Women Garment Workers'

SITUATION REPORT: JANUARY - JUNE 2024

DABINDU COLLECTIVE

1. Introduction

“When the country needed it the most, it was women who brought Dollars to the country” is a constant reminder of women workers’ contribution to the country. Being an organisation and a trade union, we began this series of Situation Reports to document the issues of women workers.

Dabindu usually follows workers' issues through informal discussions as we try to resolve the issues that workers bring to us. Such issues are documented. It is within this process that the issues for this report were gathered, mainly through individual and group discussions. As a policy, we do not disclose workers' names and specific details to protect their confidentiality and the trust workers place in Dabindu.

This report provides a brief context of the Sri Lankan situation during January and June of 2024 and delves into the issues reported: wages, forms of work, freedom of association, health and safety, and economic issues. The issues reported here document the status of women workers from garment factories in Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya from January 2024 to June 2024.

2. Background

The Sri Lankan economic crisis that persisted through the first half of 2024 was a continuation of severe financial challenges that began in 2022. The situation during January to June 2024 was marked by measures to meet IMF conditions including an increase in value-added tax, cuts to public spending, and reductions in subsidies. These measures were unpopular and led to significant public discontent. Although inflation had begun to decrease slightly from the hyperinflation seen in 2022-2023, it remained high in early 2024. The cost of living was a significant burden on the population, with food and fuel prices still elevated.

The Sri Lankan Rupee continued to be under pressure, leading to further depreciation. This devaluation made imports more expensive, exacerbating inflation and contributing to the economic strain. Sri Lanka’s debt remained unsustainable, even after some restructuring efforts. The government continued to negotiate with creditors to restructure debt terms, but progress was slow and complicated by geopolitical factors.

Although the Sri Lankan economy is forecasted to grow moderately by 2.2 percent in 2024, the country continues to grapple with high poverty rates, income disparity, and labour market issues. Poverty remains high, with 25.9 percent of the population below the poverty line in 2023. Labour force participation has also witnessed a decline, especially among women and in urban areas, due to the collapse of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (Bhowmick, 2024). Considering textile and apparel exports from January - June cumulatively, 2023 recorded USD 2,285.76 million, and 2024 recorded USD 2,258.81 million (JAAF, 2024).

3. Wages and Forms of Work

Workers continuously face inadequate wages, compared to the costs of living, leading to financial instability and hardship. Permanent workers reported inconsistencies in monthly wages. Further, some factories reduced basic salaries over the last year, and workers reported high turnover in such factories. The workers that remained reported increased production targets.

Most factories in Katunayake and Biyagama have slashed overtime work. Permanent workers in the Western province reported their basic income ranged from LKR 35,000 - 45,000 approximately. In the North, workers receive similar basic salaries, however, they have higher targets and longer shifts, sometimes 12 hours, with OT.

While most permanent workers in Katunayake and Biyagama work Monday to Friday, they repeatedly report that they must take up manpower work to cover their costs. While manpower workers in Katunayake and Biyagama receive LKR 1,300-1,400 a day, permanent workers take on such work after their shift ends, that is during the night, and/or during weekends and public holidays.

Unlike permanent workers, manpower workers are not entitled to EPF/ETF benefits, the employer has no responsibility over the worker and the majority of manpower workers must cover their own food, medical, sanitary, and transport needs within their workplace.

Inconsistencies in receiving and challenges in redeeming EPF benefits are observed in all four districts. Few workers in the Northern province reported that they have not received their EPF benefits from particular months in 2019 and 2020, which was brought to Dabindu's attention in the reporting period. This is a non-compliance with EPF regulations.

4. Freedom of association

Due to increased working hours, and therefore lack of off-days, workers reported not having enough time to engage with trade unions and their community. We observe this as a new trend in shrinking democratic and collective spaces for garment workers. The lack of days of rest has affected workers' physical and mental health.

Manpower workers have never had the right to form a trade union, which means they have no means to bargain with factories or brands. Increasing manpower work, thus informalisation of labour, makes it difficult for workers to organise and collectively bargain through a trade union.

In the North, workers are also surveilled and called out for joining union programs and meetings by their factory management. More and more workers report a fear of joining unions or any other collective activity and actively engaging as a trade union member. Workers from both Western and Northern provinces thereby reported that they must engage in unions as union members in secret.

5. Health and Safety

The push towards manpower work especially on Saturdays has reduced workers' time to engage with primary healthcare especially the Medical Health Office (MOH). Workers reported that it was due to this reason that they were unaware of the MOH services.

Workers reported issues regarding sexual and reproductive health standards inside factories. Accordingly, only some factories provide sanitary napkins, and that is only one sanitary napkin per worker for a month, which is only in case of an emergency. Workers are asked to bring their own from home. Most factories charge or deduct from salaries for this one napkin.

The majority of manpower workers reported severe SRHR violations. Some factories only provide napkins based on their EPF/ETF number, and because manpower workers do not receive EPF/ETF, they do not receive napkins. In some factories, manpower workers cannot use the washrooms and they have to wait until they get to their boarding homes.

There still are factories that only provide one time-bound washroom break per day. Moreover, workers have to walk a considerable distance to their lockers to retrieve their sanitary napkins, and this becomes difficult for those working in time-bound washroom breaks who will be penalised for being delayed in returning to their workstations. Pregnant workers are treated the same as any other workers, for example, they have to use washrooms with squatting pans even when they are 8 months pregnant.

Lack of proper disposal bins for used sanitary napkins and lacking sickrooms or nurses in certain factories were also reported. A particular case was reported about a company that provides painkillers specifically for menstrual pain, and when cross-referred with the MOH, they stated that such medication mandatorily requires a doctor's prescription.

Moreover, few workers reported a lack of proper personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks, gloves, etc. when dealing with chemical substances. Insufficient training on occupational health and safety measures has placed workers at risk.

Workers from both Northern and Western provinces complained of lacking clean drinking water that is easily accessible and inedible/unhygienic food. Lack of adequate rest and resting areas which are far away from their work station, limits the resting time of workers.

High targets have placed them in sedentary positions. Workers placed on the dancing models are required to stand for hours. For the day shift, workers only get breaks for lunch and tea, while night shift workers get a break at midnight.

Many transport services in the North stopped transport directly to workers' homes, and workers are picked up and dropped off on the main road, 6-7 km away from their homes. At night workers reported this as “life threatening.” Several factories in Katunayake and Biyagama have stopped providing transport for day-shift workers.

Workers have to endure issues in boarding houses including the lack of separate washing spaces for men and women, open washing spaces so there is no privacy and safety, and dilapidated and unmaintained washrooms and toilets.

Verbal abuse from supervisors and superiors when they do not meet targets. Workers claim “they are not treated like humans” in such situations. Physical and sexual harassment from machine inspectors/mechanics and abuse from intimate partners if they work late, overtime, extra days, or if their transport does not drop them off near home were also reported issues of safety.

6. Economic issues

Repeatedly, workers reported that they have obtained loans from microfinance agents. In the North leasing companies have identified and directly approached garment workers and pulled them into debt. Many workers in Katunayake reported the pawning of jewelry. Among many workers, the trend is to buy groceries on credit from retail shops.

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