

Garment workers are a neglected lot

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Bengaluru, May 06, 2018 22:52 IST

Updated: May 07, 2018 16:01 I

This largely female workforce remains forgotten in every poll

Two years have passed since thousands of garment workers took to the streets in violent protests. While the stir was a reaction to the Centre's decision to amend Employees' Provident Fund withdrawal rules, other factors such as poor wages, harassment in factories, and long working hours also played a role.

The Centre may have withdrawn its amendment, but nothing else seems to have changed in this sector, which for the most part remains unorganised.

There are five lakh garment workers across [Karnataka](#), but the largely female workforce — around 80% — remains forgotten during every election. Bengaluru alone has over 1,200 factories as the city is a major manufacturing hub, especially for ready-made garments. Problems such as low wages, gender disparity and sexual harassment remain unaddressed. Workers say no party has reached out to understand their problems.

"None of the parties have done anything for garment workers. The Congress government had promised a wage hike from INR 7,700 to INR 12,000 for workers in the city and a draft notification was brought out in February this year. But after the management of four manufacturers gave representation, the notification was cancelled," said Prathibha R., president, Garment and Textile Workers' Union. She added that only the JD(S), in the 2008 Assembly elections, promised to increase their wages.

A 2015 survey by the Centre for Workers' Management and Garment and Textile Workers' Union found that their wages were extremely low.

Another problem is the high cost of bus transport, forcing workers to walk to work. "Now, the Congress has promised us Indira Sarige (bus service). But we need more money, not transportation. We have no hopes from the BJP as well," said Ms. Prathibha.

The union is conducting an awareness campaign among the garment workers to ensure that their demands reach political parties. "We have given out 50,000 pamphlets to workers highlighting the issues that have not been addressed," she added.

Anita Cheria, who has been working with the garment worker community for over a decade, said the elections have not addressed the labour issues at all. "In fact, there has only been a dilution of labour laws. Even in the manifesto, nothing positive has come out from political parties. However, visibility of garment workers and their issues have increased as have their assertion of rights," Ms. Cheria said.

However, it may be long before this visibility leads to fulfilment of their demands.