



# Bangladeshi Women Protest for Equal Maternity Rights

Take a moment to examine the label on your shirt. If the label reads “made in...” a country other than China, Vietnam, or Bangladesh, your item of clothing is one of the mere 39.2% that is produced outside of these three countries. This figure implies that only three countries are responsible for producing 60.8% of the textiles that are consumed around the world. For this reason, when female garment workers in Bangladesh led a protest for equal maternity rights on National Women’s Day in 2015, it was a both a local protest as well as an international concern. There is often a tendency to read the news and adopt an ‘over there’ mentality, but if as a reader of this article your closet houses a single article of clothing that displays the tag “Made in Bangladesh”, this protest affects you.

Bangladesh is the world’s second largest clothing producer, employing approximately 3.6 million individuals in the country’s 4,500 garment factories. Women account for 90% of the workforce, generating 4.9 billion dollars in exports to the United States alone in 2016. While 10% of the workforce is men, they do not occupy the same level of jobs as the women workers. Men are consistently offered positions of higher stature and power such as managers and supervisors, while the women are relegated to sewing operators. A position of manual work requiring nimble fingers demands a level of youth that employers find among women between the ages of 18 and 32. While women of this demographic are ideal to fill such positions, they are also of child bearing age which poses a problem in a union that fails to recognize maternity rights equally among employees.

On March 8, 2015, The National Garment Worker’s Federation marched through the streets of Bangladesh in protest of the discrimination between private sector workers and government employees working in the same capacity in the same position. At that time, female garment workers employed by the private sector received only four months’ maternity leave, while 29% of women reported a failure to receive any form of paid maternity leave. This, compared to the six months received by government garment workers was considered unacceptable to these women, as newborns require a level of care past the mere four months offered by their employers. Because of this discrimination, female garment workers took to the streets, positioning themselves in front of the National Press Club. Located in the country’s capital of Dhaka, the National Press Club is a professional club that hosts the journalists of the country, maintaining 800 members and managed by 17 members of council. The request was simple “One country two laws on the same issue for women- the discrimination should end”. The women involved in this protest presented requests including equal maternity leave to that of government workers, as well as equal rights, pay, and promotion for women workers. With banners, signs, and children in tow, these women picketed themselves in front of the building.



After hours of patience and perseverance, a response was elicited from the Federation General Secretary, Safia Parvin, as well as the National Garment Worker's Federation President Amirul Haque Amin. The message of discrimination was communicated, and the response from influential leaders was in agreement with the protesting masses. The speakers were clear in their response, acknowledging a presence of discrimination in a field that already considers women as second class citizens.

Even with recognition by influential individuals and the development of worker's unions, female garment workers still face struggles regarding equal pay and discrimination. In a country that has only recently allowed for the development of unions, protests require a level of courage that many consumers fail to understand. Every clothing item purchased at a discount store and every textile that is imported to North America comes from a factory of people. These people are not an automated assembly line, they deserve rights, and as the producers of the clothing we wear on our backs, they deserve our support in this matter. Like many community-based protests a much larger issue persists, and for working class, minimum-wage earning women to advocate for their rights is noble and admirable in any society.

written by Catherine McDowell

### Additional information:

<http://www.uniglobalunion.org/news/bangladeshi-unions-protest-maternity-leave-equality-international-womens-day>

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/04/22/whoever-raises-their-head-suffers-most/workers-rights-bangladeshs-garment>

<http://www.waronwant.org/sites/default/files/Stitched%20Up.pdf>

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-09-16/most-bangladeshi-garment-workers-are-women-their-union-leaders-werent-until-now>