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Case Study: Garment Workers in Sri Lanka

The last two decades have seen the manufacturing of ready-made garments for export become a major industry in Sri Lanka, employing hundreds of thousands of mainly poor rural women and men under conditions that could be classed as exploitative. Hence it was inevitable that when the 'Make Trade Fair' (MTF) campaign began its focus on the trade in garments and the situation of the women workers who made them, it sparked some interest among the Oxfams that operated in that country.

The importance of garment exports in Sri Lanka was the result of a government policy of privatization and investment liberalization that emphasized the attracting of foreign direct investment in the manufacturing of products that benefited from cheap labour. One of the manifestations of this policy was the establishing of areas of concentrated foreign and domestic investment known as Export Processing Zones (EPZs) in which investors could enjoy special benefits. The three main EPZs were established in 1978, 1984, and 1991 respectively – and in 1992 the entire country was declared an Export Processing Zone. Because of its relatively cheap labour, well-educated workforce, and good access into European and American markets via quotas (see below) Sri Lanka became a major centre for the manufacture and supply of ready-made garments to the world market. By 2002 there were an estimated 300,000 workers employed in the industry in Sri Lanka, the overwhelming majority of them being women.¹ While women constitute some 35 per cent of the overall work force in Sri Lanka, in the garment industry they dominate, particularly in the unskilled work categories. The majority of them are young, single rural women who have few other employment opportunities.

The working conditions inside the EPZ factories are not good. Some of the more prominent problems include:

- Long hours of overtime, of up to 60 or 90 hours per month.
- Excessive production targets.
- Poor or non-existent occupational health and safety practices.
- Precarious work with little job security.
- Repression of the right to organize, to form a union or bargain collectively.
- Harassment of women workers in the factory and in the areas where they live.

Health hazards include industrial accidents resulting from inadequate training on how to use protective gear and handle machinery, the removal of safety guards, and defective machines. In addition, ventilation and sanitation systems are often sub-standard. It is not uncommon for managers to limit the number of visits that can be made to the toilet during working hours, and workers in some factories have been banned from drinking water during working hours. Workers can be required to meet unreasonable production targets (60 collars, pockets or hems per hour, when most can only sew 45), and have reported physical punishments for failure to meet these targets. Women often complain of sexual harassment both within the factories and on the streets and public transport on the way to and from work.

Lodgings for workers in boarding houses are generally crowded, unsafe, and unsanitary. In the housing complexes near the Zones, it is not uncommon to have 10 or 12 women sharing one room, and 30 sharing one toilet. They have to wake up early in the mornings to take turns using the single toilet. But despite the poor conditions, accommodation is not cheap for workers. Running boarding houses has become big business for house owners near the Zones.

A major complaint of garment workers is the excessively long hours they have to work for low pay. The low hourly rate means that they must work many hours, including overtime, in order to bring their total weekly income up to a reasonable living wage. If the wage they received for a normal day's work without overtime were enough to live on, which it generally is not, they would be less willing to work long hours. But this would not be in the interests of the factory owner who needs the ability to require people to work into the night when there are rush orders to fill and a short deadline to meet. But this can be a heavy imposition, particularly for women with families who also have