



WAGES AND GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE

Exploring the connections between
economic exploitation and violence
against women workers

October 2020

FASHION
CHECKER 

Clean
Clothes
Campaign 

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This is a Clean Clothes Campaign report, based on research done by the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) and FEMNET in 2019 as well as in the context of the Clean Clothes Campaign's FashionChecker in 2019 and 2020.

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This publication was produced with the financial support of the European Union. Its contents are the sole responsibility of Clean Clothes Campaign and do not necessarily reflect the views of the European Union.

„Women workers are silenced, through violence or threats. In the factories we are subjected to sexual harassment by superiors and if we resist, we are threatened or dismissed. That's why only few dare to talk about their experiences.“

- Labour rights activist Kalpona Akter | BCWS (Bangladesh)

All over the world, women experience violence at work, regardless of their origin, income and the industry in which they work. However, gender-specific violence and harassment are most common in those industries where many women work in poorly paid positions, where they have little decision-making authority and therefore commonly find themselves in dependency relations with mostly male superiors. The textile industry, due to the system of its supply chains, is one of these industries that structurally fosters violence and harassment against women workers. The majority of the workforce is female and includes many young women and migrant workers. Moreover, wages are extremely low, production pressure is high and women workers often have no lobby - neither as workers nor as women. Very few women workers are unionised and the majority of unions that exist are led by men, leaving women workers under-represented even in those organizations that are meant to represent their interests.

Gender-based violence is cause and consequence of economic exploitation

What further aggravates an already problematic situation is a persistent power imbalance in the factories. Women often work under precarious conditions, without contracts or being paid piece rates. Short-term contracts are not renewed when women workers cause "inconveniences", for example because they insist on their labour rights or become pregnant. These inherent dependencies mean that women workers hardly ever talk about their experiences of violence.

If it is your boss who touches you; if you have to fear being fired if you resist; if you depend on the low wages for the survival of your children - then you do not complain easily when you are confronted with violence at work.

The number of unreported cases of violence and harassment in factories is estimated to be very high, such that even where legislation is in place, the willingness of companies, governments and the public in the producing countries to address the problem remains low.

In order to break the aforementioned taboo, repeated efforts have been made by women's and labour rights organisations in recent years to provide better data and exact information on the topic. In 2020, the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) and FEMNET published the results of a comprehensive study¹ that was conducted in Bangladeshi factories highlighting the alarming extent of harassment and violence. Herein around 75% of the more than 600 interviewed workers (642 in total, 484 female, 158 male) reported that they regularly experience gender-based violence (GBV) in the factories, and around 75% of these regularly become victims of sexual harassment. The victims have no one to turn to and the cases are hardly ever dealt with. The study also confirms earlier findings that hardly any woman worker would talk to external investigators sent by the employer about sexual assaults in the workplace, which in turn, is one of the central factors preventing the issue from showing up in factory audits.

How buying practices from brands and retailers contribute to violence

Another main reason for violence in textile factories is the pressure caused by fast fashion and exploitative purchasing practices of the buying fashion companies; 64% of the female workers interviewed report that they are under enormous production pressure, and a third have been threatened or beaten by superiors due to production pressure.

Supervisors and management often threaten to dismiss or withhold bonuses if certain targets are not met. This confirms the results of previous studies², which show that the purchasing practices of international brand companies directly contribute to violence and harassment in textile factories: On the one hand, factories pass on the enormous time pressure to deliver goods within very short deadlines down the hierarchy to supervisors, line chiefs and finally the workers who are more likely to

¹ ["Stop the Violence - Break the Silence. Gender-based violence in the garment sector of Bangladesh: A study on cases, causes and cures"](#)

² e.g. Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) (2018a), (2018b); Global Labor Justice and Asia Floor Wage Alliance (GLJ, AFWA) (2019)

experience violence from supervisors the higher the production pressure³. On the other hand, the price pressure from the purchasing companies which lowers wages levels systematically and increases the structural economic dependence of women workers, which encourages other forms of violence and makes it difficult for those affected to defend themselves against violent situations or to leave them.

“The women in Bangladesh do not talk about violence and harassment, these are taboo subjects. That is why there are so many undocumented cases of violent attacks - even in the workplace. Insults and sexual assaults are so common in the factories that often neither the workers nor the management see this as a problem”.

- Labour rights activist Kalpona Akter | BCWS (Bangladesh)

Exploitation is economic violence

While the discussion on gender-based violence usually centres around verbal or physical abuse, economic exploitation is one of the most frequent and most structural forms of violence against women workers in the garment industry. Women receive less pay for work of equal value, are more often overworked and underpaid, and are more likely to do unpaid work that lies outside of contractual agreements. The low wages of female workers in turn mean that women struggle with poverty-related gender-specific consequences. Many women are not only forced to work overtime, many also need to do other paid work (including working in the garment sector from home) in order to make ends meet. In many households, the woman is the sole earner, and yet because she is a woman, she is also expected to do household and care work in addition to paid work, bringing about a double burden.

³ Anner, Mark (2019): Predatory purchasing practices in global apparel supply chains and the employment relations squeeze in the Indian garment export industry. *International Labour Review*, Vol. 158, No. 4.

Economic abuse thus leads to a deepening of poverty, constrains women's educational attainment, and fundamentally inhibits their own development opportunities and those of their children. Poverty wages place women in such drastic economic dependence that in many cases they are forced to endure other forms of exploitation and violence for both themselves and their children, including the risk of sexual exploitation as well as of child labour and trafficking. Economic exploitation leads to malnutrition, overwork and exhaustion which have adverse effects on the health of women (including maternal mortality) and their children. Factories as well as buying fashion brands should proactively address violence and harassment in their factories - also to comply with new requirements, e.g. ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment⁴. This means a policy must be in place that clearly condemns violence and harassment, protects victims and encourages women workers to report cases. Therein, it must be clear that the causes of violence and harassment in textile factories are of a structural nature and that effective countermeasures must therefore also aim to make structural changes. This has once again become clear in the context of the current crisis.

Gender and Covid-19: Women workers pay the price for the crisis

The textile industry has suffered tremendous losses as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. The cancellation of orders and the withholding of outstanding payments by purchasing companies has pushed factories to their financial limits. The pressure and financial burden is in turn being passed on directly to the workers: wages are not paid and many workers are dismissed⁵. Since social security systems are weak or non-existent in most garment-producing countries, many workers are existentially threatened.

Public institutions⁶ as well as civil society organisations and trade unions - in the production countries as well as internationally⁷ - report that the effects of the

⁴https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_INSTRUMENT_ID,P12100_LANG_CODE:3999810,en

⁵ Clean Clothes Campaign (2020): UN(DER)PAID IN THE PANDEMIC - An estimate of what the garment industry owes its workers:

https://www.publiceye.ch/fileadmin/doc/Mode/2020_CCC_Underpaid_in_the_pandemic_Report.pdf

⁶ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) (2015a): Report on Violence Against Women (VAW) Survey 2015, URL: <https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/-/media/files/un%20women/vaw/vaw%20survey/bangladesh%20vaw%20survey%202015.pdf?vs=2125>

⁷ Patty Alleman, Laura Rumble, UNICEF, 27.03.2020: [Gender equality during COVID-19](#), UN Women, 03.2020: The COVID-19 Outbreak and Gender: [Key Advocacy Points from Asia and the Pacific](#),

pandemic have hit women particularly hard. On the one hand, there are numerous indications for a significant increase in incidences of domestic violence, pertaining especially sexual violence in quarantine and other crisis situations, and particularly in families suffering from financial insecurity. On the other hand, women are also playing vital roles in responses to the pandemic - as health workers, community workers and caregivers – whereby they face an increased health risk.

Once again, a catastrophe has rendered tangible the fragile state of the garment industry but at the same time, the current crisis also harbours an opportunity. It has long been time for a transformation of the sector`s business model, for brands and retailers to change their purchasing practices, for legal frameworks to be put in place that make human rights due diligence mandatory and a need for violence in garment factories to be addressed structurally.

CARE/IRC (2020): Global Rapid Gender Analysis for COVID-19, URL:
<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/4676/globalrgacovidrdm33120final.pdf>

Recommendations

Brands and retailers

Work towards elimination of gender-based violence and harassment in factories

- Adopt a workplace policy on GBV that includes the formation of Anti-Harassment Committees with external experts and support your suppliers in implementing it
- Gender-sensitive due diligence: Analyze risk factors for GBV and take appropriate action to mitigate these risks (including risk factors related to purchasing practices and factory-level supervisory and employment practices)
- Provide information and training on a) the topic of GBV and the forms it takes and on b) the identified hazards and risks of GBV as well as the associated prevention and protection measures both to workers and management (e.g. prohibition of pregnancy tests, short-term contracts for pregnant women and lower pay for migrant women, provide childcare required by law with adequately qualified staff)
- Provide incentives that promote reporting by workers without fear of retaliation
- Introduce safe grievance mechanisms for victims of gender-based violence, such as anonymous complaints and the appointment of an external, independent, female confidant as contact person
- Support the victims of gender-based violence through legal advice; if the company has contributed to adverse human rights impacts pay for legal costs and participate in compensation payments for violations.
- Involve trade unions, especially women-led unions, as well as membership-based women's rights organizations in all of the above-mentioned processes as well as in social audits and the formulation of corrective action plans

Be transparent

- Sign the Transparency Pledge as soon as possible and disclose data in machine readable supplier lists, including gender breakdown of workforce in each factory, migrant workers as share of workforce in each factory, and presence of unions or worker committees in each factory.
- Disclose on lowest wage level paid by each supplier of each production country, for a full working week, excluding overtime, benefits and bonuses.
- Publish the annual social audit reports

Pay workers a living wage

- Commit to using transparent and robust living wage benchmarks
- Commit to pay a living wage contribution on every order you place, sufficient to close the wage gap for all workers in your supply chain
- Commit to reducing the gender pay gap in your supply chain

- Ensure and enable that all workers (also day laborers, home workers and contract workers) in your supply chain who were employed at the onset of the Covid-crisis receive their full salaries or, in the case of factory closure, receive severance pay

Policy-makers

EU-level: Call for mandatory transparency and human rights due diligence

- Develop a binding EU law to disclose supplier list. These should include machine readable information on all production units and processing facilities, as well as the name, address, parent company of the site business, type of products made and number of workers at each site.
- Advance mandatory human rights due diligence legislation nationally and at EU level to put in place an obligation on companies to respect human and especially women rights in their operations and supply-chains. The mandatory due diligence process shall be comprehensive and shall include a specific methodology for gender-based due diligence.

EU-level and production countries: Call for fair wages and violence-free workplaces

- Ensure that minimum wages in all production countries (including EU countries) are fixed in accordance with reliable international living wage standards and that transparent and robust benchmarks are included in policies and agreements.
- Ratify the ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment at Workplace and implement the accompanying Recommendation 206
- Strengthen existing laws on GBV and enforce their implementation, formulate comprehensive legislation on GBV that goes beyond the workplace
- Provide legal aid and health care for victims
- Enable the relevant inspection authorities and monitoring bodies to better monitor GBV issues at workplace

Top factory management

Address gender-based violence and wage-issues in price negotiations

- Acknowledge the existence and prevalence of GBV
- Formulate a workplace policy on GBV that protects workers, provides incentives for reporting and guarantees that a) these committees do not replace unions and that b) both committees and unions are able to operate freely without management interference
- Create "harassment-free factories" and make that a selling point towards buyers

- Establish Anti-Harassment Committees with elected members in every factory, including an external expert on gender and / or workers' representatives
- Support the functioning of these committees (regular meetings during working hours)
- Provide trainings to explain the roles and responsibilities of different committees (e.g. Participation, Safety, Welfare and Anti-Harassment) and factory unions thoroughly to workers.
- Provide legal aid and health care for victims
- Establish a trustworthy complaint system at factory level backed up by external supporters
- With buyers, address the need for fair prices for orders, to enable the factory to pay living wages to workers

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