

# Labour Movement Ecosystems and Gendered Bargaining: Learning from agreements to prevent gender-based violence and harassment in Asian garment supply chains

*Anannya Bhattacharjee*

## Abstract

This article highlights two global supply chain agreements to tackle gender-based violence and harassment in the garment industry—the Dindigul Agreement to Eliminate Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in India (2022), and the Central Java Agreement for Gender Justice in Indonesia (2025). The article is grounded in my experience negotiating and implementing both agreements. Drawing on and contributing to feminist theoretical advances in industrial relations, I argue that effective anti-GBVH supply chain agreements in the garment industry must be founded in freedom of association and embedded within *labour movement ecosystems*. I introduce the concept of *labour movement ecosystem* as a framework for analysing labour movement organisations and interrelationships, and the resulting impact and interactions within global supply chains, leading up to the signing and implementation of such agreements.

**Keywords:** labour movement ecosystems, gender-based violence and harassment, Dindigul Agreement, Central Java Agreement, garment industry, global supply chains, freedom of association, collective bargaining, industrial relations

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## Introduction

Addressing gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in garment global supply chains requires a transformative reworking of traditional unionism and industrial relations theory and practice. Both these transformations require *labour movement ecosystems*, a concept that I introduce and elaborate in this essay through the analysis of two global supply chain agreements.

The Dindigul Agreement to Eliminate Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in India, signed in 2022, and the Central Java Agreement for Gender Justice in Indonesia, signed and publicly announced in 2024-2025, two anti-GBVH global supply chain agreements in the garment industry, are discussed in this essay.<sup>1</sup> Recent scholarship shows that the Dindigul Agreement (DA) provides a powerful methodology, based in freedom of association, for the remediation and prevention of GBVH in garment factories.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, when women workers trust a workplace's genuine commitment to prevent GBVH, other workplace issues get addressed as well and factories benefit from reduced attrition and increased productivity.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the contents of the agreements, it is important to study ecosystems and processes that surround them. The article begins by outlining how gender and violence are pervasive aspects of global garment supply chains. It then defines the term *labour movement ecosystem* and lays out in some detail how the DA and the Central Java Agreement (CJA) are institutional innovations in the labour movement. This is followed by a reflection on how the learnings from the agreements can revitalise the labour movement and its practices, and a conclusion.

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<sup>1</sup> Since there have been three assessment reports of the impact of the Dindigul Agreement, the article focuses on it more than the Central Java Agreement, which is newer. However, the implications can be extended to it too.

<sup>2</sup> J Fudge and G LeBaron, 'Regulatory Design and Interactions in Worker-driven Social Responsibility Initiatives: The Dindigul Agreement', *International Labour Review*, vol. 163, issue 4, 2024, pp. 575–598, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12440>.

<sup>3</sup> Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), and Global Labor Justice-International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF), *Dindigul Agreement: Year 1 Progress Report*, 2023; P Jerrentrup and S Kuruvilla, *Dindigul Agreement to Eliminate Gender-based Violence and Harassment: Year 2 Progress Report*, Global Labor Institute, 2024; S Kuruvilla, *The Dindigul Agreement to End Gender-based Violence and Harassment: Has it worked?*, Global Labor Institute, 2025.

## Gender and Violence in Global Garment Supply Chains

In the twentieth century post-colonial world, while ‘developing’ countries focused on advancing industrialisation, ‘developed’ countries focused on maintaining advantages secured during the welfare state era. The ‘Global North’ multinationals discovered the gains of outsourcing to the cheaper ‘Global South’, leading to global capital mobility radically re-structuring corporate and financial practices.<sup>4</sup> This paradigm of global outsourcing from the North and export-led industrialisation in the South resulted in global supply chains (global production networks).

Taking advantage of a brand’s exclusive and dual access to consumers in high-income home regions and to cheap labour in low-income production regions, apparel brands from the United States and Europe established their global garment supply chains.<sup>5</sup> By suppressing retail prices and production costs, fashion brands encouraged consumers to buy often and more while underpaying production workers and violating their freedom of association.<sup>6</sup> Presently, Asia is the largest garment production region, and the garment industry is one of the top employers.<sup>7</sup>

While the apparel industry has created millions of jobs, especially for women, in the Global South, instead of lives of dignity and decency most garment workers endure penury and debt.<sup>8</sup> As Asian governments and supplier companies compete

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<sup>4</sup> I use ‘developing’ and ‘developed’ as historical references, while noting their contestations by scholars. See, for example, W Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications and Tanzanian Publishing House, London and Dar-Es-Salaam, 1973. I use more frequently ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’—terms that gained currency later.

<sup>5</sup> A Bhattacharjee and A Roy, ‘Bargaining in the Global Commodity Chain: The Asia Floor Wage Alliance’, in K van der Pijl (ed.), *Handbook of the International Political Economy of Production*, Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, 2015; A Bhattacharjee and A Roy, ‘Bargaining in Garment GVCs: The Asia Floor Wage’, in D Nathan, M Tewari, and S Sarkar (eds.), *Labour in Global Value Chains in Asia*, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 78–93, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316217382.006>.

<sup>6</sup> D Nathan *et al.*, *Reverse Subsidies in Global Monopsony Capitalism. Gender, labour, and environmental injustice in garment value chains*, Cambridge University Press, 2022; M Anner, ‘Squeezing Workers’ Rights in Global Supply Chains: Purchasing practices in the Bangladesh garment export sector in comparative perspective’, *Review of International Political Economy*, vol. 27, issue 2, 2020, pp. 320–347, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1625426>.

<sup>7</sup> ILO, ‘Asia still “garment factory of the world” yet faces numerous challenges as industry evolves’, International Labour Organization, June 2022, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/asia-still-garment-factory-world-yet-faces-numerous-challenges-industry>.

<sup>8</sup> S Barrientos, *Gender and Work in Global Value Chains: Capturing the gains?*, Cambridge

for global brands' cost-suppressive manufacturing contracts, supplier factories pass on their financial deficit to workers through poverty wages, coercive supervisory and managerial practices, and retaliation against unions.<sup>9</sup> Governments respond to brands' imposed race to the bottom through competitive de-regulation and weakening of labour laws and standards.<sup>10</sup> The poor quality of these jobs and the fragility of workers' survival, starkly exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic, demonstrate the exploitative structure of global supply chains.<sup>11</sup>

The contracting practices imposed by fashion brands on their suppliers are sustained by suppliers' coercive industrial relations, exemplified by GBVH against the predominantly female workforce, which enable suppliers to meet tight production deadlines. GBVH-driven supervisory practices include physical, sexual, and mental abuse, use of sexual favours, and punitive restrictive access to toilets and drinking water (which particularly torment pregnant or menstruating women).<sup>12</sup> The manufacturing contracts between brands and suppliers shape the employment contracts between suppliers and production workers.<sup>13</sup> In short, brands in global garment supply chains determine labour relations in supplier factories.

Labour relations in garment supply chains leverage social relations in the labour market, further enabling coercive control by having management and supervisors from socially dominant groups supervise shopfloor workers recruited from vulnerable communities.<sup>14</sup> In an industry that primarily employs women as sewing machine operators, men are typically supervisors and machinists (who can wield power by refusing to repair a woman's machine without favours). Patriarchal power

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Gender-Based Violence in Asian Garment Supply Chains', in S Saxena (ed.), *Labor, Global Supply Chains, and the Garment Industry in South Asia: Bangladesh after Rana Plaza*, Routledge, New York, 2020; N Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*, Verso, London, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Nathan *et al.*

<sup>10</sup> AFWA, *Garment Workers Under Threat from Labour Deregulation in Asia*, AFWA, 2021.

<sup>11</sup> AFWA, *Money Heist: Covid-19 wage theft in global garment supply chains*, AFWA, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> AFWA *et al.*, *Gender Based Violence in the H&M Garment Supply Chain*, AFWA, 2018; AFWA *et al.*, *Gender Based Violence in the Walmart Garment Supply Chain*, AFWA, 2018; AFWA *et al.*, *Gender Based Violence in the GAP Garment Supply Chain*, AFWA, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> AFWA, *Joint Employer Liability Legal Strategy. Holding global apparel brands legally liable for labour rights violations in their supply chains in Asia*, Legal Brief, 2021; GLJ, AFWA, and Portland JWJ, *Complaint to the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries: Wage and employment violations in the global supply chains on Nike Inc.*, 29 May 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Burawoy observes: 'Capitalism no longer homogenizes identity (if it ever did), but exploits and recreates heterogeneities, differences, whether ethnic, racial, or gender.' M Burawoy, 'Marxism after Communism', *Theory and Society*, vol. 29, no. 2, 2000, pp. 151–174, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007065023741>.

dynamics involving GBVH-based supervisory practices amplify management control over women. This GBVH on the shop floor is often bolstered by male company drivers during commutes, domestic violence in the home, and company surveillance in the community.

The contracting practices of brands lead to ‘industrial and factory-level practices that drive informal employment’, which, in turn, undermine laws and standards for millions of women workers, and increases the risk of GBVH.<sup>15</sup> The twin phenomena of brand-driven global supply chains and intentional workforce recruitment that leverages oppressive social relations (such as patriarchy) results in institutionalisation and normalisation of oppressive gendered industrial relations practices.

## Labour Movement Ecosystems: Beyond traditional unionism

In the context of the two agreements discussed in this essay, I argue that effective anti-GBVH supply chain agreements in the garment industry must be grounded in freedom of association and embedded within *labour movement ecosystems*. Both agreements are the products of relatively new (as in, from the last few decades) phenomena in labour movements, exemplified in the global garment industry. I introduce the term *labour movement ecosystems* to refer to these phenomena.

The term *labour movement ecosystems* captures the evolution of constellations of diverse labour and allied organisations, and their collaborative practices within an intersectional frame.

This essay provides a multi-scalar analysis of *labour movement ecosystems* in global supply chains, which includes unions, labour and human rights organisations and alliances, and transnational labour allies. Such ecosystems are critical to the building of necessary movement power for achieving these agreements in the context of garment supply chains.

These *labour movement ecosystems* point the way for meaningful tackling of GBVH in the garment industry. The two agreements show that GBVH prevention in garment global supply chains requires two transformations to which *labour movement ecosystems* contribute: an understanding of the labour movement that goes beyond traditional unionism and the development and deployment of intersectional perspectives.

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<sup>15</sup> AFWA, *Threaded Insecurity: The spectrum of informality in garment supply chains*, AFWA, 2024.

I use the term *labour movement ecosystem* to draw attention to and provide insights into the ecosystems of manifold labour movements and allied institutions that interact and collaborate, are responsive to workers' complex inter-connected realities, and have a shared goal of strengthening worker and union power in the context of global industry dynamics and economic structures. Such ecosystems have the potential to build a refreshed, expansive, and inclusive labour movement that can also become a force for social movements beyond the workplace.<sup>16</sup>

## The Dindigul and Central Java Agreements as Institutional Innovation

In the context of globalised capitalism, employment relations at the enterprise level cannot be understood in isolation from business and production strategies and methods of corporate governance.<sup>17</sup> The challenge is 'to take into account the increasing importance of multinational corporations and supply chains that extend beyond national boundaries and that challenge the authority of international institutions to provide regulatory frameworks'.<sup>18</sup> In the absence of effective international regulatory frameworks, brands have nurtured an unprecedented multi-billion dollar industry of audit firms, consultancies, and public relations to project their compliance with laws and standards, despite repeated findings that these voluntary arrangements do not resolve the problem.<sup>19</sup> For this reason, labour-led enforceable supply chain agreements, including the Bangladesh Accord,<sup>20</sup> the Lesotho Agreement,<sup>21</sup> and the Dindigul and Central Java agreements, discussed herein, are critically important and worthy of study.

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<sup>16</sup> Erickson and Kuruvilla state, 'The extent and nature of system "transformation" cannot be evaluated by considering the changes in particular institutions (such as bargaining structure) in isolation, or without consideration of the *process* driving these changes.' C L Erickson and S Kuruvilla, 'Industrial Relations System Transformation', *ILR Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1998, pp. 3–21, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2525240>.

<sup>17</sup> R D Lansbury, 'Varieties of Transformation in Industrial Relations: An international perspective', *ILR Review*, vol. 69, no. 5, 2016, pp. 1288–1294.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> G LeBaron, *Combatting Modern Slavery: Why labour governance is failing and what we can do about it*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> J Donaghey and J Reinecke, 'When Industrial Democracy Meets Corporate Social Responsibility: A comparison of the Bangladesh Accord and Alliance as responses to the Rana Plaza disaster', *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, vol. 56, issue 1, 2018, pp. 14–42, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjir.12242>.

<sup>21</sup> Workers' Rights Watch, *Agreements to Eliminate Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in Lesotho*, WRW, 2023.

Although the DA and the CJA are signed at a particular moment in time, crystallising what has occurred and what needs to occur going forward, the labour movement ecosystems out of which these agreements emerged extend beyond that moment. The labour movement ecosystem within which these agreements are won, implemented, and replicated are ‘multi-scalar’ in keeping with the multi-scalar industrial relations that cut across ‘numerous levels and locations in a given GVC [global value chain], ranging from the workplace to the transnational, and is dependent on the leveraging of structural labour power’.<sup>22</sup>

The DA and CJA illustrate the need for new bargaining structures fuelled by labour movement ecosystems characterised by multi-level, multifarious, and multi-organisational cooperation and coordination. In both cases, the labour movement ecosystems represent production workers’ needs by supporting diverse and emergent modes of unionism and new labour leaders. They build Global South, labour-led, multi-level bottom-up bargaining in global supply chains along with North-South partnerships based on reciprocity and integrity.

## Methodology

I write this essay as a feminist and migrant rights activist, a labour organiser and union leader across different industries (including the garment industry), a founding member and International Coordinator of the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), an Asia-based labour alliance in eight production countries and party to both agreements, and as someone who has helped develop and implement both agreements. I have had opportunities to reflect on the diverse compositions of labour movement ecosystems and what it takes for unions to win such agreements.

My positionality as first a participant and an independent scholar reflecting on the implications of the Dindigul and Central Java agreements provides a unique vantage point for understanding the internal dynamics, tensions, and innovations within these labour movement ecosystems. The analysis is based on triangulating data and being grounded in documentation, reflection, and peer review within the broader movement over a period of time. My methods include engaged participant observation and analysis of documentation concerning the negotiation and implementation of the agreements.

In my leadership role within AFWA, I have strategised and worked with AFWA’s member unions and labour organisations, such as AFWA’s strategic ally Global

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<sup>22</sup> E. Josserand and S. Kaine, ‘Labour Standards in Global Value Chains: Disentangling workers’ voice, vicarious voice, power relations, and regulation’, *Relations Industrielles/Industrial Relations*, vol. 71, no. 4, 2016, pp. 741–767, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038530AR>.

Labor Justice (GLJ), and broader allies such as the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), both of whom are relevant to the agreements under discussion. The documents relating to the two agreements were produced by AFWA and other signatories to both agreements and include meeting minutes, training curricula, grievance data, implementation reports, and communication with brands and suppliers.

## AFWA and Anti-GBVH Supply Chain Agreements as Institutional Innovation

AFWA emerged as the first Global South-led labour alliance for garment unions across production countries in Asia, where most of the world's clothing is manufactured.<sup>23</sup> AFWA has built a union-led alliance in Asia from a wide spectrum of political traditions<sup>24</sup> within a shared framework—bringing together emerging, established, and independent unions, alongside aggregating and supporting labour rights organisations.

Since apparel brands base their sourcing decisions on regional rather than national considerations, AFWA builds trade union unity through its member unions in Asia's production countries to project globally a regional labour voice with unified demands for bargaining. AFWA's goal has been to build the broadest union alliance possible to demonstrate unity and power nationally and regionally, and facilitate diversity of experience, history, and leadership. It is important to note that from the time of its inception, AFWA made a political decision to not register as an International NGO. AFWA is a representative alliance of member garment unions expressed through its structures, bargaining bodies, and decision-making.

In 2019, AFWA's Women's Leadership Committee (WLC)<sup>25</sup> began dialogues with fashion brands on GBVH prevention after AFWA's publications demonstrated

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<sup>23</sup> Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) is an Asia-based labour-led international alliance of unions and labour rights organisations. AFWA works across eight Asian production countries and has allied partners in Europe and US. Founded in 2007, AFWA has established precedents for the Asian and global labour movement and changed the terms of global labour organising, representation, and bargaining at an industrial level in the garment industry. A women-centred approach has been at the core of AFWA's work on living wages, GBVH, freedom of association, and global supply chain accountability.

<sup>24</sup> Political traditions across Cold War divisions, affiliations across the International Trade Union Congress (ITUC) and the World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU); and independent unions.

<sup>25</sup> AFWA's Women's Leadership Committee is composed of women garment trade union leaders from the production countries.

GBVH in supply chains, coinciding with the first International Labour Conference on violence at work in 2018.<sup>26</sup> The WLC members, with AFWA support, collected evidence to show that brands' factory training programmes and voluntary initiatives achieved little by way of GBVH prevention and remediation. Most workers were unaware of such trainings, faced management disapproval for their attendance, and those who attended did not find lasting impact.

It was then that AFWA, with the WLC, began to pursue an outcome-driven bargaining methodology for a remediation and prevention system at the workplace and in the industry, based on a strategic analysis of GBVH in garment factories. The DA and the CJA are based on this methodology of GBVH prevention and remediation called the 'Safe Circle Approach' which prescribes multi-level grievance mechanisms from the shop floor to the factory-level. It also includes the concept of 'Escalation Ladder', which is based on the understanding that GBVH in the workplace escalates in intensity over time and it brings together the learnings of the women's movement and the labour movement.<sup>27</sup>

## Key Elements of the Dindigul Agreement (India) and Central Java Agreement (Indonesia)

The Dindigul Agreement (DA) could not have been won and sustained without the labour movement ecosystem comprising the Tamil Nadu Textile Common Labour Union (TTCU), AFWA, and GLJ, spanning local, regional, and global levels. The three organisations were already in a collaborative relationship prior to the tragedy—the murder of Jeyasre Kathiravel, a 21-year-old Dalit woman worker at Natchi Apparel, by her supervisor<sup>28</sup>—that led to the agreement. In addition, during the implementation of the agreement, a key Tamil Nadu-based women's organisation, Vaanam, became part of the ecosystem and provided invaluable trainings, capacity building, investigative support for GBVH cases, and counselling for local and migrant workers and management. Labour movement ecosystems have the potential for building cross-movement synergies.

<sup>26</sup> AFWA *et al.*, *Gender Based Violence in the H&M Garment Supply Chain*; AFWA *et al.*, *Gender Based Violence in the Walmart Garment Supply Chain*; AFWA *et al.*, *Gender Based Violence in the GAP Garment Supply Chain*.

<sup>27</sup> AFWA, *AFWA's Step-by-Step Approach to Prevent Gender-Based Violence*, AFWA, 2019. These agreements also incorporate learnings from the Lesotho Agreement won in 2019.

<sup>28</sup> A Kelly, 'Worker at H&M supply factory was killed after months of harassment, claims family', *The Guardian*, 1 February 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/01/worker-at-hm-supply-factory-was-killed-after-months-of-harassment-claims-family>.

The DA is composed of two interlocking agreements covering three levels of industrial relations in the global garment supply chain. One agreement is between the union and management (TTCU and Eastman Exports) witnessed by regional and global labour organisations (AFWA and GLJ). The other is a global agreement between all labour parties (TTCU, AFWA, GLJ), global brands (H&M, Gap, PVH), and supplier (Eastman).

Many of the workers in the Natchi Apparel factories (the set of Eastman factories covered by the DA) are Dalit and/or migrant workers from Eastern India. Therefore, the DA addresses the intersection of gender, caste, and migration. TTCU is a women-led majority Dalit union representing the local factory garment workers in the Agreement. TTCU is deeply rooted in the local community, drawing its strength and legitimacy from long-standing relationships with women workers and their families. It is part of the local union-management dialogue, the Implementation Committee and the Oversight Committee, which are structures in the Agreement. AFWA's role in the Agreement is both at the local and regional levels. AFWA-India (National Committee of AFWA in India), of which TTCU had already been a member, represents garment unions in India. AFWA-India is part of the Implementation Committee and is represented by a national trade union leader. AFWA-Regional represents garment unions regionally through its National Committees of member unions across production countries. AFWA-Regional is part of the Oversight Committee. GLJ, a US-based NGO, is a strategy hub supporting transnational collaboration among worker and migrant organisations to expand labour rights. It is a member of the Oversight Committee.

Prior to the agreement, there were significant freedom of association (FOA) violations at the covered factories such as management ban on union access to factories and retaliation against union members. Leading up to the demand for an agreement, TTCU and AFWA worked closely on navigating and resolving multiple local impediments and attacks mounted by local actors to block the negotiations. TTCU's credibility in the community was crucial in overcoming challenges. During the later stages of the DA negotiations, TTCU, AFWA, and GLJ negotiated TTCU's first formal visit to the factory where TTCU leadership and management made a joint announcement that workers had FOA rights and that management would respect them. It is DA, through its structures and practices, that seeded, established, and facilitated labour-management dialogue and by the third year, it began to function with sufficient maturity. As Thiviyarakini, President of TTCU, said in 2023: "The agreement has created a space of social dialogue between union and management. This has enabled us to help both workers and management improve working conditions as well as efficiency of production."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> AFWA, TTCU, and GLJ-ILRF, 2023.

The DA provides a multi-scalar governance structure and grievance mechanism encompassing three levels of industrial relations.<sup>30</sup> The bottom is the shopfloor, where worker shopfloor monitors (SFMs) (one shopfloor worker for every twenty-five workers) are selected and trained by TTCU with support from AFWA, trainers, and independent women's rights experts, as first responders who identify and respond to GBVH occurring on production lines. The middle level comprises the weekly union-management dialogue between TTCU and the local factory management; and the regularly convened Implementation Committee (IC). The IC brings together TTCU, AFWA-India, Eastman's corporate leadership, and Natchi management—an ecosystem of actors who, together, helped shape the industrial relations mechanism of the DA. Given the long history of strain between Eastman and TTCU, moving towards constructive dialogue required time and careful support. The national union leader representing AFWA-India on the IC, with decades of experience in union-management relations, contributed to fostering the trust and confidence that made this gradual shift possible. The top level is the Oversight Committee of brands, labour, and supplier, where labour is represented at the local (TTCU), regional (AFWA), and global (GLJ) levels that allow for multi-layered roles.

These agreement structures resonate with Russell Lansbury's identification of three levels of industrial relations activity: the bottom, 'the workplace level, [that] involves worker-supervisor relations on a daily basis', a middle functional level where agreements are negotiated and administered, and a top level which he identifies as 'the strategic level, [that] involves both managerial and union strategies and structures' which have long-term influence on how collective negotiations between the parties are shaped.<sup>31</sup> The structures also reflect the brand-driven global supply chain split but conjoined governance mechanism: the Oversight Committee ensures overall governance enforcement while the Implementation Committee, union-management dialogue, and worker SFMs are focused on the day-to-day execution of the agreement at the workplace levels.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, the DA approach, based on AFWA's Safe Circle approach to combatting GBVH, is grounded in three key elements. The first is FOA and the importance of engaging a union and providing a non-retaliatory workplace for workers to join a union. The second is developing the agency and collective leadership of worker SFMs (women union members and not supervisors), as first-level responders due to their proximity to the daily occurrences of GBVH. The third is an understanding of GBVH as a heterogeneous phenomenon ranging from low-

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<sup>30</sup> For a detailed discussion of the governance structure and grievance and remediation mechanisms, see Fudge and LeBaron and Jerruntrup and Kuruvilla.

<sup>31</sup> Lansbury.

<sup>32</sup> The DA also provides for an independent DA Programme, based locally, to support the implementation.

intensity harassment to death or murder, and the importance of timely resolution of lower-intensity harassment to prevent escalation to higher levels of violence.<sup>33</sup> As Jeeva, General Secretary of TTCU in 2023 pointed out, ‘A lot of times, big issues arise when the small misunderstandings between management members and workers are not resolved immediately. This is what we try to address through our weekly meetings with management.’<sup>34</sup>

The Central Java Agreement (CJA) has significantly more parties and is signed between four Indonesian unions,<sup>35</sup> regional and global labour organisations (AFWA, WRC, and GLJ) and Fanatics (including both Fanatics’ own products and, under licence, Nike branded apparel) and Korean-owned supplier company Ontide. The structures and the programme are more complex due to increased number of parties and licensing agreements of WRC-affiliated universities, but overall, they too cover the three levels of industrial relations and are attentive to the three key concepts described above. CJA covers two factories, one with one union, and the other with three unions representing the workers.

Whereas in Dindigul, the Agreement helped to establish industrial relations (as described above), in CJA, the unions at the two factories already had collective bargaining agreements (CBA). It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse the interactions between CBAs and anti-GBVH supply chain agreements (also called enforceable brand agreements—EBAs); however, the necessity of an anti-GBVH supply chain agreement (CJA) embedded in labour movement ecosystems to complement the local CBA, is worthy of note. The CJA also has worker shopfloor monitors (called Satgas in Bahasa) and the GBVH Elimination Committee, which is the main local implementation body for CJA in Indonesia and has a majority of women members.

The CJA could not have been won and implemented without the labour movement ecosystem comprising Indonesian unions, AFWA, WRC, and GLJ, all of whom had already been collaborating together for several years, again spanning local, regional, and global. Here too, Perempuan Mahardika, a women’s organisation in Indonesia, has been valuable in documenting and exposing GBVH in the garment sector and shaping women-centred worker organising approach, as well as the Local Initiative for Occupational Safety and Health Network (LION) that has

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<sup>33</sup> See ‘Chapter 2: The GBV Escalation Ladder’ in *Safe Circle Approach: AFWA’s Step-by-Step Approach to Prevent Gender-Based Violence*, AFWA, 2019, <https://asia.floorwage.org/safe-circle-approach-afwas-step-by-step-approach-to-prevent-gender-based-violence/>.

<sup>34</sup> AFWA, TTCU, and GLJ-ILRF, 2023.

<sup>35</sup> Serikat Pekerja Nasional (SPN), Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (SPSI), and Kongres Aliansi Serikat Buruh Indonesia (KASBI) at factory PT Batang Apparel Indonesia, and SPSI at factory PT Semarang Garment Indonesia.

contributed through its feminist education programme to strengthen women workers' leadership. Collaborations with both organisations have added cross-movement synergies within the already-existing labour movement ecosystem.

Both agreements have adopted the 2019 International Labour Organization's *Violence and Harassment Convention 190 (C190)* and Recommendation 206's expansive definition of GBVH and approach to eradicating it. The DA also satisfies and goes beyond India's *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act*—a powerful legislation that provides for Internal Complaints Committees composed by equal numbers of members drawn from workers and management with a majority of women members, chaired by a senior woman employee and an independent member, at every enterprise with over 10 employees. Although hard won by India's social movements, it is often misused by garment factory management as the committees are not truly independent of the management. The CJA is embedded in Indonesian labour laws and the *Sexual Violence Crime Act (Tindak Pidana Kekerasan Seksual (TPKS))* (which unlike India is not workplace-based). Both agreements integrate international and national standards and laws even if an ILO convention is not ratified or an important national law is inadequately implemented.<sup>36</sup>

## Negotiating Power and Legitimacy Across Scales

A critical feature of the DA and CJA is to develop governance and grievance structures that address the twinned phenomena of brand-driven governance of global supply chains and the consequent leveraging of oppressive social relations at the workplace. These agreements are based on the idea that effective industrial relations for global supply chains require new bargaining structures and practices that are multi-scalar, involving actors at the local, regional and global levels. They also require scrupulous documentation of the labour abuses in global supply chains to bring pressure on brands to change their contracting practices.

### *Bargaining across scales*

AFWA's strategy and team typically traverse three levels to organise in global supply chains and move towards bargaining: the local and national through member unions and labour organisations in AFWA's national committees, the regional (Asia) through regional committee of leaders nominated from the national, and the global with allies from brands' home regions.

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<sup>36</sup> Fudge and LeBaron.

The negotiation process for the two agreements involved two parallel channels. One is the global channel of actors representing industry (brands and suppliers) and labour (local/ national, regional, and global labour organisations). This global channel is recognised in literature and is externally visible. The other channel, equally important, traverses the local/national and regional levels of AFWA's internal structures. This channel is often invisible to external view as it is the internal work of AFWA and member unions. Lack of recognition of this work can lead to an incomplete understanding of what it takes to build new practices and capacities in the labour movement for anti-GBVH, gender-focused and global bargaining.

This internal channel requires AFWA to ensure meaningful integration and representation of local unions in the global negotiation process. It requires adapting industrial relations concepts, issues, and frames to union leaders' lexicon and local contexts. It involves continual creation of internal multilingual strategy documents, and conducting numerous trainings, socialisation and consensus-building sessions in several languages, whose distilled contents percolate upward to the top layers of negotiation.

In the DA, AFWA's strategic alliance with GLJ, which has experience in movement lawyering and labour organising, has been critical in developing multi-level circular practices during negotiations. In this process, unions' needs are distilled into movement-sensitive legal drafting and circled back to local and national unions to check and adapt. In the CJA, AFWA worked with GLJ and WRC to engage in such a process with the four Indonesian unions in which the global allies brought their distinct expertise to the multi-level circular process.

These strategic, intentional, and long-term alliances that form labour movement ecosystems attempt to build structural power commensurate with the global supply chain structure. They maintain union and women workers' primacy and integrity while co-creating a labour movement ecosystem spanning local to regional to global. The labour movement ecosystems can respond in a context-sensitive manner to the diversity of needs for building bargaining power in global supply chains.

### *Documentation as Power*

Documentation and evidence-building that carries legitimacy in the global discursive space is central to lending credibility to labour's demands. Unlike quantifiable issues such as wages, which are relatively easier to document, documenting GBVH in the field is very challenging.

In 2018, AFWA developed a ‘spectrum theory’ that goes beyond restricted definitions of GBVH based on sexual assault to include broader gendered industrial relations practices on a women-dominated workforce.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, documentation involves integrating this broader perspective to include not only behavioural practices but also factory-wide policies targeting women’s vulnerabilities that contribute to the perpetuation of GBVH.

Although GBVH is a collective phenomenon, it manifests individually, most often with fearful or no witnesses. The broader culture of social stigma and victim-shaming is a powerful deterrent against survivors speaking out. Indeed, the International Labour Organization reports that only one in two people share their experience of violence and harassment at work out of fear of reputational damage and lack of trust in authorities.<sup>38</sup>

Given the historical gap in the broader labour movement to identify, let alone tackle, GBVH, most garment unions do not possess GBVH documentation systems or skills. Therefore, embedding documentation of GBVH as a core activity requires a political re-orientation within unions towards valuing documentation as part of their organising practice. Such practices require: knowledge of how to identify GBVH, the will and capacity to creatively and sensitively collect stories while supporting courageous survivors, analysis of the evidence in terms of soft and hard legal norms, and presenting the results of this documentation to a global audience. In AFWA, this has been a multi-layered and multi-skilled activity within a labour movement ecosystem spanning the local to the global involving intensive field work with unions and women workers, survivor support, analysis for regional convergence and power-building among member unions, and global discourse building and promotion with global allies.

The documentation of GBVH is made more challenging by the auditing industry utilised by global brands, since such audits fail to detect GBVH or to report on their findings.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, global brands demand transparency and independent investigations when faced with reports of labour abuse. In this context, investigators who are seen as legitimate by brands and labour are critical, although rare. The WRC fills this valuable role by providing credible and rigorous worker-centred investigations. In India, all parties to the DA agreed to have WRC investigate the workplaces to satisfy brands’ demand for an independent report.

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<sup>37</sup> AFWA, *Violence Against Women and Men in the World of Work*, AFWA, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), *Experiences of Violence and Harassment at Work: A global first survey*, ILO, Geneva, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Human Rights Watch, ‘Obsessed with Audit Tools, Missing the Goal: Why social audits can’t fix labor rights abuses in global supply chains’, Human Rights Watch, 15 November 2022.

WRC's findings confirmed what labour had already extensively reported earlier.<sup>40</sup> In Indonesia, the CJA was created in response to a pattern of GBVH investigated by WRC in response to women workers' complaints.

In DA, oversight processes required skilful documentation and data gathering on mandated meetings, trainings, grievance resolution, worker SFM development, and dialogue outcomes at union-management and Implementation Committee levels. The grievance documentation process involved ground-level evidence collection to detailing, framing, and distillation to meet evidentiary requirements and legal frames in the agreement. Moreover, to be legible to industry and reviewers, it required multi-organisational work and coordination, building the skills of DA programme's staff, and processing the evidence from the local to the global level by the TTCU, AFWA, and GLJ. This again demonstrates the power of the labour movement ecosystem that allows labour to draw on multiple skills and knowledge where the sum is greater than the parts.

## Revitalising the Labour Movement and its Practices: Learnings from the anti-GBVH supply chain agreements

The anti-GBVH agreements suggest that to revitalise the labour movement to meet the challenges of global value chains, we have to discard commonly held images of masculine industrial trade unions—an image that never completely reflected the labour movement in the past either. Organising in the garment industry has taken diverse forms in Asia. New unions and organising efforts led by present-day women leaders in countries such as India and Sri Lanka are distinct from national federation-led unions by recognised leaders in Indonesia or Cambodia. In India, where the mainstream labour movement has ignored the export garment industry,<sup>41</sup> new garment unions with few financial resources, often led by women leaders, have emerged. In contrast, in Indonesia with a different historical trajectory, established national federations have unionised across the garment industry but continue to struggle with sufficient women's leadership.

As organising strategies have unfolded in the global garment industry, the labour movement has expanded beyond unions, which remain the anchoring force to include diverse forms of labour organisations that augment and strengthen union

<sup>40</sup> Worker Rights Consortium, *Worker Rights Consortium Factory Assessment: Natchi Apparel (India). Findings, Recommendations and Corrective Actions*, WRC, Washington DC, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Traditional union leaders have noted to me that garment workers are 'hard to organise'. Forrest theorises 'hard to organise' and draws attention to gender-bias in industrial relations and the union world. A Forrest, 'Women and Industrial Relations Theory: No room in the discourse', *Relations Industrielles / Industrial Relations*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1993, pp. 409–440.

power locally, regionally, and globally. These organisations add power through research and investigation, legal theorising and support, knowledge and capacity development, campaigns, advocacy, bargaining support, and alliance building. The expanded cross-disciplinary labour movement extends to the global and is building new forms of North-South partnerships that go beyond traditional global union structures. Labour movement ecosystems are formed out of this broader labour movement and these ecosystems, in turn, enrich the broader movement.

*Engendering Intersectional Perspectives in Organising and Bargaining*

Gendered power relations<sup>42</sup> and GBVH percolate through brand-driven business models, policies, and behaviours in garment supply chains. Centring gendered power relations entails foregrounding GBVH, access to FOA for women workers, and nurturing of women leaders.

Both new and established unions are often ill-equipped to address gendered power relations and the pervasive nature of GBVH in a labour movement that has been historically male-led and focused more on quantitative matters of wages (the daily bread) in organising and bargaining. As Anne Forrest noted, '[c]onventional industrial relations thinking implicitly sets gender consciousness apart from, and positions it in competition with, worker/union consciousness.'<sup>43</sup>

Feminist scholarship and activism have challenged the sidelining of gendered power relations and GBVH in the workplace and industrial relations. As Ardhani Danielli explains:

Early attempts to delineate the legitimate concerns of industrial relations researchers made a distinction between personal and industrial relations...The relegation of some behaviors as merely personal has of course been challenged by the feminist dictum, 'the personal is political' and has been instrumental in showing how relationships which had previously been dismissed as 'trivial', as part of the 'natural' order, have contributed to the maintenance of gender inequality both within and outside the workplace.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> I use 'gender' not as a binary or a biological term but as a field of power and relations. Gender has been theorised by feminists across political thought and geography (e.g. Judith Butler, Patricia Hill Collins, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susie Tharu, Raewyn Connell).

<sup>43</sup> A Forrest, 'Connecting Women with Unions: What are the issues?', *Relations Industrielles / Industrial Relations*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2001, pp. 647–675.

<sup>44</sup> A Danielli, 'Gender: The missing link in industrial relations research', *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol. 37, issue 4, 2006, pp. 329–343, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2338.2006.00407.x>.

Feminists have long emphasised the dangers of shoring up of the distinction between the public and private realms that promote domination and control. However, feminists across race and nationalities have also cautioned against a singular and totalising feminism. Instead, they have called for a feminist theory and practice that reflects the ground realities shaped by gender, caste, religion, migration, colonialism, and imperialism.<sup>45</sup> Feminism is ‘a process, a collective and individual construct that is constantly renewed in the present. Feminists are not born, they are made.’<sup>46</sup>

Making gender and GBVH central to the labour movement and to industrial relations has wider implications for infusing our work with soul-fulfilling spirit. A male-centred outlook on gender and GBVH as ‘women’s issues’ that is seen as opposed and secondary to broader ‘workers’ (bread and butter) issues must be rejected. Centring gender is not only about women workers, but about understanding the social fabric of all workers to build robust union power.<sup>47</sup> Ultimately, workers are agents of change in the workplace and beyond and not un-social figures in agreements.

### *Women’s Trade Union Leadership*

Women labour leaders often experience an alienation akin to homelessness—the women’s movement may be unaware of them and the labour movement may not recognise them. Women leaders may also be survivors of abuse and violence. They often struggle between victimhood shaped by injustice that robs their sense of agency, survivor consciousness, and power and responsibilities of leadership. Supporting such leaders requires critical empathy, which demands solidarity and support, but also difficult and critical conversations as collective builders of alternate realities and as menders of internal injuries.

As the women’s movement has shown, it is naive to ascribe women-centredness or male-centredness to biology. Shortcuts such as hiring a few women supervisors surrounded by male supervisors without organisational culture change, electing one woman leader in an otherwise male-led trade union, or for women activists, researchers or leaders to uncritically assume a biologically awarded self-righteousness are unlikely to yield transformative results.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> C T Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses’, *Boundary 2*, vol. 12/13, no. 3, pp. 333–358, <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>.

<sup>46</sup> G E Damián, ‘The Fruitful and Conflictive Relationship between Feminist Movements and the Mexican Left’, *Social Justice*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2015, pp. 74–88.

<sup>47</sup> C T Mohanty, ‘Transnational Feminist Crossings: On neoliberalism and radical critique’, *Signs*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2013, pp. 967–991, <https://doi.org/10.1086/669576>.

<sup>48</sup> As Sayce argues, ‘Feminist theorists have argued that gender is less about being what one is but more about what one does in interaction with others, in other words “doing

AFWA's work with women leaders and workers and in building a diverse labour alliance with men and women has demanded difficult but essential relational practices that are often considered unimportant by the traditional labour movement but awarded a high place in the women's movement. This work is an integral part of AFWA's role in implementing the two supply chain agreements. Such relational work is never 'done', but provides an ever unfolding of learnings and corrections. It necessarily involves a continual trust-building and trust-repairing process at different levels: personal, political and ideological, and constituency-wide. This work is never-perfect, never-complete, and ever-changing, and that is what one must be continually open to.

In AFWA's experience, we have had to engage with member unions and women leaders in a continuous process of identification and documentation of GBVH in workplaces through creative means, seek out the expertise of leaders in the women's movement to support survivors, and generate learning spaces for women workers and leaders to move from individual narratives to collective negotiation. The Safe Circle Approach provides opportunities for embarking on the journey from narratives to negotiation.

#### *Deploying Intersectional Perspectives in Organising and Bargaining*

Reshaping the labour movement to meet the challenges of global garment supply chains requires cultivating skills at the intersection of the women's movement and the labour movement. The principles and skills in the women's movement can be transformative, not just for women workers but also men workers. Dominant approaches in the mainstream labour movement and industrial relations that make the male worker the gender-neutral norm, end up as a disservice to not just women workers but also men workers. As Anne Forrest reminds us: "The narrow construction of the industrial relations system as a "web of rules" ... separate the institutions and processes of collective bargaining from the working lives of ... workers ... The men themselves never appear...". This denial of workers' complex social identities that impact their experiences in the workplace cannot be strategic because it 'conveniently forget[s] that the underside of managerial authority is workers' obedience'.<sup>49</sup>

It is important to nurture new unions, varied organising styles, and women leaders to develop pathways for a refreshed labour movement. This requires an ecosystem of relational organising that challenges transactional modes of organising, requires organisers to contend not only with objective external conditions but also with internal subjectivities, and paying close attention to individuals as well as the collective.

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gender". S Sayce, *Gender change? Locked into industrial relations and Bourdieu*, Bournemouth University Business School, Dorset, 2005.

<sup>49</sup> Forrest, 1993, p. 430.

Local stories and individual narratives must inform macro-level research, policy formulation, and formulation of labour's demands. In the context of bargaining, the journey of abstraction from the local and the individual to the macro is essential for formulating workplace and industrial demands. An intersectional journey from the local and individual to the business model and structure of the industry is required to shape effective bargaining structures and demands in brand-driven global supply chains. However, this still requires more study.

Labour movement ecosystems which also incubate cross-movement synergies are required to bring an understanding of intersectionality into labour organising and bargaining. As described above, women's organisations have greatly enriched the impact of the DA and the CJA.

### *North-South Dynamics*

The multidimensional labour movement ecosystem needed for effective and sustainable collective bargaining in global garment supply chain must span the Global North and South. In this sector, but also in social movements more generally, North-South relations have evolved and are in the process of moving from colonial-style paternalism to partnerships. The term partnership signals equality and reciprocity, and it is essential for building sustainable political communities as agents for transforming the global order into a just and equitable world.

However, the locus of power in an organisation or partnership is typically determined by the internal flow of power and financial resources. Since unions emerged with industrialisation, initially in the Global North, their patterns and practices have dominated. Moreover, the concentration of financial resources in the North results in unequal powers: a Global North organisation can convene organisations in the Global South with greater ease and thus can project their practices onto their Southern counterparts.

North-South partnerships are powerful vehicles for global campaigning and bargaining. However, it is important to appreciate the difference between campaigning and bargaining. A campaign may result in an agreement at the global level or at the national level without necessarily transforming union power at the workplaces. But the ultimate test of bargaining is the transformation of relations between the local union and management at the level of the workplace. Vigilance is required to manage the three levels of industrial relations (local, regional, and global) so that union power is built on the ground through labour movement ecosystems.

AFWA's strategic alliance with GLJ has provided valuable learnings on the North-South dynamic. These include understanding the different roles of the organisations, avoiding overreach, cultivating complementarity, developing a solidarity as opposed to a transactional framework, and trust building and repairing in order to pursue a shared goal of invigorating union power in a globalising world. Building such partnerships is always work in progress.

## **Conclusion: Centring gender, building labour movement ecosystems, and scaling results-based bargaining**

This essay has introduced the term *labour movement ecosystem* as a model to describe multi-purpose, multifarious, and multi-scalar collaborations between diverse labour-centred organisations and the development of layered bargaining structures spanning local/national, regional, and global levels in the garment industry. These ecosystems span movements. It is not a fortuitous convergence of organisations, but a systematic knitting together of strategic intentions and practices based on a solidarity framework as opposed to a transactional framework.

Centring gender and GBVH at the workplace provide a rich opportunity for cross-movement collaboration. The historic passage of C190, which embraces the full scope of GBVH through the inclusion of 'economic harm' and expands the geography of 'world of work' to include locations outside and related to the workplace such as transportation, company-controlled hostels, home, and community, has brought into global prominence the decades-long concerns raised by the women's movements and women leaders in the labour movement. The implementation process of agreements such as the DA and CJA that integrate C190 has shown the potential to magnify intersectional collaboration between labour and women's organisations.

The labour movement ecosystems required to organise towards, achieve, and implement anti-GBVH supply chain agreements push us to go beyond the commonly held perceptions of collective bargaining between the union and management. In Dindigul, the DA reversed an intensely union-hostile workplace by seeding and bringing to stability union-management dialogue. Brand-driven global garment supply chain governance is characterised by an obscure layering of responsibilities and decision-making that influences shop-floor practices and control. Meaningful and transformative interventions require a high degree of alignment across multiple levels, organisations, roles, and activities—from the local and the regional to the global. For labour activists envisioning labour movement as an expansive social movement, the labour movement ecosystems around the anti-GBVH supply chain agreements provide valuable learnings.

Brands continue to promote what they claim as ‘scalable’ activities, such as training modules, hotlines, and app-based complaint mechanisms. However, these initiatives have demonstrated little, if any, improvements in identification, remediation, or prevention of labour violations and violence.<sup>50</sup> Brands enter into global framework agreements that have, to date, produced insufficient results.<sup>51</sup> The most important factor that can block ‘scalability’ of anti-GBVH supply chain agreements from select factories to the industrial level is brands’ aversion to genuine results, FOA, and preference for performative non-results-based initiatives.

The two anti-GBVH supply chain agreements discussed in this article challenge brand-driven exploitative supply chains, and coercive gendered industrial relations. Such agreements have the potential to reverse the imbalance in global supply chains and women’s loss of dignity and power at the workplace and in the industry. Hard evidence from the results of the DA show what is possible. As builders of labour movement ecosystems, we must continue to demand results-based agreements, globally and locally framed and executed, as the pathway towards violence-free, law-abiding, rights-honouring, and dignified workplaces in the global garment industry.

**Anannya Bhattacharjee** is the International Coordinator of Asia Floor Wage Alliance. Email: [anannya.b@asia.floorwage.org](mailto:anannya.b@asia.floorwage.org)

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<sup>50</sup> AFWA has worked closely with member unions in production countries to evaluate the efficacy of brands’ training initiatives and app-based complaint mechanisms. Workers belonging to our member unions have repeatedly asserted their lack of impact. The results consistently show that even good training modules rolled out efficiently, at scale, across factories have achieved almost no meaningful reduction, remediation or prevention of GBVH. These documents are internal to AFWA.

<sup>51</sup> AFWA has had several consultations with member unions on the effectiveness of GFAs. Notwithstanding the potential of GFAs, in reality, they have proven difficult to implement for a multitude of factors. See M-A Hennebert, I Roberge-Maltais, and U Coiquaud, ‘The effectiveness of international framework agreements as a tool for the protection of workers’ rights: A metasyntesis’, *Industrial Relations Journal*, vol. 54, issue 3, 2023, pp. 242–260, <https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.12398>.