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**Labour – Intensive Industries But Units Without ‘Workers’:  
Where Will ILO’s Social Dialogue Begin?**

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## **Abstract**

As part of its exercise to operationalize its core conventions the ILO has initiated what it calls a process of "promoting social dialogue". Social dialogue plays a pivotal role in identifying the important labour and social issues of the ILO's constituents. Most importantly, the ILO's fundamental principles and rights at work, and particularly the right to associate and to bargain collectively, are the *preconditions* for social dialogue.

This paper attempts at a critique of the ILO's social dialogue position and argues that the *preconditions* to even begin such a process lies in pressurizing governments and employers to change their methodology and terms of project appraisal to include minimum norms of employment and environment when setting up units of production, whether in free trade zones or outside. The attempt to increase labour's capacity to associate and bargain collectively is futile in a context where large numbers of workers do not have even the minimum recognition as a 'worker'. Based on a set of field-based studies conducted in the last five years in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and based on our specific exploration into the terms and conditions of employment of (women) garment workers in the Madras Export Processing Zone, this paper aims at an interrogation of what passes for industrial development, employment generation and gender justice in the country.

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## **Labour-Intensive Industries But Units Without 'Workers': Where Will ILO's Social Dialogue Begin?**

### **I The Context:**

The changing nature and range of issues that many developing countries, including India, are experiencing in the period of globalization in particular, raise several issues of concern that state and civil society organizations are grappling with. The first is the *growth dilemma*. The need for economic growth is not disputed but the resolution to the problem of a growth that is jobless and unsustainable still eludes us. The second is the *work dilemma*. Our societies are increasingly unable to provide employments in large numbers; worse, existing protected [howsoever inadequate] employment is rapidly acquiring a flexible character, which in our context means underpaid, insecure, unprotected employment. The third and equally important issue is the perception of *ill-being* that is increasingly becoming manifest in several ways – in macro-level indicators and in micro-level qualitative studies. The need to address all of the above from a gender perspective is also important because of the differential impact of policies and practices on men and women at all levels (macro and micro) and in all spheres (public and private).

One way in which countries of the South in particular have sought to augment foreign exchange earnings and simultaneously provide employment is by attracting foreign investment/foreign collaboration in specially constituted Export Processing Zones. This scheme has been in operation for over twenty years now in most countries. In the nineties, issues surrounding Intellectual Property Rights, Quality conditionalities under the WTO regime and the proposed abolition of the Multi-Fibre Arrangement in 2004 have already awakened South Asian governments, who are now increasingly competing with each other in offering incentives and privileges to attract investments and entrepreneurs. A direct but adverse fall-out of this competition to attract investment and increase share in global market is the dilution of and departure from basic labour and environment standards.

At a more general level, the minimum labour standards have been translated into 'Core Conventions' by the ILO and deal with:

1. the right to organize and bargain collectively;



2. the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
3. the abolition of child labour; and
4. the elimination of discrimination in employment and occupation.

Of these it would appear that the ILO considers the convention dealing with right to organize and bargain collectively the most basic of the principles underlying its work.

“It is easy to see why the ILO considers these Conventions to be fundamental: if workers are free to organize themselves and bargain collectively, they can win any other rights. If the conventions are implemented in India, they would abolish the non-bargainable category in the organized category as well as rule out the systematic victimization of workers who try to form or join unions in the unorganized sector” (Hensman, 2000: 1248).

As part of its exercise to operationalize its core conventions the ILO has initiated what it calls a process of “promoting social dialogue”: “Social dialogue plays a pivotal role in identifying the important labour and social issues of the ILO’s constituents. Most importantly, the ILO’s fundamental principles and rights at work, and particularly the right to associate and to bargain collectively, are the *preconditions* for social dialogue. However, they also require the effective operation of social dialogue for them to be fully realized. Thus the rights are intertwined with the process. The rights cannot be realized without the capacity of the government and social partners to practice their rights and without the institutional framework for dialogue to make it possible for these rights to be realized in specific circumstances. Nor can social dialogue operate effectively without a respect for adherence to these rights in practice” (ILO, 2001).

This paper attempts at a critique of the ILO’s social dialogue position and argues that the *preconditions* to even begin such a process lies in pressurizing governments and employers to change their methodology and terms of project appraisal to include minimum norms of employment and environment when setting up units of production, whether in free trade zones or outside. The attempt to increase labour’s capacity to associate and bargain collectively is futile in a context where large numbers of workers do not have even the minimum recognition as a ‘worker’. Based on a set of field-based studies conducted in the last five years in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and based on our specific exploration into the terms and conditions of employment of (women)



garment workers in the Madras Export Processing Zone, this paper aims at an interrogation of what passes for industrial development, employment generation and gender justice in the country. This paper is structured as follows:

- (i) A brief discussion of the need for bringing in the organizational structure of industries into our understanding of the nature of labour deployment;
- (ii) A more elaborate explication of the nature of employment, terms and conditions of work, the health impact of work – all based on the perceptions of the workers; and
- (iii) Reflections on the policy implications of the whole exercise.

## **II The Organizational Structure of Export-Oriented Industries: More Questions, Less Light**

Very briefly, a point that every student of Indian economy is familiar with is the fact that our top export earning industries are predominantly and relatively small in terms of scales of production and also labour-intensive industries, be it garments, leather, gems and jewellery, etc. But issues regarding this sector that are very little understood and researched, which lacuna, nevertheless, has not deterred the periodic enactment of all kinds of policies (uncoordinated by hindsight), are as follows: For example, if we take the export garment industry,

- a) Have we mapped the industry geographically, technologically, raw material/input-wise? Do we have a comprehensive understanding of the different forms of units that make up a production process within a geographical area, etc?
- b) What, for example, is the size and nature of employment generated, the skill level of such employment, the duration of employment, the sexual division of labour in the industry and in units making up the industry?
- c) How often have we attempted to link the *social base* of the industry to its economic operations? If so, what impact (adverse or benign) does the social base have on the functioning of the industry?
- d) What is the nature of the linkage of the industry with the global market and how has the latter impacted on the governance structure and performance of the units in the domestic economy?



We will dwell at some length on point (d) since it has crucial relevance for (i) the on-going functioning of existing units directly addressing the global market; (ii) the long-term sustainability of the industry concerned in its current organizational form; and (iii) the manner in which the industry *internally* translates its attempts to maintain international competitiveness. This internal translation has important implications for, and impact on, labour.

A useful way to understand the location of domestic industry in the international arena is to employ the schema outlined by Gereffi and Korzeniewicz (1990) called the 'global commodity chain'. Here, production capacity is dispersed to an unprecedented number of developing as well as industrialized countries. Utilizing the concept of a 'commodity chain', the authors state that:

One must follow two steps in building such a chain. First, to delineate the anatomy of the chain, one typically starts with the final production operation for a consumable good and moves sequentially backward until one reaches the raw material inputs. The second step in constructing a commodity chain involves identifying four properties for each operation or node in the chain (except for labour): (1) the commodity flows to and from the node and those operations that occur immediately prior to and after it; (2) the relations of production, i.e., forms of the labour force; (3) the dominant organization of production, including technology and the scale of the production unit; and (4) the geographic loci of the operation in question (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz 1990:50).

The implications of using the commodity chain model lies in the fact that, it enables us to detect where economic surplus is concentrated in a global economy. "A corollary of this fact, however, is that the main source of economic surplus generally is not at the production stage but rather at the last stage of the chain, where service activities predominate (that is, the marketing and retailing of garments)" (Gereffi and Korzeniewicz, 1990:50). Product differentiation by means of heavily advertised brand names and the use of diverse retail outlets allow core-country firms, rather than those in the periphery and semi periphery to corner the lion's share of economic rents in the industry. Even within the Third World, Gereffi (1992:106) stresses the need to differentiate the role played by each country in the world economy. The *commercial-subcontracting* role to which, we believe, much of Indian export-oriented industries



belong, refers to the production of finished consumer goods by locally owned firms, while the output is distributed and marketed by large chain retailers and their agents.

Our purpose in introducing the 'commodity chain' model into our analysis is to focus on the growth path chosen by industries and countries. At one end is the 'high road' or 'strong competition' path synonymous with innovation, high quality, functional flexibility and good working conditions. At the other, is the 'low road' or 'weak competition' path marked by lack of innovation, low quality products, numerical labour flexibility and cheap labour (Sengenberger and Pyke, 1991). The reality often cuts across this distinction in two ways: some industries share aspects of both growth patterns notably innovation and cheap labour, often within the same firms; or they include some firms which have embarked on the innovation/quality path and others which rely entirely on using cheapest workers and materials (Schmitz and Nadvi, 1993). Countries like India (who are at the low end of most commodity chains), in their zeal to continue in the chain and also enhance their export earnings, often adopt the 'low road' strategy as far as their labour is concerned. This consists in squeezing out the maximum from an already low wage-earning workforce working under abysmal, unhealthy and hazardous conditions.

A second point regarding organizational structure that needs to be highlighted (since it has implications for our subsequent discussion on Policy) is that, not all units of production making up the industry are unregistered and certainly not the units that have been set up in the Export Processing Zones. And yet, a significant proportion of the labour employed in these registered units (and almost all women) are informally employed in the sense, they have no formal 'worker' status to enable them to even begin the process of dialoguing socially. It is to a discussion of the nature, terms and conditions of such employment that we will now turn.



### III Status, Security and Social Protection: Pipe Dream for Labour?

#### III.1 General Remarks

We begin with an examination of the nature of employment increasingly being generated in the economy and the implications this has for the workforce in particular and for the poor in general.

Here we draw liberally from the works of Ghosh (2000), Nagaraj (2001) and Unni (2001). Constraints of comparability of data across countries notwithstanding, Ghosh (2000) takes a critical look at the thesis that, production shifts in manufacturing and associated job losses in one part of the world, (namely the developed world), have moved elsewhere (namely the developing world), particularly since the latter is the recipient of manufacturing production relocation. Ghosh juxtaposes this thesis with the actual experience of the vast majority of the developing countries who have experienced very substantial losses in manufacturing employment through the process of greater openness and integration of capital markets [through finance] and goods markets [through trade]. Ghosh presents calculations of the employment intensity of *aggregate* manufacturing value added (based on ILO data) for selected developing and developed countries (ibid, 2000:8). She finds that the employment elasticities emerging from this data set are all close to zero, and that there is very little to choose across such countries; further, she does not find any clear evidence of *increases* in such intensity in developing countries or *declines* in developed countries. Further and more important, for the set of Asian countries studied by her, Ghosh finds that, with few exceptions, the sectors that have been growing rapidly in terms of value added are those with low employment elasticity. Conversely, the sectors that generate more employment at the margin are those that have not been growing very fast in terms of value added (ibid, 2000:8).

Nagaraj (2000) and Unni (2001) have examined the overall trends in employment as well as the quality of employment obtaining in the Indian economy. Nagaraj's (2000) analysis shows that since 1973-74, there has been an economy-wide decline in the employment elasticity of output with the fall being more pronounced in the secondary and tertiary sectors. In short, the labour absorption capacity of the economy has reduced. Again, while there has been some diversification of rural workforce into non-farm



activities especially in the 1980s, Nagaraj finds no evidence of a sustained reduction in unemployment levels, howsoever measured. On the contrary he finds a distinct deterioration in the quality of employment. To quote Nagaraj,

Between 1977-78 and 1993-94, the share of

- the organized sector in total workforce declined from 8.7 per cent to 8.1 per cent;
- wage employment in the unorganized sector went up from 6.6 per cent to 7 per cent;
- self-employed in total workforce declined from 56.5 per cent to 51.7 per cent, and
- casual wage employment went up from 28.2 per cent to 33.2 per cent (Nagaraj, 2000:13).

Complementing Nagaraj's analysis above is Jeemol Unni's (2001) study on 'Gender and Informality in Labour Market in South Asia' which examines the concept and provides evidence of the growing informalization of the labour force in South Asian countries. Unni identifies two broad components of the informal economy, namely, non-wage employment and wage employment. She found the component of non-wage employment in non-agriculture work to be the most prominent in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. Non-wage employment in India comprises a large proportion of home-based workers and street vendors, particularly in cities.

The second component of the informal economy (namely, wage employment), Unni notes, is more difficult to distinguish clearly. For one, she found an increasing proportion of casual employees in India and Bangladesh. A significant process identified by Unni is the growth of informal employment within the formal economy. These employees do not receive the benefits due to formally employed workers. A variant of this process of informalization is the outsourcing of work by the organized sector to home workers.

Unni's discussion of the quality of employment available to workers, particularly women, is in terms of the differential wages that the women receive.

*Gender differential in wages in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal all pointed to the lower quality of wage employment obtained by women in these countries.*



*For India, detailed data on wages to employees in formal and informal components of the economy, as well as to home workers, provided evidence of the poor quality of employment available to women in the informal economy.*

*The various components of the informal economy are growing and an increasing participation of women in them is observed.*

*However, the chances are that the informal employment is what helps many households reduce the intensity of poverty (Unni, 2001:2377).*

Both Nagaraj and Unni have discussed the aspect of the change in quality of existing employment and that being generated in the economy. While Nagaraj uses the term to indicate the (deteriorating) status of employment (namely, stagnation or decline in organized sector employment, increase in casual wage employment, etc.), Unni has defined quality of employment in terms of the differential wages that women receive. We carry forward this discussion of the quality of employment to include also the aspect of the health impact of the nature of work that women in particular have to contend with both at their living and work sites.

Our examination of the labour market situation in Tamil Nadu, in particular in the last decade, brings out that, while the growth of flexible labour systems have provided employment to significant numbers of men and women (a point that requires more nuanced analysis in terms of particular sectors of industries and geographical spaces) and many of them first generation 'industrial' workers, there is no security of employment (Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan, 2001; Swaminathan, 2000). In fact we agree with Standing (1999): "the fragility of security in low-income developing countries has been increased, because of the erosion of traditional kinship systems of social support, as well as by mass urbanization and the economic restructuring. [But] all forms of labour security have been eroded around the world" [ibid: mimeo].

The rest of this section is organized as follows. We begin with the presumption that, (i) conditions of work and (ii) benefits from such work, even for the most vulnerable of workers, namely women workers, are better in EPZs than those prevailing in non-EPZs. We have, over a period of time gathered a wide range of information from different sets of women (across age, marital status, income levels, education, household status, etc.) primarily through 'listening' to these women (Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan,



1999; Jeyaranjan and Swaminathan, 2001). In the first part of this section we reproduce highlights from conversations with women workers from non-EPZ areas. The second part contains five representative case studies of women garment workers from the Madras Export Processing Zone (MEPZ).

What comes out quite starkly is the

- (i) 'non-worker' status of almost all women workers whether in MEPZ or non MEPZ area; and
- (ii) the harsher conditions of work in MEPZ.

It also needs to be stressed that hardly any of the women workers we interviewed complained of non-payment of minimum wages either in MEPZ or non-EPZ areas. But definitely the amount they received as wages were no compensation for the excessive targets stipulated, compulsory overtime extracted, and pervasive practice of sexual harassment that the women workers had to put up with on a day-to-day basis.

We have preferred to concentrate on the most vulnerable of our labouring population, namely, women workers, since understanding and documenting the context in which they work and live, and the manner in which they negotiate these varied spaces bring out quite starkly the dynamics of contemporary capitalism in developing countries. In most of these countries, including India, economic growth has thus far never been able to address issues of unemployment, adequacy of wages, social security; further, investment in basic infrastructure such as fuel, sanitation, drinking water, etc., have always been and continue to remain abysmally low and neglected. The process of greater openness and integration of capital has no doubt relocated production and employment in a number of manufacturing sub-sectors typically described as more labour intensive but this is accompanied by

- (a) job losses in other sectors of manufacturing that have been hit by import competition;
- (b) flexible production systems;
- (c) flexible deployment of labour;
- (d) erosion of all forms of labour security.



The search for cheaper prices has more often than not been translated into cheap labour with women-labour bearing the brunt of the changing nature of capitalist onslaught.

### **III.2 Observations Based on Narratives by Women Workers in Non-MEPZ Workplaces**

For analytical purposes, observations based on women's narratives can be grouped into two:

- (a) those pertaining to the structure and functioning of the households to which the women belong; and
- (b) those related to conditions of work at the work-site including the gendered 'experience' of such employment.

We are aware that the nature of stress that women experience cannot be neatly divided between that experienced at home and at the worksite; but the above distinction enables us to focus as well as highlight the fact that, to some extent, even minimal investments in basic infrastructure at the living and worksites could go a long way in relieving households, particularly women, from the wretched conditions under which they work and live.

#### **III.2.1 At the household level**

In almost all the cases involving women workers we have clear evidence of the many spaces that are being straddled simultaneously and the constant negotiation that goes on to keep to time and targets. The work-day for the women and married women in particular stretches over almost 16-18 hours leaving them exhausted. In fact 'tiredness' is the single most common complaint recorded by us. In a sense therefore lowering the burden of work as well as raising the capacity for work would go a long way in alleviating the burden due to excessive work.

For most women (married as well as unmarried with intensity increasing for married women) the daily work schedule is somewhat as follows: their day starts around 4.30 a.m. – 5.00 a.m. After almost three hours of 'work' at home, they have to rush to catch a vehicle (either a public bus or company bus) to the factory. In the absence of any alternative mode of reaching the factory, missing the bus was tantamount to losing the



day's wages. The stress involved in leaving home to catch the bus to reach the workplace in time is enormous. Almost all women workers reported inadequate time to have any meal before leaving for work.

*I am unable to take breakfast in the morning due to time shortage. This leads to burning sensation in the stomach and frequent stomach pain. As soon as I start eating in the afternoon the pain in the stomach becomes severe and because of this quantity of intake has reduced ... The foul atmosphere in the work area, particularly smell of chemicals and tablets causes nausea and even vomiting, which again kills appetite ... After joining the factory, I have become lean.  
[A common complaint among almost all women workers]*

There is no way in which women, [married and with family in particular], can relax immediately on getting back home after a day's work. Again the work stretches for almost three to four hours before the woman can call it a day. Women with small and/or growing children were particularly stressed since if they failed to cook the evening dinner within a reasonable time, they have to put up with their children going to sleep on an empty stomach. Very few women reported receiving support on a regular basis from their partners or the male members of the household. Besides, on days when the public tap went dry or some such calamity befell the household, the strain on the women was so enormous that she almost had to forego her leave or wages or both.

*Before going to work, I have to finish cleaning the house, fetching water, prepare food for husband and children, get children ready for school. After returning from work the same work continues. Sometimes husband helps in household chores.*

*[Almost all married women]*

### **III.2.2 At the worksite**

The nature of stress experienced at worksite is not just varied but also very subtle. It begins at the gates of the factory where workers are grouped into batches; young women have almost no say in the choice of batches. The organization of batch work coupled with the pressure to meet targets very often means that workers can hardly take time off even to visit the toilet. In fact most units regulate work time so strictly that they close the toilets 15 minutes before the closing time. For menstruating women, the ordeal



of dealing with such a requirement is so enormous that they end up absenting themselves on such days. Disorders of the menstrual cycle have been reported by almost all women workers. We reproduce a few of the responses to give an idea of the varied nature of the complaints that we have recorded. We are aware (a la Messing, 1997; 57) that research on dysmenorrhoea (or painful menstruation) is conditioned by attitudes that view it as having a primarily psychological base. But the overwhelming nature of the problem (as revealed by these narratives) has convinced us that work-related dysmenorrhoea needs to be addressed seriously and urgently.

*During menses there is severe pain in the leg and I suffer from mental depression. Before I joined this factory I used to bleed for two days, but after joining this duty bleeding is there for nearly five days; white discharge is more almost everyday. I visited the Employees State Insurance Hospital but have not been cured.*

*During menses bleeding is as usual, but accompanied with severe hip and leg pain. I feel depressed on those days for being born a woman.*

*My periods are delayed and sometimes irregular. Due to constant change of posture, there is numbness and swelling of legs, particularly at such times. Feel depressed and curse myself for having been born on such days.*

*During menses unable to change cloth and have to remain in the wet panties; white discharge has increased.*

*After joining this company, period has become irregular, bleeding is also less. But white discharge has become severe to the extent of requiring a change in panties. Unable to change panty since there is no facility. It also leads to itching in the vagina region sometimes.*

*During menses, I get very angry with myself for taking up work in the factory. Stomach pain and pain in the hip make it very difficult to continue with work.*

We have already noted that almost all women reported not being able to eat any meal (for want of time) before leaving for work. This means that the first solid meal taken by these workers is around noon. The workers attribute their complaints of constant stomachache and acidity to the prolonged gap in intake of food spread over their working day.

Relationships between women workers and male supervisors/colleagues are another area, which generated enormous stress. The women we interviewed were able to discern the subtle manner in which they experienced discrimination; younger, relatively



better-looking and better-dressed women were able to wrangle several favours from their supervisors such as choosing the batches they preferred to work, promotions etc. The day-to-day operation of such discrimination at the worksite inhibited the emergence of any solidarity among the women workers.

Within units of production, work environment vary depending on the process. Most work places particularly machine rooms, are generally clouded with suspended fine particles; in sections like packing where such suspended particles are less, the odour of chemicals is pervasive resulting in loss of appetite and therefore reduction in intake of food. The pressure on workers is kept up by fixing targets for each process. Target lists are generally long and detailed varying with the nature of product, level of mechanization, nature of the input material and the packing requirements. However, what is clear is that these targets are stiff and the workers are kept on their toes to keep pace with the machines. The intensity of work increases with stiffer targets when the order books overflow. Many units insist on overtime work. However, none of the units take care of the health problems of their workers. In some units protective gears are provided to the workers. But these gears hinder the rapid movement of the workers. With such gears on their body, workers complain that it would be impossible for them to achieve the set targets. Hence most of them do not use the protective gears. The problem could be a combination of both: the stiff targets that are set without any consideration for the gradual slow down in the bodily movement of the workers as well as the ill design of such gears.

Given the nature of work conditions in the industrial units of the region, the workers in general perceive that their health condition is deteriorating. Their perception is based on their experience of the new time and work regiment, the nature of material they handle in their work, their interaction with the machinery in the production process and the nature of their work.

### **III. 3 Narratives by Women Workers from MEPZ (Madras Export Processing Zone, Chennai)**

#### **Case Study 1 (CS 1)**

My name is SM. I work in the MEPZ at Sanatorium in a company called A Ltd. I am working here for 2 years. I am 21 years old and have studied up to seventh grade. I



discontinued studies due to my family circumstances and also because I was not interested in continuing. I joined the company thereafter.

**CS 1.1 Family/household**

My family consists of 8 members. My father is about 50 years, mother 45 years. I have two older twin sisters aged 29 years. They are married and live in their marital homes. They each have a daughter. The next sibling is my brother aged 25 years. He is married with a 2 year old son. I have another older sister. She works in an export company at Nagalkeni [a suburb of Chennai]. She is 23 years old. I have a younger brother aged 19 years. He is studying. My sister and I are not married but the process to find an alliance is on. If I am to give any more information about my family, my father works in the municipality and earns Rs.3500 p.m. but he does not give even 1000 rupees every month. He spends it all on himself, i.e. daily expenses for cigarettes and alcohol. Further he also takes money from my mother. If she does not relent then that day is 'shivaratri' [no sleep]. He will not let anyone sleep. He verbally abuses and shouts at everyone. Even if we were to dress well on a given day he asks " who [man] are you going to meet today?". He is of no help, rather a nuisance to all of us. My mother... she was working in a washer company for 25 years. That is how I completed my seventh grade. When I joined 8<sup>th</sup> grade, my mother took me along with her to the company on leave days, that is, Saturdays and Sundays. I would assist her in her job of stacking the wash and putting it out to dry. Once dry they had to be counted and stored. In this way I would earn weekly wages. As a result I could not concentrate on my studies. Neither my mother nor anyone else in my family stopped me from going to school. For the past two years my mother has been working in a leather company. Next... my brother...he works in a private company for a salary of Rs. 2000/- p.m. My sister-in-law is at home. My sister...she works nearby in Nagalkeni, in an export company for a salary of Rs. 2500/- p.m. My younger brother is studying through a correspondence course.

Next ...I have been working in garment export companies for the past 7 years. I used to be a stitcher. Only for the past two years I have been working in A Ltd. Here I earn Rs.2500/- p.m. There are a total of 5 earning members in my family. Out of these we cannot count on my father's salary. The family runs on the salaries of the remaining four



persons. Therefore even if one person's salary is not there we suffer. *But I have no right over spending my salary as I please. I give my salary as it is, untouched to my mother.*

**CS 1.2 Tasks at home before going to the unit and Description of the house**

My mother, sister-in-law, sister and I wake up daily at 5.30a.m. My mother and sister-in-law do the cooking. My sister sweeps the front [courtyard], draws 'kolam', she washes the dishes and clothes and then gets ready to leave. I can leave for work only after I have fetched water. There is a common/public tap at a distance of about five minutes. We do not have a well or tap at home. All the required quantity of water has to be got from there. This is a bigger job than any other. If the job of fetching water is completed only then does it feel like all the other chores are completed.

We have only 2 rooms. There is an attached bath and toilet. We do not have a gas stove, only a wood stove and kerosene stove. We have a mixer-grinder. After completing the above-mentioned chores I leave home for work at about 8 a.m. If I wait at the Chromepet [a suburb of Chennai] bus stop in the morning at about 8.15 a.m. the company bus comes. It takes about 15 minute from there to Sanatorium. We reach the company around 8.30 a.m. For those who stay far away, the company bus does not pick them up. Bus fare is also not given to the workers.

*As I have to start daily at 8 a.m., I cannot eat at all. It has to be skipped. For lunch we have to eat whatever we manage to rustle up in a hurry in the morning. At night whatever remains from lunch is eaten. The food for all three meals is prepared once in the morning. I can eat good food only on holidays. Only on holidays can we leisurely/patiently prepare chicken, eggs, fish, meat and eat satisfactorily. On other days it is just half measures ['Araikurai].*

**CS 1.3 Description of Job and workplace**

Regular timings of the company is from 8.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. In this company, in general, persons who have completed their 10<sup>th</sup> grade, 12<sup>th</sup> grade or more are usually employed. But due to my experience and as I joined when the company was new, I was employed. The company usually employs young, unmarried girls. The age group for girls is between 16-25 years and for boys is 18-35 years. Only such persons are employed.

In the perception of the employer, an unmarried person works actively/fast [surusurupagu], they will not take leave often, they will not talk back or against the supervisor or manager. If the supervisor or manager ('site adital') sexually harasses, they



will adjust. If there is overtime in the morning or overtime in the evening they will do the overtime and then go. But married persons will not be like that. They do not do overtime. They take leave often, "mother-in-law is unwell, child is unwell; relatives have come." They cite some excuse/reason and ask for permission or leave. They talk back, ask questions. This is not suitable to the management and if a person is married even if she has experience, they will not employ her. If there is a lot of work, i.e. on days when there are lot of orders daily one hour overtime in the morning and two hours overtime in the evenings is compulsory. Those who refuse are asked to leave. I am able to do overtime as my sister-in-law looks after the chores at home. Some persons who are unable to manage the household work and company overtime keep complaining. I feel terrible when I see that. They say that they keep tossing and turning but cannot sleep.

I work as a stitcher in our company. This cannot be done in a group. It has to be done individually. Each one gets a different job. One does the pasting and another does the attaching. There are separate departments for stitching, one for stitching the upper part and another for the lower part. There is only one unit in our company and there are 700 persons working here but there are 21 branches. In this unit there are 65 machines in a line. The cutting section has 50 workers-all male; the finishing section has 150 workers, comprising both men and women. The washing section has 25 persons, both men and women. The sample section has 25 all male persons. This is where model pieces are prepared. The remaining 550 persons are in the stitching line. Here both men and women do the same work. But there are more women here than men.

#### **CS 1.4 Targets**

In one hour 100 pieces and therefore in 8 hours 800 pieces have to be completed before leaving. Whether it is a small job or a big job, the same rules apply, i.e. people who have small jobs can complete 100 pieces in one hour easily. But persons doing big jobs cannot complete 100 pieces in an hour. Those people who are unable to finish have to stay compulsorily and work overtime and complete the work before they leave. Those who are still unable to finish, their identity card is taken away and kept with the management. This implies that our attendance gets cut since both in the morning and evening entry can be made only with the identity card. If we do not have the I-card, even if we come to the company, they do not mark us. As a result our salary gets cut.



We are very scared of such a situation arising and therefore have to work very hard. As a result we feel very tired. Only tea is provided to those doing overtime. If due to particular circumstances we are unable to do overtime and inform them in advance, then that day they do not let you take the tea and lunch break or even go to the bathroom and compel you to finish the work that very day. *Even if we do not eat they are not concerned. They just want the work to get done.*

We cannot complete 800 pieces in one day. Only if we work extremely hard can we finish that. From morning till noon we work very fast. But in the afternoon it is not possible to maintain that speed. We do not have the strength. But only if that is also very fast can we finish. That is why we feel very tired. The back hurts a lot. Hand and legs feel weak. Legs swell up. Even if we lift our heads while stitching we are shouted at. After all this if we have to go home and do the housework, pay attention to our family, we will just die.

#### **CS 1.5 Amenities at the workplace**

**Drinking Water** When the company had just started there were only a few workers. That is why everyone was given mineral water. But since a lot of people have joined all that is not continued. There is only bore water. This is stored in drums, filtered and given. But I do not like that water. Earlier it was safe but now it is not. You can see dust particles floating in it. Therefore we do not drink that water at all.

**Toilet facilities:** There are totally twelve toilets. All of them have water. But every evening at 5 p.m. they stop the water at the top. The reason given for this is that workers go to the toilet around that time to wash their faces, apply make up. Because of this their work might suffer and so sometimes the toilet is locked. But at other times the toilet is open. *We cannot go to the toilet often.* If at all we go more than once or twice, each of us has a token number. This number is noted and we are scolded. "You are given tea time and lunch time breaks. That is when you should go to the toilet. If you go often I will tear your chit, remember that" – they scold us. Especially during periods if you were to see us, it is torture. If you suddenly get your periods they do not give a small pad or anything. We have to go to the cutting section and ask for waste cloth. The cutting section is very far. Even if we go and ask, the way they look at us is disgusting. "What, the red light has leaked" – they ask openly. We feel shy and do not go and ask there. We



bring cloth or pad from home. In an emergency, girls who forget to bring pads or cloth go there and ask for waste cloth, come back and cry. They send her back in a very upset and angry state.

During periods even if we have severe stomach ache, we are not permitted to sit down and take a short break. Till we complete those 800 pieces, we are not allowed to get down from the machine. They verbally abuse – “shaniyankal, [witches] one gets fed up just trying to get them to do their work”.

If we talk back they cut the increment. They do not give the monthly salary on time. They send it late. As a result on that day we miss the company bus and we have to walk a long distance. We reach home late.

**Protective Gears:** When the company had started each of us was given a separate mask, cap, coat. Now for the past 2 years we are using the same. We wash them only once in a week. *Only when visitors, buyers come to the company we are asked to wear the mask, cap, coat.* At other times they are not bothered. We also do not wear them. The reason being that we cannot wear all that and produce 800 pieces in a day. It is not comfortable. There is a lot of free space in the company. But here and there one can find bundles of pieces that we stitch. So it is not clean. A lot of dust all around. If you see someone’s head and dress they are white in colour. As this dust flies in all directions we do not switch on the fan. We do not get any breeze and it is very stuffy.

#### **CS 1.6 Entry/Recruitment of workers**

An advertisement is given in the paper. Through workers also they publicize vacancies. I got to know through a friend and joined the company. We do not see the owner at all. I met the manager and joined. The manager fixes our salaries. The supervisor tells us what work we have to do. This is common for both men and women.

#### **CS 1.7 Agreement/Contract**

We did not sign any agreement while joining the company. When we complete one year we receive a confirmation order. Along with this the company rules are also given in writing which contain the following instructions: Leave should not be taken; you must come regularly. No complaint or remark should come against you. When required you should do compulsory overtime. You should come on time. You should obey the supervisor, manager. If you do not follow all these rules you will be dismissed from the company. One copy is retained by the company and one by us. An identity card



is given. There is no other agreement/contract. If we work following the rules we can work as long as we want. But the company started only two years ago. But if they dismiss you they will not hire you again. If they want to remove someone they do not give advance notice. Suddenly, out of the blue they inform that you do not have to come. Otherwise they say "look for a job in another company. You do not have to come from tomorrow".

#### **CS 1.8 Promotion**

*Promotion is not for women, only for men.* For e.g. take the case of the supervisor: as a supervisor you have to come early in the morning. You have to do overtime daily in the evening and return home late. Sometimes you have to stay back in the company. You may sometimes have to work on leave days. Further you have to go to other companies and give job work. This is difficult for women to do. The cooperation given to men is not given to women, and hence women do not get promoted particularly as supervisors.

#### **CS 1.9 Skill acquisition**

If a person has to join our company he/she has to know mainly stitching along with knowledge of attaching and closing. A person with no experience is supposed to be given a 3 month training period. But they teach/train only for one month. We have to learn within that time. During the training period salary is lower, i.e. they may give about Rs.1000 p.m. If you know the work well, they will give Rs.2500 or Rs. 3000 p.m.

#### **CS 1.10 Benefits given by the company**

20% is given as Deepavali [a Hindu festival] bonus. At the end of the year 15 days leave amount is given separately. There is loan facility but no one has availed of it till now. No one has got a loan. E.S.I.[Employees State Insurance] is deducted. Provident fund is also deducted. The company contributes an equal amount to what we contribute. That is what we know/understand. Maternity leave is available. This is for 3 months with salary. A lot of women have benefited from this.

#### **CS 1.11 Sexual harassment at the workplace**

The supervisors behave in a particular way with the men and a particular way with women. They may scare some men but they do not treat them without respect. But with women they behave very badly. Women do get scared. The supervisors speak in a



threatening and arrogant manner. “Bitch you have grown your body like that of a buffalo, and you do not even know how to do this!!

You know how to apply make up but do not know how to do this. What is this? Why have you come like ghost ‘pey’ with all your hair left loose.” You can see the world through this churidar.” Looking at the breasts “this is very sharp” they speak with double meaning. Not just the supervisors but also the men who work with us harass us sexually. There is a girl in our company who walks in a particular way. They harass her a lot as she has large breasts. “Look at that AK47 coming”: if that woman talks back they say, “look at how she speaks, she has the guts, if she was a little more beautiful, we would not have been able to hold on to her”.

#### **CS 1.12 The relationship between the owner, supervisor, and manager**

There is no connection between the owner and us. The manager, supervisor and the workers cannot get along. Regarding the manager; if someone new comes looking for a job, he recruits those who look soft or good looking. He talks with them, laughingly tries to touch them. Holds the woman’s hands and brushes his hand over it [runs his hand over it]. Flirts a little. Those who go along get good salaries. If they refuse he shouts crazily. When supervisors talk with women they do not make eye contact. They look at the breasts. They pretend to teach/train and try to touch the breasts with their elbows or the back of their hand. Some women who are alert avoid it. Few who are careless do nothing but shout at the man: “ if only he had sisters”. The supervisors pretend to stand near the machine and touch your legs. If we stare at them angrily they say sorry or look silly. But till now no case of rape has taken place.

#### **CS 1.13 How does the work affect our health**

As we breathe this dust daily, a lot of people suffer from respiratory problems. One person had to undergo an operation to clean his lungs as they were blocked with the dust. Due to this several persons got scared and left.

A lot of people have piles problem because they have to sit continuously at the machine. The body becomes thin because of sitting at power machines. We have ulcer problems because a lot of people come without eating in the morning. Headaches are caused by intense concentration on stitching for 8 hours. As all this dust falls on our heads we have dandruff problems and hair fall. Ache around the shoulders is also common. “If you are unable to finish the work given to you, don’t come stay at home.



Why do you come here and make my life miserable” the supervisors shout at us. Sometimes I feel like dying.

**CS 1.14 Forum for discussion at the workplace**

We do not have any such system in the company. We have several problems because of the supervisors and managers. But we have nowhere or no one to discuss these problems. Because we cannot meet the owner we have to adjust, as we have no other choice.

Our company gets orders from Singapore, U.S.A. Canada, Kenya, Taiwan and other such places. But we do not know how much money the company is making. But there is a lot of production.

**CS 1.15 MEPZ vs. non-MEPZ units**

In non-MEPZ starting salary is Rs.600/- p.m. but in MEPZ even a cleaner gets Rs.1500 /- p.m. In MEPZ only unmarried women are recruited. In non-MEPZ married as well as unmarried are recruited. As it is felt that unmarried girls are faster/more active, they will adjust to anything, they will not talk back and will not take leave often. But in non-MEPZ married women are employed because of their skills and past experience. In MEPZ only those who have completed 10<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> grade or degree and above are recruited. But in non-MEPZ even those who are not literate are recruited. In leather and shoe company to do that work you need not be educated. The skill to observe and learn is sufficient. What the eyes see the hands should do. Both have similar conditions, *but the pressure and conditions of work in MEPZ are worse.*

**Case study 2 (CS 2)**

My name is BL. I work in A E Garment Exports Company. I am twenty-five years old. I joined this company when I was 18 years old. I have worked in this company for 7 years. Before this job, I worked in a leather company for a year. That is where I learnt to stitch on a machine and other jobs. Now I get Rs.2000/- p.m.

I have studied till 12<sup>th</sup> grade but did not get a seat for B.Com. in college. Further my family felt that if I wanted to study further they would have to incur high expenditure. ‘If you go to work you can buy anything you need for yourself’. So I decided to go to work. From my salary I give a little to my family. The rest I use to buy clothes, jewellery, bangles, pendants, cream, etc. If I am unwell I go to the hospital. I also give my



grandmother some pocket money. That is how I spend my monthly salary. I do not ask my family for any money for my own expenses. My parents do not question me either about my expenses. That is because they know very well that I will not spend money wastefully/unnecessarily. Apart from that while working in the company I completed my correspondence B.Com. [Bachelor of Commerce] course from Madras University.

**CS 2.1 Details about my family**

In my family there are 6 daughters and not even one son. My mother says 'I thought the next will be a boy, the next will be a boy, but all were girls'. That there is not a single boy is a small disappointment in our family. My mother is a housewife. She is by nature a nervous person. She is 49 years old. My father is an artist and painter and used to work with the Central Government. His age is 58 years. But he passed away on June 19, 2001 due to a heart attack. Now we get my father's pension of Rs. 1500/- p.m. Then I have four older sisters. I am the 5<sup>th</sup> child. All the four are married. The 3<sup>rd</sup> sister stayed in her marital home for 2 years only. Her mother-in-law, her sister-in-law, and husband used to harass her. Unable to bear it she fought with them and returned home. It is 12 years since then. She works in an NGO in Chengalpattu for Rs. 2000/- p.m. We are looking for another alliance for her. Nothing has set till now. I am next. I am not yet married. An alliance has been fixed for me. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 2001 I will get married. My last sister has completed her Bachelor degree in History. She is trying for a job. She takes tuitions for children studying up to 5<sup>th</sup> grade. The total salary at home is from 3 sources- my father's pension [1500 Rupees per month.]; my sister's salary [2000 Rupees per month.]; my salary [Rs.2000]. A total of Rs 5500/- p.m.. My mother manages the home on this salary. In this situation each of our salaries is absolutely necessary.

Earlier in our home we had two rooms. Then my father's retirement money was used to build the upstairs two years ago. Now we have 2 rooms, 1 hall, separate kitchen, toilet, bathroom is also there. We also have a gas stove but my mother does not cook on it. She is very scared of cooking on it. My sister and I take turns cooking on it. We also have a mixer grinder but no fridge. We have plans to buy one later.

**CS 2.2 Water facility**

Earlier we did not have water facility. In my home on an average everyday 40 pots of water are required. We bring all this water from the public tap. We have a public



pipeline but do not get water in it. It is under repair. There is a public well but two lovers committed suicide by jumping into it. As people do not draw water from this anymore, the water has become very impure. So our biggest job is to fetch water. Everyday there is a fight at home about fetching water. Only after 10 p.m. do we start getting water. That is when the tap is less crowded. Sometimes from 4 a.m. till 12 midnight it is very crowded. Chrompet [a suburb of Chennai] is a big area. Many people do not have well facility. Everyone gets water from the public tap. We cannot get water in the morning so daily after 10 p.m. we get water. My sisters and I all of us sleep after 12 a.m. we wake up at 5.30 a.m. I do not feel like waking up but what can I do, I have to, only then will I be in time for work. This March 2001, we invested in a bore motor for water. But for cooking and drinking we get water from the public tap.

#### **CS 2.3 Tasks at home before I go to work**

We wake up every morning at 5.30 a.m. My sister cooks and leaves for work. I help a bit with the cooking. Then I clean the courtyard, draw kolam, wash dishes, sweep and swab the house and such other activities in a hurry and *leave without even being able to eat*. I have to run because at 8.55 am, the company rings a bell. We have to be inside before that. At 9 a.m. they ring another bell. By then we should have started our work. If we are even 2 minutes late, the gate is locked and we have to return home. There is no other way. The company timings are from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m. Compulsory overtime of one hour has to be done in the evening everyday. If necessary, one hour in the morning and two hours in the evening has to be done. 'Those not doing this can stay home'-that is how strictly they talk without even a little bit of conscience. The company provides no bus facility. For those who come from a distance an amount of Rs 100/- p.m. is given. For those coming from nearby places the 100 rupees is not given. I walk daily for 15 minutes to reach the company. It takes the same amount of time in the evening. When there is urgent work like in the past 3 years, in the morning from 7.30-9 a.m. and in the evenings from 6-8 pm overtime had to be done. But for the past 6 months we do not have overtime in the morning. In the evenings only, we have to do one-hour compulsory overtime. Those who disagree to do overtime, are given one week or one month's leave and asked to discontinue after that. So the company gets to pay one less salary for a month. Not



only that, they dump the work on someone else. But if the workers do not get salary for a month if they have to stay home what will happen to the family.

As my sister does all the cooking and the bore has solved the water problem, I am able to do overtime daily. But if you look at earlier times we suffered a lot. At that time I just could not manage and would come home and cry. On some days, I would even cry in the company.

In the afternoon we have a half hour lunch break. *In that half hour we cannot eat properly because the stitching material pieces have to be counted and stacked.* We have to wash our hands and by the time we even touch our food, 10 minutes have passed. At 1.25 the first bell is rung and everyone has to sit at the machine. At 1.30 the second bell is rung. At that time we should have started working. All in all it is a ten-minute break. In this time we have to eat, wash our boxes, visit the bathroom. So we eat very fast. We eat as if to fulfill a duty and days go on in this manner. In the morning as there is no time to eat we rush to work without eating. In the night there is nothing special for dinner. Only what remains from the morning. Therefore meat, curry, fish, eggs is possible only on leave days.

#### **CS 2.4 Details about our company**

There are totally two units in our company, i.e. one on the ground and another on the first floor. There are a total of 600 persons working here. Only ten of them are men. The remaining 590 are women. *A maximum of the workers are unmarried girls.* Because they work fast and actively; they do not take leave often; even on leave days or other days if there is overtime, unmarried girls are willing to stay and do it. They do not talk back to the owner, manager or supervisor. They are also willing to adjust. But if they are married women they cannot be threatened. They often cite some excuse and take leave. They take maternity leave and take a legal stance-quote the law; they refuse to do overtime; they do not work very fast. Further the employers now want persons who have completed their 10<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> grade or degree or more. In addition they expect us to also know stitching, attaching and cutting.

In our company we have no training period. Suppose someone joins the company without any knowledge of work, their basic salary is low, i.e. a stitcher gets only 1000 rupees per month. Along with that increment is given every year. There is no promotion.



Even the increment is only Rupees 50 or Rs.100. *But men get salary raise and promotion.* For example, only men are promoted to the supervisor's post. The reason being that men will visit other companies, they are willing to work even on leave days and complete the work. They stay till ten p.m. and do overtime. They do not take leave often. But women cannot do all the above mentioned. They do not promote women. Generally the women working in our company are between 18 and 25-30 years. The men are 25-35 years of age.

#### **CS 2.5 Amenities at the workplace**

**Drinking water** is available but is very bad. Water is stored in huge plastic cans and drums. The company people clean these containers once in a week or once in two weeks. Sometimes if you look inside the drum you can see hair and other substances. It is very dusty. We do not like to drink it. If we ask the cleaners we do not get a proper response. The supervisor, manager or owner does not attend to this. The reason is that they all have separate mineral water. Some workers bring water from home while others drink that water, as there is no other choice. I carry water.

**Bathroom/toilet facility:** The ground floor has 4 toilets and the first floor has 4 toilets for 600 workers. But this is not enough. For all these toilets there is one small septic tank. As a result the toilet gets overloaded and all the water comes into the company. Only after the septic tank overflows does the company clean it. Because of this overflow we cannot use the bathroom. It just keeps floating. Just looking at that makes us feel like vomiting. We worry about this and do not go to the bathroom. The bathrooms have water. What is the use?

Further we cannot go to the bathroom often. If we do want to it can be during tea or lunch break. If we go too many times, we are yelled at. They comment, "If one is built for each one, only then will it be okay." During periods it is very difficult for us. We cannot change our pads or cloth regularly. A security guard is made to stand near the bathroom. We cannot hide anything and take it in. They question us 'what, why' and ask us to open the packet. If we show the pad he looks at us in a strange way and laughs. We feel shy and embarrassed. We do not go to the company and change pads or cloth during the period. We wear the pads at home and that is that. Then we change again only after we return home. They do not give any pads or anything there. If we get our periods



unexpectedly in the company we have to pick up some waste cloth on the sly and use it. If they find out they shout horribly even for this.

During our periods if we have severe stomach ache/cramps and ask permission to sit on the floor, they do not permit it. "If you wish just do the work or else get going and leave," they say. "Do you come here to work or to rest", they ask. They do not give us a cap or a mask or hand gloves. All the dust goes into our mouths and stomachs. If anyone was to see us in the evenings, our clothes and head are very white and dusty. Everyday it is the same torture.

#### **CS 2.6 Targets**

In the company an individual does each job separately. There is no work that is done in a group. Both men and women do the same work. Each day a minimum of 500 pieces should be finished. However late it gets or whatever the time it has to be completed before we leave. We can finish it only if we do not look around, do not go to the bathroom, do not get up to drink water. Only this way can we finish. That is how we do it everyday.

#### **CS 2.7 Company space**

There is a lot of space but it is not very clean. There are bundles and bundles of cloth lying everywhere. It is full of dirt and dust. There is no ventilation. Nearby there is a ditch from which emanates a horrible stench. Sometimes mosquitoes bite us.

#### **CS 2.8 Recruitment**

In the beginning the company advertised in the paper and recruited people. I also joined the company when it was newly started. I met the owner and then joined. Everyone has to meet and talk with the owner before joining. Otherwise they publicize vacancies through workers only. The manager fixes the salary for each one of us. Who has to do what work is decided by the supervisor. This is true for both men and women.

#### **CS 2.9 Agreement/contract**

We have no written evidence of our job in the company. We only sign an application and give it. We have an identity card. That is all. This is only for those who had joined the company in the beginning. For those who joined later even that is not given. Whoever does whatever job quickly, that job is given to that person. One cannot work in this company for long. We can work for a fixed time like 5 years. But beyond that we cannot work here because the owner says, "you have been working here for 5



years. Kindly look for a job in another company.” Even I have been told “It is over five years since you joined. We believe that it will be good if you leave.” I have also informed them “ I am getting married in November 2001. I will work here till then. After that I will leave.”

If they want to remove/dismiss someone they do so without any advance notice. In our company if they dismiss someone they do not hire that person again. But if we were to leave voluntarily and we come back and ask for a job, they may consider. Further they do not remove too many men because men may cause problems; they will have demands; they talk about rules and regulations binding the company; they will demand their rights to benefits; they talk back irrespective of whether it is the owner, manager or supervisor. Because of all this there is a plan to remove these ten men from work. They are purposely picking up quarrels with these men.

**CS 2.10 Skills required to join this company and skill acquisition**

Firstly we need prior experience. We need to know helper’s job. We should certainly know stitcher’s job and the job of a checker. Now they are asking for women for supervisor’s post because they can pay them lesser than men. And they can push the women around to work. In our company there is no training period. They do not hire anyone who does not know the job.

**CS 2.11 Benefits given by the company**

*A bonus of 12% is given for Deepavali [a Hindu festival]. But it is recorded as 20%. None of the workers knew about this. As I record the production details I alone know. I have informed the workers about this. Though they all know it no one comes forward to question/ask the company. They are scared that they may lose their jobs. The company’s owner is a Muslim. So Ayudha pooja or other Hindu festivals are not celebrated. For Deepavali they give one-day leave. But there is no leave for Christmas. During the Muslim festivals they give leave. Each year we have 12 days leave and each one is given a list. We do not have a system of loan or advance. They give us Rupees 75/- for tea. They deduct ESI and PF. But if the starting salary is Rupees thousand, they deduct PF only on that amount. They contribute an equal amount. Every year they give an increment but no PF is deducted for that amount because if they deduct more PF from us then they also have to contribute that amount. We have maternity leave for 2 ½ months. Some women have made use of this.*



**CS 2.12 Sexual Harassment at the workplace**

In our company women themselves rag other women and they speak arrogantly. The seniors want to control the juniors. Then I have to tell you about the owner. There cannot be anyone worse than him. Our owner refers to women without any respect. 'Look at that 'Shiriki' – [a colloquial degrading term for girl]; 'whose hair [pubic] is she plucking there instead of doing her work.' He does not differentiate between married and unmarried women. He shouts at everyone equally. Seeing the owner, the supervisor follows suit and shouts too. The owner does not even give the minutest amount of respect. He talks in an unbecoming/horrible manner. The supervisors see this and they too do not give any respect. They are even more arrogant than the owner. Most of the days we cannot tolerate it and start crying. There have been days when we have not had lunch. There have been times when I have thought about it all night, which gave me a headache and I could not sleep. The manager just drools over women. When he stares, I feel like taking an iron box and rubbing it on his face.

If workers who have left the job come for their settlement dues, or, for their PF number, they make the person go back and forth at least 20 times stating one or the other reason. They lock the gates and do not let the workers inside. Even if the manager is around, the security is asked to say that he is not and that he is out of town. Some of them after having made several unsuccessful attempts decide that they do not want the money at all. Some workers bring rowdies along and create a scene, after which the settlement amount is given.

**CS 2.13 Relationship between owner, supervisor, manager and workers**

This is really in an extremely bad state. As far as the owner is concerned he talks badly but does not go beyond that. But the supervisors talk with double meanings. Regarding the supervisors, it is a case of which girl is going to fall into my trap. When the manager does not come to the company on some days, they have behaved in an extremely unbecoming manner with some girls. Sometimes some girls go to the manager's room with some work and sometimes the supervisors under some pretext ask the girls to come to the manager's room. Here they have kissed the girl without her consent. Persons who had walked in unexpectedly witnessed this. They have then told others about this incident. Even I have witnessed it. During one of the morning overtime the supervisor seduced a girl and had sex with her. We saw this and informed



the owner. *Immediately that girl was asked to leave. But the supervisor was given just one month's leave and allowed to join back.*

**CS 2.14 How the work affects our health**

I was a stitcher for 6 years. But I got piles and it became very serious. I cannot sit on the floor at all. The doctor advised me to stop working on the sewing machine and take on some other job. After that only I went to the owner and pleaded with him and he saw the medical report. Now I write down how much production has taken place daily in the line for the past one year.

Because of inhaling the dust a lot of people have respiratory problems. They have got asthma, tuberculosis. A lot of people have piles because they are continuously sitting at the machine and working. A lot of them have skin problems, dandruff, falling hair, knee pain, swelling in the legs, pain in the legs, the dust bothers the eyes. Sometimes while stitching, the needle pokes the skin and it become septic. Because we are continuously bent over to stitch, we develop neck and back pain. We consume contaminated water and catch a cold, cough, fever and problems like thyroid.

Everyday as we go to work without eating we get ulcers. During periods as we work without a break we have stomach ache and feel weak. If we are unable to finish the task given daily then they resort to blackmail- "Look woman, look for another company. Don't come here from tomorrow."

**CS 2.15 Forum for discussion at workplace**

In our company we have a lot of problems. But to solve these problems we do not have a union. We do not have clean toilets, the company premises are dirty, the water is contaminated, the manner in which the owner speaks to the workers is a problem and so is the way the supervisors behave with the workers. Some benefits are not available to workers. Our company gets orders from the U.S.A. but we do not know how much income the company makes.

**CS 2.16 MEPZ versus non-MEPZ units**

In MEPZ the salaries are higher. In MEPZ a helper gets Rs.1500/-p.m. In non-MEPZ units a helper gets Rs.500 or 600/- p.m.. A stitcher in MEPZ gets Rs.3000/- p.m. or 2500/- p.m. but only about Rs.2000/- p.m. in non-MEPZ units. In MEPZ a majority of the women recruited are unmarried. Nowadays in non-MEPZ too this is the case. But in non-MEPZ in some companies married women are also recruited. Women with



experience and specific skills are recruited. They do a lot of work for low wages. Otherwise the conditions in both MEPZ and non-MEPZ are the same. There is no difference.

### **Case study 3 (CS 3)**

#### **CS 3.1 Self and Family**

My name is S. I am a Christian. I work in the MEPZ in Sanatorium in a shoe company called X Shoes. I have been working here for 4 years. I am 38 years old. I have studied only till the 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I joined this company only when I was 34 years. But I have been working in companies right from the age of 20 years. For the first four years I worked in a garment company in Chrompet. That is where I acquired skills for various jobs. Then I worked in the Sanatorium in the MEPZ in a shoe company for 10 years. In that I used to do only the top piece of the shoe. Now I do the bottom piece. The reason I could study only till 4<sup>th</sup> grade is my family situation. Even as young children we suffered a lot. My mother used to work in a washer company in Chrompet for very low wages. My father used to work in a leather company. But he was a terrible alcoholic. He would not go to work regularly. Even when he got his salary he would not give it home for food expenses. We are 5 girls, no boys. I am the eldest daughter. Because of these circumstances I did not study further. I got married at 17 years. My husband is a supervisor [maistry] in construction work. There is a 7-year difference in our ages. We have a 17-year-old daughter; a 15-year-old son and a ten-year-old son. All the three are studying now. My husband has studied till the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As neither of us had a chance to study, we want our children to study well. They should not face the problems that we faced. We are bringing them up without any troubles/tensions. When the first child was born, I was 20 years. I used to work even when I was pregnant. Further my husband and I with great difficulty slogged and now we have our own house in Chrompet. We built a house and at present we have let out the three rooms on the top and three rooms downstairs for a rent of Rs. 500 per room. We stay in two rooms, that is, one kitchen and one hall. We have to clean all this- one toilet, two bathrooms. Only we use the toilet, the tenants are not allowed to use it. They go to some field nearby. We suffered a lot on account of lack of water in our home. Almost all the residents in Chrompet face the same



problem. But in the past one-year we have got some relief from this problem. It is a year since we installed a bore and a motor.

So, we are two earning members, my husband and I. In addition, we get rent from the house that amounts to Rs. 3,000. I have full right over spending my salary. I have no mother-in-law or father-in-law, but have three sisters-in-law. They are married and live separately. When I was newly married, my mother-in-law and sister-in-law harassed me. But now I am free. Without my salary it would be difficult to run the family.

**CS 3.2 Tasks at home before going to and after coming from work**

I wake up daily at around 5 a.m. put the motor on and fill the brackish water. Then I get 5 pots of water from the public tap for drinking. I make some tiffin for the morning and lunch. After the children leave for school and by the time I leave, I feel enough is enough. My older daughter keeps saying she has to study and does not do any work. Only in the evenings she washes the dishes. Nobody else helps me with the housework. They wake up, do their own thing and leave.

My company timing is from 8.15 a.m to 5.15 p.m. I return home at 7.30 p.m. It takes 30-35 minutes to reach the company gate at Sanatorium in MEPZ. I go by bus and all the company workers wait together at the gate around 8 a.m. From the MEPZ gate to our company is quite a distance. So our company bus transports us from the gate to the company. *In the morning, I cannot eat in all the hurry.* The company does not pay anyone bus fare. If we miss the bus, we reach late. If we go late, they do not let us in. In the evening, it takes, 45 minutes to reach home. If there is work, they do not have overtime in the morning, but in the evening, they have one or two hours of compulsory overtime. Everyone has to do it and if we refuse, then we have to leave the job. Everyday after doing overtime, I have to do the housework and sometimes I think to myself "why was I born a woman", and feel very frustrated. At times, this causes tension. My husband and I have fights at home. Sometimes the fight starts as a verbal one and becomes physical. Then we stop talking with each other for some days. *But he definitely would never say that I should not go to work*

Lunchtime is from 1 p.m to 1.30 pm. In this time we cannot eat properly. Sometimes because of the work we cannot eat at all. We can eat properly only on leave days.



### **CS 3.3 Details about the company**

Company has four units totally. Out of these, in two units there are 100 persons each. In the remaining two, 200 persons work in each unit. A total of 400 women and 200 men work here. Depending on which unit has more work, people are transferred within units. Women between 18-25 years and men between 20-35 years are recruited. Persons who have completed their 10<sup>th</sup> grade or more only are recruited. The pertinent school certificates have to be handed over to the company. Only then does the company recruit the person. This is basically to cross check the age of the person. I have studied only till 4<sup>th</sup> grade but I do not know how they took me. It maybe because I joined the company when it had just started and maybe also because of my 10 years experience prior to this. When the company was just starting, they recruited persons who had not studied much. But now that is not the case. *Now they mostly recruit unmarried girls. These days they do not recruit married women.* The reasons for this are that unmarried girls work briskly/fast; they adjust to any situation; it is convenient to ogle 'site adital' at them. They comprehend things told to them quickly. They obey the supervisor, owner and do not talk back; they simply accept the remuneration given to them that may not be in keeping with the work they do. But they do not question that. If it is a married woman then she does not behave as mentioned above but quite the opposite. They may have a thousand problems at home. They come to the company and keep talking about them, which obstructs their work. They take leave often. Even if something is said in jest, they do not adjust and go and waste their time with the owner. They magnify the problem. Hence they do not recruit married women.

### **CS 3.4 Details about work**

I am working as a stitcher. Sometimes I am also moved to the packing department. In one day, the target is to pack 1500 pieces of shoes or 500 pieces have to be stitched. This has to be done not in overtime but within company hours. Suppose we do overtime, the target is increased. We have to compulsorily finish it. If we do not they ask us to look out for another job. There are no divisions of work between men and women. It is the same work. Individuals do all the jobs separately. We do not work in a group. Each one is assigned one job. This is common to both men and women. But only packing is done in groups. Each of these groups consists of 10-12 persons, majority being girls.



**CS 3.5 Amenities at the workplace**

Fridge water is filtered and provided. The water is good. Toilet facility is there. There are 9 toilets in four units. We have a token system to go to the bathroom. The toilet is clean and has water. That token has a number. How often has the owner of the token gone to the bathroom can be made out by looking at that number. If we do go to the bathroom the number on the token is entered against the person's name. We cannot go to the bathroom without the token. They look at the register and check how many entries are against which person. If there are many entries against one person, then the person is called and warned. Along with that they reduce the increment. We should not get out of our seats or go to the bathroom often. If we do that then they shout at us. During periods, we do not get pads or anything in our company. We carry it from home. In case we get it unexpectedly in the company, we use waste cloth or we use the cloth used to wipe our hands. If anyone has very bad stomach cramps, they do not allow us to sit on the floor. They are just concerned about their work being done. They do not care about the workers.

**CS 3.6 Company space**

It is spacious, we have good ventilation and it is clean. When we work we are supposed to tie a mask over our nose and mouth. But we do not do that. Neither the owner nor the supervisor forces us to do that. *When buyers come we have to necessarily wear the mask while working. They do not give it to us otherwise. They just collect it and keep it* Daily in the evening while returning home the body feels itchy. The head and clothes are covered with white dust. I do not have time once I reach home to bathe and I do so the next morning only.

**CS 3.7 Recruitment of workers**

The vacancies are publicized through workers. We meet the owner and talk with him before joining. The owner selects workers but the manager decides about the salary. The supervisor divides the work, decides who does what work. This is common to men and women.

**CS 3.8 Agreement/contract**

There is no written agreement between the workers and owners. But all the workers have an identity card. As per the company rules, workers can work upto 58 years. But if we get more than three memos then we have to leave. For example, we get



memos if we take leave often; take leave without intimation; take leave continuously for a week; if we do not work briskly/fast; if the task given for the day is not completed; if we refuse to work overtime on leave days; if we refuse to do overtime when there is urgent work; If we talk back to the owner or manager; if the register shows that you have gone to the bathroom often. If a person has got more than three memos then the person is not given any advance notice but dismissed straightaway. In our company if someone is going to be removed, there is no notice period. Suddenly the particular person is called while he or she is leaving in the evening and the owner tells him/her not to come the next day and to look for another job. If someone has left voluntarily or has been asked to leave, the person is not allowed to rejoin later. We have to look for another company. Before my marriage I joined a small company and acquired the requisite skills. Then after my marriage, I joined a big company. Now I get a good salary.

*Promotion is only for men, not for women.* They give the men jobs that have more pay, but jobs that get less pay are given to the women.

**CS 3.9 Skills required to join and skills acquired**

A person should know helper's job, packing, stitching. We should have prior experience. We should know checker's job, finishing. We do not have any training period in our company. They only recruit those who already know the work.

**CS 3.10 Benefits given by the company**

I get monthly salary. We are given two months salary as bonus. But this is divided into two parts and is given once in 6 months. We have maternity leave. Quite a few women have made use of this. There is no loan facility. Managers, Supervisors, and those workers who 'smile often' are also given increment after six months. We get annual increment. But they give extra amount as increment to people they like. This is done secretly. ESI and PF are deducted. For PF we think that they contribute an equal amount as they deduct from us but I do not know any other details.

**CS 3.11 Sexual Harassment at the workplace**

This happens a lot in our company. The men who work with us, and the supervisor speak with double meanings. They harass us regardless of age. They look at newly married women and say 'this sister worked very hard last night and is sleeping here.' If the bra is visible, 'wow the banian looks new' and they laugh. If the saree has moved, they say good morning. They ask laughingly, 'shall we go for a movie.' On



Sundays and on leave days when we have overtime, *they drink a lot on the premises*. The manager also ogles at the women when he gets an opportunity and flirts. If a girl is a little beautiful the supervisor and manager speak to her. They behave distastefully towards those who are dark and ugly, they just behave hatefully towards them. If we look at the status of the worker it is very bad. They behave as if they are threatening a dog to get the work done. They get it done without a conscience. Generally women are not respected in the company.

**CS 3.12 The relationship between the owner, supervisor and manager**

It is very bad. The owner, manager and the supervisor do not get along with the workers. We have to adjust to all this and do our work. When they talk with women they size them up while talking. They do not make eye contact while talking. They look at the breasts instead and their eyes seek our consent. If we question this or go against any of this, we get a memo. So we are in a situation where we cannot question or go against. They pretend to check if the work is okay and rub against us. If we are smart we can move away and escape. Otherwise we are trapped and can do nothing. Nothing else has happened. Maybe some offence can take place or has taken place but I do not know.

**CS 3.13 How does the work affect my health**

Daily we go to work without eating. A lot of people have an ulcer problem, headaches, stomach ache, especially during periods when we do not get any rest; sitting constantly at the machine gives us lower back ache, middle back ache, pain in the legs and arms and swelling in the legs. Sore throat as we drink cold water. A lot of dust falls on our heads and causes dandruff and hair fall, skin problems. If a target is set for the day, then it has to be completed. If we are unable to finish they ask us not to come to work. We are afraid of that and we work without going to the bathroom or for water, without lifting our heads from our work. Only if we do that can we finish. But it is almost impossible to finish that work in a day.

**CS 3.14 Forum to discuss problems at workplace**

*At present we have no such thing*. But earlier there was a union that was disbanded. Now if we face any problems, we have to adjust and continue to work. That is the present situation. We think that our company gets its orders from Italy because our madam is a native of Italy.



**CS 3.15 MEPZ versus non-MEPZ units**

MEPZ pays higher salaries than non-MEPZ. In non-MEPZ both married and unmarried women are recruited. But in MEPZ only unmarried women are recruited. In non-MEPZ both academically qualified and non-qualified persons are recruited. But in MEPZ they recruit only those who have studied till 10th grade or more. In MEPZ they recruit persons between 18-25 years whereas in non-MEPZ they recruit if you are above 13 years or even above 25 years. The conditions are the same in both MEPZ as well as non-MEPZ - *bad*. Both in non-MEPZ and MEPZ benefits are less.

**Case Study 4 (CS 4)****CS 4.1 Self and Family**

My name is M+. I am twenty-eight years old. I work in the MEPZ at Sanatorium in H Company. I have been working for three months. I have 6 years experience in soldering work. I began working from the age of 17 years. I have studied till the 12th grade. As I wanted to start working I did not join college. My father asked me to continue my studies but I refused. After I finished 12th grade I started looking for a job. At the same time I was married off to a man [who is a relative] against my wishes.

Today I am separated from him and I live in my father's house for the past 10 years. I did not even stay for a year in my mother-in-law's house.

My mother-in-law, sister-in-law and husband used to harass me and because I feared for my life and I had had enough I left Chrompet and moved to Pallavaram (another suburb in Chennai itself) to my father's house. Now I have peace of mind. I do not have a mother. My mother died when I was one year old because of some illness. My father is 58 years old. I have two older brothers. Both are married. My older brother is 38 years old and his wife is 32 years. They have a son aged 10 and another aged 9. The other brother is 30 years; his wife is 28 years old. They have an 8-year-old son and a 6-year-old daughter. I have two sisters-34 years and 30 years old. They are married and live separately with their families. Other than my sisters the rest of us live together. As I am a burden to my brother and sister-in-law and as they are putting up with me even now, I go to work. Thank goodness I do not have any children. If I had a child both of us would suffer.



Work is my only comfort and way to pass my time. Before I got married I was working in a company that made electronic speaker parts. I took leave for my wedding and then rejoined the same company. The company rules allow a person to work only for 5 years and so I had to look for another job.

Four of us earn at home. I earn Rs.2000/- p.m. But I get weekly salary not monthly salary. The company gives the overtime amount along with the weekly salary. My eldest brother works in a plastic company for Rs.3000/- p.m. and the second brother works for Rupees 3000/- p.m. in a tea company. His wife also works in a tea company for Rs.1500/- p.m. My father is old and has a kidney problem. He is undergoing treatment. I have full freedom to spend my salary, as I like it. But I hand over the salary envelope to my sister-in-law. She is the one who manages the family. Ours is an ownership house. It is a one storeyed house with 3 rooms, 1 hall and a kitchen. There is a well and we get good water for drinking from outside. We have a toilet and a bathroom. We have gas for cooking, mixer, and grinder. *We have everything but no peace of mind.* My father feels very bad about my life and suffers daily because of that. He has been trying to get me married again but nothing has really worked out.

#### **CS 4.2 Tasks at home before going to work**

My sister-in-law and I wake up at 5 a.m. I assist her in cooking. I wash the dishes, sweep the house and courtyard, and fill water in the pots. I give my father a bath and help him dress and give him his medicines and food. I complete all this and leave at 8 a.m. for work. Washing the clothes, taking the children to school and attending to my brothers is done by my elder sister-in-law. My younger brother and his wife have their own set up within our home. I leave at 8 a.m. everyday and it takes 1/2 hour for the train from Pallavaram to Sanatorium. It takes another 1/2 hour to walk from the station to our company. I reach the company around 9 a.m. The timing of the company is 9-5.30 p.m. If necessary they keep overtime from 8-9 a.m. In the evening we have compulsory overtime for one hour. If we refuse, we have to go and look for another job. We do not have company bus facility nor do they give us bus or train fare. It is very difficult to do the housework and work overtime. It is just my destiny.

Daily after completing all that work at home, when I go to work, I feel fed up. *In all the hurry, I do not feel like eating in the morning. So I do not eat in the morning at*



*all but after reaching the company and at the time of starting work, my stomach starts burning.* I feel hungry and I feel like eating anything/something. But what can I do. I can eat only at lunchtime. Lunchtime is for 1/2 hour only. That time just flies because this is the time for everyone to talk, laugh, go to the bathroom, wash one's hands. In the remaining time we cannot eat with satisfaction. We just eat as if it is a routine, a duty. Similarly in the evening, after overtime, we go home very tired after 8 p.m. As soon as I get home I feel I could just sleep. Sometimes I have no appetite and do not eat at all. I eat contently only on leave days.

#### **CS 4.3 Details about the company**

The company consists of a total of 4 units. In each unit about 50 persons work. Of these 30 are women and 20 men. The women are 20-25 years and men are 25-35 years old. Only those who have completed 12th grade or their Bachelors degree work here. Majority of the persons who work in our company are unmarried. I removed my 'thali' [symbol of married females] and wear some chain. I told them that I am not married and that is why I was recruited. The employers feel that unmarried women work fast and briskly, they do not take leave often; work sincerely; they adjust to the owner's, supervisor's, manager's behaviour; they do evening overtime and also Sundays; they finish any amount of work fast in the given time. They work for low wages. Married women are not like that- they take leave often; they do not work fast; they do not adjust even to the smallest thing; they give some excuse and do not do overtime.

For this job we have to mainly know soldering; have to work fast, briskly; we have to be skilled; we have to be attentive and not get distracted; we should know finishing; we should have studied more than 12th grade. If someone who does not know the work joins, they are taught for 2-4 days. By then we should understand the work and do it. There is no training period. They recruit persons who know the job well.

#### **CS 4.4 The work**

We do not have a permanent job only temporary. Our work period is 6 months only [6 month scheme]. In this company there is work only for 6 months after which they will remove us. Then they will recruit new staff and begin work again. I do the soldering work. We do not do any work in groups but only individually. Everyday we each have to complete 3000 pieces. Only if we can do that can we work there. If that is not possible, if we are not able to do it, they give 2 chances. The third time they request you to look out



for another job. We actually cannot do 3000 pieces but somehow do it. We can do it if only we do very hard work. That and overtime has to be done. During overtime more pieces have to be done. Further, compulsory overtime has to be done. Those who refuse have to go home. There is no doubt in that. There is no difference in the work that women and men do. It is the same work. Neither men nor women have promotion, as this is a 6- month work period.

#### **CS 4.5 Amenities at the workplace**

**Drinking water:** we only have fridge water. It is clean and pure.

**Toilet/bathroom:** each unit has two toilets. They are very clean with water facility. Two toilets for a unit are not enough but what to do. We are not allowed to go often to the bathroom. The supervisors keep watching as to who is going often to the bathroom, and who is working properly. If they find a person visiting the toilet often they shout at them. But they do not lock the bathrooms. They do not give us pads during periods. We bring them from home. But we cannot change the cloth or pad in the company because there is no dustbin in the toilet. So none of us change in the company. If we get our periods unexpectedly in the company, we use some waste cloth. If during this time, we have stomach cramps then we are allowed to sit for 5-10 minutes on the floor and rest. But we have to ask permission for that. But we feel shy and embarrassed and none of us ask.

We prepare thermometers and other medical products, so we have to wear a white coat. All the workers have two white coats each. We have to wear the coat while working. If one gets dirty, we use the other one. We take the dirty one home and wash it.

#### **CS 4.6 Agreement/contract**

In our company however well we work, we can do so only for 6 months. They give this in writing on a bond paper and get our signature, keep one copy for themselves and give one to us. After 6 months we have to look for another job. They do not allow us to rejoin. They recruit new staff. They publicize vacancies through workers. I got to know through my friends and I gave my application. I attended the interview and got selected. If they do not like someone or do not approve of their behaviour, then they just call the person and inform him/her that he/she need not come to the company from the next day.



**CS 4.7 Benefits given by the company**

As it is a 6-month work period, we do not get any benefits. At the end of this period they give us a bonus amount equal to half a month's salary. They deduct ESI but we do not go there for health care. They deduct PF but I do not know if they are contributing equally. There is no loan facility. We get weekly salary and do not have maternity leave.

The company is spacious and clean and has good ventilation. The owner conducts interviews for recruiting staff. After that the manager fixes each one's salary and the supervisor decides who is going to do what work.

**CS 4.8 Sexual Harassment at the workplace**

A company will always be a bit like this and that. There can be no company without teasing/ragging. It is there in our company too. But it does not happen to all the women. The woman's behaviour determines the behaviour of the men. There are some women who tolerate being touched while talking, dashed against, talk with double meaning. What can those men do with such women? They also behave like that. Few supervisors look out for such persons and behave accordingly. They do not behave in the same way with everyone. But there is more to it- when we go to the company, we talk and laugh. We may not have anything in our minds and behave openly but the other men and supervisors misunderstand and misuse it. The owner behaves decently and so do some of the supervisors. A few come on strong. I do not know if anything untoward has happened before. It is only three months since I joined. I am a 'jolly' type. I am not a serious person. I always make people laugh.

**CS 4.9 How the work affects our health**

We have throat infection because of the smoke entering inside.[she kept clearing her throat and her voice was hoarse during the interview.] this is continuous. As we cannot eat in the morning, ulcer is a major problem. Sitting continuously causes legs and arms to ache and backache. Eyes hurt as the soldering is done by holding it close to the face. Stomach pain is too much as we sit continuously. There is severe hair loss. [She had a lot of hair before.]

**CS 4.10 Forum to discuss problems**

There is no such thing. We get orders from Singapore and Malaysia. We do not know the correct amount of income the company makes but we know that the company is



making money. Even when they earn they say they do not. Even in the company that I was working in earlier used to have a good income. But they told the workers that it was running at a loss and so the increment would not be as expected. There we used to have overtime daily from 5-7p.m. They used to have overtime on holidays too. We had to do it compulsorily. I worked there for three years. They did not deduct ESI or PF. They do not give any gift for Ayudha puja. They did not give bonus. They used to say that they did not have the money. That is why I left that job.

#### **CS 4.11 MEPZ versus non-MEPZ**

In MEPZ they have 6-month, one-year and three-year work periods after which they say that they have no work. In MEPZ only if you have studied will you be recruited but in non-MEPZ your academic qualification is not necessary. In MEPZ only unmarried persons are recruited whereas in non-MEPZ, married women are also recruited because they value their prior experience. The conditions are similar in both. Benefits are better in non-MEPZ than in MEPZ.

### **Case Study 5 (CS 5)**

#### **CS 5.1 Self and Family**

My name is M. I have been working in FSC in Nagalkeni [a suburb of Chennai] for the past 8 years. I have been working in the company since the age of 13 years. I am now 20 years old. I have studied only till the 4th grade. My father used to work and so did my mother. I was the eldest among the girls and I was taken out of school so that I could look after my younger sisters and do the housework. I began working later. I am not yet married. We are totally eight persons in our house. My father is 50 years, my mother 40, my brother is 22, my paternal grandmother is 85 years, my 3 younger sisters are 18, 16 and 12 years. Six of us earn at home. My father is a watchman in an apartment block and earns 1200 Rupees. My mother earns Rupees 500 and cooks food in a government school in Nagalkeni. My brother earns at piece rate which brings in Rupees 1200/- pm. I earn Rupees 1375, my sister works in the same company for Rs.700/- p.m., and another works in a garment company in Chrompet for Rs.700/- p.m.. I have complete freedom to spend my salary. But I do not do that because I have the responsibility of running the family. So I do not spend money unnecessarily.



We stay in a rented house. We have two small rooms. We have a bathroom but no toilet. Hence we go out into the open fields to relieve ourselves. We do not have a well or tap at home. The public tap is very close. We get all the water from there. My father does not return home everyday. He has a mistress and also drinks. So we cannot count on his salary. Some months he gives 500 or 1000 Rupees per month for household expenses and in other months he does not give anything. We are managing with our salaries.

#### **CS 5.2 Tasks at home before going to work**

I wake up everyday at 5 a.m. along with my mother. We go off to the field to relieve ourselves. Then I clean the house, draw 'kolams', do the cooking, pack lunch for everyone, fill up water, wash the dishes, have a bath *and even before I leave for the company I feel I have had enough*. My brother and father do not even clean their own plates. *In all the hurry in the morning there is no time to eat in the morning. So I go without eating*. In that hurry I do not even feel like eating. But on some days I eat. It takes 15 minutes to walk to the company from my house. The company timings are from 8.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. So I start at 8.15 a.m. It takes 1/2 hour in the evening. This is because I have to sign out and I also take the opportunity of spending some time talking to friends. This is not possible at other times.

#### **CS 5.3 About the Company**

There are 4 units in our company. In each unit there are about 800 persons working. Of these 200 are men and the others are women. They call these 4 units the old Forward. There are 5 units nearby. This is called new Forward. The new Forward has a company bus. It picks up the workers daily and brings them to the company. However the old Forward Company does not have any bus facility. They do not give us bus or train fare either. We all got together and asked the union. They said they would talk with the managing director but it does not seem like they did. Depending upon the necessity, they keep overtime in the morning from 7.30 –8.30 a.m. but in the evening we have two hours of compulsory overtime from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. We all have to do it and everyone does it. The amount got by doing overtime can take care of some of our expenses. If we refuse to do overtime, they shout at us. I also do it, as I have no other choice.

In our company there are more women who are not highly academically qualified than those who are. Persons who have completed 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade or Bachelor's degree are few. This is true for both men and women. The women who work here are between



18-25 years and the men are between 25-35 years. In the beginning when the company was just starting they used to recruit married as well as unmarried women. But it is not like that anymore. *They want more unmarried women because according to the employer the latter work fast, briskly and do overtime regardless of time, i.e. even on holidays; they do not talk back; they do not take leave often; if the supervisor or male colleagues rag/tease/harass them they ignore it and adjust; they work a lot for very low wages.* But married women are not like that. They make mistakes at work thinking of problems at home; they take leave often giving some excuse; they refuse to do overtime; they talk back to the manager and supervisor; even if male colleagues say something in jest they make it a big issue.

I am unable to manage work in the company as well as at home. When I return home in the evening I feel extremely tired. That is the reason why I cook enough for lunch and dinner at one go. In the evening my mother prepares the rice. I sometimes eat in the mornings and sometimes do not; the company allows only a ½ hour break for lunch. This time is enough just to wash hands, go to the toilet, and stack the pieces properly. We have to eat very quickly in the remaining time. We have to be seated at the table by the time the first bell rings. We start working at the second bell. For dinner we have the leftovers from the morning. We can eat with satisfaction only on leave days.

#### **CS 5.4 Work**

I do attaching. One person does the pasting and keeps sending the pieces. I do the attaching and send it. Another person stitches it. We do not do this as a group but individually. We make only baby shoes in our unit. We have to make 500 of them each day. But we make only 400. We are able to make only that many and any more is very difficult. So they have overtime and ask us to finish those 100 pieces. We also do overtime and finish it and then leave.

#### **CS 5.5 Amenities at the workplace**

**Drinking water:** we get tank water, which is filtered and provided. It is clean.

**Bathroom/toilet facility:** In one unit for the 800 persons, there are 3 toilets for men and 5 for women. They are clean, an 'ayah'[woman helper] cleans them. There is water in the toilets. But these are not sufficient for 800 of us. What can we do? There is no other way. There is a token system to go to the bathroom. We can go to the bathroom only after we buy the token. There are only a few tokens. If any person takes a token only



after he returns that token, can others take that token and go to the toilet. But there is no restriction on the number of times that a person can go to the toilet. However we cannot go too often. We can go only during lunchtime. If we go very often, then the work stops and piles up with the person. The supervisors shout, so we do not go out of fear. During periods they do not provide us pads or anything. But in the new Forward Company they do give. We bring cloth from home and if we get our periods unexpectedly, then we use the waste cloth. When we get stomach cramps during our periods they do not allow us to sit on the floor and rest awhile. They ask, "do you think this is your home or a company." They do not give us any safety items to be used, for example hand gloves, mask, and coat.

**CS 5.6 Agreement/Contract**

We do not have any written agreement, just an oral one. We do not even have an identity card. If we work as per their rules, then we can work as long as we want. If they do not like us they can ask us to leave without a notice period and remove us suddenly.

**CS 5.7 Benefits given by the company**

ESI and PF are deducted. They show us the provident fund amount at the end of each year. *They do not contribute an amount equal to our contribution. When we brought this up with the union, they said they would talk with the managing director but they have not.* They give us a bonus equal to 2-½ months salary. We also have maternity leave. A percentage of the salary can be taken as advance but this is deducted every month. For example, if the advance amount is 1000 rupees, then they deduct 100 rupees every month. They give us two sets of blue colour saree and blouse, which is our uniform. We have facilities for first aid. Every year they give us two hand towels and Hamam soap every month. They do not give us increment properly. For example, they did not give us increment this year. When we asked them, they said that the company was running at a loss.

**CS 5.8 Entry, promotion, skill acquisition**

I joined the company when it had just started. Generally people get to know about vacancies through their friends and join. When there is a vacancy, the workers are informed or they put up a notice on the notice board outside.

If anyone wants to join, they have to meet and discuss with the owner. Only after that can we join. The owner fixes the salary. The supervisor looks into who does what



work. There are promotions for both men and women if they are experienced and skilled. *But women do not get as much salary as the men.* There is no differentiation in the work done by men and women. If anyone wants to join this company, that person has to know all the work with regard to shoes. Depending on who knows what work they will assign the work. If someone who has no knowledge of this work wants to join, then such a person is given only a helper's job. They recruit a person as a stitcher only if they are very skilled. For other jobs, they train for 2 days. On the third day the workers have to do it themselves. There is no training period.

**CS 5.9 Sexual harassment at the workplace**

There is a lot of this. The status of the worker is really poor. Women are regarded in very poor taste. The males talk with double meaning; if a woman dresses well, does make up, then they, including the supervisor, talk in an unbecoming/disgusting way. If we ask them/question them, they do not respond properly. If someone with a fairly good body asks then, they come on strong. I have felt very upset because of this. When we ask for a loan, the supervisor does not give but if some girl who is a little pretty asks for it she is given the loan immediately.

**CS 5.10 How our work affects our health**

When we do burning, the smoke goes in and we suffer from cough. We develop respiratory problems. While doing skiving, the dust flies everywhere. It enters our bodies and covers us completely. There are chances of getting asthma. Some people have asthma. They are on medication. We get skin problems, hair falling and dandruff problems. In the skiving section, the workers tie their sarees and handkerchiefs over their mouths and noses and work. The company does not give anything. As they sit at the machines a lot of people have piles problems. We get headaches and stomach aches often. We get our orders from Germany and New Zealand. We do not know the quantity of the orders. *We have a union in our company but it does not work to solve problems.*

**CS 5.11 MEPZ versus non-MEPZ**

In MEPZ, the salary is high but benefits are less. In non-MEPZ, the salary is low but other perks are high. In MEPZ academically qualified persons are only recruited but that is not the case with non-MEPZ. In MEPZ they recruit only unmarried women, whereas in non-MEPZ they recruit both married and unmarried. They give importance to experience and skills. In MEPZ one does not even know what a union is, while there are



unions in non-MEPZ. Otherwise the conditions are the same in both MEPZ and non-MEPZ.

#### **IV Implications for Policy**

The complex interplay sketched above between the structures and functioning of the household and the structure and functioning of the worksite has several negative implications for women:

- a) It results in a high turnover for women labour. The concept of turnover, however, needs to be problematized since it is not necessarily related to the conventional notion of women leaving the labour market on account of marriage and/or childbirth. Our study thus far has revealed that the aspect of turnover for women is across age and marital status. In other words, how long and which women remain in the labour market at any point of time depends on the outcome of the interplay between material conditions and patriarchal forces in operation both at the workplace and in the particular household.
- b) Related to the aspect of rapid turnover of women in the labour market is that, it hinders the accumulation of job experience as far as women are concerned.
- c) Our interviews also revealed that quite a few women [more married than unmarried] consciously opted to enter units that did not demand stringent quality control, precisely because they could not cope with stress both at home and at the workplace. In the export-processing zone, however, the condition of compulsory overtime in the evening has worked against married women workers.
- d) Through overt and covert policing, employers of MEPZ have so far succeeded in disallowing any form of sustained collective action on the part of workers to enable the latter to improve their lot either financially or physically. Other ways in which the development of any form of association of workers is rendered extremely difficult is:
  - By employing [women] workers strictly only for limited periods. Even the service of the most productive and punctual worker is retrenched after this stipulated period. Further, she is not employed again in the same unit for at least a year or two. She may or may not be employed by other units in MEPZ.



- Not drawing up any formal contracts with any of the workers, particularly women. Hence there is no notice period and the workers need not be assigned any reason for abrupt termination of their service even if it is within six months.
- So designing the layout of the work area that it actually discourages any form of socialization.
- By rendering infructuous recourse to any form of legal action, since technically, there is no recognition of workers as 'workers'.

The challenges before us are many, not least being the need to go back to some of the fundamental tenets that informed the founding of institutions like trade unions, workers' councils, and Bodies like the ILO, namely, the need to reduce worker exploitation, oppression and insecurity. Over the years, the nature of industrial development and the pattern of employment that it has generated have heightened labour's sense of insecurity both at an individual level and also collectively. Further, the need to meet global standards of efficiency and to contain costs have been used as arguments either for dismantling long-established social protections, or, for not raising standards along with overall economic gains, or, for not instituting any standards at all. To go back to Standing [1999], we were able to corroborate his identification of the sources of insecurity with that experienced by our workers in this and in our earlier studies. These include:

- *Absence or reduction of control over aspects of work*
- *Absence or reduced probability of upward mobility in status or income*
- *Necessity for increased effort for any given income*
- *Increased uncertainty about outcomes*

[Standing, 1999:38]

The effects of the experience of such insecurity which again corroborates Standing's listing, include:

- Sense of oppression and exploitation
- Demoralization
- Demotivation
- Ill-health, stress



- Absenteeism
  - Quits, high turnover
- [Standing, 1999: 38]

Given the above context, we do not agree with ILO that the **preconditions** for social dialogue are **merely** the right to associate and to bargain collectively. Rather the terms of the debate need to shift to include, as **preconditions**, minimum norms of labour deployment and environment standards in any unit that is set up for production. The implication of beginning with the **organization** of production units is several:

It requires the identification of all forms of organization of units making up an industry **and** all processes of production in each unit of production. This identification is essential to accord 'worker' status to **all** labour that is required to produce and export/market a product.

At present the flexible organization of production enables considerable processes of production to be conducted at home and/or be contracted out as job work. Consequently, it becomes easier, technically, to deny that:

1. Any norms are being flouted
2. Children are being employed
3. Women and children are employed in hazardous operations in contravention to the Factories' Act
4. Conditions of employment are exploitative and unsafe
5. Environment standards are not being adhered to

The rupture between organization of a production unit and employment of labour is so complete that appraisal of projects is done purely on financial terms; the viability of a unit/industry hardly includes indicators for assessing:

- The number of units [registered or otherwise] to which the production is proposed to be contracted out
- The kind of labour [sex-wise, skill-wise] that would be employed in all of these units of production, including the duration of employment



- The salaries and other benefits that would be paid to each of these workers. Without this it is difficult to assess how far workers are assured of income security
- The nature of investments that would be required to make work places safe and dust free
- The nature of investments that would be necessary to prevent damage to environment---treatment plants, etc.
- The amount of investment contemplated to provide labour with restrooms, canteen, crèche, etc,

While employers have collectively benefited by the infrastructure provided in zones like the MEPZ, this collective perception has not been extended to labour. For women labour in particular, the conception of infrastructure in such zones is patriarchal to say the least. Each garment unit within MEPZ not just denies worker status to its women employees in particular, but thereby it is not required to invest in any facility such as crèches, etc., which otherwise would have enabled mothers with young children to seek work in these units. Such issues have been left to be dealt at the household level. The units have solved the issue by preferring to employ unmarried young women.

It could be argued that by granting workers the freedom and right to associate and bargain collectively, the production units can be pressurized to include labour and environment standards. Our answer to this is that this is unlikely to happen without external intervention. We are in a context where even formally organized units get away by denying 'worker' status to large numbers of their workers; where millions more work in non-formal units under abysmal terms and conditions of employment; where existing trade unions [which even in their hey-day never made an attempt to extend coverage to workers in non-formal units] are seeing a decline in the share of workers enrolled in trade unions. We do not have to labour the point about the patriarchal structure of our trade unions and their signal failure to highlight the specific problems of women workers.

This disjuncture at every level – between organization of production and employment of labour, between facilitating infrastructure for setting up of export-production units but not extending the infrastructure to help labour [women labour in particular], between 'work' at the household level and at the level of the unit – have more



adverse consequences for women labour. It also leads to a gender trap. Very often, policies to increase women's wage employment choose to take the easy way out by facilitating the setting up of industries that are, in official parlance, 'compatible with women's household responsibilities', rather than addressing the constraints that force 'women to work in women's work'. Even the ILO, we are sure, will accept that mere inclusion or extension of the freedom to associate and bargain collectively cannot address inimical patriarchal forces.



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