

 CASE STUDY

Enhancing Gender Equity within Textile, Clothing, and Footwear Manufacturing: A Case Study on Yeşim Apparel and Textiles

Established in 1983, **Yeşim Apparel and Textiles** is a strategic manufacturing partner to some of the world's leading brands. Founded on a "people first" philosophy, Yeşim has enshrined gender equity and social responsibility in its corporate values and identity, adopting innovative practices to empower the women and men it employs. The company has maintained this core value while scaling operations in Turkey and expanding into Egypt and Moldova, consciously creating gender equitable work cultures that align with each factory's unique market context.

WORKFORCE PROFILE

Across 6 factories, women comprise:



TURKEY

Bursa **54.8%**
Ağrı **67.3%**



EGYPT

Cairo **21.8%**
Alexandria **20.7%**
İsmalia **25.58%**



MOLDOVA

Ascena **93.1%**

ACTIONS IMPLEMENTED

◆ Institutionalizing commitment to gender equity:

- Signatory to Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) of UN Women and UN Global Compact
- Co-chair the Women's Empowerment Working Group for UN Global Compact's Turkey Network
- Mobilize industry best practice as member of Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) Gender Equality Committee
- Established supplier group Gender Equality Policy as framework that factories can adapt to market context

◆ Care and support for working parents:

- Operationalized demand-driven childcare support at all factories

◆ Addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH):

- Built supplier group capacity to design and undertake initiatives that appropriately address GBVH in context



BUSINESS IMPACTS

- ◆ Greater productivity associated with reduced absenteeism and high retention
- ◆ Among job candidates, enhanced reputation and recruitment capability as an employer of choice
- ◆ Among apparel brands, enhanced reputation as a gender equitable and socially responsible supplier
- ◆ Improved organizational capacity to sustain production and growth



SOCIAL IMPACTS

- ◆ Enhanced ability to balance care responsibilities alongside work
- ◆ Contribution to wider change in gender norms

To Yeşim, "people first" means taking concerted steps to empower its global workforce, including tailoring employee support and services to the respective needs of women and men. Establishing group-level policies and commitments to gender equality, Yeşim has laid the groundwork for a welcoming, equitable workplace, which factory leaders then contextualize to fit their specific market and workforce.

SUPPLIER GROUP LEADERSHIP COMMITMENT TO GENDER EQUITY

Senior leadership of the supplier group has aligned with the broader movement for gender equality, emboldening Yeşim local leadership to promote an equity-focused business culture at the factory-level. With top executives committed to the women's empowerment agenda, management at all levels are encouraged to adapt culturally relevant approaches in the different contexts where they operate.

In 2015, Yeşim signed the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), a framework co-founded by UN Women and UN Global Compact to advance women's participation and empowerment in the private sector. Yeşim was the first garment firm in Turkey to

sign the WEPs, and currently serves as a co-chair of the Women's Empowerment Working Group in the Compact's Turkey Network.

Yeşim is also a member of the Turkish Industry and Business Association (TÜSİAD) Gender Equality Committee. Through both workstreams, Yeşim facilitates dialogue among public and private leaders on strategies and innovations to drive equity in the world of work. Collaboration with like-minded partners is a critical avenue for companies. Alongside other industry leaders, Yeşim is exploring how to continually improve gender action in ways that are relevant, meaningful, and impactful for employees and businesses.

Networks provide a forum for Yeşim Group to learn, share, and advocate for the adoption and expansion of gender-smart policies domestically and internationally. Signing on to external compacts and enacting group-level commitments send a strong message in support of gender equity and responsible business practices at Yeşim. While these networks are primarily located in Turkey, Yeşim applies principles and learnings across their multinational factory system. Encouraged from the top, factory management is supported and motivated to roll out empowerment-focused initiatives in their respective workplaces.

This public commitment also bolsters the Group's reputation as an international supplier dedicated to gender equality. A solid track record on women's empowerment boosts Yeşim's brand equity and drives demand from corporations like Nike who value strong, sustainable supply chains.

TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION TO FACTORIES

Yeşim factories translate the "people first" philosophy in numerous ways, meaning initiatives can vary based on the market. For example, since labor force participation is largely dependent on the political and cultural context, representation of women varies based on factory location – from over 90% in Ascena, Turkey, to 20% in Alexandria, Egypt. Yeşim has recognized the need to consciously address gender inequities by tailoring operations and support services by region. Initiatives are designed to lower barriers to women entering the workforce, ensure job quality and decent work, and foster a workplace culture where female



employees are motivated to stay.

Institutionalizing Commitment to Gender Equity

At the group-level, Yeşim enshrined its commitment by enacting a **Gender Equality Policy**. The policy prohibits discrimination during recruitment and hiring, labor and task assignments, and promotion and advancement. It also importantly reiterates Yeşim's commitment to addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH). Each factory has adapted this policy, incorporating national legislation and local policies, practices, and social norms related to definitions and remedies for GBVH.

This policy also requires each factory to establish a cross-sectional **Gender Equality Committee** with at least one representative from every department and a trade union representative. Yeşim has found this structure facilitates and improves Committee buy-in and functionality. The Committee is responsible for enacting the policy, including oversight and implementation, and any subsequent efforts on gender and women's empowerment. By encouraging internal engagement, each factory can design and deploy strategies based on their intimate knowledge of gender relations in the specific work environment.

Each factory's activities ladder up to the supplier group, enhancing learning and accountability for gender-related efforts across Yeşim. One representative from each local Committee sits on a Supreme Gender Equality Board that reports to the CEO. This Board promotes cross-factory dialogue, enabling factories

to share challenges and insights on the journey to equitable and respectful workplaces.

Care and Support for Working Parents

As an advocate for gender equity, Yeşim Group takes responsibility for women's full participation in the labor force. With women performing the majority of paid and unpaid care responsibilities globally, alleviating worries about childcare can greatly enhance the likelihood that women will seek employment. Therefore, **support structures for caregivers** are a central component to gender integration efforts within Yeşim's factories.

The Yeşim Kindergarten was established on the Bursa factory's premises in 1988, just five years after the Group was established, when onsite daycare was virtually unheard of in the business world. The early initiative demonstrates the Group's foundational philosophy to put "people first" by supporting women already in the workforce, and reducing employment barriers for other Turkish women who might not apply without childcare options.

At the kindergarten, a team of licensed youth specialists care for and educate approximately 410 children between the ages of 0-6. Open six days of the week from 7am to 11pm, the kindergarten ensures accessibility for parents who work morning or



afternoon shifts. Yeşim also makes a concerted effort to encourage working dads to leverage the center, helping shift norms around care responsibilities. Yeşim conducts regular **surveys to measure parent satisfaction** with the kindergarten, and aims to continuously improve operations, education quality, and activities based on the feedback. Employees with older children are even eligible for education grants for each school-aged member of the family.

Building on this successful program, Yeşim included an onsite childcare facility during construction of its newest factory in Ağrı, Turkey in 2019. Despite delays due to COVID-19, management plans to open the facility once it is safe to do so, with capacity for 100 children. In the interim, the factory partnered with the Ministry of National Education to provide free childcare through a state-run daycare near the factory. In an effort to ease additional burdens, the factory provides **free transportation** for convenient pick-up and drop-off, meals for children, and a school supplies stipend. Free transportation for daycare staff also ensures the daycare is open and staffed at times convenient for factory shifts.

In Bursa and Ağrı, provision of onsite childcare facilities exemplifies how Yeşim designs employee support initiatives with a context-specific lens. Turkish women spend five times as many hours on unpaid care and domestic responsibilities as men.¹ Infrastructure is also a constraint. Many Turkish families do not have preschools in their area, and those who do often find it unaffordable.² Free, quality childcare onsite in Almaxtex and Ağrı lowers critical barriers, enabling more Turkish women to join and stay in the labor force.

In İsmalia, Egypt, Yeşim has recently built an onsite kindergarten to offer similar high-quality education and care services as the Bursa factory. In Alexandria and Cairo, the firm does not offer an onsite option, so working parents with children up to six years of age receive an **allowance for childcare needs**. Contact information for quality care providers is posted in the factories for parents' awareness.

¹World Economic Forum (2020). *Global Gender Gap Report*. World Economic Forum: Geneva. Available at: http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

²World Bank (2015). *Supply and demand for childcare services in Turkey: A mixed methods study*. Washington, D.C. Available at: <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/114451467999711217/Supply-and-demand-for-child-care-services-in-Turkey-a-mixed-methods-study>

In Moldova, the state provides free childcare to citizens. Yeşim attempted to build an even more convenient childcare facility at the factory in 2001, but faced many restrictions from the state due to the already existing welfare policy. Yeşim has confirmed through employee feedback that state-run childcare facilities are safe and proximal to the factory for convenient drop-off during their commute. To ensure employees can take advantage of this service, Moldova management further **arranges work shifts** to accommodate the hours of the state facilities.

For many businesses, the idea of subsidizing childcare invokes fear of high upfront costs. However, Yeşim views this vital support as an **investment in the business** that delivers tangible returns. When support for care responsibilities is embedded in all factories, employees express greater satisfaction at work. Across markets, employees see the added value of this service, as shown through strong loyalty and low absenteeism. Yeşim employees maintain an average retention of 8 years, with some staying as long as 25 years or more. Support for working parents also contributes to **low absenteeism**. Absenteeism among employees who take advantage of childcare support is just 0.9%, compared to 4.2% among all Yeşim employees.

High-quality care options validate Yeşim as a thoughtful and family-friendly company, elevating the firm as an employer of choice in its regions of operation. During a period of growth in 2019, the Group found most female candidates preferred Yeşim over other employers due to the childcare support available. In recruitment, many candidates reported quitting their previous jobs when they gave birth due to lack of childcare. In contrast, Yeşim's strong reputation enables the firm to recruit high potential talent in line with their production and growth objectives and retain them over the different seasons of their lives.

Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Yeşim maintains a policy of zero tolerance for any form of workplace harassment. In its Gender Equality Policy, the Group outlines the intention to address gender-based forms of violence and harassment in each of its markets. For this reason, the Group launched the **Equality at Home and Work project** in 2016, supporting broader cultures of respect for women and

intolerance for GBVH. As part of the project, Yeşim leadership guide factory management in identifying common manifestations of GBVH in society and mitigating against them at work. Factories then take responsibility to develop their own anti-harassment and violence initiatives based on their specific concerns.

Yeşim prioritizes initiatives which are sustainable and address the topic through multiple lenses. For example, the Bursa factory collaborated with a local NGO to train employees and interns on topics of gender equality, discrimination, and sexual harassment. Communication between colleagues remains a challenge, however. For this reason, leadership launched the **Nonviolent Communication Project**, which entails 3 weeks of progressive trainings to improve dynamics on gender diverse teams. While relevant for all staff, the initiative especially aims to enhance supervisors' awareness of gender equality and discrimination and build skills in communication and conflict management.

Recognizing GBVH in the workplace is just one manifestation of a systemic issue, the factory also educates employees on the topic through the lens of personal, intimate partner relationships. Through the Yeşim Kindergarten, parents and non-parents can attend "Parent School" where they can participate in trainings on gender equality in relationships, communication, and domestic violence.

Leveraging the momentum in Bursa, Yeşim is **diagnosing local GBVH risks** and prevention methods in the other five factories by considering working conditions, cultural attitudes, and national policies. The factories will conduct pertinent activities to gauge employees' perceptions, such as **employee surveys** to measure job satisfaction, gender attitudes, and levels of awareness on GBVH. Grounded in local understanding of these sensitive issues, factories will be better able to design actions that not only respond to incidents of harassment and violence, but address the root causes.

As more companies follow Yeşim's lead, corporate action – adapted across cultural contexts – to make workplaces safe and welcoming, can shape the attitudes and policies that dictate how women and men participate in economies.

IMPACTS

Tailored gender initiatives have positively impacted Yeşim's workforce, as well as its business operations.



BUSINESS IMPACTS

- ◆ **Greater productivity associated with reduced absenteeism and turnover:**
 - With reliable childcare and fewer complications balancing outside responsibilities, absenteeism among parents taking advantage of childcare support is just 0.9% compared to 4.2% for all employees. With absenteeism less of a concern, Yeşim sees efficiencies on the factory floor.
 - Employees value being part of an inclusive workplace that supports childcare and women's empowerment. This greater job satisfaction helps Yeşim retain its talent for many years, representing savings in recruitment and onboarding.
- ◆ **Enhanced recruitment capability:**
 - Among job seekers, Yeşim's reputation for gender equitable and family-friendly workplaces makes the firm an employer of choice in its regions of operation. During recruitment, female candidates indicate preference for Yeşim over other local employers due to the available childcare support. The ability to attract top talent enables the firm to respond to spikes in production and meet growing demand.
- ◆ **Enhanced corporate reputation among apparel brands:**
 - The firm's reputation as a gender equitable and socially responsible supplier earns Yeşim equity with brands. To buyers aligned with sustainable sourcing practices, manufacturers that pursue the principles of women's empowerment and gender equity notably differentiate themselves in the marketplace.
- ◆ **Improved organizational capacity to sustain production and growth:**
 - Yeşim's ability to smoothly expand production to new regions is partly due to its framework of global policies and commitments that are tailored to local needs. New factories conform to the supplier group regulations while adapting to their context and policy environment—a responsive and scalable model.



SOCIAL IMPACTS

- ◆ **Enhanced ability to balance care and work:**
 - Subsidizing childcare and education services enables working parents to better balance family responsibilities alongside their career. With reliable arrangements onsite or nearby, women in particular experience less stress and can remain employed through life transitions of pregnancy and parenthood.
- ◆ **Contribution to wider change in gender norms:**
 - Commitments to national and international agendas on gender equality, like the WEPs and TÜSiAD, contribute to broader development goals by providing decent work, improving women's livelihoods and job quality, and modeling equitable workplaces on a larger scale.
 - Employer-supported childcare helps level the playing field for women who perform the majority of unpaid work. Lowering this barrier to entry is a crucial strategy to increase women's participation in the private sector. In markets where women have historically been limited to the home or informal economy, corporate action to establish kindergartens or provide education vouchers can ultimately prompt shifts in gender norms around the "acceptable" roles for women in an economy.
 - By encouraging male employees to enroll young children at Yesim's facilities, the firm further sends the message that fathers have an equal stake in the care and education of their children.

LESSONS LEARNED



1. **Genuine commitment to gender equity from top leadership is mission critical.** As executives recognize that supporting women is an investment in human capital, the gains from attracting, retaining, and maximizing talent can catalyze even greater commitment to equity in the workforce.
2. **Think globally, act locally.** Philosophies and frameworks originating with the supplier group are the foundation for factories to adopt and adapt gender equity in context. Gender dynamics play out differently in every market. Drive engagement by consulting female and male employees, and tailoring initiatives and support systems to the market. External partners or NGOs can be a key resource for collaboration.
3. **“People first” is more than a slogan.** Workplace cultures are multifaceted, as are the human beings that give life to the organization. When people feel they belong and are valued, they can bring their full selves to work. Treating employees as talented individuals worthy of investment can also pay dividends in the form of productivity, cost savings, and reputation.
4. **Gender equitable practices are a sound investment.** For example, care arrangements and protections from GBVH can improve job satisfaction as well as attract and retain talent.
5. **The private sector is a powerful player on the journey to inclusive economies.** As a major employer of women around the world, manufacturing firms, in particular, can take the lead in promoting decent work for women. For deeper impact, corporations should align with national and international commitments, and partner with stakeholders advancing broader agendas on gender equality and inclusive development.

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