Clothing brands must help ensure Asia's garment workers get a living wage

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Global clothing brands must take responsibility for the millions of workers in Asia who are poorly paid by suppliers and ignored by governments, said a campaigner for higher wages in the region, ahead of an International Labour Organization (ILO) conference.

Asia accounts for more than 60 percent of the world's garment production, with the industry employing more than 15 million people directly, most of them women.

Workers deserve a living wage because the minimum wage set by most Asian countries is inadequate to keep them out of poverty, said Anannya Bhattacharjee, a coordinator with the Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA), a supply chain lobby group.

"The complexity of the supply chains is often used as an excuse for brands having no control over paying a living wage," Bhattacharjee told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"But brands have so much leverage with governments and suppliers, and they have the power to set prices," she said.

Higher wages in China, the world's largest clothing exporter, are driving brands worldwide to seek cheaper alternatives in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

Suppliers in these countries are under enormous pressure to reduce costs and produce garments as quickly as possible.

Wages in the garment industry are "structurally failing" to meet workers' basic needs, leading to excessive overtime, ill health and workers being forced to live apart from their families, according to the Clean Clothes Campaign, which is a member of AFWA.

Activists are calling for a living wage, which an employee earns in a standard working week and is enough to provide for a family's basic needs, including housing, education and healthcare, with some income left for
BASIC HUMAN RIGHT

The ILO defines a living wage as a "basic human right". Yet minimum wages across Asia are well below a level that a person could live on, and are revised by governments too rarely to reflect escalating living costs, campaigners say.

"Companies are responsible for the human rights impacts throughout their supply chain, and cannot outsource these to the state or to the suppliers," said Bhattacharjee.

"Global brands cannot wait for governments to raise the minimum wage to an acceptable level. They must pay the difference between the minimum wage and the living wage, as most of their profits comes from production in Asia," she said.

Garment exports from Asia are worth more than $200 billion annually. Many garment workers in South Asia tend to be landless laborers or lower-caste workers who are particularly vulnerable to discrimination and are often in debt bondage.

In Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, the minimum wage is a fifth of the living wage estimated by AFWA, based on purchasing power parity.

Working conditions and wages in South Asia's garment industry have come under greater scrutiny since the Rana Plaza disaster in April 2013 in Bangladesh, in which more than 1,100 workers died.

Swedish fashion retailer Hennes & Mauritz last week said it was collaborating with trade unions and governments to improve workers' conditions, after an AFWA study found violations at its suppliers' factories in India and Cambodia.

AFWA, along with other campaigners, will lobby the ILO at its conference in Geneva next week to move forward on setting a global standard for supply chains, including for wages.

"If you corner workers and you increase the pressure on them, they are going to erupt like a pressure cooker some day," Bhattacharjee said.

"That's not good for the country or for business. So it's in everyone's interest to prevent that situation - and it's easy, given how little it will take to fix it," she said.