

# Human Rights Council

## Ensuring the protection of workers in the Textile Industry



<b>Forum</b>	Human Rights Council
<b>Issue:</b>	Ensuring the protection of workers in the Textile Industry
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## Introduction

The textile industry is one of the largest employers of child abuse and slavery in the world. Major clothing brands such as Levi Strauss, Columbia, Asics, Nike, Tommy Hilfiger, and many others commit crimes such as wage theft and child labour on a regular basis without any consequences. However, it is not just major brands that are the issue. On almost any clothing tag one can find countries such as Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, China, Indonesia, among others... listed as the places of origin, due to the cheap labour that international textile companies are able to find in these countries. In less economically developed countries (LEDCs) people are more likely to accept job offers below minimum wage, as many are desperate to make ends meet. Nonetheless, unfair pay is only one of the violations of human-rights that occur within the textile industry. Cases of sexual harassment, child labour and abuse, dangerous work environments, overworking, and physical abuse have all been found to be serious issues within the textile industry, which is the reason why protecting textile workers is of utmost importance.

Workers in the textile industry work between 14 to 16 hours per day, in old buildings and warehouses at high risks of collapsing. In 2013 over 1,000 textile industry workers lost their lives in the Bangladeshi Rana Plaza factory as a result of a collapse of the factory. News websites all over the world started reporting this event, and brought greater awareness to the human rights violations in the textile industry. Since then, there has become a much larger global awareness about both the environmental and the human rights implications of the textile industry. Many companies have since made progress in creating clothes in a more ethical manner, but there still remain those who ignore the human rights violations in their factories. In recent years, ethics washing has become a means for companies to manipulate their customers into buying their products. With ethics washing, companies cover up the human rights violations they are committing, similar to greenwashing. However, it poses a large threat to the future of the textile industry. Many companies continue to search for cheap labour, with the consequence of inhumane clothing manufacturing processes that ultimately affect



millions of workers. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that the workers of the textile industry are protected as much as possible.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Child Labour

The exploitative practice of using a child/children to do specific work that is meant to be done by an adult (This practice is illegal in all member states of the UN).

### Consumer

A person, company or organization that buys a product or a service from another person, company or organization, for their own use.

### Core Country

Part of World Systems Theory, it is an industrialized country that owns businesses and capital.

### Discrimination

The act of treating a person or a group of people in a worse way, specifically due to a part of their identity such as their gender, race, or sexual orientation.

### Ethics Washing

The practice of a company faking ethical consideration in order to improve how this company is seen by the general public and how much their products are bought.

### Exploitation

In this context, the mistreatment of an individual for the purpose of gaining or getting an advantage from them.

### Human Rights

The rights that all humans obtain by birth, however are not always upheld

### Human Trafficking





The criminal act of buying or selling individuals in an illegal setting.

### Labour

The act of doing practical work especially in terms of physical effort for a specific purpose.

### Manufacturing

The act of producing a large amount of a product, particularly a good, from raw materials, most commonly in a factory.

### Semi-Periphery Country

Part of World Systems Theory, it is an industrializing country that provides cheap labour to create products for core countries.

### Sweatshop

A factory where employees are forced to work for long hours in dangerous or unhealthy conditions without getting paid a fair amount for their work.

### Textile Industry

The Industry that is involved in the processing and manufacturing of clothing by means of weaving and sewing.

### Wage Theft

The act of failing to pay full wages to employees by giving employees less money than they initially agreed to or deserve for the work they are doing is determined by a contract or by the law.

## General Overview

On a global scale, the textile industry employs more than 80 million people. This includes the fabric, clothing, and footwear industries, which make up the textile industry. The scale of the textile industry is growing at a rapid pace, in fact-since 2000, 60 million more people have become employed by the industry, showing just how fast it is expanding. But with this rapid growth of the industry, come numerous problems. In order to understand the agenda at hand, ensuring protection for all workers



in the textile industry, it is important to firstly understand the issues in the textile industry, specifically the human rights violations that occur in it due to various reasons. It is crucial to recognize the conditions that many textile workers must work in;

### Working Environment

The first issue that many textile workers must face is their working environment. This issue is also the most often talked about, as it is one of the easiest to fix, but a safe working environment is however implemented only scarcely, especially in LEDCs. Working conditions that are many times not even thought about in the western world are often hard to obtain in the main textile industry. As mentioned in the introduction, the first problem with the working environment of the textile industry, that workers must deal with, is working in old and abandoned places and factories. This setting of work is most often caused by the fact that owners want to make the most money possible, leading to them choosing the cheapest places of work, like old factories. The reason for factories in such places is the idea that an abandoned factory or building is less likely to be checked for things such as forced labour, sanitation and for hygiene. This causes many problems especially as these old buildings are not meant to be worked in. Due to this, many occurrences of breaking of these buildings or collapsing of the buildings have occurred, taking many lives of textile workers. Here, one can look at the famous example of the Bangladeshi Rana Plaza factory, mentioned previously which collapsed simply because the building where the textile factory was seated in, was old. While this is only one example, many of these collapsing factories occur throughout the textile industry, however are not as famous or known due to the limited media coverage on these issues.

Collapsing factories, while a large risk to workers are not however the only issue with working conditions in the textile industry. As mentioned before, due to buildings being old, sanitary inspections and hygiene inspections are not carried out regularly, but this goes in general and not only when factories or buildings are old. Many factories do not have regular sanitary inspections, causing these environments to be unsafe for humans. As the textile industry uses several chemicals and other substances such as bleach and dyes, many textile workers are regularly exposed to and interacting with harmful substances. These substances are harmful to human health, and the long term exposure to them can be fatal, especially when they are inhaled or interacted with on a daily basis, which many workers do. Many workers however are not made aware of this by their employers. Nevertheless so many workers are exposed to these chemicals, which has caused thousands of workers to obtain illnesses such as types of cancers and immune diseases, some of



which have been fatal. The overall safety at the workplace that textile workers endure is decreasing at the same rate that the textile industry is growing. With a larger demand for clothing, more workers are needed in factories which causes overcrowding and even poorer working conditions for workers. Other notable issues with the working environment in the textile industry include interaction with sunlight and prior training for workers. Generally, workers are stuck in textile factories for the most part of their day, with little to no sunlight. This is a problem as limited exposure to sunlight has been associated with low Vitamin D levels, leading to various other health problems such as bone pain and loss, frequent illness, depression, anxiety, and other psychological disorders. Similarly, training that workers obtain with machines is minimal. Many injuries have occurred as a result of this, as when one is not properly trained with a machine, one can easily hurt themselves using it. Due to all of these aspects, the working environment of the textile industry is very poor, causing issues that should be considered when aiming to protect workers in this industry.

### Notable Human Rights Violations

Alike to working conditions, the textile industry is known for its poor respect to human rights. In the past various human rights abuses have occurred in textile factories most often directly enforced by employers. The most notable of all human rights abuses, directly linked back to the International Labour Conventions, is the number of hours that employees of the textile industry work. Hardly ever are these Conventions upheld, meaning that more than 95% of workers are in factories for more than the maximum of 10 working hours a day, which causes physical overworking in the majority of cases, where workers are so physically drained that health problems occur. Other notable human rights violations in the textile industry include forced labour, where employers force employees to work with little to no reward when it comes to income. These conditions occur due to promises that employers give to employees, but do not uphold. Forced labour is a difficult situation as individuals' families or lives are threatened if they do not complete the work asked of them. In many instances individuals' passports or means of identification are taken away so that employees can't do anything to get out of the forced labour. Children are part of this issue, as they can be forced to work as well, especially in less developed countries where laws are not upheld as strictly in terms of child labour. While these are the most prominent human rights violations, occurring in almost all textile factories in periphery and semi-periphery countries, other less common human rights abuses include sexual harassment, slavery, rape, forcing pregnant women to work, torture, and human trafficking. In these ways workers rights are exploited in the textile industry.



## The Economy of the Textile Industry

While the economy is not a condition that workers of the textile industry must deal with like the other sections above, it is the driving force behind all human rights violations and the working environment of the textile industry. It may not come as a surprise that companies and employers want to maximize profits as much as possible. However, this also means that they want the cheapest labour possible, causing companies to primarily manufacture textile and clothing in LEDCs where production is cheaper, as workers are paid very little. Consumers around the world look to buy cheap clothing, but this comes at the price of textile workers who are paid as little as 1 cent for an hour's worth of work. Not to mention that if they do not produce the number of clothing items or textile required of them per day, payment is deducted from their wages. In general, almost all issues within the textile industry can be traced back to the modern day global economy. Therefore, considering the economy is beneficial when aiming to protect textile workers.

## Major Parties Involved

### United States of America

The United States was the first country in the world to implement the concept of “fast fashion” in its textile industry, and has since then become not only a mass exporter of goods used to make textile (cotton, wool, fabrics, etc.), but the world's largest importer of clothes. It is estimated that the USA imports the majority of its textile products from China, a country known for its mass production. When looked at from the lens of the protection for workers in the textile industry, the United States has implemented various laws nationally to combat as much forced labour and wage theft as possible, however, there are still locations, specifically rural areas where these issues are occurring unnoticed. The main issue with the approach that the United States takes to its textile industry is that it outsources all manufacturing of clothing to other countries where production is cheaper, such as China and India, as it is a core country (please see definition in the Key Terms). The vast majority of clothing that exists in the United States is not produced domestically, a pertinent issue as the United States is a host to millions of textile companies and clothing brands, who all choose to manufacture their goods outside of the USA. The United States is the largest contributor to human rights violations in the textile industry, due to its exploitation of developing countries for the purpose of obtaining textile goods from them, which has many negative consequences.



## China

Unlike the United States, China is a semi-periphery country, meaning that it mass produced products for more developed countries such as those in Europe and the United States. China is the world's largest exporter and manufacturer of textile goods in the world, accounting for over 50% of global textile and clothing production. However, this also means that China is one of the most susceptible countries to human rights violations in the industry, especially as it is still a developing nation, with millions of people working in the textile industry. Thousands of factories, especially in the Xinjiang region of China have been found to exploit their workers through forced labour and even slavery. Chinese supply chains have been accused of tens of human rights violations, across the country. The issue is not only forced labour and slavery, other violations that are commonly committed include forced separation, forced sterilization of women, sexual harassment, and torture for those who do not perform up to standards. The main reason for this, is the fact that China remains one of the few countries who has little to no laws or policies in the area of employee and worker rights, causing the situation that is present there today. For this reason there are no regular checks or precautions conducted within companies to ensure that the few human rights obligations are being followed, essentially allowing employers to do whatever it is they wish with their employees.

## India

Similarly to China, India is a semi-periphery country, meaning that it produces textiles for the developed countries across Europe and the United States. India is the 2nd largest exporter of textile goods and clothes in the world after China, primarily producing clothing for Levi's, Rieter, Benetton, Zara, and Marks & Spencers. The textile sector after the agricultural sector is the second largest employing sector in India of both trained and untrained employees. In India, the textile industry provides jobs to more than 35 million people. Such a large industry means that there is a high risk for human rights violations, however unlike China, India has many laws and organizations monitoring human rights. India has many solutions in place such as the Ministry of Textile and Industry, which monitors factories and production to ensure that products are of good quality and that employees are being handled fairly in the textile industry. Despite this, there are still many violations occurring in India, mainly as laws and policies are not upheld, and due to corruption that takes place in some instances. Specifically women are targets to many human rights violations such as abuse in the workplace, due to the gender inequality that takes place in the industry in India.





Unfortunately, many other violations also occur such as forced labour, wage theft, and child abuse, specifically in the factories of major western fashion brands.

## France

France is home to the largest number of luxury brands in the world, meaning that the fashion industry is a major part of the nation's economy. France is notorious for its fashion weeks and fashion shows, with Paris as the Fashion Capital of the whole world. Major brands such as Guess, Channel, Gucci, etc. have headquarters in France, making France a core country. While France is home to thousands of fashion companies, it does not directly produce any textile or clothes, outside of the few raw materials that it exports that are used to make fabric. This means that like the USA, it relies on semi-periphery countries for clothing, which France imports. The luxury brands who sit in France are those who have inhumane labour practices in their companies in countries like China and India. This makes France one of the major contributors to human rights violations in the textile industry, despite the nation not directly being involved in these violations. France itself sets a global example for workers, ensuring workers have many rights and additional benefits such as health insurance, pension, and many more. France is doing well in ensuring the rights of its workers, however on a global scale, is the largest indirect contributor to human right violations in the textile industry.

## OHCHR (United Nations Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights)

While the OHCHR is not directly involved in the textile industry, like the other nations listed above, it is still highly relevant to the agenda at hand. This organization works directly in line with human rights, and is the HCR's Secretariat/executive hand, meaning that all resolutions passed on the topic of human rights are integrated into this organization. For example, the OHCHR works with governments to ensure that they are fulfilling their human rights obligations, and acts as a means of doing research, education, and publicity about human rights violations internationally. The OHCHR focuses specifically on peoples who are at risk or vulnerable to human rights violations in their jobs, place of habitat, financial situation, etc. Therefore, they are a key organization in the field of human rights, and should be considered in solutions to the agenda.

## Bangladesh

Since the Independence of Bangladesh, the nation has largely grown its textile industry, to the extent that the industry now makes up the majority of the nation's economy. Similarly to India, and China, Bangladesh is known for its role in the global economy as a semi-periphery country,



producing more than 15% of the world's textile and garments. Being such an influential country in the textile industry, means that Bangladesh has many textile factories. Despite the development of national regulations and international conventions in the nation, many workers lose their lives and health at textile factories. Especially women, are at risk, as they are regularly exposed to hazardous chemicals causing health issues. The majority of issues stated in the General Overview are applicable to the textile industry in Bangladesh, long working hours, unsafe conditions, sexual abuse, and many others. Unfortunately, despite Bangladesh's growth in the textile industry over the past 50 years, there has not been much done to protect textile workers.

## Timeline of Key Events

The timeline below covers some of the most important technological advancements, and events which may be of interest, relevant to the issue at hand.

Date	Description of event
1831	George Opdyke opens the first small-scale clothing manufacture
1920s	Consumer culture is introduced into western society
1948	The UN establishes the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights"
1960s	Increased immigration to the USA reintroduces sweatshops to the USA
1970s	Many companies grow international causing a larger demand for branded clothing
1979	The first international clothing company is opened, Hennes
1990	The term "Fast Fashion" is first used by ZARA
1990s	Sweatshops are adopted internationally as companies move towards cheap labour
2013	1,000 workers lose their lives in a collapse of a clothing factory in Bangladesh
2010s	Global awareness of human rights violations in the the textile industry grows
2015	Popularity of ethically made clothing rises globally
2017	First account of "ethics washing" in the textile industry
2019 - 2021	Large rise in boycotting of non-ethical clothing brands

## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events



There have not been any resolutions, treaties or UN involvement created for the protection of textile workers specifically. There have however been resolutions and UN reports written on other topics containing sub topics of the textile industry, such as those seen below:

- Uruguay Round Agreement
- Report on Women's employment in the textile manufacturing sectors of Bangladesh and Morocco (UNRISD/2001/0006)
- ECOSOC Resolution 185 in 2001 (E/CN.4/2001/NGO/185)
- Report on the Implications for developing countries of recent developments in international trade in textiles by the UNCTAD secretariat (TD/B/C.2/204)
- Declaration on the Critical Economic Situation in Africa, 3 December 1984 (A/RES/39/29)

## Previous Attempts to solve the Issue

So far the UN has not taken any specific action on the agenda at hand, ensuring that workers in the textile industry are protected. The UN has however worked with the WHO to ensure safety of health workers. The WHO has taken many actions to ensure this by developing standards for prevention of risks that may occur in the health sector, advocating for strengthening health and safety of health workers, and supporting those countries who do not ensure full protection for their health workers. While this is a different issue than the one discussed in this agenda, it is worth noting, as the WHO did significantly improve protection of the workers, so similar action could be taken for this agenda as well. Furthermore, many individual companies have started moving towards ethical labour practices in their factories. However, this is only individual companies attempting to solve the problem, so these attempts should be implemented on a global scale, in all companies to combat the issue of human rights violations in the textile industry.

As mentioned above, certain nations have written policies and laws regarding the issue, ensuring that workers are treated fairly and have specific benefits. For example, all members of the European Union have implemented the law that employers must guarantee their workers health insurance in order to protect them from any potential health concerns they may have. There have also been steps made on an international level to ensure that there is a minimum wage in each



country, that wages may not go below a set amount. In Europe, nations have ensured that women are fairly paid for their jobs and that they have maternity leave. While these steps do not directly correlate with the textile industry, they are steps that should be taken on an international level to ensure that workers are protected. Seeing as there have been no solutions created to ensure that workers in the textile industry are protected, there have also been no solutions that have failed. It is important to propose a solution that directly addresses the issue at hand to maximize the protection that we are able to provide to textile workers worldwide.

## Possible Solutions

The largest issues within the textile industry are the human rights violations seen within the industry, specifically wage theft, long working hours, child labour, and unsafe work conditions. The UN and its member nations should aim to address each of these issues, which can be achieved in a variety of ways. Some member nations already have legislation and regulations in place to protect workers in the textile industry, which could be adopted at an international level. Generally, all regulations that can improve the quality of work for employees in the fashion and textile industries could help with the issue at hand. It is however advisable to take specific measures towards eliminating human rights violations in this industry, mentioned below, that can be implemented to achieve this goal. These will be specifically in regards to what nations, individuals, and companies should be accountable to do in order to protect textile industry workers.

A variety of regulations should be implemented in order to protect employees of the textile industry, specifically on an international level, which individual countries can adopt. An example of this would be regulations that put more proactive measures to enforce labour laws in place. A lot of the forced and child labour that occurs within the textile industry is due to insufficient action on the labour laws that are existent. Having countries enforce these laws through various ways such as having regular spontaneous checks within factories and companies for any human rights violations would be a method to protect textile industry workers. Another solution could be implementing a worldwide tracking system for clothing, so that customers and governments know exactly which factory a piece of clothes is manufactured in. Other international solutions could be writing stricter international labour laws. The main thing to be reminded of is that closing sweatshops is not a solution to protecting workers in the textile industry, as millions of workers depend on income from



sweatshops for themselves and their families. A method of ensuring that this does not happen could be to create a UN organization such as the UNHCR dealing with human rights violations specific to the textile industry, and ensuring that regulations with regards to treating workers would be followed.

While international solutions are important, holding companies accountable for their actions and manufacturing processes is essential to protect workers in the textile industry. Firstly, ensuring that all factories and companies have strict policies around their employees hygiene and safety is crucial in ensuring that workers in the textile industry are protected. Punishing textile companies with severe consequences for any forced labour or human rights violations, could help in ensuring that employees are protected, specifically in less developed nations. Implementing programs such as mandatory training sessions for employees within factories could ensure a safer working environment for them, benefiting their protection. Finally, holding companies responsible for promised wages of their employees, in any means possible.

Individual action is required as well to ensure that companies and countries are sticking to regulations. Spreading awareness about the social issues within the textile industry is one way to spark action within individuals, to get citizens to make a change, because it is ultimately up to the citizens to create lasting change, as they are the main consumers of the textile industry. Raising awareness about human rights violations would aid in protecting workers. Encouraging citizens to buy fair trade products, or shop at thrift stores, would reduce the need for inhumanely produced clothing. Furthermore, encouraging citizens to shop locally, at certified child-labour free brands would be beneficial as well. In general, any steps that citizens can take to minimize their textile consumption, by reselling, renting, or recycling clothing can help. Overall, any solution that protects workers in the textile industry is viable for this agenda.

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## Appendix or Appendices

Please see the bold sources in the bibliography above for useful and relevant information on the agenda at hand.

