

Fast Fashion Is Antithetical To Workers' Rights



Sonali Kolhatkar

Don't believe the fashion industry's stated commitment to support a living wage for Bangladesh's garment workers.

'Tis the season for holiday shopping, and as American consumers ready their spending dollars, few of us are likely to link our gift buying to the high cost of low prices on the other side of the planet. This is especially true for what has come to be known as "[fast fashion](#)," the clothing equivalent of a Big Mac: attractive, affordable, and throwaway. But the Bangladeshi women who toil as underpaid garment workers so we can wear disposable outfits, are making their voices heard loudly enough to reverberate across oceans and continents. [Mass protests](#) for higher wages have roiled the nation, at least three workers have been killed, and there is no end in sight.

Bangladesh is the [world's second-largest exporter](#) of apparel in the world, after China. It is the South Asian nation's largest industry, employing more than four million workers, a majority of them women. The largest share of Bangladesh-made garments is bought and sold by United States retailers, which include [recognizable name brands](#) such as H&M, Zara, Calvin Klein, American Eagle, and Tommy Hilfiger.

Garment workers had been taking home a meager [pay of about \\$75 a month](#), and have demanded a nearly threefold increase to about \$205 a month. When the

[Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association](#) (BGMEA) initially set new wages at \$90 a month, the mass protests began. When the BGMEA then responded by raising wages to \$112 a month, the protests actually intensified. According to [Al Jazeera](#), “more than 10,000 workers staged protests in factories and along highways to reject the panel’s offer.”

Headlines touted the offer as a [56 percent increase in wages](#), while Bangladesh’s Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, long hailed as a [liberal leader](#), patronizingly told workers to put up or shut up. She [said](#), “They have to work with whatever their salary is increased, they should continue their work.” She roundly condemned workers’ attacks on factories, saying she was worried that, “if these factories are closed, if production is disrupted, where will their jobs be? They have to understand that.”

Hasina’s government has unleashed security forces that have intimidated and attacked union organizers. Police recently [fatally shot a 23-year-old mother](#) and sewing machine operator named Anjuara Khatun after firing at protesters.

To understand why protests intensified after wages were dramatically increased, it’s worth examining the context of garment workers’ livelihoods. By one estimate, the [cost of living](#) for a single person in Bangladesh is about \$360 a month, not including rent. Garment workers’ wages have not risen since 2019 and since that time inflation has hit Bangladesh just as it has hit most of the world.

Even the demand for \$205 a month will not allow most to make ends meet. The factories’ offer of about half that number was insultingly low. Abiramy Sivaloganathan, the South Asia coordinator for the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, [told Vogue](#), “[The] increase that unions are asking for is not even enough, technically speaking, [given] inflation and the crisis the country’s going through.”

On the surface, U.S. brands, who purchase their inventories from Bangladesh’s factories, appear to be on the right side of the fight. The American Apparel and Footwear Association (AAFA), an industry trade group, wrote a [joint letter](#) to Hasina’s administration urging her to “raise the minimum wage to a level that corresponds with a wage level and benefits that are sufficient to cover workers’ basic needs and some discretionary income and takes into account inflationary pressures.”

The AAFA even went as far as asking the government to avoid retaliating against

unions and to respect “collective bargaining rights.” The U.S. State Department issued a [statement](#) saying, “We commend the members of the private sector who have endorsed union proposals for a reasonable wage increase.”

Further, global retailers are offering to eat into their profits by [increasing the price they pay factories](#) to help them offset increased wages. Currently, the cost of the labor to produce garments is a mere 10-13 percent of a product’s total manufacturing cost. The industry would have to increase that number by about 5-6 percent.

But are companies really committed to raising garment workers’ wages? A spokesperson for the [Clean Clothes Campaign](#), a rights group based in The Netherlands [said](#), “The living wage commitments of brands are nothing but empty promises as long as they refuse to explicitly support the workers’ demand for a bare minimum, let alone a living wage.”

A [survey](#) of about 1,000 factories in Bangladesh, published in early 2023, revealed that companies like Zara and H&M underpaid factories for garment purchases, making it harder for them to pay their workers. When the COVID-19 pandemic led to global shutdowns, large retailers canceled orders and delayed payments. One industry expert [told The Guardian](#), “Only when suppliers are able to plan ahead, with confidence that they will earn as expected, can they deliver good working conditions for their workers.” Rather than dip into their profits to compensate for the market slowdown in 2020, many global brands simply refused to keep their financial commitments to Bangladesh’s factories, leading to downward pressure on wages.

Given this context, fast fashion’s stated support for a living wage increase and a commitment to swallow the resulting increased labor costs sound disingenuous.

It has been more than 10 years since the deadly collapse of [Bangladesh’s Rana Plaza](#), the world’s worst garment industry disaster. The eight-story compound of factories in Dhaka was filled with thousands of workers when it crumbled under the weight of government neglect and worker exploitation in April 2013. More than 1,100 workers, most of them women, were killed.

The Rana Plaza disaster was a turning point for Bangladesh’s garment industry as workers were seen as dispensable pawns by governments and industries alike. In the wake of the disaster, North American brands [refused to join other global](#)

[companies](#) in signing on to [the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh](#). Citing high costs, they chose instead to form their own alliance for inspecting factories, one that applied lower safety standards. It was a stark indicator of where these companies' priorities lay, one that frames their current lip service to higher wages for garment workers.

Fast fashion's outlook is rosy. The industry has been steadily growing and, thanks to the cooperation of government heads such as Sheikh Hasina—who has been fixated on "[growth](#)" at all costs—it is [expected to more than double its market size](#) over six years, growing from \$91 billion in 2021 to a projected \$185 billion by 2027. Meanwhile, the workers who fuel the profits behind that expansion are [facing starvation](#). This holiday season, perhaps the best gift we can give is a commitment to [force the industry to pay up](#).

By Sonali Kolhatkar

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