

## **Implementation on Gender Equality to Achieving SDGs 5: A Case Study of the Garment Industry & Better Work Vietnam**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Gender based violence and sexual harassment is very often encountered and experienced by female workers in any field of work. Vietnam is one of the Asian countries that has a fairly high level of female workers and actively participates in the country's economy. Millions of female workers in Vietnam have the chance to advance their social and economic status through work in the garment industry. Even so, there are still many women workers rights that are not obtained properly. Being paid low wages and being in an unsafe work environment is prone to gender based violence. Vietnam itself is one of the countries that utilizes a low-cost labor force, which is mostly staffed by female workers who have low skills. This research aims to analyze “how the garment industry and Better Work in Vietnam implemented gender equality in their process to ensure and achieve SDGs Goal 5?”. This research using a descriptive qualitative research methodology. This research focuses on the analysis of actions taken by the garment industry and the non-profit organization Better Work in Vietnam to achieve gender equality. This research resulted with several programs that have been carried out by Better Work Vietnam to improve working conditions and the competitiveness of the garment industry in Vietnam. Better Work Vietnam is also working together with ILO Global Supply Chain project to resolve gender equality and sexual harassment in workplaces at national and provincial levels.

**Keywords:** *Gender Equality, Vietnam, Garment Industry, Better Work, SDGs 5.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

In 2019, Vietnam had 70.9 percent of women active in the workforce. Millions of female workers in Vietnam have the opportunity to improve their social and economic status through employment in the garment industry. Even though the percentage of female workers in Vietnam is high, gaps in getting opportunities to participate in economic activities still exist. Not only that, female workers in Vietnam also experience a double burden. Double-burden is a condition where female workers still have to carry out household activities. The participation rate of the male workforce who also performs household work is relatively lower compared to the female workforce. This double burden carried by female workers is also one of the triggers why female workers have difficulty getting career advancement and stable work (ILO, 2021).

Not only is there a gap in participation in economic activities, female workers in Vietnam, especially in the garment industry, experience sexual harassment and gender based violence. This was proven by Better Work Vietnam which conducted an internal survey regarding the prevention of sexual harassment with the aim of obtaining in-depth information regarding these cases. The survey was conducted and distributed to Better Work Vietnam business partners during a business forum, and received more

than 500 respondents from around 100 participating factories. The survey found that each individual who experienced sexual harassment preferred to remain silent and not report the case. Verbal sexual harassment is a common problem, including a lack of understanding of the various forms of sexual harassment behavior.

This survey also validates a discussion paper published by Better Work Vietnam in July 2023 which discusses preventing sexual harassment in the garment industry at a global level. In the paper, Better Work Vietnam argues that "interventions against sexual harassment occur in environments that are characterized by patriarchy, hierarchy, a lack of fundamental understanding of various forms of sexual harassment, and a habit or culture where victims of sexual harassment are oftenly silent and afraid to report cases of sexual harassment." " " is the reason why sexual harassment and gender based violence interventions can occur. The survey also showed that 60% of garment workers in Vietnam understand and are well aware of the vulnerability of female workers to sexual harassment in the work environment. 10% of respondents to the same survey admitted that they had directly witnessed examples of sexual harassment in the work environment (Better Work, 2024).

There is a perception that it is often associated with household work, that female workers in the garment industry often carry out work related to home-based production and within the scope of small companies. The participation of female workers, especially in the garment industry, in informal economic activities, as mentioned previously, creates a vulnerable and unsafe work environment. Home work environments typically have no access to social security, labor law protections, health care, and no minimum wage protections. The job deficit is also supported by the "fast fashion" business cycle which is widespread on a global scale. This "fast fashion" business model has a rotating cycle according to trends which depends on low production costs. The emphasis on production costs results in low labor costs (International Labour Organization, 2023).

The author argues based on several phenomena and events regarding the gender equality gap that occurs for female workers in the garment industry in Vietnam, indicating that SDGs Goal 5: Gender Equality has not yet been achieved. Even though Vietnam is one of the countries in Asia that has a high level of active female workers who participate in economic activities, many women's labor rights have not yet been achieved. Gender equality in the garment industry for female workers is the main focus in this research. Being paid low wages and being in an unsafe work environment is prone to gender based violence. Vietnam itself is one of the countries that utilizes a low-cost labor force, which is mostly staffed by female workers who have low skills.

These are two previous studies that discuss gender equality in Vietnam. The first article by Thi, N. N., & Kim, O. H. T. (Thi & Kim, 2018) stated that although in 2016 according to The Global Gender Gap report published by the World Economic Forum (WEF) Vietnam was ranked 33rd out of 144 countries with the greatest success in closing the gap between women in economic sector, the country still faces many challenges related to gender equality in various sectors. According to this article, in the economic sector there

is still a wage gap between male and female employees. The author states that a few factors contribute to the gender gap in Vietnam, including the country’s ingrained patriarchal culture, laws or policies limiting the age at which women can appointed to positions, and pressure to women to stay at home and take care of the house, which takes up valuable time to women’s ability development.

The second article is titled “Sexual Harassment at Work: A Case Study of Working Women in Contemporary Vietnam” and was written by Nguyen, H. T. (Nguyen, 2023). According to the author, sexual harassment in the workplace has become a contemporary issue in Vietnam. Sociocultural variables, or the societal norms that shape employees’ perceptions, have the potential to initiate sexual harassment in the workplace. Gender based social norms are the primary source of gender-based inequality and discrimination because they restrict women’s ability to pursue careers and voice their opinions in opposition to sexual harassment and violence. The author infers from his research’s findings that traditional cultural justifications that have taken root and serve as major catalyst for incidents of sexual harassment and violence cannot be addressed by Vietnamese legislation governing gender equality in the workplace.

After reviewing multiple previous researches, the author identifies a research gap that can serve as the basis for problem formulation and discussion in this research. There is a research gap because no previous research has addressed the topic of “how the garment industry and Better Work in Vietnam implemented gender equality in their process to ensure and achieve SDGs Goal 5?”.

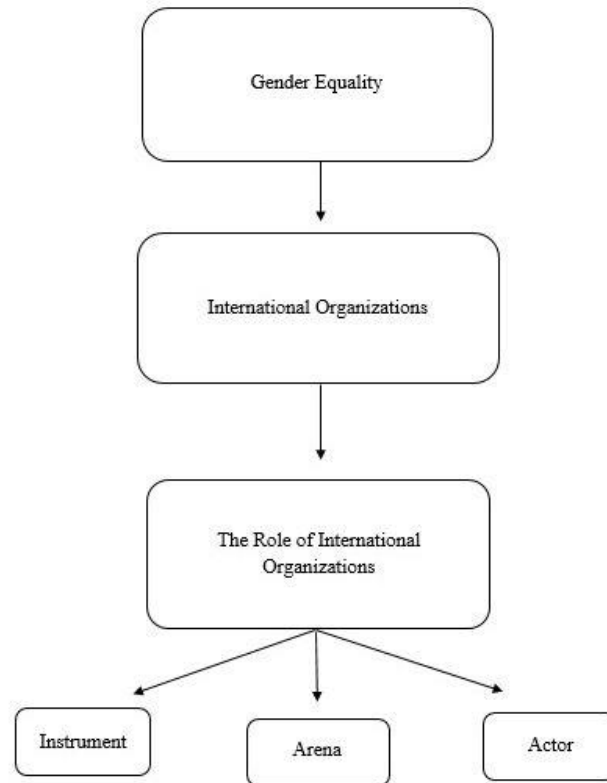
## **METHODS**

In this research, the author uses a qualitative research method with a descriptive research type. The goal of qualitative research is to interpret reality in order to comprehend its meaning. According to John W, Cresswell, inductive logic becomes more prevalent in qualitative research, where the topic of the research will be based on the results of interviews with sources and data found (Somantri, 2005). The descriptive research type aims to obtain facts with the right interpretation (Nasir, 2005). The author uses a descriptive research type because of the rampant cases of sexual harassment against female workers in the garment industry and the continued existence of gender inequality in this industry. The purpose of this research is to find out the extent to which Better Work Vietnam contributes to the resolution of gender inequality in Vietnam’s garment industry.

The author collects data through secondary data techniques. Secondary data itself means data that is not obtained directly by the researcher, but through documents containing data related to the research topic (Sugiyono, 2008). The author will choose a number of earlier studies that are related to the research topic for this study, process the data using the right analysis, and then compile the results. For data analysis techniques, the author uses literature studies from previous studies to gather information in an attempt to get an accurate representation of the research object and

to find specific data and information according to the topic of this research (Sugiyono, 2008). In the context of this research, the author tries to find the role of Better Work in the case of gender inequality in the Vietnamese garment industry.

### Analytical Framework



## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Gender Equality as a concept

Gender equality has fundamental principles that address the prohibition of discriminatory behavior against women and recognizes a power imbalance between women and men. Gender equality in the international community has become one of the emerging frameworks or labels. Over time, earlier scholars developed several labels and meanings regarding gender equality. Labels or meanings that exist on the concept of gender equality are often intertwined with each other. Equal opportunity, empowerment of women, and emancipation are some labels or meanings that are familiarly associated with gender equality. (Lombardo et al., 2009)

The concept of gender equality in international relations is often linked to sustainable development. In the process of realizing a more sustainable world, it is undeniable that most of the existing political-economic relationship phenomena contain elements of gender inequality. The phenomenon of political-economic relationships, especially

capitalism, has led to gender inequality. Capitalism encourages exploitation of women's labor, and the wages of women's labor are not guaranteed. Gender equality as a concept is important to connect with sustainable development, with gender equality, other goals such as human rights and abilities and dignity of women can be achieved (Leach et al., 2016).

In this study, the author discusses how gender equality has not yet been achieved in Vietnam's garment industry. Gender equality inequalities in the garment industry in Vietnam have also led to gender-based harassment, sexual harassment in the working environment, and discrimination against female labor. Better Work Vietnam, as one of the organizations created based on the collaboration between the ILO and the IFC implemented several solutions to address the problem. The role of Vietnam's Better Work as a non-state actor in the form of an international organization was analyzed using Clive Archer's "International Organizations" theory.

### **International Organizations Theory**

Clive Archer in his book entitled “International Organizations” defines international organization as a formal, ongoing arrangement based on the formation of member agreements and has the goal of achieving common interest. The members referred to in international organizations are governments, non-governmental, and two or more sovereign countries. Also, Archer says that international organizations must take note of three key components when handling a problem: instruments, arenas, and actors. First, when international organizations are used as instruments, it means that their members use the organizations as a tool to work toward the same goal. This can be achieved by members’ consistent actions. In the instrument point, international organizations also play a role in pushing back a conflict (Archer, 2001).

Second, international organizations as an arena mean that international organizations allow members to sit down and work toward reaching an agreement. Members of this association typically talk about a problem, which could be a problem that the organization's members are now facing or a problem that is currently affecting the entire world. It is hoped that through this association, a neutral, impartial agreement in the form of a resolution will be achieved. Third, in order for international organizations to function as actors, they must be independent, which means that they are free to act in line with what they want and free from interference from other parties (Archer, 2001).

### **Better Work Vietnam’s Role as an Instrument**

Founded in July 2009, the main goal of Better Work Vietnam was to improve working conditions and boost the competitiveness of Vietnam’s footwear and garment industry. The particular element that led to the establishment of Better Work Vietnam was the pressure given by various groups, including trade unions and non-governmental organizations, who ask for companies and the government to raise the standard of worker conditions, particularly for women workers in the garment and footwear

industries. The World Bank Group and the International Labour Organization (ILO) have initiated a movement to raise work standards in support of global efforts to eradicate poverty. Regarding the local situation, Better Work Vietnam was founded as a result of the garment industry’s explosive rise in Vietnam, which has led to a sharp increase in market demand without comparable improvements in worker welfare (Better Work Vietnam).

The Ministry of Manpower, the Ministry of Industry and Trade, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the Vietnam General Confederation of Labor work together to manage Better Work Vietnam on a national scale. The purpose of this collaboration is to implement labor legislation reforms in Vietnam that will bring the country into compliance with international labor standards and the ILO Convention. With Better Work Vietnam, 492 factories and 62 brands have worked together so far. Companies that have worked with Better Work Vietnam for four years have been successful in reducing the 85% gender pay gap and improved the income ratio for their employees by 25% (Better Work Vietnam).

### **Better Work Vietnam’s Role as an Arena**

Better Work Vietnam’s role as an arena can be seen from Better Work’s efforts to become a forum for its members to find resolutions to gender equality issues in Vietnam’s garment and footwear industry. Better Work Vietnam itself is a partnership between the ILO (International Labour Organization) and the IFC (International Finance Corporation), a member of the World Bank Group. Better Work was formed with the aim of increasing the competitiveness of the garment and footwear industry, which is one of Vietnam’s main exports. In its implementation, Better Work becomes a forum to unite the government, factory owners, global brands, employers’ and workers’ organizations, and workers. Better Work, which unites the government and workers, makes Better Work’s role as an arena very visible, where various mediations and advocacy often occur in overcoming the concerns of each party. One of the national conferences successfully held by Better Work Vietnam was the national conference on May 18, 2022 in Hanoi, which collaborated with the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) also with the support of the Australian government and has the aim of empowering women in order to realize a more advanced Vietnamese garment and footwear industry. This national conference then resulted in a new collaboration being formed between Better Work Vietnam and the Australian government to improve workers’ welfare (ILO, 2022).

### **Better Work Vietnam’s Role as an Actor**

Better Work’s third role as an international organization is that of an actor. Nowadays, international organizations can also mobilize the global populace in addition to sovereign nations. Better Work functions as a separate organization in this instance, with members making all decisions and taking all necessary actions, and partnership remaining unaffected by external factors. As an actor, Better Work possesses multiple



powers, such as issuing directives, suggestions, and decisions (Archer, 2001). Better Work has multiple programs aimed at improving gender equality in the Vietnamese garment and footwear sector. The GEAR (Gender Equality and Returns) project is the most extensively executed of these projects. The primary goal of this program is to eliminate gender gaps that still frequently exist in the workplace, particularly in industries like the garment sector where women workers are dominated. This program’s activities include, training, advocacy, mentoring and networking (Better Work Vietnam).

### **Better Work Vietnam & Implementasi SDGs 5: Gender Equality**

Better Work Vietnam was established in 2009 with the aim of supporting the development of global labor standards. Better Work Vietnam focuses on developing the garment industry and also promoting a better and decent working environment. In the report and research on labor in Vietnam that the author found on the official ILO website, several indications of gender inequality still exist in the work environment and on the scale of the Vietnamese workforce as a whole. As discussed in the introduction section, one of the phenomena of gender inequality in the Vietnamese workforce as a whole is the gap and difference in career development between female and male workers. According to the report “Gender and the Labor Market in Vietnam: An Analysis Based on The Labor Force Survey” one of the reasons why female workers tend to have difficulty achieving development in their careers is because most female workers also tend to spend twice as much time in household activities compared to male workers. This phenomenon is called double-burden.

Better Work Vietnam has several projects in its implementation, one of which is the GEAR (Gender Equality and Returns) project. The project focuses on improving the skills and abilities of female workers and increasing productivity and competitiveness more widely and evenly. The GEAR project is carried out using the skills training method, where Better Work Vietnam will provide the necessary training to help female workers develop and get opportunities to improve their careers. The GEAR project was launched during the Covid-19 pandemic and was carried out virtually. The GEAR project has produced positive results, one of which is that female workers who participate in the GEAR training can apply skills and improve skills and knowledge better. Increased self confidence, initiative, and flexibility are also positive results of the GEAR project carried out by Better Work Vietnam. Not only that, GEAR also improves the ability to adapt in a high pressure work environment (Better Work Vietnam, 2023).

### **CONCLUSION**

The implementation of Better Work in Vietnam has shown a positive impact on the welfare of workers in the Vietnamese garment and footwear industry. Companies who have worked with Better Work Vietnam have been able to close the prior salary gap between male and female workers by up to 85% and increase the income cost ratio by up to 25%, as shown by data that is clearly displayed on the Better Work Vietnam website. This research also proves that Better Work as an organization resulting from

the partnership between the ILO and IFC has succeeded in carrying out its three roles in addressing gender inequality cases in the Vietnamese garment and footwear industry. First, Better Work Vietnam as an instrument by becoming a tool in achieving the goal of improving working conditions and better competitiveness for the garment sector. Second, Better Work as an arena, by bringing together and establishing partnerships with government, non-government, companies, brands, and workers. The fact that there is a national conference focused on promoting women’s empowerment to develop a more advanced garment and footwear sector in Vietnam additionally shows the role of Better Work as an arena. Third, Better Work Vietnam as an actor has been successful in implementing the GEAR (Gender Equality and Returns) training program. Participating female workers gain greater knowledge and skills as one of the many benefits of the GEAR program. This research has limitations in collecting data related to conferences held by Better Work Vietnam and data directly provided by Better Work Vietnam speakers due to the difficulty of finding speakers.

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