

IS THE CURE WORSE THAN THE DISEASE?

REFLECTIONS ON COVID GOVERNANCE IN
SRI LANKA

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Out of the frying pan into the fire: Life of migrant garment workers in the COVID-19 response

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been ravaging the world for more than a year, rendering precarious many sectors in society. National and domestic economies are reeling from its effects, teetering on the edge of complete collapse in some cases. As the virus mutates and spreads almost uncontrollably, and the medical sector struggles to respond effectively, lockdowns and social distancing have proven to be the most effective containment measures. Lives are being saved thus, however, at the cost of livelihoods. In the apparel industry, as elsewhere, excuses are made about massive declines in demand and subsequent cancellations of orders leading to investors slashing their expenses, and factories having to try and minimise losses. An inevitable spillover of this, as it has been made out to seem, are wage cuts and layoffs, placing workers in a more precarious situation than ever before. It is in this context that I focus on the experiences of Free Trade Zone (FTZ) workers in Sri Lanka, and explore the implications of pandemic developments for the capital-labour nexus and the mediatory function of the state in this equation.

FTZ workers, as common knowledge as well as an extensive body of literature tell us, constitute an especially marginalised group in society. Cultural norms and narrative constructions of them have positioned them very much in the margins of society, and defined them as a disempowered and voiceless category. The pandemic has drastically exacerbated this state of affairs, rendering them especially vulnerable. In this chapter, I map their economic experience during the pandemic, including increasing precarity and the vulnerabilities it introduces. Second, I look at the changes induced in their work and personal lives by the pandemic, and the extreme difficulties they had to grapple with as a result. Third, I visit the question of how pre-existing narratives about them have served to further marginalise FTZ workers in these conditions, and how they have further spawned such derogatory narratives in the process. Finally, I examine the role of capital as well as the state in conditioning the choices available to labour. In building my analysis, I draw on primary and secondary qualitative data.

Context

Since the introduction of the open economy in the late 1970s, the Free Trade Zones (FTZ) have constituted a ‘neo-liberalised space’ (Jayawardena, 2020) capitalising on the labour of Sri Lanka’s rural women drawn to the employment opportunities afforded by these new establishments. They have, thence, “formed the backbone of an enormous economic shift toward export-oriented industrialization.” (Hancock, 2006, p. 1) Hewamanne (2020, p. 3) observes how the deliberate feminisation of these spaces has much to do with “patriarchal stereotypes of women being nimble fingered, docile and supplementary earners”, while Gunathilake (2019) highlights how global capital extracts profit through this arrangement of women’s subordination.

In addition to gender, these young women also come from economically and socially marginalised backgrounds, with relatively low levels of education (Hewamanne, 2017), rendering them particularly apt candidates for the kind of ‘productive labour’ that the global factory floor demands (Jayawardena, 2020). Given that

most of these women are resident elsewhere, they find themselves accommodations in and around the FTZ, which are most of the time privately afforded by them. The deplorable conditions of these accommodations is well known and documented (see, in this regard Hewamanne, 2003, 2017, 2019, 2018; Jayawardena, 2017, 2020; Hancock, Middleton, and Moore, 2012).

Stemming from these difficult circumstances is the identity of the 'zone girl' as exploited and 'contaminated', thereby being rendered culturally questionable. As such, they are dominantly associated with promiscuity, prostitution, abortion, and more generally the victims of their own lax moral standards. In their neighbourhoods, they are referred to as 'juki pieces' and the FTZ in general as the 'whore zone' (Hewamanne, 2003; Jayawardena, 2017; Attanpola, 2006; Hancock, 2006).

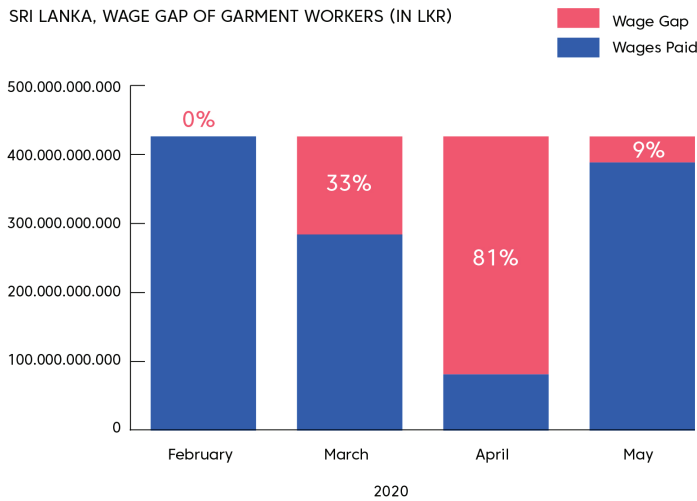
Their lives on the factory floor are no better. They are regularly subject to extreme pressure to complete targets, mandatory overtime shifts, verbal and physical abuse by their supervisors, and the resultant psychological toll of these. They have, therefore, become victims of the industrial system, completely disempowered, subjugated, and subordinated (Jayawardena, 2017; Hancock, 2006).

Two inferences may be made from the above discussion. First, women employed in the FTZs are rendered dually vulnerable at the workplace and in the social realm, due both to being a FTZ worker and a woman. Second, they have transcended the influence of the rural/ familial patriarchy into which they were born, only to find themselves bound by the shackles of industrial patriarchy and its subjugating influence in the FTZ. Therefore, their condition of marginality, even though the terms within which it is experienced have altered, remains essentially unchanged.

My focus in this chapter is to examine how these workers have become further vulnerable in the COVID-19 pandemic and the new and more intense vulnerabilities they have had to grapple with, in this context. This reflection is intended to shed light on how an external shock such as COVID-19 has laid bare and reinforced extant marginalities in society, and what its impact has been on the lived experience of a marginalised group, namely FTZ workers.

Economic anxieties and the struggle for survival

With the island-wide curfew imposed on the 20th of March, 2020, around 275,000 FTZ migrant workers found themselves trapped in their temporary accommodations around their zones, quite unable to fend for themselves (*UN(DER) PAID IN THE PANDEMIC: An estimate of what the garment industry owes its workers*, 2020, p. 28). When discussing their plight, it makes sense to take their economic condition as the point of departure, as that is at the root of many of the structural marginalities they face.



Source: *UN(DER) PAID IN THE PANDEMIC: An estimate of what the garment industry owes its workers* (2020, p. 29).

The onset of the pandemic saw their salaries being shaved significantly, New Year and cumulative bonuses withdrawn, and in some cases employment terminated as well (*Sri Lankan garment workers decry violations of labor rights - UCA News*, 2020; Hari Tv, 2020). It should be borne in mind that this is in a context of their salary during normal times averaging around 25,000 LKR, overtime included (Hewamanne, 2021, p. 56). The ‘COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pretext to Roll Back Sri Lankan Garment Workers’ Rights’ Report (2020, p. 4) reveals that FTZ workers suffered pay cuts of up to

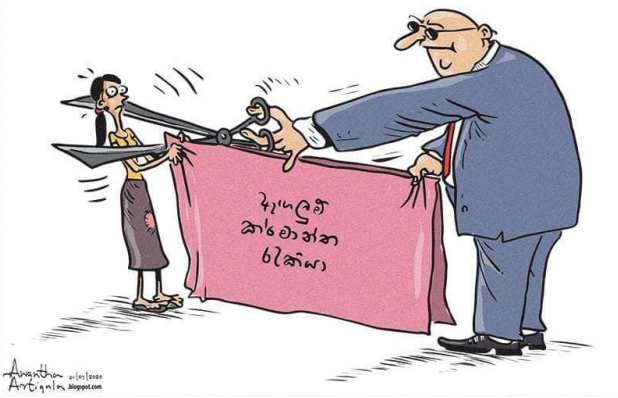
40% of their normal time salaries. In this context, Trade Unions, employers, and the government came together in a tripartite agreement on the 5th of May 2020 to protect the rights of FTZ workers in the pandemic context. It contained clauses on preventing lay-offs, providing at least 50% of the salary of all those who do and do not report to work during the pandemic (or a minimum wage of 75 USD), and continuing to contribute to the social security funds of permanent workers (*COVID-19 Pandemic: A Pretext to Roll Back Sri Lankan Garment Workers' Rights*, 2020; *UN(DER) PAID IN THE PANDEMIC: An estimate of what the garment industry owes its workers*, 2020). In spite of this, the Department of Labour found that as many as 32% of the employees in the FTZs had not been paid their May and June salaries, adding up to approximately 88 million LKR lost to the workers each month. It is noticeable that this loss was not compensated by any government relief scheme (*UN(DER) PAID IN THE PANDEMIC: An estimate of what the garment industry owes its workers*, 2020). The chart above illustrates the wage gap of FTZ workers from February through May 2020.

An activist working for the rights of FTZ workers shared the spill over effects of these wage cuts on the everyday lives of workers stuck in the FTZs under lockdown conditions:

They gave the 14,500 LKR minimum wage because the Minister asked them to, but knocked down all the bonuses usually given for the New Year. Most couldn't pay off their loans, pay their boarding fees, and send money home. Some were made to report to work in batches. But even in their case, only half the salary was paid during the first two months, then it dwindled down to a quarter of the regular salary, and then when the second wave came they terminated the services of whoever they wanted. Some actually sued for compensation and got it, but there were many others who were not willing to do so for fear of not getting work anywhere in the zone in future.¹

1 Discussion with an activist (virtual), 28 May 2021.

While the capital owner maximises their profit by exploiting workers through pay cuts and lay-offs (Hari Tv, 2020), placing the latter in an economically precarious position, the state too excludes them from access to its welfare schemes (Arunathilake, 2013). This was clearly visible in how FTZ workers could not avail the emergency relief measure of 5000 LKR provided by the government, as they could not produce proof of residence in the areas in which they were physically living. A worker interviewed for this study shared how “they wouldn’t give a curfew pass for me to go back to my village where I could show proof of residence and take the 5000. I didn’t even have money to eat.”²



Source: Artigala (2020).

Neither their employers nor the state, then, has been sensitive to the economic plight of the workers in the pandemic situation, and has not concerned themselves with their rights either as employees or citizens. This has led to the further economic marginalisation of an already vulnerable group, and has contributed to the loss of what little decision-making power they exercised in their lives through the leverage provided earlier by their income (Hewamanne, 2021). Therefore, the COVID-19 situation may be considered as having reproduced and worsened the conditions of economic marginality of FTZ workers.

2 Discussion with Biyagama FTZ worker (virtual), 31 May 2021.

Deterioration of living conditions under COVID-19

That the impact of COVID-19 has been felt differently by different quarters of society is by now well known. The FTZ worker stands out as a particularly marginalised and victimised identity in this regard, so rendered due to the multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities in her life that far predate the pandemic. The health crisis has resulted in their rights being violated both as workers and as individuals. In this section, I visit the question of how these rights violations also constituted a decline in their already compromised standards of living, on the factory floor as well as outside of it.

Working life

From the first wave of COVID to the second, FTZ workers experienced a marked decline of living quality due to a collapsing personal economy. The issue was exacerbated with the emergence of what came to be known as the ‘Brandix cluster’, or the large group of COVID infected persons found clustered in a garment factory in Minuwangoda, in the October of 2020. I reproduce below an excerpt from a worker of the factory borrowed from a web source:

I am currently receiving treatment for Corona Virus at the Kuburugamuwa Hospital in Matara. About 200 people who used to work for our company here are receiving treatment for Corona Virus. Initially, about 600 employees were infected with fever but were told to work to cover the targets. If this had been identified in that situation, the disease would not have spread like this. When we found out, we were told to come to the factory and do the PCR test. There I was diagnosed with the COVID-19. My family was informed to self-quarantine and the food items they needed were provided from the factory. My Mother, Father and Sister’s PCR tests are scheduled for tomorrow. We were sewing clothes from the Victoria’s Secret Brand when we found out. There is a rumor that clothes were brought from India. I do not know the truth or falsehood. (*Garment workers on the frontline of the pandemic outbreak in Sri Lanka*, 2020)



Source: Bandara (2021a).

The harrowing experience of having to perform labour intensive tasks such as sitting up for extended periods of time despite being infected, needs no further emphasis to be understood as corrosive. There were also instances where those who could continue to work had to compensate for the absence of others by working extra for the same wages.³

Having engaged in such heartless extraction, it is deplorable that no measures have been taken by these companies to either inoculate their non-infected staff, or follow any other accepted health protocol to ensure the health and safety of those working round the clock on the factory floor (Hari Tv, 2020; Ruwanpura, Gunawardena, and Padmasiri, 2021). Hewamanne (2021, p. 65) notes that these practices may well have continued, if not for the risk posed by a COVID cluster to larger society, and the need therefore to contain the spread of the virus.

Individual/ private life

Various publicly accessible sources such as social media posts and accounts on other print and electronic media revealed that FTZ workers found themselves extremely vulnerable to conditions of physical insecurity through the lockdown period at

3 Discussion with FTZ worker (virtual), 28 May 2021.

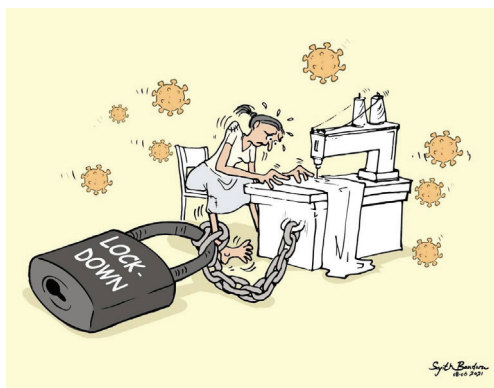
their accommodations. These vulnerabilities had manifested in the form of not having enough to eat, physical abuse and violence by frustrated partners, and unwanted sexual attention (and advances, in some cases) from landlords, etc. This is in addition to the inherent vulnerability of their accommodations to the spread of the virus, given the overcrowded living arrangements typically found therein (Perera and Fernando, 2020). As an activist working in the Biyagama FTZ shared:

When they test positive, they're asked not to come to work. Then everybody staying with them is asked to home quarantine for 14 days. When they go to use the toilet or bath, landlords look at them as though they are the devil. They had nothing to eat, no vitamin C, not even a visit by the PHI to check on them. After some time, some landlords wanted them to vacate because when a lot of people are quarantining in the same building, toilets get clogged electricity bills shoot up, all of that. Also, some workers had to live in quarantine for as many as 30 days, because when one person in the building tests positive, they have to quarantine for 14 days, and within that period another tests positive. So, some were perpetually in quarantine.⁴

Workers were also struggling with food shortages induced by travel restrictions and plummeting wages. Many had managed with just one meal a day, while others were relying on black tea and the edible yield of trees like jackfruit, provided one was accessible. Some had simply survived on water. Any grocery purchases had been made on credit. Most had had to work until as late as 2 pm on days when curfew was to take effect from 6 pm, making it impossible for them to go home (ibid; Wijesinghe, 2020).

The narrative of exploitation that cuts across all these different experiences, and explains all the many extreme marginalities faced by FTZ workers, should lay bare the corrosive bases of accumulation employed by capital and solicited by the state. The deliberate withdrawal of state authorities from monitoring the situation of FTZ workers living in quarantine or working through

4 Discussion with activist (virtual), 28 May 2021.



Source: Bandara (2021b)

the raging pandemic, and the generally lax disposition of the state health apparatus (including the military that was put in charge of ‘annihilating’ the virus) towards glaring violations of COVID protocol within garment factories, indicate the complicity of the state in the process of global capital accumulation at the expense of the health, safety, and dignity of the labour that powers the process.

Social prejudice

The view of the FTZ worker as particularly prone to being a carrier of the virus has much to do with the narrative surrounding their work and social existence that stigmatise them as ‘contaminated’ and morally lax (Preston and Firth, 2020, as cited in Hewamanne, 2021). This was particularly evident in the case of the Minuwangoda Brandix cluster, when compared with the cluster that emerged around the same time from the Peliyagoda fish market. Over mass media and social media, the Brandix cluster was highlighted above and over the fish market cluster as the new source of the COVID virus. This discourse was closely connected to the ‘contamination narrative’ surrounding FTZ workers mentioned previously, which in turn is grounded in patriarchal depictions of ‘moral women’ and how those who do not fit these parameters may suffer exposure to various dangers. The suffering that these narratives gave rise to was immense, as one respondent shared:

Most of these workers could not return to their villages because their neighbours would call up 119 and report them to the authorities. In one instance that I know of, a worker took the train all the way to Polonnaruwa just to catch a glimpse of her mother from the railway platform, and then returned to Colombo. She could not go home with her mother because people were scared that garment workers would bring the virus to the village. They were caught in a situation where they could not go to work, could not stay in their boarding houses, and could not go home.⁵

The state and society both tend to view the migrant FTZ worker as an ‘outsider’ living in the city. This view of them as outsiders has to a significant extent sanctioned the violation of many of their rights, whereby their presence does not register in any meaningful everyday sense with other citizens, nor in an administrative sense with the state (due to them being officially registered as residents elsewhere in the country). Attanapola (2006) reasons that this ‘placelessness’ they experience has introduced in the migrant worker a mindset that makes them grateful just to not fall prey to any misfortune, rather than strike back at the structures that make them vulnerable to such. Once this mentality is internalised and the corrosive structures that exploit them unquestioningly accepted, their exploitation becomes so normal as to be invisible, both to themselves and the outer world.

Their gender, their position in the economic structure, and their occupation all intersect to reinforce their subaltern experience, further restricting possibilities for corrective action (Jordal, Öhman, and Wijewardene, 2020). The extreme and increasing marginality that these realities give rise to make them further and further vulnerable to various sorts of abuses, including sexual. A respondent from the Biyagama FTZ shared how a police officer whom she had approached to secure a curfew pass in order to travel home had offered to come pick her up personally after he got off duty, clearly insinuating other intentions⁶. In many other instances, FTZ workers had been hoarded to buses and unceremoniously carted off to their

5 Discussion with an activist (virtual), 28 May 2021.

6 Discussion Biyagama FTZ worker (virtual), 31 May 2021.

home districts, where they had been dumped off at the relevant city centre, left to devise their own ways of getting home from there. In a situation of a country-wide lockdown and after an extended period of serious impoverishment at their temporary accommodations, some workers had taken as many as two days to reach home, as they had to walk up the distance⁷.

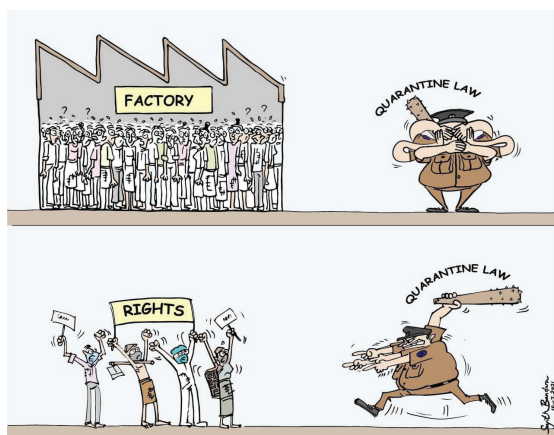
The sapping of this group of a voice signalled by this state of affairs (because the worker is not in a position to speak up, much less be heard) is, as this case and numerous others demonstrate, largely institutionally sanctioned as well. In many instances, workers have reported being hoarded by the military into quarantine centres at a moment's notice, sometimes even carted away as COVID positive cases even when they had medical evidence to assert otherwise, never being given an explanation or notice (De Silva, 2020). This treatment is indicative of how even the state apparatus viewed them as those not worth the time and effort of treating with dignity.

These accounts demonstrate how the voicelessness of FTZ workers has translated into a serious case of rights violations, particularly in the context of the pandemic. A long history of such violations had already normalised the situation to the point of invisibility (as discussed above), and the additional challenges posed by the health emergency served to compound and exacerbate them, pushing the already marginal to extreme marginality, given their lack of economic and social security. However, this structural build-up is hardly ever recognised or acknowledged even by the workers themselves, who have by now been fragmented as a labour force, making it nearly impossible to unionise or organise in any capacity. The breakdown of this collective labour power is chiefly in the service of capital accumulation. In this connection, I next discuss the alienating influence of the FTZs on these workers, and its implications on the enjoyment of their rights.

7 Discussion with NGO staff member (virtual), 20 June 2021.

The state, capital, and labour

In the multiple vulnerabilities faced by the FTZ worker in the pandemic context, it is possible, at least in part, to discern the role played by the state and capital in conditioning labour. It is already evident that both the state and capital conveniently looked away from the difficulties of the FTZ worker in this situation. What may not be quite so apparent is how this looking away made it possible for the FTZ worker to be continually used for purposes of capital accumulation in disturbingly extractive ways.



Source: Bandara (2021c).

I will first take up the case of capital, as exemplified by factory owners and managers. When the workers found themselves trapped in the FTZ, unable to go home and unable to step out due to the societal view of them as carriers of the virus, factory owners and managers strategically used their vulnerability to increase profit margins by decreasing production costs. This was done first by way of providing them transport to and from the factories, and then increasing the length of the working shift of the individual worker; slashing social security expenditure of permanent employees on the pretext of decreasing demand for their products; and substituting the labour of those who contracted the virus with those who did not, without compensation for the additional hours put in or the

additional targets met, among other things⁸. The fact that there was this serious a push from the management to continue the production process is itself evidence that there was no considerable decline in demand. In fact, there were reports of additional – and massive – orders for healthcare gear from textile plants in Sri Lanka (*Sri Lanka's apparel industry attracts over 500 mln USD orders for PPE*, 2020). On top of all this, the benefits of the GSP+ scheme also have not trickled down to the level of the worker in this time of enormous need (Hari Tv, 2020).

The treatment of the worker here is strongly indicative of a denial of their human worth and dignity, wherein settling the bare minimum of their wage is viewed as adequate. In effect, what this signifies is the reduction of the human person to a commodity, put in the service of capital, specifically its accumulation and expansion. I want to next focus on how these conditions of exploitation serve the interests of the state as well.

As Hancock (2006) demonstrates, women's labour is the key source of revenue for the failing economy of the country. More than their labour per se, what generates these revenues is the exploitation of such labour, which increases profit margins. Therefore, making conditions conducive for exploitation to continue is directly beneficial to the revenue seeking state. Harvey (2007) and Bourdieu (1998) further a similar line of thought, whereby they explain how the reliance on pools of informal labour and their extreme exploitation is a hallmark of a revenue seeking, neo-liberalising state. As such, the state's institutions are also involved in the process of controlling labour thus, either by way of turning a blind eye to its exploitation, or by actively becoming complicit in it.

Turning a blind eye to labour exploitation is something for which the Sri Lankan state – and admittedly most developing states – is notoriously known. Despite a labour law regime that is applicable to all working citizens of and in the country, FTZs are considered and treated as de facto legal bubbles in which these laws take no effect. Unjustifiable work shifts, inadequate leisure time

8 Discussion with NGO staff member (virtual), 20 June 2021.

within the working day, and unsafe working conditions are only some of the problems prevalent in the FTZs. This state of affairs has been normalised in the mindset of not only state officials and factory management, but also workers themselves (Skanthakumar, 2017). When COVID arrived in this prevailing state of affairs, the complicity of the state in the continued exploitation of labour was made evident in cases where workers were refused curfew passes, dropped off in city centres, with no regard to how they would get home, made ineligible for government relief mechanisms, etc. as discussed previously. In both the cases of capital and the state, one sees the extraction of labour on hugely exploitative terms, and the complete abandonment of the body that makes capital accumulation possible (Hewamanne, 2021). The interdependence between the state and capital for mutual sustenance, therefore, has been key to the continued exploitation of labour in the FTZs.

Conclusion

In this chapter, my focus was on understanding the ramifications of COVID on the migrant factory workers of Sri Lanka's FTZs. I have discussed how the COVID response of the government has contributed to reproducing extant marginalities, and subjected these groups to further exploitation.

FTZ workers, even during normal times, are subject to multiple marginalities found at the intersections of class, gender, and socio-cultural realities. The arrival of COVID-19 at this already highly marginalised state of affairs has turned the situation from bad to worse. With each new wave of the pandemic, we see a continuous deterioration of the personal economy of the FTZ worker, and a corresponding decline in her living standards. In this situation, the exploitative conditions in which she usually finds herself have gradually intensified, even while they become more and more normalised and thereby rendered invisible.

The already existing negative perception of FTZ workers was further aggravated by the pandemic, whereby they were viewed more and more as particularly prone to be carriers of the virus given

their living and working arrangements. The workers themselves were largely resigned to their fate, having already lived in corrosive conditions for years, perhaps decades. This state of marginality has been further reinforced by the fragmenting effect of neo-liberalism, which provides workers with ever more excuses not to organise, but rather ‘manage’ by the day.

The role of the state and capital in making these conditions possible cannot be ignored. Both have reduced the FTZ worker to a mere commodity, easily settled by paying the minimum wage, completely sapped of their human worth and dignity. In effect, the body of the worker has been neglected, while the labour it produces has been commodified on very exploitative terms to increase profit margins. For the state, this labour is simply a means to much needed revenue, and for capital it is but a tool for further accumulation and expansion. As such, both have reason to continue the conditions of marginality which the FTZ worker finds herself in, and the pandemic has but provided an additional excuse for the marginality and exploitation to continue and intensify.

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