

INVESTING IN GIRLS:
IT'S THE SMART THING
TO DO

GIRLS
ADVOCACY
ALLIANCE



Girls first



Development Cooperation
Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands

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On Friday the 27th of October 2017, the kick-off event 'Investing in girls: a good business!' took place during the Accenture Innovation Awards in Utrecht. Together with the Girls Advocacy Alliance and with the support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Plan Nederland organised the event to raise more awareness amongst Dutch international companies about gender policies and practices in their supply chain. With the help of international speakers, an impassionate moderator and outspoken entrepreneurs the afternoon turned out to be a successful event all round.

After a short but invasive trailer on the realities of working girls and young women worldwide, the moderator of the day, Rens de Jong, well-known anchor at BNR Nieuwsradio, opened the event by interviewing Monique van 't Hek, CEO of Plan Nederland. Van 't Hek reinforced the notion that cooperation is needed to create impact and real change. Plan Nederland or even the [Girls Advocacy Alliance](#) (a consortium led by the Dutch office of Plan International, Terre des Hommes and Defence for Children – ECPAT) need to cooperate to bring about change: "We can't do it alone. We need the private sector because that's where the jobs are." Van 't Hek also stressed the importance of raising awareness about girls' and women's plight, while paying particular attention to the vulnerabilities that girls and young women face in the workplace (e.g. sexual violence, early and forced marriages, forced labor, trafficking, limited access to education).



RIPPLING EFFECT

When asked about the link between the Girls Advocacy Alliance (GAA) and the private sector Van 't Hek pointed out the rippling effect that the empowerment of young women and girls has: "If women's access to the labor market is improved, this immediately improves the economic position of girls and young women, as well as their family and eventually the economy of a country. You see a decline in forced child marriages, women have fewer children and the children they do have are healthier and go to school."

GENDER A DELICATE ISSUE

Given the importance of improving the economic position of girls and young women and the crucial role that the private sector needs to play in this, it was somewhat disheartening to hear that a recent survey conducted by GAA among Dutch, international companies resulted in limited feedback. The survey zoomed in on the companies' policies on SDG 5, 8, and 17; gender equality, decent work and partnerships. Van 't Hek: "It turned out that many companies still consider gender a delicate issue. It remains unknown territory for most companies, and companies are also still reluctant to open up about human rights issues in their supply chains. In other cases companies said they were not acquainted with the practices of their suppliers." In the [report on the outcomes](#), Plan Nederland provides suggestions for improvement of the supply chain. Interviews with several stakeholders, such as the private sector are incorporated as well.

COMPANIES' CHALLENGES

In his keynote speech Dante Pesce, one of 5 members of the UN Working Group on Human Rights and Business, gave a global overview of the problems girls and young women face in the supply chain. He zoomed in on the challenges that companies face while calling out exactly those companies that claim not to be aware of the practices of their suppliers.



COLLABORATION IS NEEDED

With the changing role of business in society, the need for cooperation is bigger than ever before. According to Pesce the solution to social issues no longer lies in the hand of governments. Instead he calls for collaborations and cooperation on behalf of all those involved: "Respect for human rights should be obvious. It's an area of collaboration, not competition." Sustainable development is based on due diligence and impact. Pesce went to argue that there is no sustainable development without responsible business conduct. Just as there is no responsible business conduct, without respect for human rights.

KNOW YOUR BUSINESS

With only 2% of all assets in the hands of women, Pesce argued that the economy is still under male control, leaving women powerless. But there's hope. The number of women in higher education and those receiving post grads is impressive. According to Pesce the private sector can also create change but this requires an effort on their part: "Get to know your supply chain. That is the very minimum you can do. Commit to long-term partnerships. Review your sourcing policies." In short, companies should know their business and show commitment. The information is out there, the government has identified and gathered all the information needed, paid for by our own tax money and available for all to see. And so not knowing is no longer an option. Pesce: "When you say you don't know, I say: you haven't tried. Or you haven't tried hard enough. Just try harder."

SMART INVESTMENT

Pesce concluded by arguing that increasing women in the workforce, paying them a living wage, and offering them positions of power isn't just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do. It is more than a moral obligation, it's smart business that benefits the individual company directly: "Female workers invest their money there where it matters: in education, housing, food. And so women with an income have an incredibly effect in society overall. If women take over, the structure of economy, the overall society will be better off. Be actively inclusive. It's not only the right thing, it's the smart thing to do."

DISCUSSION ON DILEMMA'S

Pesce's keynote speech was followed by a discussion with special guests [Hans Docter](#), Director for Sustainable Economic Development at the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Jeroen

van Dijken of the [Dutch Agreement on Sustainable Garments and Textile](#). Plus interviews with representatives of the private sector: Sally Hamers of JJH Textiles and Monique Ansink, owner of Excellent Products Group. The discussion zoomed in on 3 dilemmas. First, [the unruly practice versus the theory](#). What are the challenges that companies face when they want to be a sustainable employer and offer good labor conditions and pay a living wage? Secondly, the [multistakeholder approach](#). What do we hope to achieve with this? And what is lacking in the current initiatives? And finally: [a call to action](#). What can the corporate Dutch sector do to create change? All three dilemmas were introduced by a short video that featured interviews with key stakeholders, ranging from factory workers and management of textile factories to government officials from Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Kenya, who shared their experiences and knowledge.



LABOR INEQUALITY IS EVIL

Hans Docter opened the discussion by arguing that labor inequality is the number one issue we should be focusing on: "It's so unfair...it has to do with the kind of society I want to live in. I don't feel comfortable living in a society where women are not able to use their full potential. It's not just stupid it is evil. And it's a good thing that women, and men, are stepping up and putting this on the agenda."



COMBINING EFFORTS

Meanwhile Jeroen van Dijken argued that naming the problem is not the issue, it's how to solve the issues at hand that can be problematic. And so he too reinforced the need of combining efforts. "The Dutch textile industry makes up just 1 % of the entire textile industry, even if we have 100% of Dutch companies changing their policies, we still only have 1% of the industry. We need to get those numbers up."

ONE WOMAN ARMY

One woman who singlehandedly tried to get those numbers up is Sally Hamers of JJH Textiles. She took to the stage to share her remarkable story. A self-described "one woman army," Hamers – who runs the company with her father – set up a manufactory in Bangladesh for business clothing. Her aim was to have an all female factory: "The textile industry is a male dominated world. In the end, we had 95% women. We would have reached 100% if it wasn't for the male security guards we had to hire."

A LIVING WAGE

What makes [Hamers' story](#) particularly interesting is that she also hired women in position of power and set goals and targets for her workers: "We paid living wages and we noticed people became lazy. So we gave them targets and helped them grow and work their way up. We started working in smaller groups. We offered people more control and positions of power and gave them more responsibility. The women on the floor loved that. And they also loved the fact that the company was run by a woman, someone they could relate to and that faced many of the problems they face as well. At the same time, men outside of the factory learned to accept us and our way of working because they realized that at our factory their wives and daughters were safe."

FORCED TO CLOSE FACTORY

Unfortunately, that all changed after the ISIS attacks of July 2016. With her blond hair and blue eyes Hamers was an easy target and in the end was forced to close her factory. A difficult decision, to say the least. "On a personal level it was dramatic. People were scared to come to work, because I was there and I was a very visible target." The experience, however traumatic, hasn't dampened Hamer's enthusiasm or dedication. "My one piece of advice would be: stop talking and start doing. In the process of creating change you can always change direction, but just do it."



CORRUPTION AND FALSE COMPETITION

Next up was **Monique Ansink**, owner of Excellent Products Group. The company produces some 4 million tie downs a year, which are sold in 24 countries. It's a commodity product and so the margins are low and the challenges the company faces when trying to pay a living wage are fierce. According to Ansink there is corruption and false competition. "Our factory in Vietnam consists of 50 employees of which 70% is female. I'd like to pay everyone a living wage, but the reality is that we can't afford to pay 160% of the minimum wage. We would need to raise the price of our products and the clients aren't willing to pay more." To add insult to injury there are competitors who cheat and copy certificates, which results in a far from level playing field.



INNOVATIVE IDEAS

At one point moderator Rens de Jong turned to the audience and in the spirit of collaboration he asked the audience to come up with three different ideas that could help increase the sense of urgency and place women's right higher on the agenda. After short deliberation the audience came back with three suggestions. First, gender should be made a business case and the (financial) benefits that come with employing women should be communicated. Secondly, standards should be set on government procurement. In short, the government should focus less on getting the best price and instead lead by example. And finally, the idea was raised to ride on actualities, like the current 'me-too' movement.

SOCIAL BUSINESS JOURNEY

As the event drew to a close, Plan Nederland's CEO Monique van 't Hek took to the stage for the final time and called for collaboration, urging those present to join Plan in a **social business journey**, literally and figuratively speaking. A fitting end to an inspiring event.

For more information about the multistakeholder approach or the social business journeys, please contact Sandra Bruinse at sandra.bruinse@plannederland.nl

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The Girls Advocacy Alliance is one of the strategic partners of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the Dialogue and Dissent framework.