



ASSESSMENT OF WORKERS' RIGHTS VIS-À-VIS INVESTORS' OBLIGATIONS IN EASTERN INDUSTRIAL PARK

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Info Artikel:

Submit: 2025-09-24

Revised: 2025-10-28

Accepted: 2025-11-20

Vol: 4

Number: 2

Page: 177 - 185

Keywords:

Investors' Legal Duties, Workers' Rights, Non-Discriminatory Labor Standards.

Abstrak:

This study examines investor compliance with non-discriminatory labor standards in protecting young workers' rights under Ethiopian investment and labor laws, including ILO Convention No. 111. A qualitative approach was employed using in-depth face-to-face interviews with purposively selected informants who possess relevant knowledge of workplace practices and investor behavior. Data were analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that young workers in the Eastern Industrial Park experience harassment and discrimination based on sex, language, and ethnicity. Both foreign and domestic investors often disregard labor and investment regulations, particularly in hiring and dismissal practices. Key challenges include limited labor inspection capacity, the absence of labor unions, corruption, and weak governance. The study recommends that investors implement fair, non-discriminatory labor practices and avoid bias in recruitment and promotion. The Ethiopian government should strengthen enforcement of labor laws, while BoLSA must enhance monitoring and provide training for inspectors. Greater coordination between federal, regional, and local authorities is necessary to address governance issues. Establishing functional labor unions is also essential to better protect workers' rights.

INTRODUCTION

Ethiopia has consistently demonstrated its commitment to create conducive environment for direct investment (hereafter DI) and foreign direct investment (hereafter FDI) by amending different investment laws and subsidizing the establishment of industrial parks (Mizanie, 2016). As a human rights issue is relevant to investment, but it does not deal efficiently with those who violate workers' rights, and there is no clearly established mechanism to hold investors liable. Nowadays, discrimination and harassment of young workers because of their ethnic or language background or sex is rampant. Harmonizing the investor's economic interest in profit-making with workers' rights protection is one of the challenges to enforce it properly. The government has an obligation to protect workers' rights against abuses by third parties, including enterprises, through appropriate policies, regulations and adjudication.

Ethiopia Investment Law (Article 54 (2), Investment Proclamation 1180/2020) and Industrial Park Law (Article 28, Industrial Park Proclamation 886/2015) referred the issue of labor rights to the Ethiopia Labor Law. The non-discriminatory labor standards of the labor force are governed by Ethiopia labor law. Ethiopia labor law clearly prohibits discrimination between workers on the basis of nation, sex, religion, political outlook, HIV/AIDS disablement or disablement or any other grounds (Article 14 (1) (f), Ethiopia labor proclamation 1156/2019). Ethiopia adopted non-discriminatory labor standards based on sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, disability, age, or any other grounds. Ethiopia labor law prohibits only direct discrimination but not indirect



discrimination. Direct discrimination occurred when an individual was treated less favorably compared to others in a similar position who have been or would be treated, and this is because of particular characteristics they hold that fall under a 'protective ground'. Protection against indirect discrimination that prohibits discrimination of individuals or groups of people in different situations not incorporated in labor law (Handbook on European non-discrimination law, 2018). The labor proclamation is silent with regards to the protection of individuals against discrimination at the recruitment level. The Ethiopian labor law only provides prohibition of discrimination because of sex at the recruitment level (Article 87 (1), Ethiopia labor proclamation 1156/2019). The International Labor Organization (hereafter ILO) prohibits discrimination on any grounds as to access to employment and occupation (ILO, Discrimination (employment and occupation), c 111, 1958). Job hiring, access to benefits and promotion are not regulated by Ethiopia labor law. Based on the points discussed above, this research assessed whether investors adequately comply with the legal duty of non-discriminatory labor standards in addressing young workers' rights based on Ethiopian investment and labor laws, including the ILO discrimination convention No 111.

METHODS

Description of the Study Area. Foreign direct investment (hereafter FDI) plays an important role in the development and transformation of the country. Ethiopia opened the gate to attract foreign investors. Based on the fact that industrial parks are established in different parts of the country. The Eastern Industrial Park is an industrial site established mainly to attract foreign investors. The Eastern industrial park is found in Dukem town, Oromia regional state, forty-five (45) Kilometers far from Addis Ababa. Eastern Industrial Park is the first industrial park in Ethiopia, established with the support of the government of China (Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (hereafter MoLSA) Report, 2019). Sultan Bira, who is the inspectorate and industrial peace of the MoLSA Dukem branch, said that the Eastern industrial park mainly produces clothing, textiles and apparel. Sultan Bira also stated that the majority of the companies in the Eastern Industrial Park are labor-intensive, owned by Chinese investors.

Research Design and Approach. To assess investors' compliance with the legal duty of non-discriminatory labor standards in addressing young workers' rights, and for a strong evidence-based claim, a qualitative research method, including in-depth face to face interview, was used for this study. This research was also used as mono-disciplinary legal research because it focuses on legal aspects that regulate investors' compliance with non-discriminatory labor standards to address young workers' rights. The study analyzed Ethiopia's investment and labor laws, including the ILO discrimination convention that regulates investors' compliance with non-discriminatory labor standards to address young workers' rights. The study employed non-doctrinal methodology because the researcher went to the study area to assess investors' compliance with non-discriminatory labor standards to address young workers' rights using data collection methods, including in-depth face to face interview. Data relevant to the study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data was mainly collected through in-depth face-to-face interviews with different stakeholder respondents. In the process of explicating the theories supporting the relation between investors' obligations and workers' rights, reliance is made on exposition based on a review of related literature. In the process of doing this study, national investment and labor laws, including international labor organization discrimination convention, were consulted. Based on their position and experience in the production process in eastern industrial park, in-depth face-to-face interviews with purposefully selected young workers whose rights were violated due to the conduct of investors, experts from Dukem Labor and Social Affairs Bureau, the concerned company personnel, the workers' union and lawyers were conducted to

generate important information. Purposive sampling is used because the targeted groups have information about the treatment of young workers at work place, activities of investors and have a better understanding of the issues. It has helped the researcher to get broad and clear answers to the questions that need more clarification and helped him to deeply explore and understand the experience of the participants. Qualitative data were analyzed and interpreted thematically against the relevant research issue. The laws that regulate investors' compliance with non-discriminatory labor standards to address young workers' rights, which have been in force, were interpreted and discussed broadly.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research revealed a gap between investors' understanding of the nature and severity of problems workers faced and their response. It also revealed investors' and workers' understanding of the laws. The majority of the respondents stated that they do not know their rights and duties in work place. Employer failed one of his obligations to give training to workers on their rights and duties in work place. According to Amanuel Girma, who is a human resource manager of Dong Fang Textile in Eastern Industrial Park, because of financial constrain workers are aware of their rights, but face difficulties bringing their case before the court and seeking remedies for the violation of their rights in the workplace. He further stated that there is a big financial and bargaining power gap between the workers and the employer. For the comprehensiveness purposes, the findings on discrimination and harassment of workers because of identity, origin, sex, or other similar grounds are categorized and discussed as follows.

Discrimination of Young Workers by their Employers. The principle of non-discrimination is one of the fundamental rights considered as a basis for other human rights (Rahman, Mehat, and Hamzah, 2019). Protection against discrimination is one of the important components for the growth of the global economy. At the workplace, it has long been understood that discrimination on any grounds is a problem that creates barriers to employment. It indicates that the majority of young workers get employed in an environment where he/she thinks that the terms and conditions are unfair and unjust. When there is a large scale of unemployment, the employers easily find employees with low amounts of payment. Though the laws recognize freedom of contract in labor relationships, economic and social factors take away real freedom of workers. Because of this majority of young workers in different companies are working for survival but not for a better life. An interview with Nugusu Dibaba, who is an employee of Dong Fang Textile in Eastern Industrial Park, revealed that due to the absence of an organized labor union and mistrust of the company management, workers are unsure of their jobs. Nugusu also stated that complain of workers were not solved objectively and impartially. As a result, many workers were dismissed from their posts unlawfully. The same interviewee disclosed that workers were treated unequally because of their ethnicity or origin, relationship, etc. Young workers are forced to leave their jobs because of their origin. An interviewee, whose age twenty two from Eastern Industrial Park, revealed that:

“Being Amhara and speaking Amharic became a legitimate job requirement. The majority of the newly employed workers, including the management, are mainly dominated by Amharan and Amharic speakers. The majority of the companies in eastern industrial park violated the rule of equal pay for equal work. The majority of Oromo and Oromic speaker dismissed from their post unlawfully. The companies dismissed them because they are Oromo.”

The former human resource manager of Aofan manufacturing in eastern industrial park, Eba Lejisa, corroborated the discrimination as follows:

“After Aofan manufacturing, owned by an Ethiopian national, which was previously owned by a South African national, employment of workers was undertaken arbitrarily without the knowledge of the human

resource office. Moreover, the employees are only Amharan and Amharic speakers. Eba said at present he is the only employee speaking 'Afaan Oromoo' from human resource management."

Besides, the absence of law of minimum wage law exacerbated the discrimination against young workers in eastern industrial park.

"For instance, in Aofan manufacturing, two machine operators working in the same job category were paid different amounts of salary because of their ethnic background. The operator, whose origin is Amhara and speaks Amharic, was recently employed and paid 1200 Ethiopia birr per month. However, the senior operator whose origin is Oromo and cannot speak Amharic paid 800 Ethiopia birr per month. As understood from the interviewees, for employment to such post writing and speaking Amharic was not mandatory, but the necessary criteria are to operate the machine properly. The company tried to justify the salary differences comes from the negotiation ability of the employees. The justification of the company is against the provision of Ethiopia labor law that prohibits discrimination because of origin (Article 14 (1) (f), Ethiopia labor proclamation 1156/2019)."

As understood from the interviewees' discrimination against young workers because of language or ethnic background proven to be rampant. The worst part is that the discrimination is mainly practiced by companies owned by domestic investors and by Ethiopian citizens working in managerial positions. Preferences for workers based on identity or ethnic background, but not qualification and experience, the violation of non-discriminatory labor standards.

Gender Discrimination Against Young Female Workers. Ethiopia's labor law gives emphasis to women worker rights, prohibition of gender based discrimination, prohibiting women from undertaking hazardous work, and regulation of maternity leave (Article 14 (b), 87, & 88, of Ethiopia labor proclamation 1156/2019, & Cotula & Mouan, 2021). Despite labor provisions guaranteeing protection for women's rights, discrimination against young women workers is rampant. According to Amanuel Girma, human resource manager in Dong Fang Textile plc, women faced discrimination because they were considered physically incapable, could not defend themselves like men, and were incapable to challenge hard working environment. The majority of industries considered female employees more diligent, complaint and less confrontational than their male counterparts (Redae, 2019). According to the majority of respondents, companies mainly employ female than males because of the fear that male is challenging in terms of salary payment or other benefits than female. A pregnant woman is subjected to ill treatment and dismissal. They were not granted maternity and annual leave (Article 87 (6), Ethiopia Labor Proclamation 1156/2019).

For instance, the story centers on a woman who is 24 and works in Aofan manufacturing. She is unable to feed her two-month-old baby properly. When the manufacturing company ceased operations due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she gave birth to the child. She requested post-maternity leave when the manufacturing company called back workers to begin production. Her health and that of her child are at jeopardy if she returns to work because she recently gave birth. However, the company chose to terminate her instead of giving her a post-maternity leave.

From the response of interviewees, it is clear that the enforcement of women workers' rights is mainly based on the will of employers, rather than on the employment contract or labor law. According to Nimona Tadesse, an attorney at regional and federal courts women were not paid salary equally with men for equal work or position (Article 42 (1) (d), Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (hereafter FDRE) Constitution Proclamation 1/1995, & Article 14 (1) (b) & Article 87 (1), Ethiopia labor proclamation 1156/2019). Because of employers' serious ill-treatment, women workers moved to serve as domestic servants. The employers were not willing to disclose their companies' salary payment system. As a result of this, women workers were not informed of the procedure for salary payments and could not understand how the salary was calculated. Young



women's workers in the eastern industrial park were more highly exploited than male workers. Moreover, all ill treatment of women workers by their employers is because she is a woman.

Young Workers' Harassment in Eastern Industrial Park. All industries are encouraged to maximize profit through labor exploitation specially to attract foreign investors. The majority of the companies in eastern industrial park emphasis on their business, ignoring illegal and immoral activities, including harassment committed against workers. Mostly, women workers are victims of harassment. According to Amanuel Girma, a human resource manager for Dong Fang Textile plc, male workers were largely disfavored and discriminated against by China enterprises in eastern industrial park because they were more seriously challenging the labor exploitative system than the female workers. Amanuel, in his response, indicated that the illegal, immoral, or harassment against young male or female workers in eastern industrial park largely undertaken by foreign Chinese supervisors. Amanuel corroborates the poor relationship between foreign China supervisors and workers manifested through job harassment, verbal abuse, such as insults using foreign words, favoritism, dismissal without cause, and sexual harassment of female workers.

A twenty-one-year-old male worker at Dong Fang Textile plc is the subject of the narrative. His foreign Chinese supervisor kicked and ridiculed him in front of other workers because he was unable to carry heavy material properly. The employee who was laying the heavy material questioned the foreign Chinese about the reason for the kick. However, rather than interjecting and responding, the Chinese foreign supervisor just kept slapping him. The foreign Chinese supervisor told him to leave the workplace the following day while he was performing service. This teenage employee was fired without cause and in violation of the law. This young employee claimed that the unjust removal impacted my livelihood. The fired employees asked why he did not file a lawsuit against the employer in court to seek redress. The victim answered because he was unaware of the institution and law that provided the appropriate remedy. It demonstrates unequivocally that employee dismissal and hiring occur routinely in the Eastern Industrial Park.

Employers resist and oppose the establishment of a labor union. They resist and oppose because the majority of the founders are "Afan Oromoo" speakers. A young worker age twenty three explains employers' resistance and reaction as follows:

"This employee was organizing with coworkers to form a union. However, the management of Aofan Manufacturing Plc fired him simply because many of them spoke "Afan Oromoo" and gave those who were registered as union members a final warning of dismissal. Employees of the company go on strike in response to the management's illegal action. In reaction to the workers' strike, the employer ordered the local police to make arrests of those employees who were instrumental in the formation of the union on the grounds that they were disturbing the peaceful atmosphere of the workplace. However, following the strike, the company's management held talks about the problems and agreed to reinstate the fired employee."

Employers' resistance and opposition to the establishment of trade unions are against Ethiopia labor law and the constitution. It shall be unlawful for an employer or managerial employee to coerce or in any manner compel any worker to join or not to join a trade union; or to continue or cease membership of trade union; or to require a worker to quit membership from one union and require him to join another union; or to require him to cast his vote to a certain candidate or not to a candidate in election for trade union office (Article 14 (1) (f), Ethiopia labor proclamation 1156/2019). With regard to the rights of factory and service workers, farmers, farm laborers, other rural workers and government employees whose work compatibility allows for it and who are below a certain level of responsibility, have the right to form associations to improve their conditions of employment and economic well-being. This right includes the right to form trade unions and other associations to bargain collectively with employers and other organizations that affect their interests (Article 42 (1) (a), Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia Constitution Proclamation 1/1995). Those workers have the right to express their grievances, including the right to strike (Article 42 (1) (b), FDRE

Constitution Proclamation 1/1995). The FDRE Constitution explicitly provided the three collective labor rights: the right to unionization, the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike. International Labor Organization (ILO) jurisprudence is not as explicit as this constitutional provision in recognizing the right to collective bargaining and the right to strike. The Freedom of Association Committee of the ILO provided that the right to strike is one of the most essential means through which workers and their organizations promote and defend their economic and social interests (ILO Freedom of Association, 1996). From interviewees' responses in eastern industrial park, workers were mistreated because they tried to defend themselves through exercising their legally protected rights.

Female interviewees working in eastern industrial park stated that Chinese supervisors request sexual favors in exchange for money, employment promotion, time off, or bonuses. Because there is no formal criterion and procedure for the recruitment of female workers, physical appearances and sexual attractiveness are considered to take advantage of a sexual relationship.

Female interviewees working in the Dong Fang textile industry plc quit their work because of difficulties she has had with their Chinese male supervisors from the time they refused his sexual offer.

The data clearly indicates that the majority of the enterprises in eastern industrial park are not observing and enforcing protective labor laws; instead, they established and customized subjective labor standards. It is the advantage investors possess with the purpose of endowing them with flexibility in hiring and firing workers, which finally enables them to determine working conditions in their respective companies freely (Alemayehu, 2019). The investors who own enterprises in eastern industrial park are paying excessively low wages for their workers. The information collected from the interviewees indicated that excessively low wage payments made them hopeless about their future. It has created inequitable benefit sharing from one effort, economic inequality, sustainable exploitation and unjust living standard on workers. It also undermined workers' status as human beings with dignity and self-respect.

The Federal and Regional Governments Response to Workers Rights. The government has a duty to protect workers' rights against abuses by investors by formulating and enforcing appropriate policies, regulations, adjudications, etc. (Jothy, 2010). Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (After this, MoLSA) at the regional level delegated some of its functions to bureau of Labor and Social Affairs (After this, BoLSA) (Article 171, Ethiopia Labor Proclamation 1156/2019). In the Oromia regional state, BoLSA is mandated to enforce labor standards, safety and health of workers in both private and state enterprises. BoLSA empowered to put in place an integrated labor administration system to follow up, coordinate and enforce labor laws and policies; to enhance labor inspection services; and to issue directive necessary for occupational safety and health; protection of working environment; standard of working conditions; giving work permit to type of works for foreigners and others (Article 171 (2) & 176 (1 & 2), Ethiopia Labor Proclamation 1156/2019). The response of the interviewees shows that BoLSA is weak in addressing the ill treatment of workers in eastern industrial park. Response from the interviewees corroborates that government representatives with a mandate to regulate employers' activities were complicity with violators of workers' rights. There is excessive protection for employers at the expense of labor and the human rights of the employees. There is pressure from the cabinet against BoLSA officials to enforce only the needs of investors properly. According to BoLSA authorities, there is no employer made responsible for workers' harassment and discrimination. There are internal and external practical challenges that affect BoLSA authorities in addressing workers' problems in eastern industrial park.

Limited Capacity of Labor Inspection. Respondents from the labor inspection offices located in Dukam and Bishoftu reportedly stated that they were unable to resolve all of the complaints from young workers. It is due to an overprotective attitude toward investors at the expense of labor rights.



Attracting foreign investors, which makes significant contributions to the nation's economic growth, may be the reason why the government is reluctant to follow up with and hold investors accountable. Due to understaffing, a lack of qualified professionals, financial restrictions, the absence of a strong monitoring and evaluation system, and weak relationships among stakeholders, the labor inspection offices in the study area are not operating to their full potential. According to Sultan Birra, the head inspectorate and industrial peace of the BoLSA at the Dukam branch, there are not many industries that are subject to inspection due to the resources that are readily available. As a result, workers are no longer protected, and those who violate the law do so without consequence.

Absence of Labor Union. Workers shall have the right to establish and organize trade unions (Article 113 (1), Ethiopia Labor Proclamation 1156/2019). The law safeguards employees' rights to organize into associations and to engage in collective bargaining with their employers through representatives (Articles 113-14, Ethiopia Labor Proclamation 1156/2019 & Article 10, African Charter on Human & Peoples Rights 1981). According to Ethiopian labor law, employers are generally required to engage in collective bargaining with labor unions on the basis of good faith when it comes to issues impacting the interests of all employees. To protect the interests of its members, trade unions perform a variety of tasks. When there are labor problems, for instance, it represents members in collective negotiations before the appropriate authorities (Articles 129-130, Ethiopia Labor Proclamation 1156/2019). Amanuel Girma, manager of human resources at Donga Fang Textile PLC, asserts that companies purposefully dissuade organizations that serve as a tool for protecting workers' rights. Particularly, foreign businesses are working around the clock to prevent the formation of labor unions by intimidating and terminating any employees who attempt to do so at the Eastern Industrial Park. Amanuel Girma, manager of human resources at Donga Fang Textile PLC, claims that starting in December 2018, a significant number of firings occurred at the Donga Fang PLC in Eastern Industrial Park, where around 1700 workers were fired. The rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining are threatened in Ethiopia due to a weak trade union movement and reported higher official and company antagonism to unionization.

CONCLUSION

Workers' rights were not taken seriously under Ethiopian investment laws. Ethiopian investment laws prioritize the rights of investors. If the current Ethiopia investment law properly defines and lists the roles and duties of investors, labor discrimination may be successfully reduced. Ethiopian labor law is silent regarding discrimination during the hiring process and the minimum wage for workers, and these gaps provided some foreign businesses and domestic investors with a favorable opportunity to favor some groups and exclude others due to their origin or sex. Young employees in the eastern industrial park experienced harassment and discrimination due to their sex, language, or ethnicity. Foreign enterprises and domestic investors disregard the laws governing investments and labor hire or fire employees as they like in the eastern industrial park. Limited capacity of labor inspection, absence of labor union, rampant corrupt practices and absence of good governance are the practical challenges to address workers' problems in eastern industrial park.

This research article discussed problems like the existence of legal gaps and the absence of protection of young workers' rights. Investment should not be implemented at the expense of or on the backs of employees' rights. The governments must establish a clear minimum threshold beyond which acting is forbidden as an essential means of protecting workers. Based on these findings, the researcher will suggest the following recommendations for the issues mentioned.

The Ethiopian investment and labor proclamations should be reviewed and updated to ensure that all employment relationships and investment operations give the labor force, especially young employees, equal protection under the law. The investment proclamation must safeguard workers'



rights just as equally as it protects investors, which serves as the foundation for all other rights, including economic rights. In other words, investment declarations must clearly include concerns relating to human rights in general and the non-discrimination right of workers in particular. Similar protections against indirect discrimination and discrimination throughout the hiring process should be included in labor legislation. Additionally, in order to reduce the bargaining leverage of employers, the minimum wage must be specifically stated in labor agreements.

Investors should take adequate precautions and use non-discriminatory labor standards in their operations in order to preserve the rights of young workers. Avoid any promotion or benefit based on ethnicity or language, as well as discrimination and harassment in relation to employment and recruiting. To ensure that every employee is treated fairly and according to their merits and contributions, all employment prospects should be founded on transparency and objective criteria.

To establish the rule of law in industrial parks, the Ethiopian government must act to implement labor regulations effectively. BoLSA is required to monitor and examine employer-employee relationships objectively. The inspectorates and staff of BoLSA's Municipal section should get training on the rights and responsibilities of workers. To further prevent poor leadership and corruption, the concerned higher officials working for the federal government and the Oromia regional state should collaborate with the relevant municipal branch. Additionally, as it is essential to the effectiveness and favorable effects of labor inspection, appropriate funding and human resources should be allocated. Additionally, having a fully operating labor union would be beneficial in this situation and should be established as soon as feasible.

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