

India: Women workers transform Tamil Nadu factories in fight against gender-based violence

Tuesday 11 July 2023 (Date first published: 30 June 2023).

Today 29-year-old Nadiya walks into the factory with her head held high. As well as working on the stitching line, she is also a shop floor monitor, responsible for documenting and raising complaints about incidents of gender-based violence. It's not easy work in a Tamil Nadu factory where over 90% of supervisors are men and [90% of the workers are women](#) but if something happens Nadiya works with her colleagues to record it, take it to management and get a resolution

It is a far cry from the days when Nadiya, a woman from a Dalit colony, would pray to God for protection every time she entered the factory. The days when all the women knew they were targets for the men but were trapped between the abuse and the need to provide for their families.

Across the garment industry women work in factories owned and managed by men. Add to this a social context which considers women to be inferior, and then multiply it by caste discrimination, race, age, poverty, and migrant status and you get the gender-based violence that sees men exploit the power they have over women in workplaces.

Today, however, Nadiya looks her manager directly in the eye when she stands up for herself and the thousands of women she works with. It is the kind of change she says was impossible to imagine until it was done.

In her bag is a card printed with the initials TTCU and a flag emblem. This card denotes Nadiya's membership of the [Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union](#) (TTCU) – a union led by Dalit women in a sexist, caste-ridden society where even the other trade union leaders are typically upper-caste men.

So how was a little-known Dalit women-led trade union able to transform the toxic workplace culture of a factory owned by [Eastman Exports](#), India's fourth biggest garment exporter? It starts with a crime so terrible that a 21-year-old-woman became a global emblem of centuries of injustice.

Jeyasre Kathiravel was the first person in her village to go to college. She got a job at Natchi Apparel, intending to leave as soon as she found other employment. But on the 1 January 2021, Jeyasre did not return home from work. After an extensive search by her family and community that lasted four days, she was discovered dead in a patch of wasteland, having been raped and murdered. Her supervisor at Natchi Apparel confessed and is awaiting trial.

Natchi Apparel, now known as India Dyeing, is the same factory Nadiya works in, and Jeyasre was her colleague and fellow union member. In the aftermath of Jeyasre's death dozens more women

came forward with their own stories of abuse at Natchi Apparel and it emerged that global brand H&M had been a customer of the factory for roughly ten years. As news of the murder spread, the TTCU launched the [Justice For Jeyasre](#) campaign which swiftly became a global cause. Conditions at Natchi Apparel were found to be so bad that US Customs banned Eastman Exports, which owns Natchi Apparel from importing goods into the US – a ban that has [now been lifted](#).

Amidst the outpouring of anger at Jeyasre's death, the TTCU worked with garment worker rights group the [Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) (AFWA) to construct and implement a ground-breaking agreement called the [Dindigul Agreement to End Gender-Based Violence and Harassment](#) – named after the Dindigul region of Tamil Nadu.

The Dindigul Agreement consists of two interlocking contracts, both of which are legally binding – the first is between the TTCU and Eastman Exports. These two parties have contracted to end gender-based violence and harassment at all Eastman facilities in the Dindigul region – factories, dormitories, spinning mills, printing workshops, and training centres.

The second is a contract between the TTCU, AFWA, and US based group [Global Labor Justice – International Labor Rights Forum](#) (GLJ-ILRF) on the one side, and [H&M](#), [Gap Inc.](#) and [PVH](#) Corporation (which owns Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger) on the other. This agreement locks H&M, GAP and PVH into supporting and enforcing the TTCU-Eastman agreement, and imposing business consequences onto Eastman if they fail to comply.

With its intersectional focus on ending gender and caste based violence, the Dindigul Agreement is a first not just for India or Asia, but for the entire garment industry. The only other legally binding agreement that exists is the [International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile & Garment Industry](#) which has its roots in the Rana Plaza factory collapse. There is also the Lesotho Agreement in Southern Africa.

This week, [labour stakeholders have published impact data from the first year of the Dindigul Agreement](#). The report documents women workers saying they are no longer afraid but instead actually want to work for Eastman Exports – the terror that existed at the time of Jeyasre's death has gone.

The report indicates two vital factors that are responsible for this huge change. Firstly, the Dindigul Agreement is not a voluntary scheme like the hundreds of worse-than-useless 'sustainability certification' schemes that exist in the textile industry. Secondly, this is a genuinely worker-led system of change with a women-led trade union at its centre. Women now have a strong collective voice because the agreement centres the right to join a union.

The data shows that over the past year workers across Eastman's facilities raised 185 grievances – 170 were reported by women. Remarkably, 182 of these grievances were resolved – 90% of them within a single week.

Across the garment industry, a majority-women workforce labours in plants owned and managed by men. A new report sheds light on gender-based violence in textile factories in India's southernmost

Most of the grievances concerned verbal abuse, and the resolutions have included warnings, apologies, and in one case a repeat offender manager was fired. Another manager was fired for taking photos of women without their permission. This is a key Dindigul tactic – stopping gender-based violence and harassment right at the beginning before it escalates. This means stamping out behaviours like verbal abuse or taking photos without consent before the abuse becomes physical.

Within this trade union-built framework, the shop floor monitor mechanisms for reporting and remediating grievances are survivor centred and led by women like Nadiya. This might seem obvious but many garment industry ‘safety schemes’ are organised so that the people addressing grievances are the same managers who carry out the abuse. Similarly, negative repercussions against people who report abuse is outlawed and shop floor monitors have extra protections against retaliation. This system of eyes and ears across the factory has created a network of 58 trusted shop floor monitors and union representatives.

Over the past year an intense programme of anti-violence training has also taken place, not just of workers but of managers, drivers and security guards. The people doing the training have overwhelmingly been Dalit women. The space created by the Dindigul Agreement is now being used to raise other important issues like health and safety, minimum wage violations, and canteen food. The factory crèche has dramatically improved and workers are taking advantage of the educational scholarships set up in Jeyasre’s memory.

The right to a violence-free workplace should be enough of an incentive for more brands to step up and support the expansion of the Dindigul Agreement. Where that is not enough, there is also a business case: AFWA found that when workers do not fear for their lives, employee retention rises by 67% and higher union involvement in industrial planning results in 16% greater factory efficiency.

Despite being a multi-trillion-dollar industry, the production of clothing and fashion is still routinely dismissed as ‘women’s work.’ Add to this the racism that sees the people of the Global South as there to be exploited, and you have the further devaluing of garment workers and the undermining of calls for change. And yet the women of the TTCU are actively changing the world they live and work in.

History teaches that industrial struggle is one area where women can change not only their conditions at work, but their position in society. One of the most profound aspects of the Dindigul Agreement is reports of a newfound capacity of the Dalit women it represents to challenge discrimination not just at work but in homes and communities. In this way, sexism, casteism, and gender-based violence are being challenged across society, showing the need for trade unions as a means to fight discrimination and create social change.

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P.S.

- Social Policy Worldwide. June 30th, 2023:

https://socialpolicyworldwide.org/post/women_workers_transform_tamil_nadu_factories_in_fight_against_gender_based_violence_1

- Tansy Hoskins. Award-winning journalist investigating the global fashion industry. Author of “The Anti-Capitalist Book Of Fashion” and “Foot Work – What Your Shoes Tell You About Globalisation”.