



Labouring for the Label

Gillian Southey outlines the conditions of workers in the garment manufacturing industry in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka and the gains that activism against injustice can make.

Sivadharshini sits in front of a sewing machine. Her head is bent. Her hands move quickly as she feeds fabric through the machine. There is no time to look up as she sews seam after seam. Her job — to sew the side seam on a shirt, hundreds of shirts in a brutal industry demanding many seams for little pay. It is a job she does for ten hours a day, six days a week with a break for lunch and a race to the toilet. Sometimes the hours are longer if there is a big export order to fill or there have been problems on the line — and she is not usually paid overtime for her extra labour. In a good month in the factory in south Sri Lanka, she earns \$186NZ, enough to cover expenses and send a little back to her family in Sri Lanka's war-damaged north.

Sivadharshini is one of millions of factory workers making the clothes we wear and toss when they are worn or out of date. While other household expenses have become more expensive, clothes cost a lot less than they did ten years ago. But cheap clothes and new fashion come at a price. This is a cost that we, living in a country with only a small sewing industry remaining and where most clothes say: "Made in China", do not

have to pay. Wherever clothes are manufactured, some things remain the same: workers are paid very low wages for working long days, factory conditions are often unsafe and women face regular harassment and violence. The workers are captive to their bosses, are compelled to do boring, repetitive tasks and have to tolerate whatever comes their way.

Deathtraps

The collapse of Bangladesh's Rana Plaza factory building in April 2013 pushed clothing production into the international spotlight. In the worst accident to hit the industry 1,134 people were killed, two thousand injured and many children orphaned. Until the five workshops on eight storeys crumbled, more than 3,000 people made millions of items which were sold under 29 different global brands, including The Gap and Bonmarché. In Bangladesh 4 million people, 85 per cent of whom are women, make clothes. Their output is second only to China's.

It was a wake-up call for international brands relying on contractors to deliver garments at a minimal cost. The collapse gave momentum to local workers'

campaigns demanding safe conditions and decent pay. The National Garment Workers Federation organised practical support for families affected and intensified its campaign for fair pay and decent working conditions in Bangladesh's factories. Linking with trade unions and the Clean Clothes campaign, they pressed international brands to pay compensation through a fund set up by the International Labour Organisation and for local factories to join the Fire and Building Safety Accord, allowing for independent assessment of a building's safety.

A new Fashion for Ethical Clothing

Concern about where clothing was made hit the fashion market. April 24 has become Fashion Revolution Day and is supported by companies with better employment practices. Wearing clothes inside out to display compliant labels and sending messages to manufacturers asking: "Who made my clothes?" raise awareness of some of the issues.

Back in Sri Lanka, Anton Marcus, a patron of the Women's Centre and joint secretary of the Free Trade Zones and General Service Employees Union, said the ethical clothing market is also having an impact but largely as a

public relations exercise. Brands can manufacture under an ethical label in one country and at the same time manufacture more cheaply in another country. He said the only way to change the global clothing industry is for consumers and trade unions to work together to demand fair pay and safe conditions. Clothing brands can hire people to inspect a factory. On the day of the inspectors' visit everything in the factory can be in order but the day after is an altogether different story. The workers in the factories know what is happening and this information can be shared across the union movement to get an accurate picture of the industry.

Working for Women Workers

In the 1980s the Sri Lankan government established free trade zones, or factory parks, to encourage foreign investment. The factories employed young women from the country's poorest rural communities on low rates of pay and without access to trade unions. In 1992 the government declared the whole country a free trade zone, granting more concessions to factory owners. Income from the garment sector increased by 18.5 per cent each year and accounts for about 30 per cent of the country's export earnings.

The Women's Centre has become a focal point for women employed in Sri Lanka's free trade zones. Set up in Ja-Ela in 1982 to protect the rights of women and women workers, the Women's Centre has expanded its presence to four other sites. Decades later they can point to some real successes for women workers. They have won better conditions and higher wages in some factories. At the different Centres they offer opportunities for workers to meet, use the library and computers, access healthcare and information on reproduction, find legal support and childcare, campaign for women's rights, participate in the Street Drama Troupe and other cultural activities. They publish a newspaper for workers, *Shramika*.

The exploitation does not end when the workday is done. In the boarding houses where most women

lived dormitory-style, sharing tiny outside kitchens and a single water tap, the Centre supported young women to demand improvements and stop unwanted sexual advances. When the 1994 South Asia tsunami destroyed homes on the coast, they raised funds to build some of the best post-tsunami houses available for poor communities. During the country's bitter civil war, they organised trips from the factories to meet Tamils in the north and east. When the war ended with the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in 2009, they visited Tamils interned in government camps and then helped them establish livelihoods when they were allowed to return home.



Photo from Christian World Service.

For the young Sivadharshini there were no employment opportunities in the north so in 2013 she came south to Wathupitiwala, determined to help her family left impoverished after the war. At the Eviden Timex factory she found a job sewing high-end fashion. Unable to speak the Sinhala language she had no choice but to agree to the demands of her manager. When she returned to the boarding house, she locked herself in her room. However things changed when she met Renu, a Women's Centre activist.

Joining the Women's Centre, Sivadharshini began to learn Sinhala and like other new arrivals participated in the Centre's training programmes. With her new

knowledge and support she has now found the confidence to speak out. Now aged 20 years Sivadharshini is seen as a leader by the other Tamil women workers and the factory managers. She takes the women's issues to the management and explains to her co-workers new targets and problems from the managers.

Factory owners discriminate against Tamil women, paying lower wages and poorer conditions than to Sinhala women. Factory managers employ Tamil women on short-term contracts, pay them less and make them work harder. Where Sinhala workers are sometimes given food, the Tamils have to provide their own

and are subject to much harsher abuse and racial threats. Most Tamil women are made to work even on Sundays and have little time for themselves. Landlords also charge them higher rents. The Women's Centre has been quick to see what is happening and is retracing its campaign work, this time with Tamil workers.

The price of new, ethically "clean" clothes is vigilance. ■



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