

Real welfare standards that save lives, dignity, and operational capability.

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For many years I have lived and worked across continents, and some of my strongest convictions about workers' welfare were forged in extreme weather.

One memory in particular has never left me. Despite every privilege – a comfortable air-conditioned apartment, healthy food, and the physical ability to stop whenever I wanted – I dozed off on a sidewalk during a middle-of-the-night run in the Middle East. I had simply paused for a quick drink and instantly fell asleep from exhaustion. That moment stopped me cold.

If extreme conditions could do that to someone with every advantage and every choice, what do they do to people who work outside day after day, with no escape, limited rest, and constant exposure?

That experience, combined with managing contracts with hundreds of engineering and maintenance workers in the scorching heat of the Middle East, the steppes of Central Asia, and the freezing winters of Kazakhstan, taught me that heat and cold are not just uncomfortable: they are operational and human risks. They are worsening in a warming planet, increasingly affecting lives and livelihoods at every scale, from multinationals to micro-businesses.

What “effective” standards look like

In this domain, good standards are not high-level principles or grand values. Good standards are specific and actionable, and translate directly into implementable change, here and now.

What went into every contract: decent accommodations with clear occupancy limits and quality features. Clean hygiene facilities, sufficient in number and well maintained. Reliable access to drinking water and shade for rest and repairs. Communications with family. Access to places of worship in line with personal beliefs. Recreation time and facilities. Auditable pay slips and minimum working age checks. And the removal of practical hurdles, such as pre-negotiating approved facilities that meet the same standards.

In hot climates, we added health information delivered in ways people could actually understand: storytelling, visuals, materials in the languages spoken on site, and formats accessible to both literate and illiterate workers.

To me, the goal was never a nice-looking policy document. It was an effective, living system that reflected what workers told us, removed operational hurdles, and brought the entire supply-chain ecosystem along until it became the norm.

What I learned in the field

Those principles were tested later in Central Asia. Summer heat, winter temperatures dropping to -15 °C, mud, mosquitoes, and relentless outdoor exposure made safety and welfare a daily operational priority. With a peak workforce of more than 1,300 people, we focused on two things at once: keeping people safe today and building long-term professional pathways for tomorrow.

We introduced a professional competency-building programme that strengthened local capability in trades critical to the energy sector. Safety in extreme conditions was never an add-on: it was integrated into the same system that improved employability and local skills.

Resilience, I learned again, is never created by general principles alone. It is created by specifics.

If you want decent accommodation, define it: maximum four per room, bedding specifications, furnishing details.

If you want heat protection, specify exactly where temperature is measured, how water is provided, where shaded rest areas are located, the minimum rest per hour, and deliver education in formats people can absorb and remember. Measure what matters, and act on the data, every single shift.

Why HERA's approach resonates so deeply

That same bias toward practical, context-specific action is exactly why HERA's work struck me so strongly when I heard Kathy Baughman speak about it at ChangeNOW. HERA does for women in extreme working conditions what the best employers sometimes achieve for their own teams: protects them and acts now. It focuses on tools that work on the ground – from affordable heat-triggered parametric insurance to heat-risk literacy – and weaves a network of partnerships that can support women far more effectively than any single organisation could alone.

There was no fluff, only urgency, creativity, and a clear preference for solutions that build knowledge and resilience where it is needed the most. That approach mirrors how I tackle operational excellence, worker welfare, and human rights, in global supply chains and in the transition to cleaner energy in hard-to-decarbonize sectors.

From principles to toolkits: building real resilience

Whether the challenge is workers' welfare, resilience to weather extremes, or de-risking the shift away from fossil fuels, the method is the same: learn fast from what's happening on site, improve what actually matters, replicate what works, and build modular, adaptable toolkits grounded in reality.

I remain passionate about designing operational systems that keep work smart and ethical, protect people, and create resilience for workers, nature, and investments alike, from global supply chains to nature-based solutions projects.

Action now is not a slogan. It is a responsibility.