

Pakistan labour: Khaadi faces social media rage amidst allegations of inhumane work conditions

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One of the largest brands in Pakistan's apparel industry, Khaadi, has found itself at the centre of a growing civil campaign against inhumane workplace conditions [1] and workers' rights.

Several protest demonstrations [2] have been held in Karachi and Lahore over the last week by workers and activists alleging high-handedness and unfair labour practices by Khaadi's management.

The allegations against the company include the charge that its management terminated scores of workers who worked at its factories after officially promising that it would not do so; and an accusation that its officials are responsible for driving a female worker to attempt suicide after she was allegedly penalised severely for taking an unscheduled lunch break.

However, Khaadi, in a statement issued on Monday, denied the allegations, saying the accusations circling on social media were part of a "conspiracy" against the company.

"Khaadi has viewed with concern the discussion on social media in recent days emanating from certain false news that have been spread and which seek to damage our reputation. Initially, our viewpoint was not to respond to what is nothing but malicious and libelous content, but we now feel we owe it to our patrons to clarify the matter. We therefore categorically confirm that Khaadi has NOT terminated 32 of its employees.

Another malicious story being spread and linked to the above is of the apparent attempted suicide of a young female worker. Why anyone should spread this outright lie is beyond understanding, but this just goes to show how some vested interests will stop at nothing to premeditatedly plan to try and cause reputational harm to Khaadi, and we intend to get to the bottom of this conspiracy.

Khaadi is a responsible corporate citizen. As a brand, we have endeavoured to maintain and adhere to the highest standards in all operations-which also includes following best practices with regard to our biggest assets, our employees. Our products are sourced through an array of third party suppliers. Khaadi has always endeavoured to promote our culture and heritage, and promote a positive image of Pakistan internationally, and will continue to do so.

Finally, we appeal to all to please do not share or spread news that is pure hearsay, or base your comments on speculative news, no matter shared by who, without fully knowing the facts yourself. We request this not only in the case of Khaadi, but as a general principle of social media engagement, as false rumours tend to escalate and can be quite damaging for others, whether it be brands or innocent people."

In a subsequent call with Dawn.com, however, a spokesperson for the company was not as 'categorical' in denying that workers associated with Khaadi were dismissed, saying only that the

company employed labour at its factories through third party contractors and that such workers could not be considered Khaadi employees.

She also assured that the company will initiate an audit of these 'third party contractors' and a compliance check will also be conducted.

On the other hand, agitating workers, some of whom maintain that they were sacked from Khaadi for raising their voice against inhumane working conditions, have presented a list of their grievances with the company.

Documents shared by activist Jibran Nasir provide details of the workers' grievances. On top of the list is the claim that a copy of an official appointment letter is not provided to employees at the time of their hiring, which leaves the terms and conditions of their employment open to interpretation and deprives them of having recourse to the law when their rights are violated.

Secondly, there is the allegation that the company does not deposit Sindh Employees' Social Security Institution (SESSI) contributions with the department, or issue SESSI cards to workers employed in its industrial units, thus depriving them of a means of social protection.

Similarly, it has been alleged that the company makes monthly deductions for Employees Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI) contributions from workers' salaries, but does not issue them with EOBI cards. The workers claim that this is a deliberate move to deprive them of facilities and necessary protections afforded to them under the EOBI Act.

The workers have also claimed that they are made to work over 12 hours a day. They say they are also forced to work on public holidays and Sundays; however they do admit that they are compensated for the extra hours.

As far as work environment is concerned, the workers say they are not provided clean drinking water and face restrictions on the number of times they can use the toilet in a day.

Lastly, if any employee is injured while on duty, they are not compensated for it as per the law, the workers have alleged.

Labour leader rejects Khaadi statement

Nasir Mansoor, a renowned figure in labour rights circles and the deputy general secretary at the National Trade Union Federation, Pakistan has rejected the statement issued by Khaadi.

He told Dawn.com that the affected workers had previously approached the National Industrial Relations Commission (NIRC), a platform which acts as a labour court, saying they feared being fired from the company for raising their voice against the injustices meted out to them.

A counsel representing Khaadi, on behalf of the brand, had assured the NIRC that these workers would not be sacked, Mansoor said, based on which the case was dropped from further hearing.

"But on May 22, they [the workers] were denied entry into the factory," he said; asking that if they were not sacked, Khaadi should take the media to that factory and show them that the workers were on their job.

Also dismissing Khaadi's argument that workers were provided by a third party 'supplier company',

Mansoor asked why a legal representative for Khaadi had assured the NIRC that the employees would not be sacked, “when, as per their claim, the workers were not even their employees in the first place.”

“How is it possible that Khaadi was addressing the NIRC about workers who were not their employees,” he maintained.

He also raised other issues allegedly being faced by workers in Khaadi’s industrial units. He said that the minimum salary for unskilled workers is set at Rs14,000 by the government, but in violation of the laws, rules and regulations, even skilled workers are being paid Rs13,000 by the company.

“We do not intend to ruin brands and businesses, but we will not accept slavery in industrial units on any condition,” Mansoor concluded.

Asad Farooq

P.S.

* Dawn. Updated May 29, 2017:
<https://www.dawn.com/news/1336144>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.facebook.com/zehra.khan.184/videos/10212679455042215/>

[2] <https://twitter.com/zehra1akhan/status/867828734749028352>