

FWF strategy for combating forced labour in South India

1. Background

The Sumangali Scheme, which is a form of forced labour in India, is said to have started in 1989. It is prevalent in the garment and textile industries in South India, especially the area of Tirupur and Coimbatore. Under the Sumangali Scheme, young women and their families sign contracts with factories to work for a certain period, usually three to five years, to earn a bulk of money for dowry. It is reported that many Sumangali workers live in captivity for that entire period. They are often forced to work up to 12 hours a day, live in hostels with few facilities and are earning very low wages. Some factories are reported to fire the girls or force them to resign shortly before they finish the contract so as to avoid paying the 'marriage assistance fund'.

The story was told again by a Dutch national newspaper De Volkskrant in September 2010. Several retailers on the Dutch market were found to be sourcing from factories using the Sumangali Scheme. Since some members of Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) also source from Tirupur and Coimbatore area, FWF decided to develop a strategy for preventing and where necessary redressing forced labour in garment supply chains of its members who source from high-risk areas.

2. Problem analysis

In October 2010, FWF organised a stakeholder consultation round in India. During the consultation, a representative of FWF met with the International Labour Organisation Delhi Office, Fair Labour Association India Office, local NGOs, trade unions and the local government trade department, to discuss the issue of Sumangali Scheme and other forms of forced labour in South India.

Many labour organisations have worked on the issue of Sumangali Scheme and forced labour. Besides raising awareness of the public, some NGOs also worked at community level to educate the families of (potential) Sumangali girls.

One of the conclusions from the stakeholder consultation is that forced labour in garment factories near Tirupur and textile mills around Coimbatore takes many forms. While the Sumangali Scheme is often found in textile mills, different degrees and forms of forced labour exist in the garment (RMG) industry. Important and popular characteristics of these practices are:

1. The factory employs a significant number of casual workers without offering them a permanent contract;
2. Some workers are trainees or apprentices, despite the fact that they have worked in the factory for over one year;
3. So-called trainees or apprentices are paid less than minimum wages;
4. There is dormitory facility in the factory (also called "hostel" in India), where migrant female workers are kept. The workers' freedom of movement is restricted.



Forced labour and bonded labour are widely spread in the area with prevalence going up, not down. The textile industry supplies fabrics to garment factories located all over India. Since textile factories are 2nd tier suppliers, they are usually not covered by audits from western brands, nor in the monitoring and verification process of Fair Wear Foundation.

On the 2 November, FWF organised a supplier meeting in Tirupur. A few of FWF's members, including Continental Clothing, Jack Wolfskin and Switcher, source directly from around 9 suppliers in the area, four of whom attended. Not only forced labour, but also wages, overtime, labour contracts and freedom of association were discussed during the meeting. Some suppliers had limited knowledge on the definition of forced labour. All suppliers who attended the meeting explained that training for their human resource managers and workers would be beneficial to their work on social compliance.

3. Strategies and activity planning

To work on the elimination of bonded and forced labour in supply chains of FWF affiliates, FWF will undertake the following activities:

1. Raise awareness and gain support among members of FWF. Those FWF affiliates sourcing directly from Tirupur or Coimbatore are required to participate in the investigation plan and ensuing remediation programme if required.
2. Those FWF affiliates sourcing from India but not directly from Tirupur or Coimbatore will be invited to discuss feasible strategies to monitor working conditions of their fabrics suppliers.
3. Using FWF's local audit teams and partner network, an independent investigation will be commissioned by FWF, focusing first on the first tier suppliers of FWF affiliates in the aforementioned areas.
4. Depending on the outcomes of the previous step, factory audits and trainings will be carried out. Full audits give FWF an opportunity to assess living conditions in hostels and collect more information on working conditions, so that precise and tailor-made remediation plans can be drawn. FWF will invite local trade unions and NGOs to be involved in any training activities.
5. Improvement of complaints handling system. Members sourcing from India should make sure that FWF's Code of Labour Practices is posted also in their second tier suppliers. FWF will start working with an additional complaints handler in Tirupur for easier access for workers.
6. FWF and Fairtrade Labelling Organizations International (FLO) are currently designing a pilot project to work towards fair labour conditions in the entire supply chain for clothing of which fair trade cotton is the main material. The pilot project will include yarning, spinning, weaving and dyeing stages of manufacturing into FWF's verification process.