



## Working conditions in the global fashion industry

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Across the world, accounts of excessive working hours, forced overtime, lack of job security, poverty wages, trade union rights denied, poor health, exhaustion, sexual harassment and mental stress are repeated over and over again. The reality of life in a garment factory, particularly in workplaces further down the supply chain, is a far cry from the workers' rights stipulated by law or the ethical commitments proclaimed by the big brands and retailers.

### Working hours

Long working hours and forced overtime are a major concern among garment workers. Factory managers typically push employees to work between 10 and 12 hours, sometimes 16 to 18 hours a day. When order deadlines loom, working hours get longer. A seven-day working week is becoming the norm during the peak season, particularly in China, despite limits placed by the law: Chinese workers quoted in *Play Fair at the Olympics*<sup>1</sup> reported in 2004 that they were frequently made to work a seven-day week in peak season. In one factory, they had worked 120 hours' overtime in October 2003 – three times in excess of Chinese law. "We have endless overtime in the peak season and we sit working non-stop for 13 to 14 hours a day. It's like this every day – we sew and sew without a break till our arms feel sore and stiff", said one worker.

Phan, a 22-year-old machinist in a Thai garment factory, gives this account of life at her factory: "We work from 8 am till noon, then have our lunch break. After lunch we work from 1 to 5 pm. We do overtime every day, from 5.30 pm. During the peak season, we work until 2 or 3 am. Although exhausted, we have no choice. We cannot refuse overtime: our basic wage is too low. If we want to rest, our employer forces us to keep working". Krishanti, also a garment worker in Thailand, adds: "Sometimes we have to work a day shift and a night shift. It upsets the normal body functioning ... I work like a machine, not a human being."

Overtime is usually compulsory. Workers are mostly informed at the last minute that they are expected to work extra hours. In many instances, workers report being threatened with dismissal and subjected to penalties as well as verbal abuse if they cannot work the additional hours. The same *Play Fair at the Olympics* report tells how

<sup>1</sup> Quotes and examples on this page are from *Play Fair at the Olympics – respect workers' rights in the sportswear industry*, Clean Clothes Campaign, Global Unions and Oxfam International, 2004, pages 18 and 19. The factories referred to were not named at the time of publication – in order to protect workers. Labour Behind the Label and other campaigners, however, did bring these abuses of workers' rights to the attention of the companies concerned.

a Bulgarian factory which supplies European brands imposes fines on those who do not work the overtime required; how Chinese workers were fined RMB 30 (US\$ 3.60) for refusing to work overtime; and how workers from three other Chinese factories were prevented from resigning during peak production periods by having several weeks' wages withheld by management. Often, workers are not paid the overtime rate stipulated by law.

Long and irregular working hours make it difficult for women to meet the multiple demands made on their time. The combined pressures of factory work and responsibilities at home often lead to stress-related illnesses, including depression, headaches, ulcers, high blood pressure and fatigue.

The push for more flexible working hours and the increase in informal working arrangements are further exacerbating the problem of excessively long working hours<sup>2</sup>.

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## **Health and safety**

Many of the most pressing health issues for garment workers stem from the endless hours they spend working. Poor ergonomics - how well a job task fits a worker's body - combined with long hours and unrelenting pressure to meet production quotas lead to eye strain, fatigue and debilitating overuse injuries that often go undiagnosed and untreated. Rather than adapting tools and tasks to prevent injuries, bosses routinely ignore complaints of pain and discomfort, and fire workers who can no longer keep up with production.

Workers may also be fired for taking time off to get medical care or to recover from an injury or illness. In Bangladesh, a worker interviewed in 2003 was ill at work for two months before she missed a day to go to the doctor. Her manager then deducted two day's pay, and she lost her full attendance bonus. On return she was told to work an extra eight hours unpaid to catch up with her target. In total, being unwell cost her 11 days' wages<sup>3</sup>.

In many factories, workers are not given clean water to drink nor are they allowed to use the toilet when they need to. These restrictions are especially harmful to women, who are more vulnerable to bladder infections if they do not drink enough water. Women also need regular access to clean toilets with soap and water during menstruation, but these needs are often ignored. All over the world, there are endless examples of factories only opening toilets at certain times during the day; of having too few toilets; of making it compulsory to get a pass to go to the toilets and not having enough passes for the number of workers; of not allowing visits to the toilets at the end of the working day; of recording how often the women go to the toilets and how long they stay, and so on. Indonesian workers reported having to wear dark clothing while menstruating because they knew that during the long working hours and with limited access to toilets, blood would leak through their clothes.

<sup>2</sup> Yet there are some positive experiments to report: some companies, among them Marks and Spencer's, Debenhams, H&M, New Look and Pentland have been working with suppliers to reduce working hours through improving productivity.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Cost for Women Workers of Precarious Employment in Bangladesh, A. Barkat, S.N. Ahmed, A.K.M Maksud and M.A Ali. Human Development Research Centre for Oxfam GB, 2003.

The reproductive health of both men and women workers, and their children, may be harmed by exposure to toxic chemicals, heat, noise, overwork and exhaustion. In factories where pregnant workers are allowed to keep their jobs, they may still be required to work in an unsafe environment, although they are often pressured to quit so the employer does not have to pay for maternity leave and benefits required by law.

In Bangladesh, some 200 workers have died and many more have been injured in garment factory fires between June 2004 and June 2006. Most died in stampedes as workers trapped in factories panicked and rushed to the only exit. Many factories have no emergency exits.

Yet in response to the pressure brought by international campaigners, big brands and retailers have begun to address the issue of health and safety. Most of the time, however, the improvements carried out have been the financial responsibility of suppliers. → [factsheet 13](#)

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## Pregnancy: whose choice?

In some garment factories, women applying for work are asked if they are married, going out with men, planning to have children, and using birth control. Some employers will only hire unmarried women with no children and some make each woman sign an agreement not to get pregnant as long as she works at the factory. Compulsory tests at the time of recruiting are common - women who are pregnant or refuse the test are not hired.

Workers who become pregnant may try to hide their condition as long as possible, resulting in poor anti-natal care and potential exposure to work hazards that can cause birth defects, premature birth, low-weight babies and other problems. In a Polish factory surveyed by partners of the Clean Clothes Campaign, pregnant workers hid their pregnancy up to two weeks before delivery. This means they were unable to access benefits to which they are legally entitled but they felt that at least that way they minimised the risk of dismissal<sup>4</sup>.

In 2004, all pregnant garment workers in a factory in Swaziland were ordered to write a resignation letter so the factory would not have to meet the legal requirements of maternity leave<sup>5</sup>. In China, pregnant footwear factory workers have been fired for the same reason. Reported harassment of pregnant workers includes verbal abuse, higher production quotas, longer work hours and more difficult tasks, such as standing instead of sitting or transfer to a hotter work area. Philippino trade unions report that pregnant workers were forced to work overtime, including at night, in an export processing zone of Cavite, while a worker in another garment factory had a miscarriage inside a company comfort room after being forbidden to take leave. According to the report, garment factory bosses were also known to prevent workers from taking maternity leave or pay if they wanted to return to work after the baby's birth<sup>6</sup>. The ICFTU reports

<sup>4</sup> *Workers' voices: The Situation of women in the Eastern European and Turkish garment industries*, Clean Clothes Campaign (2005).

<sup>5</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign Newsletter 21, May 2006.

<sup>6</sup> *Asserting workers' rights in Philippines sweatshops*, KMP (Trade Union Congress of the Philippines), Nov 2003.

in 2003 that while they are legally entitled to three months' maternity leave, Indonesian women workers had been fired for taking it<sup>7</sup>.

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## Harassment and violence

Violence is frequently threatened or used against workers, by supervisors, employers, the police, state security forces, strike breakers and others. Workers are often harassed, beaten, and sometimes killed for organising into unions and demanding better working conditions.

Women workers are frequently subjected to humiliating searches, verbal and physical abuse, and sexual harassment in the workplace, as well as fearing assault and rape on the way home from the factory late at night.

Factory managers and supervisors often harass, humiliate and abuse workers. Elina, a garment worker in Indonesian factory PT Busana Prima Global, reports: 'There is a lot of verbal abuse. Management call us names throughout the time we are working. They call us "stupid", "lazy", "useless", "bastard's child". They say "You don't deserve any better". There is physical abuse as well. Our ears are often pulled, and managers yell directly into our ears<sup>8</sup>.'

At a factory visited by the CCC in Lesotho, women workers reported being searched (by women supervisors) every day when leaving the factory. Some women were forced to take off their clothes to show that they were not stealing anything. Workers from this factory were raped walking home from late overtime work but management still refused to provide late night transport<sup>9</sup>. Indonesian women workers report that "pretty girls in the factory are harassed by male managers. They come on to the girls, call them into their offices, whisper into their ears, touch them (...), bribe them with money and threaten them with losing their jobs if they don't have sex with them"<sup>10</sup>.

Yet women workers are continuously challenging attitudes and stereotypes and are organising in various ways to defend their rights and demand safer working conditions and an end to harassment and violence.

Union organising workers in the Katunayake export processing zone of Sri Lanka, for instance, surveyed women workers in the boarding-house community next to the zone. A common worry of the women was their safety going home late at night as rape was not uncommon in the community. Together, union and workers decided that one solution was to get a bus to take them back and forth between the factories and the boarding houses. The workers and the union got the local authorities to buy a bus to start this service. This worked very well so the union asked the factory owners to buy two more buses. The women still worked long hours, but they were at least safer than when walking up to three kilometres (one and a half mile) between home and factories.

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<sup>7</sup> [www.cleanclothes.org/ftp/East\\_and\\_South\\_East\\_Asia\\_Regional\\_Research\\_Rep.pdf](http://www.cleanclothes.org/ftp/East_and_South_East_Asia_Regional_Research_Rep.pdf) (2003) Page 35.

<sup>8</sup> Play Fair at the Olympics – respect workers' rights in the sportswear industry, 2004, page 24.

<sup>9</sup> Made in Southern Africa, Clean Clothes Campaign, 2002, page 88. Also page 92.

<sup>10</sup> Play Fair at the Olympics – respect workers' rights in the sportswear industry, 2004, page 24.

## Precarious work

Factories often do not issue workers with proper employment contracts, leaving workers no means of redress when their employers fail to respect labour laws on minimum wages, working hours, overtime pay, health benefits, etc. Many workers – especially migrants – do not feel able to ask for such contracts, and not to have a contract is becoming accepted as normal in the industry. Even where contracts are issued, employers still flout their terms and conditions. Jing, a worker in a Chinese factory, told researchers: ‘Our contract is worth nothing. The factory management never give us what is written in the contract. They talk of not working more than three hours’ overtime - I can’ t remember having a day when I worked less than three hours’ overtime<sup>11</sup>.’

Among the worst-treated in the industry are temporary workers. Often, factories hire them on a temporary contract which is then renewed continuously as a means of evading legal responsibilities like maternity leave or health insurance. This is particularly common in Indonesia. Another tactic is to hire workers from an agency, who are then employed by the agency rather than the owner of the factory. Thus, the company that owns the factory is able to avoid its obligations as an employer.

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Many of the workers interviewed during the preparation of the Play Fair at the Olympics report were not receiving legal benefits such as health insurance. At one Cambodian factory , if workers went on sick leave for three days, the employer deducted one day’s salary; if more than three days, the employer made the worker sign a form allowing the factory to deduct the worker’s incentive bonus for that month. At one Indonesian factory, a worker reported that taking sick leave incurred wage cuts and other penalties: “We are not allowed to take sick leave...If we do, we find our wages cut when we come back. I was moved from the sewing department to the cleaning department after I took sick leave. It was humiliating. If we don’t agree to such a move, we are forced to leave without any severance pay or benefits.”

## Intimidation of trade unions

In many of the factories researched by campaigners in the past few years, workers report that management make it clear that union organising is not acceptable.

Workers interviewed in preparation for Play Fair at the Olympics felt convinced that joining a union would lead to being fired. Rana, a 22-year-old garment worker in a Turkish factory, told researchers: ‘Last year while the workers of the factory next door were striking in front of their factory, our supervisor said to us “You’ll see – all of them will lose their jobs. Never make this mistake yourselves. Otherwise you will face the same consequences.”’

Cambodian workers report that employers discriminate against trade unionists: if a factory manager finds out that a job applicant has been involved in union activities, the applicant will not be employed. One Indonesian worker described what happened after

<sup>11</sup> Play Fair at the Olympics – respect workers’ rights in the sportswear industry, 2004.

a strike at her factory: ‘At first, the strike organisers were suspended. They were not allowed to come to work and received only 75% of their basic wage. Then they were all fired. We felt very scared and powerless when this happened. It was as if management was saying to us: “See, this is the consequence of your strike”.

The obstacles to forming and joining a trade union are sometimes exacerbated by governments undermining workers’ rights as a means of attracting foreign investment. Although freedom of association and collective bargaining are protected as a constitutional right in many countries, governments often allow employers to flout this right. Buyers head for countries such as China and Indonesia precisely because of their governments’ ability to prevent unions from raising labour costs.

Many of the workers interviewed nevertheless expressed the belief that trade union representation would give them the bargaining power necessary to change the unhealthy and undignified working conditions in their factories.

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## Further reading

Adapted from:

*Play Fair at the Olympics – respect workers’ rights in the sportswear industry*, Oxfam, Clean Clothes Campaign and Global Unions (2004)

<http://www.fairolympics.org/background/olympicreporteng.pdf>

*Made by Women: Gender, the Global Garment Industry and the Movement for Women Workers’ Rights*, Clean Clothes Campaign (2005)

[http://www.cleanclothes.org/ftp/made\\_by\\_women.pdf](http://www.cleanclothes.org/ftp/made_by_women.pdf)

You will find further illustrations of working conditions in the garment industry in:

*Offside! Labour rights and sportswear production in Asia*, Oxfam International (2006)

<http://www.oxfam.org.au/campaigns/labour/06report/docs/5792oxflrweb.pdf>

*Workers’ voices: The Situation of women in the Eastern European and Turkish garment industries*, Clean Clothes Campaign (2005)

[http://www.cleanclothes.org/ftp/05-workers\\_voices.pdf](http://www.cleanclothes.org/ftp/05-workers_voices.pdf)

*Behind the Brand Names: Working Conditions and Labour Rights in Export Processing Zones*, ICFTU (2004). <http://www.icftu.org/www/PDF/EPZreportE.pdf>

Trading Away Our Rights - Women working in global supply chains, Oxfam

International (2004) <http://www.maketradefair.com/en/assets/english/taor.pdf>

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