

Improving Work for Better Health

CHAPTER 1

Your Work, Your Health, and a Healthy Community

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1

YOUR WORK, YOUR HEALTH, AND A HEALTHY COMMUNITY



Working for a living

People work to earn the money they need to live. They do not live only to work. But in factories around the world, people work in conditions so bad it harms their health. And after working long, hard days, they still do not earn enough to live on.

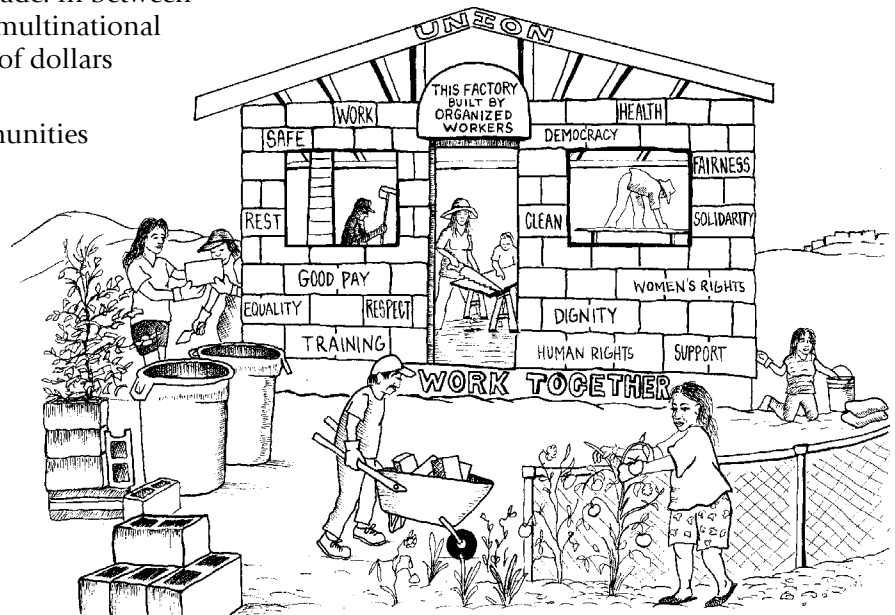
Every year, factories are built creating jobs that do not support a healthy worker and a decent life. These factories make shoes, clothes, car parts, toys, and electronic equipment for sale to people in countries far from where they are made. In between the factory and the store, multinational companies make billions of dollars selling these products.

Workers and the communities around these factories are organizing to make jobs healthier. They want better conditions such as more pay, shorter working hours, safer equipment, less chemicals, and more respect at work.

This book describes the health problems workers in these factories

face and offers solutions workers have used. It also shares skills and stories from workers organizing to create healthier jobs.

We focus on factory work in Export Processing Zones (EPZs), but the problems and concerns of workers in these factories are shared by workers in other factories and jobs. Chapter 2 has more information on EPZs.



Employers are responsible for safe jobs

Human hands and minds create each workplace and every job. Someone planned the factory you work in and decided what kind of machines, chemicals, tools, and products you use or make. Your boss may have made this decision, or maybe it was his boss, or the company that buys the products you make. People can also decide to make jobs and workplaces less harmful and more fair. People can work together — or against each other — to make a better workplace.

Organizing for better jobs

One worker alone can make small changes to her work, such as adding a cushion to pad the seat of her chair. But a single worker cannot change the most important problems harming the health of factory workers. Workers can join together to decide what changes they want to make and organize a campaign to pressure the boss to make these changes. This book includes examples of ways to organize for changes on the job. It also tells stories about workers who have waged successful campaigns for healthier working conditions.



Workers' rights

Countries that are members of the United Nations (UN) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) agree that all people have the right to safe, fair jobs that pay enough for a worker and her family to live in dignity. The UN and ILO do not force nations to live up to these agreements, but the agreements set a common goal for the respect of workers and the behavior of governments and employers. National governments have an obligation to protect human rights and workers' rights through national laws.

The United Nations (UN) is a council of countries that have agreed to settle disputes by peaceful means and not threaten or use force against other nations. Almost all countries are members of the UN. The UN encourages friendly

relations and cooperation among countries to solve international economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems. The UN also encourages countries to promote respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) is a part of the United Nations that promotes labor rights. The ILO creates international standards for workers' rights and working conditions, including worker health. It also promotes the development of independent, democratic workers' organizations such as unions.

Core labor rights

The ILO **Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work** says that all countries have a duty to protect and promote the rights of men, women and child workers. While there are many important rights covered by ILO standards, the Declaration focuses on 4 of them. The Declaration says that every country must:

- **promote and protect the right of workers to form a union** of their choice and the right of union workers to bargain and enforce a contract with their employer about pay, safety and other working conditions
- **end forced labor** such as slavery and working to pay a debt to the employer
- **end child labor** and ensure safe conditions for children who work legally
- **end discrimination** against workers by employers based on their gender, skin color, caste, religion, language, culture, or nation of origin



Women's rights

The UN, the ILO, and the laws of many nations say women and men have equal rights in economic, social and political matters. Governments are obligated to make sure women have the right to work at a profession they choose and the same rights at work as men. These rights include the right to receive equal pay for similar work, equal training and promotions, and freedom from discrimination as women or mothers.

Knowing and protecting the rights of women is especially important for workers in EPZ factories because most of them are women.

Voluntary Codes of Conduct

Some companies have Codes of Conduct for employers and workers in the factories that make their products. The codes say the company will only work with local contractors that respect specific labor and human rights standards.

These codes are weaker than the standards set by the ILO and UN for decent jobs and protecting workers' rights. For example, the codes usually require employers to pay workers at least the local minimum wage and follow local work time laws. But in many countries the legal minimum wage for EPZ factories is very low and legal work time very long. Even when employers follow these laws, workers are still exhausted from work and live in poverty.

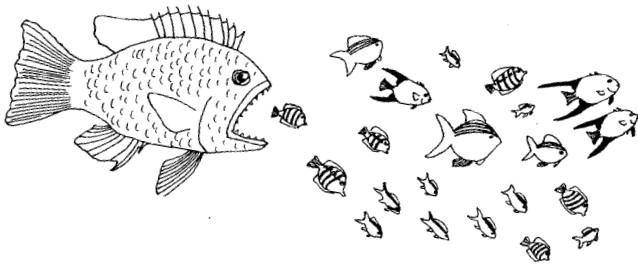
Many people question why multinational companies create these weaker "codes" instead of using the international standards agreed on by the UN and ILO.

The role of unions

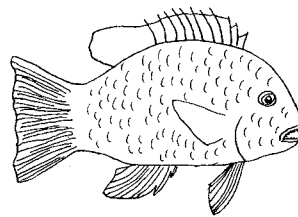
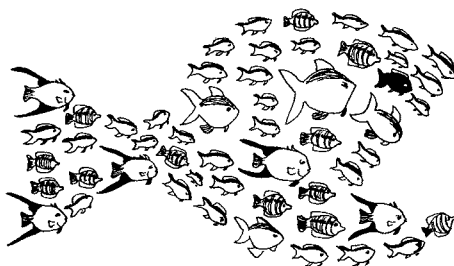
International law and the laws of most countries recognize a union as a worker-controlled organization with rights and responsibilities to defend their members' rights. An employer must negotiate work issues with the union chosen by the employees. The union has the right and responsibility to negotiate pay, safety and health, working hours, and fair and equal treatment of workers. Employers and governments must not harass or intimidate union members because they belong to the union.

The right to organize: Workers fought for years in many countries to win the legal right to form a union. It is still illegal for workers to organize unions in some countries. Even where unions are legal, workers organizing for better conditions have been fired, threatened, and attacked. Leaders and organizers have received death threats from their boss, hired thugs, the police, or soldiers. In some countries, workers have been killed for union organizing and union leaders have been killed for their leadership.

Organizing wins changes: Despite these challenges, workers organize unions, win better working conditions, and create long-lasting organizations to defend their victories. Over many years, unions have won higher wages, limits on working hours, safer work places, health care programs, and social insurance for disabled, ill, and retired workers.



Don't mourn...



...organize!

Other worker organizations

Working people have formed many kinds of groups to improve their situation. For many years women workers have formed groups to learn about and protect their rights, and to teach others about women's rights. Women's groups have helped women reform their unions and gain respect among men workers. Women have also formed their own unions when the men leading local unions ignored their needs.

Workers have formed groups based on their race, culture, language, or national background for support and solidarity. These

groups also educate others about their rights and how to protect them in the community and at work.

Workers have also formed coalitions with other groups to increase the power of their organizing. A coalition may form around a specific campaign, or may be a longer relationship around broad political and organizing goals. These coalitions can include unions, religious organizations, women's groups, human rights groups, political parties, students, retirees, and other kinds of community and worker groups.

WORKERS IN BANGLADESH

In Bangladesh, many workers have been killed and injured in garment factory fires. Families affected by fires in several factories wanted to prevent more fires and win compensation for the victims. To help their campaign, they went to Ain O Shalish Kendra (ASK), a human rights and legal aid center. ASK and the workers issued a Demand of Justice notice upon the Government of Bangladesh, the Chief Inspector of factories and the Director General of the Fire Service and Civil Defense, for failing to implement and monitor factory laws. They also issued the Demand on the President of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Managing Directors of the garment factories where there have been fires. The demand included:

- Compensation for victims.
- Improved safety conditions in the factory and training of workers to prevent fires, put them out, and escape if a fire does start.
- Improved enforcement of fire safety laws.



After the Demand was issued, BGMEA agreed to pay compensation to the workers and to bring all 1.3 million garment workers under an insurance policy covering accidents. They also publicly committed to make safety improvements and to monitor safety standards in its members' garment factories. Since this success by the workers and their families, BGMEA has helped open several health centers and smaller clinics in factory areas to provide health care services to garment workers.

How can work in a garment factory harm your health?

There are many hazards or dangers at work that can harm a worker's health. In this book, the words "danger" and "hazard" mean the same thing: a condition on the job that can cause a health problem for the workers. Not every worker will be injured or made ill by a hazard, but some will. The health problem (usually an injury or illness) may affect a worker now or may not affect her until many years in the future. For example, a worker may have a skin rash now that is caused by contact with chemicals. Another worker may become sick with cancer many years after he was exposed to chemicals. We group these hazards into two categories in this book.

The first category is "work dangers:"

- your work causes strains, cuts, or broken bones.
- your workplace could easily catch on fire
- you use poisonous chemicals.
- you are given bad food or water.

The second category is "social dangers:"

- your pay is so low you live in poverty.
- you are threatened or harassed by your boss or another worker.
- you work too many hours each week.

We will describe these dangers in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Common health problems of garment workers

Ringing ears, hearing loss
from loud noises, chemicals.

Headaches from stress, chemicals,
eyestrain, harmful body positions,
hunger.

Red, itching, watery eyes,
nose, throat from chemicals,
solvents, dust, dyes.

Couples unable to have
children, harm to the baby
before and after birth from
chemicals, heat, stress,
overwork, poverty.

Asthma, cough, cancer, lung
irritation from chemicals,
dyes, dust.

Cut, crushed, or cut off hands,
arms or other parts of the body
from machines, tools, flying parts.

Poverty, hunger, illness from
poor food, low wages, no
social security.

Red, dry, cracked skin from cleaners,
solvents, dyes.

Dizzy, sleepy, confused from
chemicals, solvents, cleaners,
overwork, not enough sleep.

Harm to liver, bladder, heart, blood
and other organs from chemicals,
dyes, stress.

Burns to skin, lungs, eyes
and throat from fire,
electric shock, chemicals,
hot air, steam.

Pain in joints and muscles from
strain, harmful body positions,
long hours, fast pace, pushing or
lifting heavy loads.

Death or severe injury by fire,
explosion, chemical disaster.

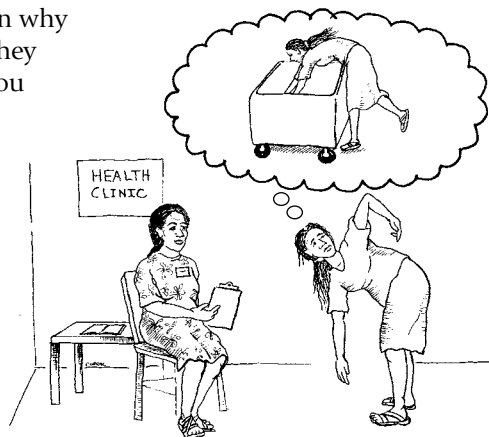


Going to a health worker

If you have a work injury or illness, consider going to a health worker to evaluate your condition. A health worker may be able to offer treatment or, if your condition is serious, refer you to a doctor.

It is helpful to the health worker if you explain why you think your injury or illness is due to work. They have probably never done the work you do, so you must describe it carefully and simply so they will understand.

Unfortunately, many doctors are not helpful treating work injuries and illnesses. They do not have training or experience with the hazards of factory work. Ask other workers and neighbors if they know a good health worker to see for workplace injuries and illnesses.



HEALTH PROMOTERS FOR WORKERS

Health promoters who work with the Comité Fronterizo de Obreras (CFO) in Mexico talk to workers and encourage them to talk to each other about conditions at work. Often the process begins slowly, with three or four people discussing their problems and frustrations. Through this process, the workers who are part of the groups gain self-confidence. Usually it starts with small steps, like role-playing a confrontation with a supervisor. Once she's practiced with friends, a worker has the confidence to say to her boss: "Don't yell at me. I hear you fine when you talk in a normal tone of voice." Supervisors are often shocked to find even minimal resistance, and workers learn that they have power.



We created this organization so we can share our concerns and learn about our rights. Now we can speak up at work and be heard.

Work dangers

Unsafe and unhealthy conditions in garment factories cause workers to become sick or injured. Some conditions are so dangerous they can kill you. Chapter 5 explains different kinds of work dangers, how to look for them in your workplace, and changes you can make for protection. Examples of work dangers include:

Strains and overuse injuries: Workers are injured from work tasks and tools that are not designed with the limits of a worker's body in mind. Long hours of work and pressure to work very fast add to the danger of these injuries.

Fire: Every year garment workers are killed and injured in factory fires. Factories are overcrowded and filled with fabric, dust and chemicals that can easily catch fire.

Chemicals: Workers can become ill from the chemicals on fabric and chemicals used to clean garments, machines, and tools.

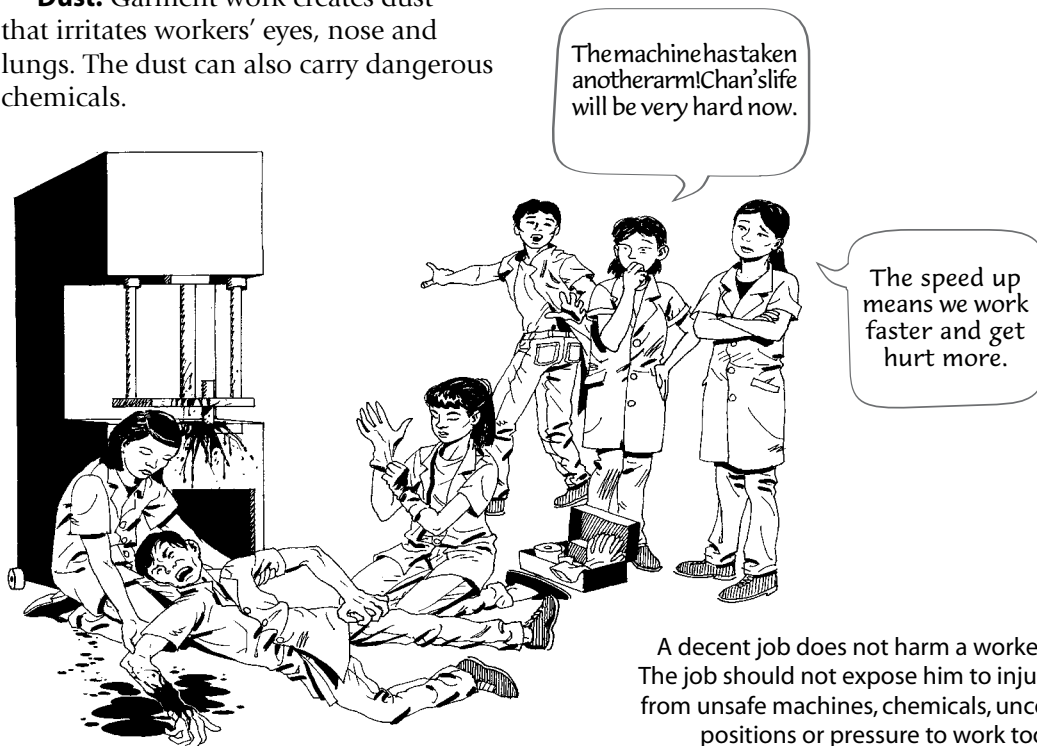
Dust: Garment work creates dust that irritates workers' eyes, nose and lungs. The dust can also carry dangerous chemicals.

Water and toilets: Factory workers are seldom given enough fresh water to drink and are not allowed to go to the toilet when they need to. There are not enough toilets and they are dirty. These problems are an insult and make workers sick.

Rest, food and an eating place: Everyone who works hard for long hours needs food and rest to stay healthy. Many factories provide poor food and do not give workers enough rest time.

Getting pregnant and having babies: Both men and women face dangers at work that can keep them from getting pregnant and having healthy babies. These dangers include chemicals, heat, lifting, stress, and standing all day.

Heat and cold: Workers can become ill if their work place is too hot and they do not get enough water to drink and rest time to cool down. If the work place is too cold, workers' hands and feet can become numb and easily injured.



A decent job does not harm a worker's health. The job should not expose him to injury or illness from unsafe machines, chemicals, uncomfortable positions or pressure to work too fast.

Machine safety: Machines can cause serious cuts, burns, and other injuries to workers using them and to workers cleaning, clearing, repairing, or working near them.

Electrical safety: Electrical wiring and equipment can shock, burn, and electrocute workers who use or repair them. Exposed wires can injure people who accidentally touch them and can cause fires.

Noise: Working near loud equipment causes workers to lose their hearing.

Light: Too much or too little light makes work more difficult, can cause headaches and eyestrain, and increases the chance of strain and sprain injuries.

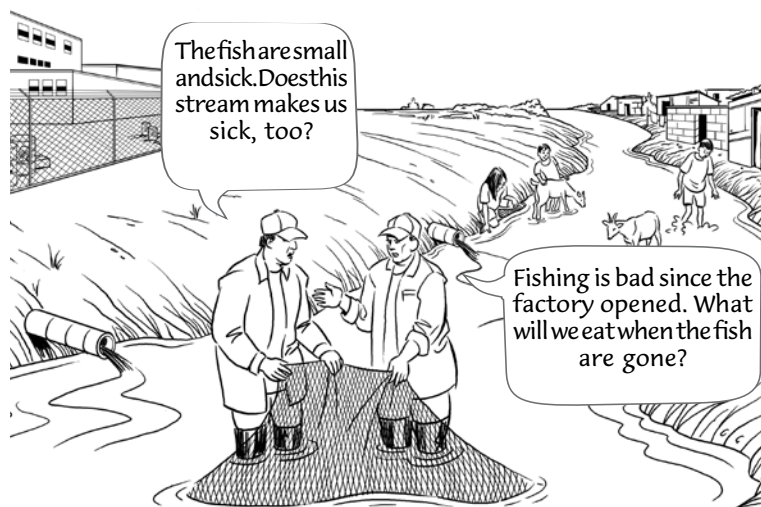
TB (Tuberculosis): TB spreads easily from worker to worker in the dusty, crowded, overworked conditions of garment factories.

Working at home: Taking factory work home brings the dangers of garment work home. Some dangers may even be more serious than in the factory.

Beyond the factory walls: Pollution and waste from inside a factory end up in the community nearby. Factories may put smoke or chemicals into the air around them. Factories may dump chemicals into a ditch, stream or lake in the community. Workers can carry home chemicals on their clothes, hair, and skin without knowing it. And of course, every injury or illness a worker gets from work goes home with her, affecting her family and community.



A decent job gives an injured worker medical care, full pay while he recovers, and lets him return to work. If a worker is permanently disabled and cannot return to work, the government or employer should provide a full pension.



Many workers live near the factories where they work. Because some factories pollute the air, water, and land, workers get a double dose of poison from work and home. A decent job does not poison the community with chemicals and waste.

Chapter 5, "Work dangers and solutions," has more information on work hazards and how workers and employers can prevent health problems. See the Hesperian book, *A Community Guide to Environmental Health*, for more information on health problems caused by hazards such as pollution outside the factory gate.

Social Dangers

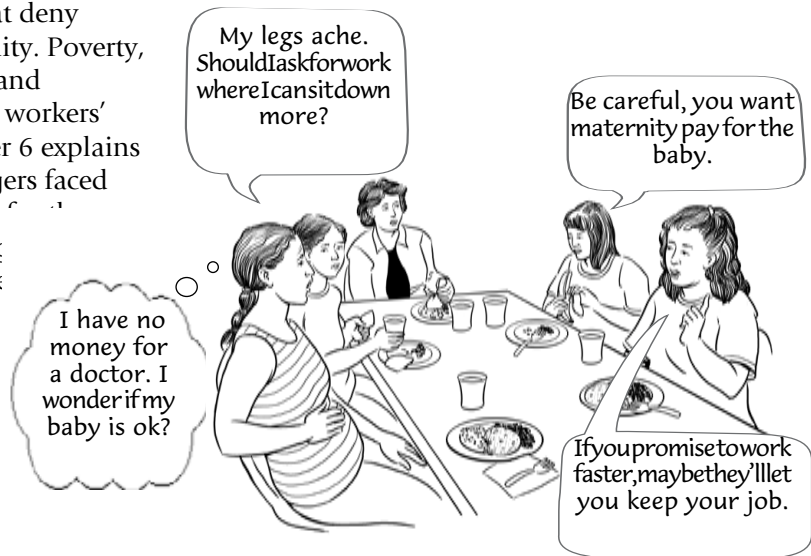
Social dangers are attitudes, customs, behaviors and conditions that deny workers their rights and dignity. Poverty, discrimination, harassment, and disrespectful treatment harm workers' health in many ways. Chapter 6 explains different kinds of social dangers faced by EPZ workers, how to look for them in your workplace, and changes to make for protection. Example dangers include:

Low wages: Factory wages are so low that workers live in poverty, yet workers and families have no other way to earn a living.

Discrimination against women: Women workers are paid less than men and have less opportunity to learn new job skills.



A decent job pays enough for a worker and her family to live a decent life. She needs a home in a community with clean water, proper waste disposal, schools and health care. She needs to feed and clothe herself and her family.



Employers who treat workers badly can harm the health of the workers' children.

Women are only hired for "women's work" and sometimes must show they are not pregnant to get a job. Union officials ignore women union members' concerns at work. Government agencies ignore women's complaints of dangerous working conditions.

Discrimination because of race, language, place of birth, or culture: Workers are treated unfairly by employers, the government, a union, or other workers because of these differences. Discriminated workers are often paid less or hired only for undesirable jobs. They also have less access to training and promotion.

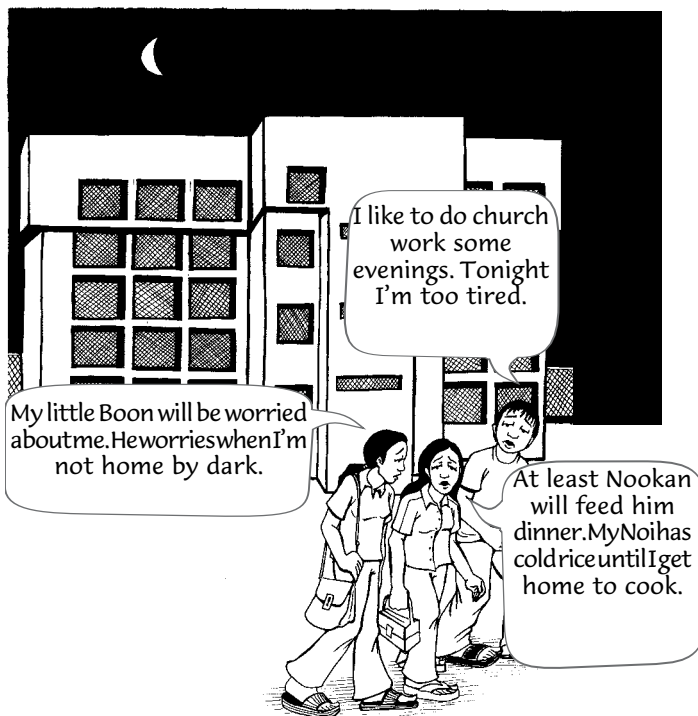
Discrimination against ill and injured workers: Workers who become ill or injured at work are fired. Employers do not pay for health care when workers are injured or made sick at work.

Unions not allowed: The law prohibits workers from organizing unions to negotiate with their boss. Or, unions are legal but employers can break union organizing campaigns and threaten or fire union leaders without being punished by the government.

Sexual harassment: A supervisor talks to a worker about sex, touches her, or makes her touch him or have sex with him to keep her job. A supervisor may allow or encourage some workers to sexually harass other workers.

Child labor: Young children work in factories to help the family survive instead of going to school. This problem is getting worse in places where many parents are sick or dying from HIV/AIDS, leaving their young children to work to support the family.

No public services: The EPZ factories pay no taxes to the town where their workers live, so residents do not have public services such as clean water, garbage collection, electricity, schools, transportation, and streetlights.



A decent job does not demand too many hours of work. Workers need time before and after work to take care of themselves, their families and contribute to community life.

Women are most affected

Most workers in EPZ factories are women because employers believe women do boring, repetitive work with their hands better than men. Employers also prefer to hire women because they believe women will work faster and longer without complaining. Because of these attitudes, the harsh working conditions of EPZ factories fall mainly on women.

Women in factories usually do different work and face different work dangers than men. It is important for women and men to work together to identify all the dangers and make the work safer for everyone.

Most social hazards of factory work are dangers that women also face in their homes and communities. Factory work brings women together where they can see problems they share and begin to talk about how to change them. Organizing to make work safer can also make communities healthier for women.

Make work safer by getting rid of dangers

Workers usually have the best ideas about how to make their work safer. When you are ready to talk about removing the dangers you have discovered, go back to talk to your co-workers and plan how to get your boss to make improvements.

Later, you may want to ask a friendly safety or health professional for advice. Sometimes safety and health professionals have ideas about effective and inexpensive ways to change workplaces to make them healthier. They can tell you if the laws where you live require specific solutions.

It may take a long time to get your boss to make the best solutions at your factory. In the meantime, there are usually things you can do to improve the situation a little. Think about simple changes you might get your

employer to make. Also think about changes you can make without your employer's support. A good short-term solution protects workers now and can win the support of your co-workers for a long-term solution. Short-term solutions include:

Workers in the maintenance department can improve guards on machines, build simple foot supports, and keep the wheels on carts working smoothly.

Workers who have been at the factory a long time can train new employees and show them how to use the machines safely.

Try to get your employer to hire workers to do maintenance, cleaning, and monitoring of the safety and health dangers in the factory.

Strategies for safer work

A boss can respond to the dangers of a specific task in different ways. Which strategy does your boss use? Which would you prefer to use?

Do Nothing Strategy

The boss may deny the work is dangerous and do nothing. When one worker becomes injured or ill, he will get rid of her and hire someone else.

I can't believe the boss just yelled at me to work faster! I can barely stay on my feet because this cleaner makes me feel sick and my legs are so tired from standing all day.



Change the worker strategy

Or the boss may try to **change the worker** by making her do the work differently or forcing her to wear uncomfortable safety equipment.

This is what I get for complaining that the cleaner makes me feel sick and makes my hands red and sore.



Change the workplace strategy

A good boss will **change the workplace** by fixing or replacing equipment, tools and processes to eliminate dangers and make the work safe.

It is much better since we talked about the ways to make this safer for me! The new brush cleans the parts better, too.

