

Sri Lanka: Brandix caught in COVID-19 mess

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Apparel manufacturer responds to mounting allegations as concerns are raised

- Workers were sent home without conducting PCR tests
- Most workers were deployed from manpower agencies
- Rights group in FTZ complains poor living conditions and severe hardships
- Company says majority COVID-19 positive employees have proven to be asymptomatic

With over 1000 garment workers from the Minuwangoda factory testing positive for COVID-19, several allegations were levelled against the parent company – Brandix Apparel Limited about how they handled the upsurge of cases. At the onset of the indefinite curfew period in March, many garment workers were at the receiving end of a challenging situation where many junior workers lost their jobs and those who went on leave weren't paid. In this backdrop another period of unemployment would certainly add to their burdens. On the other hand, health authorities are speeding up the process of contact tracing to detect more cases.

Concerns to be addressed immediately

According to Chamila Thushari, Programme Coordinator at Dabindu Collective – a non-profit organisation advocating to protect and promote rights of female workers in the Free Trade Zone, around 2000-3000 garment workers were unemployed at the onset of the curfew in March. "After the case was detected from the Minuwangoda factory, all workers from this factory and the Katunayake factory were sent home. This is without conducting PCR tests on them and this is a very risky situation. Another issue is that most workers have been deployed from manpower agencies and they work on a rotational basis. Therefore if there are less workers in one factory, the agency would send a group of workers to that factory and the same group would go to another factory on the following day and so on. This had been practised by factories coming under this chain for a while. The workers are supposed to receive their salaries on the 10th of this month but due to the prevailing situation they will not get their share either.

"Speculation is rife whether the virus spread from the human resources team that visits these factories every day. Another concern is that a husband and wife would work in two different factories, but would live in the same boarding room," she added.

Thushari further said that several other factories have closed down and workers who lost jobs were employed in other factories manufacturing various products; some which even operate under hazardous conditions. "They are helpless and would work anywhere to earn money. They have to pay boarding fees, utility bills and some even have to send money home. But they are not even being looked after," she complained.

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In a letter issued to the Labour Department, the Collective further requests the Government to deploy Public Health Inspectors (PHIs) to identify close contacts, conduct PCR tests on garment workers currently boarded at the FTZ, keep them in self-isolation within FTZ without sending them home, arrange a mechanism to provide food and essentials to workers if an indefinite curfew period is declared, communicate important details in Tamil as there are many Tamil speaking workers within the garment worker community and conduct a thorough investigation as to how the infection spread from a factory coming under the Brandix chain.

Certain workers given leave

Garment workers face many hardships while trying to make ends meet. Speaking to Daily Mirror on conditions of anonymity, two workers at the Katunayake factory expressed their fears. "We work on two shifts, one from 8.00am-5.00pm and the other from 2.00pm-10.00pm. A boarding room would cost between Rs. 5000-8000. When we leave, we have to take our belongings. If not we have to pay the rent even though we aren't physically there," the source said.

She further said that at the onset of the curfew in March, those who couldn't go home didn't even have a place to find food. However the company had asked them to take leave till Monday if they feared working under the prevailing situation. However, employees in certain sections such as packaging are continuing to work.

PHIs request support from public

A video circulating on social media showed several garment factory workers blaming PHIs for not conducting PCR tests. When asked, Public Health Inspector Union secretary M. Balasooriya said that the role of the PHIs is to help identify close contacts, find patients, enforce quarantine regulations and ensure that COVID-19 patients are hospitalised. "At the onset of the incident around 2000 PCR tests were conducted and we may have missed out on certain people. But we conducted tests on those whom we missed out as well. We are extending our services with limited human resources and there could be certain issues. What we require is the support from people to continue our work," said Balasooriya. So far 12 PHIs are working in Divulapitiya while 14 others are working in Minuwangoda. Around 200 of them have been deployed in the Gampaha district. However Balasooriya said that 40 other PHIs from Kurunegala, Puttalam, Kegalle and Colombo will join the team from today. The total number of PHIs is 1710.

Allegations pile up

Following the detection of a COVID-19 patient Brandix initially released an official statement stating that a rigorous protocol was implemented across Brandix along with the immediate response and support from the PHI.

It said that they continue to assist relevant authorities and take all necessary measures to ensure complete containment of the virus. However, several of their factories in Seeduwa, Ekala and Ja-Ela are still continuing operations. A follow-up statement issued on October 6 said that one of the challenges they have 'regrettably' experienced is that a majority of COVID-19 positive employees have proven to be asymptomatic. In its conclusion it states that the well-being of its employees, the community and the nation continue to be their top priority.

What's both intriguing and perplexing at this juncture are the efforts made using a campaign on social media conveying sympathy and concern regarding the welfare of these employees who have contracted COVID-19.

However some questions remain unaddressed. For instance, did Brandix workers who were brought in on chartered flights from India follow proper testing procedures before boarding the flights? Did Brandix quarantine the workers from India in their corporate private facilities? And were workers with COVID-19 symptoms asked to report to work?

Brandix responds

In a fresh statement issued by Brandix Apparel Limited, the apparel manufacturer stated that no parties from India or any other country had access to the Minuwangoda facility. Responding to allegations and speculation rife on social media that the workers repatriated from India didn't adhere to quarantine procedures, the statement further added that they were Sri Lankan employees while mentioning that the Government mandated 28-day quarantine procedure was followed by them and their families were brought back via chartered flights.

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