

Worker education

The vast majority of workers in global supply chains remain unaware of the existence of codes of labour conduct and what codes mean for workers. Even in factories or farms where such codes are being implemented, worker awareness is generally low. Yet Southern worker organisations, NGOs, unions and a growing number of companies are increasingly concerned about the limitations of code effectiveness when workers are not aware of codes and the rights enshrined within them.

The purpose of this workshop was to increase understanding of the importance of worker education, to identify key elements for any worker education programme, and share experience to date. The experiences of Women Working Worldwide⁷, the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) and the China Women Workers' Network⁸ provided the basis for discussion.

8.1 Why conduct worker education?

Few workers are informed about codes, labour rights and the potential hazards in their working environment. Unaware of their position within supply chains, few workers understand the purpose of labour codes, nor do they have information about the issues they raise. For example, in a sample of 261 workers across 17 code-implementing companies in Africa (all supplying horticultural products to the UK and other markets), only five per cent were aware that the codes were related to workers' rights (Smith et al, 2003).

Yet awareness of codes is crucial for workers to have faith and fully participate in audits, and for the benefits of code implementation to be sustainable. Appropriate education will not only increase workers' understanding of the issues but will also build workers' confidence to address them.

7. Women Working Worldwide, a member of ETI, is a UK-based organisation which supports the struggles of women workers in the global economy through information exchange and international networking.

8. The China Women Workers' Network, a Hong Kong based NGO, aims to improve the lives of Chinese working women. Its members include university professors, school teachers, social workers, feminist activists and labour organisers.

8.2 What should education include?

All workers are different, so a golden rule for any education initiative is that it must first identify the specific priorities for the target group of workers then base activities round these priorities. In addition, information needs to be delivered in ways that are accessible to workers. Building from this base, topics might include:

- **Their identity as workers:** this is particularly important for more isolated groups such as homeworkers and migrant workers. They may not recognise themselves as ‘workers’, and therefore may feel that any reference to ‘workers’ rights’ does not refer to them.
- **Workers’ rights as embodied in law:** including relevant regional as well as national labour legislation.
- **History and purpose of codes:** explaining why companies have adopted codes, and who is putting pressure on companies to do so.
- **Workers’ rights as embodied in codes.** It is helpful to include an explanation of different codes in the market, and what their similarities and differences are.
- **The context of globalisation,** and how this affects export and other industries.
- **The role workers can play in monitoring working conditions,** including how they can participate constructively in audits.
- **The nature of supply chains.** For example, retail and export prices for the product they produce, names of their employers’ main customers, and what customers’ codes require of their suppliers. Such information can provide workers with greater confidence and leverage to negotiate with management.
- **Practical options for dealing with code violations.** The options workers have if they know there are code violations (for example complaints mechanisms, joining a union or other workers’ association).

8.3 The experience of the ITGLWF and SAI Worker Education Programme

The International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers’ Federation (ITGLWF) and Social Accountability International (SAI)⁹ run a joint programme on worker education and awareness-raising in code implementation. The programme is targeting 14 countries in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The training is carried out with the co-operation of both the brand and supplier.

The aims of the training are to increase workers’ understanding of their rights, strengthen trade union organisation, and uphold and improve standards in the workplace. It includes components on globalisation, fundamental rights at work, codes of conduct and how workers can use codes to secure their rights.

The programme makes use of ‘study circles’. The first stage is to identify and train study circle leaders; the second stage involves mobilising the leaders to run sessions with other workers; and there is a final stage of review and feedback.

9. Social Accountability International (SAI) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to the development, implementation and oversight of voluntary verifiable social accountability standards. SAI works to improve workplaces through the expansion and further development of the international workplace standard, SA8000, and the associated SA8000 verification system.

8.4 The experience of Women Working Worldwide (India)

Women Working Worldwide, in collaboration with several local organisations, organised worker education programmes in India, with the aim of increasing workers' understanding of their rights and codes. Their experience showed:

- **The importance of developing links between different groups of workers.** After completing the training, factory workers recognised that they needed to equip themselves with knowledge of the supply chain of the company where they worked. This meant forging links with workers in the company office, who had better access to information about the company and the supply chain. Workers felt that the strengthened solidarity between factory and office workers was an important step towards gaining recognition for their rights.
- **The importance of supply chain knowledge.** The workers then collected information on the company's customers, including which customers had company codes. Finding that two of the companies had codes covering labour rights, they then used this information to negotiate with their employer to improve working conditions.

8.5 Challenges

Workshop participants identified a number of challenges to implementing effective worker education programmes. These included:

Workers who are not protected through union membership may be nervous of participating in worker education programmes. They face a difficult balance of wanting to protect their rights while not wanting to risk losing their jobs if management is not supportive.

Worker education programmes need to be sensitive to the fact that some factory owners/managers see code implementation as an excuse for not permitting or promoting union membership and recognition. Education programmes need to emphasise that codes do not replace the right to freedom of association.

Informal workers are difficult to reach. Organisations running worker education programmes find negligible participation of informal workers. Programme co-ordinators struggle to mobilise both homeworkers, who are frequently not recognised under law, and female migrant workers who rarely view themselves as workers.

8.6 Moving ahead

Workshop participants offered the following suggestions for helping to ensure that worker education programmes are effective:

- **Involve factory management in awareness-raising sessions.** Managers need to understand the management benefits of appropriate worker education and to support such programmes. Sourcing companies can play an important role in funding and supporting such activities.
- On the other hand, participants felt that **worker education should be conducted by trusted external organisations.** Factory management needs to make space for such organisations to carry out education work. Ideally, trade unions where they exist, NGOs and the ILO should work together with government institutes to deliver training. Sourcing companies can usefully support such work through 'arms-length' funding.

- **Involve workers as educators/trainers.** It was suggested that education work should include a capacity building and training element for a core group of workers who can subsequently facilitate sessions with colleagues. Peer education study circles, which take place off site for a few hours a week over a 10-week period, have worked well in pilots.
- **Multi-stakeholder initiatives need to facilitate further dialogue** about who should deliver worker education and what it should involve.
- **...and share successful examples!**

Further information

Presentation slides for the China Women Workers' Network, ITGLWF and Women Working Worldwide are available from the ETI Secretariat.

China Women Workers' Network: China Women Workers' Network (CWWN), 216-219, Lai Lan House, Lai Kok Estate, Cheung Sha Wan, Kowloon, Hong Kong. T + 852 2781 2444 F + 852 2781 4486 cwwn@cwwn.org

International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF): Steve Grinter, Education Secretary, ITGLWF, Transport House, John Dobson Street, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE1 8TW, UK. T + 44 191 230 1704 F + 44 191 232 3504 SGrinter@ITGLWF.org

Women Working Worldwide (UK): Rm 412, MMU Humanities Building, Rosamund St West, Manchester, M15 6LL, UK. T + 44 161 247 1760 F + 44 161 247 6321 info@women-ww.org

References

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