

Garment Workers' Situation Report July 2026 – September 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 July 2026 to September 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 and Background

By the close of the reporting period covering July to September 2026, the pattern this report series has tracked since its first edition had not broken; it had hardened. As the final report in this series, this edition looks back on a period in which Sri Lanka's macroeconomic indicators continued to show stabilisation. Real GDP grew by 5.1% in the first quarter of 2026, compared with 4.7% in the first quarter of 2025, while gross official reserves stood at US\$6.6 billion by the end of July and workers' remittances for the first seven months of the year had increased by 21.4% year on year to approximately US\$5.4 billion. Sri Lanka's recovery continues within the framework of its IMF Extended Fund Facility programme and the wider fiscal consolidation process. Yet these indicators do not by themselves establish that household incomes, employment security and living standards have recovered at the same pace. The textile, apparel and leather manufacturing sector, which contributed 6.1% of GDP, contracted by 3.7% in the first quarter of 2026, while its export volume index declined by 8.8%.

The World Bank has continued to describe the recovery as incomplete, noting that poverty remains elevated and that many households have yet to regain the livelihoods lost during the economic crisis. A further 10% of the population remains just above the poverty line, leaving a substantial share of households vulnerable to renewed shocks. The World Food Programme estimates that 26% of Sri Lanka's population lives below the poverty line and that 39% of households report inadequate diets. For workers, these figures describe the decisions households make about food, transport, healthcare, education and housing when income does not stretch far enough. Many of these households are still recovering from the 2022 crisis, when foreign-exchange shortages led to fuel queues, import restrictions and soaring prices for essentials, and they entered 2026 with very little financial room to absorb another shock.

The war launched by the United States and Israel against Iran on 28 February 2026 disrupted global energy markets, with the Strait of Hormuz, through which around 20% of global oil exports pass in peacetime effectively closed and global oil, gas and fertiliser prices rising sharply. Sri Lanka, which imports all of its oil and relies heavily on petroleum imports, was particularly exposed: fuel shortages triggered panic buying, rationing and price increases, with petrol rising from Rs. 317 to Rs. 398 per litre in March and diesel increasing by Rs. 79 to Rs. 382, while public-transport costs also rose. For garment workers who depend on buses and factory transport, these increases directly raise the cost of getting to and from work. The shock then spread through the wider economy: the Central Bank raised the Overnight Policy Rate by 100 basis points to 8.75% in May, the rupee depreciated by 5.5% against the US dollar by the end of August, and headline inflation rose from 7.3% in July to 8.0% in August, with food inflation reaching 8.5%. At the same time, textile and apparel exports fell from US\$455.16 million in July 2025 to US\$416.25 million in July 2026, while cumulative January–July exports declined by around 6.4% to approximately US\$2.73 billion. The industry is therefore being expected to sustain export earnings, foreign exchange and employment in a more difficult economic environment, with the resulting pressure increasingly felt through production targets, working conditions and household costs.

Wages are where these pressures meet workers most directly. Analysis based on Employees' Provident Fund data indicates that 92% of formal private-sector employees earn less than LKR 100,000 per month. This figure covers the wider formal private sector and should not be read as a garment-worker-specific wage statistic, but it shows how limited most workers' capacity is to absorb further increases in living costs. Job insecurity adds another dimension. National unemployment stood at 3.7% in the first quarter of 2026, but labour-force participation was only 49.2%, meaning that a large proportion of the working-age population remained outside the labour force. Low unemployment alone does not capture how many people are excluded or discouraged from paid work.

The exclusion falls most heavily on women, who make up just over half of Sri Lanka's population but a much smaller share of its paid workforce. Women accounted for 2.78 million of the 8.08 million people in employment in 2025, roughly a third, and the female labour-force participation rate was about 31.6 percent in 2024, far below the male rate and well below the world average. Women's presence in the garment sector, one of the country's largest sources of female formal employment, is therefore exceptional, and the terms on which they work matter well beyond individual factories. Women are the larger share of the population, yet they carry greater economic vulnerability: lower participation, lower and less secure incomes, and greater dependence on a small number of sectors.

Much of this gap is explained by unpaid care. Sustainable Development Goal 5 recognises the need to value, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, yet in Sri Lanka the expectation that women manage the household, children and the sick and elderly remains deeply embedded in social norms. A 2025 time-use survey found that women spent an average of 8.2 hours on unpaid care work compared with 5.2 hours for men. This unequal division of labour narrows women's opportunities to take up paid employment, education, decision-making spaces and other activities outside the household. For women garment workers it means a second working day beyond the factory, one that is rarely reflected in employment statistics but that determines how much time and energy remain for paid work, rest and health. It also means that changes in the cost of living, such as higher food and transport prices, are absorbed first through women's unpaid labour and their own consumption, as they stretch meals, walk further or cut back on healthcare so that the household can manage.

Women's economic vulnerability is closely tied to their safety. Sri Lanka's 2025 CEDAW review highlighted continuing concerns about gender-based violence and the effectiveness of prevention and response mechanisms. For women in low-paid work, economic dependence, insecure housing and fear of losing employment can make it very hard to leave an abusive situation or challenge harassment. That vulnerability does not stop at the factory gate. It extends to boarding houses and employer-provided accommodation, to crowded buses and company transport, and to the late hours at which many women travel home, and it is compounded when long shifts and fuel-related transport disruptions push journeys into the night.

The private sector plays a central role in whether these burdens are eased or deepened. The apparel industry remains one of Sri Lanka's major sources of export earnings and female employment, so decisions on wages, production systems, workplace safety, grievance mechanisms and maternity protection have consequences well beyond individual factories. Economic recovery that depends on productivity, while leaving workers to absorb the costs of

unsafe workplaces, inadequate protection or rising living costs, widens the gap between the value workers generate and the security they receive.

The legal framework governing these decisions is itself part of the problem. Sri Lanka's labour legislation is highly fragmented, with dozens of separate statutes, many dating from the pre- or early post-independence period, including the Workmen's Compensation Ordinance of 1934, the Maternity Benefits Ordinance of 1939 and the Factories Ordinance of 1942. These laws were written for a very different labour market. In September 2026, the Ministry of Labour stated that 49 laws relating to the rights of working people were in effect, although some were no longer active. It indicated that 12 active Acts were being amended and that four new labour reforms covering Labour Standards, Industrial Relations, Occupational Safety and Health, and Trade Unions were intended to be introduced. The fragmentation creates different entitlements to leave, holidays and weekly rest depending on whether a worker falls under public-sector rules, the Shop and Office Employees legislation or Wages Boards. In the absence of a universal state-backed social-security system, employers also carry significant obligations for gratuity, EPF, ETF, maternity benefits and severance, and employer-borne maternity costs can shape how pregnancy and women's employment are perceived in workplaces. Dispute resolution compounds these gaps. Labour Tribunals have long carried case backlogs and lengthy procedures, and although pending cases have declined from earlier peaks, thousands remain. For low-paid workers, the practical cost of pursuing a dispute can itself become a barrier to justice. Historical mistrust between employers and trade unions, a fragmented union movement and limited institutional capacity have made consensus on reform harder to reach.

It is against this background that the Free Trade Zone Labour Collective put forward a 10-section Joint Labour Law Reform Proposal in March 2026. It called for mandatory consultation with unions before labour-law drafting, stronger protection against anti-union victimisation, female union leadership, enforcement of the eight-hour day and 40-hour week, protection against arbitrary termination, coverage for contract and gig workers, equal pay, enhanced maternity rights, modernised occupational-safety legislation with joint committees, contracts in Sinhala and Tamil, and formal responsibility for migrant-worker housing and transport. Existing law already protects against certain forms of anti-union dismissal, including under the Industrial Disputes Act. The continuing concern is that workers may still face intimidation, surveillance and retaliation when they try to exercise those rights, and that a right is only as strong as the safety with which it can be used.

Four draft labour-law reforms are currently under development. These remain proposed frameworks and have not yet been enacted into law. They include the draft Prevention of

Violence and Harassment in the Workplace legislation, Maternity and Benefits legislation, Leave and Holidays legislation, and Employment Contracts legislation.

Many of the workers most affected are also away from home. A significant share of the workforce in industrial zones such as Katunayake, Biyagama and Seeduwa consists of internal migrants, including women from the North and other districts, whose wages must cover both their own living costs and support for families at home. Housing, sanitation, drinking water, transport and personal security are therefore part of the employment reality even where they are not formally described as workplace conditions. Occupational safety depends on inspection, compliance and workers' ability to report hazards, and factory fires and cases of smoke inhalation have shown what happens when safety systems fail. The existence of a social-compliance audit does not by itself mean workers experience a workplace as safe. Occupational risks also intersect with gendered ones, including harassment, production pressure, difficulty accessing toilets or rest, insecure accommodation and limited reproductive-health support. Sexual and reproductive health and rights, which include menstrual dignity, contraception, safe pregnancy and childbirth, maternity protection and freedom from violence, sit within the same picture, and abortion remains legally restricted except where necessary to save a woman's life.

Climate exposure has become part of this picture too. Sri Lanka is exposed to floods, droughts, landslides, cyclones and extreme heat, and these hazards increasingly overlap with the working lives of people in labour-intensive industries. Globally, approximately 2.41 billion workers, or 70% of the working population, are exposed to excessive heat, rising to approximately 1.45 billion workers, or 75%, in Asia and the Pacific. Cyclone Ditwah, which struck in November 2025, affected close to 2.2 million people in Sri Lanka and damaged infrastructure, homes, livelihoods and essential services, and the World Bank identified women and children as particularly exposed to its longer-term effects. Climate shocks of this kind arrive on top of an economy already strained by fuel costs and inflation, and they fall hardest on households with the fewest reserves.

Between July and September 2026, the pressures documented across the industrial zones of Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi and Vavuniya continued to compound rather than ease, as wage stagnation, extended working hours and unresolved welfare gaps layered onto the everyday demands of factory life. 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 and 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 leave restriction, wage deduction, extended working hours 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.

Leave continued to function as a site of coercion rather than an entitlement. In Vavuniya, workers who fall ill without prior notice and return the next day are turned away at the gate rather than permitted to resume their shift, effectively converting sickness into an unpaid and unscheduled suspension. At another Vavuniya factory, leave requests are refused even when illness is serious, while at a factory in Kilinochchi, workers describe being unable to secure leave for matters they consider genuinely important, regardless of how the request is framed. The clearest illustration of how punitive leave management has become surfaced in Biyagama, where a single day of emergency leave taken without prior approval results in the deduction of four days' wages, inclusive of the attendance allowance, while leave requested in advance is described as never being approved at all. The effect is a system in which workers are nominally entitled to leave but structurally discouraged from ever using it.

Wage integrity was similarly compromised through a range of deduction practices. At one Katunayake factory, a fixed sum is deducted from wages for food regardless of whether workers bring their own meals from home, turning a stated welfare provision into an unavoidable charge. Workers at a factory in Biyagama described how their supervisors are technically employed as manpower workers through an external agent, who in turn takes a significant cut of their daily wages before they are paid, layering an intermediary cost onto already compressed earnings. In Katunayake, an attendance bonus of Rs. 1,500 has remained unchanged for an extended period, even as the cost of showing up for work under intensifying conditions has not.

Working hours and staffing pressure compounded these wage and leave concerns. In Kilinochchi, working hours extended to 6:30 p.m. mean that workers who commute by bus sometimes do not reach home until close to 10:00 p.m., while in Vavuniya a similar pattern was reported, with work regularly running past 6:00 p.m. and company transport not arriving home until after 10:00 p.m., leaving little time to rest before the next shift begins. In Katunayake, workers described a workplace under sustained pressure, compounded by high attrition; as employees leave and are not replaced with new recruits, the workload is simply redistributed onto those who remain, intensifying the very conditions driving people out. A related case in Kilinochchi captured the coercive edge this pressure can take, where workers who had participated in legal aid programmes run by Dabindu were summoned and warned that trade

union membership, while nominally permitted, could cost them their jobs, with an explicit instruction not to attend similar programmes in future. This represents not administrative overreach but a direct attempt to sever workers from the very support structures designed to inform them of their rights.

Against this backdrop, a small number of cases suggested that conditions are not static. In Biyagama, workers at one factory reported that a change in management had reduced the excessive pressure they had previously been under, while in Kilinochchi, workers at another factory noted a reduction in both the use of inappropriate language when scolding staff and in overall workplace pressure. These instances remain the exception rather than the rule, but they indicate that the conditions documented here are the product of specific management decisions rather than fixed features of the industry.

Occupational Safety, Health and Welfare (OSH)

Occupational safety, health and welfare concerns during the reporting period centred on inadequate protective equipment, physically punishing working postures, and welfare provisions, particularly food and medical care, that fall well short of what sustained industrial labour requires. Across Vavuniya, Biyagama and Kilinochchi, these gaps were treated less as urgent deficiencies than as background conditions workers are expected to simply absorb.

Basic protective equipment was absent in several documented instances. At one Vavuniya factory, workers reported that neither masks nor head protection are provided, and that anyone requiring such equipment is expected to purchase it independently. The same factory's sick room, workers said, offers little more than the appearance of medical care; a doctor is present but does not examine patients, while a nurse dispenses Panadol for almost every complaint, and workers who ask to see the doctor directly are instead questioned about why they do not trust the medication already offered.

Sustained standing was reported as a driver of both physical and psychological strain. In Biyagama, workers described joint pain and varicose veins from standing throughout the working day, compounded by the fact that household responsibilities after work also require standing, leaving little physical recovery time; workers connected this cumulative strain to irritability and emotional tension at home with their families.

Welfare facilities and food provision were consistently inadequate. Toilets at a Vavuniya factory were described as unhygienic and not cleaned on a daily basis. At a Kilinochchi factory, workers reported that the same limited meal, rice and pol sambol, is served every day, while at another facility in the same district, food quantities are insufficient, leaving workers at the end of the

queue without any food at all. In Biyagama, workers described the same food served at breakfast being reused for lunch, at times after it had begun to spoil and develop an odour. At a Vavuniya factory, meals were described as nutritionally inadequate and poorly prepared, with vegetables often half-cooked and bread and dhal served every morning without variation. Taken together, these welfare gaps point to food and hygiene provisions being treated as a fixed, minimal cost rather than a condition necessary for workers to sustain long and physically demanding shifts.

Social Justice, Equity, SRHR and Access to Rights

Access to rights during this reporting period centred not only on conditions inside the factory, but also on how work arrangements affect workers' family responsibilities and safety outside it. In Vavuniya, workers raised concern over a single shared bus serving five villages after work ended at 7:00 p.m. Because the bus travels through each village sequentially, workers from the villages served last are often not dropped home until after 11:00 p.m., leaving them travelling late at night on a long, indirect route. The case shows how workplace decisions made for operational convenience can shift the burden onto workers and their families, affecting their time, safety and ability to care for their children.

This also has a direct connection to social justice, equity and SRHR. Sexual and reproductive health and rights are shaped not only by access to health services, but by whether women have the time, safety, privacy and autonomy to exercise those rights. In Sri Lanka, abortion remains legally restricted except where necessary to save the woman's life, women continue to carry a disproportionate share of unpaid care, and the 2025 CEDAW review highlighted continuing concerns around gender-based violence. For garment workers, SRHR therefore includes the practical ability to take leave when needed, access clean toilets and water, rest, manage menstruation with dignity, seek healthcare, make reproductive decisions and live free from violence and harassment.

The proposed maternity reforms including expanded paid maternity leave, miscarriage and stillbirth leave, paternity leave, nursing breaks and an insurance-based maternity fund could strengthen these protections in law. But the cases documented in this report show that formal rights alone are not enough. Long working hours, leave restrictions, welfare gaps, verbal abuse, unsafe transport and care responsibilities can all limit women's ability to exercise their rights in practice. Access to rights must therefore be understood as a question of whether women workers have the time, safety, dignity, resources and institutional support to use those rights without transferring the costs of employment onto themselves and their families.

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment

Gender based violence and harassment during the reporting period manifested both inside the factory, through the language and conduct of supervisors, and outside it, in the form of domestic violence experienced by a woman worker. In Kilinochchi, a worker sustained multiple injuries after being assaulted by her husband and has since experienced significant emotional distress, for which she is currently receiving counselling; the case illustrates that the violence women workers navigate is not confined to the workplace, and that access to support such as counselling remains essential to recovery.

Verbal abuse by supervisors was a recurring feature of the workplace cases documented. At one Vavuniya factory, workers reported being addressed with degrading language, including being told they had only come to eat rather than work, and being called derogatory terms such as buffalo and dog. At another Vavuniya facility, supervisors were reported to use inappropriate and abusive language when workers failed to meet production targets, compounding the pressure of the target itself with humiliation for falling short of it. A further Vavuniya case described workers as being hurt by consistently disrespectful and offensive language from their superiors. In Kilinochchi, female workers at one factory reported being spoken to using similarly inappropriate and offensive language, indicating that this pattern of verbal harassment is not confined to a single district or employer but reflects a broader normalisation of demeaning speech as a management tool.

Climate and Disaster Impact

Climate risk shapes the conditions under which women garment workers live and work, and it is an occupational and social-justice issue as much as an environmental one. Sri Lanka is exposed to floods, droughts, landslides, cyclones and extreme heat, and these hazards increasingly overlap with the working lives of people in labour-intensive industries.

Research on the sector shows what this means for garment workers. A 2026 study of 384 workers in small and medium-scale apparel manufacturing companies in the Biyagama and Katunayake Export Processing Zones found that 81.25% reported exposure to excessive heat, while 80.73% reported exposure to adverse weather such as floods, cyclones, landslides, lightning and strong winds. Workers exposed to heat reported sweating, headaches, dehydration, fatigue and reduced concentration, while flooding was associated with respiratory, gastrointestinal and other health problems. Inadequate ventilation contributed to indoor air-quality concerns. These risks are sharpest in labour-intensive production, where workers spend long hours at machines or in heat-generating sections such as ironing areas, with limited control over ventilation, cooling or the timing of rest.

The effects of disasters also extend well beyond the factory gates. Cyclone Ditwah, which struck Sri Lanka in November 2025, affected close to 2.2 million people and caused extensive damage to infrastructure, homes, livelihoods and essential services. The World Bank identified women, children and other socially vulnerable groups as particularly exposed to the longer-term effects. UNFPA's subsequent response documented continuing gaps in sanitation, privacy, protection from gender-based violence and access to sexual and reproductive health services, particularly for pregnant and lactating women. For women garment workers, the consequences of such events can include disrupted transport to factories, lost income, damaged accommodation, heavier unpaid care responsibilities and difficulty reaching health services. Workers from climate-exposed areas, including the North and other drought- and heat-prone regions, may also carry these vulnerabilities with them when they migrate for work. Changing rainfall patterns and recurring El Niño conditions create the potential for both flooding and prolonged dry spells, which is why climate vulnerability has to be treated as a continuing social and labour issue rather than an occasional emergency.

For women workers, climate resilience therefore means safe and adequately ventilated workplaces, reliable transport, resilient housing and infrastructure, access to water and sanitation, disaster preparedness, accessible health services and income protection when extreme weather disrupts work.

Cases Involving Male Workers

A small number of cases this quarter concerned male workers and are recorded separately here. At a factory in Kilinochchi, male workers reported frequent instances of being scolded using inappropriate and offensive language. At the same factory, male workers described being threatened with physical assault, including supervisors raising a hand to strike them and, in some instances, actually hitting them on the head. These cases indicate that the abusive conduct documented elsewhere in this report is not directed exclusively at women workers, and that male workers in the same facilities are also subject to verbal and physical intimidation from supervisory staff.

Conclusion

The cases documented between July and September 2026 do not describe a sector in crisis at the level of the 2022 collapse. They describe something quieter: a labour market that has stabilised on paper while the terms on which women actually work inside it remain largely unchanged. Wages that have not moved while the cost of living has. Leave that exists in policy but is punished in practice. Protective equipment left to individual workers to buy. Food served

regardless of whether it is safe to eat. This is also the final report in this series, and the pattern across editions is consistent: these are not scattered incidents specific to one factory or one quarter, but recur across all four locations and different employers in the same form.

Several recommendations follow directly from these cases. Wage-board and minimum-wage revisions should account for the gap between formal entitlement and actual pay, including deductions taken through intermediary labour arrangements and unavoidable food charges. Leave-refusal and same-day dismissal-at-the-gate practices should be treated by the Department of Labour as a distinct category of violation, since they function to deter leave-taking altogether. Compliance audits should assess worker-reported adequacy of food, sanitation and medical care rather than the existence of a facility alone, and the pending Occupational Safety and Health Act should require verifiable medical capacity, not merely medical presence.

The current legal and policy framework should thereby continue to be strengthened to address gaps in worker protection, particularly for vulnerable and exposed groups. Any proposed reforms should be carefully reviewed and assessed before enactment to ensure that they are practical, adequately resourced and responsive to the realities faced by workers and employers. The fuel and price volatility and the heat and flood exposure recorded this year show that garment workers are absorbing shocks that originate well outside the factory; transport cost support, workplace heat-safety standards and disaster planning for industrial zones should be built into occupational safety regulation now. None of this depends on comprehensive legal reform to begin: food safety, leave enforcement and medical adequacy could change within a single quarter if regulators and employers acted on them.

As this series concludes, the Dabindu Collective's role does not end with it. Its continued presence in Katunayake, Biyagama, Kilinochchi and Vavuniya, through legal aid, worker education and direct documentation, remains the mechanism through which the gap between labour law as written and labour conditions as lived becomes visible at all. Sri Lanka's labour-law reform process, its ratification of ILO Convention 190, and its proposed maternity and safety legislation represent a genuine opportunity to close that distance. Whether it is realised will depend on whether workers have organisations able to document their conditions, support their claims and hold employers and the state to account. Dabindu's documentation and advocacy remain central to that accountability, reporting period after reporting period, regardless of what the macroeconomic indicators say.

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