



# **Garment Labour Union**

## **A Study on Gender Discrimination among Garment Factory Workers**

**Supported by: Asia Monitor Resource Centre, Hong Kong**

## Introduction:

Literature suggests that Gender discrimination runs deep throughout all of the countries in which garments are produced. Women are frequently subjected to verbal and physical abuse and sexual harassment. The vast majority of garment workers, approximately 80%, are women. This is not by chance, but the result of discriminatory practices. Women are desirable in the garment industry because employers take advantage of cultural stereotypes that portrays women as passive and flexible. Productive, reproductive and domestic responsibilities such as cleaning, cooking and childcare constrain women's ability to seek other types of employments and they just do not have the time or opportunity to improve their working conditions, or even speak out about the abuses they face on a daily basis, making them the 'ideal' employees<sup>1</sup>.

While many governments have passed laws to address the problem, enforcement and compliance is lacking. Unionization is low and few women hold leadership positions in unions. Factory owners and managers get away with crimes of violence against women due to a combination of factors. The stigma of experiencing sexual harassment by employers and fear of losing their jobs often discourages women from reporting abuses.<sup>2</sup>

The Asian garment industry employs an estimated 55 million women, comprising roughly eighty percent of the total workforce. A number of studies on the prevalence of gender-based violence in the garment supply chain reveal the depth of the problem<sup>3</sup>.

Attaining gender justice is not an easy task in India. Discrimination against women begins even before her birth. The gruesome evils of female feticide and infanticide proves this<sup>4</sup>. In India, 60 percent of women factory workers reported experiencing some type of harassment (*Fair Wear Foundation, 2013*).

Gender-based violence, or the threat of it, is a way to control women workers in the factories and a functional part of this system of structural inequalities<sup>5</sup>.

Though the Indian constitution provides equal rights and privileges for men and women and makes equal provision to improve the status of women in society, majority of women are still unable to enjoy the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them.

Traditional value system, low level of literacy, more household responsibilities, lack of awareness, non-availability of proper guidance, low mobility, lack of self-confidence and family discouragement are some of the factors responsible to create gender disparity in our society.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://cleanclothes.org/issues/gender>

<sup>2</sup> <http://news.trust.org/item/20170719150911-06mzj/>

<sup>3</sup> Discrimination against women garment workers

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/india-2/gender-discrimination-in-india-6-major-causes/47671>

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.trust.org/item/20170719150911-06mzj/>

While intervening on behalf of the garment workers, civil society organisations have come across hardships faced by women garment workers and many studies have been conducted on the working conditions, labour rights situation etc of garment workers including harassments faced by them. But there was a need to understand the discriminations faced by women garment workers and hence this study was conducted

### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of the present study was to gain insight into the gender discrimination and degree of autonomy experienced by workers in the garment sector, both within the factory and in their personal lives. Ability of workers to participate in Labour Unions and obtain a space for addressing these issues was also studied.

### **a. Methodology:**

In order to form an understanding of these themes, factory workers were interviewed and asked a set of 39 questions. A total of 59 workers participated in this study. One male participant declined to provide answers during the interview. The total number of participants whose responses were recorded is thus 58.

The workers interviewed were from Peenya Industrial Area, Bangalore and Kanakapura in Ramanagar District in Karnataka State, India.

### **b. Age, Gender and Work Profile of Workers:**

The average age of the participants was 28 years. Of these, 39 were women and 20 were men.

The participants were a mix of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers. There were 31 skilled, 18 semi-skilled, and 4 unskilled workers. There were also six supervisors.

The participants held different posts within the factory. A majority of the participants – thirty-four in total - were tailors. Ten workers were checkers, two were quality checkers, and one was a checker in the cutting section. Five of the workers were helpers, and one was a feeding helper. Two of the participants were quality auditors. There was also one production writer, one packer, one manager, two supervisors, and one ironer.

### **c. Findings:**

**1. Work Profile:** Although a majority of the participants were women, only one of the supervisors was a woman. In contrast, there were three supervisors among the nineteen male participants that were interviewed. Similarly, all quality checkers were male while helpers, tailors and checkers were predominantly female. In short, higher jobs were held by male workers.

### **2. Working Conditions:**

In order to assess the working conditions of the participants, questions relating to such aspects as overtime, knowledge of minimum wages, promotions, ability to take leave, knowledge of the boss, number of workers, number of places and the amount of work done by each employee were asked.

#### **2.1. Wages and Deductions:**

The average salary of the participants was Rs. 9,750. On average, male participants received a salary of approximately Rs. 11,192, while women participants received a salary of

approximately Rs. 9,048. It may also be important to note that of all the participants, only the supervisors were aware of the minimum wage that is due to them for their labour.

The difference in the average salaries between the two sexes could be due to a number of reasons. One reason was that more male participants were higher in the hierarchy of jobs offered by the factory. For example, the average salary for female checkers is Rs. 7,728.75. As all the male checkers were quality checkers, they received much higher salaries.

There were significant differences in the salaries of men and women participants performing the same task. A vast majority of the tailors who participated in this study were women. However, the average salary of male tailors is Rs. 9,460.40, while female tailors receive an average salary of Rs. 9,282.83. This is not reflective of years of experience or level of skill possessed by the workers. For example, a skilled female tailor who has worked in the factory for 22 years received a salary of Rs. 9,785. In contrast, a skilled male tailor who joined the factory one and a half years ago received a salary of Rs. 9,300. Only in the case of helpers, who usually constitute 20% of the shop floor workers in a garment factory, there was no significant difference in the average salary between the sexes. The average salary was approximately Rs. 7,736.

Deductions made to the salaries of the employees were similar among men and women workers. From the total salary that is received, deductions are made for Provident Fund, ESI, transport and hostel facilities. An average of Rs. 963 and Rs. 151 are deducted for the Provident Fund and ESI respectively. Rs. 200 is deducted from two participants for transportation. Two participants make use of the hostel facilities. Rs. 600 is deducted from their salary in lieu of this.

## **2.2. Overtime Work:**

The participants were also asked questions relating to overtime. These included reasons for overtime, the amount paid for the extra labour, the ability to refuse overtime work, and the consequences of refusing.

### **a. Reasons for Overtime Work:**

The reasons for being asked to work overtime varied among the participants. The most common reason among both men and women workers is that the target set was not met, or that mistakes were made in their work. In some cases, the participants had to work overtime when they were late, or when there was a heavy work load. In other cases, the participants were expected to do compensatory work. This means that they were made to work overtime as they were given a leave of absence with pay when there was no work in the factory.

### **b. Overtime Wages:**

For the extra labour, 46 of the participants received double their salary, while 12 did not. This difference is not due to differences in gender or the type of labour being performed. Rather, the upper management, such as supervisors and the manager, were more likely to not receive overtime pay than those who were tailors, checkers or helpers.

### **c. Consequences of Refusing Overtime:**

For most of the participants, both men and women, overtime was a compulsion that they believed they could not refuse. The most common consequence of refusing to work overtime was “yelling at”. Other consequences included dismissal and withholding of wages. One

participant stated that overtime could be refused on Sundays. However, when the participant is already in the factory, he/she is expected to work overtime without refusal.

### **2.3 Promotions:**

Amount of overtime work done or years of experience in the factory do not play a role in receiving promotions. Only 15 participants have received a change in assignment, and only two have received a promotion. The reason for this may not have been years of service, as a participant who has worked in the factory for 15 years continues to hold the same designation. It must also be noted that only one participant has received an increase in pay following her promotion.

**Working conditions thus appear to be governed by a number of factors. Gender does appear to play a role in some aspects of these working conditions such as the amount of salary and the type of work allotted.** However, both genders appear to experience such factors as overtime and salary deductions similarly.

### **3. Ability of Workers to Participate in Labour Unions:**

Other questions related to labour union activities. These included questions revolving around whether the participants had any knowledge of the presence of unions, attending meetings, the right to complain about workplace grievances, and personal and workplace related obstacles in joining the union.

More women than men workers were aware of the presence of trade unions and were a part of them. They also stated that they have attempted to enrol fellow workers in trade unions. However, their colleagues feared negative repercussions from the management if they sought to join a union. Further, airing grievances relating to the workplace to the management appears to be hard for both men and women workers.

A number of participants also stated that there were restrictions in their ability to attend meetings. It is interesting to note that among the men workers, restrictions were related to the workplace alone. However, among the women workers, restrictions from their families also stopped them from attending meetings regularly. In addition, work at home, such as caring for their children, also stopped them from attending meetings. Such restrictions were completely absent among the men workers.

In short, though more women workers were aware of the presence of trade unions and were a part of them, they faced more restrictions to participate actively in labour unions when compared to male workers.

### **4. Personal Autonomy and Decision Making:**

With regard to personal autonomy, there exists several differences in the degree of freedom that men and women workers experience in relation to home and financial maintenance, spending of wages and decisions regarding where they may work.

Men workers were more likely to play an active role in making decisions relating to the maintenance of the home and the spending of wages. They were also more likely to make decisions relating to their children's future.

Financial autonomy among the women workers was also low. Several of them stated that their ATM card was with their husbands or fathers. They thus had no ability to monitor or

spend their own wages. The financial maintenance of their family was also decided by their fathers, families or husbands. In contrast, men participants experienced more autonomy in the allocation of their wages for various activities. The primary restriction on spending their wages for personal interests were financial constraints at home.

Although there were significant differences in the degree of autonomy that the men and women workers participants experienced in relation to their homes and finances, both sexes stated that marriage alliances would be fixed by their parents alone.

**Conclusion:**

Gender does appear to play a role in some aspects of the working conditions such as the amount of salary and the type of work allotted. Though more women workers were aware of the presence of trade unions and were a part of them, they faced more restrictions to participate actively in labour unions when compared to men workers. Further, it does not seem likely that the labour unions provide a space wherein such grievances of women garment workers can be addressed. Coupled with these, differences in personal autonomy between the sexes makes gender discrimination apparent.

As can be observed, even with the small sample of workers interviewed, gender discrimination and differences in the degree of autonomy between the men and women workers appears to be existing in the garment sector. This is both within the factory and in their personal lives. Ability of women garment workers to participate actively in Labour Unions and obtaining a space for addressing the issues is restricted.