



PART 2

Read the text below and answer questions 14–26.

THREADS OF INJUSTICE: LABOR IN THE GLOBAL GARMENT INDUSTRY

Garment manufacturing is one of the most globalised forms of production in the modern economy. A basic T-shirt may be conceived by a design team in one country, produced using fabric sourced from another, stitched in a third, and sold across dozens of retail markets. This fragmentation can generate employment and accelerate industrial growth in producer countries, but it also disperses responsibility. When work is distributed across multiple firms and jurisdictions, brands can claim limited control, suppliers can blame tight contracts, and regulators can struggle to trace accountability through shifting subcontracting chains.

At the centre of labour injustice is not merely “bad factories” but the purchasing practices that structure competition. Many global brands demand low unit prices, rapid turnaround, and the flexibility to alter orders with little notice. These requirements transfer risk downstream. Suppliers compete to win contracts by cutting costs, which often means suppressing wages, extending working hours, and limiting investment in safety. Even factories with managers who would prefer compliance can find that the margins offered by buyers do not cover safe staffing levels, reasonable overtime limits, or meaningful training. Under these conditions, labour standards become a commercial disadvantage unless purchasing contracts reward compliance rather than speed and cheapness.

Wages in garment work are frequently constrained by policy and power rather than productivity alone. In many producing countries, minimum wages are set through political bargaining and may lag behind the cost of living, especially in periods of inflation. Employers may rely on a narrow legal minimum rather than negotiating higher pay, and workers often lack bargaining power because jobs are abundant but insecure. Piece-rate systems further intensify pressure. When pay is tied to output, speed becomes a direct financial necessity, and workers may accept unsafe practices, skipped breaks, or excessive overtime to reach a target income. The result is not only low pay but also chronic fatigue, higher injury risk, and a workplace culture in which workers fear that slowing down will mean losing wages.

Working conditions reflect both weak enforcement and asymmetric power. Safety regulations may exist on paper while inspection agencies remain understaffed, poorly resourced, or vulnerable to corruption. In such contexts, legal standards can become symbolic rather than protective. Workers who attempt to organise collectively may face retaliation, dismissal, or informal blacklisting that makes future employment difficult.



Migrant workers can be particularly exposed when legal status ties them to a specific employer or when language barriers restrict access to complaint mechanisms. The combination of economic precarity and limited voice helps explain why dangerous conditions can persist even in factories that appear compliant on the surface.

Social auditing has become the dominant corporate response, yet its limitations are widely documented. Audits are often scheduled, giving factories time to prepare, temporarily reduce overtime, or present staged records. Some sites maintain double books, and workers may be coached on what to say. Most importantly, supply chains can hide the most hazardous work through unauthorized subcontracting, shifting orders to unauthorised workshops that sit outside official oversight. This creates social auditing fatigue: repeated inspections generate paperwork and public reassurance, but they do not necessarily alter the underlying incentives created by purchasing contracts. Brands can therefore claim due diligence while the drivers of exploitation remain intact.

Gender shapes many labour outcomes because the garment workforce is frequently dominated by women, especially in lower-paid and less secure roles. This can intersect with discrimination in promotion, vulnerability to harassment, and limited access to union leadership. Beyond the factory, women's wages often support households, making instability in garment employment a broader social issue. When wages are delayed or jobs are lost, the consequences can extend to nutrition, healthcare decisions, and children's education. Gendered vulnerability is therefore not only a workplace concern but also a household-level risk amplified by insecure labour markets.

There are, however, examples of improvement, particularly when initiatives shift from voluntary promises to enforceable obligations. Binding safety accords have shown that when brands accept contractual responsibility, share costs, and allow independent inspection, safety upgrades can become more consistent. Stronger unions and credible grievance mechanisms can also increase worker voice, while longer-term purchasing commitments can reduce the extreme volatility that drives overtime spikes. Some programmes publish supplier lists and wage benchmarks to increase transparency and reduce the space for denial. Yet progress remains fragile. Economic shocks can trigger order cancellations that cascade through supply chains, leaving factories without cash flow and workers unpaid. Improvements that depend on goodwill can evaporate quickly when commercial pressure returns.

For this reason, proposed solutions increasingly target system incentives rather than isolated symptoms. Advocates argue that labour rights will not be secured simply by better monitoring; they require changes to purchasing contracts, enforceable obligations, and pricing that covers living wages and safe production. Others propose trade measures that



link market access to labour standards, though such policies are debated and can be criticised as protectionist when they are designed without producer-country input. Ultimately, durable change depends on shifting power and accountability across the chain—from brand contracts and sourcing calendars to factory governance and worker voice—so that humane production is treated as a non-negotiable cost rather than an optional add-on.

Questions 14–18

Choose **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information given in the text, choose **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information, or choose **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information on this.

14 The passage suggests that globally fragmented production can make responsibility difficult to trace across subcontracting chains.

15 The passage indicates that some factories may want to comply but struggle because buyer prices may not cover safe staffing and hours.

16 The passage states that piece-rate systems raise wages by exactly 20% compared with hourly pay in most producer countries.

17 The passage implies that the existence of safety laws on paper guarantees effective protection for workers.

18 The passage suggests that women's garment wages can affect household welfare such as education and health decisions.

Questions 19–22

Complete each sentence with the correct ending, **A–F**, below.

List of Endings

A because they transfer risk and cost pressure onto suppliers

B when orders are shifted to unauthorised workshops outside official oversight

C by affecting healthcare decisions and children's education

D when buyers make longer-term commitments that reduce volatility

E because improvements can disappear when commercial pressure returns

F because minimum wages automatically rise during periods of inflation

19 Purchasing practices can drive labour abuses

20 Auditing may fail to detect the most hazardous work



21 Instability in garment employment can have consequences for workers' households

22 Voluntary progress can be fragile

Questions 23–26

Complete the sentences below. Choose **NO MORE THAN THREE WORDS** from the text for each answer.

23 In some producer countries, minimum wages may lag behind the

24 Inspection agencies may be weakened if they are vulnerable to

25 Risky work may be hidden when orders are shifted to

26 After sudden order cancellations, workers may be left

Answer Key

14. TRUE

15. TRUE

16. NOT GIVEN

17. FALSE

18. TRUE

19. A

20. B

21. C

22. E

23. cost of living

24. corruption

25. unauthorised workshops

26. unpaid