Using the Tack Fat factory as an example, this report looks at common hazards faced daily by workers in the garment factories of Cambodia. The report gives some idea about working conditions related to occupational safety and health. As a result of the globalisation of trade, this statement shows how those workers suffered from the Multifibre Arrangement garment and textile quota system that supplied the US and EU until this year, and the ongoing special agreement between the Cambodian and US governments for garment and textiles production.

Tack Fat produces clothes like T-shirts, jeans, and other casual wear. When this writer worked there, the factory produced mainly for the Gap and Old Navy.

**Work hazards in the Tack Fat garment factory**

The Tack Fat garment factory is owned by a Hong Kong businessman who also has another factory in China. Those factories employ around 16,000 workers; in China there are 6,000 workers and in Cambodia 10,000 workers.

The Tack Fat factory in Cambodia is located in Takong village near Phnom Penh. This factory has four unions that the workers can join. Of these the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers’ Democratic Unions (CCAWDU) represents the majority of workers in the factory; other unions are pro-employer or even pro-government. In the Tack Fat factory there are several sections which are described below.

1. **Warehouse**

   The warehouse is the first section of the Tack Fat factory. It contains all the new equipment and raw materials to provide the different sections in the factory and another branch of the Tack Fat company that produces sports wear. There are around 30 workers in the warehouse, most of them are men because it involves heavy work such as lifting bolts of cloth etc. from containers into the warehouse and workers also prepare materials inside the warehouse.
Common problems for workers in the warehouse are back pain, shoulder pain, muscle pain and also chemical-related problems such as dermatitis and other skin irritations. Accidents happen often in the warehouse because materials are stored haphazardly causing frequent falls. Inside the warehouse there is not much space and no system at all for storing the material, so workers just put it anywhere, causing accidents especially when fire breaks out, making it difficult to exit easily from the room; they can die or become injured.

2. Cutting section

The cutting section has around 50 workers, generally equal numbers of men and women. Men’s functions are to lift the heavy bolts of cloth onto the table for cutting by the electric cutter, so they can have problems like, back pain from lifting, and women cut their hands in the cutter. All workers in this section are exposed to chemicals (dyes etc.) and dust; some cloths contain dangerous chemicals. The cutting section shares space with the sewing section so they also have problems with dust like allergies and byssinosis.

3. Sewing section

Most of the 4,000 sewing section employees are women who work in three sewing departments. The nature of their function means that they have to sit for long working hours, consequently they suffer back pain, exposure to dust, puncturing by needle (which can shatter wrist, hand, and finger bones), and exposure to residual chemicals because they have close and prolonged contact with all types of cloth. In particular there are many diseased women because they have sit for a long time, using limited body resources related with low wages, so it is difficult for them to work hard.

Illustration: Hesperian Foundation

This and other illustrations from the Hesperian Foundation are from a forthcoming book on health and organising for workers in export factories. For more information on the book, contact Maggie Robbins by email at maggie@hesperian.org or by telephone at +1-510-845-1447, x222. For information on other publications of the Hesperian Foundation go to www.hesperian.org.
4. First quality control section (Buttoning, Quality Control, and Button hole)

In the first quality control section there are several sections combined - Buttoning, Quality Control (QC), and Button Holing. The number of workers in those sections is around 120; they are all women.

Different hazards are related with different sections; in the buttoning section most of the workers can easily injure their hands in the buttoning machine because the workers here have to work very fast because they are paid by piece rate and also the line production manager constantly demands that they hurry up so the clothes can be sent to the washing section. In the QC some workers sit for a long time while other workers stand for a long time - neither posture is healthy; mostly they get back pain and foot pain after working in the factory for several years. The button hole section is almost like the buttoning section except they use needles to finish sewing the holes so another problem for workers is broken needles flying around – most dangerous when they hit an eye.

5. Sand washing section

In this section the function of workers is very dangerous because they have to use a pneumatic (air-powered) gun to blast the sand and wash the jeans. So there is too much dust from the sand and cloth that gets into the body creating respiratory diseases. Workers can also be injured by sand blasting the skin and eyes and can be very serious because the sand shot by the very strong gun easily hits the skin and eyes. All workers in this section are exposed to sand dust and chemicals and dust from the jeans.

6. Washing section

In the washing section there are many different types of machine. Each machine has different problems, such as the workers have to bend right inside the machine to insert the cloth for washing and spin-drying; accidents are easily caused if the machine is accidentally switched on because of inadequate safety systems. All the workers in this section are exposed to chemicals every day, particularly bleach and detergents, but workers don’t know which chemical affects what part of health so some workers resign or are dismissed. They go back home or work in another factory but no one has yet found out a disease that is related with the washing section.

7. Finishing section (QC, Ironing, Buttoning, and Packing)

In this section the workers have to work really fast because all these departments are paid by piece rate. Working hazards of QC, buttoning, and packing are almost the same problems as those in the warehouse (section 1) and first quality control (section 4) but the ironing section has different working hazards - workers are regularly scalded by the very hot steam from the ironing machine, especially when the machine breaks down or is damaged.

Common hazards in the workplace

In all seven sections workers face major problems from sitting and standing for long periods of time, chemical exposure, dust, broken needles, and physical accidents.

But there is another main hazard in all Cambodia’s garment factories; we call it the 'mental issue'.

Every factory’s policy is to constantly earn more profit. To do this the employer frequently forces workers to do overtime as well as making them work hard to fulfil normal production-time requirements. Managers also curse the workers every day to make them work harder. Furthermore they are often threatened by section managers or administrative staff to decrease salary, be dismissed, and not allowed to work overtime, because workers need overtime to receive enough salary for their livelihoods - the minimum wage is only US$45, which cannot support even the simplest decent life.

Therefore workers are concerned daily about job security, which is often more important than health and safety. That is why they have constant stress in their minds that can even lead to serious mental disorders.

At the same time as all the problems above there is a specific hazard at the workplace for women - sexual harassment is also a threat to the women workers every day.

Some times gangsters sexually harass women who work at night or overtime into the night when they go back to the guest home. Another source of sexual harassment is caused by line leaders or factory managers, but these cases are usually hidden because of the Cambodian culture of shyness among women which makes women keep quiet about this abuse. The bosses use women’s bashfulness to put pressure on women workers by using money, promises, and most importantly, job security.