

Calls for fashion giants to support workers

A new report shows that high street brands are failing to protect workers who make their clothes, one year after a Bangladeshi factory collapsed. Who is responsible for improving conditions?



Fashion under fire: Should consumers do more to ensure garment workers get a fair deal?



Reshma Begum still has nightmares. A year ago, she was pulled alive from the rubble of the clothing factory where she worked. She had been trapped for over two weeks, and very nearly died.

Reshma was one of the survivors of the Rana Plaza factory disaster in Bangladesh – the deadliest in the history of the global garment industry. She was one of the lucky ones: more than 1,134 mostly female factory workers under the age of 30, were killed when their building collapsed. At the time, they were making clothing for some of the western world's biggest fashion brands, among them, Mango, Matalan and Primark.

To coincide with the anniversary of the catastrophe, a report into 40 of the top European high street clothing companies has been published to see what progress on workers' rights has been made. It focuses in particular on the miserable wages workers like Reshma depend on,

which often amount to no more than £5 a day.

It makes for depressing reading. Only four brands were able to demonstrate clear progress towards implementing wages that would meet workers' basic needs; Inditex (which owns Zara), Marks & Spencer, Switcher and Tchibo.

Zara and Marks & Spencer have agreed to pay a living wage by 2015, and are discussing rates with local trade unions. But the report points out that this strategy depends on the assumption that trade unions have enough strength and political clout to negotiate fairly; often they do not.

Mango and Debenhams fared far worse. They were heavily criticised for not having a living wage benchmark and for having outdated factory inspection systems. Mango's company policy is only to pay the legal minimum, not the recommended wage level, and that is often not enough for workers to live on.

A STITCH IN TIME

Some argue that Western companies and consumers must do more to protect underpaid, vulnerable workers. It is their responsibility to ensure that workers are paid enough to live on and that the buildings they work in are structurally sound. Consumers need to put pressure on brands to show they care, otherwise companies will have little incentive to strive for ethical fashion, and will only focus on profit.

But others say it is unreasonable for international brands to be expected to check every supplier and dodgy building, and often low wages are tied up with politics. In Bangladesh, many garment factory owners are entrenched in the nation's power elite, and some are even members of parliament. If the government itself has little interest in giving workers better pay and rights, what hope is there that the West alone can help? Change will only happen when international brands work with governments, local manufacturers and trade unions.

Q & A

Q What's this got to do with me?

A This report is important because it forces us to think about where the products we buy come from and how they are made. It can be all too easy to walk into a shop and buy a new top, or pair of trainers, without thinking about whether the person who

made them was properly paid or able to work in a safe environment.

Q So should I not go to certain shops?

A Some say that boycotting shops is not the solution. Workers rely on their jobs to provide for their families and boycotts simply shift the problem to other companies. But you could find out which are the most ethical brands, or ask questions in shops about their policy on workers' rights. You

could even write a letter to your MP or start a petition. Some consideration from all of us can help to make a difference.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'It is not up to the consumer to ensure that the products they buy are ethically produced.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

► Calls for fashion giants to support workers

WORD WATCH

History – The first factories which powered the industrial revolution in 18th century Britain also brought death and injury to many workers, including children.

Report – The report was produced by the Clean Clothes Campaign, an alliance of organisations in 16 European countries, in co-operation

with Asia Floor Wage, an alliance of trade unions and labour rights activists.

Profit – The Swedish retailer H&M admitted last Thursday that increased wages for workers could put pressure on profits: ‘Wage increases in Bangladesh, Cambodia and China have a negative effect because we are not charging our customers higher prices,’ said Karl-Johan

Persson, the chief executive.

Interest – Garments represent 80% of Bangladesh’s manufacturing exports, which gives the industry vast power. Factory owners also finance campaigns during national elections, giving them broad political influence. In 2012, a Bangladeshi Labour activist, Aminul Islam, was tortured and killed. He had been a vocal opponent of low wages.

YOU DECIDE

1. Do consumers in the West care about how their products are made?
2. Who do you think is most to blame for the low wages of garment workers?

ACTIVITIES

1. Discuss in groups the shops where you or your family most regularly buy clothes. Click on the Tailored Wages report in our Expert Links and find out their policies on workers’ rights.
2. Imagine you are a survivor of the Rana Plaza factory disaster. Write a diary extract explaining how it has affected your life, and why you need better protection at work and compensation.

 **BECOME AN EXPERT** Check our website for a selection of useful links to videos and further reading.

