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Re-conceptualising social upgrading in global value chains

Marslev, Kristoffer; Staritz, Cornelia; Raj-Reichert, Gale

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Department of Development Studies, University of Vienna

# ie.WorkingPaper

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## **Worker power, state-labour relations and worker identities: Re-conceptualising social upgrading in global value chains**

Kristoffer Marslev, Cornelia Staritz, Gale Raj-Reichert

### **Abstract**

Poor working conditions are widespread in global value chains (GVCs). In GVC research, the concept of social upgrading aims to understand how working conditions may improve focusing on lead firm strategies and inter-firm governance in GVCs, often seeing social upgrading as a result of economic upgrading by supplier firms. Building on work criticizing this understanding of social upgrading, we re-conceptualise social upgrading through the lens of worker power exercised at the intersection of transnational relations on a vertical dimension and local relations on a horizontal dimension. We focus in particular on the embeddedness of worker power within state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities along the horizontal dimension to explain why social up- and downgrading occurs in GVCs. Case study analyses of the apparel sectors in Cambodia and Vietnam employ this re-conceptualization. In both cases, worker power expressed in strike action was a key causal driver of social upgrading; and in both, the outcomes were critically shaped by shifting state-labour relations and intersections of class and worker identities linked to gender, household and community relations.

**Keywords:** global value chain, social upgrading, worker power, state, intersectionality, apparel, Cambodia, Vietnam

**Author information:** Kristoffer Marslev is the postdoctoral researcher in the LG-GPN project at the Department of Development Studies of the University of Vienna and at the Department of Social Sciences and Business at Roskilde University, Denmark.

Cornelia Staritz is Tenure Track Professor in Development Economics at the Department of Development Studies at the University of Vienna.

Gale Raj-Reichert is Associate Professor in Politics at Bard College Berlin.

**Contact:** Kristoffer Marslev: [marslev@ruc.dk](mailto:marslev@ruc.dk) , Cornelia Staritz: [cornelia.staritz@univie.ac.at](mailto:cornelia.staritz@univie.ac.at), Gale Raj-Reichert: [g.rajreichert@berlin.bard.edu](mailto:g.rajreichert@berlin.bard.edu)

## **Abstract**

Schlechte Arbeitsbedingungen sind in Globalen Wertschöpfungsketten (GWK) weit verbreitet. In der GWK-Forschung zielt das Konzept des sozialen Upgradings darauf ab, zu verstehen, wie sich Arbeitsbedingungen verbessern können, wobei der Schwerpunkt meist auf den Strategien der Leitfirmen und der zwischenbetrieblichen Governance in GWK liegt. Soziales Upgrading wird dabei häufig als Ergebnis von ökonomischem Upgrading durch Zulieferfirmen gesehen. Aufbauend auf Arbeiten, die dieses Verständnis von sozialem Upgrading kritisieren, konzipieren wir soziales Upgrading aus der Perspektive der Arbeiter\*innenmacht, die an der Schnittstelle von transnationalen Beziehungen (vertikale Dimension) und lokalen Beziehungen (horizontale Dimension) ausgeübt wird. Wir konzentrieren uns insbesondere auf die Einbettung der Arbeiter\*innenmacht in Staat-Arbeitsbeziehungen und der Intersektionalität von Arbeiter\*innenidentitäten auf der horizontalen Ebene, um zu erklären, warum es in GWK zu sozialem Up- und Downgrading kommt. Diese Neukonzeption wird auf Fallstudienanalysen der Bekleidungssektoren in Kambodscha und Vietnam angewandt. In beiden Fällen war die Macht der Arbeiter\*innen, die sich in Streiks ausdrückte, eine wichtige Triebkraft für soziales Upgrading. Weiters wurden die Ergebnisse in beiden Fällen entscheidend von den sich verändernden Beziehungen zwischen Staat und Arbeiter\*innen, sowie den Überschneidungen von Arbeiter\*innenidentitäten in Bezug auf Klasse, Geschlecht, Haushalt und Gemeinschaft geprägt.

**Keywords:** Globalen Wertschöpfungsketten, soziales Upgrading, Arbeiter\*innenmacht, Staat, Intersektionalität, Bekleidung, Kambodscha, Vietnam

## 1. Introduction

The past four decades have seen a transformation of factory-based mass production fragmented and reorganized into global value chains (GVCs) comprised of lead and supplier firms. Neoliberal policies since the 1980s/90s have opened borders for transnational corporations to reach a global pool of low-wage labour, which led to a large shift of labour-intensive production to the Global South (Ponte et al. 2019). GVC research aims to understand these transformations and interlinked production processes involved in bringing goods and services to markets through organisationally fragmented and geographically dispersed but functionally integrated chains. Early research was mainly concerned with *industrial* or *economic upgrading* – how firms and regions in the Global South can link up to these chains and improve their positions by moving into higher value-added activities in GVCs (Gereffi 2019).

Since the 2000s, this research agenda has been criticized for failing to consider the impacts of GVCs on workers. In response, GVC scholars set out to understand *social upgrading*, as a distinct process to economic upgrading, related to increasing workers' economic benefits and improving their working conditions (Barrientos et al. 2011). This stream of research however has faced criticism for linking the fate of workers' social upgrading largely to the behaviours and decisions of lead firms and inter-firm governance in GVCs and of supplier firms pursuing economic upgrading (Selwyn 2013; Newsome et al. 2015).

This paper contributes to this critique, which spans GVC and global production network (GPN) research, by arguing that a comprehensive understanding of worker power is needed to explain processes of social upgrading (and downgrading). Drawing on a conceptualization of worker power at the intersection of a vertical dimension of transnational relations and a horizontal dimension of local relations (Neilson and Pritchard 2009), we argue that worker power is decisively shaped by state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities that play out along the horizontal dimension. In this paper we interlink these factors to structural and associational power of workers for a reconceptualization of social upgrading in GVCs.

Case study analyses of the apparel sectors in Vietnam and Cambodia employ this re-conceptualization and show that worker power expressed through strike action, leveraging rising structural power, was a driver of social upgrading and was based on changing state-labour relations and different worker identities. In Vietnam, associational power was exerted largely at the horizontal dimension, whereas in Cambodia, it operated along both dimensions. While the Vietnamese party-state, due to its socialist legacy and fear of social unrest, sided with striking workers, the Cambodian state, built on a neo-patrimonial powerbase in rural areas, only reacted when the apparel workforce challenged its survival. In both cases, the mobilization and organization of workers were conditioned by the intersectionality of class and other social categories, in particular linked to gender, household and community relations. The case study analyses are based on several data sources. During fieldwork in Cambodia in 2017 and in Vietnam in 2018<sup>1</sup>, 80 interviews were conducted with stakeholders in and around the apparel export industries. To understand the trajectories of social up- and downgrading, and the evolving power relations underpinning them, interviews were made with workers, factory managers, representatives of trade unions and employers' associations, and officials from relevant ministries

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork was conducted by Kristoffer Marslev.

and local and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs). Further, the case studies draw on secondary sources, including legal and policy documents, civil society reports, data collected from various agencies, including strike statistics obtained from trade unions and employers' associations, and extensive coverage of apparel sector strikes and negotiations in national newspapers.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 2 we discuss the evolution of the social upgrading concept in GVC research and its critique. Section 3 sets out associational and structural modes of worker power from a GVC perspective and discusses how they play out along the horizontal and vertical dimensions of GVCs. In section 4 we present our re-conceptualisation of social upgrading, focusing in particular on the embeddedness of worker power within state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities at the horizontal dimension. Section 5 applies this re-conceptualisation to re-evaluate our understanding of social up- and downgrading in the apparel sectors in Vietnam and Cambodia. Section 6 concludes the paper.

## **2. From economic upgrading to social up- and downgrading in GVCs**

Economic upgrading, which has been a key focus of GVC research emerging in the 1990s, is a process by which firms move to higher value-added activities to increase their benefits (e.g. 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 where firms can remain stuck in or even downgrade to low-value positions (Bair and Werner 2011). Moreover, even if economic upgrading is achieved, it does not necessarily bring with it the assumed benefits nor higher value capture. This is because in a context of high competition, supplier firms may upgrade just to keep pace with competitors or simply not be replaced in GVCs (Kaplinsky 2005).

GVC research's focus on economic upgrading has, particularly in the 2000s, been critiqued for its "labour blindness" and lack of consideration of impacts on workers (e.g. Bair 2005; Taylor 2007; Palpacuer 2008). 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 workers. For instance, studies found that participation in apparel GVCs had different impacts for different sections of the workforces (Nadvi and Thoburn 2004) and that commercial pressures of horticulture GVCs are passed onto workers, leading to job informalization, low wages and excessive working hours (Barrientos and Kritzinger 2004).

The response to this critique was the development of the social upgrading concept. Social upgrading was defined as the "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 International Labour Organisation (ILO) Decent Work Agenda, social upgrading is anchored in the four pillars of the ILO Declaration on the Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (1998): 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 of working conditions such as wage levels, contractual terms and working hours; and enabling rights, which are linked to the ILO core labour standards of 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>2</sup>, concluded that social and economic upgrading was not widespread, and that economic upgrading can be a necessary but not sufficient condition for social upgrading (Bernhardt and Milberg 2013). There is also evidence on social downgrading, which is more widespread 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) highlighted that while economic upgrading may be associated with wage increases, it can simultaneously entail higher work intensity or a backlash on freedom of association. Studies also showed that economic upgrading may increase the skill content and improve working conditions of some workers but lead to social ‘downgrading’ for other workers due to cost-cutting, quality, and flexibility pressures on firms. Social downgrading often differs by workforce segmentation (permanent vs. temporary, direct vs. subcontracted etc.) and worker identities related to gender, migration or race (Plank et al. 2014).

Research on social upgrading has been criticized for its positive coupling to economic upgrading by firms (Newsome et al. 2015). Most forthcoming has been Selwyn (2013) who critiqued the concept on three grounds: (1) its assumption that lead firms, states, trade unions and international organizations coalesce around common interests in combating indecent work; (2) its failure to see that social relations of production under capitalism render such cross-class alliances unviable; and (3) its misspecification of the causes of indecent work and, consequently, unrealistic and ineffective policy proposals. He argues for the importance of understanding labour exploitation and class conflict in GVCs and – in contrast to a top-down approach – for a bottom-up and labour-led approach to social upgrading. Similarly, labour and economic geographers using the GPN approach have critiqued the focus on labour as an object without deeper conceptualization of labour as a social category and its agency to shape social and economic upgrading (Cumbers et al. 2008; Rainee et al. 2011; Carswell and De Neve 2013; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011).

### **3. Incorporating worker power into social upgrading in GVCs**

Following these critiques, our starting point for re-conceptualizing social upgrading is to focus on worker power. We understand worker power as consisting of two essential features: it is *relational*, meaning power asymmetries arise out of relationships between actors; and it is a *capacity*, meaning it does not reside in things or resources that workers possess, such as money or information, but on the ability to mobilise or act on these resources to bring about change (Allen 2003; Brookes 2019). Such an understanding of worker power has been used as the basis to identify different modes of worker power, of which the most widely used are associational power and structural power (Wright 2000).

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

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.capturingthegains.org](http://www.capturingthegains.org)



trajectories” (Coe 2015, 181). Kelly (2001, 2) argues that labour relations and control often emerge from lead firms, but “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 conceptualization stresses the multi-scalarity of labour relations, pointing out the relevance of local place-based contexts, but also how local relations and institutions are embedded within transnational power relations in GVCs (Castree et al. 2004; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Alford et al. 2017; Baglioni 2018).

### **3.1. Structural power of workers in GVCs**

Structural power arises from workers’ position in the economic system, which provides capacity to extract concessions from employers by disrupting capital accumulation. There are two subtypes of structural power: 1) workplace bargaining power, which is based on the positionality of workers within workplaces, industries and/or GVCs, and 2) marketplace bargaining power, which accrues to workers in tight labour markets (Silver 2003).

Reflecting on 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 production processes – by making critical components or controlling vital logistical flows – 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 Brazilian grapes sold to UK supermarkets or Fairtrade tea from Kenya, even small disruptions by workers can compromise a farm’s ability to meet the retailer’s demands (Riisgaard and Okinda 2018; Selwyn 2007). Notably, workplace bargaining power is reduced when capital mobility allows suppliers to easily relocate production and lead firms to shift sourcing locations. This 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 (Morris et al. 2016).

Regarding marketplace bargaining power, the more dependent an employer is on workers – because they possess scarce skills, unemployment is low, production enters high season etc. – the more bargaining power workers generally have. Similarly, the less dependent workers are on an employer, due to alternative job opportunities or the option to withdraw from the labour market and survive by non-wage means, the greater their bargaining power is (Schmalz et al. 2018). As many producer countries in GVCs have vast amounts of “surplus labour”, marketplace bargaining power tends to be weak. Marketplace bargaining power is also 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). Taking the case of logistics workers, Coe (2020) shows how increasing fragmentation of work can erode marketplace bargaining power.

Largely a phenomenon rooted in local or national labour markets at the horizontal dimension, marketplace bargaining power can also be assessed at the transnational scale, as workers increasingly compete on a global scale in the context of GVCs. On a general 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 in the Global North and South. Similarly, however, the emergence of labour shortages and rising production costs in China and compliance problems in other Asian producer countries can boost the marketplace bargaining power of workers in established supplier countries such as Vietnam or in emerging supplier countries such as Ethiopia, as it tilts the global balance of labour supply and demand.

The relational nature of worker power implies that it has to be seen in relation to the counterstrategies available to capital (and states). As already discussed, workers' structural power is undermined by the ability of capital to relocate to locations 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" which includes adopting labour-saving technologies such as automation; and "financial fixes" by 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 highlight how attempts at economic upgrading are often made in response to rising worker power (and rising labour costs), but also how the scope of social upgrading depends on the counterstrategies pursued by supplier firms, and whether these lead to greater value capture and thus enable firms to accommodate social upgrading (Marslev 2019).

### **3.2. Associational power of workers in GVCs**

Associational power results from the collective organization of workers (Wright 2000). At the horizontal dimension, it is traditionally exercised via collective bargaining through trade unions or political representation through worker parties. Associational power can also be exercised through informal worker organizations and bottom-up vehicles of mobilization (Chi 2017). It can also take the form of coalitions and alliances between workers and non-labour actors such as union-NGO coalitions and "community unionism" (Wills 2001; Helmerich et al. 2020). This is linked to the concept of "social movement unionism" which views unions as vehicles for broader socio-political changes pursued through allies with other social movements, such as women's, ecological, human rights or peace movements (Scipes 1992), which resurfaced through new rounds of large-scale labour unrest in the Global South in the 2000s (Coe 2015; Nowak 2017).

Associational power also has key transnational dimensions along the vertical dimension. Particularly in production locations where worker organizations are curbed by suppressive regimes workers have been able to leverage transnational networks as a source of collective power. For example, joining forces with trade unions in the Global North allows workers in the Global South to connect to institutions and political contexts in different locations, such as formal complaint channels or framework agreements, to exert transnational pressure on lead firms (Brookes 2019; Zajak et al. 2017). Similarly, opportunities to exercise associational power can increase with transnational linkages to ethical campaigns, global multi-stakeholder initiatives or civil society campaigns (Helfen and Fichter 2013). Such transnational networking and campaigning can trigger a "boomerang" effect whereby extra-local networks upscale workers' struggles to provoke powerful actors in other locations to intervene or influence behaviours of employers or local authorities (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Merk 2009).

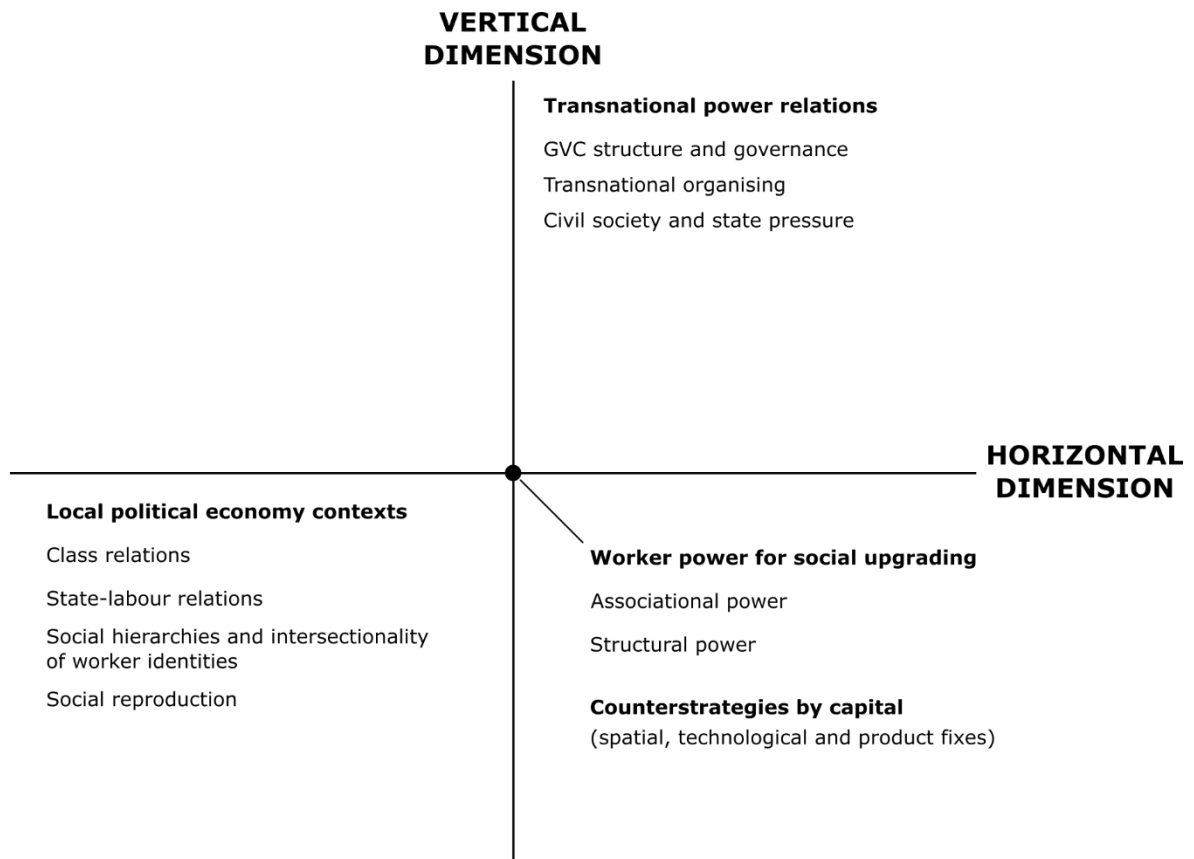
Transnational associational power can be exercised not only vis-à-vis lead firms in GVCs – the success of which partially depends on their sensitivity to reputational damage (Brookes 2019) – but also vis-à-vis states. Hence, workers and worker alliances can leverage global standards, such as international human rights norms and the ILO Core 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). For instance, the new-generation EU free trade agreements include a set of institutional dialogue mechanisms aimed at enabling civil society actors to cooperate on holding states accountable to core labour standards (Harrison et al. 2018).

Rather than substitutes, associational and structural power are often interrelated and interdependent. For workers with weak structural power – for instance in captive GVCs, where the threat of exit by lead firms diminishes workers’ capacity to disrupt the chain – associational power is needed to bring about change (Helmerich et al. 2020). On the other hand, workers with high degree of structural power still require some worker mobilization and organization to realize potential gains arising from their strategic positionality (Brookes 2019). Many examples of workplace bargaining power in GVCs, including those discussed above, while buttressed by the vertical dimension of GVC inter-firm relationships, required processes and institutions at the horizontal and/or vertical dimension such as trade unions or NGO support and hence associational power.

#### **4. Re-conceptualising social upgrading: worker power, state-labour relations and intersectionality of worker identities**

Our re-conceptualization of social upgrading – focused on worker power at the intersection of a vertical and a horizontal dimension – acknowledges the increasing amount of research on labour-led and agency-based approaches from GVC and GPN perspectives. However, we argue that in order to comprehensively understand worker power for social upgrading, a more thorough focus on the processes at the horizontal dimension, and how they interact with the vertical dimension, is required. We do this by emphasising two aspects of the horizontal dimension that are key to understanding the how and why of social up- and downgrading in GVCs: state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Worker power at the intersection of vertical and horizontal dimensions of GVCs**



Source: Authors

#### **4.1. Worker power and state-labour relations**

While antagonistic capital-labour relations are key to understanding worker power and struggles for social upgrading, the state has an important role in managing these relations and, hence, worker power is embedded within state-society relations in general and state-labour relations in particular (Campling et al. 2016). The state facilitates capital accumulation and regulates labour relations and wider social reproduction, determining who and what a worker is and controls their ability to exercise certain modes of power (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). It regulates the lives of workers in many ways such as drawing boundaries of labour markets, providing basic services and welfare, mediating class conflict, and disciplining labour. This also shapes social relations, livelihood strategies and reproduction activities of workers in their community spaces (Carswell and De Neve 2013). The state not only influences worker power at the horizontal dimension, but also at the vertical dimension through its engagements at the transnational scale in international institutions and multi- and bilateral trade and investment agreements and dispute settlement mechanisms. Importantly, these processes intersect with and impact inter-firm and capital-labour relations in GVCs.

In conceptualizing the state, we follow 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, class factions and non-class 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” (Jessop 1990, 316). Smith (2015, 298) argues that such a strategic-relational conceptualization of the state provides the “missing link in existing approaches to the state and GPNs” that can explain how and why the state acts (or not), going beyond descriptions and classifications of state functions or types.

For our purposes, this strategic-relational view of the state offers two key advantages. First, it shows that the way in which the state “manages” capitalist development, capital-labour relations and labour control is a result of the historically-specific struggles in and outside the state. Second, it helps explain the opportunities and constraints of 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 how shifting power relations in society affect the capacities of different social groups to exert pressure on the state. In this way, we can understand if, why and how the state intervenes in capital-labour relations and conflict, critically mediating the capacity of workers to wrest concessions from supplier and lead firms, but also the opportunities and constraints facing workers in directly influencing state policy.

The historical specificity of states critically shapes 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 a cooperative and populist labour movement, promote an official labour movement to thwart autonomous labour actions or attempt to fragment, divide and constrain, if not outlaw, labour movements (Rowley and Bhopal 2006). At the same time, state policies influence workers’ structural power. Through policies on migration, social protection and education, for instance, the state regulates labour supply, with implications for workers’ marketplace bargaining power (Jordhus-Lier and Coe 2011). Also, of particular importance in the context of structural heterogeneity characterizing many countries of the Global South, where capitalist modes of production are blended with pre-capitalist and socialist modes of production, are policies on agriculture and land that shape rural-urban migration flows (Bernstein 2010).

Many GVC producer countries in the Global South are characterized by, or exhibit strong legacies of, authoritarian rule. But even authoritarian regimes are open to contestation and need to strike a balance between capital accumulation, social stability and legitimacy. Hence, they exist in different ‘shades’ related to evolving power relations between social groups within and outside the state, as well as to demands of and power relations in the global market (Howell and Pringle 2019). States in the Global South are deeply constrained by the insertion into the world economy, which imposes pressures on states to act in the interests of global capital. States pursuing export-led industrialisation through integration into GVCs have for example limited trade unions and kept labour costs low in favour of foreign investment and lead firms. But these policies still play out in different ways (Rowley and Bhopal 2006). These dynamics are also important at the vertical dimensions where trade and investment agreements have favoured capital accumulation over securing labour rights. The new generation of free trade agreements by the US and EU, for example, include also labour chapters and although the commercial chapters are much more far-reaching in content and enforcement (Harrison

et al. 2018), the labour chapters have been leveraged for worker struggles putting pressure on states (Tran et al. 2017; Evans 2018).

#### **4.2. 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 multi-dimensional, and class is interwoven with other social categories such as gender, race, sexuality, age, nationality, ethnicity, place and community (Campling et al. 2016; Lawton et al. 2015; Bhattacharya 2017). Given this multiplicity of labour relations, there is not a single labouring class but different ‘classes of labour’ (Mezzadri 2020); and labour is itself a site of ongoing class struggles (Cumbers et al. 2008). Feminist scholars, and also labour research from a global history perspective, have for a long time criticised a ‘productivist bias’, arguing for the importance and complex entanglements of the reproduction sphere and social differentiation related to gender and other categories to understand capitalist production (see e.g. from a Marxist perspective, Bannerji 2011; Bhattacharya 2017; Mezzadri 2020). The intersectionality perspective, first named by Crenshaw (1989), was developed by women-of-colour feminists criticising 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 and, hence, the interlinked social relationships and systems of domination that need to be understood together, and 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 mediated by the state.<sup>3</sup>

These intersecting lines of social difference and stratification, in material and discursive, socially and culturally constructed forms, are critical for understanding the hierarchies that shape working conditions and worker power in GVCs. While the intersection of class and other social divisions is context-specific in terms of meanings, involving processes and practices at the local level, they also interact with global inter-firm relations in GVCs (Bair 2010; Dunaway 2014). Strategies of firms often build on and deepen existing hierarchies, as social differences are mobilized to ensure the stratification, discipline and control of labour (Hammer and Riisgaard 2015). For instance, supplier firms adjust to cost, quality and flexibility pressures from lead firms by creating fine-grained stratifications among their workforces linked to social differences in terms of gender, ethnicity, race, migrant status or types of working contracts which is the basis for differential schemes of remuneration and working conditions (Werner 2016; Plank et al. 2014; McGrath 2018). Such workforce segmentation, within firms and whole sectors, also serves to fragment labour and poses obstacles to building working class solidarity (Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011). Strategies of labour

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<sup>3</sup> It has been debated whether an intersectionality perspective can be linked to Marxist perspectives. Marxism has been criticized for focusing primarily on class oppression, which, however, overlooks Marxist feminists (parts of which have, nevertheless, been criticized for implicitly assuming a ‘white’ and also ‘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 (Bohrer 2018; Bhattacharya 2017). Bohrer (2018), however, argues for a synthesis of these frameworks, because ‘Marxism needs intersectionality’ and ‘intersectionality can benefit from a robust theory of capitalism’ (2).



control frequently leverage on prevailing social hierarchies, as when female workers are subjected to patriarchal managerial styles by male supervisors (Mezzadri 2016) or migrant workers are kept under surveillance in employer-controlled dormitories (Smith and Pun 2006).

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 common identity and collective consciousness among workers, facilitating collective action and individual empowerment (Carswell and De Neve 2013). Hence, worker power and struggles for social upgrading in GVCs need not be driven by class consciousness but may be unified by solidarities arising from shared sociocultural ties.

Even though we cannot give justice to a systematic intersectionality perspective in our case studies, we aim to highlight the importance of such a perspective by assessing two social categories that are particularly crucial for our cases, but by no means exclusive: gender and migration<sup>4</sup>. The expansion of assembly production in the Global South has been based on the feminization of labour, as the employment of female workers in a specific age range (typically 15 to 30 years) – in the context of engrained gender hierarchies – allowed for lower wages and poorer working conditions (Seguino 2000; Baglioni 2018). Markets and also GVCs are '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 being a low-skilled female job and ironing as requiring the strength of men. To capture the complex 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) are often subordinated to patriarchal norms, assigning them a disproportionate share of family obligations and unpaid household work; and these gender roles form the basis of patriarchal forms of labour control in production, which may include gender-based violence, and also allow for paying lower wages that are subsidized by reproductive work (Baglioni 2018; Mezzadri 2016; Barrientos 2019).

Regarding worker power, women are "considered 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 traditional trade unions and worker parties, which is accelerated by their limited time due to reproductive responsibilities (Ledwith 2012). However, gender can also form the basis of workers' consciousness, actions and struggles, and solidarity on the shop floor often arises out of gender-based grievances (Merk 2009).

Secondly – and relatedly – worker power is conditioned by internal and international migration and trans-local livelihood strategies. In many GVCs, the majority of workers are internal migrants, leaving rural areas in search of employment in urban-based industrial sectors. Migration is often used as a spatial strategy by workers and their families to cope with the unevenness of capitalist

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<sup>4</sup> For other social categories such as race in GVCs, see e.g. Christian (2016).

development, as an integral part of household strategies to diversify livelihoods and incomes (Carswell and DeNeve 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 information and money across rural-urban divides (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018). The status as migrants can significantly shape workers’ experiences, having implications for their accommodation, access to public services, social policies such as healthcare and pensions, and social networks (Ngai 2005).

These rural-urban, household and ethnic or kinship relations significantly shape workers’ consciousness, protest motivations and capacities to mobilize. In order to understand worker power in GVCs, therefore, relations between workers and their households, families and places-of-origin need to be explicitly conceptualized. In this sense, the sphere of production (in GVCs) is not only deeply entwined with the sphere of reproduction, but also with communities and locations where workers come from, which have significant implications for worker power.

## **5. Worker power and social upgrading amongst apparel workers in Vietnam and Cambodia**

To illustrate our re-conceptualization 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 triple transition to peace, capitalism and “democracy” in the early 1990s (Hughes 2003). Attracted by cheap and abundant labour and preferential access to the major markets of the US and EU, the apparel industries in Vietnam and Cambodia were among the fastest growing in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In 2018, the Vietnamese apparel industry employed 2.7 million workers and exported \$32 billion, the third highest in the world after China and Bangladesh (Better Work Vietnam 2019). By comparison, the apparel (and footwear) sector in Cambodia employed roughly a million workers and exported more than \$8 billion, the seventh highest in the world (ILO 2018).<sup>5</sup>

While the apparel industry in Vietnam was initially dominated by state-owned enterprises (SOEs), the inflow of FDI and “equitization” of SOEs changed the ownership structure; today, foreign-owned firms account for two-thirds of apparel exports (Schweisshelm and Chi 2018). The Cambodian industry, in contrast, has always been almost entirely in foreign hands, mainly by East Asian transnational producers. While both countries started in lower value-added segments, Vietnam was more successful in accommodating rising labour costs through economic upgrading, adopting labour-saving technologies and moving into more complex products. This is indicated by average unit value of US apparel imports from Vietnam (\$4.3/piece) being the highest among the ten largest supplier countries in 2019, and much higher than for Cambodia (\$3.2/piece)<sup>6</sup>. Relatedly, the two countries had different experiences with the supplier squeeze that is characteristic of apparel GVCs, where buyer consolidation and intensified supplier competition drive down export prices and heighten requirements in terms of functions, lead times and flexibility (Anner 2020). While average unit values of US apparel imports from Vietnam declined by 10% from 2004 to 2019, they dropped by 25% for

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<sup>5</sup> Trade data from WTO’s World Trade Statistical Review, [https://www.wto.org/english/res\\_e/statis\\_e/wts2019\\_e/wts19\\_toc\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/res_e/statis_e/wts2019_e/wts19_toc_e.htm) (assessed November 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Data from USITC DataWeb; only includes imports with quantities denominated in dozens.



Cambodia, which has direct implications on wages and to what extent supplier firms can accommodate social upgrading.

In terms of social up- and downgrading, in both countries, long periods of infrequent minimum wage adjustments and falling real incomes gave way to annualised wage-setting frameworks and substantial real wage increases. Yet, the two countries differ in terms of enabling rights. While Cambodia, with a unique social clause in its past trade agreement with the US (1999-2004), a comprehensive monitoring programme (Better Factories Cambodia) and a fairly progressive labour law, used to be praised as a “best practice alternative” (Wells 2007), the situation worsened to such an extent that the country made it into the ITUC’s top 10 of the “world’s worst countries for workers” in 2016 and 2018 (ITUC 2016; 2018). Vietnam, in contrast – often viewed as one of the most repressive regimes in the region – has recently seen improvements in enabling rights, culminating in a new labour law and the ratification of two of three outstanding ILO Core Conventions in 2019 (Convention 98 on the Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining) and 2020 (Convention 105 on the Abolition of Forced Labour)<sup>7</sup>. We now set out to explain these diverse trajectories within our worker power-centred conceptual framework.

### **5.1. Vietnam**

Apparel workers in Vietnam experienced social downgrading over many years – reflected in a 20% 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 in export-oriented industries in the mid-2000s (Figure 2). Sparked in December 2005 by a strike at a Taiwanese-owned footwear supplier to Nike and Adidas, protests “spread like wildfire”, and over ten days, 14 strikes took place involving 42,000 workers. A decree by the Prime Minister in early 2006, passing a 40% minimum wage hike in foreign-invested enterprises, only inspired further action (Tran 2013). The number of strikes, across all sectors, rose from around 100 per year before 2006 to almost 1000 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 (Chi 2017).

The mass mobilization of apparel workers happened despite formal restrictions on unionization and strikes. The state-run trade union, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL), is the only permitted worker representative<sup>8</sup> and is mainly tasked with ensuring harmonious industrial relations. Despite union presence in 82% of apparel factories (IWTU 2017), therefore, the build-up of associational power was largely based on circumventing formal union structures. Since 1995 not a single of more than 6,500 strikes has been led by the VGCL (Schweisshelm and Chi 2018). Such “wildcat” strikes are often depicted as spontaneous and leaderless, but have evolved into well-orchestrated and coordinated actions in Vietnam (Van Gramberg et al. 2013).

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 tended to quickly accede to workers’ demands<sup>9</sup> (Chi 2017). Labour protests also led to the

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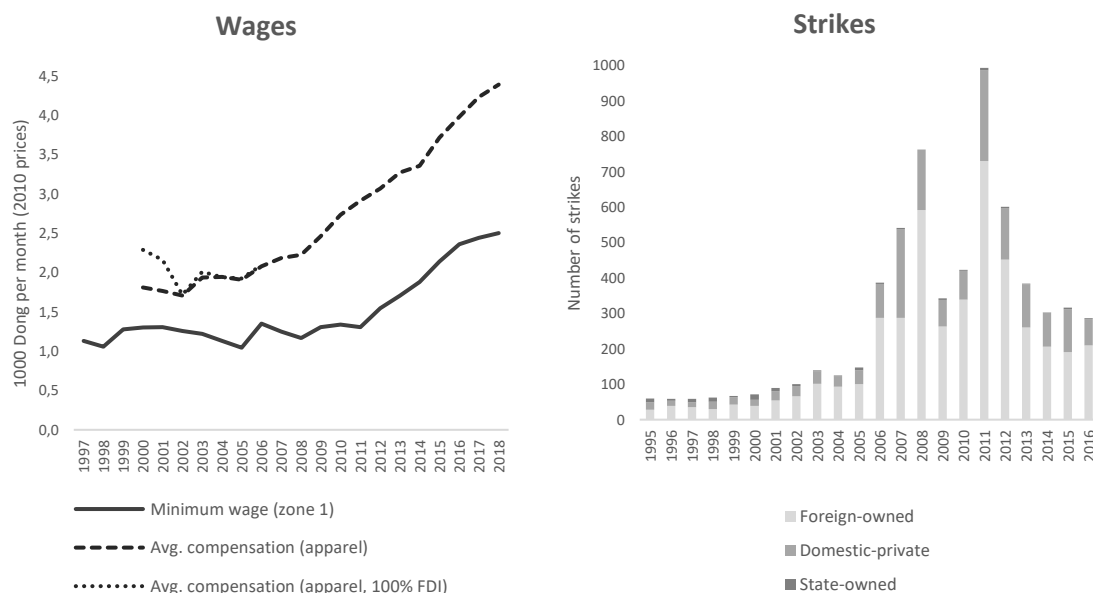
<sup>7</sup> Convention 87 on Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise is scheduled for ratification in 2023.

<sup>8</sup> This should change with the ratification of the outstanding ILO Conventions and the new Labour Code.

<sup>9</sup> An ILO survey found that 92% of all strikes in 2010 ended with all demands met by employers (Chi 2017).

government raising the minimum wage several times and implementing a new wage-fixing mechanism. A revised Labour Code, the most ambitious since its adoption in 1994, 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). The wildcat strikes also sowed the seeds for trade union reform (Chi and van den Broek 2013). This was combined with pressure along the vertical dimension in the context of trade negotiations with the EU and particularly the US, with the latter making market access conditional upon labour reforms (Tran et al. 2017). Hence, states in the Global North, based on pressure from civil society groups, supported trade union reform despite limited relations between Vietnamese and foreign worker or civil society organisations, which was leveraged by reformist factions in the Vietnamese political system, including the Ministry of Labour (MOLISA) and sections of the VGCL, to drive labour reform (Evans 2018).

**Figure 2: Strike activity and wages in Vietnam’s apparel sector**



Sources: In the left graph, data on minimum wages is from MOLISA, average compensation is from Statistical Yearbook Vietnam. Wages are deflated by CPI (2010=100) from databank.worldbank.org. In the right graph, data on the number of strikes is from VGCL, provided during fieldwork. Strike data is for all sectors.

The exercise of workers’ associational power played out against shifts in their structural power. The strikes occurred in the context of looming labour shortages in industrial areas related to the reduction of rural surplus labour, the emergence of employment alternatives and declining real wages in apparel factories. The resultant reversal in bargaining positions was captured by a director at Ho Chi Minh City's industrial parks board, who explained that while “it used to be that workers needed employers, [now] it is the employers who need the workers” (VOA News 1 Nov 2009). The labour shortage was also related to processes at the vertical dimension, as investors escaping rising labour costs in China relocated factories. Already by 2009, more than 1,000 Chinese apparel firms had established factories in Vietnam and Cambodia (Zhu and Pickles 2014). Vietnamese workers also used workplace bargaining power by exploiting vulnerabilities of apparel GVCs, staging strikes on delivery days or stopping machines at critical stages (Tran 2007b). Anner (2018) finds that successful strikes in

Vietnam often last no more than a few hours, as apparel workers know how to leverage tight delivery schedules, and suppliers are under high pressure to deliver on time, incurring fines or order cancellations if they fail.

These social upgrading processes and the shifts in workers' associational and structural power behind them need to be understood in the context of historically formed 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 VCP as the "vanguard of the Vietnamese working class". Although loyalty is waning, socialist ideas continue to shape the thinking of authorities and policymakers; and these ideological commitments oblige the state to react to workers' demands. While the Vietnamese party-state was always more polycentric and responsive than 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 the formation of independent unions, have been fervently suppressed. To capture this, Kerkvliet (2010) suggests the term "responsive-repressive party-state".

These state-labour relations shaped the events and outcomes of (and were themselves changed by) the 2006-2011 strike wave. Although the state later embraced a more hesitant approach, it immediately intervened in earlier strikes. 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 was not merely motivated by ideological conviction: with inexperience in dealing with class conflict in a capitalist market economy, authorities were wary that labour activism would spiral out of control and spill into political protests (Pringle and Clarke 2011). Vietnamese apparel workers also actively drew on the state's propaganda instruments, sending letters to administrators, unions and the vocal labour press, which generated public attention and added pressure on the state to intervene (Tran 2007a).

Worker power is further shaped by social stratification at the horizontal dimension. As in most producer countries, 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% less per hour than men and are more likely to report severe 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 2007a, 60). Family relations in the sphere of reproduction, however, also affected working time. As government regulation encouraged migrant workers to bring their families and settle permanently in urban areas, factory managers have had to accommodate the demand of shorter work schedules, with the result that workers tended to work less hours (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 multi-dimensionality of worker identities became instrumental in mobilizing (Tran 2007a; 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 also prominent (Chi and van den Broek 2020). Often, strikes were organized by older, experienced female workers, recruiting younger women by appealing to the binding force of “sisterhood” and their inclination to listen to “elder sisters”. At other times, strikers invoked their subjectivities *as workers*, alluding to the dignity of “we workers” and the state’s pro-worker ideals (Tran 2007a, 65–66). Workers’ collective action was facilitated by the formation of migrant networks built around common kinship and places-of-origin. These networks served to foster mutual trust and solidarity and enabled “class moments”, creating a sense of collective consciousness among workers based on shared experiences and grievances (Tran 2013). During the strike wave, the spread of unrest was not just aided by the spatial clustering of factories, but also travelled through these social networks. As Tran (2007b, 262) concludes, apparel workers’ “nexus of identities – including native place, gender, cultural networks, and a sense of class consciousness” – has “facilitated their labour organizing and strikes”. Given their limited voice in formal unions, the exercise of associational power by apparel workers to a great extent relied on sociocultural bonds linked specifically to gender roles and community ties.

## 5.2. Cambodia

Like in Vietnam, Cambodian apparel workers experience of social downgrading, manifested in a 25% real minimum wage decline from 2001 to 2011, a shift to short-term contracts and frequent mass faintings due to malnutrition, led to a protest wave in the mid-2010s. Industrial action reached unprecedented heights between 2012 and 2014, peaking at 147 strikes and 889,000 person-days lost in 2013 (Figure 3). After a myriad of factory-level strikes, including a four-month protest at a supplier to H&M and GAP, unrest culminated in a sector-wide strike in December 2013. Sparked by the government announcement of a \$95 minimum wage, far below the \$160 demanded by unions, an upsurge involving up to 150,000 apparel workers brought the industry to a halt. In January, the protests were violently repressed by police forces, leaving five workers dead and 23 arrested (Arnold 2017).

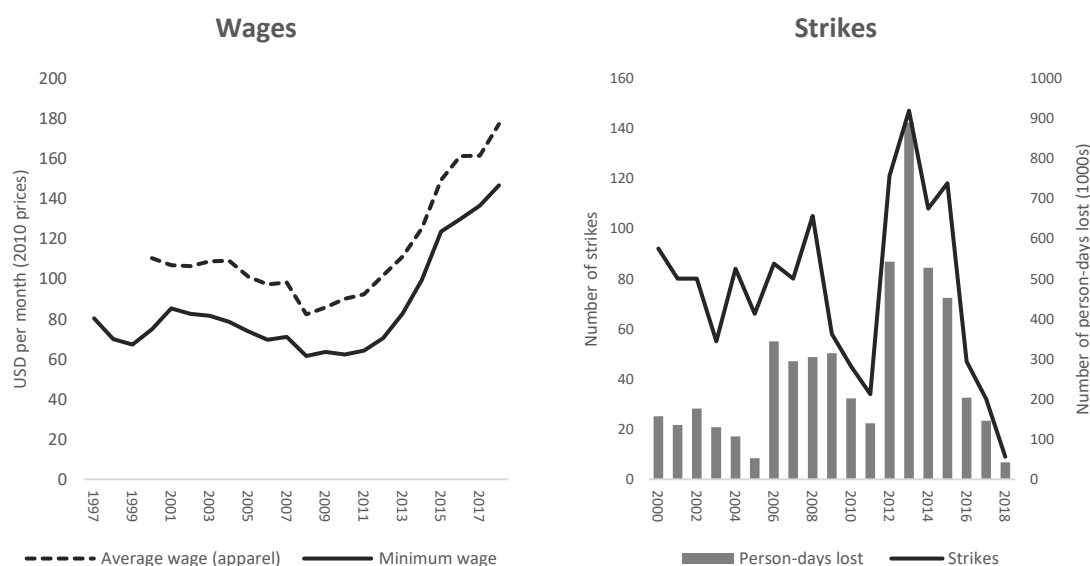
Although Cambodian apparel workers are among the most heavily unionized in Asia, their associational power is curtailed by a labour control regime rooted in unfavourable labour markets, repressive employer practices and a tight alliance between the semi-authoritarian state and foreign capital. A sizeable labour surplus, deepened by a post-Khmer Rouges baby boom, drives rural migrants into factories and discourages attempts to organize. Factories engage in a range of repressive practices, including the use of short-term contracts as a union-busting tool. And the state actively promotes “yellow” unions and frequently uses excessive force against protests. As a result, the union landscape is fragmented, overcrowded and politicised (Arnold 2014).

While workers in Cambodia have regularly protested against these conditions, three factors enhanced their associational power during the 2012-2014 strikes. First, although the wage campaign was led by independent unions, 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 (including food and service workers, civil servants and teachers), social movements and the political opposition, building a broad coalition and resonating with the notion of “social movement unionism” (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018). Third, trade unions and labour NGOs cooperated with transnational activist networks (e.g. Clean Clothes Campaign) and global unions (e.g. IndustriAll) to target lead firms. As a new strategy, worker action blamed the purchasing practices of lead firms for “starving Cambodian workers” (Dalton and Kong 2017). In this context, the January 2014 crackdown provoked major brands to intervene in support of a wage reform, triggering a “boomerang” effect that drew 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 \$73 in 2012 to \$145 in 2015, and a new, annual wage-fixing mechanism was instituted<sup>10</sup>. With subsequent raises, the minimum wage was by 2019 twice as high in real terms as at the start of the strike wave. In parallel, however, employers and the government took measures to reduce enabling rights, curbing workers’ associational power. Repressive laws, including a controversial trade union law in 2016, and continuation of legal harassment and anti-union tactics have led to a severe blow to independent unions and to a steep decline in strike activity since 2014 (Marslev 2019).

**Figure 3: Strike activity and wages in Cambodia’s apparel sector**



Sources: Minimum wages: Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training. Wages: Ministry of Commerce. Wages are deflated by CPI (2010=100) from databank.worldbank.org. Strikes and person-days lost: GMAC; updated for 2016-2018 from BFC (2018); 2018 as of 31 August.

The strikes were undergirded by a rise in workers’ structural power. Due to a number of processes, including the ebbing-away of the baby boom, the reduction of rural surplus labour, the deterioration of apparel wages vis-à-vis alternative employment and industrial re-expansion after the financial and economic crisis of 2008/09, factories experienced the first shortages of labour just prior to the surge in labour activism. Across industries, the labour shortage was particularly acute in apparel, where,

<sup>10</sup> Other material improvements include the introduction of a health insurance scheme in 2016.



according to an ILO survey, 56% of employers had vacancies (Bruni et al. 2013). The problem was aggravated by a surge in labour demand due to the relocation of factories from China. Investments in new apparel projects in 2011-2014 exceeded investments in 1995-2010, producing a 60% jump in employment between 2011 and 2015. In addition to this shift in marketplace bargaining power, Cambodian unions actively targeted factories, where workers had higher workplace bargaining power. The idea was that by securing concessions in strategic suppliers, where reputation-sensitive buyers were more likely to intervene, unions could drive a wedge into the united employers' front, forcing once-opposing employers to throw their weight behind 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 Rouges, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) and Prime Minister Hun Sen, descendants of the communist party, have become an all-dominating political force, relieving the ruling elite from having to accommodate the interests of competing social groups (Hughes 2003). Given these features, the Cambodian regime, a "liberal multi-party democracy" according to its constitution, has been interpreted as a form of "hegemonic electoral authoritarianism" (Diamond 2002) and a "party-personalist regime" (Morgenbesser 2018). Based on the suppression of rivals and the distribution of patronage in return of political loyalty, the CPP has built a strong powerbase in rural areas, home to 85% of the population (Un 2005) and has increased its share of the vote in each election, culminating in the first single-party government in 2008. The most vocal unions have historical ties to the opposition party, which was increasingly marginalised, narrowing the political leverage of the labour movement.

The shift to social upgrading coincided with the greatest challenge to the CPP for decades. After two decades of sector growth, apparel workers had become a decisive voter segment, representing almost every tenth of eligible voters. In the 2013 election, when the opposition party made higher minimum wages a core of its platform, apparel workers' votes resulted in a near-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. The election was still only won after the Supreme Court dissolved the opposition party in a lawsuit filed by the government itself (Marslev 2019).

Worker power is 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 condition 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 and preventing family support for speaking up. Third, shouldering both economic and family obligations, women are expected to provide financial support for their households (Salmivaara 2020; Lilja and Baaz 2017). In the context of strained rural livelihoods, a non-existent social security system and over-indebtedness due to a surge in micro-

credit, female workers are under pressure to remit back large portions of their wages to rural families. This generates a deep-seated fear of unemployment that dissuades many, particularly female, workers from engaging in activism. Therefore, it has been argued that in Cambodia, “social reproduction is a key factor that weakens women workers’ power vis-à-vis capital” (Salmivaara 2020, 153).

However, gender and family relations in certain respects aided mobilization in the 2012-2014 protests. Lawreniuk and Parsons (2018, 33) claim 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), where 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 also facilitated the popular support for the protests, as many had material interests at stake (Lawreniuk and Parsons 2018). This was also 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).

### **5.3. Similarities and differences**

Social upgrading in the apparel industries of Vietnam and Cambodia was driven by similar causal mechanisms (Table 1). The exercise of workers’ associational power – in the form of wildcat strikes in Vietnam and mass worker mobilization in Cambodia – forced concessions from capital and the state. While associational power in Vietnam was largely exerted at the horizontal dimension, given better opportunities for seeking concessions from the state and the lack of civil society organisations for effective transnational organizing, it operated along both dimensions in Cambodia. These labour protests were galvanized by shifts in the structural power of apparel workers: emerging labour shortages heightened workers’ marketplace bargaining power, and the workplace bargaining power arising from tight delivery schedules and reputational sensitivity of lead firms was leveraged to maximise impact.

The case studies illustrate how the embeddedness of worker power in historically specific state-labour relations and different foundations of state power, in material and ideological terms, have variable implications for worker power and social upgrading. In Vietnam, the socialist party-state intervened in support of workers, driven by a mix of ideological conviction and a fear of political protests. In Cambodia, the neo-patrimonial state only gave in, when the apparel workforce, due to its sheer size, became a decisive political force, shaking the rural powerbase of the ruling elite. While the Cambodian state responded to the surge in labour activism by restricting the room of manoeuvre of organized labour and extending state patronage to the apparel workforce, the Vietnamese state has cautiously enacted pro-worker reforms, which was supported by trade negotiations with the US and EU. In both cases, the intersectionality of class and other social relations in decisive ways shaped apparel workers’ struggles, as mobilizing and organizing were linked to gender, household and rural-urban linkages. In Vietnam, labour protests drew on a mix of class, gender and native-place identities, while in Cambodia, workers’ collective action was encouraged by households engaged in trans-local livelihood strategies.

**Table 1. Key dimensions of worker power in social upgrading in Vietnam and Cambodia**

	Vietnam		Cambodia	
	<i>Associational</i>	<i>Structural</i>	<i>Associational</i>	<i>Structural</i>
<b>Vertical dimension</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	Relocation from China; supplier squeeze (strong); targeting reputation-sensitive lead firms
<b>Horizontal dimension</b>	Strike wave 2006-2011; wildcat strikes by rank-and-file workers – circumventing VGCL	Labour shortages (strong)	Strike wave 2012-2014; grassroots-driven protest; broad-based coalition; inter-union cooperation	Labour shortages (weak)
<i>State-labour relations</i>	State-controlled monopoly union; suppression of independent unions	State ideological commitment to working class; fear of political protests	State-capital alliance; state-supported union fragmentation, harassment and violence	Neo-patrimonial state unreceptive to outside social forces; rise of apparel workers as decisive voting bloc
<i>Intersectionality</i>	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	Gender segmentation of work; reproductive work burden

Source: Authors

## 6. Conclusions

This paper presented a re-conceptualisation of social upgrading in GVCs based on worker power. It discussed how worker power is constituted at the intersection of transnational GVC relations (a vertical dimension) and conditions, relations and struggles at local and national scales (a horizontal dimension), where we emphasise the role of state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities for explaining social up- and downgrading trajectories. We highlight three key points of our re-conceptualization that are relevant for assessing and understanding social up- and downgrading in GVCs.

First, by analysing the *interrelations* of, and *interactions* between, the vertical and horizontal dimensions, worker power and social upgrading (as well as economic upgrading) should not be understood purely in GVC terms (along the vertical dimension). We concur with labour geographers in arguing that a theorization of the horizontal dimension is needed to understand how GVC dynamics ‘touch down’ in specific places, and how these places shape GVC dynamics. Hence, the two dimensions are dialectically related. Patterns of value distribution in GVCs between different nodes, and between capital and labour, interact with local labour markets and regulations in ways that make worker struggles and social upgrading trajectories in GVCs distinct from domestically oriented struggles.

Second, our re-conceptualisation highlights the critical role of the state in processes of social (and economic) upgrading. The operation of GVCs (as of markets in general) cannot be understood in analytical isolation from states, and in social up- and downgrading processes, state-labour relations



are often as important as capital-labour relations. Hence, we need a deeper theorization of the state in GVC and GPN analysis, what we offer by using a strategic relational approach as suggested by Smith (2015). This allows us to explain not only how and why states regulate, mediate and intervene in capital-labour conflict as they do, but also what opportunities and constraints workers face in exerting pressure on, and gaining concessions from, the state itself.

Third, drawing on feminist approaches, our re-conceptualisation highlights the intersectionality of worker identities that can explain repressive as well as emancipatory actions and outcomes in terms of social upgrading. Labour cannot be seen as a homogenous class, as gender, migration, race and ethnicity and other social relations in household and community spaces play crucial roles in dividing workers. We argue that these intersecting lines of social stratification are important co-determinants of worker power in GVCs, as they not only form the basis of hierarchies in working conditions and labour control, but also shape workers' consciousness, motivations and capacities to mobilize.

In this paper, we have illustrated the relevance of our conceptual framework with the cases of Vietnam and Cambodia – two cases where major strike waves and visible capital-labour conflict had an important role in achieving social upgrading. These cases confirm the relevance of a disaggregated approach to social upgrading, as workers were more successful in achieving minimum wage increases and new wage-setting frameworks than in ensuring enabling rights, and as wage hikes were accompanied by rising work intensity. We argue, however, that our re-conceptualization is equally applicable to contexts, where worker struggles find more subtle and covert manifestations, where strikes are less common or where capital-labour conflict is channelled into more negotiated and institutionalized forms. Against this backdrop, we follow other researchers speaking to the GVC and GPN analytical approaches in calling on future research to engage in a worker power centred understanding and analysis of social up- and downgrading in a variety of cases, by particularly elucidating how worker power is embedded in, and circumscribed by, the vertical and horizontal dimensions of GVCs, state-labour relations and the intersectionality of worker identities.

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