

## **Forced labour in the Tamil Nadu garment industry Briefing note**

***This briefing note will explore what constitutes ‘forced labour’ and how it manifests itself in the textile mills and garment factories of Tamil Nadu.***

Many workers in the Tamil Nadu textile and garment industries face labour rights abuses. Poor working conditions can be a problem for men and women workers, migrant workers, contract workers, homeworkers and others. However, the young women and girls who live and work on-site at the mills and garment factories are particularly vulnerable to forced labour. It is estimated that there are 200,000 of such young women workers in the sector.

When young women and girls live on-site at mills and factories their lives are under the direct control of their employer and they are therefore unable to refuse additional shifts and overtime beyond their regular hours. They do not have access to trade unions, NGOs or others who they could raise concerns with. As a consequence many young women and girls are forced to work 12 hour days, 6 days a week and sometimes more than this. Some women are even woken from their beds to do additional night shifts. Women who have worked in the factories commonly report they have no choice but to work these excessive hours.

### **ILO Indicators of forced labour**

Given the many different forms of forced labour that exist in the world, the ILO has established 11 indicators of forced labour, out of which 10 (\*) are present in the conditions of sumangali and camp labour workers:

- Abuse of vulnerability\*
- Deception\*
- Restriction of movement\*
- Isolation\*
- Physical and sexual violence\*
- Intimidation and threats\*
- Retention of identity documents
- Withholding of wages\*
- Debt bondage\*
- Abusive living and working conditions\*
- Excessive overtime\*

Apart from the retention of identity documents, it has been documented that all these indicators exist in textile and garment sector in Tamil Nadu. We found this in our own work in Pudukkottai from 2011 to 2013. There have also been well-documented reports by SOMO, Tirupur People's Forum and Anti-Slavery International among others.

In discussions with some young women workers in 2011, they frequently said that their employment was 'like a prison'. It seems that since then, little has changed and many of them are still working in unfree and abusive conditions. This needs tackling with some urgency and determination so that garment and textile employment can be a positive experience for young women with few other alternatives.

### **Retailers should insist on freedom of movement and association**

HWW believes that efforts to improve labour rights in the sector should focus on young women working under these conditions of forced labour. The key demand on companies should be that young women workers living in hostels should have their freedom, to move around, make contact with others including NGOs and trade unions, and that trade unions and labour NGOs should be able to make contact with women at the workplace or in the hostels.

Conditions of forced and bonded labour will be found most commonly in the spinning mills. However, young women are also being recruited to work in the garment sector living in hostels with no freedom. It appears that young rural women are working in less skilled areas of work where conditions are worst, whereas experienced machinists, for example, work under better conditions, some of them not in the hostels but living locally and doing daily work.

A certain amount of preparation work can be done in the communities in Tamil Nadu which are recruiting areas and remediation work can be done there when women return to their villages. This is an area where HWW has done previous work, and is continuing to pursue. But it is essential that these issues are also tackled at the workplace where women are currently employed as this is the most effective way to bring about change.

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