



‘Work makes us ill’ Health and Safety Issues in the Tamil Nadu garment industry Briefing note

This briefing note will explore the work-related health problems experienced by workers in the textile mills and garment factories of Tamil Nadu.

Young women in Pudukkottai who have worked in the textile and garment factories consistently report that their work makes them ill. Most are between 14 and 20 when they start work and health problems can have a long-term impact on their lives.

There are two main sets of interrelated issues leading to ill health:

- Conditions at the workplace, excessively long hours of work, leading to exhaustion and a range of bad health conditions, resulting accidents, depression and stress.
- Living conditions in the company-owned hostels where the women stay and quality of food in canteens. Complaints include bad food, lack of bathroom facilities or drinking water.

There are also specific health risks associated particularly with work in the spinning mills and the amount of cotton dust generated in the spinning process, which can lead to fatal illness if not effectively removed.

Young women report a variety of general problems such as fever, headaches, back and body pain, digestive and breathing problems and depression or stress. In 39 interviews carried out by Read Foundation in 2012, 22 out of 39 women reported ill health being the reason for them giving up their jobs.

Two families in Pudukkottai had lost a daughter who fell ill at work. In one case, a young woman fell ill at the workplace and although she was taken to hospital she died beforehand. Her sister who worked with her reported that she had complained of breathing and stomach problems. Another young woman died from heart problems after working in a spinning mill. Her family reported that previously she had had no health problems.

Two of the women interviewed in 2012 reported witnessing a suicide in the factories where they worked.

More generally, women reported more general feelings of bad health probably resulting from exhaustion, bad nutrition and hygiene. Many are working shifts of 10 or 12 hours, six days a week, with a further shift on Sundays if required and frequent night work, sometimes on top of a regular shift. They are frequently denied permission for leave to visit families and during their period of employment are rarely allowed out of the factory or hostel premises.

The conditions they work under amount to forced labour and they are frequently subject to verbal abuse from male supervisors, and sometimes physical and sexual abuse. Hostel wardens also are reported to be abusive. This results in stress and depression.

Although some women recover their health when they return to their home in the villages, they often suffer from long-term health problems. Among these, most common appear to be problems of reproductive health, caused by menstrual problems which began at work, with infrequent or irregular periods and frequent infections due to poor hygiene and inadequate facilities. Combined with long-term problems or illness resulting from ingesting cotton dust, these are taking a heavy toll on young women's lives and futures.

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