

These Women Make Your Zara Jeans. Now, They're Demanding to Be Paid Fairly.

BY JENNIFER CHOWDHURY JAN 22, 2019



FABEHA MONIR

“Please don’t cut off my hair,” Bobita sobbed to the attending doctor in the emergency ward of the Centre for Women and Children Health hospital in Dhaka, Bangladesh, as he prepared to stitch up the gaping wound at the back of her head.

On Monday, January 13th, 22-year-old Bobita Akhter joined thousands of textile workers in Bangladesh—the world’s second largest garments exporter—to protest for fairer wages. Last month, the government raised the minimum monthly wage for textile workers to **Tk 8,000** from **Tk 5,300**. But an overwhelming number of workers claim they didn't see a significant pay increase when they received their monthly salaries in January. This incited a series of protests that started on January 6th. Workers took to the streets to block the airport, allegedly set buses on fire and vandalized cars. Police, in return, responded by firing tear gas, water cannons and swinging batons at the protesters. **One protester reportedly died.**

Bobita Akhter received stitches after getting hit by a brick during protests in front of NASSA group's factory.

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Other protests, however, were less violent. Workers walked out of factories, refusing to work until the wage issue was addressed. Bobita was a part of one of these strikes, joining a procession of workers who staged a walkout after their lunch break.

“Everyone was running in different directions and I was trying to escape through a side street when a brick hit me on the back of my head,” Bobita explained.

She thinks it was either the police or security hired by factory owners that threw the brick at her.

“We throw bricks at the factories or if things get really violent, we throw it at the police, but we’re not going to hurt one of our own, that’s how I know it was someone from their side,” she said.

Bobita works for the [NASSA](#) group, where she is responsible for sewing up to 80 pockets an

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hour on women's jeans for ZARA. Women like Bobita, who started working in the industry at 16 years old, make up 80% of the [4 million RMG \(Ready Made Garments\) workers in over 4,500](#) factories in Bangladesh. The industry has transformed Bangladesh's economy, [contributing 83.49% to Bangladesh's total exports of \\$36.66 billion](#) and will play a large part in Bangladesh's plan to move from a [developing country to a middle income country by 2021](#). The industry has also played a significant role in economically empowering Bangladeshi women from vulnerable socioeconomic classes. Traditionally, these women worked as domestic help in people's homes for paltry wages with almost no days off but the textiles industry provided them jobs with more dignity and the promise of economic freedom.

“Working in the garments industry means that I don't have to depend on my family,” Bobita said. “Women like me are independent and we don't have to suffer abuse by our husbands or in laws. But we deserve living wages.”

Bangladesh is a nation lead by a woman prime minister and its economy is also largely reliant on women, but the average textiles worker makes less than \$100 a month, about one-quarter of the suggested living wage—[TK 37, 661](#) or \$448 USD—by the Asia Floor Wage Alliance, an international alliance of trade unions and labour rights activist who are working together to demand garment workers are paid a living wage.

Shamim Imam, a leader of the Bangladesh Garments Labor Liberation Movement, [explained](#) to the Asia Times that although the starting wage has increased, it barely matches mandated annual cost-of-living raises. The starting wage or ‘basic’ portion only makes up 40% of workers’ actual salaries; the remainder consists of bonuses, allowances and other benefits, which is often dependent on the workers’ productivity level and the factory’s production goals. In effect, the basic salary for workers has only increased by TK 372 (\$5).

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“This is the most severe protest on wage increases because they lowered the basic portion of the wage,” explained Nazma Akhter, founder of Awaj Foundation, an organization that fights for labour rights. She joined the garments industry at the age of 16 and by teaching herself English and computers, became a leading force and internationally recognized figure in fighting for workers’ rights in Bangladesh.

After almost two weeks of protests, the government revised the wage structure so that all seven official “grades” or skill levels saw an improvement in the minimum wage, but they still don’t meet the minimum living standard requirements or the demands of union leaders. Last fall, [textile workers and union leaders demanded a minimum wage of Tk 18,000 \(\\$215\) per month, and the government settled at TK 8,000](#)—far below the wage needed to live in Dhaka, where most of the factories are situated. [In a 2015 study on the global cost of living](#), The Economist ranked Dhaka at number 71 along with Montreal, more expensive than cities like Mexico City, Cleveland, or Istanbul. According to the Global Living Wage Coalition, average [housing costs in Dhaka equal TK 11,000](#). Unable to afford basic housing costs, Bobita pays TK 2500 to live in a cramped room in a slum where she shares an unsanitary and unhygienic bathroom and kitchen.

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“They only raised our wages around 1200 to 1300 taka last year but our rent increased around 500 taka and all our other costs increased too. How are we going to live?,” asked Mostafa Zahan Begum, a textiles worker in the Ashulia region of Dhaka.

The minimum wage was last increased in 2013, after the disastrous [Rana Plaza factory collapse](#), which killed over 1100 people. Bangladesh’s Minimum Wage Board is only required to increase minimum wage levels once every five years and this time it neatly lined up with the 2018 national elections in Bangladesh.

“Politicians focused on the workers during the election to get the votes but the results didn’t follow,” said Nazma.

Labor rights protests in Bangladesh have been historically violent. In December 2016, a large protest was brutally ended by police, with hundreds of workers and union activists arrested and charged with violence and more than 1,500 workers were fired. This time, too, the protests ended in horrific consequences.

“Thousands of workers have been arrested,” Nazma told ELLE.com. “The factory owners provided the names of the workers to the police who then arrested them on false political charges. The jails are going to be full of garments workers now. There are also countless injured workers.”

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Textile workers Bobita Akhter, Taslima Akhter and Jummah Begum leave the Centre for Women and Children Health hospital.

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[In an interview with the Daily Star](#), Siddiqur Rahman, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) said that no innocent worker would be penalized but that workers involved in “vandalism, looting and arson on vehicles would be dismissed.”

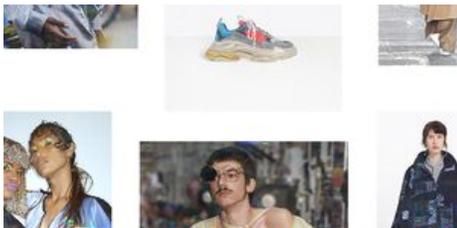
But many workers who were not involved in the violence have been arrested on false charges, claims Nazma. She said the protests get violent because textile workers in Bangladesh have very little representation and there is no central source for organizing.

“90% of the factories are unorganized and without union representation,” Nazma explained, due largely to Bangladesh’s strict labor laws..

“Beyond the law, there are practical obstacles to organizing,” said Chaumtoli Huq, an Assistant Professor of Law at the CUNY School of Law and the producer of ‘Sramik Awaaz: Workers Voices’ , a documentary on the lives and organizing efforts of garments workers in Bangladesh. “There is a police force that is formed to quell garment worker actions called Industrial Police. If workers organize, employers retaliate. There are legal, socio-economic factors that prevent the formation of unions.”

But factory owners and the Bangladesh government aren’t the sole bearers of responsibility for the plight of textile workers. Western retail brands, of which a huge component of the market is American, need to step up to the plate instead of paying lip service to corporate social responsibility. The Rana Plaza tragedy forced brands to come out of the woodwork to assume responsibility for safety conditions but the focus on creating liveable wages has been bare minimum. There’s been a concentrated effort on building safety, but the living conditions of the workers have been overlooked.

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“Fast-fashion is inherently violent,” said [Hoda Katebi](#) a political fashion blogger who often writes about exploitation in the garments industry, in an email to ELLE.com. “Retailers need to slow down with their production (i.e. not work on a "52 season timeline" as currently exists in the fast-fashion world), increase wages and allow for unionization and collective bargaining, and end retaliations against garments workers that speak out, among countless other demands.”

[In a 2016 global survey conducted by the ILO](#), 83 percent of suppliers (factories) in Bangladesh reported that their customers (retail brands) were unwilling to accommodate a price increase in their products due to a statutory increase in the minimum wage.

Nazma said brands have a responsibility to consider the workers' welfare, not just look to Bangladesh for cheap labor costs.

A 2017 report by [Deloitte Access Economics for Oxfam Australia](#) shows that on average, only 2% to 4% of the price of a piece of clothing sold in Australia goes toward factory workers in Bangladesh, Vietnam and other garment production countries.

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“Brands are instructing the factory owners to talk to the workers [to stop the protests] but no one is saying, fine, we’ll increase our rates,” explains Nazma. “Everyone is looking out for themselves, and what the workers are getting is actually not a living wage.”

The FLA report states that a key building block for better working conditions is more visibility. Brands should make sure workers and the public know which factories are producing for which brands. More and more companies are now disclosing where their factories are, but a vast majority of the industry, including many fast-fashion leaders, still do not publicly disclose

which factories produce their branded clothes. Among them is Inditex, the company that owns ZARA — who Bobita sews jeans for.

Taslima's hands were covered with Bobita's blood from helping her get to the hospital. She refused to wash her hands—they were going to see their boss at the factory offices once the doctor was done with Bobita.

“They need to see our blood-stained hands, they need to see how we're living,” said Taslima.

“THEY NEED TO SEE OUR BLOOD-STAINED HANDS, THEY NEED TO SEE HOW WE'RE LIVING.”

Taslima and another colleague, Jummah Begum scrounged through their purses to come up with TK 600 (\$7) for Bobita's medicines and TK 450 (\$5) for the hospital fees. The women hadn't left the house with that much money this morning, as they didn't anticipate getting injured. A few benevolent onlookers donated money towards the medical bills and the three women got onto a rickshaw to go straight to the factory offices to talk to the people in charge.

“As a consumer, it's your responsibility to understand and know where your clothes comes from. While H&M or other fast-fashion retailers seem immutable, it's so desperately important that we hold them accountable, and follow the leadership of garment workers organizing for their rights and better working conditions in Bangladesh and across south and southeast Asia,” said Katebi.

Over a week later, Bobita is still on medical leave.

“Once we got to the factory office, they gave me money for medical expenses and told me to take time off,” she told ELLE.com on the phone. “They don't want the other workers to see me in this condition in case it riles them up again.”

She's disappointed by the results of the protests.

“Everyone is keeping me out of the loop but I can see that there was no point of protesting. Our wages are still the same. I don't think our lives are going to get any better.”

ELLE.com has reached out to NASSA Group and Inditex for comment.

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