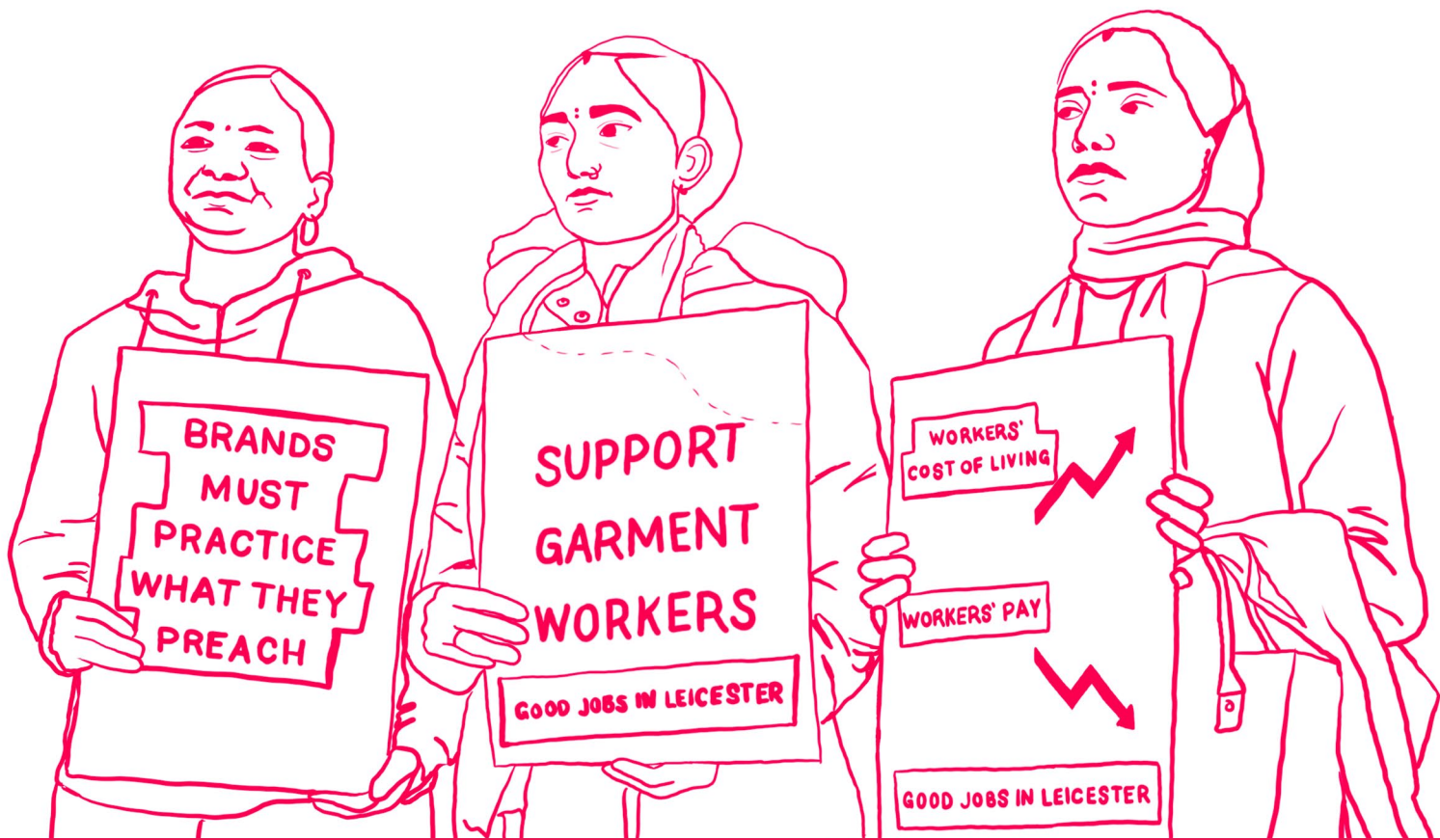


FROM EXPLOITED TO UNEMPLOYED: THE WOMEN IN LEICESTER LEFT BEHIND BY FAST FASHION OUTSOURCING

Interviews with Leicester garment workers



*TRIGGER WARNING: GENDER-BASED AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE, OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE & SUICIDE IDEATION.



OXFAM



1 INTRODUCTION

Leicester's garment sector makes a significant contribution to the UK's textile supply chain, with thousands of workers employed by small suppliers producing quick-turnaround fashion items. Many are women and migrants from South Asian countries, primarily India. They face unique challenges tied to their socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

Investigations and press reports during the COVID-19 pandemic revealed widespread underpayment of workers and rights abuses in UK garment factories: including wages as low as £3.50/hour.¹ Under increasing public pressure, the industry faced a turning point and began to address some of the violations faced by workers face.² A prospective new 'Fair Work Agency' is under discussion by the UK parliament.³

However, a few years on, the cost of compliance has made the UK less competitive within global fashion markets, which are built upon low-waged work for women. With depleting orders as brands move production overseas, many UK garment factories have closed down, particularly in Leicester. This has led to lost jobs and poverty for the migrants who rely on them for work. Women have been disproportionately impacted, which in turn leads to family pressure and a loss of bargaining power in the home.

Leicester is one of the most diverse cities in the country – 41% of Leicester residents were born outside of the UK,⁴ making it a key place to study the intersection between gender, race, migration and workers' rights. Garment workers in Leicester are vulnerable

to exploitation as a result of their immigration status, language skills, lack of access to support mechanisms such as union membership, as well as higher unemployment rates (6.7%) compared to national average rates (3.7%).⁵

The allegations of links to modern slavery and trafficking that have surfaced around the garment industry have contributed to a situation in which many workers are unable or unwilling to speak out about labour rights abuses for fear of being deported or otherwise investigated. More generally, while local community groups, trade unions and workers' rights organisations have an excellent track record of collaboration on improving awareness of rights among workers, financial pressures and fear of retaliation leave many unable to advocate for their rights from fear of losing their jobs.

Garment factories have been a key entry point for South Asian migrant women to the formal UK workforce, as language skills are a barrier to accessing many other jobs. Yet their reliance on this work means they have little bargaining power over conditions and pay, in an industry that seeks to cut corners wherever possible. Violence and sexual harassment in the workplace is endemic in garment supply chains globally – including UK factories.

The interviews in this case study research, collected and written by Labour Behind the Label, aim to shed light on workers' perspectives, reflecting on both long-term exploitation, and more recent changes in the industry.

Oxfam does not actively work in garment industry in the UK specifically but collaborates with Labour Behind the Label (LbL) to amplify the voice of garment women workers in the UK along with those across Asian countries, outlining how exploitation of women garment workers exists in global value chains. The research is a part of series of Oxfam's Briefing for Business on Value Women's Work Issue 2,⁶ which focuses on how normative business practices in particular purchasing practices, recruitment, and tax practices, reinforce gender inequality within value chains.

2 METHODOLOGY

The case studies in this research were gathered and written by staff from Labour Behind the Label – a campaign and policy NGO working to improve conditions and empower workers in the global garment industry. Labour Behind the Label has worked in the Leicester community since early 2020. Its staff have been talking with workers and supporting improvements in the industry since 2022.

One-to-one in-depth interviews were conducted by Kaenat Issufo, with 76 workers, of which 54 were women, over the course of 2022 and 2023. Each interview lasted around two hours and covered a range of topics, including the participants' work environment, job roles, pay structures and personal experiences. Workers were chosen to represent the characteristics of a broader workforce of approximately 10,000 individuals employed in Leicester at its peak.⁷

The interviews were conducted in participants' native languages (Urdu, Gujarati, Hindi, Punjabi and English) to ensure clarity and accuracy. Transcripts were translated into English for the purposes of research and campaigning work.

All participants were migrants from South Asian countries, primarily India. Efforts were made to ensure an approximately representative distribution of workers from differing supplier types to capture a broad spectrum of workplace conditions.

The case study research features stories of Kumari, Nayana, Sultana, Maya and Neetu.⁸ Throughout this research, pseudonyms are used in order to protect the identities of the women who have shared their stories. Informed consent was confirmed at both the start and end of each in-depth interview, including assurances to each woman of confidentiality. Consent forms are kept confidentially by Labour Behind the Label and following GDPR and safeguarding principles.

Additionally, key informant interviews were conducted to corroborate the findings and provide contextual insights. These informants offered perspectives to enhance the reliability of the data and deepen the team's understanding of workplace dynamics. These informants included factory managers, labour rights activists and community leaders familiar with the sector.



3 KEY FINDINGS

The research revealed significant challenges faced by workers in the Leicester garment sector, particularly women, in the face of depleting orders:

- **LOW WAGES.** Many workers earned below the legal minimum wage, with limited opportunities for pay increases. Women often earned less than men.
- **POOR SAFETY.** Factories were said to lack adequate safety measures, proper ventilation and basic facilities.
- **EXPLOITATION.** Interviewees spoke about being more vulnerable to exploitation due to their precarious legal and economic status. Long hours and extended work shifts – without notice – were common, with little regard for workers' health and wellbeing.
- **GENDERED ROLES IN THE HOME.** The economic difficulties faced by women were compounded by the gendered role they assumed in society more generally. Women workers spoke of the added pressures of maintaining family life and carrying out the domestic labour and care duties expected of them, as well as the strain that economic hardship placed on family relationships.
- **RESILIENCE.** Despite these challenges, many workers expressed a desire for better opportunities in the industry.

4 WOMEN'S STORIES

KUMARI'S STORY

Hi, my name is Kumari. I lived in India and was brought up there. My family was not that well off. We had a house we lived in. When I was a teenager, my father moved to the UK to work. He used to send enough money to us in India to afford the necessities in life. We could afford food, healthcare and clothes. My family did not have enough to send me to school, as I was a girl, but my siblings.

Most of my father's earnings would go towards my siblings' education and tuition fees. For my parents it was very important that they studied. They knew that when my siblings grew up, their money would stay in household. However, if they were to educate me, I would be married off and not useful for them.

When I turned 18, a proposal came from a boy from the UK. Without my consent, it was agreed that my hand would be given to this boy who is a relative of ours. To cut a long story short, I was married and got a spousal visa to come to the UK.

My husband wanted me to work and earn money so we can both support each other. He was a garment worker and found me work in a garment factory. I was not aware of what the minimum wage was, or anything about sick pay or holiday pay. I had no idea about my rights at work. After many years, I realized I got 50% less wages because my boss did not pay me the minimum wage.

For more than ten years I received no sick pay or holiday pay. Even when I did not want to, I was forced to work long hours. Sometimes I had to work a full day on a Saturday. If I said no, I was threatened with losing my job. I have two children and both times I received no maternity pay – I did not know about it.

I got so tired as, even after finishing work, my husband expected me to do housework. I used to come home and cook food, clean the house, do laundry, and also look after my sick mother-in-law. It is a cultural thing that women do housework. Daughter-in-laws are treated like maids.

There's the same mentality at work too. When I was pregnant and started running out of energy, I was constantly told that my speed had gone down, and that I should stop working because I was pregnant, even though I was only few months.

The environment at work is not good. People don't understand what confidentiality is. Just to be in the good books of the supervisors and the boss, they tell them about other workers' issues and problems.

I asked my husband whether I could work part time, but our financial situation meant I had to carry on as long as I could. I did not get any extra breaks, nor did I get time off work to see the nurse. I was told that any hours missed would be cut from my wages. I was expected to work at the same speed as others. Many times, I had to use the toilet and my supervisor even monitored that too. He used to taunt me about the number of times I used the washroom, despite him knowing my situation.



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Everything in the factory is about 'eye language'. Supervisors, managers and bosses would not tell you things directly, but use their eyes for everything. We just learn to understand, so they are never at fault.



Years pass by, no-one will help and nothing will change



When I was in pain during my last months of pregnancy, the supervisor did not even offer me a lift home or call a taxi. He just said I could go home. I had no strength to walk. I asked him to call my husband, he said 'I can't' and that my husband would be at work. My supervisor just told me to go home and rest. Some ladies on the street saw my situation and took me to hospital and called my husband.

Things carry on in the same way in all the factories – and at home. Years pass by, no-one will help and nothing will change.



NAYANA'S STORY

Hi, my name is Nayana. I have been a garment factory worker for almost ten years. Four months ago, I lost my job.

My boss told me that the work has gone to other country for cheap labour, as brands don't want to pay the new national minimum wage to workers here. My boss did not even give us notice or any advance warning so we could be prepared. Despite working for nearly ten years, I got no redundancy pay at all – not even a month's wages.

My life was turned upside down. I have been very stressed out and depressed lately. I don't know where to go or how to get my life back on track. When I came to the UK from India, I thought everything would go well. We are not looking for luxury in this country – just enough for us to survive. My husband and I always have arguments these days because we struggle with money to pay bills and buy food. The cost of living is so high, it is difficult to buy basic stuff. All this has effects on the children too. I struggle with English. I never went to school, so I don't know how to read or write, even in my own language.



When I started out, I even worked for £3 an hour, which was less than the minimum wage at the time



When I started out, I even worked for £3 an hour, which was less than the minimum wage at the time. I worked for a few years like that until I started to understand some of the UK's rules and regulations and learned about my rights. I had no idea about holiday pay

in this country and I don't think I got holiday pay for all the years I have worked. The boss took advantage of us because he knows we are new to the UK and don't know about our rights. Workers who do know stay quiet because they need the work. We always fear losing work. No-one speaks because the supervisor threatens us and shows us the door over little things.

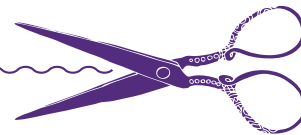
The factories are always dirty and no cleaners come; dust is everywhere. There is no such thing as health and safety in the factories. People are always being injured but do not speak out from fear. The floor in the previous factory where I worked was never cleaned. It got so dirty that it was very rough and sticky. We did not get any masks even if we wanted to protect ourselves from the debris from the garments. Breathing that in every day gave me a headache. Toilets had no handwash, were never clean, always leaked and were never fixed. They had no toilet paper.

Now there is no point discussing all of this: the factories are closing and we are without work. That is the reality. We are so embarrassed to use food banks, it is seen as a low thing in my community. People talk to each other and gossip about how we are using food banks and are poor right now. But we have no choice, as we don't want to go hungry.

We ask the people in charge of brands to open good factories in Leicester. Thousands of people depend on factory work here in Leicester. We are asking for good factories to run well here, and this will only happen when brands give them orders. Orders should be set numbers, so we also know that the boss has work and that they can then keep us permanently without the constant fear of losing our jobs or having our hours cut. We also want a fixed income so we can plan our lives well and can progress. The government should also act and make things better for us.

We should be given pay increases after a few years and promotions at work. We should also get paid redundancy when we are thrown out of work. All the appropriate policies should be in place, especially when brands declare bankruptcy or go into administration, so that they don't just leave without paying us and leaving the factories with no work. There should be strict policies on this, as the only people who suffer are the workers.

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SULTANA'S STORY

Hi, my name is Sultana. I have worked in the garment industry in Leicester for ten years. The current situation is the worst this industry has ever seen.

I have been working full-time hours all these years. Typically, my hours would be 45 a week, sometimes exceeding 50. But I have been sitting at home for a few months now. The factory I was working in is now closed, even though it had been busy for years. It is scary how this industry is collapsing.

I depend on this work; it's the only work I know. I feel comfortable working within the same community where everyone speaks my language. It is also very local and helps when I am doing school runs. I have worked for a long period of time and gained lots of experience, and trying to learn something new will take a lot of time and effort. I already have a lot of stress financially; I must pay for my expenses, and I am in constant worry about where to get money from. If I have to completely change my profession, it would be too much stress and hard work.

We need jobs. We need decent jobs with decent pay

Many of my friends are in a similar situation, looking for work. It has become so difficult for us to pay rent, water, gas and electricity. I am having many issues with my husband at home. He is the only person working, looking after family of five. He has too many responsibilities and the pressure of running the house. I feel isolated and helpless. We end up in many arguments and sometimes matters gets abusive and physical.

There are issues in this industry, with no supplier paying the national minimum wage. Bosses tell us the orders are not fixed, so sometimes they can get a lot of orders and sometimes nothing. This makes it difficult for them to give us a fixed contract and fixed hours. Whose fault is that? I blame the brands. If they are not in the wrong, then they should be transparent about it, so we workers can know who is to blame. We don't know who is telling us the truth.

I don't know if my wage slip is accurate or not. I don't know anything about how much tax we should be paying, or what a tax code is. Where do we learn all this from? People say the internet has the answer to everything, but how we would access and use it is also a question. I can't read or write, and my phone is not a smartphone as I cannot use one.

I want to ask the government whether UK brands are selling their clothes in the UK. If we have a garment production industry in the UK, should brands not be made to use the workers here before they send work abroad for cheap production? Are there no rules and regulations for this?

We need jobs. We need decent jobs with decent pay. It is not easy to do what we do. We work very hard all day sitting at machines or standing all day packing and ironing. I want to challenge all the people in authority to come and work for one day and realize how hard this work is. The brands that make millions but are not taking any responsibility for improvements are the ones I am challenging. We need this industry, but we need policies too.

Bosses have so much power over money that we feel too small to raise our voices. We are dependent, and they know that very well. I was always scared of losing my job. I didn't want to be backlisted or known as a troublemaker. My community would not support me, instead people would say that we all depend on this job and to quietly get on with it. They have already told me that we are too weak to stand up for our rights as we do not hold the power.

I request to the people in power to make our voices heard globally – and to show the true picture of this industry worldwide. The world should see that this situation happens in the UK too.



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MAYA'S STORY

Hi, my name is Maya. I am a garment worker in Leicester. I do packing and ironing. I have been working for the past ten years in many different factories. I started work when I was very young. We had moved to the UK from India for a better future for me and my family.

We were very poor in India. Our earnings were only enough to afford food, shelter and everyday necessities. My father sold his stuff to get some money for the paperwork (passport, birth certificates, visas, etc.) so we could come to the UK and settle here. He also took a loan from his in-law who had been settled in the UK for many years.

When we came to the UK, I was only a teenager. I did not go to school as my parents could not afford to send me. I am the eldest sister in my family. I had no option but to start work to support my family and pay off the loan we had taken. I was happy that my siblings had the opportunity to study in the UK for their bright future.

My father's in-law supported us for a few weeks and found work for me and my family. I was very afraid to start work in a factory, as I had no idea how it would be. I kept my strength and kept reminding myself that I needed to support my family, and that the future would be bright one day.

The first few months were very difficult, as I adapted to my new environment. I had no idea about any legal rights or rules and regulations in this country. My boss used to give my wages to my father.

While I was working as a packer, there was a man who was in his 30s also working there. At first, I did not understand his intentions, and I use to call him 'uncle'. In my village, we give respect to anyone who is older than us by calling them 'brother' or 'uncle' rather than using their names.

He constantly stared at me, which made me uncomfortable. He followed me to the toilets and blocked my way. He also offered to my father to pick me up and drop me home because 'I am very young, like his daughter's age.' My father agreed, because he was very scared of anyone misbehaving with me and dishonouring our family name.

Little did he know that this uncle figure himself had bad intentions. Every time a Bollywood song would play, he would tease me, wink at me and do dirty gestures. He would touch me often and hold my hand as if he was protecting me as an uncle, but I was very uncomfortable with it and wanted him to stop.

Once a very rude song was playing in the background, and he came and whispered in my ear 'this is what I want to do with you', meaning he wanted to be in bed with me.

I was very scared; I felt sick and lonely. The friends I could speak to were in India. It was not like today when we have access to WhatsApp: back then, we had to buy calling cards to ring abroad, and I had no money because my wages were given to my father directly. I used to cry at night for many months.

Eventually I gathered my courage and spoke to my mum about it. Instead of getting her support I was shouted at. She said, 'is this what you do at work?! Shameless, you are going to dishonour our family's name! If you don't want your father to do bad to you, then do not mention this to him.'

She told me to carry on work as normal, as though nothing was happening, to ignore everything and just concentrate on earning money to pay off the debt.

The situation got worse, as once he tried to kiss me on the streets while dropping me home. I just left him and ran to my home and did not mention anything to anyone. But I was slowly getting depressed.

There was a lady at work I called 'auntie' who was very lovely and always brought food for me. She looked after me well and treated me nicely.

I explained my situation to her, and she was very upset to hear what I was going through. She suggested that I speak to my supervisor or boss directly. I knew that my supervisor was the man's friend, so he would never support me and would even call me a liar. So I went straight to my boss. I found it very difficult to tell him about my situation. I was very embarrassed and scared. My boss did not support me either, as the uncle was his relative, had worked in the factory for many years and had many more skills than I did. So my boss threatened me that I should not give the factory a bad name and, if this continued, he would have no option but to throw me out.



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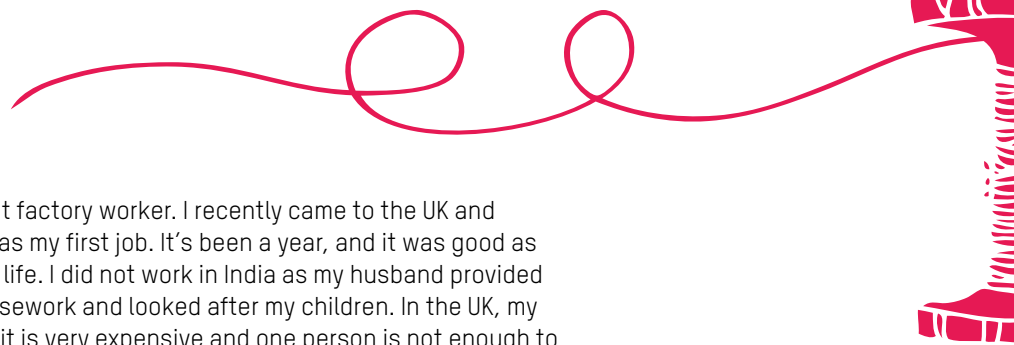


This continued for a long time until one day the uncle told me directly that he wanted to sleep with me, and if I refused he would dishonour me, and tell people lies about how I was trying to trap him because he was better off than me.

That was my breaking point. Because of the continuous stress, mental torture and depression, I decided to end my life. In my community, honour and respect are everything. If we do not have these, then society will not accept us. No-one would send any proposal for my marriage, and my sisters' lives would be ruined as they would also be categorized as dishonourable and bad. I had no support and nowhere else to ask help from.

I had made my mind up that I had no option but to end my life. I was only a teenager and knew nothing, except that I had no support from my own mother. Then I found out that my best friend was coming to the UK from India. That awakened me, giving me strength and positivity. My friend was not deferential and soft like me, she was very strong and loud. She had always supported me in all of my battles. I was not afraid of that uncle anymore. I knew she would sort him out and get me out of that hell.

When my friend came and I had told her everything, she supported me a lot. She became a shield for me. I think she was sent by God. I am so grateful to have her in my life. She saved me from the worst. I no longer work in the same factory, and I moved to a different place, for a new start with my friend who was with me always. We ended up working together and our journey to a better future began.



NEETU'S STORY

Hi, my name is Neetu and I am a garment factory worker. I recently came to the UK and started working in the garment factory as my first job. It's been a year, and it was good as my first job here to get used to working life. I did not work in India as my husband provided for me. I was a housewife: I just did housework and looked after my children. In the UK, my husband told me that I have to work as it is very expensive and one person is not enough to run the house, so I started working in the factory. I had no idea what working life was, but I started to get used to it.



Breaks are too short, and we don't even get time to relax and free ourselves from working too hard. Frequent toilet breaks are not allowed



I work long hours and I get really tired. I have to do long hours to get enough money to pay for basic necessities. My husband is also a garment worker, so our wages are not enough. I know that I don't get paid the national minimum wage or holiday pay. I struggle to spend time with my family and my children. It is a very hard life and now I think I was better off living in India. But my children wanted to come to the UK and study here. They said English is important, and studying in the UK means more opportunities for success. I have started to realize that the UK is a land of opportunities for those with education, language skills and qualifications. Not for people like us.

We have to work very hard to get very little money. I feel pressure all the time, as my husband keeps complaining. He worries about paying bills and the mortgage. We are always arguing and stressed. I feel like my health is affected by these tensions about work. Even in the factory we get stress about working faster, we are told to keep our heads down and work. It is not a friendly environment. We are not allowed to use our phones. We cannot talk with each other.

Breaks are too short, and we don't even get time to relax and free ourselves from working too hard. Frequent toilet breaks are not allowed. I have started to wear pads because I hold myself for when we're allowed to go to the toilet, so when I do go, I can't hold it anymore and end up wetting myself. Wearing pads means I can avoid incidents and embarrassment.

The past few months have been very stressful because I was not called to work full time. My hours dropped from 45 a week to 20. It was the same for my husband, who works in a different factory.

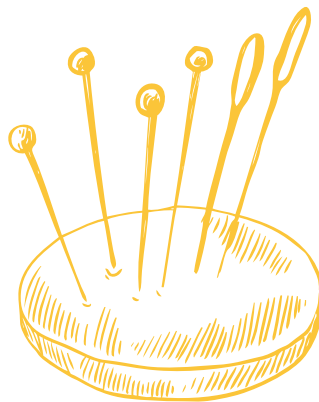
I tried looking for full-time work elsewhere, but all the factories are slow and some are even closing. Although my husband knows the situation, he has started to blame me. He says I am lazy, and I don't want to work full time. He says I stay at home doing nothing and just want to watch TV all day. How is this my fault? All the factories are facing the same thing! Due to the immense pressure and financial struggles, my husband has started drinking alcohol. He doesn't give time to the family, and this has caused a lot of fights in the house.

Not having work can cause a lot of issues in life. We want decent work and decent pay. We want the factories to stay open. Being a migrant, this is the only work I know, and I am dependent on it. At least it would support me for a few years until I settle in the UK. Maybe afterwards I can find better opportunities. The garment industry does not give its workers all their rights. If it did, then many people would want to work for this industry. All the workers ever talk about is when they will find a decent job and they will leave this industry.

The government should support the garment industry: we don't know who else is responsible. My boss says the brands are not committed to orders. If these brands are selling in the UK, which they are, then they should commit to the UK. I want to request those in power to help us, make a real difference in our lives and bring steadiness into our lives.



The garment industry does not give its workers all their rights.[...] My boss says the brands are not committed to orders



5 RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges faced by garment workers in Leicester are significant. Systemic reforms are needed to ensure fair and safe working conditions. Action by fashion brands, and local and national governments is necessary to ensure the voices of workers are heard and the complex issues that they raise are addressed.

Fashion brands must:

Commit to sustainable, long-term manufacturing in Leicester that takes into account labour costs and invests in skills and facilities.

Ensure decent and dignified work, in line with the existing legislation and the ILO pillars,⁹ including in relation to collective bargaining rights.

Ensure and strengthen the measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in line with ILO C190 and new legal duty released in October 2024 under the Equalities Act 2010. The duty regulates employers to take reasonable steps to prevent sexual harassment and create a safe working environment.

Ensure purchasing practices allow suppliers to pay workers a living wage with job security and operate safe and supportive businesses. As a guiding figure, brands are being asked to produce 1% of their global clothing in Leicester to support good jobs and fair wages for workers.¹⁰

Work with suppliers and unions to strengthen reporting mechanisms and improve access to confidential reporting systems and support, with a particular focus on women and migrant workers, including giving union access, counselling and legal assistance access, physical and mental health support access as well as supporting workers' rights training.

Enforce strong gender and intersectional due diligence regulations by having regular audits focusing on gender dynamics, fair wages and workplace safety.

The UK government must:

Adopt legislation that ensures mandatory human rights and environmental rights due diligence be conducted by UK-based companies, and businesses that wish to trade in the UK, and place criminal liability on these companies if they fail to prevent serious human rights or environmental harms in their supply chains.

Ensure the existing legislations on decent work and protections from gender-based violence, in line with ILO principles, are enforced.

Urgently address the underfunding and underutilization of labour market enforcement. This includes ensuring that the proposed 'Fair Work Agency' in the Employment Rights Bill will be accessible to workers in practice, adequately funded, provided with robust enforcement powers, has secure reporting pathways, and is fully independent of any immigration enforcement.

Support the growth of ethical garment production in the UK through skills investment, and efforts to ensure jobs are secure and fairly paid. Using public procurement to boost UK manufacture of garments could be one approach.

ENDNOTES

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LABOUR BEHIND THE LABEL

Labour Behind the Label campaigns for garment workers' rights worldwide. We support garment workers' efforts to improve their working conditions and change the fashion industry for the better, by raising awareness, lobbying companies and government, and promoting international solidarity between workers and consumers. We represent the Clean Clothes Campaign in the UK, which is a global network of over 230 organisations operating in 45 countries.

For further information, please visit www.labourbehindthelabel.org.

OXFAM

Oxfam is an international confederation of 21 organizations, working with its partners and allies, reaching out to millions of people around the world. Together, we tackle inequalities to end poverty and injustice, now and in the long term – for an equal future. Please write to any of the agencies for further information or visit www.oxfam.org.

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