



International Women's Day 2024

AFWA's Call to Action for Gender Equity in the Garment Industry on International Women's Day

Asia Floor Wage Alliance

March 2024

As we celebrate International Women's Day, Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) stands in solidarity with women around the world, especially those working in the garment industry. Today, our collective voice amplifies the urgent call to address widespread informalisation within global supply chains across Asia, a systemic challenge that disproportionately affects women, perpetuating gender-based discrimination, and impeding women from exercising fundamental rights, such as freedom of association.

AFWA's recent report '**Threaded Insecurity: The Spectrum of Informality in the Garment Sector**', spanning three rounds of research from 2020 - 2024, in collaboration with 23 trade unions and labour organisations across six countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka) provides a new framework for understanding informality in garment global supply chains as a spectrum of informalisation practices. These practices exploit workers, primarily women, by excluding them from essential labour law protections and denying them benefits, while facilitating structural discrimination based on gender, migration status, and social identity. Tragically, this leads to heightened vulnerability and marginalisation, exposing women to higher risk of rights violations and gender-based violence and harassment.

To meet the demands of brands for faster production at lower costs, garment factories increasingly rely on informal employment practices. These practices involve hiring contract labour and other forms of temporary workers, creating a vulnerable workforce that is easily exploited. Informally employed workers receive lower wages, lack essential non-wage benefits, and can be hired and fired at the discretion of the employer.



From employing workers without contracts to outsourcing to unregistered production factories and homeworkers, these practices perpetuate a cycle of vulnerability and exploitation imposed on a predominantly female workforce. Furthermore, the downgrading of workers from regular positions to informal employment contributes to the creation of a flexible pool of labour, enabling factories to meet production demands at the expense of workers' security and well-being.

A Call to Action

In response to these pressing issues, AFWA puts forward a set of recommendations to address the rights of garment workers in informal employment:

- AFWA calls for urgent state action in production countries to strengthen legal protections, including mandating written contracts for all workers and safeguarding the rights of workers to join trade unions. Additionally, collaboration with unions and industry representatives is crucial to negotiating acceptable ratios of formal to informal workers and defining productivity targets to combat excessive labour intensification. These recommendations are consistent with the ILO June 2015 Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation (No. 204), the first international standard to focus on the informal economy.
- States where lead firms (brands) are based are urged to implement binding human rights due diligence laws. These laws should ensure that workers across supply chains, irrespective of their employment relationships, have written contracts and the right to join trade unions. Base pricing considerations for lead firms should cover statutory wages, benefits and entitlements, and maintaining ethical standards as established through negotiations between trade unions and worker organisations, supplier association, lead firm, and production state representatives, ensuring fair compensation and ethical standard practices.



- Moreover, AFWA emphasizes the importance of upholding commitments to ethical employment through public procurement standards. Setting criteria that encourage sourcing from suppliers providing regular contracts and living wages can contribute to a more sustainable and just supply chain.
- At the core of these recommendations is a recognition that voluntary brand codes of conduct, implemented through social auditing mechanisms, have proven insufficient. Mandatory mechanisms are essential to bind brands to implement human rights due diligence, as outlined by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPBHR).

On this International Women's Day, AFWA calls for a collective effort to address these systemic issues. We urge governments, businesses, and stakeholders to prioritise fair labour practices, eliminate discriminatory practices, and uphold the rights of all workers, particularly women, in the garment industry. Together, let us strive for a future where women workers are collectively empowered to access and advance their rights, and lead a life of dignity.