

Notes: Webinar on ‘Investing in the post COVID-19 Garment Sector in Asia: How should Gender and Environment be integrated for Decent Work’

May 26, 2020

Introduction

Dr Cristina Martinez, ILO Senior Specialist, Environment and Decent Work (Asia-Pacific), introduced the Webinar, *Investing in the post COVID-19 Garment Sector in Asia*. She stressed that the focus of the discussion would be on identifying how gender and environmental concerns should be integrated into an action-oriented agenda to support decent work in post COVID-19 programming in the Textile and Garment sectors.

Lead Presentations

Ms. Joni Simpson, ILO’s Senior Specialist in Gender, Equality and Non-Discrimination for East and South East Asia and the Pacific, based in Bangkok, Thailand, gave a presentation on the *Gendered Impacts of COVID-19 on the Garment Sector*. The additional unpaid care burdens placed on women, as well as increased domestic violence due to confinement, may impede women’s return to work when factories reopen. She indicated that the bottom line is that conditions and challenges for the 43 million people working in the sector, most of whom are women, are likely to worsen and inequalities are likely to widen if responses do not provide gender analysis. Ms. Simpson argued that increased gender equality would make firms and the sector more competitive in the longer term. She noted that business “as usual” is unlikely and that this is a rare opportunity to ‘build a better normal’ for the sector. This *better normal* of increased gender equality, environmental sustainability, and competitiveness will not occur without deliberate actions.

Dr. Samantha Sharpe, Research Director at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) gave a presentation on *COVID-19 and Environmental Sustainability in the Sector*. Dr. Sharpe pointed out that although the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 epidemic have been severe, the environmental impacts have been positive, related to dramatically decreased volumes of production in the garment sector. For example, carbon emissions are down substantially in an industry that accounts for 5-10% of global carbon emissions. Dr. Sharpe pointed out the significant negative water impacts normally generated by the sector, both in terms of consumption and wastewater. Seventy nine billion cubic meters of fresh water are consumed across the sector’s value chain; 20% of global water pollution is attributable to the Sector. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that the geography of the textile / garment sector overlaps with global areas of high water insecurity.

Dr. Sharpe indicated divisions exist within the industry regarding future sustainability. Under enormous financial pressures, some firms and policymakers want to delay environmental investments, while others advocate a future circular economy for the sector, involving changes, such as clothes repair, the end to the discounting culture and overstocking, and more effective handling of textile waste, as a way to recover from the crisis and build resilience in the globalized supply chain.

Group Discussion

Webinar participants broke into two virtual groups for discussion, one for gender and one for environment. The questions for discussion were:

- ▶ What challenges and opportunities for change in supporting gender equality and environmental priorities does the post COVID-19 period present for the garment sector in Asia?
- ▶ Which key entry points, tactics, strategies and partnerships could lead to a more gender and environmentally-sensitive recovery response? (workplace level, sectoral level, regional level)

Environment Group Discussions

Group members discussed:

- How collaboration is an important ingredient in improving the performance of the sector in terms of gender equality and environmental sustainability. For collaboration to be effective, we must have an image of what we want the future Textile and Garment sectors to look like.
- The intersection between gender – environment is manifested most strongly around water issues. Aside from enormous water consumption and waste water generated related to production, water in factories can be the only place where workers encounter running water, important to the safety and health of women workers, for sanitation including during menstruation.
- The need for key stakeholders to focus on improving environmental and socio-economic conditions in textile and garment production areas as well as in places where the workers live.
- How demand for garment consumption is likely to fall in the post COVID-19 period. Billions of dollars (USD) in orders are being cancelled and producers are facing massive discounting pressures. Rather than collaboration, there may be cut-throat competition among firms and national systems.
- That social distancing requirements may reduce employment by 30-40% through space constraints and employment in the sector may drop. There may also be pressure on workers to take lower wages and accept lower levels of benefits. Migrant workers may be especially impacted. Policymakers need to consider retraining workers for other means of livelihood, as part of a Just Transition.
- Recovery actions will need to also include training, counselling and promotion/communication activities to address the depression caused by the crisis and enhance the confidence and resilience of enterprises, as well as capacity building for enterprises (particularly SMEs) on business operation, environment and social responsibility, and risk management.

Gender Group Discussion

Group members discussed:

- That there needs to be a focus on trade union and collective efforts to protect the rights of the workers, especially women workers. This could be increasingly difficult given that many workers migrated back to their home countries and because many women who work in the textile industry are not part of the trade unions or collectives.



- How collective movements to resolve hunger and economic issues are being activated, in India for example, which directly link to the government. Collective movements should inform a long-term strategy moving forward.
- How women are often left out of social security measures.
- How digital tools for data management and communication would be helpful for Unions.
- That automation will be a big threat to workers, and skills upgrading will be important for the future of the sector in Asia.
- Why the COVID-19 crisis elevates the issue of climate change within the fashion industry, particularly within the Swedish fashion industry.
- The need for analysis on shortening supply chains, social dialogue, and the roles of women workers in the social dialogue in response to COVID-19.

Closing Session (Whole Group)

The Environment group pointed out that the current financial situation of the sector is a possible challenge to collaboration. Group members emphasized that dispersed supply chains make collaboration difficult. The importance of water as a key nexus of the gender-environment intersect was identified. Overall, the group stressed the need for realism, indicating the likelihood of fewer workers in the sector over the foreseeable future, meaning some workers will need to transition to other sectors.

The Gender group emphasized the importance of unions and collectives to protect workers and improve bargaining power. Group members also mentioned that workers need to learn new skills to deal with automation and other trends such as near-shoring and concerns over climate change. Some positive national initiatives were shared from participants' experiences, e.g., Vietnam has a national advisory group on women, and Cambodia has a mechanism to address the needs of women workers. Workers in India are being encouraged to engage in collective action. Overall, planning for growing trends will be important for the future of the sector. Each country will have its own entry points. Key learnings from each country will feed into the Regional Action Plan that will be prepared through the project.

Dr. Cristina Martinez brought the meeting to a close. She indicated that the webinar was just the beginning of a continuing discussion of the issues raised, and that two briefs (one on environment and one on gender) will be circulated for review by respective task members soon. The next meeting of the Environmental Task Force will occur on June 23 and the next meeting for the Gender Task Force will occur on June 24. Further details will be shared with task force members shortly.