

“Forward March:” Towards safe and secure work for women in Bangalore, India

Natalie Boychuk, Undergraduate Student, University of Toronto

natalie.boychuk@mail.utoronto.ca

(905) 609-5808

92 Pricefield Road

Toronto, ON M4W 1Z9

Salina Suri, Undergraduate Student, University of Toronto

salina.suri@mail.utoronto.ca

(647) 921-5951

92 Pricefield Road

Toronto, ON M4W1Z9

Abstract

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 requires that stakeholders “protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all,”¹ and especially for those who are most vulnerable, such as migrant women. Estimates suggest that one in every seven garment workers in India, many of whom are migrants are raped or forced to commit a sexual act in the workplace. The Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act was intended for factories to establish sexual harassment committees within their facility to prevent sexual violence against female workers but is in reality rarely enforced. In Bangalore, where approximately 400,000 women are employed in the garment industry² earning about 7,000-8,000 rupees per month, garment labour unions play a significant role in enforcing sexual harassment legislation, advocating for minimum wage increases, and educating workers about their rights.³ This is particularly significant given that up to 90% of Bangalore’s garment industry is comprised of women, many of whom are migrants from rural Karnataka and Tamil Nadu or are otherwise in precarious employment.⁴ However, management in the Indian garment industry is known to demoralize attempts at collectivization in an environment where female workers are vulnerable to violence, sexual harassment, and poor working conditions. This research explores the innovative union model employed by the Garment Labour Union (GLU) in partnership with Munnade Social Organization, women-led grassroots organizations that have been successful in organizing garment workers who are otherwise unlikely to join unions because of inadequate time to participate and fear of violence or punishment.

¹ “Economic Growth,” United Nations Sustainable Development, accessed July 2, 2018, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/economic-growth/>

² Sisters for Change, “*India: Eliminating violence against women at work.*” Country Report., 2016: 18.

³ Sisters for Change, “*India,*” 2016: 19.

⁴ Fair Wear Foundation, “*India: Country Study 2016,*” The Netherlands, 2016: 20.

Introduction

The garment manufacturing industry contributes heavily to India's economic growth, as it accounts for approximately 37% of national exports.⁵ Estimates suggest that 500,000 people are working in the garment industry in Bangalore in approximately 1,200 factories.⁶ Of these workers, approximately 90% are women, many of whom are first-generation migrants from rural areas of Karnataka State.⁷ Despite the "economic miracle" of the garment industry, which is growing in an increasingly competitive international market, many workers in the industry are currently living in poverty or suffering from poor working conditions.⁸ Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8 requires that stakeholders "protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all," and especially for those who are most vulnerable, such as migrant women. And yet, estimates suggest that one in every seven garment workers in India are raped or forced to commit a sexual act in the workplace.⁹ The Sexual Harassment in the Workplace Act intended to enforce sexual harassment committees within factories to prevent sexual violence against female workers but is in reality rarely enforced. As a result, in Bangalore, garment labour unions play a significant role in combating sexual violence and other labor rights violations in garment factories.

This research analyzed non-conventional union services and other innovative strategies by the Garment Labour Union and Munnade Social Organization and how they have been used to incentivize member attainment and retention in a population that is notoriously difficult to organize. This research found that pre-union organization, women's representation in the design of programs, and coordination with NGOs improve the degree of service provision, the accountability of the union and increase trust between workers and union organizers. Non-conventional service offerings, including microfinance groups, peer and professional counselling, and low-cost child care provide value to garment workers and increase incentives for workers to organize and advocate for their labour rights.

The Garment Labour Union (GLU)'s work shows that in order to promote safe and secure workplaces, unions must engage with women's needs outside of the workplace, which then helps to increase participation in advocacy. Developing holistic approaches to unionization in the garment industry that integrate the service provision typically not included in union models has the capacity to overcome political, sociological, and legal barriers to improvements in working conditions.

Methodology

This research project aimed to understand the Garment Labour Union's integration of non-conventional union activities and strategies to increase incentives for female garment workers to become and remain members of the Garment Labour Union. The project was composed of one year of desk research followed by an intensive period of 11 days in Bangalore in which qualitative interviews were conducted. Interviews were carried out on a voluntary basis with employees of GLU and other organizations working in this space in Bangalore. All participants were interviewed in an official capacity. End users were not interviewed as a part of this study.

⁵ Sudeshna Saha, "Women Employees in Garment Industries- A Case Study conducted in selected garment industries of Peenya Industrial Area, Bangalore," *International Journal of Management Research and Business Strategy* 3, no. 3 (July 2014): 128.

⁶ Saha, "Women," 129.

⁷ Saha, "Women," 129.

⁸ Jean Jenkins, "Organizing 'Spaces of Hope': Union Formation by Indian Garment Workers," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51, no. 3 (September 2013): 623.

⁹ Sisters for Change, "India," 2016: 2.

Interviews were semi-structured and approximately thirty minutes to an hour in length. Data was collected through hand-written note-taking, later transcribed into typed notes, and then analyzed using a thematic content analysis method. Broader themes were identified from re-reading interview notes and discussion. Throughout the coding process, themes were adapted to reflect topics that appeared frequently in interview data or had been emphasized by participants.

This article discusses the work of GLU in partnership with Munnade Social Organization. The Garment and Worker Textiles Union (GATWU), another garment union operating in Bangalore's garment sector, is also known as Garment Mahila Karmikara Munnade. When referring to the work of "Munnade," this article is referring to Munnade Social Organization, unless otherwise mentioned.

Literature Review

The traditional labour union, as defined by Ghosh et al., is responsible for various primary functions to "promote and protect the interest of [its] members."¹⁰ Such functions include securing fair wages for workers, improving working and living conditions, and to "cooperate in and facilitate technological advancement by broadening workers' understanding of underlying issues."¹¹ Similarly, Ewing finds that labour unions typically serve five functions: service, representation, regulation, government functions, and public administration functions.¹² A union's service function typically encompasses benefits to workers such as health insurance, as well as professional services, such as legal counsel, which can include services for "problems unrelated to work."¹³ "Traditional" unions are often unable to adapt to the changes required in an increasingly competitive globalizing industry, which must serve workers who are increasingly constrained with their time.

Rao identifies the longstanding knowledge that the home lives of the workers are as pertinent to labour unions as factory conditions. The Whitley Commission (WC), which was formed in 1929 in India to investigate the state of labour rights in Indian states and advocate against poor working conditions, found that a prerequisite to improving working conditions is improved literacy, as workers must be sufficiently educated to understand their rights.¹⁴ Scholar J.S. Sodhi echoes this, implying that traditional union models are less effective than more innovative approaches to advocacy, as the holistic experience of such labourers must be considered.¹⁵

While trade unions have existed in India since the early twentieth century, successful unionization in the garment labour industry has been almost non-existent.¹⁶ RoyChowdury identifies a structural barrier to unionization of workers in the garment industry, writing that "mainstream trade unions in the city have shown a certain marked apathy towards this

¹⁰ Piyali Ghosh, Nandan Shefali, and Gupta Ashish, "The changing roles of trade unions in India: a case study of National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), Unchahar," *Asian Academy of Management Journal* 14, no. 1 (January 2009): 39.

¹¹ Ghosh, Shefali, and Ashish, "The changing roles," 39.

¹² K.D. Ewing, "The Function of Trade Unions," *Industrial Law Journal* 34, no. 1 (2005): 1.

¹³ Ewing, "The Function," 1.

¹⁴ Shiva B. Rao, "The Whitley Commission on Indian Labour," *New Statesman; London*, September 7, 1929, 642.

¹⁵ J.S. Sodhi, "Trade Unions in India: Changing Role & Perspective," *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 49, no. 2 (2013): 181.

¹⁶ Supriya RoyChowdhury, "Labour Activism and Women in the Unorganised Sector: Garment Export Industry in Bangalore," *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 22/23 (2005): 2251.

relatively new and female-oriented sector.”¹⁷ Additionally, the increasingly globalized garment labour industry creates high profit on export-based products, which is underscored by the low wages supplied to workers. This greatly reduces economic incentive to implement labour regulations in the industry, which is only encouraged by the lack of advocacy that has previously existed for such workers.¹⁸ In general, garment workers are classified as, “low-paid, low-skilled, easily replaceable sources of labour.”¹⁹ In India, gender-based stereotypes have increased the propensity of garment factories to target women because of their perceived passivity.²⁰ Jenkins argues that socioeconomic conditions and social conditioning decrease incentives for women to organize for their rights. For instance, many garment workers are young female migrants from rural areas surrounding Bangalore city. Generally, these women’s lives are defined by their isolation from their villages and social communities, “forced by marriage, desertion, widowhood, or acute poverty,” which has a strong impact on women’s vulnerability to sexual violence.²¹

Jenkins found that not only does the garment labour industry in Bangalore provide little means of support for the employees, but the long hours affects their 'character.' This word choice, according to Jenkins, refers to "societal prejudice towards women who are away from their home after dark."²² Jenkins outlines the societal context of vulnerability that affects the workplace itself, where "managerial tactics designed to increase productivity add to workers' stress."²³

Jenkins further identifies a variety of challenges faced by laborers during pre-union organization, including “direct, overt opposition from employers [to unionization].”²⁴ Unfamiliarity with unions also contributed to workers' distrust and hesitance to become members of GATWU (the Garment and Trade Workers' Union). Additionally, separate interviews with the leaders of national unions "described garment workers as 'lacking unity' and being 'impossible to organize.'"²⁵ This they attribute to the characteristics of garment labour workers rather than their organizations' failings. Women working in the garment labour sector are faced with the "double burden of factory work and domestic responsibilities."²⁶

Since the 1970s, when garment labour became female-dominated, the industry has spread through three areas of Bangalore: Boomsandra, Peenya, and Mysore Road. This expansion led to the opportunity to employ rural women, who find these outlying areas of the city more accessible than the previous Lalbagh area, where work was centralized during the 1960s. As such, accessing workers in this industry is increasingly difficult, and organizing them more so: the decentralized nature of companies and the strict requirements of the labourers to reach targets without overtime pay prevents these women from having time to meet with the unions outside of the factory.²⁷

¹⁷ RoyChowdhury, “Labour,” 2251.

¹⁸ RoyChowdhury, “Labour,” 2251.

¹⁹ Jenkins, “Organizing,” 625.

²⁰ Jenkins, “Organizing,” 625.

²¹ C.S. Venkata Ratnam and Harish C. Jain, “Women in trade unions in India,” *International Journal of Manpower*; *Bradford* 23, no. 3 (2002): 280.

²² Jenkins, “Organizing,” 631.

²³ Jenkins, “Organizing,” 631.

²⁴ Jenkins, “Organizing,” 632.

²⁵ Jenkins, “Organizing,” 633.

²⁶ Jenkins, “Organizing,” 634.

²⁷ RoyChowdhury, “Labour,” 2251.

In order to circumvent this issue, GATWU organizers decided to "reach out to workers in their homes."²⁸ From there, they adopted various methods of contact with the workers that were unorthodox but significantly more successful. By forming the union in a non-traditional way, the early GATWU leaders were able to deliberately avoid many barriers to the creation of a successful union.²⁹ By 2004, the *Garment Mahila Karmikara Munnade* became a formal women's rights movement with 2300 members.³⁰ GATWU now focuses on the "enforcement of statutory rights and uses corporate codes of practice as leverage in the struggle for improvements to working conditions."³¹

Since its inception, GATWU has become more orthodox in its approach to advocacy, choosing to disassociate from partner NGOs in favour of a more traditional model. However, the Garment Labour Union (GLU), a similar organization founded in 2012, has maintained the Munnade model and typified the sentiments of scholars like Sodhi and Rao.

Findings

Funding and Union Recruitment Strategies

GLU is unique in its funding scheme in that it accepts financial partnerships with non-government organizations (NGOs) and takes in membership fees to fund service provision. The mandatory membership fee amounts to 60INR/annum. These funds are drawn from all members, who number over 3,000. Additionally, due to the fact that GLU is a union, and thus cannot be directly funded, additional funds are drawn through non-governmental organizations, including Cividep and others. These funds are then used by Munnade Social Organization as a nonprofit organization in tandem with GLU to finance the various services available to the members of the union, including legal counselling and low-cost child-care.

Factory employees are typically identified as "floating populations," who often have no means of contact and are limited in time spent outside of work due to domestic duties. In order to overcome structural and sociological barriers to union organization, GLU uses a variety of methods to communicate with members and recruit new ones. Employees within the factories who are members of GLU form committees that meet once per month within factories during breaks to discuss the benefits of GLU, worker's rights, and opportunities available to factory labourers to improve their lives. The committees, which are comprised of approximately 10-15 people, are currently operating in six factories across Bangalore. This strategy creates a network within the factories of women interested in and learning about GLU and its activities. It also allows factory labourers to have such conversations without interrupting either their employment or domestic responsibilities.

GLU also advocates on labour rights issues to the Karnataka state government and other key stakeholders, including brands. Advocacy issues include wages and overtime policies. If a worker reports a labour rights issue to GLU, the standard protocol the union follows is to first contact factory management directly. If this proves unsuccessful to solving the issue, GLU members approach the Karnataka State Labour Department. In cases where the union has been unable to make progress on the issue, they will contact brands through the Clean Clothes Campaign. GLU also conducts public meetings, leadership meetings, and collective bargaining groups to push the needle on specific issues.

²⁸ Jenkins, "Organizing," 634.

²⁹ Jenkins, "Organizing," 634.

³⁰ Jenkins, "Organizing," 635.

³¹ Jenkins, "Organizing," 640.

Unconventional Union Services

Interviewees identified a number of services offered by the Garment Labour Union in partnership with Munnade Social Organization that are different than traditional union approaches. Garment Labour Union operates self-help groups for garment workers, which have a microfinance component and offer other services. Self-help groups are organized at GLU's office in Peenya and provide a space where women can collectively save in order to take out loans. Self-help groups also offer women training to understand the scholarships and facilities offered by the Welfare Boards in Karnataka. Interviewees noted that self-help groups fill a gap in knowledge; management does not offer information about scholarships and services because workers tend to be easier to control when they are vulnerable. GLU is currently operating twenty self-help groups, each with approximately 15-20 people.

Recognizing that many garment workers are vulnerable to domestic violence at home, GLU also offers domestic counselling for workers. Three staff members at GLU took a year-long course to become qualified in peer counselling for workers. Additionally, a professional counsellor travels to GLU offices once per month for cases that exceed the abilities of peer counsellors. The union also refers very serious cases to a hospital psychologist in Bangalore. This referral system was particularly significant in the case of one GLU member, who was sexually harassed by a male superior in her factory. When she refused his marriage advances, she was beaten and raped in two separate instances. The young woman, who is now traumatized and afraid of working under male managers, was referred to a hospital psychologist by GLU to receive mental healthcare.

GLU understands the day-to-day situation of workers, in which women are often the primary breadwinners of their households and do not arrive home in the evening until 8:00PM or later, forcing their children to sit outside on the stoop because the door is locked after their daycare is closed. Interviewees noted that many women bear the brunt of family responsibilities, as addiction and domestic abuse are common among men in communities. After attempting unsuccessfully to advocate for factory-operated daycares that could accommodate workers' typically long hours, GLU developed their own crèche in partnership with Samwada. The crèche, which is located conveniently in a Peenya neighbourhood where many garment workers reside, teaches children basic lessons in literacy and language and offers three meals per day. There is a cost associated with the daycare, but it is partially subsidized by union dues. Approximately 25 girls and boys are currently attending the program. Most garment workers are not educated and Munnade's work acknowledges that one way to elevate the impoverished families of labourers is by providing childcare and education to their children.

NGO Partnerships

The Garment Labour Union is partnered with third-party NGOs that provide support to the union executive and its members. These include: Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), Cividep India, Foundation for Educational Innovations in Asia (FEDINA), FEMNET eV, Munnade, Samvada, Amnesty International, Alternative Legal Forum, and Women's World Day of Prayer (WWDP). NGOs support GLU in different capacities and functionalities. Primarily, Cividep India, Alternative Legal Forum, Munnade, and Samvada are involved in the ongoing activities of the union.

Formal partnership with NGOs is unique to GLU in Bangalore's garment union ecosystem. GATWU, the first garment labour union in Bangalore and GLU's closest competitor, does not collaborate with NGOs financially as it seeks to maintain independence. GATWU instead collaborates with social movements on a non-financial basis, including the sex workers movement and the transgender movement. However, this research showed that in order to

compensate for any potential funding gaps, GATWU must maintain a higher membership fee at 120INR/annum.

The benefits of the involvement of NGOs with Munnade and GLU are threefold. Firstly, while ideally the union would be financially independent, neither the women on the executive committee nor those who participate in the union as members are capable of funding the holistic services offered. These are only possible with the aid of third-party organizations, which, practically speaking, is universally necessary for unions in some capacity. Additionally, these NGOs are able to provide other kinds of support, such as professional research and education for workers within the union, which helps to legitimize their cause and identify opportunities for growth and increased success. While Cividep India is responsible for monitoring the activities of the union, empowering workers and educating them on labour rights, human rights, and environmental standards, Samvada educates members of GLU's executive in psychological counselling techniques as well as the teachers who operate the creche. Other NGOs help in the organization of peaceful protests, governmental advocacy and helping women to live with dignity given the informal and oppressive nature of their work.

Thirdly, NGO partnerships enforce accountability and transparency within the union because these third-parties are essentially stakeholders in the success and failures of the union. As such, they are privy to the administrative and financial activities of GLU, and in some cases, take an active role in such proceedings. For example, GLU has an executive committee of approximately 20 members, and holds elections every two years for these positions. The democracy within the union is supervised and monitored by Cividep India to ensure equity and legitimacy, so that the wants and needs of the workers are upheld. Essentially, this system serves to compel the union to maintain ethical standards. Interviewees noted that labour rights challenges are big issues that unions cannot solve alone; building a strong and sustainable union through financial and in-kind partnerships will ensure that the union can continue to provide value to its members.

Women's Representation and Understanding Needs

In a context where workers have heavily constrained schedules as a result of domestic duties, frequently migrate, and are vulnerable to threats from management if they risk organization, unions must provide sufficient incentives to justify membership regardless of barriers and risks. GLU designs services based on a holistic framework, rather than solely designing services based on women's identities as workers. In this way, GLU has designed services that add value to women's lives, including micro-finance groups and subsidized child-care.

As a union founded and led entirely by women, the majority of whom have worked on the factory floor themselves, GLU has a strong understanding of the factors that motivate women to become involved in union organizing. An additional benefit to an entirely women-led union is the ability for union staff to counsel women following sexual harassment or other forms of sexual violence. This is a comparative advantage over GATWU, which operates as a competing union in Bangalore's garment industry, and is primarily led by former factory managers and senior staff. In order to design services around workers' needs, unions must have a strong understanding of the day-to-day lives of workers. In the case of GLU, union founders understand the importance of addressing labour and domestic issues in tandem, as women cannot be at peace at work if they are facing challenges in their personal lives. This holistic approach to worker wellbeing was a recurring theme in interviews with GLU representatives and was the primary motivation for designing services that address the challenges women face in their personal lives, such as their marriages and child-care.

Conclusion

Bangalore's garment industry often finds workers, many of whom are particularly vulnerable because they have migrated from rural areas, subject to sexual violence in the workplace and other forms of labor rights violations. While laws exist to protect workers and safeguard their interests, they are rarely enforced, which highlights the importance of union and non-governmental activities in filling a gap where public policy often does not adequately protect women.

Our research reflects four key findings, which differentiate the Garment Labour Union from traditional union models and emphasize addressing the holistic needs of workers in both their professional and personal lives. Alternative funding and recruitment strategies, unconventional union service offerings, NGO partnership, and a high degree of women's representation in union leadership distinguish GLU from more traditional unions operating in this space. These factors have enabled the union to holistically benefit the lives of its members and the all-women executive continues to exemplify the potential for these members in pursuing their rights. While the GLU case study focuses explicitly on Bangalore garment workers, the innovative strategies employed by the union have the potential to address barriers to organization in other contexts.

Works Cited

- “Economic Growth - United Nations Sustainable Development.” Accessed July 2, 2018.
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/economic-growth/>.
- Ewing, K.D. “The Function of Trade Unions.” *Industrial Law Journal* 34, no. 1 (2005): 1–22.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ilj/34.1.1>.
- Ghosh, Piyali, Nandan Shefali, and Gupta Ashish. “The Changing Roles of Trade Unions in India: A Case Study of National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), Unchahar.” *Asian Academy of Management Journal* 14, no. 1 (January 1, 2009).
- “India: Country Study 2016.” The Netherlands: Fair Wear Foundation, 2016.
- “India: Eliminating Violence against Women at Work.” Sisters for Change, June 28, 2016.
<http://sistersforchange.org.uk/india-eliminating-violence-against-women-at-work/>.
- Jenkins, Jean. “Organizing ‘Spaces of Hope’: Union Formation by Indian Garment Workers.” *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 51, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 623–43.
- Rao, B. Shiva. “The Whitley Commission on Indian Labour.” *New Statesman; London*, September 7, 1929.
- Ratnam, C. S. Venkata, and Harish C. Jain. “Women in Trade Unions in India.” *International Journal of Manpower; Bradford* 23, no. 3 (2002): 277–92.
- RoyChowdhury, Supriya. “Labour Activism and Women in the Unorganised Sector: Garment Export Industry in Bangalore.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40, no. 22/23 (2005): 2250–55.
- Saha, Sudeshna. “Women Employees in Garment Industries- A Case Study Conducted in Selected Garment Industries of Peenya Industrial Area, Bangalore.” *International Journal of Management Research and Business Strategy* 3, no. 3 (July 1, 2014): 128–37.
- Sodhi, J.S. “Trade Unions in India: Changing Role & Perspective.” *Indian Journal of Industrial Relations* 49, no. 2 (2013): 169–84.