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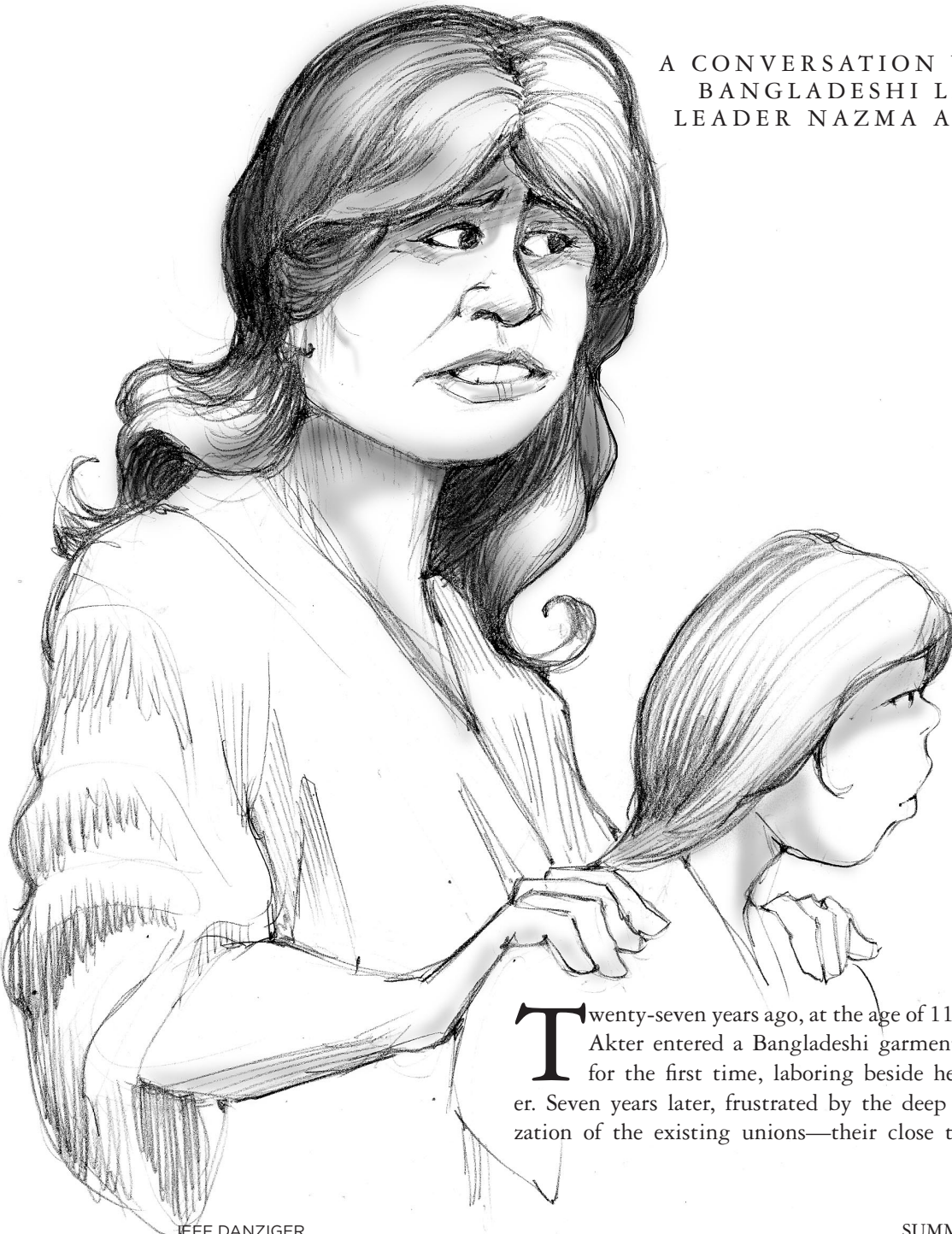
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A View from the Sweatshop Floor

A CONVERSATION WITH
BANGLADESHI LABOR
LEADER NAZMA AKTER



JEFF DANZIGER

Twenty-seven years ago, at the age of 11, Nazma Akter entered a Bangladeshi garment factory for the first time, laboring beside her mother. Seven years later, frustrated by the deep politicization of the existing unions—their close ties with

factory owners, corrupt bureaucrats, and politicians—she formed her own union, the Somnilito Garments Sramik Federation, to defend the interests of tens of thousands of Bangladeshis, primarily women garment workers. Lured from the countryside with promises of a better life, too many find themselves in ill-managed and poorly built factories where catastrophes can strike at anytime. Today, Akter is at the front lines of the battle that has enmeshed global brands, crumbling factories, workers, and consumers. Not long after the tragic collapse of the Rana Plaza complex in April where more than 1,100 workers lost their lives, she spoke from Dhaka with *World Policy Journal* editor David A. Andelman, managing editor Christopher Shay, and contributing writer Edward Bearnot.

WORLD POLICY JOURNAL: Could you begin by giving us some context around the recent tragedies in Bangladesh's factories? What is it like in these factories?

NAZMA AKTER: Our industry started in the early 1980s. That's when the workers started coming in from the countryside. The salaries were low, and working conditions and a lot of other issues were not addressed. In 1986, when I was 11 years old, I began working in a factory alongside my mother. I had been working in the garment industry for seven years when I started working for workers rights and improving working conditions. When I was working in the factory, we faced lots of problems and difficulties: on-time payments, job security, maternity issues, freedom of association. But there was one good thing. In Bangladesh, women from very poor families in the countryside, where there were no job opportunities for

female workers who were not educated, could earn money. Although the wages are low, they can now make decisions in the family, and it's a respectable job for women. Unskilled workers come here as apprentices, then day by day, they gradually become sewing machine operators and earn some more money. There are more than 4,000 factories in Bangladesh and about 4 million workers, 80 percent of whom are single women workers.

So this development is quite a positive sign and is good for our country since this spawns other industries where people are working—hotels, restaurants. All this and more are now linked to the garment industry, which is now the main source of Bangladesh's foreign currency. It's the backbone of our economy and our infrastructure. It's a good time for our country, but the workers' conditions are still very poor.

WPJ: We've heard that working conditions are bad, but we have not heard about them from someone inside the factory.

AKTER: There are long working hours. People are working 10, 12, or even 14 hours a day, sometimes more, six or seven days a week. We have problems of physical abuse, verbal abuse, and the maternity issue is a big problem in our country. When a woman becomes pregnant, she is fired. When workers raise their voices about an issue, they can be fired. Workers lack freedom of association in the workplace.

Nowadays, the safety issue is a big problem. Every year we have fire issues, and many workers have died and been injured. This is a problem because the infrastructure is not industry appropriate. They are using low quality materials when they set up the factory. And also they're not following labor laws or building codes or any

other rules and regulations. The garment industry was set up in the early 1980s with residents in individual houses. And then it grew without any regulation. After that, buyers and the international media came, saying our working conditions weren't good. Manufacturers shifted their factories from Dhaka to outside Dhaka to set up big buildings. Some of the factories are good, with good infrastructure, but many are not. And the manufacturers are not following labor laws and legal rules.

WPJ: Tell us about the relationship between the owners and the politicians in Bangladesh.

AKTER: Oh my God, thank you very much for this question. Most of the politicians are business people in our country. Some 30 parliament members are also garment center owners. Some 60 to 65 percent of people in parliament are business people. That is the relationship between politicians and industry. And, even so, the majority of people in our industry may not be parliament members, but they're also involved in the political field. The ruling party, the opposition party, even the communists, all have members in the garment industry in our country. It's a big problem because law enforcement and the regulatory bodies are always on the side of the owners.

WPJ: What changes are needed in this relationship to prevent disasters and abuses in the future?

AKTER: We have been demanding for the last 20 years that the government establish garment districts—special areas where the factories will be set up with appropriate infrastructure. Right now, gas, electricity,

transportation, roads, and construction are all not appropriate for the demands placed on them. Most of the garment industry is established by local manufacturers, and the government is not paying attention. That is why, if we want better working conditions for the industry, we need to set up proper industrial areas where the government provides land, where we could have the proper space to have the factory, workers' dormitories, irrigation, health clinics, everything we need. And these need not be high-rise buildings. Most of the garment industry is set up today in multi-story buildings which have unhealthy working conditions, few emergency exits, little fire protection, and poor construction. These are all issues, and this is why the government, including our American and European friends need to work together to help build the right infrastructure for the garment industry.

WPJ: What role should customers in the West play in improving these conditions? Recently Walt Disney Company said it's leaving Bangladesh entirely.

AKTER: Leaving or boycotting is not a solution. If companies leave this country, it will be a social disaster. Women will lose their jobs, and they will be in a very vulnerable situation. Disney and other American and European brands have been working in our country, and they have taken so much advantage of our country. They are taking goods from the sweat-

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shops as well as our blood and sweat. It's very cheap. That's why they come. But now because Rana Plaza collapsed, because of the recent fire, now everyone is saying, "Oh, Bangladesh is not safe. We don't want to work in that country." I

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don't agree with them. Those women, who are working in that type of infrastructure, cannot avoid it. They cannot move. Foreign companies have a responsibility to help improve working conditions and safety.

Also the consumers, they are buying very cheap, often "buy one, get one free." But our businesses are not giving it away for free; the local manufacturers are not giving it for free. Our women workers worked long hours, worked hard for low wages, and their productivity is very high. Those women's efforts profit the consumer, the brand, the manufacturers, and our country. But women workers have lots of problems in our country.

Because of low wages, their living conditions are very poor. Lots of workers cannot get proper food, so many suffer from malnutrition and diseases. It's not only Bangladesh's responsibility, it's a global business. Everyone has the responsibility. If a company wanted to avoid or leave this country I think it's unfair. People are talking about ethical business, they're not talking about ethical pricing. Disney, Wal-Mart, the Gap, and basically all the retailers and brands in Bangladesh, what is their responsibility? What is their role? They must take responsibility when these kinds of things happen, because if they wanted to avoid or leave this country, it's not fair.

We will not accept this. They should come to us and work together to improve working conditions and not kill the workers.

WPJ: The problem is that improvements cost money and require commitments. The reason Bangladesh is so popular among American and Western manufacturers is that labor is the cheapest. If you go one step above, then you begin to compete with the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, and even China, where competition is more on the question of quality as well as price. Are you worried that if you increase the price of labor you will be competing against countries that have other advantages that maybe Bangladesh does not have?

AKTER: I know that in a competitive market, it's very hard to compete. I know people are coming to buy in this country because of the cheap labor. That is why following proper working conditions and infrastructure is also the responsibility of the United States and Europe, because when they're getting a good cheap price, they're not thinking about the working conditions. They simply need to deliver their production to the European or American markets. Because China has become higher priced and couldn't compete, business has shifted to Bangladesh. Vietnam and Cambodia have a very small garment industry compared to Bangladesh. Yes, it is a competitive market, but if we are serious, honest, transparent, and committed to the people then it can be solved. If we are only showing that we're trying to solve things, but we're not doing them, then that will be hypocritical and not work.

Everybody has a responsibility. As a labor leader, I have a responsibility. Buyers,

owners, governments, American and European trade bodies all also have a responsibility. People are not taking this matter seriously. Only when something like the recent tragic fire happens are people serious about fire safety and focused on it. Now that Rana Plaza has collapsed, maybe now people will be talking about building safety. But after six months, buyers, the government, the Europeans and Americans, everybody will return to normal life.

We are trying to solve all the big problems immediately, but the problems cannot be solved overnight. That is why we must take short-term, medium-term, and long-term steps. Good factories, infrastructure, and education are all very important. Workers need to know how to protect themselves if this kind of thing happens. Even mid-level management knows nothing. Education for building and fire safety and prevention are important. Our government, the manufacturers, everybody is cheating our workers. That is why nobody can leave this country and claim not to be responsible. Everybody is responsible for improving the country and labor rules.

WPJ: As a labor leader, what is your strategy to help bring about these changes? What role does organized labor play in Bangladesh right now?

AKTER: Our role is to talk with the government and manufacturers to represent workers rights and also to raise our voice and campaign for them. We are also trying to educate the workers, trying to improve their conditions. But our role is sometimes very tough. In the factory, it is very tough to raise our voices in unison, so these are also issues to talk about and address to our government and European and Americans consumers.

WPJ: Tell us about freedom of association in Bangladesh.

AKTER: When workers try to raise their voices or join a union, they lose their jobs. If they seek unionism, then the government is not on the side of the workers. That is why amendments to labor laws are anti-union, especially with respect to the minimum wage. If we are talking about factory workers who have problems and want to raise their voice, then the buyer proclaims that the union is not good and will destroy its industry. No one is interested in freedom of association. That is why it's very important if we are to improve conditions and prevent disasters like Rana Plaza, there must be a trade union. When the factory isn't safe, the workers didn't want to go in, but the politicians, the factory owners like Mohammad Rana, forced them to go into the unsafe work place and killed them. They told them if they don't come to work they wouldn't get their salaries. Because they need to work, they went into the unsafe factory.

WPJ: We're interested in the power of the unions there. The power of unions in the United States and much of the West has enabled them to say, "We will take all of our workers and leave if demands aren't met."

AKTER: That is why we need your support. American and European unions are very strong. We need your support to put pressure on local brands and to help local workers to raise their voices. So all of you must tell people to buy our clothes and pay a good price, because otherwise consumers are paying very low prices, which is also not fair. They need to know where the goods are coming from, the workers' situation, where they live, where they

work, how they are eating. These issues are everyone's responsibilities.

WPJ: If workers in Bangladesh say, "We are going to stop working until this gets better," I would think that the owners could simply say "Okay, we will fire all of you and get all new people to come in." How do you fight that?

AKTER: That is why we have a legal system. We will file a case against the owner, and sometimes we can ask for help from the brand or an international group. We have an arbitration system with the owners' association, like BGMEA—Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association.

WPJ: When Pope Francis was told that workers in Bangladesh are paid \$40 a month, he said these workers, then, are not workers, they're slaves. Do you feel they're slaves?

AKTER: They do earn only \$40 a month. The living conditions are very poor. They can't access proper food, because living costs are so high. That is why our female workers are malnourished. That is why I say cheap labor cannot solve the problem. Consumers need to ask themselves when they go to stores: Where do the goods come from? How much are they selling for? And how much are they paying for the clothes? Social responsibility begins in their homes. We do not seek charity. We want living wages, decent working conditions, freedom of association, and workplace safety. It's very important for our garment industry.

WPJ: If you had a chance to tell President Obama what he should do, what would you say?

AKTER: Mr. Obama, honorable president, please tell Wal-Mart and some other brands they should respect the workers and pay a proper price, ensure living wages, safe working conditions, respect freedom of association, and do not remove business from our country. These are the things I would request Mr. Obama do for us.

WPJ: Do you think that the recent building collapse will strengthen unions or lead to any substantive, lasting labor improvements?

AKTER: Yes. The recent collapse demonstrates why we need to care properly for workers and establish a management dialogue with our unions. An infrastructure mechanism also needs to be set up. Everyone is now in a daze. Our workers are very scared to work in factories, and if the workers are not interested to work in the factory, it is very tough for everyone.

WPJ: What have you personally faced as a Bangladeshi labor leader?

AKTER: I have had cases filed against me. I am always under observation, which is meant to oppress us. Law enforcement, police, national security as well—many people are also observing our activities and our office. Our office was attacked by goons, and they beat us. These are things that personally I face.

Goons hired by the manufacturer broke into our office last year. They broke all our things. They beat our office colleagues and our garment workers, because we protested when one of the factory managers was not properly paying our workers. We were asked to withdraw and not to work in favor of the workers. That is why they hired the goons to attack our office.

WPJ: The owner of the Rana Plaza, it turns out, had a squad of goons himself. How often does the factory owner have a gang of people willing to commit violence?

AKTER: Many politicians intimidate workers. You cannot say directly that they are goons. They are the politicians threatening the people. My request to you again is to please save our workers. Try to help our workers have better working conditions, better wages, and save our industry

because this industry is very important to women workers.

WPJ: You always say women workers, are there are no men who are involved?

AKTER: There are also men working, but only 15 percent or 20 percent, and most of the men are bosses or high officials or in management. Most of the workers are female, which is why I am saying women, women, women. ●