

# Fashion Victims

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India

## More Than a Price Tag

Clothes. Everybody wears them. Whether you're a fashion superstar or someone who's only fashion requirement be that what you wear is (mostly) clean, chances are you've stepped foot into a clothing store more than once or twice in your lifetime.

As experienced consumers, we know how to shop around. Driven by the price tag, we willingly trudge from store to store in search of that next great bargain. But rarely does this experience teach us about the true cost of our clothing. Rarely does it reveal to us that it's not the price we pay that we should ultimately be concerned with.

Many of the clothes available to us as consumers, are made available by the exploitation of the vulnerable.

These are the things we rarely think of when trying on a new pair of jeans.

## Stages of Change

In 2013, the Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh drew world media attention to the dangerous working conditions of garment workers the world over. Recently, and in large part due to this increased awareness, the bid to improve safety levels

for workers in the final stages of garment production has gained a lot of traction .

However, it is imperative that the progress that is gradually being made in this area, does not distract us from the need for change along other stages of the garment supply chain.

## A Growing industry

India's garment and textile industry employs over 35 million people and is the country's second largest employment provider after agriculture.

To give you some idea of what this translates to on a global scale, India's \$40 billion textile export industry is second only to China's.

As a rapidly expanding sector, it has clearly branded itself as one of great importance to India's national economy. However, what at first glance may appear to be a development success story, masks a much grimmer reality for an estimated 200,000 girls and young women trapped in Sumangali Schemes.





## Victims of Spin

The Sumangali Scheme takes place at the inputs production stage of the garment supply chain, where cotton is spun into fabric. A recognised form of child labour and human trafficking, these schemes primarily operate in the Indian State of Tamil Nadu, and most particularly in its western districts of Coimbatore and Tirupur. More than half (65%) of India's spinning units are concentrated in this region alone, explaining why the state of Tamil Nadu is one of the largest contributors to India's Gross Domestic Product. Alarmingly, its contribution has been made at the expense of those which The Sumangali Scheme exploits.

Under The Sumangali Scheme, young women and girls are bound to work in factories for a period of 3 - 5 years. During this time, they are often subjected to every possible form of abuse at the hands of their employers.

In Tamil, "Sumangali" means "an unmarried girl becoming a respectable woman by entering into marriage" (Fair Wear

Foundation 2012).

While the custom of dowry was outlawed in India in 1961, its practice has proved more difficult to eliminate and continues to endure today, particularly amongst the more impoverished population.

What makes Sumangali Schemes seem so attractive to the girls and young women they ensnare, is the financial lump sum promised to workers on completion of their term of employment. The schemes directly exploit this "strong culturally rooted desire for young women to have an investment for marriage" (Stop The Traffik), but the reality is that less than 35% of workers actually receive these payments.

Sadly, this is just one of the many untruths which traffickers use to recruit workers.

Targeting unmarried girls and women between the ages of 14 - 23 (when the Indian legal working age is 18), traffickers source the Sumangali Scheme labour pool from impoverished communities, often in remote

areas where the truth about Sumangali Schemes has not yet been made known.

As a method of recruitment, traffickers promise many conditions that will never be met. "Cases have been reported where parents have been shown pictures of shiny buildings and swimming pools where their daughters will apparently be working" (Stop The Traffik), a stark contrast to what is actually awaiting them.

"Garment workers recruited under the Sumangali Scheme have to stay in hostels either within the factory premises or in guarded hostels run by the factory" (Stop The Traffik). While touted as a benefit to parents who are worried for their daughter's safety and virtue, in actuality it is a mechanism which allows the employer to control the girls and rob them of their liberty. Cut off from their families and the outside world, Sumangali Scheme workers are forced to work 12 hours every day with little rest. That's 4 hours more than the national legal working limit in India, and they do so without receiving any further financial compensation.

Additionally, while they are employed as “apprentices”, these girls are paid an allowance rather than a wage, and receive no real training or skilling as the title may suggest. Furthermore, the lack of a formal written contract gives the factory the ability to deduct pay for living expenses and medical care at its own discretion.

Working conditions in the factories are frequently hazardous, a fact which is heightened by the lack of training and safety equipment provided .

Chronic sickness is not unusual given the extreme working hours, unsafe work practices and equally poor living conditions . Sanitation facilities in particular are frequently insufficient, with a single bathroom serving as many as 35 people.

## A malleable workforce

The Sumangali Scheme preys particularly on young women and girls as they are regarded as a submissive workforce. Frequently uneducated, the girls and their families are largely unsuspecting and know little of their legal rights with regards employment.

## Knowing the cost

Baptist World Aid’s 2015 Australian Fashion Report found that many companies are not even aware of who makes the garments they sell. Only one in four companies knew where their fabrics were coming from and less than one in ten could tell you who was growing their cotton. Commodity chains are vast and often complex, but it is imperative that those who profit from the sale of the final garment, are made to be accountable for how their input materials are made.

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