New report: false promises and restriction of movement in production for Western garment brands

Female migrants employed in India’s garment factories supplying to big international brands like Benetton, C&A, GAP, H&M, Levi’s, M&S and PVH, are subject to conditions of modern slavery. In Bangalore, India’s biggest garment producing hub, young women are recruited with false promises about wages and benefits, they work in garment factories under high-pressure for low wages. Their living conditions in hostels are poor and their freedom of movement is severely restricted. Claiming to be eighteen at least, many workers look much younger.

These are some conclusions from the report ‘Labour Without Liberty – Female Migrant Workers in Bangalore’s Garment Industry’. The study found that five out of the eleven ILO indicators for forced labour exist in the Bangalore garment industry: abuse of vulnerability, deception as a result of false promises (wages etc.), restriction of movement in the hostel, intimidation and threats, and abusive working and living conditions. Some of these aspects are also felt to a certain extent by the local workforce, but are more strongly experienced by migrant workers.

The researched factories and their buyers

The three factories in the research belong to the largest garment manufacturing companies in Bangalore. Together they employ more than 4000 workers in various units in the country. According to export data these are their buyers: Abercrombie & Fitch, Benetton, C&A, Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger (both PVH), Columbia Sportswear, Decathlon, Gap, H&M, Levi Strauss, Marks & Spencer. Most of these brands have code of conducts that prohibit forced labour, child labour and other labour rights violations.

In responding to an ICN report ‘Unfree and Unfair’ from January 2016 on the living and working conditions of migrants in Bangalore, C&A, GAP, H&M and PVH responded with some concrete commitments. Though there has been research by them affirming the findings of ‘Unfree and Unfair’ and a meeting with suppliers, after almost two years most of their commitments still have to be put in practice.


Uma comes from a small village in northern states of India like many of her young colleagues. She was recruited and trained to go work into one of the 1200 factories in Bangalore, the “textile capital” of India. Uma used to go to school and help her mother, now she stitches dresses and sportswear for H&M, Benetton, C&A, Calvin Klein and many other big international brands. Six full days a week. The target is hundred pieces per hour. For a minor like she is - her mates reminded her she was 18, but she turned out to be only fifteen - work at the factory in a faraway city is difficult. She misses her family and friends, who are thousands of kilometres away.
Migrant workers in Bangalore: vulnerability and abuse

Uma, her name has been changed for safety reasons, was among the workers interviewed for a new investigation into the working and living conditions of migrant workers in three garment factories in Bangalore.

Official statistics on migrants do not exist, but trade unions estimate that there are between 15,000 and 70,000 migrant women from northern states working in the Bangalore garment industry. Before travelling to the factories, they are trained in skill development centres in Jharkhand or Odisha. These centres are often part of government sponsored schemes which fall under Skill India. Skill enhancement is one of the pillars of ‘Make in India’, prime Minister Modi’s major initiative to create employment opportunities and stimulate economic growth.

Recruitment agents are known for not informing recruits about their legal entitlements. They promise salaries ranging from about € 65 to € 105 and other benefits like free accommodation and food. But upon arrival in the factories, these promises often appear to be false. Migrants find themselves earning less than they were told, having to pay for accommodation and food. Migrant workers live in hostels with cramped rooms. They are not allowed to leave on weekday evenings. Only at Sundays they are allowed two to three hours away from the hostel grounds.

Many workers, although claiming to be eighteen or older look young enough to be fifteen or sixteen.

Many migrant workers reported being shouted at by supervisors in the local language of Bangalore, which they do not speak and they are repeatedly pushed to work faster. This was confirmed by all seven local workers, who observed that supervisors treat migrants badly and insult them using vulgar words. According to them, migrant girls often cry when this happens.

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Download the report and the abstract: http://www.indianet.nl/LabourWithoutLiberty.html

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GLU The Garment Labour Union is a women-led Indian trade union based in Bangalore, engaged in organizing garment workers and protecting their rights. Leaders of GLU have themselves worked for many years in garment factories in the city. GLU collaborates with other trade unions and civil society organisations to improve the working conditions.

ICN The India Committee of the Netherlands (ICN) is a Dutch human rights organisation dedicated to improving the lives of the marginalized in South Asia by giving information, advocacy, lobby, networking, research and publicity. Focus issues are business and human rights, child labour and education and the position of the 200 million Dalits in India. ICN cooperates with local organisations in India as well as organisations in the Netherlands, Europe and worldwide.

CCC Clean Clothes Campaign is an international alliance dedicated to improving working conditions and empowering workers in the global garment and sportswear industries. Since 1989, CCC has worked to ensure that the fundamental rights of workers are respected. CCC educates and mobilises consumers, lobbies companies and governments, and offers direct solidarity support to workers as they fight for their rights and demand better working conditions. Clean Clothes Campaign brings together trade unions and NGOs covering a broad spectrum of perspectives and interests, such as women's rights, consumer advocacy and poverty reduction.