

## **Rethinking Social Upgrading in Global Value Chains** Worker Power, State–Labour Relations and Intersectionality

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# Rethinking Social Upgrading in Global Value Chains: Worker Power, State–Labour Relations and Intersectionality

Kristoffer Marslev , Cornelia Staritz   
and Gale Raj-Reichert 

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## ABSTRACT

This article builds on critiques of the concept of social upgrading in global value chain (GVC) research, which problematize its coupling to lead firm strategies and economic upgrading by supplier firms, by reconceptualizing social upgrading through the lens of worker power. It argues that a better understanding of the causal processes of social upgrading can be obtained by integrating insights from labour geography, which situates worker agency at the intersection of a ‘vertical’ dimension of transnational relations and a ‘horizontal’ dimension of local relations, with conceptualizations of worker power from (global) labour studies, particularly the modes of structural and associational power. The authors call for a deeper theorization of the places in which GVCs ‘touch down’, arguing that worker power is decisively shaped by state–labour relations as well as the intersectionality of worker identities and interlinkages between spheres of production and reproduction. Case study analyses of the apparel sectors in Cambodia and Vietnam employ this reconceptualization, drawing on the authors’ own fieldwork. In both cases, worker power expressed in strike action was a key causal driver of social upgrading; and in both, the outcomes were conditioned by GVC dynamics as well as shifting state–labour relations and intersections of worker identities linked to gender, household and community relations.

## INTRODUCTION

While the globalization of production over the past four decades has provided new employment opportunities in countries of the global South, low wages and poor working conditions have been widespread, evident in long

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working hours, precarious work arrangements, limits to organizing and collective bargaining, forced labour, and deaths from building collapses and worker suicides (e.g. Barrientos et al., 2011; Marslev, 2019; Plank et al., 2014). COVID-19 has again exposed the vulnerabilities of workers in globalized production; since the outbreak of the pandemic, for example, major fashion brands and retailers in the United States and the European Union have cancelled orders worth more than US\$ 40 billion from suppliers, around half of which remains unpaid, and renegotiated prices and delivery times (Anner, 2021). These outcomes testify to the pressures that supplier firms and workers face in highly competitive global production arrangements governed by transnational corporations, whose power has increased in the context of neoliberal policies that facilitate access to a global pool of low-wage labour (Anner, 2020; Ponte et al., 2019).

Workers, however, are not only victims and passive recipients of poor working conditions in the global economy; they can actively shape their situation and the dynamics of globalization more broadly. Drawing on labour history and geography, political economy, sociology of work, industrial relations and the inter-disciplinary field of (global) labour studies, a scattered literature has emerged, bringing back the agency of workers in globalized production processes, including the analysis of the rise of transnational labour activism since the 2000s (see Brookes and McCallum, 2017). This literature highlights the need for a more nuanced analysis of worker power in the context of globalized production in order to better understand the opportunities and constraints facing workers as agents of social change.

One influential intervention to assess outcomes for workers in globalized production arrangements came from global value chain (GVC) and related research assessing interlinked production processes that bring goods and services to markets through organizationally fragmented and geographically dispersed but functionally integrated global chains. Early GVC research was mainly concerned with *industrial* or *economic upgrading* — how firms and regions of the global South can link to these chains and improve their positions by moving into higher value-added activities (Gereffi, 2019). Since the 2000s, GVC scholars have set out to understand *social upgrading* as a distinct process, related to improving workers' benefits and conditions (Barrientos et al., 2011). While the strength of this research is its analysis of firm strategies and inter-firm power relations to understand outcomes for workers in different sectors, there has been less focus on workers as agents in social upgrading processes. This gap in research has been critiqued within the broader chain and network research community. In particular, economic and labour geographers point to the limitations of social upgrading research that links the fate of workers largely to the behaviour of lead firms and to supplier firms pursuing economic upgrading in GVCs.<sup>1</sup>

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1. For example, Carswell and De Neve (2013); Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011); Cumbers et al. (2008); Newsome et al. (2015); Rainnie et al. (2011); Selwyn (2013).

This article contributes to this critique by arguing that an understanding of social up- and downgrading must adequately consider worker power. We argue, first, that integrating insights from labour geography, which situates worker agency at the intersection of a ‘vertical’ dimension of transnational relations and a ‘horizontal’ dimension of local relations, with conceptualizations of worker power from (global) labour studies perspectives, particularly structural and associational power, offers an understanding of causal processes of social upgrading. Second, we call for a deeper theorization of the places in which GVCs ‘touch down’, arguing that worker power is decisively shaped by state–labour relations as well as the intersectionality of worker identities and interlinkages between the spheres of production and reproduction. Hence, we reconceptualize social upgrading by linking these dynamics to the power resources of workers and operationalizing them along the vertical and horizontal dimensions of GVCs. Case study analyses of the apparel sectors in Vietnam and Cambodia employ this reconceptualization. These two country cases are chosen because they are among the major apparel exporters globally, have experienced social up- and downgrading along different dimensions and exhibit diverse institutional and political-economic contexts, which provide fertile ground for unpacking the causal processes of social upgrading.

In terms of methods, the analysis is largely based on fieldwork in Vietnam (Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City) in 2016 and 2018, and in Cambodia (Phnom Penh) in 2017. More than 100 interviews were conducted with stakeholders in and around the apparel industries, representing labour, capital and the state.<sup>2</sup> To capture the changing situation and strategies of workers, we interviewed leaders of four of the most vocal trade unions in Cambodia and the state-affiliated union confederation in Vietnam, as well as local and international NGOs working on human rights and labour issues. In Cambodia, a local journalist was engaged to reach workers at their homes after work, which resulted in 20 interviews; this was not done in Vietnam. To understand the economic trajectories, we talked to approximately 25 factory managers and various industry and business associations, including the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia (GMAC) and the Vietnam Textile and Apparel Association (VITAS). In addition, we consulted officials from relevant authorities, including ministries of labour, economy and industry, and the country offices of the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The interviews sought to clarify the economic and social trajectories of the apparel industries in the two countries and how different actors perceived the events and developments underpinning these outcomes. Particular attention was awarded to understanding evolving expressions and sources of worker power underlying social upgrading processes and strategies and counterstrategies pursued by labour, capital and the state. While researching

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2. Most interviews were conducted by Kristoffer Marslev in 2017 and 2018.

labour issues in these countries is notoriously challenging, access to ‘difficult’ informants was achieved through a snowballing strategy, using our own networks to identify key persons who could broker further contacts. In order to triangulate this interview material, the case studies use a range of secondary sources, including legal and policy documents, civil society reports and national media coverage.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss the evolution and critique of the concept of social upgrading in GVC research. The following section then sets out structural and associational modes of worker power and discusses how they play out along the horizontal and vertical dimensions of GVCs. Next, we elaborate on the embeddedness of worker power within state–labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities. This reconceptualization is applied in the subsequent section to re-evaluate our understanding of social up- and downgrading in the apparel sectors in Vietnam and Cambodia. The final section offers some conclusions.

#### **FROM ECONOMIC UPGRADING TO SOCIAL UP- AND DOWNGRADING IN GVCs**

Economic upgrading is a process by which firms move to higher value-added activities to increase their benefits (such as security, profits, capabilities) from participating in GVCs (Humphrey and Schmitz, 2002). Many empirical studies have shown that economic upgrading is not an automatic outcome of participation in GVCs: rather it is a contested process and one in which firms can remain stuck; they might even downgrade to lower-value positions, including by choice (Bair and Werner, 2011). Moreover, even if economic upgrading *is* achieved, it does not necessarily bring with it the anticipated benefits; in a context of high competition, supplier firms may upgrade just to keep pace with competitors and avoid being replaced in GVCs (Kaplinsky, 2005).

The focus of GVC research on economic upgrading has, particularly in the 2000s, been critiqued for its ‘labour blindness’ and lack of consideration of impacts on workers (e.g. Palpacuer, 2008; Taylor, 2007). The implicit assumption was that economic upgrading benefits workers through better wages and working conditions. Yet early research focusing on labour pointed to mixed outcomes of integration into and economic upgrading in GVCs. For instance, studies found that participation in apparel GVCs had different impacts for different sections of the workforce (Nadvi and Thoburn, 2004) and that commercial pressures of horticulture GVCs were passed onto workers, leading to job informalization, low wages and excessive working hours (Barrientos and Kritzinger, 2004).

The concept of social upgrading was developed in response to this critique. Social upgrading was defined as ‘improvement in the rights and

entitlements of workers as social actors, which enhances the quality of their employment' (Barrientos et al., 2011: 324). Framed by the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, it is anchored in the four pillars of the 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work:<sup>3</sup> decent employment and income, standards and rights at work, social protection and social dialogue. Evidence for social upgrading is widely classified in two dimensions: measurable standards, which refer to tangible aspects such as wage levels, contractual terms and working hours; and enabling rights, which refer to freedom of association and collective bargaining, non-discrimination, voice and empowerment (Barrientos et al., 2011).

A number of studies on social upgrading, particularly stemming from the large 'Capturing the Gains' project,<sup>4</sup> have concluded that social and economic upgrading are not widespread, and that economic upgrading is a necessary but insufficient condition for social upgrading (see, for example, articles in the special issues edited by Barrientos et al., 2016 and Pickles et al., 2015). There is also evidence of social 'downgrading', which is more common when one considers the uneven outcomes of economic upgrading on different aspects of working conditions and for different groups of workers. For example, Anner (2020) points out that while economic upgrading may be associated with wage increases, it can simultaneously entail higher work intensity or a backlash on freedom of association. Other studies show that economic upgrading may increase the skill content and improve working conditions for some workers but lead to social downgrading for others due to cost-cutting, and pressures on quality and flexibility. Social up- and downgrading often differs by workforce segment (permanent vs temporary, direct vs subcontracted, etc.) and worker identities such as gender, migrant status or race (Plank et al., 2014; Rossi, 2013).

To capture how GVC participation may deepen rather than alleviate vulnerability for workers, Philips (2011), contributing to global production network (GPN) research, introduced the notion of 'adverse incorporation'. This concept denotes a vicious circularity where initial conditions of poverty make workers vulnerable to precarious employment in GVCs, which — largely due to the commercial dynamics of chains — reinforce these circumstances. Rather than an aberration, adverse incorporation is integral to the 'normal functioning' of GVCs, contravening the idea that economic upgrading will improve the socio-economic situation of workers. From a different but related angle, Bair and Werner (2011) address the 'inclusionary bias' of GVC-related research through a 'disarticulations perspective' that sees the incorporation into, and *expulsion from*, commodity circuits as connected processes of uneven capitalist development. Through this lens, the

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3. See: [www.ilo.org/declaration/thedeclaration/textdeclaration/lang-en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/declaration/thedeclaration/textdeclaration/lang-en/index.htm)

4. The 'Capturing the Gains' project, led by the University of Manchester, brought together 40 researchers from 20 institutions and examined the interrelations between economic and social upgrading in four sectors: apparel, agro-foods, mobile phones and tourism.

devaluation and exclusion of some workers (and firms and regions) are constitutive of the formation and restructuring of GVCs.

A related critique of research on social upgrading focuses on its neglect of the interest conflicts and power asymmetries that permeate GVCs. Among the most vocal is Selwyn (2013) who critiques the social upgrading framework on three grounds: its assumption that lead firms, states, trade unions and international organizations coalesce around common interests in combating indecent work; its failure to see that the social relations of capitalist production render such cross-class alliances unviable; and its misspecification of the causes of indecent work and, consequently, unrealistic and ineffective policy proposals. As part of a wider turn to ‘labour-led development’, Selwyn (2017) argues for a bottom-up approach to understanding labour exploitation and class conflict in GVCs. In parallel, labour and economic geographers using the GPN approach have criticized the focus on workers as objects without deeper conceptualization of their agency (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2008; Rainnie et al., 2011). Marxist labour research, particularly on labour process theory, has made similar claims focusing on managerial control and labour resistance in the workplaces of GVCs (Newsome et al., 2015).

### **INCORPORATING WORKER POWER INTO SOCIAL UPGRADING IN GVCs**

Following these critiques, our starting point for reconceptualizing social upgrading is to focus on worker power. We understand worker power as having two essential features: it is *relational*, meaning that power asymmetries arise out of relationships between actors; and it is a *capacity*, meaning that it does not reside in things or resources that workers possess, such as money or information, but in the ability to mobilize or act on these resources to bring about change (Allen, 2003; Brookes, 2019). Such an understanding has been used to identify different modes of worker power, including the widely adopted distinction between structural and associational power (Silver, 2003; Wright, 2000). While structural power arises from workers’ position in the economic system and the capacity it provides for disrupting capital accumulation, associational power results from their collective organization (Wright, 2000).

Building on this foundation, a growing literature has explored additional ‘power resources’ that workers and their organizations can mobilize to further their interests. The Jena approach (Schmalz et al., 2018) distinguishes four power sources — associational, structural, institutional and societal power, the latter sub-divided into coalitional and discursive forms — while Brookes (2019) differentiates three: structural, institutional and coalitional. Others have proposed further concepts such as symbolic power (Chun, 2009) and logistical power (Webster et al., 2008). Two of these additional categories are relevant for our purpose: institutional power, which is the

capacity to hold employers accountable ‘through laws, regulations, and other formal or informal rules’ (Brookes, 2019: 4), and discursive or symbolic power, which is the capacity of workers and unions to influence, allude to and draw legitimacy from public discourses on justice, morality and fairness (Chun, 2009). We focus on structural and associational power as the primary modes of worker power being exercised, and also consider the mediating role of institutional and discursive/symbolic power,<sup>5</sup> both of which can constrain or enable structural and associational power. Under associational power, which we see as spanning relationships within labour as well as between labour and non-labour actors, we also discuss coalitional power; this refers to relationships between labour actors and other civil society actors such as NGOs, but also consumers, buyers and the media (Brookes, 2019), and is also called networked power (Zajak et al., 2017).

In exercising structural and associational power in GVCs, the opportunities and constraints facing workers can be conceptualized at the intersection of a vertical and a horizontal dimension (Neilson and Pritchard, 2009). While the vertical dimension represents transnational relationships, structures and processes such as inter-firm governance, competition among suppliers, global standards or transnational civil society campaigns, the horizontal dimension describes the ways in which workers are ‘embedded in particular institutional and regulatory spaces, with particular histories and trajectories’ (Coe, 2015: 181). Kelly (2001: 2) argues that although the need to discipline labour often emanates from lead firms in GVCs, ‘it is within highly localized and geographically differentiated systems of repression that labour control is constituted, and not just in the direct relationship between global capital and local labour’. Such a perspective stresses the multiscalarity of labour relations, pointing out the relevance of local place-based contexts but also how these are interwoven with transnational power relations in GVCs (Alford et al., 2017; Baglioni, 2018; Castree et al., 2004; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). In the following, we discuss the various ways in which structural and associational power articulate along these horizontal and vertical dimensions.

### **Structural Power of Workers in GVCs**

There are two subtypes of structural power: workplace bargaining power, which is based on the positionality of workers within workplaces, industries

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5. The importance of discursive, symbolic or ideational power resources has come to the fore in recent power conceptualizations in GVC research that have expanded from a focus on dyadic and direct inter-firm governance relations to include collective actors and diffuse transmission mechanisms (Dallas et al., 2019; see also Gibbon et al., 2008; Raj-Reichert, 2020). These conceptualizations can be stretched to capture worker power, but do not specifically reference worker power, which is our focus here.



and/or GVCs; and marketplace bargaining power, which accrues to workers in tight labour markets (Silver, 2003). Reflecting the strategic positionality of workers in the production and distribution of goods and services, *workplace bargaining power* arises where a ‘localized work stoppage in a key node can cause disruptions on a much wider scale than the stoppage itself’ (Silver, 2003: 13). Thus, workers who occupy choke points or bottlenecks in (globalized) production processes — for instance, by making critical components — enjoy higher levels of workplace bargaining power than those making easily replaceable goods (Brookes, 2019). Just-in-time delivery and stringent buyer requirements can render supplier firms particularly vulnerable to worker action. For instance, in GVCs with tight quality requirements, such as Fairtrade tea from Kenya, even small disruptions by workers can compromise a farm’s ability to meet retailer demands (Riisgaard and Okinda, 2018). Notably, workplace bargaining power is reduced when capital mobility allows suppliers to easily relocate production and lead firms to shift sourcing locations. This ability depends, however, on the costs of setting up new facilities, the degree of local embeddedness of firms, and the availability of alternative production sites with suitable conditions.

Regarding *marketplace bargaining power*, the more dependent an employer is on workers — because they possess scarce skills, unemployment is low, or production enters high season — the more bargaining power workers generally have (Silver, 2003). Likewise, the less dependent workers are on an employer, due to alternative job opportunities or the option to withdraw from labour markets and survive by non-wage means, the greater their bargaining power (Schmalz et al., 2018). As many producer countries in GVCs have vast reserves of ‘surplus labour’, marketplace bargaining power tends to be weak. It can also be eroded by deskilling or breaking up complex processes into less skill-intensive segments and thus widening the pool of eligible workers (Iliopoulos et al., 2019). Largely discussed as a horizontal phenomenon rooted in local or national labour markets, marketplace bargaining power can also be assessed along the vertical dimension, as workers increasingly compete on a global scale in the context of GVCs. At a macro level, the integration of China and India into the global economy and the disintegration of the Soviet Union led to a ‘great doubling’ of the global labour supply (Freeman, 2006) that undermined the marketplace bargaining power of workers in other countries; conversely, the recent emergence of labour shortages and rising production costs in China can boost the marketplace bargaining power of workers in other supplier countries.

The relational nature of worker power implies that it always has to be seen in relation to the counterstrategies of capital and states. As mentioned, workers’ structural power is undermined by the ability of capital to relocate to places with weaker and cheaper labour — what Harvey (1981) coined a ‘spatial fix’. Silver (2003) added three additional ‘fixes’ by capital to (temporarily) escape profitability crises and reassert control over labour: ‘product fixes’, by moving into product lines subject to less intense competition;

‘technological fixes’, in the form of labour-saving technologies such as automation; and ‘financial fixes’, moving capital out of production and into financial activities. These concepts overlap with typologies of economic upgrading and explicate its dialectical relationship to capital–labour conflict. They emphasize how attempts at economic upgrading are often made in response to rising worker power (and labour costs), but also how the scope of social upgrading depends on the counterstrategies available to supplier firms, and whether these enable firms to accommodate social upgrading through greater value capture (Marslev, 2019).

### **Associational Power of Workers in GVCs**

Associational power is traditionally exercised along the horizontal dimension, via collective bargaining through trade unions, or political representation through worker parties (Wright, 2000). It can also be exercised through informal worker organizations and bottom-up modes of mobilization (Do, 2017), or it can take the form of alliances between workers and non-labour actors such as union–NGO coalitions and ‘community unionism’ (Wills, 2001; see also Helmerich et al., 2020). The latter is linked to the concept of ‘social movement unionism’ (Scipes, 1992), which views unions as vehicles for broader socio-political change pursued in alliance with other social movements — women’s, ecological, human rights or peace movements — and which resurfaced after new rounds of large-scale labour unrest in the global South in the 2000s (Coe, 2015; Nowak, 2017).

Associational power, too, has key transnational dimensions. This is evident in the rise of cross-border labour activism and efforts by workers and their organizations aimed at ‘jumping scale and bridging space’ (Merk, 2009: 606) to ‘meet capital at its own scale’ (Brookes and McCallum, 2017: 201). Particularly in locations where worker organizations are repressed, workers have been able to leverage transnational networks as a source of collective power. Joining forces with trade unions in the global North can, in such settings, allow workers to connect to institutions and political contexts in other locations, such as formal complaint channels or global framework agreements, thus opening new avenues to exert pressure on lead firms (Anner, 2015; Brookes, 2019; Zajak et al., 2017). Similarly, opportunities to exercise associational power can increase with transnational linkages to ethical campaigns, global multistakeholder initiatives or civil society campaigns (Helfen and Fichter, 2013). Such transnational campaigning can trigger a ‘boomerang’ effect whereby extra-local networks are used to upscale workers’ struggles and provoke powerful ‘outside’ actors to intervene or influence behaviours of employers or authorities (Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Merk, 2009). However, some take a more critical stance towards transnational activism, observing that cross-border organizing has often collapsed due to conflicts along ideological and strategic lines, resource in-

equalities and differentiated priorities.<sup>6</sup> Transnational associational power can be exercised not only vis-à-vis lead firms in GVCs but also vis-à-vis states. Workers and labour-centred coalitions can leverage global standards, such as international human rights norms and ILO conventions, to influence firm behaviour directly or indirectly, for example through market access conditions attached to free trade agreements or public procurement contracts (Gräf and Raj-Reichert, 2020; Harrison et al., 2018).

Rather than substitutes, structural and associational power are often inter-related and interdependent. For workers with weak structural power — for instance in captive GVCs, where the threat of exit by lead firms diminishes workers' capacity for disruption — associational power can be used to bring about change (Helmerich et al., 2020). On the other hand, workers with high structural power often need to organize and mobilize to realize the potential gains arising from their strategic positionality (Brookes, 2019).

### **RECONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL UPGRADING: WORKER POWER, STATE-LABOUR RELATIONS AND INTERSECTIONALITY**

Our reconceptualization of social upgrading, focused on worker power and its articulations along the vertical and horizontal dimensions of GVCs, acknowledges the growing literature on labour-led and agency-based approaches from both GVC and GPN perspectives. However, we argue that in order to comprehensively understand worker power for social upgrading, a more thorough engagement with processes along the horizontal dimension is required. We do this by emphasizing two aspects that are contingent to the exercise of worker power, and key to understanding how and why social up- and downgrading occurs in GVCs: state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities, as shown in Table 1.

#### **Worker Power and State-Labour Relations**

States play a crucial role in managing worker power and struggles for social upgrading. Worker power, hence, is embedded within state-society relations in general and state-labour relations in particular (Selwyn, 2013; Smith, 2015). States facilitate capital accumulation and regulate labour relations and wider social reproduction, determine who workers are, and control their ability to exercise certain modes of power (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). They regulate the lives of workers in many ways, for instance by drawing boundaries of labour markets, providing basic services and welfare, mediating class conflict and disciplining labour. This shapes the social relations,

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6. Nowak (2017); for recent overviews, see for example Brookes and McCallum (2017); Zajack et al. (2017); see also Burawoy (2010) on the 'false optimism of global labour studies'.

Table 1. Conceptualizing Worker Power in GVCs

	Associational	Structural
<b>Vertical dimension</b>	Transnational organizing and activism Cross-border alliances with trade unions or NGOs and multistakeholder initiatives 'Upscaling' of conflicts to trigger 'boomerang' effect via lead firms, states or other actors	<i>Workplace bargaining power:</i> Strategic positionality in GVCs; capacity to disrupt accumulation in/via GVCs <i>Marketplace bargaining power:</i> Competitive dynamics of regional and global labour markets
<b>Horizontal dimension</b>	Workers' capacity to mobilize, through formal or informal channels Alliances with NGOs, communities and other social movements ('social movement unionism')	<i>Workplace bargaining power:</i> Strategic positionality in firms and industries; capacity to disrupt accumulation in/via local and national economies <i>Marketplace bargaining power:</i> Unemployment and underemployment in local labour markets; possession of scarce skills (skill intensity); alternative employment and survival
<b>State-labour relations</b> Strategic selectivity inscribed in state institutions + social basis of state power	Industrial relations framework State orientation, mediation and intervention in capital-labour relations	State policies on e.g. labour markets, migration, social protection, education, agriculture and land Workers' capacity to provoke intervention of, and wrest concessions from, the state
<b>Worker identities</b> Intersections of social hierarchies + interlinkages between spheres of production and reproduction	'Classes of labour', workforce segmentation and obstacles to solidarity Labour control based on social hierarchies (e.g. gender or migrant status) Multidimensionality of worker identities as basis for mobilization	Segmentation and fragmentation of workforces along hierarchical lines Reproductive work burden Co-constitution of labour regimes by productive and reproductive spheres

Source: authors' own design

livelihood strategies and reproductive activities of workers in their community spaces (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Critically, states also influence worker power along the vertical dimension through engagements in international institutions and multi- and bilateral trade and investment agreements and dispute-settlement mechanisms — processes which impact upon inter-firm and capital-labour relations in GVCs.

Although GVC and related approaches emerged, partly, in response to statist explanations of economic development, and 'the state' — as a consequence — was for long consigned to the analytical margins of these frameworks, recent work has paid more attention to the role of states in the formation and functioning of GVCs (see Werner, 2021 for an overview). This

growing body of research has highlighted the variegated roles that states play in GVCs, as facilitators, regulators, producers and buyers (Horner, 2017); the centrality of state agency in the creation of ‘outsourced’ governance (Mayer and Phillips, 2017); and the complex interactions of, and fluid boundaries between, public and private forms of governance (Bair, 2017; Gereffi and Lee, 2016). With some exceptions (notably Smith, 2015), however, these contributions have largely sought to describe, classify and typologize state functions, leaving the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of state action under-theorized.

Following Smith (2015), our conceptualizing of the state builds on the strategic-relational approach of Poulantzas (1978) and Jessop (1990), viewing the state as a complex social relation that can only be understood in its dialectical relation to society. In this perspective, the state is neither a neutral actor nor a mere instrument of the ruling class, but is itself politicized, opened up as a key arena of struggle, where classes and social actors pursue various strategies to advance their interests. As a ‘crystallization of past strategies’ (Jessop, 1990: 129), the state contains inherent biases, privileging certain actors, strategies and interests, which leads to ‘strategic selectivity’. As an arena of continuous struggle, ‘the state does not exist as a fully constituted, organizationally pure, and operationally closed system but is an emergent, contradictory, hybrid and relatively open system’ (ibid.: 316).

For our purposes, the strategic-relational view of the state offers two advantages. First, it shows that the ways in which the state ‘manages’ capitalist development, capital–labour relations and labour control are a result of the historically specific struggles in and outside of state institutions. Second, it helps explain the opportunities and constraints facing workers in influencing state policies. This relates to the strategic selectivity inscribed in the state, but also to the ‘configuration of social forces underpinning state support for particular policy directions’ (Smith, 2015: 299), and to the ways that shifting power relations in society affect the capacities of different social groups to exert pressure on the state. We can thus understand how and why states intervene in capital–labour relations, critically mediating the capacity of workers to wrest concessions from suppliers and lead firms, as well as to directly influence state policy.

The historical specificities of states shape the strategies they pursue vis-à-vis labour. Workers’ associational power is affected by state policies towards trade unions, other labour organizations and NGOs — whether they permit cooperative and populist labour movements, promote ‘official’ labour movements to thwart autonomous mobilization, or attempt to fragment, divide and constrain, if not outlaw, labour movements (Rowley and Bhopal, 2006). At the same time, state regulation influences workers’ structural power. Through policies on migration, social protection and education, for instance, states regulate labour supply, with important bearings on workers’ marketplace bargaining power (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Of particular importance in the context of the structural heterogeneity characterizing

many countries of the global South, where capitalist modes of production often blend with pre-capitalist ones, are policies on agriculture and land that intervene in processes of class formation and rural–urban migration (Bernstein, 2010). While the power resources approach sees institutional power — in the form of legally fixed labour rights and channels of influence — as resulting from the ‘coagulation’ of past class conflicts, the above examples make clear that worker power in a broader sense is influenced by state action and, as such, fundamentally shaped by socio-political struggles within and outside the state.

States in the global South are constrained by their integration into the world economy, which imposes pressures on them to act in the interests of global capital. States pursuing export-led industrialization through integration into GVCs have, for example, tended to restrict unionization and keep labour costs low, in favour of foreign investment and lead firms, but these policies still play out in different ways (Rowley and Bhopal, 2006). Trade and investment agreements have further favoured capital accumulation over securing labour rights. Yet, although they are comparatively weak, labour chapters in the new generation of free trade agreements by the US and the EU have been leveraged for worker struggles and to put pressure on states in certain contexts (Evans, 2018; Tran et al., 2017).

### **Worker Power and Intersectionality of Worker Identities**

Workers are entangled in webs of social relations in and beyond the workplace. Their identities are therefore complex and multidimensional, and class is interwoven with other social categories such as gender, race, sexuality, age, nationality, ethnicity, place and community (Bhattacharya, 2017; Campling et al., 2016; Lawton et al., 2015). Given this multiplicity of labour relations, there is not a single labouring class but different ‘classes of labour’ (Mezzadri, 2020; Mezzadri and Fan, 2018); and labour is itself a site of ongoing class struggles (Cumbers et al., 2008). Feminist scholars, as well as labour researchers taking a global history perspective, have long criticized a ‘productivist bias’, arguing for recognition of the importance and complex entanglements of the reproductive sphere and social differentiation related to gender and other categories to understand capitalist production (see, for example, from a Marxist perspective, Bannerji, 2011; Bhattacharya, 2017; Mezzadri et al., 2021). The intersectionality perspective, first named by Crenshaw (1989), was developed by women-of-colour feminists criticizing the exclusive focus on class in traditional Marxism and, in respect to feminist Marxism, stressing the interrelations of class and gender with other social categories. They argued that these interlinked social relationships and systems of domination need to be understood together, including how they are experienced by different subaltern groups (Bohrer, 2018). For our purpose, an intersectionality perspective is useful to understand not only the

differentiated outcomes for different types of workers in GVCs along intersecting lines of social difference — in material and discursive forms — but also how worker power is confronted by a wider array of social relations that do not evolve from, but are still integral to, capitalism, and are mediated by the state.<sup>7</sup>

While the intersections of class and other social identities are specific to processes and practices in particular places, they also interact with global inter-firm relations in GVCs (Bair, 2010). Strategies of firms often build on prevailing social hierarchies, as social differences are mobilized to ensure labour control. For instance, supplier firms adjust to cost, quality and flexibility pressures from lead firms by creating fine-grained stratifications among their workforces linked to differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, migrant status or types of working contracts, which form the basis for differential schemes of remuneration and working conditions (Plank et al., 2014; Werner, 2015). Such workforce segmentation, within firms and whole sectors, also serves to fragment labour and poses obstacles to working class solidarity (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011). Further, female workers are frequently subjected to patriarchal managerial styles by male supervisors (Mezzadri, 2020) and migrant workers are kept under surveillance in employer-controlled dormitories (Pun, 2005). Hence, labour control and productive work and time rhythms importantly shape, but are also shaped by, the reproductive sphere (Mezzadri et al., 2021).

The positionalities that arise amidst these intersecting social hierarchies shape workers' experiences, identities and activities (Ong, 1991). As Bernstein (2010: 116) observes, shared circumstances of workers 'are not experienced self-evidently and exclusively as class exploitation and oppression *in general* but in terms of specific identities'. Subjectivities beyond class can inform a sense of shared identity and collective consciousness among workers (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Hence, labour struggles in GVCs need not be driven by class consciousness but may be unified by solidarities arising from socio-cultural and socio-economic ties such as gender, age, education or migration experience (Pun et al., 2020), linking to reproduction and the 'everyday' life and experiences of workers (Katz, 2001).

Two social categories are crucial for our case studies: gender and migrant status. The expansion of assembly production in the global South was based on the feminization of labour that allowed for low wages and poor working conditions (Bair, 2010; Barrientos, 2019). Markets, and GVCs, are

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7. It has been debated whether an intersectionality perspective can be linked to Marxist perspectives. Marxism has been criticized for focusing primarily on class oppression, but this overlooks Marxist feminists (although some of these have been criticized for implicitly assuming a white, heterosexual and middle-class frame of analysis). Intersectionality approaches, in turn, have been criticized for their underdeveloped analysis of class and insufficient critique of capitalism as a structure (Bhattacharya, 2017; Bohrer, 2018). Bohrer (2018: 48) argues for a synthesis of these frameworks, because 'Marxism needs intersectionality' and 'intersectionality can benefit from a robust theory of capitalism'.

‘gendered institutions’ that buttress widely held perceptions of typical ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’ (Elson, 1999). In apparel factories, for example, gendered divisions of labour are framed around social stereotypes of sewing as a ‘low-skilled’ female job and ironing as requiring the ‘strength’ of men. To capture the ways in which production in GVCs is structurally linked to household and community spaces of social reproduction, Kelly (2009) proposed the notion of ‘global reproduction networks’. Within households, women in the global South (but not only there) are often subordinated to patriarchal norms, assigning them a disproportionate share of family obligations and unpaid household work; these gender roles form the basis of patriarchal forms of labour control in production, which may include gender-based violence, and allow for lower wages, additionally subsidized by reproductive and informal work of women (Baglioni, 2018; Barrientos, 2019; Dunaway, 2014; Mezzadri, 2020).

Employers in GVCs have tended to consider women as ‘more compliant and less likely to protest at poor conditions’ (Merk, 2009: 602). Evans (2017) shows how widespread norm perceptions of ‘acquiescent women’ and ‘assertive men’ reinforce patriarchal unions, exclude women from leadership positions and curb worker power in Asian apparel sectors. This is supported by research on other sectors and countries, showing that women have more limited access to trade unions and worker parties, which is aggravated by limitations on their time due to reproductive responsibilities (Ledwith, 2012). However, gender can also form the basis of workers’ consciousness and actions, and solidarity on the shop floor can arise out of gender-based grievances (Merk, 2009).

Second — and relatedly — worker power is conditioned by internal and international migration and trans-local livelihood strategies. Internal migrants, in particular persons leaving rural areas in search of employment in urban-based industrial sectors, are ubiquitous in GVCs (Phillips, 2011). Migration is often an integral part of household strategies to diversify livelihoods and incomes in order to cope with the unevenness of capitalist development (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). As a result, workers in GVCs form part of ‘trans-local’ livelihoods with household members working in multiple and shifting locations, giving rise to dense flows of money and information across rural–urban divides. Their status as migrants can significantly shape workers’ experiences, with implications for their accommodation, access to public services, social networks and protest motivations (Pun, 2005). In the case of the apparel sector in Cambodia, for instance, worker protests were partly driven by declining prices and seasonal trends in agriculture, with apparel workers protesting as representatives of a wider household structure (Lawreniuk and Parsons, 2018). These rural–urban, family, household and ethnic or kinship relations feed into workers’ consciousness and capacities to mobilize and need to be conceptualized to understand worker power. In this sense, the sphere of production is deeply entwined with the



sphere of reproduction and with the communities and locations the workers come from.

### **WORKER POWER AND SOCIAL UP- AND DOWNGRADING AMONGST APPAREL WORKERS IN VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA**

To illustrate our reconceptualization of social upgrading, we apply it to the apparel industries in Vietnam and Cambodia. In both countries, export-oriented apparel production emerged in the context of wider political-economic transitions: in Vietnam, the launch of *doi moi* ('renovation') and the shift to a 'socialist-oriented market economy' in the late-1980s (Beresford, 2008); in Cambodia, the transition to peace, capitalism and 'democracy' in the early 1990s (Hughes, 2003). Attracted by cheap labour and preferential market access to the US and EU, the apparel industries in Vietnam and Cambodia were among the fastest growing in the first decades of the 21st century. In 2018, the Vietnamese apparel industry employed 2.7 million workers and exported US\$ 32 billion worth of goods, the third highest in the world (Better Work, 2019), while the apparel (and footwear) sector in Cambodia employed roughly a million workers with exports worth more than US\$ 8 billion, the seventh highest (ILO, 2018).<sup>8</sup>

While the apparel industry in Vietnam was initially dominated by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the inflow of foreign direct investment and 'equitization' of SOEs changed the ownership structure, so that, today, foreign-owned firms account for two-thirds of exports (Schweisshelm and Do, 2018). The Cambodian apparel industry, in contrast, has always been almost entirely in foreign hands, mainly East Asian transnational producers. While both countries started in lower value-added segments, Vietnam has been more successful in accommodating rising labour costs through economic upgrading, adopting labour-saving technologies and moving into more complex products. This is indicated by the average unit value of US apparel imports from Vietnam (US\$ 4.3/piece) being the highest among the 10 largest supplier countries in 2019, and much higher than that of Cambodia (US\$ 3.2/piece).<sup>9</sup> Relatedly, both countries have experienced the 'supplier squeeze' that is characteristic of apparel GVCs, where buyer consolidation and intensified supplier competition drive down export prices and increase requirements in terms of functions, lead times and flexibility (Anner, 2020), but to different degrees. While average unit values of US apparel imports from Vietnam declined by 10 per cent from 2004 to 2019, they dropped by 25 per cent for Cambodia, with direct implications for wages and the ability of supplier firms to accommodate social upgrading.

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8. Trade data from WTO's World Trade Statistical Review: [www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/statistics/wts2019\\_e/wts19\\_toc\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statistics/wts2019_e/wts19_toc_e.htm) (accessed November 2020).

9. Data from USITC DataWeb; only includes imports with quantities denominated in dozens.

In terms of social up- and downgrading, in both countries, long periods with infrequent minimum wage adjustments and falling real incomes gave way to annualized wage-setting frameworks and substantial real wage increases. Yet, the cases differ in terms of enabling rights. Vietnam — often viewed as one of the most repressive regimes in the region — recently improved enabling rights for workers through a new Labour Code and the ratification of two ILO Core Conventions, although they are yet to be fully implemented.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, Cambodia — with a fairly progressive labour law and a unique social clause in its past trade agreement with the US, which led to the comprehensive Better Factories Cambodia programme — used to be praised as a ‘best practice alternative’ (Wells, 2007), but the situation has deteriorated dramatically over the past decade. In the following sub-sections, we explain these differing trajectories and outcomes based on our worker power-centred conceptual framework.

### **Vietnam**

Apparel workers in Vietnam experienced social downgrading, reflected in a 20 per cent drop in the purchasing power of the minimum wage in foreign-invested enterprises between 2000 and 2005. This was halted by a wave of labour unrest across export-oriented industries in the mid-2000s (Figure 1). Sparked in December 2005 by a ‘wildcat’ strike at a footwear supplier to Nike and Adidas, protests spread quickly, and over 10 days, 14 strikes took place involving 42,000 workers. A decree by the Prime Minister in early 2006, signalling a 40 per cent minimum wage hike in foreign-invested enterprises, inspired further action, including in domestic private enterprises where workers hoped for similar increases (Tran, 2013). The number of strikes, across all sectors, rose from around 100 per year before 2006 to almost 1,000 in 2011, tapering off thereafter. Most strikes occurred in foreign-owned, labour-intensive industries in and around Ho Chi Minh City. The apparel industry was the most strike-prone, accounting for a third of all strikes (Do, 2017).

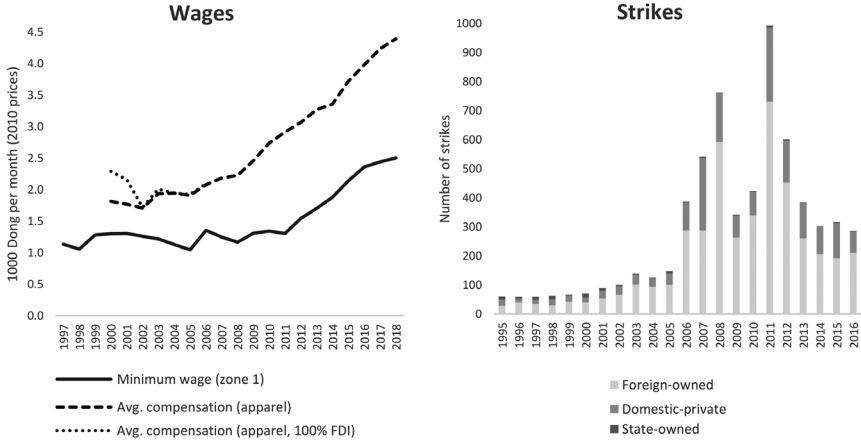
The mass mobilization of apparel workers occurred despite formal restrictions on unionization and strikes. The state-run trade union, the Vietnam Confederation of Labour (VGCL), is the only permitted worker representative<sup>11</sup> and is tasked with ensuring harmonious industrial relations. Despite union presence in 82 per cent of apparel factories (IWTU, 2017), the

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10. Convention 98 on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining was ratified in 2019, and Convention 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour in 2020. Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize is scheduled for ratification in 2023.

11. This should change with the full implementation of the outstanding ILO Conventions and the new Labour Code.

Figure 1. Strike Activity and Wages in Vietnam’s Apparel Sector



Sources:

Wages: Data on minimum wages from Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs; average compensation is from Statistical Yearbook Vietnam. Wages are deflated by CPI (2010=100) from databank.worldbank.org. Strikes: Data on the number of strikes from Vietnam Confederation of Labour, provided during fieldwork. Strike data are for all sectors.

exercise of associational power circumvented formal union structures: not a single strike has been led by the VGCL (Schweisshelm and Do, 2018).

The associational power of workers, expressed through wildcat strikes, became a key driver of social upgrading in terms of both measurable standards and enabling rights. For reasons discussed below, employers quickly acceded to workers’ demands<sup>12</sup> (Do, 2017). Labour protests led to the government raising the minimum wage several times and implementing a new wage-fixing mechanism. A revised Labour Code was passed in 2012, introducing tripartite wage-setting and a minimum wage that ‘must ensure the minimum living needs of the employee and his/her family’ (art. 91). While wage hikes during the strike wave were eroded by inflation, the institutionalization of wage reviews meant that minimum wages continued climbing post-2011, after industrial action had peaked. In real terms, the 2018 minimum wage was more than twice its 2005 level and represented an estimated two-thirds of a living wage, up from a quarter before the strike wave; average wages (including bonuses and overtime) in apparel manufacturing just met workers’ living needs.<sup>13</sup> This meant that even with the wage gains, workers had to rely on overtime and productivity bonuses for a decent living.

12. An ILO survey found that 92 per cent of all strikes in 2010 ended with all demands being met by employers (Do, 2017).  
 13. Calculations based on a back-casting of the WageIndicator.org living wage estimate for Vietnam (January 2018, average of lower and upper bound for typical family) according to the consumer price index (databank.worldbank.org).

The wildcat strikes also sowed the seeds for trade union reform (Do and van den Broek, 2013). This was supported by pressure along the vertical dimension in the context of trade negotiations with the US and the EU, the former making market access conditional on labour reforms under the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which was never concluded (Tran et al., 2017), and the latter picking up the pressure from the US in the run-up to ratification of the EU–Vietnam Free Trade Agreement. States in the global North, facing pressure from civil society groups, supported trade union reform which was leveraged by reformists in the Vietnamese political system, mainly in the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and some sections of the VGCL, to drive labour law reform (Evans, 2018).

The exercise of workers' associational power also occurred vis-à-vis shifts in their structural power. The strikes occurred in the context of looming labour shortages in industrial areas due to the reduction of rural surplus labour, the emergence of employment alternatives and declining real wages in apparel factories. The labour shortage was also related to vertical processes, as investors escaping rising labour costs in China relocated factories to Vietnam, boosting labour demand there. Vietnamese workers used workplace bargaining power to exploit vulnerabilities of apparel GVCs by striking on delivery days or stopping machines at critical stages (Tran, 2007). Anner (2018) found that successful strikes in Vietnam often lasted only a few hours because apparel workers knew how to leverage tight delivery schedules which target suppliers who are under pressure to deliver on time and who face fines or order cancellations if they fail.

These social upgrading processes and shifts in workers' associational and structural power need to be understood in the context of historical state–labour relations. Born out of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles, the Vietnamese state is, according to its 1992 constitution, based on a 'triple alliance' of workers, peasants and intellectuals, led by the Vietnam Communist Party as the 'vanguard of the Vietnamese working class'. Although loyalty is waning, socialist ideas continue to shape the thinking of authorities and policy makers, and these ideological commitments oblige the state to react to workers' demands. While the party-state was always more polycentric and responsive than is assumed of authoritarian regimes, it is particularly amenable to grassroots pressure 'if coming from workers and peasants, the constituencies on which the Communist Party was built and on which it continues to rely for support and approval' (Kerkvliet, 2010: 36). There are limits to the tolerance, though, as calls for political reforms, including independent unions, have been suppressed (Kerkvliet, 2010).

State–labour relations shaped the events and outcomes of (and were themselves changed by) the 2006–11 strike wave. Initially, the Vietnamese government immediately intervened in these strikes (although it embraced a more hesitant approach in the later stages). Once news about a strike was out, a 'strike taskforce' comprising officials from the local labour department and the VGCL would quickly arrive at the scene, investigate

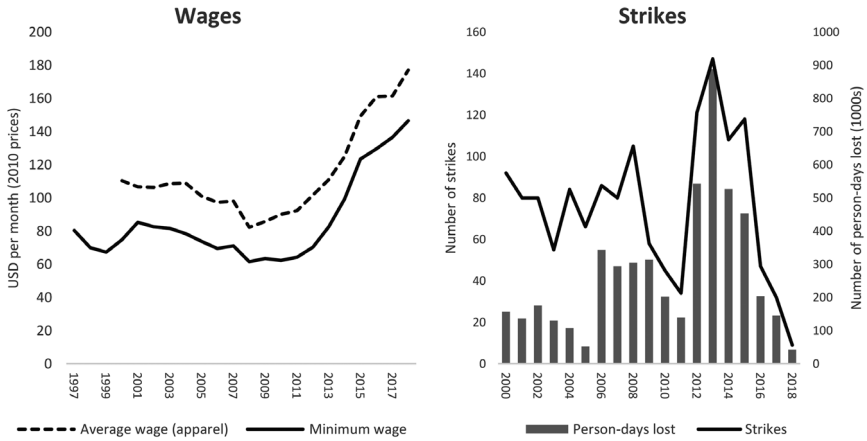
the dispute, put together a list of demands and persuade the employer to make concessions. Such a ‘firefighting role’ and resolute response were not merely motivated by ideological conviction. Inexperienced in dealing with class conflicts in a capitalist market economy, authorities were wary that labour activism would spiral out of control and spill into political protests (Kerkvliet, 2010). Vietnamese apparel workers actively drew on the state’s propaganda instruments, sending letters to administrators, unions and the vocal labour press, which generated public attention and put additional pressure on the state to intervene (Tran, 2008).

Worker power is further shaped by social stratification at the horizontal dimension. Apparel workers in Vietnam are mainly young, female migrants from rural areas. The industry has a strongly gendered division of labour with women dominating lower-paid positions as sewers and helpers and men largely occupying higher-paid supervisory roles. Female workers earn, on average, 15 per cent less per hour than men and are more likely to report health problems such as fatigue, headaches and dizziness (Fontana and Silberman, 2013). Gender stereotypes underpin patriarchal forms of labour control, and state propaganda has played a key role in constructing an image of the hardworking and ‘law-abiding’ woman, who fulfils ‘the patriarchal expectations of the work–home double burden’ and refrains from strikes (Tran, 2008: 60). Family relations in the sphere of reproduction, however, also affected working time. As government regulation encouraged internal migrant workers to bring their families and settle permanently in urban areas, factories had to accommodate the demand for shorter work schedules, with the result that workers tend to work less (typically 8–9 hours per day) than their Chinese or Cambodian counterparts (typically 10–11 hours) (Siu and Unger, 2020).

During the strike wave, the multidimensionality of worker identities became instrumental for mobilizing (Tran, 2008, 2013). Most strikes occurred in female-dominated industries, and although most revolved around low wages, gender-specific demands — such as flexible childcare arrangements or the dismissal of supervisors for abusive behaviour towards female workers — were prominent (Do and van den Broek, 2020). Often, strikes were organized by experienced female workers, recruiting younger women by appealing to ‘sisterhood’ and listening to ‘elder sisters’. Strikers also invoked their subjectivities *as workers* (the dignity of ‘we workers’), tapping into the state’s pro-worker ideals (Tran, 2008: 65–66). Workers thus drew on the symbolic power attached to the working class in a country with deeply engrained socialist discourses of fairness.

Collective action was further facilitated by the formation of internal migrant networks built around common kinship and places of origin. These networks served to foster solidarity and enabled ‘class moments’, creating a sense of collective consciousness based on shared experiences and grievances (Tran, 2013). The spread of strikes was not only aided by the spatial clustering of factories, but also travelled through these social

Figure 2. Strike Activity and Wages in Cambodia's Apparel Sector



Sources:

Minimum wages: Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training; average wages: Ministry of Commerce. Wages are deflated by CPI (2010=100) from databank.worldbank.org. Strikes and person-days lost: Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia for 2000–15; updated for 2016–18 from BFC (2018). Data for 2018 up to 31 August.

networks. As Tran (2007: 262) concludes, apparel workers’ ‘nexus of identities — including native place, gender, cultural networks, and a sense of class consciousness ... facilitated their labour organizing and strikes’. Given female workers’ limited voice in formal unions, the exercise of associational power to a great extent relied on socio-cultural bonds linked to gender roles and community ties.

**Cambodia**

As in Vietnam, Cambodian apparel workers’ social downgrading was experienced through a 25 per cent real minimum wage decline from 2001 to 2011, a boom in short-term contracts, and frequent mass faintings due to malnutrition. These outcomes led to a protest wave between 2012 and 2014, peaking with 147 strikes and 889,000 person-days lost in 2013 (Figure 2). After a myriad of factory-level actions, unrest culminated in a sector-wide strike in December 2013. Sparked by the government announcement of a US\$ 95 per month minimum wage — far below the US\$ 160 demanded by unions — an upsurge involving up to 150,000 apparel workers brought the industry to a halt. In January 2014, the protests were violently repressed by police forces, leaving five workers dead and 23 arrested (Arnold, 2017).

Cambodian apparel workers are among the most unionized in Asia. However, their associational power is curtailed by a labour control regime rooted in unfavourable labour markets, repressive employer practices and a tight

alliance between the semi-authoritarian state and foreign capital. A sizeable labour surplus, deepened by a post-Khmer Rouge baby boom, has driven rural migrants into factories and discouraged attempts to organize. Factories engaged in a range of repressive practices, including the use of short-term contracts as a union-busting tool. The state has promoted 'yellow' (i.e. employer-dominated) unions and frequently uses excessive force against protestors. As a consequence, the union landscape in Cambodia is fragmented, overcrowded and politicized (Arnold, 2014).

While workers in Cambodia have regularly protested against their working conditions, three factors enhanced their associational power during the 2012–14 strikes. First, the decisive December 2013 protests erupted spontaneously as workers reacted to the disappointing wage increase. As a result, an unprecedented number of unions — across political divides — were pulled into the strikes, paving the way for an unusual degree of inter-union cooperation (Arnold, 2017). Second, apparel workers' protests were supported by other occupations, social movements and the political opposition, building a broad coalition that resonates with the notion of 'social movement unionism' (Lawreniuk and Parsons, 2018). Third, trade unions and labour NGOs cooperated with transnational activist networks (such as the Clean Clothes Campaign) and global unions (such as IndustriAll) to target lead-firm purchasing practices that were 'starving Cambodian workers' (Dalton and Kong, 2017). With high media exposure of the January 2014 crackdown, global brands and retailers were compelled to intervene in support of wage reform, a 'boomerang' effect drawing global buyers into local struggles (Marslev, 2019).

The intensified labour unrest resulted in social upgrading in terms of measurable standards. In three years, the minimum wage (including mandatory bonuses and allowances) doubled, from US\$ 73 per month in 2012 to US\$ 145 in 2015, and an annual wage-fixing mechanism was instituted.<sup>14</sup> In parallel, however, employers and the government took measures to curb workers' associational power. Repressive laws, including a controversial trade union law in 2016, and continued legal harassment and anti-union tactics dealt a severe blow to independent unions and led to a decline in strike activity after 2014 (Marslev, 2019). Nonetheless, for reasons discussed below, the minimum wage continued climbing and was twice as high in real terms in 2019 as it had been at start of the strike wave in 2012. The 2019 minimum wage covered an estimated three-quarters of a living wage, up from a third before the strike wave, while average take-home pay was the equivalent of almost 90 per cent of a living wage.<sup>15</sup> Thus, as in Vietnam,

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14. Other material improvements included the introduction of a health insurance scheme in 2016.

15. Calculations based on a back-casting of the WageIndicator.org living wage estimate for Cambodia (January 2018, average of lower and upper bound for typical family) according to the consumer price index (databank.worldbank.org).

despite the wage increases, Cambodian apparel workers have to work excessive overtime in order to earn something approaching a living wage.

Strikes were undergirded by a rise in workers' structural power. Due to a number of processes, including the ebbing-away of the baby boom, a reduction of rural surplus labour, the deterioration of apparel wages vis-à-vis alternative employment and industrial re-expansion, factories experienced the first shortages of labour just before the surge in labour activism. The labour shortage was particularly acute in apparel, where, according to an ILO survey, 56 per cent of employers had vacancies (Bruni et al., 2013). This was aggravated by a surge in labour demand due to the relocation of factories from China. In addition to this shift in marketplace bargaining power, independent unions actively targeted factories where workers enjoyed higher workplace bargaining power. The idea was to secure concessions in strategic suppliers, where reputation-sensitive buyers were more likely to intervene, in order to drive a wedge into the united employers' front and pressure employers to support higher minimum wages across the sector (Dalton and Kong, 2017).

These social upgrading processes based on workers' associational and structural power need to be understood in the context of shifting state-labour relations. In control of the state since the ousting of the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Prime Minister Hun Sen, descendants of the communist party, have become an all-dominating political force (Hughes, 2003). Given these features, the Cambodian regime — a 'liberal multi-party democracy' according to its constitution — is conceptualized as a form of 'hegemonic electoral authoritarianism' (Diamond, 2002). Based on the suppression of rivals and the distribution of patronage in return for political loyalty, the CPP built a strong power base in rural areas, home to 85 per cent of the population (Un, 2005), and increased its share of the vote in consecutive elections, culminating in the first single-party government in 2008. The most vocal unions have historical ties to the opposition party, which found itself increasingly marginalized, thereby narrowing the political leverage of the labour movement.

The material gains for workers coincided with the greatest voter challenge faced by the CPP for decades. After 20 years of sectoral growth, apparel workers became a decisive voter segment, representing almost 10 per cent of eligible voters. In the 2013 election, when the opposition party made higher minimum wages a core of its platform, apparel workers' votes came close to causing the defeat of the CPP. Prime Minister Hun Sen, in a bid to secure the 'apparel vote' ahead of the 2018 election, launched a charm offensive with promises of cheaper electricity, employer-paid health insurance, baby bonuses and higher maternity benefits, among other things. Yet, the election was only won after the Supreme Court dissolved the opposition party in a lawsuit filed by the government itself, and the CPP, in the absence of any real competition, took all 125 seats of the National Assembly (Marslev, 2019).



Worker power was also shaped by intersections of class, gender, family and rural–urban relations. The apparel workforce is strongly gendered, a common narrative being that factories avoid hiring men to prevent labour unrest. The conditioning of female workers as ‘powerless’ is also seen in trade unions where, while the majority of members are women, female workers are under-represented in higher-ranking positions, making it ‘essentially a women’s movement under male leadership’ (Nuon and Serrano, 2010: 142). Gender and family relations affect the associational power of female workers. First, the combined demands of factory work and family duties restrict the time and energy available for organizational activities. Second, traditional codes of conduct expect women to be soft-spoken, passive and polite, limiting their public voice. Third, shouldering both economic and family obligations, women are expected to provide financial support for their households (Salmivaara, 2020). In the context of strained rural livelihoods, a non-existent social security system and over-indebtedness due to a surge in microcredit, female workers are under pressure to remit large portions of their wages back to rural families. This generates a deep-seated fear of unemployment that dissuades many, particularly female workers, from engaging in activism. It has been argued that in Cambodia, ‘social reproduction is a key factor that weakens women workers’ power vis-à-vis capital’ (ibid.: 153).

Nevertheless, in certain respects, gender and family relations aided mobilization in the 2012–14 protests. Lawreniuk and Parsons (2018: 33) claimed that Cambodian apparel workers ‘protest not only for themselves but as the representatives of a wider household structure’. Strikes are, therefore, not just driven by the insufficiency of urban wages, but also motivated by pressures on family farming, and tend to peak in the wet season (May to September), when expenses on agricultural inputs are passed on to migrant workers. Challenges to rural livelihoods, including falling rice prices, rising costs of fertilizer and heavy floods, induced apparel workers to join the strikes. Strikes were often encouraged by rural families and spread via familial and wider social networks. The dependency of entire communities on apparel wages fanned popular support for the protests, as many had material interests at stake (Lawreniuk and Parsons, 2018). This was instrumental in breaking the political dominance of the CPP in rural areas, as the opposition’s promise of higher apparel wages attracted not just apparel workers, but also their families and relatives (Marslev, 2019).

### **Comparison**

Processes of social upgrading in the apparel industries of Vietnam and Cambodia were driven by similar causal mechanisms (see Table 2). In both cases, the exercise of workers’ associational power — in the form of wildcat strikes in Vietnam and mass mobilization in Cambodia — forced concessions from

Table 2. Key Dimensions of Worker Power in Social Upgrading in Vietnam and Cambodia

	Vietnam		Cambodia
	Associational	Structural	Associational
<b>Vertical axis</b>	Limited; 'boomerang' effect via states through trade agreements	Relocation from China; supplier squeeze (medium); exploiting tight delivery schedules	Transnational advocacy networks, 'boomerang' effect via lead firms
<b>Horizontal axis</b>	Strike wave 2006–11; wildcat strikes by rank-and-file workers; circumventing VGGCL	Labour shortages (strong)	Strike wave 2012–14; grassroots-driven protest; inter-union cooperation; broad-based coalition
<b>State-labour relations</b>	State-controlled monopoly of unions; suppression of independent unions and civil society	State ideological commitment to working class ('symbolic' power); fear of political protests	State-capital alliance; state-supported union fragmentation, harassment and violence
<b>Worker identities</b>	Gendered forms of labour control; mobilization based on class, gender and kinship identities	Gender segmentation of work; reproductive work burden	Gendered forms of labour control; trans-local livelihoods and support from rural families

Source: authors' own design

Relocation from China; supplier squeeze (strong); targeting reputation-sensitive lead firms

Labour shortages (weak)

Neo-patrimonial state unreceptive to outside social forces; rise of apparel workers as decisive voting bloc

Gender segmentation of work; reproductive work burden

the state and capital. While, in Vietnam, associational power was largely exerted at the horizontal dimension, given better opportunities for targeting the state and the lack of civil society organizations for effective transnational organizing, it operated along both dimensions in Cambodia. In both countries, moreover, labour protests were galvanized by shifts in the structural power of apparel workers: emerging labour shortages heightened their marketplace bargaining power, while workplace bargaining power arising from tight delivery schedules and reputational sensitivity of lead firms in GVCs was leveraged to maximize impact. The cases, therefore, demonstrate the primacy of worker power as a driver of social upgrading, corroborating Selwyn's (2017) notion of labour-led development and related, agency-based perspectives. However, the cases also show that social upgrading provoked counterstrategies by the state and capital, which led to downgrading in other dimensions, including an intensification of work regimes in both countries and, in the case of Cambodia, a crackdown on the independent labour movement — developments that underscore the inherent fragility of social gains under capitalist production.

At the same time, the two cases show that worker power and social upgrading (as well as economic upgrading) cannot be understood purely in GVC terms (along the vertical dimension). We highlight the centrality of two largely 'horizontal' aspects. First, the cases illustrate how *historically specific state-labour relations* and different foundations of state power — in material and ideological terms — have variable implications for worker power. In Vietnam, the socialist party-state was quick to intervene in support of workers, driven by a mix of ideological conviction and fear of political protests. In Cambodia, in contrast, the neo-patrimonial state only gave in when the apparel workforce, due to its sheer size, became a decisive political force, shaking the power base of the ruling party. Different configurations of state-labour relations confronted Vietnamese and Cambodian apparel workers with different opportunities and constraints for exerting pressure on, and gaining concessions from, the state.

State reactions were also different in the two countries. The Cambodian government responded to the surge in labour activism by severely restricting the room for manoeuvre of the independent labour movement and co-opting apparel workers through material inducements. The Vietnamese government took gradual and cautious steps towards a new industrial relations framework, although it remains unclear how these legal-institutional changes will be implemented and whether they will enhance worker power on the ground. These findings show the importance of state-labour relations and their implications on worker power for social upgrading. They also raise the need for a deeper conceptualization of the state in GVCs.

Second, the cases demonstrate how worker power is conditioned by the *intersectionality of worker identities* and *interlinkages between the spheres of production and reproduction*. Not only are gender- and migrant-based divisions of labour and patriarchal forms of labour control common

characteristics; in both cases, the interrelations of class and other axes of social stratification became instrumental in exercising associational power, as mobilizing was linked to gender, community and rural–urban linkages. In Vietnam, labour protests drew on a mix of class, gender and community identities and spread through workers’ social ties; in Cambodia, workers’ collective action was encouraged by households engaged in trans-local livelihood strategies and spread through extended family networks in addition to trade unions. This underscores the need to conceptualize the complexity of social relations in production, reproduction and the ‘everyday’ life, in which workers are embedded, highlighting labour as a non-homogeneous class and intersecting lines of social stratification as important co-determinants of worker power in GVCs.

## CONCLUSIONS

In this article, we presented a worker power-centred reconceptualization of social upgrading in GVCs. We discussed how worker power can be seen as constituted at the intersection of transnational GVC relations (a ‘vertical’ dimension) and conditions, relations and struggles at local and national scales (a ‘horizontal’ dimension). Combining insights from labour geography and (global) labour studies, we showed how an operationalization of workers’ power resources — structural and associational power, in particular — along these dimensions can provide an understanding of the causal processes underpinning social upgrading. From this starting point, we concurred with labour geographers in arguing that a more profound theorization of processes along the horizontal dimension is needed to understand how GVC dynamics ‘touch down’ in specific places, and how these places shape GVC dynamics. Against this backdrop, we focused attention on two sets of relations that play out largely along the horizontal dimension and are critical for understanding how and why social upgrading occurs. First, based on a strategic-relational approach to the state, we argued that the nature of state–labour relations — forged in historical socio-political struggles in and outside of state institutions — are critical for understanding how and why states regulate, mediate and intervene in capital–labour conflicts, and what opportunities and constraints workers in GVCs face in seeking concessions from suppliers, lead firms or the state itself. Second, drawing on feminist scholarship, we argued that a conceptualization of workers’ wider social relations beyond the workplace, including the intersectionality of class with other social hierarchies and the interlinkages between the spheres of production and reproduction, is needed to appreciate how worker power can, and cannot, be exercised for social upgrading. These elaborations can be a fruitful avenue for advancing the research agenda on social upgrading.

The cases of Vietnam and Cambodia — two cases where major strike waves and visible capital–labour conflict played a lead role in achieving social upgrading — were used to show the relevance of our conceptual

framework. We argue, however, that our reconceptualization can also be applied to contexts in which worker struggles manifest themselves in more subtle and covert ways, where strikes are less common or where capital–labour conflict is channelled into more negotiated and institutionalized forms. The cases further show that social up- and downgrading can go hand in hand, as workers were more successful in achieving minimum wage increases and new wage-setting frameworks than in protecting their enabling rights, which worsened in the Cambodian case, and as wage hikes were accompanied by rising work intensity in both countries. This highlights the counterstrategies of firms and the state, which need to be conceptualized along with worker power and social upgrading in GVCs. In this combination, especially, GVC and related approaches have strong potential for assessing the interactions between firms, workers and states at different levels, related power dynamics and associated outcomes. A better conceptualization of worker power, as suggested in this article, can help realize this potential for understanding social up- and downgrading — a matter that has become even more important with COVID-19 and the heightened pressure it has brought to bear on workers.

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