

Planet Money Makes a T-Shirt- People

Why Workers Like Jasmine Are Getting A Raise



This is the world behind our T-shirt: women like Jasmine and Doris working long hours in difficult conditions, dreaming of better lives for their families.

Jasmine Akhter, 23, (center) began working in the garment industry when she was 16. (Joshua Davis for NPR)

They're part of a global wave that goes all the way back to the Industrial Revolution in England, when the first textile factories were created. In China in the 1980s, South Korea in the 1970s, America in the 1800s, and many other countries over the years, workers — mostly women — left subsistence farms to work in factories.

Historic and Modern Comparison Photographs



1905: Yarn spinning in the U.S. (Lewis W. Hine/George Eastman House/Getty Images)



2013: Yarn spinning in Indonesia (David Gilkey/NPR)

Left 1905: Yarn spinning in the U.S. (Lewis W. Hine/George Eastman House/Getty Images)

Right 2013: Yarn spinning in Indonesia (David Gilkey/NPR)



1908: Drawing frame machines in the U.S. (Lewis W. Hine/Buyenlarge/Getty Images)



2013: Drawing frame machines in Indonesia (David Gilkey/NPR)

Left 1908: Drawing frame machines in the U.S. (Lewis W. Hine/Buyenlarge/Getty Images)

Right 2013: Drawing frame machines in Indonesia (David Gilkey/NPR)



1930: Sewing in the U.S. (Lewis W. Hine/George Eastman House/Getty Images)



2013: Sewing in Bangladesh (Kainaz Amaria/NPR)

Left 1930: Sewing in the U.S. (Lewis W. Hine/George Eastman House/Getty Images)

Right 2013: Sewing in Bangladesh (Kainaz Amaria/NPR)



1911: Garment workers protest in the U.S. (National Archives/AP)



2013: Garment workers protest in Bangladesh (Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images)

Left 1911: Garment workers protest in the U.S. (National Archives/AP)

Right 2013: Garment workers protest in Bangladesh (Munir Uz Zaman/AFP/Getty Images)

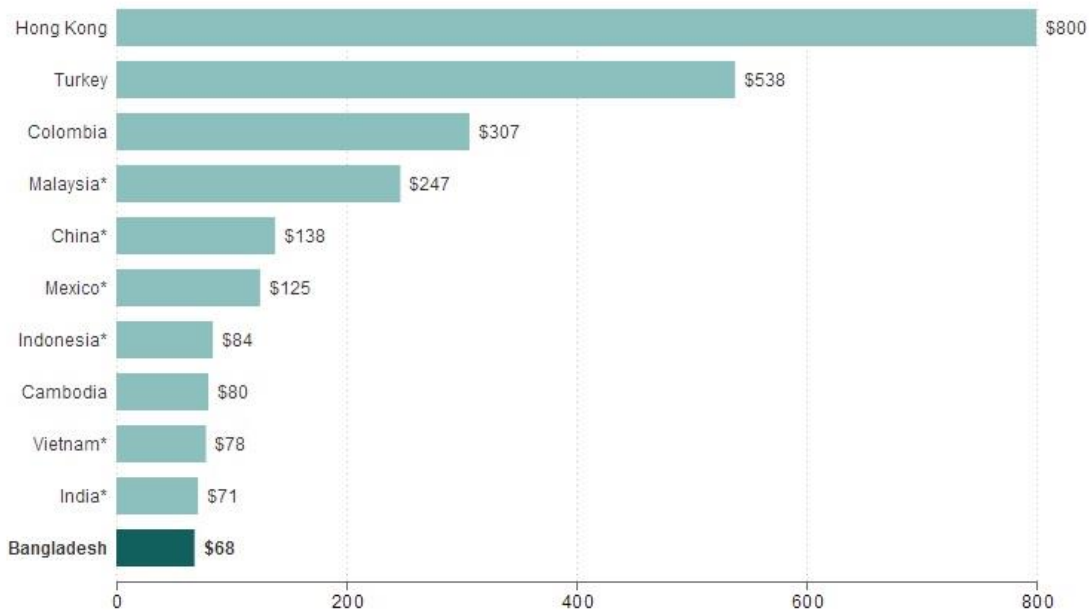
The factories can be brutal, dangerous places. In 1911, a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York killed over 100 workers, prompting major reforms that improved working conditions. Earlier this year, more than 1,000 workers were killed when the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh collapsed. Huge protests around the country followed, and Western companies that buy clothes in Bangladesh faced increasing pressure to improve working conditions and wages.

That pressure led the country to almost double its minimum wage, from \$39 a month to \$68 a month. Still, that's far below the \$104 a month the workers were asking for. (The workers who made the Planet Money T-shirt were making about \$80 a month when we were there earlier this year. Their wages are likely to rise, now that the minimum wage has gone up.)

Minimum Wage, By Country

MINIMUM WAGE, BY COUNTRY

Monthly minimum wages (or lowest relevant rate) in the garment industry in top apparel-exporting countries, in U.S. dollars



Notes: Bangladesh data as of Dec. 1, 2013. Other data as of Aug. 1, 2013. Colombia is not in the top 10, but is included here for comparison.

* Indicates a country with more than one applicable minimum wage rate (e.g., with different rates by region, enterprise size or skill level). Figure refers to the lowest relevant rate.

Source: International Labour Organization

Factory owners worry that if the minimum keeps going up, the garment industry will find someplace else to make T-shirts. That's what's happened for decades: When labor costs rose in one country, Western buyers found someplace cheaper, and prices for clothes continued to fall.

In the case of the Planet Money T-shirt, the buyer is Jockey. The company told us that the pattern of pulling out when wages rise may be coming to an end for now, because there's no country that's ready to replace Bangladesh as the cheapest place in the world to make clothes.

Wages in Bangladesh are going to rise, Marion Smith, a senior vice president at Jockey, told us. "That's good news from a humanitarian point of view."

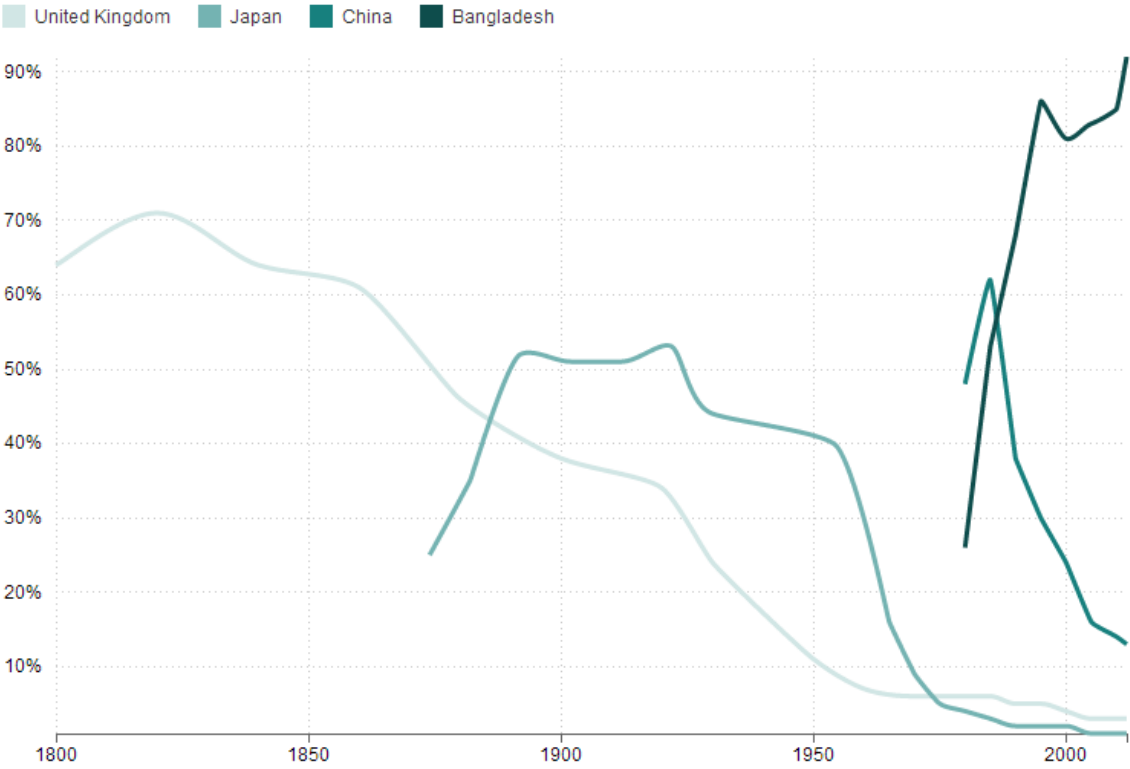
But the long-run picture for Bangladeshi garment workers is less clear.

In China, South Korea and Japan, to name just a few countries, the textiles and apparel industry brought with it investment and manufacturing knowledge, which those countries used to expand into higher-wage industries like electronics. As economies grow and countries move into other, more lucrative industries, textiles and apparel become less important. But the same may not happen in Bangladesh.

Tailor Shops to the World

TAILOR SHOPS TO THE WORLD

Textiles and clothing as a share of a country's total manufacturing exports



Notes: Inconsistent data available prior to 1980. Figures for the United Kingdom refer to textiles and clothing as a share of all exports (rather than manufacturing exports).

Sources: For years 1980-2012: World Trade Organization. For prior years: Young-II Park and Kym Anderson, "The Experience of Japan," in Kym Anderson, Ed., *New Silk Roads: East Asia and World Textile Markets*, Cambridge University Press, 1992. Kym Anderson and Young-II Park, "Effects of China's Dramatic Reforms on Its Neighbors and on World Markets," in Kym Anderson, *New Silk Roads: East Asia and World Textile Markets*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

Textiles and clothing as a share of a country's total manufacturing exports

Bangladesh stands out on the graph for a few reasons. For one, apparel exports make up a bigger share of Bangladesh's exports than they ever did for any of the other countries. And that share is still rising. If the next generation of workers like Jasmine is to have more opportunities, that line needs to fall, and Bangladesh needs to expand into other industries.