

# **NHS rubber gloves made in Malaysian factories accused of forced labour**

Monday 10 December 2018, by [ELLIS-PETERSEN Hannah](#) (Date first published: 9 December 2018).

## **Malaysian firms supplying rubber gloves to health service worldwide allegedly exploit thousands of migrants**

Britain's National Health Service ( [NHS](#) ) is using medical gloves made in Malaysian factories where migrants are allegedly subjected to forced labour, forced overtime, debt bondage, withheld wages and passport confiscation.

A Guardian investigation has revealed that at least two companies supplying rubber gloves to the NHS - Top Glove and WRP - are allegedly subjecting thousands of migrant workers from Nepal and Bangladesh to exploitative working conditions.

Top Glove - the largest rubber glove manufacturer in the world and one of the biggest employers in [Malaysia](#), with 40 factories - and fellow manufacturer WRP both produce gloves for multiple brands supplying NHS Supply Chain, the organisation which has a 40% market share of medical goods purchased by NHS hospitals and clinics in the UK.

The Guardian interviewed 16 Top Glove workers and three from WRP.

The Top Glove workers - eight from Nepal and eight from Bangladesh - alleged that their factory was "mental torture" where they had to work seven days a week, at least 12 hours a day, with only one day off a month. Their shirts were each branded with the Top Glove logo: "Be honest and no cheating."

All 16 alleged they had their passports involuntarily held by the company and were unable to get them back on request, while reportedly "unsafe" factory conditions at Top Glove meant limbs had been lost in accidents.

Although Top Glove declined to respond directly when asked for comment, it released a statement in which it conceded that excessive daily overtime was a problem. "Lengthy working hours are our main concern and we continue to explore every possible way to address the issue of our workers' excessive daily OT," the company said, adding that it was working on increasing manpower and changing shift patterns to deal with the problem.

Top Glove denied the conditions in its factories were a violation of workers' rights. "We assure you that the allegations are entirely unfounded and such allegations tarnish our good name," it said, emphasising that it complied with "local labour law requirements" and had won a number of human resources awards.

“Top Glove adopts a zero-tolerance policy with any regard to the abuse of human’s rights at all levels,” said the statement. “In fact our human/labour rights and health initiatives exceed those of the glove industry average.”

Speaking to the Guardian, three workers from WRP – which produces the gloves for lines stocked by NHS Supply Chain – told of excessive overtime, confiscation of passports and illegal withholding of pay.

The workers also claimed they were “trapped” and not allowed to leave the WRP factory, except on Sundays. The Guardian had to conduct interviews through the factory fence.

“It’s been three months already and we have had no pay; it is very very hard,” said one Nepalese worker at WRP, who declined to be named out of fear for his safety. “I can’t send the money back to my family who need it. They are asking me where it is.”

Speaking by text, a fourth WRP employee claimed they had run away after not receiving pay for four months. “More than a thousand workers have not got their salary,” said the worker from Nepal. “I need my salary, please help me.”

A potential client who visited the WRP factory in Malaysia, and asked not to be named, told the Guardian he had been shocked by what he had witnessed and claimed the overall working conditions were some of “the worst he had ever seen”, where factory temperatures were up to 70C for those working near ovens and more than 3,000 workers were housed in a hostel built for 1,800.

In a statement to the Guardian, the WRP chief executive, Lee Son Hong, denied the allegations as “baseless”, saying the company had “never forced any worker to work 12 hours a day without a day of rest in a week”.

“We are appalled that the issue of withholding pay and payment is made once every three months is brought up as we pay monthly wages according to the Malaysian Employment Act,” Lee added.

Lee also denied that workers were not free to leave the factory premises, stating that workers have “absolute freedom to go anywhere as and when they like except during working hours”, and said they “do NOT” confiscate workers’ passports, but kept them in accessible lockers. “Our workers want us to keep their passports for safekeeping,” said Lee.

The allegations suggest conditions at both Top Glove and WRP factories would meet several of the International Labour Organisation’s criteria for modern slavery and forced labour, including withheld identity documents, debt bondage and excessive overtime.

Activists accused Top Glove, which this year reported a record profit of almost £1bn, and fellow glove giant WRP of taking advantage of the desperation of migrant workers, who come to Malaysia because of the lack of work and high poverty levels in Bangladesh and Nepal.

Payslips seen by the Guardian seemed to indicate workers often worked between 120 and 160 hours’ overtime a month, exceeding the 104 hours allowed by Malaysian law.

At Top Glove, the payslips appear to show the basic salary was 4.8 ringgit (90p) per hour, with basic monthly pay of 1,000 ringgit, less than half the national median wage of 2,160 ringgit.

The payslips also seemed to show that, despite it being written into their contracts, workers only

received double overtime pay for four of the 12 hours they worked on Sundays, their one rest day a week, depriving them of thousands in wages every year.

Production targets were also reported to be extremely high.

Some workers alleged they had to package 15,000 gloves in one day, while one worker claimed his daily target had increased by 400% over the past year. If they did not meet the targets, they said money was deducted from their pay.

A 22-year-old Nepalese worker on the Top Glove production line said: "When I wake up every morning I am filled with dread. I think: 'How can I get through the next 12 hours of working? I don't know if I can do it any more.'"

"But what can we do? Lots of workers have mental breakdowns in the factory and have to pay to go back home. Top Glove factory is mental torture."

"We can't say no to working on rest days or on overtime," said one 30-year-old Bangladeshi worker, who asked to remain unnamed out of fear of company reprisals. "If we do, they say they will just send us back and I cannot afford to lose this job."

His words were echoed by a Nepalese migrant worker, who said: "I am desperate to come to the church and pray on Sundays but I cannot; they will not let me." Top Glove did not address the question of compulsory Sunday working in its statement.

Top Glove admitted it took workers' passports but said it was only for "safekeeping" in a locker to which workers had access. "We do not confiscate workers' passports," said the company in its statement. Top Glove said it had a foreign workers' passport safekeeping policy, to which workers had agreed by signing a consent form.

This was not reflected in any account given to the Guardian though one worker said that when an auditor had visited the factory, the workers had been temporarily handed locker keys and made to sign a form. The workers were not told which organisation the auditor represented.

## **'Who would we complain to?'**

Workers alleged that for months, sometimes years, much of their salary went towards paying off the debt they had incurred to come and work for Top Glove.

All Bangladeshi migrants who spoke to the Guardian claimed they had paid 18,000-20,000 ringgit (£3,300-£3,700) in recruitment fees to get the Top Glove factory job, while Nepalese migrants claimed to have paid up to of 7,000 ringgit (£1,300) in fees to work for Top Glove in Malaysia, leaving them in high levels of debt bondage. These fees were passed down through agents back in Nepal and Bangladesh.

Top Glove denied imposing recruitment fees higher than 20% of the workers' salary. "Top Glove only imposes recruitment fees as allowed by the local authorities, and the government of workers' source countries," said the statement.

Factory production lists seen by the Guardian, and brands and suppliers named by workers inside the factory, confirm that the Top Glove factories in Malaysia are producing medical and surgical gloves for companies that supply NHS Supply Chain.

An NHS Supply Chain spokesperson said: “NHS Supply Chain takes all allegations of labour abuses in its supply chain very seriously, and we have range of contractual arrangements and initiatives in place to try and prevent such situations arising.”

“We will be taking immediate steps with our suppliers to investigate the labour standards issues that you have identified and take action to responsibly address verified issues as appropriate.”

NHS Supply Chain has a code of conduct that is supposed to ensure there is no abuse in the chain, but Mahmood Bhutta, an NHS surgeon who founded the Medical Fair and Ethical Trade Group at the British Medical Association (BMA), said that the Guardian’s findings suggested “these processes are not working”.

He said he felt “ashamed as a doctor to be wearing gloves manufactured using human exploitation”.

“The BMA has been raising concerns about labour rights abuse in healthcare supply chains for over a decade,” said Bhutta.

The NHS uses more than 1.5bn boxes of medical gloves annually – each box often containing hundreds of pairs – with a value of over £35m. The figures for surgical gloves were not available.

The revelations of Top Glove and WRP come just a week after the British prime minister, Theresa May, announced that next year the government would outline steps taken to prevent modern slavery in its own supply chains.

David Thomas, the UK deputy high commissioner to Malaysia, told the Guardian he was aware of the allegations and was “raising them with local authorities and alerting UK supply chains”.

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## **Hannah Ellis-Petersen**

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