MADE IN INDIA: CONTESTATION AND POWER DYNAMICS IN EXPORT-ORIENTED
GARMENT PRODUCTION IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

By

Salil R. Sapre

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ABSTRACT

Working conditions in the global garment industry have been a subject of intense debate and criticism in scholarly circles as well as in the mainstream media. Some have argued that garment production provides much-needed employment opportunities while others have posited that these jobs result in social downgrading. Yet, much still remains unknown about power dynamics, institutions, and actors at the base of global garment supply chains. Interestingly, these local-level networks of social relationships and actors are manifested in distinctive ways across socially contentious and spatially bound geographical settings referred to as local labor control regimes. These interlinkages are further complicated by a diverse workforce in which social control by employers and workers' influence over the local labor control regime become functions of workers' socioeconomic contexts (i.e., positionality). Nonetheless, most analyses of labor control regimes are rather limited in scope in primarily accounting for the role of firm/employer practices in shaping local labor control regimes, while relatively overlooking that of labor agency. Moreover, the garment workforce has often been perceived as either feminized or migrant at a time, resulting in intersectional analyses of mutually interacting social identities – such as gender *and* internal migration status – enjoying scant scholarly attention at best. Focusing on internal migrant workers in an export-oriented garment industrial setting in southern India, this dissertation makes important contributions while pushing the frontiers of industrial relations scholarship, particularly within the context of global supply chains, in several ways. First, it adopts an intersectional approach towards labor-capital contention and highlights how worker subordination is reproduced in this relationship as it relates to workers' intersectional social identities, specifically internal migration status and gender. Put differently, it shows that employers leverage different social identities of workers in ways that reproduce workforce segmentation at the globalized garment workplace thereby hindering labor contestation. Second, it demonstrates how internal migrant women exercise agency – including non-

collective and non-confrontational – and influence the local labor control regime. Third, it presents one of the first studies to document internal migrant worker organizing extensively. In doing so, it addresses a range of migrant vulnerabilities and builds on existing work, which has highlighted union efforts for organizing locally based workers and international migrants but not internal migrants as such. Fourth, it underscores a relatively underresearched *process* of grassroots union organizing of internal migrants in an emerging context and complements the evolving scholarship in this domain. Fifth, it brings to light the challenges emanating from within unions that workers with gendered *and* migrant identities may face toward effective union participation. These impediments exacerbate preexisting low prospects for effective mobilization and undermine labor representation at the garment workplace. From a practical standpoint, this dissertation also highlights unique power relationships between workers – particularly internal migrant workers – and organizations such as employers and unions at the local level in global supply chains. It uncovers critical implications for policy formulation pertaining to labor rights targeted at highly vulnerable workers; unpacks strategies for organizing a hitherto underacknowledged worker category of internal migrants; and brings forth equity issues within the labor movement so important for active union participation and mobilization. In summary, this work is an essential consolidated complement to the existing yet rather partial grassroots analyses of labor-capital power relationships in globalized industrial contexts.

This dissertation is dedicated to Gajanan Maharaj and my family.
Thank you for being there for me.

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INTRODUCTION

As globalization scholars customarily like to say, most of us consume the products of globalization on a regular basis (Mezzadri, 2017). From the bananas and strawberries in the neighborhood grocery store, to the ubiquitous iPhones, and further to expensive luxury automobiles, the production and consumption of these diverse goods are made possible by complex logistical networks spanning the globe. Interestingly, the 'borderless world' metaphor has become quite popular for describing globalization (for example, see Friedman, 2005). According to this notion, it is possible for workers in distant lands to avail of economic opportunities anywhere in the world by simply migrating towards them. However, complexities produced by national institutions, geographical fragmentation of the labor market, a lack of accountability in the fissured workplace, and social prejudices against certain religious and ethnic groups have led to impediments to migration, deskilling, and outright discrimination not only when accessing the job market but also at the workplace (see Holgate, 2005; MacKenzie & Forde, 2009; Milkman, 2011; Rodriguez & Mearns, 2012; Tapia & Alberti, 2019; Weil, 2014).

Global supply chains (GSCs) for readymade garments (the term 'apparel' is also used interchangeably with garments) have been integral constituents of these transnational production relationships. Evidently, labels attached to readymade products sold in global apparel brand outlets can reveal the distant corners of the world from which garments arrive for consumption at the roadside mall. As documented widely in the literature, global garment production thrives on a young, docile, and mostly feminized workforce and is characterized by low-road employment practices (Jenkins, 2013; Jenkins & Blyton, 2017; Kabeer, 2004; Ruwanpura, 2011). In fact, suppliers in these buyer-driven supply chains derive competitive advantage through the employment of a low-wage and tractable workforce subjected to the vagaries of a volatile product market predicated on the latest 'fast fashion' trends (Anner, 2019; Mezzadri, 2017). With full support from national and

supranational institutions garment supply chains have indeed proliferated throughout the globe in search of 'cheaper' pastures (Hale & Burns, 2005; Mezzadri, 2010).

What makes this streamlined process possible, however, are the inter-firm linkages between buyers/retailers and supplier firms. While there has been an extensive scholarly focus on power relationships between firms and various forms thereof (Frederick & Gereffi, 2011; Gereffi, 2014; Gereffi, Humphrey, & Sturgeon, 2005; Lakhani, Kuruvilla, & Avgar, 2013; Robinson & Rainbird, 2013), more in-depth research is warranted on the micro-level dynamics of how firms regulate labor and the ways in which labor agency is exercised in socially contentious and spatially bound settings referred to as local labor control regimes – loosely defined as an intermeshing web of social relationships and power struggles between various local actors across time-space (see Jonas, 1996; Neethi, 2012; Peck, 1992; and Essay 1 in this compendium for a theoretical exposition of the concept). Doing so is critical because social relationships between labor and capital may vary across diverse contexts.

These social relationships, however, are further complicated as workers from multiple demographic backgrounds now comprise the workforce. As some scholars have noted, the contemporary workforce in these contexts may not always originate in and around industrial pockets but could also be highly diverse due to national economic migration patterns (Kuzhiparambil, 2020). 'Internal migrants' (also called long-distance, interstate, or within-country migrants) have, indeed, come to constitute an increasing share of the workforce due to both push and pull factors. For instance, they may be nudged to voluntarily migrate from the hinterland to urban or peri-urban production clusters due to a persistent dearth of sustainable employment opportunities in rural areas, or could be actively recruited by employers to meet the need for an ever-compliant workforce (see Ngai & Smith, 2007; Siu, 2017).

Yet, many aspects of local labor control regimes remain largely underexplored. For example, most studies in this domain have focused on firm/employer practices while somewhat deemphasizing the role of worker agency in shaping labor regimes (for exceptions, see Anner, 2015; Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Mezzadri, 2017). Furthermore, inasmuch as this literature has separately acknowledged workforce feminization and migrant marginalization in the garment industry (Anner, 2019; Ngai & Smith, 2007), it has mostly overlooked the mechanisms through which worker control by employers is predicated upon other social identities of workers *intersecting* with gender. For example, the proposition that worker control depends upon as well as reproduces workforce segmentation based on migrant workers' intersecting social identities – women *and* internal migrants – has remained relatively disregarded in the labor control regime scholarship. Analyzing workers' social identities from an intersectional perspective therefore gives us a critical understanding of the diversity of worker subjectivities as well as of modes of employer control within local labor regimes. Arguably, this also has implications for effective labor contestation given that workforce segmentation impedes collectivism.

On similar lines, there is a serious lack of comprehensive research on how unions in host regions organize internal migrant workers. Inasmuch as some parallels – linked to language barrier or lack of local social support networks – may be drawn between how international and internal migrants experience the host environment, important differences linked to threats of deportation or undocumented status set international migrants apart from their internal counterparts (Milkman, 2011). Given that challenges to unionization and organizing strategies are likely to be functions of worker positionality, differences in the situatedness of international and internal migrants would likely result in somewhat distinct union approaches toward each group. For example, unions catering to international migrants are likely to undertake transnational activism, interact with the state over migrant rights or citizenship issues, organize anti-xenophobia campaigns, or engage in community

organizing (Milkman, 2011; Taran and Demaret, 2006). However, little is known about the impediments to organizing internal migrants and the strategies unions have formulated to surmount the barriers they face. This is especially relevant in new settings, such as manufacturing hubs within global supply chains, where tens of thousands of migrant workers seek jobs and where grassroots unions play a key role in organizing workers.

Additionally, the great deal of spotlight focusing on the antagonistic nature of the labor-management relationship in the garment industry has translated into insufficient attention being paid to intra-union power dynamics encountered by internal migrant workers in this context. Understanding these intra-union power dynamics is important given that (i) internal barriers to organization and mobilization directly impinge upon effective trade union representation and associational power vis-à-vis exploitative employers; and (ii) these internal challenges are directly linked to the type and background of the workforce reproduced (i.e. recruited) in the industry. Thus, labor representation may be weakened when workers with specific social identities (e.g. migrant women) are disadvantaged within the labor movement in the industry.

The present state of the labor regime literature thus demonstrates a need for adding further nuance to the somewhat blinkered formulation of labor control regimes and a specific focus on internal migrant workers. To that effect, the research presented here centers on internal migrant workers in an export-oriented garment industrial pocket in India, and interrogates the enablers and hindrances to their agency. Broadly, this dissertation subscribes to the idea that workers are active agents in building local labor control regimes and their success or failure to exercise voice shapes how the localized intermeshing web of social relationships and power struggles between various actors described earlier pans out.

It raises the following important questions: (i) First, how do intersecting social identities of internal migrant women workers influence their experiences of subordination in an Indian export-oriented

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garment industrial context? (ii) How do these workers exercise agency? (iii) What is the impact of their agency on local employment relations in the industry? (iv) What are the challenges related to organizing migrant workers in such settings? (v) How do grassroots unions organize internal migrant workers in these contexts despite overwhelming odds? And (vi) What are the internal union mechanisms relating to workers' social identity through which union participation is undermined in such contexts?

This dissertation answers these critical questions by making the following important contributions to industrial relations scholarship. First, it adopts an intersectional approach towards labor-capital contention and highlights how worker subordination is reproduced in this relationship as it relates to workers' intersectional social identities, specifically internal migration status and gender. Put differently, it shows that employers leverage different social identities of workers in ways that reproduce workforce segmentation at the globalized garment workplace thereby hindering labor contestation. Second, it demonstrates how internal migrant women exercise agency – including non-collective and non-confrontational – and influence the local labor control regime. Third, it presents one of the first studies to document internal migrant worker organizing extensively. In doing so, it addresses a range of migrant vulnerabilities and thereby builds on existing work, which highlights union efforts for organizing locally based workers and international migrants but not internal migrants per se. Fourth, it underscores a relatively underresearched *process* of grassroots union organizing of internal migrants in an emerging context and complements the evolving scholarship in this domain. Fifth, it brings to light the challenges emanating from within unions that workers with gendered and migrant identities may face toward effective union participation. These impediments exacerbate the existing low prospects for effective mobilization and undermine labor representation at the garment workplace.

In the next section, I articulate the transnational context of garment production and its impact on local labor relations in the industry. It shines light on the consolidated nature of buyer-driven global supply chains and its effect on local labor control practices, as well as state support for garment production in India. Importantly, it helps situate this work in a context characterized by a top-heavy power dynamic between globally structured capital and localized labor. The introduction concludes with a section discussing the structure of this document along with an overview of the essays.

Global Garment Production: Transnational Context and the Impact on Local Labor Relations

A common pattern observed in the historical trajectory of global garment production is the footloose nature of the industry, which makes it possible for garment production to restructure across space. Research has suggested that the formulation and unraveling of the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) in the garment industry context provided a bedrock upon which garment manufacturing is spread globally today (Quan, 2008). The process began in the 1960s when domestic apparel manufacturers in developed countries faced stiff competition due to low-cost imports from Asian countries - namely Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. When the MFA, negotiated in 1974, imposed quotas on exporting countries on imports into the West, these Asian countries spread out production internationally in order to outwit national quota limits. As a result, a bulk of their production was transferred into Southeast Asian economies in a process known as the 'second geographical shift' (Crinis, 2002; Mezzadri, 2017: 22). A wider process of geographical expansion of the industry soon followed this phase. Eventually, it became difficult to sustain the protectionist policies of Western countries in the face of the free-trade agenda propagated by the World Trade Organization. As a result, the MFA was phased out in 2005. In exchange, industrialized countries gained access to markets in exporting countries (Hale & Burns, 2005). These developments worked well for exporting countries as their governments also viewed the garment industry as a

'development lynchpin' and opened up their economies for foreign direct investment (Crinis, 2002; Hurley & Miller, 2005).

As the number of exporting countries grew, a crisis of overcapacity and competition pushed many Western retailers into bankruptcy. Merchandizers in the Global North have since then consolidated as a result of increased financialization aided by the state in developed economies.

Connecting the Global with the Local

While the section above highlighted the context of lead firm (also called 'retailers' or 'global buyers') consolidation, scholars have also commented on how lead firm practices at the global level have impacted labor control at the grassroots. As indicated earlier, the 'amalgamation' of Western lead firms has resulted in an unequal power dynamic such that supplier firms in the Global South play second fiddle and increasingly comply with the diktats of lead firms. Evidently, a bulk of the transnational economic relationships between Western retailers and suppliers/manufacturers in the Global South are based on limited-term contracts, thereby unencumbering capital from relocating from one country to another easily (Mezzadri, 2010). This forces suppliers to comply with production targets or face loss of contracts.

Delving deeper into these phenomena, research has uncovered the mechanisms through which retailers impact supplier firms, and by extension, local labor control. For instance, lead firms often engage in predatory purchasing practices that create an 'employment relations squeeze' in labor-intensive industries such as garments manufacturing (Anner, 2019). The squeeze leads to maximum value capture at the lead firm level while leaving a pittance to be paid to individuals (particularly workers) engaged in the supply chain upstream. The ensuing economic precarity resulting from the purchasing practices of lead firms is offloaded onto workers.

The impact of the unequal power dynamic between retailers and suppliers is exacerbated by stiff competition among suppliers; this further enables lead firms to engage in aggressive price

negotiations (Mezzadri, 2010). This pushes wages down as suppliers compete on cost (Anner, 2019). Likewise, short lead times in fulfilling orders as well as unstable order volumes create unpredictable work schedules for workers. These factors cause a deterioration in working conditions including but not limited to excessive overtime, wage theft, and informal work arrangements. Additionally, as suppliers face intense pressure to cut costs, they also adopt more stringent labor control measures. These comprise worker surveillance and antiunionism both of which may be achieved through intimidation and worker abuse.

To mitigate these practices, however, scholars have highlighted three types of regulations in GSCs (Barrientos, 2020). They are (i) private regulations comprising codes of conduct formulated by private firms; (ii) public regulations including national and/or transnational laws governing trade and labor standards, and (iii) social regulations involving legally enforceable contracts made possible through collective voice by unions or labor advocacy groups to prevent worker exploitation and possibility encourage collective bargaining (e.g., the Bangladesh Accord and Dindigul Agreement). These approaches can either be implemented separately or simultaneously. Research has suggested that these forms of regulation are most effective when applied in tandem with each other (ibid.). An overview of these elements and their impact on local labor control below.

Private Regulation – Codes of Conduct

Codes of conduct are formal documents developed by lead firms to regulate employment practices in supplier firms. From a moral standpoint, the retailer-supplier economic relationship is contingent upon the adherence of the latter to these codes. Essentially, these codes are the bridge between ethical commitments and actual practices of supplier firms (Jayasinghe & Cao, 2024). However, the effectiveness of codes of conduct is moot. For instance, scholars have observed a persistent 'decoupling' between these regulations and actual employment practices particularly when retailers are the only entity responsible for ensuring implementation. This disconnect is driven by predatory

employment practices of global buyers, limited resources of stakeholder organizations responsible for overseeing standards implementation, weak enforcement mechanisms, and conflicting priorities of lead firms and suppliers (Anner, 2019; Mezzadri, 2010).

That said, some scholars have emphasized that codes of conduct could be an effective mechanism when formulation and enforcement are embedded in retailers' core business strategy such that a ripple effect is created through aligning procurement practices, supplier selection criteria, and performance metrics with the degree of labor compliance (Jayansinghe & Cao, 2024). Others have pointed out that coordination between NGOs and unions can help expand the ambit of codes of conduct beyond suppliers to contractors and even homeworkers. Codes of conduct can also be effective if leveraged by unions in contract negotiations (Bartley & Egels-Zandén, 2016; Egels-Zandén & Hyllman, 2006). These dynamics underscore how private regulation in the form of corporate social responsibility initiatives at the global level can influence local-level processes.

Public Regulation – National and Transnational

As far as public regulation at the national level goes, laws governing minimum wage, working time, occupational safety, etc. comprise the framework for upholding workers' rights. However, scholars have overwhelmingly suggested that the most compelling reason why exploitation persists is the lack of enforcement of labor regulation as the state in supplying countries is economically motivated to minimize implementation for attracting foreign direct investment and maintaining cost competitiveness (Bair et al, 2020; Brudney, 2023; Mezzadri, 2010). For example, state policies in supplying countries have actively encouraged the formation of special economic zones (SEZs) where labor laws are lax and unionization is forbidden (Hammer, 2010; Kelly, 2001). This overall tilt in favor of global garment buyers has preserved what Burawoy (1983) has called 'hegemonic despotism' in garment factories of the Global South. As a result, firm profitability has become the primary consideration much at the expense of labor welfare, fear of job loss for the individual

worker has been replaced by threats of collective job loss as a result of capital flight, and the state has created conditions – such as SEZs, tax breaks, anti-labor regulations, etc. – conducive for capital to minimize the opportunity cost of doing business elsewhere.

Research on the effectiveness of transnational labor regulation in protecting workers' rights has also been conducted. Studies have, however, indicated mixed results. For example, ILO's Better Work Program has been noted to have improved labor standards compliance particularly when aided by the availability of collective voice mechanisms at the workplace (Pike, 2020). At the same time, others have pointed out challenges in the implementation of transnational regulation arising from varying legal systems across the globe and logistical difficulties in monitoring compliance. They have also noted skepticism about translational regulation given their extraterritorial reach and the role of industrialized countries in formulating these laws where an inordinate proportion of value generated in global supply chains is captured (Marzano, 2021). Essentially, it has been acknowledged that transnational labor regulation shows promise in protecting workers' rights globally but its effectiveness remains a complex and contentious issue, necessitating further refinement of implementation strategies.

Social Regulation – Global Framework Agreements and Transnational Labor Advocacy Groups

Aside from private and public regulation, scholars have also highlighted the importance of social regulation in impacting local labor control. Social regulation is a mechanism in which labor plays an active role alongside management in determining the rules governing the workplace (Barrientos, 2020). A manifestation of labor-management interaction at the global level is global framework agreements (GFAs). These agreements are negotiated between lead firms and global union federations, and aim, at least in spirit, to regulate labor relations across the retailer's supply chain regardless of whether the retailer's economic relationship with a supplier is direct or indirect.

However, this form of regulation also grapples with challenges. For instance, coverage across GFAs varies significantly. Most commonly, only direct subsidiaries or tier-one suppliers are effectively covered while workers employed with higher-order suppliers are excluded from labor protection (Sydow et al., 2014). Moreover, scholars have also argued that GFAs are rendered somewhat ineffective when global union federations adopt a cooperative approach toward management based on dialogue and mutual understanding and/or when local realities are unaccounted for in negotiations (Fichter & McCallum, 2015). There is thus a widespread consensus that the effectiveness of GFAs at the local level is likely to suffer until more comprehensive monitoring mechanisms covering the full supply chain are developed, a more radical/confrontational approach to negotiations is adopted, and local contexts are accounted for (Fichter & McCallum, 2015; Sydow et al., 2014).

Non-institutional actors such as transnational labor support groups including Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) and Labour Behind the Label have also significantly impacted local labor control in the global garment industry through their advocacy efforts and direct actions (The Borgen Project, 2018). These organizations have worked, primarily through naming and shaming of global brands, to improve working conditions, ensured fair wages, and promoted safer environments for garment workers worldwide. Their campaigns have led to increased transparency in production processes and have put pressure on companies to adopt codes of conduct and ethical practices (ibid.). For instance, the CCC played a pivotal role in pioneering the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, which has made factories safer for over 2 million workers (Cleanclothes.org, *undated*). Similarly, Labour Behind the Label has been instrumental in advocating for living wages and providing compensation for victims of factory disasters, such as the Rana Plaza collapse (labourbehindthelabel.org, 2020/21). These actions have not only improved immediate working

conditions but have also empowered workers to voice their concerns and demand their rights, thereby influencing local labor relations.

In sum, scholars have identified three primary regulatory approaches to address labor issues in GSCs: private, public, and social regulations. Private regulation, mainly through codes of conduct, faces challenges in implementation and enforcement due to conflicting priorities and weak oversight. Public regulation, encompassing national and transnational laws, often struggles with enforcement at the national level due to economic pressures, while transnational efforts face complexities relating to diverse legal systems and fair distribution of value. Social regulation, including Global Framework Agreements and advocacy by transnational labor groups, involves workers in shaping workplace rules but grapples with limited coverage and effectiveness.

While these impediments seemingly paint a grim picture, research has suggests that these approaches are most impactful when implemented in combination, potentially offering a more comprehensive solution to the complex challenges in GSCs, such as predatory purchasing practices, wage suppression, and poor working conditions. This integrated strategy seeks to balance economic interests with worker protection, potentially fostering more sustainable and equitable labor practices in GSCs.

Garment Production in India

Considering the long tradition of textile production in India and the preexisting linkages with international markets, mercantile relationships of Indian exporters with multinational buyers have been historically robust. Against this backdrop, the withdrawal of the MFA and the active role of the Indian state have boosted readymade apparel exports from India in the last few decades. Even before the period of quota restrictions, however, the garment industry was 'reserved' for employment protection by the state and only small- and medium-scale enterprises were permitted to operate (Mezzadri, 2010: 502). These regulations led suppliers - to whom quotas were allocated - to

set up a number of smaller factories thereby enabling them to redistribute output across small and medium units. Following de-reservation and the termination of the MFA, the industry witnessed a structural consolidation of locally owned supplier firms (Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015) as well as a consolidation of power for a comprehensive quashing of labor resistance.

Scholars have argued that the state has also been and still is a strategic actor in shaping garment production regimes in India. It does so mainly via non-enforcement of labor legislation, deregulation, and an anti-labor tilt (Krishnan et al., 2020; Mezzadri, 2010; Noronha & D'Cruz, 2017). Moreover, India has not yet even ratified ILO conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining (Pratap, 2011). There have also been recent changes in policy. The new Industrial Relations Code 2019 has, for example, mandated that bargaining units ought to comprise at least 75% of the workforce. It also legitimizes government intervention in independent labor arbitration and creates further barriers to strikes (PRS Legislative Research, undated). Furthermore, employers are still not legally obligated to recognize unions at the workplace (Venkat Ratnam & Dhal, 2018). Scholars have also shown the involvement of the state in other aspects linked to garment production and export. The Indian state, for instance, also facilitates innovation in textiles and yarns through setting up research associations as well as encourages firms to form linkages with foreign buyers using the services of Indian consulates abroad (Tewari, 2008). Through its export promotion arm, the Apparel Export Promotion Council (AEPC), the state supports the compliance of labor standards. This oversight, however, is provided so long as it does not adversely affect competitiveness - worker rights, in fact, feature much lower on the compliance agenda (Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015). The state also enters into partnerships with private players to set up training facilities for garment work, socialize skills training, and catalyze the process of labor reproduction. This includes the recruitment and training of rural migrants for garment employment in urban clusters. The promotion of individuality, an enterprising spirit, and the development of the

competitive worker are inherent features of these training programs (Kuzhiparambil, 2020; Nambiar, 2013).

The aforementioned examples highlight the multifaceted nature of state intervention in labor regimes and a general trajectory the Indian garment industry has followed over the last few decades. Broadly, the inclination of the Indian state towards suppliers and the concentration of power with garment manufacturers are apparent in these examples. These accounts also demonstrate how a suitable ecosystem has been created for capital accumulation and exploitation of a workforce in a 'global sweatshop' (Mezzadri, 2017: 19).

In summary, the consolidation of garment retailers in the Global North and state support to garment suppliers in developing economies such as India have provided an enabling environment for spatial restructuring of capital and stringent labor control in the industry. Thus, while the Indian garment industry has significantly grown and integrated into the global market, this has come at the cost of labor rights and protections. The state's facilitation of capital interests over labor welfare underscores the persistent challenges faced by workers in this sector.

Case Study and Overview of Essays

This dissertation contains three essays situated in a garment industrial hub in South India. I chose this industrial cluster because of its uniqueness as compared to other settings (such as Chinese dormitory regimes). Specifically, it stood out in one way from an analytical perspective and in two ways from a practical standpoint.

From an analytical standpoint, this case addressed the lack of analytical attention to migrants' intersectional identity. In essence, it built on extant literature that focused on either gender or migrant identity at a time. From a practical standpoint, first, the peculiarity of this case lay in the language barrier and the ensuing challenges workers within their own country faced in navigating the host region. Particularly, the language barrier was tied to experiences of workplace humiliation and

deception (Essay 1), prospects for union organizing (Essay 2), and the extent of union participation (Essay 3). Second, union organizing of internal migrants was a phenomenon uniquely observed in this case. Other available case studies, whereas, have been analytically confined to examinations of employer action vis-à-vis workers or non-collective or non-confrontational forms of worker agency. In that regard, this case study adds to the repertoire of union organizing of a new worker category. Collectively, the essays build on the foundations of the labor control regime concept and the situatedness of internal migrants therein. While the essays collectively speak to all caveats in the existing literature discussed previously, each essay is an independent research project and engages with a subset of research questions identified earlier. Additionally, each essay employs a distinctive framework as a foundation on which its theoretical and practical arguments are based. It may be noted that the unit of analysis in the first essay is women migrant workers. This shifts to the level of the grassroots union to analyze its approaches for organizing internal migrants. While the unit of analysis remains the union in the third and final essay, the focus changes back to internal migrant women members and their involvement within the union.

The essays are organized as follows. The first essay, 'Going Global but Staying Local: The Mechanics of a Local Labor Control Regime in Export-Oriented Garment Manufacturing in India,' builds on Jonas's (1996) formulation of a local labor control regime (LLCR) and engages with questions (i), (ii), and (iii) identified previously (namely, how do intersecting social identities of internal migrant women workers influence their experiences of subordination in an Indian export-oriented garment industrial context? How do these workers exercise agency? What is the impact of their agency on local employment relations in the industry?). It dives into the complex social relationships that characterize the garment LLCR in southern India. To be precise, it delineates the locally embedded ways in which the workforce is recruited, regulated at the workplace, and spatially controlled. The essay also adopts an intersectionality lens and examines the intersecting subjugations

faced and various manifestations of agency exercised by rural migrant women in the industrial cluster. Importantly, it underscores how these forms of agency co-constitute capitalist relations in the region. In addition to the gendered subordination and agency reproduced in garment work, this essay also demonstrates how migration status is an overlapping form of disenfranchisement replicated at the garment workplace.

The second essay, 'Organizing Internal Migrant Workers in the Indian Garment Industry,' analyzes the practices of a grassroots union for organizing internal migrant workers in the aforementioned setting. It addresses questions (iv) and (v) mentioned earlier (namely, what are the challenges related to organizing migrant workers in such settings? How do grassroots unions organize internal migrant workers in these contexts despite overwhelming odds?). At the outset, this essay examines the unique challenges faced by the union in organizing internal migrant workers. Leveraging the conceptualization of intimate organizing, it then articulates how the union crafted its organizing strategy. The essay, importantly, highlights a relatively overlooked form of migrant vulnerability in the context of union organizing as well as adds to the emerging work on grassroots union organizing in emerging contexts.

The last essay, 'Gender-Blindness and its Discontents: The Curious Case of an Indian Feminist Trade Union,' asks question (vi) identified earlier (namely, what are the internal union mechanisms relating to workers' social identity through which union participation is undermined in such contexts?). It assesses gendered internal dynamics of a feminist trade union based in the South Indian setting indicated above. It counterintuitively finds that despite the union's feminist ideology the participation of rural migrant women members in the union was circumscribed as compared to their male counterparts. Drawing on the concepts of politics of place and path-dependence (Harcourt and Escobar, 2002; Kabeer, 2011), it features an in-depth analysis of internal union dynamics to examine this pattern, which unpacks the peculiar ways in which gender-blind practices

disincentivized women's proactive union participation. This study, in summary, portrays migration status as a novel form of gender-blindness as well as highlights critical challenges for labor contestation against antagonistic garment industry employers.

From a practical standpoint, this dissertation also highlights unique power relationships between workers – particularly internal migrant workers – and organizations such as employers and unions at the local level in global supply chains. It uncovers critical implications for policy formulation pertaining to labor rights targeted at highly vulnerable workers; unpacks strategies for organizing a hitherto underacknowledged worker category; and brings forth equity issues within the labor movement so important for active union participation and mobilization. In summary, this work is an essential consolidated complement to the existing yet rather partial grassroots analyses of labor-capital power relationships in globalized industrial contexts.

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ESSAY 1: GOING GLOBAL BUT STAYING LOCAL: THE MECHANICS OF A LOCAL LABOR CONTROL REGIME IN EXPORT-ORIENTED GARMENT MANUFACTURING IN INDIA

Internal (within-country) migrant women constitute an increasingly significant proportion of workers employed in global supply chain (GSC) settings. Considering that researchers have emphasized either gendered or migrant identity at a time, migrant women's intersectional subjectivities and agency remain largely underexplored in GSC scholarship. In this fine-grained qualitative study, I take a worker-centered approach to analyze migrant women's intersectional experiences and the influence of their agency on local employment relationships in a South Indian garment industrial cluster. I interrogate how employer practices are tailored towards extracting surplus value from migrant women in ways that reinforce workers' intersecting vulnerabilities anchored in gender and migration status. Expressions of worker agency, in turn, impact local worker-management dynamics in unique ways, including those that are self-exploitative for workers themselves. The paper thus encourages a push within GSC scholarship toward consideration of diverse worker groups and their intersecting subjectivities, their agency, and its unique impact on local employer practices. These dynamics have important theoretical implications for better explaining regional competitive advantage as well as practical ramifications for supporting worker rights in GSCs.

Introduction

The year 2024 marks the eleventh anniversary of the horrific Rana Plaza tragedy in which more than 1,100 workers died. Termed as the garment industry's deadliest disaster, it has been attributed to willful negligence of employers. Driven by apprehensions about missed deadlines for order fulfilment, factories housed in Rana Plaza ignored worker wellbeing and continued production despite the structure being deemed unsafe just a day before the tragedy (Anner, 2015). Such incidents, scholars have suggested, are typical manifestations of power dynamics in global supply chains[1] (GSCs) where workers, oftentimes women, are treated as disposable and face intense production pressures and social downgrading (Anner, 2019; 2020; Bair, 2010). As GSCs comprise workers with diverse combinations of intersecting social identities, a limitation of GSC research, nonetheless, pertains to the kind of worker groups interrogated and how their overlapping identities are analyzed. For instance, scholars have examined gendered as well as internal (viz., within-country) migrant subjectivities in GSC contexts.

These studies, however, have emphasized worker positionality based on one identity – either gender or migration status – at a time (Jenkins & Blyton, 2017; Kelly, 2001; Peng, 2011; Wright, 2001).

Essentially, intersectional analyses of embodied experiences of internal migrant women remain largely underdeveloped despite these workers' growing prominence in GSCs (see Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015). Accounting for their intersectional subjectivities is important considering that labor commodification may be experienced heterogeneously by different worker groups (see Crenshaw, 1989).

Employer practices, however, do not operate in a vacuum and are also shaped by worker agency. Yet, research in GSCs tends to center firm/employer practices often at the expense of interrogations of how worker agency broadly, and of particular worker groups such as migrant women more specifically, co-constitutes local capitalist relations (Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011).

This paper takes on an intersectional, worker-centered approach and focuses on the Indian export-oriented garment industry. It asks the following research questions: First, how do intersecting social identities of workers influence experiences of subordination in an Indian export-oriented garment industrial context? Specifically, what are the mechanisms through which the oppression of internal migrant women workers in such settings is reinforced? Second, how do these workers exercise agency? And third, what is the impact of their agency on local employment relations in the industry? Through in-depth fieldwork, I unpack in this paper micro-level dynamics in a south Indian garment industrial cluster[2] and make the following important contributions. First, I focus on lived experiences of internal long-distance migrant women (hereafter migrants) employed in the cluster. Most of these workers originate from outside the host state/region within India (these workers are therefore also called 'interstate' migrants). Specifically, I demonstrate using an intersectionality approach how vulnerability predicated on interlaced worker identities – gender and migration status – is reproduced by employer practices in the industry. Attention to these relatively overlooked workers is important considering their increasing prominence in the region and peculiar

subjectivities – including language barrier and regulation in dormitories (hereafter hostels). Second, I analyze the agency exercised by these workers as proactive strategies for survival and fostering self-interest in the setting. Third, I examine the impact of such agency on employer practices and local-level employment dynamics.

Broadly, this study provides a thrust for GSC scholarship towards consideration of intersecting subjectivities of diverse worker groups, their agency, and its unique impact on local capitalist relations. These dynamics can help better explain regional capitalist development and also have huge implications for social upgrading within GSCs. The paper employs Jonas's (1996) local labor control regime (LLCR) framework and treats the research setting as an LLCR. Loosely defined, an LLCR is an intermeshing web of contentious relationships between various local actors (e.g., labor and firms) across space-time. This approach is helpful in conceptually partitioning complex localized processes into analytically distinct but interconnected 'locales.' It also provides a substructure upon which studies of local-level dynamics such as this one may be situated.

In the sections that follow, I briefly discuss LLCRs and examine intersectionality as well as labor agency. I follow that with a discussion of garment manufacturing in India and then lay out my methodology before presenting and discussing my findings.

Local Labor Control Regimes

As indicated above, LLCRs may be perceived as comprising contentious interlinkages between local actors – e.g., firms, workers, state authorities, worker communities etc. – embedded within GSCs at specific locations on the space-time continuum. Labor control is treated here as a contested terrain on which capital, labor, and other mediating institutions compete to achieve outcomes suitable to their interests. In this conceptualization, capital might strive for profit maximization while labor's objectives may center on social upgrading.

As defined more formally by Jonas (1996) an LLCR:

encapsulates…the gamut of practices, norms, behaviors, cultures and institutions within a locality…through which labor is integrated into production. Whether firm-specific or industry-wide, these practices are locally constructed and become…institutionalized in time and space. [An LLCR] is structured by the reciprocal…rhythms of production, reproduction and consumption…and held together by a network of locally unique institutions and social relations. (Jonas, 1996: 328)

LLCRs, essentially, entail three 'locales' – labor reproduction, production, commodity consumption – and their interconnections. Admittedly, the boundaries between these locales are not material but analytical. In this framework, labor control becomes a historically, culturally, and spatially contingent process that facilitates the (i) reproduction (biological and social) of the workforce; (ii) regulation of labor at the point of production; and (iii) coordination of commodity consumption (patterns of material consumption). Moreover, these relationships evolve through power struggles and tensions between cost minimization and welfare maximization. Importantly, labor control is a local phenomenon as supplier firms, although linked to GSCs, operate locally (Swyngedouw, 2004). As a consequence, scholars have argued that locally specific conditions/relationships in LLCRs have important implications for uneven geographies of capitalism (Coe et al., 2004; see Peck, 1992). While the LLCR framework can highlight mechanics of competitive advantage, I utilize it primarily as a conceptual instrument for parsing out and examining socioeconomic relationships within the three locales. Specifically, I focus on intersectional subjectivities and agency in each locale and elaborate on these elements in the subsequent analysis. Below I start by assessing intersectional worker identities in GSCs.

Intersectional Identities of Migrant Women Workers

Given that workers are indispensable constituents of the production relationship, worker identity also plays an important role in determining employment processes in GSCs. An intersectionality approach is useful for examining diverse yet overlapping subjectivities of individuals along various axes of subordination such as gender, race and migration status.

Intersectionality specifically makes conspicuous the subjectivities of marginalized groups otherwise rendered invisible in mainstream narratives. Crenshaw (1989), for example, has compellingly demonstrated that although American jurisprudence recognized race discrimination faced by Black men and sex discrimination encountered by white women, it did not account for the 'double-discrimination' of Black women (ibid:149), thereby erasing their unique experiences. Furthermore, intersectionality also posits that these overlapping oppressions are not simply additive but are multiplicative and mutually reinforcing (Acker, 2006; Crenshaw, 1989). Davis (1981) has shown this multiplicative effect through analysis of violence inflicted upon Black women during slavery. Black women not only received physical punishment equivalent to their male counterparts but were more likely to be sexually exploited than white women. Essentially, they suffered trauma greater than the 'sum' of that experienced by Black men and white women.

Furthermore, scholars have also offered that experiences of intersectional oppression are spatial-temporal in nature (McDowell, 2008). Unlike in their hometowns, for example, non-native workers after moving to host regions become vulnerable due to precarity introduced by migration status. Employers then extract surplus value by reproducing workers' magnified subordination.

In GSCs, employment of internal migrant women workers has become increasingly prominent as local suppliers tap into newer labor markets. Yet, accounts of internal migrant women's intersectional subjectivities based in gender *and* migrant identities have remained underemphasized. As employer practices for capital accumulation exploit and reinforce worker vulnerabilities, understanding migrant women's intersectional subordination is critical for explaining cost competitiveness and regional development.

While there is widespread agreement about the importance of economic opportunities provided by GSC employment to women (Barrientos, 2020), research has highlighted gendered subordination in these contexts (Chakravarthy, 2007; Jenkins, 2013; Neethi, 2012; Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016).

Scholars have, for instance, observed subjugation of workers based on gendered stereotypes (Wright, 2001). Employers' gendered prejudices include beliefs that young/single women: are docile; have minimal domestic responsibilities and hence the ability to work long hours; have 'nimble' fingers that enable execution of intricate tasks; are union averse and therefore likely to avoid collection action (Chakravarthy, 2007; George, 2013; Kabeer, 2004; Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016). Similarly, wage disparity; coercion; and verbal/sexual harassment are inherent elements of gendered production relations (Anner, 2019; Gagliardi et al., 2021; Jenkins & Blyton, 2017).

Although this literature has highlighted gendered subordination within the GSC workforce, some emerging work has specifically examined experiences of migrant women in similar settings. This research, nonetheless, has also emphasized gendered experiences while disregarding migrant vulnerabilities. For example, these scholars (see Dutta, 2020; Gunawardana, 2004; Theobald, 2002) have focused on gendered dynamics at the workplace but have overlooked challenges inherent to migrant positionities – such as disposable status, poor housing conditions, and restrictive access to food and sanitation. This work has, as a result, produced incomplete accounts of migrant women's positionalities in GSCs.

Another strand of GSC research has articulated internal migrant identity. Migrant workforces, studies have demonstrated, provide employers with numerical flexibility during times of fluctuating demand. Such precarity is exacerbated by being tied to particular employers and workers' inability to switch jobs (Kelly, 2001; 2002). Scholars have also discussed 'dormitory regimes,' where living conditions of migrants are egregious and where management demands that workers be available 'on tap' whenever required (Ngai & Smith, 2007; Peng, 2011; Siu, 2017; Xue, 2008).

However, inasmuch as such migrant spaces have been treated as 'gendered,' scholars have relatively deemphasized gender identity within these settings and have focused more on migrant vulnerabilities. For example, this literature has treated hostels as living spaces for migrants more

broadly while understating differences in spatial control practices in women's and men's quarters. Additionally, most of this work has been confined to East and Southeast Asian contexts. Arguably, therefore, research on migrant subjectivities in GSCs has significant scope still left to account for migrant women's unique intersectional experiences.

Some intersectional work has been done in Indian GSCs, however. For example, studies have analyzed precarious living conditions and informality experienced by migrant women employed in garment factories (Cowan, 2021; Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015). Yet, several peculiar aspects of migrant women's intersectional experiences – targeted workplace exploitation, spatial control in hostels, language barriers etc. – in host regions still remain underexplored. Subsequent sections present a more holistic analysis of these important elements.

The Role of Worker Agency

Recent scholarship in political economy and labor process theory traditions has advocated going beyond the primary focus on waged employment to include social reproduction (Hammer & Fishwick, 2020) and its impact on workplace dynamics. This entails calls for integrating the role of agency in influencing local labor control regimes (Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020). Essentially, research incorporating labor control, despite its theoretical conceptualizations (see Jonas, 1996; Thompson & Newsome, 2004), centers the primacy of capital in influencing local dynamics whereas workers are perceived as passive victims of capitalist exploitation.

Nonetheless, the significance of theorizing agency cannot be overemphasized. Agency is characterized here as action taken by workers to meet self-interests in ways that are 'empowering' and may also impact local capitalist relations (Kabeer, 2020; Rogaly, 2009). For example, workers' decisions to migrate out and accept employment in distant locations have huge implications for regional capitalist development. Researchers have therefore called for deeper analyses of agency in understanding how labor shapes, or co-constitutes, GSC landscapes (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2010).

Although practices of institutionalized, collective vehicles of agency, viz., unions (Anner, 2015; Herod, 1997; Jenkins, 2013) are well researched, much less is known about individualized, informal agency manifestations expressed as workers' day-to-day 'micro-struggles' (Rogaly, 2009: 1977). Just as worker collectives, research has shown that individual struggles can also influence employer practices. For example, temporalities of work are shaped by workers' domestic obligations and lifecycle demands (Mezzadri & Majumder, 2020). This includes situations where women after childbirth have demanded and received flexible workhours from employers although often at lower-status jobs and wages (Carswell & De Neve, 2013). Interestingly, women's willingness to work in exploitative conditions has indicated that worker agency may also manifest in non-confrontational forms while inadvertently reinforcing capital accumulation (see Katz, 2004, on 'resilience', 'reworking', and 'resistance' as expressions of agency for restructuring everyday social relations). These strategies, nonetheless, may also take place simultaneously with participation in more radical confrontation, either individual or collective. Regardless, these phenomena compellingly reiterate that workers are not passive victims of workplace oppression but make 'wider livelihood strategies' to respond to and influence employer practices (Bair, 2010; Rogaly, 2009).

Following such theorizations, GSC scholars have scrutinized gendered and migrant agencies albeit separately. This has at least partially, if not fully, obscured expressions of migrant women's agency. For example, gender research in GSCs has highlighted collective agency exercised by feminist unions or community organizations (Jenkins, 2013) and their profound, although relatively rare, effects on local dynamics including upward revisions in minimum wages following worker protests (Barrientos, 2020). Other more informal and localized mechanisms of gendered agency influencing employer practices have included using voice as leverage to obtain entitlements from employers (see Gunawardana, 2014), care work as both resistance and attachment to the workplace (Dutta, 2020),

or simply making the choice to enter waged work (thereby providing employers with a vulnerable workforce) in order to avoid economic hardship at home (Chakravarty, 2007).

Likewise, scholarship on migration has also alluded to migrant agency and its effects on capitalist relations. In China's dormitory regimes, for instance, scholars have discussed how migrants recruited extensively among relatives. As supervisors and subordinates shared familial ties, coercive strategies of labor regulation such as physical punishment became unimplementable (Peng, 2011). Moreover, extensive familial networks at the workplace also prevented labor turnover, thereby helping stabilize the workforce for the dormitory regime (Ngai & Smith, 2007). This relieved pressure on employers to engage in continual recruitment.

Essentially, studies in GSCs extensively examining overlapping gendered *and* migrant agency have been relatively rare (for exceptions, see Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Cowan, 2021; Mills, 2005). Given that migrant women's social location has not been fully appreciated in this research, their peculiar expressions of agency and its co-constitutive effects on local employment processes remain underexplored. Accordingly, I focus on this influence in the analysis section. Before doing so, however, I articulate the broader Indian garment industry context below.

Export-oriented Garment Manufacturing in India

Textiles/garments is considered a legacy sector in India. Its expansion has resulted largely from suppliers restructuring themselves and establishing ties with global buyers as the state deregulated the industry starting the mid-1980s (Tewari, 2008). The sector is critical to the Indian economy and is the second largest 'employer' in India. According to estimates, total sector employment stands at 45 million (Ministry of Textiles, 2015) or approximately 9% of the national workforce (World Bank, 2021). The sector also has global significance as exports are projected to reach USD 300 billion by 2024-25, thereby tripling the Indian market share from 5% to 15% between 2020-2025 (Invest India, 2020).

Indian garment manufacturing relies primarily on the country's historical expertise in textiles and government support for small and medium garment units (Mezzadri, 2010; Tewari, 2008). Interestingly, several garment clusters exist in India despite the consolidation of upper-tier suppliers. This fragmentation exists on the basis of historical specializations, accessibility to raw material, and nature of available workforce. For example, North Indian clusters specialize in embroidery while those in the south engage in volume-based production (AILS, 2005, in Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015; Mezzadri, 2017). This has helped the industry in diversifying its export portfolio and remaining competitive (Tewari, 2008).

Broadly, the industry is characterized by a feminized workforce (barring clusters in the northern region), 'predatory purchasing practices', and social downgrading of workers (Anner, 2019; Jenkins & Blyton, 2017; Mezzadri, 2010; Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015). After years of operation, nonetheless, the garment industry arguably faces a shortage of native employees (those born or having migrated within-state) and has actively sought out workers from distant regions. Interstate migrants, particularly women, in fact, have constituted an increasing proportion of the Indian garment workforce over the last decade (Kuzhiparambil, 2020). These individuals are oftentimes younger than native workers and, given India's interregional language diversity (MHRD, *undated*), often face a language barrier in host regions. Broadly, therefore, their experiences of oppression due to linguistic differences and young age are intertwined with those stemming from migration status. This magnifies their vulnerability but makes them more favorable as employees. Interstate migrant women thus are arguably the new type of ideal worker.

At the same time, these individuals, hailing mostly from agrarian families facing economic precarity, perceive garment employment as a lucrative and steady source of livelihood. Their decisions are further reinforced by lack of education, personal freedom, and employment in the hinterlands.

Nonetheless, many work in the industry for a few years before returning home after accruing desired amount of savings.

I articulate these mechanisms further in the following sections. I employ an intersectionality perspective to highlight migrant women's subjectivities and underscore how their agency co-constituted local employment practices. I start with discussing my methodology.

Methodology

This qualitative study builds on in-depth, extensive data collection over the summers of 2017-2019 in a South Indian garment industrial cluster. Being fully embedded in the field site, I established relationships with two civil society organizations (CSOs), WorkerRightsOrg1 and WorkerRightsOrg2, and one union – Apparel Workers Organization (AWO). Both CSOs had overlapping interests in garment worker organizing. AWO was one of the unions active in organizing workers and worked closely with WorkerRightsOrg1. This research largely borrowed from interactions with WorkerRightsOrg1 and AWO.

This study is based on over 34 semi-structured interviews as well as observations, secondary sources, and informal interactions. Interviewees included workers, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff, and AWO representatives. Some key informants were interviewed more than once to capture developments over time. The interviewing approach revolved around workers' experiences while those of union representatives and CSO officials provided key supplementary information. Most interactions took place in Hindi while CSO staff were interviewed in English. Data collection process followed Burawoy's (1998) extended case method where interviews were treated as 'interventions.' Potential issues arising from reflexivity were addressed by inviting individuals trusted by participants to the interviews.

Data analysis was done in MAXQDA software. Coding of collected data was done inductively. Themes obtained therefrom were put in deductive buckets (namely reproduction, production, and

consumption locales) anchored in Jonas's (1996) LLCR framework. Analytical partitioning of complex social processes into conceptually distinct but materially connected buckets resulted in analytical simplicity and amplified labor-management dynamics in each locale for better scrutiny. Key findings were validated through member checking.

Intersectional analysis followed McCall's (2005) intracategorical approach wherein attention was focused on interlayered subjectivities of one particular group, viz., migrant women. Considering the sensitive nature of this work, precise geographical location of the setting was concealed and pseudonyms were used for all respondents.

The industrial workforce and AWO's membership were highly feminized with women constituting more than 80% of all workers. The workforce of around 600,000 comprised natives and migrants (~60,000) from northern/north-eastern/eastern Indian states. I focused on migrant women workers (comprising 80-90% of migrants) considering their increasingly prominent presence, peculiar intersectional subjectivities, and unique co-creative role in the industry. Most workers interviewed were young (early 20s), lived in hostels, and interacted in Hindi (though their within-group dialects varied) unlike the native population.

Input from employers, however, could not be elicited. Garment employers, in fact, have been known to be skeptical of researchers. While it is acknowledged to be an invaluable source of data, the unavailability of employer perspectives was not seen as a handicap. Following Jenkins & Blyton (2017), this study relied heavily on worker testimonies.

Research Findings: Labor Control in a South Indian Garment Hub

The garment industrial cluster considered here has been dominated by tier-one supplier factories. These factories are marked by Taylorised, feminized work and restricted upward mobility for workers. Although most factories are considered formal-sector employers, working conditions belie this status.

In what follows, I analyze localized labor-management power dynamics in this setting. I argue that exchange relationships here not only relied on reproducing intersecting social inequalities linked to gender and migration status but were also shaped by worker agency. The overall contention herein, however, needs to be considered carefully. Essentially, while employer oppression was experienced by all workers, migrant women were more susceptible to exploitation than natives (given latter's greater awareness about worker rights). Migrants, at the same time, also influenced employer practices in peculiar ways. The following discussion incorporates these perspectives beginning with workforce reproduction.

Reproduction of a Compliant Workforce

For firms, the regeneration of a productive workforce is hinged upon recruiting workers as well as accessing newer labor markets as existing labor supply dwindles (Jonas, 1996; Peck, 1992). Once recruited, conditions of social reproduction determine how workers are able to renew their labor power for capital accumulation (Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020). This section highlights recruitment of migrant women and spatial control in workers' living spaces; discussion of these practices also encompasses articulation of how they are shaped by labor agency.

Recruitment Practices

Observers have witnessed an increased ingress of young female migrant workers in the region over the last decade. The lack of local support systems, low expectations regarding wages and working conditions, and internalized gendered dispositions make migrant women ideal workers for garment employment. Beginning with the recruitment stage, this study shows how employers reproduced intersectional gendered and migrant inequalities to extract surplus value.

Although the process of migrant recruitment operated at the national level, it culminated locally. Over the last decade, a number of autonomous recruitment/training centers had been established in agrarian states in northern and eastern Indian states. Based on a public-private partnership model

and set up with the government's assistance (see Kuzhiparambil, 2020; Nambiar, 2013), these centers recruited workers for garment employers under prior contractual commitments with garment employers. Recruiters and employers were therefore considered practically equivalent in this analysis.

Recruiters overwhelmingly targeted young 'docile' women from poor households and trained them free of cost. Workers trained for 1-3 months and were sent in groups of 20-30 to factories in garment manufacturing regions. In the region considered here, all members within a group worked for the same employer. However, women and men lived in separate hostels.

Recruiters specialized in outreach, embedding themselves in local communities and popularizing skill-development programs (Kuzhiparambil, 2020). Some of the main selling propositions for these programs and garment employment were the absence of minimum education requirements, guaranteed placement with 'good' remuneration, the possibility of sending remittances back home, and 'convenient' boarding spaces for workers living away from home.

This was not the sole mode of recruiting, however. Those already employed in garment factories also encouraged friends and relatives to join garment work. Most interviewees admitted to having become aware about garment employment from others in their kinship networks. Young women in villages in fact found these programs attractive. In fact, the pay from garment work was more than other choices of livelihood – such as helping the family on the farm, or taking up domestic work in a nearby city, Given the dire economic circumstances at home and limited employment opportunities nearby, many women hoped to pay back parental 'debt' upon landing a good job. Such leveraging of social connections fueled a self-stoking cycle for regenerating compliant labor for garment production. It also transmitted the burden of recruiting to the community.

Importantly for these women, the mere decision to migrate more broadly and choosing garment work specifically was a powerful manifestation of agency because they represented conscious

choices made within a constraining context (Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Rogaly, 2009). Although young women living in villages faced severe restrictions on physical movement, their decisions to work away from home – taken either consensually with household members or even unilaterally – surmounted many a cultural barrier and ensured workforce availability for capital accumulation. Workers' encouragement of others to join garment employment also influenced how recruiters engaged in worker outreach. For instance, individuals in workers' kinship networks were 'easy' recruits who had already been influenced to work in the industry. As a result, recruiters spent relatively lesser effort in persuading these individuals to join garment work.

Recruiters, however, were continually engaged in induction drives due to high turnover among migrants. Workers' decisions to return home after a few years were in fact shaped by lifecycle demands. For example, migrant women quit garment work after gaining an ability to fulfill dowry expectations, when economic support at home was no longer needed, or due to exploitation faced in garment employment. Workers also moved from one employer to another before exiting the industry altogether. Just as seeking employment for oneself and others was an act of agency, so was switching employers or quitting the industry.

As stated earlier, migrant workers entering the industry were young. While most were 18-25 years old, a few female recruits were as young as 14. Although this was the minimum legal age for employment, there were legislative restrictions on employing workers younger than 18[3]. Some employers and workers' families, however, circumvented these restrictions. For instance, some employer-approved doctors issued counterfeit age certificates inflating workers' ages. On other occasions, workers' families got identification documents forged. Their actions were driven by extreme economic distress and hopes of expedited financial support from daughters. As a result, some workers misrepresented their true age. Interestingly, these dynamics demonstrated how

deception as worker agency, anchored in economic hardship, made young migrant women readily available for garment employers.

Nonetheless, unionists revealed that workers' real age became evident only if they were asked indirect questions. Specifically, asking their age directly received a rehearsed premeditated response. Inquiring about their year of birth or when they graduated middle school often betrayed their true age. Unions intended to use information about workers' correct age to hold employers accountable for flouting child labor law. An AWO representative narrated an anecdote from a migrant worker meeting; it also illustrated workers' efforts to conceal their true age:

> There are [migrant] workers below 18 but we don't have the documents to prove that. But if you speak to them, you'll understand. [During a meeting] we were just doing introductions. So one girl…stated her name and [said she was] 14 years old. And the girl sitting next to her said: "No no, you're 18, you're not 14!". Then [the first girl said], "Yes I'm 18, not 14". So they don't tell….[but] we are trying to collect their [real identification] documents so that we can know their birthdates.

Recruiters also often portrayed themselves as stakeholders in workers' wellbeing. They accompanied workers to their destinations and helped them 'settle in.' During recruitment though, they did not necessarily share truthful information about working conditions in garment factories. Some promised inflated salaries and misrepresented job descriptions. However, migrants had limited ability to hold recruiters accountable due to geographical separation of their workplaces from recruiting centers. This was how migrants found themselves vulnerable to misrepresentation and were unable to seek remedies for deception. Many, in fact, accepted the status quo arguing that poor living/working conditions were better than unemployment in the village. Such absence of overt resistance ensured unabated manipulation of workers by recruitment agencies.

Broadly, recruitment practices tapped into workers' intersecting identities. They were effectively organized around gender stereotypes of docility and migrants' inability to challenge deception by recruiters or seek support in case of exploitation. However, economic precarity at home also drove workers towards garment work. In fact, migrating out, recruiting others from one's kinship network,

or forging identification documents aided the recruitment process by providing employers with a steady stream of 'compliant' workers. At the same time, high turnover of migrants forced employers to engage in recruiting year-round. Furthermore, positive responses by migrants to recruiting practices also reduced employers' reliance on the native workforce. Such phenomena showed how an interplay between firms and worker agency shaped employment practices in the region.

Spatial Control in Hostels

Migrants resided in employer-provided hostels usually located in close proximity to the workplace. These spaces segregated migrant women from the outside hustle-bustle. However, as migrant women's 'local guardians', employers regulated worker movement and behavior in hostels. Specifically, wardens and security personnel acted as employers' proxies and exercised spatial control in these spaces.

For example, physical movement in or out of hostels was strictly regulated by curfew hours. However, these restrictions applied mostly in women's hostels in order to preserve female 'respectability.' Many men's hostels neither had wardens nor security guards. In many cases, women were permitted to step out unsupervised only on Sundays mainly to purchase essential items such as groceries. Security personnel (usually male) stationed at the gate noted down entry and exit times for all workers. These personnel also locked hostel gates at the start of curfew hours each evening. Workers arriving late were refused entry and severely interrogated.

Women's hostels have indeed been infamous for their surveillance mechanisms and stringent control over workers' activities. Some workers, for instance, reported that cell phone use was severely restricted inside some hostels. Workers received only one hour after dinner to speak to their families. They also highlighted restrictions on visiting each other's rooms. These prohibitions were rationalized by wardens as steps taken to prevent stealing of each other's personal belongings. However, it also served the purpose of precluding socialization and possible collectivism.

Even family members or friends had to surmount several bureaucratic hurdles to be able to meet their kin residing in hostels. When outsiders were allowed in, some hostels mandated that workers meet with them in common areas and under the watchful eye of the hostel administration. This way, wardens were able to reduce possibility of 'untoward' incidents including unionization.

The language barrier also restricted interaction between migrants and hostel staff as the latter were unfamiliar with Hindi. This largely constrained voice mechanisms and left migrant women with few pathways for redressing grievances. It also distinguished hostels in this setting from East Asian dormitory regimes (Ngai & Smith, 2007; Siu, 2017) where such challenges were largely absent. Wardens also (on account of young age) infantilized and threatened workers upon 'excessive' complaining. A WorkerRightsOrg1 representative expressed frustration over worker treatment and likened it to modern day slavery in garment factories:

> The wardens have no…manners; they treat [workers] like children…[staff] speak[s] [in the native tongue] and [it] makes them angrier that [workers] don't understand. So [they] assault them,…try to discipline them…like in…jail.

Spatial control extended beyond hostel walls as well. For instance, workers were instructed to return straight to the hostel after work. Wardens or security personnel, in fact, accompanied workers while transiting between factory and hostel. Individuals approached by unionists on the way were questioned and thoroughly investigated. Those found interacting with unknown outsiders were also coerced into ceasing such contact or risk job loss.

Intriguingly, wardens actively employed tropes of women's physical safety in hostels to ensure compliance. Workers commonly heard about the advantages of hostel living as protection against a world full of 'unscrupulous' elements. Borrowing from cultural notions regarding the supposed responsibility of male guardians to safeguard women's dignity, wardens also argued that pre-emptive restrictive protective measures were necessary because employers (often portrayed in masculine

terms) treated workers like family. Essentially, wardens dissuaded workers from raising grievances and propounded that employers favored workers' best interests.

Qualifying wardens' narratives, a researcher familiar with the setting emphasized that physical safety in hostels could be better understood when compared with workers' living conditions outside the hostel. For example, they cited instances in which supervisors exerted pressure on native workers to fabricate reasons for their husbands to leave the house, thereby creating opportunities for the supervisors to enjoy private time with the workers, in many instances not necessarily with the latter's consent. In hostels, whereas, there were cases where young migrant women were forced into moonlighting as prostitutes possibly because wardens could earn commission.

That said, the discursive nature of wardens' rationales was not new to migrant women. Having been subjected to traditional patriarchal regulations (rules pertaining to social demeanor) and restricted outdoor movement back home, women did not always contest hostel protocols. Narratives of purported kinship with the employer, on the contrary, likely helped temper the harshness of the imposed restrictions.

Regardless, workers provided emotional support to each other in the face of hostel-imposed isolation. For example, workers formed small groups comprising individuals who had trained and joined work together. Members found succor and solidarity in these groups especially during crises (e.g., workplace abuse or ill family members).

Some workers, notwithstanding regulations, clandestinely subverted hostel restrictions by engaging in romantic relationships with male colleagues; a few others covertly engaged with unionists. In transit between factory and hostel, union organizers secretly passed on to workers their contact information written on small pieces of paper. Workers then contacted them during the designated time for cell phone use. If their actions ever became known, however, surveillance of the 'troublemakers' became even tighter. This included denying permission for venturing out, or more

severe intimidation. These individuals were also threatened with job loss or 'blacklisting' from the industry. Such manifestations of worker agency, thus, often resulted in tightening of spatial control within hostels.

In summary, strategies of spatial control were predicated on migrant women's intersectional subjectivities and reproduced their oppression. Restrictions on physical movement, surveillance, intimidation, and 'soft' forms of control were some practices to which migrant women, by virtue of their identity, were subjected. Nonetheless, simultaneous exercising of agency by these workers also influenced employer practices. For example, tighter hostel surveillance was employers' response to breaching of hostel norms or covert unionism by workers. Put differently, the degree of spatial control was interlinked with worker conduct in these spaces.

The next section examines production processes and demonstrates how they were calibrated to extract surplus value from migrant women. It also presents interactions between these processes and worker agency.

Worker Subordination and Agency in the Production Relationship

'Inequality regimes' in employment relationships, as Acker (2006) has argued, thrive on reinforcement of intersectional oppression of workers. The garment industry is no different. In this industrial cluster specifically, employer strategies reproduced subordination along gendered and migrant vulnerabilities. As demonstrated below, targeted exploitation of migrant women was achieved at the workplace through monetary, interpersonal, and antiunion strategies. Inasmuch as these practices applied to all workers, migrant women faced a higher likelihood of exploitation. Yet, they both endured and resisted these practices.

In an exploitative context such as this one, an obvious question that arises is why employers engaged (or were able to) in targeted subjugation. As indicated earlier, employers had access to a steady stream of long-distance internal migrant workers without any local support system and limited

avenues for economic sustainability in the source region. The ensuing susceptibility to subordination arising from the isolation of the migrant experience, complicated further by the language barrier – as shall be presented even more compellingly below – was directly associated with the employers' approach to taking advantage of migrant women's intersectional situatedness. That workers were treated as dispensable indicated that the cost of replacing them in case they quit was low. This was further supported, if not enabled, by the state's laxity in enforcing labor regulations to prevent worker abuse. Essentially, these elements shaped a superstructure incentivizing employers to squeeze the maximum value out of workers. Despite the high turnover, therefore, the broader strategy continued to reproduce worker subordination.

Similar to other contexts, work at the garment workplace was organized along gendered lines. For instance, most supervisory and managerial staff were male while majority of line workers were female. These hierarchical relationships were embedded not only in work organization but also in the terminology used on the factory floor – almost all women, for example, referred to line supervisors as 'sir' or 'master.'

Jobs were categorized as low skilled, semi-skilled, skilled, and highly skilled. Most migrant women interviewees were tailors (semi-/skilled). Others were employed as checkers (semi-/skilled) and helpers (low skilled). Males were likely to be employed as cutters (semi-/skilled). They cut portions (such as sleeves, collars etc.) from the fabric that factories received from elsewhere. These pieces were passed on to checkers who verified if measurements of the cut portions met required specifications. Tailors sewed these portions together while helpers assisted in moving unfinished products between various stages of the production process.

Monetary Strategies & Worker Agency: Wages, Benefits, and Overtime

Employer strategies around wages, benefits, and overtime reinforced migrant women's subordination. Broadly, migrant women received the lowest wages among all regular worker groups, were less likely to receive full benefit entitlements, and were more likely to do unpaid overtime. Although wages offered met the minimum threshold, they were much too low compared to living wage standards (Anner, 2019). Roughly, migrant women earned about 8500 rupees/month (~USD 120), whereas local women made around 9200 rupees/month (~USD 130) and local males received about 9500 rupees/month (~USD 134). These approximate figures, nonetheless, reflected how wage discrimination due to migration status accumulated over and above the pre-existing gender wage disparity. Thus, wage discrimination was compounded for women who also were migrants. This wage structure was maintained through the following mechanisms. In general, native workers were more aware of labor rights as compared to migrants. Employers, therefore, exploited migrants' lack of awareness about wage discrimination by ascertaining opaqueness in payment mechanisms. This was facilitated by the prohibition of native-migrant worker interactions via surveillance, intimidation, and even physical separation. Effectively, migrants were treated as a captive group due to which their payments could be manipulated.

Workers were also entitled to unemployment and health insurance, and pension towards which payments were required from both employers and workers. Many migrants, however, did not figure out until much later that employers avoided making these payments. Employers required workers to pay towards entitlements but instead pocketed their contributions. This meant that entitlements appeared on pay slips but remained elusive when needed. While native workers were also subjected to these practices, employers took undue advantage of migrants' relative lack of knowledge about employment entitlements.

Workers also stated that despite being formal employees they were seldom granted paid leave (sick or otherwise). As a result, some workers visited home only once every few years. Moreover, factories

occasionally closed down without disbursing unpaid wages and benefits (together called 'settlement') to workers for months together. Such situations particularly left migrant women in a lurch as they had no external support systems and little information about alternative sources of employment. Nonetheless, workers still found opportunities to assert their voice and challenge employer practices. This resistance was sometimes collective in nature yet unfolded without union involvement. Moreover, these actions also led to coordination between migrants and natives. For instance, factory closures occasionally resulted in widespread protests and sit-ins lasting for days and involving both native and migrant women.

Collective worker agency exercised in such situations sometimes did influence employer behavior as 'settlements' were paid within a few weeks of direct action. Alternatively, workers willing to continue employment were transferred to other functioning units of the same employer. Interestingly, wardens (as employers' representatives in hostels) responded to workers' grievances by more aggressively propagating notions about the virtues of obedience and employers as guardians. Management thus actively attempted to undermine the possibility of future confrontation by developing worker loyalty.

Deception was another common feature of employer conduct. Many incidents about supervisors deceiving migrant workers into signing forms printed in the regional 'incomprehensible' language had been reported. Whilst (literate) native workers likely comprehended employment-related paperwork, migrants (even those with higher education) were placed at a disadvantage due to the language barrier. In such situations, migrant workers were often unaware if they had signed resignation letters or granted other waivers to employers.

Overtime was also commonplace in the industry. However, it manifested disparately across worker groups. Migrants had to rush in 15 minutes earlier and were not allowed to leave the workplace until at least 15 minutes after native workers had left. The justification given was that native workers

travelled longer distances and had domestic responsibilities. As most migrants were single and

resided in hostels located nearby, they were expected to work longer hours. However, they did not

receive extra payment for the additional thirty minutes of daily work. Working Sundays and forced

overtime even until midnight were also commonly experienced phenomena.

Interpersonal Strategies and Worker Contention: Meeting Production Demands

Worker interactions with supervisors were primarily centered around production targets and

regulation of inter-worker communication. Workers bemoaned the intense production pressure as

they were coerced into fulfilling ever-increasing production demands. While all workers encountered

these problems, migrant women were more likely to face these hardships and also to a greater

degree. Respondents, for instance, remarked that managers dehumanized them *because* of their

migrant female identity:

> Lots of women come from different [states] such as Orissa, Jharkhand, Assam…[Their problems] are ignored because they are outsiders. [Managers] think they can do nothing. (Suzanne, migrant woman)

Verbal and physical abuse were popular tactics for forcing workers into meeting production

deadlines. These were also among their biggest concerns. Workers were subjected to verbal abuse

for underperformance even during illness. This was called 'production torture.' Moreover, fatigue

from production pressure always invited supervisor ire:

> When [supervisors] ask for extra production at work, sometimes you can do it, but you cannot deliver every day. We can deliver up to a limit…Non-delivery becomes a problem. They put a lot of pressure on us (Sushmita, migrant woman).

Workers were also frequently denied time-off. For instance, a migrant woman's request for leave was

declined even as her 20-year-old son was murdered back home. Another worker stated that when

she submitted her leave application to the supervisor, he tore it and tossed it in the wastebin.

Supervisors also hurled semi-finished garments at workers or at times even slapped

'underperformers' for noncompliance with production demands. Sexual abuse in the form of

groping and showing workers pornographic content was also reported. Many young women broke down following such humiliating treatment. Supervisors took greater liberties with migrant women assuming higher impunity due to the absence of local support infrastructure for migrants.

Some respondents also accused management of picking on migrant women and using language craftily. Supervisors spoke in Hindi during private conversations with migrants but used the vernacular tongue for public shaming in order to achieve compliance. Due to the language barrier migrants often could not comprehend expletives – roughly translated as 'loafer, stupid, dog' etc. – used by supervisors to embarrass workers. The peculiarity of the migrant experience in such situations was marked by workers' helplessness – resulting from the language barrier – towards supervisor denigration.

Abused workers, however, were sometimes provided emotional support by co-workers or hostel roommates employed in the same factory (see Dutta, 2020). Some even offered assistance with informal verbal complaints to upper management. These contentious forms of agency occasionally resulted in verbal castigation of perpetrators or their reassignment to other units/production lines. Abusers were rarely fired, however. Such confrontation at the workplace, likewise, also prompted wardens in the hostels to promulgate propaganda about employers as caring members in workers' kinship networks. These tactics were designed to shape worker loyalty and quell possible unrest.

These workplaces also subjected workers to surveillance. Factories were housed in gated compounds with tall walls akin to those of prisons. Most gates were manned by security personnel who monitored all entrances and exits. Aside from physical isolation of workers from the outside world, other active methods of surveillance were also practiced. For example, the use of mobile phones was stringently regulated in factories. Some migrant women claimed that managers checked workers' social media accounts or other private conversations. Importantly, neither native women nor migrant men reported such forms of intrusion into privacy. Workers were also closely monitored

using closed-circuit cameras and those who took 'frequent' restroom breaks were disciplined. These practices were particularly mortifying for menstruating women. However, employers justified such discipline using the pretext of production pressure.

As indicated earlier, workers were also prohibited from talking to others inside the factory – the fragmentation between migrants and natives was maintained through surveillance. For the most part, no exchange of information about wages or entitlements was possible between the groups, thereby enabling employers to play one group against the other. Workers, however, gradually formed social ties across groups while working together in the factory. The ensuing exchange of information away from supervisor gaze and the formation of bonds based on shared experiences of subordination helped workers endure the trials of workplace exploitation. These mechanisms, nonetheless, largely remained inadequate as catalysts for autonomous collective action against oppressive employers.

Suppression of Worker Voice

Garment employers are notorious for union antagonism (Jenkins, 2013). Interviewees were therefore generally skeptical about exercising voice due to fear of employer backlash. Managers often threatened workers with job loss upon raising grievances. There was also a general tendency to discredit worker issues or portray the employer as indispensable to worker wellbeing:

> Once the HR head had asked us…[if] we had come to earn our livelihood from outside, why [did] we argue…over unimportant issues? He told us to shut up. He said if the factory wasn't there, we wouldn't have come so far to earn. He asked [if] we can earn our livelihood without the factory. He [spoke] in a way that silence[d] the girls. (Meera, migrant woman)

Managers also employed coercion as a pre-emptive measure for preventing collective action. Suspected unionists were either forced to resign (to avoid allegations of unfair dismissal) or 'blacklisted' from the industry. In case migrant women engaged in unionism, they were expelled from the hostel. These experiences were traumatizing for workers as being evicted exposed them to adverse societal elements outside the hostel.

Workers were also threatened with factory closure or termination of employment to prevent unionization. Some employers found illegal and unethical ways to pressure workers into compliance. Sometimes, employers went to the extent of portraying workers unfavorably to their families. In one such incident, management contacted a recruiter in Vinati's (a migrant woman) hometown, who, in turn, called on her family for assistance in coercing her into ceasing union activities. When that strategy failed, the employer tricked her family into believing that she engaged in sexual encounters with other men. Essentially, the family was threatened with social humiliation because of a 'loose' daughter. Management hoped for her parents to discipline her fearing social ridicule. When Vinati and her union approached the labor department, management further hounded her into withdrawing allegations of intimidation using the pretext that she was externally influenced to press charges. At the time of writing, her case was pending with the labor department.

Such dynamics, including eviction from hostels, reflected how employers customized antiunion practices to discipline unionized migrant women. However, they also demonstrated how these workers actively resisted employer persecution. Despite risks of employer backlash, some joined a union. A WorkerRightsOrg2 representative explained workers' perspectives about unions: a few workers were cognizant of the advantages of collective action because they came from communities in which unions were prevalent. Some of these workers, supported by unions, zealously defended their rights and contested employer actions tooth and nail. Employers responded by leveraging connections with recruiters in workers' hometowns and even risking reputational damage resulting from ensuing lawsuits. Such confrontation, however uncommon, was often long-drawn and resource-intensive for both unions and employers.

In summary, these accounts highlight the nature of power relationships at the point of production and demonstrate how asymmetries were reproduced at the workplace. Monetary, interpersonal, and antiunion strategies of employers actively reinforced migrant women's intersectional subordination.

Discrimination in wage and benefits payments, targeted abuse of migrant women, and hostel eviction in case of unionization were some of the practices reinforcing migrant women's vulnerability.

However, worker agency was also witnessed here. For example, migrant women engaged in occasional radical action in response to factory closure or formed informal solidarity groups for activating grievance mechanisms. These actions were significant as they were executed despite the absence of local support structures. Occasionally, workers also unionized.

Employers responded to these actions by either complying, although very rarely, with workers' demands (such as payment of settlement or disciplinary action against abusive supervisors) or escalating manipulation efforts through wardens to shape worker loyalty. Alternatively, management intensified backlash as Vinati's account delineated. These circumstances illuminated how agency expressed at the workplace impacted employer actions. The next section unpacks similar processes within conditions of commodity consumption.

Commodity Consumption: Material Conditions of Worker Accommodation

Workers' commodity consumption patterns speak to material aspects – rents, food etc. – of their nonwork lives. These components have direct impact on worker wellbeing and are therefore critical to examine. Whilst food consumption differed across individuals and was relatively challenging to interrogate, material conditions of hostel accommodation such as rents and physical infrastructure (distinct from psychosocial aspects of spatial control analyzed earlier) dominated migrant workers' consumption experience. These characteristics are explored below.

Living conditions varied across hostels. While some offered free accommodation, most charged monthly rents. Workers argued that hostel accommodation was preferable over other options due to higher rents charged outside. However, interviewees complained that hostel fees were arbitrarily set

and did not show in pay stubs despite being subtracted from wages. This allowed employers to report inflated net salaries and conceal arbitrarily set hostel rents.

Most hostels were also over-occupied. 100-150 individuals occupying spaces suitable for 50 were not uncommon. This overcrowding invited inconvenience due to constrained space and the resulting unhygienic conditions.

Many workers argued that hostels lacked even the most basic amenities. In many cases, workers were provided with just a bedframe. When workers requested kitchen equipment, employers charged them an exorbitant amount. In some hostels, workers cooked in bedrooms as kitchens were unavailable. Many hostels lacked proper ventilation and clean drinking water facilities. The lack of ventilation engendered other problems, such as persistent dampness in living spaces. This attracted pests and resulted in illnesses. Power and water cuts were also common as hostel administrations often failed to pay utility bills on time. Leaking roofs and blocked fire exits were also reported. Interestingly, some of these conditions existed in both women's and men's hostels, however, women were less likely to challenge them.

Workers largely coped with these tribulations by navigating the trade-off between demanding better conditions and reconciling with the *status quo*. The apprehension of higher unaffordable rents prevented them from pushing for better conditions. They also acknowledged that physical safety provided by hostels was an important consideration in choosing to reside there. Accordingly, they adapted to hostel living. For example, workers brought in clean drinking water from the factory given its unavailability in hostels. Some woke up early to use common bathrooms before the morning rush-hour. Socializing with peers also acted as a coping mechanism to compensate for lack of general recreation in hostels. Yet, dignified living remained elusive for most female hostel occupants.

In summary, these accounts illustrate material conditions of hostel accommodation. Living conditions were harsh and complemented spatial control in hostels. Nonetheless, many workers expressed agency by consciously deciding *not* to challenge their living situation. Such withholding of contention arguably perpetuated suboptimal living conditions. Higher rents or eviction stemming from actively exercising voice were in fact seen as worse outcomes as compared to reconciling with existing circumstances. Thus, workers made calculated choices towards supporting their self-interests. While doing so, they also implicitly encouraged employers to maintain the *status quo*. This demonstrated the co-constituting effect of workers' intentional *in*action on employer practices.

Discussion and Conclusion

Local-level social relationships embedded within GSCs are quite complex and entail highly contentious power dynamics. Whilst research on localized employee-employer interactions is evolving, scholars have underscored the importance of greater attention to microscopic power relationships at the foundations of GSCs (Jenkins & Blyton, 2017). This is critical as firms derive competitive cost advantage by regulating labor locally (Swyngedouw, 2004).

This study utilized Jonas's (1996) LLCR framework for unpacking space-time sensitive, local-level labor-capital relationships within GSCs. It helped analytically parse out these dynamics within the reproduction, production, and consumption spheres. The South Indian export-oriented garment industrial cluster examined here afforded an explicit intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989; McCall, 2005), worker-centered analysis and a focus on subjectivities and agency of an overlooked worker group – internal (interstate) migrant women.

In this context, employers customized their practices for extracting surplus value from migrant women. Nonetheless, worker agency, in turn, also exerted influence on employment dynamics. These processes demonstrated the contentious nature of labor control and inherent struggles between self-interests (welfare versus profit).

Employer practices were based largely on reproducing intersectional oppression of migrant women. Social reproduction, to begin with, constituted workforce recruitment and social control in hostels. Recruiters were key in inducting migrant women in garment factories. They relied on gendered assumptions about docility and the unavailability of local support networks for migrant women once in the host region. Similarly, spatial control in hostels resulted in intersectional subjugation of workers; in fact, surveillance, intimidation, and discursive methods for regulating behavior were present mostly in women's hostels.

At the point of production, subordination of migrant women was reinforced through three employer strategies – monetary, interpersonal, and suppression of voice. On the factory floor, employers exploited migrant women's lack of awareness about economic entitlements. Moreover, these workers were highly vulnerable to supervisor abuse, coercion, intrusion into privacy, and deception (premised on the language barrier). Given the relative lack of local support systems available to migrant women, the possibility of hostel eviction introduced additional roadblocks to their unionization. Poor material infrastructure of hostel accommodation further exacerbated their holistic experiences of garment employment.

Workers, however, were not passive victims of subjugation and actively shaped local employment relationships (Baglioni & Mezzadri, 2020; Coe & Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Thompson & Newsome, 2004). Within the social reproduction sphere, workers supported recruitment efforts by migrating out (despite cultural stigmatization) and, in some cases, forging documents. Although these strategies ensured economic security for individuals once employed, they also set workers up for subsequent oppression. For employers, these decisions encouraged migrant employment and mitigated the need for recruiting native workers. High turnover of migrants, however, forced firms into year-round recruitment. Similarly, insubordination in hostels led employers to tighten hostel surveillance.

At the point of production, workers occasionally formed informal collectives and influenced employer actions. For example, protests, although rare, pressured employers to disburse unpaid 'settlements.' Workplace insubordination also led to intensification in the use by hostel wardens of discursive tropes about the virtues of docility and employers as guardians. Such propaganda was intended to preclude future confrontation. Unionization also triggered employer backlash over and above prevalent workplace exploitation. This included leveraging interspatial linkages with recruiters, who delegated efforts to dissuade workers from union participation to workers' families. In the consumption context, workers' disinclination to demand better hostel infrastructure implicitly encouraged employers to retain poor living conditions. This showed the role of workers' conscious *in*action in shaping local employer practices. Broadly, migrant women's agency was thus consequential in shaping local employment relations aside from employer practices themselves. These dynamics, however, also highlight critical implications for GSC research and practice. From a theoretical perspective, they illustrate that accounting for various marginalized worker groups in GSC contexts can enable better understanding of how regional competitive advantage is secured. This is critical because firms design capital accumulation strategies to exploit workers along intersecting axes of subordination. While this study focused on migrant women, future work could further explore worker experiences based in race/ethnicity, caste, and other forms of oppression (including nonstandard work arrangements). Furthermore, attention to diverse worker groups is warranted also to understand how agency expressed by these groups influences employer practices in unique ways.

For instance, this case study focused, *inter alia*, on the agency of migrant women workers. As Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) have suggested, agency is also a function of the broader structure to which individuals are subjected. Essentially, this implies that agency involves exercising choice when individuals are confronted with multiple possible courses of action within that structure. Not only

the available courses of action but also the choices made, viz., demonstrating agency, are likely to be specific to individuals' positionalities. In the case of migrant women, for example, the range of choices for livelihoods varied from assisting their families in agricultural pursuits, taking up domestic work in a big city, or accepting garment employment. Their choice involved complex calculations including a trade-off between staying back with loved ones on the one hand and pursuing better economic opportunities on the other. While many young migrant women chose garment work, others signed up for alternative avenues of livelihood. Thus, although it may seem that individuals have no choice at the outset, they may still have 'constrained agency' to seek the best outcomes possible in a restrictive set of options. However, this set of options will depend on worker positionality.

Ergo, focusing on subordination and agency tied to identity in conjunction with other idiosyncratic elements – geographical, economic, and sociocultural – can help better explain regional development (see Kelly, 2001; Pattenden, 2016).

From a practical standpoint, microscopic analyses of how firms derive competitive cost advantage can highlight loopholes in the formulation and enforcement of labor regulation. These dynamics can also speak to the need for more effective private and social governance (Barrientos, 2020). For example, unions and CSOs in the region could leverage available private governance instruments to help mitigate labor exploitation. Establishing such social upgrading mechanisms across regional clusters can also undercut interregional cost competition anchored in low-road practices. Additionally, focusing on various manifestations of labor agency unpacks workers' perspectives about employer oppression and identifies opportunities for organized resistance. This can be consequential for unions in identifying leaders and framing contention.

In summary, this paper encourages a push within GSC scholarship towards examinations of intersectional subjectivities of diverse worker groups, their agency, and its unique impact on local

capitalist relationships. Comprehensive analyses of localized GSC dynamics indeed become

important if we are to better comprehend the fine-grained mechanisms that transform labor into

final products in retail outlets. Studies such as this are a step in that direction.

Endnotes

1. Whilst there are other mutually competing conceptualizations – global commodity chains, global value chains or global production networks –, GSCs is used here as a generic term.

2. Due to the sensitivity of information shared, research informants requested anonymity, including that of their geographical location. This paper therefore broadly identifies the region but not the specific geographical location of the industrial cluster. As such, any discussion about locational specificities has been avoided in the analysis.

3. At the time of fieldwork, the Child Labor Amendment (Prohibition and Regulation) Act, 2016, addressed child labor issues (MLJ, 2020; Rajkumar, 2020). Whilst it allowed employment of adolescents (14-18 years), it prohibited employers from having them work more than six hours a day. Night shifts and overtime were also impermissible (Paycheck, 2021).

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ESSAY 2: ORGANIZING INTERNAL MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE INDIAN GARMENT INDUSTRY

Internal rural-urban migration for economic activities has been regarded as an indispensable aspect of India's growth narrative. Given the sociocultural diversity within and across states in the country, interstate rural migrants (also called 'internal migrants', or simply 'migrants') are often treated as outsiders at their employment destinations. Notwithstanding the magnified vulnerability of internal migrants due to exploitative employment practices, research on how unions in host regions organize these workers remains underdeveloped. This is particularly true of emerging contexts – such as in manufacturing hubs in global supply chains – where migrant workers flock in tens of thousands for employment opportunities and where grassroots unions are the primary vehicle for worker organizing. To address these shortcomings in the literature, I focus on a grassroots trade union in an export-oriented garment industrial cluster in India. Drawing on the concept of intimate organizing, I examine its practices of organizing new internal migrant members using a qualitative inductive case study method. I find that the union crafted its organizing strategy based on a two-phase approach. In the first phase, it built an initial membership base of migrants. Phase two comprised more active approaches to expand migrant membership. Overall, this study offers insights for theory-building and practical implications for organizing in antagonistic contexts.

Introduction

Low-cost manufacturing for global supply chains (GSCs) has been hailed by politicians and capitalists as being largely responsible for job creation in the global South. Industries such as ready-made garment manufacturing have, in fact, been highly responsible for integrating many emerging economies into global commerce since the last quarter of the 20th century (Miles, 2016). While undeniable evidence supports this claim, labor-intensive, and oftentimes feminized, industrial sectors feeding into GSCs have been perceived by scholars and practitioners alike as highly exploitative toward workers and particularly challenging to organize. In emerging economies such as India, these challenges are exacerbated by the influx of interstate long-distance rural migrants from other states (Kuzhiparambil, 2020) who are often more disadvantaged and whose recruitment may have rippling effects on the entire workforce. For instance, it is feared that vulnerable workers entering a workforce could result in downward pressure on wages for all workers.

Instead of making determined outreach to migrants, however, the mainstream labor movement in host regions within developing contexts has mostly overlooked these workers (Ford, 2006). Grassroots unions have, nonetheless, been at the vanguard of organizing these workers. Yet, the

mechanics of grassroots union organizing in emerging contexts – such as in GSCs – remain relatively underexplored. Considering that the organizing of even the general workforce in these settings has not received as much scholarly attention as it deserves, it is somewhat natural that the dynamics of migrant worker organizing persist to be even more obscure.

Unpacking how migrant organizing takes place is critical not only because the volume of internal long-distance migration in emerging economies such as India is in the millions (Beale, 2017) but also for the reason that much is yet to be learned about the internal migrant worker experience in these settings, where tens of thousands of migrants are employed (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015). Internal migrants in contexts such as India are, in fact, a unique category of workers; inasmuch as they are not disadvantaged by international employment-related restrictions, neither are they treated as equal citizens in host regions. For example, internal migrants may face dispossession where they may be perceived as outsiders – based on cultural and linguistic differences – and therefore exploitable. In such situations, disconcerting trends linked to amplified employer control of migrants, exploitation stemming from differences in languages spoken in source and host regions, and oppressive conditions forcing workers to turn over have only recently come to light (see Essay 1).

I therefore address the aforementioned limitations of existing research by articulating a case study of a grassroots union's endeavor for organizing migrant workers in a garment industrial cluster located in southern India. The research questions explored in this study are: how does a grassroots union organize vulnerable workers in a garment manufacturing GSC setting in South India? More specifically, what is the union's approach to engagement with the internal migrant demographic in the host region? What are the challenges related to organizing migrant workers in such settings? How does the union surmount these challenges despite overwhelming odds?

To do so, I bring in two strands of the literature. First, I analyze incipient scholarship from emerging GSC contexts focused on grassroots union organizing to help provide a backdrop for this case

study. I particularly leverage the concept of intimate organizing – solidarity building based on intensive interrelationships among unionists and workers often undertaken in informal, non-hierarchical, and communal spaces – emergent in this literature as a lens to investigate organizing efforts toward internal migrants.

Second, I examine union organizing of international migrants in industrialized contexts. Given the lack of scholarly interrogation on internal migrant organizing, union endeavors for organizing international migrants my provide a fair, although imperfect, approximation of the dynamics of internal migrant organizing. This is because of the partial overlap in the positionality of the two groups. For example, while internal migrants may not face citizenship/deportation-related concerns in the host regions, sociocultural differences such as a language barrier, the lack of local social support systems, and economic marginalization represent some overlapping experiences of both migrant categories.

Essentially, while each of these strands by itself is inadequate in analyzing grassroots union organizing of internal migrants in emerging contexts, they complement each other to build a foundation on which to place this case study. To that effect, this work complicates the union organizing literature as a whole by integrating a hitherto overlooked type of worker – interstate long-distance migrant - into the organizing dynamic. Second, it contributes to the evolving scholarship on grassroots organizing in emerging contexts by adding to a growing repository of case studies critical for theory building (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

In the sections that follow, I start by analyzing the two strands of literature identified earlier. I then provide a brief overview of internal economic migration in India. This is followed by an elaboration on the methodology and articulation of the findings. The essay concludes with a discussion about implications of this research.

Worker Contexts and Intimate Organizing in Global Supply Chains

The literature on the lived realities of workers in GSCs has emphasized the feminized nature of these workspaces (Jenkins & Blyton, 2017; Peng, 2011; Wright, 2001). Scholarship in this tradition has not only highlighted worker contexts and living conditions in industrial pockets but has also analyzed worker contestation in GSCs.

For instance, this work has shown that most GSC workers are migrants who moved from nearby villages into peri-/urban areas where most workplaces are located (Jenkins 2013; Quayyum, 2019). However, much of this work has looked at GSC contexts where these migrants are a majority of the workforce, live independently of the employer in rented households (Kabeer, 1991), and are socioculturally similar to residents of the host region (the term 'native workers' therefore is not out of order to be used for them). It has left out cases where migrants travel over long distances from one corner of a country to another and find themselves in a context they may not at all recognize. Similarly, while labor scholars looking at East Asian economies have studied migrants living in employer-provided dormitories subjected to spatial control, they are not disadvantaged by acute sociocultural differences such as a language barrier (see Ngai and Smith, 2007; Peng, 2011, for detailed accounts on Chinese dormitory regimes). Essentially, little has been explored in the labor literature on living/working conditions and union organizing of long-distance migrants coming in from significantly different contexts but from within the same country.

Regardless of the type of worker, nonetheless, socioeconomic subjugation predicated on female docility abounds in these settings. For example, wage theft, verbal/sexual harassment, and gendered surveillance and intimidation are prevalent (Chakravarthy, 2007; Neethi, 2012; Ruwanpura & Hughes, 2016). In workers' living spaces where spatial control is not exercised by the employer, community patriarchs step up the task to regulate 'loose' women employed in 'stigmatized' GSC occupations (Kabeer, 1991; Lynch, 2007).

GSCs are also blighted by the disproportionate power wielded by employers who use capital flight as threats to prevent unionization. Such threats are used in conjunction with intimidation of unionists (Jenkins and Blyton, 2017; Khanna, 2011) and have resulted in low union density across sectors that participate in GSCs (Quayyum, 2019). Unionization is further impeded by societal expectations of female docility (unionism is pugnacious and therefore not ideal for women), a relative lack of union awareness, or the perceived 'immorality' of militant action against the 'magnanimous' employer (Jenkins, 2013; Quayyum, 2019).

Notwithstanding the challenges, contemporary scholars have increasingly recognized the role of collective worker agency in shaping these spaces (Anner, 2015; Essay 1; Herod, 1997). As some scholars have pointed out, positive institutional change in GSCs – such as combating gender-based violence (Chatterjee - Jamhoor, 2023) or debating the minimum wage (Dutta, 2021) – cannot be fully attributed to higher-level phenomena such as inter/national regulation and unilateral formulation of codes of conduct by lead firms, a.k.a., multinational brands. Ground-up contestation by workers is an integral but inadequately accounted-for part of this process (Barrientos, 2020; Quayyum, 2019).

Yet, much of the organizing in GSCs remains relatively shrouded from view. In conjunction with women-led campaigns gaining an international reputation, however, emerging scholarship on women's agency and associational capability has begun challenging prevalent gender stereotypes of female docility (Khanna, 2011; Pangsapa, 2007). Research in global manufacturing hubs has articulated sustained radical campaigns women have waged, including undertaking collective action through mobilizing as grassroots unions (Dutta, 2018; Jenkins, 2013). These movements have grown despite the lack of support from male-dominated mainstream unions (Quayyum, 2019). Significantly, scholars have noted that the organizing approach of these entities is highly intimate, informal, and based on intensive relationship-building with prospective members (Pangsapa, 2007).

For example, close inter-worker linkages formed due to shared experiences of subjugation and prolonged labor in close physical proximity – resulting from what Dutta (2020) has called production 'line talk' – are radicalized for building collective solidarity. Preexisting kinship bonds between friends or acquaintances from the same hometown further catalyze this process (Quayyum, 2019).

As Jenkins (2013) has articulated, activists may also develop personalized ties with members by engaging with them during after-work hours, visiting their homes, and inducting them in self-help microcredit groups as part of informal organizing, which she has defined as the 'pre-union concept.' This means these aspects could be seen as prerequisites for more formal organizing as a subsequent step.

Importantly, any form of power differential is deemphasized in these spaces while at the same time workers are encouraged to share their experiences candidly (Dutta, 2021). This is facilitated by engaging with workers in spaces familiar to them and away from employer surveillance (Jenkins, 2013; Quayyum, 2019). Extensive interactions occurring between activists and workers in their communities, as a consequence, help forge enduring bonds built on trust and solidarity.

Moreover, these movements may also adopt a holistic perspective of member engagement, with their sphere of concern not confined to women's workplace issues but extending to household and community-level matters such as access to clean water, domestic violence, transportation, financial management, as well as general counseling (Jenkins, 2013; Pangsapa, 2007). Moreover, activists may also establish trust-based ties with women's families to thwart the gendered stigma around work or unionism nurtured within workers' communities (Quayyum, 2019). Scholars have argued these tactics have helped unions politicize workers for militant action (Dutta, 2021).

In essence, intimate organizing in communal non-hierarchical spaces help ground collective organizations in concerns relevant to members. More importantly, it also fosters a sense of trust in

workers toward the union and hopefulness that their exploitation can be reversed (Pangsapa, 2007). This aspect is key to why organizing success, although limited, has been achieved in notoriously antiunion GSC settings.

International Migrant Organizing in Mainstream Unions in Industrialized Contexts

Scholars have argued that the integration of issues of migration and labor unions in both scholarship and practice is a relatively recent phenomenon across the globe (Ford, 2019). In fact, the historically low levels of organization of migrant workers in host regions had been a result either of unions' failure to treat migrant workers as a potential power resource for union revitalization or of a reluctance to organize migrants specifically (Marino, 2012). However, the overwhelming salience of economic migration over the last several decades has highlighted the overlap between migration and labor issues, with scholars increasingly concurring that union engagement with migrants must be examined and that this cannot be done without integrating the understanding of labor migration and union revitalization strategies (Ford, 2004; Rogalewski, 2022).

As indicated earlier, however, research on migrant organizing has been mostly situated in advanced economies and has centered on migrant outreach by mainstream unions. Moreover, it has focused on international migrant organizing and not so much on internal migrants. Given that research on internal migrant organizing is still underdeveloped, examining that of international migrants provides an analytical starting point. This is made possible by some degree of overlap between the positionalities of both internal and international migrants, which result in common vulnerabilities such as the language barrier, lack of local support structures, magnified economic marginalization, etc. By extension, therefore, some organizing strategies are likely to be similar across the two groups. Scholars have accordingly proposed various frameworks to parse out union approaches for organizing international migrants. For example, Penninx and Roosblad (2000) have proposed that unions may face three forms of dilemmas with the arrival of immigrant workers: (i) whether or not

to resist immigration (Connolly et al., 2014; Ford, 2006; Milkman, 2011); (ii) whether to organize migrant workers – important particularly in the context of dwindling union membership (James and Karmowska, 2012) – or treat them as outsiders; and (iii) if migrant workers are organized, the concern pertains to the extent of resource use for integrating them in the union structure (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010; Mustchin, 2012). Relatedly, whether migrants' unique positionality should be emphasized or should they be treated just like a typical worker remains a critical consideration (Alberti et al., 2013; Connolly et al., 2014). Conceiving of migrant workers as migrants *and* workers, scholars have argued, has serious implications for the institutionalization of equitable approaches for not only organizing but also fostering union membership (Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010).

While this literature has underlined the complex choices unions need to make toward migrant outreach, the underlying spirit of this scholarship has been to support migrant organizing in ways that best safeguard their wellbeing. Despite the growing advocacy, however, compelling barriers to organizing migrants exist within union spaces.

Research has suggested that barriers to migrant organizing within unions stem from both external and internal factors. External obstacles include negative perceptions of unions among migrants and employer hostility (James & Karmowska, 2012; Milkman, 2011; Mundlak & Shamir, 2014). Language barriers further deter the unionization of migrants (Holgate, 2005; Rogalewski, 2022).

Internally, the absence of migrant representation structures, resistance from native workers, the transient nature of migrant employment, and concerns over cost-effectiveness pose additional challenges (Alberti et al., 2013; Fitzgerald & Hardy, 2010; Ford, 2006, 2019; Mustchin, 2012; Rogalewski, 2022). Centralized decision-making, role ambiguity among union officials, and a focus on membership growth at the expense of migrant interests compound these difficulties (Holgate, 2005; Marino, 2012; Rogalewski, 2022). This failure of traditional union conceptualization to address

the reality of migrant workers has perpetuated their marginalization to the fringes of the labor movement (Ford, 2006).

As the above literature has demonstrated, barriers to migrant organizing are compelling. But so are union responses to the challenges. Despite the multifaceted challenges unions face in organizing migrant workers, their proactive outreach and engagement can significantly augment the effectiveness of union-migrant interactions (Connolly et al., 2014; Marino, 2012). Research has highlighted that successful approaches to overcoming these challenges recognize migrants' intersecting identities as both migrants and workers (Marino, 2012). These approaches include tailored strategies such as negotiating special clauses in labor agreements, implementing quotas for migrant representation in union leadership, and establishing migrant-specific branches within unions (James and Karmowska, 2012; Marino, 2012).

Moreover, adopting inclusive ideologies that advocate for migrant rights beyond the workplace and viewing migrants as potential agents for union revitalization have proven conducive to migrant organizing (Rogalewski, 2022). Utilizing organizers from similar demographic backgrounds as migrants, leveraging migrant social networks, leaning into migrant stories, and providing education and skill development programs tailored to migrants' needs are also effective means of building trust and enhancing union membership among migrants (Holgate, 2005; Connolly et al., 2014; Hardy et al., 2012; Mustchin, 2012). Additionally, initiatives such as offering union materials in migrants' native languages and developing a shared language of solidarity further facilitate organization among migrant communities (James and Karmowska, 2012; Cioce et al., 2022).

In summary, the existing literature has emphasized the crucial role of unions' strategies in overcoming compelling barriers to migrant organizing. It has demonstrated that trust- and solidarity-building initiatives, accounting for migrants' contexts, migrant education and awareness campaigns,

in conjunction with the overall recognition of migrants as an important potential resource for collective resistance, have been proven effective in migrant organizing.

However, to reiterate, this comprehensive literature has still left much to be desired in terms of grassroots union organizing in emerging contexts due to its focus on mainstream unions in industrialized countries. Additionally, inasmuch as international migrants are a fair approximation for internal migrants from an analytical standpoint, the positionalities of the two migrant groups do not perfectly overlap. For example, threats of deportation, confiscation of important documents such as passports by employers, or internal migrants turning into 'illegal aliens' (Milkman, 2011; Miller, 2023) are less likely to be relevant to internal migrants than to their international counterparts. Consequently, organizing stratagies are not likely to perfectly coincide either. Evidently, it is critical to account for the internal migrant experience as it is unlike that of native workers or international migrants – while more marginalized than native workers, internal migrants may not be afflicted by concerns specific to international migrants. I thus turn in the next section to this under-analyzed category of workers in the context of the Indian unions.

Migrant Workers in the Indian Labor Movement

India is the world's fifth-largest economy. It has shown economic resilience even during global downturns and has enjoyed a positive outlook from global rating agencies. The country is also endowed with a massive demographic dividend – around half of India's population is below the age of 25. Despite these promising aspects, the last couple of decades have witnessed growing inequality within and between regions. Urban areas represent spaces where wealth is concentrated. This pulls economically poor, educationally deficient, and socially disadvantaged migrants from the hinterlands into Indian cities thereby triggering rural-to-urban economic migration to the tune of 10 million annually (Beale, 2017; Keshri and Bhagat, 2013; Nayyar and Kim, 2018).

India has also undertaken fundamental changes to its economic structure since the 1990s. The strong post-independence state has given way to deregulation and a market-oriented economy in which workers are increasingly denied rights (Bhattacharjee and Ackers, 2010). Such neoliberal developments have arguably further incentivized employers to hire precarious and pliable workers, including interstate migrants, who constitute a near-majority in several industrial regions (Pratap, 2022).

Labor unions, however, have played an underwhelming role in organizing these workers. As scholars have commented, most Indian labor union federations are intricately linked with political parties. This has arguably delimited organizational innovation and prevented unions from venturing into new sectors. Moreover, the labor movement broadly has been found wanting in or is apprehensive about reaching out to women and other marginalized worker groups (Bhowmick, 2009; Gillan and Lambert, 2013; Hill, 2009), including migrants, largely due to employer antagonism and high turnover (see Lahiri, 2017). In fact, migrants have been considered out of bounds for union organizing leading some to doubt whether the Indian mainstream labor movement may ever be able to represent them (Menon, 2020).

Despite countless odds, however, the last few decades have witnessed an emergence of grassroots worker movements focusing on organizing vulnerable workers in several industrial clusters (Hensman, 2011). The Indian labor movement, thus, is bifurcated: on the one hand, central union federations represent workers in the public sector and in regions where the political parties they are affiliated with are strong. On the other, there exist relatively unstable enterprise or regional unions representing worker groups overlooked by mainstream unions (ibid.).

These grassroots unions have essentially defined strategies to engage with disadvantaged workers such as migrants. Some of these unions have also worked in tandem with civil society organizations (CSOs) on ideological issues and innovative organizing tactics – for example, staging protests and

general strikes for better wages as well as social security coverage specifically for nonstandard workers. They, overall, have subscribed to a social justice agenda (Gillan and Lambert, 2013), also encompassing challenges to intersectional oppression.

Interestingly, these autonomous grassroots movements are shaping up just as unions at national and international levels have failed to uphold worker rights in various sectors, particularly in GSCs where the threat of capital flight is persistent (Jenkins, 2013; Lahiri, 2017; see also Li and Liu, 2018 for similar case studies in China). This paper highlights one such grassroots effort to challenge capital domination in the Indian garment industry. One of the critical ways in which it did so was through intimate organizing of internal migrant workers. I explain this further in the following sections starting with the methodology of the study.

Methodology

This essay is based on intensive qualitative fieldwork in a feminized garment industrial cluster in south India. Data were collected during each summer from 2017-2019 with two organizations – Apparel Workers Organization (AWO), and a CSO, WorkerRightsOrg1. AWO was a small grassroots union in the region and was selected as an organization of interest because it demonstrated resilience and innovation in organizing disadvantaged migrant workers in a vehemently antiunion setting. It worked closely with WorkerRightsOrg1, which strategically and ideologically supported AWO in upholding worker rights.

The focus of this research was to unpack the organizing practices of AWO particularly toward migrant workers. Data were collected through 31 interviews and participant observations with AWO members, representatives, and WorkerRightsOrg1 staff.

In all, 21 AWO migrant members, 2 activists, 2 union leaders and 4 WorkerRightsOrg1 staff participated in the interviews. Some participants were interviewed during every field visit to factor in changes in AWO organizing strategies over time. Interviews were done in English with

WorkerRightsOrg1 staff, whereas interactions with workers and AWO organizers took place in Hindi. One of the activists helped translate during interviews with union leaders who spoke the local language. Observations took place in the union office and living spaces of male migrants where non-residents were occasionally allowed to visit.

Trust-building was an important aspect of this research. According to Rienharz's (1992) recommendations, specific steps were taken to build trust with the unionists. First, I approached AWO leaders and activists through common contacts at WorkerRightsOrg1. Doing so granted me access to AWO members. Second, I requested for a trusted activist to be present during interviews with workers. This person was indeed instrumental in helping workers feel comfortable during interviews. Moreover, I arranged for many interactions to take place in the AWO office. This was a familiar environment for workers and also made interviewees more comfortable. These strategies helped garner rich data.

The MAXQDA software package was used for inductive coding of data. Appropriate concepts and themes were identified based on which pertinent research questions, in conjunction with the existing literature, were crafted (Saldaña, 2009). More importantly, these themes were the building blocks based on which the following account of AWO and its engagement with migrant workers was formulated. It may be noted that this essay used pseudonyms for all entities to maintain confidentiality.

Research context: Pulling Back the Curtain

The Indian garment sector is highly feminized (Mezzadri, 2010) with women constituting 80% to 90% of the workforce in some regions. As a result, grassroots unions, just as suggested earlier, have filled in the vacuum of worker organizing left open by the hesitation of the mainstream labor movement to engage with garment workers.

AWO was one such small union founded in the early 2010s. Given the extent of feminization of the sector, it focused on women's organizing and intentionally invested efforts toward female upliftment more broadly. It was primarily a feminist union and vehemently campaigned against gender discrimination and sexual harassment at the workplace, as well as domestic violence at home. In practice, it subscribed to the intimate organizing approach elucidated earlier.

AWO originally began organizing native workers and eventually built a strong foundation on which to propagate collective voice. This worker group eventually became aware of their rights and had a relatively lower tolerance for exploitation than migrants. Due to a resource crunch the union faced often, membership expanded slowly but steadily, and at the time of writing the union had about 6,000 members – the size of the total workforce was 600,000 – spread across several factories.

A few years after it was founded, however, AWO also initiated migrant worker outreach efforts after migration into the region became significant (as migrants comprised approximately 10% of the workforce). Migrant organizing eventually culminated into a separate branch – although not instituted formally – within the union (see also James and Karmowska, 2012 for similar phenomena pertaining to Polish migrants in the UK).

To reiterate from Essay 1, most migrants had moved into the region from northern and eastern Indian states. They belonged to economically disadvantaged ethnic groups/subcastes and language/dialect groups, and came from agrarian backgrounds. Most had graduated high school and a small minority had post-secondary degrees. Furthermore, migrants were fluent in Hindi, which is also the most widely spoken language in India. However, Hindi was relatively much less spoken in the host region thereby causing communication problems between migrants and natives. There were also major differences in the dietary habits and cuisines in the source and host regions. These socio-economic and cultural differences made many migrants feel like misfits in the destination region.

Once employed in the host region, migrants lived in employer-provided hostels. These spaces were gendered, which was reflected in the fact that women and men resided in separate living quarters. There were more women's than men's hostels. This was because the share of women was about 80% within the migrant population. Women's hostels, moreover, were closely monitored. Rules in these spaces included: restrictions on the use of cellphones to an hour each day, curfew hours, designated time for recreation, surveillance of common areas, etc. (see Essay 1). Hostels were oftentimes located near the workplace. This enabled workers to commute to the factory on foot although security personnel almost always escorted them during this time.

Migrants were also discriminated against at the workplace. They earned lower wages than natives and were more likely to be verbally/physically abused by management. Employers severely admonished or even dismissed workers for issues as insignificant as talking to unionists. Social isolation resulting from living away from loved ones was also commonly experienced. Trepidations linked to employer antagonism compounded the marginalization of migrants, which often also led to high turnover rates.

Despite seemingly insurmountable challenges, AWO led the way in migrant organizing, and was the only local union (among three in total) that had a membership of as much as 400 migrants at the time of data collection. This might seem a small number but was still significant because of two primary reasons.

First, the excruciatingly challenging context represented strong headwinds against union organization. This was apparent in the relative lack of migrant organizing success of other unions despite attempts to do so. Second, considering that the goal of this research was to contribute to our knowledge of how grassroots unions organized migrants, the organizing *practices* rather than the outcome was the fulcrum of this work. The next section sheds light on organizing barriers and process.

Organizing Migrant Workers in a South Indian Garment Hub

Challenges to Migrant Organizing

It was apparent to AWO that migrant organizing was arguably one of its most arduous undertakings. Challenges to migrant outreach stemmed from employer actions such as antiunionism, amplified surveillance (tied mainly to workers' gender and migrant identities – see Essay 1), and the sequestering of migrants. Aspects of migrants' contexts such as hesitation to interact with 'strangers' in a distant land, transient economic engagement in the region, and language barrier also posed barriers to organizing.

To begin with, employer retribution towards unionists or coercion to prevent unionization posed significant organizing challenges. Threats to prevent unionization included the possibility of capital flight. As Krishna, an AWO activist asserted, workers were apprehensive about employer intimidation and pretended everything was hunky-dory at the workplace when that was not the case.

> …if she tells me directly that she has a problem and wants to become a member, then someone who listens to it might go and complain to the management that she was talking to someone regarding the union, she wants to take the membership and she was telling about problems in the factory…then she can be targeted. She can be thrown out of the hostel or work, or they might call her parents and complain, she might be abused,…she might be given more work than her target……they are scared of all this, so they lie. They say everything is alright, they don't need the union and there is no need to take membership… to make them understand and bring them to the union takes a long time. (Krishna, AWO activist)

These fears were exacerbated by allegations about kidnappings and murders of unionists circulating in the migrant community.

Aside from intimidation, employers also exercised spatial control to surveil and regulate workers in hostels (see Essay 1). These restrictions not only prevented female migrants from participating in union activities, but the constraints also produced a time crunch due to which workers prioritized other essential activities unrelated to unionization.

Interviewees also reported mutual suspicion between native and migrant workers. There were instances where native workers believed migrants posed a threat to their jobs and wages, whereas migrants felt intimidated because they were a regional minority.

> …if you look at the local worker's perspective, maybe they feel it's a threat that their jobs might go with so many migrants coming. I'm not telling that it is the case. It could be one of the things. At other times the migrants might feel that oh! these local workers are [out]numbering us or…I mean if you belong to a place, you think you are an authority to that place, right. (Priyamvada, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff member)

These preconceived notions were further reinforced by employers' treatment of migrants as a captive group. Management prevented migrants from gaining awareness of workplace entitlements by disallowing interaction with native workers (as indicated earlier, native workers were more aware of labor rights).

> But I don't understand what they tell the local people. This is the main thing. When they make announcements after our working hours end, they call the Hindi speaking people separately. They conduct meetings in Hindi where they talk about our payment. They don't tell us how much the native workers get. (Meera, migrant worker)

> Right now [migrants] do have a problem. But they are not aware of the problem. Once they mingle with local workers, only then they will understand what they are facing. Since they are not mingling, they do not know what they are going through, what are the benefits they are entitled to. They are not aware of all that. (Krishna, AWO activist)

Barriers to social interactions in the workplace thus begot mutual suspicion between migrant and local workers. The sequestering of migrants, in fact, also afforded employers the ability to maintain a native-migrant wage differential and withhold information about worker rights from migrants. Employers enforced such segregation through surveillance and discipline. This intentional policy of fostering native-migrant rivalry thus posed compelling challenges to solidarity between workers.

Migrants' contexts did not make organizing easier either. For instance, many migrant women exercised skepticism toward unknown individuals. This included activists who accosted workers for sharing information about the union. This attitude was rooted in cultural considerations and how young girls were raised back in the countryside.

I mean women are barred from speaking openly with anyone in the village. There are no associations as such. They are not allowed to go to an association, talk to an unknown person, meet an unknown person and all that. (Krishna, AWO activist)

Not engaging with strangers was therefore a preferred strategy for avoiding potentially 'unsafe' situations. As unionists were also perceived as strangers, their overtures were less likely to be reciprocated to by migrants. The lack of social support in the host region and prior knowledge about unionism further reinforced doubts about unionists' intentions in the migrant mind.

Additionally, migrants treated garment employment as a means to an end – particularly, earning enough to support siblings' education, or pay for one's own or a sibling's wedding. They returned home after these goals were achieved. Many migrants also left for home earlier in case working in garment factories became unbearable. Oftentimes, they forfeited benefits and/or settlement payments (i.e., backpay) they were entitled to upon quitting a job.

In most cases, they work for around 1 or 2 years. None of them work for 5 years. They gather enough money for their wedding and leave for their village. They don't ask about the employee benefit...They leave a lot of benefits. (Krishna, AWO activist)

When someone comes and works here for [a short time], and if she doesn't like the environment here, then she will go back home and won't come back again. This is why organizing them is a challenge. There is no guarantee on the length of time they will be here and whether they will come back at all. (Jaya, female migrant worker)

Essentially, the length of stay of migrants was highly unpredictable. This disincentivized workers from unionizing as union membership was seen by many as disruptive and unnecessary (see Mundlak and Shamir, 2014).

It was also noticeable that there was limited cultural/language overlap between migrants and the unionists (given that local workers constituted the majority membership in AWO). Intriguingly, migrants emphasized that whether they trusted someone depended on commonality of language. Essentially, shared language catalyzed trust. Since activists did not speak Hindi when migrant organizing was initiated, they struggled with migrant outreach because of the language barrier.

…also language was a barrier. The other thing was the union did not start [organizing] activities because…they did not know how to communicate in Hindi and the workers only knew Hindi. (Priyamvada, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff member)

It thus soon became apparent that migrant outreach was not possible without addressing the language issue.

AWO therefore formulated appropriate strategies to confront this problem in addition to the other impediments articulated above. I examine these strategies below.

A Way Forward: How to Organize Migrants?

Despite the concerns articulated above, AWO was fairly successful with migrant organizing. It did struggle a fair deal in the initial months but revamped its organizing approach to better counteract the bleak prospects for organizing success. This proactive adaptation was reflected in strategies predicated on intimate organizing of migrants.

When unionists initially approached migrants near the factory or hostel gates to collect information about their living and working conditions, they were met with little success. While most migrants were either hushed away by hostel wardens or security personnel escorting them, others simply avoided interacting with unionists who were seen as strangers.

Additionally, activists and leaders had not realized at that point that not speaking the migrants' language was hurting any prospects of establishing meaningful relationships with migrants.

As a consequence, AWO's migrant outreach was divided into two phases. In the first phase, AWO catered to non-economic needs of migrants – such as leisurely activities – to establish a support base or 'critical mass' with which to begin organizing. This was done to better understand migrant grievances and accordingly devise effective strategies for migrant organizing (see Mustchin, 2012). AWO's approach in this phase also involved fostering or even building on inter-worker relationships created at the workplace.

The second phase focused on more active tactics for augmenting membership. Specifically, AWO activists: subverted employer control through 'under the radar' engagement with workers; offset native-migrant mistrust by bringing about more interactions between the two groups; recruited volunteer-organizers from the migrant workforce to capitalize on friend/ kinship ties for organizing; and added members by resolving grievance even for nonmembers.

Tactically, the union discontinued phase one and moved to the second when a critical mass was reached. After this point, only phase two practices were applied to organize new workers. In that sense, the two phases were applied in a linear fashion. AWO's strategies, as a whole, were a comprehensive approach to intimate organizing as I show below.

Phase One: Establishing an Initial Support Base

Early migrant outreach by AWO continued for over a year but met with little success in light of the organizing barriers indicated earlier. Meanwhile, it also became clear that cultural resources – such as Hindi-speaking union representatives having a similar demographic profile as migrants – were an important social glue and imperative for worker organizing. AWO therefore hired an activist, Krishna, who also spoke Hindi as her second language (see Holgate, 2005, for an example from the UK). Rahul, another male activist who had been working with AWO for a few years, also spoke Hindi. However, Krishna was a younger female and in that regard was an 'intentional' hire. AWO's engagement with migrants began with the motivation to understand their grievances. This was a relatively low-profile activity involving a handful of workers (given that the majority was subjected to severe restrictions) who showed receptiveness to union activists. They were accosted outside of the factory and requested to participate in 'information sharing' sessions. This approach initiated the migrant worker campaign. AWO noticed that speaking migrants' language achieved a much-anticipated breakthrough and helped with gaining trust as the following interaction with Savitri, a female migrant worker, revealed:

Savitri: We thought [Krishna] is on our side as she was talking in Hindi. That's why we trusted her.

Interviewer: Most people don't speak in Hindi here, their mother tongue is not Hindi. So when someone speaks to you in Hindi here, how do you feel?

Savitri: I feel that he/she is from our region.

Despite seemingly overcoming the language barrier, however, the union struggled to generate committed union engagement from migrants. The slow progress prompted a radical shift in organizing tactics to generate worker interest.

The union soon began screening Hindi movies, sharing Hindi newspapers and books, and hosting boardgame competitions in its office (also called 'worker resource center' or 'WRC'). Activists invited workers in groups – lest they feel unsafe while in a new environment – during the limited free time they received every week. This also enabled unionists to engage in active interpersonal interactions during the sessions. Unionists inquired with workers about issues at the workplace and hostel. Workers were also invited to share non-work-related grievances such as navigating in the new locale, access to food, etc.

Nonetheless, there still was uncertainty around the sustainability of this piecemeal approach and whether constant contact could be maintained with workers. AWO zeroed in on an innovative strategy to incentivize workers to return to the WRC. They started dividing the movie-watching sessions into two to three parts. Specifically, each new movie was shown only in part during a watching session such that workers felt enticed to return for the remaining parts. This 'tantalization' tactic worked very well, the unionists asserted, to maintain sustained contact with workers. Similarly, the idea of lending out books seamlessly aligned with this approach because workers came back to return the books they had borrowed. Furthermore, free meals were also provided to all attendees.

So once [workers] came we asked, "What do you all like to do?" They said, "We like to watch movies." So we were like, "Which movie do you want to watch?" We had to show them half the movie that week then next week again show them the other half. Bring some books for them to read, bring newspapers of their language. And say, "Take it and go. It's okay. Come

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back next week and give it." So at least they'll come back, no, to give it? Then have some games like Carrom, Ludo, all this there. (Priyamvada, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff member)

While popular movies were initially shown, AWO also screened documentaries highlighting socioeconomic issues such as sexual harassment and wage theft in garment factories. Discussions that followed helped create a sense of self-awareness about migrants' own positionality.

> We had some small social awareness short movies and then we also had a small discussion about that. For example,...one week we had a social awareness movie about...I think sexual harassment. (Kavita, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff member)

Importantly, these conversations also aided AWO in understanding migrants' issues as well as built solidarity as experiences verbalized in these sessions were shared by most others. The purpose of these conversations was also to reinforce friend/kinship ties that preexisted in the worker community (see also Essay 1) as workers observed friends and colleagues affirm their experiences. Evidently, these interactions were treated by unionists as a precursor to formulating more substantive strategies for migrant organizing.

As part of this process, migrants were exposed to problems faced by all workers more broadly, along with the concept of unionism as an antidote to worker grievances. Such use of discursive tools leading up to collective organization was analogous to that articulated by Jenkins (2013). Workers were thus eased into the idea of unionization after the initial barrier of distrust was breached. This was arguably also when the first union advocates among migrants were born.

However, inasmuch as AWO was successful in arousing initial worker interest in unionism, it still needed substantive organizing tactics for membership augmentation. The first phase ended once the initial worker base was established. As I demonstrate below, this phase was followed by the second in which the union embarked upon a more active organizing endeavor. That said, intimate organizing remained the bedrock throughout this process.

Phase Two: Active Organizing Tactics

This next phase was geared toward actively expanding union membership. It comprised circumventing spatial control of employers, developing native-migrant solidarity, training volunteer-organizers, and resolving grievances as a pre-membership tactic. These activities were not mutually exclusive but took place in conjunction with each other – this simultaneity helped AWO with a multifaceted outreach to migrants. Importantly, these complementary activities were undertaken through intimate organizing in which AWO's emphasis lay on relationship building. I uncover these approaches below.

Circumventing Spatial Control of Employers

Given that migrants resided in hostels, unionists realized early on that working around spatial restrictions was indispensable for worker outreach. Although this was a difficult terrain to navigate, AWO developed strategies for sidestepping spatial control.

Unionists had only a few minutes to interact with migrants as they emerged from the workplace in the evenings to go back to the hostel. Activists cashed in on this narrow window of time to pass on to workers handbills in Hindi bearing contact information and preliminary information about AWO. The escorting security personnel prevented comprehensive conversations with workers and were vigilant about the presence of unionists nearby. The handbills, however, were tiny enough to fit in a worker's fist and be hidden easily from the security personnel.

As noted below, some workers contacted activists from the hostel during the designated time for cellphone use to learn more about the union and discuss their workplace issues. While it was not exactly clear what the contents of the handbills were, activists treated the brief conversations with workers as opportunities for building trust by committing to help resolve workers' grievances.

> Sometimes, they are accompanied by a representative or a hostel-in-charge who scold the workers if they see them speaking to us. So we are scared of that too. This is why we do everything in a hush hush way. Sometimes, after going to the hostel, they call us. They get an

hour to call people. So they call that time and discuss their problems with us…(Krishna, AWO activist)

Krishna's strategy in these conversations was to 'follow up continuously' with those receptive to this engagement. She noted that workers felt comfortable sharing their experiences as these one-on-one relationships developed.

> Whatever is the problem – family related or something related to their friends – I first listen to the problem, understand it and then give a solution. So somewhere they have started to think of me as a friend. They have developed a bond with me… They think of me as a sister… If they face any problem, they have someone they can trust. (Krishna, AWO activist)

Sometimes, workers expressed distress about treatment in the factory or loneliness without family support as demonstrated in the quote above. Krishna, in such circumstances, presented herself as a surrogate 'elder sister' to provide emotional support. Sometimes, she also spoke with workers' families to reassure them of their son's or daughter's wellbeing. These elements displayed Krishna's appreciation that the individuals she engaged with were not just workers but were holistic multidimensional beings.

Subsequently, a web of interdependencies gradually developed around activist-worker conversations in that workers continued supplying information to Krishna about happenings at the factory or hostel, and in return, received protection through union membership. This mutual trust and symbiosis were important outcomes of intimate organizing.

Developing Native-Migrant Solidarity

AWO perceived fostering substantive relationships between native and migrant workers as imperative because a fragmented workforce resulting from mutual distrust was in contradistinction to the idea of worker collectivism. AWO thus designed initiatives for building solidarity between native and migrant workers (see also Marino, 2012, for similar phenomena in the EU context). The key catalyst behind this initiative was the fact that native workers were highly aware of their basic rights at the workplace and therefore could support migrants when issues arose in the factory.

The union therefore created a platform on which native workers and migrants from the same workplace engaged with each other.

> …the point was that to also educate the local workers that see you have migrant workers and if there is [an] issue, since you know…more, you are supposed to help a co-worker. That was one of the purpose[s]. Also to get them on the same platform to say that we are all workers at the end of the day. (Priyamvada, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff member)

> Another workshop which we are doing mostly is solidarity between local and migrant worker. We call both local and migrant workers in one meeting and introduce them to each other. They get to know about each other's problems and ensure that everyone raises their voice together for any issue. We give them awareness about how they can join hands together… Local workers are somewhat knowledgeable about the law and they can teach [migrants] about it and then these people will raise their voice too… That is why we call both local and migrant workers from the same company and conduct solidarity programs. (Krishna, AWO activist)

AWO informally called this initiative 'solidarity meetings'. Activities in solidarity meetings involved stereotype-breaking, role playing, team building, and cultural exchanges. AWO was intentional about keeping the meetings interactive instead of following the dreary practice of having a speaker give a speech to the audience.

During on such meeting, the audience was divided into mixed teams of migrants and native workers from the same workplaces. A member from each team was given a stereotype to enact, which the teammates were asked to associate with a certain gender. For instance, a worker pretended to be a nurse, to which their teammates yelled 'female'. This was when the unionists intervened and asked that team to reflect collectively on whether they were inadvertently perpetuating any gender stereotypes. When the team members expressed doubts that they were, the unionists offered that a man could also work as a nurse and caregiving need not only be a woman's responsibility. These forms of communal learning and sharing of 'aha' moments, according to the meeting conveners, intended to build feelings of collectivism and belongingness to the same 'cohort' among workers. Similarly, another activity aimed at role-playing. It involved the enactment of scenarios wherein one member of the team assumed the role of an abusive supervisor, with instructions to direct their misconduct toward a migrant worker. The idea behind the activity was to prompt discussions and

observations regarding the appropriate interventions by native workers in such situations. The teams competed, with recognition bestowed upon the group demonstrating the most effective intervention strategies. The overarching goal of the activity, however, was to instill a deeper appreciation for cultural sensitivity and solidarity within the workplace. Reflective practices were encouraged post-activity, encouraging participants to contemplate optimal responses in similar real-life situations, thereby promoting a culture of inclusivity and mutual support.

These meetings, in essence, helped native workers better understand migrant vulnerabilities and alleviate suspicions about migrants replacing the locals. The union also encouraged native workers to not only shield migrants at the workplace but also provide them with extra-workplace assistance – such as language skills etc.

> That's the point because it adds to their strength. See [migrants] are a footloose group of workers. Now, they have no connections here. They don't have language skills here, they don't know how institutions work here. So its fully logical that they have relationship with the workers here within the factory, outside the factory. In the factory definitely the local workers have more connections, more social basis here. So supporting the migrant workers is a natural choice for the unions and the worker committees. (Madhava, WorkerRightsOrg1 staff member)

WorkerRightsOrg1 staff members asserted that this initiative transcended cultural barriers to a large extent and enabled migrants to feel supported. Additionally, it also demolished perceptions of one group benefiting at the expense of the other while also encouraging the notion of all workers being equal. Such non-hierarchical relationships between workers demonstrated the union's intimate organizing approach at work.

Training Volunteer-organizers

AWO encouraged migrants in its initial membership base to engage with migrant coworkers about the union. This practice of volunteer organizing was highly efficient considering the small size – and resource constraints – of the union, in that much of the outreach burden was offloaded from activists onto volunteer-organizers. Building on lateral connections among the membership to shape

collective solidarity was, in fact, an integral aspect of intimate organizing (see also Quayyum, 2019). Expectedly, mutual trust and friend/kinship bonds between migrant union members and coworkers resulted in the expansion of union membership.

> …[migrant members] tell their friends that they had come to our office…This is how [workers] strengthen the association…they…bring other women. They do whatever they can…after coming here, they come to know a man from their village and that man comes here, so the girls start coming with that man. Then if a girl is already working here and is a member and she gets other women from her village, then these new girls come through the girl. If one has a friend who is a member of the union, then the girls come through her. It happens this way. People come through someone, actually. (Krishna, AWO activist)

It not only undercut the distrust of migrants towards the union but also formed a self-stoking cycle in which members advertised the union to coworkers, who carried the baton forward. Krishna also stated that new members were trained on how to introduce the union to coworkers. Essentially, workers connected coworkers with AWO activists about any grievances they may have faced at the workplace. Alternatively, volunteer-organizers proactively broached the topic of unionism with those in the presumed inner circle of friends/kin. In both situations, they commonly emphasized overlapping, and at times highly sensitive, experiences of workplace subordination, which, in some cases, led to trusting conversations with potential members. This helped humanize the discussions at the outset. Once volunteer-organizers connected coworkers with AWO, activists provided prospective members with information about the union and further exposed them to the intimate organizing ecosystem to transition potential members into actual ones.

AWO also paid particular attention to identifying and nurturing worker leaders who showed initiative in organizing. These leaders were critical in accessing spaces – such as hostels – where union activists were prohibited from entering. Some members were particularly committed to becoming volunteer-organizers upon imbibing the spirit of collective action or in case they were beneficiaries of grievance redressal by the union. Some workers also considered it their 'duty' to bring in coworkers into the union and made volunteer-organizing a part of their routine activities.

There are many garment factories [here], but not all workers know about [AWO]. I think it is my duty to bring them here, tell them about [AWO] and solve their problems…I felt that by taking membership in [AWO], I have done something right…I'm on the right track. I want to bring more boys here and show them the right path so that they don't face…problems. A lot of people come from small villages here who don't know anything. It is our duty to provide them with [awareness]. We should tell them that we are members and how it has benefitted us. We should tell them to join too [so] their problems will get solved. We should request them to bring more people here. (Amitabh, male migrant worker)

One should help people in need. That person is also a worker like me. He will have problems like me…everyone has problems. Like my problem is getting resolved by getting associated with the union, his problem will also get solved. So why shouldn't I help him? I should help him. That is why I tell people about the union so that by associating with it, they also get some amount of help. (Anurag, male migrant worker)

Interestingly, a majority of the volunteer-organizers were men although many members introduced to the union through male coworkers were women. These women often were from the same village as the volunteer-organizers. A small share of these women also engaged in volunteer-organizing, albeit less overtly.

Essentially, AWO partly delegated the important responsibility of intimate organizing on to volunteer-organizers. They initiated intimate organizing on the union's behalf by leveraging interpersonal ties they shared within the migrant community. As indicated above, activists subsequently strived to mold this preexisting network of interpersonal linkages into a group of active members.

Resolving Grievances as a Pre-membership Tactic

The union vehemently advocated for labor rights and provided legal as well as moral support to workers whose rights had been violated. An innovative approach of the union to build membership, however, was also to redress workers' grievances even *before* they became members.

As Krishna emphasized, membership need not be a prerequisite for assisting workers.

Then we have to hear about [workers'] problems and provide solutions. We have to do this without membership too.

Unionists also asserted that workers did not necessarily seek union membership to preempt workplace issues but became members ex-post – i.e., after encountering problems at the workplace or getting their issues resolved. AWO thus built a brand of grievance-based unionism in which redressing grievances became one of the key aspects around which membership expansion took place.

Essentially, activists engaged with aggrieved workers by constructing narratives around providing a support system. In a few cases, unionists occasionally assisted workers with filing police complaints against the employer, mediated with state authorities on workers' behalf, supported their right to strike, and provided legal support with court proceedings.

As an example, Anurag cited how AWO helped his coworker Amitabh get his backpay when he quit after the untimely death of his father. Although employers oftentimes – and as some interviewees argued, intentionally – took months, if not years, to give workers backpay, AWO got Amitabh his overdue wages in a matter of days.

> It's true that…[his] settlement was cleared and the union helped him with it. Since then I got the trust that the labor union has certain powers and they can help us get our benefits.

In other instances, the union facilitated workers in securing alternative employment prospects and/or suitable residential accommodations subsequent to termination from employment at the factory and/or displacement from the hostel.

> [AWO] helped us get paid when they wouldn't pay us in the factory. That's why we started trusting them. (Banu, female migrant worker)

Essentially, AWO used grievance resolution as an effective pre-membership tactic. This strategy, however, was also instrumental in helping activists build personalized relationships with aggrieved workers. The process of empathizing with Amitabh's situation and assisting laid-off workers with finding living accommodations required trust-based relationship building and considering workers as holistic – and not just economic – beings. It involved partnering with workers on equal footing and

reemphasizing, according to Rahul, that 'the union always worked with and for [workers]' or that AWO considered worker wellbeing of paramount importance. This was the crux of intimate organizing practiced by the union.

Overall, these endeavors inspired confidence in workers and enabled them to collectively challenge employer exploitation rather than diffidently exiting the employment relationship. AWO's organizing tactics, it was apparent, were not only founded on interpersonal support but also, in some cases, prolonged workers' employment tenures in the industry As Rani, a female migrant worker, emphasized:

> [Krishna] had told us that the union…has been formed to help the workers…That's why there is no need to be scared of anyone. Whatever happens,…they will help us. That's how we had trust in the union.

Arguably, AWO's goal was to shape the idea among workers that the union was a comprehensive 'support system' rather than just a means to redress workplace grievances. These approaches, encompassed within intimate organizing, not only led to building trust but also propounded the perception that the union protected against employer exploitation. As news about AWO's achievements spread far and wide, AWO's membership base expanded alongside.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented above underline AWO's strategies for organizing migrant workers in a superlatively antagonistic context. Evidently, this research demonstrated that effective organizing can indeed manifest in settings written off by mainstream unions as particularly difficult to organize (see Lynch, 2007).

In the context described here, employer practices were characterized by stringent surveillance and control exercised over workers' bodies. Restrictions imposed by employers applied at the workplace and extended into hostel spaces. Employer control was further facilitated by segmenting the workforce into native and migrant groups to avoid cross-pollination of a collectivistic ethos.

Furthermore, challenges linked to the inherent nature of migration – such as distrust toward 'strangers' (including unionists), the temporal nature of migrants' engagement in garment employment, and the language barrier – further inhibited interactions between AWO and migrants. Yet, AWO formulated strategies to surmount these barriers and defied the odds stacked against its organizing endeavors. Its comprehensive strategies involved a two-phase process. At the outset, the first phase entailed AWO recognizing the value of speaking migrants' language. The union hired a younger Hindi-speaking female activist to demonstrate a serious commitment to the idea of similar background/demographics of activists and workers as a social glue. The unionists soon established relationships based on the principles of intimate organizing with a small group of trusting migrants and learned about the challenges they faced as migrants and workers. This was particularly actualized through group discussions and open exchanges that surfaced overlapping narratives of workplace exploitation to build solidarity. This phase helped AWO to formulate more active organizing strategies in phase two.

The second phase included a number of strategies to surmount the organizing barriers. For instance, AWO was able to sidestep employer control by discreetly engaging with workers. Activists reached out to workers where they were and facilitated conversations in ways that enabled workers to interact with them clandestinely (during the allotted period for phone use in hostels). Unionists also worked towards reducing the distrust between native and migrant workers by facilitating intensive engagement between the two groups. Additionally, they tackled misconceptions about unionism by creating a self-propagating mechanism through which migrant members advertised the union to coworkers. Organizing was also made possible by granting nonmembers access to union benefits, thereby enabling them to 'test out' collectivism before signing up for membership. Importantly, these tactics involved critical aspects of intimate organizing, viz., building non-hierarchical spaces for

the free exchange of ideas or experiences, fostering one-on-one relationships within the union akin to friend/kinship ties, and perceiving members as multidimensional beings.

While these tactics helped AWO build migrant membership, the associated findings also unpacked two critical theoretical implications for scholarship on union organizing broadly and grassroots union organizing in emerging GSC contexts more specifically (see Ford, 2019; Marino, 2012). First, this is one of the first studies to extensively document the strategies of a union catering to internal migrant workers. Most of the extant literature has focused on union organizing of international migrants (e.g., Alberti et al., 2013; Connolly, 2014; Fitzgerald and Hardy, 2010). While studies focusing on internal migrants do exist, they have emphasized migrant vulnerabilities and not union organizing of internal migrants as such (Ngai & Smith, 2007; Peng, 2011; Siu, 2017). This research, however, underscores a union's efforts to organize internal migrants. This is critical because, as this work has shown, some strategies for organizing international migrants may be similar to those employed vis-à-vis internal migrants. However, organizing practices are not likely to perfectly overlap in light of some differences in vulnerabilities experienced by the two groups in the host region. For example, internal migrants may not face oppression related to citizenship issues or the possibility of deportation unlike international migrants but may still be challenged by the language barrier, or the lack of local social support similar to that experienced by their international counterparts. To that effect, internal migrants may be more receptive to union organizing to be able to challenge employer subjugation. These findings, therefore, demonstrate the need to direct attention of future research on union engagement with internal migrants. For example, scholars could more deeply examine the unique positionality of internal migrants and how that influences union-organizing strategies across multiple contexts. Doing so directly addresses Tapia and Alberti's (2018) call for attention to a range of migrant vulnerabilities, and thereby plugs a shortcoming in

existing work, which highlights union efforts for organizing locally based workers and international migrants but not internal migrants per se.

Second, this work also highlights the mechanisms of grassroots union organizing in an emerging GSC context. Research on vulnerabilities of workers employed in such settings abounds (Dutta, 2019; Jenkins, 2013; Mezzadri, 2010; Miles, 2016) while that on organizing by grassroots unions, which are the predominant type of unions in these contexts, is relatively scant (for exceptions, see Jenkins, 2013; Quayyum, 2019). While this might be because of the dearth of unions in GSCs (Anner, 2019), it might also be that unions exist but have had limited organizing success and have therefore remained obscured from view. Alternatively, they simply have so far been ignored. Regardless, this essay delineates the mechanisms for internal migrant worker organizing in one such setting and paves the path for additional theory-building about how unions can still undertake organizing in unsympathetic GSC settings. For instance, future research can consolidate additional case studies (see Flyvbjerg, 2006) focused on organizing such as this one to help build a taxonomy of organizing approaches. This tool could be used by scholars and practitioners alike to possibly recommend strategies or organizing processes to be adopted for particular circumstances. Possibly, these analytical insights can also be extended beyond grassroots unions in GSCs to unions in emerging contexts in general given the relative dearth of existing labor scholarship on union organizing in these settings.

That said, organizing in these contexts remains a tall order, and whether even relatively successful unions such as AWO have achieved considerable breakthroughs in the industry is moot. Evidently, the interpretation of AWO's success is subjective and presents the classic 'glass half empty or half full' debate.

For one, it can be argued that AWO still has much to achieve – particularly in terms of expanding its migrant membership base from the existing 400 migrant members (total union membership was

6000 when this research was done). The small size of the union, in fact, constrained the amount of resources at its disposal and hamstrung, although did not fully stifle, its ability to engage in intimate organizing. For example, union-worker relationship building could not reach a point where unionists gained a comprehensive understanding of factors militating against continued union participation of migrant women after membership was acquired (see Essay 3).

Nonetheless, an alternative perspective is that organizing 400 migrants is a laudable achievement given that organizing in coercive environments exemplified by GSCs is a formidable task (Anner, 2019). According to this standpoint, AWO provided much-needed optimism and paved the way for how unions can gain a foothold in difficult settings.

Irrespective of one's perception, however, AWO's efforts in migrant organizing served as a beacon for collective empowerment in a trying context. Despite its relatively small size and constrained resources, the outcome of the union's efforts remains a significant milestone. This accomplishment indeed highlights that although organized labor has a long way to go, its destination may be closer than it appears to be.

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ESSAY 3: GENDER-BLINDNESS AND ITS DISCONTENTS: THE CURIOUS CASE OF AN INDIAN FEMINIST TRADE UNION

Examinations of impediments to women's union participation in export-oriented feminized contexts have remained confined to causes relating to employer antagonism and patriarchal mainstream union movements. Additionally, studies of unionism in export settings have stressed gendered mobilization while deemphasizing how other aspects of women's identities such as internal (within-country) migration status affect union involvement in these contexts. In this study, I examine migrant workers' engagement in a small feminist trade union active in an export-oriented garment industrial cluster in South India. Through in-depth fieldwork, I counterintuitively find that despite its feminist ideology the union's internal processes precluded migrant women's union participation to a greater degree compared to that of their male counterparts. I interrogate these dynamics using a qualitative inductive approach and articulate how migration status as a novel domain of gender blindness overlapping with class adversely affected migrant women's union involvement. This 'critical' case also has important practical implications for labor's ability to uphold the rights of vulnerable workers in anti-union contexts.

One of the most significant influences of globalization in the Global South has been the sustained feminization of the workforce. Droves of young women streaming out of factories are a common sight in export-oriented industrial pockets. At the same time, gender-based exploitation in these feminized industries is highly commonplace. Although union membership is portrayed as an antidote against exploitation, the challenges for unions to effectively represent female workers remain compelling. In feminized contexts, a large proportion of women is nonunionized (Jenkins, 2013) and in cases where they enjoy membership they face compelling barriers towards full union engagement (Guillaume, 2018). Considering the criticality of worker participation in augmenting union effectiveness (Burchielli, 2004; Gall and Fiorito, 2016; Hammer and Wazeter, 1993), it becomes imperative that unions invest in encouraging women's participation especially in feminized contexts where their exploitation is rampant and the pool of potential members is vast. However, examinations of impediments to women's union participation in export-oriented feminized contexts have remained confined to causes relating to employer antagonism (Jenkins, 2013) and patriarchal mainstream union movements (Evans, 2017). Additionally, studies of unionism in export settings have focused on gendered organization and mobilization (Dannecker,

2000; Ford, 2008) while deemphasizing how other aspects of women's identities – such as internal (within-country) migration status – affect union involvement in these contexts.

Paying closer scholarly attention to internal migrant women's experiences in export contexts is highly imperative given their increasing proportion in the global export industrial workforce. To that end, I examine gendered relationships within an Indian union in this qualitative inductive case study. Particularly, I interrogate the counterintuitive internal gendered processes in Apparel Workers Organization (AWO)1, a small feminist union active in a feminized garment export zone in Southern India. I illustrate how the participation of long-distance interstate migrant (hereafter simply 'migrants') female members in the union was circumscribed as compared to that of their male counterparts despite the union's feminist ideology. To better understand the underlying gendered processes, I also examine how participation of the majority native women members (those with bona fine residence in the state in which AWO was based) was encouraged in the union. Essentially, I address the following questions: What are the sociocultural experiences of migrant women in an Indian union organizing in an export context? Why do migrant women, and not native women, experience gender blindness in a feminist union? How do internal union processes circumscribe migrant women's participation as compared to that of their male counterparts in such unions?

To that effect, I make several critical contributions in this paper. First, I focus on a relatively overlooked worker category – interstate migrants – and demonstrate how gender blindness towards migrants within the union precluded migrant women's union participation more than that of men. Particularly, I move beyond class identity as the sole attribute on which gender blindness in unions is usually predicated (see Cooper, 2012; Ledwith et al., 1990) and highlight migration status as a novel domain of gender blindness overlapping with class. Second, I consider the AWO case as 'critical' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) and demonstrate why and how AWO's engagement with migrant workers was gender-blind despite its feminist ideology. Third, I expand the scope for discussion about gender

blindness and equity sectorally by analyzing internal union dynamics in a setting where scholarship has traditionally focused on aspects – such as employer antagonism – external to unions.

In the following sections, I examine gender-blind practices in unions across diverse contexts and assess how such practices impede women's union participation. I then move on to delineate gender-equitable approaches for encouraging women's union involvement. After discussing the methodology, I present my case study. While doing so, I also explore gender-equitable practices tailored to the union under consideration. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed in the concluding section.

Understanding and Addressing Gender Blindness in Unions

Perspectives on Gender Blindness

Traditionally, employment relations (ER) scholarship has been primarily focused on issues important to the male breadwinner (Wajcmann, 2000). However, scholars have identified the lacuna in ER research resulting from discounting gender (Baird, 2003; Hill, 2009; Rubery and Hebson, 2018). For example, they have flagged instances where mainstream economic concerns such as collective bargaining, strikes, wages, and benefits are considered valuable, whereas, those related to gender are disregarded (Wajcman, 2000). They have further noted an inordinate focus on class considerations, which comes at the expense of attention to gendered processes. Specifically, the masculine working class individual is assumed to be the norm such that only those experiences and behaviors remain visible that are exhibited similarly by men and women. This means impediments to women's union participation, women's double/triple burden, and their general delegitimization become imperceptible (Forrest, 2001). Analyses and theoretical approaches are therefore gender-blind to the extent that they do not differentiate between socially constructed realities of women and men (Danieli, 2006).

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Inasmuch as scholars have criticized gender blindness in ER theorizing, emerging gender-sensitive research has problematized gender blindness in mainstream union praxis. Gender blindness is defined here as an attribute of union engagement based on the notion that women and men are non-gendered members of a broader working class (Guillaume, 2018). This literature can be categorized into two strands. The first strand relates to unions' lack of attention to peculiar gendered subjectivities of female members. Gender blindness here may stem from entrenched masculine homosocial cultures and may adversely impact women's union participation. For instance, scholars have demonstrated how certain gender-blind norms such as weekend or after-hours meetings (including frequent visits to pubs) conflict with women's domestic responsibilities and undermine their union involvement (Cooper, 2012; Hansen, 2002). As Ledwith et al. (1990) have found, female unionists are oftentimes 'torn' between domestic and professional responsibilities with little support from unions. Moreover, marriage and parenthood hinder women from becoming leaders. In these situations, women suffer more as no special provisions accounting for their needs are made available. These tendencies are also evident in union ideologies (Dean, 2015) and the 'slip[ping]' of women's issues from union agendas (Cooper, 2012: 144).

The second strand pertains to unions' denial of women's distinctive gendered subjectivities and includes analyses of resistance to autonomous/separate organizing, quotas for women in union leadership, and gender-sensitive bargaining agendas. Such opposition may stem from apprehensions that separate structures undermine solidarity and that special provisions for women run counter to equality among members (Colgan and Ledwith, 2000). Moreover, women's interests, including inclusive bargaining, have been treated as misaligned with or marginal to broader union interests (Ledwith, 2012; Rubery and Hebson, 2018). Such challenges to separate structures and women's leadership pose steep barriers to women's union involvement (cf. Briskin, 2006; Kirton, 1999). In

most cases, this resistance has safeguarded male interests and has upheld existing power structures in unions (Healy and Kirton, 2000; Ledwith, 2012).

In emerging economies, women have always been significant participants in the workforce (Bhowmik, 2009; Hill, 2009) and in some cases even in organized labor (Tshoaedi, 2002). Yet, gender consciousness has broadly been found to be lacking in unions in these contexts. Aside from the sidelining of women (Bhowmik, 2009), an insouciance with gender concerns in mainstream labor is evidenced by the absence of even the most fundamental gender-disaggregated data (e.g., about women's participation in membership and leadership) in major unions/confederations (Chinguno, 2014; Ford, 2008). Such gender neutrality has indicated a glaring lack of awareness that women constitute a distinctive demographic group whose needs and expectations might differ from that of male members (Chinguno, 2014). Other similar examples suggesting adverse impact on women include an absence of union education for women (Britwum, 2012), lack of support from union leadership (Chinguno, 2014; Dash, 2019), an overwhelming focus on economic concerns (Dannecker, 2000), sociocultural norms including reservations about women's participation in co-gender spaces (Düzer, 2017), and affiliation to political parties (Basu, 2013).

Scholars have also discussed more active resistance to women's autonomous/separate organizing, quotas, and bargaining agendas in these contexts. For example, studies have shown that unions may view women's forums as a threat to labor solidarity (Ford, 2008). Even progressive unionists may oppose separate women's structures. Discussing a women's committee in a union, one of Ford's (2008) interviewees, for instance, stated that leadership resisted the committee as it would 'create an organization within an organization' (ibid: 24-25). Similarly, scholars have also noted hostility to women's leadership quotas (Ledwith and Munakamwe, 2015) and a broader resistance to integrating women's interests in union demands and bargaining agendas. Specifically, this research has observed

union aversion to considerations about childcare facilities, maternity leave, and anti-sexual harassment policies (Evans, 2017; Ledwith and Munakamwe, 2015; Ray, 2019).

Scholars have thus characterized gender-blind practices resulting from prevalent masculine norms or more active resistance to women's gender initiatives. These studies have also insinuated that gender blindness adversely impacts women's union engagement. The following section delineates gender equity as an antidote to gender blindness and articulates how gender-equitable practices enhance women's union engagement.

Perspectives on Equity and Gender-Equitable Practices

As the previous section has demonstrated, organized labor has traditionally emphasized gender neutrality. Women unionists may therefore not receive equitable treatment that accounts for their gendered positionality. Scholars, however, have highlighted how gender-equitable/sensitive practices – terms I interchangeably employ here – can alleviate gender blindness by counteracting male dominance and helping women assert their gendered identity within unions (Briskin, 2006; Greene and Kirton, 2002; Kirton and Healy, 2004). In unions, these practices include women-only trade union education, engagement between female members and union representatives (leaders/activists) within separate structures for women, reserved quotas, and inclusive union agendas. In grassroots organizations embedded in emerging contexts, gender-equitable practices may manifest differently. These processes are explored later within this subsection.

Gender equity, essentially, aims at counterbalancing traditional disadvantages vulnerable groups face in various settings. Accordingly, I borrow the 'philosophical' conception of equity from Raphael (1946). He argues that special allowances are warranted for disadvantaged individuals so that the disadvantages are remedied. Special treatments may initially appear unequal because the 'means required in these circumstances to give…equal treatment…is *different* from that employed for the other people [emphasis original]' (Raphael, 1946: 126). Essentially, equity necessitates unequal

treatment, at least initially, for establishing equality. Beneficiaries of special treatment do not

necessarily receive greater advantages; they receive advantages through different methods, viz. equity

practices, until equality with advantaged groups is realized. However, individuals unable to avail of

equitable treatment may remain disadvantaged.

 This emphasizes the importance of gender-equitable practices for enabling and empowering women

to engage substantively in unions. I assess two gender-equitable practices in unions across diverse

contexts below. Although all gender-equitable practices are important, women's education programs

and member-leader/activist engagement inductively emerged both as contexts in which gender

blindness was observed and as potential pathways for addressing it in the union examined here. I

highlight these dynamics in my findings.

Women-only Union Education Programs

Union education programs tailored to women's specific gendered contexts are regarded as highly

beneficial for encouraging women's union participation. Women-only union education helps build

gender consciousness, enables women to introspect and articulate their social identity, develop

radical politics, as well as facilitates union renewal (Greene and Kirton, 2002; Kirton and Healy,

2004). Furthermore, such programs help emphasize and encourage women's leadership

development (Briskin, 2006; Britwum, 2012). The informal, less-procedural nature of such programs

in fact contributes significantly to women's union involvement (Parker and Douglas, 2010).

Studies have also articulated the concept of 'safe spaces' in conjunction with women-only union

education in diverse settings. These are exclusive spaces utilized for exploring shared needs (Kirton

and Healy, 2004) and developing collective strategies to challenge gendered ideologies (Evans, 2017).

These 'less macho' settings (Kirton, 2005) provide women with an environment to express

themselves without inhibitions, as well as foster sisterhood and communal awareness of gendered

oppression in local settings (Dannecker, 2000; Greene and Kirton, 2002). Overall, safe spaces can have profound positive influences on women's union participation.

Engagement between Female Members and Female Union Representatives

The literature emphasizes the importance of women's committees and self-organizing groups for activating women's union engagement (Briskin, 2006; Colgan and Ledwith, 2000; Healy and Kirton, 2000; Parker and Douglas, 2010). Such formalized structures are pertinent largely in male-dominated unions for facilitating interpersonal relationships between female members and unionists as opportunities to do so outside of these structures are limited. These interactions further encourage women's union participation. More broadly, when exclusive interfacing between female leaders/activists and female members is institutionally supported, the ensuing interactions become a gender-equitable practice to the extent that leaders/activists create fertile grounds for women to become union-active (Kirton and Healy, 1999; Metochi, 2002, cited in Heyes, 2012).

Studies have shown that interaction between female membership and female leaders/activists is critical because they act as role models, motivate other women towards leadership roles, shape feminist agendas, and encourage participation (Briskin, 2006; Kirton and Greene, 2002; Ledwith et al., 1990; Ledwith and Munakamwe, 2015; Kirton, 1999; Rashmi, 2018). For example, Hensman (2002) has observed how female unionists in a separate structure within a bank employees' union in India developed feminist consciousness (by shaping demands for paternal leave for fathers) and encouraged other women to participate in the union. Research has further demonstrated that women leaders are highly responsive to female members' needs (see Evans, 2017; Ford, 2008). Moreover, engagement between female leaders and members broadly encourages women to speak up and feel inspired to be able to transform extant hegemonic union structures. Scholars have also emphasized that once women become active, union commitment deepens over time (Kirton and

Healy, 2013). Largely, female leadership becomes self-sustained as more women are inspired to assume leadership roles.

Understanding Gender-Equitable Practices in Female-Dominated Grassroots Organizations

In developing contexts, however, gender-sensitive practices particularly in grassroots women-dominated organizations may manifest in distinctive ways and not always exhibit boilerplate forms. Locally-specific gender-sensitive ideologies may, in fact, emerge ground-up from exposure to 'alternative forms of associational life' oftentimes facilitated by progressive civil society organizations (CSOs) (Dutta, 2021; Jenkins, 2013; Kabeer, 2011). Such exposure may create awareness and reveal opportunities for contesting subjugation within hitherto normalized systems of oppression (Kabeer, 1999) both inside and outside organizations. It may also shape idiosyncratic gender-equitable practices for fostering women's participation in organizations – including unions – resisting patriarchal subordination.

Development scholars call this 'politics of place' (Harcourt and Escobar, 2002). This politics signifies how women-led unions at the grassroots respond to globalization and injustice from their 'vantage point' by adopting strategies (both internal and external to their organizations) rooted in socioeconomic experiences specific to place. Essentially, their notions of self-identity, the kinds of injustice against which they undertake contentious action, and the nature of the action itself are predicated upon the oppressive contexts in which women are situated. Accordingly, their approaches might expediently target certain domains of inequality more than others. As these organizations respond to locally unique gendered structures, their contestation approaches are path-dependent (Kabeer, 2011).

This may also include internal strategies for member engagement. Arguably, member engagement practices might be contingent upon women's location-specific socioeconomic subjectivities (to which gender positionality is integral). These subjectivities are uncovered by socially shared

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experiences of subordination and interpersonal exchanges involving members and organizational representatives (see Jenkins, 2013). Organizations' situated understanding of effective approaches for activating member participation may thus depend on extensive interpersonal interactions that highlight women's locally-specific gender oppression and potential pathways through which member engagement may be achieved. Some grassroots collectives may therefore identify women's savings/credit groups (Jenkins, 2013; Kabeer, 2011) as means for member engagement unlike mainstream organizations where conventional gender-equitable practices might exist for such purposes. Evidently, interpersonal exchanges shape gender-sensitive practices which further reinforce women's social interactions in organizations.

Female unionists may thus formulate locally-rooted, gender-equitable member engagement approaches for augmenting member participation against socioeconomic domination. However, these practices might privilege different worker groups distinctly depending on the extent of interpersonal exchanges that help unpack gendered subjectivities of each of those groups. These dynamics underlie the case I articulate in subsequent sections.

In sum, research has identified gender-equitable practices as key to achieving union participation and effectiveness. This paper explores gender blindness experienced by migrant female members in a feminist union organizing in an export context. I illuminate this case below after explaining my methodology.

Methodology

This case study followed a qualitative inductive approach. Data collection was done each summer between 2017-2019 with AWO, a small feminist grassroots union in Southern India, and partly with WorkerRightsOrg1, a CSO that worked with AWO and was instrumental in its founding. Contact was initially established with WorkerRightsOrg1, who then facilitated conversations with AWO. These organizations were selected considering their substantial experience with worker

organizing/mobilizing. I focused on migrant members of AWO in view of (i) their dramatically increasing presence in the garment workforce (fourfold increase over four years) as well as in AWO membership, and (ii) the passive role of migrant females in the feminist union – a counterintuitive finding – as compared to that of migrant males. A focus on this conundrum provided for a 'critical' case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) of a feminist union in which migrant female members received gender-blind treatment. Therefore, natives – a group that showed an expected gendered participation pattern – were excluded from the sample.

Data were collected in the form of 33 semi-structured interviews – 13 interviews with 11 migrant women; 8 with 8 migrant men; 6 with 4 AWO representatives – including 2 activists, Rahul (male, mid-40s) and Krishna (female, early-30s), and 2 leaders; and 6 with 4 WorkerRightsOrg1 staff. Some participants were interviewed more than once to observe developments over time. While the analysis privileged migrant women's responses, migrant men's accounts were included to make comparisons of union participation of the two groups explicit.

WorkerRightsOrg1 interviewees provided contextual information and insights about native and migrant worker mobilization. Additional data (including primary and contextual details) were also gathered via non/participant observations, documents, informal conversations and analytical memos. Interviews were conducted in either English or Hindi. Most interviewees were approached via a union activist. All English interviews were transcribed verbatim while those in Hindi were translated and transcribed into English. All migrant workers I interviewed spoke Hindi.

I followed a feminist interviewing method (Reinharz, 1992) to account for power dynamics during fieldwork. I was aware of reflexivity stemming from participant perceptions of myself as an urban-bred male. It became apparent when some female participants initially hesitated to speak. However, I subsequently established trust-based relationships with interviewees. This was done by requesting the presence of a union activist during the first few minutes of the interviews to facilitate

interactions. Additionally, most interviews were held in the union office – a familiar environment for the interviewees. Nonetheless, limitations due to reflexivity may have been inadvertently woven into my analysis. For example, many participants provided guarded and rather brief responses. While this could have stemmed from hesitation, the complexity of the issues being discussed may also have influenced the process.

Research in the initial phases was exploratory and became more focused as data collection proceeded. The evolving nature of the theoretical framework, however, posed logistical challenges in seeking participants' feedback to the emergent analysis. While findings were informally communicated with AWO in the latter stages, their final comments could not be elicited. WorkerRightsOrg1, however, confirmed the validity of the underlying findings and provided valuable suggestions in the early stages of manuscript development.

I analyzed the transcribed data in MAXQDA software. Some of the lower order codes pertained to, for example, union-member interrelationships affecting migrant women's union involvement. Higher order codes/categories identified two structural elements – union education programs and member engagement with leaders/activists – in which gender blindness was observed. Migration status as a domain of gender blindness was seen as a common link across these categories (Saldaña, 2009).

This analysis emphasizes women's voices (Witkin, 2000) and uses pseudonyms for all names for confidentiality purposes. Unless stated otherwise, names refer to AWO migrant women members.

Garment Manufacturing in India as Context for Women's Activism

India is currently the world's fifth-largest garment exporter (Anner, 2019). The Indian garment industry is nationally dispersed such that garment clusters demonstrate structural commonalities as well as distinctiveness. Broadly, garment workers witness rampant wage theft, surveillance, verbal/sexual harassment, health/safety violations, and vehement antiunionism (Anner, 2019;

Jenkins, 2013; Jenkins & Blyton, 2017). There is, however, variability across clusters in products manufactured. For instance, northern clusters manufacture specialized fabrics and embroidery whereas southern clusters engage in volume-based readymade garment production. Clusters also vary in preference for worker type. For example, some clusters rely on migrants while others mostly employ majority native workers. Moreover, some northern clusters are male-dominated just as southern clusters are feminized. Regardless, the industry broadly witnesses a dramatic uptick in informalization (Mezzadri and Srivastava, 2015).

Yet, workers in large 'tier-one' production units with direct links to international garment brands/retailers are likely to be formally employed. These workers have access to signed employment contracts, state insurance, retirement and other benefits, and can form unions (Jenkins, 2013). While formalized employment may not insulate workers from exploitation, it provides them with legal recourse as leverage against workplace oppression (ibid.). Non-enforcement of legislation and anti-labor positions of state institutions have, however, made this highly onerous for workers (Mezzadri, 2010; Noronha and D'Cruz, 2017). Additionally, employer backlash towards unionists further exacerbates the prospects of worker welfare in the sector.

Unions, therefore, have been largely absent in the industry (Anner, 2019). Existing unions are often small and resource-constrained. In feminized clusters, many of these unions are grassroots organizations founded through women's labor contestation (Dutta, 2021; Jenkins, 2013). Autonomous women-led contention has been especially critical as patriarchal mainstream unions have sidelined women's interests or have perceived women as unorganizable (Bhowmik, 2009; RoyChowdhury, 2005). While women's organizing has happened in the informal sector (Hensman, 2002; Hill, 2009), analogous organizational forms are also emerging in garment clusters in partnership with CSOs (Dutta, 2021; Jenkins, 2013). AWO, the grassroots union I explore below, is one such case.

Protecting the Hands that Sewed your Denims: AWO and Migrants

As of 2019, the garment industrial zone where AWO was based employed around 600,000 workers of which 80%-90% were women. Most of these workers were formally employed in tier-one factories. Yet, they faced rampant workplace exploitation.

To facilitate collective action against employer abuse, WorkerRightsOrg1 soon after its inception began organizing native female workers in the form of self-help groups that came together as a labor union. Ever since, it had been confronted with steep challenges in organizing new members given employers' antiunionism. Against this backdrop, challenges to migrant workers' union participation were further exacerbated by surveillance and intimidation of suspected unionists at the workplace and in hostels where migrant women resided under the employer's watchful eye. Evidently, migrant women, unlike natives, were subjected to comprehensive employer surveillance extending outside the workplace. Acting as women's 'local guardians', employers tightly controlled women's physical movements and verbally/physically abused workers for flouting hostel regulations. Factors such as high migrant turnover and language barrier presented additional logistical impediments to union organization and participation.

Impacted by an adversarial context, AWO was thus afflicted by limited resources and small size. Nonetheless, it was ideologically driven – it identified as feminist, and women's economic independence, dignity, and healthcare were its key objectives. Union leaders actively took autodidactic initiatives in exploring feminist ideas and formulating organizing/mobilizing strategies. Their feminist praxis largely stemmed from their own and members' experiences of gendered oppression in economic and social spheres. AWO also represented women's issues on various fora and actively campaigned for women's rights. Furthermore, it did not permit men to assume leadership positions and had been spearheaded by an all-female leadership supported by an

executive committee. Overall, it upheld women's dignity and strove for the all-round development of its mostly female membership.

Although WorkerRightsOrg1 aided AWO with organizing during initial years and contributed to shaping its ideology, the union subsequently functioned autonomously. Since then, WorkerRightsOrg1 provided AWO with mostly general guidance. For example, it occasionally facilitated AWO's engagement with transnational campaigns. AWO, whereas, assisted WorkerRightsOrg1 with surveys and research.

AWO representatives either had been or were garment workers. They also encouraged members – volunteer-organizers – to voluntarily engage in organizing activity. Volunteer-organizers played an instrumental role in membership expansion by bringing prospective members in the union fold. This was important for the union to ensure a positive rate of membership renewal. The union had been making slow but steady progress in worker organizing and enjoyed a membership base of around 6000 spread across garment factories.

Migrants made up around 10% (~60,000) of the total workforce and were contextually somewhat distinct from natives. Most arrived from northern or eastern Indian states. About 80% migrants were young women in late teens/early twenties. Many belonged to economically unstable agrarian households, had received limited education, and took up garment work for the regular income it promised. Some were scheduled tribes – among the most disadvantaged in the caste structure – while others belonged to relatively privileged backward caste groups. Most came from traditional patriarchal settings and had enjoyed little autonomy at home. For example, gender discrimination in education, and severe restrictions on physical movement and interpersonal interactions with strangers (mostly, men) were prevalent at home. Given India's inter-state linguistic diversity with more than 20 officially recognized languages (Ministry of Human Resource Development, undated) interstate migrants faced a language barrier in the host region.

Migrant organizing in AWO took place independently of that of native workers. Witnessing a dramatic influx of vulnerable migrants and a gradual but steady decline in the native workforce, AWO proactively started organizing them in 2015. It had a migrant membership base of around 400 by 2018. Regardless, the proportion of active female migrants was much lower than that of males despite women constituting most of the migrant workforce and union membership. This meant that though many more migrant females were members most were inactive. Men's overrepresentation in active membership, therefore, was not as concerning as was women's underrepresentation in proactive union participation. This was counterintuitive especially because AWO subscribed to a feminist ideology. While employer antagonism and language barrier may partly explain the lack of union participation, gendered internal union dynamics that precluded it were also at play. The underlying gender-blind processes are examined in the following sections.

Union Participation of Migrants

Below I distinguish between union participation of migrant females and males. I report evidence on 'formal' participation (Fosh, 1993), which includes attending and participating in union meetings, volunteering at union events, and becoming a volunteer-organizer.

Migrant Females: Union representatives lamented that migrant females participated less proactively as compared to migrant males, or that participation of some women tapered over time. AWO expected members to actively participate in union events or volunteer in organizing efforts. Nonetheless, many migrant women did not attend union meetings. When they did, they did not actively partake in discussions. Women's involvement in other events followed a similar pattern. For example, AWO organized an event in July 2018 to felicitate native workers' children for outstanding academic achievements. Many migrant males volunteered help for the event, but no females were present. Kavita, a WorkerRightsOrg1 field researcher, confirmed that migrant women were not actively involved in the union. Some women confessed that they were indifferent or uninterested.

When asked if she engaged in volunteer-organizing, Kumud, a young migrant woman, unambiguously said no. Unlike men who engaged on a broader scale, women played a more passive role. Inasmuch as employer surveillance and language barrier restricted women's activities, below I show that lack of union participation can be attributed also to gender blindness.

Migrant Males: Men attended union meetings and engaged in volunteer-organizing. Jaimin, for example, claimed that he participated proactively and helped others solve 'issues.' Randeep, another respondent, had been given the responsibility of convening information sharing sessions. He was confident about his leadership abilities and authority. Additionally, many men did not restrict organizing to migrants. Anurag went a step ahead and engaged with native workers too. Krishna, the activist, appreciated workers such as Randeep for their participation and claimed that 'organizing capacity' of men was more than that of women.

Gender Blindness and its Discontents

As discussed earlier, gender blindness is detrimental to women's union participation. Among AWO members, migrant women experienced gender blindness that negatively influenced their union involvement.

AWO organized migrants by following general guidelines formulated in consultation with WorkerRightsOrg1. These goals were directed at 'mapping' the working and living conditions of migrants as well as capitalizing on their dramatically increasing numbers in the workforce through unionization.

The union viewed migrants as quite distinct from native workers. Migrants were perceived as a group having arrived from distant regions of the country, who spoke another language, lived in hostels, turned over frequently, and were much younger than natives. The quintessential native worker, whereas, was a middle-aged woman, mother, and leading breadwinner – quite similar in many respects to the union leaders instrumental in shaping union culture and practices geared

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towards native women. Embedded in localized perspectives about inequity shaped by shared experiences of subordination and extensive interpersonal interactions, the union's 'locally-rooted' gender-equitable approach, a WorkerRightsOrg1 representative suggested, accounted well for native women's needs and experiences (see Harcourt and Escobar, 2002; Kabeer, 2011).

For example, self-help microcredit groups and training programs – such as gender awareness and reproductive health seminars – were instituted since the early days of AWO for organizing native women. Aside from imparting financial autonomy and independent decision-making skills to native women, such practices also concomitantly provided them with safe spaces and common educational platforms to learn about unionism. Intimate social relationships between natives and leaders/activists also developed through communication in a common language. AWO also offered counseling services tailored to native women's emotional and material needs, and hosted a radio show in the regional language to disseminate information about union activities.

Overall, AWO's gender-equitable approach remained focused on natives due to the union's localized embeddedness and did not abstract to the level of generalized gender-equitable practices in unions described earlier. This approach developed through extensive interpersonal interactions and encouraged native women's union participation.

> It's easier to mobilize…[native] workers because…they don't [face] a language barrier…[Also] they will share their experience [with unionists] and [vice versa]. (Krishna, WorkerRightsOrg1 representative)

The importance of interpersonal exchange was indeed evident in shaping gender-equitable practices in AWO. Migrant women, however, received fewer opportunities to partake in such exchanges. Arguably, substantive union-migrant interactions so critical for developing path-dependent gender-equitable practices were stymied by the language barrier and limited union resources. Higher turnover and comprehensive employer surveillance experienced by migrants also undermined prospects of social exchange in AWO. These logistical and resource constraints precluded the

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development of shared narratives of migrant women's vulnerabilities, which restricted the union's understanding of their peculiar gendered subjectivities (particularly those experienced within AWO). No path-dependent gender-equitable practices for catalyzing migrant women's union participation could therefore adequately evolve. Neither were most of the practices deployed for natives implemented for migrants because the latter group was perceived as much too different from the former, e.g., reproductive health seminars were considered inapplicable for migrant women because most were 'young and unmarried'.

Thus, no locally-embedded gender-equitable practices tailored to migrant women could take shape in AWO. For the most part, migrant women received gender-equal, rather than gender-equitable, treatment in accordance with fundamental feminist tenets. This circumscribed migrant women's union participation. These dynamics, observed in union education programs and member engagement (or lack thereof) with leaders/activists, along with potential pathways to gender equity are articulated below through an emphasis, as stated earlier, on women's testimonies.

Union Education Programs in Mixed-Gender Settings

Education or training programs were an important avenue for AWO to share information and awareness about unionism. It had several daylong training programs for migrants. For instance, financial, legal, and linguistic literacy sessions were occasionally arranged. These programs, however, were offered in mixed-gender settings. Learning effectiveness of these sessions for migrant women was therefore moot. For instance, AWO had been engaging in negotiations with state authorities since 2018 for an upward revision of the minimum wage. Although union representatives claimed that updates were shared with migrants, female respondents were largely unaware about the issue. Most women stated that they were unable to benefit from the training sessions because they felt shy in asking clarifying questions when men were present. Many women faced challenges comprehending the union discourse as an absence of customized training for women – accounting

for their embodied experiences and existing awareness – induced tedium. In such circumstances, participants doubted the 'usefulness' of unionism.

> [Female workers] openly say that [union officials] give lectures [i.e., unidirectional discourse]; what happens the entire day [escapes us]…[women] get bored. (Kumud)

Gender blindness in AWO was discernible on other occasions as well where training sessions pertinent specifically to migrant women were absent. A pregnant migrant worker, for example, claimed that no sessions on maternity rights had been offered. AWO, whereas, argued that because most migrant women were young and unmarried, courses on maternity issues made little sense. Although education programs on legislations and rights applicable to migrants more broadly were organized, training geared exclusively toward migrant women's needs could not be instituted. Such manifestations of gender blindness reinforced migrant women's doubts about union instrumentality. Activists also lamented that they were occasionally overwhelmed with union work; in such cases they delegated mentoring of new migrant members to experienced migrant males. That resulted in women's absenteeism in training sessions either because many were uncomfortable interacting with males or did not identify with the trainers' discursive approach.

These accounts suggested that women-only education programs could be a potential response for encouraging migrant women's participation (Greene and Kirton, 2002; Kirton and Healy, 2004). These programs constitute a gender-equitable practice to the extent that they compensate for women's lack of general awareness about unionism and encourage union participation.

As basic characteristics of women-only union education were discussed with interviewees, some expressed that their apprehensions may indeed be addressed through such programs. Many women supported the notion that women-only training sessions were desirable if customized to their situated understanding of labor relations. This was important because most women had received limited education and exposure to the outside world prior to garment industry employment. Krishna also enthusiastically agreed that learning about established feminist union practices might be useful

in increasing women's participation. She also expressed ardent commitment towards establishing women-only programs in AWO thereby testifying to their transformative potential.

Thus, the need to actively engage migrant women was expressed by union representatives. They acknowledged the urgency for instituting women-only education in some form. Although the union did invest in migrant worker empowerment, no migrant women-only programs could be made available. This suggested gender blindness towards migrant women. As women eventually became apathetic to unionism they withdrew from active membership.

Absence of Safe Spaces for Migrant Women

AWO encouraged migrants to socialize for developing solidarity from ensuing interactions. It had also identified probable 'leaders' among migrants; they were mostly migrant males who often convened meetings in mixed-gender spaces in the union office.

In these spaces, the presence of men activated expectations of female bodily purity and physical separation between genders. In sexualized mixed-gender contexts many women distanced themselves from spaces where men were co-participants. They did so to preserve feminine 'respect.' Some referred to men as "bhai" (translated as "brother") to de-sexualize interactions with other males. Others expressed discomfort with 'standing near the boys' in social events. One participant, for example, did not wish to be seen interacting with other males. She also frowned at other women who interacted with male volunteer-organizers in public settings. Patriarchy indeed placed a greater burden of upholding one's dignity on women's shoulders.

> The most important asset for a woman is respect. (Bhakti)

Based on AWO's early experiences with mobilizing women, Kavita suspected that women hesitated to partake in mixed-gender spaces because gendered cultural notions dictated deference to men.

> Per the Indian tradition…like in the meetings and all…when the men start talking, the women won't speak, [they'll] be silent.

Regardless, migrant women were not perceived to be affected by this issue. However, workers stated that topics such as reproductive health and sexual harassment at the workplace (where sexist slurs were commonly used) produced discomfort and awkwardness in mixed-gender settings. Women also reported feeling uncomfortable in raising questions or responding to others' queries lest men should judge them. One female worker wondered if reticence was a better idea rather than being sneered at by men in case she said something 'wrong.' Krishna also affirmed that men 'gossiped' about women.

> [Female workers] are scared about what the men will think…Or if they will laugh at the women…(Jyotsna)

> [Women] are shy. They want to talk but they are not sure if they are saying the right or the wrong thing. In this fear, they don't open their mouth and keep shut. (Reema)

A woman ascribed these experiences to segregated rural life where exchanges between women and men were strictly regulated and interacting with men outside of the household was considered a characteristic of 'loose' women – a humiliation. A few female participants also expressed a general mistrust toward men and ensuing concerns about physical safety. This further reduced women's participation in mixed-gender milieus.

These dynamics alluded to the heavy opportunity costs migrant women paid because of the absence of safe spaces. The unavailability of safe spaces thwarted opportunities for women to create their own feminist discourse, promote sisterhood, and participate in the union. Providing safe spaces could therefore be a gender-equitable practice to the extent that it helps enhance women's participation.

Although safe spaces are considered a component of women-only education programs (Kirton and Healy, 2004), they can also be conceptualized as standalone features in the following ways. Separate spaces may be seen as (i) physical settings where women could convene with or without the involvement of union staff and discuss important matters un/related to work; (ii) sites for

socialization, in contrast to relatively structured educational programs; and (iii) settings warranting minimal resources in the form only of physical spaces unlike the comparatively resource-intensive education programs.

When safe spaces were conceptualized in this manner during interviews, many strongly suggested that safe spaces were needed for female co-workers to collectively resolve pertinent issues. Interestingly, women imagined safe spaces to be non-hierarchical even without having experienced them! A worker, for example, argued that women would 'feel happy' about getting a conducive environment enabling free expression of ideas. Another respondent asserted that this would help women develop solidarity and 'stand up for themselves' even in mixed-gender settings.

> [Women] will be able to understand each other's problems. They will share their problems with each other. The association will be stronger. (Reema)

Interviewees largely expressed consensus about the importance of safe spaces in enabling them partake more deeply in union activities. According to Krishna, taking better stock of migrant women's contexts was imperative for AWO.

Safe spaces are indeed an effective gender-equitable practice for reinforcing women's union participation. In mixed-gender spaces in AWO, however, the distinctive interests of migrant women and their need for safe spaces could not be met. This adversely impacted AWO's ability to elicit participation from migrant women.

Engagement with Leaders/Activists

Interaction of female members with female leaders/activists is critical for catalyzing member participation. Specifically, female leaders/activists act as role models and are instrumental in stimulating women into union participation (Briskin, 2006). Preferential access for women to leaders/activists is therefore a gender-equitable practice.

Union Participation and Leaders

AWO, as indicated before, had an all-female leadership. These leaders were firebrand individuals, motivational mentors, and effective organizers. They also had a clear vision for the union. A leader stated:

> I want to motivate others. I try to understand the issues of other workers and motivate them to move ahead so that they can take the organization forward.

Supriya, a WorkerRightsOrg1 employee, also fervently expressed that AWO leaders were inspiring women. Drawing from their experience surviving gender-based violence in garment factories, they were instrumental in imparting feminist values to members. They, however, engaged mostly with native workers.

When migrant women were asked their views about AWO leaders, many responded ambiguously. Some were not only unaware about the leaders' stories but were unsure who the leaders were. One participant was surprised to hear that all leaders had been garment workers.

Although there were no structural impediments migrants in AWO faced in approaching leaders, the linguistic barrier was quite compelling. Migrants, most of whom came in from North Indian states, spoke Hindi and therefore were not familiar with the language spoken in the host region. However, leaders mostly interacted with members in the local language. No unmediated conversation was therefore possible between leaders and migrants on account of different languages spoken/understood by each group. While the leaders unreservedly declared their availability to meet with all members, the language barrier resulted in a greater setback for migrant women than it did for men. Migrant women thus could neither learn about the leaders' inspirational journeys, nor imbibe feminist values, nor experience through potential interactions with leaders the motivation they needed to engage in the union. Although this did not necessarily discourage women's participation, it failed at providing opportunities for enabling it. The lack of leader-member interactions thus resulted in gender blindness to the extent that privileged access for migrant women

to the leadership could not be facilitated. This was especially important in view of women's receding union involvement.

As the probable need for closer interactions between leaders and migrant women became apparent through this work, Krishna expressed hope. With all their experience in the industry, she expressed 'high probability' that leaders were well placed to address migrant women's issues and motivate them into action if an enabling platform was built. Her hope was not unfounded. Upon hearing about leaders' backgrounds one woman exclaimed that if leaders achieved so much, so could she. She affirmed that she felt motivated after hearing hat leaders began in oppressive circumstances similar to hers but now led a union.

> I feel that I can do something like this too…[Leaders] had also faced a lot of problems…I feel like I can achieve something too. (Jyotsna)

In sum, the gender-blind nature of leader-member interactions did relinquish possible participatory gains from privileged access for migrant women to AWO's female leadership. Nonetheless, activists were hopeful that gender-equitable engagement could facilitate migrant women's union involvement. Arguably, they planned on strategizing to that end.

Union Participation and Activists

Rahul and Krishna were lead activists in AWO. Conversant in both Hindi and the regional tongue, they were the interface between leaders and migrants. They were also responsible for organizing/mobilizing migrants. Rahul, however, had more legitimacy as he was more experienced and older among the two activists. He also represented AWO on various external platforms and shared good camaraderie with migrants, particularly men.

While they could not avoid it, some women nonetheless were wary of interacting with Rahul. Others wondered about maintaining an appropriate demeanor in his presence. They felt self-conscious in the presence of a middle-aged male activist. On such occasions, their preferred choice of behavior

was reticence especially in meetings, which he almost always chaired. They also hesitated in engaging with him because, unlike Krishna, he was demographically considerably dissimilar to themselves. Contrarily, a few female interviewees confessed that they felt more comfortable communicating with Krishna because she was a woman. They felt connected to her and were more forthcoming in discussing even private matters with her. Some women also engaged in volunteer-organizing at her behest. This showed that she had a catalyzing effect (although delimited by employer surveillance and logistical barriers discussed earlier) on women's union participation.

Rahul's higher status was apparent in union meetings and field organizing trips. For example, he led training sessions while Krishna took notes or served tea. Despite the trust she shared with migrant women, her subordinate position meant that her ability to engage in meaningful interactions was muffled in Rahul's presence. Given that she engaged in tasks of lesser importance, her diminished status suggested a gendered contradiction with the feminist values AWO espoused.

It was nonetheless clear that Krishna's activism was a motivating factor for women but Rahul's pre-eminence became an inadvertent pushback against women's union involvement. Both their responsibilities revolved around engaging with migrants regardless of gender of the workers to be organized/mobilized. Such an approach meant that activist demographics (gender identity) did not match with that of members. Rahul's presence in fact circumscribed migrant women's engagement while that of men remained unaffected or was arguably supported. Perhaps, assigning the responsibility of mobilizing migrant women primarily to Krishna – including providing her with the required organizational support for doing so – could enhance their union participation. At the time of writing, nonetheless, activist-member engagement was gender-blind to the lived realities of migrant women.

Conclusion

Gender blindness indeed has an adverse impact on women's union participation (Cooper, 2012; Dannecker, 2000; Evans, 2017; Ford, 2008; Hansen, 2002). The import of analyses such as this one therefore becomes apparent considering the further effect of member participation on union power and effectiveness (Burchielli, 2004; Hammer and Wazeter, 1993).

Traditionally, gendered analyses of organized labor have critiqued how unions perceive members as 'classed' individuals (Forrest, 2001; Rubery and Hebson, 2018; Wajcmann, 2000) and disregard the needs and expectations of female members (Danieli, 2006). Accordingly, feminist employment relations research has focused largely on how class considerations sideline gender sensitivity in unions (Dean, 2015; Guillaume, 2018). Put differently, research has considered class as the primary domain of gender blindness. However, as this study has demonstrated, gender blindness in AWO was predicated on migrant identity and was experienced by migrant workers as part of a larger classed membership. Thus, new domains of gender blindness overlapping with class, such as migration status, may also manifest in unions. This is a critical theoretical contribution which complicates conventional feminist analyses of union practices.

One corollary to this contribution needs emphasis here. By highlighting internal migrant identity alongside gender and class, this research also responds to calls for moving beyond the triumvirate of class, race, and gender in organizational analyses (Rodriguez et al., 2016) and engages with emerging perspectives advocating migrant intersectional approaches in union research (Tapia and Alberti, 2019). In that spirit, this is an intersectional analysis of relatively overlooked internal migrant women in a union context. Extending the aforementioned argument, this study also insinuates possibilities for instances of blindness resulting from permutations of various cross-cutting social identity domains in diverse union settings. For example, caste or disability status may also be domains of gender blindness and vice versa. Importantly, this work reinforces intersectional arguments that

individual experiences anchored in interlayered subjectivities need to be better acknowledged and mainstreamed if manifestations of identity-based disadvantage are to be effectively identified and addressed (Lee and Tapia, 2021).

Second, the experiences of migrant women in AWO present a 'critical' case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) demonstrating that even feminist unions are susceptible to the loss of member participation due to gender blindness (see Guillaume, 2018). Existing research has noted manifestations of gender blindness in mixed-gender unions stemming from dominant masculinist norms or overt denial of women's gendered subjectivities under the guise of equality (Chinguno, 2014; Cooper, 2012; Dash, 2019; Hansen, 2002; Healy and Kirton, 2000; Ledwith and Munakamwe, 2015; Rubery and Hebson, 2018). While most of these studies have focused on male-dominated unions, this study highlighted the unique mechanics of why and how women members encountered gendered challenges toward participation even in a feminist/female-led union. In emerging contexts, women's collectives often develop bottom-up, path-dependent feminist approaches tailored to contesting peculiar forms of gendered oppression experienced at the grassroots (Harcourt and Escobar, 2002; Kabeer, 2011). Gender-sensitive practices thus developed to encourage women's organizational participation are largely engendered by collectively deliberated strategies for resisting shared subordination. However, grassroots unions may be unable to structure gender-sensitive practices for new member groups if opportunities for collective deliberation (viz., interpersonal exchanges) are limited and shared narratives of oppression cannot adequately evolve. In AWO, for example, such exchanges with migrants were restrained by logistical challenges including a language barrier, difficulty of access to workers, and resource scarcity. As a result, internal union practices (as articulated earlier) vis-à-vis migrants were rendered gender-equal. This case thus provides fresh insights into why and how some members even in feminist organizations may encounter gender blindness.

Third, this work also contributes to a better understanding of impediments to union participation in export settings. Scholarly emphases on employer antagonism (Anner, 2019; Jenkins, 2013) and the limitations of corporate social responsibility (Barrientos et al., 2019) have significantly highlighted challenges to unionism in feminized export industries. Researchers have also critiqued how patriarchal mainstream unions have neglected the interests of women workers (Evans, 2017; RoyChowdhury, 2005). Furthermore, the active role of the state in propagating capitalist interests at the cost of worker wellbeing has also been noted (Mezzadri, 2010). From a conceptual standpoint, these elements when considered together are assumed to represent a near totality of impediments to women's collectivism in export sectors. However, as this paper has articulated, gendered processes in unions (feminist or otherwise) may also undermine union effectiveness. Essentially, challenges to women's unionism may continue to be underestimated to the extent that internal union dynamics such as gender blindness observed in AWO remain underexplored. Such dynamics are thus a novel addition to the calculus of labor contestation in feminized export settings.

This analysis, however, should be appraised alongside four important considerations. First, it needs to be reiterated that the union's understanding of feminist practices was rooted locally and was influenced by its experiences situated in that context. For example, the idea that women and men were equals and that women had an equal right to gainful employment were considered radical in that setting. If one were to embed in the context described here, it would not be unreasonable to perceive AWO as the paragon of progressive feminism. However, the union also was inflicted with contradictions. For instance, as demonstrated above, migrant women received equal and not equitable treatment. Moreover, while the union did not allow male members to assume leadership positions, the older male activist had a higher stature than his younger female counterpart. It may thus be argued that while AWO had feminist undertones given its anti-patriarchal approach to

women's economic and social lives, its brand of feminism may not fit a normative conceptualization of how intersectional feminist organizations practice the ideology.

Second, misgivings may arise as to whether migrant organizing was a worthwhile undertaking given a small share of migrants, an antagonistic context, and a resource-constrained small union. As indicated earlier, the underlying sentiment among unionists was that the native workforce had been dwindling with time and that migrant workers were being increasingly recruited in the industry. This analysis and the recommendations presented could thus be treated as a proactive approach to migrant organizing that could be instituted in the union in the long term – as migrants begin to constitute a significant proportion of the workforce – if not in the short. This way, the union could hit the ground running. Successfully implementing equitable measures, and fostering a stronger union through these efforts, could also help reduce migrant turnover, particularly that which arises from workplace exploitation. Going forward, resource investment in instituting equity measures may thus become imperative in light of the gains in union membership and worker well-being.

Third, caste discrimination of migrants was not emphasized in this case study. While I anticipated discussions around caste during fieldwork, it did not emerge as a key theme. Regardless, as caste subjugation is a dominant form of oppression in India, additional research is warranted for integrating it in future studies. Fourth, while this research was not meant to be prescriptive, a way forward for unions for encouraging women's union participation could be to institute gender-equitable practices tied to resources available. This is relevant for resource-constrained unions. Safe spaces, for example, could be self-administered by participants and might not require resource investment. Similarly, practices like leader-member interactions could be facilitated by union members familiar with multiple languages. This could possibly be done in female-majority unions without establishing formalized separate structures. Gender-equitable practices might therefore be possible with minimal resources.

In summary, the withdrawal of existing members can have disastrous consequences for union survival particularly in contexts where organizing new members is a tall order. However, gender-equitable approaches can augment union participation of existing members and initiate a self-stoking cycle where members catalyze union expansion. Enabling active participation of members is therefore of paramount importance for union effectiveness especially in exploitative settings.

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CONCLUSION

This dissertation examined power dynamics and labor contestation in an export-oriented garment production cluster in South India, focusing on internal migrant workers most of whom were women. Through a rigorous qualitative case study approach centered on workers, it explored how intersecting social identities shaped worker experiences, how migrant women exercised agency, and how a union organized and was (un)able to mobilize these vulnerable workers. Specifically, the research highlighted the reproduction of workforce segmentation based on gender and migration status, while also demonstrating migrant women's forms of resistance and the challenges a union under consideration faced in representing them effectively. Overall, the dissertation provided a nuanced, worker-centered analysis of labor relations at the local level in global supply chains.

The first essay examined how a local labor control regime operated in the garment manufacturing cluster. It revealed how employers leveraged workers' intersecting identities as women and internal migrants to maintain a compliant workforce. Recruitment practices targeted young rural women, portraying garment work as an economic opportunity. In employer-provided hostels, migrant women faced strict surveillance and control over their movements and interactions. At the workplace, migrant women made the lowest wages among all worker demographies, while verbal abuse, and vulnerability to exploitation was higher compared to various worker types.

However, the research also highlighted how migrant women exercise agency within these constraints. Some workers forged documents to gain employment despite being underage. Others formed supportive peer groups in hostels or covertly engage dwith unions despite restrictions. While limited in scope, these acts of resistance shaped local employment dynamics alongside employer practices.

The second essay focused on union strategies for organizing internal migrant workers in the garment industry. It examined the approaches of a grassroots union, Apparel Workers Organization (AWO),

in building membership among a vulnerable migrant workforce. The union faced significant challenges, including employer antagonism, language barrier, and migrants' temporary engagement in the industry.

AWO developed a two-phase organizing approach toward migrants. The first phase involved establishing an initial support base through activities like screening Hindi movies and hosting game competitions to build trust. In the second phase, more active organizing tactics were employed. These included circumventing employer surveillance to pass information to workers, fostering solidarity between local and migrant workers, training migrant volunteer organizers, and resolving workplace grievances for non-members to demonstrate the union's value.

The research highlighted how the union's intimate organizing approach, based on intensive relationship-building and addressing migrants' holistic needs, was key to overcoming barriers to organizing this workforce. However, the essay also noted the ongoing challenges in expanding migrant membership given the constraints of the industry.

The third essay examined the counterintuitive finding that migrant women's participation in AWO was more limited compared to migrant men, despite the union's feminist orientation. It explored how gender blindness manifested in the union's practices toward migrant women members.

The analysis revealed that AWO's gender-equitable practices were primarily tailored to local women workers based on extensive interpersonal interactions that shaped the understanding of their needs. Similar deep engagement with migrant women was limited by language barriers and logistical challenges. As a result, practices like union education programs and engagement with leaders/activists were not adapted to migrant women's specific contexts and constraints.

For instance, mixed-gender training sessions made many migrant women uncomfortable asking questions. The lack of women-only safe spaces limited opportunities for migrant women to build solidarity and discuss sensitive issues. Language barriers also prevented migrant women from

benefiting from interactions with the union's female leadership. Counterintuitive gendered dynamics in relation to the male activist also precluded migrant women's union participation.

The essay argued that migration status emerged as a novel domain of gender blindness overlapping with class identity. It demonstrated how even feminist unions can reproduce gender inequalities if practices are not adapted for diverse subgroups of women workers. The findings highlighted the need for unions to develop more intersectional, context-specific approaches to foster equitable participation.

Taken together, the dissertation made several key contributions to understanding labor dynamics in global garment production. It provided a worker-centered analysis that highlighted the agency of a typically marginalized group - internal migrant women workers. By adopting an intersectional lens, it revealed how multiple, overlapping identities shaped experiences of subordination and resistance.

The research also expanded knowledge of grassroots union organizing in challenging contexts, documenting innovative strategies as well as persistent obstacles. It brought attention to internal migrants as a distinct category of workers, with specific vulnerabilities and organizing needs not fully captured in studies of local workers or international migrants.

Finally, by examining gender dynamics within a feminist union, the dissertation revealed ongoing challenges in translating egalitarian ideals into practice, especially for diverse workforces. It highlighted the need for unions to continually adapt their approaches based on deep engagement with different subgroups of workers.

Overall, this nuanced examination of micro-level power dynamics provided valuable insights for understanding how regional competitive advantage is secured in global supply chains, as well as identifying pathways for supporting worker rights and representation in these contexts. The findings have implications for union strategies, policy formulation, and conceptualizing labor agency in globalized industrial settings.