



The State and Transformation of Female Wage Labour in Ethiopia: The Case of Textile and Garment Industries

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1. Background

Urban unemployment is one of the major challenges that the Ethiopian economy is struggling with. The 2020 CSA urban employment survey shows that the urban unemployment rate in the country reached 18.7% in 2020. The survey report shows that 26.1% of economically active women were unemployed. Although 24% of the female work force as compared to only 10% of the male are still engaged in the informal sector, a large number of women are joining the formal labour market in recent years. The manufacturing sector in general and the textile industry in particular is regarded as a mechanism to curb the challenge of unemployment in the country.

Though the textile and garment sector is creating job opportunities for female employees, there are challenges which women low-skill labourers working in the textile sector face including gender discrimination, unequal payment and low wage as well as unsafe working environment. The study

aims to examine, through documentary and primary field-based empirical research, the state and emerging trends of female wage labour in textile/garment industries.

2. Methodology of the Research

The study used a parallel mixed methods research design, combining qualitative approach with quantitative survey research. Primary data was collected through a survey, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and observation. Collected data was analysed quantitatively after data was entered into Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) while qualitative data was analysed by generating major sub themes and themes. After the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, the research team made use of the major findings to inform policies to improve Female Wage Laborers working conditions at factories. Initially, Bole Lemi I Industrial Park and Addis Industry Village were selected. However, Bole Lemi Industrial Park was replaced by Small and Medium Garment Enterprises because of the inaccessibility of the former related to COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Key findings

The state of female employees in the textile industries

The female wage labourers earned an initial monthly salary of 1280.86. Currently, the mean monthly salary of FWL is 2029.08 ETB per month. On average, FWL typically earn around 2066 ETB per month from all sources. The average percentage of annual rate of growth of salary for FWL who were working at Industrial Village was 2.67 % while the average percentage of annual rate of growth salary for the FWL who were working at Small and Medium Garment Enterprises was 2.77%. The amount of salary paid for the female employees as well as the increment are far from enabling them to entertain their need in the existing chronic inflation that Ethiopia is experiencing.

The efforts exerted by the government of Ethiopia to address the challenge of low pays for factory workers is insufficient considering it proudly promotes the country's garment factories as providing the lowest bases wage to attract foreign investors. In addition, the government does not prescribe minimum wages. In this regard, the revised Labour Proclamation states that minimum wages shall be revised in accordance with the country's economic development, labour market and other consideration. However, the process is being dragged as the wage board is yet to be established.

Occupational Health and Work Safety at Textile/Garment Factories

The female wage labourers do not face serious occupational injuries in the factories. Among the reported few accident was a needle-stick injury that could pose a risk of infection. In case of occupational injuries, the factories utilize their first aid kit when it is minor and those who require medical assistance were taken to a health center as all the factories do not have clinics or healthcare posts. In such

instances, the factories covered transport and care costs.

Apart from occupational injuries, working in factories may increase the employees' risk of developing some conditions. The female wage labourers state that they are forced to stand for long hours while conducting their day to day work. They largely perceived prolonged standing to cause leg swelling and kidney problems.

The labour proclamation of Ethiopia does not provide workers (employee) the right to get health insurance in addition to work place accident and occupational health benefits. However, the 20-year plan titled, 'Envisioning Ethiopia's Path to Universal Health Care through strengthening of Primary Health Care' aims to ensure that everyone who needs health services is able to get them without undue hardship.

Benefits and Challenges of Female Wage Labourers at the Work Place

The textile/garment factories have created employment opportunities and in turn income for 32% of employees who were economically inactive. Nevertheless, the factory employees reported that their salary was not enough to cover basic living costs; and was far from enabling them acquire assets and property.

A few factories provided non-wage benefits to their employees. The non-wage benefits include provision of meals, incentives and transportation allowance which were however discontinued in some of the factories due to relation to market cuts which happened following the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, the female employees of the textile and garment factories benefited from on the job trainings from which they were able to obtain skills, mainly sewing.

The female wage labourers who worked in the garment and textile factories talk of multifaceted

challenges they encounter in relation to their productive and reproductive roles. The reported cases of sexual violence are low as per the findings of the research. The factories state that sexual violence is low because of their seriousness about such cases. However, the sexual violence and the factory's act in underplaying it as well as the argument of key informants regarding the reluctance of employees in reporting sexual violence are also taken into consideration.

The other set of challenges have to do with their work setting such as high transportation costs that the employees were unable to cover described and rigid bathroom breaks which compromise the health and productivity of employees. Moreover, social norms put more pressure on female employees who are expected to conduct household chores and bare caring responsibilities at home making them miss incentives and leading to salary cuts in several instances in addition to making the employees vulnerable to stress.

All in all, female wage labourers were predominantly missing from leadership positions at factories apart from serving as line supervisors. In addition, they miss the opportunity to influence employee-employer bargaining processes as they are absent from trade union leadership positions which is worsened for the textile and garment factories that did not have any trade union.

Policy Responses

There are several legal and policy documents that aim to improve the lives and working conditions of female wage labourers in Ethiopia. The education and health policies of Ethiopia recognize the promote improved working conditions to female employees through the aim of expanding girls' enrolment in education in the former and the effort towards Universal Health Coverage in the later cases. The labour proclamation of the country

also consists of provisions that directly intend to improve the working conditions of female wage labourers through mechanisms such as labour inspection, establishment of trade unions as well as setting and periodically revising minimum wages. However, the implementation of policy aims are compromised by limited capacity and commitment from the enforcing government organs.

Conclusion

The textile and garment sector is contributing much in employing female wage labourers in different factories. This leads to reducing the percentage of the unemployed as well as serves as a mechanisms to transfer from the informal to the formal sector. However, if female wage labourers in the textile and garment sector are to have meaningful change to their lives there is a need to deal with the several daunting challenges that they face in relation to their productive and reproductive roles. This requires strong commitment from the government as well as the factories in improving the working conditions of female wage employees as such interventions have a crucial role to play in improving the productivity of the employees in addition to improving their lives.

Recommendations

- 1. Facilitating the establishment of labor unions and Supporting them:** employees are not unionized even though unions are instrumental in the protection of the right of workers. Up on establishment, the unions should bargain for improved working condition and ensure industrial peace. CETU should facilitate the formation of trade unions in the textile/garment factories without delay. The confederation shall further provide trainings to members of trade unions ensure protection of employees.

2. Engaging Institutional Capacity Building:

the existing gender offices at different levels should be strengthened (in terms of logistics, budget, and human resources) to follow-up the state and working conditions of FWL in the textile/garment factories. In addition, it is crucial to establish Gender Focal Point to facilitate and coordinator any gender related programs in the factories.

3. Occupational Safety and Health:

the occupational safety and health of employees at Small and Medium Garment Enterprise are far below the expected standard. Although the government of Ethiopia has decentralized inspection tasks to lower administration units, there has been limited attempt to support the units with adequately trained manpower and other resources. This has resulted in little to none inspection activities over the factories. Thus, there is a pressing need to support existing structures

to implement OSH regulations to improve the safety of employees.

4. Setting Minimum Wage and Setting up Hostel at Industrial Parks:

the Ministry of Women and Social Affairs (MoWSA) needs to step-up and work with employers, employees, and other stakeholders to establish the wage board immediately as promised in the 2019 labour proclamation. In addition, factories in Addis Industrial village should work towards the provision of affordable accommodation to their employees considering the unaffordability of housing in Addis Ababa.

5. Working on Capacity Building of Workers:

the government could collaborate with CSOs working on the right of women to give trainings, organize conversation sessions and experience sharing, and provide material support on labor proclamation and other provisions for female wage labourers to empower them in demanding better work conditions.

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