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Gender Based Violence in the Asian H&M and Gap Garment Supply Chains: Two Reports to the International Labor Organization

Today, as negotiations are underway at the [International Labor Organization](#) in Geneva to create a global standard on women's labor rights, [Global Labor Justice](#) announces new research showing why an international labor standard on gender based violence must include strong accountability for women working in global production networks.

Along with the [Asia Floor Wage Alliance \(AFWA\)](#) and its members [CENTRAL Cambodia](#), [Sedane Labour Resource Centre \(LIPS\) Indonesia](#), and [Society for Labour and Development \(SLD\) India](#), Global Labor Justice released two groundbreaking factory level research reports exposing gender based violence in H&M and Gap's Asian garment supply chains. The coalition is also asking for immediate action to be taken by H&M and Gap to end the violence and harassment that women garment workers are forced to endure regularly in their garment supplier factories.

These reports follow the release of Friday's [report](#) documents the spectrum of gender based violence in Walmart's global garment production network in advance of its annual shareholder meeting.

This new research documents sexual harassment and violence including physical violence, verbal abuse, coercion, threats and retaliation, and routine deprivations of liberty including forced overtime. The research also makes clear these are not isolated incidents and that gender based violence in the H&M and Gap garment supply chains is a direct result of how these brands conduct business.

The [H&M](#) and [Gap](#) reports include an investigation of gender-based violence in H&M and Gap garment supplier factories, undertaken between January 2018 and May 2018 in nine garment production hubs across five countries in Asia, including: Dhaka, Bangladesh; Phnom Penh, Cambodia; West Java and North Jakarta, Indonesia; Bangalore, Gurugram (Gurgaon), and Tiruppur, India; and Biyagama, Gampaha District and Vavuniya District, Northern Province, Sri Lanka.

Contextualizing these findings in relationship to industry risk factors, the reports draw upon 2016 Asia Floor Wage Alliance [research](#) documenting human rights violations in H&M and Gap garment global supply chains; and the findings of five national level people's tribunals held by [Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) on working conditions in garment global production networks in South and Southeast Asia.

Based upon analysis of the spectrum of gender based violence and associated risk factors in the garment industry, these reports include concrete recommendations for an ILO Convention to eliminate gender based violence and harassment in the world of work. This work is urgent and important.

In an April 2018 labor dispute profiled in the [H&M report](#), the [Karnataka Garment Workers Union \(KOOGU\)](#) presented a letter to the General Manager of an H&M supplier factory in Bangalore, India requesting a discussion of three demands related to wages and other working conditions.

The meeting was never called. Two days later, the elected representatives of the union were physically assaulted by management. Leaders — including women workers — were physically beaten up, dragged out of the factory, and called derogatory caste related slurs. A 31 year old woman who was employed as

a tailor in the factory, and elected as a leader of the union, describes being grabbed by her hair and punched while enduring a torrent of slurs including, “*you whore, your caste people should be kept where the slippers are kept*” — and others with even more derogatory language.

In another labor dispute in India also profiled in the [H&M report](#), women workers employed in an H&M supplier factory in Bangalore, Karnataka, India reported physical abuse associated with pressure to meet production targets. A worker, Radhika, described being thrown to the floor and beaten:

On September 27, 2017, at 12:30 pm, my batch supervisor came up behind me as I was working on the sewing machine, yelling “you are not meeting your target production.” He pulled me out of the chair and I fell on the floor. He hit me, including on my breasts. He pulled me up and then pushed me to the floor again. He kicked me.

In an H&M supplier factory in Sri Lanka, a woman worker recounted facing retaliation for responding to unwanted physical touch from machine operators charged with fixing broken sewing machines in the production unit:

When girls scold machine operators for touching them or grabbing them, they take revenge. Sometimes they give them machines that do not function properly. Then, they do not come and repair it for a long time. After that, supervisors scold us for not meeting the target.

In an Indonesian Gap supplier factory, failure to meet production targets not only provokes verbal abuse but also intimidation and threats of firing. One woman described the daily barrage of yelling and mocking from her supervisor, driving her to meet production targets:

If you miss the target, all the workers in the production room can hear the yelling:

“You stupid! Cannot work?”

“If you are not willing to work, just go home!”

“Watch out, you! I will not extend your contract if you cannot work.”

“You don’t have to come to work tomorrow if you can’t do your job!”

They also throw materials. They kick our chairs. They don’t touch us so they don’t leave a mark that could be used as evidence with the police, but it is very stressful.

Women workers employed in a Gap supplier factory in Biyagama, Gampaha District, Sri Lanka also reported both working late into the night and risking harassment and robbery on their way home. One worker recounted:

Supervisors require us to work in the night, but we do not get transport to go home. People from the factory take advantage of women in this position. We are harassed by men who wait outside the factory gates at night, especially younger women. A friend of mine was robbed. They took all of the jewelry she was wearing.

Anannya Bhattacharjee, International Coordinator of [Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) says, “Decades of research and experience provide ample proof that voluntary corporate social responsibility initiatives whitewash a pattern of labor violations along global garment supply chains. The beneficiaries are a multi-billion-dollar corporate garment industry that has failed workers, employers, and consumers.

Corporate accountability requires brands including H&M and Gap and their suppliers to negotiate and adopt binding and enforceable agreements with garment unions in production countries.“

“Women workers and their labor organizations are uniting across borders to demand work that is free of gender based violence, pays a living wage, and promotes women’s initiative and leadership at all levels,” says Jennifer (JJ) Rosenbaum, U.S. Director of [Global Labor Justice](#). “Multinational corporations are expanding global supply chain models in many sectors. But it’s not only the corporations that are going global. Intersectional movements of workers, women, migrants and others are building cross-border networks and demanding change to a system that relies on poverty wages and gender based violence to deliver fast fashion to the U.S. and Europe at the expense of the well-being of women garment workers and their families.”

Tola Meun, Executive Director of [CENTRAL](#), described the violence documented in the report as a daily reality, “Gender based violence is a daily reality for women garment workers driven to meet unrealistic production targets in H&M and Gap’s supply chains. Most of these cases are not reported due to fear of retaliation in the workplace, including facing higher production targets or even being fired.”

“These findings from the research show that women workers need strong, independent trade unions to respond to gender based violence and the surveillance and retaliation that block many women workers from coming forward,” said Emilia Yanti Sihaan, General Secretary of the [Indonesia Federation of Independent Trade Unions \(GSBI\)](#). “Women workers will not stop with an international labor standard eliminating gender based violence - we also demand core labor standards protecting freedom of association and collective bargaining to be respected by employers and governments.”

In response to the reports, the Women’s Leadership Committee of the [Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) is asking Gap to take [three immediate action steps](#):

- Publicly support and commit to proactively implement an ILO Convention Recommendation on Gender Based Violence that includes the recommendations from the Asia Floor Wage Alliance and partners
- Meet with the Asia Floor Wage Women’s Leadership Committee in the next three months to discuss the supply chain findings and next steps
- Proactively work with the Asia Floor Wage Alliance to pilot women’s committees in factories that eliminate gender based violence and discrimination from the supplier factories

[Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) and [Global Labor Justice](#) are also calling on H&M to ensure its supplier immediately addresses the demands from the [KOOGU union](#):

- Reinstate all 15 workers who were fired in retaliation for union activity
- Terminate employment for all factory managers and senior staff involved in the attack
- Meet with [KOOGU](#) to discuss the original three demands: inclusion of an elected worker on the factory health committee to address water quality at the factory, steps to address irregular transportation to the factory, and negotiation to raise payments that are currently below living wages.

A substantive response from H&M and Gap has yet to be received after the reports coupled with requests for action were sent to [H&M](#) and [Gap](#) on May 30th, 2018.

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[Global Labor Justice](#) (GLJ) is a US based strategy hub supporting transnational collaboration among worker and migrant organizations to expand labor rights and new forms of bargaining on global value chains and international labor migration corridors.

[Asia Floor Wage Alliance](#) (AFWA) was officially formed in 2006 and includes more than 76 organizations, including garment industry trade unions, NGOs, consumer groups and research institutes from more than 17 countries from across Asia, Europe and North America.

[CENTRAL](#) (The Center for Alliance of Labor & Human Rights) is a local Cambodian NGO. The organization empowers Cambodian working people to demand transparent and accountable governance for labor and human rights through legal aid and other appropriate means.

[Sedane Labour Resource Centre/Lembaga Informasi Perburuhan Sedane \(LIPS\)](#) is a nongovernmental organization in labor studies. LIPS works to strengthen the labor movement by documenting knowledge through participatory research and developing methods of popular education in labor groups and unions.

[Society for Labour and Development \(SDI\)](#) is a Delhi-based labour rights organisation. SLD promotes equitable development by advocating for the social and economic wellbeing of workers, with a particular emphasis on women's and migrants' rights and cultural renewal among disenfranchised people. SLD works in the National Capital Region Territory, Haryana, Uttar, Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand.