

A stylized illustration of two young women with dark skin and hair, looking at each other. The woman on the left is smiling and wearing a yellow and black striped shirt. The woman on the right has a more serious expression and is wearing a blue and white striped shirt with a black braid. The background is white.

# THE FACE OF CHILD LABOUR

STORIES  
FROM ASIA'S  
GARMENT SECTOR



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Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) is an international multi-stakeholder non-profit organisation that works with clothing companies –and their supply chains– to improve working conditions in the garment industry. By becoming a member of FWF, a company commits to implementing the FWF Code of Labour Practices throughout its supply chain. Currently over 130 brands have joined FWF. FWF strives to increase awareness about working conditions and workers' rights in textile factories. For more information, please visit [www.fairwear.org](http://www.fairwear.org).

FWF, with Dutch trade unions Mondiaal FNV and CNV Internationaal and the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have formed a Strategic Partnership in order to address key themes in the garment industry. One of the three pillars of the Strategic Partnership is the goal of ending violence and harassment against women and men in the garment supply chain. The other two pillars, which complement its work on gender-based violence, are to implement a living wage and improve social dialogue.

This report was written by Zaw Aung, social research consultant and freelance writer, along with Koen Oosterom, San Latt Phyu, Ellen Keith, Saskia Wishart and Andrea Spithoff, with editing by Erin van Santen-Hobbie. To protect their identities, the report uses fictitious names and drawn portraits instead of photographs, made by Floor de Goede. Graphic design by Ruben Steeman, buro RuSt. This report is published in conjunction with the Strategic Partnership for Garment Supply Chain Transformation and was made possible through financial support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs.



Government of the Netherlands

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## CHILD LABOUR: WHO, WHAT, WHERE

Child labour. The words stir up visions of sweatshops, tiny fingers doing delicate tasks, fast fashion and a culture inclined to look the other way. But how does this correspond to the truth? The reality is that child labour is still a global problem. An estimated 218 million children (ages five to 17) around the world work, 70 per cent of whom are considered victims of child labour.<sup>1</sup>

What exactly does this mean? According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), child labour refers to 'work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development'.<sup>2</sup> There is a big difference between children helping their parents out around the house and working behind a sewing machine in a factory. Child labour is a violation of fundamental human rights.

Child labour is a regional issue, occurring predominately in Africa and Asia. Most child labour relates to agriculture, including jobs like fishing and herding livestock. However, a great number of children are employed in the industrial sector, where they face the most substantial risks. Roughly 75 per cent of children working in industry are involved in hazardous work. This is especially the case in Asia, where the likelihood of children finding employment in the industrial sector is highest.<sup>3</sup> Given the importance of the garment industry in this region, many child labourers wind up at garment factories. Here they engage in a range of tasks, including cutting, trimming threads, fastening buttons, folding clothes, ironing, etc. They may ultimately face the same labour conditions as adults, which often means working long hours (including overtime) and in sometimes hazardous conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and trends, 2012-2016', International Labour Organization, 2017, Geneva.

<sup>2</sup> 'What is child labour?' International Labour Organization. [[website](#)], (accessed 5 June 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Global Estimates of Child Labour: Results and trends, 2012-2016, [[website](#)] Geneva, (accessed September 2017).





## UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC–1989) declares that every child has ‘the right to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child’s education, or to be harmful to the child’s health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development’. Nation states should establish a minimum age, hours and conditions for the employment of children. Aside from the USA, every country in the world has ratified the UNCRC.

The Convention identifies four guiding principles that apply to all children:

1. Devotion to the best interests of the child
2. Non-discrimination
3. The right for the child to be heard
4. The right to life, survival and development.

Source: UNICEF, [unicef.org.uk](https://www.unicef.org.uk)



## FAIR WEAR FOUNDATION CODE OF LABOUR PRACTICES

The Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) Code of Labour Practices is made up of eight labour standards derived from ILO Conventions and the UN’s Declaration on Human Rights. One of these standards is ‘No exploitation of child labour’. Unlike the UNCRC, this standard sets a minimum working age at 15 years old. Through work with its member brands, FWF tries to uphold the following:

‘There shall be no use of child labour. The age for admission to employment shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in any case, not less than 15 years’ (ILO Convention 138). ‘There shall be no forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour [...] Children [ages 15-18] shall not perform work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm their health, safety or morals’ (ILO Convention 182).

Some of the main factors that can lead to child labour are:

- POVERTY
- ILLITERACY
- WEAK ENFORCEMENT OF LABOUR LAWS
- SOCIAL NORMS (society accepts it as a necessity)
- LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLING

Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) recognises that child labour continues to be a widespread problem and one not easily solved. So long as poverty exists, families will be forced to find ways to supplement their incomes, which can mean putting children to work. Sometimes children apply for work with fake ID documents, and sometimes factories are fully aware that these applicants are underage but hire them anyway. Some factory managers even feel a moral duty to employ them, as it provides much needed income for

impoverished families, and the alternatives can be much worse. And when garment factories employ children, the brands sourcing from these factories can become involved in this child labour in their supply chains, even unknowingly. Despite this, naming and shaming factories (or brands sourcing from factories) where child labour is found is not the answer. Turning a blind eye or ending a working relationship with a supplier because of child labour only leaves a hole for another brand to come in and fill the gap. Of course, the risk is that this new brand might care even less about factory labour conditions, and in this way, the situation could carry on unaddressed. Instead, FWF focuses on creating positive changes in the lives of these children.

Change starts with transparency. This publication seeks to promote a greater understanding of the realities of child labour by presenting interviews with children who were found working in Asia's garment sector.

## ASIA'S BOOMING GARMENT INDUSTRY

Asia and the Pacific region account for 41% of global child labour according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The 2014 Child Labour Index ranked several FWF production countries in Asia among those which are ranked at an 'extreme risk' for child labour including Bangladesh, China, India, Indonesia and Myanmar. Estimates of child labour in these countries reach as high as 13% of children age 5-14 years old. Many of the factors that give rise to child labour are present in this region. One key challenge is the low number of students who finish their studies.

In South Asia, only 69% of children have access to early childhood education, which contributes to high incidences of child labour. In some countries, compulsory schooling only lasts five years, and many children quit school at age 11 or 12. Up to 40% of adolescents in Bangladesh are not in school. This, combined with extreme poverty, creates a huge pool of potential under-age workers. For example, India's 2011 census estimated that more than 10.2 million children under 14 were 'economically active'.

Most countries in the region have legislation which prohibits children under 14 from working in garment factories—in line with international standards—and many have laws requiring 'age verification' methods to ensure compliance. In India and Bangladesh, young workers must provide a birth certificate, or undergo a medical examination to verify their age. In Myanmar, for all workers under 18, a medical certificate must be arranged to verify their fitness for work. Alternatively, employers in Indonesia are not required to obtain evidence of a worker's age.

In some countries, for example, Myanmar, children aged 14 and 15 are permitted by law to work a maximum of 4 hours of work. However, in a factory setting, and given the nature of the garment industry, it is not feasible or realistic to expect that the working hours would actually be limited to four. There are several reasons for this:

- There is a real risk that workers would quickly start working more hours or full time, either by their own choice or because of pressure from factory management.
- When training is arranged at the factory, the lines between 'on-the-job' training and actual work easily become blurred.
- Having workers come in for four working hours per day would put the workers in a very difficult position. There is a risk of discrimination because of 'special treatment'.
- If training is arranged outside factory premises, there are practical challenges with arranging transportation after four hours of work for only a small number of workers and finding suitable (part-time) training opportunities.

The practice of using counterfeit or borrowed identity documents, sometimes fuelled by the fact that many (especially immigrant) workers face difficulties in obtaining an ID card (which can only be obtained in their native village), makes it difficult to accurately determine the age of potential workers. Research conducted through FWF audits has revealed that child workers often use fake ID cards and doctors' attestations. Many factories know this, but turn a blind eye or simply lack the systems and procedures to verify properly. And despite the legal restrictions regarding working hours and type of work for workers under the age of 18, child and adolescent workers often work the same hours as adults. FWF audits in Asia have led to the discovery of underage labourers at several factories supplying FWF members. All those discovered were working full time and conducting the same overtime as adult workers. In addition, no medical certificates of fitness were arranged for the underage workers.

Some of the general factory workers FWF interviewed indicated that factories often look the other way when checking the age of recruits. In many cases, a lack of proper documentation is not an impediment, with factory management hiring children regardless of their age.

## ADDRESSING CHILD LABOUR IN ASIA

As the garment industry in Asia continues to grow, so does the risk of child labour. New garment factories will keep opening, with factory owners searching for more sources of low-cost labour. In some areas, there is a shortage of workers willing to work in garment factories. Staff turnover is high. With increasing orders and looming deadlines, HR managers are under huge pressure to find new workers. In order to meet this need, HR managers may become less strict with regard to workers' ages. Child labour is a persistent issue that demands continuous surveillance.

FWF chooses to be transparent about the issue of child labour. To stop it from continuing, we need to engage in open conversations about the problem. And while FWF cannot offer a single, magic solution, there are steps that brands and factory management can and must take to reduce the risk of child labour in the future.

### FWF CHILD LABOUR POLICY AND REMEDIATION PLAN

To address the sensitive issue of child labour in the garment sector, FWF has been cooperating with both buyers in the EU and suppliers in 'extreme risk' locations. FWF audits have occasionally uncovered cases of child labour. In addition to the FWF child labour policy and taking national legislation into account, FWF developed specific guidelines to address areas where child labour has been uncovered.

FWF GUIDANCE: 'AGE VERIFICATION AT GARMENT FACTORIES' INCLUDES  
A SPECIFIC CHILD LABOUR POLICY AND REMEDIATION PLAN FOR CHILD LABOUR.  
MOREOVER, IN ORDER TO HELP FACTORIES THAT ARE UNKNOWNLY HIRING CHILD LABOUR,  
THERE ARE GUIDELINES FOR FACTORIES TO IMPROVE THEIR PROCESSES OF AGE VERIFICATION.  
TO READ MORE ABOUT THIS, OR THE FWF CHILD LABOUR POLICY,  
PLEASE SEE THE APPENDICES.

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Under this plan, child labourers are not allowed to work until they reach legal working age. When a child labourer is found in a factory, FWF takes necessary action to investigate the case, including through careful inspection of the personnel file, age-proving documentation and interviews with both the factory management and the child worker in question. FWF also makes a home visit to the child's family, consulting with the parents and child to determine whether the child wants to go back to school or take vocational training. With the financial support of the brand and factory, FWF ensures the arrangement of schooling or vocational training, such as tailoring, English-language training or computer skills. In addition, full income, including overtime pay, is compensated to the family until the child reaches the age of legal employment.

When they do come of age, many children return to work at the factory, because job opportunities, especially in more rural areas, are scarce. Additionally, families often lack a regular monthly income and rely on their children's salaries. However, a number of the child labourers who participated in the FWF remediation plan report feeling inspired by their training; they have bigger dreams, of owning their own businesses or completing higher level education.

## THE ROLE OF BRANDS

FWF member brands are committed to ensuring that they source from production facilities that produce under decent working conditions. This responsibility has global implications and also applies to countries where local governments are unwilling or unable to adhere to international labour standards.

To reduce the possibility of child labour, FWF member brands should conduct proper due diligence before entering into new business relationships. This specifically includes addressing the risk of child labour. Member brands need to familiarise themselves with FWF's guidance for age verification.



They should identify and investigate countries that are at risk for child labour and make sure that personnel files like working contracts and age-verifying documents are kept up to date and in good order at all production sites, and that suppliers have adequate policies in place to address age verification.

Depending on the risk for child labour, brands must ensure that auditors allocate sufficient time to verify properly for the risk of child labour.

FWF has chosen to allocate two full working days for the on-site component of factory audits in regions where child labour has been previously identified, irrespective of the size of the factory. This allows the opportunity to review workers' personnel files, to conduct visual factory inspections and interview workers, all of which can help mitigate this risk.

### FWF AUDITS

FWF audits are different from most other audits. Audits by FWF's teams are not pass-fail exercises. The aim is to find out as much as possible about the situation in the factory. This information forms the basis of an improvement process that the FWF member brand is required to support.

FWF audits are conducted by three local experts: a worker interviewer, a documents inspector and a health-and-safety specialist. In the weeks before the audit, the worker interviewer will conduct 'off-site' interviews with workers from the factory. These interviews are done in an environment away from the factory, so the workers can talk freely. The audit team will not disclose the identity of the workers interviewed, nor the outcomes of the interviews, to the factory. The off-site worker interviews often indicate areas for further investigation.

If a case of child labour is found, it is important that the names, ages and contact details of the workers concerned are immediately recorded. If not part of a multi-stakeholder initiative that has local capacity, the brand should consult and cooperate with local initiatives focused on child labour prevention and remediation.

Most importantly, the FWF member brands are required to ascertain that the child worker is no longer employed at the factory. The member brand and the factory are obligated to compensate the child's family for at least the legal minimum wage the child would have earned. These wages should be paid monthly (not as a lump sum) until the child has reached the minimum working age set out in the FWF Code of Labour Practices or, if it is higher, the legal minimum age for working.

### FWF GUIDELINES FOR AGE VERIFICATION



As a safeguard for garment factories to prevent the recruitment of child labour, even unknowingly, FWF has also introduced simple guidelines for age verification. FWF developed these based on its experience implementing audits in garment factories. The guidelines strongly recommend that factories follow six steps of good practices whenever they recruit new workers.



## THE SIX STEPS OF AGE VERIFICATION ARE:

1. ➡ Make certain that the factory has an encompassing and law-abiding child labour policy that is communicated to factory workers.
2. ➡ Ensure that all relevant age verifying documents are thoroughly checked and recorded.
3. ➡ Trained HR staff in charge of recruitment should conduct individual interviews with all candidate workers, which should include questions that would elicit the age.
4. ➡ In cases where all existing data and the interview process fail to provide certainty about the candidate's age, a medical test focused solely on age verification should be conducted.
5. ➡ HR should have a checklist to document and foster discipline in ensuring that all their steps for age verification are followed.
6. ➡ Ensure that HR staff is trained in age verification.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, SEE APPENDIX B.  PAGE 40

Due to this initiative, the garment factories have now become more aware of the sensitive issue of child labour, as well as FWF's approach to reducing the risk and offering remediation when it does arise.

These guidelines provide a simple procedure for carrying out each step systematically; factories that follow all these steps will effectively minimise the risk of recruiting child labour and consequently also reduce the risk of damaging the factory's reputation.

## FWF TRAINING ON AGE VERIFICATION

The recruitment of new workers in garment factories in Asia happens daily, meaning the hiring of child labour (either intentionally or not) is a constant issue that requires meticulous age verification efforts if it is to be prevented.



FWF seminar on 'Age Verification at Garment Factories' in Yangon, 18 November 2017.

On 18 November 2017, FWF held a seminar in Yangon on 'Age Verification at Garment Factories' which drew on FWF's experiences working with Burmese garment factories. Participants included factory owners, managers and human resource officials, some foreign and some local, and many of whom had different expectations about how to address the very challenging topic of child labour in the garment sector. During the seminar, the factory representatives had a frank discussion about the practical issues associated with child labour, particularly the difficulties factories face regarding age verification.

Age verification seminars create the opportunity for factory representatives to address nuanced concerns regarding child labour. For example, factories have noted the lack of clarification in the existing labour law regarding the legality of juvenile workers doing overtime.

A manager of a locally-owned garment factory explained it this way: 'Every week, we have to request permission for overtime work from the labour department. We must give the list of workers who will work overtime, but their ages vary a lot. The labour department just signed and gave permission to our request. And the labour law also did not mention at all that the workers aged 16 to 18 are not allowed to work overtime. I would like to know exactly whether it is legal or illegal. What is FWF's policy on this issue?'

Another issue factory representatives have discussed is the matter of falsified documents. This includes identification cards used by the applicants in the labour recruitment process and the absence of appropriate medical facilities in the governmental mechanisms to support the process of age verification.

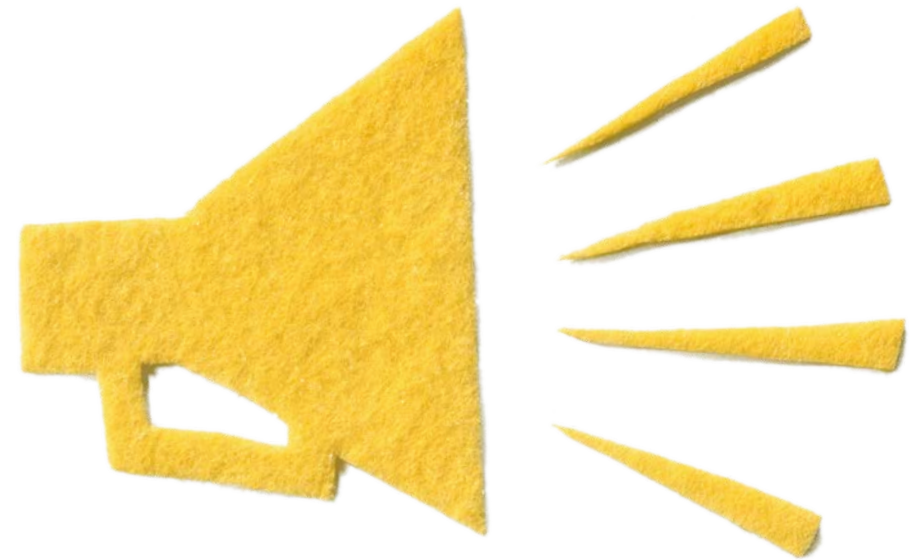


Because of the high labour mobility from rural to urban commercial centres and the lack of proper identification documents among the youth, it is indeed challenging for factories to verify the age of every worker. Many youths only apply for ID cards at the age of 18, so they often lack identification or choose to falsify it and therefore borrow an ID card of an elder sibling or friend when applying for a job. Also, in time of high buyer demand, factories often recruit new workers without requesting the necessary documents. In this way, garment factories often turn a blind eye to employing child labourers.

The FWF guidelines, however, are a straightforward process to ensure that a factory minimises the risk of hiring underage workers. By carrying out each step thoroughly, these factories will essentially curtail their risks—thereby upholding their reputation, and avoiding the costs associated with remediating cases of child labour.

A CSR officer from a foreign-owned factory shared his views:

'For instance, we recruited a new worker, not knowing that she was a child labourer. But after employing her for some time, we found out that the worker used falsified documents about her age during the recruitment process. Then, all the responsibility fell on the factory for employing this child labourer and the factory had to give compensation to her until she is 16. It is not fair!'



## THE VOICES OF CHILD LABOURERS

To better understand the issue of child labour in Asia's garment sector, FWF organised interviews with several children who were found working in garment factories during FWF audits. In this publication, the children describe the circumstances that drove them to seek employment at a young age, the conditions under which they worked, and their hopes for the future. Their stories offer new perspectives on the complexities of child labour. The countries and names of these children have been changed to protect their privacy.





I would like to set up my own tailoring business once I am 16. I do not want to go back to the factory.

## MAYA

Maya sits beside her parents in their one-room house. She is wearing a simple sleeveless blouse that she tailored following a three-month tailoring course supported by FWF at a local training centre. Maya and her family are discussing her experiences as a child labourer in a garment factory owned by a local businessman. For the most part, she listens quietly, but sometimes she interjects to add background information.

Maya is the only daughter in the family, with one elder and two younger brothers. Her family used to own a small piece of farmland, a house, a

flock of a hundred ducks, and a small boat, which her father used to fish on the river. However, tragedy struck five years ago, when severe flooding and riverbank erosion claimed the family's property. They were forced to move to their current house in a squatter area.

Her family's story is not unusual. In monsoon season, there is often flooding in the village where they used to live, due to high tides and a strong river current. This has resulted in a large population of internally-displaced people, who usually move inland to urban areas, where there are more work opportunities. As Maya explains, 'My family sold everything we owned, including a flock of ducks that we bred, and moved. We had no more farmland or other property, but debts. That's why my brother and I had to search for a job'. A few days after the move, 13-year-old Maya found work at a local garment factory. However, it took some time before her brother also secured a job there, since the factory prefers to hire females.

When asked about her childhood, Maya pauses, looking up at the tin roof of the house. 'While living in the village, my elder brother took care of the ducks every morning. I was too young to do anything but take lessons. After taking a shower, my brother and I went to school on foot with lunch boxes prepared by my mother. It is nice walking together with other friends through paddy fields to the school for half an hour. I was really happy to play with friends before directly going back home after school'. After the move, she left all this behind to work 12-hour days in the garment factory. Still, she says her only focus was on the job and trying to cope with the new environment so she could support her family. Her initial monthly salary was the equivalent of \$60 USD.

Her job at the garment factory was not her first work experience. After she left school at age 12, she began sowing and harvesting rice paddies and beans alongside her parents as a daily paid worker. At that time, she stayed in the old village and earned \$1.2 USD per day. That ended when her fam-

ily moved to the city, and she sought work at a garment factory. She began with a week of training. Once factory management realised she was a quick learner, she was assigned to sew clothes on the assembly line. Maya says, 'I was able to learn how to use a sewing machine within a few days. As I was willing to work in this job, I had no difficulty at work, except the relationship with the supervisor who often used rude words against the workers and looked down on us. I also experienced workers' demonstrations on the issue of low payment at the factory. Well, there are times that I was unhappy, particularly when we, the workers, had to meet the targets under pressure'.

She worked at the factory for a year and a half before FWF representatives discovered her. With the support of FWF and the member brand sourcing from the factory, Maya was given the opportunity to take a tailoring course at a local training centre. She is now able to make her own clothes and has already bought a sewing machine with some of the money she receives as compensation from the factory (\$120 USD/month). 'I would like to set up my own tailoring business after I am 16. I do not want to go back to the factory. I am confident that I can do it with the skills that I learned from the training. I appreciate all the support the FWF generously provided'.

Not only is she eager to share her plans, she also wishes to further improve her tailoring skills. Last year, Maya wed in an arranged marriage, and she is dreaming of starting her own family soon. And although she is still attached to her parents and youngest brother, all of whom she still financially supports, FWF's intervention has given her confidence in her ability to stand on her own two feet.



## NAN

Nan usually plays football with friends during her free time in the village, and she is a fan of Arsenal, made obvious by the jersey she wears. Although she wanted to become a professional football player, her family's economic situation sent her down a different path. Since age 12, she has worked in a garment factory for 12 hours per day, six days per week.

She is the second daughter of five children. Her father works seasonally as a driver of a paddy-harvesting machine, while her mother takes care of the children at home. When the third child in the family began school, the eldest daughter

had to drop out. Likewise, when the fourth child enrolled, Nan left school to work.

Nan says she did not initially plan to work at a garment factory, but she got the job by chance. 'The manager of the factory is from my village. One day, she shared the news that there were job vacancies at the factory. My sister went to the factory to apply for the job and I accompanied her. When I arrived at the factory, I realised that I also could apply'. As the factory's

youngest worker, she had to start at 6.30 in the morning and work until 7.00 in the evening, and was tasked with cleaning the excess threads from the finished clothes. Later, she received sewing training and became a tailor in a production assembly line.

'Some of the girls at my village who applied for this job at the same time quit working at the factory because they could not stand the initial hardship of working long hours,' Nan remarks. 'But my sister and I tried hard and became accustomed to the working environment'. The factory first decided to pay her a rate of \$22 USD per month, because she was a child and could not do a lot. However, she ultimately received \$38 USD, including overtime, at the end of the first month. Her mother, sitting beside her, interrupts to say that she was so happy with what the two sisters received, given that the whole family relies on the two daughters' incomes.

As the factory's youngest worker, she had to start at 6.30 in the morning and work until 7.00 in the evening, and was tasked with cleaning the excess threads from the finished clothes.

Nan's initial experience with FWF stirred up a mix of excitement, concern and relief once she learned that the organisation would help her get vocational training instead of working in the garment factory. 'At first, I heard that there was an inspection in the factory and the factory officials told all underage workers to hide'. Once discovered, she was initially too afraid to answer FWF's questions. 'When they explained the terms and conditions in detail, I realised that I was not allowed to work until the age of 16, but entitled to learn vocational skills or to go back to school if I wished. Meanwhile, I'd receive monthly compensation until I turned 16'.

She also mentions some peer pressure that she has experienced: 'Actually, I wanted to work and get income, instead of receiving the monthly compensation without working. I heard that some workers from the factory said behind my back that without working, I was getting even more money. I did not like it'. Through the FWF programme, she had to wait nine months before resuming work at the factory. With the assistance of FWF and the FWF member brand, she took a basic computer course at a local training centre, learning Microsoft Office skills. She now wants to find a computer-related job to exercise her new skills, but there are few relevant job opportunities in her village. Also, her mother does not want her to work far away. Therefore, Nan resumed her work at the garment factory once she turned 16 in May 2017.

'When I went back to the factory, all the machines were automatic ones, not the manual ones that I was used to. So, I had to learn to use the new machine, which was actually much easier than the manual after I knew how to use it. Although I am under the same supervisor, I am not in the line with my friends. At first, I had a bit of disappointment at work, but later on I got new friends and became happy'. She started receiving a monthly salary between \$118 and 140 USD. Due to her skills, she was upgraded to Grade A, which equates to the highest worker salary level in the assembly line. When asked about her plans for remaining at the factory, she says, 'I do not think I will work at the factory for many years because I feel I am locked up in a room from dawn to night. I want to work in an open space'.



## MAI

In 2015 Mai's life changed after her father was severely injured in an accident while working in a warehouse. 'Both of his arms were broken and he could not work for several months,' she explains. Because the entire household relied on her father's income, the accident put great financial strain on the family, and Mai was forced to quit school after the eighth grade. After this, she found a job at a garment factory to support her family. She was fourteen. After several months in bed, her father fully recovered and began working as a motorbike taxi driver. Although her mother needs to take care of Mai's two younger sisters, she also works as a seasonal labourer in the agricultural fields, especially during the harvest.

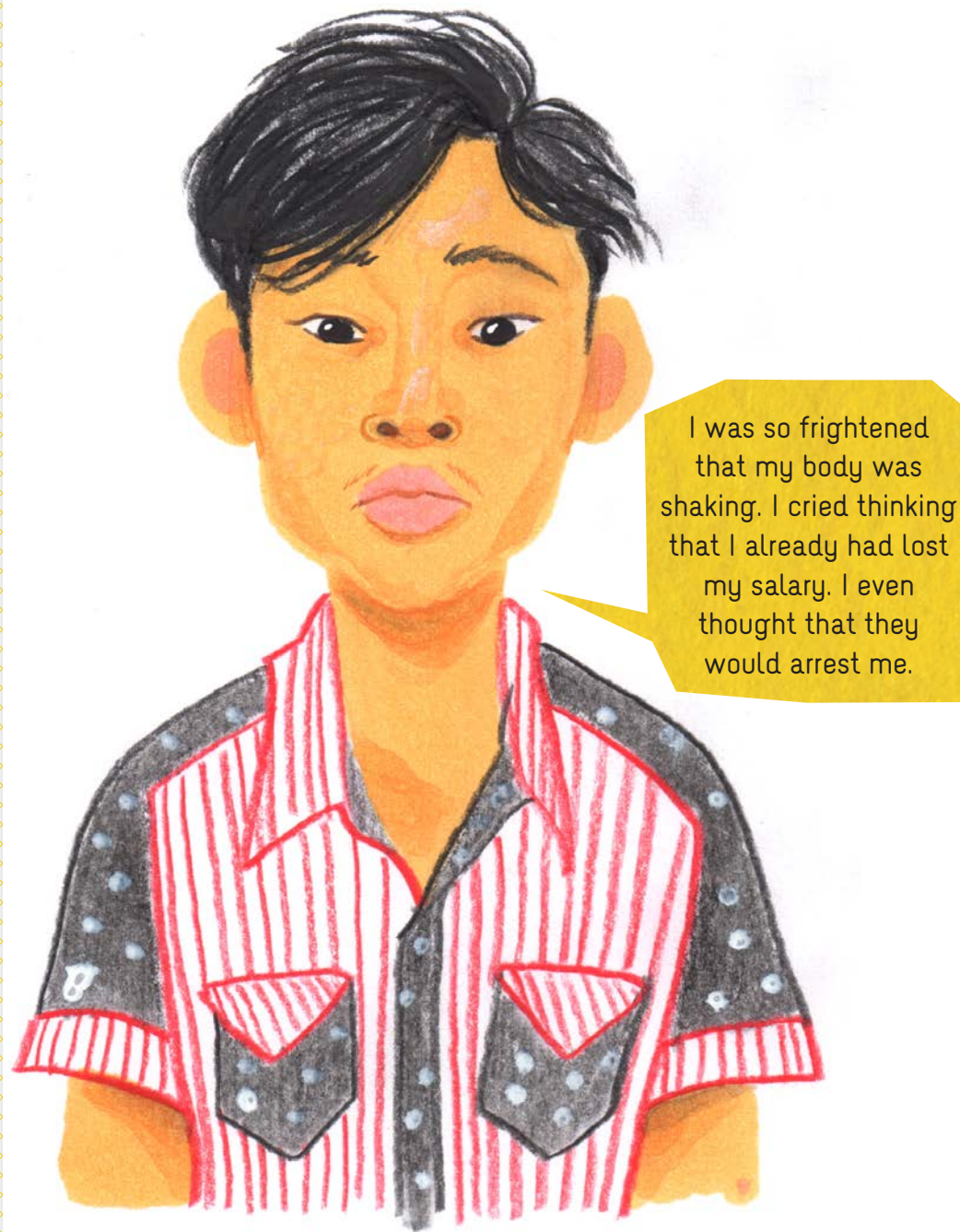
Actually, I wanted to become a teacher, but ended up as a worker in a garment factory due to my family's situation...



Prior to starting work, Mai knew little about how a garment factory operates. She did not expect the extremely long hours, which sometimes means working through the whole night, nor the constant supervision and pressure from the assembly line leaders, who can be physically and verbally abusive when they are not satisfied with the productivity.

She explains, 'In times of high demand, the workers have to work "all night" with a one-hour break for a nap on the concrete floor at dawn and then continue to work the next whole day. The line leader often came and checked my work speed and if she was not satisfied or found an error, she twisted my ear. It hurt me a lot'. Because of her family's financial situation, Mai felt unable to miss work, even when she was ill or exhausted.

Working illegally in a factory added extra stress. 'Actually, I wanted to become a teacher, but ended up as a worker in a garment factory due to my family's situation...I felt insecure whenever I heard the news that there would be an inspection in the factory. The factory simply warned us that if we were found, we would be laid off immediately. I often had to run and seek a hiding place such as a toilet, a store or a firewood pile at the backyard of the factory in order to not lose my job and income'. This cat-and-mouse game ended after about a year when FWF representatives discovered her during an inspection. Since that day, many things have changed for Mai. She has now completed a six-month English course. She has also trained to become a tailor at a local shop, all with the assistance of FWF. Through this training, she has become proficient in tailoring women's clothes. When she is older and finishes her studies, she plans to return to the factory. However, she now dreams of opening her own tailor shop and recently bought a sewing machine and an overlock machine with money that she saved from her monthly compensation.



## TUAN

Tuan stands behind the table, tired and sweaty, but he continues ironing shirt after shirt. Ironing, a job done solely by men in this factory, is physically demanding, and a task workers do not want to do for long because the heat and heaviness of the iron causes fatigue and dehydration. Therefore, factory management usually assigns new workers like Tuan to the ironing section.

Born to a peasant family, Tuan grew up in his father's paddy fields. After quitting school at the end of the eighth grade, Tuan learned to drive a tractor and other farming equipment so he could help his father in the fields. He was really interested in becoming a mechanic, repairing and maintaining farming machinery, but there were no opportunities in his small village to learn this trade. His two older sisters, who had also left school, began working in a garment factory.

When he was just 13, Tuan was hired to work in the ironing section in the same factory as his sisters. After eight months in this section, Tuan started feeling very unhappy with his job. In addition to the difficulty of his role, he was also frustrated because the factory had yet to change his payment status from daily to monthly. As a daily worker, he earned \$8 USD per week, equal to half the salary of a worker who is paid monthly.

Tuan met with factory management to discuss the possibility of learning to use a sewing machine and becoming one of the few male workers in the sewing section. He also requested a change of status to start being paid monthly. Management was supportive of this idea and transferred him to the new position.

He had just begun working in the sewing department when FWF came to do an audit. It was not the first time that child labourers, including Tuan,



had to run and hide—often in toilets, vacant rooms, warehouse, or under piles of clothes. Inspections of the factory were not uncommon, and the child labourers were warned to make sure they were not discovered. 'I was so frightened that my body was shaking. I cried thinking that I had already lost my salary. I even thought that they would arrest me, put me in custody and investigate me'.

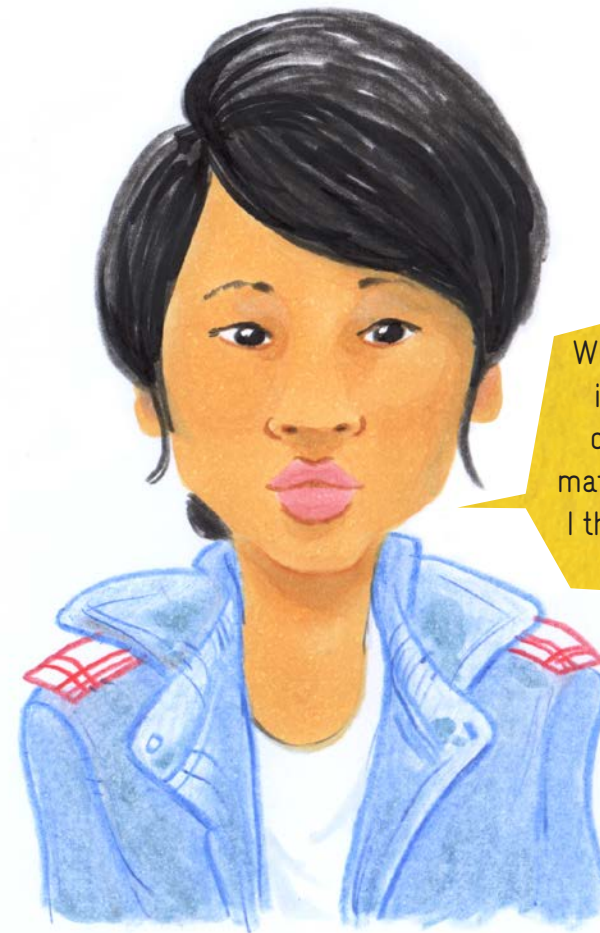
FWF interviewed him and explained that he did not need to worry because he would not lose his salary; however, he would not be allowed to work until he turned 16 years old. In the seven months in which he did not work, he attended basic and advanced computer classes. When he turned 16, Tuan went back to work in the factory.

## TULA

אנחנו מאמינים כי כל ילד צריך להשלים חינוך בסיסי, ולכן אנחנו עובדים על כך שכל ילד יוכל ללמוד בבית ספר ולקבל חינוך בסיסי. אנחנו מאמינים כי כל ילד צריך להשלים חינוך בסיסי, ולכן אנחנו עובדים על כך שכל ילד יוכל ללמוד בבית ספר ולקבל חינוך בסיסי.

At the end of tenth grade, Tula was excelling in school. She had just received her exam marks and had done very well. However, this favourable news came with a dilemma. 'On the one hand,' she explains, 'I was so happy that I passed grade 10 successfully and would only need one more year to pass my matriculation exam, but on the other hand, I felt sad to think that my parents borrowed a lot of money from a local money lender to send me from the village, where there is no high school, to a boarding school in [a nearby township] last year. My father worked hard to pay back the debt throughout the year, but has not yet paid it back completely'.

Her parents would have once again needed to borrow more money to pay for her last year in high school. She worried that the increasing amount of debt would be too hard for her family. 'My father worked on a container ship that runs along the river. My mother cannot work, but takes care of my younger sister who is still too young to send to school. I do not want them to live in a lot of debt because of me'.



What makes me happy most is that FWF helped me to continue my study for the matriculation examination that I thought I could not have sat in for this year.

She decided to convince her parents that it would be better if she were to postpone her education for one year to find a job and save money for the cost of her matriculation exam. Her father wished for her to stay in school, but Tula felt bad knowing how hard her father had to work to make ends meet. She and her parents could not come to an agreement.

One day, when she was back in her hometown visiting her family, she ran into a neighbour. The woman worked in a garment factory and offered to



offered to help Tula find a position in the factory. Despite not knowing this woman well, Tula followed her to the city.

Tula had been working in the factory for less than a month when the FWF representatives found her during an inspection. 'At that time, I was working in the packing section, clearing the unnecessary threads from the clothes and folding them neatly before packing into a plastic bag. I had no idea who they were and what they were going to inspect. Only when I heard from the other workers that they came here to inspect the factory to make sure that it did not use child labourers under 16 years old, I was worried that I would be laid off if they found me'.

Once she understood that FWF was trying to help the child labourers, her perspective shifted. 'I felt quite relieved to know that FWF would provide all this assistance. What makes me happy most is that FWF helped me to continue my studies for the matriculation examination that I thought I could not have sat in for this year. My father even cried because he is so happy that I can continue my education'.

Tula is also keen to share her future plans. 'I will apply for the military academy to become an officer in uniform if I pass the exam. If I cannot succeed in my first ambition, my second choice is to apply to the education college to become a teacher'. Tula has since passed her exam with distinctions in geography and economics.



## PRIA

THE FACE OF CHILD LABOUR

A 15-year-old girl with long black braids, Pria is trying to learn to use a sewing machine at a tailoring training centre in the outskirts of the city. She has been taking this training course for nearly four months with FWF's support in hopes of improving her skills before she is legally allowed to work.

Born into a family of poor fishermen, Pria lives in a village near the bank of a river. From dawn to dusk, her parents fish along the river with a small boat and sell their catch at a local market. As the eldest daughter, Pria must take care of four sisters and one brother, including a month-old baby. She has tears in her eyes as she talks about her childhood. 'My family is too much poor and we have to live in a small bamboo hut near the river. In rainy season, my father could not go out for fishing due to the river flood that even reached the bottom of our hut. At that time, life was so hard that we did not have anything to eat at all'.

Pria quit school at age 12 when her parents could no longer afford to pay her school fees. Since then, she has taken care of her siblings while her parents fish. In harvesting season, her parents harvest green beans in the fields near the village, and she used to accompany them. 'If I help my parents harvesting in the fields, we can do more and earn more. That's why I followed them, but I could not work under the bright sunshine for a long time as my eyes are weak and tears came out. At the time, I stopped working'.

The family's poverty was the major reason that led to her becoming a child labourer in a garment factory. She and a friend met a young woman from her village who was working at a garment factory, and the pair decided to search for a factory job.

However, twenty days after the garment factory recruited the two girls, FWF representatives discovered them in one of the regular FWF social audits of the factory. FWF instructed the factory authorities to stop employing the two girls because they were underage and in violation of national labour laws. FWF also ensured that the factory would provide them with monthly compensation until their 16th birthdays, including a guarantee to rehire the girls if they should wish to return to their jobs at the factory once they came of age.

Pria says that she initially felt very out of place at the factory and was so afraid that she did not dare speak or look at the other workers. She was assigned to feed shirt buttons into the tiny holes in the fabric, a task that required her to stand without rest from 8.00 in the morning to 6.00 in the evening each day. 'My fingertips became swollen and painful, but I had to work standing constantly without even having a few minutes to sit and rest. My legs grew stiff and painful. When the electricity blackout happened and there was no supervisor nearby, the whole room was suddenly dark and I got a chance to sit, but I had to immediately stand up when the electricity came on again'. Due to her lack of factory experience, she got ill after working a few days but did not want to request leave because she was worried that they would replace her.

Now, Pria is very happy with the chance to develop her skills at the tailoring training centre and has expressed her gratitude to FWF and the member brand for all the support she has received from the organisation. She receives a monthly compensation of \$133 USD from the factory, which works out to be higher than the minimum monthly salary of \$78 USD. She even has a dream of eventually setting up her own home-based tailoring business in her village and says she is saving for a sewing machine.

## CONCLUSION

These stories do much to provide insight into the lives of child workers in Asia's garment industry. Expanding beyond facts or statistics, they tell of people with real capabilities and dreams, who often find themselves working in the garment industry, an industry characterised by its use of low-skill, low-paid and vulnerable sources of labour. It is an industry with an unusually high percentage of child labour. While some governments have instituted some formal legislation to protect workers, this is not always implemented at the ground level. Exploitation of children, like the ones whose stories have been told, remains a problem.

While the booming garment industry in Asia continues to attract international brands and suppliers, it is important for brands to be aware of the human risks of starting production here. Companies must conduct due diligence and try to determine the labour conditions in the factories from which they source. Brands need to be on the lookout for the possibility of child labour, and be prepared to act should they encounter it.

The child workers introduced here are not unusual. They represent the experiences of child labourers across Asia and throughout the global garment industry. These children come from poor rural families that make a modest living, often from fishing or farming. They stop studying at a young age, when their families can no longer afford to send them to school. Often, they begin their working lives as seasonal workers (sometimes from the age of eight), harvesting rice or beans in the fields. At the age of 13 or 14, they may start working at the garment factories, which pay better than agricultural work. Their wages, often lower than those of an adult, help sustain their families, as their own parents normally earn much less than a living wage.

Life in a garment factory is difficult, but particularly for children. Like other garment workers, they face long working days; 60 to 70 hours per week is common. The work is physically demanding and mentally harmful. All the children reported feeling strong pressure from their supervisors, who scolded or punished them, sometimes even physically, if they were unable to meet production targets. Child labour is rooted in economic realities, the availability of affordable education and societal norms, all of which are beyond the control of clothing brands. Eliminating these root causes could take many decades and requires a multi-faceted approach. In the meantime, the vulnerability of impoverished families is never an excuse for exploiting young children.

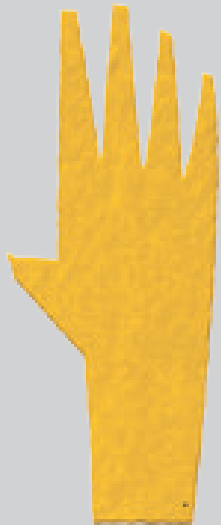
The children in these stories are denied their dignity and their childhood, but also their potential to dream—to further their lives and those of their families. FWF and its member brands are committed to ensuring that they are given a second chance, and this goes not only for these children, but for child workers in garment factories around the world. The first step to preventing child labour is acknowledging that it is still a widespread problem. Only when factories and brands become transparent about the issue, can we make strides toward improving the lives of child labourers, calling attention to their fundamental dignity as human beings, and protecting their ability to realise their dreams.



## APPENDIX A

### FAIR WEAR FOUNDATION POLICY ON CHILD LABOUR

The fourth standard of the Fair Wear Foundation Code of Labour Practices relates to child labour. Based on this, as well as the relevant national legislation, the following policies apply to FWF production countries:



# 4

## no exploitation of child labour

1. There shall be no use of child labour.
2. 'The age for admission to employment shall not be less than the age of completion of compulsory schooling and, in any case, not less than 15 years'. (ILO Convention 138).
3. The minimum age of admission for work must be in line with legal or national child labour regulations.
4. 'There shall be no forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour' (ILO Convention 182).
5. 'Children [aged 15-18] shall not perform work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm their health, safety or morals' (ILO Convention 182).
6. Long working hours (i.e. overtime) are considered detrimental to the health, safety and morals of children under 18.

## APPENDIX B

### GUIDANCE: AGE VERIFICATION AT GARMENT FACTORIES

#### FWF REMEDIATION PLAN

If/when child/young labour is found, the factory and brand share responsibility for the following remediation steps:

For all underage workers:

→ The employment between the factory and the child labourer(s) must be discontinued until the child reaches legal working age.

→ The child's family is to be compensated for at least the legal minimum wage and estimated overtime and bonuses. This could be based on the average take-home wage during the preceding three months.

→ These wages should be paid monthly (not as a lump sum) until the child has reached the minimum working age.

→ Adequate steps must be taken to ensure the welfare of the child. Consideration of the child's preferences and best interests is necessary. However, depending on the age of the child, the child should attend school or remain in

quality education (vocational training or formal education) until (s)he is no longer a child.

Once the child reaches legal working age:

→ The production site is required to offer employment in at least the same position and under at least the same conditions. The worker is free to accept or reject the offer of employment.

→ Depending on the country, a medical certificate of fitness would need to be arranged first. The cost of this must be borne by the factory. This also applies to any workers who are found to be between 16 and 17.

→ The worker (plus any other worker aged 16-17) should not conduct overtime until he/she reaches the age of 18. Practical and innovative solutions could be identified to make this feasible, e.g. a separate production line reserved for young workers (and possibly additional workers that prefer not to do overtime).

→ A detailed and time-bound plan should be prepared to ensure child welfare at the production site in question. The plan should cover the current case and include a plan to ensure that the production site does not currently and will not in the future employ workers under the legal working age and will work towards full compliance with

the FWF Code of Labour Practices. Structural solutions (including better age checks at factory level) must be established.

#### GUIDANCE FOR AGE VERIFICATION

The Six Steps:

1. CHILD LABOUR POLICY

2. DOCUMENTS CHECK

3. INTERVIEW WITH THE CANDIDATE  
WORKER

4. MEDICAL CHECK

5. CHECKLIST TO DOCUMENT ALL HR  
STEPS FOR AGE VERIFICATION

6. TRAINING OF HR STAFF

#### 1. CHILD LABOUR POLICY

→ It is important for factories to have a child or young workers policy, which outlines the factory's policy related to the required ages of new recruits and the procedure for age verification that all stakeholders can clearly understand. Stakeholders include, but are not limited to:

- Factory owners and senior management
- Factory middle management
- All factory staff and all factory workers
- Candidate workers
- Buyers (Brands and Retailers)

→ It is important to communicate the policy to the workers, as new recruits often come in via existing workers (friends, siblings, etc.).

→ Ways to communicate:

- Bulletin board
- Regular meetings in the factory
- Staff manual
- Vacancy notice on gate
- Any vacancy advertisement materials distributed
- Security guards at the gate explaining to interested workers

## 2. DOCUMENTS CHECK

➔ It is recommended that factories collect the following for all (potential) new workers:

- 3 recent photos
- National ID card
- Other (country-specific) relevant documentation

➔ In case of doubt and/or inconsistencies, it may be useful to request additional documents such as:

- Birth certificate
- Certificate of Health and Age
- Signed Letter from schoolmaster for the date of birth if the child went to school

➔ It is important that original/authentic documents are submitted, and that a clearly scanned (colour) copy is kept in the personnel file. All original documents are to be returned to the worker.

➔ It is furthermore advised to cross-check the names of applicants with existing personnel records as it happens that ID cards of existing workers are shared with new applicants who could be younger siblings or friends.

## 3. INTERVIEW WITH THE CANDIDATE WORKER

➔ The interview is a crucial step, and must be done by trained HR staff.

➔ Interviews must be conducted for all applicants and on an individual basis (one on one) and not in a group.

➔ Visual check: during the interview

- Physical appearance of the applicant.
- Careful photo check between the national ID card, photos submitted and the facial features of the applicant, including any easily visible or significant marks such as moles or scars.

➔ HR staff must conduct an interview and ask a series of questions to cross reference the data on the abovementioned age-verifying documents.

➔ New applicants should be informed of the reasons for the interview, explaining the factory's policies related to the age of new recruits, relevant legal requirement, and highlighting the importance of transparency and honesty, in order for workers to be able to exercise their rights in the future.

➔ In case there is suspicion that the applicant is underage, it is advised to also call and interview the candidate's parents and/or other family members in order to cross-check the candidate's age.

## 4. MEDICAL CHECK

On-site - inside the factory:

➔ In factories where there is a qualified medical professional on site, it is suggested to also get the opinion from that professional to estimate age by a visual check.

➔ Medical testing should only focus on verifying age. Testing for pregnancy or sexually-transmitted diseases is not permitted as part of the recruitment process. Medical testing needs to be done very sensitively, and only in cases where all of the previous data and interview process cannot give certainty about the candidate's age.

## 5. CHECKLIST TO DOCUMENT ALL HR STEPS FOR AGE VERIFICATION

➔ A form or checklist which documents the results of the various steps concerning age verification of every new application needs to be completed and signed by the HR officer. It should state that the following steps have been taken:

- Document inspection
- Interview
- Medical examination

➔ The use of the checklist would encourage discipline from the HR officer and provide a practical tool to ensure that all necessary steps are followed to verify the age of new recruits. This form would need to be kept in the worker's personnel file.

## 6. TRAINING OF HR STAFF

➔ All HR Staff involved in the recruitment of new workers should receive proper instruction and training on age verification along the lines mentioned above.









[WWW.FAIRWEAR.ORG](http://WWW.FAIRWEAR.ORG)