

GLOBAL JUSTICE • WAGE JUSTICE • LIVING JUSTICE

# JUSTICE

## FOR BANGLADESHI GARMENT WORKERS



**Reshmi Begum, a 30-year-old married machine operator, works at a one-storey garment factory at Savar, Dhaka, in sweltering conditions for the equivalent of \$65 to \$95 a month, including overtime. Her only sister Shyla died at Rana Plaza.**



**Mohammed Washim, aged 27, a machine operator injured in the Rana Plaza collapse, has recovered from his physical injuries – he still bears the personal scars.**



**Rehana Begum, aged 20, a machine operator, who lost both legs, was the breadwinner for her family. "It comes to my mind again and again. It gives me constant pain."**

# JUSTICE FOR BANGLADESHI GARMENT WORKERS

**GLOBAL JUSTICE** Bangladesh is the world's second largest clothing exporter: it has the highest wage inequalities of the main countries exporting to the US.

**WAGE JUSTICE** Average wages in the garment industry in Bangladesh were well below the country's living wage. Wages in the industry went down between 2001 and 2011.

**LIVING JUSTICE** Since 2005 an estimated 1,800 Bangladesh garment workers have been killed in factory fires and collapses.

## GLOBAL JUSTICE

Bangladesh is the second largest clothing exporter after China, and the fourth largest clothing exporter to the US. The industry, worth \$20 billion, is growing at the rate of 12 per cent a year and accounts for 80% of the country's exports. So the economic well-being of Bangladesh rests on the backs of the garment workers. Yet they are paid less than any other major clothing exporter to the US.

Bangladesh garment workers typically get paid the equivalent of \$0.15 an hour. Their American counterparts are paid USD \$16 an hour. Global injustices are built into the industry. One study noted "Manufacturers underbid each other for orders from large retailers who are in a position to demand low cost production and just-in-time delivery... and who have adopted 'lean retailing' to keep inventory – and its inherent risks – as low as possible." The risks are carried by the Bangladesh garment workers.

## WAGE JUSTICE

Most Bangladesh garment workers aren't even paid a living wage. And there are gross wage inequalities between men and women. Average wages for garment workers in 2011 were only 14 per cent of the living wage: \$52 a month compared

to an estimated living wage of \$380 a month, working for up to 14 hours a day for up to seven days a week. Men are paid more than women.

Type of work	Men's wages \$ p/m	Women's wages \$ p/m
Operator	30	20
Cutting Master	50	–
Ironer	25	15
Sewing helper	15	10
Finishing helper	14	13
Folder	20	15

## LIVING JUSTICE

Rock bottom wages are just part of the injustices inflicted on Bangladesh garment workers. The Rana Plaza collapse was the deadliest in a history of garment factory fires and collapses. It has been estimated that 1,800 garment workers have been killed in factory disasters in Bangladesh since 2005.

Substandard factory buildings, with regulations compromised through corrupt building and procurement practices, lack of proper workplace sanitation and other facilities, are compounded by the long working shifts.



## ONE RANA PLAZA WORKER'S STORY

Monika Hambrom, aged 25, had been working in the New Wave Style Garment factory in Rana Plaza for 18 months before she was seriously injured in the factory collapse. She says: "I still see it – it comes in my dreams."

She was a helper, earning around \$38 a month, with overtime. A Christian, Monika's earnings supported her family living in a village in Dinajpur district. Monika complained of difficulty breathing in the heat of the factory, the lack of medical facilities and fire protection, the lack of rest rooms and toilets, and the threatening attitudes of employers who tried to load her with extra work.

## **RANA PLAZA THE WORLD'S DEADLIEST FACTORY COLLAPSE**

When the eight story Rana Plaza collapsed at Savar, Bangladesh, it was the worst garment-factory accident and deadliest accidental structural failure in history: 1,131 people died and 2,500 were injured. More than half the victims were women, and some of their children.

Rana Plaza had contained clothing factories, a bank, apartments and shops which were evacuated immediately when cracks were discovered in the building. But the garment factories ignored warnings and ordered employees to return to work. The building collapsed on top of them. So far a government inquiry has found five main reasons for the collapse:

- Shoddy construction materials,
- Corrupt building practices,
- Flouting of building codes,
- Vibrating industrial equipment at the top of a commercial building,
- People being forced into an unsafe structure.

### **THE CHURCH OF BANGLADESH RESPONSE**

The Church took the initiative to support the rescue teams, mobilise help for the injured garment workers and their families, develop an advocacy programme based on the factory workers' needs, and is pressing industry leaders to guarantee basic labour conditions.

### **WHAT'S BEEN DONE SO FAR**

Some of the world's biggest fashion chains have plans to finance up to \$42 million-worth of fire safety and building improvements in the factories they use in Bangladesh.

The International Labour Organization (ILO), European Union (EU) and the Government of Bangladesh have declared a major "compact" to improve labour rights, working conditions and factory safety.

The Bangladeshi government agreed to let the country's 4,000,000 garment workers form trade unions without permission from factory owners, increased the minimum wage and set up a new minimum wage board. But the new minimum wage is \$34 with allowances: garment worker leaders wanted \$64 to \$90.

Implementation of these new arrangements needs to be monitored – so they aren't empty promises. And there must be equality for women: the main labour force, but grossly exploited.



Dear Friends,

### **Greetings from the Church of Bangladesh!**

During the time of agony we received many letters of condolence from you,

empathy with assurance of your prayers. Some of you have expressed your generosity to support the victims. For your information, we have helped some people directly and others through the Meril-Prothom Alo Savar Shohayota Fund, set up by one of the newspapers.

We have a plan to do more for victims who have lost the only earning member of their family, lost their legs or hands, broken their limbs or have spinal injuries. At the same time our Church has taken an initiative to form a Social Action and Advocacy Forum under the National Council of Churches. For all these we have prepared a budget and started sending to the partners who are interested and able to support the victims.

My suggestions for our partners and friends abroad for their campaigns and advocacy are set out here in this pack.

Importers and buyers should not stop their garments business in Bangladesh. At present the garment manufacturing sector is the second largest foreign exchange earner in Bangladesh. A large section of the poor people in our population is surviving on this sector. We have to keep in mind that the garment manufacturers are rich and powerful. In Bangladesh, like other countries, businessmen have hardly any ethics. They want only easy profit.

Considering all the above in any advocacy for the protection of the rights and interests of the garments workers we should not forgo the core interest of Bangladesh economy.

Thank you once again for your concern and cooperation.

Yours,



Rt Revd Bishop Paul S Sarker,  
Moderator of the Church of Bangladesh

# THE BIBLE AND JUSTICE

## LIVING GOD LIVING JUSTICE

Throughout the Old Testament we see God as the God of justice for people who are oppressed and marginalised. Below are just a few of the passages you could consider.

**DEUT. 26:5–9** This tells of how the Egyptians imposed hard labour on their captives, and how God saw their oppression.

**AMOS 5:10–24** "Let justice roll down like waters..."

**ISAIAH 1:13–17** "Promote justice! Give the oppressed reason to celebrate!..."

In the New Testament, Jesus turns to Isaiah for his first public teaching recorded in Luke's Gospel, and explains how he is the fulfilment of the Scriptures. Read this text:

**LUKE 4:16–21** "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing"

Read and discuss these texts in your Church or Bible Study group. Here are some questions to help your discussion:

### IN BIBLICAL TIMES:

- In the Old Testament, how did God intervene to bring justice for the poor and oppressed?
- How did Jesus respond to the poor and oppressed people whom he met?

### IN OUR TIMES:

- Global justice: What do the passages from Amos and Isaiah tell us about how we should live out God's justice in our world? What are implications for our own and our government's choices?
- Wage justice: "Give the oppressed reason to celebrate!" What is our response as individuals, as a church and as a society to seek to ensure that workers in Bangladesh have a just deal?
- Living justice: God responded to the Hebrews' oppression. In Christ, we are called to be co-creators of his Kingdom, transforming the here and now. How can we help to promote living justice for workers in Bangladesh, in other developing countries and in our own society?

Below is a prayer, provided by Us (United Society) which is part of the Church of Bangladesh Group.

*Lord of all,*

*For the times that we buy without thought of those who have produced our clothes, when we have sacrificed ethics for economy, we ask forgiveness;*

*God of justice,*

*Help us to hate injustice as you do, to speak up for those with no voice, and to stand with those who are forced to work in clothes factories for little reward in Bangladesh;*

*King of kings,*

*We pray for leaders and politicians in Bangladesh, for lawyers and for business leaders, that you would not let them rest until there is justice for the garment workers in that country.*

*Amen.*

## MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE POSITION OF GARMENT WORKERS

See the Anglican Alliance page at [www.anglicanalliance.org/pages/8376](http://www.anglicanalliance.org/pages/8376)

See the Methodist Conference resolution on Bangladesh at [www.methodistconference.org.uk/media/198578/noms%20yellow%20tuesday%209%20july.pdf](http://www.methodistconference.org.uk/media/198578/noms%20yellow%20tuesday%209%20july.pdf)

The Ethical Trading Initiative [www.ethicaltrade.org](http://www.ethicaltrade.org) is supporting a Bangladeshi government national action plan launched in March.

The Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council report, "Are We What We Wear? The Ethics Of Our Clothing Choices." It's available at: [www.churchofscotland.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0018/5904/Clothes\\_and\\_Ethics\\_May\\_2011.pdf](http://www.churchofscotland.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0018/5904/Clothes_and_Ethics_May_2011.pdf)

There are a number organisations and campaigns active in UK and internationally, including Bangladesh. These include: [www.cleanclothes.org](http://www.cleanclothes.org) [www.asiafloorwage.org](http://www.asiafloorwage.org) [www.labourbehindthelabel.org](http://www.labourbehindthelabel.org)