

OVERSEAS SWEATSHOP ABUSES, THEIR IMPACT ON U.S. WORKERS, AND THE NEED FOR ANTI-SWEATSHOP LEGISLATION

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Prepared Statement of Sheikh Nazma, Founder/Former President, Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity

My name is Sheikh Nazma and I am from Bangladesh. I started working when I was 12 years old, as a helper in a garment export factory called Bay Garments Ltd. At that time, in 1984 we worked 10-14 hours a day and 7 days a week. For this we earned 240 Taka a month, which comes to 2\1/2\ U.S. cents an hour. I worked for 10 years in the garment factories, eventually becoming a skilled sewing operator. But in every factory I worked, the legal rights of the workers--80 percent of whom were young women--were repressed. Then, in 1993, I helped to organize the first major struggle in a garment factory to win our rights and organize a union. It took 6 months of struggle, but eventually we won.

That was how the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) was formed, of which I was the president. The AFL-CIO Solidarity Center has helped us in our

struggle. That is when the serious threats began. Gang members, thugs, sent by management constantly harassed and threatened us. On many occasions I was assaulted and ruthlessly beaten.

...When the research began in June, we discovered scores of children just 11, 12 and 13 years of age working at the Harvest Rich factory. More than 300 to 400 adolescents--14, 15, 16 and 17 years old--were also illegally employed at Harvest Rich. Under Bangladeshi law, factories are strictly prohibited from hiring anyone under 14 years of age, while adolescent workers between the ages of 14 and 17 can only be employed under special circumstances, and are allowed to work just 5 hours a day for a maximum of 30 hours per week. Also, adolescents may never work at night.

Halima was one of the 11 year-old workers. Routinely, she was forced to work 11 to 14 hours a day, from 8 a.m. to 7, or more commonly 10 p.m. She was at the factory 7 days a week, with an average of just 2 days off a month. It was not uncommon for Halima and the other children to be at the factory 95 hours a week.

But it got even worse. Before clothing shipments had to leave for the U.S., there were often mandatory 19 to 20-hour all-night shifts from 8 a.m. right through to 3 or 4 a.m. the following day, after which the workers would sleep on the factory floor for a few hours before beginning the next shift at 8 a.m. that same morning. Even the child workers could be forced to work such grueling all-night shifts three or four times a month. While paying a very rare unannounced visit to the Harvest Rich factory in November, U.S. company representatives found dozens of workers at 12:30 a.m. still sewing boys Faded Glory jeans for Wal-Mart, 16½ hours into what would have been a 19 to 20-hour shift had the executives not sent the exhausted workers home.

...The demands of the Harvest Rich workers are very modest. They are willing to work 10, 11 or even 12 hours a day, as long as overtime is voluntary and paid correctly. They need 1 day off a week, as they are exhausted. The beatings must end. The workers' dream would be to earn at least 5,000 taka a month, which is just \$71.50 a month, \$16.50 a week, or 35 cents an hour.

-Excerpt from Overseas Sweatshop Abuses, Their Impact on U.S. Workers, and the Need for Anti-Sweatshop Legislation [Senate Hearing 110-1062], 2007