

Sustainable garment value chains

Worldwide, millions of workers, communities and businesses are involved directly and indirectly in garment value chains. A garment product typically passes through the hands of dozens of stakeholders across different continents before reaching the final consumer.

As a major contributor to the economy in many countries, garment value chains can support growth, jobs and competitiveness globally. Ensuring that economic growth and development go hand in hand with social justice, decent work and environmental protection in the complex and fragmented production networks of garment value chains is a key objective, in line with the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The European Union is committed to supporting a new sustainable development agenda through its development coopera-

tion that will deliver lasting changes and take us closer to the aim of ensuring a decent life for all. In this respect, it is active in the promotion of sustainable garment value chains ([watch the video here](#)) at bilateral, regional and global levels.



The EU's response towards more sustainable garment value chains in the field of development policy is outlined in the Staff Working Document "[Sustainable garment value chains through EU development action](#)".

The focus is on three thematic priorities:

- Economic empowerment of women,
- ➔ Decent work and living wages,
- 🔍 Transparency and traceability.



Promoting decent work for all

The garment industry has great potential to contribute to economic and social development. The European Union (EU) promotes more inclusive value chains to support decent work and living wages for all.

Garment value chains are one of the biggest employers worldwide, with 150 million people's lives touched by the global apparel industry.

Unfortunately, in many garment producing countries, workers are exposed to poor working conditions and violations of labour rights, incidents including health and safety issues, low pay and a lack of access to growth benefits and potential.

Despite increasing engagement from many stakeholders, such as global brands, to support labour rights and decent work, more can be done, including to foster ratification and effective implementation of conventions in garment producing countries.

Decent work and living wages

Fostering improvements on workers' conditions can have major repercussions at factory level.

Local social partners often have limited capacities and can sometimes be insufficiently organised or side-lined.

In order to make effective progress in this area, a wide range of actors need to be involved: from public authorities to trade unions, buyers and suppliers including local businesses, and the international community.

“ 1 in 6 people on the planet works in the global fashion supply chains ”

➤ The EU is committed to promoting decent work in garment value chains, by focusing on rights at work including freedom of association and rights to organise, child labour, health and safety at work, living wages, and the right to social and legal protection, especially for the most disadvantaged workers.

Educating garment workers through digital tools and Sunday Cafés in Myanmar

Every day, hundreds of young women in Myanmar make the difficult decision to move from their villages to the capital Yangon. With over 500 garment factories, finding a job in the apparel industry is often the only possibility for them to earn money and become economically independent.

Many women in the industry know little about their rights and fall into a circle of exploitation and debt. SMART Myanmar works with businesses to improve workplace safety, communications and environmental management as well as with garment workers, to empower them to lead better lives. The project provides female workers with a safe place where they can relax and get informed about their rights. Every Sunday, they come together at the “Sunday Café” to discuss the different factories’ wages, workers’ rights and health and safety issues. Visiting lawyers also provide legal support to resolve conflicts at work or at home.

SMART Myanmar successfully uses digital tools to educate female workers about labour laws and standards. The “Shwe Job” app (“golden work” in Burmese) presents important rights and duties in an understandable format and language. The “Sat Yone Superstar” app tests workers on their knowledge via interactive games and quizzes. The apps are so successful amongst garment workers that they will be replicated in other countries, to give more women a chance for better and safer working conditions.

“ I moved to Yangon in 2014 because it was hard to make a living in my village. I got a job in a garment factory working as a trainee on the sewing line. I would work 6 days a week and only get 2 days per year for sick leave. One day, a friend showed me a flyer for the Sunday Café. They introduced me to the “Shwe Job” app, which has tips about workers’ rights, health and safety in the workplace as well as a wage calculator. I gained so much courage and confidence. Ma Wai Lwin, Garment Factory worker in Yangon.

SMART Myanmar is a four-year project (2016-2019) funded by the EU, under the SWITCH Asia instrument. It is implemented by a consortium led by Sequa gGmbH. [watch a video about Ma Wai's story here](#)





Empowering women with a collective voice in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, over 4.5 million workers are employed in the garment sector, 85-90 percent of whom are women. The "Oikko" project (Bengali for "unity") contributed to the realisation of fundamental rights of female workers in the Bangladesh ready-made-garment industry.

Many female workers do not know about their rights. The Oikko project supported 3,000 female workers to take part in solidarity groups, where they were trained in labour law, human rights and gender equality. This enabled them to claim their rights in an active and independent way, in view of solving day-to-day issues such as ensuring that workers receive pay on time or preventing unfair dismissals.

Only 2 percent of female garment workers in Bangladesh are members of a labour union. Often, they are afraid of being laid off to stand up for their rights – or they don't know that unions exist. The Oikko project helped unions promote membership and trained union members to provide workers with information on their rights and about how to make them heard.

Oikko conducted advocacy events, both in Dhaka and Brussels, to engage with civil society and promote the implementation of labour laws, a decent minimum wage and better working and living conditions for garment workers.

"I am a garment worker. Many workers have problems getting their salaries – if they are late or absent for a day, they are counted as absent for three days and take wage penalties. I have seen women getting fired and not receiving wages owed to them. I have started to collect anyone this has happened to. Because we came together as a group, we can pressure the factory owners to give us what we deserve. Workers can collect their salary, calculate their overtime and are absent from work less often. We can teach these people and give them more confidence." Rasheda Begum, garment worker in Dhaka.

Oikko was jointly funded by the EU and Austrian Development Cooperation and implemented by CARE Austria from 2015 to 2018. [watch videos about Rasheda's story and the Oikko project here](#)



Focusing on women's economic empowerment

Gender equality and women's economic empowerment are a priority in EU development policy. Reducing gender inequality can contribute to raising the productive potential of millions of people and is widely recognised as essential for human and economic progress.



75% of garment workers are women

When applied to garment value chains, where approximately 75% of global garment workers are women, the impact on women's economic empowerment is undeniable. Increased sustainability in the garment sector will disproportionately benefit women.

Financing capacity building

Little attention is given to improving the quality of women's employment in the garment sector. As an example, only a very small proportion of women develop professionally to reach supervisory or management roles. Some efforts through development-funded programmes have actively facilitated training of women workers to reach higher positions in garment factories.



The EU focuses on improving the working conditions and addressing barriers and challenges faced by women in garment value chains. In the long term, this support will contribute to realizing the transformative potential of garment work and female entrepreneurship.

Promoting ethically manufactured slow fashion

Faso danfani, which translates to “woven cloth of the homeland”, is a Burkinabé textile with a long-standing tradition. Joséphine Nikiema has been weaving and dying *faso danfani* for decades, in the shade under the tree outside her house. Until a few years ago, she was not able to provide for herself and her three children with the income she generated.

A large majority of female workers in Burkina Faso are informal micro-entrepreneurs like Joséphine. With the help of the EU, the Ethical Fashion Initiative (EFI) works to connect them with the global garment value chains. Women like Joséphine are provided with knowledge and skills, including on health and safety at work, and receive support to come together within formal cooperatives and associations. Most importantly, they are provided with access to market. This enables global brands to design, produce and sell ethically manufactured slow fashion goods, handmade by artisan communities.

“It used to be difficult, but it's all good now. I earn enough money for my kids' school, health and food. I'm a widow, so really the man and the woman of the household. Thanks to work, things have really improved, Joséphine explains.

Top fashion brands partner with the Ethical Fashion Initiative to manufacture responsible fashion goods. Partners of the EFI include Camper, Stella McCartney, Karen Walker and Vivienne Westwood.

The EFI is a flagship programme of the International Trade Centre, a joint agency of the UN and the WTO, supported by the EU (Emergency Trust Fund for Africa) through a four-year project (2017-2021) in Burkina Faso and Mali.



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The EU promotes increased transparency and traceability as an essential step towards improved due diligence throughout global garment value chains, in view of monitoring and addressing better the social and environmental risks. [watch video](#) [“Tracing a T-Shirt”](#) and [read study here](#)



Enhancing transparency and traceability

The garment value chain is one of the most complex production models. Globalised production processes have become increasingly fragmented in complex supply chains, with a multiplicity of actors, high prevalence of subcontracting and undeclared informal work. This calls for enhanced transparency and traceability.

Key steps in garment production



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Increased transparency and traceability of products throughout the supply chain will generate new opportunities for better monitoring and addressing social and environmental risks.

Development cooperation can act as a facilitator, by supporting partnerships between the industry and others (e.g. civil society and international organisations). It can also help achieve progress with key actors in producing countries (e.g. suppliers and governments), to monitor the conditions of production.

Tracing and tracking products throughout the supply chain is an essential step towards improved due diligence. It can make companies accountable for garment workers' rights, bring attention and contribute to sustainable production and consumption and thus to a circular economy.

Reaching out to consumers

Consumers play a forceful role in promoting efforts for improved labour / environmental standards and product safety. The EU is supporting non-state actors such as Fashion Revolution which, through campaigns like [#whomademyclothes](#), advocate for a fair garment industry.

With the new focus on transparency and traceability, the EU will also contribute to enhanced consumer awareness and improve possibilities for market actors to be more transparent on social and environmental impacts in their value chains.

“Across the globe, we buy 2 billion t-shirts every year. It takes 2,700 litres of water to produce one t-shirt. The equivalent of 900 days of drinking water for one person.”