

# Fires and fatalities don't keep Bangladeshi women from the factories

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Employees sew side seams of women's blouses eight hours a day, six days a week at Beauty Garments Ltd. in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Kenneth R. Weiss/Los Angeles Times/MCT

DHAKA, Bangladesh — Mukhta Mollah nimbly smooths the red fabric as she guides it through a sewing machine. She sews side seams on women's blouses bound for America. She spends eight hours a day or longer in this hot, sweaty factory. She works six days a week.

On this day, like every workday, she will try to reach a target of 1,000 blouses.

Seamstresses sit all around her in rows that stretch across this factory floor crowded with 350 workers. Fluorescent lights buzz and blink overhead while enormous fans nosily push around the still air, which carries the familiar scent of new clothes.

It takes Mollah less than 30 seconds to complete her part of the blouse. A helper snips the thread ends and piles the garments, or clothes, into a bin to take to the next station. Mollah has long grown used to the mind-numbing repetition, the never-ending noise, the glare, the heat.

## A Complicated Picture

Mollah knows that she won't get rich. She sends nearly half of her \$20-a-week wages home to her family but she's grateful that the salary, no matter how small, gives her the means to escape her home village and the fate of her schoolgirl friends.

All of them were married before they turned 16. All have children of their own. All have moved in with their husbands' families. They must get permission from their mothers-in-law to leave the house.

"For them, it's a cage," said Mollah, 19. "My life is much better than theirs because they have no freedom. When I go back to my village and see my friends, they ask me, 'Can you take us with you?'"

Bangladesh's garment industry has gotten a reputation for harsh and sometimes deadly working conditions. An eight-story factory collapsed last April, crushing more than 1,100 workers. Six months earlier, a factory fire killed 112 people who could not flee because their bosses had locked the doors to keep them working.

Despite the horrific accidents and accusations of labor abuses, the picture of the underpaid and overexploited garment worker gets more complicated. It is especially complicated when compared to other options available to women in this poor, traditional Muslim society. About 5,600 factories in Bangladesh employ more than 4 million people. Ninety percent of the workers are female.

### **Workers From Rural Areas**

"It's not as dramatic of a transformation as a college education or launching a career," said Sajeda Amin. She studies the societal impact of the garment industry for the nonprofit Population Council in New York. But these jobs, she said, have opened a new pathway for teenage girls to go from childhood to adulthood with a some amount of independence.

Even labor activists in Bangladesh and the United States who track cases of workers being intimidated and forced to work long hours agree that the garment industry has given young women opportunities to play a bigger role in society.

"It's fantastic that they have this common industry that has put women to work," said Charles Kernaghan, director of the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights, based in Pittsburgh. Recent street protests in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, by garment workers helped nudge the [minimum wage](#) to \$68 a month, which he said amounts to about 33 cents an hour. The industry, Kernaghan said, must do more to provide a decent living wage and respect workers' rights.

Bangladesh is the second biggest maker of clothes in the world; the largest is China. It draws workers largely from rural areas such as the tiny village of two dozen houses near the Indian border where Mollah grew up with three sisters. The eldest worked for two years in a garment factory before returning home to marry.

When their father, a rice farmer, fell ill and was unable to work, Mollah willingly took the factory job to help the family. She was 15 at the time, a year older than the legal minimum age for a factory worker.

### **At The Apartment**

Mollah's two-bedroom flat is two blocks away; it is in a concrete structure with metal bars and shutters on the windows, but no glass panes. She lives there with three other young women.

The four live in a 10-foot-by-12-foot room, with a ceiling fan and a bare light bulb. Two sleep on a double bed, two on a pad on the concrete floor. The women switch places every other week and split the \$45-a-month rent.

All share a squat toilet, a porcelain-lined hole in the floor, and a common kitchen with a low stool and two gas burners that sit on the floor. They cook in the kitchen and eat in their room.

Mollah and her roommates show off their apartment with pride, even though road dust blows through the windows, forcing them to keep their clothes bundled in bags. The paint is peeling, but the floor is meticulously clean and floral pattern curtains cover the windows' iron grating.

Kanchi Hazi, the more outgoing of the roommates who constantly makes the others laugh, said she considers the sleeping arrangements luxurious compared to those at the small house she shared with her parents, six sisters and two brothers.

### **"I Have Freedom"**

The 24-year-old with a gap-toothed smile left her home village seven years ago to take this factory job. She sews pockets on blouses and works as many hours as she can get.

"I like it here," she said, arms akimbo, with fists on her hips. "I make my own decisions. I can earn money and help my family."

With overtime, she makes \$78 a month and sends half of it home. Her father, a day laborer, cannot always find work. Every few months, she makes the three-hour bus ride home to visit her family. She gets mixed reactions from villagers.

Some adults praise her, she said, because "I'm the only wage earner in the family." Others scold her for taking a job in a factory where men and women work together. It's just not a proper place for a young, unmarried woman to be, they lecture.

But when she steps off the bus to visit her family, younger village girls dance around her. "They see me as a role model," Hazi said. "I can do whatever I want. I can enjoy myself. I have freedom."

## Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences DOES NOT support the central idea of the article?
- (A) She sends nearly half of her \$20-a-week wages home to her family but she's grateful that the salary, no matter how small, gives her the means to escape her home village and the fate of her schoolgirl friends.
  - (B) Six months earlier, a factory fire killed 112 people who could not flee because their bosses had locked the doors to keep them working.
  - (C) Even labor activists in Bangladesh and the United States who track cases of workers being intimidated and forced to work long hours agree that the garment industry has given young women opportunities to play a bigger role in society.
  - (D) "It's fantastic that they have this common industry that has put women to work," said Charles Kernaghan, director of the Institute for Global Labor and Human Rights, based in Pittsburgh.

- 2 Which of the following supports the fact that young Bangladeshi women long for independence?
- (A) "My life is much better than theirs because they have no freedom. When I go back to my village and see my friends, they ask me, 'Can you take us with you?'"
  - (B) It is especially complicated when compared to other options available to women in this poor, traditional Muslim society.
  - (C) When their father, a rice farmer, fell ill and was unable to work, Mollah willingly took the factory job to help the family.
  - (D) The 24-year-old with a gap-toothed smile left her home village seven years ago to take this factory job.

- 3 Select the paragraph from "A Complicated Picture" that contains a word that is an antonym for "harmless."

- 4 Read the sentence from the article.

*Recent street protests in Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital, by garment workers helped nudge the minimum wage to \$68 a month.*

What is the meaning of the word "nudge" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) hamper
- (B) justify
- (C) push
- (D) pull