

ORIGINAL: WOMEN IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

The ready-made garment industry is a global market that is made up of incredibly complex supply chains. Big businesses often rely on labor in the Global South to cheaply produce products for mass consumption. Bangladesh, China, Vietnam—the countries that most Western retailers have printed on the tags of their clothes are the garment-making hubs of the Global South. However, the ready-made garment industry has a soiled history of exploitation of garment factory workers, who are overwhelmingly women. Women garment workers face discrimination, harassment, and exploitation in their workplaces, and are also often working in extremely unsafe conditions. The feminization of the ready-made garment industry has moved abuses beyond the simple scope of economics and human rights, but into a “gendered” category of international issues that is usually ignored or missed by mainstream international relations scholars.

The Ready-Made Garment Industry

The garment industry in particular represents the ways in which international business policy can have harmful impacts on women, as they make up about 80% of these workers (Clean Clothes Campaign, n.d). Ready-made garment factories are often run and operated by local proprietors that are contracted out by global brands. Because factory owners are vying for the biggest contracts, they are seeking the cheapest costs. Thus, women garment workers are suffering as a direct result. According to Emilie Shultze at Fashion Revolution, Bangladeshi women in garment factories are making 5,300 taka per month, pennies compared to the minimum wage (8,900 taka), and many will never see a living wage (Shultze, 2015). As well, this pay is miniscule when taking the number of hours garment workers are averaging into account, which is between 60 and 140 hours per week (Shultze, 2015). The conditions that women garment workers must contend with are known to be incredibly abusive—excessively strict workplace policies, competition, intense disciplinary action, and cruel management is typical in many ready-made garment factories (Fotedar & V, 2021). The nature of the ready-made garment industry relies on the fast pace of the fashion industry; trends come and go, and brands are responsible for keeping up with and creating those trends.

One of the issues that has brought global attention to the ready-made garment industry is the tendency for unsafe factory working conditions to bring harm to workers. It is very common for factory owners and management to purposely avoid adequate investment in workplace safety. The Rana Plaza collapse of 2013 is a prime example of this, in which the negligence of health and safety measures resulted in the deaths of 1,132 women (International Labour Organization, n.d). The Rana Plaza collapse was the result of management’s choices to ignore proper building permitting procedure, and it was documented by a number of garment workers in the building that their attempts to bring attention to the building hazards Deaths caused by hazardous building and work conditions are all too common within the garment industry, given both the nature of the work as well as the pursuit of a higher profit margin (Kabir et al., 2019).

Gender Matters

In a globalizing world, surely the lines between what was once deemed “men’s work” and “women’s work” has blurred slightly. Factory jobs may have once been a male-dominated field, and was highly masculinized as the breadwinner for the wife and children at home. However, factory work has become increasingly dominated by women, and this may be because mainstream constructions of gender dub women as “more willing to accept strict work discipline, less likely to join trade unions, and conditioned to take up tedious, repetitive, and monotonous work” (Fotadar & V, n.d). Whether this be because of femininities being seen as submissive and passive, or women being willing to do whatever it takes to make a living, or a mixture of both—the ready-made garment industry has allowed the needs of these women factory workers to be completely ignored. Peterson notes that feminization does not just inform women’s participation in or takeover of certain industries, but that in a masculinist society, feminization is used as a tool for devaluing whatever it is applied to (Peterson, 177). Through this framework, it understood that the global construction of the safety of factory workers is inherently less important for feminized industries.

There is a racialized construction of garment factory workers at play as well. Gendered, racialized capitalism operates at every level. Locally and nationally, there are economic tensions between the dominant masculine (elite white men, namely) and the subordinate feminine (white women, women of color, men of color, immigrant men, the LGBTQ+ community) (Peterson, 177). This translates to a global capitalist scale, in that the masculine (elite Western countries) dominates the feminine (the Global South) as a racialized source to be exploited. The medical industry of the United States has a history of associating Black women as being more tolerant to pain and abuse—that they are tougher, and more masculine (Rao, 2020). Thus, it is clear how those ideas about racialized women in the Global South being more suited for exploitation than women in the West (alongside the fact that the poverty wages observed in countries like Bangladesh would never be acceptable in the United States). Shapla, an 18-year-old garment worker who suffered in the Rana Plaza collapse was debilitated after the accident, facing long-term health effects and severely limited in finding work in the future (Kakuchi, 2013). Garment workers who are dealing with extreme dangers are the ones most vulnerable to the potential devastating effects.

IR Scholarship and Policy

Women’s employment is a hallmark of global gender equity projects, but the “race to the bottom” and the pursuit for cheaper labor is actively harming women factory workers. It is clear that the integration of women into the workforce is necessary for global development, equity and gender relations. However, IR scholars should be cautioned against looking at the domination of the ready-made garment industry by women as simply a positive effect of globalization (Fashion Revolution, 2015). The feminization of this industry comes at the cost of abusive, forced labor and a lack of care for the health and safety of workers. A living wage, safe working conditions, and a fair work environment would more closely align with this labor as emancipation. However, in a capitalist society, that would require a restructuring of North/South relationships to capitalism through a gendered lens.

There has been a sea of activism surrounding the ready-made garment industry, and they gained traction after the Rana Plaza collapse given the national attention it garnered and the number of lives lost. Women garment workers have taken to organizing protests and resistance to abusive factory policies. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, last updated in 2018, was one of the more notable outcomes in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse. It was unique because it had teeth; it was a legally binding agreement between brands that signed on to ensure better workplace conditions and protections for workers (The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, n.d). However, it relied on the goodwill of major, billion dollar companies to cut their profits in order to promote the wellbeing of the workers they contract. It saw results as well: factories began being successfully audited for improved conditions. The accord was allowed to expire, and the international community must find a way to implement such a law into global business policy.

Enloe discusses how feminist activism is ignored and invalidated by mainstream IR as special interest, a lost cause, or outside the realm of traditional international relations studies (Enloe, 2014). The feminization and subsequent abuse of the garment industry and its workers may be seen as a “special interest,” an intersection of women’s rights, labor rights, and human rights. What mainstream IR lacks is an understanding of security of people as security of the state. A masculine society would inherently devalue the importance of this abuse as a means for state, global, or economic security. A feminist approach would seek to understand how improving these conditions would work to improve the lives of everyone involved in the capitalist IR landscape. It is clear that gender and IR are at play in the feminization of the ready-made garment industry and the inhumane treatment from garment factory workers. However, it is not simply because most garment workers are women. Constructions of gender pervasively shape our understanding of the world, of security, of economy—and of how garment workers are seen and treated by the global community.

REVISION: CREATIVE NONFICTION

The tags on our clothes don’t tell us enough. They give us a country, a unit to look to as the source for what we have. What an amazing product of globalization—that we get to share creations from across the world, supplying the “Third World” with our demand. We do not see faces, eyes slowly dropping from grueling 140-hour work weeks, or hands aching, swollen and bruised to meet daily quotas. We do not see cots spread around factories, overcrowded because workers must be ready at a moment’s notice to create the trends that we dream up. They don’t have the time to go home to sleep. They can’t break for the bathroom, or to pick up their children. When they receive their paychecks at the end of a shift, those beat up hands hold those sleepy eyes in despair. Pennies to the dollar, almost 4,000 taka below the minimum wage.

And then the floor creaks, or a light fixture comes crashing down. Cracks run through the walls, from the ceiling to the floor. The sewing machines are on the fritz again, the factory staff are

practically stacked on top of one another. One fears for their life after a piece of a sewing machine almost falls on their foot, and tells the factory manager. Yet they're invisible; they're not even human. They are Bangladeshi, and they are women.

To be a *woman* in a garment factory means to be ignored and forgotten, but also to be invaluable to almost every person located in a country thousands of miles away, where women like us are dressed for school, for work, for a date, for a game. The factory manager, the one who told her to ignore the creaky floors and get back to work, is being praised on the world stage for his dedication to female empowerment.

“Woman’s work.” Women are conditioned to accept strict discipline and miniscule pay for tedious work, without batting an eye. What choice do they have? The options are to let their children starve, or to only see them for 20 hours a week, risk their life in an industry where fatal accidents are the norm, and be subject to physical, mental, and emotional abuse from their employers.

Why can a mother of 3 from Minnesota able to drop her children off at daycare, go to work, and clock out promptly at 5pm or receive time and a half? Why can broke college students spend hundreds of dollars of clothes they’ll wear for 3 months? Why can sports teams get major discounts on bulk orders of uniforms? They are not villains. They just live north of the global border.

How could we have gotten it so wrong? How did we preach the integration of women into the global workforce as a means for emancipation, only to subject them to a fate in which liberty is not even an option? To be a *woman of color* in a garment factory is to be the mule, to be subordinated because you have a family to take care of, to be bullied because you are perceived as weak, yet strong enough to handle it.

The empowerment of women workers that keep our clothing industry alive does not simply come from numbers. They cannot be silenced any longer.