

A large-scale photograph of a garment factory. In the foreground, a woman in a yellow shirt is focused on sewing a piece of grey fabric on a JALINCE industrial sewing machine. Behind her, several other women, some wearing headscarves, are also working at similar machines. The factory floor is filled with stacks of fabric and sewing equipment. In the background, more workers are visible, and a man in a white shirt stands near a group of people. The overall scene depicts a busy industrial environment.

Research Report - 7th Annual Session

Human Rights Council

Reforming the rights of factory workers in LEDCs

Forum: Human Rights Council

Issue: Reforming the rights of factory workers in LEDCs

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Introduction

In the past few decades, the issue of poor working conditions that factory workers in Less Economically Developed Countries (LEDCs) are exposed to has been gaining increasing global attention. Although they are a crucial part of the global supply chain, many of these workers experience exploitation, low wages and unsafe working environments. This issue is reoccurring in countries such as Bangladesh, India and Ethiopia among others due to cheap labour opportunities and poorly enforced regulations. Companies with large production demands frequently outsource their production to factories in LEDCs, this leads to workers' rights being overlooked and profit being prioritised.

For example, in 2013, the Rana Plaza collapse in Bangladesh highlights the urgency needed in addressing poor factory conditions (Motlagh). This disaster resulted in over 1,100 fatalities and many more people were injured. This has grasped the attention of media all over the world and hence brought a larger global awareness about the human rights implications in factories in LEDCs. Only after this incident, were 3,780 Bangladeshi factories assessed on their safety ("The Rana Plaza Disaster Ten Years on: What Has Changed?").

With the industrial sector employing around 24% of the global workforce (Industrial Statistics Statistics: Market Data Report 2025), which is roughly 870 million people, the scale of the issue makes it impossible to overlook. Factory workers are more than just a small segment of the labour force, they are a pillar of our global economy. However, in many LEDCs, the basic human rights of factory workers are neglected. Addressing this issue isn't just about improving working conditions, it's much broader. It is essential to recognise the dignity of millions of people and build towards a more ethical and sustainable global economy.

Definition of Key Terms

Collective bargaining

The process of trade unions and employers negotiating the details of employment.

Colonial Legacy

The lasting social, economic and political effects of colonialism on formerly colonised countries. Typically refers to the systems and inequalities that were established during colonialism that these countries have not managed to get rid of today.

Corporate accountability

The responsibility of corporations to be held accountable for their actions and their (negative) impacts.

Decent Work (ILO term)

Refers to work that is productive, provides fair income, ensures security in the workplace and offers social protections.

Detained

To be held in custody by the government.

Globalisation

The process of our world being more interconnected.

Informal labour/ informal sector

Work that is not regulated by the government, therefore lacking legal protection and formal contracts.

Labour exploitation

Unfairly using workers for economic gain, usually done by violating their rights and exposing them to poor working conditions, underpayment and long working hours.

Labour Rights

The legal entitlements of workers that protect their safety, dignity and ensure fair treatment in the workplace. Examples include fair wages, safe working conditions and reasonable working hours.

LEDCs

Stands for “less economically developed countries. This means countries that have a lower level of industrialisation and lower average incomes compared to more economically developed countries.

Outsourcing

Outsourcing is when corporations hire external companies, typically in different countries, to perform a part of the supply chain that is traditionally done internally. In the context of this issue, it means when large corporations from MEDCs hire factories in LEDCs for their manufacturing processes.

Right to strike

The legal right of workers to refuse to do their work as a form of protest.

Supply chain

Every aspect involved in the production of a final product, from raw materials, to manufacturing, distribution and sales.

Supply chain transparency

Being open and honest about where each part of the supply chain is performed and by whom.

Trade union

An organised group of workers who come together to discuss how they can protect and promote their rights and interests. Trade unions are often the ones who negotiate with employers.

General Overview

History

The reason that this outsourcing manufacturing processes to LEDCs system is in place is a consequence of colonial legacies. Many LEDCs are former colonies, whose economies have been structured around resource extraction and cheap labour, generating profits for MEDCs (“How Do Colonial Legacies Shape the Contemporary Global Political Economy?”). This has laid the foundation for the exploitation of workers in the current labour systems. Following the industrial globalisation trend that started growing around the 1970s, it became more common to outsource manufacturing to cut costs. This made LEDCs an attractive host for the manufacturing of products for wealthier nations. This also caused many countries to shift from an agriculture-focused economy to a manufacturing-focused economy, now also relying on other nations for their main source of income. Major disasters have sparked global debates on the workers’ safety and the responsibility of corporations, however the actual change remains slow (“The Rana Plaza Disaster Ten Years on: What Has Changed?”). With the number of deaths due to the poor working conditions ever increasing, change grows more urgent.

Geographical facts

The largest concentration of factory labour can be found in Asia, particularly in Bangladesh, India, Vietnam and China. A more recent development is that many corporations now also choose Sub-Saharan Africa to outsource their manufacturing due to the even lower wages (Jackston). Latin America is also active in the manufacturing of the textile and electronics sectors. Another key detail to take into account is that in LEDCs, factory jobs are usually more concentrated in urban centres, where regulation is harder to enforce, partially due to the population density (Jackston). Furthermore, informal labour thrives in urban settings which allows for poor working conditions, low wages and even child labour.

Current events and issues

The main issues that factory workers currently face are low wages, unsafe working conditions and suppression from freedom of speech. Many factory workers earn below living wage standards in their country. This is encouraged by large corporations as they pressure factories to have the lowest possible cost of production so they can make the most profit. Furthermore, workers have to work long hours with poor ventilation in accident-prone conditions. On top of this, workers are often discouraged and in the worst cases even punished for organising unions to advocate for better working conditions. This all happens largely without monitoring or reports on the working conditions of the multinational corporations under the excuse of their "complex supply chains". The ITUC Global Rights Index 2024 came with multiple statistics on the specific rights that are being violated across the world and not just in LEDCs;

- 87% of countries violated the right to strike.
- 79% of countries violated the right to collective bargaining, for example strikes for higher pay.
- 75% of countries denied workers the right to form or join a union.
- 49% of countries detained or arrested trade unionists.
- The areas with the worst average ratings on the index were the Asia-Pacific with a rating of 4.13, and Africa with a rating of 3.88. In Africa over 90% of countries denied workers the right to form or join a union (*Global Rights Index - International Trade Union Confederation*).

Impacts

The human rights violations of factory workers in LEDCs have impacts on various groups. On workers, it delivers physical injuries, stress, poverty and a lack of social mobility due to the overwhelming amount of work (Vaidyanathan). On economies it may offer short term growth, however in the long term it will only give instability as LEDCs will rely on the manufacturing exports

for profits (“How Do Colonial Legacies Shape the Contemporary Global Political Economy?”). On global consumers it gives growing ethical concerns around fast fashion and the true cost of cheap products. On international relations, human rights violations can lead to sanctions, boycotts or trade restrictions. Thus harming the globalisation and free trade of our world.

Major Parties Involved

Bangladesh

In addition to being one of the world’s largest textile exporters, Bangladesh is also reliant on the factory sector for their economic growth. Following numerous incidents, especially the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, an international spotlight has been put on Bangladesh to improve their working conditions and labour protection (Motlagh).

China

Although China is classified as an MEDC, China’s factory workforce includes many rural populations who face exploitative conditions. The alleged forced labour in Xinjiang has especially gained international attention and criticism (“UN Human Rights Council Send Letters to Companies Over Xinjiang Forced Labour Allegations - Business and Human Rights Resource Centre”).

Ethiopia

Nicknamed as Africa’s next manufacturing hub, many global brands turn to Ethiopia to outsource their manufacturing due to their low wages. However these are perhaps too low as reports raise concerns about some of the lowest wages in the world and the weak protections for workers’ rights (“Ethiopia’s Garment Workers Are World’s Lowest Paid, Says Report - Business and Human Rights Resource Centre”).

United States

Being one of the largest importers of products produced in LEDCs, the U.S. has an indirect influence over the factory conditions in LEDCs. The outsourcing decisions made by large corporations in addition to the consumer demand play a crucial role in the formation of the labour standards in the producing countries.

International Labour Organisation (ILO)

The ILO is an UN agency that sets the international labour standards and offers technical support to countries. Some of their work includes: promoting “Decent Work” policies, monitoring

conditions, pushing for global adherence to the Core Labour Standards as described by the ILO, especially in LEDCs (“Decent Work”).

European Union (EU)

The EU pushes for stricter regulations that will hold companies accountable for labour abuses in their supply chains, which includes their manufacturing processes. The strategy of the EU is to pressure corporations and the LEDC governments to improve their working conditions by pushing trade agreements and sustainability initiatives.

Timeline of Key Events

2023 - Present	UNHRC discussions on corporate responsibility and protecting the rights of factory workers.
24 April 2013	Rana Plaza Disaster, a turning point for the rights of factory workers.
2002	ILO Decent Work Initiative startup
1933	National Industrial Recovery Act, guarantees workers a right to collective bargaining (“National Industrial Recovery Act (1933)”).
1833	British Parliament passed Factory Acts, creating regulations for factory workers (The National Archives).
1760-1840	Industrial Revolution

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

United Nations Initiatives:

ILO Core Labour Standards

The ILO created 8 core conventions covering issues such as forced labour, child labour and the right to unionise (“Core Labor Standards: Handbook”). Although most countries have ratified them, the actual implementation and enforcement lack.

Decent Work Agenda

This is an ongoing ILO campaign that promotes fair employment, social protection for workers as well as protecting their rights. It can provide guidance and funding to the LEDCs in need however it does not have political power to force governments to improve working conditions (“Decent Work”).

UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011)

These principles create standards for corporate responsibility, which also covers the issue of respecting labour rights across supply chains (“UN Guiding Principles - Business and Human Rights Resource Centre”). A pullback of this effort however is that it is voluntary and not legally binding.

United Nations Resolutions:

Human Rights Council Resolution on the Right to Work

This most recently passed resolution was adopted without a vote in session. The contents focus on emphasising the promotion and protection of the right to work, including just and favourable conditions to work, which is crucial for the improvement of working conditions for factory workers in LEDCs (UN. Human Rights Council (55th sess. : 2024 : Geneva)).

UN Declaration on the Rights of peasant and Other People Working in Rural Areas

This declaration aims to protect the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas by recognising their contributions and the challenges they face, such as the lack of labour rights and poor working conditions (UN. General Assembly (73rd sess. : 2018-2019)).

UN General Assembly Resolution on Migrant Workers

In a series of 5 resolutions adopted 1976 through 1987, the rights of migrant workers were brought into focus, following the rise of globalisation. These resolutions called upon states to prevent discrimination and implement measures to ensure the rights of migrant workers (“United Nations Digital Library System”).

Aside from UN efforts, there have also been national efforts to resolve the issue internally for LEDCs. Some examples are:

- Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety
- Ethiopia’s Industrial Parks Program
- India’s Labour Code Reforms

There are speculations about these efforts however, as critics argue that these solutions favour the employers rather than the workers and therefore creating opportunities for exploitation.

Possible Solutions

Different perspectives can create conflicting possibilities for solutions on this topic. However, all solutions are viable for this agenda as long as they address factory worker's rights in LEDCs. Some ideas are:

- Enforcing minimum wage and safety standards
- Transparency in supply chains
- Ensuring ethical outsourcing via trade agreements
- Strengthening (the right to) worker unions in LEDCs
- Funding for inspections & reporting mechanisms

Appendices

Please see the bold sources in the bibliography below for useful and relevant information on the agenda at hand.

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