Emerging Writers

Volume 3 Article 3

1-10-2021

Made in Bangladesh: The Unethical Treatment of Sweatshop Workers

Samira Hossain

Samira Hossain

Second-Place Winner

Academic Category

2019-2020 Emerging Writers Contest

Made in Bangladesh: The Unethical Treatment of Sweatshop Workers

Clothing is an essential in everyone's lives. It doesn't matter if someone owns only one outfit-or twenty outfits – everyone has clothing. People know what stores they like buying their clothes from. Walmart, Target, and Forever 21 are just three of the many popular clothing stores people flock to. What people don't know is— where do these stores make their clothing? The clothing stores listed above actually make their products in international factories. Most of these factories are sweatshops.[1] Unfortunately, according to the United Nations Children's Funds, Bangladesh is the second largest textile supporter; therefore their garment sector is huge, with many of their textile factories unaccounted for and located in the "informal sector" (3). This means these factories easily turn into sweatshops because no one is regulating them. The sweatshop workers of Bangladesh are working and living in conditions that are inhumane, and although sweatshops are a necessary evil for Bangladesh's economy, it does not justify the ill treatment of the workers.

Sweatshops have been around since the industrial revolution (Powell 109). They were essential in creating the job market and moving people away from the agricultural life. However,

[1] Sweatshops are factories with poor conditions. Some of these conditions include but are not limited to: poor pay, long hours, and limited saftey.

in countries like the United States, they noticed that factory work needed to be more ethical. This resulted in the creation of laws to prevent poor treatment of factory workers. To this day, Bangladesh has made very few changes to change the treatment of factory work. For example, Powel mentions one important law the United States created was not letting children work in these factories (119). Child labor laws also exists in Bangladesh, but it is ignored. The United Nations Children's Fund reports that out of 185,000 workers in one of Dhaka's garment sector, 59% of the workers are under 18 (10). Another law created in most first-world countries for the better conditions of sweatshop workers, was providing these workers better pay and fewer hours.

During the Industrial Revolution, workers worked around 10 hours a day and were paid roughly 12-14 dollars a month (Powell 114). This would have continued if it weren't for worker strikes that demanded better pay and fair hours. These strikes caused the government to create laws that prevented factory owners from overworking and underpaying their employees. Unfortunately, worker strikes in Bangladesh didn't have the same result. War on Want statistics say workers in Bangladesh sweatshops still work 14-16 hours a day for an average income of 45 dollars per month. It doesn't get better from there. The last comparison is concerning safety. Powell relays, after many safety incidents such as the fire of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York, the United States put administrations and saftey standards into place (118). Bangladesh does not even have a set of safety standards that they are required to adhere by. According to Williams, a reporter from CBS News, who investigated some of these sweatshop workers in secret, the fire extinguishers are not where they are supposed to be, and the exits are often blocked with loads of products and boxes. The deadliest garment factory disaster in the world was the collapse of the Rana Plaza in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Due to factory owners ignoring the warnings from safety inspectors deeming the building unsafe, 1134 sweatshop workers lost

their lives and 2,500 were injured (Kabir et al. 225). While the United States barley have sweatshops today, Bangladesh has made little progress.

After working a long, tiresome shift at work, sweatshop workers go to the comfort of their homes- or the lack thereof. According to the United Nations Children's Fund, roughly 4 million people live in slums near the factories they work at (11). In these towns, there is often no running water and no sewage system (10). The United Nations Children's Fund state the sweatshop worker's houses are "non-durable housing structures made out of corrugated iron or scrap wood" (11). This means that houses would not be able to withstand rainstorms or earthquakes. Furthermore, conditions like these are excellent breeding grounds for bad hygiene and diseases to run amuck. On top of that, there is no free healthcare. Many of the workers rely on cheap, pain medication as their alternative. One of the most abused drugs for these workers is Panadol[2]. In a study done by Akhter, a woman she interviewed stated, "Panadol becomes our main food to survive from all of our physical illness and pain. Every woman who works at the factory they carry Panadol and eat it like rice*"* (5). As with any drug, the overuse of it can lead to some harmful side effects. Researchers Yoon et al., studied the effects of acetaminophen and concluded that acetaminophen resulted in 50% of acute liver failure in the United States alone (140). With the unreported numbers of Panadol abusers in the sweatshop worker population in Bangladesh, liver disease may be a common cause of death for these people. The poor pay is the blame for these workers not being able to afford better healthcare and shelter.

Women dominate the field of sweatshop work. Statistics show that 80% of the workers in the garment industry of Bangladesh are women (Kabir et al. 224). One would view this as

[2] Panadol is an acetaminophen which is commonly described as a pain reliever and it works the same way as a Tylenol.

something positive. Women have the ability to work instead of being forced to stay home. This notion is wrong. Factory owners are not hiring women because they are feminist; they are hiring women because they view them as easy to manipulate. Kabir et al. explains the fact that most of Bangladesh is run in a traditional-patriarchal manner and thus are allowed to pay women less and get away with physical and verbal abuse directed to them (225). This doesn't bode well for the future of social progress for the people of Bangladesh. It's not progress on gender equality if the only jobs available for women do not respect women but treat them inhumanely. On top of this, the factory owners do not have sympathy towards pregnant women and mothers. The United Nations Children's funds found out that pregnant women are forced to "voluntarily resign" because factory owners don't want to employ them as they can't work as hard. This has led to many women having abortions or not properly staying home to breastfeed their children in fear of getting fired. Research has shown if a mother is not breastfeeding her child in the first few months they are born, it increases the child's chance of death up to 14 times more than a child that has been breastfed (4). This data is alarming as it's unfair to these women. They are not voluntarily making the choice to breastfeed but are being forced to not breastfeed in order to support their family. These women face a conflicting choice that they can't win. They can either not breastfeed and work long hours to provide for their family (which risks their newborns' health) or they can request fewer hours in order to breastfeed and risk losing their jobs (making them not have enough money to provide for the family).

To make matters worse, it's not just new mothers who work in this field, but children too. Amin et al. concluded that roughly 15% of the children ages 5-14 work (877). One might raise the question of why do families send the children off to work rather than make them go to school? Well, firstly, most of these impoverished families can not afford to send their children to

school. This is not surprising considering the fact that the workers make around 45 dollars per month. This income barely keeps a roof over their head and food on their table. Aulakh, a journalist who went undercover to get a first-hand expierence of what it was like to work in a sweatshop in Bangladesh, says her boss was actually 9 years old, and that her boss's dream in life was to work hard enough to move up from being a sewing helper to a sewing operator, which meant she would make 45 dollars per month. This is disheartening to hear at the least. Many of these child workers will never see a better future because working in a sweatshop is all they know. Consequently, working in a sweatshop for long hours as a child has negative effects on their future growth and health. In an interview done with Akhter, a sweatshop worker explains how she has been working in the factory ever since she quit school in fifth grade. She says her fingers bleed constantly from accidental finger pricks, but she has to ignore it to work harder for more money. She works harder because she wants to save money for the future as "No one can work in the factory for more than 10 years because you will lose your physical strength, energy, and health" due to the tedious work (6). If this line of work is so hard that after 10 years it's impossible to work any longer, then it should be illegal to allow children to work in these factories.

Knowing all of this, one would wonder why no one has done anything to change these problems. The reason why would be because of the language of oppression. Bangladesh is negatively connotated with having a corrupt government and being a third-world country. Thus, when people hear about the sweatshop conditions in Bangladesh, they just think "that's unfortunate, but because the country has a bad government and is underdeveloped, that's just how they are deemed to live." As Bosmajain states, "From Genesis and beyond, to the present time, the power which comes from naming and defining people has had positive as well as

negative effects on entire populations" (1). Raising awareness that the treatment of these workers is not normal, nor is it okay to do nothing is the first step to fixing things. What solutions can people impose? A common misconception is that a good solution to the sweatshop problem could be to boycott products made from sweatshops all together in order to run them out of business; however, this is not an effective strategy. United Nations Child's Fund explains that Bangladesh "has become the second largest exporter of garments in the world" (3). This means that if people did boycott sweatshop made products from Bangladesh, not only will it destroy Bangladesh's economy but lead to the unemployment of sweatshop workers who depend on this income to live. Instead, solutions to the sweatshop problem should be focused on improving conditions and lives of the workers by making the government and mother-corporations[3] step up and take responsibility. One improvement that can happen is the government changing the minimum wage to where the sweatshop workers can stay aloof and support themselves. Of course, the argument that comes with that, according to Newell and Nasir, is that the big corporations that fund these sweatshops will look elsewhere in putting their factories if they have to pay workers more. However, if people raised awareness on the fact that if Bangladesh's government can raise the minimum wage to support their workers, then so can other third-world countries to support theirs. This way, mother-corporations would have nowhere to turn to, leading companies to accept making their factories in Bangladesh and paying them the higher requested wage.

Another improvement to sweatshops in Bangladesh would be more laws protecting minors and not letting children work. It is true that most children work to provide for their

[3] Mother-corporations are the international companies like Walmart and Target who place their factories in third-world countries.

family, however with an increase in wages, it won't be necessary for children to work as well as the parents. Currently, Bangladesh does have child labor laws put into place, however these laws are ignored. For example, the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 reveal that children under the age of 14 are not permitted to work unless the work does not interfere with their education or health (Aktar and Abdullah 165). This law is ignored because there are several loopholes. One of them is the fact that people fake their birth certificates and put a false age when applying to work. Williams from CBS News went undercover and found out a 12-year-old girl put her age as 18 on a birth certificate just so her family can make ends meet. Another is that most, if not all, sweatshops are located in the informal sector, thus they are unaccounted for (UNICEF 10). Lastly, the justice system is corrupt and there seems to be no punishments given out to the people who do break these labor laws (Aktar and Abdullah 163). To avoid problems such as these Aktar and Abdullah suggest, Bangladesh should focus on making authentic birth certificates that are not easy to counterfeit and getting rid of a thing such as the "informal" sector. They should adopt policies of punishment similar to the ones United Nations follows (157-158). This will discourage children from working in sweatshops and significantly decrease the statistics of child labor in Bangladesh today.

Instead of sending the children off to work, sweatshop worker families should be able to send their children off to school. Education is a good investment in preventing poverty because it gives more options of work with higher salaries than working in a factory. By going to school and getting a good paying job, children can provide for their parents in a more beneficial way. What's stopping sweatshop working parents from sending their kids to school? The answer would be money. School is costly in Bangladesh and many just can't afford it. The United Nations Child's Funds interviewed some sweatshop working parents how they felt about their

children's education and here's what one parent said: "I worry that I will not be able to afford to cover the cost of their education with the low wages that I earn" (12). Parents should not have to worry about paying their children's education on top of providing their family with enough food and shelter. A solution to this problem is Bangladesh's government investing in childhood education. Aktar and Abdullah recommend schooling to be free and that the only way that is going to happen is to set up a national monitoring of the government's education budget (169). If this is set up, then others can track where government spending is going and prevent it from getting in the hands of corrupt officials who won't use the money to fund education.

As mentioned earlier, safety is non existent in Bangladesh's garment factories. The Rana Plaza disaster mentioned earlier, could have been easily avoided. If Bangladesh put out laws that gave safety inspectors more power to shut down places where they deemed unsafe, less accidents like the Rana Plaza disaster would occur. Many factory disasters seem to happen because there are no emergency protocol put into place. For example, Bajaj, a writer for the New York Times, reports, the fire at the Tazreen Factory in Bangladesh killed many people who were working on the first and second floor due to there not being enough emergency fire exits. This is why Bangladesh sweatshops need to make safety their priority. A solution to this safety problem is laws requiring factories to make evacuation plans and multiple emergency exits on each floor. Everyone should also be trained in knowing where these exits lay and there should be mandatory fire drills each month.

The goal of the Bangladesh government should be to eradicate a such thing as "sweatshops." They are unethical places of hard-working labor made from greed and corruption. Bangladeshi factory workers have the right to live without worry of having enough to pay rent or put food on the table. Furthermore, they have the right as every parent does, to encourage their

children to go to school and pursue their dreams. These actions can not happen if change does not occur. The power to make a difference for these human-beings are in the hands of Bangladesh's government, mother-corporations, and the common people of the world.

Works Cited

Aktar, Sharmin.,and Abdullah M. Abu. "Protecting Child Labour in Bangladesh: Domestic Laws versus International Instruments." *Bangladesh Economic Journal of Sociology,* vol. 10, no, 1, Jan. 2013, pp.153-172. http://www.bangladeshsociology.org/BEJS%2010.1Sharmin%20Aktar%20.pdf

Akhter, Sadika, et al. "Sewing Shirts with Injured Fingers and Tears: Exploring the Experience of Female Garment Workers Health Problems in Bangladesh." *BMC International Health and Human Rights,* no. 1, 2019. *EBSCOhost,* doi:10.1186/s12914-019-0188-4.

Amin, Shahina, et al. "Poverty and Other Determinants of Child Labor in Bangladesh." *Southern Economic Journal,* vol. 70, no. 4, Apr. 2004, pp. 876–892. *EBSCOhost,* doi:http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.kennesaw.edu/journal/10.1002/(ISSN)2325-8012.

Bajaj, Vikas. "Fatal Fire in Bangladesh Highlights the Dangers Facing Garment Workers." *The New York Times,* The New York Times, 25 Nov. 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/26/world/asia/bangladesh-fire-kills-more-than-100-and-injures-many.html.

Bosmajian, Haig A. *The Language of Oppression. U of America P,* 1983.

Holly Williams. "Undercover in a Bangladesh Clothing Factory." *Youtube,* uploaded by CBS News, 22. May 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W1mvcFuiTts&t=1s

Kabir, Humayun, et al. “Vulnerabilities of Women Workers in the Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh: A Case Study of Rana Plaza.” *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, no. 6, 2018, p. 224. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsggo&AN=edsgcl.553314064&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Newell, Sarah. “Poverty Wages No More: Time for a Real Wage Increase in Bangladesh! .” *Poverty Wages No More: Time for a Real Wage Increase in Bangladesh! | International Labor Rights Forum*, International Labor Rights Forum, 16 Aug. 2018, https://laborrights.org/blog/201808/poverty-wages-no-more-time-real-wage-increase-bangladesh

Powell, Benjamin. “Meet the Old Sweatshops: Same as the New.” *Independent Review*, vol. 19, no. 1, Summer 2014, pp. 109–122. *EBSCOhost*, doi:http://www.independent.org/publications/tir/.

Raveena Aulakh. “The Clothes On Our Backs: Inside a garment factory.” *Youtube*, uploaded by Toronto Star, 10. Oct 2013. http:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qky39OWdXX0

“Sweatshops in Bangladesh.” *War on Want*, War on Want, 23 Jun. 2015, https://waronwant.org/sweatshops-bangladesh

“The Ready-Made Garment Sector and Children in Bangladesh.” *UNICEF*, United Nations Children's Fund, Nov. 2015, www.unicef.org/csr/files/CSR_BANGLADESH_RMG_REPORT.PDF.

Yoon, Eric et al. “Acetaminophen-Induced Hepatotoxicity: a Comprehensive Update.” *Journal of clinical and translational hepatology* vol. 4,2 (2016): 131-42. doi:10.14218/JCTH.2015.00052