

**NARRATIVE  
NONFICTION**  
reads like fiction—  
but it's all true

# Why Are Your Clothes So Cheap?

## ASK THESE KIDS

THE SHOCKING TRUTH  
ABOUT THE LIVES OF  
THE MEN, WOMEN, AND  
CHILDREN WHO MAKE  
OUR CLOTHING

BY KRISTIN LEWIS AND GINI SIKES



**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

What is life like for garment workers?



ANDREW HOLBROOKE/CORBIS (TOP LEFT), BOTTOM LEFT); MARK NONKES/WORLD VISION INTERNATIONAL (TOP RIGHT); DIETER TELEMANS/PANOS PICTURES (MIDDLE); LARRY TONWELL/MAGNUM PHOTOS (MIDDLE RIGHT); GMB AKASH (BOTTOM MIDDLE); MAJORITY WORLD/OIG/GETTY IMAGES (BOTTOM RIGHT)



**H**unched over her sewing machine in a noisy clothing factory in the country of Bangladesh, 14-year-old Kalpona Akter struggled to keep her eyes open. The bright-pink fabric beneath her hands would eventually become a tank top. Kalpona had never worn a tank top—or any of the clothes she sewed. She dressed in a loose tunic, called a chemise, over pants, with a long scarf draped over her dark hair.

Kalpona imagined the top she was sewing being worn by an American girl, maybe a teenager like herself. It was the 83rd shirt she had stitched in the past hour. She was exhausted, but she tried to stay focused—one wrong move and the needle could slice through her finger. If she cried out, her boss would punish her.

Suddenly, over the monotonous whir of sewing machines, she heard a man's voice shout out.

"The top floor is on fire!"

The room filled with blinding black smoke, burning Kalpona's throat. Panic erupted as people rushed to find a way out. All Kalpona could hear were screams.

## Who Makes Your Clothes?

From the steaming wetlands of Bangladesh to the arid cities of Pakistan, there are millions of men, women, and children just like Kalpona, working in dangerous

➔ **IT HAPPENED HERE TOO**  
A century ago, millions of American children held full-time jobs. Many, like this young girl in 1909, worked in dangerous factories. Accidents were common, especially the severing of fingers. It wasn't until the 1930s that child labor started to be outlawed in the United States.

factories, sewing the clothes you wear. They are crowded into sweltering warehouses in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, stitching zippers onto jeans. They are cobbling sneakers in hazy, smog-filled Chinese cities. They are cranking out T-shirts in India. They are stitching the leggings you wear on weekends, the fleece jacket you wear to basketball practice, the top you are wearing right now.

When we think about where our clothes come from, we tend to think of the stores where we bought

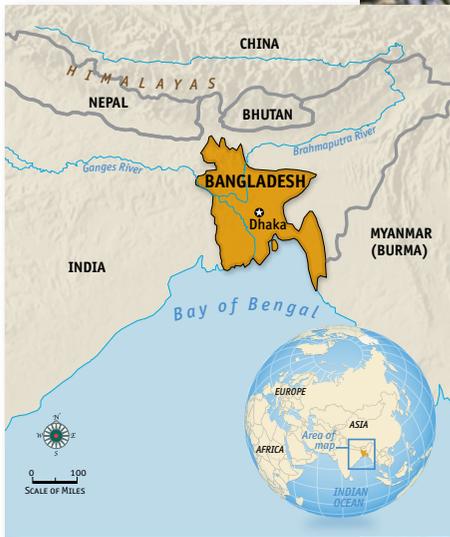
them—Forever 21, H&M, Walmart. Yet most of the 20 *billion* items of clothing we buy each year have stories that stretch thousands of miles from your local mall.

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

## Harsh Reality

Like most garment workers, Kalpona didn't grow up dreaming about working in an unsafe





**CODES OF CONDUCT** Many American companies have “codes of conduct” for the overseas manufacturers they do business with. For example, they may require that all workers be provided with clean water and bathrooms, exits be kept clear, and fire drills be held regularly. But enforcing these rules can be extremely challenging.

factory. Her father was once a successful construction contractor in Dhaka, the bustling, overcrowded capital of Bangladesh—a place where colorful rickshaws line the streets and the delicious smells of kababs mingle with the sounds of traffic and the call to prayers in the city’s many mosques.

Along with her parents and five younger siblings, Kalpona lived in a spacious seven-bedroom house surrounded by a lush garden of papaya and coconut trees. At school, she earned good grades. She loved playing soccer with her friends and wanted to be a police officer when she grew up.

Then, when she was 12, her life changed forever.

Her father suffered a stroke that left him paralyzed and unable to work. Without his income, Kalpona’s family could barely afford food. “In six months, we sold everything we owned,”

Kalpona remembers, “down to our shoes.”

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

In the United States, kids age 14 and over can legally work, but only outside school hours and for a very limited amount of time. (Kids may work on farms at younger ages.) No one younger than 16 is allowed to work around hazardous machinery.

However, in many **developing countries**, even if such laws exist, they may not be enforced. Often, children *have* to work. Without their income, they and their families could end up on the street.

That was the harsh reality that Kalpona faced.

## First Day

On Kalpona’s first day, no one bothered to ask her how old she was or told her how much she would be paid. She was simply handed a gigantic pair of scissors and told to cut fabric into two-inch strips for belt loops. She had never used scissors. Her tiny fingers blistered. She told her supervisor that the scissors hurt, but he screamed at her to get back to work.

At lunch—the only break she would get in what would be an agonizing 14-hour day—Kalpona went up to the roof of the building. From there, she glimpsed her old school. She could see her friends playing in the school yard, their blue-and-white uniforms



blazing bright in the afternoon light.

And that's when it hit Kalpona: She would never go back to her school. Her old life was gone.

## How Did This Happen?

In the United States, it's unthinkable that a 14-year-old would quit school to work all day in a factory. Yet only a century ago, children, some as young as 5, worked long hours in factories throughout the U.S. Many of these factories, known as **sweatshops**, were

dangerous and dirty. Accidents were common. Many who dared speak out for higher pay and safer **working conditions** were fired. Some were viciously beaten or even killed.

Yet slowly, through long and bitter struggles, working conditions in America improved. Laws were passed to protect workers, guarantee fairer wages, and keep children and teens away from dangerous jobs.

By the 1950s, American garment workers were working in safer factories, making everything from Stetson hats to Levi's jeans to Top-Sider shoes. Manufacturing work could be grueling, but salaries were often good. Many people earned enough to buy their homes and send their children to college. The label "Made in the U.S.A." was



**↑ DEADLY COLLAPSE** Bithi Begum (left and on the cover of this issue) was working in the Rana Plaza factory building (above) in Bangladesh when it collapsed, killing more than 1,100 people. The building had recently failed an inspection because it was found to be unstable. Employees were told that if they wanted to be paid, they had to keep working there anyway.

a source of pride.

In the 1970s, all this began to change. Factories in China and other countries could make clothing far more cheaply than was possible in the U.S. By the end of the 1990s, most clothing brands had shut down their American factories and were having their products made overseas. Today, the clothing label "Made in the U.S.A." is as rare as a pair of vintage Converse Chuck Taylor All Stars.

By moving the manufacturing of their shirts, jeans, and sneakers abroad, American companies saved billions. For shoppers, prices fell. America became a land of bargains, where even budget-conscious shoppers could fill their closets with fashionable clothes. Now, we have come to *expect* our clothing to be cheap.

It all sounds great—until you start to ask questions.

How is it possible that a trendy T-shirt can cost just five dollars?

Why is it so much cheaper to make a pair of jeans in Dhaka than in Boston or Los Angeles?

To find the answers, you must travel to sweatshops like the one where Kalpona worked.

Once you do, you will realize that the human cost of our cheap clothes is heartbreakingly high.

These factories are able to make cheap clothes because they pay their workers very little. In the U.S., workers must be paid a **minimum wage** of \$7.25 an hour. (In some states, it's higher.) In parts of China, the minimum wage is about \$2.15 an hour. In Bangladesh, it's about 50 cents, one of the lowest in the world.

## NIKE: A MODEL OF SUCCESS?

In the 1990s, Nike came under fire for the rock-bottom wages, abusive conditions, and use of child labor at its overseas factories.

Sales plummeted as angry customers held protests and boycotts. If Nike wanted to stay in business, it had to make big changes—and it did.

Today, Nike has a team that monitors conditions in its factories. Inspection reports are made public online. Nike was also one of the first companies to publish the names and addresses of every overseas factory that makes its products.

Now the company is praised for its transparency and for what is known as “corporate social responsibility.” Nike could be a model for other brands looking to address labor abuses in their supply chains.



Kalpona received even less than that. Her first paycheck was three dollars, for a month of work. “The factory owners were depriving and cheating us,” she says.

But that’s not all. In Bangladesh and other countries, many factory owners save money by failing to provide a safe workplace. Their workers toil in terrible and even deadly conditions.

In the U.S., strict laws require workplaces to be safe. Overseas, such laws may be weak. Factory owners may refuse to make improvements—like putting in fire exits—that would protect their workers from harm. As a result, thousands have been killed or seriously hurt in factories around the world in the past decade.

### Angry and Inspired

Which takes us back to Kalpona at the moment when the factory erupted into flames.

There had never been a fire drill at the factory. The only exit door on her floor was locked so that workers could not leave during the day, and piles of cardboard boxes blocked the path to that door.

Kalpona’s supervisor managed to clear away the boxes and get the door open. Frantic workers stampeded toward the narrow stairway. Fortunately, everyone—including Kalpona—escaped unscathed.

After the fire, Kalpona had no choice but to return to work. But something

happened to her. As she sat at her sewing machine, day after day, earning her meager wage, she became angry—and inspired. She began attending classes at a local nonprofit organization, where she learned that the factory owners were breaking the law. She tried to organize her fellow workers into a **union**. As a group, they could bargain with the factory owners. If the owners refused to treat them fairly, they could **strike**.

For her efforts, Kalpona was fired. Yet she only became more determined to change the lives of garment workers in Bangladesh.

Today, she is 39 years old. Like the courageous American workers from the 1920s and 1930s who crusaded for safer factories and fair wages, Kalpona has dedicated her life to workers’ rights. She co-founded the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. Now she is one of her country’s most celebrated **labor activists**.

Progress has been slow, though. In 2013, the deadliest disaster in the history of the garment industry happened in Dhaka, not far from where Kalpona once worked. More than 1,100 workers were killed and thousands more were injured when the Rana Plaza factory building collapsed. In the rubble were clothes with familiar labels: Joe Fresh and Benetton.

### Slowly Changing

The disaster at Rana Plaza was devastating to Kalpona.

But the tragedy has also



become an important turning point in the struggle for workers' rights. Last June, 41 people were charged with murder in connection to the Rana Plaza disaster. Several large Western retailers, including American Eagle, H&M, and Adidas, have vowed to do a better job enforcing rules about working conditions and fair wages at the factories

that make their clothing. More American shoppers are asking difficult questions about where our clothing is made and how our insatiable hunger for cheap apparel has contributed to global human rights abuses.

Kalpona is now traveling the world, speaking out against abuse and **petitioning** big-name brands to do more to protect the people

who make our clothes. As she works tirelessly to help others, she often thinks back to her teenage self, peering down at her school from the factory roof, wishing for a different kind of life.

“All these young women and girls are working every day, giving their lives for pieces of clothing,” she says. “We owe it to them, and all of us, to fight until we win.” ●

## HOW-TO

# What Can You Do?

Four ways to help Kalpona in her crusade to improve the lives of garment workers

**T**rying to solve the problems faced by garment workers around the world can feel daunting. What can you possibly do? Turns out, you have a lot more power than you might think.

### HERE IS WHAT TO DO:

**1** Research where your clothes are made and which companies are committed to finding and stopping abuses in their **supply chains**—and support them. Talk to your friends and families about what you find out.

**2** Write letters to the companies that make your favorite brands. Tell them you expect the people who make your clothes to be treated fairly and paid well. They will listen: You are their customer, and



Kalpona Akter (left) leads a protest in Bangladesh (above).



they want to keep your business.

**3** You don't need to stop buying all clothing made in places like Bangladesh. Bangladesh is one of the poorest countries in the world, and the garment industry creates 4.2 million desperately needed jobs there. These jobs, however

brutal, mean the difference between life and starvation for many people. If everyone boycotted clothes made in Bangladesh, the garment industry might leave and workers would lose their jobs.

**4** Spread the word that, as global citizens, we expect every human being, whether stitching a hat in Honduras or hemming a pair of jeans in Vietnam, to be treated with dignity and respect. ●

## WRITING CONTEST

Write a letter to one of your favorite clothing brands. Explain what you have learned about garment workers around the world and how you want the company to help those who make our clothes. Send a copy of your letter to **CLOTHING CONTEST**. Five winners will each get a copy of *Threads and Flames* by Esther Friesner. See page 2 for details.



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