▶ # Workers' Voice within and beyond Participation Committees

A Case Study of Two Bangladeshi Garment Factories

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Workers' Voice within and beyond Participation Committees: A Case Study of Two Bangladeshi Garment Factories

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Abstract

This study evaluates the effectiveness of Participation Committees (PCs) in addressing workers' concerns in Bangladeshi garment factories. In-depth analysis of two garment factories is conducted based on data collected from the ILO-IFC Better Work program and the Garment Supply Chain Governance project. Using workers' own articulation of their concerns as the starting point of analysis, the concept of 'workers' voice' is applied to analyse PC functionality in relation to alternative/existing voice mechanisms at the workplace. The thesis argues that existing and more established systems at the factory-level such as informal leadership hierarchies among workers and alternative grievance channels can supersede PC's role in addressing workers' concerns. This is especially the case in Bangladesh where the state's inadequate regulatory oversight diminishes the legitimacy of formal structures and limited union visibility paves way for alternative forms of leadership among workers. Besides existing legal frameworks, external initiatives and brands can also influence how workers' concerns are articulated, which consequently further limits PCs engagement with more contentious topics. This study makes three key contributions: Firstly, based on a locally grounded analysis, it reinforces existing scholarship on the influence of legal regulations, management and detrimental purchasing practices on workers' voice in global supply chains. Secondly, the study exemplifies a way to incorporate local perspectives to deepen understanding of formal voice mechanisms. And thirdly, it contributes empirical insights into the functioning of factory-based voice mechanisms within the context of Bangladesh.

Acknowledgements

Abbreviations

BLA – Bangladesh Labour Act 2006

BLR – Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015

CBA – Collective Bargaining Agreement

CPD – Centre for Policy Dialogue

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

DIFE – Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments

FGD – Focus Group Discussion

IFC – International Finance Corporation

ILO – International Labour Organisation

MoLE – Ministry of Labour and Employment

MSI – Multi-Stakeholder Initiative

PICC – Performance Improvement Consultative Committees

PC – Participation Committee

WPC – Workers' Participation Committee (same as PC)

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1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, legally mandated 'Participation Committees' (henceforth PCs) are considered a significant mechanism for garment workers' voice and representation by some industry stakeholders while others perceive it as ineffective and even at odds with more genuine forms of worker engagement. The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2006 and Bangladesh Labour Rules (BLR) 2015 outline guidelines on PC formation, objectives and activities at the factory-level. In practice, while international brands and development partners emphasize these committees as important vehicles for workers' representation, local actors such as government authorities and garment workers' unions and federations are minimally involved with PC-related activities.

For trade unions and federations, PCs are perceived as a threat due to excessive management influence and motives to use it as a substitute to unions (Bair, Anner, & Blasi, 2020; Kerckhoffs, 2019; Vogt, 2017). Although recent amendments mandate PCs only in factories without registered unions (Government of Bangladesh, 2018), union visibility at the workplace remains low. The overall unionizing environment in the country continues to be fragmented often due to opposing political affiliations and lack of resources and capacity to represent workers' collective interests against a politically enmeshed alliance of influential employers' associations and a government that suppresses collective dissent, often through brutal force (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Hossain & Akter, 2021; Rahman & Langford, 2012). Under these circumstances, workers tend to doubt the reliability of unions and are hesitant to openly associate as members in fear of retaliation.

The local governing institutions that also oversee all other industrial sectors remain significantly under resourced and are ineffective at impartially enforcing regulations. Local regulatory bodies collect minimal data on the actual functioning of PCs and lack capacity to regulate the garment sector due to significant staff shortage, inadequate reporting and monitoring systems and lack of authority for enforcing legal regulations (Akhter, Rutherford, & Chu, 2019; MoLE, 2021). This local governance vacuum is instead addressed by private

and transnational governance initiatives led by brands, third-party auditing firms and development agencies.

When first mandated in 2006, the provision to establish PCs was rarely implemented. It only started to gain prominence after the Rana Plaza factory collapse in April 2013 (Kabeer, Huq, & Sulaiman, 2020). Despite being aware of cracks in the building, workers employed at Rana Plaza were forced to return to work, which led to the deaths of 1134 garment workers and injured over 1100 more (CPD, 2015). Following this incident, the lack of workers' voice in garment factories gained prominence in transnational governance initiatives such as the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety[2]. With immense international pressure and in light of faltering union representation, the PC started to gain recognition as a medium for worker engagement and towards developing leadership capabilities (Bair, Anner, & Blasi, 2020; CPD, 2019; Better Work, 2013). PCs also became a common tool for implementing various factory-level interventions under the assumption that it represents both worker and management interests (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021).

The persistence of substandard wages and challenging working conditions, however, raises questions about whether mechanisms such as the PC are well-suited to address workers' most pressing concerns. Despite the garment sector's significant contributions to the country's economy, low wages, weak representation and lack of social support for workers indicate that regulations and standards often fall short of addressing workers' basic needs (Saxena, Mullins, & Tripathi, 2021). Under such circumstances, the significance of voice and representative mechanisms for workers at garment factories in Bangladesh is a compelling topic for further research.

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[2] In 2020, the Accord transitioned into the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), which is a local tripartite-based initiative involving employers' associations, trade unions and brand representatives. Similar to the Accord, it has a mandate is to oversee fire, structural and other health and safety-related activities in collaboration with government institutions (RMG Sustainability Council, 2020).

Existing studies have demonstrated that similar factory-based committees in global supply chains are largely ineffective towards representing workers' collective concerns especially in the absence of strong union support (Anner, 2017, 2018; Bartley & Zhang, 2012; Chan, 2015; Egels-Zanden & Merk, 2014; Khan, 2021). Fewer authors have situated analysis of PCs within the context of Bangladesh where these committees are mandated by law and unions are yet to be established as a viable alternative for representation (CPD, 2019; Granath, 2016; Kabeer, Huq, & Sulaiman, 2020; Kerckhoffs, 2019; Reinecke, Donaghey, & Hoggarth, 2017). These studies combine theoretical perspectives from industrial relations and global supply chain governance, and emphasize stakeholder interests and institutional challenges as key factor's affecting factory-based committees. Due to the weak state of governance and limited avenues for workers' representation in countries like Bangladesh, others have applied a bottom-up view or more locally grounded approaches to assessing different forms of workers' voice and collective action. The latter reflects how global factors are negotiated through local norms and translated into everyday practices and relations at the factory-floor; however, very few have applied such an approach to systematically explore the role of PCs (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Mahmud, 2013; Quayyum, 2019). The topic of employee voice particularly in globally dispersed supply chains is a growing area of academic research that requires novel approaches to understand the functionality of voice at the confluence of local and global forces; this thesis aims to contribute to this developing field.

The current study draws from existing scholarship while emphasizing locally grounded perspectives to explore the effectiveness of PC committees in Bangladeshi garment factories. PCs are viewed as a form of voice mechanism situated within the political and socioeconomic context of Bangladesh as a supplier country in the garment supply chain. The committee is examined using the conceptual lens of 'employee voice' coined by Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey, & Freeman (2020) that includes both collective and individual, as well as informal and formal forms of voice. Such a broad concept is applied since PC effectiveness is determined in relation to alternative manifestations of voice at the factory-level to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how workers and management act upon their interests

in light of locally and globally imposed limitations. Furthermore, the methodology emphasizes workers' own articulation of their concerns as the starting point of inquiry as existing labour regulations or codes of conduct do not fully capture workers' interests and also because an understanding of *workers'* voice should be based on those it is meant to represent. This approach is significant as it recognizes the agency of local actors and has substantial implications for informing policy and practice towards supporting more effective forms of workers' voice in garment supply chains.

Based on findings from case studies of two garment factories with elected PCs in Bangladesh, it is argued that existing and more established systems at the factory-level such as informal leadership hierarchies among workers and alternative grievance channels can supersede PC's role in addressing workers' concerns. This is especially the case in Bangladesh where the state's inadequate regulatory oversight diminishes the legitimacy of formal structures and limited unions visibility paves way for alternative forms of leadership among workers. Moreover, besides existing legal frameworks, external initiatives and brands can also influence how workers' concerns are articulated, which consequently limits PCs engagement with more contentious topics.

This study makes three key contributions: Firstly, it confirms existing scholarship on the influence of factors such as legal regulations, management influence and detrimental business practices on workers' voice in global supply chains. Secondly, the study exemplifies a way to incorporate local perspectives to deepen understanding of formal voice mechanisms in global supply chains. And thirdly, it contributes empirical insights into the functioning of factory-based voice mechanisms within the context of Bangladesh.

The next section provides an overview of existing research on the topic that has subsequently guided the development of a conceptual framework for this study. This is followed by the 'Methodology' section outlining the application of the case study methodology, selection of cases and data sources. The detailed 'Findings and Analysis' section includes key observations on factories A and B, which are then examined in relation to the research

question and existing literature under the 'Discussion' section and then followed by a final 'Conclusion'.

2. Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This section provides an overview of existing research on the effectiveness of participation committees and workers' voice, which subsequently informs the conceptual framework for this study. The first and second parts reflect prominent approaches to evaluating effectiveness of factory-based participation committees in global supply chains and within the context of Bangladesh. Since this thesis argues that PC effectiveness is affected by existing forms of voice at the workplace, the third part delves into the concept of employee 'voice', which in addition to participatory committees also more broadly encompasses other channels for representing workers concerns and interests.

2.1. Effectiveness of Factory-based Participatory Committees

Several studies have evaluated the effectiveness of Performance Improvement and Consultative Committees (PICCs), a type of bipartite factory-based committee advocated by the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) Better Work Program[3], which is a multistakeholder governance initiative seeking to improve labour standards predominantly in the garment supply chain; the program establishes PICCs even in countries where such committees are not required by law. The objective of these bipartite committees is to enhance dialogue between management and workers, whereby workers are represented through periodically elected representatives. A quasi-experimental impact study of five Better Work programs (Vietnam, Indonesia, Jordan, Haiti and Nicaragua) indicated that the quality of PICCs is positively correlated with improvements in the provision of adequate drinking water and toilet facilities, incidents of verbal abuse, and reduced symptoms such as dizziness, aches and thirst (Brown, et al., 2016). A qualitative impact study of the garment sector in Lesotho, noted PICCs' constructive role in addressing concerns related to health and safety and problematic supervisor-worker relations (Pike, 2020). Other studies analysed the structure and functioning of these committees and underscored key factors that influence its

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[3] Data from this program is also used for the current study.

effectiveness such as management oversight, protection of workers against retaliation, regularity of consultations, scope of topics discussed, trade union representation and gender representation (Anner, 2017; Khan, 2021). These studies also incorporated audit data from the Better Work program, which were based on local and international labour standards and also emphasized the roles of external actors such unions, brands and external governance initiatives regarding PICC functionality.

Another set of literature have drawn rather unoptimistic conclusions regarding the potential of factory-based committees due to reasons such as hypercompetitive purchasing practices of international brands and imbalanced power relations of globally dispersed stakeholders in supply chains. PICCs in Vietnamese garment factories were found to be ineffective in addressing cost and time sensitive issues due to their brand customers' purchasing practices and local factors such as the lack of legal protection and restrictive unionizing environment (Anner, 2018). In countries where committees are not mandated by law, the sustainability of factory-based committees were tied to the presence of external monitoring actors like brands or the Better Work program (Pike, 2020), since often times efforts to establish committees were '*not born of workers' own initiatives, but of a culture of dependency*', which undermined solidarity and exposed elected representatives to management retaliation (Chan, 2015). Kuruvilla, & Li, (2021) also noted that factory-based committees were ineffective as a voice mechanism especially when there is a lack of legislation and unions to protect committee members from management retaliation. In many cases, committees were used as a management tactic to undermine union activities and as a superficial display of worker representation to meet brand requirements (Bartley & Zhang, 2012; Egels-Zanden & Merk, 2014). Overall, the evidence suggests that workers in global supply chains fundamentally require strong trade union-based representation in order to engage in collective bargaining processes to reform industry standards.

2.2. PCs in Bangladesh

Similar to other garment manufacturing countries, Bangladeshi manufacturers are located within the lower bargaining end of the global garment supply chain. The country has several

defining characteristics relevant to factory-based committees and the application of workers' voice; these include a legal mandate to establish PCs, a relatively less restrictive but nonetheless challenging unionizing environment, political nexuses between employers and governments as well as between unions and political parties that undermine the state and unions' role in representing workers' interests, and the significant influence of international actors through industry governance initiatives.

Under these circumstances, a limited number of studies have systematically explored PCs in Bangladesh and gathered mixed conclusions on its effectiveness towards addressing workers' concerns. In line with the wider literature on factory-based committees, Granath's (2016) study on a brand-led Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative to support PCs highlighted the significance of trade union representation in committees, while conversely, Kerckhoff (2019) noted that both PCs and factory-based trade unions were ineffective in Bangladesh due to supply chain and institutional features such as weak enforcement of legal regulations, power imbalances, cultural barriers and complexity of apparel value chains. Both studies only focused on formally recognized voice mechanisms (PCs and unions) located within a context where informality in employment relations (Mahmud, 2013) and the lack of enforcement often diminish the expected outcomes of formalized initiatives.

Alternative analyses from industrial relations and governance perspectives highlight PC's productive roles in maintaining industrial stability, tackling significant trust deficit between workers and employers and essentially paving the way for stronger union leadership. PC representatives were noted for their role in mitigating sector-wide labour unrest in November 2016 (CPD, 2019), which were aimed at increasing wages and to protest against unfair dismissals of demonstrating workers (The Daily Star, 2016); this also presents an interesting contradiction in that one form of voice mechanism (PC) was utilized to diffuse another commonly deployed worker-led tactic (industry unrests) in pursuit of their fundamental interest to increase wages. In another large-scale study of over 200 garment factories in Bangladesh, Kabeer, Huq and Sulaiman's (2020) found correlations between wage improvements and positive perceptions about PCs; qualitative accounts of workers described PCs as an effective mechanism for communicating daily workplace related complaints to the

management for issues like bathroom maintenance, leaves and supervisor behaviour. These insights provide convincing reasons to further delve into exactly how PCs interact with changes at the factory-level, or in other words, to explore the causal links (if any) between PCs and contentious issues such as wages, working hours and workplace relations.

2.3. Contextualizing Workers' Voice

Participatory factory-based committees are only one form of voice mechanism, which in this case, is situated in a local institutional environment with weak government oversight and union representation, and within a global supply chain mired by cutthroat competition. A key assumption in this study is that under such circumstances, workers exercise agency through more nuanced techniques and channels. Therefore, to fully understand how voice works, it is necessary to look at alternative ways in which workers' concerns are responded to at the workplace.

The concept of 'employee voice' can broaden the analytic scope for this study and ground understanding of PCs in the lived reality of workers. Employee voice is explored in numerous disciplines albeit in varying capacities. For example, in organisational behaviour employee voice serves to further management objectives whereas in industrial relations voice signifies employee interests which may at times oppose management goals and is manifested through formal representative mechanisms such as trade unions and collective bargaining (Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey, & Freeman, 2020). To overcome such variations across disciplines, Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey, & Freeman (2020) propose a more general definition of voice as '*ways and means through which employees attempt to have a say'* that can be formal or informal, collective or individual, and with the intention to initiate change while navigating varying interests. This broader definition encapsulates the multiplicity of voice as well as representation, both formal and informal avenues for communicating interests and enabling change at the workplace either individually or through collective means. Furthermore, it recognizes the covergence of varying interests that shape voice at the workplace, which is significant in the case of global supply chains where 'employee voice' at the factory-level is further shaped by brand interests situated in different institutional contexts (Anner, 2018).

The combination of supply chain dynamics, local governance and employment norms and perceptions influence how these factors are translated into everyday practices at the factory-level. For example, Gunawardana (2014) reconceptualizes voice '*as a form of historically contextualized agency*' and explores this through social interactions at a garment factory inside an export processing zone (EPZ) in Sri Lanka where social norms influenced language and informal pathways for handling grievances at the workplace. Along similar lines, Mahmud (2013) emphasized the historical specificity of labour relations in Bangladesh's export-oriented garment industry, which is characterized by '*informal labour relations within a formal labour production process*' and clientelistic relations that reinforce and recreate social hierarchies between management and workers at the factory-level. Moreover, local political and labour market characteristics such as the absence of an impartial state, which fails to protect workers, a significant labour surplus and an internally migrating workforce undermine possibilities for collective representation, and results in casualized forms of employment relations that are leveraged by both workers and employers (Mahmud; 2013). Socioeconomic circumstances, particularly of female workers, and the volatile institutional landscape often tend to reinforce dependence on more informal and nuanced means for addressing concerns at work (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Dannecker, 2000; Quayyum, 2019). These studies provide valuable perspectives on how voice is locally negotiated, which further supports this study's multidisciplinary approach towards exploring PCs in relation to alternative channels of addressing workers concerns at the factory-level.

2.4. Conceptual Framework

Based on the reviewed literature, a key distinction can be drawn between approaches to studying PCs and voice mechanism in garment supply chains. Several studies employ a supply chain governance perspective emphasizing roles of key stakeholder and institutions and consequently, builds arguments for formal structures such as unions and stronger regulations for worker protection (Anner, 2018; Bartley & Zhang, 2012; Chan, 2015; CPD, 2019; Egels-Zanden & Merk, 2014; Granath, 2016; Kerckhoffs, 2019; Khan, 2021; Reinecke, Donaghey, & Hoggarth, 2017). Whereas in light of the challenging unionizing environment

and inadequate state of governance, studies incorporating more locally grounded perspectives instead stress the relevance of alternative forms of dissent and communications at the workplace in juxtaposition to the ineffectiveness of formal voice mechanisms (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Dannecker, 2000; Gunawardana, 2014; Mahmud; 2013; Quayyum, 2019).

Since PCs exist in a space where economic, managerial and socio-political forces involving spatially dispersed actors simultaneously converge, the conceptual framework for this study takes a multidisciplinary approach to evaluate the effectiveness of PCs. Recognizing the pivotal roles of stakeholder interests and governance structures like legal regulations and external governance initiatives, this study closely examines how these exogenous factors are negotiated at the factory-level and its consequences on the use of voice mechanisms.

To align with the exploratory nature of this study (Gerring, 2009), the broader conceptualization of voice as proposed by Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey, & Freeman (2020) is applied to accommodate various forms of voice that can be 'formal or informal', 'individual or collective', and are affected by interests of multiple actors. This concept also factors in the nebulous distinction between voice and representation embodied by PCs; although PC representatives are elected by workers as per legal regulations, unlike trade unions, these members have limited representational capacity since they cannot negotiate workers' interests beyond the factory-level for policy changes.

The conceptual map outlined in Figure 1 below incorporates key elements from existing literature and also draws on my own experience as a practitioner (Maxwell, 2005) in the field of labour rights and garment industry governance. Between 2013 to 2018, I have worked with brands, a Bangladeshi policy think tank organisation as well as the Better Work program.

During this period, I conducted factory audits, tracked progress of PICCs across multiple garments manufacturing countries (including Bangladesh) and collaborated closely with factory management and workers both within and outside the workplace. These interactions have provided unique experiential knowledge on factory-based committees and the working environment where a multitude of competing interests, local attitudes and perceptions and regulations mould daily practices.

Figure 1: Conceptual map on factors that influence PCs
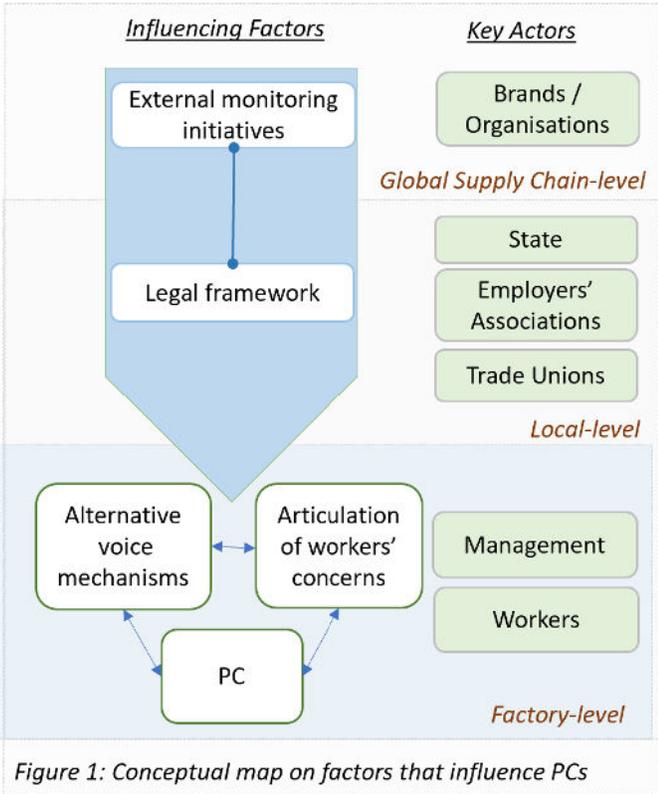
This study focuses at the factory-level in cognizance of competing interests of key actors (green boxes) and interrelated factors across local and global levels. External monitoring initiatives implemented by brands and international organisations (global supply chain level) and legal framework (local level) culminates into different manifestations of voice and articulations of workers' concerns at the factory-level. The influencing factors are interconnected since external initiatives incorporate local regulations and, in the absence of effective state governance, oversee implementation at the factory-level. Politically connected state, employers' associations and unions, also influence how legal regulations are interpreted at the workplace and guide preferences for different voice mechanisms among workers.

3. Methodology

A case-study approach is applied in this study to broaden the scope for analysing PCs in relation to the wider environment that encompasses other types of mechanisms and multiple levels of influence. In-depth analysis of fewer cases is useful for observing processes of change and examining causal mechanisms within a complex environment like a garment exporting factory (Yin, 2018). Required data has been collected from existing primary sources such as audit and improvement tracking reports, workers' survey and in-depth worker and management interviews to capture perspectives of different actors as highlighted in the conceptual map.

3.1. Case Selection

This study is based on two garment manufacturing factories in Bangladesh with elected PCs; to ensure anonymity, these will be referred to as Factory A and Factory B. Selection of cases was based on the availability of relevant information from multiple sources to provide scope for triangulation, and also my own familiarity with the local context and the data collection processes. It reflects perspectives of key actors such as external initiatives collaborating with brands, management and workers. A combination of in-depth qualitative worker interviews and selected survey data also enhanced the robustness of workers' perspectives from both factories.

Factories A and B had PCs during the study period 2017-20, and were participating in the Better Work program, which conducts audits and works directly with the committees on various factory improvement-related topics; this provided an opportunity to identify influence of external initiatives on PC's role in addressing workers' concerns. Moreover, the availability of longitudinal data strengthened analysis of PC effectiveness as it was possible to observe changes (or the lack thereof) over time as a result of different actions and mechanisms.

Examining two cases provided some basis for comparison and also reinforced reliability of observations. Since cases were predominantly selected based on availability of relevant data,

differences in factory characteristics are coincidental. Factory A and Factory B have two key differences in terms of size and the business model. Factory A employs a large workforce of over 8000 workers (Better Work, 2020) employed across approximately 50 production units; all units are located within a single compound in the Narayanganj industrial area and operated by the same management (Informant 1_A_Employee, 2021). Factory B, on the other hand employs a smaller workforce of around 1900 workers and is situated in Ashulia (Better Work, 2020). In terms of the business model, while Factory A produces low-cost knitwear in exceptionally high volumes, Factory B produces more value-added woven outwear products such as jackets, rain and winter wear (Mapped in Bangladesh, 2020; Company Website, 2020). Among similarities, both factories maintain steady customer relations and business performance above the local industry average and were noted to regularly participate in various external initiatives, which are often recommended by brands.

3.2. Data Sources

For this thesis, information was gathered from the Garment Supply Chain Governance project[4] and the Better Work program. The Garment Supply Chain Governance project (2016-19) was a large-scale study exploring several topics relating to the governance of working conditions in the global garment supply chain with a particular focus on Bangladesh as a supplier location. Topics included the impact of multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) on working conditions and to evaluate the roles and practices of multi-level 'transnational actors and institutions' such as lead firms based in Germany, Australia, Sweden and the UK, as well as the government, employers' associations and workers' unions in Bangladesh (Schüßler, 2019). In 2017, a survey of 1500 randomly selected garment workers from 240 factories in Bangladesh was carried out by the local research team. This included participants from five major industrial enclaves surrounded by worker populated residential neighbourhoods. The questionnaire covered topics ranging from working conditions to livelihoods, and included

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[4] Project website: https://www.wiwiss.fu-berlin.de/forschung/Garment/About-the-Project/index.html

specific questions on work-related concerns, perceptions of the PC and voice mechanisms in their respective factories. For this study, 76 survey respondents (female- 41, male- 35) were identified for Factory A and a larger sample of 173 respondents (female- 115, male- 58) for Factory B.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) of factory workers and several key informant interviews were also conducted to supplement survey findings. In 2018, I was involved with this project as a researcher and assisted with two of the worker FGDs (Female FGD_1_A_Workers and Female FGD_1_B_Workers) in Bangladesh. Both FGDs included randomly selected workers employed in different garment factories and in various factory-based functions. The discussions were separated by gender and held in private spaces in the participants' residential neighbourhoods to ensure that they were comfortable to openly express their views and avoid risks of manipulation or fear as it may sometimes be the case for interviews conducted within factories. A third FGD, Female FGD_2_A_Workers, of three workers from Factory A, was conducted by another researcher within the factory premises. These discussions were conducted and recorded with prior consent from all participants. During both surveys and FGDs, questions on perceptions and functioning of PCs were included and are therefore relevant to the current study.

An additional set of seven key informant interviews were also conducted between the period of 2017 to 2021. These are one-on-one interviews of individuals such as management personnel and industry experts who have worked directly with the factory. For confidentiality reasons, further information on the identity of industry experts have not been disclosed. These interviews also include information on working conditions, workers voice and PC functionality.

The second dataset includes factory 'Assessment Reports' and 'Progress Reports' from the Better Work program. The program is implemented by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) with support from the International Finance Corporation (IFC), which are agencies under the United Nations (UN) and the World Bank, respectively. The program engages various industry stakeholders at a national level and also provides in-factory assistance to

participating garment factories. Several international brands also pay for Better Work's reports and services and play an influential role in enrolling factories, especially in countries like Bangladesh where program participation is voluntary.

At the factory level, Better Work's staff conducts annual audits on working conditions based on the national labour law and international core labour standards on child labour, discrimination, freedom of association and collective bargaining and forced labour. Based on these findings, tailored training and consultations are provided to workers and management on ways to improve working conditions and comply with these standards. Two types of reports are published for each factory – the annual Assessment Reports, which are based on the audit findings and Progress Reports, to track improvement activities over a one-year period. Instrumental to the program's approach is the formation and functioning of PCs[5] as a way to improve dialogue between workers and management and engage both parties in the remediation process. Thus, Progress Reports include detailed accounts on the functional status and activities of PCs and management in order to track changes.

Table A: Detailed List of Data Sources by Factory under Annex 1 summarizes the type of data collected and analysed for each factory.

3.3. Data Analysis

This study used workers' own articulation of their problems as the starting point of inquiry rather than a predefined notion of what workers should be concerned about. This is a critical methodological consideration in order to the ground study on workers' perspectives and since PCs are also expected to channel their concerns. And so, the first step was to identify workers most significant concerns at each factory, which was then followed by an analysis of corresponding qualitative and survey data on how these concerns were addressed.

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[5] In countries where factory-based participation committees are *not* required by law, committees formed with the support of Better Work are called Performance Improvement Consultative Committees (PICCs).

Workers most important concerns were identified based on the survey question – "*18.4 - Rank three bad aspects that can be improved, according to importance*". This question specifically asks about areas that need to be improved at their factory, which entails need for further action. Respondents were free to suggest any three answers without having to pick from a pre-defined list of options; this allowed flexibility to describe issues according to their own terms. Consequently, several unique responses were recorded and later merged and categorized based on commonality[6]. For example, 19 unique survey responses were recorded for Factory A, including responses such as 'Hard work but less payment', 'Less overtime' and 'Salary payment delayed' which were then combined under the common topic of 'Inadequate pay'. Since responses were ranked by importance, the first response (out of three) was counted as the most important concern to each worker. For each case, the four most commonly noted concerns were the focus of this study; frequency of responses were emphasized assuming that the topic's relevance to a larger sample of workers will increase the likelihood of communicating these concerns to worker representatives or through other means.

This was followed by a qualitative content analysis of all Better Work reports, FGDs and key informant interviews. Coding was performed using MAXQDA, a qualitative analysis software. During this process, particular attention was paid to how each of the workers' concerns were addressed with particular attention to the PC's role in the improvement process, and whether there were any changes over time as a result of the noted efforts to determine causality. In relation the conceptual framework, general overarching themes were developed through the coding process. For example, the topic 'Excessive Workload' included workers' concerns with 'High production targets' and 'Working hours'; this depicted different approaches between management and workers regarding the same topic and therefore was tied to the factor 'articulation of workers' concerns' in the conceptual

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[6] A complete list of the unique and merged survey findings for both Factories A and B are noted in section 2.1. List of unique and merged survey findings under Annex 2.

framework. A separate category under the code 'PC' was added for general committee-related excerpts, which were not explicitly tied to the survey concerns but included essential information such as perceptions about the committee, its function and formation and relationship with management.

Since the survey, interviews and reports were conducted at different points in time between 2017 to 2021, the coded segments were arranged chronologically to observe longitudinal changes. This showed the story behind each of the concerns, including the influence of different actors such as workers, managements, brands and consultants, and processes of change (or the lack thereof). A general outline of the coding matrix and some examples of gathered excerpts are included under sections 2.2 Coding Matrices and 2.3 Examples of Coded Excerpts under Annex 2.

Moreover, workers' responses from the following survey questions were used to strengthen observations on the use of different communication mechanisms and on perceptions about PC effectiveness:

14.1. If the workers have any problems or complaints, where do they raise their complaints? – Respondents had to rate seven options along a 5-point scale ranging from 'Most Often', 'Sometimes', 'Hardly', 'Never' and 'Don't Know'. Options for raising complaints included - PC, Trade union/labour associations inside the factory, Trade union/labour associations outside the factory, complaint box, to the supervisor, directly to the management and others (complains to buyer/ brand auditors)

14.9 - What kind of complaints are placed at the PC? – open question

14.10 - Have you ever taken any complaint to the PC? – Yes/ No question

14.11.1 - Workers can openly express their views when they take any complaints to the WPC – 5-point rating scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

14.11.2 - WPC looks out for problems and complaints of workers – 5-point rating scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

14.11.3 - The management gives importance to the WPC – 5-point rating scale from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree

3.4. Limitations

Although the purpose of the current study is exploratory in nature, the external validity of findings, which is a general limitation of the case-study methodology, is nonetheless applicable in this case (Gerring, 2007). The selected factories are not representative of the larger population of nearly 3000 officially registered export-oriented garment factories in Bangladesh (Mapped in Bangladesh, 2021) that have significant variations such as in size, brand relations and business performance. Factories A and B are relatively advanced in terms of business performance as indicated by direct and steady relations with a diverse portfolio of international reputation-conscious brands and above average annual turnover (Company Website[7], 2021; Mirdha, 2021; Textile Today, 2020). Voluntary participation in external initiatives like Better Work, which require an annual subscription fee and considerable time and participation of factory employees, also indicate a degree of management willingness to work beyond minimum requirements. Better Work's explicit objective to engage PCs also means that observations on committee activities are likely to be more pronounced in these cases compared to the majority of factories that do not participate in similar programs. For further research, strategic case selection of more varied factory types, particularly subcontracting factories, can help address such empirical gaps.

Another limitation is the use of existing data sets, which were not purposefully designed to for the current research question. There was a greater number of in-depth interview data especially of workers (11 participants) from Factory A, which contributed to richer descriptions of key incidents like strikes and changes at the workplace. This however, was not the case for Factory B, which only had two worker participants who were appeared quite

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[7] Exact name and website link excluded from reference due to confidentiality reasons

reserved during interviews, especially the one male participant during the FGD. Designing topic specific surveys and interview guides for all studied cases, and including worker and management PC representatives in interview samples would have been a more concise approach to collecting relevant data. Additionally, obtaining the committee meeting minutes, which must be maintained by law, could potentially be a useful source to determine the types of issues discussed during meetings.

4. Findings and Analysis

This section describes key observations on how workers' concerns are responded to at the factory-level and the PC's role in each case, which are then scrutinized in relation to the analytical framework. The study argues that existing factory-level mechanisms can affect the extent to which PCs play in role in addressing workers concerns and that legal framework and external initiatives shape articulations of workers' concerns and preferences for different voice mechanisms, including PCs. Based on these arguments and the overall research question, findings are organised into four sub-sections. The first part discusses key regulations related to PCs to provide context for the subsequent observations on how these regulations are then interpreted through practices at the factory-level. This is followed by general information on different types voice mechanisms such as PCs, trade unions and other types of complaints mechanisms. The third and fourth sub-sections, describe workers' most significant concerns and how these are addressed at the workplace based on Better Work reports and management and workers' interviews. The last sub-sections include detailed accounts of everyday working life and social dynamics at the factory workplace, which also provide scope to assess the impact of local and global influences on preferences for different voice mechanisms at the factory-level.

A summary of key findings and the overarching themes are noted in Table E: Summary of Key Findings under Annex 3.

4.1. Legal Background

The requirement for establishing factory-based PCs was first mandated under the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) of 2006, which has undergone few critical changes over the years particularly in terms of how representatives are appointed. According to Section 205 of the BLA 2006, a factory with 50 or more workers should establish a committee with equal number of worker and management representatives known as 'Participation Committees' (PCs). While the 2006 law had initially stated that workers representatives can be selected in the absence of unions, this was later revised in 2015 so that instead of selecting worker representatives in non-unionized factories, factory workers could instead elect their

representatives under a step-by-step election process. In 2018, additional amendments were made to BLA's Section 205 stating that factories with registered unions are no longer obliged to form PCs and instead unions can choose their own representatives to fulfil similar functions (ibid.).

Committee formation procedures must follow specific legal guidelines, some of which explicitly require management presence in key activities. Every two years, worker representatives within the PC must be newly elected, and for the election, workers have the option to submit applications for candidacy or get nominated by co-workers. However, the factory management can set limitations to the number of workers allowed to participate from each production grade, section or department[8] and an 'Election Conduct Committee' including both workers and management staff must be formed to oversee the election proceedings[9]. Since the formation and the functioning of the committee take place at the factory during working hours, key activities such as arranging elections, establishing election committee, collecting nominations and informing relevant authorities, are all organized by the management.

The general purpose of the PC is to promote cooperation between workers and management to maintain industrial peace and improve welfare of workers, however, there is no explicit mention of fundamental topics of workers' interest such as wages. Section 206 of the BLA (2006) states that the main function of the PC is to '*inculcate and develop sense of belonging to the establishment among the workers and employers and to aware the workers of their commitments and responsibilities to the establishment*'. Additional sub-clauses specify responsibilities such as '*a) promote mutual trust and faith, understanding and cooperation, b) ensure the application of labour laws, c) foster a sense of discipline and improve and*

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[8] Rule 189 (2), Bangladesh Labour Rules (BLR), Government of Bangladesh, 2015

[9] Rule 188, BLR, Government of Bangladesh, 2015

maintain safety, occupational health and working condition, d) encourage vocational training, workers' education and family welfare training, e) adopt measures for improvement of welfare services for the workers and their families, and f) fulfil production targets, increase productivity, reduce production cost, prevent wastage and raise quality of products.' (ibid.). There is no specified mandate to discuss matters related to inadequate wages, which are essential for workers' and their families' well-being (sub-clause e). Furthermore, commonly used tactics such as protests and strikes by industrial workers to push for higher wages are also in conflict with PC's functions to maintain discipline and cooperation (sub-clause a and c), which places such a committee at odds with workers themselves.

While there are specific regulations on committee formation and functioning, the implementation of recommendations by the PC are non-binding. This is seen as one of the key weaknesses of such a form of worker representation (Hossain & Akter, 2021).

4.2. General Information

This section provides information on complaints' mechanisms used by workers according to survey findings, trade union presence and perceptions, and general PC-related information such as how the committees were formed, their structure and workers' perceptions regarding their respective committees. A fourth sub-section is added regarding management attitudes, as it clarifies the link between management and brands interests, and the prioritization of external initiatives at the factory-level.

4.2.1. Use of Complaints Mechanisms

For the survey question '*14.1. If the workers have any problems or complaints, where do they raise their complaints?*', workers were asked to rate the use of seven different types of complaints mechanisms. Findings from both Factories A and B (Chart 1: Use of Complaints Mechanisms at Factory A and B) indicate that respondents perceived supervisors, the PC, complaints box and management, as the most commonly used channels among workers. Although supervisors were 'most often' used, more than half of surveyed workers in both factories indicated that workers 'sometimes' raised complaints to their PC representatives. No significant differences were noted between men and women on the use of different mechanisms (gender disaggregated findings are included in Chart A: Use of Complaints Mechanisms by Gender under Annex 3).

Chart 1: Use of Complaints Mechanisms at Factory A and B
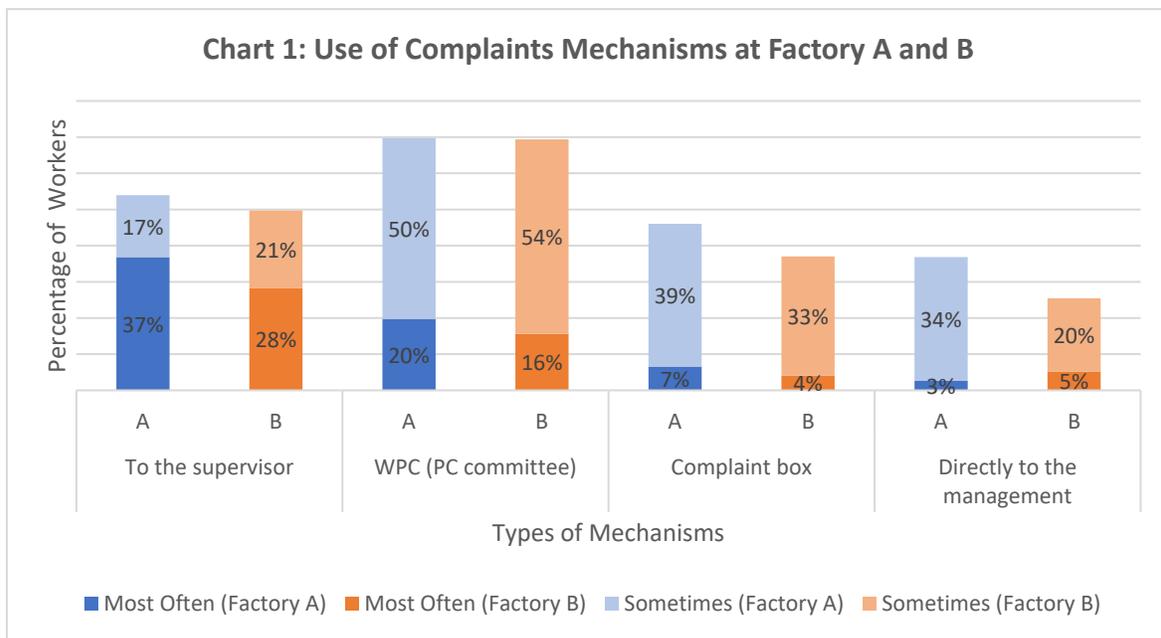
4.2.2. PCs: Formation, Structure and Workers' Perceptions

Factories A and B share several commonalities with regards to PCs. Both abided by legal procedures for committee formation, organized periodic meetings and maintained written minutes of meetings; these processes are also monitored by the Better Work program. According to Better Work's Progress Reports, elections were conducted every two years as

per legal regulations and overseen by election committees comprising of management and worker representatives. Furthermore, reports stated that PCs conducted regular meetings every two months where representatives discussed issues raised by workers and followed through suggestions for improvement.

Although the elections were conducted in accordance with legal requirements, interviews from Factory A indicated procedural ambiguities in the screening of applicants prior to voting. An elected PC member stated that she won unopposed from her production section since some of the applicants were rejected due to minor errors in their application forms (Female FDG_2_A_Workers, 2018). Another informant stated that production supervisors who collect candidate applications can limit the number of applicants from among their subordinates and reject applications (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021), which can potentially be used as a tactic to suppress any potential threats to their authority. Similarly, for Factory B, employee accounts indicated that management's influence over committee formation is inevitable since elections are held within the factory premises during working hours (Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021). External auditors, such as those from Better Work, did not report such practices since these do not explicitly violate any legal requirements; it is also possible that auditors were unaware of these occurrences.

Factory B, had a committee of 18 total representatives, including 12 workers and 6 management members. Factory A, which has over 50 different production units had a single PC representing a workforce of over 8000 workers. Although, there is a provision in the law that allows establishment of unit-specific PCs, due to the additional burden of following procedures and documentation to maintain such committees, this is not implemented in Factory A and is rarely practiced in the industry (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021; Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021).

While majority of the surveyed workers in both factories positively *perceived* PCs, significantly fewer respondents had directly approached any of their representatives. In both

factories[10], nearly three-fourths of the surveyed workers either 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed' that the PC looks out for their problems and that they can openly express their views and take any complaints to the PC. However, only 4% of the workers in Factory A, and 8% in Factory B had directly taken any complaints to committee members. This shows that although PCs' presence was appreciated by workers, it was not a commonly used channel, at least among the surveyed workers. This somewhat contradicts observations where PCs were referred to as a commonly used complaint mechanism; one possible explanation could be that workers may be assuming or citing instances of their peers approaching PCs.

4.2.3. Trade Unions

Better Work reports indicated that no trade union was present in either factory during the study period. In Factory B, a factory-based union was registered afterwards in December 2020, which also included one of the PC worker representatives (Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021). Interestingly, management only became aware of this union nearly a year later through the government website that enlists officially registered unions. One respondent stated that in order to obtain 20% worker membership, which is a prerequisite for union registration, it is likely that unions resorted to unlawful measures:

> '*There are several tricks to this, sometimes even workers do not know that they have signed the union membership form, or their signatures are collected from their homes, this is what I heard. Even NGOs are involved in collecting these signatures.*' (Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021)

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[10] Survey findings (percentage indicates respondents who 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed' with the statements):

Factory A - PC looks out for their problems (78%), workers can openly express their views and take any complaints to the PC (78%), and management gives importance to the PC (55%)

Factory B - PC looks out for their problems (73%), workers can openly express their views and take any complaints to the PC (79%), and management gives importance to the PC (65%)

Similar suspicion towards unions were also echoed by management at Factory A as they described unions as outsiders who '*used*' and '*provoked*' workers against factories without cause (Informant_7_A_Employee, 2018, Informant_9_A_Employee, 2018).

Among workers, survey findings indicated a general lack of awareness regarding unions within and outside the workplace[11] whereas interviews revealed some confusion over union identity and detachment from related activities. Over 60% of the surveyed workers at Factory A, and over 90% at Factory B responded that they 'Don't Know' about trade unions at all. For Factory A, interviewed workers initially used the term '*worker leaders*' interchangeably for both union leaders and PC representatives and later used the term '*federations*' to distinguish unions that have offices located outside the factory and were associated with wage-related protests (Female FDG_1_A_Workers, 2018). When asked about union registration procedures, one worker from Factory B mentioned the exact sum of 'Tk. 120' required to purchase a union membership card although he did not directly admit to being a union member and was generally quiet during the discussion (Male FDG_2_B_Workers, 2018).

When asked about trade union effectiveness, workers from both factories explicitly indicated that the PC performs a similar role. One participant overtly responded that there was no need for unions since '*the PC committee is already performing the tasks of trade unions.*' (Female FDG_2_A_Workers, 2018) and others stated that representatives can directly speak with the management and therefore, no longer need to protest (Female FDG_1_A_Workers, 2018), which indicates unions association with protests rather than consultative dialogue with management.

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[11] Information on the use of trade unions inside and outside factory is not included in 'Chart 1: Use of Complaints Mechanisms at Factory A and B' since none of the workers rated usage as either 'Most Often' or 'Sometimes'; only one worker at Factory B rated 'Sometimes' regarding the use of trade union inside the factory.

4.2.4. Management Attitudes

Several interviewees highlighted distinctive managerial approaches towards workplace issues and a keen focus on brand requirements and preferences. At Factory A, a top management-level employee stated that '*The factories are driven by the buyers' demand and so a question about strategy would ultimately have to be concluded in that the buyers set the tone in the market.*' (Informant_10_A_Employee, 2018). Similarly, a management representative at Factory B described that, '*the management philosophy is brand-centric*' (Informant_4_B_Employee_2021) as they prioritize swiftly responding to buyers to sustain relations. Accordingly, both companies were noted to regularly participate in various external initiatives recommended by brands such as an on-site Fair Price Shop where workers can purchase subsidized daily essentials, Mothers@Work, which provides maternity awareness training to pregnant and nursing women, as well as the Better Work program (Better Work, 2020). In some cases, the management chose to continue and further develop some of these initiatives beyond the required commitment period.

These factories maintain diverse portfolio of international brand customers, some of whom have maintained regular business relations for at least 4 years (Company Website, 2020; Informant 1_A_Employee, 2021; Mapped in Bangladesh, 2021; Online Periodical[12], 2020). Maintaining regular operations even during the pandemic period when several factories faced order and payment cancellations, also demonstrate these companies' operational stability (Better Work Progress Report, 2020; Mirdha, 2021). In other words, accommodating brand interests is incontrovertibly tied to managements own interests for business continuation.

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[12] Exact citation of periodical not added to maintain anonymity of factories.

4.3. Workers' Concerns

Based on the survey, four of the most important workers' concerns (Chart 2) have been identified for each factory of which three concerns, verbal abuse, excessive workload and inadequate pay, were significant in both cases.

Chart 2: Workers' Most Important Concerns
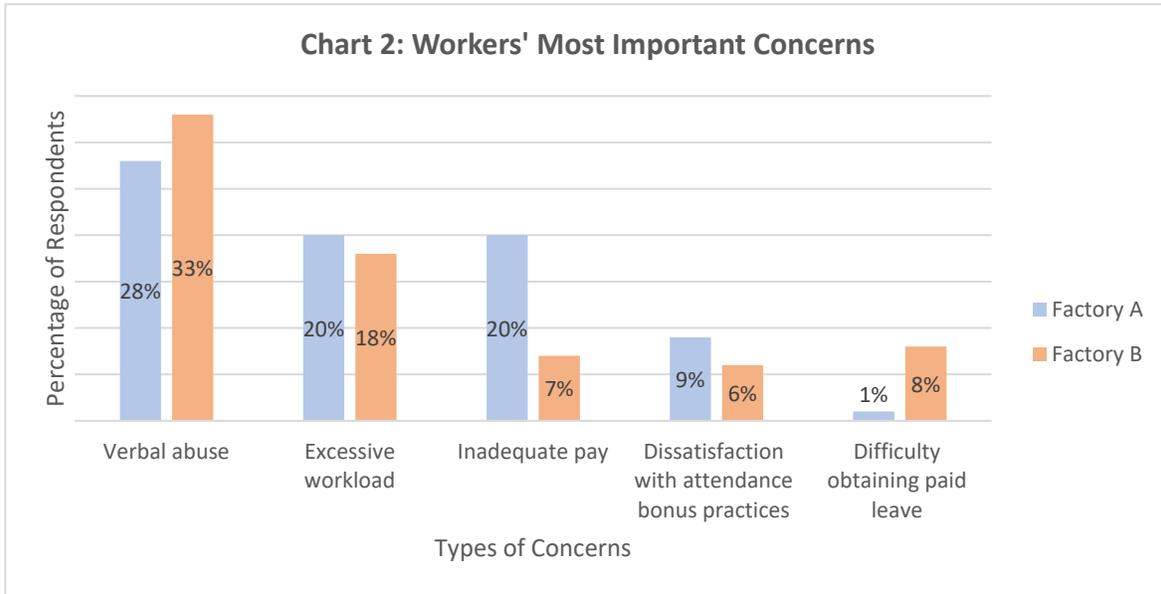
Gender disaggregated data (See Charts B and C in Annex 3) indicates that a greater proportion of men at both factories were more concerned with inadequate pay compared to women. For all other concerns, responses of male and female workers were too mixed to draw any general observations.

Verbal Abuse was noted as the most important concern in both factories (Factory A – 28%, Factory B – 33%). While interviewees from Factory A also confirmed this finding, it was not reported by Better Work. In the case of Factory B, Better Work reported this as a violation in 2017 and 2018 whereas three interviewees denied such occurrences (Male FDG_2_B_Workers, 2018; Informant_1_B_Worker, 2018; Informant_3_B_Employee, 2018). These mixed observations reflect limitations of each source as neither can always fully capture workers' perspectives; it also emphasizes how workers respondents particularly from Factory B are hesitant to openly discuss contentious issues.

The term verbal abuse refers to aggressively reprimanding workers such as by shouting and/or using vulgar language. These incidents primarily occur between workers and production management, to push workers to meet production demands, and/or to discipline them for work-related mistakes or misbehaviour. Most cases of verbal abuse were linked to high levels of work pressure, which also burdened production supervisors who sometimes even faced physical threats from their superiors to meet order deadlines (Informant 3_A_Worker, 2017; Female FGD_1_A_Workers, 2018).

Excessive workload due to 'high production targets' is the second most reported concern among workers at both factories (Factory A – 20%, Factory B – 18%). This was also confirmed through workers' interviews at Factory A. The topic of 'high production targets' is not covered by law, which primarily focuses on working hours as a way to mitigate workload.

Inadequate pay was a greater concern among workers in Factory A (20%) than in Factory B (7%). Survey responses such as 'Hard work but less payment', 'Less Overtime' and 'Salary payment delayed' were merged to form this category. Less overtime is also included since workers seek more overtime work to compensate for low wages rather than an actual desire to spend more time working at a factory, as also noted during worker interviews. Concerns regarding the inadequacy of minimum wages is beyond the scope of Better Work audits, which are based on existing legal requirements. Auditors reported that both factories ensured timely payment of minimum wages to most workers[13] and noted pay-related violations such as selected cases of misallocating pay grades, unauthorized deductions and inaccurate compensation for paid holidays and inadequate payment of benefits.

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[13] Factory A- the 2018 Better Work Assessment report noted that six mechanics did not receive the appropriate minimum wage for their position; Factory B- 2017 and 2019 Better Work Assessment reports noted that some workers were allocated to lower pay grades.

Difficulty obtaining paid leave was the fourth most important concern in Factory B (8%)[14]. Workers in this factory struggled to obtain sick leaves and believed that availing any other types of leaves were just as unlikely. These findings were also supported by interviews and Better Work reports.

Dissatisfaction with attendance bonuses practices was the fourth most important concern in Factory A[15] by 9% of the surveyed workers; interviewed workers and management also confirmed that this was also commonly discussed at the factory. The provision of monthly attendance bonus is a voluntary industry practice. Since this is not a legal requirement, it was not reported by Better Work.

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[14] Only 1% of the surveyed workers in Factory A mentioned this as a concern.

[15] Dissatisfaction with attendance bonus practices was also noted in Factory B by 6% of the surveyed workers.

4.4. Addressing Workers' Concerns and the PC's Role

4.4.1. Verbal Abuse at Work

<u>Factory A</u>**:** Management mitigated occurrences of verbal abuse by providing performance-based incentives and setting up additional channels for submitting complaints. Production supervisors were incentivized for good behaviour while ensuring production targets (Informant 8_A_Employee, 2018) and for workers, various channels were established for submitting complaints such as through appointed staff in the Compliance department who workers referred to as '*Madams'*, a 'Grievance Committee' with management and worker representatives, the PC and a 'Counselling Department'.

Most of the interviewed workers confirmed using these different channels for reporting complaints, including reporting directly to the top management, the PC[16] and also to external auditors (Female FGD_1_A_Workers_2018; Informant 7_A_Employee, 2018; Informant 1_A_Employee, 2021). Further look into PC's involvement indicated that representatives mostly passed on grievances to the management level, but were excluded from more '*sensitive*' steps of the improvement process such as investigating allegations against management staff and communicating measures and outcomes back to the workers (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021). Unease to engage with sensitive topics is also reflected in the contradictory account of a PC representative who initially stated that '*Nobody in (Factory A) ever scolds any workers or never uses abusive language.*' and later added that shouting at workers are the norm in garment factories (Female FGD_2_A_Workers, 2018).

Besides using different types of grievances channels, an informal tactic deployed by workers was the threat of factory-wide unrests. One worker ominously stated that management staff "*will think several times before hitting another worker, especially an operator. There are*

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[16] Response to survey question: '14.9 - What kind of complaints are placed at the PC?' 28% of workers in Factory A and 13% in Factory B noted '*verbal abuse*' or '*misbehaviour by line chief/ PM/ APM/ supervisor*'.

greater consequences to hitting workers." (Female FGD_1_A_Workers, 2018). Few months later, a major incident of worker unrest[17] occurred in November 2018, which was set off by an altercation between a supervisor and a piece-rate worker from the lean production line (Informant 1_A_Employee, 2021).

Factory B: Following a Better Work audit in 2019, which reported 'verbal abuse' as a violation, management took several steps which reduced occurrences over time. These included adjusting internal policies and procedures and communicating these changes with PC members, management and general workers, forming additional monitoring and remediation committees with both management and PC worker representatives and establishing a factory-based workers' feedback hotline (Better Work Progress Report, 2019; Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021). One of the employees described that this hotline was regularly used by workers and that a designated staff member recorded this information and followed up in cases of repeated complaints against a particular individual. (Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021).

According to Better Work reports, PC representatives were included by the management in some of these remediation steps such as in learning about the readjusted policies and procedures and participating in the additional committees. Alongside the PC, interviewees noted two more worker-management consultative groups, a Grievance Committee and an Anti-Harassment Committee, which were similarly responsible for handling grievances and were informed about complaints received through the hotline. The separation of roles between these different committees (including the PC) was unclear from the available accounts.

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[17] Additional incidents of worker unrests were also noted but not directly tied to verbal abuse.

4.4.2. Excessive Workload

Factory A: For workers the issue of excessive workload equates to high production targets which is unregulated, whereas for management and auditors, existing regulations on 'working hours' are most closely tied to this topic. Contrary to workers' concerns, increasing hourly output is one of the tactics used by Factory A's management to augment tight profit margins from low-cost garment production. This is reflected by practices such as the employment of piece-rate workers, whose salaries are determined by the number of items produced, production-efficiency based incentives and the introduction of lean manufacturing techniques.

This contradiction between industry expectations and workers' own definition of excessive workload emerged from accounts of how workers perceived efficiency-related measures at Factory A. Workers described the workload situation as follows:

> '(P4) They want to reduce the number of working hours while expecting us to deliver the same production targets. We have to complete 10-12 hours of work within 8 hours; previously we produced around 120 pieces per hour, whereas now it is 150-200 pieces per hour. There is a lot more work pressure.
>
> (P3) There is more pressure and more scolding.'
>
> (Female FDG_1_A_Workers, 2018)

This account refers to events in 2018 when the management had hired foreign consultants to trial a lean production model to boost efficiency and reduce working hours (Better Work Progress report, 2019[18]). Highly skilled piece-rate workers were handpicked for this production line with a continuously moving conveyor belt system, and the number of helpers supporting operators were reduced to save costs. In other production areas, management also provided monetary incentives for finishing daily targets in fewer hours. These modernizing

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[18] Incident in 2018 reported later in 2019.

efforts were interpreted by workers as excessive work since they had to process '*150- 200 pieces per hour*' with minimal breaks and it heightened job insecurities for less-skilled workers such as helpers (Female FDG_1_A_Workers, 2018).

From the perspective of 'working hours', excessive overtime work was noted throughout the study period. When asked about the persistence of these issues, a factory compliance staff described:

> '*At the end of the day, excessive production pressure is due to the 'global supply chain' and no matter how much sensitization training we provide, it is very difficult to change this. The 'lead time' is so short, that even if the supervisor does not want to misbehave, he is compelled to pressurize workers and say "give us the required production otherwise the shipment will be blocked.*'
>
> (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021)

This shows that factory-based efforts to comply with working hours and verbal abuse-related standards are undermined by conflicting brand requirements to deliver orders in shorter time periods.

The PC's role in addressing high production targets was non-existent, however, management did eventually consult with representatives on a 'working hours'-related violation on the allocation of substitute holidays (Better Work Progress Report, 2019); this clearly reflects the influence of legal framework and external initiatives on how concerns are articulated and its influence on PC's engagement with topics from an employer/brand viewpoint as opposed to addressing 'excessive targets' as perceived by workers. Moreover, production pressure and 'lack of time' were noted as key barriers against representatives' from fulfilling their duties and maintaining regular communications with the general workers. This particularly affected representatives working on a piece-rate basis since any attempts to speak to general workers during working hours (if permitted by their supervisor) could reduce their daily income. (Female FGD_2_A_Workers, 2018; Informant 1_A_Employee, 2021; Better Work Progress Reports, 2019)

Factory B: Similar to Factory A, efforts to address high production targets were also absent in Factory B. Management and external initiatives only focused on 'Working hours'-related violations without PCs involvement, partly because of workers interest to work overtime to increase pay. For example, one respondent described:

> '[PCs']¹⁹ role is very insignificant when it comes to working hours. Whoever speaks to the PC or general workers, their will firstly say that "overtime is good for us, because we earn more money". Workers do not want to do overtime, they want the income from it.'
>
> (Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021)

4.4.3. Inadequate Pay

Factory A: In the absence of opportunities to negotiate higher minimum wages, factory management and workers employed indirect tactics to respond to concerns with inadequate pay. On one hand, management strategically balanced profits, working hours regulations and workers need for higher pay, through production incentives. On the other hand, workers demanded regular overtime hours to increase take-home income and protested through strikes.

Recognizing workers' need for higher pay, management used monetary incentives as a motivational tactic. In such a way, rather than paying higher salaries for the entire workforce, income-related concerns of well-performing workers were intermittently eased while maintaining profitability. For instance, piece-rate workers who are among the most productive segment of the workforce, received benefits such as overtime wages at double[20] the hourly rate (Better Work Assessment Report, 2019), and three times the monthly

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[19] Text in square brackets added for clarity.

[20] According to Section 108 (2) in the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, piece-rate workers can be paid for overtime hours according to their average hourly pay rate; they are not entitled to overtime premium (i.e., double hourly rate) like non-piece rate workers. (Government of Bangladesh, 2015)

attendance bonuses of regular machine operators (Female FDG_2_A_Workers, 2018). The ultimate aim of enhancing the bottom line however, meant that less skilled workers such as helpers and those in lower pay grades, were particularly deprived.

Yet even piece-rate workers' sought regular overtime work to increase monthly incomes, which reflects the precariousness of performance-based incentives. Interviewed workers and factory employees asserted that it was rare to find a garment worker who does not want to perform overtime work. Workers described:

> *'(P4) We want to work overtime, but a suitable amount of overtime.*
>
> *(P5) 9-10 pm is manageable, but beyond that till 11 pm or 12 am is too difficult. If we work this late for three days in a row, we cannot get enough sleep…*
>
> *(P4) There are also household chores to take care of, like cooking, and then we have to wake up again at 5 am the next morning…*
>
> *..... We also have issues with the gas connection and many other problems. We already work till 9 pm…'*

> (Female FGD_1_A_Workers, 2018)

Regular overtime work was physically demanding due to long hours of labour and reduced time spent at home. This particularly affected women, many of whom faced greater burden of doing household chores late into the night and have less time for rest.

Strikes were a rarely employed tactic to address inadequate pay, which, interestingly, were led by highly skilled workers rather than elected PC representatives. At Factory A, two strike incidents were reported by Better Work during 2018-19 (Progress Report 2019, Assessment Report 2020) and interviewed workers also recalled earlier occurrences. Workers stated that '*Protests are necessary when our demand aren't met*' (Female FGD_1_A_Workers, 2018), indicating this as a last resort rather than a preferred method of negotiation due to the high risk of losing pay, termination and even getting blacklisted from finding another job within the sector (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). Accounts of specific incidents revealed that workers strategically used high skill levels and significant periods such as Eid holidays as leverage

during strikes, which also reaffirms how cheap and quick production dynamics of the garment supply chain are incorporated into local actions (Anner, 2018).

Analysis of strike incidents demonstrates several important aspects regarding workers' preferences for voice. For instance, in 2018, highly skilled piece-rate workers from the newly initiated lean manufacturing line had led a protest for higher pay and were able to negotiate several demands[21] (Better Work, 2019). During the negotiation process, management held a meeting with selected protestors, and explained how they cannot increase rates beyond a certain amount due to the low cost of goods provided by the brand. Upon realizing that there was no scope to further negotiate higher pay, protestors settled for other demands like an additional 15-minute break. This incident highlights the leading roles of high skilled workers during sensitive negotiations as well as the limitations of factory-based efforts due to practices higher up the supply chain (i.e., low prices by brands).

Another incident depicting informal leadership hierarchies among workers involved skilled 'neckman operators' who were called upon by the management to quell an unrest. In this case, PC's involvement in relation to skilled workers was explained as follows:

> '(P4) We wanted to go ahead [with the protest][22] despite what the [PC] members and the chairman said; we were supposed to protest prior to Eid, around 2 months ago. The neckman operators are more skilled and, in a way, they are the head of each production line that has 20 workers, they are not PC members or line chiefs; the neckman is the main operator (most skilled) in each line. They were called in by the management to prevent the protest.'

> (Female FGD_1_A_Workers, 2018)

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[21] Other demands included reaffirmation from management to discuss piece-rates with workers prior to setting the rate and timely implementation of the upcoming minimum wage; both are existing requirements.

[22] Text in square brackets added for clarity.

Overall, the PC was not proactively involved in wage-related discussions and neither could they influence overtime hours, which were determined by production requirements. One possible scope may have been to discuss the overtime hourly rate for piece-rate workers, however, an employee explained that these rates were directly set by the factory's merchandising department according to brands' prices and that it was not possible to pay beyond the negotiated amount without incurring losses (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021).

Factory B: Similar to Factory A, management also provided performance-based financial incentives to workers. Workers at Factory B received higher than average pay as confirmed by management as well as the average monthly income of survey respondents[23] (Informant_3_B_Employee, 2018). Despite higher average pay, workers at Factory B also performed overtime work to increase monthly income. Only one strike incident had occurred in 2016 (before the study period) where workers had initiated a 3-day work stoppage demanding higher wages (Better Work Assessment Report, 2017); further details on the strike outcomes were unavailable from the collected data.

PC involvement was observed in some pay-related improvements and for conveying one-time requests for bonuses to the management. One worker described how workers' demand for '*special benefits*' during the Bengali New Year was realized through the PC who raised this request to the management (Informant_1_B_Worker, 2018). Management also described other examples of how the PC was involved:

> '*...workers record their overtime hours on a small sheet, and so if their pay slip shows 60 hours of overtime in contradiction to their own records of 70 hours, then they inform the PC who pass it on to the management.*'

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[23] According to the survey question "What was your salary including overtime last month?", workers at Factory A earned an average monthly pay of Tk. 9869 and at Factory B, Tk. 10,474.

'Workers had raised the issue of delayed service benefits to the PC asking them to speak with management. When the PC approached management about this, they were discouraged [to further pursue this issue][24], instead the PC members felt threatened that they might lose their jobs if they tried to go on with this issue. This was the scenario around 2017.'

(Informant_4_B_Employee, 2021)

This shows that at the factory-level, PC representatives played a role in handling individual pay-related discrepancies. The example of delayed service benefits (severance pay) also reflects that PC representatives were fearful of losing their jobs and therefore did not pursue topics that were less agreeable among management. Interestingly about the topic of delayed service benefits, the respondent stated that this was an earlier issue from 2017, however, the Better Work Assessment report from 2019 reported the same violation, which shows that that this was not addressed over time.

4.4.4. Difficulty Obtaining Paid Leave

Factory B: Over the four-year study period, improvements were noted regarding certain types of leaves while others remained unaddressed. According to Better Work reports, implementation of sick and casual leaves improved after management provided training to the relevant staff members such as line chiefs, production supervisors and workers, and also maintained records on leave-related payments (Progress Report, 2018, 2019). No improvements were noted for violations related to annual, work-related injury and substitute leaves. A key reason for the lack of progress with annual leaves was associated with an

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[24] Text in square brackets added for clarity

unofficial industry practice of allocating these leave days to extend the duration of the yearly Eid holidays[25] (Informant_4_B_Employee_2021).

Observations indicated how different types of leaves were managed through various established channels at the factory-level. For example, sick leaves were approved by the factory-based doctor and is the only type of leave that production supervisors were more willing to accept. The Safety Committee, which is legally mandated for overseeing health and safety issues, helped workers communicate requests for sick leaves to the relevant management staff. All other types of leaves (annual, casual and substitute) requests were handled by the production supervisors; these leaves were less likely to be approved due to production pressure. (Informant_4_B_Employee_2021; Better Work Assessment Report, 2018).

Leaves were among the most frequently discussed topics with PC representatives (Informant_1_B_Worker_2018; Informant_4_B_Employee_2021) but there were some conflicting accounts regarding their involvement. One respondent explained that sick leave requests were handled by PC representatives on a case-by-case basis whereas collective requests such as for using annual leave days to extend weekends were discussed during PC[26] meetings. (Informant_4_B_Worker_2021). On the other hand, Better Work reports indicated that most of the general workers were unaware that management had consulted with the PC to allocate annual leaves with the festival holiday period (Better Work Assessment Reports, 2017, 2019). Moreover, PC representatives had similar roles as the Safety Committee

[25] The yearly Eid holidays are two significant religious events for the majority Muslim population. It is common practice to extend the duration of these holidays using annual leaves since most workers travel to their home villages during this period. However, this practice applies to all workers, including those affiliated with non-Muslim religious minorities and as a result, they do not equally benefit from such practices (also see Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020).

[26] Rule 110 (3), Bangladesh Labour Rules, 2015 – law states that in the absence of a collective bargaining agent (CBA), management should fix festival holidays based on recommendations from committee representatives (Government of Bangladesh, 2015).

representatives regarding sick leave requests, which shows overlapping functions between different mechanisms at the factory.

4.4.5. Dissatisfaction with Attendance Bonus Practices

Factory A: Similar to performance-based incentives, an attendance bonus system was set up with the ultimate aim of enhancing the bottom line. Factory A had a differentiated attendance bonus system, which the management described as follows:

> '*[the attendance bonus system is] a business tactic to reduce worker absenteeism and improve productivity. It is still possible for workers to demands equal bonuses for everyone, but from a business perspective it is not ideal to compensate a general worker, like a helper who only cuts thread, in the same way as a highly skilled worker; then there is no longer a basis for differentiation.*' (Informant_1_A_Employee, 2021)

Concerns regarding the attendance bonus system was raised through the PC, however, some contradictory testimonies were noted regarding the committee's involvement. One of the employees indicated that attendance bonuses were not discussed during PC meetings (Informant_1_A_Employee_2021) whereas, a PC respondent noted she had received frequent complaints from workers and that the committee had submitted a written application to management for increasing attendance bonuses, which did not result in any changes (Female FGD_2_A_Workers_2018).

The reported strike demands from 2018, which was led by piece-rate workers also included a demand to increase attendance bonus rates for piece-rate workers who were assigned to a newly implemented production process (Better Work Assessment Report, 2019; Informant_1_A_Employee_2021); however, it is unclear from the available data whether this had led to increases afterwards.

5. Discussion

In summary, findings indicate that PCs played limited roles in addressing concerns such as excessive workload, inadequate pay, verbal abuse, dissatisfaction with attendance bonuses and difficulty obtaining paid leave. In both factories, PC representatives' function was narrowed down to communicating workers' grievances to the management, and excluded sensitive processes such as handling cases of abusive production staff. Insights into PC formation depicts loopholes in the legal framework, which can be easily manipulated in practice since all election and committee proceedings take place at the factory during working hours and under management control. Yet interestingly, even though less than 5% of the surveyed respondents had directly approached their PC representatives, majority of workers had positive perceptions on these committees' effectiveness.

Based on the broader concept of employee 'voice' (Wilkinson, Dundon, Donaghey, & Freeman, 2020), 'formal and informal' as well as 'individual and collective' manifestations of workers voice are observable in both cases. The empirical evidence supports the argument that in face of local and global limitations, workers employ various means to address their concerns such as through existing factory-based mechanisms and organically formed leadership assigned to highly skilled workers, which supersede elected PC members' roles. Other examples of alternative voice mechanisms include additional bipartite committees also required by law like Grievance, Anti-Harassment and Health and Safety committees, and immediate supervisors who are often promoted from among workers. Informal and indirect techniques are employed in response to contested topics such as working more overtime hours to address concerns with insufficient pay.

Because of the intensive work pressure endemic to garment production in global supply chains, individualized forms of voice are predominantly utilized instead of collective efforts. The latter only materializes through rare factory-wide strikes, albeit at significant risks to the workers and under considerable fear of management retaliation. The dangers of collective voice, which is exacerbated by the absence of an impartial state that protects workers, is indicated by PCs' hesitancy to pursue difficult topics and in workers' secretive

associations with trade unions in Factory B. An added layer of hindrance to collective voice are organisational practices like individual performance-based incentives, which intermittently alleviate concerns related to low pay and further induces piecemeal efforts to address workers' most pressing concerns. Due to cutthroat demands of cheap and fast garment production, such management practices arise are described to be more so out of business necessity rather than a pernicious intent to undermine workers' voice (Informant_1_A_Employee_2021).

5.1. Management Influence

This study confirms existing perceptions about management control and influence over PC function (Anner, 2017; Bartley & Zhang, 2012; Egels-Zanden & Merk, 2014) and empirically shows that regulatory loopholes can be used to manipulate committee elections. Such influences are arguably inevitable since committee elections and activities take place during working hours and under the pressure of stringent production deadlines. In Bangladesh, management's active participation in the election committee is mandated by law and in practice, the requirements for election procedures can be easily undermined by floor-level staff who have authority over workers and are under significant pressure to meet production deadlines. Moreover, legal provisions that uphold management influence are contradictory to provisions to protect worker representatives against management retaliation[27] and these circumstances are exacerbated by the imbalanced power relations between workers and management and the regimented nature of garment production.

Within such a controlled working environment, downward 'external brand pressure' (Chan, 2015) either directly or through programs like Better Work remain key push factors for management to integrate worker representatives into addressing reported workplace violations. For example, engaging PCs in factory improvements is an explicit objective of

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[27] Section 205 (10), BLA, Government of Bangladesh, 2006

the Better Work program and accordingly, the management at Factory B involved PCs in some of the measures to address verbal abuse once this was reported by auditors. Even so, PC's assigned roles were limited to liaising between management and workers. Such narrow roles indicate management's aversion to involve worker representatives in decision-making processes, which could be due to reasons such as lack of trust as well as for efficiency reasons to avoid production disruptions.

5.2. Structural Limitations

Structural limitations of the PC include the limited scope of committee function (Anner, 2018, Hossain & Akter, 2021; Reinecke, Donaghey, & Hoggarth, 2017) and insufficient capacity to represent larger workforces. These limitations are largely due to legal regulations and practical challenges associated with garment manufacturing. In Factory A only 15 worker representatives were tasked to represent a workforce of over 8000 workers, which reflects significant saturation of outreach. The law specifies a maximum limit of 15 worker representatives per committee[28] with a voluntary provision to establish unit-specific PCs for factories with multiple production facilities[29]. However, unit PCs are rarely established in practice due to the increased burden of activities such as to maintain additional documents for external auditors and to facilitate multiple elections and committee activities. This practice is also discouraged by external auditors due to concerns that it may be used to undermine other representatives (Informant 1_A_Employee, 2021). Another factor that limits outreach is the frequently cited concern of 'excessive workload', which affects PC representatives who work full-time but do not receive paid time off to engage with workers.

As a result of the aforementioned factors (i.e., management influence, saturated outreach, excessive workload) worker representatives are unlikely to take their own initiatives to represent workers' interests. A closer look into the rare instances of proactive efforts helped

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[28] Section 183 (3), BLR, Government of Bangladesh, 2015

[29] Section 205 and 106, BLA, Government of Bangladesh, 2006

understand why this is the case. For example, in Factory A, worker representatives had submitted a written complaint to management regarding workers' dissatisfaction with monthly attendance bonus payments and also raised this issue during periodic meetings. However, this request was denied and no longer followed through afterwards. A more successful example is noted in Factory B where representatives managed to negotiate a one-time annual bonus for workers. Both scenarios reflect two essential features of negotiations between PCs representatives and management. First is the costliness of requests, where a one-time payment is more affordable and hence acceptable for management than an increase in monthly payments. This aligns with Anner's (2017, 2018) observations regarding factory-based committees' ineffectiveness at negotiating 'cost-sensitive' demands. In addition to costs, PC representatives are also unlikely to pursue requests once denied by management due to fear of management retaliation (Anner, 2018; Bartley & Lu, 2012; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Kuruvilla, Sarosh, & Li, 2021) and the voluntary nature of PC's recommendations also hinders further motivation.

5.3. Existing Mechanisms and Informal Leadership Hierarchies

Analysis of how workers' concerns were responded to at the factory-level indicates that existing mechanisms and alternative forms of leadership were better established channels compared to the PC. In both factories, workers used different types of formal complaints mechanisms such as their direct supervisors, the factory's compliance staff, additional bipartite committees (i.e. health and safety, anti-harassment and grievance committees) and the complaint hotline (only Factory B) for daily work-related concerns. Informal tactics included complaining to external auditors to cause pressure from brands and organising strikes to ensure quicker outcomes regarding contentious issues. Strikes and protests are rare occurrences due to the substantial costs for workers such as losing pay, police brutality and/or termination; these incidents also incur significant costs for management due to production and reputational losses. Another informal method was to make circuitous demands like working longer overtime hours to compensate for low wages, which comes at an exceptional cost to workers' well-being and particularly affects women who generally have an added burden of performing domestic chores after work.

Calculated preferences for alternative forms of leadership for challenging concerns was featured in accounts of strikes initiated by informally appointed worker leaders. In these situations, workers' choices were driven by characteristics such as close proximity to these leaders, stronger bargaining capacity and protection against management retaliation. In Factory A, strikes were led by highly skilled workers such as piece-rate workers or 'neckman' operators whom management called in to discuss striking demands rather than the PC. This indicates that existing informal hierarchies have a stronger influence on collective representation than formalized structures like elected committees, and that the former is also recognized by the management. Highly skilled workers have greater proximity since they work alongside general workers on a regular basis and help them learn new skills, which provides a stronger basis to form social bonds through substantive exchange. Skilled workers are also highly productive and act as a form of daily support to line supervisors who are under immense work pressure; this further renders skilled leaders less easily replaceable and better protected (compared to unskilled workers) against management retaliation. Such informally appointed leaders attain greater recognition among workers and management due to their persistent value and consequently, are considered more effective than PCs to negotiate sensitive issues of collective interests.

Common practices in garment manufacturing in supply chains. such as excessive work pressure and production at low costs, engender more individualized means for addressing workers' concerns. Due to the exceptional workload where production is measured by the minute, immediate supervisors are most frequently referred to for resolving daily work-related issues such as leave requests and payment anomalies since they work closely with workers and have authority to handle such requests. When initial requests are denied by supervisors, PC representatives are a secondary option for escalating complaints to other levels of management less accessible to the general workers. Production incentives are a precarious mean for addressing individual income inadequacies, which further undermines motivations for pursuing collective voice.

Preference towards these alternative mechanisms indicate that proximity to problem-solving mechanisms, protection against management retaliation and urgency of concerns are important aspects that influence workers' choices for voice mechanisms. These choices reflect how workers acquire substitute means for protection in the absence of a supportive state and effective union-based representation, and are also affected by hyper-competitive nature of manufacturing in the garment supply chain. Existing approaches that are borne out of workers own initiative (Chan, 2015) has important implications to reconsider what constitutes effective workers' voice under such complex circumstances where legal regulations and democratically elected structures struggle to ensure free and impactful expression of voice at the workplace.

5.4. Articulation of Workers' Concerns

Workers' concerns related to excessive workload and inadequate wages are interests beyond existing legal standards and among the most persistent concerns in Bangladesh and other garment manufacturing countries in global supply chains (Anner, 2017; Barrientos & Smith, 2007). A crucial reason behind the lack progress is because of detrimental purchasing practices of brands and retailers, which remain largely unaddressed. Industry monitoring and development efforts generally focus on actors within manufacturing countries rather than also improving businesses involved higher up in the supply chain hierarchy. In accordance with the conceptual map, the two cases further demonstrated the influence of legal framework and external initiatives on the articulation of workers' concerns, which consequently led to PCs engagement with legally recognized rather than more contentious versions of workers' concerns (i.e., excessive workload and inadequate pay). Such differences in perceptions reflect the absence of workers' voice and the higher prioritization of brand and management business interests even in the discourse of *workers'* interests.

For example, there are two distinct ways of perceiving and thus addressing the topic of excessive workload. On one hand, local regulations and brand-specific standards monitor 'working hours' to regulate excessive workload and as a result, most management-led efforts, including PC involvement, are directed at complying with these requirements. For

workers on the other hand, excessive workload specifically refers to 'high production targets' rather than longer working hours, since the latter is necessary for workers to meet the more urgent need for a liveable income[30]. It should be clarified that while working hours also affect workers' well-being, under current circumstances, low pay and exceptional production demands are more urgent priorities for workers. PC representatives did not have any role in reducing hourly targets as this is not recognized by management or legal requirements and standards.

Pay is another similarly contested topic as workers in both factories were concerned with inadequate pay despite receiving minimum wages, yet PC representatives were rarely involved in these discussions. Because of the contentious nature of this topic, commonly used tactics such as strikes, demonstrations and other forms of protests for negotiating higher pay also tend to be in conflict with the PC's objectives[31] to '*promote cooperation*' between management and workers, '*foster a sense of discipline*' and '*reduce production costs';* this reinforces prior observations on PC's passive and at times countering role in wage increase related efforts (CPD, 2019). Interestingly, the 2006 Labour Act does state that the employer 'may' consult with worker representatives (either PCs or unions) to fix the hourly overtime pay for piece rate workers[32]. However, this is rarely practiced since exceptionally low prices fixed between brands and management diminishes scope for further negotiations with workers further down the supply chain, as shown in the case of strike negotiations at Factory A. Consequently, based on these two cases, direct causal links between wage increases and positively perceived PCs could not be ascertained (Kabeer, Huq, & Sulaiman, 2020).

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[30] Overtime and work during the weekend and public holidays are paid at twice the regular hourly rate, which is based on the 'basic' portion of gross wages. According to the latest Bangladesh Minimum Wages Gazette, gross wages include five main components: basic, rent (50% of basic), medical (600 Tk. / €6), transport (350 Tk. / €3.5) and food (900 Tk. / €9) allowances. (Government of Bangladesh, 2019).

[31] Section 206 of the BLA, Government of Bangladesh, 2006

[32] Section 108 (2), Bangladesh Labour Act, Government of Bangladesh, 2006.

On the topic workers' interests beyond existing legal requirements, several studies have noted the significance of unions particularly to negotiate higher wages (Anner, 2017; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019; Egels-Zandén & Merk, 2014; Granath, 2016; Kerckhoffs, 2019; Kuruvilla, Sarosh, & Li, 2021). However, in Bangladesh, weak representational capacity, divergent political interests, fear of management retaliation and general lack of trust among both workers and management undermine unions' ability to effectively pursue such objectives. For instance, during the last round of minimum wage negotiations the revised minimum was set at Tk. 8000 (approximately EUR 82) in January 2019, which was half of the amount initially demanded from the workers' side and is substantially below estimates of living wages (IHRB & Chowdhury Center for Bangladesh studies at UC Berkeley, 2021). Unions are heavily undermined by a power nexus between the government and garment manufacturers, many of whom hold influential political positions[33] and are generally hostile towards unionizing activities (Hossain & Akter, 2021). Furthermore, among themselves, unions are fragmented by conflicting political affiliations (Rahman & Langford, 2012) and are mired by allegations of 'yellow unionism', which is to represent or be heavily influenced by management, and 'NGO unionism' whereby foreign-funded unions prioritise interests of international partners such as to alleviate Western consumers' guilt instead of focusing on grassroot-level efforts to build solidarity and represent local interests (Long, 2015). Such challenges in the union landscape significantly limits workers' scope for collective mobilization.

At the factory-level, this study shows a general lack of awareness among workers regarding union activity as well as fear of retaliation against union association. For example, in Factory B management only found out about the presence of a factory-based union nearly a year after it was established. Although it has been argued that PCs can be a step towards improving industrial relations and developing union leadership (CPD, 2019), it is difficult

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[33] 'In the 10th parliament, one third of the parliament members were garment owners' (Hossain & Akter, 2021)

to ascertain such a trajectory from the current study due data limitations. Further research on can help identify more concrete ways in which these two representative structures can complement one another, and most importantly in relation to issues articulated by workers.

5.5. Positive Perceptions of PCs and the Role of Multi-stakeholder Initiatives

Despite the PC's limited role, workers' positive perceptions about the PC indicate that it does perhaps fulfil a valuable function – it helps overcome a general gap in communication between management and workers. When management had assigned the PC to collect complaints regarding verbal abuse, paid leave and overtime payments, these representatives served as an *additional* channel for submitting individual complaints; for workers tied to their workstations having access to multiple communication channels can potentially save time and effort to resolve daily work-related issues. It therefore shows that such a committee can serve a beneficial role as a grievance channel for communicating individual complaints to management. However, the PCs role as a representative body that can resolve pressing collective concerns for workers may need to be more realistically reconsidered.

Multistakeholder industry development initiatives like Better Work, which place significant emphasis on factory-based committees, could therefore more effectively support workers' voice by broadening its scope of engagement. Firstly, through regular consultations with workers, it can identify and support informal and commonly used channels such as by involving informal worker leaders in monitoring, training and advisory efforts. Since the program reports on topics related to 'social dialogue' and 'grievance mechanisms', reporting practices could be further strengthened by conducting in-depth interviews of relevant persons involved in these processes; rigorously documenting industry practices could better inform future policy developments on election procedures and the functioning of worker representatives at the workplace.

Given the limitations of factory-based actors and the nature of workers' more pressing concerns, it is necessary to prioritize issues beyond existing legal requirements such as living wages and detrimental purchasing practices of international brands. Initiatives like Better

Work is in a unique position to work towards resolving these issues in the long term because of its close collaboration with a wide range of actors across the supply chain. Publicly reporting purchasing practices, as is done in the case of factory compliance data, can be a positive step towards ensuring greater transparency and accountability of all relevant stakeholders in the garment supply chain.

6. Conclusion

This study examines the effectiveness of Participation Committees (PCs) in Bangladeshi garment factories. Based on the exploratory nature of this thesis, a case study approach was applied. Using the concept of employee voice, PCs functionality was assessed through a multidisciplinary analytical framework encompassing stakeholder interests, governance in global supply chains and everyday factory-level interactions.

The observations reinforce several conclusions drawn by existing studies on factory-based participatory committees in global supply chains. These include PCs limited role in responding to workers most pressing concerns, strong management oversight who initiate committee activities under external pressure from brands and operational limitations of the committee model. PC representatives were found to be structurally constrained due to insufficient capacity to represent a large workforce, excessive workload, the non-binding nature of committee recommendations and fear of management retaliation. The persistence of workers' concerns throughout the study period also indicates the challenges of detrimental purchasing practices, which limit scope of factory-level actors who are positioned at the lowest bargaining end of the garment supply chain.

By analysing workers' own articulation of their concerns in relation to management and audit perspectives, this study demonstrates critical differences in the way contentious topics such as excessive workload and inadequate pay are defined and subsequently pursued through different voice mechanisms. While workers described excessive workload in relation to high production targets, legal regulations and brand standards solely focus on working hours and accordingly directed management and PC efforts towards reducing production time; these conflicting perceptions consequently exacerbated workers' concerns with hourly production targets. Such differences are also evident for wage-related concerns as workers were found to be dissatisfied with their salaries in factories that ensured the legal minimum wage. These differences emphasize the prioritization of business objectives over workers' concerns regarding contested topics.

Workers' preference for alternative mechanisms and other forms of leadership, indicate that proximity, protection against management retaliation and urgency of concerns influence workers' choices for addressing different types of concerns. The most prominent example, includes informally appointed leaders during strikes, which highlights the significance of existing hierarchies when pursuing collective interests.

This study highlights several promising areas for further research on workers' voice in global supply chains and in the Bangladeshi garment sector. These include studying common means of communication among workers such as informal and/or verbal channels, the use of technology like social media-based applications and union activities within and outside the workplace. As noted in the case of piece-rate workers in Factory A, it is also worth exploring how different types of employment contracts affect preferences for voice at the factory-level. Although gendered differences in workers concerns and choice of voice mechanisms could not be ascertained in this study, a larger sample of factories can help identify gender-based preferences and how to incorporate these into industry efforts.

Clarity on PC function and limitations at the factory-level has significant implications for policies and practices aimed towards strengthening workers' voice and representation in the Bangladeshi garment sector. Moreover, emic perspectives on handling workers' concerns are a critical source of knowledge to inform and effectively support local efforts within global supply chains. Based on the PC's limited role in addressing workers' most pressing concerns, it is necessary to re-evaluate its significance as a representative structure and to reallocate resources towards other potentially more effective channels for workers' voice. The latter can include engaging with informally recognized leadership among workers in order to strengthen voice within and beyond the factory-level.

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8. Annexes

Annex 1 – Data Sources

Table A: Detailed List of Data Sources by Factory

Table 1: Detailed List of Data Sources by Factory
Factory A
Interviews
Female FGD_1_A_Workers_2018 – 3 Female participants (Machine operator, quality controller and helper)
Female FGD_2_A_Workers_2018 – 3 Female participants (WPC member, and quality controllers)
Informant 1_A_Employee_2021 – Factory Staff (Compliance Department)
Informant 2_A_Worker_2017 – Female worker (Cleaner)
Informant 3_A_Worker_2017 – Female worker (Helper)
Informant 4_A_Worker_2017 – Female worker (Helper)
Informant 5_A_Worker_2017 - Female worker (Helper)
Informant 6_A_Worker_2017 – Female worker (Helper)
Informant 7_A_Employee_2018 – Factory Staff (Compliance Department)
Informant 8_A_Employee_2018 – Factory Staff (Production Department)
Informant 9_A_Employee_2018 – Employee (Top Management)
Informant 10_A_Employee_2018 – Employee (Top Management)
Better Work Reports
Assessment Report 2017
Assessment Report 2018
Progress Report 2018-19
Assessment Report 2019
Progress Report 2019-20
Factory B
Interviews
Male FDG_2_B_Workers_2018 – 1 male worker participant (Senior Machine Operator)
Informant_1_B_Worker_2018 – Male worker (Senior operator)
Informant_2_B_Employee_2018 – Factory Staff (Production Department)
Informant_3_B_Employee_2018 – Factory Staff (Upper Management)
Informant_4_B_Employee_2021 – Factory Staff (Compliance Department)
Better Work Reports
Assessment Report 2017
Progress Report 2018
Assessment Report 2018
Progress Report 2019
Assessment Report 2019
Progress Report 2020

Annex 2 – Data Analysis

2.1. Workers' Concerns: List of Unique and Merged Survey Findings

Table B: Unique and merged survey findings for Factory A

Merged Concerns	Survey Responses			
Excessive Workload	High Production target	Workload is not same all the time	Workload high/ excess work	Helper is not present/available for operator
Delayed Promotions	Promotion delayed			
Verbal Abuse	Misbehave from Lineman and Supervisor	Insulted by the Manager		
Inadequate Pay	Hard work but less payment	Less overtime	Salary payment delayed	
Dissatisfaction with Attendance Bonus Practices	Attendance bonus pay delayed & less			
Difficulty Obtaining Paid Leave	Less chance of getting holiday / weekly / yearly leave			
Inadequate Additional Benefits	No/bad factory transport	Do not provide tiffin	Dirty road in front of factory	
Inadequate Welfare Services	No provident fund			
Job Insecurity	No Job guarantee			
No problems at factory	Factory gives us everything, nothing bad			
Unsafe Factory	No Fire safety system/ or not good			

Table C: Unique and merged survey findings for Factory B

Merged Concerns	Survey Responses			
Delayed Promotions	Promotion delayed			
Difficulty Obtaining Paid Leave	Do not provide sick leave	Less chance of getting holiday / weekly / yearly leave		
Dissatisfaction with Attendance Bonus Practices	Attendance bonus pay delayed & less	If one day absent cut full month attendance bonus		
Excessive Workload	High Production target	Night duty must	Workload high/ excess work	
Harassment at workplace	Girls are disturbed			
Inadequate Additional Benefits	Charge Transport cost	No pension or extra allowance	No recreation system	
Inadequate Pay	Hard work but less payment	Less overtime	Salary payment delayed	
Inadequate Welfare Services	Dirty environment/ No healthcare facility			
Job Insecurity	No Job guarantee			
No problems at factory	Factory gives us everything, nothing bad			
Others	Do not follow buyers rule	Workers' education standard is not same		
Strict workplace rules	Do not permit to eat betel-leaf	Give punishment for late come/Cut the salary	Hard rules/do not provide gate pass even emergency situation	If Work pressure high, do not allow important phone call

Uncomfortable Working Environment	To work in the hot / Fan can not be run			
Unfair practices	Do not get justice/Solution			
Unsafe Factory	Factory building is not safe	For any disaster moment, no longer a lift or stairs behind the factory and does not open gate	No Fire safety system/ or not good	Stairs is not wide/not clean
Verbal Abuse	Insulted by the Manager	Misbehave from Lineman and Supervisor		

2.2. Coding Matrices

2.2.1. Coding Matrix for Factory A

The list on the first column titled 'Code System' shows codes and subcodes, and the top row labels from the second column onwards indicate different sources such as interview transcripts or Better Reports, where relevant excerpts were gathered.

Code System	Fema	Fty A	Infor	Infor	Infor	Infor	Infor	Infor	Infor	Fema	Infor	Fty A	Fema	Fty A	Fty A	Fty A	Infor
WPC																	
Mgmt WPC relations									•					•		•	•
Formation			•		•					•			•	•	•		•
Function																	
Responsibilities / Activities			•	•	•				•		•		•		•		•
Meetings														•			•
Limitations		•												•	•	•	•
Communication with workers													•				•
Perceptions about effectiveness			•				•		•		•		•				•
Workers' concerns (survey)																	
Dissatisfaction with attendance bonu			•							•	•			•			•
Inadequate Pay												•					
incentives as a motivational tacti							•				•		•		•		•
OT				•		•	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•
verbal abuse			•	•	•		•		•		•		•				•
excessive workload																	
high production targets/ lean							•				•						•
Weekend work/ excessive hours		•								•		•	•	•	•	•	

2.2.2. Coding Matrix for Factory B

Code System	1_Ma...	Fty B...	Male ...	Fty B...	Infor...	Infor...	Infor...	Fty B...	Fty B...	Fty B...	Fty B...	Infor...
WPC												
mgmt PC relations								■	■	■		■
formation		■					■	■				■
Function												
Perceptions about effectiveness		■		■	■		■	■		■	■	■
Communication with workers		■		■	■	■	■	■				■
Areas for improvement							■					
Workers' concerns (survey)_Factory B												
Inadequate pay					■							
minimum wage		■						■		■	■	
overtime		■		■			■		■	■	■	■
additional incentives					■		■					■
Attendance bonus issues (+)					■		■					
Verbal Abuse		■	■	■	■		■	■				■
Excessive workload												■
Targets		■		■								
working hours		■	■	■	■			■	■	■	■	■
Paid leave				■			■					■
casual leave				■					■			
sick leave		■						■		■	■	
annual leave		■		■				■		■	■	
substitute leave		■		■				■	■			

2.3. Example of Coded Excerpts

Concerns	Subcodes	BW Assessment Report 2017	Female FDG_1_A_Workers, 2018; Female FDG_2_A_Workers, 2018 Informants 2 to 6 _A_Worker	Informants 7 to 10 _A_Employees	BW Assessment Report 2018
		Table D: Examples of Coded Excerpts from Factory A This shows examples of coded excerpts from Factory A. Due to limited page view, all the coded segments from different sources cannot be shown here.			
Excessive workload	High production targets		FGD "(P4) They want to reduce the number of working hours while expecting us to deliver the same production targets. We have to complete 10-12 hours of work within 8 hours; previously we produced around 120 pieces per hour, whereas now it is 150-200 pieces per hour. There is a lot more work pressure. (P6) Same for us… (P3) There is more pressure and more scolding… (P5) It has been a year since the Chinese (consultants) came to the factory. Prior to this, there were more helpers assisting the operators. We no longer have the support of helpers. (P4) They have laid off a lot of helpers… " "(P4)…The Chinese consultant have been hired to make the factory similar to those in other foreign countries, so that buyers can also see the improved level of production. But we have been facing more problems since they came in as they have reduced the number of operators. "	Supervisor - "The idea of more production at a lower cost is also shared among the workers" finish higher targets for OT bonus with more hours (motivational tactic + higher workload)	

"more than one set of payroll for piece rate workers.
1) The first set of documents reflected payment for weekly hours for piece rate workers
2) A second set reflected payment for overtime hours."

"The workers of the cutting and finishing sections worked up to 9 to 13 consecutive days in the month of June 2016. Workers worked on a weekly rest day on 30th December. The workers of the cutting, sewing and finishing sections worked up to 8 days consecutive days in the month of December 2016."

(P5) These auditors come on behalf of the buyers to monitor the conditions we work in. Suppose if we work for long hours till 12 am, then we can become ill and have trouble sleeping. This would affect the production quality; if we are unwell, we are more likely to make damages. That is why they want to check whether we work for excessive overtime hours.
(P4) Buyers have limited overtime work to 72 hours per week, they will not accept anything beyond this. As a result, the factory maintains one set of records that only show overtime work for 72 hours and another set that shows the actual hours beyond this limit."

PC - "previously there was frequent pressure of overtime work but it has been significantly reduced. Only if there is shipment urgency then we might have to work up to 11 at night. Normally we leave factory by 8 or 9. The piece rate production system has contributed to improvement in production quality, time management and productivity."

in April 2018 and August 2017 workers in (cutting, sewing and finishing) process worked on several weekly rest day.

The employer did not provide compensatory days when workers worked on weekly rest day. Workers worked weekly rest days during January 2018, November and June 2017 in the Dry and Wet process and maintenance sections.

Annex 3- Key Findings

Chart A. Use of Complaints Mechanisms by Gender

This only shows the types of complaints mechanisms that were used 'Most Often' by men and women at Factories A and B.

Chart A: Complaints Mechanisms used 'Most Often' (by Gender)
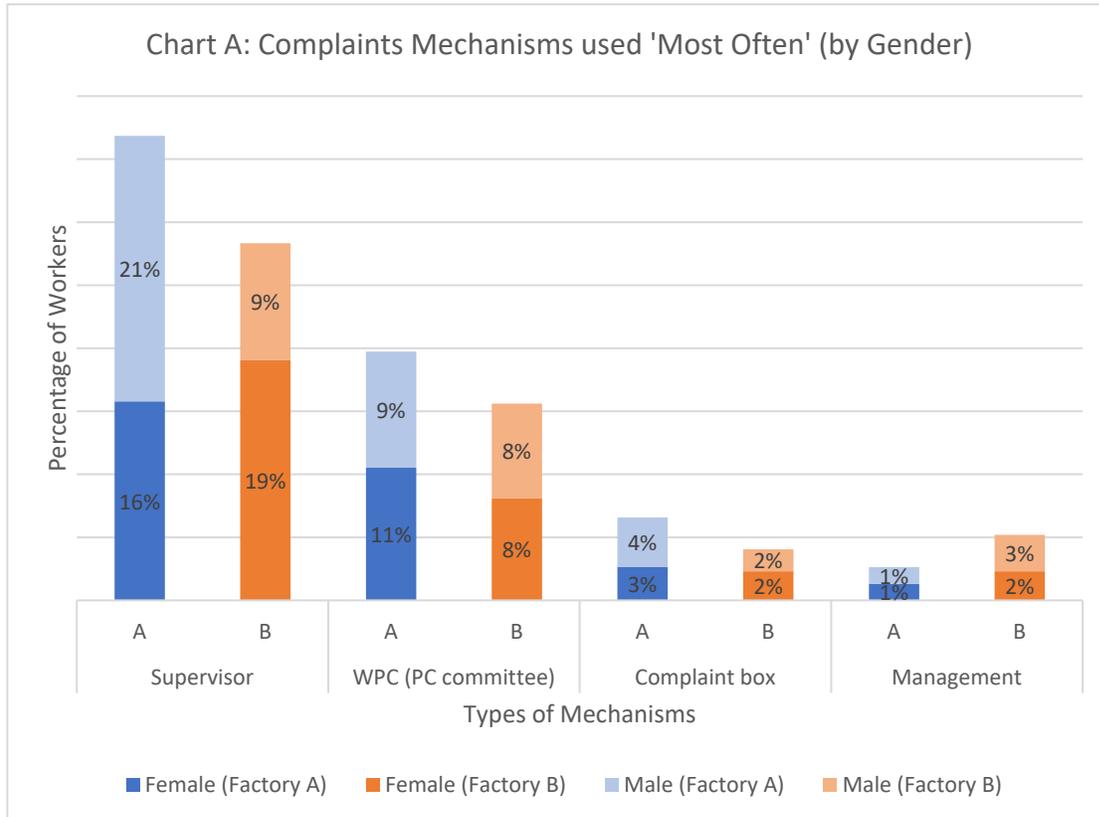
Chart B: Workers' Most Important Concerns at Factory A (by gender)

Factory A included 76 survey respondents (female- 41, male- 35). This shows the relative frequency of male and female respondents for each area of concern. It shows that a greater proportion of men were concerned about verbal abuse (34%) and inadequate pay (29%) and while women were also concerned about verbal abuse (22%), excessive workload (27%) was a more significant concern than inadequate pay (12%).
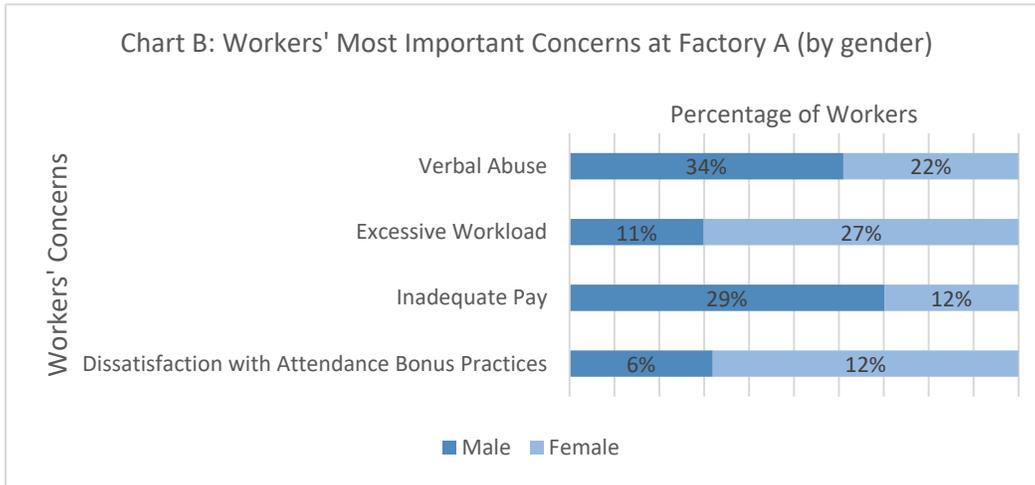

Chart C: Workers' Most Important Concerns at Factory B (by gender)

Factory B had a larger sample of 173 respondents (female- 115, male- 58). This shows the relative frequency of male and female respondents for each concern. It shows that a greater proportion of men were concerned about issues such as excessive workload (21%) and inadequate pay (14%). Women were more concerned about verbal abuse (38%) and difficulties obtaining paid leave (9%)
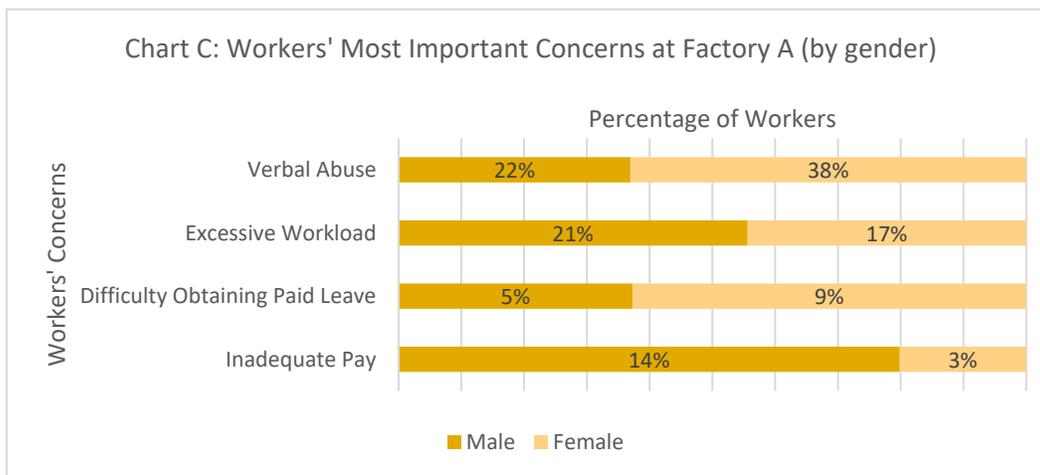
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