

Innovative Partnerships to Improve the Rights and Health of Factory Workers

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The vast majority of people who work in apparel factories around the world are young women who migrate from rural communities to the city, in search of a better life. While nutrition, hygiene and reproductive health are lynchpins to overall well-being, access to social services and health information is far from a given among this population.



Photo: Levi Strauss

As a foundation that is part of an apparel company, Levi Strauss & Co., the Levi Strauss Foundation (LSF) is in a unique position to advance the human rights of underserved people that are affected by our business. The Foundation supports the Company's commitment to responsible sourcing by funding non-governmental organizations to advance the rights and well-being of apparel workers in places where our products are made, such as China, Cambodia, Lesotho and Mexico. During the past twelve years, the Levi Strauss Foundation has invested almost USD\$10 million in thirty strategic programs, benefitting more than 1 million workers in 12 key sourcing countries. In 2011, Levi Strauss & Co. and LSF partnered to implement the Improving Worker Well-Being initiative to advance workers' human rights and improve their well-being. The [aim of this new vision](#) is to engage suppliers as partners beyond compliance checklists and strive for deeper impact in the lives of workers, families and their communities.

In 1991, Levi Strauss & Co. established the first comprehensive [workplace code of conduct](#) in the apparel industry for all contract factories and licensees, which protected the rights and safety of workers making their products. It has been called the "code that flowered 1,000 codes" because of the industry-wide changes that followed to promote compliance to these standards.

While compliance with labor codes must continue to be improved, "do no harm" must be the floor, not the ceiling. This means going beyond corporate responsibility and looking at a whole host of health and well-being programs for workers, which is a critical aspect of LSF's new approach. This

approach includes a number of strategies as well as local, factory-based programs to benefit the health, financial literacy and living environments of workers that can significantly improve working conditions of factory workers. Currently, LSF is implementing worker needs assessment surveys in apparel factories in five pilot countries—Cambodia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt and Haiti—to identify patterns and align around actionable programmatic goals.

An entry point for funders that do not have direct access to business leadership but are interested in grantmaking for workers' rights is to support and partner with NGOs and local organizations that advocate for the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced labor and child labor, and the elimination of employment discrimination (the labor principles laid out in the UN Global Compact, a United Nations initiative to encourage businesses worldwide to adopt sustainable and socially responsible policies, and to report on their implementation).

One challenge of funding in this field is that non-governmental organizations working on the ground to advance the rights and well-being of apparel workers have very few tools that can be readily adapted to meet the needs of this vision. The field remains sorely underfunded. LSF, as an example, has addressed this challenge by convening a group of grantees to share tools and strategies to train apparel workers, supervisors and factory management about labor rights and responsibilities. Together with [Business for Social Responsibility](#) (BSR), the Levi Strauss Foundation released "[Protecting the Rights of Garment Factory Workers](#)," a training resource addressing five of the most challenging issues faced on factory floors worldwide: contracts, wages and hours, harassment, freedom of association and worker-manager communication. Earlier this year, LSF convened a team of local organizations and global experts from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, India, Cambodia and Haiti. As a result of this convening, we developed a global health curriculum tailored specifically to women apparel workers.

The Levi Strauss Foundation also partnered with the [HERproject](#), an initiative of Business for Social Responsibility that links multinational companies and their factories to local NGOs to create sustainable workplace programs that increase women's health awareness. This initiative encourages a peer-led model of designing trainings on a number of topics crucial to women's health, including nutrition, maternal and reproductive health. The trainings use interactive, peer-based activities to help women learn in compelling and memorable ways. To meet the realities of production schedules, each training

can be delivered in 30 to 45 minutes. Funders can access this open-source curriculum [here](#).

Suggested recommendations for funders

In the course of this work, we've learned a few key lessons that other funders may find helpful:

- **Develop a needs-based approach** that reflects the voices of target population or local communities. Worker surveys today focus on hot-button issues (such as freedom to join a labor union), while improving worker well-being calls for surveying workers on their health, financial, educational and professional concerns and aspirations.
- **NGOs are invaluable local partners** in meeting the critical needs of apparel workers -- both on the factory floor and in the community. Building the capacity of this sorely underfunded sector to deliver greater scale and impact is an important priority. Best practice tools and curricula need to be open-source and readily usable for maximum uptake.
- **It takes time and sustained commitment** to foster track records of trust and mutual benefit in this space. Cultivating buy-in and ownership among brands, NGOs and suppliers is essential, but still challenging.
- **Define and measure business and social success with integrity:** take an honest and rigorous look at how the success of these programs is uniquely defined – among workers, trainers, supervisors, factory owners and buyers. We've seen that programs like the HERproject have [direct return-on-investment results](#) for factories. In fact, we've seen up to \$4 returned in reduced turnover, absenteeism, and tardiness for every \$1 invested. Examples of “what works” need to be open-source and readily usable for maximum uptake.
- **Walk, crawl, run:** there is no turnkey solution for building trust and scaling impact. Build capacity and tools for the long term, and turn NGOs and leaders into champions and evangelists.

In the coming year, the Levi Strauss Foundation will listen to workers' voices, and intentionally engage suppliers, NGOs, local governments and other private companies as these efforts are brought to scale. By building strong partnerships and creating widely available resources and measurement tools, we hope others will join us in this movement to improve the well-being of workers around the world.

Resources for funders

- Review the [HERproject Global Health Curriculum](#)
- Read the Levi Strauss Foundation's White Paper, [Improving Workers' Well-Being: A New Approach to Supply Chain Engagement](#)
- Read these reports from Business for Social Responsibility:
 - [Moving the Needle: Protecting the Rights of Garment Factory Workers](#)
 - [Business Returns from Women's Health Programs](#)
- [HERproject Health Needs Assessments](#)
- Review these resources from the HERproject, [Health and Human Rights: A Resource Guide](#)
- Contact [Jorge Cino](#) of the Levi Strauss Foundation for more information