



THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF FEMALE FACTORY WORKERS IN THE TEXTILE AND GARMENT SECTOR

A CASE STUDY OF AN
ETHIOPIAN INDUSTRIAL PARK

Rediet Tadele Bayu



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Foreword

The paper by Rediet Tadele Bayu provides a succinct analysis of the working conditions of female factory workers in the textile and garment sector in Ethiopia. It pays special attention to the framework of decent work, as defined by the ILO's Decent Work Agenda:

Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for all, better prospects for personal development and social integration [...] The ILO has developed an agenda for the community of work looking at job creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue, with gender equality as a crosscutting objective. (ILO, <https://www.ilo.org/topics/decent-work>)

Building on this framework, the paper examines two textile and garment firms located in one of Ethiopia's eight industrial parks. It zooms in on the question of whether work opportunities generated by Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) genuinely benefit female workers and improve their working and living conditions.

The paper emerged in the context of the larger research unit, "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Global Concepts and Contexts of Labor Exploitation," funded by the Volkswagen Foundation (Grant number 96 966). Throughout 2023, Tadele Bayu worked closely with Prof. Dr. Meron Zeleke, who leads the research unit's sub-project "'Development'" Fostering Social Inequality?: A Study on Labor Arrangements in Ethiopia's Manufacturing Sector." Under the guidance of Zeleke, Tadele Bayu conducted extensive document analysis and qualitative interviews for her Master's Thesis in one of Ethiopia's industrial parks, talking to female factory workers as well as individuals in positions of leadership and institutional oversight. Researching factory working conditions is notoriously difficult, which makes Tadele Bayu's empirical insights especially valuable. They offer a deeper understanding of the conflicting goals and struggles between the Ethiopian developmental state and local workers. As she carefully demonstrates, while the state promotes Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) as a pathway to economic opportunity—especially for women as a marginalized group—the lived experiences of her interlocutors reveal the persistent risks and realities of labor exploitation when decent work standards are not prioritized.

With this paper, Tadele Bayu makes a valuable contribution to our research unit, which centers on the overall question of how initiatives aimed at reducing social inequality and labor exploitation can, paradoxically, reinforce existing inequalities or generate new ones. The paper is best understood in dialogue with the following publications from our research unit:

Kutsche, F., Ngeh, J. & Pelican, M.. (2024). Producing and reproducing social inequalities through labor exploitation across time and space. An intermediate analysis (Cologne Working Papers in Social and Cultural Anthropology No. 10). <https://kups.ub.uni-koeln.de/74324/> (open access)

Pelican, M., Lindner, U. & Zeleke, M. (Eds.). (2025). The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Perspectives from the Global South [Special Issue]. Zanj: The Journal of Critical Global South Studies 8(1-2). <https://www.doi.org/10.13169/zanjglobsoutstud.8.1.0002> (open access)

We extend our gratitude to Rediet Tadele Bayu for her contributions to the research unit and for publishing the findings of her thesis. We also thank the Volkswagen Foundation for supporting the research unit's work.

Cologne, 8.5.2025

Prof. Dr. Michaela Pelican,

Speaker of the Research Unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities"

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGOA	African Growth Opportunity Act
COVID-19	Name of the illness caused by the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2
EIC	Ethiopian Investment Commission
ETB	Ethiopian Birr, currency
EUR	EURO, currency
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FDRE	Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia
FGD	focus group discussion
FM	Frequency Modulation, radio
HR	Human Resource
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPDC	Industrial Parks Development Corporation
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health

Abstract

The study aimed to assess the decency of the working conditions of female textile and garment factory workers in an Ethiopian industrial park by exploring the overall gendered working environment. To this end, a case study research design based mainly on primary data sources was employed. While the samples for the study were chosen based on non-probability purposive sampling techniques, the discussion mainly draws on primary data sources gathered through key informant interviews with female workers at two foreign-owned factories in a single industrial park. Then, the collected data were analyzed using descriptive data source triangulation. The study's findings revealed that most textile and garment manufacturing employees are young females with primary-level education and some have TVET/diploma certificates. However, the findings showed that the employment opportunities granted to female workers at the park came at the expense of their fundamental labor rights. On the other hand, the experience at one of the factories showed the chance of realizing decent job opportunities in the textile and garment sector. To this end, the researcher suggests the Ethiopian government should set a minimum wage limit, implement effective labor inspection and monitoring mechanisms, and promote investment policies supporting responsible investment practices.¹

Keywords: Decent Work Agenda, Labor Conditions, Work Rights, Production Employees, Industrial Parks, Investment Promotion

¹ Acknowledgements: This work is derived in large parts from a thesis submitted to Addis Ababa University in 2024 in partial fulfillment of the requirements for an MA Degree in International Relations and Diplomacy. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Volkswagen Foundation for the research funding I received through the research unit "The Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities: Global Contexts and Concepts of Labor Exploitation." Furthermore, I am grateful to all the research unit members and advisory board members for their input and productive academic discussion. My special thanks to Meron Zeleke, Michaela Pelican, Jonathan Ngeh, and Nico Wilkins for editing the manuscript.

1. Introduction

The Ethiopian government promotes foreign direct investment (FDI) in the manufacturing sector to increase exports and foreign currency earnings in an effort to create job opportunities, contribute to overall economic development, and eradicate poverty (Azmach, 2019). In this respect, many studies conducted on the manufacturing industry in Ethiopia confirmed that the garment factory has significant importance in providing job opportunities for citizens, including women (Abebe, 2020; Azmach, 2019; Kidanu, 2010; Prieto-Carrón, 2008). However, available studies showed that the issue of gender and labor inequality in manufacturing industries continues to be an issue in several sub-Saharan African countries, including Ethiopia (Edward, Noah, & Charles, 2008; Kokebe, Fekade, & Tadesse, 2020; Schaefer & Oya, 2019). Despite the large consensus on the existence of significant gender inequalities in terms of decent work participation, empirical evidence on the working conditions in the foreign-owned textile and garment factories operating in the industrial parks of Ethiopia is scarce.

Gifawosen (2019) found that textile and apparel factory workers are being paid appalling wages and that working conditions in the industrial parks are generally poor. Tsgie (2016) uncovered several critical violations of women's rights in the factory. For example, the study shows that the nature of the working conditions of female employees is characterized by long working hours without breaks, inadequate safety measures, low protection provided for workers, low wages, poor treatment of workers, mistreatment, and absence of labor unions. However, there remains a need to conduct research in further industrial parks to take into account the diversity of administrative approaches and other confounding factors within Ethiopia. Moreover, new research is needed as a new labor proclamation has come into effect. The 2019 Labor Proclamation (No. 1156/2019) differs from the previous one in several key areas

including extended maternity leave, changes to annual leave entitlements, clarifications on sexual harassment and violence in the work place, and it also introduces new rule on minimum wage. Thus, the current study attempts to explore the overall gendered working environment in the textile and garment manufacturing sector through a case study of two companies in a single industrial park distinct from those characterized above. In doing so the study aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring the overall gendered working environment in textile and garment manufacturing firms.

The central argument of the paper is that although the textile and garment sectors have enabled the creation of immense job opportunities to engage in paid work, they cannot create decent employment opportunities for female workers which would allow them to enjoy fair wages, safe working conditions, equal opportunities, and respect of their labor rights. ■

2. Brief Background of the Industrial Park

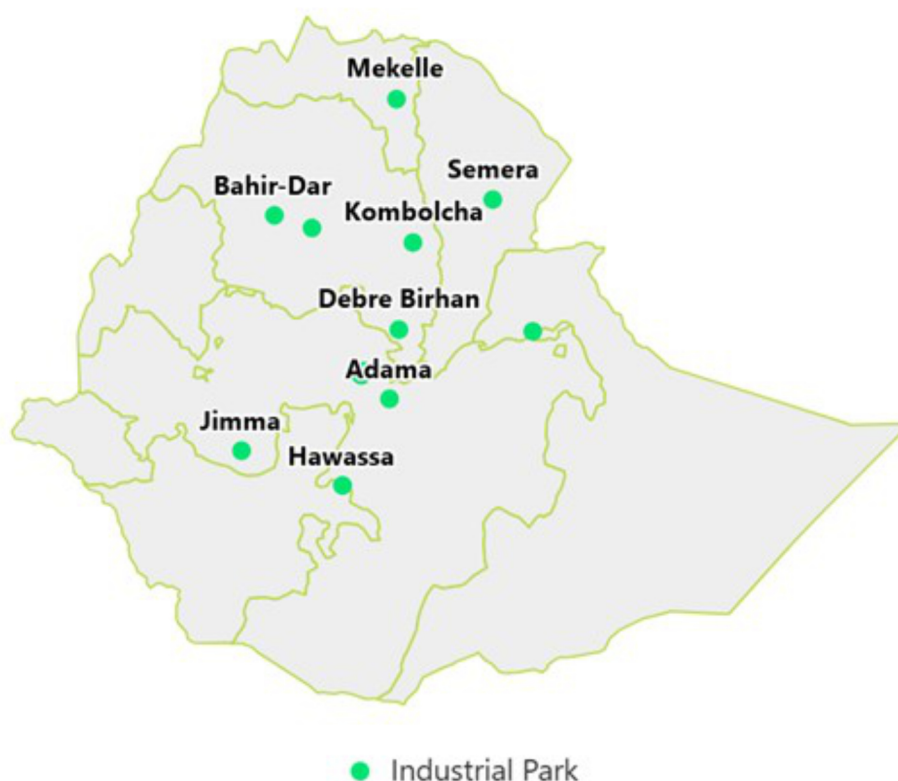


Figure 1: Location of Industrial Parks in Ethiopia.

Source: Industrial Parks Development Corporation (IPDC) webpage, <https://www.ipdc.gov.et> (last visited 8.5.2025)

The industrial park under study is located in the Amhara Region of Ethiopia. It was inaugurated within the last decade as part of Ethiopia's economic ambition of transforming itself into the manufacturing powerhouse of Africa. As per the data obtained from the Industrial Parks Development Corporation (IPDC) webpage, the park has built-in sheds that are ready for production, and there are plans to double the number of sheds in subsequent phases. However, at the time the field trip was conducted, the park was functioning with only a limited number of sheds, the majority of which were rented by investors providing job opportunities for around 4000 employees. According to an informant from the industrial park management, the park initially rented almost all of its sheds to investors from South Korea, China, the United States, and Italy, but the COVID-19

pandemic as well as the security threats in the region, including the Tigray war, have negatively impacted operations, forcing firms to size down their operations and resulting in many employees losing their jobs.² The informant also stated that the firms operating in the park are at risk of ceasing their operations entirely due to the presence of security threats in the region as well as due to Ethiopia's withdrawal from the African Growth Opportunity Act (AGOA) and associated duty-free benefits. To assess the working conditions of female workers at the park, two foreign-owned firms were selected for study: Firm A and Firm B.³

Firm A is privately held by European investors and produces textiles. The firm's products are 100% for the export market, mainly to Europe, and it has created job opportunities for over 200 local

² Interview with KI-1 (2024); interview with KI-2 (2024).

³ To ensure ethical research practices and safeguard the privacy and confidentiality of the participants, the identities of the firms were the study was carried out have been anonymized.

production workers, out of which slightly less than half are women. Firm B is a North American firm and a joint venture with Ethiopian and Chinese investors. It exports mainly to the USA and thus takes advantage of the AGOA. At the time fieldwork was conducted, the firm had created job opportunities for over 500 local production workers, nearly all of whom were women.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The first section presents the theoretical framework of the study. The second section presents the methodology of the study. The third section presents the findings of the study including a discussion on working conditions which covers a wide range of themes ranging from the recruitment process at the industrial park, wages, leave, safety measures, the existence of labor unions, and the labor inspection mechanisms used in the industrial park under study. The last section presents the conclusion of the study. ■

3. Theoretical Framework

Critical feminist theory helps to identify prevailing patriarchal structures that create disadvantages and inequalities. It points the way toward more egalitarian alternatives to the current system in which men are structurally given authority and privileges whereas women are marginalized and subjugated by rigid gender norms and expectations (Dadds, 2011; Hardig, 2004; Katisampoura, 2024; Wood, 2006). This marginalization and subjugation perpetuates structural inequalities at different levels of society, including gender-based violence, limited representation in decision-making positions, and wage gaps. Such dynamics are also prevalent in the manufacturing industries operating through FDI, impacting women in the developing world, where the international political and economic system further exacerbates women's vulnerability (True, 2010). In the manufacturing sector, men hold nearly all managerial positions. The gender divisions established in families are reproduced on the factory floor, making the sexual division of labor and its reflection of gender divisions in the home an important aspect of women's paid work (Jackson & Pearson, 1998; Ward, 1990, as cited in Prieto-Carrón, 2008).

In addition to this, the growing industrial sector in developing countries is encouraged by foreign capitalist investors seeking low-cost labor and deregulated investment opportunities. This situation leads to an unregulated economy of low-paying, unstable jobs and an unprecedented influx of women from developing nations into wage employment (True, 2010; Rodríguez & Llanereras Blanco, 2023). While this increases women's employment opportunities, it also results in increased workload for women, who work both in the labor market and at home. It also contributes to the "feminization of poverty," undermining the prospects of employment (Pearce 1989; True, 2010; Prieto-Carrón, 2008). In this case, the very solution that attempts to address inequalities

becomes a threat (Rodríguez & Llanereras Blanco, 2023).

Thus, to confront and eradicate the structural inequality women face, it is crucial to analyze systems of power and privilege, and to focus on promoting gender equality and addressing its underlying causes (Jackson & Pearson, 1998; Ward, 1990, as cited in Prieto-Carrón, 2008; True, 2010). That involves questioning gender expectations, advancing women's rights, and supporting laws that combat discrimination based on gender (Wood, 2006). In this respect, the International Labour Organization (ILO) aspires to create "productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity" through the concept of decent work (Bureau for Gender Equality and International Labour Standards Department, 2012, P. v). According to Rodgers (2007), decent work has many elements seen as an integrated agenda, extending from gender equality to freedom of association and hours of work. Thus, it does not make sense to promote employment regardless of the quality of the job—both have to go together, and the different aspects of decent work are seen as reinforcing each other (Rogers, 2007).

By drawing on the lived experience of female workers employed in the industrial park, this paper briefly discusses the working conditions of workers employed at multinational firms. ■

4. Methodology

The study is qualitative with a research design based mainly on primary data sources. The researcher employed a single case study design with the intention of developing an in-depth understanding of the work conditions in textile and garment manufacturing firms in the industrial park under study. A single case study design involves an in-depth examination of a single individual, event, or entity to understand the unique characteristics, behaviors, or experiences of the case under investigation (Yin, 2014). The industrial park under study was chosen because it is home to significant FDI and has access to an educated workforce, both contributing to the creation of a conducive environment for firms to create decent job opportunities. Further, the park is located in a region with low economic growth, making the location of the firms productive in terms of job creation and overcoming poverty. The selection of this park is thus more appealing to better understand how generating employment is translated into overcoming poverty and improving living conditions.

The researcher used both primary and secondary sources of data. To collect the primary data, the researcher performed semi-structured interviews. According to Berg (2001), a semi-structured interview is important because it makes it possible to record a variety of experiences, hear voices, create representations, and extract interpretations. In light of this, the researcher prepared semi-structured interview guidelines to gather qualitative information from primary sources, which were selected using a purposive sampling strategy also known as judgmental sampling. Purposive sampling involves selecting individuals who meet specific criteria or have particular characteristics relevant to the research objective; it is a strategy used for selecting some cases of a particular type that possess certain characteristics in which the researcher is interested (Blaikie, 2000). Based on this, eighteen female employees working in Firms A and B were selected

for semi-structured interviews and a further eight for a focus group discussion (FGD). In addition to this, the researcher selected key informants to obtain insightful, authoritative information about the work environment at the industrial park. Key informants interviewed include members of the HR directorates of both firms, members of park management, representatives of the labor union of the employees, local government officials from the Labor and Social Affairs Office, and members of the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC).

Interviews guides were prepared in English and translated into Amharic to facilitate data collection. Interviews and FGDs were conducted in Amharic. Secondary data document analysis was also used by the researcher. The data collected from key informants, female informants, FGD participants, and secondary sources was arranged and interpreted in a manner that meets the objectives of the study. In so doing, the researcher employed descriptive data source triangulation, cross-referencing the data collected from the interviews with informant production workers, key informants, FGD participants, and document analysis. According to Noble and Heale (2019), data source triangulation is applying various data collection techniques to improve the validity and credibility of study findings. ■

5. Working Conditions for Female Factory Workers

Recruitment Process

The workers in the park are mainly recruited locally. The vacancies are often announced through radio (local FM), newspapers, job websites, and other mass media. Due to the high turnover in the firms operating at the park, workers trained and recruited by the Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC) are also hired directly by the firms.⁴ Based on the information gathered from the informants from Firm A, the majority of the workers heard the news from the job posting by the firm. On the other hand, informants from Firm B heard the news of job opportunities from the EIC and through their social networks.

In the textile and garment manufacturing sector, it is common to prefer young workers, especially females, for hiring. This trend is seen worldwide as these individuals typically have minimal or no formal job experience, making them more passive, adaptable, and less likely to confront management. A similar trend is described by other studies in Ethiopia (Morris and Yost, 2019; Gifawosen, 2019; United Nations Development Program, 2018; and Theuws & Overeem, 2019). The criteria for selecting female workers in the industrial park include educational level (at least finishing primary level education), candidates' place of residence,⁵ young age, and preference for single women (though not explicitly stated in any job or career prospect announcements).⁶ The data collected from the two factories also confirm this trend, whereby the majority of the workers employed by both firms are young women between the ages of 18 and 25, who are less likely to have family responsibilities, followed by those aged 26 to 30. This, however, violates ILO

Convention 156 Workers with Family Responsibilities (1981) due to prejudice against female workers older than the factory's requirements as well as male workers in general.⁷

In addition to the above age criteria for recruitment, new employees are required to present work experience and educational credentials during their interview. While the informants employed with Firm B stated that they were required to present a certificate for completing grade 8 and work experience and/or a training certificate in the garment sector, workers from Firm A were required to present a minimum of a grade 10 certificate and work experience and/or a training certification in level 4 textiles and garments. Those employed in dyeing and wastewater treatment units are sometimes also required to have a degree in textile engineering.

The HR officials interviewed during the study stated their preference for employing female workers for positions that require care, as females are thought to be patient when handling challenging situations like long hours of work. Newly recruited female employees at Firm B are assigned to positions in sewing production units and most female employees in Firm A are assigned to the knitting and warping units. During the FGD, the participants stated their preference in working at a sewing unit to gain experience and that they value this work since it helps them launch their private businesses and remain competitive in the job market in the future.

Contract Type, Job Security, and Salary payments

The majority of female informants from both firms stated that they have received a contractual

⁴ The Ethiopian Investment Commission (EIC) is a non-profit organization promoting investment in industrial parks hoping to create employment opportunities, transfer knowledge, and attract FDI.

⁵ Interviews with KI-2 (2024), KI-5 (2024), and KI-4 (2024).

⁶ FGD participants (2024).

⁷ People with family responsibilities who work or want to work can use their right to work without facing discrimination and, if at all feasible, without conflict between their work and their obligations to their families.

agreement. Though some of them do not know what is written in the contract and/or are unable to understand the legal terms since there is no orientation offered regarding the terms and conditions of their work and the details of their contracts. The Ethiopian labor proclamation states that a contract of employment must include the nature of the job, the location of the work, the pay rate and method of calculation thereof, the terms and interval of payment, and the length of the contract.⁸ The lack of knowledge about the contract has made female employees lose the chance to acquire at least the rights stated therein. In terms of job type, production employees in both firms are hired for a probationary period of 60 days and are then hired for an indefinite period.⁹ This is in line with Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019 (Article 11, 3), which states that the probationary term starts on the first day of employment and may last no more than 60 working days. During the probationary term, employees are supposed to receive training related to their jobs. However, information provided by female informants and FGD participants has revealed that they have immediately been placed in the manufacturing units without sufficient training. This is attributed to the workers' high turnover in the firms, resulting in a general labor shortage. This is especially true in the case of Firm B, where, due to the high turnover of employees, new employees have to cover the production process.

Upon employment, new workers are given a basic induction introduction by the HR department regarding the company, their pay range, the nature of their work, and the usage of production materials. According to the interviewees, the female employees in both firms have received five days of introductory training related to the work and they are also offered on-the-job training; for instance, workers on sewing lines receive

instruction until they are capable of performing their jobs. The informants from both firms' HR directorates indicated that new employees are given on-the-job training and that line leaders have to onboard new hires, train them, and assess their readiness to use the machine.¹⁰ In addition to this, the industrial park management, and with the support of governmental and non-governmental organizations, offers female employee safety and soft skill trainings.¹¹ For example, with the help of the Labor and Social Affairs Office, the park provides new hires with basic orientation training about the industrial park's work environment, which includes fire prevention and other industrial safety procedures. However, inadequate training and the lack of clean bathrooms for employees have resulted in a work environment that is not suitable for workers. In terms of work shifts, employees at Firm A work in three shifts (from 6:00 to 14:00, from 14:00 to 22:00, and from 22:00 to 6:00). Female employees at Firm B, in contrast, work only one shift, from 8:30 AM to 5:30 PM with a one-hour lunch break.¹²

Although female employees are hired for an indefinite period of employment,¹³ there are many instances of contract termination that occur without warning or payment. The employer can unexpectedly fire employees for a variety of reasons, meaning that their employment contracts cannot guarantee job security. For instance, Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019 (Article 27, 1b) states that an employment contract cannot be terminated unless there have been a total of five days of absence within six months and the employee has been warned in writing about the issue. However, female informants indicate that missing work for any reason without permission results in termination. According to Hawa,¹⁴ a 26-year-old single mother with one child who works at Firm B, "it is unacceptable to miss work for any

⁸ FDRE Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019

⁹ Interviews with KI-4 (2024) and KI-5 (2024).

¹⁰ Interviews with KI-4 (2024) and KI-5 (2024).

¹¹ Interviews with KI-1 (2024) and KI-2 (2024).

¹² Interviews with KI-5 (2024) and KI-4 (2024).

¹³ Interviews with KI-5 (2024) and KI-4 (2024).

¹⁴ A pseudonym is used to preserve the anonymity of all interviewees, except where otherwise noted.

reason without permission, even for one day. I know of colleagues who have been fired for being absent from their work.”¹⁵

Furthermore, the women who participated in this study stated that the firms deny employees their right to be compensated when their employment contracts are terminated. In some cases, the firms even refuse to issue a letter stating their work experience. This contradicts the provision of the labor proclamation stating that “when an employment contract expires or the employee so desires, up to that point, to supply the employee, free of fee, along with a document detailing the nature of his work, the duration of her employment, and her pay.”¹⁶

Informants also expressed dissatisfaction over their salaries being paid late. According to the HR directors of both firms, payments are made within a window of seven days after the end of the previous working month.¹⁷ This has made it challenging for the female informants to deal with financial issues. The lived experience of workers in the the park resonates with the case of workers in other industrial parks, where female workers are often vulnerable to labor exploitation and lack of agency (Morris & Yost, 2019; Tsgie, 2016; Vireak & Neam, 2023). According to Morris and Yost (2019), the limited job security, contract type, and payment systems in the garment manufacturing industries in Ethiopia are the decent work issues female employees have to face.

Working Hours and Overtime Duties

The Ethiopian labor proclamation restricts regular work hours to eight hours per day and forty-eight hours per week, while overtime work is allowed with the employees’ full agreement and should be remunerated.¹⁸ The 2019 Labor Proclamation 1156/2019 (Article 68) stipulates that workers should be compensated for overtime work at the following rate, which is multiplied by the regular hourly rate: 1.5 for work done between 6:00 and

22:00, 1.75 for work between 22:00 and 6:00, 2 for work done on a weekly rest day, and 2.5 for work done on a public holiday.

The key informants from the HR directorates of both firms as well as the female informants confirmed the normal working hours at the firms to be eight hours per day. However, when it comes to overtime work, it is typically required of employees to work overtime and the majority of female informants stated that they are subtly forced to take on overtime work. On average, they are forced to do three hours of overtime work per week. The majority of female informants made it clear that they are worried about the possible consequences of working longer shifts without taking breaks, especially when the employer places unscheduled overtime work to meet the production target, exploiting female employees’ labor. This is especially challenging for women with children and family responsibilities who have to deal with other social responsibilities. One of the participants in the FGD was Adanech, a 30-year-old single mother of two children who worked in the netting unit at Firm A earning a monthly salary of 4200 ETB [29.68 EUR].¹⁹ She highlighted the difficulty of managing unscheduled overtime work: “As a single mother of two it has been difficult for me to work late overtime shifts with a small amount of overtime pay, since the salary I receive is not enough to hire child care.” On the other hand, some, if not all, of the interviewees stated that they prefer to work extra to augment their income because the compensation that they receive during their regular working hours is insufficient to cover their living expenses.

Career Improvement Opportunities and Training

The opportunity to improve through career and training allows employees to enhance their skills, knowledge, and professional development. In this regard, both firms provide various benefit

¹⁵ Interview with informant 3(2024).

¹⁶ Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019, (Article 11, 3).

¹⁷ Interviews with KI-4 (2024) and KI-5 (2024).

¹⁸ Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019

¹⁹ Currency conversions presented throughout the article are based on the exchange rate as of 31.03.2025.

packages of technical training for female employees to improve their careers. The first to be mentioned is the training provided by firms to help female employees develop the necessary skills for the workplace.²⁰ Accordingly, all production workers in both firms received training at the beginning of their employment. The training provided by the firms includes technical skills training. According to an informant from Firm B's HR directorate, the majority of female workers in the firm were untrained when they started the job, but they have acquired new abilities like cutting, sewing, and trimming to make men's suits through training.²¹ Firm A also offers training to its employees to acquire technical skills. According to an informant from Firm A's HR directorate, the firm offers professional training for its top-performing employees that helps workers keep up with industry advancements, new technologies, and best practices, including three months of training in Europe.²² However, the data gathered from female informants in both firms showed that the training provided focused on allowing employees to acquire the basic qualifications of the work rather than supporting them to advance in their careers. Moreover, most of the training provided for female employees lacked direct relevance for textile and garment work. Some female informants have tried to improve their education, but efforts to climb the ladder into higher positions have been limited due to a biased preference for hiring male over female leaders who are expected to have household responsibilities.

In general, the data collected through interviews regarding the nature of working conditions for women in the textile and garment sector of the park confirm that gender divisions established at the family level are being reproduced on the factory floor where female labor is seen as secondary (Prieto-Carrón, 2008). This has not only resulted in female workers earning relatively little,

but also in them being seen as obedient and passive, encouraging the implementation of harsh work conditions.

Wage

The Ethiopian government promotes foreign investment in the textile and garment industries with the promise of a cheap and abundant labor force within the country (Gifawosen, 2019; Meron, 2024). The Ethiopian Investment Commission's promotion on its web page reads as follows: "relatively low wage rates and large industrial workforce offer significant labor-cost advantages for investors."²³ Such an arrangement has a direct impact on the wages of employees, allowing the investors to offer poor remuneration for labor. This is especially true in the textile garment sector, where hiring an inexpensive and huge workforce is presented as a means of making a profit. This neglects the fact that wages are the central feature of working conditions that have a direct effect on work motivation and job satisfaction (Bureau for Gender Equality and International Labour Standards Department, 2012).

In Ethiopia, the absence of a standard minimum wage for the private sector and other factors such as the competitive nature of the garment industry have allowed firms to establish their own pay scales; workers in Ethiopia's textile garment factories are thus arguably the lowest earners in comparison to other countries (Morris and Yost, 2019). According to an informant from the industrial park's management, the monthly pay of production workers' starting salary in the park ranges from 1100 ETB [7.77 EUR] up to 4000 ETB [28.26 EUR]. Firm B paid at the lower end of the range while Firm A paid at the higher end of the range.²⁴ The participants in the FGD, when discussing workers' earnings, mostly talked about the challenges they have faced because of their low pay.²⁵

²⁰ Interviews with KI-2 (2024), KI-3 (2024), KI-4, (2024), and KI-5 (2024).

²¹ Interview with KI-5 (2024).

²² Interview with KI-4 (2024).

²³ EIC wave page (2023). Retrieved from <https://investethiopia.gov.et/>

²⁴ Interview with KI-1 (2024).

²⁵ It is important to note that the Ethiopian government reversed its fixed exchange rate policy to a market-based determination of the exchange rate in July 2024 (Tadesse et al., 2024). This, however, has resulted in the deterioration of the value of the Birr by half

Though the workers believe they should earn a living wage, which would cover all essential costs for the employee and their family (such as housing, food, clothes, and other everyday expenses like school and medical care), the participants in the FGD revealed that the pay they received hardly covers rent (see also Zeleke 2024). This, according to them, is aggravated due to the high inflation rate in the country. One of the female informants, Fayiza, a twenty-four-year-old single mother with two children working in Firm B, claims that despite receiving a monthly income of 1200 ETB, she finds it difficult to make ends meet. She and her two children reside in a one-room apartment that often costs 700–1000 ETB [4.62–6.60 EUR]. In addition to the rent, she also has to pay extra for energy and fuel. In an interview, Fayiza said: “The pay which I receive does not even cover the cost of housing, food for me and my children, let alone other things like clothing.”²⁶

To support workers' minimum wage, the firms offer various pay increases and promotion programs. The programs named by the deputy HR directors of both firms are detailed in figure 2.

Apart from the aforementioned incentives, Firm A offers an annual wage increment plan with monthly compensation increments and promotion opportunities for top-performing staff members. The deputy HR director of Firm A also asserts that the company has an agreement with a bank that allows employees to borrow money to build houses.²⁷ However, this kind of promotion mechanism has brought up the issue of relative salary disparities among employees. According to the participants in the FGD, wage variations are dependent on several factors, including the performance and goal assessments made by line leaders, which are frequently subjective. Furthermore, promotion mechanisms followed by the firms do not recognize the underlying power systems that support gender inequality. Consequently, what is perceived as women' reproductive responsibilities and household duties become an obstacle to female workers' ability to progress in their jobs (Cerrato and Cifre, 2018; Jackson & Pearson, 1998).

On the other hand, the firms also fail to adhere to the stated pay procedures under the labour proclamation. According to an informant from the

Pay Increase and Promotion Programs	
Firm A	Firm B
Food and Transport Allowance	Food Allowance (25 Birr/day [0.18 EUR]) Transport Allowance (15 Birr/day [0.11 EUR])
Attendance Bonus Payment (500 Birr/ Month [3.53 EUR], without any absence)	Attendance Bonus Payment (500 Birr/ Month [5.53 EUR], without any absence)
Target Incentive Bonus payment (500 Birr, [3.53 EUR])	Target Incentive Bonus payment (500 Birr, [3.53 EUR])
Bonus (for New Year, International Women's Day, and Adwa Victory Day)	
Maternity Bonus, Grief, and Wedding Party Support	

Figure 2: Pay Increase and Promotion Programs. Source: Data collected by researcher.

resulting in steep increases in the price of food and other goods, particularly those imported from overseas (Yibeltal, 2024).

²⁶ Interview with informant 4 (2024).

²⁷ Interview with KI-4 (2024).

labour union, employees of Firm B who have served for more than five years have not been paid the expected service fee.²⁸ The wage paid by the firms is generally low compared with workers in other sectors. With the exception of workers employed by Firm A, the wage cannot cover even the basic needs of workers. This shows the absence of a living wage in Ethiopia for the employees working in the garment and textile sector. This is tied to the general lack of a minimum wage in the private sector in Ethiopia which has also impacted the performance of the firms and the type of employment generated. The firms are suffering from huge turnover as the wages paid by the firms do not motivate the employees to stay with the company.²⁹ The data collected also confirms this assumption. This study found that the low wages in the firms have made workers leave their jobs as soon as they get the opportunity to be hired elsewhere. As a result, the firms under study are suffering from huge turnover, as is the case in Firm B, where almost all informants have confirmed their desire to leave their jobs.³⁰

The 2019 Labour Proclamation 1156/2019 (Article 55, 2) aimed to create a Wage Board, whereby "the council of Ministers will determine its power and responsibilities". Supposedly, the Board will be empowered to modify the minimum wage based on research taking into account the labor market, economic growth, and additional national factors. Trade unions, employees, and government representatives will make up the Wage Board and these organizations are required to collaborate with other interested parties and carry out research to regularly adjust the minimum wage to the state of the economy. Accordingly, efforts are being made to establish a minimum wage through the drafting of a regulation intended to establish a Wage Board. However, it has not yet been established. More so, the effort to set a minimum wage is in ruins as the Council of Ministers has not yet responded to a draft

regulation meant to create a Wage Board (Ashenafi, 2022). Although Ethiopian workers receive low pay, the government was reluctant to impose a minimum wage because, among other reasons, it is still preferable to being unemployed in the event that FDI decreases.

Thus, the study shows that while female workers' involvement in the garment and textile sector has increased their employment opportunities, it has also resulted in an increased workload for women who work both in the labor market and at home. This exposes female workers to more exploitation and contributes to the "feminization of poverty," particularly among low-income and marginalized female workers in developing countries, undermining the prospects of their employment and resulting in low-paid jobs (True, 2010).

Leave: Annual Leave, Sick Leave, and Maternity Leave

The Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019 of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE) entitles workers to different types of leave, including annual leave, sick leave, and maternity leave.

According to the labor proclamation, workers who have served for one year are entitled to 16 days of paid yearly leave.³¹ Interviews with female informants confirmed that they have annual leave for 16 days, as stated in their contracts. Nonetheless, the majority of the female informants said that because the employer's preferences heavily influence annual leave, it can be challenging to obtain leave on an emergency basis. On the other hand, some of the informants have also stated that they do not want to take an extended yearly leave in order to receive incentives and rewards that are dependent on meeting their output goals.

According to the labor law, workers who have finished their provisional period are also entitled to sick leave based on a medical certificate.³² The

²⁸ Interview with KI-6 (2024).

²⁹ Interview with KI-2 (2024).

³⁰ Out of the 18 interviewed women informants, 10 plan to continue working in the firms for less than one year.

³¹ FDRE Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019, Article 77 1((a)).

³² FDRE Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019, Article 85.

information gathered from the FGD participants suggested that while sick leave with a medical certificate is permitted in both companies, workers are reluctant to request medical leave until their condition worsens, fearing potential job loss. This reluctance stems partly from a lack of awareness of their rights and partly from a hostile work environment.³³

The labor proclamation also grants female workers maternity leave.³⁴ According to the FDRE Labor Proclamation, women are entitled to a full wage throughout three months (90 days) of maternity leave.³⁵ According to some of the informants, their company even entitles them to four months (120 days) of maternity leave. In addition, they are also allowed to work in environments that do not endanger pregnancy. The informant from Firm A stated that the firm supports those who plan to have children and even stated that “the firm has a culture of congratulating its workers on occasions like giving birth, and it has a plan to establish a nursery in the firm that is aimed at making the work environment suitable for females raising young children.”³⁶

In addition, the labor proclamation protects pregnant workers from working night shift and overtime work.³⁷ Pregnant employees at Firm A are thus exempted from being assigned to do overtime or night shifts between 22:00 and 6:00. Further, the firm also permits for breastfeeding mothers to leave work early.³⁸ However, according to the information obtained from FGD participants, female employees at the firms worry that becoming pregnant might result in losing their jobs. Thus, female employees, despite being entitled to annual leave, sick leave, and maternity leave, are hesitant to ask for leave. In addition to this, many female employees do not want to have

children, fearing that the work they are doing is not safe for pregnancy.³⁹

In this regard, it can be concluded that female workers' perceptions and practices regarding leave are significantly influenced by their inherent fear and job insecurity, resulting from a lack of knowledge and understanding of rights granted by the labor law. Moreover, women often spend their leave performing informal tasks dictated by societal expectations. Despite their participation in paid formal employment, they continue to face exploitation in the domestic sphere where their labor remains undervalued and unprotected.

Occupational Safety of the Working Environment

The labor proclamation has a provision related to occupational safety and health, clearly stating the need to make sure that there are no hazards to the health and safety of the employees at the workplace.⁴⁰ When it comes to workplace health and safety, the textile and garment factories in Ethiopia have a poor record (Morris & Yost, 2019). The participants of the FGD emphasized overcrowded working spaces and the lack of a ventilation system as main challenges. One of the participants in the FGD, Hayat, a 21-year-old employee at Firm B working for 8 hours per day, 6 days per week with overtime work, narrates her experience as follows: “The place we work in lacks a ventilation system, which usually leads females working in the firm, especially those working in the ironing unit, to pass out due to the high heat, in addition to the workload they have to endure.”⁴¹

Furthermore, the labor proclamation also states the need to make the necessary arrangements to guarantee that employees receive adequate

³³ FDG participants (2024).

³⁴ FDRE Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019, Article 88 (1).

³⁵ FDRE Labor Proclamation Article 88 (3).

³⁶ Interview with KI-4 (2024).

³⁷ FDRE Labor Proclamation Article 87 (4).

³⁸ Interview with KI-4 (2024).

³⁹ CEDAW, Article 11.

⁴⁰ FDRE Labor Proclamation Article 92(2).

⁴¹ FGD participants (2024).

training and are informed about the risks associated with their jobs.⁴² In this respect, female employees in the industrial park are given training both by the firms in which they are employed and by the industrial park. The informant from park management stated that workers joining the industrial park workforce receive training that helps them understand the industrial environment in a much better way; the training includes both soft skill and skills training, like sexual and reproductive health, fire prevention, and escape mechanisms.⁴³ The information gathered from the interviews also confirmed that employees received five days of training on employment related to the skills needed on the job.

In addition to this, the labor proclamation states that workers should be guaranteed safety materials or protective equipment for the prevention of injuries at work. The Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019, Article 92, states:

An employer shall take the necessary measure to safe guard adequately the health and safety of workers; in particular: Comply with the occupational health and safety; ensure that workers are properly instructed and notified concerning the hazards of their respective occupations; and assign safety officer; Provide workers with protective equipment, clothing and other materials and instruct them of their use.

The Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Directive also states that employers are required to make sure that workers are safe at work, including by offering personal protective equipment.⁴⁴ However, the workers at the park have complained that they lack safety materials.⁴⁵ One of the female informants from Firm B stated that “even though the cutting unit requires safety materials like safety shoes and gloves, the firm is not providing these materials, and even if they are

provided, the safety materials are not provided on time, and sometimes they fail to meet standards.”⁴⁶ Even in instances where safety materials are provided, the workers fail to use them properly. This exposes the workers to health hazards; for example, the workers in Firm A, even if they are provided with ear plugs while working to reduce the sound generated by machines, do not always wear them at work. Thus, despite the training, low levels of compliance and knowledge about workplace hazards show the low quality of the training being provided. ■

⁴² FDRE Labor Proclamation Article 92.

⁴³ Interview with KI-1 (2024).

⁴⁴ Ethiopian Occupational Safety and Health Directive (May, 2008).

⁴⁵ FDRE labor proclamation Article 92(3).

⁴⁶ Interview with informant 15 (2024)

6. Institutions Overseeing Labor Rights and Violations

Labor Unions in the Industrial Park

The ILO advises organizing unions to address the main concerns of employees and improve working conditions. To this end, the FDRE labor proclamation, Article 113(1), states that both employers and employees are entitled to form and organize employers' associations or trade unions and to actively participate in them.⁴⁷ At the park under study, efforts have been made by the Labor and Social Affairs Office to establish labor unions; however, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in the northern region of Ethiopia, the unions faced frequent dissolution.

According to an informant from the government, there have recently been efforts to establish new unions in all the firms operating in the park, including Firms A and B. By the time of fieldwork, unions were in the process of registering members.⁴⁸

As a member of one of these new unions shared in an interview; "though we are in the process of registering members, workers express their concern over the membership fee, which requires the members to provide 1% of their wages. Thus unwilling to pay the membership fee, the majority of the workers are not members of the union."⁴⁹ In addition to this, the pressure on the leaders of labor unions from the employers makes it difficult for the unions to survive. In both firms, previous labor union leaders were evicted from their jobs. The same union member also stated that "the previously established labor union leader was removed from his supervisory position due to his appointment as a leader of the labor union."⁵⁰

The lack of a strong labor union in the firm, however, weakens the bargaining power of workers in the park, especially for female workers

in need of a strong labor union to bargain for a better work environment.

Labor Inspection

Strengthening workplace compliance through labor inspection is one of the eight areas of importance identified by the ILO's governing body (International Labor Office, 2014). In the park under study, the Labor and Social Affairs Office take on the responsibility of checking compliance with labor standards.⁵¹ The Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019 (Article 178) also requires the "appropriate authority to assign labor inspectors who are authorized to carry out the responsibilities of follow-up and supervise the inspection service." The assigned labor inspector "[has] the power to enter into, during any working hours without prior notice." Article 179 of the same proclamation also states that if a threat is found by inspection to the workers' health, safety, or welfare, the inspector is permitted to take the appropriate corrective action.

Accordingly, the informant from the Labor and Social Affairs Office stated that "based on the prepared checklist, the task of evaluating the labor standard compliance in each firm is done with specialists from the Office without prior notice at each firm." However, when it comes to taking the appropriate corrective action, the Office fails to do so. According to the informant, this is due to the intervention of government officials for political reasons.

In addition, the Labor and Social Affairs Office take on the responsibility of facilitating dialogue between employees and employers. In this respect, the Office is working on ensuring workers' rights through a "tripartite deal" between workers' representatives, employers, and

⁴⁷ FDRE labor proclamation, Article 113(1).

⁴⁸ Interview with KI-3 (2024).

⁴⁹ Interview with KI-6 (2024).

⁵⁰ Interview with KI-6 (2024).

⁵¹ Interview with KI-3 (2024).

the office to ensure the rights of workers in a much better way than it could be ensured through labor proclamation alone. According to the informant, “the tripartite negotiation helps workers secure a better deal with firms than stated in the labor proclamation in dealing with issues like wage”.⁵² Furthermore, a committee comprising representatives from all three parties was established to make joint decisions on issues affecting both employers and employees. However, the committee has failed to achieve its intended goals, largely due to the absence of strong and effective labor unions capable of representing workers’ interests.

Institutional Grievance Redress Mechanisms

Grievance redress mechanisms are essential to express health and safety concerns and report prevalent workplace issues related to salaries, harassment, and discrimination (Vireak & Neam, 2023). The government is required to make sure that workers' rights are upheld and that they can seek recourse when violations take place. Thus, the government must enhance working conditions and establish a monitoring system for the employees.

employees and employers.⁵³ These committees include representative of the government, the Labor and Social Affairs Office, employees, and employers. This, according to the informant, has helped to deal with issues raised by employees related to workplace issues like salary and harassment. In addition, the labor proclamation stresses the need for the responsible government body to create peaceful relations between workers and investors.⁵⁴ To this end, the Industrial Peace Directorate has established a bilateral consultation forum (yehuletiyoshe wiyiyiti in Amharic) with support from the Labor and Social Affairs Office to mediate between employees and employers. An informant from the Industrial Peace Directorate confirmed that due to the presence of external threats to the safety of employees, like financial hardship and sexual harassment, the industrial park established such a forum for discussions with the community. Each kebele (neighbourhood association) has fifty members, including representatives from the police, justice system, health sector, and local community. According to the informant, this structure has contributed to a decrease in reported cases and has facilitated their resolution without involving the formal legal system.

Year of Reporting (Ethiopian Calendar)	Cases Reported
2013	36
2014	17
2015	8
2016, until January	5

Figure 3: Number of Grievance Cases Reported. Source: Data provided by Informant KI-2

According to an informant from the Industrial Peace Directorate, a Grievance Hearing Committee and a Violence Follow-Up Committee have been established to deal with issues raised by

According to an informant from the Department of Employment and Training (formerly the Labor and Social Affairs Office), the presence of a bilateral consultation forum between employees

⁵² Interview with KI-3 (2024).

⁵³ Interview with KI-2 (2024).

⁵⁴ FDRE Labor Proclamation No. 1156/2019.

and firms in the park has reduced the number of cases reported to the Labor and Social Affairs Office and to the court that are related to wage and benefit packages, like sick leave, wage, and overtime work.⁵⁵ Concerning sexual harassment cases, the informant from the Industrial Peace Directorate reported two cases of attempted sexual harassment of two female workers from the park, both occurring near their places of residence.

Workers who frequently work late shifts and overtime are more susceptible to harassment and criminal activity. According to the participants in the FGD, female employees working late night shifts in the industrial park are susceptible to harassment. This is largely due to the fact that in order to secure more affordable accommodation, many workers reside in the outer suburbs of the city and thus have residences that are far from the park's bus transport service. A lack of secure, inexpensive transportation to and from work, especially late at night, increases their risk of harassment (see also Gudeta et al. 2025).

In addition to this, the data gathered through interviews with female informants regarding sexual harassment shows that none of them have faced it at work. However, there is significant evidence to support the broad prevalence of workplace harassment and violence, since it is common for supervisors to make suggestive or offensive comments to workers (Vireak & Neam, 2023). The data collected from female informants also confirms the presence of such pressure on female workers even if it was not identified as sexual harassment. ■

⁵⁵ Interview with KI-3 (2014) from the Department of Employment and Training (formerly the Labor and Social Affairs Office).

7. Conclusion

This study has shown that Ethiopia's involvement in the garment and textile sector has enabled the creation of job opportunities, though it fails to guarantee decent employment. The study's findings align with critical feminist scholars like True (2010) and Rodríguez and Llaveneras Blanco (2023), who argue that export-oriented industries in developing countries—driven by foreign investment—sustain gendered labor market dynamics. This growth results in a surge of low-paying, insecure jobs and a disproportionate entry of women into exploitative wage employment, with minimal positive impact on their overall well-being. Further, the investment policy promoted by the Ethiopian government promises cheap labor to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) rather than ensuring a living wage. As a result, the prospect of decent employment for women in the industrial park is far from a reality. This is aggravated by the lack of strong and effective labor inspection and monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance with labor regulations. Additionally, employers' emphasis on maximizing profits through low labor costs has increased workers' vulnerability to exploitation. Overall, while FDI may generate job opportunities, it falls short of achieving decent work, since the Decent Work Agenda emphasizes not just employment creation but also fair income and workplace safety. ■

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Appendix

Appendix I: Interviews with Officials

Informant No.	Name of Institution	Interview Date
KI-1	Industrial Park Management	29/01/2024
KI-2	Ethiopian Investment Commission (Industrial Peace Directorate)	31/01/2024
KI-3	Department of Employment and Training (formerly Labor, Social Affairs Office)	02/02/2024
KI-4	Firm A Human Resources Management	29/01/2024
KI-5	Firm B Human Resources Management	29/01/2024
KI-6	Workers Union	01/02/2024

Appendix II: Profile of Female Informants Working in the Industrial Park

Informant No.	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Educational Level; Studied until Grade	Place of Birth
Informant 1	25-29	Single	-	Degree	Rural
Informant 2	<20	Single	-	Diploma (10+3)	Rural
Informant 3	25-29	Single	1	Degree	Rural
Informant 4	20-24	Divorced	2	9-12 grade secondary education	Rural
Informant 5	30-34	Married	2	Diploma (10+3)	Urban
Informant 6	20-24	Married	-	Diploma (10+3)	Rural
Informant 7	20-24	Single	-	1-8 primary level education	Urban
Informant 8	<20	Married	-	Diploma (10+3)	Urban

Informant 9	20-24	Single	-	Diploma (10+3)	Rural
Informant 10	20-24	Single	-	1-8 primary level education	Rural
Informant 11	<20	Married	-	1-8 primary level education	Rural
Informant 12	20-24	Single	-	9-12 secondary level education	Rural
Informant 13	25-29	Married	1	Degree	Urban
Informant 14	25-29	Divorced	1	9-12 secondary level education	Rural
Informant 15	20-24	Married	-	Degree	Rural
Informant 16	20-24	Married	-	Diploma (10+3)	Urban
Informant 17	20-24	Single	-	Diploma (10+3)	Urban
Informant 18	20-24	Single	-	9-12 secondary level education	Urban

Appendix III: Background of Female Participants of Focus Group Discussion

Informant No.	Age	Marital Status	Number of Children	Educational Level; Studied until Grade	Place of Birth
Firm A					
Informant 1	20-24	Single	-	Diploma (10+3)	Rural
Informant 2	25-29	Divorced	-	Diploma (10+3)	Rural
Informant 3	30-34	Divorced		Diploma (10+3)	Rural
Firm B					
Informant 4	25-29	Married	1	1-8 primary level education	Urban
Informant 5	30-34	Married	2	Diploma (10+3)	Urban
Informant 6	20-24	Single	-	9-12 secondary level education	Urban

Informant 7	25-29	Married	-	Degree	Rural
Informant 8	20-24	Single	-	9-12 secondary level education	Rural

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