

Women work like machines in India's textile mills, says union leader

BY ANURADHA NAGARAJ

CHENNAI, India (Thomson Reuters Foundation) - Rajaram Paritha is on a mission. The 35-year-old tailor wants to be the voice of every young girl who is lured with the promise of big money to work in textile mills in southern India's Tamil Nadu and then exploited and abused.

Head of the all-women Tamil Nadu Textile and Common Labour Union (TTCU), Paritha uses her experience as a factory worker to challenge forms of exploitation such as debt bondage, long hours and sexual abuse in the garment and textile industry.

"Workers have to come together like they did a few days back ... against the government's controversial government pension plan. If they don't, the exploitation will not stop," she said in an interview with the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The scale of the issue Paritha and her organization are trying to address is huge: much of India's \$42 billion-a-year textile and clothing export industry is located in Tamil Nadu, and to boost productivity and increase margins, parts of its lucrative supply chain are built on bonded labor.

A 2014 study into Tamil Nadu's textile industry by the Freedom Fund, a philanthropic initiative dedicated to ending modern slavery, and C&A Foundation, which partners with the Thomson Reuters Foundation on its human trafficking coverage, found workers were often subjected to low wages, excessive and sometimes forced overtime, lack of freedom of movement as well as verbal and sexual abuse.

A conservative estimate suggests there may be at least 100,000 girls and young women being exploited in this way.

"I vividly remember the one year I worked at a mill," Paritha said. "The machines would always be running and we were constantly working, just like the machines. Even a restroom break meant ensuring a co-worker manned your position for the few minutes you were away."

A year into the job, Paritha quit because standing for eight to 10 hours was taking a toll on her health. "I learnt tailoring and moved on. But many can't do this due to economic pressures."

Working with women and girls in 10 districts of Tamil Nadu, the union, now with nearly 5,000 members, trains its members on their legal rights, lobbying and leadership skills and addresses sexual harassment and violence in the workplace.

"We are fighting for justice for a teenager who was found dead in a mill hostel a month back and a young woman who was recently penalized for stopping the machines for a few minutes when her clothes got stuck in it," says Paritha.

"Their individual voices are suppressed by mill managements. They cannot do the same with our collective voice."

This week, after thousands of protesters clashed with police in the city of Bengaluru, the government decided to scrap a proposal to change the rule on pension withdrawals - a rollback seen as a victory for workers' unions. But the battle for rights is far from over, said Paritha.

"The change is so slow," she said. "I still see the same issues of wages being withheld, no restroom and lunch breaks come up even today. It only makes me more determined to fight."

(Reporting by Anuradha Nagaraj, Editing by Ros Russell; Please credit the Thomson Reuters Foundation, the charitable arm of Thomson Reuters, that covers humanitarian news, women's rights, trafficking and climate change. Visit www.trust.org)