



Volume 6/ 2020

**Voices of Garment Supply Chain Workers in Tamil Nadu**



# Uniform Mess: How Workers Across Garment Supply Chain in Tamil Nadu Are Coping with COVID 19 Lockdown

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to School Uniform Supply Chain

From cotton field to the garment, cotton travels through a complex supply chain to change its form and nature. India remains the leading country in terms of area under cotton cultivation and raw cotton production in the world. As per the Cotton Advisory Board (CAB) estimates, cotton production in India during 2017-18 was expected to produce 377 lakh bales of 170 kgs of cotton from 122 lakh hectares.

Cotton is hand picked from the field and taken to the ginning factories where the heavy machines operate to separate the seeds from raw cotton fibre. They first air dry the seed to reduce moisture content and then pass it through cleaning equipment to remove foreign particles, thereby facilitating improvement in the fibre quality of cotton.

From these mills, the product is sent to spinning mills, where fibres such as yarn or fabric are produced and processed into usable products. This yarn is transformed through fabric production techniques such as weaving or knitting. The yarn is dyed and bleached to give it the desired colour. The coloured fabric is then sent to garment manufacturing units to make into readymade garments.






Cotton is used heavily in manufacturing of school uniforms, which is worn by millions of school going children across India. A range of different government agencies including Tamil Nadu Textile Corporation (TNTC) to women's co-operatives produce government school uniforms in Tamil Nadu. The State is divided into 52 education districts for administrative purposes. The district social welfare officer is responsible for receiving



fabric from the TNTC, getting it cut in the cutting units and supplying this to women's co-operatives operating in every education district. Each district has one cutting centre run by the district social welfare department, where the fabric is cut to various sizes and sent to women's co-operative societies for distribution to women members who sew the uniforms and supply them to the society headquarters. The women members collect the cut cloth



The image above tries to trace the districts that falls within the cotton garment supply chain. From cotton fields in Ramanathapuram, Madurai, Valhalla, Salem, Coimbatore, and Tiruchirapalli where is handpicked and sent to the ginning mills Coimbatore and Erode for drying and separation, then to spinning mills in Coimbatore, Tirupur, Erode, Karur and Dindigul, the garment manufacturing units in Dindigul and Tirupur and stitching and tailoring in Erode.

Process	District
Stitching and tailors 	Erode
Garments 	Tirupur and Dindigul
Spinning 	Coimbatore, Tirupur, Erode, Karur and Dindigul
Ginning 	Coimbatore and Erode
Cotton farming 	Ramanathapuram, Madurai, Valhalla, Salem, Coimbatore, and Tiruchirapalli

#### 1.4 About the Gethu Group

The Gethu group, a think tank or supply chain workers collective along with [Partners in Change](#) organised a rapid assessment of the situation faced the workers in the supply chain. The Gethu group has contributed tremendously to building an understanding of the making of school uniform from the lens of science as well as a social dimension, as part of an initiative supported by Laudes Foundation.

The research team interviewed **77 workers** across **4 districts** in **Tamil Nadu**. Workers were interviewed about the receipt of their salary and on loans they have taken during the lockdown period. They were also asked about the challenges they faced while accessing reliefs and entitlements. The workers were interviewed between April 4 and 13, 2020. Further, the research team, including Gethu members have been in touch with and facilitating relief support to members of these communities in Delhi and Mumbai which has in turn, contributed in understanding the unique situation of the community members.

<b>Box 1: Sample Profile of Interviewed Respondents</b>
Overall, 77 workers from four districts were interviewed randomly over telephone, and 69 of them responded.
<b>Gender:</b> This included men and women
<b>Disabled:</b> 1 Worker
<b>Geography:</b> 4 districts in Tamil Nadu
<b>Types of professions:</b> Supply Chain Workers from cotton farmers to the garment manufacturing units.
This is <b>not</b> a representative sample, nor a structured study. The interviews were organised from April 4 and 13, 2020.

## 2. FINDINGS

### 2.1 Industry Dynamics

Employing over 4.5 million workers, second only to agriculture<sup>1</sup>, the garment industry operates through the involvement of a cheap skilled and unskilled labour force, leading to

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ibef.org/industry/textiles.aspx>

lower costs and higher export orders. Like any industrial sector, it also is the reflection of practices within the society.

A look at the industry brings out power relationships, gender dynamics and caste issues that exist in society. The burden of manual and unskilled work in the sector is disproportionately distributed between castes and gender. The study found that on an average, women performed most of the unskilled and manual jobs across the various stages of the supply chain. Women are rarely employed as supervisors and their role is restricted to backend end support to the mills and industry. For example in a ginning mill women are mostly involved in cotton drying, putting cotton in the machine and packing, the hard work of operating the machines is given to the men. The situation is a little different for garment manufacturing units, where women are often employed as designers and tailors. The study revealed that most tailors employed in the sector, were women.

With regard to caste, while the sample is very small to understand dynamics in detail, some key observations can be made. Of the 54 workers, whose caste is known, 11 are from the SC category. Most of the people from marginalised castes are given menial roles in the supply chain. The proportion of dalits in factory-based monthly waged category is negligible (2 out of 19). Four out of five are in the loading category. In spinning mills, they largely worked as auto-coners.

The Vaanavil team is separately studying the situation of dalit workers. The general observations are that they are proportionally more among daily-wagers, and in the loaders category.

## **2.2 From Cotton Field to Garment Manufacturing –Living the COVID 19**

Before a deeper dive into issues that have arisen due to the pandemic, it is important to look at the varied vulnerabilities that already exist in this sector: cheap and unskilled workforce, minimal pay; payment only made for the days worked; women form a large chunk of this cheap and unskilled labour employed in these factories; gender pay gap; exploitative work culture, employment roles based on the patriarchal norms of the society; employment of young girls through the Sumangali/Thirumagal Scheme<sup>2</sup>; unhealthy working conditions; contractual nature of work and lack of access to schemes and benefits', including ESI and PF.

While various vulnerabilities through the sector, the recent COVID 19 Pandemic only added to the challenges that people working in the sector face. The situation is particularly unfair with regard to the huge women workforce that is employed to carry out unskilled jobs in the various stages of the supply chain. Most of the respondents, barring a few men who worked as factory supervisors, are daily wage workers. During months when they worked for all of the 26 working days, they are given an incentive ranging from Rs 500 to 1000. This often places women in disadvantageous positions as they often stand to either lose money or compromise on their health during painful menstrual cycles and other such urgencies for which they would have otherwise taken leave.

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Sumangali' is indeed a generic term to practically mean camp-collies or attached in-house work force. It is an exploitative employment system involving girls as young as 12 years doing long, gruelling work shifts on slave wages, living in hostels that resemble refugee camps. They are recruited from impoverished, lower-caste families on the basis of the patriarchal idea of marriage as a girl's goal in life and the neoliberal notion of women's empowerment through the labour market. The term 'Sumangali' has been very carefully given by the employers to attract parents who face social pressure to marry their daughters.

In the context of the COVID 19 pandemic, many of the interviewees have stated how the crisis has exposed them to further challenges and insecurities making it difficult for them to meet the demands of the family.

### 2.2.1 Cotton Field

According to reports, nearly 28% of the production comes from the southern zone, which includes Tamil Nadu<sup>3</sup>. Between 2011-12 to 2016-17, in Tamil Nadu, on an average, cotton was cultivated in about 1.5 lakh hectares<sup>4</sup>. Almost 90% of the labour employed in the farm comprises women, who are tasked with the job to sow seeds, weed, fertilise, pluck/harvest and segregate cotton.

The problems and issues at the farm level began before the COVID crisis and as the crisis unfolded itself, the challenges multiplied. "Cotton farming has suffered greatly due to inadequate rain this year. The peak of the cotton season ended in mid-January. The plant was widespread thereafter. At present, the price of a kilogram of cotton is selling from Rs 25 to Rs 30. After paying the workers, I am not left with much. The COVID crisis only created further challenges for us. We do not have the Kisan Card as lands are in our ancestral name, therefore we are unable to access the benefits provided by the government. While, I received Rs 1000 and supplies from the government ration shop, these 21 days have been challenging, as we are finding it difficult to adjust our daily needs" shared Vetrivel, Cotton Farmer, Kannivadipuduppatti.



Many of the agricultural farm workers, who are employed by the likes of Vetrivel have to look for alternate jobs during the off season to sustain themselves, but the crisis has made it challenging for them to make ends meet. In most cases the workers on the field are women, as they form passive workforces who are well accustomed to the patriarchal norms of society. According to Lakshmi a cotton farmer and ginning mill worker "During off seasons I work in the ginning mill, which pays me Rs 200 per day, however, ever since the holidays have been announced post the virus there is no mill work and neither am I getting salary nor the benefit of ESI and PF. I have to take loans to make ends meet. We are waiting for Rs 1000 and supplies at the state-run ration shop". The fear of indebtedness is lingering on the minds of the workers as they are resorting to borrowing to make ends meet. They are only hoping that the government would provide them with the relief, so that they can attend the basic needs of the family.

### 2.2.2 Ginning and Spinning

From the field, the picked cotton is sent to mills for ginning and spinning. Tamil Nadu State is the largest textile hub of India, attracting huge investments. It plays a significant role in the Indian economy by providing direct employment to an estimated 35 million people. It accounts for about half of India's total spinning mill capacity, with majority of them located

<sup>3</sup> Project Co-ordinator's report, [http://aiccip.cicr.org.in/CD\\_17-18/3\\_A1\\_A17\\_PC\\_report.pdf](http://aiccip.cicr.org.in/CD_17-18/3_A1_A17_PC_report.pdf), pp. A-1

<sup>4</sup>Status paper on Indian cotton, <https://www.nfsm.gov.in/StatusPaper/Cotton2016.pdf>



in western region of Tamil Nadu comprising Coimbatore, Tirupur, Erode, Karur and Dindigul. Almost 80% of the workforces in both the mills are women, who are involved in various activities including cotton drying, putting cotton in the machine and packing, while only men work in blow room (carrying weight), Carding and other skilled work.



The crisis and the consequent measures of social distancing and economic lockdown in the non-essential sectors have impacted these workers and their peers involved in other processes of the garment supply chain. Many like Lakshmi, who are working in the ginning and spinning

mills, are living in uncertainty about their wages rendering them helpless. “For the past few days, I haven’t spoken to my daughter at Tirupur as I am unable to even recharge my mobile for Rs 150” said Parvathi a Ginning Mills worker, who was earning Rs. 1200 for 6 days of work each week, before the lockdown was announced. When she takes leave the mill does not pay. Now with the Corona Virus, since the workers are forced to take leave, she is uncertain if the mill will continue to pay her. While many like Lakshmana Shankar, working in a ginning factory are taking loans to meet family requirement, others like Parvathi are afraid since they already have standing loans and the government has decided not to pay it off.

While some have EPF accounts and are aware of salary deductions but they do not know how to access it. In other cases many do not have EPF or ESI and therefore they cannot take benefits accruing out of the recent announcement by the government to pay the Employer and Employee contribution for the next three months.

### 2.2.3 Dyeing, Printing and Power-looms

The yarn from the spinning factories is taken for dyeing and printing, from where they are sent to power-looms where they are made into fabrics.



Tamil Nadu’s processing sector is mainly focussed on yarn dyeing, bleaching and printing. According to the Government of Tamil Nadu, 2019, there are 2614 hand-processing units (25% of total units in India) and 985

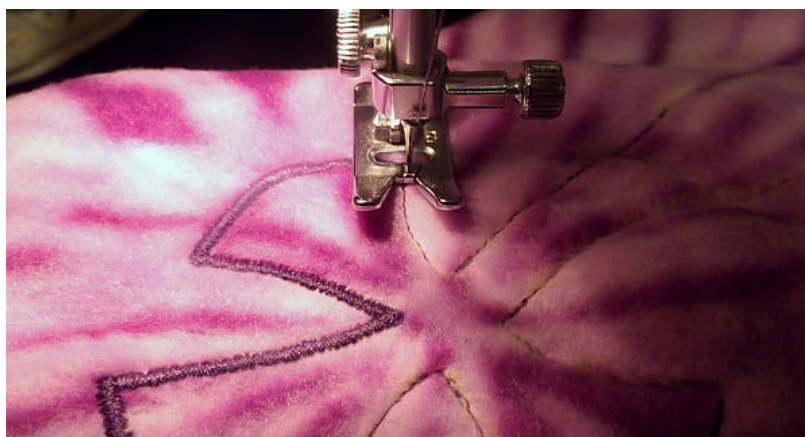
power-processing units in Tamil Nadu (40% of total units in the country) for dyeing and bleaching. The State has 23% of India’s power-looms employing 10.19 lakh people, of which

only 20% are women performing the unskilled part of the job including manual dyeing, drying after dyeing, folding, printing (unskilled labour), compacting and roll drying.

The status of the workers here too is as uncertain as those involved in the other parts of the supply chain. In fact in factories, the dyeing and the printing department closed even before the lockdown orders came in. “The whole of our work is with Chemical. We don't use chemicals without protective equipment when printing. Due to the high prevalence of coronavirus infection and the high incidence of contamination as we work with chemicals, the Administration first stopped all work in the dyeing and printing department. We have had no work since the first week of March”, shared Ramchandran, a worker in the printing department. He has now gone to the village, where his father owns some agricultural land. Many are not as fortunate as him. Shankar a Dyeing worker in Tirupur has been working in the industry for 5 years, currently earning 350 everyday. But with the lockdown, he is forced to borrow from friends and ask the company for advance.

## 2.2.4 Garment Manufacturing

The knitting, apparel and garmenting sector is the final stage of the textile value chain and maximum value-addition takes place at this stage. This industry has taken tremendous strides in Tamil Nadu with 7000 units in the state. Tamil Nadu is home to the largest knitting industry and has the biggest knitting cluster in India – Tirupur is a major hub of knitwear exports in India, contributing 45% of total knitwear exports of the country, with a domestic turnover of Rs 10,000 crore per annum and exports over Rs 25,000 crore. Interestingly the gender analysis of this stage reveals, women being employed as skilled workers, as designers and tailors, as well as, as packers, cloth cutters and quality checkers.



The change in consumer demand, closures of shops, inability of retailers to store surplus inventory, increasing stocks and plunge in export activities have severely impacted the industries in this final stage of the supply chain.

According to Gopal, a knitting department supervisor, “In these two months I am out of work as the world market situation is very bad. Workers in the knitting department are in search of various tasks. Only a few people in the HR department are doing their job. While I am getting paid, workers will be paid only if they work. There is no ESI and PF. Due to the lockdown many have gone back home with neither advance nor salary. The administration is yet to announce any salary on the 4<sup>th</sup> of the month”. It is interesting to note here that women are not employed as factory supervisors and men mostly perform the job. Sagayam Rani, working in the tailoring department is a disabled and only earning member of her family, supporting a mentally-ill sister and elderly father. Post the lockdown she did not receive her salary. Also while the company has made her sign a register stating that she was paid Rs 840 towards PF and Rs 53 for ESI, she hasn't received the intimation on her mobile. For Uma, a garment manufacturing unit worker the situation is rather taxing. As her monthly



salary of Rs 7020 has stopped due to closure of the factory, she does not know how to provide for the basic needs of the family, including drinking water, for which she has to spend Rs 100 daily.

### 3. Key issues

**3.1 Rising Indebtedness:** Loan, borrowing and credit have become a norm to tide over these trying times. Many people are forced to take loans from friends and SHGs to meet their daily needs, but are not sure how to pay it back. While the government has announced relief from non-payment in the next three months, this relief is of no consequences, as the borrower has to eventually pay it off after the period. In many places workers have to take loans even to buy groceries. “We live in the village. The problem of drinking water is very high here. There is no information on salaries yet. Having children at home not going to school increases daily expenses. The elderly mother-in-law is with us and she cannot even afford the tablets. I could not afford groceries without income. Vegetable prices are high in our village”, shared Sudha from Tirupur. Unwarranted Inflation is only adding to the existing economic burden. According respondents from Tirupur, grocery prices have escalated to almost double the cost, causing fear of indebtedness.

**3.2 Non-responsiveness and irresponsible behaviour of companies:** In almost all cases the company has been unresponsive about wages. Most workers have conveyed their uncertainty about wages and lack of clarity on the part of the company. “Last month, ESI and PF of Rs 9500 to my bank account by management. Don't know whether it includes the wages of holidays due to coronavirus. I have to wait till 8<sup>th</sup> of this month to know how much salary has been credited. It is hard to live without work” shared Motcha Raj, Ponnimanthurai.

According to Sudha, a worker from the packaging department, “We had a job until 23 March 2020. The mill has announced a holiday for us due to this coronavirus impact. The mill has not given any information regarding salaries.” In many cases the management and associations are reportedly talking about a salary cut. According to Krishna from Tirupur, “The prevalence of the disease is increasing day by day. If this situation persists, the livelihood of the residents of Tirupur is questionable. And some say that employees from the Manufacturer's Association are likely to reduce employee pay by 30%. The plight of employees is very pathetic.”

There is also a general lack of awareness on the issue as many respondents as part of the study have reported salary deductions for PF and ESI, but are unaware about the process to access it. In many cases they have reported that the deductions made during the month of February, but have not received information about the same.

**3.3 Not all have received the relief:** During the study it was revealed that many respondents have not received relief from the government, including government supplies from ration shops. Also in cases where any funds were received it has been used to cover the debt at grocery shops.

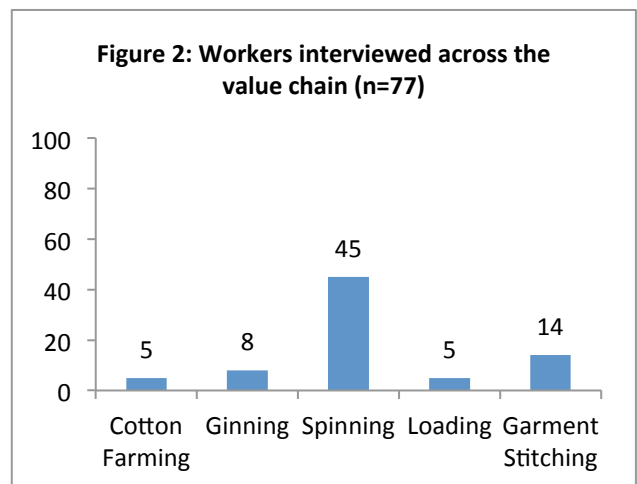
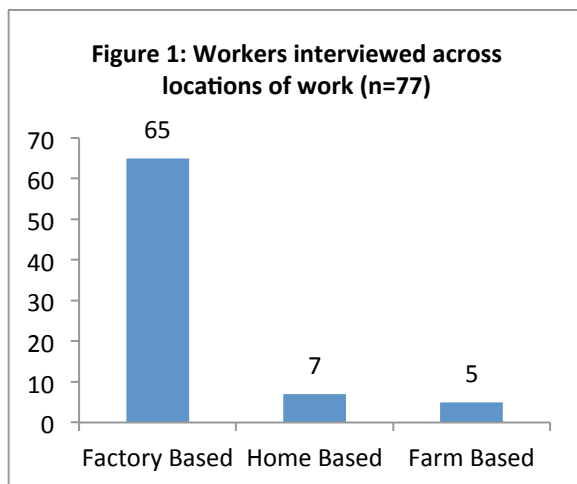
**3.4 Impact on Children:** There is an increasing fear about the negative impact of the situation on the children due to the virus. As schools are shut, parents are out of work and food availability is at its minimum, fear of not being able to meet educational and nutritional

needs of growing children. “It is very sad to think about how we are going to deal with the cost of children's education in the coming academic year” shared Gopal from Tirupur.

#### 4. Overall Analysis

As a part of the study, overall 77 workers across 4 districts in Tamil Nadu were interviewed, of which 69 were active respondents.

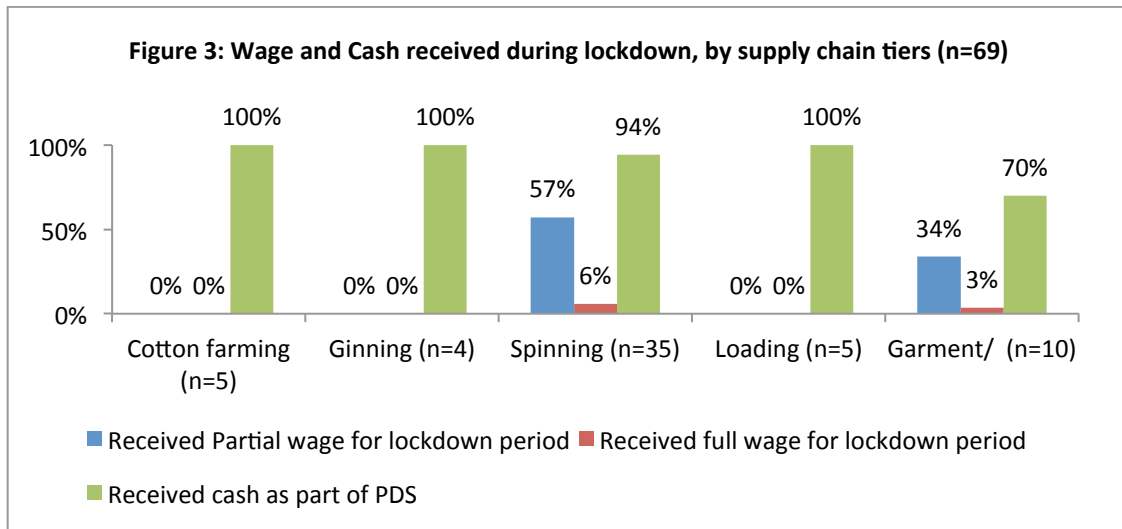
Of the 77 workers interviewed 65 of the interviewees were factory-based workers, 7 home based and 5 farm-based. Placed across the value chain most workers belong to the spinning mills. Figure 2 below shows a distribution of respondents across the value chain.



#### 4.1 Wage Payment and Government Support

In most cases the workers across the supply chain have not received wages. However, in case of spinning and garment manufacturing industry, 57% and 34% workers respectively have received partial wages. “The company only pays us for the days worked. We don’t have ESI or PF, only bonuses once a year during Siwali. For the past few months, we have had very little work to do, because the market situation is bad. Post the lockdown the situation is getting worse as we are out of work and have no income. It is very difficult to meet essential needs” shared Mariyappan from an ironing department in a unit in Tiruppur.

For those who have received partial wages, they are unsure, if they will continue to be paid during the lockdown. The uncertainty about wages and job insecurity is leading to an increasing fear among the workers about their family’s future. “Now we are passing days with little difficulty. However, it is questionable how much work will be done three months after this corona issue. The reason is that this problem is universal. Exports from Tirupur are to overseas countries and due to the lockdown therefore the goods are not shipped. Manufacturers have reportedly offered us a 30 per cent salary cut. It is scary to think we are heading towards this position. It is frustrating to think about how we are going to deal with debt and education costs” said Shanthi, Tiruppur.

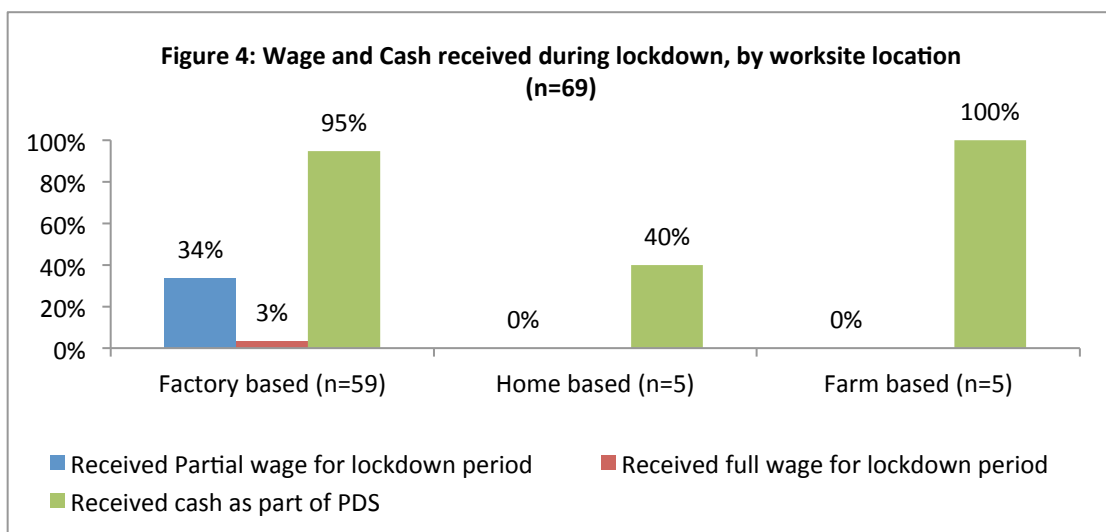


While wages remain uncertain, in most cases the workers reported having received cash as part of PDS, enabling them to pay for the some basic requirements and in some cases pay off the debts in acquiring the basic necessities. According to Sudha, Tiruppur, “The Rs. 1000 at the ration shop helped to cover the debt I bought at the grocery store.”

“While we are getting Rs.1000 for now, how long will it last. If the factories don’t open how will we be able to sustain ourselves”  
- Lakshmi, Cotton Farmer

“With children out of school, the expenditure goes up. How will I continue to pay for it? How will I pay for their education once their schools open, I have no income”  
-Gopal, Tiruppur.

Analysed based on location of work, the situation is rather distressful for the home based and farm based workers as none of them have received wages. In case of factory or mill based workers, while less half of the workers have received partial wages for the lockdown period, 3% has received full wages for the same period. This shows the grim reality of unorganised workforce and the vulnerabilities that they are exposed too.



## 4.2 Type of Work and Wages

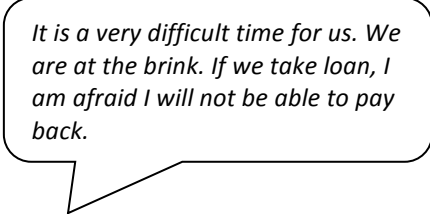
Even in factory settings, most workers who are paid at a piece rate are bearing the maximum burden of the crisis. According to Shanthi working in the ironing department in a factory in Tirupur, “I have been working in the laundry department for the past ten years. According to the laundry department, the admin will determine the rate at which we receive the fabric order. For example, a rate for orders such as a t-shirt and three fourth pant may vary as a rate for other orders. We will get a salary depending on the order. Women can earn at least Rs 300 to Rs 450 per day. We have no ESI and PF. We haven't had a proper job since last January. We get weekly pay. Our situation in Tirupur is very bad. There is a situation where it is impossible to go outside. Vegetables are available in small shops. Now we are passing days with little difficulty. However, it is questionable how much work will be done three months after this corona issue.”

Fear of no income is mounting among these workers, who are left in a rather uncertain situation. “I don't know how many more days this situation continues. The prevalence of the disease is increasing day by day. If this situation persists, the livelihood of the residents of Tirupur is questionable.” Krishna, Tirupur.

## 4.3 Loans and Rising Indebtedness

According to the study, almost 30 workers had to take loans and now fear slipping into indebtedness. “We have to get ration at an increased price from local shops. I have borrowed for now. It would be a great help if the government cancelled our due and loan amount. Otherwise, we are likely to be highly indebted” Lakshmi, Kalluppathi.

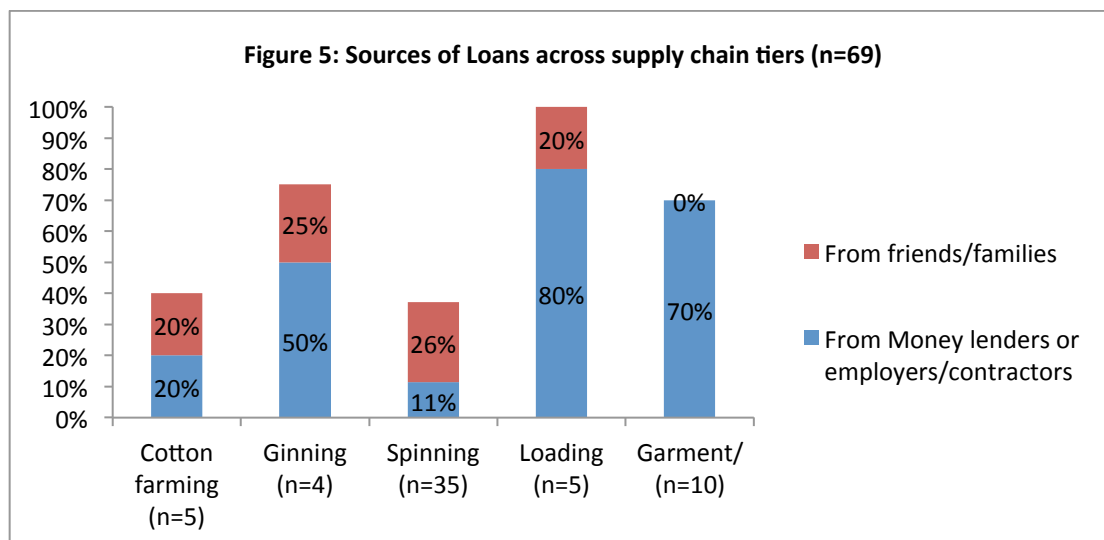
The fear of indebtedness is due to two factors, firstly the workers have taken loans during the crisis for meeting the basic requirements and secondly in many cases, the workers have taken loans earlier which have a mounting interest and no income would make it difficult to pay it off. According to Parvathi, Kalluppathi, “At present, our circumstance is very difficult without work and to pay the monthly loan. It is heartening to hear that the government has decided not to pay off the three-month loan, but it increases the fear of paying back in three instalments. Shortage of groceries is rising in our villages. I have to wait for a few more days for Rs 1000 and essentials from the ration shop.”



*It is a very difficult time for us. We are at the brink. If we take loan, I am afraid I will not be able to pay back.*

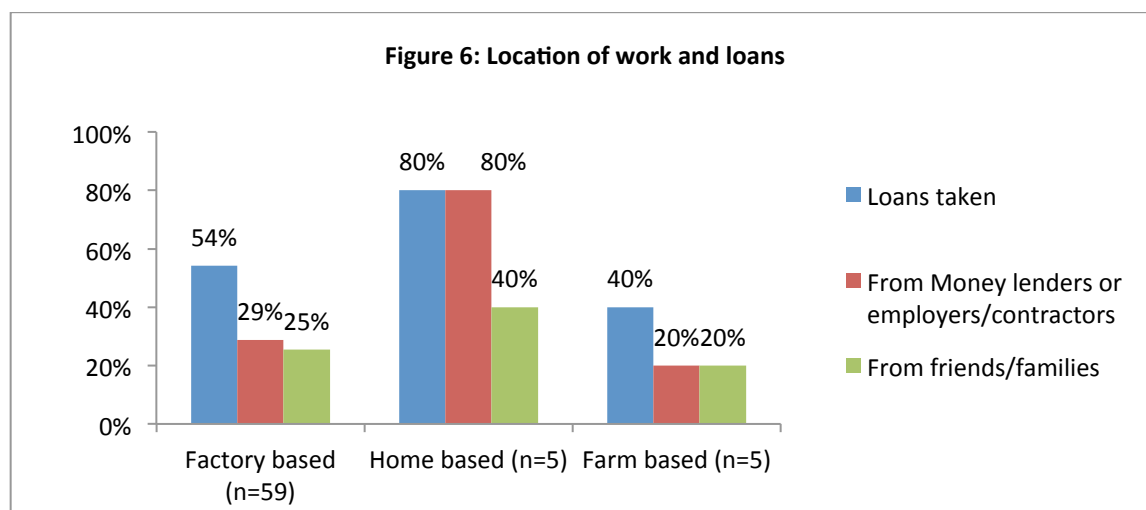
In most cases the loans are being used to sail through these times as doubt and insecurity looms in the minds of the workers. In many cases due to delay in government schemes and provisions, workers are forced to take loans. “We have to get groceries at an increased price from local shops. I have borrowed for now. It would be a great help if the government cancelled our due and loan amount. Otherwise, we are likely to be highly indebted. We are waiting for Rs 1000 and supplies at the state-run ration shop” shared Lakshmi from Kalluppathi.

Figure 5 below, details the increasing loans being taken by people involved in each aspect of the supply chain.



As observed in most cases the workers are forced to borrow from money lenders. Now there is an increasing fear of paying back these loans and sliding into poverty and debt, if they fail to do so. In some cases the workers have reported taking loans from family and relatives. While this is just a representative sample, the trend is more or less the same among the workers in the sector. The shutting down of factories and increasing uncertainty about wages is making it difficult to feed families and meet the day-to-day necessities thereby pushing them into the clutches of money lenders.

Analysing it across the location of work, almost 54% of the workers working in factories have taken loans from either money lenders or families/friends, 80% of the workers working at home have taken loans from money lenders and 40% of the farm based workers have taken loans from either money lender or family and friends. Interestingly some of the home-based workers have taken money both from money lenders and friends/family.



The data shows increasing dependence on money lenders across all work settings. This trend over time, will lead to increasing indebtedness among the workers and push them into situations of exploitation, further increasing their vulnerability.





**Gethu** is a workers' think tank on the garment supply chain. It is an informal group consisting of workers from across the supply chain from cotton farming to stitching and packaging of garments. The group meets every month to discuss diverse issues faced by workers in this textile supply chain.



**Vaanavil Research Collective** is a grassroots organisation in Tamil Nadu that promotes rapid community-based studies to inform narratives and policies related to communities at the margin.