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ADVANCING GENDER EQUALITY IN GLOBAL SUPPLY CHAINS



EXPERT ROUNDTABLE
18 February 2026

Background

On 18 February 2026, the Global Supply Chain Coalition convened an expert workshop bringing together 30 representatives from multinational companies, international organizations, industry platforms and policy actors working on trade, human rights and supply chains.

The two-hour workshop had two key objectives:

- 1. Surface insights and emerging trends:** to understand current pressures, practices and gaps related to gender equality in supply chains, including where progress is being made and where challenges persist.
- 2. Identify priority areas for collective action:** to determine where coordinated efforts are most urgently needed and how platforms such as the Global Supply Chain Coalition can add value through dialogue, practical tools, pilots, partnerships and improved accountability.

Summary of discussion

- **A shifting global context:** Gender equality can no longer be treated as a peripheral social issue. It is deeply intertwined with geopolitics, technological transformation, trade policy, macroeconomic shifts and supply chain resilience. Participants emphasized that tariffs, export controls, trade fragmentation and shifting logistics routes are reshaping supply chains in ways that create both new risks and new opportunities for advancing gender equality.

The growing integration of artificial intelligence into procurement processes was identified as a structural shift with implications for gender equality. AI-driven supplier evaluation and risk-scoring systems can strengthen resilience and transparency; however, if not designed with gender-responsive criteria, they risk embedding historical biases into automated decision-making. Technological innovation, participants noted, must therefore be governed with intentional safeguards to ensure it advances, rather than undermines, inclusive supply chains.

- **Concentrated risk in lower tiers:** Gender-related risks remain concentrated in lower tiers of supply chains, where visibility is weakest and women are overrepresented in vulnerable, informal or precarious work. Labour rights violations, unpaid care burdens, safety risks, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), and limited access to grievance mechanisms were highlighted as persistent challenges. At the same time, sectors such as textiles, agriculture, jewelry and logistics demonstrate that women's economic participation is central to value chain performance.

Participants shared practical examples showing that barriers to women's participation are often structural rather than cultural. In traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as vehicle-related industries and date palm production, targeted upskilling, engagement with fathers, husbands and employers, and visibility of women role models led to significant increases in women's participation. In some cases, logistical barriers, such as safe transportation, proved more decisive than assumed social resistance, underscoring the importance of root-cause analysis and evidence-based interventions.

- **Trade and investment policy integration:** Macroeconomic and trade decisions (e.g. subsidies, customs regimes, investment policies and logistics infrastructure) directly shape working conditions and gender equality outcomes. Yet, gender considerations are rarely embedded at that level. National Action Plans, trade facilitation committees and investment frameworks represent underutilized entry points for more systematic integration of gender equality.

- **Beyond the business case:** Advancing gender equality delivers clear commercial value, including productivity gains, workforce stability, enhanced brand reputation and improved stakeholder trust. However, participants stressed that the agenda must also be grounded in human rights and non-discrimination principles. Exclusion of women from supply chains constitutes a compliance and ethical risk, particularly in the context of emerging due diligence frameworks. Reducing gender equality to a narrow business case risks superficial implementation.



- **Fragmentation and power asymmetries:** Fragmentation across emerging due diligence laws, voluntary standards, certification schemes and national frameworks remains a major challenge. Gender equality is often implicit rather than explicit, and draft legislation in several countries does not consistently embed gender-responsive provisions. Without greater coherence, companies face overlapping expectations, while suppliers, particularly SMEs, struggle with limited capacity and unclear requirements.

Power asymmetries in global value chains further complicate implementation. Multinational enterprises set market standards that cascade across suppliers, yet expectations do not always align with local realities or supplier capacity. Participants cautioned that when targets are not matched with training, incentives and awareness-building, actions may become superficial, including symbolic role changes, or unreliable reporting. Sensitive issues, such as GBVH, are particularly difficult to assess in contexts where workers may not feel safe speaking openly. Context-sensitive data practices and trusted grievance mechanisms are therefore essential.

- **Procurement as a lever and risk:** Procurement emerged as both a risk driver and a strategic lever for system-wide change. While cost pressures can exacerbate vulnerabilities in lower tiers, procurement decisions can also embed gender-responsive criteria, contractual clauses and supplier codes of conduct that reshape incentives across value chains.

Throughout the procurement cycle — from strategy and sourcing to contracting and supplier management — companies can influence supplier behaviour, diversify supplier bases and support women-owned enterprises. Embedding gender equality priorities within procurement ensures ownership and accountability. Sustainability teams play a complementary role in positioning gender equality as a defined pillar within ESG and performance frameworks, ensuring it is not diluted across thematic areas.

- **Enabling conditions for implementation:** Participants highlighted several enabling factors: strong board-level commitment; cross-departmental engagement (e.g. procurement, sustainability, compliance, finance); harmonized standards, improved data-sharing; financial incentives; certification mechanisms; and supportive — rather than punitive — enforcement approaches. Raising expectations must go hand in hand with supplier capacity-building and clear pathways for improvement.

Strong supplier relationships were identified as essential. Trust, intercultural awareness and two-way dialogue are particularly important in global supply chains where expectations may feel externally imposed. Early engagement and proactive leadership help build credibility and accelerate sector-wide uptake of standards.

In sectors facing labour shortages, women represent an essential and underutilized talent pool. Public policy incentives, such as apprenticeship schemes or fiscal measures encouraging women's employment, can reinforce corporate action and help normalize inclusive practices.

- **From ambition to systemic change:** The discussion reflected both ambition and realism. Advancing gender-responsive supply chains requires moving upstream into trade, finance and governance systems while strengthening implementation at company and supplier level. Collective action through coalitions, policy engagement and clearer normative frameworks will be essential to make gender equality standard practice rather than an exception.



Conclusion

Gender equality is not a peripheral issue in global supply chains. It is a core risk, resilience and performance issue. Trade policies, tariffs, logistics systems and procurement decisions directly shape outcomes across value chains. Embedding gender equality into governance and sourcing practices strengthens competitiveness, while addressing structural inequalities.

No single actor can deliver this shift alone. Governments, companies, financial institutions, development partners and civil society must align incentives, clarify expectations and strengthen accountability.



Three priorities emerged:

- 1. Leadership and strategic positioning:** Board-level commitment and clear accountability, supported by cross-functional engagement across procurement, sustainability, compliance and finance, are essential. Gender-responsive procurement must be positioned as a strategic lever for resilience and performance, not reduced to a box-ticking compliance exercise.
- 2. Coherence and collective action:** Greater alignment across standards, regulations and voluntary initiatives is needed to reduce fragmentation and systematically embed gender equality into due diligence, trade and investment frameworks. Consistent multinational behaviour across home and host countries is also critical to cascading standards effectively.
- 3. Practical tools, incentives and implementation pathways:** Suppliers require guidance, capacity-building and realistic pathways for improvement. Financial incentives, contractual levers and supportive enforcement can accelerate uptake, providing safeguards are in place to prevent symbolic or unintended outcomes.

Making gender-responsive supply chains standard practice requires moving beyond awareness toward systemic integration, combining stronger governance, greater policy coherence and concrete implementation tools. The Global Supply Chain Coalition is well positioned to catalyze this shift by convening stakeholders, promoting coherence and accelerating solutions that translate commitments into measurable impact.

Learn more:

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