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## **Women Workers in the Export Ready-made Garments Industry**

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# Women Workers in the Export Ready-Made Garments Industry.

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## **1: Introduction**

An important aspect of the story of India's post liberalization growth has indeed been the drying up of manufacturing sector employment. While the increasing share of services in GDP has made this sector central to the current phase of growth, at the same time, there are concerns that the share of services in creating employment has been relatively lack lustre. Employment in services is typically clustered in the top where there is a demand for skilled, technical manpower, and in the bottom, where labour is employed in unskilled and low paid service jobs. The fact that agriculture's share in GDP has declined steadily, but that large numbers of people continue to be attached to agriculture reflects that the structure of employment in urban areas, is not accessible or attractive to unskilled or semi-skilled rural workers. The lack of growth in manufacturing sector jobs – typically the destination of unskilled workers displaced from agriculture, moving to cities in search of livelihoods -- thus has caused much concern amongst scholars of India ( Hashim: 2009; Sen and Das: 2015). and from time to time drawn the attention of policy makers, without actually generating any serious policy debate. As manufacturing industries turn increasingly towards globally competitive, capital intensive and high technology production, the question that has been asked is whether this trajectory is appropriate in a country where the majority of the workforce is still unskilled and therefore unemployable in technology embodying domains, whether in manufacturing or in services (Abhsan and Narayan:2007). As is well known, unskilled labour in urban areas, many of who are migrants from rural areas, are typically employed in the unregulated construction sector or in the lower rungs of the services sector. In both of these domains, wages and conditions of work are unregulated, work availability is uncertain, and while some social security is in principle available, the governance of it is deeply flawed.

In this context, the emergence of apparels exports as a labour intensive, growing industry and a large employer rings a very optimistic tone. Apparels production was an exclusive domain of the industrially developed countries until the 1970s or 1980s, when the relocation of the industry to less developed countries and China, began, primarily in search of cheaper labour costs in a predominantly labour intensive industry. The significant contribution of the RMG sector in terms of development of exports, as well as generation of employment notwithstanding, the use of a largely female workforce in highly irregular and insecure wage and working conditions, has cast a long shadow on the RMG sector. A critical discourse, emerging from researchers, NGOs, trade unions has increasingly framed this industry, forcing to some extent, the attention of international brands on the unfair conditions in factories across the global south which produce for the global apparels retail. However, ground level conditions, in terms of wages and working conditions, remain poor, and particularly so, in the

absence of collective bargaining mechanisms, and given the indifference of governments and political parties.

The plight of workers, particularly women workers, in the RMG sector has been widely reported, both in popular media and in scholarly work. The industry, as well as the workforce, raise several questions regarding the trajectory of industrial growth in developing countries, which have emerged as major hosts of this global supply chain industry. First, low wages, non-compliance with minimum wages, harsh working conditions and insecure tenures have characterised this industry for a long time. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that the industry definitely plays a very useful role in providing employment to a large number of unskilled women with low levels of education, particularly in a context where factory employment is drying up. In this sense, the RMG sector typifies the situation which the economist Kaushik Basu had posed as the dilemma between poverty and inequality (Basu:2008). In other words, should we support an industrial sector which provides employment, (and therefore addresses the issue of poverty), but at terms and conditions which are highly disadvantageous to the workforce (and therefore generates or escalates inequality). The RMG sector clearly typifies the horns of this dilemma, thrown up by the broader context of globalization which made possible the emergence of this global supply chain in developing countries.

The second important dimension of this industry is its close connection with the issue of female labour force participation. Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR) is an important indicator of development. In India over the preceding two decades, the FLFPR has fallen from 34% in 2006 to 27% in 2018, and is lower only in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Among developing countries, in Sri Lanka, it is 35%, in Bangladesh is 57%. In the developed world, in the U.S. it is 56% and in China 63%, which makes the Indian situation starkly weak, in contrast. While there is increasing concern over falling FLFPR, much of the analysis appears to be misplaced. For example, a frequently cited reason seems to be that rising levels of women's education indicate that women are going into education, rather than into employment. However, the available information regarding female education is itself partially misleading. For example, there is said to be 100% enrolment of girls in elementary education. On the other hand, it is well known that enrolment means very little, in the context of low attendance, high drop-out rates, low learning, low infrastructure. In higher education, the increase in women's participation has been quite unspectacular, from 7.5% in 2002-3 to only 20% in 2012-13, thus casting doubts on the co-relation of low FLFPR with education.

The other set of explanations for a low FLFPR relates to the withdrawal of women from the workforce when they get married. Here the dominant explanatory themes underline patriarchal norms, cultural values of shame if a man's wife works, and so on. However, as is known, where there is grinding poverty, where the man of the house is absent or doesn't earn or doesn't earn enough, where the man has migrated to the city in search of work, women are forced to become part of the labour force, patriarchal norms notwithstanding. The connections between greater prosperity leading women to withdraw from the workforce have not been systematically researched.

There are two points to consider here. If there is a decline in the FLFPR, there is possibly a need to look at this from a different set of lenses, that is, the quality of work available to women. The nature of the RMG industry throws some light on this issue, as a large number of women workers in the RMG sector can be described as footloose, that is, many quit the factory they work in, go into part time domestic work, or take in tailoring work at home. Or, they may spend a year or even more without any work, and ultimately join another RMG company. There is a great deal of horizontal movement between factories, interspersed with workers being without work, or in part time work, or in home based work. Successive surveys which have recorded this instability of the RMG workforce, have also recorded the reasons for it, related predominantly to the nature of the industry, where working conditions are perceived by workers to be highly coercive, and they face a lot of gendered aggression on the shop floor. The point therefore is that the withdrawal of women from the workforce, in this particular sector, is clearly related to the structure and dynamics of the industry much more than to any other factors.

Third, the dynamics of RMG industry are closely related to the issue of migration. The majority of workers in the RMG industry are recent migrants ( GATWU: 2012; Mani:2018). There is a clear distinction between the migrant workforce in this industry in different parts of the country. In north India, particularly in the NCR region, which is a major hub of the RMG sector, the workforce is predominantly male, while in the south, particularly in Karnataka, close to 90% of RMG workers are female. The pattern of migration is expectedly different in these two regions. In Karnataka, women migrant workers in RMG most typically have migrated with family from different parts of Karnataka. For most, the immediate destination or purpose of migration may not have been the RMG sector. However, as part of a low income, unskilled workforce moving from rural areas to Bangalore, frequently with only 10 years or less of school education, many of the women eventually found work in RMG factories. This has been the typical trajectory of women who are employed in the RMG industry in Bangalore. Recently, however, a new trend is seen (discussed in greater detail in section 7) whereby women from other states are working in Bangalore's RMG industry, and while some have come with their families, there is also an emerging pattern of young unmarried women from Orissa, Bihar, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand who come here with the specific purpose of working in RMG sector, and live in hostels put up by the companies themselves. In the NCR region, in contrast, the trajectory of migrants appears to be different as predominantly single men travel from different parts of north India ( U.P, Bihar) to find work in RMG, put in long hours at work, and live in spaces shared by men similarly employed. Many remain in this situation for several years, unable to bring their families to the city because of inadequate wages and high cost of living.

The RMG sector is therefore clearly one which inter-state as well as intra-state migrants use to gain a foothold in the city. It is well known that the large majority of unskilled migrant workers are pushed into the construction sector, where wages are low, working conditions are unregulated and access to social security is minimal. Migrant workers are also found in highly vulnerable occupations such as scrap collection, street selling, service work in low end eateries, street cleaning. In that context, does the RMG sector -- in so far as it fills a vacuum in the rapidly declining scenario of manufacturing sector employment -- provide a viable livelihood

for the typical R-U unskilled worker, particularly women? In the following pages, we provide an outline of the lives of RMG workers, as workers, migrants, women, heads of low income households, and part of the urban underclass.

## **2: Main features of RMG industry in India:**

The RMG industry is a rapidly growing sector. World garments exports jumped from USD 412 billion in 2011 to USD 708 billion in 2014. Currently Asia dominates garments production. The top garment exporting countries are China, Bangladesh, India, Turkey and Vietnam, while top garments importing countries are the European Union, U.S.A., Japan, and Canada. The RMG industry is predominantly labour intensive. Evolving, particularly, at a point in time (late 1980s) when manufacturing sector jobs were rapidly drying up, the RMG sector offers a large and potentially growing domain of factory based employment to an expanding urban workforce. Important features of the industry are a large percentage of female employees, and a globally integrated production and distribution system. The downside is that workers typically work with low wages and insecure working conditions, drawing the critical attention of local unions, international organizations and also of global brands and retailers.

Of the 15 top world exporters of RMG, India (3%) and Bangladesh (5%) are third and second after China (38%). India's exports of RMG increased exponentially from \$8.5 million in 2005-6, to \$40 million in 2014. In 2016, RMG exports constituted 3.5% of total exports from India. While Textiles contribute over 15% of exports from India, the RMG sector contributes over 40% to Textiles exports, employing over 12 million people. The industry operates mainly in the informal sector, with varying degrees of regulation of wages and working hours. While the textile industry is one of the oldest in India, production of ready-made apparels for export is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating to the mid 1980s. There are around 30,000 garment manufacturing companies in India producing just for export. Out of this some 5000 are in the medium to large range. India's exports of RMG in 2005-6 amounted to \$8.5 billion, showing a growth of 29.6% over the previous year and a Compounded Annual Growth rate of 8.8% in the preceding periods since 2000-01 when the total exports of RMG were worth \$5.569 billion. In 2014, textiles and apparel exports from India was \$40 billion, and RMG remained the largest contributor (40%) to total Textiles and Apparels exports from India. About 92% of workers in the RMG sector are in the unorganized sector, 96.57% of women workers are in the unorganized sector, while 86.39% of the men are in the unorganized sector in this industry.

Estimates from government Labour Department sources and from trade unions place the employment in the garment export factories as around 5 lakh workers each in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and the NCR region. Thus, given the total employment in the sector in India is around 20 lakh workers, around three fourth of export production is concentrated in these three regions ( Stotz and Keane: 2015; Deshpande: 2015).

## **3: The RMG industry in Bangalore.**

The garment and apparel manufacturing industry in India is spread over several states, with principal centres being Gurgaon (Uttar Pradesh), Bombay (Maharashtra), Bangalore and

surrounding districts (Karnataka) and Tirupur (Tamil Nadu). Karnataka, and Bangalore in particular, has been a central player in the growth of garments exports in India. In the last three to four decades, Information Technology and Garments exports have been at the forefront of Bangalore's economic growth. The RMG industry, which has an annual business turnover of thousands of crores, is composed of small, medium and large export garment units, employing from 500 to over 50,000 workers. The garment units are spread across locations on the outlying areas of the city such as Peenya, Hosur Road, Mysore Road etc. In recent times, with increasing business and rising costs of running units within Bangalore city, the industry has spread to districts and towns around the City, such as Ramnagaram, Doddaballapur, Nelamangala, Tumkur, Maddur, Mandya, Shivamogga, Hasan and even as far as Mysore. According to Government estimates, there are 900 recognised garment manufacturing units in the city of Bangalore alone, with a total workforce of 355,000. According to Trade Union and NGO estimates, there are over 1500 unit, small and big, employing more than 500,000 people, out of which over 85% are women with an overwhelming number working at the shop floor level.

While large segments of the industry in cities like Delhi and Mumbai still remain tied to outsourcing to home-based production units, in Bangalore the specific character of the industry is that it has been factory based from the beginning, and there is a process underway whereby larger units are emerging, on the basis of acquisitions and mergers; at the same time the industry remains essentially diverse in terms of structure, with a large number of firms employing as few as 50 -100 employees.

Inserted into the global supply chain of apparels production, the RMG industry in Bangalore demonstrates that globalized production processes, while providing employment to unskilled labour, at the same time, produce deep pockets of poverty and deprivation. Regulated, in principle, through a Minimum Wage Board and formal wage revisions, the RMG industry nevertheless employs a workforce which is, largely, non-unionized and footloose. This is also a workforce which is predominantly female, young and first generation migrants to the city. The dynamics of this industry highlights the deeply structural conflicts between this workforce on the one hand, and local producers and global retailers on the other.

#### **4: Wages**

The tailoring industry was brought under the ambit of the Minimum Wages Act (1948) in 1979. Accordingly, the minimum wages in this sector are fixed and revised by a Minimum Wages Board comprising of members from government, industry and trade unions. In principle, a Minimum Wage Board is responsible for the revision of fixation of wages every three years in this sector. However, after the Wage Notification of 2001, there were no revisions, until a Minimum Wage Notification came in 2009. While this Notification brought some much awaited revisions, the industry failed to implement these for over a year. In response to legal proceedings initiated by GATWU, the Labour Department issued a new Notification in March 2010, diluting the provisions of the 2009 Notification. The claim put forward by the Labour Department was that there had been a "clerical error" in the 2009 Notification. GATWU moved the High Court on the 2010 Notification and obtained a judgment quashing the notification. According to GATWU members, by not complying with the 2009 Notification, without even

a challenge in court against the notification, the industry clearly violated the Minimum Wages Act<sup>1</sup>. However, as will be seen from T-1, since 2010, minimum wages have been regularly revised in the RMG sector.

The implementation of minimum wages in this sector has remained faulty, and the stipulated minimum wage itself remains below that of other categories of scheduled employments. A survey conducted by the Garments and Textiles Workers Union in 2012 revealed that amongst skilled workers the average salary drawn was Rs 4502 (the minimum wage was Rs 4240), thus indicating that many were getting much more than the minimum wage. Amongst unskilled workers, however, as many as 45% were receiving less than Rs. 4056, which was the minimum wage at that time. More recent information on wages received, drawn from a survey of 117 workers, is presented in table 2 below<sup>2</sup>.

#### T-1 Minimum wages

	Skilled per day	Skilled per month	Unskilled per day	Unskilled per month
2010	166	4238	156	4056
2013	282	7072	272	7332
2015-16	307	7982	287	7462

Source: Survey of 117 RMG women workers conducted by author through GATWU, August 2016.

#### T-2. Wages received

	Frequency	Percent
Up to 7000	25	21.4
7000-7500	28	23.9
7500-8000	29	24.8
8000-8500	18	15.4
8500-9000	12	10.3
9000 and above	5	4.3
Total	117	1100.0

Source: Survey of 117 RMG women workers conducted by author through GATWU, August 2016.

This survey does not provide the break up between skilled and unskilled workers. However, one can assume that those in the bottom-most categories were unskilled, wherein, if Rs. 7462 is the minimum wage, 21.4 % were receiving below Rs 7000. which is well below the minimum wage, and 23.9% were receiving in the range below to just above the minimum wage (7000-7500). 25% were getting just above the minimum wage in both categories, while 30% were receiving above the minimum wage for skilled workers. These findings confirm our earlier studies where it was found that about 28% workers received below the stipulated minimum wage ( RoyChowdhury:2010, 2015). The 2016 survey also found that around 45% of workers do not get paid for overtime. A more recent survey conducted in Bangalore, and surrounding

areas found that the average wage for RMG workers is Rs. 8000 per month. Interestingly, the same study found that the average wage in RMG sector in the NCR region currently to be around Rs.11,000. In the NCR region, the workforce in RMG is predominantly male and working hours are much longer. While the working hours in Bangalore are in the range of 48-60 hours per week, in the NCR region it is 68 to 80 hours per week, according to the survey ( Mani:2018.)

The Karnataka government had issued a preliminary Minimum Wage Notification for the garments sector on 22-2-18. This had brought the minimum wage in the garment sector up to Rs 15,000 per month. However, in the first week of April, 2018, the government withdrew the Notification.. The reason given was that in their representations to the government, factory owners had stated that the increased minimum wage would make garments manufacturing non-competitive in Karnataka. This recent case of withdrawal, as well as similar instances which had happened earlier, (mentioned above) clearly indicates the state's closeness to and compliance with the industry, and signals a clear pattern of state indifference to the plight of RMG workers.

While the minimum wage is not available to close to 25% of the workers, what needs to be highlighted is that the minimum wage itself is a deeply contested construct. A recent report "Critiquing the Statutory Minimum Wage: a Case of the Export Garment Sector in India", provides a discussion of the ways in which the statutory minimum wage fails to take account of certain realities of garments workers lives ( Mani:2018) . For example, in the computation of the minimum wage, house rent is considered as Rs 600 per month, whereas in fact, the rent for a one bed room accommodation, even in the EWS (economically weaker sections neighbourhoods)is nothing less than Rs.3500, and can easily cost Rs.6,500. Similarly, in order to define the minimum wage, the family size is assumed to be composed of one earning adult, one dependent adult and two dependent children. The study highlights that a significant number ( 19 out of 85 respondents) reported as having 5-7 members.

Going beyond these technical issues in computation of a minimum wage, it is important to highlight that frequently the RMG worker is the sole wage earner. While the average wage earned was Rs.8000 per month, 14 respondents from a sample of 85 ( in the study mentioned above) reported that they were the sole wage earners in their family. In this group, eleven of the women had dependent children, eight were the sole adult member of the household, ten were in the age group of 40-50, and one was as young as 28. Most of these women, the study reports, inherited the responsibility of bringing up their families on their own at a relatively young age. Apart from single women headed households, it needs to be highlighted that RMG women workers even when they are part of a household in which ostensibly there are two incomes, in reality are often single earners, or are often called upon to be the sole providers in situations where their husbands do not have a regular income, or, as is frequently the case, may have an income which they don't bring home as they may have one or other addiction. Thus in successive surveys, RMG women have reported that they need to augment their income from the factory with extra income which they get through other work, such as stringing and selling garlands, taking in additional tailoring work at home, and so on. These considerations, drawn



from systematic observations of workers over a period of time, indicate that the minimum wage is not designed to meet the real needs of workers.

### 5: A footloose workforce ?

Earlier research has recorded that the garments industry is marked by a high rate of turn-over, quick movement from one factory to another, as well as movement from RMG to other, often even less paid, but work which is less strenuous and stressful. My recent research confirmed these trends. It was found that only 22% had worked in their present factory of employment for more than 7 years, whereas 65% had worked in present factory of employment for less than 7 years (T-3). Almost 60% had worked in other garment factories before they came to their present employment (T-4). The industry as a whole is marked by quick turn overs. The reasons for movement were varied. However, as T-5 shows, for close to 15% of the women, harassment, low salary and lack of promotions were reasons for shifting factories or for leaving the industry, while for 7.7% the company's closure was responsible for their exit. Thus together, for 22.2%, factors related to the structure of the industry were responsible for the workers moving out of their employment in a particular factory, or in the industry. Notably, 41% of the women did not wish to give a reason for their exit, which may have to do with the fact that they did not wish to talk about harassment in the workplace and its specific forms. Coercive supervisors, a highly regimented work environment where the worker's every moment is under surveillance, as well as sexual harassments are widely recorded features of the RMG sector. In a recent interview, a member of the GATWU described the experience of women workers in RMG factories as "production torture".

T-3: Frequency distribution of number of years working in current garments factory

	Frequency	Percent
Up to 1 year	14	12
1-3 years	24	20.5
3-5 years	29	24.8
5-7 years	24	20.5
7-10 years	14	12.0
10-15 years	8	6.8
Above 15 years	4	3.4

Source: Author's Survey, 2016.

T-4 Worked in other garment company

	Frequency	Per Cent
Yes	69	59.0
No	48	41.0
total	117	110

Source: Author's survey, 2016.

T-5. Reasons for shifting to other factories or out of the industry

	Frequency	Percentage
Marriage and child care	15	12.8
Health	3	2.6
Distance	11	9.4
Family and personal problems	7	6.0
Harassment	4	3.4
Less salary	9	7.7
No promotion	4	3.4
Closure of company	9	7.7
Others	7	6.0
No answer	48	41
Total	117	110

Source: Author's survey, 2016.

### **6: Health, hygiene, shop floor coercion and “fear”.**

A repeated complaint from workers, reported in several studies, has been over the lack of basic physical amenities in the workplace. Many women reported not only about the lack of proper toilets, but the time constraint in being allowed to use the toilet. Many complained that the latches to the toilets were broken and were not repaired despite repeated complaints in this regard. There were instances of when a woman goes to use the washroom, a security person is sent behind her to note the timings and make sure she comes back soon. If she does not, the matter is reported to the management and a warning is issued. Further, the manager's and supervisor's offices are located opposite the bathroom so that they can keep a check on the amount of time spent on a bathroom break (Mani:2018).

Garment workers are vulnerable to several occupational health hazards: back ache, head ache, knee pain, asthma and menstrual problems, caused by the hazardous nature of work performed by them. This requires them to take regular medical treatment. Although it is mandatory for any factory which employs more than 500 workers, to ensure the provision of a nurse, Doctor, ambulance, these are not provided. Workers from Shahi Exports at Maddur reported that although a nurse was present at the factory, very few medicines were available with her and for any ailment, and only pain killers were provided. No ambulance, doctor, or other emergency health assistance was available. Despite the availability of a resting room, the nurse discourages the workers from using it beyond ten minutes. A garment worker from Gokuldas Exports (Triangle Apparels) at Gorguntepalya, Tumkur road, reported that the nursing room in the factory had no medicines; she has witnessed workers collapsing from exhaustion and fever on the floor, yet they were given no medical treatment but were sent back home, losing their day's wages. Further, workers also spoke about the difficulties faced by them in accessing treatment under the Employees State Insurance Scheme (ESI). Most women garment workers reported

that the ESI hospitals did not function properly, as a result of which they were forced to seek medical assistance from private hospitals, and bear the expenses of the same. ( Mani:2018).

Framing these very obvious gaps in the physical infrastructure of what is available to garments workers, is a broader environment of coercion, fear and force that attends the everyday work life of a woman in a garments factory. Stiff and non-negotiable production targets set the tone of the day, every day, and it is this target that determines their time at the toilet, at lunch, that brings on the floor supervisor's fury if a worker fails to reach the target.

Closely interwoven with this "production torture", (PUCL:2018) as the workers call it, is the dimension of gender, wherein, in every factory, a group of vulnerable women face a hierarchy of male managers – the In-Charge, the floor supervisor, Unit HR, the HR General Manager, and finally, the top level Directors and General Managers. The enforcement of production targets that happens through this hierarchy, very often involves gendered aggression by male supervisors, in the use of objectionable language, aggressive body language, physical punishment such as making a woman stand for hours without giving her work, or pushing a table or instrument at her in anger, sexually suggestive comments and behaviour, and occasionally, demands for sexual favours. This combination of tough production targets (enforced through shouting, intimidation, humiliation, punishment) and a gendered atmosphere facilitating sexual harassment of both overt and indirect forms, thus creates a situation where few women survive in the same company for more than a few years.

In turn, the high rate of worker turnover produces a malleable and subservient workforce. Being first generation, rural or semi-rural young women workers, they lack the history and language of resistance to management. A culture of subservience generally prevails; resentment and bitterness rarely get expressed as resistance or complaints to management, and does not get across to visiting inspectors, from brands, or from the government, who typically receive uncritical testimonies by compliant worker representatives.

#### 7: Out-of-state migrants in the RMG industry

Recent research conducted in Bangalore reveals that many of the factories are now hiring women workers who have come in from other states<sup>3</sup>. Bihar, Orissa, West Bengal and Chattisgarh appear to be mainly the states from which garments workers are being drawn. The difference between migrants from other parts of Karnataka, and out of state women workers seems to be that in the case of the latter, the garments industry appears to be the specific destination. Of a group of 25 women drawn mainly from Bihar and Orissa, there appeared to be two streams. About 10 were married, and had come to Bangalore accompanied by their husbands and family. The women were aged between 25 to 43. The circumstances in which they took the decision to make this move was a combination of extreme poverty in the village of origin, and the fact that they had heard that women could find work in the garments industry in Bangalore.

***"We were in trouble. Our crops failed and we reached the condition where we couldn't afford a meal. There were not many job opportunities in our villages too. When the family's***

*existence became difficult with only our husbands income, we felt the need to work. But in our villages, women are not allowed to leave the house without the Ghoonghat, then how can we work and support our family. Hence, we decided to move out to earn a living and take care of our family's needs,"* ( Focus Group Discussion held at Bomanhalli) .

In this group, though the women had migrated at different points in time, one as early as nine years back, the reasons for the move were the same for all of them. As several were from the same village, and the same community, the information about opportunities in Bangalore garments industry had circulated quite effectively amongst the women and the households. The decision to migrate had been taken by their husband. In some cases, their husbands had migrated to Bangalore first, and then after understanding the possibilities of work opportunities for women, they brought their wife and children to Bangalore. The husbands of these women worked as tailors or checkers in the garments factories, or were working as construction labourers. In moving to Bangalore, their only thought had been to find a solution to hunger and poverty. Their sense of alienation in a strange city was compounded in the workplace, where language was an important element in their feelings of fear, and threat from the supervisor. Lack of communication and the inability to understand instructions often led to supervisors shouting at them, and the strangeness of the language made this even worse. The workers reported that they would not mind being hit instead of being subjected to foul language. Thus, language is a big concern in their work life. Regarding the desire to continue with this work, the workers said that they are not educated and hence they have to continue working to meet the needs of their families. If there were similar opportunities in their village, they would not have considered migrating to another place for earning. None of them want to settle in Bangalore because their family is in their village. They all cherish dreams of “going back home and living in peace”.

Having migrated with their families, these women obviously had the support of their husbands and the comforting sense of being at home, once they were out of the factory. A very different situation marked the lives of a group of 15 young women, aged between 18 to 23, who have migrated alone ( that is, not with families). They live in rented flats, or in what they called hostels. The accommodation had been rented by the company that they worked for, and the girls had to pay Rs 500 each towards rent. Interestingly, each of the girls had more or less the same story to relate. Mostly hailing from a village in Orissa called Noapara, or from Rohtas, a village in Bihar, the women were educated up to 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> class. After that they had received two months of free training from the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY) at Bhubaneshwar and Patna. After completion of the training, they were met by a HR official of the company in Bangalore that they now work for. Formally recruited by this official, the women were then given train tickets, received at Bangalore station and put up in their present accommodation. The shared accommodation ranged from three to ten women per room, depending upon the size of the room. While rent was subsidized by the company, the women were responsible for their own food, for which a kitchen was provided.

The socio economic position of these young women leave many questions unanswered for development scholars and practitioners. Each of them was either from the scheduled caste or

tribe. In terms of education most had studied up to class IX, some up to class XII, and one was a graduate.. The two month training which they had received culminated in this job, which if they could complete six months would get them a certificate. With this certificate, in principle, they could move elsewhere or back to their home villages. However, the garments industry is confined to a few cities in the north and the south, and not found in the eastern states where these women come from. There are two points to highlight here, first, from the supply side, the economic vulnerabilities of rural households in states like Bihar and Odissa provides the context whereby a large and continuous supply of unskilled labour is made available by means of a minimal intervention of two months of skilling. It was clear from the discussions that the women are in the Garments sector in Bangalore as there were no other opportunities for them in their home states. Therefore, given the conditions described above, (low wages and coercive working conditions) it is not unsurprising that many would eventually leave. Second, in terms of the demand side, it was clear that this pattern of migration had an element of design and push, in so far as the skilling was imparted to meet the needs of this industry, and the post skilling six months of employment ensured that a trained workforce would be available during that time, and if and when some leave, as they inevitably do, it would be replaced by a fresh group of trained workers. Thus through this pattern of planned migration, the industry's continuous needs of a workforce was being met. It must be remembered that labour shortage is a perennially reported problem as far as industry managers are concerned, given high turnover and a foot loose workforce. Additionally, recent studies have found that the average age of women RMG workers in Karnataka is around 35, and a significant number of the workforce are women in the older age group of 40-50 years. This conforms to the views of trade unions and company management that the garments sector in Bangalore finds it difficult to attract younger workers in the city. Younger women prefer employment in the services sector where work and supervisor pressure is less and wages are slightly higher. The planned supply of a young, female, out-of-state migrant workforce also ensured to factory managers a relatively compliant set of workers thus allowing the industry to continue with the kind of wage and working condition practices that are detrimental to worker interests, as described above.

In any discussion of labour shortage in RMG sector, it should be remembered that this is still an industry where 25-28% of the workers do not get the minimum wage, and most studies show that even the minimum wage, when translated into household per capita income, (assuming single earner) would itself represent just a subsistence income. Additionally, one would expect that if there is a genuine shortage of labour, the workforce as well as trade unions in the industry would be empowered to press for higher wages. In this particular context, we find that neither the market (that is the economics of supply and demand) nor activism has helped the workforce to bargain for higher wages, or for adequate implementation of the Minimum Wage. Therefore, where the so-called labour shortage is clearly not translating itself to higher returns to labour, this highlights the need to take a closer look at the actual nature of labour shortage in this sector. In the first place, it is important to underline, that labour attrition is taking place more in the categories of unskilled labour than in skilled tailor categories. And we find that wages earned by skilled tailors are frequently higher than the minimum wage in this category (GATWU:2012). Therefore, higher levels of skills and wages are clearly making a difference in terms of a more stable workforce in the tailor categories. In the unskilled categories, pull

factors – increasing opportunities in retail, ITES, receptionist/clerk jobs -- have attracted young women away from the RMG sector. However, it should be remembered that the expansion of such opportunities has happened significantly in South and Central Bangalore, whereas in the northern part so of the city, Yashwantpur, Peenya, RMG still remains the only one of two work option for unskilled women, the other being domestic service. Therefore, there is in fact a large actual and potential workforce still available for unskilled work in this sector, which explains continuing low wages and non-compliance with minimum wages. The instability of labour in this sector then is better described as labour turn-over than as labour shortage, that is, while many leave the industry, they are continuously replaced by the available labour force outside. The reasons for leaving the industry are largely internal to the industry itself, that is, low wages, harsh production targets, underpaid overtime work, coercive supervisors. These characteristic features of the industry have been discussed many times in the literature on RMG. The point to be underlined here is that typically labour shortage pushes wages up, both as a function of the market and as a result of workers' increased bargaining leverage, which has not happened in the case of RMG workers. In this case, then, a high turn-over, needs to be seen in terms of the exploitative nature of this global supply chain (GSR:2013). What describes the situation is workforce instability rather than labour shortage.

## **8: Collective Action in the Garments Sector**

The Garments and Textiles Workers Union, (GATWU), affiliated to a national level organization of the same name, is the largest trade union in the RMG sector in Bangalore. The other two trade unions in this sector are : the Garments Labour Union, (GLU) and the Karnataka Garments Workers Union. Each of these trade unions has a history of originating from NGOs. It is important to highlight that in the early years of Ready Made Garments exports in Bangalore, workers issues in this sector were primarily addressed by NGOs. Foremost among these was CIVIDEP ( Civil Initiatives for Development). FEDINA, another city-based NGO has also been active in this sector. CIVIDEP, which combines leaders drawn from middle class activists with former RMG workers, provided significant leadership in the initial years, that is, from the later 1980s onwards. The primary concern of this NGO was to organize RMG women workers, focusing on their residential neighbourhoods. The organization deliberately kept away from the factories, did not directly address wage related issues, and focused instead on activities pertaining to credit/basic amenities/awareness raising, and so on. Subsequently, there was a perceived need for imparting a more unionized character to workers issues, leading to the formation of the GATWU in the mid 1990s.

GATWU has a national level presence and is affiliated to the New Trade Union Initiatives (NTUI), which is a national level umbrella organization for unions working with informal sector workers. In Bangalore, GATWU works mainly on wage and work-related issues. As union presence is not allowed within factories, most women workers are reluctant to engage in union-like activities. Collective bargaining is unknown in this sector. GATWU is the largest union in Bangalore in this sector; GATWU's membership currently stands at around 6000 only, which is a miniscule proportion of the total number of women employed in Bangalore's RMG industry<sup>4</sup>. GATWU's functioning must be seen within the framework of these constraints.

As indicated in section 3, 21% of the RMG workforce continue to receive wages below the stipulated minimum. The RMG industry thus could be characterized as one where a framework of government regulations has been put in place, through the Minimum Wage Act and the Minimum Wage Board, but the implementation of this is hugely flawed. The efforts of the GATWU have been towards establishing a space for collective bargaining. These efforts, however, are confined to negotiations with the Labour Department, being part of the Wage Board, or, taking up these issues in court. An important achievement for the GATWU in recent years has been the securing of DA for workers who are paid above the minimum wage. Over the years, GATWU's most significant contribution has been to maintain a steady pressure for the upward revision of the minimum wage. In this it has been successful, that the minimum wages have been raised in both skilled and unskilled categories. The implementation of minimum wages remains, however, incomplete, as 21% in our sample were receiving less than the minimum wage, and 23% were receiving in the range of, 7000- 7500, which is also low considering that Rs. 7462 was the minimum wage. (In this context it is relevant to mention that in Karnataka in 23 scheduled employments the minimum wage has already been raised to Rs 10,000). However, as trade unions are not allowed to function from within the factories, the Union is handicapped in having no recourse to traditional collective bargaining mechanisms.

The constraints to collective bargaining are given in the broader politics of trade unionism, as well as in the structure of the industry. Mainstream left trade unions such as the CITU have not engaged in a sustained manner with grassroots issues in the RMG sector. For GATWU, the principal protagonist for RMG women, local level struggles are centred around specific, sector or unit level issues, such as implementation of minimum wage in a particular factory, or protesting sudden dismissals or termination of individual workers. Such struggles are not linked to larger political mobilizations. Local struggles, then, are defined more in terms of advocacy at the level of government departments. In the absence of alliances with other unions and political parties, such struggles do not translate into an imagination of a moment of political resistance.

In terms of the structure, the industry demonstrates conflicting tendencies. On the one hand, as has been mentioned before, there are signs of the growth of mega companies and a certain degree of centralization and concentration is taking place<sup>5</sup>. Along with these features, in response to the industrial recession in the west and reduction of orders, the industry has moved towards "just in time" production, smaller orders, shorter, more flexible delivery times. In this situation, it makes sense for the industry to move increasingly towards a flexible labour force, using home based, piece rated workers, in other words, adopting outsourcing as an employment practice. Thus even the largest companies hire up to 10-15% piece rate workers for short durations ( Mani:2012).

Thus the structure of the industry is marked by a predominantly non-unionized factory based workforce, and additionally a workforce that is invisible, given its location outside of the factory, primarily in homes. Given the political as well as the structural constraints to collective action, the future of activism in this sector possibly lies in the small, albeit valuable steps, taken by the GATWU so far.

In this context, it is important to mention that GATWU's strategy of organizing has, over the years, been impacted upon by the constituency that it handles. One of the biggest hurdles for the union has in fact been the small numbers of workers who are ready to be unionized. Of the close to 4 lakh workers in Bangalore, around 6-7000 are actually unionized. For many years GATWU had pursued a strategy of active efforts at unionization. This involved both efforts to talk to women workers outside the factory gates, and to locate them in their homes in order to enlist their membership. Primarily in response to the low record of unionization, the GATWU has now changed its strategy and no longer engages in direct efforts at unionization. Instead, the strategy is to locate women workers who may play leadership roles on the shop floor, and to train them in ways in which they can communicate the value of unionization to their fellow workers and thus increase the scope of unionization. GATWU has in that sense stepped back from direct involvement with women workers, and instead is relying upon a core set of leader-workers in each factory to spread the message of unionization. It should be mentioned that low level of unionization is at least partially a consequence of the fact that union activities are not permitted inside the factory gates. The only way to approach the women workers was to talk to them outside the factory gates, or to meet them in their homes. Women workers are typically in a rush to get home, and once at home they are typically caught up in multiple commitments in terms of house work and family members. As such, the biggest challenge to the union, given the predominantly female constituency, was to set up the time and the space in which the women could be engaged in conversations about workers issues, membership of the unions and so on.

A second reason why the strategy has been changed -- from direct dialogue with workers to reliance on worker-leaders -- is that GATWU no longer has any full time activists. In 2010, a serious internal conflict situation within the CIVIDEP led to the splitting of GATWU away from the NGO. Thereafter CIVIDEP floated a second trade union, the Garments Labour Union (GLU). GATWU, now delinked from sources of funding which came from the NGO sector, has considerably diminished resources, both in terms of finances and manpower, as indicated above. But more importantly, given the existing constraints to unionization, the emergence of two rival trade unions resulted in further fragmentation and weakening of the unionization endeavour. It was also mentioned that a workforce which is already shy of union activities, is rendered further confused when they are approached by two rival unions for membership and loyalties<sup>6</sup>.

This paper has provided a broad outline of the socio economic and occupational situation of women employees in the RMG industry, drawing from field research conducted in Bangalore, as well as from studies of RMG workers in other locales. The RMG industry provides much needed employment to unskilled women migrating to cities in search of work and income. However, the unregulated nature of the industry and a largely non-unionized workforce, create conditions wherein low wages and unacceptable working conditions continue to plague the industry.



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<sup>1</sup> interviews with Mohan Mani, member, New Trade Union Initiative of India, and Shri Jayram, General Secretary, GATWU, Bangalore, August-Dec, 2016, April-May, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> This survey was conducted in August 2016 by the author, with the help of GATWU, Bangalore. Respondents were selected from members of GATWU who are currently employed in the RMG industry in Bangalore. Respondents were drawn mainly from Shahi Exports as well as from smaller companies in the Mysore Road area.

<sup>3</sup> The information and analysis in this section draws on discussions held at the GATWU offices in April-May 2018 with Mr. Mohan Mani, Mr Jayram and Sm Pratibha of the GATWU, and in two Focus Group Discussions with migrant women workers from Bihar and Orissa at Bomanhalli and Rajarajeswarinagar on 30.4.18 and 18/5/18

<sup>4</sup> The other two unions, The Garment Labour Union and the Karnataka Garments Workers Union each have around 2000 members.

<sup>5</sup> Six of the largest RMG companies, Bombay Rayons, Gokaldas Exports, Gokaldas Images, Texport Garments, Shahi Exports and Sonal Garments, together employ one third of the total strength of RMG workers in Bangalore. Bombay Rayons and Gokaldas Exports together employ 50,000 workers, with an annual combined turnover of Rs. 3500 crores.

<sup>6</sup> Trade unions in this sector increasingly rely on retailers' pressure and global NGO-led movements to ensure compliance. See de Neeve:2009.

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