COVID19 Pandemic Voices from Margins Webinar series

Webinar 1: Garment And Textile Industry Workers From Dindigul, Tamil Nadu
Date: April 8, 2020
Minutes

PANELIST PROFILE

1. **Arockiaraj**, is a Floor-in-Charge (Stitching Department). He has been working since the age of 10 as a Kaja button hole machine operator at a local tailoring shop and has worked his way to the position of floor-in-charge in a garment factory

2. **Rajeshwari** is 27 years old and has five years of experience working in the mill as a welfare officer with the nurse. She has completed her post-graduation in Public administration. She joined as nurse with the welfare officer and in 2017 the scope of her work increased, where she was responsible for more than 1,500 labourers during the half night shift.

3. **Navi Mary** is from Nochiodaipatti village and has a working experience of 9 years in spinning mill

4. **Murugammal** is from Rajakapatti village and has a working experience of 15 years in spinning mill.

5. **Divakar** is a mill worker and has a working experience of 10 years in spinning mill.

**Mr. Tom Thomas, Moderator, Praxis:** Praxis is an Indian organisation that focuses on various facets of participatory democracy. Praxis tries to bring the voices, concerns and solutions of marginalised communities through several researches and studies directly or through face to face meetings that happen physically or digitally between the community members, policy makers, media, activists etc., This webinar series of COVID-19 Pandemic – Voices from Margins is a continuation of that attempt as during the lockdown days the major hope is to bring to the forefront the voices of the communities that are left unheard. During this exigency, an obscene class character has been witnessed where millions of poor are left with neither the livelihood nor the options for social distancing which is most essential to keep the virus at bay. They are bearing the brunt of this pandemics burden. The Supreme Court being the highest constitutional court of India has disallowed a plea for the migrant workers to be paid wages expressing that they cannot intervene in government matters and yet in the same breath found it prudent to direct the Government to regulate charges for COVID test and pay the losses if incurred to the private labs across the country. During today’s session, we will be interacting with a few workers from garment mills in Tamil Nadu.

PANELLISTS DISCUSSION
Rajeshwari, Welfare Officer, Garment mill in her key note address emphasised that there are almost 300 mills in Dindigul district and people working in these mills are dependent on its functioning. She further said - Since the lockdown, for almost a month mills have been closed due to this our livelihood is getting affected as the work has not happened and employees have not received salary even for the number of days they have worked during the previous month. Certain mills have provided salaries to their employees but with deductions made based on the number of days worked and not for the entire month. Other mills have not paid their employees with their respective salaries nor has any information pertaining to it been provided. Such families entirely depend on their salaries as their income source and are now suffering to even get money for food. When the workers approached the mills, there had been no proactive response from the employers on when they will be paid and how much they will be paid but they had stated that the payment has been deferred because they don’t have money to pay wages to employees and also in some cases few workers did not have accounts and few others had accounts for transferring the salaries which also ended up as an issue. As a result, to lack of income people have turned up to contractors as usual for advances but this time that was also not possible. Few other colleagues from mills had taken loans at higher interest rates for their livelihood. As there is no idea of when our jobs will be back this is affecting our mental health and wellbeing. Mill workers staying at hostels provided by the mills are dependent on them for food facilities where they have been managing with minimal meals as Rs.5000 received isn’t sufficient. Similarly, in Tirupur, workers are leading hand to mouth existence and struggling for one square meal a day as they also have expenses such as paying off EMIs, buying things for their children where none of the above are fully met.

Diwakar, Spinning Millworker in his key note address emphasised that salaries in spinning mills are provided on the 7th of every month. He shared - Due to the lockdown which is new to India, we do not know how to manage our livelihood. In our village through the municipality groceries are being home delivered but in rural areas, that is not possible. Migrant workers who returned from other states are not getting anything as there is some suspicion among the community that they may be carrying the virus. In case of migrant contract workers, it would benefit them if some initiative has been undertaken. The current scenario existing in rural areas would include the availability of one or two shops for 100 households open from 6 a.m. to 9 a.m. during which the shops will be open and empty but with a slight delay there is crowd and police also become violent. Especially with youth / youngsters who step out to buy things, the police beat them considering that they are just loitering around. They are more accommodating of older people.

Chandra, a member of Gethu Worker-Led Think Tank elucidated on the EPF & ESI conditions currently existing in mills. Employees working in mills are unaware of what EPF is about and neither has the employer taken the initiative to provide awareness on EPF & its benefits. Companies are very casual about the need for an EPF for their employees and are negligent about its importance. Few mills provide EPF benefits to their employees where they do not deposit PF money for every month rather it has been paid once in three months, as it serves the company better. According to garment workers the company contributes only 4% instead of 12% towards EPF. One worker received her EPF finally in January this year. The workers are unaware of the EPF details including their UAN, User id, contact number and how much money is contributed towards EPF. Sometimes the EPF
accounts of employees are filled with the details of the mill or organisation and also the workers are unaware of it. In Tirupur, the contract workers don’t have EPF benefits at the mills. Even with ESI, the same scenario exists as the money has been contributed to the workers account once in 3 months and nobody really benefits from it. They do not benefit from it as some ESI accounts are inactive and the others are not linked to a hospital. The workers need more awareness about the benefits to effectively utilize it.

**Navis Mary** from Dindigul addressed the livelihood issues faced due to lack of salaries provided by the mills during the lockdown. The workers thought that we will receive our salary yesterday but we have not received it until today. The group is unable to function without salaries and also don’t know how to or whom to approach for the salaries. People are unable to get loans either as money lenders are hesitating considering the repayment of the loans. Especially for those living in rented accommodation, money-lenders ask the workers on how they would be repaying the loans without getting a job. Regarding the salary some people have received their salaries but I have not received it. People do not know about how to manage the next two months as we keep hearing that the lockdown would be extended. At least when we go to work, there is confidence that we will be having a job, but this time we are unable to stay confident about this whole scenario. Further we have also borrowed loans in the anticipation that we will have work.

**Arockiaraj, Floor-in-Charge (Stitching), Garment mill** in his key note address emphasised about Employee Provident Fund in mills. As adding to the previous discussion on EPF, he shared the employees are unaware of the benefits of the EPF as employers don’t tell them about it. The mill employers don’t educate the workers on the purpose of a provident fund and why they need it. As said earlier in certain mills if somebody works for six months and quits working from a particular mill the HR advises them on how to withdraw the money but not on the long term benefit of it. Workers are aware that some amount is deducted from their salary but are unaware about the exact amount of the purpose of the deduction. They are not made aware that the account can be transferred further based on their shifts in employment and use it at a later stage in life, rather than quickly withdrawing it after leaving the employment. Also, the PF is registered with the company’s contact number and details and not of the workers. For a few workers they have deducted for the month of January, according to the message received but for February there was no further message regarding it. The messages are received only once in three months that PF money has been credited. Employers encourage closing the PF account in six months without explaining to the worker what the result would be and in some cases the mill owners do not give the PF account details as the workers might shift elsewhere. As the workers are unaware of this, they use it as a bait to get people to work longer for 2-3 months more in the mills.

**Sibija, Vaanavil Team** in her key note addressed about the Vaanavil team working in Dindigul district with adolescent girls and boys, workers from 20 villages in Sanarpatti Block. The team has conducted a lot of participatory research on discrimination faced by women workers at mills; Gender and Business workshop where the inputs have been put into the National Action Plan on Business & Human Rights (Zero Draft). Based on the currently existing scenario among workers the burden will increase among the adolescent’s groups as the family’s debt burdens will shift to them requiring them to work and pay off these loans. This further would be accommodated with the increase in dropouts.
Stanley, Partners in Change introduced the idea behind GETHU GROUP. “the garment workers think tank”. The garment supply chain is vast and we have been working across the supply chain since March 2019. Over the period, a small group of 15 workers had formed a cohesive group who have been consistently meeting on Sundays every week discussing various challenges faced by workers in garments & mills. As one group they have stepped up and launched a newsletter called the “GETHU POST” based on the discussions made during the meetings.

Pradeep, Partners in Change shared briefly the findings from a short research study conducted in between 2nd - 5th April through telephonic calls for the purpose of understanding the actual scenario given to the ideal one. The study was conducted with 21 Garment Workers (April 2nd to 3rd 2020) and 51 Villagers (April 3rd to 5th 2020) in Dindigul district. The key points have been mentioned below:

Key Findings:
1. Wages & Salaries – 21 Garment Workers have worked for fourteen days before the lockdown but still haven’t received the salary.
2. Pension – None of them have received
3. PM Kisan Yojana – 5 Villagers have not received it.
4. TN Ration Card (Rs.1000) – Most of the have received the amount
5. Indebtness - Groceries purchased deferring payments from shopkeepers or availing loans from relatives (no specific data on the number)
6. PS Card – Out of 51 villagers 35 villagers received the payment and ration
7. ICDS - Available cooked food provided only to 2 people.
8. Free Gas Cylinder - Only 1 received
9. Jan Dhan Account – From 51 villagers 15% own Jan Dhan accounts and none have received Rs.500
10. EPF - 20 from the 21 garment workers fall under the category of less than 100 employee’s and are not eligible for EPF. 90% should have drawings under Rs.50,000.

Bala Murugan, Freedom Fund in his key note address emphasised on the recent EPF notice where a majority of the mills/garment factories will not be included as there are more than 100 employees in such industries. Hence lobbying has been happening with the Government at State Level as textile employees should get full payment of salaries for at least three months. Initially there were a lot of issues regarding migrants and migrants stranded during the lockdown have been provided with 245 shelters with food and stay facilities but with lesser options in exercising social distancing in this case. Several conversations have been engaged with the Revenue Minister as he is welcoming suggestions and taking up serious actions. Further adding to this addendum issues faced by the workers living in the hostels with insufficient food/rations is also being considered. The South India Platform has noticed the existing and upcoming issues with the margins and has been working as a medium to channel the information to various District Governments with the help of several NGO’s.

Q&A SESSION:
QUESTION (Geetanjali) - What is the status of the worker’s children, their education and their protection? How is that impacted?
RESPONSE (Arokyaraj) - Now, if this continues, the education situation of the children will get affected. As suggested by the Government people’s salaries should not get affected and only then will we be able to contribute or pay for our children’s fees. This is not just for my family, but for most people in the village. (Also refer to Sibija’s presentation)

QUESTION (Sameer) - How can Government deal with the Rent problem? Is there any mechanism available or what needs to be done? In most cases- due process is not followed when rented the property.
RESPONSE (Arokyaraj) - As none of the employers have reached out to us and the workers have been managing within the due time.
RESPONSE (Navis Mary) - The landlord has not asked for rent but considering other factors there has been no support offered by the Government.
RESPONSE (Bala) - Government has requested landlords that three-month rent can be postponed / delayed. But that cannot be made mandatory as will have to pay together in three months post lockdown.

QUESTION (Abhishek Srivastava) – How were these workers hired whether through a contractor or directly by the business owner? Also, have they approached the State Security Board? Or are they registered there?
RESPONSE (Anusha) - There are a mixed category of both contractual & directly hired workers. Of the 21 workers interviewed as part of the study, none have approached the Board.

QUESTION (Aaditya Dar) - What has the role of the labour contractor been?
RESPONSE (Pradeep) - Regarding contractors, we have spoken to one contractor who is also former worker. He is trying to get companies pay some advance to workers.

QUESTION (Shahnaz) - What is the status of female migrant workers stranded?
RESPONSE (Pradeep) - All are contractual and they do not know whether they still have job. Companies have not committed anything about wage for lockdown period.

QUESTION (Ipshitha) - What are the thoughts from the group on how informal/ contract workers can be brought in govt. safety nets Eg: PF/ ESI?
RESPONSE (Pradeep) - The Government, if serious, should make this concession applicable to all workers receiving monthly salary less than Rs 15000/-. This will benefit both worker and company in the next three months. The EPFO may try to find out names of such companies that have deducted EPF for the month of January 2020 and have not done for the subsequent months or have deducted less for subsequent months. It would then be clear that such workers have not received wages for their lockdown period. They should send instructions to these companies.

QUESTION (Namrata) - Can the villages of the study be specified?
RESPONSE (Stanley) - Siluvathur, Viralipatti, Thavasimadai, Pethampatti, Kallupatti, Rajakkapatti, Kurumbapatti from Sanarpatti Block at Dindigul district, Tamil Nadu.
QUESTION (Namrata) - Can you please share more info on the South India platform for sharing info on COVID? Can you also inform us how cash transfers are working with anybody who does not have a bank account?
RESPONSE (Pradeep) - None have received cash transfer whereas PDS rice cardholders got Rs 1000 as cash.
(No current information on a South India platform)
QUESTION (Trinanjan) - what has been the reaction of brands? Have they cancelled pre orders, as they have in Bangladesh and southeast Asia?
RESPONSE (Bala) – There isn’t a clear picture of the whole scenario but lobbying with the associations has been happening. But moving forward there would definitely be a cut of 60% of brands from Bangladesh. And when globally reached out all the brands are similarly facing severe crisis in terms of retaining staff and paying salaries. Due to this some current orders are kept on hold and payments have been delayed. The magnitude of the scenario is still unknown but through further lobbying a precise idea on the loss of business and the trades on hold can be figured. Due to severity of this whole situation some of the brands have deferred payments for 6 months on the trades.

RESPONSES TO QUERIES THAT WERE NOT ANSWERED DURING THE WEBINAR -
QUESTION (Bharti Birla) - What is the status of the home-based workers? Is any work coming to them or are their past wages being paid?
As Dindigul belt is more of mill based but many workers are without contracts. We do not know yet on home-based workers.

QUESTION (Shahnaz) - What are the role of trade unions, CSO, NGO’s?
Every institution is gradually becoming active. We are looking forward to more vibrant TU and civil society next week.

QUESTION (Namrata) - 1) Has anyone used support from the central government schemes (insurance for unorganised sector for example)
2) Has anyone been given clarity on how 500 Rs will be transferred to Jan Dhan accounts?
3) For food are people able to use their ration cards or are they having problems with food access?
None of the Central Government schemes have reached community so far.
The Government has to clarify whether this amount is available to those poor women who did not open a Jan Dhan account because they already had a pre-existing account.
No one knows. Some have Jan Dhan Account. The report has details.
All families have access to PDS cards and most of them have received rice from ration shop.

QUESTION (Sharmistha) - considering garment making is their training, are they any other traditional skills these workers could be re deployed in this region?
As of now, there has been no information related to that but we will further look into it and let you know.

QUESTION (Prachi) - What are other options that the workers have if the lockdown continues, will they move agriculture or any other sector?
We are asking the Question now in our next round and will further let you know.
QUESTION (Shahnaz) - Is there any work going on for healthcare of the workers?
None immediately.

LINKS
Both editions of Gethu Post Newsletters can be found here:
https://gethuworkers.files.wordpress.com/2020/04/gethupost-vol2-1.pdf

NEXT WEBINAR
Please note, the next webinar is with farmers and workers from the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of Purulia, West Bengal.

Date: 10th April 2020, Friday
Time: 3:00 to 4:30 pm
Join Zoom Meeting
https://zoom.us/j/115434627?pwd=d1FBRC9mUnRibmsvK3A3U0UzVUIUUT09
Meeting ID: 115 434 627
Password: 734639