

Workers' contracts are not renewed once pregnancies become visible,

The real cost of

SITTING outside the tiny room she shares with three other women, a worker in a Cambodian clothing factory cries as she tells how she only sees her children twice a year because she can't afford to have them living with her.

Clothes made in Cambodia fill Irish shops, with Europe being

SPECIAL REPORT



from **Niamh Griffin**

IN CAMBODIA

the biggest buyer from the Southeast Asian country, but how much do consumers know about life for factory workers?

Irish groups like the Clean Clothes Campaign and ActionAid have called on shoppers to pressure their favourite brands to increase wages and make factories safer. This follows renewed focus on the industry in the wake of over 1,000 tragic deaths at a Bangladeshi factory in 2013.

As workers demand higher wages, violent clashes with Cambodian police led to four deaths

in 2014 and in one province the governor shot and critically wounded three union representatives.

Cambodia's violent history has left traditional industries destroyed. An estimated two million people died under the cruel Khmer Rouge regime 40 years ago, memorably portrayed in the film *The Killing Fields*. The garment industry is now Cambodia's largest earner. Last year the country made \$7.1bn from garment and footwear exports, up 14% from the previous year.

Brands including Primark (Penneys), H&M and luxury brands like Armani and Ralph Lauren have factories here.

Most are based around the capital Phnom Penh. With 85% of staff female, low salaries have a critical impact on housing, maternity leave and childcare. The workers usually live in small rooms, often three or four sharing a double bed.

Rooms the Irish Mail on Sunday visited were barely large enough for the bed, with clothes hanging from nails driven into the concrete walls. The women wash outdoors at communal taps using cold water and basins. There are generally no cooking facilities.

Women like Kao Sioleth are aware through the internet of the vast profits made by clothing brands, but see very little of it in their lives. A recent increase in monthly wages to \$128 has brought small relief, she said. Speaking at the Workers' Informa-



'Shot and critically wounded three union representatives'

tion Centre on her one day off a week, she said: 'We put our children to stay with my mother. They stay there because I cannot have them here with me. I see them twice a year. I have two children, two girls aged 12 and seven. It's so hard for me, but if I cannot work, then I cannot send money for them.'

Her co-worker Sok said: 'We all work on short-term contracts, two to three months, six months or for one year.'

'If you are young you can stay maybe 20 years, but then after that the shortness of the contract is based on your age.'

'Even if you stay for 10 years in one place, you have short contracts. This is a strategy that allows the factories to move on pregnant women, older women.'

Legal fees are out of reach, but many are now supported by free legal aid from the Community Legal Education Centre. At the CLEC offices, one woman told how she moved from being a worker to an activist. When the factory Thy Phalta worked in closed, she and 134 staff, including two pregnant women, were stranded.

HELP: Free legal aid lawyer Sary Both Chakrya

She said: 'We were not given any payment for finishing, we were not given salary that was owed to us. They closed the doors, they did not inform anyone. I didn't have savings, the wages

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HEAT: Co-workers using a coin-scrapping remedy to relieve heat



SHIFT: Garment worker Kong Sreymao outside rented rooms in Phnom Penh



REST: Factory workers' slums on the bank of the Tonlé Sap River in Phnom Penh

What can you do?

DUBLINER Kate Nolan heads the Irish branch of the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC). They are campaigning for a living monthly wage of €177 in Cambodia.

She said: 'I would never call for a boycott, we all love new clothes. But we should be able to shop guilt-free – the responsibility lies with the big brands to make sure their clothes are clean.'

'Every factory in Cambodia is individual, so it's up to the government to set a national minimum

wage just like it is in Ireland. This will only happen with global pressure.'

A report Kate co-authored called 'Tailored Wages' stated a living wage should cover food, medicines, rent, clothing and transport, and so the amount varies from country to country.

CCC tips on making your voice heard include:

- Find out where your clothes are made, it's usually on the label.
- Go to the social media accounts of your favourite brands and

ask why workers don't get better pay.

– Ask managers in your favourite shops do they know how much workers in the factories make.

– Sign an online petition at <http://www.livingwage.eu/>.

– Look for petitions through websites like Avaaz.

– Write letters to the brands asking them to introduce a living wage for workers.

– Choose clothing marked 'ethically produced' or 'sustainable' when you can.

at what happened in Ireland say with Clerys workers, they are in a horrible situation but there is social welfare support. In Cambodia that is not happening, workers are living hundreds of kilometres from their families so there is no support.'

Opposition politician Mu Sochua specialises in workers' rights. She said: 'Consumers should be educated about the costs involved, if you see a T-shirt for €1, you can ask yourself if you are paying for workers to be protected or is that brand making all the benefits?'

'You can walk away but it's better if you demand more pay for workers and ask about the working conditions. Stand firm on your ethics.' She says it's not just about cheap clothing: 'You have to ask questions about Nike, Puma, Primark, even Ralph Lauren. I understand that not all consumers can afford to ignore these big brands, but at the same time you don't have to buy so many T-shirts.'

Last year global headlines linked sweltering conditions at an Armani jeans factory to an epidemic of mass fainting. Photographs taken inside the factory, seen by the MoS, show workers using coins to scrape their backs; believing this will lower body temperatures in a similar way to leeches in western medicine.

Mo Sochua said: 'Some brands try to frighten consumers, they say if they pay more, their prices will go up. But

'Workers are living far away from their families, there is no support'

these companies don't publish their profits, they don't state the production costs clearly.'

A spokesman for the Garment Manufacturers' Association Cambodia declined to meet with the MoS or respond to emailed queries. Typically brands like Primark or H&M don't own factories, instead contracting local suppliers.

A spokesman for Penneys/ Primark said: 'We work hard to ensure our products are made in good working conditions, and that the people making them are treated decently and paid a fair wage. We require all our suppliers' factories to work to demanding standards, as set out in the Primark/Penneys Code of Conduct, which we require all our suppliers to comply with.'

Campaigners argue that while brands like Primark do not directly own factories, they have the power to enforce change as without them the businesses would cease to operate.

H&M's gleaming, air-conditioned Phnom Penh offices couldn't be in starker contrast to the factory workers' dingy rooms. H&M spokesman Jonah Wigerhall said: 'Wages need to go up, and that needs to happen in the right way. When workers are fainting in factories, that needs to be tackled.'

However H&M's plans for a living wage don't kick in until 2018. He declined to say how much Cambodian workers would earn, but said wages would account for experience. On consumer complaints from Ireland or Sweden, he said: 'That has had an impact. We are focused on production, every year sustainability is evaluated.'

■ See simoncumbersmediafund.ie, supported by the Simon Cumbers Media Fund

low. We started to sleep on the walk, outside at the gates so they not sell the machines. We set up we cooked. We were afraid times. Gangsters came to discuss at night, we don't know who them.' She said police didn't pre-lumbering trucks driving the picket-lines when the

strikers tried to block the gates.

Lawyer Sary Both Chakrya said documents showed brands like H&M and Walmart using that factory. There is no suggestion that these brands were involved in any mistreatment of the workers. The ministry for labour eventually ordered the salary payments.

Worker Phalta said: 'The minimum day is eight hours, we should finish at 4pm, in reality we work until 8pm. We worked six days. I could not refuse overtime, if I did, the manager is not happy. When you are sick you can have two days, if you are sick more than two days, you get a warning letter. If you are more than three days

sick, your contract is terminated.'

The legal entitlement to maternity leave is three months at half-pay.

Phalta said: 'When your pregnancy is visible, the employers will see that. They will not renew your contract.'

Without international support these conditions will continue, says Triona Pender from ActionAid. 'If you look