

# 3

## DECENT WORK

### INTRODUCTION

Targets 8.3, 8.5, 8.6, 8.7 and 8.8 include a measure of progress that ties either directly or indirectly to an aspect of decent work. Targets 8.3 and 8.5 directly state decent work in their description and measure attainment through the distribution of employment across sectors; as an increase in wages, with attention to wage growth related to marginalised groups; and as a decrease to the overall unemployment rate. Target 8.6 is focussed on the employment of youth ages 15–24, while 8.7 is focussed on elimination of child labour, which is defined as labour market participation of youth specific to ages 5–17. Target 8.8 highlights working conditions and the ability to organise for collective action.

*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 families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to*

*express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.*  
(ILO, 2019d)

Decent work and the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda – employment creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue – are integral elements of SDG 8. SDG 8 specifically addresses the promotion of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and full and productive employment and decent work, all aspects within the oversight of national governments (ILO, 2019d).

According to the United Nations, decent work means opportunities for everyone: men women and youth, to employment free from exploitation, where workers are treated with dignity and equality, receive a fair income, and are provided safe working conditions. The definition is consistent with the Declaration of Human Rights and is based on the belief that lack of decent work opportunities, insufficient educational investments, and under-consumption lead to an erosion of the basic social contract underlying democratic societies: all must share in progress (ILO, 2019a).

From this perspective, the elimination of child labour is a significant focus. The use of child labour has been linked with lower educational attainment levels and in general, given the vulnerability of the population, is viewed as a moral issue. However, there is evidence that child labour has a purpose in developing economies (Beegle, Dehejia, & Gatti, 2009; Doepke & Zilibotti, 2009). Doepke and Zilibotti (2009) find that the use of child labour may be pervasive in certain countries, so much so that ‘child labour is difficult to eradicate ... in countries where child labour is widespread, political support for child-labour restrictions is often weak’. As discussed by Bhukuth (2008)

*a large number of households survive thanks to the financial contribution made by children's work; consequently, banning such support would risk rendering the financial circumstances of the household even more precarious.*

As a result, the ILO's focus on child labour is two-fold; the first considers the role of children in poverty where their work may be necessary for the family and the second incorporates a narrower definition of work 'that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development' (ILO, n.d.-b). The ILO acknowledges the difficulty of standardising child labour as well offering that

*whether or not particular forms of 'work' can be called 'child labour' depends on the child's age, the type and hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is performed and the objectives pursued by individual countries. The answer varies from country to country, as well as among sectors within countries.*

For the working age population, which is defined by the ILO to be age 15 and higher (ILO, n.d.-c), employment is considered to be a significant element of the quality of life and is correlated to societal stability through both income stabilisation and purposeful activity (Frey & Stutzer, 2002). Alternatively, unemployment can lead to unrest and disrupt peace if it is left unaddressed (Van Der Meer, 2014). However, employment though necessary is not sufficient; the context of employment determines the value to the worker (Thin, 2012). For these reasons, productive employment that can be characterised as decent work is considered to be a significant attribution to the achievement of the United Nations present

focus: achieving fair globalisation and poverty reduction (ILO, 2019e; United Nations, 2016).

Given the global unemployment issues faced by young people (Secretariat of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2013), SDG 8 does focus on providing employment opportunities for this demographic as well as women as a means to both ensure societal connection and stability (Muñoz-Cabrera, 2015). However, implementation is not prescriptive and is left to the discretion of the country. Metrics associated with attainment or progress towards increasing employment and providing educational and employment programmes for youth participation in the labour force are simply the unemployment rate and proportionate increases in youth and gender representation within the labour market.

As many of the metrics related to the measurement of attainment of decent work are based on calculations of labour force participation rates and sectoral representation that are specific to each country, the focus of this chapter will be the defining of decent work specific to its origin and evolution to the present period, the role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in ensuring decent work, the inclusion of decent work within trade agreements, specifically addressing gender and working conditions, and the relationship between decent work and poverty alleviation.

## HISTORICAL REVIEW, DEFINING DECENT WORK

The ILO was created in 1919, as part of the Treaty of Versailles that ended World War I, to reflect the belief that universal and lasting peace can be accomplished only if it is based on social justice.

The Constitution was drafted between January and April, 1919 by the Labour Commission set up by the Peace

Conference, which first met in Paris and then in Versailles. The Commission, chaired by Samuel Gompers, head of the American Federation of Labour in the United States, was composed of representatives from nine countries: Belgium, Cuba, Czechoslovakia, France, Italy, Japan, Poland, the United Kingdom and the United States. It resulted in a tripartite organisation, the only one of its kind bringing together representatives of governments, employers and workers in its executive bodies. The driving forces for the ILO's creation arose from security, humanitarian, political and economic considerations. Summarising them, the ILO Constitution's Preamble says the High Contracting Parties were 'moved by sentiments of justice and humanity as well as by the desire to secure the permanent peace of the world' (ILO, 2019c).

At the time, there was an appreciation of the importance of social justice in securing peace, against a background of exploitation of workers in the industrialising nations. There was also increasing understanding of the world's economic interdependence and the need for cooperation to obtain similarity of working conditions in countries competing for markets (ILO, 2017). Reflecting these ideas, the Preamble states:

*Whereas universal and lasting peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice.*

*And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required.*

*Whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries. (ILO, 2017)*

Interestingly, the areas of improvement listed in the Preamble remain relevant today, for example:

- Regulation of the hours of work including the establishment of a maximum working day and week.
- Regulation of labour supply, prevention of unemployment and provision of an adequate living wage.
- Protection of the worker against sickness, disease and injury arising out of his employment.
- Protection of children, young persons and women.
- Provision for old age and injury, protection of the interests of workers when employed in countries other than their own.
- Recognition of the principle of equal remuneration for work of equal value.
- Recognition of the principle of freedom of association.
- Organisation of vocational and technical education, and other measures.

In 1998, the ILO disseminated the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Declaration (ILO Declaration). The ILO Declaration commits United Nations Member States to respect and promote principles and rights in four categories, whether or not they have ratified the relevant Conventions. These categories are: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of forced or compulsory labour; the abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

The following year, in 1999, in its Report of the Director General on Decent Work (ILO, 2019b), the ILO defined decent work. Additionally, in the same Report, the ILO noted,

‘All those who work have rights at work’, further strengthening the concept that being a worker implies the presence and need for recognition of specific rights linked to the worker’s activity. Such specific rights have to be guaranteed in order to give workers the possibility to undertake their activities in a safe and satisfactory environment.

As noted by Ghai (2002), ILO’s view of decent work puts its emphasis on four main components, namely:

- Workers’ rights, such as basic rights of workers as non-discrimination, absence of abusive conditions (including child and forced labour).
- Social security, intended as the protection from the risk of losing the source of income related to the work.
- Employment, to be interpreted as the tangible possibility to obtain a job in line with one’s needs, preferences and aspirations.
- Social dialogue, to be intended as ‘the right of workers to engage in discussions with employers and authorities over matters bearing on work’.

The ILO definition of decent work does include quantitative and qualitative attributes. Quantitative aspects can be easily recognisable, as they are adopted from a ‘mainstream’ approach to labour economics: per capita, per hour productivity and other standard metrics. On the other hand, qualitative aspects of the framework of decent work are more subtle and have less common agreement within the academic and policy-making community. Qualitative aspects have been explored with instruments available from other sciences such as psychology in an effort to discover how the role of emotional and qualitative attributes are helpful to identify a certain work as ‘decent’ or not.

The full institutionalisation of the Decent Work Agenda into the ILO culminated in 2008 with the adoption of the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalisation. This Declaration affirmed the ILO's mission to pursue social justice by placing 'full and productive employment and decent work at the centre of economic and social policies' of the ILO and its members in the face of globalisation. In this way, the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda became the basis for all ILO policy and programming.

In June 2012, the ILO Recommendation Concerning National Floors of Social Protection (No 202) was adopted by consensus. Social protection floors are nationally defined sets of basic social security guarantees which secure protection aimed at preventing or alleviating poverty, vulnerability and social exclusion. In 2015, as part of the SDGs, the ILO's social protection floors formed the basis of the criteria defining decent work.

1. Employment opportunities.
2. Adequate earnings and productive work.
3. Decent working time.
4. Combining work, family and personal life.
5. Work that should be abolished.
6. Stability and security of work.
7. Equal opportunity and treatment in employment.
8. Safe work environment.
9. Social security.
10. Social dialogue, employers' and workers' representation.

These 10 substantive elements represent the structural dimensions of the decent work measurement framework

under which both statistical and legal framework indicators on decent work are organised and classified.

Statistical indicators are quantitative indicators derived from official national data sources (e.g. labour market participation rate, unemployment rate, income). The legal framework indicators are qualitative in nature primarily based on legal texts and other related textual information. These cover elements related to the organisation of labour, worker safety and working conditions and non-discriminatory equal protection and employment opportunities. Therefore, while statistical indicators make up the vast majority of the indicators in the Framework on the Measurement of Decent Work, the legal framework indicators are equally important. The two sets of indicators are mutually reinforcing and thus both are considered essential for monitoring progress towards decent work in a given national economy. In terms of defining a set of decent work indicators for a given economy, countries are encouraged to select from the total list of statistical and legal framework indicators and add additional indicators to reflect their national circumstances and decent work policy agenda. It is recommended that indicator selection at the national level be accomplished through a tripartite consultation process. The decent work indicators are intended to support monitoring decent work in a given economy and should ideally be analysed together in a holistic manner to obtain a global snapshot of the decent work deficits and progress made for a given point in time, with provisions for necessary adjustments to decent work policy or programmes as well as periodically review the set of indicators for any necessary changes.

However, decent work cannot necessarily be attained through regulatory channels. Arguably, the listing of parameters that constitute decent work are necessary but not sufficient conditions to ensuring both progress to their attainment and implementation of dynamic policy that is focussed on the

long-term implementation and maintenance of decent work as a global labour market condition. Social perception and existing norms related to employment and related conditions need to conform to the intent of regulatory initiatives. Noting the variations between countries, the types of labour requirements and societal norms, Ribeiro, Silva, and Figueiredo (2013) point out how the definition of decent work still has no universal agreement. They highlight the potential for bias and explain the concept as presenting open room for debate, specifically referencing the standard for decent work as being defined by the regulatory and employment parameters of a Westernised, industrial society (Damme, 2011). Spector (2015) in an evaluation of US equal protections laws, notes that the multiple stakeholders: regulators, unions, work centres and organising initiatives, and workers themselves need to be able to be involved to promote a shift in the definition of decent work.

### Mission of ILO

Pursuing its founding mission that social justice is essential to universal and lasting peace, the ILO is devoted to promoting social justice and internationally recognised human and labour rights. As the only tripartite United Nation agency, the ILO brings together governments, employers and workers representatives of 187 member states to set labour standards, develop policies and devise programmes to promote decent work for all women and men.

Today, the ILO's Decent Work agenda helps advance the economic and working conditions that give all workers, employers and governments a stake in lasting peace, prosperity and progress. Since its establishment, the ILO has been committed to protecting the most vulnerable, fighting against

unemployment, promoting human rights, establishing democratic institutions and enhancing the working lives of women and men around the world. The ILO's Governing Body has identified eight conventions as 'fundamental':

1. Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise Convention, 1948 (No. 87).
2. Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining Convention, 1949 (No. 98).
3. Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29).
4. Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105).
5. Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138).
6. Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182).
7. Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100).
8. Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111).

## ENSURING DECENT WORK

Decent work is challenged by the non-standardisation of the concept's definition as well as the oversight with respect to enforceability, given that often times the regulatory relationship to worker's rights is negatively correlated with a country's development status. For many developing countries, trade is central to economic growth, which is measured by GDP. Though the measure is problematic given already discussed shortcomings related to the GDP metric and sustainability, evidence suggests that trade-led growth obscures the relationship

between a government and its people, rationally trading off the welfare of a demographic for the aggregate growth rate of the whole. In a developed country, the issue of decent work is similarly positioned as it is the most vulnerable, either due to migration status, skill level or discriminatory practice, that again appear to be less protected. In both the developed and developing country scenarios, the power dynamic, level of enfranchisement and the participatory nature of government define the domestic means for worker rights; however, in most cases, cultural and socio-economic factors that affect participatory behaviour are exacerbating factors.

Given that the SDGs are global goals where implementation is largely left to individual countries, there is a domestic dynamic with respect to the attainment of the goals within any nation. In the discussion of decent work, this involves domestic regulatory intervention and promotion of equity, living wages and elimination of gender wage disparity alongside safe working conditions. However, an overlap between countries with respect to decent work occurs in trade. An evaluation of trade and trade agreements also addresses another central element of the SDGs; gender equality. The following discussion highlights the specific issues related to decent work that are attributed to CSR, trade and the disproportionate representation of women in occupational roles where the provision of decent working environments is characterised as limiting comparative advantage.

## DECENT WORK AND CSR

CSR is the vaguely defined term for the broad concept of business conduct that aligns with social expectations of integrity, transparency, fairness and generally accepted social values (Hollerer, 2012). Events, such as the Ali garment factory

fire in Karachi, Pakistan in 2012, which killed 300 workers, and the massive collapse of Bangladesh's Rana Plaza factory in May 2013 that killed more than 1,100 workers,

*sparked renewed concerns about the lack of national labour regulations and the inadequacy of existing private social auditing schemes that seek to ensure a basic level of safety and decent work conditions for labourers in export-oriented industries located in developing countries. (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014)*

Further, these tragedies, given that they occurred within the supply chain of multinational corporations, catalysed end consumer activism, resulting in a push for greater transparency and ethical conduct across the production to consumption process. In this manner, consumer behaviour prompted interest in CSR to include a *broader goals* strategy (Weyzig, 2009). This form of CSR 'emphasises goals beyond increasing a firm's net present value' and involves corporate partnerships with NGOs and Civil Society organisations as well as bottom-of-the-pyramid initiatives (Weyzig, 2009). According to this perspective, CSR implies an active contribution of business to sustainable development and poverty reduction. However, evidence suggests that the goals and cooperative nature of this strategy have a significant 'Northern' bias. 'Northern-based consultants, academics and NGOs have dominated the defining and implementation of "cooperation" between developed and developing countries, while the voices of developing country suppliers have remained largely silent' (Lund-Thomsen, 2014):

*To the extent that international buyers still command the most rents in the value chain, through their control of design, branding, market*

*and distribution of consumer products and services, shifting to a cooperation paradigm is unlikely to increase supplier incomes substantially enough to sustain improvements in work conditions and living standards.*

From this perspective, CSR programmes implementing a broader goals philosophy, though seemingly at odds with the prevailing neoliberal perspective of CSR, where companies operate under the assumption that their value is solely found in maximising profitability (Weyzig, 2009), are in practice aligned to the profit motivations of neoliberalism in that consumer brand loyalty and premium are most often associated with CSR interest in the equality and equity attributions to the supply chain. Utting (2007) noted,

*The CSR agenda ... has broadened to embrace labour rights and other human rights. Progress in terms of realising rights, however, lags well behind the rhetoric. Aspects related to empowerment remain weak, while redistribution still figures only marginally on the CSR radar.*

Going forward, the role of CSR in promoting equality and equity within labour markets may be significant if CSR can be formalised to include contribution metrics that identify social justice and environmental justice parameters (Gugler & Shi, 2009). Hughes and Haworth (2011) point out that the vulnerability of the poor ‘is often exacerbated by under-funded and dysfunctional national policy frameworks’ and as a result ‘engagement with worker and employer organisations as well as ministries has become an important precondition for the implementation of poverty reduction strategies’ (Hughes & Haworth, 2011).

Newell and Frynas (2007) propose that CSR has a dual purpose: CSR can be both a business tool with a focus on output but also a development tool. Successful implementation of the latter requires attention to the process of CSR to include the needs of the labour force, as well as an embeddedness of CSR within a corporation's operations (Hah & Freeman, 2014).

*Gender issues in many ways exemplify some of problems associated with current CSR approaches. At the design stage, the neglect of gender issues often means codes of conduct fail to address the unique needs of women workers, as research on Africa and Central America clearly shows. (Newell & Frynas, 2007)*

At present, CSR remains a potential channel for promotion of attributions of decent work as defined by working conditions, gender equality, wage growth and working conditions and environmental protection. The actualisation related to these parameters, however, is tied to the brand proposition of CSR as it relates to the values of end consumers as well as financial market investors. As information asymmetries between production and consumption impacts continue to decline with increased transparency, arguably there will be a significant opportunity for CSR to promote decent work if indeed social justice and environmental justice are elements of end purchaser decision-making (Öberseder, Schlegelmilch, Murphy, & Gruber, 2014; Sen & Bhattacharya, 2001). The causality between CSR and social and environmental outcomes in trading partners still requires further assessment to determine the relationship between CSR outcomes and the expectations and demands of end product consumers (Kitzmueller & Shimshack, 2012).

## DECENT WORK, TRADE AND GENDER EQUALITY

Trade is often addressed through a neoliberal lens that assumes the benefits proposed in economic theory to be fully realisable. Basically, the perspective is that trade allows a country the opportunity to benefit from production and specialisation in products and services where a distinct efficiency advantage may result in above average production returns relative to other countries production of the same goods and services. Replicated across trading entities, each having a different production advantage, there is essentially, on a global-scale, more available for all with no greater resource utilisation, given the caveat of specialisation based on efficiency (MacLaren & Kolaric, 2013; Nelson, 2005). However, the theory is a simplification that does not incorporate the costs and potential for exploitation; rationale for prevailing cultural norms – including prevailing perception of gender roles and its influence on educational, employment and enfranchisement access; informational asymmetries; significance of unpaid work; and most significant to the discussion of sustainability, the adverse impact to ecosystems when production specialisation results in environmental degradation, habitat destruction and loss of species diversification (Perkins, 1997). These holistic elements can be characterised as unrecognised trade distortions that impact efficiency gains between trading partners. Unfortunately, the measure of the benefit from trade, GDP, which although is founded on the market value of trade, simplifies the assessment to a simple quantitative measure that may further exacerbate the inequalities between trading parties (Agarwal, Humphries, & Robeyns, 2003; Beneria, 2003; Nelson, 1996, 2004) due in large part to the focus on the macroeconomic landscape without balance via incorporation of the activities impacting the microeconomic environment, where disparities are more obvious. Given the disparity between the

macro and micro outcomes, some economists have strongly suggested that ‘neoliberal thinking does need to be challenged on the a priori grounds that it, in fact, lacks any actual intellectual validity’ (Nelson, 2005).

Inequities that may exist in a given society due to social norms and accepted practices and expectations can further distort the internal transmission of benefits from participation in trade on a national level. This can be specifically identified with respect to gender. Given that on a global scale, which is magnified in countries characterised as the Global South, women are disproportionately represented in poverty, due in large part to cultural and institutional barriers specific to both educational access and employment opportunities, they represent a labour class that can be easily exploited. The lack of skill, size of their population and need on the part of women to provide financially for their families makes them vulnerable to employment conditions and exploitation. Furthermore, in many countries women are limited and even barred from participation in collective action or labour unions as a result of information asymmetry, fear and potential threat of job loss. Simply stated, without a union or representative body to lobby for their interests, women as a group are weakly positioned given a lack of bargaining power emanating from their domestically discriminated status (Kohler, 2010).

Kabeer (2003) highlights yet another issue related to trade. She notes that theoretical comparative advantage, which underpins neoliberal trade, is in reality unfair advantage in practice. In her research, which came out of a larger research study on Globalisation, Production and Poverty: Macro, Meso and Micro Level Studies, a project funded by the Department For International Development UK, she states that trade has allowed for a relocation of the low-value added stages of labour intensive manufacturing away from the highly paid and organised labour in the North to the poorer,

low-wage, labour surplus economies of the South, bringing workers, often women workers, in geographically dispersed and economically differentiated locations into direct competition with each other. In other words, not only does trade not create a trickle-down equity impact to all workers, given that it centres on highly competitive unskilled products, but it creates competition between countries, creating a downward spiral in the wages of the most vulnerable, which are often disproportionately women. Given the observable outcomes, there has been increased lobbying in trade discourse for social clause parameters to be adapted to protect the most vulnerable, specifically women. Progressive academics have supported the enforcement of global labour standards on grounds focussed on social equity, particularly for women (Catagay, 1996; Hensman, 2000; Ross, 1997).

From the neoclassical economics perspective, free trade leads to increasing competitive pressures which should make it more expensive for individuals and firms to discriminate based on gender (Becker, 1971). In other words, discrimination against female workers should diminish over time with increased competition. In addition, progress in trade openness and integration would be expected to expand job opportunities, with an increasing number of women being absorbed in export-oriented industries (Ozler, 2000). Further, the Heckscher-Ohlin model of trade predicts that factor prices will be equalised among countries that trade, reflecting that trade liberalisation will prompt a narrowing in the gender-based wage differential. According to this theory, countries abundant in unskilled labour tend to specialise in unskilled labour-intensive exports. Thus, demand for lower-skilled labour will rise and the wages of unskilled labour will therefore increase relative to skilled labour. Given that, due to prevailing cultural norms, women in developing countries are more often employed in lower-wage and lower-skilled jobs than men, in

theory, trade centred on unskilled labour as a competitive advantage would increase their wages and reduce the gender wage gap.

Gender outcomes are very context-specific, depending both on initial conditions and on public policies (Catagay, 1996). Korinek (2005) insists that the gender outcomes of trade are also different in the short term (increased vulnerability of female employment) and long term (improved gender parity). Most interestingly, Safa (2018) underlines that an increase in employment does not necessarily mean an increase in wellbeing.

The literature (among others: Catagay, 1996; Ozler, 2000) concludes that globalisation has resulted in the ‘feminisation of labour’. However, the participation of women is focussed on selected sectors. This is particularly visible in the textile sector (Catagay, 1996) and in agriculture (Ventura-Dias, 2010).

### Decent Work and the Gender Wage Gap

Women’s employment has increased as the result of globalisation (ILO, 2015b; Korinek, 2005; Van Staveren, 2007). However, female employment is different in many aspects to male employment. On the demand side, these differences in the labour market concern the type of jobs women are more likely to be offered and the sectors which have a large share of female employment. Women are more likely, due to reasons stemming from choice to culturally affirmed gender roles, to accept lower paid jobs and more ‘flexible’ or precarious jobs (including part-time, etc.) (ILO, 2015b).

There is no theoretical consensus about the effects of international trade on the gender differential in wages; trade liberalisation may have a widening as well as narrowing effect

on the gender wage gap. A large body of empirical literature concludes that following globalisation, the overall wage gap is reducing (Korinek, 2005). This conclusion is controversial and methodological debate is ongoing (Van Staveren, 2007). Simplified, these theories see women's lower wages as a source of comparative advantage but which they argue evens out over time.

However, trade liberalisation may also worsen the gender wage gap. In a more integrated (but also more competitive) world economy export-oriented firms usually compete on cost reduction and therefore use the wage differential as a competitive tool. From this perspective, the bargaining power of unskilled workers will not increase, while that of skilled workers will rise. Because in many developing countries men have, on average, higher levels of education and labour skills than women, this would lead to a widening of the gender wage gap.

Empirical research on the impact of trade on the gender wage gap uses mostly country-level data, and results are mixed. Some studies support the idea that trade openness reduces gender wage discrimination (Artecona & Cunningham, 2002; Juhn, Ujhelyi, & Villegas-Sanchez, 2013). A cross-country study (Oostendorp, 2009) argues that trade liberalisation is associated with narrowing gender wage gaps (at least in richer countries). Fontana and Wood (2000) find that trade liberalisation in Bangladesh narrowed the gender wage gap with an increase in female-intensive manufactured exports such as clothing. Artecona and Cunningham (2002) examined the change in the gender wage gap in the manufacturing sector in Mexico over the trade liberalisation period (1987–1993) and found that trade liberalisation led to a decrease in wage discrimination, and that the gender gap decreased more in industries that were more affected by trade than in other industries. These findings support Becker's

theory of discrimination according to which firms that are competitive do not have the profits to wage discriminate.

Other studies, however, argue that trade liberalisation increases the gender gap. A study by Berik, Rodgers, and Zveglich (2004) of the impact of competition from international trade on the gender wage gap in Taiwan and South Korea between 1980 and 1999 showed that greater international competition in concentrated sectors was associated with larger gender wage gaps and attributed to wage discrimination against women. Similar findings were obtained by Menon and Rodgers (2009) for India over the 1983–2004 period in an analysis of how increasing competitive forces from India's trade liberalisation affected women's relative wages and employment. Contrary to the neoclassical theory, their results suggest that increasing openness to trade was associated with larger wage gaps in India's concentrated manufacturing industries. Korinek (2005) and Higgins (2012) also found that trade leads to the increase of inequalities or polarisation.

High-skilled female workers are likely to benefit from trade, and for this type of worker the gender wage gap narrows; however, low-skilled workers experience a widening wage gap and deterioration of their working conditions. It is important to emphasise that women are more likely to be low-skilled workers; they are also likely to be replaced by men when the job type changes and more skill is required in competitive industries (Ozler, 2000). This is partially confirmed by a cross-country study by Oostendorp (2009) which investigated the impact of international trade openness on the gender wage gap for more than eighty countries from 1983 to 1999. The results of the study suggest that trade is associated in richer countries with narrowing gender wage gaps. However, it finds little evidence that trade also reduces the occupational gender wage gap in poorer countries. Similarly,

Table 1. Global Multidimensional Poverty Index.

Dimensions Indicator of Poverty	Deprived If Living in the Household Where...	Weight
Health	Nutrition An adult under 70 years of age or a child is undernourished.	1/6
	Child mortality Any child has died in the family in the five-year period preceding the survey.	1/6
Education	Years of schooling No household member aged 10 years or older has completed six years of schooling.	1/6
	School attendance Any school-aged child is not attending school up to the age at which he/she would complete class 8.	1/6
Standard of living	Cooking fuel The household cooks with dung, wood, charcoal or coal.	1/18
	Sanitation The household's sanitation facility is not improved (according to SDG guidelines) or it is improved but shared with other households.	1/18
	Drinking water The household does not have access to improved drinking water (according to SDG guidelines) or safe drinking water is at least a 30-minute walk from home, round trip.	1/18
	Electricity The household has no electricity.	1/18
	Housing Housing materials for at least one of roof, walls and floor are inadequate: the floor is of natural materials and/or the roof and/or walls are of natural or rudimentary materials.	1/18
	Assets The household does not own more than one of these assets: radio, TV, telephone, computer, animal cart, bicycle, motorbike or refrigerator, and does not own a car or truck.	1/18

Source: United Nations Development Programme (2018).

Chamarbagwala (2006) notes that international trade in India's manufacturing sector benefited skilled men but hurt skilled women. A more recent study by Juhn et al. (2013) suggests that trade openness increased female employment in blue-collar positions in Mexico. However, there was no evidence that trade liberalisation improved relative outcomes of women in white-collar occupations. Vijaya (2003) insists that the existence of low-skilled jobs in export-led sectors for women can become a trap, as women will be pushed into this employment and not motivated to increase their skills in order to find a better opportunity. This is consistent with the evidence and recommendations as described by Bhattacharya and Rahman (1999) for the case of Bangladesh.

As a result of the issues outlined, and in response to both a protectionist stance on the part of developed countries as well as an interest in complying albeit perhaps superficially with the SDGs, trade agreements are increasingly taking a proactive stance with respect to acknowledgement and representation of the SDGs. This is taking place within their frameworks and is particularly noticeable in agreements between developed and developing countries. However, given the focus on GDP growth and pre-existing infrastructure and social inequities it is too soon to tell if trade agreements will catalyse domestic policy aligned to decent work as proxied by wages. Additionally, there is room for concern with a less discussed issue. Trade agreements and development in general foster a Western-centric perspective on cultural norms of social stratification, gender roles, and economics; specific to the economic framework, trade may be promoting a single perception of standard of living and gender equality. Further, by focussing on income-based metrics related to decent work, the cost of employment in terms of women's roles in unpaid work may be obscured, leading to a net gain that may be significantly lower than income increases may depict.

## DECENT WORK AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

The relationship between decent work and poverty alleviation has often been simplified to an increase in income. However, there is a complexity to the nature of poverty that income does not fully capture (Bavier, 2008; Kaplow, 2008; Pritchett, 2006, Ringen, 1985; Subramanian, 2011). This is referenced by the ILO (2015a) specific to its current mandate: ‘The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity’, as well as, by the United Nations (n.d.-a): the manifestations of poverty ‘include hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion as well as the lack of participation in decision-making’. Poverty is multidimensional and much more complex than the threshold income measure of \$1.90 a day (United Nations Development Programme, 2018). Additionally, poverty is not equally pervasive, there is direct evidence that some social groups bear a disproportionate burden of poverty (United Nations, n.d.-a).

Lötter (2011) positions poverty as a moral issue, ‘Poverty is an inhuman condition that we have a moral obligation to root out completely’ and declares that

*to be poor thus means to suffer as a result of all the consequences of not having enough economic capacities. Poor people experience the humiliation of not being able to live fully human lives as specified by their society.*

Building on the broader impact of impoverishment, Lötter (2011) notes, ‘Many morally sensitive people experience moral

outrage that humans are allowed to suffer such deplorable conditions'. Shah and Khan (2015) propose that

*the true solution of poverty is a paradigm shift where freedom of the individual is judged on the basis of its consistency with the moral objectives set for the society as a whole... In this regard, a fundamental requirement is that an individual has to judge his behaviour on the basis of some ethical constraints. For instance, he has to give up pursuing his self-interests if it clashes with the interests of society.*

The literature and expressed sentiment indicates that though decent work is a parameter of poverty alleviation it is not a sufficient threshold to eliminate poverty. From this perspective, wages and working conditions as well as other parameters that define decent work should be assessed within the context of other living conditions, including the ability to partake in the broader society. The United Nations has attempted to assess the 'multidimensions' [previously italicised] of poverty through the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI). The categories captured by the index include health, education and standard of living; though arguably the measures as provided in Table 1 can be correlated with income, they also have cultural attributions and are easily accessible measures of an ability to participate in society.

The 2018 MPI represents a revised measurement tool from the original launched in 2010. The revised indicator coincides with the start of the third decade on poverty reduction (2018–2027) and reflects consultation and input from academics, UN agencies, national statistics offices and Civil Society organisations. 'They build upon, insofar as data permit, the recommendations of the World Bank's

Atkinson Commission on Monitoring Global Poverty (World Bank, 2017) that are concerned with non-monetary poverty measures' (United Nations Development Programme, 2018).

## SUMMARY

Decent work is not a simply defined concept. It is contextually bound and affects not only income but quality of life parameters that include societal inclusion. Given the breadth of the impact of decent work, it is important to measure it in the context of a nation and in terms of both quantitative and qualitative variables. Therefore, though income is often used as a proxy for decent work and changes in income over time are attributed with characterising the attainment of decent work, income reflects only one parameter. The ability to partake in societal activities, acceptance in social settings as well as safety and dignity within and outside a work environment are all significant and important elements of decent work that require measurement and assessment on a routine basis. From this perspective, decent work is both an absolute and relative attribute; it has a minimum threshold but is relative to the context of the society where the threshold is being applied. Further, given the dynamic elements of society, the threshold parameters for decent work require adjustment with time to capture the changing conditions of the workplace, cost of living, as well as other parameters defining decent work.

Decent work is culture specific as well and this attribution needs to be included in its evaluation. The limitation to an evaluation of decent work to only quantitative characteristics may bias the benefits derived from the measure due to the exclusion of cultural attributions that may be omitted, such as the value of unpaid work.

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