



Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

Office of International Labor Affairs

Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

Worker Rights in Focus: Acceptable Conditions of Work

Although standards vary from country to country, workers across the world deserve safe working conditions, realistic minimum wages, and reasonable working hours with pay for overtime. Instead, millions of workers are exploited in sweatshops, homes, and fields, unable to effectively claim their rights. The situation is particularly dire for vulnerable groups, including foreign and migrant workers, youth, women, and minorities. Ensuring that workers are protected from abusive conditions is a responsibility of the state, yet labor inspectorates are often underfunded, understaffed, and unable to enter the informal sector workplaces where many violations occur. Decent working conditions can enhance employment relationships, boost productivity, and promote job stability, yet they remain a distant dream for many millions of the world's workers.

A Wide Range of Abuses

Exploitative working conditions range from failure to pay a minimum wage or overtime to the imposition of forced labor and conditions that lead to workplace fatalities. In practice, exploitative working conditions take a variety of forms, including:

- Keeping double or triple books to avoid paying fair wages and fees for social protection;
- Failure to establish statutory minimum wage or exclusion of certain types of workers from legal protection;
- Lack of occupational health and safety standards enforcement;
- Forcing workers to work overtime without extra compensation or paying at a piece rate that does not reach the minimum wage; and
- Restricting workers from removing themselves from situations that endanger their health or safety without jeopardizing their employment.

Highlights from the 2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (HRR) address the extent to which individual countries respected human rights and worker rights. The 2010 HRR highlighted inadequate conditions of work in numerous countries, including the following instances:

- The limited scope of many labor laws and lack of labor law enforcement by the government in Pakistan put many workers in vulnerable situations with regard to working conditions, treatment, hours, and pay;
- In China, the coal industry continued to suffer a high incidence of fatalities and accidents due to lack of health and safety standards in the mining sector;
- In Honduras, there were credible allegations of sweatshop conditions and compulsory overtime at apparel assembly factories, affecting women in particular as they comprise a majority of the apparel sector's workforce;
- Mexico's "hour bank" enabled employers to avoid paying overtime by requiring long hours when workloads were heavy and cutting hours when they were light;
- In India, recycling, trash, and sewage system workers faced deplorable and unsanitary conditions without proper safety equipment and dangerous industrial accidents continued to occur, particularly in chemical industries; and
- Employer violation of minimum wage standards and use of contract employees to avoid the payment of required benefits were common in the Philippines.

All 2010 Human Rights Reports are available at:
<http://www.state.gov/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/index.htm>.

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