

Freedom of association, collective bargaining & worker representation



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH TRADE UNION WORK IN SOUTH INDIA'S TEXTILE AND GARMENT SECTOR

The long-term sustainability of the textile and garment industry in Southern India is a common denominator for both trade unions and business. Raising overall working standards and providing space for women workers to access their rights and protections in factories is the start of a journey to mature industrial relations where women can confidently participate in and raise collective concerns that are important to them. In many instances, as reflected below, there is a shared agenda for Brands and local (enterprise) trade unions.

The visit to Southern India in Nov/December 2018 is part of base code two work on Freedom of Association (FOA), Collective Bargaining (CB) and worker representation. It is also in line with ETI's 2020 – pillar two and gender strategyⁱ, ETI Bangladesh programmeⁱⁱ and funded research on how women workers organise and access their workplace rightsⁱⁱⁱ

The primary aim of the visit was to meet with trade union leaders representing workers in the textile and garment industry in Southern India – based in Coimbatore, Dindigal and Bangalore. Together the three unions have a membership base of approximately 15,000 members drawn from spinning mills and garment factories. Apart from the range of industrial relations issues such as discrepancies in pay, overtime and bonuses, occupational safety and health, they also deal with lock-outs due to unannounced factory closures, sexual harassment cases and improved conditions for contract and migrant labour.

Decent work^{iv} and representation

All three unions work across the sector with a direct line of sight to export markets and western brands sourcing from South Indian factories. The spinning mills are often 2nd and/ 3rd tier of supply chains and thus particularly vulnerable with little or no trade union representation in the mills.

Decent work (combining rights at work with social protection and the promotion of social dialogue) in this industrial setting where workers are denied representation with restricted trade union access, is therefore brought into question and is open to abuse as workers are denied basic access to union representation.

Women workers

In many instances' women workers are still not able to raise their voices on matters important to them due to fear of loss of employment, harassment or victimisation. The trade union network and membership provide a space for education on rights and an avenue for expressing views that wider society does not provide for these women. They carry a double burden of being a mix of widowed, deserted and single with care and household responsibilities.

Delivering decent work, access to representation and gender equality

Over a twelve-month period ETI has been in dialogue with three trade unions, representing workers in different ways and in different industrial settings. Each union operates in different ways but with the overarching ethos of representing members work place rights and raising factory standards.

With education grants from the ETI RATE fund each has undertaken the delivery of training related to encouraging women workers voices to be heard. Two unions identified a small group of potential women leaders with a training curriculum including:

- Legal: factory occupational safety and health, [anti-sexual harassment](#), labour and trade union rights.
- Functional: workplace grievances, case handling and committee structure
- Leadership skills: Problem solving, communication and presentation skills

The third union, with membership in factories with recognition and agreements undertook a series of workplace seminars on grievance mechanisms and sexual harassment.

By way of summary below is an outline of their approach, work conducted and results of the learning.

Garment Labour Union (GLU)

Based in Bangalore with mainly women's membership from factories producing garments for ETI members other western and local brands.

Drawing from currently employed and experienced factory workers, GLU commenced a training programme over a six-week period with classes being held on Sundays. This is a challenge for the participants as they juggle work and family commitments. The women work in factories that don't recognise the union and thus don't get time off for union activity nor training.

As we were able to attend a class, we witnessed first-hand the enthusiasm and commitment of the participants. We also had time to interview several women. All trainees testified to growing in personal confidence and now being able to help other women on the factory floor.

All mentioned the value of being part of the union as this gives them a sense of belonging and **protection** when tackling issues such as production targets, wages and sexual harassment. Some of the individual feedback from the women is:

- realised that women don't need to live in fear
- knows how to help her co-workers when they are in trouble
- gained confidence and can now speak up for myself
- knows how to solve factory floor problems before they escalate
- knows who to speak to in management if need be
- has gone from being an "introvert" to an extrovert

Over and above the day to day workplace representation, GLU have a strong presence and experience in the CARE agenda – for example in dialogue on [Business Responsibilities for Childcare in Workplaces](#) and the plight of [migrant labour in the factories in and around Bangalore](#). Their social movement arm (MUNNADE) provides day care and after school care for vulnerable women workers.

Tamil Nadu Textile and Common labour Union (TTCU)

TTCU has been involved with the implementation of grievance contact lines – one aimed at migrant workers and the other a legal line for spinning mill workers (predominantly rural women). As a result, the training of a tranche of younger women members is due to take place in February.

The new grievance mechanism triggers emails to relevant partners with factory, hostel & labour grievances directed to TTCU. This allows for rapid response for early remedy with the relevant factory but also provides data for quarterly meetings with the industry association (TASMA).

TTCU is based in Dindigal with labour rights work growing out of a village base committee system which is closely linked to spinning mills. As the mills typically do not allow trade union representation most of the work is conducted off-site.

Indian National Textile Workers' Federation (INTWF)

A series of workshops in Coimbatore, Tirapur and Bangalore have been held in garment factories where INGLWF has recognition. The workshops focussed on grievance mechanisms and sexual harassment and attended by 68 delegates (55 women and 13 male workers) - all textile and garment workers.

The union, through member education and consultation, aimed to raise awareness of factory, sexual harassment, complaint mechanisms (Internal Complaints Committee – ICC^y) and dialogue processes. The discussion included how sexual harassment can be dealt with effectively through union intervention.

General Secretary's, Mr V.R.Jaganathan, approach has aimed at having open dialogue with women and men workers about workplace sexual harassment.

Outcomes of this series of workshops include:

- ICC's to be established in workplaces where there is union recognition.
- Union members will raise awareness of sexual harassment and the ICC mechanism with other workers.
- Women union representatives will be encouraged and trained to become ICC members once the committees are established in factories.

Conclusion

Trade union education is an important factor, not only for knowing and understanding basic workplace rights, but also for developing workers' confidence to raise issues in effective ways. This is supported through elected committees and sector networks.

ETI base code clause two on FOA, CB and worker representation is a commitment to support workers to access their basic workplace rights so that together with them we raise factory standards, level the playing field between workers and managers, work together to build effective grievance mechanisms, deal fairly with migrant workers and address the systematic work place sexual abuse of women workers.

ⁱ ETI 2020 strategy: Perspective 2020 exists to provide a clear focus for company, trade union and NGO members: to respect workers' voices, to improve their conditions – and where abuse occurs to provide an effective remedy. Formulated to show that ethical business underpins good business, Perspective 2020 rests on five pillars that will help deliver our goal – pillar two is to **“Champion the right of free association throughout global supply chains and encourage company members to include trade unions in their accountability discussions and share best practice on the benefits of effective representation.”**

ⁱⁱ [ETI Bangladesh programme](#) “in partnership with ETI's in Denmark and Norway, we implemented a programme to improve dialogue between workers and management and build workers' ability to represent their needs. An independent evaluation of the pilot phase found that the programme **had increased the participation of women in workplace processes, including in Participation Committees**

ⁱⁱⁱ **ETI FUNDED RESEARCH WITH WOMEN WORKING WORLDWIDE (report to be published late February)**

The overall aim of the research, underpinned by both the Gender Strategy, the progression of Base Code clause two on Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining and anecdotal evidence in ETI programmes aims to demonstrate women's organising (from the informal to formal) in a supply chain context relevant to ETI category groups. The research will Identify and compare:

- differences in traditional unionisation and emerging all women groups,
- drivers and triggers for adapting or change,
- changes to collective bargaining and/or negotiating agenda's,
- changes from informal development orientated groups to formal workplace representation,
- different approaches used to organise,
- Instruments being used to gain workplace recognition (for eg, the anti-sexual harassment committees)

^{iv} Decent work encompasses the basic labour standards (FOA and CB, fair wages and safe working environments) https://www.ilo.org/integration/themes/mdw/WCMS_189392/lang--en/index.htm

^v Internal Complaints Committee: established under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 http://www1.iitkgp.ac.in/institute/act_rules_procedure.pdf