

Asia Floor Wage Alliance Women Trade Union Leaders Garment Supply Chain Statement July 2nd, 2018

We write as women trade union leaders in the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) representing thousands of women garment workers in India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and Cambodia. Our members produce clothes for H&M, Gap, Walmart and other well known brands which consumers in the U.S. and Europe wear.

The research we commissioned this year exposed women garment workers in Asia fainting at their workplaces due to malnutrition, exposure to high temperatures, and high levels of chemical substances in poorly ventilated spaces. The physical toll of garment work is exacerbated by violence that inflicts physical, mental, and sexual harm. These experiences of violence are unrelenting. Women workers are forced to work through lunch and into overtime hours that may stretch into the night.

Women workers also reported facing increased harassment and retaliation when they come forward to report to supervisors, auditors and brands. Unions that stand with their women members also face aggressive union busting tactics.

Corporations Cannot Investigate Themselves — They Must Work with Women Led Worker Organizations

We commissioned this independent research to show that world what workers, trade unions, and brands already know well. Gender-based violence is prevalent and a consequence of fast fashion supply chain contracting practices. The research also proves how corporate social responsibility and internal audits exist to whitewash the problems. Uncovering and solving these problems requires working with worker organizations to change purchasing practices.

Brands sometimes like to say that violence and exploitation is coming from a few bad supervisors or Asian culture as a whole, but our research showed that it is not the case at all. The research showed how the fast fashion business is based on a business model that uses production targets and so-called competitive pricing to create a captive workforce earning subminimum wages and being forced to work overtime, placing women garment workers at routine risk for gender based violence. To sell clothes so cheap, turn over new styles fast, and deliver such high profits to brand executives and shareholders, suppliers rely on a business model that utilizes the discrimination and exploitation women workers as a cost saving measure.

Help Us Show a New Way Forward with Brands, Suppliers and Trade Unions

We are encouraged that the research has received significant global attention in major news outlets in the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America. We have received numerous

messages of support from the women's movement, trade unions, human rights groups, and others who recognize the problem and demand for it be stopped immediately.

But we need you all to understand the scope of this serious issue and take it a step further.

Now that Gap, H&M, and Walmart have been challenged to recognize what the research shows, they are trying to use their own internal audits and corporate social responsibility to distract from the necessary structural changes that they need to make immediately.

Brands themselves know these internal audits do not work. These are the same audits that have already failed to uncover what our research showed. These are the same auditors that determined Rana Plaza was safe months before it's collapse, and resulted in the deaths of more than a thousand garment workers, the majority of whom were women.

Our research shows that these internal investigations are used by suppliers to coach women workers and threaten them to not participate in. These are the same corporate programs which address trainings without actually changing the supply chain pressures where gender based violence is common as a method of meeting high production, low cost contracts from the suppliers.

Urge Gap, H&M, and Walmart to Work with AFWA Women Leaders' Committee to Pilot Projects in the Supply Chain Factories

As women workers and leaders of trade unions who work on their supply chains day after day we don't just know the problems — we know what solutions will work. These jobs are important to us - and we expect them to be decent jobs with living wage salaries, nondiscrimination, and freedom to join and lead worker organizations. These brands cannot do it alone, but together with their suppliers, and trade union leadership we can pilot innovative agreements and practices that enable women workers to lead in their workplaces, communities, and beyond.

Together We Can Remove Barriers So Women Workers Can Drive the Solutions!

We know the problems and the solutions to solving them. And we want our factories and our countries to be models of decent work for women.

If Gap and H&M are serious about commitments to women's empowerment they and their suppliers should work, locally and regionally, with us — women workers and women trade union leaders to pilot programs that change conditions in the factory immediately.

We know that dozens of trade unions and civil society organisations in Asia and globally support our efforts and we ask our supporters around the world to keep fighting alongside us.

Urge Gap, H&M, and Walmart to work side by side with the AFWA Women Leaders' Committee.

The undersigned (and growing list) of women trade union leaders of Asia Floor Wage Alliance Women Leaders Committee urge H&M, Gap and Walmart to work with us to discuss these supply chain findings and pilot women's committees in factories that eliminate gender-based violence and discrimination from the supplier factories.

Signed:

Asia Floor Wage Alliance Women Leaders' Committee

Yang Sophorn, President, Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU), Cambodia
Kokom Komalawati, Women and Child Department, National Leadership Committee, Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia(GSBI) (English: Indonesia Joint Trade Unions), Indonesia
Sumiyati, National Leadership Committee, Serikat Pekerja Nasional (SPN) (English: National Union of Workers), Indonesia
Dian Septi, General Secretary, FBLP-KPBI (Federasi Buruh Lintas Pabrik- Konfederasi Persatuan Buruh Indonesia), Indonesia
Rukmini V.P., President, Garment Labour Union, India
Rathi, Vice President, Karnataka Garment Workers Union, India
Anannya Bhattacharjee, Garment and allied Workers Union, India
R.J.K Inoka Damayanthi, Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU), Sri Lanka
Lalitha Ranjane Dedduwakumara, Textile, Garment and Clothing Workers Union, Sri Lanka
P. Kumasi, President, National Free Trade Union, Sri Lanka