

Press Note: 24.5.2020

Garments Mahila Karmikara Munnade and Alternative Law Forum

Women workers will be one of the worst hit with the Karnataka Government's notification that allows factories to increase work hours daily and weekly to 10 and 60 hours, respectively. In the survey conducted jointly by Alternative Law Forum and Garments Mahila Karmikara Munnade between May 16 and 18, 2020, **65 percent of workers said they will not and could not work for longer hours.** Given that an overwhelming segment of the workforce in garment industries are women, extending the workday or workweek will likely result in thousands of women dropping out of the workforce or being asked to leave for not being able to work extended hours. The Karnataka Government's notification betrays a complete lack of empathy and concern for women workers and their right to livelihood. By diluting labour laws in such manner, the state continues to abdicate its responsibility towards workers and their right to a dignified and healthy life and has declared itself to be anti-worker.

About the survey

The report titled 'Garment workers, Covid-19 pandemic and the Lockdown: A report from South Karnataka' is based on telephonic survey conducted between May 16 and 18, 2020 of 82 workers in Bangalore, Ramanagara, Mandya and Mysore districts. In the report, we provide a sense of working conditions prior to the lockdown as well as workers' perspectives about it; the impact of the lockdown on the material and emotional lives of garment workers; and the extent of vulnerability they feel currently. Broadly, it analyses in what ways the state and employer have abdicated their responsibilities towards workers and foregrounds what workers desperately need and want to be able to survive the aftermath of the lockdown.

Key Findings from the survey

1. 63 percent of our respondents reported not having received any salary for the month of April. 17 percent of workers reported that they received 50 percent and less of their salaries for April.

2. Many workers reported that full or partial salaries have been given only to those who reported to work in May. These workers are undertaking expensive or unsafe travel to be able to reach their workplace.
3. 96 percent of respondents said that they received absolutely no assistance from their employers, be it in the form of cooked food, dry ration kits, loans and advances.
4. The state's absence on the ground and in assisting workers was noticed by workers, with 60 percent declaring that state had done absolutely nothing for workers. 75 percent of our respondents said they received no free food from the government, 51 percent said they received no free ration from the government, 66 percent said they received no subsidised ration from public distribution system (PDS), and 18 percent said they received absolutely no assistance from the government.
5. With employers not paying salaries and the state not providing any income or food support, desperate workers had to turn to informal sources to borrow money. **45 percent of our respondents said that they had to borrow money to tide over the lockdown, mostly from neighbours, friends and relatives.**
6. **68 percent reported not having paid rent** during the lockdown period. Of those who had to pay rent, **32 percent borrowed money, dipping into savings or using their salary.**
7. The complete apathy of the state towards workers is seen in the fact that while it allowed factories to reopen, **the state provided no transport facilities for workers to reach their workplace.** During our survey, workers reported with great anguish their inability to go to work despite factories having restarted. **Workers reported feeling extremely anxious and worried about the security of their jobs, especially since some of their colleagues had begun to work. They feared that if factories begin to retrench workers, they will be the first to lose their jobs.**
8. Yet another reason that workers who are stuck at home and unable to travel stated feeling particularly restless about being unable to work because their colleagues who had returned to work had received full or

partial payments. They desperately wanted to get to work so they can get some money.

9. Afraid of losing jobs, workers are walking to work, hitching rides from passers-by, getting together to hire vans for expensive rates paid for by themselves. Women in districts outside Bangalore reported undertaking arduous and unsafe journeys to be able to reach work.
10. This survey was conducted before the recent Karnataka Government notification was issued. Given that the threat of dilution of labour laws existed, we asked workers if they would work longer hours, reduced pay without ESI and PF.
 - 66 percent of the workers said that they would not work for reduced pay;
 - 65 percent said they would not work longer hours;
 - 75 percent said that they would not work if ESI facilities were withdrawn;
 - 82 percent said they would quit if the provision for PF was stopped.
11. The last two months of lockdown with no food or income support has left workers feeling extremely vulnerable with their impoverishment bearing down heavily on them. Those who agreed to working without these facilities pointed out how other members of the family did not have work, the pressure to pay rent, utility bills and interest on loans were extremely high and the possibility of not finding employment was something they could not afford.
12. Workers are afraid of getting infected during travel or within the workplace, worried that they may carry home the virus to their family members, that lockdowns could become a regular feature rendering them completely penniless.

Recommendations

1. Government should set up a **helpline** for garment workers on wage-related and working conditions-related issues. As this survey has shown, many workers are anxious and worried about how they will make ends

meet, given that nearly 70 percent have not been paid salary for April. Complaints made to these helplines must be immediately addressed.

2. Government must ensure that **workers are paid wages**, as per the MHA order on wages which mandates that employers have to pay employees full wages until May 18, 2020.
3. Government must call for a **meeting with garment workers unions** to address concerns of wages, working hours, working conditions, commuting facilities, among others.
4. Government should evolve a **mechanism to address worker concerns if factories shut down in this period**. It should ensure payment of wages, arrears and any other form of compensation due to them.
5. Workers who have been laid off or will be laid off should be identified and provided **with access to social security safety nets such as medical insurance, universal access to public distribution system as well as income support**.
6. Garment factories must be strictly instructed to **provide overtime pay and not force workers to work on Sundays and holidays**.
7. **The exemption of factories** from sections of the Factory Act regarding working hours must be withdrawn.
8. BMTTC, KSRTC must **provide transport services** to and from garment factories at subsidised rates. Where possible garment factories must provide **free** transport services to workers.
9. **Health camps** must be conducted for all garment workers and their families.
10. **Regular inspections of factories** must be undertaken to ensure safety practices, including physical distancing, are followed.
11. **Harassment from microfinance institutions and other lending institutions must be curtailed**. Workers already distressed by lack of income and job security must not be made to feel more threatened.
12. **Fees** of children of garment workers must be waived off.
13. Garment workers must be provided **vegetables, eggs and meat at subsidised rates** so that their nutritional status does not deteriorate.

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