



## **The twisted truth of the Guardian's reporting on child workers in Myanmar**

**Dear Editor,**

A recent article in The Guardian by Mr. Gethin Chamberlain championed the findings of an activist publication by the Dutch "Center for Research on Multi-national Corporations", commonly known by its Dutch acronym "SOMO". Our view, as the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association, is that this report is misleading, lacks context, relies on anecdotal information and contains multiple misunderstandings of Myanmar law. At times it makes seemingly purposeful distortions in order to paint a picture of the garment sector in Myanmar that it thinks will get attention. The only problem is that it's just not accurate.

Does child labour exist in Myanmar? Yes, as it does in the UK (where the minimum age for part-time work is 13) and pretty much every country on earth. No, the garment industry does not condone it, does not champion it, and does not facilitate it. Furthermore, the Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association specifically states in our Code of Business Conduct that member companies should not employ workers below the age of 15. This does not mean that all factories obey every law all the time, but the fact that there are children working in garment factories in Myanmar is not – in and of itself - illegal or wrong.

The legal working age in Myanmar is 14 years of age for non-hazardous work. This was recently advised to our government by the ILO precisely because of the limited employment and educational opportunities in Myanmar, which is a "least-developed" country. Still, work by 14 and 15 year olds is rare in the garment industry and is limited to 4 hours maximum per day. Garment factories in Myanmar employ workers 16 and above for the vast majority of their workforce.

Unfortunately child labor is not a simple problem. If The Guardian had talked to factory owners or MGMA, they would have learned that child workers sometimes bring forged identification when applying for garment sector jobs, knowing that these businesses tend not to hire people under 18. To address this, some factories have started taking photographs of workers with their ID cards when they apply so that they have a record of this. However your reporting does not deal with this complexity.

What about the accusations of workers being paid below the minimum wage of 3,600k per day?

Some workers may have been paid half of this rate, because in Myanmar some workers are classified as "apprentices" for the first three months of their jobs. The minimum wage



during the apprentice period is, you guessed it, half the minimum wage. It probably merits pointing out that the UK wage rate for apprentices is only 47% of the full minimum (£3.40 for apprentices and £7.20 for the full minimum wage). SOMO isn't the first organization to look at minimum wage in Myanmar, however their findings don't fit with other, better surveys. A recent report from C&A Foundation found that 98% of workers self-reported that they were paid the minimum wage. Not perfect, but not exactly a systemic problem.

The problem with your article is the thinly-veiled accusations of illegal activity, for example stating that "Researchers found wages below the full legal minimum at factories supplying Sports Direct, Henri Lloyd, New Look, H&M, Muji, Pierre Cardin and Karrimor (owned by Sports Direct)." However due to the (poor) quality of the research, you can't tell if the workers are on apprentice, probation, or regular wages. We'd suggest you rephrase this to "some workers are paid a lower but still legal wage while in apprentice and probation periods, while others are paid below legal minimums" but again that complexity is lacking from your story.

Are the wages too low? First let's be clear, workers are not paid "13p an hour" to sew your clothes. Sewers are typically paid between 50p and 80p an hour, after bonuses for productivity, attendance and overtime. Unfortunately, overtime is often not optional – a demand ultimately driven by buyers and consumers and common in every single country producing your clothes, not just Myanmar.

We realize that 50p an hour might seem a tight wage to someone in the UK, but remember Myanmar is a least developed country. Accommodation costs in Yangon's industrial areas starts at about 20,000 kyats/month (14 pounds) – this is quite a bit cheaper than a flat in London. Similarly, a person in Yangon can eat 3 meals for less than 2 pounds. Context matters. Culture, economics and history matter – sweeping generalizations tend to simplify complex and nuanced realities.

Wages have risen 33% in the last three years even after adjusting for inflation. This is a direct consequence of the country's trade privileges and linkages with the European Union. Trade with the EU has boosted employment, boosted standards of living and has generally improved the quality of life for about 200,000 individuals over what it was a few years prior. Such rapid changes come with many new challenges, but situations for most folks have improved nevertheless, and this is why 200,000 new people chose to work in this industry during these past 3-4 years.

Should we boycott "Made in Myanmar?" If you'd like to make Myanmar's workers worse off, then go for it. We could point out many reasons why a boycott is counterproductive, but at the end of the day why not ask the workers who work in Myanmar's garment sector



9th floor, UMFCCI Building, 29 Min Ye Kyaw Swar Street, Lanmadaw Township, Yangon

whether they'd support a boycott that might cost them their job? Unfortunately, that question wasn't included in the research. We'd be very interested to see the results if it were, though.

At the end of the day, the most important thing that your story misses is that workers and employers aren't enemies. They both need each other. When stories like this come out, presenting a distorted picture of reality, it makes it harder for Myanmar workers and employers to work together to address the real problems. Last year a report by Action Labour Rights (who is also a partner on the SOMO report) falsely claimed that 27% of factories violated overtime laws. However, Action Labour Rights got the law wrong. SOMO (and therefore your article) also got the law wrong. When MGMA used the actual legal limits, the number of non-compliant factories was 2%. Again, not perfect, but hardly a systemic problem. This mistake led to serious discontent among businesses who (often rightly) claimed they were obeying the law. This article does the same. It doesn't help workers and employers come together to solve real problems. It just gives some fly-in, fly-out foreigners with little skin in the game a chance to feel like they've done something good. Unfortunately, they haven't and neither has your reporting on their work.

Finally, a comment for the editor of the paper. The photos in the story have nothing to do with the content of the SOMO report. They were taken during the visit of Mr. Chamberlain, at my invitation, to a factory he visited in early 2016 which is not profiled in this report. To use photos of that unrelated factory in a story on child labour is an egregious error. Imagine running the headline "Bank charged with money laundering" with a photo of an RBS bank when the bank being charged was Lloyds! It's deceptive and borderline libelous. We urge you to take both photos down immediately. They add nothing of substance to the content of the article and are only used by a reporter who couldn't be bothered to actually visit the factories he is writing about – trusting instead a report based on third party interviews. We are surprised that the editorial board of the Guardian finds these practices acceptable.

**Regards,**

**Ms. Khine Khine Nwe**  
**Secretary General**  
**Myanmar Garment Manufacturers Association**