



► ILO Brief

October 2025

Gender Equality in Supply Chains

How ILO interventions foster gender equality in outcomes in supply chains

Key points

- Supply chains can be an entry point to advance gender equality, as they often create new employment opportunities for women. To fully harness this potential, it is crucial to address the deep-rooted and interconnected barriers that perpetuate gender inequalities and discrimination.
- Occupational gender segregation, frequently rooted in social perceptions and biases, tends to confine women to lower-level, lower-paid positions and sectors, especially in labour-intensive supply chains in the Global South. Pay gaps between men and women are still significant, both between occupations and within the same occupation. Furthermore, the burden of unpaid care responsibilities in the household often falls on women, who struggle to reconcile them with their productive roles at the workplace. Frequent exposure to discrimination and gender-based violence and harassment further hinders women's equitable engagement at work, while unequal representation in managerial and leadership positions and limited access to networks and markets restrict their economic opportunities. These barriers can prevent women from benefiting from the new jobs created by supply chain participation.
- To overcome these challenges, the ILO is supporting constituents by providing targeted technical assistance to advance gender equality and non-discrimination in supply chains.
- The ILO is working to dismantle harmful stereotypes and promote equal opportunities in employment and occupation by implementing gender-sensitive career development programs, enabling leadership opportunities for women and promoting equal pay for work of equal value; preventing and addressing violence and harassment in the world of work; encouraging redistribution of unpaid care work and responsibilities; expanding market entry opportunities for women entrepreneurs and strengthening their representation in business associations and unions, further promoting their active and equitable participation.
- Fostering gender equality in supply chains creates mutual benefits for both workers and businesses, impacting positively supply chain performance. Evidence shows that prioritizing gender equality leads to increased productivity, stronger employee engagement and retention, as well as greater profitability and resilience.

Acknowledgements This brief was authored by Julia Zietemann, with valuable guidance, insights, and examples kindly provided by ILO colleagues, drawing on their extensive research and technical cooperation expertise on this topic.

1. Women in supply chains

Supply chains are constantly transforming production and service networks at the global, regional, and national levels.¹ These complex systems connect producers, suppliers, and consumers, including across borders, reshaping industries and fostering economic opportunities. Supply chains can reduce poverty, improve living standards and foster job creation and prosperity. Export-oriented production, which thrives within these supply chains, tends to increase productivity and output quality, advance technology transfer, and enhance workers' skills development. These factors can contribute to improved wages and working conditions for workers, and as a result, have a positive impact on their livelihoods. Indeed, since the 1990s, over one billion people, particularly in Asian countries and emerging economies, escaped extreme poverty thanks to global trade expansion.²

Approximately one in five workers globally is employed in global or regional supply chains,³ with even more workers employed in domestic supply chains. Export-focused enterprises often employ more women than those primarily serving local markets.⁴ Estimates show that **women constitute an important proportion of the workforce in global supply chains**, overall making up around 40 per cent of workers and in some sectors such as garments, even up to 80 per cent of the employees.⁵ These figures underscore the significant role women play in trade-related industries, whether they are employed in exporting companies or actively participating in international trade as business owners, entrepreneurs, cross-border traders, or consumers.

The effects of trade on workers differ by gender, influenced by sector-specific employment patterns, their concentration in specific industries, and how well their skills align with technological demands. Ultimately, the opportunities and challenges women face in supply chains depend largely on social norms, sector-specific dynamics, country-specific economic changes, governance mechanisms and the supply chain tier they are situated in.⁶

Supply chains can provide significant **socioeconomic opportunities for women**: they enable them to enter and remain in the labour market while achieving (greater) financial independence, often through higher-paid jobs.⁷ In particular, female workers in trade-related sectors are more likely to be formally employed, have an increased job quality and access to social protection benefits.⁸ Formal employment also often facilitates opportunities for female participation in trade unions and collective bargaining processes.⁹

Women's participation in supply chains can lead to many **indirect benefits** such as improved access to education, training and skill development, which can contribute to narrowing the gender wage gap, especially when opportunities arise in higher-value-added roles and activities.¹⁰ More specialized supply chains which are shifting towards advanced manufacturing and services or innovation activities tend to hold opportunities for increased gender equality and female labour force participation.¹¹ Women's participation in supply chains not only has the potential to bring tangible benefits but also to empower them by fostering self-reliance, confidence and independence, broadening their social networks and creating a more equitable balance of power within their families and communities.¹²

¹ ILO Evaluation Office, "ILO decent work interventions in global supply chains – a synthesis review on lessons learned; what works and why, 2010-2019", Geneva, 2019.

² World Bank Group, "Trade has been a powerful driver of economic development and poverty reduction", Brief, February 2023.

³ ILO, "World employment and social outlook 2015: The changing nature of jobs", Geneva 2015.

⁴ Anoush der Boghossian, "Trade and gender: addressing barriers to women's decent work through trade policy", Geneva, November 2023.

⁵ UNIDO, "Sustainable supply chains", [Sustainable supply chains | UNIDO](#), 2023.

Garret D. Brown, "Women Garment Workers Face Huge Inequities in Global Supply Chain Factories Made Worse by COVID-19", *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy*, p. 113-124, No 31 2021.

BSR and ICRW, "Building Effective Women's Economic Empowerment Strategies", Working Paper, January 2016 &

ILO, "Empowering women at work – policies and practices for gender equality in supply chains", Geneva, December 2020.

⁶ ILO, "Trade and decent work: Indicator guide", Geneva, October 2021.

⁷ ILO, "Empowering women at work – policies and practices for gender equality in supply chains", Geneva, December 2020.

⁸ World Bank Group & World Trade Organization, "Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Gender Equality", Washington, DC, 2020.

ILO, "Integrating trade and decent work – Volume 1 – Has trade led to better jobs? Findings based on the ILO's decent work indicators", Geneva, November 2023

⁹ According to ILO Conventions, all workers have the right to organize and engage in collective bargaining.

¹⁰ World Bank Group & World Trade Organization, "Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Gender Equality", Washington, DC, 2020.

Pelin Sekerler Richiardi, Sajid Ghani and Pham Ngoc Toan, "Trade and decent work in Viet Nam: Insights from small and medium-sized enterprises", Geneva, November 2023.

¹¹ World Bank Group & World Trade Organization, "Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Gender Equality", Washington, DC, 2020.

¹² Arianna Rossi & Anne Posthuma, "Women workers during global value chain disruptions", in "Making and Breaking Gender Inequalities in Work." by Rönnmär, Mia (Editor); Hayter, Susan (Editor). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024.

► The role of trade policy in promoting gender equality and non-discrimination

- Trade policy can drive countries to strengthen women's legal rights and encourage policies that promote gender equality and non-discrimination, including improved access to essential resources such as education and technology. Trade policies such as labour provisions in trade agreements are increasingly emphasizing gender equality, particularly through non-discrimination clauses. In some countries with such agreements in place, women have gained greater access to labour markets, and reductions in gender wage gaps have been observed.¹³
- The [ILO Labour Provisions in Trade Agreements Hub](#) offers a comprehensive, structured compilation of the text of labour provisions. There has been a growing number of regional trade agreements which include labour provisions in the past years. In July 2025, 130 (34 per cent) out of 380 RTAs included labour provisions, thereof 91 (24 per cent) referred to the ILO Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and 73 (19 per cent) RTAs specifically to gender-related issues.

Despite these opportunities, **significant decent work deficits for women persist**. Women are largely concentrated in lower-skill level roles or lower managerial positions within organizational hierarchies, with lower wages, fewer opportunities for training and promotion, or in home-based work, lacking occupational safety and health protections.¹⁴ These issues are particularly observed in the lower tiers of supply chains where subcontractors often operate in small or informal enterprises.¹⁵

The ILO's [Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work](#), adopted in 1998 and amended in 2022, affirms the obligations and commitments that are inherent

in membership of the ILO, including as they pertain to the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. However, some countries may not implement national laws that fully uphold the principles outlined in international standards such as the fundamental Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) and the fundamental Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), for example, by prohibiting women from entering a specific occupation.¹⁶ Moreover, systemic factors, such as restrictive legal frameworks as well as cultural and social norms, define women's roles in household, workforce and society as well as access to financial services and rights to property and resources, often hindering women's full participation in the economy.

Such gender roles and stereotypes establish gender segregation already at very early life stages, as they tend to influence the educational and training pathways of girls and boys, as well as the career orientation of young women and men. In the labour market, this division is further exacerbated by (perceived) skill differences, contributing to unequal opportunities and reinforcing the belief that male and female workers have inherently different capabilities. Furthermore, ILO research shows that industries characterized by male-dominated cultures are less likely to be led by female CEOs.¹⁷ In supply chains such as automotive, apparel and footwear as well as the retail or transport sectors, this may reinforce gender-based segregation - horizontally across tasks and occupations and vertically along hierarchies.¹⁸

Unequal representation within trade unions and women's underrepresentation in national social dialogue processes limits their ability to influence labour policies and decision-making.¹⁹ These issues adversely affect women's wages, skill development and career opportunities.²⁰ The prevalence of temporary and seasonal contract types or

¹³ Guillaume Delautre, "Decent work in global supply chains: An internal research review", ILO Research Department Working Paper No 47, October 2019.

¹⁴ ILO, "Integrating trade and decent work – Volume 1 – Has trade led to better jobs? Findings based on the ILO's decent work indicators", Geneva, November 2023; World Bank Group & World Trade Organization, "Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Gender Equality", Washington, DC, 2020;

ILO, "Global Employment Policy Review 2023: Macroeconomic policies for recovery and structural transformation" Geneva, May 2023;

Stephanie Barrientos & Charlotte Pallangyo, "Building back equitably: Spotlight on women workers in global value chains", News, September 2020.

¹⁵ Arianna Rossi & Anne Posthuma, "Women workers during global value chain disruptions", in "Making and Breaking Gender Inequalities in Work." by Rönnmar, Mia (Editor); Hayter, Susan (Editor). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2024.

ILO, "The future of work in retail: Digitalization as an engine for sustainable economic recovery and decent work", Geneva, 2023.

¹⁶ ILO, "A quantum leap for gender equality – for a better future of work for all", Geneva, 2019.

¹⁷ ILO, "The business case for change – Sectorial snapshots", Geneva, 2019.

¹⁸ Marta Fana, Fernanda Bárcia De Mattos, Valeria Esquivel, Guendalina Anzolin, David Kucera & Sheba Tejani, "The effects of automation in the apparel and automotive sectors and their gender dimensions", Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024.

Fernanda Bárcia de Mattos, Gabriela Dutrénit, Valeria Esquivel, Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid, "The effects of automation on employment: Case studies in Mexico's apparel and footwear sectors", Latin American Policy, 2024.

ILO, "The future of work in retail: Digitalization as an engine for sustainable economic recovery and decent work", Geneva, 2023.

¹⁹ ILO, "A quantum leap for gender equality – for a better future of work for all", Geneva, 2019.

²⁰ Better Work, "Understanding impact: Research insights from Better Work 2017-2022", Geneva, November 2022.

informal work combined with a lack of collective organization increases the risk of job displacements for women engaged in supply chains, especially during trade-related disruptions and economic shocks. Additionally, digitalization, technological advancements and automation may pose further obstacles to women's equal participation. This is due to the impact of these changes on working time, work-life balance, and is linked to women's specific organizational roles and skill profiles, particularly through the defeminization of certain jobs and shifts in workforce composition.²¹ The shift from manual to automated operations often reinforces gender divisions, as workers tend to remain in departments defined by specific tasks, creating a path dependency in the division of labour. While technological upgrading and automation can simplify tasks and reduce the need for physical strength, technical roles requiring engineering and programming skills may still favour men due to gender segregation in education and training.²²

Given these challenges, addressing gender disparities and inequalities, particularly where intersecting vulnerabilities or grounds for discrimination exist, is essential for achieving equitable and decent working conditions in supply chains. The ILO's Strategy on Decent Work in Supply Chains emphasizes that "achieving decent work in supply chains requires a commitment to addressing gender disparities and inequalities in supply chains [...] The Office [...] will include analyses of challenges, good practices [...] with particular attention to gender".²³

This brief highlights the targeted actions the ILO is taking to foster gender equality in supply chains. Currently, 48 per cent of ILO's active development cooperation projects in supply chains include a gender marker.²⁴ Most projects are implemented in Africa and Asia-Pacific and focus on key

sectors such as agriculture, food and forestry, textiles, clothing and footwear, and manufacturing.

2. Driving change: An overview of ILO interventions to advance gender equality in supply chains

Advancing gender equality in supply chains requires a multifaceted, comprehensive approach. Key strategies include addressing occupational gender segregation, promoting gender-sensitive career development, and bridging the gender pay gap. Combating gender-based violence and harassment, while applying a gender lens to occupational safety and health risks, challenges and management systems, involves implementing robust policies and ongoing training to ensure inclusive and safe work environments. Supporting equal sharing of care responsibilities, access to care and support services, and enhancing women's access to leadership positions and networks further drive equity and economic opportunities. Together, these efforts contribute to more inclusive and equitable supply chains.

2.1 Ensuring equal opportunities in employment and occupation

To advance equal employment opportunities, it is essential to address occupational gender segregation. This segregation is often rooted in societal and cultural perceptions that frequently confine women to lower-level, non-managerial positions. Biases, prejudices, and stereotypes about their abilities and job suitability, compounded by discriminatory hiring practices and entrenched power structures, further reinforce these barriers. To overcome these challenges and ensure equal employment opportunities, collaboration among employees, managers, companies, employers' and workers' organizations and governments is crucial. Raising awareness and promoting gender-sensitive career

²¹ Sheba Tejani & David Kucera, "Defeminization, structural transformation and technological upgrading in manufacturing", *Development and Change* 52(3): p. 533-372, 2021;

Fernanda Bárcia de Mattos, Gabriela Dutrénit, Valeria Esquivel, Juan Carlos Moreno-Brid, "The effects of automation on employment: Case studies in Mexico's apparel and footwear sectors", *Latin American Policy*, 2024.

ILO, "The future of work in retail: Digitalization as an engine for sustainable economic recovery and decent work", Geneva, 2023.

²² Sheba Tejani & David Kucera, "The effects of automation in the apparel and footwear industries and their gender dimensions: Indonesia case study", EU-ILO Project Background Paper No. 20, 2024.

²³ ILO Governing Body, "Eighth item on the agenda – ILO strategy on decent work in supply chains", Geneva, 2023.

²⁴ As of November 2024, the ILO is implementing 147 development cooperation projects that use supply chains as an entry point to advance decent work. For more information, visit: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/other/ilo-projects-decent-work-supply-chains>.

advancement are essential steps toward achieving equality in the workplace.

Promoting gender equality in the workplace involves a range of strategic [initiatives](#), including female-focused hiring campaigns, discrimination-free recruitment practices, and gender equality declarations. For example, under the SCORE project the Colombian enterprise Alqueria developed “The Grand Declaration of Gender Equality” to achieve bias-free workplace cooperation. Comprehensive training and mentoring for both managers and workers play a crucial role, particularly when targeting roles and positions with an underrepresentation of women. These trainings highlight the structural, social, and cultural barriers that hinder women’s access to employment and career advancement within organizations.

To address regional labour mobility of skilled workers, educational patterns that limit women’s access to the skills necessary for success in the labour market and enhance their employability through future-proof skills, the [FOIL](#) project implemented a range of gender mainstreaming initiatives across Central America. The project launched targeted information campaigns to raise awareness about training opportunities tailored specifically for women, introduced pilot courses aimed at developing women’s skills in technical fields, and embedded gender-mainstreaming strategies within training institutions. In addition, the project addressed dropout rates among female participants and recruited female instructors to serve as role models. To broaden occupational choices and foster employment opportunities in local and regional supply chains, employment managers were further sensitized to occupational imbalances and a regional portal for job placements was created. A similar approach was implemented in Bangladesh, where a [National Strategy on Promoting Gender Equality in Technical and Vocational Education and Training](#) (TVET) was developed. This strategy facilitated the provision of stipends to female students, enabling them to continue their education. Additionally, the creation of female-friendly facilities, supported female participation in TVET, creating a more inclusive and supportive educational environment. These interventions address obstacles in accessing quality employment that women are facing, providing opportunities to access jobs

in supply chains, overcoming the gender gap in workforce participation and contributing to increased productivity by fully harnessing the existing labour force potential and attracting women to trades with higher labour market demands.²⁵ To empower women to succeed in traditionally male-dominated fields such as STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), the ILO’s [Women in STEM Workforce Readiness and Development Programme](#) addresses educational biases, hiring discrimination, and male-dominated workplace cultures. The programme focuses on advancing women’s careers in the automotive, ICT and electrical and electronics industries in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines by providing targeted [skills development](#), facilitating job placements, and fostering peer support and mentorship initiatives. By combining technical training with essential [soft skills](#) development, trainings aim to better prepare women for leadership, managerial, and high-level technical roles.

To promote opportunities for women and foster more equitable workplaces in the garment and footwear industry, the [Better Work Gender Equality and Returns \(GEAR\) programme](#) equips women with essential leadership, managerial, technical, and soft skills, to help break through career barriers and create pathways for their growth and success. Initially developed by the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the ILO’s institutional partner in the Better Work Programme, GEAR operates through a unique partnership that reaches over 100 apparel and footwear brands, representing a major portion of the global textile and apparel market, and is also rolled out by IFC in other sectors.

A core focus of GEAR is fostering a supportive and inclusive workplace culture while raising awareness of gender- and diversity-related challenges. The programme takes a multilevel approach by engaging suppliers across all industry levels and involving both senior management and women employees. This comprehensive strategy addresses power imbalances holistically and drives systemic and cultural change throughout the industry. For example, in Sri Lanka and Madagascar, GEAR had impacted women workers by fostering promotion opportunities and salary increases. In Bangladesh, half of the workers trained by GEAR were promoted to supervisory positions and

²⁵ ILO, “A quantum leap for gender equality – for a better future of work for all”, Geneva, 2019.

significantly (39% of average increase) increased their wages.

To further enhance the impact of the GEAR programme, targeted trainings for women in leadership roles play a crucial role. The three-day Better Work Supervisory Skills Training program²⁶ specifically focuses on equipping women supervisors with the tools they need to excel. This training focuses on interactive learning about their roles and responsibilities, ultimately aiming to enhance business productivity. By emphasizing key elements such as effective communication, relationship-building, and leading by example, the programme enhances workplace dynamics and has resulted in a 22 per cent increase in productivity for production lines supervised by female trainees, an effect that is stronger than the lines supervised by men.²⁷

To further drive progress and recognize women's leadership, award programmes can incentivize and elevate commitments to gender equality, encouraging both men and women to champion these measures. These initiatives are integral to the **Sustaining Competitive and Responsible Enterprises (SCORE)** programme, which targets small and medium enterprises in manufacturing and service supply chains. SCORE's eight-part [Gender Equality Masterclass series](#) and its eight-month [Gender Equality Module](#) focus on inclusive hiring practices and ensuring voice equality. By incorporating gender-related Key Performance Indicators, the programme tracks improvements in working conditions and productivity. Engaging a high number of women trainers not only underscores the importance of gender equality but also provides practical examples of its impact. Additionally, the programme supports women entrepreneurs through tailored services offered in [collaboration with training centres](#). As part of the **WE Empower project**, the SCORE Gender Equality Module was further adapted to measure businesses' capacity to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment through the [WE-TEST](#).

To identify and develop sectors where working conditions for women can be improved and access for women employees fostered, the ILO has developed a [gender-responsive sectoral policy tool \(GENSEC\)](#) as well as a [guide](#)

[to gender-sensitive value chain development](#). The **WE Empower project** offers recommendations and shares best practices with multinational enterprises on adopting gender-responsive supply chain management practices.

Raising awareness throughout the supply chain is also essential. Expanding advisory support to sectoral institutions, organizations, and upstream buyers on integrating gender, diversity, and inclusion into their policies and human rights due diligence is recommended. In Uganda, the [CLEAR Supply Chains](#) project is improving women's leadership in coffee supply chains through a Women's Leadership Development Programme (WLDP). The programme targets women coffee farmers who are members of cooperatives and farmer organizations. Similarly, the [Sustainable supply chains to build forward better](#) and the [Supply Chains for a sustainable future of work](#) supported the inclusion of gender-specific targets and policies within the Colombian coffee sector, including as part of the [Sectoral Agreement on the Coffee Sector Competitiveness in the Coffee Sector in the Huila Department](#) and the [Pact to harvest decent work](#).

Collaborating with cooperatives and associations also plays a vital role in supporting women in asserting their position, as shown by the [CLEAR](#) Cotton project in Mali.

To address, prevent, and monitor gender-based inequalities in the workplace, the ILO supported labour inspectors in Costa Rica in identifying gender-related legal violations and ensuring the effective implementation of gender equality legislation.²⁸ Targeted gender-sensitive support is essential, as meaningful progress to achieve gender equality in supply chains requires a dedicated understanding of sector-specific decent work challenges. For example, the African Regional Sectoral Meeting on Women in Mining in 2023 highlighted the importance of tailored strategies to improve sectoral integration of women. Similarly, in Ghana, the **SCORE** project has contributed to shaping the gender component of the national SME policy, ensuring that gender considerations are integrated into effective policymaking. This effort supports the creation of more inclusive policies that address the unique challenges and opportunities women face.

The [Mainstreaming Employment into Trade and Investment in the Southern Mediterranean \(METI\)](#)

²⁶ The Supervisory Skills Training was integrated into GEAR, but is also run in non-GEAR countries as a standalone.

²⁷ Laura Babbitt. « [Supervisory Skills Training impact evaluation](#) ». Better Work Discussion Paper no.22. Geneva, 2016.

²⁸ ILO, « [A quantum leap for gender equality – for a better future of work for all](#) », Geneva, 2019.

[project](#) leverages trade liberalization and intensification to promote women's economic empowerment, increase women's labour force participation rates, challenge gender-based job stereotypes, and promote equal pay for work of equal value. METI provides gender-disaggregated analyses and is implemented in the food sector in Egypt, agriculture in Tunisia, the garment industry in Morocco, and the engineering sector in Jordan. These analyses play a key role in raising awareness and challenging perceptions about women's roles in the workforce. The METI phase II (2025-2028) will implement concrete actions to further advance equal opportunities for women and men in tradeable sectors and share more equally the gains of trade liberalisation and intensification.

2.2 Closing the gender pay gap

The principle of equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value, as stipulated in the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (C100), aims to ensure fairness in remuneration (or pay) and eliminate discrimination based on sex. Yet, the reality of a gendered division of labour frequently leads to significant income inequalities between men and women. According to ILO data, the gender pay gap remains persistently at around 20 per cent, due to a combination of structural barriers and discriminatory practices. However, evidence shows that trade openness is one critical factor contributing to reducing the gender wage gap among unskilled workers.²⁹ The ILO has published [several guides](#) to promote equal pay and co-leads the [Equal Pay International Coalition](#).

The ILO's **SCORE** [Equal pay module](#) highlights how fairness, consistency and equality in pay can be advanced. A Colombian dairy and food processing [company](#) used gender-disaggregated wage and occupational analysis to create an objective basis for discussions on the gender pay gap.

To drive further progress in closing the gender pay gap, initiatives such as gender-sensitive production incentives, attendance bonuses, a strengthened wage structure for different positions and levels of seniority, as well as social dialogue, including collective bargaining, are essential.

2.3 Stopping gender-based violence and harassment and discrimination

Ending violence and harassment in the world of work is essential for fostering a safe and equitable environment for all workers. The ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) is the first international treaty that affirms the right to a work environment free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH). To date, 49 governments have ratified this convention.³⁰ Despite these advancements, gender-based violence and harassment remains a significant barrier to achieving gender equality in supply chains. For example, in the transport or mining sectors, the occurrence of violence and harassment limits women to enter and remain in the labour market.³¹ It undermines women's health, well-being, productivity, and career progression, making it crucial to address these issues to enhance women's participation and success in supply chains.³²

According to the Vision Zero [Fund](#), simple mechanisms such as making the transport to night shifts safer by providing organized transportation, for example in buses to and from workplaces, can mitigate exposure to GBVH. However, comprehensive bus routes need to be planned to allow an easy and safe access for all workers from their homes, and mechanisms put in place to increase awareness of GBVH on the organized transportation.

Programs demonstrate that reducing gender-based violence and harassment requires more than just policies. It demands ongoing capacity-building, training, and awareness-raising about sexual harassment, adequate mechanisms for effective prevention through both risk identification and management and reporting and grievance handling as well as policies to promote equality of opportunity and treatment. [Better Work](#) shows that effectively addressing and reporting gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, also involves fostering a workplace culture of trust and confidentiality, particularly related to grievance mechanisms, supported by clear and consistent penalties for misconduct. The programme has also piloted innovative "body swapping"

²⁹ Sarra Ben Yahmed, "Gender Wage Gaps across Skills and Trade Openness," AMSE Working Papers 1232, 2012.

³⁰ The [C190 Guide](#) provides further information on the instrument's definition and scope as well as measures and best practices. Specifically for employers, this [guide](#) provides practical guidance to address, prevent and respond to GBVH. The [ILO Helpdesk](#) provides questions and answers as well as tools and resources on non-discrimination and equality.

³¹ ILO, [Women in mining: Towards gender equality](#), Geneva, 2021.

David Seligson, [Women and aviation: Quality jobs, attraction and retention](#), ILO Working Paper 117, Geneva, 2024.

³² ILO, ["Empowering women at work – policies and practices for gender equality in supply chains"](#), Geneva, December 2020.

virtual reality training that allows trainees to interact with workplace situations constituting harassment.³³

Efforts to combat GBVH should extend beyond individual enterprise-level initiatives and include employers' and workers' organizations, labour inspectorates at a sectoral level as well as government agencies. For example, the Strengthening Industrial Relations in Indonesia Project (SIRI) developed phone applications to assist union management in addressing workplace grievances and specifically providing administrative support for handling sensitive issues such as sexual harassment. Additionally, union members were trained on effectively handling sexual harassment cases which enhanced their capacity to address GBVH and provide support to victims.

Misaligned pay structures may exacerbate the risk of violence and harassment. Often, in labour intensive production lines, line supervisors' pay is linked to production bonuses, while workers receive fixed salaries. This structure may lead particularly during peak production times to higher stress and an increased likelihood of supervisors (verbally) abusing their power and (sexually) harassing workers. **Better Factories Cambodia** have successfully aligned pay incentives between workers and supervisors and promoted wage compliance, bridging the gender wage gap and leading to reductions in sexual harassment. These improvements are particularly significant for women with children and those with lower levels of formal education, though women with higher qualifications may still face challenges in receiving appropriate wage premiums.³⁴

Organizational culture is essential to foster a non-discriminatory working environment. The **Resilient, Inclusive and Sustainable Supply Chains** (RISSC) project in Asia's automotive, electronics and aquaculture sectors highlights [experience-sharing sessions](#) with female managers to foster mutual respect and appreciation. It also includes [training on responsible business conduct](#), showcasing good practices in workplace equality, non-discriminatory practices and inclusivity. To advance inclusive hiring practices, a Colombian [dairy and food](#)

[processing](#) company successfully balanced the gender distribution in specific job positions, traditionally filled by men.

2.4 Addressing occupational health and safety (OSH) challenges

A lack of gender-sensitive working environments and adequate welfare facilities, such as women's toilets, cloak or changing rooms and sanitary or resting facilities, can significantly hinder women from entering and remaining in specific sectors, such as transport, construction, engineering or mining.³⁵ Moreover, the lack of or inappropriately equipped sanitary facilities further impedes equal female participation and perpetuates occupational segregation and potentially violence and harassment in the workplace.

To address these challenges, the [Vision Zero Fund](#) developed guidance for applying a [gender lens](#) when implementing the ILO ["Occupational Safety and Health in Global Value Chains Starter Kit"](#).

Often tools and equipment are designed around a male body. This can increase the risk of workplace injuries for women and potentially impact their performance due to improper fit. Given the [gender-specific patterns of occupational health and safety, including gender-based violence and harassment, risks](#) that women face in the workplace it is essential to include targeted OSH information and gender specific examples in enterprise and institutional policies and training. Enterprises can be additionally incentivized if buying companies in supply chains [include gender-equality information](#) in the revision of certification schemes.

2.5 Promoting an equal sharing of care responsibilities

The gendered-distribution of unpaid care work significantly affects women's participation and retention in the labour force. While public investment in essential social and physical infrastructure is necessary to increase women's productive potential and their involvement in supply

³³ Kelly Pike and Tinu Koithara Mathew, ["Reflecting reality – an evaluation of the sexual harassment virtual reality pilot training in Indonesia"](#), ILO-IFC Better Work Discussion Paper no. 51, 2023.

³⁴ Laura Babbitt, Drusilla Brown and Ana Antolin, ["Sexual Harassment: Causes and Remediation Evidence from Better Factories Cambodia"](#), Better Work Discussion Paper no.38. Geneva: 2020.

³⁵ David Seligson, [Women and aviation: Quality jobs, attraction and retention](#), ILO Working Paper 117, Geneva, 2024.

chains, companies also have a vital role to play. By taking proactive measures, businesses can not only enhance their reputations but also set important industry standards. Moreover, a survey of over 12,000 enterprises active in the manufacturing, sales or construction sectors shows that around 60 per cent state that gender diversity measures contribute to improved business outcomes, increased profit and productivity.³⁶

Creating a supportive environment, through provisions such as maternity, paternity and parental leave, breastfeeding policies, medical benefits or childcare services, benefits women's well-being, productivity, and job retention. As [highlighted](#) by the **Better Work** project, such programmes not only support women to remain in the workforce and avoid absenteeism but also empower them on a personal level. Encouraging and incentivizing men to take parental leave and share caregiving responsibility more equitably is another key strategy to promote equality of opportunity and treatment. Such initiatives can free up time for women, for example enabling them to engage more actively in workers' organizations and councils, trade unions, or sectoral coordination bodies where they can effectively voice their needs, thereby fostering leadership in the workplace.³⁷

2.6 Gender equality in representation

Freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining are critical to increasing gender equality in supply chains.³⁸ However, regularly female employees face discrimination and harassment when they engage in union-related activities.³⁹ This is frequently a deterrent to consider joining a union, exacerbated by often unequal trade union structures.⁴⁰ Targeted interventions can support elevating women's voices in social dialogue processes. For example, the **Strengthening Industrial Relations in Indonesia Project (SIRI)** [encourages women to take on leadership roles](#) in trade unions, promote gender-inclusive policies and practices and advocate for the respect of labour rights. The project offers soft skill training in self-confidence, communication and leadership skills, along with in-depth education on gender inequality and discrimination issues.

In simulations, women analysed their communication patterns to improve their meeting management and decision-making styles. Moreover, participatory gender audit (PGA) workshops using ILO-ITC modules were conducted to assess organizations gender-related policies, practices, and attitudes and combat discriminatory practices, support women's needs and strengthen their voices, particularly regarding breastfeeding rights, maternity leave, working hours or workload.

In [Indonesia's palm oil sector](#), social dialogue was instrumental in improving the protection of women workers' rights. This was achieved through the drafting and signing of Collective Bargaining agreements between enterprises and trade unions. In this bipartite setting employers and workers played a crucial role to cover topics such as maternity leave, protection against discrimination and gender-based violence at the workplace. At sectoral level, to further raise awareness of gender equality, a [joint declaration](#) between employers' and workers' organizations was signed highlighting the importance of stakeholders' commitment to improve the representation of women workers not only at the enterprise level but also in the national industry. Moreover, to provide access to information about their rights for women from rural areas, with less education or in nonstandard forms of employment, a [practice guide](#) on women workers' rights and their protections which also shares best practices of palm oil companies was launched.

To further examine challenges related to women's representation in enterprises and Employer and Business Membership organisations as well as promoting diversity and inclusion, achieving equal pay for work of equal value and addressing violence and harassment at work, the **Women in Business and Management (WIBM) initiative** highlights how enterprises can benefit from gender equality in decision making positions through data collection of enterprises.

To ensure that women were represented in and can actively influence decision-making and production processes, the [Sustainable supply chains to build forward better](#) and the [Supply Chains for a sustainable future of work](#)

³⁶ ILO, "The business case for change", Geneva, 2019.

³⁷ The ILO report [Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave Policies and Care Services for a More Gender-Equal World of Work](#) provides a global overview of national laws and practices regarding care policies.

³⁸ Global Deal, "The contribution of social dialogue to gender equality", Geneva, 2020.

³⁹ Sheba Tejani, "The Gender Dimension of Special Economic Zones", In Special Economic Zones: Progress, Emerging challenges, and future directions., Washington, DC, 2011.

⁴⁰ ILO, "Empowering women at work – trade union policies and practices for gender equality", Geneva, December 2020.

projects provided training for women leaders to increase their capacity to participate in governance structures and promoted their participation in dialogue platforms on coffee, including in the [regional committee on coffee supply chains in the Huila Provinces](#) in Bogota. The projects also promoted cultural change by addressing traditional gender roles and fostering the inclusion of women in leadership roles.

The ILO's **Women's Entrepreneurship Development Programme** delivers targeted support on advocacy and representation to women's entrepreneurship associations (WEA) utilizing resources designed to amplify the voices of women entrepreneurs. The programme also strengthens regional and international networks between WEAs and fosters connections with other actors, including employers' organizations, to advance shared interests like improving access to finance and shaping policy.

2.7 Facilitating access to networks

Supporting women entrepreneurs expanding to international markets involves addressing barriers such as limited access to information, networks, and capital. Several innovative programs and projects have emerged to tackle these challenges, enhancing economic opportunities for women and expanding their market opportunities. For example, to address barriers that women often face when seeking financial support, the [Empowering women for resilient economies and peaceful communities in the refugee-affected regions of East and Adamawa in Cameroon](#) project introduced a transformative initiative focused on positive masculinity. By focusing on reinforcing gender-equitable behaviour among male community leaders, women's economic inclusion and empowerment, particularly regarding access to land and credit, were promoted. In addition, the project enhanced women's access to finance through village savings and loan groups and a partnership with a microfinance institution. In Malaysia, the ILO partnered with the Ministry of Entrepreneur Development and Cooperatives to organize a webinar series to equip women entrepreneurs with essential knowledge about financial services, helping them navigate opportunities for business growth. Through these efforts, the project not only empowered women

economically but also worked towards fostering a more inclusive and supportive financial ecosystem.

Agricultural supply chains are often shaped by a gendered division of labour defining women's roles, particularly in production. To support women moving from subsistence agriculture to profitable farming and overcome gender dynamics, the [SSTC project](#) offers targeted market information, business development opportunities, and sessions on the benefits of joining women entrepreneurs' associations. In [Colombia](#), women in the coffee sector formed their own associations to improve market access for their products and grow their business.⁴¹

Equipping women entrepreneurs with insights into emerging and existing market opportunities was an essential objective of the [Rebuilding Better Project: Fostering Business Resilience Post Covid-19](#) in Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. A virtual networking event for ASEAN-based women entrepreneurs provided a dynamic platform for forging business connections and exchanging practical advice on scaling their enterprises and finding international suppliers. Such events are invaluable for identifying new suppliers and customers, co-marketing brands, and expanding across borders, opening up more avenues for women entrepreneurs to thrive in the ASEAN market.

To improve sales, turnover, profits, and more inclusive management practices, the [gender-sensitive entrepreneurship training programme](#) (GET Ahead) supports female entrepreneurs by offering business management and soft skills training with a focus on gender dynamics and one-on-one coaching support.

Where connectivity is available, virtual marketplaces offer opportunities to break and overcome market entry barriers for women. The **Way out of Informality and Towards Sustainable Global Supply Chains in South Asia** projects successfully expanded market access for female Nepalese entrepreneurs by launching the [WinBiz](#) e-commerce platform, connecting them to broader markets and also business opportunities via the [Business Development Centre](#). In a similar vein, the [Win-Win: Gender equality means good business](#) project in Latin America has strengthened women-led businesses' export capabilities

⁴¹ ILO, "Challenges and opportunities to advance decent work in five countries and supply chains: A synthesis report", Geneva, June 2023.

through the creation of the inter-continental EU-LAC network, enhancing cross-border collaboration and knowledge-sharing. The project also launched the [Investors for Equality initiative](#) to promote and mobilize gender-sensitive investments. Meanwhile, in Tunisia, the **Supporting Women's Entrepreneurship Development in Rural Tunisia** (AFERE) project established distribution channels for women entrepreneurs and facilitated their participation in available larger-scale distribution channels.

Investment promotion agencies across regions provide advice to facilitate investors' efforts to learn about national law and practice, including gender equality and gender pay equity. However, they indicated that they lack the tools and resources to collect data sufficient to track progress and strengthen gender policies. For other business support organizations and financial institutions, the [Women's Entrepreneurship Self-Check \(WE-Check\)](#) tool provides a self-assessment to enhance gender-sensitive service and support provision to foster business growth potential.

A dedicated focus on [gender-responsive procurement](#), specifically supports women-owned or led companies.⁴² By procuring from women suppliers and distributors and by supporting contractors to promote gender equality in the workplace, marketplace and community; governments, enterprises and organizations further foster gender equality.

Conclusion

Women's participation in supply chains can enhance their empowerment and promote greater gender equality. However, to fully realize these benefits, it is critical to address persistent barriers such as discriminatory practices, occupational gender segregation, limited opportunities for career advancement and gender-based violence and harassment. Promoting an equal sharing of care responsibilities and access to quality, affordable care services, enhancing gender representation, and facilitating

women's access to networks and markets are also essential. In addition to the strategies outlined above, the implementation of regular gender-disaggregated data collection and analyses at all stages of supply chains is essential for identifying and monitoring inequalities. These analyses not only enhance transparency but also serve as a foundation for informing the implementation of fair compensation practices and equitable training and promotion opportunities.

The ILO plays a crucial role in this process by advocating for the ratification and effective implementation of international labour standards, and by supporting constituents through technical advice, assistance and tools to ensure gender equality and non-discrimination across all stages of supply chains.

By fostering strategic partnerships and through comprehensive, multifaceted strategies that engage a wide range of stakeholders, including international buyers, manufacturers and other multilateral agencies, systemic barriers can be dismantled, and more inclusive, equitable supply chains be built.

International Labour Organization
Route des Morillons 4
CH-1211 Geneva 22
Switzerland

T: +41 22 799 7239
E: supplychains@ilo.org

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54394/GEFK1936>

⁴² ILO, Women in mining: [Towards gender equality](#), Geneva, 2021.