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CONICET-UBA

Clandestine Textile Workshops: manufacturing disease

According to a study conducted by a CONICET investigator, life and work conditions in these establishments increase the risks of contracting tuberculosis and other pathologies.

In Argentina, human trafficking is a criminal offense associated with Bolivian immigrant workers' exploitation at clandestine textile workshops (TTC) in the city of Buenos Aires (CABA) and its metropolitan area (AMBA), where articles of clothing are produced for different brands.

The precarious conditions, overcrowding and unhealthy conditions that characterise these illegal workshops affect not only workers' health but also, in many cases, employees' children who live with their parents in the same premises.

Research conducted by Alejandro Goldberg, associate investigator from CONICET at the Institute of Anthropological Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), analyse the incidence of tuberculosis (TB) in the City of Buenos Aires and the metropolitan areas. Both account for over 50% of the reported TB cases and the study concludes that the risky situations of these premises provoke an increment of the TB cases and generate other different breathing, postural and visual problems.

"The data shows that although most of the 2.500 TB cases reported until 2011 at CABA correspond to native Argentine, the Bolivian immigrants cases show a sustained increase from 2004 onwards", Goldberg analyses. He conducted the investigation at the request of the Office of Superintendent of Labour Risks (SRT) of the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security of Argentina.

In some places such as the area of the Piñero Hospital, in the district of Flores, at the southeast of the city, an incidence of 198 cases per 100 thousand inhabitants has been registered. This rate exceeds the 37.5 average in CABA and National Argentine mean, which is 26 cases per 100 thousand inhabitants, according to the National Health Ministry of Argentina.

Goldberg comments that the southwest area concentrates the poorest neighbourhoods and it is there that most of the clandestine textile workshops are located. "This data about the differential TB incidence allows us to prove the ways in which social inequalities inevitably translate into health inequality", the researcher analyzes.

After interviewing workers and former TTC employees', the study shows that these type of illegal workshops tent to be in dark and closed places with little ventilation and defective hygiene. Apart from this, most buildings have construction problems so workers have to endure all these difficulties. In addition, most employees work between 15 and 18 hours a day and most of the time they live there, with their children.

Goldberg explains that these living and working conditions promote risks of infections in these workshops and increment the possibilities of contracting the disease. "Poor nutrition, overcrowding, the constant inhalation of fabric dust, daily violent situations and these workers' precarious subsistence may weaken their natural defences. Consequently, considering this unhealthy conditions, these employees are exposed to infections, contagions and the development of TB", the investigator affirms.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that approximately the third part of the world population is infected with latent tuberculosis; that is to say that they are infected by the bacillus but they are not sick yet and they can not transmit the disease. The pathology appears when the body defences are weak, such as in malnutrition cases or unsanitary living conditions.

Hugo Gramajo, principal CONICET investigator at the Institute of Molecular and Cell Biology at Rosario (IBR), explains that malnutrition, stressed caused by poor living conditions and work provoke "a significant drop in the body's defences, which makes tuberculosis bacillus spread faster and, consequently, the person can develop an acute infection. In the cases of patients who already had the microorganism in a latent state, it could be activated and that could provoke the disease".

Apart from the overcrowding and the lack of hygiene, it must be added the fact that fabrics give off a type of dust which penetrates the airways. The situation is aggravated by the lack of proper ventilation in these enclosed spaces, usually basements or warehouses.

On top of this, according to this study, TTC workers have other health problems that range from postural problems to respiratory effects, vision loss, chronic anaemia or weakening of the immune system- which makes them more prone to contracting infectious diseases and may even result in death.

"Apart from the accidents and fires there are other issues that are related to wrong table and machine placement, cutting tools' handling, visual problems caused by poor lighting conditions and breathing disorders resulting from lack of security measures such as face masks", Goldberg enumerates, " Furthermore, pregnant women have experienced arrhythmia or premature births,"

Collective migrants

In order to carry out the study, the team interviewed Bolivian workers and former workers of clandestine textile workshops who went to the Muñiz Hospital in order to consult or hospitalise for tuberculosis cases.

Thus, the team consulted doctors, nurses, social workers, pharmacists and psychologists who work at the Muñiz Hospital, the main centre for infectious diseases in the City of Buenos Aires. Investigators have also collected data from associations and institutions related to the Bolivian Migrant Community in Argentina and textile cooperatives formed by former employees of TTC.

In Goldberg's view, there is a wrong preconception in which Bolivian immigrants are associated with the increase of the TB rate. "It is said that Bolivian people carry the disease from their country and by doing that, they run the risk of infecting their 'native' population. However, that increase in the cases reviewed is associated mainly with life styles, housing, work and other difficulties they have to endure in this society", the researcher affirms.

The report includes data from different studies in molecular biology, that confirm that there is no scientific evidence in the transmission of foreign Andean strains to Argentine patients ("native") through the immigrants who arrive sick or get the disease in the CABA. Nevertheless, this situation does happen conversely. "The M strain, dominant in the AMBA,

started to spread among many of the Bolivian immigrants who contracted the disease in the TTC”, Goldberg concludes.

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