

Stitching Together a Fairer Future: Insights from the Global Garment Industry

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The global garment industry spans continents, cultures, and livelihoods. Ensuring decent work for the millions employed in its factories is an urgent concern. **Dr Britta Holzberg** has worked to unravel this intricate web through in-depth case studies in Egypt and Jordan. Her unique approach sheds new light on the factors shaping labour conditions. By considering the often-overlooked perspectives of supplier factories, Dr Holzberg offers a valuable new way of thinking about working conditions. Her work provides vital insights for academics, policymakers, and industries working to improve labour standards worldwide.

Unravelling the Threads of the Decent Work Challenge

The quest for decent work in the garment industry is not new. Governments, brands, unions, non-governmental organisations, and multi-stakeholder initiatives have been working to stamp out the abuse of workers for many years. However, progress remains slow and limited. The COVID-19 pandemic further magnified the lack of practical solutions while contributing to massive layoffs, payment cuts, and severe poverty among garment workers.

Dr Britta Holzberg argues that a critical piece of the puzzle has been missing: the perspective of supplier factories, which sit at the intersection of global pressures and local realities. She emphasises that supplier firm owner-managers play a crucial role. In addition to being highly familiar with and understanding the local norms of the regions in which they operate, they also need to consider many competing factors when making employment decisions. These include international standards, brand purchasing practices, national laws, cultural norms, and factory-level constraints.

Dr Holzberg identified two critical areas of investigation. First, she aimed to understand how global/local influences interact/shape working conditions. Second, she sought to use these insights to contribute to the debate on decent work in practice by deducing recommendations on how to improve labour standards worldwide.

Weaving Theories Together

To guide her inquiry, Dr Holzberg combined three academic perspectives. The Global Production Network lens allows examination of the industry's interconnected web of actors and power dynamics. Crossvergence theory enables examination of how global and local forces interact. Lastly, cognitive framing theories explore how individual decision-makers make sense of competing demands.

This integrated approach allowed Dr Holzberg to get a more complete picture of the challenges and influences surrounding the main issues. Her resulting conceptual framework provided her with a roadmap for analysing real-world cases.

Unravelling Threads of Influence in Jordan and Egypt

To gain real-world insight, Dr Holzberg conducted extensive field research in Egypt and Jordan's textile and garment industries, a region that hadn't been studied extensively in this context before. She interviewed over 50 factory owners and managers, 13 industry and labour experts, and 27 workers. She combined her data with factory visits and document analysis to gain deeper insights.

Importantly, the research looked beyond the first-tier suppliers directly serving international brands to examine conditions and drivers at subcontractors and textile producers further down the supply chain. This multi-level approach sought to capture the full scope of decent work challenges.

With a wealth of data in hand, Dr Holzberg undertook the first round of analysis. Here, she looked at all the data using qualitative content analysis to identify the research insights of particular



importance. In a second round of analysis, she focused on these insights using a range of different approaches, including explanatory case analysis, pattern matching, and thematic analysis.

In Jordan, Dr Holzberg traced the garment sector's decent work progress between 2006 and 2018. Following international outcry over poor conditions, the country saw significant improvements, though challenges remain. Her research in Jordan revealed the importance of coordination between global, national, and factory-level actors.

The Better Work programme, a partnership between the UN (ILO) and the World Bank (IFC), was crucial in facilitating this. Its impact was tangible, as one factory manager explained: 'Everybody is partnering with Better Work Jordan, the Ministry of Labor, factories, owners, the buyers. It's basically a teamwork.' The initiative aligned stakeholder interests, provided training and advisory services, and monitored compliance. All of this helped suppliers make much-needed changes, underscoring the potential of such collaborative efforts.

Dr Holzberg then compared different supply chain tiers by looking at both Jordanian garment subcontractors and Egyptian textile producers. The findings were illuminating. In Jordan, she found that working conditions tended to deteriorate among lower-tier factories. Subcontractors faced intense cost and time pressures from lead suppliers without having the same incentives as higher-tier factories to comply with labour standards.

In Egypt, however, the picture was more nuanced. Some textile manufacturers had better practices than the garment factories they supplied. Dr Holzberg found that local labour laws, workforce demographics, and production systems all played a role in shaping labour practices. For example, she discovered that

Egyptian textile mills with higher-skilled male workers and 24/7 machine schedules managed overtime differently from garment factories employing mainly women.

A New Theoretical Framework for Analysing Decent Work Challenges in Global Production

Integrating insights from the various analyses she conducted, Dr Holzberg refined a framework for analysing the factors influencing labour practices in supplier firms. The framework positions suppliers as active agents rather than passive rule-followers. It provides a valuable tool for researchers and practitioners to analyse the complex drivers of supplier behaviour more holistically. It combines four key elements:

- The conflict between brands' commercial and social responsibility demands. Dr Holzberg found that while brands may require suppliers to meet labour standards, their purchasing practices – like tight deadlines and price squeezes – often have the opposite effect and undermine suppliers' ability to ensure decent work.
- The power of place in shaping outcomes. Local laws, norms, and industry structures can overshadow global pressures. In Egypt, for instance, Dr Holzberg found that labour regulations and gender dynamics had a more significant impact on working hours than brands' codes of conduct.
- The interaction of public, business, and social actors on a global and local level. The interests of the public, business, and social actors interact and pose (partially conflicting) demands on owners-managers of supplier firms.



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- The importance of supplier capabilities. Dr Holzberg found that differences in human capital, technology, and financial resources helped explain variations in labour practices – sometimes more than global standard enforcement. She found that these resources can often be critical factors that enable or constrain improvements.

Remaking Responsibilities for Ethical Production

So, what will it take to achieve decent work for all? Dr Holzberg argues that the current compliance model – whereby brands pressure suppliers to follow codes of conduct – is insufficient. Dr Holzberg’s research points to the need for a ‘synergistic cooperation paradigm’ to achieve decent work. This paradigm would involve redistributing roles and responsibilities among global and local players, requiring a fundamental rethink of purchasing practices.

International organisations would set standards for decent work and responsible purchasing practices with input from all parties. This includes brands, suppliers, unions, and governments in producing and buying countries.

‘Glocal’ initiatives (initiatives with global resources that act on a local level) drive decent work progress at the ground level. Modelled after Better Work, these independent programmes provide monitoring, training, mediation, and resources – all of which empower local business, public, and social actors to improve. Dr Holzberg suggests that ‘glocal’ initiatives could serve as the primary change agents within producing countries. On a practical level, they would facilitate context-specific labour standards and conduct more effective audits. More broadly, they would advise suppliers on improvements, support worker empowerment, engage governments, and enable social dialogue.

Advocacy groups and regulators in buying countries encourage brands to adopt responsible purchasing practices, like fair prices and lead times, and to participate in ‘glocal initiatives’. Rather than policing their own supply chains, brands ought to refrain from aggravating decent work challenges with their purchasing practices and support decent work progress by supporting ‘glocal’ initiatives such as Better Work. They finance them and reward participating suppliers with better orders, creating business incentives for decent work.

Fabric of the Future

The road to decent work for all is long, but Dr Holzberg’s research helps illuminate a path forward. By weaving together theoretical perspectives, rich empirical data, and a solution-oriented approach, her work provides a strong foundation for future scholarship and action.

By centring the often-hidden voices of workers and suppliers, Dr Holzberg provides us with a humbling reminder that abstract concepts like ‘labour standards’ and ‘compliance’ are critical to the lived experience of people on factory floors worldwide every day. Acknowledging these realities, with all their complexities, is a vital starting point for any effort to reshape the global garment industry for the better.

Progress ultimately depends on stakeholders across the supply chain embracing shared responsibility, from the cotton field to the catwalks. By shining a light on the lived experiences and complex realities of the factories at fashion’s frontlines, Dr Holzberg’s work provides an essential evidence base for rethinking the road ahead. One stitch at a time, from field to factory floor, transformative change is possible – but only with all hands working together across the global garment industry.



MEET THE RESEARCHER



Dr Britta Holzberg

Dr Britta Holzberg earned her Diploma in Business Administration from the Philipps-University Marburg in 2009. She obtained a Master of Science in Social and Organizational Psychology from the London School of Economics and Political Science in 2008. In 2022, she completed her PhD in International Development Studies at the International Institute of Social Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam and the Institute of Development Research and Development Policy, Ruhr University Bochum. Her research focuses on promoting decent work in global supply chains, with a particular emphasis on the garment industry. Dr Holzberg has extensive consulting experience, supporting public and private sector clients in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa to promote social sustainability. Her research has been published in several peer-reviewed journals.



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FURTHER READING

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