



Fact Sheet

Child labour in the textile & garment industry

Focus on the role of buying companies

March 2014

Child labour is forbidden by law in most countries. It's generally considered unacceptable for a child to work long hours or to perform tedious, dangerous, heavy or dirty tasks. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that all work done by children under the age of 15 – and all hazardous work done by children under the age of 18 – is illegal. And yet there are an estimated 168 million¹ to 200 million² child labourers working around the world today. In spite of global, national and sector initiatives to abolish child labour, almost eleven per cent of the global child population is a child labourer, according to figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO).¹ This fact sheet is about child labour in the global textile and garment supply chain and is part of a series of fact sheets that SOMO is developing for the WellMade programme³.

Children are being put to work at all stages of the supply chain – from the production of cotton seed, cotton harvesting and yarn spinning mills to all the phases in the cut-make-trim stage. As well as working in fields, children are also working - though less frequently - in large formal factories and in small informal factories, as well as in subcontracted workshops and in their own homes. Young children work in the high tech spinning mills and in the

power and hand loom industry. In garment factories, children perform diverse and often arduous tasks such as dyeing, sewing buttons, cutting and trimming threads, folding, moving and packing garments. In small workshops and home sites, children are put to work on intricate tasks such as embroidering, sequinning and smocking (making pleats).⁴ Children are also being put to work in sectors related to the textile and garment industry, including leather and shoes. Child workers are also found in the sporting goods sector too, performing manual tasks such as stitching soccer balls.⁵ There are several countries that are particularly notorious for child labour in the textile and garment industry – including India, Uzbekistan, China, Bangladesh, Egypt, Thailand and Pakistan.

Governments and companies both bear responsibility for protecting the rights of workers, including children. This fact sheet offers a number of suggestions for buying companies – such as buying houses, brands and retailers – to help ban child labour from all phases of their supply chains, from the sourcing of raw materials to the stitching of final products, and to rehabilitate any child workers they might come across.



What is the problem?

Child labour is defined as work performed by a child that is likely to interfere with his or her right to education, or to be harmful to his or her health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. While child labour at first-tier suppliers of end products (ready-made garments) has decreased over the past few years, it still remains a problem. Further up the supply chain, in the textile mills, and especially in the cotton fields, child labour is even a bigger challenge.

Over the last few decades, the fashion industry has changed considerably. Brands and retailers are introducing ever more lines per year at lower costs. New items arrive in stores every few weeks. To be able to offer clothes at bargain prices and to respond rapidly to changing fashion trends, clothing brands and retailers are continually looking for cheap production locations that can accommodate complex orders and deliver quality goods at short notice. The average garment company may spread its orders over hundreds of changing suppliers. Long-term relationships with suppliers are rare. The increased pressure on short lead times and low prices has a knock-on effect throughout the whole supply chain. The 'fast fashion' model has a deteriorating effect on working conditions. Low wages, forced labour, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions and child labour are rampant throughout the garment supply chain.

Faulty audits

Because child labour is illegal, employers who have children among their workforce do everything in their power to hide such practices. Company-driven social compliance audits generally fail to detect child labour. Even in the formal sector, illegal workers and child workers are hidden away when auditors visit the plant. Many workers do not have identity papers, and have no official proof of their age. Bone or dental maturity studies are presented to verify children's age. Driven by the need to find employment, children may lie about their age. Agents who recruit workers for spinning mills or garment factories have been reported to provide factory management with falsified records about their recruits.

Unauthorised subcontracting by manufacturers

To meet tight deadlines or to be able to complete unanticipated orders, ready-made garment manufacturers may subcontract certain production processes or even shift complete orders to other factories and workplaces without informing the buying company. Particular production processes that require hand work – such as embroidery – may also be outsourced. The subcontracted factories, stitching centres, small workshops, or home-based workshops operating in the informal sector are not protected by labour regulations. To make matters worse, as they are seldom part of the buyer's supply chain, corporate inspections do not take place there. The lack of legal protection and the prevalence of casual and temporary contracts mean that workers in the industry are routinely subject to labour rights violations. They are often paid below minimum wages and are forced to work in

Cases of child labour in the textile and garment supply chain

Cotton seed production in India: Young girls exploited because of their agile fingers

(Based on publications by the India Committee of the Netherlands)

In cotton seed production, manual cross pollination (transferring pollen from one plant to another) is the main activity. Child workers, often girls, are widely employed to do this job. Child workers in cotton seed production are subjected to long working hours and exposure to pesticides for wages often below the official minimum.

In 2007, more than 400,000 children under the age of 18 were found to be employed in cotton seed farms in the Indian states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. More than half of these children were younger than fourteen. These farms account for more than ninety per cent of the total production area in India.⁶ Due to the efforts of various actors – local and international NGOs, the Indian government, the industry and international organisations such as the ILO, UNICEF and UNDP – the number of children employed at cotton seed farms decreased. Despite this decrease in numbers, the problem is far from resolved as in 2009-2010 still 381,500 children were found working on cotton seed farms in the same states. Of these, 169,900 were below fourteen years of age.⁷

Cotton harvesting in Uzbekistan: Children made to harvest cotton under threat of expulsion from school

(Based on publications by Human Rights Watch and World Vision Australia)

For two months every year, the Uzbek government forces 1.5 to 2 million schoolchildren as young as nine years old to miss school and help with the cotton harvest. The workers work every day from early morning until evening. Children live in filthy conditions (in unheated, non-insulated field barracks). They often contract illnesses and receive little to no pay. Hunger, exhaustion, and heat strokes are common. Schoolchildren can be given harvest quotas as large as fifty kilos of cotton per day and are beaten or threatened with bad grades or expulsion if they fail to meet their quota or pick low quality cotton.⁸

poor conditions with little consideration for health and safety. In home-based workshops, it's not uncommon for entire families, including young children, to work long hours to complete orders from garment factories.

Trafficking

The Asian garment industry also employs trafficked children. For example, Nepali children are vulnerable to being trafficked to India to work in various industries including embroidery, leather and garment sectors. Within India, the trafficking of child workers is also frequently reported, e.g. from North India to the South Indian knitwear industry.

Why does child labour exist?

Demand for cheap labour

Children join the labour force to satisfy the demand for cheap, unskilled labour. Certain physical attributes – such as small stature and agility – also increase the demand for child labour.

Low adult wages

Poverty is an important push factor leading to the supply of child labourers. Often, adult workers earn so little that they do not make enough money to meet their family's basic needs. Children start working to increase their family's income. There is a clear link between child labour and low wages for adult workers, both in agriculture (cotton production) and in garment factories. Children are easy to exploit and are cheap labourers. As a result, they are often hired in preference to adults.

If child labour was banned, labour would become more scarce, which would allow adult workers to negotiate better wages and improve labour conditions. Child labour sustains

poverty rather than being a way out of poverty. Child labour leads to lower wages and higher unemployment among adults. Children who work and do not go to school will end up in low paid jobs later, and so will their children – thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty.⁹

These fundamental supply and demand factors are often reinforced by factors such as a lack of adequate access to education, inadequate employment potential for those who do receive education, exclusionary social behaviour based on caste or ethnicity, gender and cultural attitudes about work and education.¹⁰

Legal and normative framework

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) has been ratified by almost all countries in the world, with the exception of the USA, Somalia and South Sudan. The Convention stipulates that all work done by children under the age of fifteen – and all hazardous work done by children under the age of eighteen – is illegal. This includes 'work under particularly difficult conditions such as work for long hours or during the night or work where the child is unreasonably confined to the premises of the employer'. The Convention outlines basic entitlements and freedoms that apply to all children without discrimination. The Convention includes four core principles that should underpin any action concerning children, whether taken by governments, parents, communities or the private sector. These four core principles are: the best interests of the child; non-discrimination; child participation; and survival and development.¹³

Two of the fundamental Conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) are about child labour: Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour (1999)

Cases of child labour in the textile and garment supply chain

Removing cotton pest in Egypt: Exposure to pesticide and harassment

(Based on publications by Environmental Justice Foundation)

In Egypt, an estimated one million children aged between seven and twelve work to manually remove pests from cotton plants each year. For periods of up to ten weeks every year, they work for eleven hours a day, seven days a week. Reported abuses include exposure to pesticides, beatings from foremen and overwork. Physical and sexual abuse of child cotton labourers has also been widely reported.¹¹

Cases of child labour in the textile and garment supply chain

Textile mills in India: Girls cheated into exploitative employment schemes to save up for dowries

(Based on reports by SOMO and the India Committee of the Netherlands)

Child labour is very common in the Indian yarn and textile spinning mills in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. Young Dalit girls are recruited from impoverished rural areas or come as migrant workers from distant states. They are hired on three to five year contracts, lured by the promise of a decent wage and an end-of-contract bonus that they can use to pay for their dowry. This employment scheme is known as the 'Sumangali scheme' – 'Sumangali' means 'happily married bride' in Tamil. In reality, these girls are overworked and live in pitiful conditions, often in factory-owned hostels where they enjoy very limited freedom of movement. The girls cannot leave the hostel unaccompanied nor receive visitors at the hostel. They often cannot even make private phone calls to family or friends. A survey among 1,638 spinning mill workers found that eighteen per cent were younger than fifteen when they entered the factory. Sixty per cent of the workers were aged between fifteen and eighteen when they started working.¹²

and Convention 138 (1973) on the minimum age for admission to employment and work. Fundamental means that they are binding upon every member country of the ILO, regardless of ratification.¹⁴

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises – a set of recommendations addressed to multinational enterprises operating in or from adhering countries and provide non-binding principles and standards. The Guidelines stipulate that enterprises should contribute to the effective abolition of child labour, and take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency.

Role of governments in combating child labour

The first responsible institution for the protection and promotion of human rights is the government of each country. Governments should translate the content of international treaties and conventions that they have ratified into national legislation. In addition, governments should ensure that labour laws are implemented and enforced. However, there is still a long way to go for countries at the production end of the supply chain, as well as at the buying end of the textiles and garment industry.

Governments at the production end of the supply chain

Countries like China, India and Uzbekistan are major producers of cotton – the number one raw material for textile products. The centre for the global fabrics and garment supply chain lies in low-wage countries in Asia and Latin America. In these countries, child labour is usually forbidden by local laws and regulations. The biggest problem, however, is the poor enforcement of national labour law as well as educational law. Government infrastructure has generally not kept pace with economic development. Lack of governmental resources is a major stumbling block, but also corruption and pressure from vested industry and trade interests. As a result, the labour inspectorate is not coping with the new demands of the expanded industry. In addition, controls might be eased in order to attract and maintain foreign investments. Free access to education is not guaranteed.

Governments at the buying end of the supply chain

The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights stipulate that **governments** should 'set out clearly the expectation that all business enterprises domiciled in their territory/jurisdiction respect human rights throughout their operations¹⁵', which includes supply chains. There is an increasing awareness of the responsibility to contribute to responsible business conduct in a global context consistent with applicable laws and internationally recognised standards. The eradication of child labour is part of this agenda. OECD countries like the UK, the US, the Netherlands, Germany, Japan, France and Spain are home to major garment buying companies and retailers. These companies should all operate in line with OECD Guidelines.

In addition, governments on the buying end of the supply chain have developed focused initiatives to curb the import of products made with child labour. For example, the Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) of the US Department of Labor has created a toolkit for responsible business to reduce child labour and forced labour. Backed up by the Trade and Development Act of 2000 and the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2005, ILAB is assessing the efforts of the 144 countries benefiting from US trade preferences in eliminating the worst forms of child labour.¹⁶

Role of companies in combating child labour

Child labour is a violation of fundamental human rights. Garment brands and retailers might be linked to these abusive practices through their supply chain.

According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights **companies** have a responsibility to respect human rights (i.e. also labour rights) across all its business operations, including at the level of suppliers and subcontractors. According to these internationally accepted principles, companies should act with due diligence to avoid infringing on the rights of others and to address any adverse impacts¹⁷. Due diligence is a business process through which enterprises actively identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they address and manage their potential and actual adverse human rights impacts. Abolishing and preventing the occurrence of child labour is obviously part of this.

The responsibility to respect human rights as stated in the UN Guiding Principles is a global standard of expected conduct for all business enterprises, wherever they operate. This means that companies always have to respect internationally recognised human rights and should do the utmost to prevent abuses from occurring. If a company is associated with a human rights abuse, it should take action to address the negative human rights impact.



What can buying companies do?

• Corporate accountability

Ideally, corporate accountability policies are integrated across business operations and the supply chain. Commitment from the corporate board of the enterprise is crucial. When corporate accountability is part of all relevant aspects of company policy, different corporate divisions – including the financial department, the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) division, the sourcing department – can work together effectively to ensure that human rights are respected across the board.

• Extended supply chain responsibility

Brands and retailers should accept a broad definition of supply chain responsibility beyond the Cut Make and Trim (CMT) phase to include not only the end-assembly phase but also preceding steps, including the sourcing of raw materials like cotton. Consequently, monitoring and corrective actions should not be limited to the end manufacturing units, but need to be extended up the supply chain, to the yarn and textile mills, and the cotton fields.

• Transparency and traceability

When abolishing child labour at all stages of their supply chain, brands and retailers should focus on gaining full understanding of their supply chains. This includes second and further tier suppliers, subcontracted units, down to the informal sector, the level of homeworkers and the cotton production, where the bulk of child labour occurs. Brands and retailers should improve the traceability of raw materials such as cotton used in their products.

• Human rights risk assessments and continuous monitoring

As a standard due diligence procedure, buying companies should undertake (pre-sourcing) human rights risk assessments at a country or regional level. In order to gain a good understanding of the particular local context, consultation and cooperation with local stakeholders, including trade unions, civil society organisations and community-based organisations, is essential.

Extra attention should be given to signs that might be an indication of child labour practices, such as the payment of low wages, or the prevalence of particular cultural views. In addition, extra attention should be paid if the design includes production processes that are known to be performed by child workers, such as hand embroidery.

• Responsible purchasing practices

The point of departure is that the purchasing practices of buying companies should enable – and not inhibit – respect for labour rights at their first and further tier supplier. This includes:

- A pricing policy that takes into account the social and environmental quality of sourced products, enabling suppliers to avoid using child labour and to employ adults instead, offering them a living wage and decent working conditions.
- Building long-term, stable buyer-supplier relationships.
- Good production planning, including reasonable supply lead times, predictability of orders and minimising last-minute changes.
- Effective communication with suppliers about specific orders, including required technical skills and capacity. Does the product design require outsourcing of certain processes (e.g. hand embroidery)? If so, buyers should require suppliers to inform them where outsourced processes take place. The same (labour) standards should apply at subcontracted facilities and buyer inspections should also take place at these sites.

• **Enable workers to stand up for their rights**

Buying companies have a role to play in ensuring that independent trade unions can play their designated roles. First and foremost, the right of workers to form and join trade unions and to bargain collectively should be protected and respected. These enabling rights permit workers to defend their rights, voice grievances and negotiate wages, as well as improving recruitment and employment conditions.

Buying companies should support and facilitate the training of management, workers and workers' representatives (separately and jointly) in freedom of association, collective bargaining, labour-management relations, child labour, etc. Such training should be delivered by trade unions or credible labour rights organisations.

• **Grievance mechanisms**

In addition, to deal with workers' needs and complaints, genuine and credible grievance mechanisms should be established. Grievance procedures are an important supplement to collective bargaining, but may never be used to replace this legitimate process.

• **Ensure support for children found employed at the company's own operations and/or in operations across the entire supply chain, including access to education**

It is of the utmost importance that companies do not limit their efforts to seeing to it that children are removed from the workplace. Instead, they should facilitate their transition to formal fulltime education. Former child workers may also need health care, adequate adult support, temporary financial support or other services.

• **Work together with local and international civil society organisations**

There are many programmes focused on combating child labour, developed by civil society organisations (CSOs) in low-wage production countries as well as international initiatives. A good example is the 'Action Plan for Companies to Combat Child Labour' of 'Stop Child Labour, School is the Best Place to Work' – a joint initiative of the Stop Child Labour Campaign in The Netherlands implemented together with partner organisations worldwide. Stop Child Labour aims to eliminate all forms of child labour and to ensure formal, full-time and quality education for all children, at least until the age of fifteen.

The Action Plan¹⁸ contains concrete and useful advice about what buying companies can do to eliminate child labour, including working together with local governments, trade unions and local organisations and joining initiatives to eliminate child labour; paying adult workers well; drawing up contracts with suppliers to eliminate child labour from all their activities and also from the activities of their suppliers; facilitating the rescue and rehabilitation of child workers.

More information

Reports and papers



Maid in India Young Dalit women continue to suffer exploitative conditions in India's garment industry – SOMO and ICN, April 2012



Captured by Cotton Exploited Dalit girls produce garments in India for European and US markets – SOMO and ICN, May 2011



A Tale of Two companies The difference between action and inaction in combating child labour– ICN, FNV Mondiaal, Stop Child Labour, June 2013



Wages of Inequality Wage Discrimination and Underpayment in Hybrid Seed Production in India – FLA and ICN, December 2012



Working toward Child Labour Free Zones – Kampala Declaration, April 2013



Working on the right shoes Progress made in addressing child labour and other labour rights by 28 footwear companies since June 2012, november 2013



Out of work and into school Action Plan for Companies to Combat Child Labour – Stop Child Labour, School is the Best Place to Work, June 2012



Forced labour and child labour in the cotton industry – World Vision Australia, 2012



List of Goods Produced by Child Labor or Forced Labor US Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs, Office of Child Labor, Forced Labor, and Human Trafficking, 2011

Useful links

- ❑ [Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations \(SOMO\)](#)
- ❑ [India Committee of the Netherlands \(ICN\)](#)
- ❑ [Stop Child Labour, School is the Best Place to Work](#)
- ❑ [Clean Clothes Campaign \(CCC\)](#)
- ❑ [IndustriALL](#)
- ❑ [UNI Global Union](#)
- ❑ [Cotton Campaign](#)
- ❑ [WellMade](#)

End notes

- 1 ILO, (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, IPEC), 'Marking progress against child labour. Global estimates and trends 2000-2012,' 2013 <http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_221513.pdf>
- 2 Stop Child labour Campaign 'Urgent need to address all forms of child labour remains': <<http://www.stopchildlabour.org/Stop-Childlabour/News-Items/Urgent-need-to-address-all-forms-of-child-labour-remains>>
Stop Child Labour campaign, 'What you can do', no date <<http://www.stopchildlabour.eu/Stop-Childlabour/What-you-can-do/As-a-company-or-organisation>> (accessed on 19 August 2013).
- 3 WellMade is an initiative of Fair Wear Foundation (FWF), Christian Initiative Romero (CIR), CNV, the Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations (SOMO) and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI). WellMade provides people working for European clothing companies with tools to understand the major labour issues that they have an influence on, and how they can support better working conditions. For more information go to www.wellmade.org.
- 4 United States Department of Labor, 'Child Labor in the Apparel Sector', no date <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/media/reports/iclp/apparel/1c.htm>> (accessed on 17 February 2014).
- 5 ILRF, 'Missed the Goal for Workers: The Reality of Soccer Ball Stitchers in Pakistan, India, China and Thailand', June 2010 <<http://www.laborrights.org/stop-child-forced-labor/foulball-campaign/resources/12331>>
- 6 India Committee of the Netherlands, 'Child Bondage Continues in Indian Cotton Supply Chain. More than 400,000 children in India involved in hybrid cottonseed cultivation', September 2007, <<http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/childbondagecotton.pdf>>
- 7 India Committee of the Netherlands, 'Seeds of child labour. Signs of hope. Child and Adult Labour in Cottonseed Production in India', June 2010 <<http://www.indianet.nl/pdf/signsofhope.pdf>>
- 8 Human Rights Watch, 'Human Rights Watch World Report 2012: Uzbekistan', <<http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-uzbekistan>> (accessed on 20 February 2014) and World Vision Australia, 'Forced and child labour in the cotton industry, 2012, <<http://campaign.worldvision.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Forced-and-child-labour-in-the-cotton-industry-fact-sheet.pdf>>
- 9 Stop Child Labour website, 'About child labour', no date <<http://stopkinderarbeid.nl/Stop-Childlabour/What-we-do/About-child-labour>> (accessed on 17 February 2014).
- 10 United States Department of Labor website, 'What are Child Labor and Forced Labor?', no date <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/child-forced-labor/What-are-Child-Labor-and-Forced-Labor.htm#>> (accessed on 17 February 2014).
- 11 Environmental Justice Foundation, 'Cotton and Child Labour', no date <<http://ejfoundation.org/cotton/cotton-and-child-labour>> (accessed on 30 January 2014).
- 12 SOMO and ICN, 'Maid in India – Young Dalit Women Continue to Suffer Exploitative Conditions in India's Garment Industry', April 2012 <http://www.somo.nl/publications-en/Publication_3783>
- 13 United Nations, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child', 1989, <<http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx>>
- 14 International Labour Organization, Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour, 1999, <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C182> and ILO minimum age convention (C. 138), 1976 <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C138>
- 15 United Nations, 'Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights – Implementing the Protect, Respect and Remedy Framework, 2011 <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf>
- 16 United States Department of Labor, 'Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB)', no date <<http://www.dol.gov/ilab/>> (accessed on 17 February 2014).
- 17 United Nations, 'Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights – Implementing the Protect, Respect and Remedy Framework, 2011 <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/GuidingPrinciplesBusinessHR_EN.pdf>
- 18 Stop Child Labour, School is the best place to work, 'Out of work and into school. Action Plan for Companies to Combat Child labour', June 2012, <<http://stopkinderarbeid.nl/Stop-Childlabour/What-you-can-do/As-a-company-or-organisation>>

Colophon

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