

Hungry and afraid: life for factory workers meeting UK demand for cheap clothes

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Pakistani workers describe trying to survive on the less than £50 a month many of them earn making items for firms such as Boohoo

When Qasim Ahmed* arrived in Faisalabad a year ago, he didn't want much – just enough money to pay for a roof over his head, buy food and send a little cash home each month.

Today, that seems like a fantasy. Instead of having enough to get by, he claims, he has found himself struggling to survive, frequently going hungry, feeling abused by his boss and fearing he is working in a factory that could go up in flames. “It makes me sad that I can't help my parents and siblings the way I hoped before coming here,” he says.

Ahmed, in his early 20s, has been working since he was 13, first in a hairdressing salon, then as a shepherd, before arriving in Pakistan's industrial city. He says his job at Madina Gloves paid less than £50 a month for three months, then £71 – still well below the legal minimum.

His pay is not the only problem, he says. “I share a dirty and crammed room with my fellow workers. We have had no water in the room for the last four days.”

While Ahmed lives more than 5,000 miles from the Leicester factory workers who found themselves at the centre of a scandal earlier this year, both have something in common: they allege that the mistreatment they suffered came about while they were making clothes for the fast-fashion brand [Boohoo](#).

The chief executive of Madina Gloves insists Ahmed's allegations are all untrue. He also says he has had no recent order from Boohoo.

The boss of another factory under scrutiny, AH Fashion, also says there has been no wrongdoing and workers are paid fairly and treated well. And a UK-based third-party buyer, JD Fashion Limited, which makes orders at AH Fashion for Boohoo, says it has made no new orders there since October.

Boohoo itself says it acted decisively to deal with issues in Leicester and intends to treat the allegations in Faisalabad with the same rigour.

It initially said AH Fashion was audited in November and given a clean bill of health, then added that it had found it was not on an approved supplier list for JD Fashion (which has no connection to the retailer JD Sports) and said it had been told the factory was closed throughout November.

Boohoo has suspended both firms while it investigates. It also indicated it was not aware of its clothes being produced at Madina Gloves and was now investigating the allegations there.

But Ahmed and other workers at both factories say they have made clothes for Boohoo recently. At

Madina Gloves, workers shared numerous pictures of the items' labels with the Guardian, as well as a pair of shorts that were brought out of the factory and handed to a reporter.

Videos also appeared to show numerous Boohoo labels on items being made at AH Fashion. And in the UK, the Guardian was able to buy a tracksuit with a JD logo on a label and made with fabric that appeared to match a pile of materials seen in videos from inside AH Fashion last week. Boohoo said it had taken delivery of the item a few days earlier. It was still for sale a week after Boohoo was alerted to the allegations.

If the details of Boohoo's supply chain in [Pakistan](#) appear fogged in confusion, the workers' claims are consistent. In more than a dozen interviews conducted in the city in recent weeks, workers at the two factories allegedly making clothes ultimately destined for Boohoo consumers in the UK described conditions of exploitation, low wages and a near-invisible status with the authorities who are supposed to protect them.

They claimed to have worked for a monthly income ranging from 10,000PKR a month (£47) to 17,100PKR, with most at the lower end of that range. The legal minimum wage for unskilled workers is 17,500PKR.

As long as the demand for the clothes is there, workers like Ahmed see little hope of change. "If I don't work in these conditions," he says, "someone else will."

Kamran Akram* is a young worker at AH Fashion, and says he gets by on less than £50 a month. "Maybe I will earn more in the coming months and years," he says. "I am here to learn."

Another teenager, Mohammed Hafeez*, claims he is on a similar rate at AH. "We are poor," he says, "therefore, we have to take the work."

Both said many others were in the same position. Another source who spent time in the factory made claims of filthy bathrooms, piles of fabric which appeared to present a fire hazard, and potential risks from ongoing construction work.

Shahnaz Hassan*, in her 50s, claims she has been working at Madina Gloves for the last eight months, earning as little as £50 a month. Like other low-paid workers, she is on a "piecework" rate, where she is paid per item of clothing she completes. As the sole breadwinner for her family - her husband cannot work because of ill health - it is vital she is paid on time.

But, she suggests, that doesn't always happen. One day, she alleges, the factory's owner, Saleem Shahzad, told her she wouldn't be paid for her work until the orders were dispatched. Shahzad denies the claim.

"It was impossible for me to wait for this much," says Hassan, drying her tears with her scarf as she speaks at her home. "I have eight children to feed and prices of basics like flour and meat keep skyrocketing.

"I deserve to be paid on time for the work I do. In protest, I left the job, but I may rejoin soon because I have no other choice."

Workers say they are not paid for overtime. In fact, when deadlines are close, they allege they are sometimes forced to work 24-hour shifts to ensure everything is ready for export.

Ikram Hussain*, in his mid-20s, claims the battle for his rights at Madina Gloves is as bad as anywhere he knows.

"I demanded at least 100PKR (about 50p) per hour for overtime. Even then I wasn't being paid for the extra six to 12 hours of work that I did for days," he claims. "However, the owner can fire any worker whenever he wishes and can ask them to come back to work when the workload increases."

Of the 1.3 million people who come to Faisalabad to work, many are from rural parts of south Punjab and more than half work in the textiles industry. While some are formally employed, others are all but invisible, hired on an ad-hoc basis and not registered with the labour department.

"There are around 0.25 million registered workers with us," Rai Yasin, the assistant director at the labour department, told the Guardian from his office, against 1.5 million in total. "We don't have the data of workers who are hired by contractors. Industrialists and factory owners avoid their responsibilities while asking contractors to provide them workers for projects and supervising these contractual workers to get the work done."

When the projects are complete, the workers are asked to leave. "The workers are exploited by industrialists and contractors," Yasin says. This group has none of the rights of registered workers, who get social security cards, meaning free healthcare, compensation for injuries and insurance.

Others blame a shortage of unions for the problem. "It is a nexus of industrialists, politicians and bureaucrats who deny basic rights to the workers," says Aslam Wafa, a labour leader and general secretary at the Faisalabad Labour Federation, sitting in an office piled with files that reach the ceiling. "As soon as some workers file a request to the labour department for establishing a union in a factory, the owner gets the news, and he fires them."

Ahmed, for his part, has an uncertain future. He lost his job a few weeks ago. Now he has found another one - but his disgust at the conditions that he and his fellow workers face remains.

Not only responsible for his own future, he has to send money home to his father, who is too old to work and support himself, and he has struggled to save enough to help his two sisters get married. After a year in Faisalabad, he feels no better off.

His dreams - of a better paying job and a home of his own - are modest enough. But he has learned to expect little. "I know we are exploited and paid less than the legal minimum, but we can't do anything," he says. "If I leave the job, another person will be ready to replace me."

** Workers' names have been changed*

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