

# Labor Concerns in Indian Apparel Industry



**By:**  
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## Abstract:

*“Since the introduction of liberalization policies in 1991 there has been considerable growth of export earnings through the garment industry. This implies that the garment manufacturing witnessed considerable growth during the last one and a half decades or so. Did Labor, employed in the industry, equally benefit from the growth proceeds? The work environment in the garment manufacturing units is unhealthy and unsafe for the workers, resulting in several health problems. The standards for working hours and wages are seldom met. There are much more compliance issues that the Indian Ready-made garment industry is yet to deal with.”*

## A sneak-peek into Indian Apparel Industry:

In India, the readymade garment industry had its beginning during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has witnessed impressive growth during the last four decades. It is reported to be the second highest contributor to India's export basket, after 'gems and jewelry.' There are around 70,000 garment manufacturing units in the country providing employment to more than 3 million persons. Most of the growth in this industry occurred since the decade of the 1980s. The value of garment exports, which was only \$2 million in 1960-1961, sharply increased from \$696 million in 1980-1981 to \$2,236 million in 1990-1991, and to \$4,765 million in 1999-2000. According to the Apparel Export Promotion Council (APEC), Apparel exports reached \$12 billion in February 2012 with a growth rate of 18.9% against the corresponding period last year. Apparel exports contribute 45% to India's total textile and clothing exports. India's exports in 2011-12 stands at \$30 billion against \$27 billion in 2010-11, said DK Nair of Confederation of Indian Textile Industry. During the next decade when the \$662 bn global textile and apparel trade would clock a CAGR of 5%, the \$89 bn Indian textile and apparel industry would grow 9.5% to become \$221 bn by 2021, according to Technopak's Textile and Apparel Compendium 2012.

India's \$58 bn domestic market would also clock a CAGR of 9% to be \$141 bn by 2021. Alarming zones in the Indian Apparel industry in context of labour:

With the advent of foreign retail players in the Indian market, the Indian garment manufacturing industry has been on the crest but the labour it involves has continuously been diving into the troughs. The industry being mostly human labour driven has brought many atrocities to its main pillar the labour itself. The industry has seen a large growth over the decade but the plight of the work-force involved has been stagnant and also striking. The problems related to labors in Indian Apparel Industry can be broadly categorized as under:

- Working conditions related problems
- Gender based discrimination issues
- Issues of child labour
- Wages and compensation based issues

These being just a few words need to be dug in deep.

Working conditions related problems:

The interdependence between working conditions and productivity is increasingly recognized. The first move in this direction came when people began to realize that occupational accidents had economic as well as physical consequences, although at first only their direct costs (medical care, compensation) were perceived. Subsequently, attention was paid to occupational diseases as well. The work environment in the garment manufacturing units is unhealthy and unsafe for the workers, resulting in several health problems. The major constraints faced by the workers in these units are:

- Poorly designed workstations
- Unsuitable furniture
- Lack of ventilation
- Inappropriate lighting
- Excessive noise
- Insufficient protection from dangerous chemicals
- Insufficient safety measures in fire emergencies
- Lack of personal protective equipment

People working in such poor or substandard environment are prone to occupational diseases. The workers in the garment units suffer from work-related musculoskeletal disorders such as carpal tunnel syndrome, forearm tendinitis, epicondylitis, bicapital tendinitis, lower back pain, neck pain, shoulder pain and osteoarthritis of the knees. The furniture used in the garment manufacturing units is either above or below the recommended levels and the strained posture had to be maintained throughout the work day, which could be responsible for the development of pain in the shoulders, the upper arm and the forearm. Continuous exposure to high levels of noise over a period of time would result in noise induced loss of hearing among the workers in this section.

Lack of personal protective equipment leads to cases of injury to fingers which is caused during the use of handheld or band knife cutting machines. Continuous use of cutting shears leads to swelling of fingers and cornifications of the skin. Lack of lights leads to headache. Accidents like needle-piercing because of the visual strain can also be caused by insufficient light at the point of operation. Apart from the above working condition related problems there are several other problems like lack of proper sanitation facilities in the factories, congested work area, improper ventilation etc. These points cannot be overlooked when discussing about the working environment of a labour in any of the industries. A proper industrial engineering team needs to be employed in order to develop proper and fatigue resistant work-stations with furniture and infrastructure suiting the work and the worker. Machine maintenance should not be overlooked by the administration as this would reduce the undesired noise in the workplace and also would be safe for the worker to work on. Proper and regular mock-fire drills should be conducted in order to train the workers to get out of the jeopardy in case of emergency. A well equipped medical team should also be employed to deal with emergencies. Sanitation and cleanliness related issues can be very easily dealt with by the management but are generally not paid heed to, most of the times.

### **Gender based discrimination issues:**

Garment manufacturing witnessed considerable growth during the post-liberalization period. Did men and women benefit from this growth equally? Women constitute a majority of the garment workers. An important reason for this was that women did not stay in the industry long enough to gain skills and experience to receive higher wages and salaries. Women leave the industry early due to gender-based discrimination practiced in the industry. Introduction of time-based wages in urgently needed to promote gender equality in the industry.

Now the question arises as to why is the feminine part of the work-force suffering this discrimination. The reasons for the same are: First, female labour is cheaper than male labour. Second, women workers are considered to be more docile, loyal and law-abiding in nature than men. Third, women workers are also more hard-working and sincere than their male counterparts. Finally, women workers have less contacts, exposure and bargaining power than male workers (Afsar 2002). Psychological, physical emotional, economical and what not; a female working in a garment factory has to face every single drop of this polluted wine. The atrocities and the inauspicious environment that the female workers have to work in cannot be versed everywhere. It can just be summed up in one single word that is PATHETIC!!!

### **Issues of child labour:**

The prevalent poverty and illiteracy in India has paved way for child labour in almost all sectors of Indian economy. The face of this inhuman, anti-social and illegal demon is even more treacherous in the garment industry. As discussed above, the inappropriate conditions prevalent in the garment industry is not at all suitable for a healthy adult to work in, how come the management employs innocent children to work in such conditions. A child not only loses his education and intellect to this social monster but eventually succumbs and loses his life as well. Dalit (outcaste) girls under 18 from poor families, who are lured with promises of a decent wage, comfortable accommodation and, in some cases a sum of money upon completion of the contract that may be used for their dowry. This is one of the innumerable examples of child labour and its exploitation in the ready-made garment industry. With the advent of international compliances and interference by local NGOs, there has been some but certainly not enough dispositioning of this social evil. After global apparel brands stopped sourcing from Indian apparel exporters for engaging child labour, the industry has decided to adopt zero tolerance to child labour and cleanse the supply chain. Apparel industry players would now make sure that labour contractors don't engage child labour and get the supply chain of the suppliers audited so that the industry starts getting orders again. With positive initiatives taken by the think tank of the industries, the elimination of child labour can be a future vision, but the way present scenario stands, fingers shall remain crossed.

### **Wages and compensation based issues:**

Chapter VI Sec 51 of the Factories Act, 1948 says that "No adult worker shall be required or allowed to work in a factory for more than forty eight hours in a week" and Sec 54

adds that “no adult worker shall be required or allowed to work in a factory for more than nine hours in any day”. Where a worker works in a factory for more than nine hours in any day or for more than forty-eight hours in any week, he/she shall, in respect of overtime work, be entitled to wages at the rate of twice his ordinary rate of wages. In reality every garment worker ends up working for nine to ten hours daily and this is not always recorded as overtime work. Often overtime work is not voluntary and workers are compelled to do overtime work to complete production targets.

There has been a noticeable movement away from the garment industry as workers look at much more lucrative and less stressful option in other booming industries like IT and retail. There is no denying that labour wage in Indian garment industry is very low compared to that of other global competitors (approx. 1/3rd of the world standards). This leads to dissatisfied workforce and hence diminished productivity. The reason for such low wages and non compliance with the wages act can be the absence of proper labour unions in context of garment industry set-up which reduces their demanding capability. The labour fails to voice its grievances in the fear of being kicked off and left unemployed and hence is forced to zip and take whatever he gets as his FATE!!

### **To sum up:**

As discussed in the preceding stanzas, the labour or the work-force in the Indian apparel industry is in a condition that is really disturbing for the spectating senses but it fails to drive any concern into the minds that thrive on it. An average worker here cannot earn a proper living standard for himself and his family. He actually might be in dreadful wanting of what he himself produces that is clothing. He lives in a dim present and if the present scene prevails than, he is certainly heading towards a darker future. It's high time that the brainy part of the society and management join their thinking hats and ponder on this question as to why the labour issues in the garment industry are still unanswered.

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