

Can we sit down?

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The Hindu

Last September's agitation by women tea plantation workers in Munnar was hailed as "a thunderous slap on the cheek of Kerala's highly patriarchal history of trade unionism". Photo: H. Vibhu



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Women protesters argue with police personnel during the garment factory workers' stir in Bengaluru this April. Photo: K Murali Kumar

Two recent uprisings by women workers in Munnar and Bengaluru reinforce how everyday issues faced by female labourers have traditionally been ignored. Do they need trade unions of their own?

On a blistering summer's day this April, thousands of women factory workers poured out of five big garment factories in Bengaluru and blocked the arterial Hosur Road for over seven hours. Elsewhere, along the Bangalore-Mysore Highway, thousands more squatted on the road, causing a gridlock.

Irate and confused commuters and travellers learnt belatedly that the women were on a flash strike protesting the central government's proposal to amend the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) rules. This would make the government component of the corpus unavailable to them until they turned 58. This rule, it was rumoured, would come into effect on May 1.

This was bad news for the women, who were dependent on the entire corpus for various domestic commitments. In the garment industry, where the attrition rate is high, they would typically resign from one job, collect their full EPF, and join another. Their precarious finances were geared to this rolling arrangement. They threatened to resign en masse before May 1, so they could collect the entire EPF due to them till

then. The factory managements, too, extended tacit support to the protest because they knew if the women's demands were not met and they resigned en masse, the Rs. 10,000 crore-garment industry in Karnataka would literally crash. Besides, the EPF issue affected men and women workers alike and so, encouraging the women's protest worked even from their perspective.

The women, who were treated almost like bonded labour in the factories, were suddenly blockading the streets. The police, who had never dealt with such a situation, did not know how to react. There were no defined leaders to negotiate with, and the police were hesitant to use force against women.

The agitation remained fairly peaceful until male workers from a local political party strong-armed their way in and started pelting stones at buses. They attacked policemen and bystanders alike. Finally, it turned into the usual melee with several people injured, property damaged and protesters carted off to the police station.

Over the next two days, more and more women from the 2,500 factories in Karnataka jammed the roads. Then, the central government announced a rollback and the women returned to their jobs. The agitation ended as suddenly as it had started.

It was a victory of sorts for the over one lakh women factory workers who form the backbone of the garment industry. The sad part was that the flash strike in no way addressed the far more stressful day-to-day problems the women face at work. But they dare not go on strike to change any of this. These semi-literate women with no special skills work for abysmally low salaries of about Rs. 7,500 to Rs. 8,000 a month. The money feeds and clothes their families. They simply cannot afford to stay away from work for very long.

The problems of the garment factory workers have been highlighted in many studies and media reports over the decades. Yet no government body or trade union has specifically addressed the issues. The workers are almost all women, the supervisors are mostly male and this in itself is a major problem. The management focuses only on targets and does not bother about the working conditions. According to journalist Pushpa Achanta, the women "stitch while standing or sitting upright for around nine hours a day, with poor lighting and ventilation, and minimal breaks for meals and using the bathroom; they often suffer from backaches, respiratory ailments and itching." They are allowed just two bathroom breaks a day and if they are in the bathroom for more than three minutes, they are subjected to verbal abuse from the supervisors. Menstruating and pregnant women are given no concessions. Even the sanctioned lunch break of half-an-hour is reduced to a mere 10 minutes; they often eat standing up. Many women have been at the receiving end of sexual, physical and emotional abuse. Although the women make clothes for high-end multinational garment retailers and designers, the trickle-down money they get is a pittance. The MNCs often just pay lip service to gender parity in the workplace in order to present a politically correct facade back in their own countries.

The Garment and Textile Workers Union formed in 2006 mostly has male leaders. In 2012, with the help of an NGO, some women workers formed the Garment Labour Union in Bengaluru. They were able to collect about 2,000 women members and create small self-help groups. However, most women workers are reluctant to participate in union activities because their families object or because they cannot find the time or because they fear they will lose their jobs.

Will it help if women workers have a strong all-women trade union of their own? Will they be able to force the authorities to take cognisance of the various issues that dog them? In September last year, Munnar, a sleepy hill station in Kerala, was taken by surprise when thousands of women tea plantation workers from all around Idukki district converged to demand better wages and working conditions for themselves. The leaders of Pembila Orumai (Unity of Women) were mostly Tamil-speaking women from the Kannan Devan Tea Estates but the women they mobilised came from all the plantations.

More importantly, the Pembila Orumai rejected all overtures from political parties and refused to allow the existing patriarchal trade unions to interfere in their affairs. They chose to negotiate with the management on their own terms. Writer J. Devika hailed the Munnar struggle as "a thunderous slap on the cheek of Kerala's highly patriarchal history of trade unionism".

Although the women plantation workers were agitating for salaries and bonus on a par with their male colleagues, they also spoke of day-to-day issues that usually never find any mention in trade union negotiations — knee damage due to long hours of standing on rocky slopes or lung problems due to pesticide inhalation. They also complained that they were under constant pressure to increase the speed of plucking and were not allowed toilet breaks. Some complained of being forced to pluck with one hand while taking a so-called tea break. There have also been other less publicised agitations by informal unions of women workers. In Kerala, for example, women working on shop floors agitated for the right to sit down during working hours.

As more and more such informal gender-based unions emerge, they bring to the fore issues that the women have always been aware of but were embarrassed to talk about; issues which have been trivialised for decades by the established patriarchal trade unions. Proper restrooms, places to sit, a space to relax in, lunch timings, freedom from sexual harassment and verbal abuse — these are some of the very basic rights that are missing.

Yet, no traditional trade union has any of these as an important point on its agenda. These are the points that the emerging all-women trade unions need to build into their agenda. In their scramble to find a foothold, the all-women trade unions should not lose their feminine perspective, which brought them to the vantage point they now occupy, from where they are actually being heard.

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