



Premalatha (front) and other garment workers attend a workshop on stopping gender-based violence in the workplace. Photos: Women's Centre

## Winter Story

# SOMETIMES WE STARVE

BY GILLIAN SOUTHEY | CWS COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR.

**P**remalatha grew up in an isolated rural village in the southeast of Sri Lanka. Her parents worked as agricultural labourers when they could. After school Premalatha and her six siblings joined them when there was work. It was never enough to support the whole family and pay for their schooling. Sometimes they missed meals or had little to eat for the whole day.

First Premalatha's older sister found work as a garment worker in one of the country's Export Processing Zone (EPZ), areas with special concessions for factories. The money she sent home became her main source of income. Wanting to help, Premalatha followed her sister when she turned 18.

"I didn't have a clue about how to use a sewing machine. When I entered the factory for the first time, I was shocked to see how girls were working and it was so strange to me. The management gave me three month's training and I started work on a very low salary.

After the training they were expecting me to sew 100 pieces in one hour and it was really difficult. That was the so called 'target'. I did not have the skills to complete 100 pieces per hour. We had to work without intervals. No one told us to have a break or lunch. The only thing they said was work, work, work. We were starving sometimes and could not use the toilet. We were afraid to ask permission from the supervisors. Sometimes, I skipped lunch to try to complete the target. Even now we struggle to complete our targets and earn enough money for living.



Premalatha has seen that when the women workers stand together they are treated more fairly.

In my factory, I report for work at 7.00 am. Before going to work, I have to wash our clothes and prepare food for my child to take to the Daycare Centre. We usually work 10 hours per day. If they paid us a reasonable salary, we could survive ourselves and spend money only for our children's education and wellbeing. But the sad part is that nobody is thinking about giving us a reasonable salary."



Left: Premalatha and her daughter share a tiny room in one of the many boarding houses that cater for workers in the EPZ. They cook outside on an open fire but sometimes are too tired to gather the wood they need. Right: Premalatha has to work very hard to meet her daily target as a machine operator.

The first Covid case in their EPZ was in the factory where Premalatha works. Someone rang the women at the boarding house around midnight to tell them not to come to work. The workers had little food on hand as the factory normally provides two poor quality meals a day. The next day Premalatha says people were scared and shopkeepers would not sell them what they needed.

“Once my daughter and I were starving for two or three days as we did not have anything eat. Even our next-door neighbour refused to talk to us or help. We were locked down in our room for nearly a month. And so I went home to my parents as that was the only solution I could think of. Even in the village the shopkeepers refused to sell me food. Somehow, we managed to survive and after some time I was called back to work,” she says.

“Joining the Women’s Centre has been very important as I have learned a lot. Earlier we were afraid to talk to the management and officers in the factory, but after participating in the awareness raising programmes and workshops we were empowered with the knowledge and willpower to go and talk to them about our rights and demands. Now we have the courage to talk to any higher officer with facts, to find solutions for our problems.

During the Covid period, the Sri Lankan Government did not take any security measures or provide welfare facilities for workers. They only used us to earn foreign currency and exploit us with the factory owners. But the Women’s Centre organised a campaign demanding a salary increment. We supported them and eventually got a Rs.2000/- (NZ\$8.81) increment. The credit goes to the Women’s Centre.”

Premalatha’s daughter goes to the Day Care Centre run by the Women’s Centre. “They treat all the kids equally and lovingly. After leaving my daughter there, I feel very relaxed and then I can go to work with a peaceful mind,” she continues.

Now Sri Lanka is facing a political and economic crisis. Food inflation stood at 57.4% in May. Nearly 5 million people need food assistance. Prices are skyrocketing and there is little medicine or gas for sale. The Women’s Centre is undertaking a needs assessment and hopes to supply food, medicine and other support so workers survive.

## Please support our Winter Appeal for economic justice.

Your donation could help workers attend trainings on employment and protection rights, fund legal support for victims of gender-based violence and subsidise the Day Care Centre.

The Women’s Centre is committed to stopping gender-based violence and exploitation at work and in the boarding houses. Their work with Tamil and Sinhala women is building understanding across the ethnic divisions that can be a source of conflict in Sri Lanka. They continue to campaign for better pay and conditions for plantation workers, including tea pickers.

**With your gift, workers like Premalatha will not have to go hungry. They will get the support they need through Sri Lanka’s economic crisis.**

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