

TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE – LESSONS ON MIGRANT WOMEN'S LABOUR

25 March 2026

March 25, 2026 marks the 115th anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire; a disaster that took the life of 146 workers, 123 of whom were young female workers in New York City. The youngest victims were two fourteen year old Italian immigrant girls. While the daughters slogged to pay rent and feed their siblings, the men who owned these lofts remained focussed on the profit, treating them as expendable units of production.

What led to the 1911 disaster began long before the first spark: building without proper exit plans and deficient fire safety, among others. To make the absence of any safety measures worse, the management bolted the doors shut to prevent “theft”. As a result women could not escape - they were burnt alive.

The Reality of ‘Cheap’ Labour

The 1911 fire was not an isolated tragedy. The Atkinson’s Mill Fire (1818) in the UK, that killed girls aged 9-18 was the earliest recorded industrial disaster in Europe. The charred remains of the bodies were buried in a communal grave - the reality of child labour of girls and boys who, in the textile industry only, were routinely forced to crawl under moving machinery to free trapped threads or jammed parts, leading to mangled fingers and limbs and many children crushed to death.

While we do not have a sex-based death toll, the 1794 Fire of East Riverside in Ratcliffe, London, is another example of negligence that cost the lives of many women. Placing these cramped, narrow laned warehouses and refineries in poor, densely populated immigrant districts was the result of a rapidly industrialised new capitalistic society deeply marked by class division and colonialism.

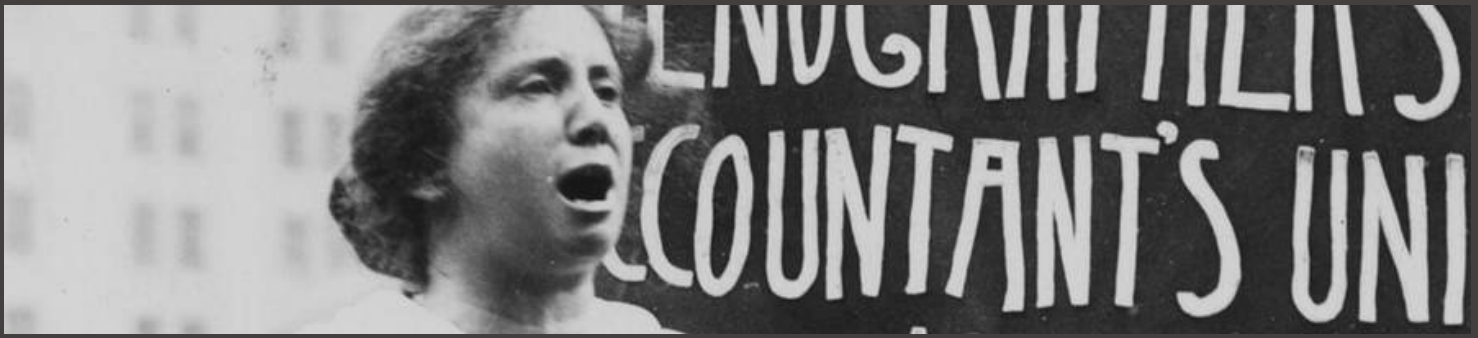
The Aftermath

The families of the victims were compensated with a pittance of \$75 per deceased worker, which amounts to roughly \$2,439.47 today.

Rose Schneiderman, Polish-American labour rights activist and feminist, one of the most prominent female labour union leaders said this of the accident: *“The life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 140-odd are burned to death.”*

The sentiment is a reminder of the system that views the lives of immigrant labour as disposable. The 1911 fire was but a small part of the history of the horrors to come, where the factory floor continues to work as a modern colony riddled with greedy business owners trying to exploit female and immigrant labour and bodies.





Modern-day Safety Failures

While the 1911 fire (and those before) is a tragedy marked by the times of unsophisticated (or no) labour laws, the present day factory floor is no stranger to danger.

A massive explosion and fire during a night-shift at a biscuit factory in Greece killed five female workers. The Violanta Biscuit Factory Explosion happened less than two months ago, proving that even “modern” facilities often rely on round-the-clock labour from women.

The physical fire hazards of any factory floor doesn't limit itself there, they are compounded by an architecture designed to keep migrant women overworked and compliant. It is also an everyday struggle between a female body and a workplace built for men.

The Toxic Sexed Data Gap: All industrial toxicology uses a standardised 70kg male body as the “reference man”. This ignores women who, on average, carry a higher body fat percentage where fat-soluble industrial chemicals accumulate. According to the report by Weaving Voices, women who are employed in manufacturing or cleaning sectors are exposed to chemicals and radiation making them have a 50% higher risk of cancer. Long term impacts on reproductive health are unmapped and not well researched.

Equipment Mismatch: Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is almost universally designed for a male default. Machines too, end up being designed with an average height conducive for a male worker to access easily. A report by the Trade Union Congress found that only 29% of female workers felt their PPE was suitable for their body type. Ill-fitting uniforms and baggy safety gears lead to snags, tears or trips; and wrong sized gloves can decrease grip strength by up to 30% leading to accidents that are blamed on “operator error” rather than a total failure of an equipment meant for “protection”.

The Disregard for Female Biology: Every industry discounts the fact that women workers have a biological, hormonal cycle that is acutely different from that of men. There is a complete disregard for the physiological effect of menstruation, menopause, pregnancy, where these aspects are seen as disruption of productivity. Rather than provide facilities that keep in mind the menstrual dignity of women workers - clean toilets, sanitary products, medical support as needed during any of the stages of the cycle, menstruating or pregnant women are considered a liability. Research from the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work points out that women who perform tasks while standing on factory floors face a *three-fold increase in the risk of preterm birth and miscarriages* due to poor/male default design and ergonomic support. There is also a lack of breaks, accessible toilets, resting areas that force women to suffer in silence. They end up suffering from chronic urogenital infections, some of which can end up being fatal. There are countries where women workers opted for (forced in some cases) hysterectomies in order to keep up with the high demands of their laborious jobs. These are specifically targeting the female workers owing to their biology, which is not under their control. Experiences as painful as menstruation and gestation are not something men can fully comprehend, let alone make provisions for female workers who are already treated abysmally in the labour market.

Lack of Single-Sex Spaces: The lack of safe, single sex facilities is a primary driver of workplace abuse, and severe health issues for women. In numerous logistics/assembly line hubs, women claim to have dehydration strategies where they purposely don't drink water to avoid having to use shared toilets, or in some cases, no toilets. With the rise in men claiming to have a female “gender identity”, this space is further jeopardised giving anyone with a self declared female identity complete access to women's spaces. For migrant women who may already feel severely isolated due to linguistic and cultural barriers, removal of single-sex spaces hijacks their safe space on an abusive factory floor.

Domestic Workers Plight: Domestic work - in particular live-in domestic work - continues to be one of the most dangerous work-spaces for women because private homes are shielded from even the most rudimentary inspections that govern public workfloors. It is an unregulated industry that employs a majority of migrant women workers, many of whom with undocumented status preventing them from seeking legal recourse. Consequently, it provides the employer absolute immunity.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports that globally, 75.6 million people are domestic workers, a vast majority being women. In the EU regions, over 80% of these women are migrants, often on "irregular" (undocumented) status. The litigation gap is such that, undocumented women in several EU jurisdictions have near-zero rate of success with legal bodies. Without any formalised contracts, these women essentially become legally "invisible".



The UN General Assembly highlighted the prolific nature of this violence in domestic setup given that there are no witnesses, and no escape. Matters get worse when the legal right to stay is tied to an employer. This offers a thriving ground for blackmailing and gaslighting. Traditionally viewed as "unskilled" or "natural" to women, employers manipulate them into working 19-20 hour shifts, and confiscate their passports as "precaution" to avoid "thefts".

Double Penalty

While the 1911 tragedy is a historical point of reference, the modern European labour market continues this logic of devaluation. Recent data suggest a persistent double penalty faced by them: for being migrants, and for being women.

According to a 2025 multinational study, immigrants in Europe earn 18% less than native workers, widening the gap for migrant women significantly. They remain heavily concentrated in the "low pay, high risk and minimal regulations" much like the factory settings that went ablaze. This is true even in cases where a migrant woman arrives with qualifications or specialised degrees. They too end up being funnelled into manual labour. Nearly 40% of non-EU residents are over-qualified for their jobs. For migrant women, specifically, this exceeds 50% in some countries. This is despite the fact that migrants face a 38% poverty risk, and within this, migrant women are blindly funnelled into shortage occupations that native-born workers have declined, effectively holding them back from aspiring better opportunities. The factory floor becomes the only available space for a woman with a degree in engineering or education because the state and the capitalist machinery refuse to see her as anything other than a "nimble" pair of hands. Despite these profoundly debilitating barriers, migrant women's labour is the engine that runs the European Economy.

The Factory Fires of Future

As we mark the anniversary of the 1911 fire tragedy, it is imperative to understand that the condition of working class women have not changed and migrant women in Europe now make a large part of this group. From the chronic illnesses due to chemical exposure and the "dehydration strategies", to the absence of female-only spaces and the silenced voices of undocumented workers, European labour and safety standards continue to fail women.

What was the locked exit of the Triangle Factory preventing women from escaping is now compounded by a multitude of legal and bureaucratic barriers. If we are to learn anything from the tragic events of the past, both labour movements and governments must acknowledge that most of the current health and safety standards do not meet female workers needs, less so if they are female migrant workers. What we need today is a labour movement that refuses to barter a woman's life, health and dignity for a profit margin. Only then, can the "never again" slogan be justified at protests for labour rights and manifestos.