

Workshop The Chain of Clothes

The garment industry is a very important industry for women, on both the consumer and production side. Moderator of the workshop **Jolein Baidenmann** sees that some progress has been made to improve the situation of women in the garment industry but we are definitely not there yet.

The garment industry in India is the second largest industry in terms of employment. **Sonajharia Minz**, Association for Democratic Socialism, India, is asked about the working conditions of women in both the rural and urban areas of India. Minz remarks that the problematic, cheap factories are mostly located in the areas neighbouring the larger cities. She provides a simple yet convincing example of how women are still discriminated and treated unequally: “When we started to talk about gender sensitivity twenty years ago, we were talking about toilets in schools for girls, because in many places there were none.” Most of the basic infrastructure for women is lacking in terms of bathrooms, washing facilities or a daytime crèche for children. By providing basic infrastructure we can have a huge impact on the lives of girls and women.

Another question to Minz: what will be the biggest challenge in the coming 5 to 10 years for the garment industry in India? We have an almost 30 years old model in the garment industry which is called SEWA: Self-Employed Women’s Association. Through this model, we must try to educate the women at home, provide them with basic, legal rights, and their collective rights as a group. We must provide them with training so they can handle their own bank account and finances. Improving the small things will have the biggest impact.

Lilianne Ploumen, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation, was asked about her trade mission to India and how she was going to debate the garment issue there. Ploumen remarks that besides India, talks will also be held with Pakistan, Cambodia and Myanmar. Because when we look at the chain of clothes, we have to be aware that it is not only one country where there are issues. The whole production process of the garment industry must be scrutinized. Among other things we talk with the Indian government about corporate responsibility and child labour, these issues will be part of the bilateral conversations. Another important step has been the exchange of information at the government level. We need to involve everyone in the chain of clothes, but one step at a time.

Recently Ploumen reprimanded Zara in Brazil. Baidenmann was therefore interested in Ploumen’s unique position as a Minister for Trade and Aid: what are her arguments to work directly with the companies and what has been the progress she made in this regard? Being a Minister for Aid and Trade, notes Ploumen, makes it possible to convene with all the parties involved and also with the larger brands. Through the cooperation with some of the larger Dutch brands, Dutch action plans have been devised on how to improve the Dutch industry. Questions were being raised what can companies themselves do to combat, for example, child labour. The issue is high on the Dutch agenda and will also be during its EU Presidency.

Gerard Oonk, President National Working Group India, was of the panel the one with the most practical experience on the ground. To him the question: what works and what doesn’t work when we talk about the garment industry and improving conditions. What often works are small improvements. But the big issues of wages, of long hours of work, or women and girls being confined to their work, not being able to form a union, those kind of big issues are still to be solved.

The issues within the garment industry seem so persistent because the vested interests for the brands are so big. But for Oonk, the argument can be made that there really is a joint interest in tackling the gender equality issue. Governments and companies have to recognize that decent work and gender equality benefits all. We have to work therefore from an holistic approach, from different levels: the government level, NGOs and the large companies must all do their part to improve the situation of the garment workers. One example of a useful method is due diligence: a certificate that traces the supply chain and ensures that workers' rights are respected and honoured.

The final stage was given to Minister Ploumen. She wanted to end with two points. Firstly, she raised the question how we can upgrade corporate social responsibility to a level so that it becomes 'business as usual'? "Be strategic," she answers, "work with the forerunners, make your government advocate for the OECD guidelines and the other institutional legal frameworks that have been developed." Ploumen strongly believes in peer pressure and the strength of the consumer. You need different allies: the corporate sector itself, united under the umbrella organization called the Global Compact, but also strong forerunners who show the proper example. Talk to the forerunners in your own country, they have the responsibility to work with the ones who are lacking behind.

Finally, Ploumen concludes with a passionate plea to end bonded labour: we are a generation which needs to abolish it once and for all. Governments must speak out and protect their girls and women, that is an important first step. All of us, also at the government level, need to make a stronger push to work with other governments and increase the awareness that bonded labour is still happening. All of us can be part of the solution to do away with bonded labour.