

Bangladesh leather industry in a New study shows dreadful working conditions

Bangladesh leather industry in New research by the international Together for Decent Leather initiative among 120 tannery workers reveals severe labour rights risks

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[New research](#) by the international *Together for Decent Leather* initiative among 120 tannery workers reveals severe labour rights risks in Bangladesh's leather industry. Problems include low wages, health hazards due to unsafe working conditions, heavy pollution, insecure jobs and forced overtime. The survey was conducted by Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF) and Research and Policy Integration for Development Society (RAPID).

- 111 of 120 of the interviewed workers are employed on a non-permanent basis

- A majority (63%) suffers from health hazards due to unsafe working conditions
- More than half of the interviewed workers receive wages below the national minimum wage

Ashraf Uddin, executive director of BLF: *“Buyers who source from Bangladesh seem to ignore all the safety risks, worker’s rights and environmental risks. This brings the workers in the industry into a vulnerable situation. The buyers should map and disclose their supply chains and implement ethical sourcing policies.”*

The survey shows that 111 of the 120 interviewed workers were employed on a non-permanent basis. Of the surveyed workers, 95 per cent were appointed without a signed contract or any other formal employment arrangements, which leaves them without any written confirmation of their employment terms and without any proof of employment. More than half of the surveyed workers (56 per cent) received a monthly wage that was less than the national minimum wage of Tk. 13,500 (\$ 158) set by the government for tannery workers. Tannery workers toil for long hours, sometimes with forced overtime, and are subject to the whims of their employers because of scant union activism and weak workers’ representation. A lot of workers in Bangladesh’s leather industry suffer from health problems due to unsafe working conditions like skin diseases

(28 per cent), shortness of breath (13 per cent), stomach ailments (32 per cent), and headaches (63 per cent). Three-quarters of those interviewed work without proper protective gear, and 79 percent lack training in how to use chemicals safely during tanning work.

Martje Theuws (SOMO): *“To put an end to this kind of serious labour violations, a robust, rigorously maintained international regulatory framework is needed. Companies must willingly or unwillingly be made to comply to the highest human rights standards.”*

Heavy pollution around the investigated tanneries

BLF and RAPID interviewed workers from 26 tanneries, approximately 20 per cent of all operative tanneries in the newly developed tannery industrial estate Savar in Dhaka. This estate was developed because of severe environmental and health impacts of the former tannery estate Hazaribagh. The government of Bangladesh ordered the relocation to comply with international environmental standards and promised better living and working conditions. Unfortunately, the effluent treatment plant is ill-functioning, so Savar is becoming heavily polluted. In March 2022, the governmental Department of Environment ordered the closure of seven tanneries for polluting the Dhaleshwari River.

Export abroad

Leather, leather goods and footwear are Bangladesh's leading leather export sub sector and growing in importance. The sub sector is the country's third largest source of export earnings, after readymade garments and home textiles, with a worth of \$1.24 billion in 2022. China is the main export destination for Bangladeshi leather.

Leather products from Bangladesh are also exported to Europe. However, due to a lack of transparency, it is very difficult to establish where leather produced in Bangladesh ends up.

Together for Decent Leather

[Together for Decent leather](#) is a joint initiative, carried out by a European-Asian consortium of seven civil society organisations. BLF and SOMO are partners participating in this program. The goal is to improve working conditions and to reduce labour rights abuses, focusing on leather product production hubs in South Asia, in particular in Vellore and Chennai districts in Tamil Nadu, India; greater Karachi in Pakistan; and the greater Dhaka region in Bangladesh. Together for Decent Leather works to secure increased commitment from companies to fulfill their human rights due diligence obligations and governments to put in place safeguards and regulation to

improve adherence to international labour standards.



This investigation is part of the “Together for Decent Leather” initiative, co-funded by the European Union.