

Union Formation by Female Garment Workers in India: Moving Forward in Unity.

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Introduction:

In the highly competitive international labour markets that characterise global garment production, many of the major international clothing brands are conscientiously casting themselves in the role of ethical retailers by espousing high standards of treatment for garment workers in their global supply chains. Their codes of corporate conduct express commitment to ideals of good and fair employment and some initiatives may well succeed, even if this virtue is a product of necessity (Locke et al, 2009). However, in all this the key aspect of good and fair employment that seems most difficult to attain at grass-roots level, is the freedom to engage in autonomous and independent collective activity – to organise – without fear of intimidation.

This paper is based on empirical research undertaken with garment workers in Bangalore, India. It charts the progress of unorganised rural migrants into an occupationally defined social movement organised around ‘self-help’ micro-savings schemes for garment workers, and thence into union organisation. It contributes to the literature on ‘organising the unorganised’ in the developing world and also highlights the role of NGOs, workers’ centres and civil society groups in protecting some of the world’s most vulnerable workers.

The Context for the Study:

In the complex networks of supply relationships which characterise today’s international garment sector (Gereffi, 1995, 1999; Hurley and Miller, 2005: 30–31), ‘good’ labour standards are not generally well enforced. This is not a ‘new’ state of affairs, in the sense that clothing manufacture has a long and well-documented history in mature economies such as Britain as one of the ‘sweated trades’ (Phizacklea, 1990: 225–26), with production in earlier times characterised by long hours of work, poor conditions, unsanitary workplaces and low pay (Blackburn, 2007: 63). However, while a combination of regulation and unionisation had improved this situation in mature settings by the middle of the twentieth century (see for example, Quan, 2008), the expansion in international competition associated with the long-anticipated demise of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (in 2004) has brought back the sweat shop (Rosen, 2002: 4). Environments more akin to the workshops of nineteenth-century Britain are once more depressingly familiar in today’s twenty-first century international garment sector, characterised as it is by poor working conditions, low levels of union influence, weak enforcement of regulation, insecurity, informality and precarious employment (Hurley, 2005: 116; see also Ebenshade, 2004: 124; Hurley and Miller, 2005: 35; Rosen, 2002: 240; Jones, 2006). It is also important to remember a point well made in literature published by the Clean Clothes Campaign, that where pay is set at a rate on or below poverty level, even bright and modern factory settings characteristic of export processing zones (EPZs) can constitute a sweat-shop (Merk, 2009).

Alongside China and other parts of South East Asia, India has become a prime location for ready-made garment assembly, particularly since economic liberalisation of the Indian economy in recent decades (Roychowdhury, 2003: 30; Hill, 2009: 399). While tailoring was traditionally a male preserve here, as in many other regions of the world, the automated production of garments on Taylorised production lines has seen the feminisation – on a global scale – of ready-made garment production for mass consumption (Winterton and Taplin, 1997: 10; Rosen, 2002: 3). Thus, export oriented garment production in Bangalore has been drawing female labour into employment since the 1980s. Today the majority of women employed in the sector are first or second generation rural migrants, brought to the city in search of work as part of on-going ‘distress-driven’ migration from rural areas.¹

Rural poverty and migration in search of work is an on-going issue for India (Bhowmik, 2009: 139; Breman, 1999). Movement from rural areas into towns and cities is often repeated several times in a lifetime in the quest for an adequate economic livelihood (Ghosh, 2009: 144). Historically, for men, this process often allowed them to maintain links with their rural home, but for women, migration from rural areas to the city has traditionally always involved ‘total alienation from the village [...] forced by marriage, desertion, widowhood or acute poverty’ (Venkata Ratnam and Jain, 2002: 280; see also Bhowmik, 2009: 136). This isolation has major implications for power relations between young women and their factory supervisors and managers when they arrive at the factory gates. In the present research, for example, there were many evidence-based accounts of women’s vulnerability to various forms of abuse, grooming and sexual harassment in garment factories. Indeed, the social status of garment workers and their defence against sexual violence is further weakened in India and other locations in South East Asia by the tendency for their standards of sexual morality to be questioned by society at large. Allegations of promiscuity harm the social status (and marriage prospects) of this group of workers, heightening their isolation and vulnerability not only within the workplace, but in their wider social communities (Gunawardana, 2007: 79; Lynch, 2007: 22; Hale and Burns, 2005: 222).

It should be acknowledged that there are concerns about workers’ conditions across a range of sectors, including so-called ‘white collar’ jobs, in India (see, for example, Taylor and Bain, 2003; Noronha and Cruz: 2009; Kuruvilla and Ranganathan, 2008), but ready-made garment workers are among the more vulnerable members of the Indian workforce, being mostly female, with low socio-economic status, and possessing limited bargaining leverage in their relations with employers. The garment assembly stage of production is reliant on female labour and the representation of these women’s interests has been further adversely affected by the relative neglect of women’s issues by the established Indian labour movement (Sankaran and Madhav, 2011; Venkata Ratnam and Jain, 2002). Thus, in common with vulnerable workforces all over the globe, those who find themselves in low-paid, low-skilled,

¹While the focus of this present paper is India, it is important to note that the targeting of vulnerable female labour is by no means ‘new’ in the context of clothing manufacture, nor is it one which is synonymous only with new locations for the industry. Studies among ethnic minority garment factories in Britain by Phizacklea (1990: 86-87), for example, found that such businesses exploited ‘easier access to female labour subordinated to patriarchal control mechanisms’ (for similar conditions in the US, see also Esbenshade, 2004: 4).

automated, casualised forms of work are likely also to be subject to multiple layers of socio-economic deprivation, and traditional male dominated industrial unionism has not addressed their needs adequately, leaving a considerable representation gap in respect of such workers (Milkman, 2006: 10–11; Bronfenbrenner, 2007: 2–5; Turner, 2007).

All this said, there are aspects of empowerment for women who engage in paid work that should not be ignored, and despite the likelihood that it increases their double burden of work inside and outside the home, some shifts in the role and status of women have been noted in India and other locations such as Bangladesh, and also Sri Lanka and Indonesia, particularly where women engage in activism (for example, Gunawardana, 2007; Hammer, 2010; Lynch, 2007; Pangsapa, 2007: 116–117; Rock, 2001: 28–30). It is therefore important to make clear that garment sector employment is not work that the women themselves wish to disappear from their labour market. They simply seek better working conditions.

In other locations, such as Bangladesh, where organisation has taken root in such conditions, it has been noted that activism has become established through the efforts and determination of ‘heroic individuals’, but that it is ‘unlikely to take the form of heroic mass struggles’ of the type traditionally identified with solidarity and unity in the wider trade union movement; rather, there are likely to be localised coalitions around a range of immediate concerns (Kabeer, 2004: 23). The garment workers’ activists in Bangalore, to be discussed in this paper, began by focusing on women’s domestic concerns as a basis for organisation, rather than solely or explicitly focusing on ideological, political or workplace issues, and they targeted workers’ living areas and communities as the main place where mobilisation could be nurtured. This strategy has brought success in a range of locations where poor and vulnerable workers have been organised (see also Fine, 2006; Hammer, 2010: 178; Holgate, 2004, 2005; Milkman, 2007). There have been associated claims that women in precarious employment are ‘rewriting the meaning of trade unionism’ (Venkata Ratnam and Jain, 2002: 284), but there is also evidence of anxiety that localised organising will further fragment the labour movement and lead to sectional interests dominating agendas as opposed to ‘uniting labour’ in pursuit of broader political and social objectives (Hammer, 2010: 170; Sherlock, 2001). However, established national union structures are failing to plug the representational gap, even if they are making positive changes and attempting to be more engaged with such issues and constituencies, and it is therefore inevitable that other forms of organisation will evolve to take the strain.

Research Methods:

This was qualitative research, relying mainly on interview material gained from a range of respondents in the city of Bangalore. In August 2009, the researcher travelled to Bangalore for a short but intensive period of research. This was facilitated by a local CSO, Cividep, in as much as they provided a driver, a translator and arranged meetings in line with the researcher’s request to meet with union activists and other actors in civil society in the city, but all costs were borne by the researcher and no influence was exerted by Cividep over the content or focus of interviews, and that organisation is not responsible for any conclusions drawn as a result of the research. Interviews were conducted, over a period of fifteen days, with garment workers and activists in their own homes, at union meetings and in workers’ centres, and the lead union activist was shadowed during his daily activities. One factory visit was undertaken and one CSR officer for a major brand was interviewed, but access through workers’ organisations precluded any further interaction with employers. Representatives of civil society organisations working in the field of labour rights, health and women’s welfare in

Bangalore were also interviewed, as was a labour lawyer, a senior local government official and leaders of established national unions in the city (which themselves had failed to organise the female garment workers).

Innovative Organising:

A lead union activist explained that organising female garment workers who come ‘from the field to the factory’ is ‘very difficult’. Their social conditioning is highly relevant to their fear of ‘organisation’ and for the women concerned, there are multiple layers of risk and disadvantage to contend with, beginning with their status on entry to factory work. A range of activists explained that for garment workers there was often a clear pattern of migration related to life events whereby, in the context of serious rural poverty, young single women were sent to the factories around the ages of sixteen or seventeen to earn money towards the support of their family (and also to earn enough money for their dowry). After some years, generally around the age of twenty-five, they might return to the village, perhaps to be married or have their first child, but poverty (or desertion by their husbands) often sees them return again to the city’s factory areas for work. Despite the IT revolution, the decline of Bangalore’s traditional engineering industry has seen a relatively high rate of high male unemployment, with lower-skilled men thrown into casualised, low paid work as motorised rickshaw drivers, painters or electricians – jobs with little security of employment or income. In this context, a significant proportion of women garment workers become the main breadwinner for their families. Though wages in the garment sector are low, and effectively below subsistence level, they are better than what women could earn in agriculture or elsewhere in the informal sector. In conditions of poverty, small houses, overcrowding and tensions over having enough food, there is a great deal of inter-marriage conflict, associated with a high incidence of domestic violence as well as desertion of women with children. The translator, who facilitated the interviews with garment workers was a lawyer working on women’s issues in Bangalore and she summed up her experience of the common life-pattern for many such young women,

“There is a very high rate of desertion [of women by their husbands] following the first child ... so what happens ... they come from the village as young girls, work, earn money, go back to the village, get married, get pregnant, have the child, get deserted ... then they have to come back to the city [with or without their husbands] for work to support themselves and their child ... that’s the way it is.”

In the reality of factory life, power lies in the hands of management and is a product of the socio-economic disadvantages experienced by poor women in society, as explained earlier. Workers are likely to be subject to bullying and harassment at work, and arbitrary managerial decisions may see them dismissed for no reason. Verbal intimidation is common (referred to as ‘torturing’ by the machinists) but there are also rarer instances of physical violence. Garment workers interviewed told of routine long hours working, determined by target completion rather than the time of day and dictated by management. In nine or eleven hour days there is just one half hour break, and many workers are not allowed to sit, but will stand for the whole of their working day. Wages are calculated on the basis of a fixed daily wage (no piecework rates are paid) and rather than the poverty level statutory minimum rate of 127 Rs per day² being a basic rate from which garment workers can improve, it operates more commonly as a ceiling, as the *maximum* rate workers may expect. Even this low rate is

² Less than £2 per day. This is a poverty level wage in the local economy.

evaded by employers. As so many factories cluster in this region, some workers will use resignation as a break from the pressure of their working lives, knowing that they will be likely to secure new employment relatively easily. The lead union activist explained that this ease of re-employment can work against the longer term interest of uniting workers to campaign for better conditions, as quitting may be the easier route for an individual. This is highly reminiscent of Cunnison's (1966) study of wages and work allocation at the Dee waterproof garment factory in England, and also resonates with the traditional use of quitting and absence as informal unorganised expression of conflict in British clothing factories more generally (Edwards and Scullion, 1982; Phizacklea, 1990; Boggis, 2001). Despite the obvious need for organisation, the mainly first generation female rural migrant garment workers Cividep seeks to collectivise, have expectations built around 'feudal-style', gender-based norms of duty, deference and obligation and have most likely been subject to the 'multiple social and gender discriminations' (Ravi and Roth, 2010: 66) typically associated with the low socio-economic status afforded to women in the poorer sectors of Indian society. It would be highly unlikely for them to seek help from politicised, male dominated unions or to see 'organising' as a natural avenue for the resolution of their problems.

In addition, the risks associated with being involved in organising activity are immense, even though rights to freedom of association are enshrined in law and form part of the soft law embodied in corporate codes of ethical conduct. The export processing factory areas of Bangalore are characterised by large, modern buildings which house between 2-3000 workers. These 'sparklingly' modern buildings, replete with the best technology, do not readily fit the stereotype of sweat-shop working. However, the sheer scale of the power imbalance in the employment relationship within these units is difficult to convey and any external observer who restricted their analysis of the condition of garment workers to the nature of the units that house them would be rewarded only with a pale and shadowy understanding of workplace dynamics and conditions of work. There are several reasons for this. First, the factories are specifically designed to convince buyers for the brands and retailers to source their garments, and it is therefore in the factory owner's interest to present a good workplace image. Second, workers are clear that if asked by any form of auditor about their conditions of work, they must speak favourably of their workplace if they wish to keep their jobs; corruption and even the use of bogus inspectors is common. Third, managerial style may be disguised and cannot be identified as easily as material factors like lighting or factory housekeeping and finally, crucially, the effect of poverty wages and long working hours can truly be seen only in the homes and personal lives of the garment workers themselves.

With this knowledge in mind, the activists in this study recognised that a move straight into unionisation was not likely to be successful. Rather, they targeted workers' living areas as a focus for organising and began by drawing women into micro-savings groups, as used as an organising tool to great effect elsewhere, in the informal sector (see the origins of SEWA, Bhatt, 2006). Once meetings were organised around the savings groups, activists determinedly spoke to women about labour rights and the benefits of solidarity. This was a strategically thought out 'first step' to engage with a 'pre-union concept' in the form of a social movement which the women themselves established after two years of administering the micro-savings groups. They named their movement *Munnade*. *Munnade*'s elected officers administer the micro-finance group savings schemes, and the organisation acts as a forum for advice and support on any problem that garment workers wish to take to it. As

well as being a source of solidarity and support at workers centres, it is a source of legal advice and guidance on every subject from domestic violence to employment rights, it organises education of its members, has a library and classes for children, and even has a committee member that works on dance and drama programmes for members. One such programme depicted the fate of rural migrant workers travelling to the factories for work and their battles with bullying supervisors and managers for their employment rights; the *Munnade* committee member explained, “sometimes a ten minute programme on a stage can have a greater impact [educationally] than hours of lectures.”

Between 2004 and 2006 *Munnade* grew and prospered. There is much in this approach which resonates with material covered in Fine’s (2006) important work on workers’ centres in the US. As a women’s movement *Munnade* could not take matters of employment rights to the labour court and so in 2006, as a result of a call from the membership itself, a union, the Garment and Tailoring Workers’ Union (GATWU), was formed. in order to access the institutional rights afforded to unions in labour courts. At first the two organisations ran in close association but they are now separate, with GATWU dealing with labour rights and *Munnade* dealing with social and community matters, including continuing the savings groups which have now grown considerably in number and influence. From an initial membership of around 60, GATWU had over 2,300 members in 2009. Members spoke movingly and eloquently about the difference that being part of the movement had made to their lives. For example, the president of *Munnade* said that no matter what the hardships of life, “if there is a second birth I do not want riches, I want to come back as a worker and to continue helping other workers.” When another was asked whether being a member of *Munnade* had made a difference to her life, she smiled and gestured with her hand, saying, “one hundred percent ... fulfilment.” In adopting this approach, the activists reflected what Hale (2005: 49) has described as ‘the recognition [among women’s groups set up in support of garment workers] of the need to organise within the broader framework of workers’ daily lives as women’.

This level of organisation was accomplished despite being met with routine intimidation at the workplace. [We are told] “...if the union comes here your factory will close”. This was a phrase repeated time and time again by a range of workers during the fieldwork period, when interviewed individually and in groups. Indeed, although the current President of GATWU fought and won a battle to prevent her employer from dismissing her for her union activity, she is now not allowed to set foot within the work premises. To satisfy the courts, the employer pays her salary and she is, in effect, paid not to come to work. In addition, she and others have suffered gross intimidation and serious physical threat as a result of their organising activity, which has always been undertaken within the law. The personal costs are great, but activists’ resilience is strong. For example, when asked if she was ever tempted to give it all up, the union president said she could never give up her role. Organisation at the workplace is virtually impossible in the context of managerial hostility, and explains why the focus on home and community is so important in mobilising workers. Innovative organising is essential in such difficult conditions (see Hammer, 2010; Holgate, 2004; Milkman, 2007)

The level of intimidation and power imbalance at the workplace is perhaps encapsulated by one tragic account of a garment worker who, eight and a half months pregnant and realising that she had gone into premature labour at work, was refused permission to leave her factory and seek medical help. She was sent from manager to manager over a period of two and a

half hours, until she was finally given permission to leave, but no other workers were allowed to accompany her despite their requests. Unaccompanied, she gave birth to her baby son as she walked through the factory gates. Left alone and unaided, with the factory gates closed behind her, her baby died there. She was left to walk home cradling her baby son and she cut the umbilical cord only when she got to her house. *Munnade* and GATWU helped this woman to get medical insurance from the employer and joined forces with another women's movement in Bangalore to take up the woman's case with the international brand being served by her factory (with a terribly irony the brand made baby clothes). As a result of this intervention she received her medical insurance (to which she was legally entitled but which the factory owner had tried to withhold on the grounds that payments were due to mothers of living rather than dead children), and the alliance with another civil society organisation delivered a larger award of financial compensation; she also got her job back and basic medical facilities were instated at the plant.

None of the compensatory measures take away from the human tragedy of this case and it would be a mistake to regard it as a single isolated and unfortunate incident unlikely to be repeated. The importance of this case lies in its ability to tell us more about the factory regimes which prevail in these contexts. First, let us try to comprehend a workplace environment where managerial authority is so far beyond challenge that a woman in the last stages of labour may not only be denied permission to seek proper medical assistance but also her friends and co-workers may be compelled to allow her to struggle out of the work premises unaided and alone. Then, perhaps, we can try to imagine how difficult and risk-laden it must be to organise in that setting. Second, the case highlights the use by local activists of the vulnerability and sensitivity of a global brand to bad publicity in order to secure concessions at a local level; their slogan was 'This is one baby that won't wear [brand-name]'. It is notable that the 'soft-law' of corporate codes of ethics is no match for over-weaning managerial power at the point of production. Third, it demonstrates that linkages between labour and different arms of civil society into a broader social movement united in the quest for greater social justice, can indeed hold global capital to account.

Conclusion:

The risk of capital flight in garment manufacture is real and ever present and this is the leverage that is used to great effect by suppliers of garments within the global garment commodity chain. The power imbalance at the workplace is supplemented by the patriarchal context of wider society, but as in other locations (see Rock, 2001; Pangasapa, 2007; Lynch, 2007), the members of *Munnade* and GATWU nevertheless resist and organise, and the workers interviewed were very clear that their lives are better for being part of a wider movement. These organisations are the product of innovative organising strategies and leadership, and they also use the global context as leverage in pressing for the enforcement of legal regulation and exploiting the vulnerability of global brands to bad publicity. This paper has attempted to analyse these developments as some of the world's most vulnerable workers try to assert a measure of power and control within the international labour process, and over their lives. While global campaigning is essential, with disparity in workplace power relations as great as that reported in this fieldwork, it must be clear that managers unconstrained by countervailing forces of organised labour *at the point of production* will simply sweep away any chance for enactment of employment rights, be they statutory or contractual, or based in the sanitised 'soft-law' of the corporate code of ethics. The activists of GATWU and *Munnade* are fighting an innovative and imaginative battle to organise;

while their victories may be small, the process of organising is itself transformative and unity offers hope to people who no longer feel themselves to be powerless and isolated individuals.

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