

▶ Experiencing social dialogue: Reinforcing the capacity of workplace committees to deliver sound labour relations in garment factories

The Workplace Coordinating Committee (WCC) and joint Occupational Safety and Health committees (J-OSH) are central institutions under the Myanmar Labour Law as they are designed to enable social dialogue to improve working conditions, and to prevent and resolve disputes between workers and their representatives and management. Recognising this, the ILO's Garment Industry Project (ILO-GIP) has developed and delivered three different training programmes to enable WCC and J-OSH representatives in its participating factories to move toward more harmonious industrial relations and safer workplaces.

Building the capacity of basic labour organizations¹ (BLOs), workers' representatives and management representatives to engage constructively in social dialogue is the core mandate of the ILO-GIP. Accordingly, the project has developed and delivered:

- ▶ a 15-day training programme on social dialogue emphasizing workplace cooperation and collective bargaining;
- ▶ a 5-day training programme on improving occupational health and safety at work; and
- ▶ a 3-day training programme on preventing and addressing sexual harassment at work.

The ILO-GIP trained the BLO, workers' representatives and management representatives in its 20 participating factories. Realizing that there were initially relatively limited and different levels of knowledge and trust between workers and management representatives, the ILO-GIP opted at times to train workers and management separately before organising joint WCC and J-OSH committee training.

The ILO-GIP partnered up with Capacity Building Initiative (CBI) to deliver its social dialogue training, with Converge Safety to deliver its OSH training, and with Care International Myanmar to offer its prevention of sexual harassment training. With regard to the social dialogue and OSH training, the ILO-GIP invested time and resources in, first, building the capacity of its local training service providers on the basis of the ILO-developed curriculum.

This case study is based on the experiences of ten WCC members from two of the ILO-GIP participating factories. An equal number of management and workers' representatives participated in the workshop. The participants had all attended ILO-GIP sponsored training.

¹ Factory level trade unions under the Myanmar Labour Law



► Changes in attitudes and practices

Promoting occupational safety and health

Participants said that, after attending the OSH training, they were better able to identify and address safety hazards in their factories. This included an improved awareness and appreciation that even a small hazard can lead to a dangerous situation for workers over time. This has also led to improvements in the structure and effectiveness of J-OSH committees within factories. Equally, the training has increased support for the use of safety equipment in their factories, as a mean of last resort.

“During the training, we learned in depth about OSH guidelines. Now, we are planning to reform our OSH committee by making sure to include one representative from every department in this factory.”

One of the workers’ representatives noted that, since the training, the BLO in their factory now actually receives many suggestions from workers about improving safety:

“It is like having several eyes around the factory. It is easy to hear the voice of workers and get the information from the ground level very rapidly.”

A management representative also reported that worker feedback on safety issues had increased since the ILO-GIP training:

“As the workers attended awareness sessions, we got a lot of feedback from them. They reported to us which workplace was unsafe. This means the management team gets to know where we need to support and maintain safety. We realised that there are still gaps in implementing occupational safety and health in our factory.”

Preventing and addressing sexual harassment

The training on sexual harassment was well received by all participants. They said that, before the training, they did not have sufficient knowledge on these topics, but now they are much more aware of how to identify and respond to this type of harassment.

“Previously, we thought sexual harassment meant only physically abusive behavior. After attending training, we now understand that it also includes verbal and psychological abuse. We have learned how to prevent this type of discrimination in our workplace.”

CARE Myanmar supported factories to develop sexual harassment policies and provided them with training resource kits.

Promoting social dialogue

After social dialogue training, participants became more aware of the need to listen carefully to others. In the past, they said they were eager to talk first and often responded to problems quickly with anger or frustration.

“Before, we did not try to find cause of problem but just blamed each other. Now, we discuss more openly and try to find the solution together. We can perform dispute resolution step-by-step, systematically.”

Now, they are committed to trying to be more friendly and open when talking to others, and making an effort to listen to their concerns. Participants said this approach makes it much easier to resolve disputes when they arise.

“Our listening skills have improved. Normally, I am talkative and not interested in listening to other people! I was always anxious to speak and be heard. Now, I practice listening to the other person. I consider the reason why they are coming to me with a problem, even though I may not agree with everything they are saying. I try to find the cause of the disagreement or dispute.”

Participants also said they learned useful information about the requirements for collective bargaining and how to approach it. They have since applied this training knowledge in practice, especially in negotiating agreements between an employer and workers.

“The role of management team members is important, especially in foreign-owned factories. They have a responsibility to be balanced and fair because they occupy a position between the employer and workers. Social dialogue training teaches us those things, so it is useful in practice and the situation has definitely improved.”

Participants said that the knowledge and skills from the training courses have enabled them to hold more organised and effective WCC meetings.

“We are able to handle cases in such a way that we can take big issues and make them small issues. And we can make the small issues disappear altogether!”

And the social dialogue training has proved to be useful to participants not only in the workplace, but also in their personal lives.

“We learned that we can improve the way we negotiate, not only in the workplace, but also in our everyday life. In our culture, we don’t usually negotiate with each other among family members. Younger people have to listen to elder people’s words. Sons and daughters dare not complaint to their parents. Actually, we should encourage the younger generation to learn negotiation skills too!”

Building trust through joint training

During joint training sessions, the management team and workers' representatives got a chance to work together and get to know one another better. The participants admitted they are now actually very fond of joint training. They said it has provided them with a valuable opportunity to learn more about each other's attitudes and personalities. As a result, they now trust each other more. They have improved their workplace relationships and formed lasting friendships. This has made communication between management and workers' representatives easier and allows them to call on each other for support when necessary.

"All the training topics were relevant to our needs. The management team and worker representatives have become friendly with each other and communication has improved."



Perceived strengths of the project

- ▶ Training topics and objectives were excellent. The trainers provided a wide variety of tools and teaching methods. It was easy to memorise information when the trainers concluded the whole day's lecture by using cartoon pictures to summarise what had been taught.
- ▶ Participants were very enthusiastic about the benefits of joint training sessions where the management team and workers' representatives got a chance to work together more closely. They said this helped them build trust with each other and improved their working relationships.
- ▶ Participants also noted that their individual self-confidence had increased due to the knowledge they gained from the training; and that this had improved their effectiveness at work.

"The social dialogue, collective bargaining and legal awareness topics were really great. Trainers taught us not to use the word 'request', but instead to use 'negotiate'. We learned that brand companies also don't want to work with factories that have strikes and labour unrest. Before that training, we didn't know this kind of information. We just asked for what we wanted. Now we consider what will benefit both sides."

Perceived gaps in the project

- ▶ Occasionally, training was conducted in the ILO training room in Yankin Township. Participants identified some logistical issues with this training venue. They said the venue was too far from their factories, so it was inconvenient for them to attend – they were sometimes late and therefore missed some of the training. Providing transport to and from this training venue, or securing a more convenient training location, may help address this issue in the future.

- ▶ Some concerns were raised about the short-term impact on production and productivity due to investing in ILO-GIP training for workers. One participant noted that, "while it is true that workers increase their knowledge level, there is not always an obvious improvement in productivity."
- ▶ After OSH training, it was noted that some employees became unduly fearful of potential hazards in the workplace. Some participants suggested that changes should be made to the content in this training so as to ensure that workers were more likely to respond to hazards appropriately, according to the assessed level of risk and the controls that are in place.
- ▶ Participants said they would like to receive more pamphlets and posters to help share training information with coworkers and/or subordinates in their factories. These types of communication materials could be very helpful in multiplying the reach and impact of training content within a participating factory at a relatively low cost.
- ▶ Reflecting on one of the strengths of the training, participants suggested that in the future all the training sessions should be received jointly by both management and workers' representatives, instead of sometimes being delivered separately.
- ▶ Some participants said they lost their chance to attend training when they were busy in their factories and couldn't spare the time. They acknowledged that it is difficult to schedule training to accommodate everyone, but said they would appreciate more flexibility to be able to reschedule missed training sessions.
- ▶ For sexual harassment complaints, participants pointed out that it is not always possible to dismiss the perpetrator because the wording in their employment contract recommends to only issue a warning. While CARE Myanmar supported factories to develop sexual harassment policies, factories may need further assistance and encouragement to adopt less tolerance of this kind of behavior and strengthen possible disciplinary consequences.

Looking to the future

Working together to achieve goals

The participants said they have decided to negotiate between employers and workers using social dialogue for a better relationship and to help achieve business and workers' goals. They recognise that brands definitely prefer to work with factories that are not involved in labour disputes and unrest – and this is an incentive to prioritize negotiation when there is an issue in a factory.

Reducing sexual harassment

Participants would like to see stronger policies to reduce sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace, and to implement robust grievance mechanisms for complaints based on leading practices, both in their own factories and across the garment sector.

Diving deeper into training topics

Across all the case studies, participants expressed a strong desire for further training to improve the productivity of factories and enhance working conditions. In this case

study, participants said they would like the opportunity to attend additional in-depth training about the legal rights of workers, dispute resolution methods, tackling discrimination and OSH topics.

Engaging top management

The participants said that sometimes it was difficult to apply knowledge from the ILO-GIP training because there is insufficient interest or support from top management. They would like top management personnel to participate actively in developing and implementing policies and to support their initiatives.

“It would be really effective if we could apply all the training knowledge in practice in all factories. If so, it is certain that we can create a peaceful workplace and increase productivity.”



“Improving labour relations for decent work and sustainable development in the Myanmar garment industry” project (ILO-GIP). The ILO-GIP aimed to reduce poverty and empower women in Myanmar by improving labour relations, social dialogue and gender equality in the garment industry. The project received funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), H&M and Marks and Spencer. The project ran from July 2016 to May 2020. For more information, please visit <http://bit.ly/ilo-gip>