

# “A Wage You Can Live On – Textile Workers in Cambodia”

A Documentary by Helle Løvstø Severinsen | Produced by Clean Clothes Campaign Denmark (2012)

Part of the “No More Excuses” Campaign

## Overview:

The documentary explores the grim reality behind Cambodia’s thriving garment industry, which supplies clothes for many of the world’s biggest fashion brands. At the heart of this booming global business lies a workforce trapped in systemic poverty. The film offers a raw and emotional look into the lives of Cambodian textile workers, mainly women, who struggle daily to make ends meet on wages that are not enough to live on.

## The Day-to-Day Reality of Cambodia’s Garment Workers:

The film begins by following a typical day in the life of a garment worker in Phnom Penh. Workers rise early in cramped, shared rooms often without basic amenities. They spend their entire day in overcrowded factories, working under intense pressure and poor ventilation. The documentary shows workers sewing rapidly in loud, hot, and poorly ventilated buildings, driven by unattainable production targets.

Several workers are interviewed, and many share similar stories: extreme fatigue, skipped meals due to unaffordability, and fainting from exhaustion. Some even joke about how hunger has become normal, but the despair in their eyes tells a different story. The film captures how wage inadequacy leads to a chain of consequences—malnutrition, debt, poor mental health, and disrupted families.

Many women report having to work overtime regularly just to cover basic living expenses. However, the long hours take a toll on their health. Factory owners often threaten to cut wages or fire employees who can’t meet unrealistic quotas, and some women say they feel like they are being treated as machines, not humans.

## The Wages – A Breakdown of Injustice:

As of 2012, the minimum wage in Cambodia was **\$61 USD per month**, with a small **cost-of-living allowance** of **\$5 USD**. In July of that year, a **\$7 USD housing/transportation allowance** and a **\$10 USD attendance bonus** were introduced, bringing the total to **\$83 USD/month**.

However, according to the Cambodian Ministry of Labour, the **actual wage needed to survive modestly** was at least **\$131 USD/month**. The **Asia Floor Wage Campaign** calculated a **true living wage** to be **\$275 USD/month**—more than **three times** what workers were actually earning.

The documentary highlights this stark disparity through graphics and testimonies, illustrating that current wages cannot cover even basic needs like food, rent, transport, health, and education.

## Human Impact – Health and Hunger:

A significant segment of the film focuses on the **mass fainting episodes** that have occurred in Cambodian factories. These faintings, often involving dozens of workers at once, are attributed to a mix of overwork, poor nutrition, dehydration, and lack of ventilation. Medical professionals explain that fainting is the body’s natural shutdown mechanism when it’s under extreme physical and emotional stress.

One worker tearfully recalls collapsing at work after skipping meals for two days. Another speaks of constantly feeling dizzy and weak but having no choice but to keep working to avoid losing her job.

### **The Cambodia Living Wage Tribunal – A Platform for Truth:**

In February 2012, the **Clean Clothes Campaign** organized a **Living Wage Tribunal** in Phnom Penh. This symbolic, public hearing gave garment workers a rare chance to speak openly about their experiences in front of an audience that included union leaders, legal experts, academics, and media.

The tribunal was not a legal court but functioned as a **people's court**—a platform to expose labor injustices.

Workers gave testimony about low wages, unsafe factory conditions, abusive supervisors, wage theft, and union suppression. Their statements were emotional and courageous, revealing the personal cost of fast fashion.

Tribunal organizers emphasized that garment workers in Cambodia have **no access to real legal remedies**. Existing labor laws are weak and poorly enforced, and multinational brands often exploit these loopholes to drive down costs. Brands operate through complex supply chains that shield them from responsibility.

One panelist stated:

"We are trying to hold the brands morally accountable, if not legally. We want to show the world that profit is being built on poverty and suffering."

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### **The Global Supply Chain – Profit at a Human Cost:**

The documentary shifts focus to the **structure of the global fashion industry**, illustrating how power is distributed. Of the estimated **\$757 billion** generated at the **retail level**, only **\$226 billion** goes to the **production side**—this includes worker wages, factory operations, and raw materials.

This leaves over **\$500 billion** as profit distributed among brand owners, shareholders, advertisers, and retailers.

A researcher in the documentary points out:

"Consumers are paying less for garments now than they were ten years ago. That means someone is paying the price elsewhere—and that someone is the factory worker."

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### **Government and Brand Complicity:**

The documentary also critiques the Cambodian government's role. While officials claim progress, workers and union reps argue that the government has failed to protect its people. Brands take advantage of Cambodia's weak institutions, knowing that there are few regulations and even fewer consequences.

A union organizer explains how **brands play the system**, seeking out countries with the **cheapest labor, weakest protections**, and most desperate populations. Cambodia has become one such hub.

"The brands know Cambodia is vulnerable. They use that to maximize profit. They say they care, but they refuse to raise wages."

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### **A Call to Action:**

The documentary ends with a powerful call to consumers, brands, and policymakers:

- **To brands:** Take responsibility for the lives at the bottom of your supply chain.
- **To governments:** Enforce labor protections and establish a true living wage.
- **To consumers:** Understand that cheap fashion is not "affordable"—it's subsidized by the suffering of others. A small increase in retail price could drastically improve workers' lives.

One poignant quote closes the film:

"We do not want charity. We just want a wage we can live on."

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### **Postscript:**

The documentary is part of the **“No More Excuses” campaign** and aligns with advocacy by the **Asia Floor Wage Campaign**, which seeks to establish fair wages across Asia’s garment-producing countries. It offers educational resources and actionable steps at:

👉 <http://livingwage.cleanclothes.org>

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