

# LaborVoices

Bangalore Garment Worker Pilot Report

## INTRODUCTION TO LABORVOICES

LaborVoices envisions a world without human trafficking, a world where all workers have access to fair working conditions. Our business model leverages market forces to bring about long-term, sustainable improvements in working conditions around the world.

As a 2012 Clinton Global Initiative member, we have committed to working within the supply chains of multinational brands in countries such as India, Bangladesh, China, Malaysia, Indonesia and Mexico. We also plan on developing and deploying an anti-trafficking application for migrant labor within supply chains.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

In today's complex global supply chains, leading corporate brands offshore production of goods to low-cost manufacturing facilities around the world. Low wages, lack of knowledge of entitlements, corruption and under-resourced labor inspectorates have left workers in these production centers highly vulnerable to egregious labor abuses such as wage theft, human trafficking, child labor and harassment. Brands have implemented complex auditing and inspection processes in an attempt to ameliorate this problem, yet labor violations continue to occur. As a response, international multi-stakeholder initiatives have convened to agree on principles of business and human rights.<sup>1</sup> Tools to put these principles into practice have been slower to develop.

## THE LABORVOICES APPROACH

Through a unique and innovative approach, LaborVoices provides a secure communication platform, accessible to workers around the world, free of charge, through their mobile phones. Co-designed with local NGOs in each area of operation, programmed in regional languages, and recorded in local voices, our audio interface allows us to direct educational messaging to workers on topics such as local labor laws, human rights, freedom of association and collective bargaining. We believe that access to this kind of information will empower workers to advocate for their own rights. We also provide informational messaging to workers—designed to advance their health, safety and overall quality of life—on local programs and services such as legal aid, healthcare, micro-insurance, educational scholarships and vocational training.

In the reverse direction, we gather accurate, real-time information on working conditions inside factories from workers. We ensure the anonymity of our information sources to prevent reprisal against workers. We aggregate this information across factories, geographic regions and industry sectors to generate

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., the [UN Guiding Principles](#), defining the duties and responsibilities of governments and business in protecting human rights.

actionable, metrics-based streams of intelligence on the supply chains of corporate brands. We offer direct and exclusive access to this intelligence to brands for a limited period, providing an opportunity for decisive and corrective action. Once the exclusivity period for a brand has expired, we publish this intelligence, empowering consumers to direct their purchasing power to socially responsible producers, and helping workers make informed employment choices.

## A MODEL FOR CHANGE

LaborVoice's crowd-sourced intelligence model pivots on the power of transparency and multi-stakeholder collaboration as tools to effect transformational change in workplaces around the world.

We believe that by connecting all stakeholders—brands, buyers, suppliers, worker representative organizations, civil society, individual workers and consumers—to a virtual roundtable and providing them with accurate information on working conditions, we can bring long-term sustainable improvements to workplaces around the world.

LaborVoices provides brands and buyers with streams of intelligence from workers in their supply chains, enabling them to benchmark supplier performance and drive reform in areas of operations, working conditions and compliance.

Suppliers can benefit from our intelligence through insights into worker sentiment and opportunities to promote worker-management dialog. Best-in-class suppliers can rise above the competition and serve as models for best practice in the industry.

LaborVoices builds alliances with local NGOs in each of the regions where we operate, organizations that have a strong track record in collaboratively advocating for labor rights and fair workplace conditions. These partners are our representatives into worker communities—explaining our mission, our technology and mobilizing workers to participate in our program. An alliance with LaborVoices can amplify the voices of these organizations, and provide them with tools and capabilities to scale their own programs and advocacy efforts.

With LaborVoices, workers can play a participatory role in improving their own working conditions. They can get updates on minimum wage, working hours, and overtime protection regulations; they can access organizations that can advocate on their behalf; and most importantly, they can safely report violations of their human rights. The LaborVoices platform can deliver anonymized testimonials from broadly representative bodies of workers on a wide range of topics. This intelligence—once made available to all the stakeholders (NGOs, factory managers and corporate brands)—can remove barriers to implementing reforms in the workplace, helping stakeholders ensure workers' basic rights regarding wages, working hours, benefits and respect in the workplace. The social returns on these reforms can expand beyond the workforce, improving lives and further enhancing the pool of labor resources for brands. Investments in factory improvements made by brands and suppliers can demonstrate strong returns through a motivated,

productive workforce and through lower attrition and turnover rates which in turn can assure the long term viability of manufacturing operations in that region.

Lastly, consumers can use LaborVoices to guide their purchasing decisions, and reward socially responsible producers—creating the ultimate incentive for brands and suppliers to invest in workplace improvements.

## THE LABORVOICES GARMENT WORKER PILOT

LaborVoices launched a pilot trial in Bangalore, India in January 2012. The pilot was targeted towards garment workers and was designed to field-test our worker interface and our social partner collaboration model.

### *The Garment Industry in Bangalore*

Prior to initiating the pilot, LaborVoices contracted with a Bangalore consultant for an assessment of working conditions and the viability of a LaborVoices solution in the garment sector. This assessment and the considerable body of research conducted by Cividep, a Bangalore-based NGO that has been advocating on behalf of garment workers since 2000, provided a clear picture of the socio-economic conditions of Bangalore garment workers.

A typical Bangalore garment worker is female, relatively young (below 28 years of age) and is a core wage-earner for her household. She has had to leave school to get married or to help support her family. Uneducated beyond primary or secondary school, she has few employment options beyond garment factories. In these factories, she may suffer violations of her most basic employment rights—an employment contract, minimum wage, working hours, leave and overtime—which are delineated in national and state laws<sup>2</sup>. She faces gender discrimination in the form of disparities in wages and promotions, and verbal and physical harassment. To make matters worse, she is not fully aware of her rights or how to exercise them, and is not a member of a trade union. She faces a key stress factor—the quota system—where she is assigned unrealistically high hourly production targets. Her supervisors may verbally abuse her and coerce her into working extra hours to meet her assigned quotas. Her health may suffer also, with frequent complaints of leg aches, back aches, respiratory conditions and anemia.

Conversations with other stakeholders brought to light some key concerns—from brands, suppliers and labor rights advocates—about the core issues of attrition, turnover, productivity and labor unrest which threaten the long-term viability of the garment industry in this region. These conversations signaled to us a readiness from these stakeholders to test out our collaborative intelligence-sharing model.

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<sup>2</sup> e.g, the Factory Act, Minimum Wages Act and the Maternity Benefit Act.

## ***Designing the Pilot***

Based on this understanding of worker demographics and stakeholder needs, we initiated with a pilot in the garment sector in Bangalore. We collaborated with a Bangalore-based NGO for a baseline assessment, application design and content development. We designed the pilot to provide educational and informational messaging on labor laws and locally available services. We queried workers on compliance with local labor laws, specifically on their working hours, wages and overtime. We also provided workers with the opportunity to record testimonials on workplace harassment. All content was recorded in the regional language (Kannada) by our social partner using the voice of a representative from the worker community.

## ***Outreach and Mobilization***



*LaborVoices users in training, Spring 2012  
(blurred intentionally)*

Our social partner performed worker outreach on behalf of LaborVoices in the major garment production areas in Bangalore. The organization conducted outreach at training facilities, outside factory premises and in workers' residential neighborhoods. In light of the contentious nature of worker-management relationships in the Bangalore garment sector, we elected not to engage directly with factory management for the duration of this first pilot. Our social partner also conducted focus group discussions to gauge worker opinion on the LaborVoices product.

## ***Results***

More than 300 workers from more than 20 factories actively participated in our pilot, accessing the system for both the messaging and data collection components. As anticipated, we were able to collect quantitative records of wages and hours, as well as overtime wages and hours. For example, 14% of respondents reported that they were not paid their overtime wages in the previous week.<sup>3</sup> We also logged more than 90 audio testimonials on working conditions inside Bangalore factories. This response category was a bit of a surprise to us; we had been cautioned that female garment workers would fear retaliation from factory management and would be reluctant to provide audio testimonials. The recorded testimonials corroborated many of the issues that labor advocates in the area have been reporting, such as unreasonable production quotas. The testimonials also shed light on some previously unknown issues, such as the suspension of

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the small sample size, this statistic is not to be taken as representative of the Bangalore garment sector as a whole.

transportation facilities at one factory. We credit these results to our social partner's relationships with worker communities in Bangalore and their outreach efforts on our behalf.

### **Learning Outcomes**

Through focus group discussions on the LaborVoices application and the pilot program, workers shared their appreciation for the ability to access information with their phones. Some of these workers had gone through labor rights training with local unions, but still found it useful to have this information immediately available. Our Bangalore pilot provided us with valuable field experience in the use of technology, while also validating our multi-stakeholder collaborative model.

#### **Sample Testimonials from Garment Workers**

*Appointment letter<sup>4</sup> is not given to us and we can be removed from our job without notice.*

*If I take leave, I will not be paid for that day<sup>5</sup>.*

*There is no canteen facility<sup>6</sup>. They scold us if we ask for that.*

*Even if I am 5 min late, I am turned away and asked to go back home<sup>7</sup>.*

*I am harassed a lot. The production targets have been increased. I am not able to meet those targets, because of which I am asked to go home. I am forced to do more production. I am told that if production is not done, why do you want to come to the factory? They have increased the production number to 160 pieces. We are forced to stay back<sup>8</sup> and finish the quota. They ask me to bring more people to join the factory.*

*I am scolded with words like "You donkey, if you didn't want to do production, why did you want to come here and die?" Last week they harassed me; we are very busy in work. They harass for production like anything. Please take some action.*

*They scold us very badly. If we don't work to their target, they say 'why you come to work?' but for us it is the matter of food. So we simply listen and work.*

*They don't scold me, but if at all they do, I will inform you.*

*They scold us if we don't produce as much as they want us to.*

*I get scolded very badly if I take leave.*

*I am harassed; when production target not met, we are scolded. We are forced to do overtime.*

*They ask us for a high rate of production. And if we can't deliver that, then they abuse us.*

*We are not paid for overtime and they cut a lot of our wages with respect to overtime.*

*There is no sexual harassment in the factory. There are payment problems.*

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<sup>4</sup> An appointment letter defines the terms of employment, similar to an employment contract.

<sup>5</sup> Meaning she is not paid if she takes time off from work, even though she is entitled to paid leave.

<sup>6</sup> The Factory Act mandates provision of canteens (dining facilities) in factories with more than 250 employees.

<sup>7</sup> Workers are turned away if they are late for work and lose the day's wages.

<sup>8</sup> Meaning forced overtime.

## NEXT STEPS

Encouraged by the success of this pilot, we plan to expand into other regions and industry sectors. We will continue to iterate on product design, while also experimenting with region- and sector-specific content development and outreach methodologies. We also plan to explore data-sharing opportunities with collaborative auditing platforms.<sup>9</sup>

LaborVoices is actively pursuing partnerships including social partners, suppliers and factory owners, buyers and corporate brands, and others in the social auditing and supply chain intelligence spaces.

## CONTACT US

We are very interested in hearing from readers of this report. If you're interested in more detailed results from this pilot, partnering with us, critiquing our methods, or simply lending an encouraging word, we're eager to hear from you. Please drop us a line at [contact@LaborVoices.com](mailto:contact@LaborVoices.com) or +1 925.456.4574.

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<sup>9</sup> E.g., SEDEX, Fair Factories Clearinghouse, etc.