FASHIONOPOLIS

THE PRICE OF FAST FASHION AND THE FUTURE OF CLOTHES

DANA THOMAS

PENGUIN PRESS
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com

Photo credits on page 295

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Thomas, Dana, 1964– author.
Title: Fashionopolis : the price of fast fashion and the future of clothes / Dana Thomas.
Description: New York : Penguin Press, [2019]
Identifiers: LCCN 2019019278 (print) | LCCN 2019022421 (ebook) |
ISBN 9780735224018 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780735224025 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Clothing trade—Moral and ethical aspects. | Clothing trade—Technological innovations. | Sustainable development.
Classification: LCC HD9940.A2 T46 2019 (print) | LCC HD9940.A2 (ebook) |
DDC 338.4/7688—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019019278
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019022421

Printed in Canada
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Set in FournierMTStd
Designed by Claire Vaccaro

TWO

The Price of Furious Fashion

ON THE TOP FLOOR of the Bendix Building, a run-down eleven-story Gothic Revival office tower in the heart of Los Angeles's Fashion District, through metal gates left slightly ajar, I spied workers hunched over machines in badly lit rooms, sewing clothes. Mounds of fabric cluttered the linoleum floor; threads, scraps, and dust bunnies were everywhere.

Suddenly, doors began to slam shut, one after the other. *Boom! Boom! Boom!*

"Wow, that was quick," observed Mariela "Mar" Martinez, an organizer for the L.A.-based nonprofit Garment Worker Center. Someone had recognized her and alerted the neighbors.

We descended to the eighth floor; its workshop doors were already closed and locked. The tip-off went building-wide. At the end hallway, we looked across the street to the Allied Crafts Building, another of the dissolute early-twentieth-century downtown towers that houses sweatshops. Its art deco façade was crumbling. Several windows were whitewashed opaque. A few of the rotten sashes were open a crack—enough for us to hear the sewing machines clattering.

We took the Bendix elevator back to the street level and walked over. In the lobby was a check-cashing booth and a Latino man using a pay phone. Martinez explained that most L.A. sweatshop workers are Latino, and most sweatshop owners are Korean. We climbed the stairs to the third story. Windowpanes were broken. A thirtyish man—a manager, perhaps—sat on a step of the rusty fire escape, smoking. "Would you go down this?" Martinez asked me. With skinny cables and hundred-year-old wall fasteners, it appeared it would buckle under the weight of more than a couple of people. And once you got down to the second floor—where it stopped—you'd have to jump into a Dumpster.

"I call this the white noise of Los Angeles," Martinez said as we made our way back to the street. "No one sees it, or acknowledges it, but it's here."

Today, Los Angeles is America's largest apparel manufacturing center. The sector began in the early twentieth century, when local knitting mills started to specialize in swimwear—brands at the time included Cole of California and Catalina. It continued to grow after World War II as the "California Look"—a casual-chic silhouette in lighter fabrics—became popular across the country. Finally, in the early 1990s, Los Angeles supplanted New York as the US fashion production capital—rising Midtown real estate prices and NAFTA were a one-two gut punch to the Garment District. In 2017, Ilse Metchek, president of the California Fashion Association, told me the local industry's annual revenue was about $42 billion. Martinez estimated there were 45,000 workers producing apparel in Los Angeles. About half were on the books and paid at least the California minimum wage, which was then $10.50 an hour.

The other half were undocumented, sewing garments for US-based brands in clandestine factories for as little as $4 an hour. No overtime. No health benefits. Horrendous conditions. Yet the large, middle-market brands who source from these sweatshops herald that their apparel is "Made in the USA," as if such a statement automatically confers authenticity and integrity, as well as a superior quality, to clothes produced offshore. It's a corporate marketing tactic to pander to consumers' patriotism while flagrantly breaking US labor laws.

Domestic sweatshops have always existed. In Richard Arkwright's day, nearly every factory was a sweatshop. The same was true on New York's Lower East Side in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. When unions and labor laws banished them, they went underground. Run by organized crime, domestic sweatshops became hidden hubs for human trafficking and money laundering. On occasion, the discovery of one makes the news—and usually the scene is horrifying. In 1995, state and federal agents raided a clandestine apparel factory in the L.A. suburb of El Monte that was surrounded by barbed wire and spiked fences and guarded by sentries. Inside, they discovered seventy-two enslaved Thai workers, $750,000 in banknotes and gold bullion, and records showing bank transfers of hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash.

With the current backlash against globalism and the accompanying protectionist calls to buy American, domestic sweatshops have grown more pervasive, especially in L.A., because of its large undocumented immigrant population. According to a UCLA Labor Center study released in 2016 and coauthored by Martinez, 72 percent of Los Angeles garment workers stated that factories were dirty; 60 percent said they were poorly ventilated and led to respiratory ailments; 47 percent reported disgusting restrooms; and 42 percent said they had seen rats. According to the investigation, the brands allegedly producing in such conditions included Forever 21, Wet Seal, Papaya, and Charlotte Russe.

In 2016, the US Department of Labor charged that these and other Southern California apparel manufacturers violated basic federal protections, such as paying minimum wage and overtime, 85 percent of the time and ordered the suppliers to pay $1.3 million in back wages and damages. (Forever 21 and Russe later stated they took labor issues "very seriously"; Forever 21 added, "These entities are completely independent of Forever 21 and make independent business decisions.") Most of these suppliers were located "right in the heart of the Fashion District—twenty blocks from City Hall," UCLA study coauthor Janna Shadduck-Hernández later said.

That's what drew Martinez to the fight. A young woman in her twenties, she grew up a few miles from the Garment Worker Center, in South Central. Her parents were employed in the city's legitimate garment industry—her father running embroidery machines, her mother cutting samples for fashion brands. She became a human rights activist while in high school and, as an undergrad at Brown University, joined the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), a youth organization committed to change via campaigns and boycotts. After Brown, she returned to Los Angeles and joined the Garment Worker Center as its organizing coordinator. Two afternoons a week, she meets with workers in the center's windowless offices in a beat-up low-rise on Los Angeles Street and listens to their grievances.

Most common is "wage theft": when bosses pay workers significantly less than the state or federal minimum wage. Usually, she'll contact the employer directly and try to negotiate a deal. If the case is particularly egregious, she'll reach out to state and federal agencies, such as the US Department of Labor's Wage and Hour Division, which will launch an investigation that may result in a raid. Martinez accompanies agents on the sweeps, and, sometimes, she says, she spots labels of brands who market their clothes as "sweatshop-free." When caught, the brands often claim they had no idea their "approved" contractors were subcontracting to sweatshops. Subcontracting is endemic in the apparel industry, creating a fractured supply chain in which workers are easily in jeopardy.

Martinez or government officials file a claim for lost earnings—the difference between minimum wage and what workers are actually paid. Everyone along the supply chain—subcontractors, contractors, brands, retailers—bucks responsibility. Factories "will close shop, or reopen under a different name," she said. "They use fake IDs, or the employer might not be the person who's on the registration. That will break a case."

When Martinez does manage to recuperate monies, it's usually "not even half of what's actually owed," she said. "We have wage claims that are fifty thousand dollars, not counting the penalties, and we'll recover five thousand dollars, ten thousand dollars max. And that's when the worker has a representative. Without a representative, the contractor will offer one hundred dollars, two hundred dollars, and a lot of people take it because it's from nothing to something."

After such meetings, Martinez continued, "brands tell the contractors, 'Either you fix this or we're taking *all* our work away from you.' They wash their hands of the problem. And if the brand leaves, the contractor has no money to pay the wages owed. I'm not super sympathetic to the contractors, but they are pawns in this system. If every garment worker in L.A. were to file wage claims, that'd be millions owed—millions that went to the pockets of CEOs." And shareholders.

She looked at me sullenly. "Listen, we all know our shit's made in sweatshops," she said. "But we put it in the back of our minds. Nobody cares."

For his mills to succeed, Richard Arkwright needed cotton. Lots of it. And with the British Empire's global network of trade routes, lots of it was available. In the eighteenth century, the economic cornerstone of Britain's colonies in America and the Caribbean was cotton. Slaves grew it, harvested it, and loaded it onto ships headed for Arkwright's factories in England. As *Communist Manifesto* coauthor Karl Marx later observed, "Without slavery, there would be no cotton. Without cotton, there would be no modern industry."

To spin the cotton, Arkwright needed armies of workers. Hundreds of poor streamed in from town and country. Most were women; men remained on the farm to tend the fields. Before Arkwright, women ran homes and raised children; he turned them into wage earners. He hired the unattended children, too, paying them a fraction of what the adults got.

Friedrich Engels, the son of a German textile tycoon and apprentice in the Manchester cotton industry, was so appalled by what he witnessed there, he penned *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, published in 1845. Mill workers were "robbed of all humanity" and trapped in unimaginable poverty, he wrote. The average life expectancy of Manchester's working class was seventeen. Epidemics—cholera, smallpox, scarlet fever—were "three times more fatal" in Liverpool than in the countryside, and alcoholism surged, with "people staggering . . . [and] lying in the gutter." Half of Britain's factory hands were women; they cost less, and were more docile, than men. And by the 1840s, just as many workers were under eighteen years old as over—equally divided between boys and girls. Starting age was typically eight or nine.

The endless hours Cottonopolis factory children spent on their feet stunted their growth and caused ailments such as chronic back pain, varicose veins, and large, infected ulcers on their legs. In the summer of 1843 alone, the *Manchester Guardian* reported a boy died of lockjaw after his hand was pulverized between wheels; a child was caught up in a cogwheel and crushed to death; and a girl was snared by a strap and spun around the machinery fifty times. Not surprisingly, child workers tried to escape. Some hid in storage rooms to sleep—only to be found by the bosses and beaten. The tales in former factory boy Robert Blincoe's 1832 memoir were so harrowing, the book is believed to have inspired *Oliver Twist*.

The adults were equally imperiled. Standing for hours in contorted positions, manipulating heavy machinery, and hauling burdensome loads deformed women's pelvises, which caused them to miscarry or die in childbirth. Rape on the job was common, with pregnancy rates spiking when factories ran at night. The fibrous dust workers inhaled on the plant floor induced respiratory infections, asthma, "blood-spitting," and consumption. Some were felled by injuries such as "the loss of the whole finger, half or a whole

hand, an arm, etc., in the machinery." Mill work, Engels declared, was a new mode of enslavement.

Public outcry eventually pressured the British government to pass a series of laws regulating factory conditions and wages. But the new regulations were ignored since, as Engels pointed out, fines were "trifling" compared to "the certain profits." Most galling, however, was what he viewed as the hypocrisy of England's wealthy. With their philanthropic endeavors, they hailed themselves "as mighty benefactors of humanity," he wrote, when, in fact, such charitable donations simply returned to "plundered victims the hundredth part of what belongs to them!" He believed that was the worst crime of all.

When the garment industry moved to America in the nineteenth century, the labor abuses followed. There, too, much of the philanthropy was ineffective window dressing. But there were exceptions. In 1890, two young, wealthy progressives—Josephine Shaw Lowell, a Civil War widow whose late husband was the nephew of Francis Cabot Lowell, and Maud Nathan, a Sephardic Jew married to a stockbroker—formed the Consumers' League of New York City, a nonprofit advocacy group of middle-class women dedicated to improving employment conditions in the local apparel industry. Their motive was both civic-minded and personal: they were troubled by the reports of exploitation of female and child workers, but they also worried about contagions embedding in their clothing.

The US House of Representatives subsequently launched an inquiry into America's apparel industry and heard overwhelming evidence for the need for reform. But nothing changed. So activist Florence Kelley made the abolition of American sweatshops her crusade. As the first general secretary of the National Consumers League—a nationwide nonprofit founded in 1899 that united local consumer organizations—she argued that modern mechanization and streamlined distribution, rather than anemic wages, were the most effective ways to reduce production costs. Indeed, she believed the sweatshop system *increased* costs because it discouraged owners from updating their machinery. She called for boycotts, stating: "If the people would notify [Chicago department store retailer] Marshall Field . . . and others that they would buy from them no clothing made in sweatshops, the evil would be stopped."

In 1899, the National Consumers League introduced the "white label"—a garment tag that certified the manufacturer had respected state employment and safety laws as well as the League's standards. The white label empowered shoppers, pushing them to think ethically about their purchases. "We can have cheap underwear righteously made and clean; or we can have cheap underwear degradingly made and unclean," Kelley declared. "Henceforth we are responsible for our choice."

Some retailers balked, but not Philadelphia department store magnate John Wanamaker. He joined the League's campaign to improve factory conditions, promoted white-label-approved clothes in his store, and had window dressers fill the Broad Street vitrines with displays that demonstrated the differences between sweatshops and white-label-approved factories. Photographs of the window exhibit later toured international trade fairs. Within five years, sixty American manufacturers had qualified to use the white label in their clothing.

Still, many factories were constructed on the cheap and often violated health and safety codes. A common infraction was locking emergency exits to prevent employee theft. Such conditions courted disaster—like the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. Fleeing workers ran onto the rickety fire escape, and it collapsed. Dozens leapt from windows and the rooftop—many with hair and clothing ablaze. In all, 146 employees died—123 women and 23 men. It was New York City's worst workplace disaster until September 11, 2001.

To fight back, in stepped Frances Perkins. A dynamic advocate for worker rights, in 1910, she became the executive secretary of the New York City

Consumers League, where she worked side by side with Florence Kelley. After Triangle, Perkins joined New York State's Industrial Commission, which regulated factories. In the 1930s, President Franklin D. Roosevelt named her secretary of labor—the country's first female cabinet member. During her twelve-year tenure—the longest in that post—a multitude of landmark acts were passed and agencies created, including the Public Works Administration; the Social Security Act, which established unemployment, welfare, and retirement benefits; and the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), which set forth the country's first minimum wage, guaranteed overtime payment, banned child labor, and instituted the forty-hour workweek. With the FLSA, American manufacturing cleaned up and moved into its golden age.

Except the Garment District. It remained "a place of Dreiserian amounts of soot and lint," Bill Blass recalled. "Manufacturers did their best to foster an atmosphere of contempt . . . Even after those of us came home from the war and were still in uniform, we weren't permitted to ride in the same elevator with our employers. We were backroom boys in the grubby business to end all grubby businesses—Seventh Avenue."

AND SO IT REMAINED, until apparel manufacturing moved offshore post-NAFTA and most of those workshops folded. Offshore, the old-style sweatshop system came roaring back to life. In developing economies, labor laws were far less restrictive, and there was little or no oversight. Thus why, within six months of Congress passing NAFTA in 1993, the House Subcommittee on Labor Management found itself holding hearings on worker abuses in a Honduran factory where the American women's wear brand Leslie Fay was sourcing clothes.

Leslie Fay had long been a standard-bearer in American fashion. Founded in 1947 by Fred Pomerantz, a cigar-chomping apparel executive who had worked in Manhattan's Garment District from age eleven, Leslie Fay—named for his only daughter—was known for its flattering dresses, sewed by union workers at the Wilkes-Barre plant. By the time Fred retired in 1982, the brand was publicly traded and sold in thirteen thousand department and specialty stores nationwide, with an impressive turnover of $500 million a year.

Fred's Wharton-educated, middle-aged son, John—on the Leslie Fay staff for decades—took the company private through a leveraged buyout—a popular financial business ploy in the boom-boom '80s. Two years later, a second leveraged buyout by former company managers and independent investors netted John Pomerantz a whopping $41 million. With this immense wealth, he and his wife, Laura, became bright lights of the New Society, as the decade's American *über*rich were known.

In 1986, Leslie Fay was listed on the stock market again, and sales reached an impressive $859 million in 1990. John was named chief executive officer; Laura, a former investment banker raised in a retailing family, served as a senior vice president. In January 1993, while on a business trip in Toronto, John Pomerantz received a call from his chief financial officer, Paul F. Polishan. "We got a problem," Polishan said ominously. "Maybe a little more than just a problem."

Small, privately held apparel companies are known to fudge accounting from season to season—counting sales orders, and profits, before they are actually completed and earned—to make end-of-year numbers look better. But Leslie Fay was a publicly traded company, and the numbers weren't simply fudged: the brand reported earning $24 million, when it had actually lost $13.7 million.

When the news broke, the company's stock crashed, shareholders filed a class-action lawsuit, and two months later, Leslie Fay went into Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. Pomerantz swore that he never knew about the accounting fraud; it was, he said, the initiative of rogue employees. (Polishan was later indicted and eventually did time in prison.)

Executives at the Wilkes-Barre headquarters initiated a cost-cutting plan. Until that time, Pomerantz had resisted outsourcing, because he

believed domestic manufacturing, with its faster turnaround time from plant to retail floor, was smart business. He also said he felt a sense of moral duty to keep production at home.

With the bankruptcy, all that good sense and moralizing went to the wayside. Leslie Fay moved production to Honduras—a long way from management's reach in northeastern Pennsylvania. Soon it became apparent that, like so many other American apparel companies manufacturing outside the United States, Leslie Fay's execs had no idea how the brand's clothes were getting made.

They learned, to their embarrassment, from witnesses during the congressional hearings in Wilkes-Barre in 1994. Dorka Nohemi Diaz Lopez, a twenty-year-old Honduran who sewed Leslie Fay dresses and blouses, was brought before them by the National Labor Committee (NLC), a Pittsburgh-based whistle-blowing nonprofit dedicated to halting human and labor rights abuses. Lopez told subcommittee members that girls as young as thirteen were on the plant floor, earning 40 to 50 cents an hour; Leslie Fay's US-based workers were paid $7.80 an hour. Conditions in the Honduras factory were Mancunian. The girls logged twelve-hour shifts or longer. Temperatures often exceeded 100 degrees, and there wasn't any clean drinking water. "The doors are locked," she testified, "and you can't get out until they let you."

Back in Wilkes-Barre, backlash was fierce: children of laid-off workers wrote to Pomerantz, asking him why he took their parents' jobs away; preachers scolded the company in Sunday sermons; displaced workers staged protests; the regional papers ran brutal op-eds excoriating Pomerantz for the move offshore. "We always felt it was like a family," fifty-six-year-old Jeannie Kowalewski, a Leslie Fay machine operator for thirty-eight years, told the subcommittee.

Pomerantz was nonplussed. In a letter to the congressional subcommittee, he wrote, "This is a bogus issue. [Offshoring] low-skilled jobs . . . is what the NAFTA debate was all about, and that debate is over."

Many American apparel companies, including household names like Kathie Lee Gifford, J. Crew, Eddie Bauer, and Levi Strauss, faced similar charges. In response, some started drafting "codes of conduct": a list of standards that a company expects its suppliers to respect. *Expects*. None of it is mandatory. All is voluntary. The need for codes of conduct shone a light on fashion's greatest, and seemingly unsolvable, conflict: how to produce for the lowest price possible while ensuring safe, humane conditions and decent pay.

Levi Strauss's executive management committee approved fashion's first code of conduct in March 1992—before NAFTA. Drawn up by a Levi's internal task force called the Sourcing Guidelines Working Group (SGWG), the code was "to ensure the people making our products in contract factories were being treated with dignity and respect, and working under safe and healthy working conditions," the company stated. The SGWG used the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Labour Organization's rules as its guide: no child or forced labor; no gender, race, or ethnic discrimination; legal hours; fair wages; benefits; freedom of association and collective bargaining; and adequate health, safety, and environmental standards for all manufacturers that produced its clothes.

The brand's motivation was questionable. Levi Strauss introduced its code shortly after it canceled contracts with a Hong Kong–owned factory in the American territory of Saipan that had reportedly violated worker rights. The scene in the plant was as bad as in developing nations: seedy dorms, endless hours of overtime, squalid toilets, locked fire exits, all on a compound fenced in by razor wire and patrolled by armed guards. As the facility officially sat on US soil, the companies who produced there, including Levi's, Gap, Ralph Lauren, and Liz Claiborne, were allowed to use "Made in the USA" tags. Days after Levi's put its code into effect, the US Labor Department discovered federal health and safety infractions in more than a dozen Saipan-based factories owned by the same Hong Kong family and filed suit. Eventually, the factory's owner forked over $9 million in back wages to workers.

To enforce the codes, brands hired independent monitors to conduct audits. As is still the case today, monitors announced their visits in advance, so factories would be cleaned and workers coached on what to say. In some countries, up to half the factories reportedly buffed up their employee records to pass inspections. Monitors had no oversight. Bribery was common. And scandals kept surfacing.

In 2003, American rap stars Sean "P-Diddy" Combs and Jay-Z were caught up in one: clothes for their hip-hop fashion brands Sean John and Rocawear, respectively, were found to be made in Honduran sweatshops. At a Senate Democratic Policy Committee hearing in November of that year, Lydda Eli Gonzalez, a nineteen-year-old Honduran garment worker, recounted, through a translator, the horrors she had experienced at Southeast Textiles (SETISA). Roughly 80 percent of SETISA's output was Sean John; the remaining 20 percent was Rocawear.

The industrial zone where SETISA was located was surrounded by a towering wall, its entrance a locked metal gate guarded by armed sentries. Official hours were 7 a.m. to 4:45 p.m.—at 75 to 98 cents an hour—but there was mandatory unpaid overtime. The Sean John shirts retailed for $40 apiece at American department stores such as Bloomingdale's. The factory produced more than a thousand each day. "Just one shirt would pay more than my wage for a week," Gonzalez testified.

Supervisors would "stand over us shouting and cursing at us to go faster [and calling] us filthy names, like *maldito* [damned] donkey, bitch, and worse," she continued. The temperature rose so high, workers were "sweating all day." Fabric fibers and dust turned their hair "white or red or whatever the color of the shirts we are working on." The drinking water reportedly contained fecal matter. Workers were forbidden to speak. They could only use the restroom once in the morning and once in the afternoon, and before entering, they were searched; normally, there was no toilet paper or soap. Women were subjected to pregnancy tests; if one came back positive, she'd be sacked. All were frisked upon entering the factory each day, and anything found, including candy or lipstick, was confiscated. They were patted down again when they punched out at night.

Combs understood this news could slay his brand and promptly stepped in. Within ten weeks, the National Labor Committee (NLC; later known as the Institute for Global Labour and Human Rights) announced that the SETISA factory's production chief and deputy had been let go; overtime was now voluntary and paid; locks had been taken off bathrooms and the guards banished; air-conditioning and a water purification system had been installed. Workers would all be registered for national health care and were permitted to establish a union. There was talk of abolishing the pregnancy tests, too.

Nevertheless, pay remained hopelessly low.

"Really, you work just to eat. It's impossible to save. You can't buy anything. It's just to survive," Gonzalez told the Senate subcommittee. "I'm no better off than I was two or three years ago. We are in a trap."

IN NO PLACE is the trap more inescapable or harrowing as in the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

A sliver between India and Myanmar in the region of Bengal, in 2019, it counted 168 million citizens, approximately one-fourth living below the poverty line. It is the ninth most populous country in the world, the tenth most densely settled.

In fiscal year 2018, 40 million workers produced more than $30 billion worth of "ready-made garments," or RMGs, for export, ranking Bangladesh the number two apparel producer, after China/Hong Kong, according to the WTO. "Eighty-three percent of our foreign currency is coming from this

sector," Siddiqur Rahman, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, told me. "Fifty million people depend on the garment industry. Our *economy* is dependent on it." The government planned to double output in five years.

Bangladesh's garment industry is relatively young—born in the 1970s, following the country's war of independence from Pakistan. South Korea had maxed out its American apparel and textile quotas at the time, so manufacturing entrepreneurs built and outfitted factories across Bangladesh's rural landscape. As with every new garment industry locale before it, impoverished young women flocked—or were dispatched by their families—to these places for jobs. With rock-bottom wages and unconscionably long hours, Bangladesh became the cheapest place to produce apparel—a new Manchester.

Suppliers erected shoddy plants by the thousands, often without permits or such basic safety precautions as grounded wiring or fire exits, but always with top-notch security—to keep the workers in and the pilfering down. Bangladeshi factories were far removed from the contracting brands' headquarters, and these workhouses went unseen and unknown.

Change would be driven by NGO advocates like Judy Gearhart, the head of the International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), a nonprofit human rights organization in downtown Washington, DC, founded in 1986 to advance "the dignity and justice for workers in the global economy." No-nonsense yet affable and unquestionably dedicated to the cause, Gearhart began defending workers in 1992, in Mexico, during the NAFTA fight; she joined the ILRF as executive director in 2011.

The ILRF has long had a presence in Bangladesh to combat child labor. But on April 11, 2005, Spectrum Sweater Industries Ltd., a poorly constructed nine-story factory in the Dhaka suburb of Savar, imploded shortly after midnight, killing sixty-four and wounding eighty. After that, Gearhart told me, "our apparel industry work really deepened. We started tracking factory fires and collapses and working more closely with the Clean Clothes Campaign and Worker Rights Consortium to campaign against companies caught with product in any of those factories."

The ILRF's strategy is three-pronged: advance legal and policy reforms; demand greater corporate accountability; and support and strengthen the influence of workers and local worker organizations. But resistance remains. The garment industry generates an enormous cash flow for the Bangladeshi government, and not only on a revenue level. In 2018, 10 percent of Bangladeshi parliament members owned garment factories and 30 percent had family members who were owners, the ILRF's director of organizing and communications, Liana Foxvog, told me. "So, you can imagine the collusion," she said. And the corruption. And the graft. Which, as in New York a hundred years ago, leads to disaster.

IN DECEMBER 2010, the ten-story That's It Sportswear garment factory outside Dhaka caught fire—despite having just passed inspection by representatives of Gap. The scene was familiar: locked exits, workers defenestrating themselves. More than one hundred were injured, and twenty-nine perished. They were not alone; between 2006 and 2012, more than five hundred Bangladeshi garment workers died in factory fires. Since That's It Sportswear produced clothes for such big names as Gap, Tommy Hilfiger, and Kohl's, the story made international papers, and there were calls for reforms.

Worker unions and NGOs sat down with brands to discuss factory safety and hammered out a legally binding accord called the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement. It sat unsigned until the winter of 2012, when ABC News in New York picked up the That's It Sportswear story, more than a year after the inferno, and questioned the designer Tommy Hilfiger and his chief executive on producing in such a firetrap. Only then did PVH Corp., which owns the Tommy Hilfiger, Calvin Klein, Van Heusen, IZOD, and Arrow brands and holds licenses for Michael Kors, Sean John, and Speedo, agree to sign the convention. Six months later, the German retail chain Tchibo also joined. But no one else did, and the agreement would not go into effect until four companies were on board.

On a November evening, eight weeks after the safety agreement stalled, twenty-three-year-old Sumi Abedin was sitting at her sewing machine on the fourth floor of the nine-story Tazreen Fashion factory in the Dhaka suburb of Ashulia when, she recalled, "a man came up and shouted that there was a fire."

Her manager and supervisor assured everyone that nothing was amiss.

"There is no fire, just go back and keep working," they told the workers and locked the door.

Fire alarms sounded. Supervisors and security guards insisted it was only a drill and told them to stay on task.

"After five to seven minutes, I smelled smoke," Abedin remembered. "I ran to the doors, the stairs, and found that [they were] padlocked . . . Smoke was coming from the downstairs." She managed to get to the second floor, but that was it," she said. The staircase was "blocked by the fire."

More than 1,100 were trapped inside. Doorways and stairwells that were open were narrow, and fire escapes were few and dilapidated. Workers tried to remove security bars from windows. One succeeded. He jumped. Then another jumped.

"Then I jumped," Abedin said.

She broke her arm and foot. The coworker who jumped with her died on impact.

In all, more than 200 were injured, and at least 117 died, nearly half burned beyond recognition. It was the worst apparel industry accident since the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire a century earlier. Investigators later found labels, clothing, and paperwork proving Sears, Walmart, and Disney had all produced there. All three claimed Tazreen was an unauthorized supplier.

Remarkably, even after Tazreen, which got enormous play in the global media, "brands still didn't feel compelled" to sign the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement, ILRF's Liana Foxvog told me. That made shady garment factory owners like Sohel Rana feel positively omnipotent.

SOHEL RANA WAS A THUG. In his midthirties, the Bangladeshi operative was known for his bullying business tactics as much as his swagger. He'd tool around Savar on his motorcycle, his biker gang in tow. A political operator, he had public officials and the police in his pocket, allowing him to deal drugs and rough up perceived enemies with impunity. He made his money with his father, who sold the family's country land in the late 1990s and bought a small patch in Savar. With the support of his armed guards, Rana seized a portion of the lot from a former business partner; for another adjoining parcel, he took control by forging the deed. Law enforcement stayed silent. As one of Rana's victims said, "The police were scared."

In 2006, the Ranas constructed a six-story compound to house garment factories, shops, and a bank. The edifice rose fast and cheap, without regard for zoning laws or safety codes. In 2011, Rana managed to secure a permit to build two additional floors—locals suspect due to discreet bribes, a common play in Savar. The town "grew quickly, and in an unplanned manner," a former local politician admitted. "There are so many buildings like Rana Plaza."

On the morning of April 23, 2013, workers at the five manufacturers based in Rana Plaza were busily sewing when an explosion rattled the building and split a second-floor wall apart like a fault line. "The crack was so huge I could put my hand in it," Shila Begum, a short, stout young woman who worked as a sewing machine operator for Ether Tex Ltd., on the fifth floor, remembered five years later.

Terrified employees poured into the street. Management called in an engineer to inspect the damage. He wanted to condemn the building

immediately. Sohel Rana, who was at Rana Plaza meeting with reporters, refused. "The plaster on the wall is broken, nothing more," he reportedly said. "It is not a problem." Everyone was sent home but ordered to return the next morning.

Around eight a.m. the following day—a Tuesday—Mahmudul Hassan Hridoy heard a knock on his front door. It was his boss and neighbor, reminding him that they were expected at the factory. Hridoy, a good-natured twenty-seven-year-old, was in fine form: he had married his pregnant sweetheart of three years that weekend, and two weeks earlier, he had quit his poorly paid job as a nursery-school teacher for the far more fruitful position of quality inspector for New Wave Style Ltd., a fashion supplier at Rana Plaza. As he was good at math, management assured him he would move up the ladder quickly. "That's why I joined Rana Plaza," he told me over lunch at the KFC in Savar in 2018.

He listened to his boss and went to work, as did everybody else, including Shila Begum. "I was really in a panic," she recalled as we spoke on a Savar sidewalk under the burning noontime sun. They all showed up, she said, because if they didn't, they feared they would not be paid at the end of the month. Bangladesh's minimum wage was $38 a month at exchange rates then—or one-third of a living wage, which economists calculate is the amount needed to cover essential needs such as housing, food, and clothing. (In January 2019, it was raised to $95 a month, which is still half a living wage.)

"I was minding my own business, making blue jeans like you are wearing, for a French brand, when the power went out," she told me. "A couple of minutes later, the generators started." As the engines rumbled, the building began to quake.

And then, she said: "It went down."

She paused and looked at me. Her dark eyes were dim, as if someone had extinguished the light inside her.

"The concrete ceiling fell on my hand and my hair was caught in the sewing machine," she said. "After a lot of struggle, I untangled my hair, but I could not free my hand." Sixteen hours later, neighbors who had joined the hundreds of emergency responders at the site rescued her. "They showed up with iron rods and pipes and pried me out," she said. "They said my guts were all over the place. I passed out and came to my senses twenty-seven days later."

Hridoy was inspecting jeans on the seventh floor when everything went dark and silent. The generators started, he recalled, "and it felt like the floor under my feet was moving. Then it was disappearing." When he opened his eyes in the rubble, he realized he was pinned under a concrete pillar. As everything came into focus, he saw he was face-to-face with one of his good friends, Faisal, who worked on the second floor as a sewing machine operator. "I'm not sure how," Hridoy told me in a whisper. "I guess my floor dropped down to his." Faisal's skull was shattered. "And his brains were spilling out."

Hridoy began to cry. "I can't forget how his head exploded in front of me," he said, sobbing. "Those memories still haunt me."

With 1,134 dead and 2,500 injured, Rana Plaza was the deadliest garment factory accident in modern history.

"I lost all of my friends," Begum said. "Many were never found."

AT FIVE A.M. STOCKHOLM TIME, the telephone of Helena Helmersson, head of sustainability for H&M, rang, waking her up. On the line was her point person in Savar, who recounted the horror of the Rana Plaza collapse and assured her that H&M did not officially produce any of its clothes there. That said, she was warned, H&M's contractors *could* have subcontracted to one of the Rana Plaza workshops; there was no way to know until the investigation was completed. Given that H&M was Bangladesh's largest apparel exporter, even if the brand was in the clear, it might still be hammered by

labor rights groups and consumers as a symbol of all that was wrong with offshoring: the lack of oversight and safety enforcement; the human rights violations; convoluted and untraceable supply chains. Two hours later, at seven a.m. sharp, Helmersson met with Karl-Johan Persson, chief executive of H&M, to carefully craft the company's response.

"None of the textile factories located in the building produced for H&M," it stated. "It is important to remember that this disaster is an infrastructure problem in Bangladesh and not a problem specific to the textile industry. The fact that this wasn't any of our suppliers' factories doesn't mean that we are not engaging in the process of contributing to constructive solutions."

Most brands, however, remained mum.

"No one stepped forward after Rana Plaza to acknowledge they were manufacturing there," Foxvog told me.

To root out which brands did produce there, teams of researchers spent months combing through the debris looking for labels and scanning import databases and factory websites in search of sourcing information. "A real triangulation," she said.

When confronted with the evidence, Walmart claimed its orders had been subcontracted to Rana Plaza without company authorization, Carrefour of France denied producing there, and JCPenney and Lee Cooper/Iconix said nothing. Once it became clear that more than a dozen US and European brands' clothes had indeed been made there, most dodged calls for compensation to victims' families and survivors, and as there were no worker rights agreements in place, there was no obligation to pay.

This time, after an onslaught of highly embarrassing media coverage, brands were in a sweat. The double whammy of Tazreen and Rana Plaza was too much. They had to do *something*. Then, they remembered the initiative they had outright ignored for two years: the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement.

Within six weeks, forty-three companies, including Primark, Inditex, Abercrombie & Fitch, Benetton, and H&M had signed the charter, renamed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety; by October, there were two hundred members, among them Fast Retailing (parent company of Uniqlo) and American Eagle.

A slew of other brands—mostly American—balked, citing liability concerns. In July, Walmart announced the enactment of the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, a similar agreement. Among its signatories: Gap, Target, Hudson's Bay Company (owners of Saks Fifth Avenue and Lord & Taylor), and VF Corporation (owners of Lee Jeans, Wrangler, The North Face, and Timberland). But the Alliance was *not* legally binding, and NGOs saw it as less efficient, and sincere, than the Accord. It was "smaller, and worked with smaller factories," Foxvog explained. And it was voluntary—a system that had been proven by decades of fires and collapses as useless.

News stories on Rana Plaza were blunt and inescapable. The awareness campaigns that followed were vocal. Yet Americans didn't change their apparel shopping habits. In 2013, they spent $340 billion on fashion—more than twice what they forked out for new cars. Much of it was produced in Bangladesh, some of it by Rana Plaza workers in the days leading up to the collapse.

In April 2018, I traveled to Bangladesh to see if conditions in garment factories had improved since Rana Plaza.

My conclusion: yes. And no.

First: yes.

In five years, 97,000 safety infractions, such as locked doors, nonexistent fire exits, and dangerous wiring had been corrected in 1,600 factories. The government had shut down 900 that did not meet compliance standards.

NYU's Stern Center for Business and Human Rights published a study a week before my visit that stated there were still $1.2 billion worth of repairs

needed to "remediate remaining dangerous conditions" in Bangladeshi garment factories and called for a task force to oversee the identification and rectification of those infractions. But the Accord had just been renewed for three years, and there were signs of progress.

I saw the improvements firsthand at an Accord-conforming factory called Rizvi Fashions Ltd. A six-story, mauve-stucco building on the road to Savar, it was constructed in 2014 by Shakil Rizvi, the former president of the Dhaka stock exchange. Inside, more than 2,000 workers manned the 1,450 machines and produced 2 to 2.5 million garments every month.

Rizvi Fashions was spanking clean and secure. Teams of men and women, most under thirty, were turning out slate-gray cotton briefs for Primark, bubblegum-pink terry shorts with ruffle hems for Deltex Organic, and white cotton undershirts for Fruit of the Loom. Everyone, from sewing machinists to quality inspectors, donned a face mask to block the inhalation of fibers. Veiled women pushed wide, mop-like sweepers—homemade Swiffers—up and down the aisles nonstop to keep the place spick-and-span. The fluorescent lights were bright, and wall-long windows allowed the sun to pour in. Huge ventilation fans cooled and circulated the air, and though it was already pushing 100 degrees outside, on the production floor the temperature was bearable.

When the factory was built, it adhered to Bangladeshi regulations at the time, which meant wiring was exposed and dangling from the ceilings, and there was nil in the way of fire safety. Then Accord inspectors came around, and things changed. Now the wiring is insulated and encased. There are sophisticated fire alarms; emergency floodlights; shelves of fire extinguishers, axes, and helmets; monthly fire drills; and fire safety teams, with leaders dressed in Day-Glo yellow vests so workers can find them easily. One-fifth of the workforce undergoes training with the local fire department to learn the basics of first aid, firefighting, and rescue. "It's an ongoing process," Anwar Hossain, manager for compliance, told me, as we crossed the plant floor.

There were other perks that sweatshops lacked: a company-subsidized canteen where workers can buy sandwiches and drinks at cost; an infirmary; a daycare center. When I looked in, a toddler and a seven-year-old girl—daughters of two different workers—were playing together. The factory is closed at night and every Friday, the Muslim holy day.

Hossain then guided me across the parking lot to the "pump room," an independent building with a sophisticated hydraulic system connected to a private 150,000-gallon underground reservoir. He and his team were mighty proud of that installation.

The Accord-demanded precautions paid off: Rizvi has never had a fire.

BUT THAT DIDN'T mean there weren't still sweatshops in Bangladesh.

"I've seen much worse," my guide told me, as we pulled up to one in Dhaka. "We just drove past several that are much worse."

Set on a blighted backstreet, the factory we were to see was built in the early 2000s, but it was so dilapidated, it looked twice as old. Four uniformed security guards—older men who seemed not terribly menacing—sat at a small table at the entrance. *As-salamu alaykum*—or "Peace be unto you"—one said to me, raising his hand to his face and nodding slightly.

We made our way up the building's lone staircase to the first-floor reception area. The filth splattered on the walls was unfathomable.

We were invited to tea with the boss and his team. I was offered an old farm chair, its paint peeling. My translator took a seat on a plastic stool. The boss settled in behind his Formica-topped desk on a well-worn pink Naugahyde swivel chair, the stuffing spilling out the split side seams. It was as if the entire office suite had been found in the street.

A wisp of a girl with wide-set eyes, enrobed in a magenta sari and tangerine cotton veil, glided by silently.

"She's young," I remarked quietly to my translator.

"Fifteen maybe," he responded just as quietly.

After five minutes of chitchat between our facilitator and the boss, we were given a tour. The stairwell—the only way out—was encumbered by big cartons of product bound for Russia. On the wall of the landing, large signs titled BUSINESS SOCIAL COMPLIANCE INITIATIVE listed, in Bangla and in English, all the safety and labor rules the factory supposedly followed. The facilitator whispered: "Those are fake."

Next to the doorway, red fire buckets brimmed with trash; the big black plastic cisterns were cracked and half empty. We entered the sewing room—a long, dark space with weak lighting. More than a hundred workers, very old to very young—some visibly in their early teens—sat behind beat-up machines, sewing clothes at a frantic pace. Like the girl I had seen earlier, the women were dressed in vibrant-colored saris and headscarves. Everyone was barefoot. No one wore surgical face masks, despite the SAFETY FIRST and WEAR A MASK signs tacked on the walls. Wiring was exposed. Windows, many with broken panes, were barred. Fabric scraps, stray threads, and heaps of finished clothes littered the floors. It was unbearably hot—more than 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Small fans blew the dust around but didn't cool much off.

There were several more loft-like floors, each dedicated to a different task. In the finishing room, tables were piled high with black jeans. Young women and men, shoeless and standing on scraps of cardboard, inspected the pants, clipped off threads, and mended flaws. In the cutting room, workers drew and cut paper patterns by hand, rather than using the computer-run systems that are the norm in aboveboard factories today. Bolts of cloth lay about on the floor, willy-nilly—more obstacles to block escape if the place catches fire. The fabric cutter, a young man of maybe twenty and thin to the point of appearing malnourished, wielded an old electric hand-jigsaw, pulling it quickly with his right hand through five-inch-thick wads of denim toward his left, which was simply clad in a metal mesh glove—as if that was going to stop the machine from slicing off his fingers. In modern plants, cloth cutting is automated.

Once we were back on the street, our facilitator told us the factory owners were a married couple who practiced ophthalmology, and they were never on-site. He said Walmart and Lidl had been produced there, but he didn't know if these were contracted or subcontracted jobs.

We thanked him for his help, got in our tired, seatbelt-less Toyota Uber, and wheeled back into the traffic. As we sat, and sat, with auto-rickshaws and scooters and buses beeping and honking nonstop, my translator googled the factory on his phone to see what more we could learn. A website popped up, with photographs on the homepage of smiling workers in a bright, clean facility, and the administrative team sitting in neat, new office cubicles.

According to the introduction, the firm was founded nine years earlier and had seven hundred workers and six hundred machines. It produced clothes "100 percent for export," and claimed its clients included Camaïeu of France, Roadrunner of Canada, and CJ Apparel of Great Britain. I wondered if any of its customers—like the Russians whose address was on the cartons in the staircase—had ever stepped into that factory.

TAZREEN'S OWNER, Delwar Hossain, was eventually arrested and charged with culpable homicide, meaning he knew his disregard for the factory's safety was likely to cause death. The trial, initiated in 2015, dragged on, as the prosecution failed to produce witnesses, and by the sixth anniversary, in November 2018, it had not been concluded.

In 2016, Sohel Rana and seventeen others, including his parents, Rana Plaza's engineer, Savar's mayor, three government inspectors, and its town planner, were charged with various crimes, including homicide. A year later, Rana was sentenced to three years in prison for not revealing the true amount of his personal fortune to the Anti-Corruption Commission. The trial for murder and other charges remained on hold, due to appeals to a higher court.

While not efficient, both cases were unprecedented in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

Back in 1998, only about 15 percent of company codes of conduct included freedom of association and collective bargaining, Gearhart told me. Now it's a given. Brands are publishing supplier lists—unthinkable even five years ago—and when a worker dies, they pay compensation.

As with every other improvement in Bangladeshi apparel manufacturing, the impetus was Rana Plaza. In the wake of the disaster, brands suddenly felt compelled—either by genuine guilt or, more likely, fear of reputational damage—to pony up something for the loss of life or limb. "But it's not called 'compensation,'" Foxvog made clear. "It's called the 'Rana Plaza Arrangement.'" Hammered out by Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), the $30 million endowment was underwritten by brands to help ease the burden for families of the deceased as well as those who sustained catastrophic wounds. But access to those funds has been complicated.

Shila Begum's injuries were severe: she must wear a medical corset and a brace on her right forearm. "My kidneys were crushed and damaged," she told me. "I can barely use my right hand." She received no government compensation and "nothing from the brands," she said. Because of her disabilities, she cannot work, and, widowed, she has no other financial support. This forced her to pull her fourteen-year-old daughter out of school; while education is officially free, she could no longer afford incidentals such as books and lunch. For daily expenses, she confessed, "I have to beg my family for money." She began to weep. "When I come here," she said, looking at the vacant Rana Plaza lot before us, "I don't want to live anymore."

Hridoy, the newlywed, walks with a crutch and suffers from terrible headaches. Sometimes he pulls his hair out as he sleeps. During his long recovery, his wife left him and had an abortion. "Rana Plaza ruined my life," he said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Nonetheless, he has done his best to rebuild it. Hridoy was the only survivor of the dozens I met in Savar who managed to wrangle money from the Rana Plaza Arrangement trust fund. He used it to open a small pharmacy. He also founded the Savar Rana Plaza Survivors Association, a support group of three hundred members who gather informally once a month in his shop to help shore each other up. Sometimes, such camaraderie isn't enough: in 2015 and 2016, two association members committed suicide by hanging themselves in their living rooms.

There is still government opposition to freedom of association and unionization. Sexual and physical abuse in factories remain rampant. Workers still do not receive severance when manufacturers go belly-up.

They also continue to be at the mercy of the brands—even if the work is contracted. Terrorism has been a constant threat in Bangladesh since the summer night in 2016 when Islamic militant gunmen stormed a chic Dhaka café frequented by ex-pats and foreigners, took forty hostages, and killed twenty. Five militants, two police, and two café employees were killed when law enforcement staged a rescue. Fashion reps immediately canceled scheduled trips and withdrew staff from the country, alarming workers as well as factory owners. "What will happen to us if the buyers are not going to come to Bangladesh?" one seamstress, a mother of two, wailed. Western chain hotels fortified their compounds with cement barriers, metal detectors, x-ray machines, and guards wielding bomb-detecting wands. The industry rebounded.

And then there is the endless tussle over paying workers a living wage. In 2016, they staged protests and demanded immediate raises. Owners and the government retaliated with force: fifty-five factories shut down for a week; fifteen hundred workers were fired; thirty-five were thrown in jail, twenty-four without bail. "That was dark for us," Gearhart recalled. "Never have we had that many workers arrested or held that long or denied bail."

All this because "the industry is *obsessed* with quarterly returns," Mark Anner, director of Penn State's Center for Global Workers' Rights, told me. "How do you develop a long-term vision if every three months shareholders demand more profits or threaten to pull out? How does this trickle-down affect workers?" Or Bangladesh as a whole? "If the workers made a decent wage, the economy would grow, because they could afford to buy lunch and get a haircut," Gearhart said. "Where's the investment in workers today? Are they really just cogs in the wheel?"