Commentary

Garments Fire: History Repeats Itself

Hasanat Alamgir, MBA, PhD,1 Sharon P. Cooper, PhD,1 and George L. Delclos, MD, PhD2,3

KEY WORDS: garment; Bangladesh; occupational health; worker safety

One hundred years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City that caused the death of 146 garment workers, a garment fire on November 24, 2012 in Bangladesh resulted in 111 deaths under remarkably similar circumstances. The majority of these workers were also young women, economically disadvantaged, migrants, and, by any definition, vulnerable.

Fires have been a persistent problem in Bangladesh’s garment industry for more than a decade, with hundreds of workers killed over the years. This most recent episode broke out in a factory just outside Dhaka, the capital city where workers were making clothes for major multinationals including Wal-Mart and Sears [Bustillo et al., 2012; Manik and Yardley, 2012]. This was the worst industrial accident in Bangladesh’s history and prompted widespread calls inside and outside the country for better safety measures in this industry.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF GARMENTS TO THE COUNTRY’S ECONOMY

In an area, the size of Wisconsin, Bangladesh houses a population of 161 million people. The median age of its population is 23.6 years. The GDP per capita is $1,900 and 31.5% of the population lives below the poverty line. With a labor force of 75.4 million, the unemployment rate is 5% [Central Intelligence Agency, 2013]. Garment exports, and remittances from Bangladeshis who live and work overseas accounted for almost 12% of GDP during fiscal year 2010 [Central Intelligence Agency, 2013].

Bangladesh is the world’s second largest exporter of apparel after China. Each year, Bangladesh exports about $19 billion worth of ready-to-wear clothes, mostly to Europe and the United States [Quadir and Paul, 2012]. There are more than 4,500 garment factories there, which employ more than four million workers [Manik and Yardley, 2012]. More than three quarters of Bangladesh’s export earnings come from the garment industry, which began attracting foreign buyers in the 1980s due to low production costs, largely attributable to inexpensive and abundant labor. Wal-Mart, Tesco, H&M, Carrefour, Gap, JCPenney, Marks & Spencer, and Kohl’s are among the large global retailers that import clothes from Bangladesh [Reuters, 2012].

The industry is critical to the national economy of this developing country as a source of employment and foreign currency and is expected to grow rapidly over the next decade as China, given rising labor costs, has started to divest from this business.

THE HIGH COSTS TO THE WORKERS

Bangladesh’s success in this booming garment business has largely depended on keeping wages depressed and...
restricting the rights of workers. The minimum wage in the garment industry is only around $37 a month, and workers cannot unionize [Quadir and Paul, 2012]. Most of the garment workers are young women who migrate for these jobs to the capital city from rural areas. These Bangladeshi women work in harsh conditions at the garment factories with minimal or no workplace health and safety regulations, programs, and practices.

The rapid growth of employment of women in the garment industry in Bangladesh has brought new opportunities for mobility, workforce participation, economic gains, and has even been associated with increased enrollment of young girls in school [Heath and Mobarak, 2012]. At the same time, however, the growth of this industry has led to reinforcement of gender segregation into low-paying, exploitive, and potentially hazardous jobs [Feldman, 2009], with resulting low satisfaction among workers about their safety and compensation [Huda et al., 2012].

In addition to the fatal hazard of fire, previous research studies [Aderaw et al., 2011; Aghili et al., 2012; Lombardo et al., 2012; Nagoda et al., 2012; Ozkurt et al., 2012; Serinken et al., 2012; Tahir et al., 2012] on employment in garment, shoe manufacturing, textile, and weaving factories have highlighted adverse working conditions to include crowded workspaces, poor lighting and air quality, and a variety of ergonomic hazards, such as repetitive movements, awkward postures, andpiecemeal work. Irrespective of gender, one study conducted in-depth interviews with 110 garment workers across 11 factories in Bangladesh and workers reported substandard wages, long work hours, job insecurity, physical and verbal abuse, and even calorie deficiency [Islam and Zahid, 2012].

Among the adverse health effects associated with garment factory employment, vision disorders and respiratory abnormalities (ranging from chronic cough and difficulty in breathing to asthma) among the workers have been reported in newspapers. These health issues are compounded by limited access to quality health care.

**INTEGRATING LAW, POLICY, AND ADVOCACY WITH SCIENCE**

Workplace tragedies have the ability to raise public awareness and to catalyze change. Frances Perkins was an inadvertent witness to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911, and became the first woman to be appointed to a cabinet position as Secretary of Labor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. She contributed to and implemented many of the New Deal reforms, including labor standards that are still in effect today [Francis Perkins Center, 2013].

Massive fire incidents are now a rare event in the developed nations, and the technology and know-how exist to prevent these tragedies from occurring in developing countries, without a need for high-cost modifications. While the global, political, and economic issues may be quite complex, the translation of basic fire protection activities is straightforward and inexpensive. Proven interventions such as provision of adequate escape paths, fire drills, emergency plans and training, first aid, fire and smoke alarm systems, safety and exit signage, and announcement systems should be implemented immediately. Additional recommendations include provisions to address the threat of being locked in during a fire as well as locating health care centers in proximity to industry [Huda et al., 2012]. In addition, this opportunity to promote higher level policy changes involving safety, skill development, upward mobility, improved health care, and wage enhancement should not be missed [Akhter et al., 2010]. Further, previous studies also suggest building dormitories, improved awareness of legal rights and responsibilities amongst workers and owners, as well as greater monitoring and enforcement of existing laws.

Globalization of the economy has led to self-regulation of multinational companies, and the increased call for Corporate Social Responsibility, including Corporate Codes of Conduct [Prieto-Carron, 2008]. The catastrophic fire in Bangladesh 101 years after the New York City fire demands that both developed and developing countries act not only as witnesses to this and other similar tragedies but also to formulate changes in response. Globalization inextricably links the need and responsibility to improve workplace safety and health, both domestically and globally. In the current research climate of translational science, what simpler, more effective translation can there be than sharing basic health and safety knowledge with workers, manufacturers, and policymakers in the developing world?

**REFERENCES**


