

# FROM **BRUISES** TO **RIGHTS**

**Addressing Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the Garment Industry**



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*Fair Action is a non-profit organization pushing Swedish companies to take responsibility for their impact on people, climate and the environment. We examine how consumer goods and services are produced and push companies to improve working conditions and pay living wages. Our vision is a sustainable world where human rights and the environment are respected. We are a member of the global network Clean Clothes Campaign.*

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*The photographs used in this report are for illustrative purposes only. They are not linked to any known instances of gender-based violence or harassment and do not necessarily depict garment factories in Bangladesh.*

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## ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Amfori BSCI</b>	<i>The Amfori Business Social Compliance Initiative</i>
<b>BCWS</b>	<i>Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity</i>
<b>CEDAW</b>	<i>Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women</i>
<b>CSDDD</b>	<i>Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive</i>
<b>EU</b>	<i>European Union</i>
<b>GBVH</b>	<i>Gender-based Violence and Harassment</i>
<b>HRDD</b>	<i>Human Rights Due Diligence</i>
<b>IFC</b>	<i>International Finance Corporation</i>
<b>ILO</b>	<i>International Labour Organization</i>
<b>NGO</b>	<i>Non-governmental organisation</i>
<b>RBI</b>	<i>Responsible Business Initiative</i>

# INTRODUCTION

***He would hit my hand, touch my shoulder, pinch me and make inappropriate suggestions. He even followed me home one evening.***

(Factory worker, Bangladesh)

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) remains deeply rooted in the global garment industry, disproportionately affecting women workers who make up the majority of its workforce<sup>1</sup>. This type of violence is most common where large numbers of women occupy low-paid positions without decision-making power<sup>2</sup> - hallmarks of the fashion supply chain. As such, GBVH is closely tied to systemic economic inequality and power imbalances. And fashion brands may be complicit: when tight deadlines and last-minute changes pile pressure on suppliers, that pressure is too often passed on to garment workers in the form of abuse<sup>3</sup>.

In 2023, Fair Action published Blouses and Bruises – How Swedish Fashion Brands Are Overlooking Gender-Based Violence at Garment Factories<sup>4</sup>, a report examining how six Swedish fashion brands; Cellbes, Gina Tricot, Indiska, Kappahl, Nelly, and Åhléns, were responding to this risk. The findings were sobering: five out of six companies failed to identify GBVH as a salient human rights risk, and only one, Kappahl, described any preventive efforts beyond standard social audits. Trade unions and worker representatives were largely excluded from human rights due diligence (HRDD) processes, and meaningful engagement with rights holders was rare.

Following the report's release, several brands pledged to do better - such as including GBVH in future risk analyses (Cellbes and Indiska), involving unions in materiality assessments (Indiska), and scaling up mitigation efforts (Åhléns).

This follow-up report assesses whether those promises have translated into tangible progress. It reviews the preventative measures and stakeholder engagement efforts made by the six companies and examines the extent to which they have followed through on their commitments to tackle GBVH in their supply chains.



Photo: Encyclopedia Britannica/CCC, Vietnam

# GBVH: PROGRESS AND PERSISTENT GAPS

Gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) - ranging from sexual and physical abuse to economic and psychological harm<sup>5</sup> - remains a widespread and systemic issue in the garment industry. These abuses are driven by entrenched power imbalances and social norms, as recognized by the ILO and IFC<sup>6</sup>. For background on the scope of GBVH and business responsibilities, see our original 2023 report<sup>4</sup>. Since then, GBVH has gained further recognition globally<sup>7</sup>, with some promising legislative and industry developments - though the pace and depth of progress remain limited.

In the spring of 2024, the EU adopted the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD)<sup>8</sup>, intended to advance corporate accountability on human rights and environmental issues. But civil society has critiqued its failure to explicitly mention gender-based risks like GBVH as well as lacking an intersectional lens<sup>9</sup>. Notably, CEDAW was excluded<sup>9</sup> during negotiations. While gender-related reporting is technically possible under several articles<sup>10</sup>, it remains voluntary. Early 2025 saw the EU Commission launch the Omnibus package<sup>11</sup> to streamline sustainability directives - including the CSDDD - with initial implementation now postponed<sup>12</sup> to 2027 and grievance mechanisms scaled back<sup>11</sup>. The actual impact on GBVH mitigation remains uncertain.

More hopeful signs come from Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, four trade unions signed the groundbreaking Central Java Agreement for Gender Justice<sup>13</sup> in July 2024, covering over 6,000 workers in two Nike-supplying factories. The agreement introduced union-led GBVH training and grievance channels<sup>14</sup>, following years of abuse reports. Union leaders hope this sets a wider precedent<sup>13</sup>.

Similarly, the 2022 Dindigul Agreement in India - the first binding GBVH agreement in Asia - has empowered some 5,000 women workers<sup>15</sup>. Through the Shop Floor Monitor system, each production line now has a female worker leader addressing GBVH. Early results show rising confidence and reporting, even beyond the workplace.



***GBVH [...] remains a widespread and systemic issue in the garment industry. These abuses are driven by entrenched power imbalances and social norms.***

Still, such gains remain the exception in a system where most GBVH measures are voluntary and brands rely heavily on social audits - a tool long criticized for failing workers<sup>16</sup>. Auditors, paid by brands, often prioritize reputational risk over worker safety. Factory visits are usually pre-announced, audits are rarely transparent, and brands face no binding obligations to act on findings<sup>17</sup>. This self-regulatory model risks masking structural problems and delaying real reform.

To truly tackle GBVH, voluntary efforts and flawed audits are not enough. What's needed is binding, gender-sensitive regulation - and accountability that centers the rights and voices of workers.



Photo: CCC, Bangladesh

## BANGLADESH: WITNESSES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest producer of clothing after China<sup>18</sup>. Swedish fashion companies have significant parts of their production in Bangladesh, and each year, clothing worth over 600 million USD is imported to Sweden from Bangladesh<sup>19</sup>. Close to 4.3 million people work in the garment sector in Bangladesh, and 57% of whom are women<sup>21</sup>. In a study published in 2020<sup>20</sup>, 76% of the more than 600 Bangladeshi workers who had been interviewed said that they had experienced some form of GBVH, most commonly sexual harassment. However, as sexual violence is taboo many cases go unreported – up to 70% according to the interview respondents<sup>20</sup>.

Behind every statistic is a story. The following accounts, shared with Fair Action by our partner organization Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS), offer a glimpse into that reality. BCWS is founded by garment workers and trade unionists, and works to improve conditions and defend workers' rights across Bangladesh.

These accounts from three women factory workers lay bare the everyday violence and harassment woven into the fabric of the fashion industry. Their voices speak not just of individual experiences, but of a pattern – one that demands urgent, coordinated action.

***From economic exploitation of women to domestic violence, from sexual harassment by supervisors to rape - violence and harassment are brutal reality for most women in Bangladesh.***

(Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity & FEMNET e.V., 2020)<sup>20</sup>



## SHARMIN: Standing up to harassment in the factory

Sharmin is a female work leader with a strong reputation. She had been working at a well-known factory in central Bangladesh for a year when her line chief began harassing her physically and mentally. “He would hit my hand, touch my shoulder, pinch me and make inappropriate suggestions. He even followed me home one evening,” she says. One day at work, he pressed her back and held her from behind. When she protested, the mental abuse worsened.

According to Sharmin she was forced to produce double the output of others. If she failed to do so she would face verbal abuse and humiliating punishments, like being forced to stand for hours. Eventually, the line chief issued a temporary suspension as retaliation.

Sharmin took the notice to BCWS where she received help to file a complaint against the line chief that was sent to the factory management. Five days later, the factory admitted its mistake and reinstated Sharmin. They also made the line chief apologize to Sharmin and promise not to repeat his behavior. After filing the complaint, Sharmin is no longer being harassed by the factory management and still works at the same factory.

*If [Sharmin] failed [her task] she would face verbal abuse and humiliating punishments, like being forced to stand for hours.*



Photo: Rainbow Collective, Bangladesh

## SUMAIYA: From victim of child marriage to workers' advocate

Sumaiya lives with her family of four north of Dhaka. Poverty made her quit her education in eighth grade. She became a victim of child marriage at the age of 14 when she was forced to marry a much older man. She struggled with household work and an abusive relationship. The abuse worsened over time, and when her husband took a second wife, Sumaiya left him and moved to Dhaka. To survive, she began working in a garment factory.

Employed as an operator in a well-known factory in central Bangladesh, she initially faced verbal abuse and extreme pressure from management. With no alternative, she endured the mistreatment silently. Things began to change when BCWS organizers visited her and encouraged her to join gender-based violence training. Through BCWS, she received education on labor laws, GBVH, women's leadership, and basic computer skills.

Sumaiya realized she had rights and began speaking up against workplace abuse, even reporting it when necessary. She now supports other female workers facing similar issues.



Photo: CCC, Bangladesh

## **NASRIN: Trapped between floods and factory walls**

Nasrin is a young garment worker from northeastern Bangladesh. Her family, farmers whose crops were repeatedly destroyed by floods, migrated due to limited opportunities for women in their village. As a teenager, Nasrin took a factory job to support her sick father and has now worked there for four years.

The factory, which she does not name out of fear for persecution, operates in an unauthorized building with poor ventilation, no clean water, unhygienic restrooms, and disregard for labor laws. “Our wages are far below minimum” she says. “We’re forced to work overtime - or go unpaid.” Rising temperatures from climate change worsen conditions, making workers sick, yet they continue out of fear of losing their jobs.

Women suffer further during menstruation, with no sanitary breaks or facilities. “It’s physically and emotionally draining,” Nasrin shares. Complaints result in verbal abuse, threats, or isolation from supervisors who enforce silence.



***Rising temperatures from climate change worsen conditions, making workers sick, yet they continue out of fear of losing their jobs.***

Nasrin dreams of starting a small business, but constant pressure and the growing impact of floods keep her trapped - highlighting the systemic exploitation that forces workers to endure unsafe and unjust conditions.

# FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Compared to their 2021 sustainability reports, the reviewed brands have made notable progress in how they address gender-based violence and harassment in their supply chains in their 2023 sustainability reports. Four out of six reviewed brands now explicitly identify GBVH as a risk - up from just one in 2021. A fifth brand, Nelly, informs us that they include it under broader human rights concerns.

All brands now also report having grievance mechanisms in place, compared to none in 2021, indicating a shift toward recognizing GBVH as a serious human rights issue. Indiska, however, did not publish a 2023 sustainability report and could therefore not properly be assessed on several of these points, but did inform us that they have a grievance mechanism in place.

## Is GBVH in the supply chain explicitly identified as a human rights risk in their analyses?

**YES** Cellbes, Gina Tricot, Kappahl, Åhléns **NO** Indiska\*, Nelly

## Does the company describe how they work to prevent GBVH in the supply chain, in other ways than through audits & codes of conduct?

**YES** Kappahl **NO** Cellbes, Gina Tricot, Indiska\*, Nelly, Åhléns

## Are labor unions listed as stakeholders in the company's materiality analysis?

**YES** Gina Tricot, Kappahl **NO** Cellbes, Indiska\*, Nelly, Åhléns

## Does the company assert that factory workers have access to a grievance mechanism?

**YES** Cellbes, Gina Tricot, Kappahl, Nelly, Åhléns **NO** Indiska\*

## Does the company assert that factory workers receive training on GBVH?

**YES** Gina Tricot, Kappahl **NO** Cellbes, Indiska\*, Nelly, Åhléns

*\*Indiska did not publish a sustainability report for 2023, and could therefore not be properly assessed.*

While the widespread implementation of grievance mechanisms is a promising development, their effectiveness remains uncertain. For example, [Gina Tricot reported receiving no complaints during 2023](#) - a finding that could suggest either a well-functioning work environment or, more likely, that the mechanism is inaccessible, mistrusted, or poorly communicated to workers.

Effective grievance systems depend not only on their existence but on whether workers feel safe and empowered to use them without fear of retaliation.

Other critical components of GBVH prevention remain underdeveloped. Only two brands - Kappahl and Gina Tricot - list unions as stakeholders in their materiality analyses and offer trainings on GBVH for factory workers, both essential for building awareness and enabling prevention. In response to us, Nelly acknowledged the importance of union engagement but lacks a clear plan, and Indiska's trainings appear limited to their own staff rather than factory workers. For two brands - Cellbes and Åhléns - no information was available regarding either training or union involvement and they have not provided additional information to us.

All but one brand fail to describe additional preventative measures aside from supplier codes of conduct that include human rights and GBVH, and continue to rely heavily on social audits and Responsible Business Initiatives (RBIs) like Amfori BSCI. These mechanisms often fall short due to limited worker input, transparency issues, and a failure to detect hidden forms of abuse<sup>16</sup>. Kappahl stands out by supplementing third-party audits with internal monitoring and use of the Higg Index FSLM, which covers 45% of Kappahl's order volume.

In sum, GBVH is increasingly recognized as a human rights concern by fashion brands, and some meaningful steps have been taken since 2021. However, structural challenges remain. Recognition must translate into action - through trusted grievance mechanisms, stronger worker participation, deeper engagement with unions and women-led organizations, and more robust, independent monitoring. It is also vital to target the root causes of GBVH, including economic and social inequality. As such, all brands should commit to paying a living wage and actively support freedom of association. Without these components, efforts risk remaining superficial, while the reality for workers - especially women in supplier factories - remains unchanged.

Photo: Rainbow Collective, Bangladesh



## Brands' commitments in the last report

**Cellbes and Indiska** will include gender-based violence and harassment as a human rights risk in their future risk analyses.

**Cellbes** ✓

**Indiska** ✗

**Åhléns** will increase its efforts on risk mitigation connected to human rights risks. ✓

**Indiska** will include labor unions as stakeholders in its future materiality analysis. ✗

# RECOMMENDATIONS TO BRANDS

The following recommendations were raised in the last report, and are still relevant to effectively combat GBVH in supply chains;

**1. Conduct an effective human rights due diligence for GBVH** – identify GBVH as a salient human rights risk, identify preventative measures, and how victims can be remediated. Provide remedy where abuses occur.

**2. Collaborate with women workers, local trade unions, NGOs, women-led civil society organizations, and worker organizations** in the human rights due diligence process to ensure that the perspective of rights-holders and stakeholders are considered.

**3. Be transparent and communicate strategies, goals, and outcomes publicly and in the sustainability report.** Use relevant indicators (KPIs) to measure the effectiveness of the activities and report publicly on those. Affected parties and other stakeholders should be able to hold the company accountable and demand improvements. Transparency is also a way of sharing good practice with industry peers.

**4. Provide financial incentives** (such as extended or larger contracts, price premiums) to suppliers addressing known risk factors of GBVH. When expanding production, give preference to suppliers with higher wages, unionized facilities, and a systematic occupational health and safety program that includes GBVH.

**5. Identify and address known risk factors of GBVH**, such as low wages, lack of freedom of association, and unfair purchasing practices:

- a. Set a living wage strategy** with time-bound and measurable goals.
- b. Identify and prevent anti-union policies and practices** in supplier factories and communicate to the suppliers that the company has zero tolerance of all attempts to prevent trade unions from organizing.
- c. Ensure purchasing prices that reflect actual labor costs, costs for GBVH preventative measures, and lead times** that safeguard working hours and occupational health and safety in accordance with relevant ILO standards and national law (whatever has the highest protection for workers).

**6. Develop safe, effective, and confidential grievance mechanisms** at factory level that are co-created with women workers and their trade unions.

**7. Provide mandatory training on GBVH to all workers in the supply chain**, as well as to supervisors and factory management, on unacceptable behavior, on how to prevent GBVH, and on how to report an incident. Provide targeted training, including life skills such as leadership and decision-making, and awareness-raising to vulnerable workers.

**8. Initiate, contribute to, and sign legally binding and enforceable agreements** to prevent and remediate GBVH in garment factories.

## METHODOLOGY

This study assesses how six major Swedish fashion brands have strengthened their efforts to prevent and mitigate gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) in their supply chains, comparing developments between 2021 and 2023 as described in their publicly available sustainability reports. It builds on the previous report [Blouses & Bruises: How Swedish Fashion Brands are Overlooking Gender-Based Violence at Garment Factories](#)<sup>4</sup>, which reviewed the same companies using their 2021 reports. One brand, Indiska, did not publish a sustainability report for 2023. However, they provided written comments on several issues covered in the study. As these statements are not publicly available, they are marked with an asterisk and excluded from summary tables but are referenced in the analysis where relevant.

After collecting data from the sustainability reports, each brand was contacted individually and informed about the study. They were invited to verify or correct any information, and later given a chance to review the final draft of the report. Each company also had the opportunity to submit a written response to the findings specific to their operations (see Appendix 1). Through these written responses, brands were able to elaborate on preventative measures and grievance mechanisms that may not have been mentioned in their sustainability reports and make pledges.

This report also includes personal accounts from Bangladesh to contextualize the issue of GBVH. These were provided by the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity. All names have been pseudonymized.

# APPENDIX 1 - BRAND COMMENTS

## **Nelly**

*“We welcome this follow up report from Fair Action for addressing this important topic. The increased focus on transparency, accountability and improved legislation in the industry plays an important role in accelerating the transformation of the fashion industry to become fairer and more transparent.”*

## **Indiska**

*“Indiska is committed to ensuring a safe and fair working environment across our supply chain. We understand that gender-based violence and harassment are serious challenges, and we need to intensify our efforts to guarantee safe workplace for women.*

*In 2025, Indiska has undertaken a comprehensive re-evaluation of its sustainability roadmap to define a definitive pathway forward. Within this revised framework, Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) continues to be identified as a salient human rights risk, demanding a concentrated and intensified effort from our organization. We are dedicated to fostering a safe and respectful environment for all workers in our supply chain. We appreciate your continued dialogue and collaboration as we strive to achieve our sustainability goals.”*

Read the full comment from Indiska [here](#).

## **Kappahl**

*“As a brand, we appreciate the insights of this report. Gender-based violence and harassment is a critical issue that often remains underreported, despite its significant impact on workers – and women in particular. The findings in the report reinforce the need for proactive measures, including strong grievance mechanisms, worker and management training, and stakeholder engagement.”*

## **Gina Tricot**

[Chose to not leave a comment.]

## **Åhléns**

[We have not received any response from Åhléns.]

## **Cellbes**

[We have not received any response from Cellbes.]

# APPENDIX 2 - DATA TABLE

	Cellbes		Gina Tricot		Indiska		Kappahl		Nelly		Åhléns	
	2021	2023	2021	2023	2021	2023*	2021	2023	2021	2023	2021	2023/2024**
Is GBVH in the supply chain explicitly identified as a human rights risk in their analyses?	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	X	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
Does the company describe how they work to prevent GBVH in the supply chain, in other ways than through audits & codes of conduct?	No	No	No	No	No	X	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Are labour unions listed as stakeholders in the company's materiality analysis?	No	No	No	Yes	No	X	No	Yes	No	No	No	No
Does the company assert that factory workers have access to a grievance	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	X	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
Does the company assert that factory workers receive training on GBVH?	No	No	No	Yes	No	X	No	Yes	No	No	No	No

\*Indiska has informed us that 97% of their suppliers have access to grievance mechanisms.

\*\* Åhléns released a sustainability report covering the years 2023 and 2024.

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Indiska AB did not publish a sustainability report for the year 2023. However, in response to Fair Action's inquiries, the company shared information related to the relevant topics via email correspondence.

# ACCOUNTS FROM BANGLADESH

The referred individual cases were provided directly to the authors by the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, Dhaka 2025.