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Garment workers remain unsafe four years after Rana Plaza

Blog post by Jean Lambert MEP and Judith Sargentini MEP

Think about the clothes you're wearing today. Do you know where they were made, and by whom? Take a look at the label - it might give you a clue to where they were stitched together. But that's where the information trail ends.

The reality is that your clothes have been on a long journey. It's likely they have covered thousands of kilometres, crossing deserts and oceans, from a distant factory floor. This fact is easily overlooked among the bright lights of glitzy shopping malls. But every now and again, there's a stark reminder of the real cost of our clothes.

On 24rd April 2013, almost 4,000 people turned up to work at the Rana Plaza garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh – some 80% of them young women aged between 18 and 20. It was just another working day, manufacturing apparel for big name brands – orders had recently been taken from Benetton, Bon Marche, Matalan and Primark. For many this meant a standard shift of 8am to 10.30pm, and two days off each month. The most senior sewers took home $12.48 a week.

At 8.45am the electricity went out. Seconds later the eight-story building collapsed, folding like a house of cards. Some 1,129 workers were killed, and another 2,500 injured. The building had been structurally unsound. It was the deadliest garment-factory accident in history.

Today marks the fourth anniversary of this terrible tragedy which caused an unimaginable loss of life. Yet, if one positive emerged from the chaos, it was to shine a spotlight on the shocking conditions endured by those who labour in dangerous, exploitative conditions to make our clothes.

In the years that followed, established pressure groups including Clean Clothes Campaign and Ethical Fashion Forum have continued to work tirelessly to tackle these deeply-entrenched problems. They have been joined by a new generation of activists such as Fashion Revolution who promote sustainable fashion, and encourage consumers to question where their clothes come from. Larger institutions such as the ILO and the OECD also launched their own initiatives with some measure of success.

However, for most of the 75 million people worldwide who work in the garment supply chain, little has changed. The majority continue to live in poverty. The combined salary of 10,000 workers in garment factories in Bangladesh is equal to the salary of one FTSE 100 CEO. Moreover, many face exploitation, verbal and physical abuse, and unsafe conditions on a daily basis.

Three years ago, the European Commission began to explore the idea of setting up its own initiative to improve transparency and working conditions in the sector. However, progress slowed, culminating simply in an event on the issue. Now the European Parliament has taken firm action, in order to urge movement on this complex yet vital issue.

The Parliament's Development Committee, with input from the Employment and Social Affairs Committee and the Committee on International Trade, has put together a new motion: the 'EU flagship initiative on the garment sector'. It calls on the Commission to prepare a legislative proposal for binding standards in the garment sector, This should include guaranteeing health and safety, the elimination of child labour, regular payment of an adequate wage, transparency of the supply chain, and empowering women who work in garment production. It calls for adherence to existing ILO and OECD guidelines, as well as independent labour inspections, and a compulsory reporting system for garment products entering the EU market that extends throughout the entire supply chain (including sub-contractors in the formal and informal economy).

The finished product is a bold proposal which looks set to be passed by cross-party MEPs on Thursday. While it's not legally binding, this show of support sends a strong message to the Commission – urgent action is needed to clean up the garment industry, and to ensure that a human rights catastrophe like Rana Plaza can never happen again.

This week, you too can join the Fashion Revolution and mark the anniversary of the Rana Plaza tragedy by holding clothes manufacturers to account. Take photos of the labels that you're wearing today and ask them #whomademyclothes? You can also sign the new #GoTransparent petition by a coalition comprising Human Rights Watch, Clean Clothes Campaign and International Labor Rights Forum which urges clothing brands to sign a new 'Transparency Pledge' by 31 May 2017.

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