

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Gendered labour activism in the Vietnamese manufacturing industry

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This article analyses the nature of female activism within the context of the Vietnamese export-oriented manufacturing industry. It highlights women's potential as change agents within the industrial fabric of Vietnamese society and identifies how gendered perceptions shaped the nature of industrial action in the country. The three examples of industrial action presented here indicate that although the activism undertaken by female rank-and-file workers in industrial zones was informal, it played a crucial role in the progressive changes to labour relations in Vietnam. Further, it shows how women's agency was shaped by their own gender perceptions, which in turn guided their industrial strategies and outcomes.

KEYWORDS

women, activism, strikes, Vietnam

1 | INTRODUCTION

Due to the rapid industrialization and globalization in some of the least developed countries in Asia, it may not be surprising that women have become the 'new face' of industrial labour and of labour activism (Broadbent & Ford, 2007; Ford, 2008). In countries such as Vietnam, the escalation of foreign investment and export orientation has bolstered a manufacturing sector that is primarily staffed by women (General Statistics Office (GSO), 2016; Hosain, Mathbor, & Semenza, 2013; Masina & Cerimele, 2018).

Although women's representation in the manufacturing sector is significant, their industrial activism in this sector has been informal in nature due to their marginalization within both the industrial and political arms of the official union organization, as well as prevailing gender norms within Vietnam. This marginalization is highlighted through the research question addressed here: How does gender ideology shape the nature of women's activism in the Vietnamese manufacturing sector? To answer this question, this research presents three examples of women's informal grassroots and unsanctioned activism that occurred between 2010 and 2016 in Vietnam.

The article outlines how the nature of the Vietnamese economic reform process contributed to informal industrial action. Despite the launch of economic reform under Doi Moi in 1986, trade unions in Vietnam remained a central arm of the Communist Party at both the national and provincial levels (Chan, 2011; Chan & Norlund, 1995). The Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) is the central trade union organization that reports directly to the Party-controlled Fatherland's Front and receives annual funding from the state budget.¹ The chairman of the VGCL is also a member of the Central Party Committee and due to the organization's political ties with the Vietnam Communist Party, is constitutionally recognized as the only legitimate Vietnamese trade union. Consequently, despite the modernization reform agenda and the surge of discontent through wildcat strikes after 2006, the VGCL's dependence on the government remains unchanged (Kerkvliet, Heng, & Koh, 2003).

As Masina and Cerimele (2018) argue, after Doi Moi Vietnam experienced a 'stalled transition' toward industrialization that delivered low wages and poor working conditions. These conditions have become a structural, rather than a transitory, factor in Vietnam's global manufacturing advantage. Faltering improvements in wages and working conditions partially explain the unprecedented informal industrial activity within what has remained a moribund system of collective bargaining, grievance handling and consultation. This has resulted in workers being afforded limited opportunities to voice their concerns through formal channels (Clarke, Lee, & Do, 2007).

Due to their peripheral and often informal position within the industrial and political arm of the labour movement, female manufacturing workers have spearheaded their own strategies to protect their industrial interests. Women's grassroots activism within Vietnam has led to improvements in their wages and working conditions and the potential revitalization of trade unions. However, as in other countries their commitment to trade unions remains contingent on their interests being supported through gendered bargaining priorities (Kirton, 1999). Therefore, cultural and organizational factors that limit women's access to important decision-making bodies often demand diverse industrial strategies (Ford, 2008; Healy & Gatta, 2013; Hossain et al., 2013; Kabeer, 2015; Mrozowicki & Trawińska, 2013).

To examine women's role as change agents in the political and industrial reform, this article analyses the extant literature on gendered activism which highlights links between gender norms and industrial and social change. The subsequent section contextualizing gendered activism within the socio-political and industrial context of Vietnam highlights how the state, trade union and corporate structure frame and influence gendered agency. Family structure and gender identity are then analysed before the methods for the study are presented. This is followed by the findings section which analyses industrial disputes within three Vietnamese industrial zones. The first case indicates how female workers in a Japanese-owned electronics firm in Hanoi developed collaborations with higher-ranked (male) engineers and office clerks to change and influence the union leadership to explicitly represent the rank-and-file workers' issues. The second case explores how female workers in a Korean-owned garment factory in Ho Chi Minh City managed to improve conditions regarding strictly controlled rest breaks and the safety of pregnant women working in the factory. This was achieved by leveraging supply chain actors and issues regarding brand reputation. The third case analyses the consequences of a well-respected female worker in a private Vietnamese company aspiring to gain an official union leadership position within the factory. Although achievements were gained through a head-on collision with an authoritarian and paternalistic management hierarchy, the female protagonist was victimized for her actions. These three cases reveal how women leverage a diverse range of actions that reflect their industrial, political and social context (Ford, 2008; Kabeer, 2015; Kandiyoti, 1988).

1.1 | Industrial relations and gendered activism

Women have always played an important role in industrial action and union reform. This is particularly relevant when paid work is integral to women's lives (Milkman, 2013). However, gender stereotypes regarding the nature of women's agency have tended to restrict rigorous analysis of their role in industrial events, including strikes. The findings of a recent study of two major disputes in the United Kingdom (Anitha & Pearson, 2018) highlight the

need for analysis of social history that identifies informal actions that are often overlooked in strike studies. This is particularly relevant in countries where women remain relatively isolated from formal roles in industrial and political institutions. For example, men tend to be appointed as the spokespeople holding relatively prestigious roles (Acker, 1990). The gendered labour division in social and industrial movements are aligned with widely held beliefs regarding gender roles in society (McAdam, 1992; Van Dyke, McAdam, & Wilhelm, 2000). These prevailing gender stereotypes perceive (strike and trade union) leadership as an attribute fulfilled by 'heroic' male leaders, which impedes women's ability to acquire senior roles in unions (Briskin, 2011). Such familiar patterns are observed in situations wherein the workforce and trade union membership are predominantly female (Francisco & de la Cruz, 2008).

Growing literature on gendered activism indicates that women can and do strategize within a set of concrete constraints, or create what Kandiyoti (1988) deems 'patriarchal bargains' that are shaped by 'rules of the game' that adopt various strategies to improve work and life in the national context. Within the industrial context, women's participation in unions and union leadership depends on national and local contextual factors (Broadbent & Ford, 2007). Dodson (2015) suggests that in less egalitarian contexts, women tend to engage in non-confrontational activities, compared with increasingly egalitarian contexts, wherein women are likely to be involved in a wider range of industrial action.

Literature on gendered activism in the Global South and the context of patriarchal norms found in many countries can often lead to particular stereotypes for female workers (Evans, 2017). Mezzadri (2016, p. 1887) suggests that in India, 'patriarchal norms ... structure women's shop-floor experience and also recreate an imagery of gender subjugation'. Similarly, in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Thailand, employers, union leaders and social activists 'stereotype' female garment workers as 'docile' and consider them unlikely to demand higher wages or unionize (Caraway, 2005).

However, perceptions regarding submissiveness and passivity are ill-conceived. Female workers are far from 'docile' (Anitha & Pearson, 2018; Ledwith & Colgan, 2002) and are vital for trade union revitalization (Greene & Kirton, 2002). For example, in textile factories in Thailand, female workers have actively decided to (or not to) participate in union activism based on their evaluation of the factory management style and the close personal ties they develop with each other (Mills, 2005; Pangsapa, 2007). In other cases wherein women could not access leadership roles, they have established separate, women-only unions as a strategy to fight for their unique needs (Brigden, 2012; Briskin, 1999; Greene & Kirton, 2002). Women-only unions, which have been established in Japan, Bangladesh, Nicaragua and Korea, encompass strategies to include non-full-time female workers and those employed in small informal workplaces (Broadbent, 2007; Kabeer, 2015; Park & Chee, 2006).

It is important to recognize that women's agency is also related with state relations that can constrain and/or enable women's labour activism. For example, Vietnam has experienced unprecedented waves of informal action, including wildcat strikes that have resulted from the failure of Vietnamese trade unions to effectively represent female members (Anner & Liu, 2016; Clarke, 2006; Cox, 2015). Female rank-and-file workers have particularly experienced discontent within the manufacturing sector.

1.2 | Institutional and socio-political context of gendered activism in Vietnam

By 1997, Vietnam had become the largest recipient of foreign direct investment (FDI) among the developing countries, in proportion to the size of its economy. However, two important factors are worth noting. First, alongside this growth, the state retained a firm grip on the nature and direction of foreign investment and its export-oriented development strategy. Second, it has relied on low labour cost as a structural, rather than a transitory, competitive factor (Masina & Cerimele, 2018).

As has occurred in other East Asian countries, governments will suppress labour voice by restricting unions and punishing workers who participate in strikes. This suppression is designed to ensure the continuous flow of

immediate FDI and the potential for further export-oriented industrialization to increase the gross domestic product (GDP) (Deyo, 1989; Ong, 1991). As many governments have recognized, exercising the right to undertake industrial action often motivates foreign capital to seek out a cheaper and increasingly docile labour force (Kabeer, 2015). According to Pun et al. (2016), Chinese provinces often ignore labour law enforcement and undermine labour protections as a competitive strategy to lure lucrative companies, such as Foxconn. Similarly, within Vietnam, provincial governments avoid intervening in industrial disputes in foreign-owned workplaces due to the fear of disrupting production and to guarantee the confidence of companies providing foreign investment (Beresford & Forde, 1997).

While responding concessionally to unconstitutional strikes in Vietnam, local and national governments have expressed increased concern regarding the VGCL's capacity to represent workers (Tran, 2007a, 2007b). For example, the government and Party leaders have increasingly urged the VGCL to become the 'real' representative organization for workers. Directive 22, which was drafted by the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) in 2008 and issued by the Central Party Committee, suggests:

The VGCL must develop specific plans to reinforce, develop and reform unions in enterprises so that the union organization becomes the real representative of workers' rights and interests and ... propose appropriate measures to provide training and incentives to union officers at enterprises. (VGCL, 2008, para. 6)

This concern regarding 'real' representation highlights that although the Vietnamese economy has developed into a manufacturing powerhouse, the industrial interests of those who have ensured that success have been ignored. For example, many young women who work in manufacturing and other sectors have attempted to represent what has been described as a new industrial proletariat, who have benefited little from economic prosperity (Masina & Cerimele, 2018). Many of these women are located at the intersections of various types of inequality: class, occupation and legal status, which indicates that building a shared identity and interests represents a considerable challenge (Kabeer, Milward, & Sudarshan, 2013). Therefore, although the economic reform under Doi Moi has enabled Vietnam to become a major industrial hub, these developments have delivered limited improvements for female workers and have escalated industrial conflict.

According to official statistics, 6655 strikes occurred in Vietnam between 1995 and 2017 (VGCL, 2018). Approximately 70 per cent of strikes occurred in foreign-owned companies, many within the manufacturing sector, and none of the strikes that occurred formally involved the trade union, VGCL. Another important feature of the industrial action is that 62.6 per cent of strikes occurred in garment, footwear and electronic industries, wherein female workers dominate both the workforce and the profile of strikers (VGCL, 2018). Although wage disputes account for the bulk of strikes between 2005 and 2013 (MOLISA, 2014), issues specific to female workers have been increasingly highlighted in recent years. Demands often coalesce around increasing the number of bathrooms available for female workers, improving the quality of factory clinics, allowing for flexible childcare arrangements, and dismissing supervisors for harassment and poor treatment of female workers (ILO Vietnam, 2011). In many cases, workers also demanded the establishment of a union or a re-election of union leaders who are increasingly sympathetic to women's issues.

Expressing discontent through wildcat strikes reflects the limited ability or desire of unions to represent female workers while negotiating with employers. However, these strikes also have wider ramifications for labour law and trade union reform. For example, in 2006, after the first wave of wildcat strikes, the government increased the minimum wages in the foreign-owned sector, which had remained frozen since the Asian financial crisis (Clarke, 2006; Tran, 2007a, 2007b). In 2007, the strike organization and settlement provisions in the 2002 Labour Code were also revised to streamline the procedures for workers to organize legal strikes. Although these reforms have not forced trade unions to become increasingly representative of their rank-and-file workers, wildcat strikes have signalled to the national trade union organization that increased action is required to improve the wages and working conditions of Vietnamese women, particularly those who dominate the manufacturing sector. Therefore, women's involvement

in industrial action both reflected and represented significant challenges to the patriarchal culture of both the political and industrial arms of the labour movement. As detailed below, familial relations have also shaped the character of industrial action.

1.3 | Female workers, family structure and gender identity in Vietnam

Women in Vietnam have historically been significant contributors to economic production through their involvement in commerce, handicraft production, agriculture and manufacturing (Duong, 2001). However, the family structure in Vietnam has also been primarily organized based on the patriarchal setting, with a male-centred kinship system at the core of familial relationships. This system is reinforced by the Confucian ideology that acknowledged women's subordination to their fathers, husbands and sons. Women gained access to education and low-ranked employment in state offices during the French colonial period, however, the wider patriarchal family structure has only marginally transformed over time (Duong, 2001; Ngo, 2004).

After Vietnamese independence, and particularly during the 1950s, women had greater public visibility because the male population was recruited into the military. Similar to other countries, family structures did undergo many changes in this post-war period (Barry, 1996). However, because the state reduced free social and health-related services after the 1980s, there has been a revival of campaigns redirecting women into traditional familial roles (Giang, 2004; Luong, 2015; Pettus, 2003) that are slightly comparable with the old Confucian ideology (Ngo, 2004).

Currently, in Vietnam, women account for 48 per cent of the total labour force and the rate of participation in the labour market is 72 per cent (GSO, 2016). Moreover, approximately 1.6 million Vietnamese women work in one of the 48 industrial zones across the country, constituting 64 per cent of the total labour force and 66 per cent of trade union membership in these industrial zones (GSO, 2016). The vast majority of Vietnamese women working in the industrial zones are rank-and-file manufacturing workers employed in low-cost labour-intensive industries, such as garment, footwear, electronics and food processing. These firms are often located in what Kabeer (2015) refers to as 'buyer-driven' global value chains, wherein the absence of women in structural power (such as trade unions) may also draw on a degree of 'associational power', which in turn draws on NGOs, human rights advocates or consumer groups that pressure institutions holding structural power. Needless to say, the vast majority of women working in these firms rarely hold managerial or influential positions of power. For instance, in the garment industry, two thirds of the team supervisors are men (Fontana & Silberman, 2013) and women are also paid less while working in the same job. According to the 2015 National Labour Force Survey, female machine operators and assemblers are paid 17 per cent lower wages, compared to the wages of men doing the same jobs (GSO, 2016).

Another important feature of the female workforce is that the 1.6 million female workers employed in the industrial zones have similar social and industrial profiles; they are primarily aged under 35 years with low skill levels and education. Moreover, most female workers have young dependent children (aged under six years). Their regular wages are often set below the liveable level, thus making them prone to work overtime to support themselves and their families. Over 60 per cent of these female workers are rural migrants who face substantial economic pressure, compared with locals, due to the higher-than-average rent, electricity and clean water tariffs, and difficulties in accessing the public social and health services (Fairwear Foundation, 2015; Masina & Cerimele, 2018).

The three cases analysed in this article show how women's marginalization of trade unions have led them to access and leverage various strategies (or what Kabeer deems 'associational power') to build agency and voice. The three cases indicate that women build agency to improve their wages and working conditions by attempting to reform the existing trade unions; leveraging the international buyer, reputation and labour rights interface; or confront existing trade unions to ensure the endorsement of women's concerns (Donaghey, Reinecke, Niforou, & Lawson, 2014; Kabeer, 2015).

2 | RESEARCH DESIGN

To explore and analyse the underlying dynamics and gender identity of female workers in industrial zones in Vietnam, this research focused on three industrial zones wherein industrial activity has been most prevalent: Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang. The industrial zone in Hanoi has a concentration of foreign-owned electronic and engineering firms that operate within the industrial zone. The industrial zones in Ho Chi Minh City and Da Nang comprise a mixture of domestic and foreign-owned firms in garment and electronics. Over 60 per cent of the labour force in these industrial zones are rural migrant workers who often live in rented apartments that are provided by the local inhabitants surrounding the industrial zones. Although each of the industrial zones in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City employ approximately 30,000 workers, the Da Nang industrial zone is relatively smaller, with approximately 10,000 workers.

To understand the nature of industrial action, several rounds of in-depth interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2016 in these three industrial zones. Attempting to gain access to factories and factory workers has been a difficult and time-consuming task, particularly while attempting to engage with workers undertaking wildcat strikes. However, the extended research period allowed the researcher to examine the activists' reasons for engaging with, or withdrawing from, industrial action. It also provided a greater opportunity to examine activists' lived experiences and the challenges they faced and enabled the analysis of the wider processes of change that occurred within Vietnamese trade unions. Undertaking interviews over a five-year period further helped to develop trust between the researcher and the participant (Bryman & Bell, 2007). This is particularly important during fieldwork in situations wherein divulging information can be dangerous for both the participant and the researcher (Brown, 2019).

At the commencement of the research, the local Vietnamese researcher gained access to workers and informal strike leaders at these three sites. First, the researcher acquainted herself with the areas wherein the workers lived by visiting their homes, participating in household chores with them and accompanying them to the factories for several weeks. After developing an understanding of the area and gaining the trust of local workers, the researcher discussed the research and asked them if they would be interested in participating in the research. Although many workers refused to participate, some were willing to discuss their experiences with the researcher under the assurance of anonymity. These workers facilitated a snowballing technique by introducing the researcher to other local workers (Penrod, Preston, Cain, & Starks, 2003). The local researcher maintained contact with participants, which led to subsequent interviews with other women who represented what many participants perceived as the 'real' strike leaders in their firms.

Interviews with the managers and union officials were also conducted on-site in their offices at their respective organizations. A total of 43 interviews were conducted with managers, union officials and workers over the course of the five-year period. The workers were aged between 20 and 40 years and had participated in at least one strike. In the first case, 16 people were interviewed, among which ten people were rank-and-file workers (eight women and two men). In the second case, 14 people were interviewed, among which eight people were rank-and-file workers (all female). In the third case, 13 people were interviewed, among which seven people were rank-and-file workers (six female and one male). (See the Appendix for the list of interviewees by position.)

Once interviews had been transcribed and analysed the researchers analysed the data that was collected and identified central themes that emerged. These themes included company profile and customer proximity, the nature of working conditions, the types of worker activism that formed, and women's associations with managers and formal trade union leaders within the three firms. Familial relations and gender ideologies were also important themes that were analysed in the research process.

3 | FINDINGS

The following three case studies demonstrate three typical approaches of female workers in the manufacturing industries of Vietnam toward building agency and voice. The first approach focused on the formation of informal

networks of (female) workers who organize strikes to pressure management to yield to their requests if negotiations fail. In the second approach, industrial action to gain improved conditions is more loose, spontaneous and leaderless. In the third and less prevalent approach, women acquire formal union leadership roles, however, women face the risk of retribution with limited protection from union hierarchy. While different in approach, these three cases reflect how women's agency was shaped by prevailing and internalized gendered ideologies relating to public (i.e., to act as a formal union representative) and private familial obligations.

3.1 | Japanese JP: Wage improvements and trade union reform

JP is a Japanese firm located in Thang Long Industrial Park in Hanoi and is the subsidiary of a major Japanese manufacturer of printed circuit boards that are used in various products, such as mobile phones and LCDs. The company employed more than 1000 workers, among which 86 per cent were female production workers. Many (approximately 60 per cent) of the labour force were migrants from nearby provinces. Each production line of 15–30 workers was led by a team leader. The team leaders were promoted from rank-and-file workers and their compensation was similar to that of the workers, however, they received a small 'responsibility' allowance. The migrant workers from JP, including the team leaders and those from other companies in Thang Long Industrial Park, lived in rented accommodation in the two nearby villages. Migrant workers formed their own networks based on: provincial heritage, employer and gender profile. In these communities, the team leaders emerged as the *de facto* leaders of the workers because they were often older and more experienced.

One year after its establishment, the JP director initiated an enterprise union and recruited a male human resources (HR) manager as the chairman of the enterprise union. Due to the repercussions of a refusal, the HR manager agreed. JP management were authoritarian, with decisions finalized by Japanese managers behind closed doors. A Vietnamese engineer commented:

All decisions were made by the Japanese managers. The Vietnamese, including engineers like me or even the HR manager were not consulted at all. We were only informed about the final decisions and implement. Among the Vietnamese staff, we shared a feeling of being disrespected. (Interview with JP7, April 2010, Hanoi)

One of these decisions was to increase the wages of local middle managers and engineers by 15 per cent, whereas the wages for team leaders and workers would be increased by only 7 per cent. After the union chairman approved the agreement without consulting employees, team leaders and workers were upset by the unfair treatment by the management. A female team leader recalled:

At that time the inflation rate was more than 10% and we had to face rising rent rates; yet, they [the company managers] only raised 7% for workers and 15% for office clerks and engineers. We were all very angry. We wanted to teach them a lesson. (Interview with JP7, April 2010, Hanoi)

As this discontent spread among the workers, a group of three female team leaders who were also neighbours in the worker villages discussed a plan. They decided to secretly submit a petition to the Japanese director to ask for a fair increase in wages for team leaders and workers. These three female team leaders leveraged personal networks to rally additional allies within JP; their personal networks comprised team leaders from other departments. They also enlisted two male engineers. When asked why he joined workers in organizing the strike, an engineer stated:

My salary was already higher and now I get twice the increase rate than the workers. I myself felt that it was unfair for them. I worked closely with these workers every day and I did not think they deserved that.

(Interview with JP16, May 2010, Hanoi)

The female team leaders drafted a petition in Vietnamese and the engineers helped translate it into English. In the petition, they demanded an equal increment to the wages of managers and engineers, expansion of the parking area and the election of new union leadership. The strike organizers demanded a response within a week, otherwise they would stop working for one day. According to one of the female team leaders, their original plan was to initiate a negotiation with the director, instead of going on strike:

When we drafted the petition, we did not think that we would go on strike at all. The engineer suggested us to include it to increase weight to our demands. We thought he [the Director] would, at least, talk to us.

(Interview with JP9, April 2010, Hanoi)

The anonymous petition was given to the director through a cleaner. To prepare for a potential negotiation with the management, the three female team leaders and their allies spent the week leading up to the strike to garner widespread support from workers and office clerks by conducting meetings during lunch breaks and after work to discuss the demands in the petition, and by distributing text messages among workers throughout the factory. Against the expectation of the team leaders, the company director simply ignored the petition, believing that the demands were merely idle threats made by a minority of workers within the factory. The director later recalled:

I was furious when I got that petition. These workers were so ungrateful. We brought jobs and income to them and they threatened me with a strike. I did not think they dared walking out so I just ignored the petition. It was a mistake! (Interview with JP1, April 2010, Hanoi)

One day before the strike day mentioned in the petition, the team leaders and their allies met. They were anxious that no reply was heard from the management. However, because the strike date had been fixed in the petition, they decided to organize the strike the next day as planned. On the day of the strike, almost all Vietnamese employees, including engineers, office clerks and workers, did not attend work. The production workers gathered outside the factory gate, whereas the engineers and office clerks remained in their homes. When the company invited the industrial zone administration officials to mediate the negotiation, production workers refused to nominate representatives due to the fear of being victimized. Consequently, the company director and the industrial zone officials met with the production workers as a group outside of the factory and within two days, the company agreed to all of their demands, including a 12 per cent increase in the salary for team leaders and rank-and-file workers, as well as the organization of a union election.

One week after the strike, a union election was also organized with one of the three female strike leaders elected to the union board and the male engineer, who had supported the workers, became the new union chairman. Although women did not gain a formal role within the union as a result of industrial action, the quality and representativeness of trade union leadership was enhanced. One of the female strike leaders explained that the outcomes of industrial action were partly driven by gender norms:

We organized the strike only because we were very unhappy with the way the management treated us. We did not want to become union officials because we had small children and very busy with both work and family. But the new union chairman is a good guy. He usually consults us about how to respond to the management. (Interview with JP7, October 2012, Hanoi)

Moreover, the new union chairman recognized his power and support base:

I do not have close contacts with the workers as they [the female team leaders] do. So, whenever there is a new policy or an important decision that the union has to consult workers, I have to rely on them. If they can persuade the workers to accept the new policy, I know it is going to be fine. If they themselves do not like the new policy, I will have to tell management to reconsider the policy or workers may go on strike. (Interview with JP15, October 2012, Hanoi)

This case indicates how female activists mobilized workers by leveraging the informal networks at work and in their communities, as well as building alliances among female workers and with the engineers. Their actions ultimately led to positive (and worker-centred) leadership changes within the union, with one female team leader now on the union board. However, this case also showed that female strike leaders were influenced by gender norms that reflected pre-existing social values and internalized stereotypes that women prioritize familial obligations over public leadership positions.

Therefore, the case reinforces the complex gendered dynamics shaping industrial and political power. However, this case also shows that female production workers were instrumental in preserving and improving workers' rights and interests through informal activism and thus played an important role as *de facto* worker representatives that balanced the priorities of worker activism, with prevailing gender norms embedded in Vietnamese society.

3.2 | Korean HSV: Building informal networks outside the firm

HSV is one of the biggest Korean garment factories in Vietnam, employing over 10,000 workers within a major industrial zone in the suburbs of Ho Chi Minh City. HSV is the direct supplier of a European sportswear brand that accounts for over 80 per cent of the company's production. The European brand required HSV to comply with its sustainability policy, which included full compliance with the local labour legislation and being socially audited on an annual basis. The corporate social responsibility (CSR) Code of Conduct of the European brand was posted on the notice board near the factory gate with a grievance hotline number. The hotline is run by the Vietnamese staff of a European NGO that deals with labour standards in the European garment supply chains, wherein the European brand is a member. Although most workers were unaware of the information, some female team leaders were aware of the importance of the hotline. A female team leader stated:

A few years ago, there was a training by the NGO for a selected number of team leaders about the buyer's code of conduct and how the hotline functions. I was among the participants, so I knew briefly how this hotline works. (Interview K7, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

HSV's labour force was a mixture of 40 per cent local workers and 60 per cent rural migrants. Both local and migrant workers lived side by side in villages surrounding the industrial zone. Women accounted for 74 per cent of the rank-and-file labour force, most of whom were aged under 35 years. With a dominance of young female workers, various issues, such as maternity leave, leave to care for young children, sick leave and rest breaks for pregnant women, have been central to their concerns. Vietnamese labour legislation requires firms to ensure that pregnant women and women raising children aged under one year are able to leave the workplace one hour earlier without any reduction to their wages (Article 155, 2012 Labour Code). A worker can take up to 20 days off per year to take care of their sick children aged under three years (Article 27, 2014 Social Insurance Law). However, according to the HR department in this factory, these regulations have reduced factory productivity by 30 per cent, particularly during high demand periods. The Korean HR manager stated:

Most of our workers are within the reproduction age. Every week, we have to deal with over one hundred cases of maternity leave, leave for caring young children, leave for pre-maternity checks. Our production

lines usually operate at 70% of the optimum productivity, a big loss for our factory. (Interview with K2, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

Amid allegations of reduced productivity, the Korean management implemented several tactics that they believed would maximize female workers' productivity. The HR department requested that incoming female workers agree to not have children during their first two years working at the company. Similarly, HR advised that women were restricted to two toilet breaks lasting no longer than five minutes per shift. To ensure compliance, a security guard was stationed outside the female restroom to record the time each woman spent in the bathroom. If the time was exceeded, bonus payments would be deducted at the end of the month.

These tactics created both anger and health risks for the female workers. Several of the women interviewed claimed that they had reduced their water intake to prevent going to the bathroom during their shifts. Consequently, the female workers' hygiene was severely compromised by their restricted use and poor cleanliness of bathrooms, as well as insufficient supporting poles or seats for pregnant women to use while using bathrooms. Restrictions similar to these have contributed to elevated rates of gynaecological infections that were reported to be as high as 60 per cent among female workers in Vietnam (Marie Stopes International, 2016). One female worker complained:

Each of us has only 5 minutes to run to the restroom and back or our bonus will be cut. It is even more difficult and dangerous for pregnant workers. The workers in my team tried to refrain from drinking water but that is very tiring for us in this hot weather. (Interview with K9, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

HSV's union executive board consisted of 15 members, among which 11 members were male managers and only one team leader; no female production workers were included on the board. The male union officials were oblivious to the issues faced by female workers. For example, the researcher attempted unsuccessfully to explain to the union chairman why female workers require access to clean water in the bathrooms, particularly during women's menstruation period. However, he insisted that clean water was provided. He had explained that this was the reason why no action was taken when complaints were raised by female workers to the union leaders regarding the bathroom conditions. The accumulated anger among female production workers exploded when a Korean manager of Workshop 5 slapped the hand of a pregnant worker because she was not working fast enough on the production line. Soon after this event, the entire production line of approximately 40 workers, who were all female, immediately suspended work, despite calls ordering them to return to work or face dismissal. One female worker from Workshop 5 recalled:

We had suffered from this manager for a long time. He was rude and bad-tempered. He always pushed us to work harder and harder. So, when he slapped on the hand of our colleague, all of us became outraged and stopped working? We talked among ourselves that we must do something to change the situation even if we would lose our jobs. We called our friends in other teams and asked them to support, which they did. (Interview with K10, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

This harsh reaction from the Korean management further fuelled the anger of the workers. The protest rapidly spread throughout other departments within the factory, with workers demanding that the Korean manager be dismissed. When their demands were ignored by the firm, a large-scale protest ensued when all the production workers left the factory and protested outside the factory gate, while simultaneously blocking the main road of the industrial zone.

When the police invited industrial zone officials and unionists to settle the dispute, disgruntled women produced a detailed list of demands, including the removal of restrictions on toilet breaks and the improvement of the female bathroom conditions. They also demanded improvements in the quality of the factory clinic by recruiting a midwife, as well as the dismissal of the Korean manager who abused the pregnant worker. A female worker who participated in the strike explained:

The strike started with the Workshop 5 but because other workers also had a lot of anger against the management, we joined the strike. There were no specific leaders of the strike, but the team leaders collected our demands and shared them around. (Interview with K12, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

The local authority visited the factory to mediate the dispute, however, the Korean management refused to accept the workers' demands and argued that they did not violate the law. Since the negotiation process stalled, a group of female team leaders decided to call the grievance hotline run by the European NGO. The workers' grievances were swiftly reported to the NGO and the headquarters of the European brand. The European brand quickly contacted HSV's management and dispatched a team to investigate the case. Five days after the European brand intervened, the strike ended when the Korean firm agreed to all of the workers' demands, with the exception of recruiting a midwife because they had no legal obligation to fulfil this demand. HSV's sustainability manager recalled:

That [the European brand] is our biggest buyer so when they came to investigate, the company was under great pressure. Not all of the violations in the workers' petition were accurate but it was true that the labour approach of some Korean managers was not good, which made the workers angry. The company had to accept all the demands to end the strike quickly. (Interview with K4, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

Follow-up interviews with female workers at HSV a year after the strike indicated that although the union leadership remained unchanged, female production workers felt empowered by the victory of this industrial action. A young female worker stated:

If we don't fight for our interests, no one will. I'm not afraid to go on strike because there are thousands of workers like us, they [the company] cannot fire all of us. They also need us to work. If they continue cutting our income, we will strike again. (Interview with K11, June 2014, Ho Chi Minh City)

To monitor the management's compliance, the European brand encouraged workers to call the hotline to report violations by the company. This led to increased confidence among female workers and created an informal mechanism for negotiations with the firm. When asked whether they wanted to develop a new union leadership, a team leader responded:

It is not necessary because the union officials are powerless in this company. But after the strike, I feel that the company has been more responsive to workers' demands. When we have any opinion about the company's policy, we just collect the demands from workers, then we [team leaders] talk to the production manager. He will then discuss with the Korean management. The management often accept our demands, or they will promise that they will do so. (Interview with K9, September 2016, Ho Chi Minh City)

The workers' strike at HSV was not founded on the strong organization and coordination of workers, as observed in the first case. There was also no clear leader among the workers. The associational power of workers was mobilized by the accumulation of discontent shared among the workers, particularly the female workers. More importantly, the workers used the politics of the global garment supply chain: the garment supply chain is buyer-driven and suppliers, such as HSV, are under pressure from international buyers to comply with their CSR policies, which was not the case with JP, the Japanese circuit board producer. The European garment brand also needs to protect their brand image; this need urged them to take swift action to settle the labour dispute.

HSV's case also shows that successful activism can strengthen perception norms. Instead of passively accepting the authoritarian approach of management, women collectively mobilized to protect their rights, thus leading to material improvements in their working conditions. Women were able to strengthen their position, thereby building

stronger motivation and support for solidarity and collective resistance in the future, by using their networks both within and outside the firm. This case also indicated how leveraging brand reputation and supply chain arrangements can increase benefits and strengthen agency over the short- and mid-term.

However, unlike the JP case, female production workers in HSV showed minimal interest in collaborating with or transforming the enterprise union or negotiating formally with the employers after taking industrial action. Female workers preferred to rely on informal activism and the support of external forces to achieve their material gains, instead of transforming the formal union organization that they had little confidence in.

3.3 | Vietnam H: Victimization and withdrawal of female activists

Vietnam H is a garment company in Da Nang. Da Nang is the biggest city in the central region of Vietnam, however, Da Nang is less industrialized, compared with Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. The industrial workers in Da Nang are primarily locals. Between 2008 and 2016, Da Nang faced an economic slowdown.

Vietnam H is owned by a Vietnamese family and sub-contracts to larger garment exporting firms. It employs over 500 workers and is located outside the industrial zones, due to the high rental costs. After receiving big production orders from international buyers, the exporting firms share a part of the orders with Vietnam H, which manufactures them at lower costs. As the second-tier supplier in the garment supply chain, Vietnam H is not socially audited by the international garment brands.

Following a common practice in family businesses, the director of Vietnam H has appointed his family members to key positions in the company. For instance, the general affairs manager who was also the union chairman was a cousin of the director.

Ms B was a 35-year-old female supervisor who managed a sewing production line of 38 workers in Vietnam H. She was one of the most experienced production workers in the company, with approximately five years of experience. She was noted among the workforce for being outspoken and courageous while supporting her co-workers.

As a result of these qualities, Ms B was elected as a member of the enterprise union executive board in 2014 and was responsible for handling the grievances of workers in her workshop, which comprised two production lines. She described her role as follows:

There was not much difference before and after I became member of the union executive board. The workers, especially the younger ones, usually turned to me for advice on all sorts of things from family conflicts, reproductive health, childcare experiences, to their concerns about company policy such as wages, bonus, overtime and welfare benefits. I'm like an older sister for them. If I can reply, I reply quickly, often during breaks or even after work when they call me over the phone. If I cannot, I will ask from the managers and then respond to the workers. Sometimes, the management treated the workers unfairly; I tried my best to help. The managers disliked me for that. (Interview with H5, May 2016, Da Nang)

However, the interaction between Ms B the other union officers in the firm was minimal because, as she explained:

The union chairman is the general affairs manager, so he is very busy. Same as other members of the union executive board. We only meet for the monthly union meetings which are also short. (Interview with H5, May 2016, Da Nang)

However, when they did meet, Ms B often disagreed with the union chairman regarding how he responded to workers' demands:

He [union chairman] is on the company's side because he is the cousin of the director. When I asked him to talk to the director to address workers' demands, he always refused and told me to persuade the workers to accept the situation. (Interview with H5, May 2016, Da Nang)

During the union election in early 2016, Ms B received the highest number of votes to become the union chairperson, however, the director refused to support her due to fear of her popular support from workers and her outspoken personality. However, a group of workers threatened strike action unless Ms B was approved as the union chairwoman and the director of the company relented. However, numerous tactics were used by the director to retaliate and obstruct B's union work. Initially, he increased her production target and the target of her production line, thus making it impossible for Ms B or her team to meet their target. The director refused to work with Ms B during union-management meetings, and frequently criticized her in public settings to damage her reputation among the workers. In May 2016, the director demoted Ms B to a cleaning position with a significantly lower wage because of work target shortfalls. As the enterprise union was affiliated with the Da Nang industrial zone union, Ms B called the industrial zone union for help. The Da Nang industrial zone unionists visited the factory and asked the director to explain the reason for Ms B's demotion, with the director claiming that the firm did not violate the prevailing employment laws. It must be noted that the Labour Code of Vietnam prohibits unfair labour practices, however, it does not provide a clear procedure to identify, investigate and handle these practices. The trade unions have used a legalistic approach and were unwilling to go beyond the tools provided in the law to support their unionists. Therefore, as the representative of Da Nang industrial zone, the union explained: 'We know that this is an unfair labour practice, but the company did not violate the law at all, so we had no way to support Ms. B' (interview with H6, May 2016, Da Nang).

When the union refused to support Ms B's reinstatement, many workers in the factory filed complaints to the management regarding Ms B's mistreatment. In this case, the workers' complaints did not result in strike action because during this period, the local economy was slowing down and the workers were afraid of losing their jobs. Moreover, the workers who were recruited due to their relationships with the owner's family would refuse to go on strike. A worker recalled:

We felt sad for Ms. B and wanted to support her. But many team leaders and workers were relatives of the Director. They would tell the managers immediately if we want to do anything. (Interview with H9, November 2017, Da Nang)

After two months, Ms B was forced to look for other jobs because she was unable to support her family with the reduced income and increased workload. Ms B explained her decision:

I was very disappointed although I understood why the workers and the union were not able to support me. I thought I would continue to work there to show the company that I would not surrender. But I am a single mother. The pay from the cleaning job was too little to support my son; so, I had to quit. (Interview with H5, May 2016, Da Nang)

Ms B's experiences represents one of the rare cases wherein a female worker successfully mobilized formal and popular rank-and-file support to overcome the gender stereotypes regarding official union leadership in Vietnam. However, she failed to gain support from other senior union leaders that she needed to protect herself against the unfair labour practices outlined above.

The head of the Da Nang industrial zone union, the upper-level union organization that Ms B's union was affiliated with, stated that because the firm did not violate Vietnamese employment law, there was no legal ground to challenge the firm's demotion of Ms B. Similar to the VGCL, the upper echelons of trade unions are patriarchal and bureaucratic in structure and nature. Their approach to Ms B's official union position reflects the stereotypical

perceptions of union officials, compared to that of other female workers. This case also highlighted that female union officers run the risk of being victimized if they challenge management and senior union decisions.

There are significant differences between the third case and the first two cases. Although the female activists in these cases faced authoritarian management, each group of women accessed different structural and associational power (Kabeer, 2015). The women in the first two cases enjoyed structural power because the labour market situation worked in their favour, whereas this was not the case for the women working at Vietnam H. The associational power of the strike organizers in the first case was developed through informal networks of migrant women. In the second case, activists were supported by the supply chain politics. In the third case, female activists worked primarily within the formal union structure and enjoyed some popular support, however, in the absence of favourable labour market conditions, collective action failed. Finally, it is noteworthy that the first two cases occurred in foreign-owned firms, whereas the third example of industrial action occurred in a domestic company. Although industrial action in Vietnam occurs more frequently in foreign-owned firms, domestic employers in Vietnam also tend to have paternalistic and authoritarian approaches to labour relations. Therefore, ownership can be an important varying factor in employment and labour relations.

4 | DISCUSSION

Female Vietnamese garment sector workers developed limited formal influence over trade union action, although they constitute 79 per cent of the manufacturing workforce. Women's limited leadership role in trade unions mirror poor representation within manufacturing management where 67 per cent of factory supervisors, managers, owners and supervisors are men (Evans, 2017). Vietnamese trade unions have retained strong preferences for male trade union leaders and much like other less egalitarian societies, prevailing gender norms shaped male managers and male trade union leaders' disregard for many issues that are important to women: including improved sanitation, rest breaks and flexible working hours (Dodson, 2015; Francisco & de la Cruz, 2008).

However, stereotypes about women's industrial passivity in Vietnam (as in other South East Asian countries) are ill-conceived. The three case studies analysed here show that female production workers have pursued diverse strategies to improve their working and living conditions. In some cases, women have attempted to improve their immediate working conditions through reforming the union movement from within (Kabeer, 2015; Kirton, 2005; Mrozowicki & Trawińska, 2013), while in others they leverage actors located outside of these institutions, including multinational corporations and customers (Kabeer, 2015).

These cases highlight several key issues for consideration. First, these cases denote the marginalization of women from the peak union body in Vietnam, the VGCL, which exhibits ongoing disengagement with the priorities of their female membership, even when women form the majority of the rank-and-file workforce. This identifies the increasing ineffectiveness of the formal (and male-dominated) trade union apparatus and the concomitant likelihood that wildcat strikes will continue as they have over the past decade.

Second, the nature of women's agency reflects prevailing gender norms. For example, in Japanese-owned JP, a female activist stated that although her role as a mother influenced her disinterest in becoming a union leader, her confidence in the male representative protecting women's interests provided crucial surety about her future industrial position. However, within the Korean-owned HSV, women preferred wildcat strikes over formally endorsed union activities to protect their rights and interests by leveraging supply chain networks outside the firm. Women used the size and brand reputation of the firm to oppose managerial attitudes regarding pregnancy, restrictions of bathroom breaks and reductions to bonus payments.

These cases indicate how women draw on both their industrial positions and their personal and familial identity in an attempt to humanize workplaces. Although both these examples of industrial action failed to position women in formal influential roles within their trade union, these groupings led to improvements in working conditions, and influenced a culture wherein resistance emerged and developed (Lamphere, 1985).

Although these cases portray the different methods through which women exert their agency and achieve improvements in their immediate environment (Sacks & Brodtkin, 1988), there remain broader implications about the nature of labour activism and industrial conflict in Vietnam. First, if the VGCL fails to recruit female workers into leadership positions, and if negative stereotypes remain deeply engrained within the trade union movement, this will hinder the ability to build an increasingly egalitarian and grassroots labour movement that strengthens progressive labour relations (Broadbent & Ford, 2007; Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Kirton & Healy, 2013; Milkman, 2013).

With over 90 per cent of wildcat strikes resulting in workers' demands being fulfilled, female-dominated rank-and-file workers in the industrial zones have been successful in utilizing this as a key weapon to attain workplace improvements. These strikes show that female production workers were not only instrumental in strategizing, organizing and negotiating strikes within their firms, but in doing so, they also transformed trade unions toward an increasingly pro-worker orientation. Therefore, women's informal activism can empower, galvanize and improve the material outcomes for female (and male) workers and the possibility for further improvement.

Promoting future change in Vietnam requires a national and organizational culture which supports women to take on formal leadership positions that will help strengthen the effectiveness of industrial action. Female union leadership in Vietnam, requires organization strategies that focus on women's needs and priorities at the workplace, which provide training for union organizers in addressing women's issues and support to female unionists with familial obligations.

However, due to the prevailing patriarchal culture that persists in trade unions, autonomous organizing may also be crucial for female workers to effectively challenge the inequalities that they face, to identify their own priorities, and to develop alternate strategies for making industrial demands that are better suited to their immediate experiences and constraints (Kabeer, 2015).

5 | CONCLUSION

Women have always played an important role in the industrial struggle, either through their participation in formal trade unions or through direct strike action. This article contributes to the extant research regarding the nature of female activism in the Global South. By focusing on the manufacturing sector wherein women dominate the workforce, this research also highlights that in these sectors, which are characterized by highly mobile global capital, the capacity to organize may be constrained, but also new opportunities for women to be at the forefront of labour activism and reform are presented (Kabeer, 2015; Seguino, 2000).

Although the weaknesses of the highly centralized and politically embedded national trade union, the VGCL, has partially propelled the surge of wildcat strikes since 2006 (Kerkvliet et al., 2003), there has been no detailed gendered analysis of these actions. This research indicates that due to the political and industrial dependencies embedded in state industrial and political institutions and the prevailing gender norms in Vietnam, women's industrial action has taken place outside the formal trade union movement. This action has resulted from the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of political and industrial life, which has limited women's formal access to decision-making bodies, however, it also reflects the extent to which women have internalized prevailing gender norms. In addition to the many obstacles that many female workers face in the Vietnamese manufacturing sector, this research also notes that women have been determined and have often been effective in ensuring material improvements in their working conditions. The three cases analysed in this article indicate three typical methods through which female workers undertake industrial action in both foreign-owned and domestic manufacturing firms that has resulted in positive improvements to their own and others' working conditions. However, it also played a crucial role in ensuring progressive changes to labour relations in Vietnam.

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DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest to declare in submitting this article.

ENDNOTE

¹In November 2019, the National Assembly of Vietnam passed the 2019 Labour Code that allows for the establishment of independent unions (that are not affiliated to the Party-controlled national trade union organization) only at the enterprise level. At the time of writing this article, none of these independent unions have been set up.

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APPENDIX

Interview Profile

Case	Location of interview	Management interviews	Unionists interviews	Worker interviews	Dates interviewed
Japanese JP	Hanoi	1 Director JP1	1 Enterprise union chairperson JP5	8 Female workers JP7–JP14	April–May 2010
		1 Deputy director JP2	1 Industrial zone unionist JP6	2 Male workers JP15 and JP16	April–May 2010
		1 HR manager JP3			April–May 2010
		1 Production manager JP4			April–May 2010
		HR manager JP3 (2 nd interview)	Enterprise union chairperson (elected after strike) JP15 (2 nd interview)	3 Female workers JP7, JP9 and JP13 (2 nd interview)	October 2012
Vietnam H	Da Nang	1 Deputy director H1	1 Enterprise union chairperson H5	8 Female workers H7–H14	May 2016
		1 HR manager H2	1 Industrial zone unionist H6		May 2016
		1 Production manager H3			May 2016
		1 CSR manager H4			May 2016
			Industrial zone unionist H6 (2 nd interview)	2 Female workers H9 and H14 (2 nd interview)	November 2017
		(Former) enterprise union chairperson H5 (2 nd interview)	November 2017		
Korean HSV	Ho Chi Minh City	1 Deputy director K1	1 Enterprise union chairperson K5	6 Female workers K7–K12	June 2014
		1 HR manager K2	1 Industrial zone unionist K6	1 Male worker K13	June 2014
		1 Production manager K3			June 2014
		1 CSR manager K4			June 2014
			Industrial zone unionist K6 (2 nd interview)		September 2016

(Continues)

Case	Location of interview	Management interviews	Unionists interviews	Worker interviews	Dates interviewed
		CSR manager K4 (2 nd interview)		3 Female workers K9, K10 and K11 (2 nd interview by phone)	