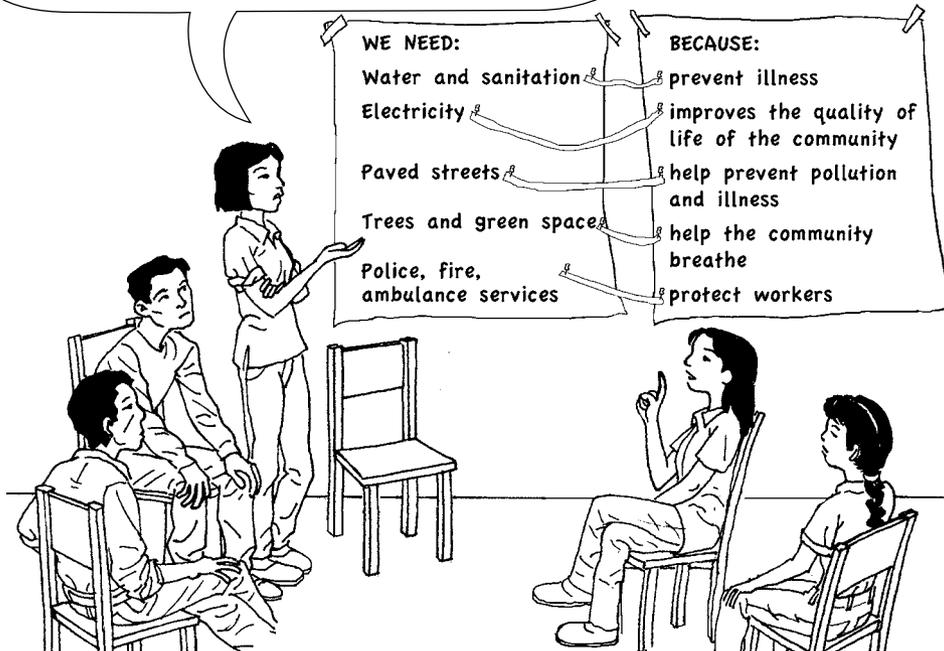


32

A decent place to live

The government uses public money to make sure export factories have electricity and streetlights, running water and sewer systems, paved roads and parking areas, telephone service, and security guards. And the factories may not even pay taxes! We are organizing to demand better housing and services for workers. The factories owe us not only a fair salary, but also better communities.



When governments allow factories to set up in your community, together they plan the buildings, roads, electricity and other services a factory needs to operate. But they often do not take workers' needs into account. In their plans, only the workers' labor counts — not their well-being.

Because export factories employ so many people, governments and employers need to make sure they have enough public services, such as housing, sanitation, safe water, and transportation. For good health and safety, they must also install sidewalks and streetlights, plant trees, build parks and playgrounds, and, of course, build and staff schools, clinics, hospitals, and cultural centers.

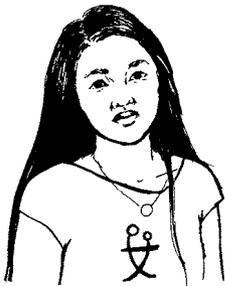
Housing

In China and Indonesia, most export factory workers live in crowded dormitories inside factory zones. In other places, such as Mexico and Kenya, workers must find or build their own houses, often in areas without electricity, running water, safe transportation, or other services. Workers in other countries live in similar conditions and share the same problems: they have jobs but do not have a decent place to live.



Six of us share this room in a boarding house. More than 100 women live here, but there are only 4 toilets, and there is never enough water. We have to carry water from a public well down the street.

Many factory workers can barely afford to pay for a place to sleep. But to stay healthy, you need to live in a place where you can bathe and use the toilet, drink plenty of clean water, store and prepare food safely, keep dishes and utensils clean, wash and dry clothes, and sometimes just relax.



We have been successful at winning more benefits in the dormitories. Our employers know they are violating the law, that workers have a right to clean, safe living quarters. We write letters and petitions, and because there are so many people in each dormitory, we can get from 1,000 to 2,000 signatures really fast. We send them to the brands, the corporate and factory management, and the union. When we win, we feel empowered!

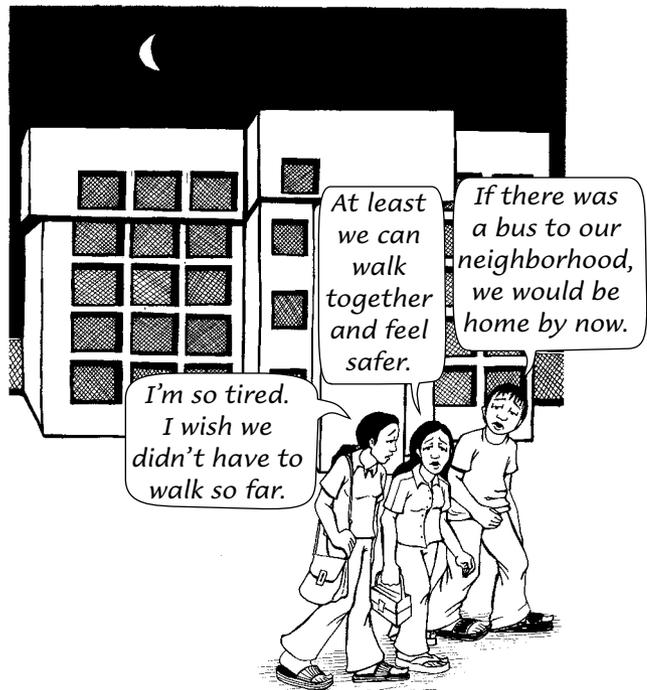
Building a housing cooperative

The St. Peter Claver Free Zone Women's Group was organized by women workers in Jamaica's export factories as a place to share their experiences, both at home and at work, with other workers. We offer counseling on labor issues as well as psychological and mental health issues, classes, and workshops. As women began to trust us and the other workers they met, the group has become stronger and more involved.

As time passed we began to take action on some of the issues that were the biggest concerns for women. One of these issues was housing. The export factories do not provide housing and the boarding houses in the area were not trustworthy or safe for women. We asked for funds from the Canadian International Development Agency to organize a housing cooperative for women. The project is so successful that we now have several boarding houses around the export processing zone. Our boarding houses are affordable, clean, and safe for women. They are also places where women can connect with other workers. We hold our workshops and classes there, too.

Transportation

Getting to and from work is a serious concern for many factory workers. Buses often do not operate early or late enough to accommodate long working hours. Traveling late at night or early in the morning can be dangerous around many factories, especially for women workers. Too many women workers have been raped or killed after they leave the factory with no safe transportation home. Many workers have to spend many hours to get to work, adding to their already very long workday.



Safe transportation between home and work is one way to protect workers from assault, robbery, and rape. Making transportation available also reduces stress and exhaustion by giving workers more time to rest, shop and prepare food, and take care of personal needs.

Here are some ideas that different groups have tried:

- **Convince owners to provide free, subsidized, or low cost transport** for workers to and from the factory, especially after dark and before sunrise.
- **Persuade local government to start a community bus service** for workers going to and from the factory zone.
- **Expand community bus service** with more and better routes that run during the hours workers need them so workers can get to and from work on time and safely.

Work directly with the bus drivers — if many workers use their services, it might be good business for them to offer better routes and times of service.

While organizing for better transportation, groups have also organized campaigns for workers to be safer going to and from work. Make a map of where your co-workers live to help you create a buddy system for walking, biking, or riding public transportation together.



Workers organize for safer streets

Thousands of young women workers in Sri Lanka's Katunayake Free Trade Zone migrated from the countryside to a vast community of boarding houses outside the Zone. Union organizers surveyed workers in the boarding houses about their concerns. They learned that the women did not feel safe traveling to and from the factories late at night because there were a lot of robberies and rapes in that area.

The organizers brought the women together to talk about the problem, discuss solutions, set priorities, and plan actions. The workers took up a series of campaigns and won several important changes.

Police reforms: Male police were unresponsive to women's concerns and unwilling to investigate attacks. Women did not report attacks expecting only disrespect from the male officers. Workers convinced the police station to set up a women's desk, staffed by women 24 hours a day. There are still problems with the police, but the situation is much better now.

Streetlights: Streetlights had been put in around the Zone and boarding houses, but they did not work everywhere. Some broke from weather and wear, others were broken by people who wanted to make the street dark. Repairs were rarely made. Workers got the government to fix the broken lights and agree to make repairs when problems are reported.

Local bus service: Workers pressured the government to start local bus service between the Zone and the boarding house community. The bus route was so popular that later the union convinced the factory owners to buy 2 more buses for the service. Not only did the women feel safer, they also did not have to walk an extra 3 kilometers each day.



These changes reduced violence and rape, and also helped the women learn a lot about organizing and creating change in their community. It built more of a community feeling among the workers. Now workers watch out for each other more, especially at night when leaving the factory.