Garment Workers' Situation Report April 2026 – June 2026

The Dabindu Collective initiated this series of Situation Reports to document issues of apparel and garment sector workers, particularly women. This is the third quarterly report documenting the status of women workers from garment factories in Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya from April 2026 to June 2026.

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. Based on ethical principles, we do not disclose private details of workers, and omit specificities that can be used to trace workers to protect them against retaliation from manufacturing companies and to protect the trust that workers place in us.

Context

The April to June 2026 period represents a moment of profound contradiction for Sri Lanka. Macroeconomic indicators point to stabilization: inflation contained relative to the 2022 crisis, IMF programme benchmarks met, and reserves partially rebuilt. Yet for the working poor, and particularly for women workers in the export garment sector, the daily reality of that "stabilization" is experienced as unrelenting economic pressure, eroded rights, and deepening structural exclusion. The distance between the recovery narrative and the lived conditions of garment workers is not incidental; it reflects whose interests the recovery is organized around.

The external shocks of early 2026 have accelerated pre-existing vulnerabilities. The US-Iran conflict triggered immediate cascading effects on Sri Lanka's import-dependent economy: fuel prices rose by an estimated 25 to 30%, electricity costs surged by up to 40%, and the government responded with rationing systems, a four-day public sector work week, and mid-week public holidays to manage consumption. These are not abstract policy decisions. They translate directly into the daily lives of factory workers, lengthening already difficult commutes, disrupting shift schedules, and increasing household costs at precisely the moment when real incomes are falling. Inflation, as measured by the Colombo Consumer Price Index, rose from 5.5% in May 2026 to 6.8% by June 2026, driven primarily by non-food price increases, which reached 8.4% year-on-year, alongside a sharp acceleration in food inflation from 0.9% to 3.6% over the same month. The CCPI index itself rose by 2.1% in a single month in June, with transport recording year-on-year inflation of 13.9% and housing, water, electricity, gas and other fuels at 6.9%. The Central Bank has projected that inflation is likely to remain above its 5% target in the period ahead. These figures are not abstractions. For many women, the bus fare to and from the factory is not a small expense; it is a significant share of what they take home each month, and a transport inflation rate of nearly 14% means that share is shrinking in real terms with each passing month. Meanwhile, the Central Bank's decision to raise interest rates by 100 basis points, intended to defend the currency, signals that the burden of macroeconomic adjustment continues to fall on wage earners far more than on those who hold capital.

Sri Lanka's deep dependence on fuel and fertilizer imports, with the merchandise trade deficit widening by nearly 46% year-on-year in April 2026, reflects the structural weakness of an economy that has not diversified its productive base despite decades of export-led growth. Approximately half of the country's remittances come from Gulf economies, which means the Middle East conflict is not a distant news story but a direct threat to household incomes here. With public debt still at 98.3% of GDP and growth projected to slow to 4.0% for the year, the IMF's continued programme involvement ensures that fiscal austerity remains the governing framework. The human cost of that framework is visible in poverty remaining above 20%, in the steady stream of skilled workers leaving the country, and in a dengue outbreak spreading across hundreds of communities while Colombo suburbs face 24-hour water cuts. Beneath the stabilization headline, basic public services are struggling.

It is within this landscape that the garment and apparel sector, a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's export economy and the primary formal employer of women from working-class communities, is trying to hold its ground. The sector faces pressure from both sides:

external trade headwinds and rising domestic operational costs. A 10% US tariff on Sri Lankan garments continues to suppress export volumes to the country's most critical market, even after a previous higher tariff was struck down in February 2026. Rising logistics and energy costs linked to the Middle East conflict are eating into manufacturing margins. Value Added Tax burdens on local raw material suppliers, raised directly with the President by industry leaders in June 2026, add further cost pressure up the supply chain. The government's proposed responses, including a "Plug and Play" mechanism for rural factory investment and a National Single Window for Trade expected to be operational by July 2026, are largely supply-side and efficiency-focused. They are oriented toward making investment easier, not toward improving the conditions under which workers produce. They represent the state's instinct to facilitate capital flows rather than regulate the employment relationship.

This matters because the labour rights architecture in Sri Lanka, though formally progressive on paper, is systematically undermined in practice. Sri Lanka has ratified key ILO conventions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, yet across much of formal export manufacturing, trade union rights are regularly denied. Workers face political interference in union activity, retaliatory transfers by management, and the use of "essential service" designations to suppress industrial action without providing any alternative mechanism for workers to raise concerns. The regulatory ambiguity that enables this is not an accident; it is a condition that employers actively exploit. For garment workers in export processing zones, where the zone model itself was historically designed to attract foreign investment by limiting the reach of standard labour law, the gap between formal legal protection and daily reality is wide and well-documented. The June 2026 appointment of a 15-member Salaries and Pensions Commission gestures toward reform, but structural changes to labour governance in the export sector remain absent from the policy agenda.

Women carry the concentrated weight of all these overlapping pressures. Their labour force participation remains at approximately 33%, compared to 70% for men. This is not because women lack education or capability. It is because the labour market continues to be built around an older model that treats caregiving as invisible, uncompensated, and a purely private matter. As Sri Lanka's population ages and care obligations grow heavier, they fall with increasing force on women who simultaneously face employment structures that penalise any departure from full-time, physically present, continuous work. The reinstatement of fuel rationing and mid-week public holidays makes the logistics of factory employment harder for women who are also running households. Rising costs in transport, housing, and utilities, which are the specific categories driving current inflation, hit hardest those managing household budgets on a factory wage. The June 2026 CCPI data confirms that these are also the categories recording the highest inflation in the current period, with transport at 13.9% and housing-related costs at 6.9% year-on-year. The garment sector depends structurally on women's labour while the conditions it offers continue to pretend that women's other work, the reproductive, domestic, and caregiving work that does not stop when the factory shift starts, simply does not exist.

Climate vulnerability adds another layer that can no longer be treated as a background concern. Cyclone Ditwah in late 2025 is estimated to have reduced the main agricultural season output by around 10%, contributing to food price pressures that materialised sharply in June 2026, when food inflation jumped from 0.9% to 3.6% in a single month, driven by rising prices of fish and vegetables. Seawater is intruding into freshwater systems, threatening drinking water in agricultural communities. Coral bleaching driven by El Niño and La Niña is threatening the coastal livelihoods of communities from which many workers in the northern zones come. The estimated 1.4 to 2 billion US dollars in losses from recent climate events makes clear that Sri Lanka's ecological exposure is not a future risk; it is a present reality. It intersects directly with factory workers' health, with the water and sanitation infrastructure in their communities, and with the food security of the households in which they live. For workers in older industrial zones built without climate resilience in mind, and in newer northern sites where infrastructure is still catching up, the combination of climate stress and employment precarity is compounding in ways that are not yet fully visible in any official account.

The situation between April and June 2026 cannot be understood through a single lens. It is the product of a macroeconomic programme that prioritises creditor recovery over social investment, a global trade and geopolitical environment that transmits external shocks with disproportionate force onto smaller economies, a labour rights framework that is formally progressive and practically weak, a gendered economy that extracts maximum value from women's productive and reproductive labour while offering minimum structural accommodation for their lives, and a climate crisis whose effects are already being absorbed by those least responsible for it and least equipped to bear it. It is within this convergence of pressures that the Dabindu Collective documents, quarter by quarter, what recovery actually feels like for women garment workers in Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya.

Labour Rights & Employment Conditions

Labour rights concerns during the reporting period reveal a consistent pattern in which the gap between formal entitlements and workplace practice is exploited through production pressure, coercive leave arrangements, withheld earnings, and outright intimidation of workers who attempt to organise. Across Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya, the cases documented reflect not isolated violations but a systemic management logic that treats legal obligations as negotiable under the cover of operational necessity.

Production targets remain a primary site of pressure. In Kilinochchi, workers at one factory are required to produce 120 pieces per hour while simultaneously operating two machines. This target, set well above standard industry benchmarks, is structurally incompatible with safe working conditions, particularly over the course of a full shift. Workers are not experiencing occasional overwork but are positioned within a permanent state of intensity that erodes both physical health and the ability to take the minimum rest to which they are entitled. In Biyagama, a 12-hour shift spanning from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. was reported at one factory, with workers required to stand throughout, paid overtime at only Rs. 275 per hour, and subjected to a Rs. 90 daily meal deduction from wages already compressed by long working hours. At another Biyagama factory, the situation was starker: a 12-hour standing shift with no overtime payments at all and a Rs. 4,000 monthly lunch deduction. That such deductions are made in the context of unpaid overtime reflects a broader accounting logic where workers absorb the costs of their own subsistence while their additional labour time goes uncompensated.

Leave entitlements have been subjected to similar manipulation. At a factory in Katunayake, 12 days of leave were granted conditionally, with the requirement that workers cover the time by working on Saturdays, effectively converting a statutory entitlement into a productivity exchange. At another Katunayake factory, leave from the

10th to the 21st was granted, with two days requiring additional coverage. In Kilinochchi, management at one factory formalised a policy requiring at least three days' advance notice for leave requests, with last-minute requests refused. While production planning needs are real, a blanket policy that precludes emergency leave, particularly for the predominantly female workforce managing care responsibilities alongside paid work, falls short of the flexibility required under the Shop and Office Employees Act.

May Day presented a specific and revealing case. At a factory in Biyagama, management announced that the public holiday would be treated as a regular working day. Following Dabindu's direct intervention, a call to factory management, the decision was reversed and May Day was observed as a statutory holiday. That worker's right to a gazetted public holiday required external advocacy to secure points on how routinely statutory protections are bypassed in the absence of effective enforcement.

Dismissal practices documented during the reporting period are among the most serious concerns raised. At a factory in Biyagama, 50 workers were terminated without prior notice, with those who had worked for fewer than six months dismissed without entitlements. More troubling still, management asked workers to submit resignation letters in exchange for Rs. 5,000, an amount far below any statutory severance entitlement and one that, if accepted, would convert an unlawful termination into a voluntary resignation, extinguishing workers' rights to any further remedy. This practice is not a misunderstanding of the law; it is an attempt to use workers' economic vulnerability to foreclose their legal rights.

Dabindu met with affected workers at this factory and raised awareness about the option of filing a police complaint regarding the unlawful terminations. Meanwhile, 33 workers who resigned from a factory in Katunayake did not receive their gratuity payments, a violation of the Payment of Gratuity Act, which establishes an unambiguous entitlement.

The reporting period also surfaced concerns about differential treatment of contract versus permanent workers. At the same Biyagama factory where mass dismissals occurred, contract workers who had completed more than six months of service received a bonus of Rs. 25,000. At another Biyagama factory, contract workers received only Rs. 10,000 as a festive bonus. The gap between what permanent and contract workers receive, in both security and compensation, reflects a two-tier employment structure in which contract status is used to limit liability and reduce the cost of labour at the margins.

Non-payment and delay of wages also emerged as a significant concern. At a factory in Katunayake, annual increments were not given in April, and April salaries were delayed, a period that coincided with the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, when many workers travel home and incur costs in anticipation of receiving their wages. The timing compounds the harm beyond simple non-payment. Workers at a factory in Katunayake also reported that uniforms have not been provided, a basic employer obligation that, when unmet, places the cost of maintaining work-appropriate clothing on workers themselves, a further instance, alongside delayed wages and increments, of workers absorbing costs that are properly the employer's to bear.

In Vavuniya, the response to Dabindu's letters documenting worker concerns was employer threats against employees. This is a direct attempt to suppress worker voice and to leverage workers' employment dependence to insulate management from accountability. Union busting was also separately documented at the same employer in Vavuniya. These two cases are not unrelated: threats following external advocacy and active union suppression represent a coordinated effort to prevent workers from exercising their rights to organise and seek external support, rights guaranteed under ILO Conventions 87 and 98, both of which Sri Lanka has ratified.

At a factory in Vavuniya, workers described 12-hour shifts from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. with no Saturday or Poya day holidays and no emergency leave provisions. Workers reported being expected to work continuously, in the words of one worker, "as if we were machines." The monthly salary of Rs. 30,000, the statutory minimum wage gazetted for January 2026, appears to be the ceiling, not a floor being built upon. More than one year since the minimum wage revision, the baseline is already being eroded by inflation, deductions, and non-payment of overtime, leaving workers with effective earnings well below what the nominal figure suggests.

Taken together, these cases illustrate a labour environment in which formal protections are structurally undermined through coercive leave conditions, withheld statutory payments, the suppression of collective organisation, and the use of dismissal and resignation coercion to manage labour costs at workers' expense. For the women who make up the majority of production floor workers across these zones, these conditions are not a peripheral workplace concern but the material basis of their livelihoods and economic security.

Occupational Safety, Health & Welfare (OSH)

Occupational safety, health, and welfare conditions during the reporting period reflect a persistent failure to implement existing statutory requirements alongside emerging concerns that are likely to intensify under the current climate and economic pressures. Across all four locations, cases point to systemic inadequacies in food safety, toilet and sanitation access, ergonomic design, heat exposure, and menstrual health provision. These conditions individually constitute regulatory violations and collectively represent a workplace environment that does not meet the minimum standards established under the Factories Ordinance or the welfare provisions applicable to the garment sector.

Food safety concerns were documented at multiple sites. At a factory in Katunayake, workers reported finding insects, worms, and flies in canteen food on a daily basis, not as a one-off incident but as a recurring, unresolved problem. At factories in Biyagama, food was described as unsuitable for consumption, with identical low-quality meals served daily. Workers at two Biyagama factories faced monthly deductions of Rs. 4,000 and daily deductions of Rs. 90 respectively, meaning workers were paying from their wages for food that did not meet basic safety or nutritional standards. At a factory in Vavuniya, workers similarly described unsuitable food. That contaminated or poor-quality food is being provided across multiple factories, in some cases for a fee, reflects a welfare infrastructure that functions primarily as a revenue mechanism rather than a genuine provision of worker wellbeing.

Toilet and sanitation access emerged as a significant rights issue during the period. At a factory in Katunayake, workers are required to obtain a token to access the washroom and are allowed a maximum of five minutes; if this time is exceeded, the worker's name is recorded and monitored. This practice instrumentalises bodily functions as a disciplinary matter, placing surveillance on the most basic expressions of physical need. Comparable restrictions on toilet access, compounded by physical distance from the production floor, were also documented in Vavuniya and are discussed below. The Factories Ordinance provisions on sanitation facilities and their accessibility are clear;

their effective circumvention through timing rules and physical distance is a violation that carries direct health consequences, particularly for the predominantly female workforce in relation to urinary tract infections, kidney health, and menstrual hygiene management.

The non-provision of sanitary pads at a factory in Katunayake was separately documented. Menstrual health is an occupational health matter for the female-majority workforce in the garment sector, not an optional welfare provision. Its absence in a workplace where toilet access is already restricted compounds the practical difficulty of menstruation management during the working day and reflects a broader invisibility of women's reproductive health within occupational safety frameworks.

During a factory visit in Kilinochchi, it was observed that machines are designed to be operated while standing and are of a height that makes seated work impossible. Workers in Kilinochchi described how standing throughout the entire working day leads to severe lower back pain and an inability to bend after shifts, and identified varicose veins as a condition developing as a result of prolonged standing. These are not subjective complaints but recognised occupational health consequences of unsupported, uninterrupted standing during long shifts. In Biyagama, workers across multiple factories reported being required to stand throughout 12-hour shifts. The failure to provide seating where the nature of work does not require continuous standing is a violation of existing Factories Ordinance provisions and represents a preventable cause of chronic musculoskeletal harm.

Production pace itself surfaced as a distinct occupational health and safety hazard, not only a labour rights concern. At a factory in Biyagama, workers are required to meet an hourly target of 140 pieces, a pace that leaves no built-in recovery time within the working hour.

Exposure to occupational hazards beyond heat and ergonomics was also documented. In Kilinochchi, female workers at one factory reported developing skin allergies as a result of exposure to dust from garments during production. This is a direct occupational health hazard arising from inadequate dust management and workers are bearing the absence of protective equipment and its effects with no documented employer response.

In Vavuniya, the picture that emerges across multiple workers documenting their conditions is one of a workplace where basic occupational health and safety standards are not being met in any consistent way. Workers operate 12-hour shifts from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. with no rest days except Sundays, no emergency leave provision, and production expected to continue without interruption. Restroom facilities are not located near the production floor, and access is restricted to designated break times, meaning workers cannot respond to basic bodily needs when they arise. The health consequences of this have been raised directly by workers. Medical facilities within the factory are inadequate, and when a worker needs to access outside healthcare, the absence of a gate pass system for emergencies means that even urgent medical needs are subject to the same restrictions as ordinary leave. Food provided is described as unsuitable. Taken together, these are not individual complaints about comfort; they are a cumulative picture of a working environment where the conditions necessary for workers to stay physically well over the course of a working day, and a working life, are simply not in place.

Heat exposure continued to present risks in Biyagama, where machinery operating at very high temperatures was documented. In enclosed production environments with limited ventilation, sustained heat generated by machinery creates conditions associated with dehydration, fatigue, and heat stress, risks that are not incidental to the work but structural features of factory environments that have not been addressed through adequate ventilation or occupational health monitoring.

A particularly serious welfare failure occurred at a factory in Biyagama when a worker experienced a worsening of her asthma during the working day and was taken to hospital by the factory. Her request that someone accompany her was refused. Following her hospitalisation, she was not provided bus fare to return home. The absence of support for a hospitalised worker is not merely an act of indifference; it is an indication that worker welfare is not structurally embedded in how these workplaces operate.

Waste management and environmental conditions at a factory in Katunayake were also flagged, with dirty wastewater flowing behind the canteen and emitting a foul smell. This is both a hygiene risk and an indicator of inadequate environmental compliance at the factory site.

Together, these cases demonstrate that occupational safety and health failures in the April to June 2026 period are not exceptional events at individual factories but consistent patterns across zones and employers. As climate variability continues to intensify, and as economic pressures constrain maintenance and welfare expenditure, these conditions are likely to worsen without stronger regulatory oversight, independent monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms that do not depend on workers risking their jobs to report violations.

Climate Disaster Impact

No individual cases documented during the April to June 2026 period explicitly record direct climate disaster impact on workers in the manner recorded in the previous quarter. However, the effects of climate-linked economic pressures on workers' living conditions outside the factory gate were evident in cases that illustrate how environmental costs are being transferred to the lowest-income segments of the workforce through their basic accommodation arrangements.

In Biyagama, following the government's increase in electricity tariffs, itself a consequence of the energy price surge linked to the global fuel crisis intensified by the US-Iran conflict, boarding house owners increased rental fees by Rs. 10,000. For workers residing in boarding houses near the Biyagama Export Processing Zone, this represents a significant and sudden increase in fixed monthly expenditure at a time when wages remain at or near the statutory minimum of Rs. 30,000 and overtime earnings are being suppressed or withheld. This is not an isolated grievance from a single household. Rising boarding costs in areas surrounding export processing zones have been a recurring pressure point for workers, and the electricity tariff increase has given landlords a ready justification to pass costs on immediately and without notice. For workers already stretched across transport, food, and remittances to families back home, a sudden Rs. 10,000 increase in monthly rent can represent the difference between staying in employment and leaving it. The climate and geopolitical crisis is not arriving at the factory gate through floods or heat alone; it is arriving in workers' housing costs, in their transport costs, and in the compression of the real value of their earnings.

This case should be read alongside the broader economic context documented in this report. The reinstatement of fuel rationing, the surge in energy prices, and the government's declaration of mid-week public holidays to manage consumption are climate- and crisis-linked policies whose costs are not being absorbed by employers or the state but are cascading down to workers through boarding fees, transport costs, and the disruption of working schedules. Decisions are made at the policy level without assessment of their impact on wage-dependent households, and workers are left to absorb the consequences individually.

As climate variability and geopolitical energy shocks continue to shape Sri Lanka's macroeconomic environment, the indirect but material impacts on garment workers' household economies require explicit recognition within both labour policy and climate response frameworks.

Social Justice, Equity, SRHR & Access to Rights

The cases documented under this theme during the reporting period reveal how the intersection of employment status, ethnicity, and gender creates layered barriers to the exercise of basic rights in the workplace. Across locations, workers' access to reproductive health provision, linguistic equity, and dignified treatment is curtailed not only by individual employer decisions but by the absence of institutional frameworks capable of enforcing existing protections in the specific conditions of export manufacturing.

Menstrual health provision, or its absence, recurred as a concern at a factory in Katunayake, where sanitary pads were not issued to workers. Read alongside the documented restrictions on toilet access across multiple sites during the same reporting period, this creates a compounded barrier to menstrual hygiene management during the working day. Women workers in production environments cannot practically manage menstrual health when they cannot access toilet facilities when needed, when those facilities are not proximate to the production floor, and when the materials necessary for menstrual hygiene are not provided as part of basic workplace welfare. These are not separate issues but interconnected dimensions of a workplace environment that does not accommodate the bodily realities of its predominantly female workforce. Sri Lanka's commitments under CEDAW and the provisions of ILO Convention 190, ratified earlier in 2026, create a normative framework that requires workplaces to address conditions that specifically disadvantage women, yet their implementation in these settings remains absent.

Maternity protection remains a further area where formal entitlement diverges from working reality for women in the garment sector. The Maternity Benefits Ordinance of 1939, covering women working in a trade, and the Shop and Office Employees Act of 1954 together protect women employed in the private sector across both industrial and non-industrial contexts, and the law provides protection against unfair dismissal linked to maternity, against work injurious to a mother's health, and guarantees that maternity leave does not affect salary increments, pensions, seniority, or promotions, alongside requirements for nursing breaks and facilities. Yet the entire financial cost of maternity leave in the private sector falls on the employer, with no state-sponsored scheme to share that burden, which creates a direct disincentive for factories to hire or retain women of childbearing age, a dynamic consistent with Sri Lanka's female labour force participation rate remaining one of the lowest in South Asia at 29.8% despite decades-old legal protection. None of the cases documented this quarter involved a denial of maternity leave outright, but the structural disincentive this creates for women's continued employment sits behind several of the patterns already described in this report, and warrants direct monitoring in future reporting periods.

The inadequate medical facilities and restricted access to outside healthcare documented at a factory in Vavuniya, detailed in the Occupational Safety, Health & Welfare section above, are also, at root, a question of access to rights. Vavuniya, unlike the western province EPZs, does not benefit from the same density of health infrastructure in the surrounding area, so a workplace that does not itself provide adequate care leaves workers with markedly fewer alternatives nearby. Read together with the absence of a gate pass system for medical emergencies, this moves the issue beyond a workplace welfare gap to a denial of timely access to a basic entitlement.

A distinct equity concern emerged in Biyagama, where Tamil and Sinhala workers are required to work together in a production environment where communication and language differences have created practical difficulties. The language gap between management and workers in northern factories has long been documented, with Sinhala-speaking management issuing instructions to a predominantly Tamil-speaking workforce. What is emerging now, however, is a different and more complex dynamic:

the barrier is no longer only between management and workers but is appearing between workers themselves, as Sinhala-speaking and Tamil-speaking workers are placed together on the same production lines. The informal communication that workers rely on to coordinate work, share knowledge about targets, and support one another through the shift is disrupted when that shared language is absent. This raises the risk of errors, increases individual vulnerability on the production floor, and erodes the peer solidarity that is often the only practical support available to workers in high-pressure environments. The absence of any employer accommodation for this, whether bilingual supervisors, translation support, or basic communication standards, reflects an indifference to ethnic equity in the workplace that runs alongside, and compounds, the gendered indifference documented throughout this report.

The boarding fee increase documented in Biyagama, where landlords raised fees by Rs. 10,000 following government electricity tariff increases, disproportionately affects migrant workers. Women who have relocated from other provinces to work in the zone, who are without the housing security of family proximity, and who depend on boarding houses for safe accommodation near their workplace, are particularly exposed to this form of cost pressure. Rising accommodation costs in the context of static wages constitute a de facto reduction in real income and contribute to the material conditions of poverty that Sri Lanka's social protection framework has identified as a priority concern.

Together, these cases illustrate how SRHR, ethnic equity, and access to basic services are not peripheral themes in the world of garment work but central to the daily experience of workers navigating an environment where their rights are formally recognised but not structurally guaranteed.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Gender-based violence and harassment during the reporting period reflects patterns that are both direct and structural, in some instances constituting discrete incidents of abuse, and in others revealing an environment so normalised around intimidation and disrespect that it functions as a management tool in itself. The cases documented across Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi, and Vavuniya share a common feature: in each setting, the power differential between supervisors and production workers, amplified by employment precarity and the absence of safe reporting mechanisms, creates conditions in which abuse is perpetuated and silence is maintained.

The most severe workplace harassment case during the reporting period was documented at a factory in Katunayake, where a supervisor with more than 20 years of tenure has been physically and verbally abusing female employees. When workers reported these incidents to higher management, they were threatened with consequences for their employment. One worker resigned as a result. This pattern, abuse by a long-serving supervisor, institutional protection through higher management response, and ultimately the worker leaving rather than the perpetrator facing consequence, is not an anomaly. It is the predictable outcome of a reporting environment where the person being reported and the mechanism for receiving the report operate within the same hierarchical system. Sri Lanka's ratification of ILO Convention 190 earlier in 2026 creates an explicit obligation to establish accessible, independent, and confidential reporting mechanisms for violence and harassment in the world of work. The events at this factory illustrate precisely the gap that Convention 190 was designed to close.

On the route to a factory along Gym Road in Katunayake, a man stands naked daily, exposing himself to women workers travelling to work. This is not an incident that occurred within the factory premises, but it occurs in a space defined by the work relationship, on a path used specifically by workers commuting to the factory. ILO Convention 190 explicitly extends the definition of the "world of work" to commuting routes, recognising that workplace-linked violence does not stop at the factory gate. The failure of any institutional actor, employer, local authority, or law enforcement, to address what workers describe as a daily occurrence of indecent exposure places a burden of risk and fear on women workers simply in exercising their right to reach their place of work.

In Vavuniya, multiple workers at a factory documented verbal abuse and disrespectful behaviour from supervisors. Workers described offensive language, demeaning interactions, and an environment in which they were not treated with basic dignity. The pattern is inseparable from the broader conditions documented there: 12-hour shifts, no emergency leave, toilet access restricted to break times, and management that responded to Dabindu's external correspondence with threats against workers. Each of these elements contributes to a total environment of control in which verbal abuse functions as one of several mechanisms for enforcing compliance.

In Kilinochchi, team leaders at two factories were documented as using abusive and inappropriate language toward workers when production targets are not met. The scale of the consequence is significant: at one factory, more than 50 female workers have resigned per month over the past six months as a direct result of this treatment. Cumulative attrition of this magnitude, more than 300 workers over six months at a single factory, represents a major human and economic cost, one whose root cause is a supervisory culture of intimidation. Workers are leaving jobs, not because they have found better alternatives, but because the working environment has become intolerable. In the context of the northern economy, where formal employment opportunities are more limited than in the western province EPZs, each resignation represents not only a personal loss of income but a withdrawal from the formal economy by a woman worker who found the conditions of participation unacceptable.

This pattern across locations, from individual supervisor abuse in Katunayake, to the normalisation of verbal aggression as a production management tool in Kilinochchi, to the external harassment on a Katunayake commuting route, points to a landscape in which gendered violence and harassment are not exceptional events but embedded features of the environment in which women garment workers spend their working lives. Implementation of Convention 190's requirements, including independent grievance mechanisms, employer accountability frameworks, training for supervisors, and workplace policies with meaningful consequences, remains the unfinished work that sits between ratification and the reality documented here.

Conclusion

The cases documented in this report across the April to June 2026 period do not point to exceptional failures at individual factories. They point to a system operating as designed: one in which the cost of production is consistently externalised onto workers, legal obligations are treated as negotiable, and the structures that should provide redress, labour inspection, union representation, and grievance mechanisms are either absent, weak, or actively suppressed. The macroeconomic context of the period, marked by rising inflation, a fuel and energy crisis, and the compression of real wages, has intensified these conditions without creating any corresponding improvement in employer accountability or state enforcement.

Across the five thematic areas, some cross-cutting patterns are worth naming clearly. Physical working conditions, particularly enforced standing during 12-hour shifts, high production targets, heat exposure, and inadequate sanitation, are concentrated not only in terms of their severity but in the fact that they are experienced by an overwhelmingly female workforce. The denial of toilet access, the non-provision of sanitary pads, and the structural invisibility of menstrual health within occupational safety frameworks are not incidental oversights; they reflect a workplace model that was not designed with women's bodies, health, or lives in mind. The language barrier emerging on production floors in the north, now appearing between workers and not only between workers and management, represents an equity concern that is compounding both safety risks and the erosion of worker solidarity.

Where Dabindu was able to intervene directly during the reporting period, the outcomes demonstrate both the importance and the limits of external advocacy. The reversal of a May Day working day decision following a direct call to factory management in Biyagama, and the raising of awareness among dismissed workers about their right to file a police complaint following unlawful terminations at another Biyagama factory, are instances where advocacy produced a tangible result. However, these outcomes should not obscure the fact that statutory rights required external intervention to be exercised at all. The need for Dabindu's involvement in securing a public holiday or informing workers of their legal rights is itself an indictment of the enforcement environment.

The situation in Vavuniya, where management responded to Dabindu's correspondence with threats against workers and where union busting has been separately documented, is a reminder that advocacy also carries risks for those it is meant to support. Protecting workers from retaliation while continuing to document and report requires the kind of trust that Dabindu's collective spaces are designed to build, and that trust depends on maintaining the confidentiality commitments set out in this report.

Looking ahead, the convergence of inflation, energy costs, and trade pressure on the garment sector creates conditions in which employers are likely to seek further reductions in labour costs, whether through increased production targets, reduced bonuses, expanded use of contract employment, or resistance to wage adjustments. The cases documented here, taken alongside the macroeconomic context, suggest that the April to June 2026 period represents not a temporary spike in violations but an intensification of structural conditions that have been present across multiple quarters. Continued documentation, collective organising, and engagement with legal and policy frameworks remain the primary tools available to workers and to the organisations that accompany them.

This pattern of workers bearing the weight of institutional decisions made without their meaningful input is not confined to the factory floor. It is visible too in the ongoing dispute over the proposed unification of the EPF and ETF, where trade unions have pushed back against a governance restructuring they were not substantively consulted on ahead of time, and have called for the government's structural findings to be made public before legislation is drafted. Whether the issue is a denied right for access or the custodianship of a worker's retirement savings, the underlying dynamic is the same: decisions that directly affect workers' security and well-being continue to be made at a distance from them, reinforcing the case for stronger, earlier, and more binding worker participation across every level of the system that governs their labour.

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