
Institutional work within the boundaries of multi-stakeholder initiatives: The relational agency of implementing partners and women cotton-pickers in practice change

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Abstract

In Pakistan, cotton is picked by women who witness first-hand the social and environmental challenges of the global textile industry, which the BCI, a multi-stakeholder initiative (MSI), aims to mitigate. Scholars have yet to investigate the ability of MSIs to achieve change, that experienced by the cotton-pickers themselves. This article offers an original perspective on how relational agency is exerted between an MSI, implementing partners and cotton-pickers, through the mutually interacting work of creating boundaries around an institutional space. This helps explain how, in an otherwise highly restrictive context, women's agency is leveraged. Based on 40 qualitative interviews with the BCI cotton-pickers and their implementing partners, the study finds that, through institutional work, cotton-pickers have upgraded their working practices. However, the MSI's impact depends on its ability to maintain its boundary and corresponding practices. By implication, the women's poverty continues to be a highly significant limitation on the improvements to their lives.

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Introduction

Pakistan is one of the world's largest producers of cotton, it being picked by women and subsequently circulated into global production networks (GPNs). Here, women have a marginalized social position and poor conditions of work, with tremendous deficits in the implementation and monitoring of existing conventions and labour laws (Ijaz, 2019). Thus, for workers, low wages, dangerous health and safety conditions, and forced labour continue to be observed in global production networks. Few studies focus on women workers in the Global South or highlight the severe challenges that hinder improvements in their working conditions (see, for instance, Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Munir et al., 2018).

Many of the challenges to social responsibility and human rights are caused by 'the governance gaps created by globalization – between the scope and impact of economic forces and actors, and the capacity of societies to manage their adverse consequences' (Ruggie, 2008: 189). In recent decades, multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs) have been put forward as a form of governance mechanism enacted through the involvement and coordination of various stakeholder interests, mainly international buyers and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (Kabeer et al., 2020; Mena and Palazzo, 2012), to eradicate or modify substandard labour practices in GPNs (Barrientos, 2013). MSIs have thus emerged as important institutions in global governance processes for private self-regulation through global standard- and rule-setting for responsible behaviour, often in response to complex sustainability challenges (Zeyen et al., 2016). One example is the Better Cotton Initiative (BCI), the largest MSI in the cotton industry (BCI, 2021), which works to improve the standards of cotton production in countries like Pakistan in an industry characterized by precarious work and substandard labour practices. The BCI defines membership through certification and as such creates a boundary between conventionally produced cotton and cotton produced by accredited members. The BCI commissions local implementing partners to engage with the workers to assist in implementing the global certification standards.

With the rise of GPNs, through which international buyers coordinate at least 50% of global trade (World Bank, 2020), the impact and relevance of breaches of social responsibility on Global North buyers is evident. To stay legitimate, the pressure is growing on such companies to develop dedicated approaches and tools to handle environmental and social responsibility, as well as provide corresponding transparency in purchasing and production practices.

MSIs' ability to make and sustain changes at the micro-level remains an unresolved issue (Jerbi, 2012). However, the connections between the Global North and Global South through GPNs points to the global relevance of the working and living conditions that are at the root of these production networks. Given the importance of scouting out mitigating solutions to instigate change, this article studies the ability of MSIs to handle such breaches at the micro-level. Our objective is thus to advance understanding of the

micro-level work and outcomes of an MSI as enshrined in the experience of changes to the practices and agency of cotton-pickers working in a strongly institutionalized context that otherwise tends to limit opportunities for worker agency.

A newer, yet growing stream of research on agency in institutional processes focuses on institutional work to capture a wider array of the different forms of agency involved in institutional stability and change (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006), involving not only collective actions that are explicitly contested, but also more relational and less radical changes. Hampel et al. (2017) call for more research on ‘institutions that matter’ to major social issues in the Global South whose complexity is likely to demand different forms of institutional work.

Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) showed how the interdependence and recursive interplay of practices and field boundaries enable embedded change agency, i.e. explaining how those subject to institutions can influence them. An institutional work perspective thus allows examination of how agency occurs in a highly constraining context, through both practice work – i.e. ‘the work of actors to create, maintain, and disrupt the practices that are considered legitimate within a field’ (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010: 189) – and boundary work, i.e. work directed at the boundaries between different groups (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Both are relevant to MSIs seeking to accomplish practice change. When contradictions between fields and across boundaries become too severe, radical change is the suggested outcome ((Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). The interplay between boundaries and practices may motivate actors to affect them through institutional work. In the context of the present research, the BCI responds to stakeholders’ demands on the social and environmental sustainability of working practices in Pakistan’s cotton-picking industry.

This article therefore advances research by asking how institutional practice and boundary work through an MSI facilitates the involvement of women workers in changing work practices and conditions in a context of institutions that otherwise limits their opportunities and agency to effect change. In doing so, the article examines how institutional work achieves changes to women workers’ practices through MSI initiatives, particularly through practice and boundary work that, among other things, seek to create and configure micro-mobilization contexts (McAdam, 1988, 2003) for change.

The findings of this study therefore further understanding of the work and outcomes of an MSI within a context of prevailing institutions that limit worker opportunities and agency (Tarrow and McAdam, 2018). The study takes its point of departure in an MSI that maintains a boundary in the organizational field demarcating those who are members, i.e. those who partake in the production of certified cotton and those who do not.

This article contributes to the study of how change and stability occur from contradictions (Seo and Creed, 2002; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) between the respective practices within and outside the boundary of the MSI. In doing so, we respond to calls (De Bakker et al., 2019; Kabeer et al., 2020) to take a worker-centric perspective to the outcome in terms of changes to labour practices (examples are Kabeer et al., 2020; McGuire and Lasser, 2021). Previous studies have focused on formal work settings as set out by MSIs (see, for example, Munir et al., 2018). Instead, this study examines the informal spheres at the base of GPNs, where most women workers operate, and is distinctively

focused on the women's lived experiences of their own practices and materialized changes following the implementation of the MSI and limits to this.

Combining theoretical inspirations from research on wider institutions that shape worker mobilization and agency and an institutional work perspective to explain how an MSI achieves changes allows labour to be studied as an actor and agency that is relationally situated and contextually embedded. A substantial research stream revolves around the ability of the resourceful and powerful superhuman to accomplish profound change (DiMaggio, 1988). However, our analytical focus on the relational institutional agency of women cotton-pickers and implementing partners allows us to understand change as occurring through the other, more mundane efforts MSIs make at implementation. Although these actors do not have extraordinary resources to redirect existing practices and norms, more mundane changes can grow out of day-to-day instances of agency (Lawrence et al., 2011). While the BCI creates a framework for the work practices, it depends on local implementing partners, who have a direct relationship with the women workers. Therefore, as the unit of analysis shifts its focus to the impact on women workers' practices and agency, the analysis cuts across several levels, ranging from the MSI to its implementing partners, while the women workers themselves also make evident the relational and recursive nature of institutional work. In this way, introducing the institutional work perspective to the MSI literature allows for a more in-depth analysis of local-level agency, which is a prerequisite for understanding the impact of MSIs, whether they affect stability in or change to current institutions and workers' conditions.

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows. First, we review research on the ability of the MSI to sustain change and review the literature on women workers at the root of GPNs. Next, the analytical framework is outlined. The methodology then presents the research design and the analytical procedure. Prior to the findings, the context of the study is described. The last section concludes with suggestions for further research and the practical implications.

Conceptual background: Relational agency through MSIs

Changing working conditions through MSIs

MSIs' ability to sustain change at the workers' level remains a question with a few divergent answers (Jerbi, 2012). On the one hand, MSIs have been seen to improve standards of production, as well as introducing novel monitoring procedures and certification mechanisms (Bernstein, 2001). In addition, they may be able to come up with appropriate solutions to governance-related issues by integrating resources among stakeholders (Rein and Stott, 2009; Utting, 2015). On the other hand, MSIs have been criticized for constituting a form of privatized elite regulation largely intended to protect international buyers, rather than solving local challenges through real changes (O'Rourke, 2006). The latter claim gains weight due to the participation of private businesses in some MSIs (Barlow, 2022).

Some literature considers the emergence of MSIs to be an acknowledgement of the limitations of traditional command-and-control regulations (Baumann-Pauly et al., 2017). The ability of MSIs to enforce change by taking on a political role and responsibility is

frequently debated (Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2016; Moog et al., 2015; Scherer and Palazzo, 2011). Given the increased risk of corporate abuses in states in which governments take a narrow view of their responsibilities, MSIs may compensate for and have the potential to improve the legitimacy of non-state forms of governance, as they tend to be permissive with respect to wrongful firm behaviour (Dolan and Opondo, 2005; Ruggie, 2008). A positive outcome largely depends on the effectiveness and legitimacy of the chosen solution in meeting the local challenges (Mena and Palazzo, 2012). Relatedly, Beisheim and Simon (2015) found how a high level of institutionalization is correlated with the level of MSI success. They argue that it is the fit between the intention of the project and the particular social and economic conditions in these areas that matters most for project effectiveness, e.g. improvements in workers' conditions.

Hence, MSI research requires analysis that is attentive to the society in which an MSI is embedded and to how implementation occurs through levels of institutionalization, which is likely to involve not only the monitoring of outputs and efforts to optimize choice and the utilization of resources, but also the adaptation of initiatives to local requirements (Beisheim et al., 2014). Recent research continues to critically assess the MSIs as change agents, despite the suggestion that their *intrinsic worth* is an arbiter of their *raison d'être*, which requires the thorough internalization and collaboration of various stakeholders over time (Soundararajan et al., 2019).

Women workers and their agency at the base of GPNs

Few scholars have addressed the role of women workers at the bottom of GPNs (e.g. Anner, 2012; Barrientos and Smith, 2007; Barrientos et al., 2003; Munir et al., 2018; Prieto-Carrón, 2008). Based on detailed empirical studies of export-oriented industries, they emphasize that men usually take permanent jobs, whereas women are expected to perform household duties, such as collecting water and firewood, cooking and childcare (Butler, 2014; McCarthy, 2018). This means that women who work outside the household are most likely to participate in part-time and possibly home-based forms of employment in informal production environments. Moreover, these authors point out that women are less educated and less free because a systemic lack of fairness and other disadvantages are cultural norms, particularly in developing countries (Bexell, 2012).

The literature on women workers at the bottom of GPNs describes the gendered constraints that form and limit women's agency. Women workers face institutional and structural hurdles to their adoption of customary methods of unionization (Tighe, 2016). Pakistani women workers face challenges in relation to employment rights, such as discrimination in wages, concerns regarding sexual and reproductive rights in employment, and sexual harassment at their workplaces (Husain and Lund-Thomsen, 2015). In these contexts, women are also restricted spatially, their decision-making being determined by their inability to be spatially mobile (Carswell and De Neve, 2013).

Munir and co-authors (2018) include a gendered perspective on labour in their investigation of the restructuring of the Pakistani apparel sector. Based on interviews, notably not with the women workers themselves, they conclude that, even though multilateral agencies may have facilitated dynamic interactions among the actors in production networks, the outcome of the reforms mostly reflected the interests of international and

local elites, not those of marginalized workers. Although more women were included in the workforce, causing the division of labour to shift, this was partly viewed as a way to promote labour obedience and protect the ability of the industry to pay low wages, and much less as a means of emancipating women.

Overall, in the analysis of GPNs, workers are often called *labour*, which is not uniformly conceptualized (Carswell and De Neve, 2013). Mostly, throughout the GPN literature, workers have been ignored or treated as passive actors (i.e. labour), while labour agency is only considered under the rubrics of unionization as a form of collective action (Niforou, 2015). Herod's early call for 'a focus on workers as actors . . . required a more serious attempt to link "workers" own economic and social practice' (2001: 31), while at the same time acknowledging how the agency of workers unfolds and realizes interests within settings, thus sparking an interest in considering labour not merely as a resource but for its agency.

Few sources describe labour agency in terms of social strategies of resilience, reworking and resistance, with corresponding discussions of consciousness (Katz, 2004). Katz (2004) and Coe and Jordhus-Lier (2011) have taken steps to recognize the agency of workers by revealing how workers are relationally embedded in capital structures. Such approaches can lead the way to 'incorporating lived experiences within the everyday spaces and places of work . . . to sharpen understandings of the shifting opportunities, struggles, divisions, and constraints facing workers and their communities' (Warren, 2019: 702), as well as analysing the everyday nature of labour, as suggested by Carswell and De Neve (2013). Even mundane activities are important to take note of, even when they are not particularly aimed at achieving change; indeed, change can result from actors' practical work (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Altogether, with respect to the impact of MSIs, scholarly knowledge is mostly based on data from formal work settings, rather than the informal spheres where many of the women workers work. Also, the existing literature is mainly focused on identifying women's challenges – there is very little first-hand data from the women's own perspectives. This reflects the lack of knowledge about the micro-impacts of MSIs (Knudsen, 2013), including their relevance in the eyes of the local workers themselves (Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen, 2014; Ruwanpura and Wrigley, 2011). This article leverages such empirical analyses. In contrast to approaches that merely concentrate on collective and organized acts of change and resistance, this article studies how the work of an MSI's implementing partners affects the various practices of women workers' everyday affairs in the context of their labour and livelihoods, which considers women's quotidian circumstances contextually. In adopting this emphasis, we extend the scope of the current literature to deal with changes in labour practices as actually experienced. Such practices reflect local developments and can provide a window into understanding the real changes and limits to change in social relations and workers' livelihoods (Carswell and De Neve, 2013).

By means of the concept of institutional work, this article suggests another way of giving voice to micro-agency in the analysis of GPNs. This makes it possible to examine the lived experiences of workers to trace the impact of an MSI on workers' lives in any significant manner, however mundane (Lawrence et al., 2011). Institutional work usually addresses the question of how human agency affects existing legitimate structural

practices. So far, the institutional work literature has not been integrated with the GPN literature. However, conceptual resources in research into institutional work can advance the analysis of this phenomenon with its focus on actors' roles in institutional change and continues to have relevance when studying resilient institutional fields (Scott, 2014), such as those within which women workers operate in Pakistan.

Theoretical framework

Explaining the governance processes and impacts that involve elevated levels of complexity, participation and the wickedness of problems, as in the context of MSIs, demands combinations of theoretical inspirations (Peters, 2011). Peters calls for analytical strategies that combine different theoretical streams of explanation to achieve more complete understandings of contemporary governance processes and outcomes. Particularly relevant are analytical strategies that account for how institutions, the actors within them, ideologies and the international environment interact in producing governance processes and outcomes (Peters, 2011). Policies for social problems are formed and implemented through an array of diverse implementation structures which can be understood as institutions (Peters, 2014). MSIs can be considered an example of such institutions (Zeyen et al., 2016) with different degrees of institutionalization that deliver private governance in the face of complex social problems. Studying interactions between the MSI as an institution and participating actors underpinning ideologies in their international environment may provide a more robust understanding of how impact is generated (Peters, 2011). First, institutions provide mechanisms for channelling diverse interests into policy development and implementation. Second, this tends to occur around ideologies and manifestations of ideas that inform and frame governance processes (Peters, 2011). Institutional scholars also refer to institutional logics to conceptualize the cultural-ideational content of institutions. Third, accounting for institutions without what scholars of older forms of institutionalism, such as Stinchcombe, understood as 'the guts of institutions' (Stinchcombe, 1997) will not explain impact. An institution only works to the extent that someone, somewhere, holds it to its standards (Stinchcombe, 1997). This requires shining a spotlight on individuals' work in relation to institutions (Peters, 2011; Stinchcombe, 1997). Hence, how individuals and institutions interact is central for explaining how outcomes are generated through governance processes (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Peters, 2011: 45), for example, in the context of MSIs.

This conceptual background sensitizes our analytical orientation in the study of how relational agency through an MSI facilitates change in worker practices and conditions. We blend this theoretical inspiration with conceptual resources of research on agency in the context of wider institutions that create and limit opportunities. In doing so, we combine the conceptual inspirations of research on political processes in the context of worker agency and mobilization (Tarrow and McAdam, 2018), as well as recent theoretical advances in institutional studies of organizations around institutional work (Lawrence et al., 2011). Combining such theoretical inspirations, this article furthers research on the possibilities and limits to change generated by relational institutional work through MSIs, in this case between the MSI, the workers and their implementing partners.

In the following, we synthesize literature to further sharpen the conceptual framework for the empirical analysis.

Institutions, actors and agency in MSI processes and outcomes

Political process scholars studying worker mobilization for change and institutional scholars interested in change agency in organization studies have long recognized the complementarities and possibilities for cross-pollination between these diverse research fields as a way of tackling important research problems at their intersection (McAdam and Scott, 2005; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008). These scholars widely recognize how (collective) agency occurs in and explains change, often despite pressures towards sustaining the status quo. This involves an interest in how agency is shaped by the broader contexts of institutions that present political or institutional opportunities to actors (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015), varying among others with political regimes and country contexts. Wider contexts of prevailing institutions may potentially open up opportunities for actors, yet the opposite is equally true in that they may also limit mobilization and agency (Tarrow and McAdam, 2018). To allow for a fine-grained analysis of how relational agency through an MSI is involved in generating changes, in work practices and agency, in an otherwise strongly institutionalized and unfavourable context that limits the opportunities for the mobilization and articulation of claims to rights, we blend the above-mentioned conceptual inspirations with recent theoretical advances in research on the institutional work of actors. The concept of institutional work is useful because of our particular interest in actor-level relational work within institutional processes (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Research has advanced the notion of institutional work to capture a wide range of forms of agency with consequential effects for institutional change and stability, comprising not only explicit, collectively organized action, but also more relational and less concerted agency, at times with incremental changes.

An institutional field is a relational space consisting of durable institutions, which legitimate practices and give way to institutional work. The literature on institutional work covers a broad spectrum of agency. A considerable stream of literature departs from the concept of the institutional entrepreneur (DiMaggio, 1988), which has often focused on the institutional agency of a few powerful future-oriented actors with enough self-interest to pursue institutional change in response to structural pressures (Maguire et al., 2004). A more social view of agency rejects the idea of a superhero like the institutional entrepreneur to focus instead on the actor's skills (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Institutional work emphasizes the purposive human agency in creating, maintaining or transforming institutions (Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006). Particularly, with the MSI's aim to accomplish practice change within its boundary through its participants, we turn to the literature on institutional work through practice and boundary work. Zietsma and Lawrence theorize further and show how practice and boundary work reciprocally interact in effecting change as two forms of institutional work. To create practices, institutional work involves making and setting in place mechanisms to make sure they are used (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Maintaining practices involves setting up systems and/or regulations for the normative, cognitive and regulatory structures to make them

reproduceable and to police them (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Finally, disrupting institutionalized practices demolishes the normative, cognitive and regulatory pillars that support the said practices (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Besides practice work, Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) also define a complementary type of institutional work: boundary work, with the purpose of bounding a field by creating new boundaries and bolstering existing ones. The interplay of boundaries and practices has been found to be central to the institutional work done by actors in, for instance, translating events across field-level practices. As such, ‘boundaries and practices exist in a recursive relationship significantly affected by the heterogeneous boundary work and practice work of interested actors’ (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010: 191). In our case, the MSI creates a boundary between distinct realms of human activity insofar as its *members* produce in accordance with MSI-coordinated activities and certifiable standards. Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) find that, under conditions of institutional stability – i.e. with unbroken boundaries and accepted practices – agency primarily reproduces past practices, whereas contested boundaries and practices spur projective agency. Hence, future-oriented agency and the potential creation of new institutions could be the result of constructing new (temporary) boundaries to shelter the existing institutional environment from being sanctioned. Also, institutional work can be directed towards both current practice and current boundaries. If the current boundaries restrict practice work, actors can engage in institutional work to change them (boundary work), which eventually can result in a context that allows for practices to be influenced (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010).

By means of the concept of institutional work, this study adds to the understanding of how, within the boundaries of an MSI’s implementation level, relational agency is reflected in changed agency for the women workers. In this way, the analysis pays attention to the relational institutional work of *intermediate* implementing partners and women workers within the boundary of the MSI through practice work and boundary work in promoting, bounding, defending and protecting changes in the local practices of women cotton-pickers. Our combination of theoretical inspirations responds to calls for a more politically sensitive and critical understanding of institutional work through a relational conception of power (Willmott, 2011). This conceptualization of relational institutional work in the context of an MSI allows us to provide deep insights into what research on worker mobilization refers to as the making of micro-mobilization spaces, i.e. sites that facilitate worker agency, particularly in terms of worker participation and mobilization in changing work conditions (McAdam, 1988). Micro-mobilization contexts refer to ‘the small group setting in which processes of collective attribution are combined with rudimentary forms of organizations to produce mobilization for collective action’ (McAdam, 1988: 134–135). Relational institutional work through MSIs and the mobilization of workers in changing working conditions and practices can thus be considered an institutional process (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008).

Methodology

Research design

We use the case-study research design to allow empirical examination of a limited number of actions regarding a real-life phenomenon to increase in-depth understanding of

how such events are shaped and produced by tools that have evolved from abstract structures (Eisenhardt, 1989). In studying the example of institutional work at the implementation level of an MSI, it is only by considering the situatedness of the implementing partners and the women cotton-pickers that an understanding of the institutional work associated with changes to the practices of these women can be fostered.

To study this example, we centre on the work done by the BCI implementing partners in relation to the practices of women workers. To understand this work, we collected data on the BCI, implementing partners and cotton-pickers under the BCI.

The BCI has the intended purpose of continuously mitigating the adverse environmental and social effects of cotton production and improving the local economy. In striving for this impact, compliance-based verification is combined with cooperative capacity-building (Ghori et al., 2022). The BCI contracts farmers in 22 countries, including Pakistan, one of the largest BCI producing countries in the world (BCI, 2023). In Pakistan, the standards system was launched in 2009 and currently has more than half a million Pakistani smallholders, about a third of the total, producing BCI-certified cotton (BCI, 2023). Most BCI cotton-pickers are women who are locked into their jobs with very limited work mobility, thus allowing us to focus on the gender aspect of the impact of MSI changes. Due to the limited impact of state regulation to improve working conditions, the changes to women workers' labour practices are more easily isolated to the BCI.

Data collection and analysis

Qualitative interviews made possible personal interactions with workers who are sensitive to a variety of understandings. As women workers are marginalized and live in poor rural societies, we see their perspectives on their own working practices as a sensitive area of research. Interviewing caused some complications, as conducting research on sensitive topics, including several stereotypical social customs, norms and values related to women in Pakistan, can contribute to further culture-related challenges for researchers, even when they are fully cognizant of the cultural context (Adikaram, 2018). To underscore the independence of the interviewer, ensure confidentiality and establish rapport, all the interviews with women workers were carried out with the assistance of a local female student to mediate the social challenges. We did not find that the women were unwilling as such to share their experiences (Fatima and Asad, 2018), but we did not receive the elaborate answers that we experienced in other contexts. Interviews were carried out in person, lasted between 25 and 60 minutes, and were conducted in English or Punjabi. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed.

In total, 40 interviews with various actors involved in the BCI network in Pakistan were conducted in late 2017. These included two interviews with BCI staff in Pakistan, two interviews with BCI implementing partners in the Pakistani Punjab, one interview with a farmers' association, four interviews with field facilitators, four interviews with producer unit managers, four interviews with male workers in the BCI, and 23 interviews with female smallholders and workers in the BCI (detailed in Table 1). Interviews with workers, field facilitators and producer unit managers were conducted in the districts of Toba Tek Singh and Layyah in the Pakistani Punjab, both known as cotton-growing districts.

Table 1. Key stakeholders of the BCI.

Key stakeholder	Description
Smallholders and workers	Farmers who are not structurally dependent on permanent hired labour. Farm size up to 20 ha of cotton. Cotton farm workers are women cotton-pickers. These take part in learning groups (LGs).
Field facilitators	Facilitators are selected (and paid) by the implementing partners (IPs) and trained by BCI. They support the LGs and medium farms to achieve the Minimum and Improvement Requirements through ongoing support during the season. They are most often from the same society and sometimes previous workers.
Producer unit manager	A producer unit consists of learning group members and medium farms, and each PU has a PU manager. Each PU has an internal management system (IMS) in place, coordinated by a producer unit manager (PU manager). The PU manager is selected by the IP and trained by the BCI.
Implementing partners	IPs are local organizations working with cotton farmers and workers to enable them to grow better cotton. They are linked to the BCI through a specific contract (i.e. the Implementation Partnership Agreement). They are responsible for creating an enabling environment for the farmers to participate in the Better Cotton standards system, and to grow and sell better cotton.
BCI country-level secretariat	Country managers (CMs) make the final decisions on licensing, and thus the selling of better cotton by the PU. BCI CMs are the contact point for the BCI in that country or region and are responsible for oversight of the implementation of the Better Cotton standards system.

Authors' own work.

Interviews with the BCI's implementing partners covered their understanding and collaboration with the BCI's country office; the purpose of their business and their work with women workers; and how they perceive their role in promoting the workers' well-being. Interviews with field facilitators focused on their work tasks and the related challenges and opportunities for women workers. In our interviews with these workers, we enquired about their relationships with both implementing partners and the related field facilitators, their awareness of the BCI standards system, their experiences working in the BCI production network, and changes to practices after the BCI standards had been implemented.

By means of a blend of inductive and deductive coding, the data analysis remained close to the circumstances in which the interviews were conducted, while at the same time enabling the theoretical perspective to emerge from the concepts in the research question (Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019). The focus of the coding was on the relations between the work done by the implementing partners and the practices of the workers. We simplified the structure in the empirical material while iterating through several rounds the empirical material (interviews and secondary data), the existing literature on MSIs and emergent structures in the empirical material. Three aggregate themes emerged relating to the changes to agency and women's conditions. Along with their subcodes, these are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Main themes.

Theme	Sub-theme
Inciting collective working practices	Impact on wages through better negotiation with landlords, better working conditions (feeling safer, remaining comfortable, feeling supported, receiving increased amount of work possibilities).
Training	Improving workers' self-confidence; developing capacity-building tools; learning groups; training in cotton growing and picking; changing picking methods; awareness of the possible harmful effects of chemicals; awareness of improved cotton quality; awareness of own worth; awareness of role of collective bargaining; improving effectiveness of farmers spraying; decreased expenses and environmental impact.
Engaging with the private sphere	Prompting importance of children's education; accentuating women's worth; domestic household guidance (guiding women workers and their families toward improved domestic and social conditions).

Authors' own work.

In the findings section, quotes are presented to illustrate the underlying data. These come from an 18-page data-table of quotes for the main themes.

The institutional context for women cotton-pickers and the BCI in Pakistan

Pakistan was created at independence from the British in 1947. Throughout the postcolonial era, it has undergone a continuous struggle to create and maintain its sense of statehood, as reflected in numerous domestic insurgencies (Naseemullah, 2014), and it has serious deficiencies in its capacity to implement and enforce legislation (Ijaz, 2019): 'Pakistan's labour inspection mechanism has been wholly ineffectual, and the subject of numerous corruption allegations' (p. 7). Due to the multiple layers of informal contracts outside the state's sphere of influence (Asad and Haider, 2018), employment can occur under unsafe conditions that go unnoticed. Women workers who occupy the lowest tiers of employment suffer especially from this lack of labour-law enforcement (Tewari, 2017). Thus, although laws are passed, enforcement is generally lacking (Asad and Haider, 2018). Limitations in the central government's capacity to implement decisions in various policy areas (Börzel and Risse, 2016; Ijaz, 2019) result in a governance gap in which MSIs like the BCI can play a governing role aimed at and constructed with members of the GPNs. To be sure, *de jure* regulation of the transnational space in which GPNs are located is challenging, but there is an increase in national and international regulation on human rights and the social sustainability to circumvent modern slavery. For instance, the EU has implemented human rights due diligence into the legislation with the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (McCorquodale and Nolan, 2021). The philosophy of shifting regulation to the sourcing enterprise makes sense, since enforcement in the Global South is scant. While human rights due diligence is a series of interrelated processes that are intended to assist companies in their accounting for potentially adverse human rights impacts, liability and enforcement are not as such part of

human rights due diligence (McCorquodale and Nolan, 2021). Reporting on these issues to create legitimacy and then relying on self-regulation without specific liability and enforcement have been highly criticized (Deva, 2012) and may still offer the use of the MSI as a perhaps questionable indicator of due diligence.

While Pakistan is characterized by some governance gaps, women's labour market participation and agency are governed and constrained by a rich institutional complexity of other cultural and informal institutions. Pakistan is a male-dominated society, one in which women have firm restrictions placed on their independence of views and, in several ways, are denied the ability to make decisions about their personal lives (Tarar and Pulla, 2014). For example, merely obtaining male approval of her working can be seen as a significant hurdle to overcome, and related confrontations in the family can be very challenging (Khatana, 2020).

The labour market is dominated by patriarchal gender relations, which are reflected in the distribution of female and male employment across economic sectors and occupations (Elson, 1999). Moreover, the shared understanding that daughters are not likely to get involved in paid work challenges female education (Siegmann and Shaheen, 2008). Consequently, the literacy rate of women in the districts of Punjab is among the lowest in the country (Hassan, 2021).

Women are highly concentrated in agriculture and unskilled occupations, where they account for more than two-thirds of overall female employment (Akram, 2018), and some jobs, such as cotton-picking, are almost exclusively performed by women (Siegmann and Shaheen, 2008). Social norms stereotype gender roles by associating them with certain tasks, thus providing a link between paid labour-market work and unpaid reproductive work, making both bearers of gender (Elson, 1999). Although women's involvement in the rural economy is high, women work on land that they normally neither own nor control (Kouser and Qaim, 2017). Such women are commonly perceived to be earners of supplementary incomes and have limited access to and control over financial resources. The harvest is sold by and through men, who often control the resulting income. Cotton-picking is demanding work, and while men, who have more choices in the labour market, can migrate to urban areas to enter industrial employment, women have fewer alternatives in generating an income (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Siegmann and Shaheen, 2008).

Overall, the agricultural sector, which is mostly informal, employs about 40% of the workforce, with a larger share of women employed. Although unionization is understood as a key step in strengthening the social position of workers, the labour movement is not strong in Pakistan, which has one of the world's poorest rates of unionization, with about 3% of the entire workforce being unionized, of which women represent a minimal percentage (ILO, 2018). Moreover, the membership rate is lower in Punjab than in Pakistan as a whole. Despite reported attempts to organize workers from the informal sectors, unionization within these sectors remains minimal (ILO, 2018).

Based on the above, women workers in the cotton industry are among the most marginalized of workers: working in the informal sector as women in a patriarchal society, their privileges are precarious, and their unionization still very rare. The political and institutional context of opportunities for women workers' agency is very restrictive (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008; Tarrow and McAdam, 2018). For this

reason, taking into account the possible role of such workers' agency produces the image of an immensely constrained actor that is far removed from the institutional entrepreneurs highlighted in earlier work.

Findings

In presenting the findings, we analyse the relational work between MSI implementing partners and women workers and the consequential effects on working practices and conditions, with a focus on the recursive boundary and practice work in efforts to affect institutional and practice change.

The recursive boundary work of the MSI

The BCI wants 'cotton farmers to become more resilient to unpredictable climate conditions and be able to make a decent living from farming by producing Better Cotton – better for farmers, the environment and the sector's future' (BCI, 2023). The BCI objectives are development-oriented and focus on the practices to be used in BCI-certified cotton production. The objectives seek to impose a distance from conventional cotton production and imply that common practices and conditions are not good.

BCI cotton certification is regulated by principles and activities involving the work of bolstering the boundary of the BCI and concurrently shaping the practices of the workers. These include: (1) *better stewardship of the standard system*, which defines the BCI's production principles; (2) *capacity-building and training*, a programme that provides training to farmers on how to grow certified cotton, and that supports them in the fields through experienced local implementing partners. This collaboration with local partners is meant to support farmers and workers in adopting practices that are consistent with the principles of the BCI, which now include: (3) an *assurance programme*, which assesses farmers by means of results indicators; (4) a *chain of custody*, a programme that also links supply and demand in the value chain; and (5) a *claims framework*, which shares stories and information from the field to disseminate and delimitate BCI cotton and related claims (BCI, 2023).

From these elements, the BCI can be characterized as a standard-setting organization, creating and bolstering a boundary separating those farmers and workers who adhere to the BCI from those who do not. In their principles, there is a focus on supporting farmers and workers in complying with the standard through capacity-building methods, or to support the formal BCI boundary. There are also forms of practice work that are more directed towards the practices than the boundaries, such as the *sharing of stories* constituting the work of promoting and supporting certain underlying institutions, which again helps sustain the definition of which practices fall within the boundary of the BCI. Since the BCI organizes capacity-building programmes for workers through collaboration with local implementing partners, the implementing partners reflect the expressed boundary by supporting farmers and workers in adopting practices that are consistent with the BCI's production principles.

Thus, these criteria concurrently define the MSI boundary. At the micro-level, they are reflected in the practices of the implementing partners. The latter operationalize the

BCI's capacity-building approach cooperatively with influence from their project activities. This is because the BCI does not have formal requirements regarding the types of methods local partners should adopt. This allows the implementing partners some flexibility in developing different capacity-building practices that appear applicable to them within their respective contexts. The implementing partners have substantive local knowledge that is found to complement the objective of the BCI. This was illustrated by an implementing partner as follows:

. . . the main objective . . . is to upgrade the small farmers at the rural level. The BCI is an international organization, and the concern of the BCI is related to cotton, particularly improving the social and environmental conditions of farmers. Therefore, considering all these things in retrospect, the BCI and our organization decided to collaborate to promote the Better Cotton Standard system.

The implementing partners are central actors in implementing the Better Cotton Standard (BCS), including its capacity-building element; they work with cotton farmers, facilitating them to produce and sell better cotton, while also approaching the task in a flexible manner.

We all work like a team rather than a donor. . . . There is no monitoring of it or of the mistakes. There may be some feelings that some areas need to be improved. If there is any identification for it, we do help to improve it. It is a very comfortable relationship without compromising on the standards and procedures.

The institutional work of sanctioning and monitoring does not appear to be unduly onerous in the relationship between the implementing partners and the BCI. Rather, the relations between them appear to be governed by trust, which is ascribed to the high knowledge of the chosen implementing partners.

Through boundary work, the MSI delineates and protects a bounded institutional space around the main principles of the BCI, which recursively interacts with work affecting changes in practice. The role of the implementing partners is to administer these boundaries locally and to translate them for and with local farmers and workers' use, of which we offer several examples below. The implementing partners enjoy an important role in the BCI, fostered by the BCI principle of collaboratively working to change practices at the workers' level, but also to do so with a degree of flexibility based on experience. The implementing partners are quite free to choose work practices, as long as they do not compromise BCI principles. In this manner, the implementing partners have an impact on *the nature* of the implemented principles.

Changes to practice and leveraging women workers' agency

Cotton-pickers' labour practices have been impacted in several ways by the actions of implementing partners with the involvement of the BCI. Our findings are divided into three interrelated categories in which institutional work is exhibited: (1) inciting collective work among the women workers; (2) providing training in aspects related to cotton-picking; and (3) engaging in the privacy and family-related spheres of women's lives.

The variety of these activities aimed at affecting changes is considerable, ranging from training sessions to collective representation. These forms of work did not unfold progressively but rather concurrently, and in an interplay with the ongoing boundary work. Below we demonstrate how this work impacted women's lives.

Inciting collective work practices. Inciting the women to work collectively affected them in various ways in terms of both experienced outcomes and relational practice work. Going together to the fields and working as a group, women were more facilitated in their needs, as this led to knowledge exchange, learning and support; they experienced achieving more employment options and could enter into collective bargaining. As experienced by women workers and a field facilitator:

When we work in a group, we remain comfortable, we support each other, we can replace each other, we can do a huge amount of work, we tell each other how to pick cotton, where to work after this, how much time and work is left. We start work together and leave the field together. (women worker L)

It is better. Sharing issues in a group is tantamount to our solution. As a group we can manage things in a better way. Women grouping produces mutual understanding. (women worker J)

This social coherence helped improve their training. And, this is a common practice now. It is far better now than earlier. So, it's working on organic fields, and our teams are building their more social capacities. (field facilitator A)

The quotes reflect both the relational ties among the women workers incited by the field facilitators and related outcomes in terms of training, togetherness and the experience of a more comfortable work situation.

In addition, collective work practices made paid work a legitimate option for a rural woman, as she would not be allowed to go out alone due to the institutionalized perception of what makes a respectable working practice for women who are constrained by the institution of family. In particular they need their family's permission to move around freely, a restriction based on arguments often citing tradition. This was, for example, expressed by a BCI representative and women workers as follows:

There are some families who don't allow their female members to go to fields alone, but the families have no hesitation [in allowing] them to go in groups. . . . Then, since these pickers also move to some faraway lying field, yet safety becomes the key concern. Joining and going in a group for picking and training, the concerned families feel security for their female members and allow their permission. (BCI A)

. . . going in groups is secure and satisfied for the related families, but working alone is felt [to be] unsafe. (BCI)

We work in a group, we have a sense of security, and we feel protected. . . . I feel very satisfied working alongside other women pickers. (women worker Q)

We experience more security, safety and protection in the wake of grouping and union, which are the result of the training this organization [the Lok Saanj Foundation] imparted to us. (women worker S)

The experiences of safety and independence are closely related, being nurtured by the understanding of the women's families. Being involved in a group and in training sessions leverages the possibility of the women to participate in work independently of their families, but with their fellow workers. According to a producer unit manager, the introduction of groups was decisive in allowing some women even to take a job.

Thus, the group appears to be a legitimate replacement for women's family members in chaperoning them with the special responsibility of the women leader. A group of women, normally between 10 and 15, would select a leader to be their contact with the landlord (*zamindar*), and these informal groups were also a forum for deliberation:

This social coherence helped improve their training. And, this is a common practice now. It is far better now than earlier. So, it's working on organic fields, and our teams are building their social capacities more. (field facilitator A)

I go and work in a group. Our representative consults with everyone and the decision is conveyed to the farmer. Whatever we say she forward[s] this to the farmer. (women worker T)

We work in a team. Our team has a madam representative. Our issues are discussed and put forward before the farmers through this representative. (women worker R)

The use of work groups formed part of a micro-mobilization context created by the MSI and their implementing partners, using boundary and practice work to facilitate women's agency and voice. Thus, the groups effectively improved communication between the female cotton-pickers and their landlords.

[They] select their chief/group leader to negotiate their matters with the farmers, including their wage rates. They have this chief as a collective representative or spokesperson to discuss and negotiate all the affairs. As a group, they can negotiate things and get their demands accepted. (producer unit manager A)

We discuss issues related to wages within the group. Everyone shares the consensus on the wage-rate settlement. And everyone receives the same rate. And we convey this developed consensus to the farmers through the one selected person. (woman worker E)

Before forming the group, everybody worked individually, so there were certain issues in that too. Now we are working in safety, protection, and team spirit. Our demands are accepted by the farmers. We put wages rate of 15 rupees forward, so it is accepted, and we receive it now. (women worker T)

We work by consensus. It increases our bargaining power . . . the zamindar is compelled to accept our demands. (women worker P)

This is some kind of support for them. In our culture most of the women are housewives, and they have shy behaviour and can't negotiate good bargaining individually. (BCI B)

Working in groups enables women cotton-pickers to practise wage-bargaining and to do so both collectively and with evidence of some success. On the one hand, the group facilitates micro-mobilization, which results in a community-like constellation of women and is an enabler of labour practices enhancing the professionalism of the work, while also providing a stronger female voice in relation to their families and landlords. This agency is a distributed result of the MSI increasing the practice of working in groups and the women's perhaps more mundane participation. On the other hand, there are limits to the agency and change impact on the women workers, as changes happen within the realm of the MSI's boundary and practices. Legitimate and possible changes do not deny the workers' role as a resource to the GPN.

Training. Training the women workers is uniformly understood as a central practice of the implementing partners in support of the BCI's capacity-building programmes. The implementing partners describe how they work closely with the BCI in mobilizing small-holders to provide a learning environment for the workers. Learning sessions take place several times during the cotton-picking season. The training covers picking techniques, the timing of the work, the pesticide impact on the environment, health measures protecting the environment, and one's own health. Our interviews reveal how, in various ways, the training and acquired skills have led the women to engage in incremental changes to their everyday work practices. The quotes below illustrate this:

Earlier, one day after spraying, the picking process started. So, in this way, many women pickers were exposed to the harms of these dangerous chemicals. Now, after having training, they are aware of the possible dangerous effects of these chemicals. They start picking after some days, when the effects of these chemicals will have vanished. (field facilitator C)

I got training: they told us how to wear the dopatta while picking cotton, we wear it tight on the head to cover our hair, we start picking cotton at 9:00 am, and stop picking at 3:00 pm. This routine is beneficial, so we do not pick wet or damaged cotton, and we keep it clean by putting it on cloth. (women worker D)

Now, picking is done from the lower to upper end of the plant. Earlier, this was done from upper to lower. As a result, now the cotton is cleaner, and we get a good price for it. (women worker J)

Another woman (I) echoed our own impression: 'Earlier, we didn't know about these things, but after learning these methods through training, things have been changed. We remain safer from the sun, and our hair is safe from cotton and dust.' Thus, knowledge about the deleterious effects of pesticides altered cotton-picking practices. In this way, the health of the women cotton-pickers develops into a legitimate normative element to be considered in the cotton fields by workers and landowners alike.

However, in Pakistan only women do the cotton-picking, and 'women are usually not conscious about the health dangers related to the use of pesticides' (field facilitator A).

At the same time, women are hired on unfavourable terms – normally as day labourers – to do some of the hardest work in the cotton cycle. Compounded by the lack of legal protection for women workers and the presence of possibly damaging materials on farms, women workers’ health and safety concerns persist in cotton farming, ‘mostly since they do not wear – or do not have access to – appropriate personal protective equipment while picking cotton’ (BCI producer unit manager). This discrepancy illustrates the result of the institutional work performed by the BCI and their implementing partners by way of tutoring the women and picking up these new practices. This is also reflected in the ability of the women to negotiate their incomes, as described earlier, and as exemplified through the training as well: ‘after the training, they have come to know the significance of their unity. They were taught the usefulness of their united stand and organization’ (field facilitator D). The training of the women workers also changed their understanding of the value of their own worth, as well as the implications for their wages of their engaging in collective bargaining with the skills to negotiate own terms better than before.

Engaging with the privacy and family-related sphere of women lives. Engaging in the private and family-related sphere of women’s lives, the implementing partners were also involved in communications beyond what was solely related to the work sphere of women workers. Such work included prompting children’s education, accentuating women’s worth, and giving them guidance on internal domestic issues. The following quotes illustrate how children’s education was prompted:

In the Pakistani context, there are some regions which have very low ratios of child education. So, the need to enrol these children in school is felt at times. And, as the poverty rate is also higher in these regions, yet women have to labour. . . . So, the implementing partner helps them in some way to send their children to schools. (BCI A)

. . . during one session of training, I had drawn these trainees’ attention and said to them that you need to look at Madam Rosa, who was present there and teaching you people about health, picking, dressing and cooking skills. And all these qualifications this teacher had due to her education and consciousness. So, one of our trainee women acted upon this instruction and sent her girl to a government school in the village. (field facilitator D)

The implementing partners and their field facilitators prompt parents to send their children to school and not keep them in the fields with their mothers. Despite this focus, in some remote areas where the women workers are migrants, the process is more challenged.

A related issue is the emphasizing of women’s worth, which the implementing partners address in two main ways. This quote illustrates how this has become part of what the implementing partners do:

. . . we instruct them about the value of the women’s share in the progress of the state and society. (implementing partner C)

We also see examples of a change in the perception of women’s role and worth, accentuated by a working individual contrasting existing perceptions of women’s role in society:

Almaas, she's a success story. . . . Now she is also working as the trainer facilitator and training the male farmers in the field. She is very cooperative. She has presented, very confidently, the question of women's empowerment and women's role as farmers and workers before an audience of three hundred supply-chain men in Lahore. So, if such a woman is supported through funds from the BCI and given access to the international market, it will be very motivational for other women workers. (BCI B)

This indicates the relational agency that is reflected in taking on a new role in cooperation with the MSI. Related to this category, we can trace examples of facilitators who take on the role of guidance in the domestic household, in this manner accentuating the woman's voice in the household. This category is not as well represented in the material, but it provides clear examples of the engagement of the implementing partners in the private sphere of cotton-pickers.

. . . a person from a village told me about his poverty issues. . . . I asked him about his family affairs and advised him to send his wife to pick so that she can contribute to the family livelihood and home. After a little hesitation, he sent his wife to our training session, and she joined a group and started picking. Now they are earning their livelihood in an honourable way. (implementing partner C)

The implementing partner can take on the role of a guide in intra-household affairs because of the partner's role in the BCI. The outcome that the women experience is thus relationally dependent on the MSI, the implementing partner and her own participation. Providing guidance within the domestic household is a matter of affecting the internal family dynamics. This is therefore more sensitive data, which may explain the fewer quotes on this question.

Discussion

In the current system of globalization, there is a need to solve sustainability issues in developing countries, which, due to the dominance of global supply chains, cannot be seen as a challenge to the Global South alone. Current research is divided on the issue of how MSI can play a part in elevating the level of sustainability in GPNs. In suggesting a novel approach to agency for change in MSIs, this study has combined analysis of the wider context of prevailing institutions that tend to shape agency – in this case, limiting change – with an institutional work perspective to zoom in on the micro-level practices that occur within the realm of an MSI and thereby understand the ways in which change occurs through an MSI. We thus zoomed in on how the wider context of institutions, actors within institutions and their work interact to produce MSIs and worker outcomes (Peters, 2011).

The institutional boundary work of an MSI

Previous research has emphasized MSIs' strength as resulting from the network structure that fosters legitimacy and leverages knowledge involving both private- and public-sector actors (Soundararajan and Brammer, 2018; Soundararajan and Brown, 2016; Tewari,

2017). Adding to this literature, our analysis shows how, in an otherwise highly institutionalized context with respect to women workers' position and practices, an MSI can be understood as creating the boundaries and space within which steps towards institutional change could be taken. Work on the political processes of worker mobilization has drawn attention to how agency is shaped by the wider context of prevailing institutions (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015), which in Pakistan comprise a constellation of institutions (Goodrick and Reay, 2011), including government, market, family and community, that tend not to favour women workers' mobilization and articulation of claims to rights. However, the boundary work of the MSI has enabled some modification of the institutional profile of its host country, here Pakistan. The study contributes insights into how institutional work through an MSI may constitute and configure microspaces for worker collectivization and mobilization in changing work conditions and practices (McAdam, 1988). Therefore, our findings emphasize the relevance of conceptualizing and analysing the MSI through its boundary work. This is because the legitimate practices of women workers exist in synch with the defining principles of BCI *membership*, which shapes their practices within that boundary (Swidler, 2001; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). In this manner, our study points to the potentially profound material consequences of such boundaries, making them strategically and tactically significant for stakeholder attention (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010).

As a continuation of this, existing conceptualizations of institutional boundaries predict that a strong field boundary will lead to isolation from its external environment, while the boundary delimits the legitimacy of a practice so that contradictions between accepted practices and norms within and beyond the boundary can arise (Seo and Cred, 2002; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Our study confirms this in showing that, through its standards, the MSI can define membership (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) and legitimize practices that are different from those accepted outside the MSI, and potentially to some extent catalyse women's agency in relation to wider institutions, e.g. the family and community. In this way, the MSI has the potential to improve conditions through relational institutional work. In short, our findings illustrate how setting up BCI standards creates a boundary which can enable practices different from those of the surrounding society. Thus, this somewhat formal boundary is underpinned by the criteria that have been implemented with the workers and creates a space within which actors can nurture change through institutional work (cf. Linneberg et al., 2021).

Zietsma and Lawrence (2010) suggest that, if contradictions between bounded fields arise or are created, further change can happen. Due to the nature of our case, there are at least three delimited spaces with respect to the legitimate working and livelihood conditions of women workers: the Global North, the Global South and the bounded MSI. There is a stark contrast between the first two, but a much smaller difference between the MSI realm and the Pakistani context in which the production and worker levels of the MSI are situated. Hence, with respect to the strong institutions in the Pakistani context, an MSI can be understood both as a buffer and as making leeway with respect to legitimizing practices in two contra-indicative spaces: the local and the transnational. This reflects quite well why existing research does not agree on the benefits of the MSI when it comes to improving sustainability. While we find that the MSI can contribute to social sustainability (Soundararajan et al., 2019), our approach also shows that as a model the

MSI is open to both the reproduction and transformation of existing practices. Notably, if the MSI should be successful in affecting current institutions, it must create and set in place mechanisms representing alternative institutions so that they can be used and policed (cf. Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Being able to navigate this strategy is a central challenge for designing and developing MSIs, namely setting in place practices which represent alternative institutions, having them accepted and implemented locally while continuously policing their boundary through certification and dialogue.

While this section has discussed the macro-level role of the MSI in making changes possible by bounding and bolstering an institutional space, the next section discusses the complementary relational practice work that is central to the practices of implementing partners and women workers.

Institutional practice work between implementing partners and women workers

MSIs have been criticized for being unable to improve labour conditions (Ghori et al., 2022), let alone reach the most marginalized workers (Barrientos and Smith, 2007). Our findings show that, by means of local implementing partners and their field facilitators, the most marginalized workers are reachable by the work done by an MSI. The political and institutional structures of opportunities (Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2008; Tilly and Tarrow, 2015) are highly constraining for women workers in Pakistan. Leveraging their working conditions and agency through an MSI therefore also involves more subtle and intricate forms of work with institutions that traditionally have not been fully captured by the forms of agency that are often the focus in research on worker mobilization, institutional entrepreneurship collective actors, and their mobilization and strategies. To fully capture relational agency through the MSI in this context also requires paying attention to smaller, incremental practice change, etc. The findings of this study show that institutional work is relational in the sense that interrelated practice work is carried out by implementing partners and women workers. In a quite mundane manner, these women participate in new practices based on their interaction with the field facilitators. The foundations of the wider impact of BCI lie in their ability to create new institutions and practices. By making and setting in place corresponding mechanisms through implementing partners, they lay the groundwork for making sure that BCI mandated practices are increasingly used (cf. Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). Similarly, Jenkins (2013) shows how, through *supporting* activities, an NGO ‘focusing on women’s domestic concerns, offering practical support in pursuit of greater social justice’ (p. 624), co-created agency amongst the women, which resulted in the creation of a women’s social movement. These initial outcomes later resulted in formal unionization. Whereas Jenkins’ study focuses on the mobilization of women garment workers, our results consider instead relational agency between women workers and the MSI more broadly in terms of smaller changes to practice, as well as in relation to the family and local community.

The BCI standards system is the backbone of implementing partners’ organization of women communities through working groups to build capacity. As one of the key elements of the BCI, capacity-building is achieved through the dedicated training of the women workers, and as a result work relating directly to the boundary of the MSI.

Training occurred by implementing partner field facilitators and comparing the women's working methods, thereby developing best practices. This mode of learning is enabled through the women's participation in training, which induced them to change specific labour practices to, for instance, cater to their own health, strengthened their own perception of working effectively, and allowed them to professionalize their work.

While these findings highlight the importance of collective action (Niforou, 2015) and the centralization of workers, as opposed to their being placed in disparate locations (Lund-Thomsen and Coe, 2015), for collectivization and agency purposes, they also add insights into other means of achieving change and impact.

Hence, the changes to the women's working practices are transformative (Linneberg et al., 2021) in the way in which learning from field facilitators and other women becomes a way of being which is different from working alone. The implication of the creation of groups on the women's working practices also reflects the relational nature of agency (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011), which grows out of the community and takes the form of both individually initiated agency (one woman's suggestion for changing a working practice) and collectively initiated agency (the work group gaining a voice in bargaining). A diverse range of forms of agency is exerted in the context of MSI, spanning more individual, distributed and concerted action in changes that are both more incremental and more transformative (Lawrence et al., 2011).

Through boundary and practice work, the MSI among others configures a space for micro-mobilization, as sites for the emergence of more collective action (McAdam, 2003; Ward, 2016). MSI practices catalyse more concerted agency through mechanisms of brokerage (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015) in terms of connecting women, collectivization and the supporting formation of categories of identification and purpose (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Collectivization potentially increases women's ability to bargain and communicate with the landlords, suggesting potential emancipation for women workers. In other words, the women workers gained a voice that augmented their potential for agentic behaviour more easily. Based on individual agency, collective agency arose because of shared values and goals through a process of social interaction (Pahl-Wostl, 2006). Indeed, collective practices enhanced the women's power, even in the face of quite strong opposition to it (Evans, 2002). In previous work, the mobilization of women workers into the workforce was partly understood as a means of protecting the practice of paying low wages, not women's emancipation (Munir et al., 2018). Contrary to this work, the women workers were already part of the workforce, given their highly institutionalized role as cotton-pickers. Like McGuire and Laaser (2021), our findings also show that the agency of women workers and their implementing partners is heavily constrained by the nature of the cotton industry as a place for the marginal woman worker, with no other immediate possibility for earnings or for otherwise escaping their lives as they are in the short run. In this way, because of tensions between changes in working conditions and practices through the MSI and other surrounding institutions, the MSI to some extent leverages women's agency to work further at various institutions in the context of local communities. However, the prospects indicate mundane changes and levels of agency, as opposed to radical changes to the women's conditions and agency. An institutional lens is useful in explaining the constraints of agency, as well as the situatedness of women cotton-pickers regarding the extent to which institutional work can thrive.

This is also reflected in the way women workers retain their traditional responsibility for household duties. In this way, many women experience an increase in the total workload. The importance of intra-household bargaining over women's and men's domestic lives is highly valued in the context of gender in Pakistan. Consequently, to elucidate women's situations and show how changes through MSIs may be made in production networks, we need to consider intra-household bargaining, as well as broader social and cultural practices (McCarthy, 2018), and thus how constellations of institutions tend to work against the emancipation of women workers. In addition, the reality of immense poverty is highlighted by the data we collected as an ever-important factor in the decisions that are made regarding women's participation in the workforce (similar to Beisheim and Simon, 2015).

Using interviews from the women workers themselves, our article confirms Lund-Thomsen and Coe (2015) and De Bakker et al. (2019) in showing how the work done by national actors – here implementing partners – is central to the MSI outcome. Thus, in the context of cotton production, the changes to women's working practices are largely moulded by the content offered by the implementing partners and the institutional context. Intermediaries such as implementing partners are central in linking workers in the Global South to the global supply chain, leveraging knowledge while at the same time endowing the new processes and standards with legitimacy.

Common to this literature is the understanding that global MSIs strongly rely on intermediaries for local implementation to be embedded in 'the local social context – including gender and household relations, and the ways in which these impact on local work practices and work organization' (Nadvi, 2008: 340). This study shows that intermediaries can only incite women workers to engage in different practices if they are able to comprehend the local context (cf. Linneberg and Korsgaard, 2019) and be sufficiently flexible in their working practices to bridge different institutional settings, in this way connecting the global mission with local practices, as was done by the field facilitators in the case of the BCI. This confirms earlier research suggesting that the context of women workers' livelihood strategies is taken into consideration (Beisheim et al., 2014; Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Jenkins, 2013).

Conclusion

Drawing on the institutional perspective is helpful in analysing the impact of MSIs, as it clarifies their micro-level potential and limitations, taking their contextual embeddedness into consideration. Until now, most of the literature on MSIs and their role is empirically evaluative. It serves the purpose well of assessing the current conditions in a specific location or the impact of a specific MSI, but moving beyond this is useful for establishing an understanding of why and how such an impact can be created through the MSI's organizing. As a response to the literature on global production networks, which often fails to take the most basic level of the network – such as the marginalized women workers – into account, the data gathered for this article allow a dedicated micro-level focus.

The current study shows how MSI organizing can work as a vehicle for change if it creates clear boundaries to protect improved practices, yet at the same time fails to

sustain change if clear boundaries are not created and maintained. The practices exist in a recursive relationship with the boundaries, in which the latter legitimize practices and practices enact boundaries. In the current example, the BCI depends on multiple actors including the practices of the women workers to reflect MSI membership corresponding to its principles, which represent the boundary of the BCI.

Our findings detail how implementing partners and their field facilitators work within the framework of the BCI in such a way as to induce women workers to engage in agency in order to bring about change. The most prevalent elements of this institutional work stem from: (1) training women workers to build their capacities; (2) instigating collective work in groups to improve women's bargaining practices, build up their feelings of empowerment and safety, and allow them to benefit from knowledge-sharing; and (3) engaging with the private sphere of women lives, which goes beyond the cotton-picking to include prompting children's education, accentuating women's worth and guiding women on internal household issues.

Confirming earlier research on this theme, the use of local implementing partners paves the way for nurturing changes for women that take their context into consideration, given that their partner is knowledgeable about the local challenges and conditions. The institutional perspective describes well the possibilities for change within boundaries. For example, capacity-building work and work to convey production principles are central to the work of implementing partners who are seeking to impact women workers' practices. This work is closely related to the main pillars of BCI, i.e. the main characteristics of the boundary. The ability to have a positive impact hinges on the ability to sustain the boundary, which will nurture corresponding institutional work. What is detrimental is that the boundary is clear and is policed, i.e. that there is a real difference between members and non-members.

From this perspective, one can also point to the challenges in using local implementing partners if such partners are too entangled in the local institutional setting. The risk is that the practices communicated to the workers are more in sync with the context outside the boundary than with what is promoted within it. The current study does not present this evidence clearly, though there are some suggestions that, since there is a less formal check-up, practices could be less vigorously implemented.

Although our findings show those changes that women workers experience as meaningful in their everyday lives, it remains a question how effective these micro-level changes are for women workers' emancipation and the betterment of life in the lower tiers of the GPNs. Such influences in labour practices can potentially improve women's voice, immediate economic conditions and health-related issues. Such changes, however, depart from the current position and situatedness of women workers. Under the current system of production, it is therefore questionable how mundane changes in practice can translate into larger qualitative improvements for these women.

Limitations and future research

This research is limited in that its data are confined to specific areas of Pakistan and rely on a limited number of interviews. Women workers outside of the BCI were not interviewed; however, many had worked outside of the BCI previously. Using the institutional

work frame allows for analytical generalizations according to this framework; using other frameworks will reflect different aspects of the outcome of an MSI. In relation to future research, the present article has identified the significant role of implementing partners to mediate in implementing MSI boundaries through their practices. In particular, the role played by these agents lies very close to the practices of the women workers and has a potential to impact both the experience, and the ability, of global standards to be implemented locally. Concerning this issue, scholars have adopted top-down approaches, looking primarily at the upper levels and first-tier suppliers. However, we suggest further research be conducted to focus more on the roles of mediators, which can inform us about actual changes or decoupling as they connect the uppermost and lowest levels. Such research can investigate how the pressure to reach global standards is met in seemingly different contexts in such a way that it results in changes locally.

Practical implications

Our findings show that the MSI has the potential to result in incremental changes for workers, but for this model to play a legitimate role in western and southern countries alike, boundaries and practices both need meticulous attention from the stakeholders. The focus on the boundaries of the MSI, i.e. what defines insiders and outsiders, must be maintained and enforced continuously. The practices should reflect the boundaries well. While both need to be developed in synch with agents who are knowledgeable of the context, they must also be differentiated from the institutional realm in which they are embedded, otherwise changes in this area are not likely to happen. Instead, MSI work will legitimize western buyers' supply chains in the Global South and assist them in their global window-dressing.

Moreover, our findings suggest the need to enhance the national institutional setting through constitutional, social and political possibilities to alleviate the lower levels of work and particularly women workers' conditions, as the issue of poverty remains the overarching factor of significance.

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