

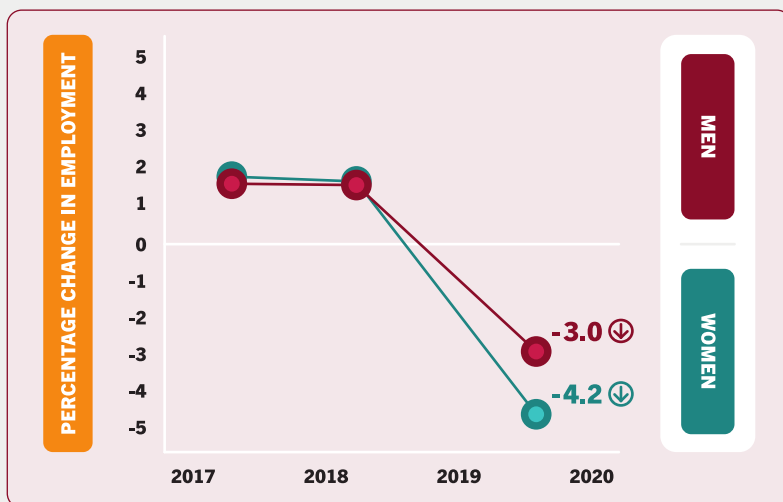


# COVID-19 and Gender Equality in Global Supply Chains



# 1 Introduction

**The COVID-19 pandemic has affected global supply chains in ways unseen for many decades, with many businesses experiencing disruptions in sales and supply chains, resulting in losses.**



The economic and social impact on men and women workers is even more dire. The [International Labour Organisation \(ILO\)](#) estimates that between 2019 and 2020, there has been a decline in global employment to the tune of 54 million jobs for women or 4.2%, and 60 million jobs for men, which is equivalent to 3%. Women have therefore been disproportionately affected by the pandemic in terms of overall job losses, and although it is expected that job recovery in 2021 will be higher for women in comparison to men, it will still not be enough to return to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>i</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has also highlighted the gender gaps that exist in terms of the quality of jobs for women compared to men.

We know that women are typically found in lower-skilled occupations, characterised by low wages, long working hours, limited opportunities for career advancement, lack of social protection and exposure to occupational health and safety risks, as well as violence and harassment. Prevailing social norms and domestic responsibilities also mean that women are more likely to seek flexible work, which often means increased job insecurity. With the pandemic, these risks have been amplified even further, with conditions worsening for women workers who are at greater risk of being made redundant or having their hours reduced.<sup>ii</sup> This ultimately affects their economic stability and puts them at even greater risk of precarious employment in future.

Women are typically found in lower-skilled occupations, characterised by:



LIMITED OPPORTUNITIES FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT



EXPOSURE TO OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY RISKS



LOW WAGES



LACK OF SOCIAL PROTECTION



LONG WORKING HOURS



VIOLENCE AND HARASSMENT

**We are reversing the progress that has been made towards greater equality between women and men in the workplace.”**

A significant amount of research on the gendered impact of the pandemic has been carried out over the past year and the overwhelming consensus is that we are reversing the progress that has been made towards greater equality between women and men in the workplace. This brief aimed at ETI corporate members, provides a synthesis of the evidence so far drawn from secondary sources of data\*, to increase awareness and understanding of the disproportionate impact that the crisis has had on women workers. It also provides some recommendations on how to ensure that we are not only building back better, but also in a gender equitable manner.

Now more than ever, it is imperative that efforts to rebuild and improve working conditions in supply chains aim to address the systemic constraints that continue to perpetuate gender inequalities, and put women workers at risk. At the time of writing this brief, many production countries particularly in South Asia, are experiencing second and third waves of the virus with various forms of lockdown and restrictions still in place. This is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, which means workers will continue to suffer the negative effects of the pandemic.

\*Unless otherwise stated, all references have been accessed between July and September 2021.

## 2 The gendered impact of COVID-19 in global supply chains

History has shown women and girls are usually more affected in times of crisis, by negative impacts on, but not limited to, their livelihoods, health, food and nutrition security, and overall protections.

### NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON WOMEN AND GIRLS



LIVELIHOODS



HEALTH



FOOD



PROTECTIONS

This pandemic is no different, with women being among the hardest hit in terms of economic and social impact. Some are going as far calling it a 'shcession' because of the degree to which gender equality gains have been reversed.<sup>iii</sup>

Across global supply chains, structural and social barriers mean women are typically concentrated in low-skilled jobs that pay less compared to those carried out by men. They are less likely to have permanent contracts or access to social insurance, all of which increases their vulnerability to shocks such as COVID-19. They are also slower to be re-employed when recovery gets underway. By contrast, men are more concentrated in permanent jobs, which offer protection during times of crisis.<sup>iv</sup>



# Data shows that dismissals have disproportionately affected specific groups of women, regardless of their skills or years of service at a given factory”



**With the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of workers have been furloughed or retrenched and those who remain employed have seen a significant reduction in their hours.**

Unfortunately, the data shows that dismissals have disproportionately affected specific groups of women, regardless of their skills or years of service at a given factory, for example, women who are pregnant or on maternity leave.\* [A survey of businesses and suppliers carried out by Sedex](#) in April 2020, revealed that many were either reducing the number of hours for workers or laying off temporary workers as an immediate strategy to manage the economic repercussions of the pandemic. We know that women are typically overrepresented in the temporary

workforce even though data at business and supply chain level is not readily available. As factories begin to return to some form of normality and re-hire workers, women are more likely to be discriminated against during the process, either directly or indirectly. The cumulative impact is increased poverty and economic hardship for millions of female workers, particularly in countries where social protection and government support schemes are weak. Where such schemes are available, they are often more easily accessed by workers with permanent contracts, which tend to be men.



**Another gendered impact of the pandemic is the increased burden of unpaid care work that has fallen on the shoulders of women as a result of school closures and family members getting infected by the virus.**

[Women perform 75% of the world's total unpaid care work](#) with figures rising as high as 80% to 90% in South Asia and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In India, it is estimated that the time spent on unpaid care work has increased by 30% since the pandemic started, making it more difficult for women to remain in the workforce.<sup>vi</sup> Under Indian law, factories with more than 30 women workers have to provide day-care facilities however, many have been closed in order to

curb the spread of the virus. For example, the [closure of creche facilities in garment factories in Bengaluru, India](#) has resulted in many young mothers having to resign from their jobs, thus putting additional financial pressure on their families.

Although the decision to close the facilities has been made in order to reduce the spread of the virus, this has disproportionately affected women workers given their roles as caregivers.






There is also a [growing body of evidence](#) that the pandemic has increased the risks of [gender-based violence \(GBV\)](#) against women, including domestic violence.

GBV in the workplace has and continues to pose a challenge for businesses in terms of their ability to detect it and implement appropriate remedial measures for affected workers. Traditional audit mechanisms rarely reveal the extent of the issue, and workers, particularly female victims, are scared of reporting incidences out of fear of losing their jobs. With the pandemic, the added pressure to meet deadlines with a reduced number of workers, as well as increased uncertainty of jobs for most workers, has exacerbated cases of GBV. Various forms of curfews and restrictions on movement, the financial pressure on households, male unemployment backlash, and anxiety about the future means women are also more susceptible to domestic violence from male partners or relatives.<sup>vii</sup> This in turn affects women's performance in the workplace in addition to mental and physical wellbeing.

The enormity of the challenge of GBV in the world of work is what has led to the adoption of a landmark convention on violence and harassment by the ILO in 2019. Strong and inclusive in scope, [Convention 190 and its accompanying Recommendation 206](#) provide a framework for tackling the issues including prevention, protection and remedy for all workers, regardless of their contractual status and irrespective of where they are working. However, for these provisions to have a real impact, governments need to ratify, resource and implement the Convention. Businesses should also recognise this new standard and strengthen their workplace policies and practices accordingly.



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## Garments and footwear supply chains

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt across many manufacturing industries, including garment and footwear supply chains which have been hit particularly hard. Since the start of the pandemic, mandatory factory closures due to lockdowns, drops in global consumer demand and supply chain bottlenecks resulted in a sharp fall in global garments trade during the first half of 2020.

This led to both temporary and permanent factory closures and mass retrenchment of workers, most notably in South Asia, [which accounts of 60% of global garment exports](#). With buyers cancelling orders and challenges with input supply, business declined by up to 70% for some countries in the region, affecting an estimated 2.27million workers.<sup>viii</sup>

### SOUTH ASIA

**60%** OF GLOBAL GARMENT EXPORTS

BUSINESS DECLINED UP TO **70%**

The sector has slowly begun to recover as brands and retailers resume business operations in full, but the impact on workers is still being felt.

In the ready-made garments sector, women account for approximately 65% to 75% of the 40 million global work force.<sup>ix</sup> Nearly one in five women in Cambodia are employed in the garment sector,

whilst in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, approximately one in seven women are employed in the sector, and one in nine women in Bangladesh and Myanmar.<sup>x</sup> At the peak of the pandemic, millions of them lost their jobs when brands and retailers abruptly cancelled orders. Workers were made redundant without payment of wages for work completed or severance pay, and for some, these jobs may never return.

### READY-MADE GARMENT SECTOR BREAKDOWN

#### WOMEN ACCOUNT FOR 65% - 75% OF THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE



#### NUMBER OF WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THE RMG SECTOR

CAMBODIA 1 IN 5

PAKISTAN & SRI LANKA 1 IN 7

BANGLADESH & MYANMAR 1 IN 9

#### MILLIONS LOST THEIR JOBS, SOME MAY NEVER RETURN

An analysis by the Clean Clothes Campaign estimates that [workers lost US\\$3.19 to 5.78 billion between March and May 2020](#) due to lay-offs and factory closures in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. For those who have returned to work, there are

concerns regarding health and safety, as not all factories are able to implement social distancing and other safety measures effectively. For women, balancing the burden of unpaid care with returning to work remains a challenge.



**They are thus an integral part of the supply chain however, they are also found at the very bottom of it, working long hours for very little pay.”**

Another vulnerable group of workers that have been hit hard by the pandemic are [women homeworkers](#), who even before COVID-19 are considered amongst the most insecure and lowest paid women workers in global supply chains.<sup>xi</sup>

The vast majority of homeworkers are women who perform a range of critical tasks including embroidery and embellishment work, attaching buttons and cutting loose threads. They combine paid work at home with their domestic and caring responsibilities, thus providing the flexibility and specialist skills that first tier suppliers need if they are to meet the tight time frames and price expectations of their customers. They are thus an integral part of the supply chain however, they are also found at the very bottom of it, working long hours for very little pay.

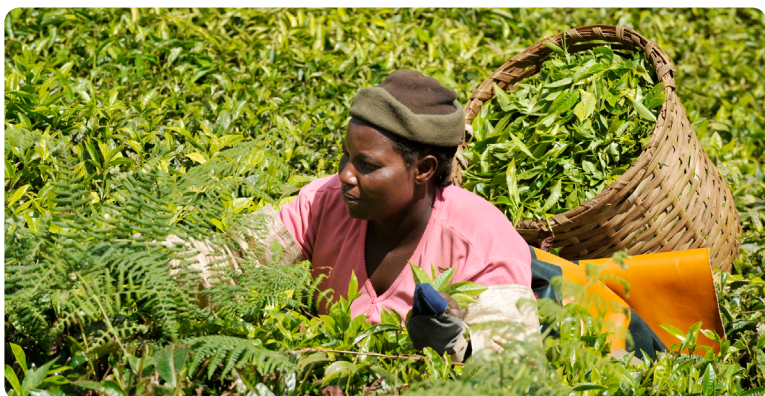
The disruption in garment supply chains has trickled down to this group, with many homeworkers having lost their sources of income. In August 2020, HomeNet South Asia interviewed over 500 homebased workers across in South Asia, and found that during the peak lockdown period, 75% had no work and therefore no income.<sup>xii</sup> At the time of interview over 60% reported receiving neither cash nor emergency food from the government. Some women home-based workers have been able to organise themselves and transition to producing personal protective equipment (PPE), however, this is a minority. As the industry continues on the road to recovery, many of these women homeworkers remain vulnerable given the informal nature of their work.



## Agricultural supply chains

**Agricultural supply chains have not been as affected as other sectors given that food production and distribution are considered essential commodities. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated inequalities and [pushed many food workers and farmers into poverty](#).**

The impact differs from country to country, as well as production capacity, with smaller producers more severely affected. Delays in picking and delivery, as well as cancellation of orders, has led to significant post-harvest losses, particularly in the flower and fresh produce supply chains. While government lockdowns in many production countries did not result in farm closures, they did affect movement of workers forcing suppliers to reduce the number of temporary and seasonal workers they typically employ. Again, women are overrepresented in this group and have therefore been more affected in terms of job losses. For those who retained jobs, the lack of closure of farms has also increased the risk of infection.



Women constitute a significant percentage of workers in processing and packaging of food, as well as other agricultural products.

For example, in Kenya, women account for 80% of the 150,000 direct flower workers. At the peak of the pandemic, flower suppliers were forced to reduce their permanent workforce by as much as 50%, whilst others had to put workers on unpaid leave. For those who remained, their workloads more than doubled.<sup>xiii</sup> Social distancing requirements and other health and safety considerations also resulted in workers having to reduce their shifts, which meant lower incomes and increased job insecurity.

In the tea industry, women account for 60% of the workforce and have been more severely impacted by the pandemic compared to men.<sup>xiv</sup> In the tea plantations in Assam, it is estimated that women lost 45 days of work on average due to lockdowns compared to 33 days for men.<sup>xv</sup> For [Moroccan women migrant workers](#) engaged in fruit harvesting in Spain, the pandemic has exacerbated the already challenging working conditions they face. With only a fraction of the seasonal workers usually employed available to bring in the harvest last year, workloads for these women increased significantly in what is already a grueling task of fruit picking. There have also been [reports of inadequate protective equipment and over-cramped living conditions](#) for the female seasonal workers.

**DIRECT FLOWER WORKERS IN KENYA**

**80% ARE WOMEN**

**GLOBAL TEA INDUSTRY**

**60% ARE WOMEN**

**TEA PLANTATIONS IN ASSAM, INDIA**

**45 FOR WOMEN**

**AVERAGE NUMBER OF WORK DAYS LOST DUE TO LOCKDOWNS**

**33 FOR MEN**

### 3 **Build back better and in a gender equitable manner**

**The COVID-19 pandemic has affected women's employment in global supply chains and resulted in a significant reversal in gender equality gains.**



**This section provides:**

Recommendations for businesses on to how to ensure gender equality considerations are part and parcel of policies and programmes necessary to support the recovery of supply chains and ensure decent conditions for all workers.

**Whilst women have been hit the hardest by the pandemic, they will also be essential for recovery and long-term resilience of supply chains.”**



#### RECOMMENDATION 1

## Collect and analyse gender-disaggregated data

The first step to building back better is getting an accurate picture of the situation and this can only be achieved if the data is available. The pandemic has once again exposed the lack of gender-disaggregated data in supply chains, which makes it difficult to get a full sense of the impact on women workers, particularly in the lower tiers. This directly affects the efficacy of response and recovery measures, which are less likely to be evidence-based and more likely to be gender-blind, thus overlooking the needs of women compared to men.<sup>xvi</sup>

Businesses should therefore endeavor to utilise [supply chain tools<sup>xvii</sup>](#) and [assessment systems](#) to gain a better understanding of women workers' roles in the supply chain, including employment status and pay. It is also important to collect data on the gender and category of workers that have been affected by job losses and pay cuts (temporary, migrant etc.), as well as who is being re-hired, for what jobs and under what terms.<sup>xviii</sup> This information will help businesses and their suppliers to work towards recovery that benefits all workers and tracks progress. It will also go a long way to improve the effectiveness and resilience of the supply chain during the recovery process, and ensure women workers are not left behind.



#### RECOMMENDATION 2

## Support health, safety and wellbeing measures

Although the majority of businesses are implementing measures to protect workers and curb the spread of the virus, there is room for improvement as operations start returning to full capacity. Many production countries are experiencing second and third waves of the virus at the time of writing this brief, with workers at risk of falling ill both at work, as well as during the commute to and from home. Workers could be forced to make the difficult choice between going to work and risking illness and/or infecting other family members, or staying at home and facing severe economic hardship. This predicament can be particularly pronounced for women workers, who face greater job insecurity and have additional care responsibilities.

Businesses need to therefore continue supporting their suppliers with implementing health and safety protocols to control the spread of the virus within the workplace. This could include providing PPE, testing kits and handwashing facilities to workers at no cost, or supporting the development of [training materials to educate workers on hygiene practices and social distancing](#). As countries begin to roll out COVID-19 vaccination programmes, businesses can encourage their suppliers to organise workers for vaccinations and provide information on benefits and availability. They should also support suppliers to develop [trade union/worker-management consultation and communication channels](#) with appropriate representative structures to address pandemic-related concerns, health and safety issues.



### RECOMMENDATION 3

## Listen to women's voices

Historically, women have been underrepresented in trade unions and worker organisations, despite strong evidence that shows the benefits of including women in such platforms.<sup>xix</sup>

When women are not able to take part in the conversation and bring their concerns to the fore, existing gender gaps are likely to persist or in some cases increase. Given the critical role they play in most supply chains, it is imperative that women's voices are at the centre of recovery and rebuilding efforts. By understanding their challenges and addressing their specific needs, supply chains are more likely to recover with increased resilience and sustainability.

Businesses should therefore encourage and support suppliers to ensure equal representation of women in worker committees, internal taskforces and other worker organisations. They could also look to work with [local unions](#) and NGOs who are knowledgeable of the challenges faced by women workers, to support the recovery process.



### RECOMMENDATION 4

## Support women's unpaid care work

As schools, creches and care services closed during the pandemic the time spent by women on unpaid care has increased significantly, forcing many to make the difficult choice between earning an income or staying home to take care of family members. Recognising this challenge and factoring it into recovery plans is critical towards keeping women active in the labour market.

In many countries, it is required by law to provide childcare facilities at workplaces when the number of employees passes a certain threshold. It is important to begin re-opening these facilities where they have been closed, ensuring appropriate safety precautions are taken. Where they are not available, business can encourage their suppliers to provide them and utilise worker-management communication channels to determine other measures that could support women with care work. Women workers should also be supported with more flexible working arrangements and they should not be discriminated against for requiring some flexibility to balance their care responsibilities. Messaging around care should encourage women and men to take the time and resources they need to care for themselves and their dependents during these difficult times.



#### RECOMMENDATION 5

## Address gender-based violence in the workplace

Every employer has a responsibility to protect the physical and mental well-being of its employees. There is growing evidence that the pandemic has led to increased cases of violence and harassment, including gender-based violence in workplaces, which go largely undetected.

To make progress on this issue, businesses can start by reviewing their supplier codes of conduct to reinforce the importance of addressing GBV and sexual harassment. A review of purchasing practices is also necessary given the correlation between short lead times and management practices on the factory floor, whereby supervisors under pressure to meet tight deadlines resort to harassment and abuse to push workers to deliver on orders. Businesses could also look to support suppliers with training on GBV, how to detect it and provide remedy. All workers and supervisors should be made aware of what constitutes GBV and sexual harassment, and provided with clear and accessible mechanisms to submit anonymous complaints. Complaints should be resolved immediately and communicated to the workers concerned. All necessary steps should be taken to support victims by providing them with safe spaces and flexibility to take time off work if they need to. With increased incidences of domestic violence, employers can support women by recognising that domestic violence can have a significant impact on wellbeing and work performance, and provide them with information on where they can seek help and support services within their communities.

Support women by recognising that domestic violence can have a significant impact on wellbeing”

# Endnotes

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