

EU flagship initiative on the garment sector

2016/2140(INI) - 28/03/2017 - Committee report tabled for plenary, single reading

The Committee on Development adopted an own-initiative report by Lola SÁNCHEZ CALDENTEY (GUE/NGL, ES) on the EU flagship initiative on the garment sector.

Members recalled that 60 million people worldwide work in the textile and clothing sector, which creates many jobs, particularly in developing countries. However, textile manufacturers in developing countries are constantly exposed to aggressive purchasing practices by the international wholesale and retail trade, which is also due to fierce global competition. This state of affairs has led to widespread labour rights violations, including: poverty wages, forced labour and child labour, arbitrary dismissals, unsafe workplaces, violence against women, etc.

Most human rights violations in the garment sector concern various aspects of labour rights, such as the denial of workers fundamental right to join or form a union of their choosing and bargain collectively in good faith.

Members noted that voluntary initiatives led by the private sector over the last 20 years have not proven to be effective enough in bringing about a real improvement in workers rights. Multi-stakeholder initiatives like the German partnership for sustainable textiles or the Dutch agreement on sustainable garment and textile have still to produce concrete results. The efforts of corporations to promote workplace compliance can support, but not replace, the effectiveness and efficiency of public governance systems.

Members welcomed the increasing attention given to the promotion of decent working conditions through global supply chains following the Rana Plaza factory collapse and acknowledged the Commissions commitment towards responsible management of supply chains, including in the garment sector, as outlined in the Communication entitled Trade for All.

Members noted, however, that existing voluntary initiatives not only recurrently overlap and fail to cover the whole supply chains loopholes, but also fall short of effectively addressing human rights issues.

Consequently, a legally binding institutional framework is urgently needed.

The Commission, aligned with the principle of Policy Coherence for Development reflected in Art. 208 TFEU, must develop a legislative proposal for binding supply chain due diligence obligations in the garment sector, aligned with OECD Guidelines and the highest internationally agreed standards on human rights and social and environmental standards.

This proposal must be human rights centred and must focus the spotlight on the core problems garment workers face (occupational health and safety, a living wage, freedom of association, sexual harassment and violence in the workplace and the elimination of forced and child labour). The following matters must also be addressed: (i) key criteria for sustainable production, (ii) transparency and traceability, including the transparent collection of data and tools for consumer information, (iii) due diligence checks and auditing, (iv) access to remedy, (v) gender equality, (vi) supply-chain due diligence reporting, (viii) the responsibility of companies in the event of man-made disasters and awareness raising in the European Union.

Members called for consumers to be provided with clear, trustworthy information about sustainability in the garment sector, where products originate from and the extent to which workers rights have been respected. They proposed, to this end, the development of EU-wide labelling standards for fair clothing, accessible to both multinational companies and SMEs, to assist customers in their purchasing decisions.

Members called for an effective and compulsory reporting system and due diligence for garment products entering the EU market to ensure increased access to information on the conduct of enterprise. It encouraged the EU to work with all relevant stakeholders to promote a successful social partnership and to support stakeholders in the development and implementation of wage-setting mechanisms in accordance with relevant International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, especially in countries where there is a lack of adequate legislation.

They recommended further research on ways of improving audits and inspections in the clothing and footwear supply chain. They emphasised the importance of independent labour inspections in early warning and prevention, as well as in enforcement of national rules and regulations on health and safety at the workplace.

The Commission is called upon to: (i) continue to include the ratification of core ILO standards, health and safety inspection, and freedom of association in discussions on continued preferential trade with countries linked to the global supply chain for the garment sector, and; (ii) strengthen human rights, labour and environmental conventions under the Generalised System of Preferences.