

BLOOD THREADS: FAST FASHION'S CRUEL NEEDLE PIERCING THROUGH THE INNOCENT HANDS

Fouzaan Ahsan* Swastika Mukherjee* Swapnil Hazra*

ABSTRACT

Child labor is a dark reality of the fashion industry, especially in Bangladesh, where many of the world's largest fashion brands outsource work. This paper discusses the staggering scope of child labor in the fashion sector within Bangladesh, where millions of children get entrapped by poverty, deprived of education, and are put through hard work. These young workers are asked to work for long hours in hazardous conditions, meager wages, and often under severe health risks associated with unsafe environments, compounded by the ever-present threat of exploitation and abuse. Despite these international and national laws to eradicate child labor, their implementation is often inconsistent and sometimes even ineffective. This paper underlines how global fashion brands can either perpetuate or alleviate this problem through supply chain practices. The review of corporate responsibility shows sharp contrasts between brands simply washing their face with the rhetoric of ethical sourcing and ones having rigorous processes for transparent audits. The paper also examines the efforts put in by the Bangladeshi government, non-governmental organizations, and consumer advocacy groups in dealing with this crisis. Government efforts, no matter how good their intentions are, remain incomplete due to a lack of resources and endemic corruption. NGOs, though making remarkable contributions in rescuing child laborers and providing them with education and vocational training, have very little coverage. Only consumer awareness can really bring about much-needed change, and this will require consistent global attention and commitment. Case studies—from the rehabilitation of child workers in Dhaka to comparative analysis of factories supplying different international brands—really brought to life the issues at play, along with some of the potential solutions, in this research. Given the enormity of the scale and effect of child labor in the fashion industry in Bangladesh, a very pertinent question that crops up is how a harmonized global effort can be mobilized to finally rid the supply chains of the world's leading fashion brands of child labor.

*BA LLB, FIRST YEAR, AMITY LAW SCHOOL, KOLKATA.

*B.DES, FIRST YEAR, AMITY SCHOOL OF FASHION TECHNOLOGY, KOLKATA.

*ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, AMITY SCHOOL OF FASHION TECHNOLOGY, KOLKATA.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Despite all the increased attention paid to the issue over recent years, child labor is still prevalent in the global fashion industry today, with Bangladesh representing one of the biggest suppliers for most of the world's major fashion brands. In 2019, about 1.7 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 years were in child labor in Bangladesh alone, out of which many worked within the garment sector¹. The socio-economic situation of Bangladesh is riddled with rampant poverty and low literacy rates, which naturally gives birth to child labour. According to UNICEF², 11.3% of children are engaged in child labour, including hazardous work. This very trend of exploiting children to meet the fast fashion industry's need for cheap labour has continued unabated despite several international and national legislative measures and cries to eradicate this menace.

Scope and Significance

The present research focuses on the fashion industry in Bangladesh, which is a very critical stakeholder in the global apparel market. This study, with a view to bringing the dire conditions faced by child workers into the limelight and assessment of the effectiveness of the existing legal and corporate measures in place, aspires to raise an awareness of urgent reforms among policymakers, industry leaders, and consumers. The study shall further provide the impetus for change by resulting in evidence-based recommendations toward the eradication of child labor, ensuring ethical production in fashion. According to the International Labor Organization³, the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated this situation with more children having been pushed into labor following economic hardships and school closures. Therefore, root causes of poverty and lack of education have to be addressed if sustainable change has to be achieved.

¹ UNICEF, 'Child Labour Rises to 160 Million – First Increase in Two Decades' (Press Release, 10 June 2021) <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/press-releases/child-labour-rises-160-million-first-increase-two-decades> accessed 23 July 2024.

² UNICEF, 'Data on the Situation of Children in Bangladesh' (UNICEF, 6 October 2022) <https://www.unicef.org/bangladesh/en/data-situation-children-bangladesh> accessed 23 July 2024.

³ International Labour Organization, 'Child Labour in Bangladesh (2019)' <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/child-labour/lang--en/index.htm> accessed 20 July 2024.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC FACTORS DRIVING CHILD LABOUR IN BANGLADESH

Poverty

Poverty can be attributed as the main factor driving child labour in Bangladesh. A considerable part of the country's populace is below the poverty level, and so the families have to depend on whatever little income is earned by their child to meet basic needs. According to the World Bank⁴, an estimated 24% of the population in Bangladesh lived below the national poverty line as of 2016. In addition, many families are obligated by the economic hardships at the time to send their children to work rather than to school, and this tends to perpetuate the vicious cycle of poverty, thereby limiting future opportunities for the children.

Lack of Education

Further limiting child labor in Bangladesh is the limited access to education. Many children in the country, especially in rural areas, can scarcely access school either due to financial constraints or because they need to work to support the family's income. An estimated 2 million children aged 5 to 17 are involved in hazardous work, most unable to attend school given work demands⁵. In the absence of learning opportunities for these children, they have very limited choice but to join the labour force well before the statutory age, often in risky working conditions.

Cultural Norms and Practices

Cultural norms and practices also contribute largely to why children from Bangladesh continue to experience child labor. For instance, in some societies, there is a culturally accepted norm that children should engage in work at an early age to help their families. As stated by the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of International Labor Affairs⁶, such societal expectations or traditions may push the family to view the earnings of the children as more important than their education. As mentioned earlier, many communities have no understanding of the adverse consequences of child labour on a child's growth and development and, in relation, to the child's

⁴ World Bank, 'Poverty & Equity Data Portal - Bangladesh'

<https://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/BGD> accessed 20 July 2024.

⁵ Human Rights Watch, 'Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most': Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories (2015) <https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/04/22/whoever-raises-their-head-suffers-most/workers-rights-bangladeshs-garment> accessed 20 July 2024.

⁶ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 'Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor - Bangladesh (2019)' <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/bangladesh> accessed 20 July 2024.

future. Some of these cultural perceptions, or traditional beliefs, have to be eliminated to see a greater significance in working to alleviate child labour.

WORKING CONDITIONS IN THE FASHION INDUSTRY

Long Working Hours and Low Wages

Children in the garment sector in Bangladesh are usually required to work for long hours for very minimal wages. Many of them work for 12-14 hours a day, six days a week, for wages that lie at levels way below the living wage. For example, the average wage of a garment worker in Bangladesh is merely one-third of what would be considered a living wage. The financial burden compels families to withdraw their children from schools and put them in the workforce to help them meet their minimum daily requirements. This situation is further compounded by the presence of international brands of repute that, despite putting in place zero-tolerance policies on child labour, indirectly perpetuate these conditions by ensuring low-wage structures in their supply chains and making demands for high output⁷.

Health Hazards

Garment factory work is perilous and fraught with serious health risks for child labourers. Low ventilation in factories often exposes workers to dust and toxic chemicals, which may result in respiratory problems and other illnesses. All tasks are performed nearly continuously with high force, which is physiologically very demanding and might eventually cause musculoskeletal disorders. In addition to all these factors, safety conditions are also poorly monitored, which results in accidents. Reports highlight incidents like the Tazreen factory fire and the Rana Plaza collapse, resulting in hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries that underline how serious the dangers are in which garment workers find themselves⁸.

Exploitation and Abuse

The exploitation and abuse of workers in the garment sector are common. The majority of children are working and are yelled at and sometimes physically abused by the owner or by

⁷ Stop Child Labour, 'Garment Brands Contribute to Low Wages, Long Working Hours, and Child Labour in Bangladesh' (Stop Child Labour, 18 February 2021) <https://stopchildlabour.org/garment-brands-contribute-to-low-wages-long-working-hours-and-child-labour-in-bangladesh/> accessed 23 July 2024.

⁸ U.S. Department of Labor, '2021 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor: Bangladesh' (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022) <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/bangladesh> accessed 23 July 2024.

other workers; instead, they have to do extra hours of work without payment. This translates into a hostile working environment where the pressure to meet production quotas turns into exploitation. Evidence of forced labor and trafficking is also found in the informal sectors of the industry. This makes them invisible across the supply chain and very hard to hold their employers to account, let alone seek justice for the abuses they face⁹.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK AND ENFORCEMENT

International Laws and Conventions

The International Labour Organization has laid down a number of conventions with the objective of abolishing the practice of child labor in totality. The principal ones include ILO Convention No. 138, Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, and ILO Convention No. 182, Worst Forms of Child Labour. Bangladesh has ratified both these conventions to abolish child labor and protect children from exploitation and hazardous conditions at workplaces. As stated by the ILO¹⁰, these two Conventions bind the member states to set a minimum age for admission to employment and take immediate and effective measures to eradicate the worst forms of child labour.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child¹¹, which Bangladesh ratified in 1990, spells out a specific framework of activities that are supposed to protect the rights of children, including the right to be free from economic exploitation and hazardous work. Article 32 binds the signing countries to protect children from work that is likely to harm the health of children or interfere with their education. This convention is implemented in Bangladesh and monitored by a Committee on the Rights of the Child, which makes recommendations to improve child protection measures.

⁹ Solidarity Center, 'Invisible Work: Exploitation in the Global Garment Industry' (Solidarity Center) <https://www.solidaritycenter.org/photostory/invisible-work-exploitation-in-the-global-garment-industry/> accessed 23 July 2024.

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, 'ILO Conventions on Child Labour' (ILO) <https://www.ilo.org/international-programme-elimination-child-labour-ipecc/what-child-labour/ilo-conventions-child-labour> accessed 23 July 2024.

¹¹ United Nations, 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' (United Nations Audiovisual Library of International Law) <https://legal.un.org/avl/ha/crc/crc.html> accessed 23 July 2024.

National Laws in Bangladesh

The minimum age of employment and working conditions are regulated in Bangladesh under the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006¹². According to the Act, no child below the age of 14 shall be permitted to work in any occupation whatsoever. Adolescents between 14 and 18 years shall not be engaged in hazardous work. One of the main challenges is the enforcement of these provisions because of a lack of resources and entrenchment of poverty.

Labour law enforcement in Bangladesh is carried out by the Ministry of Labour and Employment. However, the adequacy of its enforcement has usually been curtailed by inadequacy of inspection capacity, corruption, and political will. According to a report by the U.S. Department of State¹³, the labour inspectorate lacks the resources to make regular effective inspections or to enforce child labor laws properly. From this, therefore, stems widespread non-compliance and the continued exploitation of child workers.

Corporate Responsibility

Corporate responsibility is very important in addressing child labour in fashion brands. Most international fashion brands have adopted ethical sourcing policies, which require suppliers to adhere to the set labour standards that prohibit child labour. Most of the policies call for commitments to conduct regular audits and allow transparency in the supply chain. Organizations like the Fair Labor Association¹⁴ offer guidance on certification programs on how ethical sourcing can be implemented.

Supply chain auditing¹⁵ is one of the major tools used by companies in order to monitor compliance with labour standards and detect child labour. Suppliers will inspect factories, on a visit, for adherence to the ethical sourcing policy. It is also worthwhile to remember that the efficacy of audits may vary at times. Some reports even claim that audits alone cannot eradicate child labour without a comprehensive approach that includes worker education and community engagement.

¹² Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, s 34 & s 41.

¹³ U.S. Department of State, '2020 Trafficking in Persons Report: Bangladesh' <https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-trafficking-in-persons-report/bangladesh/> accessed 20 July 2024.

¹⁴ Fair Labor Association, 'Fair Labor Accreditation' <https://www.fairlabor.org/accountability/fair-labor-accreditation/> accessed 20 July 2024.

¹⁵ Fair Labor Association, 'Principles of Fair Labor and Responsible Sourcing' <https://www.fairlabor.org/accountability/standards/manufacturing/mfg-principles/> accessed 20 July 2024.

CASE STUDY

This paper presents the case study on the dynamics of child labor in the garment industry in Dhaka, Bangladesh, from the perspective of perpetuating factors, conditions of children at work, and various interventions underway by different stakeholders to redress this problem.

Dhaka is the capital of Bangladesh and hosts one of the largest garment industries in the country. The industry supplies the substantive share of foreign currency to the economy of Bangladesh and accounts for about 84% of the country's total exports. However, it is also one of the industries that highly involve the use of children as labourers.

Most families in Dhaka live below the poverty line, surviving on the income their children generate. The average income the families receive cannot even sustain them, and the result is that the children have to join the workforce. Children from low-income backgrounds cannot get access to education due to a lack of means. These children end up working in garment factories with no other option to make ends meet. In some communities, the concept of child labor becomes cultural due to acceptance as a means of supporting the family. A norm is therefore perpetuated as the cycle of child labor goes on. The children employed in the garment factories of Dhaka, Bangladesh, face very rough and hazardous working conditions. Children spend 10-12 hours a day and six days a week in the workplace. They are paid very low wages, way below the minimum level fixed by law. Health risks are, therefore, pretty high, with exposure to harmful chemicals, bad ventilation, and a lack of proper safety measures.

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Bithi is a 15-year-old girl from Dhaka, one of the large cities in Bangladesh. She started working in garment factories when she was just 12. Extreme poverty and her father's illness pushed her family into the garment sector and forced her and her elder sister to work. It was the only alternative left for her family, reeling under the financial crisis, to work in the garment industry catering to the affluent countries like Canada and the United States of America for their garments and clothing.

Bithi had been working in a small, overcrowded factory making pockets for blue jeans. The workdays were long, sometimes as many as 12 hours a day, six days a week, under very difficult conditions with very little pay—about \$1 per day. Ventilation and other safety measures were very poor within the factory, so Bithi was very exposed to health risks. First, the environment was overwhelming, and Bithi cried on her first day at work. She became accustomed to the routine with time but only at a big cost to her health and well-being. Her dream of becoming a

doctor was shattered as she had to forgo her education to support her family. Bithi's mother, Feroza, also expressed that with eight members living in a single room and a bedridden husband, she saw no other alternative but to send her daughters out to work. These economic pressures and cultural acceptance of child labour perpetuated the cycle of poverty and exploitation.

The story of Bithi reflects how deeply child labor is entrenched in the Bangladesh garment industry. A multi-pronged strategy with strengthening labor legislation enforcement, financial support to families, easy access to education, and changing attitudes in society toward abolishing child labor would be required. Only when the government, NGOs, corporate sectors, and communities work together will this cycle of child labor be broken¹⁶.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FACTORIES

Unethical Brands

2014, SOMO (Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations) and ICN (India Committee of the Netherlands) wrote and published a report regarding the abuse girls and women workers went through in the South Indian textile industry, one of the hotspots of child labor for large fashion companies. SOMO interviewed some of the workers from Jeyavishnu and Premier Mills, textile companies who export their products to 40+ countries around the world, such as The USA, Australia, Germany, and South Korea, and also one of the main distributors of textiles for H&M, Mothercare, etc. They found that most of the girls were persuaded by promises that included well-paying jobs, comfortable accommodation, nutritious meals, and opportunities to get training and education, but in reality, what they were getting was something entirely different. They weren't able to go home when they wanted to, they were put to work 12 hours a day and were getting less wage than they were promised. Some of the girls who were employed were even sent by their own parents during the recruitment process.

Children between the age of 5–17 years old ideally should be getting their formal education, socializing with friends and families, discovering what they're interested in, and many more. But in reality, things are not as easy or smooth sailing. In other countries like Bangladesh, parents have to get their children out of school and make them work in fashion company's factories instead, such as H&M, Esprit, and GAP because the wages there are so low and to

¹⁶ World Vision UK, 'Child Labour in Bangladesh' (World Vision UK, 12 June 2019) <https://www.worldvision.org.uk/about/blogs/child-labour-in-bangladesh/> accessed 23 July 2024.

help them with their family's economic income. In most cases, the children who work in those factories do not attend school nor do they receive formal education. In Bangladesh, it is considered a norm for girls to marry and for boys to do labor once they've reached adolescence.

Based on a household survey from the Bangladesh Government in 2010, between 7–9% of children aged 9–10 had not yet attended school. It is estimated that 4.3% of children aged 5–14 work and 6.8% of children aged 7–14 work whilst still getting their education. These living conditions faced by the children become a huge factor in their future, which will make it harder for them to get well-paying jobs later in life, they usually end up getting low-paid jobs, and this whole thing continues in an endless vicious cycle of generational poverty¹⁷.

H&M

Swedish fashion chain H&M worked with clothing factories in Myanmar where children as young as 14 toiled for more than 12 hours a day, according to a book being published in Sweden next week. “They employed anyone who wanted to work,” Zu Zu, one of the girls who started work aged 14, told the authors of *Modeslavar*, or *Fashion Slaves* in English. Writers Moa Kärnstrand and Tobias Andersson Akerblom met with 15-year-old girls who were working until 10 pm in breach of Myanmar's laws and the international labour convention. The girls were working for two factories, Myanmar Century Liaoyuan Knitted Wear and Myanmar Garment Wedge, both near the capital, Yangon. H&M said it had taken action with both factories over ID cards and overtime after being made aware that a group of 14- to 17-year-olds had been working long hours since 2013. However, it said in a statement: “When 14- to 18-year-olds are working it is therefore not a case of child labour, according to international labour laws. ILO instead stresses the importance of not excluding this age group from work in Myanmar. H&M does of course not tolerate child labour in any form.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Alvira Nov, 'Exploiting Childhood: Unveiling the Dark Realities of Child Labor in Fast Fashion' (Medium, 10 July 2023) <https://medium.com/@alviranov/exploiting-childhood-unveiling-the-dark-realities-of-child-labor-in-fast-fashion-bea3a99d8b71> accessed 23 July 2024.

¹⁸ Kate Hodal, 'H&M Factories in Myanmar Employed 14-Year-Old Workers' (The Guardian, 21 August 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2016/aug/21/hm-factories-myanmar-employed-14-year-old-workers> accessed 23 July 2024.

GAP

The Indian children reportedly found making clothes for Gap Inc. should be reunited with their families and compensated by the government, activists said Monday amid a spreading scandal about the use of child labor by the international clothing chain.

The reported discovery of children as young as 10 sewing clothes for clothing retailer Gap Inc. in a New Delhi factory has renewed concerns about child labor in India, but government officials offered no comment. Britain's Observer newspaper on Sunday reported that it had found children making clothes with Gap labels in a squalid factory in New Delhi. It quoted the children as saying they were from poor parts of India and had been sold to the sweatshop by their impoverished families. Some said they were not paid for their work.

Gap responded quickly, saying the factory was being run by a subcontractor who was hired in violation of Gap's policies, and none of the products made there would be sold in its stores. Gap spokesman Bill Chandler told The Associated Press on Sunday. "Under no circumstances is it acceptable for children to produce or work on garments."¹⁹

Ethical Brands

Stella McCartney and Levi's

This British powerhouse designer is no stranger to sustainable style. Stella McCartney's pieces are leather and fur-free, and she was one of the first designers to pioneer earth-friendly innovation. Today, every item of clothing is crafted with cutting-edge innovation, locally sourced materials, and effortless luxury. In 2011, the fashion house joined the Ethical Trading Initiative, one of the most iconic denim brands in the world, Levi's has certainly made strides to become more sustainable. Started its first sewing factory in 1960 and continuously sought to stay ahead of the curve and to help others. It hasn't changed since it opened in the 19th century. Today, this brand collaborates with local suppliers and relies on Water Less technology to reduce 96% of water on every pair of jeans.²⁰

¹⁹ Associated Press, 'Report: Gap Caught in Child Labor Scandal' (NBC News, 28 October 2007) <https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna21516766> accessed 23 July 2024.

²⁰ Mia Steiber, '20 Best Sustainable Clothing Brands' (The Trend Spotter, 14 March 2022) <https://www.thetrendspotter.net/sustainable-clothing-brands/> accessed 23 July 2024.

Organic Basics

Organic Basics, a Denmark-based company offers a great range of ethically made underwear, activewear and everyday essentials. Organic Basics is also a certified B Corp. Alongside their GOTS certification, this makes them an excellent choice for your ethical essentials.

PACT

Finding one brand that offers sustainable fashion for the whole family can be tricky — especially given the high price tags and limited releases of many eco-friendly clothing companies. Pact, however, offers a broad line of options for everyone in the family with classic styles that cross-generational tastes and meet the criteria of even the most ethically and environmentally conscious consumers. With clothes for men, women, children and babies, plus bed and bath products, Pact checks all of the boxes.

When it comes to sustainability and quality, Pact has embraced both eco-friendly practices and materials to create durable apparel that is meant to last longer than fast fashion alternatives. The company uses organic cotton in all of its clothing, which requires 91% less water than regular cotton to produce and is free of toxins. In fact, Pact lists how much water was saved in the production of each of its products — which is something consumers concerned about water conservation will appreciate. Pact also offers carbon offset shipping by allowing consumers to buy credits to offset the calculated impact of shipping to their specific address. And, the recyclable box the products arrive in can be reused to ship gently used clothing to a variety of non-profits with a free shipping label.²¹

EFFORTS TO MITIGATE CHILD LABOUR

International Organizations

International Labour Organization

The ILO has been at the forefront, promoting adherence to the Fundamental ILO Conventions, which include measures against child labor. They have implemented projects like the CLEAR

²¹ Olivia O'Bryon, 'Pact is Bringing Sustainable Fashion to the Whole Family' (Forbes, 10 October 2021) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/oliviaobryon/2021/10/10/pact-is-bringing-sustainable-fashion-to-the-whole-family/> accessed 23 July 2024.

Cotton project, which works to eliminate child labor in cotton, textile, and garment supply chains in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Pakistan, and Peru.²²

United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UNICEF focuses on children's rights and has been active in addressing child labor in the garment and footwear sectors. They work on promoting policies and practices that prevent child labor and ensure children's right to education.²³

Good Weave International

Founded by Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi, GoodWeave targets child labor in hidden supply chains of the apparel industry. They partner with businesses to inspect supply chains, remediate child labor, and implement social and educational programs to prevent its recurrence.²⁴

European Union

The EU promotes due diligence in supply chains and supports initiatives to combat child labor, such as the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chains in the Garment and Footwear Sector. They have also significantly contributed to eradicating child labor in the cotton industry in Uzbekistan through partnerships with the ILO.²⁵

Save the Children

This organization works globally to protect children's rights, including preventing child labor. They engage in educating communities, advocating for policy changes, and supporting the reintegration of child laborers into schools.²⁶

²² European Commission, 'Are the Clothes You Are Wearing Free of Child Labour?' (European Commission, 10 November 2020) https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/are-clothes-you-are-wearing-free-child-labour_en accessed 23 July 2024.

²³ UNICEF, 'Children's Rights in the Garment and Footwear Supply Chain' (UNICEF, 2020) <https://www.unicef.org/media/70121/file/Childrens-rights-in-the-garment-and-footwear-supply-chain-2020.pdf> accessed 23 July 2024.

²⁴ GoodWeave, 'New GoodWeave Short Film Shines Spotlight on Child Labor in Hidden Apparel Supply Chains' (GoodWeave) <https://goodweave.org/new-goodweave-short-film-shines-spotlight-on-child-labor-in-hidden-apparel-supply-chains/> accessed 23 July 2024.

²⁵ European Commission, 'Are the Clothes You Are Wearing Free of Child Labour?' (European Commission, 10 November 2020) https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/stories/are-clothes-you-are-wearing-free-child-labour_en accessed 23 July 2024.

²⁶ Human Rights Careers, 'Organizations That Are Working to End Child Labor' (Human Rights Careers) <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/organizations-end-child-labor/> accessed 23 July 2024.

Human Rights Watch

HRW conducts research and advocacy to expose and combat child labor practices in the fashion industry. They work on raising awareness and pushing for stronger enforcement of labor laws and corporate accountability.²⁷

Centre for Child Rights

Focused on protecting children's rights in India, this organization conducts research, and advocacy, and provides legal aid to children affected by labor practices. They engage with government and civil society to push for systemic changes.²⁸

Fast Fashion Brands

Zara (Inditex)

Zara, owned by Inditex, has implemented stringent policies to eliminate child labor within its supply chain. The company's "Code of Conduct for Manufacturers and Suppliers" prohibits child labor and aligns with international standards such as those set by the International Labour Organization (ILO).²⁹ Key aspects of Zara's approach include:

Supply Chain Monitoring

Inditex conducts regular audits and inspections of its suppliers to ensure compliance with their code of conduct. This involves both announced and unannounced visits.

Partnerships and Initiatives

Zara collaborates with various international organizations to enhance its monitoring capabilities and address child labor issues. This includes partnerships with the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and the Global Compact Network.

²⁷ Your Sustainable Guide, 'Child Labor in Fast Fashion' (Your Sustainable Guide, 23 January 2023) <https://yoursustainableguide.com/child-labor-in-fast-fashion/> accessed 23 July 2024.

²⁸ Human Rights Careers, 'Organizations That Are Working to End Child Labor' (Human Rights Careers) <https://www.humanrightscareers.com/issues/organizations-end-child-labor/> accessed 23 July 2024.

²⁹ Inditex, 'Our Commitment to People' (Inditex) <https://www.inditex.com/en/our-commitment-to-people> accessed 23 July 2024.

Training and Capacity Building

Inditex provides training to its suppliers to ensure they understand and implement ethical labor practices, including the prohibition of child labor.

Gucci (Kering Group):

Gucci, under the Kering Group, is committed to maintaining high ethical standards and eradicating child labor from its supply chain. Gucci's policies are detailed in various documents, including their "Responsible Purchasing Code of Conduct" and other sustainability reports. Key elements of Gucci's policies include:

Zero Tolerance Policy

Gucci maintains a strict zero-tolerance stance towards child labor, which is clearly outlined in its purchasing code of conduct.³⁰

Certifications and Standards

Gucci adheres to internationally recognized standards, such as the SA8000 certification, which ensures respect for workers' rights and prohibits child labor.³¹

Supplier Audits

Regular audits and assessments of suppliers are conducted to ensure compliance. Non-compliance results in immediate corrective actions or termination of the business relationship.

Transparency and Reporting

Gucci publishes annual sustainability reports detailing their efforts and progress in combating child labor and other ethical issues within their supply chains.³²

³⁰ Gucci Equilibrium, 'Policies and Commitments' (Gucci) <https://equilibrium.gucci.com/policies-and-commitments/> accessed 23 July 2024.

³¹ Gucci, 'Gucci's Responsible Purchasing Code of Conduct' (Gucci, 2023) https://equilibrium.gucci.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Guccis-Responsible-Purchasing-Code-of-Conduct_2023_EN.pdf accessed 23 July 2024.

³² Gucci Equilibrium, 'Home' (Gucci) <https://equilibrium.gucci.com> accessed 23 July 2024.

H&M Group

H&M Group has also taken significant steps to combat child labor through comprehensive policies and practices.³³ Some key components of their strategy include:

Global Framework Agreements

H&M collaborates with global unions such as Industrial Global Union to ensure fair labor practices and the elimination of child labor.

Supplier Code of Conduct

H&M's code of conduct strictly prohibits child labor. This code is based on ILO conventions and is enforced through rigorous audits and inspections of their supply chain.

Sustainable Sourcing and Transparency

H&M has increased transparency in their supply chain, publishing the names and details of their suppliers. They work closely with these suppliers to ensure adherence to ethical labor practices.

Capacity Building

H&M engages in continuous dialogue and training with their suppliers to improve labor conditions and eliminate child labor.

CONCLUSION

The extensive child labor in the fast fashion industry in Bangladesh underlines issues of poverty, lack of education, and structural exploitation. While this problem is very well grounded in international conventions, national laws, and corporate commitments, it is very unlikely to disappear and thus calls for much more intense and multi-faceted efforts. These socio-economic factors drive child labor, hazardous working conditions, and uneven application of labor laws, continuing this vicious cycle and entrapping millions of children in a life of hardship and lost potential.

³³ H&M Group, 'Sustainability' (H&M Group) <https://hmgroup.com/sustainability> accessed 23 July 2024.

These hopes rest in international organizations' and NGOs' responsible brands, but this has to be scaled up with stronger governance and consumer advocacy. International fashion brands will have a big role to play in going beyond rhetoric and ensuring true and transparent practices with respect to ethical sourcing and fair labor conditions.

Activities that consumers engage in can stir major change. Rallying with ethical brands and creating a demand for accountability on the part of other companies that exploit cheap labor shall help drive a real change in breaking the cycle of child labor. It shall call for collective effort from governments, corporations, and individuals to bring about sustainable change.

Change begins with awareness, but it thrives on action. May we weave a future where each and every child is free from the cruel threads of exploitation and where fashion spells fairness.

