Women Garment Workers'

SITUATION REPORT: OCTOBER - DECEMBER 2025



DABINDU COLLECTIVE

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Garment Workers' Situation Report
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Introduction

The Dabindu Collective initiated this series of Situation Reports to document issues of apparel and garment sector workers, particularly women. This is the first quarterly report for 2025, documenting the status of women workers from garment factories in Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi and Vavuniya from October 2025 to December 2025.

This report provides a background of Sri Lanka's economy and the apparel and garment sector's socioeconomic context. Situated within this context, the report delves into worker issues on the themes of wages, work hours, job security, climate crisis and labour conditions, occupational health and safety, SRHR, and sexual and gender-based violence in the world of work.

As a feminist labour and women's rights organization, Dabindu follows worker issues through the collective spaces that we host. Through structured and unstructured group discussions with over 2,000 workers based in the 4 locations mentioned above, and individual case handling, we document and report the issues present here. On the basis of ethical principles, we do not disclose private details of workers, and omit specificities that can be used to trace workers, in order to protect them against retaliation from manufacturing companies, and to protect the trust that workers place in us.

Context

Sri Lanka's socio-economic conditions during October–December 2025 reflected a period of fragile macroeconomic stabilisation alongside persistent structural vulnerabilities, particularly for wage- dependent and low-income populations. Economic growth remained positive in 2025, with national output expanding by approximately 4.2-5.4 percent year-on-year, supported mainly by industrial activity, construction, and export-oriented manufacturing. However, this recovery remained uneven and weakly translated into improved living standards, as real wages and labour market security lagged behind headline growth indicators.

Inflation trends during the reporting period pointed to renewed pressure on household purchasing power. According to the Colombo Consumer Price Index (CCPI), year-on-year headline inflation rose from 1.5 percent in September to 2.1 percent in October 2025, marking the third consecutive month of positive inflation, driven by base effects and increases in both food and non-food prices. In November 2025, headline inflation remained at 2.1 percent, representing the fourth consecutive positive reading, though momentum stalled as food inflation eased slightly while non-food inflation continued to rise. These dynamics underscored the continued vulnerability of low-wage households to price fluctuations, despite an overall moderation compared to earlier crisis years.

Preliminary findings from Sri Lanka's 2024 Population and Housing Census indicate that women constitute a majority of the population, accounting for approximately 51.7% of the total population. However, this demographic advantage is not reflected in economic participation, as women remain significantly underrepresented in the labour market. According to the World Bank Gender Data Portal, female labour force participation was estimated at around 31.6% in 2024, highlighting gender disparities in employment outcomes. This gap reveals long-standing barriers to women's economic inclusion, such as unpaid care work, limited workplace protections, and restricted access to secure jobs.

In response to longstanding labour market vulnerabilities, the Government of Sri Lanka enacted significant wage reforms in 2025. The National Minimum Wage (Amendment) Act, No. 11 of 2025 introduced a revised minimum wage of Rs. 27,000 per month (Rs. 1,080 daily) effective from 1 April 2025, with a further increase to Rs. 30,000 per month (Rs. 1,200 daily) from 1 January 2026. The incorporation of the Budgetary Relief Allowance into the basic wage was intended to strengthen income security, improve EPF and ETF contributions, and enhance statutory compliance across sectors employing low-wage labour.

This already fragile economic and labour context was significantly disrupted by Cyclone Ditwah, which struck Sri Lanka in late November 2025. Rapid post-disaster assessments estimate direct physical damage of approximately USD 4.1 billion, affecting housing, agriculture, transport infrastructure, and essential services. Historical comparisons indicate that disasters of this magnitude result in economic losses equivalent to 2.5-5% of GDP, with impacts disproportionately borne by low-income households and informal and wage-dependent workers. The cyclone also triggered renewed inflationary pressures, with December 2025 inflation projected to rise to 4.0 percent year-on-year, driven by supply-chain disruptions and sharp food price increases.

Taken together, the apparel sector remains crucial for employing women and generating export revenue, yet recent climate shocks have exposed the sector's deep vulnerabilities, with at least 15 major garment factories disrupted by cyclone-related flooding in late 2025 and an estimated 20% of workers in affected areas unable to return to work for extended periods. The October-December 2025 period underscores the convergence of macroeconomic fragility, uneven labour reform implementation, persistent gendered labour market inequalities, and escalating climate risk. Although stabilization measures yielded some improvements, underlying structural gaps and recurrent climate shocks continued to undermine income security and worker protection, setting the context for the labour rights, occupational safety, gender equality, and climate-labour justice issues examined in the sections that follow.

Labour Rights & Employment Conditions

Wage-related grievances during the reporting period revealed how payment structures can undermine statutory protections even when they appear compliant on paper. At a Security Company stationed Biyagama, contract workers reported that salary is based on shifts, requiring 26 minimum shifts per month to meet basic earnings, with additional shifts paid at LKR 1,600 each. A worker was paid between LKR 22,500 and LKR 27,000 since April, while another who worked only 23 shifts in November received LKR 24,000 for the month. The core issue here is that the shift-based payment system places the burden of securing adequate work hours entirely on workers. When insufficient shifts are available, workers earn below the LKR 27,000 legal monthly minimum wage, despite the per-shift rate appearing acceptable. This structure effectively makes monthly income precarious and dependent on shift allocation rather than guaranteed employment. A similar pattern emerged at a cleaning company at Biyagama, where a 15-year contract worker reported earnings between LKR 22,500 and LKR 27,000 since April. Cases were formally referred to the Labour Department for review.

The manipulation of wage documentation surfaced as another mechanism for worker exploitation. At a factory in Horana, a permanent worker who travels from Biyagama with 3 months of employment, missed one day of work and received only half her monthly salary, while all other workers received their full pay. When she requested the full amount from HR, she was told she could receive the withheld half salary on 20th October if she "set the next half." Critically, this deduction was made without a letter, salary sheet, or any written justification. When the worker formally requested her owed wages through a letter submitted on 13th October, management responded by asking her to resign in order to release the remaining salary. The absence of documentation serves a clear purpose: it prevents workers from having evidence of wage violations while creating leverage for coercive practices. By 7th November, a follow- up correspondence requested that management put their resignation demand in writing, making visible what had been an informal but effective pressure tactic. To date, however, the factory has not paid her the remaining salary.

Moreover, in Kilinochchi, resignations have risen, prompting daily recruitment efforts with incentives for employees of 1,000 rupees for new hires and 3,000 rupees for encouraging former employees to return to work. This phenomenon is implemented in the factory while the standard eight-hour workday continues and overtime has been reduced. In one factory in Vavuniya, workers face difficulties obtaining leave during emergencies; for example, a worker was denied leave to take her daughter to Jaffna Hospital. Climate-related disruptions further exacerbate wage insecurity, as seen in Kilinochchi, where employees unable to reach the factory due to flood-submerged roads experienced salary reductions. Together, these cases highlight persistent labour vulnerabilities that undermine both worker wellbeing and operational stability.

Occupational Safety, Health & Welfare (OSH)

In the two factories in Vavuniya, workers face excessive production targets (100–120 pieces per hour) and the handling of heavy garments, combined with strict supervision, excessive machine noise, and lack of safety masks. In one factory, unhygienic toilets were reported, while other's concerns focused on the physical strain from high production and heavy garments. These conditions result in both physical health issues, such as respiratory symptoms, and psychological stress, showing how high productivity demands intersect with poor occupational safety.

In one factory in Kilinochchi, workers carry heavy loads, stand for up to 12 hours, and meet production targets of 140–150 pieces per hour. These demands have caused chronic musculoskeletal problems, including back pain and varicose veins, highlighting the long-term consequences of sustained physical strain.

Two factories in Biyagama, reported issues of poor sanitation, long distances between production station and washrooms, inadequate safety equipment, insufficient canteen facilities, and low-quality meals. Workers at one of these factories attempted to address these gaps collectively through complaint boxes and discussions with the Disciplinary Coordinator, indicating that while collective action can prompt improvements, the lack of formal grievance systems limits systematic solutions. Two more factories in the Biyagama FTZ reported poor meal quality, restricted mental freedom, and "more work, less pay," reflecting the combined effect of psychological stress and economic pressures on worker well-being.

Overall, these factories illustrate a consistent pattern: high production targets, inadequate safety measures, poor sanitation, and limited welfare converge to create both physical illness and psychological strain. While some collective measures help address immediate issues, the absence of formalized occupational health and welfare mechanisms exacerbates worker vulnerabilities, underlining the need for comprehensive OSH interventions.

Climate Disaster Impact

During the late November flooding, factory workers across Katunayake, Biyagama, Vavuniya, and Kilinochchi were exposed to significant risks due to the absence of standardized disaster preparedness and labour protection measures. In Kilinochchi, workers who had taken shelter in schools due to flooding were instructed to report to work using company-arranged transport, despite the lack of access to food, dry rations, or relief assistance. Similarly, in Vavuniya, while one factory declared a holiday on the 27th, the other required workers to report on both the 27th and 28th, compelling attendance amid widespread flooding and disrupted living conditions. These contrasting responses within the same disaster context reveal how worker safety and income security were left to discretionary management

decisions rather than guided by clear protocols.

Inundation of boarding homes was particularly severe in worker boarding areas in Katunayake. Flooding affected boarding homes along Welabada Road canal-adjacent areas, and Kovinna, Awariwatta, and Muthuwadiya, where water levels reached first-floor height in multiple locations. Workers reported being stranded for days as access roads remained submerged, limiting mobility and access to essential supplies. For workers living in Kovinna, the situation was extreme: workers from boarding homes experienced extensive damage, with one group forced to live in a bus parked on the roadside for seven days until floodwaters fully receded. Other homes were flooded up to the ground-floor ceiling, while even elevated houses raised approximately two feet above ground level were inundated by three feet of water, requiring evacuation on the 29 November.

In Kilinochchi, workers from Vidiyal and Vanavil reported the loss of essential household items, including bedding, kitchen equipment, and clothing. Despite the scale of damage, Vidiyal workers did not receive dry rations, while Vanavil workers received only small dry ration packs and a salary advance deposited on 5 December. Workers were nevertheless required to report to work, with factory buses continuing operations. Upon arrival, no facilities were provided to wash flood-contaminated mud from their feet and hands, increasing health risks. Some workers developed fever, possibly related to rat-borne illnesses, but no medication or preventive treatment was provided by local authorities or garment companies. Additionally, there was uncertainty about whether their absence would affect attendance records or pay, as salary sheets were only expected after the 10th December.

Wage protection during the disaster period remained notably absent. In Kilinochchi, workers' salaries were reduced for November despite roads being fully submerged and inaccessible, making it impossible to report to work. In a large-scale factory in Katunayake, workers who did not report on the 2nd were marked on leave and received no pay. Across multiple locations, workers waited anxiously for salary sheets to determine whether attendance cuts would be imposed for days lost to flooding, effectively transferring the financial burden of climate disasters onto workers themselves.

Moreover, in Biyagama and Katunayake for the days missed due to the climate devastation, that is 28th November to 1st December, workers were requested to do covering on Poya and Saturdays until December vacation was announced on the 23rd December. Some factories reported working on Sundays as well. A Biyagama factory reported 2-hours of covering after their 9-hour shift for the 1st week of January 2026, and the 12th April 2026. While working Sundays, Poyas, and hours beyond the shift requires additional pay, it should be noted that majority of factories in these two zones operate under the principle of compressed week or the 10-hour work day.

Relief provision during the floods varied sharply by employer and location, creating unequal outcomes among workers facing similar levels of hardship. In Katunayake, leading factories supported affected workers by providing rations, while another in Seeduwa allowed workers to stay away from work if they were flood-affected but limited relief distribution to those whose boarding homes were flooded, excluding workers whose family homes were affected. A similar pattern was observed at another large-scale factory, where relief was provided only to workers whose boarding houses were flooded, and workers who did not report to work on the 2nd December were marked absent and unpaid.

In Biyagama, factories including few leading and established factories distributed dry rations following the floods; however, these were provided to boarding house owners rather than directly to individual workers, limiting workers' control over aid access. While the Army provided cooked food on the day of severe flooding, no government agency delivered sustained relief in the days that followed, leaving workers dependent on inconsistent employer-led responses.

The government compensation package for flood damage of up-to LKR 50,000 was not provided to many workers in Katunayake and Biyagama. Workers reported filing out applications and Grama Niladhari Officers collecting information on the extent of damages for each boarding homes, and yet, these workers living on rent were not privy to compensation. Instead, the compensation had been given to boarding home owners, a few who live in the same premises and many who are not, and the compensation is to be distributed among those who were present in the homes during the floods itself. This is without any supervision from local authorities.

Other government services including the rat fever medication distribution by the local Medical Office of Health, and clearing tube and ground wells, from which boarded workers bathe, cook and clean from, after the floods were lagging, until Dabindu intervened by reporting to Municipal Councils, GN Officers and the District Secretariat.

Overall, the flooding exposed deep structural gaps in climate-labour governance within the apparel sector. Workers faced unsafe travel conditions, housing loss, health risks, and income insecurity, while employer responses remained fragmented and discretionary. The absence of enforceable disaster- response standards left low-wage, contract, and boarding-based workers particularly vulnerable, underscoring the urgent need to integrate climate resilience, wage protection, and worker welfare into labour policy and factory-level protocols.

Social Justice, Equity, SRHR & Access to Rights

At Katunayake, workers accessing mobile clinics reported abnormal Pap smear results and breast lumps detected independently, with follow-up referrals made to the Public Health

Midwife (PHM), while a similar breast health concern was reported among manpower workers in Biyagama, showing how health screenings can identify serious conditions, but workers, particularly those on contract, are left to navigate the public health system on their own without paid leave or transport support for follow-up treatment.

In a leading supplier to the U.S., workers reported that suggestion forms were available only in Sinhala, with no Tamil-speaking management contact present, demonstrating how making grievance mechanisms available in only one language effectively blocks Tamil-speaking workers from accessing formal complaint channels, with engagement initiated requesting Tamil-language forms and designated Tamil- speaking focal points.

These cases show how gender, language, and contract status combine to limit workers' access to healthcare, grievance systems, and workplace dignity, with these barriers becoming particularly severe during crisis situations.

Gender Based Violence & Harassment

At Katunayake, a worker received repeated unsolicited messages from an unknown person on Messenger who persistently asked for her WhatsApp number. She blocked the account, highlighting the potential for online harassment linked to workplace networks and the lack of clarity on why such persistent contact occurs.

In a Kilinochchi factory, a contract worker faced verbal abuse and humiliating language from a team leader after taking leave to care for an ill parent, reflecting retaliation for using family care leave and power imbalances in supervisory practices. Another worker was harassed by a three-wheeler driver after refusing unwanted post-shift messaging, experiencing threats and intimidation, demonstrating how vulnerability extends beyond the workplace, particularly for night-shift workers. A third case involved a worker subjected to repeated inappropriate physical contact and pressure from an external party, emphasizing the constant need for vigilance and self-protection in the absence of institutional support.

Across these cases, workers must manage both in-factory and external harassment with minimal protection, showing the urgent need for effective grievance mechanisms and policies to safeguard dignity at work and prevent retaliation or threats.

Conclusion

The October–December 2025 period in Sri Lanka illustrates the convergence of fragile macroeconomic conditions, incomplete labour reform implementation, and heightened climate vulnerability, which together compounded risks for garment sector workers. Persistent underpayment, punitive leave practices, unsafe occupational environments, and psychosocial stressors highlight systemic labour rights gaps. Women and contract workers

remain disproportionately affected, facing structural inequities in pay, safety, and SRHR access.

Cyclone Ditwah further exposed these vulnerabilities: approximately 374,000 workers, including a large portion of industrial workers, likely encompassing garment sector employees experienced disrupted livelihoods, representing potential monthly earnings losses of US$48 million. With nearly 7.5% of the national population in affected areas and sectoral job losses spanning industry, agriculture, and services, the disaster demonstrates that business continuity fundamentally depends on workforce resilience. Effective disaster risk reduction requires timely relief, wage continuity, flexible labour arrangements, and formal preparedness protocols; equitable relief distribution and proactive employer engagement are essential components of sustainable business operations.

Strengthening OSH compliance, enforcing statutory minimum wages, and ensuring dignity and safety at work are critical for building a resilient and inclusive garment workforce. Holistic interventions spanning wage enforcement, occupational safety, psychosocial wellbeing, and climate-responsive labour management are essential to uphold international labour standards and protect workers' rights in Sri Lanka's apparel sector.

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