

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR TARGETS FORCED LABOR IN FASHION INDUSTRY

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The U.S. Department of Labor (“DOL”) has allocated \$22 million to target the growing issue of abusive labor practices in the fashion industry, and specifically, to combat the use of child and forced labor in supply chains, especially in South America, Africa, and Southeast Asia.

Clothing production is booming. In fact, according to a [report](#) by sustainability consultant McKinsey & Company, clothing production doubled from 2000 to 2014. The global market now produces more than 100 billion garments a year, according to a [report](#) by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. At the same time, driven by “fast fashion,” the amount of wear we get from clothes has dropped by 36 percent, with almost 65 percent of all garments ending up in a landfill or being incinerated.

With more clothing being produced, production supply chains have already become a concern, raising concerns for the potential of forced labor, human trafficking, and/or indentured child labor. The DOL [estimates](#) that there are currently 25 million people in forced labor, and of those, over 4 million are children.

There are efforts to counteract this problem. For example, the DOL maintains a [list](#) of products (and corresponding locations) that are believed to be at higher risk of being produced by forced or indentured child labor. Importantly, there probably many more international occurrences that are not identified on this list.

Where Are the Funds Going?

According to the DOL, the funding will be used to:

- Support the International Labor Organization’s work with several governments in Africa not only address the problem of child and forced labor, but bolster services for victims of child labor and forced labor;
- \$5 million to World Vision Incorporated to do the same things for several Asian countries;
- \$5 million to Pact Incorporated. This contribution economically empowers vulnerable women and girls in certain supply chains in countries such as Colombia;

- \$4 million to Corporación Escuela Nacional Sindical. This money will increase the ability of Colombian workers in identified sectors to better understand their legal rights; and
- \$3 million to the ILO to increase research on forced labor in the garment sectors in Argentina and Mauritius, an island nation in the Indian Ocean.

What Companies Can Do

With increasing concerns for human trafficking and forced labor issues, companies are advised to better understand their own product supply chains. An increasing number of international laws, including the U.K. Modern Slavery Act, Australia Modern Slavery Act, and California Transparency in Supply Chains Act address slavery and forced labor in supply chains, and in the case of the California law, require companies to prepare and publish on their web page a statement concerning their efforts to eliminate such practices in their supply chains

BCLP has experience helping companies develop policies, procedures and statements in compliance with these laws. For more information, please contact the authors.

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