

Cheap clothing at a hefty price: sweatshops in bangladesh

[Business](#)



On April 24th, 2013, thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers head to Rana Plaza to start the day's work. They settle in their seats and begin working away on their sewing machines, making as many of the same cheap shirts as possible. Suddenly the power goes off and they hear a boom. The building crumbles leaving over a thousand people dead. This event was the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, the worst accident in garment industry history.

The cause of this disaster was poor building infrastructure provided by the company's owners that prioritized profits over the workers' well-being (Burke, " Rana Plaza"). Bangladesh is responsible for 6. 2% of the United States's clothing imports (Chalabi). To put that into perspective, only 2% of the United States's clothing is made in the United States (Vatz). Some people argue that the overall economic benefits of the Bangladesh garment industry outweigh the destructive impact on the Bangladeshi people.

However, the unsafe and unethical working conditions within this industry have caused the loss of human rights and even life. Bangladesh's sweatshops are destructive to the people working in the inhumane conditions. The conditions of these sweatshops are equivalent to those found during the Industrial Revolution Era in the United States. Hundreds of factory workers are forced to work in small, cramped rooms filled with materials and products waiting to be shipped (" Sweatshops in Bangladesh"). As the space between the workers shrinks, the risk of a major catastrophe increases.

Because of the proximity of the workers to the materials and each other is so minimal, it creates the potential for a major fire or other electrical malfunction (" Sweatshops in Bangladesh").

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Many major catastrophes have occurred because of the high-risk working conditions. It was recorded that, “ Since 1990, more than 400 workers have died and several thousand more have been wounded in 50 major factory fires” (“ Sweatshops in Bangladesh”). Although factory owners claim they have improved the safety conditions of their factories, the horrific electrical fires keep occurring. Over the past five years there have been at least six factory fires as a result of electrical malfunctions, causing nearly two hundred deaths and over four hundred injuries (“ Timeline”). Many of these factories only have one exit and there are no fire extinguishers to be found (“ My Life”). The worst part about this situation is that these catastrophes are completely preventable, if only the factory owners invested time in the safety of their workers (Burke, “ Rana Plaza”).

Along with the horrible working conditions, many of the workers are faced with mental and physical abuse. Working seven days a week and sometimes 14-16 hours per day, the factory workers barely have enough energy to make it through the week. Along with these exhausting hours, many female factory workers are mentally abused, facing discrimination and sexual harassment. For example, expectant mothers are usually denied maternity leave and are forced to work until they give birth (“ Sweatshops in Bangladesh”). One expectant mother lost her unborn child at seven months pregnant because she was not granted any breaks and forced to work for long hours (Lazare). The strenuous work day created pressure on the fetus causing it to die in the mother’s womb.

Another woman named Zashmin Khatun was forced to resign because her production rates slowed down when she was five months pregnant. Her supervisors threatened her husband's job if she did not resign, and she was not paid for taking her leave. She claimed that "The bosses had no sympathy for pregnant or sick workers" (Kernaghan 13). Also, many women are "cursed, slapped, and punched" by their supervisors while working on the job (Lendman). Without breaks or time to talk, the workers are required to complete certain tasks by specific deadlines.

If these workers are unable to finish their work, they are abused, withheld pay, and sometimes even fired from their work ("Sweatshops Propelling Bangladesh"). To avoid these punishments, many work overtime to keep up with the demands. Morium Begum was interviewed and revealed, "In April 2013, I worked 150 hours overtime. In May, I toiled 160 hours overtime. And in June 2013, I worked 210 hours overtime" (Kernaghan 16).

These workers do not receive the proper payments for the extra work they perform. Along with extended hours, the workers are forced to work on religious holidays such as Lailatul Barat, which is a very important Muslim holiday (Kernaghan 16). Not only are women affected by this terrible industry, but also many young children are being put to work in these Bangladeshi factories (Kernaghan 16). Although there is a law that states a child can only begin working at age 14, many factories sneak in children as young as five. According to the ILO's survey on Child Domestic Labor in Bangladesh, 421,000 children, aging from five to fourteen, work in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

Because some of these children live with their employers, this arrangement forces the children to be completely dependent on the company employers (Ahamed). Most of these children are forced to sleep on the floor of the factory (Towell). Along with poor working conditions, many of these children are being physically abused by their employers. Because the abuse occurs hidden inside the factories, many people are not aware that this happens so the abuse continues (Ahamed). Furthermore the children who choose to work in the factories quit school so they can work full time to support their families (Bloom).

In the article, *Sweatshops Propelling Bangladesh into Development*, the author states, “ The majority of sweatshop employees are illiterate because they have not yet completed their education and are therefore they are not aware of the fact that they could and should be fighting for higher wages.” The children are not receiving the education needed to get a good job; therefore, many of these children stay within the garment industry and earn very little money. Because these workers are unaware of the wages they could be earning and do not have the proper education for a higher-paying job, the poverty cycle continues to keep turning within the Bangladesh economy (Ahamed). Some argue that the benefits these garment factories bring outweigh the negatives. One benefit of the garment industry is it improves the Bangladeshi economy (Massie).

Alex Massie has discovered that, “ The Bangladeshi economy has been growing at approximately 6% a year recently.” The result of this growing economy is an increase of minimum wage in Bangladesh. The minimum

wage “nearly doubled” from 2006 to 2010 (Massie). In December of 2013, the minimum wage increased from \$38 per month to \$68 (Yardley; Quadir). According to Krugman, this increase in wages leads to people moving to cities for jobs, causing unemployment to go down (qtd.

in Massie). According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in 2009 the unemployment rate was at 5% and in 2013 it decreased to 4.3% (“Bangladesh Unemployment”). In Bangladesh, there are nearly three million people employed by the garment industry. In response to the lower unemployment rates and higher wages, people are no longer forced to live in the streets.

According to Krugman, having these factories in Bangladesh creates a positive ripple effect throughout the economy and positively affects its people (qtd. in Massie). Many companies, such as H, Gap, and others, have promised to improve the safety of the working conditions that are present. These companies passed the “Accord on Fire and Building Safety.” This accord promised to provide money to the factories to improve their working conditions (“Bangladesh Garment Workers Suffer”).

Although the Bangladeshi garment industry is improving the economy, are the death and pain the Bangladeshi people go through really worth it? A major garment industry disaster occurred in Bangladesh on April 24, 2013. This was the Rana Plaza collapse that killed nearly 1,100 people (“Timeline”). It does not matter how much the economy improves if it only improves because of the struggles of everyday workers. The Rana Plaza collapse was entirely preventable, but because the major companies were

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focused solely on their profits, they chose to ignore the warning signs. The day before the collapse, April 23, 2013, an inspector told the owner of the Rana Plaza building that there were cracks in the foundation of the building.

The owner sent everyone home that day, but by the next morning, they were forced to return if they wanted to keep their jobs. The crack in the foundation got worse and caused the collapse of the building ("Rana Plaza"). If the owners took the inspector more seriously, they could have prevented the deaths of so many workers. The companies that held claim to that building did pass the "Accord on Fire and Building Safety," but they never enacted upon it. Most families did not receive the money that was promised to them by these major companies ("Bangladesh Garment Workers Suffer"). The negative effects of the garment industry clearly outweigh the positive effects.

The negative impact of this industry includes unsafe working conditions, worker brutality, poor wages, thousands of deaths, and an uneducated population ("Sweatshops in Bangladesh"). Although factories claim they are trying to make the conditions better, nearly nothing has improved for these workers ("Bangladesh Garment Workers Suffer"). Now that the secrets of the Bangladeshi garment industry have been exposed, more people are willing to stand up for what is right. The workers of this industry have started to create labor unions in order to gain better working conditions. Although many have failed, it gives the people hope and inspiration that one day they will have the rights promised to them (Kernaghan 36). Lastly, many of us unknowingly contribute to the continuation of this abusive industry.

We purchase clothing that is made in Bangladesh unknowingly, such as clothing from Gap or Old Navy (Lazare). By becoming a more informed consumer, we can support companies that do not engage in these abusive practices. Patagonia, Brooks Brothers, and New Balance are companies who do not participate in these abuses (Covert). While shopping if you see a ten dollar sweater and think the price is too good to be true, it probably is.

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