



**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RESEARCH AND
ANALYTICAL REVIEWS (IJRAR) | IJRAR.ORG**
An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

SRI LANKAN GARMENT INDUSTRY AND LIMITATIONS OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS

Saima Azim

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Abstract: Sri Lanka's garment industry employs around 300,000 workers, the majority of whom are women who migrated from villages to work in the Free Trade Zone. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted Sri Lanka's garment industry, like other sectors. The Pandemic and its implications on the global economy resulted in cancelled orders, no job security, exploitative and unsanitary work environments, non-payment of wages and bonuses, and even attacks on members of the trade union. Sri Lankan workers produce garments for brands like Gap, Ralph Lauren, Marks & Spencer's, Levi's and many more. Even during the Pandemic, despite the initial cancellation of many orders, these brands continue to profit.

The Pandemic has been catastrophic all over the world. However, in developing nations of the Indo-Pacific, like Sri Lanka, unfair wages, lack of job security, and an exploitative workplace environment have led to the worsening of women's position in Sri Lankan society. The paper will explore the issue through a feminist lens and look at restrictions of the Global North's understanding of women in the workforce and how the Western understanding of economic independence for women doesn't translate in the Global South, and leaves women susceptible to exploitation and a forced, continuous cycle of poverty and dependency.

Keywords: Feminism, Labour, Sri Lanka

Introduction:

Women workers in the garment industry conjure up many myths and fairy tales. These stories often range from them being perfect for the job due to their nimble finger to their lack of understanding of heavy machinery, or them being good at sewing to being docile and compliant workers, or them being secondary workers in households, helping in running the home rather than being its breadwinner.¹ Feminists, decades ago engaged in the question, "Why is it women who overwhelmingly constitute the labour force?" were presented with answers that women workers had "nibble fingers" and they possessed visual sharpness which resulted in higher productivity.²

Women workers all over the world have been great contributors to the textile industry for centuries now. A look at pre-industrial revolution Europe shows a clear hierarchy of how the textile industry worked, with male merchants in Britain distributing wool to households, where tasks at the preparatory level were taken care of by women and children (and even servants and apprentices if the house had them). In contrast, men of the house took to weaving. They were also the ones who negotiated with the merchants. The system was patriarchal to the core. The pre-industrial era Britain and France of the 1600s-1700s saw these male weavers, who were also the masters of the house, rise up, organise, form Guilds and demand protection of the interests of the workers. However, like everything from that time, these were affairs of the men. Women rarely could join such Guilds unless in the capacity of wives or daughters of the male weavers. Even when women were allowed to be members of the Guild or form their own Guild, such as widows in France or women in the Silk industry, they still could not align with mainstream Guilds, as the responsibility of sworn members was always a position reserved for men. Following this, 18th-century women were mostly out of the weaving industry, including the silk industry, which was exclusively dominated by women in the 12th and 13th centuries. As male weavers organised and protected their earnings, they did everything to alienate women weavers.³

The practice of alienating women and dominating industries continued even through colonialism and the two World Wars. The practice of colonialism brought the opportunity for the colonisers to access raw materials, agricultural produce, and minerals, produce products and then sell them back to their regimes in the Third World. The link between the Global North and Global South was established. It wasn't till the 1960s, when the percentage of manufactured goods being exported from the developing to the developed nations started rising, that there was a shift in the relationship between the two. The restructuring of the market was evident in the next two decades, when the developing nations that exported 15.2 per cent of the textiles in 1963 reached 23.2 per cent by 1975. While the percentage of developing countries in cotton yarn production in 1950 was 19 per cent, it went up to 40 per cent by 1978.⁴

¹ Diane Elson, "Nibble Fingers and Other Fables" in *Of Common Cloth: Women in the Global Textile Industry*, edited by Wendy Chapkis and Cynthia Enloe (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 1983), p. 5.

² Dian Elson, Ruth Pearson, "Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Labour: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing," *Feminist Review*, Vol. 7, Spring, 1981, p. 92.

³ Margherita Gloster, Martha McDevitt, Amrita Chhachhi, "Restructuring: The Cutting Edge," in *Of Common Cloth: Women in the Global Textile Industry*, edited by Wendy Chapkis and Cynthia Enloe, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, 1983, pp. 18-19.

⁴ Folker Froebel, *The New International Division of Labour* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 27-28.

The transition that started in the 1960s picked up pace in the 1970s, when the transnational corporations started moving plants to the Global South, reeling under the impact of the world recession. The corporations moved to the Third World in search of cheap labour (often female) for their plants. They categorise these jobs as unskilled to justify their economic pursuits. This resulted in workers in the Global North feeling like they were being robbed of their jobs by the cheap, unskilled workers of the Third World.⁵ However, the shift, with economic and political motives at the corporations' end, has not translated to development in the Third World. This paper, with a focus on Sri Lanka, a country with relatively satisfying socio-economic parameters, will look at how the notion of development and independence for workers, especially women workers, has not materialised in the Global South and how the illusion of relative success held by Sri Lanka was shattered during the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic.

Sri Lanka and the Garment Industry:

The political landscape of Sri Lanka transitioned from democratic socialism to market-oriented policies in the 1970s. The shift reverberated in the class dynamics as well as the ethnic relations within the Island nation.⁶ The capitalist influence on the political economic shift, which valued economic concerns over the welfare of the people, was how many states leaning towards neoliberal economic systems found themselves. Throughout the 1970s, neoliberalism established itself at a global level. The search for cheap labour was a primary motive for the garment sector to move to East Asia and then to the Global South. This was accompanied by efforts to reduce the bargaining powers of the unionised labour under a changing paradigm. The traction for these policies was a result of the structural adjustment policies, which were implemented in the Global South in the late 1970s.⁷

The year 1977 was a watershed moment for multiple reasons, including its impact on labouring groups, a trend that continues to this day. Sri Lanka's political economy since its independence in 1948 has always been more or less committed to the principles of social democracy, which were a legacy of the activism of the labouring communities that started in the later part of the colonial era and continues post-independence. The movement led by labourers against exploitative labour conditions resulted in legislation that protected workers and their health, wellbeing, and welfare, making Sri Lanka a social state.⁸

The actions of the unions, along with a people-centric development policy, led to many gains for Sri Lanka. It brought the country to economic growth that made it into a developing nation while maintaining high social development. This gained the attention of the Development Economists and was used as a case study to look at people-centred development, where gender parity in human development indices had been achieved. The state allocated almost a quarter of its annual budget to social welfare, resulting in a highly educated and healthy

⁵ Margherita Gloster, Martha McDevitt, Amrita Chhachhi, "Restructuring: The Cutting Edge," in *Of Common Cloth: Women in the Global Textile Industry*, edited by Wendy Chapkis and Cynthia Enloe, (Amsterdam: Transnational Institute, 1983), p. 17.

⁶ Newton Gunasinghe, "The Open Economy and Its Impact on Ethnic Relations" in *Newton Gunasinghe: Selected Essays*, edited by Sasanka Perera, (Colombo: Social Scientists Association, 1996), p. 185.

⁷ Kanchan Ruwanpura, *Garments without Guilt? Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lanka*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), pp. 14-15.

⁸ Alain Supito, "Grandeur and Misery of the Social State", *New Left Review*, Vol. 82, July-August 2013, pp. 99-103.

workforce between its independence and 1997. The time also saw strong unions, especially public unions and their presence in the national economy. The achievements of the people-centric development were one of a kind in all of South Asia and were even used by Industrial capital to lure the garment industry in Sri Lanka.⁹ Sri Lanka was the first country in South Asia to adopt a free market system in 1977. The country's initial foray into the garment sector came through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that came primarily from East Asian capital. The free market led to the establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs), which are commonly referred to as Free Trade Zones (FTZs), emerging out of the structural adjustments practised to align Sri Lanka's economy with the global development agenda.¹⁰

However, the open economic policies in Sri Lanka did bring the workers' rights under attack. All this resulted in economic polarisation, which grew into ethnic schisms and social conflict.¹¹ Six years into the open market system, in 1983, the Island nation was plagued with an almost three-decades-long ethnic violence and war. The ethnic war was also accompanied by political violence, engulfing the Sri Lankan youth all across the country. All communities bore the impact and burden of the Sinhala-Buddhist conflict war.¹² Just like with any area burning up in conflict and violence, everyday people were impacted by the power struggle, including the labouring class. The duration of the conflict saw frequent political and legislative assaults on unions and even reconstitution. The ethnic climate of the time seeped into the working of businesses and employee councils, who had a paternalistic approach to employees. The rivalry between the party-political unions went on to weaken the labour movement in the country. Though regime change in 1994 did lead to relaxation in union repression and a charter was brought in to try to strengthen workers' rights.¹³ However, these attempts did not reap much change as subsequent governments firmly remained committed to the principles of market economy, with capitalism as the focal point.¹⁴ Furthermore, the political volatility resulting from the influence which ethno-nationalist forces had on political terrain also continued to suppress efforts by labourers. The party unions of the time were also closely associated with Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism, and any space for cross-community labour dialogue or solidarity was non-existent. It is also important to note here that men dominated most leadership positions within unions despite the predominant presence of women in relevant

⁹ Supito, *New Left Review*, pp. 103-105.

¹⁰ International Labour Organisation (ILO), "Working Paper No. 69- Export Processing Zones in Sri Lanka: Economic Impact and Social Issues" URL: https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_ent/---multi/documents/publication/wcms_126264.pdf > [Accessed on July 28, 2024].

¹¹ David Dunham and Sisira Jayasuriya, "Equity, Growth and Insurrection: Liberation and the Welfare State Debate in Contemporary Sri Lanka," *Oxford Development Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 97-99.

¹² Sharika Thiranagama, *In My Mother's House: Civil War in Sri Lanka*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2014), pp. 19-21.

¹³ Janka S. Biyanwilla, *The Labour Movement in the Global South: Trade Unions in Sri Lanka*, (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 76-80.

¹⁴ Rajesh Venugopal, *Nationalism, Development, and Ethnic Conflict in Sri Lanka*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 27-28.

sectors.¹⁵ Despite all this, labourers and women labourers were able to find consequential moments to exert their agency. These actions were an apparent deviation from already established protocols of the union politics. They sometimes resulted in building new social movements against multiple odds.¹⁶ Scholars over the years have found that the agency labourers could assert was an outcome of not only their desire not to be exploited but also because of their education and knowledge. There have been instances in the post-1997 era in Sri Lanka that suggest that workers refused to be mistreated, and their education helped them rebuff workplace indignity. Documentation of workers' struggles in Sri Lanka points to how they struggled collectively to uphold their labour rights, some of which are even mentioned in the Sri Lankan constitution. The workers have, historically, fought for appropriate working conditions within factories and have, through struggle, found a standing ground within the capitalist system. The labour struggles pushed the Sri Lankan apparel sector to become ethical in the early 1980s, even as many countries in the Global South have not achieved that decades later.¹⁷ In the early 1980s, the labourers highlighted the exploitative nature of their jobs and negotiated better working conditions. The state's decision to listen and agree with their needs laid the foundation for ethical sourcing, a decade later. Their struggles and solidarity brought into practice a system that got Sri Lanka the ethical sourcing credentials.¹⁸

The country soon, in 1983, plunged into a three-decade ethnic conflict and war. The government didn't just see Sinhala-Buddhist chauvinism but also fully fledged political violence, which was also directed towards the labouring class. In the shadow of the war, unions faced numerous legislative and political assaults and were even reconstituted. This conflict also influences the employee councils and workers and unions found themselves contained under the "paternalist rule of employers".¹⁹

By mid-1994, there was a regime change at the centre, and unions had some hope, and a charter was made to strengthen workers' rights. However, this did not stick, as the subsequent governments continued to be committed to a market economy and re-regulation of legislation.²⁰

Multiple factors contribute to the distressing conditions of the women garment sector workers in Sri Lanka. Some of them impact all workers, irrespective of gender, while some are specific to women. They include women labour as cheap labour, busting of unions, improper working conditions and women's position in Sri Lankan society.

¹⁵ Kumari Jayawardena, *Labour, Feminism and Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Select Essays* (Colombo: Sail Fish, 2017), pp. 40-45.

¹⁶ Samanthi Gunawardena, "Struggle, Perseverance and Organization in Sri Lanka's Export Processing Zones", in *Global Unions: Challenging Transnational Capital through Cross-Border Campaigns*, edited by Kate Bronfenbrenner (New York: Cornell University Press, 2007), pp. 80-81.

¹⁷ Ruwanpura, *Garments without Guilt? Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lanka*, p. 75.

¹⁸ Ruwanpura, p. 72.

¹⁹ Janaka S. Biyanwila, *The Labour Movement in the Global South: Trade Unions in Sri Lanka* (London: Routledge, 2011), p. 77.

²⁰ Rajesh Venugopal, "The Politics of Market Reform at a Time of Civil War: Military Fiscalism in Sri Lanka", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 49, 2018, p. 69.

Sri Lanka's garment sector is the country's second top foreign exchange earner with around 300 factories making clothes for dozens of well-known global brands.²¹ The garment industry in Sri Lanka directly employs 350,000 workers. One in seven women in the Island nation works in the FTZ factories spread across the Northern and Western provinces. Most women who work here are between the ages of 18 and 25, and almost always are living far from their families.²² Women have to constantly face and overcome all kinds of hardship just to be employable. It is essential to note that though women workers are everywhere in Sri Lanka, employed women workers make up a tiny percentage. It is also necessary to focus on how rural and urban women tend to have different skill sets and priorities in employment in the FTZs. The rural women lack skills, and urban women who are married or have children often realise that they are struggling to manage the workload and lack flexibility in the workplace.²³

Around 2006, Sri Lanka's Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) members came up with Garments without Guilt (GWG), as a labelling strategy with the aim that the garments produced in the country were to carry a brand label and a tag about it being guilt-free. The initiative was proposed with the vision of establishing a platform to promote the Sri Lankan apparel sector as a safe place for retailers seeking to do business ethically. However, the JAAF was used to present and promote the apparel sector as a niche and ethical procedure, which also created value.²⁴ Various global multi-stakeholders and international corporations were interested in the initiative, which has emerged mainly in response to years of debate around workers' welfare and working conditions. The apparel industry has been notorious as it has continued to find ways to exploit labour, with assistance from government policies and strong-arming trade unions and workers, while still maintaining its ethical standards.²⁵

Pandemic, the Garment Industry and the Women Workers:

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the spread of COVID-19 a Pandemic in March 2020. Five months later, in August 2020, JAAF estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 workers in the industry would lose their jobs due to COVID-19.²⁶

²¹ Piyumi Fonseka, "Battered by the Pandemic, Sri Lanka's Female Garment Workers are reeling from the Economic Crisis", *Scroll.in*, May 19, 2022, URL: <https://scroll.in/article/1024122/battered-by-the-pandemic-sri-lankas-female-garment-workers-are-reeling-from-the-economic-crisis> [Accessed on July 27, 2024].

²² Adrija Bose, "Sri Lanka's Crisis Broke the Women who Help with Country's 505 Export", *Boom*, August 22, 2022, URL: <https://www.boomlive.in/world/sri-lanka-economic-crisis-women-garment-factory-workers-export-sex-work-18937> [Accessed on July 27, 2024].

²³ Sunimalee Madurawala, "Economically Empowering Sri Lankan Women: One Strategy does not fit all", *Daily Mirror*, March 8, 2018, URL: <https://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Economically-empowering-Sri-Lankan-women-One-strategy-does-not-fit-all-146907.html> [Accessed on July 28, 2024].

²⁴ Ruwanpura, *Garments without Guilt? Global Labour Justice and Ethical Codes in Sri Lanka*, p. 2.

²⁵ Ruwanpura, p. 2.

²⁶ Charumini de Silva, "Apparel Industry Fears 100,000 Job Losses Post COVID-19", *Daily Financial Times*, August 10, 2020 URL: <https://www.ft.lk/TOP-STORY/Apparel-industry-fears-100-000-job-losses-post-COVID-19/26-704360> [Accessed on July 29, 2024].

The first Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in Sri Lanka was established in 1978, a few years before the country fully plunged into an ethnic conflict. It was set up in a town called Katunayake, about 35 kilometres from the country's capital, Colombo. The assembly lines of the factories and plants in the new FTZ were filled with unemployed rural women, characterised by unrelenting schedules, poor work conditions, and minimal wages. Most of the workers were from the North Central and Southern provinces. Though since the end of the civil war in 2009, many Tamil women from Eastern province have also started working in the FTZs, however the majority workers are still from North Central and Southern provinces.²⁷ The culture in the FTZ is similar to any transnational factory, anywhere in the world, with demands of maximum output with minimal wages in highly exploitative conditions. They also practice the late-stage capitalism's gendered working relations.²⁸

The expansion of the first FTZ in Katunayake, near the Katunayake International Airport, resulted in multiple locations over the next few decades. By the year 2012, there were 12 major FTZs in Katunayake, Biyagama, Seethawaka, Kandy, Watupitiwala, Mirigama, Mawathegama, Koggala, Mirijjawila, Polgahawela and Horana. Since then, new zones and single industries have been established in various parts of the country, such as Kilinochchi and Vavuniya. The FTZs have expanded beyond the apparel industry, including garment accessories, garment-related services, export trading houses, steel products, rubber product manufacturing, motor spare parts, electronic and electrical products, tobacco processing, food and beverages, costume jewellery, and logistic services.²⁹

Over four decades after the first FTZ, in 2020, basic worker salary was at LKR 14,000 per month, though with overtime, women could earn up to LKR 25,000. Various zones had salaried, basic and sub-contractual jobs. In the 92 factories in the Katunayake zone, around 45,000 rural women from socially and economically marginalised groups worked as machine operators. In the FTZ of Biyagama, almost 30,000 workers worked, and the subcontracting agencies in the area added another 20,000 workers. Most of the women workers who make up these FTZs are young, unmarried, and educated. Though there are a few state-run hostels, they aren't enough to accommodate everyone. So, migrating women from the rural areas often find themselves hastily renting rooms locally.³⁰

It is important to note that women's employment within the garment industry is not just about their docility. Just like any other patriarchal society, the employment of women workers in factories and plants in Sri Lanka does not necessarily translate to empowerment. Most of it is negotiated between factory owners or managers who are men and the fathers and brothers of women who assure the employers that women of their house are pleasing, abiding, and hard-working. In response, the managers promise to keep their women employed, safe, and pure.

²⁷ Sandya Hewamanne, "Pandemic, Lockdown and Modern Slavery among Sri Lanka's Global Assembly Line Workers" in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 1, p. 41.

²⁸ Hewamanne, "Pandemic, Lockdown and Modern Slavery among Sri Lanka's Global Assembly Line Workers", p. 56.

²⁹ Shubhangi M. K. Herath, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women Garment Workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZs)" *Women's Centre Sri Lanka*, April 25, 2022, p. 11.

³⁰ Hewamanne, "Pandemic, Lockdown and Modern Slavery among Sri Lanka's Global Assembly Line Workers, p. 57.

The garment sector has significantly and constantly contributed to Sri Lanka's economy, bringing in USD 5.4 billion in export earnings in the year 2019, accounting for 6 per cent of the nation's GDP and a sizable 40 per cent of all exports. The manufacturing of textiles and worn apparel, according to the 2018 annual report of the Central Bank, garnered a gross national income of 654,482 million Sri Lankan rupees (USD 3 million). The estimations for the year 2025 were at USD 8 billion.³¹ However in August 2020, five months after the arrival of Covid -19, JAAF estimated that 80,000 to 100,000 workers in the garment industry would lose their jobs due to Covid-19.³² Despite the loss of workforce, Sri Lanka was considered a success when it came to curbing the spread of the Covid-19 virus in early 2020 with mist help from state imposed measures, imposed with the iron fist of the military. However, things changed drastically during the second wave of COVID-19.

The first wave of the Pandemic saw predictions of economic losses all over the globe. Sri Lanka was able to sustain a large chunk of its workers and export business even as the world went into lockdown. In August 2020, job loss was not the only news in Sri Lanka. The Central Bank, in a report, estimated a 183 per cent rise in exports since April 2020. The rise is attributed mainly to the apparel sector.³³

The initial impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic was seen mainly in the supply chains and the lives of workers due to the sudden and strict lockdown measures. Adding the global trade restrictions to the national level measures resulted in a significant number of workers losing their jobs, shifting to part-time work, receiving only a portion of their salaries, or becoming casual workers. These actions had catastrophic consequences on the personal lives of the workers.³⁴

Despite the Sri Lanka garment industry's hard-earned image of being fair, safe, and ethical, not just by the standards of the Global South, but beyond that too, the impact of the factories remaining open during the COVID-19 Pandemic on the workers cannot be overlooked. A long history of social welfare, unions, a safe working environment, and fair pay has been the standard of the Sri Lankan apparel industry. However, the things that happened during the second wave of the Pandemic to the workers, particularly women workers, need much attention.

The second wave of the Pandemic, October 2020 to April 2021, saw a decline in the financial woes of the workers as production had started again, albeit slowly. But with one FTZ factory becoming the epicentre for the virus, the workers faced a lot of marginalisation and social stigma. A wage reduction and job cuts were

³¹ Textile Today, "Sri Lanka Apparel Sector aims to Reach \$8 bn by 2025", *Textile Today*, January 31, 2019, URL: <https://www.textiletoday.com.bd/sri-lanka-apparel-sector-aims-reach-us8-bn-2025/> [Accessed on July 30, 2024].

³² Daily Financial Times, "Apparel Industry fears 100,000 job losses post-COVID-19" *Daily Financial Times*, August 10, 2020, URL: <https://www.ft.lk/top-story/Apparel-industry-fears-100-000-job-losses-post-COVID-19/26-704360> [Accessed on July 30, 2024].

³³ Sri Lanka Brief, "As Sri Lanka Government is Unresponsive, Unions and Civil Groups make a Desperate Appeal to the International Community to Protect FTZ Workers." *Sri Lanka Brief*, May 31, 2021, URL: <https://srilankabrief.org/as-sri-lanka-govt-is-unresponsive-unions-and-civil-groups-make-a-desperate-appeal-to-the-international-community-to-protect-ftz-workers/> [Accessed on August 01, 2024].

³⁴ Herath, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women Garment Workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZs)", p. 6.

practised by many manufacturers even as workers struggled to fulfil bigger production targets with a smaller workforce. This exploited many labour laws and jeopardised the well-being of workers.³⁵

The second wave and its impact on the garment industry workers, particularly women, can be understood by looking at various reports and surveys about the outbreak of the virus in different FTZs, and how factory administration handled the virus and the sick workers during that time.

A Reuters report from November 2021 indicated how garment workers were at the centre of the second wave of the Pandemic. The report looked at the Brandix factory, which produced clothes for global brands like Gap and Marks & Spencer and employed around 35,000 people. What started with cold and cough among workers in the monsoon season later revealed itself to be the COVID-19 virus. Workers' health was monitored by on-site doctors, who prescribed cold medicines and sent them back to work, until around 1,000 of the 1,400 workers from the factory were infected with the COVID-19 virus. The factory, which is located in Gampaha, was a hotbed for the virus and resulted in around 7,000 cases in Gampaha.³⁶

Another report jointly done by Solidarity Centre and Industri Global Union, based on the survey of garment sector workers in the Katunayake FTZ, with 144 participants comprising 97 women and 47 men, 93 Sinhala and 51 Tamil workers, was indicative of the deteriorating working conditions for workers at the Katunayake FTZ. The survey group included people who worked in sewing sewers, supervisors, machine operators, helpers, machine cleaners, cutters, loaders and packers. Most of the workers were permanent workers. The report pointed to how COVID-19 impacted the FTZ, which was already suffering from union busting and workers who were not aware of their rights. The Pandemic further pushed them into a corner as they suffered a loss of income, benefits, allowances, faced delayed payments and sometimes even non-payment. The workers had to also adjust to increased work hours and workload, constant switching between different production lines and even loss of jobs due to closure, temporary termination and retrenchment.³⁷

The report by Women's Centre Sri Lanka in collaboration with United Nations Development Project (UNDP) surveyed 200 ethnically diverse women workers in 5 FTZs, of which the Katunayake, Biyagam and Koggala were Sinhala majority zones. At the same time, Kilinochchi and Vavuniya were included to bring in the Tamil workers. The survey was done in two parts to include the first and the second wave of the Pandemic, mainly because the workers were impacted differently during the two waves. The study found that, like every other place, FTZs during the first wave were shut down, and management decided to send workers back home as the only means to comply with the lockdown, however, the shortage of time and resources and better planning led to over 2,000 workers being stranded in boarding houses between March 2020 and May 2020. However, during the second wave, the conditions in the FTZs were complicated. A large number of workers lived and worked in close physical and social contact, sharing space in the factories, hostels, and boarding houses, posing a grave threat to infection control within these zones. The lockdown impacted factories, and though most of

³⁵ Herath, p. 7.

³⁶ Shihar Anees, "Garment Workers on Front Line of Sri Lanka Coronavirus Outbreak, *Reuters*, November 4, 2020. URL: <https://news.trust.org/item/20201104000609-ve3w9/> [Accessed on August 01, 2024].

³⁷ Pavithra Wijethunge, *Overworked and Underpaid, Sri Lanka's Garment Workers Left Hanging by a Thread*, (Colombo: Solidarity Centre, 2021), pp. 9-12.

the workers were at home during the first wave, before the second wave, a highly skilled labour force was asked back first; however, the majority of the workforce was women, so they were disproportionately impacted. Between the shutdown of the first wave and the production surge of the second wave, many workers found themselves jobless, seeking alternative employment, or working with reduced pay. By the second wave, when production picked up but the workforce remained short, workers lost their bargaining power and were forced to work long hours in poor working conditions, even when FTZs became COVID-19 clusters. They also had to face workplace verbal harassment, and even their meal provisions were cancelled.³⁸

Throughout the various reports published during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the reports maintained the reluctance of the participating workers (men and women both) to talk openly of exploitation based on gender, ethnicity or working conditions. They expected to face hostility for their lived realities within the FTZs and had little to no trust in labour tribunals for justice, given their past experiences. The lack of industry representatives was a significant obstacle in filing any legal case, as their absence at the labour tribunals would lead to cases being postponed.

These exploitative conditions of the workers in the FTZs led to civil society organisations and unions working with labourers to question the Labour Ministry, the State Minister of Primary Healthcare, the Ministry of Health, the Commissioner General of Labour, and the Board of Investment. However, the lack of response led to them making an appeal to the international community, asking for an intervention and holding the Sri Lankan government and factory management accountable for the exploitation faced by the workers throughout the Pandemic, to protect the workers and to treat them as only as essential workers but also as frontline workers considering the proximity risk of their accommodations and workplaces.³⁹

However, little progress was made in protecting the workers during the Pandemic. The pressure of sustaining through it resulted in the worst economic crisis Sri Lanka had ever seen.⁴⁰ The constant destruction of structures meant to protect workers and especially women workers have slowly been erased away leaving the Sri Lankan garment sector to deal with the harsh reality, even as the big companies they work for and the big brands they make products for, continue to earn unfathomable amount of money. In the aftermath of the Pandemic, many women workers had to take up new jobs or multiple jobs to keep up. A trade unionist from the Katunayake FTZ reported that in 2022, there had been a 20 to 30 per cent increase in workers turning to sex work to keep themselves and their families fed.⁴¹

Conclusion:

The Sri Lankan Garment Industry was thrown for a loop right after the Pandemic, as the country faced an unprecedented level of economic crisis, along with Bangladesh stepping up to take a significant share of the

³⁸ Herath, "The Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Women Garment Workers in Sri Lanka's Free Trade Zones (FTZs)", pp. 12-21.

³⁹ Sri Lanka Brief, "Appeal to the International Community to Protect the FTZ Workers."

⁴⁰ Khana Linh, "Sri Lankan Apparel Exporters Under Threat Amid Economic Crisis", *Business of Fashion*, July 18, 2022, URL: <https://www.businessoffashion.com/news/global-markets/sri-lankan-apparel-exports-under-threat-amid-economic-crisis/> [Accessed on August 01, 2024].

⁴¹ Bose, "Sri Lanka's Crisis Broke the Women who Help with Country's Export."

garment industry in the country. However, the impacts of a phenomenon like the COVID-19 pandemic and the social and economic crisis that followed it cannot be read in isolation. We need to look at the global context within which the Sri Lankan garment industry functions.

The Pandemic has not triggered new issues; it has just exposed how urgent it is to safeguard the vulnerable workers across sectors and how significant government and industry accountability is towards putting people-centric policies forward.

The conditions of the workers, women constitute a large part of which, in Sri Lanka, have been degrading for a long time, even before the Pandemic. The constant union busting, Big Brands' incessant demands for more production in less time, the burden of ethical garment production leading to more daily hires and subcontract workers, the deteriorating working conditions for women workers, unfair wages, and physical and mental distress have caused a lot of burden for the workers in the FTZs in Sri Lanka.

The Sri Lanka garment industry needs to go back to its worker-centric roots. To form unions and laws that protect workers, make working in factories safe and dignified for women, and provide them with opportunities to build solidarity and a quality of life beyond the capacity to earn a wage. The factories need to assess their understanding of the women workforce and see them as capable individuals employed in the factory based on their skills and potential rather than on the behest of their fathers and brothers with the promise of protection of their honour.

The state also needs to look at policy changes within the garment industry sector by creating effective bodies that ensure the rights of the employees and fair treatment, by implementing improved and effective welfare schemes and having a national setup to overlook all of it, by establishing physically and mentally healthy workplace environment for all workers and addressing discriminatory practices within the FTZs, and by embedding human rights due diligence practices into business operations.