

## Women workers: are current practices enough to address discrimination at the workplace?

Women workers make up a significant proportion of the workforce in global supply chains. In the manufacturing sector, the workforce in many countries is comprised largely of women – up to 90 per cent in some cases. Women also have a strong presence in agriculture and in some sectors, for example horticulture, women often constitute the majority of the workforce. Yet women workers face widespread discrimination in a variety of forms and face distinct labour problems that do not affect men, or affect them to a lesser degree.

Unfortunately many labour codes and current approaches to code auditing and implementation are weak when it comes to identifying and addressing gender discrimination and labour issues specific to women workers. The purpose of this workshop was to raise awareness of gender discrimination and issues for women workers, and to identify effective means for uncovering and addressing abuses of women in the workplace. The workshop drew in particular on the experiences of the Kenya Women Workers Organisation, Levi Strauss & Co and research conducted by Marina Prieto (Bristol University, UK) with women workers in Nicaragua.

### 10.1 Key issues faced by women workers

Men and women workers face many common issues in the workplace. Nevertheless, there are a number of important ways in which women are confronted with problems that are specific to them. These include the following:

**Women have to balance work with their roles as wives and mothers.** Most societies continue to assume that women should be the primary carers for children, and sick and elderly people. But all too often the labour management systems and facilities found in workplaces do not take into account women's specific needs which must be met if they are to fulfil these roles. These include, for example:

*“Sexual harassment is nothing new but all women have had to put up with it.”*

- clean toilets or other facilities for breast-feeding
- the ability to take frequent breaks during the working day for breast-feeding
- advance warning about overtime work so that childcare arrangements can be made
- reasonable working hours which enable women to care for their children and other dependants.

**Women work predominantly in low paid and insecure jobs.** Since they are often hired without formal contracts as homeworkers or seasonal workers, many women workers face insecure jobs and have little protection under labour law. Furthermore, lack of permanent employment status denies women important social benefits such as maternity leave, childcare and medical care.

**Trade union membership is generally low among women workers.** Those in the informal sector are often reluctant to complain about their conditions, or join unions or workers' associations, for fear of losing their jobs. Low pay also means that many find it difficult to afford union membership fees. Thus, with low representation in the formal work sector, few women join unions. In India, for example, women represent 96 per cent of the unorganised sector (that is, workers who are not members of a union). As a result, many unions fail to address women-specific labour issues.

**Culturally accepted gender 'norms' prevent women from recognising that they have the same rights as men.** Many women grow up in families, communities and societies with cultural values and practices that assume and reinforce inequality between the sexes. Often such values and practices include the division of labour between men and women, with women's work seen as less valuable. Growing up with these values, women will often accept this as 'normal' and as a result do not challenge workplace practices such as unequal pay for men and women.

**Management and supervisory jobs are often dominated by men.** It is not uncommon for male supervisors to use their position to demand sexual favours from women workers, as a condition for contract renewal, promotion, lighter work or reduced working hours.

**Women face disproportionate types of abuses.** Women face specific types of abuse such as pre-employment pregnancy testing, pregnancy screening, sexual abuse and forced contraception. Fearing discrimination or dismissal, women often hide their pregnancies from managers. As a result, pregnant women continue to carry out inappropriate work in inappropriate conditions, which can harm the mother and child (for example, heavy lifting, continuous standing and exposure to chemicals).

*"Discrimination is painful. It cannot be ignored just because it is complex."* MARINA PRIETO

## 10.2 Challenges

There are some relatively easy changes that can be made to improve conditions for women workers. Nevertheless, there are also some difficult challenges.

**Current auditing practices tend to miss discrimination and women-specific labour issues.** For many companies implementing codes, the typical audit, conducted quickly and often by men, relies mostly on management interviews and involves spending little time talking

to workers. In a situation that does not provide the space, time or sense of trust, women workers, fearing recrimination or job loss, often find it safer and easier to hide any problems and tell auditors that everything is fine.

**Gender issues are complex, and are often not identified by women workers.** Supported through deeply structured societal ‘norms’, women’s labour issues are often complex and do not have simple technical solutions. Often poorly educated and with limited access to information about workers’ and women’s rights, many women may not identify gender discrimination nor be aware of their right to challenge it.

**The core ILO standards that form the basis for many codes do not address women-specific labour issues.** Though most codes do not preclude addressing women-specific labour issues, few make these issues explicit. Thus, at present codes do little to raise awareness of women-specific labour issues. As a result, many sourcing companies, auditors and suppliers involved in code implementation remain quite unaware of the issues.

### 10.3 Moving ahead

Workshop participants identified a number of principles which they felt should guide efforts to improve conditions for women workers. These included the following:

**Creating awareness of women-specific labour issues.** Participants highlighted a need for awareness-raising at all levels in the supply chain, for both women and men.

- *For women workers.* Women workers themselves need to be informed about their rights and made aware of the different forms which discrimination can take. They need to be given the knowledge and confidence to identify and raise gender-related issues. One possible approach would be to work with local training/capacity-building organisations to train selected women workers as educators, who can then in turn educate other workers.
- *For trade unions.* Where unions are male-dominated, participants suggested that local NGOs with specific experience in women’s issues could work with union officials and worker representatives to improve their awareness of women-specific labour issues and gender discrimination.
- *For supplier management and auditors (including sourcing company staff).* Awareness-raising for supplier management and auditors would need to enable them to question ‘norms’ (beliefs, practices) that perpetuate gender discrimination. Participants suggested that local NGOs with expertise in women’s issues may be in a good position to provide this training for suppliers.

**Increasing the number of women managers and supervisors.** This can help to make labour policies and practices more women-friendly, and also help to reduce problems of sexual abuse and harassment.

**Improving auditing practices.** For discrimination and women-specific labour issues to be properly identified during audits, auditing practices need to include more gender-sensitive, participatory approaches. Improved cultural sensitivity, use of female auditors to interview women workers, interviewing men and women in separate groups, and use of off-site interviews, are some of the specific practices identified during the workshop.

Participants agreed that the auditing methodology developed in the ETI project in Zimbabwe is a useful model to build from. The project was also seen to have generated useful information about women's experiences in the workplace.

### Further information

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**Presentation slides** from Marina Prieto and Levi Strauss & Co are available from the ETI Secretariat.

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**Based on learning gained from the ETI project in Zimbabwe.**