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OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PROBLEMS AMONG FEMALE GARMENT FACTORY WORKERS IN SRI LANKA

Vijitha De Silva,¹ Hester Lipscomb,² Truls Ostbye² ¹*University of Ruhuna, Galle, Sri Lanka;* ²*Duke University, Durham, USA*

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Objectives Over the past three decades, the garment industry has become a major foreign exchange earner for Sri Lanka. The objective of this study is to provide an overview of work related health problems experienced by the female textile workers of Sri Lanka.

Methods This study was carried out among a random sample of female garment factory workers in the free trade zone in Koggala, Sri Lanka. Data was collected by medically qualified research assistants using a structured questionnaire.

Results 1058 female workers participated in the study. Most (63.7%) were working as sewing machine operators; others included quality controllers, ironers and workers in packing and cutting departments. Mean age was 27.8 years, and most had an education beyond grade 10. Most (85.3%) workers came to work from their family homes. 15.6% were reporting musculoskeletal problems, the most prevalent complaint being lower back problems. 2.3% reported migraine and 5.3% tension headache. 5.6% had had a recent workplace injury, most of these (68.3%) were puncture injuries. 0.5% of workers reported having been subjected to emotional abuse, none of the workers reported any sexual or physical abuse at work during last 12 months.

Conclusions Female textile workers in Sri Lanka report a variety of health problems, most notably musculoskeletal problems. However, relative to studies of other occupational groups in middle income countries, our results indicate that they are relatively healthy overall. This may be in part due to their young age. Long term follow-up studies of these workers is therefore warranted.