

Sri Lanka: Garment workers stranded due to negligence of others: COVID-19 Denial Dangerous than the Virus

Tuesday 13 October 2020, by [MOHAN Sulochana Ramiah](#) (Date first published: 10 October 2020).

Sri Lanka saw a sudden surge in COVID-19 cases from September and with that, the plight of the garment workers came into the limelight, once again, with some alarming exposure on how they were treated during these COVID-19 times.

The Government and the management of the concerned garment factory, where the COVID-19 emerged, should take the responsibility and curtail the frightening situation before Sri Lanka turns out to be like India, where the virus in its full form is spreading all over.

As we write, 1,053 had been confirmed positive from 4 October, all from the said garment factory and it is said that out of a total of 40,000 workers, 30,000 are residing in boarding places in the FTZ and its outskirts.

It's also alarming to see the number of stranded workers unable to return to their homes, but have been asked to remain in their rooms.

It's imperative to offer health checkups and clear those stranded garment workers to return to their home without being confined to their boarding houses. They are stranded in their own country.

This very situation had been forecast in February by human rights activists for garment workers and the FTZ union, but it seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

While the Government now says the situation is crucially monitored, elsewhere, in the European countries, it is reported that the second wave of COVID-19 has hit and the restrictions are being ramped up. Sri Lanka is in the process of determining when and how the new cluster emerged and the leading apparel in Minuwangoda, Brandix Lanka and its management is responsible to expose how the new cluster emerged.

Source still a mystery

World Health Organisation (WHO) Representative to Sri Lanka Dr. Razia Pendse told Ceylon Today that they are waiting to get a clear picture as to how the new COVID-19 surge evolved in Sri Lanka and called upon the garment sector to follow strict health measures as they work in close and confined workplace settings.

She also added that the garment sector is vulnerable due to, close and confined workplace settings and should strictly maintain physical distance by rearranging workplace layouts and limiting large meetings, regularly disinfecting surfaces, increasing ventilation, providing accessible hand hygiene facilities, allowing flexible working hours, and encouraging staff who are not feeling well to stay home and seek medical care.

The Free Trade Zones & General Services Employees' Union (FTZ Union) also alleges that the garment sector has not been properly monitored since the first case was recorded in February this year.

Some say people are injected with fear but that's obvious because it's not only the COVID-19 affected patient that is quarantined but those who had acquaintances with the patients including those in the family, workplace and even the passengers who they had travelled with. Stories are emerging that some of those passengers who travelled with the garment worker to Pungudutivu are hiding and some of them have responded to a government call to be quarantined and the list of contacts is long and the situation is dangerous. The bus driver and the conductor were stopped and taken away for quarantining.

There could be a possible national lockdown if the matter is not under control. However, pocket curfews that are controlling the movement of the public, are seen as a positive move.

If the virus was community spread then there is no way of tracing the origin and that's exactly what is 'alleged' when the first affected garment worker was traced. There were several claims, like some of those she was associated with could not be divulged.

However, the woman concerned has said that she had been ill and even after taking medicine she continued to be sick. But yet she was asked to report to work.

FTZ Union Joint Secretary Anton Marcus said, "We firmly believe, if required precautionary measures were effectively in place, there would have been no possibility for half the workforce to contract the virus.

Quoting Dr. Sudath Samaraweera, the Chief Epidemiologist of the country, who said, "When analysing the details of the factory workers, we noticed that there had been respiratory diseases in some, since 20 September, even though the female factory worker, who first tested positive, had developed symptoms on 28 September." Hence, the fact is, Brandix had not taken any steps to have PCR tests done on any of those workers from 20 September until the female worker admitted to the Gampaha hospital was tested positive at the hospital on Sunday 4 October.

The critical situation with COVID-19 is that it can be denied and ignored by anyone because there is no solution found within the country, no guarantee of immunity as yet, no known treatment so far globally and no vaccine found as well. This can lead to a dismal virus spread.

Marcus said, "With half the workforce, the apparel sector revenue has not dropped compared to 2019" and he alleged that many apparel factories have not strictly followed health measures and garment workers' boarding houses were not monitored.

He also alleged that most of the garment factories with the COVID-19, had begun to concentrate more on the production of garments rather than on the welfare of the workers and as early as March 2020, they had urged the Government's Task Force at a meeting, to be more cautious about the garment workers.

Currently, around 350 garment factories are in operation. Marcus also doubted that since COVID-19, is considered a community spread, it is difficult to find the origin as to who contracted it first, you cannot chase after one person.

While the COVID-19 global pandemic pushed the whole export manufacturing sector into a deep crisis, it has also exposed the apparel industry as the most inhuman exploiter of employees.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, when factories had to be closed due to the indefinite curfew imposed by the Government to control the spread, employers used it to downsize their workforce and in the process tried to prevent the workforce from possible union activity.

“We, as a responsible trade union, therefore, proposed to the tripartite taskforce, appointed by the Labour Ministry, that was established with the Labour Minister as the chair, to establish Health committees at every enterprise to ensure decisions taken by the taskforce are implemented and to monitor guidelines set by health authorities and precautionary measures taken at factories. Sadly, the Labour Department has not enforced these steps and have allowed employers the discretion to act as they please,” Marcus said.

Indian connection?

In terms of the finding of the new cluster, the public have begun doubting that Sri Lankans working at the Brandix Vishakapatnam factory in South India, who were chartered to Mattala Airport on 22 September. Brandix management cleared that no parties from India or any other country had access to the Minuwangoda facility.

They said the Government mandated a 28-day quarantine period and it was adhered to by Sri Lankan employees and their families brought back via charter flights.

“We understand that there have been concerns with regards to foreign nationals working at our facility in Minuwangoda and we would like to clarify as follows. We can confirm that no parties from India or any other country have had access to the facility during this period. We would also like to clarify that our facility in Minuwangoda does not use any fabric from India nor has it taken in any orders from our facility in India as well.”

Brandix further said, “With regards to concerns on employees returning to Sri Lanka from India through charter flights, we can confirm as follows. We operated three chartered flights from Visakhapatnam, for our Sri Lankan employees working in India and their families, who returned to Sri Lanka. We confirm that they, including their families, followed the Sri Lanka Government protocol for the prevention and control of COVID-19, which included PCR testing and a 14-day mandatory quarantine at a Government-regulated quarantine facility, as well as the 14-day self-quarantine process done under the supervision of the respective PHIs. Further to this, it must also be said, none of these Sri Lankans or their family members visited the Minuwangoda manufacturing facility.”

However, the management does not disclose the date of arrival of the workers from India. Why? In case they had arrived on 22 September, they should have been under quarantine till Monday, 5 October and then another 14 days for self-quarantining. Did this happen? Every story of the quarantining of passengers coming into Sri Lanka was highlighted by the Media but not this particular group. Did the PHI monitor them in their homes? Did they complete the quarantining process or were they dragged to work, are, some of the questions lingering in the minds of the public.

Over the video clip, Brandix said, they have identified that the primary female party is the owner of a hostel, while the two members occupying her hostel and the supervisor being referred to, are employed by a third-party cleaning service provider contracted by the Brandix Minuwangoda facility. “We confirm that none of these individuals are employees of Brandix.

This particular statement does not divulge anything in detail. Here again, there is skirt over the allegations claiming negligence where workers were asked to report to work after the detection of

COVID-19 infections, but Brandix referred to those workers as being employed by a third party, but it does not confirm or deny the allegations.

Garment workers' grievances

Ceylon Today spoke to Executive Director of Standup Movement Lanka Sahila Dandeniya, an activist fighting for the rights of the garment workers of Katunayake from 2008.

She said from the time the apparel industry bloomed and young girls and boys were employed, and even during the lockdown these workers were not given the Rs 5,000 allowance by the government and their lives were completely crippled during those days. Now again they are considered the root cause for the new spread.

She added that no details of the public being made aware of those who arrived from India have been released as yet. But following their arrival, it is suspected that the woman concerned fell ill. The garment worker, a 38-year-old, is from Divulapitiya and was working as the team leader of the sewing section at this factory.

She also spoke about how the workers are forced to meet the target and don't even take a break at their tea time.

"The 'work-study officer' picks who is the fastest on the machine from the staff and then forces others to follow the same speed taken by that person as an example. This is how they meet targets and they are the only ones who get target incentives.

They work tirelessly no matter whether they are sick or not. Most of them don't even take their sick leave and some of the management are in the habit of calling the owners of the boarding houses to send their workers to the factory.

There was clear evidence that went viral last week, where a hostel owner came up to the garment factory saying how she was asked to send sick girls to work.

Initially, the garment workers were asked to strictly follow the health guidelines, but gradually when the covid-19 was under control, there was negligence and mask-wearing was not practised by all.

She said especially in the ironing sections, the stores and the packing sections where there is no air conditioning, workers did not wear masks as it was too hot to be in those rooms.

Dandeniya also spoke about the 100s of manpower agencies that 'supply' garment workers when there is a shortage in factories. "There are unregistered agencies as well who are linked to the Human Resource (HR) of the factory. "When the HR contacts these manpower agencies, in case of shortages of workers, they immediately get down the number of workers and drop them at the factory for daily wages of roughly Rs 1,500. The agent takes about Rs 800 at the end of that day for supplying them.

She alleged that many factories are in the practice of hiring such workers without following regulations. Like cattle, they are given off to factories during 'rush hours'.

"This rotation of workers for factories has no regulation, but garment workers are often seen loitering around these agencies to register for a daily wage job. These agencies certainly don't do the needed health checks before handing over these poor workers and just a temperature check does not determine whether they have the virus or not.

These so-called manpower agencies are run by husbands and wives and even a group of friends who exploit the situation of the dire need of jobs at both ends.

Dandeniya said, with a general announcement workers had to return to their boarding houses and again the situation is repeated. "This time they are not going to listen and there are some trying to escape from this situation they are in to earn a living, since they cannot go to their homes and the predicament is severe and unstoppable," she added.

She also said that a worker, who was taken for a PCR test, in fear, had called her husband who was a soldier. "He is with her in a boarding house she said and that's what a husband would do when hearing the news that his wife was taken for PCR testing."

Dandeniya pointed out that none of her garment factory contacts are willing to talk for fear of losing their jobs and she is unable to trace what is happening to those who were taken away as 'COVID-19 suspects'. Their phones are switched off, she said expressing her concerns.

"We want to apply pressure on the Government and the Board of Investment to regularise some of the practices that are affecting the workers such as streamlining their payments/allowances as the virus has hit them hard. They cannot go home when the factories are carefully selecting their workers, she stressed.

I am stranded and want to go home

Ceylon Today contacted a girl, in her early 20s, currently at the FTZ, who is stuck in her boarding house. She has to remain there since there were a few boarders who had been working with a corona-affected garment factory worker.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, JT (not her real name) said she needs to get back home. "I was asked to go to my hostel until further notice, the supervisor said. He isolated me and some of those who are boarded, with those workers who had worked at a factory that had COVID-19 patients. The supervisor told 10 of us to go back after checking our temperature."

Her salary was Rs 20,000, given on 4 October, from which she has already paid her debts and the room rent. "I was asked to go back to the room but what can I do now? I have no money to feed myself."

She expected that at least the factory would give her an allowance to buy food stuff. She said last month she was given a Rs 2,000 voucher to buy groceries. "My parents are crying urging me to come home but can I go home?" she asked the writer. She pleaded to make arrangements to send her home, because she has no money to survive. "At least I had tea at the factory but now I don't even have that."

These boarding's don't supply food. Most of them live in congested rooms which serves them as their kitchen, as well as the sleeping area.

"I don't know when they would call me back to work but I'd rather go home," she said.

She also stressed that they were not given any instruction on how to do a health screening and travel to their hometown. If that is known she said she could beg or borrow and do the needful to return home.

"PCR testing would be good but where should I do it and release myself from this mess," she asked.

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