational support for more than 15,000 children.

Now, the organization is aiming to reduce child labor to zero in the carpet industry, while expanding its model to other sectors—including apparel. Its latest project is a pilot in northern India to increase transparency and address child and forced labor at the homeworker level, in partnership with C&A Foundation and C&A.

EXAMPLE

SEWA and Ruaab

The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is a women’s trade union that was set up in Gujarat in 1972 with the aim of organizing women in the informal sector. SEWA is modeled on community organization and community-generated solutions. SEWA itself has also stepped into the value chain as an intermediary negotiating directly with international clothing companies and export houses. This role has been critical in ensuring home-based workers bypass middlemen and gain access to formal employment and higher paying clients.

In order to gain employment and fair wages, SEWA members decided to form their own women-run production company in 2010: Ruaab. Ruaab represents a unique model of garment sourcing and production that is managed and owned by female producers who aim to ensure full transparency and fair work throughout the entire supply chain. Ruaab has secured regular work from buyers such as GAP, ZARA, Primark, Monsoon, and C&A.

EXAMPLE

Simples Nacional

Between 2001 and 2009, Brazil added 17.4 million new jobs, and most of them were formal employment opportunities. This surge was underpinned by macroeconomic policy that fostered more inclusive growth by lowering the cost of investment, expanding domestic markets, and, crucially, strengthening institutions that promote formalization through Simples Nacional. Recognizing that the failure to register businesses and pay taxes contributed to informality, Brazil created a new taxation regime, Simples Nacional, to simplify and harmonize taxes for micro, small, and medium-sized businesses. This made it easier for smaller enterprises to navigate the system and pay labor taxes, creating a larger formal employment market than ever before.

2: Go Further to End Harassment and Violence

Economic empowerment is impossible in the face of physical threats, violence, or harassment. Freedom from verbal and physical violence is crucial not only to a woman's well-being but also to her ability to participate in the labor market and garner the benefits of her earnings. However, according to the literature and the interviews conducted as part of this research, violence remains prevalent in the workplace, in transit to and from work, and in public spaces affecting many women in the apparel sector. In some regions, restrictive norms about masculinity have led to a habituation of the experience of violence and high levels of tolerance for sexual harassment and intimidation. In recognition of the scale and severity of this issue, the ILO is considering a convention on violence in the workplace.¹⁶

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In Bangladesh, when female garment workers describe the violence they experience in factories and also similarly in their homes and communities, they use the Bangla term ‘nirjaton,’ which can be construed as ‘torture.’ This word is frequently used to talk about physical or verbal abuse within factories, often at the hands of factory managers.

”

—ICRW research, 2015

¹⁶ Ryder, 2013.

Many women face violence and harassment in the workplace and at home, an experience that is only exacerbated for informal workers.¹⁷ Moreover, there is a general lack of education and training about women's right to live free from violence and what actually constitutes harassment, coercion, and abuse. Women who have experienced violence frequently lack access to justice mechanisms, limiting their ability to claim their rights and seek compensation and restitution. Restrictive gender norms and expectations about men's roles and masculinity and workplace power dynamics frequently compound the experience of and habituation to violence.

Substantial investments in the well-being of women workers have been made over the years—for example, by ILO Better Work, HERrespect, and UNWomen. However, none of these efforts can achieve their goals if participants still encounter threats and violence at home, on their commutes, and/or at work. Violence and harassment must be considered unacceptable because it is damaging to women and contravenes a dignified and productive working environment.

Violence takes many forms, and sexual harassment within factories is particularly problematic. For the most part, sexual harassment is neither defined nor acknowledged by factory leadership. The United Nations acknowledges that gender-based violence (GBV) is “an umbrella term for any harm that is perpetrated against a person's will, and that results from power inequalities that are based on gender roles.”¹⁸ The EEOC definition of sexual harassment (cited by UN Women) includes “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature.”¹⁹

According to the Fair Wear Foundation, about 60 percent of female workers in Bangladesh and India have experienced harassment

According to key informants, Bangladeshi factories narrowly define GBV as applying only to physical violence and rape, excluding any other forms of physical, mental, or verbal harassment. In some cases, anything less has become so habituated that it is not viewed as harassment. Furthermore, women who have experienced violence or harassment and want to leave work often feel trapped because their factory jobs are an essential source of income for themselves and their families. There is also evidence that violence in garment factories often manifests as veiled threats and intimidation used to control and silence workers. As a result, these offenses become “invisible,” and are not addressed.

It is time for companies to bring these invisible abuses to light and devise solutions that not only stop abusive practices within factories, but also look beyond the factory wall to identify cultural or regulatory factors that increase violence against women and exacerbate vulnerabilities.

¹⁷ Chappell and Di Martino, 2006.

¹⁸ In 1993, the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women offered the first official definition of the term “gender-based violence”: “Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”

¹⁹ US Equal Employment Commission, accessed March 2017.

*“They swear at us when we fail to complete the work. ...They scold. They say ‘Hey you! Daughter of a b****, daughter of a pig! How come so much work has been piled up?’... I cry. I feel like quitting the job. But I can do nothing. I have to work here to take care of my family. My family lives on my earnings.
—Garment Worker, Bangladesh*

WHAT COMPANIES CAN DO

There is a significant role for apparel companies to play in putting a stop to GBV and harassment within the workplace. The following actions recognize the necessity of gender equality in combatting harmful norms, changing societal attitudes, and ending GBV.

ACT

- » **Condemning Violence against Women:** First and foremost, companies need to recognize, both internally and publicly, that incidences of violence and harassment occur, and must be dealt with. Companies should ensure all suppliers understand what constitutes GBV, and that it is prohibited by company policies. Once existing policies are clarified and the definition of GBV is clear to supervisors, companies should reflect on their own practices to ensure there are no direct perpetrators or indirect sources of violence and harassment and put in place effective and visible anti-violence and harassment policies across the whole supply chain. Companies can train staff, particularly staff such as brand representatives that interact directly with suppliers at factories, on violence prevention and remediation.
- » **End the Habituation of Violence and Harassment:** Sometimes, violence and harassment have become so habituated that they are not recognized as inappropriate behaviors. Brands should support, and, as necessary, provide training for line managers and supervisors that elucidates what constitutes harassment and violence, and conveys in no uncertain terms that these acts are not acceptable within or beyond the factory walls. These efforts should leverage existing resources such as Labor Voices and similar projects that provide anonymous hotlines to report incidences of violence and harassment.

EXAMPLE

Fair Wear Foundation

In 2011, Fair Wear Foundation and local partner NGOs in Bangladesh and India launched a program to integrate anti-harassment laws into garment factories via anti-harassment committees. Initially only minor issues were reported, but as trust in the system grew, more serious issues began to surface. Worker surveys showed increased comfort with coming forward with complaints and growing understanding that it was their right to be free from workplace harassment. There is still much work to be done, but these early successes show promise.

Since 2014, Fair Wear Foundation and partners SAVE and CIVIDEP have led training programs for factory supervisors in India's garment industry. The programs focus on training women to become supervisors, and providing training for current supervisors on communication and management, emphasizing anti-harassment practices. Through this work, Fair Wear aims to reduce workplace violence and economic discrimination against women in garment factories.

ENABLE

- » **Supporting Innovative, Multi-Partner Models:** Findings from successful GBV programs, including those implemented by the Fair Foods Standard Council, Fair Wear Foundation,²⁰ and ILO Better Work, point to a need to draw on innovative and multi-partner models to address violence. Successful programs mobilize all members of the value chain, and have built-in systems for evaluation and rigorous analysis to affirm the success of the program or flag when changes need to be made.
- » **Supporting Education & Compliance:** Apparel sector brands can also play a role in supporting rights education—both in the workplace and within communities—and ensuring that codes of conduct and compliance requirements explicitly address gender violence in the workplace. In addition to initiatives directly targeting women workers, GBV trainings should include suppliers and line supervisors, inspectors, and union and worker organizations to identify violence and harassment, understand the root causes, and reduce violence in the chain.
- » **Engaging Men:** Gender equality will not be achieved and GBV will not end if interventions focus solely on women. Men must also be an active part of the conversation. Companies can help to provide opportunities for men to better understand the importance and value of women’s empowerment. Companies can also help men address the challenges they face in understanding the issues and the roles—both positive and negative—they may play within their supply chain. These efforts can be amplified through partnerships with community-based initiatives or NGOs.

EXAMPLE

Innovative, Multi-Partner Models

The Fair Food Program (FFP), created by the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, brings together stakeholders across the value chain in support of humane work conditions and fair wages in the agricultural industry. Grower members are expected to uphold certain human rights standards on their farms through the Fair Food Code of Conduct, while buyers commit to purchase only from compliant growers. A Fair Food label was created for consumers to identify which buyers are FFP participants. The program works by organizing workers and consumers to put pressure on growers and buyers to join and comply.

FFP also created an independent auditing body called the Fair Food Standards Council (FFSC) to monitor the system. Notably, the FFSC includes both experts in the industry and agricultural workers. In this way, the FFSC ensures that auditing and sourcing are more closely linked and the system is accountable to workers. Audits are performed on all participating farms. During the process, FFSC auditors interview a minimum of half the workers as well as supervisors, conduct an extensive review of the farm’s payroll, and verify that working conditions uphold the program’s standards. By having a central, independent auditing body that includes workers, the FFP reduces inefficiencies and ensures auditing and sourcing more closely converge in the value chain. This has contributed greatly to the program’s success and should serve as a model for independent, binding, and collective auditing.

²⁰ For more information on Fair Wear Foundation’s work to end gender-based violence, see: www.fairwear.org/vaw-prevention/#!/content/https://www.fairwear.org/vaw-prevention/international-womens-day/.

- » **Supporting Organizations that Help Victims:** Apparel sector companies can and should collaborate with organizations providing direct legal and health services to victims of violence, abuse, and harassment. This includes ensuring all factory workers are aware of and able to access these services if needed without fear of negative repercussions at work.

INFLUENCE

- » **Maximizing Existing and Supporting Proposed Binding Frameworks:** Although there is currently no global standard on violence and harassment at work, several international conventions on GBV exist, such as ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), adopted in 1979. These conventions were designed to promote gender equity and prevent discrimination against women in communities and the workplace. However, they often go unenforced due to cultural, financial, or other factors that limit implementation and oversight. Apparel companies should be aware of these conventions, ensure they are upheld within their supplier factories, and call on national and local governments to enforce and implement the requirements. Companies should make clear to suppliers that working relationships must be conducted in full compliance with key conventions, even if there are gaps in local enforcement.

Additionally, companies can voice support for new conventions that would create a global standard on violence and harassment at work, such as the ILO Convention on Violence at Work. At the end of 2015, the ILO announced that a debate for a convention will be on the ILO Conference agenda in 2018, and efforts are already underway to gather support for such a standard.

- » **Make a Public Stand and Advocate:** To both acknowledge and de-stigmatize the problem, companies can speak out in support of and advocate for policies and programs that combat GBV and enable women's economic empowerment. Further, companies can use the power of their brands to champion gender equality and dismantle harmful norms, policies, and practices, including labor practices. There are ample areas for companies to raise their voice and use their influence to engage in dialogue to promote gender equality and stand up for policy advancements that support women's rights in the countries where they source products.

3: Join Global Efforts to Recognize Childcare Needs

From cooking and cleaning to caring for the elderly and children, women shoulder a disproportionate amount of unpaid work. The UN's Sustainable Development Goal No. 5 around gender equality makes explicit reference to the need for public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies to “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work” and to promote “shared responsibility within the family.”²¹ There are many good reasons for business to advance this agenda too. A good starting point to support women to enter and remain in the workforce is to offer secure, viable, high-quality childcare options.²² Apparel sector companies can play a significant role in increasing the availability and quality of childcare options, which, in turn, can have significant positive outcomes for women workers.

Despite strong recognition of the importance of childcare in empowering women—including by the UN High Level Panel for Women's Economic Empowerment²³ and the Women's Economic Empowerment Roadmap²⁴—there is a widespread lack of affordable, quality childcare in many apparel sourcing regions. This limits women's ability to work and may confine them to informal or home-based employment or force them to completely leave the labor market. Support for childcare has been largely absent from recent efforts to improve working conditions in apparel sector factories. One informant expressed frustration at the limited attention given to this issue:

“There have been improvements in factories with the Alliance and the Accord. But when it comes to childcare, daycare, not at all. If a factory has over 500 employees it must have a daycare but workers do not use them. Their hours of work change constantly and the daycare has limited hours. Many workers live an hour away and don't want to travel with their baby, transportation is dangerous. The childcare should be where the people live, in the community.”

²¹ United Nations, 2015.

²² UN Women, 2015; Gammage 2015; Ray, 2013.

²³ UNHLP on Women's Economic Empowerment, 2016.

²⁴ United Nations Foundation, 2013.

“Part of the law is to have a daycare facility, but it is not used. The worker has to prepare the child, its food, then has a hazardous route to work—this is not child friendly. They can’t work if their kid is with them. Most workers send children to villages. Children aren’t breastfed or cared for by their mothers. Some kids are at home in slums and become victims of trafficking, accidents, other problems.” —Women’s Rights NGO, Bangladesh

Investing in childcare solutions can provide significant benefits to women workers and bolster other investments to increase women’s economic empowerment. Increasing evidence points to business benefits such as reductions in absenteeism, sick leave, and turnover, as well. Relatively simple interventions, such as care centers with space for mothers to breastfeed on site, allow mothers to return to work following maternity leave without limiting their childcare choices. To be successful, such interventions must be both properly implemented and enforced, and designed with women’s needs and cultural and professional realities in mind. For example, in India, The Factories Act of 1947 establishes a series of expectations for factories with 30 or more women employees, including childcare on factory premises. However, only a small percentage of factories comply with this requirement. According to the Maquila Solidarity Network, “Of the approximately 1,200 garment factories operating in Bangalore, reports consistently estimate that 95 percent of factories lack functional crèches.”²⁵

Even when mandated childcare is provided, it is not always safe or convenient for women workers to use.

For many women, shifts are longer than eight hours, but on-site childcare facilities are typically open for only eight hours a day. Moreover, commutes are often long, and transportation can be dangerous. As a result, even if on-site childcare is available, many women choose to leave their children with family members at home, or in the case of migrant workers, send their children back to their villages to be cared for by extended family.

ICRW’s interviews found that lack of childcare is an important reason women leave the apparel workforce or enter informal employment. Many garment workers begin in factories and eventually leave to become home-based workers:

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT

Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN)

MSN brings together women workers to identify and discuss needs and to propose grounded, practical solutions that set a strong agenda for working women’s rights in Central America.

One of the top items on the MSN agenda is childcare. MSN is collaborating with other regional women’s and trade union organizations to ensure that employers and governments provide quality childcare services for women workers. Together, they are raising a collective voice to engage international apparel brands, industry associations, and governments to find practical, grounded childcare solutions that best meet the needs of women maquila workers.

²⁵ Maquila Solidarity Network and Cividep India, 2016.

“I used to work in a factory, but working hours were very long. I had only 15 minutes to eat and I used to get off from work very late at night, I did not have anybody who helped me to take care of my children while I was working. For all of that, I decided to work from home”—Garment worker from Zapotlanejo

Efforts to provide women-centered solutions to childcare challenges are nascent, but some innovative programs are already finding success. Some organizations, like Phulki in Bangladesh, are independent of factories, while others, such as Nalt Enterprise in Vietnam, are factory owned and managed.

Phulki offers childcare in a range of environments, from factory-based programs to local community facilities, in order to bring childcare to the women, wherever they are. In addition to providing on-site childcare, Phulki programs emphasize education in child development for both mothers and fathers, which helps redistribute care responsibilities within the family.

Nalt Enterprise, a Vietnamese garment factory with an 85 percent female workforce, invested substantially in improving working conditions for women and establishing a family-friendly working environment. The factory built a free kindergarten next door for workers’ children, initiated a program to pay annual school fees up to and including university, and built an accredited health clinic for workers and their families. As a result, the factory has seen lower turnover rates, a steady downtrend in worker absenteeism, and a reduction in strikes through good employee relations.

WHAT COMPANIES CAN DO

Access to high quality, safe, inexpensive childcare is a major unmet need for women garment workers. On-site care facilities also provide opportunities for education and health services, which, together, provide the support needed to boost women’s economic empowerment.

ACT

- » **Ensure Mandatory Childcare Requirements Are Met:** Some sourcing regions require employers of a certain size to provide on-site childcare. Apparel companies can explore the current state of compliance within their supply chains, evaluate gaps, and work with suppliers, NGOs, and governments to implement solutions. These solutions should not only fully meet regional requirements, but also provide safe, high quality care that is compatible with worker realities.

ENABLE

- » **Invest in Community Childcare Centers:** Apparel sector brands can increase access to childcare, and increase the quality of that care, by providing assistance to factory owners. Apparel brands can invest in trainings and partnerships to establish and sustain high quality on-site care.
- » **Best-Practice Sharing:** As more apparel brands invest in childcare solutions, many lessons will be learned. The apparel sector should work collectively to identify the programs that are most successful, overcome challenges, and streamline implementation in shared factories and across sourcing regions, as appropriate.

INFLUENCE

- » **Voice Support for Policies that Recognize Unpaid Work Responsibilities:** The expectation that women will carry the brunt of unpaid domestic and care work is deeply rooted in societal norms and perceptions about what is a woman versus a man's responsibility. Companies in the Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG) product sector are increasingly using their advertising platforms to challenge traditional gender stereotypes or promote new gender roles such as men cooking, cleaning, or looking after children. One example of this is Unilever's "Unstereotype" campaign²⁶ as part of its Sustainable Living Plan. Apparel companies can consider using their public facing platforms to promote gender-equal roles, help to raise the profile of women workers' needs, and provide opportunities for public education on the challenges women face.

²⁶ Joseph, 2017.

Conclusion

The barriers to women's economic empowerment are varied and complex, and interact with everything from policies and regulation to development agendas, societal norms, and cultural expectations. The business case for women's economic empowerment is clear—particularly in emerging economies where much of the apparel supply chain is located. The apparel sector has made significant investments and gained valuable insights. Now, it is time to deepen and expand that work to better address the specific needs of women workers in the global value chain in collaboration with suppliers, NGOs, international development agencies, and governments.

Every company can take action to benefit women's economic empowerment in the areas where they have direct control, such as owned operations and Tier 1 suppliers. Beyond these actions, companies can also use their size and scale to amplify positive impacts and enable other value chain actors through partnership, incentives, and public communications.

Beyond individual company action, the apparel sector has the opportunity to come together and, through research, advocacy, and communications, create an environment that supports and advances women's economic empowerment. The apparel sector has invested significantly—perhaps more than any other sector in the world—in supporting women. By taking on the three challenges identified in this paper—addressing informality, going further to end violence, and addressing care needs and responsibilities—the apparel sector has a real opportunity to drive the agenda and inspire others to follow suit on behalf of women workers.

Companies can **collaborate** with or support the work of government, international industry and labor associations, researchers, and civil society to fully visualize and understand the scale and nature of these three interconnected challenges. The apparel sector has significant influence both within countries with a large supply chain footprint—such as Bangladesh, India, China, Vietnam, Indonesia, Cambodia, Jordan, and Turkey—and with consumers around the world. Together, the apparel sector can influence policymakers and advocate for change as well as enable other actors, such as NGOs, suppliers, and partners, to take action and accelerate progress.

Many of the barriers to women's economic empowerment are systemic. The apparel sector can influence policy change and drive industry-wide progress by sharing knowledge and expertise, and supporting policies proven to advance women's empowerment and gender equality. These policies can address challenges such as equity in property ownership, access to education and healthcare, protection from

violence, worker rights, and equal pay for equal work. This could be accomplished through a variety of approaches, including a collective manifesto, joint statement, or public principles.

With the release of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals, there is also a framework in place that companies can use to connect individual and sector actions to the global development agenda. Investments in the three areas outlined in this report will directly support the achievement of several of the development goals, including: No. 1, No Poverty; No. 5, Gender Equality; No. 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth; and No. 10, Reduced Inequalities. Making effective use of Goal No. 17, Partnerships, provides the opportunity for the apparel sector to set an example for other sectors and industries.

Appendix

Table 1:

Bangladesh	<p>Bangladesh set a goal to reach upper-middle-income country status by 2021, and the Ready Made Garments (RMG) sector remains crucial to reaching that goal. The Bangladeshi garment sector is highly feminized. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) estimates RMG employees are 80 percent women. Other sources (such as Capturing the Gains) estimate 60 percent to 70 percent of RMG workers are women, possibly due to an increase in knitwear production, which employs a higher number of men. Many of these women come from poor, rural areas, and RMG sector jobs are frequently the only wage-earning employment available to them.²⁷ While economically successful, much of the sector’s potential remains unrealized today, largely due to insufficient management and poor labor relations. The sector has also faced significant challenges, notably the devastating Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, which set in motion renewed efforts to address health and safety and engage in social dialogue in the sector. To reach its full potential, the Bangladeshi RMG sector should strive to protect fundamental rights at work, catalyze women’s empowerment, and underpin a broader shift toward a more industrialized economy powered by gender equity in workforce participation.</p>
Brazil	<p>Brazil hosts a full fashion chain, from fiber and textile production to clothing, retail, and a large consumer market. Wages and working conditions have improved significantly over the last decade in response to rising internal demand and investment in labor market institutions, including inspection, industry-wide collective bargaining, and minimum wages. Despite the maturity of the value chain and the rollout of social protection and investment in strengthening labor market institutions in the 2000s, a significant portion of garment production continues to be in small and home-based production units characterized by long hours and low wages. Almost 25 percent of employment is in home-based production, where approximately 94 percent of all workers are women. In Brazil, a move towards better regulation and more formality within the sector will be critical to realize the potential for the sector and for women workers.</p>
Mexico	<p>In Mexico, the textile and garment industries collectively accounted for 3.7 percent of GDP in 2014—80 percent of which comes from the apparel sector. The sector workforce is 60 percent women; for textiles, it is 35 percent women. In keeping with trends across the sector, the feminization of the garment sector has resulted in lower average pay compared to the textile sector and other sectors with predominately male workforces. Upgrading and mechanization within the sector has resulted in the “de-feminization” of certain roles and occupations. ICRW’s observations indicate this is</p>

²⁷ AWAJ Foundation, AMRF Society, and Consulting Service International, 2013.

	<p>likely due to the fact that men are more likely to work with more complex machines, and are more highly compensated. ICRW's interviews shed light on the need for a gender perspective along the entire value chain, particularly with respect to improving the terms and conditions of employment and addressing structural barriers such as care needs, maternity leave, safety, and social protection against discrimination and violence. The interviews also revealed clear spaces for collaboration among brands, particularly in terms of coordination in auditing and codes of conduct, promoting greater transparency in the chain, and working together to move the market collectively.</p>
India	<p>Sixty percent of the garment workforce across India is female, with significant variation by region.²⁸ India has high rates of informal and home-based work, particularly among women, so the number of women contributing to the global apparel sector is likely much larger. Economists recognize that India will not be able to reach its economic potential without increasing women's participation in the formal workforce and economy. Recently, the government launched programs to bring "trainees" from rural areas to urban centers like Bangalore to learn trades and work in facilities like apparel sector factories. These trainees are often the first unmarried women from their villages to migrate to the city, and these jobs are likely their first formal employment opportunities. As such, the number of women participating in India's formal economy is set to rise significantly, and addressing vulnerabilities and preventing abuses will be key to the country's on-going development and success.</p>

²⁸ Kane, 2015.

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