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Measuring Women Empowerment in the Indian Apparel Industry

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The Indian apparel industry employs 7 million people as a part of its workforce, and is the second largest provider of employment in the country behind agriculture (AEPC, 2016). The female labor force participate rate in the Indian apparel industry was found to be 80% (Saha, 2014). However, India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates and ranks 120th in female labor force participation (World Economic Forum, 2014).

The significant role that women empowerment plays in economic and social development has led practitioners and researchers to search for the indicators that affect women empowerment (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005). Women's empowerment is deemed particularly important from the social justice and equality perspectives as well as a necessary means to achieve economic development goals, such as poverty reduction and increase in, nutrition, health, and education in developing countries (Quisumbing & Kumar, 2011). However, scales to measure the women empowerment in the apparel industry is needed, and research to understand the indicators and factors impacting women empowerment.

With the gap in the women labor literature within the Indian apparel industry context, this research aimed to develop and measure women empowerment index in the apparel industry. Empowerment scale was developed using Alkire-Foster methodology (Alkire & Foster, 2007) and identified production, resources, income, leadership and time allocation as the five domains of empowerment. The research specifically measured the women empowerment level of women working in the Indian apparel industry and the domains that contribute to the women empowerment distributions. Data were collected over a two-week period, during March 2016. A market research firm was employed, targeting adult (18 years and above) female apparel workers with at least 1 year of work experience in the Indian apparel industry. 426 usable survey responses were collected. The data was cleaned, and analyzed.

The scale found that the Indian female apparel workers were not empowered, with a measure of 0.690 out of 1. A score of 0.80 and above is considered to be the adequate score to achieve empowerment. The five domains of empowerment showed that only 28.7% of women were empowered. The results also indicated that the Indian women working in the apparel industry do not have adequate empowerment in all of the five domains. Income and leadership domains were found to contribute most towards the empowerment score with 23.7% contribution each.

Resources contributed 21.6%, production contributed 19.5% and time contributed only 11.4% towards Indian women's empowerment. The results showed that among the 71.3% of women that were not empowered, 45.1% were not group members, 41.2% lacked access to credit and the ability to make decisions about it, and 36.7% lacked sole or joint decision making power over income. The results also showed that only 35.8 % of women had gender parity with the primary males in their households.

The findings have important implications and contributions. First, being one of the first women empowerment scale applied to the apparel and textile industry it clearly shows the specific areas for the industry to could help improve. For example, in Indian women working in the apparel factories, 74.3% of the respondents worked more than 10 hours daily and it contributed 54.6% towards the women's disempowerment. Second, the results showed that domains of empowerment, gender parity and gender relations are important aspects of the women empowerment. Third, the results also showed that providing an amiable group environment can increase women participation in groups and thereby increase women empowerment. The findings also suggested that looking at the households and incorporating empower goals for the household instead of the individual workers in the factory may be more beneficiary in creating a healthy owner – worker relationship. Several limitations were identified in this study, accordingly leading to future research opportunities. The samples were focused on the apparel employees working in the Tirupur apparel export hub and therefore a national comparison cannot be done. Modifications were made to the empowerment scale to focus on the apparel industry, further research might be needed to fine tune the modifications to have more accurate measure of women empowerment in the apparel industry.

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