

Chapter 1

Labour in global industries

“What can we do as consumers? What can we do to help garment workers in the Cambodian garment sector? How should we consume better or differently?” More than a dozen people are sitting in a small seminar room of an adult education centre in Bonn, Germany – more than 10,000 km away from Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia where approximately one million people,¹ most of them young women from the countryside, work in the most important export-oriented industry of this Southeast Asian country. I have just finished my presentation on women workers in the Cambodian garment sector as part of a political education event on the UN’s 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2019. After a lengthy discussion on the working and living conditions of women workers in the global garment industry, using Cambodia as a prime example, one participant – who asked the questions above – looked at me expectantly.

These questions on “sustainable consumption” are often raised when it comes to a more intensive examination of the working and living conditions of workers in so-called low-wage countries in the frame of political education and public relations work in Germany. One could say too often. Without denying the significance of the question of how we have to consume more sustainably, I am nevertheless quite critical of it. Ultimately, this question is about oneself, about one’s own agency, about the question of how I as a consumer *here* in the Global North can become the person who can change something *there* in the Global South². As selfless

¹ Pre-COVID-19, reported by the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU) (2019, p. 6). There are currently no exact figures.

² Discussions on the concepts of “Global North” and “Global South” should not be overlooked, even though it is not possible to include them in detail here. It is important to state, however, that these concepts are controversially discussed. By using these concepts, I explicitly emphasize the geopolitical relations of power that are linked with these concepts and that also marked the integration processes of countries in the Global South such as Cambodia into globalized industries managed and regulated by actors in the Global North. However, I will not ignore the fact that these concepts are highly dynamic and by no means geographically limited.

as this question might seem, it is in a way also quite a self-centred one, taking me as a consumer, or more generally the consumption of products, as the starting point, ending up with debates and discourses on sustainable certified clothing from environmentally and socially conscious alternative brands that only a few – and definitely not workers themselves – can afford. The topic of sustainable clothing consumption is, in this regard, just one of many others, ranging from the consumption of sustainable certified food to the bizarre question of which (e-)car I should drive or not. The problem is that with such questions we risk building up our own supposed sustainably and consciously consuming world – a kind of parallel and ever-growing microcosm – without ever leaving this consumerist bubble.

This book explicitly and deliberately goes beyond the question of how we can consume better or differently in a country like Germany with a strong market for clothing made in Global South countries like Cambodia. To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not mean that this question does not matter at all. Nonetheless, if we want to achieve structural changes and sustainable improvements for workers on the ground, initiating real transformative processes towards a better world where all people – not only a small part – can live and work with dignity, we cannot just ask ourselves what should we do *here* in the Global North to help *there* in the Global South. Rather, we need to ask questions such as: what do processes of production and the “life-making processes” of the workers, as two leading theorists of Social Reproduction Theory (SRT),³ namely Tithi Bhattacharya and Susan Ferguson, call social reproduction processes,⁴ look like – not only *there* but ultimately worldwide? How do these processes relate to each other? How should these processes relate to each other? What needs to be changed here, in this context? We should devote ourselves to these and other questions much more intensively. We have to start and really stay with these

³ Discussed later on and in the course of the book in more detail.

⁴ See, for instance, their contributions on the online blog of Pluto Press: “Deepening our Understanding of Social Reproduction Theory”, accessible via <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/deepening-our-understanding-of-social-reproduction-theory/>, last accessed 10 August 2021 or “Life-Making, Capitalism and the Pandemic: Feminist Ideas about Women’s Work”, accessible via <https://www.plutobooks.com/blog/life-making-capitalism-and-the-pandemic/>, last accessed 13 December 2021.

questions. This book argues that this is possible, first and foremost, by following the perspective of labour from below.

The perspective of labour from below means that we take processes of production in which labour has to exist and, related to that, systematically linked processes of social reproduction in which labour has to reproduce (both the individual labourer and her/his family) as the points of departure. It means that we start with labour and their perspective, considering labour – the women workers in the Cambodian garment sector – as central actors, key players in global industries such as the garment industry who can bring about changes and improvements themselves. What can we learn from these workers? How can we build on their struggles to think and really stay outside our box?

1.1 Starting and staying with labour – a scientific and political project

This issue of considering labour as a starting and “staying point” is not only an individual one but also a social and quite political question. Dominant initiatives to change and improve the situation of labour in global industries are commonly conceptualized and developed top-down from diverse actors in the Global North, ranging from brands and their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives to multi-stakeholder initiatives where again brands, but also states and international trade union confederations or national trade unions, regularly come together at negotiation tables to discuss better working conditions and higher wages in particular, further promoting discourses and debates that contribute, for instance, to the creation of new legal frameworks. A case in point is the recently passed “Act on Corporate Due Diligence Obligations in Supply Chains” (in German: *Lieferkettensorgfaltspflichtengesetz* (LkSG)) by the German parliament that aims to prevent human rights violations in supply chains.⁵ Meanwhile,

⁵ Apart from the fact that some of these initiatives are briefly discussed critically in this book (especially in chapter seven), there is deliberately no detailed critical reflection on them. In addition to the fact that there are already lots of discussions dealing critically with the supply chain law (for instance the German trade union Ver.di or the German trade union confederation DGB), CSR initiatives (cf. Frankental 2001; Burckhardt 2013) or programmes such as the BFC (cf. Hughes 2007; Merk 2012), space is deliberately left for a discussion of possible strategies that are discussed and conceptualized together with workers on the ground from the bottom up.

campaigns such as the Asia Floor Wage (AFW) campaign or the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), which do work with labour and labour organizations on the ground, still focus on an approach that risks to end up with a similar narrative that “we *here* have to do something for them *there*”. Even though it is undoubtedly central to raise awareness and to provide information and education, the question remains: where are the workers as the central actors, the key players for change and improvement? What happens if we really start with these workers on the ground and if we really stay with them to explore global industries from below and to investigate their agency at the local level and far beyond? It is precisely these last questions that give rise not only to the political but also to the scientific need to deal more intensively with the role of labour and labour agency in global industries, and it is precisely the relatively young and expanding research field of labour geography that brings these necessities together.

Labour geography is both a scientific and a political project that initiates the necessary paradigm shift towards labour as a significant geographical agent that actively shapes and uses the capitalist landscape in her/his own sense (Herod 1997, 2001) and whose role in global industries needs to be further researched and explored. Following Andrew Herod (1997, p. 3), “workers have a vested interest in attempting to make space in certain ways. Workers’ abilities to produce and manipulate geographic space in particular ways is a potent form of social power”.

This book ties in precisely with this scientific and political project of labour geography and systematically expands it with a feminist perspective around social reproduction processes. It explicitly deals with the question of what production and social reproduction look like from labour’s perspective. It deals with the question of how workers themselves shape and use their environment and how they themselves try to cope with their situation or try to change or improve it. This book starts and stays with these workers to find out how labour not only (re) acts locally but also how labour can network and organize on a transnational scale in order to fight for labour’s real needs and demands on the local scale and far beyond. At this point, labour is explicitly considered an actor, a key player who does not only act locally. Global industries are not simple linear production chains linking local workers *there* with local consumers *here*. They are highly complex global production networks (GPNs) that are “ultimately networks of embodied labour” (Cumbers et al. 2008, p. 372). Starting from this understanding, we have

to ask what initiatives can or should be embarked upon to structurally change and sustainably improve the situation of labour. How can or should strategies be developed with together labour from below? The field of labour geography thus perfectly combines the scientific need to investigate the role of labour as an “active geographical agent” in global industries (Herod 1997, p. 2) as well as the political necessity to start and stay with labour and labour agency to explore and develop approaches of networking and organizing labour in constantly growing and shifting global industries – not from the top-down but from the bottom up. It allows us to deal with more strategic and future-oriented questions such as how can labour and labour agency at the local level be brought to another level? How can labour and labour agency be scaled up?

Labour in the field of labour geography is predominantly considered in terms of “formal labour processes” such as trade unions, as Maurizio Atzeni (2021) critically discussed it.⁶ Following a traditional understanding in the frame of labour studies, the focus is set on trade unions as the main representatives of labour on higher scales and their primarily requirements of better working conditions in production sites and higher wages (cf. Bergene et al. 2010; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; more on that later on). While all these are important, labour and labour agency are far more diverse than that and labour’s needs and demands are far more complex. As a feminist scholar activist, it was important from the very beginning for me to see, recognize and actively take into account these facts. Looking at the Cambodian garment sector, labour primarily means women workers on the ground. It means informal workers and formal workers at the same time. It means non-unionized workers as well as unionized workers. Moreover, it means daughters, mothers, wives or sisters who are not only integrated in a production process, but also in a systematically linked process of social reproduction for which they – as girls and women – are traditionally responsible on their own, without any remuneration.

⁶ This concept was discussed in the framework of his talk on the conference ‘Labour conflicts in the Global South’ at the University of Nottingham, UK in 2019, based on his paper that was published two years later through *Globalizations*. In the course of this book, I will also apply this concept of “formal labour processes”, without further referring to the discussions at the conference and, by extension, Atzeni’s article.

Until today, this gendered side of social reproduction has hardly been systematically investigated in the field of labour geography – and this is exactly where this book seeks to contribute. This book shows how important it is to deal with labour in her/his diversity as well as with the processes of production and social reproduction at the same time. We cannot only deal with the question of what production looks like or should look like. What about the processes that keep this production going, that keep this production alive? Let us only think of Tithi Bhattacharya's question (2017, p. 1), which she raised when she introduced SRT: "If workers' labour produces all the wealth in the society, who then produces the worker?" What do these processes of social reproduction look like that keep production and also its central actors – namely labour – alive? By following a feminist labour geography perspective with a focus on social reproduction (cf. McDowell 2015; Dutta 2016) – which will be theoretically developed in more detail in the next chapter – we can explore global industries explicitly from a women workers' perspective from below, which can truly account for workers in their diversity and perceive them not only as actors in the production process but also as subjects of social reproduction.

1.2 The point of departure: Women workers in the Cambodian garment sector

[I]t was something for me. I was demanding what I deserved. The salary was low. Hence I have to stand up and struggle to get what I deserve. It has to start from me because nobody else would do it on my behalf.

I met Sovann, a young garment worker in her mid-20s, along with her more experienced union friends Maly and Pich, for dinner far outside downtown Phnom Penh in 2017. We met at Pich's home where the local leader of an independent union was living with her ex-husband and their three children in a small, rented store. Pich rented this mini store as she was trying to earn some extra money through small sewing jobs besides working in the factory. We women sat together eating and drinking and talked about the general strike by Cambodian garment workers in 2013/2014, in which all of them – as Sovann's statement underlines – proactively participated. This strike touched me very much from the very beginning. I was with my family at home in Bonn and to this day I can still remember all the pictures very well – on

TV, in the newspapers – showing all these garment workers, all these women, and their supporters, tens of thousands to more than one hundred thousand people,⁷ marching through the streets of Phnom Penh. For a long time, they were fighting for higher wages and – as we will learn from them later on – for much more than that. A few years later, I was now sitting with three of these women workers – with Sovann, Maly, and Pich – who had acted as central political subjects from the very beginning of that strike.

Not all of the women workers we will meet in this book are unionized with an independent union like Sovann. Not all of the women workers who we will get to know better are as obviously politically active as Sovann's older union friend Pich, a local union leader, or Maly, a local union representative. However, all women workers who participated in this PhD research project shape the capitalist landscape in which they and their families live in their very own ways. All of them actively use their everyday places and spaces for themselves and their families, for their real needs and demands, and all of them ultimately embody great potentials that are not only central at the local level but – as we will see in this book – can also be decisive far beyond. These women workers in the Cambodian garment sector can be considered as a significant starting point for investigating how labour shapes and uses the capitalist landscape not only in the sense of capital, but really in the sense of labour (Herod 1997, 2001), and not just on the local scale, but with a transnational potential that is still too much ignored.

Cambodia is in this sense only one example among many other countries in the Global South where predominantly rural women like Sovann, Pich, or Maly produce cheap clothes for big brands in the Global North in one of the many production sites. The Cambodian case study nevertheless serves as a particularly interesting one. It is a prime example of how countries in the Global South have been integrated at the very bottom of the global production chain for garments in the course of neoliberal globalization and how Western countries from the Global North (especially the US and the EU) have played leading roles in these integration processes. In this context, the Cambodian case study also clearly demonstrates the importance of the country's specific political instability and economic dependency – a kind of “underdevelopment” that is commonly attributed to so-called “developing coun-

⁷ There are no exact figures.

tries” or “third world countries” – for which Cambodia has a specific starting point due to its past history of wars and destruction. Nonetheless, due to the specific integration backed by Western countries under the guise of “development and progress”, Cambodia’s garment sector has become the country’s most important economic pillar. Moreover, it is one of the first countries in which transnational initiatives aiming to change and improve the situation of garment workers (such as the Better Factories Cambodia (BFC) programme) have been implemented.

This country case study also illustrates the impact or consequences of the steadily changing global economy and the need for labour-intensive production to always search for new spatialities – for new “spatial fixes” (Harvey 2001; Silver 2003)⁸ – in order to find and take advantage of the most favourable production locations. These new spatialities are not only created by outsourcing production to other countries (wherein the relocation of capital and therefore of production from the Global North to the Global South is by no means a simple one-way street) but also by generating specific spatial strategies within the production country itself (especially in terms of informalization processes) that in turn have disastrous repercussions for the labour force on the ground. Since the Cambodian garment sector is a relatively young (around 30 years) and increasingly insufficiently competitive sector, these dynamics can be clearly observed in the last decade. In this context, the case study also reveals that the internationalization of production goes hand in hand with “the new international division of labour” (Fröbel et al. 1977) wherein “material and discursive forms of social differences” – in this case study not only along the lines of class (labour) and race (“developing countries”, “Third World countries”; “Global South”) but especially in relation to gender (young women) – are mobilized in order to generate maximal profits (cf. Bair 2010). The mobilized women workers in the Global South are, nevertheless, “not just objects of transnational capital’s frenetic search for cheap, docile, and dexterous labor” (Bair 2010, p. 216). The Cambodian case study and, last but not least, the aforementioned general strike by garment workers in 2013/2014, show unequivocally that women workers in Cambodia “are also acting subjects who negotiate and often find creative ways of resisting” (ibid.),

⁸ Beverly Silver follows David Harvey and discusses “the technological fix” which addresses the need for technological innovations in capital-intensive production steps.

demonstrating that they are far more than economic actors, namely significant political subjects who should be considered as such not only at the local level but – as this book will show – also far beyond.

1.3 Book outline

This book is organized into a theoretical part discussing the key literature and the heuristic framework (chapter two); an introductory section presenting the case study (chapter three); a methodological part describing how the empirical research was developed and conducted (chapter four); and three larger discussion chapters presenting the empirical data and results of this PhD research. The book concludes with the main findings and contributions of the research and points out possible starting points for further research.

The theoretical part

Chapter two discusses the theoretical framework of this research. It engages with a wide range of literature on GPNs as well as from the expanding field of labour geography in order to enrich theoretical debates and discourses on labour and labour agency in global industries with a feminist perspective. The chapter builds on an expanding group of labour geography scholars who have begun to use the GPN approach as a conceptual framework (cf. Herod 2001; Castree 2007; Cumbers et al. 2008; Coe and Jordhus-Lier 2011; Coe and Hess 2013) in order to investigate the role of labour as a significant agent. However – and this is the new element – it goes further, as this research systematically includes the gendered side of social reproduction from the beginning of such an undertaking. What role do social reproduction processes play in this context? To what extent are GPNs systematically linked to processes of social reproduction? How do these processes relate to each other spatially? What does this mean for labour and labour agency in global industries? Building on the literature of social reproduction feminism, the chapter demonstrates why a feminist labour geography perspective on global industries that are reconceptualized as global (re)production networks (GRPNs) (cf. Kelly 2009; Barrientos 2019) is needed while exploring not only labour and labour agency in GRPNs but also new or alternative bottom-up strategies of

solidary practices among labour in constantly growing and shifting global industries.

The introductory section

Chapter three is a background chapter in which Cambodian women workers as the protagonists of this book are contextualized in the broader (theoretical and also spatial) framework of the GRPN of garments. This chapter introduces the case study and outlines the great transformation processes of rural households in Cambodia and the establishment of translocal life realities since Cambodia opened up and was integrated into the world market – and thus also into the expanding global garment industry – in the 1990s. How are women spatially embedded in the garments GRPN? What does their spatial reality look like? The chapter critically reflects on women workers' vertical relations and horizontal embeddedness in the garments GRPN, in which women workers (have to) act as significant agents. Chapter three zooms in and takes a closer look at women workers on the ground and at how they are spatially integrated into the global garment industry. This specific integration has significant consequences for women workers' everyday lives, their struggles, as well as for their agency on the local, national, and transnational scales.

The methodological part

Chapter four deals with the methodological framework of this book. If we want to start theoretically with women workers on the ground and their labour agency from the bottom up, what does that mean methodologically and empirically? This research has ultimately become a pilot project for a bottom-up approach of (self-)networking and organizing labour in the garments GRPN by directly building on and working with Cambodian women workers on the ground in order to investigate new or alternative (self-)networking and organizing strategies on the local scale and beyond. Following a (facilitated) feminist (participatory) action research approach, the research puts local women workers and their agency not only theoretically, but also methodologically and empirically, as starting points to explore the garments GRPN from below. Starting with the women workers' life stories and their everyday realities, women workers and their agency on the local, national as

well as transnational scales are at the heart of the debate. The transnational approach of linking workers with other workers along the chain – directly at the next node or link in the production chain – has become a particular focus of interest and was pursued in practice together with the women workers. The chapter discloses the whole research procedure of this PhD project, demonstrating the methodological and empirical consequences of a theoretically elaborated feminist labour geography perspective on GRPNs.

The three larger discussion chapters

The three following chapters represent the major discussion chapters, presenting the empirical data and findings of this research. While the fifth chapter is dedicated to the women workers, their life stories and their everyday lives and struggles at the local level, chapter six deals with women workers and their agency in the context of the national general strike by Cambodian garment workers in 2013/2014, investigating how women workers on the ground shape and use their spatialities at the local level and far beyond, before chapter seven then turns to those women workers and their agency on the transnational scale. The order of these three chapters was deliberately chosen in order to be able to deal with the individual specific spatialities on the one hand and to work out the interconnections and links of these spatialities in which women workers (re)act on the other hand. Since this book is particularly concerned with the question of local women workers and their everyday agency and how can it be brought to another – namely higher – scale, this spatially oriented order (from the local to the national and transnational scales) appears to be the most coherent way to approach this question.

The first larger empirical section, chapter five, details the women workers in the Cambodian garment sector with whom I have worked over recent years. How do these women become garment workers? What do the life stories of women workers in the Cambodian garment sector look like? What is their everyday life like and what are their difficulties and problems – their everyday struggles? Six short stories of women workers in the Cambodian garment sector serve as starting points to examine the women workers' everyday struggles that are by no means only struggles for better working conditions and higher wages but clearly struggles of social reproduction. This chapter

investigates the women workers' daily struggles around care as well as related to the wider conditions under which these women have to reproduce themselves, their families and their children as the next generation of labour, developing strategies to cope with their lives. This examination of women workers' everyday struggles – and what they are actually struggling for – entails key political consequences for labour movements and transnational initiatives that are often pushed into the background.

The general strike of 2013/2014 and the post-strike developments are the focus of chapter six. What role did women workers play in the strike? How did they shape and use the capitalist landscape? What role did spatial processes of production and social reproduction play in this regard? A feminist labour geography perspective on the strike and on the developments that have followed since 2013/2014 reveals that different manifestations of labour as well as different forms and dimensions of labour agency exist that ultimately stand in each other's way (cf. Douth 2021), leading to contradictory outcomes. The women workers' everyday places and spaces hold, in this sense, great potentials to counter these contradictions, offering a perspective for a new or alternative – and definitely transformed – labour movement that is needed in Cambodia (and elsewhere).

Chapter seven explicitly builds on the potentials investigated in the previous chapter. How can transnational labour solidarity be built from below? How can transnational labour solidarity be conceptualized and developed with local women workers from below? What kinds of ideas and strategies should be discussed with the women workers to achieve structural changes and sustainable improvements at the local level and far beyond? What do women workers think about (self-)networking and organizing labour along the chain? What do they think about (self-)networking and organizing along the chain via the next-node approach? Women workers and their everyday places and spaces are thus considered as starting points once again. The specific approach of linking labour along the chain, directly at the next node or link in the production chain, builds on the assumption that these women workers on the ground are best able to know and explore their environment. They can best network and organize locally, taking their everyday spatialities and, related to that, their agency to another level, as – following a feminist labour geography perspective on GRPNs – these women and their agency are not locally determined but transnationally linked

through the women themselves. This chapter focuses on the meeting of two different and highly gendered groups of workers along the chain – garment workers and truck drivers – who have together discussed new or alternative bottom-up strategies for practices among labour in the increasingly complex garments GRPN.

The conclusion

The final chapter discusses the key findings of this research with particular reference to the research questions. It sets a focus on the empirical findings in the discussion chapters (five, six, seven) in particular and links them with relevant theoretical debates and discourses in the expanding field of labour geography, highlighting three new theoretical insights. It discusses the potentials as well as the limits of this research project, underlining the need for further research on labour and labour agency in global industries by following a feminist labour geography perspective that systematically incorporates processes of social reproduction from the outset.