



May 2020

THE EMPEROR HAS NO CLOTHES

GARMENT SUPPLY CHAINS IN THE TIME OF
PANDEMIC

Issue - II

INTRODUCTION

Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), an Asian labour-led global labour and social alliance, has been monitoring the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on workers in garment-producing countries through ground reports from AFWA partners and allies in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and detailed tracking of local and national news media sources. These perspectives of global south workers and unions are presented in the series, “The Emperor Has No Clothes.”

The first issue of “Emperor Has No Clothes” mapped the initial impacts of the pandemic on workers in global garment supply chains.¹ The report highlighted the varied state responses in major garment-producing countries in Asia along with concerns around wage payment, lack of social security and access to healthcare, with a special

focus on the exodus of migrant workers due to factory closure or lockdown.

This report provides a follow-through on these topics but lays emphasis on the issues around wage payment, support mechanisms and layoffs of garment workers, specifically in Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Most importantly, the report presents a typology of discriminatory practices in the labour market that account for the immediate impact of the pandemic on garment workers in terms of access to employment. These are built on existing social inequalities related to age, gender, religion, nature of employment, and wage levels, and generate new forms of discrimination based on spatial proximity to factories, and accentuate union-busting tactics that are direct or subtle, with or without the support of the State.

The report is divided into the following sections:

Part I deals with the state of lockdown in these countries,

Part II provides an overview of the current scenario of the global garment industry,

Part III briefly explains the state of garment workers in Asia,

Part IV focuses on wage disbursements, non-wage support mechanisms,

Part V explains the discriminatory factors shaping layoffs in the garment industry,

Part VI focuses on food security,

Part VII focuses on healthcare,

Part VIII provides the concluding remarks.

PART I

STATE OF CORONAVIRUS SHUTDOWN : TOTAL AND PARTIAL

The first issue drew attention to the differential impacts of two kinds of State responses – partial shutdown in Cambodia and Indonesia and total shutdown in India and Sri Lanka. Partial shutdown in Indonesia took the form of large-scale social restrictions implemented by local governments with the approval of the Ministry of Health, while in Cambodia, it took the form of suspending bars, casinos, restaurants, and so on. In Myanmar, the government announced stringent social distancing measures, including mandatory quarantines for travellers, localized lockdowns of buildings and streets with confirmed cases, “Stay at Home” programs and de facto curfews. In all these countries, garment industries were allowed to operate, with certain restrictions aimed primarily at ensuring social distancing on the factory floor.

Total shutdown took the form of a national lockdown in India from 25th March when all services, except essential services, and factories were suspended abruptly. Gradual relaxations were announced since 15th April and areas were categorised as red, orange and green zones based on the level of inci-

dence of coronavirus infection. Similarly, Sri Lanka imposed an island-wide curfew on March 20, which took the form of a national curfew for 52 days till May 11, with phased relaxations depending on the level of risk.

It needs to be noted that even during the total shutdown in India and Sri Lanka, according to AFWA partners, some garment factories were formally operational with State permits to produce Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits and hazmat suits for healthcare workers – as was the case in countries under a partial shutdown. However, there have been cases of violations, for example in Bengaluru, India, where a garment factory obtained permit for production of PPEs, but continued producing garments, which was then forced to shut down after police inspection. As the lockdown restrictions have been gradually lifted, garment factories have reopened in Sri Lanka and in certain regions of India like Bengaluru, Tiruppur, Gurgaon, Kolkata and Ludhiana – with certain conditions – while, in regions like Gujarat, production has not resumed.

PART II

GLOBAL GARMENT INDUSTRY: CURRENT SCENARIO

The global garment industry is currently suffering from supply constraints in the form of a shortage of raw materials as well as demand constraints in the form of a decline in retail demand in Europe and North America. Though there has been a revival of consumption demand primarily in China, industry surveys² point out that there is likely to be a fall in discretionary spending in the upcoming months. Unsold inventories in retail stores are likely to result in deep-discounting trends that can further squeeze the margins for suppliers and workers in garment-producing countries. The COVID-19 crisis has also pushed many fashion brands to file for bankruptcy, which could lead to liquidation, reorganisation or sale of these brands. The post-pandemic period might also be characterised by a restructuring of global supply chains with a preference for near-shoring to reduce

lead time as brands seek to exercise greater control over the production process by investing in digital technologies to reduce uncertainty.³

Current production during the pandemic is geared primarily towards completing orders, samples demanded for the upcoming year and meeting the demand for PPE kits. New orders for garments placed by brands have considerably declined, which has led to apprehension about the prospects of work in the near future. As highlighted in the first issue, brands cancelling and postponing orders has aggravated the crisis in garment-producing countries, severely affecting many supplier firms that operate on wafer-thin margins. Due to public outcry, a few brands have made commitments to pay for existing orders, and many more are urged to do so.



Photo Caption : Garment workers leaving a factory after their shift
Photo Credits: CENTRAL, Cambodia

PART III

THE STATE OF GARMENT WORKERS IN ASIA

“I am worried how our family will get through this crisis. The contractor has not even paid for the garments we stitched and we have no new orders since the lockdown. My husband is a daily wage earner and he has been out of work since the last week of March. We have two children and ailing parents to take care of - we can barely feed ourselves. We could not pay our rent or electricity bill this month and we were forced to take a loan from the local money lender - we will now have to offer him our labour to service the debt.”

Anu, a garment worker in Tirupur

The shortage of supply of raw materials in Indonesia, Cambodia and Sri Lanka, owing to global supply chain disruption has affected production and livelihoods. As State-administered lockdown has been phased out in India and Sri-Lanka, ground reports from AFWA partners suggest that there have been more cases of factory closures owing to resource crunch or demand constraints.

This has disproportionately impacted workers who are paid poverty level wages, with workers struggling to meet essential costs including food, rent, debt repayments and school fees for children. The limited inter-

vention of most States has exacerbated the crisis, with many workers forced into debt and predatory interest rates even for their daily subsistence.

Trade unions worry that the COVID-19 crisis will lead to a spike in child labour, bonded labour and human trafficking, with garment workers moving to other occupations including sex work.

The following sections highlight some of the major concerns of workers regarding wage disbursement, financial support, layoffs, food security and access to healthcare.

Trade unions worry that the COVID-19 crisis will lead to a spike in child labour, bonded labour and human trafficking, with garment workers moving to other occupations including sex work.

PART IV

WAGE DISBURSAL AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS

The trends in layoffs and wage disbursement depend, to a great extent, on the status of production in the context of lockdown.

- In India, where there was a total shutdown, there has been uncertainty around wage payment for the lockdown period. Though there was an advisory from the Union Ministry of Home Affairs that employers should pay full wages and not resort to layoffs, it was not implemented by many firms and the advisory was withdrawn in a few weeks.⁴ In Sri Lanka, the government has been able to obtain an undertaking from employers not to lay off workers and also pay LKR 14,500 or half a month salary, whichever is higher, for all workers, from April. However, the benefits of this undertaking have accrued mostly to permanent workers.
- In countries with a partial shutdown that permitted factories to operate, there have been reports of mass layoffs. This might be due to the early onset of the crisis in those countries where production was not suspended totally, thereby running short of raw materials or finishing the orders that have already been placed.

In regions like Ahmedabad and Ludhiana in India, the industry relies on a circulatory migrant population and informal agreements between employer and employee. Here, layoffs, in the strictly legal sense, might not occur as the act of dismissing workers for the slightest fluctuations in market trends has become normalized.

The livelihoods of thousands of workers are shaped by the volatility of the global market, and the unpredictability of the pandemic has pushed them to their wits' end.

The most basic support mechanism during this pandemic for workers would be ensuring the timely disbursement of wages. Based on media reports and ground accounts from AFWA's partners and allies, we identify certain key trends in wage disbursement as well as non-wage support. These trends can neither be neatly categorised nor can they be considered conclusive. Nevertheless, they can be taken as indicators of the emerging concerns faced by the workers and point to how core commitments are bypassed by employers.

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Total Payment

‘Total payment’, in this report, broadly refers to the complete payment of basic wages with or without bonuses, overtime pay or other potential compensation. Ensuring the payment of basic wage for all workers is the bare minimum that can be done during the pandemic, especially since most garment workers have low savings due to poverty-level wages in the industry and have no government support to fall back on. In most countries, this has accrued only to permanent workers, thereby excluding a majority of the workforce.

- Factories in Indonesia and Cambodia that have remained operational without layoffs have paid full wages to workers in March and April, irrespective of their contract status.
- Most regions in Sri Lanka (in particular Northern Provinces, Uva and Sabragamuwa Provinces) have also reported complete payment of basic wages for March and April.

Partial Payment

In several instances, workers have not even received full payment of basic wages, which is referred to as ‘partial payment’ here. In several cases, partial payment is negotiated through bipartite or tripartite discussions, but the uncertainty during the pandemic has been exploited to severely weaken the bargaining strength of the organised workers. Workers have also been coerced into accepting wage cuts due to the threat of layoffs and factory closures.

- In factories in Indonesia and Myanmar that refused to pay full wages from March, decisions regarding how much is to be paid, work hours and production targets are to be decided through discussions between factory management and the workers, and have resulted in varying levels of partial payment of wages. However, most of these decisions are taken by employers without consulting workers and unions.
- In Myanmar, many workers have accepted wages below the wage they settled for in bipartite discussions with the factory - in the fear that demanding the rightful compensation will lead to job loss. In Mingalardon Township, workers have been paid only 40-70% of their wages, due to suspension of work for most of April due to public holidays (Thingyan/Myanmar Water Festival) as well as COVID-related inspection, despite a government order stating that employers should not resort to wage cuts.
- In Sri Lanka, many workers in the Free Trade Zones (FTZ) in the Western Province received only partial wages for March and April or received just half the wages in March and no wages in April.
- In Bengaluru, India, most garment factories have only partially provided wages for the lockdown period and are yet to pay wages for April. Some factories that have offered April wages have only provided half the basic pay and it has been provided only for workers who were able to report back to the factory within a specified date. These arbitrary conditions with regard to reporting have made it impossible for workers who live in containment zones (who are not allowed to leave their homes) as well as those have no access to personal transport to receive their wages, in the absence of transportation facilities provided by the company. Further, permanent workers in some export factories in Bengaluru have been presented with three options for wage payment for May – opt for a cut in wages for May, or complete payment but work on Sundays (without extra pay), or complete payment for May with the condition of a cut in wages in the upcoming months.
- In Kolkata, India, workers in the hosiery industry have received 30-40% of their wages for April, with a promise that the remaining will be paid when production resumes.

Non Payment

Non-payment of wages can be due to three reasons

- Firstly, due to factory closures as is the case in Java in Indonesia that has affected thousands of workers.
- Secondly, non-payment can occur due to the status of workers, where daily wage earners and contract workers have been disproportionately affected in all countries. This segment that includes mostly the migrant workers are the most vulnerable to market fluctuations as they do not generally enjoy any State-mandated social security mechanisms or benefits.
- Thirdly, unions also report that factory owners as well as contractors have absconded or refuse to answer the phone calls of workers, leaving workers with no assurance of pay.

In Tiruppur, India, garment workers, irrespective of their contractual status, have not received wages while middle-level managerial and accounting staff have reported that they have received only 50-60% wages during the lockdown period. Many piece-rate workers and home-based workers in Ahmedabad, Gurgaon, Ludhiana, Mumbai, Tiruppur and Surat have not even been

paid for the garments they produced in February and March. Also, daily wage workers and contract workers in Sri Lanka have not received any pay for the lockdown period.

In Cambodia and Indonesia, unions report that some workers who have been laid off or furloughed have not received wages for the days they worked.

Withholding Festive Bonuses

The payment of festive bonus is a regular and legally mandated practice in Indonesia during Ramadan every year. This bonus is integral to tide over the additional expenses incurred by workers during Eid-ul-Fitr. Many companies are informing workers that they will not be able to pay the entire amount of the festive bonus (which is generally equal to one month salary of a worker) or that they can pay the amount only in

installments over a period of time, which can extend upto 8-10 months. In a factory in Sukabumi, Indonesia, workers have been protesting against the employer's decision to pay the bonus in eight instalments. The company has now agreed to pay the bonus in a single instalment, on the condition that wages for the next three months will be paid with a delay of ten days.

Non- Wage Support from State, Industry, and Civil Society

In the absence of regular wage payments amidst suspension of production, some workers are receiving non-wage support in the form of income and essential commodities from the state, industry or civil society. This has, at least in some instances, partially helped workers to cope with the economic distress induced by the pandemic. Key interventions in this regard include:

A. Non-wage Financial support:

In some of the smaller factories in Tirupur, workers have been paid token amounts of INR 500-600 by their employers based on personal relationships. Bigger firms have sponsored rice, dhal (lentils) and other basic necessities to workers. This support depends ultimately on informal employer-employee relations that mirror patron-client relations. Hence, the distribution of this kind of financial support has not been uniform.

B. Civil Society Intervention:

Many NGOs and unions - including AFWA partners and allies - have been doing extensive work in supplying provisions as well as raising funds, especially in the context of inadequacies of State intervention in all the garment-producing countries, but with regional distinctions. A noteworthy case of civil society intervention is in Ludhiana in India, where food is arranged to all workers using the extensive langar system (free com-

munity kitchen) of the Sikhs. This comes as huge support for Unions that can focus on issues related to wages and employment, as the most pressing concern of hunger is taken care of. However, this kind of civil society intervention is a special case due to the cultural particularities of Ludhiana in Punjab. For instance, this safety net can be contrasted with Gujarat, where such mechanisms of community intervention are weak, and, with little State and industry support, workers are extremely vulnerable.

C. State-mandated income support:

With many workers losing work or taking pay cuts due to the COVID-19 outbreak, some states have announced certain schemes to provide income support to workers. While the funding for many of these schemes is insufficient, unions also worry that there will be targeting errors, with intended beneficiaries losing out due to errors of both inclusion and exclusion.



Photo Caption : READ distributing ration to workers in Erode District, Tamil Nadu
Photo Credits : READ, India

In **Cambodia**, suspended workers are to receive USD 70, which is about 37% of the minimum wage, with the state paying USD 40 and the employer, USD 30⁵. There is uncertainty around the full payment of USD 70 as the government's share has not been paid yet. This is despite the fact that the monetary support is much below the revised poverty line of the country, amidst rising living costs including rent and exorbitant electricity charges in Cambodia.

In **India**, the government has announced a package of INR 20 lakh crore (which is 1.1% of the GDP) to provide free food grains, loans, credit and cash relief for certain sections of workers and to generate employment for migrants returning to rural areas through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA). This package offers no specific support for garment and textile workers and has been considered highly insufficient to mitigate the humanitarian crisis unfolding in the country. Moreover, it falls short of meeting the demands of unions and economists that the government must provide every household with INR 7,000 per month for a period of three months and every individual with 10 kg of free food grains per month for a period of six months, which, according to them, is only likely to cost 3 percent of India's GDP.⁶

In **Indonesia**, for workers affected by the COVID-19 crisis, the government is pro-

viding a Pre-Employment Card Scheme, where each recipient is entitled to a benefit package of IDR 3,550,000.⁷ However, the amount will be transferred only if the worker completes certain online training programmes. Unions and workers have been critical of the government for imposing such conditionalities and allocating a huge portion of the non-wage support for online courses at a time when workers are struggling for food and other basic necessities.

In **Myanmar**, the Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population, on 30 April, stated they would provide social security benefits to workers of 'registered factories' that are temporarily closed for inspection amid the COVID-19 outbreak. These workers will receive 40 per cent of their salaries for the unemployed days in accordance with the Social Security Law.⁸ However, our allies in Myanmar inform us that no worker has received this payment till now. Many workers are unaware about this scheme and there are many instances where employers are withholding worker's social security cards or resort to non-registration of workers to deliberately reduce the number of workers on the records so as to bypass their obligations to contribute to the welfare fund.

In **Sri Lanka**, daily wage workers who lost their jobs have also been assured of Rs. 5000 (around US\$27) as income support.⁹

PART V

LAYOFFS

Market uncertainty and resource crunch due to the impact of the pandemic have been used as an excuse to lay off workers in the garment-producing countries. Media reports indicate indiscriminate layoff of millions of garment workers across Asia - nearly 110,000 in Cambodia¹⁰, 2.1 million workers in Indonesia¹¹ and 1,000,000 in Bangladesh.¹² This has been due to the shutdown of units as they do not have the

financial or material wherewithal to continue production.

Layoffs need not happen in strictly legal terms due to the informal relationships between employers and workers. Furloughs are another mechanism by which workers are temporarily sent on leave, which is also used as a strategy to avoid severance pay, for example, in Indonesia.

Layoffs have revealed new patterns of worker-preference and have unearthed existing patterns of societal discrimination.

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It needs to be noted that such layoffs occur in an institutional setting that has fostered the logic that labour relations should be highly flexible, which implies dilution of workers' rights so as to keep the firm at the micro-level and economy at the macro-level afloat. The following are identified as key factors that may shape employment status in the near future:

A. Nature of Contract

It is the trainees, daily wage earners, contract workers, and home-based workers that are the first to be laid off in most cases. Due

to the informal and highly volatile nature of employment in certain regions like Gujarat in India, it is not possible to neatly categorise them as layoffs as it is a regular feature to dismiss workers as and when needed by firms. In Tiruppur, those who had preferred to be piece-rate workers in order to earn more have been hit hard due to the absence of work.

In Sri Lanka, manpower workers in Free Trade Zones (FTZ) in the western provinces and trainees (who have worked for less than 6 months) in Uva and Sabragamuva provinces have been asked not to report to work. In Indonesia, it was the trainees or workers with less than one year of experience who had been laid off in most factories.

B. Spatial Proximity to Factories

As the lockdown restrictions are gradually being lifted, workers who reside nearest to factories are being called back first to work. This is anticipated, given the restrictions on inter-state and intra-state mobility imposed by the government. This is the case in Bengaluru where city-based workers have returned to factories, in Gurugram where workers from Delhi have not been able to restart work in factories, and in Tirupur where workers staying in neighbouring districts like Erode and Coimbatore have been unable to restart work in reopened factories. Private buses arranged by factories that workers relied on for transport are not operational anymore, which means that workers have to incur personal expenses to reach factories. With public buses also plying only in limited routes, workers are hiring autos or taxis to reach factories. These private means of transport are shared by 5-8 work-

ers, which not only adds to the financial burden of workers but also endangers their lives as social distancing becomes impossible in such crowded transportation facilities. Workers are willing to bear any cost to reach factories as many factories are forcing workers who do not report to the factory within a specified date to resign. Thus, State regulations aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 have been wrongfully exploited by factories to force workers to resign.

Also, in many cases, workers who reside in villages, away from the factories, are persuaded by their communities not to return to work due to the fear of contracting coronavirus during the travel to the factory or within the factory itself. Thus, a multitude of factors put those workers who stay near factories at an advantage over those who stay farther away.

With the COVID-19 crisis pushing families into debt and bonded labour in many regions, adolescent youth are quitting schools to start work in factories and mills.

C. Age

As the elderly are the most vulnerable to the coronavirus, it is expected that they may face discrimination in the labour market despite willingness to work. In Bengaluru, unions report that many women workers above the age of 40 have not been called back to work. Similarly, in Uva Province and Sabragamuwa Province, Sri Lanka, older workers have

been asked to stay home. Although, earlier this month there had been discussions that these workers might receive a small monetary support and payment of existing dues, presently the chances of this seem bleak.

Employers have also gone to the extent of actively employing adolescents in factories, taking advantage of the economic anxieties

of the families. With the COVID-19 crisis pushing families into debt and bonded labour in many regions, adolescent youth are quitting schools to start work in factories and mills. The deep digital divide in the Global South which has made students un-

able to transition to digital learning during this crisis, has also played a significant role in incentivising families to send children and adolescents to work. An important case highlighting this emerging concern is stated below :

Case Study

Adolescent Girls Being Recruited into Spinning Mills in Dindigul, Tamil Nadu

In Dindigul, Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU) reports that many spinning mills are only allowing workers who are willing to live in hostels to work due to COVID-related travel constraints. Since workers' families are facing high levels of indebtedness due to job loss and many adolescents are no longer attending schools - girls as young as 14 are being sent to work in spinning mills by families. As older women take care of household chores and with alcohol-induced domestic violence on the rise, families find it more convenient to send their daughters to work where they live in hostels. Their wages provide marginal support to families during the pandemic.

However, this is a matter of grave concern due to multiple reasons. Firstly, TTCU worries that the girls might never return back to schooling as they get further absorbed within the system. The prospects of additional financial support acts as an incentive for families that are surviving with meagre incomes. Secondly, the industry has a tendency to rely on unorganised young girls who are submissive to the whims of the management. Many of these girls are already working overtime around 16 hours in the spinning mills in unsafe working conditions with limited freedom of movement. Thirdly, this is reminiscent of the Sumangali Scheme that recruited young girls, especially from Dalit communities, to work in factories and spinning mills under conditions of forced labour. This system of employment was severely criticised for relying on underpaid labour under very high conditions of exploitation that jeopardised the physical and mental health of young girls. Fourthly, the young girls are susceptible to gender-based violence, with a rise in the number of cases of physical, verbal and sexual harassment. This may go unreported - for fear of losing their jobs, which may be the single source of income for families reeling under a severe economic crisis.

D. Gender

Many young mothers in garment factories in Bengaluru, India have been unable to return back to work as the creche facilities mandated in factories under the Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 have been temporarily stopped. The creche facility in garment factories is an important factor that allowed mothers of young children to

take up jobs outside the home and support the family income. The lack of this facility, although aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19 to children, has added to the financial burden of many families as many women workers are unable to return back to work and are voluntarily resigning from their jobs.



E. Union Membership

The pandemic has also been used as an excuse to bust Unions as is most evident in the case of Myan Mode Factory on the outskirts of Yangon, Myanmar.¹³ Out of 571 workers who have been dismissed, 520 belonged to the factory Union that had been protesting for better safety conditions. This is as opposed to 700 non-unionised workers who were able to retain their jobs in a clear case of singling out organised workers to weaken labour's strength. Employers have also taken advantage of the COVID-19 emergency law that prohibits gathering of more than 5 people to clamp down on strikes against non-payment of wages for April, leading to

arrests of protesting workers. This has effectively meant that workers have been penalised for asserting their right to compensation.

Even in Cambodia, unionised workers are being targeted in layoffs, despite government appeals not to engage in such discrimination. In a clear indication of union-busting with the complicity of the state, a local union leader has been arrested and imprisoned for putting up a post on social media criticising the suspension of unionised workers.¹⁴ This raises major concerns around how the uncertainty around the pandemic can be used to clamp down on freedom of association.

F. Minimum Wage Level

Unions in Indonesia have observed that factories in areas where wage rates are high – for example, in Jakarta - shut down first, compared to factories in areas where labour is cheaper. The Tangerang Industrial district in Indonesia was one of the first regions in Indonesia to face indiscriminate mass layoffs, and unions believe that this could have been because the wage rate is much higher in this region compared to other regions. There are also instances where suppliers with multiple factories furloughed or laid off workers in units situated in regions where the minimum wage rate is higher while they continued production in units

where minimum wage was lower.

G. Religion

In what appears to be a vindication of growing communalism in India, there have been reports that at least 50 Muslim workers have not been re-employed, while Hindu workers have been taken back in a factory in Gurgaon.¹⁵ This should be seen against the backdrop to communalise the pandemic through social media propaganda by singling out socially-marginalised communities as carriers of the virus. The fallouts of such malicious misinformation can also be known in the weeks to come.

How are workers coping with this crisis?

News reports indicate that several Indonesian workers are using their layoff compensation to set up small stalls/shops in the city. The sudden loss of jobs has impacted migrant remittances that support young children and the elderly in families. In India and Indonesia, migrant workers are returning to their villages where some of them have taken up agricultural work. AFWA's partners in Tirupur report that this has had a depressing effect on rural wages with agricultural wages falling from INR 300 to INR 250. This has accentuated disguised unemployment, which has been a perennial feature of developing economies. This is compounded by the fact that prices of certain cash crops, an important source of rural income, have been depressed by the slowing of global demand. To further understand emerging concerns, we now focus on healthcare and food security based on available evidence.

PART VI

FOOD SECURITY

The most pressing concern among workers is ensuring food security. Garment workers, who are some of the most vulnerable categories of workers, were, in many instances, chronically food insecure before the COVID-19 crisis. They suffer high levels of anemia, an iron deficiency, and are in many cases malnourished, making them more vulnerable to COVID-19.

Decades of neoliberal economic reforms have perpetuated agrarian distress and diluted the universality of public distribution systems (PDS), which have been a bulwark against food insecurity in countries like India. The shortage of farm labour and the disruption in logistics and distribution networks due to transport restrictions in all countries have posed severe threats to domestic food security.¹⁶ The looming drought condition in Indonesia and Cambodia also compounds the problem due to a deficit in key staples. Thousands of garment workers in Bangladesh went on public demonstrations to seek resolution to the most immediate of all problems – hunger.¹⁷

There are at least two kinds of issues faced by workers – first is access to rations and second is inadequacy of rations. India's PDS system has been severely critiqued for the errors associated with targeted provi-

sioning. Migrant workers who constitute a floating population find it difficult to access rations through PDS as they are not recorded as residents in destination areas. Several workers in Tiruppur complained that they are unable to access rations provided by the government due to lack of identity cards. Those workers who stay in hostels were deprived of access to rations and those who have left for their homes have been stranded mid-way. At least 383 people have died due to the ill-conceived lockdown in India, with at least 58 deaths due to starvation and financial distress.¹⁸

The second issue arises with respect to the quantity and quality of rations. As of now, workers in India are provided mostly rice, wheat, dhal (lentils) and cooking oil. Activists highlight how the lack of dietary diversity can perpetuate the issue of malnutrition and stunting among children in countries like India. Due to loss of income, daily-wage earners are unable to purchase commodities from the market. This is partly attributed to food supply chains being disrupted due to the pandemic. AFWA's partners in Indonesia and Sri Lanka report that availability of food would be a major issue in the upcoming months.

PART VII

HEALTHCARE

“We are scared we won’t survive this crisis; we will die most probably before they find a cure for this virus.”

Radha, a garment worker in Bangalore

The pandemic has caught workers in a twin-dilemma – the necessity of wage work for survival as well as concerns around safety conditions in the workplace. Factories that have reopened have been operating at 30-70% of their usual capacity and, at least in most regions, have ensured temperature checks and disinfectant sprays due to State-led health inspections. However, there are practical difficulties where units employ thousands of workers in one shift, where mechanisms fall grossly inadequate. News reports reveal that factories in Bangladesh have been operating at 60-70% of workforce, flouting physical distancing norms.¹⁹ In Bangladesh, more than 100 workers tested positive for COVID-19 in the first week of May, raising concerns about the safety of their co-workers. This is amidst calls by ITUC and Global Unions for recognising COVID-19 as an occupational disease.²⁰ The ILO notes that COVID-19 and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), if contracted through occupational exposure, can

be classified as occupational diseases.

The most important limitation in focusing solely on workplaces is that there simply is no monitoring mechanism to ensure that physical distancing norms and sanitation facilities are implemented in accommodation facilities. Garment workers stay in cramped facilities in rented rooms where a single room accommodates 6-10 workers. The employers do not take responsibility for this, as these facilities are arranged by the workers themselves who actively seek out such low-cost housing options at their meagre wage levels. Similarly, in the absence of safe transport mechanisms, migrant workers who are returning to factory units in Bengaluru are traveling in buses, and by sharing auto-rickshaws or taxis, where physical distancing norms are not followed. This raises huge concerns in all garment-producing regions as it puts workers at great risk outside the factory space.

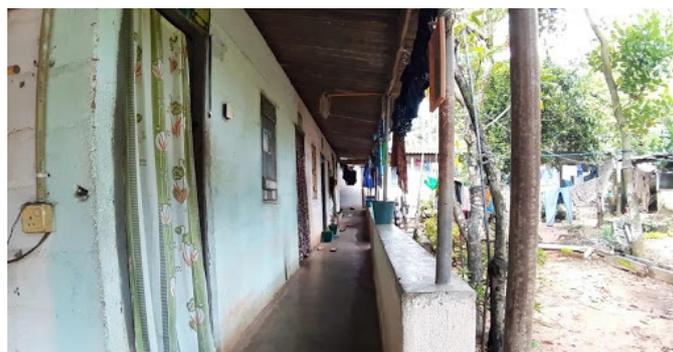


Photo Caption : The living quarters of garment workers in Free Trade Zones (FTZs), Sri Lanka
Photo Credits : Stand Up Movement, Sri Lanka

PART VIII

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The pandemic has triggered an unprecedented crisis in global garment supply chains. It has also exposed fault-lines of opaque production systems that seek out vulnerable segments of the population as workforce.

This issue has highlighted the emerging channels of support that workers have received, patterns of layoffs and concerns related to health and food security. The most vulnerable segment of the global garment workforce consists of daily wage earners, contract workers and home-based workers.

Patterns in layoffs reveal how factors like employment status, spatial proximity, age, gender, union membership and religion have been used to discriminate against workers. Exploiting the excuse of market uncertainty, employers are undertaking measures that further fragment the working class.

The pandemic has also highlighted the inability of the State to respond to the pandemic and its collateral effects, in terms of ensuring access to decent healthcare and food security. While Indonesia has postponed its proposed labour reforms, several states in India have gone ahead with suspending all labour laws and extending the work day from 8 to 12 hours, contrary to international conventions. Taking advantage of anti-China sentiments, employers in India have been calling on states to weaken trade unions so as to revive the industry.

The tripartite mechanism that is necessary to solve industrial disputes under capitalism is being targeted to facilitate business interests. This was most evident in Karnataka where the Principal Secretary of the Labour Department who devised mechanisms for ensuring timely wage payments got transferred under pressure from the Em-



Photo Caption : Distribution of Ration by Centre of India Trade Union (CITU) and Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti (BGVS), in Bengaluru, India
Photo Credits : Dhiman Sau



AFWA demands that the loss of income due to suspension of work and the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods be partially mitigated in the short-term by a one-time Supply-chain Relief Contribution (SRC).

employers' Association and has been replaced by the Principal Secretary of the Industries Department in a clear case of conflict of interest. This is merely an extension of neoliberal reforms that had worsened the impact of the pandemic in the first place, which would be disastrous to the working class and would accentuate social inequalities. The uncertainty around the pandemic should not be used as an excuse to weaken labour laws and smash unions who help to mitigate structural inequalities between capital and labour.

Global garment supply chains are organised in an opaque manner because of which the brands that appropriate most of the profit are not held accountable or responsible for purchasing practices that perpetuate poverty-level wages. AFWA demands that the loss of income due to suspension of work and the impact of COVID-19 on livelihoods be partially mitigated in the short-term by a one-time Supply-chain Relief Contribution (SRC), wherein brands pay an additional 2% of their past annual sourcing that is passed on through brands to suppliers and becomes payable directly to each worker.²¹ In the medium to long term, brands should step forward and commit to a fair price or a premium that ensures payment of a living wage and social security, and safeguard freedom of association.

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