Core vs. non-core standards, gender and developing countries: a review with recommendations for policy and practice

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ABSTRACT

A key issue confronting policy makers across developing countries is how to improve the terms and conditions of work of that part of the labour force that works outside of formal labour market structures where core labour standards are applied. This is an important issue, due to the large number of people involved and also due to key gender dimensions that arise.

In this paper we explore these issues, focussing on the key newly industrialised countries of India, China, Indonesia and Brazil. We argue that the focus of policy should be on non-core standards; and that more needs to be done, specifically: promoting the organisation of informal sector workers; improving the physical security of – and access to – work, and the government acting as an “employer of last resort”.

1. INTRODUCTION: CORE VS. NON-CORE STANDARDS

As the shortcomings of the dominant Washington Consensus approach to economic development and well-being become ever more apparent, there has been increasing concern expressed at the pitfalls of globalisation and the activities of multinational corporations. As such, a renewed emphasis has been placed upon the role of labour standards (Ghose 2003).

For several decades certain labour standards have been incorporated into national laws, international laws/conventions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) asserts fundamental rights and freedoms to which everyone is entitled, without “distinction of any kind”. The rights proclaimed for employees include the right to work, free choice of employment, just/favourable conditions of work, equal pay for equal work, just/favourable remuneration, and the right to form/join trade unions (though there is no right to bargain collectively). The 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) commits state signatories to uphold these rights and imposes general obligations to ensure the enjoyment of rights and to prevent non-state abuses. The state may, however, fulfil economic,

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social and cultural rights progressively, depending on available resources, as, for instance, in the case of the right to work and the right to an adequate standard of living (Ewing 2004).

Some of these rights have been incorporated in parallel conventions of the International Labour Organization, setting out what are classed as core labour standards that all governments are supposed to implement (though not all do). The 1998 ILO Conference of Member States unanimously adopted the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, thereby accepting the obligation to pursue these principles and rights by virtue of their membership of the ILO, even if they have not ratified the Conventions. These core labour standards are summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: ILO’s Core Conventions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Convention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Forced Labour</td>
<td>1930</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize</td>
<td>1948</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining</td>
<td>1949</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Equal Remuneration</td>
<td>1951</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Abolition of Forced Labour</td>
<td>1957</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Discrimination Convention (Employment and Occupation)</td>
<td>1958</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Minimum Age</td>
<td>1973</td>
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These are often grouped in three or four categories (referred to as “basic principles” of the ILO), namely,

- Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining (Nos. 87 and 98);
- Freedom from forced labour and discrimination in the labour market (Nos. 29, 100, 105, and 111);
- Abolition of child labour (Nos. 138, 182).

These three categories acquired additional prominence because of their significance for negotiations on international trade and the related protracted dispute between developed and developing countries on the question of compulsory labour standards (ILO 2000). The latter were urged by many rich countries who wished these to be included as a so-called social clause both at the ILO and, more significantly, at the GATT Uruguay Round negotiations. This issue goes back at least as far as the efforts of industrial countries in the 1950s to negotiate a Havana Charter (in the event unsuccessful) that would regulate trade between countries by establishing an international trade organization (de Castro 1995). However, developed country support for mandating adherence to core labour standards in relation to trade has waxed and waned, partly in response to the arguments put forward by trade unions and development economists in the South.

A major related issue was that the US regarded the ILO as having no teeth, therefore arguing that the World Trade Organization should monitor adherence to core labour
standards as a condition for international trade. However, in the last few years, the world has implicitly adopted the ILO’s non-coercive stance regarding the implementation of core labour standards, rather than the proposed coercive approach under the WTO.

In addition to core labour standards, there are a number of other desired standards concerning the terms and conditions of work, relating to the notion of “decent work”. These ‘substantive’ standards include working hours, decent wages, maternity protection, decent and safe working conditions, including sanitary arrangements and child care facilities, among other things. Some of these so-called non-core labour standards—for example, “just and favourable remuneration and conditions of work”—are included in the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

However, it is important to observe the reversal of the historical order in which labour rights were recognized in advanced countries. In the UK for example, early efforts to improve labour standards focussed on gaining legislation to eliminate the worst forms of child and female labour (chimney sweeping and labour in coal mines, respectively). It took many decades of workers struggle before the right to form trade unions and to bargain collectively became recognized. As the English social historian E. P. Thompson observed in relation to the English working class: “The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making” (Thompson 1963).

The main purpose of this paper is to argue that this debate needs to move on from its current focus on core labour standards and must recognize the nature of labour markets and the condition of labour in the world today. The intellectual basis for these labour standards was that they were largely the product of European influence at the ILO during the early post-war period, when social democracy began to assert itself. In practical terms, these standards are more easily applied in labour markets of developed countries where there are both workers’ and employers’ organizations, and generally high levels of formal sector employment - backed up by varying degrees of social protection (and better enforcement capabilities) amidst a modern welfare state.

However, the condition of the vast majority of the world’s labour force stands in stark contrast. While core labour standards remain an important objective for this majority, we argue that it is as (if not more) appropriate to focus on improving non-core standards (substantive standards). These are crucial to improving the livelihoods and wellbeing of many millions of workers worldwide. To put it another way, our emphasis is on promoting non-core standards in the informal sector, which absorbs the bulk of the labour force in developing countries. We also urge governments to promote full employment through schemes in which the government acts as employer of last resort.

The remaining discussion is organized as follows. In Section 2 we present a statistical profile and brief comment on the condition of labour worldwide. Section 3 follows with a focus on employment and informal labour in four newly industrialized countries (NICs)—India, China, Indonesia and Brazil. Section 4 then carries forward the analysis of Section 3 by looking at the implications for policy and practice; here
we argue that governments need to: do more to encourage the organization of informal sector workers; ensure adequate and safe transportation to work; and act as an “employer of last resort” when needed.

However, in advocating a role for government, we are not just referring to formal government policy per se. There are many groups in the public, private and volunteer sectors – local, national and international – that can work alongside government to better improve the conditions of work (and governments should not hinder such attempts, but rather, actively encourage them). In this analysis we draw on contemporary experience (and good practice) from the selected NICs.

2. GLOBAL LABOUR MARKET TRENDS

In this section we examine global trends in the labour market, focusing on unemployment rates, the proportion of workers earning incomes at or below poverty thresholds, and the incidence of vulnerable work. In 2007, nearly half of all workers were deemed to be in vulnerable employment (see Table 2). Though Table 2 reveals a slight improvement in the indicators between 1997 and 2007, this improvement is in the process of reversal due to the current global economic downturn.

Indeed, the ILO reported in late May 2009 (Soros News) that the global labour force is expanding at an average rate of 1.6 per cent a year - equivalent to around 45 million annual new entrants, whilst global employment growth decreased to 1.4 per cent in 2008 and is expected to drop further in 2009, to between 0 and 1 per cent. This implies an increase in global unemployment. Indeed, the ILO projected that by the end of 2009, between 210 million to 239 million persons would be unemployed around the world. If this occurs, the global unemployment rate would be between 6.5 and 7.4 per cent—representing an increase of 0.5-1.4% in the world unemployment rate between 2007 and 2009, given the 2007 data in Table 2. Such projections rest on estimates of between 39 and 59 million additional unemployed persons since 2007, though the actual figures will depend on the effectiveness of fiscal expenditures and improvements in the financial sector, among other things. In addition to rising unemployment, the ILO projections also indicate that 200 million workers are at risk of joining the ranks of people living on less than US$2 per day between 2007 and 2009 (ibid.).

Another cause for concern is the likelihood that the global downturn will increase the proportion of vulnerable employment as a share of total employment. In fact, the ILO estimates that this figure could rise as high as 53% in 2009 (ILO 2009). Vulnerable employment refers to contributing family workers or own-account workers who are less likely to benefit from safety nets that guard against loss of incomes during economic hardship (ILO 2009). These groups are part of the informal sector.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Global Employment Trends, 1997 and 2007</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>World Unemployment (millions)</td>
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</table>
Informal employment is commonplace in the developing world; one-half to three-quarters of non-agricultural work in developing countries falls under the category of informal employment (ILO 2002). Informal sector workers can be owner operators, self-employed, or wage workers; they can be temporary or part-time workers, casual day labourers, contract workers, industrial outworkers, or unregistered workers (ILO 2002). They are located in rural and urban areas, and can be members of a variety of demographic groups—though women constitute the majority of informal sector workers in most developing countries (ibid.). It is also worth noting (see Figure 1) that the highest-paid informal sector jobs (micro-entrepreneurs/employers) are predominantly held by men, while the lowest-paid informal sector jobs (industrial outworkers and home-workers) are predominantly held by women (Chen 2003).

**Figure 1: Informal Sector Employment by Average Earnings and Gender Segmentation**

![Informal Sector Employment Diagram]

Source: Chen (2003).

Informal sector workers are generally not covered under labour law, yet they support capitalist economies by providing a reserve army of cheap labour to sustain profitable economic activity. Because of this contribution, policymakers often
encourage informal sector work, referring to it as the birthplace of small- and medium-enterprises (SMEs) (Wulandari 2008: 2), a so-called structuralist view which equates informality to opportunity for entrepreneurship (see also Debrah 2007, for a critical discussion). However, this representation disguises the fact that informal work is often highly intensive, undertaken in vulnerable working conditions, lacking in job security and as such, hardly entrepreneurial (ibid). Therefore, whilst informal workers contribute to the health of the economy at large, they are themselves unprotected.

It is worth noting that the predominance of informal labour today has been linked to ideas emerging from the Washington Consensus. The original ‘Washington Consensus’ was well-known for its focus on financial and trade liberalization, privatization and deregulation. However, Rodrik (2001) argues that the scope of the ‘consensus’ has evolved and expanded over time. Amongst other things, the ‘augmented Washington Consensus’ has intensified the push for labour flexibility (at least until the current world economic crisis), thus increasing the potential scale for non-core / informal work.

3. LABOUR MARKET TRENDS IN INDIA, CHINA, BRAZIL, AND INDONESIA

Here we continue the above analysis by focussing specifically on labour market trends in the key NICs of China, India, Indonesia and Brazil. As large economies taking on an increasingly important role in the world economy (as recipients of FDI and exporters of manufactured product), it is of some importance to study them in their own right. While Table 3 (below) reveals that more males than females are economically active in all four selected NICs, the difficulty of measuring informal labour in developing countries means that female labour in particular is likely to be undercounted. This is because more women than men tend to work in the informal sector.

Table 3. Key Labour Market Indicators, Brazil, China, India and Indonesia: 2000, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>% Economically Active Population (15+)</th>
<th>% Unemployment Rate (15+)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>81.9</td>
<td>81.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>59.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>79.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>70.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>81.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>86.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes:
1. Data for Brazil is for 2001 and 2006.
2. Data for unemployment rates in China is for urban areas only.
Informal labour plays a significant role in all four countries. Even though India, for example, has achieved impressive economic growth during the last two decades, approximately 93% of the total workforce in India is estimated to be in the informal sector (including informal agricultural labor, informal non-agricultural enterprises, and informal non-agricultural and non-enterprise labor) (ILO 2002: 34). Estimates from many organizations suggest that at least half of all work in Indonesia takes place in the informal sector (Sarkar and Kumar 2002: 77-78). In Brazil, estimates of informal sector employment as a share of total employment range from 40-63% (Henley, Arbsheibani, and Carneiro 2009). In China, the 2004 Economic Census suggested that approximately 40% of individual business operators were not registered with industry or commerce administrative bodies.5

Tables 4-7 provide a breakdown of vulnerability indicators for each of the four countries. However, it should be said at the outset that obtaining data on poverty and vulnerable employment for individual countries is problematic, with data disaggregated by gender particularly difficult to obtain (ILO 2009).

### Table 4: Employment Trends, 1997 and 2007 CHINA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unemployment (millions)</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>5,768</td>
<td>3,031</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>8,300</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unemployment Rate (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Poverty headcount ratio (% population)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>US$1.25 per day PPP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>36.0 (1995)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerable Employment as share of total employment (%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Poverty figures at US$2.00 per day unavailable

### Table 5: Employment Trends, 1997 and 2007 INDIA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Unemployment (millions)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Unemployment (millions)</th>
<th>Female Unemployment (millions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>4,197</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>10,011</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the exception of Indonesia, each country had demonstrated some improvement in reducing the proportion of those in vulnerable employment and/or poverty over the last decade. In particular, China’s success in poverty reduction mirrors the rapid growth of the Chinese economy over the last 10 years. India shows some improvements, but still had a high proportion (42%) of those in poverty in 2007.
2007. Brazil appears the most ‘developed’, having a lower poverty incidence and a lower percentage of workers in vulnerable employment. Indonesia, however, still has two-thirds of workers trapped in vulnerable work (illustrating the persistent and ongoing severe impact of the 1997 financial crisis on the Indonesian economy). As such, a focus on non-core standards makes sense in these four countries, given their high incidence of informal sector work. In the next section we consider how to extend non-core standards; drawing on examples from these countries.

4. **EXTENDING NON-CORE STANDARDS: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The material and analysis in the previous sections indicate that greater emphasis should be placed on promoting the ILO’s ‘substantive’ labour standards. Core labour standards are especially difficult to implement in the informal sector, and in any case are not as relevant to the predicament of labour as non-core standards such as working time, existence of a contract, level of wages, and decent working conditions. Hence, from a practical point of view, core labour standards may not be as important for the vast majority of the world’s people working in the informal sector. In this section, we examine various methods (not all of which rely on formal policymaking) for improving work conditions in developing countries.

4.1. **Promoting the organization of informal sector workers**

Here we consider (and review attempts at) the organization of informal sector workers. The challenge for informal sector workers is not merely one for the formal legislative agenda. Because these workers often “work in isolated or dispersed areas,” they have trouble organizing themselves to support positive change (Wulandari 2008: 1). Since there is often strength in numbers, however, we discuss different methods for organizing these workers, focusing on successful examples in key newly-industrialised-countries.

*Scrap workers in India: Organizing through Adult Education*

In Pune (the second largest city in the state of Maharashtra, after Mumbai), scrap collectors have successfully organized themselves into the Scrap Collectors Union, called Kagad Kach Patra Kaithakari Panchayat (KKPKP). Two groups of workers undertake scrap collecting: waste pickers and itinerant buyers. In Pune, 92% of waste pickers are women and they have a shared cultural and religious background (99% are Matang, Mahar, and Neo-Buddhist) (Wulandari 2008:8). The KKPKP actually emerged from an adult education program in SNDT Women’s University in Pune. The program—Project for the Empowerment of Women Waste Pickers—was designed to “promote critical awareness and lifelong learning among waste pickers”; it focused strongly on the recipients’ personal learning needs, combining a literacy program with a focus on work-related issues (Wulandari 2008:7).

The experience of this program sheds light on some of the challenges of organizing informal sector workers. One challenge to organizing the waste pickers was that they did not conceive of themselves as workers. Why would someone join a union if s/he does not believe s/he is a worker? By accepting the (erroneous) definition of a worker as a formal sector worker, informal workers themselves unintentionally
contribute to the (suboptimal) status quo. Therefore, cultivating a collective worker identity among the waste pickers was an important goal of the program. There were “two collective identities involved in this process. The first one was the identity of informal labour as oppressed workers to encourage waste pickers to embrace the values to fight. The second one was an occupational identity to encourage waste pickers to demand their rights from official government authority” (Wulundari 2008:9).

One strategy that helped the waste pickers conceptualize themselves as oppressed workers was to refer to the caste and religion commonly shared by nearly all of the waste-pickers (recall that nearly all are Mahar and Neo-Buddhist). For example, the architect of the Indian constitution, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, was a leader of the Dalits (untouchables) and “a hero to the Mahar caste and Neo-Buddhists” (Ibid), often referring to the Dalits as the oppressed peoples. Therefore, oppression was not a new concept to the waste pickers; it had just never been applied to their work before. Since the waste pickers already shared a collective identity based on caste and religion, they were able to build upon this to develop an expanded sense of collective identity as oppressed workers. The program was also able to encourage a collective occupational identity by showing the waste pickers how influential their contributions were to the management of urban solid waste (previously, the waste pickers had considered their activities in terms of individual-level benefits).

As a result of the educational program, the KKPKP was established in 1993. It is relatively small (about 5,000 members today) but has achieved several goals:

- Educational aid for the children of waste pickers
- A credit co-operative governed by scrap collectors
- Inclusion in the Regulation of Unemployment and Welfare Act in Maharashtra
- Free medical insurance premium for all KKPKP members within Pune

*Home-based workers in Indonesia: Organizing through existing Union-NGO networks*

Since 1990, the informalization of the Indonesian workforce has grown as many factories have relocated away from urban areas, causing many factory workers to shift from permanent factory employment to informal work (Wulandari 2008) – a process accelerated during the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis and subsequent downturn in the manufacturing/export sector (De Ruyter and Warnecke 2008). In fact, a survey conducted by the NGO Humanika in 2003 indicates that in Surabaya (the East Javan capital), “73.17% of home-based workers used to work in factories” (Wulandari 2008:21). Home-based work generally results in a much lower level of earnings compared to factory work; therefore, Indonesians transitioning from a permanent factory job to home-based work must often work two or three jobs to earn equivalent income.

Organized labour was repressed in Indonesia during the Suharto regime. In fact, the Serikat Buruh Regional labour union (SBR) developed a close association with the NGO Humanika primarily as a cover for the workers’ movement. However, even after the regime’s 1998 demise, at which time workers dared to be more open about
their resistance, the SBR-Humanika partnership remained. The SBR represents home-based workers who used to work in factories, and developed an interesting strategy of organization in the last decade.

Organizing this group of workers is challenging because there is no one place to locate them; they no longer work in a factory. Furthermore, there are differences between informal workers who used to work in factories and those that did not. However, SBR believed it would be easier to organize those with a shared occupational experience such as factory work.

First, the SBR approached the local women’s organization in Surabaya (Walandari 2008). This organization (Pembinaan Kesejahteraan Keluarga, or PKK) was the Family Welfare Organization. Since the PKK aimed to address issues of women’s subordination, the SBR felt it was a good fit to include issues of labour organization for female home-based workers. While this has not led to legal changes in protection for these workers, the organization has facilitated the development of village savings programs and collective hygiene education. The SBR also worked to organize street vendors (predominantly male), who were dismissed from factory work. Organizing these workers has perpetuated new forms of organizing based on current occupation, for example, among street vendors who have never worked in factories. Street vendors were then able to negotiate for a regular space in which to work.

Finally, SBR-Humanika set up an organization in 2002 called the Indonesia Labour Movement Syndicate (SGBI), which “was intended to formalize the union-NGO network at national level as it also involved other trade unions that worked closely with NGOs. In East Java, at provincial level…the East Java Labour Council (DJBT) was set up as a part of SGBI” (Walandari 2008:23). SBR belongs to both DJBT and SGBI, but the former focuses on provincial changes while the latter focuses on national changes. In this way, a local movement has spread across Indonesia.

**Domestic workers in Brazil: Organizing through religious and non-union associations**

Domestic work is an important aspect of informal labour in Brazil; more poor women work as domestic workers in Brazil than in almost any other Latin American country (Zepeda 2008). Therefore, the organization of domestic workers is of particular interest here. In Recife (North-eastern Brazil), the domestic workers’ movement began as a Catholic movement. In 1960, the Young Catholic Workers movement began to mobilize domestic workers, assisted by aid from the Catholic Church (Anderfuhreren 1994). The movement began informally, involving simple meetings to discuss shared experiences in the field. This cultivated a sense of solidarity, however, and the first formal march by domestic workers took place in Recife in 1963. However, military action in 1964 stopped the movement in its tracks, arresting supporters and participants.

The next twenty years were characterized by the struggle to formally organize. Though the first registered association of domestic workers was formed in 1970, legal requirements made the process difficult; forming a registered association required 20 signed records of service (uncommon in this line of work). In 1978, a national coordinating body was initiated with representatives from each state’s association of domestic workers. However, in Brazil registered associations “have no
representative power before the law,” while trade unions do have such power (Anderfuhrren 1994: 19). During the early- to mid-1980s, then, the most significant achievement of the national council was to improve the national organization of domestic workers—not to affect labour legislation. Because of this, the movement was dominated in the 1980s by a push for union status, and in 1989, the Union for Women Domestic Employees (UWDE) was formally established as a trade union. Though being a trade union meant that UWDE could work with the Ministry of Labour, in the early 1990s most regional branches of UWDE decided to join forces with larger trade union confederations, in hopes of gaining more voice. As discussed in Anderfuhrren (1994:20), today domestic workers in Brazil share most of the same rights as other workers:

- The right to organize
- A minimum wage
- A thirteen month’s wage
- Weekly time off with pay
- Annual holidays
- Maternity leave
- Notice of termination
- A retirement pension

However, these rights cannot be attributed to UWDE efforts (after its formal unionization). Instead, most of these rights were achieved through the efforts of the pre-union domestic workers associations, coupled with the strong leaning of the Brazilian government towards social protection and social rights after the end of the military regime in 1985 (Vidal 2008). Today, one of the greatest challenges to UWDE efforts is the lack of funding and dearth of regular dues-paying members (Vidal 2008; Anderfuhrren 1994).

**Summary**

It is possible to organize informal sector workers from a variety of starting points, including educational institutions, religious institutions, and existing union-NGO partnerships. Whilst the starting point may differ, each example reveals the importance of some sense of shared identity in the initial stages of the organization process. This shared identity need not be one of occupational identity, though it certainly can be. However, even with a collective identity in place, successfully organizing informal sector workers requires an understanding of several potential barriers to this endeavour. The country examples in this section illustrate some of these challenges: worker and cultural identity issues, documentation requirements, military and/or governmental opposition of worker movements, among others. However, overcoming these challenges can benefit informal sector workers in many ways, from being able to negotiate collectively on matters such as work conditions and the price of inputs and outputs, to achieving a measure of empowerment for women working in the informal sector.

**4.2. Improving physical security and access to work**
Another factor affecting the labour force is the physical access to jobs. On average, road accidents occur twenty times more frequently in developing countries than in developed ones—so safety issues abound for men and women in these areas (World Bank 2006). Until recently, it was assumed that improvements to transport infrastructure and services such as roads and buses benefit men and women equally. However, there are several important gender issues to consider in the transport sector.

According to a World Bank study, “women and men often have substantially different patterns of demand for transport services and... interventions in the transport sector usually did not respond well to the needs of women” (Riverson et al. 2005:3). In rural areas, efforts to build motorized roads “often do not benefit rural women, who mainly work and travel on foot around the village” (World Bank 2007a:1). In rural and urban areas, women are more dependent than men on public transportation (United Nations 2009). However, even in urban areas, most public transportation is geared towards peak-hour commuter service. This does not fit the needs of most women, due to women’s disproportionate demand for off-peak-hours transportation. Informal sector jobs often operate at different hours than formal sector jobs. Furthermore, since women bear most responsibility for unpaid household labour, including picking up children from school, women need a greater variety of transportation routes each day—not exclusively a commuter service (World Bank 2006). When these factors are taken into consideration, it is clear that not all transport projects facilitate women’s access to work.

Women may also lack adequate transport due to cultural barriers. In some countries, it is not considered acceptable for women to ride alongside men on public transportation, so women are effectively home-bound unless they are wealthy enough to have access to private transportation. This, of course, limits the range of income-earning activities for many women.

A decade ago, the World Bank established a Gender and Transport Thematic Group; this group approved grants to 16 developing countries around the world “to conduct planning studies, design pilot projects and conduct evaluations to help integrate gender into transport projects and policies” (World Bank 2002). These studies indicate that there are many ways to improve transport safety and access for women, so that they have better physical access to paid labour. Furthermore, projects can be undertaken at the local, national or international level, using governmental or non-governmental resources.

*Reducing time poverty and improving health in India: The Water Campaign*

In many developing countries, rural women often are responsible for collecting water. Without adequate transportation, this can be very time-consuming and much of the day is spent doing essential household chores. In fact, since head-loading is the most common method of carrying water to the home, women must often make the trip to the well several times per day (Bid, Nanavaty and Patel 1999). This type of ‘time poverty’ places considerable restraints on women’s ability to participate in income-earning ventures. Therefore, transportation to and from the water source (or a way to access water closer to home) is crucial to the improvement of physical
access to work for rural women. Transportation to and from work alone will not help these women if they do not have enough time for a paid job.

In recognition of this problem, the Self Employed Workers Association (SEWA) in India initiated a water campaign in 1995. This campaign focused on two rural, arid districts: Surendrangar and Banaskantha. This association has improved household access to water in these districts by constructing a sizable number of rainwater harvesting tanks (80 in Surendrangar and 60 in Banaskantha) as well as plastic-lined ponds in Banaskantha for water conservation. Women have formed eight watershed collectives in Banakantha and have taken responsibility for repairing these facilities and accounting for all of the water stored there.

While there is no data on paid labour for women in these areas and whether it has changed in response to the water campaign, access to water is of course crucial in order to have healthy workers. A SEWA study notes that “the provision of drinking water is closely linked to the capability of women to enter the labor markets, so that when we try to intervene to link the embroiderers with markets, we find that we have to deal with the Gujarat Water Board for better drinking water schemes for them” (Nanavaty 2000:10).

*Improving physical security in Brazil: Introducing women-only buses and subway cars*

Sexual harassment of women on public transportation vehicles is a major problem in many developing countries. It impacts their mobility and their access to public spaces such as workplaces, parks, cultural and recreational facilities (Khosla 2005). The fear of sexual harassment may discourage some women from commuting to work, thus limiting their options for earned income.

In Goiana, Brazil, sexual harassment became such a problem that in 2006, the city council unanimously approved the creation of a women-only bus service during morning and evening rush hours (Associated Press 2006). Goiana is not the only city to initiate such a plan; Mumbai also has women-only buses (see Matthan 2008). Rio de Janeiro passed a bill reserving some subway cars and commuter rail trains for women after “hundreds of female commuters deluged the state legislature's hot line with complaints about fondlers” (Contreras 2008). The women-only subway cars in Rio de Janeiro circulate all day and are not limited to rush hour periods.

Further research is needed to estimate the effects of women-only public transportation options on women’s perceptions about mobility, personal safety, and their workplace options. The service has been very popular so far in Brazil and Mexico City (another city with women-only subway cars). In fact, Mexico City had to increase its number of women-only vehicles by 20% because there was so much demand (Contreras 2008).

*Improving transport project design in China: Gender-inclusive public participation*

Traditionally, urban transport in China “has traditionally been driven by engineers and policy makers who focus on investments in capital works...[and] on economic efficiency with little attention to ensuring that projects addressed the needs of the intended beneficiaries” (World Bank 2007b). Therefore, improving public participation in the planning process is essential if all groups (including women, children, and the poor) are to benefit from transportation innovations.
Bennett (2007) discusses a five-year project undertaken in the Liaoning Province of China. Financed by the World Bank, this project aimed to determine the public’s main urban transportation concerns and integrate those concerns into the project design. Groups defined by mode of transportation (walkers, bus users, bicycle users, bus drivers, three-wheeled drivers) as well as ‘vulnerable’ groups (poor people, disabled, migrants, and seniors) were recruited to participate, with men and women in each group. In several groups, men and women were separated to give women a higher comfort level in sharing their opinions.

Participants were asked to discuss several aspects of transport, including:

- Trip from home to bus
- Transport efficiency
- Transport safety
- Infrastructure condition
- Transport services
- Urban walking condition
- Urban biking condition

The project led to important insights about gender-differentiated perceptions of their city’s transportation. Compared to men, women were less satisfied with most aspects of transport, and were also much more concerned about transportation safety issues in general.

As a result of this participatory process (which concluded in 2006), dramatic changes were made to the original project proposals. While the original proposals targeted urban road developments and road expansions, the final plan focused on secondary road improvements, traffic management (especially the separation of motor vehicle and non-motor vehicle traffic), and stronger attention to sidewalks and pedestrian needs—including streetlights (Bennett 2007). The implementation phase is currently underway.

**Summary**

The examples above clearly illustrate that providing physical security and access to work is not just a matter of constructing more roads, nor is it simply a matter of cost. Even though road availability and the transportation cost are important issues, there are many others to consider as well, including transportation safety for all (even those on foot or non-motorized vehicles). Furthermore, there is a strong gender component; time poverty and widespread sexual harassment can affect women’s abilities and willingness to undertake paid work outside of the home. Therefore, it is important to realize that availability of transportation does not mean that transportation is accessible.

**4.3 The government as an employer of last resort**

Finally, we argue that the government should step in and be an employer of last resort. This is even more pressing now in the current context of a world-wide economic downturn that stands to impinge severely on developing countries in
particular. As such, international agencies and national governments should give top priority to job creation.

It is interesting to recall that the preamble text of the old GATT states explicitly that the purpose of the organization was not to promote free trade for its own sake, but rather to regard trade as a means of attaining full employment. As previously noted, in the 1980s and 1990s under the influence of the Washington Consensus neo-liberal ideology, international agencies (particularly the Bretton Woods institutions and the GATT/WTO) eschewed full employment and emphasized labour market flexibility. This paper urges that full employment not only be an ILO priority but should also be a top concern of the IMF and the World Bank. In more practical terms, labour ministers should have as much influence over the general direction of the macroeconomic policies of governments as do finance ministers.

Hence, there is need for urgent recognition by governments of their obligation to provide decent work for all those who wish to have it. If the private sector (including formal and informal enterprises and the rural sector) is unable to provide sufficient jobs, the government should act as employer of last resort. The April 2009 G20 Summit gave legitimacy to the idea that governments have a responsibility to maintain or generate employment through fiscal stimulus initiatives and the establishment of specific work creation programmes. The challenge facing policymakers in developing countries is not limited to generating employment for the openly unemployed, but extends to increasing opportunities for decent work for the large numbers of underemployed and self-employed (for whom income from paid work is generally their only form of social protection).

The notion of "government as employer of last resort" now refers to a wide range of policies and actions. In recent years, a number of countries including Argentina, India, and South Africa have introduced employment guarantee schemes of varying degrees of ambition and with varying objectives that provide valuable lessons regarding operational matters and that also highlight gender issues. Schemes that generate employment can also, by increasing social capital, be used instrumentally to reduce women’s unpaid labour burden while also freeing women to engage to a greater extent in paid work (Zammit 2008). Below, we outline two examples of such schemes.

*India’s Employment Guarantee Schemes*

In 2005, the Indian government enacted a bill for a National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which was based loosely upon legislation passed in the state of Maharashtra in 1977. This legislation basically guaranteed (manual) work to all adults over the age of 18 in rural areas at a given wage (see Wray 2007 for a discussion). The programme was financed entirely out of state expenditures and during 1993, “created 148 million person days of work, with expenditures accounting for 10-14 % of the state’s total development budget” (Ibid. 33, from Dev 1995). The programme is decentralised and run at local/community level, facilitating maximum responsiveness to local needs and also enabling the participation of voluntary organisations.

Evidence suggests that this programme has been pivotal in reducing rural poverty, improving agricultural production (through infrastructure provision), breaking down
class prejudices and stabilising family incomes. Moreover, studies suggest it promoted employment for women; and has reduced unemployment and underemployment by anywhere within 10 to 30% in the areas covered (Ibid.).

*Employment Guarantees in China?*

Highlighting the ability of local governments to support “steady production of manufactures” and provide job training, the Chinese Vice Premier recently stated that “employment and people’s livelihood should be guaranteed” (China View 2009a). While more time is needed to assess whether this becomes formal policy, it is worth noting that the National Human Rights Act of China (2009-10) already guarantees employment for the disabled (China View 2009b).

5. **CONCLUSION**

This paper has explored the issue of core vs. non-core labour standards in developing countries, with a focus on the important emerging economies of China, India, Indonesia and Brazil. We argue that more attention should be shifted to non-core standards that facilitated the growth of waged employment. Furthermore, rather than promoting trade union organisation and labour market regulation in the formal sector *per se*, governments should focus on the informal sector—specifically, organizing informal sector workers, improving access and safety to paid work, and finally, acting as an employer of last resort. A focus on the informal sector would also improve female participation in the labour market.

**REFERENCES**


