

Addressing the adverse impacts of the Pandemic on women workers in the Apparel & Textile Value Chain – Roundtable 1

14 Aug 2020

Promoting Responsible Value Chains in India for an Effective Contribution of the Private Sector to the SDGs

(PROGRESS Project)

Sector: Apparel and Textile

Impact area: SDG 5



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Background

The textile and apparel sector workers have been strongly affected by the adverse impacts of Covid-19. While, the entire workforce in the sector is reeling from the shocks of the COVID, certain factors have made it even more distressing for the women in the workforce. As operations are resuming, more and more challenges are surfacing for the women in the A&T sector. There is increasing instance of informality for the women workers and women are finding it more difficult to re-integrate into workplaces. This is partly due to unfavourable regulatory changes (longer hours which cannot be managed when juxtaposed with the unpaid work that women have to shoulder) and partly due to the utter collapse of community support and enabling ecosystem (creches etc.) which was available before the pandemic.

These challenges are not entirely new but undeniably the pandemic has exacerbated the impact on women in the workforce. While, things were improving for women employed in formal factories, the poor plight of the home-based workers and informal sector remained a cause for concern. The pandemic has necessitated that we build back different.

Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) has held a roundtable discussion on the above on 14 August 2020, involving stakeholders from the private sector (apparel and textile businesses) and the civil society. The discussion was held under the PROGRESS Project, which looks at private sector participation towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

PROGRESS Project

Centre for Responsible Business (CRB) and Aston India Centre for Applied Research (AICAR), Aston University, UK have teamed up for a research project to explore and investigate how private sector companies - as part of Global Value Chains (GVCs), production networks and FDIs in India have/could better contribute towards achievement of specific Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly inclusive education and life-long learning (SDG4), employment and decent work for the youth (SDG 8), women's social and economic empowerment (SDG 5), sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), and Climate Action (SDG 13). The project focuses on four sectors: Textile and apparel, Agri-processing, Gems and jewellery, and Pharma.

This project referred to as the PROGRESS project is being supported and funded by International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada.

Roundtable

Following were the broad goals of the roundtable discussion:

- To briefly outline women workers-specific issues (both for formal and home-based workers) that have emerged during the pandemic
- To discuss solutions that have been implemented or potential solutions that can be implemented
- To identify individuals and organizations (government, NGOs, private sector, implementing agencies) that would enable concrete action on the ideas generated and also facilitate dissemination to the right stakeholders

The discussion was attended by representatives from Women in Value Chains, Traidcraft, Home Net South Asia, Prem Jain Memorial Trust, Shahi Exports, Aditya Birla Fashion & Retail Limited, Fair Labour Association, Marks & Spencer, Apparel Training and Design Centre, International Development Research Centre (Canada) and Aston University (UK).

Following are the highlights from the roundtable discussion:

- Effects of the pandemic/lockdown on women workers were compounded as they were traditionally the primary caregivers in households. Longer working hours and absence of support systems like creches made things more difficult. Also, women were easily laid off as they weren't perceived as primary bread-winners.
- Among other ill-effects of the lockdown was an increase in domestic violence. In many rural work-centres (cooperatives, micro-units, etc.), women didn't report back or work even after lockdown was partially lifted. Work has been casualized gradually over a decade (fewer benefits, longer hours, lack of safety net).
- Collective enterprises were desirable as they had relevant support systems, decent working conditions, etc. Cross-sectoral supply chains are crucial too, e.g. in many cases women in the garment sector could find jobs in the food sector as demand for supplies in rural areas went up due to reverse migration.
- Home-based workers should be recognized, so that they could avail benefits similar to permanent employees in factories.
- Need for social protection was highlighted by multiple attendees.
- CSR funds could be utilized for paying salaries during emergencies. This would need changes in the Companies Act.
- Need for collaboration across value chains would be crucial to ensure wages, decent working conditions, etc. during emergencies. Ultimately, wages would depend on production and thus on demand.

Way forward

CRB will take up some key intervention ideas with relevant stakeholders, and plan pilot projects aimed at alleviating the situation of women workers in the sector. These pilots will ideally be done in collaboration with brands, manufacturers and civil society organizations who have expertise in those domains.

Some of the emerging courses of action are:

- Recognition of home-based workers as employees of brands/manufacturers, so as to make available to them all relevant benefits and social security
- Implementing best practices and code of conduct (OSH, prevention of sexual harassment, etc.) in work-centres in both urban and rural districts
- Engaging communities to provide complementary and essential services like creches, training centres, safe spaces, etc.