



Killer Jeans, Sandblasting and Fashion Victims

By Kelly Mills, Intern, International Labor Rights Forum February 18th 2011



Your jeans may be hurting more than just your wallet, especially if they were purchased with an already worn or faded look. The [Clean Clothes Campaign](#) (CCC), an alliance of European organizations, [International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation](#) and other organizations around the world are calling for an end to the denim treatment process of sandblasting, a process that is used to soften and lighten jeans and create that worn-in look.

Sandblasting is a process used to treat denim that involves propelling a stream of abrasive material against the fabric at high pressure to gradually soften and lighten the material. In many factories, natural sand is used to sandblast jeans. This natural sand contains a mineral called silica, which is known to harm workers regularly exposed to it. In the US, sandblasting is only allowed when the sand used contains less than 0.5% silica and in the EU, the material may only contain up to 1% silica. However, the majority of denim sandblasting today takes place in other countries where labor standards are not very strongly enforced. You can [learn more in this recent CCC report](#).

The deadly effects of silica in the denim industry were first noticed in Turkey, where the sand used contains up to 80% silica, according to the [Turkish Solidarity Committee of Sandblasting Labourers](#). As dust from sandblasting enters the air, the workers are exposed to the silica, which causes a known occupational disease, silicosis. Silicosis is a fatal, incurable lung disease that is irreversible and continues to progress even when exposure to the mineral stops. In the last decade, [approximately 600 Turkish workers have been diagnosed with the disease](#) and as of July 2010, at least 46 workers had died as a result of silicosis.



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In an effort to halt the spread of silicosis in Turkey, the [government banned manual sandblasting](#) in

April 2009. Similarly, denim-producing companies, [Levi Strauss & Co and H&M, announced a global ban](#) of the process in September 2010. Unfortunately, many other companies and countries have been slower to implement bans on sandblasting. The CCC reports that manual sandblasting may still take place in major jeans-producing countries like Bangladesh, Egypt, China, Cambodia and Mexico.

To make the jeans industry safer for its workers, the CCC has launched an urgent action demanding that brands take responsibility for their supply chains and ban the process of sandblasting. [Take action today with CCC to let brands know that you won't stand for inaction](#) on this important issue. Until more brands make their sandblasting policies public, you can avoid contributing to the spread of silicosis by being conscious of which jeans you buy. If a pair of jeans looks faded and worn, check the labeling or ask the retailer what finishing technique was used on the jeans.