

Fashion Kills:

Industrial Manslaughter in the Global Supply Chain

No matter how you cut it, a pair of jeans is not worth a worker's life.



Workers from the Garib & Garib Sweater Factory in Bangladesh march to protest the working conditions that contributed to the Feb. 25 factory fire, which killed 21 employees.

BY GARRETT BROWN

More than 42 young workers in Turkey died terrible deaths from silicosis after intense exposures to crystalline silica. These workers were sandblasting denim jeans in garment sweatshops so international clothing brands can charge triple price for jeans with the worn, faded look so desirable to consumers in Europe and the United States.

These officially documented deaths – only 2 years' worth to July 2007 – are just the tip of the iceberg among the 8,000- 10,000 denim workers in Turkey and thousands more globally. A 2008 Turkish medical study found radiological confirmation of silicosis in 53 percent of sandblasters in a survey of 145 denim workers. At least 4,000 work-

ers in Turkey alone are considered to be at risk.

Silicosis is an occupational lung disease caused by the inhalation of dust containing free crystalline silica, such as sand used for abrasive blasting. Silicosis is an incurable, progressive disease that worsens over time, even after exposure to silica stops, resulting in agonizing deaths by suffocation as lung capacity decreases, or non-fatal chronic disability.

Around 5 billion pairs of denim jeans are made throughout the world each year. In 2008, Turkey was the third largest world exporter of jeans, with sales of \$2.3 billion. Major jeans producers are also located in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Jordan and Mexico.

A growing segment of the jeans markets are expensive “vintage” jeans with a worn or faded look. This appearance is created by the use of sandpaper or brushes, chemical treatment with potassium permanganate, acids or bleach and laser technology. Since 2000, sandblasting has become the preferred method because it is quicker, more reliable and cheaper. Abrasive blasting with very fine sand both softens the denim and lightens its original deep color.

INVISIBLE WORKERS

In Turkey – as in other jeans factories globally – sandblasting is done in small, unventilated rooms by workers typically using only paper dust masks. Turkish workers,



The fifth floor of the Garib & Garib Sweater Factory in Bangladesh is pictured above. A major fire in this factory on Feb. 25 killed 21 workers on the top floor.

who routinely work 10-11 hours a day, 6 days a week, experience intense exposures to silica dust during production, which accelerates the development of disease. Workers sandblast 250-500 pairs of jeans a day and 3,000-5,000 skirts and other clothing items. Additionally, many denim workers in Turkey sleep at the worksite in an adjacent room, receiving a second dose of silica from uncontrolled circulation of dust within the building.

Because the jeans industry pays poorly (\$100-\$125 a week) and has brutal working conditions, most workers either are migrants from rural areas of Turkey or immigrant workers from Romania, Moldavia, Georgia or Azerbaijan. Scores of sick sandblasters have disappeared from Turkey, returning to suffer unrecorded silicosis deaths in their home villages.

Turkey's first recorded silicosis cases were in 2005 with two workers who started sandblasting jeans when they were 13 and 14 years old. It took only 5 years of work to develop the disease, and the younger

worker died the day after his diagnosis. Since then, some denim workers in Turkey have had such intense exposures that they contracted silicosis after no more than a year of sandblasting work, due to long hours of exposure to high-silica content dust.

GOVERNMENT, CSR FAILURES

After the UK banned abrasive blasting of garments in 1950, and the rest of Europe followed suit by 1966, denim blasting moved to Turkey, Bangladesh and Syria. After a major campaign by unions and medical professionals, the Turkish Ministry of Health formally banned denim sandblasting in March 2009. But the work simply has moved to hundreds of illegal sweatshops, subcontracting to suppliers of well-known international brands, including Levi's, Strom Jeans and Dolce & Gabbana.

The Turkish government, like virtually all governments in the developing world, has few inspectors to actually enforce the Ministry of Health ban, and has no political will to restrict a multibillion dollar export business generating essential foreign income.

The international brands' much vaunted "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) programs – now a \$40 billion business worldwide – also have failed to protect supply chain workers. Levi's, for example, has developed "corporate code of conduct" guidelines for abrasive blasting operations, but none of the Turkish sandblasting subcontractors



Broken glass in the Garib & Garib factory following the Feb. 25 fire.



tors has the financial and technical resources to implement these measures.

The brands, in addition to failing to provide necessary resources to contract factories, have purchasing policies that ruthlessly drive down prices paid to suppliers and pit them against one another in a global race to the bottom. CSR code monitoring programs, using for-profit, third-party auditors anxious to keep their international clients happy, rarely go beyond first-tier suppliers, so sub-contracted sandblasting workshops almost are never identified, let alone inspected and their conditions improved.

Sandblasting workers are among the most vulnerable of Turkey's work force. Children and thousands of immigrants without work papers work in the industry and, like garment workers in many other countries, are so desperate for work that they cannot refuse any job, no matter how unsafe and deadly it may be.

THE MARKET ALSO KILLS

Why would jeans producers and retailers routinely expose thousands of workers to a well-known fatal disease? It is because "the market" made them do it.

Retailers can sell semi-destroyed vintage jeans for 3 times the price of regular jeans. Brands, which typically split 60-70 percent of the jeans'

price tag with retailers, have no interest in reducing their profits by providing contract factories with the resources needed to protect workers. The contractors, relentlessly squeezed to cut per-unit prices, in turn play subcontractors off one another, so providing workshop sandblasting booths, local exhaust ventilation systems or effective personal respirators for workers are simply impossible.

Government efforts to protect workers, when not undermined by local corruption and lack of resources, are fatally undermined by the need for international investment to pay foreign debts and for domestic economic development, no matter what the cost to national and immigrant workers.

Confirmation that market forces, schizophrenic corporate business models and government inaction result in workers' deaths can be found thousands of miles away from Turkey in the factory fires in Bangladesh.

Since 1990, there have been 33 major garment factory fires in Bangladesh and more than 400 garment workers have been killed. During this same period, more than 200 other garment factory fires have resulted in injuries to more than 5,000 workers.

The causes of these fires are well known to all involved – large quanti-

ties of poorly kept flammables, damaged and overloaded electrical systems and absent or completely inadequate fire suppression equipment.

The latest major fire occurred Feb. 25, when 21 female workers were burned alive on the top floor of the Garib & Garib Sweater factory. The exit doors were locked. This tragedy occurred 99 years after the same scenario killed 146 garment workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City.

The Garib factory, which produces for famous European and Canadian brands, actually had a fire just 6 months before that killed a firefighter. The national newspaper, *The Daily Star*, reported that "locals and firefighters said the owners did not seem to have learned much from the fire in the same building six months back."

The international brands also have not learned much either, and over a much longer period of time. Almost all the factories with killer fires in Bangladesh, including the Garib factory, repeatedly have been monitored over the last 20 years by for-profit corporate code auditors. In fact, the ultra-low-cost garment sector in Bangladesh continues to grow despite the fires and abusive conditions that no one, including the brands themselves, deny are endemic.

The brands' CSR programs have completely failed to prevent deadly Bangladesh fires or hundreds of silicosis deaths in Turkey because market forces have overwhelmed the apparel brands' publicity-oriented CSR efforts.

WORKER RIGHTS

The health and safety of garment workers effectively can be protected only if these workers have the information about the hazards they face on the job, the power and opportunity to meaningfully participate in workplace safety programs and the right to stop working if they are



The burnt and damaged Garib & Garib factory in Bangladesh.



locked into fire-trap factories or poisoned day and night by airborne chemicals.

But exercising these rights requires “big picture” changes in the global business model. Workers have to be able to walk away from deadly workplaces without starving or being blacklisted. Contractors have to be paid enough to afford effective engineering controls, protective equipment and worker training. International brands have to alter their business model so that the “iron triangle” of the lowest possible price/highest possible quality/fastest possible delivery does not trump everything else. Employers at all levels of the supply chain have to recognize the right of workers to organize themselves to improve their conditions by speaking and acting in their own name, and to be informed and empowered members of the factory health and safety programs.

The best CSR code monitors are the workers themselves who are on site every day and have an unalterable commitment to safe workplaces. Trained workers can play invaluable roles in performing work-site safety inspections and accident investigations, ensuring that corrective actions actually work and are implemented, and in conducting peer training with coworkers.

This is exactly what the 20-year-old global CSR industry was supposed to bring about. But if the international brands’ top-down, management systems- focused CSR

programs are unable to prevent workers from suffocating to death from a centuries-old disease in Turkey, or prevent them from being burned to death, time and time again, in obvious death-traps in Bangladesh, then what good are they?

A sea change in global supply chain management is clearly a ways off. But interim measures that could save lives in the near term include: an international ban on sandblasted denim jeans by all producers; a consumer boycott of sandblasted jeans; government enforcement of existing sandblasting bans and building codes; employer health and safety measures to protect garment workers using alternative technologies; and government-sponsored, industry-funded medical surveillance programs for silicosis victims.

No clothes shopper or official corporate business plan deliberately would require that workers be killed for a pair of faded jeans or a pretty blouse, yet that is precisely what’s happening to Turkish denim workers and Bangladeshi garment workers. This must stop.

Surely no fashion item should be, literally, to die for.

Garrett Brown, MPH, CIH, conducts workplace health and safety inspections for the state of California. The views expressed here are his own and not in any way those of the state of California.

RESOURCES:

Metin Akgun et al., “An Epidemic of Silicosis Among Former Denim Sandblasters,” *European Respiratory Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 5, 2008, pp.1295-1303; available for free at <http://erj.ersjournals.com/cgi/reprint/32/5/1295>.

S. Sahbaz et al., “Denim Sandblasting and Silicosis Two New Subsequent cases in Turkey,” *Occupational Medicine*, Vol. 55, No. 1, 2007, pp. 87-91.

Metin Akgun et al., “Silicosis in Turkish Denim Sandblasters,” *Occupational Medicine*, Vol. 56, No. 2, 2006, pp.554-558.

Levi Strauss & Co., *Social and Environmental Sustainability Guidebook*, 2010, Chapter Two, “Abrasive Blasting,” pp. 108- 112; http://www.levistrauss.com/sites/default/files/librarydocument/2010/4/SES_Guidebook_2010_v1.pdf.

World Health Organization, Silicosis, Fact Sheet No. 238, May 2000; <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs238/en/print.html>

Silvana Cappuccio, “Jeans, the Human Cost of a Fashion Icon,” *HesaMag*, No. 1, Dec. 2009, pp. 46-47; <http://hesa.etuirehs.org/uk/newsletter/newsletter.asp>

Maquila Solidarity Network (Canada), Bangladesh Campaign, <http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/taxonomy/term/381>