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Ensuring fashion supply chain grievance mechanisms are truly effective



Guest Author

The well-intentioned efforts of fashion brands and retailers to put in place grievance mechanisms in their supply chains are missing the mark. Companies should consider sector wide approaches, writes corporate responsibility consultant, Doug Cahn.



Common grievance mechanisms for garment workers include These efforts are well known and include web forms, mobile apps, toll free numbers staffed by local compliance professionals and call centres. Credit: Shutterstock

When John Ruggie, special representative to the UN secretary general for business and human rights, conceptualised the foundational principles for effective grievance mechanisms throughout the supply chain he understood the central role that fashion brands and retailers would play. He called on companies to ensure access to those

mechanisms be a part of a company's commitment to respect rights. When it came to operational-level grievance mechanisms in particular, he understood that a company's obligations could be administered not only by each company acting alone, but by companies in collaboration with others. This is relevant for global brands today as regulators in Europe and elsewhere require transparent communications that document the impact of brands' initiatives to protect workers in their supply chains, including their grievance channels.

Do grievance mechanisms for fashion supply chain workers work?

Leading fashion brands and retailers have invested significant time and money into developing and implementing global grievance mechanisms in their own supply chains. These efforts are well known and include reporting channels accessed through links to web forms, mobile apps, toll free numbers staffed by local compliance professionals or call centres. Information when provided by workers is managed in a variety of ways, each according to the customised protocols typically developed by the brand or retailer.

Evidence of these efforts can be easily found by glancing at a factory's notice board where multiple customer hotlines can be found posted side-by-side, often creating a bewildering and confusing array of numbers to call or text in order to file complaints. Most are placed within sight of a watchful management who are suspicious of the role of third party complaint channels and who passively or sometimes actively discourage their use. Workers rarely understand what to expect if they file a complaint and even more rarely trust management claims to refrain from retaliatory behaviour.

To consider a better design of grievance mechanisms, we must first recognise two important truths:

1. The unskilled and semi-skilled labourers that constitute the vast majority of the workforce in fashion supply chains are transient and their skill sets are fungible. They may work in one factory today and another factory next month or next year. This is the nature of a workforce that has recently entered the formal sector, is building skills,

and is looking to better themselves and their families through higher skilled jobs and increased earnings. A worker who learns about a grievance channel in one factory may not be permitted access to it when they move to a different factory. This lack of continuity leads to a lack of awareness and trust.

2. Factories and the subcontractors they use are rarely exclusive to one brand or retailer customer. As such, brand and retail-centric initiatives can appear to workers to be duplicative, confusing, or simply irrelevant.

Providing effective grievance mechanisms for garment workers in the long-term

Brands and retailers considering approaches to meet [Germany's new Corporate Due Diligence Obligations](#) for the Prevention of Human Rights Violations in Supply Chains Act, for example, should keep in mind that investments in grievance mechanisms that are focused solely on a particular company's supply chain may well meet their immediate reporting obligations.

However, effectiveness over time is not likely to be achieved unless grievance mechanisms are designed to reflect the transient nature of the workforce. In the complex web of commercial relationships between brands, retailers, suppliers, factories and subcontractors, workers do not fall neatly into brand-by-brand silos. Collective actions are needed and they are possible.

The Amader Kotha Helpline in Bangladesh serves as an example, supporting a significant portion of that country's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector since 2014. As a partnership between Clear Voice, a project of The Cahn Group, ELEVATE, and Phulki, a non-profit organisation based in Dhaka, the Helpline has been able to provide in-factory training to over a million workers and currently provides a grievance reporting channel to over 400 factories. In so doing, the Helpline has become a one-stop shopping solution for workers who need to report and resolve a concern.

The benefits of this critical mass approach are many including:

- Reduction of confusion on the part of factory management and workers that comes with elimination of multiple brand and retailer grievance channels
- Widespread awareness of and access to the Helpline: workers will know or have heard about a friend or family members who have used the grievance channel
- Facilitating the ability of brand and retailers to collaborate on remediation when that is needed, consistent with anti-trust requirements.

Brands and retailers need not worry that collective or consolidated grievance mechanisms will make it difficult for them to exercise their responsibilities or deny them what they need to meet regulatory requirements. On the contrary, collective efforts will increase effectiveness and efficiency at the same time. Through agreed-upon escalation protocols, brands and retailers can learn of small problems before they become more serious or larger problems that require their timely attention.

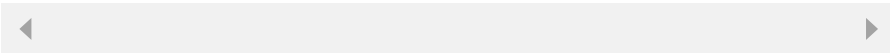
Sector-wide initiatives take time to establish since they involve multiple parties aligned to a single set of operational protocols. Still, collaborative approaches that recognise and reflect the needs of a sector-wide labour force, and not the immediate fashion supply chain specific workforce, will be worth the effort.

About the author: Doug Cahn is the principal of The Cahn Group, LLC, a corporate responsibility consultancy, and global project director of the Amader Kotha Helpline in Bangladesh.

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