



Case Summary

Gender-based violence at H&M Supplier Factory – Natchi Apparels, India

Jeyasre Kathiravel, a 20-year-old Dalit garment worker at H&M supplier Natchi Apparels in Tamil Nadu, was found dead on 5th January, 2021. Thangadurai, her immediate supervisor at the same factory, is currently in police custody and is facing charges for murder. Thangadurai has confessed to authorities that he raped and killed Jeyasre. Co-workers and friends of Jeyasre claim that they have seen Thangadurai sexually harass her in the factory multiple times over the last few months before her death. Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), an Asia Floor Wage Alliance partner organises workers at Natchi apparels and is providing support to Jeyasre's family.

Jayasre's Murder

According to Jeyasre's family and friends, she left her home on 1st January 2021 around noon, after the supervisor Thangadurai called and asked her to report to the factory. The police investigation later revealed that Jeyasre was taken by the supervisor to his friend's house, where the family presumes that she was raped, before being poisoned and strangled to death by the supervisor and his accomplice.

The family filed a missing person complaint on 2nd January and named the supervisor as a suspect, as many workers in the factory and her village knew that he had been sexually harassing her for a long time. He had also been the last person who had contacted Jayasree before her disappearance. Co-workers also knew that he had a history of sexually harassing women workers in the factory and Jeyasre was not his first victim. While he initially denied his involvement, his suspicious actions throughout the investigation and later his confession to the police about the crime, confirmed his involvement.

Jeyasre's body was found on 5th January in a wasteland, in a nearby village by farmers and cattle-grazers. During the days before the body was found, the region experienced heavy rains and the body was found in a decomposed state. While the family awaits the detailed post mortem report, given the state the body was found, it is unlikely that we will have conclusive evidence of the rape and physical violence she suffered immediately before her murder. However, there is ample evidence from workers'

testimonies that it was the unchecked sexual harassment in this H&M supplier factory that led to the untimely death of the young Dalit woman worker.

Testimonies

Seven women workers at Natchi Apparels have testified that Jeyasre was sexually harassed multiple times by the supervisor. They have stated that the supervisor had a history of sexually harassing women and that he is not the only supervisor or manager who has indulged in these actions. Women workers have pointed out that there are many instances of sexual harassment and violence in the factory - including name-calling, slut-shaming, bullying, beating, and assault. According to the workers, many factors have contributed to the high incidence of gender-based violence in the factory – including the lack of a well-functioning grievance mechanism for responding to sexual harassment (Internal Complaints Committee), lack of CCTVs within the work spaces, and the skewed gender ratio between supervisors and workers - where more than 90% of supervisors are men while 90% of workers are women.

Women workers at Natchi Apparels have no faith in the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) as they observed no change in the behaviour of the supervisors and managers even after registering complaints. Some workers observed that those who complained to the ICC were demoted, fired from their jobs, or became targeted within the factory through increased production targets or other forms of violence. Other workers commented that they do not know how the ICC works and who the members of the ICC committee are. Thus, workers find no incentive in registering a complaint with the ICC.

Women workers in the factory also stated that CCTV cameras are not placed on the factory floor and hence there is generally no video evidence of the various forms of GBV that women experience in the workplace. A woman worker who has worked for more than three years in the factory told TTCU anonymously that, *“CCTV cameras are only kept in the corridors or the entry of the factory or close to the bathrooms. This is to see who all enter the factory, to monitor if workers are loitering around, or to see how many minutes we are staying away from work to go to the bathroom. They use it only to scold us if we spend too much time away from work. There are no CCTVs in the workplace as such - this is where all the harassment happens. So, there is never any evidence of the sexual and physical harassment that women workers suffer on the factory floor. Managers use this opportunity to torture us.”*

Another worker, on anonymity, pointed out how women workers are forced to accept sexual harassment as a “normal” condition in the workplace. She said in a discussion with TTCU union leaders that *“the gender ratio is very skewed in the factory. There are*

hardly any women supervisors and managers in this factory. Most workers, on the other hand, are young women and many are migrants, who are staying away from their families for the first time. They have no proper support system within the factory and have no access to prevention or grievance redressal mechanism for sexual harassment. They are scared to complain against the managers as they are girls from poor families. They worry that they will lose their jobs and be unable to feed their families if they complain". She also pointed out that many young local girls like Jeyasre pay for their college fees by working an 8-hour shift in the garment factory. If they complain and lose their jobs, they will not be able to continue their education, forcing them to suffer silently or get conditioned to accept it.

Other issues in the factory

Workers also reported other issues in the factory including the non-payment of minimum wages for some categories of workers, forced unpaid overtime, high production targets and forced resignation of workers before the payment of yearly bonus. One woman worker stated that *"while some workers received partial wages for the Covid-19 lockdown period, they were all forced to do unpaid overtime once the factory reopened."*

Natchi Apparel also refuses to acknowledge and work with trade unions, including TTCU which represents many women workers in the factory. According to Thivya, state president of TTCU, *"factories in Dindigul, including Natchi Apparels, claim that there is a stay order from the court stating that no union activities can be allowed in the factory as the factories are situated close to the National Highway and gatherings of workers outside the factory will endanger the workers' lives by speeding vehicles. When we ask factories to provide us a copy of this stay order, they are unable to show it. The existence of this stay order, which no union has seen, has been used for years to prevent us from building factory-level unions. We are now forced to organise at the village/community level."*

About TTCU: Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU) is a registered independent union exclusively for women workers in Tamil Nadu, India. TTCU was founded in 2013 and represents around 11,000 workers in Tamil Nadu. 80 percent of TTCU's members work in the textile and garment industry. TTCU works across the major garment hubs of Tamil Nadu including Coimbatore, Dindigul, Erode and Tirupur.

