



CO DATA

## Faces and Figures: Who Makes Our Clothes?

Apparel production can often conjure up images of factory workers on sewing machine production lines. This is only part of the picture. Around the world, roughly one in eight workers is involved in the fashion and textiles industry in a huge variety of jobs.

These workers may be farmers growing cotton or other crops for raw fibre. They may be operating machinery that processes raw material into yarns or fabrics, or the dyeing vats that are part of treating a textile – or they may be managing product logistics and retail.

Pinning down the definitive number of garment and textile workers around the world is difficult as each potential source uses different definitions or levels of accuracy and may date from different periods. A conservative estimate of several sources combined would suggest that there are approximately 430 million workers and farmers in the industry involved in activities ranging from raw material production (cotton) to the cut-make-trim stage. (See Table 1.)

The World Bank estimates that there are 3.5 billion people in the global workforce.<sup>1</sup> This means that approximately, at the very least,

one in eight of these people are involved in the fashion industry in some way. Many of these workers are based in Asia.

This is in fact likely to be a low estimate of the true number involved in garment supply chains for various reasons. The statistics used to reach the approximated figure of just under 430 million were the most recent available but these are out of date. They also have major gaps in terms of who is included, for instance:

- Whilst they include workers in the major garment producing countries they do not include workers in all countries
- They don't include workers involved in the manufacture of synthetic fibres, or cellulosic fibres – which account for substantial shares (65% and 8.7% respectively) of global fibre consumption.
- They don't include workers in the retail sector or agricultural workers involved in raising cattle or sheep for leather or wool production.

### Informal workers

Another major complicating factor when assessing worker numbers is the 'informal' sector – that part of the industry where workers have no legal recognition or protection and often work without formal contracts in poor conditions, including at home, and for low wages.

Estimates vary as to how many workers are employed in a formal sense – at factories, mills and other companies. However based on information from WIEGO and the International Labour Organisation<sup>2</sup> where informal figures are not recorded CO has made a calculation based on a conservative 35% of the number formally employed in the sector.

### Gender

Roughly 75% of factory-based garment workers are women.<sup>3</sup> Some argue that this figure underlines the garment sector's role in offering economic empowerment for many women. Others, however, point to the low wages paid to these female workers and argue that the sector exploits the economic inequality that exists between male and female workers.

### Cotton farming

The cotton farming sector – which involves mainly small-scale farmers and associated services operating throughout the developing world – dominates the fashion and textile industry workforce. Estimates of total numbers involved in cotton vary but are around approximately 350 million globally.<sup>4</sup>

#### References

1 World Bank (2017) Labor Force, Total, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.TOTL.IN>

2 See Wiego, Statistics on the Informal Economy; ILO, Informal Economy

3 EU (2017) [Sustainable garment value chains through EU development action](#), Commission staff working document

4 Fairtrade Foundation, Cotton Commodity Briefing (2015)

**TABLE 1**  
Estimating the number of global garment workers and cotton farmers

Estimated number of garment and textile workers	Asia	28,985,000
	Europe	1,023,000
	USA & Canada	1,262,600
	Turkey & Middle East	2,379,083
	Africa	382,800
	South America	2,818,236
Estimated number of informal garment and textile workers		29,823,866
Estimated number of cotton farmers and ancillary workers		350,000,000
Estimated number of silk farmers and workers	China	1,000,000
	India	7,900,000
	Thailand	20,000
<b>Total</b>		<b>429,617,771</b>

Sources: ILO, Clean Clothes Campaign, SOMO, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Better Work, Euratex, Fairtrade, Wiego, INSERCO

**FIGURE 1**  
Estimating the number of global garment workers and cotton farmers

