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Bangladesh's Most Vulnerable: Women Garment Workers

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Abstract

The fashion industry in the late twentieth century saw a shift from national manufacturing to outsource manufacturing. This business model requires mass consumption and mass production adhering to tight deadlines. This system enables fashion companies to maximize their profits at the expense of garment workers in developing countries, especially women workers in major garment exporting countries such as Bangladesh. This thesis aims to present the results of research done on the Ready-Made Garment industry (RMG) in Bangladesh and answers to the question: *how has mass consumption in the fashion industry affected major manufacturing countries like Bangladesh and their workforce?*

This research question is tracing the history of the modern fashion system and of mass consumption, mass production, and the exploitation of garment workers from the point of view of Marxist theorists. In doing so, this paper focuses on female workers in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh. As well as focusing on how the industry was established by including specific quantitative and descriptive data regarding the female workforce. The research conducted demonstrates that mass production practices have proven harmful and deadly to Bangladesh's female garment workforce.

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List of Abbreviations

BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BDT	Bangladeshi Taka
BCG	Boston Consulting Group
CCC	Clean Clothes Campaign
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
COVID-19	Coronavirus
CPO	Chief Procurement Officer
EBA	Everything But Arms scheme
EU	European Union
GATT	General Agreements on Trade and Tariffs
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GLJ	Global Labor Justice
GSP	Generalized System of Preferences
ILO	International Labor Organization
LDC	Least Developed Country
LVMH	Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy
MFA	Multi-Fiber Agreement
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NAP	National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization

NGWF	National Garment Workers' Federation
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
SDG	Sustainability Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States of America
USD	United States Dollars
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

1. Introduction

Fashion plays a pivotal role in everyday life but hidden in the background of ordinary behavior is the process of creating fashionable garments (Wilson, 1-3). In anthropological terms, fashion is a cultural force that drew sustenance from social customs, group psychology, material life, economic institutions, other types of human interaction and in turn has influenced them (Blaszcyzk, 2). Fashion can be described as a social mechanism of change where a group of people agrees on a certain kind of dress as "fashionable" and conforms to it creating a system that values what is new because it is new (Simmenauer). With mass production being introduced after the Industrial Revolution, the growth of capitalism alongside the development of modern classes and society, the fashion industry has become a powerful sector for countries' economies all over the world. Over the years though, production has been sought out in cheaper manufacturing sites such as Bangladesh so fashion companies can save on the labor cost often resulting in exploitative working conditions for millions of women. Therefore, this thesis answers the following research question: h*ow has mass consumption in the fashion industry affected major manufacturing countries like Bangladesh and their workforce?*

This thesis explores the relationship between mass production in the fashion industry, garment manufacturing, and female garment exploitation. An introduction to the development of the modern fashion industry, an industry focused on mass production is addressed to preface why garment manufacturing countries like Bangladesh would be pressured to risk the wellbeing of their workforce. Next, the Marxist theoretical framework regarding consumption and its relation to capitalism is discussed with a focus on theorists such as Thorstein Veblen, Karl Marx, and

Walter Benjamin. The theoretical framework regarding production, outsource manufacturing, and the underdevelopment of countries like Bangladesh is subsequently taken into consideration by addressing the dependency theory. Additionally, the history of the development of Bangladesh's garment industry is discussed to explain their country's vulnerable position in the global garment industry. Lastly, research is presented on how the majority female workforce has been affected mentally and physically by working in exploitative conditions leading up to the current situation due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19)

2. The Fashion Industry

This first introductory section presents a brief explanation of the evolution of the present-day fashion industry. Society saw the emergence of fashion during the middle of the 14th century when traveling and commercial exchanges were facilitated. The birth of the modern fashion industry began developing in Europe during the 15th-18th centuries. The development of modern fashion happened simultaneously with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution, the development of the modern capitalist system or the economic system that consists of private ownership of the means of production, the factory system of production, the rise of the department store, and the advent of cheap print media (Hammen; Heller, 46).

The Industrial Revolution allowed factory production with machines such as the cotton mill enabling the production of garments at higher rates. During this time, the garment production process was in the West with textile mills and cotton factories all over England and the United States (US) as there was an abundant labor supply. Since then, the garment production process has been almost operating by machines to keep up with the continuous high demand from the global market. Children played a major part in garment production in both the US and across Europe, especially England, as the children's small hands were to work the machines producing more than adults, and slaves had no other choice but to work for their potential freedom. Child labor was extensive during the early industrialization period during large-scale production and rendered orphaned and fatherless children in the same vulnerable position the women of Bangladesh are currently in (Humphries, 175).

The Industrial Revolution raised the degree of competition during production and introduced reducing wage costs to get the most benefit after production resulting in low wages

for children workers (Humphries, 177). Children made up one- to two-thirds of all workers in many textile mills in 1833, as they were responsible to contribute to their household due to many families being below or near the poverty line at the time (Humphries, 177). The widespread availability of children and manufacturing strategies increased child labor as manufacturers fended off government regulation by appealing to keep labor costs low to compete internationally (Humphries, 183). Child labor was strategic to the transition to factory production as capital entered the production process and transformed the means of production (Heller, 176). Child labor was considered a 'necessary evil,' essential to the competitive success rendering employers had more market power deciding on lower wages (Humphries, 183). With an inherently exploitative production process, the child labor reforms and emancipation in the 19th century disrupted the labor supply for garment production in the West (Humphries, 178).

Historian Fernand Braudel emphasized fashion, clothing, commerce, and consumption at the height of the 'great transformation' of the West in the early modern period creating a 'consumer revolution' (Heller, 48). This transformation led to a vast extension of the West's global power and cemented the West's hegemony over the rest of the world fostering an ongoing sense of European superiority because of capital (Heller, 176). The consumer revolution can be seen with the rise of the department store that led to an industry shift to follow the wealth line to a population with more disposable income. As women began working at a higher rate and the availability of credit increased, there was a focalization on selling more units of cheaper products instead of a few from a more expensive product, establishing the basis of the current fashion industry. The concept of the department store introduced the idea of consolidating large amounts of mass-produced goods for public consumption, now able to be materialized with industrial inventions and the sewing machine (Monet). Increased disposable income and industrial

production methods have become the backbone of mass consumerism and mass production what would then become fundamental and maximized by fashion companies to reap the greatest profits.

To increase profits and expand fashion brands' clientele base, luxury brands have gradually segmented the market since the mid-twentieth century creating new brands to appeal to different price ranges to increase their profits. The segmented market creates a fashion pyramid with five price segments where the higher on the pyramid, the higher the price gets with a reasoned value proposition as there is a higher level of quality and creativity (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation). At the top of the pyramid is haute couture as it is for exclusive customers and tailored to the body, then there are the lines that are mass-produced such as ready to wear, diffusion, bridge, and mass-market (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).

To define each segment in order one has to begin with haute couture which refers to garments tailored and made with high craftsmanship and the finest materials and fabrics specifically for a single client referred to as 'walking pieces of art,' important to sell the dream of fashion and luxury (Fisher). Ready to wear or prêt-à-porter was invented by Italian companies in the 1970s to combine high fashion creativity and industrialization resulting in mass-produced clothing where the price range is three to five times the mass-market price (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation). In the 1980s, Italian and American brands created the diffusion segment to reach a more affordable market and younger clientele in which production is made in even wider volumes and is most of the time outsourced (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation). The bridge segment was born within American department stores as a mid-range to connect the high end of the market with the mass-market, offering products that are potentially outsourced

with a decent level of creativity but at the right value and with the right delivery in store (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).

Lastly there is the mass-market segment, often synonymous with fast fashion, which is focused on the company's success factor offering outsourced products for different brands, all customers, all occasions, and different price ranges within an affordable budget (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation). Fast fashion companies thrive on fast cycles; rapid prototyping, small batches with a large variety, more efficient transportation and delivery, and merchandise presented on the hangers with price tags already attached rushing the standard turnaround time from catwalk to consumer from six months to weeks rendering old collections disposable at a faster rate (Joy et al. 275). Relying on the consistent gratification of the consumer through their low prices and variety so consumers can continually evolve their temporary identities, fast fashion draws them back in consequently perpetuating the system and generating profit. Therefore, fast-fashion chains in the West have grown faster as a whole low cost, fresh design, and quick response times allowing for greater efficiency in meeting consumer demand earning higher profit margins—on average 16 percent—than their traditional fashion retail counterparts, who average 7 percent (Sull and Turconi). The creation of lower segments highlights the emphasis on business and profits due to the increasing probability of outsourcing in lower segments potentially relying on exploitative labor to keep low prices.

Within these different segments, there are different business models with two main models; the luxury brand business model and the business model for mass-produced garments and accessories. The luxury business model is less dependent on fashionability but is based on iconic contents, legacy, and heritage as they are the ones that set the trends for that season (Corbellini, Business Models in the Market). But as one goes down in the pyramid and down in

the price range, there is the business model for mass-produced items. The business model for mass-produced items is more reactive to fashionability, market trends, and seasonality to produce more products due to their short life cycles (Corbellini, Business Models in the Market). The fashion calendar consists of four main seasons, Fall/Winter, Spring/Summer, Pre-Fall, and Resort, where collections are shown in fashion shows all over the world a year before the actual season, and Pre-Fall and Resort over-lapping the other seasons. But due to the high demand for products, the four main seasons have been subdivided creating as many as fifty-two micro-seasons in the fashion calendar for the lower segments, therefore, cutting down on production and manufacturing time to keep up with the fast-paced changing trends and customer demands (Cline, 71).

During the mid-twentieth century with the evolution of the lower segments, outsource manufacturing was sought out to be the best solution for the insufficient national labor supply and demand for mass production. Outsource manufacturing refers to hiring outside of one's own company to assemble parts or produce a product (Bay Source Global). Indeed, many companies systematically searched for the most profitable sites for production to manufacture their products, allowing companies to potentially cut significant costs in labor production (Hoskins, 78). Companies found that manufacturers in the East tend to be more disposed to readily accept retailers' low offers. Over the last forty-fifty years, large amounts of the garment production industry have shifted from the Western world specifically to Asia in countries such as Bangladesh accounting for over 60% of the world's ready-made garment production, according to the Living Wage in Asia Clean Clothes Campaign 2014 report (4). Ready-made garments refer to mass-produced, factory-made clothing that can include prêt-à-porter, diffusion, bridge, and mass-market products that were previously discussed.

Although outsource manufacturing does drive business in developing countries, it created a social and political problem by dividing the geographical map of the world into two different spaces. Companies' headquarters, offices, most stores are often located in the West, while in the East where the production occurs but is usually hidden from customers' scrutiny, creating a divide between the world of consumption versus the world of production. The latter's disclaimer production is because companies hire manufacturers, who hire contractors, who hire subcontractors, who then hire garment workers. Therefore, garment workers are placed at the bottom of the labor chain while being among the most important elements in the production process. Creating this division diverts the attention from the production process and allows many companies who outsource the manufacturing of their products to potentially allow unethical practices such as exploitative labor while cutting their costs. Consequently, companies would hold no corporate social responsibility (CSR). CSR refers to a self-regulating business model that helps a company be socially accountable to itself, its stakeholders to practice and be conscious of the kind of impact they are having on all aspects of society, including economic, social, and environmental (Fernando). Although the companies might reap the benefits of potentially exploitative situations, they avoid their responsibility to those exploited by stating garment workers are not directly employed and therefore the companies are not at fault, placing garment workers in large garment production countries like Bangladesh in a vulnerable position as seen during the 2013 Rana Plaza building collapse that is later discussed (Bossavie et al., 12).

Literature Review

This chapter is a literature review that examines theories on mass production in the fashion industry, production in Eastern countries, and the dependency of Eastern countries on

Western countries. The historical background has allowed fashion to shift to become an economic and cultural power. Through a sociological lens, a fashion garment can be referred to as a symbolic product that anchors cultural dreams and social aspirations in a trickle-down method (Blaszczyk 9). In *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions,* Thorstein Veblen discusses the trickle-down movement that depends upon a hierarchical society that strives for upward mobility among the different social strata (112). As well, Veblen argues that the prime function of dress within the leisure class is to display the wearer's wealth by their consumption and the most immediate form of conspicuous consumption is quantity (125). Thus, a new style is usually presented by people at the top strata of society and will be adopted by those in the lower strata of society causing the affluent to reject that style for another after its adoption, assuming a social hierarchy that seeks social distinction causing the elite to steer away and create a new cycle (Veblen, 117). In the current fashion industry, it is seen with the new creation of various fashion segments and seeing these lower-cost sectors copying trends from luxury fashion houses to democratize fashion and allow those of lower economic status to still be well dressed according to the popular trends at the moment.

According to Walter Benjamin, fashion's tempo is driven by capitalism since capitalism needs constant novelty to keep sales buoyant, what he called 'eternal recurrence' of the new driving towards mass reproduction (179). In 1966, Spanish designer Paco Rabanne foreshadowed the current pace of the fashion industry as he labeled fast fashion the future of fashion characterized by the disposable qualities due to the competitive industry that has driven suppliers into shorter supply times (Hoskins, 22). Fast fashion has been referred to as 'McFashion' because of the speed with which gratification for consumers with disposable income is provided since 'McDonaldization' discusses changes in capitalist economies as they

moved towards globalization of consumer culture through mass production and mass consumption (Joy et al., 275).

Through the creation of a culture of consumption, Karl Marx emphasizes how the capitalist mode of production and consumption demands perpetual innovation, variation, and suspension (34). Meaning, "Capitalism requires continual newness, if only to keep sales buoyant, for its cellular unit is the commodity," where fashion becomes the mechanism that delivers the continual novelty endlessly stimulating production and consumption (Leslie). Marx referred to the fashion industry as a negative one that is to be executed in the shortest possible times; leading to higher consumption and higher waste through the cheapening of production where production only has meaning once the product is consumed by subjects (Leslie). Thus, a garment only becomes a real product when being worn being consumed, but consumption is the motive for production causing consumers to appeal to the aesthetics of commodities.

Karl Marx discussed the constant 'wanting of the mind' by the masses and how this craving places more power in the hands of the companies allowing supposed luxury garments and accessories to be overpriced. For example, luxury handbags are considered to be one of the biggest scams in the retail world found to be marked up ten to twelve times over the cost of production (Thomas, 17). But what is often happening is 'Made in Bangladesh' tags made hidden in luxury clothing and accessories overshadowed by the tags of 'Made in Europe' that give the item its luxurious and exclusive attributes. But many of these luxurious garments and accessories are made in Eastern factories of the developing world, considered to be of lesser value, while the final touches are made in western countries allowing them to take the credit and mask the early garment and textile production stages. This allows the luxury sector to exist outside of the exploitative system shielded by ideas like craftsmanship and design. But behind

the glamour, many companies in the luxury sector are based out of the same factories with the same working condition (Hoskins).

The East-West dichotomy refers to the difference between the Western and Eastern worlds, as historically Asia is regarded as the East and currently Australasia, Europe, and North America are considered the West differentiated mainly on cultural boundaries rather than geographical (Mestrovic, 61). Consumer's perception of Eastern produced products is often a negative one, generalizing that products from low-cost countries like Bangladesh are often of poor quality and not comparable to Western-made products not taking into account the significant improvement in manufacturing (Insight). Although being made in the East does not mean of lesser value, the legitimization and power Western fashion companies have due to their historical legacies allow their European tags to be at the top of the fashion hierarchical system while less expensive brands that carry the original tags of their Eastern production places them at the bottom. This low hierarchical position the East carries can be argued insinuates the East produces cheap products in both quality and value and establishes a new manufacturing map of the world and labels the West as the gold standard of quality. Referring to Edward Said's theory where colonial narratives have helped how Westerners' interests in lands of the East or 'Orient' they were exploiting for economic, social, and cultural purposes, the new business model reliant on outsourcing calls into question an orientalist view to the new global production and consumption map (8).

Western consumption and the Eastern production allow a system of dependency to flourish. German economist and political activist Andre Gunder Frank, best known for his work on the dependency theory in *The Development of Underdevelopment,* he argues that the people of poor countries are not to blame for the failure of development in their countries (NCCA, 2).

He He argues that rich consumer nations like those of Europe and North American are ‘core’ countries that make up the ‘metropolis’ and have economic power and use it to exploit ‘peripheral’ nations, like Bangladesh, to keep them in a state of dependency and under-development (NCCA, 2). The weakness of ‘peripheral’ nations is built into a world scheme in which western countries have dominant economic power and military power, and use the capitalist system to maintain that power. The existing system has created an unequal division of labor; highly paid and highly skilled labor remains in the West while low paid and low skilled labor remains in the East. Becoming a major issue for the development of the Eastern countries as dependent states provide cheap labor, such as garment labor, in response for money, goods, and services from dominant countries but serves the interests of the latter more in most cases (Yusha, 22). The latter discussion on the vulnerability of a country like Bangladesh fits the theory as the country has always been under the rule of another state and its human and natural resources have been exploited either in favor of the ‘core’ nations or in the context of a globalized world (Yusha, 23).

The dependency theory points out how promoting real equality is only a façade and instead can potentially exploit patriarchal values. Related to Marxist-feminist theory, women specifically can be exploited through taking advantage of women’s material subordination (SUNY Levin Institute, 10). Women’s material subordination refers to women enduring worse conditions than men because there is no better alternative for them other than being a mother or maybe a domestic laborer (SUNY Levin Institute, 13). Therefore, development projects largely benefit men at the expense of women. Economic modernization marginalizes women both economically and socially, consequently increasing their dependence on men (Sarker, 49). Bangladesh has a patriarchal culture in which men have a virtual monopoly on political and

economic power, and women's rights and working conditions are a low priority for the men in power limiting women's resources, opportunities, and capabilities. As dependency scholars note, women have most of the jobs created by the garment industry, but these are low paying jobs that exploit them in dangerous conditions and never enable them achieve economic emancipation.

Capitalist systems creates an economic surplus but is appropriated by those with control in the highest level of the corporate pyramid. For example, wage contracts are designed to deceive and exploit illiterate workers who rarely understand the terms of the contract when they sign them. When workers realize they are being exploited protest, they have already lost the legal right to protest. This allows the trillion-dollar fashion industry to devalue human life due to the abundance of human labor available in Eastern countries for the sole purpose to increase the company's surplus-value to thrive under the economic system. In this process, garment workers are reduced to the status of machines in the production line like that of Fordism, or the system of mass production of consumer goods using assembly line techniques to sustain economic growth in advanced capitalism (Thompson).

The system then enables the dehumanization of workers by the Western companies causing the workers themselves to be as disposable as the clothes they are making, as another desperate worker from the reserve army of laborers is eager enough to take their place to provide for their families. These conditions are excused through the further division of cultures and the two spaces of the West and the East by excusing the difference in a livable wage and what constitutes a living wage in an Eastern country subjecting it as their normal or better than other jobs they could have, further dehumanizing garment workers. As mass production and the constant need to find new ways to make more profits regardless if it is at the expense of others grow, these characteristics become connected to how the fashion industry works and has led

German economist Werner Sombart to his famous phrase that states fashion is, “capitalism’s favorite child” (Leslie).

So far predominantly Marxist critiques of the capitalist system have been presented concerning the fashion industry but many scholars have defended decisions made for the better of the economy. Consumerism is widely seen as a cultural expression of developed capitalism allowing unprecedented freedom afforded by bourgeois capitalism that can enable the potential for human development (Varul, 293-194). Fashion can be considered as an identifier of a person, but mass production equalizes every person’s opportunity to identify as opposed to a feudal division of class enabled through the progress due to capitalism (Steele, 25). Although fashion was created for the privileged few, in the late nineteenth and twentieth-century mass production made fashion accessible to the majority, leaving the distinguishing feature of fashion to become the display of personal taste since there is an internal drive to assert one’s unique individuality (Steele, 26). The democratization of fashion means the direction of fashion change is no longer unilinear, traversing geographical places, and flows from both the traditional centers of style as well as ‘the periphery’(Steele, 198-199). Popular culture and global media have allowed members of the lower classes, subcultural and marginal groups to influence fashion as much as those in the upper classes creating instead a trickle-across concept theorized by George Sproles, allowing fashion adoption influences to be simultaneous by different socioeconomic groups (Steele, 198-199).

Through this democratization, the masses can all benefit from the higher productivity of others in the form of better and more affordable products, services, and more job opportunities (Lowe, 2). These job opportunities and stimulation of the economy can be produced through

outsource manufacturing, therefore providing jobs for those in developing countries in comparison to the other paths of employment they would be able to find. From a business standpoint cutting the costs provides the opportunity to afford quality machinery and equipment while being able to hire a skilled workforce promoting innovation and advancement, stimulating both Western and Eastern economies. For example, since the 1980s, the growth of garments has been pivotal in making Bangladesh less poor and opening economic opportunities for millions who had not had these opportunities before causing the garment industry to represent one of the recent success stories of industrial development (Rahman, xvi). Thus, exploitation can be argued to not be inherent in capitalism but instead inherent in garment manufacturing in the fashion industry. If manufacturing work is welcomed by the producing countries in the East, it is out of need and the progressive vision of economic stimulation that can reflect in the society. Employment can therefore empower workers regarding decision-making that can promote the advancement of society. Thus, the decision to enter the industry has provided an opportunity to take care of oneself financially and build one's future which has reduced the burden and responsibility of the family for one's well-being (Rahman, 32).

Although there are some positives to the capitalist system and the model the fashion industry has adopted to enable profit maximization and economic stimulation, in this case, the means do not justify the ends. Through Marshall Berman's reading of Marx he writes, "the freedom Marx has given with one hand he seems to be taking back with the other: everywhere he looks, everyone seems to be in chains" simultaneously critiquing a Marxist perspective of capitalism but emphasizing that in a capitalist system the masses are mostly passive with some working harder for the system than others with minimal return (44). For the trillion-dollar global fashion industry to thrive in a capitalist society, all fashion segments have adapted and

implemented a business model to increase mass consumerism and maximize profits made possible by exploiting high levels of workers through outsource manufacturing, reducing them to human capital with no intention of stopping any time soon due to high demand. The original, pre-industrial definition of fashion was to make things together; a collective that is a convivial, sociable process used to communicate with each other but the current definition is that of the production, marketing, and consumption of clothes becoming an industrialized system for making money (Thomas, 11).

Modern society has shifted from one of needing to want in excess by thinking materialism will patch up life's issues, a job clothing and accessories do perfectly. In combination with aggressive pricing strategies the fashion industry has implemented since the late 1900s and early 2000s, there has been an increase in options for Western consumers through mass production and an increase in profits for Western fashion brands with the cost of an increase in human rights abuses for garment workers specifically in major garment supplying countries such as Bangladesh. In this case, Bangladesh has then been left at the hands of dominant western countries and billion-dollar fashion companies due to the dependence on their business for the development of their country. In a state of dependency for capital, the well-known saying 'money talks' comes into play as the economic development of the country and competitive garment manufacturing prices for business are prioritized rather than the well-being of the millions of women garment workers.

The trillion-dollar fashion industry presents the perfect façade for the unjust actions happening behind closed factory doors as it is an industry about image and anything that can taint the reputation and image of the fashion brand is to go purposely unnoticed or under-

recorded. Consequently, exploitative labor has become the backbone of our economic system and the backbone of the fashion industry without a sign of stopping any time soon with further technological advancements to increase consumerism such as online shopping and online marketing.

3. Bangladesh's Garment Workers' Vulnerability and the Paradox of Women Empowerment through Garment Work and Structural Exploitation

The Bangladeshi Garment System

As previously mentioned, Bangladesh plays a vital role in the garment industry as a major garment exporter in the global market. This third chapter is going to study the garment industry in Bangladesh from a historical and contemporary point of view relying on historical accounts and research from non-governmental and academic scholars. This section is examining the role women play in the development of Bangladesh's garment industry and the multiple issues that have surfaced. The 'feminization' of garment work discusses the large role women play in the garment industry and gender inequality issues. As well, prominent problems in the industry discussed such as low wages, unlivable wages, working hours, the hazardous infrastructure these women and the effects on the female garment workers and their families. The last section discusses the effects of the Coronavirus pandemic on the garment industry that has endangered the already vulnerable garment workers even further.

Historically, Bangladesh's textile industry was among the greatest in the world exporting throughout Asia and later Europe, as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century (Rahman, xvi). As a former British colony from 1700-1947, the imperial power destroyed the textile industry in the Bengal region to make it dependent on agriculture (Rahman, 5). Therefore, the economic development of the region depended on British imperialists and lead to exploitation of the colonized and underdevelopment of the region (Rahman, 5). During the pre-independence

period, Bangladesh and East Pakistan were instead East Bengal (1947-1971), and the region had a booming cotton textile industry that became one of the greatest industries in the world and became a key source for employment (Rahman, 2). The region was controlled by Pakistani rulers until its independence in 1971 but relied on the same exploitation and underdevelopment just as the British did since East Pakistan was heavily dependent on the ruler in West Pakistan (Rahman, 5).

After independence in 1971, Bangladesh chose to rebuild their once successful garment sector by investing in the construction of their economy on products they were already used to producing such as garments and textiles. Since then there have been three major economic transformations that have allowed the garment industry to grow as it has, consisting of its early independence years, the denationalization and deregulation stage, and the more recent stage of economic reform (Kurpad, 81). In the early years, Bangladesh followed a development strategy of state intervention and control characterized by excessive nationalization of industries in which the RMG industry had not yet been fully established (Kurpad, 81). In the second phase, initial trade reforms were established as trade barriers were relaxed and a free-trade environment for the garment sector was established, allowing for deregulation and relaxation of price controls (Kurpad, 81). The third phase is from 1990 until now, which is characterized by economic reforms that scaled-down and rationalized tariffs, removed trade-related quantitative restrictions or specific limits on the quantity or value of goods that can be imported or exported during a specific period, eliminated import licensing, unified exchange rates, and allowed for a more flexible exchange rate system allowing for economic growth and development, specifically of the garment industry (Kurpad, 81; OECD).

These transformations have caused shifts in the garment industry as well, characterized in two phases, early independence to the termination of the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA) and the growth of the industry post the elimination of the MFA (Kurpad, 82). The MFA was managed under the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) but in 1995 the latter was replaced by the World Trade Organization (WTO) (GATT and the Goods Council). The MFA refers to an agreement signed and negotiated by the governments of forty-four countries in 1974 that provided rules dictating trade in the textile and clothing industry allowing industrialized countries to restrict imports from developing countries (Rahman, 18-19). The MFA allowed the Bangladesh RMG industry to prosper and subjected garment exporting countries to quantitative restrictions in the form of quotas for their exports to major markets helping these countries secure certain quantities of sales meanwhile shielding regional competition through the quotas (Kurpad, 82).

But in 1995 within the framework of the WTO, the Agreement on Textiles and Clothing (ATC) was established as its successor to allow the phasing out of MFA quotas and the acceleration of quota growth rates for products not yet integrated into the WTO to occur over ten years in three stages (Uruguay Round Agreement). The issue of the progression of the garment industry arose upon the termination of the ATC in 2005, resulting in the second transformation of the garment industry. Quantitative restrictions on exports of textiles and clothing from developing countries to the West were reduced and brought about regional competition in South Asia that was once lessened by quotas (Kurpad, 82). Bangladesh's RMG industry flourished after 2005 but had to have the most attractive incentives for companies to continue manufacturing with them and not with their regional competitors. Therefore, Bangladesh implemented the cheapest manufacturing costs for companies to have a regional advantage and

resulted in outrageously low minimum wages for a nation with a high labor supply and an exploitative but efficient schedule allowing them to produce high-quality products at low prices and fast time frames (Kurpad, 82-86).

An economically favorable reason that has allowed for the growth of the RMG sector is the favorable trade agreements with Western countries. European chief procurement officers (CPOs), namely the executive level employees whose responsibilities include sourcing, supply management, and procurement for the company, took advantage of these agreements such as the European Union Generalized System of Preferences (EU-GSP), in which Canada is involved as well (McKinsey & Company, 7; Rahman and Fawthrop; Biedron). The GSP is an agreement that rules on duty-free imports of garments from vulnerable countries to supposedly alleviate poverty and create jobs based on international values and principles (European Commission). Concerning Bangladesh, the Everything but Arms (EBA) scheme is in place and grants full duty-free and quota-free access to the EU single market for all products except arms (European Commission). The US on the other hand has a similar zero-tariff trade agreement with African countries, Central American countries, Mexico, Israel, and Jordan but not with Bangladesh (Baughman et al). Therefore, Bangladeshi garment and textile companies have faced tariffs up to 46% of their cost which is why many propose the US to follow the EU and Canada's footsteps (Baughman et al).

The RMG's share of total exports has increased from 53 percent in 1995 to 83 percent in 2017, with its exports reaching about 28.1 billion USD (Bossavie et al., 4). The export share of gross domestic product (GDP) tripled between 2003 and 2017, gaining Bangladesh the title of the world's second-largest garment exporter after China. Although the 2020 spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the global supply chain and caused economic loss up

to 3.16 billion USD and affecting more than 2.26 million workers, Bangladesh remains a major textile exporter being second to China in previous years (Palazzetti). The industry provides jobs and earnings opportunities to over 4 million workers and represents over 40 percent of the total industrial employment in the country (Bossavie et al., 4). As of 2004, there were more than 100 different types of garment factories exporting to more than 50 countries around the globe with the main export markets being the EU with 61.91% of Bangladesh's total exports, the US with 17.97%, and Canada with 3.45% of the total exports in 2019 (Ahmed, 34).

Although there are more than 4,000 garment factories, most of the companies exporting garments are in the center of Dhaka, Khulna, and Chittagong/Chattogram and even in residential areas (Rahman, 33). The factories are often in close to each other facilitate the global buyers to visit the factories and inspect their goods, further incentivizing the companies to do business in Bangladesh. With most of the factories being in the center and south of Bangladesh, garment workers from the north continue to migrate to exporting cities (Rahman, 33). This has subsequently caused the urban population to increase, slums to spread, and urban utilities and services that were already faulty to be under more pressure due to the overcrowding in these cities (Rahman, 33). The RMG sector is monitored by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA). The garment sector is then sub-divided into the knit, woven, and sweater sectors (Bylund and Eriksson, 12). According to the BGMEA, clients include H&M, INDITEX, PVH Corp, Target, Kiabi, Benetton, Decathlon, M&S, C&A, Puma, Primark, Tesco, and others. H&M and Inditex alone are respectively annually sourcing 3.5 billion USD and 1 billion USD (Uddin).

Bangladesh's business elites would have the power to influence governmental policy but instead, they show little lobbying initiatives with growing corruption in different public sectors, and with no transparency or accountability. The Bangladeshi government itself weakens its position in the globalized world and by default places its garment workers in a more vulnerable position at the hands of both the national market and global market. Poor governance due to the non-pursuance of strong state policies and the ineffectiveness of the Bangladeshi parliament has increased the cost of doing business in Bangladesh as companies steer from doing business with a corrupt government if there are not enough motivating reasons such as lower production costs (Rahman, 92-95). Bangladesh has a democratic parliamentary system in which the government is expected to be accountable to the Parliament and therefore the population, but with both ineffective the citizenry is vulnerable at the hands of its government due to the minimal opportunities to improve their working conditions.

Bangladesh also lacks the economic base to be a strong actor in the globalized world of today. Since around 47 million people still live below the poverty line, the country is still considered a Least Developing Country (LDC) regardless of its economic growth and human development (Norpoth et al). Bangladesh instead relies on lending instruments such as the Structural Adjustment Facility (SAF) and the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF) created by the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to promote their economic growth and to create structures to facilitate globalization (Rahman, 99). The current level of socioeconomic vulnerability of Bangladesh, with the RMG being the largest industry that drives the economy and the inadequateness of its government leaves the country with no other choice but to depend on external forces to boost their economy. But by depending on external forces, these companies shape Bangladesh's process of globalization and the terms in

which Bangladesh controls their garment industry to be the most attractive amongst the competitors. In this case, the Bangladeshi government chooses to sacrifice its labor supply of around 4 million people in the garment industry to work in exploitative conditions and live in poverty to keep the national economy somewhat stable and a major industry afloat.

'Feminization' of Garment Work

Bangladesh would not have been able to become an attractive manufacturing site if it was not for the millions of people below the poverty line willing to get any work opportunity possible. Garment work includes manual labor ranging from sewing, machinery, dyeing, attaching buttons, cutting of fabrics, and in some cases finishing the garment with its corresponding label (Clean Clothes Campaign, 7). Many companies argue outsourcing is a great way to give low skilled workers in developing countries a 'respectable' job, provide for their families, learn a skill, and in succession uplift society and boost the economy. Garment work in Bangladesh seems like a great alternative for many women living below the poverty line and has pushed the female labor force participation rate up to 36.4% in 2017 according to the ILO (2).

Mentioned but not precisely defined in the legal definition of human trafficking, exploitation shall at a minimum include the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs as elaborated in the Palermo Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, in Particular Women and Children annexed to the Convention against Transnational Organized Crime adopted in November 2000. According to the ILO, there are indicators for labor exploitation that include deceptions of conditions of work including false promises about hours, days to be worked, and the working environment, deception about the nature of the job regarding the legality of the job promised, deception about wages and monthly

earnings, excessive working days or hours, hazardous work, low salary, no social protection, threats and acts of violence, and the withholding of money, all factors that can apply to the situation Bangladeshi garment workers have to face (3-5).

In Bangladesh, women account for almost 90% of the total RMG workforce becoming the driving force and backbone of the industry (Hoskins, 73). The 'feminization' of the garment industry stems from the nature of the work needing smaller and nimbler hands, the abundant labor supply of unskilled women, and unlivable conditions of landlessness, poverty, and famine that began in the middle of the 1970s and have forced women to enter the labor market (Rahman, 30). There are 'formal' garment factory workers that are supposed to have the factory identification card and a formal contract with the details of the work they are accepting that come into the factory during their designated schedule time and are supposed to reap the benefits under Bangladeshi labor laws and their contracts. More often, this does not happen to be the case for all workers as it makes the factory owners more liable to the exploitative conditions the workers are working under. In addition to 'formal' garment factory workers, home-based workers are supplying subcontracted labor to the export garment factories presented as even more docile and vulnerable, becoming a pool of cheaper workforce (Mahmud and Huq, 3). They work on a piece-rate basis further cutting the cost of production for clothing manufacturers, usually considered an extension of domestic work home-based garment work becomes invisible socially and from policies (Mahmud and Huq, 5).

The women are usually young, unmarried with little formal education and from poor, rural families usually migrating from the north of the country to the major manufacturing cities in Bangladesh (Stanwick, 40). Young and unmarried women are specifically wanted as they would have no family or marital obligations that would interfere with their long working hours,

reinforcing the argument many manufacturing companies and the Bangladeshi government give as the garment sector has been considered an aid in allowing the independence of women by presenting the opportunity them to leave home, avoid early or arranged marriage, and make their own money. To have no interference with their working hours raises the incentive to hire younger women even though the average age for female garment workers is 26.6 years, which for around 95% of women a job in the RMG sector was their first paid employment opportunity in the formal sector, according to the ILO (9). Managing illiterate and uneducated women is in the benefit of factory owners so they do not feel forced to have up a formal work contract, distribute wage slips, or document the workers' earnings (War on Want, 6).

The RMG sector is regulated under the 2006 Bangladesh Labor Law and is monitored by the Bangladesh Ministry of Labor and Employment (War on Want, 1). The 2006 law was amended in 2013 to be more aligned with international labor standard and is considered instrumental in potential justice for garment workers the failure of the implementation of these laws poses a major problem in potential improvement for exploitative conditions millions of garment workers are facing (War on Want, 1-2). In 2015 the Bangladesh Labor Rules were then put in place to better ensure the implementation of the Bangladesh Labor Law but yet there have not been drastic changes in implementation (Khan). Bangladesh has ratified seven out of eight fundamental ILO conventions such as the labor convention to uphold the rights of female workers to equal remuneration as male counterparts (Khan). The failure of the implementation of these international standards and national labor laws poses a major issue as it increases the vulnerability of garment workers and the disparity of unequal treatment for the female workforce.

The RMG industry predominantly being composed of a female workforce presents a gender inequality issue since the small percentage of men that do work in the garment industry are usually in higher ranking positions (ILO, 13). Female representation in managerial positions is overall declining; remaining low and unchanged from 2010 to 2018 since sectorial leadership roles are more male-dominated with over 95% of men holding line supervisor positions (ILO, 15). The rankings in employment positions are divided into approximately seven 'grades' that all factories follow to divide the garment workers, where most of the women employed are in the lowest grade, Grade 7: Helper and Other Entry Level Positions, while men are often in Grade 1: Higher Supervisors and Grade 2: Line (Section) Supervisors (Menzel and Woodruff, 4). Women are more likely to be employed in lower-level positions because they are cheaper, abundantly available and therefore disposable, increasingly vulnerable, docile, and more manageable than male workers, making them more likely to accept without protest flexible terms of employment, and less likely to be susceptible to 'anti-management' and union propaganda (Farhana et al., 565).

The discriminatory and sexist language used to describe women stems from the patriarchal nature of Bangladeshi society, described as a distribution of power and resources within families such that men maintain power and control of resources making women powerless and dependent on men (Cain et al., 406). The material base of patriarchy is men's control of property, income, and women's labor allowing the creation of the context where women would not be interested in higher-level positions because they do not feel qualified since men work faster and a man's output is greater than a woman's output (Cain et al., 406; ILO, 15). The UN views gender equality as, "not only a fundamental human right, but a necessary foundation for a

peaceful, prosperous, and sustainable world," yet gender based discrimination is pervasive in the garment industry (Kinsey & Company, 16).

Unlivable Wages

The issue of gender inequality is tied with one of the major issues of the Bangladeshi garment industry, low wages. Women are largely underrepresented in higher-level positions, the ones that pay more, women get paid even less than the minimum wage of 58 USD at a labor cost of 0.11 USD per shirt as of 2011 (Kurpad, 86). The minimum wage is already low but gender inequality is pervasive enough to affect income as a man's average monthly earnings exceed a woman's monthly earnings by 2.7% (Huynh, 5). As reported by the ILO, in 2018 the gross wage for a Grade 1 worker was 17,510 Bangladeshi Taka (BDT) while for a Grade 7 worker, a usual female position was 8,000 BDT (14). The 8,000 BDT equivalent to 100.3 USD a month, was a 2,700 BDT increase made in 2018 after garment workers had been fighting and protesting for a minimum wage increase double what they received, asking for 16,000 BDT, as the living costs keep increasing making it harder to make ends meet (Clean Clothes Campaign). These protests were met with violent and repressive responses by factory owners and police being dispersed with water cannons, tear gas, batons, and rubber bullets, thousands lost their jobs, and factory owners purposely blacklisted many garment workers by setting up billboards with names and photographs at the gates of factories and using biometrics to track and share their profiles to other factory owners (Clean Clothes Campaign).

Working Hours

The second main issue in the garment industry tied to low wages is the exploitative work schedule that takes a physical toll on the women and can potentially affect their families due to their absence at home. Regarding work schedule, according to Bangladeshi law workers are

supposed to work an eight-hour shift and forty-eight hours per week, excessive working hours are the daily norm to meet the unrealistic production targets set by factory owners but are not considered overtime so are therefore unpaid (War on Want, 5). The average workday for a garment worker exceeds that of eight hours at around thirteen to sixteen hours a day and usually includes working the night shift, legal under Bangladeshi Labor Law, to only return in a couple of hours for the next workday while still attending to their household domestic duties (War on Want, 3). Garment workers are often manipulated by superiors to work these long hours without a bathroom or food break or on short notice leaving workers without a choice but to accept regardless of inconvenience due to the risk of potentially losing their job if they were to decline (War on Want, 4). Workers are also entitled to fourteen days paid sick leave but most workers report never receiving paid sick leave as they are instead manipulated to work regardless of their illness as it is not considered an excuse (War on Want, 5).

To fulfill the unrealistic production targets of mass production to keep their jobs, a majority of women need to work overtime hours to meet basic needs due to the low wages and rising living costs. The rapid changes in high street fashion trends and the tight production deadlines imposed by Western retailers make production targets difficult to fulfill as workers are forced to learn new and complex designs in a very short space of time (War on Want, 7). Factory owners can choose to overcut overtime pay and fine garment workers for a list of reasons including a lack of punctuality, failure to meet production, unnecessary conversation with co-workers, absence without leave, making mistakes, or protesting management decisions to ultimately lower the workers' already low wages, as there is no provision in the Bangladeshi labor legal system for fining workers (War on Want, 5). Since many women are illiterate female workers are more often cheated than men regarding overtime deductions or fines that do not live

up to the factory owners and since many do not have legal contracts or factory identity cards, they are ultimately vulnerable to the decisions of the factory owners (War on Want, 6).

Sexual Harassment

In unfair gender dynamics such as the ones in Bangladesh, women are extremely vulnerable to potential sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace. The unequal women to men ratio has led to high rates of sexual harassment and discrimination to be disregarded and not upheld by many employers, according to the NGO War on Want (4). Sexual harassment situations range from insults directed at a person's gender, suggestive comments, suggestive language, demeaning remarks, or unwelcomed physical assault or touching of any kind and can potentially be a great source of mental stress (Begum et al., 293). Although there is a culture of unacceptable work behavior such as insults and shouting from higher-level supervisors to meet output targets, women disproportionately experience physical violence and sexual harassment (ILO, 28). In addition to obscene language, physical violence, and sexual harassment, many garment workers report other forms of punishment such as humiliation like being made to stand on tables, being threatened with losing their jobs, being sent to prison, and being forced to undress (War on Want, 6). The added stress and torment from superiors create both mental and physical stress on garment workers that are already in an exhaustive daily schedule.

In a culture where violence against women is socially normalized, survivors often do not feel violence against them is something that would be taken seriously or is worth reporting, especially where their finances could be at risk and lack of trust in police is common as stated by South Asian director at Humans Rights Watch, Meenakshi Ganguly. Many unmarried workers were specifically afraid of disclosing any information on sexual harassment since it decreases their marriage possibility in the future as marriage is often for economic security and since

Bangladesh is the third-largest Muslim populated country (Lazar). With more than 16 million Muslims and Islam as the state religion proclaimed in the 1980s, marriage is considered a contract where the women have a strict role and could therefore be looked down upon if they were to have relations before they were married regardless if it was solicited or not (Habib, 16).

Many workplaces lack policies and mechanisms to address sexual, verbal, and physical harassment becoming a major factor in why women leave the job at an average of 34/35 years old due to the fear of speaking out against their superiors to potentially risking their source of employment (ILO, 30). The possibility of sexual harassment becomes a strain of mental and physical stress, further affecting the millions of women in an already exploitative environment. There are specific associations such as the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA), an association that in 2009 set out guidelines for protection against sexual harassment at workplaces and other institutions but implementation is a major problem (Khan).

Family Effects

The exploitative conditions in the work take a toll on the families of these garment workers due to the exhaustive working schedule. Many women workers report being separated from their children for long periods becoming highly concerning for the working mothers who are breastfeeding (War on Want, 7). If pregnancy were to occur during employment, in most cases women individually negotiate with management for time off before and after childbirth (War on Want, 7). Although under Bangladesh labor law women are guaranteed maternity leave up to a total of sixteen weeks split between eight weeks before childbirth and eight weeks after childbirth which some do, in most cases, women must accept a reduced wage or take unpaid leave instead (War on Want, 7).

Inadequate maternity protection, high risk of sexual abuse, inadequate breastfeeding support, and poor access to quality childcare put a serious strain on the relationship between these working mothers, their families, and their children. Due to the low wages and rapid urbanization of the major manufacturing cities, most of the workers and their families live around deprived urban slum areas where children are at risk of child labor themselves and lack basic services (UNICEF, 3). Around these slum areas, there is a lack of clean water, adequate sanitation and hygiene, healthcare resources, adequate nutrition, and adequate education resulting in what the United Nations Children's Fund describes as, "denying the children of garment workers a safe environment where they can thrive and develop" (3).

With limited childcare options and the mothers often away from the home, the children are usually in the streets due to the limited educational resources available as well. This furthers an intergenerational cycle of poverty where many daughters might feel the need to get involved in the garment industry to help their mothers provide due to low salaries. It often happens that children will have to get involved in child labor to supplement the mother's income but then exposes them to the exploitative conditions at a much younger age and harm them for longer. If the children would not be working, they could be exposed to violence and could potentially follow a bad life path due to the lack of an older reference to guide them in life.

Working in exhaustive conditions affects the mother's health and potentially affects their ability to adequately raise a healthy child due to the potential decline of their health (UNICEF, 8). It is uncommon for these factories to provide hot meals, usually only allowing space to eat their home-cooked foods but with low wages, there is limited access to healthy food for the mothers furthering the decline of their physical health (UNICEF, 8). Because of the exhaustive working environment, workers in the garment factories suffer from various diseases like fever,

headache, back pain, eye infection, jaundice, typhoid, weakness or anemia, skin diseases, and diarrhea (Habib, 5). Interconnected, if low wages mean limited access to food for the mothers it means limited access for their children and families as well as affecting the physical health of those depending on the mother garment worker. The exploitative conditions in which approximately 90% of the four million garment workers work indirectly affect the livelihoods of more than 25 million people, as of 2015, whom they must support (UNICEF, 7).

Hazardous Infrastructure

Another reason for the exploitative conditions of garment working that has had serious effects over the years is that the majority of the women who work in the Grade 7 low-paid and less skilled jobs, work where hazards are comparatively higher (Begum et al., 291). Although Bangladesh's RMG industries are part of the ILO's Decent Work Agenda, Bangladesh has failed to provide safe and healthy work environments and conditions for their factory workers (Kurpad 86). 'Decent Work for All' is a principle that guide's the ILO's work, has become the eighth goal of the UN's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, and sums up the aspirations all people have for their working lives to deliver a fair income with security and social protection, to safeguard basic rights, to offer equality and increased opportunity and treatment to reduce efforts to reduce poverty to achieve equitable, inclusive, and sustainable development (ILO; Kenner and Peake, 92).

Regarding the unsafe work environments, garment factories have been referred as 'sweatshops,' due to their small size, enclosed nature with little ventilation (Kurpad, 86). Usually, the air quality of the factories is contaminated, there is a lack of safe drinking water, there is no functioning fire escape, and they are reported to be very hot and dusty as sewing, cutting, and ironing are done on the same overcrowded floors (Habib, 5). With the lack of safe

drinking water and hygienic facilities, preventable water-related diseases can be exacerbated by limited access in the workplace to clean toilets and water and soap for hand washing (UNICEF, 7). Bangladeshi labor law states employers must ensure basic standards for health and safety in the workplace are complied with but are often undermined in Bangladeshi garment factories (War on Want, 4). By law, factories with more than 300 workers must have medical and nursing staff on-site during all working hours but workers report that no doctor available during their night shifts meaning they are unable to access medical assistance if an accident were to occur (War on Want, 5).

The inadequate safety conditions have resulted in horrible fires and the collapse of various garment factories because of poor infrastructure and undermining of safety standards. The rapid growth of the RMG sector has created deadly infrastructural hazards as the demand for more capacity has allowed the establishment of garment factories to appear in apartment buildings and other multi-use structures not built or meant to safely handle large numbers of workers and machines (113th Congress). Since 1990, more than four hundred workers have died and several thousand more have been wounded in over fifty major factory fires such as the Chittagong fire in 2006 where fifty-four workers passed away (Stanwick, 41). In February 2010, a deadly fire killed twenty-one and injured more than fifty at the Garib & Garib Sweater Factory, and in November 2012, there was another deadly fire that killed more than a hundred people (Kurpad, 87).

The most significant accident is the Rana Plaza collapse in April 2013. Considered to be one of the biggest tragedies in the fashion industry, the eight-story Rana Plaza building contained multiple clothing factories in Dhaka collapsed and killed 1,136 and injured 2,535 (Stanwick, 41). Most injured and deceased were young women working on the production of RMGs for 29 major

international brands such as Zara, Wal-Mart, Benetton, and Mango, mainly set up for EU export (Kenner and Peake, 87). Although the Rana Plaza tragedy was not the first time a building collapsed, hundreds of workers died due to negligence from the employers after illegal floors were added and reports of poor infrastructure were made to the supervisors months before the collapse of the building (Stanwick, 41). This event encouraged Bangladesh to enact a national plan or known as the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity (NAP) in 2013 that stipulates a series of commitments for the government of Bangladesh to meet by certain deadlines such as upgrading the labor inspection department and increasing the budget to carry out proper and detailed inspections to prevent future incidents (113th Congress).

The Rana Plaza tragedy uncovered the tragic and even deadly conditions many workers must face and how the system turns a blind eye to faults as the building collapsed due to structural problems as it was not built with the necessary permits and after workers were threatened with the loss of their jobs if they refused to step into the building (Stanwick, 41; Hoskins, 68). International brands failed to provide adequate funding to ensure all survivors and their families to receive payments to cover loss of income and medical expenses (Sommer, 5). Instead, a trust fund administered by the ILO was agreed upon by some brands, the Bangladeshi government, employers, national and international trade unions, as well as NGOs to collect 40 million USD to compensate victims and their families (Sommer, 5). As a major exporting market, the EU was also obliged to react after the Rana Plaza disaster due to international pressure and resulted in organizing the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact, a soft law initiative supported by the ILO and other governmental actors such as the USA and Canada, domestic and international trade union and employer organizations and the Bangladeshi government (Kenner and Peake, 88). Although there have been comments regarding the effectiveness of the

Bangladesh Sustainability Compact, its purpose was to be a blueprint for future EU interventions to provide solutions to complex interactions between trade, sustainable development, and human rights considerations in bilateral or multilateral relations (Kenner and Peake, 88).

There are agencies to regulate flaws in the manufacturing system such as building inspection teams, labor inspection teams, and auditors, the 'watchtowers' that are supposed to protect worker's lives but end up becoming mere industry fronts that allow exploitative conditions to continue (Hoskins, 75). These injustices have caused many workers to be on the frontlines for non-governmental organization work and unions to help set a new standard for conditions and wages. But in Bangladesh, factory management take steps to prevent the formation of trade unions causing many to stay silent as they may risk their source of income, regardless of it being a right protected under the Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining ILO Conventions, ratified in 1972 by Bangladesh (ILO).

One of the largest unions is the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF), established in 1984 as an independent, democratic, and progressive trade union federation campaigning for the protection and enforcement of women workers' rights (War on Want, 3). With over 1,000 successfully organized factory committees in different garment factories and thirty-seven factory-based unions that make up NGWF, accomplishments have been able to be made such as the minimum wage raise in 2010 to 3,000 BDT but since then has been raised further (War on Want, 4). NGWF is only one example of the handful of unions that have been able to make positive and progressive change in the RMG sector but their efforts to form trade unions are often suppressed by the Bangladeshi government and factory owners themselves with threats and even physical violence.

Many RMG factory owners are closely tied to the political scene in Bangladesh, as discussed in the previous chapter, causing many laws to not be enforced as they might conflict with the interests of the elite in addition to the growth and earnings of the RMG sector (113th Congress). The 2006 Bangladesh Labor Law was considered a landmark achievement, consisting of twenty-five separate acts and ordinances to extend the scope and applicability of nationwide labor regulations addressing gender disparities, maternity leave, wage, and schedule issues among many topics that have been discussed in this chapter (War on Want, 1). Without proper help from the government and elites such as factory owners or manufacturing superiors to make sure the rules are respected, garment workers are left with very few national options for improving their current work situation.

COVID-19 and its Impact on Garment Workers

The world has been impacted at the end of 2019 pushing through 2020 due to the infectious respiratory disease named the Coronavirus disease that can be spread through droplets of saliva or discharge from the nose according to the World Health Organization (WHO). With 59,204,902 cases, 1,397,139 confirmed deaths across 220 countries and territories, COVID-19 has impacted the world as we know it now having to wear masks, socially distance, hyperawareness to sanitation, hygiene, lockdowns, and limitations to groups of people in confined spaces (WHO). These new rules to limit the spread of the virus have heavily impacted the global economy, the global supply chain, and therefore the garment industry. According to the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), the fashion industry's revenue could drop by more than one-third, the equivalent of up to 640 billion USD in lost sales, and has heavily impacted the entire supply chain. Government and corporate responses and the lack of responses have exposed vast structural inequalities created by supply chain production models heavily affecting the

millions of female garment workers exploited and dependent on mainly Westerners' fashion consumption (ILO, Forward).

Women garment workers who live from paycheck to paycheck, without access to healthcare and social protection systems, who have been disproportionately affected by a crisis in which major employer and government responses have been absent according to the ILO (Forward). The fashion supply chains that benefit from these precarious conditions are essentially responsible for eroding individual and social safety nets, precipitating the humanitarian crisis of female garment exploitation (ILO, Forward). The virus has posed a problem for Bangladesh due to its insufficient preparedness to manage this fatal disease and has made a slow start towards COVID-19 preparedness endangering garment workers even further (Kabir et al., 1).

Bangladesh went into lockdown from March 26, 2020 to May 30, 2020 due to the high number of infections and resulted in the BGMEA closing their factories and the shipment processes becoming increasingly difficult to carry out because of global lockdowns (Kabir et al., 2). Although during the lockdown, e-commerce sites were still running and online purchases increased, supply chains could not continue to meet the demands due to the health and hygiene limitations resulting in millions being without work. During this pandemic, workers have faced and continue to face the uncertainty about whether they would be paid, concerns on the re-opening of the factories, and if they were going to follow preventative sanitation protocols (Kabir et al., 2).

The virus has impact RMG workers' health both physically and mentally and resulted in the loss of employment of the main or only source of income for millions (Kabir et al., 1). As an already vulnerable group even before the virus, there was a rise in evidence of rape and suicidal

cases (during lockdown), as well as infections and deaths related to COVID-19 (Kabir et al., 1). Already having been paid the bare minimum and then losing their main income or making less than normally, garment workers can no longer provide for their families and meet the basic needs posing other problems regarding buying food, paying rent, and other expenses.

The Prime Minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, announced a stimulus package close to 500,000,000 USD for the garment sector to handle the pandemic (Kabir et al., 3). A part of the money was meant to be able to pay the wages of their workers but sadly many factory owners did not pay the full wages for their workers for March and April and did not pay outstanding wages on time (Kabir et al., 3). After the re-opening of factories on April 26, 2020, garment workers were contacted to return to work under the threat if they did not they would lose their jobs and any outstanding salary, while COVID-19 protocols were not enforced on public transportation and in the workplace (Kabir et al., 4). The already vulnerable group of garment workers is further at risk working during this unprecedented pandemic as the main sector supporting Bangladesh's economy is seen being prioritized over garment workers' health and well-being.

4. Concluding Remarks

This last chapter discusses the efforts NGOs and international institutions have made and the possible options to improve the conditions of garment workers and the fashion industry. Over the years, more emphasis has been placed on the exploitative conditions in which millions of women garment workers are working to manufacture millions of garments. Since the government of Bangladesh has failed to take initiative to appropriately address the injustices a disproportionate amount of women garment workers have to face daily, international non-governmental organizations have taken the responsibility to address change. NGOs like the ILO, the UN, War on Want, Global Labor Justice (GLJ), Fashion Revolution, Global Fashion Agenda, Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), and the Circle amongst plenty of others are dedicated to improving the working conditions of the global garment industry. Many organizations like War on Want have urged responsibility to fall on Western companies and Western governments by having consumers call for their accountability and acknowledge their wrongdoing in the garment industry. Over the years, transparency and accountability have been trending topics and have been asked of companies by both consumers and organizations to help acknowledge human rights abuses in the manufacturing of Bangladeshi garments.

The Coronavirus has shed light on the injustices hidden in garment manufacturing and how unsustainable the current fashion industry's business model is. Mass production and mindless consumption by consumers create a ripple effect of issues from exploitative manufacturing, environmental issues, and garment waste so many have called on the implementation of the circular economy regarding production. According to the Ellen MacArthur

Foundation, a circular economy addresses the issues of mass production and mass consumption referring to a new business model based on the principles of designing out waste and pollution, keeping products and materials in use, and regenerating natural systems. Therefore, instead of promoting the constant buying of new fashion through different fashion seasons and new trends, reusing material from already used garments and the emphasis on durability is encouraged.

Although the circular economy promotes sustainability, it is a concept reliant on finding alternative ways to use what is already made rather than making more or in excess but simultaneously poses a problem for garment workers that are dependent on mass-production to earn only the minimum. For this reason, pressure has to be enacted from the bottom up but real change can only be brought from the top-down. In this case, consumers, international organizations, and NGOs have multiple options. To pressure fashion companies to improve the conditions or stop outsource manufacturing, for western governments to regulate their imported garments, and for the Bangladeshi government to set rules for their garment industry. But tangibly consumers and international actors are limited to bringing awareness and calling for accountability to the exploitative conditions many women garment workers.

Options to pressure brands, garment factories, and therefore the Bangladeshi government can stem through collective solidarity from consumers and garment workers supported by unions, international organizations, or NGOs. Consumers boycotting fashion brands who outsource manufacture provides an alternative that theoretically can make a difference and force those in charge of these companies to change their current ways by presenting them an ultimatum in which they either change or lose money. The main issue is collective solidarity from the millions of fashion consumers all over the world who are all in different socioeconomic

statuses of life who either might not be interested or feel that if garments were to get more expensive they would not be able to afford them.

Collective bargaining through union representatives and protesting from garment workers themselves in unions and supported by NGOs has resulted in positive change in the past as discussed in a previous section. Being supported by NGOs and international organizations provides a safety net when garment workers on the frontlines are to be met with violence or are fired and left with no income. In this case, NGOs and international organizations can help by raising awareness and calling attention to the issue at a global scale potentially funding jail bailouts, those left with no income, and medical expenses through donations from companies, consumers, or the organization's funds. The problematic aspect of collective bargaining from garment workers is in the way it forces garment workers to risk their lives, their source of income, and fight their own battles with solutions presented only after events would occur when in fact these exploitative conditions would not occur if there was not such a high demand for garments by fashion consumers all over the world.

The actual change stems in the fashion industry from those in powers, in this case, the chief executive officers (CEO) of fashion companies, superiors in charge of manufacturing or production for fashion companies, superiors in charge of making legislation regarding trade restrictions in Western countries, international trade institutions such the World Trade Organization, and lastly political elites in Bangladesh and owners of manufacturing factories. While consumption of lower fashion segments e-commerce sites have risen and is projected to rise further due to COVID-19, many high fashion companies have slowed down the pace of production and the number of fashion shows during fashion seasons such as Gucci's Creative Director Alessandro Michele announcing the Florentine fashion house will go 'season-less'

meaning they will only meet twice a year to produce collections to promote sustainability and less consumption (TFL). If brands can make big decisions to sell, manufacture, and market less trendy products addressing the issue of mass production and the consequences come with it such as an exploitative working schedule, companies can address the exploitation issues in manufacturing countries like Bangladesh.

International trade organizations like the WTO also have a role in possibly aiding the current situation for garment workers. These organizations can monitor the international community and make sure they uphold ethical standards when producing the products to trade internationally. By enacting stricter standards for trade approved by western countries, Bangladesh would have more to lose and feel obligated by the international community and international trade organizations to oblige with garment products that were manufactured by workers that are not in exploitative conditions. As Bangladesh presents itself to upholding all international standards on paper, there would have to be separate auditors and monitoring agencies to routinely check manufacturing factories and make sure the standards are being adhered to. The risks may run that due to the competitive nature of the industry to gain profit, full transparency and authenticity would not be presented and remain hidden in Bangladesh. There would have to be more initiative by the international institutions to ensure all members are transparent, truthful, and ethical in the manufacturing process of the products being traded internationally.

The main issue is one of unfair money allocation and greed with money. As presented throughout this thesis at the rate of mass production the fashion industry is going, million-dollar companies like Mango and billion-dollar conglomerates like Louis Vuitton Moet Hennessy (LVMH) would not lose a significant amount of money in paying their garment workers livable

and respectable wages. By doubling or tripling the wage of garment workers, the labor cost per garment increases only a minimal amount and therefore raises the retail price but ensures those making the pieces are being justly paid for their hard work, as wages for production does not exceed three percent of the price paid in store (Clean Clothes Campaign, 5). If companies were to take CSR for those manufacturing their garments by increasing their budget spending on manufacturing and production and ensuring that the factories manufacturing for them are paying their garment workers livable wages with the money they are paying the factories, one of the three major problems the majority female garment workers are enduring would be solved.

Regarding the hazardous and physical exploitative conditions of garment working, the Bangladeshi government is the one to address these internal issues affecting their female garment workforce through stricter regulations in the industry. The Bangladeshi Ministry of Labor and Employment can amend the Bangladesh Labor Law working with the BGMEA to double the minimum wage and to most importantly demand stricter compliance by factory owners of multiple issues such as actively bringing to justice sexual harassment and abuse cases in the workplace by making stricter legislation and the Bangladeshi Ministry of Labor and Employment to provide more resources for support for these women. As well, as stricter compliance is needed for the number of people working in the factory to avoid overcrowding and follow COVID-19 protocol, of an adequate eight-hour working schedule, of viable alternatives for home-working to not risk health issues through transportation, of payment of justly agreed overtime work, and of payment for maternity leave or assurance the job will not be lost upon giving birth. If more routine or random inspections are carried out and fines are made to factory owners that do not comply, owners would increasingly get accustomed to follow the rules and maintain ethical working conditions.

To ensure Bangladesh upholds their current legislation and future amended legislation are sanctions and pressure from international actors to oversee the Bangladeshi RMG industry. There have been hundreds of reports written by international organizations and NGOs providing recommendations on how to address issues in the garment industry but active execution of these recommendations has not been carried out so far rendering these considerations lost. Major importing countries of Bangladesh's RMG products Companies as well have a role in certifying the garment factories they are dealing with are upholding ethical working conditions for their female garment workers. Fashion companies are the ones that determine whether factories have customers to produce for, ultimately having the power to force Bangladeshi garment factories to work under humane conditions.

In conclusion, in the global garment industry female garment workers are the most vulnerable group by being subjected to exploitative working conditions that severely affect their mental and physical health and consequently their families. Fashion plays a pivotal part in everyday life presenting itself as a mere form of self-expression when it is ultimately a business focused on capital. This thesis has explored these topics with the following research question: *how has mass consumption in the fashion industry affected major manufacturing countries like Bangladesh and their workforce?*

The question has been explored through the Marxist theoretical framework of mass consumption and capitalism, as well as the theoretical framework on the economic dependency of underdeveloped countries. The Industrial Revolution has shifted the production process of textiles and garments, introducing mass production and exploitative practices to vulnerable groups like children to sustain the new competitive nature of the fashion industry. After labor reforms in the West, outsource manufacturing was introduced as a perfect alternative to maintain

the low production costs but has resulted in the endangerment of the workforces of garment-producing countries. Research has been developed on Bangladesh's role in the garment industry leading to the exploitation of female garment workers that work with unlivable wages, exploitative working schedules, high risk of sexual harassment, high possibility of gender discrimination, and the hazardous working conditions and places they work in. The million-dollar Bangladeshi garment industry is essential for the country's economy and has been able to help provide millions of women with jobs to support their families. But while garment work empowers women with better job opportunities than others available in Bangladesh, women garment workers are simultaneously exploited and have their issues overlooked by their employers and their politicians.

The intermeshing of RMG owners in the political scene emphasizes the economic motive that overshadows the wellbeing of the female workforce responsible for the livelihood of the manufacturing industry in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is primarily responsible for prioritizing money over millions of their women while presenting a façade on legislation in front of the international community but allowing human rights abuses to continue with their knowledge. But responsibility also falls on the international community and fashion companies. The responsibility falls on the international community for seeing Bangladesh take inaction and disregarding exploitation in the manufacturing of western garments because fashion companies contribute a grand amount to western economies and on fashion companies for overlooking, therefore, allowing exploitative practices to be upheld to produce their products so they can save money in the cost of production.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an unravelment of the globalized world as we know it, highlighting the interconnectedness and dependency needed in today's world. The

hidden stages of manufacturing have been magnified due to the global crisis and have resulted in the changing of the fashion industry. Now is the determining time to address these issues and make proper changes in the midst of adapting to life and business after the Coronavirus. There are plenty of organizations like the UN that are attempting to spread awareness and call attention to the need for improvement as a society (UN Sustainable Development Goals). Although change will be brought about slowly, the best way to bring is to start a global movement promoted by NGOs and international organizations and furthered by consumers to highlight these human rights abuses to the Bangladesh female workforce to promote change and not refer to these injustices as unalterable in the fashion industry.

Glossary

Bridge	Born in the US within American department stores as a mid-range to connect the high end of the market with the mass-market. This offer the customer a product with the right level of creativity but also the right value for the money with the right delivery in the store for customer's daily use but could potentially be outsourced. Companies tend to be a mix in terms of distribution between wholesale and retail to outsource their product in order to have the right value for the money (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).
Chief Procurement Officer	[An] executive level employee whose responsibilities include sourcing, supply management, and procurement for the company (Biedron).
Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)	A self-regulating business model that helps a company be socially accountable—to itself, its stakeholders, and the public and by practicing this

	companies can be conscious of the kind of impact they are having on all aspects of society, including economic, social, and environmental (Fernando).
Coronavirus	An infectious respiratory disease that can be spread through droplets of saliva or discharge that has 59,204,902 cases, 1,397,139 confirmed deaths across 220 countries and territories (WHO).
Dependency Theory	Western countries like the United States, countries in the European Union, and Canada are 'core' countries that make up the 'metropolis' and historically exploit 'peripheral' nations, like Bangladesh, by keeping them in a state of dependency and under-development (NCCA, 2).
Diffusion	Created in the 80's by Italian and American brands to reach a more affordable market and a younger customer range in which production is made in wider volumes, where most of the time they are outsourced (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).
East-West Dichotomy	The difference between the Western and

	Eastern worlds, as historically Asia is regarded as the East and currently Australasia, Europe, and North America are considered the West differentiated mainly on cultural boundaries rather than geographical (Mestrovic, 61).
Everything but Arms (EBA)	Grants Bangladesh full duty-free and quota-free access to the EU single market for all products except arms (European Commission).
Exploitation	Shall at a minimum include the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labor or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude, or the removal of organs (Palermo Protocol 2000).
Fashionability	How ‘in trend’ a product is during that particular fashion season.
	Generalized System of Preferences: removes import duties from products coming into the EU market from vulnerable developing countries. This helps developing countries to alleviate poverty and create jobs based on international values and principles,

	including labor and human rights (European Commission)
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	The standard measure of the value added created through the production of goods and services in a country during a certain period (OECD).
Haute Couture	A small business but is important for image building as it sells the dream of fashion and luxury (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).
Mass-market	Synonymous with fast fashion, is focused on the success factor for the company but offers different brands, targets different customers, different occasional views, and different price ranges all within an affordable budget. There is an effective management of the supply chain but is normally outsourced and potentially falls into the category of exploitative work (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).
McDonaldization	Discusses changes in capitalist economies as they moved toward greater rationalization through mass production and mass

	consumption (Joy et al., 275).
Modern Capitalist System	The economic system that consists of private ownership of the means of production (Hammen; Heller, 46).
Multi Fiber Agreement (MFA)	An agreement signed and negotiated by the governments of forty-four countries in 1974 that provided rules dictating trade in the textile and clothing industry allowing industrialized countries to restrict countries from developing countries (Rahmad, 18-19).
Outsource Manufacturing	Consists of hiring people outside of the company to assemble parts of, or build an entire product. (Baysource Global).
Paco Rabanne	Fashion House established in 1966 by Basque designer Francisco Rabaneda y Cuervo and has made €1.93 billion in 2018 (About Paco Rabbane).
Quantitative Restrictions	Specific limits on the quantity or value of goods that can be imported (or exported) during a specific time period. (OECD).
Ready-Made Garments	Refers to mass-produced, factory made clothing that can include prêt-à-porter,

	diffusion, bridge, and mass-market products.
Ready-to-Wear	Named prêt-à-porter in French but invented by Italian companies in the 70's to combine the creativity of high fashion and the industrialization of the industry. Refers to mass-produced clothing from expensive and brands where the price range is 3 to 5 times the mass-market price and the designer expresses himself in the fashion show collection suitable for a wide range of occasions (Corbellini, Fashion Market Segmentation).
Seasons	The period in which the new fashion collection is displayed. Includes Fall/Winter, Spring/Summer, Resort, and Pre-Fall usually shown around a year before the time period.

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