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Becoming ‘active labour protestors’: women workers organizing in India’s garment export factories

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ABSTRACT

India ranks fifth in the global garment exports. The bedrock of this export industry are poorly paid, migrant women and men. Marked by high rate of exploitation and precarious employment, garment workers are often perceived as a dispossessed lot without any means to resist their exploitation. What possibilities remain within this narrative to make room for everyday politics and resistances? Looking at the individual and collective struggles of garment workers in two southern Indian states, this article highlights the everyday organizing strategies of women resisting their ‘disposability’. Specifically, the article draws attention to women’s life stories to demonstrate what can be learnt from them about the conditions under which to imagine, and come to, build labour unions. The article contributes to the critical feminist scholarship on global factories by explicating the tension between the need to illuminate the extent of exploitation and the urgency of drawing attention to women’s stories.

KEYWORDS

Garment workers; women’s narratives; labour organizing

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, a large body of inter-disciplinary feminist literature has produced a robust critique of the reorganization of global production that began in the 1960s. This work highlights the emergence of the ‘global factory’ in Latin America, Asia and Africa – enterprises that were not only export-led, but also female-led, in that they are fundamentally reliant on women’s labour. As Werner points out, this scholarship has tracked the ‘capitalist investments and contracting relationships to “far-flung” locations’ (Werner, 2016, p. 5) to theorize the new gender division of labour. For example, Wright’s (2006) powerful critique of the discourses deployed by global capital shed light on the mechanisms that enable the discursive production of a ‘disposable’ third-world woman whose labour-depleting body produces global commodities. Collectively, this feminist corpus has drawn attention to the gender dynamics of the reorganized transnational production model, particularly with respect to how it produces – within and beyond the workplace – new conditions of gender oppression (Elson & Pearson, 1981; Fernandez-Kelly, 1983; Salzinger, 2003), new gender roles (Pearson, 2013; Swaminathan, 2012), and reconfigurations of women’s autonomy and independence through waged work (Kabeer, 2000; Ong, 1987; Pun, 2005; Wolf, 1992). Feminist scholarship has also interrogated the process of incorporation of women’s labour into the global production system at national and regional scales, showing how transnational capital exploits

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differences of gender, class, race, caste, age, ethnicity, and mobility (see Bair, 2010; Mezzadri, 2016; Ruwanpura, 2011 for a review). In particular, Mezzadri's decade-long work in India's garment export sector has demonstrated how locally 'already socially classed labouring bodies' are mobilized and incorporated in sweatshops 'in particular tasks, activities and with given working rhythms and conditions', where commodification and exploitation work in tandem (Mezzadri, 2017, p. 75).

While this critical feminist scholarship helps us to interrogate the workings of global capitalism, it is also marked by at least two related types of silence. First: we rarely hear the voices and viewpoints of the women workers themselves, the protagonists in this theatre of global production. We know far too little, for example, about such basic questions as: how does a 'third world factory woman' perceive the notion of her own so-called disposability? In what ways do women view their lives and labour in particular social, material, political, and ideological contexts? How do women, within and outside of waged relations, perceive of themselves, sense their self-worth, think about their experiences, or reflect on the consciousness of the labouring process? The relative inattention to these questions may be rooted in the understandable desire of feminist scholars to keep their analysis trained on the deplorable and violent labour conditions that women experience daily. Indeed, some have suggested that women workers can be insufficiently aware of their own subjugation, even grateful for the income-generating work. However, Siddiqi has argued that inattention to women's own understandings of their labouring lives, can be 'its own kind of violence against workers and at times even undermin[es] mobilizations on the ground' (Siddiqi, 2009, p. 171). For instance, in the context of South Asia, to understand the meanings that women attach to work, researchers must locate that meaning within the broader livelihood struggles of households/communities, considering the nature of entitlements, available resources, employment possibilities, and the social relations of gender, caste, poverty, access to health care, education and social security (Gidwani & Ramamurthy, 2018; Menon & Sundar, 2018; Rao, 2014).

The second silence is that we know little about how women's own, emergent, processual, and longitudinal sense of self translates into moments of labour organization. We know that women around the world are organizing against low wages, poor working conditions, sexual harassment, and over-work; reports show that they are demanding health care and social security; they are opposing factory closures and forming associations (Hensman, 2001; Kelly, 2019; Nowak et al., 2018). These accounts suggest that women are resisting the idea of their own disposability, even under vulnerable conditions; that they are expressing their agency, and organizing politically. What remains opaque, however, is a necessary (if insufficient) *prior* condition to women's union-based resistance: just how, exactly, women workers come to understand themselves in such a way that leads them to unionization. This is particularly important when we consider that many women labour organizers emerge from contexts of rurality, being first time industrial workers, and considerable gender oppression – conditions and contexts where labour organizing would appear a remote likelihood.

These gaps animate the current work. Thus my empirical focus is to better understand how women come to imagine themselves as active, engaged, labour activists. Specifically, I seek to correct the gap noted by Silvey (2003) in which research on labour struggles and organizing often focuses on the conditions that lead to protests/strikes, but pays inadequate attention to the more long-run conditions that women experience – in their homes, their communities, their workplaces – that are crucial 'in making women into active labour protestors' (Silvey, 2003, p. 140). Greater attention to the process by which seemingly 'disposable' women come to see themselves as agential labour activists would complement the ongoing, multi-disciplinary scholarship that demonstrates how: women workers, households, local institutions and communities co-constitute labour

relations and workplace politics (Carswell, 2016; Neethi, 2016); women's everyday, micro-scale struggles (Carswell & De Neve, 2013; Rogaly, 2009); and the significance of the places – rooms, homes, the shop floor – in which struggles play out (Datta, 2007; Dutta, 2019; McDowell, 2015).

Further, I argue that the way to access women's own accounts of their lives (and thus the factors that they consider important to their emergence as organizers), is through long-form narratives told by women themselves. I suggest that women's own narratives – not just of their lives as they are but as their lives came to be – also offer powerful counter-narratives to those accounts that emphasize the exploitative effects of capitalist globalization, thereby opening up possibilities for solidarity and 'translocal politics' (Katz, 2001, p. 722).

In this article, then, my aim is to examine: what can be learned about workings of the global capital by paying attention to women's narratives and everyday embodied experiences, from homes to factories; and how those life narratives can reveal the processes that shape how women come to imagine themselves as people capable of and motivated to organize to form unions. Specifically, I present the life-narratives, or stories, of women labour activists from South India. Through their stories, I explore the processes by which these factory women were inspired to form two women-led garment workers unions in Bengaluru (Karnataka) and Chennai (Tamil Nadu). My focus is not on the dynamics of the union formation nor on the collective empowerment that unionization came to build (for this type of account, see Agarwala, 2013; Nair, 2016). Rather, by tracing the trajectories by which women came to be union leaders, I reveal how rooted their formation is in such key but overlooked subjectivities as their own sense of self-worth, their practical consciousness, and their struggles for dignity in different spaces and at different scales. Further, the women's stories draw much-needed attention to the critical nature of support and care that women provide each other as they enter newer relations of waged work – a key form of solidarity work that is critical for organizing against exploitative labour relations both within and outside workplaces. Ultimately, I aspire to contribute to the critical feminist scholarship on global factories by explicating the field's tension between the need to illuminate the extent of exploitation and the urgency of drawing attention to women's stories and their multiple struggles against the idea of and possibility of disposability.

The article is based on in-depth, long-form interviews that I conducted with five women leaders in Bengaluru and Chennai in June–July 2017. I interviewed the women in their respective union offices. The interviews were conducted in the Kannada and Tamil languages, and I transcribed them into English. Those interviews were supplemented by discussions with key labour activists and regional NGOs. Each of the women occupies a different leadership roles in both unions. I interviewed the women as part of a larger research project, funded by the Ford Foundation on the impact of pricing and sourcing dynamics on the conditions of work in India's Ready Made Garment (RMG) export sector (see Anner, 2019).

In the following section, I provide some background on that export sector, and on the conditions of work in it, as documented by labour activists, NGOs and researchers. Next, I present narratives of the lived experiences of two women leaders. I chose these two narratives for their empirical richness, for their comparability/contrastability, and because of the quality of the insights they offer into under-examined roles and questions about how women organize (in and out of the workplace), and how that leads not just to women's participation in unions, but to their formation and leadership of them. In the Discussion, I review two key insights that emerge from women's accounts: conditions that engender women's path to protest; and the power of life stories that illuminate the everyday processual and embodied ways in which women come to organize and resist the double burden of capital and patriarchy.

2. Background

2.1. Women in garment work in India

While India has a long history of textile production (Yafa, 2005), it was not until the 1990s that the country significantly expanded its apparel export sector. Presently, India ranks fifth in global apparel export, exporting products worth over USD 18 billion annually. Production is spread across different regions: the northern region produces niche commodities for a highly diversified export market, and the southern region specializes in the mass production of outerwear. The regional differentiation in the sector is linked to the political economy of specific regions, historical industrial trajectories, commercial dynamics, and the product cycle of the garments produced (Mezzadri, 2017).

Globally, the garment sector has incorporated women into factory-based work since its origin, reproducing itself as a ‘feminized’ industry not only through an increase in the number of women employed but, as Mezzadri notes, ‘a systematic rise in “undesirable” jobs paying “feminine” [i.e. lower] wages’ (2017, p. 77). Notwithstanding this global imaginary of an evenly feminized industry, however, India seems to be an outlier: in Northern and Eastern India, the factory-based workforce remain largely dominated by men, and it’s in the non-factory workplaces (i.e. home-based) where women predominate (Mezzadri, 2017, p. 78; also see WIEGO, 2016). This dynamic, however, is completely different in southern India, which follows a pattern similar to other garment producing countries, with a large proportion of women workers employed in the garment export factories.

Even within South India, there were differences among the garment industries. For example, from its beginnings in the 1970s, the garment industry in Chennai had employed women workers both in the factory and non-factory settings, which was quite exceptional compared to other regions (Kalpagam, 1981). In contrast, Bengaluru’s garment industry in the 1970s primarily hired men, but after a number of labour strikes in Gokuldas, one the largest garment export houses in the region, the industry started employing women workers based on the perception that women wouldn’t unionize (RoyChowdhury, 2005). The incorporation of women in assembly-line garment production was seen as the ‘feminization’ of the local labour process that was ‘aimed at ensuring both labour cost minimization and labour discipline’ (Mezzadri, 2017, p. 87).

2.2. Wages and conditions of work

Wages in the garment sector in India remain very low despite producing for some of the top apparel brands in the world (e.g. Gap, Levi Strauss, H&M, Nike etc.). The sector demonstrates ‘classic features of informality with a workforce that is non-unionized and footloose’, with a large number of women workers receiving less than the stipulated minimum wage (RoyChowdhury, 2015, p. 84). As per a recent estimate by labour researchers in Bengaluru, the wage share per worker in the sector is about 16% of FOB (freight on board) (Mani et al., 2018).¹ The actual wages vary across states from Rs. 6000 to Rs. 16,000 (\$85–\$299) per month (see Mani et al., 2018 for comparative wages in Karnataka and NCR-Delhi).

Numerous media and NGO reports have shown instances of women workers being subjected to verbal abuse, sexual harassment, public humiliation for failing to meet targets, over-work, low wages and forced overtime (Anner, 2019; Cividep and Somo, 2009; Jenkins, 2013; Mohan, 2017; Sisters for Change and Munnade, 2016). For instance, in Bengaluru, which has 1200 registered RMG export factories that employ over 500,000 women workers, 60% of women reported to

have faced harassment by male supervisors (Sisters for Change and Munnade, 2016). In 2015, the International Labour Organization noted:

verbal abuse ... followed by being forced to work when unwell, physical violence ... and a number of them say they have witnessed or been locked in the workplace. Sexual violence or harassment of women is reported by one in ten of all workers but nearly one in five women. (ILO, 2015, p. ix)

In light of these prevailing conditions of work, I now turn to the stories of two women workers and their everyday political acts against workplace oppression, leading to the process of organizing and subsequently forming the Garment Labour Union (GLU) in Bengaluru and Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU) in Chennai.

3. Becoming active labour protestors

Coming to Bangalore was like coming to America, it was all new. I didn't know anyone in the city, neighborhood was new, was worried about money. (Rukmini)

Married at the age of 16, Rukmini came to Bengaluru in 1991 from Mandya district in rural Karnataka after her husband got a factory job in the city. 'Of all my siblings, two brothers and a sister, I am the only one whom my parents didn't send to school', she said. Rukmini's younger sister, who was disabled by polio as an infant, was sent to school as their parents anticipated low prospects for finding her a groom. After Rukmini's father left his job in the Indian railways to return to the family's 1 acre (0.4 ha) farm, he started drinking heavily, leaving her mother to take care of the field, household work, and children. 'I was not sent to school [because I had] to help out with the household chores', Rukmini said.

I begin this section with the story of 44-year-old Rukmini, who is the president of the Garment Labour Union (GLU) in Bengaluru. I spoke to Rukmini in a very busy GLU office where the front room was occupied by a dozen or more children from the neighbouring working class areas who were attending an after-school tutoring class, and in another corner of the room some men from a garment factory were being trained by two GLU members (women) about their legal rights to form a union. Through Rukmini's story, which I have paraphrased closely to what she had narrated, I will describe the process of formation of the union. My point is not to prioritize her role over the other women who have all been central to collectivizing. Rather, I seek to emphasize the life story of an individual woman worker that demonstrates the 'becoming' of an active labour protestor.

Rukmini's decision to work in garment factories is not exceptional. Situated within an overall context of access to urban-based waged employment, Rukmini is typical of migrant, rural, semi-rural women² with limited access to skilled jobs, education, social networks or other resources (RoyChowdhury, 2015). For example, of the estimated 500,000 garment export workers each in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, women comprise 80% of the workforce and are mostly rural-to-urban migrants, the majority of whom come from within the states; a small proportion from out of state (Mani et al., 2018). However, what is exceptional in Rukmini's case is that despite being a migrant woman with no schooling or prior experience of industrial work, she led the formation of a garment workers union in the city. Here's her story.

3.1. Garment Labour Union, Bengaluru

A year after her marriage, Rukmini got pregnant with her first child. She was 17 years old and in a new city. 'I was worried about money, my husband had low wages ... it was stressful and

overwhelming.’ She went back to her mother’s home in the village to give birth and stayed there for nine months. While in the village as a young mother, she started learning to stitch on a sewing machine at home. She also worked at the local *aganwadi* (government-run rural childcare centre). When her child was nine months old, Rukmini returned to the city to her husband and found a job as a domestic maid. She also started working in an informal recycling unit that sorted plastic milk packets. ‘That work made me sick. The smell from the rotting milk packets was nauseating, I couldn’t do the work for long ... after one month of doing that work, I quit.’ During this time, Rukmini’s small child fell ill, and it became difficult to manage the mounting medical bills.

In 1992, my monthly wages were Rs. 300 (\$4.22), my husband’s was Rs. 200 (\$2.81), and the medical bill was more than Rs. 500 (\$7.03). A neighbour told me about possibility of work in the garment factory nearby. I knew how to stitch, so I thought I will try to find work in the factory.³

After getting that job in 1992, Rukmini worked at different garment factories in the city. Being a tailor, she was always in demand and could find work easily. As she recounts, ‘In 1992–93, production was much more relaxed [than it is now], we did 30–35 pieces an hour. We would sit, relax, have fun ... it was like family. The employer was caring – it was a factory in Mysore Road’. Those conditions didn’t last.

In 1996, after Rukmini’s second child was born, she had to quit her job to take care of her children. She re-joined the factory work in 1998 – just around the time that the factory began supplying garments to big multinational brands like H&M and Gap. Recounting her experiences after rejoining factory work, Rukmini said:

Work pressure was more, more extra time, constant screaming by supervisors for production ... they would call us ‘owl’,⁴ say ‘why do you come here to work?’, sometimes the supervisor or production manager (PM) would throw a book, piece of cloth, scissors, pencils towards us or twist our ears when production targets were not met. My salary was Rs. 71/day (\$0.99) at that time, about Rs. 1050/month (\$14.77). I used to fight back against the supervisors and PM. I had confidence in my skill as a tailor, I would fight back.

Scholars have noted that the shift in work conditions that Rukmini describes as happening between 1992 and 1998 was linked to the phasing out of Multi Fibre Agreement, a global quota system for the export of textile goods, which accelerated competition amongst garment-exporting countries (Siddiqi, 2009). For women, while the physical work was taxing, it was the daily verbal abuse by the supervisors that caused most anxiety and stress, and was deeply affronting to their dignity (see Anner, 2019). After several years enduring this stress-inducing verbal violence, around 2002–2003, Rukmini came across some pamphlets on garment workers’ rights by an urban labour NGO called Cividep (Civil Initiatives for Development).

At that point, Cividep had for over a decade done the pre-union work of raising awareness about labour rights amongst workers in their residential areas rather than at the factory gates. In the 1960s and 1970s, by contrast, when the garment industry was physically located near the men-dominated industries of the Lalbagh area of Bengaluru, there was more ‘potential for unionization’ (Roy-Chowdhury, 2005, p. 2251). However, with the gradual shift of the garment factories to export-oriented zones in the rural outskirts of the city (where Rukmini worked) or Boomsandra and the recruitment of large number of women workers, the chances of unionization in the sector were substantially weakened. Nevertheless, Rukmini was undeterred: she started attending some of Cividep’s legal trainings on labour rights.

I went to the legal training program and heard people speak. I heard the labour commissioner speak and got very angry. He spoke of labour rights, work conditions, minimum wages ... we didn't have any of these in our factory. So I waited for the meeting to end in order to speak with the commissioner. He told me that to get our demands met, we needed to collectivize, form unions ... I had no idea about unions, I had heard of some labour strikes, but not much.

Inspired, in 2004, Rukmini along with a few other garment workers formed a women's organization called *Garment Mahila Karmikara Munnade* (henceforth, Munnade) with support from Cividep. Initially, Munnade activists organized in their own neighbourhoods, forming self-help groups. These groups allowed women to set up a microfinance credit system while also responding to domestic violence and household issues, including organizing resources for children's education or health care needs. As the organization responded to working class women's day-to-day issues, it built up trust amongst them. That trust eventually allowed organizers to gradually start to approach issues related to work conditions and workers' rights (Gross, 2013, p. 22). Munnade members began distributing pamphlets around garment factories on labour rights and conducting regular factory-gate meetings. As Rukmini recalled, 'slowly we realized we needed to form a workers' organization to deal with the management, we needed legal support and formal representation – we needed to form a union'. This realization led to the formation of Garment and Textile Workers Union (GATWU) in 2006.

In April of that year, GATWU organized a public consultation with the garment workers and held a rally in which Rukmini was elected as the general secretary and made a public speech. Until this point, managers in the factory where Rukmini worked did not know of her union involvement 'After the rally, when I went to the factory, I was called to the head office. They told me there won't be any jobs if we did union work, they asked me to quit the union. I told them to give it to me in writing that they wanted me to quit the union. They threatened to fire me. I told them to give it to me in writing if they wanted to fire me', Rukmini recounted. Instead of firing her, managers began to publicly humiliate her instead: announcing on the shop floor that she was not working properly, and assigning her 'tough' work targets. This follows a standard play-book: victimization of workers due to union activity is not uncommon in India, and it can often take violent forms, including physical and verbal abuse, over work, demand to meet high production targets, and so on (Dutta, 2018; Greenhouse, 2018; Teltumbde, 2012).

One day a production manager shouted at Rukmini for not meeting her target for a batch of stitching. 'It was a different material and not easy to stitch. I got angry and asked him to do it and see if it was possible. He couldn't do it and spoiled the material. I asked him to fix it', Rukmini recalled. After this incident Rukmini was shifted to a different department and finally, in 2007, suspended from work on false allegations of running an 'illegal' micro credit system (chit fund) in the factory. GATWU filed a complaint protesting Rukmini's suspension leading to a domestic enquiry by a retired judge. After the hearing, while the judge did not revoke the suspension, he directed the management to continue to pay Rukmini's wages. 'So from 2007 onwards the company pays my wages (\$4.49/day), while I continue to do my union work', said Rukmini.

Since 2006, Rukmini and GATWU has been actively investigating and exposing labour rights violations in different garment factories. The group has also been building alliances with labour organizations in importing countries (e.g. Europe, US) as a means to scale-up their local campaigns. However, in 2013, Rukmini and other active women members quit GATWU after an intense struggle against one of the male union leader who sexually harassed some of them. The women then formed the Garment Labour Union (GLU).⁵ Nevertheless, these women faced intense opposition for publicly raising the sexual harassment accusation against the leader from multiple quarters:

from within the union movement (including a national trade union) and from prominent members of feminist and human rights organizations, who viewed any split in the union as detrimental to the broader union activity in the city. However, by forming GLU and making their complaint public, the women demonstrated the indivisibility of their dignity from their politics and ideology as union organizers.⁶

Even now, at a great risk of making herself vulnerable to all sorts of public scrutiny, Rukmini has continued to raise the issue of sexual harassment with national and international union federations.⁷ After separating from GATWU, she and other union women also formed a separate social organization – *Munnade* – to continue working at the community and household level with the workers. GLU has been actively organizing amongst garment workers since then and have both women and men members, with a strong women led leadership.

3.2. *Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU), Chennai*

The Garment and Fashion Workers Union (GAFWU), based in Chennai, emerged in 2009 out of the struggle led by women workers of a ready-made garment export factory located inside the Madras Export Processing Zone (MEPZ). Energetic 50-year-old Dilli Babu, a worker at the Celebrity Fashions factory (and vice president of GAFWU), recounted how women started striking inside the factory to protest low wages and poor working conditions even before any formal collectivizing efforts began in the factory.

Dilli has been working in the garment export factories since 2003. Born and raised in Chennai in a family of nine siblings, Dilli finished high school before quitting studies to tutor neighbourhood children to support her family. Married at the age of 26, Dilli's husband supported the family by working in a small food catering business. 'I didn't work outside (home) for almost 10 years after my marriage, I was just sitting at home. My son was born in 1997. I had three miscarriages. I decided to join garment work in 2003, there was as such no pressure to join factory work', Dilli explained. Dilli's first job was at Ambattur Clothing Limited (ACL), a garment export unit inside the MEPZ.

In 2006, after ACL's management changed to a new owner – Celebrity Fashions – supplier to major US brands such as LL Bean and Timberland, workers felt insecure about the continuity in their employment contracts with the new management. They feared breaks in their service records, and possible changes to their annual bonuses, pay-increase and working conditions. The workers raised their apprehensions about these issues with the new managers. The latter assured the workers of job protection and other benefits. But after taking over the unit, Celebrity Fashion reduced bonuses and did not give annual pay raise. Describing other changes, Dilli said that 'After Celebrity Fashions took over ACL, there was compulsory overtime, high work pressure, no Casual Leave – things changed completely'. In 2008, Dilli and other workers started agitating for bonuses and earned leaves and, as a result, became targets for harassment by the management.

In 2008, after a sit-in strike by the workers inside the factory, the management declared a lock-out. A union that was affiliated with a political party then negotiated a compromise with the management and approached the agitating workers – mostly men – to break the strike. However, Dilli and other women workers did not trust the union men who did not even consult them and decided to take the matter into their own hands. 'I told them [women workers]: "let's find solutions ourselves"', said Dilli. She suggested that they approach *Penn Thozhilalargal Sangam* (PTS), an autonomous women-led union based in Chennai. 'In 2009, we had met the activists from the Sangam

when they were doing gate meeting near MEPZ, we had read their pamphlets. So we decided to approach them to discuss our issues and how to form a union', Dilli recalled.

At that time, PTS had already been working for four years (since 2004) with women domestic workers, home-based workers, construction and quarry workers, and street vendors. Like *Munnade* in Bangalore, PTS worked at the community level, engaging in day-to-day issues of sanitation, domestic violence, and access to basic resources such as clean water, electricity, housing, and cylinders of cooking gas. Since 2005, with the emergence of export factories in the garment and electronics sector around Chennai and entry of young women in these factories, PTS activists also started engaging with factory-based issues in the garment export units. In 2008, PTS started a city-wide 'Know Your Rights' campaign, distributing pamphlets on workplace rights especially focusing on young women working in the garment and electronics factories. Along with pamphlet distribution, PTS activists, started organizing public meetings close to the industrial areas where the factories were located. It was during one such public meeting and pamphleteering outside MEPZ that Dilli Babu and other women workers from Celebrity Fashions met them.

In May 2009, led by women workers from Celebrity Fashions and with the support of PTS, GAFWU was formed. However, the management of Celebrity Fashions refused to recognize GAFWU as a union despite its strong membership on the shop floor (as of the time of writing, it remains unrecognized). In 2010, Dilli was physically assaulted by the management personnel. 'They attacked me, pulled my saree and hair. They were doing this since I was active in the union and organizing workers. They even got some workers to sign a document alleging that I was a "bad woman"', Dilli said. After this incident, Dilli took three days leave to recover and when she rejoined she was demoted: sent to be a helper in the cutting section, rather than resuming her skilled job as a tailor. The next year, in 2011, Dilli and another worker named Elisabeth Rani (who had been working in the garment export sector since 1997 and is another leader in GAFWU) took leave from the factory to attend a national trade union rally in Mumbai. Returning after four days, the Production Manager physically attacked Elisabeth and took away her ID card when he learned about her union activities. GAFWU's response was swift. 'GAFWU made a police complaint against the company manager. The company gave me a two-months leave with salary and after GAFWU intervened again, they took me back [to skilled work] in the finishing department as an ironer', said 46-year-old Elisabeth. The company continues to target and arbitrarily dismiss union members.

Although GAFWU was formed by the leadership of women workers from Celebrity Fashion, it works across different garment factories in Chennai. In particular, it has taken up the issue of safe transportation of women workers to their workplace. This was necessary because of factory managers' tendency to effectively lay off workers by arbitrarily ceasing to provide them with reliable transport facilities between home and work.⁸

One of GAFWU's biggest fights has been to get minimum wages implemented in Chennai's garment sector, where wages remain as low as \$58–\$88 USD/month (Rs. 4000–6000). In 2010, GAWFU found out that one of the main reasons for such low wages was due to the obstructive tactics employed by the garment manufacturers. Through legal interventions in the courts, they had managed to stall the periodic revisions of minimum wage by the state, as stipulated under the Minimum Wage Act.⁹ In August 2010, GAFWU decided to implead in the pending cases in the High Court. After a protracted legal battle, the interim injunction was lifted in 2012.¹⁰ However, the government didn't immediately revise the wages and only after numerous petitions, public campaigns and demonstrations by GAFWU, on 12 December 2013, the State government revised minimum wages of garment workers, hiking it by about \$43 (Rs. 3000) for skilled and unskilled

workers. In October 2014, state government confirmed the revised wages and published it in the Tamil Nadu Gazette in December 2014. Immediately, more than 500 garment factory owners from Chennai, Coimbatore and Tirupur filed petitions in the Madras High Court seeking to quash the Order on the grounds that the hike would make the industry ‘uncompetitive’ and ‘unsustainable’. The industry also falsely claimed that the government did not follow due process in revising the wages (Sukumar, 2015).¹¹

Meanwhile, GAFWU has continued to organize and campaign for the implementation of the revised wages at the factory level, to which management such as Celebrity Fashions have responded harshly by dismissing some of the key shop floor union leaders, including Dilli Babu and Elizabeth Rani (Thozhilalar Koodam, 2017). Neither currently has a job.

4. Understanding the conditions for unionization through women’s life stories

The aim of the article is to draw attention to women’s life stories in order to learn, broadly, about workings of the global capital from the everyday embodied experiences of work, and specifically, how women are motivated to form unions. Rukmini and Dilli’s stories offer us multiple insights into both these aspects: they show us women who are resisting at an individual level, and also mobilizing on the ground to build strong worker-led organizations that are not restricted to factory-level issues but demand larger sectoral changes such as the enforcement of labour laws in the garment sector. The stories also show us how women confront and resist the double burden of capital and patriarchy on their path to becoming active labour protestors. Two key insights stand out.

4.1. The conditions for organizing: women’s paths to protest

At the level of individuals, these stories show how a migrant woman like Rukmini, without any formal schooling or previous experience of factory work, is nevertheless acutely conscious of her skills as a tailor and has a strong sense of self-worth. She mobilizes that consciousness to counter the daily verbal abuses of the supervisors and the arbitrary actions of the management. Her story reveals how she not only tries to change her own conditions of precarity, but organizes with other women to demand improvements, so women can earn income and work with dignity.

Her story also shows the multiple sites of waged and unwaged work, often gendered, that she has to perform simultaneously. As she herself explains, those experiences shaped her consciousness and identity as a worker. Not only that, in recounting her own trajectory of employment, she is reliably narrating the larger restructuring of the global garment industry, with the lifting of the quota system in the mid-1990s. In other words, her personal story is clearly linked – by her – to the broader political economies in which she labours. This indicates how worker narratives are able to capture at micro-scale (bodies) the larger changes in the macro-economic policies and in some instances, as we see in Rukmini’s case, that insight prompts labour responses. In sum: women’s narratives make visible these micro-scale everyday embodied experiences that are critical in the process of becoming active labour protestors that otherwise becomes invisible.

More collectively, in both Bengaluru and Chennai, we see the significance of creating community-level support and in organizing work outside the workplace. This was demonstrated by the important role played by Munnade (Bengaluru) and PTS (Chennai) in mobilizing workers in their residential areas by addressing household and community-level issues, like access to clean water and domestic violence. And even after the formation of unions, women union leaders show that they remain actively involved in these profoundly *social* organizations – continuing to

support women outside the workplace. One could argue about the limitations of such activism as ‘developmentalism of a certain kind’ that does not produce radical labour politics (RoyChowdhury, 2005, p. 2250). However, the support networks and social organizations that Rukmini and Dilli describe play a critical role in providing much-needed care and emotional and material support to women, which ultimately helps to build a broader political base amongst workers. Also, these forms of mobilization stand in contrast to the way traditional trade unions usually organize in the formal workplaces with predominantly male workforces.

Indeed the some of the issues around which women mobilize and organize inside the workplace overlaps with similar everyday concerns of life and labour around which they organize in the residential areas. For instance, issues of transportation, toilet breaks, harassments, closures, leaves, and workplace accidents – conditions that make it possible for women to access and continue to work under safe and dignified conditions. However, these concerns are often seen as factory-level issues, and are not considered to be a part of a larger, organized workers’ struggle. However, for women these are significant actions. Although it could be argued that these strategies lead to workers’ gains that are insufficiently transformative, I would argue that in terms of labour conditions or collective actions in the sector, given the overall context of unionizing in the garment sector, for women and their associations these concerns and fights over them are indeed significant. After all, they serve as an important reference that encourages and emboldens other women to speak out against everyday injustices and indignities.

4.2. *The power of life stories*

The above point highlights the processual, long-run, embodied, and deeply social ways in which women come to resist and change their conditions of work, and the ability of women to *articulate* that process. These are insights that could not have emerged from the common methodological strategy of surveys or cross-sectional comparisons of women’s lives in the present moment. What was arguably required instead was a privileging of the longitudinal: an approach that understood women’s political actions as *emergent*, the product of their lived experiences as girls, young mothers, in villages and cities, that shape how they come to perceive of themselves and how they, then, come to identify the conditions that they will simply not tolerate. In the case of the women highlighted here, that moment was the profoundly gendered affronts to their dignity that they experienced daily on the factory floor.

Additionally, the women’s stories illustrate the nature of solidarity work that women undertake which can be critical source of power for women to draw upon as they struggle against exploitative work relations at different sites and scales. By illuminating the micro-spaces of struggles both inside and outside the workplace, the article not only provides a lens into the nature of everyday conflict between labour and capital, but also the kinds of unexpected possibilities that might emerge for organizing that often gets lost in the larger analysis or narratives of traditional unionizing.

It is important to note here how women’s narratives also reveal how their struggles, whether individual or collective, do not necessarily always emerge from a pre-conceived notion of labour rights. Rather, they emerge during the process of work, from a fought-for sense of self-worth, and through interactions with other workers in and outside the workplace. These actions are everyday political acts. While not wholly transformative, they challenge the idea of ‘docile’ and ‘disposable’ third-world factory women. As is evident in the experiences of Rukmini, Dilli and others, women confront the management and even shift jobs when faced with an abusive workplace. This indicates that under specific conditions, they actively make decisions in choosing how,

when and under what terms to labour. While I do not claim that women are always able to respond in these ways, the purpose here is to highlight the existence of women's refusal to be ill-treated – not just by management but also by their own peers. Their actions show just how much women's politics, labour protests and ideologies can not be separated from their personal sense of self-respect and dignity.

I suggest that this form of life story can be more broadly taken up as a means to access everyday, embodied experiences of women resisting global capitalism, and to imagine possibilities of a trans-local politics that could offer a counter-narrative to the idea of 'disposable' third world factory woman. Narratives also helps us reflect on the 'experiential contradictions' generated when people encounter industrial work or global capitalism. For instance, in Rukmini's and Dilli's stories we see how they faced opposition from women workers themselves, since they were perceived by their co-workers to be threatening to their jobs. Often in the global narratives of 'third world factory woman', these tensions or 'critical differences' get flattened out, often producing 'troubling analytical simplifications' (Siddiqi, 2009, p. 171). Paying close attention to the contexts within which women live and labour, their own perception of themselves, their experiences and motivations, helps us to understand the multiple ways in which women resist and collectivize.

Crucially, these narratives also illustrate the double burden of capital and patriarchy that women have to confront as they try to assert their political, economic and social autonomy (see Hensman, 2011; Milkman, 2016; Pearson, 2013). As we see in both Dilli's and Rukmini's narrative, in their organizing efforts to challenge the workings of global capital, they had to strongly resist the oppressive patriarchal structures in the workers organizations. For instance, Dilli narrates how she and other women workers in Celebrity Fashion opposed the way the representatives of a trade union negotiated an understanding with the management to end the strike by approaching the men in the factory. The women not only opposed the men making the decision on their behalf, but also proactively reached out to a women-led union (PTS) to form their own union in the factory. Similarly, Rukmini narrated how women had to fight back against the sexual harassment by a male union leader, even as they organized to oppose the arbitrary actions of the management, ultimately leading to the formation of new women led union. In retelling of these stories, it becomes apparent that for women class struggle is often a gendered process where women become active protestors against the double burden of capital and patriarchy.

Notes

1. The estimation is based on multiple factors – annual apparel export data for 2016–2017 (\$17,479 million), estimation of total workforce of 20 lakh workers (2 million), an average wage of \$1460 per annum (Rs. 1 lakh) and an estimated per worker production value of \$8766 (Rs. 6 lakh).
2. Studies have shown urban labour market to be hostile to women generally. Women's workforce participation rate is 14% as against 55% for men in urban areas. Papola notes gender discriminations in wages, hiring and promotion in urban labour markets (Papola, 2012, pp. 11–12).
3. Interview with Rukmini, President, Garment Labour Union, Bengaluru, 18th July 2018.
4. The term 'gube'(owl) is used in the Kannada (and several other Indian languages) as a derogatory term to ascribe lack of intelligence or mental quickness to a person. In this way, it is similar to the use of 'moron' or 'idiot' in English to insult people. The term 'owl' retains its original, non-derogatory meaning in other contexts (for instance, when referring to the nocturnal habits of owls) and is only understood as a slur or derogatory term when intended as an insult. In Kannada, this term is also gendered in that it is used for insults directed towards women mostly.
5. In 2009 and 2011, sexual harassment committee constituted by Cividep found the allegations of sexual harassment against the male union leader to be valid that led to his dismissal from Cividep, where he

was a paid employee. He however continues to be associated with GATWU which is affiliated to international labour federations.

6. Personal interview with members of Garment Labour Union, Bengaluru, 19th July 2018.
7. Rukmini as the president of GLU has recently written to the leaders of different international labour federations highlighting the incidences of sexual harassment faced by them but have received no response or even acknowledgment to her complaint. Email communication with Rukmini dated 14th May 2020.
8. Press Release by Garment and Fashion Workers Union, GAFWU. Garment Workers Win Back Transport Facility, 12th May 2018. <https://tnlabour.in/factory-workers/6775>.
9. Minimum Wage Act (1948) that is applicable to all industrial sectors, requires that each State in the country revise wages for every industry at least once every five years through a tripartite mechanism. In case of Tamil Nadu, the minimum wage in the garment sector was revised in 1994 and then in 2004 and finally in December 2013. However, each time the state government revised the minimum wage, owners of garment factories filed petitions in the Madras High Court and got injunctions on the notifications. Till 2010, the government too did not push to defend its notification in the court. Even the Court did not question the motives of the employers in obstructing the implementation of wage revisions for over a decade (Email communication with Meghna Sukumar, former labour activist with PTS/GAFWU dated 5th July 2018).
10. Press Release by Garment and Fashion Workers Union, GAFWU. High Court dismisses writ petitions challenging Government Order on Minimum Wages for Garment Workers. 15th July 2016. <https://tnlabour.in/factory-workers/3885>.
11. In 2016, the Madras High Court dismissed the appeals made by the employers and ordered 30% wage hike under the Minimum Wages Act. See: <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/dQs5QEjXMKLE37QaQ4TFnL/Madras-HC-orders-30-pay-hike-for-garment-workers-in-Tamil-N.html>.

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