

# VALUING WOMEN'S WORK:

A framework for business on  
gender equality and decent work

ISSUE 1

Briefings for  
Business on Valuing  
Women's Work



OXFAM

Our strategic focus, Valuing Women’s Work (VWW), aims to redefine what ‘work’ means so that all the work women do – paid and unpaid – can truly be valued. This first briefing from the forthcoming series, *Briefings for Business on Valuing Women’s Work*, is an overview and introduces some of the issues we will be tackling as part of the strategic focus of VWW. The series aims to improve and reinforce companies’ understanding of how the systemic issues driving gender inequality interact with business practices. Vivaly, the briefings show how transformative gender equality engagement is not about fixing women but about removing the structures and norms which disempower women in the first place.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [rmhlanga1@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:rmhlanga1@oxfam.org.uk)

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Cover photo: Final puzzle piece hovering over position. © Edge2Edge Media/Unsplash.

# Foreword

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The COVID-19 pandemic hammered home the inequities of the current economic model – built on the backs of many but benefitting only a few. A big chunk of this puzzle is the work done by women, including their disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work. This forms the backbone of the global economy, yet the contribution of women’s work is frequently overlooked and undervalued.

Our strategic focus, *Valuing Women’s Work*, aims to redefine what ‘work’ means so that all the work women do – paid and unpaid – can truly be valued. The true value of all women’s work deserves to be recognized, fairly measured, and invested in as part of the global economy. Women have an equal right for their work to be rewarded, to work free from violence and harm, and to live free from poverty. This isn’t just about getting more women into work, it’s about changing the system that too often ignores, oppresses and excludes women.

Our new series, *Briefings for Business on Valuing Women’s Work*, is a call to action for the private sector to play its part in redressing this in its value chains and operations. The briefings aim to improve and reinforce companies’ understanding of how the systemic issues driving gender inequality interact with business practices. Vitally, they show how transformative gender equality engagement is not about fixing women but about removing the structures and norms which disempower women in the first place.

This first briefing is an overview and introduces a framework consisting of some (not all) critical building blocks, such as living wages, grievance mechanisms and remediation, that we think businesses should tackle. We set out key considerations, provide evidence of companies doing well or poorly, and offer recommendations for what companies can do to address gender inequality in a way that will drive real impact. Subsequent briefings will build on these issues.

Our intent is to be a ‘critical friend’ to businesses. We always challenge the underlying causes of poverty – from social attitudes to business practices and government policies. Time and again, we’ve seen what we can achieve when we stand together with others and speak out against the injustices that cause poverty.



**Aleema Shivji**  
Chief Impact Officer,  
Oxfam Great Britain

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# Executive summary

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Climate change, conflict, the cost of living and COVID-19 crises have further exposed how our economies rely on globalized business models that fail to respect human rights and the environment. The constant search for low prices and high profits, coupled with restrictions to freedom of association and weak regulatory environments, exacerbate and often exploit the systemic and structural inequalities endured by millions of workers and communities around the world, with women and girls particularly exposed to abuse. Women and the work that they do, including their disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, form the backbone of the global economy, yet their contribution is frequently overlooked and undervalued.

Corporate-led initiatives on gender equality aimed at addressing this are often hampered by the need to have a business case and driven by shareholder interests. This can lead to the commodification of women rather than supporting the obligation to fulfil women's human rights.

A radically different approach is needed. Oxfam is calling for the 'valuing of women's work' and is challenging the private sector to play its part. This briefing gives an overview of the foundational themes that the private sector needs to address to create a more caring and green economy that values women and the work that they do. Valuing women's work is not just about getting more women into work. Nor is it simply about respecting the work of people who happen to be women. It is about changing the systems that too often ignore, oppress and exclude women. This is about women's fundamental rights and human rights. It is about pushing for workplaces, societies and economies that work for all people and our planet.

This briefing introduces a framework with four overarching pillars comprising thirteen building blocks that we believe is critical for companies if they want to get to grips with gender equality in their value chains. The four pillars are: approaching gender equality as a human right; dismantling the structures, systems and norms that ignore, oppress and exclude women; changing the way companies do business; and rewiring the system.

Transformative approaches to gender equality will involve companies developing and implementing gender strategies, action plans and policies; creating safe working environments free from violence; and implementing business models and practices that do not exploit and drive informality. It requires businesses to safely gather and maintain data and undertake human rights impact assessments (HRIAs) as part of wider human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD). It means recognizing, supporting and taking measures to redress women workers' unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work and respecting their rights as carers, both through direct policies as well as by paying their fair share of tax in the countries they do business.

The framework is built on the long-recognized premise that gender equality is about human rights, and gender inequalities are human rights violations. As such, gender equality efforts need to be systematically embedded within a company's wider responsibility to respect human rights, as required by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). Doing so will also help companies align with the new mandatory HREDD legislation being introduced in many countries.

We believe that businesses can play an important role in delivering a kinder, fairer world. Alternative economic and business models are essential if we are going to safeguard human rights for all and the survival of the planet. This requires the private sector to redefine business models that do not rely on exploitation to drive profit. Our framework for businesses calls for a gender-transformative approach, addressing structural injustices, discriminatory and extractive business practices, in order to create a system where women can enjoy their rights and where all women's work is valued.

# 1.

## The challenge

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**//There will always be those who will tear us down and tear us apart because they want the status quo to remain. But together we can break down the barriers that have kept women from achieving the equity they rightfully deserve.//**

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Nobel Laureate<sup>1</sup>

Many root causes of gender inequality are linked to discriminatory systems of oppression, such as patriarchy, racism and xenophobia, heteronormativity, and extractive relations of coloniality, which drive poverty and social exclusion. The COVID-19 pandemic not only exposed vulnerabilities confronting workers in global value chains,<sup>2</sup> but also our reliance on business models that fail to respect human rights, exploit existing inequalities,<sup>3</sup> and drive the destruction of the environment.

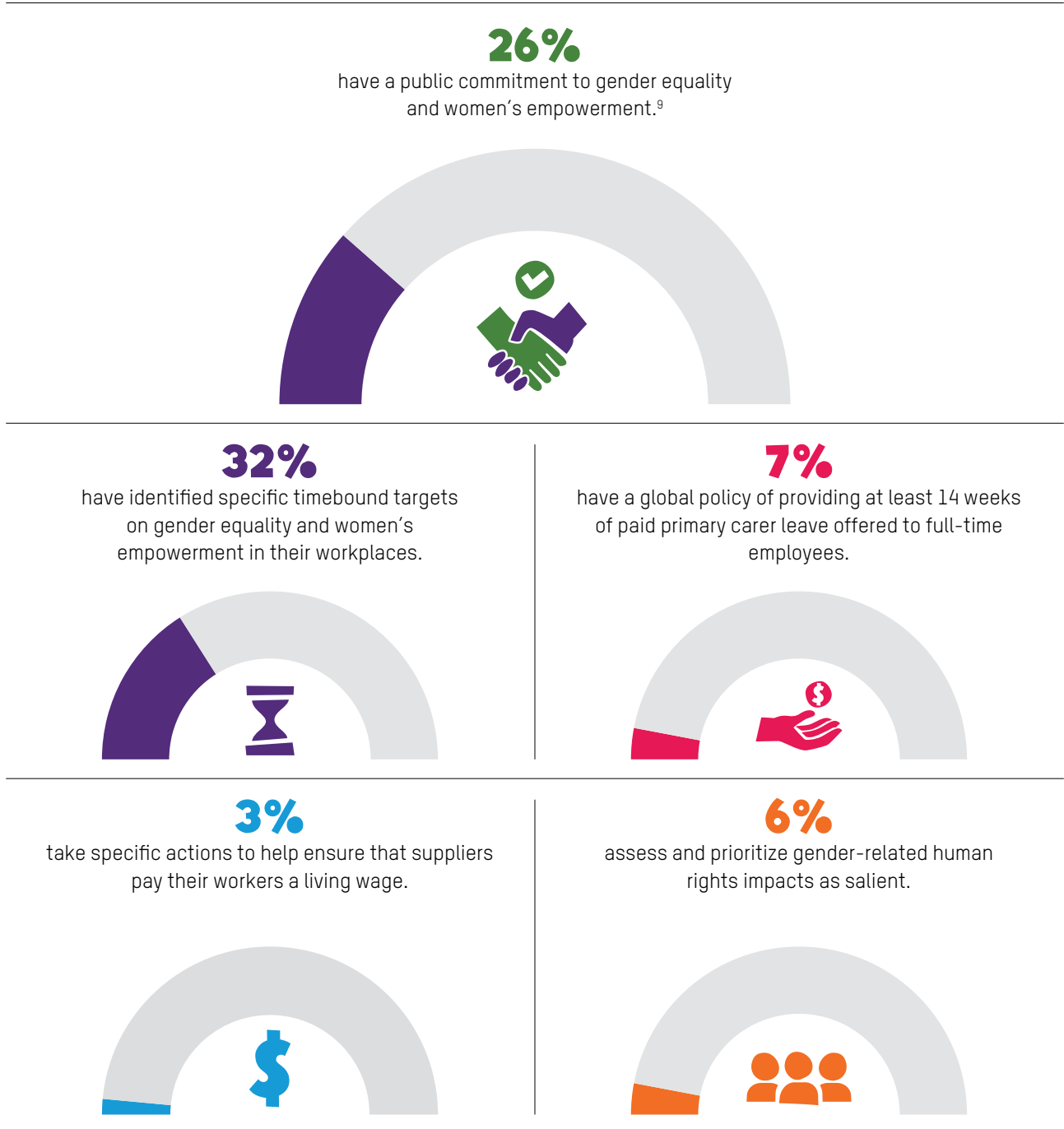
The paid and unpaid work that women do is the backbone of the global economy, yet their contribution is frequently overlooked and undervalued. Corporate practices contribute to this undervaluation and even benefit from exploitation and discrimination:<sup>4</sup> the constant search for low prices and high profits, the drive for an ever quicker turnaround of products, the move to subcontracted rather than directly employed labour, and the reliance on weak monitoring and accountability systems.<sup>5</sup> These practices, combined with many companies' failure to pay their fair share of tax,<sup>6</sup> drive the systemic and structural inequalities experienced by women and girls around the world. In response, our framework calls for businesses to not only change their approach to gender equality and their business practices, but also to play a role in rewiring the system.

Valuing women's work is not just about respecting women's work. It is about ensuring the work is decent, and that rights to engage in collective bargaining are upheld. This involves challenging societal norms of what constitutes 'women's work' and who does it, changing policies and norms that determine whether this work is unpaid or underpaid, and standing in solidarity with women who try to break out of such norms. It is about changing the systems that too often ignore, oppress and exclude women, marginalized or under-represented groups, and benefit from such oppression. It is about women's fundamental human rights, and pushing for workplaces, societies and economies that are just and work for all people and our planet.<sup>7</sup>

While corporate-led gender equality initiatives have increased over the years, a closer look is required at their effectiveness. Many such initiatives seek to 'economically empower' women by supporting them at an individual level (for example, by enhancing women's skills and knowledge, or enabling access to resources), with an assumption that once women enhance their capacity, they will operate in the market and workplace with the same degree of agency as men. At their most reductive, they can reinforce a set of deep narratives of women as powerless, economically inactive, idle and unskilled workers, in need of help, rather than those who are exploited. These programmes are often limited in remit, being a pilot or targeting a very small part of the supply chain. Often these approaches achieve limited change, superficially addressing human rights harms, and fail to address the structures, norms and systems which disempower women in the first place.

The World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) 2023 Gender Assessment and 2023 Gender Benchmark data of 1,006 of the world's most influential companies shown below paints a dismal picture of where are at now.<sup>8</sup> Figure 1 is a snapshot of the state of play on gender equality engagement.

**Figure 1. World Benchmarking Alliance 2023 Gender Assessment and 2023 Gender Benchmark**



The challenge faced by corporate-led gender equality initiatives, can in part be attributed to resting on a business case for engaging on gender. This leads to the commodification of gender equality rather than centring the primary need to fulfil women's human rights, and being rooted in values of equality, equity, rights and justice. Rationalizing responsible business conduct through financial gains and the business case does not always withstand scrutiny<sup>10</sup> and, we believe, misses the point. At their most reductive, corporate-led gender equality projects can be seen as another instrument privileging shareholder's interests over all else, yet this is not what company law demands.<sup>11</sup> Women's rights are human rights, and these are inalienable and should be upheld regardless of their value for business success.

Current economic systems are structured on gendered, racial and class inequalities which dictate the conditions in which women enter the workforce and the kind of work they take up. Without addressing these fundamental issues, corporate-led equality initiatives potentially reinforce these inequalities. For example, while many more women have entered the workforce across the globe,<sup>12</sup> harmful social norms mean that women still bear primary responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work. This underlines a core argument in this brief, that companies must also dismantle the structures, systems and norms that ignore, oppress and exclude women, as well as change the way they do business.

Sponsorship or corporate social philanthropy (CSR) of women's initiatives by private businesses also often overlap with those traditionally provided by the state, for example, education, water and sanitation, and healthcare. This mission creep, as noted in Oxfam's report, *Sick Development*, risks undermining the provision of essential services.<sup>13</sup> Paradoxically, unfair corporate tax practices deprive governments of funds to invest in quality critical public services and care infrastructure, while shareholders take the lion's share of the value generated by workers.

The next section outlines how the private sector can better understand and engage with valuing women's work. Before going further, a few clarifying statements are needed:

- Women are not a homogenous group: women workers' lived experiences differ, especially those facing marginalization due to intersections of gender, race, migrant status, caste, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, and so on. Recognizing this diversity in developing and implementing policies and plans, collecting data and undertaking human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD) is a key cornerstone of the framework.
- The private sector is also far from homogenous, and actors within it vary in size, scope and power. This briefing focuses on the actions of multinational companies, but we recognize the immense role that micro-, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), as well as purpose-led businesses, can play in creating a more just and caring world.
- This briefing gives an overview of the symptoms and drivers of gender inequality that connect with the private sector. Subsequent publications will explore the issues raised in greater detail. The building blocks presented here are ever-evolving good practice learned from the experience of others and our own experiences advocating for women's rights and advocating to the private sector.
- The briefing also provides insights from the most recent gender data in the WBA 2023 Gender Assessment and 2023 Gender Benchmark, that assessed the contributions to gender equality of 1,006 of the world's most influential companies.<sup>14</sup> This included in-depth assessments of 112 companies from the food and apparel sectors on some metrics.

**// Women's rights are human rights, and these are inalienable and should be upheld regardless of their value for business success. //**



# 2.

## A framework for getting to grips with gender equality

**//Achieving gender equality is about disrupting the status quo – not negotiating it.//**

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, former UN Women Executive Director<sup>15</sup>

The framework in Figure 2 below, provides initial steps for the private sector to start valuing women’s work, with the themes or building blocks being foundational rather than a finite list. Some issues are more commonly understood by companies, such as the gender pay gap, but we also draw attention to neglected issues such as unpaid care and domestic work. The focus is on respecting rights and ensuring decent work. The aim is to improve and reinforce companies’ understanding of how these systemic issues interact with business practices. Importantly, gender equality should never be about ‘fixing women’: true gender equality engagement is about removing the structures and norms which disempower women in the first place.

### PILLAR 1.

#### Approach gender equality as a human right

WBA data shows<sup>16</sup> that companies do not have a firm grip on their responsibility to respect women’s rights and mitigate risks. Human rights are a responsibility not an option. To both understand their responsibility and prevent and mitigate risks, companies should begin by approaching gender equality as a human right:

**Building block 1.** Develop and implement gender strategies, policies and action plans.

**Building block 2.** Safely gather and maintain gender-disaggregated data.

**Building block 3.** Conduct regular robust gender-responsive HREDD, to identify, prevent, mitigate and remediate adverse human rights impacts.

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## PILLAR 2.

### Dismantle the structures, systems and norms that ignore, oppress and exclude women

Companies often struggle to understand their role in enabling and participating in systems and structures that overlook, undervalue and underpay women's work. To correct this, they must:

**Building block 4.** Centre women's voices and representation and uphold rights to social dialogue.

**Building block 5.** Address harmful social norms and business cultures.

**Building block 6.** Create supportive environments for recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care and domestic work.

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## PILLAR 3.

### Change the way you do business

At the core of why business has such negative impacts on women is how companies procure supplies, hire and reward workers, and have an impact on the environment. Unfortunately, far too often exploiting workers and externalizing costs onto local communities can be good for a company's bottom line, especially in the short term. Companies should:

**Building block 7.** Redress informal and precarious work.

**Building block 8.** Ensure safe working conditions and tackle gender-based violence and harassment.

**Building block 9.** Pay living wages throughout value chain and close any gender pay gaps.

**Building block 10.** Pay their fair share of tax – which can be invested in public services and care infrastructure, and thereby directly reward, reduce and recognize women's care work.

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## PILLAR 4.

### Rewire the system

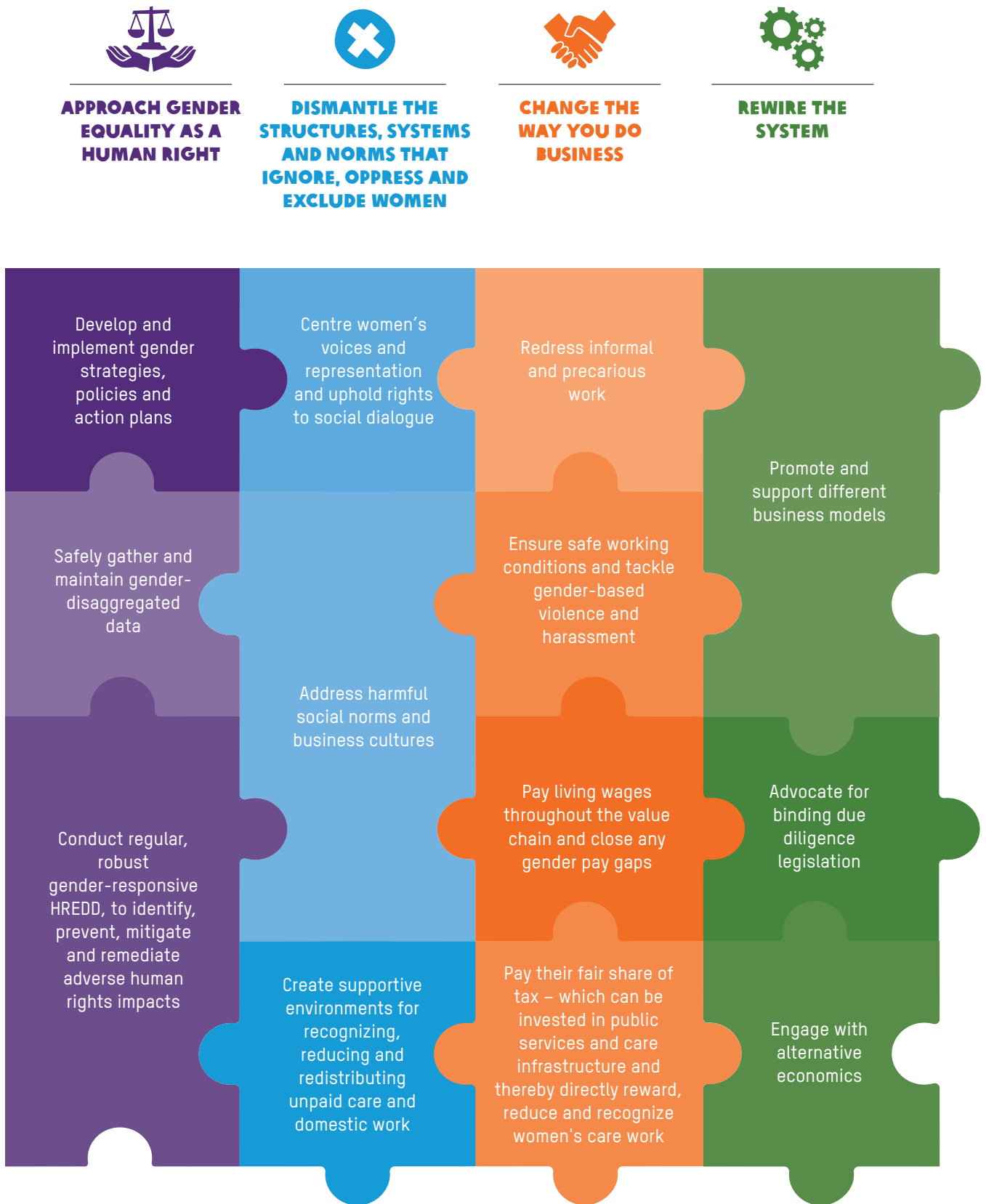
It is also important for companies to understand that individual company actions alone will not unilaterally reform the system. Respecting that governments' legislative role is fundamental alongside reforming business models, this means:

**Building block 11.** Promote and support different business models.

**Building block 12.** Advocate for binding due diligence legislation.

**Building block 13.** Engage with alternative economics.

Figure 2. Valuing women’s work framework for the private sector



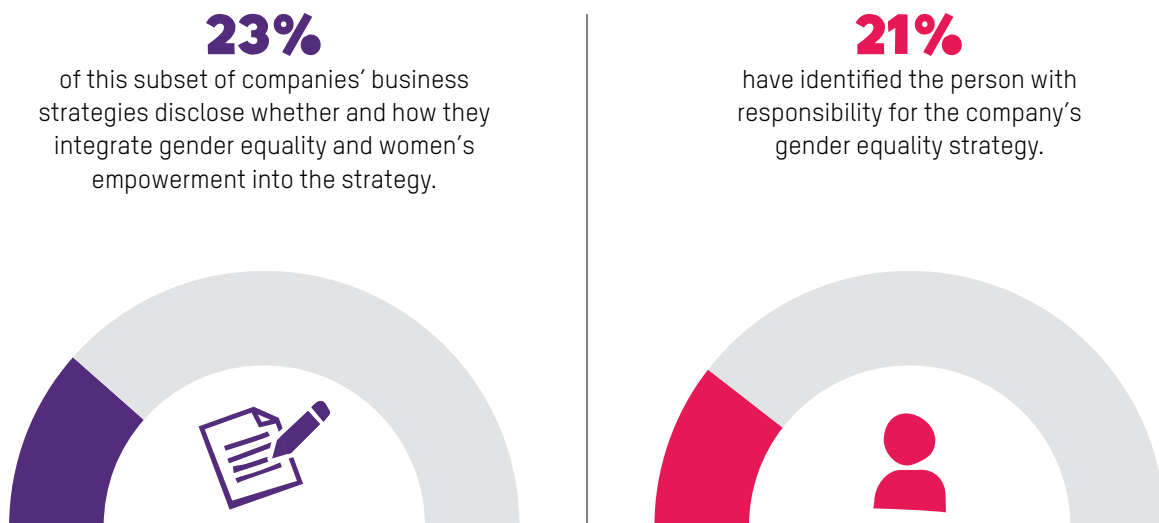
# 3.

## Pillar 1: Approach gender equality as a human right

### Building block 1. Develop and implement gender strategies, policies and action plans

At the outset, commitment is required at the director/board level and action across all the building blocks to see progress towards gender equality and justice. Companies need to develop a gender strategy with board/director-level accountability for implementation, accompanied by resources, policies and action plans that are based on gender-disaggregated data. It is disappointing then that the WBA 2023 Gender Assessment and 2023 Gender Benchmark<sup>17</sup> shows that companies have not got to grips with even the required foundational steps to progress towards gender equality: 74% of the 1,006 companies assessed have not yet made a public commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment.<sup>18</sup> Only 32% of the 1006 companies have identified specific, timebound targets on gender equality and women’s empowerment in their workplaces.<sup>19</sup> The in-depth assessments of 112 food and apparel companies in Figure 3 below shows that only 23% of this subset of companies’ business strategies disclose whether and how they integrate gender equality and women’s empowerment into the strategy. In the same subset, only 21% have identified the person with responsibility for the company’s gender equality strategy,<sup>20</sup> drawing attention to how these highly feminized sectors are failing women.

Figure 3. WBA 2023 Gender Benchmark: Assessment of food and apparel companies



Our own experience<sup>21</sup> tells us that unless a company has a strategy that recognizes specific gendered challenges, including root causes that have a disproportionate impact on women, they will be unable to make progress on gender equality.<sup>22</sup> The commitment to deliver a gender action plan should sit alongside a broader commitment and action plans to ensure decent work for all workers across value chains. Good corporate governance requires that companies have gender-responsive action plans co-created with affected communities and workers, with measurable targets, routine monitoring, and access to survivor-centred gender-responsive grievance mechanisms. The strategy should be a 'living document' to be cognizant of emerging challenges and issues and ensure women workers' rights are safeguarded during economic shocks, embedding learning from the recent experience of COVID-19. Strategies, policies and plans need to be publicly accessible to all, reinforced through management, training and induction, and available in relevant languages and formats (including verbally).

Gender strategies, policies and action plans require the following baseline commitments from companies:

- Making a public commitment to gender equality and women's human rights.
- Having a gender equality strategy applicable throughout the value chain, with clear targets, that is publicly available and accessible to all.
- Establishing senior leadership accountability for driving gender equality.
- Embedding gender equality in other decent work policies and ensuring that these proactively address any gendered issues that women face, such as occupational health and safety.
- Gendered HREDD through which the company identifies and discloses specific issues that disproportionately impact women in supply chains and seeks to address them.
- Meaningful consultation with employees and workers in value chains to inform its gender equality strategy.
- Regular public reports on progress on gender equality, including on targets, and sharing progress with workers and communities across the value chain.
- Robust, accessible and appropriate gender-responsive grievance mechanisms that are trust- and survivor-centred.
- Transparent targets to increase the proportion of its sourcing from women-owned enterprises.

## Building block 2. Safely gather and maintain gender-disaggregated data

A crucial starting point for companies is the collection of gender-disaggregated data on a range of issues such as staffing, roles, grievances and pay, and across value chains. We cannot solve problems we cannot see. Companies should work with gender experts, who have a specialist understanding of the root causes of gender inequality, to interpret the data. This is especially important where companies do not have in-house gender expertise, and where women workers' voices may be missing due to the nature, length and complexity of the value chain.

Companies should safely collect and maintain gender-disaggregated data as part of wider mandatory HREDD risk assessments to understand the risks facing diverse groups of workers. This can be through communities, including by engaging with local women's rights organizations, community groups and trade unions, while recognizing how these are also often skewed by unequal power relations according to gender, race, caste, class and so on.

Corporate metrics are needed that make women's informal and unpaid work visible, which can then be fed into further developing and refining gender strategies, policies and action plans.<sup>23</sup> WBA's assessment shows that gender-disaggregated data is a mixed bag. While it is positive that most companies (75%) disclose the gender balance across all employees, this is only in their own operations. On other crucial aspects, such as collecting and disclosing gender-disaggregated data on the employee's absenteeism levels, this drops to just 2% of companies, while a near invisible 0.2% collect gender-disaggregated grievance data.<sup>24</sup>

### Box 1. Protecting workers' data

Data is power and therefore needs to be collected, stored and used with care, in line with GDPR legislation<sup>25</sup> and rules which offer the highest benchmark of data protection standards. While disaggregated data is important, this should not compromise the safety or other rights of people to whom data belongs. Data collection must be based on the free, prior and informed consent of workers, which they understand can be withdrawn at any time. Companies must find ways to minimize the amount of personal data they collect, and ensure that there are tight restrictions on how, where and for how long it is stored and used.

Disaggregation needs to maintain anonymity; caution needs to be exercised if disaggregation results in being able to identify individuals. While disaggregation can help identify groups and enable bespoke interventions, being able to identify groups can also expose them to prejudice and compromise their safety. This harm could be from supervisors or other workers, but also possibly the state (for example, in countries where LGBTQIA+ people are criminalized, or where union activists and human rights defenders face persecution).

Gender disaggregation is important when analysing:

- the composition of a company's board of directors and senior executives.
- the company's workforce, including operations and value chains, with priority given to the highest-risk value chains.
- grievance data (e.g. the number of grievances reported and remediated).
- percentage of employees participating in professional development programmes.
- percentage of employees promoted.
- gender balance of the workforce by occupational function.
- employees' annual turnover and annual absenteeism levels.
- pay data, within and between bands.
- contract types.

## Building block 3. Conduct gender-responsive human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD)

HREDD is generally understood as a process by which companies can efficiently identify, prevent, mitigate and account for the negative impacts of their activities or those of their subsidiaries, subcontractors and suppliers.<sup>26</sup>

### Spotlight on human rights impact assessments (HRIAs)

It is crucial that companies are aware of the human rights risks associated with their operations or value chains, and how their own policies and practices may have negative impacts on people and the environment. However, the adverse impacts of corporate activities are by no means gender neutral. Pollution, land grabbing, exploitation of workers and violence against human rights defenders all have different and disproportionate effects on women.<sup>27</sup>

A useful tool for companies to understand and address these impacts are HRIAs, which are in-depth research studies to identify the negative human rights impacts of business activities, based on the perspectives of those affected, such as workers and community members. Conducting HRIAs can help companies to understand where and how their operations or sourcing activities are harming people, and subsequently to establish and implement action plans to address those negative impacts.<sup>28</sup>

For corporations, gender-responsive due diligence means ensuring that:

- there is explicit recognition that corporate activities are not gender neutral.
- the scope covers the entire value chain.
- compliance is in line with human rights instruments.
- action plans are co-created with affected communities and workers.
- there are measurable targets for salient gender issues, combined with routine monitoring.
- remediation processes are gender-responsive.
- companies address root causes, including purchasing practices.

Due diligence is not gender-responsive without proper stakeholder engagement, which should include women rightsholders and women's (rights) organizations.

**// Due diligence is not gender-responsive without proper stakeholder engagement, which should include women rightsholders and women's (rights) organizations. //**

# 4.

## Pillar 2: Dismantle the structures, systems and norms that ignore, oppress and exclude women

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### Building block 4. Centre women's voice and representation, and uphold rights to social dialogue

Women are too often overlooked or ignored, at all levels, from the factory or farm, to women in management or the boardroom. Centring the voices and perspectives of women, especially those at the intersections of multiple forms of discrimination, is essential in all activities tackling inequality, as is upholding their individual and collective rights to engage in social dialogue.

Companies need to introduce participative initiatives which capture and amplify women's voices within the workplace and ensure they make space, respect, listen, consult and *act* on the issues that women identify. These initiatives can range from social dialogue, including through trade unions, women's rights organizations and workers' organizations, anonymous worker surveys, or facilitated gender focus groups and workshops. Care needs to be taken to include all women workers, ideally in separate and safe spaces, keeping in mind that women are not homogenous and face different forms of discrimination or barriers to participation. Where literacy levels are low, written surveys and apps should be accompanied or replaced by safe spaces for dialogue. Communication should be available in different languages and formats.

Companies should actively support the right of all workers to freedom of association and to join or form a union. It is shocking that WBA data revealed that only 3% of companies can demonstrate how they support their suppliers' practices on freedom of association and collective bargaining.<sup>29</sup> Unionising has supported a shift in power from employers to workers, including by raising awareness among workers of their rights, creating better conditions for workers, and platforms for fair dialogue and bargaining between workers and companies. While many unions are working hard to improve their representation of and engagement with women, and to centre women's voices and priorities,<sup>30</sup> traditionally unions have been dominated by men and have not given sufficient attention to gender inequality concerns. Engaging with feminist organizations, women's rights organizations, and formal and informal women workers' groups will help enable women's voices to be heard within mainstream union spaces.

WBA data shows that while most companies (75%) collect data on the gender composition of their workforce, only 15% maintain gender balance (of 40 to 60%) across all employees.



This decreases at different levels of leadership: 16% of companies maintain gender balance at the board level, 10% at executive management, 7% at senior management and 9% at middle and other management. This raises questions as to whether companies can track and understand women's voices across the workforce and supply chains.<sup>31</sup> True diversity and inclusion will ensure representation of different groups at all levels, including leadership, workforce and by occupation.<sup>32</sup>

At a minimum, getting to grips with women's voice and representation requires that companies:

- have employee participation initiatives that centre and amplify the voices of diverse women and integrate employee feedback into company policies and practices.
- require their suppliers to recognize collective bargaining and engage with trade unions, women's rights organizations and/or workers' groups.
- ensure that policies are free from unfair discrimination and equal opportunity policies apply across supply chains.
- have gender-balanced representation at all levels of leadership and workforce, and by function.
- provide financial incentives for suppliers' non-discriminatory practices and proactive measures to support women in recruitment and hiring, employment and retention, and promotion, across value chains.
- reduce the number of workers on informal contracts. Workers on less secure contracts are unlikely to speak up.

## Building block 5. Address harmful social norms, business culture and practices

Among the root causes for gender inequality are patriarchal social norms, which in turn shape and inform business cultures and practices. Harmful social norms are prevalent in and outside of the workplace. These are often gendered and integrated throughout a person's lifecycle, from early childhood onwards. They inform attitudes, behaviours and practices within workplaces. For women, harmful social norms will often draw boundaries across a range of work-related areas, including women's voice, leadership, career progression, pay, dress, the kind of work they do (including operating machinery) and access to spaces and resources, including workers' groups and training opportunities. Reductive stereotypes are harmful for both women and men, especially when people attempt to break or do not conform with these norms.

One key way that companies can have an impact on norms is through advertising and marketing. Advertising can either positively or negatively affect how girls and women are perceived and treated in society. Companies urgently need to move away from harmful sexist portrayals of women in advertising, such as the perfect housewife and the pleasing woman. Social norms are held in place by the narratives we weave.

Misogyny and racism are also apparent in the products that companies sell. One example is skin-whitening cosmetic creams that are widely considered to be racist and white-centric, promoting anti-Black racism and privileging the white gaze and white-supremacist beauty standards.<sup>33</sup> The psychological harm these products have caused to their targeted audiences in Asia, the Middle East and Africa has had an impact on generations of Black, Asian and Middle Eastern women, especially those with dark skin and those who do not fit within the beauty standards being promoted by these products.<sup>34</sup>

Companies often think workplaces are gender neutral and, therefore, do not see their role in shifting social norms. A starting point for these shifts includes companies:

- making a public commitment and taking action to address negative gender stereotypes in their marketing campaigns and calling on others to do the same.
- taking action to remove and avoid discriminatory marketing practices such as selling equivalent products at a higher price for women.<sup>35</sup>
- engaging and influencing others, including the government and private sector, to address the root causes of gender inequality in its supply chains.
- undertaking advocacy towards governments (including sourcing country governments) to address systemic labour rights issues within value chains.

## Building block 6. Recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work

Perhaps the biggest unrecognized contribution of women to society, business and the economy is the vastly unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work that falls on women and girls. The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that if such services were valued based on an hourly minimum wage, they would amount to 9% of global gross domestic product (GDP) or US\$11 trillion (purchasing power parity in 2011).<sup>36</sup>

This undervaluing negates the true value women bring to societies and economies and deepens inequalities. A manifestation of patriarchal norms, women's unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work is a major barrier to education and training, decent work, and participation in political decision-making. This is particularly the case for women living in countries and contexts where governments lack resources to adequately invest in quality, universal public services.<sup>37</sup>

Reframing the narrative on unpaid care and domestic work towards being a collective responsibility, and a social and economic policy issue, is critical to increase government and private sector investment in care and supporting infrastructure and services, and the development of transformative care policies. Ultimately, valuing care as a social good and an essential part of the economy is key to achieving an economy that values wellbeing and equality over growth and extraction.

However, the basics are needed from companies, as only 7% of the WBA sample have a global policy of providing at least fourteen weeks of paid primary carer leave offered to direct full-time employees or provide at least two weeks of paid secondary carer leave. Given that women in supply chains are often not on full-time contracts, these policies, already dire in their coverage, may be leaving many people out, showing how little companies are doing to redress unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>38</sup>

Companies need to recognize that their women workers may be undertaking high levels of unpaid care and domestic work, and support their rights as carers, while enacting measures to reduce and redistribute women's unequal share. A starting point can be through undertaking a rapid care analysis<sup>39</sup> to fully understand the issues women workers may be facing, and the introduction of policies such as enhanced paid maternity and parental leave, paid carer leave, paid breastfeeding breaks and flexible working.

The following commitments, implemented throughout supply chains, can form an important base for companies getting to grips with unpaid care and domestic work:

- Pay their fair share of taxes and provide transparent country-by-country reporting.<sup>40</sup>
- Provide at least 14 weeks of paid primary carer leave to full-time and part-time employees, in line with ILO standards.
- Monitor the return-to-work rate of employees after primary carer leave and their retention a year after such leave.

**// Ultimately, valuing care as a social good and an essential part of the economy is key to achieving an economy that values wellbeing and equality over growth and extraction. //**

- Implement concrete actions that promote the return to work and retention of workers after primary care leave.
- Provide at least two weeks of paid secondary carer leave to all employees, in accordance with ILO standards.
- Track the number of workers who take secondary carer leave.
- Offer childcare and/or other support to its employees.
- Offer flexible working hours to its employees.

## Private sector rapid care analysis toolkit

Oxfam has recently developed a private sector rapid care analysis (PS RCA) toolkit,<sup>41</sup> which aims to help management and workers to understand the heavy responsibility and long hours of unpaid care and domestic work done by workers, particularly women workers, and together to come up with a set of recommendations and actions to address these. The process enables deeper analysis of how workplace policies and practices interact with workers' unpaid care and domestic work, given that gender audits alone seldom focus on this work. A PS RCA is not a replacement for an audit but fills a gap, as employers take action to support workers' unpaid care and domestic work, which can have long-term impacts on the social norms around such work in the household and in communities.

Before engaging in a PS RCA, it is important to understand that invisible or visible power relations may prevent workers from disclosing sensitive information. Taking part in a company-led focus group discussion or dialogue may expose certain workers, making them vulnerable to retaliation (harassment at work, risk of being excluded from job promotions, risk of losing one's job, and so on). Therefore, it is important to ensure that confidentiality and anonymity are maintained throughout the process, data protection measures taken, and additional safeguarding measures are put in place, including assigning a safeguarding focal point and sharing information on safeguarding reporting channels.

### Box 2. Insights from the PS RCA toolkit pilot in Indonesia and Philippines

Oxfam has been piloting the PS RCA toolkit in different contexts with different types and sizes of businesses, such as a medium-sized seafood processor and exporter, and micro-, small- and medium-sized businesses':

**Buy-in from the company management at all levels and workers is crucial for long-term sustainable change in policy and practice,** from action planning on unpaid care and domestic work and developing and implementing policies, such as flexible working, that address this.

**Context matters in designing solutions.** It is imperative to incorporate socio-cultural understanding of the context in which companies and workers operate. Cultural nuances determine the appropriate solutions and recommendations that align with workers' needs.

**Orientation and refresher of policies.** Businesses should conduct regular refresher orientation (in appropriate languages and formats) on policies, such as flexible work arrangements, paid leave, eligibility requirements for leave, credit and cash advances or emergency loans, to encourage new and existing workers to utilize these, as well as to raise awareness.

**Workers are not a homogeneous group.** Diverse workers across the value chain need to be engaged: women on lower incomes and those in informal work take on even greater unpaid care and domestic workloads, for example, collecting firewood for cooking and fetching water. As they are disproportionately affected, with limited or no access to energy and labour-saving devices, they may require distinct actions.

# 5.

## Pillar 3: Change the way you do business

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### Building block 7. Redress informal and precarious work

Globalization has drawn millions of women into paid employment across the majority world. Today, supermarkets and clothing stores source products from farms and factories worldwide made by women workers. At the beginning of their supply chains, most workers – picking and packing fruit, sewing garments, cutting flowers – are women. Many workers toil in conditions of informality, including many home-based workers. Informal work refers to work and employment which is low-paid (often at subsistence level), insecure, unregulated and unprotected – without an employment contract or access to representation and social protection, such as paid parental leave, paid sick leave and holidays. Informal work transfers social and economic risks from businesses onto workers, and encompasses unregistered employment, casual or day labour, unpaid family labour and self-employment, among others.<sup>42</sup>

Informality creates precariousness, where workers have no job security or social protection and do not earn enough to maintain a decent standard of living, including having little or no resilience to shocks.

Informality is driven by prevailing business models that place downward pressure on suppliers in terms of wages and working conditions. This is backed by evidence from WBA's in-depth review of 112 food and apparel companies, where only 35% require that their suppliers employ workers through formal contracts.<sup>43</sup> This is concerning considering that both are highly feminized sectors and with a high degree of informality.<sup>44</sup>

There are a range of interventions that the private sector can introduce through work policies and practices, such as contracts for workers, improved pay and access to healthcare, all designed to support workers and tackle informal and precarious work. These include:

- sourcing practices that do not drive down wages and conditions, and compel suppliers to outsource to ever lower-paid, more informal workers.
- monitoring and reducing precarious work, including by improving conditions for precarious workers while safeguarding their jobs.
- upholding decent work principles as part of gender and human rights strategies, including contracts, living wages and social protection.
- requiring suppliers to offer their workers formal contracts.
- requiring financial and other support to suppliers to support formal work.

## Building block 8. Tackle gender-based violence and harassment

Sexual harassment and violence against women and girls as well as LGBTQIA+ people is not bound by geography or culture – it is a global crisis.<sup>45</sup> Gender inequality is both the cause and consequence of gender-based violence and harassment; one-third of women will experience violence at some point in their life.<sup>46</sup>

ILO Convention 190 is the first international treaty to recognize the right of everyone to a workplace free from violence and harassment. While some governments around the world have ratified the convention,<sup>47</sup> more must follow suit, ensuring that national laws and policies, and implementation, are in place to prevent and address gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work. This violence extends to human rights defenders and trade unionists.

Across all sectors, poor purchasing practices create an enabling environment for perpetrators of gender-based violence and harassment – it is workers, particularly women workers, who pay the price when companies exert pressure to get more products and services for less money at pace. In-depth research into the highly feminized apparel and food sectors shows that the feminization of these sectors is the cause and consequence of informality and precarious work,<sup>48</sup> which consequently is likely to see increased instances of gender-based violence and harassment.

A BBC documentary in 2023 that highlighted widespread sexual exploitation in Kenya's tea sector<sup>49</sup> was a stark reminder of why companies need to recognize that outsourcing contracting, downward price pressures and insecure work contracts create a perfect situation where women are exploited. When companies rely on outsourced temporary contracts, fear of losing a job or the desperation to retain one, stigma, victim-shaming/blaming, inadequate accountability mechanisms and cultures of impunity often create barriers to women feeling able to report instances of gender-based violence and harassment.

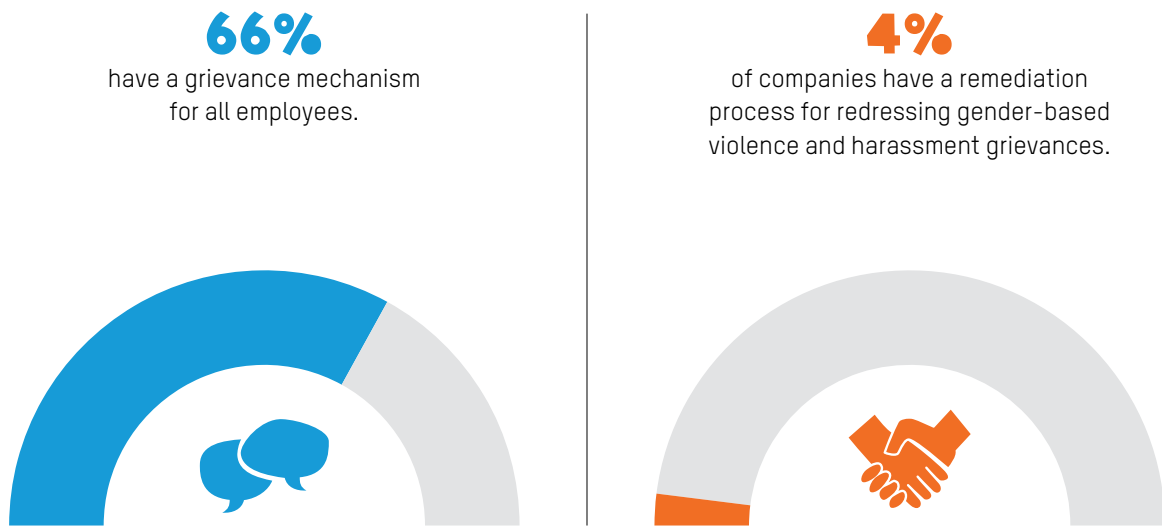
A report by Global Labor Justice (GLJ) and Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA),<sup>50</sup> released as part of their #GarmentMeToo campaign, exposes how physical and verbal abuse, coercion, threats and deprivations of liberty are tied to workers' ability to reach production targets. Violence is perpetrated against women workers, including verbal, physical and sexual abuse, harassment and bullying, as way to control and subordinate women.<sup>51</sup>

Survivor-centric approaches informed by women workers themselves are necessary to ensure appropriate and accessible ways to report gender-based violence and harassment that allow for anonymity. This needs to happen alongside creating workplace cultures where perpetrators are unable to thrive and hold onto their positions. Reporting mechanisms need to be coupled with the acute understanding that gender-based violence and harassment is a systemic social issue, and companies need to take responsibility for their complicity and recognize where their actions and inactions enable violence to take place, creating a culture of impunity.

WBA's assessment<sup>52</sup> shows that while companies have policies and general grievance mechanisms in place, almost all fail to specifically address gender-based violence and harassment, particularly regarding remediation: 66% of companies have a publicly available policy on gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace and 66% have a grievance mechanism for all employees. Yet, only 4% of companies have a remediation process for redressing gender-based violence and harassment grievances. The data in figure 4 (p.22) shows a token effort to address gender-based violence and harassment. The absence of remediation fails women and undermines faith in reporting mechanisms. Requiring suppliers to have policies without financial incentives and ensuring that reporting and redress mechanisms are resourced, pays lip service to gender equality commitments.

**// Poor purchasing practices create an enabling environment for perpetrators of gender-based violence and harassment – it is workers, particularly women workers, who pay the price when companies exert pressure to get more products and services for less money at pace. //**

Figure 4. WBA 2023 Gender Benchmark: Grievance mechanisms and remedies.



To tackle gender-based violence and harassment, companies should have the following basic measures in place as an important starting point:

- Publicly available policies regarding gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace (e.g. zero tolerance policy, safe transport policy).
- Mandatory training on gender-based violence and harassment for all employees and require suppliers to also provide such training.
- Accessible, appropriate, survivor-centred remediation mechanisms and processes for addressing gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace and for women community members to seek redress in operations and supply chains.
- Require suppliers to have a grievance mechanism in place for workers and women community members.
- Monitor its suppliers' remediation process for addressing grievances filed by their workers and members of local communities.
- Provide financial support to its suppliers to prevent gender-based violence and harassment in the supply chain.
- Collect, analyse and monitor gender-disaggregated data on the remediation of gender-based violence and harassment grievances at least annually.
- Address gender-based violence and harassment as part of gendered human rights due diligence processes.

## Building block 9. Pay living wages and close gender pay gaps

### Living wages

It is important to note that even minimum wages are still not consistently paid in supply chains, especially to women, who frequently face barriers to the freedom of association which is vital in pushing for higher wages and rights.<sup>53</sup> Many lack contracts or are on short-term, daily wage, seasonal, piece rate or part-time contracts. Women tend to be segregated into the lowest paid sectors and roles, and paid less than men in equivalent roles.<sup>54</sup> The fact that a paltry 3% of the 1,006 companies assessed by WBA take specific actions to help ensure suppliers pay their workers a living wage<sup>55</sup> partly explains why so many people in work around the world continue to live in poverty.

A living wage is defined as the wage received for a standard work week that is the minimum needed to afford a decent standard of living in a specific location for the worker and their family. A living wage gap is the difference between actual wages and living wages. A living wage is considered the floor, not the ceiling.

However, signs of change can be seen. Stemming from the legacy of the FairTrade movement and campaigns calling out the injustice of poverty, many retailers have started to make public commitments<sup>56</sup> on living wages within their supply chains. These commitments are long overdue and welcome in the context of the low wages paid historically, for instance, to global agricultural workers and farmers, who are the backbone of our food system. Given that retailers and support organizations are working in this area from the top down, it is important to centre workers, recognizing that living wage benchmarks are not silver bullets. As the benchmarks and commitments on living wages mature, stakeholders should:

- Recognize collective bargaining and trade union rights as key ways for workers to demand higher wages. Living wage commitments should not be used to circumvent unions, collective bargaining and what it means to uphold freedom of association: if these rights were realized in full, there would be no need for living wage benchmarks.
- Recognize the vital role of workers and their unions when establishing living wage figures – workers should have meaningful input into what is required for their own decency.
- Avoid exacerbating gender inequality in living wage benchmarks. Many benchmarks do not routinely include childcare and education provision for children under the age of five, unless this is provided by the state. Companies should be aware that childcare costs do not evaporate when no official provision is provided; rather the cost is absorbed by unpaid carers, in many contexts, women and girls who may miss out on school or other crucial activities.

The following measures can help create the basis for a living wage:

- Commit to, and pay, a living wage throughout supply chains.
- Review and change purchasing practices that place downward pressure on prices and wages, for example:
  - recognize the importance of stable and long-term business commitments with supply chain partners. Fix this through fair sharing of risk in contracts, commitment to longer-term, more stable contracts and reducing punitive hedging mechanisms.
  - redress precarious work caused by informal contracts by ensuring job security through permanent contracts.
- Monitor that suppliers are paying a living wage.

- Provide financial incentives within supply chains to facilitate the paying of a living wage.
- Recognize and respect the rights of workers to form and join a trade union and engage in collective bargaining over wages and terms of work.

## Gender pay gap

In 2022, the difference between average hourly earnings for men and women in the UK was 15%, with women aged over 40 experiencing the biggest gap.<sup>57</sup> Disturbingly, disaggregated data shows that this is even worse for many Black, Asian and minority ethnic women. Data from the Office for National Statistics in 2018 indicates considerable disparities in pay, depending on the nature of employment. Black employees earn on average 9% less, while employees of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage earn 17% and 20% less than white employees, respectively.<sup>58</sup> Globally, women earn 17% less than men on average.<sup>59</sup> WBA data shows a dismal picture in which only 3% of companies disclose the ratio of the basic salary of women to men in their total direct operations for each employee category. Unless gendered issues are actively brought to the fore, tackling gender equality will not be possible, including tracking the gendered outcomes of compensation and benefits policies.<sup>60</sup>

Factors that contribute to the gender pay gap include labour market segregation, low benchmarking of women's starting salaries, disparity in pay negotiations at the start and during employment, and women being allocated lower-paid roles and having lower rates of promotion, due to actual or assumed maternity leave and childcare and women taking on flexible roles that pay less. This is also linked to caring responsibilities – the 'motherhood penalty' and the 'fatherhood dividend'<sup>61</sup> – which drive economic inequality both during women's working lives and into retirement.

Closing gender pay gaps is intrinsically linked to other issues covered in this paper, including collecting gender-disaggregated data, getting gender-balanced representation at all levels, addressing unpaid care and domestic work, and supporting suppliers' non-discriminatory practices. Currently, companies are not only forcing women, their families and communities to live in poverty, they are shifting the costs for upholding their right to a dignified standard of living to the state, and then undermining the state's ability to do this when they don't pay their fair share of tax.

## Building block 10. Pay a fair share of tax

Across the issues identified by building blocks, the private sector plays a role in exacerbating the situation when companies fail to pay their fair share of tax. In particular, by depriving governments of much-needed resources to invest in public services and infrastructure that can redistribute women's unpaid care work, such as health and education, water and sanitation, and social protection. Even when not acting illegally, businesses frequently use sophisticated tax planning and global networks of tax havens to take advantage of a broken system that allows them to get away with paying less than their fair share. Businesses need to comply with the spirit as well as the letter of the tax laws and regulations of the countries in which they operate.<sup>62</sup>



# 6.

## Pillar 4: Rewire the system

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**//The current economic system has delivered the intersecting crises of climate, ecological breakdown and inequality. It has sought growth at any cost, and has treated the earth, nature and people carelessly in pursuit of profit.//**

Women's Environment Network, 2022 Feminist Green New Deal<sup>63</sup>

This section focuses on the role of sectors, coalitions and associations in the wider systems change required for a kinder, fairer world.

### **Building block 11. Promote and support different business models**

Systems change necessitates action beyond that of individual business: it requires governance rooted in democratic accountability to citizens. However, businesses have an important role to play. Social enterprises, worker-owned and led cooperatives, purpose/mission-led businesses and FairTrade enterprises are examples of the diverse range of alternative models that aim to value the rights and wellbeing of workers, communities, and the environment over returns to shareholders. While these business models are typically small-scale and not transferable wholesale to multinationals, many of their values and practices, such as mutuality, cooperativism, equity and representation, could be adapted and adopted by major companies.<sup>64</sup>

### **Building block 12. Advocate for mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD)**

Governments' failure to regulate,<sup>65</sup> and the lack of effective due diligence obligations with meaningful consequences for non-compliance<sup>66</sup> continue to be major obstacles to a more just, sustainable world. There is heavy reliance on voluntary business approaches, while complex corporate structures allow companies to evade responsibility. The need for mandatory HREDD is urgent. The case studies by the Corporate Justice Coalition show that postponing action on human rights perpetuates a situation where companies are allowed to profit from forced labour in their global supply chains; where local communities and Indigenous peoples are branded as criminals, attacked and murdered for defending our planet; where workers live in fear of their life-threatening working conditions; where women suffer from gender-based discrimination and low wages that deny them dignity; and where victims of abuse are made to wait for more than a decade for justice.<sup>67</sup>

WBA's 2022 Social Transformation Baseline Assessment showed that 78% of companies are still not taking HREDD steps,<sup>68</sup> highlighting that voluntary measures can only go so far. WBA's 2023 Gender Assessment underscores how such HREDD processes must have

a gender lens, as even though women's rights are fundamental to all companies, only a disappointing 6% of companies in the sample assess and prioritize gender-related human rights impacts as salient.

In the UK, despite hosting many companies with vast global value chains spread across the world, the government is yet to implement mandatory due diligence legislation. Therefore, a key demand from Oxfam, alongside other members of the Corporate Justice Coalition, is for a new British law against human rights abuses and environmental destruction in supply chains everywhere – a Business, Human Rights and Environment Act.<sup>69</sup> This should be modelled on the world-leading 'failure to prevent'<sup>70</sup> model of the 2010 Bribery Act – as already recommended by Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights<sup>71</sup> and identified as legally feasible by the British Institute of International and Comparative Law. Across Europe, legislation introducing binding HREDD is being adopted. After France in 2017<sup>72</sup> and Germany in 2021,<sup>73</sup> the European Commission has proposed binding due diligence legislation for the entire EU.<sup>74</sup>

Companies that have not already called for binding due diligence legislation should join their peers in the UK<sup>75</sup> and EU<sup>76</sup> calling for this. Across the world, there is the need to support such instruments.<sup>77</sup> A binding UN treaty to hold corporations and other business accountable for rights abuses, accompanied by robust national action plans, would help to dismantle the current architecture of corporate abuse and impunity affecting people.<sup>78</sup>

**// A binding UN treaty to hold corporations and other business accountable for rights abuses, accompanied by robust national action plans, would help to dismantle the current architecture of corporate abuse and impunity affecting people. //**

### Building block 13. Engage with alternative economics

Our predominant economic system is obsessed with GDP growth and profit. GDP measures the sale of arms and oil but ignores the value of peace and clean air. It fails to measure wealth inequality, climate breakdown, unpaid care and much informal labour, social cohesion and more, nor does it take account of how GDP growth in one country is based on unequal power relations and economic rules that enable exploitation of another. The role of companies in contributing to many of these issues has been highlighted throughout this briefing. It is a system focused on unfettered shareholder profits and as such fails all but the top 1%. Where economic growth is rooted in exploitation, women have been consistently feeling the impacts.

Alternatives to GDP are being trialled and adopted all over the world, from Scotland to Nepal and Wales to New Zealand. Other initiatives include the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), the Wellbeing Economy Alliance (WEAll),<sup>79</sup> the Degrowth movement<sup>80</sup> and Doughnut Economics.<sup>81</sup> All are designed to help create an economy that promotes wellbeing, shares value and opportunity far more equitably with all those who co-create it, and does so within planetary boundaries. These shifts signal a need for companies to urgently rethink how they operate and the impact they are having on workers, communities and the environment.

# 7.

## Conclusion

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**//The task is clear: to create a culture of caretaking in which no one or nowhere is thrown away, in which the inherent value of people and all life is foundational.//**

Naomi Klein, author and social activist<sup>82</sup>

The work that women do – both paid and unpaid – comprises an essential but undervalued part of the economy. Societies, economies and companies could not function without their unpaid care work and underpaid work, while companies profit significantly both from this as well as wider forms of gender-based discrimination, such as the gender wage gap and the driving of informality that has a disproportionate impact on women workers in global value chains. The scale of inequality and discrimination that women face across the world is staggering and is unacceptable.

Viewing the issues through a gender-transformative human rights lens fundamentally changes how companies analyse sustainable development problems, prioritize them, attribute responsibilities, set targets and design interventions. Respecting women's rights and human rights more widely does not mean only minimizing negative impacts; it means enabling positive outcomes by creating a more conducive environment in which human rights can be realized and ensuring accountability and remediation where violations have occurred.

New laws on HREDD would increase protection for individuals and communities, workers, human rights defenders and the environment. They would create clarity and a level playing field for companies and give consumers the confidence that human rights abuses and environmental damage are not part of the price tag for products.

There is also a need to fundamentally change the dominant public and institutional narratives, so that they value care and informal work and recognize these as work. Finally, economic metrics need to change to ones that ensure that care and informal work are measured, recognized and endorsed. The private sector has a vital role to play and is in a powerful position to challenge the current dysfunctional narrative around women's work and implement transformational change. The 13 building blocks set out in this briefing offer a pathway for companies to begin that journey.

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