

India Cheap Labor Garment Export Industry

Fashionable and famous -- at the garment worker's cost!

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India's success in the global garments market has been at the cost of the basic rights of this industry's predominantly female and migrant labour force. These women work in sweatshops that demand impossible targets of 100-120 garments an hour, with virtually no breaks allowed. Eighty per cent of TB patients registered with the ESIC, accordingly to one official, are garment workers exposed to cotton fluff

India has made a name for itself as a garment manufacturing centre of global renown. The textiles and garments industry contributes 16.63% of India's export earnings; around 45% of this comes from garment exports alone. The garments industry provides employment to around 3.5 million people across the country. Delhi, Mumbai, Tirupur, Bangalore and Chennai are the five major garment production hubs, producing exclusively for the exports market. Karnataka has a sizeable presence in the garments and textiles sector; many well-known multinational brands have chosen this state to set up their global sourcing centres.

Leading garment manufacturers like Tommy Hilfiger, Marks & Spencer, Gap, H&M, Matalan, Mothercare, George, etc, employ Karnataka's largest unorganised workforce. In Bangalore alone there are 500,000 workers in the garments industry, in 1,200 factories spread across the city.

But India's niche in the global garments market has been carved out at the cost of lakhs of workers in this industry's predominantly female and migrant labour force.

"My salary gets cut if I take even a day's holiday. All of us feel that there is no job security; we are under constant threat of being fired by our supervisors," says Banu, a garment worker in the Hosur Road area of Bangalore. "Minor mistakes in the work, or non-completion of targets could trigger the management to ask us to leave the job," she adds.

Roughly 80% of garment workers are women between the ages of 21 and 25. Most are semi-skilled migrant workers and the sole earning members in their families.

The phasing out of the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA) in 2005 was a great opportunity for small factories to increase garment production for exports. As the market became highly competitive, only factories that could produce at the lowest cost survived; many were forced to close shop. Thus, stiff competition was inevitable among different factories in the country and also among the countries of the third world that were able to produce garments at a much lower cost than India. There were instances where India lost orders to China and Bangladesh. Just a couple of years ago, India was at second position in garment exports, after China; today it stands sixth with countries like Bangladesh and Vietnam higher up the ladder. Again, the pressure to produce at lower and lower costs is adversely impacting the

worker at the lowest end of the chain.

Harassment at the workplace

The work of garment workers is physically demanding, calling for impossible targets of 100-120 garments an hour as against the normal rate of 60-70 pieces. And this is made more punishing by the verbal harassment employed to goad women to work faster and longer hours, often skipping lunch to meet their targets.

“I have experienced verbal abuse when I don’t meet the production targets. Cloth pieces are thrown at my face,” says Shyla, a garment factory worker in Bangalore. “The supervisors shout at us, asking: ‘Why have you come to work if you can’t work hard? You’re getting a salary, aren’t you? Why don’t you stay at home if you’re so slow?’.”

“How can you work in peace with somebody shouting at you, ridiculing you, your being a woman, your work, your poverty,” Shyla asks. Workers point out that verbal harassment using hurtful, derogatory and gender-insensitive language is an important reason why women leave work.

They say the management is insensitive to the condition of workers. They complain that women who come in late or take leave without notice are suspended and reinstated only after strict disciplinary action. Often, women are prevented from leaving the factory during work hours even for genuine medical reasons. One woman told me that a garment worker who developed labour pains was not allowed to leave work. She lost her child because she didn’t reach the hospital in time.

More than a decade after the Supreme Court issued the landmark Visakha judgment in 1997 mandating the creation of gender committees at all workplaces to deal with cases of sexual harassment, this direction is largely being ignored by garment industry employers. In the absence of a non-threatening space where women can report instances of sexual harassment, workers suffer the sexually-loaded comments passed by supervisors in silence. “The supervisor talks to me in a personal way. He does not touch me, but I feel harassed by his way of talking. I have to tolerate it if I want to keep my job,” says one worker.

Health: Whose concern is it anyway?

Garment factory work (tailoring, cutting cloth, fixing buttons, finishing, checking, ironing, packing) is repetitive and monotonous, involving long hours sitting or standing in one position. A 2008 study by Cividep on the Bangalore garments industry reported that nearly half the respondents from among women workers complained of backaches and breathing problems linked to their work.

“I suffer from backache, leg and knee pain due to constant bending over the table to see the needle and running the machine with my leg,” says Shylaja, a worker interviewed for the study.

Injuries are common, especially puncture wounds from needles on the fingertips and nails as the cloth is passed through heavy vibrating mechanised machines. A worker can ill afford to report this as she may be declared unfit and removed from the job. In cases of severe puncture wounds through the tips of the fingers, women have had to be hospitalised and have had to stay away from work for at least a month.

Mechanisation brings with it noise; there are no studies or regular checks to detect sound-induced hearing loss. Noise is also a known risk factor for stress.

Very few workers get masks to wear during work. They are constantly engulfed in the fluff of cut pieces of cloth. Women complain of tightness in the chest, breathing difficulties, allergic sneezing, persistent coughs and runny noses. There were no official statistics available at the Employees State Insurance scheme (ESI) or its management on the prevalence of respiratory problems or byssinosis, although illnesses like asthma and tuberculosis are frequently reported. The ESI medical officer, in conversation with activists of the Garment Mahila Karmikara Munnade (Garment Women Workers Front), expressed concern over the fact that 80% of all tuberculosis patients registered with the ESI are garment workers.

Workers contribute to the ESI scheme and are entitled to accessible healthcare and social benefits. But this is not the case in practice.

Long hours of sitting, very little water intake, and the fear of going to the toilet causes constipation and piles. In some sweatshops, supervisors keep a check on the number of times a worker takes a toilet break. If it is frequent the worker is asked to leave the job as it is believed speed of production is hampered. As a result, many workers do not drink much water.

The triple burden of household work, looking after children and being productive in the job has a longstanding effect on women's health. They skip their morning meal to rush to the factory, they skip their lunch if there is pressure to meet targets at work, and, when they get home in the evening, the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning and caring take precedence. Shyla says: "We are always on the run; we eat just to satisfy our hunger pangs. It is so difficult to sit down and eat peacefully!"

This circle of hard work, irregular food habits, reduced food and water intake and limited resources in the context of the gendered role of women leads to undernourishment. Anaemia among women garment workers and complaints of gastric ulcers are very common.

Under the Factories Act, crèche facilities, drinking water facilities, and a canteen have to be made available to workers. Often crèches do exist but are underutilised. Factories provide water, but with no guarantee of its quality. Indeed, in 2004 and 2008 there were outbreaks in Bangalore of gastroenteritis due to contaminated drinking water. In both cases women suffered great physical discomfort, but no action was taken by the regulatory authorities to put in place a mechanism to monitor the quality of drinking water. In many factories, canteens are poorly ventilated and too small to accommodate all the workers. As a consequence, women are forced to sit and eat on the roadside or in an adjoining space.

Maintaining the balance

On average, a family spends Rs 500-600 a week on food and medical care. Although the minimum wage is required to be revised every three to five years, this was last done in June 2001! Taking care of a family on an income of Rs 3,500 (average monthly income of a garment worker) in a city like Bangalore is next to impossible. The only alternative is to borrow, leading to indebtedness.

The garments industry, second in terms of foreign exchange earnings, has not escaped the

impact of the global financial crisis; orders from the West are drying up. Being a labour-intensive sector, the brunt of this has been borne by garment workers by way of job and wage cuts. One company in Mysore Road has stopped providing transportation to people from nearby villages, as a cost-cutting measure. With no transport facilities from their village, around 600 workers have indirectly been thrown out of their job.

Retrenchment had always been a problem among garment workers. Often, when a worker takes leave for personal or medical reasons she is not reinstated. Sometimes management tells workers "to take leave" after five years are up, to avoid paying benefits. When the workers return they are not always given their jobs back. If this happens, especially these days, it's next to impossible to find a new job in another factory.

(Suhasini Singh is a researcher and communications coordinator at Cividep India, which works on labour issues in the garments sector and on issues of corporate accountability)

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