

# **Ramatex: On the other side of the fence**

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## **Abbreviations**

AGOA	Africa Growth and Opportunity Act
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
IC	Investment Centre
ITGLWF	International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers Federation
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LAC	Labour Advisory Council
LaRRI	Labour Resource and Research Institute
MoL	Ministry of Labour
MTI	Ministry of Trade and Industry
NAFAU	Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union
NCCI	Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry
NUNW	National Union of Namibian Workers
ODC	Offshore Development Company
SWAPO	South West Africa People's Organisation of Namibia
WVTC	Windhoek Vocational Training Centre

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## **1. Introduction**

The Ramatex factory is undoubtedly the most spectacular foreign investment in Namibia since independence. The massive size of Ramatex's operations, the establishment of a totally new industry and the controversies surrounding the company's environmental impact and working conditions, have made Ramatex one of the most talked-about companies in Namibia today. The company is not only the subject of debate amongst politicians, business people, researchers and the media, but also among ordinary men and women on the streets of Windhoek.

Even before Ramatex started its operations in Namibia in 2002, the company made headlines, as it was the biggest investment in terms of the government Export Processing Zone (EPZ) programme. Government proudly announced that it had secured the Ramatex investment ahead of South Africa and Madagascar, which had also been considered as possible locations by the company. Ramatex and its subsidiaries are expected to create almost 8 000 jobs in Namibia, but concerns were raised regarding the company's impact on the environment, health and safety issues as well as the working conditions for Ramatex workers.

This booklet will not discuss all aspects in detail but will give a brief overview of Namibia's EPZ programme as well as a profile of the Ramatex Company. The main part of this booklet deals with the experiences of Ramatex workers. All too often their views are discarded by policy makers who simply argue that 'workers should be grateful to have any job at all'. We believe that development must be a people-centred process that cannot ignore the views of those directly affected. We therefore hope that this booklet will contribute towards making the experiences of Ramatex workers known. This booklet will present their stories as they have told them. We also hope that this booklet will contribute to a debate about the costs and benefits of investments like Ramatex in terms of long-term sustainable development.

## **2. Namibia's EPZ Programme**

As part of its strategy to become internationally competitive and to create favourable investment conditions, the Namibian government introduced the EPZ Act in 1995. The government hoped that EPZs would attract foreign investment to Namibia and boost the country's manufacturing capacity. It also expected the creation of 25 000 jobs in the EPZs within 3 years. Namibia's EPZ Act of 1995 outlines the purpose of EPZs as follows:

1. To attract, promote or increase the manufacture of export goods;
2. To create or increase industrial employment;
3. To create or expand export earnings;
4. To create or expand industrial investment, including foreign investment; and

5. To encourage technology transfer and the development of management and labour skills.

Both foreign and local companies can apply for EPZ status, as long as they export all or most of their products. In addition, they are privileged in a number of ways, which include:

- Corporate tax holidays (no taxes on profits of EPZ companies)
- Exemption from import duties on imported intermediate and capital goods
- Exemption from sales tax, stamp and transfer duties on goods and services required for EPZ activities
- Reduction in foreign exchange controls
- Guarantee of free repatriation of capital and profits
- Permission for EPZ investors to hold foreign currency accounts locally
- Access to streamlined regulatory service ('one stop shop')
- Provision of factory facilities for rent at economical rates
- Financial support for staff training

When the EPZ Act was passed in 1995, it stated that the Labour Act of 1992 would not apply in EPZs. The government argued that both local and foreign investment in the first five years of independence had been disappointing and that EPZs were the only solution to high unemployment. President Sam Nujoma described the exclusion of the Labour Act as necessary to allay investors 'fear of possible industrial unrest'. He promised that regulations on conditions of employment would be put in place to address the fears of workers. He further stated that 'the non-application of Namibia's Code in the EPZ Regime as a delicate compromise which is necessary to achieve the larger goal of job creation'.

Namibia's largest trade union federation, the National Union of Namibian Workers (NUNW), opposed the exclusion of the labour act as a violation of both ILO conventions and Namibia's constitution. The union federation instructed its lawyers to challenge the constitutionality of the EPZ Act in court. However, during a high level meeting between the government, SWAPO and the NUNW, in August 1995, a 'compromise' was reached which stipulated that the labour act will apply in the EPZs, but that strikes and lock-outs would be outlawed for a period of 5 years.

In 1999, the Labour Resource and Research Institute (LaRRI) carried out a comprehensive study of Namibia's EPZ programme. LaRRI's study was published in March 2000 and found that EPZs had fallen far short of the government's expectations of creating 25 000 jobs and facilitating skills and technology transfer needed to kick-start manufacturing industries in the country. At the end of 1999, the EPZs had created very few jobs although millions of dollars had been spent on promoting the policy and on developing infrastructure with public funds. LaRRI's study received extensive media coverage and drew instantaneous comeback from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry in charge of Namibia's EPZ programme. The Ministry's Offshore Development Company (ODC) argued that it was too early to

measure the success and failures of the programme as EPZs would only show results in the long term. Citing Mauritius as an exemplar to follow the island had to wait 20 years for their EPZ programme to yield positive results according to the ODC.

The Namibian government nevertheless set itself the target of 25 000 EPZ jobs by the end of 1999. LaRRI's study on the other hand revealed that only 400 jobs had been created by the end of that year. The study further pointed to poor labour conditions as a likely source of future conflict in EPZ companies. Namibian trade unions were particularly opposed to the clause in the EPZ Act, which made strikes and lockouts illegal for a period of five years. The unions demanded that this clause should be amended to grant the right to strike to all workers, including those in the EPZs.

LaRRI's EPZ study was discussed in the tripartite Labour Advisory Council (LAC), which brought together representatives of government, business and labour. The Council invited LaRRI, the ODC and the Investment Centre (IC) to provide additional information and debated the merits of the EPZ programme. It then concluded that the EPZs did not fulfil their aims and objectives with regards to creating 25 000 jobs within the first five years, increasing the amount of manufactured goods produced, expanding industrial development and assisting in the transfer of skills and technology in the zones. The Council was also concerned about the clause suspending strikes and lockouts in EPZs, which was in direct contravention of International Labour Standards, and especially the Freedom of Association Convention (No. 87), which Namibia has ratified. The Council agreed to recommend to the Minister of Labour to advise Parliament not to re-enact the clause in the EPZ Act, which prohibits strikes and lockouts. This recommendation was accepted and since 2001, EPZ workers and companies have the right to strike and lockout.

Despite mounting scepticism about the EPZ programme, government maintained the policy. EPZ status was granted to a poultry plant in Karibib as well as mining companies such as Ongopolo and the Scorpion Zinc Mine and Refinery in Southern Namibia, owned by Anglo American Corporation. The Scorpion project is expected to employ over 500 people and contribute about US\$ 118 million (about N\$ 1 billion) annually to Namibia's GDP which would mean an increase of about 4%. Although Ongopolo and Skorpion obtained EPZ status for their processing operations only, it is likely that they will use the EPZ status to gain tax exemption for their profits. Simple accounting trickery like transfer pricing could ensure tax exemption and deprive the Namibian State of tax revenue from the mining sector. An income, which has so far contributed significantly to the national economy.

In 2001, the Ministry of Trade and Industry announced that it had succeeded to snatch up a N\$ 1 billion project ahead of South Africa and Madagascar which had also been considered as an investment location by the Malaysian textile company Ramatex. This was achieved by offering even greater concessions seemingly above those granted to other EPZ companies. Drawing in the parastatals providing water and electricity (Namwater and Nampower) as well as the Windhoek municipality, the Ministry put together an incentive package which included subsidised water and

electricity, a 99-year tax exemption on land use as well as over N\$ 100 million to prepare the site including the setting up of electricity, water and sewage infrastructure. This was justified on the grounds that the company would create 3000 - 5000 jobs during the first two years and another 2000 jobs in the following two years. The plant turns cotton into fabrics and the Namibian government hopes that local cotton producers will be able to increasingly supply the required cotton. The cotton will be imported duty free. Ramatex's decision to locate production in Southern Africa was motivated by the objective to benefit from the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) which allows for duty free exports to the US from selected African countries.

### **3. The Ramatex Berhad Company - A Brief Profile**

Ramatex Berhad was established in 1982 as Gimmill Industrial (M) Sdn., a small textile manufacturing plant in Batu Pahat, Malaysia. The Ramatex Group, as it is now known today, expanded vertically from dyeing and knitting mills into yarn manufacturing in 1989 and continued its growth into finishing fabrics and printing in 1992. On November 12, 1996, the Ramatex Group was officially listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange. Ramatex is the undisputed leader in the Malaysian textile industry. Today members of the Ma Family who originally set up the business are still the majority shareholders, owning 59 percent. They also still play an active management role.

The company produces fabric and garments for **Nike, Adidas, Puma, Otto Versand, Target, Wal-Mart and Sears Woolworth**. Ramatex's subsidiary Tai Wah penetrated the international market in 1982, producing branded apparels for European buyers under names such as **Adidas, Christian Dior, Ralph Lauren, Nike and Halmode**.

Ramatex Berhad has subsidiaries in China, Mauritius, Namibia and South Africa. Ramatex has three garment factories in the Eastern Cape South Africa owned by 2 of its subsidiaries: SA Tai Wah Textiles (Pty) Ltd and the May Garment Company (Pty) Ltd. On 16 September 2003, SA Tai Wah and May Garment gave notice that their operations In Dimaza, Eastern Cape, South Africa would cease resulting in job losses for 2 500 workers. Apparently, this was due to the company's relocation of production to Namibia. Most workers in South Africa earned around N\$ 950 per month while the wages paid in Namibia are lower.

With a turnover of about U\$ 200 million a year, the Ramatex group currently operates from three major manufacturing facilities in Malaysia, China and Namibia. The Malaysian facility mainly caters for the export quota markets, whereas products manufactured in China are mainly aimed at the Chinese domestic market and non-quota customers. The production in Namibia services the US market under the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).

The company has similar operations in all three countries consisting of spinning mills, knitting plants, dye and print houses and also operates (under the subsidiary names Gimmill Industrial and Fulong) several sewing plants. The company's total annual

capacity stands at around 50 million kilograms of yarn, 30 million kg of knitted and dyed fabric and 75 million garments. The operations in Namibia are envisaged to reach 16 million kg of yarn, 12 million kg of fabric and 3,6 million garments per annum within five years.

The majority of fabric produced by the Ramatex group is used in-house while 85% of the yarn produced is exported. About 3% of the turnover is reinvested into research and development each year and the company has computerised its manufacturing facilities with state-of-the-art technology and machinery. All the factories are linked via a computer integrated manufacturing system, which monitors each stage of production.

The main subsidiaries of Ramatex are the following:

**Fulong Sdn Bhd., Malaysia** (garment manufacturing)

**Ramatex Textiles Industrial Sdn. Bhd., Malaysia** (manufacturing of yarn, knitting, dyeing and printing of fabrics)

**Ramatex Industrial (Suzhou) Ltd., China** (yarn manufacturing, and fabric knitting, dyeing and printing)

**Gimmill Industrial (M) Sdn. Bhd., Malaysia** (Manufacturing of garments)  
Fulong Sdn. Bhd. Malaysia

**Tai Wah Garments Industry Sdn. Bhd., Malaysia,** (garment manufacturing)

**Gimmill Corporation Pty. Ltd., Singapore** operates a plant in Mauritius (Sentosa Enterprises Limited) producing T-shirts, polo shirts and pants.

In addition three investment holding companies (Ramatex Capital Limited in British Virgin Islands, Ramatex [North Asia] Pty.Ltd. in Singapore and Summit Deal Sdn. Bhd.) are part of the Ramatex group.

Ramatex implements an aggressive expansion programme and more than doubled its sales between 1996 and 1999. Profits more than tripled in this period to RM 105 million (U\$ 28 million) but fell to RM 71,6 million (U\$ 18,8 million) in 2002. Overall, the Ramatex group employs about 50 000 people.

The company plans to buy several medium-sized manufacturers in Cambodia and Indonesia to strengthen its position in the international textile market and to increase its profits. According to Ramatex' executive director Albert Lim Poh Boon, the company plans to serve the wealthy part of the textile market from its Malaysian factories while the production in Namibia and China would go for 'cost efficiency' and provide low cost products. The Namibian operations are meant to cater for the European Union, the Middle East and the east coast of the USA.

## 4. Ramatex in Namibia

Even before Ramatex started its operations, concerns were raised regarding the environmental impact of the company's operations. Earthlife Namibia approached various ministries and the City of Windhoek to enquire about the environmental assessment, especially regarding the company's water consumption, health and safety measures for workers and people living near the factory and the possible pollution through contaminated waste. Earthlife Namibia anticipated Ramatex to consume about 1,5 million litres of water per day (which would be more than half of Windhoek's total water consumption) once the company became fully operational. The organisation was also concerned about the use of toxic substances and asked for more information on the disposal and treatment of waste water and the protection of workers. These concerns were met with open hostility by the Namibian government who accused the organisation of being against development and job creation. Despite promises that environmental control would be watertight and that the environmental study ('verification study') would be made public, this has not happened. According to a local newspaper, the Windhoek mayor expressed his anger at 'anti-developmental forces who would like to see thousands of previously disadvantaged and dehumanised Namibian families continue languishing in poverty'.

Tensions arose when thousands of job seekers lined up for jobs at Ramatex in **early 2002**. Female trainees were issued letters instructing them to take pregnancy tests (at their own costs) in line with 'company policy'. Workers also complained that Ramatex was only interested in young women workers up to 25 years of age. The company allegedly also did not want to employ tall and fat workers. Workers also claimed that Ramatex trainers had slapped them on their head, pinched them and insulted them for making mistakes. Ramatex executive director Albert Lim Poh Boon, however, denied the allegations while the former Trade and Industry Minister Hidipo Hamutenya called on workers to 'embrace the Ramatex work ethics' and to 'put your skills to work with passion'. On the other hand, the Minister of Women's Affairs and Child Welfare, Netumbo Nandi Ndaitwah described the pregnancy tests as discriminatory against women. The permanent secretary in the Ministry of Labour pointed out that in terms of the Namibian Labour Act, denying a woman a job because she is pregnant would constitute an unfair labour practice.

By **March 2002**, more than a 1000 young workers (mostly female) had completed their training in basic sewing and quality control and were awarded certificates of competence. Ramatex promised to provide intensive technical training to more than 6 500 Namibian workers before the end of 2002. The Namibian government was hoping that this would be the first step towards building a 'skills-based competitive advantage for Namibia to become the leading centre for textile and garment industries in Africa'.

In **June 2002**, Ramatex made headlines again as several workers suffered from skin rashes and swollen hands. They called on government to bring in independent doctors to investigate the causes of their illness. Workers believed that the rashes

were a reaction to the dust and cotton particles in the factory but were told to leave their jobs if they felt they had allergic reactions. Workers further claimed that they could not consult health practitioners during work time, as Ramatex would deduct the money for the day and issue them with warning letters. The workers wanted the Ministry of Labour to compel the company to provide protective masks and gloves and to send labour inspectors to the factory.

Workers were also unhappy that they did not receive N\$ 750 a month as the company had promised but only 480 a month. To aggravate matters worse, workers were told that due to a shortage of materials caused by a delay in the delivery of containers, production workers would be 'laid off' for a week and not receive any payment during that time.

The Namibia Food and Allied Workers Union (NAFAU) which had been refused access to the company premises, also raised concerns about the working conditions at Ramatex, the unfair recruitment procedures and the controversy surrounding the disclosure of the environmental impact assessment. The company once again denied all allegations and continued to refuse NAFAU access to workers - even over lunchtime. The union then held meetings with workers outside the factory premises to inform them about their rights.

**In July 2002**, the Ministry of Labour gave Ramatex an ultimatum of 3 weeks to register its workers with the Social Security Commission as required by law. A government investigation team was dispatched to the factory to examine the working, health and safety conditions. The company was also advised to allow collective bargaining at the factory in compliance with the Labour Act.

However, not everybody supported the call for Ramatex to adhere to Namibian laws and regulations. A well-known Windhoek lawyer wrote to NAFAU General Secretary Cuana Angula, requesting him to apologise to Ramatex for his comments on the working conditions. The lawyer went as far as questioning Angula's loyalty to SWAPO and accused him of collaborating with the enemies of government. Likewise, the Namibia Chamber of Commerce and Industry (NCCI) attacked what it called the 'unsubstantiated claims' about the Ramatex factory. They alleged that criticism of Ramatex would harm Namibia's chances of attracting investments.

**In August 2002**, more than a thousand Ramatex workers downed tools in protest against vague work contracts, which they believed set their monthly salary at N\$ 360. The strike was abandoned when NAFAU and the Ministry of Labour intervened to allay workers fears. Ramatex claimed that workers would receive performance-related pay on top of their basic N\$ 360, which would bring up their salary to around N\$ 800 per month. The company agreed to take the striking workers back and announced that workers would be paid N\$ 3 per hour plus production-related incentives.

**In September 2002**, the Ramatex Executive Director complained to the Namibian Prime Minister that the Windhoek Municipality was not granting Ramatex sufficient

additional land (at discount rates) for expansion. Ramatex threatened that unless their request was granted, they might move to other countries. However, the municipality pointed out that there was simply no more land available at the existing site and that Ramatex had illegally used some of its land for the construction of worker's hostels. On several occasions the company had refused to discuss these illegal building activities and even continued the construction without approved plans - despite the City's written instruction to stop.

In the weeks that followed, the Ministry of Trade and Industry (particularly the Investment Centre) and Ramatex tried to address some of the conflicts, which they attributed to a "clash of cultures". An agreement was reached between the Municipality and the Ministry of Labour and Ramatex signed a recognition agreement with NAFAU in **October 2002**.

In **April 2003**, however, tensions boiled over once again. Following a 'wildcat strike' over poor wages and conditions of service by over 3 000 workers on 14 April, the Ramatex management closed the factory for two weeks and threatened to eliminate the architects of the wildcat strike. The company also declared its intention to fire all workers. NAFAU tried to negotiate the re-opening of the factory but was unsuccessful and was even accused by some workers of selling out their demands.

When the factory re-opened its doors on 28 April, Ramatex wanted to fire 600 workers whom they accused of 'masterminding' the strike. After negotiations between the company, NAFAU and the Labour Commissioner during which Ramatex was (once again) reminded about Namibia's labour laws, workers were issued with new contracts. The company also accepted that all accused workers would have to be given fair hearings.

However, in **May 2003**, Ramatex suspended 416 workers (without pay) accusing them of masterminding the strike. Shortly afterwards, several hundred Asian workers downed tools demanding wage increases and better conditions of service. This strike lasted just a few hours and was kept under wraps by the company, which did not even report it to the Ministry of Labour. The company claimed that some Buddhist workers wanting to observe the religious festival of 'Wesak' prompted the work stoppage. However, this explanation was contradicted as Ramatex dismissed seven of the striking Asian workers and sent them back home.

Only 54 workers of the 416 suspended workers have not yet been reinstated. They are mostly from the dyeing, knitting and spinning departments. Thus far, five workers were dismissed after disciplinary hearings while most were reinstated and transferred to different departments within the Ramatex complex. Further disciplinary hearings were scheduled for October 2003.

By **October 2003**, Ramatex and NAFAU had reached some agreements. The company agreed that NAFAU should come up with a scheduled time to introduce courses or seminars for supervisors and management. In addition, the company has

agreed that workers can elect two full-time shop stewards and one union official. These officials will have an office at Ramatex fully furnished with all the necessary equipments.

## 6. The experiences of Ramatex Workers

In July 2003, we interviewed 31 workers most of whom were women (26). The youngest workers were 21 and the oldest were 35 years old. Most (27) were single and had children. Twenty-three workers spoke Oshiwambo as their mother tongue; six were Otjiherero, one Damara-Nama and one was a Rukwangali speaker. Almost all the workers interviewed were born outside Windhoek. Almost all had some form of secondary education. Four respondents indicated that their highest educational background was grade 8; thirteen had completed grades 10 and twelve went as far as grade 12. Most workers stayed a significant distance from the work place and nearly everyone walked to and from work (some as far as 7 kilometres), as they could not afford the taxi fares.

### Employment history

We wanted to establish whether the workers had any other work experience before they joined Ramatex. Most said that Ramatex was their first job and only a few had previous work experiences, for example being waiters and waitresses at restaurants and shebeens, security guards, carpenters, long distance drivers, cashiers and construction workers. Some of those who had worked elsewhere before joining Ramatex, were generally nostalgic about their previous job:

*I worked somewhere else and the working condition and money was far better. I used to get about N\$ 5.00 per hour but now I'm getting only N\$ 3.00 per hour. I enjoyed my previous work, there was no verbal and emotional abuse, the problem was only that I was a casual worker and it takes long for them to appoint a person permanently. The main reason why I came to work for Ramatex is because I wanted a permanent job and security, which I am not getting now either.*

*Yes, I was a construction worker I used to build. I was not working at the time because my contract has already expired. I could have been with my previous employer still. Shilumbu wange okwali hafutu nawa. [Okwali hapenge omafele omugoyi no milongo hetatu, keshe kehulilo lo mwedi okwali hehupupo no mafele ahamano ngee nge ndafutu uumbo [My previous employer used to pay me really good. He used to give me N\$ 980.00, and I was left with about N\$ 600.00 every end of the month after having paid rent. I was retrenched. I really loved my previous job because they paid me much better than here].*

*For me, I left the chocolate factory to come to Ramatex. The reason was because I was a contract worker there, and the contract was about to end. So*

*they took our names to the Ministry of Labour so that other companies can take us. So I thought Ramatex is perhaps a future company, and maybe it pays nicely. The time we came and started here, the pay was different. My pay was much better there and even the working conditions. My pay has now decreased by N\$600.*

*My life is more difficult now than when I was with my previous employer. Like now I am renting a room, now here at Ramatex if I do not work overtime I will not make enough to pay for my room.*

There was only one worker who felt that it was better for her to be working at Ramatex than being at the shebeen:

*Okwali hailongo mo bashu. I use to work in a shebeen. Ongalamwenyo yange oyili nawa paife shaashi ondafiyapo obashu no hailongele Oramatex. [My life is much better now, since I left the shebeen to come and work for Ramatex].*

## **Recruitment and training**

Almost all workers indicated that employment at Ramatex was advertised widely on the radio and newspapers. There were a few who indicated that they were notified by the Ministry of Labour. They said that the requirements for a job at Ramatex were Namibian citizenship, grade 10-12 of schooling, age 18-25 and sewing experience. This is how workers found out about jobs at Ramatex:

*I was looking for work and I came across people lining up for training at VTC and then I joined them.*

*I went to the Ministry of Labour and I was informed that they were recruiting for Ramatex.*

*Ame ondeshilesa moshifo, ndee handii ko Ministry yo Trade andi udifa ofoloma. Omadina etu oye kiifanywa mo Radio opo tuye ko interview. Ointerview oya ningilwa ko Ministry yo Trade. [I heard through the newspaper, I went to the Ministry of Trade and filled in the forms, whereby our names were called later through the radio for interviews. The interviews took place at the offices of the Ministry of Trade].*

*Ame ondayile ko Ministry yo labour. Ovalombwelange kutya otava kutile o Ramatex. Ondayandja edina lange ndee tava ifanange konima yo mafiku. [I went to the Ministry of Labour and I was informed that they are recruiting for Ramatex. I was called after a few days].*

This practice was confirmed by Ramatex manager Ms Lim, who said that recruitment does not take place at Ramatex as the Ministry of Labour was doing the recruitment for the company. The Ministry keeps a database, and the company contacts them whenever they need more workers.

According to the workers, they were offered on the job training before they could be fully employed by Ramatex. Some were trained at the Windhoek Vocational Training Centre and some are still being trained on the factory premises. The duration of the training varied. Some were trained for 3 months, some for only three weeks whilst some have been trainees for over five months:

*Ngaye ondali mo traininga uule wiiwike itatu ko VTC. [I underwent training at VTC for three weeks].*

*Ame onda trainingwa uule wii vike ivali ko VTC. [I was trained for two weeks at VTC].*

*Ame onda trainingilwa okuhondja ko VTC uule wee mwedi nhatu. [I was trained in sewing at VTC for three months].*

*Ame natango ondili mo traininga. Ohailongele odola yimwe nii filinga itano. Navakwetu ava tuli natango mo traininga otwali twa lombwelwa kutya ohatu trainingwa ashike uule wee mwedi nhatu. Paife eemwedi nhatu oda pita, omwedi owu omuditano ndee natango vati tse ootrainees, hatumono ashike Odolala niifilinga itano movili. [I am still in training. I work for N\$1.50 p/h. Those of us still in training were told we will be in training for 3 months, but now those three months have passed, this is the fifth month and I am still apparently a trainee, getting N\$ 1.50 per hour].*

*I was trained for just two weeks. We used to get N\$ 30 per week. After that we came to Ramatex and we were told we have to undergo training again for another three months still at N\$3.00 per hour and we were told that after training we will get promoted but it is still the same amount.*

*Were trained at VTC for three weeks and we were paid N\$ 30 per week, and then we came to Ramatex and were told to undergo training again for another three months, whereby we were paid N\$ 3 per hour. Since then we are still getting N\$ 3 per hour after the completion of training.*

*We were promised N\$ 3 per hour while on training, but now training is finished and we are still getting N\$3 per hour. Some people who just start training are even earning more than us. It is very upsetting.*

*I was trained as a cutter. The problem is that they said the training should be for three months, but now you find yourself in training for seven months and you*

*are still in training and getting such little money. They told us if you complete three months your salary would increase.*

*I am still in training and I get N\$1.50 per hour. We were told that training will only last for three months, and now its six months on training and I'm still getting N\$ 1.50 per hour.*

Ramatex manager Ms. Lim outlined the company's training policy as follows:

*The people recruited are then sent to Ramatex for training and placement. Ramatex offers training to its employees for a minimum period of three to six months depending on how fast different individuals learn the skills needed. The trainees receive an allowance during the training.*

When asked what the allowance was, Ms Lim responded that this was confidential. She further revealed that some people were sent to Malaysia for training.

On the job-training trainees seem to be in a more vulnerable position. They seem to remain much longer as trainees than those who were trained at VTC. As a result, their basic income remains lower.

The document outlining Ramatex recruitment procedures indicates that the process consist of six steps:

**Step 1:** Register with the Ministry of Labour which undertakes the recruitment jointly with the company.

**Step 2:** Interview with production head in the presence of a representative of the Ministry of Labour. Thereafter, approved applicants enter the training programme.

**Step 3:** This is the test period, which takes 3 - 5 days. This serves to determine if an applicant is trainable and has the basic skills for the position applied for. If a person does not succeed during this stage, he/she will not be offered further training and will not be employed.

**Step 4:** The applicant is taken into the training programme and has to sign the training agreement. At this stage, the trainee should have acquired the basic skills in sewing and knowledge of the various types of machines he/she will work with. Applicants are also expected to be familiar with certain styles of clothing and have a basic understanding of the sewing process.

**Step 5:** Performance appraisal. At this stage the worker will either be employed or dismissed - depending on his/her performance.

**Step 6:** Those who passed the performance appraisal will sign a contract and receive a salary increase (currently from N\$ 1,50 to N\$ 3 per hour)

After the contract has been signed, a worker will be given two more weeks of training, followed by another evaluation. If the performance was not satisfactory, he/she will be given the first letter of poor performance. Another 2 weeks later, a second evaluation will take place, and the worker will be given a final warning for poor performance if

he/she fails to meet the company's expectations. This will also lead to a disciplinary hearing, which might result in a dismissal.

## **Working hours**

Ramatex workers usually start the day shift at 07h00 or 07h30 in the morning while the night shift begins at 19h30 and at 21:30. Most workers leave work by 19:30. The kitchen workers start at different times. Some work from 08h00 until 17h00, some work from 06h00 until 15h00 and other shifts lasts from 10h30 until 19h30:

*We start at 7 in the morning knock off at 5 in the evening, work 5 days a week. Generally we work for about 6 days a week, Sunday is overtime.*

*We do not get tea break, except 1-hour lunch. The company does not provide lunch; you have to provide it yourself. The lunch is provided for Chinese because they have hostels on the premises.*

The effects of working everyday for long hours were clearly felt by the workers:

*Sometimes I spend three months without seeing my children. The problem is that I have to work from 7 in the morning until 7:30 in the evening so that I can earn little bit more.*

*We work from 7 in the morning to five in the afternoon. But with overtime we work until 19:30 and sometimes we leave at 9 or 10 o clock at night. This is Sunday to Sunday.*

*We work everyday, from the first day of the month to the last day. If you do not work overtime during the week, they will not allow you to work overtime over the weekend, because they know only by working overtime can one make a bit of money.*

*We work the same hours everyday. If you are tired you are told to go home and never to come back again. If you miss work on Saturday and Sunday, you are just told to go home or you get fired depending on the number of warnings. If you just miss work on Saturday and Sunday, the moment the Chinese supervisor see you he or she will only talk to the Filipino in the office, they will then tell you, 'go office, sign warning'.*

*I start at seven in the morning. We iron over a hundred items in an hour, and we stand the whole day. The standing is very painful, but there is nothing I can do because it is my work. I leave at 19h30 in the evening, whether it is a weekend or normal weekday. Sunday-to-Sunday. When I started I used to attend night classes but I don't get time anymore and I stopped going to classes, because I have no time.*

A kitchen worker explained:

*We work six days a week and we get a day off, sometimes we work seven days, but we don't get paid working on Sundays. The day that we are supposed to be on leave we don't choose them ourselves they only draw up a list of names indicating who will be off duty. They only chose names randomly, if you chose a off day for yourself they will make you sign a warning letter. Mostly Sundays are regarded as off days, but we are required to report for duties sometimes and that's why we do not get paid for working on Sundays, even if we work.*

Almost all respondents indicated that they work everyday of the week and often for 11 hours. The reason given was 'to make a bit more money'. Every worker is only awarded a one-hour break during the working day but they do not have tea breaks. The lunch breaks differ according to the different factories. This is how one worker explained the lunch arrangements:

*We do not get tea break (okamulongo), except for the 1-hour lunch. The company does not provide lunch, we each have to bring our own from home. The Chinese and Filipino workers are given food during lunch, because they have hostels on the premises.*

If a worker starts at 7:00 AM and leaves at 19:00 it means that person spends 12 hours a day in the factory - 11 hours work and 1hour lunch break. If workers are employed as packers or to do the ironing, they will spend 11 hours of their day, at least 6 days a week. At the end of the 7-day week 77 hours would have been spent standing, about 2 340 hours in a month!

Workers indicated that they are not allowed to consume anything whilst working, except during their lunch hour:

*We (Namibians) are only allowed to drink water. If you are found drinking anything coloured, than your chances of being called for a warning at the office is quiet high. You know why I have a problem with this rule is that the Chinese people are allowed to eat whatever they want even when we are working. They come there with their packets of chips and coldrink and display them on their desks and eat. When it comes to us (Namibians), our glasses or containers of water are not even supposed to be on the table. This also raises a health concern, because the fabric is always dusty and when a glass of water is on the floor it can gather dust (ontsi) from the fabric and the water is contaminated. In addition our Chinese colleagues are always spitting and one fears that they might spit in your water if it is not closed.*

## **Salaries and benefits**

Ramatex workers spoke about their basic monthly income at length. Although there seem to be an inconsistency in the monthly basic salary mentioned by different respondents, the consensus is that trainees earn below N\$ 300 whilst those who completed their training generally earn below N\$ 600. Workers are extremely unhappy about their low salaries and expressed their frustrations as follows:

*We are paid N\$ 3 per hour. When you calculate, it is supposed to be N\$ 648 per month, but they only pay us N\$ 585 and they say it is a basic salary. When we work overtime, we only get N\$1.50 extra per hour. But on Sundays it is a double hourly rate. On Saturday it is N\$4.50 per hour and on Sunday it is N\$6 per hour.*

*I am a trainee and get N\$297 basic pay. They pay N\$1.50 per hour plus 75c extra for overtime, but only if you have worked every day of the month and week, otherwise you get less than that. We are not paid if you are off sick or if you take any other leave, which is always unpaid leave.*

*I was getting N\$ 600, including overtime I was getting N\$ 800 but only if worked overtime for many days.*

*Tse mbali tulimotraininga oha tu mono iithilinga iheyali no siperitha kehe mowili yo overtime. Opeyi yetu ohayi pitile mombaanga yo ohayi nanako N\$20 dho mbaanga. [Those of us who are still in training get N\$ 0 75 C extra per hour for working overtime. We get paid through the bank and then the bank deducts N\$ 20 charges for services].*

*Before I started work at Ramatex, I had my savings account with SWABOU. Now that I am working I still have to go to my savings account to get some money from there. At least then my cousin used to give between N\$300-500 every month. Now no one gives me anything because they believe I am working. Ramatex has not contributed anything to me really. At that time I used to have some money in the bank, but now I really do not have anything at all. In essence I can say its now a disadvantage.*

*I just want to complain about the day we get the money. I think the day is very far. We get the money after 7 days of every month. Like me, my father is not here in Windhoek. I am taking care of my father's house and I need to pay bills at the end of the month. And also to help my brother and my sister. The salary is very small. I pay for the house alone N\$ 200. The rest of the money you can only buy food, clothes you can't consider.*

In addition to the low pay, workers are also not always sure how much they would get paid at the end of a respective month:

*We have a problem. Sometimes you calculate the amount you are going to get at the end of the month. But at the end of the month the amount on the pay slip*

*is very little. Especially those of us who work for N\$1.50 per hour. Once the company sees that the money is becoming too much they take a bit off... It is just the company that's eating the money. They never reimburse you even if you present the case at the office. There is no month when one is sure about the amount you are going to get even if you think you will get N\$700 you will be paid less... We do not know why we get paid so late, maybe it is because we are a lot.*

*Sometimes you work so hard, you are expecting to get a commission, because we were told that if you reach a certain production level, you qualify for commission. End of the month comes and no commission. Sometimes the agreement was that you will get 85 cents per T-shirt, but when the commission appears on the pay slip the addition is 1c. Imagine what one will do with a cent? I do not know how they count because even if you count, you will never be able to understand how they arrived at the 1cent.*

Another worker raised a concern with regard to discrepancy in monthly payments:

*When we started we were promised N\$ 25 per day. Now the more people they are employing, the lower the wages. I am very upset because some people are the one's we trained them, and now they earn more than us. They are getting between N\$ 700 to N\$ 800 a month while we are only getting N\$ 500 a month.*

As a result of their low salaries, production workers try to work overtime to make ends meet. However, there is none or very little impetus for kitchen staff to work overtime:

*We can work overtime in the kitchen, but it does not help to work overtime because we hardly get paid for working overtime. We only get an additional 20c per hour for overtime. That's how little we earn. It is better to go home and do something beneficial for the family instead of wasting time and energy for 20 cents extra per hour at Ramatex. What do you do with 20 cents in this world?*

## **Making ends meet**

Time and again, Ramatex workers explained to us how difficult it is to make ends meet with their minimal monthly income. In most cases, workers cannot make ends meet with their salaries and are forced to live beyond their means. Like other urban residents, rent, food, water, surfaced as the most important necessities for workers. The majority mentioned that they are hardly left with any money to buy enough food let alone clothing:

*I have to pay for my transport N\$ 200, N\$ 250 for rent, account N\$ 152 and for five months I have not even send meal-meal to my children. Look at my clothes they are so old because I cannot afford new ones.*

*There is nothing left for saving, I rent a room for N\$ 300, I spend N\$ 120 for transport after that there is only N\$ 200 left with that I have to buy food and I have a child to look after and there is nothing left.*

Other workers added:

*With regard to transport, I spend N\$ 100 per month because we are in a group and we share the cost. I spend N\$ 350 per month on rent for a room. I spend at least N\$ 300 on food and have an account for my bed on which I pay just the amount I can afford per month because I cannot afford the required instalment. I am normally left with about N\$100 or less after all these expenses.*

*I do not spend anything on transport because I walk from home everyday. I however spent N\$ 300 for the room per month.*

*My child is in a crèche, and I pay N\$ 150, I don't pay anything more but what I am getting here is really very little for what I need.*

*I walk everyday. I pay rent for the house, which is N\$ 350; I spend food for my family about N\$ 300. I spend N\$ 150 on transport.*

*My rent is N\$ 300, Food N\$ 300. I pay N\$ 300 for a bed. I earn N\$ 585 and I spend N\$ 900. My mother helps me out with the rest.*

*I spend N\$ 190 on transport a month and my basic salary is N\$ 377 and if I work over-time it amounts to N\$ 400 and something and then you subtract N\$ 190 for transport.*

*We get some money from the family members, and they always tell us why we bother to go and work at Ramatex, instead of just staying home.*

*The problem is that we are staying in other people's houses you see and when you explain to them that the pay is not so great you see, they do not understand. They just think you are lying. Like now after a few days even before the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month than the money is finished that's why it is a great problem.*

A suspended worker (when asked whether she had any additional source of income) explained her predicament as follows:

*Maybe my mother, but it was not enough, the only person who was assisting me was my boyfriend. Sometimes he gave me N\$500, enough to buy clothes. I could never say to myself let me take N\$500 and go shopping. No, you just have to share with the rest of the family.*

None of the workers enjoyed their incomes alone. Sharing is a norm in most African societies and most Ramatex workers had to carry the responsibility of extending

financial support not only to their own children, but also to their siblings and in some cases to their parents.

## Protective clothing and work-related accidents

We noticed that Ramatex workers were not wearing any protective clothing. When we asked them for the reasons, they explained:

*We do need them but we do not have them at all. I have asthma every day I have flu, from month to month and day to day. I report everyday to the office and nothing happens (coughing while explaining). We want aprons, because the fabric's colour is always fading off and it affects our clothes. Everyday you go home you have to do some washing otherwise all your clothes will be too old and coloured.*

A kitchen worker added:

*Hulle het ons hoede en aprons gegee, maar een ding wat ons rerig nodig het is handskoene, want hulle laat sny ons gevriesde vis sonder handskoene en verskriklike gevriside vleis, dis glad nie safe nie. [They have given us hoods and aprons for protection, but one thing that we really need are hand gloves, because we are made to cut frozen fish without gloves and extremely frozen meat, it is not safe at all].*

Other production workers stated:

*Ngaye ohe tonyo iikutu ngee ya kangulwa. Ohatukala twathikama esiku alihe. Olundji oha tweehama molwo ontsi ndjo hayizi miikutu mo. MoSoondaha ondayile koshipangelo shaashi okwali tekolola. Koshipangelo ondafalwa ko x-ray nondamonika ontsi oyindji komapunga. Oonesa odhali tadhi pulandje ngele ohatupewa iinima yo kwii gamena kontsi. Ondati tse ihatupewa ndele ohe mono aa Chiina yamwe yazala omamaska. Kakwali ndishi ngele omaska ngono ogokwii gamena komukithi. Kishiyiiyengele aa Chiina mbono omaska odhawo yoyene nenge oyedhi peva ko company. [I do folding after the clothes are ironed, we work standing and those clothing are very dusty. We mostly get sick because of the dust from the clothes, like on Sunday I went to the Hospital because I was coughing. At the Hospital x-rays were done on me and it was discovered that I have a lot of dust on my lungs. The nurses at the hospital ask me whether we are given mask to protect ourselves from dust. I told them no we are not given any mask, but I see some Chinese people wearing masks. I didn't know that they could protect you from getting sick, I don't know whether the company gave the masks to the Chinese or it's theirs].*

*We need uniforms because you cannot wear your best clothes here. It will be old by the end of a working day. The clothes will be ruined and dusty by the end of the day and what about our health in the long run?*

*You know every time you come with your clothes, they get old and dirty and the money is not so much to buy more clothes. In a week I at least have to wash my clothes five times a week, because every time they get too dirty to wear them just like that for the next day. Like me I came here with nice clothes but now they are old and the money is too little. It is only enough to maybe buy food, or rent or taxi.*

When we asked workers if they made any attempt to find out from the company as to why they did not receive protective clothing, they replied:

*I asked my supervisor when I realised that the clothes were dusty. He told me that since he started he did not see people given any protective items and he told me that I should take a piece of cloth to cover myself. But the piece of cloth is also dusty because it is from the same type of fabric.*

Workers also recounted accidents at work, which seem to happen regularly:

*Look I am cut; this is because of Ramatex [pointing at a scar on her finger]. This was stitched at the hospital. They took me to the hospital. I have lost the use of my finger. My finger does not bend backward and forward anymore. I was not compensated for this.*

*Daar is a paar wat al ongevalle gehad het by die werk. Niks word daaraan gedoen nie, hulle word net huis toe gestuur. [There are a few people who had accidents on duty already. Nothing is done about it, they are only sent home].*

*Sikulimwe ondamwene osteki yonane yagwila meho lyokakadhona kamwe hatulongo nako. Onane oyateka pokati manga tatuuhondjo. [I once saw a needle in a colleague's eye. It broke in half while she was sewing, and the one piece fell at her (pointing) lower eyelid].*

*Omasikuualanga sho twa suspendwa ondamono okakadhona kamwe hakazi ko Mbili katedwa omunwe keshina lyoombadi. Okwayi yemwene koshipangelo. Oonane ndhono odhanika oshiponga. Ohadhiteka mbala. [Just after we got suspended I saw a lady who is living in Ombili; the button machine cut off her middle finger. She just went to the hospital on her own. Those needles are very dangerous. The needles are not strong, they breaks quickly].*

*I was not injured whilst at work, but I have seen people who developed big funny lumps on their bodies. Their bodies were swollen and I think they are allergic to the fabric.*

Several workers pointed out that they were concerned about suffering back problems later in their lives. A worker who does ironing explained that they are expected to iron at least a hundred items per hour:

*The standing is very painful, but there is nothing I can do. It is my work. I have already started suffering back pain especially at night when I go sleep. I do not know what will happen to me in a few years to come.*

*We stand the whole day and we never get a chance to sit. Since I started working here I stand seven days a week. We are already sick now, we feel pain because of the long hours standing, and if they see you leaning on something for support you will be given a warning.*

Other workers could perform their tasks like sewing while sitting. We wondered how comfortable the chairs were that Ramatex provided for them. They explained:

*The chairs are planks, and they are very uncomfortable. It is very painful for your buttocks, and if you make a cushion to sit on it will be taken away from you. If you bring a cushion from home it will be destroyed when leaving for home by the security because they assume that you brought it to steal. They will open it to see what is inside.*

## **Relationship with supervisors and colleagues**

Ramatex workers indicated that they have two supervisors. A Namibian and a Chinese supervise each line in each factory. The views and opinions about the Chinese supervisors were often not very favourable. Namibian workers described the Chinese supervisors' behaviours towards them as 'inhumane' and 'just like colonisers':

*The Chinese have terrible manners. They treat you bad. If you ask for two days leave, then they say I do not want to give you two days; I will only give you one day. Otherwise they let you go for a whole month with no pay.*

*Ko Ramatex okuna omaihumbato taanyengafana. Ame nambulu wange okwali hatu liudu nawanawa. Kali hatukunge ngaashi AaChiina yoko Ramatex. [The behaviour at Ramatex is quite confusing. My former employer and me used to understand each other very well. He never used to insult me like the Chinese people at Ramatex].*

*At my division we were trying to organise ourselves, so that we can sign contracts, stipulating the amount of money that we are supposed to be paid. The supervisors are supposed to be working and communicating well with the other colleagues, but most of the supervisors are Chinese and they were not willing to co-operate with us. And things don't work like that.*

Another worker expressed her anger as follows:

*Die verwantskap is baie sleg, want daar is nie kommunikasie nie, hulle vloek and skree aan ons. Somige tye will ons die toilet gebruik, maar ons word nie toegelaat nie. Soos die ander dag, een Chinese was gevra om skoon te maak, maar hy het gekom en vir my geordere [ordered] om te gaan skoon maak. Wat ek nee gese het, het hy die bestuurder gaan se. En toes se die manager hy gaan al die Namibianers fire and dan werk hy net met Chinese and Fillipyne. Hull noem ons swartes al die tyd. Hulle will he die Namibianers moet al die vuil en morserige werk doen, terwyl die Chinese, Malaysians and Fillipyne al die maklike werk doen. [The relationship is very bad, because there is no communication they insult and shout at us. Sometimes we want to use the toilet and we are not allowed to. Like the other day one Chinese was told to clean up, but he came and ordered me to do the cleaning. When I refused, the manager told me that he will fire all the Namibians and only work with Philippinos and Chinese. They call us blacks all the time. They want the Namibians to do all the dirty, messy work while the Chinese, Malaysians and Philippinos are doing the easy work].*

*There is a problem if you want to take leave, the manager has to give you forms to sign. Even if your mother has passed away and you want to take days off, the manager will ask you: 'why your mother die?' If you go it will be risky, because you won't be paid for those days when you are absent or they will fire you when you come back. Yes, he is the one who asks people: 'why your mothers die?' He asks that in my ears, Even if you bring the death certificate it won't help. But one just has to take the risk; you will be a fool to miss your mother's funeral because of Ramatex. Whichever way it will be unpaid leave whether death or hospital.*

*They are real colonisers. They do not understand that a person is human.*

This is how a suspended worker explained what she did not like about her supervisors:

*I loved the job. You know when I was at work I would be working with passion, but the problem came in when someone suddenly started talking to you in a very rough manner. Or a Chinese supervisor would just stand around you whilst working. If one is alone, you work better you know you have made a mistake and you correct it. But the moment someone comes and stands around you, you make more mistakes, you become nervous and they [supervisors] start screaming at you.*

This was confirmed by other workers:

*They do not listen. What I hate is that one is working hard, you finish a bundle. Suddenly you just see a big bundle and the supervisor is claiming you have to undo them because they are faulty. Whilst you know very well you did not do it.*

*Whilst working we indicate our numbers by using a piece of paper, and if someone make a mistake and they do not want to redo it, they will write your number down and once the supervisor has that number she will bring the items to you and what can one do? Even if one can try and explain yourself, they just say re-do it.*

*The Chinese have the worst manners. The Philipinos have respect for others as human beings. Except the one in the office, we believe the Chinese influenced him. Like one day I told my Chinese supervisor that I am going to the north. My mother was sick and she [supervisor] tells me, go and come back tomorrow. I told her, it is far. She said: 'if you do not come back tomorrow, you would never ever work again at Ramatex'.*

*If a Chinese person hates you, or you have a disagreement once, she will make your life difficult. Everyday it will be: 'you no gooda. You lazy' etc. Even if you cough, she will have a problem. They easily go to the office and say 'I do not like this person; please take her away from my line, because I do not like her'.*

*They will transfer you. You might be moved from sewing to packing. Sometimes you ask for a permission slip to go to town, maybe coming back in the afternoon. But on the payslip, the Chinese supervisor will write 'go to town do not ever come back'. Or she will say: 'go but tomorrow you are not working'.*

*If you have a problem with a Chinese nothing is done, you cannot even explain yourself. What happen is that the people in the office only ask you to sign a warning. Some of us have up to five warnings and 'I am on the final warning'. They only speak Chinese as well. There is normally not much done all they say is that you have a contract sign here.*

A kitchen worker remarked:

*We are not allowed at all to taste the food we cook. If they see you tasting you will be send home immediately or they will make you sign a warning for misbehaving. They will come and open your mouth and make you spit the food out. Sometimes you are chewing your gum, you will be forced to open your mouth so that they see what is in your mouth.*

Conflicts and physical attacks between the Chinese supervisors and the Namibian workers seem to be almost an everyday experience, a scenario which the following quotes demonstrate:

*I once had a fight with a Chinese supervisor. She provoked me for too long until I could not take it anymore. I really lost it that day. She threw a t-shirt at me. I picked it up. She threw another one I picked it up and the third time she tried again and I hit her in the face. So, her colleague took me to the office. They asked what was the problem. She just kept saying 'me I don't know'. The*

*people at the office said I should go home and I reported to NAFAU. NAFAU asked them why they send people home without investigating properly about what happened. So, they reinstated me, just to be suspended after the April 2003 strike. But now she [supervisor] has gone back to China, because Ramatex management could also not take her behaviour any longer. She was not executing her supervisory duties properly. She was transferred from factory B to A, but she was still behaving the same way.*

*I was using a broom and a Chinese worker wanted the broom that I was using, I told him that he should wait until I finished. He grabbed the broom from me and hit me with it and kicked the bucket of water that I was using. I then went and told our Malaysian Manager about the issue and she was not helpful. Then I went to another one, and he spoke to another manager...He didn't want to listen, he only pushed the door in his face and he told me that I should go and open a case with the police, because they don't want to talk about the issue. I did go to the police and the Chinese worker was arrested and it created havoc at the factory when he was taken into custody. They were saying that Namibians are very dangerous. Since then I have been having problems with our supervisor here, because apparently I should not have reported the assault. I was in pain when he hit me, and I was crying that day and I think they might fire me any day because of that.*

Intimidation and unfair labour practices are common at Ramatex as several workers testified:

*I wanted to go to a funeral and when I asked the manager he only gave me a warning form to fill in, but I am still going to the funeral no matter what might happen.*

*If the Chinese have spoken and he says something to a Philipino you only have to sign the warning. It does not matter whether you want to explain why you were absent. If the Chinese have spoken it is done. If they dismiss you, you will never get paid.*

*Sometimes the way they treat us you look at them and you feel they are more Namibian than we are. For us that's colonisation.*

One worker explained how unhealthy the division between Namibian and Chinese workers could be. She was hoping that workers would learn to live together:

*All I want to say is that people should work together. We do not like each other especially when it comes to Namibians and Chinese. Let's communicate, let's stand together, and let our union also be stronger.*

## A Ramatex worker's social life

Given the long hours of work, the low salaries and the long distance to and from work that most workers have to walk, Ramatex workers experienced an almost total destruction of their social life (which refers to activities such as spending time with family and friends, going to church, or enjoying entertainment):

*Sometimes I spend three months without seeing my children and they are just in Gobabis.*

*Every weekend you know you have to be here, if you miss one day then you know Monday you will be given a warning...you have no time to visit anyone.*

*Whenever we need something we always have to send family members to buy things for us, because we have no time.*

*When I started I used to attend night classes but I don't get time anymore and I stopped going to classes. In my case for example, the people who paid for NAMCOL classes are complaining, because I do not get time to go to school anymore. They are complaining about their money being wasted, and the owner of the house always says 'My house is so dirty, you never clean it, you are always coming home late, there is no work like that'. I asked the company if I can still continue going to classes. They said to me if I want to go to school I should go to school because there are a lot of people outside the gate.*

*Working here is like prison; one does not get time to do anything else. Ones clothes are always dirty even the house. (linima oyagagala ashike, negumbo olyagagala ashike). You leave home in the morning, you come back at night. The salary is even worse. You take this out, you take that out, and then at the end of the day, there is nothing left, especially if one Saturday and Sunday passes without working.*

## **Employment Contracts**

Most workers complained about the poor working conditions and their low wages. We asked whether they had an employment contract and if yes, whether they were familiar with the content. If they signed a contract, did they understand the content? Some workers were aware of the contract, but had no idea what it contained. One can therefore conclude that the workers might have unintentionally agreed to what they now regard as exploitation. One of the workers explained how this happened:

*The contract was read to more than 3000 people at one time, how will one hear anything, and then you were just made to sign, We were not even allowed to read the contracts ourselves. That NAFAU man read the contract to us. We just signed, we were afraid we will get fired, so we just signed.*

Another worker added:

*I have an employment contract but I did not see a copy. It was read to us at the gate, and we were told 'go through quickly, run go inside'.*

The contracts given to workers at Flamingo Garments (a Ramatex subsidiary that operates within the Ramatex compound) indicate that workers are employed on a renewable one-year contract basis. Workers are put on a 'flexible remuneration scheme', which allows management to unilaterally decide if a worker is paid according to 'time-based remuneration' (according to the time worked) or according to his/her productivity. The contracts also state that workers will be 'progressively appraised' and that they can be dismissed based on this evaluation within the first three months.

The contracts further state that the company may transfer workers to carry out duties and job functions 'as the company deems fit'. The usual hours of work per week are 45 but workers 'may be required to work overtime when requested' and they 'should not refuse' shift work. The contract informs workers that they 'shall follow the company's arrangement on their rest day for operational requirements'. According to the contract, workers are entitled to 24 consecutive days annual leave, 12 days sick leave, and 'medical assistance resulting from work-related accidents'.

The contracts end with a paragraph which states that: 'The employer has the right to amend the above rules and regulations and other procedures and it will be made known from time to time'. Furthermore, the Ramatex code of conduct states that 'employees must obey their superiors at all time with respect' and that they are not allowed to talk during working hours which is seen as an 'unsatisfactory work performance'.

The Ramatex contract is another indication of the power imbalances between workers and the company. Several clauses in the contract empower the company to change conditions of employment unilaterally and may thus be in conflict with the Namibian Labour Act, which aims to promote dialogue and negotiations between employers and workers.

## **Trade Union Membership**

Ramatex currently employs about 7 500 workers of whom about 6 000 are NAFAU members. The trade union was recognised by the company as the 'exclusive bargaining agent' in 2002. Although the company initially tried to avoid the union and refused NAFAU access to its premises, the attitude of management has changed. According to Ms. Lim, the senior manager at Ramatex:

*NAFAU has a better understanding and focus on what business is all about. NAFAU does not only concentrate on fighting for the workers, but also understands the way business operates.*

When asked whether there were still any continuous negotiations between Ramatex and NAFAU, her reply was that all negotiations had been concluded. This is an

indication of the difficulties the union faces in its attempt to negotiate better conditions of employment for its members. Although, workers had high hopes that their working conditions would improve when their union was recognised, some seemed disillusioned:

*Most of us only joined NAFAU after the strike. Most of us are not really familiar with NAFAU and they only help us on matters like when we for example break a needle while working and when Ramatex wants to fire us from the job... But when it comes to salary increments they don't get involved.*

*Even if we complain about our problems, NAFAU does not solve any problems here in Ramatex. I am not impressed by NAFAU; they are only best at making us loose our jobs. Because when we have a dispute NAFAU is never siding with the workers but with the company.*

*NAFAU does not necessarily get us out of hearings, its always suspensions. They are weak. There is also pressure from the president you know' whenever these unions are trying to say something the president is blocking them.*

In September 2003, Ramatex dismissed 30 workers, claiming that they had not reached the required production target as per company policy. NAFAU challenged the issue and won the case. The union examined the evaluation of workers' performances and found that there were inconsistencies in the way the evaluation was carried out. By 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2003 only 3 cases were still in dispute and further discussions are being held.

NAFAU also managed to negotiate for the election of 2 full-time shop stewards as well as an office on the company premises. However, NAFAU's recognition agreement provides for negotiation on 'substantive issues' (like wages and other employment conditions) to take place every three years which severely hampers the union's attempts to negotiate better conditions for Ramatex workers.

## **Other experiences**

There are certain procedures that are followed when workers arrive at the factory in the morning. Workers explained:

*You clock your card, and then you immediately switch on the machine and you start work. But before we enter the production room, we put our belongings (handbags and lunch boxes) outside.*

We further learned that when workers go to the bathroom they get searched. The same happens when they leave work:

*When its time to go home we get searched by a female security guard. They search our bodies. We want to be searched properly. We are not comfortable with the searching.*

A suspended worker from Ramatex explained why she was uncomfortable with the searching and how it often led to abuse.

*I hated the way they searched people there. I know of an incident where a colleague was having her monthly cycle. The security guard forced her to explain what was between her legs. She said it was a pad. They insisted that she must have stolen a T-shirt. She insisted that it was not. The security guard pulled her to the bathroom, only to find that my colleague was telling the truth. I know of another worker who was undressed in the office in front of a group of Filipino and Chinese people. She was also accused of stealing. She was found with nothing.*

When we asked workers what they liked and disliked most about working at Ramatex, these were some of the responses:

*We dislike the wages and working on Saturdays and Sundays. We work very hard for this company filling those containers all the time within a few days. They benefit from us but we don't get anything in return.*

*The money is too little and I do not like the walking to and from work everyday morning and evening.*

*I do not like anything. They have terrible manners, the Chinese, they treat you bad. If you ask for two days leave, then they say I do not want to give you two days; I will only give you one day. Otherwise they let you go for a whole month with no pay.*

However, there were also some positive aspects that workers mentioned:

*Well, I am glad that I learnt a skill. I like the fact that I met different people. I would not have met them if I was not working at Ramatex.'*

*If I was just at home I would not have met so many people who are different. I am happy that I made new friends'.*

Others however expressed their dislikes very strongly:

*I dislike the exploitation by the Chinese people, the low wages, and the working conditions. They are very filthy they spit on the kitchen floor all the time and sometimes they mess the toilet and the toilet pot will be full of their feces and they will ask us to clean it without any cleaning material. Sometimes they only come and step on the toilet pots with their dirty feet and ask us to clean them.*

*The bosses don't have any respect for people, they don't regard us as humans, and furthermore when working they don't have proper working hours that's it is time for people to get off-duty, they will only make you work. That's the life at Ramatex.*

One of the workers recommended:

*I would just like them to have similar standards for all workers doing the same thing, not salary differentials for people who are doing the same job and started at the same time. People who have worked longer to be recognised as such and be given increments. Those of us who work on a ratio basis get paid very little and the ratio system should be fair and transparent.*

There are several hundred Asian workers employed at the Ramatex factory in Windhoek. They are from China, the Philippines and Malaysia and are housed in hostels within the Ramatex complex. Unfortunately we were not able to conduct full interviews with Asian workers due to language problems and workers' fear of victimisation. However, we managed to establish that the Asian workers are paid in U\$ and that they earn an equivalent of N\$ 3000 - 4000 per month in addition to the accommodation and food provided for them.

## 7. LIFE STORIES

### LIFE STORY 1: SAIMA<sup>1</sup>

My name is Saima. I am 25 years old. I was born in Otsandi, Omusati region and come from a family of seven children. I am the second born. I came to Windhoek in 1999, after I wrote my grade 10 examination. I was not very successful, and therefore did not proceed to grade 11 and hence did not complete high school. I stayed with an uncle in Hakahana<sup>2</sup> since arrival up until 2001 when I fell pregnant. My uncle was not very impressed, and he asked me to move out. I moved out of my uncle's house and went to stay with my boyfriend, the father of my child in Greenwell-Matongo<sup>3</sup>.

*Edhina lyandje ongaye Saima. Ondina oomvula omilongo mbali nantano. Ondavalelwmo Tsandi mo mu Sati region. Ondina aamwameme yaheli. Ngame omutiyali. Mo Windhoecka ondeya mo 1999, konima sho ndashanga ograde 10. Inandi yi pita nomolwaasho inandiya ko grade 11 tashiti ine mana omatilika. Okwali hekala na TateKulu ko Hakahana kuzangaa sho ndathika sigo omo 2001 sho nda ningi epunda. Tatekulu kali nande eshipanda, ndee tatifhandje megumbo. Ondazimo etandi kakala no boyfrienda yandje ko Greenwell-Matongo, he yo kaana kandje.*

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<sup>1</sup> Name changed to protect her identity

<sup>2</sup> Section of Windhoek's Katutura township

<sup>3</sup> Section of Windhoek's Katutura township

I had no previous work experience. Before Ramatex, I tried to make ends meet by working in my boyfriend's shebeen. I underwent training for three months at the Windhoek Vocational Training Centre (WVTC). I was trained in sewing. I was paid N\$30 per week during the training.

*Inelonga nale pehala limwe manga inee longa ko Ramatex. Okwali handii hupu ashike shaashi okwali helongo mo Bashu yo boyfrienda yandje. Onda trainingwa uule woomwedhi ndatu ko Windhoek Vocational Training Centre (WVTC). Onda trainingilwa oku hondja. Okwali he futwa oodola omilongo ndatu koshiwike.*

We start at 7 in the morning and we normally leave after five. Weekdays we get N\$ 3 per hour. Sundays we get N\$ 6 per hour. That is the only time when we make a bit of money. On Saturday we get N\$4.50 per hour. We only get 1-hour break everyday. The company provides lunch for Chinese and Filipino workers because they live on the premises. The company has build hostels for them.

*Ohatutameke iilonga po heyali, olundju ohatuze miilonga konima yontano. Omasiku go shiwi ke ohatumono oodola ndatu mowili. Moosoonda ha ohatufutwa oodola hamano mowili. Molyomakaya oodola Ne niitano mowili. Ohatuyi pomwiha uule wo wili yimwe mesiku. Ocompany ohayipe Aachiina naa Filipino omwiha shaashi ohaazi pehala lyilonga. Ocompany oyeya tungila oohostela.*

We work with needles, and they are not that strong. They break very often. The colour of the fabric is ever fading. I am not sure what the problem is, I guess it is not very good quality. We do not have protective clothing. Maybe they should provide us with aprons, because we need to protect our clothes, and perhaps some things to protect the hands as well. I know quite a number of people who have asthma, and if they continue working here, I do not know what is going to happen to them in a few years time. I have been cut this is because of RAMATEX (pointing at a scar on her finger). This was stitched at the hospital; they took me to the hospital. I have lost the use of my finger.

*Ohatulongo noonane, ndee kadhina oonkondo. Ohadhi teka mbala. Olwaalwa keehethimbo ohalukala taluziko ashike kiiyata. Kandishi naana kutya omolwashike, ondiwete mbela kutya oquality kayishi ombwanawa. Shila naye tuge uutetahema, niinima yimwe yo kwiigamena koonyala. Ondishi aantu oyendji yena oasma, ndele ngele oyatsikile okulonga kishi naana kutya otaa kakala ngiini ko nima yoomvula. Ngaye mwene onda tetwa molwa RAMATEX (tuulike ko ko shiyadhi kokanwe) oyafalandje koshipangelo. Okanwe kandje ihakalongowe.*

When we arrive in the morning the female security guards searches us. They search our persons. I am not really happy with the way they search us. We want to be searched properly. We are not comfortable with the searching.

*Shaa twathiki ongulonene, oha tu hadhwa ko security yo mukulukadhi. Ohaye tuhadha kolutu. Kihole naana omukalo ngo haye tuhadha. Otwahala okukala hatuhadhwa nomikalo omiwanawa. Ina tupanda naana omukalo ngu ha tu hadhwa.*

I spend N\$180 per month on transport. Luckily I do not pay rent since I am living with the father of my child. My child is in a crèche, and I pay N\$150, I don't pay anything more but what I am getting here is very little for what I need. At the moment I am supporting other 5 people with this income. My mother, my other 3 siblings and my child.

*Ohefutu oodola ethele no milongo hetatu mo transporta komwedhi. Elago enene kakwali hefutu egumbo shaashi ohekala na Tate gwo kaana kandje. Okaana kandje okeli kokinda, ohefutu oodola ethele nomilongo ntano. Ihefutu we shimwe shiili, ndele iimaliwa mbi he mono mpano iishona oya pitililwa koo mpubwe dhandje. Ohe supporta aantu yeli yatano niimaliwa mbi he futwa, Meme, amamwameme yatatu, nokaana kandje.*

There is one Namibian supervisor per line and one Chinese. We have a problem with Chinese people, if you have a problem with a Chinese there is nothing done, you cannot even explain yourself. What happens is that the people in the office only ask you to sign a warning, some of us have up to five warnings and 'I am apparently on the final warning. They only speak Chinese as well. There is normally not much done all they say is that you have signed a contract here.

*Kehe polayina opuna omu Namibia gumwe no mu China gumwe. Otuna oproblema naa Chiina, shaa wuna uudhigu no mu Chiina kunaa shi toningi, iho vulu nande okwii gamena. Ohakutiwaala shayineni owarninga. Tse yamwe otuna oowarninga dhaadha puntano, ngame aniwa ondili mo warninga yahugunina. Yo noho oohaa popi ashike oshi Chiina. Ihatupopisha, ohaatyala owa shaina okotraka.*

I have a good example, I was using a broom and a Chinese worker wanted the broom that I was using, I told him that he should wait till I finished he grabbed the broom from me and hit me with it. He thereafter kicked the bucket of water that I was using. I then went and told our Malaysian Manager about the issue and she was not helpful and then I went to the Chinese supervisor. He didn't want to listen he only slumped the door in his face and he told me that I should go and open a case with the police because they don't want to talk about the issue. I went to the police and the Chinese worker was arrested and it created havoc at the factory when he was taken into custody. The supervisor even threatened that he's going to fire all Namibians and only work with Chinese and Filipinos.

*Ondina oshiholelwa oshaanawa. Esiku limwe okwali telongitha oshikombe. Omuniilonga gumwe go mu Chiina okwali ahala oshikombe. Ondati nategelele sigo otemana, okwe shiyakulako ashike kungame eteshidhengithandje. Okuzampono ye otathanga okayemele komeya hakwali telongitha. Okuzampono ondayi etelombwele manager gwute go muMalaysia. Inawatelandje naana, okuzampono ondayi ko*

*supervisor yo mu Chiina. Ina pulakena naye, okwadhengepwaala omweelo etati niika patulule oshipotha ko polisi shaashi yo inaahala okupopwa kombinga yo shinima sho. Ondayi ko polisi omu Chiina etakwatwa. Oshali sheeta epiyagano sho akwatwa. Osupervisor okwa tameke tati aniwa ota tidha aa Namibia ayehe miilonga etakala ashike naa Chiina naa Filipino.*

The contract was read to more than 3000 people at one time, how will one hear anything, and then you were just made to sign. We were not even allowed to read the contracts ourselves. That NAFAU man read the contract to us. We just signed, we were afraid we would get fired, so we just signed. NAFAU does not necessarily get us out of hearings, its always suspensions. They are weak. There is also pressure from the president you know whenever these unions are trying to say something the president is blocking them.

*Okotraka oya leshelwa aantu yevulithe pomayovi gatatu pethimbo limwe, omuntu otuuvupo ihe shike, okuzampono owa shayina. Omusaane gwo ko NAFAU eyituleshele. NAFAU ihe tukutha naana moohearings, ohe tu suspenditha ashike. Oyaswaka. Opuna noho ethindilo halizi ku presidende, kehe ethimobo taakondjitha okutyasha, ye presidende oteya bloka.*

What I most dislike about the job is that the money is too little. I do not like the working everyday morning and evening. What I like is the fact that I learned a skill. I also like the fact that I met different people, I would not have met them if I was not working at RAMATEX.

*Shi ngaa kaandihole kombinga yiilonga mbino iimaliwa iishona. Kihole noho okulonga kehe esiku ongula nongulohi. Ondapanda ashike shaashi ondiilonga sha. Ondapanda ngaa shaashi onda tsakanena naantu oyendji, ando inetsakanena naantu ayehe mba yiilinoyili ando okwali iheelongo mo RAMATEX.*

### **Life Story 2: Lena<sup>4</sup>**

My name is Lena. I am 23 years old. I was born in Onyaanya, Oshikoto region. I have three siblings and I am the first-born. I am not married and have no children. I completed grade 10 in 2000. I am staying in Havana with my aunt. I heard about the job through the radio. In the radio it was stated that applicants should either have 10 or 12 and between 18 and 25. They also required sewing experience and Namibian citizenship.

*Edhina lyandje ongaye Lena. Ondina oomvula omilongo mbali nandatu. Ondavalelwa mo Nyaanya mo Shikoto region. Inehokanwa, ngame kina uunona. Ondamana ograde 10 mo 2000. Ohekala ko Havana no mumwayina gwaMeme. Lilonga mbino ondeyuuvu mo radio. Moradio oyati aniwa ngu taningi eyindilo nakale ena ograde 10*

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<sup>4</sup> Name changed to protect her identity

*nenge o 12 ye nakale ena oomvula omulong nahetatu sigo omilongo mbali nantano. Aniwa nakale noho eshi okuhondja, ye nakale omu Namibia.*

I have never been employed before RAMATEX. At the beginning I was very happy that I got a job. I also felt very lucky that I have been selected out of so many applicants, but as time went, I was not looking forward to go to work everyday. I lost the job after the April 2003 strike. I almost forgot, they were giving people problems there at the gates during recruitment. They were chasing away people who were tall and especially the fat ones. Some were told they are not clean enough even if they had the qualifications.

*Inelonga nale manga ineelonga ko RAMATEX. Petameko ondali nda nyanyukwa shaashi ndamono iilonga. Okwali noho nduuvitie ndina elago sho ndahogololwa mokati kaantu oyendjiyendji, konima yethimbo kakwali nande hekala nduuvitie nawa okuya kii longa kehe esiku. Iilonga ondeyikanitha konima yekanka mu April 2003. Okwali taape aantu oproblema pomweelo pekuto mpo. Aantu yamwe okwali taatidhwapo shaashi anuwa aale unene, unene ngaa mbo yoondoka. Yamwe oyalombwelwa kutya inaayela nawa kutya nee oyena onzapo.*

My life did not change at all, it got worse, because people used to give me money when I was not working. When I started work they stopped, because they assumed I have money since I am working. Before I started work at Ramatex, I had my savings account with SWABOU. Even when I started working I still used to go to my savings account to get some money from there. At least then my cousin used to give me between N\$300-500 every month.

*Onkalamwenyo yandje kayali ya lunduluka nande, oyuukaala kuuwinayi, shaashi aantu okwali haappendje iimaliwa sho kwali iheelongo. Sho ngaa ndatameke iilonga mbela oyatakemeke tayiipula kutya ondina iimaliwa shaashi ohelongo. Omanga inee tameka kulonga ko Ramatex ondali ndina okambo kompungulilo ko SWABOU. Sho ngaa ndatameke iilonga natango ondali ishewe handi kanana iimaliwa mbili kwali hepungula nale. Sho kwali iheelonga omamwaaMeme avalwa ko mu mumwayina gwaMeme okwali ngaa hapendje yaadha ko mathele gatatu sigo gatano kehe omwedhi.*

I used to spend N\$ 150 on taxi fare. I used to buy food for about N\$ 180. At first I was staying in my mother's house. But I moved out, because our stepfather did not like us. So I moved to my mother's sister's house. Every end of the month I was expected to pay rent. So I had to really struggle and on top of that we were also not getting paid on the day everyone else get paid. Our payday used to be bit late at Ramatex, sometimes on the 7<sup>th</sup>.

*Okwali hefutu oodola ethele nomilongo ntano dho taxi. Okwali he landa iikudya yethele no milongo hetatu. Petameko okwali hekala megumbo lya Meme. Ndele onda zimo shaashi Omusamane gwa Meme kali etuhole. Kehe kehulilo lyomwedhi okwali he tegelelwa ndifute egumbo. Okwali he hupu nuudhigu, kakwali noho hetufutwa*

*pethimbo aantu oyendji haafutwa. Okwali hatufutwa olata, ethimbo limwe mugahayali gomwedhi.*

I used to buy clothes for my five sisters and one brother. I was only starting to think how I could support my whole family and then I lost the income, because now I do not have job anymore.

*Okwali he landendele aamwameme yaakadhona yeli yatano iikutu, na mumwameme mati gumwe. Opoolwaan ndaa dhika tandii pula kutya ota ndi supporta ofamili yandje ngiini, paife onda kanitha iiyemo, paife kandinawe iiilonga.*

I do not know why I was not reinstated. I did not lead the strike. I was not reinstated apparently because according to the company I am one of those who were masterminding the strike. I did not even know about the strike until the day of the strike. I think the company just wanted to minimise the number of employees. But besides that, the working conditions were very bad. For every little incident, you are made to sign a warning. Just for missing work on a weekend, even if you missed one day during a weekend, when you come back on Monday, they just tell you to sign a warning, but one can also get fired depending on the number of warnings you have been awarded. One does not even get a chance to read that warning. I did not even know what the contract contained, even though I signed it. It was read to lots of us at the gate and told 'go through quickly, run go inside'.

*Kishi naana kutya omolwashike ineeshunamo miilonga. Ngame inekwatela ekanka komeho. Ineshunamo aniwa shaashi ngame ogumwe gwaambo twali twa kwatela ekanka komeho, ngaye no strike kwakwali ndishi ngele okuna enkanka sigo esiku lye kanka. Ondiwete kutya ocompany oyali aashike yahala oku ninga omwaalu gwawo omushona. Kakele nee kwaasho, onkalo yiilonga oyali ombwiinayi. Keheaala kokoyima okashona oho shayinithwa owarninga, molwaashi inooya kiiilonga nande esiku limwe moweekanda, sho togulauka omaandaha otakutiwaala shayina owarninga, otashi vulika noho wu tidhemwo miilonga, shii kwatelela kutya owuna oowarninga ngapi. Omuntu kushi nokutya okotraka omwashangwa shike kutya nee ondeyishaina. Otweyileshelwa po mweelo tuli otundji etakutiwa piteni meendelelo, tondokeni muye meni.*

I loved the job. You know when I was at work I would be working with passion, but the problem only came when someone suddenly start talking to you in a very rough manner. Or a Chinese supervisor would just stand around you whilst working. If one is alone, you work better you know you have made a mistake and you correct it, but the moment someone come and stand around you, you make more mistakes, you become nervous and she start screaming at you.

*Ilonga okwali ndi yi hole. Ethimbo limwe okwali hekala naana telongo neyitulemo lela, ndele uudhigu owali ashike hawuyapo ngele omuntu gumwe tatameke tapopi nangweye pamukalo omwiinayi lela. Nenge osupervisor yo mu Chiina otathikama ashike pungweye manga tolongo. Ngele omuntu owuli ongwaayike, oholongo ngaa*

*nawa, shaashi owushishi ngele waningi epuko etolipukulula, ndele ngele omuntu eya etekuthikamene, ohoningi omapuku ogendji, shaashi oho haluka etatameke te kukugile.*

Sometimes you worked so hard, you are expecting to get a commission, because we were told that if you reach a certain production level, you qualify for commission. End of the month comes and no commission. Sometimes the agreement was that you will get 85c per T-shirt, but when the commission on the payslip appears the addition is 1c. Imagine what one will do with a 1c? I do not know how they calculate because even if you count, you will never be able to understand how they arrived at the 1c.

*Thimbo limwe omuntu owali ho longo naana ngweye to lombwela kutya oto futwa okomisi. Shaashi oyali yetulombwela kutya shampaala walongo iinima yithike pontumba oto futwa okomisi. Ehulilo lyomwedhi otali thiki ngweye inoo pewa okomisi. Ethimbo limwe eyuvathano otakutiwa okomisi iithilinga ihetatu no sipenitha kehe mokambidja kamwe. Ndele okomisi sho ngaa tayikeyaa pokaslipa opwa gwedha ashike osenda yimwe. Kishi nande kutya ohayalula ngiini shaashi nande owukale hoyalula, ito mono nande kutya ko senda ndjono yimwe oyathiki ko ngiini.*

Just after we got suspended I saw a lady who is living in Ombili<sup>5</sup>; the button machine cut off her middle finger. She just went to the hospital on her own. Those needles are very dangerous. The needle breaks so quickly. If I had a choice I would not go back to RAMATEX, but what can one do? We did not get jobs. If I get a job today I will not go back to Ramatex, even if it's just to sweep.

*Omasikuualanga sho twa suspendwa ondamono okakadhona kamwe hakazi ko Mbili katetwa omunwe keshina lyoombadi. Okwayi yemwene koshipangelo. Oonane ndhono odhanika oshiponga. Ohadhiteka mbala. Ando okwali tevulu okuhogolola, ando ite shunako ko RAMATEX, ndele omuntu oto ningi ngiini? Inatumona iilonga. Shaa ndamono iilonga nena ndji, ko RAMATEX iteshunako nande, kutya nee oyo kukomba.*

I was satisfied with NAFAU's performance. When I first lost my job they really struggled for me until I got back inside. So, they reinstated me, just to be suspended after the April strike. I am satisfied with what NAFAU is trying to do. They are still trying to get us back in there and I have to commend them for that. I am not intending to join a different trade union, because when we are outside the factory hoping to be reinstated, others are always saying, come lets' join a different trade union, and I say no, I do not want to.

*Okwali nda panda iilonga ya NAFAU. Oyali yakondjelendje noonkondo sigo ndashunameni. Ondashunamo etesuspendwa ishewe konima ye kanka lya Apilili. Ondapanda iilonga ya NAFAU, shaashi natango otakondjitha okutushunamo, nondina okuyapandula molwaasho. Inehala okulyoina ehangano limwe lyaaniilonga shaashi kehethimbo tuli pondje twategelelwa okushunamo yamwe ohaakala taati, heyi tu lyoineni ehangano limwe lyiili, ndele ngame inehala.*

<sup>5</sup> Section of Windhoek's Katutura township

The Chinese have the worst manners. The Filipinos have respect for others as human beings. Except the one in the office, we believe the Chinese influenced him. Like one day I told my Chinese supervisor that I am going to the north, my mother is sick and she tells me, go and come back tomorrow. I told her, it is far. She said if you do not come back tomorrow, you would never ever work again at Ramatex. If a Chinese person hate you, or you have a disagreement once, she will make your life difficult. Everyday it will be ‘you no gooda. You lazy etc’. Even if you cough, she will have a problem. She can easily go to the office and say ‘I do not like this person, please take her away from my line, because I do not like her.

*Aachiina oyena omikalo omiwinayi lela. Aafilipino oyena esimanekeno lyuuntu waantu. Kakele kwaango eli mo office, otwiinekela kutya Aachina oyo yemunwethamo. Siku limwe onda lombwele osupervisor gwandje go mu Chiina kutya oteyi koWambo shaashi Meme oteehama, ye oyatati inda ndele togaluka ongula. Ondemulombwele kutya okokule. Yootaati ngele inogaluka itolongo we nande mo RAMATEX. Shampa ashike omu Chiina ekutonde, nenge ihaamuiyuvu naye okuna okuninga onkalamwenyo yoye ondhigu. Kehe esiku otakala tati ashike ‘you no gooda, you lazy’. Nande owakolola ashike, otakala ena oproblema nangweye. Ohaavulu ashike okuya ko mbelewa etati omuntu nguno kandi muhole, mukuthamo molayina yandje shaashi kandi muhole.*

They will transfer you from the line. You might be moved from sewing to packing. Sometimes you ask for a permission slip to go to town, maybe coming back in the afternoon, but on that slip, the Chinese supervisor will write ‘go to town do not ever come back’. Or she will say, ‘go but tomorrow you are not working’. You know people are not the same. Sometimes you go to the bathroom, and you have a running stomach, but once you go there for more than five minutes, when you come back you are send to the office apparently to sign a warning.

*Otayekukuthamo shili molayina moka. Otashivulika yekukuthe kokuhondja eyai kufala ko kupakela. Ethimbo limwe otopula okambapila ko kapelemeta, tashivulika togaluka omutenya, ndele omuChiina pokapelemeta otashangapo ‘inda kondolopa ndele inogalukawe, nenge otati, inda ndele ongula itolongo. Owushi kutya aantu inafaathana, ethimbo limwe otoyi kokakandjugo ndele shaala waningi ko ominute dhivule puntano, shooalwa togaluka otaku tiwaala inda ko mbelewa wu kashaine.*

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Ramatex presents a typical example of a global production chain in the era of globalisation. The experiences in Namibia are in line with international trends of transnational corporations (TNCs) spreading their operations globally in search for increased profits. The fact that Ramatex managed to play out three Southern African countries against each other showed how TNCs utilise their bargaining position to gain

increasing concessions from host countries which are desperate to attract investments. Ramatex' employment practices are in line with other global textile companies who prefer young women workers who are seen to be 'docile' with 'nimble fingers' and less likely to join trade unions or resist company management.

The first 2 years of Ramatex' operations in Namibia have been turbulent and marked by controversies. Many of the conflicts and tensions have remained unresolved as they were dealt with at the 'political level' instead of addressing the root causes of the problems. Ramatex seems to have a very close relationship with the Namibian government but unless the problems experienced by Ramatex workers are addressed, the company is likely to be the site of many future conflicts.

There is no doubt that Ramatex enjoys a 'special status' in Namibia that is not awarded to any other company. Ramatex did not only receive an enormous amount of government support and subsidies, but also enjoys full political backing in its dealings with workers, trade unions, environment groups etc. The Namibian government hopes that the new textile industry that Ramatex brought to Namibia will stay and expand in the years to come. On the other hand, Ramatex workers experience the daily frustrations of not being able to make ends meet despite working 9 -11 hours every day! Unless this situation is redressed in the near future, Ramatex will essentially be contributing to the establishment of a large number of 'working poor' - people in full-time employment, unable to even meet their basic needs. This stands in sharp contrast to the Namibian government's stated objective of promoting decent work in line with ILO standards.

Based on the assumption that Ramatex and its subsidiaries will employ about 7 000 Namibian workers at the end of 2003 with an average wage of N\$ 500 per month, and given the expenses of about N\$ 120 million in public funds to set up infrastructure for the company, the following calculation can be made: The financial support that Ramatex received from the Namibian government is equivalent to the **salaries of all workers for 34 months – almost 3 years!** A huge investment by any standard which can only be justified if Ramatex' operations in Namibia will lead to long-term sustainable jobs of decent quality. Otherwise one may well argue that the huge public investments could have been spent more efficiently on other programmes aimed at job creation.

Ramatex chose Namibia as a host country because of the incentives that the Namibian government offered the company. Although the Ramatex senior manager did not disclose any details of the special incentives offered to her company, she confirmed that Ramatex came to Namibia 'because of the incentives your government offered us'. Ms Lim further explained that the AGOA benefits (duty-free exports to the USA) were also critical for Ramatex' decision to come to Namibia. She warned that if the AGOA arrangement came to an end, Ramatex might reconsider its operations in Namibia. In such a case, the Namibian government would have to offer Ramatex even better incentives to continue production in Namibia. This indicates a likely scenario of continuous cross-subsidisation with public funds in favour of a foreign

company. It also highlights the vulnerable position of Namibia in relation to TNCs that play the globalisation game to their own advantage.

The following recommendations are therefore geared to address some of the most urgent challenges and problems experienced at the Ramatex plant in Windhoek:

- There is a need for the Namibian government to review its current EPZ policy to ensure that the policy results in investments that will promote socio-economic development in Namibia instead of draining national resources.
- The Environmental Impact Assessment Study on Ramatex urgently needs to be made public, so that all relevant stakeholders are aware of possible threats and are able to discuss how to deal with them. If such a study has not been completed, then it is imperative for a new study to be conducted as a matter of urgency. Such a study should at least cover the following: health and safety issues at Ramatex, the impact of Ramatex' usage of water on Windhoek residents, as well the impact of possible pollution on residents living in the vicinity of the company.
- Trade unions must negotiate better salaries and working conditions through collective bargaining. This should include minimum wages as the current salaries and benefits do not allow workers to even meet their most basic needs. Unions should also ensure that workers are not exploited by being kept as trainees for longer than necessary.
- The recognised union, NAFAU, should employ more organisers to be able to effectively organise the Ramatex workers. Preference should be given to women organisers because of the high number of women employed by Ramatex.
- The company has to review its contracts and bring them in line with Namibian laws and practices. Ramatex also has an obligation to ensure that workers understand their contracts, and possibly even translate them into a language best understood by the workers. The company must also ensure that workers are compensated for injuries at work.
- Like all other companies with 50 or more employees in Namibia, Ramatex also has to comply with the affirmative action legislation. This includes training and employing 'historically disadvantaged' Namibians in management and supervisory positions. This might also help the company to deal with some of the 'cultural differences'. There is a need to sensitise workers and managers alike to such cultural differences and to help acquaint Non-Namibians with Namibian cultures and customs. There is also a need for Ramatex to train its managers and supervisors in 'human relations' based on the respect for workers dignity and rights.
- Ramatex should be informed by the Namibian government and trade unions in no uncertain terms that it has to comply with all Namibian laws and regulations. This includes the Namibian constitution, the Labour Act, the Social Security Act, the Affirmative Action (Employment) Act, the collective bargaining agreement with NAFAU, health and safety regulations etc.
- The company has to provide the necessary protective clothing to protect worker's health. This will also benefit Ramatex, as it will reduce absenteeism due to illness.

- Transport should be provided for Ramatex workers, especially for those who work at night. Women in particular are at risk of being attacked on the way to and from work.
- Clear and transparent grievance procedures need to be drawn up by Ramatex in conjunction with trade unions and workers representatives
- Ramatex has to abolish all discriminatory practices and should implement English literacy programme for some workers in order to improve communication at work.

The experiences with Ramatex to date point to the urgent need to ensure compliances by foreign investors with Namibian laws, regulations, workers rights as well as environmental, health and safety standards. Experiences elsewhere have shown that compromises on social, environmental and labour standards in the name of international competitiveness have led to a 'race to the bottom'. The Namibian government - as well as trade unions - have to demonstrate that they are serious in defending these rights that were only won through long and bitter struggles. It will be critical to demonstrate to Ramatex that Namibian laws, regulations and rights are not negotiable. Otherwise, Ramatex might set an example that others will follow, resulting in the loss or undermining of some of the achievements realised in Namibia since independence.

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