

*Concept Paper #3*

# **Women Center Network Exchange – How to Work with Unions**



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**Registered offices**  
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**FABRIC Asia**  
Sayon Phnom Penh, 1st Floor  
#42, Samdach Pan Street (214),  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

E [giz-kambodscha@giz.de](mailto:giz-kambodscha@giz.de)  
I [www.giz.de/cambodia](http://www.giz.de/cambodia)

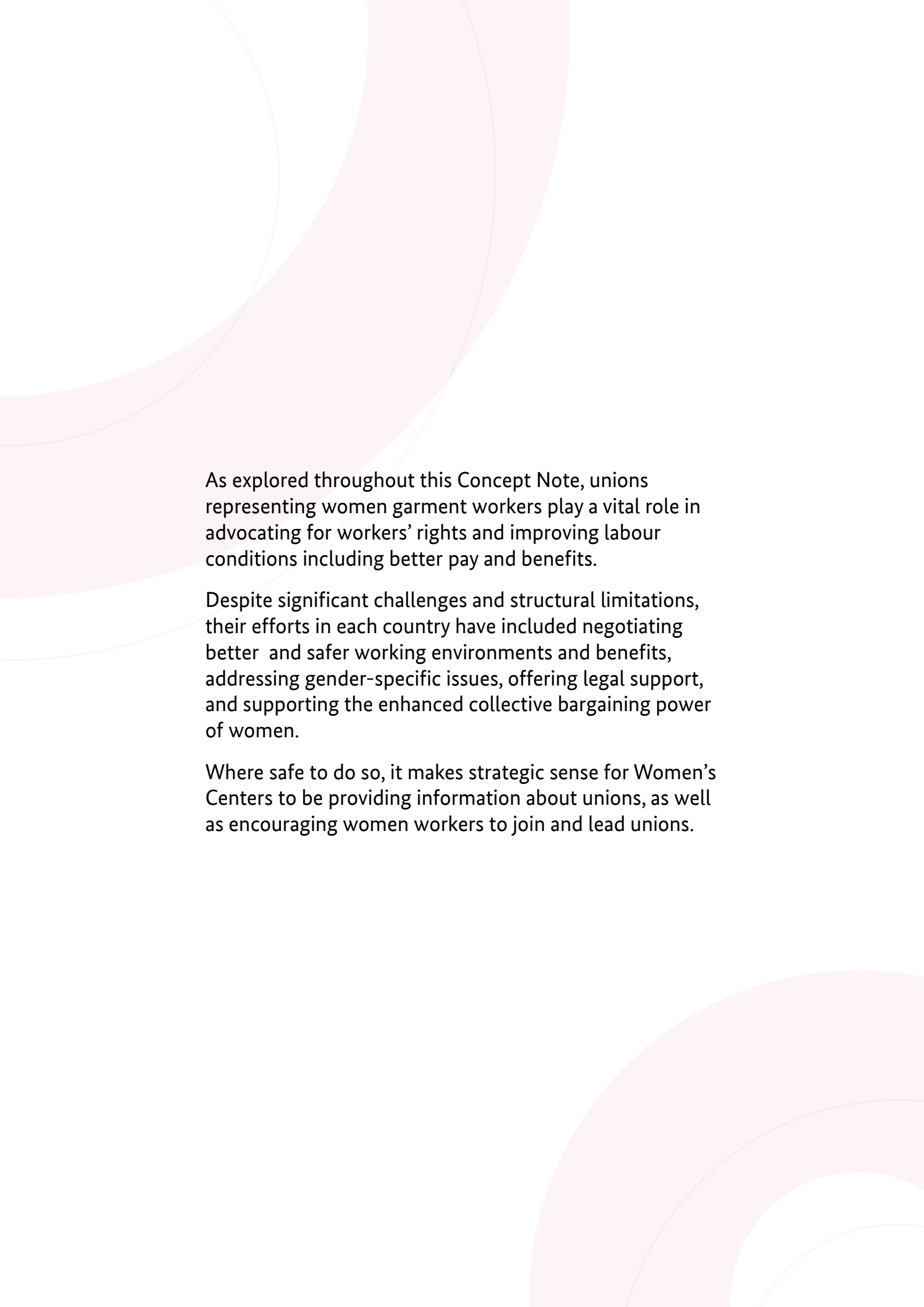
**Author:**  
Kate Seewald

**Responsible/Editor, etc:**  
Anashua Madhubanti  
Constantia Chirnside

**Design/Layout, etc:**  
Monileak Ean

**Photo credits/sources:**  
GIZ/A Dose of Cath  
GIZ/Darakorn Photography  
GIZ/Monileak Ean  
GIZ/Roman Koenig  
GIZ/Sabrina Asche

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As explored throughout this Concept Note, unions representing women garment workers play a vital role in advocating for workers' rights and improving labour conditions including better pay and benefits.

Despite significant challenges and structural limitations, their efforts in each country have included negotiating better and safer working environments and benefits, addressing gender-specific issues, offering legal support, and supporting the enhanced collective bargaining power of women.

Where safe to do so, it makes strategic sense for Women's Centers to be providing information about unions, as well as encouraging women workers to join and lead unions.





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## I. INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar, women make up a significant majority of the garment sector workforce – almost 60% in Bangladesh, over 70% in Cambodia, and more than 80% in Myanmar.<sup>1,2,3</sup> The textile and garment production sector is the largest industry in each country and plays a vital role in their economies.

While women constitute a significant portion of the labour force in all three

countries, they are disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paid and most precarious positions. Occupying the lowest rungs of the employment ladder, they are particularly vulnerable to gender-based discrimination and disparities, often facing minimal pay, limited job security, and poor working conditions. The production workforce largely relies on young women between the ages of 16 and 33, many of whom migrate from rural areas and typically

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<sup>1</sup> ADB, In Bangladesh, ADB Helped Build A Safer and Healthier Workplace for Women Garment Workers, 24 March 2023, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>2</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>3</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Kingdom of Cambodia, [\[online\]](#).

have only limited formal education, which further increases their socio-economic vulnerability.

Several structural issues contribute to these challenges. Traditional gender roles restrict women's opportunities for advancement, limiting their support systems and choices. Additionally, economic structures that rely on workforce exploitation and benefit from the gender pay gap reinforce economic inequalities. Limited access to education further limits women's employment opportunities and bargaining power in the workplace.<sup>4</sup>

As a result of these underlying issues, female garment workers often earn wages that are insufficient to meet basic living costs, trapping them in a cycle of economic insecurity. Many women lack social protection measures, such as maternity leave, pensions, and healthcare. Often stuck in lower-ranking positions and working physically demanding roles, women are also less likely to receive adequate safety protections.

Gender-based discrimination is widespread in the garment industry. Women frequently experience unequal treatment in hiring, promotions, and wages. In addition, sexual harassment is rampant, with many women workers subjected to verbal abuse or unwanted advances from supervisors and colleagues. Cultural norms often silence women, making it difficult for them to report such incidents without fear of retaliation.<sup>5</sup>

## **FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION AND THE RIGHT TO ORGANISE**

Freedom of association is a fundamental human right enshrined in international law, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (Article 22), and the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions 87 and 98, which recognise workers' rights to freely form and join trade unions and to engage in collective bargaining. However, garment workers—especially women—face significant barriers to exercising these rights.

Although many garment workers belong to unions, women remain grossly underrepresented in leadership roles, due to a range of structural reasons that are explored in Section IV. Moreover, in many countries around the world, including Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, union work is increasingly undermined by repressive labour laws and government interference. Outspoken union leaders and worker activists frequently experience harassment, intimidation, and dismissal for organising efforts.<sup>6,7</sup>

The increasing dominance of so-called 'yellow' unions, which are created or co-opted by the employer to promote employer and/or government goals, further weakens genuine worker representation, creating an environment where women's voices and needs are even less represented in decision-making processes.<sup>8</sup> Undue restrictions on union activities violate international labour standards and national laws at times and

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<sup>4</sup> UN Women & ILO, Understanding the Gender Composition and Experience of Ready-Made Garment Workers in Bangladesh, 2020, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>5</sup> CARE Australia, 'I know I cannot quit.' The Prevalence and Productivity Cost of Sexual Harassment to the Cambodian Garment Industry, 2017, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>6</sup> CENTRAL, Barriers to Representation: Freedom of Association in Cambodia, 2024, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Whoever Raises their Head Suffers the Most:" Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories, 2015, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>8</sup> Eurofound, European Industrial Relations Dictionary: Company Unions, 2019, [\[online\]](#).

perpetuate exploitative working conditions in the garment industry.<sup>9</sup>

Given this context, this concept note aims to explore the prospects and challenges for Women's Centres to support women-led and gender-responsive union work through their programming in each country. Women's Centres and trade unions can be thought of as mutually beneficial to one another, as the protection of freedom of association is a fundamental enabler of successful Women's

Centre initiatives. Conversely, when unions are restricted or dismantled, civil society efforts to advocate, provide support, and improve conditions for women workers are significantly weakened. However, while strengthening women's union representation and protecting the right to organise can maximise the impact of Women's Centres, the extent to which they can safely and openly collaborate with independent unions is highly context-specific, and far from guaranteed.



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<sup>9</sup> IndustriALL Global Union, Myanmar: the military regime's dangerous attack on independent trade unions, 22 February 2025, [\[online\]](#).

## SECTOR SNAPSHOT



### Cambodia

The garment sector is one of Cambodia's largest industries, accounting for a significant share of the country's exports and employing around 925,000 workers<sup>10</sup>, the vast majority of whom are women. The sector has been a key driver of economic growth, attracting major international brands and generating vital employment opportunities. However, working conditions remain precarious, with many garment workers facing low wages, excessive working hours, job insecurity, and inadequate workplace protections. Despite annual minimum wage adjustments processes, salaries often fail to meet the rising cost of living, leaving workers trapped in economic hardship.

In recent years, Cambodia's National Social Security Fund (NSSF) has played an increasing role in expanding social protection coverage for garment workers. The scheme now provides health insurance, maternity and paternity benefits, and some forms of workplace injury compensation. Despite some workers facing barriers in accessing coverage, the expansion of the NSSF is providing greater financial security, particularly for pregnant women and new mothers.<sup>11</sup> Even though such provisions, many women are forced to send their babies to live with relatives due to inadequate workplace childcare facilities and nursing/pumping provisions, causing widespread psychosocial harm and undermining public health goals around exclusive breastfeeding.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the partial withdrawal of the EU's Everything But Arms (EBA) trade preferences exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the sector. Thousands of workers were suspended or lost their jobs, with many receiving little to no social protection. More recently, economic pressures and automation pose additional threats, potentially displacing workers without adequate reskilling or transition support. While the sector continues to play a leading role in the Cambodian economy, accounting for approximately 62 per cent of Cambodia's total merchandise exports in 2022, there are concerns that Cambodia's competitiveness and "continued growth in the garment sector cannot be sustained."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Kingdom of Cambodia, 2024, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>11</sup> Oxfam, Cambodia's women garment workers have been promised a decent life: now we must support them to claim their rights, 2022, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>12</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Kingdom of Cambodia, 2023, [\[online\]](#).

## SECTOR SNAPSHOT



### Bangladesh

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest exporter of garments and textiles after China, making it one of the most significant players in the global textile industry. The sector employs over 4.5 million workers, the majority of whom are women, and contributes significantly to the country's economy.<sup>13</sup> The government has set ambitious targets to expand the industry, aiming to reach \$50 billion in annual textile and garment exports. However, despite this rapid growth, working conditions remain challenging, with many workers facing low wages, unsafe conditions, and job insecurity.

Since the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, there have been notable improvements in legislation and enforcement, particularly in union representation, minimum wage, and job security. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety has led to factory inspections and structural improvements.<sup>14</sup> However, ILO's International Labour Standards are still not being fully met, and many factories continue to operate without adequate oversight, leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation, harassment, and unsafe conditions.

The social protection system in Bangladesh remains limited, with many garment workers lacking access to maternity benefits, health insurance, and workplace injury compensation. While some efforts have been made to improve workers' rights and safety, the sector continues to face significant environmental and labour challenges.<sup>15</sup>

Textile production, particularly dyeing and printing, consumes high levels of water, chemicals, and energy, raising concerns about sustainability. Additionally, rising automation and the harmful impacts of climate change on women workers' health, pose increasing risks to their livelihoods and industry stability.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Asia Garment Hub, People's Republic of Bangladesh, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>14</sup> Worker Rights Consortium, International Safety Accord / Bangladesh, [\[online\]](#)

<sup>15</sup> War on Want, Stitched Up: Women Workers in the Bangladeshi Garment Sector, 2011, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>16</sup> Asia Garment Hub, People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2023, [\[online\]](#).

## SECTOR SNAPSHOT



### Myanmar

Since the early 1990s, Myanmar's garment sector has played a significant role in the national economy, experiencing periods of growth and contraction over the past three decades. Historically, the industry primarily served Japanese and South Korean markets, with limited engagement from North American and European retailers due to sanctions imposed by the U.S. and EU in the early 2000s.<sup>17</sup> Following the lifting of these sanctions in 2011 and 2013, major international brands began sourcing from Myanmar, leading to a surge in factory openings and exports. Before the 2021 military coup, the sector was poised for continued expansion, employing over 500,000 factory workers, more than 80% of whom were women, mostly between the ages of 16 and 27.

The pandemic was “the first blow to a rapidly expanding sector that was projected to employ 1.6 million workers in Myanmar by 2026”.<sup>18</sup> The military coup in February 2021 then exacerbated the disruption to the garment sector, creating instability, economic uncertainty, and a deteriorating human rights environment. International brands withdrew or scaled down operations, citing concerns over worker exploitation, forced labour, and political instability. Remaining workers have faced worsening conditions, including increased repression of union activity, job losses, and heightened risks of gender-based violence and harassment.<sup>19</sup>

The future of Myanmar's garment industry remains highly uncertain, with limited data and restricted access to reliable information. Many international organisations have reduced their engagement in Myanmar due to human rights and governance concerns.<sup>20</sup> Efforts to support displaced garment workers, ensure safe migration pathways, and provide alternative livelihood opportunities are therefore increasingly critical. Regional collaboration and international pressure will play a key role in determining the industry's trajectory and the protection of workers' rights.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2023, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>18</sup> MacIsaac, V. 'As Myanmar's Garment Industry Unravels, Desperation is Rising,' The Irrawaddy, 2024, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>19</sup> Hui Yee, T., 'Myanmar garment workers struggle to survive – and keep up with global orders,' The Straits Times, 2024, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>20</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2023, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>21</sup> CSIS, Squeezed From Two Sides: Myanmar Garment Workers Caught Between Covid and the Coup, 2022, [\[online\]](#).



## II. BACKGROUND

### THE ROLE OF THE FABRIC PROJECT AND WOMEN'S CENTRES/CAFÉS

The FABRIC Asia project (Promoting Sustainability in the Textile and Garment Industry in Asia) is committed to fostering a competitive and sustainable garment industry that is fair to workers and respectful of the environment. Collaborating with a diverse range of stakeholders, including factory owners, government ministries, civil society organisations, and international

brands and manufacturers, the project aims to develop a unified vision for sustainability in the textile and garment sector. It functions as a think tank, compiling and disseminating knowledge from successful sustainability initiatives across the region. By engaging with global initiatives and promoting joint positions on sustainable production criteria, FABRIC Asia seeks to

drive meaningful change in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Vietnam, and China.

## **STRENGTHENING NETWORKS: THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S CENTRES IN PEER LEARNING**

Within the framework of the FABRIC Asia project, there is a dedicated effort to enhance knowledge exchange and peer support among female garment workers through the establishment of community spaces, known as Women's Centres or Women's Cafés. The cafes were first established as part of the Promotion of Social and Environmental Standards in the Industry (PSES) project in 2010. The original Café was implemented by GIZ, in collaboration with the Bangladeshi government and industry stakeholders. As a result of its success and unique approach, the concept was later scaled up to be replicated in Myanmar and Cambodia.

Coordinated by GIZ FABRIC, the Women's Centres operate within local communities, providing accessible platforms for education, advocacy, support, and connection. The initiative brings together workers, centre staff, local NGOs, and development partners, fostering an inclusive dialogue aimed at improving gender-equitable working conditions and sharing success stories to address common challenges.

At their core, Women's Centres serve as vibrant hubs for empowerment, skill-building, and community-led networking, delivering targeted interventions to address the specific needs of women in the garment industry. By facilitating workshops, training sessions, and resources, these spaces aim to support women in overcoming systemic barriers and cultivating independence, while strengthening the long-term sustainability of the centres themselves.

Moreover, the Centres are designed as inclusive environments that welcome diverse perspectives and help reshape societal views on traditional gender roles. Beyond knowledge-sharing, Women's Centres function as essential networking platforms, connecting individuals and organisations.

Depending on the country, the spaces are known as Women's Centres, Women's Cafés, or WE House (Women Empowerment House). While all establishments focus on providing a safe space and supporting women's development, their specific capabilities, training programs, and areas of focus may vary depending on local contexts and available resources.

In an effort to strengthen cross-country collaboration, GIZ FABRIC launched the Women's Centres Network, enabling initiatives from Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar to collaborate on industry-wide challenges and promote lasting impact. The Network was introduced at a launch event in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in December 2023, which successfully facilitated the exchange of challenges, solutions, and success stories among stakeholders. Building on this momentum, a follow-up Network Exchange Workshop event was organised in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in April 2024, specifically focusing on gender-specific challenges, facilitating dialogue and practical insights, and including site visits to local textile factories and Women's Centres. In August 2025, another exchange was held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, chosen due to visa restrictions for some participants. The workshop focused on strengthening the role of women and youth in trade unions, addressing gender-related barriers and workplace challenges, and resulted in two joint action plans to guide further collaboration.



These Network Exchange Workshops respond to the growing need for collaborative approaches to promoting gender equality. They offer a platform where participants can explore solutions to key challenges, exchange practical strategies, and strengthen cross-country cooperation. Additionally, staff and management can gain insights into sustainable income streams and innovative multi-purpose use of their spaces. The workshops also encourage the development of (digital) resources and – to the extent that it is safe to do so – union collaborations, supporting the establishment of a strong and resilient network for women workers.

Access to information about local workers' unions is particularly important for women garment workers, given the specific challenges they face in the industry. Women are disproportionately affected by poor working conditions, gender-based discrimination, and limited opportunities for advancement.

As explored throughout the remainder of this Concept Note, unions representing women garment workers play a vital role in advocating for workers' rights and improving labour conditions including better pay and benefits. Despite significant challenges and structural limitations, their efforts in each



country have included negotiating better and safer working environments and benefits, addressing gender-specific issues, offering legal support, and supporting the enhanced collective bargaining power of women. Where safe to do so, it makes strategic sense for Women's Centers to be providing information about unions, as well as encouraging women workers to join and lead unions.



### III. THE ROLE OF UNIONS

#### IN PROMOTING GENDER-RESPONSIVE GARMENT SECTORS

All workers, regardless of gender, have the right to be represented at work, under universal human rights laws and conventions. International labour standards recognise unions as primary agents for collective bargaining and social dialogue, ensuring fair wages, safe working conditions,

and protection from exploitation.

As the garment industry adapts to global challenges such as climate change, automation, and shifting trade policies, unions play a critical role in ensuring that labour rights are upheld. Furthermore, due

diligence frameworks and corporate accountability mechanisms require meaningful engagement with unions, as workers' rights cannot be safeguarded without their direct involvement.

## **TYPES OF UNIONS IN THE GARMENT SECTOR:**

There are several types of unions with different structures, levels of independence, and functions. In the garment sector, industrial unions and general unions are most common. Industrial unions represent workers within a specific industry, such as textiles or manufacturing, while general unions cover workers across various sectors rather than being industry-specific. These types of unions are traditionally independent, meaning they are founded and organised by workers, who advocate for their members' rights without employer or government interference.

They commonly focus on the needs and rights of their members by organising collective bargaining, strikes and other actions to increase the well-being and safety of workers through collective power. In countries where the garment sector employs large numbers of workers, unions have the potential to unite workers across multiple factories, strengthening collective bargaining power and achieving systemic change. The collective representation of their membership gives union the power to. This allows them negotiate for better wages, improved safety standards, and greater protections against unfair treatment, addressing widespread industry issues.<sup>22</sup>

## **WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN UNIONS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES**

Women are underrepresented and frequently excluded from leadership positions within garment sector unions. This lack of inclusion results in gender-specific issues, such as maternity rights, workplace harassment, and equal pay, being inadequately addressed in union negotiations. Male-dominated union leadership structures reinforce systemic barriers, making it harder for women to access leadership positions or advocate for their rights within the broader labour movement. This can perpetuate a cycle of male-focused advocacy. In factories without a collective bargaining agreement, union leaders are often vulnerable to various anti-union tactics. The additional responsibilities associated with representational duties can place significant strain on them, frequently resulting in burnout and high turnover, as the role effectively amounts to managing two jobs simultaneously.

While fully women-led or women-founded unions are rare, groups that specifically focus on supporting female garment workers do exist to varying degrees in each country:

- In Cambodia, while female representation in union leadership remains low, women's empowerment initiatives are in place, including the GIZ-coordinated Women's Centre known as Worker's Empowerment House. WE House is run in partnership with the Women Union Network (WUN), an umbrella network of 17 trade unions.
- In Bangladesh, pioneering organisations like the Awaj Foundation

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<sup>22</sup> Asia Garment Hub, Why brands & employers must do more for worker representation, 2024, [\[online\]](#).

operate in permanent partnership with trade unions, to advocate for women workers' rights. Founded by a former garment worker turned labour rights leader, Awaj and its sister union provide a strong model of women-led union organising and collaboration.

- In Myanmar, some women-focused activities by formal independent unions may continue to exist, but information is scarce. Union activity has been severely restricted by the current instability of the political landscape, as detailed in Section IV.

Representatives from both Cambodia and Bangladesh emphasised the urgent need to increase women's participation, activism and leadership within trade unions. They also highlighted key areas where unions are already actively advocating for improvements in the lives of women garment workers. These include securing breastfeeding breaks and designated nursing/pumping rooms, expanding access to childcare, addressing sexual harassment in the workplace, pushing for safe transportation options for women workers and their babies and toddlers, and strengthening maternity protection policies.

## **THE ROLE OF WOMEN'S CENTRES IN ENHANCING FREE ASSOCIATION FOR WOMEN WORKERS: FINDINGS FROM KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS AND NETWORK EXCHANGES**

Women's Centres provide essential spaces for female garment workers to access information, resources, and peer support in a sector where union leadership remains male-dominated – or, in the case of Myanmar

– forcibly disbanded. While these centres are not substitutes for unions, they can serve as crucial intermediaries, equipping women with knowledge of their rights and connecting them to advocacy mechanisms.

In interviews conducted for this concept note, participants highlighted both shared and country-specific challenges in promoting women's representation and negotiating power in the garment sector. However, a key divergence emerged in their experiences with union collaboration; while Women's Centres in Bangladesh and Cambodia engage closely with formal unions, in Myanmar, the present absence of independent union activity has shifted the role of Women's Centres towards filling critical gaps in women's empowerment and worker education left by union suppression.

### **Cambodia:**

Despite some challenges – including internal competition among partners for members, and risks related to the political situation for independent Cambodian unions covered in Section IV – WE House representatives report that their model of collaborating with the WUN, an umbrella body comprising multiple unions, is highly effective and sustainable, particularly in terms of capacity-building and worker outreach. By engaging directly with unions, the centre has been able to scale its impact beyond what would be possible through CSO-led training alone. Their long-term union collaboration reportedly allows for knowledge and advocacy efforts to continue even if donor funding declines, ensuring the work of WE House in strengthening women's leadership and rights in Cambodia's garment sector is both scalable and sustainable.

“

There have been significant benefits from collaborating with WUN. One of the most valuable aspects of this partnership is that the unions act as our multipliers. We provide capacity-building programmes on labour rights, gender equality, and other key issues, and the unions go out and share this knowledge directly with workers.

If it was just us working in isolation, it would be really limiting because our physical centre is small, and we primarily operate on weekdays, when workers aren't available. Unions, on the other hand, have the space, time outside business hours, and the ability to reach far more workers than we could alone. This ability to scale up our outreach is a huge advantage of this model.

”

- Interview, Cambodia Women's Centre Representative.



## **Bangladesh:**

Women's Cafés, developed under the FABRIC project, work in collaboration with trade unions to strengthen women's participation. Organisations such as the Awaj Foundation have taken a leading role in advocating for women workers' rights,

working directly alongside well-established and independent women-led unions. This model of women-led organising has successfully improved conditions, although cultural and structural barriers to women's leadership in most unions persist.

“

**We believe that unions are key to making sustainable change. Our focus is on building women's capacity to understand what unions can offer them, including freedom of expression, movement, and association.**

**Through our Foundation, we have a sister organisation, which is our union. Both the Foundation and the union are essential for establishing women's empowerment. It is crucial that workers understand the role of unions and the responsibilities of employers towards them.**

**This is the only pathway to improving wages. Bangladesh still has some of the lowest wages, and without collective bargaining, workers cannot push for wage increases. It is simply not possible. In a male-dominated society, in a man's world, we must challenge patriarchy in society and the union sector.**

”

- Interview, Bangladesh Women's Centre Representative.



## Myanmar:

The 2021 military coup led to the suppression of independent unions, forcing many to disband or operate underground. In this context, Women's Centres have become one of the few safe spaces where female garment workers can access vocational training, legal awareness, and psychosocial support. However, due to security concerns,

these centres must be careful to keep their operations politically benign in the eyes of the junta. Large gatherings are considered high-risk, requiring training sessions to be split into small groups. Centre representatives, while distinguishing their work and membership base clearly from those of trade unions, highlighted that their efforts are doubly important in the current context.

“

**Yes, in the absence of unions, it is true that the Centres are even more valuable. It's not that we are doing the same work that unions once did, but we are offering resources that are much needed during a very difficult time for women workers.**

”

- Interview, Myanmar Women's Centre Representative.

Across all three countries, Women's Centres play an important role in bridging the gap between workers and advocacy structures. In Cambodia and Bangladesh, this means facilitating engagement with unions and providing leadership training for women within union structures. In Myanmar, where formal union activity is highly restricted, Women's Centres offer a lifeline for worker empowerment, delivering education on labour rights, safe migration, and gender-based violence prevention in an environment of heightened risk and economic turmoil.

## LEARNINGS FROM WOMEN CENTRE NETWORKS EXCHANGES

Despite political and economic challenges, regional exchanges between Women's Centres in Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar have enabled valuable collaboration and knowledge-sharing. For instance, in-person discussions during the Network Exchanges unpacked and explored the structural and legal barriers to forming trade unions for women in each context. These include strict requirements such as mandating a minimum number of workers from the same factory to form a union, making it difficult for women to organise.

Although women's participation in trade unions has increased since the 1980s, Network Exchange participants described how many women in their own context remain hesitant to engage due to limited tangible benefits, wage discrimination, and weak social protection policies.

Other common challenges across the region highlighted during the Network Exchange include restricted mobility for women in union activities, bureaucratic hurdles to formalising unions, and difficulties in implementing ILO conventions. Strengthening grievance mechanisms and advocating for the ratification of conventions like ILO 190 were therefore identified as common priorities. Additionally, participants agreed that social and environmental programs must address women's specific health concerns, particularly in the context of climate change, to ensure their inclusion and protection.

In Bangladesh and Cambodia, further cross-cutting barriers such as persistent gender norms and societal pressure regarding the roles women should hold were discussed. Participants also stressed the need for more authentic engagement of women workers in decision-making processes, as well as targeted responses to health issues such as heat stress, which disproportionately affect women in the sector.







## IV. BARRIERS

### TO WOMEN'S FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION & UNION LEADERSHIP REPRESENTATION

Women in the garment sector face significant barriers to union participation and leadership. While they make up the majority of garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar, they remain underrepresented in union leadership. A combination of socio-cultural norms, economic vulnerabilities, political risks, and structural limitations restricts their ability to organise, advocate for their rights, and secure leadership roles within unions.

These barriers can be grouped into four main areas:

1. Gender-based discrimination and socio-cultural norms
2. Economic vulnerabilities and job insecurity
3. Restricted access to information, networks, and leadership opportunities
4. Shrinking space for unions and increasing political risks

This section provides a brief overview of each barrier to women's union participation and leadership, before conducting a deeper analysis of the current landscape for trade union activity in each country.

## **1. GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AND SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS**

As in many contexts around the world, women in Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar face a wide range of cultural and structural obstacles that discourage them from union involvement:

### **Cultural Barriers and Social Expectations:**

Gender norms often dictate that women should avoid confrontation or collective action, particularly in male-dominated workplaces. This discourages them from taking on leadership roles or engaging in union activism.<sup>23</sup> Further,

“

**[...] even where women do hold some leadership positions, the real power remains with men in Cambodia's patriarchal society.**

”

- Interview, Cambodia Women's Centre Representative

### **Harassment and Intimidation:**

Women active in unions can reportedly face higher risks of experiencing harassment from employers, factory managers, or even male union members. This creates a hostile environment that discourages women's participation.

“

**Workers tend to trust unions more than employers, but one issue is: what happens when male union representatives or staff are the ones committing sexual harassment or violence? This is a serious concern.**

”

- Interview, Cambodia Women's Centre Representative

### **Male-Dominated Leadership Structures:**

In many cases, unions are led by men even where the majority of a workforce are women, reinforcing systemic barriers that make it harder for women to access leadership roles. As a result, issues that disproportionately affect women—such as maternity leave, workplace harassment, and equal pay—are often deprioritised.

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<sup>23</sup> Ismail, F., Abdul Kadir, A., Mohamad Azmi, N.A.H. and Mohd Yusof, H., 2024. Strategies to encourage women workers to sign up and remain in trade unions. *Environment and Social Psychology*, 9(2), pp.1-12.

**“As a female activist, I have faced many challenges. We come from a conservative Muslim society, where deeply entrenched norms are difficult to change. Class structures also play a role. There is patriarchy within the union movement itself, [so] women must be strong, brave, and lead the way. Patriarchy will change only when women take leadership roles. I am beginning to see more women joining unions, which is a positive sign. However, we need more women in leadership, not just participation. And we need quality unions, not just quantity.”**

- Interview, Bangladesh  
Women's Centre Representative

within the democratic processes of union elections, where traditional gendered assumptions influence voting behaviour.

**“A key issue is that voters continue to elect male [union] leaders, even when women are running. There is still a higher level of trust in male leadership, even among female voters. Many believe that men are stronger, less burdened by housework, and more capable of leadership roles. There's still a long way to go in changing attitudes and behaviours. So we try to empower women to see their own leadership potential—as well as recognising leadership qualities in other women.”**

- Interview, Cambodia  
Women's Centre Representative

### **Internalised Attitudes and Stereotypes:**

Deeply ingrained gender norms and societal expectations, like expectations of women working, running a household and taking care of the family in addition to a full-time job, continue to shape perceptions of leadership within the garment sector and trade unions. Women are often socialised to see leadership as a male-dominated space, reinforcing structural barriers to their full participation. Even when women have the skills and experience to take on leadership roles, they frequently encounter scepticism or a lack of support from both male and female colleagues. This bias is not only reflected in workplace structures but also

## **2. ECONOMIC VULNERABILITIES AND JOB INSECURITY**

Women's economic dependence and job insecurity act as major deterrents to union involvement:

### **Precarious Employment and Fear of Retaliation:**

Many women in the garment sector are employed on insecure and short-term contracts, making them vulnerable to

dismissal if they attempt to speak out or advocate for their rights through union membership or leadership. This fear is especially pronounced in industries or workplaces where union activity is discouraged or actively suppressed by management.

### Accessibility and Inclusivity:

Trade unions may not always be accessible or inclusive to women, particularly those from marginalised communities or with disabilities. Physical accessibility, language barriers, and cultural sensitivity are all factors that can impact women's ability to engage with unions effectively. Further, many unions do not offer flexible meeting times or childcare support or other arrangements, making it difficult for women—who often juggle paid work and unpaid domestic labour—to participate.

### Overtime Hours:

Many women workers are compelled to work overtime, leaving them with little to no time for activities beyond earning a livelihood and supporting their dependents. Rising inflation has exacerbated this situation, making it increasingly difficult for workers to afford basic necessities such as food, housing, and other essential expenses, even with extended working hours.

**“Inflation is having a severe impact on workers. No matter how many hours they work, they cannot afford decent food, housing, or a dignified life. This situation is unsustainable.”**

- Interview, Bangladesh Women's Centre Representative



### 3. RESTRICTED ACCESS TO INFORMATION, SUPPORT NETWORKS, AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

#### Lack of Awareness and Education:

Many women workers have limited access to information about their labour rights and the role of unions in securing better conditions. This lack of awareness is often due to restricted formal education, limited outreach by unions, and workplace environments where discussions about labour rights are discouraged. Without sufficient knowledge, women may not recognise the benefits of union membership or understand how to advocate for themselves effectively.

“Unions are key to making sustainable change [so] our focus is on building women’s capacity to understand what unions can offer them, including freedom of expression, movement, and association.”

- Interview, Bangladesh Women’s Centre Representative

#### Restricted Mobility and Exclusion from Networks:

In some cases, women are unable to attend union meetings due to factory restrictions or security concerns. Union meetings are often held at times or locations that are difficult for women to access safely, particularly if they take place after dark.

“Gender-based violence (GBV) is a major issue in Bangladesh, which goes unaddressed, making it even more difficult for women to step into leadership roles within unions or management.”

- Interview, Bangladesh Women’s Centre Representative

#### Overburdened with Unpaid Care Work:

The expectation that women are responsible for both paid work and household duties means they often do not have time for union activities. Many women juggle long working hours with caregiving responsibilities, leaving little room for additional advocacy or leadership roles. Without structural support, such as childcare provisions or flexible scheduling for union activities, their participation in collective bargaining and leadership remains significantly limited.

#### Restrictions on Safe Communication Channels:

In Myanmar, where independent union activity has been severely repressed since the coup, many union leaders have gone underground or fled the country. This has made it difficult for workers – especially women – to access reliable information, seek guidance, or safely communicate about labour rights. Online communication channels are restricted, and many platforms commonly used for worker organising, such



as Messenger, require VPNs – which are now also banned by the military.<sup>24</sup> The fear of surveillance and retaliation further discourages open discussions about workplace rights, leaving women workers more isolated.

**“ Some unions may be continuing their work, but underground. We are not connected with them through our work, because it is not safe. [So] to us, they are silent. ”**

- Interview, Myanmar Women's Centre Representative

### **Lack of Promotion Opportunities:**

Women are underrepresented not only in unions but also in factory management. The dominance of male leadership at every level of the garment sector limits opportunities for women to rise into decision-making roles, further entrenching gender disparities and hindering their progression into leadership within unions.

**“ Women's leadership in trade unions is important, but it is equally important to see women represented in management on the factory floors, as these positions are overwhelmingly held by men. ”**

- Interview, Bangladesh Women's Centre Representative

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<sup>24</sup> Mi Ei Thinzar Myint, Signal Down: Junta Blocks Last Secure Communication Channel in Myanmar, The Irrawaddy, 23 July 2024 [\[online\]](#).

#### 4. SHRINKING SPACE FOR UNIONS AND INCREASING POLITICAL RISKS

While garment workers in Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Myanmar have the legal right to freedom of association under international labour conventions and national laws, the reality is far more complex. Independent union activity is increasingly restricted, while state-aligned or employer-backed “yellow unions” proliferate. Women workers, already underrepresented in union leadership, are particularly vulnerable to these shrinking democratic and labour spaces.

##### ‘Yellow’ Unions as a Tool to Suppress Independent Organising

As genuine unions gain visibility and influence, employers and governments have responded by creating or co-opting so-called “yellow unions.” These are unions that claim to represent workers but, in reality, serve the interests of factory management or state authorities, without real membership except on paper. Sometimes these unions are created as a counter to real unions. Yellow unions operate in various ways to suppress independent organising:

- **Diverting membership away from real unions:** Workers may be misled into joining yellow unions, believing they offer legitimate representation. In some cases, workers are automatically enrolled in yellow unions without consent.
- **Undermining collective bargaining:** By claiming to represent workers, yellow unions can negotiate weak or management-friendly agreements that fail to address real workplace concerns. This reduces the bargaining power of independent unions.

- **Intimidation and misinformation:** Some yellow unions pressure workers to leave independent unions by spreading misinformation about the risks of unionising, offering short-term incentives, or threatening job losses.

For women, who already face cultural and institutional barriers to participating in unions, the existence of yellow unions further restricts their ability to engage in meaningful advocacy. Many workers—especially young women with limited awareness of their rights—may struggle to differentiate between legitimate and employer-controlled unions. This dynamic weakens overall worker representation and dilutes the impact of union-driven labour rights advocacy.

“ We are also facing the issue of yellow unions, which can further undermine independent worker organising and limit meaningful representation for women. ”

- Interview, Bangladesh Women's Centre Representative

##### Legal and Political Barriers to Independent Union Formation and Activity

Independent union activity is increasingly repressed in many garment-producing countries, including Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, where both employers and state actors employ a range of legal and extra-legal tactics to restrict worker organising and collective bargaining. Restrictive labour laws and bureaucratic hurdles present significant challenges to

unionisation. In Cambodia, the 2016 Trade Union Law (TUL) introduced burdensome registration requirements for new unions, making it more difficult for independent unions to gain legal recognition. Strict membership thresholds and complex administrative processes have been used to deny or delay registration, limiting the ability of unions to operate effectively.

In Bangladesh, union registration is frequently and arbitrarily rejected, particularly in export-processing zones, where workers face severe restrictions on forming independent unions. Meanwhile, in Myanmar, independent union registration has effectively ceased, and many trade unions have been dismantled or forced underground, leaving workers with little recourse to collective action or labour protections.

### **Criminalisation of Union Activists and Worker Intimidation:**

Independent unions across the garment sector in each country increasingly face repression, with union-busting tactics employed to suppress worker organising.<sup>25</sup> Harassment, surveillance, and arbitrary legal action against union leaders are widespread, often with employers coordinating with authorities to dismantle labour activism.<sup>26</sup> Workers who attempt to unionise risk dismissals, blacklisting, and, in some cases, physical intimidation, making collective bargaining efforts increasingly difficult.<sup>27</sup> These risks not only weaken unions but also deter workers—especially women—from participating in advocacy for better wages,

working conditions, and protections against workplace abuses.

Myanmar presents an extreme case of state-led repression of union activists. Since the 2021 military coup, the regime has violently cracked down on trade unionists, forcing many into hiding or exile. Union leaders who previously advocated for garment workers' rights have been detained, while female union members face heightened risks if they attempt to organise. The near-total dismantling of independent unions has left many workers without formal protections, exposing them to further exploitation and deteriorating labour conditions.<sup>28</sup>

### **Impacts of Union Repression on Women Garment Workers and Women's Centres**

For women in the garment sector, and for civil society actors working to improve their rights, these shrinking democratic and union spaces have far-reaching consequences. The repression of independent unions disproportionately affects women, who often rely on unions to advocate for protections against gender-based discrimination, maternity rights, and workplace harassment. When unions are weakened, these issues are deprioritised or ignored altogether.

- **Cambodia:** In Cambodia, women-led initiatives such as WE House continue to advocate for women's right to free association and increased female leadership within trade unions. Despite these efforts, restrictive labour laws and deeply ingrained cultural

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<sup>25</sup> CENTRAL, Barriers to Representation: Freedom of Association in Cambodia, 2024, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>26</sup> Human Rights Watch, Cambodia: Covid-19 Pandemic Used for Union Busting, 2022, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>27</sup> Human Rights Watch, Bangladesh: Garment Workers' Union Rights Bleak, 2017, [\[online\]](#).

<sup>28</sup> FairWear, Myanmar's Garment Industry at a Glance, 2023, [\[online\]](#).

norms continue to limit women's ability to meaningfully influence decision-making processes. Additionally, civil society actors that engage with trade unions must navigate a sensitive political landscape. Those perceived as favouring independent unions risk being seen as aligned with political opposition parties—particularly the now-dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP)—which can pose significant risks to their operations and credibility.

- **Bangladesh:** While some progress has been made through organisations like the Awaj Foundation, which works with independent and women-led

unions to advance women's labour rights, opposition from factory owners and state authorities remains a significant barrier.

- **Myanmar:** With independent unions largely dismantled, Women's Centres have become one of the few remaining safe spaces where female workers can access legal education and support. However, their ability to operate is limited by state surveillance and political risks.



## TRADE UNION SNAPSHOT



### Cambodia

Cambodia's garment industry employs approximately 925,000 workers, with women making up over 75% of this workforce. While unionisation rates in the sector are relatively high on paper, with around 60% of garment workers belonging to unions, the prevalence of "yellow unions"—aligned with employers or the government—has undermined genuine worker representation. These unions weaken collective bargaining efforts, discourage independent organising and threaten workers' collective actions for the fights against unfair labour practices which are organized by independent and democratic unions. The real union density rate is estimated to be around 15%.

The 2016 Trade Union Law (TUL) introduced strict regulations, requiring unions to meet high membership thresholds and submit detailed financial records. These bureaucratic hurdles make it difficult for independent unions, particularly smaller or newly formed ones, to register and operate legally. Failure to comply with these regulations can result in the revocation of union registration, further restricting workers' ability to organise and bargain collectively.

Despite women comprising the majority of the workforce, they remain underrepresented in union leadership. In 2016, the Women Union Network (WUN) was established as an umbrella partnership to empower female workers, strengthen their leadership skills, and advocate for improved working conditions. WUN also provides critical support against gender-based violence in the workplace. However, broader challenges persist, with a restrictive legal and political environment limiting the ability of workers—especially women—to assert their rights effectively.

## TRADE UNION SNAPSHOT



### Bangladesh

Bangladesh's garment sector, the second-largest in the world, employs over 4.5 million workers, most of whom are women. While trade unions have pushed for better wages and working conditions, they remain constrained by restrictive labour laws, factory-level suppression, and employer-backed yellow unions designed to weaken independent organising.

The Bangladesh Labour Act grants workers the right to unionise, but factories require at least 20% of employees to be members before applying for registration, a process often blocked by authorities. Unionised workers frequently face retaliation, including dismissals, intimidation, and violent crackdowns. At the same time, yellow unions, controlled by factory owners, misrepresent worker interests, discourage strikes, and obstruct collective bargaining, further marginalising women, who already face wage disparities and workplace harassment.

Participation Committees (PCs), mandated in factories with over 50 workers, offer a controlled alternative to unions but lack collective bargaining rights. Employers often use PCs to sideline genuine organising efforts, selecting worker representatives while limiting meaningful participation, particularly for women. Strengthening independent unions is crucial to improving conditions for women workers and ensuring that economic growth does not come at the cost of labour rights violations.

## TRADE UNION SNAPSHOT



### Myanmar

Since the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar's trade union landscape has faced severe repression. The ruling junta has systematically dismantled independent labour organisations, targeting union leaders with arrests, torture, and imprisonment. The Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar (CTUM) and its affiliates have been particularly affected, with many leaders forced into hiding or exile.

In a move to further suppress independent labour movements, the military regime established the Myanmar Labour Confederation (MLC), a state-controlled entity designed to replace legitimate unions like the CTUM. This action violates international labour standards, undermining workers' rights to free association and collective bargaining.<sup>29</sup>

The garment sector, employing predominantly women, has been severely impacted. Workers face deteriorating conditions, including wage violations, excessive working hours, and increased gender-based violence. The absence of independent unions has left these workers vulnerable, with limited avenues to advocate for their rights or address grievances.

While grassroots organisations and Women's Centres continue to operate in order to support women workers, the erosion of labour rights in Myanmar highlights the critical need for international solidarity and intervention to protect workers and restore fundamental freedoms.

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<sup>29</sup> Khaing Zar Aung, The Labor Movement in Myanmar Is Facing Brutal Retaliation, Jacobin, 10 October 2024, [\[online\]](#).



## V. OUTLOOK AND CALL TO ACTION

The underrepresentation of women in union leadership has significant implications for the broader female workforce. Addressing the root causes – including the cultural, social, and legislative/political barriers explored throughout Section IV of this concept note – requires concerted, sustained, and collective action.

Without women leaders to champion their interests, many of the unique challenges faced by women garment workers risk going unaddressed. Issues such as sexual harassment, maternity leave, and gender pay gaps are less likely to be prioritised in male-dominated unions. This oversight perpetuates a cycle of gender inequality and

limits the overall effectiveness of unions in advocating for all workers' rights.

Interviews with local representatives emphasised that it is important to recognise – and provide sustainable funding to – emerging efforts aimed at increasing women's involvement in union leadership. Initiatives by international organisations and local NGOs working to empower female workers through training and capacity-building programs, such as the Women's Centres in Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, are providing effective, deeply rooted, and readily scalable solutions. These programs focus on leadership skills, legal rights, and advocacy, and, where it is safe to

do so, they help to equip women with the tools they need to take on more prominent roles within unions.

Additionally, in Cambodia and Bangladesh, some unions are beginning to recognise the importance of gender inclusivity and are taking steps to create more supportive environments for female members. This includes implementing gender quotas for leadership positions, offering childcare during meetings, and scheduling activities at times that are more convenient for women with disproportionate household responsibilities.

To enhance the mutually reinforcing dynamic relationship between women's empowerment initiatives and trade unions, further action is needed:

1. **Protect and promote freedom of association** in garment-producing countries, ensuring that unions can operate without fear of government or employer interference.
2. **Provide economic and legal protections** for women workers so they feel secure enough to engage in union activities. For example, reducing the reliance on extensive overtime to support dependents can free up time for women to engage in union activities.
3. **Strengthen cross-border networks and activities** to support worker empowerment initiatives in politically restrictive environments. For instance, a representative from Myanmar suggested establishing Myanmar-language Women's Centres in host countries across the region where high numbers of emigrant women garment workers have settled, in order to reduce their vulnerabilities to exploitation and trafficking.
4. **Expand the role of Women's Centres** as alternative platforms for education, organising, and advocacy, particularly where union activity is restricted. Doing so safely and sustainably will require thorough risk assessments and deferring to local experts' knowledge of the specific context, as well as long-term, committed resourcing.
5. **Build a regional network for women to participate in unions**, to strengthen cross-border solidarity, enabling women to share strategies for overcoming legal, social, and institutional barriers to union participation. This network could amplify efforts to harmonise labour rights protections across countries and strengthen collective bargaining power, by fostering sustained dialogue and knowledge exchange. Such a network could also facilitate the following:
  - **Sharing ideas for overcoming barriers** to union formation and improving women's representation in union leadership, and sharing best practices in relation to childcare provision, retirement benefits, or other relevant topics;
  - Establishing **cross-country mentorship programs**, experienced union leaders are paired with women who are new to union activities, to build confidence and develop new generations of engaged women union members and leaders in each country;
  - Co-designing strategies to engage the public, in particular men, and change attitudes about women's roles and leadership

capacity;

- Sharing **success stories** of women-led union initiatives and their impact on working conditions. Celebrating these achievements can motivate more women to join unions and take on leadership roles.
- Promoting **cross-border social protection** policies and legal **harmonisation**;
- Establishing a **regional legal support system**, including, for example, a pro bono **legal aid** network, **mobile legal clinics**, and **online legal resources** in local languages;
- Developing and implementing widespread **education campaigns** to inform women about their rights to unionise and the benefits of union membership.
- Such a network could offer a peer-to-peer platform for **support and solidarity**, where women can share experiences, seek advice, offer mutual aid, and gain emotional and practical support from peers facing similar challenges. Participation in the network could also boost personal and professional growth, providing women with opportunities for leadership development, skills training, and increased confidence in advocating for themselves and others.

## CONCLUSION

Addressing the structural barriers that prevent women from participating in and leading unions is essential for achieving fairer, more equitable labour conditions in the garment sector. The systemic exclusion of women from union leadership weakens the effectiveness of collective bargaining and perpetuates gender-based inequalities in wages, working conditions, and protections against harassment.

Women's Centres and other empowerment initiatives play a crucial role in bridging this gap by providing education, advocacy, and leadership training. However, without strong, independent unions, the ability of these initiatives to secure lasting improvements for women workers remains constrained. Strengthening women's representation in unions, protecting freedom of association in increasingly restrictive operating environments, and fostering regional networks of solidarity are all important steps in this effort.



