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Threads of Labour in the Global Garment Industry

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Introduction

An estimated 40 million workers, most of them women, are employed in the global garment industry. The industry is worth at least US$350 billion (£190 billion) and is expanding year by year (de Jonquières 2004). Clothing production is a major source of employment in many poor countries in the South, and, as such, the industry *could* play an important role in social and economic development on a very large scale. For it to do so, however, there needs to be a massive reconfiguration of the distribution of wealth and power in the industry. Contemporary trends in the organisation of production, reinforced by the re-regulation of the global economy, have made it very difficult for workers to organise and/or to improve their conditions of work.

The women workers upon whom the garment industry depends for its wealth are largely invisible, increasingly distanced from the major brand-name retailers in the industry by complicated chains of subcontracted production. The industry generates immense wealth for those at the top of the corporate hierarchy, while many millions of women are forced to make our clothes in poor conditions, with low pay, forced overtime and insecure hours of work. At present, they are scarcely able to organise at their own workplaces, let alone find the power and resources to try to reshape the evolution of the industry at an international scale. In spite of this, there has been widespread resistance by women workers, supported by a growing network of organisations that have developed to educate and empower women workers in the industry and to link their struggles to wider campaigns.
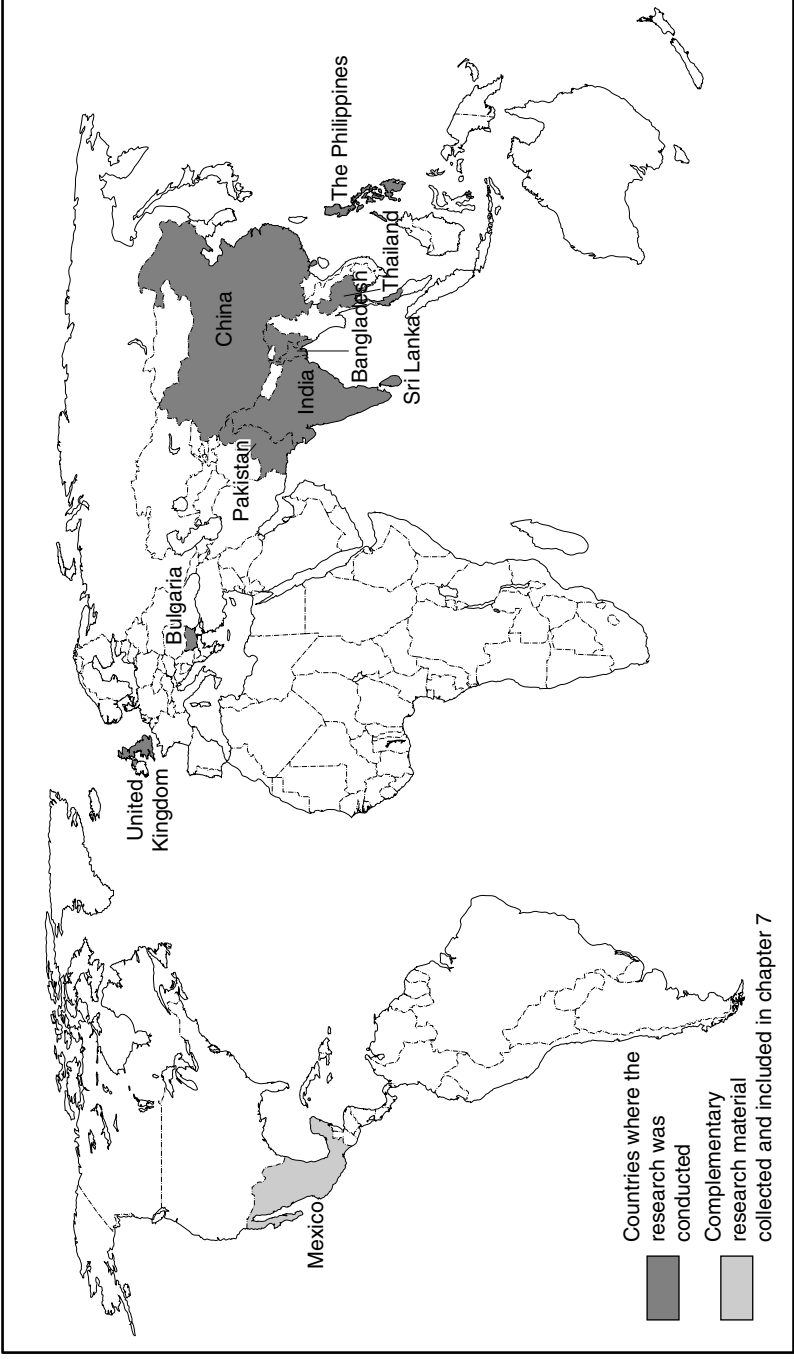
Figure 1.1 Countries where the research was conducted

Women Working Worldwide (WWW) is a small non-governmental organisation (NGO), based in the UK, that has built up a network with some of these women workers' organisations and used these links to inform public campaigning and advocacy work in Europe. WWW supports the rights of women workers in industries supplying the world market with consumer goods such as clothing and footwear, and our particular concern is with the way in which changes in the global economy can have a negative impact on the working lives of women. The aim is to increase awareness of these changes and to support the development of appropriate strategies for defending workers' rights. WWW has been active since 1982 and since then a strong working relationship has been established with workers' organisations throughout Asia, as well as in Africa and Central America (for more information see Chapter 3, this volume). This has enabled the development of collaborative projects on issues of mutual concern. The focus has been on the garment industry, as the most globalised industry employing a majority of women workers.

This book reports on an action research project, co-ordinated by WWW, linking ten local organisations in nine different countries. The research was intended to shed light on the structure of the global garment industry and the scope for resistance in Bangladesh, Bulgaria, China, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the United Kingdom. Each local organisation devised research to meet its own needs, while simultaneously contributing to an international collaboration aimed at better understanding the operation of subcontracted supply chains, their impact on employment and their implications for organising. By sharing experiences across national boundaries, local research projects have coalesced to allow a network of workers' organisations to trace the threads of women's labour in the global economy while also supporting ongoing organising activities at local, national and international scales. In addition, the book includes complementary research conducted by similar workers' rights organisations in Mexico. As such, the book provides an insight into the operation of the global garment industry, from the 'bottom up', in ten different countries across Asia, Europe and Central America (see Figure 1.1).

In this book, the findings from this action research are situated within existing knowledge about current trends in the garment industry and it will be seen that the work corroborates analyses provided by more academically based research. At the same time, the research documented here expands on that knowledge by providing information about more hidden operations at the bottom of supply chains, which became visible

through the development of a relationship of trust between researchers and workers. In this book, 'bottom up' understandings of international subcontracting chains are also viewed within the framework of changing international trade regulations associated with the phase-out of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), which is set to radically change the geographical spread of the industry. The focus of the last part of the book is on the impact of these changes for workers and on the ways in which they and the organisations that support them are challenging the likely negative impact on working conditions. It is argued that the strength and global reach of workers' support networks is such that there are real opportunities for changing the ways in which the industry operates.

By way of an introduction to the book, this chapter provides a brief overview of the development of networked capitalism at the global scale, arguing that networked activism is a necessary response. Over the past decade or so, companies have responded to such activism with the development of new initiatives in corporate social responsibility (CSR). These are outlined, in brief, in the penultimate section of this chapter before we go on to highlight their limitations. In particular, we argue that CSR does not adequately address the impact of subcontracted production and the way that pressure is forced down the chain eroding pay, security and working conditions.

In sum, *Threads of Labour* argues for a renewed focus on the politics and practices of international subcontracting and its impact on workers in garment production and beyond. The book makes the case for tackling the structure of the industry and the way in which subcontracting is managed, rather than focusing on the particularities of production and working conditions in particular parts of the world. Moreover, in the context of the MFA phase out, we argue that there are opportunities to intervene in the evolution of the industry in order to improve the conditions of workers. While we acknowledge that workers are already differentially affected by their position within the hierarchies of international subcontracting chains, and that their power to act is shaped accordingly, we also seek to take an industry-wide approach and consider ways to improve the situation of all those working in apparel production.

Networked Capitalism

Since the 1970s, technological, political and economic developments have conspired to propel a powerful new form of capitalism into view.

Characterised by its networked form and global reach, this model has profound implications for labour. In particular, a growing number of multinational corporations (MNCs) have reconfigured their operations, shedding their in-house production capacity and using subcontracted supply chains to source goods and get them to market. Rather than having their own factories, these companies contract goods and services from their suppliers, retaining only the design, marketing and brand-development functions in-house. Through the management of complex supply chains, leading corporations are able to use geographical differentiation in production costs, legal regulations, trade quotas and labour supply to maximum effect, sourcing their products at the requisite quality and the cheapest price from the most suitable suppliers. Leading MNCs have thus been 'hollowed out' and no longer have to bear the risk of employing large numbers of staff in production. Simultaneously, they have been fuelling competition between subcontractors to keep their own costs low.

In many ways the garment industry is the exemplar of these contemporary trends in global production, and a number of the key texts that have alerted both academics and activists to the implications of globalisation and subcontracted capitalism for the reconfiguration of the world's working class have focused on the clothing industry (see Dicken 2003; Fröbel et al 1980; Gereffi 1994, 1999; Klein 2000; Ross 1997). Low start-up entry costs, labour intensity and the ease of subcontracting all make the garment industry particularly vulnerable to horizontal internationalisation and vertical subcontracting. Although very similar developments have taken place in the electronics industry, auto manufacturing, toy production and the horticultural sector, in many ways, the garment industry has pioneered the new trends (Barrientos et al 2003; Cook et al 2004; Dicken 2003; Harvey et al 2002; Holmes 2004; Raworth 2004).

A commodity or supply chain approach has become dominant in academic accounts and analysis of these patterns of global manufacturing. Gereffi (1994, 1999) has argued that the global apparel industry is now characterised by buyer-driven commodity chains, as distinct from more traditional producer-driven chains. By this he means that garment industry supply chains, which involve a wide range of component inputs and the assembly and distribution of finished goods, are determined by the retailers and brand-name merchandisers. He argues that these buyers create the geo-economy of garment industry chains by having the ability to select suppliers in different parts of the world. In addition, the governance of such chains is characterised by the power of those at

the top. Gereffi (1994:97) uses the term governance to refer to the 'authority and power relationships of the chain.' Subcontracting in buyer-driven chains like those in the garment industry concentrates power with the buyers rather than with those making the goods.

This analytical framework has been used widely, by a range of academics and activists, to make sense of the changing geography of global production. As might be expected, scholars have gone on to add to the model in order to incorporate additional factors and emphases. Indeed, Gereffi and his various co-authors have themselves gone on to explore the ways in which value is produced and captured within commodity chains and the implications of this for industrial policy and efforts to upgrade production capacity in different parts of the world (Gereffi 2003; see also Kaplinsky 2000). In recent years, a number of geographers have used the model to engage with debates about globalised production but have sought to avoid the implied linearity of the focus on chains, replacing it with attention to networks. In his research on global production, for example, Dicken (2004:15; see also Dicken et al 2001) has used the notion of global production networks that are 'a nexus of interconnected functions and operations through which goods and services are produced, distributed and consumed.'

This approach has the advantage of widening the net to include all those who are involved in the processes of commodity production, distribution and consumption. Moreover, it also enables a widening of the analysis of power relations to embrace institutional, labour and civil society actors and their networks, and their potential impact on the nature and location of production, distribution and exchange. As such, a focus on networks can also help to identity points for intervention and political action in particular corporations and industrial sectors. Taking up this agenda, Smith et al (2002:47) argue that labour has been strangely neglected. Workers appear only 'as passive victims as capital seeks cheap labour' in much of the commodity chains literature. Moreover, they go on to suggest that it is important to pay particular attention to labour processes and political organisation in the constitution of commodity chains:

> We would contend that labour process dynamics strongly influence wealth creation and work conditions within any one node and across a chain. In addition, we would argue that organised labour can have an important influence upon locational decisions within and between countries thereby determining in part the geography of activities within a value chain (Smith et al 2002:47).

It is this call for attention to labour that we take up in the rest of this book. Not only has labour been neglected in the analysis of commodity chains, but little work has been done to explore what these new forms of capitalist production mean for labour politics and practice.

Labour movement responses

The development of internationally networked, subcontracted capitalism has had a devastating impact on traditional trade union organisation. Successful collective bargaining requires that there are two parties to bargain: one with (potential) collective strength and the other with the means to concede change (or otherwise). When a company owns a factory there is a direct relationship involved in this negotiation of power: workers and employers need each other, and have to co-operate with each other to some extent at least. But in subcontracted capitalism, those with real power over the contracting process—the ultimate employers of all those involved in any particular supply chain—are generally hidden from workers and located many thousands of miles away overseas. Managers of these supply chains are not directly responsible for the workers and are often less than fully dependent on them for the production of goods. This limits the scope for collective bargaining over the terms and conditions of employment. If workers were to demand improvements that put up costs, it is likely that they would end up losing their jobs, as the contract would be shifted elsewhere.

Indeed, even in cases of workers' protest that have involved international solidarity action, workplace organising has often resulted in the leading brands and retailers reconfiguring their supply chains, to source their goods from elsewhere (see Bonacich 2000; Bronfenbrenner 2000; Cravey 2004; Traub-Werner and Cravey 2002). This model of capitalism increases competitive pressures on suppliers, and even the largest manufacturers are under severe pressure to keep costs as low as they can. While there might be scope for workers in these larger factories to win small improvements in the terms and conditions of work, dramatic improvements will depend on those at the top of the chain.

In this context, the prevailing model of workers' organisation that is focused on creating workplace trade unions needs to be overhauled. Traditional trade unionism makes less sense than it did in the past, not least because organising at the workplace is no longer enough. Manufacturing workers in particular, need to be able to challenge the impact of subcontracting that is controlled beyond their own workplace.

If workers are to bargain to improve their conditions of work, the competitive contracting environment and the unequal power relations on which it rests need to be tackled. This involves understanding where power lies in the subcontracting chain and in particular, how the control exercised by buying companies over prices and production schedules limits the ability of suppliers to respond to workers demands for improvements in pay and conditions. Understanding this geographical differentiation of power in subcontracting chains is critically important if we are to develop new ways to improve workers' conditions of life.

The geographical distance involved in networked capitalism means that workers are not only isolated from their ultimate employers but also from the consumers of their products. Northern consumers never see the workers who make their clothes and rarely make any connection between the prices they pay for fashion items and the quality of life of workers. Furthermore, the producers and consumers involved do not share any political institutions that could be used to put pressure on those at the top of the contracting chain (for an argument that they should, see Monbiot 2003). This contrasts with the public services where services are typically contracted, provided and consumed in a shared geographic location. In the public services sector in North America, subcontracting has similarly been used to keep costs down by reducing pay, eroding working conditions and reducing the quality of service provision. But here living wage campaigns comprising coalitions of community-based groups and trade union organisations have highlighted the impact of subcontracting on workers, and made political demands for the state to regulate, and for employers to act, in order to improve the terms and conditions of those doing the work (see Pollin and Luce 1998; Reynolds 2001; Walsh 2000; Wills 2004). Such campaigns can construct a community of interest between workers, community-based organisations and service users regarding the benefits of higher wages and better conditions, and then deploy their collective political power against the local state and employers to this effect.

Subcontracting thus poses sectorally differentiated political challenges that depend, at least in part, upon geography. Geographical distance needs somehow to be overcome so that a community of interest and solidarity can be constructed that is able to recast the way in which subcontracting in manufacturing takes place. In order to do this, activists will need to develop a sophisticated understanding of the networks of capital involved, where they are grounded, and where political action can have an effect. As Massey (2004:11) puts it:

> Different places are of course constructed as various kinds of nodes within globalisation; they each have distinct positions within the wider power-geometry of the global. In consequence, both the possibilities for intervention in (the degree of purchase upon), and the nature of the potential political relationships to (including the degree and nature of responsibility for) these wider constitutive relations will also vary.

Thus, to organise successfully in the global economy, workers in buyer-driven supply chains need to be part of a new kind of political organisation or set of networks with the necessary political tools to change the way in which capitalism works. Such political organisation requires awareness of geographically differentiated economic and social relations, and the development of transnational links between workers in producing locations and consumers and activists in the key markets and home ground of the main MNCs. This kind of networking activity has developed over the past two decades and has gradually had greater leverage over conditions in the garment industry. Women Working Worldwide sees itself as part of this activity, having developed relationships with emerging organisations of women workers in the industrialising areas of the South since the early 1980s and then sought to build links between them and trade unions and consumer-based organisations in the main markets of Europe. These organisations include the Clean Clothes Campaign (Europe), the Maquila Solidarity Campaign (Canada), and United Students Against Sweatshops (US), all of which have focused their campaigns around labour conditions in the garment industry and have sought in different ways to forge greater transnational solidarity between workers and consumers (for more information, see Chapter 3, this volume, and Johns and Vural 2000).

These and other similar organisations are also engaging in debates about the need for corporations to act responsibly, about the injustices of world trade and the battle against neo-liberal models of political economy. As Heintz (2004:225) argues in his review of the challenges facing the anti-sweatshop activists in North America, it is necessary to: 'contest the current structures of the global economy in ways that expand opportunities and protections for the most vulnerable segments of the world's labor force.' This is the agenda not only of the emerging workers' rights networks but also of the global justice movement more generally, which recognises the plight of workers in international supply chains as one of the manifestations of the devastating impact of current models of globalisation (see Fisher and Ponniah 2003; Monbiot 2003; Wainwright 2003).

Activist organisations have drawn attention to the situation of the women workers upon whom the garment industry depends for its wealth. However, although a body of work on gender and industrialisation has highlighted the plight of women workers in globalised production (Elson and Pearson 1998; Enloe 1990; Perrons 2004; Standing 1989), workers have been largely invisible in academic and policy debates associated with the analysis of commodity chains (for important exceptions, see Barrientos et al 2003; and the research completed by Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), some of which appears in Lund and Nicholson 2004). Moreover, in both academic and activist circles, there is a danger of representing women as exploited and disempowered workers in sweatshop economies with no voice of their own (for more on this critique see Kabeer 2000, 2004). This is despite the fact that new organisations—often located outside the workplace—have developed in most areas of export-oriented production in order to support, educate and empower women workers in the industry. In many cases, these organisations have developed, at least in part, as a result of the difficulties of organising as unions. Where state repression, employer hostility and/or union weakness have made it difficult or impossible to organise in the workplace, such organisations have come to play a similar and/or complementary role (Rowbotham and Mitter 1994). It is critically important that ways are found for activists involved in international campaigns to link effectively with these new organisations and trade unions so that they can work together with workers in voicing demands.

As an example of new forms of women workers' organisation and the context in which such organising takes place, it is valuable to look at a country like Bangladesh, where garment production has transformed the landscape of employment and labour organisation. The industry has grown rapidly since the 1980s and there are now some 3280 factories and some 1.8 million workers (almost all of them women) employed in the sector (Kabeer 2004:15). It is estimated that less than 10% of these workers are engaged in the largest factories in the country's two export processing zones (EPZs) where conditions are most favourable to workers. Most are employed in factories and workshops with less than 500 workers, or are working at home. While some of the workers in these smaller factories and workshops, and some homeworkers, will be sewing clothes for export, they are likely to be engaged in sub-subcontracted operations, with little knowledge of, or relationship to, those at the top of their production network or chain. In the particular context of subcontracted garment production—much of it

informalised—trade unionists in Bangladesh have struggled to establish workplace organisation. But this does not mean that the workers involved are not challenging many aspects of industrial life. Indeed, the organisations that have been developed, such as Karmojibi Nari (a partner in the WWW research work reported in this book; see Chapter 4, this volume), are supporting women workers and working alongside existing trade union organisations. Organisations like Karmojibi Nari reflect the experiences of women workers, highlighting their need for particular forms of workplace and community organisation, as Kabeer (2004:23) explains:

> Such organisations bring with them the recognition that women workers' exercise of agency in the workplace is unlikely to take the form of the heroic mass struggles that make up trade union lore. Engaged in unceasing, individual struggles on a daily basis to combine their domestic chores with waged labour, and to negotiate their way in a world hostile to the idea of women working for pay, their agency in the workplace takes a lower key and less confrontational form...mass collective action through the trade union movement remains a remote possibility.

Likewise, in Central America, it is estimated that trade unions represent less than 1% of *maquila* workers outside Honduras, and it is women workers' organisations that have begun to fill the gap in labour representation (Prieto and Quinteros 2004). Successful initiatives here, as in other parts of the world, have comprised: the establishment of centres to serve those in the key areas of export production; the establishment by faith organisations of trusted support groups for workers; and the provision of routes to connect with workers by social welfare initiatives offering housing, medical, educational and legal advice. As Shaw (2002:54; see also Dannecker 2000; Hale 2004) explains: 'Some of the most successful organising work has been done by women focusing on community issues and issues that connect the community and the workplace—housing, childcare, transportation, safe drinking water, health, environmental protection.' Once such community groups are established, they have shown themselves able to build bridges to any existing trade union organisations and/or to promote new ways of organising that are sympathetic to the circumstances of many women workers.

In this regard, it is significant that such methods are now being developed to organise workers in the North as well as the South. Where workers have not had the opportunity to establish traditional trade union organisations, or where they face too many barriers, new

collective organisations are being developed. In North America, a number of workers' justice centres have been set up to reach, support and mobilise groups of low-paid workers, many of them migrants, who have weak associations with their workplaces and stronger affiliations outside (Gordon 2001; Ness 1998). Likewise, new coalitions of trade unions and community-based organisations are reaching and organising workers beyond the walls of the workplace. This is most evident in the considerable number of community-union living-wage coalitions in the US (see Harvey 2000; Walsh 2000; Wills 2001a, 2004). As the landscape of industrial employment has changed, so new organisations have been created, and this book documents some of the efforts that are being made by a number of these groups as they work, often alongside trade unions, to tackle the power imbalances created by subcontracted production.

Corporate Social Responsibility

It was during the 1980s, when deindustrialisation accelerated in the North, that corporate experiments in subcontracted production really took off. Fuelled by the dominance of neo-liberal conservatives at the helm of the global economy, companies argued that globalisation was good for business, even if it inevitably involved a 'race to the bottom' in labour, social and environmental standards. Indeed, following the principles of laissez-faire economics, the gurus of the new capitalism argued that the favourable investment conditions afforded by cheap labour were an advantage to the developing world, facilitating ever greater development and 'trickle-down' to the poor. By subcontracting production, corporations realised that they could secure greater flexibility and profitability without owning productive capacity as had been necessary in the past.

It was not really until the 1990s that coordinated opposition to this model developed on an international stage. In the wake of a rising tide of protest, witnessed on the streets of Seattle, Genoa and Cancun, social movements began to coalesce in their battle against neo-liberal capitalism. Huge demonstrations, corporate campaigns, the development of social forums and fair-trade initiatives have helped to shift the debate and put the corporations under some pressure to change. In this context, social and environmental responsibility have become 'bottom-line issues', critical to the reputation of a company, the value of its brands,

its attraction and retention of staff, and its success in the market place. Political action has thus created some space in which to manoeuvre against corporations in the interests of labour, community and environmental protection (Adams 2002; Rock 2003).

Faced with organised opposition, a number of companies have been prepared to publicly recognise their responsibilities to those they employ and have developed standards of corporate social responsibility (CSR), to which they and their suppliers are supposed to adhere. Many have adopted corporate codes of conduct that set out minimum standards for conduct along their supply chains (see Diller 1999; Hale 2000a; Hughes 2001; Jenkins et al 2002). In addition, a very small number have negotiated framework agreements with the global union federations, allowing for a more rigorous monitoring and implementation regime (see Miller and Grinter 2003; Wills 2003a). Organisations like the multi-stakeholder Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) in the UK and the Fair Labor Association (FLA) in the US have been valuable in pooling resources and expertise in the implementation, monitoring and verification procedures of codes (see Chapter 3, this volume).

On the face of it then, alliances of political campaigners, trade unionists and consumers appear to have won considerable concessions, bringing at least some corporations to social account. Moreover, by encouraging corporations to develop the policies and practices of CSR, campaigners have strengthened their armoury to defend workers' rights, not least because corporate hypocrisy makes much better news than straightforward bad practice. At the same time, however, the plethora of CSR initiatives has done nothing to alter the facets of the global economy that cause the problem of poor and declining standards of employment in the first place. Intense competition, particularly in highly price-sensitive markets such as those for garments, food and electronics, has not gone away. Nor indeed, has the need to deliver ever greater shareholder value. In pursuit of both, large corporations designing and selling manufactured goods will inevitably look to reduce costs, and subcontracting production is a very effective route to that end.

As the research in this book illustrates, corporate supply chains in the garment industry now involve multiple layers of subcontracted production, some of it visible but much of it hidden. Even if a company has a code of conduct or an exemplary policy to promote CSR, it is extremely difficult to know exactly what is happening on the ground. Workers will often be unaware of who they are working for, and are even less likely to know about any codes of conduct or their implementation (and for details of previous research and activism by WWW on codes of conduct,

see Hale 2000a; Chapter 3, this volume). Thus while WWW has welcomed the development of CSR, corporate codes of conduct, ethical trading initiatives and the opportunity to take part in new attempts to improve labour standards, we remain very cautious about the impact such measures will have. This book highlights the systemic causes of poor working conditions and suggests that subcontracted chains of production and the wider political-economic environment that this kind of production helps to create, means that *most* garment workers, and perhaps an increasing proportion of them, are deprived of good working conditions and rights in employment.

Threads of Labour

The contributors to this volume have all been involved in the work of WWW, as staff or management or as collaborators on particular projects. The book is very much a collective product arising from our networking activities over the past 20 years. In what follows, Chapter 2 explores the global operations of the garment industry in more detail, focusing on the changing nature of supply chains and the key processes that impact on those doing the work. Following this overview, Chapter 3 introduces the research that has taken place in the context of WWW's involvement in what is termed a 'new labour internationalism' that has developed since the 1980s, linking women workers' organisations in poor countries in the South with growing consumer activism in the North. This chapter addresses the emergence of new forms of workers' organisations, North–South networks and campaigns for the rights of garment workers, the development of corporate codes of conduct and the need to include workers in their development and implementation. The chapter concludes by explaining why women workers' organisations elected to research subcontracting chains in more detail, highlighting the need to understand the structure of the industry in order to change it.

The organisations involved in the research are introduced in Chapter 4. Here the principles of action research are elucidated, before the research and its outcomes in each of the nine countries involved are outlined. It is argued that locally implemented, internationally co-ordinated action research provides a methodological framework for conducting research in an era of globalisation.

Chapters 5, 6 and 7 draw on material collected by the project partners and collaborators in ten different countries. The main trends identified

across the projects in Asia and Europe are summarised in Chapter 5. This chapter develops an approach to conceptualising supply chains in the garment industry from the perspective of workers, arguing that much happens 'below the water line,' where it is difficult to trace what goes on. The chapter also highlights the main issues for workers employed in garment production, drawing on examples from the action research. Chapter 6 then explores the particularities of developments in the UK—where apparel is a declining industry—and Chapter 7 looks at recent changes in Mexico, further illustrating the similarities and differences in the experiences of workers in different parts of the world. Chapter 8 goes on to draw out the lessons of the research for the battle to defend and extend workers' rights in the industry. And, crucially, the chapter argues that the strategy best able to meet the needs of workers will depend on their position in the supply chain, which is linked to their employment security and status, the extent to which they are covered by local labour law and their ability to campaign for new national and international regulation. Chapter 9 sets these debates in the context of likely future changes in the industry focusing on the implications of the end of the MFA—and its associated trade regime—in 2005.

In sum, *Threads of Labour* explores the impact of international garment industry supply chains from the 'bottom up.' The book seeks to contribute to debates about the globalisation of the economy, the operation of international commodity chains and new developments in labour organising from the perspective of the workers involved. Drawing on internationally co-ordinated but locally developed action research has allowed us to highlight local experiences alongside global trends. We have sought to embody supply chain analysis, and bring it to life by looking at the experiences and situation of some of the workers involved in the contemporary garment industry. The action research data has already been used by local organisations that support women garment workers, informing educational programmes, political action and organising work. This book seeks to share this experience more widely, highlighting the way in which action research can enhance academic debate by developing new insights at the same time that it is used to change the world from below. By publishing *Threads of Labour* we also hope to extend the political reach of the research by contributing to ongoing debate and action about the need to reconfigure economic power relations to the benefit of workers, their communities and poorer nations in the South. The book aims to contribute to ongoing efforts to recognise and improve the position of women working in global production networks, in and beyond the garment industry.