

## Why Are Your Clothes So Cheap?

By: Kristin Lewis and Gini Sikes

Hunched over her sewing machine in a noisy factory in the country of Bangladesh, 14-year-old Kalpona struggled to keep her eyes open. The bright pink fabric beneath her hands would eventually become a tank top. Kalpona had never worn a tank top or any of the clothes she sewed. She dressed in a loose tunic with a long scarf draped over her dark hair. Kalpona imagined the top she was sewing being worn by an American girl, maybe a teenager like herself. It was the 83<sup>rd</sup> shirt she had stitched in the past hour. She was exhausted, but she tried to stay focused- one wrong move and needle could slice through her finger. If she cried out, her boss would punish her.



Suddenly, over the monotonous whir of sewing machines, she heard a man's voice shout out. "The top floor is on fire!" The room filled with blinding black smoke, burning Kalpona's throat. Panic erupted as people rushed to find a way out. All Kalpona could hear were screams.

### **Who Makes Your Clothes?**

From the wetlands of Bangladesh to the cities of Pakistan, there are millions of men, women, and children just like Kalpona, working in dangerous factories, sewing the clothes you wear. They are crowded into sweltering warehouses in Cambodia stitching zippers onto jeans. They are cobbling sneakers in hazy, smog-gilled Chinese cities. They are cranking out T-shirts in India. They are stitching the leggings you wear to school, the fleece jacket you wear to basketball practice, the top you are wearing right now.

When we think about where our clothes come from, we tend to think of the stores where we bought them – Forever 21, H&M, Walmart. Yet most of the 20 billion items of clothing we buy each year have stories that stretch thousands of miles from your local mall.

In a land far away, human beings made them. The bitter truth is that life for many of garment workers, as they are called, is brutally hard.

### **Harsh Reality**

Like most garment workers, Kalpona didn't grow up dreaming working in an unsafe factory. Her father was once a successful construction worker in Bangladesh. Along with her parents and five younger siblings, Kalpona lived in a spacious seven-bedroom house. At school,

she earned good grades. She loved playing soccer with her friends and wanted to be a police officer when she grew up.

Then, when she was 12, her life changed forever. Her father suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to work. Without his income, Kalpona's family could barely afford food. "In six months, we sold everything we owned," Kalpona remembers. As the family faced starvation, Kalpona had no choice but to quit school and get a job in one of the clothing factories.

In the United States, kids age 14 and over can legally work, but only outside school hours and for a very limited amount of time. No one younger than 16 is allowed to work around dangerous machinery. However, in many poor countries, even if such laws exist, they may not be enforced. Often, children have to work. Without their income, they and their families could end up on the street. That was the harsh reality that Kalpona faced.

## **First Day**

On Kalpona's first day, no one bothered to ask her how old she was or told her how much she would be paid. She was simply handed a gigantic pair of scissors and told to cut fabric into two inch strips for belt loops. She had never used scissors. Her tiny fingers blistered. She told her supervisor that the scissors hurt, but he screamed at her to get back to work. At lunch – the only break she would get in what would be an agonizing 14-hour day, Kalpona went up to the roof of the building. From there, she glimpsed her old school. She could see her friends playing in the school yard. That's when it hit Kalpona: She would never go back to her school. Her old life was gone.

## **How Did This Happen?**

In the United States it's unthinkable that a 14-year-old would quit school to work all day in a factory. Years ago, American garment workers were adults, working in safe factories and earning enough money to buy their homes and send their children to college. The label "Made in the U.S.A." was a source of pride. In the 1970s, all this began to change. Factories in China and other countries could make clothing far more cheaply than was possible in the U.S. By the end of the 1990s, most clothing brands had shut down their American factories and were having their product made overseas. By moving the manufacturing of their shirts, jeans, and sneakers abroad, American companies saved billions. For shoppers, prices fell. America became a land of bargains, where even budget-conscious shoppers could fill their closets with fashionable clothes. Now, we have come to expect our clothing to be cheap.

It all sounds great – until you start to ask questions. How is it possible that a trendy T-shirt can cost just five dollars? Why is it so much cheaper to make a pair of jeans in Bangladesh than in America? To find the answers, you must travel to factories, or sweatshops, like the one where Kalpona worked. Once you do you will realize that the human cost of our cheap clothes is heartbreakingly high.

These factories are able to make cheap clothes because they pay their workers very little. In parts of China the minimum wage is about \$2.15 per hour. In Bangladesh, it's about 50 cents, one of the lowest in the world. Kalpona received even less than that. Her first paycheck was \$3.00 for a month of work. But that's not all. In Bangladesh and other countries, many factory owners save money by failing to provide a safe workplace. Their workers toil in terrible and even deadly conditions. Factory owners refuse to make improvements -like putting in fire exits- that would protect their workers from harm. As a result, thousands have been killed or seriously hurt in factories around the world in the past decade.

## Angry and Inspired

Which takes us back to Kalpona at the moment when the factory erupted into flames. There had never been a fire drill at the factory. The only exit door on her floor was locked so that workers could not leave during the day, and piles of cardboard boxes blocked the path to that door. Kalpona's supervisor managed to clear away the boxes and get the door open. Frantic workers stampeded toward the narrow stairway. Fortunately, everyone escaped. After the fire, Kalpona had no choice but to return to work. But something happened to her. As she sat at her sewing machine, day after day, earning her meager wage, she became angry and inspired. She began attending classes at a local nonprofit organization, where she learned that factory owners were breaking the law. She tried to organize her fellow workers in a union. As a group, they could bargain with the factory owners. If the owners refused to treat them fairly, they could strike.



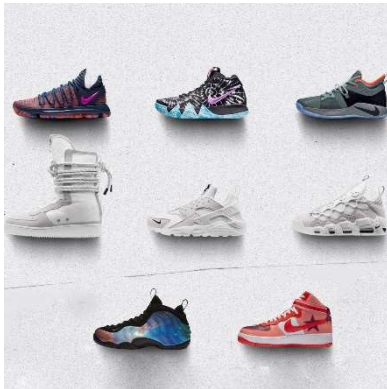
For her efforts, Kalpona was fired. She became more determined to change the lives of garment workers in Bangladesh. Today, she is 39 years old. Kalpona has dedicated her life to workers' right. She cofounded the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. Now she is one of her country's most celebrated labor activist.



Progress has been slow, though. The deadliest disaster in the history of the garment industry happened in Bangladesh, not far from where Kalpona once worked. More than 1,100 workers were killed and thousands more were injured when the Rana Plaza factory building collapsed. In the rubble were clothes with familiar labels: Joe Fresh and Benetton.

## Slowly Changing

The disaster at Rana Plaza was devastating to Kalpona. This tragedy has also become an important turning point in the struggle for workers' rights. The factory owners connected to the Rana Plaza disaster were charged with murder. Several large American companies, including American Eagle, H&M, and Adidas have vowed to do a better job enforcing rules about working conditions and fair wages at the factories that make their clothing. More American shoppers are asking difficult questions about where our clothing is made and how our hunger for cheap clothes has contributed to global human rights abuses.



Nike came under fire for the rock-bottom wages, abusive conditions, and use of child labor at its overseas factories. Sales plummeted as angry customers held protests and boycotts. Today, Nike has a team that monitors conditions in its factories. Inspections reports are made public online. Nike could be a model for other brands looking to address labor abuses in their supply chains.

Kalpona is now traveling the world speaking out again abuse and petitioning big name brands to do more to protect the people who make our clothes. As she works tirelessly to help others, she often thinks back to her teenage self, peering down at her school from the factory roof, wishing for a different kind of life. "All these young women and girls are working every day, giving their lives for pieces of clothing," she says. "We owe it to them, and all of us, to fight until we win."

## What Can You Do?

There are four ways you can help improve the lives on garment workers. First research where your clothes are made. Purchase clothes from the companies that stop abuse. Secondly, write letters to the companies that make your favorite brands. Tell them you expect the people who make your clothes to be treated fairly and paid well. You are their customer, and they want to keep your business. Third, don't stop buying clothing made in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world. The garment industry creates 4.2 million jobs. Lastly, spread the word that, as global citizens, we expect every human being, whether stitching a hat in Honduras or hemming a pair of jeans in Vietnam, to be treated with dignity and respect.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ HR \_\_\_\_\_

Why Are Your Clothes So Cheap?

1. Read the claim below and check 4 pieces of text evidence that supports the claim:

**Claim:** Most clothes that Americans wear are made by workers in foreign countries who often work with low pay and sometimes dangerous conditions.

**Textual Evidence** (check 4 boxes below that PROVE that workers in foreign counties work with low pay and dangerous conditions).

- "The top floor was on fire. The room filled with blinding black smoke, burning Kalpona's throat."
- "Kalpona's first paycheck was \$3.00 for a month of work."
- "Thousands have been killed or seriously hurt in factories around the world in the past decade."
- "More American shoppers are asking difficult questions about where our clothing is made"
- "More than 1,100 workers were killed and thousands more were injured when the Rana Plaza factory building collapsed."

2. Read the text evidence below from the section "How Did This Happen" and decide which of the claims listed is supported by the evidence.

**Textual Evidence:**

- "In many poor countries, children have to work."
- "These factories are able to make cheap clothes because they pay their workers very little."
- "In Bangladesh and other countries, many factory owners save money by failing to provide a safe work place."

**Possible Claims (check one that summarizes the 3 textual evidence sentences above).**

- Americans buy 20 billion items of clothing each year.
- Some popular American stores are Forever 21, H&M, and Walmart
- Most Americans don't realize that the human cost of our cheap clothes is heartbreakingly high.
- Our clothes are made in countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan.

3. Read the claim below. Which detail does NOT support the central idea?

**Claim:** In developing countries, children must sometimes work to help their families survive.

A "Often, children *have* to work."

B "At school, she earned good grades."

C "As the family faced starvation, Kalpona had no choice but to quit school and get a job in one of Bangladesh's many clothing factories."

D "Without their income, they and their families could end up on the street."

I chose letter \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. Read the claim below. Find and write 3 pieces of textual evidence to support the claim (show that people and companies are working to improve the conditions of garment workers)

**Claim:** Labor activists, like Kalpona, consumers, and clothing companies are all helping to improve the conditions of garment workers overseas.

1. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_