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## "Made in Bangladesh"

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“Made in Bangladesh”

Senior Project Submitted  
to The Division of Human Rights  
of Bard College

by Joya Alia Syed

Annandale-On Hudson, New York  
May 2020

**Acknowledgments**

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## Preface

As a child, I remember the drive from the airport to my grandmother’s house in Bangladesh. The streets were always filled with colorful saris, salwars, and oil-slicked braids

from commuting women who worked in the garment factories which were constructed on the sides of highways. The garment industry in Bangladesh has grown and changed a lot since I was young. I never knew that this industry had a dark side until I was around 14, when the Rana Plaza disaster happened. I remember reading everything I could find about the building collapse, and I recall my cousin taking part in relief programs for injured victims. I would say my curiosity and concern for workers rights grew after this industrial disaster.

As my curiosity grew about the garment industry as a whole, I learned that my father, Syed Samiul Islam, owned and ran a garment factory in the 1980s. Both my parents grew up in Bangladesh when there was no garment industry. However, my father's firsthand experience, along with my research, helps paint a fuller picture of how the industry has transformed over the last 40 years.

In the early- to mid-1980s my father and his friends returned to Bangladesh from Abu Dhabi where they were building bridges, and they decided to start an engineering firm. At that time there were very few garment factories in Bangladesh that were built according to industry specifications and basic government standards.

He and his team set up an export-oriented garment factory in 1984. Even though they did not have money to invest, they were able to get loans on easy terms and started to import machinery and raw material. The factory was in business from 1984 to 1990. It was a two-storied spacious concrete factory building with adequate toilet facilities. Most of his workers were women who had 8- to 10-hour shifts and 2 hours of overtime pay. All workers got lunch breaks, sick leave, and maternity leave (not paid). There were around 350 workers. Apprentices received 350 taka (\$4 today) a month, machine operators received 750 taka (\$9) per month, senior machine operators received 1000 taka (\$12) a month, and operators for specialized machines

received 1500 taka (\$17) per month. Sometimes my father had to pay off mastans (thugs) with 1000-2000 taka not to vandalize their factory. The whole importing business was licensed for raw material like cloth and thread. The raw material such as fabric, thread, and other trimming materials, as well as packaging material (carton boxes), were imported tax free under bonded warehouse licensing. He said, “This was rare and illegal. Few factories did it— yes, selling imported raw fabric tax free and selling it in the local market would be profitable, but it had to be done with local buyers and a false export letter of credit and import done for local consumption.”

My father's factory was known as the Speedwell factory in the Mirpur area of Dhaka. He and his team designed and built it from scratch and ran it for a few years, profitably, until a political movement rose to remove President Ershad. This political turbulence resulted in hartals, or work stoppage. Hartals were strikes for the whole country where work and transportation came to a standstill. Unfortunately, there were days my father and his business partners could not keep the factory open. That meant they could not meet shipping deadlines and started accumulating losses. After 2 to 3 years my father and his partners decided to give up and sold their factory and license to a much bigger company. Speedwell was a midsize factory but unfortunately it was unable to compete with the bigger factories due to lack of profit and ability to ride out the hartals due to economies of scale. My project is inspired by my memories and my father's experience, as well as the questions that have been with me since I was a child.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The Rana Plaza garment factory collapse occurred on April 24, 2013, in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It is known as the deadliest garment factory disaster in modern history, killing more

than 1,134 workers and injuring more than 2,000 people.<sup>1</sup> In order to meet the global demand for apparel production, three additional floors were illegally constructed in the Rana Plaza building by the manager Sohel Rana. Press reports after the Rana Plaza factory collapse claimed that workers saw cracks on the outside of the building the day before, during which five manufacturing operations were trying to meet production deadlines on apparel products for the European Union and U.S. markets. Management assured them that the building was safe and workers were told they would not be paid if they did not come to work. An hour later, the building collapsed. Soon after the disaster, the government shut down eighteen factories for safety reasons as industrial safety concerns grew throughout the country. After the disaster, labor rights activists scoured through the collapsed buildings to find company labels to determine who was responsible only to uncover more bodies. Survivors struggled to remember information on what brand they were manufacturing due to the trauma.

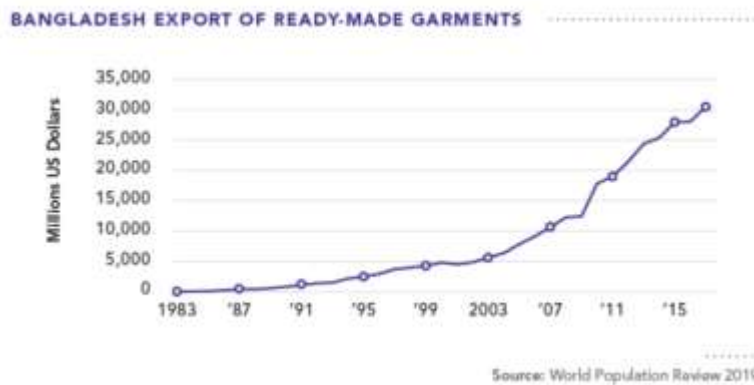


Figure 1 (BGMEA)

The garment industry has been an integral part of Bangladesh's economy since the 1970s, capturing 80% of its total export revenue in 2017 and 81% in 2018.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows the growth of ready-made garment exports in Bangladesh from 1983 to 2015. This industry has supplied

<sup>1</sup> Brian Stauffer, Human Rights Watch (2013)

<sup>2</sup> Dr. M. Habibur Rahman, Sayeed Ahmed Siddiqui, 2015

employment and export earnings to millions. The industry employs 3.6 million workers, with 2.4 million being women. In 1978, around 130 workers from the first four garment factories in Bangladesh were sent to Korea for management training so they could eventually begin their own companies. Seven-hundred factories were operating in Bangladesh by 1985, and by 1995 there were about 2,400 registered factories. By 2014, there were around 4,000 factories operating in Bangladesh.

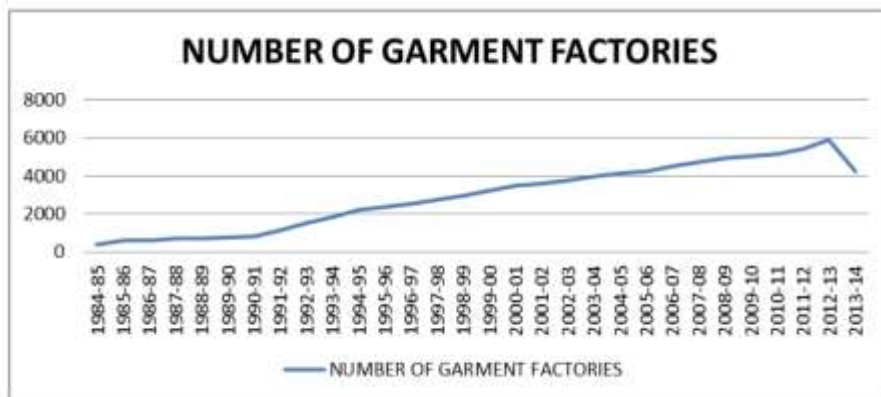


Figure 2(BGMEA)

Figure 2 illustrates the growth of garment factories from 1984 to 2014. The garment sector employed about 1.2 million people, with 90 percent being women, by 1995. This is especially notable because Bangladeshi women were introduced to employment opportunities much later than women in other Asian countries that had already experienced economic development. This was the first industry that provided Bangladeshi women with employment outside the home.<sup>3</sup>

Consumers of fast fashion could no longer ignore the lack of ethical standards in Bangladeshi factories. Most consumers do not think too much about the “Made in...” tags or who cuts, stitches, and labels the clothing we wear daily. These are usually products of women who have their own story intertwined with the label. Female garment workers suffer from low wages, gender inequality, gender-based violence, and few working rights. There are a handful of

<sup>3</sup> Sajeda Amin, 1998

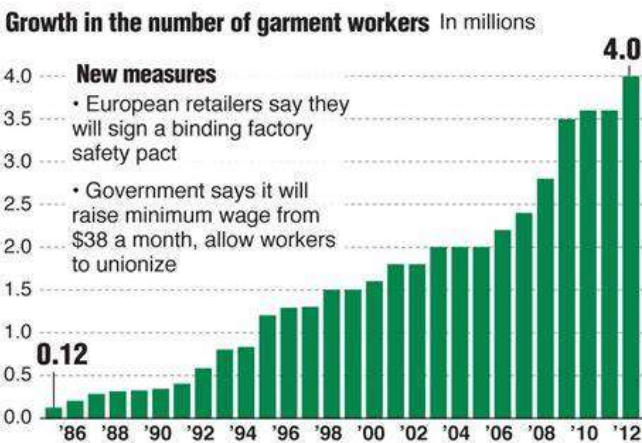


arguments that oppose increasing salaries for garment workers. The reason why companies are able to supply inexpensive clothing at an affordable cost is due to the production cost. By exploiting workers, factory owners and western companies are able to produce “fast fashion”. Therefore, increasing the hourly rate for workers will also increase production costs, which will negatively affect Bangladesh’s economy if Western buyers can find less expensive manufacturers in other countries, or the price of clothing would increase for consumers, yielding less demand. Currently, managers and factory owners are not held accountable for their disregard for their workers, so industry standards need enforcement by a higher power. Figure 3 illustrates the growth in the number of garment workers in the industry from 1986 to 2012 in millions. This paper looks at how the Rana Plaza disaster changed existing practices, exploitation of workers, and ethical production.



## Bangladesh's garment workers

*In the wake of a garment factory building collapse that killed more than 1,100 people in Dhaka, Bangladesh, measures are being taken to improve worker safety and wages.*



Source: Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, BBC  
Graphic: Pat Carr

© 2013 MCT Figure 3 (BGMEA)

## **Methods**

The paper explores the impact of the Rana Plaza accident on working conditions in the sector through a secondary analysis of trends, exploitative problems, and remediation attempts in the industry. I attempt to answer the following questions: What were conditions before Rana Plaza? What led to Rana Plaza? And how did Rana Plaza change the industry? My paper will allow the reader to understand why and how labor conditions and workers' rights in the industry changed after the worst industrial disaster of modern times. I searched for scholarly material, grey literature from private sectors, and news media literature by using keywords such as Bangladesh, garment factory, human rights violations, Rana Plaza, political institutions, women's rights, policies, and organizations. I also used information from websites and reviewed publications from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), International Labour Organization (ILO), economic research institutes such as the Center for Policy Dialogue, Population Council, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, and relevant ministries and departments of the Bangladesh government such as the Export Promotion Bureau and Department of Labor. In addition, I reviewed articles that offer workers' perspectives, particularly women, whose voices are often missing from the conversation. Finally, I explore consumer demand as an important dimension of the growth and evolution of this sector as well as analyze how labor rights are viewed by buyers.

In my review I find that while there is a rich literature on the garment sector in Bangladesh, the voices of workers are often missing. I had hoped to base this analysis on primary data. I was also approved by Bard's Institutional Review Board to do so. However, timing and budget constraints prevented me from collecting these primary data.

I began by discussing the history of the garment industry in Bangladesh along with its economic significance in the country. This is important background so the reader understands

where and why the problems in the industry have started. Then I will review the fast fashion industry and the importance of consumer demand as a driver of the trends in the fashion industry that we have observed in recent decades. I will also describe some of the abuses that take place in factories such as physical and verbal abuse, excessive overtime, dangerous working conditions as well as irregular and underpaying wages. I will highlight the role that women play in both the industry and the overall economy. Then, I will discuss the overarching problem of political institutions and corruption that have influenced the industry as well as some policies and agreements that have tried to address these issues before and after the disaster. I will conclude by discussing possible solutions and what we as consumers can do to support and fight for labor rights for garment workers.

### **The Problem with Fast Fashion**

The sustainable fashion supply chain plays a crucial part in the global fashion industry stemming from the dynamic nature of the clothing sector due to consumer demand and evolving taste. The average consumer bought 60% more clothing in 2014 compared to 2000 but keeping each item for half as long. This, however, fuels critics' arguments that these practices might only promote habits of "guilt-free consumption".

John Hobson's journal article *To die for? The health and safety of fast fashion* discusses the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013. According to the research gathered by the advocacy group International Labor Rights Forum, almost 1800 garment workers have been killed in building collapses and factory fires in Bangladesh alone since 2005, though these problems also afflict several other countries where cheap clothes are produced. Before the Rana Plaza factory collapse, factory owners had repeatedly been asked to close factories because of concerns for structural safety. The Bangladeshi government has acknowledged that almost 90% of Dhaka's

high-rise buildings are not built according to local construction standards. However, structural issues are not the only concerns.

One example of a harmful practice in the industry is sand blasting, a process used to give jeans a rustic look. Sandblasting increases the risk of silicosis in garment factories where products are often produced in poor working conditions. A Turkish investigator published a case study in the *Journal of Occupational Health* in 2003. This study monitored small workplaces employing 10 or fewer workers that sandblasted jeans for larger companies. After looking into these workplaces he found that workers did not have effective respiratory protective equipment or sufficient ventilation. “The sand being used contained up to 95% quartz and up to 15% feldspar. The dust exposure levels were 20 times the recommended levels with respirable dust containing free silica exposures of  $76\text{mg}/\text{m}^3$  against a permitted level of  $0.25\text{mg}/\text{m}^3$ . Of 11 denim sandblasters studied (mean age 32), over a third had radiological evidence of silicosis.”<sup>4</sup> Additionally, a 2005 research study from the School of Medicine at Atatürk University in Turkey reported more cases of silicosis in sandblasters. These cases had radiological evidence of silicosis in sandblasters which were confirmed in an open lung biopsy.

Hobson says,

“However, the sale of sandblasted jeans continued and the practice of sandblasting shifted to other countries, particularly Bangladesh. In 2012, the Clean Clothes Campaign report ‘Deadly Denim: Sandblasting in the Bangladesh Garment Industry’ found that mechanical sandblasting continued to expose workers to silica dust and that mechanical sandblasting was largely carried out in unsealed environments with little protection for workers, using inadequate safety equipment. Despite this report, not

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<sup>4</sup> John Hobson, 2013

all manufacturers were prepared to issue statements clarifying their stance on the situation and whether the practice continued within their supply chains.”<sup>5</sup>

The health and safety issues in the global clothing industry raise questions about collective responsibility as people who wear and buy clothes. Hobson asked the question, “Can we merely blame the clothing industry or do we all as purchasers of cheap clothes have responsibility for the disaster in Bangladesh and the numerous others that afflict the clothing industry worldwide? Do we really want fast fashion that workers give their lives for?”<sup>6</sup> This perspective of collective responsibility might help illuminate the extensive abuse of workers, poor conditions, and exposure to other hazards such as the use of adhesives and solvent in close quarters without adequate protections. The U.S. owner of Calvin Klein and a German retailer signed the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Agreement which necessitates independent inspection of any factory used by a supplier. David Blair, Chief Correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* says, “If you are going to make money by selling products on the high street you have an obligation to ensure a basic minimum of decency in the conditions in which they are produced. That was recognized in 1802 when the first Factory Act was passed limiting the hours that British women and children could work. Today the women and children work in Bangladesh, not Bradford but they are equally deserving of safe and healthy working conditions. Is it just and proper that Bangladeshi women die making a £1.50 T-shirt worn by our children?”<sup>7</sup>

The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire ushered in a new era of labor codes and safety measures for American workers. American and European companies have made some efforts to improve safety standards since then. Fast fashion implies that items are generally inexpensive

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<sup>5</sup> John Hobson citing Bakan ND, Özkan G, Çamsari G, 2011

<sup>6</sup> John Hobson, 2013

<sup>7</sup> John Hobson citing David Blair, “*What price those £10 chinos now?*” 2013

and affordable to the average consumer. This has led to a significant industry shift, which instead of focusing on traditionally well-made, classic, and long-lasting garments, prioritizes new and trendy clothing on a seasonal basis. The logic behind the industry lies in the quick design and production of cost-effective items that satisfy ever-changing consumer demands. If consumers want new fashion, global garment industries are willing to rise to meet those demands. The mutual interrelationship between the manufacturer and the consumer continues high-fashion production while maintaining low prices. However, Bangladeshi factories face pressure from retailers to deliver quickly and cheaply or else risk losing business to competitors, which encourages the dark side of the industry. Factories are more willing to take shortcuts than invest in safe working conditions.

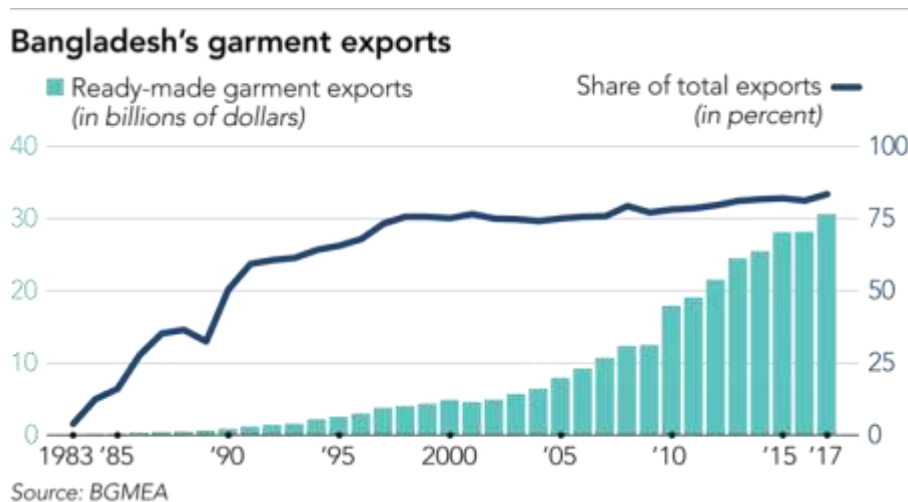


Figure 4

Garment exports account for around 90% of Bangladesh's exports, making it the second-largest garment exporter after China.<sup>8</sup> Figure 4 represents the RMG export growth in billions of dollars and percent from 1983 to 2017. The growth of the garment industry has helped lift millions of people out of poverty, particularly women who account for 85% of garment workers in Bangladesh. Currently, the average monthly wage for garment workers is roughly \$62. In less

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/exploitation-or-emancipation-women-workers-in-the-garment-industry/>

than half a century, the poverty rate in Bangladesh has dropped nearly 80% to 30%, and the national GDP has grown on average 6% each year.

Unfortunately, the Bangladeshi government has been hesitant to raise wages or even enforce regulations out of fear that it will spur fashion brands to move production elsewhere. Workers without formalized employment usually lack social protections, which results in a greater risk of exploitation. Garment factory owners in Bangladesh have become increasingly frustrated with the internationally-backed Accord agreement. A recent *Daily Star* piece titled “Accord: blessing turns burden?”, discusses what the author sees as unreasonable demands for safety improvement. Owners do not want to implement new safety measures that can be expensive. In addition, some factory bosses have questioned the push for greater compliance at a time when the prices being paid for garment exports keep falling.

## **Chapter 2: Working Conditions and Labor Practices**

### **Working Conditions and Violence**

Studies report widespread abusive behavior towards women in the garment industry as forms of discipline and generally gender-based behavior. In the *Stitched Up* report published in 2011 by *War on Want*, wrote that 988 total workers interviewed, 718 reported being spoken to with obscene language, while 427 were hit in the face, and 443 had been beaten by factory managers. However, the more alarming reports were the 297 women reporting sexual advances and 290 being touched inappropriately. In addition to those who were interviewed, 333 reported threats of being sent to prison, 328 reported threats of being forced to undress, and 484 reported being threatened with losing their jobs. 70% of women who agreed to undertake night shifts

reported that they did not receive food or drinks.<sup>9</sup> Night shifts often led to a long working day where occupational accidents were more likely due to exhaustion. Unfortunately, one in four of those interviewed had accidents during night shifts. The report also noted that 790 of those interviewed stated that no doctor is available during night shifts, which means if an accident occurs, they are unable to access medical assistance even though by law, a factory with more than 300 workers must have medical and nursing staff on site. Lastly, 60% of workers say that family lives have been disrupted due to night shifts. Female workers have expressed concerns about long periods of separation from their children. A 2006 Bangladesh labor law allowed female workers a total of 16 weeks paid maternity leave; however, this paid leave is denied by most factories. As a result, many women are forced to work during the final stages of pregnancy to meet factory demands, jeopardizing the health of the child and mother. Kabeer writes, “They were treated as undifferentiated, homogenous, faceless and voiceless members of a puppet-like reserve army of labor whose behavioral strings were pulled by capital, not social actors who thought about, struggled against and acted upon their own conditions.”<sup>10</sup> Women obtaining factory employment also meant that there was a radical departure from traditional female seclusion in Bangladesh. This meant a number of young women were unaccompanied on the streets every day and late at night as they traveled back and forth to work. Unfortunately, this public visibility also led women to deal with unwelcome attention from men they passed on the streets. Many received suggestive comments or abusive catcalls, or were pressured into sexual overtures. Sometimes these women were even labeled prostitutes due to how late they would travel alone at night after garment factory hours which can affect social standing in the community.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/Stitched%20Up.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Kabeer, 2000



## Modern Slavery

The Modern Slavery Act, passed by the British Parliament in 2015, requires clothing companies to monitor for forms of modern slavery in their supply chain but does not require companies to publish information about which factories produce the goods they sell.<sup>11</sup> In Bangladesh's case, some British brands might not be monitoring any acts of modern slavery, let alone publishing supplier factory information. Modern slavery refers to forced labor, exploitations, and abuse. Andrew Wallis, chief executive of Unseen says, "I feel that this is a very acute example of modern-day slavery and one which should be acknowledged as such...in the Dhaka case we have an exploitative situation where technically the workers were free to leave but due to economic factors they actually are not able. Add to that the exploitation around lack of safe working conditions, overwork, underpay, demand from western companies and societies for cheap goods, and you have a pretty toxic mix which comes down to splitting hairs over what is slavery and what is not."<sup>12</sup> The *End Slavery Now* website defines it as forced labor used in different industries, such as textiles, to produce products for global supply chains.<sup>13</sup> Despite the industry's hesitancies to comply, the Modern Slavery Act can still serve as a great influence for the future of Bangladesh's garment industry. Unfortunately, the government system in Bangladesh allows illegal work to be done "off the books", which will be discussed later on. Policies, laws, and regulations are not enforced as a result of local corruption.<sup>14</sup> Due to this lack of enforcement, workers suffer while the industry thrives. Although there have been reports that Western brands that do not do enough to stop exploitation and violence, including sexual violence, in their supply chains would be investigated, the issues persist. There is little to no

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<sup>11</sup> Kelly, 2013

<sup>12</sup> Kelly, 2013

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.endslaverynow.org/learn/slavery-today/forced-labor>

<sup>14</sup> Shawan Tanim, 2013

political will or economic incentive to acknowledge and address these problems. Workers need their voices heard, but the power of the manufacturers makes it very difficult to pass legislation or resolve these rampant issues.

### **Major Factory Accidents in Bangladesh**

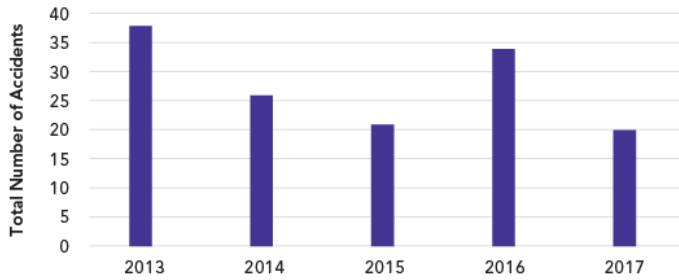
- February 23rd, 2006 - Factory fire at KTS Textile Mill in Chittagong
- April 11th, 2005 - Nine-story garment factory building collapse at Savar near Dhaka, killing more than 100 workers
- March 2006 - 3 factory fires, leaving 142 workers killed and more than 500 injured
- February 27th, 2010 - Factory fire
- December 12th, 2010 - Factory fire killing 31 workers and injuring at least 100 more

Accidents like those above usually take place due to a lack of proper safety measures at the factories. A *Daily Star* report revealed that “According to official statistics, only three inspectors are engaged in inspecting safety measures at as many as 15,000 factories under the Dhaka divisional factory inspection office. And only 20 inspectors are now deployed to inspect around 50,000 registered factories in the country.”<sup>15</sup> These disasters are caused by negligence or the greed of management. Figure 9 compiles the total number of garment factory accidents from 2013 to 2017.

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<sup>15</sup> Pinaki Roy, 2006

BANGLADESH GARMENT FACTORY: TOTAL NUMBER OF ACCIDENTS .....



Source: NYU Stern Centre

Figure 9

Despite these accidents, many factory owners have not faced any legal action by the government. Sohel Rana, owner of Rana Plaza, was arrested and jailed. This is not only because capitalists have the corrupt police on their side, but also because factories are owned by politicians who are more worried about losing money than paying workers more and building proper but more expensive infrastructure. In addition, 60% of the Bangladeshi Parliament are garment factory owners. This makes passing legislation, bills, or policies for the RMG very difficult, as progressive measures are not incentivized. Workers often express their demands for better working rights, but dissent often backfires when owners threaten workers by using mastans and police. However, incidents of worker revolt have shown that these workers have the potential to break this vicious chain of political resistance locally as well as globally. The global chain of super-exploitation and repression is generating global resistance.

### Gender Dimensions of Employment in the Garment Industry

“I can't remember the name of this Factory it was in Narayanganj but I can hear that 150 girls were found to be pregnant. Can you imagine that, *one hundred fifty girls pregnant!* That is why people say such terrible things about garment factories. I heard this from a girl who lives next door to us. I am not sure I believe it, of course. I don't think I believe it but one of those

girls told me, ‘It doesn't matter if you believe it or not it's the truth. I have seen it with my own eyes!’ She used to work in that factory you know. After this happened she gave up working in garments.”<sup>16</sup> - Unnamed female in Naila Kabeer's book

This quote represents the workers perspective. It also is an example of how women are treated in this industry. Unfortunately, women do not have a proper voice in society even though they are assets in this massive industry.

### Age and Sex Composition of the Workforce

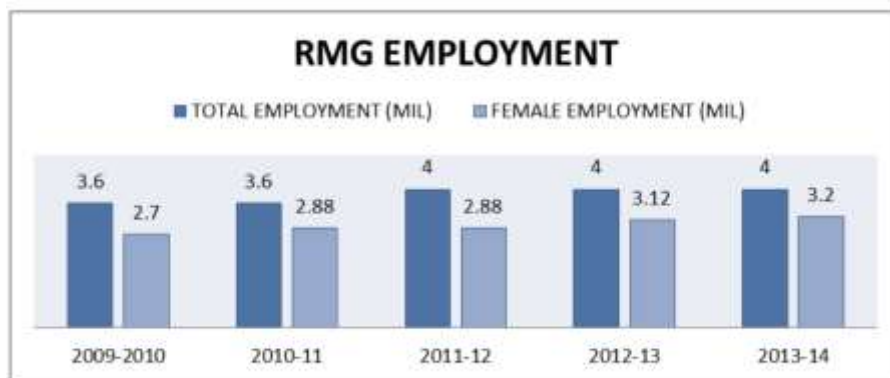


Figure 5 (BGMEA)

One of the most historic female-dominated industries in the world is the garment industry. Today, more than 85% of the industry are women.<sup>17</sup> Figure 5, from BGMEA, compares the total employment with female employment in the garment industry in Bangladesh. However, employers claim that older workers perform poorly and tend to make more mistakes compared to younger women workers, therefore the majority of the labor force is younger women.

Bangladeshi women working in the garment industry face violence and abuse such as sexual harassment, verbal abuse and physical abuse from other male factory workers and managers on a daily basis.

<sup>16</sup> Kabeer, 2000

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/exploitation-or-emancipation-women-workers-in-the-garment-industry/>

## Historical Importance of the Industry for Women's Work

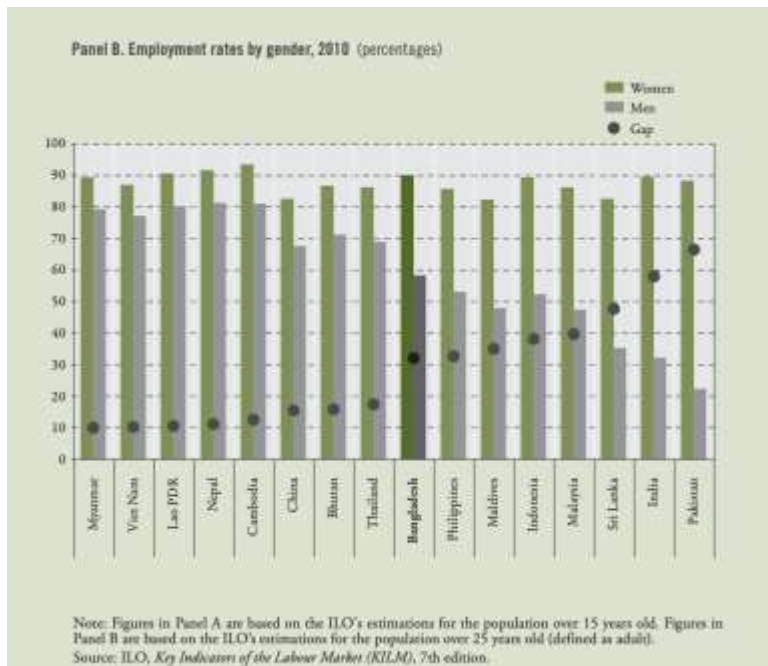


Figure 6

The export-oriented manufacturing industry began to draw attention in the 1980s when the workforce became female driven.<sup>18</sup> Figure 6 shows the gender variations in employment rates in labor markets within different countries. The male to female ratio is significantly different and demonstrates how women are assets in the industry. Women who had worked in traditional agriculture were being introduced to the modern industry as waged workers. The UN conference for International Women's Year in 1975 demanded that women become more integrated into labor markets. Many feminist scholars pointed out that unmarried young women in developing countries reflected an intersection of the economy's demand and the culture of supply. The few studies that have looked into Bangladeshi women's entry into the paid labor force shed light on other aspects of their lives, which show, unfortunately, that little to nothing has challenged the structure of patriarchy within the family and community. Women face systematic discrimination

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/exploitation-or-emancipation-women-workers-in-the-garment-industry/>

in both society as well as in industry. It is clear that women earn less than men.<sup>19</sup> Due to this exploitation, European fashion companies make profits but neglect to give the most basic rights to their female workers. An article by *Fashion Revolution* says, “By outsourcing production, these companies are able to both step away from their responsibility and to play producers against each other to get the best and most profitable deal. The deregulated nature of the global economy makes workers' legal protection very thin and their right to organize and bargain collectively is constantly restricted.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Essential Working Women**

Even though many young women in the garment industry face violence on a regular basis, they are invaluable assets of the Bangladeshi economy. According to the *Stitched Up* report, the living wage for a single worker to be at least 5,000 taka a month and almost 9,000 for a family of four. Majority of garment workers in Bangladesh earn 3,000 taka (around \$36) a month. The new minimum wage has been set as 8,000 (around \$95) a month. Women contribute a total 64.93% of labor in the RMG sector, and they seek the same conditions that any worker expects—to work under dignified conditions, gain decent pay, and have basic work security in order to avoid poverty and become independent. Both Leslie T. Chang and Naila Kabeer argue that the globalized garment industry empowered women from poor backgrounds by enabling them to find work and a salary early in life. In addition, work in the garment industry has allowed women to gain recognition for their economic contribution from their family and community.<sup>21</sup> However, garment workers are often conscious about their rights and have a more

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<sup>19</sup> Kabeer, 2000

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.fashionrevolution.org/exploitation-or-emancipation-women-workers-in-the-garment-industry/>

<sup>21</sup> Kabeer, 2016

critical mindset than women who do not have jobs in the industry. Figure 7 is another data reference from BGMEA that compares the economic contribution to industry production by women and the overall workforce contribution.

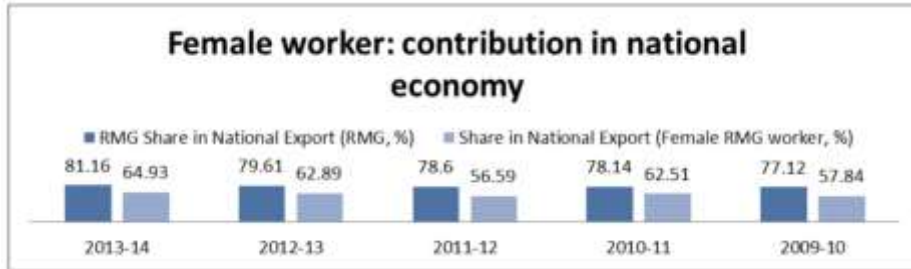


Figure 7 (BGMEA)

Women’s integration into paid work has been a crucial force for emancipation and the growth of gender equality. The other side of the argument is that women’s unequal position in society has allowed factory owners to form an even cheaper and more flexible workforce. From one perspective, work in the garment industry is reproducing subordination in society rather than challenging it.

### **Political Restrictions on Unionization**

For a number of historical political reasons, there is not a significant amount of collective bargaining in the garment sector of the Bangladeshi economy. Trade unions have historically been an important part of the political process. Before and after independence in 1971, unions sought to sponsor and support political parties and did not have a strong presence in the workplace. With the state's interest in a profitable garment industry, labor activism has been suppressed through violence, intimidation against workers attempting to unionize and legal restrictions. In the 1980s, the abuse of trade unions became extreme under President Ershad’s military rule. Corruption in factory management became common practice, as cooperative labor leaders were installed into the ranks of the ruling elite. The number of trade union members is

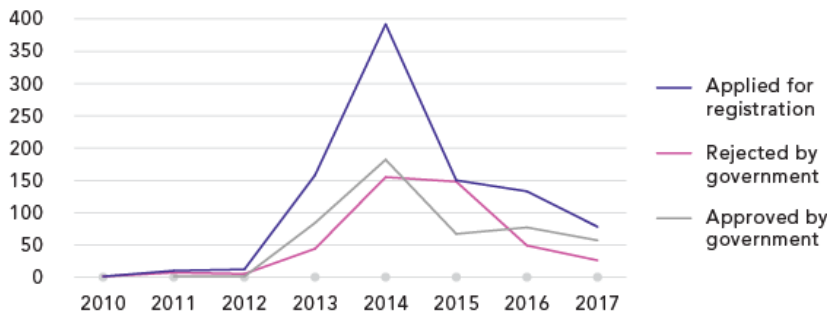
very small compared to the total labor force in the country. The average membership of trade unions has declined significantly over the last 50 years. The trade unions' presence in export-oriented sectors are very weak and the level of unionization of workers is very poor. These sectors include the Export Processing Zone (EPZs), shrimp exporting firms, finished leather and RMG. Lack of labor law enforcement and inhibiting legal provisions reduce trade union membership in the sector. Many of these sectors are deprived from the right of collective bargaining and the right to organize. However, a provision was incorporated into the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 to protect workers against employers who are anti-union. "Section 186 provides that conditions of service will remain unchanged while application for registration is pending and no employer shall terminate the employment of any worker who is a member of such trade union, while an application for registration for trade union is pending." Organized trade unions of RMG workers have been suppressed by administrative and political intervention. However, from 1994 to 2006 garments worker unions signed an agreement with BGMEA to implement minimum wages, recognizing trade union activities, fixing working hours and ensuring maternity leave. BGMEA has positively influenced the growth of welfare for workers by promoting social dialogue on a formal and informal basis. But as a result, there was a spread of mistrust among workers against the leaders. In addition, this weakened the power of trade unions that are supposed to assert the worker's agenda. Eventually, these unions became tools for the ruling party and became alienated from the general workers. Practices of corruption contributed to a decline in the strength of the trade unions and loss of credibility. Therefore, despite the existence of trade unions in Bangladesh, they are not trusted by workers in the industry.

In addition, many trade unions are denied registration by the government. Figure 8 compares trade unions in the sector. It exhibits how many unions have applied for registration,



been rejected by the government, and been approved by the government. Unions are rejected by the government because they were affiliated with the wrong parties. Clearly, not many are approved since the government prefers to limit collective bargaining.

**TRADE UNIONS IN BANGLADESH GARMENT SECTOR, 2010-2017** .....



Source: Solidarity Center, Bangladesh

Figure 8

The reality is that Bangladesh is undemocratic. This means that there is a lack of voice from the people due to Bangladesh's repressive and tyrannical government. This makes it impossible for garment workers to speak on human rights violations that happen within the industry. The lack of a democracy also makes external pressure difficult since many government officials refuse international support.

### Chapter 3: Activism before Rana Plaza

The Constitution of Bangladesh is based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was intended to encourage commitment to safeguarding human rights. The constitution lists eighteen fundamental political and civil rights. These include the right to life and personal liberty, equality before the law, safeguards as to arrest and detention, freedom of assembly, freedom of occupation, rights to property, protection in respect of trial and punishment, and so on. It also protects certain social and economic rights of the population. Almost five decades

after independence in 1971, the government has remained ineffective when it comes to political order. There is weak legislative authority, lack of political consensus, undemocratic political party structures, and weak local governance. As a result, these problems have created a lack of equal access to justice, increases in social tension, and human rights abuses, including those which we commonly see in the garment industry. The government remains a passive spectator to these cruelties. While human rights organizations such as Humans Rights Watch, Cleans Clothes Campaign, ILO and Transparency International, put pressure on the government to attend to the economic, political, and social needs of the Bangladeshi community, their efforts often go unheeded. The government generally permits human rights groups to conduct their activities. With regard to specific cases, groups can publish reports, hold press conferences, and issue appeals to the government. Human rights organizations also report harassment by the government agencies as well as threats from ruling party activists. This demonstrates the unwillingness of the elected government to allow human rights organizations to document its human rights record, or take measures to improve it.<sup>22</sup> It is clear that normal labor laws are not enforced in Bangladeshi garment factories. Workers, mainly women, are at risk of being molested or raped on their way home late at night, working long hours, being paid less than minimum wage (8,000 taka or \$95 a month), and having no maternity leave. Human rights challenges encountered by Bangladeshi society are manifestations of the underdeveloped socioeconomic conditions of the political and civil situations of the state.

Under the global Multi Fiber Arrangement (MFA) each developing country had a quota imposed by the importing country on the categories of finished product that could be exported. The MFA was governed from 1974 to 1994 and expired on January 1st 2005. During the 1980s, quota distribution was controlled by Bangladesh's Export Promotion Bureau based on the criteria

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<sup>22</sup> Habib Zafarullah and Mohammad Habibur Rahman, 2002

of the previous year's exports. The Bangladesh Export Promotion Bureau is a government agency responsible for the country's export industry. Exporting more than the factory capacity was possible only by subcontracting, which helped factories earn a higher quota for the following year. Corrupt factory or labor inspectors were not interested in real-time inspection but expected a yearly bribe. If the bribe was not given then they would file court cases under arcane labor laws from the British colonial times. During the early 1990s the situation changed. CMT (cutting, manufacturing and trimming) rates at which buyers compensate manufacturers, exports were more streamlined, and the BGMEA (manufacturer's association) started taking greater roles dealing with customs, certifying utilization, and handling distribution of quotas. Salaried workers increased also, but to the extent of the growth the profit margin by the exporting companies. The Accord and Alliance agreement is a code of conduct that encourages a safe and healthy global RMG industry, such as by addressing subcontractors and those in the informal sectors which tend to get away with not enforcing improved regulations.

Working conditions in Bangladesh were addressed by updated Bangladesh labor laws and building codes, International Labor Organization (ILO) commitments, codes of conduct held by multinational corporations, and U.S. Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) trade preference policies. Bangladesh has been a member of the ILO since 1972. As the demand for labor rights in Bangladesh's garment sector increases, more organizations, policies, and agreements have taken effect. But have they helped garment factory conditions and labor rights?

Bangladesh is a signatory to the ILO conventions that guarantee policies and regulations for implementing decent work. The ILO began in 1919 as an organization of workers, employees, and governments to implement decent working conditions around the world.<sup>23</sup> The 1998 ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work constitutes Bangladesh and

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<sup>23</sup> Mary Jane Bolle, 2014

all ILO members to uphold an obligation to core labor principles. However, Bangladesh has only ratified 30 out of 35 of the ILO conventions.<sup>24</sup> None have been ratified in the last 12 months. In addition, these principles are very similar to the list of internationally recognized worker rights in the U.S.

### **ILO Principles<sup>25</sup>:**

1. Freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining
2. The elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labor
3. The effective abolition of child labor, including the worst forms of child labor
4. The elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation

However, the ILO has no enforcement powers other than technical assistance as to whether or not countries uphold the ILO core labor principles. The organization works with the World Bank, government officials, labor groups, and factory owners to ensure decent work conditions and a safe workplace.

### **U.S. Trade Preference Programs<sup>26</sup>**

The Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) program was first introduced in 1985. In order to support third world countries economic development, the GSP provided unilateral U.S. tariff preferences for products exported from developing countries. The following are working rights defined by the GSP programs:

1. The right of association

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<sup>24</sup> [https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11200:0::NO::P11200\\_COUNTRY\\_ID:103500](https://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:11200:0::NO::P11200_COUNTRY_ID:103500)

<sup>25</sup> Mary Jane Bolle, 2014

<sup>26</sup> Mary Jane Bolle, 2014

2. The right to organize and bargain collectively
3. A prohibition on the use of any form of forced or compulsory labor
4. A minimum wage for the employment of children, and protection against the worst forms of child labor
5. Acceptable conditions of work with respect to minimum wage, hours of work, and occupational safety and health

Bangladesh is a beneficiary country under the GSP. However, the Office of the United States Trade Representative (USTR) accepted a petition from the AFL-CIO that challenged whether Bangladesh was meeting the GSP worker rights criteria; that decision is still pending. In addition, several businesses are debating whether to withdraw from Bangladesh due to being associated with a country that may lose its GSP status based on the lack of enforcement of worker rights. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing if these programs and regulations are being enforced.

## Social Movements and Campaigns

Activism before Rana Plaza were grassroots movements that did not make a significant impact. These social movements and campaigns listed in Table 1, mainly raised awareness for social injustices and human rights violations that happen in the RMG sector. Nike Girl Effect and Clean Clothes Campaign are still running but serve as a resource for garment worker workers and adolescent females who want to be more valued in society. The Harkin Bill which aimed to ban importation of products manufactured by children. This bill was passed and UNICEF sent a team to release children from their duties in garment factories. Unfortunate, UNICEF’s 1997 report confirmed that children were in deplorable situations such as scavenging through trash dumps, begging on streets and girls who ended up going into prostitution. “Made in Bangladesh” was a controversial film that raised awareness about garment workers. This pushed brands and consumers to think about ethical responsibility but did not physically change any issues or conditions. These movements helped consumers make informed choices regarding their clothing preferences, influencing demand, which will ultimately change the supply. Credit is due to these efforts for highlighting the violations in the RMG sector but did not change anything and resulted in the Rana Plaza disaster. This event took legislation and policy action to a new and more serious level. But these grassroot movements were only tools to create awareness but were not effective programs to change factory conditions.

Table 1:

Campaign Title/Year	Goal
Harkin Bill 1992, 2007	Senator Tom Harkin introduced the “Child Labor Deterrence Act” in 1992 and eventually introduced an amendment to the Tariff Act of 1930 in 2007. This was meant to stop imports to the U.S. of products manufactured by child laborers. He advocated for international working rights in Bangladesh. However, Bangladesh claimed that the bills were insufficient because it would increase poverty levels.

<p>Nike Girl Effect 2008</p>	<p>A global movement to enhance the unique potential of adolescent girls. It empowers young girls all over the world to find fair and equal employment and societal mobility.</p> <p>Global development Agenda <a href="https://news.nike.com/news/nike-foundation-launches-new-girlffectorg">https://news.nike.com/news/nike-foundation-launches-new-girlffectorg</a></p>
<p>Clean Clothes Campaign 1989</p>	<p>A global network dedicated to not only improving working conditions but also ensuring the fundamental rights of workers are respected and empowering workers in the industry.</p> <p>CCC is a collaborative project by NGOs and trade unions who have common interests such as consumer advocacy, poverty reduction, and women's rights. <a href="https://cleanclothes.org/">https://cleanclothes.org/</a></p>
<p>Made in Bangladesh (film and movement) 2019</p>	<p>To highlight the critical importance of the fashion industry and to think about the workers behind the clothes that are seen in fashion photography. Emphasizes that brands should engage in ethical responsibility.</p>

Working conditions in the Bangladeshi garment industry remain precarious. After the Rana Plaza disaster, fashion brands were quick to disassociate themselves with the incident. Retailers and consumers shunted accountability for the conditions that led to such an event. Young unemployed women from poor families became the new workforce with rock-bottom wages and long working hours. The unit labor cost in Bangladesh was the lowest compared to other ready-made garment-producing countries from the very beginning. The labor cost was \$0.11 per shirt during the 1990s. The average monthly wage in purchasing power parity (PPP) was lowest in Bangladesh according to the ILO, barely enough for the cost of living. Female labor force participation was very low in the country when the industry began so women had few opportunities for work outside the home. Women also did not have education but wanted to have some form of income for themselves and their families. Human rights advocacy in Bangladesh intensified after the Rana Plaza disaster.

## **Chapter 4: After Rana Plaza**

The Rana Plaza was a turning point for both the entire industry and global brands. Recently, the Bangladeshi garment industry has benefited from policy and material support from international financial institutions.

### **The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (The Accord)**



The Accord on Fire and Building Safety was created post-Rana Plaza disaster in 2013.

The Accord is a five-year legally binding agreement signed on May 15th, 2013 between retailers, global brands, and Bangladeshi trade unions to build a safe RMG industry in Bangladesh.<sup>27</sup>

Buyer signatories' commitment to the Accord over five years:

- Disclosure of Bangladeshi suppliers and submitting these suppliers to safety inspection led by recognized and independent experts
- Public disclosure of inspection reports
- Requiring suppliers to implement repairs and renovations as determined in the inspections
- Paying suppliers prices that make possible repairs and renovations and the safe operation of factories and maintaining supplier relationships throughout the five-year length of the program
- Allowing democratically elected worker representatives into supplier factories to educate workers about workplace safety and workers' rights
- Guaranteeing certain rights to workers of factories affected by renovations or by the implementation of the Accord, such as the right to refuse unsafe work condition efforts towards maintaining their income during factory downtime, and  
Ceasing business with a supplier who fails to comply with these requirements

The Accord serves as a code of conduct for buyers who do business in Bangladeshi factories that engage laborers in their production process. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) was in effect before Accord in 2007 and was initiated by commercial banks in Bangladesh for Bangladeshi garment factories. The CSR was created to promote socio economic development, environmental protection, international compliance and equal participation of women. It is “a self-regulating business model that helps a company be socially accountable-to itself, its stakeholders, and the public.” This initiative is more of an honor system or pledge with no enforcement of oversight. It is a long term practice for sustainable development and human resource for several sectors including the garment industry and is still running today but has not made the significant changes that were intended.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://bangladeshaccord.org/>

In 2013, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development estimated that 80% of global trade takes place through transnational corporations by contractual relationships as well as ownership of foreign affiliates.

Many U.S. buyers found the Accord to be too restrictive due its binding requirements listed above. The Accord has also been seen as a deal-killing issue for several U.S. buyers who refused to join the agreement due to its binding requirements. Western brands worry about lawsuits, they are reluctant to pay for building renovations, the fear of negative publicity, and have less of a presence in Bangladesh than other companies. Wal-Mart, Sears and GAP are some of the Western companies that have denied to join the Accord due to liability concerns.

Overall the Accord is a governance contract that connects the two sides of the global supply chain. It also constitutes a link between Bangladeshi suppliers and buyers in developed countries. The government failed to enforce safety standards which enabled the disaster to happen. After the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, the Bangladeshi government still failed to enforce safety standards for factories, which is why the Accord was found to be necessary. The Accord, originally mandated for five years, was renewed in 2018 for another three years, until 2021 and has been working with the government to enforce safety standards and compensation for workers. As of today, more than half of the factories under the Accord have been inspected and are now up the code. The minimum wage has increased, and reports of sexual and verbal abuse have fallen due to the Accords outreach program. The highlights from the Accords 2020 quarterly report is listed below.

#### **Last Quarterly Report Highlights (January 2020):<sup>28</sup>**

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<sup>28</sup> <https://bangladeshaccord.org/updates/2020/02/11/january-2020-quarterly-progress-report>

- 1,618 factories inspected
- 311 safety committees completed safety training
- 552 complaints of sexual and verbal abuse, withheld payment and employment termination have been resolved and 156 complaints are under investigation

### **Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance)**

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety was a group of 28 global retailers who formed and developed the launch of Bangladesh Worker Safety Initiative in July 2014; a five year program to help improve safety in the RMG industry. Because it describes itself as “A legally binding, five-year commitment to improve safety in Bangladesh ready-made garment factories” it is similar to the Accord in terms of marketing language. “Legally binding” for the Alliance is defined as follows:

“Membership to the Alliance is a five-year commitment—and the agreement and its terms that are legally binding on all of its members. The Alliance Board of Directors — chaired by an Independent Director —has the authority to seek binding arbitrations against any Member who does not satisfy its obligations under the agreement, and to publicize and expel them for failure to abide by the commitments set forth in the Members Agreement.”<sup>29</sup>

The Alliance was created after the Accord when Western companies refused to sign before the deadline passed.

### **Membership Agreements**

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<sup>29</sup> Jaakko Salminen, 2018

- “Further, Alliance Members shall require that the Factories they work with respect the right of a worker to refuse work if he/she has a reasonable justification to believe that a safety situation presents an imminent and serious danger to his/her life, and that such worker shall be protected from undue consequences, in accordance with the relevant ILO Conventions and Bangladeshi Law.
- Factories will be identified as “Approved for Production” when they have (1) undergone an inspection against the Alliance Fire Safety & Building Integrity Standard by Qualified Inspectors (or an equivalent inspection conducted by the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh or the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology on behalf of the Government of Bangladesh); (2) are not found to have any conditions that present a severe and imminent risk to life or limb; (3) are willing to participate in the development of a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) with reasonable timeframes to remediate the safety risks identified during the inspection; and (thereafter 4) over a reasonable period of time demonstrate progress towards timely completion of CAP items.
- Following the inspection of a Factory by a Qualified Inspector, whereby the Factory does not meet the Alliance Fire and Building Safety Standards, Alliance staff and Members will direct the establishment of a Corrective Action Plan, with reasonable timelines for completion of the plan.
- Following the initial inspections, periodic follow-up evaluations will be conducted on the recommendation of the Committee Experts, Alliance staff, and Qualified Inspectors. If the Factory meets the Alliance Fire and Building Safety Standards, a longer reevaluation period may be allowed.
- The Board of Directors and the Members approved a modification to the 10% reserve of the Worker Safety Fund (WSF) intended to support temporarily displaced workers due to factory safety remediation in order to release the unused reserve from Years 1-3 of approximately \$2.87 million USD to be used to support the Alliance’s sustainability initiatives in Bangladesh.”<sup>30</sup>

The Alliance membership imposes few unenforceable obligations on its members unlike the Accord. In addition, the Alliance requires a mandatory cost for brands to cover a maximum of \$1 million per year but there are no other financial obligations for Alliance members. The

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<sup>30</sup> <http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/who-we-are/membership>

Alliance has created significant improvement in the RMG industry and will hopefully be sustained in the future.

**Progress of Alliance:**

- 93% of remediation has been completed across factories
- 428 factories have completed their initial Corrective Actions Plans
- Around 1.6 million workers have been trained in fire safety
- More than 28,000 factory guards have been trained in fire safety and evacuation procedures
- Worker Safety Committees have been formed and are operating in 181 factories, giving workers a seat at the table with management in resolving safety issues within their factories<sup>31</sup>

And as a part of the Alliance efforts, all members will continue to fund Amader Kotha (Our Talk), a helpline program that will function as an effective tool that is utilized and trusted by workers. Workers will be able to discuss their concerns such as withheld pay or abuse by managers which will be investigated and resolved. Because the Alliance program ended in 2019, member brands are interested in working with local organizations to monitor safety in Bangladesh factories and continue their work even without binding requirements.

Both coordinate safety efforts and have improved over 80% of the problems such as workers rights, building safety and other violations that were identified at 2,800 factories in Bangladesh. Since the Accord and Alliance formation, there have been no mass casualties from garment factory accidents, workers voices from factories working under the Accord and Alliance have been heard, safety conditions have improved and are closely monitored. The difference between the two is found in the labor management relations. The Alliance is a company developed and controlled program that provides worker representatives but are not a part of the agreement and have no role in its governance while the Accord recognizes leadership roles for

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/en/progress-impact/progress-reports/466-annual-report-2017>

worker representatives resulting in transparent cooperation between management and labor workers.

However, Commerce Minister Tofail Ahmed said that government officials who are affiliated with garment factories would rather see the Accord leave.<sup>32</sup> While the Accord and Alliance programs have significantly changed the sector after Rana Plaza, some parties believe that outside groups are no longer needed since they were not regulating with the government's approval in the first place. If the Accord is forced to leave, signatory brands would also leave as well which would result in a major financial loss for many factories. There is no way of knowing when this could happen but there is a great threat to Accord. I believe that the chances are high that progress will continue if brands want to continue to improve factory and working conditions; so much progress has been made already. Hopefully this progress continues in the RMG industry with or without the Accords involvement.

## **Accountability**

Producing countries are responsible for working conditions and labor law compliance in factories. Footwear companies and global apparel that order from manufacturing factories also have the responsibility to ensure that the rights of workers are upheld throughout their supply chain. This disclosure is what builds corporate responsibility.<sup>33</sup> After Rana Plaza apparel companies have published supplier factory information in December 2017 with full pledge alignment, also known as the Transparency Pledge. The Transparency Pledge aims for good practices of global apparel companies and supply chain transparency which implies companies to publish supplier factories and authorized subcontractors. This will not only help ethical work, but

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.textiletoday.com.bd/accord-alliance-leave-bangladesh-january-commerce-minister/>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/20/more-brands-should-reveal-where-their-clothes-are-made>

also build stakeholder trust and human rights diligence in the apparel supply chain.<sup>34</sup> In 2016, a coalition of labor and human rights organizations and global unions created the Transparency Pledge. Members of this coalition were Clean Clothes Campaign, Human Rights Watch, IndustriAll Global Union, the International Corporate Accountability Roundtable, the International Labor Rights Forum, The international Trade Union Confederation, the Maquila Solidarity Network, UNI Global Union and the workers Rights Consortium. Since the end of 2016, more and more apparel companies have started to disclose information on supply chains and factory locations to indicate the sites that they are monitoring and where they are producing. These brands were Adidas, C&A, Columbia Sportswear, Cotton On Group, Disney, Esprit, Forever New, Fruit of the Loom, Gap Inc., G-Star RAW, Hanesbrands, H&M Group, Hudson's Bay Company, Jeanswest, Levi Strauss, Lindex, Marks & Spencer, Mountain Equipment Co-op, New Balance, Nike, Pacific Brands, PAS Group, Patagonia, Puma, Specialty Fashion Group, Target USA, VF Corporation, Wesfarmers Group (Kmart and Target Australia, and Coles), and Woolworths.<sup>35</sup> This information is disclosed on their websites. Usually, a company will disclose information about protecting workers, paying living wages, conducting fair trade, and working with factories, as well as how they abide by international labor and human rights standards. Clothing companies that source from Bangladesh include JCPenney, Walmart, H&M, and Gap. Companies that do maintain ethical business practices tend to follow the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.<sup>36</sup> This guidance says that businesses should demonstrate that they are aware of human rights in their supply chains by including all information about where their factories are located. In addition, some industry leaders have standardized making supplier chain information viewable for the public. Nevertheless, luxury

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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/20/more-brands-should-reveal-where-their-clothes-are-made>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/20/more-brands-should-reveal-where-their-clothes-are-made>

<sup>36</sup> Brian Stauffer, 2013

fashion brands such as Chanel, Dior, Armani, Ralph Lauren Corporation, and Dolce & Gabbana have released little to no information about their supply chain or even how workers are treated. Other brands such as American Eagle Outfitters, ASICS, ASOS, Canadian Tire, Carrefour, Carter's, The Children's Place, Clarks, Desigual, DICK'S Sporting Goods, Foot Locker, Forever 21, HUGO BOSS, KiK, MANGO, Matalan, Morrison, New Look, Next, Pentland Brands, Primark, Rip Curl, River Island, Sainsbury's, Shop Direct, Sports Direct, and Urban Outfitters are also not releasing the same information. A reporter who was not named says, "Not enough has changed in global fashion supply chains and business practices on the whole across the industry are still very secretive...It is extremely challenging, if not almost impossible, for a consumer to find out where their clothes have been made, by whom and under what conditions. Never again should a tragedy like Rana Plaza happen, yet factory fires, safety accidents and faulty buildings continue to harm people in the places where our clothes are made."<sup>37</sup>

As of 2018, the top manufacturers for clothing and textiles in Bangladesh are Alhaj Textile Mills Ltd, Envoy Textiles Ltd, Anlima Group, DIRD Group, Regent Textile Mills Limited, and ACS Textiles and Towels (BD) Ltd. The Bangladesh Textile Mills Association (BTMA) provides a free list of suppliers across categories such as yarn manufacturing spinning mills, fabric manufacturing spinning mills, and textile processing mills. These are companies owned by Bangladeshis and politicians. BTMA also provides information about suppliers such as the managing director, company name, factory address, and main products. However, there is no information about workers.<sup>38</sup>

Professor John Ruggie, former United Nations Special Representative for Business and Human Rights, said to Human Rights Watch:

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<sup>37</sup> Lucy Handley, 2017

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.chinainportal.com/blog/bangladesh-clothing-textiles-manufacturers/>



“At the very heart of the guiding principles and corporate responsibility is the notion of ‘knowing and showing.’ If a company does not know and cannot show, or will not show, then it raises questions... A company that respects human rights ... is in a sense shortchanging itself by not being transparent. If it believes its [human rights] practices are strong, they should be disclosing the sites they are monitoring and take credit for that.”<sup>39</sup>

The public availability of this supplier information is an important step for the apparel sector, since unauthorized subcontracting is a frequent problem. According to the Gap website, “Subcontracting is common in the apparel industry, and it can pose risks because suppliers may outsource production to facilities that have not been approved by buyers and that do not uphold requirements for safe, fair labor practices and working conditions. Our Global Supply Chain and Supplier Sustainability teams collaborate to address unauthorized subcontracting (UAS).”<sup>40</sup>

Unauthorized subcontracted sites are places where some of the worst labor abuses take place with no type of accountability. It is crucial to highlight the problems in the garment industry and expose the truth within the business. In this industry, there are many human rights violations that are neglected. Naila Kabeer, a Professor at the London School of Economics and author of *Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual? Workers’ Perspectives on Multi–Stakeholder Initiatives in Bangladesh after Rana Plaza* (Unpublished), states that there have been studies of factory managers with qualitative consultations and initiatives with Bangladesh-based stakeholders.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Brian Stauffer, 2013

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.gapinc sustainability.com/unauthorized-subcontracting>

<sup>41</sup> Naila Kabeer, *Paradigm Shift or Business as Usual? Workers’ Perspectives on Multi–Stakeholder Initiatives in Bangladesh after Rana Plaza* (Unpublished)

## **Conclusion:**

From the gathered research stated above, we know that there is a fundamental violation of human rights in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. The Rana Plaza garment factory collapse was one of the worst factory disasters to occur in the garment sector. Fashionable clothing and the demand for keeping up with new trends should not be traded in for human life; and in this case, hundreds of lives. We also know that several legislations that have been put in place before Rana Plaza that have not changed much and programs that have changed conditions after the disaster.

It is crucial to remember that collective action is essential. It is not an issue that one organization can solve on its own. There are many parts that play into changing labor expectations. By raising awareness, we can change the consumer perspective of those who prefer ethically produced clothing which means demanding factories to release supplier chain information for full transparency. This includes salary, location of factories, work hours, sourced material, maternity leave, proper infrastructure and so on. This is the Transparency pledge. Even after Rana Plaza, American companies still get away with subcontracting with unethical manufacturers. The reality is that changes in the garment industry will not happen since some political affiliates are not team members. Collective actions from the consumer demand side is crucial..

The main questions are now how can *we* change demand? And how can one raise awareness? Social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and even films and news broadcasts are great places to start, due to the breadth of their reach. The average person spends around 144 minutes a day on social media. This means that consumers are bound to see a campaign flyer, a documentary trailer, or an organization discussing their cause if it is displayed on social media platforms. Women are central victims of the garment industry, so

campaigning and advocating for women's rights is crucial. It is very important to empower women who are constantly marginalized and discouraged to act politically toward the Bangladeshi government so that they can become stronger, more independent individuals. Although another alternative would be to promote education for young women so that they can find better and safer employment opportunities.

Terms such as “corporate social responsibility” and “sustainability” are thrown around so casually that it is often difficult for consumers to understand what they really mean. Consumers become confused about whether these are simply buzzwords or genuine efforts by brands to hold themselves accountable for social ills associated with the industry. Proponents of “slow fashion” argue for investing in pricier but more ethically sourced goods as the degrowth movement advocates for almost no consumption at all and a return to thrift shops (second-hand clothing) and clothing swaps. When people consume second-hand clothing, it decreases the demand for new clothes and puts less pressure on garment workers to produce mass quantities. So another solution is to shift consumer perspective and encourage demand for second-hand clothing. These are solutions we as activists and consumers can do to support garment workers. This is the time to shed light on the situation by bringing ethics to the center of the debate. Violence, exploitation, and unfair working rights should not be tolerated in any industry, let alone the garment industry.

Ultimately, the Accord and the workings of Alliance have made a positive impact for the RMG sector in Bangladesh. As much as we activists prefer for the Accord to continue, an undemocratic country makes it difficult to work around. Bangladesh does not see a democratic future or a new government reelection any time soon. The Accord along with other local NGOs

must operate until the government is truly democratized so that workers can assert their rights themselves.

## **Epilogue**

Factory closure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed new and shocking weaknesses in the industry. Once the virus reached global levels, thousands of orders were cancelled by suppliers. This means that factory owners and managers were burdened with

financial loss due to social distancing precautions. Rubana Huq, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, says in a *New York Times* article, “Our situation is apocalyptic. The cancellations and hold instructions coming in from Western fashion retailers are pushing us to the point of insolvency, with massive open capacity and raw materials liabilities.”<sup>42</sup> There have been more than \$2.9 billion worth of clothing orders canceled due to the coronavirus crisis. The managing director of the Ananta Group, Sharif Zahir, owns seven factories totaling 26,000 workers and supplies for Zara, Gap, H&M, Levi’s, and Marks & Spencer. He says, “The situation is very bad. The Bangladeshi supply chain is in complete disarray with many foreign brands acting irresponsibly.”<sup>43</sup> Western buyers are either canceling orders, delaying payments, or asking for discounts on already made and shipped orders. In recent weeks, Bangladeshi workers have returned home from their cramped and unsanitary workspaces in garment facilities due to mandated shutdowns. Unfortunately, almost all Western buyers have denied contribution to worker wages and 70 percent of workers did not receive payment before being sent home. It has also come to light that even after the shutdown was extended, several factory owners have demanded workers go back to work by April 5 or else risk losing their jobs. Many of these workers live in remote villages outside the city. At this time, it puts not only workers, but also the local population at risk for coronavirus infection by not following social distancing orders. Babul Rahman traveled more than 95 miles by foot and rickshaw to get to work since public transportation was suspended only to find out he was laid off. “I had to spend thrice as much money to come to Dhaka because buses are closed due to the shutdown. Everything is more expensive because of the coronavirus as it is, now if my salary decreased, I

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<sup>42</sup>Elizabeth Paton, 2020

<sup>43</sup> Elizabeth Paton, 2020

don't know how I will survive.”<sup>44</sup> Human rights groups and unions have repeatedly asked Western buyers to financially support garment workers during this time.

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<sup>44</sup> Naimul Karim, 2020

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