

# Globalised Production and Networks of Resistance: Women Working Worldwide and New Alliances for the Dignity of Labour

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This article uses as its starting point the global networking activities of Women Working Worldwide, a small women's organisation based in the UK but working with an international network of women workers' groups, mainly in Asia but also Africa, Central America and Eastern Europe. These are groups supporting women who have been drawn into export production, working in factories supplying the world market with consumer goods such as clothing and footwear. It recounts the organising strategies of these groups and how this has led to the emergence of local and international networks supporting women workers' rights not just as workers but also as women. It looks at how these groups have linked with Northern based campaigns, such as the Clean Clothes Campaign, and how together they have exposed the abuse of workers' rights in international supply chains and so prompted a response from MNCs in the form of "corporate social responsibility." In particular, the article considers the networking activity of Women Working Worldwide itself and whether involvement in the development of the UK Ethical Trading Initiative provides possibilities for utilising the power of international networking. It raises the particular problems presented by the global increase in subcontracting which separates workers from one another and makes organising even more difficult. At the same time, it highlights the inventiveness of women's organisations in developing new and effective forms of resistance, and examines the potential for bringing these together with more traditional forms of trade union organising.

## INTRODUCTION

The impact of globalisation on women as workers has been debated by both academics and policy makers since the 1980s, when "the new international division of labour" was seen as leading to the feminisation of the global labour force. Academics have considered the significance for gender equality

whilst activists have focussed on the way in which women are being exploited as workers. In both cases, the tendency has been to look at how globalisation is shaping women's experiences, rather than on at how women are actively engaged in processes of change. This is also the case with the current plethora of activity and discourse around "corporate social responsibility," which considers how codes of conduct on labour standards can be used to protect the rights of women workers. Little attention is paid to what women workers themselves are doing. Haven't they developed their own strategies for confronting the impact of globalisation on their working lives? Are there not organisations which understand and represent their demands and which have played a part in changing attitudes to corporate responsibility? This article will explore the rise of such women workers' organisations and networks. It focuses on activities linked into Women Working Worldwide (WWW), a networking organisation which I co-ordinate. The article will argue that, although they are largely ignored, these women's organisations are a significant force for change, signalling the rise of a new international labour movement.

This article first of all takes us back to the 1980s when multinational corporations (MNCs) began relocating much of their labour-intensive production to countries with low wage costs. Most of the young women who were drawn into export production were beyond the reach of trade unions, but soon began developing their own organising strategies. The paper recounts how this led to the emergence of local and international networks focussed on the abuse of women workers not just as workers but also as women. It looks at how these networks have linked with the trade union movement and with Northern based campaigns, such as the Clean Clothes Campaign. Together they have exposed the abuse of workers' rights in international supply chains and so prompted a response from MNCs in the form of "corporate social responsibility." The article raises the particular problems presented by the global increase in subcontracting which separates workers from one another and makes organising even more difficult. At the same time, it highlights the inventiveness of women's organisations in developing new and effective forms of resistance, and examines the potential for bringing these together with more traditional forms of trade union organising.

The article is written from the perspective of Women Working Worldwide, a small women's organisation based in the UK that has played a key role in the emergence of these new international networks. WWW started in 1982 when a group of women researchers and activists came together to organise a conference on "Women on the global assembly line," focussing on the employment of women in the newly emerging Free Trade Zones in Asia. After the conference it was decided to continue working together and two groups became active, one in London and the other in Manchester. After several years, the Manchester group raised funds for a project raising awareness about the situation of women workers in the global garment industry and Manchester became the base for the organisation. WWW's particular concern

is with the way in which changes in the global economy have a direct impact on the working lives of women. The focus continues to be on industries supplying the world market, particularly those producing consumer goods such as garments and footwear. The aim is to build international links between workers in these industries, and between workers' representatives and those acting on their behalf in Europe. This involves working on collaborative initiatives with a network of women workers' organisations, mostly in Asia but also in Central America, Africa and Eastern Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The focus of WWW's project work is developed through consultation with partner organisations. These are women workers' groups and women's initiatives within trade unions and larger NGOs. Although they are not part of WWW's structure in that there is no formal network membership, it is the collaboration with and between these organisations that is the heart of WWW's work. The project workshops that bring these groups together are crucial to the maintenance of WWW's sense of direction and identity. Whilst taking its lead from these discussions between women workers' organisations, the focus of WWW's work is also determined in part through networking with organisations in the UK, Europe and North America, such as home-working organisations, trade unions and development agencies. There are also strong academic links, reflected in the fact that the office is based within a university, and one of the aims is to help bridge the gap between academia and activism. This includes organising seminars that bring academics together with members of trade unions and NGOs. Most of the material used in this article is taken from internal reports accompanying this global networking activity and some of it has not been previously documented.

## THE EMPLOYMENT OF WOMEN IN EXPORT PRODUCTION

In the 1980s it became apparent that the global integration of production and the expansion of world trade were accompanied by a "feminisation" of the labour market (Standing 1999). In particular young women in low wage economies were being drawn into export production, particularly in light industries such as garments and electronics. This challenged Boserup's thesis that predicted the increased marginalisation of women from mainstream production (Boserup 1970). Some welcomed this, seeing it as signalling the integration of women into the development process. However, other feminist economists challenged this notion of integration, suggesting instead that it represented the continuation of gender subordination in the interests of world capital (Elson and Pearson 1981). Since production is relocated to poor countries in a drive to cut costs and to increase "flexibility," it should be no surprise that such production involves the employment of women, almost universally seen as cheap and dispensable. Indeed, it soon became apparent that these new jobs were characterised not only by low wages but also by long hours, intense work schedules, lack of job security, lack of health and safety

protection, as well as denial of the right to organise. Controls have been particularly harsh in Free Trade Zones, fenced off areas exempt from regulations such as tax laws and protective labour legislation (ICFTU 1996).

The spread of these "world market factories" during the past twenty years has been dramatic. Their location has shifted as more low-wage economies have been integrated into the global economy, providing even cheaper labour and infrastructure. Within Asia, the shift was from countries such as Korea and Hong Kong to the Philippines and Sri Lanka, then to Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia and now China, Vietnam and Cambodia. There is also a concentration in Central America and a recent move to new locations in East and West Africa. As more and more women are drawn into export production, there has been some debate on the gender impact. Some, such as Susan Horton (1999), argue that at least in relation to rates of pay, women have benefited from this form of industrialisation. However, whilst there may have been some long term gains in those countries involved in the first phase of export production, notably Hong Kong and South Korea, it is clear the same forms of exploitative production are simply being shifted to poorer countries. Overall, Standing (1999) concludes that not only is women's work still characterised by low pay, lack of protection, irregularity and insecurity, but that more men are being drawn into work with the same characteristics.

## THE EMERGENCE OF NETWORKS OF RESISTANCE

In academic debates about the significance of this increase in women's employment, little attention is paid to the ways in which women have reacted to the forces of global capitalism and whether any of the gains that have been achieved have been through the collective actions of women themselves. This is not surprising, given the undocumented nature of much of this activity and the complexities of some of the relationships involved. The following account is written from the point of view of Women Working Worldwide, a networking organisation which is built on the belief that change will only come about through women organising for themselves. The networking activities described have involved personal trust between individuals and a sustainability that is only possible when there is long-term commitment to working together. That these networks should span the world from South, East and Southeast Asia to West and East Europe is a demonstration of the positive opportunities presented by globalisation, even in the face of widespread oppression.

In looking at the development of these networks it is important to begin with the self-organisation of women workers. The young women who were initially drawn into export production had no experience of paid work, let alone of organising and negotiating with employers. Yet right from the start it was they who were at the forefront of struggles against the exploitative nature of their employment. Looking back in 1998, Pearson notes the devel-

opment of “innovative strategies“ by women to organise in defence of their interests as both workers and women. She also notes that this has been without the support of male-led trade unions, who have often seen their demands as marginal. Here I look in more detail at these strategies. How do women workers’ own organisations link to local and regional support networks and later to the growing movement in support of labour rights in countries where the products of their labour are sold?

The potential for the self-organisation of women workers in export production was recognised immediately by feminist economists such as Elson and Pearson (1981). Even in the early 1980s Elson was looking at the opportunities that employment in export production provided for women to organise not only as workers but as women. Most workers were young women who had migrated from the countryside in order to help support their families. The long hours of work, lack of health and safety protection and physical and verbal abuse by supervisors meant that many developed illnesses and their low wages meant they frequently denied their own needs in order to be able to send something back home. However they knew that their rights were being violated and, as Elson (1981) pointed out, the fact that they lived together in boarding houses provided the opportunity for collective action. In spite of the long hours of work they were able to spend time together discussing their lives in ways that had previously been impossible.

It became apparent in the early 1980s that women workers in the new FTZs across Asia and parts of Latin America were beginning to develop their own defensive strategies. Trade unions were not allowed into FTZs and attempts by workers to organise themselves were often met with brutal oppression. Nevertheless workers began to initiate their own collective action and to do so in ways which were quite new to the established labour movement. For example, women in the Bataan EPZ (Export Processing Zone) in the Philippines organised “mock funerals” of companies with particularly exploitative practices (Donald 1990). Similarly, the whole workforce in factories in the Philippines and several other locations began wearing their company tee shirts inside out when there was an issue with management. Meanwhile in Korea, a vibrant workers’ movement had developed which was centred on the new world market factories. More than 85 percent workers were women and it was they who lead the demonstrations for the right to organise, in spite of heavy police oppression (Rhei 1998).

These initial worker activities soon led to the formation of local organisations: for example, women’s centres based outside the FTZs. Since workers were not allowed to organise in unions, most operated under the cover of religious or community organisations. Two such organisations were set up in Sri Lanka in the 1980s, Da Bindu and the Women’s Centre. The women were initially linked into Christian organisations but soon became autonomous. Da Bindu began publishing a newsletter for and about the workers that recounted stories which again showed the innovative and effective

organising strategies of women workers. For example, since they were not allowed to speak whilst working, they developed the use of eye contact for signalling to each other. This tactic was used in a factory in 1990 when a worker was hit so hard by her supervisor that her eye was pushed into the machine and she lost consciousness. Immediately and silently all the women in the factory walked out and refused to go back until she was taken to hospital. They then refused to return until the supervisor was dismissed (Da Bindu 1990).

These small women's organisations not only strengthened workers' struggles but their organisations also became a channel to the world beyond and a basis for networking on the issues that women faced in export production everywhere. In 1985, a regional networking organisation, the Committee for Asian Women (CAW), was set up in Hong Kong. Right from the start this brought together organisations representing women in both formal and informal workplaces. It included the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) of India which was already organising homebased workers. Although in a completely different work situation from FTZ workers, CAW recognised that all women workers "suffer from the oppression of being a woman and a worker under an unjust economic order" (CAW 2001). CAW is now a network of women workers' organisations and women's sections of trade unions in thirteen countries, with a secretariat in Bangkok. They organise workshops for workers and activists, publish a biannual "Asian Women Workers' Newsletter" and collaborate on research and advocacy work at the regional and international level (CAW 1995).

By the early 1990s, similar organisations had developed in Central America where FTZs, known as *maquilas*, have proliferated; these mainly supply the US market. One of the first organisations was Facto X in Mexico supporting women in the border factories. In Nicaragua in 1993, the Maria Elena Cuarda Women's Movement for Employed and Unemployed Workers (MEC) began a vociferous campaign for women workers' rights. They conducted massive information campaigns, trained women leaders and organised mass meetings to consult workers on their grievances. From these meetings a list of fourteen demands was drawn up to present to the Ministry of Labour. It is notable that four of the first five demands specifically addressed gender issues: protection for pregnant women, non-discrimination, equal pay and the banning of violence and sexual harassment, the fifth demand being a living wage. Such has been the strength of their movement that all Zone employers have signed agreements to comply with these demands. At the same time, MEC was central to the establishment in 1996 of a network of women workers' organisations across the region, known as the Central America Network in Solidarity with Maquila Workers.

All these women workers' organisations see their role as not only to support the immediate struggles of workers but also to organise internationally to share information and strategies of resistance. It is recognised that in

globalised production, power does not lie with the local employer but with multinational companies, based mainly in the US, Europe and Japan. This recognition has become the basis for the development of international alliances between women workers' organisations and a number of Northern based women's initiatives, including Women Working Worldwide.

## NORTH SOUTH NETWORKING

WWW's early activities included building support for women workers involved in disputes with British companies. This included workers in a garment factory in the Bataan EPZ in Sri Lanka which was owned by a British company and was refusing to pay the legal minimum wage. The workers camped outside the factory and organised a 24 hour picket to prevent other workers being brought in to replace them. Meanwhile, WWW and other organisations in the UK put pressure on both the manufacturing company and retailers in the UK. In the event, WWW was sued by the company. After a year of organising, the factory was closed, though workers did receive their redundancy pay. Although at the time it seemed little had been achieved, in retrospect it can be seen that the workers' movement was strengthened and the pattern set for networking activity which over the past twenty years has become increasingly effective.

Meanwhile, similar networking was beginning in the Americas. *Mujer a Mujer* (Woman to Woman) was an alliance of women workers' organisations across Mexico, Canada and the US in the build-up to the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994. NAFTA was an agreement between the three countries gradually to eliminate trade barriers and so create increased competition and investment opportunities across the region. *Mujer a Mujer* were concerned that this would lead to an increase in the exploitation of poor workers in Mexico. NAFTA is one of the trade agreements that has in fact contributed to the huge expansion of *maquilas* across Mexico and Central America supplying the USA and Canada. In Canada, this led to the setting up of the Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), which works in support of women workers in Central and South America as well as in Canada itself. More recently, a similar group has been set up in the UK, the Central America Women's Network (CAWN). These organisations also network with each other. MSN and CAWN often work together on initiatives as well as with WWW. This collaboration has enabled the development of direct networking links between women workers' organisations in Central America and Asia including exchange visits and joint workshops.

WWW and MSN have also been centrally involved in developing public campaigns in Europe and North America in support of workers' rights in globalised industries such as garment production. By the 1990s, WWW, by then with a more secure base, began working on an awareness-raising project called "The labour behind the label." Links were established with the emerg-

ing Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC) in the Netherlands which was organising actions in relation to C&A, a major Dutch garment retailer. It was agreed that retailers should be made to account for the conditions under which garments that they sell are made. No longer should they be allowed to claim that it was not their responsibility, as had been the case with the Bataan workers in 1990. "The Labour Behind the Label" was later taken as the name of a new UK network which was to become part of the Europe-wide Clean Clothes Campaign. This includes solidarity groups, development agencies, church groups and UK trade unions who are working in support of garment workers, together with a support base of individual activists. Similar networks now exist in most European countries, all themselves part of the wider CCC (<http://www.cleanclothes.org/>). Although these are not specifically women's networks, it is noticeable that all the leading activists in both the UK and Netherlands are female.

## CAMPAIGNING FOR CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY

Northern based organisations such as MSN, WWW and CCC have been instrumental in pressurising companies to pay attention to the rights of workers in their supply chains. It is interesting to look at how these networks have operated and how, in the case of the UK, this led directly to the setting up of the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI). It is also important to ask how the network of organisations working with WWW relates to this growing movement for corporate responsibility.

The Clean Clothes Campaign has proved itself to be an extremely vocal and effective international campaign on workers' rights. This has only been possible through holding together a wide network of organisations and individuals campaigning across a growing number of European countries. It has a secretariat in Amsterdam and regular meetings are held with country representatives. However, each national coalition develops and organises its own program of activity. These include campaigns directed at particular companies, or on specific issues such as a living wage, using leafleting, post card campaigns and **newer** creative interventions such as alternative fashion shows.

At the same time, direct support is given to workers, mainly through an "urgent appeal" system through which consumers are encouraged to write to employers, owners and Government officials. These are in support of workers who are in dispute with management about issues such as the arbitrary dismissal of union organisers or lack of overtime or redundancy pay. They may also be in support of workers who have been injured in accidents such as factory fires. There have been many examples of fires in China, Thailand and Bangladesh, such as one in the Chowdhury Knitwear factory in Dhaka in 2000, where lack of exits meant that when 53 women and children were killed and another 100 injured in the stampede to leave the building



(CCC 2000).

Through organising support for workers' disputes over the past ten years, the CCC has developed strong links with workers' organisations in Asia and elsewhere. A diverse patchwork of networks now exists between particular European campaigns and organisations in countries supplying their market. For example the German CCC has developed strong networking links with organisations in Eastern Europe, again mainly through direct contact between women activists. Sister organisations are now working in support of garment workers within Bulgaria and Romania.

Campaigning around workers' rights in the garment industry has mainly targeted well-known retailers and branded companies such as Nike. Similar campaigning has taken place in North America. Together they have **effected** a change in attitude such that these companies now accept responsibility for working conditions in their supply chains. One of the first to respond was Levi Strauss, which was exposed in 1992 for employing Chinese prison labour in the island of Saipan. It reacted by introducing a code of conduct on labour standards for the company's supply chain. This then became the standard response of all major garment retailers: companies draw up a list of labour conditions that have to be adhered to by the supplying companies. These conditions relate to issues such as health and safety, working hours, and sometimes the right to organise, and are loosely based on ILO (International Labour Office) conventions.

Once companies began adopting codes of conduct campaigners realised that they needed to change the direction of their activities. Up until then, the focus of campaigns had been on exposing companies and calling on them to take responsibility. Following media exposure, more and more companies acknowledged this responsibility but claimed that their codes of conduct would ensure good practice. Companies could now ward off criticism by publicising their particular Code of Conduct. The challenge for campaigners therefore became to make sure that these codes were more than a public relations exercise and were implemented in practice.

In the UK another network of NGOs was meeting, at the time called the UK Trade Network. Participants at these meetings include WWW and others such as Christian Aid who had been campaigning for labour rights in the production chains of UK supermarkets. It was decided to set up a Monitoring and Verification Working Group to work on ways of ensuring the implementation and effective monitoring of company codes. Eventually, this led to the establishment of the Ethical Trading Initiative, which is an organisation managed by representatives of NGOs, trade unions and companies. The aim is to collaborate on pilot monitoring and other initiatives aimed at ensuring that codes actually lead to improvements in working conditions. A rigorous Base Code on Labour Standards has been established, including the all important clauses on the right to organise, which all company members must seek to implement. Many companies have joined, in the realisation that it is in their

interests to work with NGOs and trade unions rather than be exposed by them in the press.

As one of the initiators of the Ethical Trading Initiative, WWW remains an active member. However it has strong reservations about an organisation which is driven by the needs of companies. Codes themselves are a top-down initiative that has been developed without negotiation with workers and in most cases without their knowledge. For this reason WWW decided to take up this issue with the women workers' organisations in their network. Since WWW had now been working with organisations in Asia and elsewhere for up to twenty years a strong network had been established, though without any formal membership. This network is consulted on the issues that WWW takes up and if there is general agreement a project is developed for fundraising. In April 1998 the network was consulted on whether to undertake a training and consultation program on company codes of conduct. Once the organisations understood the concept and the fact that codes were being widely adopted by companies, many of them agreed to take part in a project.

The outcome of this was a four year consultation and education program on codes of conduct in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand. Funds were also raised for a similar program organised by the UK Central America Network in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica. By the end of this program there was widespread understanding by activist organisations of the existence and significance of codes of conduct. Workers themselves are also becoming more aware, not only of codes as such but also of the value of international networking. For the first time, they realised that people on the other side of the world were interested in their working conditions and could support them in their demands. As one Bangladeshi organiser reported: "Workers became aware that foreign consumers are trying to do something good for them. They have got the feeling that they are not alone. As a result their level of awareness and sense of their rights was raised" (WWW 2002).

It is significant that within the NGO caucus of the Ethical Trading Initiative, it is the women's networks, WWW and CAWN, who have provided the links to worker organisations in the South. They have been joined recently by Homenet, an international network of homeworking organisations based in the UK and again run entirely by women. All three are very small organisations but they are the ones that have close links with workers' organisations. This means that there is intense demand by the ETI and other "corporate responsibility" initiatives on their time and also on the organisations they work with. There is also a dilemma about how much to engage in collaboration with companies. For the UK-based organisations it has been a matter of testing the ground. Whilst some initiatives have gained little there have been some experiences which seemed to have produced significant gains and taken campaigning a long way forward since the experiences with the Bataan workers in 1990.

One initiative that has demonstrated this progress is the action taken in support of flower workers in Kenya, based on networking between the Kenyan Women Workers Organisation (KEWWO) and WWW. This began on Valentines Day 2002, when a conference was called by activists in Kenya who were beginning to organise in response to reports from workers about labour rights abuses such as forced overtime, pesticide poisoning and sexual harassment. Since it is UK supermarkets who take an increasingly high proportion of flowers grown on Kenyan farms, WWW proposed that complaints be taken to the ETI, of which they are all members. This was agreed and KEWWO prepared a report of working conditions on farms which WWW presented to the ETI. The supermarkets responded immediately and staff from Marks and Spencer and Tesco went out to Kenya in November and met directly with workers. They were convinced of the truth of the allegations and their visit was the catalyst for the setting up of the Kenya Horticulture Ethical Business Initiative managed by a committee representing workers, employers and government. It remains to be seen to what extent this initiative will bring about long term change, but there is no doubt that there has been a remarkable shift in attitude on the part of employers and a new confidence amongst the workforce that their rights should be respected.

## RESPONDING TO SUBCONTRACTING

Networking on the basis of the linkage between producer and retailer was relatively straightforward in case of Kenyan flower workers, since it was easy to establish which farms were supplying UK supermarkets. The problem in many industries is that this connection is far from transparent, because of the growth of subcontracting. In the case of the garment industry, intense international and local competition, combined with the demands of the fashion industry, mean that there are now long and complex subcontracting chains between the retail outlet and the workplace. Typically, buying companies contract major manufacturers who subcontract to smaller production units, who in turn increase their flexibility by bringing in temporary workers or putting out to homeworkers. An embroidered shirt sold by Monsoon could have travelled from a big manufacturer in Delhi to a small factory in a nearby town, to an outworker and then back to the big manufacturer before being shipped to the UK. By reducing the regular workforce and using subcontractors, employers can react to the changing market, absolve themselves of responsibility for workers and keep costs to a minimum. Workers outside main units of production are typically not covered by labour legislation and receive lower rates of pay. The further down the subcontracting chain a worker is, the worse her/his pay and conditions. Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of women find themselves on the lowest rungs of subcontracting chains.

It is women workers at the end of subcontracting chain who are most in need of support. The irony is that they are the least likely to receive it. Top-

down initiatives such as the ETI are much more likely to have an impact on big factories that are the first level of the supply chain. Large known suppliers are relatively easy to audit for labour conditions. However, in the case of small workplaces, regular inspection is almost impossible and often they are not even covered by national legislation. Trade unions, where they do exist, rarely reach into back streets and people's homes. Yet the majority of the labour force in poor countries, and certainly the majority of women workers, are so-called "informal workers" working outside major units of production. Also, an increasing percentage of those working in factories are working on a casual basis without proper employment contracts.

This increase in subcontracting presents huge challenges to those networking on labour rights issues. Yet even in this context, women's organisations have worked together to bring about significant changes. The Self Employed Women's Organisation (Rose 1993) in India is frequently held up as a model in this regard, organising garment home workers alongside cleaners, street vendors and food workers. Most of their members work for the domestic market but there is an increase in those linked into international subcontracting. Similar organisations have emerged, particularly in support of homeworkers, not only in poor countries such as the Philippines, Thailand and South Africa, but also Australia, Britain and Canada. Many of these organisations are members of Homenet and have worked together on international initiatives. One of the most significant achievements of this networking was the advocacy and lobbying work with the trade union movement which led to the adoption of the ILO Convention on Homeworking in 1996 (Homenet 1999).

Many of the organisations linked into WWW's network are also beginning to focus more on the needs of informal workers. In 2000 the Committee for Asian Women, The Korean Women Workers' Association and WWW organised a workshop in Seoul entitled : Globalisation and Informalisation. This was attended by representatives of women workers' organisations from fifteen countries in Asia and Europe. All came with similar accounts of the ways in which global economic integration is accompanied by the marginalisation of women and the undermining of their rights as workers. This included factories closing and the same work is being put out to women workers on an informal basis, or of workers being sacked and re-employed through an agency system. Of course, such measures not only threaten women's status as workers but also make any attempt to organise and unionise extremely problematic.

WWW is currently running an action research project on international subcontracting in the garment industry. This involves organisations based in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, HongKong/China, the Philippines and Bulgaria. All these organisations recognised that for workers to organise successfully in the garment industry there is a need to understand how subcontracting actually operates. They each took their own

starting point, usually local factories, and tried to trace the links both up and down the supply chain. Some focussed more on the national and international linkages, but several focussed mainly on tracing the links with outworkers. This identified hierarchies within outwork itself, resulting from the fact that work taken home by factory workers is then subcontracted to other workers. Such developments serve to divide workers from one another and to make conventional workplace trade union organising virtually impossible (WWW 2003).

## RELATIONSHIP TO TRADE UNIONISM

There is no doubt that these new women workers' organisations and networks are pointing to new ways of organising which face up to the complex realities of globalised production. Nevertheless, all are totally committed to the principle of trade unionism and many of their activities are in support of workers' rights to organise and to bargain collectively. Some work closely within or together with existing trade union structures. However, this is rarely an easy relationship. It is important to look at how these women's organisations relate to trade unionism at local, national and international level, and at whether the potential for collaboration signals a new international labour movement.

Currently only about 5 percent of the global workforce in the garment industry is organised in trade unions (ILO). It is therefore in the absence of trade unions that women workers' organisations have established their significance. All recognise that ultimately it is only through collective trade union representation that workers can really bargain with employers and ensure sustainable improvements. Many of these organisations are working in situations, like FTZs, where trade unionism is banned or where political repression prevents organising. In such situations one of the main activities of women workers' organisations is to campaign for trade union rights to be recognised.

Nevertheless, even where trade unionism exists, women workers often see the need for their own organisations. Trade unions rarely prioritise the demands of poor women workers, particularly when some leaders become more concerned about power and influence than about representing workers. Some women workers' organisations, such as the Maria Elena Cuarda Women's Movement in Nicaragua, have come about partly as a result of the frustrations of women activists with the male-dominated union hierarchies. Some, such as Karmojibi Nari in Bangladesh and the Women Workers' Organisation in Pakistan, see themselves as addressing the specific needs of women workers alongside trade unions of which they are also members. Others, such as those organisations supporting workers in small workshops or at home, are normally doing so in the absence of any attempt by trade unions to organise such workers. However this is beginning to change as more trade unions are now recognising the challenges of the pervasive informalisation of work.

The closeness between women workers' organisations and trade unionism can be seen in the various ways in which women worker organisations have facilitated the emergence of effective unions. One example relates to Free Trade Zones, where trade unionism is typically prohibited. In 1999 the legal situation in Sri Lanka changed so that it became obligatory for even employers within FTZ to recognise trade unions if more than 40 percent of the workforce were members. Within weeks, the new Free Trade Zone Trade Union was registered, with branches attempting to establish themselves in factories all over the zones. This was only possible because of the levels of awareness that had already been developed amongst the workers by a network of organisations including Da Bindu and the Women's Centre. (CAW 2002). These centres remain essential focal points for women workers, particularly since trade unionism remains suppressed in spite of the legal changes.

Another example of the crossover between women workers' organisations and trade unions can be seen in the development of the Korean Women Workers' Union. The Korean Women Workers' Association United (KWWAU) had been working alongside trade unions since its inception in 1992. The focus was on issues which were not being adequately addressed by the trade union movement such equal pay, maternity protection and child care. By the end of the 1990s, the financial crisis coupled with the increase in outward investment by Korean employers meant that many women workers lost their jobs and so their trade union status. In fact the Government had a clear policy of "women out first" and there were no restrictions on workers being sacked and then re-employed on a casual basis without union rights. The KWWAU recognised that the situation demanded radical action and that as a women's association their ability to negotiate with employers was limited. They therefore established a new Women Workers' Trade Union which operates on a completely different basis from traditional unions. Women can join whatever work they have or even if they have none, and the focus is on those issues that women themselves identify as of immediate concern. Membership has soared to several thousand and many new sectors have been organised. For example KWWU has a court case in support of golf caddies who were being dismissed at the age of 40 in order to bring in younger women (Choi 2000).

A similar story is provided by Ana Clara in Santiago, Chile, a member organisation of Homenet. Ana Clara is a small women's organisation which began working in 2000 with garment workers who have been forced to leave factories and become employed on poorer terms and conditions in small workshops or at home. Similarly, in the shoe industry stitching and assembly increasingly takes place in home based workshops. In order to build networks with these isolated workers Ana Clara trained homeworkers themselves to carry out surveys and to locate other workers. On the basis of this education and training homeworkers are now being encouraged to set up their own unions and within a year, four new unions were registered (Homenet 2002).

This overlap between women workers' organisations and trade unionism demonstrates that many of the tensions with unions are more about tradition and territory than they are about worker representation. Women workers' organisations are sometimes accused of undermining trade unionism. In reality, they are more often helping to develop effective trade union organisation. The important thing is not what an organisation is called but it's willingness to address the real needs of workers and to accept different ways of organising. WWW's own network includes representatives of both autonomous women workers' organisations and representatives of women's projects within unions. When these organisations meet together in project workshops there are no major tensions between them on this issue. All are equally committed to women workers' rights and to the principles of genuine trade unionism.

Successful collaboration can also be seen at the global level, for example in some of the activities of the European Clean Clothes Campaign. Although key players are mainly NGOs, the national platforms in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany all include strong trade union representation. The Labour Behind the Label, the UK CCC platform, began as an alliance of NGOs but now membership includes all the trade unions which organise UK garment workers. Collaborative action has included a Euro 2000 football campaign, campaigns on issues such as a Living Wage and the targetting of particular companies such as Gap and Disney with street demonstrations and postcards from consumers. Collaboration also takes place in debates about effective mechanisms for the implementation of codes of conduct and other protective measures.

European-wide networking is matched by joint action at the global level. Campaigns in support of garment workers bring together trade unions and NGOs in both North and South. This can be seen for example in a recent campaign in support of workers in Lesotho. In January 2001, collaborative research was carried out by the Clean Clothes Campaign and LECAWU, the Lesotho Clothing and Allied Workers' Union, to document working conditions in garment factories. After a press conference to release officially the first research findings, the Lesotho government launched its own investigation into the garment industry which fully supported the research. Meanwhile Labour behind the Label used the research findings in a campaign to pressure the Gap to take responsibility for working conditions. As a result, the Gap launched its own investigation in one of their contract factories that resulted in the management recognising LECAWU. Also the Canadian-based Ethical Trading Action Group (ETAG), involving the Maquila Solidarity Network, noted that the Canadian garment retailer Hudson Bay Company sourced from two large garment factories in Lesotho. A campaign was started to pressure Hudson Bay in relation to a wide range of illegal and unfair activities. Nien Hsing, a Taiwanese company, owned one of the factories researched. Nien Hsing had long refused to negotiate with LECAWU. The research reports

provided ammunition for a global campaign to put pressure on Nien Hsing which has been taken up by unions and NGOs in North America and Europe. LECAWU has now been able to negotiate an historic agreement with Nien Hsing, committing management to recognise the union once they organise a majority of the workers (CCC 2003).

## CONCLUSION

These collaborative actions based on global networking can be seen as signalling a new kind of labour internationalism, one which places the demands of women workers right at the centre. This comes at a time when established trade union bureaucracies are under increasing pressure. They have been frequently challenged for their marginalisation of women workers and more recently critics have **noted** their inability to react appropriately to the realities of globalised production (Waterman 2001). In the meantime many trade unionists are joining forces with other organisations committed to workers' rights and are operating across borders in a way that overcomes institutional boundaries. Through these alliances, workers are able to strengthen their own strategies by calling on the support not only of other workers but also of consumers on the other side of the world.

These developments have been driven forward by the innovative organising and networking initiatives of women activists. By starting with women's own experience and prioritising the immediate demands of women workers, women's networks have pioneered new forms of resistance. These are beginning to challenge the exploitative pressures of complex international subcontracting chains. In networking in this way women are taking advantage of the positive opportunities globalisation presents for collaborative action across cultures and continents.

## ABBREVIATIONS

|        |   |
|--------|---|
| CAW    | Committee for Asian Women                     |
| CAWN   | Central America Women's Network               |
| CCC    | Clean Clothes Campaign                        |
| EPZ    | Export Processing Zone                        |
| ETI    | Ethical Trading Initiative                    |
| FTZ    | Free Trade Zone                               |
| ICFTU  | International Federation of Free Trade Unions |
| KEWWO  | Kenyan Women Workers' Organisation            |
| KWWAU  | Korean Women Workers' Associations United     |
| LBL    | Labour Behind the Label                       |
| LECAWU | Lesotho Clothing and Allied Workers' Union    |
| MEC    | Maria Elena Cuarda Women's Movement           |
| MSN    | Maquila Solidarity Network                    |
| NAFTA  | North America Free Trade Agreement            |



## NOTES

1. Angela Hale is Director of Women Working Worldwide. She was one of the founding members of the organisation in 1983 and helped to raise the funding to set up the first staffed project in 1989. At the time she was working as a regional officer for War on Want and was involved in various activities aimed at raising the gender sensitivity of UK aid agencies. She was also instrumental in setting up Womankind Worldwide, an agency specifically supporting womens development initiatives. Angela also has a PhD in Sociology and has taught in Higher Education for a number of years, specialising in the Sociology of Development and Gender Issues. She sees one of the aims of WWW as the development of more links between academics and activists.  
 As Director of WWW Angela is responsible for raising funding for project and for overall project delivery. One of the key challenges has been to ensure sufficient funding to maintain the continuity of the work and at the same time to base this work on consultation with network members. Funding is raised for paying other staff in the UK and in the participating organisations. The Directors role is crucial in maintaining communication between all project participants and also with key constituencies such as the trade union movement and the movement for ethical trade. The strength of WWW's work is based on networking not only with project participants but also with other organisations sharing similar aims.
2. WWW has no core funding so all work is funded on a project basis. All staff including the Director are issued with contracts for the project period only. Projects are funded according to the emphasis of the work. Work that is primarily to do with raising awareness in the UK and Europe are funded primarily by the European Commission. Work that is based in Asia or elsewhere has been funded primarily by the UK Department of International Development and the Community Fund. Funding has also been received from a number of Trusts and Development Agencies. Office space is provided by the Sociology Department of Manchester Metropolitan University.

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