

# LABOR RIGHTS

## WHAT ARE THEY AND WHY DO THEY MATTER?

Sustainability in the textiles and fashion industry is not just about saving the planet and protecting animals. Sustainability is also about **human rights** — particularly the rights of the people making our clothing. People are involved in clothing production in every step along the way, from fiber to dyeing to assembling to retail to disposal. And people suffer the repercussions of the environmental impact of making clothing.

Labor rights for the people within the textiles industry is a complex, nuanced issue but we hope this document will provide an introduction to its basic ideas.

### Power, Money, and Safety

Labor Rights are a series of multifaceted issues with many different legal and financial aspects, but most can be distilled down to three main categories:

**POWER** - YOUR RIGHTS AND YOUR ABILITY TO ENFORCE THEM

**MONEY** - PAYMENT FOR YOUR WORK

**SAFETY** - PROTECTION FROM DANGER, RISK, OR INJURY



*POWER*



*MONEY*



*SAFETY*

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## POWER

Power is the ability to direct or influence others. In the textiles industry, there is an extreme imbalance of power. Millions of people work in the industry but the profits and legal resources lie with a select few large brands. Some key elements of power that can be utilized by workers are **freedom of association** and **collective bargaining**.

**Freedom of association** is the right of workers and employers to organize to defend their interests, including for the purpose of negotiating salaries, benefits, and other conditions of work. ([Department of Labor](#))

**Collective bargaining** is the right of workers to join trade unions without fear of discrimination, to have their union recognized as the representative of its members, and to have this union negotiate the terms and conditions of their employment on their behalf.

([Clean Clothes Campaign](#))



**Bottom Line:** Both freedom of association and collective bargaining ensure that workers and employers have an **equal voice** in negotiations. They also increase certainty and stability in the workplace and improve labor-management relations. But many brands participate in union busting and scare tactics, which worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic.

### Take Action

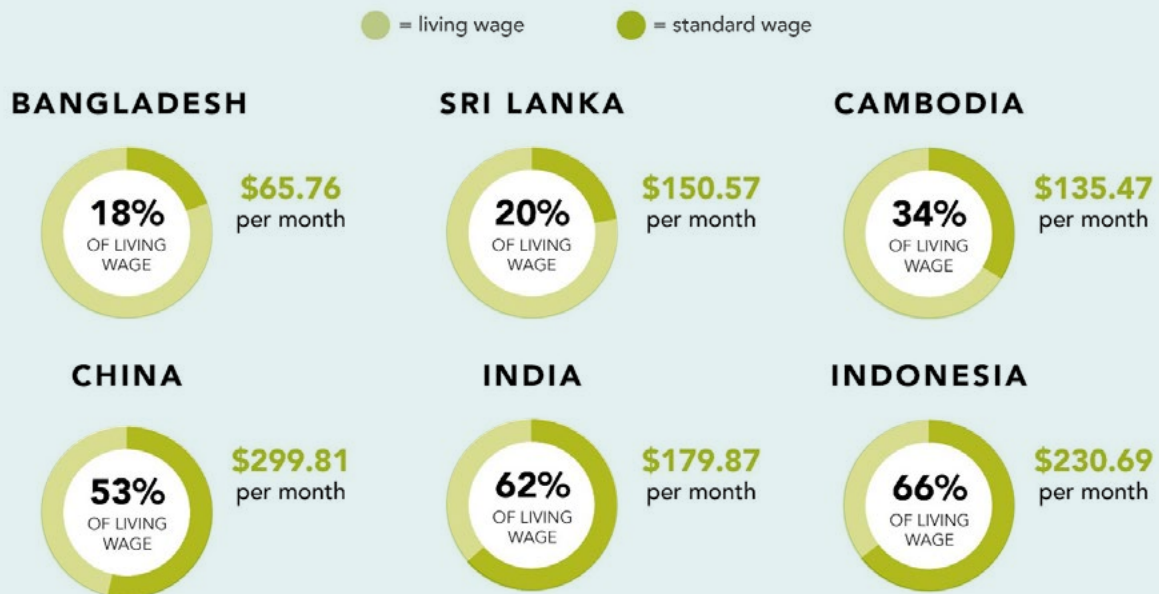
- Learn more about unions, their benefits, and who can join: [What Unions Do](#).
- If eligible, [join your local union](#) (Note: this is United States focused).
- Join or donate to a workers' rights organization such as [Working America](#) or any of the textiles-focused organizations [here](#).

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## MONEY

**Money is essential to survive.** It is necessary to buy food, shelter, clothing, and medical care — legally-defined minimum standards for a decent standard of life. It ideally enables us to provide for ourselves and our families as well as their future. However, many workers in the textiles industry are barely paid enough to survive, much less thrive.

### Average Monthly Garment Factory Wages (2015)



SOURCE: [LABOURBEHINDTHELABEL.ORG](http://LABOURBEHINDTHELABEL.ORG)

### Minimum Wage vs. Living Wage

The minimum (or standard) wage paid to textile workers does not always reflect a fair or living wage. Minimum wage is the lowest wage per hour that a worker may be paid, by law. It varies across countries, and even across states in the United States.

**Minimum wage is not the same as a living wage.** A living wage should cover basic human needs and allows a [safe, decent standard of living for workers and their families.](#)



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## MONEY

### Piece Rate vs. Hourly Rate

In addition to minimum wage versus living wage, brands manipulate how much garment workers are actually paid by using a piece rate.

“Under this pay system, workers earn as low as \$.03 per assembly operation (ex. setting a seam, trimming a blouse), which is entirely too low to ever enable a worker to earn the minimum wage per hour. Not only does utilizing the piece rate enable – and even justify – sub-minimum wage, but it also creates unsafe working conditions, as garment workers are constantly racing against the clock to complete as many items as possible.”

— [Garment Worker Protection Act](#)

**“We could not take a single piece of chicken for the last two months.”**

[WORKERSRIGHTS.ORG](#)

– Bangladeshi worker who makes clothes for C&A, H&M and Zara



**Bottom Line:** There is NO EXCUSE for not paying garment workers a living wage. According to one study, raising the price of a t-shirt just 20 cents would enable a living wage for garment workers in India. **It takes just four days for a CEO from one of the top five global fashion brands to earn what a Bangladeshi garment worker will earn in her lifetime** ([Oxfam](#)).

### Take Action

- Read: [What Makes up the Price of a Zara Hoody?](#) And [How Should We Think about What We Pay for Clothes?](#)
- Purchase items made by companies who pay their workers a living wage or companies who are transparent about the suppliers they work with and the cost of their products. In particular, look for [certified B Corporations](#) or [Fair Trade companies](#).

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## SAFETY

Safety is a basic human right. Garment workers should not be forced to work in unsafe conditions, to face discrimination and abuse, or to work long hours without any breaks.

### UNSAFE WORKPLACES

Many garment workers do not feel safe at work. Dangerous buildings, locked exits, high temperatures, dust and chemical exposure, and physical violence are all documented issues within the industry.

[More about Unsafe Workplaces.](#)

### GENDER DISCRIMINATION

In 2019, the Asia and Pacific regions employed approximately 65 million garment workers, or 75% of all garment workers worldwide. In these regions, the majority of garment workers are women (35 million), and the garment sector employs 5.2% of all working women ([ILO report](#)). This is not by chance — this is due to discriminatory practices. Women are sought out due to cultural stereotypes and societal expectations — they are expected to be flexible and docile and to take care of the majority of domestic and reproductive responsibilities.



**1,134 Garment Workers' Lives Lost at Rana Plaza**

|| *My job is ironing. It's very hot there during the summer, and the irons are in a part of the factory where there are **no windows**. It's hot, full of steam, you're in hurry, you're standing all the time, and you're exhausted. So it happens that **workers faint**. There were days in summer when the **temperature in factory couldn't be measured with a thermometer**.* ||

An anonymous worker from Croatia -  
Filling the Gap, 2020

**Clean  
Clothes  
Campaign**



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## SAFETY

### PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE)

During the Covid-19 crisis, many garment workers worked in factories that did not follow the guidelines to prevent exposure to the coronavirus. [Social distancing and mask wearing was not enforced](#). And if they were exposed to Covid-19, they often had no paid time off or healthcare. Many workers were forced to choose between potentially deadly illness or starvation.



IMAGE VIA [THE CONVERSATION](#)

**Bottom Line:** Garment workers are people who deserve to work in a safe, secure environment where they feel valued. Deemed “essential workers” during a time of pandemic, their health and safety should always be a priority.

## Take Action

- Learn more about gender discrimination in the textiles industry: [Clean Clothes Campaign Gender Discrimination Resources](#).
- Read a report from the International Labour Organization about the effects of Covid-19 on garment workers: [The supply chain ripple effect: How COVID-19 is affecting garment workers and factories in Asia and the Pacific](#)

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## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

### Learn More

- Read [Could Living Wages Help Solve Fashion's Climate Crisis? New Research Says Yes.](#)
- Watch the [#sharetherisk video](#) produced by the Manufactured Podcast, which outlines how brand order volume changes impact factories and translate to lower wages. When brands have all the power to order and cancel products but none of the risks, everyone else loses.
- Redress Raleigh is continuously collecting resources on our website that focus on [Labor Rights](#) — from videos to articles to podcasts to specific organizations — where you can learn more about current issues and actions to take.
- Read [Reward Work, Not Wealth](#) for a better understanding of the inequality crisis and ideas on how to change society for the better.
- Read any of the many [research reports](#) from Workers Rights Consortium on the apparel supply chain, including specific impacts from Covid-19.

### Use Your Voice

**You don't have to be an expert on Labor Rights to use your voice, nor do you need to spend money. Some simple ways to amplify existing movements are:**

- Ask #WhoMadeMyClothes on social media. (Learn more about this campaign via [Fashion Revolution.](#))
- Follow and comment on posts by workers rights' organizations calling out large brands. ([Such as any of the organizations listed here.](#))
- Ask your favorite brand via email or social media how they are ensuring their workers are protected.
- Sign the [#PayUp Petition](#), which includes 7 actions for the textiles industry to take to reform the industry and create binding agreements that uphold garment workers' rights and drastically improve working conditions.
- Follow new campaigns you can get involved with via [The Garment Worker Center](#) in Los Angeles, a workers' rights organization leading an anti-sweatshop movement.
- Choose any or all of the [Clean Clothes Campaigns](#) to learn more about and add your name to the petitions.

“This is a profound international crisis that has disproportionately affected the people at the bottom of the supply chain, to the extent that their very survival is at stake,” said Mark Sebastian Anner, a professor of labor and employment relations at Penn State University and an expert on the Bangladeshi garment industry. “We’ll be seeing the repercussions for years to come.” — [The Guardian](#)