Garment Worker Safety Meeting Kit

What’s At Stake

It’s important for employers and workers to be aware of the hazards associated with garment manufacturing and take precautions to guard against work-related illnesses and injuries.

What’s the Danger

SPOTLIGHT ON HEALTH & SAFETY OF FACTORY WORKERS

Garment factory workers who operate sewing machines perform precise and repetitive tasks, frequently for 10–12 hours a day, and for six days a week. The workers are usually seated at flat, non-adjustable workstations where they rapidly sew, cut, and trim – visually demanding tasks in workplaces where the quality of the lighting varies widely. The workplaces are commonly subject to poor ventilation, intense heat, clouds of airborne fiber dust, cluttered workspaces, and unsanitary factory conditions.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

SNAP-SHOT OF GARMENT MANUFACTURING

Machinery/Training

Before any work begins on a piece of machinery, the operator should be trained in its proper operation and all safety precautions to follow. Workers should be trained to know that any machinery with exposed moving parts should be properly guarded.

Sharp And Cutting Instruments

Workers should be instructed to follow basic safety precautions while working with sharp and cutting instruments. Precautions

include: using sharp tools that are in good repair; carrying and storing sharp tools properly; and always cutting away from the eyes and body.

Role Of Chemicals

Dyes, enzymes, solvents, and other chemicals are used to create different fabric finishes and durability. So, proper ventilation, respiratory protection, and other personal protective equipment are important to protect workers during chemical processing. Workers should know where and how to access Safety Data Sheets (SDS) on the chemicals used in their workplace.

Eyes Protection

Eye protection is critical. Garment workers can avoid eye injuries by using proper shields on high-speed sewing machinery or safety glasses where appropriate.

Ergonomics

Many tasks in garment manufacturing require repetitive motions. To prevent ergonomic injuries workers should be encouraged to rotate tasks or take frequent, short breaks to stretch and relax muscles. Workstations should allow enough space for the task, have appropriate working height, and provide proper seating. Manufacturing tools and machinery should incorporate ergonomic design principles and should not require an excessive amount of force to operate.

Hearing Protection/Heat Stress

Some garment manufacturing equipment can be very loud, so proper hearing protection may be necessary. Because a garment factory uses many heated processes, it is important for workers to avoid heat stress by labeling and guarding hot surfaces and drinking plenty of water during their shift.

SOLUTIONS TO ENHANCE SAFETY AND PRODUCTIVITY

It is widely accepted in industry discourse that improvement in productivity is an important part of “the solution” to achieve the

safety and security of garment workers. Improvement in efficiency reduces the manufacturing cost per garment which could be directed towards better well being of the factory workers.

Indoor Air Quality And Ventilation. Workers are perpetually exposed to cotton dust in garment factories during fabric cutting, weaving and knitting. As they handle and sew fabrics, lint and other small particles are released into the air and into their lungs. Research has persistently demonstrated the relationship between garment work, endotoxin exposure, and higher levels of respiratory illness, including some forms that can go undiagnosed. Proper ventilation can efficiently reduce the presence of dust in workspaces; however most garment factories provide either substandard ventilation equipment or none whatsoever. Many factories provide workers with protective masks which reduces worker exposure to endotoxins but if often discomforting when working for long hours in string of hot days.

Workplace Lighting. Garment workers, especially those who spend years sewing 10–12 hours a day and 5–6 days a week in under lit workplaces, often complain about their vision. Several surveys have reported widespread instances of lighting at garment factory worksites as insufficient. Proper workplace lighting, especially for precise manufacturing like garment work, is essential.

Workplace Temperatures. One of the most frequently expressed concern is about workers being exposed to erratic temperatures at workplace. Many workers face heat-related discomfort and illness, and is particularly more challenging for garment factories because workers are in tightly enclosed workspace, laboring long hours over strings of hot days in a row, with little to no ventilation or air conditioning. Several factories, especially in countries where the industry has grown more recently, are housed in warehouse-like facilities. Such facilities are especially susceptible to extreme heat, particularly during the spring and summer months when clothing production for the fall and winter seasons is at its peak.

Toilet Hygiene And Sanitation. Workers reporting inadequate number of toilets and even when they are available, bathrooms are

generally soiled and unmaintained. There is a common tendency among the workers to reduce their toilet visits not only because of their uncleanness, but also because they fear pay reductions for taking too long for bathroom breaks. This practice is known to lead to urinary infections and other, more serious, health consequences.

Drinking Water. Many surveys report of garment workers not having fresh potable water at their workplace. In several instances while the water is available, it was not clean and distributed in old, dirty containers. As a result many workers bring their own water and reduce consumption which is a issue particularly in hot seasons.

Disease Vectors And Pests. Garment workers report presence of rodents and cockroaches in the workplace. Beside pests, there is additional concern about exposure of workers to indoor mold, which is directly related to a variety of health effects such as allergic reactions, skin irritation, coughing and headaches.

FINAL WORD

Most garment workers do not feel safe at work. Not only are they working in dangerous buildings, but workers are routinely exposed to inhumanely high temperatures, harmful chemicals and physical violence.