

Social Justice Leaders on What Matters: Hilary Pennington & Anannya Bhattacharjee

This video transcript captures a Zoom conversation between Anannya Bhattacharjee, international coordinator at the [Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#), and Hilary Pennington, executive vice president of programs at the Ford Foundation.

To return to the website, go to [Social Justice Leaders on What Matters](#)—and scroll down to access more videos in the series.

Transcript begins.

[Anannya Bhattacharjee, an Indian woman with dark brown hair and a blue patterned scarf draped over her shoulders, joins Hilary Pennington, a white woman with short blonde hair, wearing an orange sweater, in a video conversation.]

[on-screen text: Hilary Pennington, Executive Vice President of Programs, Ford Foundation]

HILARY PENNINGTON: What were some of the most important moments of learning for you that have really informed the approaches you've chosen to take?

[on-screen text: Anannya Bhattacharjee, International Coordinator, Asia Floor Wage Alliance]

ANANNYA BHATTACHARJEE: I have to connect here and now with where I am, with the communities that I am in. So how do I do work that is not all externally oriented—happening somewhere else—but also make a change here and now, where I am? Global work is absolutely impossible to do unless one is locally grounded.

And what I find, coming from the Global South, is that we see a lot of leadership coming from Global North. It often appears that Global North has the strategy and Global South is the field on which the strategy's played.

HILARY: That is—absolutely, yes.

[on-screen graphic: Social Justice Leaders on What Matters, Hilary Pennington with Anannya Bhattacharjee]

HILARY: Anannya is the international coordinator of the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, a global supply chain campaign for living wages and for a violence-free workplace for

garment workers in Asia. She is also president of the Garment and Allied Workers Union in North India.

Can you paint a picture of work inside a garment factory in North India?

ANANNYA: A garment factory in North India would typically be, maybe, say, three or four floors high and have different departments in each floor. The core worker is a tailor. Workers have to come to work on the dot, like, if they're even 10 minutes late, they may be told that you won't get paid for the day. Workers tell me that they cannot even lift up their head because every second counts. And if you don't produce, then workers can be threatened with termination. There is forced overtime. There is denial of liberty, like, just going to the toilet or taking your breaks.

Asia Floor Wage Alliance works across Asia—so in all the garment-producing countries—and these are almost 90% women workers.

HILARY: And I'm imagining that while there are women workers, there are probably not equal representation of women in the ranks of management. So can you talk a little bit about why power-building efforts to develop and support the leadership of women workers are so important?

ANANNYA: Yeah, from the Asia Floor Wage Alliance's point of view, gender-based violence is what we call the coercive situation in which women workers work. This is the business model. The business model relies on gender-based violence in order to produce the goods at the cost that they are produced—which is extremely low—and at a rate which is extremely fast for, you know, producing extreme profit.

HILARY: These international brands get more and more sophisticated at claiming the language and claiming the changes, when in fact those have not happened. So can you talk a little bit about how you are trying to bring pressure through regulatory bodies to change that?

ANANNYA: The way the global supply chain works is that brands actually make their sourcing decisions regionally, not nationally. They look at Asia as a labor market with a certain labor cost attached to it, on average, across Asia.

HILARY: Yeah.

ANANNYA: We realized as trade unionists why we were failing at raising country-level wages—because the brand would simply compete one country against another. If one country raises wages—“Okay, we are moving to another country.” So what we said is that if they have a regional labor market approach, we must have a regional bargaining approach to counter that, to meet them where they are at. So we brought all the trade unions together in Asia, and for the first time we developed the formulation for an Asia-wide living wage because that is what will restore basic dignity to workers. So that is our bargaining approach.

HILARY: What were some of the most important moments of learning for you that have really informed the approaches you've chosen to take?

ANANNYA: What is very important to me is to be grounded, because I was actually a student in the United States and I got politicized through campus activism. And I got involved in, you know, anti-apartheid and all these other struggles, and then I realized that it's very important to do all this stuff, but I have to connect here and now with where I am, with the communities that I am in. So how do I do work that is not all externally oriented—happening somewhere else—but also make a change here and now, where I am? Global work is absolutely impossible to do unless one is locally grounded.

HILARY: Yeah.

ANANNYA: And what I find, coming from the Global South, is that we see a lot of leadership coming from Global North. It often appears that Global North has the strategy and Global South is the field on which the strategy's played.

HILARY: That is—absolutely, yes.

ANANNYA: And in Asia Floor Wage, that was my absolute determination—that the strategy must come from Asia, and then we tell the consumers of Europe and North America that, “This is what we want. Can you campaign on this?” And it took some persuasion. It's not as if it happened overnight. It's not often that a Global South organization tells the Global North, “Here is our strategy. Will you support us?”

HILARY: So this, I think, is one of the most important issues and power imbalances happening now in the philanthropic sector. And all too often funders play right into it. You know, for the big problems that face the world, we cannot actually solve them unless we bring the knowledge and experience of people who are in the Global South to the table.

I think about how deeply feminist your approach and your work is. We are at a time, I think, when feminism is being challenged for good reason. And particularly, women feminists from the Global North are being challenged by their sisters in the Global South. So I'm curious for you, you know, how you see the future of feminism in a way that can really make room for shifting those kinds of tables and perspectives.

ANANNYA: That question can be answered in many different ways, depending on the part of the world one is in, you know? I totally agree with you that, you know, when I was in the United States, I used to be very much part of the women of color movement, you know, challenging the sort of monolithic view of, you know, feminism, women's rights ... And that struggle is not over. I mean, it's continuing.

One of the things that I'm trying to do in the region that I'm in right now is that I find that the women's movement is quite divorced from the labor movement, and it has been so for a long time. The usual charge from the women's movement is that the labor movement is so male dominated and it's so annoying and, you know, they don't pay attention to women's issues. All of which is true. My point is that I came from the

women's movement. I saw in my backyard, workers needed to be organized. And I just said, "Okay, I will organize." You know, nobody taught me how to be a trade unionist. What I found is that we have to build the labor movement new. We have to build it fresh. We cannot sort of hark back to sort of old leaders and say teach me how to build a union. It's not rocket science. It's just organizing. So one has to just get out there and do it. Don't criticize the labor movement from outside. You become a labor organizer, a labor leader, and you have to change the labor movement.

And so part of being a feminist today, I feel, is that we not only have to critique the system as it exists, we have to enter it, we have to change it. We have to change the way business happens in the—in the world of whatever movement one is in.

HILARY: I couldn't agree with you more—especially in the male-dominated spaces and fields—100%.

It's such a challenging time because of COVID and all of the impacts of it. It is a time that is sort of accelerating history, accelerating change. So, as you look out now, is there anything that makes you optimistic?

ANANNYA: Yeah, strangely enough, I feel energized and optimistic during this time—keeping aside the really tough period that all of us are going through at a personal level, organization level, all kinds of things. The reason I feel optimistic is because I feel that people are really rethinking their approach to the planet, their life, their consumption habits. So people are really wondering whether we should live the way we were living before. We must be radically transformative at this point because when we are most scared and most uncertain, we tend to go and retreat more. This is not the time for retreat. This is the time for pushing for the maximum transformation because this may be the only chance we got right now.

HILARY: You know, I just so resonate with—and that's what I see, actually, in you and in so many of the organizations and people that Ford works with, you know, people who have radical imagination. They are not trying to imagine how to go back to normal. I really appreciate your work and your leadership and the opportunity to partner with you. Thank you.

ANANNYA: Thank you very much. I appreciate this a lot. It was lovely talking to you.

[on-screen text: What's your take? Join the conversation]

[on-screen graphic: Ford Foundation logo]

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