

Global Issues

Doing the Right Thing? COVID-19, PPE and the Case of Sri Lankan Apparels

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Introduction

Sri Lankan apparels is often considered the poster child for global apparels, given its heightened attentiveness to global ethical codes and increasingly eco-friendly production. In tune with this image, Sri Lankan apparel industrialists were also quick to shift gears and move into the production of personal protective equipment (PPE) with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. While other supplier countries in South Asia and Asia faltered, Sri Lankan apparels had its sights on other possibilities – securing one of the largest orders for PPE by May 2020. Alongside and yet again in contrast to other suppliers, Sri Lankan apparels also struck a tripartite agreement to protect worker jobs and secure wages at no less than minimum wages.¹ All seemed well. Yet by early October 2020, Sri Lankan apparels came into the media spotlight, when the outbreak of a COVID-positive case occurred at one of the largest and most reputable apparel producers – BRANDIX, which then fast became a cluster that led to community transmission (Jeewandra et al., 2021: 14–15). This attention has not faded since then. It is a year since this fall from grace, and an opportune time to reflect and digest possible causes – partly due to the pandemic, but I want to argue also due to structural facets underpinning the global supply chain and Sri Lankan apparels itself.

Reports of factory closures were frequent at the start of the pandemic, from Bangladesh to Cambodia, with costs borne by workers with job losses, lost wages and non-payment exposed (Carswell, De Neve and Yuvaraj, 2020; Cook et al. 2020; Toppa, 2020). The early days of the pandemic were a blow to labourers. Despite hardships endured by workers, reactionary forces called for the stripping of prevailing labour laws, particularly pronounced in India (Gaur, 2020; Scroll In, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, too, some sections of employers were calling for suspension of labour laws (Amerasinghe, 2020),² but Sri Lankan labouring classes secured a semblance of security. By 25 May 2020, IndustriALL (2020) reported a successful tripartite agreement. The essence of this settlement was that workers not in work during May and June “will be paid 50 per cent of their wages or LKR 14 500 (US \$77.00), whichever is more beneficial”. Additionally, the “employees provident fund (EPF) and employees trust fund (ETF) contributions on the wages will also be paid to workers” (IndustriALL: unpaginated). Correspondingly, the apparel sector had secured success in shifting to

¹ However, it is important to bear in mind that minimum wages in Sri Lanka are significantly lower than the estimated living wages stipulated by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), with the latter more than 4.25 times the minimum wage.

² Perera (2020) reports that the head of the Employers Federation wrote a letter to the Minister of Labour calling for suspensions in labour laws – in tune with the opinion piece written by Amerasinghe, a former head of the Employers Federation of Ceylon.

PPE production, an early success for an otherwise flailing global industry (Mezzadri and Ruwanpura, 2020; *The Hindu*, 2020; Xiuhaunet, 2020).

Sri Lankan apparels had another favourable boon. Until October 2020, Sri Lankan authorities were managing the spread of the COVID virus effectively. Commentators attributed Sri Lanka's early success in curbing virus transmission to an effective public healthcare system, robust surveillance and contact tracing (Basu and Srivastava, 2020; Borgen, 2020; United Nations, 2020). A conducive context facilitated the shift of Sri Lankan apparels to PPE manufacturing, and permitted workers to volunteer to produce a commodity much in demand since the onset of the pandemic. Sri Lankan apparels was so successful that the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020) placed the country second in manufacturing PPE for the January–June 2020 period, second only to China.

How and why did Sri Lankan apparels then find itself in a media vortex come October 2020? Moreover, why has this unyielding pressure by labour rights groups continued? In the sections to follow, I outline how the industry placed itself during the pandemic, briefly track evidence around the BRANDIX fall-out around a factory cluster and community transmission, before shifting to analyse reasons why Sri Lankan apparels faced intense approbation.

“Doing the Right Thing”

Almost from the onset of the pandemic, a promotional video clip of 3:16 minutes produced by MAS, another large apparel producer,³ entitled *CoVID-19: Doing the Right Thing during a Pandemic*, was circulating on social media. Since 26 April 2020, this clip was also publicly available on YouTube; it uses MAS's trademark slogan “Change is Courage” to underline steps taken by MAS, as a corporate entity. MAS (2020) represents itself as making a smooth shift towards PPE manufacturing, primarily to support the nation. Two weeks prior to this, *The Hindu* (2020) reported how BRANDIX had launched PPE production.

The video clip offers a closer glance at manufacturing products with alertness to health protocols. Rolling figures and numbers give weight to the turmoil caused by the global pandemic. Using a sombre woman's voice, it offers context for corporate entities like MAS to step forward and make an active contribution to frontline health care workers and government servants. Primarily, the video clip is represented as stepping up and serving the nation, although most images are of non-Sri Lankan (i.e. white) medical professionals, with a few active images of Sri Lankan medical and military cadres interspersed.

Viewers also get an account of the 16 000 PPEs and 100 000 protective masks manufactured by MAS.⁴ Moreover, the video shows how MAS supplied twenty-one medical centres and hospitals in the country with innovative and woven re-usable water-repellent PPE (1 600), non-woven disposable PPE (8 450) and other non-apparel support: a magnetic robot and Perspex boxes to administer medical treatment. Innovating a new generation of customised and filtered medical masks of various types and quality is another contribution made to medical bodies, according to the clip.

The focus is on how MAS's shifting gears to produce PPE was about serving the nation. It is

³ BRANDIX, Hirdramani Group (HG) and MAS are considered the big three leading apparel producers in Sri Lanka; they are local capitalists gone global (Ruwanpura, 2022).

⁴ The video clips distinguishes between PPE and protective masks. MAS defines PPE as protective gear other than masks (gowns, gloves, etc); this is different from how PPE is commonly understood in the rest of the world.

relatively silent on how the move towards PPE production was also about manufacturing for the global market. *The Hindu* (2020) reportage is more revealing in this regard. Nonetheless this was a commendable transformation for Sri Lankan apparels, which keeps with the previous analysis of positioning the sector as a vanguard, whether it be for ethical trading, eco-friendly manufacturing or the sustainability agenda (Perry, 2013; Goger 2014; Fernando et al., 2019; Barnett et al., 2021; Ruwanpura 2022).

In serving Sri Lanka, the video clip deploys jingoistic language of unfinished “battles” and “war against” the novel coronavirus (COVID-19), which circulated globally, too. Sri Lanka is not alone in using militarised metaphors of battles and wars against the virus when managing a public health crisis. Yet, the use of this language has particularly troubling resonance in the country, given three decades of war, a decade of unresolved ethnic politics and the fact that apparel-sector workers also now include all ethnic communities, especially in the north and east of the country. The use of chauvinistic and military metaphors also sidesteps decades of poor resourcing in public health care and how the intensity of the pandemic is connected to the perilous state of the public health sector (Basu and Srivastava, 2020; Bhaskaran, Dutta and Naidu, 2021).

Our attention is then shifted to workers in the last forty seconds of the short video clip. The process of mobilising 500 volunteer labourers (MAS associates) and how health and safety standards were upheld is prominently featured. Static images of disinfection used on workers entering factory premises, monitoring body temperature, physical distancing between workers on the shop floor, wearing masks and visors, boards separating worker stations are richly captured. MAS’s global presence is also reinforced, with its 99 000 strong workforce across fifty-three production sites in sixteen countries unifying to confront global challenges.

The clip produced by MAS offers a glimpse into a few vital issues. First, the video reflects the agility of capital – its ability to modify manufacturing from fashionwear to PPE, a frictionless shift, suggesting vision and will on the part of Sri Lankan apparels. The video is also a gesture to Sri Lankan accolades on upholding health and safety, with precautionary arrangements to protect labour and produce various PPE outputs.

This confident attentiveness to health and safety appeared to hold water during the initial phase of the pandemic, with no major (or minor) reporting of factory-level COVID outbreaks. Supporting voluntary governance regimes ought to hold, given that Sri Lankan apparels have carved out a niche as doing ethical and sustainable business (Perry, 2013; Goger, 2014; Fernando et al., 2019). Yet, as Bryson and Vanchan (2020) remark, global production processes and supply chains are not immune from risks or precarity, with COVID-19 highlighting and heightening these odds. As they argue, stocktaking is essential to ensure “context-based approaches to understanding globalization and localisation” (Bryson and Vanchan, 2020: 531; see also Cook et al., 2020). It is also as a glaring moment of dis/articulation for a country often considered to be at the forefront of value creation and upgrading (Bair and Werner, 2011; McGrath, 2018). Adopting these perspectives, I shift to the reportage on the BRANDIX fall-out. I analyse it as an illustrative case of the contradictory and varied nature of global production processes, in which local uneven distributional effects are also a factor.

The Virus of Corruption?

Sri Lanka went into a localised version of lockdown during April/May 2020. During this time, the majority of Sri Lankan apparel-sector workers were on furlough, with only a handful volunteering

to labour through the pandemic by producing PPE – initially to supply national needs.⁵ By the third week of May 2020, there were accounts of Sri Lankan apparels attracting over \$500 million worth of orders of PPE (*The Hindu*, 2020; Xinhuanet, 2020). Local production of PPE to serve the nation had modified into meeting global demand.

The possibility of undoing these early attainments were built into the steps undertaken by the Sri Lankan government to manage the pandemic. Instead of utilising and investing in Sri Lanka's public health system, the President appointed a militarised COVID-19 Task Force. Medical doctors or civil servants from the Ministry of Health were cast aside without any consideration about using the military in an ethnically febrile post-war context (Nandakumar, 2020). Moreover, as yet another public health specialist reminded, Sri Lanka's growing inequality, poverty and under-resourcing of its public health system meant that "More than ever before, Sri Lanka should think of snapping out of this dream that our health systems is as utopically just and equitable" (Fernando, 2020: unpaginated). Yet, seemingly oblivious to the inequities, injustice and uneven impacts that COVID-19 was imposing on the Sri Lankan population, a segment of medical professionals called for even more privatisation – by advocating treating COVID patients at private hospitals (*Daily Mirror*, 2020a). The drift towards reinforcing inequality was further cemented when hotels were turned into paid hospitals or quarantine centres. The disquiet over Sri Lanka's management of COVID-19 was to come later; initially, the dominant sentiment was for "effective" management of the pandemic. The BRANDIX fall-out punctured this confidence.

The Minuwangoda cluster, as it was initially called and continues to be formally designated, was symbolic of the problems associated with a militarised response to COVID-19 management, and exemplifies the *virus of corruption* that scars the Sri Lankan polity. Unholy relations between the military, the government and capital were exposed. The one reported case of a worker at a BRANDIX factory testing positive for COVID-19 in Minuwangoda rapidly turned into an entire cohort of 1 069 labourers (Aneez, 2020; *Daily Mirror*, 2020b; AFWA, 2021; Hoskins et al., 2021). Although, BRANDIX, the Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) and the Sri Lankan authorities were at pains to champion credentials as upholding procedures, the situational analysis provided by the Health Promotion Bureau exposes October 2020 as the point at which the COVID-19 cases started to rise (see Figure 1). Medical analysis reinforces the point that the large outbreak started in October 2020 (Jeewandara et al., 2021).

October 2020 is then the moment in which COVID-19 shifted from cluster outbreaks to community transmission. The official denial of community transmission is partly linked to the identified source – a woman worker at a reputable garment factory – but how she came to contract the virus is unacknowledged. High-end production sites ought to have upheld health and safety regimes that should have prevented the scale of the COVID outbreak within them – and halted the subsequent community transmission. To add insult to injury the government, the corporate entity (BRANDIX) and the military came across as in cahoots, protecting each other and placing responsibility on workers who ought to be celebrated as the backbone of a pandemic-ravaged economy.

I rely on newspaper archives, press statements by BRANDIX, JAAF and labour rights organisations to offer a glimpse into the highly fractious interpretation of events. How does one

⁵ The tripartite agreement was reached only in May 2020 to support and protect workers (IndustriAll, 2020). This is not to say that there were no reports of workers finding themselves in a state of frenzy, unannounced (temporary or permanent) factory closures together with lack of sustained government support towards its working class – whether in the formal or informal sector (Gunawardana and De Silva, 2021; Ruwanpura, 2021).

make sense of disjointed documents? While it is not feasible to delineate events clearly, inferences can be made given the weight of evidence around infringing labour rights. To extrapolate, connections between the government, the military and the corporate sector need to be prised apart. Transparency International’s (2020) latest report notes how Sri Lanka slid further down the Corruption Perception Index (CPI), buttressing the pervasiveness of corruption. The BRANDIX factory fall-out offers a glaring example of unholy alliances between the government, the corporate world and the military, which run contrary to the welfare of the nation and its citizens.

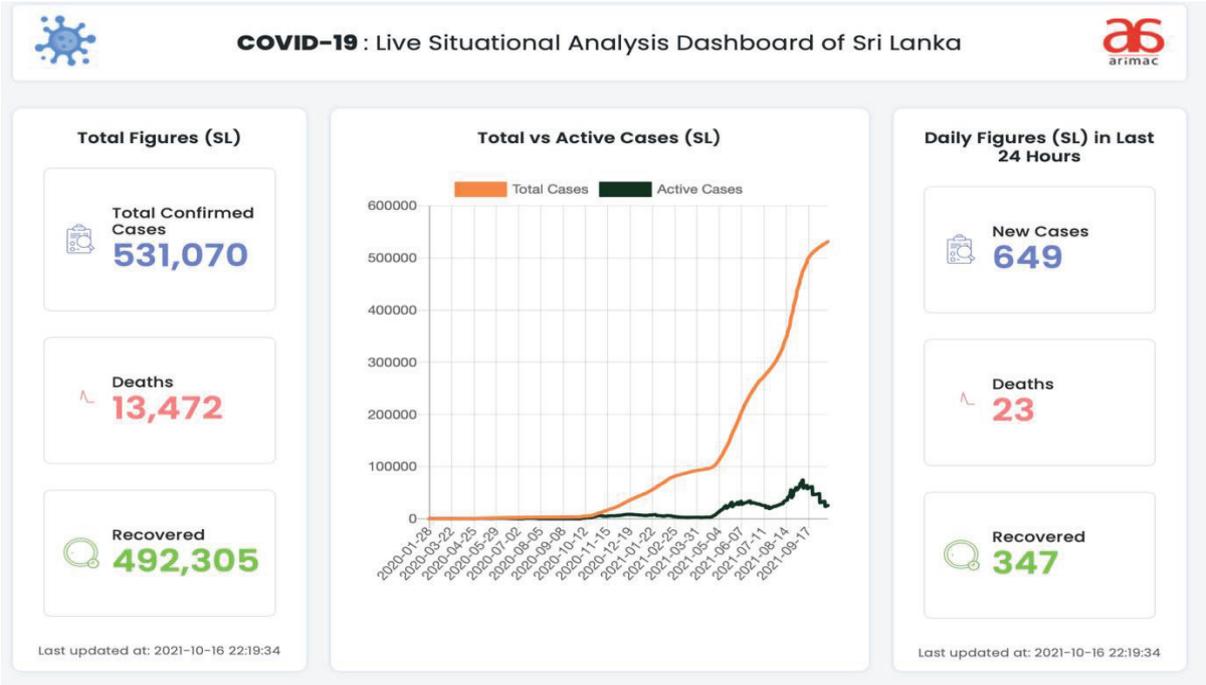


Figure 1: Screen shot from Health Promotion Bureau (2021), Sri Lanka

BRANDIX made a formal announcement on 4 October 2020 that a worker was detected as COVID-positive. From the time of the announcement there were discordant news reports and press statements. The main highlights revolved around negligence on the factory floor, accounts of recent returnees from a BRANDIX plant in India and their presence at the Minuwangoda factory.

To start with the latter, the media recounted how BRANDIX staff in India travelled to Sri Lanka on three charter flights, consisting of middle-level management, supervisory staff and workers. These three flights came to Sri Lanka in June, August and September 2020. The Public Health Inspectorate Union remarked that the stipulated quarantine period had not been observed by the returnees of the last flight, as the Public Health Inspectorate (PHI) had not been contacted to monitor the returnees during their home isolation phase (*Daily Mirror*, 2020c).

In contrast, the head of the COVID-19 Task Force, a military official, was emphatic that the relevant procedures had been followed. Moreover, the eventual community spread was pinned on a Ukrainian tourist, who had allegedly come into contact with the worker through twice- or thrice-removed connections (Weerakoon and Dissanayake, 2020). The Minister of Health at the time, Pavithra Wanniarachchi, however, was reported to have said:

It was true that cases were reported from several areas in the country but each case had neither direct or indirect links to some of the positive cases of the Minuwangoda cluster ... Therefore, reports that cases are reported here and there randomly, are not just and correct (*Daily Mirror*, 2020d).

Multiple and incompatible reports from government officials emerged.

Yet, corporate accountability was unlikely when the official government position reflected corporate interests. The viewpoint of BRANDIX and JAAF was consistent – denying any negligence and underscoring its adherence to occupational health protocols as well as COVID-19 procedures for its travellers from India (BRANDIX, 2020).⁶ Continued severance from corporate responsibility was also reflected in a formal response to a Human Rights Watch (2021a) article in July 2021. BRANDIX rested on the grounds that a Magistrates Court in Minuwangoda concluded that there were no grounds for an investigation by the Attorney General’s department (HRW 2021b). From a legal governance perspective, a lower court making decisions that would be binding on a higher legal body, the Attorney General’s department, ought to be highly suspect.⁷

While BRANDIX was riding on its favourable technical approach to health and safety credentials in responding to Human Rights Watch (2021b), it was downplaying how supply chain pressures result in practices of “covering” and working even when ill (Mezzadri, 2012; Prentice and De Neve, 2017; Ruwanpura, 2019). Equally, productivity pressures and incentive payments also compel risk-taking, given the lack of living wages in the industry. Ethnographies of the shop floor, whether in Sri Lanka or elsewhere, have vividly portrayed how management, supervisors and labourers take on risks that run counter to the health, safety and well-being of workers (Kim, 2013; Prentice and De Neve, 2017; Ruwanpura, 2022). At this juncture, similar views are articulated best by the spouse of a worker and the head of the Public Health Inspector Union, when they said:

Six days before she contracted the coronavirus, my wife had a fever. So, we informed of her inability to report to work. But the company management did not approve of her leave. Workers were instructed to seek medical treatment from within the company if they had fever (Spouse of a worker, quoted in *Daily Mirror*, 2020e).

Although those who are responsible are now claiming that the passengers who were brought down from India underwent the regulated 28 day quarantine, let them show our Union the details where they underwent the mandatory quarantine and who the respective PHIs were, who supervised them during the 14 day self-quarantine (Head of PHI Union, quoted in *Daily Mirror*, 2020c).

It took one of Sri Lanka’s smaller opposition political parties, National People’s Power (NPP), to give voice to the problems related to disregarding the health of workers and the dangers of working through illness (*Daily Mirror*, 2020f; AWFA 2021). In contrast, statements by BRANDIX, former military personnel and the Minister of Public Security blamed workers for labouring through poor health (Brandix, 2020; *Daily Mirror*, 2020g). It is as if government functionaries and the corporate world were wholly unaware that the working poor underpin Sri Lanka’s economy.

⁶ It should be noted that as events unfolded, BRANDIX was issuing press statements on company letterheads, some of which I downloaded or cut-and-pasted to a Word document. Currently (October, 2021) the BRANDIX website no longer has these letterheaded press statements but some version of the initial statements on the web browser itself.

⁷ Moreover, it also typifies the deterioration of the country’s public institutions and the increasing democratic deficit, with the corporate sector equally culpable.

They appear to be equally oblivious to the drop in wages workers experienced from April 2020. The nexus between poverty wages, risk-taking and the compulsion to work through illness is neglected.

Yet, in the specific instance of the worker infected with the novel coronavirus, the worker's spouse gives credence to the view that risks were taken by management and supervisory staff. The limits to a technocratic approach to health and safety are laid bare (De Neve, 2009; Mezzadri, 2012; Ruwanpura, 2014; Raj-Reichert, 2017), despite protestations by BRANDIX on its role in upholding bipartite arrangements to protect safe conditions during the pandemic.⁸ In taking on massive orders and storming ahead as a forerunner in PPE production to protect healthcare personnel globally, Sri Lankan apparels was neglecting and may have undermined the health of its own workers – and by extension the poorly resourced public healthcare system in the country.

Conclusion: Revisiting “Doing the Right Thing?”

Putting on record a clear outline of events on the BRANDIX factory fiasco is difficult, given corporate and government obfuscation. Flagrant disregard or selective application of public health procedures, corruption, militarisation, technocratic health and safety codes, narrow conceptualisations of sustainability, management risk-taking, poverty wages and production pressures all factored into the BRANDIX case and the subsequent community transmission of COVID-19 in the country.

A narrow technocratic approach to health and safety on the shop floor fails to concede overlapping spatial practices between production sites and workers' homes (Kim, 2013; Dutta, 2019; Ruwanpura, 2019; Cook et al., 2020). When the working poor are the backbone of Sri Lankan apparels, with their poverty reflecting the lack of living wages within the sector, accentuating superlative health and safety standards within production sites has limited traction. The absence of living wages shapes the living standards of workers in their homes and neighbourhoods – and their poverty in turn forces workers to do overtime, labour through illness and take incalculable risks. For Sri Lankan apparels to absolve themselves from not connecting easily discernible dots is a wilful neglect of inherent exclusionary effects, uneven income distribution and wage dispersion. It is also a lapse in corporate social responsibility and appreciation for ethical trade concerns. The risks and (dis)articulations are then endemic to global production processes (McGrath, 2018; Bryson and Vanchan, 2020), with ethical trading claims without living wages laid bare.

A connective thread may be found via tropes of sustainability and value creation. Sustainability commitments are prominent on the websites of apparel producers in Sri Lanka, including BRANDIX. However, sustainability pledges appear to be oblivious to the full breadth of the sustainability agenda, including Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 3 – which is concerned with people's health and well-being. While SDGs are aptly critiqued for leaving many behind, neglecting costs of reproduction and life-sustaining needs (Weber, 2017; Rai, Brown and Ruwanpura, 2019), the fact that corporate entities still forsake the entire agenda speaks volumes about the limits to SDGs: specifically, an inability to appreciate value creation connected to the productive–reproductive continuum. This is a failure that also propels managers and supervisory staff on the

⁸ Herein lies another in-built weakness – the absence of tripartite mechanisms, involving unions within production facilities, and so Sri Lankan apparels' continued neglect of freedom of association (Biyaniwila, 2011; Ruwanpura, 2022). This said, it would be remiss on my part not to note how a union movement dominated by men speaks for a sector where women workers predominate; thus, limits to union dynamics and composition also need critical reflection.

production floor to drive workers to do overtime or work through ill health.

Sri Lankan apparels' exposure during the pandemic is also inherently linked to global capitalism's uneven development. The unequal distributional effects within the country displace onto workers a socio-economic burden when they toil for a globally and locally profitable industry. Herein lies the vulnerability. Risk-taking, poverty wages and endemic corruption in Sri Lanka all factored into the BRANDIX factory cluster that resulted in community transmission of COVID-19 in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan apparels can officially continue to be in denial, or they can **do the right thing** by adopting a reflexive turn so that, in promoting and protecting workers via living wages, they then rightly serve the nation, too.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the grant from the Adlebertska Foundation based at the Handelshögskolans, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, that facilitated the archival research for this paper. I would also like to thank the editors of the *Global Labour Journal* for a friendly and speedy review process, and Karin Pampallis, the Journal's managing editor, for her help at the last stages.

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