

What will it take to Improve Working Conditions in Garment Supply Chain Factories after COVID?

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DESCRIPTION

The global COVID pandemic over the last two years has exacerbated and accelerated the unsafe, illegal, and hazardous working conditions faced by 60+ million garment workers toiling in supply chain factories around the world. Low wages, long hours, unsafe and unhealthy conditions, and gender-based violence and harassment became even more pronounced as international clothing brands took advantage of the global crisis to reduce their production costs and increase their profits [1,2].

To regain lost ground and achieve sustainable progress in improving working conditions in garment factories, international brands, local factory owners and governments in the producing countries must adopt different purchasing practices, end the charade of corrupt, ineffective factory audits, and promulgate and actually enforce worker-protective laws and regulations. Genuine improvement in the lives of garment workers requires that the underlying causes which turn factories into sweatshops must be recognized, addressed, and altered. This includes a new business model for supply chains; transparency and accountability in monitoring working conditions; and meaningful participation by workers in health and safety programs at the factory level. Real change in global supply chain factories requires action in the following areas:

- Improving occupational health and safety, including complementing national regulatory enforcement with the International Accord;
- Replacing the failed corporate social responsibility schemes with the approach, transparency, and accountability of worker-driven social responsibility programs;
- Ending the practice of wage theft by employers and brands, and establish a genuinely living wage for garment workers;
- Ending gender-based violence and harassment, and implement as a starting point the International Labour Organization's Convention 190;
- Respecting workers' basic, internationally-recognized labour rights, including the right to form a union and bargain

collectively; and

- Adopting the open accountability approach and requirements of strong human rights due diligence framework which is under consideration by the European Union and has been enacted already by some member states.

Workplace health and safety

Significant improvements in garment worker health and safety were achieved during the eight-year term (2013-2021) of the Bangladesh Accord for Fire and Building Safety. Now called the International Accord, the program is continuing in Bangladesh and is slated to expand to other garment-producing countries. When implemented in coordination with effective enforcement of national laws and regulations, the International Accord could substantially improve worker safety in the post-COVID era [3,4].

Worker-driven social responsibility

The voluntary, self-regulation of the corporate social responsibility (CSR) industry, as applied to global supply chains like apparel, has generated positive publicity for the brands, but actual working conditions for millions of women garment workers at the factory level remain unsafe, unhealthy, and illegal [5,6]. In addition to the dominant "sweatshop business model" designed and implemented by international clothing brands, CSR has failed because of ineffective and corrupt "CSR monitoring" or "social auditing" that does not capture even hazards in plain view, let alone the underlying causes of unsafe and illegal conditions [7]. CSR has also failed because there has been no meaningful, genuine participation by workers themselves. Fortunately, an alternative which prioritizes the participation of workers, transparency and accountability is gaining ground in global supply chains as "worker-driven social responsibility" (WSR). The approach and core activities of WSR are transferable to many supply chains in the global economy as well as the apparel industry [8].

Ending wage theft and a living wage

During the COVID pandemic, garment workers throughout the

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world lost millions of dollars in wages that were never paid to suppliers by the international brands, and/or government relief funds that were never paid to workers by factory owners. An international campaign to “name and shame” those brands and employers has highlighted a relentless battle to claw back these wages, an effort that must continue in the post-COVID world [9]. But even before COVID spread, garment workers’ wages frequently violated national minimum wage laws, and were as much as 45% below what is actually needed to meet basic needs, the internationally-recognized “living wage” [10-12]. The post-COVID world for garment workers must include payment of back wages and a genuine living wage.

Ending gender-based violence

For decades, garment workers—the majority of whom are women – have been subjected to horrifying levels of gender-based violence, including harassment, assault, and rape. This violence only increased during the pandemic to epidemic levels of its own [13]. A key starting point for reducing violence against women is ratification and implementation of the International Labour Organization’s Convention 190, which went into effect in June 2021 but has only 10 country ratifications. Effective anti-violence efforts require promoting and protecting women’s participation and leadership on the factory floor, in their unions and community organizations, and in society at large [14,15].

Human rights due diligence

The decades-long record of the apparel industry violating the human rights of its workforce – including systematic violations of freedom of association, wage and hour, health and safety, and non-discrimination laws as well as environmental protections – has sparked legislation to require multinational corporations to conduct human rights due diligence (HRDD) evaluations of the impact of their operations worldwide. This means actively identifying and assessing actual and potential impacts on people and nature; taking corrective action to eliminate these impacts; tracking the effectiveness of corrective actions; and communicating the results to all stakeholders (including workers and their communities). As with all legislation, “the devil is in the details,” and a wide-ranging debate is underway to define exactly how comprehensive, how binding, how transparent, and how effective the HRDD laws will be [16-18]. If broadly defined and effectively enforced, HRDD laws could play an important role in improving working conditions in numerous global supply chains.

The COVID pandemic has been a catastrophe for women garment workers in terms of their and their family’s health, their working conditions on the job, and their living conditions in the community. If the post-pandemic world for them and all global supply chain workers is to be different, then substantial changes must be made in the business model of multinational corporations, the failed CSR model must be replaced with the approach and activities of worker-driven social responsibility efforts, national and international laws and standards must actually be enforced, and workers themselves must play a central role in creating safe, healthful, and respectful workplaces.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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