

# A STITCH IN TIME SAVED NONE:

HOW FASHION BRANDS  
FUELED VIOLENCE  
IN THE FACTORY AND BEYOND



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in the Factory and Beyond**



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ASIA FLOOR WAGE ALLIANCE

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# **A STITCH IN TIME SAVED NONE :**

## **How Fashion Brands Fueled Violence in the Factory and Beyond**

### **Executive Summary**

This study documents women garment workers' experiences of gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Asian production countries. It elaborates "economic harm" as a form of GBVH, underscoring how the business models of global apparel brands and their actions during the pandemic-induced recession exacerbated women workers' vulnerability to violence both inside the factories and in their homes, families, and communities, leading to the feminisation of the COVID-19 crisis.

### **Economic Harm as GBVH**

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBHV) is endemic to the garment industry. Asymmetrical power relations between apparel brands in the global North and suppliers in the global South are such that brands are able to dictate the terms of production, requiring ever higher production targets at ever lower rates, leading to high-pressure work environments in which management, who are typically men, employ tactics like bullying, abuse, and harassment to speed up the work process and discipline the predominantly female workers.

At the outset of the pandemic, global apparel brands unilaterally acted to protect their profits and rapidly cancelled manufacturing orders worth billions of dollars. As suppliers in production countries faced economic crisis in an already highly competitive environment, many global apparel brands demanded deep discounts, placing even more downward pressure on suppliers. Given these realities, escalation of GBVH in garment factories during the pandemic was, sadly, predictable and inevitable.

At the same time, brands rely on the secondary position of women in society to keep costs low and amass super-profits by paying poverty-level wages. Therefore, when brands, through their unilateral practices, unleashed widespread wage theft during the pandemic, women, who were already disproportionately at poverty level, found their survival – and that of their families – in extreme jeopardy.

“Economic harm” as a form of GBVH is recognised by the International Labour Organization in its Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment and Recommendation R206. While there is no definition of what constitutes “economic harm”, given the widespread wage theft that disproportionately impacted women workers and its cascading effects, it is an important area of exploration. Brands’ purchasing practices created the conditions for longstanding GBVH that pre-dated the pandemic, and their irresponsible actions in the context of COVID-19 led to a number of deeply gendered economic-based phenomena that inflicted immense harm on women workers. Thus, the report elaborates on economic harm as a form of GBVH and examines how it intersects with gendered power inequalities in the broader society to produce reverberations of GBVH throughout the spaces of home and community. The findings reveal that economic harm imposed on women workers is directly linked to the global brands’ business models, purchasing practices, and irresponsible actions during the pandemic.

## **Beyond the Factory Walls**

Domestic and care work, disproportionately carried out by women, is essential for the renewal and reproduction of the most vital component of production processes – workers. In this way, the global economy is sustained, in large part, by the unpaid and underpaid labour of women. Women make immense social and economic contributions, yet their contributions remain unrecognised and undervalued, demonstrated by the lack of employer-based social protection and public services.

Women’s role as the main breadwinner in their families is also unrecognised, such that their waged labour has remained consistently underpaid, they are relegated to low-paid and insecure jobs and are more vulnerable to unemployment during times of contraction of the workforce. Global brands use this to their advantage to keep labour costs low and production flexible, which is why women make up the majority of workers engaged in garments manufacturing.



At the outset of the pandemic, brands abandoned workers in their supply chains and women were left to fend for themselves and their families through any means, which entailed reducing their consumption, taking on huge debt, and selling meagre assets to cover the costs of basic survival. Further, economic insecurity and forced intensification of work imposed by brands reinforced gender inequality and led to increased incidences of GBVH in the home and wider community, and the fabric that binds families buckled under the weight of extreme pressure.

All of this so that brands could minimise losses and increase their super-profits and so that value could be extracted from the bodies of women workers whose survival came at extreme costs. In this way, women workers subsidised global apparel brands during the pandemic-induced recession in 2020 not only through wage theft, but also through social reproduction of the workforce at great personal expense including their physical and mental wellbeing.

## **Methodology**

The report answers the following questions:

1. In the wake of COVID-19, what are the emerging gendered forms of GBVH women workers faced in global garment supply chains in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka?
2. How has the restructuring of the organisation of work changed and/or escalated the factors exposing women garment workers to GBVH in the workplace, home and community in the context of the pandemic?
3. In the political context of the pandemic that has become increasingly repressive and anti-labour, how have women workers, trade unionists and activists responded to GBVH?

## **Sample**

- Focus group discussions (FGDs) with 351 garment workers employed across 61 supplier factories;
- In-depth interviews with 68 women garment workers employed across 45 supplier factories;
- Spanning 6 countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan; and

- 15 trade union leaders from Cambodia, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

## **Tools of Data Collection**

- FGDs were conducted with small groups of workers to understand and identify the different/changing forms of violence encountered by women garment workers both within and outside the factory, specific to the COVID-19 context.
- In-depth interviews were conducted as case studies of gender-based violence and harassment among women garment workers for deeper exploration of findings from FGDs.
- Key information was collected from participants to understand the varying degrees to which GBVH affects workers according to their employment status, nature of contract and type of household.
- Selected factories across prominent garment manufacturing hubs in all countries were chosen on the basis of being Tier 1 factories, located in either new or old industrial zones, and representing different impacts according to whether they were open or closed during partial or complete lockdown scenarios.

## **Major Findings**

### **Wage Theft Committed by Brands During the Pandemic Disproportionately Impacted Women Workers in Their Supply Chains**

- # Suppliers leveraged the pre-existing gender pay gap, hiring or retaining women workers for low wage rates during periods of lockdown, and laying off men whose wages are higher.
- # Men were more likely to be rehired post-lockdown while the reduction in the number of workdays was more severe for women, leading to disproportionate impacts borne by women.
- # Suppliers were forced, by brands' unilateral cost-cutting, to dramatically downsize the workforce using an array of tactics ranging from legal to blatantly illegal, and impose increasingly flexible and insecure forms of employment on workers reflecting discrimination based on gender, caste, ethnicity, marital status, life cycle stage, etc.

## **Intensification of Work Due to Reduction of the Workforce and Increased Targets had Serious Repercussions for Women on Production Lines**

- # Women were forced to work unpaid overtime and prevented from taking legal mandated breaks.
- # Verbal abuse, physical violence and sexual harassment increased on production lines and during commutes while fear of retaliation and economic insecurity led women to tolerate or refrain from reporting unwanted and abusive behaviours.
- # Women were exposed to heightened health risks as occupational safety and health deteriorated resulting in fainting, exhaustion, physical illness, increased workplace accidents and risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus.
- # Mental health was severely impacted leading to depression, stress and anxiety, and even suicidal ideation as a result of increased work intensity, economic insecurity, the associated rise in GBVH and the virus itself.

## **Economic Harm Imposed by Brands Led to a Ripple Effect of Different Forms of Violence Experienced by Women Workers in Their Homes, Families and Communities**

- # Women's unpaid domestic and care work increased during the pandemic, compounded by the lack in employer-based social protection and social services, forcing many women to drop out of paid employment.
- # Women were forced to reduce their consumption, take on huge debts and sell meagre assets leading to hunger, malnutrition and bodily neglect.
- # Women were exposed to increased violence in their homes including familial domestic violence and in employer-provided factory dorms and boarding houses perpetrated by employers, landlords, shopkeepers etc.

# Way Forward

## Human Rights Due Diligence

Voluntary codes of conduct of brands, implemented through social auditing mechanisms have failed to improve the conditions of supply chain workers. Instead, we need mandatory mechanisms that bind brands to implement human rights due diligence as outlined by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights:

- # Brands must be mandated to identify and remediate GBVH across their supply chains through liability incorporated into their manufacturing contracts with suppliers. This commitment must not only comply with national legislations in production countries, but must be designed to overcome legislative and enforcement gaps.
- # Brands must make concrete commitments to understanding, identifying, and addressing risk factors for GBVH across their supply chains – especially economic harm arising from brands' purchasing practices – through a ground-up approach that upholds respect for freedom of association and is led by workers and trade unions. Brands must invest in grievance mechanisms at the factory level that are co-created with and accessible to women workers, and are designed, implemented, and monitored in collaboration with women workers and their trade unions.

## Compensating for the Gaps in Employer-Based Social Protection and Services in Production Countries

The invisibilisation of women workers as primary caregivers has resulted in the erosion of public provisioning, infrastructure and social protection policies driven by fiscal austerity measures. This non-recognition of women's role in social reproduction is utilised by brands to evade or withdraw provisioning of employer-based support. Brands must not hide behind the jurisdictional and governance weaknesses in production countries and instead comply with the international normative frameworks laid out by the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, UNGPs and the ILO standards.

Brands must compensate for gaps in laws and policies in production countries with regard to employer-based social protection by setting and implementing standards for supporting women workers in their supplier factories that are incorporated in manufacturing contracts. Brands must collaborate with workers and trade unions to identify and overcome gaps in employer-based social protection and commit to sharing costs of providing support to women workers in their supply chains.

Social benefits should not be tied to lifelong wage work and unemployed workers must be able to cover their cost of reproduction. We need a global architecture for social protection and a New Social Contract that has social protection against employment loss at its core.

### **Wage Forward: Towards Enforceable Wage Agreements**

Women workers' access to a guaranteed and protected living wage is central to addressing widespread GBVH, in the form of economic harm, within and beyond garment factories catering to global garment supply chains. However, due to the lack of binding mechanisms, the promise of living wages in voluntary codes of conduct has remained unfulfilled.

The Wage Forward Campaign launched by the global garment labour movement demands that brands sign on to an Enforceable Wage Agreement (EWA), a global, legally binding agreement, negotiated and signed by trade unions, international brands and retailers to guarantee a living wage to garment workers. Through this agreement brands will make legally binding commitments to pay an additional contribution in the form of a 25% premium on every order placed that will make up for the gap between legally mandated minimum wages and estimated living wages in production countries. This agreement will replace the voluntary codes of conduct of brands with a union-driven and worker monitored process for the payment of living wages.

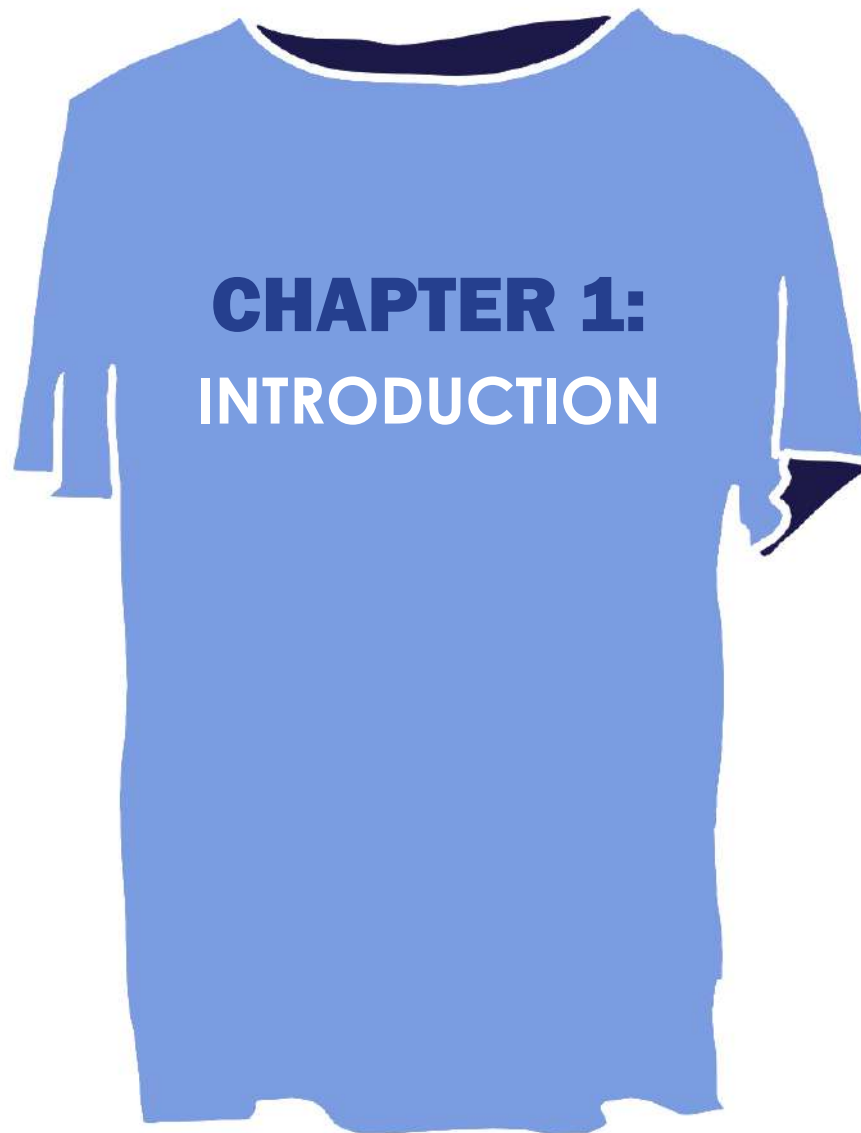
### **Implementation of Safe Circle Approach through Brand Agreements**

The various workplace programmes to address GBVH in supplier factories developed by corporate social responsibility divisions of brands have failed to make any meaningful changes in organisational culture that is required to end GBVH in garment factories.



The AFWA-WLC's Safe Circle Approach is a transformative approach. Global brands must, together with their suppliers and AFWA's Women's Leadership Committee, implement the "Safe Circle Approach" in their supply chains to catalyse transformational interventions in garment global supply chains.

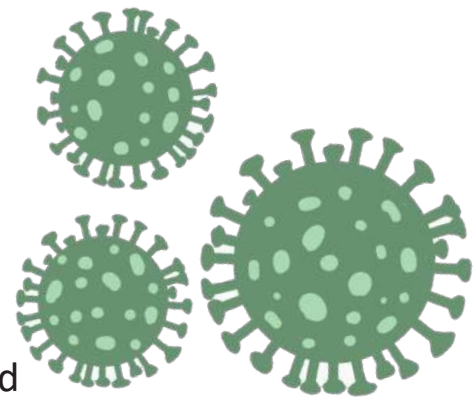




**W**hen the COVID-19 pandemic reached garment production countries in Asia – that are the largest manufacturing base for global apparel brands – public health took momentary precedence over economic imperatives as governments shifted between full and partial lockdowns between March and May 2020. However, for developing countries, such as in Asia, that rely heavily on a few specific exports as is the case in the global garment industry, many factories that were in the process of manufacturing orders for global apparel brands were allowed to operate despite full lockdowns. When the time came for governments to unlock, this industry was among the first to reopen.

At the same time, due to government-imposed closures of shops and department stores in global North consumer countries, global apparel brands

unilaterally acted to protect their profits and rapidly cancelled manufacturing orders worth billions of dollars. Many major apparel brands initially refused to accept or pay for goods that were already produced, resulting in mass layoffs, terminations, and factory closures. However, due to public pressure many were forced to agree to pay, although, most brands did not release the funds until later in the year and there is no evidence that these payments were passed on to workers for arrears. Brands such as American Eagle Outfitters, Bestseller, HEMA, JCPenney, Kohl's, and Walmart have still made no commitment to pay in full for completed orders. As these countries started to recover and their economies reopened, production resumed according to demand as the pandemic raged on in global South countries with low rates of vaccination. Many global apparel brands exploited the opportunity to see just how much they could squeeze suppliers by demanding deep discounts resulting in more losses for suppliers who, in turn, passed these onto workers.



As for the millions of garment workers and their families whose survival directly or indirectly depends on employment in the sector, economic crisis in the midst of a public health emergency meant that workers not only faced the threat of the virus; they also faced the threat of losing their jobs. Despite health risks, most were eager to return to work and many who retreated to their rural homes travelled back to manufacturing hubs at great personal expense only to find that no jobs were available as suppliers used an array of tactics to trim the workforce. Others returned to work to find that the poor working conditions they had become accustomed to only worsened, production targets increased, and wages diminished. For workers in either scenario outstanding unpaid wages during full or partial lockdowns was – and remains – a huge problem.

Global apparel brands' unilateral practices pressured suppliers to reduce costs which were passed, in the form of wage theft, onto garment workers who were already working under poverty-level minimum wages.<sup>1</sup> Apparel brands, who are the drivers of global garment supply chains and who have rejected the decades-long demand of garment workers for a living wage, irresponsibly created an unprecedented crisis for workers, especially for women. Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in the factories intensified and spilled over into households and communities. Further, economic insecurity as a

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1 AFWA. (2021). Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist\\_Book\\_Final-compressed.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist_Book_Final-compressed.pdf)

result of the crisis disproportionately affects women workers as they have become doubly responsible for ensuring the survival of their families. As the main breadwinner in their families, the heavy weight of economic insecurity has led to catastrophic consequences as women reduced their consumption, took on huge debt, and sold meagre assets to cover the costs of basic survival. Meanwhile, public health systems and infrastructure were ill prepared for such a crisis, so that the women were also overburdened with caring for the sick and schooling for children, in addition to their regular household responsibilities

This study documents women garment workers' experiences of gender-based violence and harassment in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. It argues that (1) global apparel brands depend on and profit from women's secondary status in society, thus reinforcing discriminatory social norms that led to the disproportionate impacts borne by women workers in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic; (2) the different forms of gender-based violence and harassment that were exacerbated under the COVID-19 pandemic correspond to the needs of production; in fact, the logics of global garment supply chains create the conditions for gender-based violence and harassment that extend from production lines to all aspect of women workers' lives, and; (3) women workers subsidised global apparel brands during the pandemic-induced recession in 2020 not only through wage theft, but also through social reproduction of the workforce at great personal expense including their physical and mental wellbeing. The result of this has led to what can be understood as the feminisation of the COVID-19 crisis.

Major apparel brands have been identified where workers shared their experiences of GBVH in supplier factories. However, certain brands have responded to instances of GBVH and begun dialogue and negotiations with AFWA to address the violence in specific supplier factories; with an expectation that such models can be replicated to instances in other countries and regions. Recognising this good faith effort, we have not named them in this first edition of the report in anticipation that they will honor their stated commitments.



# 1. Structure of the Report

The report has two main components: chapters 2, 3 and 4 explore the gendered forms of violence experienced at different locations. Chapter 5 concludes the report by looking at women workers' responses and agency in the face of GBVH and provides recommendations on how trade unions, suppliers, national governments, and global apparel brands can work towards the prevention and eradication of gender-based violence and harassment.

**Chapter 2** outlines the conceptual framework used in this research to understand the gendered forms of violence and harassment faced by women workers in six garment production countries. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, we found that the actions of global apparel brands during the pandemic-induced recession exacerbated gendered forms of violence and associated risk factors affecting working conditions, family dynamics and social relations. The catastrophe unleashed on garment workers was avoidable and yet predestined due to the logics of global garment supply chains centred on the flexible, cheap labour supplied by a predominantly female workforce, resulting in the feminisation of the COVID-19 crisis, which is the starting point for the analysis in this report.

While the findings in this study corroborate what previous and more recent studies have found – that GBVH is endemic to the garment industry and has worsened under the pandemic – we offer an expanded framework that explores *economic harm* as a form of GBVH. We then explore the concept of *embodied trauma* to capture the ways in which work and working conditions impact mental health in a manner that is deeply gendered. Further, we deepen the analysis by examining not only women's experiences at work; but also, in their *households and communities* in this unique context by applying theoretical conceptualisations about social reproduction. Finally, we look at how these conditions lead to the *disintegration of the family*, eroding the very social fabric of garment production countries.

**Chapter 3** explores women's experiences of GBVH on production lines by elaborating the categories of "economic harm". Here we examine the gendered dimensions of wage theft; namely, how suppliers cut costs by manoeuvring the gender pay gap and imposing mass layoffs, illegal deductions and terminations, reducing the number of workdays, and refusing to pay outstanding wages leading to a fall in income that disproportionately impacted women as well as forced intensification and degradation of women's labour. We go on to illustrate the restructuring of employment relationships along social divides



as suppliers imposed flexibility and reduction of the workforce using an array of tactics leveraged along the multiple oppressions women face. We then look at what we term as the “garment industrial trauma complex”, interrogating the verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual harassment on production lines and during commutes as well as heightened health risks. Finally, we explore how economic harm leaves its marks in the mind and viscerally in the physical body, culminating in what we describe as *“embodied trauma”*.

**Chapter 4** examines the household and community as sites of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic as a result of their total abandonment by the industry during the pandemic. The themes explored are unpaid domestic and care work, the role of women as primary earners, domestic violence and differing notions of the “home”, widespread debt, hunger and malnutrition, and reduced consumption leading to bodily neglect, as well as the disintegration of the family. As demonstrated in this chapter, women workers subsidised global apparel brands during the pandemic-induced recession not only through wage theft, but also through social reproduction of the workforce at great personal expense including their physical and mental wellbeing and the erosion of the social fabric that shapes their lives.

**Chapter 5** summarises the main findings of the report and gives a broad overview of how women garment workers and their trade unions have sought to eradicate and prevent GBVH. It concludes the report by offering recommendations and way forward towards a more equitable society, a transformation which can only be achieved through accountability and greater distribution of wealth and power from the principal employer of global garment supply chains – the brands.



## 2. Methodology

This Asia-wide research on the experiences of gender-based violence and harassment facing women garment workers is based on six countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Since the primary objective of the study was to capture experiences of violence and harassment faced by women workers in global apparel supply chains during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, field data collected focused on three key aspects:

1. The realities of women workers in the pre-covid times that shaped their condition under the pandemic;
2. The differing experiences of women in partial and complete lockdown scenarios;
3. The lived experiences of workers in the post-lockdown period.

This categorisation is useful to better understand the contextual specificity of violence and its changing forms facing women garment workers during the continuum of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study is an attempt towards making visible the different aspects of women's work, and its changing forms within and outside the domain of the factory to include the home and the community, along with the exacerbation of the forms of violence at these different sites of reproduction.

For women workers in the garment industry, violence and harassment in the world of work, takes place not only in physical workplaces, but also spills over to other spaces that include commuting, work-related social events, public spaces, teleworking, and, often, the home. By examining the daily lived experiences of women at different sites to analyse how women navigate gender roles and norms within those spaces, this study captures the multiple and sometimes contradictory ways in which patriarchy and capitalism impact women of varying socio-economic contexts, identities, ethnicities, and nationalities differently. Insights gleaned from this research identify experiences of violence, locate the workplace (read factory) and domestic factors that combine at the intersection of the garment supply chain industrial practices along with structures of patriarchy and discrimination.

## **A. Research Objectives**

This report has three interrelated objectives:

1. To highlight how the existing organisation of global garment supply chains exacerbate women workers' vulnerability to violence by linking the actions of global apparel brands during the pandemic to women's lived experiences inside and beyond the factory walls.
2. To share knowledge on the differing, changing, and emerging forms of violence encountered by women garment workers during COVID-19.
3. To provide recommendations on the ways in which trade unions, suppliers, and global apparel brands can work collaboratively towards the prevention and eradication of gender-based violence and harassment.

## **B. Research Questions**

This research seeks to explore the following questions:

1. In the wake of COVID-19, what are the emerging gendered forms of GBVH women workers faced in global garment supply chains in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Sri Lanka?
2. How has the restructuring of the organisation of work changed and/or escalated the factors exposing women garment workers to GBVH in the workplace, home and community in the context of the pandemic?
3. In the political context of the pandemic that has become increasingly repressive and anti-labour, how have women workers, trade unionists and activists responded to GBVH?

## **C. Methods of Research**

A qualitative methodology was required to meet the objectives and answer the research questions, as the research focuses on identifying and understanding GBVH across supply chains through the lens of the everyday realities and lived experiences of women workers – providing a potent basis for developing worker-driven and ground-up solutions. Thorough

understanding about women's realities and experiences necessitates eliciting beliefs, opinions, insights, social norms, etc. – things that could not be analysed from quantitative data. At the same time, for sensitive topics like GBVH, this is the most appropriate method, because respondents are more likely to share their experiences in one-to-one and small group settings. Therefore, focus group discussions and in depth semi-structured interviews with women garment workers and activists were the primary research methods used.

## **D. Tools for Data Collection**

### **Research Phase I: Focus Group Discussion (FGD) for a Preliminary Analysis of Gender-Based Violence**

- # The FGDs were designed to understand and identify the different/ changing forms of violence encountered by women garment workers both within and outside the factory, specific to the COVID-19 context. The FGD exercise helped to identify and add any new forms of violence/ accentuation of existing forms arising due to the pandemic. Other than the existing risk factors, this exercise included identifying additional risk factors perpetuating violence. For this exercise, AFWA's spectrum of violence, which is an exhaustive list of the forms of violence was used by the researcher to mark the different forms of violence that women garment workers have faced during COVID-19. If women faced new forms of violence during COVID-19, it was added to the existing list. This exercise was important to assess how widely prevalent is the problem of gender-based violence and how it has intensified during the pandemic.
- # A small group, comprising of five to ten women garment workers, was considered suitable for conducting an FGD. Depending on feasibility



and accessibility, at least one FGD each was conducted across 10 factories each in India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Cambodia and Indonesia. In Bangladesh, due to logistical barriers presented by lockdowns, 20 individual case studies were conducted across 12 factories.

# The criteria for the selection of factories ensured the representation of factories across prominent garment manufacturing hubs in all countries. It also covered factories which faced different impacts due to lockdowns. The criteria were as follows:

1. New Industrial Zones and Old Industrial Zones
2. Open/Closed during partial or complete lockdown situations depending on country context
3. Factory is operating in the supply chains of selected global apparel brands as a Tier 1 supplier. Tier 1 factories are the focus of the study for more transparency, accountability, and their direct linkage with big brands.

# Participants for the FGDs were selected to provide a representative sample based on the following criteria:

1. Employment status of workers in the factory e.g., permanent/contractual/daily wage worker/piece-rate worker
2. Nature of work contracts e.g., fixed term/short-term/monthly
3. Type of households e.g., women running households single-handedly/jointly with other family members

# Semi-structured interviews (collection of workers' stories) were also part of the FGD process.

## **Research Phase II: Case Studies Documenting GBVH**

# In Research Phase II, field investigators identified and documented case studies of gender-based violence and harassment among women garment workers reflecting findings from Research Phase I and explored the issues, contexts and experiences of gendered forms of violence in depth.

# The case study method was important to cover the spectrum and how forms of violence are linked through escalating processes under COVID-19. While there were overlaps in the forms of GBVH when



documenting the case studies, the objective was to explore multiple facets of the phenomenon of gender-based violence within particular contexts.

- # In-depth interviews through case studies are useful when one wants to get detailed information about a person's thoughts and experiences or wants to explore new issues in depth. Such a method is appealing for it provides a scope to gain access to the ideas, memories, experiences and thoughts – broadly termed lived experiences – of women which for long have been hidden and silenced.
- # During the process of the interviews, it was important to set the context of such violence too through examples, such as a) high production targets b) employment status c) job security d) payment of wages etc., for participants to be able to easily relate the form of violence faced with the context of its occurrence.

Focus Group Discussions		
Countries	Number of Factories	Number of Workers
INDIA	22	107
INDONESIA	10	74
CAMBODIA	10	68
SRI LANKA	10	39
PAKISTAN	9	63

Case Studies		
Country	Number of Factories	Number of Workers
INDIA	5	10
INDONESIA	8	10
CAMBODIA	5	5
SRI LANKA	6	11
PAKISTAN	9	12
BANGLADESH	12	20

NOTE: Data collection in Bangladesh was conducted within a short time period (August 2021) during a total, nationwide lockdown. As a result, the sample of workers from Bangladesh include workers who were easily accessible to trade unions during the lockdown. Therefore, only 20 case studies were selected for the purpose of the study illustrating experiences of violence and harassment faced by women garment workers.

## Research Phase III: Interviews with Trade Union Leaders

Interviews with trade union leaders/leaders from AFWA's Women's Leadership Committee (WLC) helped us to capture their understanding of GBVH in garment factories, how unions and workers' collectives have taken action to address GBVH in global production networks in Asia, and issues and challenges women leaders encounter in tackling violence in factories. Three to six trade union leaders from each country were interviewed for this purpose.

**Sri Lanka** – Three women trade union leaders

**India** – Three women trade union leaders

**Cambodia** – Three women trade union leaders

**Indonesia** – Six (three men and three women) trade union leaders

**Pakistan** – Three women trade union leaders



## E. Limitations and Ethical Considerations

For fear of retaliation, stigma, and dismissal from work, many women expressed inhibitions to share experiences and stories of violence and harassment at work in small group settings. For women to be able to express themselves unhesitatingly, we needed to ensure our research took a gender-sensitive and inclusive approach. Facilitators of FGDs were well-versed in speaking about sensitive issues like GBVH, in exercising sympathetic and active listening skills, and in cultivating a supportive and sympathetic group dynamic. Respondents were informed about priva-

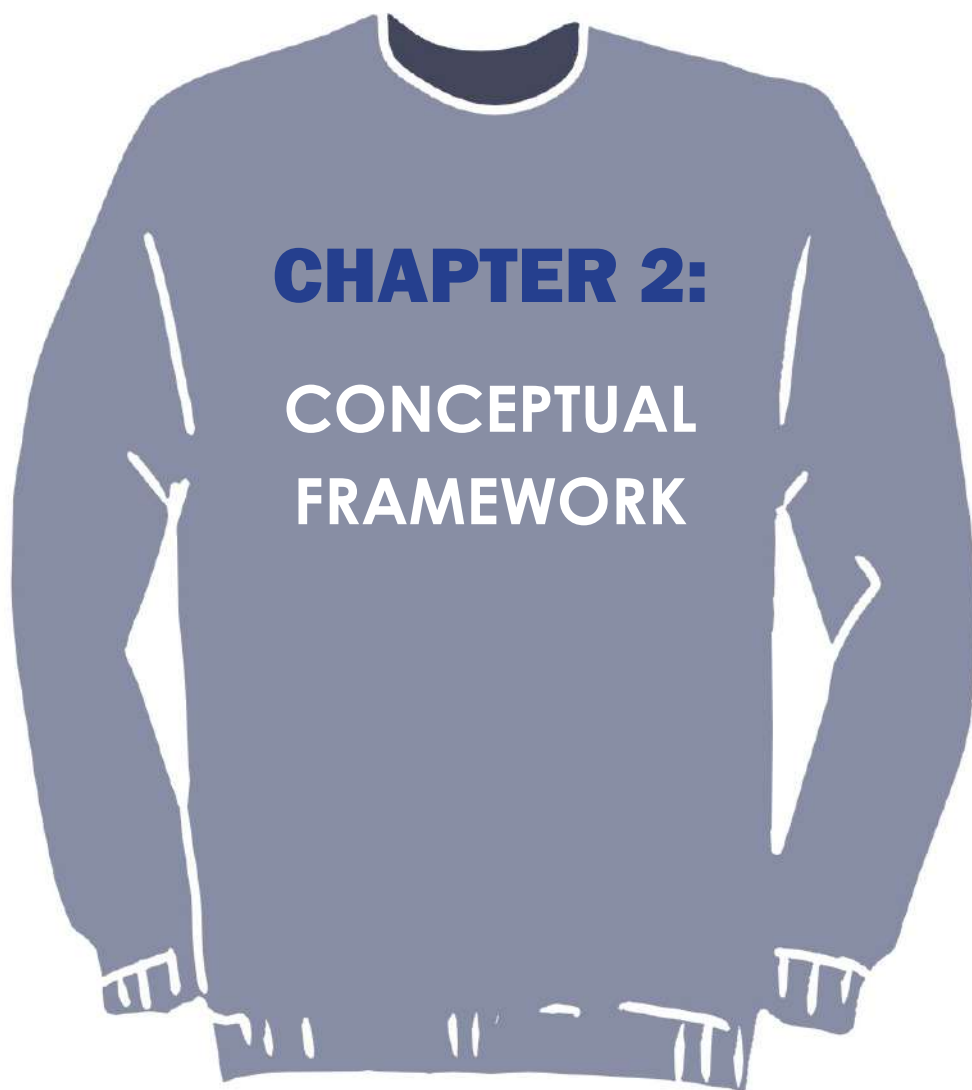
cy/confidentiality and the names of interviewed workers have been replaced with pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity and privacy.

Since GBVH is a sensitive topic of investigation, and women may attach feelings of shame to the issue, researchers were extra cautious to not ask questions that were direct like, “What is the incidence of physical violence in your factory?” Instead, questions about violence were asked through the use of examples from locally specific GBVH lists of behaviours created for each country for researchers to be able to ‘arrive’ at the incidence of violence (whether mental, verbal, physical or sexual) rather than directly posing such sensitive questions to participants.



Many of these interviews were conducted on digital platforms, due to pandemic restrictions, which presented additional problems. In one-to-one interviews, having a family member present could affect the answers of the interviewees or even subject them to unforeseen negative consequences. For example, for a victim of domestic violence it would be dangerous to share openly if she is confined to small living quarters with her abuser. Interviewers were careful to not ask any questions that could subject the interviewee to any conflict if a family member was present. Further, because often the trauma brought on by GBVH has much to do with their lack of consent and feeling powerless, the interviewers were careful not to pressure respondents to answer questions if they showed hesitation.





**S**upply chain business models of global apparel brands leverage and deepen existing gender inequalities in society and create the conditions for widespread gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) among production workers, who are predominantly women. GBVH experiences for women workers worsened during the pandemic-induced recession. The logics of global garment supply chains contributes to the escalation of GBVH and to what could be understood as the feminisation of the COVID-19 crisis.

This report builds on the GBVH spectrum of violence analytical framework developed by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) in 2018<sup>1</sup> through a study of gender-based violence observed in production lines, during commutes, and in employer-provided housing in Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup>

AFWA's GBVH spectrum of violence (Table 1) categorises four types of violence; namely, physical and sexual violence/ discrimination; verbal and mental violence; coercion, threats and retaliation, and; deprivations of liberty. It lists the various forms in each category according to gendered aspects of violence which include, violence against a woman because she is a woman and violence directed against a woman that affects women disproportionately due to (a) high concentration of women workers in risky production departments and (b) gendered barriers to seeking relief.

The study also identified risk factors associated with brand purchasing practices, including purchasing practices that demand shorter lead times and lower production costs, job insecurity, lack of public disclosure of supplier factories, low wages, and excessive working hours.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Global Labor Justice (GLJ)<sup>3</sup> identified distinct forms of GBVH, building on the spectrum of violence framework, according to whether women workers were locked into or locked out of supply chain employment, as well as risk factors associated with gender and those related to brand purchasing practices.<sup>4</sup>

While the spectrum of violence framework still rings true, and its later incantation in the context of the pandemic serves as a useful analytic tool, our research offers two new elements to AFWA's spectrum of violence framework.

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1 AFWA. (2019). Asia Floor Wage Alliance's Step-by-step Approach to Prevent Gender Based Violence at Production Lines in Garment Supplier Factories in Asia, pp 8. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AFWA-Step-by-Step-approach-to-Prevent-GBV-May-2019.pdf>

2 AFWA, et al. (2018a). Gender Based Violence in the Gap Garment Supply Chain. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GBV-Gap-May-2018.pdf>

AFWA, et al. (2018b). Gender Based Violence in the H&M Garment Supply Chain. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GBV-H-M-May-2018.pdf>

AFWA, et al. (2018c.) Gender Based Violence in the Walmart Garment Supply Chain. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/GBV-walmart.pdf>

3 In 2020, Global Labor Justice (GLJ) merged with International Labor Rights Forum and is now known as GLJ-ILRF.

4 GLJ-ILRF. (2020). Advancing Gender Justice on Asian Fast Fashion Supply Chains Post COVID-19: Learning from ILO's Convention 190 on its First Anniversary. Retrieved from <https://globallaborjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Advancing-Gender-Justice-on-Asian-Fast-Fashion-Supply-Chains-Post-COVID-19-Guidance-from-ILO%E2%80%99s-Convention-190-on-its-First-Anniversary-single-page.pdf>



**Table 1: Spectrum of Gender-based violence and harassment**

	<b>Gendered aspects of violence, including:</b> 1. Violence against a woman because she is a woman 2. Violence directed against a woman that affects women disproportionately due to (a) high concentration of women workers
<b>FORMS OF VIOLENCE</b>	
(a) Physical and sexual violence/discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assault, including pushing to the floor, beating and kicking, gendered aspects (1) and 2(b)</li> <li>• Slapping, gendered aspects 2(a) and (b)</li> <li>• Pushing, gendered aspects 2(a) and (b)</li> <li>• Throwing heavy bundles of papers and clothes, gendered aspects 2(a) and (b)</li> <li>• Sexual harassment, gendered aspect (1)</li> <li>• Sexual advances, gendered aspect (1)</li> <li>• Unwanted physical touch, including inappropriate touching, pulling hair, and bodily contact, gendered aspect (1)</li> <li>• Rape outside the factory at accommodation, gendered aspect (1)</li> <li>• Overwork with low wages, resulting in fainting due to calorie deficit, high heat, and poor air circulation, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> <li>• Long hours performing repetitive operator tasks, leading to chronic leg pain, ulcers, and other adverse health consequences, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> <li>• Serious injury due to traffic accidents during commutes in large trucks without seatbelts and other safety systems, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> </ul>
(b) Verbal and mental violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General verbal abuse, including bullying and verbal public humiliation, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> <li>• Verbal abuse linked to gender and sexuality, gendered aspect (1)</li> <li>• Verbal abuse linked to caste or social group, gendered aspect 2(a) and (b)</li> <li>• Verbal abuse targeting senior women workers so that they voluntarily resign prior to receiving benefits associated with seniority, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> </ul>
(c) Coercion, threats, and retaliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Threats of retaliation for refusing sexual advances, gendered aspects 1, 2(a) and (b)</li> <li>• Retaliation for reporting gendered violence and harassment, gendered aspects 1, 2(a) and (b)</li> <li>• Blacklisting workers who report workplace violence, harassment, and other rights violations, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> </ul>
(d) Deprivations of liberty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forced to work during legally mandated lunch hours, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> <li>• Prevented from taking bathroom breaks, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> <li>• Forced overtime, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> <li>• Prevented from using legally mandated leave entitlements, gendered aspect 2(a)</li> </ul>

This expands the spectrum of violence by:

**#** Elaborating on **economic harm**<sup>5</sup> as a form of GBVH. The International Labour Organization's Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment and its accompanying recommendation R206 recognise economic harm as a

<sup>5</sup> According to the ILO in its Convention 190, the term "violence and harassment" in the world of work refers to a range of unacceptable behaviours and practices, or threats thereof, whether a single occurrence or repeated, that aim at, result in, or are likely to result in physical, psychological, sexual or economic harm, and includes gender-based violence and harassment.

form of gender-based violence;<sup>6</sup> however, the full scope and dimensions of this are not yet fully understood.

- # Examining how economic harm intersects with gendered power inequalities in the broader society to produce reverberations of GBVH throughout the spaces of **home and community**.

Further, the multiple oppressions according to socially constructed differences on the basis of gender, caste, ethnicity, migrant status, etc. that expose women workers to varying degrees of risk are also considered.

## **1.The Logics of Global Garment Supply Chains and the Feminisation of the COVID-19 Crisis**

Since the offshoring of garments manufacturing from global North to global South countries began decades ago, women workers have entered into the industrial workforces of production countries at ever higher rates. Several studies have documented this phenomenon termed the feminisation of labour, which is not only used to define the sharp increase in women's labour force participation in industrial sectors but also to underscore the nature of employment as increasingly precarious and flexible.<sup>7</sup>

While the wages were alarmingly low and the working conditions appalling, such export-led industrialisation was promised to lead developing countries to prosperity on the one hand, and to gender equality on the other, as more and more women would gain economic independence and break the shackles of traditional domestic life. However, why is it that after five decades of export-led development with garments manufacturing at the forefront, income inequality between and within global North and global South countries has increased, wages have remained stagnant and women workers on a mass scale are still trapped in poverty, insecurity, and work environments rife with abuse? To explore this, it is useful to examine the political economy of global supply chains, using a feminist lens.

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6 ILO. (2019). Violence and Harassment Convention, No. 190. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C190](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190) ILO. (2019). Violence and Harassment Recommendation, No. 206. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:R206](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R206)

7. Standing, Guy. (1999). 'Global Feminization Through Flexible Labor: A Theme Revisited'. World Development: 27(3), pp 583-602.

The garment industry is often an entry point into export markets and global supply chains for developing countries on their pathway to industrialisation and job creation. This industry is credited with having helped lift millions of people out of poverty.<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have challenged whether this is really the case, arguing that many developing countries pursuing export-led development via garments manufacturing have become trapped in low-value added production, that low wage, unskilled work has



become a structural feature, and that this had led to embedded poverty rather than an escape from it.<sup>9</sup> While fashion brands have amassed super profits, workers' wages are less than 4% of the production cost for a single garment<sup>10</sup> and fall far below living wage estimates. These observations challenge the notion of the 'trickle-down' effect that remains a core component of the dominant export-led development ideology.

Global apparel brands based in the global North who, through their market control over suppliers from the global South, concentrate enormous profits and power away from those engaged in production.<sup>11 12</sup> The motivations for outsourcing production to the global South have always been cost savings from input prices, supplier firm flexibility of output, and specialisation<sup>13</sup> as brands find it more cost effective and risk averse to handle seasonal fluctuations in demand, and constantly changing fashion trends through outsourcing production.<sup>14</sup> By exploiting geographic differentiation in costs, surplus labour, and state policies to attract foreign direct investment, global apparel brands have succeeded in transforming the industry into one of the most profitable

8 ILO. (2019). The future of work in textiles, clothing, leather and footwear. Working Paper No. 326, Geneva: ILO. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms\\_669355.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/publication/wcms_669355.pdf)

9 Selwyn, B. (2019). 'Poverty chains and global capitalism'. *Competition and Change*: 23(1), pp. 71-97.

10 Emran S, Kyriacou J and Rogan S. (2019). *Made in poverty; the true price of fashion; what she makes*. Carlton, VIC: Oxfam

11 Gereffi, G. (1999). 'International Trade and Industrial Upgrading in the Apparel Commodity Chain'. *Journal of International Economics*: 48(1), pp 37-70.

12 Bhattacharjee, A. & Roy, A. (2015). 'Bargaining in the global commodity chain: the Asia Floor Wage Alliance'. Kees van der Pijl, ed. *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Production*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp. 334. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Towards-an-Asia-Floor-Wage-Nov-2015.pdf>

13 Mead, Donald C. (1984). 'Of Contracts and Subcontracts: Small Firms in Vertically Dis-Integrated Production/Distribution Systems in LDCs'. *World Development*: 12 (11/12), pp 1095-1106.

14 Collins, Jane L. (2009). *Threads: Gender, Labour, and Power in the Global Apparel Industry*. University of Chicago Press.

and exploitative of the modern industries.<sup>15</sup>

Supplier factories are marked by an absence of unions, poverty-level wages, and dangerous working conditions.<sup>16</sup> This is caused by the constant and mounting downward pressure on supplier factories to compete with one another in a ‘race to the bottom’ to secure manufacturing contracts from brands, resulting in suppression of wages and degradation of working conditions. Further, because the low cost of labour came to be viewed as a comparative advantage, successful integration into global supply chains meant that deregulation of labour along with weakening of trade unions became a precondition of export-led development.<sup>17</sup> To illustrate this trend, figures show that between 1989 and 2010 suppliers in countries with higher levels of labour rights violations increased their share of exports, whilst those demonstrating a higher level of workers’ rights have seen their exports drop.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, despite progress made in lifting some workers out of poverty, the garment sector has witnessed a decline in workers’ rights, and an increase in violations of core labour standards – and global apparel brands have been able to accumulate ever higher profits as a result. At the same time, the industry has seen a dramatic shift over the past two decades as ‘fast fashion’ has increased the speed and quantity of production, and the number of ‘seasons’ for retailers has increased from four to as much as twenty-four for some brands.<sup>19</sup> The impact of this for women garment workers is longer hours, intense work pressures, and hazardous working conditions.

Women make up approximately 75 percent of the workforce, amounting to more than sixty million garment workers globally.<sup>20</sup> Critical feminist scholars have studied the phenomenon of feminisation of labour that is characterised by

15 Ho, Laura, Catherine Powell, and Leti Volpp. (1996). ‘(Dis)assembling Rights of Women Workers Along the Global Assembly Line: Human Rights and the Garment Industry’. *Harvard Civil Rights - Civil Liberties Law Review*: 31, pp 383–414.

16 WRC. (2013). ‘Global Wage Trends for Apparel Workers, 2001–2011’. Center for American Progress. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/global-wage-trends-for-apparel-workers-2001-2011/>

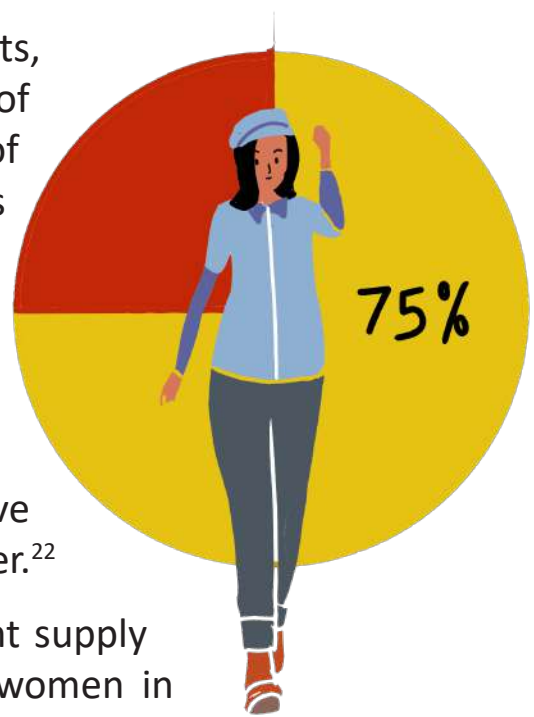
17 Mezzadri, Alessandra. (2008). ‘The Rise of Neo-liberal Globalisation and the ‘New Old’ Social Regulation of Labour A case of Delhi garment sector’. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*: 51(4).

18 Anner, Mark, Jennifer Bair, and Jeremy Blasi. (2012). ‘Buyer Power, Pricing Practices, and Labour Outcomes in Global Supply Chains’. Retrieved from <https://wsr-network.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/inst2012-0011.pdf>

19 McFall-Johnsen M. (2019, October 21). ‘The fashion industry emits more carbon than international flights, maritime shipping combined’. *Business Insider*. Retrieved from <https://www.businessinsider.com/fast-fashion-environmental-impact-pollution-emissions-waste-water-2019-10#:~:text=The%20fashion%20industry%20emits%20more,flights%20and%20maritime%20shipping%20combined.&text=The%20fashion%20industry%20produces%2010,pollutes%20the%20oceans%20with%20microplastics.>

20 Solidarity Center. (2019). *Global garment and textile industries; workers, rights and working conditions*. Washington, DC:

the subordination of women within labour markets, including wage differentials, gendered forms of discipline and control, and the predominance of women in low-paid, insecure, and precarious forms of work. They have pointed out that this devaluation of women's labour is based on the social construction of the feminine body as intrinsically 'disposable', 'replaceable', or 'expendable'<sup>21</sup> and the socially constructed notion of women's role in the family as reproductive in contrast to men's role as the main breadwinner.<sup>22</sup>



We argue that the logics of global garment supply chains benefits from the secondary status of women in societies at large. The subordination of women in production is critical to brands' business models that enable them to amass huge profits. Numerous studies have documented the proliferation of GBVH in garment supplier factories as a tactic of discipline and control that is linked to the purchasing practices of brands.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, global apparel brands cancelled billions of dollars' worth of placed orders, refused to pay for completed goods, delayed payments for months, demanded deep discounts, and refused to contribute to outstanding wages and legally mandated compensation owed to workers. Due to the asymmetrical power relations between brands and suppliers enabling brands to shirk any accountability to workers in their supply chains, widespread wage theft, informalisation, job insecurity, and intensification of work became particularly pronounced during the pandemic-induced recession and had devastating impacts on women garment workers and their families.

Women workers, at great personal sacrifice, were forced to subsidise global apparel brands through the pandemic, enabling them to recover and continue to amass huge profits. At the same time, instances of gender-based violence and harassment proliferated at alarming rates, which is explored in depth in the chapters 3 and 4. The drastic consequences borne by women due to the logics of global garment supply chains can be understood as the feminisation of the COVID-19 crisis.

21 Mezzadri, Alessandra. (2016). 'Class, gender and the sweatshop: on the nexus between labour commodification and exploitation'. *Third World Quarterly*: 37(10).

22 Elson, Diane and Ruth Pearson. (1981). 'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers': An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing. *Feminist Review*: 7(1), pp 87–107.



## 2. Economic Harm as GBVH on Production Lines: A Multi-Dimensional Phenomenon

Chapter 3 elaborates “economic harm” as a form of GBVH. Building on AFWA’s 2021 report *Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains*, pre-existing risk factors identified by the ILO, new and emerging risk factors under the pandemic documented by GLJ and AFWA in 2020 and taking inspiration from a variety of scholars theorizing structural violence, we develop a framework to understand economic harm as a form of GBVH that is endemic to garment workers, who are mostly women, in global garment supply chains. We elaborate economic harm through three dimensions.

### A. Gendered Dimensions of Wage Theft Under COVID-19

The first dimension of economic harm as GBVH centres on wage theft explored through four phenomena elaborated in chapter 3 including, the gender pay gap and gendered fall in income, the disproportionate impact of unpaid wages, illegal deductions and terminations on women workers, and the further degradation of women’s labour.

AFWA’s *Money Heist* report extensively documents wage theft as a predominant economic experience of garment workers and holds brands liable as joint employers, along with suppliers, for the theft. AFWA has termed wage loss of garment workers as “wage theft” as these are lost wages that are mostly covered by national laws or are the legitimate expectation of workers based on international normative frameworks of the ILO for the protection of human rights.<sup>23</sup> Wages are meant to cover the costs of social reproduction of labour power – in other words – the cost of workers taking care of themselves and their families. Wage theft led to severe economic distress that exacerbated other forms of GBVH outlined in chapters 3 and 4 of this report.

Aside from brands’ denial of living wage to garment workers in spite of decades-long struggles, global apparel brands’ strategies has led to the degradation of already poverty-level minimum



23 AFWA. (2021). *Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains*. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist\\_Book\\_Final-compressed.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist_Book_Final-compressed.pdf)



wages through 1) denying their support for struggles of workers and trade unions to raise minimum wages, and 2) further disguising the stagnated wages through productivity-based and performance-based payment schemes.<sup>24</sup> Workers, impoverished through poverty-level minimum wages, begin to depend on the non-wage payment schemes.<sup>25</sup> Many of these have been stripped away since the advent of the pandemic, causing many workers who have remained employed to sink below the poverty line.



## **B. Restructuring Employment Relationships Along Social Divides**

The second dimension of economic harm centres on employment relationships including imposed flexibilisation and reduction of the workforce as well as the forced intensification of work.

While the garment industry is widely considered to be an important source of formal employment for developing countries in the global South, this is hardly the case.<sup>26</sup> The industry has become increasingly informalised with widespread use of short-term contracts and third-party manpower agencies. These terms of employment leave women contract workers particularly vulnerable to exploitation when compared to directly employed workers,<sup>27</sup> and expose them to greater risk of egregious labour practices and unemployment during times of crisis, as was the case for many in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic. Insecure employment relationships render workers significantly more vulnerable to other forms of abuse, heightens fear of retaliation, thus undermining GBVH reporting, and reinforces impunity for employers. In addition, informalisation and casualisation weaken trade unions and collective bargaining.<sup>28 29 30</sup>

24 Standing, Guy. (2009). *Work after Globalization: Building occupational citizenship*. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA: Edward Elgar.

25 Masina, P., and Cerimele, M. (2018). 'Patterns of Industrialisation and the State of Industrial Labour in Post-WTO-Accession Vietnam. *European Journal of East Asian Studies*: 17, pp. 289-323.

26 Hewison, K., and Kalleberg, A.L. (2013). 'Precarious Work and Flexibilization in South and Southeast Asia. *American Behavioral Scientist*: 57(4), pp. 395-402.

27 Man-Kwun Chan. (2013). *Contract Labour in Global Garment Supply Chains*. WIEGO. [http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Chan\\_Contract\\_Labour\\_Report\\_final\\_2013.pdf](http://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/files/Chan_Contract_Labour_Report_final_2013.pdf)

28 Arnold, D., and Bongiovi, J.R.. (2013). 'Precarious, Informalizing, and Flexible Work: Transforming Concepts and Understandings', *American Behavioral Scientist*: 57(3), pp. 289-308.

29 Munck, R. (2002). *Globalisation and labour: the new great transformation*, New York: Zed Books, pp. 67.

30 ILO. (2016). *Report of the Director-General: Fifth Supplementary Report – Outcome of the Meeting of Experts on Violence against Women and Men in the World of Work*, GB.328/INS/17/5, Geneva, pp 7.

Garment workers were subjected to forced intensification of work, defined as the need to work faster and face tighter deadlines, reduction of idle time and the need to conduct a number of work tasks simultaneously.<sup>31</sup> The ILO has identified such conditions as risk factors for gender-based violence and harassment for women workers.<sup>32</sup> During the pandemic, AFWA identified additional risk factors for garment workers including nature of contract, spatial proximity to factories, age, union membership, minimum wage level, and religion<sup>33</sup> showing how women workers' experiences of GBVH at the workplace intersect with other socially oppressive identities and personal status of workers, used by employers to cut costs and maintain a flexible workforce through convenient hiring and firing.

### **C. Garment Industrial Trauma Complex**

A third dimension of economic harm is what we term as the “garment industrial trauma complex.” We use the term to bring attention to a) a garment industrial complex that is fuelled by extreme corporate greed, which directly contributes to b) a complex web of – what can only be described as – trauma from verbal, physical and sexual abuse, intersecting with heightened health-related anguish, and extreme deep economic-based anxiety. In chapter 3, the garment industrial complex is elaborated in terms of verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual harassment at the workplace and during commutes as well as heightened health risks during the pandemic. These, as well as the other components of economic harm, led to what is referred to in this report as embodied trauma.

Mental health and its relationship to working conditions has gained increased attention in recent years, such as the harmful impacts of demanding job requirements and low control over the work process,<sup>34</sup> work intensification,

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31 Green, F. (2004). ‘Work intensification, discretion, and the decline in well-being at work’. *Eastern Economic Journal*: 30(4), pp 615–625.

32 Pillinger, Dr. Jane. (2017). *Violence and harassment against women and men in the world of work: trade union perspectives and action*, International Labour Office, Bureau for Workers’ Activities (ACTRAV). Geneva: ILO. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms\\_546645.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---actrav/documents/publication/wcms_546645.pdf)

33 AFWA. (2020, May). *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Garment Supply Chains in the Time of Pandemic*, Issue 2. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/The-Emperor-Has-No-Clothes-Issue-II-May.pdf>

34 Karasek, RA and Theorell T. (1990). *Healthy Work: Stress, Productivity and the Reconstruction of*

heightened performance pressures, bullying and harassment,<sup>35</sup> and the use of fragmented tasks, and extractive work targets.<sup>36</sup> Precarious employment has also been associated with depression<sup>37</sup> and increased risk of suicide.<sup>38</sup> The ILO has also devoted significant attention to emerging psychosocial risks, stress and mental health problems related to working conditions and the organisation of work.<sup>39</sup>



We also take inspiration from feminist literature that stresses the importance of acknowledging the lived experiences of women facing violence as ‘embodied’, highlighting the significance of women’s material, lived bodies as navigating power and systems of gender domination<sup>40</sup> and bringing attention to violence against women, recognising the power differentials between men and women cross-culturally and internationally and the social and political contexts in which violence against women occurs.<sup>41</sup> Importantly, this body of literature also underscores the exploitation of women’s bodies through the capitalist imperative of neoliberalism that intersects with gender oppression as well as with global disparities of wealth.<sup>42</sup>

Taking these important contributions into consideration, we deploy the term “embodied trauma” to capture women garment workers’ experiences

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Working Life. New York: Basic Books

35 Woods, M. et al. (2019). ‘Mental Illness, Social Suffering and Structural Antagonism in the Labour Process’. *Work, Employment and Society*: 33(6), pp 948-965.

36 Carter, B, Danford, A, Howcroft, D, et al. (2013). ‘Stressed out of my box: employee experience of lean working and occupational ill-health in clerical work in the UK public sector’. *Work, Employment and Society*: 27(5), pp 747-767.

37 Han, KM, Chang, J, Won, E, et al. (2017). ‘Precarious employment associated with depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in adult wage workers’. *Journal of Affective Disorders*: 218, pp 201-209.

38 Min, KB, Park, SG, Hwang, SH, et al. (2015). ‘Precarious employment and the risk of suicide ideation and suicide attempts’. *Preventative Medicine*: 71, pp 72-76.

39 ILO. (2015, June). Resolution concerning the recurrent discussion on social protection (labour protection), 104th Session of the International Labour Conference, Geneva. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_806099.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_806099.pdf)

40 Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

41 Webster, Denise C. and Dunn, Erin C. (2005). ‘Feminist Perspectives on Trauma’. *Women & Therapy*: 28(3-4), pp 111-142.

42 Fischer C., Dolezal L. (2018). ‘Contested Terrains: New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment’. Fischer C., Dolezal L. (eds) *New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment, Breaking Feminist Waves*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

of violence as not only linked to work and working conditions, but as related to interactions with systems of power and gender domination, carried in the mind and viscerally in the physical body, having long-term and deep impacts both individually and collectively along intersectional lines.

### **3. Beyond the Factory Walls: Changing Home and Community Dynamics Amid COVID-19**

Having devoted chapter 3 to “economic harm” as GBVH, chapter 4 explores how economic harm intersects with gendered power inequalities in the broader society to produce reverberations of GBVH throughout the spaces of home and community. These reverberations are illuminated by situating the “home” as a site of violence and what we term as the “disintegration of the family”. To achieve this, we take inspiration from feminist political economists and social reproduction theory.

Feminist scholars have repeatedly called for a more holistic account of what constitutes work, and the need to recognise the household as a place of work. These theorists have challenged previous conceptualisations of labour and value by examining the unpaid and underpaid work of maintaining everyday life outside the formal workplace largely carried out by women.

Indeed, women and girls are responsible for 75 percent of unpaid care and domestic work in homes and communities globally.<sup>43</sup> For women who also work outside the home, this has been referred to as ‘the second shift’.<sup>44</sup> Further, feminist economists have drawn attention to the ‘third shift’ to underscore the undervalued and unpaid emotional labour that is mostly done by women. These scholars have highlighted that women are overwhelmingly responsible for ensuring the emotional wellbeing of family members and carry the mental and emotional burden of worrying about the family.<sup>45</sup>

Social reproduction theory also recognises that the gender division of

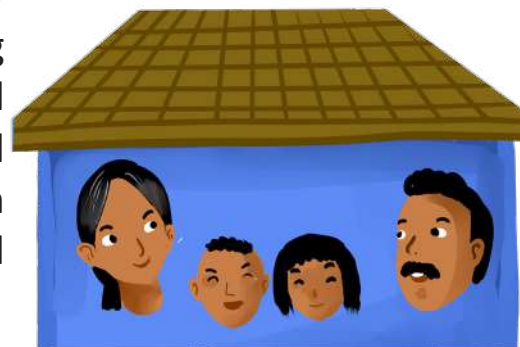
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43 Moreira da Silva, J. (2019, March 18). ‘Why You Should Care About Unpaid Care Work.’ OECD Development Matters. Retrieved from <https://oecd-development-matters.org/2019/03/18/why-you-should-care-about-unpaid-care-work>

44 Hochschild, A., and A. Machung. (1989). *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home*. London: Penguin Books.

45 Chung, H. (2020, March 30). ‘Return of the 1950s Housewife? How to Stop Coronavirus Lockdown Reinforcing Sexist Gender Roles.’ *The Conversation*. Retrieved from <https://theconversation.com/return-of-the-1950s-housewife-how-to-stop-coronavirus-lockdown-reinforcing-sexist-gender-roles-134851>

labour presumes women's responsibility for most of the reproductive work including childcare, domestic work, shopping, and other tasks of homemaking in the household setting. Our findings portray the intensification and reassertion of women's unpaid work and primary caregiver role during the pandemic.



Social reproduction theory also draws attention to false assumptions about women's role in the family as secondary earners, and how this serves to devalue women's paid labour in the factory setting. We elaborate how the industry is able to take advantage of this misconception, effectively making invisible women's role as primary earners, resulting in severe social and economic impacts; for example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, domestic violence is reported to have increased manifold as financial worries heightened within cramped and confined lockdown conditions.<sup>46</sup> We also found women were forced to take on debt, exposed to hunger and malnutrition, and compelled to reduce their consumption leading to acute bodily neglect.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened the centrality of households and reproductive work as families and individuals shouldered the responsibility for the provision of welfare, laying bare gendered inequalities in households and global labour markets.<sup>47</sup> Garment workers were faced with not only the retreat of the state but also with disengagement of global apparel brands and the absence of employer-based social protection. Recognising the interlinkages between the factory and household, then, makes visible the reach of the employment relationship,<sup>48</sup> reinforcing the "home" as a site of violence.

Numerous studies have also demonstrated the relationship between reproductive labour and global supply chains extending beyond production

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46 UN Women. (2020). COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls>

47 Stevano, Sara, Alessandra Mezzadri, Lorena Lombardozzi, and Hannah Bargawi. (2021). 'Hidden Abodes in Plain Sight: the Social Reproduction of Households and Labor in the COVID-19 Pandemic', *Feminist Economics*: 27(1-2), pp 271-287.

48 Pillinger, Schmidt and Wintour. (2016). Negotiating for Gender Equality Issue Brief No. 4. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms\\_528947.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_528947.pdf)



hubs to rural households.<sup>49 50</sup> For the families of garment workers, supply chain employment influences family structures and relationships in many ways. This is particularly evident in the context of the pandemic in which economic distress, insecurity and changing workplace and employment conditions in supplier factories also led to shifting dynamics in families, leading to a sense of “disintegration of the family” and a subsequent erosion in the bedrock of society.

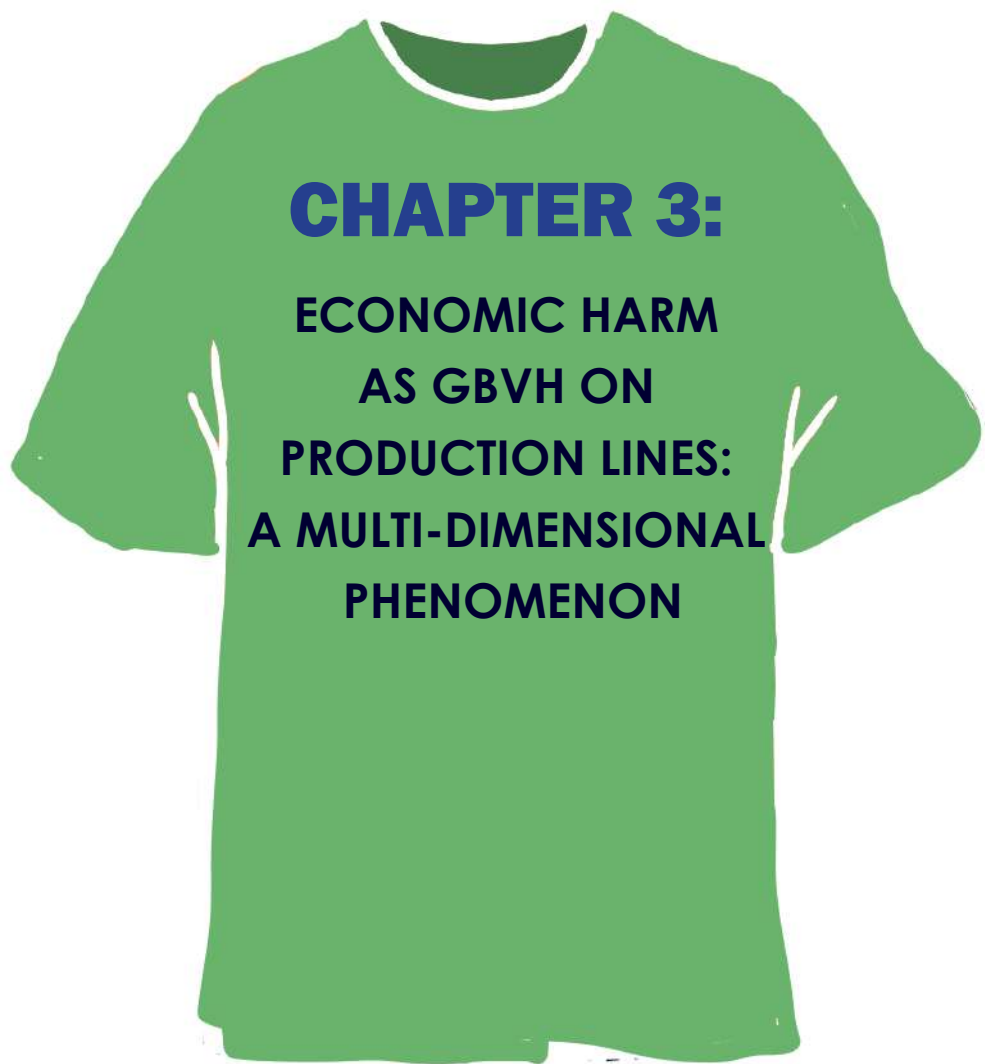


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49. Kelly, Philip F. (2009). ‘From Global Production Networks to Global Reproduction Networks: Households, Migration, and Regional Development in Cavite, the Philippines’, *Regional Studies* 43:3, pp 449-461.

50 Silvey, R. (2001). ‘Migration under crisis; household safety nets in Indonesia’s economic collapse’, *Geoforum*: 32, pp 33–45.

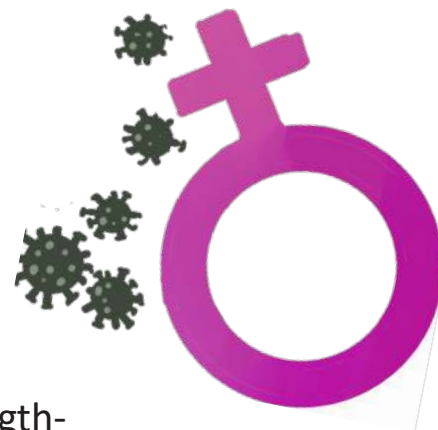




**N**umerous studies have recorded the range of dynamics that account for GBVH in global garment supply chains as well as how these are driven by the actions of lead firms based in the global North. More recent studies have uncovered how GBVH during the COVID-19 pandemic increased in supplier factories in global apparel brands' supply chains. This report confirms what previous studies have found: that GBVH is endemic to the industry and that the logics of global garment supply chains provide conditions that led to the inevitable escalation of GBVH during the pandemic.

This chapter develops the multiple dimensions of “economic harm” which the ILO’s 2019 Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment and its accompanying recommendation R206 recognise as a form of GBVH.<sup>1</sup> The findings describe a range of GBVH experiences in production lines during the pandemic which point clearly to a heightened level of economic harm caused by the actions of global apparel brands.

In addition, the findings reveal that GBVH, in the form of economic harm, has become an essential condition in supply chains through which lead firms transfer the costs of market crises to women workers in order to accumulate vast profits or control losses. The fashion industry, despite being a modern capitalist industry, relies on and strengthens pre-capitalist patriarchal relations in supplier countries as a central means to amass wealth. Lead firms benefit from the predominance of women workers in their supplier factories, who are coerced into accepting conditions of employment through which they absorb the costs of market fluctuations in the form of insecure employment and poverty-level wages.



We begin with an exploration of the gendered dimensions of wage theft during the pandemic, resulting in a drastic fall in income, which impacted women in particular ways. Our findings also expose an interrelated and unmistakable trend under the COVID-19 pandemic: the forced intensification of women’s work alongside the gendered fall in income, maintained through an imposed flexibilisation of the workforce by unethically leveraging women workers’ multiple oppressions. Subsequently we explore how this trend has led to higher incidences of physical violence, sexual harassment, and verbal abuse, as well as heightened health risks during the pandemic. The combined effects resulted in – what we have called – “embodied trauma” that women workers have endured in the context of the pandemic, in order to subsidise the businesses of brands.

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1 ILO. (2019). Violence and Harassment Convention, No. 190. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:C190](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C190)

ILO. (2019). Violence and Harassment Recommendation, No. 206. Retrieved from [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100\\_ILO\\_CODE:R206](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:R206)

# 1. Gendered Dimensions of Wage Theft Under COVID-19

During the pandemic, women workers reported widespread wage theft such as the non-payment of legally mandated minimum wages, as well as other forms of wage theft, defined by AFWA as any reduction in monthly wages. This includes loss of wages for non-production days, either due to partial or total shutdown of the factory, as a result of government-imposed lockdowns or reduction and/or cancellation of orders by brands; unpaid overtime wages; illegal deductions from wages; use of degraded wage systems such as piece rates to extract more value while paying less; and denial of incentives and bonuses that form a crucial component of workers' access to survival.<sup>2</sup>

## A. Gender Pay Gap and Gendered Fall in Income

The indiscriminate wage theft experienced by women workers during the pandemic was largely due to the manipulation of the pre-existing gender pay gap, as well as a gendered fall in income due to mass layoffs of women workers – both measures employed by suppliers to cut costs.

**Leveraging of the Gender Pay Gap:** Suppliers leveraged the pre-existing gender pay gap in order to secure their margins given the flexible production demanded by brands. They hired women workers for low wage rates during periods of lockdown, particularly for hurriedly completing pre-lockdown orders, as well as for the production of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits.

For example, during the lockdown periods in India and Sri Lanka, suppliers continued to employ women to produce at low wage rates, while most men (whose wages are higher than that of women) were laid off. Women manpower workers employed in a Levi's and Adidas supplier factory in Sri Lanka demanded a raise in wages at par with male workers, but were denied both by the manpower agency and the factory. They continued to work at 900 LKR (4.5 USD) with a heavier workload than men for 10 hours a day, while male workers were paid 1000 LKR (5 USD).



<sup>2</sup> AFWA. (2021). Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist\\_Book\\_Final-compressed.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist_Book_Final-compressed.pdf)

**Gendered Fall in Income:** At the same time, in the post-lockdown period, when factories resumed their operations, women workers faced a gendered fall in income due to a drastic reduction of workdays. This is because women are confined to low skill jobs on the production line, making them more susceptible to layoffs when factories reduce the size of the workforce to adjust their businesses based on brands' fluctuating demands. As a result, the women workers' income remained persistently low in the post-pandemic period, while male workers' income gradually improved to pre-pandemic levels by the end of 2020. This was also the case in countries where total lockdowns were not imposed.

For example, in Indonesia, women workers faced the greatest brunt of the 'No Work No Pay' policy imposed by suppliers. As a result of this policy, workers only received 2 to 3 days of work per week for an extended period. 27-year-old Ati, 37-year-old Titli and 25-year-old Lena, were forced to resign in November 2020 due to a continual reduction of their wages since July 2020. Several women workers reported that they received less than the monthly minimum wage of 3.1 million IDR (214.34 USD) despite working long hours on the days that they received work. Similar methods were used by employers in Pakistan, who reduced the number of workdays per month by half, while payments were delayed by 10-15 days.

**Disproportionate Impact of Unpaid Wages, Illegal Deductions and Terminations on Women Workers:** Due to the effects of the pre-existing gender pay gap, coupled with a severe gendered fall in income as a result of reduction of their workdays, women workers were more vulnerable when wages were unpaid or illegally deducted.

For instance, in Cambodia, all workers received less than half of the monthly minimum wage in the case of suspension of work in their factories due to cancellation or reduction of orders by brands. However, women workers were particularly hit by the deduction of wages, while many did not even receive the monthly wage of 70 USD mandated by the government in the case of suspension of work.

In several countries, workers also reported that *illegal deductions* from wages were common. In Sri Lanka, manpower workers were forced to accept illegal deductions in their wages as suppliers refused to pay workers unless they completed a full 10 hours of work. Workers also reported that 100 LKR of wages were deducted per hour if workers required time off due to exhaustion or illness. In Cambodia, even though the government announced a marginal

2 USD wage increase in minimum wages to 192 USD in 2021, many workers did not receive the pay rise. Others reported that their pay checks often showed deductions of incremental amounts from 0.2 USD to 0.3 USD.

Similarly, the loss of work and wages as a result of widespread factory closures due to order cancellations by brands also had a disproportionate impact on women workers. While all workers lost their jobs in these instances, with suppliers refusing to follow due process or pay legally mandated compensation, women workers were particularly affected as they have faced the disadvantage of lower and more insecure wages over the years, much prior to the pandemic.

## **B. Intensification and further Degradation of Women's Labour**

Even as women workers were facing the effects of the pre-existing gender pay gap and a gendered fall in income due to a reduction of workdays, as well as the disproportionate impact of unpaid wages, illegal deductions and terminations, suppliers engaged in several additional measures for cost-cutting that led to an intensification and further degradation of women's labour during the pandemic, elaborated below.

**Forced Intensification of Women's Labour:** As the size of the workforce in each factory reduced through mass layoffs, women workers not only lost workdays and associated wages, but faced a simultaneous intensification of their labour due to an increase in production targets on the days that they did receive work. Women stated that the production targets per worker increased as much as 50%, and work in production lines became so tense that many experienced physical and mental breakdowns.

A central means through which this was achieved was through *forced and unpaid overtime work*. The increase in production targets resulted in an extension of the workday, requiring additional hours to complete work, without any increase in wages. For example, in Indonesia during the fasting month of Ramadan, official working hours, including overtime, are typically reduced to 9 hours (7 AM to 4 PM). In one FGD, workers from





an AEO, and Zara supplier factory shared that this policy was only observed on the first day of Ramadan, and working hours resumed to 7 AM to 8 PM the following days. Many also worked on Sundays to meet individual production targets that could not be reached during the normal work week; however, they were not paid for the additional time.

Workers in India reported forced unpaid overtime by 2 hours on average after the lockdown in 2020, increasing the workday from 8 to 10 hours. Further, forced overtime increased with certain styles that were more complicated, requiring more time per piece.

In Cambodia some workers were forced to work overnight to reach production targets. In one factory, respondents shared that if they refused to work overtime on one occasion, they would be denied opportunities for overtime in the future or they would be moved to other departments where they would earn less.

Respondents in Pakistan stated that their workday increased on average to 12-14 hours without overtime pay. Employers at a Levi's supplier factory instructed guards to prevent workers from leaving the factory before their target is reached, even in case of emergency. In a Bestseller supplier factory when workers requested to take leave due to exhaustion, they were handed notice of termination the very next day.

In addition to unpaid overtime, suppliers also engaged in other exploitative practices to ensure that women workers met higher production targets without additional pay. This was through increasing the labour expended by women per unit of time.

Women workers reported a *reorganisation of the labour process*, in which workers were responsible for more than one specified task without any additional compensation. In a few FGDs in India, in the post-lockdown scenario, workers reported being required to switch between production lines and departments, becoming responsible for more than one specified task. For example, after a tailor in one production line is finished stitching one piece of cloth, she is expected to immediately shift to another production line to finish the product by thread clipping. This was also the case in some factories in Indonesia; workers were regularly moved between packing and embroidery departments.

Workers also stated that they were faced with *deprivations of liberty* to ensure that no time was wasted in non-production activities. They were



forced to work during legally mandated lunch hours, prevented from taking bathroom breaks, and prevented from using legally mandated leave entitlements.

*“Even if we are allowed to break for 30 minutes for lunch, we have to work for extra 30 minutes without pay to make up for the loss to the company. Such long hours of work without rest is extremely stressful for the mind and body.”* – Manju Devi, a garment worker from a Old Navy and AOE supplier factory in India

*“They [management] would rush us to cut our one-hour break short and we were insulted all the time. I bring my food from home, and I eat it whenever I get time while sitting in front of the machine.”* – Nafisa, a garment worker from a Levi’s supplier factory in Pakistan

In Cambodia, workers said that they were afraid to take bathroom breaks for fear of verbal abuse. Some said that they would limit themselves to one restroom break per day, some would hold their urine for a long time, and some would restrict their water intake to avoid bathroom breaks. Participants were aware of the risk of a urinary tract infection, and some reported regularly having stomach and bladder pain. According to participants, the factory management allowed them to have lunch and bathroom breaks, but due to the pressure they faced they would sacrifice these to meet production targets and avoid verbal abuse.

*In one FGD with women employed at a Old Navy and AOE supplier factory in India, respondents stated that if they attempted to skip their 30-minute lunch break, they would be scolded by their supervisor. “We are not allowed to take water and washroom breaks. There are times when the supervisor comes and stops the machine to harass us.”*

*Another young woman added, “The question is not whether we are allowed to take bathroom and lunch breaks. We are burdened with so much work that the constant mental pressure of not being able to complete tasks on time prevents us from taking such breaks.”*

*“Bathroom breaks are strictly monitored by our supervisors. If we are late by even a minute, supervisors hurl abuses at us. In order to avoid chaos, we drink less water. What else can we do?” another participant said.*

**Further Degradation of Women’s Labour:** Women workers also faced further degradation of their labour due to the erosion of their wages through various measures implemented by suppliers.

One way in which women’s wages were eroded was through the *denial of incentives, increments and benefits* that are crucial additions to their basic

wage. Even prior to the pandemic, the basic or minimum wage in the garment industry has remained at or just above poverty levels. Wage structures have become more complicated over time, combining a variety of legally-required and optional allowances, bonuses, and incremental payments. The result is that workers' basic wage has steadily degraded and stagnated; but the degradation is disguised through a semblance of "increase" using non-basic wage components that can be removed and altered at will by employers. Consequently, workers become dependent on non-basic wage components to rise above subsistence levels.

However, many of these non-basic wage components have been stripped away since the advent of the pandemic, causing many workers who have remained employed to sink below the poverty line.

*"The management only gave 50% of the wages for the lockdown period. Even with the regular monthly salary, which is 8000 INR – we can't meet our daily needs. So, you can imagine how bad this situation was. The attendance bonus has not been provided for 6 months. – Sudha, a garment worker from a Nautica and Vans supplier factory in India*

Echoing this in Pakistan, participants stated that despite the increase in workload, they did not receive any incentives, increments or attendance bonus. Women garment workers in Sri Lanka are also dependent on incentives to reach above subsistence levels. According to one activist this renders them significantly more vulnerable to abuse:

*"Workers can maintain a minimum standard of living because of incentives. The basic salary is very low – the minimum wage in Sri Lanka is 14,500 LKR (72 USD) but garment workers' salary ranges from 17,000-20,000 LKR (85-100 USD). Employers only paid garment workers the minimum wage during the lockdown. They also depend on incentives based on individual targets. If they do not reach their target, they will lose the daily incentive. What I see today is the harassment by machine operators. If a mechanic wants to start a sexual relationship with the female workers, what they do is they fix the women's machines if they comply to sex. They touch the women's bodies, and if they object, they will not fix the machine quickly, and the women lose the daily incentive, about 4,000-5,000 LKR (20-25 USD)." – Chamila, Programme Coordinator, Dabindu Collective*

Another measure implemented by suppliers that led to a degradation of women's labour was an *increase in piece rate system of payment*. Many workers are paid entirely according to piece rates, often disguised as the minimum through a system requiring workers to complete a certain number of pieces to reach minimum wage levels. For example, during one FGD in

Indonesia, participants reported that the wages they receive is always below the monthly minimum wage. Hareena, age 46, worked for 11 years on fixed term contracts at a factory supplying to AEO and Zara. She stated that she often works around 10-12 hours per day starting from 6 AM until 8 or 9 PM because the factory uses a piece rate system, requiring more work to reach the local minimum wage rate. The rate per piece is 50-350 IDR (.001-.02 USD). Her monthly income is 1.6 million IDR (106 USD), far from the city's minimum wage of 3.1 million IDR (214 USD). Many piece-rate workers in Pakistan reported that the rate per piece was reduced, forcing workers to reach higher targets for the same pay.

### **DOUBLE NON-RECOGNITION OF WOMEN'S LABOUR**

The gendered effect of the various mechanisms through which women workers were not paid for time spent on production amounts to non-recognition of their labour. While this happens to both men and women, the effect on women is what we term “double non-recognition” – a noteworthy gendered experience in an industry that depends predominantly on women workers.

As feminists have pointed out, women's reproductive labour and care work in the home is unrecognised, thus making women's labour invisible and under-valued in society. When women workers face the same invisibilisation of their wage-labour in the workplace through non-payment – it signals yet again a failure to recognise the value of women's labour.

During the pandemic, the double non-recognition of labour went over and above the pre-existing widespread devaluation of women's labour through underpayment for labour performed. This was evident in absolute non-payment for work performed by women, including forced, unpaid overtime.

## **2. Restructuring Employment Relationships Along Social Divides**

An unmistakable trend in the context of the pandemic was the restructuring of employment relationships, utilised by suppliers to inflict wage theft on women workers. This was achieved by imposing flexibility on the workforce through increased informalisation and discrimination based on socially constructed hierarchies, allowing factory owners to reduce the workforce with

greater ease. In other words, brands' actions had a cascading effect on management practices of suppliers, that unethically leveraged workers' multiple social oppressions to achieve workforce flexibilisation.

### **A. Imposed Flexibility and Reduction of the Workforce**

Increasingly, supplier factories make use of informal and insecure employment arrangements to reduce labour costs and maximise their flexibility to hire and fire workers. Contract workers cost less to employ per unit, often receive lower wages, rarely receive non-wage benefits, including paid leave and social security, and can be fired according to the shifting needs of brands. Women workers were more likely to be hired through contractual or casual forms of employment even before the pandemic. In the context of the pandemic, widespread use of short-term contracts and third-party manpower agency contracts were increasingly imposed on women workers, rendering them significantly more vulnerable to job insecurity and abuse.

In Indonesia, many participants experienced a dramatic shift in their employment status as permanent workers to contracts as short as 1 to 3 months. This was experienced by many participants such as 36-year-old Suci from a factory supplying to Asics in Indonesia, who had worked as a permanent worker for 16 years until May 2021 when her status was changed to casual daily worker. Other workers on short-term contracts from a Walmart supplier factory in Indonesia reported that since they were suspended during July and August 2020, as of September 2020, many were not able to resume work as their contracts had expired and were told to submit new applications, despite having worked in the factory for more than two years. In Cambodia, respondents also stated that their contracts were shortened from 1 year to 6 months, and from 6 months to 3 months.

In India, workers also reported that employers are increasingly implementing the use of short-term contracts. Many of the respondents on short-term contracts noted that they felt more pressure because of job insecurity and that supervisors openly threatened to terminate workers' contracts if they are not able to meet production targets. Meanwhile in Pakistan, many respondents, especially piece-rate workers, worked without any contract as casual daily workers.

In Sri Lanka, participants reported widespread use of manpower workers through dispatch agencies, with some factories firing all regular workers to exclusively hire a reduced workforce comprising manpower workers in

their place. As manpower workers, they faced uncertainty about whether they would receive work on any given day. During one FGD with manpower workers employed as helpers at a factory supplying to Nike, one participant, Amali, shared that:

*“Some days, we go to manpower work, but they send us back saying only 15-20 workers are hired that day. We have returned home some days without work. We go the next day too, and the same result. Some days they hire, other days not. The number of workers employed has reduced and they do not hire workers as permanent workers now.”*

The legal system also enables employers to meet the flexible production demands of global apparel brands by making it easier to fire workers. These legal loopholes include firing workers on fixed or short-term contracts before they are legally required to move to permanent status; moving permanent workers to short-term status; terminating workers with less than one year of experience; relying on manpower agencies that dispatch workers on a casual daily basis.

Employers also used an array of discriminatory and illegal manoeuvres, in order to reduce the number of workers. These are: offering no contracts or paperwork, keeping workers on short-term contracts for years despite legal requirements to make them permanent; recording layoff or furloughed days as absence from work that can later be used as grounds to sack workers; firing workers for refusing to work overtime or demanding payment for overtime; firing workers who take leave; forcing permanent workers to resign and re-join as new employees; threats to withhold severance payment unless workers voluntarily resign; terminating older permanent, long-term workers, and; sacking union organisers or sacking workers who are involved in protests or union activities.

*“When the pandemic began, I started to feel unwell and could not go to work due to my illness. I had a high fever. No one used to go to the hospital for the fear of catching the virus. I talked to a doctor and took some medicine, but it did not make me well. After about a week of having a high fever and cold I became exhausted, and I couldn’t even stand. I informed the factory about my situation, but they would not approve leave. Finally, when I was well, I returned to the factory where they used foul sexually explicit language at me. They told me to sign a paper and forced me out from the factory after taking my signature. That was the end of the month when I should have been paid my salary, but they refused to pay me because of my absence. Later I filed a lawsuit in the Labour Court with help from the trade union. I do not know when I will get the money I am*



owed.” – Sakhina, worker at a factory supplying to Inditex in Gazipur, Bangladesh

Additionally, employers terminated workers using tactics that exist in a legal grey area such as, setting impossibly high targets and sacking workers who are unable to meet them; terminating or laying off workers citing social distancing ordinances; eliminating employer-provided transportation so that workers are unable to come to work or arrive late so that they are sacked; closing factories or filing for bankruptcy and reopening under another name; refusing to pay for COVID-19 testing and terminating workers who exhibit symptoms, and; verbally abusing and deriding workers until they are forced to resign.



According to respondents, workers were also terminated according to their willingness to tolerate labour rights violations and GBVH. For example, respondents from a C&A supplier factory in Cambodia suspected that the entire weaving department was downsized due to their reputation of standing up for their rights and refusing forced overtime, while the sewing department workers are less aware of their rights and thus more easily exploited, demonstrated by the fact that they are regularly forced to work overtime without complaint, retained their jobs.

*“I used to always face harassment in factory, but I learnt a lot from my senior female colleagues who have worked in the factory for a long time. They would support me while I would protest the bad behaviours. I would always respond immediately if someone treated me badly. The senior male colleagues and my supervisors learned to be careful when they spoke to me. However, when the pandemic came, they found their opportunity to take revenge. They listed all the employees, including me, who were empowered to protest abuse, and those who offered support. All of us were terminated and new employees were brought in without delay. The factory authority refused to give us our documents so that we could not have the proof to claim our salary that was owed. Now many of us are economically vulnerable. I’ve been looking for a job, but fortune has not come to me yet.”* – Mala Akhtar, a garment worker employed in a factory supplying to NEXT and Walmart in Gazipur, Bangladesh



## B. Unethical Leveraging of Multiple Oppressions

The severity of economic harm and other forms of GBVH were exacerbated according to socially constructed differences. On top of being disproportionately affected as women, respondents noted facing risk according to additional factors including, their age or life-cycle stage, proximity to factories, migration status, and caste.

Manpower workers in Sri Lanka stated that although they were grateful to find work through the manpower agency due to their desperate financial situation, work through the agency has remained inconsistent and follows the usual discriminatory patterns.

*“The company is not hiring new workers these days and they do not hire pregnant women or mothers with small babies. They don’t hire us if we are sick – especially these days if we have a cold or a fever, they won’t hire us.” — Chathurika, a manpower worker from a Nike supplier factory*

For pregnant women across countries, many were terminated or forced to resign. In India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, respondents stated that most of the young mothers have voluntarily resigned after the factory refused to reopen the creche. Many young mothers were also forced to leave their children at their village, to be cared for by their elderly parents.

Older women were also fired or were not rehired when factories reopened. In Pakistan, workers from a factory supplying to Inditex and NEXT stated that in order to reduce the risk of infection, all staff over the age of 50 were terminated. Ten workers, including 4 widows were fired and because the legal age of retirement is 55 years for women workers, these workers were denied of pension, gratuity, and other entitlements. On the other hand, women who were in good books of management despite falling in same category remained employed.

*In Bangladesh, one interviewee, Aanadi, stated, “When the COVID-19 situation came, my supervisor said to me, ‘you are old, corona will attack you then you will kill all of us. You should quit your job.’”*

During the lockdown, in some production hubs in India, migrant women were trapped in the factory dorms and subjected to forced labour. They experienced increased risk of exposure to the virus. Even during the lockdown, one factory in India supplying to Marks and Spencer and Walmart forced women in the hostel to work.

In one area of India, where a large number of Dalit women workers are hired from local villages, they faced additional challenges. Employers tend to be from dominant caste communities and therefore possess a double hierarchical leverage both as employers and upper-caste members. Some Dalit women workers resorted to sex work, when they lost their jobs in the industry, putting them at high risk of both gender-based and caste-based violence.

### 3. Garment Industrial Trauma Complex

#### A. Verbal Abuse, Physical Violence, and Sexual Harassment

*“The line chief used very abusive language, addressing me with foul words. The supervisor harassed me in various ways, even trying to touch my body, slapping me on my backside. One day he hugged me when he found me alone in front of the toilet. After that, I was afraid to go to the toilet. Despite these problems, I kept silent for the fear of losing my job. It changed my thinking about working in the garment sector. Life as a garment worker is not safe for women workers like us. Men are very cruel!”* –Sakhina, a worker in a factory supplying to Inditex in Gazipur, Bangladesh

Many respondents shared increased verbal abuse including bullying and verbal humiliation over missing impossibly high targets during the pandemic.

At the same time, focus groups and interviews with garment workers indicate that the gap between the pervasive experience of verbal abuse on the job and the lower rates at which those behaviours are actually reported is partially explained by the way verbal abuse in the garment industry is normalised and widely considered as ‘part of the job’. A common form of abuse in Cambodia and India was supervisors openly threatening to terminate workers’ contracts if they are not able to meet production targets. Respondents agreed that such threats discouraged women from reporting GBVH and labour rights violations. Many participants noted that their male co-workers were also subject to abuse, however, supervisors were more less harsh towards men, tending to reprimand them in private.



Most women linked their tolerance of verbal abuse to economic dependence and were left feeling powerless and stuck. One woman worker in India, Ragini, expressed that since they are poor, they are forced to work in order to feed their children and family. If they dare respond, women are asked to leave from the next day.

*“The ‘scolding’ is worse in the finishing department. After the lockdown, they expect you to finish 10 hours of work in 8 hours. At least 50% of the workers in our factory have suffered some form of verbal or mental ‘torture’ since June 2020 – when our factory reopened after the COVID-19 lockdown. The supervisors and managers curse you or yell at you or embarrass you in front of other workers, if you don’t finish the required targets. They yell at both men and women workers. I know of some workers who quit, as they could not suffer the ‘torture’ from the management. There are young girls, who leave the factory crying – after being humiliated by the management in front of their colleagues, for not finishing targets or making a mistake in a stitch.” – Padma, a garment worker in India*

Women workers noted that sexual harassment, which was already common, increased during the pandemic; in particular, sexual advances from managers and supervisors.<sup>3</sup> Increased incidences of sexual harassment and physical abuse varied dramatically with estimates across countries ranging from 10 to 100% of workers having witnessed either sexual harassment or physical abuse inflicted on a co-worker in their workplace. This wide range is correlated to specific problematic managers, union presence, anti-sexual harassment policies/programs, as well as employment relationship and social group. This report finds that sexual harassment is endemic across the garment industry, with the heaviest impact borne by women, especially young, migrant women, daily wage workers, contract workers and non-unionised workers.

*“Migrants in garment factories were left to starve by everyone – the industry, the government and the contractors. I know of fair looking women migrants from North Indian states like Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand etc, who work in my factory – who started selling their bodies in desperation to feed their families. Managers and supervisors like them for their ‘fair skin’ and take them to hotels and other places. Their story is so sad – they could not access rations and they had no transport to go home.” – Lakshmi, a local garment worker from a factory supplying to C&A in India*

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<sup>3</sup> Although legal definitions of sexual harassment vary, the ILO defines sexual harassment as a sex-based behaviour that is unwelcome and offensive to its recipient. It either involves a quid pro quo (requiring the victim to engage in or tolerate sexual behaviours in exchange for job benefits or even continued employment), or hostile working environment that subjects the victim to intimidation or humiliation. Behaviours that qualify as sexual harassment include physical violence, touching, unnecessary close proximity, verbal comments and questions about appearance, lifestyle, sexual orientation, offensive phone calls and non-verbal such as whistling, sexually suggestive gestures, and display of sexual materials.

Participants from one factory in India supplying to Super Dry, Polly, American Regal, IMC, Nest and Taylor reported that 25-30% of the women workers in the factory faced physical abuse of various forms which include, inappropriate body touching, pushing and mishandling of chairs on which workers are seated, throwing rejected materials on the floor and/or at workers, threatening physically by raising hand, etc. Respondents were of the view that even when supervisors did not actually hit/slap them, they were just short of doing so, which for them was a form of unpardonable physical abuse. Some of the elderly women in the group said that the managers didn't even take the age of women into consideration when perpetuating such violence against them. One woman, Asha, said, "What respect will you have of men who abuse women of their mother's age?"

Some forms of physical abuse are also normalised over time. For example, respondents from one Super Dry and s.Oliver supplier factory in Cambodia said that their supervisor regularly throws stacks of garments or books at workers when he is angry, but they did not consider it violence since it never resulted in visible injury.

The findings show that the increased intensity of work was used by managers to get sexual favours. This was common in Bangladesh, India, and Sri Lanka as respondents shared that some women would tolerate unwanted behaviours and exchange sexual favours to ease the torture on production lines. As one woman stated:

*"When a supervisor fancies a woman worker, he will ask for sexual favours and she will not be able to finish her requisite production targets within the given time. Then the supervisor forces the other workers in the production line to cover up for that woman, or else he will be in trouble. So other workers in the production line are forced to complete not only their own targets, but also the targets of that woman worker who has caught the fancy of the supervisor. If we try to say we can't work in conditions like this, the higher up officials will get angry and tell us not to come to work here. So, we remain silent." – Sarojini, a garment worker from a Marks and Spencer, and Walmart supplier factory in India*

Another participant from India stated:

*"Management forces women workers to indulge in sexual acts, by promising them lower production targets and higher pay. A woman worker told me last year, her supervisor had offered to cut her targets by half, if she went out with him. She was too scared to complain about it to the Internal Complaints Committee. It requires a lot of courage to speak out about sexual harassment. Now, women are more scared to talk about it – as they fear they will lose their jobs,*

*which they can't in the middle of this COVID-19 induced financial crisis.” – Rani, a garment worker from a Khol's supplier factory*

Similarly in Sri Lanka, one woman activist shared:

*“Management used the pandemic to their maximum advantage. They used favouritism, giving priority when preparing the rosters according to their preferences. If a woman worker was not in good terms with the supervisor, then he would not give her work. If she did not have work, she received only half her salary. Regarding overtime, supervisors' favourites were allowed to leave any-time, while others had to toil. Those who were forced to work overtime could not object otherwise they would lose their job. Supervisors would say, 'we have many people waiting to work for us, you can leave if you want.' This type of discrimination was also apparent in the way salary was calculated. Sexual harassment increased as there were more opportunities for men supervisors to harass female workers. For example, when calling workers to the factory they would say, 'I'll call you in for work in place of X' in exchange for sexual favours.” – Ashila Dandeniya, Executive Director/Founding Member, Stand Up Movement*

The findings also corroborate what previous studies have found: supervisors inflict harm on workers with impunity. Workers in India claimed that if perpetrators are male workers, they are generally suspended or terminated. However, if they are supervisors or managers, no action is taken against them; in fact, complaints against supervisors often results in retaliation.

Across countries, workers reported fear of retaliation and economic dependence as the primary deterrent from reporting abusive behaviours. Women are also discouraged from reporting GBVH due to fear of stigmatisation and/or victim-blaming, the idea that women themselves somehow stimulate the harassment.

## **B. Violence and Harassment During Commutes**

Women workers are also often subjected to GBVH during commutes. This was exacerbated under the pandemic as employers stopped transportation services. Lateness due to stoppage of employer-provided transportation also led to termination or harsh disciplinary measures forcing workers to resign.

In one FGD in north India, workers from a Super Dry, Polly, American Regal, IMC, Nest and Taylor supplier shared that their factory resumed production, manufacturing PPE kits, even while the nationwide lockdown was in effect. To avoid hassles with the state authorities, workers were made to come to work at 2AM. They took longer and difficult routes to reach the factory. By



the time they reached the factory, they were already exhausted. Some also faced physical harm from police for violating curfews. Even when they told the police that they were summoned to work by the factory management, workers were held responsible for breaking rules, not the company. “We were told by the management that it was our responsibility to get to work. The company will not be responsible for whatever happens to us during commute.”

For migrant workers who went back to their rural homes to save money during the lockdown, the pandemic added additional risk of GBVH as they traveled back to manufacturing hubs. For example, in Sri Lanka, between March and May 2020, many factories were closed either due to lockdowns or cancellation of orders. However, despite lockdowns, export factories were allowed to resume production. For women who were able to return home during factory closures, this led to a chaotic mass return of workers to production hubs in which workers tried to find any means available at great individual cost. They came back under pressure from the employers, and from fear of losing their jobs. As one migrant working in Katunayake Free Trade Zone in Sri Lanka shared:

*“We went home during lockdown using a BOI bus, the factory did not even provide transport to the villages. Later in May, the factory assigned buses from my village but I had already returned to Katunayake by that time. Some workers were only given transport halfway. I came back to work using 5 buses from Aluthgama to Katunayake because I wanted the job so badly. Most workers were asked to bring letters from the PHI and asked not to return without it. Those who could not come back on time were not employed. Some had fair reason. The COVID cluster of navy personnel arose, and some villages were isolated. Those workers could not come to work. This happened in my village too but because I had already registered with the PHI who had monitored my quarantine, I got the letter. Some came as late as 18 May, and none of them were taken in for work because 15 May was the deadline. Some workers hired vehicles from the village to get to Katunayake, but they were not taken in by the factory because they were late.”* — Danushka, a garment worker from a J Crew, Delta, Land’s End and American Airlines supplier factory

Women in Bangladesh also face many dangers on the way to work as portrayed in the following case study:

*My name is Farida Khatun. I was born in Uthuli village in Manikganj district. I came to Gazipur with a hope to earn money for my family. Rickshaws and buses are the means of transportation from my home to the factory. I usually travel by bus. I would go to the bus station very early, and had to fight my way onto the bus, competing with men for a space. As I am getting on the bus, some men*



would pretend to help, lifting me up and groping my backside. When I would look back at them, they would just smile and wink.

If I had a window seat, the man next to me would be almost sitting on my lap, pretending to be asleep and trying to throw his whole body on top of me. Otherwise, he would adjust his body so that his knee would touch my knee. One day, a man who looked like a gentleman sat down next to me. After couple of minutes, I saw that my first impression of him was wrong. The whole ride he kept folding and spreading his arms trying to touch my breast with his elbow. Even looking outside the bus, I faced such experiences. Men on the street, tea and food vendors would stare and try to make eye contact. When the bus got stuck in a traffic jam, a few would blow kisses at me so I would turn away and try not to look out the window. I tried to not sit by the window because of this but even then, I was not safe. One time a man rubbed his penis with my hand and expressed his excitement.

After this, I decided I would not sit anymore so I started traveling by standing. But still there was no relief. When the bus ride got bumpy, the men standing beside me would fall on me, intentionally throwing his fully body on me. Then, I decided to travel only by rickshaw. Due to the workload in the factory I would return home late. Once when I was walking to the rickshaw by myself, the driver shouted to another that he would be having a good night, indicating bad intentions.

I don't understand why all these things happened to me. What is my sin? Why do men behave this way to me? Do I look so unrespectable that men get excited? Many such questions have come to my mind. At one time I thought I would not work anymore; I would not leave my home. Then I wouldn't have to endure this treatment. But I could never do this because of my financial burden. I came to Dhaka to provide a better life for my children and family. I try to be strong to carry on through these situations. I have to continue working – I have to fight for my survival.

Now I speak up in such situations. I tell the man next to me to sit properly; I tell the man standing next to me to be careful. I also mimic a slapping motion to those boys gazing at me with bad intentions outside the window. Each day is like this. It happens to all of us women garment workers all the time and most of us stay quiet. Who do I tell? What should I say? What will they think of me? We are always silent, but for how long?

## C. Heightened Health Risks During the Pandemic

The forced intensity of work was accompanied by deteriorated occupational safety and health conditions that resulted in fainting, exhaustion, physical illness, increased workplace accidents and increased risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

*“I cannot prioritise my health over work because I need to work long hours to pay off my debts. I often suffer from headaches and fevers while working excessively on the machines and I must take medicines every day to control them. My body aches, I feel tired all the time, my eyesight has worsened, and I often suffer from mental exhaustion.”* – 42-year-old Faiza, a machine operator at a Levi’s supplier factory in Pakistan

Common health complaints of garment workers due to poor working conditions in the factories are respiratory issues due to cotton dust particles and poor ventilation and leg and body pain due to sitting in front of the sewing machine without movement for several hours. According to our research findings, increased work intensity resulted in more severe pain and adverse health impacts. Workers from India reported feeling suffocated, difficulty in breathing, and dizziness when wearing surgical masks due to respiratory issues developed in the factory over time. Some workers even stated that their co-workers were forced to resign due to worsened breathing problems.

*“I have contracted a lot of health issues after working in the garment factory. I have breathing issues, severe leg pain and back pain. I take a pain killer almost every day to overcome the leg and back pain. I have spent a lot of money on medicines to cure it, but doctors say, it will go away only if I stop working as a tailor in the factory. I can’t afford to lose my job, or my children will starve. If the pain becomes too much during work, I go to nurse’s office and get a pain killer. I know that having so many pain killers is not good for my health but how else can I work?”* – Padmini, a garment worker from a Khol’s supplier factory in India

Several workers reported more frequent work accidents due to increased work intensity and poorly maintained machines -- such as cuts on the fingers and hands. One worker from India recounted a recent accident in which a tailor pierced her finger with the needle and was so badly hurt and bleeding that she had to be taken to the hospital.

*“Accidents happen a lot and that is mostly because mechanics do not maintain machines properly. Only when the buyer is visiting the mechanics are very careful with the machines. Otherwise, they are quite careless. Because of this,*

*accidents happen constantly. I, myself, have cut my finger several times. High production targets are also another factor contributing to these accidents. Every day a few workers face some kind of accident – finger or hand cuts.”* — Radha, a garment worker from a Nautica and Vans/VF Corp supplier factory in India

*“There has been a rise in accidents in the factory after the COVID-19 lockdown. Every day at least one accident happens in the factory. The rise in production targets is the main reason for this. We are always in a hurry to finish the targets – and as we do that, we end up cutting our fingers, or piercing it with needles. I have myself pierced my finger with the needle so many times.”* – Mary, a garment worker in India

The imposition of lockdowns was states’ primary response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Regarded as ‘essential’ in the sense that the garment industry is an important contributor to developing economies, many states were faced with the very real possibility of economic collapse. When factory work resumed at the earliest opportunity, many workers, faced the health versus subsistence trap, and were fearfully dragged back into work with the hope that any extra precautions taken would be sufficient. This was particularly so in the case of contractual or casual workers.

Risks that expose workers to COVID-19 include: failure of employers to observe health protocols after a period of time; failure to provide testing and facilitate vaccination of workers; underlying health conditions associated with working in the industry for years; overwork preventing adequate time for rest; unhygienic toilet facilities; overcrowding in company-provided buses and public buses; overcrowding at entryways and in canteens; overcrowded and unhygienic boarding houses and factory dorms; poor air circulation and high temperatures; lack of proper distancing between workstations; thumbprint scanners that are not properly disinfected, and; security checks from security officers who do not observe proper health protocols.

Precautions such as maintaining one metre of distance between workers on production lines, that workers would be provided with masks, that breaks would be staggered so that distancing could be achieved were by and large not being done according to most participants. As some pointed out, proper distancing would be extremely difficult to achieve with so many workers on production lines and considering that speed and reaching targets is the main priority.



Further, factory-provided transportation and public transportation are overcrowded so that social distancing is not possible.

Workers from a Levi's supplier factory in Pakistan stated that while the factory enforced distancing initially, this was not possible in company-provided transportation that was regularly overcrowded and never disinfected. They also observed that health and safety measures were at odds with the increase in working hours and suspension of weekly holiday.

*"There is no social distancing in the company transport. Forget about a meter, there is not even a centimetre sometimes!"* – Lasantha, a manpower worker from a Nike supplier factory in Sri Lanka

Lack of PPE was reported across countries. For example, in Sri Lanka:

*"The factory gives us cloth masks even now with the spread of COVID, I have myself requested a proper mask, but they still give us cloth masks. The cloth used for the masks comes from the cutting section. Workers in the cutting department had tested positive for corona a few days back, now the other workers are touching what those workers had been touching. The tailors touch them, they don't have a proper mask, no gloves."* – Nimali, a worker from a NEXT supplier factory in Sri Lanka

Workers from Cambodia said that although some safety protocols were put in place, such as mandatory surgical masks and frequently spraying of alcohol, they were concerned about risks associated with unclean restroom facilities, poor air circulation, lack of proper distancing between workstations, small canteen facilities that are easily overcrowded, thumbprint scanners that are not properly disinfected, and invasive security checks from security officers.

Several participants from Pakistan stated that while employers were initially keen to follow health protocols, requiring masks and installing disinfectant machines at entryways, these efforts diminished quickly, and disinfectant machines ceased to function and were never repaired. Employers never thought of improving ventilation or of keeping toilet facilities clean.



*Workers from a Levi's and Inditex supplier factory in Pakistan stated that no safety measures were taken whatsoever, so workers endeavoured to follow health protocols on their own.*

A number of respondents stated that any additional costs associated with COVID-19 health measures were borne by workers.

*In Indonesia, workers from a Walmart supplier factory reported that while they are required to supply their own surgical masks, if found to not be wearing a mask they would be subjected to a fine in the form of wage reduction.*

*Participants in Pakistan stated that if any worker showed even minor symptoms they were forced to get tested at their own expense. As many could not afford to get tested, they were terminated as a result.*

*Workers from a Levi's supplier factory in Faisalabad, Pakistan stated that while the factory arranged transport to vaccination centres, not only were they required to supply their own masks, which was strictly enforced, they were also fined 500-1000 PKR (3-6 USD) for violating any health protocols.*

Few employers made efforts to ensure workers received vaccination.

*Workers from a Levi's supplier factory in Pakistan stated that the factory avoids testing workers fearing that it will be forced to close if any cases are discovered.*

According to participants from Sri Lanka, in some factories when a worker is infected with the virus, she and those near her are sent to quarantine centres while the other workers are required to continue working. Manpower workers stated that they are treated inhumanely compared to company, or permanent, workers who contract COVID-19. Further, due to poor housing conditions, migrant workers are at greater risk of contracting the virus due to overcrowded, unsanitary conditions, and with workers from 5-6 factories typically residing in one boarding house.

One migrant worker, Amandi, employed as a permanent worker at a NEXT supplier factory in Sri Lanka shared when she tested positive for COVID-19, she was left to fend for herself in the boarding house for 5 days despite constant pleas to local officials. Finally, she was transported to a quarantine centre where she faced horrendous conditions. The factory offered her very little support:

*"There was a discarded bed near a toilet, and I took it to my room with 2 others. We slept in that bed. We were fed only coconut sambal and rice; we did not even*



*get a Panadol tablet. We were asked to clean the toilets, clean the room, asked to bring all the dirt to the ground floor from our room on the 4th floor. I called the factory and told them that I don't even get hot water, I don't even have a bed, I asked them to take me away. After 3 days I was dropped in Gampaha. I called the factory and said I need transport to the boarding house. They sent a vehicle and a bag of goods, with only 3kg of rice and few other things. There was not even a bottle of coconut oil. My condition worsened upon return to the boarding place. I requested transport from the factory to take me to a hospital, they sent a vehicle and brought me back too. The factory never called me to check how I was, I spent my own money to call the factory. My friends topped up my mobile to call, I owed them money."*

## **D. Embodied Trauma**

As this chapter has shown, during the pandemic, women garment workers experienced multiple forms of violence and injustice in their work lives – that we have elaborated as “economic harm”. They face stolen wages, under-valuation of their hard work and labour, and outright invisibilisation of their wage-labour in industrial workplaces not unlike their unacknowledged care work at home. They find that their realities as women through different stages – youth, pregnancy, age, motherhood, marital status – are used as leverage to deny them basic justice and security at work, at the same time that their labour fuels the lucrative global garment industry. Their bodies face invasive violence in production lines and during commutes and their minds are shatteringly targeted with sharp and incessant abuse intended to strip them of their basic selfhood and dignity. The pandemic's own dangers further compounded what can only be described as traumatic realities of women garment workers.

These lived experiences of women arise out of systems of unequal power and oppressive domination and leave their marks in the mind and viscerally in the physical body. The term “mental health” although clinically not incorrect does not fully describe the long-term and deep impacts left behind on women, both individually and collectively. The economic harm and its impacts faced by women workers could be more effectively described as “embodied trauma”.

*“I feel like I do not have any control over my life, and I can't protect myself from harm. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, life was stressful as there was always tension at home around money. Moreover, my breathing issues seem to have worsened over the last year and I am always scared of contracting COVID-19. I have watched too many people, especially young people, die from COVID-19 in the last year. I am scared to work in a crowded factory, but I do not have any option but to continue here – or else face starvation.” – Geetha, a garment worker in India*



During discussions and interviews, it was repeatedly raised that mental health issues such as depression, stress and anxiety, and even suicidal ideation were very common amongst garment workers as a direct result of increased work intensity and the associated rise in GBVH. Mental health issues related to working conditions are not uncommon such as, low self-confidence and depression resulting from years of abusive disciplinary practices; due to monotony and repetitiveness of tasks; due to fear and anxiety of verbal abuse for not reaching production targets; due to stress over recurring illness related to work in garment factories; due to anxiety over sexual harassment; and due to exhaustion from overwork. Respondents reported that these common mental health issues related to working conditions were exacerbated as a result of the intensification of work under the pandemic.

*“You’re useless – that is the word that the Chinese manager called me. It’s just a word, but it hurt my heart. It hurt much more than the physical violence I receive. I try so hard every day to avoid making mistakes and reach the target, but I could not complete the amount of work in time. So, he blamed me and called me useless.”* – Bopha, a garment worker from a Nike supplier factory in Cambodia

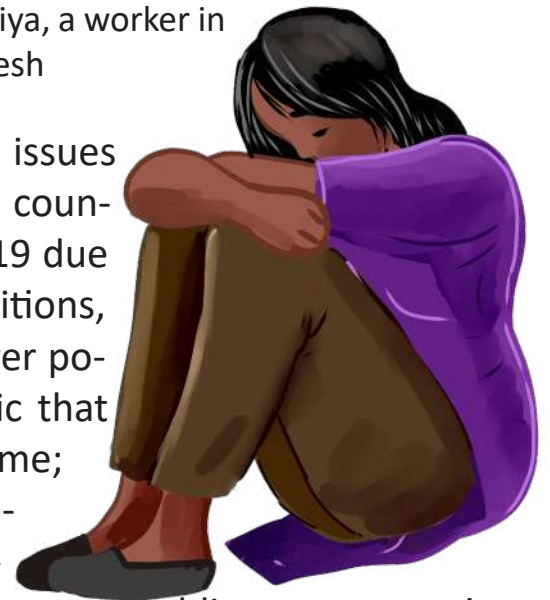
Verbal abuse was a leading cause of mental health issues according to participants, such as Bopha. Another participant from India with 20 years of experience said that she cried frequently while working in the factory due to shouting and other forms of verbal abuse. Other respondents stated how the constant threat to dismiss from supervisors kept them in a state of existential duress and many workers ultimately resigned on their own as a result.

The stress of the work environment followed workers to their homes. For example, respondents from Cambodia stated that they were constantly overthinking and had difficulty sleeping; many reported having recurring nightmares. Similarly in India, women felt a deep sense of anger, restlessness, and anxiety. Once an incident occurred, they replayed it in their minds the whole day. Many women frequently broke down and skipped their meals at work because of emotional disturbance. This not only deteriorated their physical health, but also affected their productivity at work leading to more abuse from supervisors.

The most troubling mental health outcome was depression among workers leading to suicidal thoughts. Respondents linked these feelings to the abusive work culture as well as economic harm when suicidal ideation occurred because respondents found their lives so unbearable due to financial strain and inability to enact any alternative that feelings of fatalism developed.

*“I fell into a deep frustration. I called, “O God, put me to death.” If suicide is not a great sin, I would do that.” – Sumaiya, a worker in a factory supplying to Inditex in Gazipur, Bangladesh*

This was compounded by mental health issues related to the virus itself. Participants across countries reported anxiety over contracting COVID-19 due to overcrowded and unsanitary working conditions, transportation and living conditions; anxiety over potential future recurrent waves of the pandemic that would result in factory closures and loss of income; stress due to isolation and separation from children and family members, and; fear of contracting the virus during normal activities such as using public transportation and going shopping. Additionally, participants felt that as garment workers, they were at greater risk of contracting the virus and expressed constant worry over spreading the virus to loved ones.



One of the most recurring themes was the association between mental stress and economic harm. Respondents reported feeling powerless, with very little control over their lives due to dependence on low-wage jobs. Further, wage theft not only led to worry over survival; it was accompanied by a sense of injustice that left respondents feeling powerless as they had few avenues for recourse. During one FGD in Cambodia, respondents stated that despite the increase in their workload, their salary was reduced by 50%. In those moments, they reported feeling depressed stating, “We can’t even survive with the reduction of wages. The price of food is higher, but the family’s need is still the same, and the bank still requires us to pay monthly for our loans.”

*“During the lockdown in 2020 and in 2021, I did not receive wages. Our wages have not increased for the past 2 years. After the first lockdown, we stopped receiving attendance bonus. My husband is also a tailor and he also did not receive wages for both lockdowns. We have delayed rent for 4 months and the landlord is constantly threatening to throw us out of the apartment. We have no one to depend on – as all my family members are equally poor. Some days, I feel like I do not want to live any longer. I can’t handle this tension and fear. The factory management has no sympathy for us. They only care about production targets. So many workers lost their family members or neighbours during the second wave and they are constantly worried or stressed about the situation at home – yet when workers report to work, all managers do is yell at workers, humiliate them or harass them to make sure they meet production targets.” – Sandhya, a garment worker from a Nautica, Vans/VF Corp supplier factory in India*

While many factories have facilities to treat physical illness, although insufficient, no employers have provisions for short or long-term mental health; rather, the working conditions in the factories run counter to any sense of psychological well-being. In fact, garment factories embody the worst of gendered power asymmetries and, garment workers face stigmatisation and varying degrees of abuse according to multiple oppressions such as ethnicity, caste, religion, and so on, that work together to produce a sense of ontological inferiority and marginalisation.

## Conclusion

This chapter elaborates the different forms of economic harm as a form of GBVH, and also reveals how economic harm inflicted on women was exacerbated under the pandemic. Economic harm, a form of GBVH in a low-wage industry that largely employs women workers, is embedded in the production processes driven by the business model of global apparel brands.

As supplier factories operate on thin profit margins and are subjected to the fluctuating and unilateral demands of brands, they pass their losses onto women workers through wage theft and degradation of wages. Unpaid wages result in the non-recognition of labour time, which has the effect of reinforcing the invisibility of women's labour.

To cut costs, supplier factories imposed unethical flexibilisation and reduction of the workforce. They searched for increasingly informal employment arrangements and the pandemic enabled them to expand the repertoire of tactics used to reduce the workforce, including increased use of short-term contracts that misused existing realities of women such as life-cycle stage, migration status, caste, etc – essentially turning social oppressions into business leverage. At the same time, the system of workers' dependency on renewal of short-term contracts has the effect of blurring boundaries, as it becomes difficult for workers to effectively draw lines between meeting job requirements and tolerating abusive behaviours.

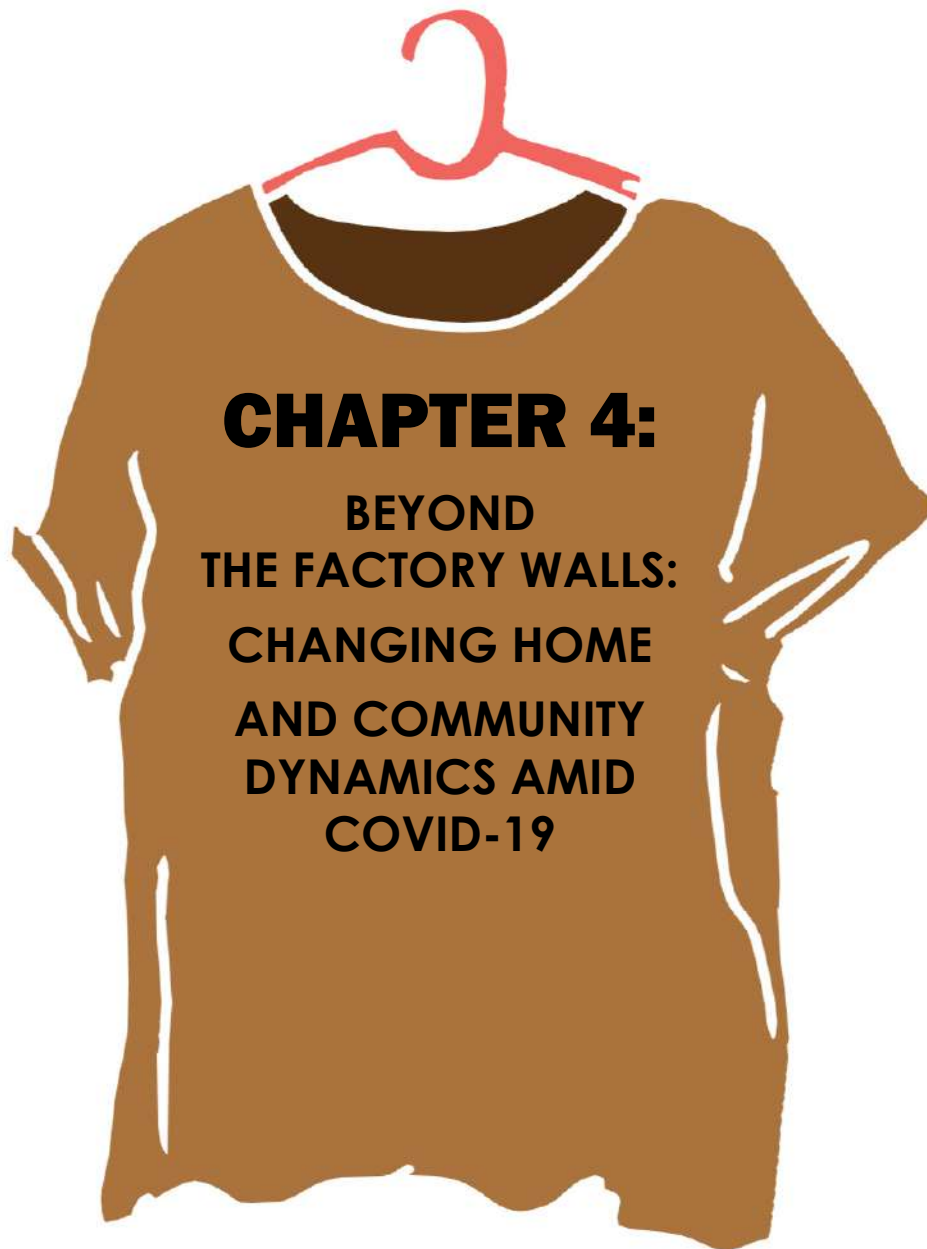
The labour process, or the organisation of work, is deeply influenced by the logics of global supply chains as employers endeavour to get the most work out of workers for the lowest cost. This led to increased intensity of work subjecting workers to overwork resulting in fainting, exhaustion, physical illness, increased workplace accidents and increased risk of exposure to the

COVID-19 virus. At the same time, physical, sexual and verbal abuse were also exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. The particular function of GBVH in the workplace is to discipline workers because it reminds women that their primary social function is to be subordinate to men. These disciplinary strategies are deeply gendered largely because managers and supervisors tend to be men, giving them tremendous power over women concentrated in the various labour-intensive production departments.

With so much uncertainty and pressure to reach production targets with fewer workers, GBVH naturally increased as a tool to speed up production. Economic insecurity created by the actions of global apparel brands meant that women workers have become more vulnerable to abuse. Women garment workers often have to tolerate inappropriate comments and abuse while at work to ensure their earnings are not negatively impacted and to maintain job security. The majority of women garment workers found verbal abuse to be a routine aspect of their workplace environment, and nearly all of the respondents, particularly those on short-term contracts and insecure employment arrangements agreed that depending on low wages had led them to tolerate inappropriate behaviours. Accepting or tolerating abuse in the workplace differs from consent but due to the constraints on workers, few address these abusive behaviours on the job.

Finally, the multiple dimensions of economic harm as elaborated in this chapter, led to intense mental health outcomes. These mental health outcomes are more than momentary shifts due to changing life circumstances. They are intrinsically linked to the long-term effects of navigating gender discrimination and subordination in supplier factories, having deep impacts that are carried in the mind and body in what can be understood as embodied trauma. Together these findings reveal that the logics of global garment supply chains create the conditions for the differing, changing, and emerging forms of violence, captured under economic harm, encountered by women garment workers during COVID-19.





**W**hile the last chapter dealt with how the organisation of work affects women's experiences of GBVH inside the factory, this chapter turns to sites of violence beyond the factory walls that have usually received less attention in understanding the lives of women garment workers in global supply chains. Women are integral to the logics of global garment supply chains not only because they make up the vast majority of the workforce; but also, because they are essential to the social reproduction of the workforce. Therefore, an examination of the current situation of women workers would be incomplete without a discussion on its continuity into the spheres of the home and community – the sites of social reproduction.



Chapter 2 began to demonstrate how spaces of production and reproduction are inseparably linked. As will be seen in this chapter, the employment practices embedded in global garment supply chain models not only create the conditions for violence and abuse in supplier factories that both predate and are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic; they also constitute and reinforce the conditions for gendered violence beyond the factory walls.

We begin with an exploration of how women workers were affected in their homes in terms of the intensification of unpaid domestic and care work as a result of their total abandonment by the industry during the pandemic. It goes on to indicate that the role of women also as primary earners for their families became more prevalent during the pandemic. Yet this role is not recognised in the industry, the home, in communities – indeed, in the nation – as is evident in the lack of institutional support and diminishing public services.

We discuss violence in the home where we use a broad definition of “home” to include not only the family home but also poor private or employer-provided housing or boarding arrangements for workers that expose women to violence from different actors.

The chapter then illustrates how women were forced to take on debt, exposed to hunger and malnutrition, and compelled to reduce their consumption leading to acute bodily neglect. Lastly, it indicates women’s deep distress and demoralisation in the face of an overall sense of disintegration of the family among the working class in the garment sector. The findings in this chapter reveal that women workers subsidised global apparel brands during the pandemic-induced recession not only through wage theft, but also through social reproduction of the workforce at great personal expense including their physical and mental wellbeing and the erosion of the social fabric that shapes their lives.

## **1. Intensification & Reassertion of Women’s Unpaid Work and Primary Caregiver Role**

Our findings reveal that women’s unpaid domestic and care work increased during the pandemic to varying degrees according to whether countries imposed full or partial lockdowns. There were also differences in experiences according to whether workers were terminated, laid off or suspended, or continued to work. However, despite these differences, the common experience was a reaffirmation of traditional gender roles and norms that assert women’s role



as primary caregivers, regardless of whether they are primary earners.

As countries went into full lockdowns, as was the case in India and Sri Lanka, restricted mobility and suspension of paid work meant that more family members spent time in the home and more social reproduction activities were carried out in the household. For example, prior to the pandemic, some women factory workers did not have to cook or do household chores during the workday. They would cook in the morning, purchase food, or bring prepared food from home for lunch, and cook again in the evening after work. However, with more family members in the home during full lockdown, they had to cook and do more chores during the day. On the other hand, some women experienced the opposite, owing to comparatively longer working hours and more rigorous demands in the factory in the pre-lockdown period. Increased time for leisure was, however, the result of less time spent on cooking due to financial hardship resulting in food scarcity. According to Abhira, a worker from a Marks and Spencer supplier factory in Bengaluru, India:



*“There was always a worry about finances during the lockdown period, but the workload seemed lower during those months. In the pre-COVID period, I never had a moment’s rest – I was either working in the factory or at home. Even on a Sunday, I had to wake up at 5 AM – as the uniforms of my children had to be washed, or my husband clothes had to be ironed or there would be cleaning to do. Since no one was leaving the house during the lockdown, washing and ironing of clothes really declined. We also had no money to cook vegetables or meat – so cooking time also declined. Everyone was scared to leave home – so there were no expenses. We ate little but we slept a lot during those months.”*

India and Indonesia saw a huge exodus of migrant workers back to the villages due to the uncertainty created by the loss of work and wages and a lack of support from industry during the crisis. At home in rural settings, women’s share of unpaid work increased dramatically. Instead, household responsibilities in the village were borne by the younger siblings, mostly younger sisters. Some women migrants who returned home during lockdowns took up more precarious and poorly paid work, such as agricultural labour for survival, in addition to engaging in unpaid subsistence farming on their family farms.

*“My husband insisted that we move back to his village, immediately after the lockdown was announced. I tried to resist it, as I knew that village life would be difficult now, especially after living in the city for 10 years. The water supply*

*is not very good in the village and there are too many mouths to cook for. I spend the lockdown period, doing household work or work at my father-in-law's agricultural land. I did not have a moment's rest. At some point, I even felt that work in the factory is better – as I used to at least make some money. My father-in-law got rid of the labourer who worked in our land during the lockdown, saying there was no money to pay him. I had to work in the field instead of him – removing the weeds, putting fertilizers etc.”* – Nandini, a garment worker from a Marks and Spencer supplier factory in Bengaluru, India

In Sri Lanka, despite nationwide lockdown, some factories continued to operate but reduced the number of workers or hired dispatch/manpower casual daily workers. For these respondents, the amount of housework was unchanged. Many reported that they would arrive home from the factory as late as 10 PM and have to prepare dinner for the family and do other household chores. They then wake up at 4:30 AM to do the housework, arriving at the factory by 7:30 AM.

The research suggests that men's exploitation of women's labour in the home increased during the pandemic. As Laila, a worker from a Levi's supplier factory in Pakistan reported:

*“During the lockdown women were expected to do all the household chores. All men did was command us. Upon delay, they would simply shout and scream. On an average, 18 hours a day was spent on childcare and other household chores that included – cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing clothes, ensuring safety of family members, taking proper care of the elderly and the sick, etc. We didn't get any help from anyone. Being left to manage everything alone, we suffered from chronic headaches, body aches, and fever.”*

Married women across countries reported spending more time doing housework despite whether they spent an equal amount of time in paid work as their husbands. If the women were not working in the factory, they spent the entire day doing housework, leading to physical and mental exhaustion. Men, however, were able to enjoy leisure time and were found to only help occasionally with tasks like cooking and childcare. Further, while many of the women respondents reduced spending due to financial hardship, men continued to have access to personal spending for leisure activities. This was echoed in Pakistan; while men enjoyed the luxury of smoking despite financial crisis, women had to cut down on their basic necessities or borrow money in order to make ends meet.

*“Honestly, I feel housework is way heavier and tiring than working in the factory”*  
– Chanthou, a garment worker in Cambodia

Despite facing hardships at home and in the factory, women continued to hold the primary responsibility of housework and childcare. Some respondents accepted this as their duty, but for some there was a sense of injustice created by the awareness of the inequality in household chores.

*“I am so tired and upset, and keep questioning ... Why does he not even help with housework when he is back home from work? He is always with his phone, playing the PUBG game for which he spends 1\$ per day for internet. It is a complete waste of money.”* – Romdul, a garment worker from a C&A supplier factory in Cambodia

However, workloads in the home did not affect everyone in the same way or to the same extent. Some women garment workers in India reported that due to the closure of factories, household workloads eased, at least during the two months of nationwide lockdown. Respondents felt that instead of juggling household chores with factory work, the lockdown provided time spent at home that was less stressful than work in the factory.

*“Yes, we managed housework even before the lockdown. There was no change in this aspect as such. I would always do household chores all by myself. In fact, I enjoyed doing so. The only relief the lockdown brought was that we could stay away from production pressures and supervision of the supervisors and floor managers.”* – Malini, a garment worker from a Marks and Spencer, Old Navy, Express, Target, K Mart and JC Penney supplier factory in India

The narratives from Cambodia and India demonstrate differing attitudes of women towards unpaid work in the household. Being confined to the home, for a short time, was not necessarily disadvantageous, and certain household tasks provided greater freedom and fulfilment. The pandemic was seen as an opportunity by some women to spend more time with the family, fostering social relations that differed markedly from a highly regimented factory life<sup>1</sup>. However, such social relations in the domestic sphere are not always liberating, as the experiences of women in Cambodia illustrate. For these respondents, paid work outside the home represented more freedom to socialize and evade the control of the patriarchal household.

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1 Ferree, Myra Marx. (1985). ‘Between Two Worlds: German Feminist Approaches to Working-Class Women and Work’. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*: 10(3), pp. 525.

## 2. “Is this Justice?": Invisibilisation of Women’s Role as Primary Earners

Women enter industrial employment as their ability to earn industrial wages often determine continued sustenance of their families. This is particularly apparent in the garment sector, where women are often the sole breadwinners in their families. However, the industry is able to take advantage of the widespread view of women’s earnings as supplementary to the family, rather than the primary source of income, in order to reduce costs by imposing repressed and insecure wages on women. The composition of the labour force reflects a contradictory reality – many women have no ‘male breadwinner’ on which to rely. In particular, this is reflected in the context of migrant women garment workers, whose remittances form a crucial component of the livelihood of their rural households. During the pandemic, women workers were caught between their role as earners, who are also most likely to lose work and wages, and also as overworked primary caregivers forced to compensate for diminished external support and services (as the next section will show).

In many of the respondents’ households at least one adult male family member engaged in self-employment or otherwise employed, also contributed to the household income until the pandemic-induced recession in 2020 led to widespread layoffs and terminations and reduction of working days. In many of these households, women became the sole income earner in the family.

*Lilya, a 37-year-old garment worker sewing hats at a Nike supplier factory in Indonesia, was forced to work throughout the pandemic not only to support her children, but also in the absence of any financial contribution from her husband. In 2017, her husband’s health took a major downturn that caused him to be confined to bedrest. Although his health gradually improved with time, he still could not do any strenuous manual labour. Thus, Lilya’s income was the sole contribution to the household, including the educational expenses of her children as well as her husband’s medical expenses.*

*Esih, a 40-year-old Indonesian garment worker at a Nike supplier factory, was also faced with financial hardships. Her husband’s business suffered severely as a result of the pandemic-induced recession, and he could not repay his business loans. Esih’s wages became the only means for her family’s survival while she also had to take responsibility for her husband’s debt.*

Just like Lilya and Esih, women garment workers are often the primary earners in their families, and many more became the main breadwinner as a result of the pandemic.

Asia Floor Wage Alliance's cross-border living wage formulation accommodates unpaid care work. According to AFW, a worker needs to be able to support themselves and two other 'consumption units' (1 consumption unit is equal to 1 adult or 2 children). This calculation accommodates reproductive or care work because a living wage with this earner-dependent ratio allows for care services (such as childcare and domestic work) to be either purchased on the market or supports a family member who does this work unremunerated. AFW's women-centred wage formulation is unique in the world of wage calculations. In the event that one additional family earner loses their job or source of income, as was overwhelmingly the case during the pandemic, a garment workers' poverty-level wages could not support unpaid care and domestic work or the cost of purchasing these services on the market. As a result, women workers suffered extraordinary stress.

Some women also reported that they were discriminated against simply for being the main breadwinner.

*"With small children at home to be fed and rent to be paid, we had no option but to risk our lives during the lockdown. We had to walk through small alleys facing the risk of predators, humans and animals alike. We had to walk through water clogged filthy roads, and blocked drains which got worse with the incessant pouring of rains. My point is when we risked our lives to help work going in the company during lockdown, how can the company ask us to leave now without any consideration? Is this justice? Also, laying off workers has not been uniformly applicable. For a family with a husband, wife and their four children, who are all employed, the company has been generous with them. But for someone like me who is the only earning member in the family and without a permanent roof over my head, the company wants to sack me? Is this justice?" – Sunitha, a garment worker from a Super Dry, Polly, American Regal, IMC, Nest and Taylor supplier factory in India*



### **3. Women's Care Work Taken for Granted: Lack of Employer-Based Social Protection, Public Services and Support**

Similarly to invisibilisation of women as primary earners, their care work is not only made invisible but also taken for granted – in the industry and in society at large.

This is reflected in the lack of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies – where there is an underlying assumption (a taking for granted, as it were) that women will somehow compensate for the lack through their care work. The industry, too, relies on an intentional non-recognition of women workers' role as primary breadwinners and caregivers in their households – demonstrated not only in terms of employment and wage insecurity during the pandemic, but also in the absence or withdrawal

of employer-provided support and employer-based services. All of this overburdened women workers with new care work pressures including in healthcare, education and childcare, further aggravating economic hardship for single mothers and primary breadwinners.



The makeup of households and women's status as single mothers had differing impacts. For example, while in dual income or two parent households women still had to take on a larger share of unpaid care work, single mothers faced even greater challenges that carried severe economic implications. For example, in India, under the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017, factories with more than 30 women employees are required to provide a creche for children under six. However, many garment factories refused to reopen creches after the COVID-19 lockdown citing health and safety concerns, without providing any alternative form of support. Many women dropped out of paid employment even when factory operations resumed to full capacity after the lockdown, as employers exploited the disadvantage of single mothers to downsize the workforce. Furthermore, as the amount of childcare work taken up by households increased due to closures of schools, day care and creche facilities, and the breakdown of informal care networks, some women were forced to resign. Other single mothers decided to go to work

and leave their children with other unpaid caregivers such as grandparents and neighbours. In some cases, children were even left unsupervised in the home putting them at risk.

Similar concerns were raised by women garment workers in Pakistan who reported that management closed factory creches, citing health and safety measures, and that many young mothers were terminated as a result. In Sri Lanka, day care centres in many garment factories ceased operations, forcing many young mothers to quit their jobs. In factories where day care services continued, strict time constraints were imposed after the lockdown, making it difficult for women to work overtime. Women workers in Sri Lanka stated that creches ceased operations after 6:30 PM, forcing them to finish work to resume childcare responsibilities. Discrimination against young mothers operationalised through the closure of childcare facilities in the factories meant that many women's prospects for economic independence were lost. Other women in Sri Lanka pay for private day care services, which became increasingly difficult due to the reduction of working days and loss of income.



Women also had to compensate for services that were formerly purchased from the market with their unpaid care labour, like healthcare and education, which they could no longer afford due to decreased household incomes, overwhelmed services, and lockdowns that restricted mobility and school closures.

*“As a widow with three dependent children, I did not have any savings to help me. I have my social security card, but I cannot avail my old age pension benefits. I was jobless with no source of income; hence, I was unable to manage the expenses of my house. I was very worried during the lockdown because without pay, I was unable to manage the medical, educational, and other expenses of my family.” – Seema, a garment worker from a Levi’s supplier factory in Pakistan*

One worker from a factory supplying to AEO and Zara in Indonesia, 44-year-old Tati, described her experience providing care for a family member infected with COVID-19 at her own expense with no time for adequate rest.

*In May 2021, Tati’s father contracted the infection and she had to rush to her hometown for a month to help him. While food was supplied by the village level government authorities and neighbours, Tati was physically and mentally stressed because of the additional caregiving responsibilities. In addition to the*

*added burden of caring for sick family members, her own health was jeopardised as she was regularly exposed to infection.*

Because women had to take on the majority of social reproduction activities, from food shopping to buying medicine, they were more exposed to health risks than their male counterparts.

Additionally, widespread closure of schools not only resulted in working-class women spending more time on childcare; they were also forced to supervise home schooling. Women workers from Indonesia reported facing numerous difficulties while handling electronic gadgets and online platforms to ensure their children attended virtual classes. They reported spending an inordinate amount of time and energy on their children's education in the middle of other domestic chores. This means that their household chores increased considerably. At the same time, families lack the resources to accommodate online learning, especially for multiple children, as was the case with Mala, a 50-year-old garment worker from a factory supplying to Levi's in Sri Lanka:

*"I have three children who can't go to school, and it is difficult for them to attend class online. The youngest does not understand, I ask him to look at the screen, but he gets distracted. It is difficult to get him do it. I am using a simple phone and there is only one smart phone in the house and all three cannot log in from one phone. If all three had lessons at the same time, they cannot all attend. The eldest cannot skip his lessons, so I have to give him the mobile phone, disregarding the needs of my other two children when they all have lessons at the same time. My second and third children hardly get to attend class. I have to ask around about what lesson was done and get them to do it. One data card only lasts a week. I cook the 3 meals, wash clothes, clean the house, stitch and attend to the kids' online education at the same time."*

## **4. Home is Where Work is: "I Feel Unsafe and Insecure"**

We have used an expanded definition of "home" in this discussion as that is how "home" is experienced by working class as well as migrant women workers in urban manufacturing hubs. "Home" is conventionally understood as the familial, patriarchal, heterosexual household. It is also commonly perceived as a private space, separate from the reach of the state or the "public"

sphere,<sup>2</sup> where domestic violence most commonly occurs with husband as the perpetrator and wife as the victim. However, feminists have shown that “home” can have different configurations and meanings – for the working class, migrants, Dalits, indigenous women, women of colour, Black women, and so on.

Women garment workers’ homes may be their familial homes locally if the workers are local. Very often however, homes are rooms in employer-provided factory dorms, or rented rooms in private boarding houses or slums near the factories. Working conditions and employment relations penetrate the so-called “private” homes, blurring the boundaries between the home and the factory. While familial domestic violence was exacerbated as a result of economic insecurity and the reorganisation of work, we also found migrant women workers subjected to different forms of gendered violence by non-familial actors in their homes.

Several studies have highlighted how domestic violence often spills over into the workplace with a negative impact on workers’ lives and productivity of enterprises. However, in the wake of the pandemic, a reverse tendency is gaining ground – from factory to home. Several women noted how long working hours and forced unpaid overtime during the pandemic has led to disharmony in families, exacerbating instances of domestic violence.

*For 35-year-old Nena, a daily worker who works as a packer in Indonesia, domestic abuse began at the end of 2020, because her husband was terminated and became jealous that Nani could still earn money. In addition, because she had to work overtime in the garment factory to earn extra money so she would often come home late. Her husband became suspicious that she was having an affair and would beat her. She filed for divorce and now lives with her mother and three children.*

Women across countries were faced with similar circumstances as portrayed in the following narratives:

*“The managers give us high production targets, which we cannot complete in 8 hours, then they curse and yell at us. They make us do overtime work but refuse to record it and refuse to pay us for it. I would be delayed in reaching home due to this unrecorded overtime and my husband would yell at me, asking me why*

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2      Bhattacharjee, Anannya. (1997). ‘The Public/Private Mirage: Mapping Homes and Undomesticating Violence Work in the South Asian Immigrant Community’. M. J. Alexander and C. T. Mohanty (eds), *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*. New York and London: Routledge, 1997. pp. 308–29, 396–8.

*I am late and whom was I with. My husband is always angry and abusive when I stay back to do overtime work. If I refuse to do overtime work, the managers abuse me, if I do the overtime work, my husband abuses me.” – Saritha, a garment worker in Bengaluru, India*

*“The factory makes us stay until 9:30 or 10:00 PM. When we return home, we have to wake up at 4:30 or 5:00 AM and do the housework. The transport arrives at 6:15 AM. When the worker returns home, nothing is done; the husband and children do not have dinner. Clothes are not washed. There is no water, no tea. These lead to problems between the husband and wife, resulting in beating. Many of my co-workers have experienced this, and it is happening even now. Those who could not bear it, their families scattered. Either the husband had gone away with another woman, or he does not come home at all. So, the children are left at someone’s house, the daughter may have had a sexual abuse. There are many drug users, they may have influenced the son. We have faced many such problems.” – Jeevarani, a garment worker from a Polo and Marks and Spencer supplier factory in Sri Lanka*

Further, as illustrated below by Sumaiya, long working hours in the factory have reverberating effects, exacerbating domestic violence, which affected women’s ability to report to work resulting in termination. In the context of the pandemic, the added stress of loss of income worsened situations of domestic abuse.

*“I had to work in the factory until late at night, around 11 PM. When I came home, I had to cook. When I returned late at night, my husband would look at me with suspicion and beat me. Our landlord also harassed me for coming home late. He told me, “I will not let you in if you come late at night.” One day I came from the factory after 12 AM and the gate was locked. I was forced to stand there all night then, tired, I fell to the ground and fell asleep. In the morning both the landlord and my husband shouted at me. The continued work pressure, the landlord’s behaviour, my husband’s physical and mental torture made me break down emotionally and physically. I became sick. I couldn’t stand up or walk. I stopped going to my factory. After few days, I learned I had been fired from the factory. It was at this time that the pandemic started. The COVID-19 outbreak affected the daily income of my husband who pulls a rickshaw. Since I couldn’t give him any money, his torture has increased. I fell into a deep frustration. I called, “O God, put me to death.” If suicide is not a great sin, I would do that.” – Sumaiya a garment worker from an Inditex supplier factory in Gazipur, Bangladesh*

Violence in the home is not only perpetrated by husbands directed at their wives. Redefining the notion of the home, as experienced in the housing arrangements and living conditions of rural-urban migrant and working-class women, we see gendered forms of violence perpetrated by employers, landlords, shopkeepers etc, against women in their homes.



*“During the lockdown last year, I was surrounded by difficulties. Our factory was completely closed for one month which led to a severe financial crisis as I, along with the other workers, were not paid during this time. I had to pay 7,000 PKR (41 USD) monthly for my rented house, along with the electricity and gas bills. The landlord continuously demanded the rent and harassed us constantly, saying that if we were unable to pay, he would kick us out of the house, and we would still have to pay the money.” – Ayesha, a garment worker from a Levi’s supplier factory in Pakistan*

Because large parts of the local transport networks were suddenly closed down during nationwide lockdowns, migrant women were trapped in production hubs, unable to return home or earn wages. These migrant women faced difficulties paying for rent and basic necessities due to loss of income and were subjected to harassment and violence from landlords and shop owners.

*I was getting ready to go to the nearby medical store. It was a Sunday, so I woke up late and immediately decided to go for a bath. We don’t have an attached bathroom in the rented house; it is just outside in the common area. When operations in the factory shut, I lost income and that affected our everyday functioning. I was unable to pay my rent. The landlord would call and harass me for the money. I was in no position to pay and that’s when I thought of borrowing from my acquaintance. Just as I entered the bathroom, I heard the house owner call out my name, Chahna, Chahna, where are you? When there was no response from my end, he started screaming and shouting. I quickly finished my bath and quietly entered the room. Just as I stepped out of the bathroom, I shouted back saying that I will speak to him in sometime. But he couldn’t wait. The landlord followed me and just as I was putting on my clothes (wearing the blouse and petticoat), he banged the door and barged inside. I was half naked! I didn’t know which side to look. He is so shameless that instead of leaving the room, he started abusing me. He started calling names and threatened me of calling the police and evicting me from the house. After good 10 mins of harassment, he left the room. – Chahna, a garment worker from a Super Dry, Polly, American Regal, IMC, Nest and Taylor supplier factory in Gurgaon, India*

Migrant women living alone in urban areas are regularly subjected to harassment and violence as in the following case study from Bangladesh:

*One day on the way to the factory I went to a store to recharge my phone. When I started leaving the store, the store owner called out and asked, “Do you live alone? Don’t you have a husband? How do you live without a husband?” I started feeling uncomfortable and left the store immediately without uttering a word. Another day when I was returning home in the night, I saw the store*

*owner standing on the street. I got scared and hastily walked towards home. In order to avoid meeting him, I started using another lane to the factory, but in vain. When the man didn't see me for a couple of days, he started following me home. He would stand in front of my house and wait for me.*

*My neighbours started talking about me and commenting on my character. One day I overheard them saying, "How is she leading such a life. Where does she earn her money from? She is definitely a prostitute." I would think how can people talk so ill about others without knowing the other side of the story. Should I bear with all this only because I am a woman? Should I not protest and question? I feel unsafe and insecure because I am living all by myself.*

*One day the landlord called me to the other side of the road and said, "Spend two nights with me. You will be exempted from paying rent for two months. This matter will be between you and me and I will not insist if there is no rent in the coming months. Make me happy and I'll help you." I didn't know what to do. I felt so humiliated and thought suicide was the only way out. When I shared this matter with the house owner's wife, she didn't believe me. Instead, she blamed me and behaved rudely with me; accusing me of leading him on. She said, "Hey you prostitute! I will kick you out of the house. You will have nowhere to go. Where did you get the courage to blame my husband? Be within your limits!" – Anju, a garment worker from Bangladesh*

Women migrant workers have some of the most insecure and exploitative conditions in the region, often made worse by the accommodation available to them in employer-provided factory dorms. Migrant women workers living in employer provided worker hostels are more vulnerable to GBVH. In India, young migrant workers living in worker hostels are subject to extreme exploitation and abuse. In one FGD, respondents suspected that the hostel, which is situated within the factory complex, is frequented by managers and supervisors, and women workers are subjected to rape. They recounted the story of a migrant woman, who they believe was raped and murdered by the supervisors. The body of this young woman was found in the toilet of the factory complex. Workers claim that the contractor who brought her to the factory oversaw her burial, and the family was not even informed about the suspicious circumstances surrounding her death.

Women working in Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in Sri Lanka tend to live in cramped and unhygienic boarding houses where safety in the surrounding area is a concern. Women reported that due to travel restrictions and lockdowns in Sri Lanka, they were confined to boarding houses. Extreme weather conditions exacerbated their situation making housing almost inhabitable

for many of them. Many migrant women who were prevented from traveling to their homes due to lockdowns experienced intense monitoring from factory management in their boarding houses, in which they were required to report their whereabouts, who they met with, shared food with, etc. Women also faced strict measures from landlords who prevented them from leaving; they also reported being regularly harassed and threatened by landlords to pay the rent or be evicted. At the same time, the poor conditions of boarding houses exposed migrant women to greater risk of contracting the virus.

## 5. Crippling Debt, Bodily Neglect and Hunger

Garment workers across Asia suffered around 25% wage theft in 2020. Their pre-pandemic poverty-level wages meant that families had little savings to tide them over during the crisis. They and their families coped by reducing consumption, depleting their savings, and taking on more debt.

AFWA's 2020 *Money Heist* report found that in Bangladesh, 99% of the workers interviewed had taken on debt during the pandemic. In Cambodia, the average size of debt for garment workers increased more than two-fold, from 628 USD pre-pandemic to 1390 USD by the end of the year. In India the average size of debt for garment workers increased more than two-fold in 2020, from 152 USD in the pre-pandemic period to 360 USD by December 2020. In Indonesia at the peak of the pandemic, debt financed 32-35% of consumption. In Sri Lanka, though the levels of monthly debt per worker per month was relatively low at 6 USD in the pre-pandemic period, average debt has risen to around 15-17 USD per month from April, with this level persisting throughout 2020. In Pakistan, as the wages of garment workers dipped by 60-70% in April 2020, the debt taken by workers increased by around 113% for the same period and the share of debt in household consumption increased from 4% in the pre-pandemic period to 59% at the peak of the COVID-19 lockdown period. Women workers from India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka reported that in addition to taking high interest loans, they were forced to sell meagre assets such as jewellery, cooking utensils, and basic household appliances to pay off debts or cover the cost of basic necessities.

Wage theft had devastating, long term consequences on the nutrition and health of workers' families which was confirmed by several studies<sup>3</sup>

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3 Einarsen et al., (eds)., 2003 *Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace: International perspectives in research and practice*. Taylor & Francis.

Giga, S. et al. (2008). 'The costs of workplace bullying', research commissioned by the Dignity at Work Part-



conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Garment workers across countries reported struggling to access enough food for basic survival. The narratives of respondents highlight two underlying issues disproportionately affecting women. One is a gender gap in food and nutrition security, and the other is an unfolding hunger pandemic resulting in malnourishment and adverse health impacts. The coping strategies of women across countries fell into three scenarios: 1) *due to a dip in household food consumption, women skipped meals on a regular basis;* 2) *in order to feed their children and husbands, women reduced their food intake and nutrition quality, and;* 3) *women ate last or ate leftover food.*

Most commonly, women reported removing more expensive food items like meat, eggs, and fruits from their food baskets, as well as other staples like vegetables, grains, and milk. Some women reported refraining from eating until they ensured that the other family members had enough to eat, and only eating what was left after family members had been fed. Women from across countries informed that there were times when they had to skip all three meals a day. This was common among respondents from Sri Lanka who reported that some days they could not even afford a coconut.

*"I can survive on anything, even unhealthy food. But I have to do whatever it takes to provide nutritious food to my children."* – Romjang, a garment worker from a C&A and Marks and Spencer supplier factory in Cambodia.

*"We completely stopped buying milk so that we could save some money. In fact, I would add a lot of water to the gravy I cooked to increase the quantity so that it was enough for us for two meals. That is how we managed."* – Aalia, a garment worker from a Levi's supplier factory in Pakistan

*"The food for husbands and children were always the priority. We can eat whatever is left for us. But we cannot compromise on their protein intake. So, even if not chicken, we try to buy eggs occasionally."* – Farah, a garment worker from a Levi's supplier factory in Indonesia

*"I reduce my consumption for my family. For example, if I buy half kilograms of squid, I only eat one of the squid. I keep the rest for my children and my husband. I even use laundry powder for washing my hair just to save money to buy milk for my son."* – Kanitha, a garment worker from a C&A supplier factory in Cambodia



Industrial centres where export-oriented garments manufacturing takes place is one of the most significant destinations for internal migrants. As a result, rural communities are linked to global supply chains in that remittances from migrant garment workers are crucial to the subsistence of these communities. This was particularly true for women workers in Sri Lanka who were trapped in production hubs and unable to go home or send money. Some reported cutting down on their consumption levels and borrowing money to send remittances to their families, crucial for meeting their daily needs. Juhi, reported that she had to cut down on her food expenses in order to send money to her elderly parents in the village. There were times when she ate only one meal per day, and at other times she skipped meals for several days in order to save money for remittances. At the same time, with government-imposed lockdown restrictions in different parts of the country, the process of sending money was also difficult.

Reduced food consumption had negative impacts on the nutrition and health of women garment workers. For example, women from Pakistan reported suffering from severe body aches, muscle pains, chronic headaches, and backaches due to malnourishment. Further, as a result of eating less, women were more susceptible to contracting the virus due to weakened immune systems. Women across countries also reported that reduced income resulted in foregoing medical treatment and buying medicine.

*“During the lockdown, father stopped taking his medicine for more than month, which the doctor said he should have regularly after his heart surgery. We could not afford it, we worried he would pass away from not having it.” – Usha, a garment worker from a Primark supplier factory in India*

*“Since the lockdown in March 2020, I have been experiencing tremendous stress. I was already suffering from high blood pressure – and during the lockdown, I had to stop taking the medicine as I had no money to buy it. I fainted in May and had to be admitted in the hospital. My brother-in-law paid for the expenses. I was very embarrassed as I had to depend on him. I am constantly worried about paying for my children’s education. I want them to have a good childhood – but I do not know if I can provide for it. My husband offers no support in raising our children.” – Chamini, a garment worker from a Kohls supplier factory in Bengaluru, India*





Women reported challenges with regard to basic reproductive health needs. For example, women in India and Pakistan could not afford to buy sanitary pads and had to find less hygienic means. Similarly, women faced difficulty accessing maternal care.

*One woman in Pakistan explained, “Doctors in public hospitals were overburdened treating COVID patients and we could not afford to go to private clinics. A woman I know took loan on high interest rates for delivery of her daughter in law in a private clinic.”*

*Echoing this in India, one woman from factory supplying to HEMA in Tamil Nadu, India shared, “I did not go for my monthly prenatal check-ups in April and May. We could not afford it. People tell me you need to have nutritious food while you are pregnant, but we could not afford it.”*

## 6. Disintegration of the Family

*“That’s why I would like to say that women should not be forced to work more than the 8 hour working day, the piece rates and salaries should be increased, and women workers should not be forced to work for overtime or in double shifts as they are also responsible for looking after their children as well as the other house chores. The absence of a women in the home has a bad effect on the household and many social issues can develop. In the end, I want to say that we should be paid and compensated for the lockdown period.” – 42-year-old Faiza, a machine operator at a Levi’s supplier factory in Faisalabad, Pakistan*



The basic unit of social organisation and the bedrock of society is the family. This is particularly true in Asian countries. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, untold hardships have been foisted upon the families of garment workers: many have lost loved ones to the disease itself, or to untimely deaths arising from health problems that did not receive medical attention for lack of means, and economic vulnerability has had cascading effects. Women, as the primary caregivers and primary earners of garment workers’ households, felt helpless to ease the extreme pressures on family relationships, and to stop

the erosion of the glue which holds a family together. The demoralisation and a growing sense of disintegration of the family is evident in several spheres.

First, increased job insecurity and work intensity has heightened the level of threat felt by women; forced overtime can result in arguments and domestic abuse; and unemployment leads to being unable to ensure adequate provision for the upkeep of the members of the family. Second, economic harm and the resultant inability to pay for food, rent, and other essentials cause stress and disharmony on a daily basis. Third, the double non-recognition of women's labour time at work in the form of unpaid wages and at home as unpaid primary caregivers (compounded by the gendered division of domestic labour and the lack of institutional support and services) has reaffirmed women's secondary status in society – putting them under tremendous strain.

*“Relationships with family members is also slowly deteriorating as we are constantly thinking of how to make ends meet. We have stopped living life. Sometimes, we do not even want to talk to our children. Most of us want to just keep things to ourselves. We do not feel like talking about it to anyone. This leads us to depression and mental breakdown.”* – Pisey, a garment worker from factory supplying to C&A, Marks and Spencer, and Walmart in Cambodia

A fourth dimension is the geographical distance isolating family members from one another, as was the case with many migrant women who were forced to leave their children in their rural homes. As factories re-opened but creches remained closed, some workers were forced to leave their children in their villages and returned to work. In a world where women continue to be primary caregivers regardless of their role as breadwinners, it is noteworthy that when migrant men move between rural and urban spaces, the family is still held together by women who stay behind and continue to be caregivers. Unfortunately, when women migrate to production hubs as breadwinners, the role of caregiving is often neither filled by other family members nor by care work services which then has implications for children who have to be left behind with no one to take care of them.

*“As the creche is closed, I have left my 4-year-old daughter in the village. There is no one to take care of her here – but my husband's parents [in the village] are also finding it increasingly difficult to manage her alone. I am thinking of moving her to my parents' house. When I left she would not stop crying. I felt very sad but we did not have any options. My husband and I both have to go to work and we can't always depend on my neighbours to take care of her. I am hoping the creche starts soon, so I can bring her back to Bengaluru.”* – Maya, a garment worker from a Nautica, Vans/VF Corp supplier factory in India

*“After COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, the creches are closed. Some have left their children in the village and returned to work. I know a woman in my floor who left her 10-month baby in her village and returned to work. She was telling me that she feels extremely sad as she has not seen her child for 2 months. She is not able to breast feed her child. She lost her husband also recently. She is hardly holding up. There is no one to offer her support. She is constantly falling back on the targets. Workers in her line are doing extra work every day to support her, so that the supervisors won’t scold her.” – Chaarvi, a garment worker in India*

Another participant, Prisha, from a factory in Sri Lanka supplying to Columbia, Levi’s, Adidas, and Reebok shared:

*“I worked in a tea plantation before coming to Katunayake. After 3 months of working, I was laid off due to the pandemic. They did not call me back to work and paid 1 month’s salary. I work as a manpower worker and when there is no work, there is no money. My husband cannot do heavy work because he has a problem in his legs. I take care of my mother, 2 kids and my husband from my salary. My eldest child is with my mother in Kandy, but I have not been able to send money to them for 2 or 3 months now. When I was working, I used to send money twice a month, about 20,000 LKR. I only speak with the child 2 days a week, because I cannot even afford to top up the mobile. My mother does odd jobs when she can to feed the child, but she has leg pains because she is old. There are some vegetables grown in the garden. My sisters also send my mother a bit of money. We have been very sad.”*

Another aspect of geographical distances concerns remittances, as rural communities were cut off from lifelines due to loss of jobs in garment factories. As one participant, Kalani, from a NEXT supplier factory in Sri Lanka shared:

*“I used to send money to my mother for her survival. She is old and cannot fend for herself. But now due to lockdown restrictions, I am not able to go and see her. I also haven’t sent her any money since April 2020. I contracted the virus, was hospitalised, and spent 2.5 months in the boarding place recovering. I earn 24,000 LKR per month. There is nothing to send home. I need to spend at least 2,000 LKR for medicines each week. It really hurts to see that I am not being able to help me mother tide over the crisis. She is managing all by herself. She doesn’t share her pain with me. Knowing what I am going through, she prefers to keep quiet and takes things as they come. Our basic salary is 26,000 LKR, although we have served for 15 years in the same factory. They cut EPF/ETF and the attendance allowance (during lay-off) and I got only about 22,000 LKR that time. I was short of money already. I had arrears to the grocery shop. I was also asked to pay the boarding house rent for the 2.5 months I was without work.”*

Finally, as this chapter has shown, during the pandemic, women garment workers experienced multiple forms of violence and injustice in their personal lives – comprising their families, homes, and bodies – as a direct result of conditions at work. Their realities foreground intensification of their unpaid work, continual erasure of their frequent role as primary earners, lack of respect and support for their care work, lack of a safe home, spiralling debt, and bodily neglect and hunger. Together, these have had withering effects on the psyche of women, whose emotional labour is vital to the family's sense of well-being, particularly for children.

## Conclusion

While the above findings might be understood, at first glance, as merely a symptom of the COVID-19 pandemic, on closer examination of workers' households, urban communities, and rural villages of women workers as sites of violence reveals several linkages and a wider set of consequences that emanate from garment factories.

First, in lockdown scenarios, women's unpaid care and domestic work increased, due to the gendered division of labour exacerbated by school closures, the breakdown of informal care networks, lack of social welfare and public health infrastructure, absence of employer-provided support, and the virus itself. This had many gendered effects, including decrease in leisure time, restricting opportunities to engage in paid labour, increased risk of exposure to the virus, and reinforcing gender inequality.

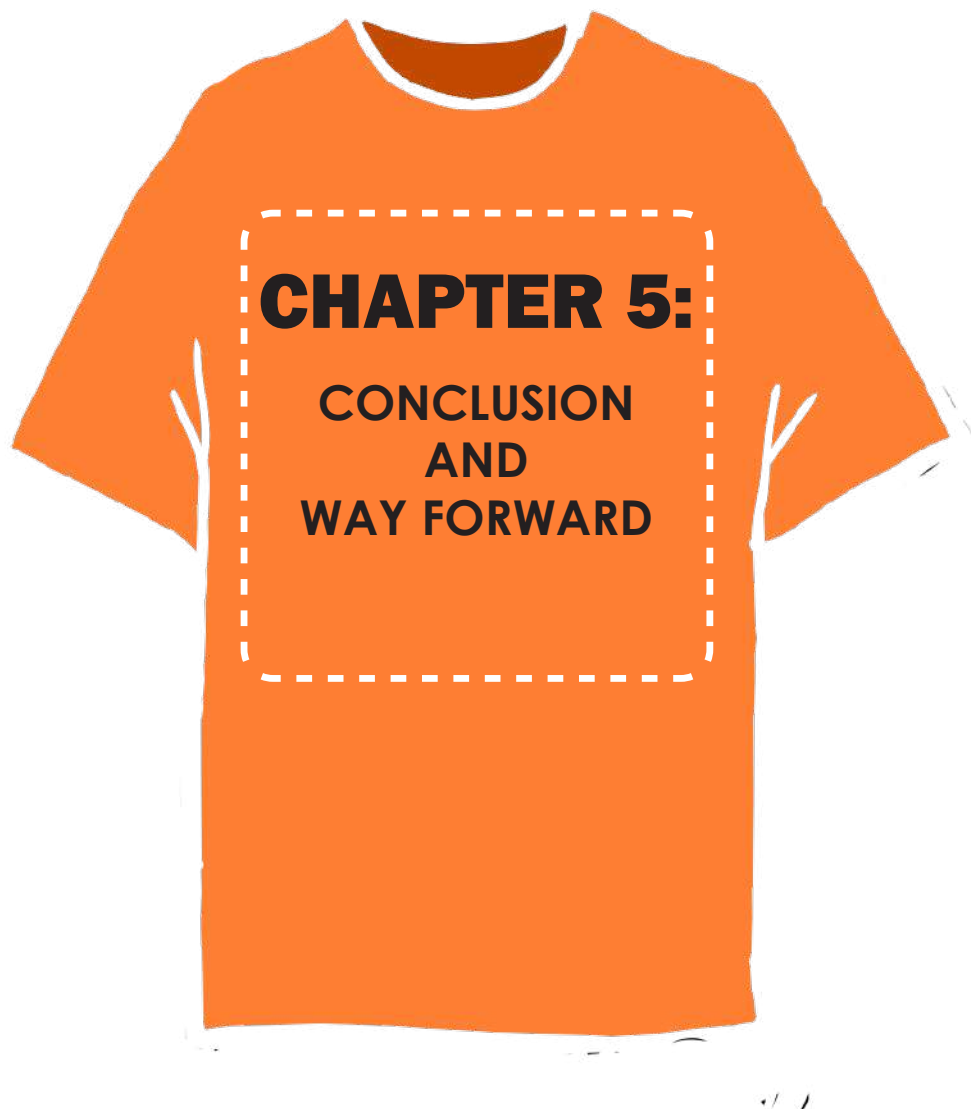
Second, wage theft pushed women deeper into poverty, forcing them to sell meagre assets, take on more debt, and reduce their food consumption resulting in adverse health impacts. Third, economic insecurity led to heightened tensions in the family resulting in increased incidences of domestic abuse, while housing arrangements and living coupled with financial hardship exposed women to violence and harassment in their homes perpetrated by landlords, shopkeepers, and employers. Fourth, the combined effects of economic harm and gendered violence had deep emotional impacts that we describe as embodied trauma, made worse by the evident disintegration of the family as a support system.

Together these findings reveal that the logics of global garment supply chains and the organisation of work in the factories has reverberating effects, penetrating all aspects of garment workers' existence, and extending the violence

of the production process to all arenas of social reproduction along gendered lines. Because women workers' households and communities are embedded in global garment supply chains as essential components of production and reproduction, women workers subsidised global apparel brands during the pandemic-induced recession not only through wage theft, but also through social reproduction of the workforce at great personal expense including their physical and mental wellbeing and the erosion of the social fabric that shapes their lived experiences outside the factory walls.







**T**his report contributes evidence and analysis to the current global reflection underway, on the progress of gender equality in the world. Furthermore, it extends the current discourse on gender-based violence and harassment in global garment supply chains along two axes. It elaborates on – one, the multi-dimensional phenomenon of “economic harm” recognised as GBVH by the ILO’s C190; and two, rippling effects of economic harm beyond factory walls into homes and communities. The report operates through one of the long-standing feminist pillars of analysis – that production and social reproduction spaces are inseparably linked.

“Too little has changed.”<sup>1</sup> It is the reflection of international community who gathered at the Generation Equality Forum 2021 organised by UN Women in Mexico City and Paris reviewing the progress of gender equality since the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. Even though some progress has been made, women remain more vulnerable to poverty<sup>2</sup> and violence against women continues to be widespread.

This report studies the evidence provided by women garment workers across six countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka – during the COVID-19 pandemic and situates the analysis in the context of the logics of the global garment supply chain driven by apparel brands. For decades, the global garment industry has promised to reduce poverty and uplift the status of women but has only delivered poverty-level wages, long working hours, unsafe and unhealthy working condition, job insecurity, and gender-based violence and harassment. As shown in detail in chapters 3 and 4, not only has the condition of women workers remained unchanged despite being part of the globalised economy via employment in global supply chains; their lives worsened during COVID-19 pandemic as a result of patriarchal power relations that are utilised by lead firms for accumulating profits.



The business models of lead firms in global garment supply chains leverage gender inequalities for cheap and flexible production, with gendered violence and abuse informing employment relations within their supplier factories. At the same time, they also shape and reinforce gendered violence beyond the factory – within the spaces of reproduction, that is, the home and community.

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1 UN Women. (2020). Action Coalitions: GLOBAL ACCELERATION PLAN EXECUTIVE SUMMARY. New York: UN Women. Retrieved from <https://forum.generationequality.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/UNW%20-%20GAP%20Report%20-%20EN%20-%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>

2 Munoz Boudet, A. M., Bhatt, A., Azcona, G., Yoo, J., & Beegle, K. (2021). A Global View of Poverty, Gender, and Household Composition. Retrieved from <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35183/A-Global-View-of-Poverty-Gender-and-Household-Composition.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

# 1. Inside and Beyond the Factory Walls

The documentation and analyses of economic harm in chapter 3 points to the core issue of how gender inequality is leveraged by lead firms to a) augment and diversify forms of wage theft leading to a gendered fall in income, b) escalate degradation and devaluation of women's labour through significant intensification of work; c) substantially weaken the already precarious and insecure employment relationships of women workers.

This multi-dimensional economic harm inflicted on women workers leads to a heightened and complex state of trauma which we term the “garment industrial trauma complex.” It comprises increased verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual harassment at and while commuting to work; heightened health risks due to forced intensity of work and deterioration in health and safety standards; and embodied trauma caused by the absorption of such violence in the mind and viscerally in the physical body by the women workers.

Economic harm, in its various forms reverberates through the homes and communities of women workers, as shown in chapter 4. Women workers were overburdened, materially and emotionally, as simultaneously unrecognised primary earners and invisibilised primary caregivers. The weight of these responsibilities was significantly increased by lack of employer-based social protection and diminishing public services and support. Women workers faced crippling debt and hunger as a result of insecure work and wages, which added to their overlaid burden.

The report also shows how women workers do not experience “home” as a safe, secure, and “private” living space as the boundaries between home and workplace become blurred. Non-familial actors such as supervisors easily accessed their homes to extract sexual favours or intimidate; as did landlords and shopkeepers. Workers' stories indicate a sense of disintegration of the family as they encountered repeatedly everyday an inability to meet daily needs, stress and disharmony, increased domestic and care work, and domestic violence.

This, then, is the industry that is expected to contribute to poverty alleviation by creating job opportunities for people without access to education,<sup>3</sup> generating approximately 60 million jobs globally,<sup>4</sup> with the majority of these

3 Fukunishi, T., & Yamagata, T. (2014). 'Introduction: The Dynamism of the Garment Industry in Low-income Countries'. *The Garment Industry in Low-Income Countries*, pp. 1-37. Palgrave Macmillan, London

4 Richetti, M. & De Palma, R. (2020, October 9). Will COVID-19 accelerate the transition to a sustainable fashion industry? United Nations Industrial Development Organization. Retrieved from <https://www.unido.org/>

concentrated in Asia.<sup>5</sup> The Asian countries produce more than 60 percent of world's clothing, with more than 90 percent of the production exported to developed countries.<sup>6</sup> These clothing are manufactured for international brands some of whose owners can be found on the Forbes World's Billionaire List.<sup>7</sup> Our findings reaffirm other research that COVID-19 has exacerbated the exploitation and oppressive situation faced by women workers in global garment supply chains. Women workers subsidised global apparel brands at great personal expense and to the detriment of their homes, families and communities.

## **2. Responses of the Asian Trade Union Movement to Eliminate GBVH in Global Garment Supply Chains**

### **A. Living Wage**

AFWA has argued that the lack of living wages escalated the massive humanitarian crisis brought about by the pandemic as workers who earn poverty level wages do not have the resilience to survive even a few days of wage loss without severe fall in consumption and high levels of indebtedness, causing them to slip into long-term and intergenerational poverty.<sup>8</sup>

In 2009, AFWA developed the only cross-border women-centred living wage for garment workers, called Asia Floor Wage (AFW). We have demanded that brands pay for the gap between the national minimum wage and the AFW. AFW is a family wage which is calculated to be able to support three consumption units (1 consumption unit is equal to 1 adult or 2 children) and it accommodates unpaid domestic and care work. This formulation has become a credible and legitimate benchmark globally. The global garment labour rights movement has launched the Wage Forward Campaign,<sup>9</sup> which demands that

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stories/will-covid-19-accelerate-transition-sustainable-fashion-industry

5 AFWA. (2014). Report on Living Wage in Asia. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/LW-in-Asia-AFWA-CCC.pdf>

6 World Trade Organization. (2018). *World Trade Statistical Review 2018*. Retrieved from [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/statis\\_e/wts2018\\_e/wts2018\\_e.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/wts2018_e/wts2018_e.pdf)

7 Dolan, Kerry A., Wang, Jennifer and Peterson-Withorn, Chase (eds.). (2021). 'Forbes World's Billionaires List: The Richest in 2021'. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/billionaires/>

8 AFWA. (2021). Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist\\_Book\\_Final-compressed.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist_Book_Final-compressed.pdf)

9 Wage Forward. (2020). A New Strategy for Achieving Living Wages in the Global Garment Industry.

brands pay an additional living wage contribution on every order placed, such that it covers the gap between the legally mandated minimum wage and estimated living wage in production countries.

## **B. Women Garment Trade Union Leaders at the Forefront of the C190 Movement**

As garment workers are predominantly women, AFWA since its inception has maintained the centrality of women workers. After developing a women-centred living wage formulation, AFWA along with the trade union movement, labour rights movement and women's right movement, took part in the campaign towards the ratification of the ILO C190. In 2018, as the ILO held its first tripartite International Labour Conference (ILC) meeting on gender-based violence at the workplace, AFWA published its reports on GBVH in global garment supply chains of Walmart, Gap, and H&M. AFWA founded its Women Leadership Committee (WLC) comprised of women trade union leaders. WLC delegates participated in the ILC and celebrated the passage of the C190.

## **C. Women Garment Trade Union Leaders Formulate a GBVH Bargaining Approach**

AFWA formed an interdisciplinary gender and labour team of women trade union leaders, labour rights educators and women rights activists to develop an approach to address GBVH in garment factories. When C190 was adopted in July 2019, AFWA published its Safe Circle Approach to prevent GBVH in garment supplier factories.<sup>10</sup>

The Safe Circle Approach goes beyond the prevalent brand-supported approaches such as exclusively top-down trainings, hotlines, or phone apps. AFWA trade unions have seen little change come from these activities. The Safe Circle Approach takes a holistic view to prevention of GBVH in the factory that includes systematic bottom-up women's leadership development; tiered and structured dialogues between management and women workers for problem-solving and transformation of organisational culture; as well as long-term monitoring and oversight. AFWA has developed Safe Circle into a training

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Retrieved from [https://wageforward.org/files/galleries/Intro\\_living\\_wage\\_campaign.pdf](https://wageforward.org/files/galleries/Intro_living_wage_campaign.pdf)

10 AFWA. (2019). Asia Floor Wage Alliance's Step-by-step Approach to Prevent Gender Based Violence at Production Lines in Garment Supplier Factories in Asia, pp 8. Retrieved from <https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/AFWA-Step-by-Step-approach-to-Prevent-GBV-May-2019.pdf>



curriculum which was published in 2020 and is now being rolled out by AFWA and WLC members in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka, soon to be expanded to Bangladesh and Pakistan.

## **D. Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining**

Trade unions and women's leadership are essential for the prevention and elimination of GBVH at the workplace. AFWA supports its union partners at various levels in identifying, voicing and publicising GBVH; in elevating women workers' issues into collective bargaining efforts; and in requiring brands and suppliers to ensure freedom of association and play an active role in creating a GBVH free workplace.

## **E. Developing the Joint Employer Liability Legal Strategy**

AFWA has worked with trade unions to develop the joint employer liability legal strategy<sup>11</sup> – aimed at both reversing the economic harm inflicted on women workers during the pandemic by recovering their lost wages; as well as at addressing governance gaps within global garment supply chains which allow brands to evade legal liability for their actions, including the creation of conditions for GBVH in their supplier factories through harmful purchasing practices.

It interprets and extends labour protective legislations across Asian production countries to provide trade unions the opportunity to hold brands legally liable, along with their suppliers, as joint employers of workers in their supply chains. At present, national jurisdictions in six Asian countries are considering this demand made by workers and trade unions – signalling the possibility to redefine the legal paradigm within global garment supply chains. It has provided a pathway for workers, trade unions and governments of production countries to challenge structural inequalities within global garment supply chains that allow brands to make unilateral decisions that lead to harmful employment practices, and insecure work and wages within their supplier factories.

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11 AFWA. (2021, July). Legal Brief: Joint Employer Liability Legal Strategy: Holding Global Apparel Brands Legally Liable for Labour Rights Violations in their Supply Chains in Asia. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/JOINT-EMPLOYER\\_9-JULI\\_FINAL.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/JOINT-EMPLOYER_9-JULI_FINAL.pdf)

### 3. Way Forward

#### A. Human Rights Due Diligence

The need to address poor regulation of global supply chains by establishing corporate accountability for widespread labour and human rights violations facing workers in the global South has become a priority within global discourse on business and human rights. This urgency has been triggered by the growing recognition that the voluntary codes of conduct of brands, implemented through social auditing mechanisms have failed to improve the conditions of supply chain workers. Rather, it has enabled brands to hide behind certifications by third party auditing firms that negligently report compliance.<sup>12 13</sup> Rather than rely on self-regulation by brands, we need mandatory mechanisms through which brands are bound to implementing human rights due diligence as outlined by the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Such mechanisms must operate within the understanding that ensuring human rights due diligence covers and is accessible to all workers.



Brands must be mandated to remediate GBVH across their supply chains by conducting specific risk assessments, with liability to address them.<sup>14</sup> This must be incorporated into the contracts for manufacturing between the brands and suppliers and must operate to overcome the gaps in national legislations within production countries.

Brands must make concrete commitments to understanding and addressing risk factors for GBVH across their supply chains through a ground-

12 AFWA. (2021). Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist\\_Book\\_Final-compressed.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist_Book_Final-compressed.pdf)

13 AFWA. (2021). Money Heist: COVID-19 Wage Theft in Global Garment Supply Chains. Retrieved from [https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist\\_Book\\_Final-compressed.pdf](https://asia.floorwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Money-Heist_Book_Final-compressed.pdf)

14 GLJ-ILRF. (2020). Advancing Gender Justice on Asian Fast Fashion Supply Chains Post COVID-19: Learning from ILO's Convention 190 on its First Anniversary. Retrieved from <https://globallaborjustice.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Advancing-Gender-Justice-on-Asian-Fast-Fashion-Supply-Chains-Post-COVID-19-Guidance-from-ILO%E2%80%99s-Convention-190-on-its-First-Anniversary-single-page.pdf>

up approach that upholds respect for freedom of association and is led by workers and trade unions. They must be mandated to identify risk factors across their supply chains in relation to their business models and remedy them in consultation with trade unions. In particular, economic harm inflicted on women workers arising from the purchasing practices of brands must be identified as a major risk factor for GBVH.

Brands must invest in grievance mechanisms at the factory level that are co-created with and accessible to women workers. This is possible when grievance mechanisms are designed and implemented in collaboration with trade unions, such that it addresses the challenges such as retaliation for registering complaints, allows workers to be represented by organisations of their choosing, ensures that workers are educated on how to access these mechanisms, and are placed in charge of monitoring its implementation.

## **B. Compensating for the Gaps in Employer-Based Social Protection and Services in Production Countries**

The invisibilisation of women workers as primary caregivers has resulted in the erosion of public provisioning, infrastructure and social protection policies driven by fiscal austerity measures. This non-recognition of women's role in social reproduction and its relationship to their employment arrangements and working conditions was (and continues to be) utilised by brands to evade or withdraw provisioning of employer-based support while women workers were overburdened with a new set of pressures to ensure the renewal and reproduction of their households, and the labour force at large, during the pandemic.

Brands must not hide behind the jurisdictional and governance weaknesses in production countries such that they utilise and reinforce patriarchal social norms. Rather, as major global brands, they must comply with the international normative frameworks laid out by the OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises, UNGPs and the ILO standards.

This means that brands must compensate for gaps in laws and policies in production countries with regard to employer-based social protection by setting and implementing standards for supporting women workers in their supplier factories; and these standards must be incorporated within their manufacturing contracts with suppliers. Additionally, brands must collaborate with workers and trade unions to identify and overcome gaps in employer-based social protection. Rather than pushing the costs of employer-based

support to their suppliers, brands must commit to sharing costs of providing support to women workers in their supply chains.

As this report has shown, the pandemic and the resultant recession accelerated economic harm in its various forms. If there is any lesson to be drawn from the present crisis and the cyclical nature of crisis under capitalism, it is that such issues will not be solved by economic recovery and job creation. Social benefits should not be tied to lifelong wage work and unemployed workers must be able to cover their cost of reproduction. AFWA's *Money Heist* report pointed out the need for a global architecture for social protection and the emerging consensus for a New Social Contract that has social protection against employment loss at its core. International civil society has called for a Global Fund for Social Protection<sup>15</sup> funded by governments and the global garment labour movement has called for a complimentary Severance Guarantee<sup>16</sup> Fund financed by global brands and retailers.

### **C. Wage Forward:<sup>17</sup> Towards Enforceable Wage Agreements**

Women workers' access to a guaranteed and protected living wage is central to addressing widespread GBVH, in the form of economic harm, within and beyond garment factories catering to global garment supply chains. While brands promise adequate wages, including living wages, in their voluntary codes of conduct, this goal has remained unattainable due to the lack of binding mechanisms for its implementation.



The Wage Forward Campaign<sup>18</sup> launched by the global garment labour movement demands that brands must sign on to an Enforceable Wage Agreement (EWA), a global, legally binding agreement, negotiated and signed by trade unions, international brands and retailers to guarantee a living wage to garment workers. Through this agreement brands will make legally binding commitments to pay an additional contribution in the form of a 25% premium on every order placed that will make up for the gap between legally mandated

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15 Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (GCSPF). (2020). Civil Society Call for a Global Fund for Social Protection to respond to the COVID-19 crisis and to build a better future. Retrieved from [http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-07CivilSocietyCallGlobalFundSocialProtection\\_EN.pdf](http://www.socialprotectionfloorscoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-07CivilSocietyCallGlobalFundSocialProtection_EN.pdf)

16 Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC). (2020). COVID-19 wage assurance & severance guarantee fund. Retrieved from <https://cleanclothes.org/campaigns/pay-your-workers/covid-19-wage-assurance>

17 Wage Forward. (2020). A New Strategy for Achieving Living Wages in the Global Garment Industry. Retrieved from [https://wageforward.org/files/galleries/Intro\\_living\\_wage\\_campaign.pdf](https://wageforward.org/files/galleries/Intro_living_wage_campaign.pdf)

18 Ibid.

minimum wages and estimated living wages in production countries. This agreement will replace the voluntary codes of conduct of brands with a union-driven and worker monitored process for the payment of living wages.

#### **D. Implementation of Safe Circle Approach through Brand Agreements**

Global apparel brands must take responsibility and action to eliminate GBVH in their supply chains. Corporate social responsibility divisions of brands have developed various workplace programmes to address GBVH in their supplier factories; however, they have failed to make any meaningful changes.

We know from experience that such programmes cannot accomplish the transformation in organisational culture that is required to end GBVH in garment factories. The AFWA-WLC's Safe Circle Approach is a transformative approach. Global brands must, together with their suppliers and AFWA's Women's Leadership Committee, implement the "Safe Circle Approach" in their supply chains to catalyse transformational interventions in garment global supply chains.







# **A STITCH IN TIME SAVED NONE:**

**How Fashion Brands Fueled  
Violence in the Factory and Beyond**