



BURMESE WOMEN'S UNION

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Date: 25th April, 2017

Abuses Implicate Multinational Corporations in Myanmar Garment Sector

Amend Minimum Wage Law, ensure minimum standards in factories are met

The Burmese Women's Union today released a briefing paper and film, "***Forgotten Voices Behind the Reform***", highlighting abuses of women workers in supply chains used by multinational corporations sourcing garments in Burma. The briefing paper and film document physical and verbal abuse, lack of basic sanitary and safety standards in factories, and disciplinary action against women demanding improved working conditions in garment factories in Yangon.

In an investigation spanning 4 months (January to April, 2016), Burmese Women's Union interviewed 66 women workers from garment factories in Mingalardon, Shwe Pyi Thar and Hlaing Thar Yar such as New Green Land, Honeys, Tristate Myanmar, ATK, Hangzhou Hundred, Myanmar Huayi, Myanmar Solamoda, E-land Myanmar, kittenish, Hong Kong (1) and (2), Shwe Yi Sabal, G2G and Myanmar skys supplying clothes for brands including H&M, Marks and Spencer and C&A. Women workers reported facing physical and verbal abuse from their employers, unsafe working conditions – including a lack of emergency exits, toilets and potable water – and termination of their contracts if they raised grievances or attempted to form unions.

"International brands continue to profit by exploiting women in Myanmar's garment sector. It is that simple," said Tin Tin Nyo, Chair Person of Burmese Women's Union. "Women are working in abusive and unsafe working conditions, and neither companies nor the Government of Myanmar are doing anything to stop it."

Workers explained to Burmese Women's Union that employers effectively force employees to work for up to 11 hours per-day, often without stopping to eat or visit the toilet. Workers are packed into confined rows in factories where windows remain shut, and in which drinking water is not properly filtered, resulting in health problems among workers. Factory owners are also denying workers the benefits of the 2014 Social Security Law – including health benefits, maternity leave, and coverage in case of death or injury on the job – despite taking 2% of their monthly salaries for a health and social care fund.

The report and film also detail the refusal of employers to pay the minimum wage to women workers across factories in Yangon. In August 2015, the Government of Myanmar implemented a minimum wage of 3600 Kyat (approximately \$2.60 USD) per day for 8 hours of work. Despite this, employers routinely underpay staff, and in many factories the minimum wage is used as a ceiling rather than a floor.

"Not only is the minimum wage insufficient for providing a dignified standard of living for workers, but it is easily dodged by many employers who pay their workers slave-like wages," said Tin Tin Nyo. "The Government must amend the law so that it can provide for workers' basic needs, and then ensure the law is implemented effectively."

Several workers reported restrictions on their ability to air grievances regarding their working conditions, and on their ability to form labour unions. Burmese Women's Union received reports that attempts to unionize

and protest were met with retaliation, dismissal and even violence by employers. Hnin Cherry, a 17-year old worker in a garment factory in Yangon told Burmese Women's Union:

"You're not allowed to tell anyone outside the factory about your labour, or what you're sewing or about your target. And you can not form your own labour union. If you break the rules, you will be fired."

Under domestic law, Myanmar's 2011 Labour Organization Law establishes that workers may form unions and stage protests if they give 14-days notice and provides penalties for employers that punish the unionization of workers. Under international law, the Myanmar government has an obligation to respect, protect and fulfil the rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, the right to just and favourable conditions of work, and the right to protection of health and to safety in working conditions as stipulated under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

"We want young women in Myanmar to know they are safe and secure in their jobs, and to have dignity and respect in their places of work," said Tin Tin Nyo. "The Government of Myanmar has to take action to show that investors are welcome here, but only if they prioritise the lives of their workers over profits."

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