

## How the Syrian conflict is impacting the Turkish garment sector

In a bare basement apartment located in a working class suburb of Istanbul, five boys, and their parents, Aslan and Fadiya, sit on colourful cushions on the floor, sharing a simple meal. They are Syrians who left their home north of Aleppo in October 2013, running across olive groves to evade the border guards as they fled the conflict and sought refuge in Turkey.

The two older sons, Hamza and Osman, now aged 14 and 13, lead the regular lives of schoolchildren. But until auditors for Fair Wear Foundation (FWF), which works to improve labour conditions in the garment industry, spotted them in a textile factory in November 2014, they were child workers, providing a livelihood for their family, which had lost everything in the war. Hamza was 11 when he was first hired. “Hamza sometimes cried when he left for work early in winter,” says Fadiya, 35. “After he was gone, I cried too. I wished I could go to work in his place, but I had young children at home and couldn’t.” Osman followed in his big brother’s footsteps a year later.

The Syrian conflict may seem distant to fashion companies and consumers, but the war is having a direct impact on the garment sector through its supply chain. A growing number of Syrian children, hired in violation of International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions that prohibit child labour, are used as cheap manpower in Turkish textile factories.

### **Blind eye**

“We know child labour is an issue and the garment sector will have to deal with it. In places like Turkey, with the influx of Syrian migrants, it is a significant risk,” says Margreet Vrieling, FWF Associate Director. “Brands should not turn a blind eye hoping that it won’t affect their supply chain.”

Unlike many other garment companies, which immediately sever ties with producers to avoid damage to their reputation when confronted with child labour, thus putting workers’ livelihoods at risk, FWF brands engage with their manufacturers to find solutions to labour issues in their supply chain.

To address the child labour case, FWF therefore set up a meeting in Turkey between three member companies and the supplier they were sourcing from. The manufacturer had sub-contracted part of the production process without their permission to another firm, which hired the minors. The brands and their supplier jointly set up a fund to compensate the children and support them financially until they reach the age of 15, when they can legally work. “For a brand, especially one that wants to promote an ethical image, finding child labour in the supply chain is never good for your reputation,” says Sven König, in charge of Production Management and CSR at Vaude, a German sports clothing company, involved in the case. “But how you handle the situation is important. Responsibility is in our DNA.”

### **First in his class**

For Hamza and Osman, the intervention was life changing, but their plight is not unique, nor is Turkey the only country where children are employed. Around the world, an estimated 168 million boys and girls are forced to earn a living, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Like many other fashion brands, some companies affiliated to FWF have found children in their supply chain, in Myanmar and Bangladesh as well as in Turkey. In each case, they sought immediate remediation, in accordance with FWF principles, which require members to take responsibility for labour conditions throughout their supply chain.

Poverty is the main factor driving children into early employment globally. In Turkey, many Syrian families forced out of their homeland by the conflict struggle to make ends meet.

Hamza and Osman’s parents were living comfortably in Syria and they had high hopes for their children until the war robbed them of their future. “Hamza was first in his class,” says his father proudly. Aslan, 40, was a trader who frequently travelled to Iran for business until the conflict erupted. Gradually, the fighting grew closer. “It became too dangerous to send the boys to school. One day, a mortar shell hit the building ten minutes after they had left.” Eventually, as Islamic State forces approached, the family fled to Turkey.

### **Low pay, irregular work**

In Istanbul, they joined relatives who had left earlier. For a while, 35 people were living under the same roof, before Aslan found a job in a bakery and rented a flat for his wife and four sons. Another baby boy was born in May 2015, one of nearly 180,000<sup>1</sup> children born to displaced Syrian families in Turkey.

When Aslan lost his job, the family was left in dire straits. Turkey has opened its doors to Syrians, but only 258,333<sup>2</sup> of the estimated 2.8 million Syrians who benefit from ‘temporary protection’ in Turkey, where they do not have ‘refugee’ status, are looked after in camps. The others are left to fend for themselves, which usually means taking on irregular work for low pay, at the mercy of exploitative bosses. In sectors like confection and shoe manufacture, children are favoured because they are work at a fraction of the official minimum wage.

Child labour was on the decline in Turkey until the influx of Syrians fleeing the conflict turned the tide. In surveys conducted among Syrians in Turkey, Support

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<sup>1</sup> *Some O Syrians born in Turkey since war began*, Hürriyet Daily News, 18 January 2017 <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/some-180000-syrians-born-in-turkey-since-war-began.aspx?pageID=238&nID=108721&NewsCatID=341>

<sup>2</sup> Official figure from AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency), as of 12 December 2016

for Life (SFL), a humanitarian agency, found that one child at least works in almost a third of Syrian households in Istanbul.<sup>3</sup> Focus group discussions with 46 Syrian children conducted in the city of Şanlıurfa showed that 86 per cent worked to help support their families and 24 per cent were the sole breadwinners.

### **Work permits**

On 15 January 2016, the Turkish authorities announced that Syrian under protection would be allowed to apply for legal work permits. The decision, taken in the context of the EU-Turkey agreement to curb irregular migration to Europe, was welcomed in European capitals.

In practice, however, the rules are too restrictive to have a major impact. Syrians can only obtain a work permit in the province where they have been registered, but most of them congregate in big cities, which offer better opportunities.

Employers also have little incentive to jump through bureaucratic hoops to obtain work permits when unskilled Turkish labour is available. In some cases, local authorities are unwilling to cooperate. “I tried to have two Syrian workers registered. We went from one official agency to the next, and I couldn’t succeed,” explains Salih Karamans, a garment manufacturer who supplies FWF brands. As of 18 January 2017, the Turkish authorities had only granted 13,298 work permits to Syrians.<sup>4</sup>

### **8 to 7.30**

When Hamza’s cash-strapped parents heard that a job was available for their eldest, they reluctantly sent him to work. Osman followed him a year later, but he only worked for a short while before FWF intervened.

Hamza initially performed lowly chores, cleaning and helping other workers. Eventually, he learned to iron newly manufactured garments, working from 8 am to 7.30 pm on weekday and 8 to 1 pm on Saturday. On rare occasions, he took on evening shifts, which were not compulsory. “I wanted to earn more money for my family,” Hamza explains.

When the FWF team turned up at the small production site, they found a total of five children, who were earning 550 TL, just over half the Turkish minimum wage, which stood at 1,000 TL at the time (as of January 2017, the net minimum wage stands at 1,404 TL or approx. 366 €). One family left for Europe before the compensation project was implemented. Children in a second family were involved in the remediation scheme for a month before they also left Istanbul.

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<sup>3</sup> Sezen Yalçın, *Syrian Child Workers in Turkey*, Turkish Policy Quarterly, Fall 2016

<sup>4</sup> *Over 73,000 foreigners given work permits in 2016 in Turkey, Syrians take lion’s share*, Hürriyet Daily News, 18 January 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/over-73000-foreigners-given-work-permits-in-2016-in-turkey-syrians-take-lions-share-.aspx?PageID=238&NID=108683&NewsCatID=345>



The FWF Turkey representative was able to find a school where the two boys could enrol. Thanks to the steady monthly income the children receive, the family can also provide schooling for their younger brother, 11 year-old Walid.

### **Prevention and remediation through the FWF approach: responsible purchasing practices**

Successful remediation has allowed Hamza and Osman to pursue their education, unlike some 400,000 Syrian children living in Turkey who do not have access to school according to Human Rights Watch.

Preventing child labour in the garment industry, however, requires more sustained efforts. Through responsible purchasing practices, brands can exert positive influence.

Garment companies that join FWF commit to implementing the FWF Code of Labour Practices step-by-step, including its provisions on child labour, which mirror those of ILO. FWF operates under the assumption that no supply chain is ever problem-free, but it expects member companies to adopt responsible purchasing practices and remediate problems that arise in cooperation with their producers. “FWF-affiliated brands have an obligation to get to know their production sites and be transparent about issues in their supply chain,” says Margreet Vrieling. They have to be well informed, and when problems are encountered, use their influence for remediation.”

In practice, monitoring can be challenging: production involves numerous stages, and supply chains are complex and multi-layered. A BBC Panorama documentary, broadcast in October 2016, highlighted the presence of Syrian child labourers in sweatshops that produced clothes for major Western fashion brands. Its researchers revealed what has long been an open secret: major producers may seem to comply with labour regulations, but suppliers sometimes turn to sub-contractors, often working informally, to fulfil orders.

#### **Short delivery times**

“Some products are more likely to end up being worked on by children, especially those that involve manual processes like beading or spinning. As a brand, you must understand the technological process and be vigilant,” says Mariusz Stochaj, head of product and sustainability at London-based Continental Clothing, winner of the 2016 FWF Best Practice Award.

FWF encourages its member brands to establish long-term relations with their suppliers. “Within the garment sector, it is very common not to know what is happening next year. For a factory, controlling these fluctuations is difficult. It creates an instable environment and vulnerabilities for the workers,” says Margreet Vrieling.



In the outdoor clothing and work wear sectors, the flow of orders tend to be more stable. The rapid turnover and cheap price tags of main street fashion, on the other hand, require short delivery times and low production costs. “The competition is very fierce in this business,” says Salih Karaman, who produces for FWF brands as well as others. “As manufacturers, we are powerless. Brands impose prices and because there are many intermediaries, the profit margin of the manufacturer is minimal.”

### **Long term relationships**

Most brands focus first and foremost on profitability and quality, but these goals are not incompatible with upholding high labour standards. “Responsible purchasing practices are definitely a key factor in the prevention of child labour. If you have long-term relationships with your suppliers and you care about the workers’ welfare, you develop a feel for this, you know when you can’t push further on prices. Workers are always the weakest link,” says Sven König of Vaude. “You have to choose your partners wisely and make sure you agree on a set of values.”

In some countries such as Myanmar, Bangladesh or Turkey, where a significant share of the production is informal, compliance with the ILO ban on child labour is known to be weak. Official statistics suggest that the textile industry, one of Turkey’s top export sectors, employs approximately one million workers (2014 figures), but unions believe up to two million informal workers also contribute to it.<sup>5</sup> Brands that opt to produce in these locations must exercise due diligence and monitor production with additional care.

The government should monitor labour conditions in factories more closely and enforce compliance with the law. “Once we saw a workshop full of children, and when we asked about visits by official inspectors, we were told that they come, drink tea and leave,” says Yildiz Koç, FWF Turkey representative. “Child labour has been normalized.” Activists in Turkey also deplore the fact that unions are not paying enough attention to child labour.

### **Cooperation**

“Addressing child labour has to be a combination of industry and government or international statute,” says Mariusz Stochaj. “It also depends on brands’ commitment: if they hunt for the cheapest prices, there is a greater likelihood that there will be unscrupulous, unethical methods in their supply chain.”

Brands that only account for a small percentage of a factory’s production have limited leverage to demand changes, which is why FWF encourages cooperation between members sourcing from the same suppliers to boost their influence. “If you’re lucky enough to find other FWF members working with the same manufacturer, this is the best case scenario,” says Sven König. “You can

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics from the website of Teksif, Turkey’s Textile, Knitting and Apparel Workers’ Trade Union



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combine corrective efforts and have more leverage, more impact.” Vaude won the 2015 FWF Best Practice award for a joint training project conducted in cooperation with two other companies, Jack Wolfskin and Salewa.

Fair Wear Foundation is in favour of working together with other multi stakeholder initiatives like FLA and ETI.

### **Cut and run**

The media also have a role to play: consumers should be aware that when T-shirts or jeans are on offer in retail shops for the price of a Frappuccino, these cheap bargains often carry a hidden cost that others, including child workers like Hamza and Osman, end up paying.

Unfortunately, says Mariusz Stochaj, media coverage of child labour cases tends to focus on the initial scandal, which dies down rapidly. “The reaction of most brands, especially high-profile names, is to cut and run as soon as there is talk of possible child labour,” he says. “Cancelling orders or cutting ties with suppliers doesn’t solve anything at all, in fact, it can make things worse if the children were the only source of income.” Highlighting solutions and best practices, as well as explaining the broader context in which child labour occurs, would have a more beneficial and lasting effect.

Creating an environment in which garment companies can be more honest about the darker sides of the industry and engage constructively with their suppliers would be an important step towards preventing child labour. “We want brands to be frank and open about it,” says Margreet Vrieling of FWF. “Brands and suppliers must give each other room to do business in a respectful way.”

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