

## Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF) & the SEEP Network Women's Economic Empowerment in Market Systems Learning Series

### Webinar 5 Summary

#### Background

Funded by the U.K. Department for International Development and working in Jordan and Egypt the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF) stimulates increased women's economic empowerment through a market systems approach. As part of its learning and knowledge management strategy, AWEF has partnered with the SEEP Network (SEEP) to conduct a two-year learning series on women's economic empowerment (WEE) in market systems development (MSD). The series consists of quarterly webinars and an annual practitioner learning brief, with the purpose of catalysing discussion and engagement on the topic and sharing current initiatives, good practices and lessons amongst and between donors and practitioners in WEE in MSD.

#### Webinar 5: Making the Business Case: Women's Empowerment in the Apparel Industry

**Date & Time:** 8.30 am EDT, May 21<sup>st</sup> 2019

#### Presenters:

Rania Attia, Lead Market Systems Analyst, Arab Women's Enterprise Fund  
Maryam Piracha, Pakistan Deputy Country Director, Market Development Facility/Suniya Taimour, Business Adviser, Market Development Facility  
Hayat Abdul Malik, RMG Sector Lead, Private Enterprise Program Ethiopia (PEPE)

#### Moderator:

Nayeem Kashem, Technical Adviser, Arab Women's Enterprise Fund

#### [Webinar Recording Link](#)

#### Summary

The apparel industry is globally one of the largest employers of female workers, with women representing 68% of the garment workforce and 45% of the textile workforce (ILO 2014). The global apparel sector faces a variety of well-documented challenges in relation to its female workforce, including low pay, health and safety concerns, irregular work volume and schedules, lack of access to benefits such as health insurance and maternity leave and instances of workplace-based harassment, violence, and discrimination. This webinar focused on how three different market systems development programmes in Egypt, Pakistan and Ethiopia have tackled these issues. Presenters from the Market Development Facility, the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund and the Private Enterprise Program Ethiopia (PEPE) spoke about how they engaged private sector partners to build a compelling business case for women's inclusion and empowerment that delivered value for both the women and the business.

Maryam Piracha and Suniya Taimour from the Market Development Facility spoke about some of the results achieved by the programme in Pakistan, where the textile and leather goods industries are the main employers of women, yet the number of women employed in the sector remains limited. Even though factory owners find female workers more conscientious and disciplined they are reluctant to hire them because of management challenges. Under the socially conservative norms of Pakistan, men and women seldom mix, and when they do there is a perceived heavy reputational risk for businesses. Working with Servis, a large footwear manufacturing company in Pakistan, MDF has demonstrated the potential recruitment and retention benefit of a female-only facility. In addition to setting up a female-only unit, fully managed by female supervisors, the company has introduced other provisions such as a day-care facility, a first in the local leather industry. As a result, Servis has built a name and reputation for being a socially responsible employer, making it easier for the firm to recruit other women. The superior quality of work from the female only stitching unit means that the company has now dedicated production from this unit to its most quality conscious buyer. As a result of the initial success, Servis expanded and set up some additional female only stitching lines without MDF's support. MDF is working with the firm to further build up the evidence base for the business case, by collecting data on productivity.

Hayat Abdul Malik from the Private Enterprise Program Ethiopia (PEPE), also known as Enterprise Partners, spoke about the program's support to government and private ready-made garments and apparel industrial parks relating to recruitment and retention of women from rural areas. PEPE has supported Hawassa Industrial Park to improve recruitment of female workers from rural areas through provision of information on the jobs in industrial parks, provision of transport, grading of jobseekers into different roles and training on soft and technical skills. PEPE supported the development of a labour market information system or database, which enables allocation of workers to factories but also permits workers to start building up a CV. Building on these interventions, PEPE has partnered with the government and BSR's HERProject to deliver a number of worker welfare programmes focused particularly on female workers, who make up of 90% of workers in the RMG factories, covering issues such as sexual harassment, nutrition, sexual and reproductive health, confidence building and improving women's access to financial services. PEPE's research found that one of the reasons for high absenteeism related to women's limited access to menstrual products. PEPE is now working on developing market linkages that can help address this. PEPE is piloting a 5-year retention program, where factories match savings of workers over a 5-year period and provide them with entrepreneurship skills training. The program has reduced turnover and absenteeism, with workers who are part of the scheme moving into supervisory positions or leaving the factories after the 5-year period to start their own businesses.

Rania Attia from the Arab Women's Enterprise Fund (AWEF) provided an overview of the programme's intervention with Arafa Group, the largest RMG firm in Egypt. AWEF's research found that under-representation of women in the Egyptian ready-made garments (RMG) workforce, which at 45% stands considerably below global benchmarks, is one of the leading causes for the sector's low productivity, relating also

to high turnover and absenteeism within the industry. Despite on-going efforts by large RMG firms to hire more women, discriminatory social norms, informal recruitment practices, working environment & management issues hinder women from accessing and remaining RMG jobs. Working with Arafa Group, the largest RMG firm in Egypt, AWEF's interventions have focused on creation of gender-sensitive recruitment channels, to improve women's access to RMG. AWEF has also addressed issues relating to retention through supervisor skills training to improve treatment of workers and the general working environment. Analysis carried out by the AWEF programme has shown that the interventions have generated over \$100,000 in annual savings for the firm as a result of the improvements in turnover rate, absenteeism rate and time spent managing disputes between supervisors and workers and lower recruitment costs. As a result Arafa has also improved its performance in audits and inspections from buyers, meaning the firm is now more likely to maintain contracts & increase sales.