

**BETTER WORK**

## **Better Work Discussion Paper Series: No. 7**

### **Corporate Social Responsibility and the Worker Stakeholder: Lesotho Clothing Workers' Perceptions of What Makes Better Work**

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June 2012



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LESOTHO CLOTHING WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
WHAT MAKES BETTER WORK**

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**Abstract:** Better Work is a partnership programme of the ILO and IFC for improving compliance with labour standards, which directly engages retailers with unions and manufacturers as well as domestic government. It is an alternative to the traditional channel for labour standards enforcement (i.e. buyer codes of conduct), which facilitates greater transparency and accountability through social dialogue. The purpose of this study is to establish a better understanding of the factors that influence workers' perceptions of what makes better work. This builds on previous research about Better Work, which has quantitatively analyzed supplier assessment reports and worker questionnaires. Using the case of Lesotho, this study takes a qualitative approach to measuring workers' perceptions, drawing on feedback from 17 focus group discussions with 149 workers from 40 factories. Findings indicate that supervisor-worker relations play a critical role in shaping workers' perceptions of their work, as do OSH policies that are sustained beyond buyer visits. Workers suggest that human rights awareness, supervisor training, OSH improvements, and flexibility regarding doctors and sick leave will make their work better.

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## INTRODUCTION

The apparel sector has been a springboard for industrial development in many countries. The sector, however, has also been notorious for poor working conditions and rampant exploitation of mainly female workers. National systems of enforcement have proved inadequate to the task of ensuring compliance with legislated standards and trade unions have generally made little headway in the sector in developing countries. The reputational damage this situation caused to major brands and retailers in the US and EU has resulted in efforts at private governance to address non-compliance, mainly through the mechanism of codes of conduct and buyer audits under the rubric of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Better Work grew out of an alternative approach first piloted in the Better Factories Cambodia programme. Since then Better Work has been rolled out in an additional six countries and has emerged as a leader in the social regulation of international labour standards.

The Better Work programme seeks to improve compliance with labour standards without adversely affecting supplier competitiveness. In fact, compliance should improve the viability of suppliers because they get an international stamp of approval that should attract more orders from buyers that value ethical sourcing. The mechanism Better Work uses to achieve this is by conducting comprehensive assessment processes at subscribing firms, which go well beyond the baseline requirements often found in buyer codes of conduct.<sup>1</sup> Its approach, furthermore, emphasises joint problem-solving and training for the remediation of these issues, rather than punitive action.

Lesotho is the first country in sub-Saharan Africa in which the Better Work programme has been implemented. It is a suitable candidate for the programme. Lesotho is a small country with a population of less than two million, the majority of whom are engaged in subsistence agriculture (Silici et al., 2007). It has very high levels of poverty, unemployment and HIV/AIDS. There is little industrial development: for years the main source of income was remittances from its male citizens employed as migrant labour on South African mines (Murray, 1981). The apparel sector is a relatively recent phenomenon and is vitally important for job creation, poverty alleviation and economic development.<sup>2</sup> It began in Lesotho in the 1980s as a result of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), which imposed quotas on the quantity of apparel that developing countries could export to developed countries.<sup>3</sup> The limits imposed by the quotas led to

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<sup>1</sup> Better Work uses clusters of compliance indicators to measure compliance with core labour standards, national law, and other conditions of work. Better Work Enterprise Advisors conduct the assessments, and rely on a mixture of their own observations, as well as feedback from managers and workers during their walkthrough of factories.

<sup>2</sup> According to information on the website of the Lesotho National Assembly, Lesotho is one of the poorest countries in Africa, with one half of the population reportedly living on less than two dollars per day. A 2010 World Bank report records life expectancy in Lesotho as 47.4 years. According to the Lesotho fact sheet created by the World Bank, exports of goods and services accounted for approximately 44% of Lesotho's GDP in 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For a full discussion of patterns of growth and decline in Lesotho's clothing industry, see Morris et al. (2011). Also, Morris et al. describe the emergence of two global value chains in Lesotho: (1) Chinese and

what was known as quota-hopping, whereby manufacturers in certain countries moved operations to countries with unfilled quotas. This saw a number of mainly Taiwanese-owned<sup>4</sup> firms locating subsidiary manufacturing operations in Lesotho, all of which were geared to exporting to the US. The embryonic industry was given a further boost by the US's African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA), which came into effect in 2000.

The ending of the MFA on January 1, 2005 caused the industry to contract sharply, underlining the dependence of the industry on the trade regime. But over the last few years the industry has slowly increased in size, boosted by a growing number of South African-owned apparel firms that have located operations in Lesotho. These firms are not dependent on AGOA, exporting their products back to South Africa.<sup>5</sup> They hold out a potential lifeline for the industry given the uncertainty with regard to AGOA. The special dispensation for 'less developed countries' within AGOA that requires only single transformation<sup>6</sup> for duty-free access to the US is due to end on 30 September 2012, with AGOA itself coming to an end in 2015. Given that there is only one textile mill in Lesotho (a denim mill), that there is very little left of the South African textile industry and very few textile mills in the rest of Africa, the ending of the special dispensation will exclude almost all the Chinese-owned firms from the benefits of AGOA. Most will close and the industry would more than halve in size. African countries are lobbying the US government for an extension of the special dispensation and the Act but there is no certainty at this point about what the US intends to do.

Currently there are about 45 clothing firms in Lesotho.<sup>7</sup> The Chinese-owned firms are in a slight majority but employ considerably more workers because they tend to be much larger than the South African-owned firms.

**Table 1: A snapshot of the apparel firms in Lesotho<sup>8</sup>**

Location	Firms	Origin of investment	Export market	Buyers (examples)
Maseru	25	China	US	Gap, Levis, US Polo, Kmart, Childrens Place, Kohls, etc.
Maputsoe	20	SA	SA	Mr. Price, Foschini, Edgars, Woolworths, etc.

Though there may be little that Better Work can do about the trade regime, the impact on the industry of AGOA not being extended raises an important question about the role that Better Work has within the region, in addition to the global arena. Developing more

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Taiwanese firms which export to the US, and (2) South African owned firms which export back in to South Africa. This study draws on this framework of two global value chains to analyze the influence of owner nationality and end market on workers' perceptions of what makes better work.

<sup>4</sup> In this paper, the term 'Chinese-owned' is used broadly to include both Chinese and Taiwanese owners.

<sup>5</sup> Exports from Lesotho to South Africa are duty free because both are members of the South African Customs Union (SACU).

<sup>6</sup> Garments must be made in the country but there are no restrictions as to where the yarn and fabric are manufactured.

<sup>7</sup> These numbers are based on 2010 LNDC data but we speculate, at the time of writing, that the numbers may be in decline. According to Cornelia Staritz, who made a research trip to Lesotho in March 2012, the total count may be 38 factories.

<sup>8</sup> This is based in part on information supplied by the Lesotho National Development Corporation in 2010.

of a relationship with South African owned firms may be one strategy, though these firms are not under the same external pressures to subscribe to Better Work as are their US-supplying counterparts. However, leaving this issue aside, the fact of the matter is that there is an industry of Chinese and South African owned firms that employs about 35 000 workers, all of which are vulnerable to downward pressure on labour standards and working conditions.

This situation is by no means unique to Lesotho. A considerable literature has emerged over the last 20 years documenting, and at times criticizing, the efforts of retailers and brands to ensure decent working conditions in global supply chains that extend into developing countries (Doorey, 2008; Elliott and Freeman, 2003; Esbenschade, 2004; Frank, 2008; Gereffi and Mayer, 2006; Gereffi et al., 2005; Jenkins, 2002; Locke et al., 2009; Locke et al., 2007; Mamic, 2004; Mayer and Pickles, 2010; Pearson and Seyfang, 2002; Yimprasert and Candland, 2000). More recently, several scholars have given attention to researching the impact of Better Work on supplier compliance, mainly in Cambodia. The research includes work on the relationship of compliance with competitiveness (Oka, 2012), the impact of Better Work on wages (Robertson, 2011), factory survival (Brown et al., 2011), and human resource management innovation (Robertson et al., 2011).

This study seeks to contribute to this literature but differs from it in a number of important ways. First, much of the above research has examined longitudinal data, measuring the impact of Better Work over time and what its relationship is with a number of independent variables (e.g. factory survival). This study, however, was conducted at about the time that the Better Work programme was launched and therefore provides a baseline 'picture' of the industry prior to any impact that Better Work might have on it. Second, the above research is quantitative whereas this study is qualitative, with findings drawing entirely on focus group discussions with workers. Third, the study has engaged with workers directly regarding their perceptions of labour standards and working conditions as well as seeking their comments on what can make their work better.

By placing the worker stakeholder at the centre of the discussion, the study intends to provide both a meaningful contribution to Better Work, and a springboard for future research that places workers at the centre of a comparison of the impact of Better Work over time.

Despite the above differences, the aim of the study is confluent with the existing research on Better Work: to understand what role Better Work can play in improving labour standards and working conditions. We explore a second question in the context of Lesotho, namely whether owner nationality leads to variation in workers' perceptions of what makes better work. Chinese factory owners have been attracted to Lesotho primarily by the benefits of AGOA, whereas South African factory owners are motivated mainly by the much lower labour costs compared to South Africa. We hypothesised that this would impact on their approaches to managing their factories, which would in turn be reflected in workers' perceptions of what makes better work.

## **WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT MAKES BETTER WORK**

International labour standards are a response to the needs and challenges faced by workers in a globalizing economy who are otherwise insufficiently served by the

protections offered through their employers, unions, and governments (Baccaro, 2001; Cohen and Sabel, 2006; Elliott and Freeman, 2003; Gereffi and Mayer, 2006). In the global apparel industry, even when well-intentioned brands implement corporate policies that demonstrate their social responsibility to workers in their supplier factories, they are challenged by several obstacles.

First of all, while they may keep a record of who they are sourcing from, these factories are often sourcing fabric from other factories whose location is unknown to the brand. Hence the structure of the global value chain itself poses an issue for enforcement (Gereffi et al., 2005). Secondly, the auditing procedures they employ are not always effective – for example, inaccurate reporting or top-down policing that does not result in sustained improvements in working conditions (Locke et al., 2007; O'Rourke, 1997; Yimprasert and Candland, 2000).

Locke points out that the literature on labour standards in global supply chains has revolved around debates over what should be included in the code of conduct, what auditing procedures should be used to monitor the codes, and whether audits are more transparent when conducted by the company, government, or NGOs (Locke et al., 2009). What he argues is that focusing on measures of compliance alone is too narrow. Instead, he demonstrates that taking a commitment approach to address workplace issues, where the auditor is depicted as a teacher who engages in root cause analysis and joint problem solving, will lead to sustained improvements<sup>9</sup>. Better Work is one such example of a commitment approach. It takes a comprehensive approach to assessing compliance, as well as to the remediation of issues through training and education.

In the literature on global governance and corporate responsibility that has emerged over the last two decades, the term 'labour standards' is often used interchangeably with 'working conditions'. Better Work has delineated between the two by creating a model of compliance clusters, which they use as part of their monitoring and evaluation practices. The first cluster is 'core labour standards'. This includes the abolition of child labour, forced labour, protection from discrimination in respect of employment, and the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining. The second cluster is 'working conditions'. This includes compensation, contracts and human resources, occupational health and safety, and working time.

Previous research, based on evidence from Better Factories Cambodia, has reinforced the validity of these categories using factor analysis, and has demonstrated their appropriateness in assessing labour standards compliance (Brown et al., 2011). In this study, we take a different approach to this analysis by soliciting the feedback of workers on (1) the issues most important to them, and (2) what they believe can make their work better. The components of both compliance clusters (i.e. core labour standards and working conditions) are used to measure workers' perceptions of what makes their work better. In seeking to understand the key research question, 'what do workers think will make their work better?' we consider the following issues: Are workers on board with what the other stakeholders believe will make better work? (i.e. Do the Better Work (BW) compliance clusters broadly cover the range of issues that matter to workers?) Can we

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<sup>9</sup> This is quite unlike a compliance approach that depicts the auditor as policing for violations and applying penalties. Locke suggests that a combination of both approaches should be taken.

learn anything more from focus group discussions than what we already know from BW factory assessments?

## **METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

The following is a brief discussion of the methods used for data collection and analysis. The first component involved conducting focus group discussions with factory workers. The second component involved the analysis of the feedback from these discussions, whereby workers' feedback was coded and organized according to the compliance clusters.<sup>10</sup> In addition to organizing their feedback by these pre-established themes, new themes that emerged in the discussions were also coded and analyzed. This created room for workers to express their feelings about aspects of working life that may not have been anticipated by the researcher but which play a role in shaping their perceptions of what makes better work. Workers were also asked directly to share their opinions on what could make their work better.

Guidelines for the focus group discussions were established following the model of the Better Work compliance clusters. This is a model that has been applied in research on other Better Work country programmes during the monitoring and evaluation assessment process. Research that draws on data derived from using this model is also emerging in the literature (Oka, 2012; Brown et al., 2011; Robertson, 2011; Robertson et al., 2011; Seo, 2011). Basing the guidelines on these already established measures makes the results comparable, which will assist in future research comparing the Better Work programme across countries.

The focus groups took place in three waves – in May 2011, September 2011, and December 2011, and all were digitally recorded. A total of 149 workers participated in the focus group discussions (8-10 people per group), and were recruited by their unions to join the discussions. Although union leaders were asked to recruit workers in the clothing industry only, 16 out of the 149 represented other industries (14 footwear, 1 electronics, 1 umbrella). They are included in this study.<sup>11</sup> In total, there were 111 females and 38 males, representing 41 factories across both industrial cities, 14 of which had subscribed to Better Work.<sup>12</sup>

To analyze the data, we used the qualitative software known as NVivo 9. NVivo is a software tool that allows for efficient sorting and retrieval of data, which is extremely useful in organizing data by themes, as well as identifying new themes in the data. It

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<sup>10</sup> The sorting of data was facilitated by the use of NVivo 9, qualitative software for organizing and coding data. The software also assisted with running queries that helped to identify patterns in the data

<sup>11</sup> No workers have been omitted from this study. Footwear was initially excluded because BW does not yet extend to this industry, but because this is a baseline assessment of working conditions in factories at the beginning stages of BW, the researchers felt it was worthwhile to include the 16 workers from the footwear and other industries for the following reasons: (1) For comparison at a later stage – are conditions improving in BW factories as opposed to non-BW factories? (2) Their experiences were quite similar to workers in the clothing industry. (3) The footwear factories fit a similar model of SA-owned, exporting to SA, as in the clothing industry. We wanted to keep this small sample to compare results within this value chain but representing different industries.

<sup>12</sup> At the time the research was conducted, 11 of the 41 factories had subscribed to Better Work. Within a few months following the research, 3 more factories subscribed. Due to the relative youth of all subscriptions, these latter 3 are regarded as BW factories in this study.

doesn't analyze the data, but rather provides support in the development of an organizing system (Tesch, 1990), which aids in preparing data for analysis. In this study, it allowed us to conduct an integrated analysis, treating the data both qualitatively and quantitatively (Bazeley, 2002).

Initially, nodes (or folders) were created for the five compliance categories mentioned above: core labour standards, compensation, contracts and human resources, occupational safety and health, and working time. New nodes were created for themes that emerged while proceeding through the transcripts. For example, the issue of workers' relations with supervisors came up quite often, so a new node 'supervisor relations' was created. Then, anything that was said regarding supervisor relations was coded (or filed) to that node. Also, by establishing attributes for each participant in the beginning, the findings could be sorted by participant after the coding was complete. This made it possible to analyze the data according to specific attributes (e.g. owner nationality, end market, BW status). Information on owner nationality and end market was available for 142 of the 149 participants.

**Table 2: Demographics of focus group participants by value chain**

	BW		Non BW		TOTAL	
	Factories	Workers	Factories	Workers	Factories	Workers
<b>China-USA</b>	12	43	8	28	<b>20</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>SA-SA</b>	1	12	16	59	<b>17</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>Unassigned</b>	1	2	2	5	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>149</b>

The Better Work Lesotho programme (BWL) was in an early stage of implementation at the time this research took place. Taking this in to consideration, in addition to asking about their working conditions, workers were asked what they believed could make their work better. Hence, the findings are not indicative of the change this programme has had in Lesotho. Rather, they serve as a baseline against which future comparisons can be made. The following is a discussion of the findings.

**FINDINGS**

The findings of the study are presented under the broad headings of (1) the Better Work compliance clusters (broken down by core labour standards and working conditions), and (2) Additional issues. The tables below provide a summary of the frequency with which different issues within these categories were raised. Each 'count' is a reference or statement made by a participant that falls within a given category. Most of the comments made in the discussions are accounted for (i.e. we can match the statement to a worker from either a Chinese- or South African-owned factory). However, it was not possible at all times to be able to identify who was speaking (from the digital recordings of the discussions). These comments are labelled throughout the study as 'unidentified'.<sup>13</sup> The column "owner uncertain" refers to comments made by the 6

<sup>13</sup> Demographic information is available for all participants. 'Unidentified' does not refer to the participant (they are all accounted for) but rather to the source of the comment.

workers in factories for which information on owner and end market is incomplete or uncertain.

**Table 3: Summary of References by Compliance Clusters and Additional Issues**

	Chinese owned	South African owned	Owner uncertain	Unidentified comments	Total
<b>CORE LABOUR STANDARDS</b>					
Child Labour	0	0	0	0	0
Discrimination	9	13	1	3	<b>26</b>
FOA & CB	7	16	2	2	<b>27</b>
Forced Labour	2	6	0	2	10
<b>WORKING CONDITIONS</b>					
Compensation	20	6	5	9	41
Contracts & HR	29	5	0	9	44
OSH	76	26	2	18	<b>125</b>
Working Time	10	7	2	4	23
<b>ADDITIONAL ISSUES</b>					
Chinese management	29	1	0	7	37
Government	6	0	0	4	10
South African management	2	16	0	3	21
Supervisor Relations	40	76	8	32	<b>162</b>
Unions & Collective Power	2	16	2	20	40
Work Life	7	2	0	1	10

A quick glance at the table indicates that the topics of ‘Supervisor Relations’ and ‘OSH’ weighed heavily in the focus group discussions. Though issues related to core labour standards came up relatively less frequently, they shed light on different instantiations of non-compliance, particularly with regard to discrimination in the workplace.

#### **CORE LABOUR STANDARDS**

After an investigation of the statements that workers made on the topic of core labour standards, it became clear that the major issues had to do with discrimination and freedom of association – specifically with respect to pregnancy and HIV/AIDS. Forced overtime was another issue commonly raised. These issues are discussed below.

#### *Discrimination*

Better Work assesses discrimination on grounds of race and origin, religion and political opinion, gender, and ‘other’ grounds. On race and origin, the workforce in Lesotho’s apparel industry is entirely local (Basotho) rather than migrant. As such, discrimination is not generally targeted at any particular group of workers but rather with respect to all workers in the industry. Many reported that they are disrespected by their foreign

managers – often shouted at by Chinese managers, or talked down to by their white<sup>14</sup> South African managers. This could be due to cultural stereotypes about Africans being lazy (a notion referred to in the literature on Chinese attitudes towards African workers) (Lee 2008) or on stereotypes about black Africans being inferior (an Apartheid era legacy that lingers among the attitudes of some managers).

In terms of gender discrimination, there was consensus among the participants that men and women are treated equally in terms of the wages they are paid. Some men said they are discriminated against, stating that it is difficult for them to get jobs because factory managers ‘don’t want male workers’ or prefer female workers because they supposedly ‘know the machines and are easy to work with’.

Workers in South African owned factories mentioned issues relating to discrimination slightly more frequently than workers in Chinese owned factories, but only workers in Chinese owned factories mentioned the issue of discrimination against pregnant women. Their feeling was that pregnant women are being pushed so hard to the point that they leave, rather than being fired outright. Gender discrimination was also discussed in the context of sexual harassment. For example, if a male supervisor is interested in a female worker, makes an advance on the woman, and she refuses him, he can treat her unfairly, by giving her undesirable tasks or making work more difficult for her in some way.

Workers in both types of factories spoke about discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS, an issue that came up both in the focus groups in Maseru (generally Chinese owned), and the focus groups in Maputsoe (generally South African owned). As a policy, workers should not be asked about their health status as a condition of employment. However, several workers indicated that it is still possible for the supervisors to determine one’s status by requiring them to visit the factory clinic. People with HIV said it is easy for them to be identified because they require permission in order to get their medications or go for check-ups. Once people know their status, it makes them vulnerable to mistreatment.

*“When one worker asks to go to a doctor, they want to see the book, they want to see exactly do you have a problem. If the supervisor learns from the doctor that there’s an issue with you, if they know you suffer from this and this, they’ll talk about it all the time.”*

### *Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining*

A compliance assessment in a factory might unearth whether or not there are unions in the factory, if workers are allowed to join unions, and what mechanisms there are for collective bargaining. An important underlying issue related to this topic, however, is the access that workers have to such mechanisms, including the real ‘freedom’ they have to join a union. Anti-union discrimination was raised as an issue in 8 out of the 17 focus group discussions, and the issues put forth by workers raised several important obstacles to their freedom of association. For example, some factories have automatic dues deduction from payroll while others require that workers come individually to the main

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<sup>14</sup> Workers referred to South African managers either as ‘white South African managers’ or simply ‘white managers’, although there are some black South African line managers and production managers. Here, they are referring to their white South African factory managers.

office in order to pay their dues. For some, this is not a problem. For others, it is quite intimidating to do this in front of their bosses, and many let their membership in the union lapse for fear of negative consequences on the job. When automatic deduction is stopped, there is also a tendency for some workers to not pay their dues themselves.

Some workers reported that they are taunted or given unpleasant jobs as a form of discrete punishment. They described it as management pushing them to resign and showing them that the union cannot help them. In addition, once a worker is promoted to supervisor, they are discouraged either from remaining with the union or ever considering joining the union, and rather that they are 'on management's side' now. Some felt that managers use this as a strategy to keep the power of the union at bay.

*“When they see a person that he is strong at the union, they promote them to be supervisors, so he can be on their side.”*

### *Forced Labour*

From a legal point of view, not being able to leave early on payday is not forced labour, nor is mandatory overtime considered to be forced labour. However, when workers spoke about managerial practices such as not allowing workers to leave early on payday, or requiring them to come in for overtime when they had other obligations, they associated this with forced labour.

*“She [supervisor] makes us stay for overtime even if we don't want to come, and on Saturdays when I want to go to funerals I am not allowed. I am supposed to come to work. They make it a must that we come to work for overtime.”*

Some workers said that supervisors will not allow workers to go for lunch if they don't meet their production target. Some workers felt forced to cut their lunch hour to the 'interests of supervisors.' Other supervisors make their workers stay until 5pm on a payday, when they should be leaving at 12pm, which especially worried workers who live far away. A few different workers mentioned this as an issue, demonstrating an important link between workers' safety, and being forced to stay late on paydays.

## **WORKING CONDITIONS**

### *Compensation*

Minimum wages for workers in Lesotho's clothing industry are negotiated on an annual basis by a Wages Advisory Board, and are made public in their government gazette. One way to establish compliance would be to check a factory's pay records against these minimum requirements that have been established. Given that this option was outside the scope of this study, we turned instead to workers' feedback on what they earn, how they spend it, and what changes (in addition to a salary increase) would make this aspect of their work better. Secondly, simply looking at the results of audits that have assessed a company's pay records does not necessarily prove that workers are receiving those wages.

Presented with the topic of 'making ends meet', workers gravitated towards the key concern that their expenditures grossly exceed their income. They also frequently

brought up two additional issues that are indirectly related to compensation: (1) There is inflexibility regarding doctors and sick leave, and (2) pay increases are sporadic and based on favouritism. Most of the compensation related issues raised in the discussions (and in particular the first two key points) were seen by workers as linking directly to their health and safety. With the salaries they earned, they could not afford to properly feed their children, and they were forced to take loans at extremely high interest rates (40%). Discussions around the issue of compensation shed light on the implications it has on a range of issues both within and outside of the workplace.

Additionally, workers stated that they are not provided with compensation in the case of an injury on the job, and many workers found it difficult to take the 12 days of sick leave they are entitled to<sup>15</sup>. First of all, it is difficult to provide the required proof (limited to specific doctors), especially if they usually visit traditional doctors. Secondly, they believe there is an issue of favouritism (e.g. a supervisor who 'does not like you' can keep you from returning to work if you have taken sick leave). This also sheds light on an issue of work-life balance that emerged in the discussions about compensation. Workers expressed a lack of compassion on the part of their supervisors with regard to their own well-being but also with regard to their needs at home (e.g. needing to take care of a family member who is sick).

Workers also felt that individual pay increases are given according to an unwritten policy of favouritism. Many mentioned that there are workers who do the same job and have been there the same amount of time, yet one will receive a raise and the other will not. It is the same with annual bonuses. There will be years that go by without some workers getting a bonus, whereas others in an equal position receive theirs. It's not clear to workers what they can do to ensure they receive a raise or bonus, other than to try to get their supervisor to 'like' them.

*"The supervisor is the one who goes to the manager and says you should give a raise to so-and-so. It's usually because they like them."*

### *Contracts and Human Resources (HR)*

In the focus group discussions, workers' statements related to the topic of contracts and HR could be grouped under three categories: HR relations, Contracts, and the DDPR (Directorate for Dispute Prevention and Resolution). HR relations received the most attention, with 21 out of the 44 statements referring to some aspect of the relationship between workers and personnel.

Across all factories, the HR officer positions are held by local Basotho. This was intentionally built into employment policy, in part to compensate for the language difficulties of non-English-speaking foreign managers. Aside from payroll and other logistics, HR is primarily responsible for dealing with disputes and discipline. When

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<sup>15</sup> In the BW clusters, this issue would fall under Working Time and not Compensation. However, because workers see 'sick leave' as a form of social security and/or benefit, it seemed to line up with point 23 in the clusters (compensation: social security & other benefits). 'Leave' in 'working time' seemed to lack the sense of health and well-being that workers were attaching to not receiving an appropriate amount of sick leave. Whereas, alternatively, they spoke about working time in the strict sense of when they started/ended, etc.

workers have an issue, they must first speak with their line supervisor and then their manager or production manager, but ultimately they can go to HR if the issue remains unresolved. This is a problem for workers who find it difficult to approach their supervisors. The problem is further perpetuated by a sense among workers that HR tends to side with supervisors.

*“If there is a problem between a worker and a supervisor, and a worker goes to personnel, the personnel will take the supervisor’s side.”*

Workers also expressed dissatisfaction with the contracts they are given. First of all, they are often in English and not explained to workers. Secondly, for those workers who did receive contracts, they said that none exceeded one year in length but were renewable annually, making it easy for employers to let go of employees.

Another point brought out in the discussions was the role of bribery in getting hired, and the role of gender in keeping a job that was attained through bribery. One group of workers reported that people standing outside the factory gate try to gain an advantage in getting hired by bribing the supervisor or manager who comes out to select a few workers. Once they are hired, some will try to ask for it back, in particular the men. Male workers will make more of a scene and cause enough disruption to the person who hired him, that they are likely to get their money back. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to see it as a sunk cost rather than confront a supervisor. Additionally, workers are concerned that HR managers are promoted based on their ability to ‘motivate’ (or be harsh with) workers, and that they tend to side with management, brushing workers’ issues aside.

*“When the other personnel got dismissed, the score lady was actually turned into the personnel. She doesn’t talk good. She often harasses us. ...She’s doing that work because of her dirty language.”*

If HR does not help workers resolve their issues, workers have the option of taking their cases to the Directorate for Dispute Prevention and Resolution (DDPR). Some workers in Maseru said they had utilized this option, and that they had won. Most of these people, however, said that though the DDPR ordered their employer to pay them their award, they had not received what was owed to them. Fewer workers in Maputsoe had taken a case to DDPR. Several workers said they were concerned that filing a case against their employer or taking them to court would result in the employer leaving the country.

### *Occupational Safety and Health*

As indicated in the initial summary table, occupational safety and health (OSH) was a key concern raised by workers in the focus group discussions. There are OSH policies outlined in the Labour Code – in particular regarding equipment, the labelling of hazardous chemicals, the use of personal protective equipment, etc. There are also some company-specific policies that have been implemented – for example providing tea breaks or uniforms. In addition, some US multinational companies have codes of conduct with which their supplier factories must abide. Nonetheless, workers did not feel sufficiently protected.

Many workers complained of strong chemicals being used in their work, which affected both the person using the chemical, as well as workers in neighbouring sections. In some cases, unlabelled chemicals led to hazardous encounters for workers. One worker reported that a man had mistaken a chemical for water, and it burnt his insides. Another woman said that there is in-fighting between some of the workers, and she is afraid that someone might one day use that chemical water to poison her food. In addition to hazardous chemicals, several workers mentioned that the machines they use are unsafe, and felt that their bosses wanted to save at the expense of the workers' health. Some said they were using older (non-automatic) sewing machines because they are cheaper, which leads to more finger injuries. Others said they use equipment that has been modified in some way to make production more efficient.

*“You would have instructions on the containers that this thing should be used appropriately like this, but then the Chinese, or our supervisors, will just instruct us to use it wrongly, simply for the convenience of achieving results.”*

Some workers were given personal protective equipment, though most reported that it was either insufficient in quality (i.e. the fumes or dust could pass through it), or was provided only when buyers were visiting. Several people mentioned the issue of buyer visits. Workers who had at some point experienced a buyer visit, or received PPE, were more likely to express discontent with the quality of OSH protection. A possible explanation for this is the heightened awareness of what is possible when management is paying more attention to their working conditions. They were tired of the quick-fixes, and most of their statements included the phrase, “only when the buyers come...” or “we know the buyers are coming when....” This concerned them because, “once we know the buyers are not there, it’s definitely a problem.”

### *Working Time*

Feedback from workers indicated that firms comply with the law on regular hours of work, which is 45 hours per week. Most workers are at work from 7am-4pm Monday to Friday and have an arrangement to work one hour of overtime per weekday, ‘knocking off’ from work at 5pm. Most of the workers participating in this research also reported working overtime on Saturday, anywhere from 6 to 9 hours. Many workers expressed their concern with the 7am start time, which they felt is too early. This is especially so in the winter when it can get extremely cold and it is still dark when they are walking to work. Workers stated that it is difficult to work under such conditions and that they would be much more effective if the working day could be shifted back by one hour. That is, working from 8am-4pm rather than 7am-5pm<sup>16</sup>. Some have raised this concern to their respective managers but no changes have been made.

Another issue related to working time that frequently came up in discussions was that of workers' ability to meet their targets. Most felt that their targets were too high, and that

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<sup>16</sup> Most workers said they work 9 regular hours from 7am-4pm and then one overtime hour from 4-5pm. This resulted in 45 regular hours (Monday-Friday), 5 overtime hours (Monday-Friday), and many worked 6 hours on Saturdays (total 11 overtime hours). This is the legal limit according to national labour law in Lesotho. A number of workers reported that 9 hours per day was too long for them.

they struggled to reach them. Often, there were negative consequences for this. In some situations, workers opted not to take tea breaks or go to the bathroom, in order to maximize their working time. An issue mentioned earlier is that some of the machines are altered for the sake of cost effectiveness. In addition to the implications this has for workers' health and safety, it also impacts on their ability to meet their targets. Some workers complained that this can slow down the work process, and that it puts more pressure on them.

**ADDITIONAL ISSUES**

In addition to using the compliance clusters framework to organize workers' feedback, several additional issues were raised by workers throughout the course of the focus groups. The table below illustrates the categories that were added to the analysis based on the issues that workers' raised most often.

**Table 4: Summary of references within 'Additional issues' by owner nationality**

	<b>Chinese owned</b>	<b>South African owned</b>	<b>Unidentified comments</b>	<b>Total</b>
Supervisor Relations	40	76	40	<b>156</b>
Foreign Management	31	17	10	58
Unions and Collective Power	2	16	22	40
Government	6	0	4	10
Work Life	7	2	1	10

The issue that came up most frequently was that of 'supervisor relations' although a sizeable number of statements were made regarding foreign managers<sup>17</sup> and workers' collective power. Collective power is not a reference to freedom of association and collective bargaining, but rather to workers' desire for (1) unity between the unions, and (2) stronger collective power through this unity. Workers also expressed dissatisfaction with government's passive role in ensuring their well-being, as well as with managements' lack of concern for their work-life balance. In this section we focus on the dominant issue of supervisor relations which, we argue, underpins most of the issues discussed in the focus groups.

*Supervisor Relations*

The issue of supervisor relations came up in virtually all of the focus groups. In some cases, it dominated much of the discussion. Many of the things workers said about issues within the compliance clusters can be related back to the issue of supervisor relations. In fact, supervisor relations were the source of many of the specific issues that were raised. Some workers reported that male supervisors abuse their power by coercing female workers to go out with them. Others said that supervisors find ways to determine whether workers are HIV positive, and will discriminate against them on this basis. Many

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<sup>17</sup> This is arguable related to the role being played by and given to Basotho supervisors, for example, in Chinese owned factories. There, the Basotho supervisor's responsibility is to push production and 'motivate' the workers.

workers said that supervisors use favouritism, which affects who gets a pay raise, who can take sick leave, and who is selected to be a supervisor. When unskilled workers are promoted on the basis of being 'liked' by a supervisor, workers said this ends up creating more work for them, putting them under more pressure to meet their targets. Additionally, supervisors serve as the middle-man between workers and HR, which left many workers feeling like there were obstacles blocking them from addressing their concerns.

The issue of supervisor relations also dominated the discussions outside the realm of the compliance clusters framework. Using the matrix coding function in NVivo to do a search of all feedback on every topic, the word "supervisor" was the top hit. Further investigation led to the discovery of additional sub-themes within the topic of supervisor relations. Specifically, we broke these down in to 7 categories: conflict and power, disrespect, doctors and sick leave, favouritism, forced work, sexual harassment, and skills/knowledge sharing. The following table illustrates the number of references made by workers that could be categorized within one of these sub-themes.

**Table 5: Summary of references within 'supervisor relations' by owner nationality**

	Chinese owned	South African owned	Unidentified comments	Total
Conflict and Power	11	22	23	56
Disrespect	10	17	4	31
Doctors and Sick Leave	1	6	1	8
Favouritism	10	18	6	34
Forced Work	1	2	1	4
Sexual Harassment	0	4	0	4
Skills and Knowledge Sharing	8	11	6	25

The sub theme 'conflict and power' was established to capture what workers described as 'everything changing' when other workers were promoted to being a supervisor. The statements made in this sub category reflect the divide between these two classes of workers, and the ways in which supervisors exert their control. Workers described supervisors as turning against them, not listening to their concerns, and using petty issues against them as a form of control. Some suggested this is due to the pressure they are under to impress their managers, in order to hold on to their supervisory positions.

*"Before then they are just on the same level with everyone else, like you can eat together, but once they're promoted you find that the person eats alone."*

The sub theme 'disrespect' was created to capture workers' perceptions of feeling mistreated and talked down to in the workplace. Many reported that they are shouted at, and others said they are treated like slaves. Several brought up the issue of young supervisors disrespecting their elders, speaking to them however they wanted to in the workplace. Though some of the statements were with reference to Chinese supervisors, workers often spoke of issues with the local supervisors.

*"I have a problem with the Basotho supervisors. They don't treat us well, and they treat us like lunatics when we talk to them."*

Another key issue for workers was that of 'favouritism'. The word 'favouritism' was

among the top 25 words used most often in all references to supervisor relations. Favouritism was discussed largely in the context of promotions, pay increases, and punishments or mistreatment. Workers felt that certain people received certain advantages from supervisors because they were either their family member, romantic partner, or someone they 'liked' better than the others. Additionally, these informal selection procedures led to issues with skills and knowledge sharing.

*“Workers who are ultimately elected, you find that basis is not that they have experience or that they are bright or something like that, it’s just because you can talk whatever you like. So you get these people who don’t know work, yet they supervise us.”*

Workers felt they could not learn from their mistakes or that they spent too much time trying to show other workers how to do their jobs. In both cases, this was a result of supervisors not having the knowledge to show them how to do their work better. This slowed down production on the line, which led to managers putting increased pressure on the line supervisors. Inevitably, it was the workers who ended up feeling the brunt of this pressure.

### *Foreign Management*

In the context of our research questions, we anticipated that workers in Chinese owned factories would have less favourable perceptions of their working conditions than would workers in South African factories. The literature on Chinese management in Africa suggests that Chinese businessmen view Africans as lazy and selfish, interested in their own benefit at the expense of collective and corporate good (Lee, 2008). Due to this lack of cohesiveness, it was expected that Chinese owners would pay little attention to working conditions or to workers in general. In one of the focus groups, a worker reinforced this expectation when she said,

*“The Chinese do not work with people nicely. They are rude. It’s like they have been trained to talk to Basotho in a certain way, not that they don’t speak English or Sesotho. They just speak to people as they please.”*

In South Africa, many employers choose to, or must, recognize unions in their workplaces. They have become familiar with negotiating, and can be expected to understand that unions are a part of every day working life. It was therefore expected that South African owners would pay more attention to working conditions and to workers in general. One worker commented,

*“Our [South African] manager has allowed us to have a committee who will represent us and talk about all issues.”*

We did find partial support for our expectations. Workers in Chinese owned factories had almost twice as many complaints about their foreign managers than did workers in South African owned factories. Also, some workers alluded to the attentiveness of their South African managers who allowed workers to come talk to them about their issues. Contrary to our expectation, however, we found that many workers in South African factories had an intense fear of their South African owners.

A number of South African owners do not actually come to work every day at the factory. Some live in Durban and come to the factory once every few weeks. Some live just across

the border in South Africa, but leave the daily operation of the facility to their mid-level managers and supervisors. Workers said that when their owners were coming to the factory they were instructed to keep quiet and keep their heads down. Some said they fear their South African owner so much that they hide when they see him coming. They said that the owner can fire them on the spot, instantly, without any notice.

Also contrary to our expectations, we found that workers in both types of factories were equally dissatisfied with their working conditions. Though some of the issues varied slightly between the two types of factories, the overarching theme in both Chinese and South African owned factories was that supervisor relations, not necessarily foreign management, was driving a lot of the issues.

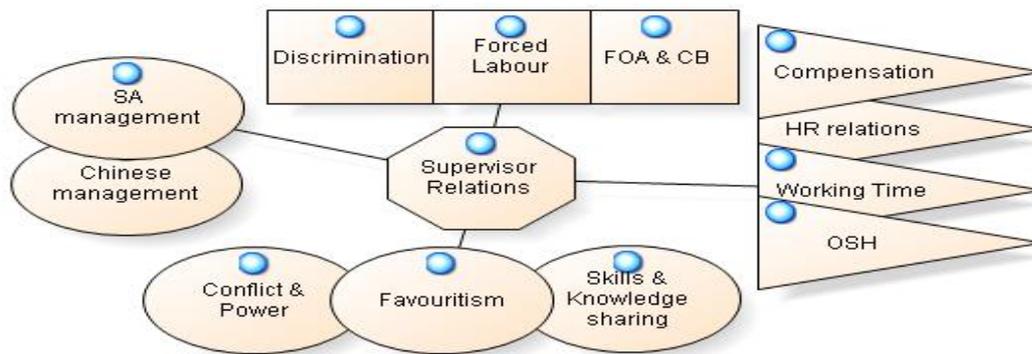
Upon closer inspection of the comments made regarding Chinese management, many were with reference to Chinese supervisors. In Chinese owned factories, there is generally one Basotho supervisor appointed per line, and one Chinese supervisor for every two or three lines. The Chinese supervisor is in charge of the technical aspects of work (e.g. setting up for new styles, showing workers a task), and the Basotho supervisor is in charge of 'motivating' the workers. This set-up, whereby Basotho supervisors are selected to push the workers, predisposes them to be harsh or exert control over the workers. If someone makes a mistake, or a worker has a question, it is difficult to ask as they are worried they will be punished in some way.

In the South African owned factories, there is generally one supervisor per line, and they are most often Basotho. Workers in these factories described promotion procedures as being random or based on favouritism, and that Basotho supervisors often abused their positions of authority. In addition, workers felt that these supervisors often had little experience, which made it difficult for them to properly learn from their mistakes.

In both cases, there is little interaction between the managers and the supervisors before the supervisors take to the floor and begin overseeing the workers. Furthermore, owners and managers spend relatively little time on the factory floor, where the workers and supervisors interact. The lack of training and formal promotion procedures impacts negatively on workers. When they can't learn properly, production slows down. They turn to each other for help, and many shop stewards reported that they spend a lot of their time showing workers how to do things, or fixing their mistakes.

Additionally, this has a negative impact on workers' morale. They are punished easily, and in some cases squeezed out of their jobs (e.g. when a supervisor wants to hire someone they prefer). As noted above, some workers said that the increased pressure to meet high targets has resulted in their not taking tea breaks or going to the bathroom. This can have serious consequences for their health, as well as detrimental consequences for performance. The following figure illustrates the linkages between the issue of supervisor relations with core labour standards, working conditions, and additional issues brought up by workers.

**Figure 1: The nucleus of supervisor relations**



### *Unions and Collective Power*

Many workers made reference to the unions in Lesotho’s clothing industry not working well together. Some spoke about the competition for power that goes on between the unions, fighting for their own membership rather than the collective benefit of all workers. Others mentioned in-fighting within one of the unions, whereby mixed messages are being given to workers, leaving them confused about the union’s overall agenda and/or their involvement in specific instances of collective action. There was a distinction between the workers in Maseru and Maputsoe. The former recently participated in a stay-away campaign led jointly by all five unions. The latter had not participated at all, and pinned the blame on friction between the two union leaders.

*“Workers get confused because he’s [Union X] but [Union Y] union leader will talk to the workers and say nothing is going to happen, so continue with work... Some will go with the other union leaders, others will not do anything, they’ll listen to the person who says nothing is going to happen. So it divides them and they get confused.”*

Workers also expressed criticism about their fellow workers, arguing that they are too passive and too protective of their own individual security rather than fighting for the rights of workers as a collective group.

*“Workers love money so much that they’ll say I’m going to continue to work, not go to Maseru and participate in strike... It’s an individual perspective that I’d rather go to work, working for my family and struggling. Why go on strike.”*

What they wanted was for the unions to come together so that workers could be on the same page and have a stronger voice. Workers in Maputsoe were especially tired of the in-fighting and the mixed messages they received. Moreover, they were growing increasingly frustrated as they saw the workers in Maseru joining together under their unions, while the unions in Maputsoe continued to argue with each other.<sup>18</sup> They learned about the stay-away campaign in Maseru, and saw that those workers could unite, but felt restricted from doing so themselves, given the climate between the unions in Maputsoe and the perceived attitude among the workers that ‘half a loaf is better than no loaf at all.’

<sup>18</sup> In 2011, there were a couple of stay-away campaigns (and threats of more) organized by the clothing industry unions in conjunction with other sectors (i.e. transport and education). Most workers in Maseru participated in the stay-away but none in Maputsoe did.

*“Even if we try and unite and say let’s form a union so that we can be able to approach our managers, it will only be 10 people out of 100 people.”*

In Maseru, workers spoke with pride about having participated in the stay-away campaign. Though they didn’t see immediate results in terms of the wage increase they wanted, they felt like they had accomplished something important by virtue of joining together in a common struggle. Most talked about enjoying it, even though they stayed home without pay for several days.

*“We are happy that the unions have become one, and now they’re just working together.. This time they sat together, talked and they had that solution of becoming one.”*

Having relied on workers’ feedback to learn about the issues most important to them, this last section turns exclusively to workers again, specifically addressing the question: “What do you think will make your work better?” Below we analyse their responses.

## WHAT WORKERS WANT

As we went through the feedback of workers, we coded all of their responses to the question, “What do you think will make your work better?” in a separate node called ‘Make work better’. Additionally, any time they spoke about an issue and made a reference to how it could be better, or how they would prefer the situation to be, we coded those suggestions to the node ‘Make work better’ as well. Workers offered suggestions for how to make work better in most of the ‘compliance cluster’ categories, in all of the ‘additional issues’ categories, and presented a few other ideas as well. The table below illustrates how many references to ‘making work better’ were made in different categories.

**Table 6: What can make work better, by compliance cluster and additional issues**

Compliance Category	Compliance Item	# Suggestions	Total
Core Labour Standards	Core Labour Standards	6	6
Working Conditions	Compensation	10	36
	Contracts & HR	7	
	OSH	14	
	Working Time	5	
Additional Issues	Supervisor Relations	14	24
	Chinese Management	5	
	South African Management	1	
	Government	4	
Other suggestions	Training	24	39
	Union Unity	7	
	Better Work	6	
	Discussions	2	

The top 5 words used most frequently in workers’ suggestions for how to make work better were: (1) Training, (2) Supervisors, (3) Managers, (4) Shop Stewards, and (5) Skills. This is illustrated in the following ‘tag cloud’.

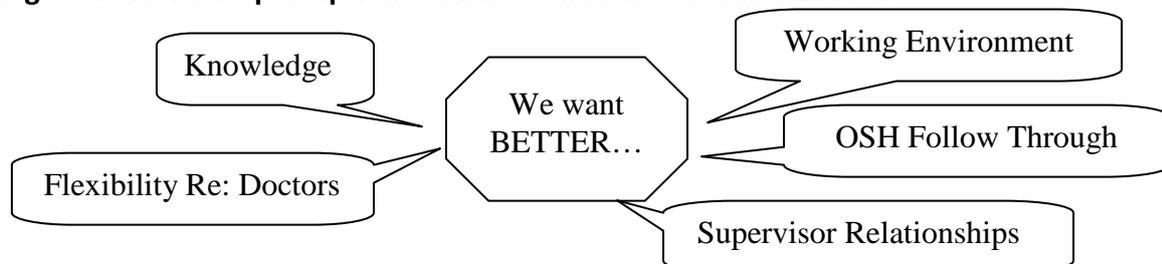
**Figure 2: Words used most frequently when describing what can make better work**

accidents afraid aid aids awareness back bad **bank** break build buyers **bw** care  
 chemicals children **chinese** chronic communicate **communication** compensation  
 complaints computer **concern** conditions conflicts **contracts** control coughs cut differently  
 discriminated donations eat employed employer employers environment freedom  
 full government happy hard heaters heating **help** **helpful** hours  
**human** improve increment involve issues job knowledge **law** learn  
 leave love **management** **managers** medical  
 member **money** mugged **need** owners paid pension **personnel**  
 pregnant provide **relationship** **rights** rules salary self shifts  
**shop** sick skill **skills** social **stewards** straight supervisor  
**supervisors** tea technical together train  
**training** unions unite voice warm water  
 winter wish women workshops

**WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT CAN MAKE THEIR WORK BETTER**

Not only did workers offer their perspectives on what could be made better in the workplace, they also offered suggestions for how to go about doing this, or what they believed could lead to the changes they wanted. The following figure summarizes the main ways in which work could be made better.

**Figure 3: Workers' perceptions of what can make their work better**



First, workers want to be *better equipped with knowledge* about the law and their rights, and to have *better relationships with their supervisors*. Both of these relate to the broader issue of supervisor relations that came up throughout the focus groups. In

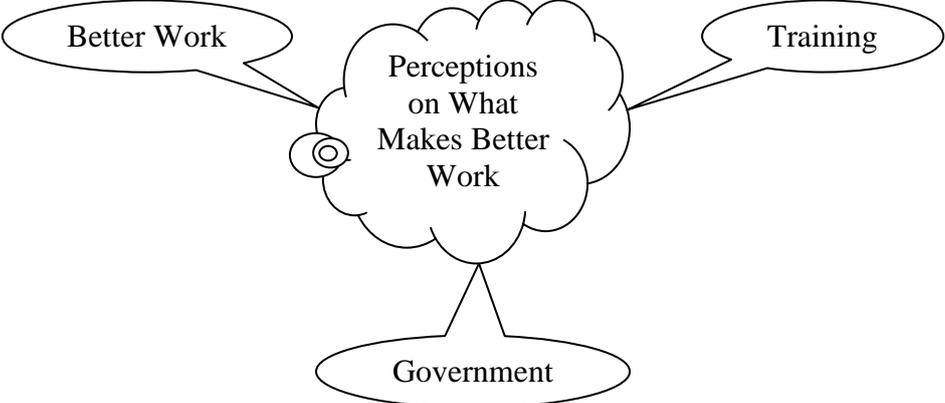
addition to their belief that work would be made better through better treatment from their supervisors, they also wanted to play a role themselves by being more aware of what they are entitled to, what is allowed in the workplace, and what is not.

Workers also frequently mentioned the need for *better follow-through on OSH practices*, not just the quick fixes that currently take place when buyers visit the factories. They also desired a more comfortable and *better working environment*. Several reported that they would be able to work better if they had heaters and hot water, or if they were provided with something to dampen the noise in the factories, or medications in the case of rashes or cuts. Another suggestion was to begin work one hour later in the winter, to avoid the dark (which is dangerous) and the extreme cold (which they said makes them inefficient on the job). Furthermore, if they do happen to fall sick, they want *better flexibility in terms of the doctors* they can see. This also came up in the context of showing compassion for the workers' needs at home as several mentioned that they are not permitted to take leave to tend to a sick child. In general, many of these ideas could be captured in the broader theme of health and safety.

In fact most of the issues raised throughout the focus groups could be broadly encompassed as issues of supervisor relations and health and safety. So it was not surprising that most of their perspectives on what could make their work better related back to these themes. Given the issues they raised, and their ideas about what could be better, they offered the following broad suggestions for how to make work better: (1) Training, (2) Government Enforcement, and (3) Better Work.

**WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS ON HOW TO MAKE SURE CHANGES TAKE PLACE**

**Figure 4: Workers' perceptions on how to make sure changes take place**



*Training*

Throughout the focus groups, workers stressed the need for supervisor training, particularly with reference to people skills and how to communicate with workers. Some also mentioned supervisor training in the context of basic skills. Many felt that supervisors are promoted based on favouritism or their ability to be tough on workers, and that they often lack experience, which ends up creating more work for the workers, or contributing to the tension in their relationship. They talked about being punished for making mistakes, when they would rather be trained or shown the work in a proper way.

*“People will be happy in the sense that they will be able to approach the supervisors and talk about their problems they are having and he will be able to show them and guide them with their work, instead of insulting them and shouting.”*

Workers also talked about training for upper management, in that they should be the first to understand how to treat workers properly. Then, when they hire supervisors, they can share that knowledge themselves. Otherwise, workers felt that supervisors are acting without a proper role model and can treat the workers how they please.

*“Also management should be the one learning...he doesn’t even care if a supervisor can insult anybody in front of the workers. He doesn’t care.”*

Several mentioned the value that would be added by training shop stewards. Given the current disconnect between supervisors and workers, shop stewards end up showing workers how to fix their mistakes, and trying to motivate them as well. They felt that by training shop stewards in skills and on the law they would be best equipped to pass on that knowledge to the workers.

Finally, workers said that they themselves should be trained. Interestingly, many of them said they would want training in order to acquire a broader range of skills so that they could eventually leave their factory jobs. They expressed a feeling of being trapped, unable to look for other work because of their lack of skills. As mentioned earlier, many workers also said that they wanted training in the law and human rights so that they could stand up for themselves.

### *Government*

Several workers mentioned that the government should play a more active role in enforcing the law. There was a general sense of distrust, in that they felt government tends to give employers the freedom to do as they please in the industry and country at large.

*“We are slaves, you know that. In this country, we don’t belong. This country is here for the Chinese.”*

But there was also a perception that government could force employers to take certain actions, for example to enforce that employers subscribe to Better Work. In this way, they felt that the government could play an interventionist role in ensuring that managers and supervisors received the training they need, and that their working environment would be improved.

*“The problem now is that there is lack of enforcement from the side of the government, but we do believe that there is a role in making sure that [Better Work] is achieved.”*

They also saw the Labour Department as having a distinct role in improving their conditions. They suggested that Labour inspectors work with shop stewards to educate them about their rights and about proper workplace practices. Also, by working with shop stewards, they would learn the real issues concerning workers in the workplace, which workers felt are not covered properly by the managers who show them around on inspections.

## *Better Work*

Workers believed that Better Work could be an impartial auditor. Many of them raised issues related to buyer visits, including how they prepared for the visits, what safety equipment they received just before buyer visits, and how certain sections of the factory are closed for buyer visits. They felt that, with Better Work doing the monitoring, they would be able to really look for everything and see what is actually going on.

*“If the factory owners agree to the programme, it will help ease the work.”*

Workers also felt that Better Work could bring change. Many perceived Better Work as playing the role of mediator between employers and workers. They wanted Better Work to offer the training to supervisors, as well as to workers. They also hoped that Better Work would play a mediating role between the unions, to bring them together. Without unity between the unions, the workers felt that their collective power was compromised and that it would be nearly impossible to achieve the kind of changes they wanted. Again, they believed Better Work would be successful only if government enforced it.

*“Better Work should be the mediator between the workers and the managers, the whole hierarchy. Better Work should come between.”*

## **CONCLUSION**

Better Work assessments cover a broad range of workplace issues and, indeed, when workers spoke about the issues most important to them, several fell within the categories against which compliance is assessed by Better Work. Within the discussions around these issues, however, an important theme emerged. Namely, that the issue of supervisor relations underpins much of what workers are dissatisfied with in the workplace. In talking about core labour standards, it was often the supervisors who were discriminating against workers on the basis of pregnancy or their health status, and the supervisors who workers' felt were forcing them to stay for overtime. In talking about working conditions, workers recounted stories of unskilled supervisors getting in the way of their own learning on the job, preventing them from speaking to HR about their issues, berating them, or not allowing them to take breaks for their medications. Most of what workers said, whether it was about provisions for their health and safety, their ability to meet their targets, or their overall morale at work, could be traced back to the issue of supervisor relations.

Better Work has taken steps to train supervisors in Lesotho's clothing industry, based on some feedback about supervisors needing training in people skills. It is important to note, however, that the needs run much deeper than how to interact with workers. The lack of a formal selection procedure is leading to instances of favouritism and bribery, lending itself to a further divide between workers and supervisors, and has implications for the relationships between workers as well. Their lack of technical skills slows down production, as workers cannot turn to them for advice. Additionally, workers would not want to turn to supervisors because they find them generally harsh to deal with, and

work in fear of punishment.

Contrary to expectations, workers in Chinese owned factories did not speak overall less favourably about their working conditions than did workers in South African owned factories. Though there were some issues that they mentioned more often (e.g. OSH and buyer visits), there were other issues that were mentioned more frequently by workers in South African factories (e.g. union discrimination and working time). Furthermore, it was clear from the discussions that workers' issues in the workplace had less to do with the nationality of their owners, and more to do with their relationships with their supervisors, most of whom are Basotho. As mentioned earlier, it seems that both Chinese and South African managers have a somewhat distant relationship with their supervisors. What interaction there is appears to be limited, and then supervisors are left to their own devices on the factory floor. In Chinese factories, although there is also a Chinese supervisor on the line with a Masotho supervisor, it is generally the job of the Masotho supervisor to 'push' the workers.

Workers felt strongly that training of supervisors would significantly improve their working conditions. Additionally, they believed there should be training for top managers, shop stewards, and workers' as well. Increasing awareness of one's rights, as well as educating their superiors on how to interact with them, was a combination of measures that workers felt would make their work better.

The level of detail collected in focus groups allowed for a nuanced understanding of the root causes of the most important issues to workers. By including workers in their full capacity as worker stakeholders, researchers and policy makers in corporate social responsibility and international labour standards will be better informed, and opportunities for improvements will increase. Additionally, workers are able to exercise their dignity by giving direct input on what can make their work better. As one worker eloquently ended a focus group discussion,

*“It is helpful to discuss these issues because it raises awareness on the fact that we should know our rights, and we should know why we wake up in the morning and go to work, and also so that we could reach our goals at the end of the day.”*

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