RESEARCH ARTICLE

Behind the Seams: An Assemblage Analysis of Labor Exploitation in Cambodia and Vietnam's Garment Industries

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Abstract

This article examines how labor exploitation among garment workers in Cambodia and Vietnam arises from the interaction of legal governance, economic development strategies, and cultural belief systems. Despite contrasting political regimes, Cambodia's fragmented pluralism and Vietnam's centralized authoritarianism, both countries produce similar exploitative outcomes: weak enforcement of labor protections, constrained worker representation, and persistent precarity. Using a most different systems design supplemented by an assemblage approach, the study analyzes how export-oriented growth and integration into global supply chains exert downward pressure on wages and working conditions. It also explores how religious and ethical worldviews, such as karmic endurance in Cambodia's Theravāda Buddhism and moral restraint shaped by Mahāyāna Buddhism and Confucianism in Vietnam, inform how workers interpret, endure, and sometimes symbolically resist their conditions. These belief systems function as informal mechanisms of governance, sustaining compliance where institutional safeguards fail. By deploying assemblage theory in a comparative analysis of Cambodia and Vietnam, this article challenges reductionist accounts of labor exploitation by presenting how it emerges through the contingent alignment of fragmented legal authority, transnational economic imperatives, and internalized moral frameworks.

Keywords: labor exploitation, labor governance, export-oriented development, moral frameworks, cultural belief systems

I. Introduction

Cambodia and Vietnam, located in Southeast Asia's Indochinese Peninsula, are significant manufacturing hubs in the global garment supply chain. In Cambodia, the garment and footwear industries employ around 800,000 workers, where 90% of them are women. This represents around 10% of the national labor force (ASEAN, 2024). The garment sector generated nearly $12 billion in 2024, accounting for 44.59% of Cambodia's total export revenue (Pisei, 2025). These underscore Cambodia's reliance on low-cost production as a driver of growth, enabled by investor incentives, duty-free access, and favorable trade agreements.

Vietnam is also a global manufacturing powerhouse driven by an export-oriented growth model under its one-party socialist system led by the Communist Party. Exports have accounted for over 90% of the country's GDP (Sreedharan, Kapoor, & Nguyen, 2018). By 2023, Vietnam had emerged as the third-

largest exporter of textiles and garments globally, generating over $40 billion in export revenues each year (WTO, 2023). The industry provides jobs for roughly 2.7 million people and accounts for about 16% of Vietnam's total export revenue (VITAS, 2024).

Given the garment industry's structural importance in both countries, this study undertakes a comparative analysis of poor working conditions in the garment industry in Cambodia and Vietnam. Applying a most different systems design (Mills et al., 2010), the research explores how two countries with distinct political regimes and union frameworks produce similar outcomes for garment workers.

II. Methods

The comparative analysis proceeds along three core dimensions: labor governance, economic development strategies, and cultural belief systems. These categories reflect the key assemblages that shape garment workers' lived conditions in each context. Labor governance includes the structure and enforcement of labor laws, union dynamics, and the role of state and non-state actors. Economic development considers export orientation, foreign investment regimes, and the pressures of global supply chains. Cultural belief systems refer to the moral and religious frameworks through which workers interpret and internalize their conditions. Together, these dimensions serve as the analytical backbone of the comparison, allowing the study to examine how structurally different regimes assemble functionally similar outcomes of labor exploitation.

In applying the most different systems design, this study treats Cambodia and Vietnam as cases that diverge across key institutional and cultural variables yet converge in labor outcomes. Cambodia is characterized by fragmented labor governance, a proliferation of pluralistic but weak unions, and enforcement systems undermined by corruption and limited state capacity (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Vietnam, by contrast, operates under a centralized socialist regime with a single-party-controlled union structure and formal legal protections that are routinely circumvented through informal negotiation and bureaucratic discretion (Ngo, 2016; Hoang & Jones, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2020). Cultural logics also differ: Cambodian workers often draw on Theravāda Buddhist ideas of karmic suffering and moral endurance (Tomalin, 2007; Cassinerio, 2021), while Vietnamese workers navigate workplace hierarchies shaped by Mahāyāna Buddhist compassion and Confucian norms of harmony and restraint (Tran et al., 2020). Despite these differences, both cases exhibit similar patterns of wage suppression, precarious employment, gender-based harassment, and ineffective worker representation (Sreedharan et al., 2018; Hardefeldt & York, 2023). MDSD allows the study to trace how these shared outcomes arise not from identical systems, but from structurally distinct yet functionally convergent assemblages of governance, market forces, and moral worldviews.

While much of the existing scholarship on labor exploitation in Southeast Asia has focused on institutional weaknesses,

corporate malpractice, or trade liberalization, fewer studies have explored how cultural and religious worldviews shape worker compliance and resistance in everyday factory life. Even fewer apply a comparative lens that treats political divergence not as a barrier, but as a means of uncovering structural commonalities in exploitation. Analyses of Cambodia and Vietnam often remain siloed, overlooking how functionally similar labor outcomes emerge from dissimilar configurations of governance and belief. Moreover, the dominant frameworks tend to treat culture as a background variable rather than a constitutive force. To address these gaps, this study applies an assemblage approach, which understands social conditions as contingent formations produced through the interaction of heterogeneous elements (Delanda, 2016). Rather than attributing exploitation to any single cause, assemblage thinking enables a multidimensional understanding of how labor precarity is actively constructed and sustained through the alignment of fragmented labor governance, export-led economic pressures, and culturally embedded moral frameworks. In doing so, this article offers a new account of labor exploitation in Southeast Asia that takes seriously the co-constitution of global production, power, and culture.

III. Hands at Work, Laws at Rest: Politics and Labor Governance

a. Legal Foundations of Labor Policy

Cambodia and Vietnam each possess formal labor regimes designed to safeguard garment workers. In Cambodia, the Constitution and 1997 Labor Law guarantee equal pay, freedom of association, and protection against gender discrimination. The law also covers working hours, minimum wage, and leave entitlements, with a 2021 amendment introducing changes to shift schedules, holidays, and dispute processes. Vietnam's 2019 Labor Code similarly outlines employment contracts, occupational safety, and collective bargaining rights. It is supported by the 2018 Anti-Corruption Law and the ratification of ILO Convention 98. However, Vietnam's continued delay in ratifying Convention 87 reflects its reluctance to allow independent unionization.

b. Enforcement Gaps

Despite these legal protections, enforcement remains limited. In Cambodia, the labor inspectorate under the Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training lacks institutional capacity and credibility. From 2009 to 2013, only 10 out of 295 violating factories were fined, and just 7 faced legal action (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Corruption further erodes enforcement. Inspectors admitted to receiving $100–$200 to hand over to superiors for favorable inspections. Factories officially labeled as compliant were often reported by workers to violate labor standards, including excessive overtime and contract abuse.

In Vietnam, anti-corruption laws have not translated into stronger enforcement. Bribery remains widespread in the garment sector (Nguyen et al., 2020), and employers are often compelled to negotiate informally with state agents. Legal safeguards on working conditions are frequently ignored (Sreedharan & Kapoor, 2018). Studies by Locke et al. (2007)

and Chan and Wang (2004) note that implementation is minimal, while Hoang and Jones (2012) found no functioning enforcement in the factories they examined. Although grievance mechanisms exist, they are often inaccessible or distrusted by workers.

In both settings, legal protections exist on paper but are selectively enforced as part of a broader regime of non-enforcement where compliance is managed through discretion, negotiation, and corruption rather than consistent legal application.

c. Trade Union Dynamics and Limitations

The Union governance differs across the two cases, yet both restrict worker power. Cambodia's labor movement is pluralistic but fragmented, featuring independent federations such as the Textile and Garment Workers' Federation of Cambodia. However, proliferation has not led to consolidation. Many unions compete rather than coordinate, and some are co-opted by political elites (Young, 2021). Arnold and Shih (2010) argue that industrial relations in Cambodia were shaped by donor agendas rather than worker mobilization. The 1999 US-Cambodia Textile and Apparel Trade Agreement introduced a tripartite model modeled on Western standards, leading to what Bienias (2015) describes as economic unionism aligned more with elite political arrangements than grassroots demands.

The weakness of Cambodia's union landscape is not just structural, but also spatially uneven. Union presence remains inconsistent. Better Factories Cambodia (2014) reported that 29% of surveyed factories had no unions. Those that do are frequently targeted by employers. Human Rights Watch (2015) documented over 35 cases of union busting since 2012, including the dismissal of recently elected union representatives and the systematic use of short-term contracts to undermine organizing efforts.

Vietnam prohibits independent unions entirely. The Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL) monopolizes union activity and operates under the authority of the Communist Party. Though formally extensive, the VGCL lacks the autonomy to advocate for workers' interests. It is positioned more as an administrative body than a site of resistance. Many workers describe the VGCL as ineffective or indifferent (Ngo, 2016). While some turn to wildcat strikes, these actions remain risky and often invite surveillance or punishment.

Although Cambodia permits union pluralism and Vietnam maintains centralized control, both systems ultimately restrict worker agency. Rather than enabling genuine bargaining, union structures in both countries serve to contain unrest–through political co-optation and fragmentation in Cambodia, and state control in Vietnam.

d. Labor Governance Reform Beyond the State

In response to enforcement failures, both states have relied on international and non-state actors to improve labor governance. In Cambodia, Better Factories Cambodia (BFC)–a joint initiative by the ILO and IFC–was launched in 2001 to monitor compliance and improve transparency. It has improved the country's profile among global buyers, but its effectiveness in addressing deeper issues is

contested. Hughes (2007) notes BFC prioritizes global benchmarks over local labor needs. Bienias (2015) observes that wage and overtime violations, as well as the use of subcontractors, are prevalent in the garment sector but remain largely unaddressed in public discourse and monitoring initiatives. Although she does not specify the reasons for this omission, such issues arguably pose a challenge to state and employer interests by revealing practices that circumvent formal regulation and complicate enforcement.

Vietnam's Better Work Vietnam (BWV), established in 2009, operates in over 500 factories. Its initiatives include Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) and the Factory Ambassador Programme, both of which aim to build workplace capacity and improve safety and gender equity (Betterwork, 2023). While these programs have produced localized improvements–such as improved communication and reduced harassment–they remain limited in scope. They focus primarily on interpersonal dynamics and voluntary managerial reforms, rather than systemic issues such as wage violations, excessive overtime, or the misuse of short-term contracts. Moreover, BWV's reliance on cooperation with state agencies and its non-binding framework restrict its capacity to address violations that implicate broader political or institutional structures.

Both BFC and BWV reflect the limits of compliance-oriented reform models that rely on voluntary participation and state cooperation. While such programs can lead to localized improvements in factory conditions and managerial practices, they lack the institutional independence and enforcement power needed to address deeper structural violations–such as wage theft, forced overtime, and union repression–that are often rooted in the broader political economy of labor governance.

IV. Garments of Globalization: Economic Models and the Fast Fashion Industry

a. Global Supply Chains and Export-Oriented Development

Cambodia and Vietnam occupy strategic positions in the global fast fashion supply chain. Their export-oriented economic models shape labor dynamics in distinct yet converging ways. In Cambodia, the garment sector is a primary destination for brands such as Adidas, H&M, UNIQLO, and Zara (SWITCH-Asia Programme, 2022), drawn by low wages, lenient regulation, and preferential trade arrangements. These conditions meet the demands of the fast fashion model, which prioritizes rapid design turnover, just-in-time production, and minimized costs (Miranda & Roldán, 2023). Factories are pressured to meet short lead times, respond to volatile market trends, and maximize output with minimal investment in labor protections.

Vietnam's garment sector followed a similar trajectory through the Đổi Mới (renovation) reforms of the late 1980s, which introduced export-led industrialization and encouraged foreign direct investment (FDI) via tax incentives, deregulation, and limited labor organization (Le, 2022). In 2018, FDI in Cambodia's garment and footwear industries surged by 90%, while Vietnam's export growth in garments and footwear reached 79% and

60%, respectively (Donker, 2021). This influx of capital has incentivized cost-cutting across both economies, resulting in what Donker terms "downward pressure on wages and working conditions" as states compete to attract mobile capital.

This convergence is visible in shared outcomes. Cambodia's minimum wage, despite increases, covers only 36% of the estimated living wage, and over 53% of workers are on short-term contracts that let firms bypass obligations and hinder union activity (Donker, 2021). In Vietnam, 77% of factories exceed legal workweek caps, and wage compliance has dropped since 2011, even as FDI rises (Betterwork, 2019). These patterns reflect not incidental failures, but systemic consequences of FDI-driven development strategies that reward states for maintaining weak labor enforcement.

b. Exploitative Production Practices and Informalization

Fast fashion's demand for speed and flexibility reinforces exploitative labor practices in both contexts. In Cambodia, forced overtime, short-term employment, and intimidation tactics are widespread, according to ASEAN (2025). To remain competitive, garment factories in Cambodia and Vietnam predominantly employ low-tech CMT models: approximately 60 % of Cambodian factories operate on cut-make-trim contracts (ASEAN, 2024). Similarly, over 65% of Vietnamese garment exports come from CMT operations, with many firms stuck in low-value production phases despite significant export growth (Linh, 2025). This reliance on labor-intensive processes and the avoidance of capital-intensive automation is driven by buyer pressures, low wages, and a lack of industrial policy, which collectively limit deeper modernization and reinforce dependency in global supply chains. Vietnam's system differs in form but not in effect. A significant share of garment production is subcontracted through multi-tiered networks, where primary export factories outsource work to smaller workshops–often informal, unregistered, or home-based units operating outside industrial zones (ILO, 2019). These subcontractors are typically engaged to absorb excess orders during peak production periods or to meet tight deadlines imposed by global buyers. Because they fall outside formal regulatory oversight, labor standards in these sites are rarely enforced, leaving workers vulnerable to low wages, unsafe conditions, and exclusion from union representation.

These spaces allow firms to meet fast fashion demands while distancing themselves from responsibility for labor abuses (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013. Informalization, in turn, exposes workers to occupational hazards–such as unsafe equipment, excessive hours, and lack of formal protections–that go largely unmonitored. These risks are intensified by the scattered nature of subcontracted sites, which are often located in residential neighborhoods or outside formal industrial zones (Human Rights Watch, 2015). This spatial dispersion isolates workers from one another and from formal unions or grievance mechanisms, fragmenting collective action and shielding employers from accountability.

In effect, Cambodia concentrates exploitation within formal factories while

Vietnam disperses it through informal networks. Both models achieve the same outcome: minimizing labor costs while externalizing accountability.

c. Institutional Reinforcement and Global Governance Structures

The exploitative dynamics of fast fashion are not driven solely by national policy choices but are reinforced by global institutions and trade regimes that promote export-led growth. In Cambodia, labor conditions have been shaped by the World Trade Organization's liberalization frameworks and the World Bank's structural adjustment programs, which prioritize trade liberalization and FDI over labor protection (Titievskaia et al., 2021; Arnold, 2013). The WTO's rejection of the social clause in 1996, which would have tied trade benefits to labor standards, exemplifies this orientation.

These frameworks have positioned Cambodia as a model for market-led development, despite persistent labor violations. The country's dependence on low-cost, high-volume production has become structurally entrenched, with minimal incentives for reform. Vietnam has similarly expanded market access through trade agreements like the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA). While these agreements include labor provisions, enforcement mechanisms remain weak and largely symbolic (Human Rights Watch, 2024). Vietnam's integration into global markets is further accelerated by WTO liberalization, which has facilitated rapid export growth without binding commitments to labor rights. These international agreements enable countries to maintain competitive advantages by limiting wage increases, delaying union reform, and resisting meaningful oversight.

The result is an institutional architecture that not only enables but actively sustains exploitative production conditions. Global trade regimes and development institutions reward deregulation and minimal compliance, making labor exploitation a structural outcome of global capitalism–not an anomaly.

V. Culture & Compliance, Silence and the System: Cultural and Religious Framing

a. Cambodian Spiritual Beliefs and the Moralization of Suffering

Cambodia is a predominantly Theravāda Buddhist country, with over 95% of the population adhering to the faith, making it a central force in shaping moral values and social behavior (The Association of Religion Data Archives, 2020). Theravāda Buddhist beliefs are seen in the daily life of Cambodian citizens and thus play a central role in shaping how garment workers interpret and respond to the realities of labor exploitation. Rather than viewing suffering solely through a material or legal lens, many workers draw from a spiritual framework in which hardship is rationalized as a karmic consequence. According to Tomalin (2007), Buddhist ethics encourage individuals to "live patiently with a situation." In this context, submission to difficult conditions is not only a product of external coercion for it is also culturally and

spiritually internalized as virtuous. Cassinerio (2021) notes that garment workers in Cambodia often focus on interpersonal mistreatment, such as verbal abuse or favoritism, rather than linking their experiences to broader structural injustice. This moral framing, grounded in expectations of respect and fairness, presents a cultural preference for dignity through endurance rather than confrontation. These values are further reinforced by management, creating a convergence between religious morality and labor governance.

Yet, it would be faulty to conclude that Cambodian cosmology and Buddhism only bring about submission. In moments of acute tension, particularly when foreign owners violate spiritual boundaries, mass fainting episodes have emerged as culturally intelligible acts of protest. These events, documented by Eisenbruch (2018), are understood by workers and local communities as forms of spirit possession triggered by moral and ritual disorder. Factories constructed on former Khmer Rouge killing fields or sites where guardian spirits are believed to reside often experience mass faintings following labor disputes or workplace accidents. These episodes are not dismissed as medical phenomena but interpreted as spiritual expressions of outrage. In one case, a spirit–channeled through a possessed worker–verbally chastised a factory owner and demanded ritual offerings to restore harmony (Eisenbruch, 2018). These fainting episodes present a clash between local spiritual sovereignty and global capitalist incursion. While they do not conform to conventional forms of labor resistance, they nonetheless function as symbolic denunciations of exploitation, introducing a form of protest grounded in Khmer moral cosmology. As Eisenbruch (2018) observes, these events become "culturally coherent forms of social protest," especially when institutional recourse is unattainable.

b. Cultural Ethics of Restraint in Vietnam and the Politics of Silence

In Vietnam, the internalization of labor exploitation is shaped by overlapping frameworks of Mahāyāna Buddhist ethics and Confucian social hierarchies, both of which emphasize social harmony, moral self-restraint, and deference to authority. Although Vietnam's religious landscape is pluralistic, Mahāyāna Buddhism remains a cultural reference point that informs how suffering and obligation are interpreted. Unlike the karmic individualism in Cambodia's Theravāda tradition, Vietnamese Mahāyāna Buddhism highlights compassion and interdependence, particularly through the ideal of the bodhisattva, to delay personal liberation to alleviate the suffering of others (Tomalin, 2007). This moral orientation overlaps with Confucian ideals that prioritize social order, filial piety, and the avoidance of public conflict. As Tran et al. (2020) note, Vietnamese workplace culture often demands that workers suppress grievances to maintain interpersonal harmony, and employees are taught to value the collective good and family reputation over individual well-being. Speaking out in the factory hierarchy risks disrupting moral order and bringing shame to oneself and one's kin. Here arises a culture of silence, where endurance becomes an ethical imperative. Moreover, political repression intensifies this culture of silence even more as the

Vietnamese government enforces strict control over labor organizing, permitting only the state-run VGCL to operate legally. This creates a dual mechanism: cultural norms discourage protest, while state policies enforce compliance through the threat of punishment. Mahāyāna Buddhism's emphasis on non-confrontation and duty provides a framework through which hardship is moralized. Labor suffering is not only tolerated but rendered intelligible within dominant ethical systems, turning cultural compliance into a mechanism of governance.

Though both countries share global garment supply chains, they differ in how labor suffering is internalized, endured, and at times, ritualized. Cultural and religious norms in Cambodia and Vietnam function not as passive traditions but as moral infrastructures that regulate behavior, absorb grievance, and delimit the boundaries of resistance. Attending to these moral frameworks reveals how power is not only imposed from above but also sustained through the everyday moral reasoning of workers themselves.

VI. Linked by Thread, Divided by Borders: Shared Exploitation in Cambodia and Vietnam's Garment Industries

a. Forced Labor Practices

Exploitative labor practices remain widespread across Cambodia and Vietnam. Child labor persists in Cambodia's construction and garment sectors, with children involved in hazardous tasks (Field, 2017). In Vietnam, trafficked minors as young as twelve have been found working in unregulated factories supplying global brands (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013).

For adult workers, forced and excessive labor is routine. In Cambodia, refusing overtime can result in wage cuts or contract termination (Kashyap, 2015). In Vietnam, workers are threatened with dismissal or financial penalties for absenteeism, even when related to illness, or for failing to meet strict quotas (Sreedharan et al., 2018). These coercive measures ensure labor compliance through economic dependency and fear.

However, these outcomes do not arise from a single point of failure. Rather, they result from the alignment of state indifference, corporate incentives, cultural norms, and economic precarity. In Vietnam, legal ambiguity and top-down union control intersect with Confucian expectations of harmony and restraint, reinforcing a workplace culture where resistance is both structurally and morally discouraged. In Cambodia, the absence of strong enforcement mechanisms combines with karmic narratives that moralize suffering, leading workers to rationalize coercion as part of their spiritual path. These dynamics illustrate a system where labor compliance is produced through the entanglement of bureaucratic, economic, and cultural forms of power.

b. Unsafe and Hazardous Work Environments

Workers in both countries endure extreme heat, poor ventilation, and unsafe factory conditions. Cambodian factory temperatures frequently reach 40°C, prompting worker demands for cooling

interventions (Thorn, 2024, as cited in Nimol, 2024; Sreydeth & Sothyroth, 2024). Meanwhile, Vietnam faces worsening wet-bulb heat conditions, particularly in major industrial zones such as Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi (Not For Sale, 2024).

Factory layouts often pose direct safety risks. In Cambodia, workers report fears of entrapment or assault in isolated areas (Human Rights Watch, 2015). In Vietnam, over a quarter of factories have blocked emergency exits, presenting life-threatening dangers in crises (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013). These hazardous environments manifest most visibly through mass fainting incidents. In Cambodia, faintings are frequent, linked to toxic fumes, excessive heat, and psychological stress (Maza, 2017; Kamazu & Kim, 2019). In Vietnam, such incidents are less frequent but have occurred in extreme heat, such as the Quang Nam case where 66 workers collapsed (Thuy, 2016). The persistence of unsafe conditions reveals how health risks are normalized within production regimes that prioritize output over well-being. In Cambodia, fainting episodes are not only physiological responses to stress but also socially intelligible protests framed through local cosmologies, especially when they occur near spiritually significant sites (Eisenbruch, 2018). In both countries, physical and symbolic dimensions of labor risk are reinforced by state disengagement and moral expectations of endurance, producing compliance without direct coercion.

c. Gender-Based Discrimination and Harassment

Women and LGBTQI workers experience widespread abuse across both garment sectors. In Cambodia, many workers have reported experiencing or witnessing physical and verbal harassment without access to protection mechanisms (Lawreniuk & Parsons, 2017). In Vietnam, nearly half of surveyed female workers experienced at least one incident of violence or harassment in the previous year (Hodal, 2019).

Pregnant workers face systemic discrimination in both contexts. Cambodian factories frequently refuse to hire or renew contracts for visibly pregnant women, often subjecting them to harassment or unreasonable workloads (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Vietnamese factories circumvent maternity protections by assigning women to short-term contracts, and denying them leave and benefits (Worker Rights Consortium, 2013).

Gendered exploitation is sustained not only through weak enforcement and employer misconduct but also through deeply embedded narratives of duty and sacrifice. Global production models value pliant, feminized labor, while local moral frameworks–whether rooted in filial piety or Buddhist ideals of endurance–discourage defiance. These intersecting pressures render gender-based violence systemic and overlooked, tolerated within a moral economy of labor shaped by state silence and corporate cost-cutting.

d. Job Insecurity and Economic Instability

Mass layoffs and factory closures have intensified job insecurity in Cambodia and Vietnam. In Cambodia, over 20,000 garment workers have been displaced (Hardefelt & York, 2023), while Vietnam experienced the loss of nearly 280,000 garment jobs in just five months, many without adequate compensation (Business & Human Rights Resource Centre, 2023). Despite rising living costs, wages remain stagnant in both countries. Cambodian workers report declining real wages with minimal increases since 2020 (ILO, 2018; Hardefelt & York, 2023). In Vietnam, 99% of workers earn less than the Asia Floor Wage, even when working overtime (Oxfam, 2022).

These conditions drive workers into debt cycles. In Cambodia, 91% of surveyed workers hold loans–often informal, high-interest, or sourced directly from employers (Hardefelt & York, 2023). Vietnamese migrant workers commonly face steep recruitment fees, leading to debt bondage within global supply chains (Business & Human Rights Centre, 2025). Insecurity is not a side effect but a deliberate feature of the system. The state's permissiveness toward informal finance, the absence of labor protections, and the global race to lower production costs all converge to offload risk onto workers. The normalization of financial precarity is further entrenched by cultural expectations of resilience and familial responsibility, making unstable livelihoods appear natural–even inevitable.

e. The Cross Stitch of Exploitation

Despite notable differences in governance structures and cultural traditions, Cambodia and Vietnam converge across four core dimensions of labor exploitation: gender-based harassment, unsafe working environments, coercive labor practices, and deepening economic precarity. These outcomes are not coincidental or parallel; rather, they are produced through the interplay of institutional silences, global production pressures, and culturally embedded expectations.

In Cambodia, subcontracting arrangements and religious interpretations of suffering reinforce compliance without overt coercion. In Vietnam, centralized labor control is legitimized by Confucian ideals that privilege social harmony and discourage open dissent. Although these may appear as divergent cultural logics, in practice they facilitate structurally similar outcomes. State disengagement, often rationalized through local moral codes, is further compounded by the ability of transnational capital to exploit both regulatory gaps and normative deference. Consequently, what emerges is not an absence of governance, but a calibrated system of containment. Workers conform not only out of fear or economic necessity, but because institutional design, cultural rationalization, and market dependency operate in tandem to constrain collective resistance. Predictability benefits multinational brands. Political stability is secured for state actors. Yet the costs are disproportionately borne by workers.

Furthermore, policy responses that treat legal reform, cultural education, or market oversight as isolated solutions risk misdiagnosing the issue. Cultural frameworks are not inert; they are strategically mobilized to rationalize inaction. Legal mechanisms are not simply underdeveloped; they are selectively enforced in ways that preserve elite and corporate interests. Similarly, global brands are not passive beneficiaries–they are active participants in structuring conditions under which exploitation is both normalized and obscured.

VII. Conclusion

This This study examined how Cambodia's fragmented pluralism and Vietnam's centralized authoritarianism produce similarly exploitative conditions for garment workers. Using an assemblage framework, it demonstrated that labor exploitation does not stem from a single factor but emerges through the interaction of weak enforcement, economic dependency, cultural norms, and transnational pressures within global supply chains.

Despite distinct political systems, both countries converge on labor governance models that prioritize capital while limiting worker agency. Cambodia's union pluralism is weakened by elite capture and donor influence. Vietnam's state-controlled VGCL inhibits independent collective action. Enforcement differs in form, with corruption prevalent in Cambodia and informal negotiation dominating in Vietnam, but both reflect a model of governance through non-enforcement. Legal protections exist but remain selectively applied, managing labor rather than protecting it.

Economically, both states have adopted export-led strategies that treat labor as a cost rather than a development partner. Cambodia's dependence on foreign-owned factories and Vietnam's subcontracting networks reflect how low-cost labor becomes institutionalized as a market advantage. Labor clauses in trade agreements like CPTPP and EVFTA remain largely symbolic in practice. Culturally, moral worldviews help rationalize exploitation. In Cambodia, Theravāda Buddhism promotes endurance through karmic belief, while in Vietnam, Mahāyāna ethics and Confucian values emphasize harmony and restraint. These beliefs function as informal mechanisms of discipline, reinforcing compliance in the absence of institutional redress. Labor exploitation thus arises from a convergence of legal, economic, and cultural assemblages. The assemblage approach captures this complexity, showing how inequality is simultaneously structured and internalized.

Future research should center the lived experiences of workers, exploring how they navigate and resist these forces. It should also examine whether global interventions genuinely challenge these structures or merely rebrand exploitation. Achieving real change requires not only national reform but a fundamental transformation of the global economic system that makes labor exploitation enduringly profitable.

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