

Speeding Ahead and Falling Behind: Workers' Rights in the Booming Bangladesh Garment Industry

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the fashion industry has gone through a major shift, from how the clothes are sold all the way back to where and how the materials are made. One of the many countries that has felt the affects of this boom is Bangladesh, more specifically their textile industry which has become the second largest producer of the product type in the world. But, with this influx in business there has also been a slew of worker's rights violations that come hand in hand with it. A common issue of globalization, the labor chains connecting the companies that are outsourcing to the factories in Bangladesh often go unchecked. Leaving the relationship between the company, the supplier, and the workers to be a tremulous one built up on what is being produced, how much needs to be produced, and by when – details such as how the workers are treated and their working conditions in a grey area. A no-man's land that the nation state, the companies, and the factories all refuse to claim responsibility over.

THE GARMENT INDUSTRY AND BANGLADESH

Bangladesh holds claim to the second most high profiting industry in the world, China being the first.

It is also the nation's largest export industry.

- **Overall Population in Bangladesh:** 160 million
- **Workers in the Garment/Textile Industry:** Over 4 million*
- **Amount of Garment Factories in Bangladesh:** 4,560 (2018)
- **Overall National Export Earnings (2018-2019 fiscal year):** 40.53 billion dollars USD
- **Garment Industry Export Earnings (2018-2019 fiscal year):** 34.1 billion dollars USD
- **National Workers' Gender Proportion:** 66% make, 34% female
- **Industry Workers' Gender Proportion:** 60.8% female, 39.2% male
- **Minimum Wage in Bangladesh Per Month*:** 1,500 taka (\$17.61 USD)
- **Minimum Wage in the Bangladesh Garment Industry Per Month*:** 8,000 taka (\$95 USD).

While the national minimum wage is adjusted every five years, due to outside influence from companies in accordance to the 2013 Bangladesh Fire and Safety Agreement the garment industry is separate. At first it was 5,300 take (\$63), but back in 2018 there was a demand from workers to increase it to 18,000 taka (\$217 USD) a month, which the government refused to rise to and instead went to Tk 8,000. The average monthly wage for labor in Bangladesh is just \$101, compared to \$135 in Myanmar, \$170 in Cambodia and \$518 in China- so that is the note the workers were taking from.



Figure 1: The government, on September 13, 2018, announces Tk 8,000 as the minimum salary for garment workers. Garment workers on the factory floor, sourced from the Daily Star. <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/news/bangladesh-rmg-garment-workers-minimum-salary-8000-taka-announced-1633342>



Figure 2: Aerial view of the Rana Plaza building site after it collapsed in April 2013, killing more than 1,100. Photograph: Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images

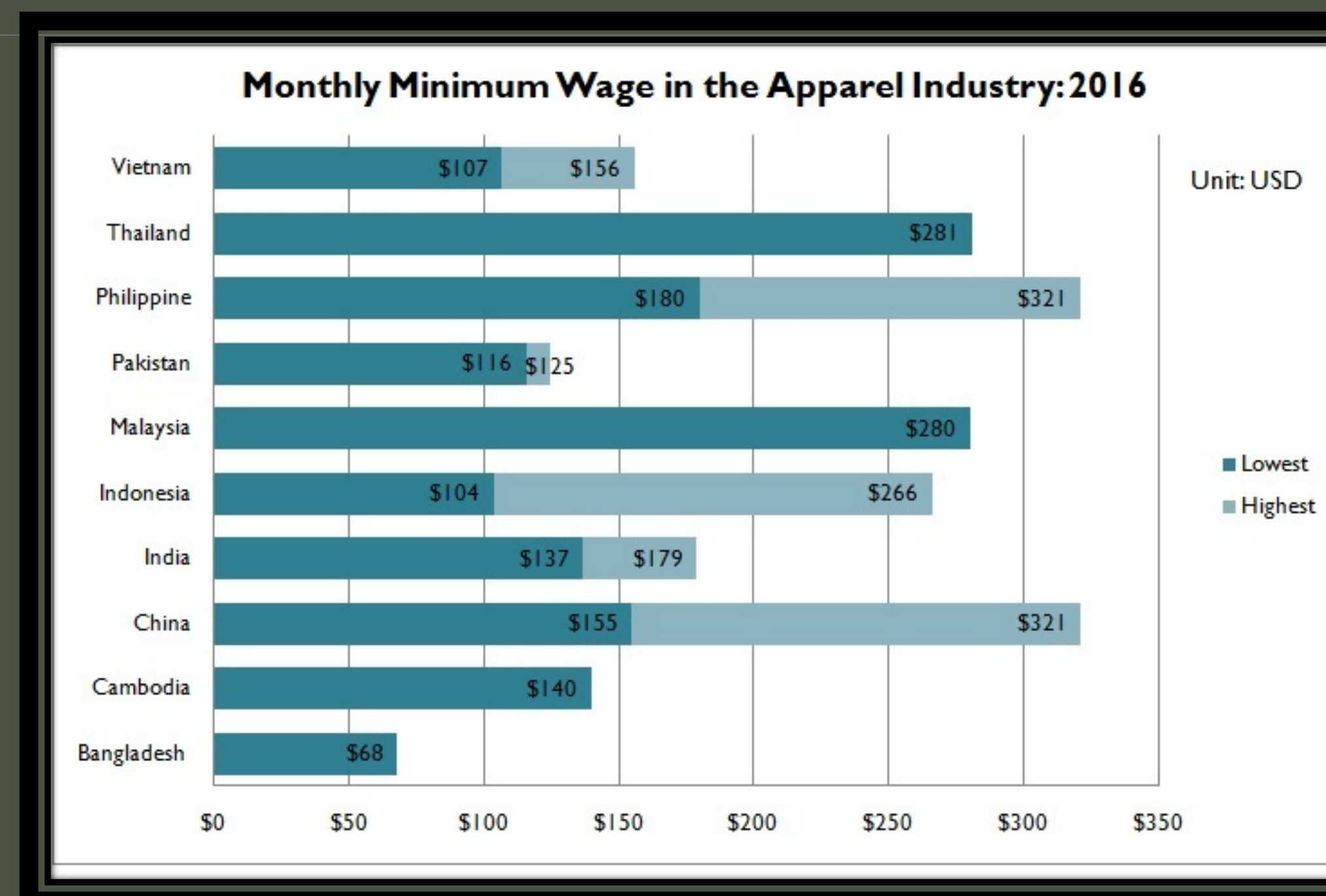


Figure 3: Monthly Wages in Textile Industry (2016), Sheng Lu Fashion and International Trade Sourcing

MAJOR LABOR POLICY AND EVENTS TIMELINE

1972: Bangladesh becomes a member state of the ILO on June 22nd.

*Since then they have ratified 33 Conventions, 7 of which are fundamental Conventions from the Declaration. Among these are Conventions 87 (freedom of association and protection over the right to organize) and 98 (Right to organize and collective bargain convention). The early 1970's was also when the textile industry first began to rise in the nation.

2006: Initial Labour Rights Act is passed in Bangladesh.

*This act was made to cover workers' freedom of association and start the process of a union registration system.

2011: The National Skills Development Policy is Accepted

*This is a long-term goal spanning to 2030 for the direction of skill development programs and resources for workers in Bangladesh – it also expands upon several other policy plans such as the Public Health Action Plan of 2008.

2012: ILO National Labour Policy Accepted

2013: The Rana Plaza building collapse (which held 5 factories inside of it) and soon after the Bangladesh Labour Act. Over 1,100 people died in that one incident, and over 2,400 were injured.

As a result of the tragedy, the Bangladesh Fire and Safety Agreement was also created. It is a five-year binding accord global brands/retailers and trade unions to help improve the RMG industry.

2015: Bangladesh Labour Act Implementing Rules are put into place.

2017 – TODAY: Pay raise protests and strikes continue for a higher minimum wage for garment workers (a living wage), as well as further work safety measures. Increase in monthly minimum wage form Tk 5,300 (\$62) to 8,000 (\$95).

SOLID POLICY and POOR APPLICATION

There are currently 120 unions in Bangladesh, the largest being National Garment Workers' Federation. Despite the well-structured policy and ILO support, the Bangladesh government is notoriously anti-union. In 2015, 75% of union applications were denied, and many existing unions were audited and or dismantled. This is reflected in how the police force have sided with the employers during worker protests in the past, notably in 2017 when a protest for a higher minimum wage was suppressed with violence- overall the government has also made no real attempts against union-busting.

Workers also have reported having to work 10-14 hours a day with little to no breaks and more often than not no pay for overtime, some don't have contracts and so no protections when they are working, and at least 92% of workers have reported some sort of harassment in the workplace. The situation has improved in that there are now statistics and studies that show this, but with the pressure from both international companies and the government for higher productivity – the suppliers are only pushing their workers harder.

CONCLUSION

- While unions are gaining more power in the garment industry, there are still large amounts of workers' rights violations on the factory floor – many targeting union members specifically.
- As the industry is only bound to grow larger at this point, the best course of action for the workforce is to continue the way they are now. Increasing union membership and presence in the factories, while also supporting training sessions and making them alongside other resources more accessible.
- Accountability for who is responsible for accidents and conditions in the workplace is key going forwards. This is a slow process, but as of 2013 there has been improvements in record keeping and support systems for workers through the ILO and the Bangladesh Fire and Safety Agreement.
- With this in mind, it is up to all participants in the labor chain to support the other parts and for the companies to acknowledge their influence over the production process.

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