

The Rise of Fast Fashion and its Consequences on the Labor Force

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Abstract

The rise of the fast fashion industry in the past three decades has had a widespread impact on the global economy. This paper examines some of these consequences, focusing particularly on the impact of fast fashion on the labor force of developing countries. Previous research on the garment industry in developing countries has acknowledged some of the negatives of fast fashion production; however, few sources cover all the ways in which garment workers have been affected. This paper provides a comprehensive review of the impact that fast fashion has had on the wages, working conditions, and health outcomes of garment workers. By compiling data on these three categories, this paper aims to evaluate how widespread fast fashion's consequences have been in the garment industry. Research was conducted using a combination of statistical data and case study data. The resulting evidence suggests that fast fashion has created poor wage outcomes, intense and dangerous working conditions, and negative health consequences for garment workers. The results of this research are especially pertinent for policymakers, retailers, and consumers to consider: the model of fast fashion production has created injustice and exploitation in the labor force, and all three of these groups have the power to change how the fashion industry operates.

Today, fashion is cheaper and more accessible than ever. We can buy new clothing for just a few dollars at the click of a button, spending less on a new shirt than we might on a meal. Our options are endless: fast fashion brands like Shein, Zara, H&M, and Uniqlo add hundreds, if not thousands, of new styles to their websites every day. As a result, the fashion industry now makes up a huge part of the global economy: it is worth about \$1.3 trillion in retail sales per year. To put this number in perspective, the value of global retail sales is approximately equivalent to the combined GDPs of the 126 poorest countries in the world (Common Objective 2018).

The sheer size of the fashion industry, combined with its shockingly low prices, seemed too good to be true. How were retailers producing so much clothing? How were they profiting if prices were so low? I decided to do some research into the process of fast fashion production. The information I found suggested that I had been correct: fast fashion is, indeed, too good to be true. While Western consumers may not be paying high prices for their clothing, somebody somewhere is: garment workers. With the help of this preliminary investigation, I formed my research question: how has the rise of fast fashion impacted the labor force of developing countries?

I hypothesized that the rise of fast fashion had had a negative effect on the labor force of developing countries, which was based partially on the Marxist school of economics. In order to test this hypothesis, I looked at a number of studies on garment workers in developing countries and collected data on wages from the International Labor Organization and the Global Living Wage Coalition. I found a wide range of evidence generally supporting my hypothesis: fast fashion has created low wages, poor health outcomes, and dangerous working conditions for garment workers. The results of this research are pertinent to all consumers, especially within the United States. If our clothing is made in unethical conditions, it is time we reconsider the products we are consuming and the brands we are choosing to support. The implications of this research are discussed in greater depth later in this paper. For now, I will begin with an overview of the rise of fast fashion. I will then provide a literature review on the general factors affecting the labor force, as well as on the intersection between fast fashion and the labor force. Next, I will use the *Theory and Methodology* section to explain in greater detail how I conducted my

research, including the theory on which I based my hypothesis and the types of sources I used. The main body of the paper will consist of an analysis of the three main areas in which fast fashion has impacted garment workers: wages, working conditions, and health effects. Finally, in the *Policy Suggestions* section, I will provide possible ways forward regarding justice and accountability in the fashion industry.

Context

To examine the impact of fast fashion on garment workers, it is important to first understand the production process of fast fashion itself. In the following section, I will describe what constitutes fast fashion, explain why it has become so popular in the past two decades, and summarize the basic business model of fast fashion retailers. Additionally, I will provide insight into how garment production might evolve in the coming years.

Prior to the 1990s, most retailers produced standardized and classic apparel, partially due to the design restrictions of factories and partially because consumers were less trend-oriented (Bhardwaj 2010). Brands generally produced only a few lines per year—often a spring/summer line and a fall/winter line—and the period between the design and consumption of clothing was much longer. Retailers had to predict what designs might be popular months in advance. However, in the 1990s, this model of production changed rapidly. There were a few primary reasons for this change: first, the internet became open to the public in 1991, making clothing accessible and attractive through online shopping. At the same time, retailers in the US and UK began outsourcing production to developing countries, where production costs were vastly lower. As a result of lowered input prices, everyday brands were able to reproduce the designs of high fashion designers for low prices. Additionally, as prices dropped, trends became accessible to the average consumer, rather than just the elite. As shopping became easier and cheaper, retailers began to produce more and more lines each year to respond to increased consumer demand: Taplin (2014) states that brands shifted from producing 2-4 lines per year to having a new line every 4-6 weeks.

In the past three decades, clothing has become increasingly cheap and accessible as so many brands have switched to the quick-response model of production. Today, many of our most popular and trusted retailers can be classified as fast fashion, including Zara, Forever 21, Walmart, and American Apparel, H&M, Gap, Topshop, and UNIQLO (Lambert 2014; Zhenxiang and Lijie 2011). With so many brands producing clothing for less, inflation-adjusted clothing prices fell by 41% from 1993 to 2003, while the prices of other goods rose (Perry 2013). Meanwhile, clothing consumption doubled from 2000 to 2015, and the average number of times a garment was worn decreased by 36%. Today, the world produces 92 million tons of clothing and clothing-related waste per year (Mulhern 2022). This paper explores the consequences of this extreme level of fast fashion consumption: namely, the consequences on the labor force of developing countries.

Literature Review

In order to study the impact of fast fashion on the labor force of developing countries, it is important to first review the factors that might impact the labor force more generally. Scholars that have researched the labor force of developing countries tend to approach the subject through the following lenses: demographics, women's involvement, dependency on developed countries, policy interventions, quality of institutions, economic performance, labor market regulations, informal vs. formal sectors, and rural vs. urban populations.

Extensive work on the labor force has focused on socio-demographics. Factors such as education, age, wealth, and household characteristics have a significant impact on the labor force. Researchers including Lane, Hakim, and Miranda (1999), Brada, Marelli, and Signorelli (2014), Arora (2012), and Hussain, Mumtaz, Anwar, and Huang (2016), assert that better education generally increases labor force participation and average wages. Many women in developing countries are not as well educated as their male counterparts, which limits their participation in the labor force and drives their wages downwards (Hussain, Mumtaz, Anwar, and Huang 2016). Age is another major determinant of labor force participation. According to research done by the ILO (2013) and Brada, Marelli, and Signorelli (2014),

young people in developing countries lack employment opportunities, skills, and work experience, which in turn negatively affects their participation in the labor force. Furthermore, a lack of employment opportunities in developing countries can lead young people to emigrate to countries with greater job prospects (ILO 2014).

Among other important socio-demographic factors, scholars have also addressed wealth and household characteristics. Generally, wealthier individuals will garner higher wages than poorer individuals (Mohamed 2015). Extra money gives individuals the opportunity to invest in tools, materials, education, and training: these resources promote greater future returns and higher wages (Blattman, Fiala, and Martinez 2014). Household characteristics such as marital status, household size, dependency ratio, and gender of household head also seem to affect labor force participation. In one study of poverty in Pakistan, researchers Shaukat, Javed, and Imran (2020) found that larger households tended to have more money, as more individuals allowed for more working hands, which has ramifications for women, children as well as the overall economic well-being of the family.

The difference between urban and rural populations is another important socio-demographic factor to consider when discussing the labor force. Scholars agree that poverty rates tend to be significantly higher in rural areas of developing countries (Ferranti 2005, Hu 2002). In one study, researchers Shaukat, Javed, and Imran (2020) found that in Pakistan, 9% of the urban population lived in poverty while 57% of the rural population lived in poverty. In another study, Lagakos (2020) found that rural populations in India and Nigeria had higher infant mortality rates and more cases of malnutrition. Additionally, urban households were far more likely to have finished floors, electricity, and televisions than rural households. Thus, the urban labor force is generally better off than the rural labor force.

Another prolific approach in the literature centers on issues related to women's participation in the labor force. Many factors affect this participation ranging from education to structural and systemic factors specific to the country in question. Klasen (2019) notes that the historic economic structure of the country, gender barriers within the society, and the growth of jobs deemed appropriate for educated women all impact women's employment outcomes. Furthermore, Arora (2012) asserts that improving

women's access to healthcare can significantly improve their employment outcomes. Another lens through which scholars have examined the labor force is policy interventions, including social security and welfare. Generally, researchers have found that the lack of unemployment benefits in developing countries contributes to poor employment outcomes. Because workers cannot afford to stay unemployed while they search for a higher-quality job, they accept low-paying and even dangerous work out of necessity (Majid 2001). Subsequently, the ILO (2014) writes that strengthening social protections is a key part of economic development. Additionally, some studies show that a higher minimum wage is correlated with lower levels of poverty (Edwards and Lustig 1997).

However, scholars note that minimum wage policies affect formal and informal sector workers differently (Gindling 2018). Informal sector workers are not protected by social security benefits or minimum wage policies. (Canagarajah and Sethuraman 2001). Thus, implementing or raising the minimum wage might decrease formal sector employment, raise informal sector employment, and decrease informal sector wages (Jones 2016). This shift occurs because workers that are displaced from the formal sector often do not have the savings to hold out for formal sector employment. Therefore, more workers move to the informal sector; without a corresponding rise in demand for work in the informal sector, those wages are driven down. Because the informal sector is often large in developing countries, in many cases accounting for over half of developing nations' GDPs, minimum wage policies are not sufficient in addressing labor force poverty. (Pratap and Quintin 2006). Subsequently, scholars have examined other long-term, structural factors that influence labor force performance.

One of these factors is the quality of institutions in each developing country. Many scholars, including Le, Kim, and Lee (2016) as well as Aluko and Ibrahim (2020), assert that higher institutional quality can promote financial sector development. Sidek and Asutay (2021) note that government expenditures, in the presence of high-quality institutions, can promote economic growth via reduced corruption, reduction of political risks and good governance. Interestingly, some research hypothesizes that a well-developed financial sector can play the role of higher-quality institutions in promoting economic growth in developing countries (Aluko and Ibrahim 2020). Scholars also write that institutions

have an impact not only on economic growth, but also on the distribution of wealth. For example, researchers Amendola, Easaw, and Savoia (2013) found that increasing property rights protection increases income inequality, especially in low-democracy countries. However, they also found that some countries have developed institutions to counterbalance this effect. Similarly, Mohamed (2015) found that higher wages are associated with higher unionization rates, suggesting that workers' rights and economic equality are positively correlated. Therefore, the quality of a country's institutions has a profound effect on its economic performance, as institutions regulate the economy.

Above, I have discussed determinants of labor force success that depend on the country in question itself. Now, I will briefly discuss the labor force of developing countries in the context of the global economy. Trade liberalization is one way in which a developing country's interaction with the global economy can impact its labor force. For example, researchers Winters, McCulloch, and McKay (2004) assert that liberalizing trade in a given country is likely to alleviate poverty there in the long run. In one study, researchers Wacziarg and Welch (2008) found that countries that liberalized trade in the 1950-1998 period experienced an increase in average annual growth rates of about 1.5 percentage points. These countries also increased their investments and raised their trade to GDP ratios by about 5%. However, as Weisbrot and Baker (2003) note, trade liberalization can also displace agricultural workers and workers in other traditional sectors. Additionally, trade liberalization encourages developing countries to increase their reserve holdings in order to maintain currency stability in international financial markets: thus, they will not be able to invest this money in human or physical capital, which has significantly higher returns. Therefore, a country's foreign trade policies will significantly impact its economic development and labor force outcomes in complex and significant ways.

Another global factor that affects the labor force of developing countries is demand in developed countries. As Lane, Hakim, and Miranda (1999) explain, labor is a derived demand. The performance of the labor force depends largely on the demand for the product being manufactured. Subsequently, demand shocks in developed countries can have a significant effect on workers in developing countries. For example, the ILO (2022) and Sullivan (2022) discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic interrupted global

supply chains. When demand for manufactured goods decreased in developed countries such as the US and the EU, the labor force in developing countries was negatively impacted. Another way in which the labor force of developing countries is impacted by the economies of developed countries is through migrant remittances. Several scholars such as Dilip (2007), Giuliano and Ruiz-Arranz (2009), and Barajas, Chami, Fullenkamp, Gapen, and Montiel (2009) generally agree that remittances can help to alleviate poverty in recipients. There is much discussion on the effects of remittances on long-term growth, however, scholars agree that the success or failure of developed countries' economies will impact the size of remittances, and subsequently impact the labor force in developing countries.

Fast fashion's effect on the labor force of developing countries has been less extensively researched. However, scholars who have researched the subject tend to agree that the growth of the clothing export sector has lifted millions of people out of poverty in developing countries. Russel (2022) writes that countries who increased clothing exports to the EU in the first decade of the 21st century, such as Cambodia, Myanmar, and Bangladesh, saw significant declines in poverty. Specifically, Cambodia's poverty rate fell from 50% to 18% between 2003 and 2012. Similarly, Thomas (2019) and UNCTAD (2022) assert that the economies of least-developed countries (LDCs) are heavily dependent on the clothing industry. In Bangladesh, for example, the clothing sector employs about 4.5 million people and accounts for 20% of total GDP (Thomas 2019). In Morocco, a 10% increase in clothing exports led to a 5% increase in employment (Lane, Hakim, and Miranda 1999). Cambodia has experienced an average economic growth rate of 7% per year for the last decade, largely thanks to their clothing export sector (Russell 2022). Clearly, growth of the fast fashion industry has stimulated the economies of many developing countries, in many cases leading to a rise in GDP and a reduction in unemployment rates. However, the expansion of the clothing export sector has not been all positive. While economists have determined that growth in the clothing export sector has benefitted many developing economies, they have paid less attention to the sector's impact on individual workers. Some research acknowledges the poor working conditions or frequent accidents in garment factories; however, there are very few comprehensive reports on the experiences of garment workers in developing countries. In this paper, I

will address this gap in the field by compiling and analyzing data on garment workers' working conditions, wages, and health from the 1990s to the present in order to assess fast fashion's impact on the labor force of developing countries.

Theory and Methodology

In this paper, I argue that fast fashion has had a negative impact on the labor force of developing countries by perpetuating low wages, arduous and dangerous working conditions, and poor health outcomes for garment workers. This hypothesis is supported by capitalist economic theory, which states that profit-seeking companies will pursue the lowest-cost methods of production (Lambert 2014). This theory applies to the structure of fast fashion: suppliers need to keep costs of production low in order to remain competitive in the industry, so costs are often cut in unethical and dangerous ways. Suppliers in the garment industry are known to pay low wages, force overtime, and eliminate safety measures, all for the sake of profit (Prentice, De Neve, Mezzadri, and Ruwanpura 2018; Hearson 2009; Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar 2016).

In order to assess the impact that fast fashion has had on the labor force of developing countries, I compiled and analyzed research from a variety of sources. Primarily, I reviewed direct studies and surveys of garment workers, and extracted wage statistics from the International Labor Organization and the Global Living Wage Coalition. A breakdown of the research methods used for each section is as follows:

In order to evaluate fast fashion's impact on wages, I compared data on the living wages, minimum wages, and average wages for garment workers in various regions. Additionally, I reviewed statistics of minimum wage compliance rates in different countries. This data was taken from the ILO, the Global Living Wage Coalition, and a study by Huynh (2017). Next, I examined the relationship between fast fashion and working conditions of garment workers. For this section, I reviewed studies on the working conditions of garment workers, the most useful of which included an overview of accidents in garment factories from 1990 to 2013 by Islam (2014), and a study of global value chains in Asia by

Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar (2016). Finally, I studied the impact of fast fashion on the health of garment workers. This section features more prominently data from Paul-Majumder (1996) on the health of garment workers before and after entering the industry, as well as research by Turnberg (2021) on some of the major long-term illnesses common in garment workers.

Analysis

Wages

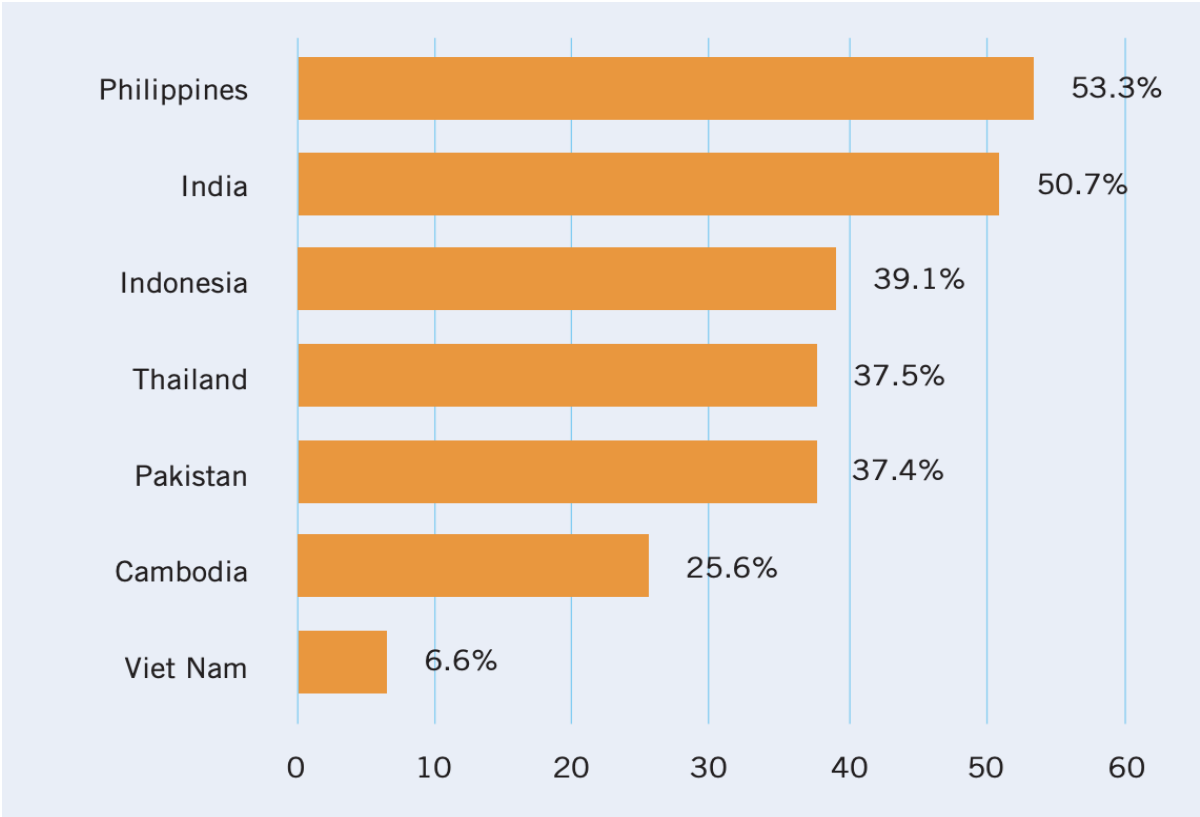
The aim of this paper is to examine the impact that the fast fashion industry has had on the labor force of developing countries. I argue that fast fashion has negatively impacted garment workers in developing countries. In this section, I will focus specifically on how fast fashion has affected the wages of garment workers. The bulk of evidence suggests that fast fashion has had three main effects on wages: it has put downward pressure on wages in some countries, promoted low rates of minimum wage compliance, and entrenched the large discrepancy between the minimum wage and living wage for many garment workers. While it is difficult to prove causation, the correlation between the rise of fast fashion and these stated effects on wages suggests that fast fashion has negatively impacted the wages of garment workers in developing countries.

The rise of fast fashion began in the 1990s; therefore, in this section I will examine trends in the wages of garment workers from the early 1990s to the present. Namely, I will track the relative growth of garment workers' wages as compared to growth in wages of workers in other sectors and track the changes in purchasing power of those wages. Additionally, this section will detail the discrepancies between living wages and average wages of garment workers, as well as examine low rates of minimum wage compliance, and suggest that fast fashion is partially to blame for these wage trends. Generally, this section will provide evidence to suggest that fast fashion negatively impacts the earnings of garment workers.

This section will begin with a short examination of minimum wage compliance rates. Numerous studies have revealed that many garment workers make less than the minimum wage. According to the

ILO (2016), “More than an estimated half of garment wage earners in India and the Philippines are not paid the minimum wage. Likewise, in Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand nearly two in five salaried workers earn less than the minimum level.” These minimum wage noncompliance rates are illustrated in Figure 1, entitled *Minimum Wage Non-Compliance Rates in the Garment Sector*. As fast fashion retailers are responsible for employing many workers in the garment sector of developing countries, they are partially to blame for these low rates of compliance. These low non-compliance rates suggest that fast fashion creates poor wage outcomes for workers.

Figure 1: Minimum Wage Non-Compliance Rates in the Garment Sector



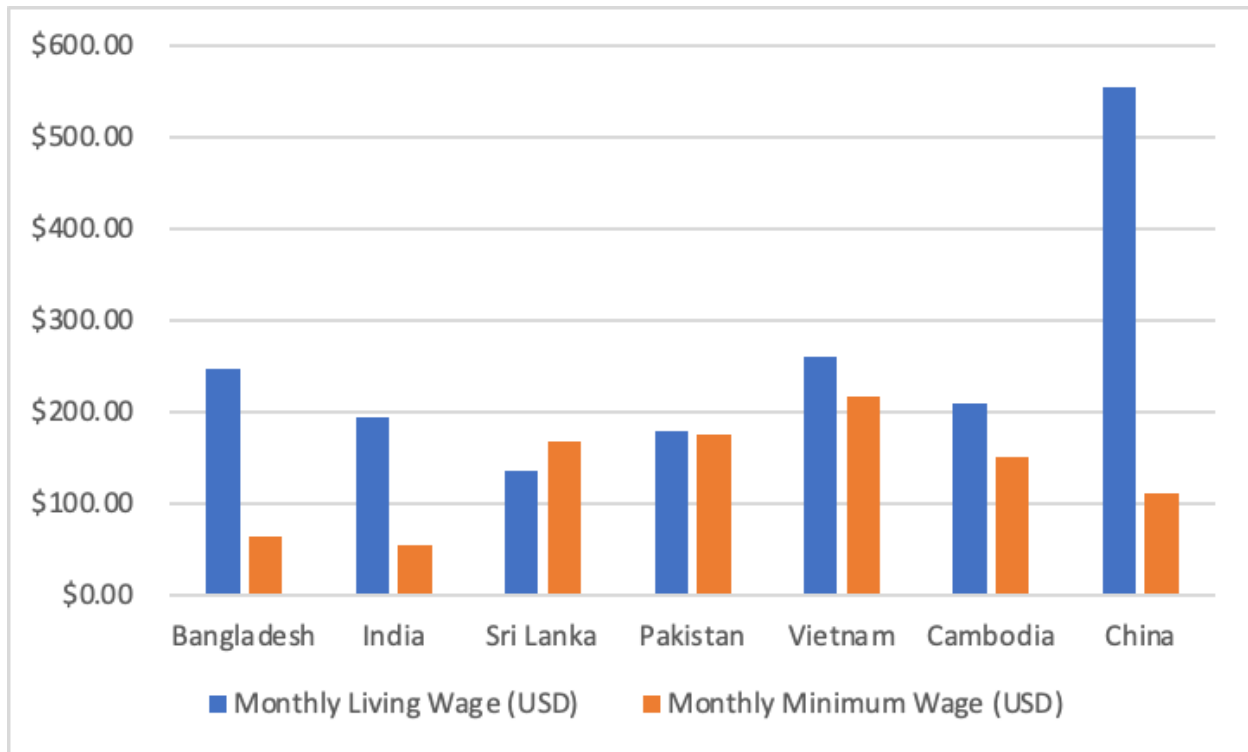
Source: Huynh, Phu. “Developing Asia’s Garment and Footwear Industry: Recent Employment and Wage Trends,” n.d., 4.

However, garment workers often do earn the minimum wage. As a result of increasing pressure from the public to clean up their supply chains, many retailers have signed on to initiatives or codes of

conduct that would better regulate their suppliers. However, while many of these codes of conduct enforce manufacturers' compliance with minimum wage laws, many agreements don't mandate that workers earn a living wage (Hearson 2009). In this section, I will compare the living wages and average wages of garment workers in top clothing-exporting low-income countries in order to illustrate the insufficiency of minimum wage compliance.

First, it is important to distinguish between a minimum wage and a living wage. A minimum wage is the wage floor a particular government sets for workers' earnings. A living wage is the minimum amount a person in a given area needs to sustain themselves, and accounts for basics such as food and shelter. While some garment workers globally earn pay at or above the minimum wage, very few of them make anywhere near the living wage for their region. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign (2020), about 93% of retail brands are not paying their workers a living wage. This is partially because minimum wage rates are often set far too low. According to research by Hearson, 2009, the living wage in Thailand in 2006 was estimated to be 8,000 baht (\$162.54) per month. In contrast, the minimum wage ranged from 148 baht (\$3.05) per day in some rural areas to 203 baht (\$4.06) per day in Bangkok. Calculated using the higher wage, this equates to a monthly wage of 4,500 baht (\$91.43) (Hearson 2009). Thus, garment workers in Thailand made well below the living wage, even if their employers were in full compliance with minimum wage laws. The discrepancy between minimum wages and living wages is widespread. As the chart *Minimum Wage vs. Living Wage, by Country*, presented in Figure 2 illustrates, the top garment-exporting low-income countries (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Vietnam, Cambodia, and China) nearly all have minimum wages that are significantly lower than the estimated living wages. Therefore, even if retailers enforce minimum wage compliance, they are doing little to ensure that garment workers actually earn a proper living. Much of the clothing that comes out of low-income countries goes to fast fashion brands, so it is these brands that are partially responsible for these unlivable wages, as will be discussed later in this section.

Figure 2: Minimum Wage vs. Living Wage, by Country

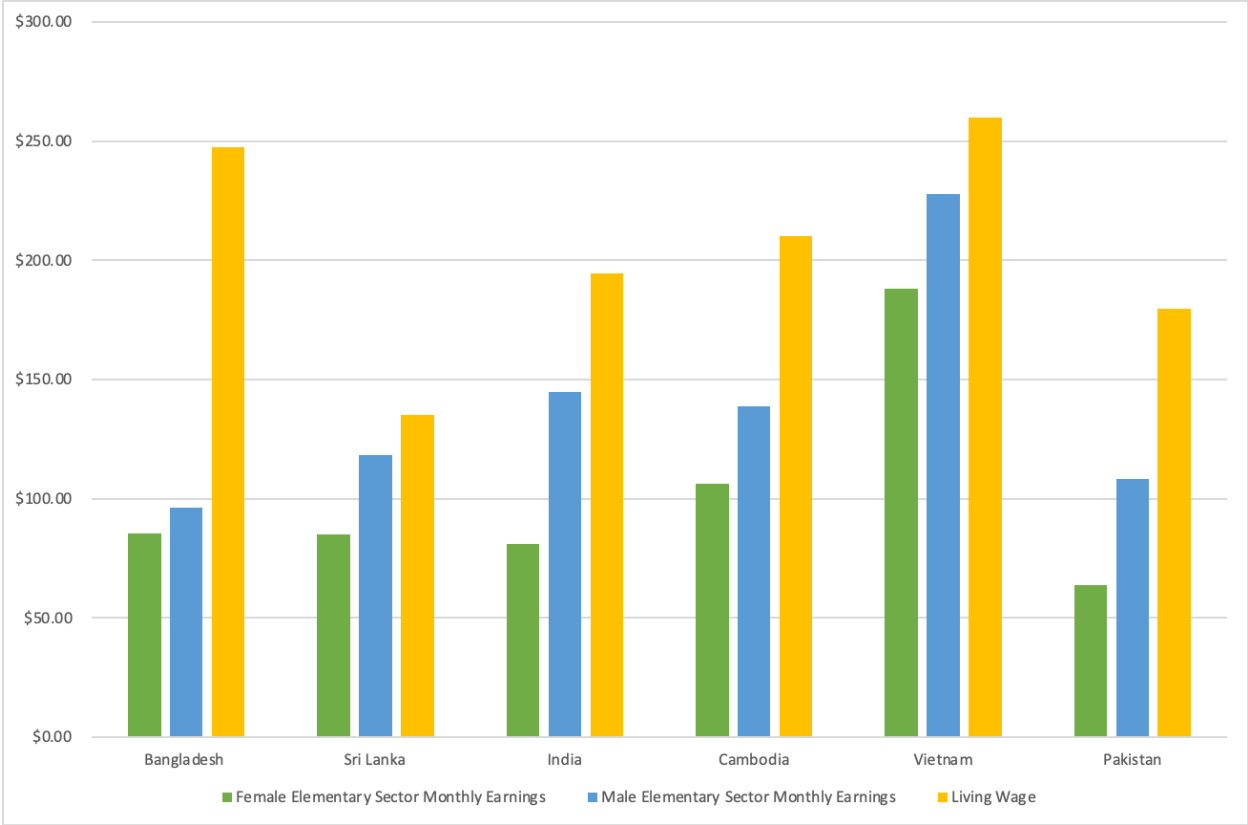


Source: Minimum wage rates were taken from the ILO (2019) https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_762534.pdf. Note that these minimum wage rates are general and not specific to the garment industry, except for that of Cambodia. Living wage rates were taken from the Global Living Wage Coalition <https://www.globallivingwage.org/>. Each country's rate, as conveyed above, is an average of every living wage estimate provided for a region in that country. Note that the living wage can vary significantly between regions, especially urban and rural areas.

Often, the actual wages of garment workers are above the set minimum wage. However, in the vast majority of cases, the average wage of garment workers in a developing country still falls below the living wage. For example, in Bangalore, the 2006 'bare minimum' wage calculated by labor rights groups was 4364 rupees (€65.50). In contrast, the average garment worker there earned about 2418 rupees (€36) per month (Hearson 2009). This trend exists in most garment-exporting low-income countries: garment workers, on average, earn far less than the living wage. Female workers are especially harmed by these low wage rates, as they earn less than their male counterparts to begin with. As the chart *Figure 3: Living Wage vs. Average Monthly Wage of Workers in the Elementary Sector* illustrates, there is a significant gap between the living wage and the average wage for male workers, and an even larger gap between the

living wage and the average wage for female workers. Thus, even if retailers ensure that garment workers are paid above the minimum wage, those workers may not be earning a living wage. Many clothing exports go to fast fashion retailers; therefore, it is clear that garment workers supplying fast fashion retailers are largely undercompensated.

Figure 3: Living Wage vs. Average Monthly Wage of Workers in the Elementary Sector



Source: Living wage estimates taken from the Global Living Wage Coalition <https://www.globallivingwage.org/>. Average monthly wage estimates taken from ILOSTAT, using the latest available year https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer16/?lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EAR_4MTH_SEX_OC.

One reason for the minimum wage falling so far below the living wage is that governments fail to raise it for long periods of time, meaning inflation can steadily decrease the real value of a worker’s income. For example, the minimum wage in Bangladesh did not change at all between 1994 and 2006. In that time, the real value of wages was cut in half due to inflation. When the minimum wage was finally

raised in 2006, its real value was still below what it had been in 1994 (Hearson). Additionally, some governments want to maintain the competitive advantage that a low minimum wage permits. In Bangladesh, the garment industry had the lowest sectoral minimum wage in the country when measured by researchers in both 1985 and 1994 (Zohir 2001). By raising the minimum wage, countries risk losing out on large export gains. So, again, retailers cannot rely on minimum wage laws to set an adequate standard of pay for workers.

Thus far, this section has examined the low rates of minimum wage compliance, as well as the general discrepancy between minimum wages and living wages globally. These statistics suggest that garment workers in developing countries have insufficient earnings. Because fast fashion retailers employ many of these garment workers, the stated evidence indicates that fast fashion creates poor wage outcomes for workers in developing countries. Now, I will present evidence that links the rise of fast fashion to a depression of garment workers' real wages in several developing countries

The data on wages in the garment sector from the 1990s to the present is limited; however, it seems that garment workers in many developing countries have seen a decline in real wages since the rise of fast fashion. While this data is not enough to generalize about wages in all developing countries with large fast fashion industries, it sheds some light on the realities of fast fashion and its potential negative effects on wages.

Research conducted by the Center for American Progress (2013) studied wages in low-income garment-exporting countries from 2001 to 2011. Researchers found that wages for garment workers fell in real terms during this period in the following countries: Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Philippines, Thailand, Mexico, Cambodia, Bangladesh, Honduras, and El Salvador. Five of these countries are in the top ten garment exporting countries to the United States: Bangladesh, Mexico, Honduras, Cambodia, and El Salvador. In these countries, wages fell in real terms by an average of 14.6% between 2001 and 2011. The largest declines in wages occurred in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Cambodia, where wages for garment workers fell in real terms by 28.9%, 23.74%, and 19.2% respectively. In Bangladesh, the reduction in garment workers' wages was smaller at 2.37% over the course of the decade, but still

significant considering the country's stance as a top garment exporter to the United States. In the Philippines and Thailand, wages of garment workers fell by about 6%; in Honduras by 8.76%; El Salvador by 11.5%; and in Guatemala by about 13%. According to the Center for American Progress (2013), this general decline in wages from 2001 to 2011 has only widened the gap between prevailing wages and living wages. As a large part of the rise of fast fashion took place in this time period, it seems that fast fashion is correlated with a decline in real wages in many developing countries.

Working Conditions

So far, I have provided evidence to suggest that the fast fashion industry has created poor wage outcomes for garment workers in developing countries. However, low earnings are not the only consequence of fast fashion that garment workers face. Many garment workers are subject to poor and often dangerous working conditions, including excessive working hours, locked fire exits, and structurally unsound buildings. In this section, I will discuss the arduous and dangerous working conditions that garment workers face and highlight several major garment-factory disasters. Additionally, I will explain why the compliance standards that some fast fashion retailers have committed to are insufficient in ensuring worker safety.

Excessive hours for garment workers are widely regarded as a hallmark of the fast fashion industry (Prentice, De Neve, Mezzadri, and Ruwanpura 2018). The shortened design-to-retail cycle that characterizes fast fashion puts pressure on garment workers to finish garments at a faster pace, which leads to forced overtime, overworking, and very little allowance for sick days or time off (Hearson 2009; Taplin 2014; Paul-Majumder 1996). One study estimated that garment workers in Bangladesh work an average of 11.21 hours per day, 26.1 days per month (Sikdar, Sarkar, and Sadeka 2014). Still, the intensity of garment manufacturing goes beyond the intense hours. Many garment workers risk their safety, and even their lives, every day just by going to work. According to the Common Objective (2018), 1.4 million injuries occur annually in garment factories, equating to about 5.6 injuries per 100 workers. In

the past decade, several major accidents have occurred in garment factories that supply fast fashion brands.

In 2012, the Tazreen Fashion factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh caught fire, killing at least 112 and injuring hundreds. The fire originated in a room where flammable materials were being illegally stored. As it moved throughout the building, many workers were prohibited from exiting the building by managers, who wanted workers to continue completing orders. Others were unable to escape due to blocked off staircases or iron grills on windows. The building lacked a sprinkler system, an outdoor fire escape, and a proper escape plan. Furthermore, the fire extinguishers in the building were not used, suggesting a lack of emergency training for workers (Manik and Yardley 2012).

Unfortunately, the lack of safety protocols that caused and exacerbated this accident are not uncommon. In 2010, 21 workers died in a garment factory fire in Gazipur, Bangladesh. The workers suffocated to death as a result of the building's poor ventilation system, lack of emergency lighting, deadbolted exits, blocked stairwells, and unauthorized sheet metal storage structures preventing roof access. Again, security guards had not been trained in operating fire extinguishers or fire hydrants. Though another fire had occurred in the garment factory six months prior, no additional safety precautions had been implemented (Islam 2014).

In 2013, another garment factory in Dhaka collapsed, killing 1,134 workers inside. This tragedy, known as the Rana Plaza collapse, was a result of the eight-story building's unsound structure. The top four floors of the building had been constructed illegally, and the foundation of the building was unstable. The day prior to the accident, employees had evacuated the building after hearing noises that sounded like explosions and seeing cracks in the walls. Still, managers told employees that the building was safe, and asked workers to return the next day despite orders from the police to temporarily suspend production. Employees came to work in fear that they would not be paid otherwise: one woman who worked at the factory said that "the authorities deduct salaries for three days if we don't work a single day" (Islam 2014). Another man claimed that "the factory management threatened the workers that their month's

salary would not be paid if they did not show up at work” (Islam 2014). Again, this accident was at least partially preventable, and occurred because of unsafe working conditions and a lack of workers’ rights.

The list of garment factory accidents goes on, as illustrated in *Figure 4* below: *Major Accidents in Garment Factories, 1990-2013*. The most common causes of the disasters listed below include unsound building design, poor ventilation and lighting, blocked escape routes, improper wiring and electrical design, unauthorized storage of flammable materials, electrical overloads, and a lack of safety training for workers. Clearly, workers who produce for fast fashion brands are subject to very dangerous conditions on a regular basis. In other words, it seems that fast fashion can very negatively impact the lives of garment workers in developing countries.

Figure 4: Major Accidents in Garment Factories, 1990-2013

Year	Garment	Died
1990	Saraka Garments, Dhaka	32
1995	Lusaka Garments, Dhaka	22
1996	PallabiSuntex Ltd	14
1996	Tahidul Garments	14
1997	Shanghai Apparels, Dhaka	24
1997	Rahman & Rahman Apparels, Dhaka	22
1997	Tamanna Garments	27
1997	Jahanara Fashion, Narayanganj	20
2000	Macro Sweater, Dhaka	23
2000	Globe Knitting, Dhaka	12
2000	Chowdhury Knitwear and Garment Factory, Dhaka	48
2001	Kafrul Capital Garments	26
2004	Chowdhury Knitwear, Narsingdi	23
2005	Shan Knitting, Narayanganj	23
2005	Spectrum Garments, Dhaka	80
2006	KTS Garments, Chittagong	62
2006	Phoenix Textile Mills, Dhaka	21
2010	Ha-Meem Clothing Factory, Dhaka	29
2010	Garib&Garib Sweater Factory,Dhaka	21
2012	Tazneen Fashion, Dhaka	113
2013	Rana Plaza Tragedy	1132

Source: Islam, “The Political Economy of Industrial Accidents in Readymade Garments Factory in Bangladesh.”

So far, I have summarized the most common poor working conditions that garment workers face and illustrated how frequent and preventable many garment factory accidents are. Now, I will explain why fast fashion brands implementing standards of labor compliance are often insufficient in protecting garment workers. The dangerous working conditions of garment workers have become more widely known in recent years, especially following disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 and the Tazreen factory fire in 2012. As a result, many retailers have begun to monitor labor regulation compliance more closely. However, although standards of compliance have risen in the past few years, poor working conditions have persisted in many garment factories. In one survey of garment factories, only 50-100 suppliers out of 5,000 were thought to have very high levels of compliance (Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar 2016). A primary reason for this is the separation between tier 1, 2, and 3 firms. While tier 1 firms receive orders directly from retailers, tier 2 and 3 firms usually subcontract orders through a tier 1 firm. Retailers do not work directly with tier 2 or 3 firms; thus, these firms generally fall out of retailers' 'compliance nets' (Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar 2016). In other words, tier 2 and 3 firms are usually not subject to the audits or inspections that tier 1 firms might face. According to Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar (2016), tier 1 firms comprise only 20% of total garment firms. Therefore, retailers that audit only their direct suppliers overlook a large portion of garment workers. So, even if fast fashion retailers claim to have strong codes of safety compliance, they may still be employing many garment workers who are exposed to unsafe working conditions.

Researchers have found substantial evidence to support the claim that garment workers in subcontracting firms may continue to face poor conditions. In a 2008 survey, 16.7% of workers in subcontracting (tier 2) firms reported accidents resulting from poor electrical systems. They also reported that the subcontracting firms locked emergency exits. In contrast, between zero and 4.5% of workers (depending on the location) in directly contracted firms reported the occurrence of such accidents (Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar 2016). Another study of 10 garment firms, 5 who were compliant with labor regulations and 5 who were non-compliant, found that the compliant firms usually received direct orders and the non-compliant firms usually subcontracted orders. The firms receiving direct orders also usually

got better prices from buyers Nathan, Tewari, and Sarkar 2016). These findings suggest that workers in subcontracting garment firms are still exposed to relatively poor working conditions. The structure of fast fashion encourages this structure of contracting and subcontracting, as the competition between firms for orders keeps prices low. Thus, the structure of the typical fast fashion supply chain promotes non-compliance with proper labor standards, as indirect suppliers are not audited or regulated sufficiently.

Health Impacts

I have so far discussed the poor wage outcomes and dangerous working conditions that garment workers face as a result of fast fashion. However, the risks that fast fashion creates for workers can be even more long term. In the following section, I will provide evidence that demonstrates a strong correlation between work in the garment industry and significant health consequences, particularly for women. Furthermore, I will explain how these health consequences are related to fast fashion practices specifically.

Research indicates that garment workers face serious health risks as a consequence of their employment. In one study by Paul-Majumder (1996), 54% of garment workers surveyed in Bangladesh reported having healthy lifestyles prior to entering the garment industry, a number that was reduced to just 12% after workers entered the industry. The most common ailments faced by garment workers were coughs, colds, fevers, and weakness. Before beginning work in the garment industry, only 9.2% of women reported having a cough, cold, or fever 'often.' After entering the industry, 38.7% of women reported feeling these symptoms often. For men, these percentages were similar: 7.8% prior to entering the industry, and 28.6% after entering the industry. Similarly, the number of workers that reported experiencing weakness 'often' rose from 3.5% to 23.7% in men, and 7.4% to 45% in women. As illustrated in *Figure 5 below, Illness Patterns Among Garment Workers Before and After Joining the Garment Industry*, workers experienced increases in several other ailments after entering the garment industry. This overall increase in instances of illness suggests that work in the garment industry has a negative effect on worker health.

These high rates of illness after entering work in the garment industry are likely attributable to a few factors, including long hours, few days off, low food intake, and poor working conditions. Numerous studies show that fast fashion has increased working hours and decreased working conditions, as discussed previously (Taplin 2014). The types of materials used during garment manufacturing can also impact worker health. According to Bick, Halsey, and Ekenga (2018), 90% of clothing sold in the United States is made of cotton or polyester, materials which pose serious health risks to those producing the clothing. Thus, it seems that fast fashion has negatively affected the labor force of developing countries in terms of health.

Figure 5: Illness Patterns Among Garment Workers Before and After Joining the Garment Industry

Incidence of Illness	(percentages of total workers)							
	Extent of experiencing illness							
	Male				Female			
	Often	Some-times	Very Rarely	All Workers*	Often	Some-times	Very Rarely	All Workers*
Before Employment								
Eye trouble	1.5	4.9	93.6	100.0	1.1	4.4	94.6	100.0
Cough, cold and fever	7.8	33.4	58.8	100.0	9.2	31.7	59.1	100.0
Headache	2.5	15.7	81.8	100.0	3.4	20.2	76.4	100.0
Weakness	3.5	15.8	80.7	100.0	7.4	13.7	81.9	100.0
Jaundice	-	6.5	90.6	100.0	-	4.9	95.1	100.0
Stomach upset/diarrhoea	3.8	10.3	85.9	100.0	3.7	12.2	84.1	100.0
Urinary infection	-	-	100.0	100.0	-	-	100.0	100.0
Others	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
After Employment								
Eye trouble	16.3	26.4	55.2	100.0	20.4	33.5	46.1	100.0
Cough, cold and fever	28.6	44.9	26.5	100.0	38.7	42.3	19.0	100.0
Headache	26.1	36.3	37.6	100.0	42.2	35.0	22.8	100.0
Weakness	23.7	42.0	34.3	100.0	45.0	29.3	25.6	100.0
Jaundice	12.3	11.2	76.5	100.0	11.7	11.3	77.0	100.0
Stomach upset/diarrhoea	9.0	23.3	67.7	100.0	10.5	20.9	68.6	100.0
Urinary infection	6.9	10.2	82.9	100.0	11.7	13.4	74.9	100.0
Others	-	11.0	89.0	100.0	-	11.0	89.0	100.0

* Regarding diseases before employment, 41 male and 66 female workers did not respond. Therefore, in the case of diseases before employment, percentages are calculated on the basis of total 204 male and 366 female workers, respectively. However, regarding diseases after employment, all workers responded. Therefore, in the case of diseases after employment, percentages are calculated on the basis of total 245 male and 426 female workers, respectively.

Source: Paul-Majumder, Pratima. "Health Impact of Women's Wage Employment: A Case Study of the Garment Industry of Bangladesh." *The Bangladesh Development Studies* 24, no. 1/2 (1996): 59–102. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40795546>.

Further research by Turnberg (2021) indicates that work in the garment sector can also increase the likelihood of several severe and long-term illnesses. One such illness is bladder cancer: a 2007 study

of Spanish textile workers showed a significant jump in rates of bladder cancer for certain types of textile workers. For workers in winding, warping, and sizing positions, the chances of developing bladder cancer were over four times higher than those of a person not exposed to textile manufacturing (Turnberg 2021). Another study found that work in textile manufacturing is correlated with asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, a term used to classify diseases causing airflow blockage and breathing problems. In this study, 13 textile workers had their FEV₁ measured, which shows the amount of air one can expel from their lungs. 12 out of 13 workers were found to have an FEV₁ ranging from 17-58%—a healthy range is 80-120% (Turnberg 2021). Thus, work in textile manufacturing seems to be correlated with serious risks to worker health.

Health consequences as a result of work in the garment industry seem to disproportionately impact women. This discrepancy can be attributed to a multitude of factors, including the lower-quality employment, household responsibilities, and lower food intake of women. According to Paul-Majumder (1996), a higher percentage of women are employed in lower-down positions, such as those of operator or helper, than men. Specifically, in Bangladesh, 45% of female garment workers were operators and 42% were helpers, while only 26% of male workers held either job. These jobs can be physically demanding: operators often have to remain seated for over 12 hours with only a 45-minute lunch break, while helpers stand and move between operators for the same length of time. In both positions, workers end up inhaling toxic substances, dust, and small particles of fiber. Conversely, men tend to occupy higher-up positions such as quality control: this safer job employed 27% of male workers and only 8% of female workers. Another reason for poorer health outcomes for female garment workers could be the entrenchment of traditional gender roles in many countries. According to Paul-Majumder (1996), many of these low-income, top exporting countries have societal norms dictating that women are the last to eat. Women, as a result, often have less to eat than men in their households, especially in cases of food insecurity. Additionally, women generally have less time to sleep, as they have to perform more domestic work than men. Men who work 12 hours per day spend about 20 minutes doing domestic chores, whereas women who work the same amount spend an average of 90 minutes doing domestic chores (Paul-Majumder

1996). With less sleep and less food, it follows that women suffer disproportionately from the health risks perpetuated by fast fashion.

Children are also especially at risk in fast fashion production. Lambert (2014) reports that although child labor below a certain age and above a certain number of hours has been outlawed domestically and internationally, these laws are often unenforced. Children in the garment industry are often abused by managers, and their wages are even lower than those of their adult coworkers (Lambert 2014). When a British film crew went undercover in a Bangladeshi garment factory in 2014, they found “children as young as thirteen working ‘up to eleven hour days in appalling conditions,’” as well as managers abusing young women for working too slowly (Lambert 2014). In addition to suffering mistreatment in factories, children who work in the garment industry usually lack a proper education, which holds them back from finding higher-quality work later on in life (Lambert 2014). Thus, fast fashion can harm the lives and futures of children in developing countries.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the evidence provided in this paper, it is clear that the fast fashion industry has exploited garment workers by allowing low wages, dangerous working conditions, and poor health outcomes. However, while various government agencies, labor rights organizations, and even retailers have made efforts to remedy these injustices, the situation of garment workers remains grim. The difficulty in improving conditions in the garment industry is the result of a few factors. First, the supply chain is long and murky, with subcontracting allowing suppliers to fall outside ‘nets of compliance,’ as discussed in the section *Working Conditions*. Second, the constant turnover of designs in fast fashion means that retailers and suppliers have short-term contracts with fluctuating prices, rather than long-term, stable contracts. As a result, suppliers are constantly competing with one another to secure contracts, causing cost-cutting. Third, the governments of the countries in which such labor injustices occur often have little motivation to regulate the market. If costs of production rise, retailers might take their business

elsewhere, which could harm the given country's economy. Therefore, governments often turn a blind eye to these low wages and dangerous working environments.

Still, the situation is not hopeless: there are a few strategies that might be employed to improve the conditions of garment workers in developing countries. One such strategy could be requiring retailers to sign long-term contracts with specific suppliers, which would prevent retailers from switching suppliers if costs of production rose. A long-term contract would give suppliers the opportunity to improve wages and working conditions without the fear of losing business due to rising costs. In order to prevent retailers from changing suppliers when contracts were renewed, additionally regulations would need to be instituted. For example, government regulations could require retailers to perform individual cost analyses for orders. Retailers would be required to pay suppliers, at minimum, the estimated amount an order would cost to complete. This estimate would factor in living wage amounts and overtime time constraints, and ideally help to enforce better working conditions and pay.

Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have presented evidence suggesting that the garment workers who produce for fast fashion retailers receive low wages, endure dangerous working conditions, and are at an increased risk for certain health consequences. These findings are relevant for a variety of groups to consider, including government agencies, retailers, and consumers. With the knowledge that garment workers are often underpaid and overworked, governments should consider the laws regulating the industry, and determine where there are holes and opportunities for reform. Retailers should recognize how their quick models of production, as well as their short-lived contracts, create unethical working conditions. Finally, consumers should begin to question where their garments are really coming from, the work that their retailers are doing to prevent injustice in the industry, and their individual shopping habits.

This paper provides an updated and comprehensive take on the injustices that garment workers experience in developing countries. There are several limitations to the research provided in this paper. First, the data provided on wages is limited, as many workers are not paid 'by the book' and much of the

work is informal. A more extensive analysis on how wages in the garment sector have changed in comparison to wages more generally would be helpful. Another limitation of this paper is that it doesn't focus specifically on a certain country. While certain countries are highlighted and researched more extensively, it is difficult to apply the research conducted to any one region. Finally, this paper did not delve into how changing consumption habits might impact garment workers. Ideally, retailers would absorb any lost costs; however, a more in-depth analysis would be required to evaluate where the actual costs burden would fall.

Further research on this topic might examine how a reliance on garment exporting has shaped the economies of developing countries. Some academics argue that the garment industry has made developing countries overly reliant on trade and has stunted diversification of local economies; both of these arguments are worth exploring. Shifting from the supply side to the demand side, further research could examine the buying habits of consumers. Are consumers spending more money as a result of fast fashion, despite the apparently low prices of clothing, due to shorter clothing life cycles? How much do consumers care about the origins of their clothing? The answers to these questions might provide insight into how consumers can learn to decrease consumption.

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