

Press release 2018-05-31: Power of the voice

Despite efforts to strengthen the voices of workers in the Bangladeshi garment sector through social dialogue, real improvements remain to be seen. Those who want to join or form unions risk threats and harassment, and the chances of negotiating for better terms are limited. Even though Swedish buyers claim to address the challenges, few of their suppliers have trade unions or collective bargaining agreements in place.

Bangladesh is the second-largest garment and apparel exporting country in the world, attracting numerous multinational companies with its low production costs. However, this has come with a high price for millions of workers, most of them women, who are employed in the Bangladeshi garment industry where low wages, extensive overtime and hazardous work environments are all common features.

After the deadly collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in 2013, several initiatives were launched to improve workplace safety and the so called social dialogue between garment employers, workers and the Bangladeshi government. However, in an index compiled by global trade union ITUC, Bangladesh still ranks as one of the worst countries to work in. Workers have limited chances to negotiate their terms of employment and those who want to join or form unions risk repercussions from factory owners including harassment, abuse and even killings.

In a new report, Swedwatch explores the state of social dialogue through a survey with 15 Swedish clothing and home textile companies sourcing from Bangladesh. The answers show that the companies are aware of the risks for union rights violations in the country, and that these are primarily addressed through factory audits, labour rights trainings and through building long-term relationships with the suppliers. In the survey, the companies state that knowledge about labour rights seem to have increased at their supplying factories during the last years. However, many also say that there is still widespread skepticism towards trade unions.

“Swedwatch research shows that the companies do engage in several ways. Still, trade unions and collective bargaining agreements are mostly absent in their supplying factories, which indicates that workers’ rights are not respected”, says Anna Åkerblom, researcher at Swedwatch.

In the absence of trade unions, the survey shows that most of the buyers have instead relied on factory level worker participation committees, legally required by the Bangladeshi government. However, as the study shows, these committees are often controlled by factory management and have not succeeded in delivering real influence for workers.

The report, *Power of the Voice*, highlights the possibilities for buyers to improve the situation for the workers through more sustainable purchasing practices:

“Companies can be a positive force through providing economic incentives to suppliers where independent unions and collective bargaining agreements are in place” says Ulrika Urey, director at Fair Action, who also stands behind the report and its recommendations.

The report furthermore encourages companies to investigate if there are anti-union policies and practices at their suppliers, and if so, take appropriate measures to prevent these.

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