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## The afterlife of industrial work: Urban-to-rural labour transitions from the factory to the informal economy

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WIDER Working Paper 2021/158

## **The afterlife of industrial work**

Urban-to-rural labour transitions from the factory to the informal economy

Alessandra Mezzadri<sup>1</sup> and Kaustav Banerjee<sup>2</sup>

October 2021

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has escalated processes of labour transition from industrial work to the informal economy, which have always characterized the life of the working poor. Exploring urban-to-rural labour transitions through a feminist political economy lens and adopting a life-cycle approach to labour and social reproduction, this paper analyses the post-industrial livelihoods and experiences of former Indian garment workers leaving the National Capital Region and moving back to Bihar. Emphasis is placed on workers' reasons for leaving the industry and their current employment and reproductive strategies. Findings are based on a sample of 50 former workers, identified in urban industrial hamlets and traced back to their place of origin. Respondents' experiences are analysed based on semi-quantitative questionnaires and life histories. Findings reveal that upon leaving the factory, workers find alternative informal employment through caste or social networks while using land as safety net. Farming and informal work are not alternative but rather complementary income and work strategies. By adopting a life-cycle approach to studying labour transitions across formal and informal employment domains, this analysis contributes to policy debates on decent work.

**Key words:** feminist political economy, social reproduction, informal economy, urban-to-rural labour transitions, post-industrial livelihoods, life-cycle approach

**JEL classification:** B54, J46, P16, R23

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## 1 Introduction

Many economic analyses of labour-intensive industries like the textile or garment sectors present factory work and employment relations in these sectors as positive alternatives to informal economic activities. The Lewisian parable of workers in labour surplus economies moving from low-paid, low-productivity work in the agricultural sector to higher-wage, higher-productivity jobs in the urban industrial sector is still often accepted as an inevitable progression for development (Lewis 1954). Hence, factory work is generally represented by much of the development literature as a sort of point of arrival for the working poor, who are therefore supposed to move from more informal to more formal jobs (e.g. Powell 2014).

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 crisis has abruptly unsettled the simplistic assumptions behind these narratives of linear progress. The crisis suddenly revealed how many industrial sectors rely on greatly precarious rural migrant workers. During the pandemic, these workers were quickly expelled from production networks and occupations in urban centres, and in places like India they had to start a proper exodus to return to their villages (e.g. Kesar et al. 2021; Samaddar 2020). One could argue that COVID-19 escalated one of the most sudden urban–rural transitions in the recent history of world capitalism. In this process, many rural migrants returned to informal occupations and/or farming, struggling to reconstruct viable livelihoods (e.g. Carswell et al. 2021, 2022; Mishra 2021).

Notably, while COVID-19 represents a remarkable rupture in productive and reproductive trajectories (Kabeer et al. 2021; Stevano et al. 2021), one could argue that the unravelling of the pandemic has also laid bare a number of existing processes and trends (Mezzadri et al. 2021; Ossome 2020). For instance, it has revealed the analytical weakness of a number of dichotomies and overly sharp distinctions deployed to picture the world of work that have significantly overplayed differences between formal and informal—and industrial and non-industrial—employment and occupations. In fact, well before COVID hit, scholars like Martha Alter Chen (2012) and Jens Lerche (2010) had theorized formal and informal employment relations as strongly interrelated, and best conceptualized as situated along a continuum (see also Breman 1996). Within this continuum, one can imagine different typologies of labour transitions taking place. If one involves workers moving from more informal occupations to factory labour—much of the literature on global factories stresses the rural origins of the workers employed (e.g. Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015; Pun et al. 2015; Wright 2006)—another far less studied typology of labour transition implies workers moving from factories back into informal employment, in a sort of reverse Lewisian movement. The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey in India captures this macro trend quite starkly. Employment in agriculture as a percentage share of total employment went up from 42.5 per cent in 2018–19 to 45.6 per cent in 2019–20, a reverse movement of almost 12–13 million workers in one year. This movement also entails a reduction of the wages that workers may be going back to, as the daily wage for casual labour in agriculture for the same period was 291 rupees (R), as compared with R349 for self-employed and R558 for salaried jobs. This article explores this second type of transition, which, while escalated by the pandemic, has always been at work.

Notably, notwithstanding certain exceptions (e.g. Hewamanne 2018; Prentice 2017), post-industrial work analyses still represent a significant gap in the literature. However, their potential to contribute to debates on working poverty and livelihoods is considerable. Evidence suggests that many workers employed across the global garment assembly line stop working by the time they are 30–35 (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015; Pun et al. 2015). What do their livelihood opportunities look like after their industrial experience is over? Do they access new socioeconomic

opportunities? Have they accumulated savings or key skill sets thanks to their work in the garment factory? Or have they accumulated debt? Can they become successful micro-entrepreneurs? Or do they move back into informal employment? What are the narratives that former workers deploy to represent their own past industrial experience and current livelihood options? While these questions are often overlooked, they can enable us to concretely assess the link between contemporary labour relations and working poverty across the factory/non-factory and formal/informal divides, and to explore the informal economy as a site where both accumulation and exploitation can take place (e.g. Harriss-White 2002; Maiti and Sen 2010). Moreover, the same questions are crucial to analyse working poverty *as it is experienced across workers' life cycle*, and not simply during a temporary phase of employment.

Overall, this analysis stresses the relevance of adopting a *life-cycle approach* to the study of working poverty, as single, temporary moments of employment are not sufficient to capture the challenges faced by the working poor. In doing so, the analysis is anchored to understandings of work and labour which are not confined to the narrowly defined social perimeters of labour processes or individual spaces of work but that stress the intersections between productive and reproductive dynamics and domains and embeddedness in different physical and social geographies. In this sense, we also propose a novel approach to the study of informal(ized) employment across varied spaces of work, informed by feminist political economy debates on labour and social reproduction (Mezzadri 2019, 2020; Naidu and Osome 2016; Rao 2021) and attentive to different local socioeconomic ecologies. In fact, across the life cycle, the livelihood opportunities available to the rural working poor undergo a 'double movement' of sorts (Banerjee 2010), and employability may be coterminous with that movement. Post-factory opportunities may also vary depending on this. Finally, state policies, as mediated by caste, gender, geographical provenance, and mobility, are also likely to shape distinct livelihood opportunities and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Banerjee 2016) across the areas workers return to after their industrial experience is concluded.

This analysis focuses on workers formerly employed in the Delhi industrial conglomerate, the National Capital Region (NCR), a key hub of India's *sweatshop regime* (Mezzadri 2017). The NCR, comprising Delhi, Gurgaon, Manesar, and Faridabad in Haryana and NOIDA (New Okhla Industrial Development Authority) and Greater NOIDA in Uttar Pradesh (UP), and increasingly stretching across the Delhi-Jaipur industrial belt, is a complex industrial formation, characterized by great labour mobility and multiple processes of labour circulation (Cowan 2018; Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). It mainly sources its millions of workers from UP and Bihar. This sets challenging conditions for doing research on former workers, as the majority of them return to their village of origin upon leaving the garment factory for good. For this reason, the analysis has focused on a small sample of 50 workers, whose post-industrial work experiences were analysed using mixed methods: first, through asemi-quantitative questionnaire, and then, for a subset, through the collection of 17 life histories. The sample was constructed by deploying multiple snowballing techniques: namely, collecting lists of contacts from Kapashera, one of the largest housing hamlets for industrial workers in the NCR, and from unions working in the area. Workers were contacted using details from this initial list; further snowballing took place in Bihar in February to early March 2020, where research started in the area of Patna and then moved to surrounding districts.

The outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic disrupted the fieldwork process significantly. The collection of life histories was suspended in May 2020, due to national and local lockdowns and in order to mitigate potential health risks. Several life histories were collected by phone when fieldwork resumed, from April 2021. The decision to suspend fieldwork also reflected our desire to abide by ethical ways of conducting research, avoiding 'piratic' or merely 'extractive' methods (Okech 2020; Tilley 2017), particularly given the magnitude of the compounded health and economic crises triggered by COVID-19. This choice had its costs, as by the time we resumed fieldwork in 2021 the phone numbers of several respondents did not work any longer, most likely

also due to the financial impact of the pandemic on India's working communities—an issue increasingly well documented through case studies across the whole subcontinent (e.g. Agarwal 2021; Samaddar 2020). Yet we strongly feel that our choices were ethically necessary. Despite the dramatic events and related difficulties, we were able to finalize the collection of field-based findings by July 2021. We report our findings in the sections below, starting with a discussion of the social profile of the respondents.<sup>1</sup>

## 2 Labour transitions during and after garment work, and workers' profile

The majority of studies on the garment industry in the NCR agree on the social profile of its workforce: most workers are male circulatory migrants from the Hindi belt, particularly from UP and Bihar (Mani et al. 2018; Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015; Singh and Kaur Sapra 2007). Arguably, the in-work experiences of these migrants already include multiple labour transitions, which may involve either crossing urban–rural corridors or quickly circulating between multiple industrial units. Classic *yearly circulation*, which is greatly widespread in India (Bremner 2013; Shah and Lerche 2020), where workers move back to their place of origin during the industrial lean season (which often overlaps with festivals and harvest seasons), is paralleled by *industrial circulation* (Mezzadri 2017)—that is, the transition of workers from one industrial unit to another in the same industrial area.

According to a 2013–14 survey (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015), yearly circulation in the NCR garment industry represented only one-third of all circulatory movements, while industrial circulation was at 60 per cent. This means that almost two-thirds of the industrial workforce consisted of individuals who worked in any given industrial premises for less than one year. These multiple labour transitions at work in the NCR call for high degrees of labour flexibility, with implications for workers' social profile. In northern India, the type of workforce able to sustain these multiple transitions is male and relatively young. It is hence unsurprising that our sample in this study, which arguably explores yet another labour transition in the industry—the final exit from industrial work—reflected this. Almost all of our respondents, namely 96 per cent, were male; only two female workers were sampled and interviewed. All respondents were over 35 years of age; that is generally the cut-off age for work in the industry, due to either retrenchment or exhaustion (Mezzadri 2017).

Collating a sample was probably one of the most significant challenges of this study, already well before the outbreak of COVID-19. This is because the extreme mobility, numerous labour transitions, and social profile of the workforce set significant hurdles in the way of the identification of who has actually left the industry for good—many continue circulating back to the NCR—and where these people have relocated. The sample was built thanks to multiple snowballing entry points. We started our post-work inquiry in Kapashera. Here, initial connections and informal chats with a few housing contractors, in September 2019, confirmed a high proportion of workers from Bihar and UP employed in the garment industry and residing in the industrial hamlet. In fact, several contractors overseeing 'the lines'—the rows of rooms where

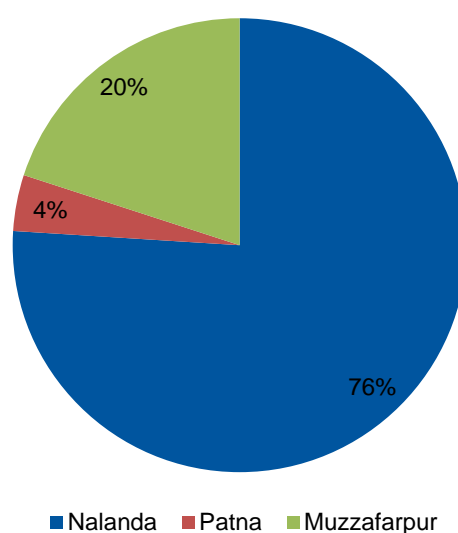
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<sup>1</sup> Ibrar Raza was the research assistant initially appointed for this project, and his work on data collection was crucial. He conducted the initial survey through questionnaires with the Bihari workers identified during the initial mapping and helped to identify others on the basis of local snowballing. He also collected the first life histories, before COVID-19 disrupted the fieldwork process. Other life histories were collected by Mohammad Aaqib, Govind Kumar, Keshav Singh, and Rajiv Ranjan (all based in Patna, Bihar), on the basis of the contact list and networks developed through the initial mapping and questionnaires. The interviews were transcribed in Hindi by Bhaskar Jha and then translated into English by Madhavi Shivaprasad and Shrawan Jha.

industrial workers live in Kapashera, which resemble the plantation lines deployed as housing during colonial times (Mezzadri 2021)—had once been garment workers too. They stayed on in the urban industrial hamlet even after they left the industry.

Contacts with unions were crucial to build a list of former garment workers, and this was deployed as a guide for our search for questionnaire targets in Bihar. In Bihar, the search often involved a complex, informal process of contact tracing, as many workers had changed contact details, like phone numbers, and others may have migrated elsewhere. A significant portion of those leaving the industry, however, go back to their place of origin, and we captured this segment of the former industrial population. The survey started in Patna, Bihar, in February 2020 and then snowballed to the districts of Nalanda and Muzaffarpur. Due to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, which reached India by mid-March 2020, the physical interviews for life histories had to be stopped after eight interviews (conducted till mid-March 2020). The rest of the life histories were collected via phone. This was possible due to the completion of the questionnaire by that date. The geographical distribution of the sample is given in Figure 1.

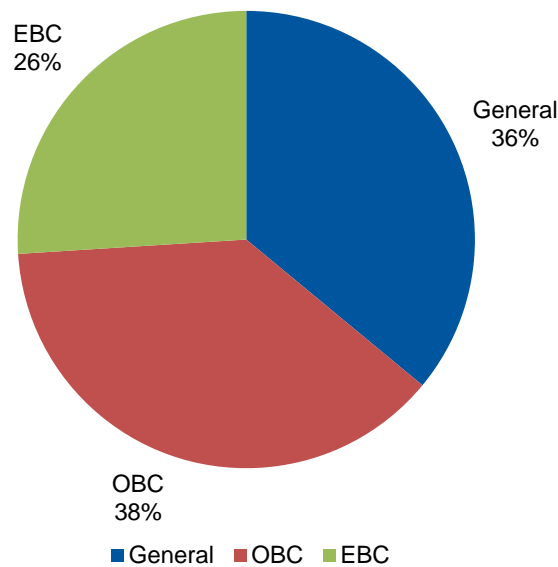
Figure 1: Respondent distribution by district in Bihar



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

In the sample, 68 per cent of workers were Hindus and 32 per cent Muslims, confirming the relative over-representation of Muslim labour in the northern garment industry, which is a characteristic linked to the early origins of tailoring during the Mughal Empire (Roy 2013). All respondents were married, with children. In terms of caste, previous surveys in the NCR indicated the dominance of General Castes (GCs) and Other Backward Castes (OBCs), and this was also confirmed by our survey. However, we decided to break down the very large category of OBCs into two sections: OBCs and Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), a category in fact only deployed in the state of Bihar in India and which has been championed and implemented by the current state government. Overall, 38 per cent of respondents were OBCs and 36 per cent were GCs. EBCs, however, represented a sizeable portion of respondents in the districts surveyed on the basis of our initial list—namely, 26 per cent, almost a third of respondents (Figure 2).

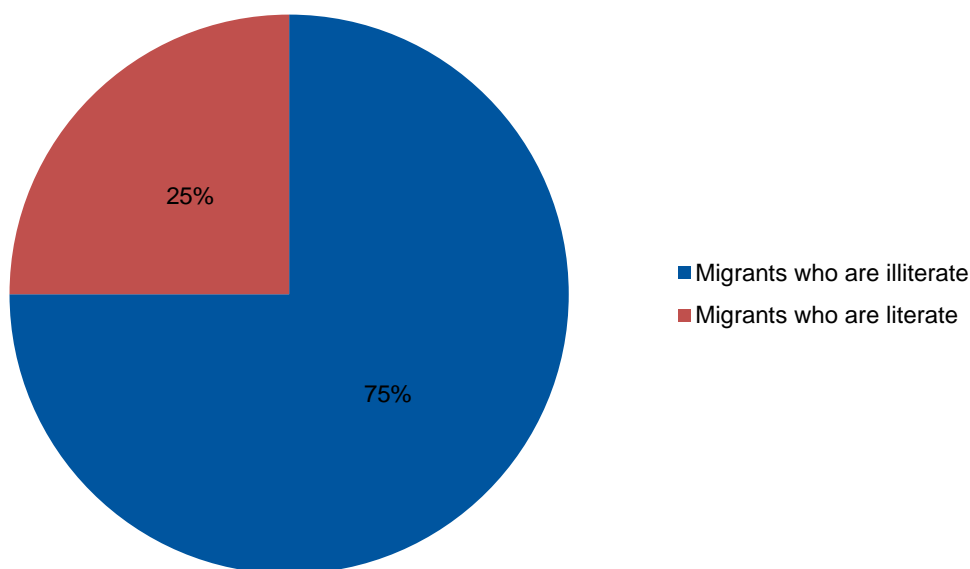
Figure 2: Caste distribution of respondents



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

The education level of respondents was lower than that generally reported for garment workers in the NCR (e.g. Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). The great majority of former migrant workers reported being illiterate. Only 25 per cent had gone through formal schooling (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Migrant literacy profile

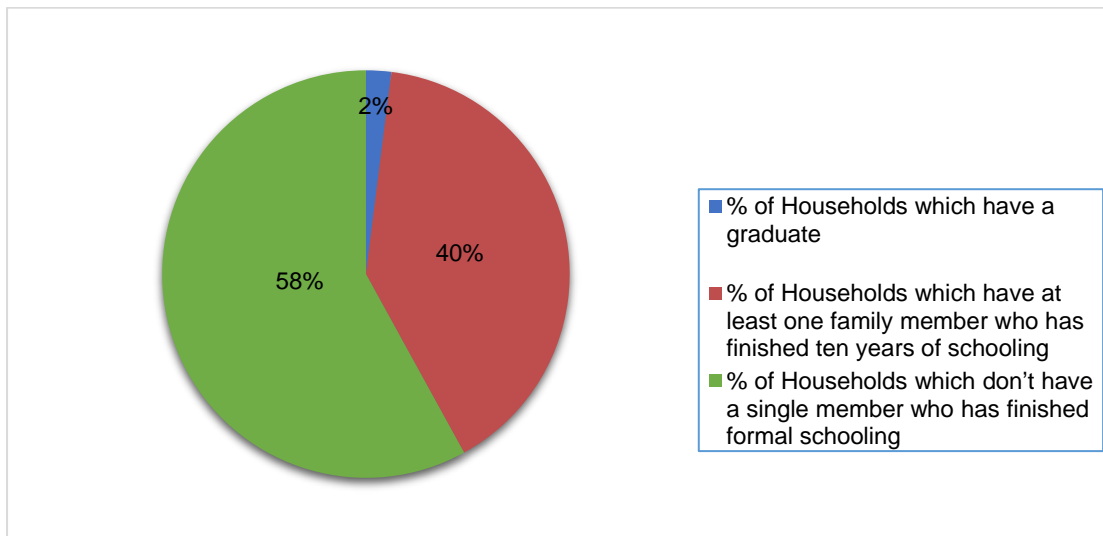


Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

Information on the household member of respondents revealed very low education levels overall. Only in one family did we find a member holding a BA. In 20 families there was at least one member who had finished ten years of schooling. However, in the remaining 29 there was not a single member who had finished formal schooling (Figure 4).



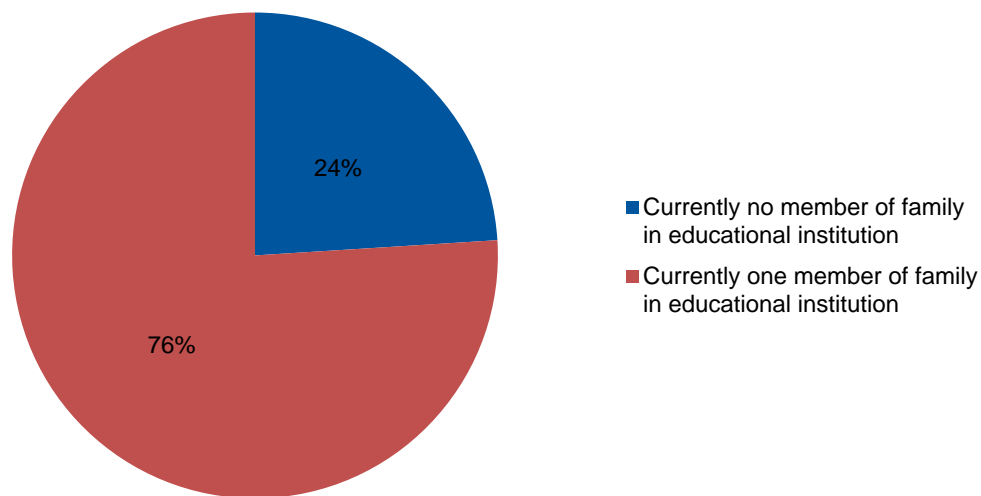
Figure 4: Literacy distribution by household



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

While adult family members had low levels of education, households reported that their children were currently attending school (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Households with one member currently in school



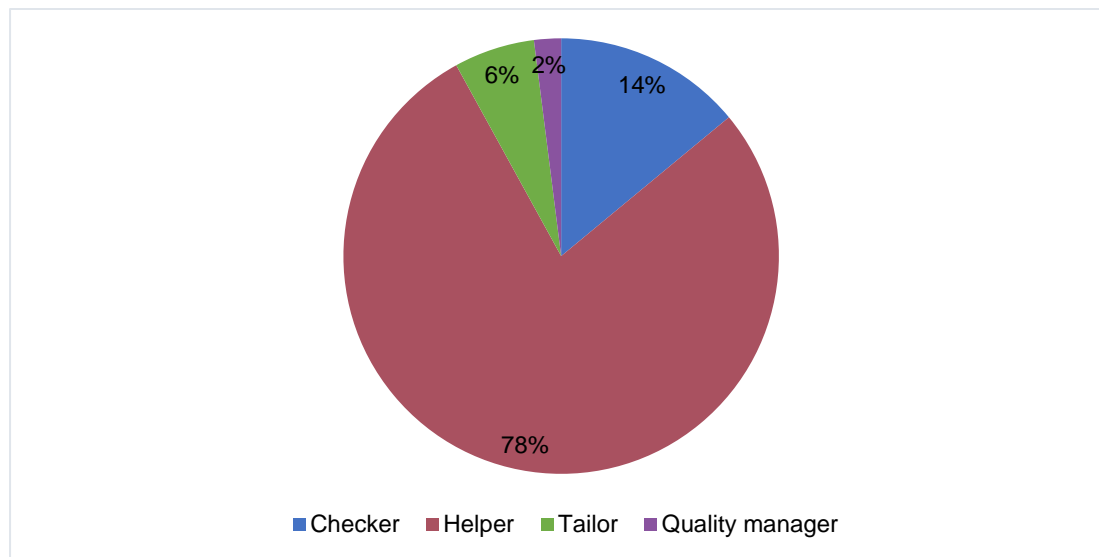
Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

The low education profile of the former workers may have to do with skills and tasks performed. Along with geographical provenance, this issue will be discussed in the section below, which also presents findings on recruitment, wages, and termination of industrial employment in the garment industry.

### 3 Workers' former industrial life: recruitment, wages, and reasons for leaving

The former workers interviewed in the districts surveyed had worked for a handful of renowned garment companies in the NCR. The majority were helpers or checkers; only 6 per cent were tailors and very few (2 per cent) were quality managers. Therefore, our sample shows a certain bias towards the bottom of the employment ladder in the garment industry. However, this bias is valuable, as it provides information on the implications of garment work for vulnerable working classes of the NCR–Bihar belt. Bihari workers fill many of the low-skilled positions in garment companies, and are also higher in number than workers from other regions. UP workers—the other dominant category on shop floors and in workshops (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015) and also in home-based units (Unni and Scaria 2009)—are generally considered more skilled. This is also because of the original caste division of labour in the industry, which continued until the 1960s and 1970s, before the export boom made it untenable. Initially, the caste of Darzis dominated the tailoring craft (Lal 2004). Muslim Darzis were found to be concentrated in UP. With the export boom that began in the 1970s, the caste nexus in the industry faded, as there was a considerable increase in demand for labourers. In the garment industry, circular migration from Bihar—otherwise a widespread phenomenon since colonial times—started to become significant during this period (Mezzadri 2017). The distribution of jobs performed in the NCR garment industry reported by respondents is represented in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Respondents by type of work

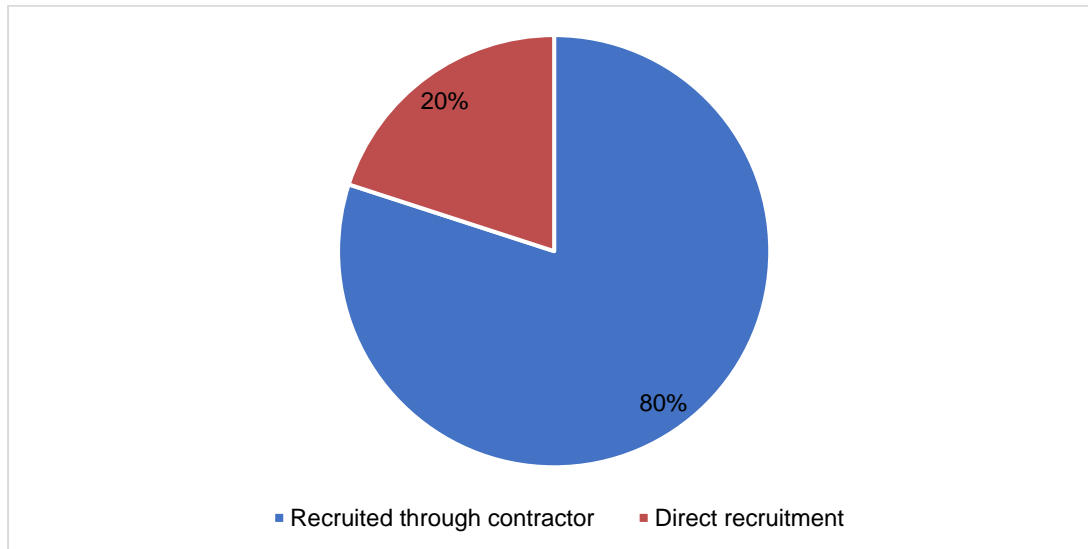


Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

Former garment workers mainly reported having been recruited via local contractors (*thekedaars*); only 20 per cent reported 'direct' recruitment at factory gates (Figure 7). In fact, even workers directly recruited may well be managed by contractors once they enter the factory. This is a well-established practice, which blurs contract and direct labour relations (Lerche et al. 2017; Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). For those recruited by contractors, the contracting relationship may have been initiated in Bihar, where local contractors are in contact with those in the NCR. In fact, while it may be the case that some contractors travel all the way to the NCR with their 'teams'—this happens, for instance, in embroidery networks (Mezzadri 2017), where workers also sleep and live in the working space owned by the itinerant contractor—in most cases local contractors feed into wider contracting networks. This 'cascade of labour intermediaries' (Barrientos 2013) controls labour across the Hindi belt corridor until it reaches the NCR, and often during workers' whole period of employment. The relaxation of the Contract Labour Act by the government of India,

which was first rolled out in the textile and garment sector before being expanded to all sectors with the labour reforms of the second BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) government, further blurs the distinction between contract and regular employment. As a result, rates of contract labour have gone up in India across sectors (Srivastava 2016).

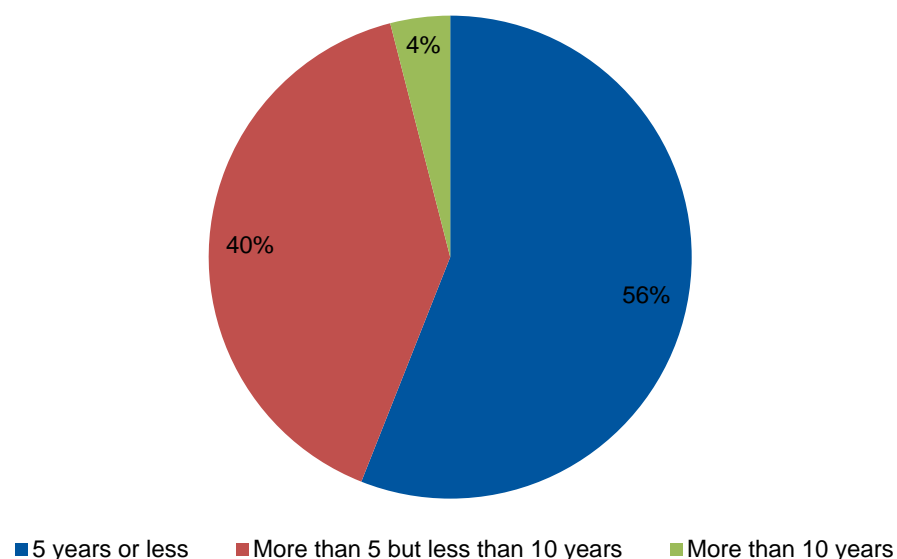
Figure 7: Recruitment process



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

The majority of former workers surveyed had worked in the garment industry for either five years or five to ten years (Figure 8). This is an important finding, as the industrial employment period suggests that garment work is overall temporary in the lives of these workers. Many travel to the NCR for a limited period of time and leave within ten years.

Figure 8: Number of years worked in garment industry



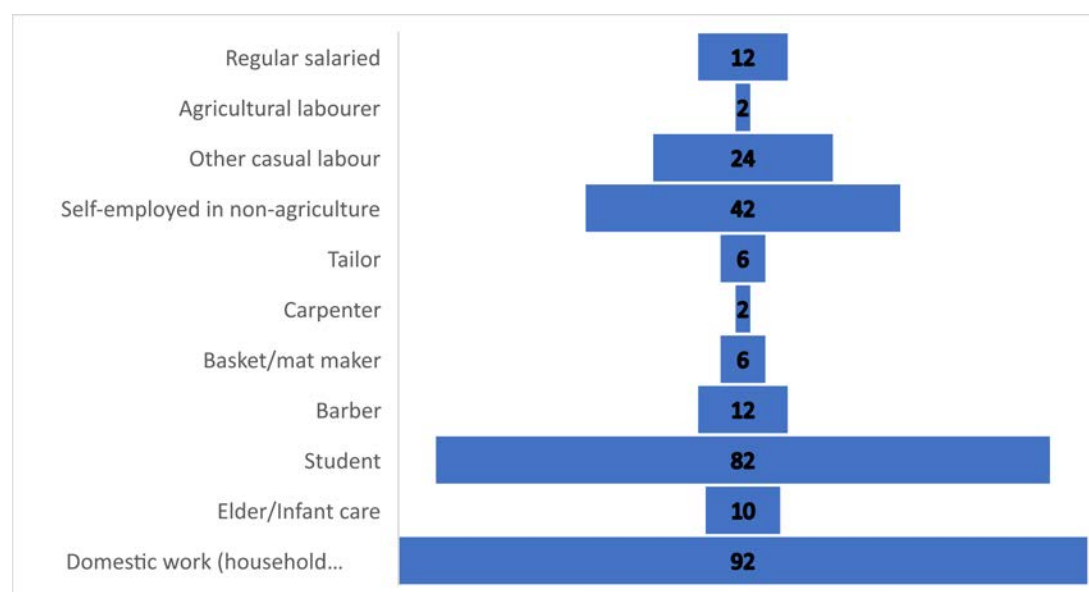
Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

Notably, a similar study on former workers conducted in Bangalore provided quite different findings. There, former workers interviewed about their past experience—mostly women, given the substantially different labour relations at work in the Indian south (Mezzadri and Majumder

2018, 2020)—reported having worked in the sector for at least ten years, with many having worked on and off in the industry, notwithstanding high rates of break in service—for 20 years. On the other hand, Bangalore’s overall labour regime is based on the ‘feminization’ of factory production and a focus on mass-produced basic garments. While this is only one of the multiple gendered pathways followed by the garment commodity chain in India, also based on pre-existing regional patriarchal systems, it is the one where women’s bodies at work are most visible (Mezzadri 2016). Findings suggest that in the north, in the NCR—where the labour regime is based on the ‘masculinization’ of factory and workshop production and women are mostly segregated into home-based value addition—employment in the sector may be far more temporary, flexible, and ultimately volatile.

Based on the above, one should note that for the sample of workers interviewed, employment in the garment industry was already the result of previous labour market transitions, mostly from informal jobs. In fact, the families of the former garment workers were also mostly engaged in informal occupations. Women were confined to doing reproductive work within the household, children to studying while other male members who were not direct dependants mostly performed different informal activities, ranging from self-employment (including petty services) to casual labour. A few were engaged in agricultural casual work; others (roughly one-fifth) reported regular employment (Figure 9).

Figure 9: Distribution of household members by primary occupation

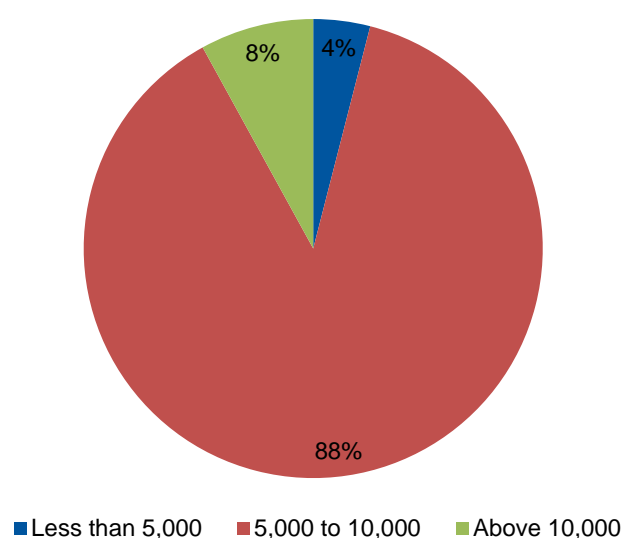


Note: by primary occupation of at least one family member.

Source: authors’ illustration based on own data.

The monthly income reported by respondents during their garment employment was broadly in line with the information provided by surveys of the sector in the NCR, with wages mostly set between R5,000 and R10,000 (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Monthly income in garment industry

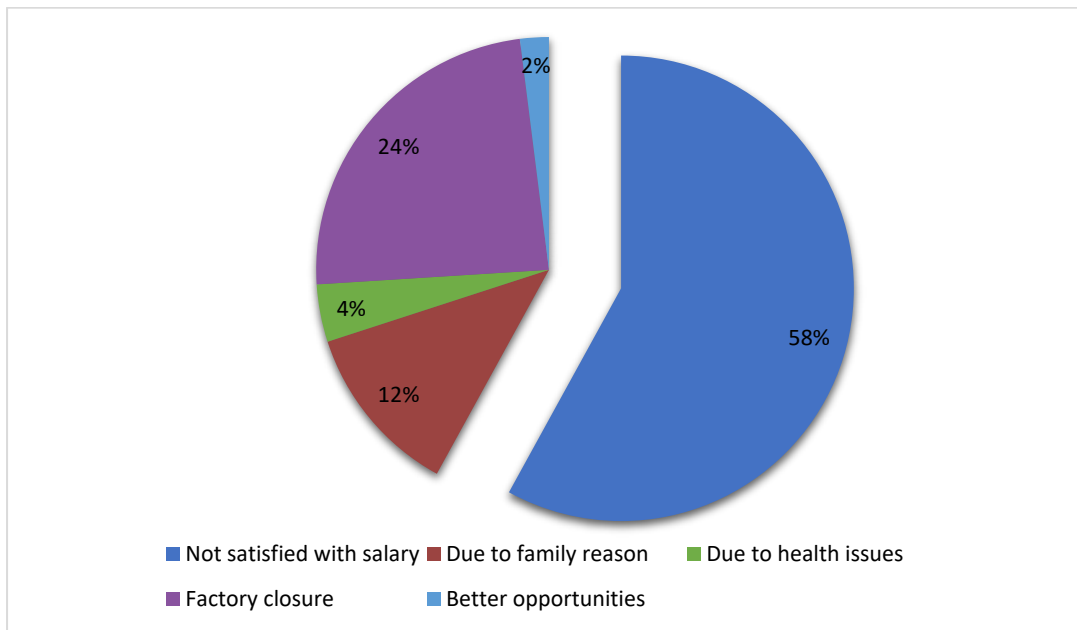


Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

These are hardly high salary levels, and they explain well why workers do not feel committed to the sector overall and may have experienced many labour market transitions in their lives before terminating work in the industry and once again changing their livelihood strategies once they hit 35. This age seems to be the cut-off for the majority of garment workers, in India and in most of the garment-export-producing countries (Mezzadri and Majumder 2018).

Low salary levels (low real wages) were also reported by the majority of respondents to be the main reason for leaving the industry. In fact, life histories revealed that even when nominal wages were higher in the industry, they were often not enough to account for urban–rural differentials or to allow workers to cope with the harshness of working rhythms, and they did not guarantee savings. Another significant factor was factory closures. This means that the flexible employment geography of the industry, with its high levels of breaks in service and continuous labour circulatory movements, is drawn by both employers and workers: in other words, by both capital and labour. On the one hand, employers may terminate employment through factory closures, due to effective company closure, or simply because of the relocation or termination of one industrial unit within the industrial network of the company, which in the NCR often comprises several units. On the other hand, however, workers may decide voluntarily to leave the sector, given its strenuous rhythms and low salaries. Former workers also listed family reasons and health issues as other causes for leaving, and a few also mentioned better opportunities (Figure 11). Health issues were reported consistently both in questionnaires and in life histories.

Figure 11: Reasons for leaving the garment industry



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

Once workers terminate their fragmented industrial employment experience in the garment sector they face yet another labour transition, which adds to those already experienced before joining the sector and during their period of employment in garment factories itself, when, as we have discussed above, workers already circulated several times back to their place of origin on a yearly basis as well as across the many industrial units of the NCR. As we shall detail in the next section, once they are back in their place of origin, workers' labour and reproduction trajectories becomes fairly different from that shaped by industrial work. They are based on a range of informal activities, as well as land.

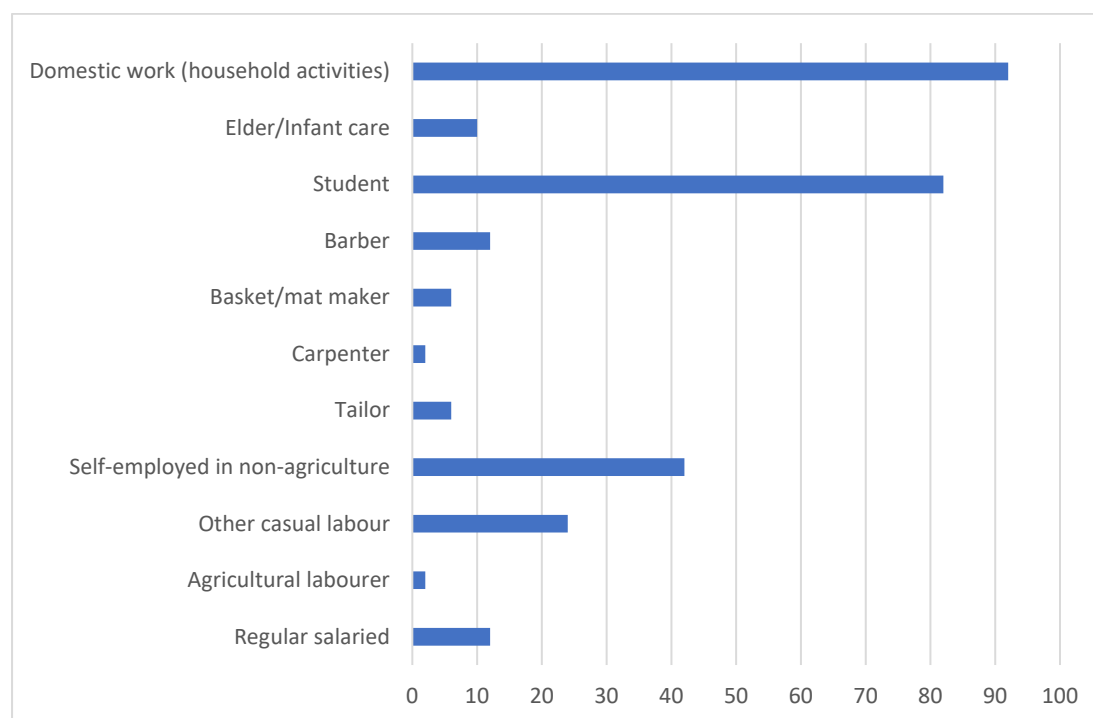
#### 4 Post-industrial livelihoods, land, and social reproduction

Studies of workers in industrial areas in India often stress the precarious living conditions they face, often crammed into industrial hamlets or hostels which may lack access to basic amenities and *de facto* do not look that different from urban slums. The living arrangements of workers in industrial hubs is where they reproduce *daily*—that is, where workers sustain themselves at the end of their long shifts and where they regenerate their capacity to toil for factories. In China and other East Asian countries like Vietnam, several authors have illustrated how these daily reproductive spaces are greatly connected with the rhythms and pace of factory work, so as to represent almost an extension of them (e.g. Cerimele 2016; Pun 2007; see also Pun et al. 2019 on Eastern Europe). The Chinese giant industrial conglomerate Foxconn owns entire villages across China, where its workers live in company dormitories and are fully integrated into the factory 'way of life', in a system where the boundaries between work and non-work times have been erased. Given the centrality of this system in manufacturing social compliance and readily available cheap labour for the factory, Pun and Smith (2007) call it the 'dormitory labour regime'. In the NCR, dormitories and large infrastructural solutions hosting the industrial proletariat are replaced by more informal living arrangements in local hamlets and enclaves, or by the industrial version of the old plantation 'lines'. The latter arrangement characterizes the area of Kapashera (see Cowan 2018), where this study began.

Conditions of work in the industrial hamlets and enclaves of the NCR further explain why workers prefer to return home after some years of service. Quality of life is rather low and can only be sustained for a limited period. As we have seen in the previous section, the salary is also not sufficient to entice workers to stay, even if they are not retrenched. Moreover, reproduction in the urban industrial area is only for single individual (male) workers—who in many cases share a tiny room with five to eight others (see also Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015). It does not cater for family life.

When asked about current occupations, workers report varied trajectories (Figure 12).

Figure 12: Post-industrial livelihoods

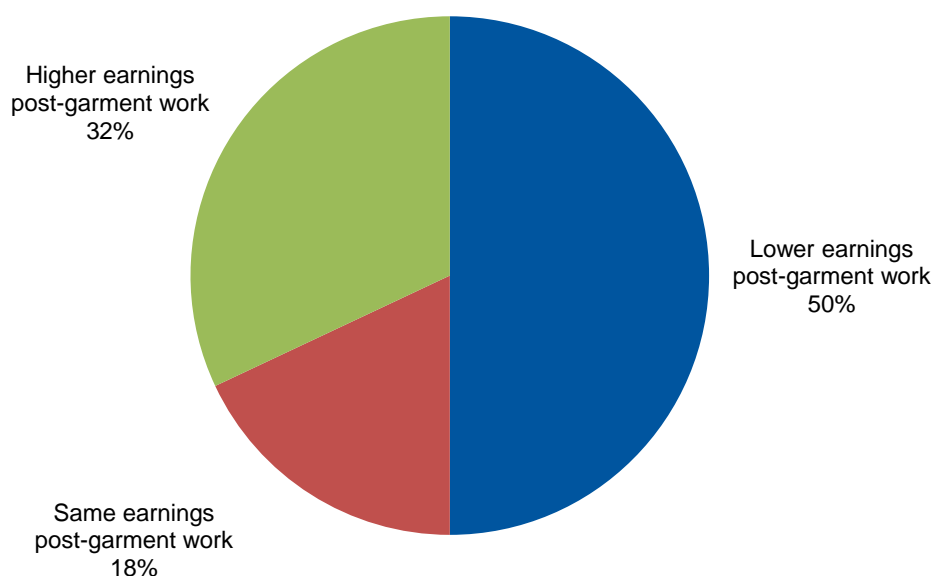


Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

None of these responses seem to suggest that respondents became entrepreneurs, as suggested by studies in other countries (e.g. Hewamanne 2020). Obviously, this has to do with the low salaries these workers earned during their industrial employment period, which were not sufficient to generate savings. Hardly becoming successful entrepreneurs, former garment workers, like their working household members, instead engaged in a number of informal occupations, including tailoring, basket weaving, working as barbers, driving totos (mini auto-rickshaws), doing daily construction work, or selling fruit. A few also engaged in agricultural labour.

Their earnings in Bihar, highly variable, may be subject to the significant fluctuations of the informal economy. However, they may not be significantly lower than they were in the NCR, and as such they may guarantee a better life for returning migrants (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Earnings during and after industrial work



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

A full picture of workers' earnings in the NCR and in Bihar is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Industrial afterlife livelihoods, garment earnings, and afterlife earnings

Former worker	Post-industrial livelihood	Garment wages (R)	Post-industrial income (R)
Satish S.	Barber	7,000	6,000–8,000
Balmiki S.	Barber	8,000	6,000–8,000
Sanjay S.	Barber	7,000	6,000–8,000
Dev S.	Security guard	8,000	7,000
Balmiki Y.	Labour (agriculture)	5,000	300–400 /day
Vikas S.	Barber	8,000	6,000–8,000
Shankar S.	Self-employed	8,000	9,000
Parwesh K.	Quality manager	22,000	32,000
Ranjeet K.	Nurse	8,000	8,000
Md M.	Tailor	12,000	15,000
Md P.	Tailor	12,000	15,000
Jagdish S.	Auto driver	7,000	12,000
Ajeet K.	Labour (construction)	7,000	300–400 /day
Sunil K.	Labour (construction and agriculture)	8,000	300–400 /day
Meera D.	Housewife	6,000	n/a
Ravi R.	Self-employed	7,000	7,000
Md I.	Labour (construction)	6,000	300–400 /day
Anil S.	Labour (construction and agriculture)	8,000	300–400 /day
Deepak K.	Self-employed	12,000	15,000
Suman K.	Self-employed	6,000	10,000
Pintu K.	Toto (rickshaw)	7,000	400–500 daily
Raj K.	Labour (construction)	7,000	300–400 /day



Mukesh K.	Labour (construction)	8,000	300–400 /day
Rakesh K.	Icecream seller and agricultural labour	7,000	300–400 /day
Ajay K.	Kirana store	9,000	7,000–8,000
Sunil S.	Barber	6,000	6,000–7,000
Chote T.	Barber	4,000	6,000–7,000
Samindar R.	Labour (construction)	6,000	300–400 /day
Mohammed Iq.	Pan-shop seller	7,000	3,000–4,000
Mohammed D.	Tailor	8,000	7,000–8,000
Mohammed N.	Bidi maker	6,000	200–300
Mohammed Z.	Casual labour and Bidi maker	7,000	200–300
Raju K.	Fruit seller	8,000	7,000–8,000
Deepak K.	Shop seller	7,000	5,000–6,000
Sudha D.	Bidi-maker	6,000	200–250
Ganga P.	Labour (construction and agriculture)	7,000	300–400 /day
Birendra K.	Tea stall	8,000	3,000–4,000
Mithlesh P.	Toto (rickshaw)	6,000	400–500 daily
Pramod K.	Security guard	8,000	6,000
Jogendra S.	Shop seller	7,000	3,000–4,000
Farman A.	Shop seller	6,000	5,000–6,000
Md Sahim	Medicine supplier	6,000	7,000–8,000
Abdul H.	Private school teacher	8,000	6,000
Mohammed M.	Shop seller	7,000	5,000–6,000
Mohammed Ir.	Shop seller	6,000	5,000–6,000
Mohammed S.	Casual labour	6,000	300–400 /day
Mohammed A.	Private job	8,000	5,000–6,000
Nazre A.	Shop seller	6,000	5,000–6,000
Zishan A.	Fruit merchant	6,000	15,000
Arshad A.	Shop seller	6,000	5,000–6,000

Source: authors' construction based on own data.

The findings reveal that for the majority of respondents (50 per cent) reporting earning less than in the NCR, the fall in income post-industrial work was actually not dramatic; in fact, 68 per cent earned only R500–1,500 less. For one-third of former workers, the fall was more significant, with 24 per cent earning R2,000–4,000 less and 8 per cent earning R4,000 less. However, the bottom of the distribution includes former workers who did not actually work for a wage or who did not earn currently (women and the one tea stall worker in the sample).

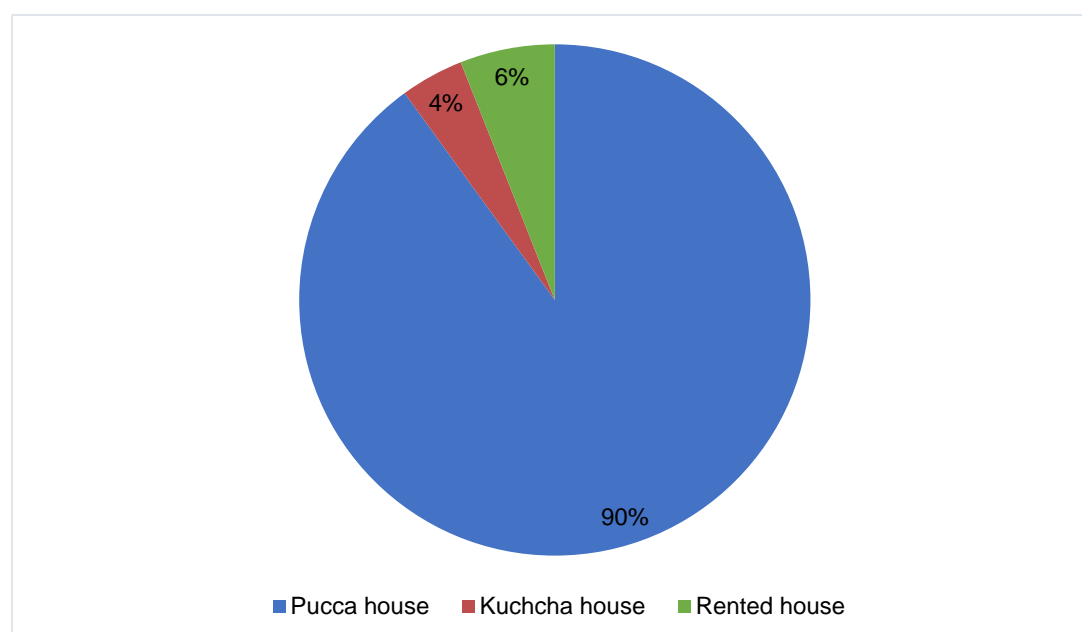
Notably, findings for India may differ substantially from those for other countries due in part to the place India has in the global garment commodity chain (GGCC). A study by Hewamanne (2020), in particular, highlights the possibility of virtuous cycles for Sri Lankan women garment workers once they leave the factories and go back to their villages, where many are able to initiate successful small businesses thanks to savings accumulated during their employment period in garment factories. Sri Lanka occupies a very special role in the GGCC: that of ethical, virtuous hub (Ruwanpura 2016). Hence, salaries and contributions in the sector, while still problematic, are far better than those experienced in India or Bangladesh, which are instead global hubs for niche markets targeting, respectively, highly specialized and embellished production and large basic (and cheap) garment orders. Given the stark differences in typologies of commodity production, business models, and wage levels, corresponding differences in trajectories and opportunities open—or not—to former garment workers across different countries are hardly surprising.

Findings on incomes and wages reveal that, in India, not only were former garment workers largely unable to save; they were also not necessarily able to send remittances home during their

employment period in the garment factory. Unlike what is reported by workers on the lower rungs of the garment supply chains (Mezzadri and Srivastava 2015), the Bihari former garment workers we surveyed highlighted that their salaries were just enough to guarantee their individual survival in the urban area but insufficient to support family financial necessities back home. Indeed, since 2016, demonetization, food inflation, and the rise in taxation triggered by changes in goods and service tax (GST; see Das 2017) have all contributed to real wage stagnation or even decline for India's working classes. In sectors like textiles and garments, where nominal wages must be kept down due to international competition, workers' purchasing power has declined dramatically. Coupled with the harsh living arrangements workers face in urban industrial hamlets, where the rent squeeze imposed on industrial workers by local slum landlords and their contractors has also gone up (Cowan 2018; Tiwari 2015), workers' inability to save would explain the relatively short period of time the workers surveyed here stayed on in garment factories before returning to their place of origin.

Indeed, living arrangements overall seemed much better at place of origin than in the NCR, where the majority had lived in over-crowded Kapashera. Respondents mostly lived in what in India are classified as pucca houses: properly constructed homes. Only 4 per cent reported living in kuchcha houses: less solid constructions more in line with slum dwellings. Only 6 per cent lived in rented accommodation (Figure 14). The vast majority had their own houses. In fact, it was on this basis that they could return home upon finishing their employment experience in the garment factory. Land too was a factor.

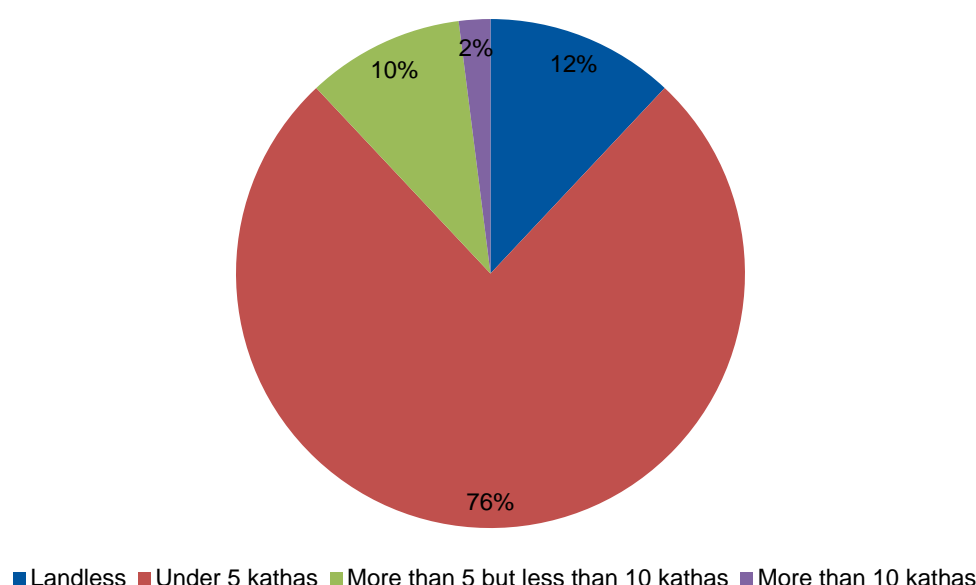
Figure 14: Respondents by house type



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

The great majority of former workers surveyed owned some land. Only 12 per cent were landless. The majority, 76 per cent, owned less than five khatas of land. Only 10 per cent owned between 5 and 10 khatas; and only 2 per cent more than that (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Respondent distribution by landholding



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

The marginality of the land owned by former garment workers surveyed in Bihar signifies that respondents mainly relied on the labour market to survive. At the same time, however, it would be erroneous to consider land ownership meaningless. The Lewisian model of labour surplus economies underestimates the importance of land ownership in developing economies. In fact, even if land cannot be considered profit-making or a key component of household income, together with house ownership it still provides some collateral and insurance against periods of financial adversity.

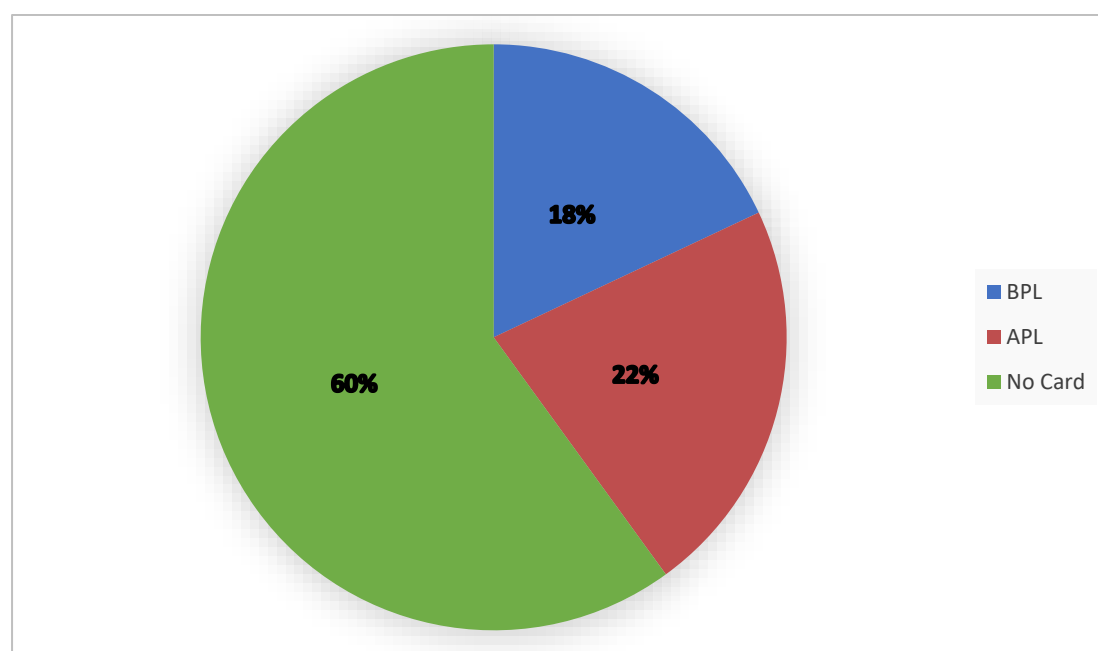
Moreover, land provides a reproductive safety net: a place for the household to wait for the circular migrant to come back home, given the inability of industrial hamlets to accommodate or reproduce family life. In quite a few cases, the subsistence production that may take place on this marginal land can still complement family income in kind. In short, despite its economic marginality, land remains central to livelihoods; it still represents the pivot around which the broad social reproduction of the household can be organized. During the short returning spells of circular migration, during industrial lean seasons, the household will reabsorb the reproduction of garment workers also thanks to this land. After the final labour transition through which garment workers leave their factory jobs behind, households will reabsorb these workers for good, again also thanks to this land. Former garment workers' employment trajectories, as we have seen, soon realign with those of the other family members left behind.

Arguably, while providing crucial information on post-industrial work livelihoods, information on the lack of full land dispossession also provides key insights on the features and reproduction of industrial labour regimes. In fact, this lack of full dispossession is central to the ability of employers to externalize the cost of the social reproduction of the workforce to the villages and small towns that workers come from (Mezzadri 2019). However marginal, the small patches of land owned by the industrial workforce in India work as a very effective subsidy to both capital and labour. While representing a key coping mechanism for workers, central to their highly diversified livelihood based on many labour transitions, labour's land is also turned into an effective mechanism to reduce employers' labour and social costs. The role that land plays in livelihood strategies and how it intersects with informal employment will be further explored based on workers' life histories.

It should be noted that the findings do not suggest any relationship between landholding and caste, also due to the marginality of the average land size reported by respondents overall, set at below 1 acre. The few landless former garment workers within our sample were GCs. EBCs had, overall, a slightly higher average landholding of 4.19 kathas, against an average of 2.6 and 2.47 for GCs and OBCs, respectively. Overall, for the scope of our study, potential inequalities between OBCs and EBCs—which may justify their subdivision into distinct groups as in Bihar—do not really translates into either industrial employment patterns or asset ownership.

Land remains the most significant form of indirect social insurance for former garment workers and their households. In fact, 60 per cent of respondents did not possess any social insurance card, nor did they report being covered by other government schemes. This said, 40 per cent of the respondents reported possessing either BPL (below the poverty line) or APL (above the poverty line) cards (Figure 16). Specifically, 18 per cent reported possessing BPL cards, while 22 per cent reported possessing APL cards. For these former workers, the net effect of the transition from factory employment and migratory work in urban areas to informal employment at place of origin also depended on this access to state provision. Indeed, state policies have the capacity to mediate distinct livelihood opportunities and patterns of inclusion and exclusion (Banerjee 2016). In fact the double movement or reverse Lewisian movement in this specific case could be a result of inclusive strategies undertaken in Bihar, and could be operational in the local context; specifically, the EBC recognition drive undertaken by the Bihar government could be a contributor to this.

Figure 16: Respondent distribution by BPL and APL cards



Source: authors' illustration based on own data.

These findings on social entitlements are significant in several different ways. First, they suggest that one-fifth of former garment workers are considered officially poor. Ownership of a BPL card is also mediated partially by caste—albeit not linked to land—with a majority of EBC and only a few OBC former workers possessing such cards. Engagement in export-oriented sectors does not necessarily lift these workers out of poverty. And even in case where garment work temporarily lifts the poorest segments of the workforce over the poverty line, upon leaving the industry a significant proportion of them may fall again below that line. Moreover, as none of the respondents reported leaving the sector with any sort of savings, even workers who were not the poorest were unable to use their earnings from garment work towards building a new, more profitable future.

Overall, the findings seem to confirm the temporariness of this type of industrial occupation, and its articulation—before workers join the garment factory, during their time at work in the factory, and after the completion of their industrial experience—with the informal occupations also performed by family members in their place of origin. In this light, through data provided by former workers, garment work mostly appears either as a form of working poverty or at best as a very temporary relief from the precariousness of informal living. The next section gathers key insights on labour transitions as experienced and voiced by former garment workers.

## 5 Former workers' narratives: distinct trajectories and some common traits

Workers' own voices collected through life histories are incredibly useful in order to (a) further qualify the reasons behind their initial transition to the NCR and final transition back to the village; (b) assess workers' own explanations of the difference between their experience of industrial work in the NCR and their current experience in the village; and (c) further appreciate the entanglement of land and informal work in their trajectories of transition away from industrial work.

Narratives consistently represent the decision to migrate to the NCR as part of a collective family strategy rather than individual choice. Seeking employment outside the village in the garment factory was seen as a way to subsidize the family left behind to tend the land or engaged in different informal occupations. Hence, the expectation of remittances was central to this collective strategy. This is a noteworthy reminder that theories seeking to explain employment practices and experiences should not necessarily adopt the individual as the main point of reference to analyse and assess labour transitions and their outcomes. Individual workers are also *de facto* part of a collective in their move to the city and into industrial employment. Workers recalled joining others—either family members or acquaintances—in their outward trip to the NCR, and reported sharing rooms with several workers. Their recollection of their life in Kapashera or other industrial hamlets was of one where productive and reproductive work were tightly entangled. They experienced the burden of daily reproductive tasks, shared with the other workers with whom they lived, and they worked very long hours, overtime being largely the norm in garment factories in the Delhi metropolitan area. Narratives reveal that this productive–reproductive continuum was crossed by different forms of abuse and cheating, which workers wanted to spend time explaining during interviews.

In particular, several of the workers who shared their histories with us ascribed their final decision to leave the NCR as due not only to meagre earnings—which is what largely emerged in the questionnaires, and which we shall expand on shortly—but also due to being systematically cheated or scolded by either labour contractors (*thekedaars*) or landlords and sellers (often connected) in the industrial hamlet. Several workers mentioned being shouted at and being verbally abused by contractors, and two mentioned contractors running away with their wages, events that then would trigger escalating violence from all those to whom payment was due. Balmiki recalls:

The *thekedaar* would run away with the money. When he run away, then I would be trapped, the landlord would get violent ... The grocer would get violent, he is catching hold of me, but how do I pay him?

Workers' stories suggested a high degree of control exercised in industrial hamlets. These were highly informal reproductive spaces, yet crossed by multiple relations of the subordination that workers are subjected to. Even renting a room did not imply entitlement to a space beyond that of workers' own individual bodies. Rooms rented to three workers are not permitted to house more. The landlord would know immediately if lodgers allowed anyone else in, and would ask:

Why are there more chappals [shoes] in front of your house today?

In fact, workers' recall also confirmed how labour contracting is greatly differentiated in the NCR, with some contractors being entirely informal and invisible in the factory system, and others instead being registered by the company and hence able to provide workers with access to social security like the Provident Fund (PF) and Employee State Insurance (ESI). However, unlike in other areas, where workers reported the ability to routinely access their PF, workers mostly reported lack of access to these funds upon leaving, with one expressly referring to this practice as wage theft by contractors. Findings from other studies conducted in the NCR in fact suggest that labour contracting density may be further increasing since the beginning of the pandemic (Basu et al., forthcoming). They also confirm the PF theft practices reported by our respondents.

According to workers' narratives, the hardship experienced in the NCR remained uncompensated by earnings—an issue also captured by the questionnaires. Workers lamented that they could not systematically save, although saving opportunities had been a primary reason for outward migration. Overall, their narratives painted the process of circular migration as risky and not rewarding. Crucially, workers explained that saving was difficult, due both to the labour practices explained above, and to the weight of daily reproductive costs on overall salaries. Jagdish explained that even if one was working steadily, 'the money he gets in return, it is of no use, he is just forced to continue working there' (interview held in June 2021). As harsh experience of work was ultimately not compensated financially, many talked about their decision to move back to the village as liberating. In the village one could at least be 'free', experiencing 'the freedom where you don't have to put up with people swearing at you'. Another worker explained:

If I am earning a few paisa, good, but even if I am not, I am not answerable to anyone. And there, we have to be under someone's thumb. If I don't do [work] there, I have to listen to two words [criticism], if not, then I will die hungry.

In fact, several workers interpreted heavy debt burdens and the concomitant abuse at the hands of *thekedaars*, landlord, and shopkeepers in Kapashera as part of the same process of daily work insecurity. No wonder many referred to their productive and reproductive factory work experience as being one of bonded labour.

Exhaustion was also mentioned, although it remained a secondary reason to leave in workers' narratives. Undoubtedly, however, the move back to villages implied far less work in terms of reproductive activities. Certainly, these men only dealt with the reproductive burden during their experience of circular migration in the city, as the burden was immediately re-internalized by women and elders once they returned to the village. In this light, workers' stories clearly spoke of the informal 'economies of care' represented by the village (Shah and Lerche 2020), which arguably also provided a financial subsidy to the industry during times when workers routinely went home during their industrial employment period (Mezzadri 2020). In the words of Balmiki again:

Here I have a house, door, my world is here. Even if I don't work one day, I can still eat. But there if I don't work one day, then I don't eat either.

Several workers acknowledged earning less in the village—although not too significantly, as was well captured in the questionnaires. However, they also explained that their expenses were significantly lower, and they valued being able to live with their families. Freedom—*azadi*—was once again a recurrent theme in workers' own assessment of the differences between industrial work in the NCR and their current occupations. Obviously, quite a few mentioned the hardship brought about by the recent lockdowns. However, they talked about it as a collective experience that was hopefully temporary. There is a significant difference between these workers and those

whose images circulated across social media worldwide following the sudden lockdown announcement of 22 March by the government of India. These workers were already at home in their villages, and did not have to embark on such dramatic journeys home. That said, some reported being in debt due to the pandemic and struggling to find continuous employment. In fact, in terms of coping with this difficult period, land emerged once again as a key asset. All workers who shared their life histories, with the exception of two, were among those in our sample who reported having some land.

In fact, life histories revealed how in the villages, livelihood strategies are extremely porous, yet they always somehow seem to be connected to land. In this sense, while we expected to be able to map more significant differences in life-cycle trajectories among those who ‘go back’ to farming and those who engage in informal occupations, workers’ own narratives revealed that this distinction did not necessarily hold. Work and income decisions and strategies—both of outward migration and of industrial exit and return to informal occupations—took into consideration social networks and family collective options and assets. The life histories of workers engaged in informal occupations also clearly highlighted how access to family land remained central to their livelihood strategy as returnee migrants. At the same time, the informal occupations many returned to were often shaped by caste and social network opportunities.

Several respondents who shared their life history with us were from the Naai caste, whose traditional occupation is barbering. Some of them reported going back to this activity informally, as already practised by other family members, hence utilizing caste networks. None of the workers reported utilizing savings from their period of industrial employment, as they had none. While caste networks may have helped in reinserting workers into traditional informal activities, they did not represent workers’ only opportunities, and people from the same caste or community reported different post-industrial work trajectories. Devanandan, for instance, who also came from the Naai community, came back from Delhi to become a security guard in a local hospital. He reported accessing this opportunity through friends and acquaintances—kinship, rather than caste networks. This is to say that overall, the life histories hardly pictured a specific functional relationship between caste and the post-industrial work trajectories. Indeed, caste occupational ties represented an option once workers went back to their village, but there were other opportunities shaped by life in the village. At times, the social networks offering new opportunities to returning workers may have been intergenerational, as was the case for Ranjeev, who managed to become a nurse thanks to connections related to his father’s former employment in a low-ranking government job. While memories and narratives of the reasons why these workers quit their job in the garment industry were fairly comparable, their post-work opportunities varied on the basis of multiple factors.

However, there was one element of commonality to all the stories we collected, and that was the marginal presence of land in the livelihoods of the workers. As the results of the questionnaires showed, the amount of land owned by those who reported it among their assets was generally small. Yet it formed part of a collective survival strategy for workers and their families. It did so during workers’ migration experience in the NCR, when family members left behind in the village cultivated it, and it remained so after workers’ return. In fact, workers reported cultivating land for their own consumption either in parallel to their informal employment or through family members, either parents or brothers. In a few cases workers reported sharing accommodation with their enlarged family—not only with parents but often also with siblings and their families. There were always members of the households attending to the land, even if all respondents highlighted that what was obtained via subsistence farming was not enough to cover the family’s nutritional needs: it was a subsidy to overall food consumption. One respondent reported leasing the land for sharecropping instead, obtaining some subsidy to his informal wage.

Questions on the effect of COVID-19 were asked tangentially and carefully, as it was revealed to be a triggering question for many respondents. However, it emerged that land is likely to have also played a role in survival during the lockdown periods, when one could only go out a few times a week to perform work. Indeed, those who did not have land did not have any safety when COVID-19 hit and reduced work opportunities. One of the two landless workers we interviewed, whom we reached via phone and who reported working as an auto-rickshaw driver, answered our call in Ranchi, in Jharkhand, to where he had out-migrated for work immediately after the lockdown was lifted. As he could not sustain and complement his informal activity with subsistence farming, he had to once again seek work outside his village. Through workers' narratives, land emerged as still playing a reproductive role in sustaining livelihoods, even if in the form of a marginal subsidy to informal work and life in the village. In this sense, farming and informal work should not necessarily be interpreted as alternative income-generating strategies.

## **6 Labour transitions and workers' life cycle: policy implications for decent work**

The findings of this study on the post-industrial work trajectories and experiences of former garment workers returning to Bihar from the NCR have some important policy implications. In particular, they suggest the need to adopt a *life-cycle approach* to evaluating the merits of some typologies of employment *across time*, and not simply during temporary phases in the lives of the working poor. In other words, the evaluation of the impact of given employment experiences should not only focus on static indicators like take-home wages or benefits during a limited period of the employment, but should also consider the opportunities and possibilities subsequently open to workers during labour transitions into other forms of work—a sort of continuum of small movements (often back and forth) during a labouring life cycle. In the cases we explored, garment work neither provided key life-changing opportunities to workers nor could be understood as the Lewisian turning point, given that workers moved out of industrial work after a relatively short period of time. Former garment workers reported a lack of savings; in fact, they also reported a lack of significant remittances during the factory employment period. Given the well-known harsh and depleting rhythms characterizing the garment industry, in India and elsewhere, and in the absence of significant savings, one does wonder if five to ten years of strenuous work in NCR garment factories while living in a housing environment like that of Kapashera are ultimately worth their likely toll on workers' bodies, health, and time.

After they had left the industry and the NCR, these migrant workers returned home to perform varied informal occupations. Some of these occupations were the same that their family members left behind in Bihar had continued to engage in, on the basis of caste ties. Others' work opportunities instead were new, and materialized thanks to other social networks, based on kinship or other solidarities. We cannot, nor should we attempt to, interpret different options too functionally. However, we can broadly conclude that across the majority of cases, the household micro-economy back home provided workers with some key safety nets and alternatives to move away from garment work. The relevance of land, even in its marginal reproductive role in sustaining livelihoods, seems instead to be the most common trope emerging from workers' narratives. However, rather than representing an alternative strategy in itself, subsistence farming emerged here as a subsidiary form of income support in the context of a collective strategy for family survival. Notably, this finding also confirms how the partial dispossession characterizing the migratory industrial working classes in India reproduces 'the village economy' as performing a key role in their sustenance and daily and regenerative care (Shah and Lerche 2020), while also enabling the externalization of reproductive costs away from industrial employers or the state (Mezzadri 2019; 2020).



These considerations have implications for the decent work agenda. In a convincing critique of the Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs') approach to work, Rai et al. (2019) illustrate the limitations of approaches to decent work that do not include any consideration of reproductive work. Revealing the contradictions between SDG5, centred on gender and reproductive work, and SDG8, focused on employment and decent work, the authors highlight how conceptualizations of decent work that exclude reproductive activities *de facto* embrace a narrow, growth-centred development agenda that reinforces the invisibility of unpaid contributions within households and those who perform it—mostly women. Based on our findings, we can scale up this argument further. First, our understanding of what constitutes decent work should not be based on static comparisons between work experiences, like mere differences in take-home wages, for instance. If acknowledging the relevance of reproductive work is crucial, so is highlighting the *broader reproductive structure* in which specific employment experiences take place. This means analysing the benefits or depleting effect of given forms of employment in the context of the broader *life cycles* of workers, and also considering opportunities for labour transitions based on assets, skills, or savings accumulated. In short, effective approaches to decent work should also account for the overall *broader reproductive potential* and implications of specific forms of work.

Second, and relatedly, industrial and informal work should not be conceived as two separate alternative work routes for working classes in the Global South, to be assessed one against the other. There is strong interplay between the two, and many industrial workers engage in informal work upon leaving industries. The broader temporal reproductive trajectories of the working classes entail complex interplay between the two types of work, as they entail interplay with marginal farming, in a context where partial dispossession of land is the norm.

While this great reproductive complexity represents a clear challenge to possible novel theorizations of decent work, it does suggest the need to steer policy debates towards the adoption of more significant indicators of the social impact of labouring experiences, which may include remittances, savings, care, and reproductive opportunities for the future. The impact of the COVID-19 crisis has currently recentred policy debates in this direction, by underlining the relevance of social reproduction and a 'caring economy' (Care Collective 2021; Women's Budget Group, 2021) in supporting sustainable livelihoods in a post-pandemic world. Arguably, this process may offer greatly valuable avenues to rethinking the decent work agenda in ways that may prioritize the long-term reproductive needs of the working classes. In countries where welfare states do not guarantee pension contributions to their workers, who move back and forth across different forms of employment and experience multiple forms of labour transitions in their lives, moving the policy debate from static to dynamic, life-cycle-based gains from employment experiences appears paramount.

## 6 Conclusions

This paper is the result of a two-year research project focusing on the post-industrial work trajectories of former garment workers who left the NCR to return to their place of origin, in Bihar. It entailed a complex and time-consuming methodology, which implied identifying workers leaving the industrial hamlet of Kapashera and tracing them back home along the NCR–Bihar corridor. Through a combination of semi-quantitative questionnaires and life history collection, we managed to reconstruct some of the salient features of workers' industrial experience in the NCR, including their reasons for leaving, memories of industrial employment, assessment of the difference between past and present livelihoods, and contemporary life and work trajectories. Given the small size of our sample and the complex management of a difficult process of fieldwork taking place during various phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, we see this exercise as providing initial input into what we hope can become a far broader conversation on labour transitions across formal and informal employment domains and their interplay in the lives of the working classes in the Global South.

Yet despite their limitations, we believe that our findings suggest the methodological relevance of adopting a life-cycle approach to labour transitions. This approach entails assessing employment experiences and their outcome against the broader spatial and temporal reproductive canvas against which they take place. It rejects dualist understandings of formal and informal employment as entirely separate trajectories to be assessed one against the other, given their entanglement in the lives of the working classes in the Global South. Notably, such a rejection is embedded in a wider theoretical rejection of the Lewis model as a meaningful model to capture employment movements in labour surplus economies. In fact, one could argue that our findings—and workers' narratives in particular—fully reveal the factors undermining the possibility for a Lewisian turning point: namely, the circularity of labour transitions across industrial and non-industrial (informal) sectors, in contexts of only partial land dispossession. This issue is increasingly stressed also in urban studies focusing on slums and informal work (see RoyChowdhury 2021). Notably, these considerations also have implications for the ways in which we should recentre theorizations of decent work, against productivist assessments linked mainly to comparisons in static indicators of employment performance like, for instance, take-home wages alone.

With specific reference to the garment industry and its workings in India, we can draw two implications from our empirical findings. First, workers' responses and narratives seem to confirm once again the extremely precarious nature of employment in the sector. In fact, specifically, workers' testimonies identify labour contracting and high reproductive expenses in industrial hamlets as one of the key reasons behind their difficult experience in the NCR; their inability to save, and, ultimately, their decision to leave. Upon leaving, workers return to their villages and find work in alternative informal occupations shaped by caste or other social network networks. That said, for the majority, land continues to have a role in supporting daily and intergenerational, individual, and collective reproduction. Once again, this confirms the need to reject frameworks theorizing employment experiences as entirely different alternatives or trajectories, and studying labour transitions and their entanglements as distinct moments/movements in wider reproductive livelihood strategies. Much-needed novel policy lessons can be derived from this holistic approach centred on work and social reproduction.

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