

Garment Workers On The Frontline Of The Pandemic: Outbreak In Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka's worst Covid-19 outbreak has originated from a Brandix garment factory: 1,036 employees and 361 of their close contacts have tested positive - over a quarter of the country's total cases. Speaking out against the exploitation and conditions that led to the outbreak, hundreds of workers from the factory have exposed how they were initially told to keep working to meet targets when they reported the onset of symptoms.

Now, deeply concerning reports are surfacing of arbitrary arrest and detention of workers by the military, and of cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment in quarantine centres, in a government attempt to control the spread of the disease.

[News broke](#) on 7 October that a cluster of confirmed Covid-19 cases had originated from a Brandix-owned factory in Minuwangoda, Gampaha. Brandix (or Brandix Apparel Limited), headquartered in Sri Lanka, is one of South Asia's biggest clothing manufacturers, employing 53,000 workers across Sri Lanka, India, and Bangladesh. It is one of Sri Lanka's biggest clothing exporters, and produces clothing for many UK high street brands. By 13 October, 1,036 workers and 361 of their close contacts had tested positive for the coronavirus, making it the largest outbreak yet on the island and raising the country's total Covid-19 cases to over 4,844.

Unions and workers' organisations - including War on Want's partners in Sri Lanka, Women's Center and Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union (FTZ&GSEU) - have demanded to know what safety measures Brandix put in place, how effectively government authorities monitored them, at what point the first infections were found, and what action was taken to protect others from the further spread of the disease.

"Initially, about 600 employees were infected with fever but were told to work to cover targets," said a female worker from the factory, who is being treated in hospital. "If this (Covid-19) had been identified in that situation, the disease would not have spread like this."

It has come as no surprise to trade unions, workers' and women's groups representing thousands of garment workers that a large Covid-19 outbreak has happened in a garment factory. For decades these groups have highlighted how the global fashion industry's 'race to the bottom' has resulted in poverty pay, long hours, and unsafe working conditions. Crowded factories with poor ventilation and close working production lines create environments ripe for the spread of infectious diseases.

Many garment workers in Sri Lanka migrate from rural areas, living in poor quality, overcrowded boarding houses close to factories - the only housing option their low wages afford them. Many share rooms and sanitation facilities, making social distancing impossible.

"It is sad to hear about the situation of the female garment workers in Sri Lanka in the current context, especially considering their major contribution to the country's income," said Padmini Weerasuriya in a statement from Women's Centre, a Sri Lankan female workers' association. "We

have continuously highlighted the pathetic working conditions of workers, especially in the apparel industry, for nearly four decades.”

In an attempt to control the spread of Covid-19, the military was called in on 11 October to round-up workers, often late at night or early in the morning, to forcibly take them to makeshift quarantine centres. Law and Society Trust report that 53 workers from Avariwatte were woken up and herded into a bus and taken to a centre in Kalutara.

[“The military came in the middle of the night](#) and gave us only ten minutes to pack our essentials and get onto the bus,” said a worker from Kalutara. “The military told us not to delay them, because they had been having sleepless nights and were very tired. We had no time to check. I had just received my Negative PCR test 2 days ago. I wasn’t even given the chance to tell them this. They didn’t allow anyone to speak! They just herded us into buses and took us away.”

Workers have reported that makeshift quarantine centres are not clean, that toilets are flooded and unsanitary, and that they had not (by 13 October) been seen by any health professionals.

When challenged about the garment industry’s record of protecting workers’ rights, companies and fashion brands are keen to point to the thousands of jobs they have created. However, without ensuring that the essential rights of workers in their supply chains are protected, this is not decent work – it is exploitation.

Anton Marcus, Joint Secretary of FTZ&GSEU, said in a letter to the Chairman of the Presidential Taskforce on Covid-19:

“Decent work is about right to employment, to begin with, and that employers should provide a living wage for the employee and the family. It should ensure workplace safety without discrimination and the right to of employees to organise as trade unions.”

Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa boasted earlier this year that his administration had the virus “under control”, but this outbreak and the rising total number of cases are challenging this assertion.

In an open letter to the Sri Lankan Department of Labour, workers’ organisations have said they fear that “there is a risk of the virus spreading to other factories within the Brandix chain because human resources officers and management level officials travel to other branches on a weekly basis.”

The Covid-19 pandemic has for months laid bare the cruelty of neoliberal capitalism. Far from being a “great leveller”, the virus disproportionately impacts those already bearing the brunt of gross global inequality. Garment workers in the Global South have long been at the bottom of the pile in consumer supply chains, and the pandemic has seen already destitute workers lose billions in legally owed wages. [Clean Clothes Campaign and the Asia Floor Wage Alliance have been documenting how the coronavirus has impacted garment workers’ rights around the world since the start of the pandemic in an invaluable live blog and reports.](#)

However, garment workers continue to fight back. Our partner organisations Women’s Centre, FTZ&GSEU and Dabindhu Collective are among many other workers’ groups that are educating, organising and campaigning for change, often in the face of resistance and repression.

Full statement by Women’s Center

Latest Covid-19 Update in Sri Lanka - 2nd Statement issued by Women’s Centre

As per the information department of Sri Lanka, as at yesterday (11th Oct) a total of another 180 persons from the Minuwangoda cluster have been tested positive for the Covid-19, increasing the total number of cases of the Minuwangoda cluster to 1,307. Among them, 48 have been detected from the quarantine centers while remaining 12 patients are close contacts of the Minuwangoda apparel factory workers.

Recently a 38-year-old female employee of 'NEXT' apparel factory in Katunayake also has been tested positive for COVID-19. The patient is a mother of two children from Rajapakshapura, Seeduwa. It has been not yet revealed how she had affected the virus and she had been admitted to the Horana Hospital. At the moment PCR tests are ongoing on other employees at the factory who had maintained close contacts with the patient. Also, the pathetic situation is most of the garment workers were asked to vacate the boarding house by the owners.

Today, Women's Center interviewed a Women worker (Over the phone) in her early 20's who is working for Minuwangoda Brandix apparel factory for past one and half years and who have been tested positive for Covid-19.

"I am currently receiving treatment for Corona Virus at the Kuburugamuwa Hospital in Matara. About 200 people who used to work for our company here are receiving treatment for Corona Virus. Initially, about 600 employees were infected with fever but were told to work to cover the targets. If this had been identified in that situation, the disease would not have spread like this. When we found out, we were told to come to the factory and do the PCR test. There I was diagnosed with the Covid-19. My family was informed to self-quarantine and the food items they needed were provided from the factory. My Mother, Father and Sister's PCR tests are scheduled for tomorrow. We were sewing clothes from the Victoria's Secret Brand when we found out. There is a rumor that clothes were brought from India. I do not know the truth or falsehood."

Also, Women's Center interviewed a small factory owner who is getting subcontracts from Brandix Minuwangoda. She expressed her feelings as below.

"I'm Gayana Rupasinghe, I'm 40 years old. I am the owner of a subcontract company called 'XXX Lanka.' There are twenty women workers who are working with me. I'm Getting subcontracts from Minuwangoda Brandix Garment factory. If there's any urgent required orders to be covered they are requesting my employees to cover the targets. Accordingly, two weeks ago I sent ten of my employees to Brandix in Minuwangoda and I went to Brandix last week to pay them salaries. According to my symptoms I was referred for a PCR test and it was confirmed that I am a positive person for Covid-19. Five out of my ten employees were tested positive. I was taken to a hall in Kamburupitiya, Matara. It is an old hospital which was repainted and there are nearly 126 people. All the others are sisters who are working for Minuwangoda Brandix apparel factory. I am on medication and I had an operation recently. I have cholesterol. I did not get the medicine from any pharmacy. Finally, I got the medicine through a doctor who has a close relation to my family. The company has not given anything so far. When we shouted, they just send us a pair sandals, a packet of biscuits and five under panties."

It is sad to hear about the pathetic situation of the female garment workers in Sri Lanka in the current context specially considering their major contribution to the country's foreign income. We have been continuously highlighted the pathetic working conditions of workers, especially in the apparel industry for nearly 04 decades and worked towards their betterment.

As a Women's Organization which is serving for FTZ & Garment factory women workers our message is the government should immediately intervene and control the spread of this corona virus to the society. Job security must be protected. Government authorities, factory owners, brands and

buyers must work to protect the dignity of all working women and to protect their jobs.

Padmini Weerasuriya
Executive Director
Women's Center

**Full open letter signed by Dabindhu Collective, Stand Up Movement Lanka and more
To Government authorities, Labor department, Board of Investment and Brands**

In Sri Lanka Corona a global pandemic was possible to control to some extent with the commitment of all so far. Garment factories, which were the main source of foreign exchange earnings for the country, were immediately opened up as a solution to the economic downfall faced by the country. Once again the virus has resurfaced dangerously from the Minuwangoda Brandix factory leaving authorities unable to identify the source of the virus. With this situation, the thousands of workers in the area and their families are feeling fear and anxiety which needs to be addressed sensitively.

Because the aforesaid company is a network of companies that employees a relatively large workforce, the employees allege that although higher officials have been informed about the relevant risk, they have not taken any action. It is not clear what health care measures that the Brandix factory had taken to protect their workers and how many times the factory was inspected by a health inspector of the area. There is a risk of the virus spreading to other factories within the Brandix chain because human resources officers and management level officials travel to other branches on a weekly basis.

We have learned that the factory employs manpower workers obtained from manpower agencies and these manpower workers have been subsequently sent to work in Minuwangoda, Katunayake, Seeduwa and Welisara factories. Manpower workers further say that there is no confirmation that they have worked in those factories and that the administrators in the factories located in Katunayake are acting without any responsibility to the employees. It is reported that the garment workers who went to the Minuwangoda area on Sunday (the market) were also told to leave their respective factory immediately.

The above incidents show that employers act without any responsibility towards their employees.

Therefore, we urge all parties to work with transparency for the safety of the nearly 50,000 employees working in the Katunayake area.

Therefore, our demands are,

- All factories should be systematically inspected by the Government and the Department of Labor to ensure that the factories in the export sector comply with the safety guidelines prescribed by the Government.
- As there is a risk of the virus spreading to all export sector workers, we request to the Ministry of Health to test all employees in the Free Trade Zones now and from then on to set up a randomized testing program to detect and prevent infection in advance.
- The government and employers needs to take steps to provide proper treatment to all employees detected with COVID-19.
- Take action to ensure that salaries are paid to all employees without any deductions.
- Ensure that workers aren't sent back to their villages as done during the last lockdown and quarantine them within the area.
- Employers or the government must ensure that the food and medical needs of workers in boarding's are met if a long-term curfew is to be declared.

- There are thousands of Tamil speaking workers employees in this sector hence, ensure that all communications are sent out in Tamil and services are accessible in Tamil.
- An extensive investigation into the cause and spread of the virus on such a scale should be carried out at the Brandix factory and this investigation team should also consist of female staff.
- Brandix should be transparent about the following:
 - Explain and reveal whether there is a risk of the virus spreading from Brandix Minuwangoda to any of the other factories within the Brandix chain.
 - Institutional measures taken for the safety of the employees of the Minuwangoda factory and other affiliated factories.
- The government should conduct a comprehensive investigation into how the virus spreads so widely and the steps taken by export factories to protect the health of their workers.
- Reform the Ministerial Task Force on the Protection of Workers' Rights during the COVID-19 pandemic to include female representation.

Finally we urge actions to be taken to prevent stigmatization of the women workers in the current crisis and the measures taken to address it.

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Letter to the Chairman of the Presidential Taskforce on Covid-19 from FTZ&GSEU

Dear Sir,

Request for Independent Inquiry into present outbreak of Covid-19 at Brandix factory in Minuwangoda

Despite successful control of the pandemic within a few months, we believe you are well aware, the present COVID-19 virus spread that began from the Brandix owned apparel factory in Minuwangoda, has created a very uncertain environment in most parts of the country with many factories in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone also compelled to close down due to “contacts” established with Minuwangoda Brandix factory workers.

There is a growing social stigma on apparel workers, with media coverages overstepping their responsibility in exposing “contacts” as “irresponsible” and as those spreading the virus. This has reached a situation where apparel sector employees, especially those at Brandix Minuwangoda factory had been denied lodging, traveling in buses and even shopping for groceries, as complained by victimised employees in social media. This manner of “social discarding” could extend even to their family members and to their school going children. Therefore, it is necessary to officially divulge the actual source of the Brand ix outbreak, the extent of the present spread and all measures taken for quarantining of positive cases and of “contacts”.

With numerous media reports the “suspicion” on how the Brandix factory at Minuwangoda became the origin of the present wave of COVID-19 spread is also linked to Sri Lankan expatriates or Indian labour brought from Viskhapatnam during the last weeks of September, that Brandix management has cautiously avoided answering.

It is a fact, some big companies that manufacture for exports and those handling mega construction projects have been employing cheap labour from neighbouring countries, especially during the last decade and before. Despite the pandemic, labour from these neighbouring countries continued, though not to the extent before. In such context the “Daily Mirror” in their IO October 2020 issue had an investigative news report titled “PHIs did not supervise Brandix Repatriation flights - PHI Union”.

This news report reveals that the Head of Corporate Communication at Brand ix Apparel Ltd. Ms. Imanthi Perera had confirmed 03 flights chartered by Brandix had got down 341 passengers. Thus, the suspicion there can be an Indian link to the COVID-19 outbreak at the Brandix factory in Minuwangoda keeps growing with no acceptable, forthright and official explanation to date from the Brandix management.

As a responsible trade union that represents export manufacture and apparel sector employees, also as a long term member in the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) chaired by the Hon. Minister of Labour, and a member of the “Tri-partite Taskforce to Respond to Impact of COVID-19” at the Labour Ministry, we feel disturbed with these allegations going about without any reasonable and acceptable explanation from relevant quarters. It could impact adversely on the whole apparel industry and in turn, its employees too.

It has therefore become necessary to investigate as to how the COVID-19 outbreak at the Brandix factory Minuwangoda began and whether allegations of Indian or SL expatriates from Viskhapatnam having close access to the factory and its workers, are true and accurate.

We therefore call upon you to appoint a special investigation committee with expertise and knowledge on apparel and export manufacture sector and also community health, to investigate the “outbreak and spread of COVID-19 virus at Brand ix factory, Minuwangoda and whether that had any Indian connection through SL expatriates, through Indian labour or through raw material imported from India”.

We sincerely hope you would immediately concede to this request for a special investigation, given the importance of the apparel industry and export manufacture in post COVID-19 economic

recovery, that Sri Lanka seriously needs at this moment.

Thank you

Yours sincerely

Anton Marcus
Joint Secretary
Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union

Collective

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P.S.

War on Want

<https://waronwant.org/media/garment-workers-front-line-pandemic-sri-lanka-outbreak>