

A Knowledge Sharing Forum on Women, Work and Migration

7 – 9 April 2018

Colombo, Sri Lanka

The International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW-IS) is convening a knowledge sharing forum on Women, Work and Migration on 7-9 April, 2018 in Colombo, Sri Lanka. The Forum, as part of a DFID/ILO implemented programme entitled Work in Freedom, is planned as a structured conversation between organised women's workers groups and academics and activists focusing on women's rights, especially women's rights to work and mobility. The regions in focus are selected countries of South Asia and the Middle East that are the focus of the programme.

Rationale of the Forum

Women make up 49.4 percent of the global paid labour force; in South Asia, their participation is at 28.6 percent of the regional paid labour force (ILO 2017). When it comes to labour migration, women are represented more equitably yet their labour participation remains highly gendered. Women workers are concentrated in unpaid, underpaid, and informal sectors such as agriculture, textiles, hospitality, street vending and care work (including domestic work)¹. In addition to the traditional gendered stereotypes surrounding women's employment, the barriers to women's economic empowerment are further affected by other intersecting forms of class, caste and racial discrimination. In some sectors such as domestic work, garment work, and sex work, the majority of workers are not only women, but also migrants, indigenous, Dalit, or minority groups who face additional and often significant social, economic and political barriers, both in their home communities and in the communities where they seek work. These multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination can be exacerbated during economic, natural and humanitarian crises (including conflict and post-conflict situations), refugee and internal displacement settings.²

As women's lives as workers often shift back and forth from unpaid to paid work, across regions and sectors, their occupational trajectories are punctuated not by a linear progression of better income options, but rather by a succession of insecure, precarious jobs, where their capacity to negotiate constitutes the lifeline of survival. The combination of engendered and social stereotypes act as an effective means of disciplining women's labour and maintaining low wages and the over-representation of women in precarious employment is often reflective of the subordinate positions that women tend to occupy (Verick, 2014).

Factors determining demand and supply for women's work

Demand for women's work varies across sectors. For example, demand for care work is determined by factors that vary from increasing urban aging populations, to urban women's increasing participation in the paid labour force³, and decreasing public investment in health and education that would otherwise have enabled the employment of nurses, child care workers, or hospice care workers. Demand for garment and textile workers similarly depends on labour regimes combining low wages with labour disciplining capacity, access to buyer's markets and other infrastructure, trade and fiscal incentives (Mezzadri, 2015).

Labour supply is fueled by a combination of varying factors including peaking demographic dividends, expenditure cuts resulting in paucity of livelihood options (Ortiz, Cummins, Capaldo, & Karunanethy, 2015) gender and socio-cultural attitudes (Tzvetkova and Oztiz-Ospina 2017), the transformation of local economies from subsistence agricultures towards globalized extractive supply chains, dispossession or loss of habitat

¹While women in South Asia seeking paid work have traditionally been employed mostly in agriculture work (ILO, 2016), in both South Asia and Arab States, emerging sectors of paid work include the care sector (Tayah, 2016), the garment and textiles sector (Habib, 2014), and the hospitality sector.

² See paragraph 11 of the Agreed Conclusions, 61st Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, available at <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/61/csw-conclusions-61-web.pdf?la=en&vs=5452>

³ With noteworthy variations: while in most countries female labour force participation in paid jobs is increasing, it is also decreasing in some countries of South Asia.

(Sassen, 2014), and in resource-rich areas: conflict and violence⁴. Distress migration is an important characteristic of labour supply to precarious occupations as it allows poverty wages to appear acceptable.

Commonalities in women's employment: undervaluation, non-recognition and violence in the world of work

There are several factors that are common to women's working and living conditions such as the non-recognition of their work which in turn can curtail their access to formal labour-related entitlements, excess work-time combining both paid and unpaid work expectations, gender-specific mobility restrictions, and gender-based violence (also referred to as violence against women) both in their private lives and also in the world of work.

The non-recognition of women's work can take many forms: it can include occupations not covered by the labour laws of many countries (such as domestic work or sex work), but it is also related to a general undervaluation of work including underpaid work, gender pay gaps (ILO, 2016), payments below minimum wage levels, or the withholding of wages. *Excess work time* combining paid and unpaid work occurs across socio-economic income categories and across occupations: women who are in a paid employment work longer hours (ILO, 2016), and are also expected to fulfil unpaid household work responsibilities. *Mobility restrictions* occur through a variety of mechanisms including migration bans on women, segregation in living spaces such as dormitories for manufacturing workers or households for domestic workers, combined with confiscation of passports (e.g. sponsorship system).

Gender-based violence (GBV) is "violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or [violence] that affects women disproportionately".⁵ It has been estimated that one in every three women over the age of 15 (i.e. 35%) has experienced sexual or physical violence at home, in their communities or at the workplace.⁶ The International Trade Union Confederation (2016) has identified numerous forms of GBV that women workers are vulnerable to, including physical abuse, sexual violence and harassment, verbal and sexist abuse, bullying, coercion, psychological abuse, economic and financial abuse, and stalking. The risk of exposure to violence is greater in occupations where work is informal, precarious, or low compensated, where work is segregated by gender, where workers are prevented from joining or forming trade unions and where employer accountability is low.⁷

Target 5.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals requires States to "eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation".⁸ Since 2017, efforts are being made to introduce a new ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment Against Women and Men in the World of Work.

Fragmented and isolated workforce, and opportunities for women workers' solidarity

The fragile and fractured world of work described above limits the potential for inter-occupational solidarity and action among women to overcome these social and institutional challenges. Women's share in the unionised workforce is lower than men's. Awareness of common issues among women tends to be limited, in rural areas to official midwives and social outreach workers, and in urban areas to women in trade unions or worker facilitation centres.

⁴As recognized by UN SC resolution 1035, conflict and violence further widens gender divides.

⁵This is the definition of GBV provided by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW Committee) in its [General Recommendation no. 19](#). The Committee also noted that the underlying consequences of these forms of gender-based violence help to maintain women in subordinate roles and contribute to the low level of political participation and to their lower level of education, skills and work opportunities.

⁶WHO, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, South African Medical Research Council (2013), Global and regional estimates of violence against women: prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence, WHO http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf?ua=1

⁷Ibid.

⁸See Goal 5 of the SDGs on gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030-goal5.html>

Yet, there are also several opportunities to overcome such challenges. Social capital can be strengthened between women worker organisations across common occupational and migration pathways between rural and urban areas, across dominant and strategic sectors of employment, and by leveraging the support of solidarity networks fighting different forms of violence, discrimination and exclusion. Platforms and spaces of intersectionality enable women workers to share experiences, develop mechanisms of solidarity and identify and advocate for common positions.

With growing international conflict and economic stagnation, there is a risk of women's working conditions worsening across occupational sectors. There is therefore an acute need to understand and reflect on such trends, identify actors of change and share experience on how to overcome them through strategic coordinated action.

The Forum

The forum then is primarily an attempt to understand the reality of women's experiences in the world of work through a conversation between women workers groups and other activists and academics in related social justice movements. It is also an effort to deliberate about the impact that changing livelihoods and working conditions have on women's working lives, and how to build solidarity in the face of widespread global instability and uncertainty.

Objectives:

1. Take stock of current trends for women workers across the region, learn the impact of policy responses on the lived realities of women workers, and to understand the impact these responses have on labour conditions, trafficking and modern slavery
2. Learn from the strategies utilised by women workers' movements from different sectors to protect labour rights, and reduce risks of labour exploitation and workplace violence
3. Provide an opportunity to share experiences from participating groups in the Work in Freedom programme, in strengthening solidarity and advocacy among women workers' organisations, women migrants' rights, women's rights and other key advocacy groups
4. Producing a statement to be shared at upcoming sessions of the [International Labour Conference](#) which will include discussions on ILO's initiative on a Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work

Forum Format and Discussion Themes

The Forum is a three-day meeting comprising of panel discussions, active group work and interactive, participant-led sessions. Discussions will be centred around the following themes.

The big picture and us

Theme 1: The big picture: trends and policy frameworks affecting women in the world of work

1. Existing and emerging policy trends affecting women's employment in South Asia
2. International and State policy developments on labour, agriculture and development and the macro-level implications for women workers, including those migrating for work

Theme 2: Breaking-down the big picture: the impact of international, regional and national policy decisions on women's daily experiences

1. The impact of economic uncertainty, migration and development policies on women's livelihoods: learning, sharing and standing up

Intersecting identities: Women, Workers, Migrants

Theme 1: We are Workers (women and migration in the world of work)

1. International and domestic frameworks on decent work, violence against women at home and at work
2. International and domestic frameworks on safe and fair migration

Theme 2: We are Women (defending the rights of ALL women in the world of work)

1. Stories of resilience and struggles by women workers' movements engaged in domestic work, garment & textile, sex work, construction, informal economy and care economy
2. Identifying common pathways of women's occupational mobility

Organising, Mobilising and Advocacy

Theme 1: Making the case for collective organising and mobilising

1. The strategic role of organising, mobilising and networking: services of solidarity
2. Successful collective action against violence against women in homes and workplaces

Theme 2: Strategies for building cross-occupational solidarity, advocacy and networking

1. Examples of advocacy efforts to raise the value of women's work, overcoming discrimination
2. Identifying suitable strategies to advocate for women's inter-occupational solidarity including the use of new technologies and social media

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