



LOOKING BEYOND FIRE EXTINGUISHERS

Surveying Fire Hazards in the Textile Hub of Narol



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

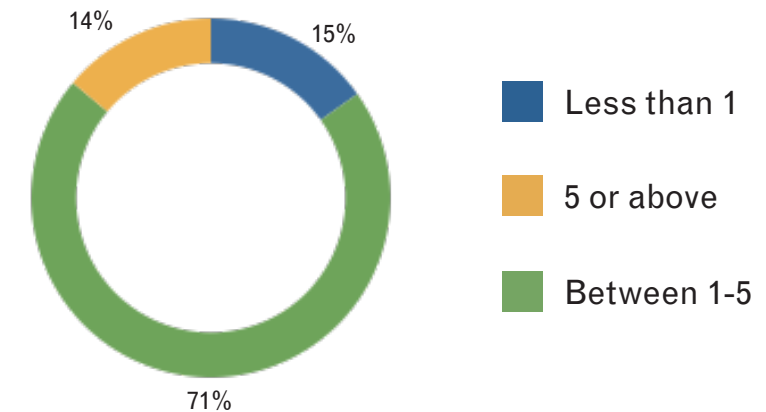
This report is based on survey, interviews and focused group discussions with 95 workers employed in large-sized processing factories situated in Narol, a garment and textile industry hub in the south-eastern periphery of Ahmedabad. The objective of the report is threefold: first, to study conditions in processing factories, which are less studied than manufacturing factories; second, to focus on fire hazards as part of the safety of workers by examining factory floor realities through provisions of the Factories Act, 1948 (“the Act”) and the Gujarat Factories Rules, 1963 (“the Rules”); and third, to foreground the perspectives of workers on hazards and safety.



PROFILE OF THE WORKERS

96% of the surveyed workers are contractually or casually engaged on verbal terms without any written agreements, many of whom are paid cash daily or on piece-rate. Only 17% of the surveyed reported deductions towards PF or ESI. 71% of the workers were found to be employed in the same premises for at least over a year on perennial and core activities of the factories. Among these, 83% were without social security cover and in many cases even lacked adequate shelter or access to basic facilities at their workplace. 98% of the workers reported working in 12-hours shifts, with no overtime compensation and often unpredictable timings. 67% were found to be between 18-35 age group.

NO. OF YEARS WORKERS HAVE BEEN EMPLOYED AT THE SAME FACTORY



CONDITIONS AND HAZARDS AT THE WORKPLACE

All of the participants complained of unbearable heat at their workplace, in spite of fans and exhaust fans in 88% and 50% cases, respectively. 96% of the workers reported unchecked presence of fabric dust and fumes, and 97% cited regular contact with harsh chemicals that causes, inter alia, burns and irritation to skin, eyes, nose and throat. These working conditions are indicative of contraventions of sections 13 & 14 of the Act that require effective measures to prevent inhalation of impurities as well as provision of adequate ventilation and temperature regulation in every workroom. 88% of the workers also reported having to work alongside high-noise producing machines.

CONDITIONS AND HAZARDS AT THE WORKPLACES

CONDITIONS AND HAZARDS	AGREED
High temperature	100%
Fans	88%
Exhaust fan	50%
High humidity	88%
High noise level	88%
Presence of dust	96%
Exposure to harsh chemicals	97%
Gloves and boots for handling chemicals	62%

LACK OF FIRE COMPLIANCE

Exposed live wires were reported by 71% of the workers, and careless maintenance of other electrical apparatuses was also reported to be common sight. 97% confirmed combustible and flammable material such as fabric dust, hazardous chemicals and cloth material to be present at their workplace. Collection of fabric dust on wires, electrical panels and light fitting is also rampant, which is highly susceptible to ignition due to short circuits in exposed live wires and broken switches, and possibly due to static charge and surface heat generated by machines. Prevention of accumulation of such flammable waste material is mandatory under rule 66-A(8) of the Rules.

While this reiterates the frequentness of the various means for ignition present in the textile processing sector, the widespread practice of allowing exposed live wires and broken sockets alongside that, demonstrates a failure to eliminate and prevent creation of fire hazards. This indicates a contravention of rule 66-A(4) that provides for precautions against ignition where there is a danger of fire from accumulation of flammable substances, along with section 37 of the Act. Moreover, persistence of such conditions indicates a wilful aggravation of fire hazards.

Work premises were mentioned to be equipped with fire extinguishers by 74% of the workers. However, out of these, 47% reported that the extinguishers were not routinely serviced and tested. This suggests a contravention of section 38 of the Act that mandates provision and maintenance of fire-fighting equipment. Fire hydrants that supply water for fire-fighting, and automatic sprinklers

were cited to be absent in all but one of the workplaces, reflecting breach of rule 66-A(13) that mandates factories to be equipped with these.

In case of fire exits, 44% of the workers reported a lack of unimpeded and continuous means of escape, with routine cramping of lorries, cloth rolls, packed material and chemical containers in passages and in front of exits. Regular obstruction of the passages and means of escape due to the day-to-day operational requirements, such as lorries loaded with raw materials, haphazard stocking and piling of finished materials, was cited to be prevalent by 82% and 93% of the workers, respectively. Similarly, chemical container drums were reported to be found lying around machines, corridors and doors by 88%.

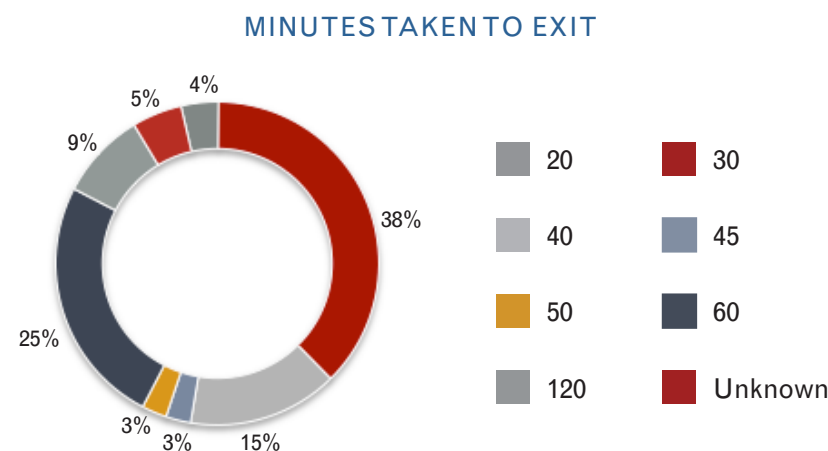
82% of the workers estimated that due to these hindrances, it would take them between 30-60 minutes to escape from their workstation to outside of the factory premises in case of an emergency. This is also likely because 62.5% of the workers stated that they could avail of only two exits, often disproportionately shared between at least 250 workers.

Even if factory premises were found to be equipped with fire-fighting equipment and exits, absence of training in escape routes and evacuation protocols to be followed in case of an exigency will compound the risk posed by the prevalence of fire hazards. Unfamiliarity with such plans and protocols was reported by 98% of the workers. 95% of the responses also revealed absence of fire alarms, which are usually the sole means of alerting and triggering evacuations in case of emergencies.

These findings indicate grave violations of provisions under section 32 that mandates passages and exits to be kept free from obstructions, and rule 66 that spells out requirements of adequate means of escape, along with section 38 of the Act.

PRACTICES CAUSING OBSTRUCTIONS TO MEANS OF ESCAPE

PRACTICES	AGREED
Materials (such as grey material) found lying around machines, passages and doors	82%
High piles of stock	75%
Stocking and piling of materials in corridors	93%
Stocking and piling of materials in front of exits	75%
Chemical containers and gallons found lying around machines, passages and doors	88%
Complex spatial layout	32%
Exposure to harsh chemicals	97%
Gloves and boots for handling chemicals	62%



SR. NO.	PARTICULARS		YES	NO
		Ignition Source		
1		Exposed live wires	72%	28%
2		Broken sockets	64%	36%
		Presence of Combustible Material		
3		Chemicals	97%	3%
4		Fabric dust	96%	4%
	Hard Compliance	Soft Compliance		
5	Fire Extinguisher	Availability	74%	26%
		Training to operate	6%	94%
6	Fire-exit Sign		61%	39%
7	Automatic Sprinkler		-	100%
8	Fire Hydrant	Availability	8%	92%
9	On-site Emergency Plan	Announcement or alarm	2%	98%
		Practice of fire drill	2%	98%
10	Safety Committee		1%	99%

Enquiry on occupational practices that create fire hazards revealed absence of even basic workplace safety at the factory premises, as processing work involves use of acids, alkalies and other hazardous chemicals, and generation of fabric dust. Schedule XII of rule 102 of the Rules that provides for regulation of the use of acids and alkalis in factories are not explicitly applicable to processing factories. 94% and 96% of the workers reported no prior training or information on occupational hazards present in their work. Along with this and the absence of protective equipment for a significant share of respondents, workers are daily subjected to a high vulnerability to burns and injuries, and lung diseases due to prolonged exposure to the dust. Workers find themselves in a constant trade-off between making a living and safeguarding their health.

LABOUR MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Workers have a right to raise concerns as to their safety or apprehension of imminent danger to their life or health to the factory management. The notified person is duty-bound to take remedial action and send a report of the action taken to the factories inspector. But there is no provision to supervise compliance to this. 64% of the workers were unwilling to raise safety concerns with their superiors, for fear of retribution by their employers that could look like arbitrary termination from work, verbal abuse, intimidation, and threats to life and limb. Moreover, the informal nature of the employment precludes them from

negotiating better work conditions with their *thekedaar* (contractor), who is often the sole reliable safety net in the urban work destination. Under section 111A of the Act, safety concerns can also be brought to the notice of the factory inspector directly by the worker or through a representative. However, workers self-select out of bringing these to the notice of labour department or police due to the lack of proof of employment status as well as stigma associated with being a migrant.

The findings revealed that employers abstain from engaging in routine hazards faced by workers and are more concerned with maximising profit margins through manipulating maximum labour. This takes the form of irregular 12-hour shifts (reported by 98% of the workers), erratic daily targets (84%), on-site living and cooking (18%), lack of unambiguous information on hazards (94%), no prior training (96%) and exposure to harsh chemicals (97%) and fabric dust (96%). The long-term health impacts of working in such conditions also aids the industrial demand for a predominantly younger workforce (67% were found to be between 18-35 age group). Mechanisms such as the Safety Committee that involve worker representation in identification of hazards, formulation of safety policies, etc. is applicable only to Schedule I-hazardous industries. Moreover, it does not ensure representation of contractual or casually engaged workers.

MANAGERIAL PRACTICES

PRACTICES	AGREED
Worried about safety	94%
Can identify places that feel unsafe	92%
Workplace safety can be improved	100%
Unwilling to raise workplace safety concerns	64%
Personal safety is own responsibility	31%
Unpredictable daily tasks	84%
On-site living and cooking	18%
Lack of unambiguous information on hazards	94%
Lack of training	96%
Increased workload since 'unlockdown'	73%
Increase in wages, if workload increased since 'unlockdown'	2%

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Aajeevika Bureau, established in 2005, is a non-profit organisation, which provides specialised services to migrant and informal workers including legal awareness and aid, healthcare, financial services and skills training. It conducts research, teaching and training and policy advocacy at local, regional and national levels through the Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions (CMLS). For sustainable change in employment and public provisioning systems, Aajeevika Bureau also undertakes grassroots mobilisation of worker communities in both rural source and urban destination areas. Through its operations across western India, in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Maharashtra, it focuses on ensuring that migrant and informal workers can - live and work with dignity, *everywhere!*



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