June 2026

TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY IN GARMENT SUPPLY CHAINS

ADVANCING THE ILO'S TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA IN THE ASIAN GARMENT SECTOR

Introduction

The International Labour Organization (ILO) Transformative Agenda for Gender Equality ("the Agenda")[i] provides a critical framework for Asia's garment sector, which produces 55–60 per cent of global apparel exports[ii] and employs an estimated 42 million women.[iii] Despite driving one of the world's most profitable industries, women garment workers continue to face significant "decent work deficits" in buyer-led global supply chains that shift risks onto suppliers and workers through intense cost pressures and unstable sourcing practices.[iv] These pressures are intensifying amid geopolitical tensions, trade weaponization, and the global rollback of women's rights, increasing risks to gender equality and decent work.

In this context, two pillars of the Agenda are especially urgent for women garment workers: equal pay for work of equal value, including through pay transparency, and prevention of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the world of work.[v]

This briefing highlights decent work deficits in gender-segregated garment supply chains (Part I), freedom of association violations as a root cause of gender inequality in the workplace (Part II), Enforceable Brand Agreements (EBAs) as a model to create the conditions for cross-border social dialogue addressing gender discrimination and freedom of association violations (Part III), and recommendations to the ILO and constituents on integrating EBAs into strategies to advance gender equality in global supply chains (Part IV).

As part of the Agenda, workers, governments, and employers should advance Enforceable Brand Agreements as a proven means of advancing gender equality.

Part I: For Garment Workers, Global Supply Chains Perpetuate Gender Inequality

The garment sector exemplifies how global supply chains reproduce and intensify gender inequality through feminization of the workforce and devaluation of women's labor.[vi] Companies at the top of garment supply chains use outsourcing to minimize their labor costs, contributing to precarious work, long working hours, and low wages at supplier factories.[vii] At factories, women are concentrated in low-paid, labor-intensive roles such as machine operators and checkers, while supervisory and management roles are male-dominated.[viii] Despite their role as primary family breadwinners, women's labor remains systematically undervalued, effectively subsidizing brands' reliance on low-cost, flexible production.[ix]

A. Women garment workers' poverty-wages are discriminatory

The concentration of women in "feminized" sectors is strongly associated with poverty-level wages. Despite rising productivity and export earnings in the garment sector, garment sector wages across Asia remain at or near poverty levels, despite rising productivity and export earnings.[x] Companies, or brands, at the top of garment supply chains engage in purchasing practices that contribute to the suppression of minimum wages[xi], as governments must factor cost competitiveness and relocation risks into minimum wage-setting processes.[xii]

AFWA's 2024 consumption survey of garment workers found that their monthly income (including minimum wage, bonuses, and overtime) covered only a fraction of total family expenditure: 28% in Bangladesh, 61% in Cambodia, 52% in India, 43% in Indonesia, 69% in Myanmar, 26% in the Philippines, 38% in Sri Lanka, and 61% in Vietnam.[xiii]

Low-cost production is sustained not only through poverty-level wages, but also through unequal distribution of unpaid care work.[xiv] Women garment workers in Asia often leave home before dawn, complete long shifts under top-down production pressures, and then return home to unpaid domestic responsibilities.[xv] The costs of social reproduction are therefore externalized onto women workers. Their unpaid care work remains largely invisible, undervalued, and unsupported by adequate wages, employer-based protections, or public services.[xvi] These unpaid care costs are factored into AFWA's living wage calculation methodology, which demonstrates how women garment workers' pay falls short of social reproduction costs.[xvii]

B. Precarious work, informality, and inequality make GBVH the norm

Precarity remains widespread within the formal garment manufacturing sector in Asia, including subcontracting and outsourcing, use of labor contractors (e.g. 'manpower agencies'), short-term contracts or non-contract temporary work, and home-based work.[xviii] In garment supply chains, firms use these arrangements to maximize labor extraction while avoiding labor protections.[xix] This suppresses workers' wages, eliminates benefits, and weakens job security and workplace safety.[xx]

These dynamics are highly gendered. Marginalized groups – especially women, migrants, and caste-oppressed workers – are concentrated in these most informal and precarious forms of work, increasing their exposure to rights violations and violence.[xxi]

GBVH is structurally embedded in garment global supply chains.[xxii] Male supervisors enforce unreasonable production targets through physical and verbal abuse, denial of bathroom breaks, and forced overtime.[xxiii] This culture of unchecked gendered harassment and intimidation easily escalates into more severe forms of GBVH.[xxiv]

Corporate self-regulation has failed to address these structural power imbalances.[xxv] Existing grievance mechanisms are frequently company-controlled, both when operated by brands and factories. As a result, workers distrust existing mechanisms, credibly fearing retaliation for using them and doubting that reporting will lead to meaningful action. In highly precarious conditions where workers face economic insecurity and weak freedom of association protections, these barriers to action become even more severe, as workers fear losing their jobs and have little protection if there is retaliation.

Taken together, these dynamics demonstrate that gender inequality and GBVH are structurally embedded within a supply chain model dependent upon low labor costs, labor flexibility, and gendered workplace power relations. Addressing these decent work deficits therefore requires a rebalancing of power that strengthens freedom of association and collective bargaining, creating viable reporting and grievance channels and enforceable accountability throughout the supply chain, from factories to brands.

Part II: Denial of Freedom of Association Fuels Gender Inequality in Garment Sector

Just as states have failed to close the gender pay gap through minimum wages and wage discrimination laws,[xxvi] garment production countries have also been unable to secure freedom of association rights for workers through national labor and employment law[xxvii], both due to the laws themselves and to weak enforcement.[xxviii] In the garment sector, precarious employment creates extreme power imbalances between predominantly-women production workers and their employers.[xxix] This is exacerbated through short-term contracts, blacklisting, high thresholds for unions to achieve collective bargaining, and restrictions in Export Processing Zones that further limit access for union representatives to factories to speak to workers.[xxx]

As the Agenda acknowledges, "...evidence shows that collective agreements can help close gender pay gaps."[xxxi] The structural root causes of GBVH – precarious work, gender-segregated management hierarchies, cultures of impunity – are also best addressed by freedom of association and women workers' collective power. Where collective bargaining is curtailed by substantial limitations to freedom of association, gender discrimination and GBVH proliferate.[xxxii] This is apparent throughout the garment industry's local, national, and global supply-chain contexts.[xxxiii] Notably, C190, Article 5 requires ratifying states to respect the rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining.[xxxiv]

Recent breakthroughs in the form of enforceable agreements address gender discrimination and help eliminate GBVH in the garment industry. They can protect freedom of association rights and the principles of C190 in enforceable agreements. These Enforceable Brand Agreements (EBAs) show the potential to realize the Agenda in the global garment industry through concrete mechanisms with accountability and voice for stakeholders at all levels of the supply chain.

Part III: Enforceable Brand Agreements (EBAs) Show the Agenda is Possible for Garment Workers

In recent years, EBAs have emerged as a model to meaningfully address GBVH in garment supply chains. AFWA and GLJ are signatories of two landmark EBAs: the Dindigul Agreement to End GBVH (Dindigul Agreement) and the Central Java Agreement for Gender Justice (Central Java Agreement). Promotion and expansion of EBAs like these is essential to achieving the ILO's transformative agenda, as these agreements create concrete protections for freedom of association and women worker leadership that enable gender equality in garment supply chains.

The Dindigul Agreement, which concluded in 2025, achieved well-documented successes to enable gender equality in a factory in Tamil Nadu, India. The agreement created an effective grievance mechanism for GBVH cases, which encouraged substantial increases in reporting and resolved 75% of cases within 2 weeks. Trainings through the agreement also increased understanding and confidence among women workers about GBVH issues. The freedom of association protections and mechanisms of the agreement, including union-appointed Shop Floor Monitors (SFMs), created the environment for Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labor Union (TTCU), the union signatory, to grow its membership and women workers' collective power on the shop floor and in bargaining.

In a statement at the conclusion of the Dindigul Agreement, all stakeholders agreed that its "outcomes offer a powerful signal of what is possible when stakeholders work together to address GBVH by supporting women workers' collective action"[xxxv] and that "industry drivers can significantly reduce GBVH in the global garment industry by adopting key elements of this model."[xxxvi] Signatories included fashion brands H&M, Gap, and PVH, factory management Eastman Exports, the union TTCU, and international labor stakeholders AFWA and GLJ.

The Central Java Agreement, which recently concluded its first year of implementation, contains substantially similar mechanisms to the Dindigul Agreement and has already shown promising increases in GBVH reporting and elimination. These EBAs are examples of how freedom of association and women worker leadership realized through multi-party bargaining can effectively address GBVH – and are an essential part of any transformative agenda for gender equality.

The Agenda emphasizes the need for social dialogue as the "backbone and principal enabler of the transformative change the Agenda seeks to achieve" on gender equality.[xxxvii] The ILO has recognized that EBAs enable inclusive and effective cross-border social dialogue to address fundamental labor rights, including discrimination in the world of work.[xxxviii] EBAs lay a new path for women workers to build collective power and engage in meaningful social dialogue, enabling women workers' organizations to "negotiate lasting, systemic change"[xxxix] by engaging in multi-party bargaining to address the root causes of GBVH in garment supply chains.[xl] They are especially powerful because, as outlined in Parts I and II above, the severe limitations of freedom of association and the gendered power dynamics of supply chains make social dialogue perilous and nearly unattainable for most garment workers.

EBAs like the Dindigul and Central Java Agreements answer the ILO's call by "empowering those most affected by discrimination and inequality to exercise their right to a collective voice and representation — not merely as beneficiaries, but as agents and leaders of change."[xli] Several mechanisms of these agreements make this possible:

- Defining GBVH using the definition from ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment.
- Freedom of association protections including proactive statements from management to workers of its partnership with the union and commitments to non-retaliation for workers who report GBVH.
- Union-appointed worker shop floor monitors with additional retaliation protection, who reinforce anti-GBVH measures and encourage reporting with their coworkers.
- Effective grievance mechanisms with multiple reporting channels.
- Oversight structures include all stakeholders, including brands, to hold factory management accountable for agreement implementation. Given their outsized power in garment supply chains, the participation and leverage of global brands in agreement structures is essential to the success of these agreements.

Entrenched gender discrimination, including GBVH, is an unsustainable reality for garment workers. It is a problem exacerbated by the supply chain system and weak freedom of association protections across garment production countries. But there is a proven solution – Enforceable Brand Agreements.

The Violence Out of Fashion campaign led by AFWA and GLJ is demanding that fashion brands actively sign more of these agreements to eliminate gender discrimination in their supply chains.[xlii]

Part IV: Recommendations

All ILO constituents – workers, governments, and employers – should encourage negotiation of EBAs in supply chains as a proven means of addressing GBVH. Constituents should encourage the ILO to prioritize EBAs "deepen[ed] efforts to address key structural barriers relating to … violence and harassment" and in "enhanced efforts to build constituents' capacity to engage in social dialogue to advance gender equality and non-discrimination, with attention to the effective representation and participation of women."[xliii]

The ILO should integrate EBAs into its policy toolkit for advancing gender equality in global supply chains. Specifically, the ILO should:

- Recognize EBAs as a practical mechanism through which member states can integrate the principles of ILO Convention 190 and Conventions 87 and 98, particularly where global supply chain dynamics limit the reach of national enforcement;
- Facilitate tripartite dialogues on supply chain governance and encourage governments to create regulatory environments that recognize and support EBAs as complementary to national labor law enforcement;
- Provide technical assistance and capacity building to member states on supply chain governance structures, including how EBAs can complement national labor law enforcement and serve as compliance mechanisms for due diligence principles and emerging legislation;
- Reference EBAs as a recognized best practice in supervisory body observations and recommendations, particularly in cases involving GBVH and freedom of association violations in supply chains;
- Commission and disseminate research on EBA outcomes to build the evidence base for multi-party bargaining as a structural intervention against GBVH.

T**he Asia Floor Wage Alliance** is an Asian labor-led global labor and social alliance across garment producing countries (including Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka) and consumer regions (USA and Europe) for addressing poverty-level wages, gender discrimination, and freedom of association in global garment production networks.

Global Labor Justice is a US nonprofit, founded in 1986, that supports workers and unions around the world in exercising fundamental labor rights, including freedom of association and international labor standards.

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[vi] International Labour Organization, *Employment, Wages and Productivity Trends*, 33.
[vii] International Labour Office, *Decent Work in Global Supply Chains*, paras. 18–19, 21, 24–25.
[viii] International Labour Organization, *Employment, Wages and Productivity Trends*, 34-35;
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[xii] International Labour Organization, *Employment, Wages and Productivity Trends*, 24; International Labour Office, *Decent Work in Global Supply Chains*, para. 62.
[xiii] Unpublished data on file with AFWA.
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