Gender-based Violence and Harassment in Cambodia's Construction and Garment Sectors

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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For female garment and cement workers

Author's Declaration

This thesis is my own work and does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. It does not contain any material previously published or written by another person where due reference is not made in the text. This thesis meets the University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.

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Abstract

Gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace (workplace GBVH) is a persistent global issue with far-reaching consequences for workers' well-being and the workplace. Despite international frameworks such as the International Labour Organization's Convention C190, which affirms the right to a safe and dignified work environment, workplace GBVH remains deeply entrenched in many sectors. This thesis investigates the structural and cultural underpinnings of workplace GBVH in Cambodia's garment and construction industries – two sectors with contrasting gender compositions and levels of global supply chains integration. Using a refined version of Hearn and Parkin's (2001) three-level framework, this thesis addresses the following research question: How does the organisation of work and workplace culture contribute to the normalisation of workplace GBVH in global and regional supply chains? In answering this question, the study reveals how workplace GBVH is embedded across macro-level institutional structures, meso-level organisational practices, and micro-level interpersonal dynamics.

The findings challenge the notion that workplace GBVH is merely the result of individual misconduct, instead demonstrating that it is a systemic issue rooted in the highly gendered society, the organisation of work, and workplace cultures that normalise silence and complicity around women's experiences in both settings. Notably, the research questions the effectiveness of global supply chain governance and voluntary compliance mechanisms, showing that even in sectors with international oversight, such as garment manufacturing, protections against workplace GBVH remain weak without enforcement and accountability. Furthermore, the study pushes back against assumptions that women are safer in female-dominated sectors, revealing that gender composition alone does not mitigate workplace GBVH; rather, it is the intersection of gender with structural and cultural dynamics that shapes women's experiences. This thesis, ultimately, contributes to a deeper understanding of GBVH at work, offering critical insights for designing more effective, context-sensitive strategies to create truly safe workplaces, particularly for women.

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Chapter One

Introduction

For seven years, Sreymom had worked as a cleaner in a cement factory.[1] Each day, she endured heat, exposure to cement dust, and the discomfort of sharing break spaces and toilets with male co-workers, leaving her feeling exposed and humiliated. When working, Sreymom followed unsafe instructions from her male group leader not because she did not know the risks while conducting cleaning when the machine was still operating, but because she could not afford to say no, knowing that speaking up could mean losing overtime opportunities which she desperately needed to raise her children or even losing her job altogether. Sreymom believed she had to 'work like a man' to earn respect and avoid being seen as 'half-hearted' in a workplace shaped by male values. When a physical fight broke out between two of Sreymom's female co-workers, Sreymom stepped in not to report it, but instead to silence them, fearing that if management found out, both women would be fired. Sreymom's actions reflect the broader, often invisible compromises that women make at work where they are subjected to violence by other women as well as men and where silence becomes a mechanism of survival.

Sreymom's story is not unique. Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) at work is a global and seemingly intractable problem that impacts millions of workers, most of them women. Numerous studies identify a range of potential consequences for workers, including impacts on their mental health (K. Blindow et al. 2024), their employment (Cortina and Areguin 2021; Akter, Teicher, and Alam 2024), their physical well-being (Rahman and Ferdous 2024; K.J. Blindow 2024), and their economic stability (Zacchia and Zuazu 2023). For employers, GBVH potentially results in lost time, injuries, complaints, staff turnover, loss of skills and reputational risk (Vara-Horna et al.

[1] INT2KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.

2023; Au, Dong, and Tremblay 2024). According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), workplace sexual harassment cost the world USD 2.6 billion in lost productivity and USD 0.9 billion in other financial costs in 2018 alone (ILO 2021). These wide-ranging consequences underscore the urgency of addressing GBVH not only as a human rights issue but also as a matter of economic and organisational sustainability.

Despite the international consensus on the importance of making workplaces safe, workplace GBVH remains pervasive.[2] One of the reasons that women suffer is that workplaces are not gender-neutral (Jeff. Hearn and Parkin 2001; Acker 1990; Applin, Simpson, and Curtis 2023). Scholars consistently highlight the role gender plays in how management controls labour, as is evident in the power dynamics embedded in the organisation of work and workplace cultures (Habib 2014; Ong 1991). As such, the workplace should not be considered as only a physical space but a site where gender roles are actively constructed, reconstructed, and maintained (Jeff. Hearn and Parkin 2001). As Ward (2022) points out, gender stereotypes are perpetuated through workplace practices, maintaining women's unequal participation in union activities and normalising these issues within workplace culture.

Building on this understanding of workplace GBVH as a structural and cultural issue, this thesis addresses the following research question: How does the organisation of work and workplace culture contribute to the normalisation of workplace GBVH in global and regional supply chains? In doing so, it differentiates both between male- and female-dominated sectors and between sectors with a high level of integration into the global economy and sectors that do not. In seeking to explain interactions between global and national institutions and the social-cultural context of specific countries, with firm-

[2] The ILO has repeatedly emphasised the importance of making workplaces safe from violence and harassment, including GBVH. To demonstrate this commitment, it adopted the Convention on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (C190) in June 2019, sending a clear signal to member states that violence and harassment at work are detrimental, and encouraging member states to ratify the Convention (ILO 2025). C190 constitutes an international commitment among governments, employers, and trade unions to ensure workplace safety. It addresses a wide range of unacceptable behaviours and practices and applies to all individuals in the world of work, regardless of their location or employment status. While acknowledging that violence and harassment can affect individuals with gender identities, it recognises that women are disproportionately targeted due to their gender.

level policy and practice and people's behaviour in Cambodia's garment and cement factories, it employs a refinement of Hearn and Parkin's (2001) multi-level approach to enable a nuanced analysis of how GBVH is embedded across three interrelated levels: the macro, the meso and the micro. By applying this refined framework to Cambodia's garment and cement factories, the thesis confirms how GBVH is not simply a matter of poor behaviour or even poor management. It is also a consequence of deeply embedded structural and institutional dynamics. Based on my analysis of these sectors, this thesis determines that, although cement workers and garment workers are employed in different sectors with varying workforce demographics (one male-dominated and one female-dominated) and levels of exposure to the global economy, their experiences of workplace GBVH are broadly consistent. In short, while the two sectors are characterised by specific risk factors, the organisation of work and workplace culture in both continue to perpetuate highly gendered forms of violence and harassment.

Definitions

To lay the groundwork for this analysis, it is important to first clarify key terms that are used frequently in this thesis. Four key terms need to be defined, namely 'gender', 'workplace GBVH', 'the organisation of work' and 'workplace culture'. Gender refers to the socially prescribed roles of being a woman or a man, that is, it is a social construct. Kelan (2010) argues that gender is constructed and reconstructed through interaction. For example, if women are in managerial positions, they often have to act like men to fulfil the male script of being a 'manager'. At the same time, if they act like a man, they are punished for not being woman enough, that is, for not carrying out their socially constructed role (Kelan 2010). This expectation extends beyond specific roles to entire industries. For instance, in traditionally male-dominated sectors such as transportation, women must conform to certain behaviours to be accepted as part of the group (Foley et al. 2022). The issue is not simply about women being women, but about how the characteristics of male-dominated sectors – defined and maintained by men – shape what is considered acceptable behaviour for people of different genders (Baxter and Wallace 2009). Of course, all people may be affected by GBVH (Enarson and Morrow 1998), but

women are the majority of victims of GBVH (McDonald 2012). In defining the scope of this research, I have therefore chosen to focus on women's experiences.

The second term that needs clarification is 'workplace GBVH'. Workplace GBVH is a subcategory of workplace violence and harassment, defined as behaviours and practices that threaten the physical, psychological, sexual or economic well-being of individuals based on their gender or sex (Runge 2020). In the workplace, GBVH incidents can range from subtle harassment to serious forms like sexual assault or rape and can occur once or multiple times (Runge 2020). Perpetrators may include co-workers, supervisors, subcontractors, management or third parties (McDonald 2012). As confirmed in C190, GBVH can manifest in various settings, including workplaces, employer-provided accommodation, work-related events, and even during travel to and from work (Runge 2020). As specified in C190, risk factors for GBVH in the workplace include poor working conditions and informality, stress and stigma, discrimination (including intersecting inequalities), roles involving contact with the public, isolated or remote work, and circumstances of crisis, all of which create environments where violence and harassment can proliferate (UNWomen and ILO 2024).

The third term that needs to be defined is 'organisation of work'. As highlighted in the literature, the way in which work is physically undertaken, and the physical conditions of work, such as inadequate safety measures or unfair wage practices, can severely exacerbate vulnerabilities and increase the risk of GBVH (Naved et al. 2018). In this study, the organisation of work is defined as the work process but also the division of labour, and related issues such as production targets, wages and conditions. The fourth term, 'workplace culture', refers to the ways in which people act and interact within a workplace (Greenwood 1997). It is important to note that workplace culture is guided by both written and unwritten rules, which are both crucial elements in the construction of workplace cultures (Agapio 2002). There are multiple aspects of workplace culture, but the ones considered in detail in this study include social norms, the distribution of power, incentive structures, organisational tolerance, and accountability.

Approach and Method

To understand how workplace GBVH is constituted through 'violations' (cf. Hearn and Parkin 2001) at the macro, meso and micro level, I compared female workers' experiences in Cambodia's garment and cement factories. The comparative case study method involves the in-depth, contextualised analysis of two or more cases with the aim of exploring similarities and differences across settings (Bartlett and Vavrus 2017). Scholars have used this method to understand the labour process on the shop floors and their links to labour exploitation in tortilla factories in the US and Mexico (Muñoz 2019) and in comparing different patterns of labour activism in garment factories in China and Cambodia (Franceschini 2020). This method is appropriate for this study because it allows for a direct comparison of workplace GBVH in different factory settings within the same industry. It also facilitates comparison between industries, allowing for an assessment of the impact of integration into global and regional supply chains on management's responses to workplace GBVH.

In each factory, I undertook a detailed study of ways in which work was organised and the workplace cultures in which it took place. The purpose of this detailed study was to identify how specific aspects of the organisation of work and workplace culture contributed to (a) the incidence of workplace GBVH and (b) the responses of different actors to it. Female workers' narratives are central to each empirical chapter, not as anecdotal illustrations but as a primary source data that illuminates how GBVH is experienced, interpreted and resisted within workplace contexts. As Guiterrez et al. argue, when researching sensitive topics like gender-based violence:

> [I]t is essential to employ methods that empower women, enhance their autonomy, and foster a sense of being believed, ultimately promoting their personal control and freedom. In this regard, narrative interviewing is well-suited to fulfil these needs. Through narrative interviews, women have the opportunity to share their experiences in their own words, reclaim their agency, and shape their own narratives, thereby contributing to their empowerment and the sense of control over their own lives (Gutierrez, Choperena, and Belloso 2024, 3).

Storytelling thus positions participants not only as respondents but as knowledge producers, generating insights that would otherwise remain invisible.

To ensure methodological rigour, workers' narratives were systematically analysed alongside observational and other key informants interview data to identify recurring patterns and divergences. Coding focused on themes related to the arrangement of work, working conditions, organisational practices, power dynamics and cultural norms across cases. Triangulation with other data sources ensured that personal experiences of women enriched the comparative analysis, thereby strengthening interpretive validity (Braun and Clarke 2006). This integrated approach enabled the study to trace how macro-level supply chain structures and meso-level workplace cultures and organisation of work intersect with micro-level experiences of GBVH, producing a holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

Case selection

There are three primary reasons why Cambodia is an ideal location for this research. Firstly, Cambodian society is highly gendered in ways that value men over women (Brickell 2011). There are behavioural codes that dictate how men and women should act both at home and in public, and women are expected to be quiet, diplomatic, avoid conflicts, remain virgins before marriage, and uphold their family's honour (Derks 2008). If they deviate from these behavioural codes, they are subjected to intense social pressure. Conversely, men are considered the head of the family, the primary breadwinner and are responsible for ensuring that family members behave appropriately; where they are not, men have the license to discipline them (Lilja and Baaz 2016). Understanding this societal context helps explain why women behave in certain ways in response to their experiences at work.

Secondly, women are well-represented in the paid workforce, particularly in the garment and construction sectors, which are two of the most important sectors in the Cambodian economy (Ministry of Planning 2019). Employment in footwear and garment was approximately 660,000 in 2018 (ILO 2019), up from 600, 000 in 2015 (ILO 2015). Most workers are migrants from rural areas. As each garment worker supports around

five dependents (Salmivaara 2020), the sector provides livelihoods for approximately one-quarter of Cambodia's 16 million citizens. It also provides the vast majority of formal-sector employment opportunities for women, who account for 80-85 percent of the sector's workforce (Nuon 2021). Cambodia's cement factories play a critical role in supporting its construction sector. In fact, just five cement factories produce enough cement products to support half the building projects in the country (Chea 2021). There are no statistics available for the industry as a whole, but women account for around 15 percent of the workforce in the three factories studied.

Thirdly, the incidence of workplace GBVH is known to be high in the garment sector. A survey published by CARE Australia found that nearly one in three Khmer garment workers had experienced sexual harassment in the year before the survey was conducted (Heron, Cooper, and Meagher 2017). There is no pre-existing scholarship on working conditions in the cement factories, and certainly no prior information on the incidence of workplace GBVH. However, as the most developed male-dominated factory environment in the country, cement production was a logical comparator for the female-dominated garment sector.

Data collection

In the garment sector, I collected data from three garment factories, all of which are integrated into global supply chains. Two of these factories are located in Kandal Province and one in Phnom Penh. Phnom Penh is the leading area for garment production, providing employment to 18 percent of the country's garment workers (ILO 2018). Kandal, which has a long history of garment production and remains the province with the most garment factories, accounted for around 15 percent of garment workers (ILO 2018). In 2018, it was the second-largest province in terms of the number of garment factories. Workers in Kandal Province mostly live in their own homes, although some night shift workers live in employer-provided accommodation. The three cement factories included in the study are all part of Asian supply chains. All three are located in Kampot Province, which is home to four of the five cement factories in the country as shown in Figure 1.1.

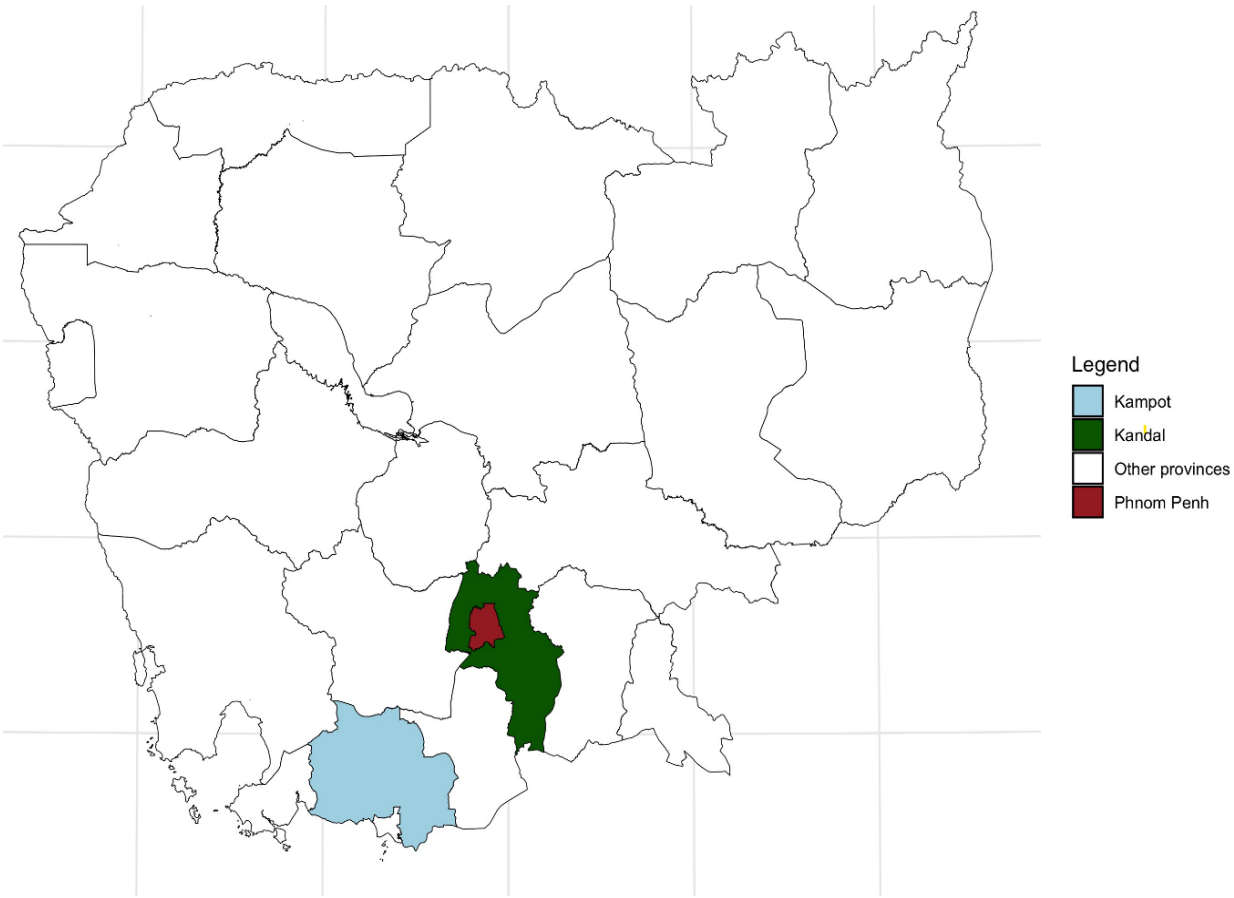

Figure 1.1. Map of Research Sites

In both sectors, the factories are owned or managed by foreign interests. The three garment sector factories are Thai, Hong Kong, and Chinese-owned and the three cement factories are Thai, Khmer-owned (but Chinese-managed) and Chinese-owned. These diverse ownership profiles make it possible to examine the extent to which nationally inflected management styles impact workplace culture and the organisation of work. Selecting factories with different ownership and management profiles provides a more nuanced understanding of how global capital and transnational management practices influence the persistence – or mitigation – of workplace GBVH in the two sectors, and prior research in the garment sector indicates that language barriers and different cultural

backgrounds cause conflicts between Khmer workers and Chinese supervisors (Derks 2008).

I conducted a total of 164 interviews, of which 160 focused on the factory level (Table 1.1), and an additional four involved national union officials.[3]

Table 1.1. Factory-level Interviews

	Thai Garment Factory	Hong Kong Garment Factory	Chinese Garment Factory	Thai Cement Factory	Khmer Cement Factory	Chinese Cement Factory
Human Resources Staff	0	1	0	1	0	0
Factory Administrative Officers	0	3	0	1	0	1
Subcontractor Staff	0	0	0	0	1	0
Safety Officers	0	0	0	1	0	0
Enterprise Union Officials	2	3	2	3	2	1
Group Leaders	1	4	2	2	4	4
Female Workers	18	25	17	28	20	12

Factory-level data collection involved three phases in each factory. The first phase (January 2022 to September 2022) involved long-form, semi-structured interviews with female workers. During this period, I conducted 60 interviews with female workers from three cement factories and 60 interviews with female workers from three garment factories.[4] I selected this modality because long-form, semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to establish rapport between interviewer and participant (Magaldi and Berler 2020), which is essential in a study focusing on GBVH. This method allows space

[3] I conducted five interviews with national union officials across both sectors. In the construction sector, I focused on one national union that had affiliates in all three cement factories.

[4] The cement factory interviews were conducted as part of 'Better Responses to Gender-based Violence in Cambodia's Construction Sector' (LP200100431), the Australian Research Council-funded Linkage Project to which my PhD was attached.

for informants' verbal expressions (Byrne 2004), which helps them feel that their stories have been heard. The semi-structured interviews were guided by a set of topic areas designed to foster discussion around my central research question, including their motivations for working, general working conditions, organisation of work, workplace cultures, their experiences of GBVH (direct or indirect), the impact of violence on their well-being and self-esteem, and the roles of key players such as management, subcontractors, trade unions and co-workers in responding to GBVH incidents.

Recruiting participants was not easy, especially from the cement factories, where the majority of workers are men. In Kampot, I stayed in a guesthouse because most workers lived in the surrounding villages. I stayed in nearby town, as local union representatives advised me to stay where I could get a good phone connection (the village had poor reception). I travelled daily to the area near the factories, where I met with workers. It was challenging at first, as workers did not know who I was, but they became more interested in my research over time. In Kandal province, I rented a room in an area where many garment workers lived. My landlady owned a small shop in front of her house where many workers came to buy groceries, especially after work. I came and sat at the shop almost every day, which allowed garment workers to become familiar with me. The situation was very different in Phnom Penh, where workers live in accommodation scattered across the city. There, I relied at first on introductions from local trade union representatives to connect with workers. I then followed up by visiting workers at their homes or meeting them in informal settings such as markets near their residences. These casual encounters helped build trust and allowed for more open conversations over time.

Since my study focused on women's experiences of GBVH, and workers are often reluctant to discuss this matter to protect themselves from social backlash (Weber et al. 2022), I had to find a safe way for women to share their experiences. I ensured this by conducting the interviews in private, neutral locations chosen by the participants, and by allowing them to decide the time and pace of the conversation. I also used open-ended questions and reassured participants that their identities would remain confidential. In some cases, I conducted a few initial conversations on their daily activities and showed

interest in their lives which allowed trust to build gradually before conducting the actual interview. These strategies helped create a space where women felt safer to speak about their experiences without fear of judgment or retaliation. In addition, participants were provided with access to a confidential local counselling service, with supporting documentation and hotline details provided at the time of the interview. This measure provided a critical safeguard given the potential emotional distress associated with recounting experiences of GBVH, reflecting my commitment to a trauma-informed and ethically responsible research design.

Each of the semi-structured interviews I conducted lasted approximately 60 minutes, depending on the availability of the interviewees. I explained the aims and objectives of the research to each participant and protected their privacy and confidentiality by using pseudonyms. A few potential participants were reluctant to participate, and those who participated sometimes revealed their direct and indirect experiences of GBVH toward the middle or the end of the interviews. My informants understood that the interviews could stop at any time, and I only audio-recorded the interviews with permission. Each participant was told that they were free to withdraw at any time without having to explain why. However, once they began talking, none of them wanted to withdraw. As one participant said emphatically before the interview even started, 'I'm glad that you come to ask me about my working conditions, as I've never met anyone who is interested in my work and my life.'[5]

I was mindful of my positionality when conducting research because my opinions, social background and belief system could potentially influence my research process including how data should be collected and analysed. Research is a process that is shared between the researcher and participants, it is not just a production of knowledge, and the identities of both the participants and the researcher influence that research process (England, cited in Manohar et al. 2017). Scholars have noted that when the researcher is a female and participants are female, communication tends to be much better and the data is more meaningful (Gill and Maclean 2002). As a female Khmer, I did not find it difficult to start a conversation with female workers about GBVH. My shared gender and

[5] Fieldnote, August 2022.

cultural background helped build rapport and trust. However, I was also aware of the differences in class and education between myself and the participants. To minimise these barriers, I made conscious choices in how I presented myself. I dressed simply, in clothing similar to what many workers wore, and avoided anything that might signal authority or distance. I travelled by tuk-tuk or on foot, rather than by car or motorbike, to avoid appearing privileged or inaccessible. I also adjusted my language, using informal Khmer and avoiding technical or academic terms, to ensure that conversations felt natural and inclusive.

The second phase of data collection involved interviews with 26 senior staff members responsible for human resources, administration, production and safety in the factories. My objective here was to understand the organisation of work and workplace practices from management perspectives as well as their view on GBVH and their response strategies. These interviews, which were conducted after all the workers' interviews were completed in order to protect my worker informants, were conducted before February 2024. The Hong Kong Garment Factory accepted my interview request partly because the management knew me from my previous work with Better Factories Cambodia (BFC), and I was able to interview key personnel, including human resource and administrative officers, a dispute resolution officer, a compliance officer, male group leaders, and female supervisors. The Thai Garment Factory and the Chinese Garment Factory rejected my email requests and letters, with one citing a busy production schedule, and the other ignoring my request. However, through my trade union connections, I managed to interview two group leaders (one male and one female) from the Chinese Garment Factory and one female supervisor from the Thai Garment Factory. My previous work with BFC added a layer of complexity to the garment factory interviews. Some participants initially associated me with monitoring or compliance roles, which could have influenced how they responded. To address this, I was transparent about my current role as a student and researcher, and I took time to explain the purpose of my study and how it differed from my past work. I emphasised that I was there to listen and learn from their experiences – not to evaluate or report on them. This repositioning was essential in building trust and encouraging open dialogue.

The third phase of data collection took place between June 2022 and January 2024. During this time, I interviewed five national federation officials with whom the enterprise unions were affiliated, many of whom knew me from my previous work with BFC. These interviews provided another important layer of insight, helping to contextualise the actions (or inaction) of enterprise-level representatives within broader union strategies and institutional constraints. They also revealed how national-level union leadership conceptualises GBVH, the extent to which it is prioritised in collective bargaining agendas, and the challenges they face in advocating for stronger protections and the informal strategies they sometimes adopt in the absence of formal procedures. I subsequently interviewed 13 enterprise union officials, whom I initially contacted with the help of the national federation leaders with whom the enterprise unions were affiliated. These interviews focused on understanding company and union approaches to workplace GBVH, what interventions they take when GBVH incidents occur, and what reasons lay behind their actions. This multi-level engagement with both enterprise and federation-level actors enriched the analysis by highlighting the disconnects – and occasional alignments – between policy, practice, and lived experience.

Once the interviews were completed, I transcribed the spoken Khmer recordings to written Khmer. I then analysed the interview and other data using inductive thematic data analysis techniques (cf. Braun and Clarke 2021) with the aim of moving beyond the usual explanation of women's experiences of GBVH from its social, economic, and cultural dimensions to identify the way in which GBVH incidents emerge through the organisation of work and workplace cultures. I also collected secondary data about the sectors and government and other public documents related to workplace GBVH, which I accessed online and by direct request. These sources included the Ministry of Planning Labour Force Survey 2019, National Bank of Cambodia for the sectors' development, BFC's reports on the incidence of GBVH cases, and documents from the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training and the Ministry of Women' Affairs.

Thesis Outline

Chapter Two presents my conceptual framework for a better understanding of GBVH, based on a refinement of the three-level analytical framework proposed by Hearn and Parkin (2001). It adapts this modified framework to the Cambodian context by integrating insights from feminist labour studies and global production network literature, which helped me establish the analytical tools I needed to investigate how the macro and meso-levels ultimately shape everyday workplace interactions and normalise the occurrence of GBVH within factory environments. By situating workplace GBVH within broader structural and institutional dynamics, the framework highlights how power relations are produced and reproduced to shape the lived experiences of female workers. In the Cambodian context, the analysis proceeds across these three levels. At the macro level, I examine the impact of international labour standards within global supply chains, as well as national attitudes toward gender and the labour movement, to understand how these broader forces influence meso-level conditions. At the micro level, I focus on individual interactions on the shop floor, demonstrating how these are shaped by – and in turn reinforce – dynamics at both the macro and meso-levels.

The remainder of the thesis is divided into two main parts. Part One focuses on the garment factories and Part Two on the cement factories. Each part consists of three chapters, the first of which discusses the organisation of work, the second of which discusses workplace culture, and the third of which presents the experiences of individual women. Through this detailed and systematic comparative analysis, I demonstrate that women's experiences of workplace GBVH have little to do with whether they are employed in a male or female-dominated sector but rather are dictated primarily by workplace culture and the way in which work is organised. In doing so, it challenges prevailing assumptions about the protective nature of female-dominated workplaces and the effectiveness of global governance mechanisms, showing instead that workplace safety for women depends on how gender is constructed and managed within specific organisational and cultural contexts.

Part One reveals that the organisation of work is highly controlled in the garment factories, creating a high-pressure environment in which women are frequently blamed

for production delays and subjected to verbal abuse and intimidation. Workplace culture in these factories is shaped by hierarchical management structures, often dominated by foreign supervisors, who are mostly male. It is also a culture of silence, which turns a blind eye to everyday practices such as inappropriate touching during body checks, gendered expectations around obedience, and discourages reporting GBVH incidents. Together, these factors create a work environment where GBVH is both pervasive, difficult to challenge, and invisible.

As Part Two reveals, work is less tightly monitored in the cement factories. However, women are often assigned to physically demanding and hazardous tasks based on gendered assumptions about their suitability for 'detail-oriented' or 'cleaning' work. These task assignments not only expose them to physical and psychological risk but also reinforce their marginal status within the workplace, making them more vulnerable to workplace GBVH. The fact that management processes are less formalised – but also the fact that the cement factories are embedded in regional, not global, supply chains – is reflected in the absence of clear procedures for addressing workplace GBVH. Workplace culture is shaped by male dominance, both in numbers and in authority, and by a tolerance for rough or aggressive behaviour. Women in these settings report feeling isolated, especially when they are mostly surrounded by men. And when they experience workplace GBVH, it is almost always dismissed as an individual matter that has nothing to do with management practices, further compounding their vulnerability.

The concluding chapter argues that the Cambodian case confirms the importance of understanding workplace GBVH as a culturally and structurally embedded phenomenon, shaped and sustained by macro- and meso-level interactions that inform micro-level behaviours in the workplace. These study's findings demonstrate that GBVH cannot be reduced to individual behaviours; rather, it is produced through macro-level factors, which are reinforced by meso-level dynamics within organisational structures and workplace cultures. These structural and cultural forces shape norms, power relations, and managerial practices that inform micro-level behaviours on the factory floor. By foregrounding these multi-level interactions, the study not only deepens our understanding of how GBVH operates in factory settings but also lays the groundwork

for future research that applies a multi-level analytical framework to other national and industrial contexts, opening up new avenues for examining how global and regional production systems, local governance structures and workplace cultures interact to shape gendered experiences of work.

Chapter Two

A Framework for Understanding Workplace GBVH

In Chapter One, I demonstrated that workplace GBVH is not only a significant issue but also an urgent matter requiring immediate attention due to its substantial consequences for workers, particularly women, businesses and the broader society. For example, the cost of sexual harassment (one form of workplace GBVH) in Cambodia's garment sector alone is estimated at USD 89 million per year (CARE International 2024). These costs include worker turnover, absenteeism, and presenteeism (where workers are physically at work but unable to fully concentrate due to the psychological impact of harassment). However, this estimate does not include the hidden costs to the victims, their families and society at large including long-term health, social and economic repercussions. Yet, despite the scale of the problem, and its economic and human toll, efforts to address workplace GBVH have yielded only limited results.

Current approaches to addressing workplace GBVH remain narrowly focused on the workplace itself (Caballero 2024; Nielsen, Bjørkelo, and Mikkelsen 2025; Pillinger and Wintour 2019). These include establishing policies and procedures, advocating to have provisions on GBVH in the collective bargaining agreement, and raising the awareness of management and workers. However, relying on these strategies overlooks other important factors, such as national-level influences on the incidence of GBVH at work and the way in which work itself is arranged and organised, making workplace GBVH appear as if it is a standalone issue, when it is not. In short, it is necessary to look beyond the factory level to examine what happens at a broader national context as well as at firm-level factors and interpersonal interactions, which are themselves influenced by broader economic constraints and sociocultural norms.

This chapter does so by introducing a three-level analysis comprised of the macro, meso and micro levels based on an adaptation of the framework developed by Jeff. Hearn and Parkin (2001). Having introduced their original framework, and made the argument for modifying it, the chapter then illustrates it with reference to the comparative literature before applying it to the Cambodian context. In doing so, the chapter challenges the notion that workplace GBVH can be effectively addressed through isolated, factory level interventions alone, calling instead for a more holistic approach that recognises the embeddedness of workplace experiences within broader socio-economic and cultural systems.

Approaches to Studying Workplace GBVH

Much of the literature on workplace GBVH adopts a gendered lens that prioritises women's experiences, reflecting the disproportionate impact of violence and harassment on women in the world of work. This focus is grounded in evidence that women are more likely to experience GBVH due to structural inequalities and gendered power relations (McDonald 2012). Focusing on women allows for an examination of how gender norms intersect at various levels across regional, global production systems, work arrangement and practices to shape vulnerability and resistance. However, scholars caution that this focus should not obscure the experiences of other marginalized groups, nor should it reinforce essentialist assumptions about women as passive victims (Kelan 2010).

While this thesis follows that tradition by centring women's narratives, it does so critically, acknowledging that it is not enough to merely describe women's experiences. necessary to expose systemic patterns of harm. Historically, research on workplace GBVH has been dominated by studies of sexual harassment, often conceptualised as an individual-level problem requiring behavioural or legal remedies (McDonald 2012). This narrow framing has been critiqued for neglecting broader forms of gendered harm, such as bullying, economic coercion and psychological abuse, which operate within organisational and structural contexts. Recent scholarship signals a shift toward more expansive definitions that encompass violence and harassment as culturally and institutionally embedded phenomena (Runge 2020). This thesis responds to this growing

recognition GBVH is part of violence and harassment in the world of work and cannot be understood without situating it within intersecting systems of power, including labour arrangements and practices within supply chains.

Another dominant trend in the literature is the concentration on single industries, often those that are either highly feminized (e.g., garment, care work) or male-dominated (e.g., construction, mining).[1] While such studies provide valuable insights into sector-specific dynamics, they risk producing siloed accounts that overlook cross-industry patterns and structural drivers of GBVH (Pillinger and Wintour 2022). This thesis addresses that gap by adopting a comparative approach, examining GBVH in both garment and construction factories to illuminate how gendered violence is constituted through multi-level interactions that transcend sectoral boundaries.

Hearn and Parkin's Three Levels of Analysis

In their book *Gender, Sexuality and Violence in Organisations: The Unspoken Forces of Organisation Violations* (2001), Hearn and Parkin develop a framework for understanding violence, violations and the act of violating at work that takes into account the fact that the root causes of these phenomena are influenced by broader contextual factors. In this book, the authors argue that it is important to see organisations as active players in constructing, reconstructing and maintaining violations by silencing them through unspoken forces, including gender and sexuality. In order to understand how violations emerge in organisations, then, it is crucial to understand how they are formed and operate. This is because organisations are not only embedded in broader gender orders but are also constituted *by* and *through* gender.[2]

Hearn and Parkin (2001) acknowledge the complexity and contested nature of distinguishing between gender and sex, referencing the work of Oakley (1972, 1985)

[1] See, for example, Kabir, Maple, and Usher (2025), Febrilly and Siscawati (2023), Ayaz et al. (2024), Park et al. (2022), Kissi et al. (2024) and Céspedes-Báez, Prieto-Ríos, and Pontón-Serra (2022).

[2] It is not only Hearn and Parkin that understand gender is central part of the organisation's operations. Other scholars including as Butler (1990); Cockburn (1991); Collins (1995); Alvesson (1998); and Acker (2006). Acker (2006) also suggest that organisations are gendered, and should not be understood as gender neutral, because capitalism does not only control women's labour, but also their bodies.

between biological sex differences and ‘gender’ as social and cultural construction of those differences, much of the debate around which took place during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Part of the complexity lies in the fact that different contexts produce different definition and the distinction it itself is socially and culturally constructed. In this respect, Hearn and Parkin draw on Scott’s (1986) definition of gender as ‘a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power’ (cited in Parkin and Hearn 2001, 6). This definition offers a broader conceptualisation of gender and its presence within organisational structures and processes. Hearn and Parkin go on to define a violation as ‘a process of damaging’ and violence as ‘structures, actions, events and experiences that violate or cause violation or are considered as violating’ (Jeff. Hearn and Parkin 2001, 18). As such, violence can be seen as ‘much more than physical violence, harassment and bullying. It can also include intimidation, interrogation, surveillance, subjugation, discrimination and exclusion that lead to experience of violation.’ This definition offers a broader understanding of violence that shows the connection between violence and violations within organisations, but also the connection between workplace GBVH incidents and broader organisational issues. Although they do not specifically use the term workplace GBVH in their book, it is clearly a form of violation that is constructed and maintained within organisations through workplace structures and practices.

Jeff. Hearn and Parkin (2001) demonstrate that gender is expressed in the workplace through five elements, namely (1) the gendered division of labour, both formally and informally, and its accompanying processes of inclusion and exclusion, which create vertical and horizontal divisions of labour within the organisations; (2) the gendered division of authority, with men typically exerting more authority over both women and other men, producing a gendered bureaucracy; (3) gendered processes between the centre and margins of organisations where ‘front line’ activities are often staffed by women while ‘central’ activities are more often performed by men; (4) the gendered relationships of individuals outside the workplace, where women typically continue to carry unpaid domestic work; and (5) gendered processes in the operation of

sexuality and violence within organisations, including the occurrence of sexual harassment and the dominance of some forms of sexuality over others.

These five elements interact with each other. For instance, the gendered division of labour is closely linked to the gender division of authority because those who hold power – often men – craft rules that appear neutral but in fact uphold a gendered structure that influences how work is allocated. Similarly, male leaders often assert that certain tasks require physical strength, identified as a male trait, and design jobs that 'fit' men. This bias emerges in recruitment process, paving the way for men to seize greater opportunities, leading to higher wages and skills advancement. As such, this system predominantly serves the interests of men, as they find themselves in a cycle where they work for and alongside one another, reinforcing a structure that benefits them more than it benefits women.

As Table 2.1 suggests, Jeff. Hearn and Parkin (2001) differentiate between patriarchal violations, economic violations and cultural violations that occur at the macro, meso and micro levels, which intersect across these levels to shape men's and women's experiences at work. Macro-level factors provide a contextual framework within which organisations both exist and evolve, since organisations do not operate in isolation but are deeply embedded within their surrounding context. As Walby (1990) points out, patriarchy is a social system in which men hold authority over women, children and property. As a consequence of patriarchal structural violations, men's domination extends not only over women but also over other men through the establishment of rules, legislation, and social expectations that dictate behaviour at home and in public, but also at work. Historically, these rules and expectations were developed by dominant men in legislative bodies, such as parliament, to ensure that subordinated groups obey their rules, while the state remains largely unaccountable (e.g. through an ineffective court system) in cases of violence against women and children. Economic structural violations can be viewed through the lens of capitalism and exploitation, whereby women's labour is exploited through wage differentiation between men and women. Cultural structural violations, meanwhile, can be understood as the cultural values associated with

fatherhood, where men commit violence toward family members (particularly toward women) in the name of protection (Jeff. Hearn and Parkin, 87-89).

Table 2.1. Hearn and Parkin's Three Levels of Analysis

	Sub-category	Example
Macro	Patriarchal violations	Men's violence at the national level, state violations, institutional violations, violence in terms of inequality in political system which are the production of social structural violations
	Economic violations	The involvement of the state in setting economic systems through the lens of capitalism and exploitation
	Cultural violations	Violations due to race, religions, or ethnicity and cultural values associated with fatherhood
Meso	Patriarchal violations	Power imbalances between men and women in organisations and the associated violations such as gender inequality, sexuality and other related social divisions and the structured gendering of organisation, including the ways in which organisations respond to these violations
	Economic violations	Labour exploitation through the structured economic class relations in organisations as violations and the interpretation of at least some forms of capitalist work exploitation as violation
	Cultural violations	Ethnicity, race, locality, language, culture, religion, citizenship or other cultural exclusions at work
Micro	Patriarchal violations	Male-dominated organisational culture that reproduces violence
	Economic violations	Task allocation and work pressures, managerial power and control where workers compete with each other's for rewards or benefits
	Cultural violations	Violations based on gender, class, ethnicity, nationality

Source: Author's summary of Hearn and Parkin's (2001) Three Levels of Analysis

The workplace-level power dynamics that inform organisational structures and their orientations to violence and violations reflect the influence of these macro-level violations. For example, patriarchal violations at the meso level reflect the power imbalance between men and women (but also dominant and subordinate groups) in organisations as well as in wider society. These, in turn, are reflected in economic violations, such as occupational segregation and differential reward systems that favour one group over another, but also in cultural violations, for example, discrimination on the

basis of gender, but also on the basis of other factors such as nationality, ethnicity and class. These meso-level violations – but also their macro-level counterparts – influence micro-level interactions within the organisations themselves.

Micro patriarchal violations often involve the domination of men in workplace structures. An example of this could be a workplace where aggressive behaviour and intimidation are normalised or even rewarded by male managers, creating a workplace culture where violence is tolerated, in ways that largely benefit a particular group of men. Such practices not only silence women but also reinforce a culture where male voices are prioritised, perpetuating a cycle of gender inequality. As Hearn and Parkin (2001, 100) note, however, aggression is not always a necessary component of a micro-level violation:

> Organisations provide many social and psychological resources for the reproduction of individual psychologies of violation. These include the processes of rationalisation, distancing, following organisational role and authority and trivialization perhaps through humour.

Perhaps the most insidious form of control in Cambodia and elsewhere is the insistence on a culturally acceptable performance of gender. Women who fail to conform to feminine stereotypes that define women as subordinate risk even lower status than they would otherwise (Collinson and Collinson 1996). By contrast, men who conform with masculine stereotypes that define men as dominant do gain approval and status from other men. While such men may not gain approval from women, the powerful positions they hold give women no alternative but to defer to them, especially in high stakes work situations (Martin 2003, 360). To make matters worse, powerful men can deny that their behaviour is gendered, and women often cannot challenge them. Denial does not erase the harm women experience from being excluded, making them feel out of place, or requiring them to 'act like men' (Martin 2003, 357). In short, women are forced by the system to do gender in expected ways because disrupting the gender order is seen as 'rocking the boat', upsetting the social structure and coordinated actions that are premised in gendered expectations that strongly embedded at the macro and meso levels. But, as

Martin (2003, 347) asserts, 'without rocking the boat', the gender institution cannot be changed.

By highlighting the interconnections between these three levels of analysis, Hearn and Parkin's framework offers a powerful tool for understanding workplace GBVH. However, the distinction it draws between patriarchal and cultural violations is unhelpful, since patriarchy is best understood as an element of culture rather than something that is separate from it (Hovorka and Dietrich 2011). As such, I propose using a single category that subsumes patriarchy and other elements of culture. Additionally, the distinction between the meso and micro levels as described in Hearn and Parkin's framework is not sufficiently clear. In order to make this distinction more useful, I have redefined each level, as summarised in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2. Refinement of Hearn and Parkin's Levels of Analysis

	Sub-category	Example
Macro	Cultural violations	The influence of national and international cultural norms (including patriarchal norms) as expressed through global and regional supply chains, and national institutions
	Economic violations	Violations arising from the structure of the national economic system, including its level of integration with the global economy
Meso	Cultural violations	The influence of cultural norms (including patriarchal norms) as expressed through organisational policy and practice
	Economic violations	The influence of organisational policies and practices on economic outcomes
Micro	Cultural violations	The influence of individual interactions and daily practices in the workplace
	Economic violations	The impact of macro and meso economic violations on individual interactions in the workplace

At the macro level, I focus on the influence of international and national cultural norms on national-level institutions, and the violations they generate, and violations arising from the structure of the national economic system which, in Cambodia's case, is highly integrated into global supply chains. At the meso level, I focus on how international, national and local cultural norms, in conjunction with economic opportunities and pressures, influence organisational policies and practices lead to cultural and economic

violations at the firm level. The micro level, I focus individual interactions and daily practices, which reflect the influences of the macro and meso levels.

In applying this framework, I demonstrate that, since none of these levels can be understood in isolation, workplace GBVH is not just an individual or organisational issue but a systemic problem requiring coordinated efforts at all levels. Broader cultural and economic factors influence how organisations are structured and, ultimately, how men and women are treated as employees within those organisations. Organisations' cultural and economic structures, in turn, set the parameters for interpersonal interactions which are simultaneously influenced by macro-level factors. Since workplace structures and individual behaviour almost inevitably reflect societal norms, the interplay between the macro and meso levels profoundly affects daily workplace interactions, especially where management encourages workers to compete for material and other kinds of rewards.

Gendered Violations Across Different Country Contexts

Many studies on GBVH at work tend to focus on one, or at best two, of these levels of analysis rather than examining all three levels across different sectors in the same country context. A first group of studies delves primarily into the macro level, scrutinising the societal and cultural norms that sustain violations against women in society. These studies illuminate the influence of patriarchal structures that strongly embedded in society and family, often reinforcing hegemonic masculinity through ideology and legislation (e.g. Pettus 2004). A second group investigates gender violations at the workplace level by paying attention to the ways in which work is arranged and the ways in which women's labour is exploited, emphasising organisational power and control that contribute to workplace violations (e.g. Alvesson 1998; Ong 2010; Akter, Teicher, and Alam 2024). A third group focuses on micro level violations within specific workplaces, examining how daily interactions lead to violations against women (e.g. Martin 2004; Adisa, Cooke, and Iwowo 2020; Woo 2018).

In this section, I build on the preceding discussion by reviewing existing literature on gendered violations at work across a range of settings. While many of these studies offer valuable insights into workplace GBVH, they tend to focus on only one, or at most

two, levels of analysis. By isolating macro, meso or micro-level dynamics, these studies often overlook the ways in which structural, organisational, and interpersonal factors interact to produce and sustain gender-based harm.

The macro level

Cultural violations are evident in the ways in which state establish their rules by narrative gender roles to serve their interests. In most if not all contexts, patriarchal ideology is so powerful that 'men are usually able to secure the apparent consent of the very women they oppress' (Sultana 2010, 3). For example, during the United States–Vietnam war, the Vietnamese government promoted the concept of heroic femininity, expecting women to support the war by becoming soldiers, managing farms, homes, and nursing wounded soldiers (Pettus 2004). Yet, while the women were encouraged to take on new leadership roles, they were still expected to fulfill traditional household and caring roles in the family – duties that were still understood as being more important for women than public activities or employment (Pettus 2004). Meanwhile, under Suharto's New Order (1965–98), hegemonic masculinity was reinforced in Indonesia through state-sponsored violence including sexual violations and the murders of labour activists and women in East Timer (Robinson 2008).

Patriarchal systems and institutions are 'man-made' (Brownmiller 2005). Women's economic participation is constrained by patriarchal ideology, as expressed in economic structures that are tailored for men. In Botswana, women are regarded as their husband's property, a powerful socio-cultural convention reflected in legislation created by men to control women (Hovorka and Dietrich 2011). The relevant laws were abolished in 2004, removing the legal power husbands held over their wives. Nevertheless, Hovorka and Dietrich (2011) found that women still have limited opportunities to engage in entrepreneurship and, when they do, face barriers in obtaining financial support for their entrepreneurial activities (Hovorka and Dietrich 2011). As one female participant in their study observed, 'Everyone thinks that [entrepreneurship] is a man's world and that we can't make it … women are supposed to be behind the man in the kitchen, with the child' (Hovorka and Dietrich 2011, 59).

This observation reflects the broader reality that labour markets continue to function largely on the assumption that men's primary role is that of breadwinner and women's primary role is of caregiver in most countries. This belief shapes women's roles and marks their locations in the paid workforce (Ledwith 2012). This reality persists even in advanced economies like Australia, where an increase in the proportion of female breadwinners has been met with deep suspicion. As Heron et al. (167) argue, women face significant disadvantages due to the structure of the labour market:

> Women are corralled by glass walls (where they work in highly feminised and often undervalued occupations), glass ceilings (where men dominate in senior organisational roles and women are absent), and sticky floors (where women are concentrated in lower-level occupations without prospects for advancement or development). Put simply, relative to men, women are in a disadvantaged labour market position.

The 'sticky floor' is even more evident in emerging economies and in global industries which, as Alessandra et al. (2017) notes, are fundamentally gendered formations, where women's bodies are often equated with cheap labour and where states use this leverage to claim comparative advantage.

The state's role in sustaining these gender regimes is undeniable, since states actively encourage women to occupy specific roles within certain industries, thereby reinforcing entrenched patriarchal norms (Caraway 2005). This reality is frequently glossed over by highlighting high rates of women's employment, even as men continue to secure better jobs with higher pay (Alessandra et al. 2017). For example, many of Indonesia's four million garment workers, the majority of whom are women, are employed on fixed-term contracts (Ford and Gillan 2021) with the consequence that they are less likely to receive benefits such as life insurance or workplace injury compensation, which are typically available to permanent workers (Osterreich 2020). Given the over-representation of women in the sector, this practice has can be understood as a macro-level gendered violation.

The meso level

It is important to understand that macro-level cultural violations influence power relations at the workplace level. Men have long made rules and practices to secure their economic, political, and social dominance, and these rules and practices continue to influence what happens at work. For instance, women are generally assumed to be easier to control than men and more able to work in poor conditions (Ong 2010) – beliefs that echo today in occupational segregation justified by reference to the superior 'fit' or qualifications of one gender over the other, even when research contradicts such claims (Jeanes, Knights, and Martin 2011). As Jeanes et al. 2011) point out, women put up with these meso-level inequalities in part because they have fewer options, rights and opportunities to do work with decent working conditions in a society where power is largely held by men.

Men's superior power in the workplace is evident in the ways in which women are supervised, which are in turn influenced by cultural violations at the macro level. For example, a study by Akter, Teicher, and Alam (2024) examines the role of factory managers in eliminating workplace GBVH in Bangladesh's garment factories. Before examining what happened on the factory floor, the authors discuss the broader context to illustrate the point that workplace practices are partly influenced by cultural violations at the macro level, since men have power to control women not only in the family but also in society. As they point out, it is thus no surprise that management positions in the garment factories are almost always held by men. Similarly, in a society where husbands have the right to beat their wives, it is unsurprising that managers understand workplace violence as a valid means of compelling women workers to meet their production targets (Akter, Teicher, and Alam 2024, 16).[3] And since there is no specific law that requires employers to establish policies on workplace GBVH, it is unsurprising that all the ten factories that participated in this study did not have such a policy.[4]

[3] The authors point out that this behaviour is noted in several other studies including Naved et al. (2018), Kabeer and Mahmud (2004), Habib (2014), Rahman and Ferdous (2024) and Hossain, Mathbor, and Semenza (2013).

[4] The authors seek to understand about management's perspective, and so the study focuses only on those perspectives. It would have been useful, however, to understand workers' perspective on management's approach in responding to workplace GBVH.

Economic violations at the workplace level reflect the social construction of skills, a process that is highly gendered (Sen 1999). For instance, on garment production floors in India, women are generally referred to as 'operators' while men are referred to as 'tailors'. This distinction is made to imply that men are capable of knowing how to transform fabric into complete garments, whereas women working on the assembly line are not able to do so. Therefore, they are assigned single assembly line sub-tasks, resulting in lower wages compared to their male counterparts (Alessandra et al. 2017). Research shows that women in garment factories consistently report that this assembly line work is characterised by repetitive, tedious, and alienating tasks which is rooted in a division of labour that is not based on actual skill or ability, but rather on the fact that their gendered identity as women (Bhattacharjee 2019).

The micro level

To deepen the analysis of how gendered power relations are reproduced at the micro level, it is useful to examine how gender violations manifest in everyday workplace practices. These violations often appear routine, yet they play a critical role in reinforcing structural inequalities. Importantly, also they are not confined to overt acts of discrimination or harassment but are embedded in the ordinary functioning of institutions and interactions.

In a separate study, Jeff Hearn (2003) examines micro-level economic violations in Finnish universities, contending that recruitment and promotion practices are significantly influenced by not only by the dynamics of gender but also of race. This study investigates how (meso-level) university policies and (micro-level) faculty behaviour intersect to create discriminatory recruitment processes that adversely affect applicants. Similar power dynamics can be observed in other settings. Muñoz (2019), for example, notes that female workers employed in Mexican tortilla factories feel compelled to expend additional effort to gain the attention of their supervisors to secure their employment and may need to submit to sexual harassment in order to maintain it. Both cases illustrate how micro-level economic violations perpetuate power imbalances that transcend individual institutions and industries.

When considering cultural violations at the micro level, it is crucial to understand how male dominance plays out on a daily basis. For example, research conducted by Um (2023) on militarised workplaces in Korea reveals that women are excluded from male-only informal networks and norms during and after work. Activities such as drinking and buying sex – considered after-hours practices – are key to gaining a sense of belonging and being fully integrated into these workplaces. Although no major decisions are made, such gatherings serve as a means of sharing information and building rapport. For example, when smoking together, men forge private relationships with fellow smokers, including high-level figures such as executives, relationships that often women due to the stigma around female smokers in many countries (Woo 2018). These insights reflect the fact that gender is constructed and maintained through everyday interactions (West and Zimmerman 1987; West and Fenstermaker 2002). In short, men do not need to devise explicit strategies to exclude women because their exclusion is inherently aligned with norms and stereotypes of masculinity at play at both the macro and meso levels.

Women are also excluded through daily interaction in the workplace itself. Martin (2004) illustrates this point where a male corporate vice president, Tom, asks his female counterpart, Betsy, to answer a ringing telephone in a nearby office, his action is informed by workplace norms. Tom's behaviour aligns with the expectation that men have the right to seek assistance from women. By treating Betsy as a woman instead of as his co-vice president, Tom's behaviour reflects the gendered organisational norms that shape their workplace dynamics (Martin 2004, 1263). Meanwhile, women who conform to femininity stereotypes that define women as subordinate may gain approval from men, but they do not gain equal status (Jackman 1994).

This point is illustrated by a study conducted Adisa, Cooke, and Iwowo (2020) on women's behaviour in two high street banks in Nigeria, which concludes that patriarchal behaviours at home are refracted through organisational settings that ensure that women are dominated, discriminated against and permanently placed in inferior positions. As a female participant said:

> The organisation is dominated by men. Sometimes they treat me well and equally, and sometimes they treat me as Nigerian men treat a woman – as a peripheral or slave. For

> example, in meetings, sometimes I will be asked to give my opinions on issues and sometimes not. Usually, men will dominate the conversations, and I think it is not good enough – it kills my innovative ideas, which is not good for the progress of the organization. (Adisa, Cooke, and Iwowo 2020, 156)

Another woman noted:

> The men that I work with often look down on me because I am a woman. This has killed many of my brilliant ideas and suggestions. For example, last week during the departmental meeting, I had a brilliant idea on the subject matter, but I was not allowed to voice my opinion. I raised my hand to talk but the manager never called me. He is a very patriarchal person who believes that women should not talk where men talk. These days I don't care whether the organisation makes progress […] I keep my ideas to myself. (Adisa, Cooke, and Iwowo 2020, 156)

These insights underscore the pervasive influence of patriarchal values in the workplace, where gender dynamics significantly limit women' interactions and opportunities.

Gendered Violations in Cambodia

In applying my refined version of Hearn and Parkin's model in Cambodia, I demonstrate that workplace GBVH is not merely an individual issue, but rather a structural and cultural one. At the macro level, I assess economic influences, but also the impact of national and international norms on the prevalence of workplace GBVH, examining factors such as international labour standards, national attitudes toward trade unions. Moving to the meso level, I analyse the influences within the three garment and three cement factories, with a particular focus on how work is organised and supervised. At the micro level, I focus on individual interactions on the shop floor which, as argued above, are shaped by the dynamics at the macro and meso levels as reflected in the unique circumstances of each worker and how their cultural and economic backgrounds influence their experiences at work.

The macro level

Recognising the critical importance of establishing work environments free from violence and harassment, the ILO C190, establishing the international standard for addressing

workplace GBVH. However, adapting these international standards to the Cambodian context presents considerable challenges, partly because of the structure of the post-conflict economy and its position in the global economic order, and partly because of the impact of sociocultural norms pertaining to gender relations and authority structures.

It is reasonable to assume that the extent to which these standards are internalised and enforced would vary across sectors, depending on their visibility and integration into global supply chains. Within the same country context, differential integration into the global economy brings with it different levels of pressure to conform with international labour standards. The garment industry, which is highly visible internationally, has long received a great deal of attention from global players. By contrast, the country's cement factories are far less visible, both because of the lack of attention on the cement industry globally and because Cambodia's cement factories mainly serve local demand. And while they have received some attention from the international labour movement, they are subjected to far less pressure to adhere to international labour standards than are the garment factories.

Cambodia's garment sector occupies a very particular position within the country's economy. After the economic devastation of the Khmer Rouge period (Nuon and Serrano 2010), the global community identified the production of readymade garments as a way to support Cambodia's economic recovery. International distrust regarding Cambodia's status as an ethical sourcing destination prompted the establishment of a Trade Agreement on Textiles and Apparel between the United States and Cambodia (1999–2004), which required the Cambodian government to demonstrate ongoing improvements in labour rights in exchange for incremental increases in market access (Serrano and Nuon 2018). To monitor progress, the ILO funded the Garment Sector Working Conditions Improvement Project, the precursor to BFC (Arnold and Toh 2010).

BFC has played a pivotal role in shaping Cambodia's reputation as a compliant sourcing destination, conducting independent factory assessments, publishing assessment reports and providing training to improve working conditions.[5] Its model of tripartite

[5] This, however, is true only for the exporting factories under the BFC's assessment mandate, leaving some subcontracting companies and factories producing for the domestic market unassessed.

cooperation – bringing together government, employers, and unions – has been seen as a benchmark for labour governance in the Global South. The involvement of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a member of the World Bank Group, further reinforced the program's credibility by linking improved labour standards to investment incentives and global buyer confidence. Through this partnership, BFC not only helped to institutionalise labour monitoring but also positioned Cambodia as a test case for market-driven labour compliance in global supply chains.

While these interventions have strongly influenced the garment sector, the protection of workers' rights remains inadequate, in large part because of the institutional climate in which both the garment and cement factories operate.[6] This institutional environment is shaped by Cambodia's authoritarian system of government (Arnold 2017) and the exclusionary nature of its industrial relations system (Ford, Gillan, and Ward 2021), which order and stability over workers' rights (Ward and Mouyly 2016). For example, the government often fails to enforce its own labour laws, a decision that stems more from political will than from limitations in capacity and resources (Hughes and Un 2011). When combined with employers' exploitative practices, this state inaction creates barriers for unions and other organisations seeking to support workers. A recent ILO assessment on freedom of association and protection of the right to organise emphasised that independent unions continue to face legal and political constraints, including deregistration and limited access to dispute resolution mechanisms, but also harassment (ILO 2024). These challenges are compounded by the dominance of pro-government unions and the shrinking space for civil society, which together undermine the effectiveness of the labour movement in advocating for meaningful change. For example, employers frequently dismiss factory-level union officials and members (Human Rights Watch 2015).

While less studied than the garment sector, it is clear that Cambodia's cement industry presents its own set of challenges in protecting workers' rights. The sector is characterised by limited regulatory oversight. Despite the high demand for cement and the fact that factories operate around the clock, workers are rarely employed directly by

[6] For a detailed discussion of the institutional climate in Cambodia, see Ford, Gillan, and Ward (2021).

the factories. Instead, the majority are hired through subcontracting companies, which creates fragmented lines of responsibility and frequent changes in employment status. The involvement of these subcontracting companies has an enormous impact. For example, they frequent change their names, forcing enterprise unions must re-register, disrupting continuity and weakening collective representation. Unsurprisingly, enforcement of labour standards is weak, and protections for workers remain minimal, even though they work in a heavy industry exposed to excessive noise, dust, and heat.

Irrespective of the sector, the primary macro-level cultural influence women's experiences as workers are gender norms that systematically marginalise women (Roberts 2015). In Cambodia, these norms were historically codified in the Chbab Srei and Chbab Proh, two ancient codes outlining expected behaviours for women and men respectively at home and in public spaces. According to the Chbab Srei, women should move quietly, avoid arguments and uphold family dignity. As implied in a common proverb, 'Having a daughter is like having fermented fish in the house', a woman's poor reputation can quickly spread, affecting not only herself but also her family (Derks 2008). This cultural expectation effectively silences women, who are expected to conceal their suffering rather than speak out, as vocalisation of their concerns would contradict the social expectations of female propriety.

Conversely, masculinity is intrinsically tied to fulfilling social expectations that position men as household heads. Men are expected to be vocal and dominant, as suggested in the proverb, 'men are gold; women are cloth' (Brickell 2011). As Lilja (2016, 43) notes, if a man is not recognised as the head of the household, his masculinity may be threatened. This perpetuates the belief that men are entitled to use violence to discipline women, while women are expected to tolerate such treatment – a reflection of persistent patriarchal structures (Farvid and Saing 2022).[7] Although these gender codes are no longer formally taught in schools, studies by GADC (2010) found that over 80 percent of respondents still believe in the continuing salience of these codes.

[7] Gender expectations also extend to sexual behaviours, with women expected to remain virgins until marriage while men face no such restrictions. Research indicates, moreover, that many women believe it is unacceptable to refuse sex with their husbands, even when unwilling or unwell, reinforcing the notion that women deserve mistreatment if they do not conform to social expectations (Farvid and Saing 2022).

These cultural norms intersect with economic vulnerabilities to shape the lived realities of women in the workplace. Women, who constitute the vast majority of the garment sector workforce and are mostly migrants, typically occupy the lowest-paid positions within the hierarchy – as are the non-migrant women employed in the male-dominated cement factories. These gendered patterns of employment reflect broader social expectations that devalue women's labour and reinforce their economic dependence. The combination of weak labour protections, exploitative management practices and deeply rooted gender norms creates a workplace environment where women are more vulnerable to mistreatment, including workplace GBVH. In such contexts, the workplace becomes an extension of the broader social order – one in which women are expected to endure hardship and remain compliance, both at home and at work.

The meso level

Economic violations at the meso level are apparent in how women are assigned roles that mirror their domestic responsibilities. Management views women's work as an extension of their home duties, reinforcing traditional gender roles (Habib 2014; Naved et al. 2018; Mezzadri 2017). As a result, women typically perform cleaning tasks or detail-oriented work. Women's work is also devalued in alignment with their lesser status in society more broadly. Even though their work is tiring and often difficult, management often characterises it as simple and undemanding (Habib 2014). In addition, men are routinely given the opportunity to work night shifts, a privilege afforded to them based on their gender and the perceived risks to women's safety should they work at night. Conversely, women in female-dominated roles frequently have less access to bonuses and are more likely to have their pay docked for 'underperformance' (Naved et al. 2018).This misrepresentation has real economic consequences, contributing to significant wage disparities and a lack of opportunities for promotion. It also helps explain why women are disproportionately subject to disciplinary action, often justified through claims of poor performance.

Such approaches fail to consider how the allocation of work exposes women to particularly high levels of criticism (Naved et al. 2018). For example, women may be

assigned detail-oriented tasks that men typically avoid and be expected to complete it in minimum time in order to make their production targets (Pillinger and Wintour 2022), making it difficult to avoid mistakes. Line managers, meanwhile, blame women for their poor work performance, conveniently ignoring the underlying systemic of gendered task allocation (Rahman and Ferdous 2024).

The extensive use of subcontractors, which often leads to wage suppression and exploitation of workers, allows employers to reduce labour costs while diminishing workers' bargaining power. These subcontracting systems also have particular consequences for women (Ngai and Huilin 2010). In general terms, subcontracted roles tend to be more precarious, lower paid, and less regulated conditions. Workers often lack access to formal grievance mechanisms, social protections or union representation, making them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Women, in particular, are assigned gendered tasks associate with docility and compliance further entrench their marginalisation within these informalised labour arrangements. As a result, subcontracting not only reinforces existing gender inequalities but also creates structural barriers to women's economic empowerment and workplace safety.

Macro-level cultural violations feed into these patterns. For example, management in both the garment and cement factories foster workplace cultures that encourage compliance and discourage conflict. Workers are expected to follow directives of their superiors, much as family members are expected to follow their (male) household heads. The same influences manifest in the management structures of the female-dominated garment factories, where men occupy most top and middle management roles. In the cement factories, these dynamics are expressed through rigid hierarchies and men's management styles, where authority is rarely questioned and deference to male supervisors is both expected and enforced.

Notably, similar patterns are also evident in the ranks of trade union leadership, including in the female-dominated garment sector (Evans 2017). As Ward (2022, 591-593) points out, moreover, these male union leaders frequently 'point to women's lack of suitability for higher level union work' because of their caregiving responsibilities and but also concerns about their safety and mobility – limiting women's opportunities for

leadership and advancement. Both these concerns reflect broader societal norms that prioritise men's roles in public and professional spheres while confining women to domestic roles.

The micro level

Economic violations at the micro level are evident in the gendered distribution of discretionary opportunities and rewards. Research suggests that male-led management structures tend to perpetuate gender bias in performance evaluations, with assertive behaviour being rewarded in men but penalised women (AleAhmad and Lupu 2025; Hultin and Szulkin 1999). In Cambodia's garment factories, studies reveal that women in the sector earn significant less than men, with an average gender pay gap of 13%, despite working similar hours, reflecting decisions made predominantly by male managers (Basu, Gieg, and Medie 2024; Weimann-Sandig 2024). Current evidence from other contexts further suggests that group leaders and immediate supervisors exercise considerable discretion over the allocation of leave, with women potentially facing greater scrutiny and more frequent rejections of their requests than their male counterparts (Osmani and Hossen 2018). Male workers, meanwhile, often have greater access to additional shifts and overtime opportunities, which significantly enhance their income and potential for advancement (Pandey 2002). Team leaders and immediate supervisors exercise considerable discretion over the allocation of leave, with women potentially facing greater scrutiny and more frequent rejections of their requests than their male counterparts (Osmani and Hossen 2018). Male workers, meanwhile, often have greater access to additional shifts and overtime opportunities, which significantly enhance their income and potential for advancement (Pandey 2002). In the Cambodian context, research on the garment sector shows that although both men and women express concerns about low wages, men are more likely to supplement their income through Sunday overtime work, while women shoulder a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities (Better Factories Cambodia 2020).Meanwhile, the dominance of male supervisors in both garment and cement factories reinforces hierarchical workplace cultures that often marginalise women's voices. Research shows that male-led

management structures tend to perpetuate gender bias in performance evaluations, with assertive behaviour being rewarded in men but penalised women. Even where women hold supervisory positions, they not only remain constrained by the authority of their own male supervisors and peers, but also actively perpetuate gender stereotypes through their own supervision practices (Watts 2009). In male-dominated workplaces, in particular, female supervisors often feel compelled to adopt masculine leadership styles to gain respect (Watts 2009). Alternatively, they may choose to emphasise the 'caring' aspects of their supervision to conform with feminine stereotypes (Baines and Cunningham 2011).

The gendered aspects of these roles intersect with other factors, including the cultural backgrounds of supervisory staff. As noted in Chapter One, both the cement factories and the garment factories included in this study were owned or managed by foreign companies, and most supervisory staff are not Khmer. This cross-cultural dimension adds complexity to daily workplace interactions, as cultural differences in communication styles and managerial approaches interact with gender dynamics to create additional barriers for women workers. To date, this specific intersection has not been studied in the Cambodian context. While Franceschini (2020) examined how workers' agency was curtailed by language and structural barriers between Cambodian and Chinese workers on construction sites, there is no research exploring similar dynamics in comparative perspective between cement factories and garment factories managed by different nationalities, nor how these practices contribute to differential treatment of men and women on the production floor.

Macro-level cultural factors influence the way in which women respond to these inequities. Although many women privately express anger over this unfair treatment, they often refrain from taking action due to societal expectations of femininity that affect the way that they approach workplace interactions – expectations that may discourage women from open confrontation with authority figures, particularly male supervisors (Nahar 2024). Conversely, women may be left feeling that they need to acquiesce to those supervisors' demands or even provide sexual favours in order to secure access to these discretionary benefits. A survey conducted by CARE International found that nearly one in three Cambodian garment workers had experienced sexual harassment in

the year prior to the study, and many felt forced to continue working under such conditions due to family obligations. As one female garment worker explained: "Sometimes, of course I think about not going to work anymore because of this [sexual harassment]. But then I think about my family's condition, and I know I cannot quit" (CARE International, 2017:4). This finding aligns with ILO research, which highlights that Cambodian female garment workers are expected to be moral, invisible, , hardworking, while carrying a societal obligation to support their family (ILO 2012).

When these micro-level violations are understood in relation to the meso and macro levels, it becomes clear that workplace GBVH is not merely the result of individual behaviours but is both structured by, and reinforcing of, broader patterns of gender inequality. As such, the daily interactions between workers and supervisors both reflect and reproduce the gendered division of labour and authority established at the meso level, which in turn is shaped by the cultural norms and economic structures at the macro level.

Conclusion

As argued throughout this chapter, workplace GBVH manifests through complex interactions across these interconnected levels, requiring multifaceted analysis. At the macro level, economic structures, sociocultural norms, and political and legislative frameworks establish the broader context in which organisations operate, shaping the conditions that either enable or inhibit workplace GBVH. These macro-level factors are reflected at the meso level, where organisational structures and practices can either mitigate or exacerbate GBVH. Finally, everyday interactions between individuals reflect and reproduce gender power imbalances at the micro level, normalising certain behaviours while rendering others invisible or unacceptable. The systematic integration of these three levels of analysis through my revised version of Hearn and Parkin's framework provides a robust structure for analysing the impact of violations at these different levels on female factory workers' experiences of work in the Cambodian context.

This thesis addresses three critical gaps in the existing literature on workplace GBVH. First, it responds to calls to extend analyses to consider factors beyond the

workplace by demonstrating how violations at the macro and meso levels structure the micro-level interactions through which GBVH occurs. Second, it addresses the gap left by the literature's tendency to focus on single industries by systematically comparing cross-industry patterns. Third, while considering women's experiences and workplace policies and procedures, it contextualises both these discussions in a broader analysis of how the organisation of work and workplace culture systematically create the conditions in which GBVH becomes normalised, revealing the specific mechanisms through which organisational arrangements heighten women's vulnerability to harassment while simultaneously deterring them from challenging it.

The empirical chapters that follow apply this framework to women's experiences in Cambodia's garment and cement factories. The three chapters in Part One begin this process through a close study of factory-level organisation, workplace culture and GBVH incidents in the garment sector. As these chapters reveal, the organisation of work and workplace culture systematically in the garment factories reinforces gendered hierarchies and power imbalances, creating conditions in which workplace GBVH is more likely to occur and less likely to be reported or addressed. By examining how these organisational and cultural features interact with broader structural and interpersonal factors, the chapters demonstrate that GBVH is not an isolated phenomenon, but a product of the systemic inequalities embedded in the everyday operations of factory life. Part Two then continues the analysis through a parallel examination of the cement sector.

Chapter Three

The Organisation of Work in Garment Factories

Garment factories, particularly in Southeast and South Asia, are at the heart of the global fast fashion industry, in which millions of workers strive to meet relentless production demands. These factories are embedded in a system driven by international brands and retailers that prioritise speed, flexibility and cost efficiency to meet fast fashion demands which translates into highly fragmented and hierarchical labour arrangements, where tasks are standardised, closely monitored and subject to strict time pressures. The emphasis on meeting tight delivery schedules and maintaining competitive pricing reinforces a regime of control and surveillance, leaving little room for worker autonomy. In this context, gendered divisions of labour are not incidental but reflect the logic of global supply chains that seek to maximize productivity while minimising costs. These globally driven organisational practices intersect with local gender norms to reproduce inequalities and heighten women's vulnerability to exploitation and harassment

Garment factories are often managed by staff with diverse national backgrounds, adding another layer of complexity to an already demanding work environment. Such conditions are undoubtedly present in Cambodia's garment factories. The pressure to meet daily production targets places further women workers because they are expected by society to balance workplace demands with their domestic responsibilities. In the factory itself, female-dominated roles, though requiring focus and precision, are often undervalued compared to the technical roles dominated by men. This arrangement of labour highlights how work assignments not only reflect societal norms but also

perpetuate them, entrenching disparities in job security, wages, and opportunities for advancement.[1]

Understanding how the organisation of work contributes to workers' experiences is crucial to unpacking their lived realities. This chapter takes up that task by comparing three garment factories with different ownership configurations, revealing how these differences – and similarities – impact workers' daily lives across three garment factories with different ownership configurations. It begins by exploring each factory's physical environments, wages and conditions to understand how ownership and management practices influence workers' experiences. Across the three garment factories, two key similarities emerge. First, all three factories prioritise and maximise production, demonstrated by the ways in which work is assigned, monitored and rewarded on the production floor. Second, there is a strong perception that women are less capable of managing men, resulting in fewer men being employed under female supervisors. Additionally, while the Thai Garment Factory relies on local supervisors, the Hong Kong and Chinese Garment Factories employ foreign supervisors, further shaping dynamics on the production floor.

By analysing the organisation of work across the three garment factories, this chapter demonstrates that, despite their different ownership profiles, there is a consistent pattern in how women experience work in these factories as a consequence of management structures, labour hierarchies and global supply chain pressures that collectively position women in roles of lower value and greater vulnerability compared to their male counterparts. As the following discussion reveals, these organisational features create conditions that heighten women's vulnerability to workplace GBVH across all three factories, where a gendered division of labour concentrates women in female-dominated production sections such as sewing, where they face relentless pressure to meet escalating hourly targets, while men are assigned to less scrutinised tasks.

There are, however, some important differences between the factories, including contract arrangements. The Thai factory's reliance on short-term contracts that are renewed every three months based on supervisors' discretionary evaluations creating

[1] See Agapio (2002), Alvesson (1998), Collins (1995) and Foley et al. (2022).

profound job insecurity, which is known to discourage reporting, while the Hong Kong factory's continuing contracts and the Chinese factory's transition from subcontracting to direct employment offer marginally greater stability. The use of production targets and the scheduling of shifts are also influential. As a consequence of these, the pace and intensity of work vary across the three factories. While challenging in all, female workers in the auto-knitting and yarn sections of the Hong Kong Garment Factory endure gruelling 12-hour shifts with compulsory overtime and limited breaks. Together, these organisational arrangements restrict women's autonomy over their bodies and time, intensify their dependence on supervisors who control both their job security and earnings, and create power imbalances that enable harassment to occur whilst simultaneously deterring women from challenging it.

The Thai Garment Factory

The Thai Garment Factory is centrally located on a main road in Phnom Penh, within a bustling area of the city. Established in July 2012, the factory is owned and managed by Thai nationals and specializes in sportswear production for world-leading brands like Adidas, New Balance and Puma,[2] with significant markets in Australia, Italy, and Germany. A well-known manufacturer in the global market, the factory is part of a larger, vertically integrated group within Cambodia that produces for international buyers. Buyers often prefer these kinds of factories as they offer 'full package' services which eliminate the need to search for separate textile and component suppliers, which helps to minimise the risks of poor product quality, late deliveries and compliance issues.

The factory directly employs approximately 2,938 workers. Most of the workers I interviewed had migrated from different provinces and now rent rooms near the factory. The surrounding area is densely packed with shops catering to their needs, selling items such as clothing, makeup, groceries and prepared food. Many of these shops are small, family-run businesses that rely heavily on the regular purchases of factory workers. On payday, the energy in the area is palpable, with workers flocking to these stores to buy

[2] Publicly available document produced by the Thai Garment Factory.

essentials and pay off their debts: it is common for these shops to extend credit to workers, with payments settled on payday.

Living near the factory, most workers walk to work, typically in groups with other female workers who live in the same accommodation blocks. They typically carry water bottles, lunch boxes, and bags. Outsiders can easily identify workers by their cheap clothing and youthful appearance. In this factory, workers are not provided with uniforms, but group leaders wear pink shirts, industrial engineers wear blue shirts and mechanics wear purple shirts, making them easily recognisable on the production floor. For workers, they normally wear long pants and long-sleeve shirts to protect themselves from heat and fabric dust and wear their factory identity card outside their clothing. It is important to note here that in the Thai Garment Factory, female workers are prohibited from wearing short skirts or dresses, a rule that Thai management says is in place to ensure their safety, particularly in emergencies like fires where such clothing could hinder quick escape.[3] While management frames the rules as a precaution for emergencies, it also serves as a form of behavioural control that disproportionately targets women. For example, many younger workers find this rule too strict and as a sewing worker told me that she heard her young female fellow worker complain, saying that: 'I have one life, but I can't enjoy it. I have no freedom, I have to follow whatever they said, if they ask us to turn left, we need to turn left and if they ask us to turn right, we have to turn right, we can't complain or argue.'[4] Despite the strict enforcement of this rule, some female workers choose to ignore it. Doing so can have consequences. For example, one female worker reported that she was required to go home to change, affecting her record of punctuality and her attendance bonus.[5] Such incidents are unlikely to affect male workers in the same way which highlight the gendered nature of rules enforcement and its implications for women's autonomy which starting from the factory gate.

[3] INT65PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[4] INT65PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[5] INT65PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

The factory environs

During working days (Monday to Saturday), the Thai Garment Factory opens its gates at 6:40 am. Due to its location in a busy area, traffic around the factory is a significant concern. To avoid the congestion, workers often arrive early, ready to enter the gates as soon as they open, about 20 minutes before their workday begins. At the gate, they undergo body scans when they arrive. Male workers are scanned by male security guards, while female workers are scanned by female guards. After passing the security check, workers proceed directly to their designated workspaces, which are scattered across different production buildings.

The sportswear production line begins in the fabric warehouse, located on the ground floor, where fabric is stored and inspected before being sent to the cutting section. From there, cut fabric is transported to the sewing production lines, which are housed on the upper and lower levels of a larger building. After sewing, quality controllers meticulously inspect the garments to ensure they meet the required sewing standards. If they pass inspection, the garments are sent to ironing performed by workers on the same production line. After ironing, a final quality check is performed before the items are packed into boxes and prepared for shipment. This step-by-step process reflects the factory's highly organised workflow, emphasising quality control at multiple stages to meet production standards at the end of the production line and rework is required to ensure that the product is flawless.

Additional facilities at the factory include motorbike parking lots, an infirmary, and outdoor eating areas where workers can eat during lunch breaks. The eating areas are equipped with tables and chairs, although the chairs do not have back-rests.[6] Workers report that the eating areas are big enough and kept clean, with a roof that allows for

[6] It is common on production lines where back rests are not provided as it is often associated with relaxation and management normally avoids offering such seating to discourage workers from relaxing during work hours. However, in June 2024, the Thai Garment Factory invested in back-rest chairs on the production line as well as improving air quality by installing polyvinyl chloride strip curtains at 14 access doors in an attempt to prevent hot air from infiltrating the factory. A trade union leader confirmed this investment due to international buyers' requirements (personal communication, Thai Garment Factory August 2022).

natural light, as well as fans and loudspeakers. Around the factory's main gates, many food trucks and street vendors gather, offering snacks, fruit, breakfast, lunch and drinks. Workers are not allowed to bring food into the production areas, but they can leave their lunch in the designated eating areas. Management implements this policy to prevent insects from contaminating the production process as part of quality compliance standards, commonly stipulated in buyers' codes of conduct.

Workers have access to toilets separated by gender. However, the pressure of reaching the production target imposes significant constraints on their use. The need to meet these targets often discourages workers from taking toilet breaks, which are perceived to diminish their productivity and consequently the overall team's ability to achieve production goals. One worker explained, 'Here they [leaders] don't prohibit us from going to the toilet, but we ourselves don't go often because we care so much about the production target and bonus … sometimes we wait until the lunch break.'[7] Another pointed out, 'Everyone is working so hard, and they all have problems with their kidneys because they don't go to the toilets and because workers want to get the production bonus.'[8]

The limited availability and poor cleanliness of the toilets further exacerbate this issue. The factory employs only six cleaners, and these cleaners are responsible for maintaining both male and female toilets. Typically, toilets are cleaned once a day, between 8:00 am and 9:00 am, after workers have started their shifts. In the women's toilets, small bucket bins are provided, where workers can dispose of sanitary pads and other rubbish. These bins are typically not emptied until the following day, leading to frequent overflows of pads and toilet tissue.[9] Cambodian toilets use water rather than toilet paper, and toilet paper is not provided. As a result, some workers bring their own tissues or use fabric from the production floor to dry themselves after washing.

[7] INT60PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[8] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[9] It is common across different factories where management raised a concern over the dysfunctional toilets and women appeared to be the ones who management blamed for misplacing their sanitary pads which caused the toilets to clog. None of the management I interviewed considered insufficient toilets to be an issue (fieldwork note, January 2024)

Sometimes they flush these materials down the toilets, which can result in clogging. This is particularly problematic given the high volume of workers per toilet, and their reliance on these facilities throughout the day.

The division of labour

Work in the Thai Garment Factory is structured around both ethnicity and gender.[10] At the top level consists of the Thai management team, responsible for overseeing and managing the entire factory including its production process. Most members of top management can communicate in basic Khmer, and staff from the administrative office acts as translators for those who cannot. Below top-level management are senior supervisors, supervisors, team leaders, technical workers and industrial engineers who are all Khmer.

The sewing section, the largest section in the factory, illustrates this hierarchical structure. It has four senior supervisors, all of whom are women, each overseeing 15 production teams. Below them are 16 supervisors, each responsible for managing four production teams. This arrangement enables the senior supervisors to manage a larger number of workers, while supervisors handle smaller groups in alignment with the hierarchy. A significant majority of both senior supervisors and supervisors are female, with only one male supervisor in the sewing section. These senior supervisors and supervisors are skilled technicians who understand the production plan and have the ability to execute it. Most of them can read and write, possess basic English proficiency, have basic computer skills and bring extensive production experience to their roles.

Managing workers on the production floor is critical to ensure smooth production lines. Senior supervisors, supervisors and team leaders play an important role in managing day-to-day or even hour-to-hour production as well as administrative aspects of work. The key distinction between senior supervisors and supervisors lies in their level of experience in overseeing production and managing a larger workforce. Senior supervisors are crucial to the operation of the production floor, regularly communicating with management and implementing production plans. For instance, if there is an order for

[10] Personal communication with a trade union leader in the Thai Garment Factory, August 2024.

30,000 shirts to be completed within a month, senior supervisors are responsible for dividing tasks among the supervisors and making necessary adjustments to ensure timely completion. Beneath them are team leaders, each managing between 10 and 30 workers, depending on the style of garment being produced. Team leaders are typically promoted from among the skilled workers and are responsible for ensuring production targets are met.[11] They oversee technical aspects such as checking the number of pieces produced on an hourly basis, recording production data into the computer system and submitting overtime requests if targets are not achieved. Additionally, team leaders handle administrative tasks including recording absenteeism, managing worker movement to ensure adequate staffing and determining bonuses. They also instruct workers, address mistakes, grant leave requests and have the authority to decide on contract renewal for individual workers.

Skilled workers who have extensive experience on the production floor are promoted to work in the sampling room where they manage multiple production machines and train workers to increase their efficiency. There are also 'technical workers' and industrial engineers of mixed genders who play key roles in the factory. Industrial engineers, who are typically high school graduates or first- or second-year university students, are primarily responsible for monitoring workers' output using digital clocks. Although they generally do not have the authority to discipline workers, they help manage performance alongside team leaders and supervisors. When a worker struggles to meet production targets, these technical workers are called in to identify issues and provide guidance on working harder and faster.[12] Quite often, that advice is provided harshly. For example, a female technical worker once criticised a worker who was not meeting the required target, saying, 'When you sew slowly and cannot reach the production target like this, is it because the machine is sleeping, or the operator is sleeping?' The comment led the workers to tears, despite her best efforts to meet the target. [13]

[11] MGT6PP, (a female team leader, Thai Garment Factory), March 2023.
[12] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[13] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

At the bottom of this hierarchy are the workers themselves. Most of them are women working at the sewing section, which is heavily female-dominated.[14] First, the sewing section is critical to the production process, and disruptions in it can significantly impact overall output. Consequently, the factory prefers women for these roles due to their perceived greater compliance and willingness to accept less favourable working conditions without protest.[15] Women are perceived as more compliant and less likely to challenge authority, making them preferable for tasks such as sewing that require adherence to detailed instructions and less frequent breaks. [16]

Second, men are generally unwilling to take on tasks traditionally associated with women, such as sewing or detailed inspection work, which they view as less prestigious or physically demanding compared to roles that involve heavy lifting. This reluctance to engage in tasks deemed to be 'women's work' further reinforces their assignment to physically demanding roles like cutting, ironing, and warehouse operations. At the same time, when men *are* considered for sewing roles, they must demonstrate exceptional proficiency and reliability.[17] Men must, therefore, excel at their tasks to be considered for such positions, ensuring they can seamlessly integrate into the workflow without necessitating frequent oversight.

Another reason that helps to explain this labour assignment is the predominantly female leadership within this part of the factory. The factory places male workers in sections like cutting or the warehouse, where male leaders are responsible for managing them. This separation reflects an underlying assumption about gendered communication and authority. As one worker explained, 'Male leaders control male workers; female leaders control female workers. If female leaders manage male workers, it might be hard

[14] The cleaning staff is also mostly composed of women, with only one male cleaner whose duties are limited to rubbish collection and cleaning areas outside the production floor, excluding toilets.
[15] Interviews with female workers across different production sections and a team leader in the Thai Garment Factory consistently confirmed this finding.
[16] Factory management did not agree to be interviewed, so it was not possible to ask about the reasons for this division of labour. However, it reflects arrangements commonly found in garment factories in Cambodia and across Asia. For comparative cases, see Franceschini (2020), Yeophantong (2020); and Akhter, Rutherford, and Chu (2019).
[17] INT59PP (quality controller, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

because men would find their harsh words hard to accept. Male leaders know better how to talk to male workers.'[18]

Women in the sewing section were quite happy with the division of labour, expressing a preference for working alongside female co-workers because it allows them to discuss topics that they prefer to keep private from men. A worker shared:

> We talk among ourselves about things like how many times you had sex last night. Since most of us are married, we feel comfortable asking each other these questions because we know the men are working far from us. This kind of conversation is not common, but we talk about these kinds of things when the energy is low at work, just to get everyone laughing.[19]

Similar sentiments were expressed in the ironing section, where women also dominate. One worker described how everyday conversations can be light-hearted and even a bit cheeky:

> For example, when someone calls in to take leave, our female team leader might joke, 'Are you taking leave because your butt hurts? Or you didn't sleep last night because you were having sex?' These comments are only directed at married women, never at male workers … it doesn't bother me, and everyone laughs.[20]

As this description suggests, the division of labour within the Thai Garment Factory reflects the arrangement of tasks based on gender roles. Women are perceived as more compliant and are concentrated in sewing roles, often under female leaders, while men are assigned to physically demanding tasks led by male supervisors.

The ways in which workers are promoted to team leaders highlight Thai management's prioritisation of productivity over leadership development. Management at the Thai Garment Factory strategically utilises local resources such as university graduates and Khmer team leaders, supervisors, and senior supervisors to leverage their understanding of local values. One key strategy is the use of local language to intensify

[18] INT52PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[19] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[20] INT51PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

work on the production floor, ultimately aiming for higher quantity and quality output, often by taking women's labour for granted through the assignment of tasks associated with their domestic roles.

Wages and conditions

The workers I interviewed had been employed at the factory for periods ranging from two to ten years, reflecting their long-term relationship with the workplace despite being hired on fixed- term contracts. Workers initially start with probationary contracts lasting between two and three months. Upon successful completion, they are transitioned to fixed-term contracts, which are renewed every three months up to a maximum of two years. After this period, workers may be offered indefinite contracts, contingent on the factory's needs and the recommendations of team leaders and supervisors. The fact that contract extension for those on probation or fixed- term contracts is closely tied to the performance evaluations conducted by immediate team leaders and supervisors reflects a performance-based approach to job security. As a result, most workers remain on fixed-term contracts which management uses as a tool to maintain discipline and productivity which are the two key criteria for contract renewal.

Workers' contracts follow a standardised template, where administrative staff only need to input basic information such as the worker's name, date of birth, position, work identity number, base wage and the duration of the contract. These contracts cover crucial aspects of employment, including working hours, wages, allowances, and various types of leave, including paid leave, public holidays, special leave, sick leave, and maternity leave. They also outline termination procedures and notice requirements, adherence to work instructions, and confidentiality agreements regarding factory information. Workers are covered by the National Social Security Fund, which provides protection for workplace-related accidents.

The factory's standard working hours run from 7:00 am to 4:00 pm, including a lunch break from 11:00 am to 12:00 pm. However, workers are often required to work overtime from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm, and in urgent cases, until 8:00 pm. Since many workers rely heavily on overtime pay and production bonuses to supplement their

income, they are generally willing to work overtime.[21] As this willingness is often influenced by the belief that accepting overtime may improve their chances of contract renewal, indirectly placing pressure on them to comply even if when they are physically exhausted. As a practice on the production floor, those who want to work overtime must ensure that they can meet production targets during regular hours as those who fail may also be excluded from overtime opportunities, as team leaders may question the utility of additional payments for those who do not perform adequately. Conversely, if a worker refuses an overtime request, they may be reassigned to a different section, potentially impacting their ability to secure overtime work in the future but also disrupting team dynamics.[22] This dilemma is embedded in the factory's work arrangement system, creating pressures with consequences that workers find difficult to avoid.

During interviews, workers did not express concerns about taking maternity leave or other types of leave when discussing common workplace challenges, although they noted that the approval process is lengthy and complicated. The process to request leave involves several layers of sign-off, which can be time-consuming and discouraging. As one worker explained, 'When we need to take leave, I normally call in because I think it's easier. But we ask for leave when we are on the production floor, the process is much more complicated.'[23] The ironing worker echoed these concerns, noting the difficulties of requesting leave on site: 'When we need to take leave, I usually make a phone call because it is simpler. However, if we are on the production floor, the process becomes much more complex. We need to ask permission from the team leader, then the supervisor, followed by the big boss and then the administrative officer. The entire process takes about an hour, so I prefer to call instead.'[24]

Wages are paid every two weeks. At the time fieldwork was conducted, typical earnings for production workers ranged from USD 120 to USD 130. Overtime earnings could increase their take-home pay to approximately USD 150.These wages complied with prevailing minimum wage regulations. Workers also received a seniority bonus of

[21] See Florence (2022); Salmivaara (2018); and Habib (2014).
[22] INT66PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[23] INT51PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[24] INT51PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

USD 2 per month after one year of service, with an additional USD 1 added annually, up to a maximum of USD 11. They are also eligible for bonus payments based on their ability to meet production targets. This bonus system is designed to incentivize group performance: if a production group achieves at least 70 percent of the hourly target, each member receives USD 1.50 per day. If the group meets between 65 percent and 70 percent of the target, the bonus is reduced to USD 1.25, with no bonus awarded for performance below this threshold. This structure pressures workers to avoid delays and maintain high productivity levels to secure their bonuses. As one worker noted, 'We need the minimum wage, bonus, and overtime payment to cover our living costs.'[25]

The allocation of production bonuses is at the discretion of management, as the government does not regulate bonuses. They are typically reserved for those working directly on production lines where production targets are clearly defined and most of these workers are women. Production targets are set on an hourly basis and escalate throughout the day. For example, the target may start at 40 pieces per hour and increase to 60 pieces per hour by the third hour. Workers are pressured to meet these targets and exceeding them is rare due to their continuously rising nature. This high-pressure environment is reflected in the sentiment expressed by a worker, who said, 'They never feel enough.'[26] Another worker who works in the ironing section shared the following observations about the impact of the production targets: 'I feel upset. Sometimes the style is so complicated. I've seen sewing workers cry and become sad when they couldn't meet the hourly production targets. They are blamed for not reaching the target and it is considered their own fault. We have nothing to say; we just need to keep working.'[27]

By contrast, the male-dominated warehouse, packing and cutting sections are excluded from the bonus schemes. The gendered distribution of production bonuses reinforces existing inequalities with women bearing the pressure of meeting targets to earn additional income. Such a system not only reflects but also perpetuates the gendered division of labour, shaped in part by the way in which bonuses are structured and

[25] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[26] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[27] INT51PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

distributed. With no local laws to guide bonus distribution, management has full control over the system, such authority not only emphasises existing inequalities but also highlights how the design of production bonuses shape women's experiences at work, intensifying physical stress but also undermining women's ability to care for themselves.

The Hong Kong Garment Factory

Established in 1992, the Hong Kong Garment Factory has developed into a well-established expert in knitwear manufacturing, bringing decades of experience in this specialised field of production. In fact, the factory is one of Cambodia's leading sweater producers, supplying renowned brands across Europe, the USA, and Japan, including well-recognized names like Marks & Spencer, C&A, and Uniqlo.[28] Like the Thai Garment Factory, the Hong Kong Garment Factory is integrated into a larger, vertically structured group operating within Cambodia. It is the largest of the three factories in terms of scale. However, due to its long-standing operation, it is clearly not the newest facility, and its physical appearance suggests that management has invested little in its maintenance.

The factory directly employs around 3,170 workers, with the majority working day shifts, except for the auto-knitting section, which operates on a 24-hour cycle.[29] Given the factory's rural location in Kandal Province, migrant workers are a less prominent feature of the workforce. Most of the workers I spoke with are locals who commute from their homes and often return home for lunch. Despite its rural setting, the area around the factory has a wide range of shops catering specifically to workers. Many of these are small family-run businesses that rely heavily on sales to the factory workforce. For those who do not go home, these shops provide convenient options for lunch, which they generally eat in the indoor eating area provided by the factory.

[28] Personal communication with a compliance officer in the Hong Kong Garment Factory, July 2024.
[29] MGT3KD (human resource officers, Hong Kong Garment Factory), March 2023. Workers assigned to the auto-knitting section are provided with on-site accommodation, where the factory supplies utilities such as electricity and water.

While most workers do not receive uniforms, those in leadership roles such as team leaders, supervisors, office staff, and auto-knitting section workers are provided with blue short-sleeve shirts. Workers in the final quality control section are given blue caps and aprons to keep the products clean. The caps and aprons are stored on the production floor, and replacements are available if needed. For the rest of the workforce, inexpensive clothing is worn, as in the Thai Garment Factory. However, unlike the Thai Garment Factory, there are no strict rules regarding clothing, so both male and female workers wear what they like. Nevertheless, it is common practice across the industry to wear long pants and long- sleeves shirts. Female workers typically choose this type of clothing for practical reasons such as protecting themselves from fabric dust, machine oil, or minor injuries that can occur when working with needles and machines.

The factory environs

The Hong Kong factory consists of approximately 67 buildings, each designated for different aspects of production. Its knitting facilities are equipped with 2,300 fully computerised Japanese machines, capable of performing a range of knitwear styles. This extensive array of machinery allows the factory to efficiently meet demands for flexible production, intricate designs and to provide competitive pricing. In addition to its knitting capabilities, the factory operates a large in-house garment dyeing mill, contributing to a substantial monthly output of up to 4 million garment pieces.[30] With this advanced equipment, the factory ensures both high-volume production and the ability to accommodate diverse buyer specifications. The factory's high roof promotes good ventilation, and the auto-knitting section is air-conditioned, with machines operating 24 hours a day to maintain continuous production.

Recruitment predominantly occurs through word-of-mouth, leading to a workplace where women often work alongside family members. This reliance on kinship networks fosters a familial environment, which the factory leverages to maintain a stable and compliant workforce. By integrating familial relations into the workplace, the factory creates a paternalistic atmosphere that reinforces gender roles and hierarchy.

[30] Publicly available document produced by the Hong Kong Garment Factory.

On normal working days, the factory's main gate opens early to allow Chinese supervisors to open their production floor around 6:30 am, half an hour before the official start of the working day at 7:00 am. Workers commute by motorbike, bicycle or on foot, often traveling with their fellow villagers. The road leading to the factory becomes increasingly busy until around 9:00 am. Access to the factory is straightforward, with workers parking their motorbikes and bicycles along the walkway to the production buildings. Although security guards are stationed at the main gate, there is no routine security check for food or personal items being brought into the production floor. After parking, workers proceed to their respective production buildings, where they use fingerprint scanners to record their attendance. I was told that some workers actually come to work early to increase the number of pieces they produce, then complete their attendance scan when the official time starts at 7:00 am as Chinese supervisors open the production building at around 6:30 am.

The factory has an infirmary and a designated indoor eating area, which is equipped with a concrete roof, fans, and electrical lighting. Despite these facilities, many local workers prefer to return home for lunch, as they live close to the factory.[31] Others prefer to eat at the factory to save commuting time and maximise their working time, as the production building gate is often left open during lunch breaks. Eating on the production floor is prohibited, but workers can eat quickly in designated water drinking areas where the risk of contaminating garments is minimal. If particularly hungry during working hours, some workers resort to eating discreetly under their workstations.[32] Although workers in this factory have fewer restrictions on toilet use, the unclean conditions often discourage them from using them. A team of 25 female cleaners is responsible for the toilets in addition to keeping the production floor during their shift. It is common that prioritisation is given to cleaning the production floor over the toilets, as ensuring that

[31] The company supports this arrangement by providing free accommodation for workers in the auto-knitting section, who are required to be on production floor for alternating 12-hour shifts. All workers living in this accommodation are from the same section and so understand the importance of maintaining a quiet environment for rest. Workers living in this employer-provided accommodation share with two to four other people, and their daily routines are monitored by Khmer security guards and a Chinese interpreter.

[32] INT9KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

products remain clean is critical to avoiding rejections from buyers. The state of the toilets is particularly bad during night shift, when they are not cleaned.[33] This reflects a clear imbalance in priorities, with management emphasising product cleanliness to meet buyer expectations while sidelining basic hygiene. In this way, workers' discomfort and unmet needs are normalised by management as part of factory work.

The division of labour

The Hong Kong Garment Factory operates under a dual-layered management system that reflects both ethnic and gendered hierarchies. The production managers and top executives are Hong Kong Chinese, working inside the office building, while mainland Chinese supervisors, recruited for their technical expertise, are stationed directly on the production floor.[34] The recruitment strategy for Chinese supervisors, managed exclusively by top management, bypasses the Factory's administrative and HR departments. There is a total of 85 Chinese supervisors, each of whom is responsible for a production section. Each supervisor oversees five teams, each of which has a Khmer team leader.

Unlike the Thai Garment Factory, where locals occupy supervisory roles, here the majority of supervisors are Chinese. There are about 400 Khmer team leaders who play a crucial role in daily operations. They manage 20-30 workers each, following the instructions of the Chinese supervisors in their respective sections. The team leaders handle attendance by processing leave requests, addressing workers' questions regarding technical aspects of the styles being produced and relaying information about workers' performance to their supervisor. However, they lack the authority to renew contracts or even approve leave.[35]

This dual-layered management system creates a complex dynamic on the production floor. While some workers view Khmer team leaders as mere conduits for Chinese supervisors' directives, others see them as accessible figures, as someone to

[33] INT5KD (auto knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[34] Personal communication with compliance officer, August 2024.
[35] Personal communication with compliance officer, August 2024.

whom workers can talk about their concerns on the production floor and who can address their concerns.[36] Due to language difficulties, two Chinese translators are assigned for each production buildings to interpret for the Chinese supervisors. Their presence reflects factory management's attempts to streamline communication, and therefore production, but also reflects underlying tensions and varying levels of worker trust within the leadership structure. Because the presence of translators is limited on the production floor, some Chinese supervisors have learned key phrases in Khmer such as 'Why are you still making these mistakes?' According to one worker, 'To make it sound more serious, they shout while saying those questions, from as far as 50 or 60 metres away.'[37] This behaviour exacerbates the stress and pressure felt by workers.

On the shop floor, production roles are divided along gender lines, reflecting traditional beliefs about gender suitability for different tasks. Women are predominantly assigned to lighter tasks such as auto-knitting and handwashing, accounting for around 80 percent of the workforce in these sections. Men are allocated to more physically demanding roles. For example, in the washing section, men manage the machinery and chemicals while women primarily focus on handwashing tasks.[38] The dyeing section employs only 20 percent women, and the yarn warehouse has just 10 percent women due to the physically demanding nature of lifting large yarn bundles. The packing section is exclusively male.[39] Interviews with administrative and human resource staff revealed that they exclusively recruit men for tasks traditionally associated with men's labour.[40]

Women workers' beliefs about the reasons for the gendered division of labour on the factory floor vary considerably. A key reason, some say, is that both the Chinese supervisors and the factory management prefer not to hire male workers because most of the Chinese supervisors and Khmer team leaders are women. If conflicts arise or if

[36] INT10KD (auto knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022 and INT7KD (packer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[37] INT6KD (stitcher, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[38] Team leaders also noted that in laundry section men load garments into washing machines, while women perform handwashing, due to the perception that women are better suited for washing delicate garments. MGT1KD (male team leaders, Hong Kong Garment Factory), March 2023.
[39] MGT3KD (human resource officers, Hong Kong Garment Factory), March 2023.
[40] MGT3KD (human resource officers, Hong Kong Garment Factory), March 2023.

mistakes occur, it could lead to situations where female leaders must reprimand male workers. This, they say, would be deeply uncomfortable.[41] Additionally, heavy-lifting tasks receive less close monitoring, which shifts accountability away from those leaders: 'Men are assigned to tasks with a low risk for errors, such as moving garments from one table to another using physical strength. With such tasks, mistakes are less likely, and consequently men rarely face blame. They only need to understand the shirt styles and prioritise the most urgent ones.'[42]

In the quality control section, men are exclusively assigned tasks that require significant physical strength, such as transporting garments, pushing carts, loading heavy materials, and carrying heavy boxes. When asked about this division, women explained that it reflects an appropriate division of labour, as women's roles demand meticulous attention to detail, and men become bored more quickly.[43] Conversely, in the auto-knitting section, men are perceived to work less efficiently than women. As one worker explained:

> Some men left the team after a short period of time as they can't work with eight machines while handling other tasks. They find our work is complicated. They used to complain that they couldn't work with machines because those machines are running so fast and at the same time, they need to check the knitting panels, which they find overwhelming. Men normally want to do only one type of work whereas women have to do many things. Women are patient with work, but men aren't. In my auto-knitting section, men normally start with four machines and then six machines, but women normally just train for one week and then start to work with eight machines. Two men normally work with eight machines. They need to work like this for about one month, which is different from women who can do the work after one week.[44]

Another reason relates to the history of industrial action in the factory. As one worker reported, 'In the past, the factory used to employ male workers, but they went on strike.

[41] INT16KD (sample maker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[42] INT26KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[43] INT9KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[44] INT20KD (auto knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

Since then, the factory has limited male hires to urgent production needs, placing them on three-month short-term contracts to discourage resistance to management.'[45]

Industrial action aside, the Hong Kong Garment Factory's gender-based division of labour reflects entrenched stereotypes, with women assigned to detailed, lighter tasks and men to physically demanding roles. This setup not only perpetuates traditional gender roles but also affects efficiency and worker satisfaction. Women manage multiple machines and intricate tasks, reinforcing the belief in their superior multitasking abilities, while men handle heavy lifting, which can lead to inefficiencies in roles requiring precision. The factory's preference for gender-segregated work environments also underscores how gender biases influence both operational practices and worker interactions. As in the Thai Garment Factory, this gendered division of labour reflects entrenched stereotypes and operational strategies that prioritise control and efficiency by assigning women to work with complex, detail-oriented tasks under close supervision, while men are assigned to physically demanding tasks but with less scrutiny. Such arrangements not only reinforce traditional gender roles but also shape women's experiences on the production floor and heighten their vulnerability within the factory's hierarchical structure.

Wages and conditions

In Hong Kong Garment Factory, I interviewed female workers who had different seniority ranging from a few months to those who have worked for the factory since its operations began in 1992. Such varieties of the interviews provide me with a wide range of information about the factory's practices and their implications on female workers' experiences.

The majority of workers are employed on continuing contracts (with no end date), which provide much more stability than the short-term contracts used in the Thai Garment Factory.[46] The standard contracts used in the Hong Kong Garment Factory meet

[45] INT26KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[46] A notable exception concerns workers in the packing section, who are employed under short-term contracts.

minimum requirements under the labour law including working hours, minimum wage provisions (which comply with rates set annually by the ministry), and allowances (including seniority bonuses). They also lay out expectations that workers will behave well, not cause trouble at work, and not negatively impact their co-workers. The factory also has a series of additional internal rules must be followed, including provisions for paid leave such as public holidays, weekly days off, annual leave, special leave, maternity leave, sick leave and work-related accidents which are not explicitly mentioned in the employment contracts but are clearly outlined in the internal rules.[47] Workers have the option to inform their representative if they cannot come to work due to sickness or personal commitments, or they can call their team leader to report their absence. Disciplinary actions are also outlined in these rules.

Production workers typically work eight-hour shifts six days a week, with start and end times adjusted to manage traffic congestion on the small roads surrounding the factory. For most sections – including quality control, lamp checking, mending, buttonhole making, washing, labelling, ironing, folding, and packing – shifts run from 7:30 am to 5:00 pm, including a 1.5-hour lunch break and overtime extends from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm. Workers in trimming and linking panel sections have a split schedule. They work from 7:00 am to 11:00 am, take a 1.5-hour lunch break, and then resume from 12:30 pm to 4:30 pm. Overtime, if required, is scheduled between 5:30 pm and 7:30 pm. Workers in the auto-knitting and yarn sections face particularly demanding conditions, working gruelling 12-hour shifts which incorporate two hours of compulsory overtime, and which rotate on a monthly basis. The first of these runs from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm, with breaks from 12:00 pm to 1:00 p.m. and 5:00 pm to 6:00 pm while the second runs from 7:00 pm to 7:00 am also with two hours of breaks.[48]

The Hong Kong Garment Factory employs a dual payment system, combining minimum wage with a piece rate system to incentivize productivity. Workers in skill-intensive sections such as sewing, quality control, ironing, linking, amending, and trimming are compensated based on piece rates. The piece rate system in more

[47] These items are not included in workers' contracts.
[48] INT2KD (auto knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

specialized sections reflects the factory's approach to rewarding skilled labour and boosting output.[49] Conversely, workers in the washing section, where tasks involve operating machines and handling garments with minimal skill variation, receive a standard minimum wage.[50] Production bonuses are provided only in the linking section, acknowledged as one of the most challenging areas in knitwear production.

Leave is granted at the discretion of the supervisor, who must be notified one day in advance for short leave and several days ahead for extended leave. Workers must inform their team leader first, who then forwards the request to the Chinese supervisor. Some workers say that there are no significant restrictions on the timing or duration of leave.[51] Others feel that supervisors resent worker absences. One worker noted, 'The Chinese supervisor, who is very mean and gets grumpy when we ask for leave.'[52] Another shared her experience of being denied leave by the Chinese supervisor, saying, 'It's hard to take leave. If we take a lot of leave, we'll be scolded.'[53] Recalling a time during her pregnancy when she struggled to complete her tasks, this worker explained how a co-worker tried to assist her, only for the team leader to reprimand her co-worker, saying, 'Everyone has their own work to do; they don't have time to do someone else's task!'[54] This dynamic forced worker to help each other in secrecy, constantly watching for the leader to avoid getting caught: 'It was hard.'[55]

In short, the Hong Kong Garment Factory reveals a similar pattern to the Thai Garment Factory, whereby management organises their workforce according to gender and, in doing so, reinforces traditional gender roles that shape workers' experiences on the production floor. However, in terms of working conditions, the Hong Kong Garment Factory offers greater flexibility in working hours and lunch breaks to accommodate workers' needs. In terms of wages, the factory uses a mixture of basic wages and a piece

[49] The implementation of the piece rate system in skill-intensive sections has a demonstrable impact on the social dynamics among workers on the production floor, as discussed in Chapter Four.
[50] Personal communication with compliance officer in the Hong Kong Garment Factory, August 2024.
[51] INT18KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[52] INT2KD (auto knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[53] INT11KD (sewer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[54] INT11KD (sewer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[55] INT11KD (sewer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

rate system, unlike the Thai Garment Factory, which uses a basic wage and production bonuses. However, both of these systems serve the same purpose: high productivity and qualities which contribute to the pressure workers receive to meet production demands.

The Chinese Garment Factory

The Chinese Garment Factory is also located in Kandal Province, across the river from the Hong Kong Garment Factory. The factory was registered as an exporting factory in 2022; before that time, it operated as a subcontracting factory for several years. Managed by a Chinese owner, the factory specialises in knitwear production. Despite serving international buyers such as Rodd and Gunn, H&M, Anko, Lou and Grey, and Chicos,[56] the factory does not own a dyeing mill, which limits its capacity to offer a full production package. This omission may be attributed to its origins as a subcontractor.[57]

As global brands have intensified their focus on supply chain transparency, compliance and traceability, subcontracting factories like this one have faced pressure to formalise their operations as shown in the factory's recent registration to engage directly with buyers and possibly meet stricter sourcing requirements. Since its upgrade, the factory has repainted its main gate and surrounding areas, possibly to appeal to buyers and project a more professional image. In the past, it operated under limited visibility, producing goods for larger factories without direct engagement with buyers. It has also adjusted its internal organisation and labour practices to better align with buyer expectations around quality, delivery timelines and social compliance.

Compared to the Thai and Hong Kong Garment Factories, the Chinese Garment Factory is significantly smaller, employing around 500 workers, most of whom are locals. The surrounding area is quieter with fewer food stalls operating nearby as many workers bring their meals from home or return home for lunch. The auto-knitting section operates 24 hours a day where workers are required to do shift work, but unlike the Hong Kong Garment Factory, workers are not provided with on-site accommodation. As a result,

[56] TU4KD (male trade union president, Chinese Garment Factory), January 2024.
[57] Personal communication with a local trade union leader in the Chinese Garment Factory, August 2024.

many women stay with co-workers who live nearby rather than returning home after their shifts.

The factory environs

The Chinese Garment Factory features two main gates: one, marked with the factory's name, is located on a side road, while the other is situated directly on the main road. Workers typically use the gate on the main road, as this was the entrance used before 2022. The factory gate opens about one hour before the official start time of 7:00 am, allowing workers to enter, park their motorbikes or bicycles, and access the production buildings. The parking lots are clean and covered with zinc rooves, but the outdoor eating area is poorly maintained. With around ten tables and chairs attached to the tables, it is a small space, though adequate, given that most workers eat at home. It is also located next to the parking lot and so is affected by dust and pollution.

In the mornings, workers walk, ride a bike or motorbike to work often wearing simple clothing and factory identity cards. They blend into the village setting which creates a different atmosphere from city factories where garment workers are more visibly distinct from city residents. In this factory, workers are provided with uniforms in different colours according to their production section but are only required to wear them when there are visitors such as buyers who come to the factory. There is no strict security check at the gate. Upon entering the factory, workers proceed to their respective production buildings and record their attendance using fingerprint scanners located at the entrance of each building.

On the production floor, where work is required sitting, workers are not provided with back-rest chairs, and experience discomfort from sitting for extended periods.[58] Workers have raised concerns about poor airflow, especially during the dry season.[59] To

[58] INT46KD (quality controller, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022. According to this interviewee, Chinese supervisors think that providing back-rest would slow down production and make workers lazy.

[59] INT33KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022. Another worker who worked in the trimming section also raised concerns over the heat inside the production floor (INT41KD, September 2022).

address this, Chinese supervisors allow workers to bring small fans from home.[60] In theory, workers are prohibited from eating or drinking on the production floor, in accordance with buyer requirements to prevent product contamination.[61] Their food and water are kept in a designated area, and they are required to go there if they need to drink water. They are also permitted to spend up to five minutes eating snacks outside if they are hungry. In practice, these rules are not closely policed. As a worker in the auto-knitting section reported, 'In this factory, I can bring food onto the production floor, which is much better than the other factory. We can eat our noodles, as boiled water is provided, and I can drink energy drinks.'[62]

In this factory, there are no unreasonable restrictions on using the toilets.[63] However, there is a shortage of toilets relative to the size of workforce, and the facilities are poorly maintained. Although there are separate toilets for men and women, the number is provided for each, leading to much longer wait times for women. Women often face criticism for spending more time in the toilets.[64] Workers are also concerned about infrequent cleaning, as the toilets are cleaned every two or three days and rubbish is removed only once a week. This is partly due to there being only one cleaner per production section, who is responsible for cleaning both the toilets and the production floors.[65] In addition, the toilets have holes in the walls, and some do not have proper locks, requiring workers to use strings to secure the doors. A female worker said:

> I sometimes feel worried when I use the toilet because the string may not be safe or strong enough. We used to report this issue to our team leader, but the lock was never fixed properly, and when the factory replaced it, it soon broke again. Some toilets even have small holes in the walls, so I have to stuff tissues in them to block the gaps, making it difficult to use the toilet, so sometimes I avoid using it altogether.[66]

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[60] INT46KD (quality controller, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[61] INT33KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[62] INT32KD, INT38KD (auto knitting workers, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[63] INT39KD (packer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[64] INT43KD (cleaner, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[65] Personal communication with trade union president in the Chinese Garment Factory, August 2024.
[66] INT36KD (packer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

During the night shift, women use flashlights from their phones due to safety concerns, as the lights in the toilets are inadequate.[67] Even when a toilet room does have functional lights, there are issues like holes in the walls, which make the women worry about being seen from the outside. As a result, many prefer to take toilet breaks in pairs, asking fellow workers to accompany them for added security.[68] This situation highlights the ongoing struggles for basic safety and dignity that women workers experience, reflecting broader concerns about the factory's commitment to maintaining a secure and respectful work environment.

The division of labour

In the Chinese Garment Factory, the division of labour is also structured hierarchically, along ethnic and gender lines. Top management but also all production supervisors are mainland Chinese. Each production section is managed by one of eight supervisors, three of whom are female. These supervisors hold authority over workers' leave requests, contract renewals and disciplinary actions. They are also responsible for addressing mistakes on the production floor and sending workers to the administrative office to get warning letters when necessary.[69] Beneath the Chinese supervisors are team leaders. Amongst the ten team leaders, seven are female. Communication on the production floor is facilitated by two Chinese interpreters, although some Chinese supervisors have a basic understanding of Khmer.[70]

The team leaders manage workers' day-to-day activities. The number of team leaders for each team varies based on team size: one team leader manages smaller teams, while teams of over 20 workers are overseen by two team leaders. Team leaders' duties include monitoring the production line, relaying urgent orders, recording absenteeism, signing overtime timesheets, encouraging overtime work and training their team

[67] INT44KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[68] INT43KD (cleaner, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[69] INT44KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[70] MGT4KD (female team leader, Chinese Garment Factory), March 2023.

members.[71] Workers reported having a good relationship with their team leaders who allow workers not to work overtime until 8:30pm alone. As one worker explained, 'If it's during the day, my leader may not be happy if many people leave and don't work overtime, as it might affect the target. But if it's at night, like working until 8:30pm, she understands.'[72] Team leaders also remind workers not to talk too much on the production floor, emphasising that full attention is required to avoid mistakes. If errors occur, Chinese supervisors often blame the team leaders for failing to manage their workers effectively.[73]

The division of labour at the Chinese Garment Factory mirrors patterns seen in the Hong Kong Garment Factory with some notable differences. In the auto-knitting section, the gender balance is relatively even, with married couples featuring prominently. By contrast, the thread section is exclusively staffed by women.[74] In the ironing section, men handle the actual ironing, while women perform measurement tasks to ensure garments do not stretch post-ironing. Men avoid measurement tasks because they are paid a piece rate for ironing, allowing them to earn more, while women receive minimum wage for measurement tasks.[75]

The packing section is predominantly staffed by women, who fold shirts, count items, and attach labels while men are responsible for physically demanding tasks such as making boxes and loading products onto trucks. In the linking section, men deliver garments to women who perform the actual task of connecting knitwear. Cleaning roles are exclusively filled by women.[76] According to a female cleaner, the factory does not recruit men for cleaning positions, partly because men prefer roles with higher earnings and because their collective presence could lead to potential unrest, contrasting with the more compliant behaviour observed among women. As she explained, 'Administrators and the Chinese supervisors and team leaders do not dare to blame men very much

[71] MGT4KD (female team leader, Chinese Garment Factory), March 2023.
[72] INT46KD (quality controller, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[73] INT41KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[74] INT28KD (threader, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[75] INT31KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[76] Factory management did not agree to be interviewed, so it was not possible to ask about the reasons for this division of labour.

because they would not tolerate it, whereas women just look down to the floor and take the blame.'[77]

Like workers in the Hong Kong Garment factories, women expressed a preference for working with other women. They cited issues such as men being less focused on work because 'they are busy flirting with the girls.'[78] Additionally, women find small talk at work helpful. As one woman explained, 'At work, we chit-chat among ourselves as female co-workers. We pay compliments to each other, saying things like, 'Look at your shape – you have a nice butt, or your skin is so white, and I want fair skin too.' This leads to conversations, for example, about different whitening lotions and how to take care of our skin.'[79] In the ironing section, where women measure garments, some workers mentioned difficulties communicating with male colleagues: 'It's hard to talk to male workers because they don't listen when they're not doing well with their ironing tasks.'[80] As these comments suggest, women prefer working with other women not just for work-related reasons but also for social connection and mutual support.

Wages and conditions

The workers whom I interviewed at the Chinese Garment Factory had been employed at the factory for periods ranging from a few months to six years. As production workers, they typically start with a two-month probationary contract. Upon successful completion, they are given a three-month contract. Some workers are offered one-year contracts, but upon completion, these contracts are terminated. Workers are then allowed a 15-day break during which they can work on an hourly basis, with payments made every Saturday.[81] After this period, they start again on a three-month contract. This cycle of short-term contracts creates ongoing uncertainty and limits access to benefits like

[77] INT43KD (cleaner, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[78] INT38KD (auto knitting, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[79] INT45KD (auto knitting, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[80] INT33KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[81] INT38KD (auto knitting, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

seniority bonuses but also maternity leave. In addition, the lack of continuity affects their ability to advocate for better conditions.[82]

Standard working hours in most sections are eight hours per day, six days a week. Workers start at 7:00 am, take a break for lunch from 11:00 am, and resume work from 12:00 pm to 4:00 pm, with overtime from 4:30 pm to 6:30 pm, including a 30-minute meal break. The auto-knitting section operates 24 hours and is divided into two shifts along the same lines as the Hong Kong Garment Factory, with the first shift from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm and the second from 7:00 pm to 7:00 am. During urgent production periods, overtime on the day shift can extend until 8:30 pm. As in the Hong Kong Garment Factory, the linking section is the only area offering a production bonus.[83]

In terms of accessing their leave, workers reported that in general, the process is straightforward, whether it is for sick leave or personal reasons. One worker noted, 'Here we can take leave if we want to; the Chinese supervisors do not restrict our rights to take leave, but we need to inform them if we are going to be absent.'[84] Yet, while leave policies appear more flexible, social pressure and team-based performance metrics can discourage women from taking necessary time off. Another worker reported that frequent sick leave may result in pressure from team members and leaders: 'When I take a lot of sick leave, my co-workers are unhappy because it affects our team's performance, and I also receive blame from my leader.'[85] Few expressed concern expressed about maternity leave, most likely because they know they are not entitled to it if employed on a contract for longer than one year, or about the impact of the duration of their contract on their entitlements.

Though smaller in scale, the way in which the factory structures its workforce mirrors the patterns observed in the Thai and Hong Kong factories. Women are predominantly assigned to roles such as cleaning, sewing, trimming, linking and quality

[82] The contracts cover basic issues such as contract duration, working hours, overtime payment, roles and responsibilities, termination provisions, and annual leave. They lack detailed provisions on other benefits such as maternity leave (which is only provided to workers who have been employed for at least one year) as well as seniority bonus provisions.
[83] Personal communication with a trade union leader in the Chinese Garment Factory, August 2024.
[84] INT32KD (auto knitting, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[85] INT44KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

controlling sections where constant attention is required and are closely tied to traditional gender roles. They also carry the burden of meeting high production targets, contributing to workplace stress. However, working conditions appear somewhat more relaxed. Workers generally describe a more connected and informal environment, possibly shared by long-standing relationships from the factory's subcontracting days. Such familiarity fosters a sense of community and ease among workers, distinguishing the factory's atmosphere from the more rigid and target-driven environments of the Thai and Hong Kong factories. Although this sense of familiarity helps mitigate some of the stress associated with production demands, it does not eliminate structural gender issues embedded in the organisation of work.

Conclusion

While there are operational differences between the three factories, the organisation of work in the Thai, Hong Kong, and Chinese garment factories all take a similar approach in terms of how task is assigned and supervised. Across all three settings, a highly gendered division of labour is evident, shaped by broader social norms that associate certain tasks with specific genders. Women are consistently assigned to roles deemed 'lighter', such as sewing and cleaning, while men undertake physically demanding tasks such as packing and cutting. Similarly, although there are some differences in remuneration arrangements, women employed in all three factories experience pressure to work long hours to maximise their earnings while juggling their domestic responsibilities.

In both these respects, global supply chains play a pivotal role in shaping workers' experiences. Driven by tight deadlines, cost-cutting imperatives, and high-volume demands from international brands, factories respond by intensifying production targets, enforcing rigid schedules, and relying on flexible labour arrangements. Women, who are disproportionately employed in roles requiring speed and precision, bear the brunt of pressures which is further exacerbated by a production bonus system that gives management significant control over workers' behaviour and performance. These pressures also reinforce gendered expectations as management strategically leverages women's perceived compliance to meet market demands.

Understanding these dynamics is essential for examining how the organisation of work is shaped by both internal gender hierarchies and external economic pressures. The following chapter presents insights into workplace cultures across these three factories, providing a deeper understanding of management approaches, interactions on the production floor, and the role of trade unions with the aim of offering a comprehensive view of how the organisation of work and specific workplace cultures contribute to women's experience at work.

Chapter Four

Workplace Culture in the Garment Factories

Export-oriented garment factories, which employ hundreds or even thousands of workers, primarily women, operate under a combination of formal and informal rules that regulate factory operations and workers' behaviour. On the formal side, there are various policies and procedures designed to ensure compliance with national laws and the requirements of international buyers.[1] These policies and procedures typically cover recruitment processes, occupational health and safety regulations, disciplinary actions, termination procedures, and guidelines for freedom of association. However, in practice, factories' informal rules – rather than the formal policies and procedures – that determine how production workers are treated and how issues are managed. Interactions between management, supervisors and co-workers on the production floor are key in shaping the workplace culture, playing a crucial role in defining what types of beliefs, actions, and behaviours are considered acceptable in each particular setting. Together, these formal and informal dynamics create workplace cultures. As Harenstam and Nyberg (2021) have noted, gender is created and recreated through the social interactions at work.

This chapter evaluates how workplace culture, as expressed through social norms, power relations, incentive structures, and organisational tolerance and accountability, shapes women's experiences. As it demonstrates, variations in leadership styles, incentive structures, the enforcement of rules and the degree of responsiveness to women's concerns all contribute to shaping these experiences, as well as to the extent to which women feel empowered to seek support when experiencing workplace GBVH. However,

[1] Garment supply chains are often seen as being simple, although in practice they are not. Brands do not own garment factories. Buyers outsource all production and may change suppliers each season, looking for lower prices or specific skills to produce their required products. Brands generally manage their suppliers through codes of conduct, or sets of rules to which suppliers agree to comply (Morris and Rickard 2019).

while the three factories share many similarities, they also exhibit key differences that affect women's sense of agency, belonging and vulnerability at work in general, but also their experiences of workplace GBVH. Management approaches to power and accountability are one important differentiating factor: in the Thai Garment Factory, Khmer supervisors leverage shared cultural expectations to exert subtle control, while in the Hong Kong and Chinese Garment Factories, foreign supervisors rely heavily on overt forms of coercion that workers find particularly traumatising. While all three ignore various forms of non-sexual and sexual harassment and violence, management's response to formal complaints differs markedly. In each case, workplace culture prioritises production over worker safety and creates environments where women's primary strategy for survival is silence.

Social Norms

Ideas about who should supervise whom and how men and women work are closely tied to gender norms. As explained in Chapter Three, the perception that women will listen to instructions also creates the environment where leaders, supervisors, both male and female, prefer to have female subordinates. A male supervisor in the Hong Kong Garment Factory explained: 'Managing male workers can be a challenge because they like to get out and chit chat.'[2] A male team leader in the Chinese Garment Factory echoed this, stating he preferred to manage women due to their willingness to learn and work diligently:

> Since women don't smoke, they spend more time working. Also, when I teach women to measure shirts, they pick it up very quickly. Men, on the other hand, can take weeks to learn tasks because they often lack focus and sometimes leave without permission. Sometimes, I even need them to be warned by the admin office … I think it is easier to manage women's work, because if the shirts are urgent, they'll try to help manage those shirts for us. And if the work can't be finished on time, they'll help to work overtime for us. But if we ask male workers to work overtime for us, sometimes they don't want to do it.

[2] MGT02KD (team leader, Hong Kong Garment Factory), March 2023.

> Sometimes when we say the shirts are urgent, men go and smoke or play on their phones … and I have to call them back.[3]

Female leaders have even more difficulty supervising male workers. A female team leader from the Thai Garment Factory recounted a troubling experience: 'When I tried to instruct a male worker, he got very angry and seemed ready to attack me. I felt unsafe … If the leader was male, they probably wouldn't dare to react like that.'[4] A similar assessment was provided by a female team leader in the Chinese Garment Factory. As she explained:

> Men are hard to supervise. Female group leaders can't instruct them to work. For example, if the lamp checkers don't have enough work to do and we ask them to go and help in another section, they won't do it. I asked them to go and help those who work in the canton area, and they said no. They said that they are employed to check the lamps, and they'll only do that. If there is no lamp checking to do, they sit and do nothing, even though we are asking them to work during working hours! If women have no work, and they are asked to go and help in the packaging section, they are okay with that. Also, men get angry easily and behave aggressively. Even the Chinese find it hard to work with them. My Chinese supervisor does not seem to know how to fix this issue. She said that next time they won't employ men.[5]

When managing female workers, female supervisors do not hold back in the same way. A quality controller working in the Thai Garment Factory told me, 'I frequently hear things that are said on the sewing line. When [female] leaders blame workers, they use words like "Brainless!".' They don't say these kinds of things to men because they are worried that men would take revenge on them when they get outside the factory.'[6]

In the close-knit environment of garment factories where workers often develop long-term relationships, social norms around sexuality also influence daily interactions. Such norms not only shape how workers relate to one another but also affect women's ability to perform their jobs and seek support when boundaries are crossed. For example,

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[3] MGT05KD (team leader, Chinese Garment Factory), March 2023.
[4] MGT06PP (team leader, Thai Garment Factory), March 2023.
[5] MGT04KD (team leader, Chinese Garment Factory), March 2023. Because of this known issue, male supervisors are typically assigned to manage male workers across all three factories.
[6] INT53PP (quality controller, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

in the Thai Garment Factory, a trade union leader explained that (male) mechanics often prioritise which sewing machines they fix based on the attractiveness of the (female) workers asking for help. One sewer confirmed this assessment: 'At work, all the men are mechanics who fix the machines … When my machine doesn't work, I need to call them for help, but because I'm not beautiful, they don't come to fix it very quickly. However, when a beautiful girl calls them, they come fast.' There is no institutional support in such situations. The same worker complained to her team leader about this unfair treatment, and her leader told her that if she called a mechanic and he did not come, she needed to keep looking for another one.[7]

This particular problem is less common in the Chinese and Hong Kong Garment Factories, where auto-knitting machines require less maintenance. However, workers still report that physical appearance influences how they are treated. For example, in the Hong Kong Garment Factory, a worker reported that a Chinese supervisor in the auto-knitting section regularly hired young, attractive women and would invite them out for dinner. One worker recounted an incident where she was trapped in the supervisor's car when she refused to go out with him.[8] In the Chinese Garment Factory, a female worker who worked in the auto-knitting section expressed discomfort over a Chinese supervisor who would approach her daily, trying to initiate a romantic relationship despite her clear rejection of his advances. She explained that, to protect herself, she would escape to the toilet whenever she saw him approaching. Everyone at her workplace was aware of the situation, but no one intervened.[9]

Sexualised joking is also a common feature of workplace culture across all three factories. A male union secretary in the Hong Kong Garment Factory explained that male and female co-workers alike engage in sexualised joking with one another. He explained that he did not think it was necessary to intervene because everyone seemed to enjoy these interactions, and that stepping in might make it harder for them to work together.[10] In the Chinese Garment Factory, sexualised comments are also commonplace, as

[7] INT66PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[8] INT16KD (sample maker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), September 2022.
[9] INT38KD (auto knitting worker, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[10] TU3KD (union secretary, Hong Kong Garment Factory), January 2024.

evidenced by an incident where a male co-worker responded to a female worker's correction about an ironing error – specifically, that a shirt had been incorrectly sized around the chest – by saying, 'Why? Because I heard you love big breasts, right?'[11] Sexualised banter also occurs in the Thai Garment Factory, though largely among women themselves. For example, a female ironer told me that when one of her female co-workers yawned at work, especially those who were married, she and other female co-workers would jokingly ask, 'What did you do last night, have sex?'[12]An elderly cleaner also noted that women ask each other how many times they had sex the night before.[13] Women report that engaging in such banter provides a form of entertainment amidst the drudgery of factory life. One female worker explained that such topics foster laughter and camaraderie, saying, 'It's a good fun that helps kill time … it keeps us awake when we feel sleepy and tired.'[14]

However, this normalisation of sexualised behaviour blurs the line between consensual joking and harassment. Sometimes, women's interactions include physical touch. The same cleaner said, 'I saw female workers touching each other's breasts when they finished work.'[15] Interactions between workers and supervisors are also frequently sexualised. In the Chinese Garment Factory, a team leader asked a female worker, 'How often do you have sex?'[16] In the Thai Garment Factory, a female team leader asked a worker requesting sick leave, 'Are you asking for sick leave because you have pain in your butt, or because you didn't sleep last night because of sex?'[17] In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, a packer explained that she and her female team leader 'touch each

[11] INT33KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[12] INT57PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[13] INT56PP (cleaner, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[14]INT59PP (cutter, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022. Workers also make sexualised comments among themselves as a form of quiet rebellion against their supervisors. In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, for example, female workers reported male colleagues making derogatory comments about their Chinese female supervisor's appearance, with remarks like, 'Their beauty is fading away… they might have had sex with someone already, which is why their breasts look different.' INT16KD (sample maker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[15] INT56PP (cleaner, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[16] INT34KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[17] INT51PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022

other's butts at work. We're from the same village, so we don't really mind.'[18] While largely accepted by workers, these behaviours also objectify women's bodies and reinforce a culture where inappropriate sexual commentary is normalised as a means of coping with the stressful working environment.

While many workers accept or even participate in these behaviours, they also reinforce a culture where women's bodies are routinely objectified and where inappropriate comments are dismissed as jokes. This normalisation makes it difficult for women to report unwanted attention or harassment. As one worker in the Chinese Garment Factory explained, 'If we feel that [a co-worker] has been playing too much, we can't report it to our team leader because they will see it as a personal issue that has nothing to do with them.'[19] In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, a female packer raised a similar concern about responding to verbal abuse, 'I don't want to speak up when a team leader put the blame on me. You have to look at these younger workers, even they don't speak up … so how dare I speak up … I am an old woman.'[20]

Power

Across the three garment factories, top-down pressure to meet production targets creates a hierarchical system where middle management, supervisors and team leaders pass on stress and control to workers, especially women at the bottom of the hierarchy, resulting in a tense and stressful work environment. For example, as a quality controller from the Hong Kong Garment Factory explained, 'My team leader blames us if the Chinese supervisor blames her; she just wants to relieve the pressure she experiences – and then she's fine.'[21] According to a ironer from the Thai Garment Factory, 'Senior supervisors and supervisors shout loudly because they are also under pressure from Thai managers, who blame them if production is slow.'[22] In the Chinese Garment Factory, a quality controller observed, 'My team leader is just like a friend. At work, she sometimes has to

[18] INT7KD (packer, Kong Hong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[19] INT34KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[20] INT7KD (packer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[21] INT12KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[22] INT50PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

shout to demonstrate to the Chinese supervisor that she controls her team.'[23] The power exercised by middle management reflects the values embraced by top management which prioritises production above all else, maintained through shouting, blaming and pressure rather than support or collaboration.

A culture of blame is common where workers are held responsible regardless of the actual source of the problem. Many have internalised the understanding that, being at the lowest rung of the hierarchy, they are the ones who must shoulder the blame. As a sewer employed in the Thai Garment Factory explained: 'The leader gets blamed by the supervisor if their team doesn't meet production targets, and then the leader comes to blame the workers. We can't talk back. If we do, our contract won't be renewed.'[24] Another quality control worker confirmed this assessment: 'We have to take all the blame from everywhere – the higher levels blame the lower levels, and we are the last in line, so we end up with it all.'[25] There is also a strong culture of blame in the Hong Kong Garment Factory. As a stitcher explained: 'When someone is blamed, the whole team can hear because the Chinese supervisor shouts at them. They call out that worker's identity number, and the worker has to go to the supervisor's desk to be chastised … they need us to work fast and perfectly!'[26]

Supervisors use blame as a tool to maximise productivity. In the Hong Kong Garment factory, blame is sometimes assigned even *before* a mistake is actually made because team leaders are afraid of getting in trouble with their Chinese supervisors. As one worker shared, 'When workers make mistakes, the team leader is also blamed by the higher-ups. To avoid being blamed, they warn everyone about potential mistakes before they even occur.'[27] When mistakes do happen, team leaders often do not bother to determine who is at fault. As a packer working in the same factory explained, 'When a mistake occurs, everyone is blamed. It wastes too much time [to work out who made the

[23] INT47KD (quality controller, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[24] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[25] INT53PP (quality controller, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[26] INT6KD (stitcher, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[27] INT11KD (sewer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

mistake], so they prefer to blame everyone to save time.'[28] An ironing quality worker from the Chinese Garment Factory shared a similar story: 'When there is a big mistake, the Chinese supervisors call us in and blame us as a group … We've gotten used to it now.'[29]

Workers are expected to obey their supervisors without question even if they disagree with their decisions. If workers challenge an instruction, the factories simply claim they are not following orders. As a sewer in the Thai Garment Factory explained, 'Here we can't talk back. We can't raise our voices; if we want to question who is right or wrong, we are sent to the office and receive a warning letter. They say we don't listen to them and that we talk back.'[30] In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, workers raised similar concerns. A stitcher stated, 'If we talk back, the Chinese shouts at us very loudly … the whole section of about 100 workers can hear.'[31] Another noted, 'When the Chinese supervisor blames us, we just have to be quiet. If we speak up, it's like putting fuel on the fire.'[32]

Supervisors in the Chinese Garment Factory admonish workers for talking, insisting that they maintain full concentration on their tasks.[33] Workers are also instructed not to talk in the Hong Kong Garment Factory, where Chinese supervisors to strictly enforce rules against worker communication during tasks. As one worker explained:

> The Chinese don't allow us to talk at work, but you know we are human beings: it's hard not to talk. So, if the Chinese see us talk, they'll call our team leader out and blame her and she blames us, the workers. Sometimes, a worker is called to stand at the Chinese supervisor's desk, where they're questioned about why they're talking. It's an open space, with no privacy.[34]

[28] INT7KD (packer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[29] INT31KD (ironing quality control, Chinese Garment Factory), August 2022.
[30] INT61PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[31] INT6KD (stitcher, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[32] INT17KD (linking worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[33] INT45KD (auto-knitting worker, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[34] INT13KD (quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

More generally, disciplinary measures are generally used to reinforce compliance rather than address worker grievances. As sewing in the Thai Garment Factory reported, 'In a group of 100 workers, only one might dare to speak up, and that person risks receiving a warning or termination. For example, if we argue with the group leader, we're transferred to another team for being 'stubborn', which negatively impacts our morale and self-esteem.'[35] In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, a similar dynamic exists: 'If there's a problem, we'd prefer to receive a warning letter because the process is quicker. If we speak up, it turns into prolonged session of complaints, with the Chinese supervisor continually accusing us while the translator keeps translating it.'[36]

Power is also exercised through ethnicity. In the Thai Garment Factory, all supervisors and leaders are Khmer. As an ironer observed, 'The Thai people normally only come when the products have to be shipped or sometimes, they come down for a short time then disappear. They don't come to bother workers; they let Khmer blame Khmer.'[37] Khmer supervisors' cultural familiarity allows them to exert quite subtle forms of control. This is particularly the case with female workers, who are under pressure to comply with cultural expectations around obedience and respect for authority. By contrast, Chinese supervisors manage the production lines in the Hong Kong and Chinese Garment Factories. Their approach to workers is much more aggressive and overtly coercive than that of Khmer supervisors at the Thai Garment Factory.

Workers describe an environment filled with tension and intimidation, where language barriers exacerbate feelings of fear. As a knitting worker in the Hong Kong Garment Factory observed: 'The Chinese supervisors blame us when there's a problem, and we can't talk back. If we do, they start banging the table loudly, so it's better not to speak up.'[38] In the Chinese Garment Factory, a trimmer remarked, 'The Chinese supervisor sometimes gets angry about our work. She looks very angry, but we don't

[35] INT62PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[36] INT10KD (auto-knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[37] INT51PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[38] INT10KD (auto-knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

understand what she's saying.'[39] Although these findings reveal different leadership styles, but they ultimately serve the same purpose: while Khmer supervisors rely on shared cultural expectations to maintain authority, Chinese supervisors often assert authority through fear and discipline, reinforcing unequal relationships between workers and management.

In this context, personal relationships – and even small bribes like buying food or running errands for leaders – become a means through which workers can secure favours. As a sewer in the Thai Garment Factory explained, 'The supervisor only makes life trouble for those she doesn't like. For those she likes, everything seems fine.'[40] A trimmer in the Chinese Garment Factory also emphasised the importance of maintaining a good rapport with team leaders, even visiting their homes or sharing meals together.[41] These informal dynamics impose additional burdens on workers – who must not only meet high production targets but also engage in extensive emotional labour to avoid penalties – and have a profound negative impact on worker morale. When workers must rely on personal relationships to secure fair treatment at work, it blurs professional boundaries and makes it even harder to challenge inappropriate behaviour.

Incentive Structures

The incentive structures within the factory significantly contribute to this culture of blame and abuse. Supervisors and group leaders are rewarded with higher bonuses for meeting production targets. For example, in the Thai Garment Factory, team leaders receive three times the production bonus compared to workers when production targets are met.[42] This system encourages supervisors to exert immense pressure on workers, particularly those on the sewing lines, the majority of whom are women. A worker in the quality control section at the Hong Kong Garment Factory also said that supervisors push

[39] INT44KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022. It should be noted here that some workers mentioned that their team leaders are more understanding and do not shout as much (INT36KD, INT37KD, INT39KD).
[40] INT66PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[41] INT41KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[42] The specifics of the bonus structure are less clear in the Hong Kong and Chinese Garment Factories, but it is widely recognised that supervisors receive bonuses tied to production performance.

workers to extreme levels: 'The supervisor shouts 'quick, quick, work quick!' around five times a day.'[43] According to a female packer in the Chinese Garment Factory, supervisors shout 'Quick, quick, quick!' She went on to say that this no longer bothered her, 'because my work is always urgent.'[44] Workers understood only too clearly why their supervisors pushed them. As a sewer explained, 'They want money and they want Thai people to like them, so they don't care about workers.'[45]

In piece rate systems, which are commonly used in low-wage industries such as agriculture and garment manufacturing, workers are compensated based on the number of units produced (Borino 2018). In Cambodia, garment workers are normally paid according to the number of units they produce. For instance, one unit may be paid at half a US cent, or in some cases, payment is calculated per dozen, with a dozen units earning five US cents. At the end of every two-week period, workers' earnings are calculated. If their total piece rate earnings exceed the minimum wage, they receive that amount; if they fall short, they are paid at least the minimum wage. In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, workers reported arriving early and leaving late in their efforts to avoid censure from their supervisors and maximize their earnings. This relentless pursuit of productivity limits their ability to take necessary breaks, such as going to the toilet or drinking water. A trade union deputy president noted the detrimental shift in workplace culture following the introduction of the piece rate system:

> When I first started to work here … workers were nice to each other, including the group leaders; they didn't get jealous, and workers were able to take care one another … Now workers are more individualistic; they just care about themselves … I think the piece rate is something that we need to blame … Because of the piece rate, workers start to come to work earlier, which affects their break time … They eat very fast and return to work as soon as they finish … they don't think about their health anymore.[46]

[43] INT13KD (final quality controller, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[44] INT35KD (packer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[45] INT62PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[46] INT26TU (union deputy president, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

A similar trend can be observed in the Chinese Garment Factory, where piece rates are set at such a low level that, even with hard work, workers often only earn the minimum wage. Under Cambodian labour law, those who produce fewer pieces than the minimum wage threshold must still be paid at least the minimum wage. Consequently, factories are reluctant to continue to employ workers who consistently produce below the minimum wage, and so their contracts are likely to be terminated.[47] By contrast, the Thai Garment Factory uses production bonuses rather than piece rates. For example, if there are ten workers on a production line, they must produce a total of 150 underwear items per hour during the eight hours workday to earn a USD 1.50 production bonus per person. According to one worker, these bonuses function to 'buy workers' minds and labour'.[48]

Supervisors weaponise other aspects of the incentive structure to maintain control. Workers report avoiding challenging their supervisors because they have the power to determine whether or not they continue to work in the factory. As a sewer in the Thai Garment Factory explained, 'We can't say anything for fear of being judged as disobedient and not having their contract renewed.'[49] In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, too, workers avoid speaking up for fear of losing their jobs. As a cleaner explained, 'I've never reported any concerns because the contracts of others who have weren't renewed.'[50] In this way, supervisors' authority over contract extensions acts as an invisible but key tool for controlling the workforce, fostering an environment where compliance is driven by fear of job loss.

This control extends to the distribution of bonuses as well. In the Thai Garment Factory, team leaders have the authority to allocate production bonuses. One worker explained that new recruits often receive reduced bonuses: 'Sometimes the leader gave a smaller production bonus, for example, new workers could lose seven, five, or two dollars.'[51] Supervisors are also responsible for awarding bonuses based on workers'

[47] INT43KD (cleaner, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[48] INT49PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[49] INT66PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[50] INT24KD (cleaner, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[51] INT54PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022. The team leader confirmed in an interview that part of her responsibility is assigning production bonuses for each group. MGT06PP (team leader, Thai Garment Factory), March 2023.

performance in the Chinese Garment Factory and the Hong Kong Garment Factory.[52] One worker in the sample room at the Hong Kong Garment Factory was forced off piece rates onto a monthly wage: 'I was making samples and teaching workers how to make them. They said I was hard to talk to.'[53] The lack of a formal mechanism to monitor or check how these powers are exercised reinforces supervisors' control on the production floor through the incentive structures where performance-based incentives are not only tools for motivation but also instruments for discipline, fully controlled by both top and middle management. Women, in particular, suffer under these structures because they are often worked in lower-paying, less secure roles where the threat of losing even a small bonus can have a significant impact on their livelihoods. In such environments, silence becomes a survival strategy, and the incentive system reinforces not only economic control but also gendered subordination.

Organisational Tolerance and Accountability

Management's and union officials' understanding of workplace GBVH varies significantly but is seldom very deep. During the fieldwork period, a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) was under negotiation at the Hong Kong Garment Factory, the draft of which includes provisions related to workplace GBVH. When management asked the trade union to justify the need for them. When faced with this demand, local trade union leaders were unable to provide a clear explanation of workplace GBVH, stating that it was a standard format received from the national trade union federation, and they did not fully understand what it was.[54] This lack of clarity has made it difficult for the local trade union to persuade management of the importance of addressing workplace GBVH in the workplace. The situation is even more challenging in the other two garment factories, which currently do not have CBAs in place and whose workplace policies lack specific measures to address GBVH.

[52] Personal communication with a trade union leader in the Chinese Garment Factory, August 2024.
[53] INT16KD (sample maker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[54] INT003KD (dispute resolution officer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), January 2024.

On the production floor, group leaders and supervisors closely monitor workers, creating a high-stakes environment where failure to comply with instructions can result in termination, reassignment to lower-paying teams, or denial of overtime work. Yet they are not encouraged to protect workers' well-being in any way, including in cases where workers are subjected to harassment or even violence. Part of the problem is that the factories do not provide supervisors and team leaders with training in management or communication. Some leaders exhibit these skills without training. As another sewer in the Thai Garment Factory observed, 'My team leader knows how to communicate effectively with workers, resulting in hard work under her supervision. She doesn't resort to blame. I believe it's just a matter of effective leadership. Some people simply lack the skills to lead.'[55] In general, however, workers reported that supervisors in both the Chinese and Hong Kong Garment Factories simply yelled at workers. As a quality controller explained, 'The Chinese work according to their feelings; sometimes, with just a small mistake they shout at us!'[56] A sewer in the Hong Kong Garment Factory made a similar remark, saying that when problem arise at work, 'They shout, our ears burn, but no one ever rebels.'[57]

For their part, senior management overlooks abusive behaviours perpetrated by group leaders and supervisors – even co-workers – provided that production targets are met. For instance, in the Thai Garment Factory, when workers reported instances of Khmer supervisors using offensive language, the administrative office stated they would address the issue. However, the supervisors did not change their behaviour; in fact, the situation worsened, with increased intimidation directed at those who reported the misconduct. As one sewer noted, 'Supervisors don't change, and the blaming increases because they know who reported them. Those who complain about a group leader or supervisor may be transferred to different teams.'[58]

The emphasis on production rather than workers' well-being is also evident in the way that surveillance technologies are use in the factory. Various forms of surveillance

[55] INT62PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[56] INT46KD (quality controller, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[57] INT11KD (sewer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[58]INT62PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

are implemented to intimidate workers, such as close monitoring during working hours. When asked about the purpose of surveillance on the production floor, workers primarily indicated that it is used as a means of control. An ironer from the Chinese Garment Factory explained that 'CCTVs are placed to prevent theft of clothes and materials. They are also situated near the toilets to monitor workers because some do not return to work promptly, using the toilets to chat or play on their phones. It feels like the real purpose is to keep an eye on us, to see if we're using our phones while in the toilet.'[59]

In the Thai Garment Factory, workers reported that CCTVs were positioned along the route to the toilets, ostensibly to prevent harassment but actually to ensure that workers do not use toilet breaks to talk on the phone.[60] A cleaner in the Chinese Garment Factory concurred with these assessments: 'CCTVs in the toilets are used to catch workers who take too long at the toilet.' She went on to point out that this practice targeted women unfairly, since the actual problem was that there were not enough toilets provided: 'Women often have to line up to use the toilets. Men are rarely targeted because there are more male toilets available.'[61]

These surveillance technologies are often trumpeted in reports to buyers and other stakeholders as a measure to prevent GBVH. It is clear from their use, however, that this is simply not the case. In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, for example, a human resources officer explained that GBVH incidents must be reported within a relatively short timeframe if CCTV footage is required to substantiate the case. This is so, they added, because CCTV footage only captures events from the past 15 days.[62] It is widely known, however, that victims of workplace GBVH may take far longer than 15 days to decide to report an incident, especially in a context where workers are not confident that a complaint would be handled sensitively.

This concern is warranted, as was clear in the attitude of an administrative officer at the same factory. In our interview, a male administrative officer described a case where a

[59]INT33KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[60] INT54PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022. A female ironer in the same factory confirmed this assertion (INT57PP, September 2022).
[61] INT43KD (cleaner, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[62] MGT7KD (human resources officer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), January 2024.

female worker had reported that a Chinese security guard had hugged her to me. Instead of acknowledging the severity of the situation, he insinuated that the woman was exploiting the incident for financial gain:

> In the past, she was fine with it, but one day she wasn't. That girl filed a complaint to the police for compensation. She asked for USD 1,000, but the Chinese supervisor only offered USD 500. Sometimes workers use these situations to make money. It's okay the first time, but they file complaints the second time … the Chinese have a lot of money, so it's good for the business.[63]

In the Chinese Garment Factory, there was an incident involving a male co-worker videotaping a female worker in the toilet. Despite clear evidence from CCTV footage, the administrative office closed the case, claiming it was necessary to keep the matter private to protect the victim's reputation, leaving her to work alongside the perpetrator without any compensation.[64]

As these examples suggest, factory management is loath to take accountability when their employees are subjected to workplace GBVH. Across all three factories, general grievance handling procedures are in place whereby administration offices have the authority to issue a first, second, and third warning, leading to contract termination if misconduct persists.[65] In general, however, the application of disciplinary procedures is selective. Warning letters are rarely issued to supervisors or team leaders; they are more often given to production workers for resisting those leaders' instructions. None of these factories has dedicated policies or grievance handling procedures specific to GBVH and, although suggestion boxes have been placed throughout the production buildings, they rarely function effectively. Furthermore, no leaders had received any training on GBVH or how to handle it appropriately.

[63] MGT03KD (male administrative officer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), March 2023.
[64] MGT04KD (female group leader, Chinese Garment Factory), March 2023.
[65] The Thai Garment Factory, Internal Regulations Article 10, registered with the Ministry of Labour in December 2015.

Factories often shift the responsibility of addressing sexual violence to victims, expecting them to report incidents to the police if they wish to pursue a resolution. An auto-knitting worker in the Hong Kong Garment factory described the following incident:

> There was a female worker who went to use the toilet during the night shift. When she was taking off her pants, she saw a man watching her from under the toilet door. She quickly pulled up her pants. When she opened the door, the man walked away immediately. This happened during the night shift when there were many people at work. We don't know what the solution is. The man kept saying he didn't do it, and the victim didn't want to pursue the case, it was closed.[66]

A similar incident occurred in the Chinese Garment Factory, where a woman ran out of the toilet screaming for help when she caught a mechanic watching her. After reporting the incident to her group leader, the building manager consulted with the mechanic's group leader regarding possible disciplinary action based on the victim's wishes. The victim ultimately chose to close the case on the condition that the perpetrator delete any incriminating evidence from his phone. While she could have escalated the complaint, she opted not to due to a lack of time and financial resources to pursue it further. Reflecting on this case, the worker who described it remarked, 'I don't know how she could keep working and fight against this shame. Maybe because she is already married.'[67]

Another worker also noted that workers often feel compelled to resolve issues within their work team due to the high costs associated with escalating complaints. One worker explained:

> When problems arise, it depends on the nature of the issue and how we want to resolve it – whether we approach the team leader, the admin office, or even the police. Most of the time, we prefer conciliation because if we escalate matters, we must take leave from work, which means losing pay. As workers, we need the money, so we often choose to resolve issues quietly.[68]

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[66] INT2KD (auto-knitting worker, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[67] INT45KD (auto-knitting worker, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[68] INT27KD (threader, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

There are some differences, however, in how management handles GBVH cases in the three factories. In the Thai Garment Factory, reported issues are often closed quickly, as management is more concerned about potential reputational damage than supporting victims. However, while they were confident that the factory would take action against a perpetrator in high-profile cases that affect its reputation, such as a physical fight, workers remain sceptical about how effectively the factory would handle GBVH cases.[69] As a worker explained, 'If we filed a complaint related to GBVH, they'd surely resolve it; they wouldn't leave it open to protect their company's reputation. But, at best, they might terminate the perpetrator.'[70] In most cases, however, they were uncertain that ever lower-level perpetrators would be suitably disciplined. In one case, for example, a female worker reported that a female security guard squeezed another female worker's breast while conducting a body scan. The administrative office told the guard to apologise but took no further action.[71] The likelihood that perpetrators in higher-level positions would be disciplined was even slimmer. Workers also expressed uncertainty about whether, if they were to report a case, management would maintain confidentiality for victims.[72]

When asked whether the administration office has ever resolved any GBVH cases, workers indicated that they had never heard of such incidents being handled. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given the lack of confidence that management will protect their interests, many workers in the Thai Garment Factory feel uneasy about approaching administrative staff. A union leader noted, 'About 90 percent of workers don't want to go to the administrative office alone. Most of them want the union to be with them.'[73] Since union leaders are also workers, they are not always available to support victims, since frequent absences meant that their own teammates had to work harder to meet production targets.[74]

[69] INT53PP (quality controller, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[70] INT53PP (quality controller, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[71] INT57PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[72] INT63PP (ironer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[73] TU6PP (female union president, Thai Garment Factory), January 2024.
[74] TU6PP (female union president, Thai Garment Factory), January 2024.

In the Hong Kong Garment Factory, too, the enforcement of internal work regulations is closely tied to union intervention. This factory has a human resources officer specifically charged with resolving workplace disputes, and union officials are allowed to accompany workers during the process. However, if both workers are union members, the union generally aims to secure an outcome where both parties to continue working at the factory. For example, there was a case where a male worker sang a song full of sexual innuendo, making some female workers feel uncomfortable. A union official witnessed the incident but took no action. Justifying this choice, they said that: 'The worker didn't know what was right or wrong due to a lack of training. Also, he's been our member for many years.'[75]

Factory management may also consider the perpetrator's strategic importance to production before deciding whether to terminate them. In the case cited earlier, where a Chinese supervisor in the quality control section at the Hong Kong Garment Factory refused to sign off on a female worker's piece-rate earnings because she refused to sleep with him, the victim reported the incident to the trade union. The union accompanied her to the administrative office, but the factory refused to intervene, stating it was a criminal matter. The case was referred to the police, and the perpetrator offered USD 500 as compensation, which the victim rejected. Although the case eventually went to court, the victim, who had since married, become pregnant and moved to another province, chose not to attend the court hearings. As a result, the court ruled in favour of the perpetrator, citing the victim's absence. The perpetrator then returned to the factory, using the court's decision to claim his innocence, despite the fact that it rested on a technicality.[76] The factory allowed him to do this, creating the perception that there is little chance that perpetrators will be held accountable for their actions.

While it is unclear whether any GBVH cases have been resolved in the Chinese Garment Factory,[77] a trimmer shared a story about her co-worker's daughter, who was

[75] INT26KD (male union deputy president, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.
[76] TU1KD (male union president, Hong Kong Garment Factory), January 2024.
[77] Chinese Garment Factory management declined my requests for an interview, so detailed information about grievance procedures relating to GBVH in the third factory is unavailable. However, union officials confirmed that they are also allowed to accompany workers to the administrative office.

touched inappropriately by a male co-worker. The young woman was wearing jeans with a hole on her upper thigh, where he touched her. She was scared and told her mother, who then confronted the man. The perpetrator dismissed it as a joke, and the mother warned him not to do it again. The worker who reported this case observed:

> We are all workers, and we don't want to spend time on this because it would take away from our work. But if he keeps doing it, we will report it to the group leader, and eventually to the administration office. Usually, they'll call the perpetrator in and issue a warning letter, because the factory doesn't want a long case – it disrupts production.[78]

The reluctance of factory management to address GBVH reflects a broader culture of unaccountability, wherein grievances are often sidelined in favour of maintaining operational efficiency and protecting the factory's reputation. Formal grievance procedures exist but are selectively enforced, with lower-level workers bearing the brunt of disciplinary actions and supervisors and team leaders evading sanction. As such, victims of workplace GBVH are left to navigate challenging circumstances without institutional support, often feeling compelled to drop their complaints to avoid further complications. This dynamic not only undermines the potential for justice but also underscores the fact that, in all three factories, management prioritises production over worker safety, leaving victims vulnerable and disempowered in the workplace.

Conclusion

In examining the workplace cultures of garment factories in the Thai, Chinese, and Hong Kong Garment Factories, it becomes evident that power dynamics between upper and lower management, but especially between management and the production floor, shape the experiences of women workers. In each context, power is often concentrated in hierarchical structures that can inhibit open communication and limit women workers' agency. This concentration of power fosters an environment where women feel vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as they often lack the means to voice grievances or advocate for their rights.

[78] INT44KD (trimmer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

Incentive structures within these garment factories further complicate the interplay of workplace culture and women's experiences. While performance-based incentives can drive productivity, all three factories prioritise output over worker well-being, leading to increased pressure and, in some cases, unethical practices. This emphasis on meeting production targets incentivises supervisors to overlook incidents of harassment, perpetuating a culture of silence and complicity. This incentivisation not only undermines workers' safety but also reinforces a toxic work environment where profit margins take precedence over humane treatment.

Social norms and organisational tolerance toward misconduct play a pivotal role in shaping the overall atmosphere within the garment factories. In all three, there is a disturbing normalisation of violence and harassment. This tolerance for inappropriate behaviour not only endangers workers but also reflects a broader societal issue regarding perceptions of, and responses to, gender discrimination and violence. Accountability measures are crucial in countering these entrenched norms; however, their implementation is often inconsistent and insufficient. Using a series of workers' stories, the following chapter illuminates the interplay between the organisation of work and workplace culture in specific incidents of workplace GBVH, highlighting the connection between these two elements in shaping women's experiences and responses.

Chapter Five

Workplace GBVH in Garment Factories

This chapter draws attention to the experiences of female workers who have encountered or witnessed non-sexual and sexual forms of workplace GBVH. As foreshadowed in Chapter Three, which examined the organisation of work in the garment factories, and Chapter Four, which focused on workplace cultures, this chapter analyses the role of these factors in shaping individual workers' experiences of workplace GBVH. Through this analysis, it reveals that these incidents of workplace GBVH were a direct result of how work is organised within specific workplace cultures that normalise such behaviours. The chapter begins with three workers' stories, which illustrate how non-sexual forms of workplace GBVH are enacted on the garment factory production floor. It then turns to sexual forms of GBVH, which it illustrates with another three workers' stories. The experiences of all six women reveal patterns in which the organisation of work and workplace cultures intersect to enable and perpetuate workplace GBVH.

Non-Sexual Forms of GBVH

Non-sexual forms of GBVH are behaviours that, while not sexual, are rooted in gendered power dynamics and contribute to a hostile or degrading work environment for certain genders which is often shaped by social norms within a particular context. On the production floor, these non-sexual forms can range from aggressive body language, yelling and insults, to unreasonable restrictions on toilet breaks. Such behaviours are often normalised within factory routines and justified as part of production demands, making them difficult to identify as violence and harassment: many women I spoke with believed that non-sexual forms of GBVH are not taken seriously as abuse. Instead, these

experiences are generally regarded as personal failures on the part of the victim, leading many workers to blame themselves rather than question the systems that encourage it.

The three stories below illustrate how these dynamics play out on the production floors in the Chinese, Thai, and Hong Kong Garment Factories. Veasna's story highlights how team leaders treat workers differently based on gender, reinforcing harmful hierarchies and causing psychological harm.[1] It underscores the impact of high production targets and the mechanisms employed by management to force workers to meet unrealistic expectations while shedding light on the prevailing perception among male workers and supervisors that sewing lines represent 'light work' suitable for women, which contributes to a workplace culture that assumes that women do not make mistakes when doing their jobs. Vika's story then uncovers how gendered task assignments lead to unfair attribution of blame, with women disproportionately targeted.[2] Lastly, as demonstrated by Chenda's story, the lack of basic support leaves women exposed to abuse.[3] In her case, the action taken by a male administrative officer exacerbated the problem by shifting the responsibility from management to the victim.

Veasna's story – The Thai Garment Factory

Veasna, a 38-year-old woman, worked in the sewing section of the Thai Garment Factory. At the time of our interview, which took place in her rented room after she finished work, she had been employed at the factory for approximately three years. Prior to this time, Veasna worked as a sewer in another factory owned by Chinese management. As a sewing worker producing sportswear for well-known brands, Veasna had experienced firsthand the psychological violence that occurred on the production floor, which had profoundly affected her well-being, not only at work but also at home.

Veasna worked from 7:00 am to 4:00 pm Monday through Saturday, often extending her hours with overtime from 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm. She informed me that her difficulties at work on the production line were largely due to unreasonably high

[1] INT62PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.
[2] INT24KD (cleaner, Hong Kong Garment), August 2022.
[3] INT43KD (cleaner, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

production expectations. As she explained, ‘The factory sets production targets that are well above our capacity to produce. For example, a worker can produce between 50 to 60 pieces an hour, but they ask us to produce 70 pieces an hour.’ Describing the impact of these targets, she added:

> We’re always exhausted. Also, we get in trouble if we can’t reach the target. It makes us feel bad. Even when we get home, we feel sad because of the way we’ve been treated during the day. We can’t forget it, even when we’re home; we keep thinking about what we can do differently when we return to work the next day, how to reach the target and work faster. No one wants to be scolded by the team leader or the supervisor.

Summarising her feelings about her work, she said, ‘I feel so small working on the sewing line.’

When I noted that many people claim that sewing was a light task, Veasna was quick to reject this statement. She expressed her strong disagreement, adding that such statements were often made by male workers to undermine women’s contributions to the production process. She explained that her role in the sewing section is fraught with challenges: ‘I know for sure that our work is tough. We get a lot of criticism and are held accountable every time a shirt has an issue.’ I was curious whether male workers experienced similar treatment, so I asked Veasna to reflect on the division of tasks between male and female workers. She explained that the sewing line, staffed by women, was a critical component of the entire production process, as it was where the garments were assembled and counted as the final output. This contrasts with the cutting section, where the majority of the workforce was male. Men working in the cutting section did not seem to experience as much pressure as women working on the sewing line. As she explained, ‘The cutting section merely involves cutting fabric, but at the end of the sewing section, you can see the final shirt … If buyers are dissatisfied with our products, their complaints typically stem from the sewing section, such as incorrect labelling or wrong styles. Our section is the most critical part of production.’

When I asked about the differences in treatment of male and female workers, Veasna pointed out that team leaders and supervisors, who were mostly women, did not look down on male workers in the same way. When male workers made mistakes, they

were typically asked to correct them without using the harsh language directed at female workers. She elaborated:

> When we as women make a mistake, they use cruel words, questioning whether our mistakes are a result of how we were born or if we've brought our brains or eyes to work. Their aim is to hurt us deeply, whereas with male workers, the blame is less severe. Team leaders and supervisors are concerned that if they criticise men too harshly, they might retaliate or cause problems later. However, they feel no such pressure when blaming women; they feel free to use any language they choose.

Veasna's story underscores the damaging effects of unrealistically high production targets on workers' psychological well-being. It also highlights a systemic issue whereby female workers are disproportionately targeted for harsh treatment compared to their male counterparts. The fact that male workers are often treated with more respect and leniency stems from gender stereotypes that view women as easier targets for verbal aggression, which in turn makes female workers feel inferior and incapable. Importantly, female team leaders and supervisors play a role in sustaining this culture by internalising and reproducing these gendered hierarchies, not only reinforcing gender inequalities but also legitimising the use of psychological harm as a tool of management to increase workers' productivity.

Vika's story – The Hong Kong Garment Factory

Vika worked as a cleaner on the production floor, a job that had allowed her to observe and reflect on conditions on the production line. When I met her, she had worked as a cleaner for about ten years in the checking and mending section of the factory. Her workday began at 7:30 am and continued until 11:30 am, after which she took a 1.5-hour lunch break. She resumed work at 1:00 pm and sometimes worked until 8:00 pm when overtime was required in her section. Before working at the factory, Vika was employed as a daily wage labourer on a vegetable farm. She decided to apply for a job at the factory in her mid-50s because daily labouring did not guarantee a regular income.

Each day, Vika cleaned the floor nonstop as fabric dust generated from the sweatshirts was everywhere. Cleaners were responsible for ensuring the production floor

remained spotless so that the garments did not get dirty during the production process. Threads often fell onto the floor as workers trimmed garments at speed, creating a constant cycle of mess that the cleaners had to manage. Vika explained that workers moved quickly and spoke little. Among cleaners and production workers, there was a shared understanding of the importance of keeping the products clean. While cleanliness was essential to maintaining production quality, the relentless prioritisation of spotless garments often came at the expense of workers' health and dignity.[4]

There were no men employed on the production lines in Vika's section. When I asked her why that was the case, she said it was because men were unable to perform the meticulous tasks required. For instance, when mending knitwear, workers must ensure that the fabric is mended seamlessly, so it appears as though it has not been repaired, requiring careful and detailed-oriented work. The only role where a few men were employed was as checkers, which was less detail-oriented. As part of this work, men transported garments from one place to another or to the laundry area, a task that required far less attention than mending. Comparing the mending and quality checking roles, Vika concluded, 'I don't see how you can make mistakes if your job just involves moving garments from one place to another.'

By virtue of this division of labour, women working on the production line were much more likely to experience verbal abuse. Although both men and women were blamed for errors, since only women performed the mending tasks, they bore the brunt of the leaders' criticism, often expressed using aggressive language such as, 'Did you bring your eyes to work?' or 'Why can't you check the garment properly? Is it because your hands are broken?' Vika expressed her discomfort with the verbal violence of her co-workers, wondering why supervisors could not find more respectful ways to communicate. Workers rarely reacted, she said, instead looking down at the floor while being abused. With no way to go, she continued, 'because they are workers the [team leaders] can blame them as much as they like, and because they need money, they have to endure these conditions. All workers can do is 'pretend they are deaf'.

[4] See Hoque (2022) and (Perry, Wood, and Fernie 2015, author-year) for further discussion on product quality and its relationship to corporate social responsibility.

The treatment of women in the mending section of the Hong Kong Garment Factory reflects the broader power dynamics of the factory and in particular the normalisation of psychological harm. The factory allows supervisors to use abusive language to increase productivity. Being aware of their economic precarity, workers feel unable to respond. In this setting, the organisation of work and workplace culture create a situation where verbal abuse is tolerated, producing a toxic environment where women are overburdened, devalued, disrespected and systematically set up to fail, a situation that does not impact male workers the same way.

Chenda's story – The Chinese Garment Factory

Like Vika, Chenda worked as a cleaner, which enabled her to witness what happened to the everyday experiences of women on the garment production floor and reflect on their origins in workplace culture and the organisation of work. She had previously worked as a security guard before transitioning to her current role. Her nephew, who worked in the packing section had recommended her for her cleaning position, which she had held for approximately three years when I met her. In her mid-50s, Chenda worked alongside many other cleaners. Her young co-workers respected her as an elderly woman who did not rely on support from her children. Chenda began working at 7:00 am and took a break for lunch between 11:00 am and 12:00 pm. She then returned to work from 12:00 pm until 4:00 pm. The factory allowed workers to take a 30-minute break to eat their food before the overtime shift began at 4:30 pm.

Chenda swept and mopped, and undertook other cleaning tasks required by production leaders, ensuring the factory floor was kept clear. While cleaning the production floor, she noticed that female workers worked extremely hard to keep their jobs because those who did not work quickly enough risked being fired. As in the Hong Kong Garment Factory, production workers were often blamed by team leaders or supervisors for perceived infractions and shouted at when they did not meet their targets. Like Vika, Chenda felt that this behaviour is highly gendered. When I asked her why, so few male workers are employed on the production floor, without hesitation, she replied,

‘The factory doesn’t want to hire male workers because they are more likely [to] retaliate against the management if they are not treated well.’[5]

Another point of tension in the Chinese Garment Factory related to the time needed to go to the toilet. Despite the fact that the majority of the factory’s 500 workers were women, there were the same number of male and female toilets, five for men and five for women. Chenda found it difficult to understand why the factory had not built additional toilets for women, given their greater numbers and specific hygiene needs. Compounding by this issue was the presence of numerous CCTV cameras positioned around the toilet areas. According to a female ironer working in Chenda’s section, these cameras were used to monitor whether workers genuinely needed to use the toilet, or whether they were going there to chat or use their phones.[6] These suspicions reflected a broader workplace culture in which toilet breaks are not seen as a legitimate need. Other female workers reported being frequently questioned upon returning to the production floor if they were perceived to have spent too long in the toilet. Since male workers rarely had to queue, they could use the facilities without delay or being questioned.

The constant queues for the women’s toilets also meant that there was little time for cleaners like Chenda to maintain them properly. Interviews with other female workers revealed significant issues surrounding toilet cleanliness and maintenance. According to one worker,[7] the toilets were cleaned only every two or three days. According to another, the rubbish bin was only emptied once a week.[8] As a consequence, the toilets were frequently dirty, with rubbish bins often overflowing with used sanitary pads. A third worker reported that she sometimes avoided using the toilet altogether due to the lack of functional locks and holes in the toilet walls.[9] Workers also expressed concerns about safety, especially during the night shift, when the toilets were dimly lit. But instead of

[5] A number of studies have identified the perception among management that women are good for production. See Salmivaara (2020) and Collins (1995).
[6] INT33KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[7] INT28KD (yarn worker, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[8] INT31KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[9] INT36KD (packer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.

requesting better lighting, they began asking for help from other female co-workers, who stood watch while they used the toilet. As Chenda explained:

> I can't go to the toilet by myself, even if I have to, I need to shout to people who are waiting to use the toilet to wait for me. There are many drug addicts in the factory, and there isn't enough light. For those who can use the flashlight from their phones, they use them. But those who can't, they need to use the toilets in the dark. I don't know what to do as every toilet is the same; they're dark.

Despite this, management failed to take any remediation such as constructing additional toilets, raising the height of the toilet doors or improving the lighting around the toilets.

Chenda also told me an incident involving violence against a pregnant woman that highlights how management's actions can themselves constitute non-sexual forms of workplace GBVH. Recognising the issues with queuing, the administrative office issued a rule allowing pregnant women to use the men's toilets when the women's toilets were occupied. One day, a male worker videotaped a pregnant woman while she was using the men's toilets. That woman realised that she was being recorded when she looked up and saw the phone camera. Screaming in shock, she reported the perpetrator to the team leader, who escorted him to the administrative office. The administrative office gave him a warning letter after he acknowledged his improper behaviour and promised to remove the recording from his phone but did not dismiss him. Administrative staff then summoned all pregnant women to a meeting, where they were informed about the incident. Rather than ensuring that the men's toilets were safe or that the women's toilets were clean, the male administrative staff told the pregnant women to return to the women's toilets, but to be careful so as not to slip on used sanitary pads.

Sexual Forms of Workplace GBVH

According to the survey conducted by CARE Cambodia, one-third of female garment workers experience sexual harassment at work.[10] The most widely reported type of sexual GBVH experienced on the production floor by the women I interviewed was sexual

[10] CARE surveyed 1,287 garment workers (of whom 1,085 were women) (Carella and Ackerly 2017).

joking, not bodily touching. Comments directed at female workers – by supervisors, but also by other workers – include sexual innuendo and remarks about the size and shape of their breasts and other body parts. While sexual comments are experienced or witnessed by female workers on a daily basis, acts of sexual violence, though less frequent, also occur. In the three factories studied, these incidents included inappropriate touching but also attempted and actual rape.

Despite the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment, victims often remain silent. Many felt that the verbal nature of these offences meant that they were not serious enough to file a complaint against the perpetrator. In addition, the absence of witnesses or physical evidence made it difficult to substantiate claims, further discouraging victims from seeking recourse through the administrative office or local authorities. Victims may also fear retaliation from male perpetrators. As a female worker explained:

> I heard men talk about sexual comments, such as saying a woman has big breasts and a big butt, saying 'She looks alright!' That means that they think that having sex with that woman would make them feel amazing. When I heard these kinds of comments, I feel very angry, but I didn't do anything about it. If I reported them to the admin office, I worried that those men would take revenge by doing something bad to me. Also, it's just words, just part of how they joke around at work. But if they physically touched someone, it would definitely be reported.[11]

The intense fear reflects a lack of trust in both the factory's internal systems and the broader justice system. As such, women often choose inaction over action, as the consequences of speaking out, even in cases of rape or attempted rape, can be difficult to bear. Victims fear damage to their reputations and face potential financial and emotional harm, especially in situations where support is limited.

The following vignettes provide deeper insights into the prevalence of sexual violence and harassment across the Thai, Hong Kong and Chinese Garment factories. They illustrate that, despite the seriousness of these cases, various interventions taken by victims and others range from silence to discussions with co-workers, as well as seeking external intervention. This reflects a poor institutional response, where both internal

[11] INT58PP (cutter, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

mechanisms and external supports are inadequate to assist victims of sexual violence, allowing sexual harassment and violence to be tolerated and perpetuated without consequences.

Socheata's story – The Thai Garment Factory

Socheata was a 23-year-old woman from Kampong Cham Province, which lies to the north of Phnom Penh. [12] When I met her, she was working in the Thai Garment Factory, where she had been employed as a sewer for two years and two months. She was married and lived in a rented room with her husband near the factory. I interviewed her in her rented room after she finished her work one evening.

Socheata told me that women were frequently subjected to intrusive body searches when entering the Thai Garment Factory, which did not allow workers to bring food onto the premises. To enforce this rule, workers were subjected to body searches before entering the workplace. Female guards conducted body searches for female workers and male security guards conducted them for male workers. While the body searches were supposedly random, in reality, they were not. According to Socheata, men were seldom searched, and some women were much more likely to be searched than others: 'Women with big boobs are more likely to be selected and the security guards grope their boobs very hard to see whether they are hiding any food.' When asked if the security guards asked permission before touching female workers' bodies, Socheata added that the security guards 'just grab us … Sometimes, they touch every part of our bodies.'

Women's bodies were subjected to other kinds of indignities, as Socheata herself was only too aware. Around four months before I met her, a male security guard had grabbed her buttocks while she was returning from lunch. As Socheata described the incident: 'My co-workers shouted at him, asking why he did that … He said there was a cobweb on my butt. But when I turned, I couldn't see any cobwebs. It was highly unlikely since I had been sitting and working on my sewing line before going to eat.' Socheata confronted the security guard, demanding to know why he had acted in such an inappropriate manner. He responded that he was only trying to save her life, which only

[12] INT66PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

further fuelled her frustration. Seeking to address the issue without escalating it, Socheata approached the security guard's wife, who also worked in the factory, believing that as a woman, she would be empathetic. She hoped that by sharing her experience, she could prevent future incidents. Instead, his wife said, 'Why are you so serious? You aren't a virgin; you already got married!' Angry, Socheata retorted, 'That doesn't mean I can be touched!' Rather than acknowledging Socheata's concerns, the woman attempted to justify her husband's behaviour by accusing Socheata of trying to hide food, despite the fact that body searches were conducted by guards of the same gender. Her co-workers encouraged her to escalate the issue to the administrative office or the lead security guard, but Socheata decided to give the security guard, a fellow Khmer, an opportunity to change his behaviour.

Other workers I interviewed had heard about this incident. One co-worker expressed the following opinion:

> She told us about it during the lunch break. She said she just wanted to close the case … I think she could be part of the problem. She seemed normal after it happened. Maybe the perpetrator chose her because he knew he could get away with it. Like you and me, he wouldn't do it. I said to her, 'Maybe because of you as well, otherwise everyone else would be touched by that security guard.' She didn't respond. Instead, she just laughed … I was angry when I heard about the incident, I felt that the security guard looks down on us, and I think she should have reported the case. Otherwise, a lot of people might think the garment women are not good, as they allow things like this to happen without complaining.[13]

Socheata's experience highlights the deeply embedded cultural and social complexities surrounding sexual forms of workplace GBVH. Her decision to confront the perpetrator and seek resolution through informal channels – such as by speaking with the security guard's wife – reflects both her desire to avoid escalation and her hope for empathy from another woman. However, the wife's dismissive response, rooted in harmful gender stereotypes and assumptions about marital status and bodily autonomy, reflects how internalised norms can perpetuate harassment. Her reaction further complicated the situation, revealing how victim-blaming and peer judgment can silence victims. Rather

[13] INT54PP (sewer, Thai Garment Factory), September 2022.

than expressing solidarity, she questioned Socheata's response and implied that her behaviour may have invited the harassment. Socheata's choice to give the security guard a chance to change, despite encouragement to escalate the issue, shows the emotional labour and moral negotiation victims often undertake.

Finally, Socheata herself chose not to report the incident to the union or administrative office. When asked why she did not consult the union, Socheata told me that it was focused on leave-related issues and entitlement for pregnant workers, not cases of sexual violence and harassment. This distinction between collective and individual concerns reflects a structural gap in how unions operated, and in which sexual forms of workplace GBVH were frequently treated as a private matter rather than a systemic issue requiring collective action. Factory management declined my requests for an interview, but the union president confirmed that neither the factory nor the union had specific GBVH polices in place, leaving victims with few choices should they decide to pursue redress.[14]

Bopha's story – The Hong Kong Garment Factory

Bopha was 25 years old when I met her.[15] She had been working in the Hong Kong Garment Factory for more than four years, during which time she experienced significant changes in both the workplace and her personal life. Before marrying a man from the same area, Bopha lived in her home village with her parents and younger siblings about five kilometres from the factory. She worked in the linking section, where women were employed to sew knitwear pieces together, a task that is fiddly and exacting. After she married, she kept working for the factory.

I interviewed Bopha in her home village because she said it would be a safe place to share her story with me. By the time I reached Bopha's house, it was dark already, as the interview was scheduled after she finished work. The road to Bopha's house was quite dark at night as there were no streetlights on the road. I was told by other villagers that sometimes even the main road did not have light; either the lamp was broken or there

[14] INT6TU (female trade union president, Thai Garment Factory), January 2024.
[15] INT17KD (sewer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), August 2022.

was no electricity to start with. I asked Bopha about her general working environment, how she saw it, and whether she had ever personally experienced or witnessed gender-based violence at work. After many pauses and with tears in her eyes, Bopha told me that she had been a victim of sexual violence, perpetrated by a male co-worker she knew well from her neighbourhood. The perpetrator had attacked her on two separate occasions.

The first incident occurred during lunchtime when fewer people than usual were working on the production line. Bopha was knocked out of her chair by the man, who was attempting to touch her breasts. She warned him that she would file a complaint against him and get him fired if he did it again. The man brushed off her concerns, telling her not to take his actions seriously and that they were friends. Bopha hoped that her warning would be enough to stop him from harassing her again. Unfortunately, it was not. The second incident occurred after she became engaged. It was around nine or ten in the morning when the same male co-worker attacked her when she went to the toilet. When he put one of his hands on her shoulder, Bopha initially thought that he was just saying hello. But then he grabbed Bopha's breasts while hugging her from behind. Then he started pushing her into one of the toilets and tried to lock the door behind him. Bopha was terrified and pushed the door hard. Luckily, it opened, and she escaped.

When I asked Bopha how this incident could have occurred, she told me that it must have been pre-arranged. When I pressed her, she said that a similar thing had happened to another female worker, whom another male co-worker was videotaping while she was using the toilet. 'Wasn't there a separate toilet?' I asked. Bopha answered that the toilets were set up in two opposite rows, one for men and the other for women, and that the doors between the two rows of were left open, providing a space through which a male co-worker could record the women. Another factor, she said, was that the toilet block is quiet. Few people use the toilets because they are working hard to reach their production targets. According to Bopha, workers' preoccupation with their production targets means they are also unlikely to take time to become involved in others' business. She went on to say that another reason why her co-workers would have been unlikely to intervene even if she had shouted for help. Factory workers, she said, assume that if a woman must have some kind of relationship with a man for him to touch

her that a man would not touch a woman if he did not know her. Thus, in Bopha case, even if she had shouted, her co-workers would likely have ignored her because they knew the man was her friend.

Although Bopha may have threatened her aggressor with reporting, she was unlikely to do so. The factory employed a standard grievance handling procedure for all cases. Under this system, a perpetrator was permitted to make three mistakes before facing termination. This meant that victims must continue to work alongside their perpetrators. Bopha also doubted that a complaint would be handled confidentially. While she did inform a union official, he advised her against approaching the factory for that reason. Consequently, Bopha was left to choose between risking further attacks from her aggressor or seeking alternative avenues for redress. She decided on the latter: 'When I got home, I told my parents and my fiancé, and we decided to file a complaint with the local authorities. Otherwise, he wouldn't stop. He had attacked me twice already. I was so worried that this would keep happening to me. He might have done something even worse.'

Having spoken to her parents and fiancé, she approached the village chief in the hope of resolving the matter. Asking for his support did not come without cost. First, Bopha paid him some money so that the case could proceed. Having written down some details about what happened, the village chief approached a police officer, who called Bopha's aggressor into the police station for mediation. When the police questioned Bopha's co-worker, he said that he and Bopha were friends; that it was just a *joke,* and that Bopha should not have taken it seriously. Bopha was very angry with his responses and told the police officer that she had made it clear to her aggressor on two occasions that his behaviour was not acceptable, and it was not a joke. She emphasised that the joke would not involve touching her breasts when she had made it very clear that she did not like that behaviour.

Ultimately, Bopha's aggressor apologised for what happened and paid her around USD 300 in compensation. He also signed a so-called 'promisory letter' so this issue would not happen again. However, virtually all of this sum was given to the police and the village head for 'helping' her 'resolve the case'. After the mediation, Bopha and the

man never spoke again. However, they still worked together for quite some time before her aggressor resigned from his position at the factory. Despite receiving some compensation – something that many victims of workplace GBVH did not receive – Bopha's experience continued to haunt her. When asked how she dealt with her trauma, Bopha responded that she felt safer now that she had her spouse by her side. Also, not many men were working directly with her. More generally, after the incident, she avoided engaging in conversation with her male co-workers, fearing that, if she did, people would assume that they were acquainted, and the man she spoke to might also act inappropriately towards her.

Reflecting on Bopha's experience, it is clear that her decision to call on the village chief and a police officer – rather than her supervisor or someone else in the factory's management structure – can be explained by two main factors. Firstly, her desire to preserve her reputation is paramount. Cambodia's cultural context shaped Bopha's response to her harassment. The values embedded in this traditional code, emphasising female modesty, obedience and reputation, continue to shape women's behaviour and decision making. For Bopha, these cultural expectations contributed to her initial hesitation to report her aggressor, fearing the damage to her reputation and her family's reputation. Yet, her ultimate decision to speak out, supported by her parents and fiancée, highlights the importance of close, trusted relationships in empowering victims to seek justice. By contrast, the factory environment offered little protection.

Secondly, Bopha lacked confidence in the existing grievance procedures at her workplace. During the initial incident, she confronted her aggressor but chose not to report him. This decision was influenced by her observations of how similar incidents had been mishandled, often leading to gossip throughout the factory and potentially damaging the victim's reputation. The absence of specific protocols for addressing sexual violence, coupled with the factory management's emphasis on production over workers' well-being, further discouraged her from reporting the incident to management. A factory HR officer explained to me that a perpetrator would be terminated for touching a victim's breasts or buttocks in accordance with article 83 of the Cambodian Labour Law. However, if a victim requested compensation, the factory would simply forward the

matter to the police.[16] The same official described a situation where a perpetrator was allowed to continue working:

> Termination of the wrongdoer would also depend on the needs of the production at that time and to what extent the union wanted us to do. In cases involving disputes like sexual harassment or violence between union members, the union typically prefers conciliation and simply issuing a warning to the perpetrator. So, we decided to issue a warning letter instead of termination.[17]

In short, the workplace culture was one in which serious misconduct is often downplayed or ignored, forcing victims like Bopha to seek external support systems, including from her family, the village chief and the police. The involvement of the village chief and police, although costly and emotionally taxing, ultimately generated a small amount of financial compensation. However, the resolution offered did not address her psychological trauma.

Vimean's story – The Chinese Garment Factory

Vimean's story[18] was one of the many examples provided to me by workers of sexual jokes and comments on the production floor.[19] These remarks, often centred on sex lives and physical appearances, largely targeted married workers. This is partly because such jokes carry sexual connotations that single women are not expected to relate to, since they are culturally conditioned to avoid sexual activity before marriage to preserve their family's reputation. Married women, on the other hand, are assumed to have more knowledge of sexual matters and are therefore seen as more likely to understand the connotations behind the jokes. Additionally, because they are already married, sexual

[16] MGT7KD (human resource officer, Hong Kong Garment Factory), January 2024.
[17] MGT7KD (human resource officers, Hong Kong Garment Factory), January 2024.
[18] INT34KD (ironer, Chinese Garment Factory), September 2022.
[19] There are many more cases across different sections in the three garment factories where participants reported that sexual jokes and sexual comments are very common on production floor (INT13KD, INT16KD, INT18KD, INT26KD, INT34KD, INT35KD, INT43KD, INT44 KD, INT45KD, INT47KD, INT57PP, INT58PP, August to September 2022).

jokes are perceived by married co-workers, both male and female, as less damaging to their reputations.

As a victim of sexual harassment (although married), Vimean's experience illustrates the profound impact such behaviour has on her self-esteem and her relationship with her husband. It also sheds light on how her specific workplace culture created the opportunity for sexual harassment to occur without consequence. In her early 30s, Vimean found a job in the garment sector because it was one of the few industries that offered opportunities for women with a limited education. While she had never worked in another sector, she had moved from factory to factory during four years in the industry. When I interviewed her, she had been working at the Chinese Garment Factory for about four months. She had decided to move there so that she could work alongside her husband, believing that being apart might challenge their relationship as a couple. As a new worker, Vimean was employed on a short-term contract, renewable every three months. Because of this status, she told me that she would decide whether or not to join a trade union when she was offered a longer contract.

Vimean worked in the ironing section, which employed around 100 workers. Most of these workers and all the team leaders were male. Vimean worked in a team of 13 people, in which she was the only woman. Her husband worked in the same section, but in a different team. Her husband was an ironer, while Vimean measured ironed garments to ensure that they met the required standard. Work began at 7:00 am and took a break for lunch between 12:00 pm and 1:00 pm. The teams then returned to work from 1:00 pm until 4:00 pm. If there was an urgent order, they worked overtime until 8:30 pm.

Vimean had a good sense of humour and enjoyed fashion. As the only woman in her small team, she was the centre of attention and was frequently subjected to sexual comments and jokes from her male colleagues. Sometimes, she had to bend down to measure garments. If wearing clothing with a low neckline, her co-workers could see her breasts. All too aware of this, Vimean's male co-workers constantly asked her to dress more sexily:

> They told me that they loved women who wore sexy clothes … more revealing clothing. They say that they can't see anything [meaning her breasts]. I told them that I didn't like

> wearing sexy clothes. When I reacted like that, they said that I shouldn't get upset with this because it was just a joke.

At other times, Vimean's male co-workers talked about her among themselves within her hearing. She once heard one make the following comment: 'Could you please tell the woman in our team to wear more sexy clothes so that I have more energy to work? They said they loved seeing sexy women on the team.' Such comments were not a one-off. As Vimean reported:

> They talk about me every day. Sometimes they said I should wear jeans to work so that they could see my shape more clearly, and I said, 'Why don't you focus on your ironing work so that you can earn more money?' They said they're working, but they also want to look.

Her male colleagues also commented on the way she did her hair. They frequently asked her to tie it up, saying that doing so would make her look more attractive. Vimean told them that, as a married woman, it was no longer appropriate for her to tie her hair up. Her co-workers responded that she should do so precisely so that she could keep her marriage intact. They even made comments about her lipstick, or lack thereof:

> When I arrived at work late and didn't have time to put on lipstick, sometimes they'll ask, 'How many times did you have [sex] last night? … is that why you came in late and didn't have time to put on red lipstick?' I tell them that I can't wear red lipstick all the time, but they say that I need to because I look very pale without it. To avoid these kinds of interactions, I always make sure to keep a lipstick in my purse. The female members of the other ironing team also always carry lipstick with them. Sometimes they share their lipsticks with me so that I can look more presentable for our male co-workers.

These were not the only times that Vimean was bombarded by sexualised commentary. 'My male co-workers sometimes suggest that I was wearing pyjamas to work because I mightn't have time to change after having sex.' On occasion, her male co-workers had even told her to get a breast enhancement. Elaborating, Vimean said, 'Sometimes they say my breasts are even smaller than a man's. I tell them, "This is how it is; I was born with breasts this size."'

When I asked Vimean how she felt about these comments, she said that they ‘aren’t much of a problem’. In fact, for her, these kinds of comments help bring the work environment to life: ‘They are just jokes to make the workplace less tedious, and if those jokers aren’t around, the work seems dull and quiet.’ Her husband had a very different perspective, however. When she told him about what she considered to be just workplace banter, he became angry and said that he did not want their male co-workers to talk about her in this way. In an attempt to reduce the harassment, he insisted that she throw all her more revealing clothes away. Vimean did not comply immediately, but he became very upset if she wore revealing clothing to work. In the morning, when she was deciding what to wear, her husband would intervene, choosing a turtleneck shirt. She complied because she thought that it was essential to do so to maintain her marriage. Her husband told her that he did these things because he cared about her, but she found it very hard: it was very hot inside the factory, and even hotter in the ironing section, where Vimean and her husband worked.

It is clear from this account that Vimean’s husband was complicit in her experiences of sexual harassment. He did not speak to her co-workers or her team leader or take other steps to stop the behaviour. Instead, he put pressure on her by asking her to change the way she dressed. It is also possible that he chose this individual approach to avoid involving management or co-workers, perhaps to protect his own job and position, both at work and within their marriage. What is clear, however, is that her husband’s repeated demands for her to cover up placed additional strain on Vimean, highlighting how workplace harassment and family dynamics intersect. As Ward (2022) points out, gender regimes operate not only in the workplace but also within the household, where men exert control over women who deviate from socially prescribed roles. Such norms restrict women’s ability to fully participate in the workplace without fear of social judgment, which, in Vimean’s case, includes judgment from her own husband.

Her male team leader was also complicit. He not only ignored team members’ behaviour toward Vimean, but he also participated in it alongside them. According to Vimean, he also made sexually oriented jokes at her expense when he felt bored. Providing an example, she said: ‘Once he asked me how often I allowed my husband to

have sex with me. I said, "Once every week or once every month." He replied, "If I had a wife like you, I would want sex every day!"' In order to keep the atmosphere light, Vimean participated in the 'joke', replying 'My husband isn't very strong.' Not surprisingly, then, Vimean did not see her team leader as someone who could help her. When asked what she would do if she decided that she could no longer tolerate such behaviour from a co-worker, Vimean said that she would have no choice but to speak with that person directly. If that did not work – and she very much doubted that it would – Vimean believed that her only choice was to leave the factory. This decision was pragmatic since the factory did not have formal procedures for dealing with sexual violence and harassment at work.

Less predictably, Vimean felt that her female co-workers were little better. Instead of supporting her, they reinforced the harassment culture by encouraging her to conform to the expectations of their male colleagues, reflecting the behaviour mirrors broader social norms in which women are expected to be compliant with male authority. This complicity reflects how social norms outside the workplace influence interactions on the production floor. Her female co-workers' actions demonstrated that workplace harassment is not solely about power differentials between men and women but also involves peer pressure from co-workers of the same gender. These findings suggest that the general assumption about workplace GBVH in the industry – that it virtually always involves male supervisors who target their female subordinates – is misled.[20] Rather, Vimean's experience demonstrates workplace sexual harassment does not only result from high power differentials between men and women; it is also supported by women workers who are employed in the same position and arguably having the same power as the victim.

[20] Many studies conducted in Bangladesh have demonstrated that violence often stems from the male supervisors toward female subordinates. See, for example, Habib (2014); Collinson and Collinson (1996); and Naved et al. (2018).

Conclusion

The narratives from these six women collectively reveal the profound impact of the organisation of work and workplace culture on the prevalence and experience of workplace GBVH in Cambodia's garment factories. These experiences demonstrate that both non-sexual and sexual forms of workplace GBVH are not isolated incidents but rather are shaped and sustained by structural and cultural conditions on the production lines. Chenda, Vika and Veasna's experiences highlight non-sexual forms of workplace GBVH, including verbal abuse, emotional distress and neglect of women's needs. In Chenda's case, witnessing the mistreatment of co-workers and the administration's failure to act revealed how production demands override worker protection. Vika's story illustrates how gendered task assignments and unchecked verbal abuse create a hostile environment, while Veasna's experience reflects the emotional distress of being constantly scrutinised and undervalued, confirming how high production targets and hierarchical structures reinforce women's subordination and expose them to physical and psychological harm.

Meanwhile, the experiences of Socheata, Bopha and Vimean reveal sexual forms of workplace GBVH that are deeply embedded in the structural and cultural fabric of the factory. Vimean's case illustrates how male-dominated teams and peer complicity – including among female co-workers – reinforce a culture where harassment is normalised to silence victims and justify inappropriate behaviour. Bopha's case further highlights the failure of grievance mechanisms and the prioritisation of production over protection, forcing her to seek justice outside the factory through informal and costly community resolution. In each case, the organisation of work, combined with a workplace culture that tolerates and trivialises harassment, created conditions where workplace GBVH is tolerated and perpetuated.

As these six cases underscore, the reluctance of victims to report incidents of management or trade unions reflects a deep mistrust in institutional systems that are themselves shaped by the organisation of work and workplace culture in which the violence occurs. When workplace GBVH is embedded in daily operations, normalised through production pressures, and trivialised by both peers and supervisors, it becomes

difficult to recognise it as harassment or violence based on gender. Furthermore, the way in which incidents are handled – or ignored – not only discourages victims from coming forward but also influences the actions of bystanders, reinforcing a culture of silence. These stories make clear that workplace GBVH is not only a matter of individual misconduct, but a structural issue rooted in how work is organised and experienced. The following chapters turn to the cement factories, where similar patterns emerge, mirroring the conditions and consequences observed in the garment sector.

Chapter Six

The Organisation of Work in Cement Factories

Cement production plays a critical role in meeting Cambodia's growing infrastructure demands. Unlike garment factories, which are deeply embedded in global supply chains, cement factories primarily serve regional markets, supplying large volumes of cement to neighbouring countries such as Thailand and China. This regional orientation shapes the organisation of work in distinct ways. The emphasis on cost control and flexibility has led to widespread subcontracting, which distances factory owners from direct responsibility for workers and creates fragmented employment relationships. These subcontracting arrangements often result in weaker oversight of labour conditions, limited job security and heightened vulnerability for workers, as subcontractors exercise significant discretion over hiring, wages, and work allocation. In this context, gendered dynamics intersect with structural precarity, but unlike garment factories, the pressures stem less from global brand compliance and more from regional market competition and the pursuit of low-cost production.

Mirroring Chapter Three, this chapter examines the organisation of work across three cement factories with distinct ownership structures, namely Thai, Khmer and Chinese. Comparing these factories, it assesses the extent to which different management practices influence the experiences of female workers. The chapter begins with an overview of the factories' physical layout, daily routines and workplace dynamics before delving into the division of labour and working conditions in each. This discussion reveals how gender dynamics are shaped by the way in which work is organised. In the Thai Cement Factory, female workers are predominantly employed as cleaners, handling tasks such as clearing cement dust and cleaning machines. By contrast, in the Khmer Cement Factory, women are involved in roles such as cement testing, warehouse and

customer service (sales) that, while still gendered, involve a broader set of responsibilities and require a higher level of skills and education. In the Chinese Cement Factory, female workers mostly work in the bag production section in conditions that are in some way similar to those found in the garment factories.

Despite these differences, there are many similarities across the three factories. All three are located in the same geographical setting and focus on comparable products. Each relies on long-term relationships with subcontractors to supply a significant portion of its workforce and all are largely led by men. Moreover, the duties assigned to men and women are often very different even when they have the same job title. At the same time, as the chapter demonstrates, the way in which work is organised – and the associated experiences of female workers – varies across the three factories. The Thai and Khmer factories employ workers on indefinite-duration contracts (with the Khmer factory not even requiring written agreements), but this apparent stability is undermined by workers' lack of direct employment relationships with the factory, leaving them accountable to multiple layers of predominantly male supervisors. Working hours is another. In the Thai and Khmer factories, women are largely excluded from night shifts, which limits their earning potential but provides them with some protection from some forms of sexual violence and harassment. In the Chinese factory's bag production section, however, women not only work night shifts but endure machine-paced work without breaks in conditions akin to the garment sector. In each case, the spatial and temporal organisation of work exposed women to environments with inadequate facilities, with insufficient time to take adequate breaks, and dependent on male supervisors.

The Thai Cement Factory

The Thai Cement Factory began its operation in 2008 and is owned and managed by Thai nationals as part of a larger network of companies specialising in cement production in Thailand.[1] As one of the largest cement producers in Cambodia, the factory produces approximately 4.2 million tons each year, contributing to nearly 50 percent of the local

[1] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.

demand for cement, which is estimated at 10 million tons per year.[2] In addition to supplying the domestic market, the factory also exports its products to Thailand. It is the cleanest and best designed of the three cement factories. The factory complex is tidy and there are flower beds and two big ponds in front of the main gate. Due to the fact that it operates 24 hours a day, the complex is well-lit.

The factory directly employs 255 staff members and contracts 1,016 workers through 15 subcontracting companies, with about 85 percent of these workers being male.[3] Of these 15 subcontractors, only three – subcontractors A, B, and C – employ women workers. Subcontractors A and B hire a total of around 60 women to clean the production lines, while Subcontractor C employs women to clean the office buildings and staff accommodation. As the factory is located in a rural village close to raw materials, most workers are local residents whose family homes are near the factory. Unlike the busy areas around most garment factories, the surrounding area has few shops selling drinks and snacks. Workers generally bring their food from home or return home for lunch. However, there are several shops in the factory area that serve the cement truck drivers who stop for food and drink while waiting for their trucks to be loaded with cement products or before continuing to their destinations. These truck drivers are employed by various construction companies or stores and come from different parts of the country.

The area around the factory experiences heavy traffic from these large and mid-sized trucks, which contribute to poor road conditions and significant air pollution. Workers navigate the bumpy roads on motorbikes or bicycles. They wear different coloured uniforms provided by their subcontractors. The logos on their uniforms make it easy to identify which subcontracting company employs them. They are also required to wear a factory identity card. To protect themselves from the harsh, dusty and hot working environment, workers often wear long-sleeved sweatshirts under their uniforms and use yellow hard hats over small towels to keep their heads cool and safeguard against falling objects. In contrast to the garment factories, where security personnel generally wear

[2] Publicly available document produced by the Thai Cement Factory.
[3] Personal communication with the administrative office in the Thai Cement Factory, January 2024.

standard uniforms, security guards at the Thai Cement Factory, known locally as '911', dress in military-style uniforms. It is important to note that the Thai Cement Factory emphasises safety at work as one of its core values, which is posted around the factory compound in English and Khmer. One of the core values reads, 'Safety is 100% achievable by [being] caring and uncompromising.'[4] Workers are trained and reminded about their safety obligations. However, the focus is strongly on avoiding physical work accidents rather than other kinds of risks to workers' safety.

The factory environs

The factory has a boom gate that facilitates the entry and exit of large cement trucks. The gate opens before 8:00 am each working day. Upon arrival, workers undergo a security check at the gate. The security guards are known for their strict adherence to the rules. As workers enter, they are checked for compliance with personal protective equipment (PPE) requirements and the condition of their motorbikes, including working brakes and side mirrors, as well as confirming that workers wear motorcycle helmets.[5] Those who do not meet these requirements are denied entry.[6]

Following this security process, workers proceed to a series of meeting rooms to receive their daily instructions from their supervisors. Daily tasks for female cleaners are assigned in a meeting room each morning, whereas those cleaning accommodation and office buildings have fixed workstations. Women who clean the production line also receive a safety talk about half an hour before they start working and can reject the task if they do not believe it is safe to perform. They are also required to attend safety training sessions on a monthly basis.[7] Before starting to clean the production line, women workers employed by Subcontractors A and B have to recite the factory's safety rules, known as called 'nine plus one' rules. These rules include (1) Use a safety belt when working at heights, (2) Turn the machine power off and put up safety signs before commencing

[4] Photograph of core values poster taken while conducting an interview with the human resource and administrative department in the Thai Cement Factory, March 2023.
[5] Personal communication with trade union president at the Thai Cement Factory, September 2024.
[6] Personal communication with trade union president at the Thai Cement Factory, September 2024.
[7] MGT14KPT (engineers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.

cleaning, (3) Secure permission before releasing your safety belt, (4) Secure permission before commencing work in a high risk area, (5) Carry a work permission letter, (6) Consume no alcohol or drugs at work, (7) Wear a seatbelt when travelling in a car, (8) Wear a safety helmet when travelling on a motorcycle, (9) Do not use a mobile phone while driving, and (10) Park trucks safety along the road. Workers employed by Subcontractor C are not required to remember these rules as they are tasked with cleaning the accommodation and office buildings, not the production floor.

The factory's production process is organised into different mills. It begins with raw mills where materials such as limestone, clays, rocks, and mountain stones are stored. Then there is the production zone, which is the largest part of the factory. In this area, these raw materials are combined to produce cement powder. This process involves heating raw materials to temperatures of up to 1,400 degrees Celsius, mixing them, and then storing the resulting cement powder. Surveillance cameras are located throughout the factory's production line, monitoring the machines' operation. Quality control for both raw materials and finished products is carried out in a laboratory. The factory also includes a maintenance and repair section that is responsible for monitoring the operation of machinery. Finally, there is an operations and administrative department.[8]

The factory has additional facilities including a canteen, break rooms, and apartment buildings and townhouses to accommodate staff, visitors and senior management. Workers are not entitled to accommodation, though they are provided with a place to eat and space to take naps if needed. Several female cleaners expressed discomfort with using shared nap rooms with both men and women, citing concerns about the fear of their shirts riding up while they are asleep. To address this discomfort, they bring towels to cover themselves while sleeping. The factory's management, staff, and visitors have access to the canteen, where food is available for purchase. However, workers reported that the food prices in the canteen were beyond their financial reach, leading them to bring food from home instead.[9] These arrangements meant that

[8] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.

[9] Fieldnote in January 2022. 'What do you have for lunch?' is the normal way to start a conversation in my culture and this is what I normally ask workers before my interviews, as most of my interviews happened during workers' lunch break.

production workers were kept apart from management and other staff members, even during breaks.

In this factory, bathroom arrangements vary for different kinds of workers. Office staff have access to separate male and female toilets. Female cleaners who clean the accommodation and office buildings can access the female toilets. Those who clean the production line and the machines use the same toilets as the male production workers. Women found the experience of sharing the toilets with male workers highly unpleasant.[10] As one of the women described, 'The toilets are very bad. They're very smelly as we have no separation of toilets and also men normally smoke in the toilet. Men sometimes piss outside the toilet which creates a strong smell, and when they poo, they don't flush. Since many people use the toilets, we don't really know who does that, but I guess it must be men.'[11] Another woman said:

> Men only use the toilets when they need to shit. They are so dirty after the men have used them because they don't flush them properly. There's always shit floating in them. Not to mention the mess their dirty feet make when they are in there; they don't care. They also smoke in the toilet. They smell awful! When we use the toilet after a man has used it, we must flush it and clean off the dirt from their shoes. We use the toilet after we've done all that cleaning.[12]

When asked if she would use a different toilet in such circumstances, she said there was no point in moving because all toilets smelled the same. Because of the toilets' condition, female workers avoid using them, a choice that carries health consequences. A worker explained: 'The doctor said it was because I held in my pee so often. Lots of workers have this kind of problem. When they go to the hospital, a doctor said because they hold in their pee.'[13] As these statements suggest, the state of the facilities does not reflect the factory's core values of safety.

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[10] It is consistent across my data collection that women share bad experiences of sharing the toilet with men due to the bad smell (INT63KP, and INT65KP, June 2022).
[11] INT66KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.
[12] INT48KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[13] INT8KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.

The division of labour

Role allocation at the Thai Cement Factory is highly gendered. At the highest level, the Thai management team, consisting of a Thai managing director and a Khmer deputy director, oversees the entire factory.[14] This top-level management sets the factory's strategic direction and is responsible for overarching decisions. They are supported by an administrative department, which manages communication between key stakeholders, such as relevant ministries, and oversees staff employment contracts. The administration office also addresses issues with production workers who violate factory internal regulations, for example, where a worker has stolen factory property. At the top management level, all leaders are male. Ten female staff members are employed directly by the company, but none hold a leadership position.[15]

Technical roles are parsed by both gender and ethnicity. Historically, the factory employed numerous Thai engineers to manage the production floor but, in recent years, there has been a shift towards employing local Khmer graduates. This change aligns with the factory's social corporate responsibility goals and signifies a move towards integrating local talent into technical roles, although still within a gendered hierarchy. Engineers, who are primarily male, manage the operation of machinery. As one engineer noted:

> I have a team of 20 people and 50 workers from the subcontractors. I have all male team members, and we have no women in my team. The reason that we have all males in my section is because we need physical strength to work with machines and also it is hard to find those who can understand how to work with machines as we don't have enough female human resources in this field.[16]

Supervisory and technical roles are also all occupied by men. These lower-ranked staff members act as intermediaries between engineers and subcontracted workers, and their responsibilities include task allocation and reporting. They are employed by the factory to

[14] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.
[15] Personal communication with administrative officer, October 2024.
[16] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.

communicate the tasks to workers and they also have the ability to know how many workers are required for specific tasks and how long it will take to complete the task.[17] However, they are not directly engaged in recruiting workers.[18] There is also a safety officer who monitors the safety of different teams on the production floor, making sure that workers are safe while working the assigned tasks.

In addition to top management, the administrative department, engineers, supervisors, technicians and safety officers, there are various subcontractors who take responsibility for different parts of the production floor. Subcontractors provide both skilled and unskilled labour through a bidding process, and the factory opts not to handle recruitment directly, delegating these responsibilities to subcontractors.[19] According to the factory's human resources department, subcontractors play an important role: 'We don't want to recruit and manage workers ourselves. We want these tasks to be done by subcontractors, since they already charge us extra service for managing workers, although we also need to make sure that they are safe [so] we train workers about their safety at work.'[20]

As noted above, three of the factory's subcontractors employ women. Subcontractor C employs around 30 women to clean the offices and residential accommodation. The cleaners work alone if they are assigned to a townhouse or in a small team if they are assigned to the guesthouse. Since all cleaners working for Subcontractor C are women, all teams are single sex. In the apartments and townhouses, the cleaners undertake housekeeping duties – mopping the floors, washing dishes, hand washing and ironing clothes, cleaning the bathrooms and preparing beds – for Thai staff and visitors. They normally start when the staff or visitors leave for work and finish when the occupants return home. One woman described her typical day as follows:

[17] MGT14KPT (engineers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.
[18] MGT14KPT (engineers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.
[19] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023. Some subcontractors only provide unskilled labour to the factory, and some subcontractors provide both skilled and unskilled labour.
[20] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.

> When my boss leaves for work in the morning, I make his bed, clean his toilet and clean the whole house until 10:00 or 11:00 am. When he comes to eat his lunch, I have to leave. He then leaves for work at about 1:00 pm, at this time I return to wash the dishes and his clothes. At about three in the afternoon, I iron and put his clothes away.[21]

In addition to the leaders' preference for recruiting women because cleaning is considered a *lighter task* compared to working on the cement production line, women themselves also hold this view.[22] For example, one cleaner stated that cleaning is more suited to women's labour since, traditionally, women are responsible for cleaning at home, proclaiming that 'This work is not for men!'[23] The same woman expressed a strong belief that the cleaning position is perfect for her, explaining, 'At least I can work under shelter, close to my house and my family. I don't want to work outside my village.'[24]

The conditions in which cleaners are employed to work in the townhouses and the guesthouse are similar to those experienced by domestic cleaners or hotel cleaning staff. The conditions in which cleaners employed by Subcontractors A and B to clean the production facilities are not. There, they face a harsh working environment characterised by dust, noise and heat. As one woman described it, 'I think we might be deaf soon, because I can't hear anything clearly. I work in a place where it is too loud. If someone called me from behind, I could hardly hear them … and my lungs are weak because of too much dust.'[25] Other women commented on the strong smell of diesel, which they cannot escape even if they wear many layers of clothing and multiple masks. As one

[21] INT45KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

[22] It should be noted here that women also acknowledge differences in pay as a reason why men are unlikely to seek cleaning roles. As one noted, men are not inclined to perform tasks such as cleaning toilets because, in her words, 'Men want to do something that suits them, and cleaning roles pay less.' (INT45KPT, March 2022).

[23] INT5KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.

[24] Women's bodies and mobility are often scrutinised. Daughters are expected to stay close to their parents and emulate the image of virtuous women. Virtuous women serve and respect their husbands, honour their parents, and care for their children (Nishigaya 2010). Therefore, working with their husbands in their village is considered as a better option. Some women expressed in interviews that the reason for working in the factories in their village is to combine paid and unpaid work without compromising their expected role as virtuous women.

[25] INT44KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

explained, ‘The smell from the machine is so terrible and our clothes get dirty no matter how many layers we wear. I need to change my clothes often because of the bad smell from the machine. I am disgusted by the smell of my own body.’[26] Cleaning the production floor is also physically hard. On the production line, women are assigned to manage spills by carrying between 500 to 600 kilograms of cement dust per day.[27] Sometimes, cement powder is spilled on the production floor at up to two centimetres in depth.[28] Female workers need to use a shovel and bucket to pick up the cement powder that spills from the production line and put the powder back into the production machine.[29]

The number of people in each cleaning team on the production line depends on the work required but in general, women work in a team of at least three people. Sometimes they work in all-women teams and sometimes there is a mix of both genders. When asked about how men and women perform on the cleaning teams, many women had definite views. According to one, ‘men don’t pay enough attention to detail. They’re kind of careless.’[30] Another woman agreed, saying that her group leader and supervisor do not assign men to clean the machines because ‘they do not clean them well.’[31] Another worker confirmed this assessment: ‘Women can clean even the tiny little holes in the machines. Men can clear stones, sands, dirt that are spilled along the production line, but they are not good at cleaning small holes of the machines.’[32]

There is also a more structural element to the division of labour between men and women on the production line cleaning teams, embedded in task allocation:

> If men are assigned to clean machines, we need to clean up after them. Men don’t want to work with bad smells or get dirty like women. I sometimes also want to go and clear the

[26] INT66KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.
[27] INT9KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[28] INT47KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[29] INT47KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022. If a woman is pregnant, she will be moved to some other cleaning besides the production line such as cleaning the office building according to my interview with engineers in the Thai Cement Factory (MGT14KPT, March 2023).
[30] INT1KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[31] INT63KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.
[32] INT46KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

> production line like a man, and I understand that it can be tough, but I don't like the smell of oil either. I used to ask my leader to assign me to do the men's work, but he didn't allow me to do so. My leader said clearing work is tough and cleaning machines is easy work which is right for women. I get tired of getting the smell on my shirt, but the leader said clearing work is for men.[33]

Another woman who raised a similar concern was told by her team leader that she could not be assigned men's tasks as such work might negatively affect her uterus.[34]

Management claims that if women were assigned physically demanding tasks, they would be unable to perform them. [35] However, women employed under subcontractor A and subcontractor B also work on the production line, cleaning cement dust, coal and dirt – tasks similar to those performed by men. When it comes to cleaning machines, women are generally assigned this role due to their perceived attention to detail rather than their having any particular skill. When urgent tasks arise that require additional help, their male co-workers often hesitate and claim they do not know how to do the work. Sometimes, they even make patronising remarks such as, 'Wow, you're doing an amazing job, just like you work in a kitchen.'[36]

As these observations suggest, the division of labour within the factory reflects gendered assumptions about the work that men and women can do. Women are primarily assigned to cleaning roles, which are categorised as unskilled labour despite the physical and environmental challenges of cleaning the production floor. By contrast, men are typically engaged in machinery-related tasks and roles considered physically demanding by factory leaders. This division of labour limits women's potential to take on roles beyond cleaning, which significantly impacts their capacity for income generation. For example, cleaners are rarely offered overtime opportunities, restricting their ability to earn extra income. Additionally, they are not permitted to work shift rotations, which typically offer higher pay than the regular hours of 8:00 am to 5:00 pm.

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[33] INT63KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.
[34] INT1KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[35] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.
[36] INT9KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.

Wages and conditions

The female workers I interviewed had worked at the factory for between six and fifteen years, reflecting both the factory's long-term reliance on subcontracted labour and the extent to which particular subcontractors are integrated into the factory's operations. As noted above, access to overtime work is limited, particularly for women, as their work is often not considered urgent or important. Male workers, on the other hand, can get access to shifts and overtime work, which contribute more to their income-earning ability and the opportunity for skills advancement. Female workers, primarily cleaners, work from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm with a one-hour lunch break and rarely work overtime unless required for special events, such as dinner parties. By contrast, male workers work one of three rotating shifts (6:00 am-2:00 pm, 2:00 pm-10:00 pm, 10:00 pm-6:00 am) and may work overtime if needed. Women generally have Sundays off, while men's days off vary.

At the time I conducted fieldwork, all Thai Cement Factory workers were employed on indefinite-duration contracts.[37] However, while management, office workers, engineers, technicians, supervisors and safety officers were employed directly by the factory, production workers, including cleaners, were employed by subcontractors. The administration section would not provide me with a sample employment contract, but the administrative officer I interviewed claimed to provide benefits to workers that met, if not exceeded, those required by law.[38] Workers who were employed by subcontractors do not possess copies of their contracts and thus have no way of checking the terms and conditions of their employment. However, a factory-level trade union president confirmed that they are covered by the National Social Security Fund, which provides protection for workplace-related accidents, and are entitled to 18 days annual leave, as

[37] During my fieldwork in 2022 and 2023, workers were employed under indefinite-duration contracts. However, I was told that from 2024, the factory wanted to shift the contract to fixed-term contracts of three months, six months or one year duration. There is no clear explanation for this change; however, an administrative office told me that there was a new human resource manager who had changed the contracting arrangements (personal communication with an administrative officer in the Thai Cement Factory, September 2024).

[38] Personal communication with an administrative officer in the Thai Cement Factory, September 2024.

well as paid sick leave, paid maternity leave and paid breastfeeding breaks.[39] He also said that, with the exception of reproduction-related leave, leave provisions are the same for men and women. However, the gendered division of labour means that wages are, in most cases, very different. Female cleaners earn USD 7.50 per day, whereas male cleaners earn USD 10 per day.

The working conditions at the Thai Cement Factory reveal obvious differences in how workers are treated based on gender, employment status and the nature of their roles. While all workers are employed on indefinite duration contracts, there is a clear division between those employed directly by the factory and those hired through subcontractors, particularly in terms of benefits, access to employment contracts, and working conditions. Female cleaners, who are subcontracted, face harsher physical and environmental conditions compared to their male counterparts, despite being assigned *lighter* tasks like cleaning. As discussed above, however, this label of lighter work is misleading, as the physical demands of their job, such as handling heavy spills of cement dust and enduring extreme levels of dust, noise, and fumes, contradict the notion of it being less strenuous. Additionally, the gender pay gap, combined with women's exclusion from overtime and evening shifts, further exacerbates their economic vulnerability.

The Khmer Cement Factory

The Khmer Cement Factory, established in 2019, is owned by a prominent Khmer tycoon but run by Chinese nationals, who manage both cement and bag production.[40] With a production capacity of approximately 1.9 million tons per year, the facility serves both the local market and exports to China. The factory is located approximately 20 kilometres from the Thai Cement Factory, and is also relatively clean and well-lit. As with the Thai Cement Factory, the location of the Khmer Cement Factory in a rural village means that workers are predominantly local residents, working alongside their family members,

[39] Taking leave was not difficult for workers who worked in this factory. They simply needed to tell their group leader that they were not available to work or that they needed to leave early because they had a family commitment. INT44KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[40] MGT9KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.

friends or fellow villagers. The area surrounding the factory is quiet, as it is located about five kilometres from the main road in mountainous terrain. There are not many shops outside the factory, but there are some inside that sell drinks and snacks that truck drivers can buy while they are waiting for their cement orders to be loaded, as workers usually bring their food from home.

There are two main subcontractors in this factory, one Chinese and the other Thai. The former employs around 400 production workers and around 24 security guards.[41] The latter employs approximately 100 workers, who construct buildings around the factory, repair trucks, clear land and maintain the sewage system. There is a clear separation between the two groups. Khmer workers employed by the two subcontractors identify themselves as 'Thai workers' or 'Chinese workers' and wear different coloured uniforms provided by their subcontractors. Workers' uniforms are also differentiated by role. For example, those who work in the laboratory section are required to wear a full uniform, while those employed as gardeners or cleaners are provided only with a T-shirt. The security guards employed by the Chinese subcontractor do not dress in the same way as those in the Thai Cement Factory but rather wear standard security guard uniforms.

Workplace safety protocols at the Khmer Cement Factory are less stringent compared to the Thai Cement Factory, where regular safety briefings are an integral part of daily operations. By contrast, workers at the Khmer Cement Factory are not required to participate in such briefings on a daily or even monthly basis. This lack of consistent safety training exposes workers to higher risks, as they are not routinely reminded of safety measures – although they are provided with PPE such as dust masks, hard hats and safety belts when working at heights. Workers at the Khmer Cement Factory also lack the authority to refuse tasks they perceive as hazardous, putting workers at higher risk of workplace accidents. There is no difference, however, in the two factories' approaches to other risks, including the risk of workplace GBVH.

[41] Personal communication with union president, October 2024.

The factory environs

As with the Thai Cement Factory, the Khmer Cement Factory features a boom gate at its entrance. This gate is always open due to the factory's 24-hour operation. Workers enter the factory without having to undergo PPE compliance checks upon entry as long as they are wearing their uniform and a factory-issued identity card. Once inside, workers proceed directly to their designated workstations.

As in the Thai Cement Factory, the production process is organised into different mills. Most of the factory compound is dedicated to cement production, including raw mills, cement mills, cement clinker storage and a laboratory. There are also office buildings, apartments for Chinese supervisors and accommodation blocks for some workers who have worked there since the factory opened.[42] There is a canteen, but only Chinese supervisors and senior staff members are permitted to eat there. Production workers have to find a spot around the factory compound to eat the meals or snacks they have brought from home. There is also a karaoke lounge where young women are employed to sell beer and other drinks to Chinese supervisors enjoying their evenings after work.

In this factory, male and female workers have access to separate toilets. However, men sometimes urinate outside or use the female toilets because the male toilets are dirty.[43] A female cleaner described her response when she first started working at the factory: 'The toilets were extremely disgusting and dirty … They had no cleaner before me, and many workers had been using those toilets. I almost cried. I wanted to resign … it was disgusting!'[44] While some areas, such as the warehouse and office buildings, have cleaner facilities, overall sanitation remains poor. Women also have safety concerns, as the toilets are not very private, do not have proper locks and are not properly lit. For example, a worker reported that she sometimes limits her consumption of liquids to avoid

[42] Production workers employed after 2020 are not provided with accommodation.
[43] INT87KPT (cement lab, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[44] INT51KPT (cleaner, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.

using the toilet.[45] Another worker reported that she decided not to use the toilet altogether after midnight:

> The production floor toilets are a disaster. They're made in the Chinese style. They use toilet paper instead of water. But there's no toilet paper in the toilets! And there aren't any cleaners. Also, there's no light, and it's a long way from my workstation. And the male and female toilets are too close to each other. Also, there is a big gap at the top and bottom of the toilet door. If someone wants to look, it'd be very easy to do. The ones close to my workstation are surrounded by big trucks. They're so quiet that if something went wrong, no one would be there to help … So, I usually use the toilet in the warehouse section. But they close at midnight so from midnight on I don't use the toilet until I finish my work.[46]

The factory environment not only shapes the practical challenges women encounter daily; it also perpetuates a culture of inequality and subjugation, impacting their overall well-being. Conditions in this factory, including the general environment and the accessibility and state of toilets, severely impacted workers, particularly women, who were forced to adopt what they perceive as practical solutions to navigate these challenges.

The division of labour

The division of labour at the Khmer Cement Factory is also highly gendered. Although the factory is owned by a Khmer tycoon, the technical aspects of production are managed by the Chinese management, which also oversees key operational areas such as finance, marketing, procurement, human resources and production.[47] Top-level management is supported by a network of mostly male section supervisors, deputy supervisors and team leaders, who are also Chinese. Chinese interpreters play a crucial role in bridging communication between the Chinese leadership and Khmer workers, providing work instructions, managing attendance records and conveying concerns.[48] There is no dedicated safety officer as in the Thai Cement Factory. Instead, team leaders and supervisors are responsible for ensuring workers' safety.

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[45] INT87KPT (cement lab, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[46] INT54KPT (packer, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[47] Personal communication with administrative office in the Khmer Cement Factory, September 2024.
[48] Personal communication with administrative office in the Khmer Cement Factory, September 2024.

As in the Thai Cement Factory, production workers occupy the lowest level of the hierarchical structure at the Khmer Cement Factory. They are recruited through subcontractors who supply labour based on the specifications provided by Chinese supervisors. According to an administrative officer: 'Workers we've recruited are between 18 to 40 years old. 40 years old is the maximum as older people's bodies are weak. Also, they tend not to listen to instructions saying that they are old enough to know which is different from younger workers who are more likely to follow instructions.'[49] Requirements also include the number of workers needed, their gender and the section in which they will be placed, though qualifications are seldom specified except for workers assigned to laboratory, sales and warehouse roles, who require a high school certificate.

There are also some specific criteria for men and women. According to the same administrative officer, men must have physical strength and attend work regularly. Those employed in the sales section must also be able to deal with tough customers:

> We've decided that physically demanding tasks are given to male workers, and lighter tasks are given to female workers. For example, for the sales section, women tend to work very well, dealing with truck drivers; therefore, in this section, all workers are women. Male workers are hot-tempered, so since the beginning, the Chinese supervisors want female workers for this section.[50]

Young women are also assigned to work in the laboratory, where they bring and test samples every hour. They are required to travel to different locations to collect these samples.[51] Contrary to the assumption that laboratory work is relatively easy, workers reported that they need to navigate steep stairs to obtain coal samples and ride bicycles to areas near the mountains to gather stone samples, often in hot or rainy conditions. Additionally, these women face risks associated with travelling home alone at night.[52] As one woman working in the cement laboratory explained, they must return home because they are women, whereas male workers can sleep outside the factory gate in a

[49] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.
[50] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.
[51] INT53KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[52] INT53KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.

hammock.[53] These differences not only underscore the gendered nature of labour practices within the factory but also reflect broader concerns about women's safety and well-being.

These comments also confirm that the allocation of tasks in the Khmer Cement Factory is premised on a clear gender-based division of labour. As noted above, women are employed as cleaners, office workers, laboratory workers and cement packers. As a woman employed in the laboratory explained, women tend to have fewer options when working in a heavy industry like a cement factory because women are understood to be weaker than men and as not being able to handle physically demanding tasks such as fixing the car or driving big trucks.[54] For their part, men work with machines, clay and coal, or in the cement packing section where they load bags of cement onto trucks.

While some men also work as cleaners, they are only responsible for outdoor tasks, such as maintaining gardens, cleaning roads and cutting grass, avoiding tasks like cleaning toilets. According to a female cleaner, 'If men are asked to clean the office, they don't do it well; they don't know how to organise things.'[55] Men also refuse to do some kinds of work. For example, a female laboratory worker explained that there used to be a male worker in her section, but part of his role involved cleaning, which he refused to do. From that time on, the laboratory's Chinese supervisor only recruited women to work in the section.[56] As in the Thai Cement Factory, these arrangements go unchallenged, with few women questioning the assumptions underpinning these gender-based roles.[57]

In addition to having gender-based criteria for heavy and light tasks, gendered task allocation reflects management's concerns about potential interruptions on the production lines. The same laboratory worker mentioned that she was told by the Chinese supervisors that, 'male workers were lazy and slept a lot during the night shift and they even argued back when given instructions.'[58] As noted above, younger women are

[53] INT58KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[54] INT56KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[55] INT81KPT (cleaner, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[56] INT53KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[57] INT74KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022 also invoked the same thinking that cement laboratory work is right for women and heavy work is solely for men.
[58] INT56KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.

employed in customer services to deal with male truck drivers. Workers' explanations for this decision echo those given by the administration: 'As women, we have a lot of patience and know how to talk to them. I'm not certain about this, but I heard that a male worker once got into a fight with one of the truck drivers, and ever since then, this job was only available for women.'[59]

The experiences of female workers, who navigate hazardous environments to perform their duties or deal with difficult customers, further illustrate the impact of the gendered expectations embedded in occupational and task allocation in the factory. These dynamics largely mirror wider societal norms that govern gender roles: for example, women may feel compelled to accept unpleasant tasks, such as cleaning toilets, which are considered to be 'women's work'. These experiences of women suggest that management is more focused on minimising production interruptions than on the physical and mental health of workers. This approach, often driven by male decision-makers, not only overlooks the challenges women face daily but also reflects how male power is reinforced by apparently uncontroversial practices in the factories.

Wages and conditions

In the Khmer Cement Factory, most workers are employed by subcontractors under indefinite-duration contracts after passing a three-month probationary period. Most do not go through a formal recruitment process – they just come in and provide some basic information about themselves, then go straight to work. After three months have passed, they transition to an indefinite duration contract without having to sign a written agreement. As the administrative officer elaborated: 'For this level of workers, they are just normal workers, who are easy to find … and we want to make things simple.'[60] This absence of written contracts, highlights a broader issue of worker precarity since, without formalised agreements, workers lack clarity on their rights and obligations. This creates a power imbalance in favour of the employer, where workers are more easily replaceable. It

[59] INT55KPT (packer, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[60] Personal communication with an administrative officer in the Khmer Cement Factory, September 2024.

simplifies management's control over the workforce while leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation.

The factory nevertheless claims that workers are provided with benefits according to the law. When asked for an example, the administrative officer mentioned a recent case when the factory paid all outstanding payment requirements when it decided to terminate six workers.[61] More generally, workers are entitled to one and a half days of paid annual leave per month worked and can request sick leave by simply informing their team leader. The allocation of weekly days off is flexible, allowing workers to either take one day off per week or work seven consecutive days and then take two days off the following week. Workers have some autonomy over their leave schedules as long as they inform their team leader, their Chinese supervisor or the subcontractor – although this flexibility is limited by the need to prioritise the smooth operation of the factory. For example, taking more than two consecutive days off is discouraged as it puts a strain on the team's capacity.

As in the Thai Cement Factory, actual working hours in the Khmer Cement Factory vary by position. Men are mostly employed as mechanics and work one of the three rotating shifts: 8:00 am to 4:00 pm and from 4:00 pm until 12:00 am and from 12:00 am until 8:00 am. Cleaners, who are primarily older women, work from 7:00 am to 11:00 am and from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm, with a two-hour lunch break and Sunday off. A female cleaner described how these working arrangements allowed her to complete domestic duties without undue stress: 'I feel so happy about my work; I don't want to stay at home. I usually get up early in the morning, prepare my cows, ducks and chicken, and then prepare for work.'[62] Younger female workers mostly work in the laboratory, warehouse, customer service and packing sections, on shifts that rotate every two days without a fixed weekly day off. This schedule is much more demanding. As a younger female laboratory worker reported, 'I'm always tired. I feel that my body has become weaker because we don't get enough sleep. We need to force ourselves to keep our eyes open.'[63]

[61] Personal communication with an administrative officer in the Khmer Cement Factory, September 2024.
[62] INT51KPT (cleaner, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[63] INT74KPT (cement lab, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.

In terms of wages, female workers earn varying amounts depending on their position. In the cement packing section, female cement packers received a set wage of USD 192 at the time fieldwork was conducted, while male cement loaders earn based on the quantity of cement they load. A female cement packer, whose husband worked as a cement loader, explained that he earned between USD 450 and USD 700 per month. This disparity is justified by management on the basis that cement packing is easier or less demanding than cement loading. However, the female cement packer challenged this justification, arguing that she should be paid more because her working conditions put her health at significant risk. She described her challenging working conditions, expressing concern about her ability to continue with such physically demanding work:

> It's a very tiring job because we need to pack a lot of cement bags – like a thousand bags. I can feel my nostrils filled with cement dust … I don't know how much cement dust is entering my body … I truly believe our work is dustier than the men's loading work because I can see that when they sneeze, they don't have cement dust in their nose, while mine is filled with it.[64]

She further described the challenges she faced while working during her period. After packing 1,200 bags, she started to feel unwell; her eyesight became blurry, and she noticed blood seeping through her pants. The following day, she visited a doctor, who informed her that she was anaemic due to heavy bleeding. However, she chose not to share this incident with her team, fearing that her younger team leader might accuse her of not being strong enough to do the work. When I asked her how she felt about the incident, she replied, 'At that time, I thought I was losing my life. Since I was working the night shift, they couldn't see the blood, especially since I was wearing multiple layers of clothing.'[65] This incident confirms that a cement packer's task should not be considered as 'light' and should not justify lower pay. The difficult working conditions reveal the physical demands of the task and highlight the worker's inability to voice her

[64] INT76KPT (packer, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[65] INT76KPT (packer, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.

concerns due to fear of losing her job, especially given her limited employment options due to her age.

A challenge for workers in the warehouse section, particularly for those working on the night shift, involves feelings of loneliness and discomfort. In a warehouse section, two female workers are employed: one on the day shift and another on the evening shift. Although both workers agreed that the job itself is not particularly difficult or tiring, the loneliness of the evening shift, which runs from 4:00pm until midnight, made the second worker uncomfortable. As a warehouse worker, she is responsible for providing materials from the inventory warehouse as requested by the Chinese supervisors. If materials are needed after her shift ends at midnight, her team leader contacted a Chinese supervisor residing in the factory's accommodation to unlock the warehouse. This arrangement concerned this worker, who explained:

> Normally, at least two people come to get materials from the warehouse – one Chinese and one Khmer. Sometimes, only one Chinese supervisor comes. Initially, I was worried when a Chinese supervisor came by themselves, but eventually, I got used to it as I started to know them. Still, I worry about what might happen if someone were to grab me; I don't know who would come to help since I work here alone.[66]

The working conditions at the Khmer Cement Factory illustrate a systematic disregard for worker rights and well-being, rooted in informal employment practices that leave workers vulnerable. By employing workers without written contracts, management not only obscures the rights and obligations of both parties but also reinforces a power dynamic that favours the factory. Wage disparities between male and female workers further exacerbate the situation, with female cement packers receiving significantly less compensation than their male co-workers despite undertaking physically demanding tasks that jeopardise their health. The isolation felt by female warehouse workers on night shifts amplifies the psychological toll of their labour, as they confront not only the physical demands of their jobs but also the fear of potential threats in a solitary work environment. The justification of wage differentiation on false calculations of the

[66] INT88KPT (warehouse worker, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.

difficulty of particular tasks demonstrates, meanwhile, the intersection between formal and informal workplace arrangements in the Khmer Cement Factory.

The Chinese Cement Factory

Established in the 1970s by Khmer investors, the Chinese Cement Factory ceased operations during the Khmer Rouge period (1975–79). It reopened in 2012 under new ownership, though production only recommenced in 2015.[67] Despite the change in ownership, the factory kept its original name as Chinese investors sought to avoid the complex administrative process of renaming the factory.[68] However, the cement bags are branded with the name of the Chinese investment firm as well as the name of the factory.[69]

Like the other cement factories, it is located within a rural village, surrounded by residents' houses and rice fields, and employs primarily local residents. However, it appears older and dirtier. The approach to the factory is via a narrow, unpaved dirt road, which generates significant dust, leading to complaints from local villagers. Workers commute by bicycle or motorbike and are provided with uniforms having the subcontractors' names in Chinese. As in the Thai and Khmer Cement Factories, many female workers choose to wear multiple layers of shirts to protect themselves from the heat, despite Cambodia's hot climate. Workers are also required to wear hard hats for safety reasons. Security is provided by the military police. According to a union leader, this is necessary, since 'truck drivers are not afraid of our normal security guards, who have no guns, whereas the military police carry guns and handcuffs.'[70]

Compared to the other two cement factories, the Chinese Cement Factory produces a relatively small amount of cement at approximately 1.2 million tons of cement annually, serving both local and export markets, particularly China's. Despite its lower capacity, a distinctive feature of the Chinese Cement Factory is its ability to produce

[67] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[68] INT92KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022. Confirmation from MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[69] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[70] INT90KPT (trade union president, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

cement bags, which it uses not only for its own purposes but also supplies to other cement factories in the country, including the Thai and Khmer Cement Factories. Conditions on the production floor in the bag production facility are more like those in a garment factory than on the cement production floor.

The factory employs approximately 300 workers, hired through two Chinese subcontracting companies.[71] The workforce is predominantly male, with around 20 female workers initially hired for the laboratory and cleaning sections. Following the establishment of the bag production section, the number of female workers increased to around 100. Like the Khmer Cement Factory, there is no dedicated safety role. Instead, team leaders and supervisors are responsible for communicating safety information to workers. On the bag production lines, team leaders are tasked with conducting random quality checks on production and ensuring that workers use PPE. As one explained, 'When I check the quality of bags, I also take pictures of workers who are eating, not wearing hard hats, or not using proper boots … But you know, because we are Khmer, we tolerate each other, I don't normally report these issues immediately to the Chinese. I allow that to happen once or twice before deciding to report the case.'[72]

As in the Khmer Cement Factory, there is no rule that workers in the Chinese Cement Factory can reject tasks they deem unsafe. However, safety training is provided, sometimes every six months or once a year. A worker described the experience:

> In the meeting, they gave us documents about safety to read, they collected them back after the training. They also gave us Q&A or multiple-choice questions and sometimes we had to match pictures to labels to learn when it was safe to operate the machine and when it was not … those who couldn't read could ask for help…we could also look at each other's answers … no problem.[73]

As in the Khmer Cement Factory, workers here cannot reject unsafe working conditions, exposing them to increased risks at work.

[71] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[72] INT99KPT (quality controller and safety officer, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[73] INT93KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

The factory environs

The Chinese Cement Factory opens its gates around 6:00 am. Workers are required to wear uniforms including hard hats, and safety shoes and display their factory identity cards while on duty. There is no body scanner at the gates; workers park their motorbikes or bicycles, register their attendance, and proceed directly to their workstations. The factory's layout includes two separate production buildings: one for cement production and the other for bag production. The cement production process itself is organised into ten sections: cement production, machinery and truck operations, the mountain worksite, the laboratory, administration, inventory, safety, marketing, finance and cement packing, where workers pack cement powder and load cement products onto trucks.[74] The bag production process is divided into eight sections: raw materials handling, threading, bag making, gluing, labelling, printing, cutting and quality control.[75]

A canteen is provided only for Chinese supervisors. As production workers are scheduled for eight-hour shifts without a designated meal break, the factory does not provide an eating area for them. The factory had additional facilities including parking lots, a break room for cleaners and an infirmary. It also provides accommodation for workers living at least 25 kilometres away. At the time fieldwork was conducted, only male workers used this accommodation; female workers typically return home after their shifts.[76] The availability of toilets in this factory varies from section to section. In the cement packing section, men and women shared the same toilets because men do not want to walk to designated male toilets, which are further from their work areas.[77] However, those who work in the office buildings –mostly administrative staff, but also female cleaners – have access to separate toilets with relatively cleaner and safer conditions.[78] In the bag production section, meanwhile, the toilets are separated by

[74] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[75] INT99KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[76] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023. An interview with female team leaders also confirmed the same information that women normally come back home after work, MGT11KP, March 2023.
[77] INT97KPT (cement packer, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[78] INT94KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

gender, but they are in poor condition. As a female bag maker noted, 'Some cubicles have water, but others don't. I only use cubicle number three because it has water.'[79]

A female cleaner who is tasked with cleaning roads inside the factory compound, collecting tree leaves, but also cleaning the toilets in her section, mentioned that there are separate toilets where she works. However, she finds it difficult to use them due to cigarette smoke, which she believes comes from male workers and supervisors who use the women's toilets. She noted that even if the smoking is reported and temporarily stopped, it soon resumes, making reporting seem pointless.[80] As a result, she tended to clean the toilet close to the end of her shift, as her team leader preferred that she prioritise her other tasks. This meant, however, that it was difficult to clean all her allocated toilets daily.[81] Additionally, since cleaners have Sundays off, no toilets are cleaned on that day. It is therefore unsurprising that workers in the Chinese Cement Factory frequently complained about the unclean toilets.

The division of labour

The division of labour is structured around a clear hierarchy, with a distinct separation between top management and operational levels. At the top of the hierarchy is the Chinese management team, which is responsible for overseeing the production processes for both the cement and bag production sections. Below Chinese management are Chinese supervisors, who are tasked with managing the technical aspects of production and supervising larger team members. Underneath the Chinese supervisors are the Khmer team leaders, who manage smaller groups of workers of three to four workers. The team leaders receive instructions from the Chinese supervisors and ensure that the tasks are executed by their teams. The Chinese supervisors also make decisions regarding the assignment of workers to specific roles, often determining whether men or women are suited for specific tasks.

[79] INT91KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[80] INT95KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[81] INT95KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

Recruitment of female workers for the cement production line is minimal, with 20 women employed across different sections including the laboratory, warehouse and office. According to one worker, one reason for not recruiting more women is the possibility of pregnancy. As she explained: 'They don't hire women because women might get pregnant … and then they are busy with their babies.'[82] Most workers in cement production are men, as the Chinese supervisors believe men are more suitable for physically demanding roles. Team leaders also noted that female workers generally do not apply for jobs involving heavy-duty tasks.[83] Additionally, employing male workers provides more flexibility in assigning night shifts, which leaves the factory with fewer responsibilities and concerns compared to hiring women.[84] This practice aligns with cultural norms that discourage women from working at night.

In the cutting and gluing sections, male workers are employed to handle tasks that involve physical strength and technical expertise. By contrast, all cleaners are women, cleaning the toilets, roads inside the factory, and office buildings. Management has stated that the bag production section is suitable for female workers because it involves lighter tasks.[85] The bag production section employs a more mixed-gender workforce, although women dominate this area. In this section, male workers typically engage in tasks requiring specific technical skills, such as operating the bag and glue machines, while female workers are assigned to thread machines, connecting threads and quality control roles. Female quality controllers ensure that the cement bags meet production standards. Their tasks involve ensuring the bags are properly woven, the threads are not cut off, the bag mouths sealed, the glue properly applied, and the printing colours not faded. [86] These tasks certainly require a high level of attention to detail. As a bag worker explained:

> There are five people in my team: three women and two men. Three women are responsible for checking the quality of the bags. Among the three of us, one person stands in front of the machine to take the bags as they come out, while the other two stand behind, receiving

[82] INT92KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[83] INT100KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[84] MGT10KPT (male team leaders, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[85] MGT12KPT (administrative officer, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.
[86] INT100KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

> the bags and checking their quality. We take turns standing in front because it gets very hot and the position is tiring … when we inspect the bags, we drop any defective ones onto the floor, throwing them to both sides of the machines … we trip over the defective bags sometimes because we don't pick them up right away. We don't have time to focus on the defective ones. We give all our attention to checking the good bags as they keep coming out of the machine all the time.[87]

Work in other sections of the factory is equally gendered. For instance, in the weaving section, female workers monitor the threading machines, while male mechanics oversee the machines' operation. At times when men were employed to monitor the threading machines, they left after a short period, citing low wages but also the physically demanding work as reasons for seeking work in another section. As one woman explained, 'Men normally leave our section after working here for a short period. They want to work with other men looking after big machines.'[88] Another reason, she added, was reputational: 'It can look inappropriate to have a man in a section where an overwhelming number of workers are women.'[89]

Wages and conditions

In the Chinese Cement Factory, workers start on three months probationary contracts. Upon successful completion of probation, a form is submitted by the administrative department to the Chinese supervisor who evaluates the worker's performance to determine if the contract should be extended. Contracts can be extended for six months, then for a full year. After two years, workers may be offered indefinite duration contracts.[90] The decision to extend contracts rests solely on the discretion of the Chinese supervisor. As part of their contract, workers are not permitted to work for a competitor for two years after leaving this factory.[91]

The employment contracts themselves follow a standardised template where administrative staff input basic information such as name, address, and national

[87] INT100KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[88] INT98KPT (threader, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[89] INT98KPT (threader, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[90] Personal communication with a trade union president in the Chinese Cement Factory, September 2024.
[91] A fixed-term contract template was provided by the trade union president in September 2024.

identification number. These contracts consist of nine sections detailing work conditions, though they do not explicitly define the roles and responsibilities of the workers. Instead, tasks are assigned by team leaders and Chinese supervisors, and workers are expected to remain flexible in taking on additional assignments based on the factory's needs. Workers must also report their tasks to their direct supervisors such as team leaders, supervisors, or both. Workers are enrolled with the National Social Security Fund and are entitled to 18 days of paid annual leave. Leave requests must be submitted two weeks in advance and require approval from the Chinese supervisor. Regarding sick leave, a medical certificate is required for an absence of more than two days, but no specific limit on sick leave is mentioned in the contract.

Working hours vary by position. The bag production, threading and cement production lines operate on three shifts: 7:00 am to 3:00 pm, 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm, and from 11:00 pm to 7:00 am, with shifts rotating every two days. Cement packers also work in three shifts: 8:00 am to 4:00 pm, 4:00 pm to 12:00 am, and from 12:00 am to 8:00 am. The cleaning section operates only during the day, from 7:00 am to 11:00 am and from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm, allowing for a two-hour lunch break. Workers in the cement laboratory and warehouse work from 7:30 am to 5:30 pm, also with a two-hour lunch break. Workers in the cement production line receive a basic wage, while those in the bag production section can earn more depending on their productivity. One female worker remarked, 'It's fair because team leaders operate the machines. We, as women, can't operate them since they require fixing and knowing English. I don't think I could handle it.'[92] Team leaders in the bag section, all male, earn USD 30 more per month than their female team members.

A concern for bag section workers is wage deductions for mistakes, such as failing to properly inspect defective bags. One worker explained, 'Sometimes they deduct five dollars, and sometimes eight dollars, depending on the number of defective bags that went undetected. But they don't tell us how many bags were defective; they just decide what to deduct.'[93] When asked if she took action, she added, 'There's no point in going to

[92] INT100KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[93] INT91KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

the office because deductions are never reversed. And workers who complain usually receive a warning letter.'[94] A factory representative explained that deductions are made because defective cement bags, once distributed across the country, cannot be returned. Workers, however, are sceptical and suspect that these deductions are used as a scare tactic to ensure they are more diligent in their work.[95]

While work is relatively well regulated on paper, the Chinese Cement Factory is perceived to have worse working conditions compared to the Thai Cement Factory and the Khmer Cement Factory. Older female workers working in the cleaning section have considerable flexibility, with proper lunch breaks and the ability to leave early if they finish their tasks. By contrast, bag production workers are subjected to strict targets and endure eight-hour shifts without breaks, working alongside non-stop machines while being closely monitored. This aspect of the organisation of work has very real consequences for workers. As one explained:

> I have a stomach problem now … I'm busy at work and don't have enough time to eat. For example, I eat breakfast at six. By eleven thirty I should have lunch, but my shift does not end until three in the afternoon. When I get home, we have dinner around 5 or 9. Sometimes, I bring my lunch home and eat it as dinner … this is what's causing my stomach issues.'[96]

Those who work with machines such as in the bag, threads and packing sections have reported that it is even hard for them to go to the toilet. The continuous operation of machines requires them to keep pace, leaving little time for breaks. The ability to take breaks is also dependent on the condition of the machines. As a female worker in the threading section explained, 'We can go to the toilet if our machines are running smoothly. We can ask a co-worker to watch our machines if we need to go, but if the machines aren't working well, it's hard to go … we work the whole time, we have no

[94] INT91KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[95] INT93KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[96] INT99KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

time to break.'[97] There are also issues of gender discrimination. For example, a female quality controller noted:

> Our work is hard. We have to stand the whole time. If someone gets pregnant, they usually dismiss her. I heard they now let pregnant women work, but standing for long hours can lead to miscarriages … A few women have had miscarriages in the past, and that information was passed from one person to another … I think miscarriages happen because we had to stand long hours and bend down to take the bags. Also, the bump could hit the table where we check the bags as we work standing up. Just look how worn out the belly area of my shirt is! Each of us had a huge hole in our shirt because we stood working for long hours and our shirts rubbed against the table in front of us when we took the bags …This doesn't happen to male workers.[98]

She continued, explaining how one colleague continued working until six months into her pregnancy before resigning, knowing the factory would not take responsibility for any complications. During these six months, two other female team members helped to conceal the pregnancy to ensure that the pregnant team member could keep working. As she explained, 'We didn't let her stand in front of the machine, we asked her to stand behind us … but when her belly started to show and then she was asked to resign.'[99] She continued on to say that 'It's easier to resign if you're pregnant.'

There are also gender-based differences in the ways that the rules are applied. For example, workers are no longer allowed to wear earphones during their shifts in the bag section, as management believes this could distract them and lower productivity. Night-shift workers find it challenging to stay alert without music: 'Earphones are used to help us stay awake and refreshed while checking bags. Now, without them, we feel sleepier.'[100] However, this rule is not enforced in the cutting section where the workers are all men.[101]

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[97] INT98KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022. The situation for the team leader, however, is better: 'The team leader only walks around to check the machines; she doesn't work directly with them. So, she can sleep, eat and sit whereas we can't, if we stop, the machines will stop working.'
[98] INT100KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[99] INT100KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[100] INT100KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[101]INT99KPT (quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, the organisation of work in cement factories has significant implications for female workers, particularly due to the hierarchical management systems in place. Despite the fact that the three factories are owned by different nationalities (Thai, Khmer, and Chinese) and managed by two (Thai and Chinese), women occupy a similar position at the bottom of the structural hierarchy across all three. This hierarchical system makes women – who constitute a small minority of the workforce, except in the Chinese factory – highly visible at the worksite but almost invisible in management positions. Women often lack comprehensive knowledge about factory operations and receive instructions from multiple levels of authority, including factory management and supervisory staff employed by the subcontractors, who are predominantly men. As a female cleaner noted, 'I have about three or four different bosses, bosses from the factory, bosses from subcontractor and those who work in an office, they all can ask me to do the cleaning.'[102] This layered hierarchy limits women's interactions with higher-level management, thus reducing opportunities for them to voice concerns.

Secondly, the environments across the three factories are not conducive to women's needs, particularly regarding access to sanitary facilities. Women struggle daily to access bathrooms and must find strategies to navigate their limited accessibility, such as using toilets in other sections, limiting their liquid intake, or avoiding going to the toilet altogether. This neglect of women's sanitary needs persists despite all three factories claiming to care about workers' safety. In a broader sense, the factory environments reflect the organisational priorities, whereby continued production is management's primary concern. Where safety is considered, management focuses on the use of PPE and the prevention of workplace accidents, ignoring other elements of workers' safety. This narrow definition of safety means that psychological and other physical risks to workers, and especially women, go unmanaged.

Thirdly, the narrative around who should do 'lighter or heavier' tasks is often used as a way to justify occupational segregation and the gendered allocation of tasks – a

[102] INT67KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.

division of labour that offers women fewer opportunities to advance their skills and perpetuates broader social norms around gender. In the Khmer Cement Factory, women are tasked with work that requires detailed attention and patience, such as in cleaning, customer service, or the packing section, tasks that are considered to be highly gendered. In the Chinese Cement Factory, women work on the production line, where attention to detail is required to check the quality of the bags – a skill that is explicitly ascribed to women. The Thai Cement Factory, too, explicitly identifies cleaning as 'women's work', which it claims is lighter than the tasks undertaken by men. Women employed to keep the production lines clean disagree with this statement, claiming that their work is as hard as, or even harder than, men's.

Fourthly, the gender division of labour, as illustrated in the third point, is reflected in the wages and conditions of female workers. Wages are largely determined by management's assessment of the physical strength required to complete tasks, ignoring the skills required by the women to complete their work. Women also have less access to income-generating opportunities such as working overtime or in shift rotations, which are deemed unsafe for women because of the times at which they have to travel to and from work. At the Khmer Cement Factory, a small number of workers live onsite. However, none of the factories attempt to mitigate these risks by, for example, providing transport services. These different narratives result in women being confined to lower-paying roles with fewer opportunities for financial advancement, reinforcing economic disadvantages and perpetuating gender disparities in wages and working conditions.

As this chapter has demonstrated, the organisation of work across the three factories has an outsized impact on the women who work there. The next chapter will delve deeper into the workplace cultures of these factories, examining how power dynamics, social norms and organisational priorities shape female workers' experiences, particularly in relation to GBVH incidents. This discussion will provide a clearer picture of how the organisation of work and workplace culture intersect to determine the practices and values embedded in everyday interactions on the production floor.

Chapter Seven

Workplace Culture in Cement Factories

This chapter investigates the influence of workplace culture in male-dominated environments on the experiences of women workers in the cement factories. It explores the extent to which workplace culture in these settings shapes the daily experiences of women workers while at work. By evaluating the power dynamics present in daily operations, the incentive structures embedded within the workplace culture, and the social norms that define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, it delves deeper into the factors that impact women workers. Additionally, it examines organisational tolerance, focusing on how organisations address issues related to GBVH and their accountability in responding to such incidents.

Based on this analysis, the chapter argues that the workplace cultures of the three cement factories under study share many similarities but also exhibit notable differences, which influence not only women's general experiences at work but also their perceptions of workplace GBVH and their understanding of the appropriate actions to take if they experience it. In the Thai Cement Factory, subcontractors enforce a strict prohibition against conflict that silences workers' complaints, while in the Khmer and Chinese Cement Factories, foreign supervisors exercise power through ethnic hierarchies and language barriers that position Khmer workers as inferior and blame them for production failures caused by inadequate resources. All three factories normalise sexualised joking as a means of control and rely on male co-workers to reinforce gender hierarchies, but management's understanding of and response to GBVH differs markedly. In each case, workplace culture in male-dominated environments leaves women isolated, compelled to

participate in practices they find uncomfortable to gain acceptance, and without institutional support when harassment occurs.

Social Norms

Although the three cement factories are owned or managed by different nationalities, perceptions of women's roles in the workplace are closely linked to social norms that prevail in Cambodia and, to a greater or lesser extent, in Thailand and China as well. For example, married women take jobs in the cement factories because they are 'close to our homes, children, and husbands. If we work outside our village, we need to spend more money. Some people decided to work here to be with their children. No matter what, I need to work here so that I can be close to my children.'[1]

Meanwhile, management and workers alike believe that some tasks can be done *only* by men or *only* by women. In some circumstances, men are recruited to female-dominated teams but then decide to leave. In the bag-making section of the Chinese Cement Factory, where the majority of workers are women, one worker explained that subcontractors recruit both men and women, but that men quickly moved on.[2] In others, team leaders and supervisors believe that doing 'men's work' is harmful to women's health, potentially resulting in an inability to have children – evidenced by the fact that a male leader told a group of cleaners that doing tasks assigned to men 'might affect their uterus'.[3]

These beliefs are largely shared by women themselves. In the Thai Cement Factory, subcontractor B only employs women to clean onsite accommodation and office buildings. According to one cleaner, the exclusive employment of women makes sense because 'Men can't perform tasks such as preparing bedrooms, washing clothes, and cleaning toilets. They can't do those tasks.'[4] A second cleaner confirmed this perception, adding that this was so because women have always done these tasks even at home: 'We

[1] INT45KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[2] INT98KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[3] INT1KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[4] INT45KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

clean the kitchen, clean the bedroom. And I think it is not appropriate for men to prepare a bedroom, pillows, bed sheets, or wash clothes. I think this work is not for men.'[5] Factory-level trade union leaders confirmed that subcontractors do not hire men to perform so-called 'women's work', especially in the case of these cleaners, whose work involves tasks such as washing dishes and bed linen. The latter would be especially difficult for men to handle, they said, in cases where there is blood or semen on the sheets. Additionally, some staff members discard used condoms in the bin without wrapping them and female visitors sometimes leave used sanitary pads in the handwashing area on the sink. Dealing with these intimate objects is perceived to be an inappropriate task for men.[6]

Employment policies in the customer service team reflect these beliefs, but also other social norms about women's reproductive role. In the case of the customer service team in the Khmer Cement Factory, assumptions about women's domestic roles influence the *kinds* of women appointed to particular positions. Only young women who have at least completed high school are considered for employment. While educational level might be relevant, why is youth a criterion if not for the pleasure of male customers? According to a worker in the section, management prefers young women because they tend not to take much leave due to domestic responsibilities. This worker agreed with this assessment. As she explained, 'I think this job is hard for married women because it requires us to switch shifts constantly. If a woman is married, she might become pregnant, and this job would be too demanding for a pregnant woman. It is dusty, tiring, and too loud, and it requires us to lift heavy sacks and replace them if there are any problems with the bags.[7]

Concerns about women's reproductive roles and the risk of negative responses from spouses feed into the section's recruitment policy, but also into concerns about how to avoid communication problems within the team. As another woman explained:

[5] INT5KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[6] INT72KPT (trade union leader, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.
[7] INT55KPT (cement packer, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.

> I think if we are all women in the team, we work better because we can maintain a good relationship with each other. If we work with men, maybe we are shy, we don't want to talk to each other, and we don't want to work with each other. Also, some workers have husbands, and if they work alone with a male worker, they worry that their husbands might be jealous. So, the Chinese subcontractor only wants to recruit women.[8]

When asked if she agreed with this practice, she said that she did. Elaborating, she added:

> The leader's decision is good because some husbands are not happy to see their wives working with other men, and he doesn't want to have problems at work. I think this is a good decision because women work well together, and at night we can sleep together. If we work with a man, it is hard for us to sleep because we can't share a bed while women can. So, I think what my leader believes is reasonable.[9]

As these observations illustrate, social norms about women's reproductive roles and the relationship between married women and their spouses are deeply embedded in recruitment practices. However, these practices are also influenced by other social norms, including assumptions that women are obedient, detail-oriented and weak. A laboratory worker reported that only women are assigned to customer service roles because they are perceived to be good at following instructions and paying attention to detail while performing tasks considered by management as lighter than working on the production line, where physical labour is required.[10]

At the same time, women are ambivalent about measures put in place for their benefit. In the Thai Cement Factory, it is common practice to reassign pregnant women to different sections, such as cleaning various office buildings.[11] The work is lonely and often leads to feelings of boredom and despair. One pregnant woman, who was working as an office cleaner after being moved from the production line when her group leader learned of her pregnancy, shared her experience. About two years ago, she had also been

[8] INT79KPT (customer service, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[9] INT79KPT (customer service, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[10] INT56KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[11] Article 182 of the Cambodian Labour Law 1997 states that 'after the maternity leave and during the first two months after returning to work, they [women] are only expected to perform light work.' In the Thai Cement Factory, management believes that cleaning the office is a *light task* that is suitable for pregnant women to perform.

pregnant. Because she disliked cleaning the office, she continued working on the production line, resulting in a miscarriage. Now, she forces herself to work as a cleaner in the office building, even though most of the workers there are male:

> We only have one task here: cleaning the room, and it is quiet. We have no one to talk to. IT IS VERY QUIET. On the production line, I work with a team, and when we have a break, we take it together. Here, I work alone, and I have my break alone. When I go to clean the office room, there are staff members there who I can talk to a bit. But when I finish my cleaning, I need to go back to the room and sit there alone.[12]

Another aspect of women's role in broader society that influences gendered occupational distribution in the three factories is the assumption that they will naturally serve as peacemakers. As the female team leader from the customer service team at the Khmer Cement Factory explained:

> My team consists entirely of women because the truck drivers are men. When women work with men, the work is easier. Male drivers mostly have a 'light heart' [meaning that they are quick to anger]. They like to use their anger to solve small problems. Women rarely get angry. They have a 'heavy heart' [meaning they are easy to talk to]. When women talk to truck drivers, they mostly listen because the women know how to communicate effectively and are easy to understand. They are also hardworking and are patient with their work. We used to have men in the group, which is why we learned that men had difficulty working with truck drivers. For example, two years ago, a male worker told a male driver to load cement according to the number provided in the queue. The driver didn't listen because he wanted to go first. An argument occurred, and the Chinese supervisor had to resolve the issue. After that, my Chinese supervisor decided not to employ men anymore.[13]

When asked if she agreed with this policy, the team leader said, 'I do because when we have women in our team, they rarely have problems with drivers.'[14]

A third assumption relates to attention to detail and physical strength. As noted above, some team leaders have expressed concerns – some well-founded – about the potential impact of certain tasks on women. However, assumptions about what tasks

[12] INT49KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[13] MGT7KPT (female team leader, Khmer Cement Factory) March 2023.
[14] MGT7KPT (female team leader, Khmer Cement Factory) March 2023.

women can and cannot perform do not end there. Interviews with team leaders in the Khmer Cement Factory confirmed that they believed that women should focus on work that requires close attention. In the laboratory, their role is considered critical because specific instructions must be followed, and women are perceived to be good at following instructions. For example, women are tasked with water testing while men are responsible for carrying water to the laboratory and transporting acid to pour into the testing tank.

When asked why this was the case, a male team leader said: 'Although men are strong, they don't pay much attention to work. That's why we need women to do the testing.'[15] With regard to physical capacity, this team leader explained: 'Pouring the water into the tank would be hard for women because it requires a man's strength.'[16] A male leader from the same factory, who works in the soil grinding section held similar views. When asked why there are no women in his team, he said that he believes women cannot perform the tasks required, particularly during the rainy season when the soil becomes very sticky. 'We need men's labour, and my male Chinese supervisor only recruits men.'[17]

These same team leaders were also influenced by concerns about women's safety when travelling to and from work. According to the team leader from the Khmer Cement Factory's laboratory, women in his team – unlike laboratory workers in the Chinese Cement Factory – do not work at night because of concerns about their safety while returning home.[18] In the Chinese Cement Factory, a male team leader mentioned that their Chinese subcontractors do not want to recruit women to work in the Central Control Room (where all cement production is monitored) because that section is not very busy. According to this team leader, having men's labour means that 'the subcontractor can assign men to do other tasks when the section is not very busy. Also, women don't apply for my section because of shift work, which is hard for women to do at night.'[19]

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[15] MGT8KPT (male team leader, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.
[16] MGT8KPT (male team leader, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.
[17] MGT8KPT (male team leader, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.
[18] MGT8KPT (male team leader, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2023.
[19] MGT10KPT (male team leader, Chinese Cement Factory), March 2023.

It should be noted here that not all women accept the social norms they encounter in the workplace. A female cleaner who works along the production line explained that she could handle the tough working conditions, working in a hot and dusty environment, whereas men find these tasks difficult.[20] Some are also cognisant of the ways in which social norms are used selectively to justify management practices. As one cleaner explained, 'We're asked to work just like the men' when clearing cement dust along the production lines.[21] It was, in fact, clear across all three factories that management used different and sometimes conflicting narratives to convince men and women to take on the roles that they want them to take on to reduce problems at work and increase productivity.

Power

In cement factories, management exerts power through the strategic use of multiple subcontractors, allowing subcontractors to have power in hiring, managing and firing workers. This power can be exercised over workers in explicit or subtle ways. For instance, management at the Thai Cement Factory fosters a strong work culture where disputes are discouraged, emphasising the importance of solidarity. This rule, although not part of the factory's formal written policy, is prominently displayed on a poster on the wall, which is visible to both workers and their group leaders. As one worker explained:

> They don't want us to get into conflict because we have to work together. If we have a problem with each other, it would be hard to work because we're in the same team. When our work is allocated by our supervisors, they don't know who doesn't get along with whom. If there's a problem, they say that we need to talk to each other to resolve the matter, and we should not get involved in a conflict or fight with each other.[22]

Workers interpret this 'rule' as a prohibition against conflict, understanding that any disputes could result in severe consequences, such as job loss, which is particularly daunting given the scarcity of employment opportunities in their village.

[20] INT3KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[21] INT4KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[22] INT8KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.

Across all interviews at the Thai Cement Factory, workers consistently mentioned that it was essential to avoid conflict at work. As one female worker explained: 'We've never had any disputes because this is a rule here. We can't have a dispute with anyone. Our team leader said if we get into a dispute with anyone, all those involved will be terminated. It doesn't matter who is right or wrong. They [the team leaders] need us to like each other.'[23] This rule is strictly enforced not only by team leaders but also co-workers, who work to ensure that no disputes occur, and if they do, resolve them quickly. For example, one woman said the following when asked what she would do if she had a conflict with someone at work: 'I guess we just need to stop talking to each other for a few days, and hopefully that matter would resolve on its own. This is because if someone knows that we're in conflict with each other, then the subcontractor will know … we can't have a dispute or conflict at work. If that happens, our contracts will be terminated.'[24]

Management expects workers to work together harmoniously and follow instructions peacefully, much like family members are expected to listen to the head of the family, which in this case could be the factory or subcontractor. This position was explicitly stated when I interviewed human resources and administrative officers of the Thai Cement Factory about the company's values: 'Here we love each other like one family. We use the word family here.'[25] The term 'family' was also frequently used in other interviews when workers were asked about their working conditions. Terms like 'brothers and sisters'[26] and 'family member'[27] were used when explaining that conflicts are discouraged. By emphasising solidarity and 'family values', management ensures compliance and harmony at the expense of individual rights and grievances. When added to social norms around the relative status of men and women, this approach has a

[23] INT5KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[24]INT6KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022. INT7KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022 also said the same thing that the rule is posted on the wall at work, prohibiting workers from having disputes and should consider as each other like sisters and brothers like a family.
[25] INT13KPT (human resource and administrative officer, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.
[26] INT7KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022, INT48KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[27] INT49KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

particular impact on women in this male-dominated workplace, where the majority of leadership roles are held by men.

Although there is no such rule displayed on the wall in the other factories, workers at the Khmer Cement Factory and the Chinese Cement Factory were also told that they should avoid workplace conflict. As a worker at the Khmer Cement Factory explained, 'When I was interviewed for the job, I was told not to have conflicts at work and not to come into a disagreement with others. He [the leader] said that I need to compromise, ask questions, and help each other.'[28] In the Chinese Cement Factory, workers are also reminded during job interviews not to have conflicts at work. This is particularly relevant in the bag-making section, where the large majority of workers are women. As a female worker recalled from her job interview with a subcontractor: 'He told me not to cause any problem with anyone at work.'[29] An interview with female team leaders also revealed the same situation where they were told not to have conflicts at work while signing their employment contracts. As they explained: 'When we signed our contracts, we're told if we have a conflict, both parties will be terminated.'[30]

This method of control feeds into the power of supervisors and team leaders on the factory floor. According to workers, supervisors have different personalities; some are considered good bosses, while others are not so nice. For example, a female cleaner described how different bosses reacted when they saw workers taking a break along the cement production line:

> When some bosses see us stop working, they ask for reasons. But some other bosses don't even allow us time to answer the question. Some bosses are nice, and some aren't. A good boss asks us and at least lets us respond. Some bosses, whenever they see us sit down, just say, 'Don't sit! You need to start working.'[31]

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[28] INT56KPT (cement laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022. When asked about how she felt about this, she said, 'I think what they said was good because it would be difficult to work if we're in conflict.'

[29] INT91KPT (bag maker, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

[30] MGT7KPT (female team leader, Khmer Cement Factory) March 2023.

[31] INT46KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

As in the garment factories, however, it is common for supervisors and team leaders to attribute blame as a means to exert power. One cleaner working in the Thai Cement Factory reported that her supervisor asked intimidating questions such as, 'You don't know who the boss is and who the worker is? If you take a break for this long, I will write your name and hand it over to your subcontractor.'[32] Another, who works in a Thai manager's house, recounts her experience of unreasonable treatment by her male team leader:

> I've been working for a Thai boss for about a year without any issues, but the Khmer group leader who inspects our work is usually dissatisfied with what we have done. When he comes to inspect our work, he can be very disrespectful, speaking as if he is of a much higher status – as if we can't compare ourselves to his level. We can't argue with him; we are just workers. He speaks to us in a way that makes us feel upset, saying that we did not do this or that correctly. Sometimes, he comes just to express his anger and then leaves. He blames us for things we can't do. For example, we couldn't clean underneath a large cabinet. This was unreasonable as it was too heavy for us to lift. He blamed us for not cleaning parts that were out of reach. I felt he was being really unreasonable. He also asked us to clean the top of the fridge and the high windows. I said I could not reach them, and he called me lazy. We told him that we could only clean where it was safe, but he accused us of making excuses to avoid work. His words were harsh, and I was very upset. Once there were too many water bottles in the freezer, and they had become stuck. When he came to check my work, he called me over and blamed me without asking who did it. He said, 'You, yes, you bitch! You can't put so many water bottles in there! The freezer could explode, bitch! And with your small salary, you couldn't afford to pay for the damage, even with your whole monthly salary.'[33]

In the Chinese Cement Factory, ethnic hierarchies feed into workers' sense of exploitation. A female worker who has been employed since the factory opened approximately 42 years ago and was working as a cleaner along the production line at the time of the interview, reported extreme hostility towards Chinese subcontractors: 'In this factory, all the supervisors are Chinese. The Chinese control us in every section; we're Khmer, and we only have our labour. The Chinese have everything, including the skills in production. We're here for them to use our labour, we have no rights, we do whatever the

[32] INT47KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[33] INT45KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

Chinese ask us to do … Everything is under Chinese control.'[34] Frustrated by the evident power imbalance, she gave the following example:

> When there are problems with bags, there is always a meeting organised before we can go home … the meeting normally takes around 10 to 20 minutes after work. The Chinese supervisor talks in Chinese about the problem, and an interpreter translates what they say into Khmer … I've never seen any protest from Khmer people. No one ever protests. We all stay quiet even when we are blamed [for mistakes] … if we can't bear it, we have no choice but to leave.[35]

Like her co-workers, this worker remained silent. Yet despite her silence, her analysis was sharp: 'I think the mistakes are not the fault of the Khmer workers. They're the fault of the Chinese people. For example, they don't give us enough glue to put in a machine, which is why the bag cannot be glued properly. But our supervisor never blames any Chinese people. He always blames us because we're workers.'[36]

This culture of blame is also present among workers. In the Khmer Cement Factory, for example, accusations come not only from workers' direct supervisors or leaders but also from their male co-workers. For example, in the customer service section, the female workers are tasked with ensuring that the correct amount of cement is loaded. The loading itself is performed by male co-workers. Female workers report that male co-workers are very quick to blame them if they make a mistake. One described this specific experience:

> At that time, there was a male worker who worked for a subcontractor, and his payment was based on his loading capacity. He was supposed to load 300 bags of cement onto a truck, but he misheard the number and ended up loading 320 bags. We knew the number of bags was over because we had a bag counting system where we could see the number of cement bags being loaded onto the truck. The moment we realised that there were 320 bags, we asked him to unload the excess. He was angry about losing time because he also needed to load cement bags for the next truck and screamed from downstairs. He yelled and said, 'You've been working here for a very long time, but you're still making these mistakes! You've been working here for a long time, but you are still like sticky rice!'

[34] INT96KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[35] INT96KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.
[36] INT96KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

> What he meant by this is that we are stupid. It was okay because it was our mistake. However, when he made a mistake, we never blamed him.[37]

This case illustrates that men have social power attached to them simply by being male. Even though they can make mistakes, female workers do not dare to blame their male colleagues.

Gender hierarchies also affect the small number of female supervisors and team leaders in the factories. In the Chinese Cement Factory, for example, a female team leader working in the cement quality control section said that she found it easier to manage women in her team as women follow instructions better, and she did not feel intimidated if she needed to yell at them:

> I think managing women is easier than managing men. When supervising men, I need to be careful with my words as they can get angry very easily. But when we ask women to do something, they will do it, unlike the men. Women are easy to talk to, but with men, if we don't know how to talk to them, we worry about our own safety in case they don't like us. Therefore, even if we are furious with them, we need to speak to them nicely; we can't shout, which is different from women, whom we can shout at a bit.[38]

Another key aspect of workplace culture evident in all three factories is the use of humour, much of it sexualised, as a technology of control. At the Khmer Cement Factory, the majority of supervisors are male Chinese. Although most workers cannot speak Chinese, those who can understand a little reported that supervisors like making jokes with them. One female worker reported: 'This happens more often when we understand the language. They said, "This person loves you; will you love him back? But he is a bit old." They make this kind of joke. Sometimes we laugh at what they said, but sometimes we're offended.'[39] Another female worker in the same team mentioned that their supervisor frequently called and sent text messages to women in their team: 'He loves to call and send text messages, and then people end up in a relationship with him. That

[37] INT83KPT (customer service, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[38] MGT11KPT (female team leader, Chinese Cement Factory) March 2023.
[39] INT53KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.

relationship can become deeper, potentially leading to sleeping with him. I think it starts as a joke, and then he asks that person to be with him.'[40]

Sexualised joking occurs among colleagues – male and female – in all three factories, where it symbolises a complex interplay between camaraderie and control. As a female cement packer employed in the Chinese Cement Factory explained:

> When we go to work and look tired, people might ask us, 'What did you do last night?' implying that we had sex the previous night, which is why we look tired in the morning. We're not offended by such comments; it has become normal because we know in our hearts that it is just a joke, as we understand the personality of the person making the comment. Some people talk to us in a funny way, but others make us feel like they want to look down on us. So, it really depends on who says those words. We need to assess both their words and body language to understand the real meaning. We normally just hear those words within our team; other team members wouldn't dare to speak to us like this. We use this kind of stuff [sexualised jokes] in our team to gain more energy at work, make us feel fresh, and help us forget about our long working hours and how tough our work is, at least for a while.[41]

Similarly, a woman working in the Thai Cement Factory explained that her male co-workers often initiated sexual jokes to increase energy levels before starting work. Instead of feeling irritated, she enjoyed making the situation even funnier. She provided the following example:

> When I came to work in the morning with an upset face, my co-worker would make comments such as, 'Was it because your husband didn't have sex with you last night? Is that why you have such a sad face?' And then I would reply, 'That's not true, I had sex three or four times last night,' and he said, 'That's why you look exhausted, no energy to work!' I said that if it were him, he wouldn't be able to come to work; he would be very exhausted. That was a joke, and everyone laughed.[42]

A cleaner assigned to the office building at the same factory concurred, saying: 'I feel like we are brothers and sisters, and as we have been working with each other for so long,

[40] INT56KPT (laboratory worker, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.
[41] INT101KPT (packer, Chinese Cement Factory), July 2022.
[42] INT7KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022

we understand each other's hearts and feelings … This creates a fun working environment … It's all for fun, and we all laugh. I'm happy to have people talk to me and have fun together, including office staff.'[43] Not all women, however, are comfortable with remarks about their bodies, as another female cleaner at the same factory explained. While she was standing and cleaning the machine, a male machine operator commented on her appearance, saying things like, 'Our sister has a good shape,' which made her feel uncomfortable. She responded, 'Please stop joking around like this as we are all married; you have a wife, and I have a husband.'[44]

As Collinson and Collinson suggest, there are three main functions of jokes on the shop floor. Firstly, jokes are used as a control mechanism, where informal interactions can create power structures beyond the reach of organisational control and management. Secondly, jokes offer a means of conformity, confirming group membership. For example, a new worker in a male-dominated section is exposed to group norms and must prove their willingness to adhere to these rules. Thirdly, jokes can be a form of resistance, helping workers cope with monotonous tasks and preventing boredom. Sexualised jokes, including name-calling and commenting on appearance, are common and are used by both men and women to create a fun environment, boosting morale under tough working conditions such as loud noise, heat, and dust. As these examples demonstrate, in the cement factories, sexualised jokes are used to foster a sense of unity and boost morale. At the same time, however, in the context of workplace cultures that require that conflict should be avoided at all costs, participation in the joking culture is seen as a way to be accepted as part of the group, and some workers feel compelled to participate in these jokes even though they feel uncomfortable.

Incentive Structures

These power relations are reinforced by incentive structures that largely benefit men who are able to work night shifts or on the basis of the physical demands associated with (mostly male) roles. For example, in the Thai Cement Factory, cleaners – who are almost

[43] INT49KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[44] INT61KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

all women – are paid on a monthly basis and only work during the day shift, while male workers are employed in various positions, mostly working with machines serving as operators or machine attendants are paid about 10 to 20 percent more wages as they work in shift rotations.[45] In the Khmer Cement Factory, a similar trend can be observed. In the cement packing section, bonuses are provided to men who work as cement loaders but not to the men and women who work as cement packers. As a result, men who work as cement loaders can earn almost triple the amount earned by cement packers. When asked why cement packers are not provided with bonuses, I was told that the cement packer role is not considered as physically demanding as the cement loader role.

In some cases, workers are cognisant of the inherent injustices in these arrangements. At the Khmer Cement Factory, there is a woman who works as a cement packer while her husband works as a cement loader. The woman explained:

> Men are assigned to work as cement loaders, where they need to load cement bags into trucks. Women are mostly assigned to be packers … I work as a packer, and my husband is a cement loader. He loads cement bags into the trucks. My niece, who works with me as a packer, has a husband who is also a cement loader. My husband can earn about USD 600 a month, while I earn only about USD 260, including when working on public holidays. My work and his work are equally tiring, but the subcontractor only employs men [as cement loaders].[46]

In the Chinese Cement Factory, production bonuses are provided in the bag-making section, where the majority of the labour force is female. As in the garment industry, where production bonuses are widely used, these bonuses serve as a tool to motivate workers to achieve productivity targets but also to police their performance. Quality controllers in this section also have deductions made from their wages when they do not check the quality of the cement bags thoroughly. The process surrounding the deductions is not transparent and workers are blamed for mistakes even if bags are damaged after leaving the production line. As one worker explained, she was told she would receive a

[45] Personal communication with an administrative office in Thai Cement Factory, February 2024.
[46] INT76KPT (cement packer, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.

bonus if she produced a certain number of bags, but it was unclear to her why deductions were made.

> I don't know why my wage was deducted. The bags are cut by the machine, but the male leader is the one who runs the machine. When the bags come out of the machine, I and three other female workers check them. If I received a low salary for the month, I asked my team leader to find out what had been deducted from my salary because I didn't know. He always helped. The office didn't say much; they just said I made mistakes, which is why there was a deduction.[47]

As these examples show, incentives are used in ways that are gendered and lack transparency. Some female-dominated roles do not provide access to bonuses because those roles are seen as not urgent or physically demanding, while women in other female-dominated roles have deductions made, while male-dominated roles do not. Although women feel angry about such arrangements, they do not take action due to the difficulty of finding other work that allows them to meet society's expectations of them as women. As one worker explained, 'I wanted to quit. I wanted to change jobs. But if I quit my job here, it would not be easy to find a job elsewhere because it would be far from my house and my children. So, we just have to endure it.'[48]

Organisational Tolerance and Accountability

Across the three factories, there is little discussion – let alone action – against incidents of workplace GBVH. When asked about their understanding of GBVH, managers, supervisors and team leaders either admitted they were unsure of its meaning or tentatively mentioned incidents of inappropriate touching targeting women but also situations in which women had been assigned physically demanding tasks. In the Khmer Cement Factory, management representatives said that maintaining authority within the factory, such as by having CCTV and security guards or military police to keep situations under control, was the best way to prevent criminal acts, including GBVH. In the Thai Cement Factory, management believes that preventing GBVH at work involved ensuring

[47] INT101KPT (quality control, Chinese Cement Factory), July 2022.
[48] INT101KPT (quality control, Chinese Cement Factory), July 2022.

that women are treated 'fairly' by assigning them to lighter tasks. [49] By contrast, management at the Chinese Cement Factory had no sense of what GBVH means or how to prevent it.

Given management's lack of understanding of the issue, it is not surprising that there are no specific policies, procedures or training sessions provided in any of the three cement factories to handle GBVH. In fact, the only procedures in place are the standard grievance handling procedures, where the administrative office has the authority to issue first, second, and third warnings, leading to contract termination if misconduct persists, as indicated in the Thai Cement Factory's internal regulations. [50] It is not surprising, either, that none of the human resources officers interviewed could identify any cases of GBVH that had occurred in their factory.

While management claimed to have no knowledge of GBVH cases, trade union leaders in all three factories said that they had experience dealing with at least some GBVH incidents. For example, in the Thai Cement Factory, there was a case where a female union member had been spied on by a male co-worker while she was using the toilet. As soon as the victim realised someone was watching her, she left and called a female union leader. The union leader advised her to speak to her team leader, who managed about ten people at the time. The union leader was not involved in the subsequent discussion but was later informed that the case had been settled. The perpetrator paid compensation and was dismissed two or three weeks after the incident.[51] In the Chinese Cement Factory, a male trade union leader involved local authorities in a GBVH case where a Chinese supervisor harassed a cleaner. He explained:

> The cleaners only clean the offices when the bosses are not there. But one day, this cleaner went to clean the office, and a staff member entered the room. He saw the cleaner and offered her money to have sex with him. When the cleaner refused, he tried to grab her. She screamed and tried to hit him with her broom. She ran out of the room and called me.

[49] MGT13KPT (human resource and administrative officers, Thai Cement Factory), March 2023.
[50] The Thai Garment Factory, Internal Regulations Article 10, registered with the Ministry of Labour in December 2015.
[51] INT73KPT (trade union leader, Thai Cement Factory), June 2022.

> We have military police at the factory 24 hours a day, so I contacted them. They went to resolve the case with the administration manager … there is no CCTV in the office room.

The victim told the union leader that she felt it would be difficult to continue working at the factory if other workers knew what had happened to her, so she did not want to make the case public. After a brief process of conciliation, she was paid around USD 2,000. She continued to work at the factory, as did the perpetrator. When I asked why the perpetrator was not terminated, the official responded, 'This Chinese company always takes sides with their people, and the perpetrator said it was just a joke.'

A similar incident occurred in the Khmer Cement Factory. A worker who is employed as a gardener recalled hearing about a young female worker who experienced GBVH while working in the karaoke lounge. A Chinese supervisor got drunk, touched the young worker's hand and asked her to have sex with him. When the young worker rejected his request, the supervisor grabbed her. The incident, which had been captured on CCTV, was reported to a union leader. The woman who described this incident to me did not specify which leader the matter was reported to or know what the resolution was; the only thing that she knew was that 'she already resigned and a new young worker came to work here.'[52] This outcome raises doubts about the effectiveness of CCTV as a preventive mechanism to protect workers, as well as about the seriousness with which management regards GBVH.

When I asked workers about their perceptions of how management uses CCTV to understand whether it helps eliminate GBVH incidents, they said that the location of the CCTV cameras does not benefit them or protect them from GBVH incidents. Rather, they claim, they are put in place to monitor their performance at work. In the Khmer Cement Factory, a female worker in the customer service section explained, 'There are no security cameras where I work; security cameras are only placed around the packing machine. They only care about how their machines work; they don't care about how truck drivers treat us.'[53] In the warehouse section, a female worker explained, 'There are

[52] INT75KPT (gardener, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[53] INT55KPT (customer service, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.

CCTV cameras, but they can only see what happens in front of the warehouse.'[54] A female worker employed in the Thai Cement Factory said: 'We can only get overtime if we work hard. Our team leaders know who works hard and who doesn't because CCTV cameras are placed around where we work.'[55] Another also expressed doubt that CCTV can help reduce GBVH incidents, as she explained. 'The CCTV cameras are placed far up there … I'm not sure whether they can capture those activities. We can't access the cameras to see what is there, but there is a person in charge of monitoring them … They're the ones who know which parts of the area can be captured by the cameras and which parts can't.'[56]

In the Chinese Cement Factory, CCTV cameras are used overtly to monitor workers' behaviour as a means of disciplining them. As a female cleaner who works along the production line explained:

> Cameras are everywhere, even along our sidewalks. Inside the workplace, there are also cameras … There was a case where a worker was asleep during working hours, and they checked the camera footage and posted the worker's picture on the workers' information board. After seeing that picture, workers were scared of being caught … Also, in cases of theft, if workers steal something from the factory, their pictures are posted from the footage. No more stealing ever happens.[57]

The placement of CCTV cameras in all three factories clearly identifies management's organisational priorities. While senior staff claim that it has a role in preventing workplace GBVH, it is clear from these examples that their primary purposes are to safeguard company property and discourage behaviours that negatively affect production, not to create an environment where workers feel that their safety is prioritised and protected. As a result, their presence does not foster trust among workers that the factories will address their issues, including GBVH incidents.

[54] INT88KPT (warehouse, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022.
[55] INT1KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), January 2022.
[56] INT49KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.
[57] INT96KPT (cleaner, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

Workers' doubts about management's intentions are exacerbated by the fact that action is seldom taken when incidents do occur. Consequently, workers seldom report GBVH incidents to higher levels of management. Instead, these incidents mostly end up in conciliation between the victim and the perpetrator, facilitated by team leaders, supervisors, or factory-level trade union leaders. There are a number of reasons for this outcome. Firstly, victims of sexual violence fear that confidentiality may not be maintained, and that they will experience reputational damage as a result. Second, victims believe that the standard grievance handling procedures – the procedures used if a case is reported – will not protect them. They worry about the risk of retaliation from the perpetrators, since most of the cases reported just resulted in perpetrators receiving a warning letter. Third, if the issue remains unresolved, it may be escalated to a higher level outside the factory, potentially involving legal proceedings. Pursuing legal action can be a protracted and financially draining process, which is particularly challenging in Cambodia's context, where workers live from pay-check to pay-check.[58] Additionally, trade unions often lack the necessary funds to support victims in pursuing judicial proceedings. In short, if victims report GBVH cases, the process can entail significant personal and financial consequences, which may deter workers from seeking redress.

Conclusion

In this Chapter, I have assessed the relationships between workplace cultures and women's experiences across the three cement factories. I have presented evidence that suggests a clear link between women's experiences of violence and harassment at work, social norms and the way power is exercised, particularly through multiple subcontractors where women are at the bottom of the hierarchical structure with many layers of supervision. Sexualised joking that is used to increase energy levels, along with the consequences of having a conflict at work, are all ways of controlling labour on the

[58] It is important to note here that Cambodia's legal system comprises three levels of courts, and there is no specified timeframe for case resolution. Furthermore, the court system is notorious for its corruption and unreliable decision-making.

production floor. These tendencies are reinforced by the incentive structures in place in the factories, which penalise women.

In these environments, the tolerance of inappropriate behaviour and the absence of clear policies to address GBVH create a culture where violence and harassment incidents are often overlooked, inadequately addressed or selectively implemented. This culture of unaccountability not only undermines the potential for justice but also perpetuates an environment where workers, particularly women, feel unsupported and vulnerable. For women workers, these workplace cultures mean navigating a challenging and often hostile environment, coupled with the lack of institutional support, which can lead to feelings of isolation, discomfort, and disempowerment. This workplace culture not only affects their mental and emotional well-being but also impacts their overall job satisfaction.

Workplace culture, along with the organisation of work, has a very real impact on women's experiences in the workplace, including their experiences of GBVH. The following chapter demonstrates these connections by examining the stories of six female workers who experienced sexualised or non-sexualised forms of GBVH in the workplace. As these stories demonstrate, most incidents do not occur in isolation but rather are made possible by the contexts in which these women work.

Chapter Eight

GBVH in the Cement Factories

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of female workers who have experienced or witnessed various forms of GBVH in the male-dominated cement factories. As in the garment sector, these behaviours, both non-sexual and sexual, have been normalised as part of the workplace culture, influenced by the designs and execution of work in a gender-unequal society. Building on the discussions from Chapter Six, which explored the organisation of work in the cement factories, and Chapter Seven, which analysed workplace cultures, this chapter illustrates how these factors impact six female workers' experiences of GBVH. These stories demonstrate that incidents of GBVH occur as a direct result of how work is organised within specific workplace cultures that normalise such behaviours. Victims and bystanders are often compelled to remain silent, as the entrenched norms surrounding the organisation of work and workplace culture make reporting these incidents seem impossible or irrelevant. In the cases where the GBVH incidents are actually reported, the resolution often places an extra burden on the victims rather than providing a sustainable solution where women can feel safer at work.

Non-Sexual Forms of GBVH

Non-sexual GBVH, in the form of physical and/or psychological violence, is increasingly recognised as an issue in Cambodia's garment factories. However, its presence in the cement factories goes largely unnoticed.[1] The female cement workers I interviewed had

[1] In the construction sector, where the majority of workers are men, women in other countries also experience sexual harassment (Buchanan et al. 2014) and other unpleasant behaviours targeting them because of their gender (McDonald, Charlesworth, and Graham 2015). Women suffer from intimidation and humiliation, and their performance is constantly scrutinised to make them feel they do not belong in a male-dominated sector (French and Strachan 2018)

experienced various forms of insulting, physical and psychological violence. Psychological violence varies, including the pressure to reach production targets. For example, in one factory, women engaged in detailed work faced high production demands, making mistakes likely due to the intense focus on quality checks. Women also feel psychologically unsafe in their work environments, which are characterised by intimidating conditions such as steep stairs, poor lighting, loud noise, dirty and dusty surroundings. One alarming case of physical violence involved a woman who was nearly killed by a truck driver who attempted to run her over.

As noted in Chapter Seven incidents of workplace GBVH often go unreported despite the persistence of these kinds of abusive behaviours. Even though women recognise that such behaviours make them feel uncomfortable or unsafe at work, many victims and bystanders perceive non-sexual forms of GBVH as insufficiently serious to warrant reporting. Instead, these incidents are frequently framed as personal failures on the part of the victim, who struggles to meet expectations in a male-dominated workplace. Consequently, victims often blame themselves rather than questioning the assignment of tasks, other aspects of the organisation of work, or the culture of the workplace. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that women feel pressured to endure verbal abuse and unequal treatment while remaining silent due to their need to support their families and the benefits of working close to home.

The following three stories reveal how these dynamics unfold on the production floors of each of the cement factories, illustrating how the organisation of work and workplace culture contribute to a stressful and unsafe atmosphere at work for women. Sreymom's experience at the Thai Cement Factory reveals physical violence may occur as a consequence of the pressure to conform to expectations that women work 'like a man'. Thida witnessed the psychological violence perpetrated against her female co-worker by a male truck driver and cement loader at the Khmer Cement factory, while Sreay Na's story reveals the links between the pressure women suffer when striving to achieve unrealistic production targets on the bag production line in the Chinese Cement factory and the verbal abuse employed almost daily if they fail to reach those production targets.

Sreymom's story – The Thai Cement Factory

At the time of my fieldwork, Sreymom was 37 years old, married with children and a union member. She had worked as a cleaner for a subcontractor in the Thai Cement Factory for seven years. She had gone through a rigorous recruitment process to get the job: of 50 female applicants, only 15 were selected. Although she worked as a cleaner – a role deemed by both the subcontractor and the factory to be unskilled labour – she had to go through the three-month probationary period.[2] She joined the union after passing her probation.[3]

Following factory practice, Sreymom had to go through a security screening to ensure that she wore proper PPE. Sreymom then worked an eight-hour day from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm, with a one-hour lunch break from 12:00 pm to 1:00 pm, during which she ate her packed lunch from home and rested in a break room waiting to resume work. Although the weather was hot, Sreymom wore multiple layers of clothes to protect her body from heat, dust and oil, and carried a towel with her to cover her body while taking a nap in a break room shared with male workers and a male team leader. Sreymom also had to use the same toilets as men, where she described it as 'hard', although the toilet was well-lit and properly enclosed.

Sreymom took her work seriously, doing whatever her Khmer male team leader told her to do, even if it was unsafe, because she desperately needed the job to raise her children and the convenience of working at a factory located in her village so that she could go to work and look after her children. For a long time, Sreymom found the work difficult because she had to clean the machines while they were still running. She thought

[2] Article 68 of the Cambodian Labour Law states that 'A contract for a probationary period cannot be for longer than the amount of time needed for the employer to judge the professional worth of the worker and for the worker to know concretely the working conditions provided. However, the probationary period cannot last longer than three months for regular employees, two months for specialised workers and one month for non-specialised workers.'

[3] As a common practice, a union official told me that the union did not recruit members when they were still on probation because it would create a potential risk of termination by the employer, who might claim that workers did not meet performance standards as an excuse to prevent them from joining the union. Moreover, union officials were unsure whether workers would continue their employment after the probationary period, so they chose to wait and see whether it was worth investing their time and effort in those workers.

that if she refused, her leader would tell her to 'go and sleep at home', which she interpreted to mean her job would be terminated. When I interviewed her, she had recently attended a safety training session, where she was informed that she could refuse to perform work that she considered risky. Sreymom told me that her leader had not informed her of this; however, she said that she was unlikely to reject an instruction even if she felt unsafe because she was worried that doing so would make it hard for her to work with her leader. As Sreymom explained, 'I know that those who protest aren't liked by the leader and don't get any overtime.'

In addition to trying to fulfil her leader's and general expectations at work, Sreymom also had to meet a set of more general expectations associated with working in a male-dominated workforce. Sreymom said, 'Working here, we need to be strong, otherwise men would say we're exploiting their labour [i.e. free riding on men's efforts]. We need to work like them.' She recalled an incident that occurred in 2015, shortly after she began working at the factory. A physical fight occurred between two female cleaners. Sreymom described the incident as follows:

> She carried big loads. While working with her shovel, she used one of her legs to push the rocks. Just like a man! Another one worked like a woman, slow and lazy. The hardworking woman said to the lazy woman, 'You're half-hearted! You only have half a heart!' … These kinds of interactions were common between them and led to a hostile relationship. Then, one day, the hard-working woman threw a pack of cake at the lazy woman. A physical fight was ready to break out, but I intervened because they could both lose their jobs. The following day, the lazy woman worked as hard as a man.

When I questioned Sreymom about how she felt about the situation, she felt that the first woman had been justified in her criticism. Speaking with pride, she said, 'Working here, we all need to work like men. Otherwise, we will get a reputation of being a half-heart.' This statement provides some critical insights. Literature has informed us that in the construction sector, as a male-dominated workforce, interactions are constructed to protect and impress that identity.

Scholars like Ness (2012) found that men behave with anger and hostility toward women and weaker men – including telling women or weaker men that they are incapable

of performing real men's work (i.e., heavy loads) – in order to maintain and reaffirm masculine identity and dominance. This case provides further evidence of the extent to which women are pushed to shift their gender identification in order to blend in with the masculine culture of the cement factories. At the same time, it offers a valuable counter example to this analysis since the pressure to conform to 'male' work practices was exerted by another female worker rather than a male co-worker or supervisor. In this case, the hard-working woman acted as an agent, not only maintaining a male work style but also policing the behaviour of her co-worker. Significantly, Sreymom herself agreed with this approach.

When asked whether the incident was reported either to the union or her team leader, Sreymom exclaimed, 'No!' due to the fear that both of her co-female workers would face a serious consequence of losing their jobs, because in this factory, workers were prohibited from engaging in conflict. As Sreymom went on to note, 'I didn't want other people to know that they were fighting because they could both lose their jobs. Our group leader says that one person can't start a fight. At this work, we are not allowed to get into conflict of any kind. So, we didn't tell anyone, not even the group leader or our union rep.'

Thida's story – The Khmer Cement Factory

When I met Thida, she was 19 years old and single, and lived near the factory with her parents.[4] She had been working at the cement plant for about a year in the packing division, accepting cement orders from truck drivers. Thida explained that she needed a high school certificate in order to be able to apply for her position. But, unlike Sreymom, who had to go through quite a formal recruitment process even to be employed as a cleaner, Thida explained that her high school certificate was enough for her to get the position.

Thida was required to wear a full uniform supplied by her Chinese subcontractor, but she did not have to go through the security process at the factory's main gate. She worked eight hours a day on rotating shifts, from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm (1st shift), 4:00 pm

[4] INT83KPT (sales, Khmer Cement Factory), June 2022

to 12:00 am (2nd shift), and 12:00 am to 8:00 am (3rd shift). Of the three shifts, the third shift was the busiest since many truck drivers travelled from different parts of the country to transport the cement products. Her shifts rotated every three days, and she had four days off every month. Since Thida worked with another woman each shift, she found it difficult to take any extended periods of leave, knowing that her colleague would have to work alone. Her mother and uncle worked at the same factory as cement packing workers. Thida informed me that, although she worked at the same factory, she had never had the opportunity to work directly with them due to their different shift arrangements.

Thida's work was not particularly difficult or physically demanding, though it did require attention to detail. She was tasked with examining the cement orders, using the invoice to confirm that she gave customers exactly what they had purchased. As part of this work, Thida had to use a computer to check vehicle plate numbers and, after checking all the relevant documentation, communicate with cement packers about the number of cement bags that needed to be packed. If she made a mistake and overfilled an order, the amount owed would be deducted from her wages. If the mistake was really serious, she could be fired.

Thida's division consisted of three teams. Another worker in her team told me in a separate interview that the section would not hire mixed teams for this role for a variety of reasons. First of all, they said that working with a woman would make men uncomfortable, and vice versa. Second, the woman's spouse would be jealous if his wife worked with another man. Third, conflict would likely occur between male workers and the truck drivers, slowing down the entire purchasing process. As a result, the Chinese supervisor decided to only hire women for the section. The women on the team thought it was a reasonable decision since women understood each other better. The job required them to sit very close together, and they could sleep next to each other at night when not many trucks were coming in the single bed provided.

Although she worked in a female-dominated team, Thida's job required her to deal with many men. As noted in the previous chapter, many of the truck drivers travelled long distances to pick up the cement, and sometimes, while they were waiting for their turn to load cement products, they consumed alcohol. This practice made it hard for

Thida and her female co-worker, as one of them had to come to knock on the window of the truck when the driver got drunk in their truck, missed their turn, or did not remember their queue number. Thida said the situation was worse if that happened during the night, as some of the trucks were parked away from the light, and she felt scared when she had to knock on their windows. As she explained, 'I have to protect myself by bringing walkie-talkie and my phone with me when I go to wake them up just, in case something bad happens.'

Truck drivers often made comments about her appearance, asking for her mobile phone number and whether she had a husband or not yet, or even touching her hands when she handed them documents related to their cement orders. Thida also mentioned that it was common for truck drivers to be anxious about loading the correct cement orders since they would be held responsible if any cement bags were missing. Therefore, they often asked Thida to check her system again and again. If the cement bags were missing, they would show their frustration. When the number of bags was correct, however, they said nothing.

Thida also had to deal with male cement loaders who added another layer of pressure on her when performing her work. The cement loaders worked for a subcontractor and were paid according to the number of cement bags they had loaded onto the truck. They had to move from one truck to another to be able to get paid by the subcontractor. If, for some reason, the number of cement bags was overloaded, the cement loader had to remove the excess amount from the truck. Such delays affected their work on the next truck. In these instances, they blamed Thida for not doing her job well. Like the truck drivers, they did not recognise her work in any way when things went smoothly. Thida had never spoken to the cement loaders about this, but it affected how she felt about her work.

When speaking to me about her experiences of working with men, Thida recalled an incident when her female co-worker was attacked by a truck driver during peak season when the cement products were on sale. As Thida explained:

> When truck drivers arrive, we direct them to a queue and assign them a queue number for their turn to load cement materials. On that particular day, one truck driver arrived first, but

> he was asleep in his truck, in the queue, so the next driver stole his place. The first driver became enraged and yelled at the second driver to move his vehicle. But the second driver refused. The first driver came over and yelled at my co-worker. I saw him yelling at her.

Thida's co-worker was scared. The situation was tense, and she was surrounded by truck drivers. Thida herself did not feel afraid: 'We have a security camera at work, and there were a lot of truck drivers. Also, my male supervisor said that any truck driver who dared to attack us would face consequences.' Armed with this knowledge, she intervened: 'I talked to the second driver about moving his truck. He refused to move it and said he didn't care! He only moved it after my supervisor stepped in. After work, my co-worker was chased by the second truck driver. He tried to run her over with his truck!'

Thida's supervisor advised her co-worker that she should have taken note of the truck's plate number so that she could file a complaint. Thida doubted that doing so would be of any use but remained silent. Thida told me that sometimes one truck was driven by many different drivers as some of the trucks were sent to pick up their cement products, and they had many drivers. I asked Thida if the incident would have played out differently if her co-worker had been a man. Thida said that it probably would have been more serious because the drunk truck driver would not have tolerated a male worker's attempts to bring the situation under control, and a physical fight would have likely ensued. When I asked whether her co-worker's experience made her feel uncomfortable, Thida answered, 'It made me worried about my own safety. I was worried that I would face a similar situation.' Since Thida was a union member, I asked her whether the male union president was aware of this case; she reported that she did not inform him because she did not know him well enough and was worried that he might ask her questions that she could not answer.

Thida's experience reveals some important dynamics in her male-dominated workplace. First, the unsafe environment, triggered by the lack of rules about alcohol consumption onsite, made Thida feel uneasy at work, adding more burden to her work. This feeling of unease was exacerbated by demands on her to manage packers' and truck drivers' feelings when ensuring the correct number of cement products were loaded onto the trucks. Doing so was very important, as her wages would have been docked if the

quantities were wrong. Second, the advice from her Chinese supervisor indicated a lack of institutional support, placing the burden on the victim to note the truck plate number, and failing to do so was seen as the victim's failure rather than the failure of the factory to understand the root cause of the violence. These day-to-day violations targeted women and were strongly embedded in the male working culture, creating an environment where women felt unsafe at work.

Sreay Na's story – The Chinese Cement Factory

Sreay Na was the youngest woman amongst my informants.[5] She was 18 years old and single and had been working in the bag production division at the Chinese Cement factory for about two years when I interviewed her. She had previously worked for a subcontractor and had only recently been hired directly by the company. Sreay Na got her job because her aunt, who also worked there, knew the subcontractor. Sreay Na had decided to leave school because her family lived in poverty. She believed that working close to home would allow her to save the money she earned. When the subcontractor recruited her, she was asked whether she could handle the three shift rotations. On her first day on the job, Sreay Na was told three things: what her work schedule would be, that she was not allowed to have any conflicts with her co-workers, and that she should not join a union.

Sreay Na worked three rotating shifts: the first from 7:00 am to 3:00 pm, the second from 3:00 pm to 11:00 pm, and the third from 11:00 pm to 7:00 am. When I asked her how she felt about working this type of schedule, she said that the morning and afternoon shifts did not bother her, but the night shift was difficult because she had trouble staying awake. The afternoon and evening shifts presented another problem, however. The factory did not provide workers with accommodation unless they lived a long distance from the factory. Since Sreay Na lived close, she did not have access to employer-provided accommodation, which meant she had to travel to work or return home late at night. Along with another female team member whom I interviewed separately, Sreay Na raised concerns about not having allocated time to eat her meals, since workers had to

[5] INT91KPT (bag quality controller, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

coordinate among their teammates and return to work as soon as they had finished eating. Sreay Na said, ‘My stomach felt bad when I didn’t allow time to digest my food properly.’ Sometimes, she had to wait until she got home to eat her meals. Sreay Na also mentioned that the toilets often had no water.

Sreay Na’s team consisted of five members: three female co-workers, one male co-worker, and a male team leader. The women workers were responsible for inspecting the quality of the cement bags while their male co-worker transferred the bags to the warehouse. Her male team leader operated the bag-making machine. In her eight-hour shift, Sreay Na and her team produced around 30,000 bags, meaning in one minute, she and two other female workers were required to inspect 20 bags. Sreay Na and her female co-workers inspected each bag that came out of the machine in piles of ten bags at a time to ensure that they were all of good quality, with the correct colour, print, size, and glue attachment to ensure that the bags could hold cement powder. They had to flip through all ten bags at the same time, then placed the non-defective bags on the side in a pile and then placed them on a trolley. Once around 4,000 bags were piled on a trolley Sreay Na’s male co-worker then transported them to the warehouse. The defective bags were dropped alongside Sreay Na. This meant there was a mess since there was little time to deal with defective bags, and sometimes Sreay Na tripped on them.

Checking the quality of the bags required Sreay Na and her two other female co-workers to stand up all shift, and if Sreay Na decided to eat her meal, it would put pressure on her other two female workers to finish very quickly, as the machine did not stop. Their male co-workers worked under different conditions. Her male team leader operated a bag-making machine – a role only available to men – and could enjoy more break time. As Sreay Na explained, ‘The team leader only connects the bags, and it’s the machine that pulls the bags out. When he is free, he doesn’t come to help us; he just takes a seat and relaxes. Sometimes, he comes and jokes with us, but he doesn’t do anything to help.’ Her male co-worker also had access to better working conditions, as he could move around when transferring the bags from the production section to the warehouse. And since he did not have to work very closely with the bag-making machines, he had some flexibility in terms of his movement, as well as when taking breaks.

A deduction was made from the team's wages if they did not check the bags properly. For example, there could be a situation where each of her team members had USD 5 or USD 8 deducted a month if there were a number of bags that customers reported as being faulty. Sreay Na said that she felt that these deductions were unfair. She also resented the way that her Chinese supervisor talked about the bags. Teams in the bagging section were required to attend daily sessions when their supervisor discussed any issues with production. As Sreay Na described it, 'The meetings usually take around 15 minutes and are held after working hours. We have to stand in lines and the supervisor strolls between us, lecturing us on the bags. He says something like, 'Don't you have ears, eyes, or a brain? Why are the bags so damaged? I hate hearing all these comments, but you know … he's the boss.'

Like many of her co-workers, Sreay Na was really upset by these daily meetings because she felt that the meetings were targeting her team. In fact, she was so upset that she had trouble leaving her feelings at work. Aware that she sometimes took her frustration out on her younger siblings, she had told them to avoid her when she got home. Sreay Na commented that the factory wanted her to work at a high volume while ensuring that all the bags, which did not seem to stop coming out of the machines, were of good quality. This meant she and her two other female co-workers had to keep their eyes on the machines all the time. These conditions did not apply to her male co-worker, whose job did not require him to be this vigilant, while women were selectively recruited to perform such tasks.

When I asked her whether she had ever protested about this, Sreay Na told me there was no point in protesting: 'Even if we protested, things would remain the same.' When I asked about other workers' reactions to feedback from the supervisor, Sreay Na said that many workers were unhappy with the comments, and some even attempted to respond. When they did, the supervisor cut them off, and the meeting dragged on and on. Sreay Na noticed that no female employees ever responded to the supervisor's comments. Instead, they remained silent. According to Sreay Na, 'We women choose not to answer because we want the meeting to end as soon as possible so that we can go home.'

Women's experiences of verbal abuse are not limited to these daily meetings. For example, Sreay Na recounted an incident in which a female co-worker was yelled at for eating her lunch during work hours, even though male workers could eat while waiting for the trolleys to be loaded. When I inquired if male workers ever get shouted at, Sreay Na responded, 'No … male workers are powerful, and they have loud voices. They wouldn't let this kind of thing happen to them. But female workers prefer to remain quiet.'

Sexual Forms of GBVH

My interview data suggests that women working in the cement factories suffer from a range of acts of sexual violence and harassment, including being required to have physical contact with men while performing their roles, being watched while using the toilet, or being pressured into having sex. Despite the persistence of these abusive behaviours, women as victims and bystanders do not know what to do. Many victims worry about their reputation, especially when they work in their village, where everyone knows who they are. Others want to pursue some kind of redress but do not know who to talk to or what process to follow. When incidents are raised with supervisors, or even unionists, they are frequently framed as unrelated to subcontractors or even the factories, leaving women feeling that they are the ones who need to look after themselves.

The following three stories illustrate how these practices unfold in women's experiences of sexual forms of GBVH on the production floor. Pha's experience reveals a link between a lack of separation and privacy between male and female toilets and incidents of sexualised GBVH. As discussed in Chapter Six, the Thai Cement Factory's toilets are poorly maintained. Some even have holes in the walls, which means that women workers can be watched while using the facilities. When I asked women about this arrangement, they mostly reported that since they started working in cement factories, the toilets have always been arranged this way. Phava's case, meanwhile, underscores management's failure to deal adequately with cases of sexual harassment, in this case, transferring the victim to a different section while the perpetrator remained employed. Meanwhile, Ranora's case illustrates how established workplace procedures –

in this case, the requirement that women train newly recruited workers on the job – leads to situations where women are exposed to unwanted physical contact.

Pha's story – The Thai Cement Factory

Pha and I met during her lunch break.[6] She arrived on her bicycle, a common mode of transportation for workers, especially during their lunch breaks. She was wearing her work uniform, which bore the name of the subcontractor that employed her in large print. When we met, Pha was in her late 30s and had been a cleaner at the cement mill for seven years. Pha did not mention how she got her job. However, she did say that poverty and the proximity of the factory to her home were the primary motivators she sought employment there.

Pha's subcontractor employed 34 cleaners, among whom 14 were women. Female cleaners were only employed for the day shift, while male workers were mainly assigned to work around the clock, including night shifts, where they were responsible for monitoring how machines ran. Each morning, the cleaners assembled to receive instructions from factory staff or their subcontractor, detailing where they needed to work and how many people were assigned to each area. This information changed daily due to the unpredictable nature of the manufacturing process. By contrast, male workers who operated the machines went directly to their workstations without needing a morning briefing. Pha had to wear a 3M mask and earplugs when working in loud work environments, such as when cleaning machines where other machines, which produced a lot of noise, were running. There was a safety officer as well who was tasked to make sure that all workers performed their work safely, and workers could reject the task if they thought it was unsafe to perform, such as where there was no safety guard.

Cleaners usually formed teams of four or five people if they were assigned to clean the production floor or teams of two if they were assigned to clean machinery. The cleaners used a strong-smelling oil cleanser to clean the machines. When cleaning the production floor, one person shovelled the dust into buckets, while the others carried the buckets, each containing around 12 kilograms of cement dust, to be put back into the

[6] INT48KPT (cleaner, Thai Cement Factory), March 2022.

cement production line. During this process, their entire bodies became covered in cement or coal dust. The cleaners often made fun of each other, jokingly saying things like, 'You look like a buffalo.'

When asked about her general working conditions, Pha stated that she did not find her work so difficult now, compared to when she first started:

> I've become used to these working conditions. My work section has a reputation for being the dustiest section of the entire production line. The machines are massive, and they generate a lot of noise and dust as they crush stones for the cement powder … I know I have to wear a face mask to protect myself from cement dust, and I have to wear earplugs while cleaning the machine. I also know that I can't clean a running machine because it's unsafe.

Pha's response astounded me. It was peppered with English-language terms like earplugs, clear (clearing away the cement dust), cement mill, run (when the machine is turned on), and AM (autonomous maintenance). She was also clearly familiar with basic safety precautions, such as the importance of using PPE provided by the factory and the subcontractor. She could also take a break if she felt tired, not too long. The factory also provided a break room where all cleaners could rest and eat their lunches.

When I asked about other facilities, Pha complained about the toilets. As she explained, since she began work in 2015, the toilets had been arranged the same way. She said that, since her first day at work, women had been forced to share with the men: 'Men only use the toilets when they need to shit. They are so dirty after the men have used them because they don't flush them properly … They even smoke in the toilet. The smell of the cigarettes and their poop is so bad that I can't use the toilet right after them. I need to flush water into the toilet and splash it around the entire cubicle before I can use it … It's disgusting.' Pha also recalled an incident when a female worker was spied upon by a peeping tom while using the facilities. There was a hole in the wall, and the male co-worker watched the woman as she used the toilet. The woman looked around, caught the man's eye, and threw a large amount of water at him. Pha did not know what would happen next; she had just heard people talk about it. But since then, she has always worried when using the toilet.

Pha's worst fears were realised when her own niece experienced a similar incident while at work:

> My niece was single at the time. She worked as a safety officer at the factory. A truck driver watched her through a hole when she was using the toilet. She was terrified, and almost fainted when she saw what happened but made a quick exit. She had recognised the truck driver and confronted him. He kept saying he didn't do it; he didn't do it. Then he said he would go to a holy site with my niece and vow before God that he didn't do it. But he didn't follow through.

Pha's niece did not inform her supervisor or the union about what had happened. She chose instead to speak with that perpetrator directly because she was concerned that, if she made the situation known, the man would be fired by his employer. She was also concerned about protecting her reputation. Because she remained silent, she had to keep working with that man for around three months, at which time he was fired from the factory for stealing goods. Pha's niece told her that she was humiliated about what happened, saying, 'Aunty, I feel so embarrassed. I am a virgin; I am not sure whether the man saw my [vagina] or not while I was using the toilet.'[7]

As discussed in Chapter Two, Khmer women are trained to guard their femininity, and discussion of their bodies and sex-related topics is discouraged (Hoefinger 2011). Unlike men, women are expected to maintain their virginity before marriage for the sake of their family's reputation, as their prospective husbands must pay a significant amount of money for a wedding to take place. If the girl engages in sexual relations with a man before marriage or part of her body is seen (particularly her private parts), the family considers it a lost asset. With these considerations in mind, Pha's niece decided not to talk about the matter to the factory or even her parents. Instead, she bore the weight of having to work with that perpetrator and carried the doubt of how much of her body he

[7] Squat toilets typically consist of a ceramic pan set into the floor. The pan has a hole in the centre and raised footrests on either side. To use a squat toilet, you place your feet on the footrests and squat down over the hole. Many squat toilets in factories are equipped with a manual flushing system. This can be a bucket of water with a scoop or a hose to rinse the pan after use. There is no toilet paper. Most toilets are provided with a small bin without a lip.

had seen. To her, having a 'clean record' meant enough that she felt forced to keep the matter secret.[8]

After this incident, Pha's niece could not sleep. Pha was heartbroken, but she did not know what to do. When I asked whether her niece had asked her to do anything about it, she said, 'She just wanted to close the case. She wanted no one to hear as that man was still working with her, and it was hard for her to resolve the case as the man kept saying that it was not him.' Pha stayed silent but exercised even more caution, inspecting the toilet and its surroundings each time before using it. Notably, also, she and her niece did not see the way in which toilets were arranged as making such incidents more likely, though they were cognisant of, and worried about, the lack of confidentiality in terms of victim protection if they reported the case.

Phava's story – The Khmer Cement Factory

Phava was 21 years old when I met her.[9] She had been working for the cement factory for roughly two years. Phava did not mention how she got her job, but she did say that her motivation for working was that her family could not afford to pay for her further schooling, and she had a five-year-old sibling to provide for. Phava's job required her to assess the quality of the sample materials used in cement production. Each hour, she had to go to the raw material storage areas to collect samples, which she then brought to the lab for examination. The samples were taken from various locations in the factory complex and further afield. For example, workers must climb up to retrieve a coal sample for testing, while some samples had to be collected from a nearby mountain range, and Phava would have to ride a bicycle to collect them.

Phava spent eight hours each day working with the other three female team members. When assigned to the first shift, she began at 7:30 am and concluded at 3:30 pm. The second shift began at 3:30 pm and ended at 11:30 pm, and the third shift began at 11:30 pm and finished at 7:30 am the next morning. Each shift had a Chinese team

[8] This story suggests that there is a high level of under-reporting of sexual violence, especially when it involves unmarried women. However, married women, also want to keep incidents secret for the protection of their family's reputation, particularly if they have a daughter.
[9] INT52KPT (lab technician, Khmer Cement Factory), March 2022.

leader, who was sometimes male and sometimes female. There was no set break time during the eight-hour shift, but workers could take a break for food after confirming the quality of the sample each hour. Workers in this section got four days off each month, which they could take in consultation with other members of their team.

Phava's working environment was one where sexual harassment was a common occurrence. She had frequently witnessed her male Chinese leaders discussing the purchase of sex from Khmer women. Phava could understand a little Chinese and often heard them discussing how much it would cost – concluding that as long as they paid for the sex, it was fine. They also said that all Khmer women were the same, especially those working in the laboratory section. Phava recounted one occasion where a recording had been made of a female worker having sex with a male Chinese team leader, which had been shared with male Khmer team leaders. According to the rumours circulating through the factory, the woman worked in the laboratory section.

One of the Khmer male team leaders showed Phava the film and asked if she knew the girl. According to this man, the video was leaked after the girl refused to have sex with the Chinese group leader again. Phava was enraged when she heard this, but she was wary of approaching Chinese leaders to complain. Additionally, when she visited other sections to collect samples, different Chinese leaders would ask her, using Google Translate to communicate, how much she would charge to sleep with them. One offered to pay her around USD 100 for sex. Phava was left speechless by his enquiry. She glared at him and left. From that time, she was afraid of the Chinese leaders and did her best to avoid contact with them.

Despite her best efforts, Phava was subsequently pressured by a female Chinese group leader to have sex with a Chinese male group leader from the other team. The group leader kept harassing her even after she refused. As Phava explained:

> She asked me about my personal life, whether I was engaged or married … And when I made it clear that I didn't like being asked these kinds of questions, she became angry and had me work very hard, asking me to clean this and that. When I refused, she would yell at me. I had to pretend that I couldn't understand Chinese. She was quite upset with me, and she gave me very frustrated looks. I couldn't bear it any longer, so I spoke to my Chinese supervisor using Google Translate and asked that I be transferred to another group.

When I asked if Phava's supervisor had queried her transfer request, she said: 'The supervisor was aware that my group leader was not a decent person, and she had a history of abusing her group members. He was also aware that she didn't like me … but, you know … Chinese people tend not to believe us. They trust what other Chinese people say.' Sexual violence often occurs in work environments that are highly sexualised (Gutek and Morasch 1982), and where sex is embedded in an organisational culture (Hunt et al. 2010; Carr 2020). Such behaviour is exacerbated when employers do not respond to complaints from workers, preferring to ignore the complaint or minimise its seriousness, blame victims or protect valued employees who are guilty of sexual harassment (Icenogle et al. 2002). In this case, although Phava was given a transfer, no further steps were taken against her female group leader, even though her superior was aware of her repeated behaviour, or against the male group leader who initially propositioned her.

This pervasive culture of silence and complicity not only perpetuates the cycle of abuse but also leaves victims like Phava feeling isolated and powerless. After these incidents, Phava was particularly concerned about her safety if she left the factory late at night but thought that she had little choice but to continue working to support her family. To ensure her own safety, she decided to wait until sunrise before heading home. But she had not told anyone about this experience. She feared that they would blame her for what happened, and her mother would want her to resign. She also felt too ashamed to tell anyone else that the man approached her for sex. The unsupportive workplace culture, meanwhile, left her with no option but to endure these unsafe working conditions, which potentially impact her physical and psychological well-being.

Ranora's story – The Chinese Cement Factory

Ranora was 27 years old when I met her.[10] She joined me after ending her night shift around 8:00 am. Ranora lived near the factory with her husband, who worked as a cement loader, while she worked as a cement packer. They both worked for a Khmer

[10] INT97KPT (cement packer, Chinese Cement Factory), June 2022.

subcontractor in the packing section. Ranora mentioned that she chose to work in the factory since it allowed her to live with her spouse while also earning a decent wage.

In Ranora's case, the recruitment process was completely informal. Ranora was not asked to complete any documents while working for the subcontractor. When she started, though, she had to provide a subcontractor with a large box of Carabao, an energy drink, as an inducement to give her work. She told me that she had heard that any worker who came to work for this subcontractor had to pay either USD 50 or provide a large case of Carabao if they wanted to get a job. While this meant that the process was quick and easy, it also made Ranora felt uneasy, since without a formal contract she could be summarily fired at any time.

As a daily wage worker, Ranora was paid a wage of roughly USD 8 per day, but only for the days she actually worked. To make ends meet, she almost always worked seven days a week. Often, she would rest for just eight hours on the day that her shift changed before going back to work. For example, she might start work at 8:00 am and finish at 4:00 pm but then start again at midnight. Ranora worked with three other women, though another team had both male and female workers. There were two cement packaging machines, each of which was attended by two workers. The machines had eight holes each to accommodate eight different cement bags. Workers had to ensure that each bag was correctly attached to the hole in order for the cement powder to flow in without spillage. If the bag was incorrectly placed, a cloud of cement dust engulfs the production floor. Each cement bag held 50 kilograms of cement. Each time, if a cement bag was misplaced, Ranora's nose would fill with cement dust.

Despite her relatively lowly status, Ranora was required to train new team members while also completing her own job. There was no opportunity to train them before work began, so they had to be trained while the machine was running. Ranora explained that this was difficult, not least because the noise of the machine meant that she had to remove her face mask for her voice to be heard. It was also difficult to work while instructing someone else: 'The newcomer can stand in the right position, but the trainer cannot. I always get cement dust in my face while teaching a new employee how to do the job.'

Because of the subcontractor's attitude, turnover was high: 'Sometimes a newcomer works for one or two months and then leaves.' This high turnover meant that Ranora and her workmates regularly had to train new workers. When I asked her if she had ever experienced physical touching at work, she mentioned that she was concerned about this when instructing newly recruited male workers. Quite commonly, Ranora's breasts touched a new worker's shoulder when she was showing him how to handle the work, since Ranora had to stand behind him and hold his hands with the cement bag to show him how the machine operated. Sometimes, other forms of physical contact also occurred. On one occasion, Ranora told me, a new male worker 'brushed my butt with his butt' while she was training him.

Ranora's experience of bodily contact was a consequence of the improper arrangements put in place by the subcontractor and the factory, which did not provide appropriate time, space or facilities for training. When asked about how she felt about this kind of contact, Ranora said, 'I gave my all to work; I didn't have time to think about the touching.' Elaborating, she said that she was more concerned about the cement dust than her bottom or even her breasts: 'I was so worried about the cement dust, I was trying so hard not to slip over in it.' At the same time, she was very concerned about what her husband would say if he found out. She felt that she could not tell her husband because he would be jealous and assume that she was having an affair. In fact, she worried constantly that her husband would find out that she had made physical contact with a male worker during training sessions, even if it was accidental.

It is often assumed that the presence of a woman's spouse in the workplace helps protect them from harm.[11] However, as Ranora's experience attests, this is not always the case. Ranora's husband worked downstairs, whereas she and three other female workers worked upstairs. But Ranora usually ate her lunch with her husband despite working at different workstations. Her husband also checked her phone every day after work. to find out how many people she was in contact with. He only allowed her to have five contacts, including her parents and close relatives. Ranora felt that she had to be careful whom she

[11] See Janning (2006) and Halbesleben, Wheeler, and Rossi (2012) for further discussion on spousal support for paid work.

contacted, and with whom she had contact. When I asked her whether she wanted to work in a team that had a male worker, Ranora quickly said, 'No.' Concerned about her husband's reactions, she felt more comfortable working with another female worker.

Conclusion

The narratives from these six women collectively reveal the profound impact that the organisation of work and workplace culture have on the experiences of female workers, despite working in different cement factories. These experiences are shaped by societal expectations framed through gender norms, which women must bear while also performing their paid work. These women's stories illustrate how their experiences play out on the production floors and how they encounter both non-sexual and sexual forms of GBVH.

Regarding non-sexual GBVH, the physical fight that Sreymom witnessed in the Thai Cement Factory was caused by two women trying to work as hard as their male colleagues in order to feel included in their male-dominated environment. This expectation, which was reinforced by their female colleague, highlights the gender dynamics and the struggle for acceptance in a male-dominated environment. While Sreymom's story illustrated physical injury influenced by male working culture, Thida's story about her experiences in the Khmer Cement Factory highlights the complexities and challenges of working in a male-dominated environment as a woman. The fact that Thida's team had to deal with male truck drivers and cement loaders, combined with the high stakes of their detail-oriented jobs, created a stressful atmosphere in their division. The incident when her co-worker was attacked by a truck driver underscores the safety concerns and unpredictability of her work environment. It was also clearly linked with the decision to hire only women for her section, which, while intended to reduce conflict, also reflects gender roles and social norms that put women at risk.

Sreay Na's story, meanwhile, highlights the gender disparities and challenging working conditions in the Chinese Cement Factory. The demanding work schedule, lack of accommodation for workers on night shift, and the pressure to maintain high product standards without adequate breaks create a stressful environment. The verbal abuse

during daily meetings and the unequal treatment of male and female workers further exacerbates the situation. These three stories provide a better understanding of the non-sexual GBVH incidents that contribute to the way work is organised, structured, and practised, putting women at risk and making them feel mentally and physically unsafe. Regarding sexual GBVH, Pha's niece's story of having to deal with her encounter with a peeping tom on her own while forcing herself to continue to work with the perpetrator was exacerbated by social norms that made her reluctant to pursue redress. Even when Pha herself witnessed a similar incident, she decided to do nothing.

Phava's story further reveals the impact of ineffective responses on the part of management to complaints and the normalisation of perpetrator behaviour, creating an environment where female workers feel unsafe and undervalued, even when issues of sexual GBVH are reported. Meanwhile, Ranora's experiences of unwanted physical contact highlight the impact of workplace culture and organisational arrangements on workers' well-being and job satisfaction. The informal and exploitative recruitment process, lack of formal contracts, and inadequate training facilities create a precarious work environment where workers like Ranora feel insecure and undervalued as women in the team.

As all of these cases have demonstrated, subcontractors and factory management take little or no responsibility for the fact that the organisation of work and workplace culture put workers, predominantly female workers, at risk of GBVH. Without institutional support, victims remain silent. In the rare instances where a case is reported, the victims bear the burden of working with the perpetrator and continue to feel unsafe, while the perpetrator is not held accountable for his actions. As Sreymom, Thida and Sreay Na's experiences reveal, being a union member does not guarantee better outcomes. This is partly so because victims as well as the bystanders are unsure about the complaints process and how long it will take, but also the extent to which the factory will maintain confidentiality and protect them from repercussions. They also worry about the

extent to which the trade union will support them in such cases. As a consequence, many of them, Thida included, do not go to their union.[12]

The experiences presented in this chapter demonstrate that workplace GBVH is deeply embedded in the organisational structures and culture of cement factories. The final chapter of this thesis draws together the findings to challenge dominant assumptions and call for systemic change across all levels of interaction. In doing so, it highlights the urgent need for integrated approaches that confront the root cause of workplace GBVH, rather than relying on fragmented interventions that fail to deliver meaningful protection.

[12] This is consistent with the interview I did with a male trade union president in Thida's factory. When I asked him whether he had been involved in resolving any GBVH cases, rather than answering me, he said that, while he talked about GBVH with his members, their fear and embarrassment prevented them from reporting. He believed, moreover, that their reluctance to do so was their fault: 'If you don't tell me about how bad the Chinese leader is or you don't tell your supervisor about what the leader does to you such as touching your body, it's your problem.' As this explanation suggests, the leader failed to consider how reporting procedures could be improved, instead simply blaming the victim.

Chapter Nine

Conclusion

GBVH is a pervasive worldwide issue that affects women across industries and borders. Sreymom's story, and the stories of the other women chronicled here, serve as a powerful reminder that workplace GBVH is not an individual problem, but rather the broader systemic patterns that allow such harm to persist. Through a comparative analysis of Cambodia's garment and cement sectors, this thesis has explained how the organisation of work and workplace culture contribute to the normalisation of workplace GBVH in male- and female-dominated sectors, both internationally focused and locally focused.

As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, workplace GBVH should not be considered merely as a 'women's issue' to be addressed by individuals, but rather as an issue that is deeply embedded in the way work is organised, the culture of the workplace, and broader political, legal and social systems at play in Cambodia but also globally. Cultural norms, economic structures and regulatory arrangements at the macro level work to silence women, while the lack of institutional support – which leaves victims feeling powerless in defending their right to feel safe at work – increases the likelihood that women will experience workplace GBVH. Gendered violations at each of these levels reinforce individual-level beliefs and behaviours to create an environment where GBVH is normalised and rarely addressed. In order to reduce workplace GBVH, it is therefore necessary to address its root causes and recognise that it is a systemic issue.

In garment factories, women experience workplace GBVH even before they enter the factory: from the moment they had to choose what to wear to avoid comments about their clothing and bodies; to the moment they arrived and had their bodies scanned – and possibly touched – at the main gate under the assumption they were hiding food; to the moment they sat at the production line, where unrealistic targets were closely monitored

and constantly reinforced; to the moment they used the toilet, where unpleasant conditions forced them to choose between discomfort and risk; and finally the moment they were abused for failing to meet their production targets. These experiences reveal a consistent pattern in which workplace GBVH is linked to how work is organised, but also to workplace culture, which places women in vulnerable positions where they are powerless and isolated – knowing that, even if they report the case, seeking redress is difficult and unpleasant and attempts to do so may backfire.

The situation is very similar in the cement factories, especially in the bag production section of the Chinese Cement Factory, where high production targets are set with no break time, leading to fatigue and a higher likelihood of mistakes. Women cleaners are assigned tasks like shovelling heavy cement dust based on the perception that women are better at handling the fine details of cleaning, while men are deemed unsuitable for such tasks. This exposes women to serious health risks. These aspects of the organisation of work are exacerbated by a workplace culture that reinforces the belief that such tasks are inherently 'women's work', placing women in less favourable and more hazardous conditions.

As this thesis has demonstrated, then, these women may be employed in different sectors, with different workforce demographics and different levels of exposure to the global economy, but they have broadly similar experiences of workplace GBVH. As this finding confirms, workplace GBVH is not confined to a particular industry or economic context, nor to a specific style of management. Rather, it responds to broader economic and cultural norms at play globally as well as in specific national contexts. In short, workplace GBVH is not simply a matter of individual misconduct or isolated incidents, but a deeply systemic issue rooted in violations at the macro and meso levels.

Advancing Hearn and Parkin's Three-Level Framework

How does the organisation of work and workplace culture contribute to the normalisation of workplace GBVH in global and regional supply chains? In answering this question, this thesis has engaged with issues raised in the literature on workplace GBVH, which has increasingly called for multi-level approaches to capture the interplay between

structural, organisational and interpersonal dynamics (McDonald 2012; Runge 2020)}. Despite these calls, much of this literature has continued to focus on either individual behaviours or organisational policies, with fewer studies systematically linking these factors to macro-level economic and cultural forces. Adapting Hearn and Parkin's (2001) three-level framework so that it is more readily applied to real-word cases responds to this gap by offering a way to theorise GBVH in a more holistic way(2001) (Figure 9.1).

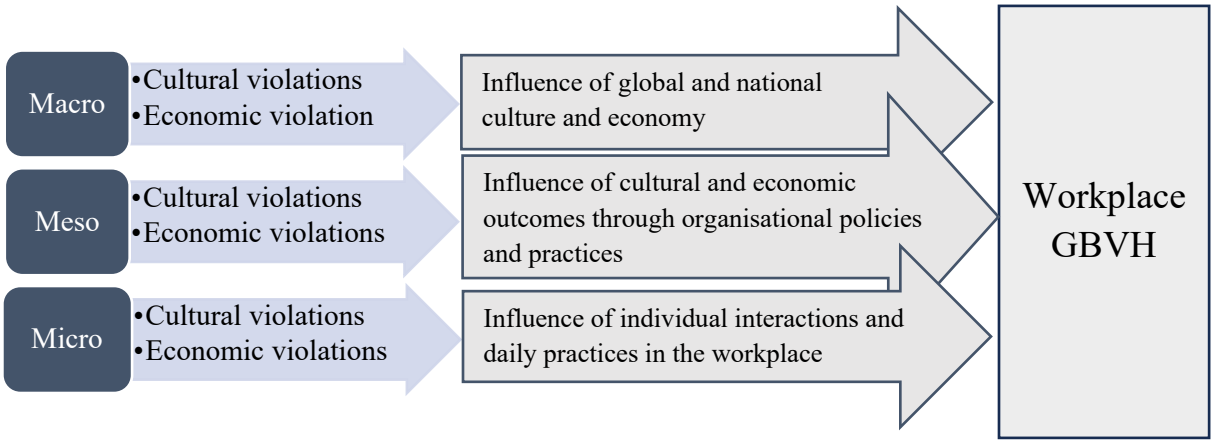

Figure 9.1. Framework for Understanding Workplace GBVH

Consolidating patriarchal and cultural violations into a single category allowed for a more nuanced analysis of how cultural factors enable and sustain workplace GBVH, while inserting clearer analytical distinctions between the macro, meso and micro levels, made the framework more useful for empirical research. As explained in Chapter Two, my interpretation of the *macro level* emphasises the influence of economic structure and cultural norms on national institutions. At this level, societal norms, gender expectations, legislative frameworks and labour movement shape the broader context in which organisations operate, influencing the prevalence of workplace GBVH. My interpretation of *the meso level* focuses on organisational policies and practices, highlighting how workplace environments and management decisions can either mitigate or exacerbate workplace GBVH. Finally, my interpretation of the micro level highlights individual interactions and daily practices on the shop floor, which reveal the subtle, often unspoken interpersonal dynamics that perpetuate workplace GBVH.

This refinement of Hearn and Parkin's (2001) framework advances our understanding of workplace GBVH by exposing the mechanisms through which economic and cultural factors interact across all three levels to create environments where GBVH is normalised and difficult to address. For example, at the macro level, Cambodia's dependence on export-oriented industries creates economic pressures that, when combined with cultural norms that silence women, establish conditions where workplace protections are subordinated to production imperatives. At the meso level, these pressures translate into organisational practices that create vulnerability to abuse. At the micro level, these workplace pressures combine with prevailing expectations about the ways in which men and women relate to limit women's ability to resist GBVH – or report it when it happens. Understanding this complexity is crucial if we are serious about making workplaces safe for women.

Macro-level factors

Cambodia's broader political economy, court system and cultural norms play an important part in shaping the possibilities for encouraging or addressing workplace GBVH. As the country relies heavily on export earnings from the garment industry, attitudes towards workplace GBVH in the sector are influenced by global buyers and the global unions, as well as by international and national NGOs. Often funded by international donors, these organisations typically run training programs and support advocacy efforts in an attempt to raise awareness and put pressure on the Cambodian government to address the issue. By contrast, regional supply chains, such as those linked to cement production, operate under markedly different dynamics, with minimal engagement from buyers and limited external compliance monitoring. This lack of oversight reduces incentives for factories to adopt international labour standards or gender-sensitive policies. Furthermore, regional supply chains tend to be less exposed to reputational pressures, making GBVH interventions largely dependent on local governance structures and management discretion rather than consumer-driven accountability mechanisms.

As this thesis has demonstrated, however, these initiatives have largely failed to translate into meaningful change at the workplace level. Even in the garment sector, management has struggled to establish effective workplace-level policies. Conditions vary between the cement factories but, even in the best-performing factory, management tends to prioritise physical work-related injuries while overlooking other issues that equally impact women. Meanwhile, enterprise unions, with their low levels of bargaining power, have largely failed to incorporate workplace GBVH provisions into collective bargaining agreements (CBAs). Even where they have done so, they most often rely on templates provided by their national federations without fully understanding or being able to explain the content to factory management. Labour inspections, meanwhile, typically occur only once a year, and often rely on checklists that provide little insight into workplace GBVH and little opportunity for meaningful intervention.

In the absence of effective factory-level mechanisms, most incidents of workplace GBVH are left altogether unaddressed. In the most serious cases, however, local authorities, such as police or commune officials, may step in. Where they do, however, they often extract a substantial cut from the financial compensation they require perpetrators to pay. Even when cases reach the courts, victims often face long delays before a decision is made – if a decision is made at all – and outcomes may favour the perpetrator. As a consequence, most women who have experienced workplace GBVH do not want to bring their cases to court due to the widespread reality of corruption, the exhausting legal process, and the limitations imposed by their living conditions and financial constraints.

Meso-level factors

The way in which work is organised is gendered, and this is clearly linked to further violations. As Hearn and Parkin (2001) suggest, an incident at work is not an isolated event; senior management, supervisors and group leaders *choose* whether or not to make workers feel safe by establishing rules, policies and monitoring how those rules and policies are being implemented.

Across different factories in the two sectors, work arrangements disadvantage women and create situations where they are likely to suffer workplace GBVH. First, women's safety and dignity are not considered when designing factory infrastructure or the physical layout of work. For example, women reported feeling uncomfortable when required to train newly hired male workers, as no dedicated training space was made available to them. Even the provision of and access to toilets is highly gendered. Senior managers, who are in the majority men, do not prioritise providing sufficient toilets for women to use. Insufficient numbers of toilets mean that women have to queue to use one. But rather than building more toilets, women are blamed for the time they spend on bathroom breaks. The toilets are also dark and dirty and often have holes in the cubicle's walls. As a result, women often feel that they need to go to the toilet in pairs in order to feel safe.

Second, women are generally tasked in sections that require adherence to detailed instructions and have access to less frequent breaks. Women are perceived by management to be willing to accept less favourable working conditions without protest, explaining why they are assigned to high-pressure, production-critical sections. Consequently, however, women are more likely to face criticism from their supervisors than men in less pressured roles. In this way, the organisation of work reflects the influence of social norms, which largely disadvantage women. The combination of high pressure, limited autonomy and frequent supervisory scrutiny creates an environment where harassment and abuse goes unchallenged due to the normalisation of these conditions and the perception that women are expected to endure them.

Women are also disproportionately disadvantaged by elements of workplace culture including social norms, power structures, and a lack of accountability. Incentive structures are arranged in ways that put pressure on group leaders and supervisors to ensure that their teams reach their production targets, encouraging them to pressure the workers they lead. The fact that they have discretion over the allocation of leave and overtime, but also the payment of bonuses and even contract renewal, gives them a great deal of power over those workers. This whole system works together such that workers not only need to meet high production targets but also to navigate interpersonal

relationships to avoid penalties – a necessity that, as discussed below, can exacerbate the risk of workplace GBVH.

Workplace culture also dictates what happens if a workplace GBVH incident occurs. In both garment and cement factories, management mostly treats such incidents as personal matters. There is no clear training or communication to workers that such behaviour is unacceptable, creating an environment where management appears to tolerate such conduct. Moreover, management's responses are often influenced by concerns about its own reputation rather than the well-being of the victim. As a result, many women are discouraged from reporting workplace GBVH due to fears of retaliation or loss of income and even their jobs. Women's willingness to engage with formal meso-level mechanisms is also affected by macro-level factors. Given the scarcity of formal-sector jobs in Cambodia, women who experience workplace GBVH may feel they have no viable option but to remain in hostile work environments. Trade unions also have a poor record when it comes to dealing with workplace GBVH incidents, especially when the perpetrator is also a union member. These practices also reflect macro-level factors: in a context where union activities are systematically restricted and union leaders face overt attacks, maintaining membership becomes a priority.

Micro-level factors

At the personal level, women's experiences of workplace GBVH are shaped by the broader structures and institutional practices around them. The way work is organised, the pressure to meet production targets, and the lack of safe reporting mechanisms all contribute to a sense of fear and helplessness. Women internalise these pressures and often feel that they must endure inappropriate behaviour in silence to keep their jobs. This silence is not a sign of acceptance but a reflection of the limited choices available to them in a system that does not prioritise their safety or dignity. It is also shaped by cultural expectations that demand that they be respectful, quiet and non-confrontational. These expectations are carried into the workplace where women feel they must manage their emotions. Speaking up or resisting can be seen as disrespectful or disruptive, which can lead to punishment or social exclusion. As a result, many women choose to remain silent,

not because they are unaware of the injustice, but because they are navigating a system that punishes resistance and rewards compliance.

It is important to recognise here, however, that women do resist. In many cases, this involves developing informal strategies to protect themselves. Some try to build good relationships with their group leaders by sharing food, offering small gifts, or visiting them when they are sick. Others avoid drawing attention to themselves, hoping that by staying quiet and working hard, they can avoid being targeted. The emotional and psychological toll of these experiences is significant. Constant exposure to harassment, pressure and fear affects women's mental health, leading to stress, anxiety and a sense of isolation. It can also make them more vulnerable to workplace GBVH. Because they are forced to rely on informal relationships rather than on formal protection, women often feel pressure to maintain these informal relationships even when they are exploitative. Avoiding visibility can also mean that abuse goes unreported, reinforcing a culture of silence and impunity. In both cases, the burden of managing risk falls *entirely* on women, rather than on systems and structures that should ensure their safety at work.

Challenging Assumptions: Governance, Gender and the Realities of GBVH

This research challenges prevailing assumptions about the efficacy of global supply chain governance in improving working conditions. In garment manufacturing, where international buyers are present and compliance frameworks exist, it would be reasonable to expect stronger protections against workplace GBVH. However, the evidence presented in this thesis reveals that – despite the investment of global brands and of Better Factories Cambodia – there is remarkably little difference between the prevalence of workplace GBVH or in the way that it is handled in the cement and garment factories. As this suggests, corporate social responsibility and even independent monitoring mean little without enforcement, accountability, and attention to how work is organised and experienced on the ground. This finding is particularly significant for industrial relations scholarship, as it demonstrates the limitations of voluntary compliance mechanisms, but also the benefits of sectoral comparisons in testing the impact of such mechanisms.

It also challenges assumptions about the impact of the numeric dominance of male or female workers on the experiences of women. While it is often assumed that women fare better in female-dominated sectors, the findings of this thesis suggest that gender composition alone does not determine the prevalence or severity of workplace GBVH. I have demonstrated that women's experiences of workplace harassment and abuse are shaped more by gender violations through power hierarchies, production pressures and broader cultural norms than by the gender ratio of the workforce. This finding confirms that workplace GBVH needs to be examined through a framework that considers the intersection between gender, organisational structures, labour processes, and institutional responses rather than gender alone.

Finally, my findings highlight the importance of listening to women's voices – not just as victims but as experts on their own experience. Their insights reveal not only the human cost of gaps in existing protections but also the tactics that victims develop to cope with workplace GBVH. The difficulties women workers encounter, the emotional labour they undertake, and the strategies they use to navigate unsafe workplaces all point to the fact that it is not enough to implement formal protections through national legislation or workplace policy in isolation. As Sreymom's story reminds us, behind every data point lies a person navigating risk, silence, and survival. Her story and the stories of other women matter, not just as evidence of harm, but as blueprints for change.

Recognising these complexities helps us move beyond blaming individuals and instead focus on building systems that are responsive, inclusive and grounded in the realities of those most affected. If workplace GBVH is to be addressed, it is necessary to pay serious attention to workplace culture, as it is workplace culture that determines if legal requirements and company policies are enforced. At the same time, however, changes in workplace culture at the micro and meso levels are not enough. As this thesis has demonstrated, workplace culture is shaped in large part by the organisation of work, which in turn is driven by macro-level factors including prevailing cultural approaches to gender, national governance frameworks, and the ways in which global and regional supply chains operate. It is only by addressing these broader factors that real change in the ways that workplace GBVH is handled at the factory level can be achieved.

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