

<b>Forum:</b>	Human Rights Council
<b>Issue:</b>	Addressing the issue of sweatshops in Southeast Asian nations such as Cambodia
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## Introduction

Sweatshops in Southeast Asia are a pressing human rights concern, drawing attention to the exploitation of labor in the global supply chain. These factories, often marked by deplorable working conditions, long hours, and inadequate wages, are prevalent in countries like Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia. They primarily produce goods for international brands seeking to minimize production costs.

Workers in Southeast Asian sweatshops face numerous rights violations. Many endure unsafe working environments with insufficient ventilation, exposure to hazardous materials, and a lack of basic safety measures. The pressure to meet high production targets often leads to forced overtime, with workers receiving low pay that barely meets subsistence levels. Child labor remains a significant issue, depriving children of education and exposing them to exploitation.

These conditions contravene several international agreements, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. Despite some progress in addressing these issues, enforcement of labor laws remains weak in many Southeast Asian nations. Corruption, lack of resources, and economic pressures hinder effective regulation and oversight.

The global demand for inexpensive, fast fashion is a primary driver of sweatshop proliferation. Multinational corporations outsource production to Southeast Asia, capitalizing on lower labor costs and less stringent regulations. This creates a cycle of dependency, where local economies rely on these industries despite their exploitative nature.

In this conference, delegates must come to a consensus on means to reduce and disincentivize the expansion of sweatshops across Southeast Asia, whilst also drafting new solutions that corroborate on contemporary labor laws, ensuring that the rights of workers are safeguarded and large companies are held accountable for their actions.

## Definition of Key Terms

### Textile

Any fabric or cloth, especially woven.

### **Offshoring**

The practice of moving a company's operating base to a country where labor costs are cheaper.

### **Sweatshop**

A negatively connoted term for a working environment considered to be unacceptably difficult or dangerous. Sweatshop employees often work long hours for low wages.

### **International Labor Organization (ILO)**

The only multilateral body bringing together representatives of governments, employers and workers at world level.

### **Living Wage**

A wage that permits a basic, but decent, lifestyle considered acceptable by society at its current level of economic development, such that workers and their families are able to live above the poverty level and participate in social and cultural life

### **Watchdog**

An independent organization set up to police a particular industry, ensuring that member companies do not act illegally

### **Trade Unions**

An organization made up of members (a membership-based organization) and its membership must be made up mainly of workers.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility**

A business model by which companies make a concerted effort to operate in ways that enhance rather than degrade society and the environment.

## **History & Developments**

### **The grasp of colonialism**

#### *The exigence*

The contemporary issue of sweatshops in Southeast Asia happens to be deep-rooted in its colonialist history. Although Southeast Asian nations were relinquished from the grasp of colonialism in the 1950s, they never escaped the shadows that imperialist imposition wrought. In the midst of their freedom, many Southeast Asian nations sought to develop their economies and shape national identity through rapid industrialization. However, ensnared by a lack of resources, they tended to resort back to the exploitative practices of colonialism, seeking developed nations in the West for economic assistance.

### *A new age of expansion*

Starting from the 1960's, Southeast Asia began to rapidly industrialize. In the pursuit of perpetual economic growth and development, many Export Processing Zones were established in countries such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and the Philippines, implementing economic reforms to attract foreign investment. These reforms included deregulating labor markets, offering tax incentives, and providing access to cheap labor. The influx of multinational corporations seeking to reduce production costs led to the proliferation of sweatshops, particularly in the textile, garment, and electronics industries.

The 1990's also marked an age of globalization that swept through Southeast Asia. As the global community saw an increased demand for cheap labor and expansive production of consumer goods, many major conglomerates and companies looked overseas. Thus, Southeast Asian nations became the hub for the textile industry, further promoting the growth and expansion of sweatshops.

As these countries industrialized, urban centers became more densely populated, resulting in increased amounts of worker exploitation and the desensitization of labor laws.

### **Modern Developments**

According to the World Trade Organisation (WTO), Asia alone accounts for 58.4% of world clothing and textile exports. More than 70% of EU imports of textiles and clothing come from Asia.

The customers of garment producers are most often global brands looking for low prices and tight production timeframes. They also make changes to product design, product volume, and production timeframes, and place last-minute orders without accepting increased costs or adjustments to delivery dates. The stresses of such policies usually fall on factory workers.

### *Wage Complications*

Governments often set minimum wages that are insufficient to meet living costs. For instance, in Cambodia, despite a legal minimum wage in the garment sector, many workers reported earnings below this threshold due to underpayment and wage theft. In some cases, employers delay or outright refuse to pay wages, particularly after layoffs or factory closures. Workers often lack legal recourse to recover

unpaid wages. 38% of surveyed workers reported job loss (11% temporarily suspended, 27% permanently dismissed). Those still employed saw a 21% decrease in average monthly income, dropping from \$187 to \$147. 88% reported reducing food consumption due to diminished income. Workers with children faced severe challenges, with 80% reporting they had to skip meals to feed their children. 75% of workers borrowed money to purchase food, indicating a reliance on loans to meet basic needs. With the complete and utter denial of a living wage to sustain basic necessities, many workers suffer from hazardous living conditions and often have no way of alleviating themselves from these circumstances.

### *Working Conditions*

The explosion in the volume of orders has not led to the necessary adaptation of production capacities. This has provoked strong pressure on working conditions, as reported by NGOs. And despite growing unrest from workers, which has led to strikes and protests in several countries, often repressed as in Cambodia and in Bangladesh, their main achievement has been slight increases in the minimum wage, which remains still far below a living wage.

Sweatshop workers in Southeast Asia endure harsh and exploitative working conditions characterized by long hours, low wages, and unsafe environments. Many are forced to work 12 to 16 hours a day, often without sufficient breaks, as they strive to meet demanding production quotas under constant pressure. Workers are frequently exposed to toxic materials without proper protective gear, leading to serious long-term health issues, while factories often lack basic safety measures, resulting in a high risk of accidents. Additionally, break times are minimal or non-existent, contributing to physical and mental fatigue. Many workers live in overcrowded and substandard housing, lacking essential amenities such as clean water and sanitation, and are often trapped in cycles of debt to recruiters or employers. Female workers, who constitute a significant portion of the labor force, face additional vulnerabilities, including gender-based discrimination and harassment, often earning less than their male counterparts for similar roles. The cumulative effect of these conditions leads to significant psychological stress, as workers feel compelled to comply with unreasonable demands to retain their jobs, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to protect their rights and improve their working conditions.



*Figure #1: Dormitories at a Chinese Steel Processing Facility*

# Trade Unions

The creation and organization of trade unions are often suppressed, and the organizers of such unions are regularly punished and mistreated. Workers claim that some managers mistreat employees involved in setting up unions, or force them to resign. Some claim they have been beaten up, sometimes by local gangsters attacking workers outside the workplace, and even at their homes. With such suppression, the advancement of workers' rights has therefore remained stagnant, stressing the need for immediate action tackling these imminent issues.

## Major Parties Involved

### International Labor Organization

The ILO has ratified a series of conventions negotiating for proper labor standards in Southeast Asia. Amongst these are eight fundamental conventions that encompass the basic labor rights for all workers (Figure 1). Moreover, there is a set of four governance conventions, one of which pertains to labor inspection. Importantly, Cambodia and China are two countries in which these policies are not ratified. Additionally, the ILO conducts awareness campaigns and collaborates with NGOs to implement grassroots initiatives, thereby enhancing efforts to eradicate child labor and improve worker rights in the region.

No	Subject	Ratification by selected countries								
		CHN	BGD	IND	PAK	VNM	KHM	IDN	LKA	KOR
29	forced labour	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	x
87	freedom of association and protection of the right to organise	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x
98	on right to organise and collective bargaining	x	✓	x	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x
100	equal remuneration	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
105	on abolition of forced labour	x	✓	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	x
111	discrimination (employment and occupation)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
138	minimum age	✓	x	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
182	worst forms of child labour	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Figure #2: Ratification status of ILO conventions across Asian countries

### Company Watchdogs

Key company watchdogs, such as Human Rights Watch, the Fair Labor Association, Clean Clothes Campaign, SOMO, and the Business & Human Rights Resource Centre play crucial roles in addressing labor abuses in Southeast Asian sweatshops. These organizations monitor labor practices, conduct investigations, and publish reports that expose violations, such as child labor and unsafe working conditions. Their advocacy efforts pressure multinational corporations to improve supply chain transparency and adhere to ethical labor standards. By

raising public awareness and mobilizing consumer action, these watchdogs influence corporate behavior and promote accountability, contributing to better labor practices in the region.

## Multinational Conglomerates

Multinational conglomerates in the clothing and textile industry, such as Nike, H&M, and GAP, have exacerbated labor conditions in Southeast Asian sweatshops through practices like outsourcing for lower labor costs and the demands of fast fashion, which prioritize rapid production over ethical standards. This often leads factories to cut corners, resulting in long hours, low wages, and unsafe working conditions. Additionally, the lack of supply chain transparency makes it difficult to hold these companies accountable for labor violations. Superficial audits fail to uncover serious issues, as evidenced by the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh, where brands were implicated despite prior passing grades from auditors. Collectively, these practices perpetuate a cycle of exploitation and undermine the rights and safety of workers in the region.

## Previous Attempts to Solve the Issue

### Relevant UN Resolutions

- Resolution A/RES/61/177 (Promotion of the Rights of Workers, 2006)
- Resolution A/HRC/RES/32/10 (The Human Rights of Workers, 2016)

### Other Treaties or Events

**ILO Conventions No. 138 on Minimum Age and No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor** are classified as fundamental rules that all countries shall adhere to. Convention No. 182 stands out as the first ILO convention to achieve universal ratification, and it was also the most rapidly ratified in the organization's history, with the majority of ratifications occurring within the first three years after its adoption in 1999. Convention No. 138 has similarly been widely embraced by member states. In response to these conventions, a majority of countries have enacted legislation aimed at prohibiting or severely restricting child labor. However, despite these legislative efforts, child labor continues to exist on a massive scale, particularly in developing countries, often in appalling conditions. This persistence can be attributed to the complex nature of child labor, which is influenced by economic, social, and cultural factors, making it clear that mere legislative action is insufficient to eradicate the problem entirely.

**The ASEAN Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers**, adopted in 2007, aims to safeguard the rights of migrant workers across Southeast Asia, recognizing their significant contributions to economic development. The declaration emphasizes the need for member states to implement policies that protect migrant workers from exploitation, discrimination, and abuse, ensuring access to decent work, fair wages, and social protection. It calls for cooperation among ASEAN countries to uphold the rights of migrant workers and facilitate their safe and legal migration. The impact of this declaration has been notable, as it has led to

increased awareness of migrant rights and the establishment of various national frameworks aimed at protecting these workers. However, challenges remain, including inconsistent enforcement and varying levels of commitment among member states, which continue to affect the conditions of migrant workers in the region.

The Better Work Program, a collaboration between the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), aims to improve labor standards and enhance competitiveness in the garment industry across countries like Vietnam and Cambodia. Launched in 2007, the program provides a comprehensive approach that includes factory assessments, training for both management and workers, and the establishment of worker-management dialogue systems. Its impact has been significant, leading to improved working conditions, increased compliance with labor laws, and better wages for workers. By fostering a culture of collaboration between employers and employees, the program has not only enhanced productivity but also contributed to the empowerment of workers, giving them a greater voice in their workplaces. Despite these successes, ongoing challenges such as the informal nature of some employment and the need for sustained commitment from all stakeholders remain critical for the program's long-term effectiveness.

## Possible Solutions/Questions to Address

### Enhancing Union Rights

Governments should simplify the registration process for trade unions, ensuring that workers can easily organize and advocate for their rights. Legal frameworks must be established to protect union leaders from harassment and persecution, creating a safe environment for collective bargaining. By promoting unionization, workers can better negotiate fair wages, benefits, and working conditions, ultimately leading to more sustainable and ethical labor practices.

### Employment Standards

The establishment of regular employment as the standard across industries. Authorities should enforce laws that guarantee workers access to compensation in case of workplace accidents or injuries. This includes mandatory health and safety regulations, regular inspections, and penalties for non-compliance.

### Due Diligence

Brands must implement comprehensive human rights due diligence processes to identify and mitigate risks within their supply chains. This involves conducting thorough audits and engaging with local stakeholders to ensure compliance with ethical labor standards. Transparency in these processes is key, as it holds brands accountable and encourages them to take proactive measures to address labor violations and improve working conditions.

### Legislative Accountability

Importing countries should implement legislation that holds companies accountable for human rights violations throughout their supply chains. This includes mandatory reporting on labor practices and penalties for non-compliance. By enforcing such laws, importing countries can pressure brands to uphold ethical standards and ensure that their products are sourced responsibly, promoting fair labor practices globally.

### Consumer Awareness

Consumers play a pivotal role in advocating for workers' rights through their purchasing decisions. By becoming more informed about the impact of their choices, consumers can demand transparency and ethical production from brands. Supporting fair trade initiatives and spreading awareness about labor conditions can drive brands to prioritize ethical sourcing and improve conditions for workers in Southeast Asia.

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