

Garment Workers' Situation Update Report

July - December 2024

By Dabindu Collective



Introduction

Dabindu began this series of Situation Reports to document the issues of women workers. This is the second bi-annual report for 2024.

Dabindu follows worker issues through group discussions and one-on-one case handling. It is within this process that the issues for this report were gathered. As policy, we do not disclose workers names, and specific details to protect confidentiality and the trust workers place on Dabindu.

This report provides a brief context of the Sri Lankan situation and delves into the issues reported: wages, work hours, freedom of association, occupational health and safety, domestic violence, housing issues, and economic issues. The issues reported here document the status of women workers from garment factories in Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi and Vavuniya from July 2024 to December 2024.

Background

July to December 2024 was a politically contentious period in Sri Lanka with the two back to back overdue elections; the Presidential election in September, and General election in November. Both led a regime change with the election of the National People's Power (NPP).

Nevertheless, the economic reform programme of the IMF and the bondholder agreements reached with the Ranil Wickramasignhe regime remained in tact. In June 2024, Sri Lanka agreed on a memorandum of understanding with the international private bondholders and in November 2024, IMF staff reached an agreement with Sri Lankan government for a third review.

Sri Lanka entered a deflation of 0.5% (CCPI) in September 2024, for the first time since September 2015, and the economy growth recorded 5.5% in October 2024. Unemployment rate recorded at 4.7% in October 2024 and labour force participation as of June 2024 was 47.8% (DCS, 2024).

According to the JAAF (2025), garment and apparel export revenue increased to USD 4.75 billion by end 2024, compared to USD 4.5 billion in 2023. Spikes in apparel revenue was observed in August (USD 4.85 bn) and October 2024 (USD 4.0636 bn) with the US continuing to be the largest export destination (39.9% of the export market share).

Wages and Working Hours

In the reporting period manpower workers reported daily wages of LKR 1500- 2500. However, there were several cases of workers receiving inconsistent wages. One such case, where a

worker was informed LKR 4,000, but they only receive LKR 1,500, with LKR 300 deducted for meals, deductions which were not communicated at the time of agreeing to work.

Permanent workers take-home salary ranged from LKR 25,000 – 50,000. These workers did not report any increments to their wages, including bonuses for the year end. Salary increments are provided in January. Workers stated that they have no hope in increments or substantial increments given the cost of living.

In terms of working hours and shifts, workers in Katunayake stated that targets must be achieved, even if casual leave is taken. Workers are required to meet the production target for the leave day in advance through covering.

Hourly targets are notable pressure induces for workers. A Biyagama garment workers report hourly targets now have to be completed within 50 minutes with the reduction of workforce. In the two factories in Vavuniya, workers reported during November/December, their hourly target of 50 rose to 300 pieces.

2024 was another year where the Labour Department granted administrative relaxation for a 5-day work-week which stipulates 10 hour shift with 1 hour of OT. This is done with the consent of workers in factories approved by the labour department. However, there have been inconsistent labour practices with regards to overtime work. Workers from Katunayake and Biyagama reported overtime sheets forcibly signed without when employees refused.

With the Presidential and Parliamentary Elections in 2024, September and November respectively, workers lost many monthly allowances such as attendance bonuses. Approximately LKR 3,500-5,000 of attendance bonuses, given for full attendance, were cut during the elections mainly because workers faced transport difficulties in returning to work, and therefore missed a day of work. Some workers of Katunayake reported their daily wage was also reduced due to absence. While cost of travel amounted to LKR 3000-4000 workers, many workers in Katunayake were not granted leave or a covering shift.

Job Security

As for employment contracts and duration, both manpower and permanent workers reported issues. While manpower workers are terminated without prior notice, forced to resign for over production mistakes and issues, they are often assigned tasks outside their agreement, such as cleaning or toilet maintenance, when they are hired for a specific role such as packing. For permanent workers, mistakes in production are used as basis to verbally and mentally harass making it an inhospitable working environment. This was a common issue in all four districts where workers resign to escape the mental pressure. Manpower workers reported similar accounts of unbearable workload.

Workers also reported difficulties in taking leave for medical reasons and even legal reasons such as attending divorce proceedings, as they were warned by management for leave.

Freedom of Association

The general atmosphere during the period was fear of unionising, and joining or even been found related to a union due to fear of retaliation from factory management. Workers recommended organising or any related activity to be done outside the factory and connecting new workers to the union was to be done without mentioning the term “union.”

One case of workers organising reported in Katunayake. Workers, of a unionised factory, faced a rigorous questioning after organising a petition to get leave for the parliamentary election. Two workers had to undergo an internal inquiry. One worker was promoted to remove them from non-executive level, the level of workers that formed the union.

Occupational Health and Safety

Unbearable targets are a persistent issue for workers. Workers report they do not have enough time to drink water, they are unable to go to the washroom and they avoid drinking water to avoid washroom breaks. Skipping meals and lacking time to change sanitary pads are also caused by high targets. Workers from one factory in Katunayake have to sign a book just to leave their workstation drink water and only 5-6 minutes allowed for washroom breaks.

Workers in all districts noted that their peers use drugs to achieve the increased targets, an issue Dabindu reported to Medical Offices of Health in all 4 districts.

The Kilinochchi and Vavuniya MOH reported a rise in malnutrition of children of garment workers mainly due to workers' inability to attend clinic regularly and pick up the Triposha. This is mainly due to misaligned schedules between workers and MOH open hours.

Manpower workers face discrimination and are not given proper care or support. No assistance is provided to sick or injured manpower workers for treatment or hospitalization. Manpower workers are not provided breakfast by the company.

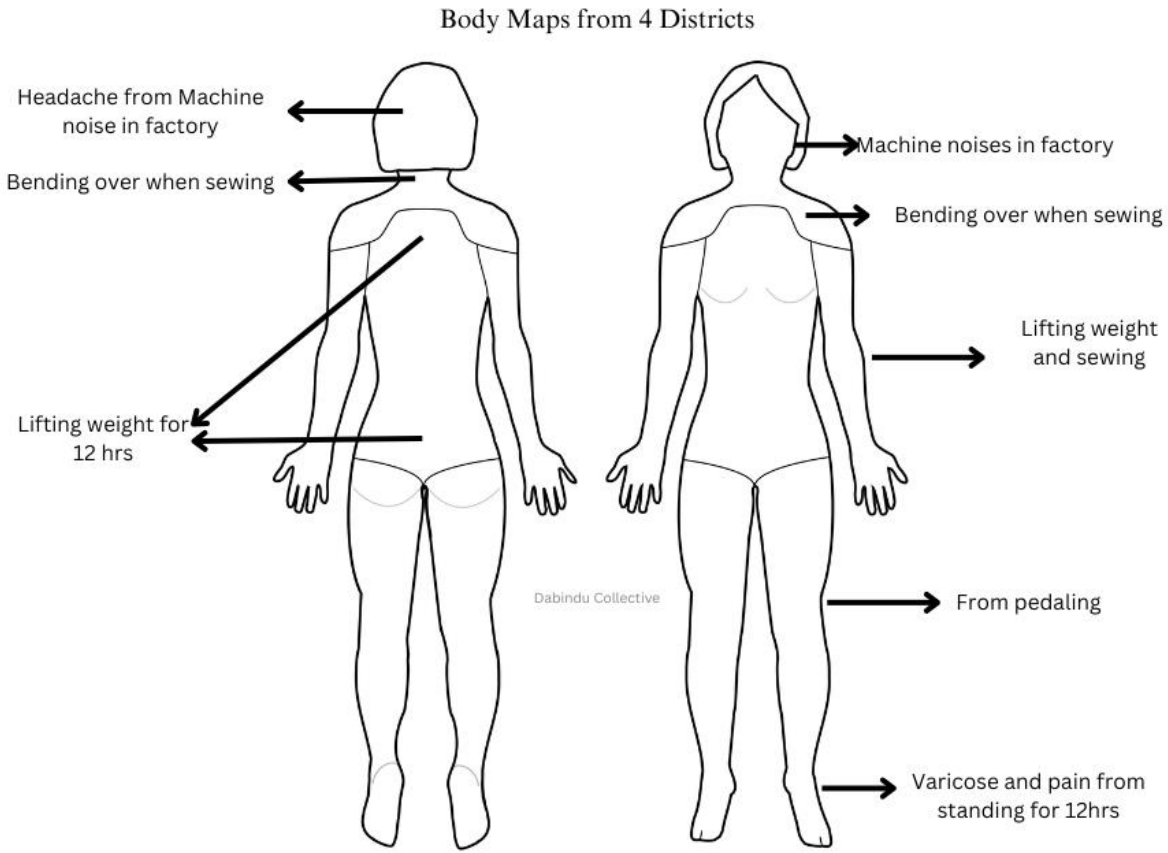
Workers continued to report lacking nutritious meals, for example only serving a watery dhal curry with soya meat. Vavuniya and Katunayake workers reported, bugs are found in the food, and serving of old food mixed with a new batch. One factory in Katunayake had a breakout of food poisoning due to contaminated water.

Workers in a Katunayake factory reported that when someone falls sick, there are no resources or personnel available to provide treatment in the factory, and the vehicle for transportation takes too much time to arrive. Workers lack time to visit the BOI medical center. One factory restricts access to the sickroom in emergencies.

Workers in Katunayake and Biyagama reported lacking disposal bins for sanitary pads, unclean and inadequate washroom facilities. Moreover, many workers are not provided sanitary pads in factories.

As for cases workplace injuries, one case of a factory where chemical exposure cause skin colour alteration and dehydration, another of breathing problems due to dust and one case of difficulty due to non-adjustable chairs/stools for workers of different heights.

Moreover, through the body mapping exercise workers of all four districts mapped pain in their body in the following manner based on similar reasons stemming out from work.



Economic Issues

Dabindu provides specific support for single mothers in the garment sector, covering 26 cases in the Northern and Western Province. While the majority of single mothers reside with their parents or siblings, 11 out of them are the single income earners.

Stressors of their family life includes their costs for children's education and lack of time and attention given to it, as well as medical expenses of family members. One case reported, was one of debt taken for a homebased livelihood activity of a worker's mother. The worker had to remain in the stable income avenue at the factory to pay off her mother's debt.

Housing

Workers in Katunayake and Biyagama are mainly internal migrants who reside in boarding homes for monthly rent. Workers reported issues of men and women having to use the same washroom, lack of proper garbage disposal and clean drinking water, and overcrowding.

Domestic Violence

Financial stress, increased workload and working hours, and overlapping shifts among family members/partners has been a common cause of relationship and family stress for workers in all four districts. One single mother reported mistreatment from her community for not remarrying and reported fear for her safety.

Dabindu handled 6 domestic violence cases, 3 of which involved drug abuse. One case of domestic violence was where an ill worker was forced violently to work in the factory by her husband to pay off his debt.

