

UNHRC Research Document – Labour Rights Violations in the Fast Fashion Industry

Definitions:

- Fast Fashion

- A business model in which clothing brands rapidly produce inexpensive, trend-based garments, relying on short production cycles, outsourced manufacturing, and high-volume sales.

- Labour Rights Violations

- Breaches of internationally recognized labour standards including non-payment of living wages, excessive working hours, forced labour, unsafe working conditions, child labour, suppression of unions, discrimination, and gender-based exploitation.

Background of the Issue

The roots of labour exploitation in the fast fashion industry can be traced back to the economic restructuring and globalization waves of the late 20th century. As Western brands sought cheaper production overseas, they shifted manufacturing from Europe and North America to Asia, Africa, and parts of Central America. This shift coincided with the rise of global supply chains, where production was divided across multiple countries and subcontractors, making accountability difficult.

During the 1980s and 1990s, major apparel brands embraced a new model based on accelerating fashion cycles and cutting production costs. This created a race among supplier countries, Bangladesh, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and later Myanmar and Ethiopia, to offer the lowest labour prices. As governments competed for foreign investment, many weakened worker protections or failed to enforce existing labour laws. This dynamic allowed factories to impose poor working conditions, long hours, and unsafe environments. The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh became the most tragic symbol of these systemic issues. The eight-story factory building, housing thousands of garment workers, collapsed due to severe structural flaws, killing 1,134 people and injuring more than 2,500. Investigations revealed that workers had been forced inside despite visible cracks and safety concerns. The disaster highlighted how corporate pressure for low costs and fast turnaround directly undermined safety and human rights.

In the years following Rana Plaza, global brands publicly promised reform, but research from human rights organizations, labour unions, and the ILO shows persistent violations. The industry's continued expansion, especially through "ultra-fast fashion" brands like Shein, has increased pressure on workers. The accelerated production cycles require near-constant output, pushing suppliers to intensify labour exploitation. Most garment workers are young women from rural or low-income backgrounds. Their economic vulnerability and limited access to legal protection leave them at high risk of exploitation, harassment, and wage

Discussing labour rights violations in the fast fashion industry

discrimination. Migrant workers, particularly in Malaysia, Thailand, and China, are also vulnerable to forced labour indicators including debt bondage, passport confiscation, and threats of retaliation.

Today, the fast fashion model depends on low wages, long hours, and suppressed labour rights. Without structural industry reform, these human rights abuses are expected to intensify, especially as brands continue shifting production to countries with weaker regulatory systems.

Discussing labour rights violations in the fast fashion industry

Key Actors and Stakeholders

Producing countries: Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Myanmar, Vietnam, China, Cambodia, Sri Lanka. - Their interest is maintaining economic competitiveness and jobs; often reluctant to strictly enforce labour laws due to fear of losing foreign investment.

Consumer countries: EU states, United States, UK, Japan. - Their interest is to regulate brands headquartered in their territory; some have begun adopting mandatory due diligence laws.

Corporations: Zara, H&M, Primark, Uniqlo; ultra-fast fashion: Shein, Temu. - Their focus is on low production costs, rapid manufacturing, high margins.

Garment workers: Majority women aged 18–35 facing poverty wages, harassment, and unsafe conditions.

International bodies: International Labour Organization (ILO), NGOs such as Clean Clothes Campaign, Human Rights Watch - They conduct investigations, advocate for workers, push for transparency.

Consumers: Drive demand for low-cost clothing - Their purchasing habits fuel the demand for cheap clothing. Lack awareness of the human rights impact of fast fashion.

Current Situation

The current state of labour rights in the fast fashion sector reflects a combination of economic pressure, shifting supply chains, weak labour enforcement, and the rise of ultra-fast fashion companies. Wage theft remains one of the most widespread abuses. In Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and India, workers frequently report being paid below legal requirements, denied overtime pay, or forced to work excessive hours to earn minimal income.

In Myanmar, particularly after the 2021 coup, military-backed factory owners and subcontractors have intensified exploitation, with reports of forced overtime, wage withholding, and retaliation against workers who protest. Factory safety conditions have improved only marginally since Rana Plaza. Many worksites still lack proper ventilation, emergency exits, fire alarms, or protective gear. Structural risks remain common, especially in unauthorized subcontracted workshops that operate outside official monitoring systems. Forced labour remains a critical concern. According to global forced labour analyses, workers frequently face coercive recruitment practices, restricted movement, withheld documents, and threats of termination or violence. Migrant workers, especially women, are often trapped in exploitative contracts.

Gender-based rights violations also persist. Female workers represent up to 80% of the garment workforce in many countries and face sexual harassment, verbal abuse, pregnancy discrimination, and lower pay compared to male colleagues. In Cambodia and Bangladesh, women have reported threats and dismissal for attempting to unionize. Another emerging issue is algorithmic management in ultra-fast fashion supply chains. Warehouse workers associated with Shein and other similar brands report constant digital monitoring, unrealistic productivity targets, and punitive performance systems. These practices increase work stress and reduce rest periods, contributing to unsafe working conditions.

Major Challenges

1. **Lack of Supply Chain Transparency** Fast fashion supply chains are often intentionally opaque. Brands typically publish first-tier supplier lists but refuse to disclose subcontractors or warehouse locations. This makes it difficult for UN bodies, NGOs, and workers' rights groups to track violations, investigate abuses, or ensure accountability.
2. **Economic Pressures and the Race to the Bottom** Producing countries rely heavily on garment exports for economic growth. Governments fear losing jobs and investment if they enforce labour regulations too strictly. This leads to a "race to the bottom," where countries try to offer the lowest possible production costs, resulting in deregulation and weakened labour protections.
3. **Weak Enforcement of Labour Laws** Even when labour rights exist on paper, enforcement is minimal. Labour inspectors are under-resourced, underfunded, or influenced by local factory owners. Corruption and political pressure further undermine effective monitoring. Many violations go unreported because workers fear retaliation or job loss.
4. **Suppression of Unions and Worker Representation Across Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, and Cambodia** union leaders and active workers face intimidation, harassment, pay cuts, or dismissal. In Myanmar, unionization has been effectively dismantled in many regions, leaving workers without any legitimate channel for negotiation. 8
5. **Gender-Based Inequalities** Female garment workers face unique barriers including wage discrimination, harassment, and limited access to maternity leave. Gender-based violence in the workplace often goes unpunished. Women who attempt to advocate for labour rights face increased risks.
6. **Consumer Demand for Cheap Clothing** Global demand for fast, inexpensive fashion drives brands to maintain unsustainable production speeds. Efforts to improve

Discussing labour rights violations in the fast fashion industry

labour rights often conflict with consumer expectations of low prices, hindering progress toward ethical production.

Blocs

1. Western Bloc (EU states, UK, US, Canada, Australia, Japan)
 - a. Support binding corporate due diligence, transparency requirements, human rights audits, and multilateral cooperation with the ILO.
 - b. Push for ethical production and labour rights monitoring.

Country List: Germany, France, Sweden, Spain, Netherlands, United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia.

2. Eastern Bloc (States prioritizing sovereignty, domestic industry protection, or state-led economic control)
 - a. More reluctant to allow external interference in domestic labour regulations.
 - b. May frame labour rights as internal issues, not UN mandates.

Country List: China, Russia, Myanmar, Vietnam.

3. Non-Aligned Bloc (Developing countries where garment production is a major economic sector)
 - a. Emphasize economic development, anti-poverty measures, and financial assistance.
 - b. Support labour rights improvements but require capacity-building and funding.

Countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Nepal.

Questions a Resolution Must Address (QARMA)

1. How can Member States ensure transparency across multi-tiered supply chains?
2. What mechanisms can hold corporations accountable for labour violations?
3. How can the UNHRC support producing countries in enforcing labour protections?
4. How can workers, especially women, be empowered to unionize?
5. Should a binding treaty on business and human rights apply to the apparel sector?

Discussing labour rights violations in the fast fashion industry

<https://arisa.nl/en/report-highlights-labour-abuses-in-pakistans-garment-industry>

<https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/findings/spotlights/stitched-with-slavery-in-the-seams>

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/from-us/press-releases/fast-fashion-and-luxury-brands-shift-orders-in-hunt-for-cheaper-labour-impacting-thousands-of-garment-workers>

<https://www.globalworks.se/project/warehouse-workers-and-office-staff-losing-the-game-in-ultra-fast-fashion>

<https://www.ijirl.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/EXPLORING-THE-INTERSECTION-OF-FAST-FASHION-SWEATSHOPS-AND-LABOR-LAW-ABUSE.pdf>

<https://www.ijsshr.in/v7i4/Doc/34.pdf>

<https://www.fairplanet.org/story/forced-labor-fashion-garment-industry-no-sweat>