

# Fashion brands putting millions of workers at risk with gaps on human rights and gender equality, shows new research

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AMSTERDAM, NETHERLANDS, November 20, 2023 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The World Benchmarking Alliance (WBA) has today published its latest Corporate Human Rights Benchmark and Gender Benchmark, revealing major gaps in the supply chain processes and commitments of apparel companies, putting millions of garment workers in the global supply chain at risk.

WBA assessed 55 of the world's most influential apparel companies, including Adidas, Fast Retailing, Kering, SHEIN, and VF Corporation, based on their governance and strategy, workplace, and supply chain practices.

While the sector has shown some progress compared to previous benchmarks, with 69% having improved their score since 2018 on key human rights indicators. WBA's research shows the industry still fails to fully protect workers' rights: more than 60% of companies scored less than 20/100 points on the human rights indicators, and 38% scored less than 20/100 points on the gender equality indicators.

High-performing companies across both benchmarks, including VF Corporation and Inditex, have fundamental corporate due diligence and sector-specific policies for their supply chain to protect workers against violence, harassment, and child and forced labour. Others, including SHEIN, Prada, and Youngor Group fail to meet key indicators across human rights and gender equality.

Apparel companies have high expectations for their suppliers, but these are not backed by responsible purchasing practices or supply chain mapping.

94% of companies place expectations on their suppliers regarding human rights and/or gender equality, but less than a third of these companies take actions that set suppliers up for success, such as avoiding short notice requirements and delayed payments, mapping supply chains, or providing targeted support on gender equality.

Companies must better understand their supply chain to be able to support suppliers: 56% of fashion companies still aren't identifying all of their direct and indirect suppliers. Without such mapping, companies have no way of protecting workers, as they do not know who or where their suppliers are, or what issues they face. Companies that carry out rigorous supply chain mapping perform better in all gender equality indicators.

There is some improvement on issues such as child labour and forced labour – but many companies are still too passive. The industry must take more advanced steps.

Since WBA's assessments of companies' human rights performance began in 2018, WBA has seen some improvements in companies taking steps to eliminate child and forced labour in their supply chains. [1] However, the recent protests by garment workers in Bangladesh calling for increased wages, are a stark reminder that actions on paying supply chain workers a living wage are still too slow. Many companies are still passive and not transparent on the issue, leaving workers at risk of poverty.

Of all apparel companies assessed, only 12 companies (22%) disclose evidence of activities that support their suppliers in the payment of living wage. When it comes to corporate commitments, only 7 companies (13%) disclose a timebound target for the payment of living wages across their supply chains or include living wage requirements in their contracts with suppliers.

Namit Agarwal, the World Benchmarking Alliance's Social Transformation Lead, said:

"Fashion brands are still too slow to respect human rights and gender equality. Our research shows big gaps between what companies claim to do in their supply chains and what actually happens. Companies are failing to support suppliers and workers putting at risk the apparel sector as a whole. Not a single company requires its suppliers to offer a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave, which is an internationally agreed standard."

Well-rounded gender equality measures are essential to protect garment workers from violence and harassment, but many apparel companies don't have this as a priority.

Globally, around 80% of garment workers are women. Apparel companies failing to recognize and address gender-specific issues in their operations and supply chains are therefore putting millions of women at risk. Most companies (85%) have a policy that protects women from violence and harassment in the workplace, but significantly fewer companies (66%) require their suppliers to do the same. 27% do not require their suppliers to have an equal opportunity or non-discrimination policy that explicitly protects pregnant and/or married women workers.

Only 4% of companies have publicly disclosed processes to remediate violence and harassment grievances which detail clear sanctions for perpetrators, including termination. Of these, only half (2% of all companies) give support to the whistle-blowers, such as providing time off work or counselling. This may lead to violence and harassment at work being significantly underreported, often because the possible outcomes of the remediation process are not clear to whistleblowers, or because of fear of the consequences.

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[1] The percentage of apparel companies that are taking steps to achieve a living wage in their supply chains has increased from 23% to 33% between 2018 and 2023. Similarly, the percentage of companies that are working towards eliminating child labour in their supply chains has risen from 42% to 45%, and the percentage to eliminate forced labour, in particular free movement of workers, has risen from 62% to 78%.

Maggie Leung

Forster Communications

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