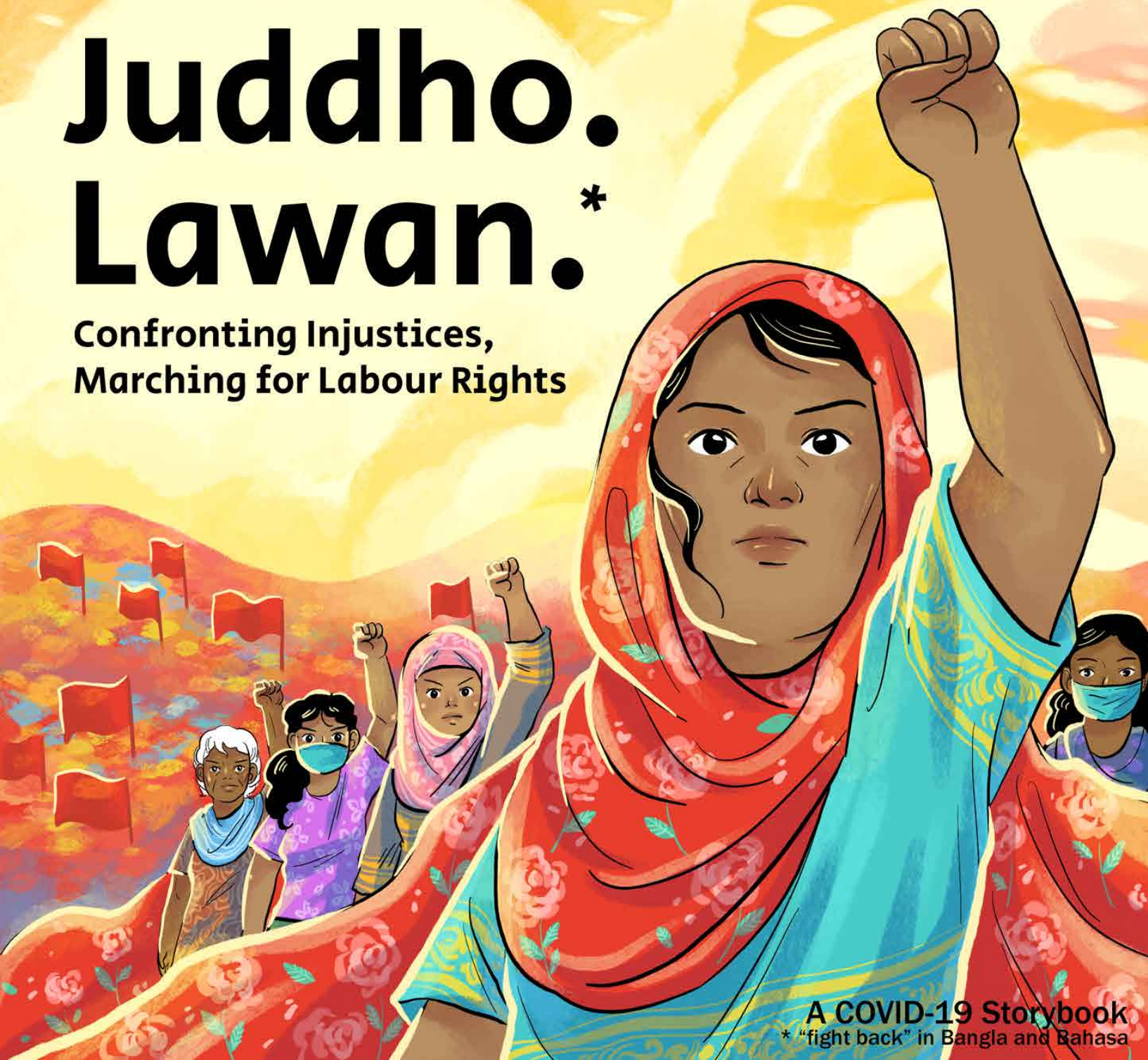


Juddho. Lawan.*

Confronting Injustices,
Marching for Labour Rights



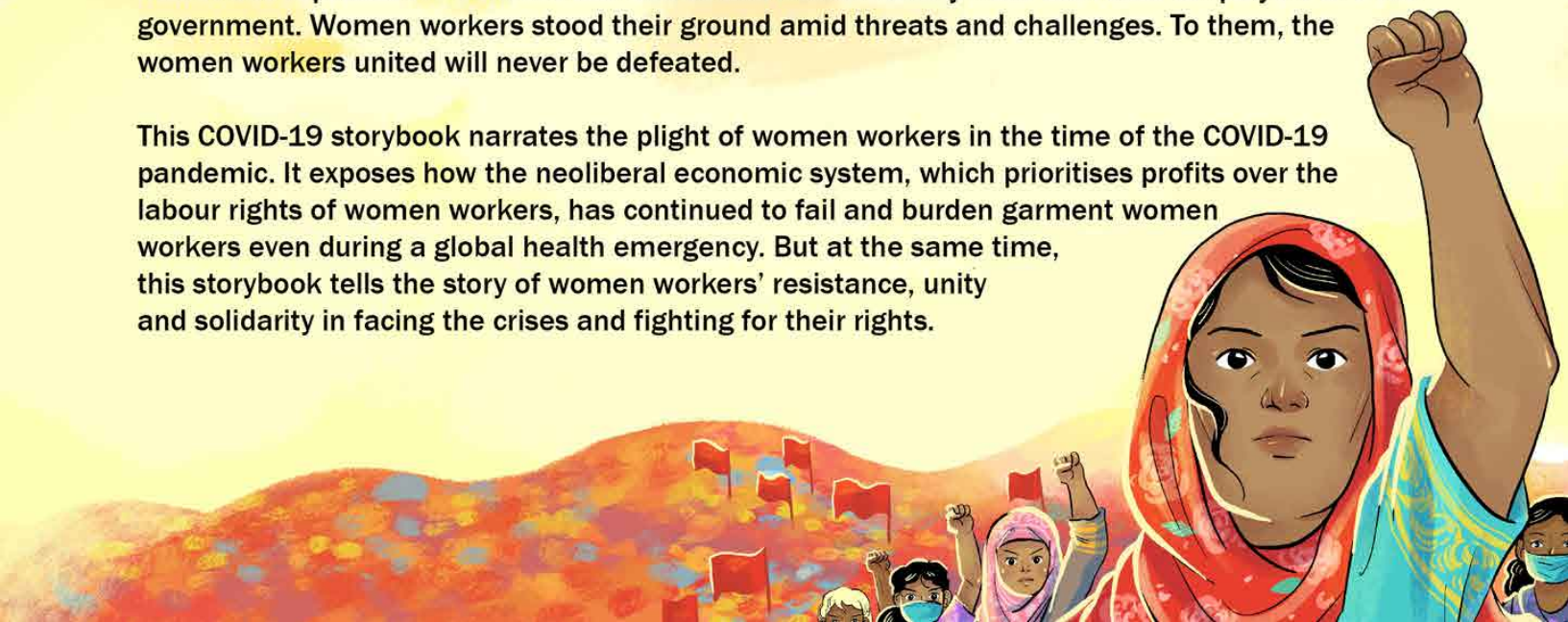
A COVID-19 Storybook
* "fight back" in Bangla and Bahasa

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused health and socio-economic crises that exposed the vulnerabilities of poor health care systems and exacerbated inequalities across the globe. Millions of people contracted the virus and navigated their way to survival amid poor pandemic health responses, while nearly half of the global workforce or over a billion people face economic hit from the pandemic. In Asia and the Pacific, many governments resorted to closing borders and implementing nationwide lockdowns which resulted in an economic downturn and put jobs and livelihoods at risk. Women workers, who are disproportionately represented in low-wage jobs, were hardest hit.

Even before the pandemic, many women workers have been burdened with long work hours and unpaid overtime fees, poverty wages, lack of benefits and security of work, and poor and unsafe working conditions. With the threat of COVID-19 and implementation of lockdowns and restrictive policies, these dire working conditions were exacerbated, and women found themselves in a more difficult situation than ever. Millions of women workers lost their jobs and livelihoods, while many of those who were kept endured the poor working conditions and the risk of getting exposed to the virus without proper protection.

Women workers knew too well that abuses would worsen and that their rights and safety would continue to be compromised as health and socio-economic crises intensified. They knew that there was no other option left but to collectively rise, resist and unite for their rights. Despite the challenges, women workers organised and mobilised themselves to fight for those who have been retrenched and suffered from wage cuts and unpaid overtime work. They collectively asserted their rights to health and reproductive benefits and demanded accountability from both their employers and the government. Women workers stood their ground amid threats and challenges. To them, the women workers united will never be defeated.

This COVID-19 storybook narrates the plight of women workers in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. It exposes how the neoliberal economic system, which prioritises profits over the labour rights of women workers, has continued to fail and burden garment women workers even during a global health emergency. But at the same time, this storybook tells the story of women workers' resistance, unity and solidarity in facing the crises and fighting for their rights.



Two years have passed since the COVID-19 pandemic struck the world.

More than four million people died worldwide.



In Asia and the Pacific, 81 million jobs were wiped out in 2020.



22-25 million employed persons were pushed into poverty.



70% of these workers are women in the informal sector: agricultural workers, domestic and home-based workers, and street vendors, who have no access to decent work.



Even with formal work, women suffered. In Bangladesh and Indonesia, experiences of women garment workers further exposed the already inhumane conditions that corporations and neoliberal economic system imposed upon them. Millions faced oppression, injustices and discrimination, only made worse in the face of the pandemic.

In fact, even against the backdrop of global health crises, women garment workers' wages were cut...

My husband and I used to earn around USD 235 combined, but now our salaries are only at USD 118 in total.

Belly,
Bangladesh

I only bought rice for this month, and we spent 15 days eating only rice, mashed potatoes and vegetables.



I can't even afford my house rent anymore...

Dahlia,
Bangladesh

I barely have enough for food and medicine.



... they were threatened to lose their jobs...

I was suspended from my job without receiving any salary. My husband was retrenched as well.

Lili,
Indonesia

What I earn now is barely enough for our family. It is not enough.



IDR 900,000
 (USD 62) - RENT
 IDR 400,000
 (USD 28)
 -water & electricity
 IDR 3,000,000
 (USD 210)
 -daily needs
 - TOTAL EXPENSES
 IDR 4,000,000 (USD 277)
 - SALARY: IDR 4,080,000
 (USD 297)

Our company has offered a very small severance pay to some of the workers who have worked for over 15 years in the company.

My friends are afraid. It's either they accept it or get nothing at all.

...and, consequently, they were forced to plunge deeper and deeper into debt. They couldn't afford even their most basic needs such as food, medicine and housing.



I've had to apply for a loan, but most of it was used to pay for my debts. With the rest of it, we put up a small food cart selling sausages to get by.



I'm sorry, mother, I can't afford to send money to you and my sister anymore...

Shiuli, Bangladesh

It's all right, dear, I will take out a loan so that you can at least come home.

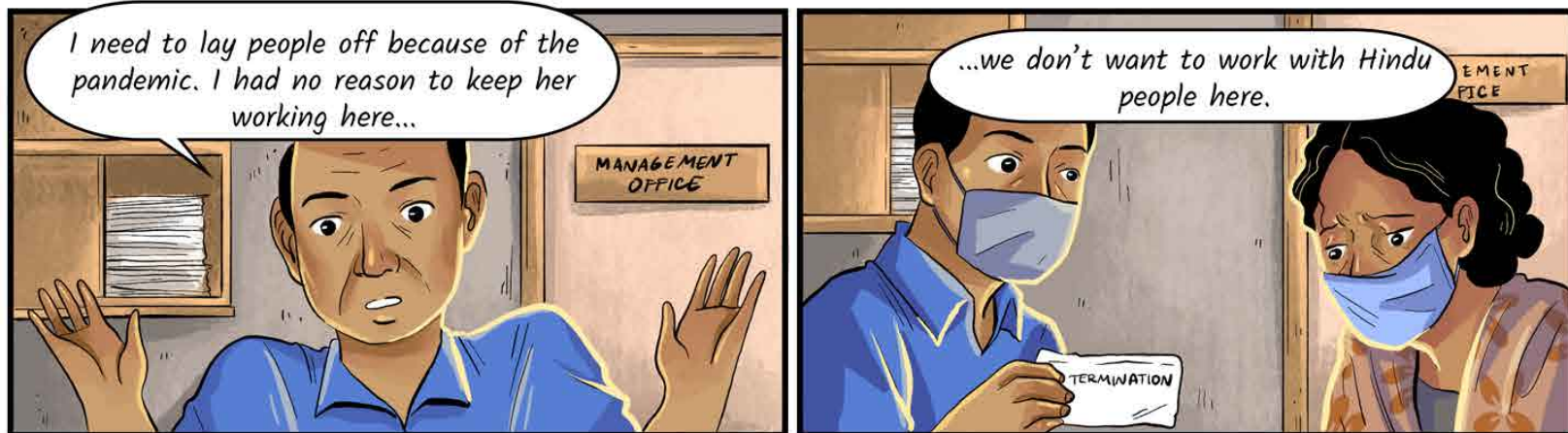
...but for how long will people keep giving us loans?

These women, who already lack access to labour rights, comprehensive social protection and government relief programmes, suffer immense financial crises that push them further into poverty.

At this state, they face the risk of starvation and COVID-19 infection while falling further into debt.



Not only that, they were retrenched on discriminatory bases, such as religion and age...



...disregarding their contractual status, years of service, performance and qualifications.

Even if they had been able to stay to work at their factories, their conditions remained harsh.

Our production targets have increased as much as 200% even though there have been massive layoffs.

The burdens are heavier on those who remained.



A surge of production targets as lockdown policies loosened, long hours, extreme fatigue: women have faced these difficulties even before the pandemic.

Much of these things contribute to women's burnout.

Dian Septi,
Union Leader, FSBPI

Even before the pandemic, medicines have been like "snacks". Women workers take them just to keep their bodies from falling apart, because they work overtime without pay!



Not only that, the pressure to reach daily targets is higher than before.

Do it again!



Again!



Why are you so slow? Finish the target! You will not leave until you're done!

We have to oversee any problem, standing for eight hours straight.

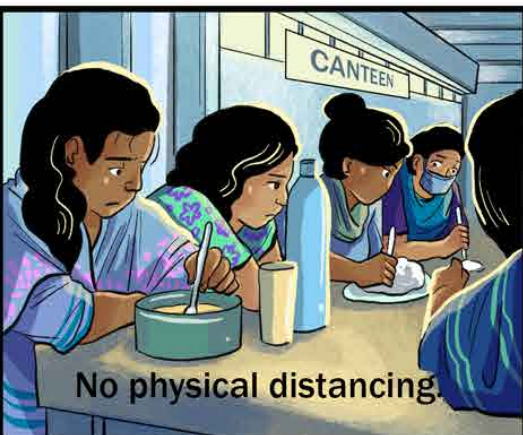
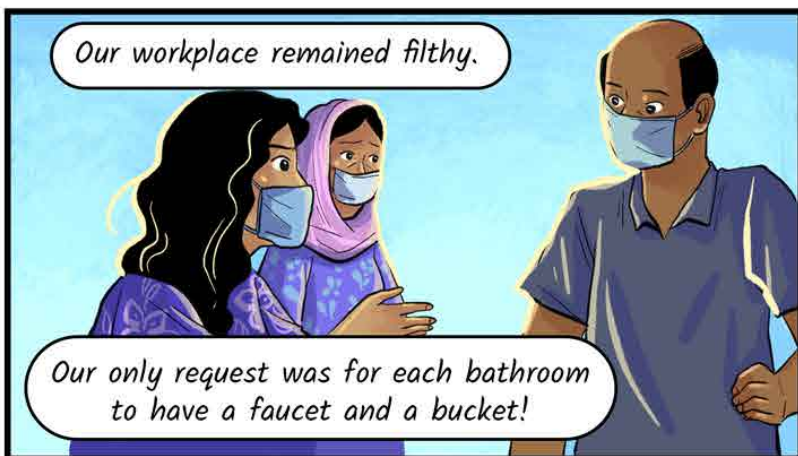


Now, it's even worse.

Yet, the companies would not even provide for Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in the workplace. No Personal Protective Equipment. No mental health services. No sexual and reproductive health services.



Women workers remain vulnerable to potential virus transmissions, because no preventive measures are observed.



Then they would require us to take antigen tests that we have to pay for ourselves.



Meanwhile, health facilities are overwhelmed. We're always exposed to the virus, and our only option is to self-isolate for 14 days or more.



Often, we are left to fend for ourselves, so we decided to buy oxygen tanks, food and medicines for ourselves. But oxygen tanks are hard to find and expensive.

So much of women's needs have been neglected, even before the pandemic began, and this rings true for their reproductive health needs. Instead of supporting women workers who are entitled to maternal rights, corporations violated these laws instead.



You should just resign. We can't cover for the costs of your childbirth and other maternity needs.



Of course, we couldn't take that. We protested and fought for our rights!



Sheikh, Bangladesh

We organised ourselves to help each other with the childbirth through arisan*. Although it's not much, it can make our burdens less heavy.



Lili, Indonesia

*arisan - an Indonesian social activity centered around gathering money in a more sociable and entertaining manner.

All these are evidence of how women are marginalised, a symptom of how fundamentalisms and neoliberal capitalism reinforce patriarchal practices that neglect the needs of women. This happens not only in the workplace but at home as well.

I am shouldering much of the burdens now since I lost my job.



Women's responsibilities do not end, not even at home.

When my husband lost his job, I became the breadwinner, but the burden of care work still falls on me.



A survey in Indonesia revealed that women spent more than three hours per day for unpaid care work, much higher than that of men.

91% of 557 women workers in Bangladesh reported that they do more care work now.

There is a disbalance in the care arrangement amongst family members, as patriarchal mindsets perpetuate unpaid care burden on women.





Even at work, I worry about my children. I monitor my child's online schooling through WhatsApp.



Every time there's an assignment, I forward it to his father, who is at home.



Then I also have to pay my mother for taking care of my child. I really can't stop working. They are all relying on me.

The stress and burdens only escalate from there.

In Bangladesh, 4, 249 women in 27 out of 64 districts have been subjected to domestic violence since the pandemic began.



About half of domestic violence survivors are subjected to emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, or both physical and sexual abuse.

They do not even know how to ask for help.



Fahima, Bangladesh



He has become increasingly violent since he lost his job.

I filed a case to the police, but they didn't find him because he disappeared for two and a half months.



When he returned, he convinced me not to push through with the report...

For decades, these injustices have been entrenched in the system of our society.

Governments have aligned their interests with corporations, instead of with the people. Their policies such as privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation have armed corporations with ways to protect their own interests and profits, rather than protect the rights of workers.



These only created more spaces for further exploitation: violation of workers' rights, low wages, precarious working conditions, prohibition of freedom of association, and restriction of protests and strikes – all in the name of profit.



Governments imposed Special Economic Zones, supported by International Financial Institutions, to regulate unfair practices in the garment supply chain.



And as soon as women workers demand for their needs, military forces used by companies intimidate and harrass them to prevent them from organising, and employ violence against trade unionists and labour rights defenders.

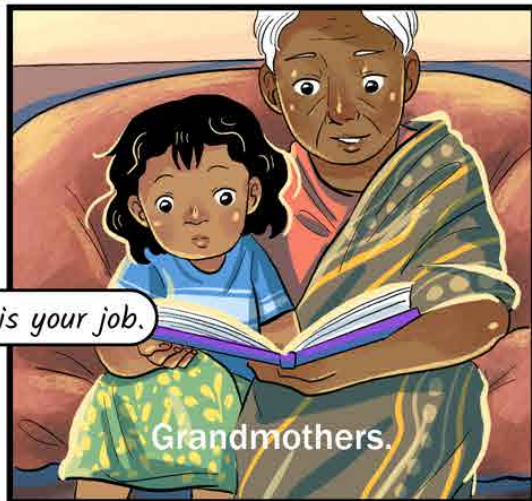
Meanwhile, patriarchy has constructed gender roles that burdened women with caregiving responsibilities, whether paid or unpaid.



This is all you should be doing.



This is your job.



Gender injustices spare no age and generation of women.



You should take care of the children even if you have work.



We have no help to give you.



Through layers and layers of multiple and intersecting discriminations against their gender, national and ethnic origins, descent, race, religion, age and class.



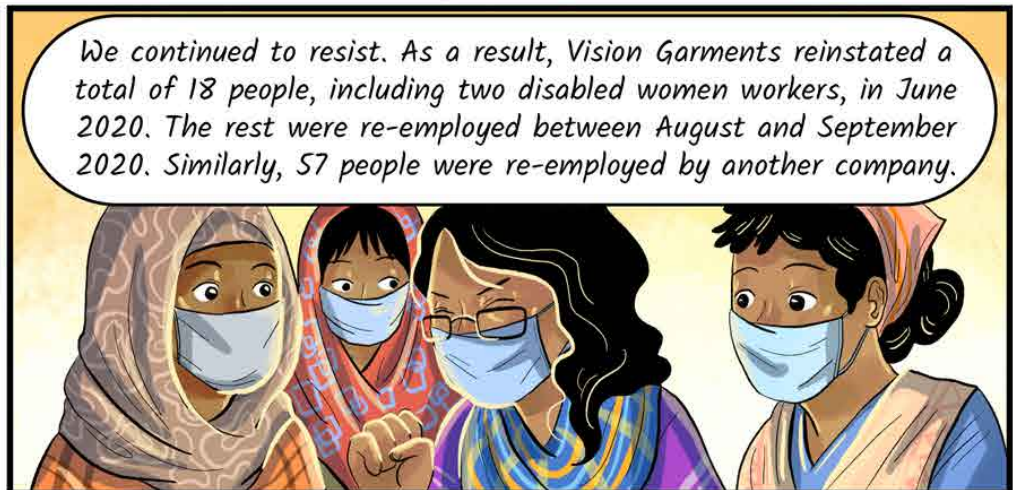
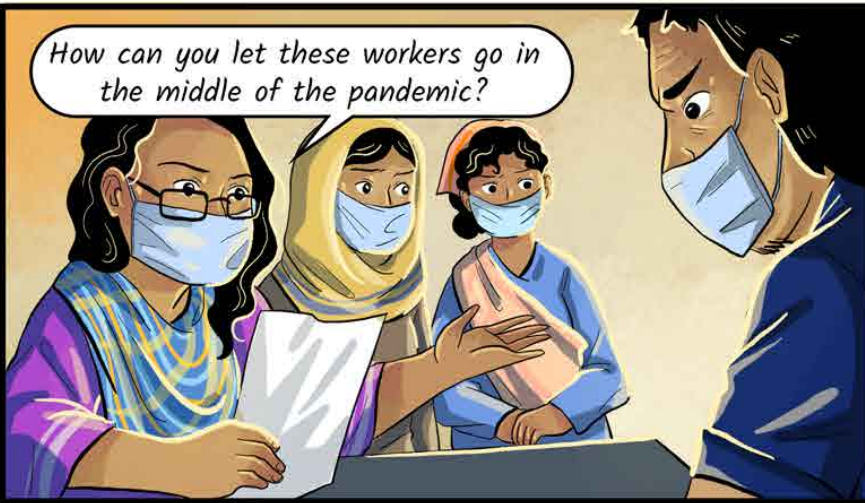
You're just a woman!



You have no rights!



These forms of violence against women heavily affect their health and well-being.



Nothing will be achieved by simply waiting.

They are only using the pandemic to further exploit us! They have cut down our wages by 50%, saying that it's because of massive order cancellations! But this is just their manipulation tactic!

We must demand these brands and companies to be held accountable!



But we're afraid...

Yes, what if the factory closes down?

We will all lose our jobs...



We resisted and pushed for our demands. At the end, the company gave in: no wage cuts.


We also found out that our members did not receive social assistance from the government.

We didn't receive anything...



Of course, we could not let that be. We provided emergency reliefs...






...and then, together with the Indonesian Legal Aid Institute, we filed complaints and demanded for transparency from the government, so that they will rechannel their social assistance to workers.


We found out then, that instead of giving out packages worth IDR 650, 000 (USD 45) per household, the packages were only worth IDR 150, 000 (USD 11)!

They would alternate the disbursements as well -- one month they will give the package, and then the next, they will not.


Losing a job is the first. Economy and health would not be conflicting had our basic needs been guaranteed, and yet the government does not guarantee it. Second, the government does not provide health facilities. Third, the attitudes and actions of political elites and oligarchs have shown their lack of empathy for the people.



They say whatever they like; their statements are clueless, and their policies do not heed the needs of the people!



Here in Bangladesh, there has been a lot of corruption regarding the distribution of relief provided by the government.



If they would only take the initiatives and right steps with the help of the National Identity Card, they would be able to select real impoverished people so that relief will reach door to door.

Women suffer from various gynaecological problems. We demand the government to establish quality health centres in the factory areas where we can get health services at a lower cost!

We demand for the government to support those who have lost their jobs, either to get another job or to support their businesses! The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments and Ministry of Labour and Employment must consult with worker unions!

Resistance will not die in Indonesia. We have taken matters into our own hands, by forming an emergency COVID-19 committee.




The pandemic did not weaken feminist solidarity. When the committee couldn't distribute food and medicine, other women rights organisations helped them cook and distribute food to union members.

We will not let our rights be trampled on!

We demanded for payment of attendance bonus, maternity leave and annual leave, from our company. The authorities scolded and threatened us, so in response, we refused to go to work.

The factory closed down, and even when it re-opened, we did not return until our demands were met and put in writing!





And our movement was successful! The workers at our factory were given annual leave money for 2019 and 2020, and seven pregnant workers were given maternity leave and benefits.

We also won in our negotiations to get paid leave, and the factories stopped suspending workers!

Our company imposed a policy without consulting the workers. It would not sit well with us!

Two shifts for workers?

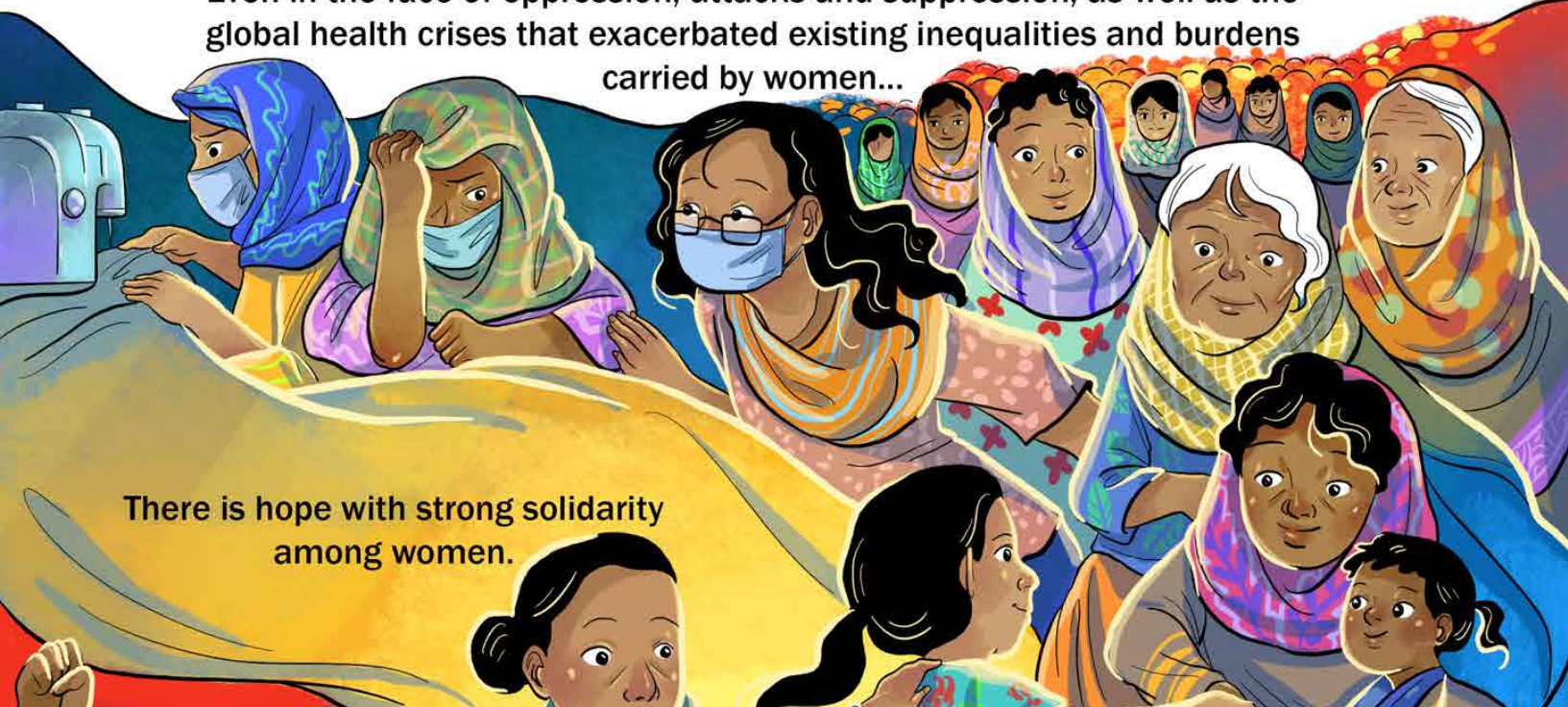
But 6AM for the first shift is too early. We have so much to do at home with our kids before going to work.

How can they add a Saturday work-day and not count it as overtime?

Negotiating while organising workers isn't easy. Our union is in charge of handling the cases.

But we have entered the second stage of negotiation. No agreement has been reached because the owner refuses to see us. But we will continue to assert our rights despite the limitations brought about by the pandemic!

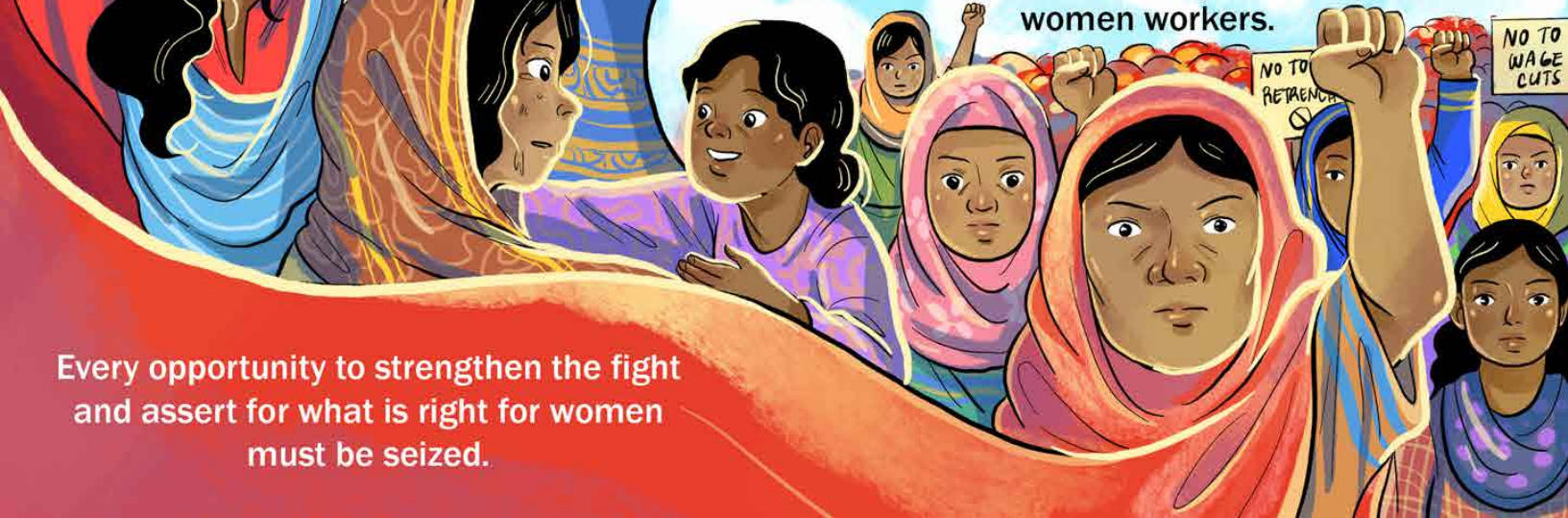
Even in the face of oppression, attacks and suppression, as well as the global health crises that exacerbated existing inequalities and burdens carried by women...



There is hope with strong solidarity among women.



Ensuring safe and healthy working conditions, especially now with the pandemic, is key to creating a conducive work environment for women workers.



Every opportunity to strengthen the fight and assert for what is right for women must be seized.

There is hope in the power of women, who will pave the way to realising women workers' rights to decent work, to speak out and to organise.



The fight for women's human rights and development justice has been long, and it is time women workers claim what is rightfully theirs.

This feminist COVID-19 Storybook is produced based on the stories from APWLD partners, members and their communities, including:



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