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Gap passes the buck

The international clothe label Gap withdraws Christmas garments produced at sweatshops in India violating norms on child and gender labour

Soni Sinha / New Delhi

A REPORT LAST week by NGO, Bachpan Bachao Andolan (BBA), on children involved for garment finishing operations in the world's largest apparel retailers, GAP, has brought to light the conditions existing in the Indian apparel export industry. "GAP, having been accused of making the children work for long hours on unwaged work, has launched an internal investigation after an undercover study fixed the blame on them," said Bharat Raheja, Information Officer, GAP.

The expose has lifted the lid off the child labour stigma prevalent in the industry in India. This also includes retail outlets like Walmart, Tesco and JCR.

However, attempt by *Sahara Time* to talk to GAP country manager Anil Badanah was met by 'not available for comment'. Badanah has recently been called back by GAP head-office in US, sources said.

On the other hand, BBA chairperson Kailash Satyarthi holds fort and says: "The children were picked up from the Shahpur-Jat area of Delhi while working on smocked embroidery outfit for children destined for GAP's kid section, whose retail outlet in India has one of its sub-letting divisions working from this area in South Delhi."

GAP officials countered the allegations saying that the factory belonged to an 'unauthorised subcontractor.'

GAP has stopped production of their Christmas garments and has ordered all the stocks to be destroyed, informed Raheja. GAP claims all garment manufacturers to sign a strict code of conduct governing their behaviour. Last year the retailer suspended contracts with 23 factories that had violated the code.

According to SABAL, an NGO working for street and underprivileged children said: "More than 20 per cent of India's economy is dependent on children, that involves an equivalent of 55 million youngsters under 14 years of age. Unfortunately, there is not a single handicraft export unit that does not involve child labour at some point of time thus defaming the country's child protection Act."

According to records of the last six months in the apparel export division, about 78 per cent of the participating apparel exporters felt that their export volumes would increase in the coming six months. While 32 per cent of the participating companies were of the view that their exports will increase by upto 10% over the next six months, another 46% of the respondents indicated export volumes to go up by over 10%. Exporters believed that the burgeoning volumes would be on account of higher demand in the existing international markets along with entry into the new markets.

Despite the highly competitive and cost-conscious global market, 44% of the exporters reported increase in the export prices in the next six months; this counter move towards the increase in export prices is in response to the expected intolerable low realizations on account of higher input costs. To top it all, the market stock exchange fluctuations, the decrease in the dollar rupee value has raised an alarm bell with exporters trying to wind up business much before their deadline.

On conditions of anonymity an apparel exporter said: "the companies subletting the work to smaller contractors is not something new, it has been done in almost all export and handicraft industry across the world. The contractor who sublets, to smaller villages or hamlets around metro points, cannot be present at all times, it is then despite strict guidelines, the rules against protection of child labor are flouted from most of the internationally reputed companies."

Off the record, the apparel exporter said that the violation of child labor Act are mostly brought to light on account of in-house rivalry. The rival company of a sub letter who is also trying to meet a deadline for the same supply to the foreign destination generally does so.

Confirming the above was Deepika Govind, Bangalore based apparel exporter. However, she affirmed that what has happened with the international retailer could be in connivance with some other sub letter trying to meet deadlines of the same.

GAP said it was unaware that clothing intended for the Christmas market had been improperly subcontracted to a sweatshop using child labour. It announced it had withdrawn the garments involved while it investigated breaches of the ethical code imposed by it three years ago.

The company has pledged to convene a meeting of its Indian suppliers as well as withdrawing tens of thousands of the embroidered girl's blouses from the market, before they reach the stores. The hand-stitched tops, which would have been sold for about £20, were destined for shelves in America and Europe in the next seven days in time to be sold to Christmas shoppers.

