

Asian workers making M&S clothes paid far less than living wage – report

Labour Behind the Label says workers in Sri Lanka, India and Bangladesh earn less than half what they need for decent living

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Sunday 14 February 2016 17.35 GMT

Workers making clothes for Marks & Spencer in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India are still not being paid sufficiently, six years after the retailer promised to support the payment of a living wage in those countries.

Under the British chain's Plan A environmental and social policy, it promised to "implement a process to ensure our suppliers are able to pay workers a fair living wage" in the three south Asian countries.

M&S said its target was achieved in 2015. But a report by the workers' rights group Labour Behind the Label said workers from three factories in Sri Lanka, another three in India, and two in Bangladesh were all being paid well below the amount required for a decent standard of living.

In Sri Lanka, basic pay averaged 13,500 Sri Lankan rupees a month (£64), but campaigners say they need as much as 33,000 (£158). Workers spoken to for the report were mostly sharing single-room, tin-roofed houses with no access to running water. In India, workers were earning an average of 6,284 rupees (£64) but thought they needed more than twice that for a decent living.

Those interviewed said food and education expenses were difficult to meet on their wages and that most families shared toilet and tap water facilities with others. In Bangladesh, researchers only spoke to a small number of workers, but they were all living in slum housing and earning a maximum of 8,000 taka (£70) despite working long hours of overtime and needing 15,000 taka (£131) for what they considered a living wage.

Anna McMullen, a campaigner at Labour Behind the Label, said she was "disappointed and angry" that M&S had been not been able to make a difference to the lives of workers, despite its promises.

"Everybody was lauding M&S as having achieved something great, but when we checked it out, there hasn't been an effect," she said. McMullen called on M&S to be more transparent about its supply chain so that workers' rights groups could monitor and work with it to

improve conditions.

M&S said it now knew that the price it paid suppliers was sufficient to ensure that they could pay a living wage in India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and that it had also helped factories become more efficient so they could pass on more money to employees. More than 750,000 workers have been trained in financial literacy, workers' rights and healthcare, giving them more confidence in claiming their due.

An M&S spokesperson said: "We are committed to further improving working conditions in our clothing supply chain and our work since 2010 has made a significant difference. For example, average wages at our supplier factories in Bangladesh are now 60% above the current minimum wage.

"There's always more to be done due to the complex nature of the clothing supply chain and we cannot determine the wages paid to supplier employees. However, we are committed to ensuring our cost prices remain high enough to pay a fair living wage, training workers in financial literacy and worker rights, and playing our part in collaborating with other brands and governments to improve the sector."

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