

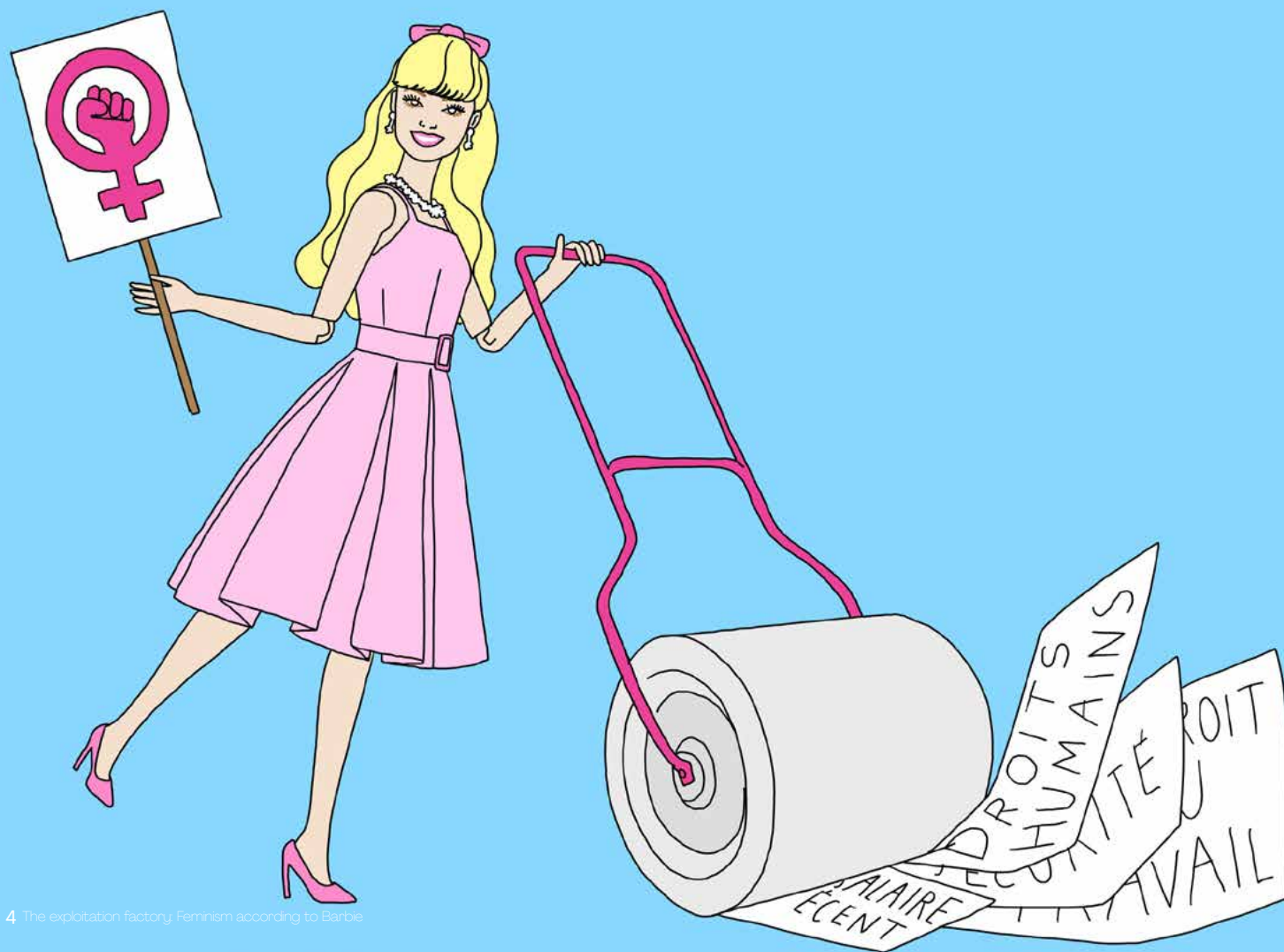


The exploitation factory:
Feminism according to Barbie



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Barbie

From Hollywood to the factory floor

In 2023, millions of people around the world went to see Barbie, a film co-produced by Mattel. Its purportedly feminist tone made it an undeniable cultural sensation that was praised and criticised in equal measure. Unsurprisingly, sales of Barbie dolls surged on the back of the film's success¹. Mattel's marketing gamble on a veneer of feminism – 'purplewashing' – paid off.

While Mattel continues to rake in huge profits from its plastic doll's global cultural prominence, we are pursuing our thirty-year quest to uncover its closely guarded manufacturing secrets. Our investigations have revealed that female production line workers are not only exploited through poverty wages, but are also victims of sexual harassment in a working environment characterised by systemic gender-based violence.

We have repeatedly called on Mattel to take steps to protect the women working in its factories, but to no avail.

In 2024, the year of Barbie's 65th birthday, we returned to a Mattel factory to see how the brand's public message of emancipation stacks up against

the everyday experience of the women it employs. Working with our partners from China Labor Watch, we conducted an undercover investigation combining observations and in-depth interviews at the Chang'an factory, which was the sole Barbie production site in China as of spring 2024.

This new investigation shows that, despite numerous warnings and demands for action, Mattel has not implemented systemic change to improve conditions for women in its factory. The corporation is violating its ethical commitments, and in some cases is in breach of the Chinese legal framework and local labour law. Our findings also show that the promises of emancipation and equality proclaimed in the film Barbie do not extend to all women. The investigation demonstrates the glaring gap between the aspirations of marketing-friendly feminism and the everyday reality of female Chinese workers, oppressed by the excesses of unbridled consumerism.

¹. <https://fortune.com/2023/10/25/barbie-sales-mattel-movie-film-doll/>

A long story of exploitation

Consistent problems over decades of investigations

ActionAid France has been warning Mattel about the shocking working conditions in its Asian toy factories, along with those of its subcontractors, for nearly thirty years. In 1996, female employees in Thailand told us about unacceptably low wages, excessive overtime and major safety breaches. In 1998, under pressure from our appeals and mobilisation by local trade unions, Mattel was forced to adopt a 'code of conduct' to regulate relations with its suppliers. An investigation conducted the following year in twelve factories in southern China found poor compliance with this code, and ineffective regulation by the independent commission that was supposed to oversee its implementation.

In May 2011, Hu Nianzhen, a woman who worked at the Taiqiang factory run by one of Mattel's Chinese suppliers, died by suicide after jumping from a sixth-floor window of the facility. When family members gathered in front of the building in her memory, they were physically assaulted. As Hu's husband explained: *'Women working here are under a lot of stress, as production is constantly increasing in order to fulfil orders. If they don't make their quotas, they are viciously reprimanded. If you happen to make a mistake when assembling a product, you not only have to start again but also have to pay a fine.'* Mattel, however, played down the tragedy and rejected all calls to pay the family compensation and to improve working conditions. It claimed the suicide was an 'isolated event', unrelated

to the working environment, but workplace suicides are symptomatic of unsuitable working conditions, excessive pressure and toxic management practices.

In 2013, on the back of a new undercover investigation by China Labor Watch, ActionAid France revealed that Mattel owed between 6 and 8 million euros to the 'underlings' manufacturing its toys. This represented the total sum of unpaid work and social security contributions for six Chinese factories over the course of a year. Mattel, concerned about its image, finally agreed to enter into discussions with our partners from China Labor Watch. But the solutions it proposed, centring on increasing the frequency of audits, were feeble, and it has since been shown that such measures are insufficient to resolve human rights violations².

In 2019 and 2020, two new investigations in Guangdong province revealed the systemic nature of gender-based violence in Mattel factories. Numerous witnesses described a climate of widespread, normalised sexual harassment within the manufacturing facilities, with women subjected to regular abuse, including verbal harassment and unwanted physical advances, from male colleagues or managers. Despite complaints, factory managers turned a blind eye to this abusive behaviour, leaving victims with no protection or support.

Although Mattel's code of conduct recognises the importance of a working environment free of discrimination and harassment, there is no evidence that these principles are being effectively applied, and the

observations of our investigator on the ground suggest they are not. The audits carried out after our appeals, the International Council of Toy Industries (ICTI), have been opaque, and have raised questions due to their lack of transparency and reliability. ICTI did however, provide Mattel with ethical certifications that enabled the multinational corporation to shirk its responsibilities.

Furthermore, Mattel had a seat on the ICTI governing board, at least between the year 2021 and 2022 through its Global Head of Sustainability and Social Impact, which seems like a potential source of bias at best, and perhaps even a conflict of interest.

A US toy giant, made in China

Mattel is a multinational entertainment company and toy manufacturer founded in Los Angeles in 1945. Its toys are produced both in its own factories and in facilities belonging to third-party manufacturers for whom it is one of a number of clients. According to its US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) filing, Mattel entrusts the production of its most important toys to the factories it owns³. These include the Chang'an factory, which as of 2024, was the only facility in China producing Barbie dolls.

The week after the film Barbie came out in July 2023, net sales of the dolls increased by 20%⁴, and in the fourth quarter of 2023 Mattel's total net sales hit \$1.6 billion⁵. The film undoubtedly boosted the company's revenue, and was a key pillar of its marketing strategy.

« 2023 was a milestone year for Mattel. We extended our leadership in our key toy categories and gained significant share overall, achieved extraordinary success with the Barbie movie, and further strengthened our financial position »

- Ynon Kreiz, Mattel Chairman and CEO⁶

In 2024, the year in which Barbie celebrates her 65th birthday, Mattel is expecting its revenues to remain stable. Despite this, in February it announced a new cost reduction plan, aiming to make \$200 million in savings by 2026.

A culture tolerant of gender-based violence

The factories in which we have been conducting investigations for nearly thirty years primarily employ women, often from poor rural areas. Those who have migrated from the countryside in search of better living conditions are known as *nongmingong*, and are more likely to put up with precarious, very low paid work and degrading working conditions. In western Europe, their closest counterparts would be undocumented migrant women, who have limited rights, are vulnerable to exploitation and face institutional and gender-based violence. Between 2019 and 2024, we collected testimonies from several women who described frequent abuse at the hands of male colleagues and managers. We also observed the emergence of a new form of abuse: cyber harassment, which targets women on social media and in employee group chats. These women described feeling helpless in the face of inaction by supervisors, the normalisation of acts of harassment and the lack of channels through which they could seek protection.

Mattel has a legal and moral responsibility to ensure decent working conditions throughout its production process. As a co-producer of the film *Barbie*, which specifically tackles issues of gender equality, the company might reasonably be expected to have an impeccable record in this area. But for several years, we have been calling out its inadequate or non-existent protective measures, which are failing to effectively and structurally eliminate the phenomena of violence and exploitation.

2. <https://soutenir.actionaid.fr/static/rapport.pdf>

3. <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/63276/000162828023004416/mat-20221231.htm>

4. <https://www.leparisien.fr/economie/succes-du-film-barbie-les-ventes-de-poupees-en-hausse-surtout-aupres-des-adultes-12-08-2023-LZME6P3TRRBLBMST-P32XZPREVI.php>

5. <https://corporate.mattel.com/news/mattel-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-2023-financial-results>

6. <https://www.lsa-conso.fr/malgre-le-succes-de-barbie-mattel-veut-faire-des-economies,454281>



Methodology

This report is based on an undercover investigation conducted in the Chang'an factory in Dongguan in Guangdong, a province in southern China. The investigation was carried out by a Chinese human rights activist between January and February 2024. Her identity remains undisclosed, even to us. We will call her Chun.

Chun was recruited to a job on the assembly line, where she worked for 14 days. She lived in the women's dormitory, sharing a room with 5 other workers. Her immersion in the daily lives of workers enabled her to observe company practices, and conduct discreet interviews with her colleagues. She spoke informally to dozens of workers, and held in-depth interviews with 17 of them (11 women and 6 men). These individuals occupied a range of different posts within the factory, including on the assembly line, in the pad printing workshop, and on the automation line. The interviews

were held in person, and supplemented by subsequent conversations on the messaging app WeChat. Chun also documented her observations with photos, even though photography is prohibited within the confines of the factory. Some of these images, wiped of their metadata and blurred where necessary, are included in this report.

To protect her safety, we had no direct contact with Chun, who communicated via China Labor Watch.

At the time of the investigation, between 1800 and 2100 people were employed at the Chang'an factory, with an almost equal male/female split. During peak periods, usually in the run-up to Christmas, over 10,000 workers can be employed at the factory. Worker numbers have, however, been greatly reduced by automation and the introduction of machines designed to increase competitiveness.

Going undercover

Conducting undercover investigations in factories owned by multinational corporations is a dangerous endeavour that takes a great deal of courage and determination. The investigators who infiltrate these facilities put themselves in considerable danger to gather information of public interest that would remain unknown or hidden without their involvement. ActionAid France is aware of the risks they run and is committed to strictly protecting their anonymity.

Unfortunately, however, sometimes our precautions are not enough. After our last joint investigation was published, the investigator was identified after she appeared in the French press with her face covered. This seriously compromised her safety, and she became a target for threats and intimidation. ActionAid France helped her get to safety, and China Labor Watch got her out of China. She now lives in the United States.



China Labor Watch

China Labor Watch is a US organisation founded in 2000 by a Chinese worker living in exile to expose the working conditions in the 'workshop of the world'.

The organisation works to give workers a greater voice, combat forced labour and human trafficking, and investigate violations of rights in manufacturing sectors. It collaborates with civil society organisations and trade unions to document the everyday experiences behind the 'Made in China' label. The organisation regularly publishes the findings of its in-person investigations, conducted by people who have infiltrated some of the biggest factories in the country.

ActionAid France and China Labor Watch have been working together since 2009.



**Exploitation
for all!**

Rapid 'regeneration'

Chang'an is known as a 'health regeneration' factory, using a term borrowed from gaming that refers to the process by which a player can quickly restore their health bar after taking a hit. The factory is known for offering an almost immediate solution for people who need to make some money quickly. Workers are hired on the spot and can also be housed on site if they want, with the cost of accommodation automatically deducted from their wages. Meals are also provided, on an 'eat now, pay later' basis. Finally, the factory has a notice period of just three days, and workers who quit or are fired are paid three days after they leave.

« The day I arrived in Chang'an, I went to the recruitment office, where I had to scan a QR code to bring up the hiring form. As soon as I had filled in the form, I was hired. The next morning, I was there at 7:50 a.m. as requested. Around a dozen of us took a bus to our medical exam. At 1 p.m. we had our induction training. The next day I was set to work entirely on my own, on tasks that were totally unfamiliar to me »

- Chun

But this 'regeneration' comes at a high price, as the factory offers wages far below the market average. In reality, the Mattel Chang'an business model seems to be set up to target the most vulnerable and most precarious by offering them a short-term solution that flouts the basic requirements of workplace health and safety, stability and well-being. Precarity and instability are not conducive to a healthy, sustainable working culture.

By deducting accommodation and meal costs from employee wages, the factory also presides over a system in which people can work for an entire month but be left with little money to show for it. This system increases workers' dependence on the factory, trapping them in a cycle of poverty, with no real way to save money or progress up the career ladder.



Unacceptably low wages

Someone working in the factory for a standard 40-hour week – which management would not allow – would receive a basic salary of 2200 yuan (€278). In France, we calculate that this would equate to living on a monthly salary of between €600 and €700. This is not enough money to cover the basic needs of someone living in Guangdong province. According to the interviewees, it would take at least 5000 yuan to reasonably cover local living costs.

Workers are thus made dependent on overtime in order to supplement their basic income and have any hope of affording decent living conditions.

Including overtime, the mean salary of an assembly line worker can be up to 4000 yuan (€506), and workers in the pad printing workshop can earn up to 4500 yuan (€570). Those who work night shifts receive a monthly bonus of 780 yuan (€99). A reference table setting out the ‘maximum income’ for each post is displayed on a board in the factory, giving the salary for certain posts as up to 5000 to 6700 yuan (€633 to €849). But in practice, very few people can hope to earn this kind of salary, unless they do a very specific job, work regular night shifts and do several dozen hours of overtime.

Below the living wage

The salary received by workers at the factory is below the local living wage, which is estimated by the Global Living Wage Coalition to be 3719 yuan (€471), and well below the kind of decent wage needed to support a family, calculated at 5143 yuan (€651)⁷.

The living wage is the minimum amount needed for someone to cover their essential needs, including food, housing, healthcare, education and transport. It enables them to afford a decent standard of living without relying on excessive overtime.

A decent wage is a broader concept that encompasses not only essential needs, but also supports workers to live a fulfilling life, meaning one in which they do not merely survive, but can fully participate in the social and cultural life of their community. It involves decent working conditions, opportunities for personal and professional development, and a certain level of economic security.

A frantic pace of work

On average, assembly-line employees work 6 days a week, 10 hours a day, with a 40-minute lunch break. They rack up between 84 and 110 hours of overtime a month, in major breach of Article 41 of the Chinese Labour Law⁸, which states that workers must work no more than 36 hours of overtime a month.

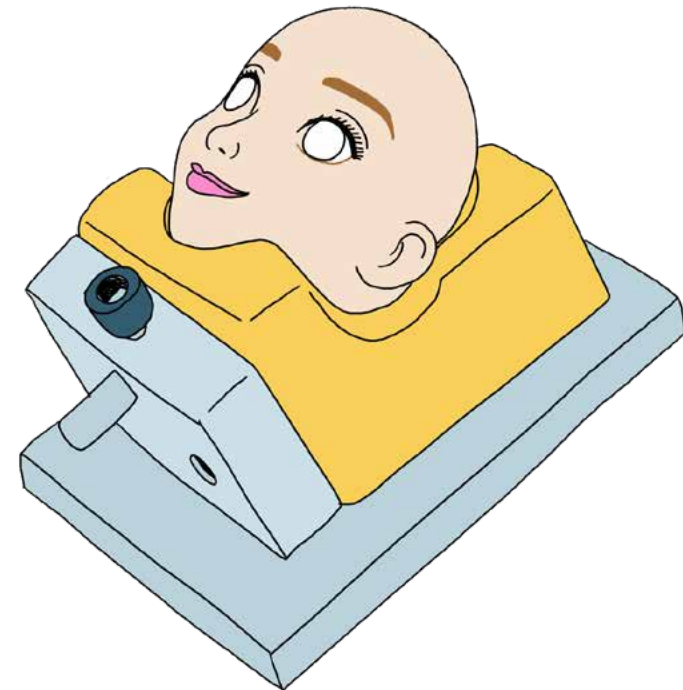
Interviewees reported that everyone was systematically required to work overtime from their first month in the factory. China Labor Watch suspects this amounts to forced overtime, since opt-out requests are often rejected and employees who fail to fall in line are called in to see management. Chun observed that: ‘If individuals refuse to work overtime, the managers pressure them to resign from the factory.’

The issue of overtime is in fact one of economic and wage justice. At Chang’an, the basic salary is so low that workers are dependent on the overtime system to make up for inadequate basic wages and thus ensure their financial security and that of their family. This systematic shortfall, in tandem with the ‘health regeneration’ model, pushes employees further into precarity, causes health problems and makes for a poor work/life balance. Since the regulations and legal frameworks that apply to overtime are less stringent, employee interests are also less protected. Mattel must commit to a review of its wage policy, and to stricter controls on overtime.

This structural reliance on overtime is indicative of another problem: that of the factory’s unrealistic production and profitability targets. These vary across the different workshops and assembly lines, with daily output set between 900 and 1200 units. Workers have to produce at least 2 products a minute. In the workshops, they usually have to work for 10 hours with no or few breaks in order to meet the daily quotas. These targets

are fixed, even though some dolls are bigger or heavier than others. Unfinished units are carried over to the following day.

As the assembly line operates continuously, workers have to arrange their breaks with their colleagues, since they cannot just stop as and when they need. In order to meet the targets, they have to curtail their breaks, with some people even limiting their water intake to prevent themselves from needing to go to the toilet too often. This is a particular problem for employees working on floors 2 to 5, who have to go to the toilet on the first floor, and thus lose 10 minutes of working time.



Managers create a hellish atmosphere

Everyday life in the factory is punctuated by abuse and harassment from an endless stream of bosses. Each workshop has a large number of managerial staff: the director, team leaders, several people responsible for quality control, temporary deputy team leaders, and numerous managers with broad training or supervision remits.

This extremely hierarchical model produces and perpetuates a climate of control and surveillance. It feeds a culture of domination, in which workers are continually reminded of their subordinate position and subjected to surveillance that hinders their ability to work independently, calmly and under decent conditions. It also contributes to a culture of harassment, as described by the interviewees, with each manager seeking to assert their authority over workers.

Several people told the investigator about insults and verbal abuse from managers, who criticised their work with the clear intention of encouraging them to pick up the pace. They reported public humiliations causing high levels of unhappiness, and explained that they felt powerless to do anything about these practices. Women are particularly targeted by such harassment. According to Ai, a worker who was preparing to leave the factory: *'The managers behave badly, they're impatient, they say we're incompetent and call us idiots.'*

A few days after she arrived in the factory, Chun overheard the following tirade: *'Don't you even know how to do anything? [...] You really are stupid [...] The other teams didn't even want them so landed me with them [...] How many times have I told you? I've told you not to do it but you can't help yourself. You can't even put in a nail right, how is that even possible?'* Insults and

humiliation are commonplace, with managers even sometimes throwing things at workers.

In such situations, workers have no way of protecting themselves. The atmosphere in the workshops is described as repressive, abusive and depressing, with workers feeling isolated. The climate is so poisonous that it makes it very difficult, if not impossible, for employees to form friendships with one another. Managers space workers out in order to limit their opportunities to talk. Ai described it as 'a depressing and boring atmosphere'. Most of the interviewees had no hope for the future, and no prospects for personal or professional development. Some leave the factory to get away from these abusive practices, but the 'regeneration' system carries on regardless, feeding on the permanent churn of new arrivals.

7. <https://www.globallivingwage.org/living-wage-benchmarks/urban-shenzhen-china/>

8. https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/laws_regulations/2014/08/23/content_281474983042473.htm



Sounding the alarm on safety

Workplace accidents are common. During the investigation, two relatively serious accidents involving forklifts occurred within the space of a week. While all manual labour involves the potential for accidents, the risks are exacerbated at the Chang'an factory by several factors.

First, workers are exposed to hazardous substances on a daily basis, sometimes without protective equipment. In the assembly and pad printing workshops, employees use chemical degreasers that irritate their eyes and skin, but are not provided with work uniforms or protective goggles. Pollutants are also present in the pad printing and injection moulding workshops, and throughout the spray painting process. At the hair styling workstations, workers have to use very high temperatures to fuse plastic hair fibres to the dolls' heads. Worse still, in other workshops, employees are exposed to extremely hazardous substances containing benzene. But they are not told about the toxic nature of these substances, their health impact, how to protect themselves and others, or how to administer first aid in the event of acute poisoning. Although a hazardous substances notification letter is distributed to the workers handling such chemicals, it does not include this essential information.

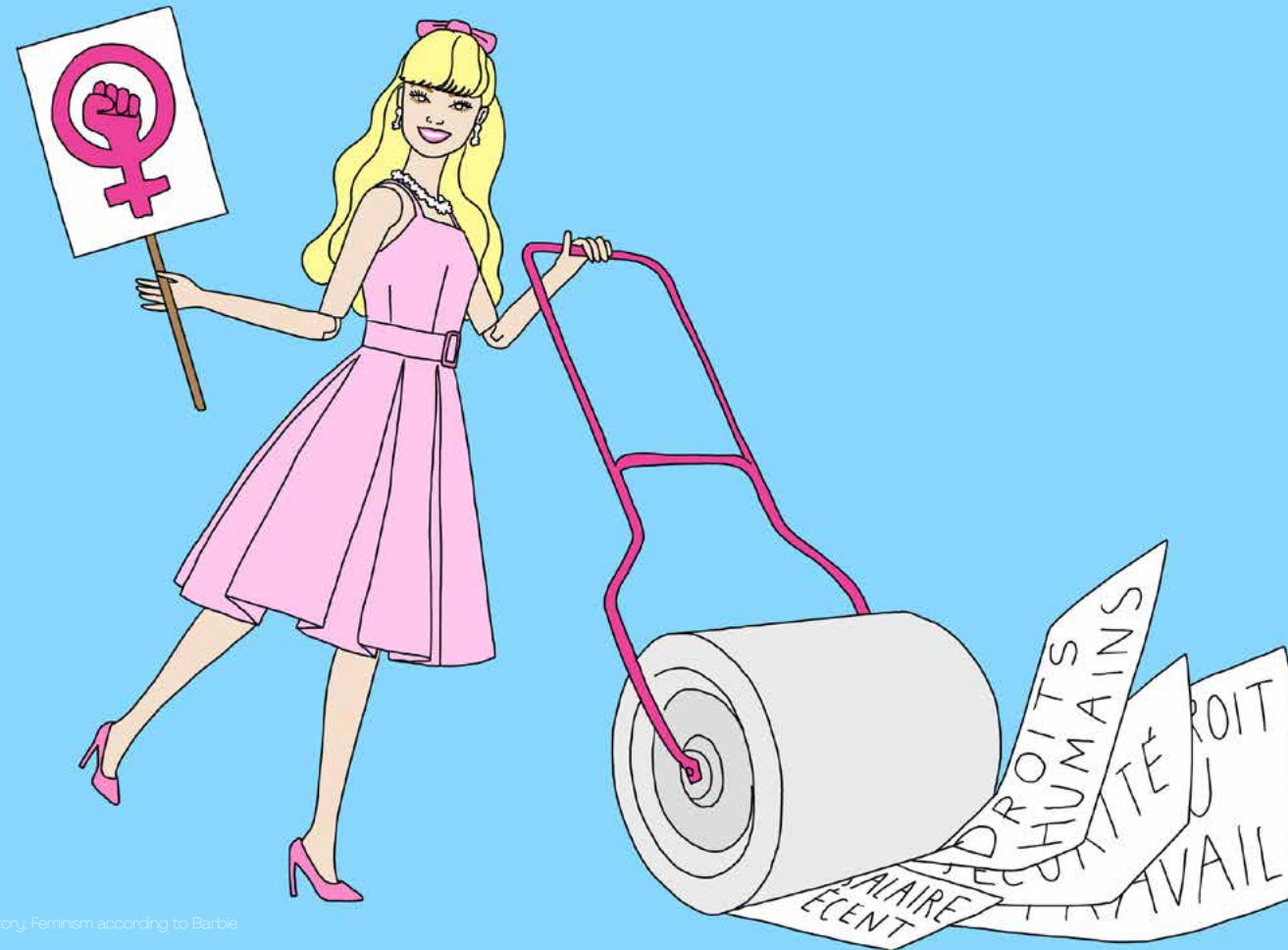
Then there is the arduous nature of the work. The interviewees described working at Chang'an as being physically gruelling. The work is hard, almost non-stop, and noisy. The days are very long, and employees develop hand, back and shoulder pain. Chun observed that: *'I looked at my hands, so rough from the hard work. The managers have rough hands too since they also work on the factory floor [...] some people look so tired they struggle to walk after work.'*

Employees told the investigator that they worried about being so tired they would be less alert around hazardous machinery.

Finally, the health and safety training is far too brief. The 4-hour induction training delivered the day after employees are hired includes a specific safety module that provides a brief overview of the fire risks, use of protective equipment, certain practical precautions and what to do in the event of an accident. This module is overseen by the factory's health and safety department, which is also responsible for human resources, audits and security. It does not provide enough information to ensure safe working conditions. Under Chinese law, employees are required to receive at least 24 hours of training before they can start work. But at Chang'an, workers receive just 4 hours of training. To circumvent this requirement, the factory makes employees sign a document stating that they have completed 'a 24-hour induction training programme', promising them that the remaining 20 hours will be delivered over the next month. None of the employees interviewed had received this additional training.

Women

on the front line of abuse and exploitation



Over a number of years, our investigations have revealed the systemic nature of sexual harassment in Mattel's factories, from degrading comments about female employees' physical appearance, to sexually suggestive comments and humiliating photos. Despite a code of conduct that recognises the importance of a workplace free from any discrimination or harassment, many women report daily abuses within the factory, in the dormitories and around the building. The men responsible, whether ordinary employees or managers, do not appear to fear any consequences from management – quite the irony for a company that vaunts its 'Best Employer for Women' awards⁹. This status is rather hard to believe, given how little it seems to apply to women working on the factory floor.

The gap between the company's public image and the everyday reality of its female employees, which we have been documenting for nearly three decades, is unacceptable. On 8 March 2024, International Women's Day, Barbie encouraged girls to be '*confident, daring, brave and legendary*'¹⁰. In the film, she declares that '*we fixed everything in the real world so all women are happy and powerful*'. But the Chinese women working in the Chang'an factory appear to have missed out on this emancipatory, progressive movement. Far from the cameras, they experience exploitation and gender-based violence on a daily basis, while Mattel continues to pursue its quest for feminist respectability.

By claiming that it is committed to equality even as it exploits female employees and turns a blind eye to the gender-based violence to which they are subjected, Mattel perpetuates the very inequalities it professes to be fighting.

⁹. <https://corporate.mattel.com/careers/awards>

¹⁰. <https://corporate.mattel.com/news/barbie-celebrates-65-years-of-inspiring-girls-to-recognize-their-full-potential>

Watch out for purplewashing

The term 'purplewashing' (or 'feminism washing') refers to the strategies used by companies or institutions to proclaim a feminist message purely for marketing or public relations purposes, while preserving the patriarchal and dominant structures that exploit women and entrench social injustice. It represents an opportunistic appropriation – or even distortion – of feminist principles and movements in a bid to boost sales and consumption.

Over time, through fierce struggles, decisive strikes and global social movements, feminists have secured historic victories and gradually loosened the grip of patriarchy. Feminist activists have forced essential discussions into the public conversation looking into various subjects such as gender-based violence, the culture of consent, or intersectional aspects feminist struggles. The popularisation and broader dissemination of feminist ideas, notably by the media, has raised awareness about questions of equality and thus changed the lives of millions of women. But this increased visibility has also led to certain

companies appropriating feminist messages and concepts without actually doing anything to advance equality and social justice. These companies use feminism purely to serve economic and productivist interests, while preserving the existing structures of domination.

However, feminists are not fooled: we understand that purplewashing is not only a travesty of feminist values, but also plays a role in undermining their revolutionary force. By reducing feminist concepts to a marketing message, companies, in particular multinational corporations, depoliticise our struggles and strip them of their transformative power. The feminist movement, in all its forms and by its very nature, inherently challenges power structures, resisting any attempt at co-optation. Feminism is a disruptive movement that is staunchly opposed to attempts by companies to appropriate its ideas in a bid to capitalise on equality, as if this were something that could be bought and sold.

Mattel, champion of purplewashing

Mattel is a prime example of a multinational corporation engaged in purplewashing. In the 2010s, after being criticised by feminists for decades for perpetuating unrealistic, dangerous beauty standards with its Barbie dolls, Mattel made a strategic shift in a bid to rehabilitate its image and shore up declining sales, which fell by 16% in 2014. Since then, the company has expanded its range of dolls to include different skin tones, body types and appearances. As Mattel goes on with its buzzword "inclusivity": Barbie is now made available wearing a hijab, with a disability, and as a non-binary person. Inspired by strong, powerful women such as scientists, athletes and artists, Barbie showcases diverse careers and leadership roles for girls and women.

But mere representation in consumer products does not constitute a structural advance towards a society that genuinely embraces social justice and gender equality. Instead, it disguises the lack of social transformation by maintaining an illusion of progress and equality. Mattel claims that the purpose of its doll is to give young girls 'limitless possibilities', but for such potential to be realised, practical steps must be taken to combat the discrimination and obstacles that women face around the world, from childhood through to adulthood. The availability of all kinds of different Barbies with all kinds of different body types does nothing to challenge the discrimination and the unequal

distribution of resources and opportunities faced by women who wear the hijab, women who have a disability and non-binary people. Unsurprisingly, there is no Chinese Factory Worker Barbie to reflect the working conditions of the women who sweat and struggle on the factory floor to make these toys.

Mattel effectively reduces questions of equality to a series of individual consumer decisions, sweeping aside the collective and systemic dimensions of discrimination. Even as it adds more dolls of colour to its range, the company is exploiting poor, non white Chinese women, excluding them from the egalitarian movement celebrated by its marketing strategy. The company pushes an understanding of equality that excludes economic systems, social class and North-South relations. This results in a very narrow vision of feminism, confined to the private sphere, dominated by a logic of consumption and devoid of any activist edge.

Real equality requires reforms to remuneration policies, working conditions and redistribution of wealth. If companies are to truly act on gender equality, they must be held responsible for their own practices, not just in their corporate headquarters, but throughout their production chains. This requires the implementation of binding regulation requiring multinational corporations to respect the rights of their female employees and ensure decent working conditions for all.

Women living in fear

Sexual harassment is an everyday experience for women working in the Chang'an factory, who describe being subjected to *'verbal harassment and leering in the workshops, dormitories and in the street'*. Given the factory's demanding production targets and limited breaks, harassment mainly (though not exclusively) takes place in workplace-adjacent settings: on social media and around the dormitories.

For several years, verbal and physical harassment have been compounded by the growing problem of cyber harassment on the work WeChat group, on which men regularly make degrading sexual comments about the physical appearance of their female colleagues. This situation was brought to light by our 2020 investigation *Sexual harassment: Mattel must do better*¹¹, but there is no sign of the company having been prompted by these revelations to end the continuum of gender-based violence endured by their female employees. Xiaohong¹² explained: *'One man sent me pushy messages for months, it was always the same thing: sexual messages and questions about why I wasn't married. He pressured me to send him photos.'* The female interviewees confirmed that such behaviour was widespread.

We also discovered a number of forums on the Baidu social media platform, with the tags 'Chang'an Mattel' and 'Dongguan Chang'an', associated with sexual posts about women working in the factory. Photos, taken and shared without the consent of the women in question, are accompanied by degrading discussions. One of the photos has the caption: *'Woman born after 2000, has worked at Mattel just over a year, her tits are so big I can't focus at work.'*

If we were able to find these posts easily, Mattel can too. The multinational must act immediately to have them taken down.

In theory, the Mattel Chang'an factory has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to sexual harassment. In the induction training, the company states via its managers that action will be taken against offenders. But the trainers skim over the definition of sexual harassment in the workplace, and reporting procedures and channels. They also fail to provide information about the harassment complaint hotline¹³, which is only publicised by posters hidden away in obscure corners of the factory. At present, women believe there is little point in reporting incidents. When one of them spoke to a representative from Mattel House¹⁴ to report being verbally abused by a manager, her concerns were heard, but there was no follow-up, and the manager in question was not disciplined for his actions.

For those who want to live on site, the Chang'an factory has a sleeping zone divided up into dormitories. This is a popular option, since it is cheaper and takes less effort than finding somewhere to stay in the city. Generally speaking, however, living conditions in the dormitories are far from ideal. Each one houses up to 8 people, they are crowded and chaotic, and there is limited personal space.

The women's dormitories are located across the second to the fifth floors, and the men's dormitories on the sixth and seventh floors. Health and safety rules dictate that the dormitory doors remain unlocked – a measure that ironically appears to put women at greater risk. This is, in any case, the feeling they expressed to the investigator. Some felt uneasy, while others felt in danger.

While men are prohibited from entering the women's dormitories and vice versa, this rule is not strictly applied. Our investigator personally observed male workers hanging around the women's toilets and showers, and others whistling at passing women from the upper floors. Outside working hours, men cluster in small groups at

the factory entrance, staring and whistling at women with impunity, creating an atmosphere of 'street harassment'.

Female employees report feeling the 'male gaze'¹⁵ on a daily basis. The structure of the building itself appears to enable this, since men are housed on the upper floors and can easily look down into the women's dormitories below. Several of the women reported feeling watched and being whistled at in the only private space available to them in the factory.

The long-term damage of cyber harassment

Sexual cyber harassment is a particularly damaging form of gender-based violence. Online, encouraged by anonymity and a feeling of impunity, perpetrators express themselves in a more extreme and more abusive way. For the victims, the abuse is constant, since they can receive messages at all hours and cannot simply leave and go elsewhere. Finally, as with the case of one woman whose stolen photo is still circulating online, the damage can persist over the long term, making it very hard to begin the process of recovery.

As with all forms of gender-based violence, cyber harassment compels women to make themselves small and invisible and strips them of their human dignity. Mattel must protect its female employees by putting in place targeted prevention measures to combat the culture of harassment, and develop a safe, decent working environment.



The shared areas in the factory dormitories also perpetuate traditional and discriminatory gender stereotypes. The women's section thus has a 'beauty salon' and a 'beauty kitchen', while the 'computer room' is located in the men's section.

This layout reveals a gender bias within the company's thinking that runs contrary to the image promoted by its marketing strategy. Women are assigned to domestic and grooming activities, while men are encouraged to pursue intellectually stimulating activities. What would Barbie say?

Barbie doesn't care about women's health

The factory lacks appropriate facilities and services for the specific health needs of women, notably in relation to pregnancy, menstrual health and breastfeeding.

First, pregnant and breastfeeding women lack suitable facilities. This is despite their legal right to such spaces. China's Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests¹⁶ states that companies employing a certain number of women must provide suitable facilities: single-sex toilets, spaces for pregnant women and lactation rooms. The Chang'an factory has no such facilities. Mattel claims that pregnant women have access to a special canteen, but this is not the case.

The factory does not allow women to take paid leave for dysmenorrhea (severe period pain). This contravenes Chinese law, under which female employees with diagnosed severe dysmenorrhea or excessive menstrual bleeding are entitled to 1 to 2 days of leave during their period. The existence of these legal provisions is never mentioned, and there is nothing to inform women that they are entitled to such leave. The female interviewees could not recall any colleagues being allowed to take leave for these reasons.

Pregnant women are at a disadvantage in the Chang'an factory. The tasks assigned to pregnant women are often based on stereotypes about their capacity – or supposed incapacity – to work effectively. This is also the case for women returning from maternity leave. Pregnant women thus take a major financial hit, since the tasks to which they are assigned after announcing their pregnancy are often less well paid. Once women register as pregnant with the women's department of the trade union, the factory reassigns them to an assembly workshop,

supposedly because they are less exposed there to toxic chemicals. While the intention appears laudable, the wages on the assembly line are the lowest in the factory. After the seventh month of pregnancy, women are no longer allowed to work night shifts, restricting their ability to work overtime. They then work an 8-hour-a-day, 5-day week, and are therefore only entitled to a basic monthly wage of 2200 yuan (€278). This has significant material consequences: pregnant women face particular financial vulnerability, and considerably reduced wages and opportunities.

In Guangdong province, women are entitled to an average of 178 days of paid maternity leave. However, because this is calculated on the basis of their last few months of work, during which women working at the Chang'an factory are only assigned to basic salary tasks, maternity leave means a low income with no financial security. In practice, the only women in the factory with sufficient financial resources to take their maternity leave in full are those in managerial positions. Most of the women interviewed by the investigator reported returning to work shortly after giving birth, with the majority leaving their newborn baby in the care of elderly relatives back in the countryside.

Gendered division of labour

Although it is not official company policy, jobs are generally allocated on a gendered basis, meaning discrimination between male and female employees is introduced from the outset.

People apply to work at the Chang'an factory, rather than applying for any particular position: it is the managers who are subsequently responsible for assigning new employees to the various workshops in the factory – and these assignments are not gender-neutral. Female employees are often assigned 'women's work' – at the time of the investigation, all of the employees working on the Barbie hair styling station were female, for example – while male workers are mainly assigned to jobs seen as 'men's work', such as the use of machinery. The partial automation of the manufacturing process also has a gendered impact: more men receive training in use of machinery, which gives them access to better paid jobs. The better paid technical roles are thus mainly reserved for men, while the often physically demanding, lower paid jobs on the assembly line are mainly occupied by women.

Finally, it comes as no surprise to find that it is men who occupy middle- and senior management posts, such as those of CEO, managing director and director. The higher up the chain we go, the fewer women there are. Women are poorly represented in management, and when they are appointed to such posts, it is generally at the lower level, in roles such as team leader.

12. The harassment hotline number is shown on posters, but these are displayed in non-prominent places, for example behind a door that remains permanently open.

13. Mattel House is an office in the factory set up by Mattel. Its Mattel Care Ambassadors are responsible for the well-being of workers, and are available to listen to reports of problems in the workplace.

14. The concept of the 'male gaze' describes how women are often perceived and evaluated in a sexist way, reduced to their appearance and desirability to men, with their own experiences and subjectivity being ignored. This 'male gaze' reinforces patriarchal power dynamics by entrenching a particular male, heterosexual and sexist perspective as the dominant norm in social interactions.

15. Le "male gaze" ; regard masculin, est un concept qui décrit comment les femmes sont souvent perçues et évaluées à travers une perspective masculine, où leur valeur est réduite à leur apparence et leur désirabilité pour les hommes, plutôt qu'à leurs propres expériences et subjectivités. Cela reflète et renforce les dynamiques de pouvoir patriarcales en plaçant le regard masculin comme norme dominante dans les interactions et les représentations sociales.

16. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2023-01-12/china-law-on-the-protection-of-womens-rights-and-interests-revised/?locl=bloglaw#:~:text=The%20new%20law%20expands%20these,expires%20during%20her%20pregnancy%20or>



Our demands

Improve working conditions

- Ensure that the basic salary represents a minimum living wage
- Reduce the number of working hours in the factory and end the policy of automatic overtime
- Set reasonable production quotas
- Ensure working conditions are compatible with employee health and safety, and provide all employees with protective equipment appropriate to their needs
- Ensure that staff training is comprehensive and detailed, and complies with the minimum period of 24 hours required under local labour law
- In the absence of trade union freedom in China, ensure that workers have access to helpline numbers, and put in place easily accessible and anonymous channels for making complaints

for Mattel

Combat gender-based violence

- Strengthen and implement, throughout the supply chain, an internal policy prohibiting gender-based violence, with a clear definition of sexual harassment, a simplified complaints procedure ensuring anonymity, sanctions for perpetrators and measures to protect and compensate victims
- Allow local organisations to run training on gender-based violence for both workers and managers
- Improve living conditions and privacy in the dormitories
- Support victims by guaranteeing specific workplace rights and providing them with legal and psychological assistance
- Sign up to international frameworks or establish agreements with feminist and human rights organisations that include suppliers and subcontractors

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pour des peuples solidaires

aux côtés de celles et ceux qui luttent pour leurs droits



ActionAid France is a feminist, international solidarity organisation. We support workers fighting for their economic and social rights, always by their side, never in their stead.

Written and edited by: Salma Lamqaddam, women's rights campaign manager at ActionAid France

Translation into English: Hayley Wood

Typesetting and design : Enora Bource

Illustrations : Anna Wanda Gogusey

Photography : China Labor Watch

Media enquiries and head office

8 rue de Srebrenica - 75020 Paris - 06 25 87 25 72

salma.lamqaddam@actionaid.org

Supporter relations

5 rue de Châtillon - BP 200912 - 35000 Rennes - 02 99 30 60 53

ecnire@actionaid.org

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