

Clothing brands play an important role in tackling child labour

Clothing brands can learn from their peers who dare to be honest about detecting child labour in their supply chains by knowing the risks, limiting them, and taking action where necessary.

With increasing frequency, Syrian refugee children are being found in Turkish factories that produce clothing for the European market. This is a widespread problem that requires both political attention and resolute action from western clothing brands. Companies affiliated to Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) are stepping up to take responsibility for working conditions in their supply chains. But their actions alone are not enough. If more brands were to also step up, FWF members and the industry in general could act more effectively when child labour is discovered. The FWF member signatories to this letter have all recently found and remediated cases of child labour in their supply chains.

One of the signatories recently encountered child labour during in-depth factory inspections. The brands sourced clothing from the same Turkish manufacturer who - without informing its customers - had subcontracted production to another factory. During an inspection of the subcontractor on the brands' behalf, FWF discovered five children working there. All brands involved quickly organised a meeting in Istanbul to work together with the factories, to ensure that the children stopped working as soon as possible. A school was found for which the factory and the brands pay for. They are also providing income compensation, continuing to pay the children wages until they are old enough to work legally.

100% fair clothing

It may seem paradoxical to put these brands forward as examples: after all, there was a serious problem in their supply chains. But this highlights an uncomfortable truth: 100% fair clothing is virtually impossible to find. Clothing supply chains are too complex for that: long, international and, as the Turkey case illustrates – rarely transparent. It takes time to implement positive changes. However, clothing brands still have a duty to ensure that their clothing is produced under good conditions and to resolve problems with the factory when they occur. And that is exactly what these brands are trying to do.

Child labour is not restricted to the Turkish clothing industry. FWF auditors recently came across twenty 14- and 15-year-olds at a factory in Myanmar, where another of this letter's signatories has clothing production. The children formed part of a group of 60 employees who were locked away in order to hide them from the audit team. The highly experienced FWF team had never come across anything like this before: astonished children, fearful of losing their jobs.

Take responsibility

The respective brand immediately sent three managers to Myanmar. Together with the FWF audit team and local brand staff, they made sure that the 14- and 15-year-olds stopped working straight away. Here, too, income compensation is being provided, including

overtime and bonuses, until the children reach the age of 16, the legal working age in the country. In the meantime, the brand is investing in training for the children. They are being taught computer skills, sewing and English, and one is training to be a welder. This may sound like nothing less than should be expected, but in fact it is quite exceptional that managers from a major clothing company would immediately fly halfway around the world and take this kind of responsibility. Even though the workers in question are not their own employees.

Enrolment in training courses is a good outcome for these particular children, but not a long-term solution to child labour. The sustainable solution is for brands to use their influence to prevent child labour from happening – or recurring if found. Our advice to brands? Know who makes your clothing! Understand your supply chain and the risks of (hidden) subcontractors. The purchasing practices of brands have a huge influence, positive or negative, on the lives of employees in clothing factories. Scrutinise your suppliers properly and do your research. It is all too easy to do a quick check of factories and decide that nothing is wrong. Make sure that decent wages are paid, enough for adult employees to support their families.

Tackling the problem together

Even though these FWF brands are transparent about finding child labour, they cannot resolve the issues on their own. After all, this is not something that happens only in their supply chain. Particularly in Turkey, more and more media report about Syrian refugee children working in garment factories. Child labour remains a widespread risk. The best thing for children working in clothing factories would be if many more brands were to take responsibility and invest in better working conditions.

Clothing brands alone cannot eliminate child labour. To achieve that, a joint approach is needed, involving governments, factories, trade unions and others. We're aware that change won't happen overnight. But the industry can use its economic influence in a coordinated manner to support positive changes at factories. It is high time to feel good about the clothing we wear.

Sophie Koers, Associate Director of Fair Wear Foundation, on behalf of Continental Clothing (United Kingdom), Takko (Germany), Heigo (The Netherlands) and Fristads Kansas Group (Sweden)