

Update on FWF's efforts to eliminate forced labour in South India

In 2010 FWF wrote a strategy paper on the situation of forced labour in South India to guide business to source responsibly. This is a short overview of the steps FWF has taken since then to contribute to solving the problem.

1. FWF has conducted worker interviews in eleven factories in the Tirupur/Coimbatore area in late 2011/early 2012. These are not only CMT factories, but also factories involve in spinning, knitting, dyeing and etc. The findings are as follows:
 - None of these factories have a typical and complete Sumangali system, but some of them have problems such as restriction of movement; workers living in hostels are not allowed to leave on their own; wages are paid to relatives of the workers. The situation is complex. Some workers are probably under some kind of scheme, but it is hard to prove it. The workers themselves do not understand the (implications of the) deal completely and there is no documentation.
 - The majority of the workers do not complain about the system. They have accepted restriction of movement as 'normal'. They are from the countryside and they are also not allowed to go out freely at home. Since they are not allowed to go out, they do not perceive a need to receive their wages directly. Thus they also do not complain that the money goes to their family.
 - Unions do not have access to the Sumangali workers or workers living in hostels (the local term for 'dormitory'). In general, workers are not (fully) aware of their rights.
 - 'Hostel workers' have no way of report any problems. They are not able to turn to their families – they are the ones that put them in the hostels in the first place. They can't complain to the management. And they have no means of contacting unions or NGOs in the area.
 - There are some urgent OSH problems in spinning and knitting factories which should also be addressed, such as cotton dust and noise level.
 - Our own methodology and audit team: audit team needs extra training on the topic. Due to the strong Indian cultural influence, some auditors believe that restriction of movement is acceptable.

2. To address the above problems, we have implemented several measures:
 - Training of auditors and involving local stakeholders in offsite workers interviews. Frequent consultation with local stakeholders is important.
 - We avoid confronting manufacturers with the word "Sumangali scheme", since they will deny this and become difficult to work with. They usually are open to discussing associated topics like 'restriction of movement', 'failure to pay minimum wage' or 'not paying directly to workers'. In the Corrective Action Plans, we want to first address the urgent OSH problems such as fire safety in hostels, dust level and noise. Another priority is to require factories to consult local NGOs and provide trainings to workers.



- The key strategy is to give a voice to the workers, so that they will – in time - express their needs. We believe that the follow-up is to ensure their right to organise and provide them information.
 - a. FWF is carrying out a project funded by the UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women. The project aims to set up functioning anti-harassment committees in the factories supplying FWF members. It includes trainings to workers and management on what constitutes harassment and violence, elections to set up anti-harassment committees and follow-up support. According to local regulations, a woman member of a reputable NGO must participate in the committee. FWF is working with SAVE in this project. We believe this project could give us and the local partners access to hostel workers and Sumangali workers.
 - b. As part of the project, we will organise a local stakeholder forum, involving the government to discuss this issue. This will create a supportive environment.
 - c. FWF has set up an extra complaints hotline for harassment issues. We will enhance the complaints mechanism in 2012.
- FWF has made efforts to work with other MSIs and business initiatives on this issue. There may be closer cooperation in the future.
- Due to visa problems of FWF verification staff, the supplier workshop had to be postponed until 2012. In the meantime, FWF conducted management interviews at two factories. During the interviews, the interviewer informs factory management about the expectations and commitment of FWF and its affiliates. More management interviews will be conducted in 2012.