Behind the Seams: An Overview of Child Labor in the Ready-Made Garment Industry of Bangladesh

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Introduction

The world we live in is one shaped by circumstance. It's only by chance that some of us have the privilege of growing up middle-class in the United States while others experience food insecurity in the global south. For similar reasons, some live in homes with marble floors and others sleep on dirt floors under straw roofs. Many argue that this is simply the way the world works. There is a clear division between the Haves and Have-nots. The Haves are the people who have access to medical care, can afford to buy a book, and can choose to drive electric cars in the spirit of being environmentally conscientious. Importantly, "the Haves have even more income and resources to enable them to retain the 'Have' status" (Schlesinger, 2022, para. 7). The Have-nots are a group of people who likely live below the poverty line and walk instead of using a car to travel. They often lack the education that would provide them with higher-paying and more skilled jobs. The Have-nots have insufficient access to clean water and basic standards of living. This dichotomy bleeds into the social constructions of our world, especially the global factory system.

One of these industries that epitomizes the separation between the Haves and Have-nots is the garment and textile industry. At one point in time, clothes were solely made by hand for individual people. Nowadays, clothing is produced for the masses, feeding a global market that is hard pressed on meeting product demands. The Haves, in this case, are consumers of these clothes. These consumers can drive to their nearest shopping mall or shop the latest trends online using their smartphones. In contrast, the Have-nots are on the producing end of this dichotomy. They are the low-wage, impoverished workers who cannot afford the clothes they make for the Haves. "The garment and textile industry employs approximately 75 million people worldwide—that's 1% of the world's total population" (Global Living Wage Coalition, n.d. para 1). One of the

garment industry's most popular locations for production is South Asia, with the nation of Bangladesh being a regional hub. While this industry is a cornerstone of the world economy, it is ridden with flaws. One of the most glaring of these flaws is the exploitation of the industry's child workers. As such, this paper serves as an analysis of the pervasiveness of child labor in the ready-made garment industry (RMG) of Bangladesh.

Methodology

The literature used in this thesis consists of texts and statistics from governmental and nongovernmental agencies of academic articles. This thesis serves as an explanation of the current pervasiveness of child labor in the RMG of Bangladesh. It acknowledges the current policies set forth by international and national governmental agencies while making suggestions for improvement. To emphasize some of the issues regarding child labor in Bangladesh, this thesis broadens its scope to other countries in the South Asian region as well as the United States.

I was first introduced to this topic during an undergraduate course called "India and Its Neighbors" taught by Dr. Kari Jensen. While taking the course several years ago as an Individually Negotiated Honors Option (INHO) to fulfill my honors college requirements, I conducted research centered around the RMG Industry of Bangladesh, but focused specifically on the vulnerabilities of female workers. Learning about the topic sparked my interest, and I was very curious about how many "made in Bangladesh" tags I could find in my closet. After looking, I was shocked to see so many. It made me think about how I, a young woman from the United States, have a completely different life from the young women who make my clothes. Although very simple, my thought shows the relation between the processes of production and consumption. The relationship between me and the women making my clothes illustrates how

places are interdependent and interrelated because of global economic processes. This thought is what turned into the basis of my first research paper about Bangladesh. When it came time to decide on a topic for this thesis, the RMG industry of Bangladesh was something I was already familiar with. For this thesis, I wanted to focus my research on children instead of women.

It is important to disclose that I have never been to Bangladesh or known anyone from there. I am a female undergraduate student who studies Linguistics and Global Studies. The absence of personal experience causes me to be reliant on desk research. With that, I recognize that my research is analyzed through the lens of an outsider. I am aware of the privileges and limitations that I have in engaging with this topic.

Introduction to Bangladesh

Today, in 2025, Bangladesh is one of the most populous countries in the world, sitting in eighth place, with around 175.7 million people (World Population Review, 2025). The relatively new sovereign nation is home to one of the fastest-growing middle classes (Mujeri, 2024). As the map below shows, Bangladesh is located in South Asia, bordered by India, Myanmar (Burma), and the Bay of Bengal. Physically, Bangladesh is a unique country as it sits on the world's largest delta. From the Himalayan Mountains, the Ganges (Padma) and Brahmaputra (Jamuna) rivers, along with many others, flow freely through the nation, creating its relatively flat terrain with fertile silt deposits. In Bangladesh, it is common for the poorer communities to live on the banks of rivers because that is where it is most affordable. The rivers flood annually, which repeatedly displaces thousands of people from their homes. The agricultural sector cannot absorb the workforce of the increasing rural population. As a result, they are forced to move to towns and cities. Many end up in the capital city, Dhaka.

Figure 1. (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.)

Dhaka, which happens to be Bangladesh's largest city and one of the world's fastest-growing megacities with over 20 million people, serves as a political and economic hub. (Behind Asia, 2022). Those who have been displaced from the riverbank communities seek out any employment they can find in cities, and in particular in Dhaka. Many of the people from these landless families have ended up in the garment industry. Largely, the country remains absent from the international stage and media. However, on occasion, Bangladesh gains attention for harsh weather patterns, political unrest, or, most notably, the human disasters deriving from labor issues.

After a long history of colonialism and political strife in the region, in the wake of the country's independence in 1971, Bangladesh was one of the poorest nations in the world. Its lands were struck with famine, causing extreme poverty to its people. Bangladesh's jute industry was one of the economic survivors of the war, but the jute industry alone was not enough to sustain the whole economy. Whatever was to come next would have to be built from the ground up. One of the first industries to rise from the dust was its telecommunications sector. However,

the most notable was its manufacturing industry, which gained a foothold in the establishment of an abysmally poor economy. The sustainability of the manufacturing industry by way of its RMG industry continues to prove to be a driver of economic progress, then and now. “It is a remarkable turnaround that, in defiance of all expectations, Bangladesh today is a middle-income country with a per-capita income significantly higher than that of Pakistan and neck and neck with India’s” (Basu, 2021, p.28).

The nucleus of the economic growth in Bangladesh is attributed to its RMG industry, so much so that this sector is considered to be “high priority” by the government. Bangladesh’s garment sector is the country’s largest single source of export revenue, exporting to over 150 countries. “As of December 2020, total exports stood at USD 27.4 billion, capturing a market share of 6.30% out of the global apparel export market of $435 billion” (Bangladesh Investment Development Authority, n.d.). Nationwide, this industry accounts for over 4 million total garment workers; of these 4 million workers, less than 20% are males. So, the RMG industry in Bangladesh is mostly made up of female workers. Given these statistics, the RMG industry has provided an abundant number of women with opportunities to provide for their families outside of the household. In doing so, these opportunities have not only further diversified and developed Bangladesh’s workforce but also the nation itself. As Bangladesh continues to invest in women working outside of the home, the nation elevates its many sectors.

From sheer statistics alone, the RMG industry has proven to be a cornerstone of the Bangladeshi economy. Some of the biggest names in fashion have products that are born out of the garment factories in Bangladesh, most notably, The Children’s Place, H&M, ZARA, Gap, and Primark. However, just considering the above figures and leading brands of this industry

would be dismissive of its many worker-related issues. Low wages, unsafe working conditions, worker-led strikes, coupled with several catastrophic events, has contributed to industry wide hardship.

Within a one-year span, two of the most disastrous factory tragedies occurred. These very avoidable incidents claimed the lives of over 1,250 workers. In 2012, the Tazneen factory fire occurred, likely due to an electrical short circuit. The fire quickly spread through the nine-story building where workers were trapped due to inaccessible or blocked fire escapes. Since the contents of the factory were highly flammable, the absence of fireproof walls and sprinkler equipment made for the worst possible outcome. In the wake of this, no more than a year later the eight-story Rana Plaza Factory collapsed. This was the worst industrial disaster in the history of the country, with 1,129 deaths and several thousand people maimed for life, physically and mentally (Butler & Hammadi, 2017). Its devastation made national headlines, gaining well warranted attention. Despite cracks visible in the walls, workers on the day of the collapse were still forced to come into work and perform their daily duties, pretending as if the structure was not breaking right under them. Neglectful behaviors and forced labor exhibited by the building owner proved to have devastating outcomes.

These events “highlighted massive problems in working conditions [and] led some international buyers to stop sourcing from Bangladesh” (Berg et al., 2021, para. 6). Most workers came from rural, low socioeconomic backgrounds, oftentimes not earning enough money to put food on the table. Employees went into work every day unprotected and with one choice to make, work or starve. As previously stated, much of this workforce is female but importantly, it also consists of children. Children are a vulnerable group of workers that

are exploited. Child labor has become a national struggle for Bangladesh as well as the RMG sector.

Child Labor and the Structure of the RMG Industry of Bangladesh

Bangladesh's required minimum age for work is 14 years (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023, section 2). However, Bangladesh Labor laws prohibit anyone under the age of 18 from engaging in work that is categorized as "hazardous" by the Bangladesh Investment Development Authority (BIDA) (Bangladesh Investment Development Authority). According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), hazardous work includes 38 activities throughout many sectors of the nation's economy including the RMG industry (International Labour Organization, 2014). The hazardous activities most relevant to the RMG sector are the dying and bleaching of textiles. More recently, "the government added five additional sectors to the hazardous work list" (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2021, para. 1) including tailoring and informal production of garments. The types of tasks that are appropriate for children are outlined as "light work" under ILO's Convention no. 138, the minimum age convention. "C 138 defines light work as work which is "(a) not likely to be harmful to their health or development; and (b) not such as to prejudice their attendance at school, their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes approved by the competent authority or their capacity to benefit from the instruction received" (WORLD, n.d.).

With consideration of the ILO Convention No. 138, it allows us to realize that not all forms of child work can be considered child labor. Certainly, many violations within child work constitute the label child labor, but not all child work is child labor. In some

cases, a child participating in work outside of the home can positively contribute to their lives, in a way that it does not interfere with their education, health, or well-being as outlined by the convention. Children working is sometimes pivotal in contributing to their household incomes. Skills gained through employment in their young lives can contribute positively to their adult careers. However, the term child labor is specifically aimed at the type of work that is physically, mentally, or socially unhealthy to children. Also encompassed in this category are children who work under the legal age as well as exceed the 5-hour working limit per day set forth by the Bangladeshi government (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2006).

Given the parameters of *what is* to be considered child labor are understood, it is essential to understand the various types of factories that exist within the Bangladeshi garment sector. There are over 5,000 garment factories in Bangladesh. The garment industry is responsible for keeping up with the demands of "fast-fashion" companies that are "headquartered in high-income countries, playing a major role in a product-line's value creation" (Stafford, 2018, para. 7). To do so the garment industry adheres to a specific supply chain in which factories have varying relationships with product companies. They are divided into three tiers, which are crucial to the supplying of materials or components for the final products.

Tier 1 suppliers have a legitimate business relationship with the companies they provide products for. "Fast fashion brands don't touch production directly; instead, production is outsourced to supplier firms in developing countries" (Stafford, 2018, para. 8). Since the world of fast fashion is ever demanding, work that cannot be completed conducive to a company's timeline gets outsourced to tier 2 and 3 suppliers. These suppliers are first

sub-contracted by tier 1 factories then tier 2 to tier 3 and so on. Where this type of outsourcing becomes problematic is when tiers 2 and 3 factories are not authorized to be utilized by brands. The absence of brand authorization leads these types of factories to not adhere to worker complaint guidelines, consequently, being notorious for poor working conditions. “Since unauthorized subcontractors are unregistered, they operate without government regulation and oversight, resulting in deteriorating work facilities where worker abuse runs rampant” (Stafford, 2018, para. 8). These factories labeled as tiers 2 or 3 are also referred to as subcontracted factories. Some factories, however, can be labeled as mix-contract. This indicates the presence of authorized work accounted for in the formal sector occurring simultaneously with work being completed informally. “According to the ILO, the formal sector refers to all incorporated enterprises. An incorporated enterprise is a business entity, which is registered in a particular country/state as a separate legal entity to its members or owners” (Save the Children, 2022, p.11). Reciprocally, “the informal sector refers to all unincorporated enterprises that produce, at least partly, for the market and are not registered; the informal sector is characterized by very small firms and household units scattered throughout the country” (Save the Children, 2022, p.11). However, child labor exists well within the walls of both sectors in one capacity or another.

As such, child labor is not only a concern of the people of Bangladesh, but it applies to the world. “Despite a wide range of global and national level interventions, the absolute number of child labor is on the rise, especially in the poor and developing economies where most economically active children dwell” (Hoque, 2024, p.1). The RMG industry demands a certain kind of worker. Unfortunately, children hit the mark on this profile as they are low skilled and low wage employees. Child laborers are also less likely to engage in union work, or speak up

about anything negative in the workplace. The density of children in Bangladesh, their economic hardships, coupled with unethical working practices makes Bangladesh a prime breeding ground for child labor. Thus, begging the question, what is the pervasiveness of child labor in the RMG industry of Bangladesh?

Pervasiveness of Child Labor in the RMG Industry

A study conducted by the University of Nottingham and the organizations Rights Lab, Bangladesh Labour Foundation, and Good Weave International documented the current existence of child labor within the RMG Industry in Bangladesh. Within this study "all of the minors interviewed were illegally employed in terms of violating international or Bangladeshi laws, including 99% of them who worked more than five hours a day, thus qualifying as child laborers" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p.6).

The information gathered was based on a survey of 1,305 RMG workers interviewed individually as well as ten in-person focus groups. The interviews spanned 20 research locations covering the majority of the nation. Of those surveyed about 6% of the participants were reported to be minors. Of that specific pool of participants 83% of the minors were female. Thus, reinforcing the strong female prevalence in this industry. Additionally, of the participating minors about half of them reported engaging in work at mixed-contract factories, subcontracted factories, and at export-oriented factories. These subcontracted factories are essential in sustaining production levels in Bangladesh. The study highlights the fact that all the minors interviewed about their work in subcontracted factories were illegally employed in some way. Consequently, there is minimal oversight in these factories which "significantly increases the risk of exploitation or safety violations, making workers more vulnerable to labor rights abuses" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 48). Of the

88 participants in the focus groups 24 were minors. The ages of these minors ranged from 12-17 years of age. Focus group reports showed that the child laborers were performing the same tasks as their adult counterparts and working excessive hours.

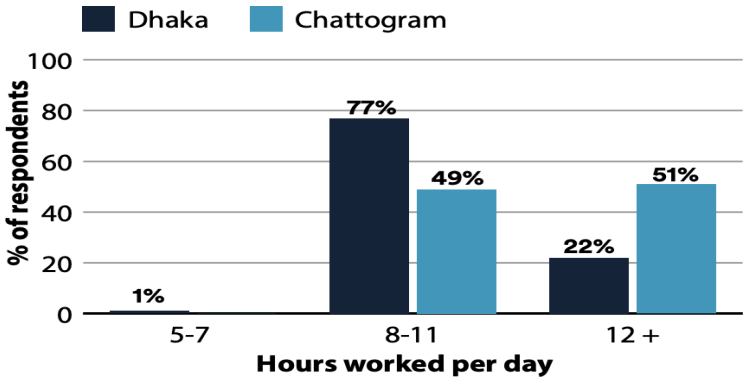

Figure 2: Children's work hours (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 29)

Figure 2 shows the number of hours worked by child laborers in their respective factories. All but 1% of minors reported working well past their 5-hour limits per day in their factories. Most of the children are working well over 8-hour workdays. "A 14-year-old participant from Chattogram reported being forced to stay past 8 pm to assist others in the factory after completing her shift. She was threatened with deductions from her overtime pay if she did not comply" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 29).

Furthermore, Kliuha's study highlights the clear infractions of children performing "hazardous work". The general considerations of "hazardous work" have previously been outlined. But more specifically, in the RMG sector, hazardous work is considered but not limited to children having to "carry heavy loads, use hazardous machinery, and handle chemicals without protective equipment" (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2018, p. 2). The further consequences of "hazardous work"

when it comes to bleaching/dyeing textiles expose children to potentially fatal outcomes. This study also reported child laborers cleaning and moving factory machines. Much to the children's disadvantage, their petite hands make them a much more suited target for cleaning the machine compared to their fully mature co-workers. Thus, children are being forced into these unlawful requests time and time again.

Consider this account from a young child laborer named Fatima from Chattogram. She began her work in a garment factory when she was 13 years old. When asked generally about her work at the factory she said “I work at a small factory, I know I am cheap labour for them and that is why I was hired. Management didn’t verify my age or give me a contract of any kind.” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 32). The omission not only confirms the negligence of factory owners but also exposes a system where children are left defenseless. She describes her work as very exhausting and without rest breaks. She expresses, “I am obligated to work. And if we ask for leave when we are ill, they tell us to act as if we are fine. ‘Finish the work first, then go’” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 32). Fatima is just one of too many children who have experienced unlawful treatment and abuse. Her story perfectly mirrors the main findings of the study. The statistics we see are her lived experiences. Across the industry, she can be related to the accounts of many others, some in the formal but others a part of the informal sector. Now we must further explore the dynamics and statistics of the informal sector of the RMG industry.

Another study conducted by Chanani et al. (2022) explores the pervasiveness of child labor in Bangladesh’s informal RMG factories. “In Bangladesh, informal factories produce both for the domestic market and/or operate as unauthorized subcontractors for export-oriented factories” (Chanani et al., 2022, p. 362). The nation’s RMG supply chains are multi-layered

entities that include direct suppliers and indirect suppliers. The informality of the RMG industry lies within these unauthorized subcontractors. Unauthorized subcontractors are the moral kink in the supply chain where many of the issues of child labor live and breathe. The study by Chanani et al. (2022) specifically targets this group of factories as they pertain to rates of child labor.

Just as Kliuha et al. (2021) concluded from their surveys, Chanani et al. (2022) highlight the abundance of child labor in the informal sector. Similarly, Chanani et al. (2022) remotely surveyed workers from factories located in Keraniganj and Narayanganj, cities in the greater Dhaka area. The surveys totaled 11,555 responses between both communities. Of these responses, about 19% of responders were identified as being from 14 to 17 years of age. “Every respondent aged 14-17 confirmed that they work more than 5 h per day, indicating that all working children were at risk of forced labour” (Chanani et al., 2022, p. 367). It was also pointed out that, oftentimes in the Keraniganj factories, child laborers were found to be sleeping in the factories. Largely because venturing back to their communities would not be conducive to their long and demanding work schedule. Another interesting survey finding was that “there was a higher percentage of child laborers under 14 years of age in Keraniganj (10%) compared to Narayanganj (4%)” (Chanani et al., 2022, p. 366). This statistic is well supported by the fact that Keraniganj factory personnel actively recruit the children in their villages to come and work in their factories.

Thus, 94% of children aged younger than 14 were reported to begin working in factories upon recommendation from friends or relatives (Chanani et al., 2022). This practice was not found in Narayanganj, which can account for the slightly smaller figure of the under-14 workers. In place of a recruitment process by factory owners, Narayanganj

factories employ the children who come to work with their parents. It is important to note that within these informal factories, parents too often trust their recruiters for the safety of their children. Parents believe that their children are more likely to succeed in the factories than in school or learning a profession. The study suggests that parents are extremely unaware of the risks their children face every day in these factories. All of which perpetuates a vicious system in which children are further exploited.

Chanani et al. (2022) points out that "Informal factories, due to their unregulated nature, are able to hire these underage workers much more readily than the formal sector" (2022, p. 368). The researchers attribute such rampant rates of child labor to the weak enforcement of laws by the government and the responsible agencies. "Although the government has established laws and regulations related to child labor, gaps exist in Bangladesh's legal framework to adequately protect children" (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs , 2023, section 2). The most relevant gap can be seen through the misalignment of free/compulsory education and the minimum working age. Currently, compulsory education is met with the completion of the fifth grade. Usually, a fifth grader is around ten years old. Being that the minimum age for working is 14, there is a four-year gap that exists. So, what is a child to do who is no longer in school and not yet old enough to legally engage in work? With struggling families, gaining a job illegally during that gap period seems very appealing, thus, the exploration of such a framework is necessary.

But first, what are the building blocks that put children in a position to be subjected to all of this? Sure, strengthening legal frameworks would improve the climate for children. However, the most effective policies are ones that take into account the tangible causes and

shared vulnerabilities of the victims. Subsequently, the consideration of the causes of child labor and the vulnerabilities of this group is relevant.

Causes of Child Labor and Vulnerabilities of Child Laborers in the RMG Industry in Bangladesh

For any adult, the garment factories are a considerably unsafe environment. Typically, very hot, under-ventilated, and crammed with dangerous equipment. With certainty, it is no place for a child. However, "in South Asia, child labour and exploitation are the combined product of many factors, such as poverty, social norms condoning them, lack of decent work opportunities for adults and adolescents, migration, and emergencies" (UNICEF, 2016, para. 2). It is a necessary evil of sorts to economies, especially in the case of Bangladesh.

It has been said that within the context of Bangladesh, "poverty is the number one cause of child labor" (Uddin, 2018, p. 113). Although the nation has made incredible strides in building a sustainable economy, still a significant number of its citizens live in poverty. Families find themselves destitute and have no other option than to send their children to work at very young ages. "They didn't get a primary education, they can't get into secondary school, and their families rely on their income" (Nonkes, 2019, para. 15). Their work is oftentimes the only way families can have their basic needs met. Sometimes, even with the additional household income, households cannot fill their needs. Many programs have been implemented through organizations such as the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to aid in poverty reduction by way of educating children, and governmental stipend programs to keep girls in school have been in place for decades. However, an abundant amount of poverty remains, thus feeding the entity that is child labor.

It is normal for rural children to be sent to work over their urban counterparts. Bangladesh has had a very long agricultural history in which children were working alongside their families in fields to sustain themselves. “The prevailing social norms and economic realities prove that child labor is broadly accepted” (Uddin, 2018, p. 105). Through this lens, it is much easier to rationalize children going to work as it is a part of rural life. The only difference is that the factory is a new field for the children.

Within these factories are a group of children who are already extremely disadvantaged before beginning to sew their first pair of pants. Aside from their broader societal struggles, the children of the RMG industry face many dangers day to day within the factories themselves. Some of the most striking of them are physical/psychological abuse, health-related risks, and gender-based violence.

Child laborers are a vulnerable population that is especially susceptible to many forms of abuse. One of the most common forms of abuse is physical and psychological. “Generally, physical maltreatment in the workplace consists of hitting, beating, burning, or stabbing, while psychological abuse usually takes the form of bullying or scolding, and neglect includes the denial of rights at work” (Ahad et al., 2023, p. 2). A study conducted by Ahad et al. (2023) brought to light some of the most common risk factors that increase the likelihood of abuse for a child laborer. These risk factors include the child’s socioeconomic status, gender, and even the characteristics of their perpetrators.

Within the socioeconomic sphere, researchers determined that in homes with unemployed adults, children are more likely to be abused in the workplace (Ahad et al., 2023). The household’s dependency on the child’s income outweighs the abuse they may face on a day-to-day basis. For children, changing their job is not as easy as changing their clothes. So, due

to economic shortcomings, children are forced to be pawns in a vicious cycle. Researchers also found that within households, there is a limited awareness of what is actually faced by children in factories. Too often, children are sent to work without being properly monitored. “Of note, impoverished parents often focus on the short-term financial benefits rather than long-term outcomes” (Ahad et al., 2023, p. 7) of their children in these harmful spaces. So, while their children's well-being is cast aside in the workplace, only a part of their physical being is taken care of by

their wages.

The researchers relate the abuse to broader society by explaining the normalcy of physical punishment from parent to child. In Bangladeshi culture, physicality when regulating a child's behavior is a common practice. The practice of corporal punishment, which intends to cause physical harm, is illegal in schools but not in daycares or garment factories. Despite its social acceptance, “The government also reported that a law to ban corporal punishment of children in all educational institutions and workplaces is being drafted, as well as a comprehensive law to ban all forms of violence against children, including corporal punishment” (End Corporal Punishment, 2024, p. 2). Children who lack education have little idea that the behaviors they face are unjust. However, Ahad et al. (2023) point out that a child laborer is more likely to be abused by adults who have been abused themselves. What the literature suggests is the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment. Thus, it was concluded that “a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of perpetrators would assist in efforts to stop maltreatment at its source” (Ahad et al., 2023, p. 2).

Lastly, many gendered vulnerabilities pose unique threats to both young males and females. Two of the largest are disparities in pay and sexual harassment. Since the RMG

industry is largely dominated by females, their risks are a bit different than those of their male counterparts.“Both men and women workers experienced harassment in the form of repeated insults and shouting, but only women workers have reported experiencing sexual assault” (Matsuura et al., 2020, p. 28). Not only do the supervisors perpetuate this behavior in the workplace, but most often there is a lack of policies to address the sexual harassment that not only girls but women of all ages face. In doing so, supervisors sweep the abuses directly under the rug, enabling an unsafe work environment.

Overall, financial exploitation is an issue that both young males and females face. “The observation is that child labourers are often deprived of their wages/salary or payment is delayed or may be provided with food and accommodation instead of wages.” (Ahad et al., 2023, p. 5). According to Kliuha et al. (2021), minors overall were far more likely to experience delays in their payments than their adult co-workers. One of the most alarming reasons for such delays was the minors' not being able to speak out against their adult supervisors. Child laborers have such a minute voice that concerns over payment are not perceived as an appropriate topic to be discussed with their bosses. In addition, gendered issues add a more complex layer to this topic. Across both categories of adult and minor females, “the average female factory worker’s wages are 2,000 BDT (18 USD) per month lower than the average male wages” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 43). The vulnerabilities of these children exist in many spaces. They exist within their parents, who are caught within the bounds of society, often unwilling and unknowing of how to change their frame of mind. But also, within their workspaces, in the form of supervisors. Vulnerabilities also lie on the surface of their skin reinforced by anatomy.

Child laborers also face abuse due to their gender. It seems as if everywhere the children go, they are at risk. There is almost no place in their world where their vulnerabilities do not

dominate. For instance, these children not only face harm from their physical and mental bruises. Child laborers are also in danger of many other health risks. The intersection of health risks and RMG workers is complex. Adult workers and child workers are "frequently affected by various types of diseases mainly due to the unhygienic workplace conditions and the dust produced from raw materials" (Kabir et al., 2019, p. 2). Most commonly, from these conditions experts have found a prevalence of musculoskeletal issues, respiratory problems, kidney failure, and even sexually transmitted diseases. When workers become sick, they are unable to take time off to heal. As a result, while continuing to work, employees become less and less productive as their ailments keep them from their factory's desired efficiency. In saying this, "most RMG workers do not get full payment when on sick leave, concerns about failing health may lead to stress and psychological health issues, in addition to the financial burden" (Kabir et al., 2019, p. 2). Coupled with these illnesses is an inadequate diet as a result of poverty. These struggles, of course, are not immune to the children in the factories. Children are susceptible to more severe health risks than their adult colleagues for several reasons. In terms of respiratory issues alone, children physiologically have a smaller airway diameter, which "results in more severe symptoms from respiratory infections due to airway inflammation and increased mucus production" (Christophers et al., 2020, p. 1). Considering this, areas in garment factories that have large amounts of dust or pollutants are more dangerous for child workers. Therefore, "children are not mini adults for disease prevention or treatment of infections because they are smaller, their anatomy and physiology are different, and, most importantly, their immune system and immunological exposure history are less mature" (Christophers et al., 2020, p. 1). So developing these health issues from a young age, whether it be respiratory or something else, poses significant threats to long-term health for the children.

One would think that if the RMG workers had adequate working conditions that did not cause them health problems, overall employees would be more reliable and efficient workers, thus benefiting the factories. “The literature signifies that the RMG workers of Bangladesh and India are more vulnerable than other workers” (Kabir et al., 2019, p. 12). This shows that factory owners miss the bigger picture of worker well-being, since the literature mentions more adequate working conditions as conducive to higher efficiency. A way to achieve workers’ rights is through legal advocacy and a framework that reinforces worker prosperity. The next section highlights this while providing criticism and personal suggestions.

Legal Protections of the Children of the RMG Industry in Bangladesh

Broadly, Bangladesh has many policies relating to child labor. According to the United States Department of Labor Bureau of International Labor Affairs (2023), the children of Bangladesh are subjected to some of the most awful forms of child labor. Included in this list is the garment industry. “Although the government has established laws and regulations related to child labor, gaps exist in Bangladesh’s legal framework to adequately protect children” (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023, section 4).

Until recently, Bangladesh’s policies with regard to a minimum age of work, prohibition of using children in illicit activities, alignment of compulsory education years and minimum work age did not meet international standards. The lack of adherence to international standards has proven to be extremely harmful. All of these lend themselves to children not only being at risk for becoming child laborers in general but also laborers of the RMG industry. Aside from this, having restricted access to education or a lack of enforcement of universal primary education denies children basic human rights.

When it comes to the enforcement of child labor laws in Bangladesh, the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) is responsible. This smaller organization is located within the broader government agency, the Ministry of Labor and Employment (MOLE). From the years 2022-2023, DIFE spearheaded an action plan to eradicate child labor from a sub-district in Dhaka, a plan which grew into taking on Bangladesh as a nation. It was titled the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor (2021-2025). This project was originally anticipated to be completed in 2023, but has been expanded well into 2025. Its efforts have implemented labor inspections, routine worksite inspections, unannounced inspections, a complaint mechanism for citizens, and imposed penalties for child labor violations. At the societal level, MOLE has raised social awareness, increased access to health/education programs, and strengthened law enforcement. "The MOLE monitored activities of the divisional councils and district and sub-district level coordination committees to ensure coordinated work to eliminate child labor" (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023, section 4).

In conjunction with this governing body the National Child Labor Welfare Council (NCLWC) coordinates governmental efforts within society. Included in this council are child advocacy groups, employer/worker organizations, as well as government ministries. Their ultimate goal is to magnify child labor monitoring activities at all levels. This is largely because "Bangladesh established policies related to child labor. However, lack of coordination of government ministries responsible for implementing the National Plan of Action on the Elimination of Child Labor hindered the policy from fulfilling its mandates" (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023, section 4). The ILO points out that although the strides made at the governmental and societal level have

yielded some positive outcomes, there are many glaring issues in the informal sector with the participation of child labor that have halted significant progress. Most specifically, this agency has pointed out the garment sector. The specific strides that are being referred to are the ratification of the international conventions: the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ILO Convention No. 182 on the worst forms of child labor, and ILO Convention No. 138 on minimum age for entry to work. After Bangladesh ratified ILO's minimum age convention (C138) in 2022 nearly 50 years after the convention's inception, ILO stated the following: "With this ratification, Bangladesh has now ratified all eight of the ILO's 'Fundamental Conventions' covering social and labour issues that are considered fundamental to rights at work" (International Labour Organization, 2022, para. 5). These include changes to the minimum working age as well as the alignment of the compulsory school age and legal entry into the workforce. "In Bangladesh, free and compulsory education is currently mandatory until grade 5. This change would be in line with the National Education Policy which recommends free and compulsory education up to grade 8" (International Labour Organization, 2022, para. 12). These corrections speak to the commitment the government of Bangladesh has to eliminating child labor from not only the garment sector but across all industries. Consider this statement made by the ILO Country Director in

Bangladesh, Tuomo Poutianen, about Bangladesh's ratification of the ILO minimum age convention: "This ratification is a milestone for Bangladesh as it seeks to eliminate all forms of child labour. ILO will continue to work closely with the government, employers and workers of Bangladesh to ensure a brighter future for all its children" (International Labour Organization, 2022, para. 13).

Aside from the steps already taken to reduce child labor, I will now suggest some of my thoughts on how to ensure a fair and sustainable system. Importantly though, there are some wrong ways to go about the eradication of child labor. The strategy I am referring to specifically is boycotting the RMG industry. Consider the history attached to the United States congressional proposal, the Harkin Bill. Proposed in the 1990s when child labor in South Asia was well documented in the media, the Harkin Bill, in conjunction with the Child Labor Deterrence Act sought to "prohibit the importation of products produced by child labor and includes civil and criminal penalties for companies and nations that employ underaged workers" (Hindman & Quddus, 2009, p. 773). In theory, the bones of the proposal sent out the right message to the world: solidarity against child labor. However, the threat of the passing of this bill led to the dismissal of tens of thousands of child workers in the Bangladeshi RMG industry. "Local press reports indicated that many former garment workers ended up on the streets, engaged in hard labor such as stone breaking at construction sites or worse." (Hindman & Quddus, 2009, p.773). So, what did this bill that was never even signed into law accomplish? The short answer is absolutely nothing; if anything, it created a whole other host of issues for child workers. Children who were already impoverished took a nosedive even deeper into the hole. This shows that a suitable solution does not eliminate child labor overnight. It is a solution that has the children's holistic development at its core. Similarly as Jensen (2015, p. 15) mentions "it is not a solution to ban child domestic work but rather to work with the children to find ways to improve their everyday lives and protect them from potential harm". Though the work she speaks about in this literature is child domestic work, her statement is transferable to the child workers in the RMG industry. The suggestions I propose would improve the development of children's lives, not just facilitate their absence

from factories. Some children in Bangladesh, among other similar nations, benefit from working. The type of work, however, must be regulated and safe.

I believe that a system similar to a national registry, where all child workers' ages are tracked, would be helpful. The system would be digital as it would be the most convenient way for the government, as well as other necessary organizations to access this information. Aside from tracking a child's age, it would also include their employment history and necessary documentation to verify their age. In this case it would be a birth certificate and or school documents. To ensure legitimacy in documentation, an unbiased outside party can be utilized for verification. Also, this system can be cross-referenced with the young workers' respective schools, which provides an additional layer of security. By doing this, not only would they be compliant with their age requirements in the workplace, but their status in school is also monitored and maintained. This seems to be somewhat realistic considering that Bangladesh is currently going through a reform where all citizens are eventually meant to have a National Identity Card, offered at least from age 15, but especially meant for those 18 and older because of voter registration (Bangladesh Election Commission, 2019, para. 1).

Within the verification process, if something is deemed illegitimate, an alert should be sent to all of the relevant child labor authorities. This would launch an investigation pinpointing the illegitimacy, followed by the necessary legal actions. Although it would require some additional manpower, the efficiency at the heart of this system would streamline the process of finding non-compliant factories. There would also need to be funding provided for the government to develop and sustain the system. However, the benefits of this system would aid in bridging the necessary gap between legal frameworks and enforcement. The top priority should be holding the adults accountable for the children they are responsible for.

Another suggestion I have in aiding the eradication of child labor would be to better engage the parents of the child laborers. As mentioned, one of the main reasons children are engaged in work at such a young age is that their family relies on their income. Sometimes this is because of a parent not being able to work for a culmination of reasons, whether it be physical or something else. In other cases, parents are unaware of the hazards of involving their children in work. I envision the involvement of parents in a few different ways.

One would be the promotion of alternative-income opportunities. For instance, providing parents with skill training in a specific field or possibly vocational training could lend itself to new financial opportunities. With this, parents of child laborers would be able to acquire higher-paying skill-based jobs, providing more income for their household. It is very possible that if parents can gain higher-paying jobs that their children can just focus on their education. It is worth noting that the minimum wage for garment workers in Bangladesh is the lowest in the world. “Earnings are between 9,300 and 11,500 Bangladeshi taka (roughly 89-98 Euros) per month” (Shamsher Elora, 2024, para. 3). In US Dollars (USD), it works out to be less than $11, which is a far cry from a livable wage. Possibly, if the wage level were even a bit higher, parents would not have to send their children to work at all. This, however, may not be feasible because Bangladesh would lose out on contracts in competition with other low-income countries.

Another suggestion would be to create a local network among parents, and from this, possibly a local committee for child labor protection within the community. First, the local network among parents could be a space where they share their children’s stories and struggles. But also, a place where valuable resources and information that would better suit their children are spoken about. Discussion surrounding the importance of education and

management of household finances could increase visibility towards the issue. Achieving this network may be difficult as parents work long hours similar to their children. In addition, parents assume some additional responsibilities apart from their children like cooking, cleaning, etc.. So a way to make this program realistic could be to provide incentives such as time off from work. Also compensated meals for families on meeting nights solicited by labor unions could alleviate obstacles. Despite these obstacles this committee could present, the benefits are far more important. Connection between parents within a community creates social bonds, which then adds to better societal dynamics of broader society. Collective advocacy for issues such as reduction of child labor becomes that much easier with a well-established social network and positive relationships.

Extending the reach beyond the circle of parents, the establishment of a child protection committee within the community would also be beneficial. Ideally, this committee is made up of parents of the child laborers but also teachers, school officials, local law enforcement agencies, social workers, and even children. The purpose of this group would be to monitor child labor in their community, remain vigilant in identifying warning signs, and report instances of child labor as the members see them. This blended group would be a middleman of sorts in terms of facilitating the connection of community figures and the powerful authorities.

Strengthening the social relationships between community leaders and community members will show solidarity in the fight against child labor. Not only does this improve society overall, but it improves the lives of the children they are fighting for. Also, it is worth considering that “to effectively deal with problems in this industry, and especially the issue of child labor, it is important to understand the culture and the mindset of the employers”

(Hindman & Quddus, 2009, p. 773). So, as the discussion moves towards the exploration of child labor across the region as well as the globe, paying attention to the cultural values that shape the societies in which these issues exist, we can better assess next steps for improvement.

Child Labor Regionally and Across the Globe

Broadly, "There are 62 million children in child labour in the Asia Pacific Region, accounting for 7% of the population of children, according to the 2017 Global Estimates on Child Labor, 28 million of them are in hazardous work" (Bhandary et al., 2022, p. 1). The children are spread across a wide variety of sectors and industries. The nations of South Asia have many similarities in their children being engaged in child labor. "A UNICEF recent study points out that inequality, which stems from gender, age, socio-economic status, caste/ethnicity, influences the chance of children engaging in child labor, the types of work they engage and the severity of exploitation." (UNICEF, 2016, para. 2). UNICEF recognizes child labor as a threat to national economies. Although the literature presented in this thesis has been centralized to Bangladesh and its RMG industry, it is worth broadening the scope towards its neighboring nations, considering "Bangladesh is not much different from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or Burma in using young children in apparel production" (Hindman & Quddus, 2009, p.775). For example, the most important export products for both Bangladesh and Sri Lanka come from their textile industries. So, this section will focus on the pervasiveness of child labor in neighboring countries to Bangladesh.

Surrounding Bangladesh is a country that has a massive garment industry, none other than the most populous country in the world, India. The research analyzed notes that in

factories, “Children as young as 4 to 5 years begin to observe their household members doing the work and pick up various skills by assisting their family” (Bhullar et al., 2015, p. 27). The mere thought of a 4-year-old working in a factory alongside their loved ones is mind-blowing. At 4 years old, realistically, children are not able to identify by name the shapes that they are cutting. The literature also adds that “children often sit in uncomfortable postures for long periods during work” (Bhullar et al., 2015, p. 35). Aside from this, children also reported having pain in their eyes, causing their eyes to deteriorate. “Few children who engaged in thread cutting shared that their hands would hurt from using the cutter for long hours. They usually applied some balm or flexed their fingers and palms to get back to work.” (Bhullar et al., 2015, p. 35). This insight alone speaks to the many struggles children face just in the physicality of the work. The other abuses faced by children in the workplace in Indian factories could be delved into much deeper. However, there are more unique examples of child labor that exist across the region worth looking into.

West of Bangladesh, on the opposite side of India, is Pakistan. UNICEF estimates that about 3.3 million Pakistani children are trapped in child labor (UNICEF, n.d.). The child labor situation in Pakistan is privy to many of the struggles children face regionally. However, some specific differences add more layers to the issue of child labor in Pakistan. This struggle, in particular, that the children of Pakistan face is that only 34% of children under five are registered at birth nationally (UNICEF, n.d.). One’s identity being recorded at birth is a fundamental right that not only gives a record of a person’s accurate age but also verifies existence. This lack in Pakistan is problematic as it may skew the percentage of the actual number of children engaged in child labor, given the number is extremely likely to be much higher. To take this a step further, if a child does not legally exist, it is nearly impossible to not only protect them from issues

relating to child labor but also child marriage and being treated as children under the eyes of the law.

Just over 1,700 miles southeast of Pakistan sits the island nation of Sri Lanka. Similarly to Bangladesh, the garment and textile industry of Sri Lanka is one of its most successful sectors. "The textile and apparel industry in Sri Lanka has grown to become the largest single source of export revenue in the country" (Save the Children, 2022, p.8). The minimum age for children to engage in work in Sri Lanka is 16 years old, which is a bit older than some of the nations surrounding it. However, "it is very likely that the children engaging in economic activities, even before reaching the minimum age of employment (16 years old), is much higher than reported" (Save the Children, 2022, p. 31). A specific struggle that this industry and others around the world have faced as of late are the aftereffects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In Bangladesh "the COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting unprecedented effects on the garment workers especially who are associated with their health, financial hardship and inability to pay for essentials say foods and treatment" (Hossain & Alam, 2022, para. 6). Sri Lanka was unfortunately no different as employees struggled with health-related issues and economic uncertainties. As such not only children but "all workers have lost income, benefits and allowances, and have experienced delays in payment or at times, the wholesale non-payment of their wages" (Save the Children, 2022, p. 21). This led to about one-fifth of employed workers, mostly women and children, to lose their jobs. This, of course has had disastrous effects as poverty is prevalent in Sri Lanka, although not as prevalent as in the other South Asian countries.

Since many of the children engaged in child labor across South Asia emerge from impoverished households, addressing the standard of living issues could quell the rising figures. In doing so, children would be able to attend school, which substantially raises the standard of

living in the long term. Children who have better access to education are more likely to gain higher-paying jobs which in turn lifts them out of poverty. This is especially true given what we know about Nepal and Sri Lanka. An interesting point is made by the International Labour Organization & Central Bureau of Statistics of Nepal (2021): "Children who spend more time collecting water are more likely to engage in child labor. Provision of easily accessible water, either through the effort of private, governmental, or non-governmental organizations could help mitigate this problem" (p. 54). The point that is being made here is simple. If something so basic such as access to water is granted, or at the very least, improved, rates of child labor will decrease. This shows us that complex solutions are not always the answer to our most complex issues. Some solutions, however, require a bit more coordination. Governmental intervention by way of enforcement of legitimate identification would be most useful in Pakistan based on the provided concerns. As for India, an effective way to reduce child labor would be random factory check-ins to assess the wellness of children and compliance with working conditions. Based upon what we have learned about the surrounding South Asian nations, there is much overlap in issues with child labor in their respective garment sectors, as well as a few universally applicable solutions.

To believe that issues of child labor are exclusive to the countries of South Asia or developing nations in general would be false. A lesser-known struggle in terms of child labor can be found right here in the United States. Recent reports have found that many states across the U.S. are attempting to weaken child labor laws. Child labor laws have been in place for over a century for the safeguarding of children while providing them with opportunities to be able to work in a variety of different sectors. Many Americans boldly assume that because these laws are in place and have been for so long that the violation of such laws is in the distant past.

However, the findings made by the U.S. Department of Labor, as well as the Economic Policy Institute, would contradict those sentiments. “In fact, violations of child labor laws are on the rise, as are attempts by state lawmakers to weaken the standards that protect children in the workplace” (Sherer & Mast, 2023, para. 2).

Researchers have attributed this policy weakening to the multi-industry-led push towards greater access to low-wage labor. By pushing the envelope today, industry groups will be able to dilute federal standards that protect the laborers of tomorrow. Consider this very alarming statistic: “the number of minors employed in violation of child labor laws increased 37% in the last year and at least 10 states introduced or passed laws rolling back child labor protections in the past two years” (Sherer & Mast, 2023, para. 5). The policies being amended in the states in question largely have to do with extension of working hours as well as lowering the working age of children in specific industries. For instance, Iowa has proposed a bill that asks to allow under special permits for “14.5-year-olds to drive themselves up to 50 miles to and from work between 5:00 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.” (Sherer & Mast, 2023, para. 14). Just condensing the proposed hours alone brings up concerns for children’s education.

To further this trend in the U.S., Arkansas has signed into law in 2023 that “children under 16 will no longer need to provide an employment certificate from the Division of Labor that verifies proof of their age and parental consent to work” (Sherer & Mast, 2023, para. 14). This extremely problematic legislation will facilitate an increase in the number of illegal child laborers. Additionally, Iowa has proposed “granting new discretion for the state to waive, reduce, or delay civil penalties if an employer violates child labor laws; and providing employer immunity from legal claims arising from the injury, illness, or death of a child while engaged in a work-based learning program” (Sherer & Mast, 2023, para. 13). So not only are children

becoming more at risk for false documentation of their age and status, but companies will be held less liable through legal protections. The enforcement of labor standards makes these companies less desirable to work for, which is obvious. But what these companies cannot fathom is that to be appealing to workers, employers must offer more competitive benefits, i.e., safe working conditions, higher wages, etc. That is simply how the job markets are supposed to operate.

Given this information, the federal government in the U.S. must recommend policy amendments and implementations that align with increasing penalties aimed at child labor violations as well as reinforcing the integrity of child workers. In tandem with this, the government should further aid agencies that are supposed to enforce labor standards. All of which together would aid in extinguishing the rising rates of child labor in the U.S.. Considering these suggestions about child labor in the context of the United States as well as South Asia, what can be done about child labor? What needs to change?

A Call to Action

Child labor is an issue that has been persistent in Bangladesh since its independence in 1971, and it is still abundant despite the government's increased awareness of its negative impacts. In some ways, it can be argued that the issue has improved, because “Bangladesh has ratified all key international conventions concerning child labor” (United States Department of Labor. Bureau of International Labor Affairs, 2023, section 2). Acknowledging the dire issue of child labor is one thing. It is completely another to advocate, provide a framework, and hold employers accountable to improve the conditions for child laborers. Through a variety of approaches, some focused on the education and general well-being of children, others on the

framework of supply chains, many suggestions have been provided to facilitate appropriate action. However, as we have learned, there are still gaping holes in the application of these conventions. Luckily, organizations such as The Child Rights Action Hub, created specifically for advocating on behalf of child laborers in the RMG industry of Bangladesh, are pillars to this fight. The Child Rights Action Hub was born out of the organization, The Center for Child Rights and Business. The organization works with businesses to best support young workers in global supply chains. They ensure the compliance of the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) among others to not only strengthen supply chains but ensure fairness to the living and breathing children who constitute it. Additionally, the Child Rights Action Hub emphasizes the importance of child rights as a core practice to a sustainable business model. Much of their reach has expanded across Asia, although they are active in Europe, Africa, North and South America as well.

The Child Rights Action Hub's main strategy in combating child labor in Bangladesh specific to the RMG sector "aims to empower fashion brands and retailers to engage lower-tier suppliers in preventing and addressing child labor" (The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024, para. 3). Additionally, their strategies address various socioeconomic and other risk factors children face by increasing overall visibility. This organization facilitates the collaboration of the government, private entities, civil society organizations, and brands to participate in their four-part workstream.

The first part/workstream of The Child Rights Action Hub's main strategy suggested conducting risk assessments to analyze the needs of the child laborers working for the lower-tier factories. "Child labor is most prevalent in lower-tier factories that are often

unregulated and opaque" (The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024, para. 8). Due to this, the organization implemented community mapping exercises that opened eyes concerning local challenges and their direct correlation to child workers' rights. The second workstream applies the knowledge gained through the research conducted in workstream one to training strategies to be implemented in the lower-tiered factories. As such, these strategies outfit the factories with information about effective child labor prevention and educate them on the standards outlined by EU's CSDDD. The suggestions can be directly applied to each individual factory, thus outline those specific community struggles made apparent by workstream one. Moving towards the third workstream, its focus is on child labor prevention and remediation training. Like the last workstream in several ways, this step highlights the importance of programming for children. One of the most prominent being the Access to Decent Work for Youth (ADWY) program. This ensures that child workers conduct their duties in a safe environment, are given age-appropriate tasks, as well as fair wages. Outside of the workplace, this program also educates children on soft skills training, financial literacy, worker protections, sexual health, and technical skills. This holistic approach better suits children for a long and sustainable life. Also educated through this program are the managers who oversee the children, as the program would be useless without their participation. The fourth and final workstream focuses on youth development. This can manifest in many ways. For this program, it means child workers have access to monthly living stipends, access to education, as well as case managers to check in on the progress of children. This shows that "by enabling young workers to secure jobs in the formal sector and supporting their growth opportunities, they can avoid or transition out of hazardous positions in lower supply chain tiers and the informal sector" (The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024, para. 9).

As of October 31, 2024, this program has had significant impacts on child laborers in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. Eighty-seven child labor cases have been integrated into their remediation program (The Centre for Child Rights and Business, 2024). Through the program, 85 staff members were trained across 50 subcontracting factories on child labor protection rights. Additionally, to emphasise the importance of the buyer's role in the fight against child labor, many have taken part in several initiatives. Overall, this multi-layered approach mostly focuses on the education of child laborers and employers alike to create a compliant environment. Although it does include the reformation of supply chains, the approach suggested by Kliuha et al. (2021) attempts to fill in the gaps in the Child Rights Action Hub's strategy.

Suggestions made by Kliuha et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of involving not only the government of Bangladesh but also international buyers, suppliers, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and trade unions. This scaled approach recommends mapping supply chains, risk assessment of child labor in the RMG sector, payment enforcement on livable wages, and remediation/prevention of discriminatory working conditions.

As stated, one of the most effective ways to better address child labor in the RMG industry of Bangladesh is to map supply chains. This is solely to comprehend the manner by which lower tier factories feed RMG exports. One of the first steps the government can take in this process would be to "simplify the registration process for smaller worksites that still operate without trade licenses to encourage their formal registration" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 64). In doing so, the informal sector becomes smaller, and a by-product of that would be

decreased child labor. In conjunction with this, the government could bolster supervision of subcontracted factories in areas identified as high risk. An example would be the factories in Chattogram referred to earlier in this paper, with more than 50% of child laborers working 12 or more hours per day. Moreover, the government would benefit from mandating the disclosure of suppliers and factory subcontractors. The improvements suggested for international buyers and suppliers are to ensure that their supplier staff are always up to date on labor guidelines and policies. Also, to "develop detailed guidelines on subcontracting in consultation with civil society organizations that can provide technical expertise, to ensure that RMG production occurs in compliant facilities" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 64). To take this a step further, both parties should "streamline the subcontracting approval process for small production units to ease the production target pressure that pushes suppliers to outsource orders to undisclosed subcontracted worksites" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 64). This policy would be pertinent as the correlation between subcontracted work in the RMG industry and child labor is very strong. As for NGOs and Trade Unions it would be helpful for them to "deploy or expand initiatives to support transparency e.g. central databases that list factories and categorize them as exporters or subcontractors or both, to help the convergence of terms and understanding of factories' roles in the wider RMG industry" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 64).

Moving towards their next level of suggestions, the risk assessment of child labor in the RMG sector becomes the focus. The Bangladeshi government is encouraged to employ more labor inspectors with the expectation that workers will be more adequately covered across the nation. Improvements should also be made to DIFE in a way that assesses child labor-related risks at all worksites, including subcontracted facilities as well as the base settings. International buyers must familiarize themselves with organizations to conduct

regular unannounced monitoring. Also to foster “effective engagement with right holders– workers and their communities, including children, and other stakeholders, including suppliers, NGOs, and Trade Unions, to gather insights on modern slavery and child labor risk and to inform due diligence strategies” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 65). Suppliers have a critical job and that is to provide the most accurate and transparent reports of child labor risks. The priority should be focused towards “high-risk tiers of the supply chain by identifying suppliers involved in manual, labor intensive, or easily subcontracted processes” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 65). With all of this information, NGOs and Trade Unions should share these findings of child labor in all types of factories with brands and suppliers.

The third part of Kliuha et al. (2021) 's actionable items is more focused on a specific struggle child laborers face. That is the fair and equal enforcement of payment of living wages as well as overtime compensation. To begin this process, the Bangladeshi government would substantially raise the penalties for wage violations and withholding overtime payments. Also, more importantly, the government would establish a minimum wage requirement for child workers. This minimum wage should be set and readjusted should inflation occur. But also “minimum wages at a level that aligns with a living wage, that considers inflation, and the cost of living– e.g., food, sanitation, housing, clothing, commuting, etc., in production hubs like Dhaka and Chattogram” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 66). It has been realized that the enforcement of child labor policies is an area where the government of Bangladesh falls short. Where international buyers fall short is their unwillingness to increase prices that would contribute to workers earning a livable wage. This is exactly the space in which the literature suggests change on their front. Suppliers, however, should “guarantee timely payment and overtime pay for work beyond 8 hours”(Kliuha et al.,

2021, p. 66) and “avoid inflating targets that deny workers their overtime pay” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 66). The roles of the NGOs and Trade Unions in this step would be to lobby in favor of regularly scheduled wage reviews that address inflation, gender pay disparities, and the cost of living. More importantly, NGOs as well as Trade Unions should “Provide capacity building and training for workers on tracking and calculating overtime pay to increase their understanding of rights and entitlement” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 67). Educating the workers, especially children, helps combat their vulnerabilities as well as provides them with a voice to advocate for themselves.

The last step, Kliuha et al. (2021) point out, is the remediation and prevention of abusive/discriminatory working conditions. The governmental suggestion here has been brought up by many, and that is to enforce the laws that deal with abuse. Which, again, may seem simple, but this is an area where Bangladesh struggles greatly. To alleviate some investigating responsibilities, it is suggested that “workers have access to Independent reporting bodies and effective legal resources for abuses in the workplace” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 67). International buyers could improve greatly by conceptualizing “Factory inspections and corrected action plans with a focus on better working conditions for workers and capacity building to achieve stronger management systems for suppliers, rather than on punishment” (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 67). It is also important to point out that in this space, it should be on the international buyers to support climate-friendly projects and suppliers' factories. Climate impacts from the RMG industry are felt not only in Bangladesh but by the world, particularly heat stressors. The protection of the earth is just as important as the protection of the child laborer, as we cannot even facilitate human existence or factories should our earth be destroyed. To reinforce the policies suggested above, suppliers would

need to implement a zero-tolerance policy for things like abuse, harassment, and intimidation occurring in the workplace. In tandem with this, the implementation of gender-specific policies as well as adequate factory standards should be ensured. Suppliers ultimately should "Provide all workers with written contracts that list terms and conditions of work" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 68) to ensure transparency for the child workers and employers. Lastly, NGOs and Trade Unions are suggested to "Conduct campaigns to educate workers about legal working hours and overtime entitlements, resources available to them, and how to recognize and report abuse, especially for women workers" (Kliuha et al., 2021, p. 68).

Overall, these recommendations are a direct reflection of the research/findings previously discussed regarding the RMG sector of Bangladesh. It addresses issues from both sides of the coin by acknowledging market challenges yet maintaining that, at the end of the day, these workers are children. Similarly, as Child Rights Action Hub mentions, directives such as the CSDD imposed by the EU and the U.S. are pivotal towards the RMG sector becoming compliant. All in all, the emphasis on coordination from all aspects of the supply chain, as well as the government, reinforces the idea that to have real progress, all must be on board.

Concluding Thoughts

The RMG industry of Bangladesh is a living and breathing entity that gives life to the economic stability of the nation. This industry as a pillar of growth for Bangladesh, has not only established its relevance today but proves its necessity well into the future. Based on the literature reviewed the garment industry is well without its flaws.

One of its most glaring flaws is the pervasiveness of child labor that exists within its factories. We have explored the pervasiveness of child labor in the context of the RMG sector of Bangladesh specifically. According to the literature, it was concluded that child labor is most pervasive at the informal, mixed-contract, and subcontracted levels. This is not to negate its existence in the formal sector, where instances of child labor are documented. It is not as frequent. This is because of the informal factories' minimal oversight, weak law enforcement, and gaps in legal frameworks. As the literature points out, some of the most common infractions that factories commit include the denial of regular/overtime pay, exceeding set work hours, engagement in hazardous activities, and physical abuse. The contributing factors again include poverty, lack of decent working opportunities, as well as the general acceptance of child work in broader society. Children are at risk physically and mentally as they are sent to work unmonitored. As we have learned, this is not exclusive to Bangladesh, it is prevalent across the region of South Asia as well as pockets in the United States.

As such, the RMG Industry in Bangladesh is a very well-integrated part of people's lives here in the United States and across the world. So much so that if anyone were to look into a closet in almost any house in America, it would be fair to guess that several pieces of clothing came from a RMG factory in Bangladesh. Therefore, it would be incorrect to say that the issues that reside within the industry are completely irrelevant to us who live thousands of miles away. Today, we live in a world where influencers and public figures across all platforms rule our screens, but also tell us what our life should look like and what clothes we should wear. Brands like H&M, Zara, Lululemon, and Gap we see on screen, come out of these factories in Bangladesh. As a consumer, being aware of the struggles workers face could change the way a person buys their clothes. For instance, if a consumer knows of the unsafe working conditions of

a certain company, they may choose to support a more ethical one. This is not to say million-dollar businesses will cease to exist, but it could aid in better conditions for workers if the impact is significant enough. The better conditions would manifest themselves through policy change or better enforcement of already existing laws. Research leads to awareness, then to understanding. The next actionable item would be advocacy, which could further lead to policy change and the changing of an industry. So, as it seems, this research is a drop in the bucket when it comes to yielding actual change. However, it is a vital part of the process, which by and large makes it significant.

There are many other ways to join the fight against child labor besides policy change and educating yourself. For instance, you can "Contact retail stores, manufacturers, and importers. Kindly ask them questions about the origins of their products. Let them know you want to buy products that don't involve child labor and give them suggestions for ethical products and services they can offer instead." (Rakestraw, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, if you are a person with investments, ensuring that your money is supporting clothing companies with ethically sound supply chain practices bolsters support for those companies doing the right thing. Lastly, raising awareness among those around you surrounding the issues of child labor can make such a difference. By pledging against child labor, you are aiding in the betterment of the lives of children near and far. No matter how far the distance, every child deserves a childhood.

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