WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Training youth to lead reforms in the apparel sector

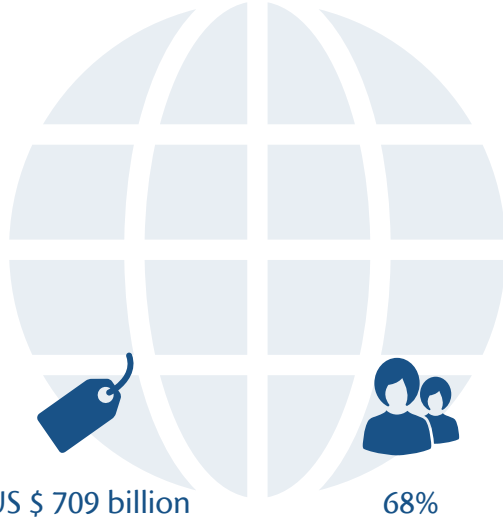
Judy Gearhart, International Labor Rights Forum

International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF)

International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) is a human rights organization that advocates for workers globally. ILRF works with trade unions, faith-based organizations, and community groups to support workers and their families.

ILRF works for a world where workers have the power to speak out and organize to defend and advance their rights and interests; a world where workers have the right to form unions and bargain collectively to secure a safe and dignified life for themselves and their families; and a world where everyone is free from discrimination, forced labor and child labor.

Global Apparel Sector



60 million
Total
Employment

US $ 1,162.8 billion
Total Retail
Industry Value

US $ 709 billion
Total Value
of Exports

68%
Total Women in
the Workforce

Source: ILO and companyandmarkets.com

Challenge

Low skill garment workers are deprived of safe working conditions, fair wages and collective bargaining rights across the world. Yet, policymakers often operate under the assumption that companies will simply move elsewhere if the costs of labor increase.

Strategy

The key to reform in the apparel industry lies in enabling young, first-time workers to stand up for their rights. As the vast majority of apparel sector workers are young women, better collaboration between women's rights organizations and trade unions is an imperative.

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Many countries in the Global South see apparel – a labor-intensive sector that can help drive export-oriented industrialization – as a stepping-stone toward development. In some countries, like Cambodia and Lesotho, the textile and clothing industry employs up to 90 percent of the total number of manufacturing sector workers.[1] The vast majority of garment sector workers are female; for instance, 76 percent[2] of Thai garment workers and 85 percent[3] of Bangladeshi garment workers are women. Cheap, flexible and young female labor forms the backbone of this industry. But the modest economic returns of formal employment in the sector often come at a heavy personal cost to these young women. Now, as governments and apparel industry leaders take a deep look at reforms, in the aftermath of the 2013 Rana Plaza factories collapse, it's an important time to identify strategies that can give a voice to these young workers.[4]

This chapter analyzes the serious challenges faced by young apparel sector workers in the Global South – challenges aside from worker safety that lie outside the media spotlight. It cites evidence based on field experience that starts to answer some of the difficult questions pertaining to the employment of young women in the sector. Are these young women able to build a career and a life from this early employment experience in the apparel sector? How will these jobs, which are the first formal sector employment for many, impact these workers in the future? Does the increased employment of young women enable a substantial change in their role in society?

This chapter substantiates the claim that upward mobility is not the outcome for most young apparel sector workers. It then goes further to outline a strategy for improving working conditions in the apparel industry by training young women to become effective labor organizers, examining a case study from Honduras.

The apparel industry challenge

The apparel industry – particularly the cut, make, and trim portion – requires relatively low skill levels, making it a common point of entry for young workers joining the industrial labor force. The margins in the industry are notoriously slim,[5] however, and policymakers must deal with the reality that companies often move elsewhere when the costs of labor increase. For example, major apparel brands like Crocs and Coach have begun to shift their production from China to countries in South and Southeast Asia, due, they say, to rising labor costs.[6] Wages in China rose 10.7 percent in 2013 and are projected to rise another 11 percent in 2014.[7]

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As a result of this phenomenon, many governments seek to attract producers and catalyze the growth of their apparel sectors by minimizing labor regulations to keep labor costs low. When workers' rights organizations seek wage increases for apparel sector workers or insist on better regulation, government and industry representatives argue against these demands on the grounds that labor will become more costly than in neighboring countries and the centers of production will shift.[8]

The result is wage stagnation in the industry. In a study of apparel sector wages in 15 of the top 21 apparel exporters to the United States, the Workers' Rights Consortium and the JustJobs Network found that real wages in these countries have not kept pace with increases in productivity, and in many cases wages have actually declined in real terms. On average, prevailing straight-time wages[i] in the export-apparel sectors of these countries provided only 36.8 percent of a living wage. Furthermore, in five of the top 10 apparel-exporting countries to the United States — Bangladesh, Mexico, Honduras, Cambodia, and El Salvador — wages for garment workers declined in real terms between 2001 and 2011 by an average of 14.6 percent. The gap between apparel sector wages and the living wage increased.[9]

Over the last decade, Bangladesh's export apparel industry has been the fastest growing in the world, and the country now has the second largest apparel export industry after China. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factories collapse that killed more than 1,100 Bangladeshi apparel workers in April 2013, a diverse range of stakeholders – civil society, policymakers, consumers, and the large corporations that depend on Bangladeshi workers – have sought to find solutions for improving working conditions in garment factories.

[i] *Defined as regular wages, not including overtime hours.*

The most noteworthy effort thus far is the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety – a legally binding agreement negotiated by Bangladeshi unions, Global Union Federations, and international workers' rights groups that requires signatory companies to comply with independent safety inspections of the garment factories in their supply chains. Yet despite the progress the Accord represents, a number of concerns besides worker safety also warrant attention.

In order to make ends meet, most apparel workers agree to work excessive amounts of overtime, which can lead to the type of exhaustion and malnourishment behind the widespread fainting of Cambodian garment workers earlier this year.[10] The International Labour Organization's Better Work program found that compliance levels in Cambodian factories are below 50 percent on several regulations that are relevant to these fainting episodes, including those pertaining to long overtime hours and heat levels in factories. As of 2013, in 97 percent of factories, overtime is not exceptional, and in 86 percent of factories it is not limited to less than two hours per day.[11]

Beyond the worsening wage conditions, the young female workforce in the garment sector faces another chronic issue: sexual harassment in the workplace. In a conference convened by the International Labor Rights Forum in April 2014, four women trade union leaders – from Bangladesh, Honduras, and Cambodia – spoke about their experiences with sexual and physical abuse at work. These women, who all began working in the apparel industry between the ages of 13 and 17, had each suffered and/or witnessed sexual harassment and corporal punishment at work.

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Better Work reports a high incidence of sexual harassment in the countries where it works. In Indonesia, 82 percent of garment sector workers report that sexual harassment is an issue in the factory where they work. In Jordan and Haiti, the figure is 34 and 38 percent, respectively.[12]

The fact that many of the young women working in the garment industry are formal sector employees should provide them with better protections. Indeed, several major apparel-exporting countries where violations are still common – including Cambodia, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, and Philippines – have ratified all eight of the International Labour Organization's core conventions.[13] But enforcement of these laws remains weak and young women in the sector

are subject to low wages and exploitation. As such, many have sought to organize themselves into unions. The denial of collective bargaining rights among factory owners and in some cases governments is a major challenge confronting these young women.

Worker organizing is often curtailed through discrimination against trade unionists or direct violence against organizers. In January 2014, for instance, Cambodian workers met with violent crackdowns when they protested for better wages; five were killed and 23 arrested.[14] In Bangladesh, under the duress of significant trade pressure,[15] the government began registering local trade unions, but organizers were attacked as they sought to move towards collective bargaining.[16] In Honduras, workers are routinely discriminated against for organizing and union leaders face tremendous pressures when they seek to engage in collective bargaining.[17]

A strategy to change the industry through young women's leadership

There is growing recognition among civil society organizations that enabling young, first-time formal sector workers[ii] to stand up for their rights is critical to reforming the poor wages, unsafe working conditions and exploitation that occurs in the sector. Efforts to push governments to recognize freedom of association and collective bargaining, better enforce labor regulations, and protect the rights of workers must be complemented by the community-based work of empowering young women to organize themselves.

Responding to this imperative requires collaboration between women's rights organizations and trade unions. Women's rights groups help place the infractions against individuals in a broader social and economic context and are better placed to advocate for equal treatment, motivate women's participation, and help ensure that women are protected from violence. Trade unions, while facilitating these causes, also empower women by bringing them together to take collective action.

Examples of this hybrid model already exist. In Bangladesh, for example, the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity and Karmojibi Nari are two NGOs that have established community-based centers for women's rights and empowerment

[ii] *Many apparel industry workers, especially young women, have already been working in the informal economy, but for most the apparel industry is their first formal sector employment experience.*

training and maintain a collaborative working relationship with trade unions and organizers.

The model has been operating in Latin America since the 1980s. Women lawyers and rights advocates have been working through community-based organizations to provide basic legal training to women with a primary education. As these initiatives have joined with union organizing programs, the increase in women's leadership has been tangible. Two NGOs helped pioneer this approach: *Servicio, Desarrollo y Paz* (SEDEPAC) in Mexico and *Centro de Derechos de la Mujer* (CDM) in Honduras.[iii] The focus of these programs has helped women to organize and build networks of women human rights defenders and to file basic court cases – ranging from domestic violence, rape, and divorce to workplace sexual harassment and discrimination cases.

The strategies employed by these organizations contain several common elements, which are discussed briefly here.

"See, Analyze, Act"

There are three phases to the training, where participants look at their experiences with a shared problem, analyze what they can do about it, and decide what actions to take. This road-tested popular education formula creates the fundamental building blocks for the course. As a result, the training goes far beyond awareness raising or technical skill building. The 'see' component is meant to build on (not just build up) the knowledge of the course participants. It is critical that the women first realize their own expertise, so rather than start with lectures, the trainers facilitate a series of discussions about life experiences. Once participants understand the powerful knowledge of their experiences, the group then moves on to analyze the problem and the legal recourse available to them. Trainers help participants put the law into their own language and understand how they can use it. From that moment, the discussions of how to act happen with almost no prompting.

Connection to broader social justice movement

The trainers in these programs tend to be active participants in the women's movement in their respective countries. The fact that the organizations that provide the course are also engaged in other social justice movements, especially the women's movement, is an important asset. This allows the trainers to root the training in broader support networks. In Honduras, for example, CDM adapted their course after the coup in 2009 so that they could include modules on citizenship and political participation.[18]

Grounding in law and legal processes

The core technical modules of the training focus on relevant laws and legal processes. Legal grounding is critical to the empowerment of the women participating because it emphasizes

[iii] *The author worked for SEDEPAC from 1991 to 1993 and provided technical assistance to some of the women's human rights defenders (*defensoras populares*) who graduated from the CDM program in 1996/97.*

women's entitlements and the duty of the state to ensure those. Importantly, the training goes beyond a "know your rights" class. It focuses on how participants can organize and support each other in using the legal mechanisms available to them. Because these courses focus on strategies for claiming rights, they avoid some of the shortcomings often associated with 'life skills' training or programs to help women organize their lives better. Rather than convey a message that women should make more with what they have, the course galvanizes participants to demand the justice to which they are entitled.

This training model outlined here has enabled groups of trained defenders in both Mexico and Honduras to organize their own grassroots group of defenders. These grassroots coalitions of women human rights defenders have become well known within their communities, and women continue to call on them to intervene and process cases.

In Honduras, CDM has been running the human rights defenders course for more than 20 years and the women who have come out of those trainings have become leaders and organizers throughout the social justice movements of the country. The course is generally offered in the northern industrial region of the country, where *maquiladoras* – free trade zones – and banana plantations are prevalent.

In the last five years alone, CDM has trained upwards of 450 women human rights defenders. The majority of the defenders, approximately 60 percent, work in the *maquiladoras*. Many of these young women initially come into the course through their contact with the unions, and as a result the unions now have approximately 150 of the defenders mainstreamed throughout their network.[19]

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CDM's Program Coordinator, Yadira Minero, is careful not to claim credit for what many would consider the impressive impact of their program. She insists that what the women's rights popular defenders have done after completing the course is all to the credit of the women leaders themselves. Nevertheless, the CDM-trained women human rights defenders have a strong presence and influence within their communities and their workplaces.

Evangelina Argueta, the Coordinator of the *Maquiladora* Organizing Project at the *Central General de Trabajadores* (CGT), or Honduran Confederation of Labor, says the women who have completed CDM's defenders training have all become leaders in their trade union.[20] They are working as officers within their union or as organizers in other factories. The training has helped these women document and file sexual harassment and discrimination cases. They are also better equipped to stand up for their peers, raise concerns directly with management, and identify issues that must be addressed by the union. Of the seven CGT trade unions that are registered in the Honduran *maquilas*, four of the presidents are women, and all four of these women are graduates of CDM's defenders training.

Conclusion

The collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh shone a spotlight on worker safety violations in the labor-intensive apparel sector. But the fact that a majority of those working in the factories, and in the apparel sector worldwide, are young women that also suffer wage discrimination, sexual harassment and other forms of exploitation is not adequately addressed. The benefits of working in the formal sector largely elude these young women.

If young women workers are to fully benefit from entering the formal sector, they require the skills necessary to organize themselves, tap support networks, and bargain for higher wages and better working conditions. While the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety is a significant advance beyond past initiatives that have been voluntary and confidential, more needs to be done in order to address the chronic challenges inherent in the industry.

Women's rights advocates and trade unions should take advantage of this window of opportunity – while the apparel sector is under heightened scrutiny – to build young women's leadership in the workplace. Enabling young women and girls to not only find formal sector jobs, but also take on a proactive role in organizing and defending their rights at work, can transform the pervasive practices in the apparel industry and generate better employment outcomes for its millions of workers.

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