

15th February 2018

LETTER TO MINISTRY OF LABOUR, MAURITIUS

Hon Soodesh Satkam CALLICHURN

Mauritian Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations, Employment and Training

Dear Honourable Minister,

Re: Support for Mauritian and Bangladeshi Government discussions and invitation to event 'Migrant Workers: Driving collaborative approaches towards responsible recruitment' on 22nd February 2018

Expression of support regarding activity on labour migration management

We are writing to you on behalf of the Ethical Trading Initiative and the undersigned brands to express our support for discussions between the governments of Mauritius and Bangladesh on the topic of labour migration. We understand that the two parties are currently in negotiations to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on this topic, which is of great interest to us as companies sourcing from Mauritius. We are pleased to learn about these discussions and would like to understand the current status of the negotiations and broad timelines for future progress.

We note that the Mauritian President, her Excellency Mrs Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, is the Chair of the ILO Commission on the Future of Work, and has been vocal about your government's commitment to respect for workers' rights, and the guarantee of social protection for the most vulnerable workers. We commend your government's trade and investment objectives being aligned with the principles and practice of decent work.

Working towards alignment of government and company efforts

During your meeting with our colleagues last November, ASOS and its suppliers expressed their concerns regarding the challenges faced by Bangladeshi migrants in our supply chain, namely the issue of workers paying excessive recruitment fees to agents in their home country to secure employment in Mauritius. Where workers are liable for recruitment fees, they can be trapped in debt bondage. This is a form of modern slavery and is a violation of ILO Fundamental Convention, C29 on Forced Labour.

We recognise our responsibility to respect and protect workers in our supply chains. We have all been working with our Mauritian suppliers to increase transparency in the recruitment process and mitigate the risk of debt bondage. We are keen to ensure our efforts are aligned with that of the Mauritian government and follow recognised international best practice on this topic. In order to achieve this, we hope to see alignment on the following core areas:

1. A commitment to ensure that migrant workers from Bangladesh and other countries working in Mauritian factories and plants are not in situations of debt bondage as a result of fees paid to recruitment agents.
2. A commitment to establishing a more transparent and regulated recruitment process between the two countries – we endorse the possibility of launching an online recruitment portal as a part of the proposed Memorandum of Understanding;
3. The provision of a grievance mechanism for Bangladeshi migrant workers living in Mauritius to raise complaints should they have any issues; this could be managed by the Bangladeshi Labour Attaché (Mr. Ohidul Islam).

4. A commitment to enabling migrant workers to have full access to their right to freedom of association and collective bargaining and the right to join a free, independent and democratic trade union that can represent their interests.

On our part, we are committed to:

- the principle that employers rather than workers should pay for recruitment;
- take urgent steps to ensure that where workers are found in situations of debt bondage resulting from unscrupulous recruitment practices, they will be remediated. This will require partnership between brands, suppliers and other key stakeholders;

In addition, the undersigned companies will write to our suppliers, informing them of our commitment to freedom of association and collective bargaining for all workers – including migrants – and ask them to take appropriate measures to ensure that workers can access these rights without prejudice. This is in line with the Mauritian government's ratification of ILO Conventions 98 on Collective Bargaining, and Convention 87 on Freedom of Association. We will monitor progress on this.

Event Invitation

On 21st and 22nd February 2018, The British High Commission and ASOS will be holding a multi-stakeholder roundtable event in Port Louis to bring together key stakeholders to discuss challenges in managing labour migration, and agree on a common framework for improving worker protection in Mauritius and beyond. We will have representation from the following stakeholder groups: governments of the UK and Bangladesh, international brands sourcing in Mauritius and local industry representatives, among others. We would like to invite you to inform participants about your work in this area to date, and hope that you are able to attend.

Our desire is to work collaboratively to protect the interests and rights of Bangladeshi workers in Mauritius by preventing unethical recruitment. By bringing together prominent employers in the Mauritian garment, food processing and sugar industry, we intend to encourage efforts to prevent exploitation during recruitment. Ultimately, we believe this will aid in protecting workers, offering an ethical and sustainable solution for business and demonstrating Mauritius' efforts to improve working conditions in the country.



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