

Opinion – Choudhury on exploitation in Bangladesh

Foysoḷ Choudhury, MBE, MSP, is a Bangladeshi-born British businessman, and the first MSP of Bangladeshi background to be elected. Here he responds to reports that high street retailers such as Zara and H&M have paid garment factories in Bangladesh less than the cost of production.

Mr Choudhury writes: “All high-street retailers who have supposedly been engaging in unethical practices when purchasing from garment factories in Bangladesh. Whilst consumers in the UK often buy items at these popular chains, unfortunately a story of inequality, exploitation and unfair practices lurks behind many purchases.

“Research undertaken at the University of Aberdeen surveyed 1,000 factories in Bangladesh and their findings were shocking. The cost of materials and production has soared globally. Yet, the research showed that the price we pay to producers in Bangladesh has apparently stayed the same as before the pandemic, two years ago, meaning that garment factories are facing a real term cut. As a result, many factories selling to large, global retailers such as H&M and Zara were supposedly paid below the cost of production for their garments. Unethical practice was also evident, with the

research concluding that between March 2020 and December 2021, 90% of high street brands were found to be engaging in unethical practices such as cancelling orders and delayed or failed payments.

“Many retailers involved have denied claims. However, *if* the factories are not being paid enough for their production, unfortunately the workers at these factories may not be being paid enough either.

“Rightly, we fight for the rights of our workers at home. However, it would sadly seem that we neglect the rights of workers globally who are responsible for producing the clothes and items we use regularly. 12 of the brands listed in the report were apparently members of the Ethical Trading Initiative, aiming to promote workers’ rights. This, whilst undertaking business practices which could quash fair pay for workers in Bangladesh.

“We cannot preach about paying workers fair wages globally whilst perpetuating a system of financial exploitation which, unfortunately, ensures that businesses often don’t have the funds to pay their workers a fair wage. We cannot continue to give with one hand and take with the other when it comes to the visage of fair play versus our unethical trading practices. We cannot continue to operate on an ‘out of sight out of mind’ basis. Instead, we need to recognise that these practices are, in part, being propped up by the UK’s global unethical business practice. We need to shift our priorities and act to ensure that all workers involved in our production chains, around the world, have access to workers’ rights.

“I urge governments to ensure that our importers pay the correct costs and make the process ethical. We must not profit at the cost of others around the globe facing exploitation and unfair wages; this immoral trading must stop.”



Foysoł Choudhury MBE MSP