

Decent Work in Textiles and Garment Production: Analysing the formation of glo-cal perspectives and practices in Egypt and Jordan

Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals postulate that “decent work for all” shall be achieved worldwide by 2030. In global textiles and garment production, global and local public, business, and labour stakeholders have implemented efforts to achieve this goal. Nevertheless, indecent work realities persist, especially in textiles and garment supplier firms in the Global South. Previous research showed that a multitude of global and local (glo-cal) influences shape work realities on the factory floor. To better understand the complex problem of ensuring decent work in global garment production, this dissertation, therefore, focuses on the actor in global production networks that stands where the glo-cal influences interact – the local supplier. Three research questions guided the PhD project. First, how do glo-cal influences crossverge at the point of the supplier and motivate (in)decent work outcomes in the global garment production network? Second, how do crossvergence dynamics diffuse across different horizontal nodes and vertical stages of the global garment production network? Third, how do owners-managers of garment supplier firms frame their decent work perspectives?

To answer the research questions, this PhD project investigated the formation of glocal perspectives and decent work practices in the textiles and the garment industries in Egypt and the garment industry in Jordan. The field research included qualitative interviews with 54 owners-managers from 38 factories, 13 industry and labour experts, 27 workers, multiple field observations, and document research. A content analysis of the collected data identified sub-topics that were subsequently analysed in-depth for scientific publication. This final thesis presents four scientific papers highlighting different aspects pertaining to the research questions.

The first paper introduces the notion of crossvergence as a conceptual lens for understanding and analysing the formation of (in)decent work practices in supplier firms. The concept underscores the complicated role of suppliers in ensuring decent work in global production networks. Owners-managers of supplier firms must consider multiple, partially contradicting glo-cal influences when making employment decisions. In particular, they are affected by global competition, global public and private labour regulations, local institutions, local socio-culture, and the local industry environment. Understanding their decisions requires not only an analysis of these glo-cal influences but also an analysis of how suppliers process these influences as active agents.

The second paper investigates the progress towards decent work in the garment industry in Jordan between 2006 and 2018. A qualitative explanatory case analysis served to dissect the

glo-cal influences on suppliers that shaped decent work realities in Jordan. The results further refine the crossvergence framework that was developed in the first paper and illuminate the multi-level developments needed to promote decent work in Jordan. Public, business, and labour stakeholders on global, local-industry, and factory levels influenced decent work outcomes in Jordan. The paper shows that decent work progress in Jordan was only possible with a third-party mediator and advisor, Better Work Jordan, which aligned glo-cal stakeholder demands and enabled suppliers to develop decent work capabilities and practices.

The third paper analyses the diffusion of global labour standards in the garment production network. A qualitative multiple-case analysis served to compare glo-cal influences on and working hours practices of tier-1 and tier-2 garment suppliers in Jordan and garment and textiles suppliers in Egypt. The results show that crossvergence dynamics play out differently in different nodes and stages of the garment production network. Aggressive procurement practices, as well as intellectual, financial, and physical resource limitations, drove excessive working hours of lower-tier suppliers. The paper highlights the need for new purchasing strategies in the garment production network, as well as further investments in initiatives that strengthen local resources for decent work practices.

The fourth paper explores cognitive decent work frames of garment factory owners-managers that influence decent work decision-making. A thematic analysis of the collected research data revealed that owners-managers in Egypt and Jordan dominantly frame decent work as a (paternalistic) family responsibility and as a business responsibility. Additionally, owners-managers generally agreed with the imperative of human rights and the protection of basic human needs. The detected frames only partially accorded with global conceptualisations of decent work, thereby raising questions about the universal applicability of global labour standards. The paper suggests including universalistic (human rights-oriented) and particularistic (supplier responsibility-oriented) regulations in global standards to improve their legitimacy and effectiveness.

The results of this thesis contribute to the decent work debate in theory and practice. First, the thesis provides the research community with an analytical tool – the crossvergence framework – to capture glo-cal influences on suppliers and to account for supplier agency when discussing decent work outcomes in supplier firms. Second, it deduces specific propositions for the design and implementation of global labour standards to better account for local needs and value systems. Third, it proposes a redistribution of roles and responsibilities in the quest for decent work in global garment production, captured in a synergistic cooperation paradigm. The paradigm highlights the institutionalisation of glo-cal initiatives, like the Better Work country programs, in local production contexts, as well as the obligation for the global North to ensure responsible purchasing practices of global garment brands and retailers.