

Sri Lanka: No vaccine yet for apparel workers

Wednesday 7 April 2021, by [RATHNAYAKE Dinitha](#) (Date first published: 12 March 2021).

Compensation not paid to the laid off

Despite their immense contribution to the national economy and the second wave of the Covid-19 outbreak in Sri Lanka originating from apparel factories, the workers employed in these factories in the apparel industry are yet to receive the Covid-19 vaccine, *The Morning* learnt.

“The Governmental authorities still haven’t added these workers who are on the frontlines of the economy, to the priority list, in terms of groups eligible for vaccination. We urge the Government to do so,” speaking to *The Morning*, Executive Director of the Stand-Up Movement organisation Ashila Dandeniya said.

According to Dandeniya, 886 Covid-19 cases have been reported from 56 factories in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone (FTZ).

“We have 14 FTZs and Katunayake, Biyagama and Koggala are the main ones. In Katunayake, we have 79 factories with 34,000 workers, Biyagama around 24 factories and 15,000 workers, while Koggala has 18 factories and 8,000 workers. Can you imagine the risk that the apparel workers are facing,” she queried.

According to Dandeniya, all workers in FTZs should be vaccinated, as otherwise, the Government might have to suffer the consequences.

She further claimed that factory workers who lost their jobs are yet to receive any compensation from the factories or the Government. As per Dandeniya, about 1,800 workers in the Katunayake FTZ and 975 from the Biyagama FTZ lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 pandemic situation while 11,000 manpower workers in the apparel industry also lost their jobs.

“The apparel industry is the second-largest earner of foreign currency, generating \$ five billion annually. Since March, in many factories, the minimum wage has been around Rs. 14,500 to Rs. 17,000, with no overtime pay,” she further claimed.

The second wave of the Coronavirus also spread across the country from an apparel factory in Minuwangoda.

Most of the factories lack safety measures and basic sanitary facilities and therefore there is an increased possibility of workers getting infected and in turn infecting others, Dandeniya noted.

Meanwhile, speaking to *The Morning*, Chief Epidemiologist, Specialist Dr. Sudath Samaraweera said that the priority list depends on the number of vaccine doses available in the country, adding that while apparel workers could be among the priority groups in the future, at present this was not a reality.

“In the future, we will definitely consider the apparel industry. We know about the outbreaks which

have been reported from the FTZs. First, we need to buy more vaccines from the manufacturing companies. But it all depends on their manufacturing capacity. We will also consider the country situation when we revise the priority list,” he said.

According to Samaraweera, workers had also had to spend large sums of money on Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests due to these outbreaks.

However, Dr. Samaraweera noted that priority has been given to groups who are at high risk of contracting the virus and also the ones who contribute to the economy directly such as those in the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank.

Dinitha Rathnayake

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to *ESSF* newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

The Sunday Morning

<https://www.themorning.lk/no-vaccine-yet-for-apparel-workers/>