

Concept Paper #1

Promoting Gender-Equitable Working Conditions through Women's Centers/Cafés and its Network



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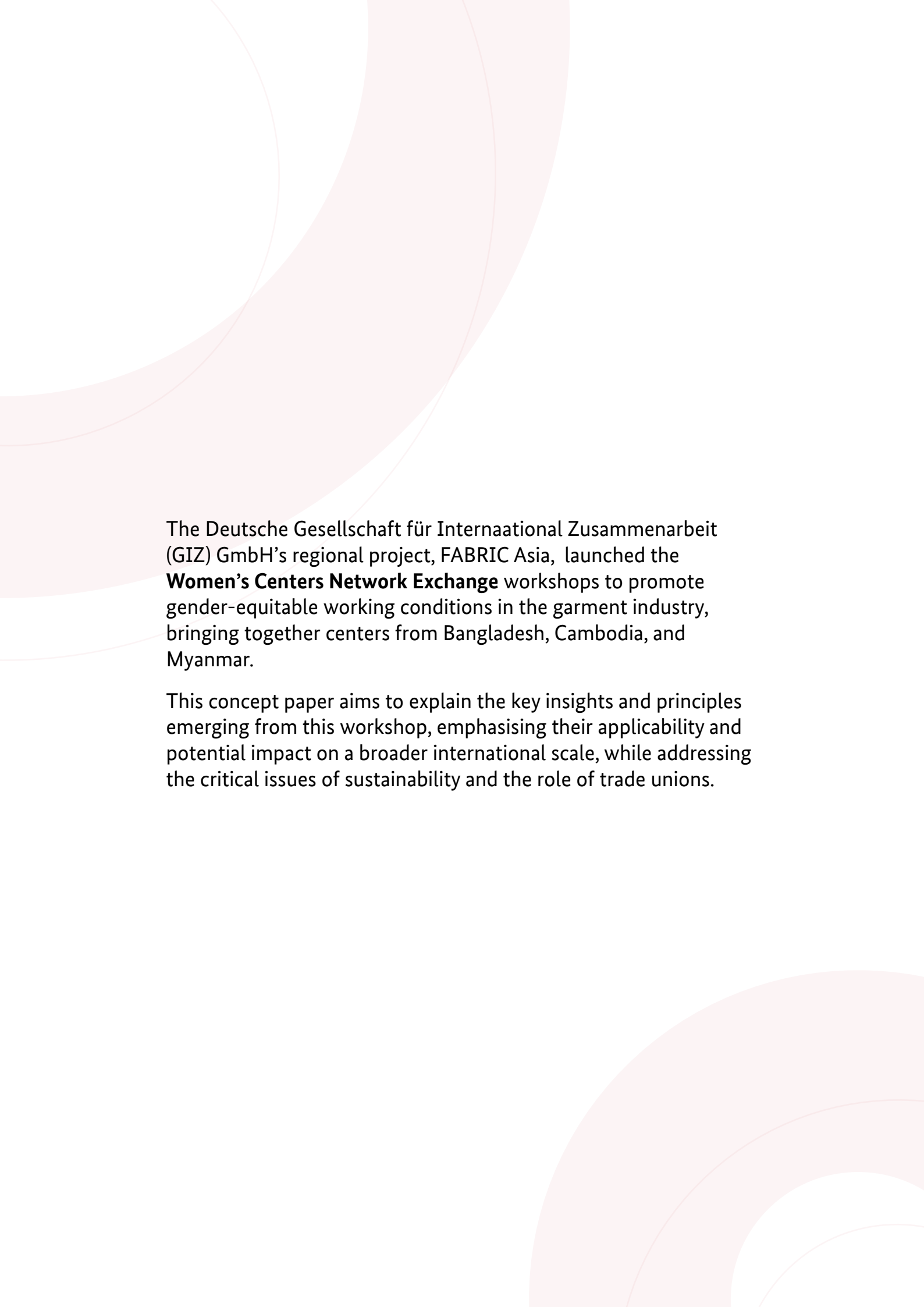
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The Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH's regional project, FABRIC Asia, launched the **Women's Centers Network Exchange** workshops to promote gender-equitable working conditions in the garment industry, bringing together centers from Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar.

This concept paper aims to explain the key insights and principles emerging from this workshop, emphasising their applicability and potential impact on a broader international scale, while addressing the critical issues of sustainability and the role of trade unions.

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I. CONTEXT

In recent years, the global garment industry has seen a growing emphasis on prioritising gender equity within the workplace together and improving working conditions for women workers. Recognising the need for collective action and innovative approaches, GIZ FABRIC has launched the Women’s Centers Network Exchange in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, to serve as a model initiative that

highlights the potential of Women’s Centers/Cafés in promoting gender-equitable working conditions.

FABRIC represents more than just an initiative; it embodies a commitment to fostering collaboration among key stakeholders in the garment and textile industries across Asia. Its mission encompasses supporting the transition towards fair production practices, promoting gender-equitable working conditions, and

preserving the environment through regional exchange, knowledge dissemination, and cooperative efforts. The project encompasses Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Vietnam, emphasising a regional approach to tackle shared challenges.

To empower women in the garment and textile sector, FABRIC has taken tangible steps. Two women's centers, the Hlaing Thar Yar Women Center in Myanmar (which concluded its operations in September 2023) and the Women Empowerment House (WE House) in Cambodia, have been established as safe spaces. These centers provide capacity development training tailored to the needs of women garment workers, covering topics such as labour laws and social and labour standards.

Recognising the necessity for collective action and innovative approaches, FABRIC initiated the first Women's Centers Network Exchange in 2023, bringing together participants from Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar. These participants represent Women's Centers actively involved in advancing gender equity within the garment industry. Over the course of three days, participants shared success stories, discussed

challenges, and collaboratively explored strategies to create a more women inclusive working environment, with a specific focus on addressing sustainability challenges. The second exchange took place in April 2024 in Dhaka, bringing the same participants again together. Furthermore, in this event also factory workers and unionists from Bangladesh participated as well. This time, the event was based on the introduction of the first Women's Centers in Phnom Penh, focusing on gender focused topics, specially addressing issues that particularly impact female workers. The event focused on digital tools to raise awareness and the work with unions. The last day of the event specifically focused on potential sustainability measures of Women's Centers in Bangladesh. Participants also gained the opportunity to visit a Women's Café in the outskirts of Dhaka as well as a factory which was highly requested by the participants for hands-on experience.

This concept paper aims to explain the key insights and principles emerging from this workshop, emphasising their applicability and potential impact on a broader international scale, while addressing the critical issues of sustainability and the role of trade unions.



II. BACKGROUND

The Asian garment and textile sector appears large on the global stage, contributing over half of the world's textiles and clothing exports and providing employment for a vast workforce of approximately 60 million individuals.

In Bangladesh, the garment industry plays a pivotal role in the country's economic growth, employing millions, particularly women, and facilitating the export of clothing worldwide. Similarly, in Cambodia, the garment sector strengthens the economy, attracting major brands due to lower production costs. The industry employs a substantial number of women, driving economic growth. In Myanmar, despite facing challenges such as political instability, the textile and garment industry remains vital for job creation and national development. However, alongside these achievements, women in this sector encounter various challenges.

Based on the information provided, it's evident that women constitute the majority of the workforce in the garment and textile sector in Asia. However, they face numerous challenges, including insecure employment, substandard working conditions, inadequate wages, gender-based violence, and harassment. Additionally, women often lack representation in trade unions, resulting in their voices being marginalised. Many female workers also have limited knowledge about their labour rights, wage standards, benefits, and working time regulations.

The establishment of Women's Centers/Café in close proximity to industrial areas, where a significant portion of garment workers reside, aims to address these pressing issues. These centers serve as invaluable resources for workers, providing them with essential support and guidance. Through Women's Centers/Café, workers can access information on labour rights, occupational



health and safety standards, grievance mechanisms, and receive consultations and advice on various matters affecting their well-being and rights.

Addressing sustainability is also crucial for the enduring impact of Women's Centers/Café in promoting gender equity within the garment industry. Achieving sustainability involves navigating diverse challenges and implementing innovative solutions. By understanding and addressing sustainability-related challenges, Women's Centers/Cafés can strengthen their foundations and ensure a lasting positive influence on gender-equitable working conditions.

Recognising the central role of trade unions in fostering gender equity within the garment industry, it is crucial to understand their multifaceted contributions. Trade unions play a pivotal role in negotiating with employers to secure fair wages, equal



opportunities, and safe working conditions for all workers, thereby contributing to gender-equitable practices within the industry. They also serve as powerful advocates for policy changes at both the organisational and industry levels. Their involvement can influence policies that promote gender equity, inclusivity, and sustainable practices. Trade unions empower workers by providing a collective voice. Collaborating with Women's Centers/Café ensures that the challenges faced by women garment workers are heard and addressed effectively.

The success of the Women's Centers Network Exchange demonstrates the replicability and scalability of this model beyond national borders. Involvement of stakeholders from other countries is also beneficial in exploring the establishment of similar Women's Centers/Cafés to

collectively support gender equity in the garment industry.

The Women's Centers Network Exchange represents a pioneering initiative, emphasising the transformative potential of sustainable Women's Centers/Cafés in advancing gender-equitable working conditions. Looking ahead, stakeholders and trade unions worldwide are encouraged to unite in fostering a more inclusive and equitable garment industry through the establishment of Women's Centers/Cafés with sustainability at their core. This collective effort aims to create a global network committed to breaking down barriers, empowering women in the workplace, and ensuring the enduring impact of Women's Centers/Cafés.



III. OVERVIEW: CURRENT STRATEGIES AND PRACTICES

INDUSTRY SIDE:

In response to longstanding concerns on working conditions of women in the garment industry in Asia, there has been a significant emphasis on worker engagement. Various approaches have been implemented including creation of spaces for female workers to exchange issues, enhance knowledge and understanding of labour rights as well as empower them in daily life and workplace alike. Factories and industry stakeholders are undertaking numerous initiatives to cultivate a supportive environment for female workers. Many facilities have introduced capacity building programmes aiming at addressing specific needs of women workers, offering training sessions on technical skills and financial literacy, among others. These efforts may also involve establishing women committee/ groups within factories to facilitate workers

discuss their concerns and access resources related to workers' rights and safety. Moreover, beyond the factory walls, collaboration with NGOs, CSOs and government agencies further extend support networks for women workers, providing counselling and legal aid services that contribute to creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace for women in the industry.

GOVERNMENT SIDE:

Many Asian countries have introduced legislative reforms/ regulations and initiatives aiming at protecting the rights of women workers. These encompass measures such as limits on working hours, provision for maternity leave, and regulations to prevent gender-based discrimination and harassment in the workplace. For instance, the Labour Code of Vietnam 2019 includes provisions on sexual harassment at the workplace, and instruction decree on improving female workers working conditions.

Bangladesh has enacted multiple laws and provisions to protect women workers. Primary among them is the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006), which prohibits discrimination against women in recruitment, promotion, and training. It also mandates maternity leave benefits, restricts working hours for pregnant women, and prohibits night shifts for women in some industries. Nari o Shishu Daman Nirajatan Act (2000) offers legal recourse for women facing sexual harassment in the workplace and at home. However, much remains to be achieved, particularly in terms of women's rights in the workplace.

Regulations: National Workplace Safety and Health Policy (2015): This policy outlines specific guidelines for ensuring safe working environments for women, including

regulations on sanitation, lighting, and personal protective equipment.

Cambodia has developed multiple national laws and guidelines aimed at addressing Violence against Children (VAC) or Violence against Women (VAW) including the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims (2005), the Law on Suppression of Human Trafficking and Sexual Exploitation (2008) and its Explanatory Note, the Labour Law 1997, the Education Law 2007, the Law on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2009), the Inter-Country Adoption Law (2009), the Penal Code (2011), and the Juvenile Justice Law (2016). In addition, the Five Years National Strategic Plan 2019-2023 (Neary Rattanak V) and the Five Years National Action Plan on Violence Against Women 2019-2023 (NAPVAW), which is led by the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), have both been developed and implemented. When looking at Cambodia's legal landscape governing violence prevention, it is clear that while some progress has been made, gaps in the legal protection framework remain.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Alongside the government and sectoral initiatives, the format of Women's Centers/Cafés plays crucial role in promoting gender equitable working condition. These centers are not merely physical spaces; they are dynamic hubs of empowerment, catalysts for positive change, and advocates for inclusivity. At their core, Women's Centers/Cafés are committed to address the different challenges faced by women in the garment industry. Through various strategies, these centers aim to dismantle stereotypes, and create inclusive workspaces.

Empowering Women in the Workplace:

Women's Centers/Cafés play an important role in empowering female workers by providing a supportive environment that fosters self-confidence, skill development, and leadership. This empowerment contributes to dismantling gender stereotypes and promotes women's active participation in decision-making processes.

Creating Inclusive Workspaces: Women's Centers/Cafés contribute to the creation of inclusive workplaces by addressing the needs and challenges faced by women in the garment industry. This inclusivity extends beyond gender, embracing diversity in all its forms.

Advocacy for Policy Change: The role of Women's Centers/Café as advocates for policy changes and influencers at both organisational and industry levels was underlined, emphasising the need for proactive engagement.

IV. STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

The Women Center Network Exchange convened key stakeholders involved in the management, implementation, and support of Women Cafés in Bangladesh, Women Centers in Myanmar, and Women Empowerment House (WE House) in Cambodia. These stakeholders included development partner, local NGOs operating the centers, Women Centers' managers, responsible individuals, and notably female garment workers from these three countries. Over the course of three days, the exchange provided a platform for stakeholders to address the challenges and opportunities encountered by the Women Centers in each respective country. Through collaborative discussions, the stakeholders explored suitable approaches and strategies to foster

a more inclusive working environment, with a specific emphasis on addressing sustainability challenges. Additionally, the exchange facilitated sharing of lessons learnt, success stories and common issues among Women's Centers in the three countries. Stakeholders were also given the opportunities to provide feedback following the exchange, reflecting on the insights and discussions that took place, including an on-site visit to the WE House.

Key findings of the consultation: The workshop's vibrant discussions displayed crucial insights that shed light on effective strategies for advancing gender equitable working conditions within the garment industry. These insights, gathered from the diverse experiences of participants representing Women's Centers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar, underline the importance of community-centric approaches, knowledge exchange, and collaborative networking. The consultations showed that the participants find the exchange crucial to be able to exchange on services and long-term sustainability ideas of the Women Center. Furthermore, the participants are interested in having deeper discussions on gender-related topics, like how to tackle gender-based violence or digital tools for capacity development and how these topics can convene synergies with the Women Centers. This feedback was taken in consideration for the next exchange (April 2024 in Bangladesh).

Community-Centric Approach: Women's Centers/Cafés operate at the heart of communities, providing a localised and accessible platform for education, entertainment, support, and networking. This community-centric approach enables targeted interventions to address specific challenges faced by women in the garment industry while fostering sustainability



through community engagement.

Knowledge Exchange and Capacity

Building: The workshop demonstrated the effectiveness of knowledge exchange in enhancing participants' capacity to advocate for labour rights and gender equity. Women's Centers/Cafés serve as hubs for continuous learning, offering training programmes, workshops, and resources that empower women with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate and challenge systemic inequalities, contributing to the long-term sustainability of these centers.

Collaboration and Networking for

Sustainability: The collaborative spirit fostered during the workshop showcased the potential for Women's Centers/Cafés to serve as networking spaces. Through partnerships and collaboration, these centers can share resources, reduce duplication of efforts, and collectively address industry-wide challenges, ensuring the long-term sustainability of their impact. The role of trade unions in this collaboration is crucial for amplifying advocacy efforts and ensuring workers' voices are heard.



Innovative Outreach Programmes:

Innovative outreach programmes, such as creative board games, were highlighted as effective tools for disseminating information and promoting engagement.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS TO ACTIONS

The regional Women Center Network format has demonstrated its efficacy in enhancing the capacities of Women Centers through cross-regional learning and discussions. This exchange not only highlighted valuable insights but also served as platform for the emergence of effective strategies, paving the way for progress towards gender-equitable working conditions in the garment industry. These insights, drawn from diverse experiences of participants representing Women's Centers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar, underscore several key aspects crucial to establishing new Women's Centers that could potentially be replicated in other countries.

The Women's Centers Network will continue its exchanges through informal setups. The exchanges may occur either as stand-alone activities or as part of larger events where the subject matter is relevant. Social media channels such as Facebook and Telegram groups will be utilised to strengthen connections among Centers in the Network, enabling participants to continue exchanging view and ideas, thus enriching their experiences and knowledge on issues relevant to the Women Centers.

KEY INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For those considering the implementation of Women's Centers in the future or those currently managing such Centers, the following guidelines emerge from the collective insights of workshop participants:

1. **Diversify Income Streams:** In addition to traditional funding sources, consider establishing diverse income-generating activities within Women's Centers. This approach enhances financial sustainability and reduces dependence on a single funding channel.
2. **Strengthen Collaborative Networks:** Foster partnerships and collaboration, particularly with trade unions, worker organisations, and the private sector. This collaborative approach amplifies advocacy efforts and broadens the impact of initiatives, ensuring a more comprehensive and inclusive approach.
3. **Incorporate Sustainable Practices from the inception:** Develop and implement sustainable practices within Women's Centers to ensure their long-term impact at the very beginning of their implementation. Consider environmentally friendly initiatives,

efficient resource management, and practices that contribute to the overall well-being of the community and the Women's Centers themselves.

- 4. Continuous Knowledge Exchange:** Sustain knowledge exchange and capacity-building programmes for women in the garment industry, particularly through regional exchanges. These ongoing initiatives contribute to the continuous empowerment of women, providing them with the necessary tools and skills to develop their professional environments effectively.

These actionable recommendations serve as

a foundation for those embarking on the journey of establishing Women's Centers. By integrating these guidelines, future initiatives can be shaped to be not only impactful in the short term but also sustainable and adaptive to the evolving needs of women in the garment industry.

VI. CONCLUSION ON LONG-TERM SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability of women's centers has been a challenge in all of the participating countries. Several local initiatives have been attempted to generate income for the centers –



however, not all of them have succeeded in generating the volume of income required. During regional exchanges, it was clear that creating self-sustainable and income-generating spaces for women garment workers requires a multifaceted approach that addresses various aspects of their needs and challenges. Here are several strategies that can be implemented:

1. Sustainability requires a proper business plan – in most cases, the income generating activities attempted were not successful due to a lack of a proper business plan which includes financial analysis. If necessary, external consultants should be hired to develop the business plan. There should be a

gradual phasing out of donor funds process identified, and support should be provided by donors to enable this transition, such as through the provision of seed funds.

- 2. Multi-use spaces** – The physical spaces of the women's cafes can be used flexibly to perform different functions at different times of the day. During the daytime, most workers are in factories. Therefore, the physical spaces can be either rent out or used for income-generating activities such as training, handicrafts making, etc.
- 3. Proper safeguarding and grievance mechanisms need to be in place for daycares** – A popular model for income generation is the use of day-care centers. However, in order for daycare centers to be effective, they need to have proper safeguarding and grievance mechanisms in place to ensure children's health and welfare is protected.
- 4. What works and what does not** – Some of the initiatives in place in some countries are not scalable in other countries due to challenges such as the cost of electricity, the level of literacy, etc. However, a common model which can be utilised can be low-cost upskilling trainings for female workers, along with services such as resume development, cover letter writing, etc. This enables the empowerment of female workers, as they are able to apply for higher positions and supervisory roles.
- 5. Linkages with local ethical fashion initiatives** – Women's cafes can be used for spaces to produce handicrafts and simple processing of food products. Rather than selling these at the local market, the products can be sold to the consumer through boutique shops, partnerships with local supermarkets and



VII. NEXT STEPS

The manual titled *“How to set up community platforms for women garment workers”* published by the FABRIC Asia project in 2021 will be updated to reflect the most recent developments regarding the operation of Women Cafés/ Centers and the Network exchanges. This updated manual will serve as valuable resource for organisations and individuals interested in creating and implementing similar models of community-based platform to provide support to women workers in garment industry.

FABRIC also takes the results and insights gained during the event into the project activities. Two concept papers will also be created, focusing on digital tools for workers as well as on working with unions and how they can support promoting the Women’s Centers.





