

STITCHING LIVES, ORGANISING WORKERS

Collectivising Efforts In The
Export-Oriented Garment
Industry In Bengaluru



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*Dedicated to the garment women workers who have committed
their labour, bodies and lives for the family and the factory*

Introduction

At the turn of the 21st century, Bengaluru's predominant image was that of an IT city—a city flooded with people and companies from across the globe cashing in on the information technology boom. Homegrown companies such as Infosys and Wipro and their top management officials became household names, even as they received unprecedented access to corridors of state power. In the academic realm, scholars demonstrated with painstaking detail that the IT sector in the city was not built merely on the talent and entrepreneurial skills of these companies but rather on the long history of public sector industries and the ecosystem they had fostered in the years immediately after independence (Upadhya 2016; Nair 2005).

In this period of the 'IT boom', as it is popularly known, another employment-intensive industry was also growing rapidly in the city. This was the export-oriented garment industry where factories manufactured high-end, fast

fashion fulfilling orders received from transnational apparel corporations in the global north. The industry drew in a vast army of poorly-educated women from areas surrounding Bengaluru, offering them low-paid, moderately stable employment (Roy Chowdhury 2021; 2017). Garment women workers, clad in colourful, inexpensive mass-produced sarees with handbags slung over their shoulders, striding briskly towards their factories were, and continue to be, a common sight in many parts of the city. The textile industry remains one of the highest foreign exchange earners for the country as well. Yet, neither the industry nor its workers have found any representational space in dominant imaginations of what Bengaluru is. The garment city and its workers have for long remained invisible to the middle-class eye, trained to look with awe and aspiration at the glass towers of the IT city and its legions of office employees.

Similarly, the efforts to organise the exploited garment workers in the city has also received very little attention or captured the imagination of news media. Public memory regarding worker strikes in Bengaluru is generally rather sparse; even where it exists, it is limited to the public sector strikes of the 1980s held under the leadership of politically-affiliated trade unions and dominated by male, factory-going workers (Subramaniam 1997a; 1997b). Public sector employment may have been steadily decreasing as also the organising power of their trade unions. But factory work has continued, albeit under the aegis of private capital. The typical image of a factory worker in Bengaluru, for at least two decades if not more, is no longer a unionised male worker. Rather it is the garment woman worker who works under immense 'production torture' (People's Union for Civil Liberties-(PUCL) Karnataka et al. 2019) who is the most representative factory worker in the city.

Within this larger context of invisibilisation, the work of autonomous unions such as the Garment and Textile Workers' Union (GATWU) becomes extremely crucial to document, foreground and represent. Organising efforts among garment factory women workers have been quietly afoot over the last two decades in Bengaluru and GATWU has been central to these efforts.

This work of organising gives lie to the fact that the city is middle-class, dominated by IT companies and their office employees and, is no longer host to any serious labour movement. Focussing on GATWU and other similar organisations helps us unsettle some hegemonic representations about Bengaluru and reveals how much of the city's—and even the country's—economy is upheld by the back-breaking work undertaken by unprivileged women workers.

The exploitation of the worker in the global south has been studied extensively and has been the subject of civil society action in global north. A rich body of scholarship has emerged on the global garment supply chain that has theorised the embodied nature of labouring in the industry, on the extractive and exploitative nature of garment capital among others (Mezzadri 2016; Douth 2021; Anner 2019). In this however, the local (by this I mean a range of entities such as the individual worker, particular cases of violation, organising efforts, even countries of global south) have merely been deployed as evidence and not necessarily as the site of action. The focus on the transnational apparel corporation, the global supply chain and its operations has meant then that there has been insufficient focus on the local: the systems of patriarchy that workers inhabit, the nature of the local state that works to thwart any collective action, the challenges these pose to organising workers. Unions and para-unions working to organise garment women workers have to work with these realities and frame their strategies accordingly.

In this report, we focus on the local: the expansion of Bangalore city's garment industry both spatially and the workers it drew in; individual workers and their life contexts that led them to join and eventually quit the garment workforce and their experience of the garment factory, and finally the history of garment organising in the city. We do this because this is a corrective to scholarship and activism that is excessively centred on transnational apparel corporation and global north and excludes the voices and histories of workers and activists in individual garment producing centres. Further, placed against

the context of writings on Bangalore and Karnataka, this report brings to visibility the garment women workers who also produce export-oriented goods, much like the over-represented IT worker. It also highlights how organising efforts in the garment industry have had to work incrementally while being tuned into specific social contexts of the worker in order to make inroads into collectivisation.

This report is a culmination of previous research conducted by the Alternative Law Forum in association with GATWU in which we studied the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on garment workers between the periods of 2020 and 2022. The three reports produced in this period have been compiled together in a volume titled *Resignations and Resistance Amidst State Inaction: Chronicling Garment Work During the Pandemic* (Shivanand 2022).

Methodology

The report is based on interviews with three sets of individuals:

1. **Former Garment Workers** : We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with about 20 garment workers from Peenya and Nayandahalli. The purpose of these interviews was to understand what drew them to working in the garment factories, i.e. their individual life contexts and migration histories, how they framed and understood the exploitative contexts in which they worked, why they quit the factory and what they do now to sustain themselves. Through this, we wanted to be able to understand what social relations the garment draws on and what kinds of future it can enable for women workers. Names of workers have been changed to protect identity.
2. **Union Organisers** : We focussed primarily on the Garment and Textile Workers' Union and its key organisers, namely R.Prathibha, the president

of GATWU; K.R. Jayaram, legal advisor to the union and Ratna, a field activist for the union. As an autonomous union, until recently, GATWU has been central to the collectivising efforts in the ready-made apparel industry. We also spoke to other organisers who had previously been part of GATWU and its predecessor organisation Garment Mahila Karmikara Munnade (Munnade) and their memories of the period. Through these interviews, our purpose was to document and narrate a history of how collectivising efforts began among women workers in the export-oriented ready-made apparel sector, challenges they have faced and the networks built to hold garment capital accountable to some extent. It is however pertinent to mention here that GATWU and Munnade at different points in its existence had many other individuals who together contributed to the initiatives detailed here. Our interviews are limited to only three individuals because of limited time and resources.

3. **Industry Personnel and Observers:** The final set of individuals we spoke to were those who had been involved with the industry for decades: with the Apparel Export Promotion Council, as observers and as manufacturers. This was a small set but the purpose behind doing this set of interviews was to understand the larger contexts which informed the growth of the industry as well as workers' lives in the unfolding decades of the early 2000s.

Outline of Report

The report will begin with tracing the industrial and labour geographies of garment work in the city, particularly focussing on the early 2000s, when factories began to move outwards to the peripheries of the city. It will briefly dwell on how this also led to changing labour geographies in terms of where it drew its workers from.

In the next chapter, it will then focus on the histories of work in the garment factory, particularly on shop floor practices, some of which continue to

persist today. It foregrounds the voices of the workers we spoke to, how they made sense of their working conditions in the context of their own lives as migrants, first-time industrial workers and as women within a patriarchal family system.

The final chapter presents the history of collectivising efforts in the city, given this context of a female-dominated workforce, facing patriarchal pressures within and outside the factory and functioning under severe time poverty. How did collectivising efforts understand this situation and frame their actions in order to mitigate the impact of these factors?

In the conclusion, we draw together these various strands to call for specific actions by the state on minimum wages and universal health coverage by the state as well as enforcement of labour laws. This is particularly crucial as the industry expands to rural areas in the state as well as draws in workers from states as far as West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Orissa among others.

Geographies of Garment Labour

In this section, we will look at the changing geographies of garment labour in the period between the late 1990s and early 2000s. This period is significant because of the expansion of garment factories in Bengaluru and a simultaneous expansion in the geographies of labour employed in these factories. The expansion was largely driven by the phasing out of the Multi-Fibre Agreements (MFA) from 1995 onwards. The MFA was an agreement that restricted the export of apparel from developing countries to developed countries to pre-allocated quotas. While this was done in order to protect the domestic apparel industry in developed countries, what it essentially did was to engineer a wider geographical spread of the production process.

If in the 1950s, newly industrialising countries such as Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and South Korea began to export low-cost apparel to developed countries, the introduction of the MFA resulted in garment entrepreneurs

in these countries shifting their apparel production to China, Vietnam and South Asian countries to make use of the quotas allotted to these countries (Alam et al. 2018). When the MFA being was phased out, countries such as Bangladesh and Vietnam which were predicted to lose out to bigger countries like India and China, managed to retain their share in the market while some others like Mexico and Philippines experienced negative growth.

In India, the export-oriented garment industry began in the 1960s. The first phase which lasted upto the mid-1980s was driven by a demand for Indian handloom garments in the US and Europe. The second phase from the mid-1980s saw a steady growth in knitwear garments with this segment overtaking handloom exports significantly between 1980s and 2000s (Roy 1998). In the initial decades of post-independence India, the apparel sector had been reserved for the small-scale sector which prevented the expansion of garment companies. Instead, a large number of small units were set up by entrepreneurs leading to a 'decentralised and networked production structure', which it has been claimed, affected the scale of operations. From 1985 onwards, deregulation of the industry began and technical modernization enabled the firms to increase capacity (Murayama 2008). With liberalisation in the 1990s, national textile policies began to encourage exports and the import of machinery and other necessary items were no longer prohibited, thus allowing for the ready-made apparel sector to expand its operations.

These related changes in the international and national context (introduction of MFA, phasing out of the MFA, liberalisation in India in the 1990s and deregulation of the sectors), have had their bearing on the ready-made apparel sector in Bengaluru. Key factors for the city's growth as an export centre include the increase in manufacturing capacity, consolidation of production inside factories and the relocation of garment units from Mumbai to the city (Mezzadri 2016).

In the following sections, we will trace the multiple factors that came together in the period of the 1980s and 1990s that eventually led to the

establishment of the assembly-line production by a women-dominated workforce in specific clusters within the expanding city of Bengaluru.

Changing nature of garment workforce

Until around 1985, the garment factory in Bengaluru was dominated by a male workforce and was tailor-centric. Recalling this period, K.R.Jayaram, a long-time observer of the garment industry in the state and legal adviser to GATWU, noted that piece work was the dominant mode of production, i.e. workers were paid for every full shirt (piece) stitched. The tailors then were skilled workers who stitched complete garments. In this format of piece work system, tailors had bargaining power and could halt production if they felt rates were not in their favour. In this period, women's presence in the factory was restricted to cutting, packing and khaja button departments.

The shift to women dominated assembly-line production was gradual and one of the first companies to initiate this shift was the undivided Gokaldas company, a well-known garment manufacturing company in the country. Assembly line production is a system of production where different components of a single product are manufactured and assembled along a chain of workers, called the assembly line. This is executed by a batch system where workers are divided into different batches and assigned roles along the assembly line. Recollecting this period when he was working as a member of the management team of a garment factory, he said that with the arrival of the batch system, primary recruitment was only of women. In his own factory, they had shifted to the batch system by 1993-94.

The logic of assembly line production spread rapidly through the factory sector in Bangalore and the tailor-centric, piece work system disappeared. Remarkably, this change in the manner of production, taking place within a span of a decade elicited little to no protest. Scattered accounts of this shift

to hiring women for production attribute it to periodic strikes undertaken by workers; for Gokaldas, it seemed to be due to a violent strike in one of their units around present Malleswaram that pushed the management to hire more women since they were considered a more docile workforce (Mezzadri 2016).

The workers who replaced them—unskilled women workers—began to work in assembly line production. Segmented into doing small tasks, these women are never able to learn to stitch full garments. After having observed the industry for decades now, Jayaram and R. Prathibha, the president of GATWU, have both reached the conclusion that garment industry works does not contribute to the skilling process in any way.

In one of our early interviews, Jayaram had this to say:

“Actually, those working in the fields are more skilled, they need to know how to sow seeds etc. But in factories, you don’t need to know anything. Because it is assembly-line production, different workers do different tasks; Unskilled work is what happens in a garment factory. Even if you work for 20 years, you will remain completely unskilled. You can’t say I have worked for 20 years, and I will now get out and start my own tailoring business. It isn’t possible.”

Changing spatial location of factories

Until the 1980s, the garment industry was entirely concentrated around the Lalbagh area. Says Jayaram,

“In Bangalore the entire garment industry was in Lalbagh Road. From Lalbagh to Machine Road (Double Road) there were around 25-30

factories. And at Khader Shariff gardens near Sudhama nagar, there were around 75 factories like Gokaldas Exports, Gokaldas Images and Ashoka Exports. Rajajinagar was the head office for Ashoka Exports. Mission Road for Gokaldas Exports. At Silver Jubilee Park Road, all local companies were concentrated.”

Further, recalling Bengaluru of the time, he said:

“When factories were around Lalbagh, workers travelled from nearby places such as Madiwala, Srinagar, Mysore road, Rajajinagar. “If you stood around Town Hall at 8 am, there would only be garment workers. There were no buses to Lalbagh road. It was a two-way street and BMTC had no entry then. So people would get down at Town Hall and walk to Lalbagh,” recalls Jayaram.”

Around the time that garment manufacturing companies began to adopt assembly line production, the number of manufacturing units began to rise. As the demand for space increased, factories began to move out of Lalbagh road to Yeshwantpur, Tavarkere and Madiwala. The city’s continued expansion pushed garment factories to seek space to set up units around Peenya, Mysore and Hosur Road (particularly Bommanahalli and Bommasandra).

According to Mohan Mani, labour researcher at the National Law School of India University and an advisor to GATWU, the proliferation of factories in localities like Peenya also had to do with the fact that in the 1990s and 2000s, a number of public sector industries were closing down. The ancillary industry they supported also began to close down, leaving empty a lot of factory sheds from which they operated from in the Peenya Industrial Estate. Availability of relatively inexpensive spaces has been a key local factor in the industry’s growth in the city. Says Mohan Mani,

“If you look at the garment industry in Bangalore itself, much of it is on rented property, not own property¹. And now when the industry

is moving out, partly of course because it is getting more and more difficult to get workers for the wages they are offering, but partly also because there is a competition in real estate. Today, apartment blocks are much more lucrative than rent income you get from a factory.”

Changing labour networks

The period between the late 1980s and 1990s then was a period of rapid changes. At the global level, MFA related restrictions had begun to ease, increasing export possibilities. At the national level in India, textile policies had moved towards deregulation and lifting of import restrictions on requisite machinery. At the city level, factories had begun to adopt assembly line production, thereby increasing their production capacities. This expansion, as we noted in the previous section, had led them to establish manufacturing units in the peripheries of the city.

This expansion to areas such as Yeshwantpur and Mysore Road in the 1990s and early 2000s drew in women from neighbouring districts seeking employment in these factories. “Workers coming to factories in Yeshwantpur would take the Tumkur train at 5 am, reach here by 6.30-7 am in nighties and brush their teeth and wash their faces at the railway station. While her colleagues huddled around her, garment workers changed into sarees on the railway platform while their colleagues stood around her, providing her privacy. They would then all head to the factory together,” Jayaram said.

Apart from workers who commuted daily to Bengaluru, many others migrated to Bengaluru on a semi-permanent basis. They were the first wave of garment workers who joined factories in the early 2000s when assembly

¹This is one of the reasons that garment factories can close down overnight by simply moving machinery out. This has been discussed in some detail in our earlier report. See (Shivanand and R.Prathibha 2021)

line production in the garment factory had become firmly women-dominated. These set of workers form our cohort of respondents. We will return to this later in the report.

By the late 2000s, when factories were unable to find enough workers within the city and the number of workers from neighbouring districts commuting to the city did not increase at the pace that was needed, companies began to send in vehicles to places such as Ramanagara and Channapatna to ferry workers to factories, thereby further expanding and deepening the labour catchment area. According to Jayaram, there were four sets of women workers who were progressively employed in garment factories.

1. Women in Bangalore
2. Women from nearby areas around Bangalore
3. Women from neighbouring districts were provided transportation to come to Bangalore
4. Establishing factories in rural and semi-urban areas and drawing in workers from surrounding villages.
5. This is also supplemented by efforts to bring in young women workers from the neglected regions of eastern India to meet the needs of factories in Bengaluru

Factory managements' efforts to expand the labour geography—or labour catchment areas, as some scholars put it—of its workforce has come due to severe scarcity of labour that the garment industry faces. Young women in Bengaluru do not prefer to work in garment factories for two reasons, according to Jayaram:

“The reason is that if you have finished upto SSLC, know a little English and how to handle computers, you can get employment easily in malls, housekeeping and sales...Women also do not want to go through the pains of harassment, production demands in the garment sector.”

The growth of the service sector in the city has thus meant that garment work is no longer an attractive option for those seeking to join the workforce. From phase 3 onwards, faced with acute shortage of workers, garment factories created deliberate recruitment strategies to entice workers. Jayaram recalled that factories would organise udyoga melas, go to rural areas and give out pamphlets, and appoint a manager/supervisor to recruit workers from rural areas. This however led to a trend in which workers came to be ‘attached’ to the supervisor or manager who gave them jobs and would move if the supervisor moved to another factory. It exacerbated discontinuity in tenure, something GATWU campaigned against:

“It became a terrible trend. Workers were close to these ‘masters’ because they would help out, give them leave when they want, help out financially if they wanted, if the master left they would also leave. Workers would work for 3-4 years and move to the next factory along with the supervisor. Other factories would entice supervisors by offering monetary incentives. We campaigned against such tendencies and told workers not to quit their jobs, you will lose your service. This was between 2008 and 2016-17.”

This is an instance of the extent to which labour practices are tied to the social relations that exist outside the factory. This is an aspect that is only getting strengthened more as factories move to rural areas and draw upon spatially embedded caste and gender relations².

In this report, however, we will look at the first generation of garment workers who joined the assembly line production when the export-oriented ready-made apparel industry was in its expansionist phase and had begun to establish manufacturing units in peripheral parts of the city. We do so in order to document their migration histories, how they made sense and coped with the extractive industry and most importantly on what futures were enabled by their work in the garment industry.

² We refer to aspects of this in our report on the factory closure in Srirangapatna (Shivanand 2020).

Snippets of history of ready-made apparel production in Bengaluru

Recalling the conditions that led to the establishment of a garment sector in Bangalore, a garment manufacturer in the city, who did not want to be identified, said this had to do with the fact that land and land resources were much cheaper and more easily available than in Bombay, a city that had been the hub for textile mills until the late 1980s. Yet another reason for the growth of Bengaluru as the centre for garment production, Alessandra Mezzadri notes in her book, was the city's proximity to fabric centres. Confirming this, the garment manufacturer, whose company was one of the first to be established in Bengaluru, noted that cotton crepe was sourced from Erode in Tamil Nadu and Kannur in Kerala.

An interesting linkage between Mumbai and Bengaluru emerges with this garment manufacturer's company which hired production and patent managers from a small garment company in Mumbai. These technical specialists were the ones who introduced assembly line production and the practice of monthly wages, aspects that the specialists were familiar with in the Mumbai context. Jayaram too recollected, and this is verified by other accounts of this period, that the company introduced this mode of production around 1985-86, which was then adopted across other factories as well.

Recalling the history of how garment production began in India, the garment manufacturer said,

“The first customers were Swedish and that’s what started off Bangalore’s industry. My family and the ones before them were selling into the Swedish Market. They were selling cotton crepe which was traditional Indian strength. The first cotton crepe was made on handloom and they switched to powerloom in Tamil Nadu. They got fabrics also from towns like Erode and Kannur. So, the garment industry in Bangalore did not happen because of the textile base in Bangalore because the city does have a textile base but the export industry from Bangalore was plugged into (textile production in) Kerala and Tamil Nadu...It’s based on cotton and it was stimulated by brands in the Swedish markets. These are the three points to note how it started.”

Garment manufacturers’ attendance in trade fairs was another important factor in developing the export industry’s base in the city. It was in these fairs that suppliers got to know of new trends, fabrics and made contact with buyers. The garment manufacturer’s family members travelled to Cologne, Germany and trade fairs in other countries where they learnt about the global ecosystem, presented their collections, and received orders that helped them grow. Recollecting these details, the garment manufacturer said, “trade fairs played an important role in the origin of the industry.”

History of Work in the Garment Factory: Revisiting the 2000s

The women who came to work in garment factories in Bengaluru in the early 2000s did not necessarily come to work in the garment factory, but migrated because members of their natal and marital families were in the city. More often than not, they were in some degree of financial duress. Often, they had no idea what a garment factory was until they came to the city and saw hordes of women walking (mostly) to nearby factories.

The role of neighbours and acquaintances

Neighbours, acquaintances or relatives introduced them or helped them get employment in factories. Multiple factors coalesced together to create a new labour geography in the peripheral areas of the city. The city was expanding outwards in the direction of Peenya in the north west, Nayandahalli in

the south west and Bommanahalli in the south east. These areas were still relatively less dense and their peripheral location made it affordable for migrating families to reside here. Rajni, who migrated to the city with her husband to reside at Nayandahalli, recalled how the area did not resemble a city at all—that it was all bayalu (open, plain field). “There were no houses on the way to the bus stand even. We couldn’t wait to get to where the houses were when we were walking.” According to her, people came and lived in Nayandahalli because they could get to the garment factories by walk and did not have to pay bus charge. At that time, there were a lot of murders and thefts in this area, she claimed.

In this same period, garment companies were also in their expansionist phase and had moved to the peripheries of the city and set up units in areas such as Peenya and Nayandahalli. Women from these newly migrated families began to join factories in large numbers, rarely ever travelling beyond the limits of their neighbourhood. The garment factory’s low educational requirements also meant that these women, who had rarely studied beyond high school, were able to easily get employed. Factories did not have to do much to recruit workers as these neighbourhoods, for them, consisted of a large reserve of workers. Relying largely on word of mouth, these informal networks of neighbours and acquaintances were key to recruiting workers in this phase.

Sushma, a former garment worker from Nayandahalli, came to the city about 17 years ago along with her husband after spending the first five years of her married life in her husband’s village. When her husband was unable to undertake farming in a viable fashion, both migrated to the city, leaving behind their children with Sushma’s mother. Her husband’s earnings as a loading helper at a large private transport agency was inadequate to run the household. It is then that Sushma decided to also begin working. Her spouse’s friend, who knew someone working in a garment factory, managed to get her employment at a factory called VKN, where she worked as a tailor for a few months before moving to another factory nearby.

Unlike Sushma, Parvathi, a former garment worker from Nayandahalli, came from Mandya 20 years ago, as a teenager during her school vacation to meet her cousin sister. This is when she saw another tenant in her relatives' building going to work in the garment factory. "I had no idea what this work was but I wanted to see what it was like. So I went with them and joined work. I had no plans of coming to Bangalore to work at all. I had just come with my friend to meet with my sister," she said. While curiosity may have prompted Parvathi to explore the world of garment factory, she stayed on as a way of building financial and self-independence. "In my mother's house, there was difficulty. I was the ninth child for my mother... There was strife in the family."

Friendships, Camaraderie and Reprives

Away from the strife, in the city, the prospect of dressing up, wearing a handbag, and heading to the factory was something Parvathi cherished: "The factory was my duniya. My batch was everything to me." This ebullient recollection of her time in the garment factory has much to do with Parvathi's memories of her girlhood which she spent on the shopfloor as an excellent worker, receiving praise from supervisors and being bribed by older workers to do their share of work. Importantly, she had not yet been bogged down by the cares of marital life. Gowri too had similar recollections of the factory:

"I would be very happy to go to work. I had so many friends and all these aunties (older women) were also there. From morning to evening we would be immersed in stitching the pieces. When salary came, I would give it to my father and keep the OT (overtime wages) for myself. We would go off to eat in a hotel, roam around Lalbagh and Cubbon Park. Life was better back then. We would work, eat what we want, buy whatever clothes we wanted but now life has become about looking after children."

Even when supervisors showered verbal abuse on them (an aspect we will return to later), Sanjana, a former garment worker, recalled how she and her colleagues made light of the situation: “They would scold and go but after that we would giggle at him after he left. He would say no one else talks as much as they do in the collar section. It was kind of jolly.”

For some women, working in the factory brought respite from domestic strife. The camaraderie shared by women on the factory floor, despite the abuse and work pressures, somehow sustained them on an everyday basis. Rajni, whose husband expected her to hand over her monthly wages to him and beat her if she did not, recalled how she wished she could have worked longer in the factory. “After work when we came back home, I would think why did it become evening? If the factory had stayed open, maybe we could have worked longer.” Her co-worker and union organiser Ratna, who walked home together with her also had a similar domestic situation at home. “We would walk together thinking in the factory, there was one kind of himse (referring to a visceral mix of anguish, torture and agony). Now, I don’t know what kind of himse awaits us at home,” she said.

At another point, Ratna recollected how much she cherished her time at the factory, given the domestic violence she faced at home. “I had so much trouble at home but if I came to the factory, it felt better. I liked the friendships we made. we would sit and eat together, talk about all the things our husbands did and that time I thought of how much garment industry has supported women, why we have come from villages to work here.”

For Yashoda who worked in multiple garment factories, her recollection of her time at the factory also centred around the solace workers offered each other.

“The relationships between workers was strong then. they were supportive, they had a helping nature. If anyone scolded or hit us on

the head, someone would come and say, ‘let it go. you know he is like that’. If we had any alterations to do, they would pick up two-three and say let me remove the stitches for you.”

As someone who interacts with garment women workers regularly as part of an NGO she runs, Yashoda reflected also on the changing nature of interactions amongst workers, given the high hourly production targets demanded from workers.

“Nowadays it has become mechanical. There is no time to help others. Workers say we don’t have time to drink water or talk, let alone help others. There is no friendship on the floor. Maybe they become friends outside the factory but inside there is not much support.”

Child Labour in Garment Factories

In the early 2000s, illegal deployment of underaged workers seem to have been common as the workers we spoke to had themselves been child workers or remembered young girls hiding under the tables or in bathrooms for hours when factory inspections were taking place. These inspections were undertaken either by buyers (apparel corporations) or by squads formed by the State Labour department. Gowri, who was 14 when she joined a garment factory, recollected how she and others would stay hidden in the bathroom for 2-3 hours. “I was told that if I came out, they (the squad) would take me and them. At that time, I didn’t know much... For 4-5 years worked as a helper only because I was still a small girl and didn’t know much work. I wouldn’t even know how to hold scissors properly.” Sanjana too remembered hiding under the table when buyers visited the factory: “We were small girls and they would get to know by looking at us. The buyers would come and check. That is how I learnt that these clothes go to foreign (countries).”

Namratha, who had seen young girls being employed in the factory that she worked in, believed that factories hired them because these young girls were docile and because they were not on official rolls, they could be paid much very little wages.

“In my factory too they would employ girls who were underage. When buyers would come, they would put them in the baby room. There were girls as young as 13-14. There was a girl called Geeta. She was only 13 years. I scolded her mother and told her she is too young. But she told me that there was difficulty at home. Her income was needed. Her father was unwell. Salaries of such girls was lower. Their names were omitted from the register. There was no such thing as attendance because that would reveal their age. These kids would not be given id cards either. For them, employing such girls meant no one would question them. People like us would talk back. So everywhere they would take such young children.”

Jayaram, legal advisor to GATWU, also acknowledged that child labour was present in factories widely, until atleast the early 2000s. He recollected that the expose by an international organisation of child labour employed in Nicaraguan factories which manufactured for Nike and Gap create a major furore in European countries and the United States of WAmerica. “The reputation of these companies took a big hit when it came to light that they were using child labour in manufacturing their products. Their business went down significantly,” he said. News reports of the time indicate that Nike did undertake a review of its corporate responsibility practices and concluded that even if they do ‘everything they can to eradicate child labour’ in their supplier factories, they cannot guarantee the practice would completely cease to exist (Day 2001).

The 1990s and early 2000s were also the time when Europe and North America were seeing the rise of anti-sweatshop campaigns in which transnational apparel corporations were targeted for the unfair labour

practices taking place in their supplier factories, located primarily in Global South. In response to these campaigns, apparel corporations signed onto voluntary codes of conduct in which they signed up to prevent child labour from taking place in their supply chains. "It is after these developments that companies began to ask their supplier factories if they employed child labour before giving them their contracts," Jayaram said.

Poor Wages, Unskilled Labour

Given that women joining the factories were working for the first time in their lives, they started off in lower positions within the assembly line. Seethamma, who moved to Bangalore after her husband's health condition prevented him from undertaking work, was introduced to the factory by her sister-in-law. She started as a low-level checker and worked in this position for three years before moving onto becoming a helper. She then received training within the factory and then worked as a tailor for 10 years before quitting the workforce. When Seethamma

Changes in machinery during the 2000s: A tailor's account

Yashoda, who previously worked with Munnade and now works with KOOGU, recollected the changes that took place in production technology over the period of the 2000s. Excerpts from an interview with her:

"Over the 8 years I worked, machinery underwent a lot of change. We would all get happy when we saw new machines. Usually, the machines were put to use for things that needed high quality work-- cuff, finishing, pocket.

Earlier, we used to have to cut the thread manually at the end. As machines changed, we could do double click with our leg and the thread would get cut and fall off on its own.

At first, we used to have to use one needle to put two stitches. Then we got machinery where double stitch would happen at one go.

Removing all the threads and dust from the pieces was a lot of work. but then later these large machines came. We would be able to put the garment inside it and it would get cleaned before checking.

Previously we used to have to press the machine and loop the thread around the bobbin. Then they gave us a machine where the thread would loop around the bobbin itself. We stopped using scissors entirely.

Ironing was done manually earlier by individuals and we used the iron boxes used at home. Then they introduced steam iron."

started work in the early 2000s, she was earning Rs. 76 per day, i.e. roughly Rs. 2500 or so. Fifteen years later, she was earning Rs.360 per day, i.e. roughly Rs. 10000. While her salary had quadrupled, the actual increase was barely enough to afford her any financial security after quitting work.

Parvathi, who recollected her time in the factory positively, earned only Rs. 900 per month, given that she was employed when she was underaged. Even as she gained proficiency and she became a tailor, her salary was only Rs. 1500-Rs. 2000. Working seven days a week and overtime, Parvathi had managed to earn Rs. 16000 per month when she finally had to quit. For Sanjana too, whose mother got her employed in a factory after being unable to pay Sanjana's school fees, joined the factory as a trimmer.

“That time, I didn't know what that was (trimmer). I didn't even know that word. *Was this like being like a helper?* No no, for helper you have to know something. This job is for people who don't know anything. I used to get 600 rs salary. They saw my adeptness (*churuku*) and put me into batch as helper within a month. I used to mark where it was colour fusing, colour turning, marking colour. I used to do the job of two helpers. Because I was fast in my work, they put me as feeding helper. Then they made me a tailor. I used to draw a salary upto 1200 rs.”

It was quite common for workers to undertake overtime work without any extra pay, let alone double pay. Rajni recollected working between 8.30 and 8.30 p.m. without taking any leave, so that she would get the Rs. 100 attendance bonus when she began work about 20 years ago. Her salary when she started was Rs. 200 per month. When she left the factory Choice after having worked for about 15 years, her salary was a paltry Rs. 2500. This too was increased only because workers went on a strike at the factory demanding higher wages. In all her time as a worker, she had had no PF. There was nothing she could fall back on, except her children, when her deteriorating health forced her to quit.

In this period of the 2000s, when the workers we spoke to were still part of the garment workforce, at the international level, negotiations were afoot to ensure that transnational apparel corporations adhere to minimum wages laws in supplier countries. This demand by anti-sweatshop campaigns in the Global North, did force brands to demand that workers be paid better if supplier factories had to get their contracts (Powell 2014). “Until about 2000, in Bengaluru, workers did not get minimum wages in garment factories. Like with child labour prohibition, the codes of conduct the brands were signing onto demanded that workers in the supply chains receive the minimum wages set by that country’s government,” Jayaram said. Brands sought to enforce them through compliance audits and inspections, he added.

Recollections of abuse in the factories

While anti-sweatshop campaigns may have been successful in reducing child labour significantly, they were less than successful in challenging the patriarchal bases on which division of labour was premised on the shopfloor. For the workers we spoke to, one of their stinging recollections of working in the shopfloor was of being scolded.

Scolding as Verbal abuse or necessary rebuke?

“If you are okay being scolded and don’t take it to heart, then you can do it. If you start questioning why they are scolding you and want to resist it, it becomes harder. Once you learn work, they won’t tell you anything. But they don’t give you time to learn and keep scolding you. When they are scolding you, tears are flowing from your eyes. Who wants to cry and work?”

Rashmi, a former garment worker, cited the excessive scolding as her reason for why she quit her job at the factory. She had followed her mother’s

footsteps and landed a job in the same factory in her late teens. However, unwilling to bear the verbal abuse directed at her by supervisors, she quit. Her mother, Seethamma, on the other hand, worked for 16 years before quitting to meet her gendered responsibilities within the family. Seethamma however believed that the scolding was necessary because workers would not work properly.

This framing of scolding as the norm and as necessary—otherwise workers would not listen—was a common refrain in conversations with workers. Workers maybe painfully cognizant of the excessive demands made on them to increase production targets but also sometimes empathise with the supervisors who scold them. Kaveri, who worked for six years in a garment factory, said: “They want you to do work. Who wants to just make you sit and give you salary? That isn’t possible.” She further explained that supervisors likely shout because they also face enormous pressure to meet production targets: “But they will also have pressure. Everyone scolds. Who doesn’t?” Another former garment worker, Namratha, felt that it was the scolding that motivated her to rise up the ranks to the position of a quality checker.

“Only when you get scolded in front of 10 people for not doing the work the way you are supposed, that is when you will learn. I have also been scolded a lot. Because they would ask for the piece fast, I would send it off without doing it properly. Then I would get called in front of people and scolded by the quality control (QC) supervisor. After that only, I thought why should I not become the QC. I decided I didn’t want to get scolded by anyone.”

These scoldings are to be understood against the high production targets that workers were expected to meet. Gowri, recalling this, said:

“They would ask us to finish 100 shirts in an hour. Those who had learnt work could finish off very fast but we were young and didn’t know so

much. If we didn't stitch properly, they would just throw the piece onto our face. So even when my mother called me for lunch, I would not go and instead sit and continue working. I have worked so hard that I have stitched clothes on an empty stomach quite often."

Gowri's 'voluntary' refusal to take breaks was also to avoid being shouted at:

"There was one master called Raju who would always talk touching us only. It was horrible but we couldn't say anything because we thought 'oh what if he increases our production targets'. At that point, we didn't have committee (anti-sexual harassment committee). Supervisors would also scold very badly. They would call my mother and ask her 'what have you fed her? Cow's milk or buffalo's milk? Because she is being like a buffalo'."

'Gratitude' to the industry and to abusive supervisors

Gowri later recalled how she became a coveted worker because she learnt to do work quickly and efficiently. Masters would apparently fight over her and once when she was asked to choose who she wanted to work with, she went with her original master Raju. She felt enormous gratitude for him because he taught her how to work, starting from how to hold scissors.

This gratitude for the master was a narrative I heard from a few others as well. Sanjana, who like Gowri joined the garment workforce when she was still in her teens, recalled her Ganesh 'master' with gratitude, a master who had hit her on the head sometimes when she was not working well.

"He's taught me work though, right? He was like a guru. He would scold me if I went out during coffee breaks around 10.15. He would say go sit at the machine and learn the work. He was from my side-Somwarpet. His thing was that this girl should learn. I had this thing that I shouldn't get scolded or beaten by him and so I used to do work very fast. If he had

not beaten me (or created the fear), I wouldn't have learnt work. I would have been like these people who work 'dully'. For others, he has scolded very, very badly.”

Both Gowri and Sanjana are former garment workers who joined work in their late adolescent years. Inducted into the workforce at such a young age, their memories of abusive masters are also perhaps informed by how they were given special attention and ‘moulded’ into being ‘good workers’, a point of pride for them even now—hence the gratitude. Fear of being scolded is framed as something that drove them to do better, work extra hard and gain appreciation. In other words, it is gratitude at being disciplined. This gratitude extends to the garment factory as well. When I brought up scolding yet again, Sanjana, explained her feelings about the factory thus: “But that is where I have learnt to work. Kalyani, Devaki (names of factories) are all like my ‘tavar mane’ (natal home). That is how I feel. We have learnt because they scolded us.”

Intimidating unfamiliarity of the factory and the city

For some others like Sushma, the scolding was never acceptable. She left the garment workforce during her pregnancies but returned for the sake of income. During our conversation, Sushma welled up repeatedly, recalling the scolding and could not even bring herself to repeat the abusive words.

“We had come from the village, no? So, it was torturous. They would scold us so much. First when I got married, I came and worked as a tailor in Konankunte cross. The manager there had scolded me in such a way that even now when I think of it tears come to me. Just because I had made a small mistake on the label. I had just come to Bangalore, I didn't even know to speak properly and I was working for the first time... Back then, everyone was men. Supervisor, PM, feeding helper, manager, QC everyone you would get scolded by. If I got scolded, some of the other

workers would laugh. That would make me feel worse. Some would understand of course.”

Even now, such stifling atmosphere in the factories often drive women to shift factories frequently or leave the workforce entirely. Most women who join the garment industry do so because they desperately need the income—to support oneself or the family is a common reason. This desperate economic situation combined with the verbally abusive environment at work leave women feeling overwhelmed and stuck—a feeling many women expressed. Manjula, recalling how distressed she used to be at the factory, said:

“I had left everyone I know and come here. I would often regret the fact that my parents were not well off, that I had to work like this and get scolded. I would cry everyday after coming back home. One day, it got so bad that I threw the scissors and left because I could not withstand it. I asked them how can you scold like this. Don’t you have sisters yourself? Then another supervisor came and told me not to feel bad and took me back.”

In some cases, verbal abuse has even driven workers to suicide. Rathna, a union organiser, recalled an instance when a garment factory worker died by suicide in the factory restroom. This worker was already struggling with the fact of her husband’s re-arrest in an incident of petty crime and the verbal abuse by her supervisor—asking her to go ‘stand on the streets’ (an euphemism for suicide) drove her over the edge, Rathna claimed.

Yet another factor that informs women’s decision to stay and not challenge verbal abuse is their position as first-time workers. For women who migrated to Bengaluru in the last two decades from districts around the city, the garment factory was not only just a place of work but also the first time they stepped out of the bounds of the family and their closeted lives. They were also likely the first women in their families to work in an

industrial set up, the first to have colleagues (mostly women) and supervisors and employers (mostly men) about whom they knew little to nothing (i.e. meeting people outside of their caste, village and gender contexts).

Fear was an emotion most workers recalled about their initial years in the factory. Rajni, whose marital life had greatly distressed her, said:

“I used to get very scared going to the factory. I had just come from the village where my mother would make coffee for us and I would simply do chores around the house. I had never stepped out into the world on my own. I didn’t know anything.”

Migrating from her village to Bengaluru as a young bride, to a sparsely populated neighbourhood in the outskirts of the city, Sushma recalled being intimidated by her new life contexts.

“Back then, I would think maybe it’s better to stay in the village only and do some coolie kelasa for someone... If in today’s position, he had scolded me I would have given it back properly. At that time, I was afraid of Bangalore. I didn’t know Bangalore... I didn’t even know what a garment factory was. I was scared what would happen if I spoke. Not anymore. Now I have understood Bangalore, travelled around here and there.”

For Yashoda who transitioned into organising garment workers with Munnade, coming to Bangalore was like ‘going to America’. Having grown up in an agricultural family in rural Tumkur, her only connection to the city was the stories her uncle who frequented Bengaluru would tell Yashoda and her cousins when he returned to the village.

“When I first joined Vibosa, it was a very scary experience. The factory was big, the supervisors would scream so much at us that my body would

tremble. I would often wonder if maybe it would have been better had I just stayed back in the village and did some coolie kelasa. Atleast there, I knew agricultural work.”

Workers may have worked long hours in the factory but just as the work of stitching a garment was fragmented into pieces, their knowledge of the factory and its products was also sparse. This added to workers’ fear that them doing something wrong would lead to catastrophic consequences. Gowri, who still pronounced brands as branch, recollected what she had been told about the products manufactured by the factory:

“Those who would come for checking would tell us that what we are stitching is going out of country. They would say if the piece is not stitched well, it will be returned from the airport and then factory will go for a loss and you wouldn’t get any salary. Or you would have to go the airport and restitch and come back.”

A life of being scolded’

Sustained scolding emotionally depletes the woman worker. The words used are often sexual in nature, invoke ideas of woman’s honour, and are abusive, some of which are directed towards her parents and husband as well. It drives women to desperation, leaving them with one of two options. The first is to work harder so that abuse is not hurled at them, resulting in increased productivity but with long-term consequences for health or inability to maintain the pace of work as one ages. The second is to resign because the abuse is unbearable, thereby ensuring that there is hardly ever a long-term workforce that can mobilise to seek better working conditions and wages.

Another former worker, Manjula, expressing a somewhat more ambivalent attitude towards garment work, said that she did not want to say anything too negative about garment factories “because they have given us work

when we needed it”. Acknowledging that the work was very hard and the scolding excessive, she however said, “This is the life for women. A life of being scolded”.

This stoic characterisation about women’s lives—being scolded by husbands, supervisors, families—was part of a larger worldview that neglect, abuse, indifference are the reality of women’s lives. For many of the women we spoke to, their lives were saturated at best with domestic neglect or at worst with domestic violence by husbands.

This also meant that even for the best of workers such as Sanjana, moving up the garment factory hierarchy was impossible.

“When I was at Devaki Fashions, one boy joined work. He didnt know anything at all, not even how to control the machine at all. I was the one who taught him all the work. When he went to Bombay Rayon, he called and asked me to come work as a supervisor. He said that I had taught him how to work and you are still a tailor. So I worked as a supervisor for six months there, around the year 2007. I had to quit though because I had young kids and as supervisor I had to leave only after giving all the accounts and that would get late. By the time I left, the factory bus would have already departed and I would have to take another bus and come home. Husband was ‘drinks party’. If I came home that late, there would be a fight always. That’s why I left.”

After-lives of garment workers

The garment workers we spoke to had all quit the workforce at some point in their lives, as demands of the family became important to prioritise. Women left jobs after they got pregnant or to look after young children or old parents. In many instances, family members insisted that they quit their jobs to perform care-giving functions. Yet many return to work when

care-giving responsibilities reduced or were not fully occupying of their time. Returning to work was essential because wages at the garment factories were so low and the demands of raising a family so high that workers had little to no savings at the end of their working tenures at the factory. The situation was particularly dire if their spouses had been particularly unproductive or had not contributed to the family's financial well-being.

Prioritising flexibility over stability

When women returned to work, their priority seemed to be flexibility. Kaveri, whose husband asked her to quit after she had her second child, now undertakes piece work since it allows her some degree of flexibility in her work schedule to accommodate her care-giving responsibilities. Undertaking piece-work has not only given her higher salaries but also allows her to come back in time to take care of her children when they return from school. This is a compromise she has had to make at the expense of foregoing state-provided health care through ESI, provident fund and pension—a litany of social security benefits that very few garment workers eventually access.

The workers we spoke to undertook piece work where possible, like Kaveri; some went into domestic cleaning work, the sector most poorly educated women turn to, like Sushma. Rarely did they undertake tailoring work, like Parvathi, who had managed to learn how to stitch an entire garment during her time at the garment factory³. Some entrepreneurial women like Sanjana have set up their own tailoring units where they undertake piece-work for bigger factories producing for the domestic market. For older women like Rajni, whose precarious health does not permit her to undertake any strenuous work, working children are their only constant source of support.

³ Recall that Parvathi joined the workforce when she was very young and because she was very fast at stitching, she volunteered to do other worker's tasks as well, for some extra money from them.

Deteriorating Health

“When I was working in the garment factory, I worked a lot because I could. I wanted money so I just did so much OT. Even when I was pregnant, I used to come back home at 9 pm,” recollected Parvathi. Like other women, she also pointed out how working on some machines generated ‘body heat’. “When you work on machines like double needle, triple needle, feed up, white discharge increases. I used to work on all three. You asked me how I used to get Rs. 16000 as salary? It was because of all this. At that time, I was young and hot-blooded. I didn’t realise it. But after children, when you are 30-35 you get to know.”

Although she took up tailoring work at home to support herself and her family, she has had to stop now because she has developed chronic back pain. “Whenever there is pain, I just take pills and go to sleep. If you are lucky and you have a husband who looks after you, then you will be fine. If you are not lucky, and your husband is not good, then you will not be fine.” She has been postponing a surgery she needs for her back because it is expensive and her husband has not had the interest in ensuring she gets the surgery done.

Rajni and Ratna, who worked together at a factory, recollected how their hands would be full of colour as they worked with jeans material. They had to put their hands in to turn the garment over and as they did so, the colour would stain their hands. For Rajni, this caused rashes frequently, forcing her to quit work every few years, before leaving it permanently when she was diagnosed with hemorrhoids.

For Yashoda, now an NGO leader, working in the factory aggravated her asthma: “After I went into the industry it became much more as well. I would try to put a kerchief over my mouth and do it but my main job was to attach sleeves and when tailoring, there is a lot of dust involved. At times, it would

get so bad that when walking back home to Srinagar, I could not even climb the slope.”

Working long, stressful hours, women workers sacrifice their youth, health and time to the factory. While they did acknowledge that their health worsened from years of work in the factory, they did not blame the factory or expect any reparations. Much of it gets folded into the logic of inevitability or necessity of garment work for their lives at the point in time they were working.

The social reproductive functions, such as childbirth and other care-giving work, that women undertake may force them to leave the factory. But it is important to acknowledge that such work is also extremely difficult to continue doing this work even beyond a certain age. As this section shows, the losses—in terms of their health—are long-term and the returns for their labour are paltry. Most women have to continue to find some other forms of work since the low wages of the sector prevents any form of accumulation for the future.

In this long chapter, we have traced the histories of garment work in the early decades of the 21st century in Bengaluru, through the experiences of former garment workers locating it within the broader contexts of changes in global garment sector and within policy changes in India. Scholars and activists have long pointed out that one of the aspects of work in the neoliberal economy has also been the feminisation of work in industries, both new and old. In this chapter, by foregrounding the voices of workers who were part of the initial decades of feminisation of work in the garment sector, we have demonstrated what the lived experience of this phenomenon has been for lakhs of women. Reflecting on their experience of work in the factory, if some women said that the garment industry ‘helped’ them a lot during their time of need, others presented it as something that they were forced to undertake given familial needs and conditions. To understand the practices of the garment industry and why environments of abuse prevail, there is a

need to return to feminist understandings of patriarchy and the hold it has on women and men alike. In this chapter, we have shown that even though the garment industry and its women dominated workforce maybe only a couple of decades old, the practices of disciplining labour on the shopfloor draw from time-tested patriarchal ways of disciplining and controlling women.

If this is the case, what forms must organising and collectivising in this sector take? It is to this we turn now.

Unionising in the garment sector

This chapter will trace the history of garment organising and unionising in Bengaluru. It will do so by looking primarily at the Garment Textile Workers' Union (GATWU) and its evolution. We look at GATWU because this autonomous union—that is not affiliated to any political party or directly attached to any NGO—does represent one of the more successful efforts at organising labour in new industries such as garment factories which are embedded within a global supply chain⁴. The trajectory of GATWU also represents unconventional modes of organising workers in the context of a neoliberal economic system—a system characterised by footloose capital (i.e. transnational and local garment capital is notorious for shifting to cheaper regions without any form of notice), a wilfully 'weak' state that refuses to enforce labour rights and workers whose tenure insecurity is so all pervasive that they have little to no space to identify themselves primarily as workers.

Much scholarship and activism has shown the precarity engendered by the global supply chain and its impact on workers, and to some extent on

individual factory owners. This footloose nature of garment capital has also meant that workers are averse to being unionised; traditional unions have also stayed away from organising such workers because of the threat of sudden closures; and conventional trade union organising has not been attempted or been successful in organising women. Given these different factors that plague unionising in the sector, GATWU's strategies of organising offers us lessons into possible ways of organising labour in post-liberalisation India.

This chapter draws from largely from interviews with union organisers and their fellow comrades who have assisted the unions—particularly GATWU—in its nearly two-decade journey.

Anti-sweatshop campaigns in the Global North

GATWU did not begin as a trade union, nor was there any specific intention to start a trade union when garment organising began in the early 2000s. Infact, part of its origins lie elsewhere in activism that was beginning to form in countries in Europe in this period.

While garment factories proliferated in countries of the global south, concerns about the exploitative conditions under which garments were being produced in countries of the global south began to grow among civil society groups in European countries where apparel brands were headquartered. Known broadly as the anti-sweatshop movement, a number of campaigns began to emerge in these countries. Studying the Clean Clothes Campaign, which has been a crucial actor in garment organising in other places including Bangalore, Philip Balsinger argues, “the rise of anti-sweatshop⁵ campaigns in several

⁴GATWU has recently become part of the All India Central Committee of Trade Unions (AICCTU).

⁵The United States General Accounting Office defines a sweatshop as a business that violates both health or safety, and wage or child labor laws. Typically, sweatshops are characterised by low wages, long working hours and unsafe working conditions

European countries can be explained by the fact that similar campaigns had started to appear in other countries as part of the slowly rising global justice movement against the effects of free trade and neo-liberalist policies. The growing grievances along global supply chains had provoked protests, and pioneering social movement organizations in Europe and North America had started mounting campaigns to put the issue on the public agenda” (Balsiger 2014, 50). This led to the establishment of transnational advocacy networks that focussed its energies on campaigning against the proliferating sweatshops in the global south and the state of labour rights in these sweatshops. These advocacy networks consisted of a variety of actors such as NGOs, foundations, elements of the media, churches, trade unions, and parts of intergovernment organisations or governments (Garwood, 2005).

Such newly-formed global campaigns and organisations reached out to civil society organisations in countries such as India to gather together evidence on egregious violations. This also kickstarted a flow of funds from Europe to India in the form of grants and projects to set up civil society organisations, worker resource centres and so on to engage with garment workers and factories here. One such organisation that began collaborations with international organisations was CIVIDEP. Recalling this period and how it impacted garment organising efforts in Bangalore, president of GATWU, R.Prathibha said,

“There was rapid growth in a short span of time. Campaigns were beginning in other parts of the world, there was pressure to start multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs)⁶. They wanted NGOs in local areas. We (CIVIDEP and Munnade) got to know CCC, particularly the India committee of Netherlands because of this. All these developments started in 2002-04.

⁶“MSIs are collaborations between businesses, civil society and other stakeholders that seek to address issues of mutual concern, including human rights and sustainability. To do so, initiatives may work to facilitate dialogue across stakeholder groups, foster cross-sector engagement, or develop and apply standards for corporate or government conduct” (“What Are MSIs? - MSI Integrity,” n.d.)

At this time global supply chains began to be the focus of concerted NGO action. The idea was to take garment workers voices to the level of the brand. It was not to start a militant trade union.”

For instance, Oxfam initiated a project to study the entire cotton supply chain in 2002, and partnered with a newly formed NGO called CIVIDEP, based in Bangalore, to undertake organising (not necessarily unionising) of garment factory workers. Oxfam’s support enabled CIVIDEP to form Munnade which undertook a range of activities that brought women workers together. Former and presently employed garment workers and former middle-management officials from garment factories were brought together in a developing collective in this period of the early 2000s through the activities initiated by CIVIDEP and Fedina, another NGO. The nature of this collective is important to note: none of these were individuals with any connections with formal and conventional trade union organising.

Describing the work of CIVIDEP, a 2007 report by OXFAM notes:

CIVIDEP at Bangalore has adopted a twin strategy of international advocacy reinforcing the local organisation of the workers and vice-versa. Accordingly, it has supported the women workers to organize themselves on the shop floor and in the community. The most important formation is Garments Mahila Karmikara Munnade as a socio-political front with a paid up membership of 830 (Rao and G. Muralidhar 2007).

The emergence of Munnade as a social welfare organisation is an important development in the history of GATWU. Unionising within a female-dominated workforce was extremely challenging, if not impossible given that women workers suffered from time poverty and did not also consider themselves as workers. Further, for activists themselves, the labour movement in Bombay which led to the closure of scores of mills and the loss of thousands of jobs were a reality to contend with. Closer home, industrial action undertaken by Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) at Ashoka

Exports had led to the closure of the factory. Given such previous organising efforts in the garment industry had led to massive industrial closures, there was understandable apprehension among organisers, and likely some workers, about unionising.

Most importantly, unionising was not the intent behind these early organising efforts. The idea was to create welfare-based initiatives for garment workers and if any egregious instances of violation taking place in garment factories came to light, to initiate action to support the worker/s. This could be in terms of reaching out to apparel corporations ('brands', as they are called colloquially) and/or the different institutions of the local state.

Cultural strategies for mobilisation

Early on, activists associated with CIVIDEP realised that women workers would not be open to conversations if they approached them with the intention to unionise. K. Jayaram, who was then associated with CIVIDEP, recalled how he would use his credentials also as an insurance agent and approached workers to sell policies. This ensured that he did not draw undue attention of factory security guards and appeared less threatening than he would have as an activist.

“I used to go there at 5PM in Peenya 14th Cross with LIC bag⁷. There was a brief case every time. I used to tie it to my vehicle like a sales man. I used to talk to workers and slowly got to know them. After getting to know them I used to ask them about their salaries, etc. and got to know about the company.”

⁷ LIC is Life Insurance Corporation of India

One of the most successful ways through which activists reached out to workers was through initiating self-help groups (SHGs). After undergoing training at the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development on how to build SHGs, activists began to reach out to garment workers to initiate multiple SHGs of 10-20 workers in factories. Recalling this, Prathibha said,

“We would do gate meetings and then walk with them in the direction they were going. There was a park there and we would ask them to sit and talk with us for a bit there. We did that for many days. that’s when we were able to start 2-3 sanghas. that’s where they shared with us.”

Meetings organised as part of these sanghas became one of the first times that garment women workers congregated outside of the factory. It became a platform for sharing grievances and labour rights violations which also prompted the activists to undertake reparative action targeting the factory management. One instance of this was when workers in Ramya Creations (name changed) complained about the foul, abusive language deployed by a factory supervisor against the women workers. Recalling this incident, Prathibha said,

“We wrote a complaint to the state women’s commission. The member secretary went to the factory for an inspection. Workers there told her with tears in their eyes what they were going through. This supervisor was immediately removed from the factory. We all distributed sweets. This was a big achievement for us.”

As complaints began to pour in through the meetings organised as part of the SHGs, activists associated with CIVIDEP and Munnade began to reach out to brands and civil society organisations to help negotiate with garment factory managements. In one of the earliest cases of compensation that GATWU-Munnade was able to wrest from a garment factory was

in the case of the tragic loss of a new-born baby of a garment worker. K. Jayaram recalled this incident thus:

“In garment factories, pregnant women come till the very last day because they will not get their salaries otherwise. In one case, a pregnant worker began to develop labour pain. At 10.30 a.m., she sought permission to leave. The management made her run around and by the time they gave her permission, it was 12 pm. When she was leaving after permission, the security guard also delayed. She had her baby right there but it died. Even at that time, they didn’t call for an ambulance. Two people put her in an auto with her baby attached to her. She went home and took a knife and cut the umbilical cord herself. Anyway, it became a very big issue. Two lakh was given as compensation. At that time, this was creation of history.”

In a few other cases, when activists filed refusal of employment and won both cases, workers received compensation of Rs.75000 to Rs. 85000. Such initial successes bolstered the confidence of some of the activists who then went onto start the GATWU, an aspect I will return to later. Munnade on the other hand continued its work of reaching out to women in ‘non-threatening’ ways, hoping to build a sense of worker identity. Among the repertoire of activities undertaken by Munnade was a worker magazine *Suji Dara*, published with regular frequency once every two months between the years 2004 and 2011 and then intermittently till 2019 before it completely stopped.

The magazine was circulated amongst garment workers and attained great popularity, so much so that Munnade activists were referred to as ‘*Suji-Dara people*’, Prathibha stated. She also added:

“We would write stories about the industry (in Bengaluru and elsewhere) and publish workers’ poems and stories. When SSLC-PUC results were announced, we would publish the names of all garment workers’ children who passed the exams, congratulating them. We would also publish

messages wishing workers on their birthdays and anniversaries as well. We would also publish stories of whatever GATWU and Munnade did. We would have doctors and lawyers write about health tips and laws respectively. In the editorial section, we would focus on what is happening in the industry now.”



Figure 1: Cover Page of Suji-Dara (trans.Needle-Thread) Vol.9, Issue 1, May-June 2014

Other activities that Munnade did were to organise summer camps, educational trips, karate camps, theatre groups and youth groups for children of garment workers. Recalling one such summer camp they had organised in April 2003 for about 30 children of garment workers, Prathibha said:

“We publicised the summer camp in factories in Nayandahalli such as Vidya Creations and Shalini creations. We raised some money through CIVIDEP but got more from CSR funds. We got a free classroom for our camp for one month from Siddaroda Ashrama; got a hotel owner to offer pulav and curd rice and a travel agency to offer transportation to students for a month at subsidised rates. For resource persons, we got some (then) upcoming and established artists. For the students, this was all free. At the end of the month, students were to put up a big skit of the play Punyakoti. We had called all the workers saying your child will perform, please come. About 100 workers gathered. It was such a big success that everyone was talking about it.”

Another successful activity that Munnade undertook was to collaborate with FM

ನೆರವು

ಪ್ರತಿ ಶನಿವಾರ ಹಾಗೂ ಭಾನುವಾರಗಳಂದು, ಗಾರ್ಮೆಂಟ್ ಕಾರ್ಮಿಕರು ಯಾವುದೇ ಕಾರ್ಮಿಕ ವಿವಾದಕ್ಕಾಗಿ, ತಮ್ಮ ಮೇಲಿನ ದೌರ್ಜನ್ಯ, ಕೌಟುಂಬಿಕ ಸಲಹೆಗಾಗಿ ತಜ್ಞ ವಕೀಲರನ್ನು ಈ ಕೆಳಕಂಡ ಸಂಸ್ಥೆಯಲ್ಲಿ ಉಚಿತವಾಗಿ ಸಂಪರ್ಕಿಸಬಹುದು

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1. ಗಾರ್ಮೆಂಟ್ ಅಂಡ್ ಟೆಕ್ನಿಕ್ಯಲ್ ವರ್ಕ್ಸ್ ಯೂನಿಯನ್ (GATWU)
 ನಂ. 17/1, ಹೊಸ ಗುಡ್ಡದಹಳ್ಳಿ, ಬಸ್‌ಸ್ಟಾಪ್ ಹತ್ತಿರ, ಮೈಸೂರು ರಸ್ತೆ, ಬೆಂಗಳೂರು-26. ದೂ: 080-26745242
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 ನಂ. 105, ಮೊದಲನೇ ಮಹಡಿ ಕರ್ನಾಟಕ ಗೃಹ ಮಂಡಳಿ ಕಟ್ಟಡ ಕಾವೇರಿಭವನ, ಕೆ.ಪಿ.ರಸ್ತೆ, ಬೆಂಗಳೂರು-560 009
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3. ವಿಮೋಚನಾ
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Figure 2: Announcement in Suji-Dara magazine of list of worker and women's organisations to help women workers facing domestic violence and requiring legal and other assistance

Rainbow to air a regular skit called Banni Munnadeyona. In this, a recurring character Sheela who was a union member would cover topics like brand audit, bonus, minimum wages, family harassment. Aired between 7 and 7.30 a.m., the skit was prepared by Munnade activist Deepa Girish and assisted by Prathibha. The skit ran for nine weeks and was so popular that there was a demand to broadcast it again. Munnade's office also began to run a library that was free for women and their children to use when they wished to. They attended to women's complaints about domestic violence and navigating the police and judiciary when needed. In 2003, Munnade activists also began cultivating contacts with media to ensure coverage for this growing industry. Jayaram recalling this, said:

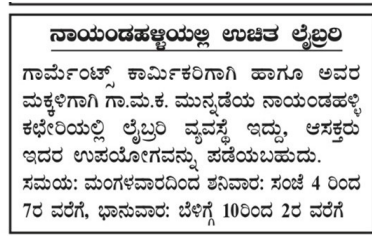


Figure 3: Announcement in Suji-Dara of the free library service for garment women workers at the Munnade office

“First initiative we undertook was to inform the world of the plight of garment workers. This we started in 2003 only. We started a media campaign. Because of that the world got to know of what is happening inside the factory. The Hindu was the first newspaper to report consistently. Vijaya Karnataka wrote a series of reports on the garment industry. We also did a series of programmes. These outreach programmes ensured that garment workers who never once stepped out before we started to get 1000s of workers to come together for events like May Day, Women's Day. We used to call actors like Tara, politicians like Tanvir Sait, Shobha Karandlaje for our events.”

In these ways and more, Munnade approached garment women workers by attending to their intersectional and complex social identities rather than only privileging their worker identity. Further, many of these activities undertaken by Munnade exceeded the limits of the project that CIVIDEP was committed to at the time, as activists used the framework of welfare

and development to craft cultural strategies that enabled them to build relationships with workers in and out of the factory. Prathibha believes Munnade's ways were the only way to gain workers' confidence: 'We couldn't have started off as a trade union. If we hadn't started out with this social dimension, if we had just gone in to talk to workers about their rights etc, they would not have heard us out at all.'

Building and sustaining a union

GATWU's strategies, on the other hand, encompass a variety of scales: from undertaking factory level interventions to campaigning for the state to increase statutory minimum wages for garment workers to working with international civil society organisations to hold apparel corporations responsible.

In 2006, when GATWU was formed, it began to work on developing leadership within individual factories. Despite the numerous hurdles, leadership began to develop slowly. "We don't go with full-time activists because someone else can't come from outside and do this work. They have to come from within the factory. So, what we have done is to build leadership within factories and whatever they can do within the factory through them workers' grievances are sorted out," Jayaram explained.

Activists also began to cultivate relationships with local reporters to draw attention to working conditions in garment factories. The Kannada newspaper Vijaya Karnataka wrote a series of reports on the garment industry. The Bengaluru edition of the Hindu newspaper also reported consistently on the industry. GATWU also undertook a minimum wages campaign in March 2007, in which activists went door to door selling pamphlets to workers for Rs. 1 and sticking it on their front doors. Along with acclaimed labour organisers from other sectors, GATWU chalked

out the demands and presented representations to ministers and labour secretary. Recalling the sequence of events, Prathibha said,

“We argued that minimum wages (for the garment sector) was first notified in 2001; every five years it needed to be revised but it had not been done and so a draft needs to be prepared. In 2007, they (the state government) put out a draft notification saying it will be Rs.127 rs now. The draft notification needed to be finalised in three months but it did not happen till 2007-08. We kept writing letters asking for the final notification. We took out a big march from Banappa park to Senate Hall where we did a big programme. Finally in March 2009, they gave the final notification. We began writing letters to brands and to factory owners to implement the hike. But it was of no use. Around September 2009, we went to high court.”

Over time, GATWU's strategies began to include negotiations with the state on minimum wages; where the state was hostile or reluctant, the union has sought judicial intervention. Garment factory managements have often claimed that increasing wages for workers would make factories financially unviable; and that women's wages are only additional incomes in a household and hence do not need to match the salaries of men. Minimum wages typically are meant for the unorganised sector; in the organised sector, wages are fixed on the basis of collective bargaining agreements. This, however, is not the case in Bengaluru's garment industry where not a single case of wages being fixed due to collective bargaining exists.

Where efforts were made to pursue collective bargaining, this has sometimes been met with violence as in the case of Shahi Unit 8 where another garment workers' union Karnataka Garment Workers Union (KOOGU) attempted to initiate negotiations. Recalling this incident, union organiser from KOOGU T.S Swamy said that while unionised workers were targeted routinely, the situation escalated when they submitted a memorandum asking for better working conditions and higher wages. The Workers'

Resource Consortium (WRC), an independent labor rights monitoring organization, published an enquiry report in which they found the factory management had indulged in physical beatings, death threats, gender, caste, and religion-based abuse, threats of mass termination, and the expulsion from the factory of 15 worker activists (Workers' Rights Consortium 2018).

Under these circumstances, minimum wages are the only legal mechanism available for workers and union organisers to demand higher wages. However, large ready-made apparel producers who have powerful access to central and state governments and have lobbied to keep minimum wages low and fend off statutory, periodic minimum wage revisions, according to GATWU members and other union organisers. Union organiser from All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) Sathyanand Mukund, speaking about disparity in minimum wages between the garment sector and other sectors had this to say:

“The idea that you can set minimum wages of Rs. 8000 to 9000 for garment workers and Rs. 11000 for pharmaceutical workers is simply absurd. That raises a lot of questions. One is discrimination between workers and the other is between industries. Why should a pharmaceutical owner pay more than a garment factory owner? Rs.1000 per worker per month is huge. So the amount of pull they (garment industry) have with the government is unprecedented even in comparison with other industries...Informally in the labour department, they would say that there are two holy cows: IT industry and garment industry. There are informal instructions that disputes and unionisation in these two industries should not be encouraged⁸.”

Apart from demanding implementation of workers' rights from the local state and building leadership in individual factories to be able to address

⁸This claim has not been independently verified by ALF but is a constant refrain heard from union organisers during interviews.

any issues that might arise, GATWU has also built networks with multi-stakeholder initiatives at the international level. This is crucial since an entire voluntary governance structure has emerged globally to hold transnational apparel corporations responsible for what happens through the entire supply chain. Through these networks, they reach out to brands who have placed orders with garment manufacturing companies when labour and human rights violations in the latter's units come to light. They undertake such a move when factory managements refuse to respond to GATWU's complaints and demands.

One of the earliest instances of collaboration was with the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), which has branches across Europe. The case was regarding a Bengaluru-based garment manufacturer called Fibres and Fabrics International (FFI), which produced apparel for the clothing brand G-Star. This case is crucial also because this is what led to the formal creation of GATWU. During one of his many interactions with workers at FFI, Jayaram, one of GATWU's founders and its legal advisor now, had come across instances of physical violence meted out to workers in the factory's working unit. At the same time, according to Jayaram, CCC was also looking for evidence of such violence in the factory so that it could ensure G-Star can address the violations. Jayaram worked to gather the evidence and when G-Star refused to acknowledge CCC's report based on this evidence, he had women's rights activists undertake an enquiry. G-Star was forced then to take note of this report which documented the following violations.

- Women workers were forced to work for 10 hours
- Overtime pay was only given at the normal and not double rate.
- In the washing unit, workers were forced to undertake acid and stone wash without safety gear, leaving them with boils and unable to eat food without experiencing a burning sensation
- While the company provided food for workers, it had to be finished in 20 minutes. This was rendered even more painful because workers could not touch the hot rice because their hands would be burning.

- The company worked in two shifts. But workers who started the first shift at 6 a.m. would not be let out until 6.30 p.m in the evening, even though their shift ended at 2 p.m.
- Workers who protested were put on the second shift which would begin at 2 p.m. and end at 10 p.m. These workers were attacked on their way home at night.

Narrating these violations, Jayaram recalled that CCC began to undertake international campaigns based on the evidence that Munnade had gathered: “They would protest in groups of 15-20 in front of G-Star stores, including in Hong Kong. That is when G-Star began to feel the heat and came for discussion.” When FFI’s lawyer got a gag order against all the organisations involved that the issue at FFI should not be discussed anywhere, the issue became very well-known. “The ex-prime minister of Netherlands became the mediator--FFI, G-Star, CCC and us. We challenged the SA-8000 certification citing all the violations taking place in the factory (it had been given by an american organisation) and they did an enquiry and found the allegations to be true. They withdrew the certification. FFI started to face other problems. This issue began to be discussed at the European Union level, at the ILO etc. Amnesty International also waded into the issue,” Jayaram stated. Eventually, G-Star acted to ensure that FFI implement labour laws, including eight-hour work days. A committee headed by a retired judge effected a compromise between the company and GATWU that any issues within the factory would be resolved through mediation and GATWU was free to organise workers in the factory. According to Jayaram, this case prompted Munnade activists to come together to create a union: “This case was the reason we formed a trade union. Before that we had Munnade. We used to come from an NGO background. With Munnade, we could not file cases according to the law. In any case, not as much as a trade union can. With that intention, we planned to start a union in October 2005 and registered it in March 2006.” But for various reasons, the leadership at CIVIDEP decided to continue working as a social organisation rather than build membership for the union. Jayaram states that it was only in 2010

that the union began to organise and build its base among garment workers. Reflecting on GATWU's strategies from 2010, he said:

“We learnt a lot through the FFI case. We gained a lot of traction at the international level but at the ground level we had no membership. We used international law but nothing of the Indian law provisions. We realised that if we go directly to international law, we won't have a grip on the ground here. What we learnt from the FFI case was that our membership should be strong at the ground level, workers should stand behind us and then we can go to the international level.”

Mohan Mani, a labour researcher who has worked closely with the union, agrees with this assessment that a strong worker base is necessary for any union. This is particularly necessary when it comes to implementing the agreement reached between the union and the brand/factory. Mani says, “If an agreement is negotiated between a brand and a union, it does not have any legal binding. At the ground level, factories can renege on the terms of the settlement. In that situation, unless there is a union which is strong enough, it will be very difficult to follow up and ensure that there is full compliance.”

Such varied strategies are a necessity given the nature of garment capital and workforce. Offering a critical analysis of GATWU's strategies, Mani says:

“GATWU has moved out of just looking at the workers as victims and looking at just harassment at the workplace as an issue, to economic demands, but it has not moved beyond a point of taking up the whole issue of bargaining. On the economic issues, it has only been able to take it up at the industrial level, not at the factory level, i.e. to say that minimum wage is fine, but we want to go beyond that. So, that's where it stands. It is not an easy task, given that the workforce, in Bangalore

city, for sure, is still footloose work. You are here for 3–4 years, you leave typically because you are pregnant and you have to have a baby. It is a remarkable thing that despite ESI and maternity benefits, you find that many workers actually leave when they have to have a child. And that's something that needs to be addressed. And the fact that you are constantly requiring to get money out in terms of your PF. So, whenever there is a crisis, you quit, you collect your dues, and then you rejoin after some time. So, in the absence of there being a tenured workforce, it almost becomes like as if it is a migrant workforce.”

Another aspect to pay attention to in the history of organising is the number of reconfigurations that have taken place between individuals and organisations. While the first efforts of reaching out to garment women workers was through the welfare mode initiated by NGOs such as CIVIDEP and Fedina, over time this resulted in the creation of GATWU and other unions such as Garment Labour Union (GLU), KOOGU among others. This was done in order to build a support base among workers for negotiations with transnational apparel corporations as well as to be able to file complaints with the state labour department. In its initial years however, it was still bound in some ways to the workings of the NGOs. Even as GATWU and Munnade grew, its journeys have been marked by a series of interpersonal conflicts, leading to splits in the union. Such conflicts have meant that worker-leaders and worker-activists who came into their own through working at GATWU have over the years moved away to form their own unions or welfare organisations. By no measure is this phenomenon of splits and reconfigurations limited to garment organising; it has however had the effect of fragmenting efforts to collectivise women workers in the export-oriented garment industry in the city and state.

One of the aims of this report has been to emphasise the local—which is the site where organising and mobilising takes place—and to document the specificities that leads to the emergence of collectivising efforts. To that end in this chapter, we have traced the two decades long history of garment

organising in the city through the work of Munnade and GATWU. The work of Munnade—starting SHGs to enable women to access credit, producing a magazine to connect workers to their compatriots across the world while also recognising key events in their lives (children’s graduation, anniversaries etc) not only brought garment women workers together but also created possibilities for activists to transition to union organisers. The history of GATWU that we have documented here also is a local history of how a union came to be, how an understanding of the necessity of the union developed among its organisers, and finally what are the limits to organising given the nature of the industry as also the social contexts of its workers.

Conclusion

This report documents the changing geography of garment work in Bengaluru and the desperation which drove first generation women workers to join factories. Having joined the workforce, they were rarely able to challenge the patriarchal operations of the factory, as our interviews show. Yet the work and wages afforded them some measure of financial and familial relief as they settled down in the city. The women however incur long-term costs as has been detailed in this report.

Impact of low wages: Excerpts from interviews with women presented here reveal that their tenure as garment workers may widely vary given individual care-giving and reproductive responsibilities. Yet, it is clear that working within the garment industry with its low wages offers little to no income security for the women workers. That is, workers can rarely ever retire and have to continue to find other forms of work, also likely low-paying.

It is in this context that GATWU's demands for periodic revision of minimum wages by the state government acquires significance. Apart from the fact that garment women workers are one of the least paid formal sector workforces in the state, the persistent low wages can offer no form of income security during and after their work within the garment industry.

The argument that women's wages are secondary are also belied by the life histories presented here with many women narrating how they had to shoulder the burden of running the family, given absent and/or alcoholic husbands. Women workers are primary, or at the very least equal, earners in low-income households.

The state needs to undertake a substantial upward revision of minimum wages in the sector in order for women to have a modicum of income security. Transnational apparel corporations need to incorporate living wages into their financial calculations when negotiating with garment factories.

Impact on health: Both interviews with women here as well as extant literature point to the substantial adverse impact that garment work has on workers. However, there is no recognition of it either from transnational apparel corporations, factories and the state. While export-oriented garment industry does offer state-mandated employee state insurance, this is limited to their tenure at work. Given that the adverse impacts on health are long-lasting and appear at a later date and not only when they are working, the need for universal and life-long health coverage is essential.

Moving ahead, it is important for the state and the industry (manufacturers and brands) to acknowledge the long-term costs these women workers continue to bear and remedy the same. The State must ensure that its wage revision and welfare schemes address these costs and industry must examine how wage structure and workplace practices need to change.

Unsettling shopfloor hierarchies: One other way to bring about change is to unsettle hierarchies within the garment factory. This will also help counter patriarchal ideas and practices are deep-rooted. The division of labour within the factory where women workers are almost always supervised by men needs to first be dismantled to promote women to supervisory capacities. Adequate arrangements need to be made in terms of transport and other additional support for women to undertake these new roles. Training for women needs to become institutionalised with the state mandating that women be promoted to supervisory capacities.

Long-term involvement of feminist organisations and collaboration with trade union organisations are also a way forward to address issues faced by women in garment factories as well as mitigating effects of patriarchy. Sexual, verbal and physical harassment faced by women in factories need to be addressed by both feminist and labour organisations.

The State must take the initiative and involve brands, manufacturers, civil society and workers unions to ensure a healthy, dignified working life with fair compensation for women garment workers.

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Stitching Lives, Organising Workers traces the changing industrial and labour geographies of garment work in Bengaluru, particularly focusing on the early 2000s. Using the oral history method, the report charts the histories of work in the garment factory, including patriarchal shop floor practices, some of which continue to persist today. It foregrounds the voices of former garment workers, how they made sense of their working conditions in the context of their own lives as migrants, first-time industrial workers and as women within a patriarchal family system.

The report also presents the history of collectivising efforts in the city and the challenges faced in organising garment women who face patriarchal pressures within and outside the factory and function under severe time poverty. How did collectivising efforts understand this situation and how did organisers frame their actions in order to mitigate the impact of these factors is explored in this report.

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