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WOW // Work and Opportunities for Women

What is the care economy, and why does it matter in supply chains?

OVERVIEW

- Why aren't women progressing in leadership roles in factories despite extensive training programmes?
- Why are fewer female farmers attending climate-smart training or workshops?
- Why are there fewer women available to fill green jobs in technical roles?

Whilst the answer to these questions will be multifaceted, the disproportionate amount of time women spend on paid and unpaid care work will often be a major root cause. Women in global supply chains are likely to be undertaking a variety of unpaid care work alongside their 'productive' roles. In Bangladesh, WOW found that women were working an additional seven hours a day on family and domestic duties, essentially working a 'double day' alongside their work in the factory.

To achieve successful outcomes for gender equality interventions in supply chains, it is not enough to build women's assets and skills; it is vital also to consider what will enable their participation and control. This means thinking about social norms and any relevant legislation or business practices that might underpin them. Two of the biggest social norms challenges facing women in supply chains are care work and gender-based violence. This note focuses on the latter, and the Resource Kit signposts readers to the more extensive information available on addressing GBV.

Definition: **The care economy**

The paid and unpaid, formal and informal domestic work and care of people, including children, the elderly, the disabled and dependents with other care needs.

In supply chains, women also often undertake invisible labour that directly contributes to the production of goods and services. For example, family members work to support the traditionally male wage earner (e.g., invisible artisans and homeworkers), and it is assumed that his wages cover the costs of the additional labour.

Risks to the business of not addressing invisible labour and unpaid care

- Child labour and modern slavery
- Poverty and risk of migration away from supply chain roles
- Skills gaps and retraining costs when women leave the workforce
- Lower productivity and absenteeism

Opportunities

- Meeting SDG 5 and gender commitments in supply chains
- Authentic leadership on a complex shared challenge
- Supply chain resilience (especially to shocks, e.g. COVID-19 and climate change, which see large increases in women's unpaid care roles)
- More productive supply chains and skilled workers
- Increased transparency and reduced risk

What can businesses do in their supply chains?

On caring and domestic work, companies have begun to take steps to influence change – some have subsidised childcare provision; others are using their brands to break down stereotypes and encourage men to take on more domestic work; and corporate leaders are using their influence to encourage the uptake of paternity leave. Less guidance exists on how companies can tackle these interlinked issues further down their supply chains – despite the fact that this is where women face the most disproportionate responsibilities and where social safety nets are weakest. Here, we summarise some steps that can be taken. More details can be found in the WOW reports listed in this resource kit.

Recognise unpaid care and invisible labour

- Conduct a supply chain mapping to identify where invisible labour risks and opportunities lie. Consider adding invisible labour and unpaid care to materiality assessments.
- Engage women workers in the process of designing and taking action – for example, through social dialogue.

Reduce

- Enable and support suppliers to provide flexible working hours, safe and dignified spaces to breastfeed at work, and childcare options – from on-site crèches to locally supported social enterprises.
- Ensure that suppliers are providing a living wage, reducing the likelihood of women workers experiencing poverty, and increasing their chances of accessing time-saving options.

Redistribute

- Ensure that any ambitious gender-equality targets, such as increasing the percentage of women in leadership, are underpinned by clear action on invisible labour.

Examples of action

The RainForest Alliance wanted to go beyond certification to find support systems that would help prohibit child labour in Guatemalan coffee-growing communities. They partnered with FunCafé (a Foundation of the National Coffee Association) to scale up their Coffee Kindergartens (ages 4–6 years) and Coffee Camps (7–13 years). These camps recognise that the coffee harvest coincides with school vacations and that parents have nowhere to leave their children. During the 2021–2022 coffee harvest, 82 centres served 1,716 children. The cost of providing the camps is supported by buyers who either make a cash or in-kind investment[1].

In Papua New Guinea, **CARE** helped to increase women's participation in coffee-related extension services from less than 5% to 44% over five years. Engaging male leaders in coffee companies and husbands on family-run coffee farms was crucial to this outcome, as women's roles were not previously recognised or valued by them. CARE used the Family Business Management Training tool to help achieve these results. This approach led to more shared responsibility for caring and domestic roles and enabled joint decision-making around production and income.

[1] https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/insights/our-work-to-prevent-child-labor-guatemala-coffee-farms