

Research Report

COMMITTEE : International Labour Organisation

ISSUE : *How to mitigate labor exploitation within the textile industry and reduce the negative impacts of fast fashion?*

CHAIRS : Morgan DAWSON & Cléa LASSAGNE

How to mitigate labor exploitation within the textile industry and reduce the negative impacts of fast fashion?

KEY WORDS

Labour exploitation: An employer taking unfair advantage of an employee. Labour exploitation can appear in different forms such as unjust pay, excessive work hours, physical and verbal abuse, and unsafe working conditions, for example. Labour exploitation mainly occurs when companies wish to increase their profit margins and therefore cut down on costs which would guarantee their employees' well being. As a result, some employees might find themselves working in inhumane conditions but with seemingly no alternative.

Fast fashion: The frequent introduction of new “fashion trends” and clothes on the market by textile corporations. Corporations that use the fast fashion business model aim to get customers to buy new clothes at a much faster rate than they usually would.

Textile industry: The textile industry refers to the production of woven, printed or knitted patterns, used for clothes or other objects that use such materials. Other terms such as “garment industry”, “clothing industry”, or “fashion industry” refer solely to the production of clothes but are included under the term “textile industry”.

Living wage: A wage that permits a person to afford all that is necessary for their well being (ex: healthcare, education, food, housing, etc.) and be able to participate in social and cultural life. The living wage varies from country to country and can also vary within the same country, most commonly when comparing urban and rural areas.

Forced labour: an extreme result of labour exploitation. Forced labour consists of all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of a penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily. According to The United Nations' definition of forced labour, the following categories are not considered forced labour : work for the military under the context of mandatory military service; work required during an emergency such as pandemic, war, natural disaster; work that is part of obligatory civic duties of a country, etc. Forced labour has been banned by the UN since 1957.

OVERVIEW

Note from chairs: Fast fashion has many negative impacts (increasing labour exploitation, damaging the environment, etc). However, this committee being the International Labour Organisation (ILO), we will only focus on the negative impacts in relation to labour. Other negative impacts like those related to the environment will not be treated in this committee.

The immensity and rapid growth rate of the textile industry means that it requires a vast workforce. Large textile corporations generally attempt to maximise profits, often to the detriment of the aforementioned workforce. A main way companies raise their profit margin is by seeking out cheaper labour in developing nations (**Fig.1**).

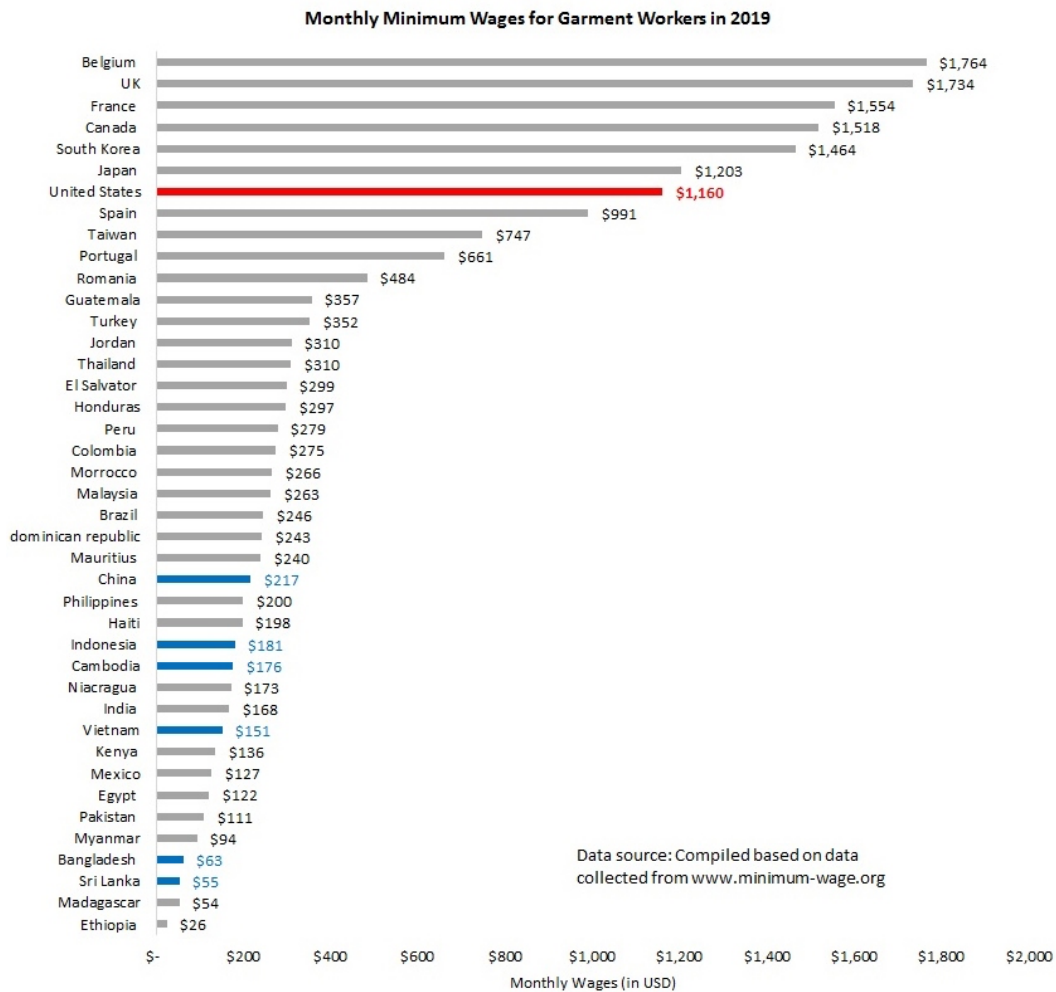


Fig.1 : Average monthly minimum wage for garment factory workers in different countries (2019). [Source](#)

The fact that labour is cheaper in developing countries compared to developed ones can partly be explained by lower living costs and a lesser skilled workforce, but another major factor contributing to their lower cost is worker exploitation. In many instances, labour laws are lacking or not sufficiently upheld, allowing companies to exploit their workers by not paying them fair wages; wages often being lower than the living wage (**Fig.2**). Workers are not paid enough to be able to afford necessary expenses, and if we take into account the fact that a worker needs to financially support family members as well, they are paid on average 2 to 5 times less than the living wage.

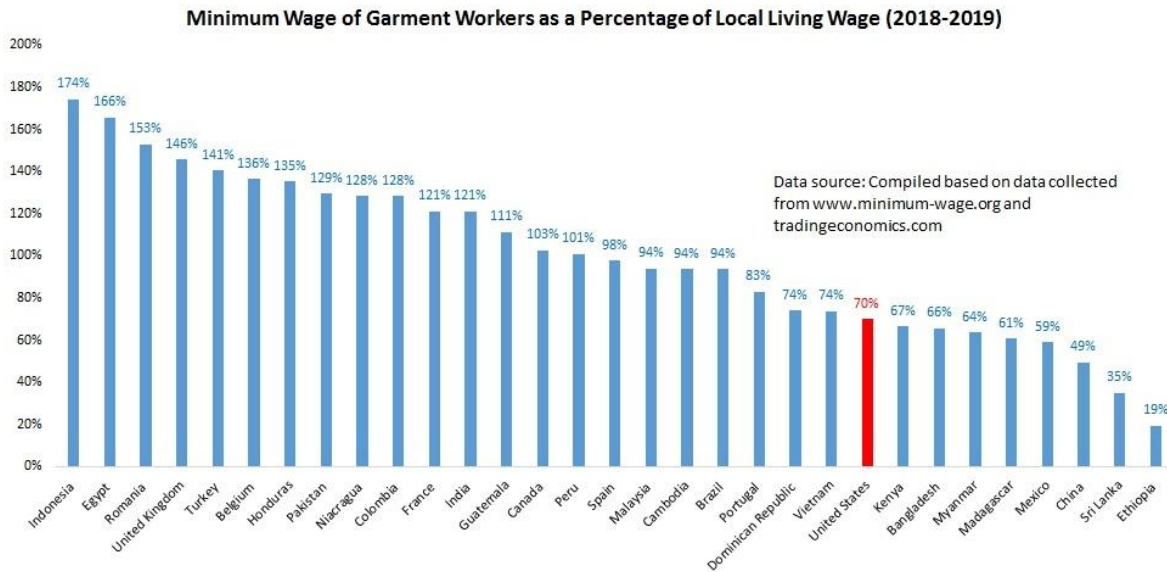


Fig.2 : Average pay of workers in the garment industry as a percentage of the country's living wage. [Source](#)

To further increase profit margins, some companies will cut back spending on workers and factories, creating unsafe working environments. Workers lack many amenities (ex: breakrooms, bathrooms, etc.) and benefits such as health insurance and paid vacation or sick leave.

Factory conditions regularly do not meet safety standards, exposing workers to hazardous chemicals which are significantly more dangerous because of poor ventilation and high temperatures. Furthermore, many textile factories lack basic amenities such as break rooms or lavatories, making work conditions even worse.

The treatment of workers in the textile industry is often substandard. A study conducted in 2007 by the ILO estimates that 22% of the global workforce works more than 48 hours per week, with most of these workers residing in developing nations. Many studies show that working such long hours leads to negative effects on the worker’s mental state and wellbeing, whilst accidents and injuries are more likely to occur in the workplace due to tiredness. Workers are often subject to verbal and physical abuse; to increase production rates, employees are harassed and assaulted as means to push them to work harder. Members of protected groups, particularly women and children, are on numerous occasions victims of harsher treatment due to their vulnerable position. Women in developing nations are often less mobile and become dependent on the work offered to them; their limited choices of work leads companies to further exploit them. Children lay within the same circumstances but have the added vulnerability of being young and more exploitable by factories.

Fast fashion heavily amplifies the injustices faced by workers within the fashion industry: the push by companies to produce more clothes at low prices further increases the exploitation of workers and has strong negative impacts. With heightened production and more deadlines, employees are forced to work longer and harder days. Fast fashion exacerbates an already unjust and hostile industry and directly impacts the factory workers in developing nations. But trying to reduce costs by exploiting the workforce can actually have the opposite effect: workers being pushed to such extents makes them less able to work at the desired levels

and loses profit for companies due to low productivity rates. Companies that favour productivity over the well being of their employees often result in a loss of profits because the workers cannot live up to their demands.

RELEVANT UN TREATIES AND EVENTS

UN treaties

Convention concerning Forced or Compulsory Labour - 1930

Adopted by the ILO on the 10th of June 1930, this convention marks a five year transitional period of terminating the use of forced labour. Its main object is to suppress the use of forced labour in all its forms, irrespective of the nature of the work or the sector of activity in which it may be performed. As of 2021, the Convention has been ratified by 179 of the 187 ILO members.

Abolition of Forced Labour Convention - 1957

Adopted on the 25th of June 1957 by the General Conference of the ILO, this convention prohibits any and all use of forced labour whilst simultaneously outlining the duties countries must fulfill in regards to stopping it.

Events

The Rana Plaza disaster - 24 april 2013

This disaster saw the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which housed five garment factories, killed at least 1,132 people and injured more than 2,500.

The collapse was due to the building not meeting standards required by construction legislation. This disaster is evidence of the poor and dangerous working conditions that workers are forced to endure and highlights the severity of labour exploitation in the textile industry. **(Fig. 3)**



Fig. 3: Picture of the Rana Plaza in the aftermath of the building collapse. [Source](#)

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Labour laws

Countries along with the UN have passed many laws and conventions prohibiting the use of forced labour and limiting the exploitation of workers. Nevertheless, employers within the textile industry continue to exploit their employees, either by operating in countries that have few or no labour laws prohibiting such practices, or by ignoring the laws altogether because the consequences aren't grave enough to deter them. To remedy these problems, new laws need to be put in place or existing laws need to be applied more vigorously so the consequences

outweigh the profits the companies make from exploiting their workers. To effectuate such change, countries need to be encouraged and/or pressured into doing so by other countries, organisations of the UN, independent organisations, and workers unions.

Sustainable clothing

The demand for clothes and the popular trend of fast fashion creates high production demands in the textile industry. This high production demand increases the needed labour and leads companies to exploit their workers. A way to mend this phenomenon is to lower the demand. The production and promotion of sustainable clothing to the general public would change the current mindset of constantly buying new clothes and push them away from fast fashion. Sustainable clothing exists in multiple forms : making clothing that lasts longer, or simply using the current available clothes for longer periods of time.

Collaboration of entities and workers

Overall labour exploitation is not beneficial to anyone: workers have a poor quality of life, and companies are less productive and therefore less profitable. Promoting communication and cooperation between governments, companies and workers can create mutually beneficial solutions and improve the textile industry as a whole. Finding methods that can improve conditions on both sides of the spectrum means that all different sides will be enticed to take action. This can be accomplished by bringing together different entities into an open dialogue, something many non profit organizations such as the *Better Work* programme seek to do.

In situations where companies are not willing to deviate from their course of action, other solutions of collaboration are possible, such as unionisation. Unionisation brings together workers and gives them the power to create change within the industry. Unionisation can be made possible and encouraged by the government of an organisation but also by independent organisations aiding workers in the creation of such.

The *Better Work* programme

The *Better Work* programme was launched in August 2006 and is partnered with the ILO and the IFC (International Finance Corporation). They work to bring diverse groups together: governments, global brands, factory owners, unions and workers to improve working conditions in the garment industry by improving labour laws, advocating for those who are being exploited, and more. They currently operate in 12 developing nations, helping 1 700 factories and 2,4 million workers. The programme is a great example of how the textile industry can be improved and utilized to fight poverty and social injustice.

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