

# Forced Labour in Tamil Nadu's textile and garment industry:

An investigation into the working conditions of young women making clothes for the UK high street



Briefing by Homeworkers Worldwide  
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Homeworkers Worldwide is a UK-based NGO which exists to support homeworkers and other informal women workers around the world. We support organising efforts so women workers can have a voice and push for improvements in their working conditions. We also conduct research, campaign and work to ensure companies are held accountable for the labour conditions in their supply chains.

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Cover photograph: Thousands of young women like these work in the textile and garment industry in Tamil Nadu, but many are subject to exploitation and forced labour.

## INTRODUCTION

This briefing is based on research into one garment manufacturing company in Tamil Nadu, South India. However, the poor conditions highlighted in this report are endemic in the industry. Low wages and long hours are common in garment manufacture. The demand from multinationals for cheap clothes, produced quickly to meet the fast fashion trends, places great pressure on manufacturers and workers pay the price. In the Tamil Nadu industry in particular, very young women are being deprived of their freedom, their health and their most fundamental rights as workers. The garment industry in India needs to face these problems and improve conditions, but ultimately the multinational retailers need to accept responsibility for creating the conditions which drive this exploitation.

## BACKGROUND

### ***A route out of poverty?***

The Southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu has been developing and industrialising rapidly in recent years. A major source of this economic growth has been the garment and textile industry, supplying both the national and export market. Around 700,000 workers are employed in the industry, many of these travelling from poorer rural areas where there are few alternative sources of work and agriculture is in decline. For the first time many young women are leaving their villages, drawn to manufacturing hubs such as Coimbatore and Tirupur, where they hope for the chance to earn a decent living to support themselves and their families.



*Many young women travel to textile and garment factories from rural villages likes this one.*

However, too often the reality for these young women is very far from decent work. Working in the mills and factories, wages are low, working hours are extremely long, work is often damaging to their health, verbal and physical abuse are common and there are also reports of sexual harassment. The young women who have travelled from rural areas to work generally live close to the factory in company controlled hostels, where they complain of poor accommodation, bad food and inadequate bathroom facilities. Young women are believed to make up around 200,000 of the workforce. Many of these women are under 18, with some starting work as young as 14 years old.

### ***Sumangali schemes and bonded labour***

One of the most controversial aspects of employment in these factories and mills is the so-called 'Sumangali' schemes. Under these schemes women commit to working for the company for a fixed period of years in return for a lump sum, often used to pay 'wedding expenses' or dowry. These schemes are attractive to poor young women, and their parents, offering substantial sums they would be unable to save themselves. However, they are also a form of bonded labour, tying young women to exploitative employers. There has been a long campaign over the past 10 years to eradicate this form of bonded labour, and it has been outlawed by the Tamil Nadu state government. Yet recent research for SOMO (Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations) reveals that the sumangali schemes persist.<sup>1</sup>

### ***Company accommodation and risks of forced labour***

*'They don't pay the full amount for overtime. Overtime is compulsory. They would check who didn't go for overtime and the supervisors would shout at them.'*

Even where women are not working under sumangali schemes, many of those living in company accommodation are subject to forced labour. Their lives are strictly controlled by the company, so they are unable to refuse additional shifts, sometimes working late into the night, sometimes woken from their beds to work extra shifts. Other workers, known as 'day workers' do not live in the hostels. Whilst their working conditions and pay may be poor they are not as vulnerable to forced labour as the women who live in the hostels, and they also have more opportunity to move on to another employer if they are unhappy with their treatment.

Working conditions are a concern across this cost-conscious industry, where there is intense competition not just locally but from countries such as Bangladesh and Vietnam. There are other groups of workers in this industry who are also vulnerable to exploitation, and frequently denied their rights. These include homeworkers, migrant workers and contract labour. Any occasion where a worker is denied their rights is a cause for concern, but we are currently focussing on the young women in the mills and factories because forced labour – a form of modern slavery – is an abuse of basic human rights as well as labour rights, and because the workers in question are so young and vulnerable.

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1 'Flawed Fabrics', ICN & SOMO, 2014

## RESEARCH

### ***Field work***

We have been working on the problem of forced labour in Tamil Nadu since 2011. From 2011 to 2014 we gathered field notes and discussed working conditions in the textile and garment industry with women workers. In the early part of our work, we talked to many young women, in meetings and on field visits to villages, about their work in textile mills and garment factories. In the course of this work, we had discussions with 27 women in some detail about their work at one particular garment factory that frequently recruited workers in this district. In order to confirm the information we were given, in 2013 and 2014 we interviewed a further 24 women in detail about their employment in this company, making a total of 51.



*Young women who have worked in garment factories take part in field research to discuss and record their working conditions.*

### ***Interviews***

Researchers interviewed 24 former workers of a large clothing manufacturer during 2013 and 2014. This manufacturer produces clothing for a large number of international companies including major high street retailers here in the UK. 20 of the 24 workers lived in company hostels, and four were day workers living locally. Most of the women interviewed were working in jobs deemed unskilled, such as packing, folding, checking. They often have to work late to complete work done by machinists during the day. The workers were interviewed after they had left the company because it is simply impossible to access workers whilst they are living and working on-site, due to the strict controls

placed on the women in company hostels.

### **Focus**

This company was selected as the focus of our research because it is a major employer of young women in the area where we were working. It was not selected because we believe it to have particularly bad employment practices, in fact the working conditions are in some ways better than usual for the industry. Nonetheless, the practices described by the women we spoke to amount to forced labour as defined by the International Labour Organisation (see appendix).

## FINDINGS

### **Forced labour**

*"We don't want to go back there because it is very long hours. We have to work from 8 in the morning till 10 at night. 14 hours in total. Sometimes we even work 24 hours at a time."*

The women reported working excessive hours and felt unable to refuse the company's demands. Most of the women reported working twelve hours a day – one and a half eight hour shifts. Some reported additional overtime on top of this. All the women we spoke to said they had to work some Sundays (making a seven day week). A third said they had to work a Saturday night shift (on top of a Saturday day shift) in order to have Sunday off. 20 out of the 24 women said they had been forced to work either overtime or night shifts. Leave to visit families is frequently denied and paid holidays not granted.

*'I worked there but didn't like it. They are very strict. When we live in the hostel we are not given leave. When parents come to see us in the mornings, they have to wait to see us in the evening. The management doesn't tell the girls that the parents are there. For the first six months, we are not allowed leave. After that, we can have one day for every six months. I left and am now working in another factory.'*

There are a number of ways in which the women are made vulnerable and therefore unable to refuse demands that they work excessive hours. Living in company accommodation they have no freedom of movement, due to the restrictions placed on them by the company, and freedom of association is clearly impossible. Trade unions and NGOs cannot speak to the women as they cannot gain access to them when they are constantly under the control of company. Of the 20 women living in the hostels, 16 said they were not allowed out in the evenings, and 13 said they were not allowed out to go to the shop. All but one of the women said there was no trade union at work, one who thought there might be said it was not for women. Fourteen of the women thought there was a workers committee, but none had felt able to raise issues around work such as hours, overtime, wages etc. There is no effective grievance mechanism. Without independent support and without organising, it is virtually impossible for these young women to challenge their working conditions.

*'I never made a complaint about any of these issues out of fear. There was nowhere to complain to and the supervisors would abuse you. In the hostel there was a hostel madam. But her main role was to sort out any fights between the girls.'*

Their age, class and caste also makes them vulnerable. Many of the workers are from

very poor rural backgrounds, are under 18 years old and from the dalit community. This makes it particularly difficult for them to challenge older male supervisors, and to refuse excessive work. Most supervisors are men and workers are young women. Many report verbal abuse, forms of sexual harassment and/ or physical abuse. 19 of the 24 women reported verbal abuse by supervisors.

*'At this company, supervisors were disrespectful of girls. They were sweet to some girls so that they would oblige them. If girls did not oblige them, they got the hard work. Others got concessions. During the night shifts, sometimes the supervisors would take the girls away.'*



*Thousands of young women like these work in the textile and garment industry in Tamil Nadu, but many are subject to exploitation and forced labour.*

### ***Additional concerns***

Whilst forced labour is the focus of this report, other labour rights abuses and problems were also reported, and give cause for serious concern.

- **Wages** – Payment of wages is not transparent and workers do not understand the calculations. If the number of hours worked is taken into account, workers are not being paid at the level of minimum wages. Women were very unclear what payments they received for overtime. *"We do about 50 hours overtime in a month and some overtime is not paid at all. There is no-one to complain to."*
- **Health** – Of the 24 workers interviewed, 19 reported that they had been ill or had

an accident as a result of their work. The types of illnesses reported included headache, eye strain, and various pains (leg, stomach, throat). Accidents described included fingers pierced by needles, one worker reported her hair caught in the machine and burnt and another reported that her friend's fingers were burnt. Many of the women attributed their illnesses to having to work nights.

- *Poor living conditions* - There are many complains about the conditions in the hostels. Two had suffered physical abuse by the hostel warden, and nine had suffered verbal abuse. When asked to make general comments about their work and accommodation, twelve women complained of bad food with two saying there was not enough food.
- *Child Labour* - It is common for young women between 14 to 18 years to work in this industry. In our sample half had begun work under 18 years of age. It was unclear whether there were girls under 14 working at this company, some of the women we spoke to thought there were, others thought not. However, even if all workers are over 14, adolescent workers are only supposed to work limited hours, and not in hazardous occupations. The working hours detailed above are far beyond those limits, and the health problems reported indicate that this was, in fact, hazardous work.
- *Auditing* - *'Sometimes foreign auditors come to the factory. The workers are treated well for one day and get good food. The auditors don't talk to the workers. They are there only 5 to 10 minutes.'* When responding to concerns raised about rights abuses in this company in the past, retailers have stated that audits of the company contradict the findings of campaigners. It appears that audits are simply failing to pick up on these issues, or perhaps they are being concealed from the auditors. Some of the women we spoke to were aware of auditors visiting the factory, four said that girls under 18 were hidden in hostels during audits.



*Thousands of young women like these work in the textile and garment industry in Tamil Nadu, but many are subject to exploitation and forced labour.*

These findings are shocking, but they are not surprising to anyone who has been looking at the Tamil Nadu textile and garment industry over the last decade. The appalling truth is that these findings simply echo the many reports on forced labour, bonded labour and other rights abuses that have been published in recent years.<sup>2</sup> Retailers and manufacturers have had plenty of time to make progress on these issues, but young women workers continue to be denied their most basic rights.

#### WHAT IS NEEDED:

- Acknowledging the problem – companies need to recognise the reality of these conditions (*response is often denial, particularly of the more serious issues*)
- Alternatives to audits - audits at this manufacturer have failed to identify many of these problems
- Commitment to abolish forced labour within clear time frame (*1 year*)
- Commitment to freedom of association (*workers rights training, and ensure the women workers can access independent NGOs and/or trade unions*)
- Functioning grievance mechanism for workplace violations
- System for safe and hygienic accommodation for workers
- A sense of **urgency** – this problem has been known about, and documented for some time. We need urgent action to address these fundamental rights abuses.

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<sup>2</sup> See list of resources in end notes.

## ENDNOTES:

### **Sources of evidence:**

Evidence of the above conditions has been collected from young women who have been employed at the company in question. 51 women were interviewed between 2011-2014, 27 women participated in group discussions between 2011 and 2013, and this was followed by individual interviews with 24 women in 2013 and 2014.

All the workers interviewed had experience of employment in one of two units belonging to the company (which owns multiple sites), with the majority housed in hostel accommodation.

### **Other relevant reports:**

*'Flawed Fabrics: The abuse of girls and women workers in the South Indian textile industry,'* ICN & SOMO, 2014.

*'Behind the Showroom, the hidden reality of India's garment workers,'* FIDH, 2014

*'Slavery on the High Street,'* Anti-Slavery International Report (2012)

*'Bonded (Child) Labour in the India Garment Industry'* ICN & SOMO (2012)

*'Maid in India'* ICN & SOMO (2012)

*'Understanding the Characteristics of the Sumangali Scheme in Tamil Nadu textile and garment industry and supply chain linkages,'* Fair Labour Association and Solidaridad, May 2012.

*'Captured by Cotton'* ICN & SOMO (2011)

*'Women Workers in a Cage,'* Tirupur People's Forum (2008)

## APPENDIX

The ILO has listed 11 indicators for determining whether forced labour exists – the greater the number of indicators present in a workplace, the more likely it is to constitute forced labour. The garment workers we spoke to described conditions that fulfilled 7 of these 11 criteria.

Indicators of forced labour	
Abuse of vulnerability	Many of the workers are from very poor, rural backgrounds, are under 18 years old and from the dalit community.
Deception	Working conditions are not as advertised in recruitment materials.
Restriction of movement	Those living in hostels do not have freedom of movement.
Physical and sexual violence	Some reports of physical abuse.
Isolation	Workers have little contact with family and friends and no freedom of movement or association.
Intimidation and threats	Many report verbal abuse, forms of sexual harassment and/ or physical abuse. 19 of the 24 women reported verbal abuse by supervisors.
Retention of identity documents	Not reported.
Withholding of wages	Not reported – but workers were very unclear what wages they were due.
Debt bondage	Not reported.
Abusive living and working conditions	Many complain about the conditions in the hostels.
Excessive overtime	Most of the women reported working twelve hours a day. Some reported additional overtime on top of this. All the women we spoke to said they had to work some Sundays (making a seven day week).