

Work and Death in Sri Lanka's Garment Industry BY

Tuesday 13 July 2021, by [BAUTISTA Jahan Nidia](#), [HOSKINS Tansy](#), [JAHAN Dil Afrose](#), [MAYORGA Juan](#) (Date first published: 7 May 2021).

Sri Lanka is home to some of the biggest garment manufacturers in the world, and while clothing exports have risen, so have COVID-19 infections among workers. We talk to people who face the daily choice of disease or impoverishment.

Sitting alone in a room containing two narrow beds and a small table, Priyangika is sick with COVID-19. She fell ill after the virus spread through the garment factory where she works in the vast Katunayake Free Trade Zone outside Colombo, Sri Lanka.

“When I called the owner of the boarding house to say I tested positive for coronavirus, he scolded me, saying that we bring filthy diseases,” said Priyangika, whose name has been changed to protect her anonymity.

Sri Lanka is home to some of the [largest](#) garment manufacturers in the world. Its central bank has reported a [183 percent rise](#) in exports since April 2020 — largely attributed to the apparel sector. But even as wealthy nations in the West begin to open back up thanks to plentiful vaccines and hospital capacities, the island nation is currently experiencing a deadly third wave of COVID-19 and recently reported its [highest](#) single day of fatalities. In a globalized world of both virus transmission and clothing production, Sri Lanka's garment workers are currently caught between production targets and destitution, sickness and increasing authoritarianism.

While Sri Lanka's apparel industry has a hard-earned reputation for being safer than many other countries', garment factories have stayed open during recent lockdowns with the [Public Health Inspectors Union](#) now saying most COVID patients are in the clothing sector. In a statement, [Amnesty International](#) noted apparel production continuing despite limited testing and inadequate quarantine or care facilities for sick factory workers, as well as a lack of vaccine prioritization for those garment workers.

As factories continue to churn out jeans, T-shirts, bras, and sportswear, unions and labor rights campaigners say workers' rights in Sri Lanka have deteriorated. Ashila Dandeniya is a former garment worker who founded the [Stand Up Movement](#) to represent garment workers in Sri Lanka and has spent the pandemic distributing over six thousand emergency food parcels to quarantining workers.

“There were a lot of unfair terminations — maybe someone was five minutes late to work, or they were unable to meet production targets, or they were just terminated because they'd been working in the factory for less than six months,” Dandeniya says.

According to Dandeniya, the belief that extreme measures were needed to get factories “back on track” has in turn normalized draconian behavior from management. Even measures intended to protect workers have led to deeper exploitation. Social distancing, for example, means factories are

reducing the number of workers who clock in each day. “Before it would be fifteen to twenty people doing one operation; now it is five people. Five people to do the work of fifteen to twenty,” Dandeniya says. “No matter how difficult or physically straining it is, if workers say they can’t do it, they are asked to leave.”

Roshani, whose name has also been changed, spent most of the pandemic as a temporary “manpower” worker earning 900 LKR (\$4.50) per day. Her job consisted of sitting on the floor surrounded by machines and snipping loose threads off clothes, then packaging them into bundles so heavy she could barely drag them across the factory floor. Managers set harsh targets and anyone who failed to meet them was not asked back the next day.

Being a temporary worker came with an additional stigma: “Permanent staff think about manpower workers as spreaders of corona, as we work in different factories each day,” Roshani says. “They don’t talk much with us, and they treat us as inferior. When we walk, they give us a wide berth.”

In March 2021, Roshani secured a permanent position at a factory, but found it no less exhausting. Manpower workers were bused to and from factories, but, as a permanent worker, she had to make her own way across the Free Trade Zone.

“Some days I had to leave the house around 5 AM. There are no buses at that time, so I walked. I did overtime until 7 or 8 PM. There was no time for me to use the washroom or drink water.” That month, Roshani earned 23,000 LKR (\$116).

Factory Infections

The link between Sri Lanka’s garment factories and COVID-19 infection rates is a controversial subject. In November 2020, [Reuters reported](#) that a thousand workers at the Brandix factory in Minuwangoda had tested positive for COVID-19. With factories in multiple countries, Brandix is one of the world’s biggest garment manufacturers, making clothes for Gap, Victoria’s Secret, and Marks & Spencer, among others.

Three official reports have investigated the Brandix outbreak, which [scientists](#) have linked to Sri Lanka’s second wave. One report was commissioned by the Sri Lanka’s labour minister, one by the attorney general, and one by Brandix itself, which says it was not responsible for the outbreak and has been unfairly targeted. None of the reports have so far been made public.

In the aftermath of the Brandix outbreak, the Labour Ministry recommended factories set up bipartite COVID-19 safety committees consisting of employers, workers, and trade unions. Yet these committees have still not been setup in the vast majority of Sri Lanka’s garment factories.

“The right to information on health issues is a workers’ right. Employees must have the right to refuse work which is detrimental to their health,” says Anton Marcus, joint secretary of the Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees Union ([FTZ&GSEU](#)). “We explain [to employers] that COVID-19 is not an occupational disease. COVID-19 is a pandemic and therefore the measures to prevent the spreading of the virus should go beyond the factory to include living conditions for employees and transport.”

“Cooking items have been placed in her room and a quarantine sign put on her door.”

The FTZ&GSEU is currently negotiating the creation of a union at Next Manufacturing Ltd, a factory in Sri Lanka owned and run by British clothing firm Next plc, after workers voted to form a branch in January 2021. Next Manufacturing Ltd is one of the factories where there is currently an outbreak of COVID-19. In May, a spokesperson for Next told *Jacobin* that while safety is a top priority, 143

workers had tested positive at the factory. The FTZ&GSEU believes this figure was well over two hundred and set to increase.

British campaign group [War on Want](#) believe factories' reluctance to create COVID-19 bipartite health committees has a simple explanation: "They want to drive production forward as much as possible with minimal disruption or expense to preserve their profit margins," Ruth Ogier at War on Want told *Jacobin*. "This is why proper safety measures and proper monitoring have not been put in place. The result is a rapidly rising number of cases in garment factories and communities."

Back in her tiny room in the boarding house, Priyangika shares a bathroom with five other women. Her salary is too small for her to afford her own room, though her roommate moved out after Priyangika tested positive for Coronavirus. Cooking items have been placed in her room and a quarantine sign put on her door.

Far from the family her salary helps to support, Priyangika is unable to say whether she will be paid for the time she is sick off work. "I don't know whether they will pay me or not. I do not know what they will pay me until I get the salary." She is, however, still expected to pay full rent and electricity costs at the boarding house.

She hopes things will not get as bad as during the second-wave lockdown when she stayed inside for six weeks: "I was mentally broken down," Priyangika says. "I was restricted to the four walls of the boarding house and I couldn't go back to my village." During this time, she also went hungry: "I didn't have food during this time. I ate rice sprinkled with salt."

Throughout the pandemic, Sri Lanka's garment workers have continued to stitch clothes for some of the biggest brands in the world. Sri Lanka's factory owner association, the Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF), [lists](#) H&M, Calvin Klein, Hugo Boss, Levi's, and Uniqlo amongst its clients. A collective of women's rights groups in Sri Lanka, including the Stand Up Movement, are calling for fashion buyers to pay a premium for production during lockdown or restricted periods, and for this premium to be given directly to workers as hazard pay.

But instead, the fashion industry's response to COVID-19 has seen brands cancel billions of dollars of orders, placing a huge strain on manufacturers. JAAF recently published an open letter stating brands were telling factories to airlift clothing orders to make up for delays. "Due to the global inequity in vaccine distribution, you and the countries you reside in are starting to ease restrictions and go back to what life looked like pre COVID-19 while we have been crippled by yet another wave that has seen COVID-19 cases rise by over 130 percent in two months," the statement read.

JAAF told *Jacobin* that they are "working very closely with the government authorities to ensure the safety of employees and the community whilst keeping the industry operating," and that a national rollout of the vaccine is crucial to getting the situation under control. Campaigners want the government to vaccinate all Free Trade Zone workers within two weeks. But there is no sign that garment workers have yet to be prioritized.

Despite this, experts say Sri Lanka's garment factories are safer than those in neighboring countries like Bangladesh and India: "In many ways the sector is ahead of the game — especially with regards to the built space and work conditions within the factory floor," explains Dr Kanchana Ruwanpura at the University of Gothenburg.

But there remains an overarching ethical issue facing Sri Lanka. "There isn't enough global recognition for Sri Lanka that it is also a militarized regime in a sense," says Dr Ruwanpura, whose [forthcoming book](#) tackles the presence of a powerful military. She points out that Sri Lanka's

COVID-19 task force is entirely made up of military officers. Many of these officers have exceptionally brutal records. The head of the national operations center for COVID-19 prevention is army commander Shavendra Silva, the target of a US-imposed [travel ban](#) for war crimes committed during the final stages of the conflict against the Tamil Tigers in 2009, when up to seventy thousand Tamil civilians were killed. And Sri Lanka's current leader, President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, served as defense secretary during the vicious counterinsurgency.

Large sections of the garment workforce are young women who migrated to Free Trade Zones from once-war-torn rural areas. As well as creating a dangerous atmosphere in which dissent over labor rights abuses leads to intimidation, the creation of an army-led COVID response has seen garment workers forcibly moved to quarantine centers.

While she was still working as a temporary manpower worker, Roshani received a phone call with the news that army personnel had taken the inhabitants of her boarding house, including the owner, to a quarantine center 100 km away after one of the boarders tested positive. She spent the next twenty-one days hiding alone in the boarding house, keeping the lights off and fearing that soldiers might return.

"The apparel sector needs to start thinking about what [a militarized regime] means for claims around ethicality," Dr Ruwanpura concludes. "Everybody accepts Myanmar is militarized, but they are not realizing what is happening in Sri Lanka."

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