

Precisely ten years ago this month, in April 2013, a massive, multi floor garment factory collapsed. In an industrial suburb of Dhaka, Bangladesh, at least 1,134 people were killed. Mostly young women.

**Rick** [00:00:49] And it's the worst industrial accident on record.

And in the rubble of the factory, among the bodies of hundreds of workers, were labels for some familiar companies. Zara, Walmart, Benetton, and Mango had all produced apparel in this tower. Called Rana Plaza.

**Rick** [00:01:11] And what was particularly striking about the Rana Plaza factory collapse was that it was completely avoidable.

This is former Brown University provost Rick Locke, speaking in 2014. He says everyone knew—everyone who was there on the ground could see that Rana Plaza was dangerous.

In fact, cracks in the building's foundations and in the walls were reported the day before. They were reported to the police. The police came to the local building owner and said, you know, you should really shut this down. It's not safe.

That very day, the workers didn't want to go into the building.

[00:02:18] And what was striking is that these workers felt that they didn't have a choice because they felt that if they didn't go back to work, they would lose their job. And so shortly after the shift began, as they were in the early hours of their shift, the building collapsed and killed most of them. [16.7s]

In the wake of the tragedy, the outcry began.

27.0s] [00:15:36] Every single time that there's a newspaper article about Rana Plaza or any of these things. If you read the articles, it always says they need to be inspected more often, more rigorously, more transparency, etc..

But. The Rana Plaza factory *had* been inspected. Not only that. It had been inspected by a professional company who specializes in this. There are entire businesses who only do just this. Go to factories and inspect them. This is what's called "a social audit"

**Emma** [00:11:33] It's an inspection of a factory to see if it complies with standards for labor rights and labor conditions.

This is Emma Vogt of the Clean Clothes campaign, who says that many clothing brands will hire one of these outside company to do these audits. To go check on their factories for them. Often times because the factories are in countries very far away.

**Emma** [00:05:43] oftentimes brands don't actually have the capacity to be in their factories.

And this world of companies who go inspect factories on behalf of brands? This is a huge international business and there are these international players.

[00:32:43]There's Bureau Veritas. There's Intertek. There's Rena. Those are some of the big names which won't really ring a bell with anyone hahaha

And another company that rings no bells. Is TUV Rhineland. A auditing company based out of Germany.

**Emma** [00:31:52]. Which won't sound familiar, but TUV Rhineland actually ... Was controversial because it's performed in audit at a factory in the Rana Plaza building. And they made a report saying that the building was of good construction quality and this is less than a year before it collapsed.

How is this possible? That everyone on the ground could see that the factory was crumbling. That you could see it with your own eyes. And yet the company that was hired to report back- the company that had one job- said everything was ok. What the hell.

The problem is far beyond this one factory. And far beyond this one auditor. The problem lies deep within the hidden world of factory audits. And this industry is so strange, so large, so complicated, that it makes it almost impossible to know where and how our clothes are made. But this industry might also hold the key to fashion's salvation. If only we all knew about it. But it's really freaky in there.

**BREAK**

Like any annoying fashion person, I believe that clothes should cost a lot of money. Because they should be worth a lot of money. But I fully understand that the flaw in this argument is that most of us do not have a lot of money.

**Sofi:** [00:04:30] we're not willing to change the fact that a retail worker makes \$17 an hour. Then sure, they should have cheap clothes.

Sofi Thanhauser, the author of *Worn: a people's history of clothing*. And she gets that we all want lots of cheap clothes, of course, because everyone should have access to self expression.

**Sofi:** But what it relies on is a worker in Bangladesh who's also making radically less than they should be. And so there's a way in which we justify exploiting a foreign worker in order to continue a system where our own workers aren't paid enough.

And when it comes to cheap clothes, it's a vicious cycle of exploitation, where our fates are all interwoven. Especially Americans. We, for many many decades have been accustomed to mass-produced affordable clothes.

Sofi [00:00:58] So that happened here first in New York. ...

And if you know anything at all about the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire that broke out in a downtown garment factory in Manhattan in 1911, you know that we also had some pretty terrible working conditions here.

we started out in the 1900s with teenage girls essentially in the Lower East Side, making clothes in sweatshops, and then because of those teenage girls, a lot of who read a lot of Marx in the old country

So they built up unions.

**Sofi 2** [00:09:29] ... And this I mean, this group of girls and the movement that they built raised making garments to the level of a decent existence. But the effort to unionize textiles was just this decades long fight that was pretty brutally lost in the end.

And the end was really quite recently- until 1980 up to 70% of American clothes were made in the country. And clothes from brands like Lee and Carhartt were still made by unions. How did this just end?

**Sofi:** It's not like, oh, whoops, sure, let's let in these cheap goods. It was engineered [00:10:53]And I don't think it's, you know, like a grand overarching single person's evil plot. But I do think there was a real irony in the fact that garment making was unionized and that the reason that disappeared was because of this willingness to flood the market with goods from East Asia in an explicit effort to bring capitalism there.

After World War II, Japan's textile capacity was decimated. I mean, everything in Japan was decimated, because the US had decimated it. We had dropped the atomic bomb on them. And so. The US felt obligated to rebuild Japan's economy. The US was going to spend money and resources on Japan to rebuild. And make sure our economies were way too bound up for us to ever go to war again.

**Sofi:** And the plan was for the US to totally resuscitate the textile industry ASAP- basically because of a general feeling that Japan shouldn't be allowed to, quote unquote, fall to communism.

So The US government hatched this kind of wild plan to export our excess cotton to Japan.

**Sofi** [01:01:01] ... So it's actually a mississippi senator who proposed the idea that the State Department subsidize the sale of U.S. cotton to Japan so that they could then produce cotton textiles, and that all just kind of not sounded good to everybody.

And obviously if the US was going to artificially prop up the Japanese textile industry, we also had to buy this stuff. Someone had to create the market for it. And it was going to be us.

[01:04:22] yeah, garments started to flow in from Japan and then later Japan took charge of the more capital intensive part, made the fabric and then sent it out to these other places– Korea, Taiwan– to be sewn into garments. So, they're flooding the U.S. market. Much to the dismay of the American textile industry.

By the time of the Kennedy administration, there was an awareness that hmmm, if we keep letting these clothes come in unchecked, our domestic clothing industry is going to bottom out.

[01:04:56]...But they also weren't willing to alter this basic calculus. And the decision really was to let the U.S.. Textile and garment industries die.

Because we could have changed that. Ultimately the US government decides whether clothes made in other countries are cheap or expensive. And they do that by taxing it or not taxing it. But we've come to see cheap clothes as part of democracy. Part of our freedom of expression. And who could resist the clothes that were coming out at unfathomably low prices, once they started getting made in China.

**Amelia** [00:02:45]Yeah. China is a unique case.

Amelia Pang is the author of Made In China. Which is an exploration of why Chinese goods, historically, have been so so so cheap. And it's because a lot of the times, the labor was free. Because China has a huge network of labor camps.

It's the largest forced labor system that is still in existence today.

And you could say “hey America's prison population is also manufacturing products without sufficient pay!” You'd be right. That's very true and its a huge issue. But in China this forced labor system is so much larger than prisons.

**Amelia** [00:04:52] There's this vast system of extralegal detention centers where people who are arbitrarily detained they haven't been sentenced in a court. They're just people who have disappeared into these facilities for various reasons.

Sometimes these camps are labeled as rehabilitation or reform centers. Or juvenile detention centers. Pang says that people can be put there for being Uyhgurs or feminists or dissidents

**Amelia** ] [00:07:45] they haven't been sentenced to anything, but they can disappear for years at a time during very intense and torturous manufacturing work. Many of these people die in these facilities and they all have to make products.

This labor camp system has been around since the 1930s. They were modeled on soviet gulags, when the Chinese Communist Party was gaining momentum.

Each time they captured a region, they'd take prisoners

Usually landlords or peasants with a little more money than others, anyone who was labeled counter revolutionary

These were the types of people that were forced to produce weapons and other products before they were executed.

And after the Chinese Communist Party officially took over in 1949, they realized that this system was extremely lucrative.

**Amelia** [00:10:12] The production value of these labor camps was about ¥1.7 billion in 1958.

That's like 43 billion dollars today

The production value of these forced labor facilities surged to ¥14 billion. After the US became China's second largest importer in 1979.

I bet a lot of American brands probably did not knowingly sign up to get their products made by forced labor. I mean, ok, I'm sure some knew. But there were also brands that probably had no idea.

I don't want to say that companies knowingly sourced from forced labor because a lot of times there's these hidden subcontracts that happen.

Like if a garment factory needs help finishing an order, or even just adding some finishing touches- it's so cheap to outsource that to a prison camp.

**Amelia** [00:19:45] Even very small parts of the process are subcontracted out. So, for example, just. Just packaging. Just putting the packaging together at the very end. That could be done at a labor camp.

So it's hard to even parse what's made in a prison camp and what isn't. That kind of subcontracting is usually done under the table.

**Amelia** [00:34:25] you know it's very common thing that happens in the industry.

But in the 90s, Americans started to realize how common this was. And got outraged. Specifically at one company.

**Amelia** [00:11:14] So in the nineties, there was a global anti sweatshop campaign against Nike

Boycotts, bad press. Really bad for Nike.

[00:12:32] It pushed Nike to finally start doing audits. It was one of the first companies to start doing audits, and this was a really a revolutionary thing to do at the time.

So Nike was like ok: We'll create some labor standards and then we'll go check in on our factories and make sure they're being upheld.

that wasn't acceptable.

But the Fair Labor Association was like no way, come on Nike, you can't inspect your own factories.

**Sarosh** [00:02:04] I mean, Nike would send their own people and then they would just say whatever Nike wanted them to say.

Professor Sarosh Kuruvilla teaches labor relations at Cornell.

So they said we needed a third party. [00:02:29] So they went to PricewaterhouseCoopers, which is a financial audit firm and they chose Pricewaterhouse because it was a respected auditor.

Ok but PricewaterhouseCoopers was also the one who handed Moonlight's academy award to La la land. I don't know why people keep asking this company do things outside their wheelhouse

**Sarosh** [00:02:45] As it turned out. That was a bad move because the accountants who do auditing financial auditing have no idea what it is to audit factory conditions.

Checking for, say, coerced labor or child labor or fire safety, or worker harassment, is so completely different than looking at a spreadsheet of numbers. It is not the same as a financial audit. It's a totally separate skill set.

[00:03:15] So that failure of the financial auditing system. Gave rise to a new occupation, if you like, called social auditing.

Social as opposed to financial auditing. There was no one who specialized in this.

**Sarosh** [00:03:26]Many, many firms rushed in to to try to fill that void. And that's how the industry has grown in leaps and bounds. I talked to several people and we came up with an estimate of \$85 billion

an 85 billion dollar industry.

But it could be more than that.

Because the social auditing industry has branDED out to factories that make toys, electronics, furniture. Office supplies. Now almost all companies now send someone to check out their factories abroad. But it really all started with clothing.

**Sarosh** [00:20:54]Apparel is unique because this private regulation model started there.

And, compared to other sorts of manufacturing, Apparel factories can have a risk of abuse. Because it's just so easy to start an apparel factory. You just need some sewing machines

[00:21:47] if I buy ten sewing machines, I'm a garment factory and I can get business.

So you could put your ten sewing machines anywhere.. In any old dangerous space. Without any proper business sense or capability. And so, to guard against this, this is what a social auditor does.

**Sarosh** [00:23:11]So typically the auditors go into the factory.

They spend some time checking payroll records

because payroll records tell you about many things in the code of conduct.

That's how you look at overtime, wages, working hours, etc.

[00:23:39]Some time is spent walking around the factory. Some time is spent talking with managers and some time is spent talking with samples of workers. And that's typically an audit.

Seems simple enough, right? Just, you know, check everything. But audits are not one size fits all. Especially when you start to get into different countries, with different regulations.

**Sarosh** [00:43:10]You have to remember that you know China. Until recently was responsible for more than 60 to 70% of low cost garment and software and garment and toy exports. [00:43:40]So a lot of a lot of those small garment factories producing socks, etc., are no longer operate in China because they've gone to low cost places like Bangladesh, India and Vietnam.

The kinds of countries where Bent works.

**Bent** [00:00:05] I am in Thailand, but I cover Southeast Asia. So including Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia.

Bent is an auditor. He's a really good auditor. He's sort of a best case scenario. And in that best case scenario- a good audit is mostly about talking to workers. Asking them what their life is like and what their working conditions are. Which is hard to maneuver, because on the factory floor, workers can't really be honest if they know that their bosses might be listening. So Bent goes the extra mile to meet workers offsite

**Bent** [00:36:00]. So offsite we can talk about everything because it would be a place where the workers are comfortable. They will choose the place. Some would want to do it at their home or does want to do at a cafe

Bent is corroborating, fact checking. Functionally being a reporter. His audits are really involved

**Bent** [00:04:31]And it can take a lot of time. So you would spend some months.

But this is a best case scenario. Most auditors don't do what Bent does. They don't take months to meet people off site and corporate them. And not because these auditors are stupid or lazy or evil. It's because- most auditors just don't get paid a lot. Not enough to spend *months* on an audit.

And why are auditors paid so little? Because - and this is the twist that makes no sense at all. Quite often, the auditors are paid... by the factory.

**Bent** [01:07:09 So you are monitoring the factory, but you're actually getting paid by them.

By the factory they're supposed to be inspecting.

**Bent** [01:06:04]When social auditing happened in the beginning ...it was still the brands that were, you know, they were hiring auditors. The auditors came to the factory and made the report and send it to the buyer. So that was what happened probably in the late nineties, early 2000s.

And then, brands started to say that the factories should have more "buy in"

And what that means is that the brand will tell the factory, Oh, you will have this company say Intertek come and visit you, but you will have to pay them because that's your buy in. So, so the brands were kind of like, so they don't even want to pay for the audits.



And factories were like, ok, fine, we'll pay for these. We'll pay much much less for them.

**Bent** [01:08:00] it's definitely a very murky world. [01:09:12]The they are all kind of levels of cheating

The levels are so deep, that even if a clothing company says" look, we did an audit and we've had this reputable company check in on our factory, here's our certification." It might not mean shit. Because as the audit industry has grown, so has the audit *deception industry*.

But I'll tell you about it. After the break.

-----BREAK-----

May I just say for the record- the countries where our clothes are made *do* have labor laws. In fact, on the books, many of those laws might be better than ours in the United States. It's just that we also don't follow our laws here.

Sarosh [00:05:17] we have laws, too, for the workplace, which are often very rarely followed and often violated heavily.

And so. As it happens in so many countries, workers have to come together and advocate for themselves.

**Avery:** May I ask what are you on your cheeks? What are you wearing on your face?

**Thomas** [00:26:51]So yeah, I will answer for them, because it is called thanaka and it is kind of the traditional makeup for the burmese people.

I had never heard of thanaka. But it's a pretty cool form of makeup slash sunscreen made from treebark. And as my kind translator Thomas said, this is the traditional make up of the burmese people. And it's what Phyto Phyto Mar, Hla Hla Htay , and Khin Mar Aye were wearing on their cheeks.

[burmese] - now they all three together. So we can start.

Avery: thank you so much Thomas for translating

Phyto Phyto Mar, Hla Hla Htay and Khin Mar Aye are among the estimated 70 thousand refugees who have fled Myanmar.

**Thomas** [01:12:50]We have to leave from our our family in Myanmar and we are at the very far place at the work- in Thailand...

Now they're living in Thailand. All three of these workers were employed at a factory called VK Garments. Which made, among other things, jeans for the British chain tesco. And from what I understand, their experience in the garment industry is not unusual, especially for immigrant workers. This is what Khin Mar Aye said.

**Thomas** [00:55:53]...Sometime the factory management withhold our legal document and sometimes they withhold our passports

Sometimes, if workers depend on their employer for their immigration status, sometimes the employer will take their documents away, which means they can't leave. It creates essentially forced labor.

**Thomas** [00:55:53]We the migrant migrant worker had been forced to work overtime. But even though we work every minute we did not receive any like a sufficient money we do not have sufficient income even though we work every day.

The Thai minimum wage is 354 Thai Bhat a day. Which is \$10.41.

**Thomas** [00:25:20]but they only receive around 150 or 130 or sometimes 170.

That's five dollars or less. And they didn't get the legal overtime rate. So they were not making enough money to live an actual social life.

00:12:12]And we are actually facing these difficulties in our daily experience and .. we don't have enough money to buy food and other things. And we are in the financial difficulties almost all the time

And you'd think an audit would pick up on this. Like, hey it seems like there's forced labor happening here. But of course, the auditor sees none of it.

**Thomas** [00:32:47]the factory manager always had been informed in advance of the auditing before auditing visits to our factory.

In this case, like so many cases, the auditors were paid by the factory. So of course they coordinate with the factory and are like "ok, can we come on this day?" And so the factory knows they're coming. And they get ready. And one way factories can prepare for an audit is by hiring an auditing consultant.

**Sarosh** [00:27:17]audit consultants help the factories improve their game. And that's genuine.

as professor Kuruvilla said Many of these auditing consultants used to be auditors themselves.

But the auditing the consultants also help the factories pass the audit through. Fair means or foul.

Yes, sometimes they can really provide valuable insight to help a factory improve. But they can also just help factories fake improvements.

**Sarosh**[00:27:35]Those audit consultants often wind up helping the factory falsify accounting payroll information so that when that information is presented to the auditor, you know, it all looks great, even though the false sets of books and they could help them create for false sets of books

Some of these “auditing consultants” help make actual *fake* timecards.

**Amelia** [00:14:35]Yeah, they they can create fake time stamps to show that workers are working like a good amount of hours. They're not being overworked and

Amelia Pang, author of Made In China

You know, they're handmade and they look so real that even professional auditors can't tell the real ones when the fake ones. There's software that can edit a lot of the the their documents to make it look like all legit. [7.3s]

And another part of making fake books is opening fake bank accounts on behalf of workers. Which is what Hla Hla Htay said happened at the Vk Garment factory.

Thomas [01:07:49]They opened the bank bank account for us but they, they would hold our banking information like bank card and our bank account.

So the factory would put money into workers bank accounts, to show payroll for when the auditor came in

but they, they, they withdraw the money themselves because of the banking information and bank card are in the hand. So these kinds of things.

**Bent** [00:43:46]It looks compliant, but it's not because it's still made up. [5.4s]

Bent has even seen factories where the owners just fully try to hide a part of it. Like in one factory, he had been told that the workers were housed in really shoddy subpar dormitories. But when he got to the part of the factory where he knew the dormitory was. There was a wall.

[00:30:43]they had built a wall.

They just were what dormitory?

We don't have a dormitory!

What are you talking about?

[00:31:33].. and we could see, well, you know, the the wall looks very new and the work hardly dried the cement down on this, this wall. But yeah, that's that, that's, that's some that illustrate also to the extent some of the what what factory owners are willing to do to hide things from us.

And the workers know this is all an elaborate performance. They're playing a role in it.

**Thomas** [00:33:28]we have to prepare two day or three days before auditing visits to our factory.

The workers, of course, had to clean the whole place up. And Khin Mar Aye says that the day before the audit team arrived at the Vk Garments, the workers had been instructed exactly what to say.

**Thomas** [00:37:01]we had been lectured by the factory management to lie. And they always force us to do make lie - to to tell lies to the audit team.

But, it's not just that workers are forced. They also don't want to fail the audit. They don't want the factory to lose any orders.

It means that we will lose our job and we will be unemployed.

Bent, our auditor, says this happens a lot. That when he's talking to workers in a factory, many times they will have been coached on a script. Terrified of losing their job. And Bent says its his job, as the auditor, to get them to break that script.

**Bent** [00:39:56]... Workers are sitting there because they have to. They're telling us things because they're told to. You have to go out and you have to be creative and not can't follow the script.

You don't want to ask "do you get vacation?" you want to ask "what did you do on your last vacation?" You don't want to ask "do you get maternity leave?" you want to ask "what would happen if you got pregnant?"

**Bent** [00:38:39]So a question that my least favorite is, So what is your earning during the day? You just know they're going to say whatever the number is. And it's it's a waste of my time. It's a waste of their time, even when I know that this is not true. So I'd rather ask other things- what do they know about this? What do they know about that?

But again. Most Auditors are not like Bent. Most auditors are literally also following a script. They're running through a checklist. They're not paid enough to do much more than that.

**Bent** [00:40:43]And that that is where I think most auditors fail because they come with a checklist and they have a very clear script and they just following it. Then what you get is nothing

And "nothing" is ok. For the factory. For brands. It's enough to just say on paper "look, we checked!" All good. It's just how they cover their butts.

**Sarosh** [00:15:19]Companies persist in doing this because they think that, you know, this is what everybody else does. And so in order for each company to justify why it does audits, it says, obviously, as everybody else is doing it.

But the workers at the VK Garment factory didn't do it how everybody else is doing it. Phyto Mar, Hla Hla Htay , and Khin Mar Aye broke out of the mold. They didn't play the game they were supposed to. They didn't go along with the theater. They told the auditors what was happening to them.

**Thomas** [00:09:45]So when the auditing arrived to our factory we talk to them about our current situation, what we really receive

The auditor, this big company called Intertek, of course had been paid by the factory.

00:12:12... But after that the audit team inform that to the factory management and it make the problem for us and the workplace.

So telling the auditor only hurt the workers.. The workers were trapped in this terrible factory.

And that's where I need to pause.. Because it's entirely too easy to make this about corrupt factory owners who just can't help but exploit and abuse people at every opportunity

**Rick** [00:17:00]The discourse is that there's some you know, they're like evil people that have to be inspected more often.

Rick Lock again.

And while, you know, some of the I think that the owner of Rana Plaza building was probably not the most morally, you know, upright kind of person,

Same with the VK Garment factory owner. Not a paragon of morality there. But, broadly, it's not like oh these factory owners just love to be cruel and greedy.

most of these people are actually really decent people who are working really hard to make things work under very, very hard conditions.

Because these garment factories are forced to do the impossible. They churn out more and more clothes every year. Faster and faster. At lower and lower prices. Professor Kuruvilla says the price of one garment has gone *down* over the last five years... which makes no sense, because all manufacturing costs have gone up.

Sarosh [01:13:52] I mean, electricity cost, wages, minimum wages, change materials, everything. How is this possible?

It's possible because a lot of factories are barely scraping by- cutting corners and sometimes even eating costs -losing money on expedited shipping- whatever they have to do to get garments out cheaper and faster.

And who is putting these expectations on the factories? It's the brands.

Rick: [00:19:28] the plant could only make 20,000 pair of running shoes a month. Why was there an order for 25,000 there?

A lot of brands are asking factories to do more than they are capable of doing.

And of course, the rational plant manager isn't going to say no to a big order. They're going to take that order, right?

The factory is going to just say yes and agree to everything and try to make it work— because it's all in a desperate bid to get more orders for the next year.

**Sarosh** [00:55:54]there's never a guarantee that the that same factory that we will give you a minimum set of orders for the next year because they want the freedom to move because they might be somebody else with a lower price.

Professor Kuruvilla says that brands switch factories at the drop of a hat- many of them go to whoever can offer them even the slightest discount.

**Sarosh** [00:55:33] So there's some other factory that can give you a \$0.01 lower price. Companies move, right? Because a global brand might source from China today, then they might source some Cambodia tomorrow because it's cheaper in Bangladesh - and it's constant movement. There's a lot of speed dating going on. But there's no commitment.

If a brand were to commit to a factory. To guarantee orders- to say, "ok, we will work with you for the next 3 years. Here's where you need to do to improve." Then the factory might feel safe

enough, and have enough money to do repairs in their building, or pay their workers more. To actually act on the changes they need to make and not feel like they have to lie.

**Bent** [00:52:10] When we look at the numbers, and if you look at the earnings of the brands- which are like really in the multi billion dollar range- its clear that the money is there. There is a lot of money in the garment industry, but it almost all goes to the brands. I think brands could take a cut and simply just pay a bit more to the factories.

And that's at the heart of this whole problem. That the brands aren't really committed to their factories. They don't take responsibility for the conditions there. And the workers at the Vn Garment factory knew that.

So guess what. The workers at the Vn Garment Factory turned around and SUED the brand they were producing for. They sued that british chain they were making jeans for. And not only the brand. They also sued the auditing company!!

**Emma** [01:05:48] So now the workers are taking both tesco - the brand they were producing for and intertek the auditing company to court.

Emma Vogt from the Clean Clothes campaign says this is massive, that the workers also are accusing the *auditor* of negligence. That's a really powerful message.

**Emma** [00:57:03]auditors also have a responsibility here. If they keep reporting back to the brands that everything is fine when it's clearly not and they make money off of that

And this lawsuit is pretty amazing. But it's a bandaid, it's not a solution. The workers are still dealing with the fallout.

**Thomas** [00:38:59] In total 136 workers had been dismissed from the factory after this happened. And so so we are not we are not that worker anymore in the vn garment factory. [00:42:12]... and so so it it create a huge difficulty for us to find a new job.

And the lawyers who represent the workers are still trying to get Intertek & Tesco to settle the case.

**Emma** [01:09:52]So our hope is actually that the that the companies now find a solution directly with the workers, that the case can be settled and that the workers rather than actually having to wait for the case to go through the court system

And it's sort of a cruel full circle joke- because this is what audits were supposed to do in the first place! They were supposed to help the brand understand how the workers were treated! To make their conditions better. But audits really can still be that. Like Audits can really become a useful tool. If they're done honestly and well, and brands actually read them and heed them and act on them, audits could improve lives all over the world.

And this is where we come in. As consumers and as citizens. And this where I could deliver a lecture about we need to buy less and pay more for clothes. But this is so much bigger than our individual consumer choices. But we have a role in pushing our favorite brand to do better.

**Amelia:** [00:31:34] Google that brand. Google the word audit. See if they publish any of their audits.

And then, Amelia Pang says, read the audit. See what it actually says.

**Amelia** [00:31:33]A lot of time it's very vague. It's a very short summary. They don't tell you how long it took to conduct that audit. They don't tell you what they looked for. And those are red flags, in my opinion [00:30:46] I say just writing social media, public social media posts, pointing out this brand's lack of supply chain transparency, you know, could have more impact down the line than people may realize.

I have to admit. I first sort of rolled my eyes at this. Like— people are functionally enslaved to make our cheap clothes and the most that we, the beneficiaries of this whole system can do... is tweet?

[00:29:35]a lot of major brands actually dedicate a pretty big budget to something called social listening, which is the process of identifying and assessing what people are saying about your brand. it's very likely that that Instagram comment will get documented in an internal report for an executive at the company.

Amelia says that caring that little bit. Just saying that you give a damn- that actually matters. But I didn't realize how possible this was, until I learned who Bent works for. Who he does his thorough, comprehensive auditing on behalf of

**Bent** [00:02:17]We monitor on behalf of the U.S. university.

Universities in the US. Which, when you think about it, are huge brands- especially like, sports teams licensing. Merch.

**Bent** [00:05:48]... it's a multibillion industry to produce all the goods for the universities. ...So we have about 150 members including from Harvard and UCLA and many others.

The members of this alliance of schools have an incredible open supply chain

**Bent** [00:12:14]For the universities, you can go on our website, it will be on workers rights dot org.

And this is because universities know that their customers are outspoken and educated and they care. And because of that simple fact, because their consumers care. Bent lives in



Southeast Asia and carefully inspects about 20 factories each year. Slowly working his way through the 300 or so in the US University roster.

**Bent** [00:48:52] So I'd rather focus on a limited number and make improvements there. And then we move on to others. It would be really great if I could work myself to the stage that I was unemployed. Although after so many years I doubt it would happen. Who knows. It would be nice.

It would be nice. And good auditors like Bent can really help factories improve, one by one. But again audits, ultimately, are a tool. They're very useful and they're telling. But bigger changes also need to happen. Like what happened in the wake of the Rana Plaza collapse.

**Sarosh** [00:45:06] I think about Rana Plaza and what it did was that it created the accord

The Bangladesh Accord, was established in 2013, is a collective agreement between a number of brands and factories and labor unions. The accord actually obligates brands to ensure proper fire and building safety in their factories. And it's working. As of 2019, 90% of the factories involved in the accord have gotten repairs and fire resistant doors and isolated stairwells. And just necessary stuff.

**Bent** [00:26:23] Every year, I would say before the Rana Plaza there, there was at least one major fire or something else that killed dozens, if not hundreds of workers. And that's just not happening anymore.

Bent says that is definitely because of the accord. It's been so successful, that the accord has also been adopted in Pakistan. And it will be interesting to see if it has the same impact there. If it will also protect workers from fire and unsafe buildings. But that's all it can do.

**Sarosh** [00:45:54] just because a building was remediated so you probably wouldn't die of a collapse. Does not mean that all labor standards have improved.

There are so many elements that make a factory good. Just like there are so many elements that make any workplace good. And it really is possible. Like these can all be good workplaces. We don't have to accept that clothes come from cruelty. We just don't.

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Clean Clothes Campaign is gathering signatures for a petition calling major brands to sign the International Accord. Consider signing it. Click the link in the show notes, or get to it on articles of interest. [substack.com https://actions.eko.org/a/levi-s?eko=true](https://actions.eko.org/a/levi-s?eko=true)

To learn more about Rana Plaza, the background and aftermath visit <https://ranaplazaneveragain.org/> - the timeline page has a lot of interesting information

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