



# CHANGE THE WAY YOU DO BUSINESS:

Leading with women workers voices

**ISSUE 2** Briefings for Business on Valuing Women's Work



This second briefing in the *Briefings for Business on Valuing Women's Work* series explores how systemic business practices perpetuate gender inequality through informal work, particularly in feminised sectors with large numbers of women workers, like tea and garment. Through women workers' voices and case studies, the briefing reveals how patriarchal norms and inequitable practices exacerbate vulnerabilities and ruin lives. The briefing highlights the need for companies to address informal and precarious work, ensure safe conditions, tackle sexual and gender-based violence and pay living wages to advance gender equality and decent work. It also underscores the importance of fair corporate tax contributions to support public services, infrastructure and social protection. It calls for private sector accountability to create equitable and sustainable value chains, in order to make the vision of valuing women's work a reality.

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This publication is accompanied by two case study reports, *'Tea Leaves a Mark: The voice of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Kenya's tea estates'*, written by Gregory Mwendwa Kiio and commissioned by Wangu Kanja Foundation in 2024, and *'From Exploited to Unemployed: The women in Leicester left behind by fast fashion outsourcing. Interviews with Leicester garment workers'*, commissioned by Labour Behind the Label in 2022–23. This briefing paper quotes and draws upon the women's voices from these two papers. For the full stories of the women workers in Kenya's tea estates and the UK's garment factories, please read the case study reports.

For further information or to comment on this paper, please email [policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk)

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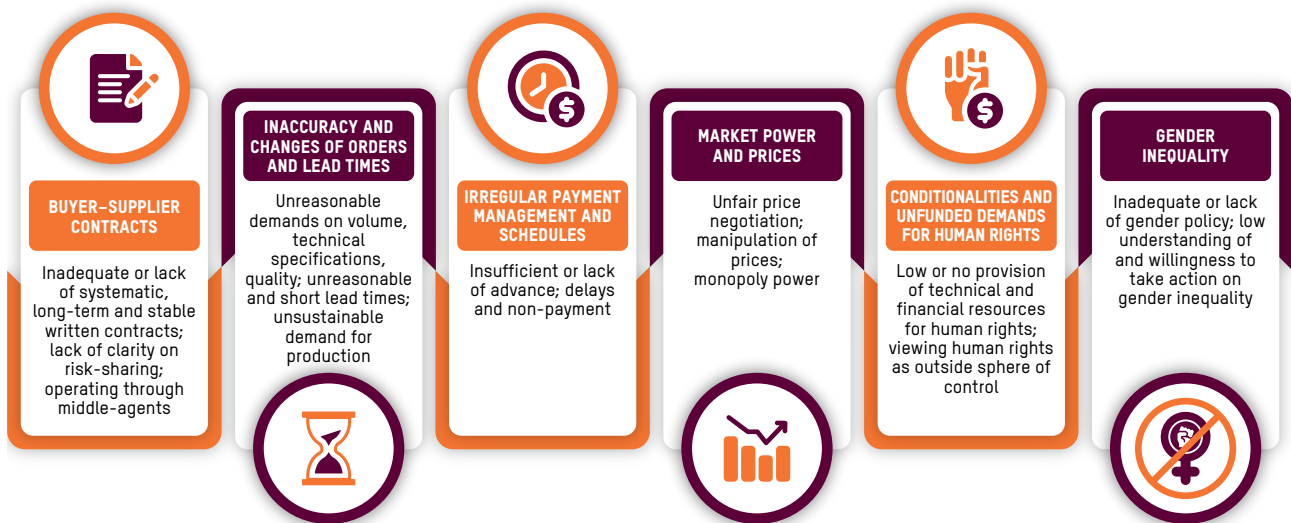
# Executive summary

Global value chains account for 60% of global trade and employ around 17 million people across the world.<sup>1</sup> Many argue these have brought about unprecedented growth, wealth and jobs, fuelling labour-intensive and export-driven economies.<sup>2</sup> Labour-intensive value chains have also boosted women's labour force participation rates,<sup>3</sup> however, much of this work, particularly in feminized value chains, has come in the form of exploitative informal and precarious work – and with human rights abuses.<sup>4</sup>

Modern business practices, such as, purchasing practices stem from colonial legacies, which place profit and the pursuit of growth over people and planet. Numerous multinational corporations and companies owe their origins, wealth, power and growth to colonialism.<sup>5</sup> Today, the wealth of these companies is largely extracted from the Global South in raw materials, cheap labour and power imbalances in trade. The value of exploited labour by workers in the Global South amounted to €16.9 trillion in 2021, representing 826 billion hours of work.<sup>6</sup> The continuation of colonial legacies in business and unfair purchasing practices exacerbate and lead to poor working conditions.

Purchasing practices, such as, the absence of contracts, inaccuracy of orders, irregular payment and management schedules and market power and prices squeeze suppliers of vital resources, which ultimately lead to workers, especially women at the bottom of value chains, paying the price.<sup>7</sup> In addition, conditionalities and unfunded demands for human rights and low understanding of and lack of willingness to take action on gender equality, coupled, with the lack of robust legislation mandating human rights due diligence,<sup>8</sup> results in human rights in value chains being voluntary with haphazard progress.

Figure 1. Unfair and irresponsible purchasing practices



As a result of pressure from buyers, suppliers often resort to informal and precarious labour to cut costs, impacting women workers the most.<sup>9</sup> This is particularly evident in feminized value chains, such as, tea and garments where the bulk of informal workers are women. The women's voices featured in this report: Grace, Jackie, Cecilia, Scholastica and Mercy (former tea pluckers in Kenya's Kericho County)<sup>10</sup> and Kumari Nayana, Sultana, Maya and Neetu (working in garment factors in Leicester, UK),<sup>11</sup> alongside women garment sector workers from Asia,<sup>12</sup> have never met, yet their experiences of working conditions are alarmingly similar.

Downward pressure on unit costs in value chains leads to recruitment practices focused on hiring workers at the lowest possible cost, ultimately targeting those living in poverty. As a result, many women workers are hired on informal and short-term temporary contracts, with little job security, poor wages, few labour protections and low levels of collective bargaining. Instead, their work is fuelled with high-levels of SGBV as a result of abuse of power by managers and supervisors, and the desperation to secure and meet livelihood needs. Women from marginalised communities based on race, migrant status, caste, tribe, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, etc., are worse off. Isolation and low-levels of confidence in grievance mechanisms lead to many cases going unreported and cultures of impunity in workplaces.

The gulf between wages and profits is evident where workers in the tea sector, for example, receive just 1–2%<sup>13</sup> of the price of the tea, while wholesalers and retailers capture 45% of the price consumers pay.<sup>14</sup> Living wages and living income are far from reach with minimum wage non-compliance across the garment sector in Asia estimated to be 25–50%.<sup>15</sup> Poverty wages, coupled, with poor working conditions and inadequate public services, infrastructure and social protection, lock women and their families in cycles of intergenerational poverty. This is reflective also of a wider broken economic system where governments lose vital resources through corporate tax abuse and evasion and from the collapse of corporate taxation. In 2024 alone, tax abuse cost the world an estimated of US\$492bn.<sup>16</sup> While higher-income countries lose revenues equivalent to an average 7% of their public health budgets, lower-income countries, where the majority of women informal workers live, lose on average five times that amount, reaching up to 36%.<sup>17</sup> When states fail to allocate sufficient resources to healthcare, education and justice systems, the impacts on women are acute, with women incurring additional out-of-pocket expenses, such as, those on private healthcare, legal costs and childcare.

A critical first step is recognizing these links to solving the root causes of a capitalist, patriarchal, racist, classist and heteronormative system that is propped up through the exploitation of labour and the environment. Gender inequality is not inevitable but can be tackled by companies making different choices. A transformative approach to gender justice for businesses means ensuring decent work, including living wages, and upholding rights to unionize and engage in collective bargaining. It requires creating safe and violence-free working environments by restoring confidence in survivors through accountable grievance mechanisms and effective remediation, and implementing business models and practices that do not drive informality. Lastly, it recognizes the critical role companies can play in wider societies, which starts with paying their fair share of tax in the countries in which they do business.

As part of Oxfam's Valuing Women's Work framework for business on gender equality and decent work, we call on companies to 'change the way you do business'.<sup>18</sup> This includes:

1. Recognize *colonial legacies and the transformative role that businesses can play in bringing about decent work for women workers in their value chains*;
2. Commit and take action *on corporate human rights and tax abuses*;
3. Review and change *unfair business purchasing practices*;
4. Remedy *women survivors of SGBV and workers*; and
5. Advocate *for transformative approaches to gender equality and decent work in businesses and value chains*

Figure 2. Call to action



# Endnotes

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