**For a Few Dollars More: Towards a Translocal Mobilities of Labour Activism in Cambodia**

This paper uses the context of Cambodia’s 2013/14 and 2015 minimum wage campaigns to demonstrate the translocally rural-urban nature of worker agency and activism within global production networks. In doing so, it first highlights the gendered and hierarchical nature of the Cambodian union movement, emphasising in particular the disjuncture between its thriving, inter-occupational grassroots support and the male dominated, top down hierarchies of the union leadership. Secondly, the authors present primary informant testimonies and quantitative figures produced from 13 years of secondary strike data to highlight the key role of agricultural pressures in motivating strike participation. This translocal perspective on protest is used, finally, to demonstrate how certain features of the Cambodian union movement – hierarchy, male predominance and structural disjuncture – are rooted not in abstract norms, but in the everyday mobilities of translocally rural-urban livelihoods, which have rendered grassroots activism largely independent of the structures that represent it.

1. **Introduction**

Sparked by the meteoric rise of the garment industry from near non-existence in the early 1990s to the cornerstone of the national economy today, the past four years have seen Cambodian social movements enter the international spotlight like never before. Following years of growing unionism, a new wave of coordinated, nationwide strikes demanding a $160 monthly minimum wage for garment workers began in late 2013, but was brutally interrupted in January 2014, when police opened fire on protestors in the capital, killing five. Little momentum was lost, however. Eighteen months later, a new campaign saw factory workers, farmers, teachers, and the young united in support of a $177 minimum wage for the garment industry, as a nation described as ‘a shattered society’ only two decades earlier (Martin, 1994), gave rise to vibrant evidence of its own solidarity.

Despite its egalitarian ethos, though, contemporary activism in Cambodia possesses long embedded structural features that constrain the voices of certain groups. The emergent factory-scale unions of the 1990s have gradually coalesced into a handful of large scale federations, characterized by hierarchy and a lack of responsiveness to grassroots supporters. The result is an organized labour movement which is at once bottom up and top down; grown and enthusiastically supported by workers, but lacking dialogue between leadership and membership. The collective agency of this overwhelmingly female labour force is therefore sustained and constrained by complex translocal relationships rooted in non-union structures such families, social networks and the household economy.

Evidence of similar disjunctures between thriving informal activism and uncommunicative formal hierarchies – both in Southeast Asia (Brown and Ayudhya, 2013; Mills, 2012; 2008; 2005) and elsewhere (Barrientos, 2013; Wad, 2013) – has led to a growing interest in the concept of ‘horizontal agency’ in global production networks (Nielsen and Pritchard, 2009) and in particular how it intersects with vertical structures of representation (Coe and Hess, 2013). However, such analyses have adopted largely immobile foci, failing to fully reflect the translocal nature of pressures and incentives in the developing world. Cyclical mobility, communication flows of money and goods mean that workers’ – and especially women’s – livelihoods are determined as much by the livelihoods of their rural sender households as their urban wages, yet the role these linkages play in activism is significantly underexplored.

In view of this lacuna, this paper offers a translocal perspective on labour activism in Cambodia. Using a combination of rural and urban interviews and focus groups conducted both prior to and during the 2015 nationwide $177 campaign, it uses informant testimonies from the garment sector and other unionized sectors to explore the gendered and hierarchical nature of labour activism in Cambodia. Secondly, it extends the examination of these norms beyond unions themselves, to demonstrate how the translocal nature of migrant work renders both chronic and acute rural pressures key to determining the strength and volume of activism in the garment sector. Finally, it highlights how translocal obligations also play a role in determining the specific form of activism, encouraging the development of inter-occupational horizontal linkages at the expense of progression within vertical union structures.

1. **Framing the Translocal Mobilities of Protest**

In recent decades, processes of globalisation have transformed both local and global economies, drawing millions of people in the Global South into the industrial sector. Geographers have attempted to understand this by focusing on Global Production Networks (GPNs) as a means of ‘interpreting the complex spatiality of power relations’ that govern people’s interactions with these economic processes (Cumbers et al. 2008:371). However, the GPN literature has been criticised for a ‘top-down’ (Cumbers, Helms and Swanson 2010:51), ‘firm/capital-centric approach’ (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011: 221) that has remained ‘largely silent’ (Coe and Hess 2013:5) on how workers actively participate in shaping these multi-scalar economic systems (Carswell & De Neve 2013; Coe 2012).

Recent efforts to bring actors – such as unions, communities and workers themselves – back into the study of GPNs have helped to explain Southeast Asia’s contemporary development (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Nielsen and Pritchard, 2009; Nadvi, 2008), highlighting in particular the role of worker agency on economic systems (Lier, 2007). However, they have focused overwhelmingly on collective agency (Carswell and De Neve, 2013), thereby neglecting the agency of individual workers and failing to consider the agency of workers on each other (Rogaly, 2009). As Nielsen and Pritchard (2010) argue, this means that so far only ‘vertical’ agency – i.e. top down or bottom up agency – has been explored, at the expense of ‘horizontal’ agency, enacted by peers upon each other. The result has been a poor understanding of why some groups – most notably women – are significantly underrepresented in labour movements.

Part of the reason for this is that – despite detailed explorations elsewhere (Ford and Gillen, 2015; Ford, 2013; Cohen and Rai, 2004) – the institutions that facilitate collective agency have become something of a black box within labour geography (Cumbers et al., 2008; Coe et al., 2008). They have been shown to under represent women in leadership roles (BWI, 2014; Broadbent and Ford, 2007), but the broader structures that produce this unequal representation are unclear. Closely linked to this issue is the failure to consider the wider factors that affect women’s ability to exercise agency in labour movements. Garment workers are not a homogenous or undifferentiated group; rather, ‘their diversity – in terms of gender, caste, and migratory status – is important for understanding their agency’ (Lier, 2007: 66). Trade unions are therefore organizations that represent *particular forms* of labour and express the tensions and contradictions stemming from the geographical entanglements of space and power that run through them (Cumbers et al., 2008: 385). However, the ‘refined analysis’ necessary to understand how these complex structures influence labour agency as a whole are ‘lacking’ in the contemporary literature (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2010: 8).

A particular issue is the persistently industrial focus exhibited by studies of labour activism (e.g. Barrientos, 2013; Wad, 2013; Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). Modern sector growth in many emerging economies has been fuelled not only by foreign direct investment, but also pressures on traditional livelihoods (Bowen, Cochrane and Fankhauser, 2012; Tacoli, 2009). Climate pressures, falling agricultural prices and a lack of opportunity at home are among the triggers that have ‘pushed’ (Bylander, 2015; ADB, 2012) rural households to diversify traditional agricultural income strategies, encouraging family members to migrate and take up work in urban manufacturing sectors. Variations in rural conditions (Parsons, 2016), mediated via gendered household norms (Cumbers, 2016), are therefore key determinants of garment workers’ economic behaviour. However, the wider impact of these factors on agency within production networks remains unclear.

Underpinning this lacuna is a historic schism in the geographic literatures between the rural and urban dimensions of mobility, which retains a persistent influence on studies of migrant work despite mounting evidence of its inaccuracy (Rigg, 2013; 2012; 2005; Potts, 2010; McGee, 2008). Efforts to resolve this disjuncture may be traced to Magobunje’s migration systems framework (1970), a seminal early framework that aimed to embed migration flows more fully in social institutions by bringing the influence of local institutions such as households and community councils into the analysis of mobility. Nevertheless, this approach has since remained underutilized as the Todaro (Harris and Todaro, 1970; Todaro, 1969) and other unilinear models (e.g. Zelinski, 1971; Lee, 1966) came to dominate geographic – and more broadly economic – conceptions of mobility from the 1970s onwards. Only recently has a re-examination of migration systems frameworks (Bakewell, 2014; Bakewell et al., 2012; De Haas, 2010) invited greater attention to migration’s ‘micro and macro elements, allowing subsystems to nest within larger systems’ and local institutions to be incorporated into the same analytical framework as price differentials and historical flows of people’ (King, 2012: 140).

Nevertheless, migration systems approaches have been criticized for their ‘mechanistic, positivist nature and… neglect of the personal and humanistic angles of mobility (King, 2012: 21), an issue translocality frameworks (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013a; Brickell and Datta, 2011; Poe et al., 2014) – which consider the rural and urban dimensions of mobility as an integrated system rooted in livelihoods and lived experiences – have sought to resolve (Herbeck, 2015). These frameworks have had a broad influence. In conjunction with recent research in the human-environment systems literatures, they have been used to demonstrate that translocal communities’ mobility is linked to environmental factors (Afifi et al., 2016; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013b), while research in the geographic (e.g. Ang et al., 2014; Lindley, 2010) and mobilities literatures (Manderscheid, 2014; Merriman, 2014) have highlighted how translocal communities are mobilized by cultural and interpersonal factors (Philips and Robinson, 2015; Jensen, 2009; Mackay, 2007).

Despite their influence, though, the insights of migration systems and translocality frameworks have not been used to explore how everyday worker livelihoods play a part in shaping agency within GPNs (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Lund-Thomson and Coe, 2013), or labour activism more broadly (Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu, 2011). Consequently the ‘top down’ interpretation of agency (Cumbers, Helms and Swanson 2010:51) that characterizes labour geography is underpinned by a failure to understand fully the multi-sited, interpersonal and mobile nature of agency at the “bottom” of supply chains. There is therefore a pressing case for ‘reconnecting agency to the wider societal structures in which is it embedded’ (Coe, 2013: 272) by paying greater attention to economic agents’ translocal livelihoods and voice finding strategies in order to understand the complex and multiple ways in which agency manifests in practice.

Building on classic studies such as Elson and Pearson (1981), amongst others, this paper therefore aims to show how the agency of workers – and in particular women’s agency – is constrained and shaped both by the vertical structures of unions themselves and by horizontal, translocally mediated, structures and associations such as the family and household economy. In addition to its implications for the mainstream GPN literature, this perspective speaks also to the literature on transnational feminist solidarity (Fougner and Kurtoğlu 2011; Bandy, 2004), which has tended to focus on how solidarity is built through the interaction of unions themselves. As shown here, horizontal solidarity may be an equally important force in sustaining solidarity movements across borders, sectors and social groups. Moreover, it may be sustained (and constrained) by actors who possess no direct geographical or industrial link to union movements themselves.

From this perspective, this paper aims more broadly to elucidate questions of significance to three areas of the labour geographic and wider GPN literature. First, it aims to contribute to the study of GPNs (Coe and Hess, 2013; Lund Thomsen et al., 2012; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2008) by exploring the ‘horizontal’ dimension of labour agency (Nielsen and Pritchard, 2009) through the lens of mobile livelihoods. Secondly, it will contribute to the literature on unions and labour movements (Ford and Gillen, 2015; Ford, 2013; Barrientos, 2013; Wad, 2013; Cohen and Rai, 2004) by adopting an institutional perspective to analyse the constraining role of Global Southern unions on women’s agency, as called for by Carswell (2016), Carswell and De Neve (2013) and Barrientos (2013). Thirdly, it will help to resolve the persistent urban and industrial bias of the GPN and labour activism literatures (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Rogaly, 2009) by emphasizing the translocally linked rural-urban nature of agency in production chains. In particular, it will highlight the role of agricultural and familial factors in motivating or constraining factory level and grassroots activism.

1. **Methods**

This study was conducted in two phases: firstly between June and July 2015 and secondly in October 2015. The first phase was directed towards understanding the pressures and constraints of garment work, union membership and protest. It explored memories of the 2013 protests and sought insights into the legacy of that conflict. Three months later, the second phase renewed this focus in the context of October’s nationwide minimum wage negotiations, the largest period of mass activism since the crackdowns of early 2014. During this latter timeframe, the remit of the study remained centered on the garment industry, but – in the novel context of mass inter-sectoral engagement – was expanded to include interviews with activists and union representatives from other industries who had affiliated themselves to the $177 movement.

The first round of interviews consisted of key informant interviews and focus groups undertaken with respondents resident in a factory complex close to the location of the Steung Meanchey riots in 2014. The majority of these interviews were facilitated by staff at Cambodia’s largest union federation: the Cambodian Coalition of Apparel Workers Democratic Union [C.CAWDU], who introduced the research team to factory level union representatives working in the vicinity of the 2013/14 protests. Union representatives organized a total of 25 key informant interviews and 10 focus groups with workers and representatives themselves. In addition, a further series of 15 interviews was organized independently of C.CAWDU, including conversations with workers, factory representatives of other unions, market traders, former garment workers currently engaged in child care, and the parents and relatives of workers.

Reflecting the multilateral landscape of the $177 campaign, the second round of interviews was undertaken in conjunction with a range of unions across multiple industries. Staff at C.CAWDU facilitated one key informant interview with senior staff and two with union representatives, as well as three further focus groups (two female and one male); staff at the Cambodian Independent Teachers Association [CITA] facilitated one key informant interview with a senior staff member and one focus group discussion with members; the Coalition of Cambodia Farmers Community [CCFC] facilitated key informant interviews with the director and a lower level representative, as well as a focus group with members; the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Associations [IDEA] arranged a key informant interview with the director and one focus group; and the Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation [CFSWF] also facilitated an interview with the director and one focus group. Finally, the directors of the Cambodia Youth Network [CYN], Focus on the Global South, Cambodia [FGS], the Cambodian Worker Friendship Union [CFWU] and the Cambodian Union of the Movement of Workers [CUMW] also agreed to be interviewed as key informants.

Thus, across the two rounds, a total of 62 key informant interviews and 17 focus groups were conducted across various occupations and at various levels of unionism. All interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 20 and 60 minutes. Like the focus groups, which contained 3 to 8 respondents and also lasted between 20 and 60 minutes, these were conducted by one of two pairs of researchers, each incorporating one native and one proficient speaker of Khmer. To further contextualise these data, the qualitative findings have in section 5.2 been set against a further, secondary data set collected from factory records by the Garment Manufacturer’s Association of Cambodia [GMAC] in order to highlight how the processes and trends observed in the qualitative data operate at a national scale. This approach was intended to provide detailed insight on both the everyday operation of Cambodian unionism in the wake of the 2014 crackdowns – as well as eyewitness recollections and reflections on that event – and multi-scalar union functionality as it manifests during the course of a campaign.

1. **Background**

Unionism in Cambodia emerged as a social movement and in many respects remains one. It shares many characteristics with newer, small scale, social movements representing young people, informal workers and women and is increasingly building direct linkages with these groups. However, Cambodian unionism possesses issues which set it apart from comparable industrial movements in the developing world. Union membership stands at up to 70% in the garment industry (Nuon et al., 2011; Nuon and Serrano, 2010), continues to grow and remains enthusiastic, yet most of Cambodia’s more than 1000 unions are organized into large federations (Arnold, 2013; Nuon et al., 2011), with affiliations to government, opposition, or neutral camps. Strategic conflict between the powerful leaders of neutral unions, combined with accusations of political manipulation against politically aligned ones creates deep rifts in the top level facade of industrial activism that undermine the strength of its base.

In part, these contradictions stem from the lightning pace at which the garment industry has emerged as a major force within the nation and the lives of its inhabitants. Political stability – albeit at the expense of meaningful democratic pluralism – under the three decade prime ministerial incumbent Hun Sen, teamed with an economy structurally adjusted to become one of the most open in Asia (TRAC, 2013) has seen hitherto unprecedented growth, built on a basis of foreign direct investment (Ibid.). Thus, whilst twenty years ago, the garment sector was almost non-existent, today it employs at least 700,000 workers (International Labour Organisation [ILO], 2015), out of a population of 15 million (World Bank, 2014), alongside numerous workers in complementary occupations such as construction, petty trade, and transportation (Parsons, Lawreniuk and Pilgrim, 2014), who have been estimated almost to match the size of the garment worker population itself (Vuthy and Hach, 2007).

The effect of this rise has been an economic boom which has transformed Phnom Penh, a city described in 1998 as a member of those “fourth world” stragglers characterised by complete ‘structural irrelevance’ to the global economy (Shatkin, 1998: 378), into the vanguard of Cambodia’s “development miracle” (Madhur, 2013: 1) only fifteen years later. Consequently, even in a country in which 70% of the population is under 30 (Pham et al., 2009), and the mean age of a garment worker is 27 years old (CARE, 2017), almost everybody is aware of worse times not far behind.

In this rapidly developing context, understanding what the garment industry meant to its workers in its early days – and by contrast, what it means today – is essential to understanding the emergence and growth of Cambodian union activity. Much as today, the garment industry’s early participants were predominantly ‘single young women, living away from home and earning wages which, although miserable, have formed the basis of an independent lifestyle unusual for a single person in Cambodia’ (Hughes, 2007: 842). On this basis, although strikes occurred with some frequency in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the ‘spark’ for these events was ‘frequently not issues of pay’, but poor treatment by managers and supervisors in the form of forced overtime, verbal abuse and ‘racist slurs’ (Ibid.).

The issues faced by Cambodian unions in their early years were therefore essentially local ones. Protected by the 1997 labour law which guaranteed a right to strike and to participate in non-violent demonstrations, factory level strikes continued to take place until the middle of the last decade. Whilst four union federations – (the Cambodian Federation of Independent Trade Unions [CFITU], the Cambodian Union Federation [CUF], the Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia [FTUWKC], and the National Independent Federation of Trade Unions of Cambodia [NIFTUC]) – coordinated activity throughout this period, it remained relatively small in scale (Arnold, 2013), never approaching scope of action seen today.

Nevertheless, this predominantly reactive mode of unionism was to change rapidly in the wake of two significant events: the influence of the ILO’s Better Factories Cambodia programme, first launched in 2001, and the initiation of the US-Cambodia trade agreement in 2006, which created significant incentives for the industry to adhere to national and international labour standards (Berik, 2008), leading to ‘a rapid proliferation of trade unions in Cambodia’s garment industry’ (Arnold, 2013: 13). Furthermore, this proliferation – from 1.4 unions per factory in 2008 up to 1.7 per factory in 2011 (Ibid.) – was matched by an even more rapid upturn in the power and disruptive influence of unions. From 2006 to 2007, the number of working days lost annually to strikes more than sextupled – from 52,000 to 344,000 – roughly maintaining this level for the following three years in spite of a sharp drop in strikes in the aftermath of the global economic downturn (Nuon and Serrano, 2010).

In addition, the statistical data alone do not bear witness merely to an increase in union activity, but to a shift in focus from ‘demands in the language of national pride and the rights of Khmers to be treated respectfully in their own land’ (Hughes, 2007: 842), towards a more progressive and cohesive era characterised by large scale union federations and nationwide campaigns. Led by increasingly dominant union federations such as C.CAWDU, unions and social movements across all labour sectors have begun to register their support for improvements in garment workers’ wages, viewing this intersectoral solidarity as a vanguard strategy for wider social justice in the Kingdom.

In this respect, Cambodian unionism in many ways reflects the tenets of “social movement unionism”, wherein unions play a leading role in effecting social change beyond a given industry (see Dibben et al., 2012; Dibben, 2004; Scipes, 1992). However, unlike in Bangladesh, where workers first began to find a genuine voice through the formation of the Bangladesh Independent Garment-Workers Union [BIGU] and thus the de-politicisation of unionism in the sector (Rock, 2001), the Cambodian case reveals an opposite trajectory. Rather than devolving from party politics, the Kingdom’s union movement has become increasingly politicised over time (Arnold, 2013), as the merger of the Sam Rainsy party with the Human Rights Party in 2013 created – until its dissolution by the ruling party in 2017 – a new force for democratic change, building in large part upon the Sam Rainsy Party’s traditionally strong support amongst the rapidly growing industrial sector.

This new party – the Cambodian National Rescue Party [CNRP] – affiliated itself with several previously independent unions as a means of counterbalancing the heavy constraints imposed by the government on the labour movement. Given that the unions pledging their support for the CNRP in this way had generally adopted a broadly anti-government stance whilst independent, the direct impact of this strategy is unclear. However, the surge of enthusiasm that greeted Sam Rainsy’s return from exile in 2013, together with the CNRP’s explicit support for workers’ demonstrations, appears likely to have contributed to the sharp spike in strikes and protests which culminated in the fatal crackdown on striking garment workers in Steung Meanchey in 2013.

Despite the high human cost, that campaign was viewed as a success in most quarters, gaining factory workers their largest ever minimum wage increase – from $100 to $128 – and reversing the trend of real wage decline which had continued since the inception of the industry until 2010 (ILO, 2015). Nevertheless, there is a growing awareness that Cambodia’s unionisation, though extensive, is only weakly representative of the specific interests of its supporters. Women in particular – though comprising over 85% of the workforce (ILO, 2015) – barely figure in the upper levels of garment worker unions (Noble and Jayasinghe, 2016; Arnold, 2013). Consequently, the Cambodian labour movement has been called ‘a women’s movement under male leadership’ (Nuon and Serrano 2010: 142), with hierarchical and unresponsive power structures frequently failing to reflect the interests of grassroots supporters (Noble and Jayasinghe, 2016).

Nevertheless, structural issues such as these are not the sole cause of underrepresentation. The Cambodian garment industry’s workforce is closely linked to other sectors – agriculture in particular – which influence workers’ abilities to engage in collective action through remittance and time obligations (Parsons, 2016). Furthermore, women’s ‘time and mobility are constrained by social and cultural norms that assign the responsibility for social reproduction to women’ (Chen, 2001: 7). Consequently, representation in Cambodian unions is complex: workers’ ability to exercise agency is structured at a number of scales, making it necessary to move beyond mono-dimensional investigations, towards a multi-scalar and multi-local investigation, in order to grasp them. In pursuit of this aim, the following empirical sections will highlight how the union structures interact with translocal livelihoods to shape agency and the nature of contemporary protest in the garment industry and beyond.

**5.1 Gendered Norms of Protest and Representation in the Union Movement**

Reflecting on the protests by factory workers of late 2013 and early 2014, the breadth and intensity of the violence was an overriding theme. As one garment worker, who had not been involved in the initial demonstration, but returned from elsewhere in Phnom Penh at the height of the conflict between protestors and police related:

‘By the time I got to Canadia, I could already see blood on the ground, so I knew that something violent had happened. As I was driving through, there was fighting all round. The protestors were throwing stones at the police. The police used shock guns and some were firing real guns. At the same time, some police were injured and being treated at the clinic’ (Female Garment Worker, 24, 13/07/2015).

Opinions are somewhat split as to the sequence of events that culminated in the deaths of six people, but most informants agree that a group of protestors began to vandalize part of a factory in the area – as one stated ‘it was mostly garment workers; they broke the mirrors in the factories, destroyed the fans’ (Female Garment Worker, 22, 09/07/2015) – before ‘the police and army came because they said the workers threw stones through the windows and broke the fans in the factory’ (Female Garment Worker, 24, 24/07/2015). According to informant reports, police subsequently ‘destroyed equipment and began to beat workers’ (Male Garment Worker, 41, 24/07/2015), venturing even into ‘the residential area with guns and smoke bombs’ (Female Garment Worker, 43, 24/07/2015) and causing the majority of protestors to ‘go back to their rooms and hide inside’ (Female Garment Worker, 25, 17/07/2015).

Thus, whilst most who were present on the day admit that garment workers damaged property, stating in their defence that ‘we had to do that because we had to demand a higher salary’ (Female Garment Worker, 23, 24/07/2015), protestors lay the blame for the subsequent violence on state authorities. As they stated: ‘the government sent the soldiers in to attack the protestors. They hit them, which made the protestors angry. So they began to throw stones and burn things like tyres’ (Female Garment Worker, 27, 09/07/2015).

Nevertheless, accounts of the protest and crackdown also reveal a more complex, gendered, landscape of interpretation. For instance, a female garment worker, present at the protest explained that ‘at the time, the men were the only ones who were active, causing the violence, but the women were the only ones calling people to join’ (Female Garment Worker, 27, 24/07/2015). By contrast, as a male worker related:

‘On the day, there was dancing and singing at the bank, but then the security forces turned up and ruined everything. They beat people up and created danger…At that time, most people at the demonstration were men. Women just stood and watched people having fun. They went to buy food at the market as normal. Then when the violence happened, they ran away and hid in their room.’ (Male union representative, 24, 22/07/2015)

These accounts disagree both on the extent of women’s role in organizing the protest and the blame held by male workers in causing the violence. However, they also reveal a gendered concept of protest that extends beyond workers’ behaviour during the strike itself. Testimonies that ‘the demonstration was taken over by men, but the women stood watching’ (Female Garment Worker, 30, 23/07/2015) have given way, in the aftermath of the crackdown, to the more general statement that ‘if there is violence at a strike, it is mostly men who do it’ (Female Garment Worker, 25, 22/07/2015), or that ‘mostly it’s only men at the demonstrations because only they dare go. It is only bravery that makes them go and not the women’ (Female Garment Worker, 27, 24/07/2015).

Indeed, so ingrained has the axiom of male leadership during protests become that many factories are now reluctant to hire men at all. As a female worker related, for instance, ‘men doing the demonstrations and strikes always walk at the front, so now the factories don’t like to take on men; only two or three men are working in the factory’ (Female Garment Worker, 23, 22/02/2015). Moreover, the same attitude characterizes leadership in the union movement. Although representatives are elected ‘every year’ (Female Workers Focus Group 3, Factory 1, 30/09/2015) or ‘every two years’ (Female Workers Focus Group 2, Factory 2, 29/09/2015) on the basis of ‘having the right abilities’ (Male Workers Focus Group 2, Factory 2, 29/09/2015), the abilities in question are often viewed as inherently male. As a group of male workers explained: ‘in the trade union, they prefer to choose men, because they can go out easily and walk far away. They are also braver and lead the protests…whilst women’s role is just to give information to simple workers’ (Male Worker Focus Group 2, Factory 2, 29/09/2015).

Similarly:

‘They choose men because they are strong and not scared. Their voice is heard. But a woman’s voice, maybe it wouldn’t be heard’ (Male Worker Focus Group 3, Factory 1, 30/09/2015).

Preconceptions such as these mean that the one person one vote system by which factory representatives are elected tends to produce male leaders at all levels of the union hierarchy to represent an electorate that is almost 90% female (Noble and Jayasinghe, 2016; ILO, 2015). As workers explained, this stems largely from a lack of confidence in women’s leadership:

‘In the union, most of them are women, but most of the leaders are men. If the women stand for election, the [other] women often don’t choose them because they prefer the men because men are stronger. They don’t always believe that the women can deliver what the men can do’ (Garment Worker, 27, 24/07/2015)

These perceptions are changing, however. The experiences of January 2014 have shed a new light on these arrangements amongst union hierarchies, as the descent of previous protests into violence raised the need for an approach less prone to generating conflict. As a senior member of Focus on the Global South explained, for instance: ‘women are more strategic, men just use muscles to fight’ (FGS Program Manager, 05/10/15). Similarly, as the second senior leader explained: ‘female workers are generally better than the male ones at solving problems within the factory because they do it in a gentle way, without losing their temper. Men tend to lose their temper’ (Sieng Sambath, president of CWFU, 01/10/2015). Workers too, expressed an enthusiasm for pursuing a more active role:

‘I don’t care what the roles of women are. I have to do that demonstration. There are no reasons to be polite any more. If women stay under the old laws, they will suffer under oppression. Women now have to stand on their feet. Men and women’s rights are equal now, so if men can do anything, women can also do that’ (Female Garment Worker, 29, 21/07/2015).

Nevertheless, whilst such expressions of women’s aptitude to lead by both union bosses and workers themselves suggest a movement towards greater representation, tangible change has been minimal. This is due in large part to the ‘triple burden’ faced by migrant women (Noble and Jayasinghe, 2016), who must manage ‘the competing demands of livelihood activities, public life and a disproportionate share of family responsibilities’ (Noble and Jayasinghe, 2016: 10) if they wish to fulfil a leadership role. As Pov Sina, president of the CUMW, explained for instance, in all fields of migrants work, female workers are expected to ‘spend less and eat less and take more overtime’ (Pov Sina, president of CUMW, 02/10/15), none of which is conducive to taking on administrative responsibility in a movement, but which is nevertheless ‘the custom in Cambodia’ (Ibid.).

These pressures, which fall to a greater extent upon women than men, are key to explaining women’s lack of representation in the union hierarchy. However, what is less remarked upon is that they are also a driving force shaping the nature of grassroots activism. Where the garment sector’s overwhelmingly female workforce marches, protests and campaigns for higher wages, it is not only in the context of their own urban livelihoods, but a wider network of dependency underpinned by gendered norms and responsibilities.

The implications of this perspective for the literature on unions and labour movements (Ford and Gillen, 2015; Ford, 2013; Barrientos, 2013; Wad, 2013; Cohen and Rai, 2004) are twofold. First, they highlight how household-scale, gendered relations are a key influence on the manifestation of translocal protest and, more broadly, social movements in the developing world. Second, moreover, they demonstrate how institutionally examining Global Southern unions, in the manner called for by Carswell (2016), Carswell and De Neve (2013) and Barrientos (2013) amongst others, reveals a constraining influence on women’s agency, deeply enmeshed within the broader promotion of worker agency. As the following section will highlight, the scale of this constraint and thus the extent of the burden on garment workers’ agency is closely linked to rural concerns.

**5.2 Agency and Protest in the Context of Translocal Livelihoods**

One of the key misconceptions over the industrial action undertaken by Cambodian garment workers in recent years is that it reflects factory wages insufficient to support an urban life. Whilst the cost of living in urban areas has certainly risen in recent years, often in direct correlation with publically mandated increases to the minimum wage (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016), urban price rises are not necessarily the primary pressure on garment worker livelihoods (Lawreniuk, 2017; Parsons, 2017; Parsons et al., 2014; ILO, 2011). Rather, the high proportion of gross salaries remitted by garment workers to their (usually) rural households is a key determinant not only of severe constraints on urban livelihoods, but dynamic and differential constraints, which see garment workers faced with vastly different urban livelihoods depending on their rural circumstances (Parsons, 2016).

The key importance of these rural pressures was emphasized repeatedly by garment workers, who explained that ‘if a garment worker’s family is very poor, then it is very difficult for them to find the money [to support both themselves and their household’ (Female Garment Worker, 27, 22/07/2015). Thus, although urban factors were frequently bemoaned by workers, who stated that ‘every item has gone up in price. The salary has gone up a bit, but everything [now] costs more’ (Male Garment Worker, 25, 16/07/2015), it is a translocal conception of poverty that defines garment work for the majority. As workers elaborated, this difficulty often leads workers to take on debt because ‘they have to send a lot of money, so they have to borrow money from somebody in the city and then they need to do overtime the next month in order to pay it back.’ (Male Garment Worker, 26, 16/07/2015).

Nevertheless, although the long term situation of the sender household defines urban livelihoods in the garment industry, the pressure this engenders is neither uniform, nor unidirectional. Rather, frequent communication between garment workers and their families (Parsons et al., 2014) means that specific short term shortages – either in the form of reduced income due to limited overtime, or additional rural or urban costs – tend to be felt by both garment workers and their families simultaneously. In many cases, this is seen as an effective strategy, with both sides finding ways to make ends meet in the face of constraints. Such workers explained that ‘if I earn more, I send more. If I earn less, I send less’ (Female Garment Worker, 28, 16/07/2015) and that ‘generally, in the home village, they adapt. If I have a low salary because I don’t get any overtime then they adapt and spend very little [that month]’ (Garment Worker 27, Takaeo, 17/07/2015).

As several workers explained, though, obligations to family are not always so loosely defined, placing acute pressure on workers to remit large proportions of their income in order to fund short term livelihoods deficits, or specific purchases in some cases. As a young worker explained, such obligations may be delayed but must ultimately be met, even at the expense of personal health in some cases:

‘This month, my house wanted money to buy a motorbike to take vegetables to the market, but I said please wait, I have to take some overtime and spend less money in order to send this money to you. Sometimes doing this affects my health. Sometimes I feel exhausted, sometimes sick, so I have to ask permission to rest for one or two days’ (Female Garment Worker, 23, 22/02/2015).

As such, translocal household livelihoods are determined by the combination of chronic pressures rooted in insufficient rural livelihoods and shorter term, idiosyncratic pressures and shocks – generated both by one off purchases and the death of livestock, damage to property, or illness – which have often severe implications for both rural and urban livelihoods. More specifically, however, translocal livelihoods are closely determined by the needs of agriculture, which generates both chronic and acute pressures for who depend on it. As the mother of a garment worker – visiting her daughter – explained, ‘In farming season, the children send back us about $100 [per month] for fertilizer etc. But other times, if they are sick or something, then they only send $30. The children work to support the whole family’ (Mother of Garment Worker, 60, 22/07/2015). Moreover:

‘If the family in the home village is very poor, then it is very difficult for them to send enough because they need so much. My family is average, so it is OK for me, but it is very difficult when there is no rain because I need to send a lot of money…Workers from poor families have a very difficult life because they send everything home and then have nothing left’ (Female Garment worker, 22, 15/07/2015)

Given these close linkages between agriculture and urban work, the role of agricultural pressures emerges as a key factor in fomenting urban protest. Indeed, this is reflected in the testmonies of a number of workers, who cite the pressures of sustaining their family farm as paramount in encouraging them to join the protests of 2013 and 2014. As one of the protestors at the time stated, the strike occurred ‘because workers’ families were generally farming badly, so they had to buy fertilizer and everything. It costs a lot and it is hard for the workers to send enough money’ (Female Garment Worker, 29, 22/02/2016). Similarly:

‘The factor that made me protest is that the salary is not enough to live and send money home. Now I have to send less, but it is not enough for my family. They need to buy fertilizer and many [other] things. If there isn’t enough money then I have to borrow it from somebody else. Then I have to spend less next month to pay them back and send less money home [again] too (Female Garment Worker, 24, 21/02/2015).

Whilst worker accounts such as these are compelling, the evidence linking protest to agricultural conditions goes further. As outlined in table 1 below, data collected by the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia [GMAC] since 2004 demonstrates that the gross number of worker days lost to strikes reported by GMAC member factories rises over 31% during the months May to September, the country’s primary period of agricultural labour, during which 75% of the country’s rice crop is planted (Yu and Diao, 2011). Moreover, whilst the mean number of strikes per month also rises 12% during this period, it is worker days lost per strike (a proxy variable for strike attendance) that increases most prominently, rising over 28% in the months May to September.

Table 1. Strike Data 2004-2016 (Source: GMAC, 2017)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Calendar Period | Mean Number of Strikes | | Mean Number of Worker Days Lost to Strikes | | Mean Worker Days Lost per Strike |
| Whole Year | 7.2 | 372,282 | | 51,705 | |
| Period of Wet Season Rice Planting  (May to September) | 7.8 | 454,693 | | 58,293 | |
| Period of Dry Season or No Rice Planting (October to April) | 6.9 | 313,418 | | 45,423 | |

These figures, produced for the purposes of this analysis from 13 years of monthly data, highlight the extent of the linkage between agricultural pressures and industrial action. In combination with the testimonies above, they demonstrate that support for union action is strongest at times of greatest rural need. As a trade union member opined, ‘if they were rich, maybe they wouldn’t protest, but they’re poor’ (Female Trade Union Member, 30, 01/09/2015) and never is their translocally mediated poverty more strongly felt than in the planting season, when the rapidly rising cost of agricultural inputs and rural wage labour (IBRD and World Bank, 2015), combined with high and rising levels of environmental risk (Bylander, 2015; MoE and BBC, 2011) generates an acute, periodic set of household expenses in addition to the monthly burden of support and sustenance for both rural and urban households. Thus, for workers whose ‘family is very poor and only depends on workers, then it is very difficult, because you don’t have enough to spend here and it pressures you to spend even less’ (Female Garment Worker, 21, 21/07/2015), a situation that workers highlighted as both a past and present reason for industrial action:

‘Now there is a shortage of water and the family need money to buy insecticides and fertilizer. Sometimes, they have water, but no insecticide and fertilizer, so the yield isn’t enough for the family. At the time of the strike, there was [also] a drought, no water, so the rice field produced just enough for eating. There was nothing to sell.’ (Garment Worker, 25, Svay Rieng 22/07/2015)

As the quantitative and qualitative data show, then, seasonal pressures such as these are a key factor underpinning large and growing worker support for the garment industry. However, the translocal dimension of worker’s livelihoods not only supports, but also shapes the labour movement. Worker activism, manifested through strike days and demonstrations, increases during peak agricultural seasons, as rural familial pressures place an additional financial burden on urban workers. At a larger scale, therefore, the implication is that the economic pressures and familial concerns of rural agricultural play a tangible role in the functionality of GPNs.

Thus, these data demonstrate what may be gained by avoiding the persistent urban and industrial bias of the GPN and labour activism literatures (Carswell and De Neve, 2013; Rogaly, 2009) by instead emphasizing the translocally linked rural-urban nature of agency in production chains. In particular, they highlight the role of agricultural and familial factors in motivating or constraining factory level and grassroots activism. Moreover, as outlined in the next section, just as workers’ economic priorities are constrained via the informal, often familial, networks in which they are embedded, so too do these same networks direct and influence how campaigns themselves progress.

**5.3 Translocal Factors in the Form of Horizontal agency: Analysing the $177 Movement**

The $177 movement was presented by union leaders as emerging from the ashes of a ‘failed’ $160 campaign, which had produced a modest ‘$20 rise [actually $28] in the minimum wage’ (Operational Manager, C.CAWDU, 02/10/2015), and which culminated in the fatal clash between protestors and police in January 2014. As such, it was viewed by workers as both a continuation of the momentum gained up to 2014 and as a fresh start, backed by producers, the international community, and extensive research into the garment industry and the living conditions of its workers.

However, top level management of the $177 campaign was not straightforward. It was subject to frequent changes in direction and fierce negotiation by various parties. Key lines of contestation between government supporting unions, independent unions and moderate unions widened under pressure, creating ‘many conflicts’ (Operational Manager, C.CAWDU, 02/10/2015) between representatives putatively on the same side of the negotiations. The result, as the acting director of CITA explained, was that:

‘Every time we have a meeting, we get together and discuss and some people shout. There is tension, but in the end we have to mediate between each other and find a middle ground’ (Acting Director, CITA, 30/09/2015)

Amongst the female dominated grass roots, by contrast, the $177 campaign appeared very different. Like the union movement more generally, workers spread support via informal networks, encouraging others to join unions, participate in demonstrations, and attending meetings. Familial networks were key to this process, as the ‘vast majority’ of garment workers are migrants (UNFPA, 2015: 1) and – according to a survey of the Teuk Thla migrant enclave in West Phnom Penh – over half of current garment workers have arrived in the past year (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016; Parsons et al., 2014). Consequently, union members’ personal networks in urban areas are often based firmly in familial linkages, so that ‘joining depends on who [in the family] comes first; if the oldest comes first, then they join the union and then everybody else does’ (Garment worker, 24, 13/07/2015). From this familial root, recruitment proceeds through everyday social interaction, rather than regular meetings or sustained instruction by representatives:

‘First the trade unions came and give us some information about the salary movement…[then]…after we understood the idea of increasing our salary, we informed others about it. We do this of our own accord and we don’t care what type of people we tell, we just tell everybody. Then when they understand the idea of increasing the salary, they usually agree to join. Nobody says no to this movement’ (Female Workers Focus Group 1, Factory 2, 28/09/15).

The informal, network mediated manner in which information and support for the $177 movement were spread resulted in inter-occupational support for the campaign. Members of groups as diverse as the farming communities of Kandal, roadside petty traders, and KTV workers expressed strong opinions that the garment workers’ struggle for fair wages was closely connected to their own. Only through mutual support, they argued, would a better Cambodia be achieved:

‘I heard about the $177 movement from the union, so I joined a demonstration outside the ministry of labour. Every sector was there: KTV girls, beer girls, everyone. We want to help the garment workers like this so that one day they may help us in return. We are a very small group [otherwise], so we don’t have any power’ (KTV worker Focus Group, 06/10/15).

This sense of striving for a greater, nationwide good, which extends beyond the conditions experienced by any given group, has become a powerful motivator within the Cambodian union movement. Speaking of the 2013 strikes and their role in them, workers explained that ‘all of the unions joined together to do something for the general benefit of the country’ (Garment worker, 23, 24/07/2015) and that ‘at the time of the strike, we were protesting for the whole country’ (Garment Worker, 23, 22/02/2015).

During the $177 movement, this sentiment was reciprocated on a grand scale by unions representing other industries. Teachers ‘participate[d] in this campaign because they have relatives who are workers and we feel that Cambodian workers should have a better life [in general]’ (Focus group with teachers, 02/10/2015); farmers proclaimed that ‘they really pity the garment workers and want them to have a better salary’ (CCFC community leader, 01/10/2015); and elderly petty traders explain how they ‘joined the $177 campaign because they wanted to help the garment workers’ (IDEA focus group, 05/10/2015). The wider movement, therefore, was driven by the sense that what is good for the garment workers is good for everybody.

Although rooted in solidarity, this ideology is also pragmatic. The Cambodian migrant economy is intricately interlinked and the garment sector is at its heart (Parsons et al., 2014). Petty traders, motorcycle taxi drivers and construction workers know, therefore, that better salaries for garment workers mean a better life for themselves as well, both directly – via improvements in the fortunes of family members – and indirectly, as a result of improvements in the local economy (Vuthy and Hach, 2007). Similarly, as rice farming becomes less and less sustainable in the face of unpredictable rainfall and the rising price of inputs (Bylander, 2015; Oeur et al., 2012), people from rural areas are becoming increasingly ardent supporters of the $177 movement. As a farmer from Kandal complained:

‘It’s different from the past. In the past, only one member [of the household] would work and everybody would be provided for. Nowadays, everybody works, but it’s still not enough. Remittances [from the factories] are important, but it’s not enough for people here to live’ (CCFC Community Leader, 01/10/2015).

Indeed, the importance of remittances to rural income does not only engender support in one direction. Female migrants in particular continue to make decisions together with their nuclear family throughout the duration of their migration and involvement in unions and campaigns such as this one are no exception. Consequently, the involvement of migrant workers in wage protests indicates, in many cases, the support of not only the workers themselves, but of their families:

‘[the protesters’] family members encouraged them to campaign for this [pay rise]. Not only family members who live together in the same room, but those who work in different factories encouraged each other to do it too. They had a talk with their whole family, who said that if the other people go then you have to go too. Otherwise, if you stay home then you’ll just be profiting from other people’s efforts’ (Focus Group 1, Factory 2, 28/09/15).

Similarly, as farmers explained of their children’s campaign:

‘I encourage all of my children to participate in this campaign. I don’t worry about the violence, because this campaign is for everybody, the whole country.’

‘The role of the rural community is very important [to the garment sector union movement] because ninety five percent of families never say no to their children when they ask to join this campaign. The only ones who do are a very small number whose living conditions are better already. They are just waiting to get the benefits [of change and better salaries] from somebody else’s work’ (CCFC Focus Group, 01/10/15).

As these testimonies show, the strengths and weaknesses of the Cambodian labour movement are not rooted in abstract moral norms, but the everyday performance of mobile livelihoods. Contemporary work in Cambodia is rooted in strong local and translocal networks and so too is contemporary activism, whose form is determined by these networks. Thus, when union officials explain that ‘many female representatives are unable to sacrifice the hours that representatives in the labour movement are required to commit [because] they have no time due to their family’ (Operational Manager, CCAWDU, 02/10/2015) this should not be taken to indicate a lack of either agency or involvement in the union movement.

Rather, it denotes their participation in an alternative, horizontal and informally mediated form of agency, based on small but broadly interlinked groups outside of union structures. Family members and close friends in both rural and urban areas form a network of obligations that cross cuts occupational – and by extension union institutional – boundaries and which provides not only the impetus for protest, but also the mechanism by which it manifests. So intertwined are workers within these networks that their agency may be viewed as being both collective and individual; they protest not only for themselves but as the representatives of a wider household structure.

Thus, the disjuncture between grassroots activism and top level unionism is indicative not merely of a broken union, but of two discretely structured entities. Whereas unionism is a local phenomenon, structured in a hierarchical and broadly traditional manner, activism is translocal and mediated via the informal and familial networks that that entails. Agency, therefore, must be considered not merely in terms of voice within the union movement itself, but also in terms of voice and activity within a nationwide horizontal structure of mutual support which has yet to be effectively represented in national negotiations, but whose force and form are determined to a significant extent by the everyday realities of translocal livelihoods.

The implications of this positon are therefore significant first for the study of GPNs (Coe and Hess, 2013; Lund Thomsen et al., 2012; Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011; Cumbers et al., 2008), in which respect exploring the ‘horizontal’ dimension of labour agency (Nielsen and Pritchard, 2009) has been a recent priority. As the data here show, horizontal forms of labour agency operate through structures and institutions that are distinct from the formal structures of unionism. Social and familial networks build and sustain the grassroots dimensions of the Cambodian labour movement by using narratives of cross-sectoral solidarity that do not feature in the union driven discourse of the campaigns themselves. In this respect, therefore, the findings here are of relevance, also, to the literature on transnational solidarity (Fougner and Kurtoğlu 2011), which in its emphasis on international, rather than cross-sectoral, solidarity, has tended to focus on how solidarity is built through the interaction of unions themselves. As shown here, horizontal solidarity may be an equally important force in sustaining solidarity movements across borders, sectors and social groups.

**Conclusion**

By focusing on Cambodia’s large scale wage negotiations of 2013/14 and 2015, this paper has aimed to highlight the value of a translocally rural-urban lens on labour activism in the developing world. From this perspective, it has demonstrated that the rural-urban linkages and broad, horizontal, social and familial networks that tend to be viewed primarily in terms of impeding women’s access to union hierarchies in fact play a far more fundamental role in shaping activism. Specifically, informant testimonies – in conjunction with over a decade of strike data provided by GMAC – suggest that rural and especially agricultural pressures play a key role in motivating involvement in strikes, protests and demonstrations. This is because income is assessed as a part of a translocal household system, wherein regular communication and (bi-directional) remittances mean that short term changes to income or outgoings manifest in both rural and urban livelihoods simultaneously. Consequently, strikes are best attended during the monsoon rice planting season, when the need to purchase agricultural inputs places most strain on the livelihoods of urban workers.

Moreover, these vital economic linkages not only impact on the behaviour of garment workers themselves, but draw a broad network of non-factory workers into the affairs of the factory. Rice farming communities, increasingly dependent on modern sector remittances from migrant children, are an influential voice in labour activism and workers in other industries with little connection to the garment industry were key to the strength of the $177 campaign. Whilst a national sense of solidarity underpinned this multilateralism, it was the informal social and familial networks generated by mobile livelihoods that allowed it to manifest. Given this, the gendered nature of the Cambodian minimum wage protests cannot be ignored. Although union leadership may be male dominated and somewhat insensitive to the specific pressures faced by women in the Cambodian workplace, the horizontal and translocal dimensions of protest bring these issues to the fore in industrial action, even if they remain somewhat unrecognised in this role.

In this way, the paper helps to reconcile (Carswell and De Neve, 2013) and Rogaly’s (2009) call for greater emphasis on the agency of individual workers – as well as Lier’s (2007) claim that individual diversity is key to understanding worker agency – with the collective position adopted by the majority of the GPN literature. As the data presented here have aimed to demonstrate, worker activism in Cambodia is centred on individuals, but mediated via interlocking translocal networks which surround those individuals, thereby shaping the nature activism via the sum of multiple diverse livelihoods, rather than the combined voice of workers facing similar conditions.

This translocally rural-urban lens on protest helps to explain the disjuncture between grassroots support and the union hierarchy, a characteristic which previous analyses have tended to view as a function of entrenched gender norms impeding access to positions of authority. By moving beyond the mono-local, industrial focus of previous studies, as called for by Barrientos (2013), Wad (2013), and Bezuidenhout and Buhlungu (2011), the evidence here demonstrates that whilst gendered norms of care, authority and activism are key to shaping the nature of the union movement in Cambodia, they are nevertheless not discrete cultural tropes, but attitudes rooted in the everyday practice of translocal livelihoods. The lack of interaction between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of unionism is therefore not only a question of failure on the part of the former, but also of success on the part of the latter, which has seen activism embraced through social structures whose extent and logic is largely independent of formal unionism.

Further recognition of this horizontal and translocal dimension of Cambodian social movements is essential in a national context where meaningful formal unionism is perilously under threat from legal reform. Mediated as it is through informal networks which are far more difficult to restrict than their formal equivalents, it potentially provides an effective means by which to retain associational capacity in straightened circumstances. In order for this avenue to function effectively, however, union hierarchies have the potential to play a key catalytic role by acknowledging and supporting the pan-sectoral nature of the solidarity that underpins their activities. Unions in Cambodia are, as they stand, the somewhat dislocated focal point for a wider social movement that lacks a catalyst. Yet, by working towards greater recognition of workers’ translocal priorities, they are well placed to provide this spark and recapture the Kingdom’s growing industrial power.

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