

Voices from the Factory Floor: Unmet Health Needs of the Workforce in the Manufacturing Sector

Organised by Swasti and the Catalyst Group

Date: 21 July 2025 | 11:30 am - 01:00pm IST

Session Overview

This webinar brought together worker voices, public health experts, and industry leaders to understand the health and well-being challenges of workers in the manufacturing sector, explore the impact of human-centred design, and discuss sustainable business-led solutions

Introduction & Context Setting

Speaker: Joseph Julian, Senior Director, Swasti

Joseph introduced the session by framing the discussion around Swasti's nearly two decades of experience in understanding and addressing the unmet health needs of factory workers. He emphasised the importance of hearing directly from workers to understand their lived experiences and the role of businesses and civil society in addressing these needs through sustainable, human-centred interventions. He underlined the importance of data, lived experiences, and collaborative action to transform workplaces.

Worker Testimonial

Speaker: Mary, Worker at a Formal Clothing Company | Translation: Sukanya R

Mary, a mother of two who had to leave school early due to financial hardship, shared her journey of managing anaemia while working as a cutter. With support from Swasti's health intervention and life skills training, which covered topics like anaemia, diabetes, and high blood pressure:

- Her haemoglobin level improved from 6 to 11.5 g/dl
- She was promoted to Executive – Accounts
- Gained confidence through communication training
- Her transformation had a profoundly positive impact on both her workplace productivity and family life. Today, she feels "healthier, confident, and ready to take charge of her own life," and has expressed deep gratitude to her factory management for implementing the program.



Joseph emphasized the power of consistent behavioural change and how even modest interventions can spark transformation when factory management is invested.

Lived Realities of Workers

Speaker: Aditi Shekhawat, Manager, CPHC Alliance at Swasti

Aditi shared the lived health realities of garment factory workers, based on in-depth conversations with 58 men and women across Bangalore, Jaipur, Karur, and Tirupur. These workers form the backbone of India's apparel industry, which employs an estimated 45 million people.

The core theme from the workers was that **"the first happiness is being healthy."** The discussion revealed two distinct health journeys: a "Cycle of Depletion" for women, driven by the "double

burden" of work and home duties, and a "Cycle of Stress" for men, stemming from intense "provider pressure." These different paths lead to specific health challenges, from chronic pain and weakness in women to stress-related conditions in men. The session also explored how workers resiliently navigate their healthcare options, making calculated choices based on cost, time, and access.

Key takeaways:

<p>Chronic conditions: Women reported high rates of back pain, headaches, anaemia, and reproductive health issues. Women reported menstrual health issues, and persistent body pain. For men, reported intense financial stress, often manifesting as physical ailments like digestive issues.</p>	<p>Mental health: Financial stress and lack of support caused persistent mental strain; factories sometimes served as emotional sanctuaries where workers felt they could express themselves more freely than at home.</p>	<p>Gendered experiences: Women face the “cycle of depletion” – malnutrition, skipped meals, and the physical toll of household duties on top of factory work.</p> <p>Men deal with the “cycle of stress” from provider pressures and physically demanding work, vividly illustrated by the story of a migrant worker in a pressing unit who battled extreme heat and relied on IV drips for energy.</p>
<p>Healthcare access: Workers rely on self-treatment (home remedies) or local private clinics for minor issues.</p> <p>Time, cost, and fear of wage loss limit access to ESIC and formal healthcare, making every healthcare decision a rational, economic one.</p>	<p>Worker resilience: Despite structural challenges, workers demonstrate strong coping strategies and willingness to engage in health interventions</p>	

Designing Interventions That Work

Speaker: Shankar A.G., Program Director, Swasti & CPHC Alliance

Shankar presented Swasti's human-centred health-at-work model, which is built on the reality that over **75% of workers face health issues, with 80% of these issues going undiagnosed**. Key components include:

- **Integrated, preventive care** targeting issues like anaemia, hypertension, and diabetes.

- **Empowering workers** through behaviour change communication to become **"first responders" for their health** and their families.
- **On-site & online services (bricks and clicks model)** for continuity and flexibility.
- **Top-down engagement:** Involving factory leadership and supervisors to institutionalise worker wellness and ensure programs are embedded, not just temporary projects.
- **Contextual design:** Programs must adapt to geography (e.g., focusing on nutrition in Bangladesh, HIV in Lesotho), workforce composition, and local priorities.
- **Leveraging social capital:** Using ESIC, health insurance, and government schemes to strengthen impact and reduce out-of-pocket expenditure.
- **Multi-sectoral partnerships:** Engaging brands, civil society, and government for sustained outcomes.

Worker Story: Nagama

Nagama, a 37-year-old widow and single mother, shared how she overcame health hesitations after losing her husband to health issues. After a workplace reproductive cancer awareness session and counselling from Swasti, she opted for cervical screening and made lifestyle changes to manage her pre-hypertension. She now champions health screenings in her community, even educating her landlord's wife, and believes passionately that "a healthy woman can achieve anything."

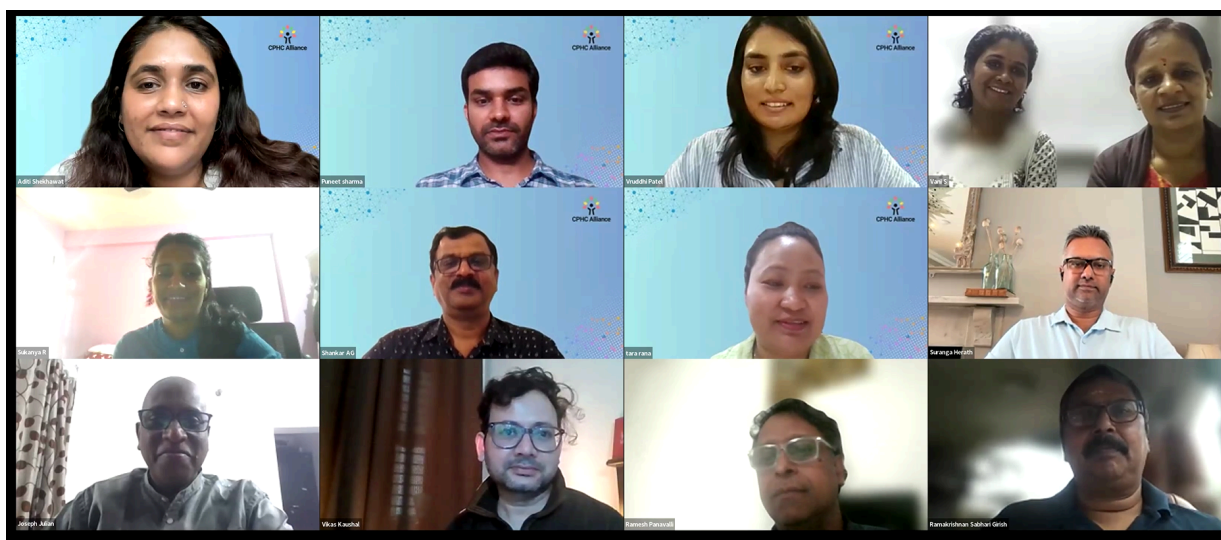


Measuring Impact

Speaker: Vruddhi Patel, Program Lead, Health at Work, Swasti

Vruddhi presented outcome data from Swasti's Health at Work program (adapted for India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam) and other global workplace health programs, proving that investing in workers is good for business:

- **Cambodia's HOPE Project:** 60% anaemia reduction, 40% increase in clinic use
 - **PACE Program:** 49% rise in self-esteem, 150% rise in self-efficacy
 - **Women in Factories (Tufts University):** 40% reduction in gender pay gap, 20% drop in absenteeism
 - **Bangladesh HERproject:** 43% reduction in worker turnover
- Vruddhi emphasised that data is essential for evaluating, refining, and scaling interventions effectively.



Screenshot from the webinar attended by 43 participants

Business Perspective on Human-Centred Health

Speaker: Suranga Herath, CEO, English Tea Shop, Sri Lanka

Suranga shared the inspiring story of transforming English Tea Shop into a globally recognised, human-centred business (B Corp certified and winner of the UK's King's Award for Sustainability):

- Transitioned from contract manufacturing to an organic, purpose-driven brand to **break free from the legacy commodity model**.
- Implemented shared ownership (30% equity to employees), an inclusive culture, and child allowances
- Launched PRAJAVA, a community-centred wellbeing program in response to Sri Lanka's economic crisis
- Partnered with Swasti to assess health gaps and roll out tailored health and well-being interventions

- Advocated for **co-design**, **brand accountability**, and **supply chain collaboration** to embed health and well-being into business DNA
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Q&A and Reflections

Moderator: Joseph Julian

Key insights from the discussion:

- **Ramesh Panavalli (Holland & Barrett)** inquired about sustaining momentum post-pilot. Shankar emphasised the importance of leadership buy-in and leveraging social capital. Ramesh advocated for embedding worker health in **sourcing models and business KPIs**, and urged the integration of **climate risks, such as heat stress**, into well-being strategies.
 - **Suranga highlighted the need for brands and manufacturers to co-design solutions in a "50/50 partnership" and move beyond "tick-box" compliance exercises.**
 - The group agreed that **human-centred design, collaborative models, and measurable impact** are essential to scale sustainably.
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Closing Remarks & Feedback

Aditi Shekhawat facilitated a Mentimeter feedback session and group photo.

Joseph Julian closed the webinar by reinforcing the key takeaway:

"Listening with purpose is the first step to transformation. Human-centred design, collaboration, and measurement create real impact—for both workers and businesses."

Next Steps

1. Swasti to explore ways to make workplace health programs sustainable within business systems.

2. Brands and factories to co-create long-term, worker-focused well-being models.
3. Worker health and well-being to be integrated into business KPIs and strategy.
4. Swasti will continue to share data and case studies to influence industry-wide adoption.
5. Further explore linkages between climate risks and health vulnerabilities in factory settings.

Annexure

1. [Webinar video recording link](#)
2. [Webinar Deck link](#)
3. [Social media amplification](#)
4. [Concept Note and Agenda - Voices from the Factory Floor: Unmet Health Needs of the Workforce in the Manufacturing Sector](#)