



Perspective: Asia Floor Wage and Gender October 7, 2009

An Asia Floor Wage for the global garment industry has significant advantages for lives of millions of workers who are primarily women. According to research by several scholars as well as international institutions and NGOs, women represent an estimated 60% to over 80% of the global garment manufacturing workforce. The ILO considers gender equality as a key element in its vision of 'Decent Work for All Women and Men' for social and institutional change to bring about equity and growth. Indeed, women's empowerment is about women taking ownership of their lives and leading a dignified existence without discrimination. This must be with the support of their social environment and with protection from verbal and physical abuse. The AFW is a firm advocate of these principles.

It becomes plain that in an industry that largely employs women as its workforce, improving working conditions and wages not only has a direct impact on the emancipation of women but it is also conjoined with benefits for the economy as a whole. Clearly, to promote gender equality and the role of women in society are both basic human rights that must be at the core of any strategy of development, as this logic directly relates with issues of poverty.

Women are known to be wise investors and savers. Their responsibility as home builders, care-takers and child bearers connotes a situation where an improvement in their wages would have an immediate effect on their families and their social environment. It then becomes obvious that the most viable route to alleviate poverty is to correct wage discrimination, because women are in a position to make the most out of these improvements beyond their own personal sphere. Currently, the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) published statistics on the global gender pay gap that proves that the differential still remains starkly wide at 17 per cent. A decent *minimum living wage* is therefore a rational step forward to correct this imbalance.

Most importantly, the AFW naturally propels a proactive cycle for women with important benefits arising for their personal identity and their perceived value at the workplace. As an Asia Floor Wage raises the value of women's work to a dignified level, it demonstrates to female workers that they are worthy. Worthy of

respect for they are invaluable in the production process, which further engenders pride and dignity for themselves.

If working for the garment industry could ensure such personal emancipation through an established *minimum living wage*, women would also be less susceptible to be forced into denigrating occupations. Consequently, the AFW would alleviate issues of corrupt human trafficking and the disparaging exploitation of women who are trafficked into dangerous work situations.

The Asia Floor Wage formulation is a woman-centred formulation. It is based on a single-earner family with dependents in order to include within its costing the unpaid household work, including carework that is critical for a family and is mostly even today done by women. It acknowledges the fact that many families are headed by single women. Even in the case, where women of the family participate in labour force and there are more than one earners in a family, AFW formulation reflects the reality that the second income is typically spent on hiring paid careworkers and household services . Otherwise also the second income hardly compensates the additional household work that working women continue to do.

Considering the global importance of the garment industry, it also has the ability to set an example. Given that Asian garment workers are some of the lowest paid workers of the world economy, one could conclude that global industries that employ primarily women have the lowest wages. Similar efforts can be initiated in other industries to do the same for women workers. This process of imitation is evermore possible when the campaign has secured coordination in all Asian countries, proving its distinction as competent for an achievable alternative strategy that reaps results for women.

Assuredly, a *minimum living wage* that the AFW advocates has the capacity to promote certainty in lives ridden with uncertainty. Certainty in being capable of supporting their families to meet their basic human needs, to ensure that their children receive education so they may have the opportunities to rise out of poverty, and to meet the minimum requirements for a decent life.

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