

## **Introduction to the Tamil Nadu garment industry Briefing note**

***This briefing note will explore the Tamil Nadu garment textile and garment industry, how it has changed in recent years and why so many workers are subject to gender and caste discrimination and other rights abuses.***

### **The Background**

Tirupur, in Tamil Nadu in South India, is the centre of a textile and garment industry which supplies most big UK clothing retailers, as well as other international companies. The industry produces 'jersey' or 'banian' as it is known in Tamil, garments such as t-shirts, nightwear, children's clothes and sportswear.

The area has long been a traditional area for growing cotton and the centre of a textile industry, with the production of garments for export rapidly increasing over the last twenty years. While Tirupur itself is the centre for garment production, there are many hundreds of spinning mills producing yarn in nearby parts of Tamil Nadu. The spinning and garment companies are Indian-owned. Some companies do the whole process from spinning to the final assembly of garments, while others concentrate only on spinning or garment-making. The hundreds of spinning mills in the area also supply yarn to companies in India and abroad, including to Bangladesh, China and the Middle East. Most major retailers in the UK are sourcing clothes from Tamil Nadu.

The increase in export production and competition in international markets has led to changes in the workforce. When the sector mainly supplied a national market the workforce was highly unionized and was mainly made up of men. Now, with the emphasis on export production, working conditions have become poorer, and the workforce more vulnerable.

There is a growing proportion of women employed in the sector (working under some of the worst conditions), as well as the increasing use of migrant labour and contract labour. Union access to the workplace is rare and rights abuses are common. Some workers live in Tirupur and travel to factories every day. But recent campaigns by local NGOs and trade unions have highlighted abuses of workers' rights, particularly in the employment of young women recruited from distant areas and living in company-controlled hostels. Many are working in conditions of forced or even bonded labour. It is estimated that out of a total workforce of 600,000 at least 200,000 are young women working in such conditions.

## **Poverty and discrimination**

There are issues in the textile and garments sector involving both men and women workers; migrant workers from different states in India and subcontracting to informal workers based in workshops or at home. In the factories, there is widespread use of contract labour, a system whereby only the gang-leader is employed by the factory and he, in turn, is responsible for a team of workers.

Our focus is on the young women workers, the majority of whom are recruited from poor, rural districts of Tamil Nadu. A minority of the young women in camp labour and sumangali schemes are being recruited from other states of India, including Karnataka and Orissa.

The young women recruited from rural areas of Tamil Nadu are mainly forced to seek work in the textile and garment sector through poverty in the villages. Most are recruited by agents, many of them based in the villages, who seek out the poorest families or those with many daughters. The majority of the poorest are dalit (used to be described as 'untouchable') families. Agents promise the families that their daughters can earn wages in the factories, that conditions are good and the girls are kept safe in the hostels.

Most girls go to school while education is free, usually up to 10<sup>th</sup> grade, although some drop out earlier. Most poor families depend on daily waged labour, which is irregular and badly paid, particularly at times of drought. They see the opportunity to work in the garment or textile sector as a way to survive economically, save up money for a girl's marriage or pay off debts. In most cases, the monthly wage is handed over to parents rather than kept for a girl's own use. Boys are not recruited from the villages and girls' wages can be used to keep a brother in school.

The girls often do not see the value in staying on at school and feel duty bound to help their family by earning some money. Before they go to work, they may see it as more glamorous and modern than village life. Once they have experienced a period of employment, however, they often say the only thing they enjoyed about it was their friendships with other girls.

Employment of young women in the sector, therefore, builds upon structures of discrimination based on age, caste and gender. There are examples not only on violations of labour rights but broader violations of human rights and abuse of young women as human beings. In one workplace, young women were told the only way they could leave their employment would be if the company took away all their clothes and they would walk out naked.

## **Homeworking and informal workshops**

The Tamil Nadu garment industry is not only built on large-scale mills and factories. Informal workshops and women working at home also play an integral role in how the industry functions. Subcontracting is common in Tirupur, where it is estimated as many as one in five garments workers may be working at home or in informal workshops. These homeworkers are outside any formal employment or social protection for workers and not generally included in trade union membership.

### **Global supply chains and global responsibilities**

Many of the cotton jersey garments produced in Tamil Nadu are intended for export, including to major high-street retailers in the UK. In this respect there are many similarities with the garment industry in Bangladesh, which has been under increased scrutiny since the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Spring 2013. Both industries sell themselves on their ability to produce clothing quickly and cheaply for Western markets, both involve appalling labour rights abuses, unsafe working conditions and the exploitation of women workers in particular. At the same time both industries are vital to the local economy, providing much needed employment to women living in poverty.

It is important, therefore, that campaigners and retailers focus on what can be done to improve working conditions in these industries, rather than simply to threaten to move work elsewhere when problems are exposed. A number of British retailers are currently working to improve the conditions of women working in the textile and garment factories in Tamil Nadu, which is positive but progress is slow. It should not take a disaster of a similar nature to Bangladesh's Rana Plaza tragedy for retailers to address the problems in Tamil Nadu with the urgency and determination the situation requires.

**HWW October 2013**