

# **Aftermath of the Rana Plaza Tragedy: Throug a Gender Lens**

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## **Abstract**

The Rana Plaza building collapse on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2013 resulted in the death of over 1100 garment factory workers in Bangladesh. This paper examines the current scenario of Bangladeshi women's livelihood pursuant to safety measures implemented by retailers, manufacturers and other organizations globally under a Corrective Action Plan (CAP) to improve the situation of ready-made garment (RMG) industry workers. Notwithstanding persisting issues with labour standards and working conditions, the RMG sector is still the main source of employment and economic survival for Bangladeshi women. Although this sector does need reform in working conditions and labour standards, implementing the CAP could lead to a decline in women's employment, negatively impacting the overall economy. A collective commitment and agreement among all stakeholders, including the Bangladesh Government, to protect women's employment through medium- and long-term strategies is essential to ensure the sustainability of the Bangladeshi RMG industry.

**Keywords:** Ready-made garment industry, workplace safety, compliance, women's livelihood, rights, corrective action plan, Bangladesh, Rana Plaza.

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**To**

**My Father, Dr. Shamsul Alam**

**&**

**Jutta Treviranus**

**Director, Inclusive Design Research Centre**

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## Acronyms

|              |   |
|--------------|---|
| <b>APP</b>   | All Party Parliamentary Committee                             |
| <b>BEF</b>   | Bangladesh Employers' Federation                              |
| <b>BEPZA</b> | Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority                   |
| <b>BGMEA</b> | Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association  |
| <b>BKMEA</b> | Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association |
| <b>BLA</b>   | Bangladesh Labour Act   |
| <b>BWB</b>   | Better Work Bangladesh Programme                              |
| <b>CPD</b>   | Center for Policy Dialogue                                    |
| <b>CAP</b>   | Corrective Action Plan  |
| <b>CB</b>    | Collective Bargaining   |
| <b>CIDA</b>  | Canadian International Development Agency                     |
| <b>DFID</b>  | Department for International Development, UK                  |
| <b>DOL</b>   | Department of Labour, Government of Bangladesh                |
| <b>EPZ</b>   | Export Processing Zone  |
| <b>EU</b>    | European Union  |
| <b>EI</b>    | Injury Insurance  |
| <b>GOB</b>   | Government of Bangladesh                                      |
| <b>IBC</b>   | IndustriALL Bangladesh Council                                |
| <b>ILO</b>   | International Labour Organization                             |
| <b>IFC</b>   | International Finance Corporation                             |
| <b>ILS</b>   | International Labour Standards                                |
| <b>MOLE</b>  | Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh   |
| <b>NTPA</b>  | National Tripartite Action Plan                               |
| <b>OSH</b>   | Occupational Safety and Health                                |
| <b>RMG</b>   | Ready-Made Garment  |
| <b>TU</b>    | Trade Union   |
| <b>UN</b>    | United Nations  |

# 1 Introduction



Figure 1: Human rights rally by Bangladeshi women (Source: World Report 2015, Human Rights Watch)

*If we can make factory jobs better and more responsive to women's needs and wants, the empowerment benefits will multiply tenfold. That's good for poverty alleviation, sustainable business, and most importantly, for the millions of hard-working women who go to work every day with dreams of a better tomorrow.*

*Meiers, May 28, 2013: Harvard Business Review online, n.p.*

## 1.1 An overview of the study

This Major Research Paper presents a gendered perspective of the corrective action that ensued following the tragic collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory building in Dhaka, Bangladesh on April 24, 2013, and offers a thesis supporting women's employment in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, both as an issue of upholding women's rights and for sustaining the economic development of Bangladesh.

At the root of the arguments presented in support of the thesis lies the dichotomy between Western and Eastern perspectives on the RMG sector environment in Bangladesh: the former focusing on its hostile and exploitative environment; the latter on its inevitable economic and emotional role in the lives of women. The following quote, which reflects the Western perspective in its mildest form, comes from Racheal Meiers, Director of the BSR HER project (which focuses on the empowerment and capacity building of low-income women working in global supply chains).

*If we can make factory jobs better and more responsive to women's needs and wants, the empowerment benefits will multiply tenfold. That's good for poverty alleviation, sustainable business, and most importantly, for the millions of hard-working women who go to work every day with dreams of a better tomorrow.*

*(Meiers, May 28, 2013: n.p. Harvard Business Review)*

Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development at the Gender Institute, London School of Economics and Political Science, expresses the Global South perspective in this quote:

*Simply highlighting their problems, and ignoring their gains, erases the possibility that may have been a calculus of choice involved and that woman may consider these jobs worth defending.*

*(Kabeer, 2004, p. 21)*

The quotes by Meiers and Kabeer stem from the observed conditions of the women's labour force in the garment sector in Bangladesh, but they convey slightly different perspectives. Though these quotes are based upon the RMG sector in Bangladesh, they reflect similar scenarios in the labour sectors of other countries in the Global South. The issues surrounding women's labour are the same, whether it is in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India or China. Women's labour conditions in the RMG industry have many pros and cons. While most of the time this sector is portrayed as a hostile and exploitative environment, as seen through Global North eyes, that does not always give the full picture (Saxena, 2015). This sector is also known for its significant and positive impact, especially in promoting women's empowerment, provision of livelihood, education, environmental awareness and elimination of child labour. These impacts are difficult to quantify, yet without which, Bangladesh, perhaps, would not have been able



to achieve higher growth and higher standards of living. Thus, RMG's positive contribution to Bangladesh, both direct and indirect, needs to be recognized.

Kabeer (2004) clearly supports the argument that RMG has made a positive contribution to Bangladesh. Most of the time, the garment industry in the Global South is portrayed negatively, focusing media attention on exploitative working conditions, low wages, descriptions of labour clashes and an exploitative policy network, and primarily publishing images of unsafe factories. Yet, despite this misrepresentation, and the labour condition shortcomings that do persist in varying degrees, this sector is also known for its positive impact, especially women's empowerment and provision of livelihood, leading to overall improvement to the entire country.

Meiers' quote presents an insightful perspective on the garment and textiles industries in developing countries, highlighting the need for reform that these industries face today. An important aspect to note in this whole situation is that more than 80 percent of the workers in this industry are women; moreover, these women are the sole breadwinners for their families. Ensuring a good livelihood for these women also ensures economic security for another few million people in the country.

On April 24, 2013, however, the collapse of Rana Plaza, the multi-storied building housing an RMG factory cluster, exposed to the world the

poor working conditions in this industry sector. This accident resulted in the deaths of approximately 1132 people, with approximately 2500 people sustaining injuries (Daily Star, 24 April 2014). It is thus not surprising that this event ranked as the worst garment-factory accident in history, worldwide. The adversity of the tragedy completely shocked the world apparel sector. The magnitude of this accident reveals the irresponsible manner in which garment production is repeatedly subcontracted to a string of industry players, such that the original production firm loses control of the working conditions within which its garments are produced. In such situations, the question arises, who is ultimately responsible for the labour conditions?

As a result, some terrible truths of the apparel industry were exposed as the unseen, background stories of the RMG sector of Bangladesh. This accident is also an example of similar situations in other developing countries, which produce garments for the world. Around the world, much attention has focused on the devastated lives of women, as this segment of the workforce represents the backbone of the RMG industry. Therefore, it becomes a priority to understand and analyze the aftermath of the tragedy and its impact on the lives of the women involved. Hence, it is important to investigate and analyze the role of women factory workers in this industry

and the extent to which they can self-advocate for their rights to bring about policies that can actually improve their lives in the large context.

## **1.2 Significance of the study**

This research portrays the global context of women workers in the RMG garment industry in light of the reference disaster. Although the general perception of the garment and textile industry in Bangladesh most often comes from images of wretched and exploitative working conditions, I want to represent this industry from the perspective of providing significant gains to the people of Bangladesh. My research is positioned in the Bangladeshi context, as Bangladesh is the second largest garment exporting country in the world and is heavily dependent on women making up its workforce.

I am using the Rana Plaza accident as a case study to examine how this event has changed the RMG sector, especially for women workers. Specifically, this study will examine the impact of the collaborative national and international efforts for corrective action on women workers. Thus, my study recognizes the role of all national and international stakeholders in the policy-making process, how they are connected to one another, how important the sustainable reforms are to them and how all the stakeholders should work together with the Bangladesh government in devising a medium- and long-term strategy with the objective of ensuring sustainable reforms and improvements.

### **1.3 Research objective and questions**

Because the women's labour force is the backbone of the RMG industry, there is a need to evaluate the current conditions of women workers' livelihoods and also to find ways to improve them. Analyzing the effects of alternative policy and program change reveals the extent to which these actions can create sustainable livelihood opportunities for women factory workers through innovative ways including, but, that are solely not limited to, training, capacity building, and awareness creation.

My research engages these issues through the following objective: to examine the RMG industry in Bangladesh in light of the Rana Plaza disaster and the remedial measures being taken from the perspective of women garment workers. My research seeks answers to the following questions:

1. In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza accident, what implications do the post-event safety measures taken by retailers and other organizations have for the lives of women workers?
2. How do these safety policies and programs affect women and their livelihoods in the apparel industry in Bangladesh in exploring opportunities for sustainability?

## **1.4 Motivation for the study**

My research interest in the RMG sector got its start long before I moved to Toronto in 2012. Before I came to Toronto, I had been working for more than a decade in a fashion school under the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association (BGMEA), the regulatory body in the garment sector in Bangladesh. My teaching and research pursuits at that time put me in close touch with different garment factories in Bangladesh for a substantial amount of time. One of the projects I worked on involved the European Union, the British Council and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). My research aimed at understanding the issues regarding sustainability that the RMG industry was facing at that time and also to provide insights into how factories in the UK and Bangladesh were innovating sustainability to enhance business practices. By doing this, I became especially aware of the working conditions in the garment industry and started gaining insight into how these working conditions needed to be reformed to ensure a sustainable future for the fashion-making industry.

The Rana Plaza accident happened a year after I moved to Canada. The death of 1100 people shocked me immensely. As I was far away from my home country, I could not directly help with the relief measures but did all that was possible remotely. Not long after, I started realizing my duty and

responsibility towards this industry and towards Bangladesh. I started reading and exploring more about this industry and started positioning myself as somewhat of a bridge between the Global South (maker-manufacturer) and Global North (consumer-user). I realized that a lot of reform was necessary, some of which was in the roadmap, but also as a Bangladeshi I understood the country's infrastructure and limitations. Straddling the Global South and Global North, I could see a gap between stakeholders from both the East and West. Another strength of mine was that, being a woman of Bangladeshi roots; I understood 'women's' issues in Bangladesh and how these could be resolved from a gender perspective. Though I am only one person and my initiative may be small, one day, hundreds, thousands or millions of small initiatives like mine will lead to a truly sustainable future of fashion, where women like me will one day live a full life with dignity, choice and value.

## **1.5 Structure of the paper**

I have divided this paper into seven sections. Section 1 provides an overview of the study, its objective, questions, outline and significance. In Section 2, I situate women garment workers in the context of the advantages and disadvantages of working in the garment industry and then analyze the same specifically in the context of Bangladesh. Section 3 explores the methodology of the study. Section 4 provides background information of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Section 4 also looks at the working conditions for women workers in the RMG sector. Against this background, I also describe the case of the Rana Plaza accident. Section 5 offers an analysis of the tragedy and the remediation that has subsequently taken place through Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) for the improvement of this industry brought about by retailers and different organizations. Though these CAPs are meant to be for the betterment of this industry, they have had some negative consequences on the lives of the women involved. These trade-offs need to be understood. Along with this, I have also tried to identify the gaps and loopholes of all the remediation and action plans. In Section 6, I go on to explore which parts of the CAPs especially cater to women workers, especially because women are the main component of this labour force. Section 7 provides all the references I have used for this research study.



## 2 Literature Review

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Figure 2: Myanmar women sew garments at a factory in northern Yangon's Shwepyitha township  
(Source: Nikkei Asia Review, December 3, 2014)

*The characterization of the industry as comprising anything other than sweatshop that fuels the capitalistic hunger of domestic elites and international corporation is viewed as unbelievable, unrealistic and even naïve. Often these criticisms come from those who have never been to any of these garment exporting countries, visited factories, or talked with garment sector workers.*

*Sanchita Banerjee Saxena, 2014, p. 21*

## 2.1 Introduction

In this section, I review literature on the conditions in the garment industry in the Global South from the viewpoint of women's labour and how this sector has contributed significantly to women's livelihoods. I portray the global context of women workers, the advantages and disadvantages for women workers, and then I analyze the same specifically in the context of Bangladesh.

Since the start of my project, I have realized that the garment industry is full of contradictions and that there are multiple ways to look at the root cause. But one strong issue that has always existed in the entire scenario is the extent of women's empowerment and how this relates to the overall improvement of their lives. Thus, I look at the concept of empowerment and some debates surrounding women's empowerment that the garment industry is facing today. Another major issue I grew to understand is that women's empowerment is sometimes stalled by various labour problems. I also discuss labour and compliance issues of the garment industry in Bangladesh. This literature review then extends further into the debate of policy and remediation after the Rana Plaza accident to point out some gaps and linkages in the remediation plan. The findings from this review serve to

contextualize my study and provide the background for understanding the rest of this paper.

## **2.2 Women's empowerment in the Global South**

When gender equality is considered in the context of women workers in the garment sector in the Global South, thoughts often turn to inequality and exploitation through low wages and inferior working conditions. All the same, I would argue that the availability of this employment opportunity to women workers in the garment industry is a comparative advantage to women who are passive or active earners in other industries in the same country or economy. Whether it is Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India or China, there is always a conception that the working environment for women labourers in the garment sector is hostile and exploitative and that there is a need for reforms in labour standards and policies (Saxena 2015). This conception has a direct impact on women's livelihoods. In line with the same, there have been many discussions about women's empowerment in the garment sector and how empowerment could improve their working conditions and livelihood. Spanning different times, places and circumstances, these studies discuss both general and country-specific social norms and paradoxes. This literature review will focus on the similarity of

the debate on the constraints and/or advantages experienced by women working in the garment industry in the Global South.

Women's empowerment holds different meanings to different people. Given the strong connection of my thesis with women's empowerment, I elaborate on this concept through the works of Naila Kabeer and Sarah Mosedale. Naila Kabeer, a prominent author and researcher on gender studies in London, UK, defines empowerment as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability" (2005, p. 13). This is meaningful in the context of women in the Global South who have culturally been leading male-dominated lives. Mosedale goes a step further, stressing the importance of agency to carry out one's decisions as much as the power to make those decisions when she states that "definitions of empowerment usually include a sense of people making decisions on matters which are important in their lives and being able to carry them out" (2005, p. 244). The importance of such agency cannot be overstated.

Empowerment also gives women a voice and the capacity to bargain or, to use a gentler term, negotiate. Through empowerment women gain the economic power and financial freedom that gives them a voice in their family, workplace and last, but not least, society. Through empowerment, women gain the freedom to marry or not and a choice to live on their own

terms. Thus, it is obvious that economic life of women in the Global South is intertwined with their social and personal lives (Meiers, 2013, n.p).

Global labour conditions is a multifaceted issue, and there are a number of arguments regarding their effects in the larger picture of labour conditions and empowerment. Nevertheless, the point offered here is that working conditions and environment are subordinate to personal empowerment issues, at least in this context. Although there are issues with labour standards, wages and working conditions, the garment sector still provides women workers with an escape from a completely passive (dependent/bonded) life, as Bangladesh is a patriarchal society. The garment sector provides women workers with a level of job satisfaction not easily attainable in other comparable women's labour roles in other industries within these economies. The ability to earn regular wages gives women prestige and self-confidence. Most of these women garment workers are the breadwinners for their families. However minimal their wages might seem in dollar terms, this earning is the only opportunity for this huge labour force to make a more decent living than it otherwise could. Thus, their work enhances their self-respect and bolsters their image within their families and society at large. The following statement by Meires supports this view.

*Yet in many ways, wage-earning women hold the highest potential in the global economy, both from an economic standpoint and from a gender-equality perspective. We know*

*they are risk-takers, and they're also influencers. Their wages support multiple family members, and their earning power is respected by whole communities.*

*(Meires, 2013: Web. n.p.)*

The definition of women's economic empowerment offered by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) also supports Meires' view:

*Having access to and control over the means to make a living on a sustainable and long term basis, and receiving the material benefits of this access and control: Such a definition goes beyond short-term goals of increasing women's access to income and looks for longer term sustainable benefits, not only in terms of changes to laws and policies that constrain women's participation in and benefits from development, but also in terms of power relationships at the household, community and market levels.*

*(Stone, 2013: Web. n.p.)*

Studies also suggest that a major percentage of these women who are unmarried factory workers save a portion of their earnings for sought-after objectives such as marriage expenses, improving living conditions and attaining a better social status. This earning capacity makes these women quite "esteemed" and sought after in the marriage market. Comparable cultural values are prevalent in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka that gives employed women independence, self-confidence, a better sense of self-identity and dignity in society.

Kabeer (2004) draws a similar conclusion that, despite a number of challenges and complaints the garment sector has caused, women workers have gained significant value and prestige in their own workplaces, society in general and the country as a whole. As noted earlier, Bangladesh, like many other countries in the Global South, is known for its male-dominated society. For most of these women workers, the garment sector offers them an option to temporarily escape from dominance at home, but they may often face the same oppression from male employers. Before the garment industry started, women in these countries were mostly confined to their homes or found employment only as domestic help. Although they always worked hard, their efforts did not directly contribute to the economy. In a sense, their unpaid contribution was passive. With the introduction of employment opportunities in the garment sector, albeit with low earnings, these women have gained self-confidence and a sense of identity within their families, communities and societies. Understandably, all this led to personal freedom, enabling these women workers to live their lives with a sense of agency and dignity.

Similar views are expressed by Majumdar & Begum (2000), Dannecker (2000), Lynch (2012) and Ngai (2005). Lynch's (2012) and Ngai's (2005) research express similar views when they describe the transformation of a rural girl into a garment worker. The process of an

ordinary village girl transforming to become a “dagong” (China) or “Juki girl” (Sri Lanka) simultaneously manipulates wants, lacks and desires to be independent and enshrine them among the village girls for whom the alternative is a void, a steamrolling into their family wants and societal norms. This shift illustrates how an average village girl transforms into a income-generating individual who can then support her dream of living a life of her own. This transformation also expresses the dream of becoming not just industrial producers but also modern consumers, a notion unachievable in their former lives within their rural homes, cultural contexts and societal attributes at large.

To present a balanced perspective, an alternative view is provided. Based on the garment sector in India, Singh (2009) presents a different impression of the complex union of women’s empowerment and their working conditions. Similar to other countries in the Global South, India is facing substantial issues relating to labour conditions and wages. Singh draws a comparative analysis of women’s working conditions in three factories that produce garments for Tesco, Wal-Mart and Marks & Spencer. Singh (2009, p. 18) outlines that thousands of young, single women who come from villages to work and live a better life in the city face oppressive working conditions and low wages. Along with this, other concerns that workers in this industry face are long working hours, usually with no



overtime payment, excessive work pressure, inadequate workplace facilities, workplace harassment and absence of bargaining power. The other issues Singh notes (2009, p. 18) that is crucial here is that of “social audit.” When buyers occasionally visit these factories for audits, the factory management “shows” the buyers a proper factory environment, which does not reflect the usual factory conditions. In this light, Singh’s article quotes two workers:

*When buyers visit the factory, workers who are found sharing their problems with auditors are given out-pass and sent home.*

*Gowramma, 30-years, tailor*

*Safety equipment such as masks and gloves are provided to workers only during visits by buyers.*

*Nagesh, 21-years, garment worker*

These statements present a clear picture of how the real factory conditions differ from the audited ones, and how the management forces these workers to work in the factory, taking advantage of the fact that otherwise they will be out of work. In addition, both statements provide a glimpse into the underlying reality where these women are forced to join and work in the garment factory for their daily survival.

Majumder and Begum (2000, p. 23) also show that social status for women workers does not necessarily always increase in this sector but rather declines. In fact, women who work until late at night in the garment industry sometimes face a negative image in these mostly conservative

societies and hence their lower social class actually dips further. The strict, conservative societies devalue the moral stature of these women for their freedom to choose the life they want, to move around freely and work late at night, leaving them socially less accepted and empowered.

The words of Dina Siddiqui, a popular writer on the South Asian Citizen's Web, perceptively sum up the argument in this section:

*... the economy [in Bangladesh] is heavily dependent on the labour of women factory workers in the garment industry, where local feminist understandings of the 'sweatshop economy' have not always converged with global feminist/left concerns about the exploitation inherent in the (now not so new) New International Division of Labour.*

*(Siddiqui, 2013, n.p.)*

## **2.3 Labour in the Bangladesh context**

A number of studies have been conducted on the labour and compliance issues in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. This employment sector is the highest foreign currency earner for Bangladesh and has thus become its economic backbone. Yet the inside story is full of contradictions. Albeit the majority of the workers in this sector are women who have been serving as the main support of this industry, still this sector has failed to successfully

meet/serve the basic tenets of this predominantly female workforce. Thus, different studies present two perspectives of the situation.

Labour standards and rights are almost totally ignored in the RMG industries in Bangladesh (Ahamed, 2012; Kumar, 2006; Sikder, Sarkar & Sadeka, 2014). Overall working conditions in this sector are below minimum standards, and most of these standards do not meet the standards of the International Labour Organization (ILO) (Kamal, Billah & Hossain, 2012). The main issues that were identified, among others, are low wages, irregular payment, physical and mental health issues, excessive work, security in job, wage discrimination, absence of proper trade unions, etc. (Ahamed, 2013; Ahmed, Raihan & Islam, 2013). Also, due to unhygienic surroundings in factories, workers sometimes suffer from various diseases. Ahmed et al. (2013) identified the following 18 major reasons as the main problems that lead to labour unrest:

1. Long working hours and sudden layoffs
2. Lack of minimum facility and safety
3. Sub-standard living conditions
4. Deferred benefits
5. International conspiracy and coercive role of the law enforcing agency
6. Too much dependence on buyers

7. Pressures from the workers and mastans<sup>1</sup>
8. Use of workers by others and rumours
9. Price hike of necessary items
10. Unfulfillment of education demands of the children
11. Distorted minded workers
12. Political instability of the country
13. Too much and inhuman workload
14. Reluctance of the government regulatory bodies
15. No promotion opportunity
16. Wages are not paid on time
17. Poor working environment
18. Insufficient wages for fulfilling basic needs

Although low wages seem to be the main cause of dissatisfaction for the workers, that is not always the most salient reason why he complains. In fact, some other irregularities equally serve as drivers of workers' frustration, if not more. Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, p. 16) also support this view when they suggest that the level of wages is not (always) the most significant source of dissatisfaction. In fact, they claim that wages in this sector are normally better than in other industries in which women work

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<sup>1</sup>Bengali word for hoodlums/miscreants.

<sup>3</sup>ACCORD is the first legally binding multi-stakeholder agreement between international trade unions IndustriALL and UNI Global, Bangladesh trade unions, and 180 international brands and retailers (companies) on codes for building and fire safety.

under similar conditions. The other main cause that has been creating workers' dissatisfaction is the irregular or delayed payment structure. Sometimes, the factory owner delays wages for months on end (Kabeer, 2004, p. 16). This has been a regular occurrence in most of factories. Other sources of dissatisfaction are inadequate childcare facility, overtime, some health hazard issues and a general lack of respect towards women workers. For women workers, insufficient childcare and paternity support can also be a major cause of disappointment (Ahmed, Nasima & Alam, 2013, p. 13). The study also suggests that, although the Government of Bangladesh has amended the rules regarding the provision of maternity leave and child care facilities, these services/rights are still not provided in most factories. Most women workers have little knowledge of their rights or of the necessary applications to employers or the doctor notes needed in order to claim their rights. Most pregnant workers are fired or sent home on unpaid leave upon revealing pregnancy-related conditions and hence pregnant women, more often than not, work through to the final stages of pregnancy for fear of being sent away, thus risking the health and lives of both mother and child (Ahmed, Nasima & Alam, 2013, p. 13).

Employers' and supervisors' attitudes towards women workers is one of the main causes of frustration and dissatisfaction experienced by the majority of women (Dannecker, 2002; Kabeer, 2004). Social gender

inequality is a huge concern, as the lack of respect that the supervisors show for their workers creates inherent job dissatisfaction. This particular factor emerges routinely as a source of dissatisfaction. As Dannecker (2000, p. 135) notes in her study, “all the interviewed women articulated their insecurity and their helplessness with regard to the way the supervisors addressed them, talked to them and treated them.” Sexual harassment is another issue that needs to be taken into account, although women are always vulnerable to workplace sexual harassment regardless of the place.

There are studies that support another perspective of the industry that, despite all the criticisms and condemnation, the garment industry in Bangladesh provides its women workers a significant gain. Whatever the monetary significance of the earnings, this is the only sector that has been able to give a strong footing for women in society. As Meiers, states:

*Factory jobs give millions of women what they can't get anywhere else: a salaried wage. With it, they can begin to exert control over their future. Factory work isn't just about making clothes; it's also about a potential path toward gender equality.*

*(Meiers, 2013: n.p.)*

The RMG sector has given its women workers self-identity, self-confidence and a means to manage their own lives, which otherwise would have been impossible. Also, representing themselves in the society in their own name has given women liberty and freedom from isolation. This

dialogue has been supported by Kabeer (2004), Farhana, Syduzzaman & Munir (2015), Sikder, Sarkar & Sadeka (2014) and Ali, Begum, Salehin & Farid (2010). As noted, all these studies suggest how these working women now have a voice and decision-making power over their homes, lives and societies in which they live. In a patrilineal society like Bangladesh, traditionally, women never had the power to talk over their husband, father, brother or even son. As stated by Heath and Mobarak (2015, p. 13), “the garment industry has likely played a key role in the remarkable progress Bangladesh has made in improving women's lives over the past 40 years.”

The same point was made by Kabeer (2004), when she described how the conditions of women's lives were before they came into the garment sector and how these women now have gained the power of decision-making because of the value of their economic contribution. While Kabeer doesn't deny the fact that this sector still needs reform in terms of working conditions, at the same time, she claims that the picture often depicted by the Global North does not always provide the true picture of this sector. Hence, some of the labour standards that the Global North is trying to impose may not necessarily prove to be the best practices for the particular economy in question; rather, Western labour standards might serve the other side's interest. Certainly, this sector has proved to be a great source of emancipation for the women in these economies to contribute actively and

thus gain the place and space they very much need and deserve in their social order. As Kabeer writes:

*And for women themselves, whatever problems they face within the garment industry, the options outside are far bleaker. They are reluctant to jeopardize the concrete gains they have made in the present for the uncertain gains in the future that struggles in the workplace might bring. They know well that for every woman who is prepared to fight, many others are prepared to take her place on acquiescent terms.*

*(Kabeer, 2004, p. 25)*

Sikder, Sarkar & Sadeka (2014) drew similar conclusions, stating that regular income has given women control over their lives and a greater role in household decision-making, which is also an important measure of economic empowerment. Their study shows that about one-third of women in the garment sector have the opportunity to participate in decision-making at home. It also gave woman workers adequate control of their expenditures and a positive standing in their families and societies.

Ahmed (2004, pp. 41-42), however, refutes this view, stating that, although this empowerment is an inevitable choice for these women, it is not necessarily the best solution for them. In fact, in some cases the situation becomes worse (when compared to their otherwise passive-earning domesticated living) from the perspective of women's rights. As he argues, women workers come from different backgrounds and classes and, as such, working and earning holds different meanings for these different women.



Employers always prefer women labourers who tend not to have a voice and who can be moulded to their needs. Depending on their particular situation, age and background, the effect women's earnings has on their decision-making power at home differs. To women who come from a situation of abject poverty, the garment sector is the best possible employment opportunity, making it better than the inevitable alternative of serving as a prostitute and/or household labourer. Women who come from a better social stratum also view this as respectable employment, because, although they are not the sole breadwinners of their families, they may be able to spend their earnings as they choose and make the economic situation better for themselves and for their families. For a single woman, working gives her power over her life, enabling her to decide how to spend her earnings. On the other hand, in a patriarchal society, most married women might not have the opportunity to leverage their earnings for personal expenses over their households, even though it could be argued that these women certainly use their earnings for the betterment of their lives.

Another important issue that has impacted women's lives through employment in the garment sector is the change in the pattern of their livelihood. Ali, Begum, Salehin & Farid (2010) show how women's livelihood patterns have changed in a positive way. Their study reveals the significant benefits of having access to jobs, even beyond the income opportunity in the

form of an improved livelihood pattern after finding employment in a garment factory. In another study by Farhana, Syduzzaman & Munir (2015), it was shown that there is a noteworthy difference in terms of life before and after for women joining this sector. After they started earning, some women were able to send their kids to school and some could help their aged parents. By investing their own money into their families, women could improve their families' living conditions dramatically. Wages have also been raised post-2001, and there is hope that they will increase further. A substantial number of single women save some portion of their earnings towards their marriage expenses, making them "better valued" in the marriage market. This argument is supported by statements/quotes in various reports. One such quote was made in 1993 by the then-President of Bangladesh, Abdur Rahman Biswas, at the Batexpo (an Annual Apparel and Textile Exposition in Bangladesh):

*The garment industry is one of the major foreign exchange earning sectors of Bangladesh. [...It] has come as a blessing to our teeming millions who could not for so long find any sources of employment. It has especially made the womenfolk self-reliant by creating large-scale employment opportunities for them. (BGMEA, 1993)*

*(Siddiqui, 2009, p. 164)*

Similar statements are also found in the brochures of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers Association (BGMEA) from 1993:

*As a consequence [of the industry], a socio-economic development process has been introduced in the country, the most significant one is the employment of a huge [number of] women workers who would otherwise be unemployed and remain victims of social discrimination. For the first time in the history of Bangladesh this industry has created the highest employment opportunity for the country's underprivileged womenfolk in an organized industrial sector. Most of these female workers were able to improve their quality of living by working in the ready-made garment industry.*

*(BGMEA, 1993, brochure)*

Thus, there is a clear indication of how women garment workers established their position and contribution to national development. This larger development and progress has, in turn, also certainly improved their livelihoods, creating a new consuming class. As discussed earlier, these women spend a substantial amount of their earnings on themselves, be it for the betterment of themselves or their families, which in turn contributes to the national economy. This has a significant impact over their lives and how they carry themselves in society.

## **2.4 Law and policy remediation**

The devastating Rana Plaza accident of 2013 led to increased awareness about the garment sector as a whole, which made people from all walks of life realize the need for reforms in every branch of this industry to bring about the desired changes (Human Rights Watch report on Rana Plaza, 2015). Public pressure also resulted in the adoption of a range of action plans

and agreements. A significant difference has already been achieved between situations pre- and post-Rana Plaza tragedy in terms of safety progress, safety capacity building and workers' rights. Rees (2015) reports as follows on the conversation regarding what could be done towards the betterment and sustenance of the industry:

*Research undertaken by Tufts University for Better Work Vietnam demonstrates a direct correlation between factory compliance and both productivity and profitability, suggesting better work means better business. A study of 185 Vietnamese factories and 5,100 workers revealed a 5.9% boost in profitability when workers perceived improvements in their conditions, including an improved sense of physical security and assurance of wage payments.*

*(Rees, D., 2015, p. 28)*

Complementing this, Rees also reported that, “[i]mprovements in compliance to labour standards don’t just benefit factory owners. They translate directly to worker wellbeing and can have a dramatic impact on countries’ social and economic development” (2015, p. 29).

Wichterich and Khan further reinforce this with their statement:

*The adopted agreements and the commitments made at national and international levels are an attempt to set up a multi-stakeholder governance system for the RMG industry. They represent a challenge to the existing power structures in the transnational apparel chains.*

*(Wichterich and Khan, 2015, n.p.)*

Though the Human Rights Watch report on Rana Plaza (2015) does not support the argument that there has been a significant improvement, it still concurs with the points of recommendation:

*Companies should work in consultation with unions and labour rights lawyers to ensure that pricing and sourcing contracts adequately reflect and incorporate the cost of labour, health, and safety compliance. Such contracts should include the cost of the minimum wage, overtime payments, and all legal benefits.*

*(Human Rights Watch report on Rana Plaza, 2015, p. 64)*

All these reformatory action plans are now, more than ever, principally pushing for safer working conditions. Better work by ILO<sup>2</sup>, ACCORD<sup>3</sup>, ALLIANCE<sup>4</sup> and the NTPA<sup>5</sup> are examples of this reform. There is direct correspondence between the compliance achieved and improvement seen in the industry (Wichterich & Khan, 2015). Thus, improvement of labour law and compliance in this industry means safer and better working

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<sup>3</sup>ACCORD is the first legally binding multi-stakeholder agreement between international trade unions IndustriALL and UNI Global, Bangladesh trade unions, and 180 international brands and retailers (companies) on codes for building and fire safety.

<sup>4</sup>The ALLIANCE for Bangladesh Worker Safety was founded by a group of North American apparel companies and retailers and brands who have joined together to develop and launch the Bangladesh Worker Corrective Action Plan (CAP), a binding, five-year undertaking that will be transparent, result-oriented, measurable and verifiable with the intent of improving safety in Bangladeshi ready-made garment factories.

conditions for millions of people in Bangladesh. It also contributes to the economic and sustainable growth of the country.

## **2.5 Summary**

The above literature forms the basis of my theoretical framework. All these theories are interrelated and present the vital issues relating to the improvement of the RMG sector of Bangladesh. And thus, I argue that none of the safety measures and remediation taken after the Rana Plaza accident is particularly structured for the needs of women workers. Therefore, there is an absence of inclusion in the whole situation. Because women are the major stakeholders of this industry, there is a need to analyze all the remediation through a gender lens and recommend a policy and guideline that especially caters to women—a policy that will improve women’s livelihoods. This will ultimately lead us to a sustainable future of the garment industry in Bangladesh as well as in the Global South.

### 3 Methodology

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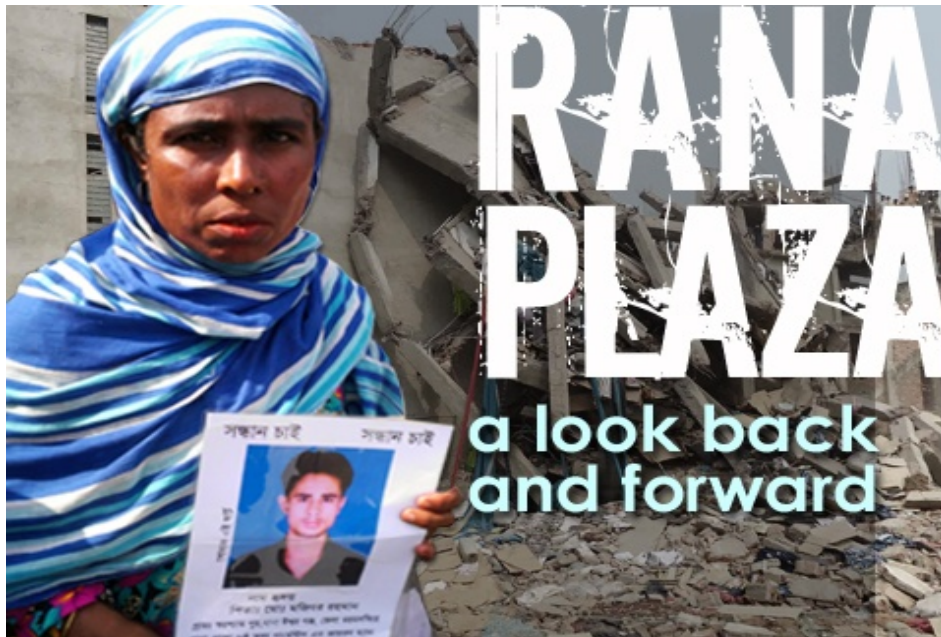


Figure 3: A look back and forward

(Source: Institute for Global labour and human rights 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2014)

*Case studies become particularly useful where one needs to understand some particular problem or situation in great-depth, and where one can identify cases rich in information.*

*(Noor, 2008: Case study: A strategic research methodology. American journal of applied sciences, p. 1602)*

### **3.1 Nature of the study**

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the research approach and methods employed. The study adopted 1) case study research, 2) archival research with a qualitative approach to foster a more insightful examination of the aftermath of the Rana Plaza accident. Since a majority of the labour force in garment factories in Bangladesh, as well as in the Global South, is comprised of women, adopting a gender lens was considered appropriate to focus specifically on a segment of the problem in relation to the most significant yet vulnerable group: women workers.

### **3.2 Case study research**

A case study research approach was considered appropriate as it best serves to examine a specific problem in order to acquire an in-depth understanding. The Rana Plaza accident was chosen as the topic in view of the remarkable impact this event had on the global, as well as the Bangladeshi, RMG sector. The focus of the case study is on factors such as labour condition violations, policy and strategy failures and enforcement of law and policy dialogue. As Yin (2011) states, “[c]ase study assumes that examining the context and other complex conditions related to the case(s) being studied are integral to understanding the case(s).” Carla Willig argues



(2008) that case studies “are not characterized by the methods used to collect and analyze data, but rather its focus on a particular unit of analysis: a case.” Many well-known case study researchers, such as Robert E. Stake and Robert K. Yin, have written about case study research and suggested techniques for organizing and conducting the research successfully. Thus, a case study approach allows for a broad discussion in understanding different activities and other types of considerations in social, economic and political environments for a wide range of topics, people, themes and contexts.

Through a case study of the Rana Plaza accident, I tried to explore the truth in the background stories and a possible way forward for the garment industry. The garment sector of the Global South has been known for its negative and contradictory working conditions for a long time. As outlined earlier, one accident the Rana Plaza accident, exposed the profound flaws within the RMG industry, not only in Bangladesh but also other countries that make fashion for the world, primarily the Global North. The Rana Plaza case study, discussed in Section 4, is also a great example of inquiry that investigates a real-life context. Another major advantage for choosing the case study method is for its extensive and rich data analysis and breadth of data availability. After the accident, a substantial amount of research was conducted in this sector. This made it possible for me to gather expert opinions for research purposes. The Bangladesh Government, BGMEA and

other stakeholders (national and international) have conducted numerous studies on a large scale that have informed my analysis. Strength in the case study method is the data gathering procedure, which involves using multiple sources and techniques. These data were collected through a variety of secondary material research from online and academic sources of sufficient credibility. Because the data collection process generated a large amount of data from multiple sources where systematic organization of the data had already been done by other researchers and institutions, it was possible for me to focus on the main part of my research: .

The CAPs that were taken up after the accident were investigated. Most of the ideas were also assessed for their effectiveness to make changes in organizations and established processes. Keath (2010) stated that “[w]e love case studies because they allow us a glimpse into causation. We hope that consistent underlying ‘architecture’ of success will present itself.”

### **3.3 Archival research**

This research relied on various published sources for data. For the most part, I have used the data from: official statistics and documents, technical reports, scholarly and peer reviewed journals, trade journals, books, research institute reports, etc. I also used data from various stakeholders including national and international organizations who are well-known for producing

valid research, such as the International Labour Organization, Bangladesh Government, BGMEA, ALLIANCE, NTPA, Human Rights Watch Report on Rana Plaza (2015), Bangladesh All Party Parliamentary Group, UK, CPD, World Bank, IFC, etc. These trusted sources of data made my research procedure valid and valuable. As Nova (1960) wrote:

*[s]econdary data analysis is helpful in designing subsequent primary research and, as well, can provide a baseline with which to compare your primary data collection results. Therefore, it is always wise to begin any research activity with a review of the secondary data.*

### **3.4 Limitation and challenges of the study**

I faced a variety of limitations in my research, most of which were due to practical, financial and time constraints. Physical location is one of the main challenges that I have faced. The case study is based on Bangladesh, but I have conducted all the research in Toronto, Canada. The second most important limitation was the time frame of the study. The research time frame was short, which limited my planning and methods in conducting the research.

Another limitation I faced was financial. Travel to Bangladesh is costly and time-consuming. So, despite my desire to travel to Bangladesh, I was not able to go there and conduct any interviews. The final limitation I faced was the adverse political situation in Bangladesh. In the past three years, Bangladesh has

faced seriously volatile political situations, creating a very hostile environment. So I thought it was not safe for me to travel to Bangladesh to conduct the research on-site.

There were some challenges that I faced with my case study analysis and secondary literature reviews. The first and main challenges were data organization and selecting and scrutinizing literature for review. Since the accident was a major wake-up call for everyone in the garment sector around the world, substantial research has been conducted, and hence a vast amount data and literature was available for the case study. At first, the volume of data available overwhelmed me. From these huge amounts of information, I needed to carefully funnel out the data relevant for my purposes. Also, most of the huge quantity of data and literature did not directly address questions related to my research objective. Since I did not collect the data myself, I did not have any control over what was contained in the documents. Oftentimes this tended to limit my analysis. Among the vast amount of research that has been done on the garment industry in the Global South, very little of it looks at the issues from a gender perspective. So, throughout the evaluation and analysis procedure, I needed to remain focused, using and interpreting the data with diligence and extreme care so that I minimized bias in the study.

Another problem was the authenticity and credibility of the data. Much of the information was gathered online. However, the challenge of citing resources from the Web depends on the ability to assess the credibility of sources. Anyone can publish anything on the Web that can be copied, misleading and sometimes, even, fake. So I had to carefully check the credibility of all the information.

Another challenge I found with the case study approach was bias in the study. I agree with the fact that the Rana Plaza accident is considered to be one of the deadliest garment-factory accidents in history; however, in the aftermath of this accident, the data and literature have not looked at or described the full picture of the garment industry or Bangladesh. Through my research, I found that most of the data and literature was based on only the negative and abusive aspects of this industry and country. After the accident, the world has been looking at this industry and country only through this single accident. It was difficult, but not impossible, to find literature that supported other perspectives to provide a holistic assessment of the entire issue.

## 4 The Rana Plaza Accident

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Figure 4: Site of the Rana Plaza accident on April 24, 2013 (Source: Daily Star, June 04, 2015)

*The collapse of an eight-storey garment factory in Rana Plaza on the outskirts of Dhaka on April 24th killed at least 400 people and injured many more. It was probably the worst industrial accident in South Asia since the Bhopal disaster in 1984, and the worst ever in the garment industry.*

*(The Economist, May 4, 2013)*

## 4.1 Ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh

As noted earlier, Bangladesh is the second largest RMG producer in the world resulting in the RMG sector emerging as a multi-billion-dollar export industry in the country. After 1971, it was assumed that the country's economy would not survive due to the fallout of the jute market, the country's only export and foreign earning sector. Since then, Bangladesh has proven its potential with the rise of RMG sector and it has never looked back. The incredible development of Bangladesh's RMG industry has proven its ability to be a resilient nation, which has risen from the status of being "a basket case," as former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, remarked in 1971, to one which has outshone many other countries.



Figure 5: Ready-made garment factory in Bangladesh: women working at sewing machines

(Source: The Daily Star, 19 December, 2011)



Figure 6: Ready-made garment factory in Bangladesh: workers working at knitting machines

(Source: Transparency International Bangladesh, 31<sup>st</sup> October, 2013)

The RMG sector is Bangladesh's most influential sector in terms of economic contribution and empowerment as well as positive social changes.

In 2002, the Centre for Policy Dialogue reported that

*[d]espite many difficulties faced by the sector over the past years, it continued to show robust performance, competitive strength and, of no less importance, social commitment. RMG's contribution to Bangladesh economy is well-known, well-appreciated and well-respected.*

(CPD Occasional Paper Series 50, 2002, p. 2)

This sector has more than 5000 factories and earns 80 percent of the country's foreign currency, providing employment to about four million



workers. Approximately 80 percent (2.8 million) workers in this four million-strong workforce are female. This huge workforce is making a significant contribution to the national economy as well as to family earnings, as outlined earlier.

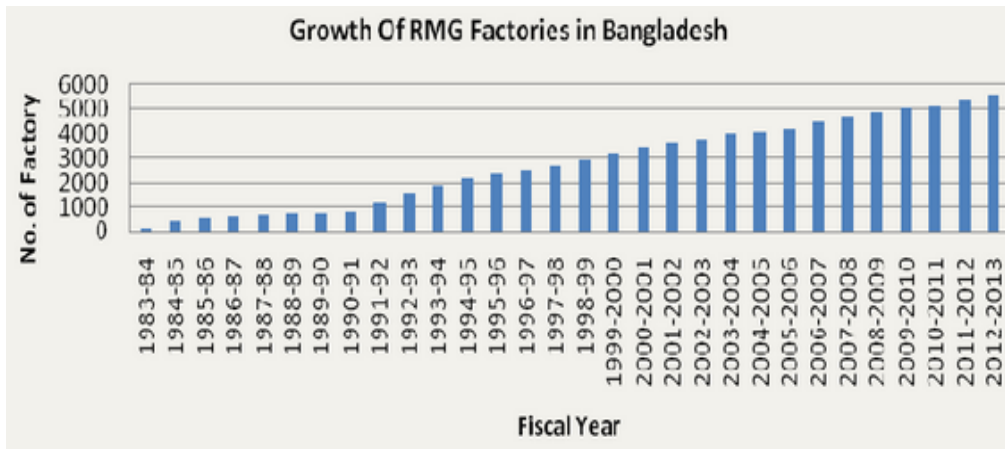


Chart 1: Growth of the RMG sector (Source: Textile Today, August 2014)

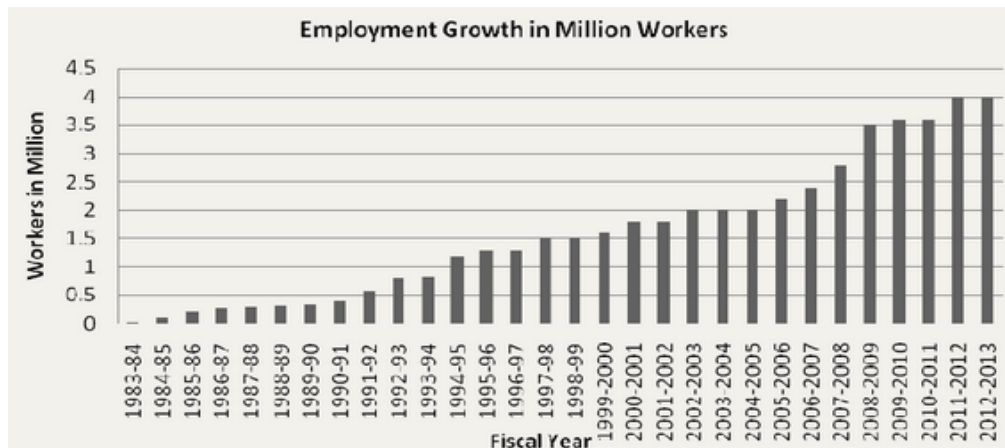


Chart 2: Employment growth in the RMG sector (Source: Textile Today, August 2014)

Since the start of the garment export industry in late 1980s, Bangladesh has seen its RMG export levels grow steadily, and the country has become a top global exporter (Neilson, 2009). Thus, for the past three decades, the RMG industry has been playing a vital role in the country's overall growth. With over \$25 billion in export value in calendar year 2014, the RMG industry is the most important industry sector of Bangladesh (BGMEA Report) as indicated in Chart 3:

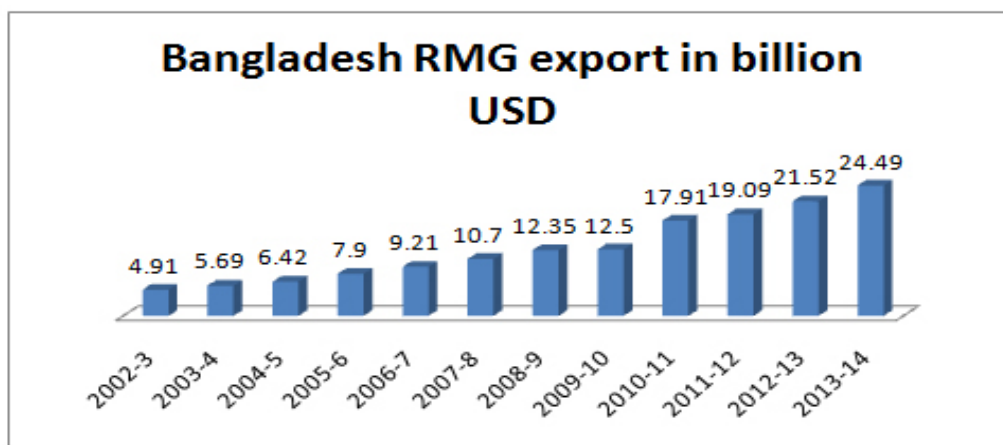


Chart 3: Bangladesh RMG exports (Source: Bangladesh Textile Today)

A good number of studies have been carried out about the RMG sector of Bangladesh from a variety of focal points. Some of these studies tell of this sector's journey in becoming the strongest economic sector of Bangladesh. These studies were supported by Neilson (2008), the CPD Report (2002) and the Mckinsey Report (2012).

Studies show that government support and promotion play a vital role in this industry's success. Often we see that government promotion is inadequate, time-consuming and weak. It always lacks proper coordination. Despite all these shortcomings, since the birth of this sector, the Bangladesh Government has shown its unparalleled support, which is quite remarkable as compared to other similar countries. Over the years, development of new industrial policies has also helped this sector to become successful. Other than that, the Bangladesh Government has been quite open to entrepreneurs' new ideas and initiatives. Some of these ideas deserve mention here: back-to-back LC( Letter of Credit), bonded warehouse, backward linkage and forward linkage for the RMG Industries. Thus, along with the Bangladesh Government, entrepreneurs, financial institutions, buyers and different organizations around the world, a huge dedicated workforce, combined with global market opportunities, have created a story of unparalleled success compared to anywhere else in the Global South (CPD report, 2002).

McKinsey & Company prepared a detailed report on Bangladesh's RMG sector's growth and opportunity in 2012. The McKinsey report (2012) declared Bangladesh as one of the most promising next hotspot destinations for global apparel sourcing in the world. Over the last few years, China, which has always been a great source of all commodities, has started to lose its attractiveness due to wage increases and capacity pressure and, as a result,

the sourcing preference has started moving to other countries. The report showed that Bangladesh was positioned as the preferred destination over Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia. Price competitiveness, access to easy labour and capacity was one of the main reasons for this preference. In the survey, the report claims that 52 percent of chief purchasing officers (CPOs) do not see China as a preferred destination for business and most of these CPOs are interested in sourcing from Bangladesh. JP Morgan listed Bangladesh as one of the “Frontier Five” where investment is worthwhile. Goldman Sachs stated that Bangladesh is one of the “Next 11” emerging countries. Thus, this industry has grown phenomenally over last three decades and, as such, has become the backbone of the whole country.

## **4.2 The collapse of the building**

### **4.2.1 Background information**

On the morning of April 23, 2013, some factory workers gathered outside of a factory building that was reported to have a crack on the seventh floor. It was an eight-storey building, named Rana Plaza, on the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The management assessed the crack but did not take it seriously; instead, management insisted that the workers go back inside and work, otherwise they would not get paid. Next day, on April 24, 2013, the building, which held four factories, several shops, a bank and a few thousand

workers, collapsed. The accident resulted in more than 1100 deaths and approximately 2515 people injured (Rubya, 2014; Seabrook, 2013).

*It is considered to be the worst garment-factory accident in history, as well as the deadliest accidental structural failure in modern human history. The scenes of the disaster and the conditions of workers (have) shaken the world and exposed the profound flaws within the RMG industry in Bangladesh.*

*(Bangladesh APPG Report, 2013)*

The Bangladesh Government formed an investigation committee to identify the reason for the accident. The main cause of the accident was due to engineering and architectural flaws. More specifically, it was found that the Rana Plaza building was constructed with extremely substandard material, for example, rebar iron rods and below grade cement (GUARDIAN, May 23, 2013). Another reason for the building's collapse was load-bearing. The architectural plan of Rana Plaza was originally sanctioned for six floors. But the building's owner, Sohel Rana—a member of the ruling Political Party—used political pressure and influence to add two additional floors to the building to put to commercial use. Shops and a bank occupied the first two floors and four different garment factories occupied the other floors. Garment manufacturing equipment is always heavy, and due to the continuous process of weaving, knitting, etc., creates a shaking rhythm. Ultimately, all of the weight and vibrations of the garment manufacturing

equipment contributed to the collapse of the building (GUARDIAN, May 23, 2013).

Various well-known brands' products were found in the premises, including Benetton Group, Bonmarché, Cato, Dress Barn, Joe Fresh, Mango, Matalan, Monsoon, The Children's Place, Primark and Wal-Mart. The garments factories in Rana Plaza, where a total of 2750 workers were employed in a single shift, were: New Wave Style Ltd., New Wave Bottom Ltd, Phantom Apparels Ltd., Phantom Tac Ltd. and Ether Tex Ltd. (Daily star Arvhive, 24<sup>th</sup> April 2014).

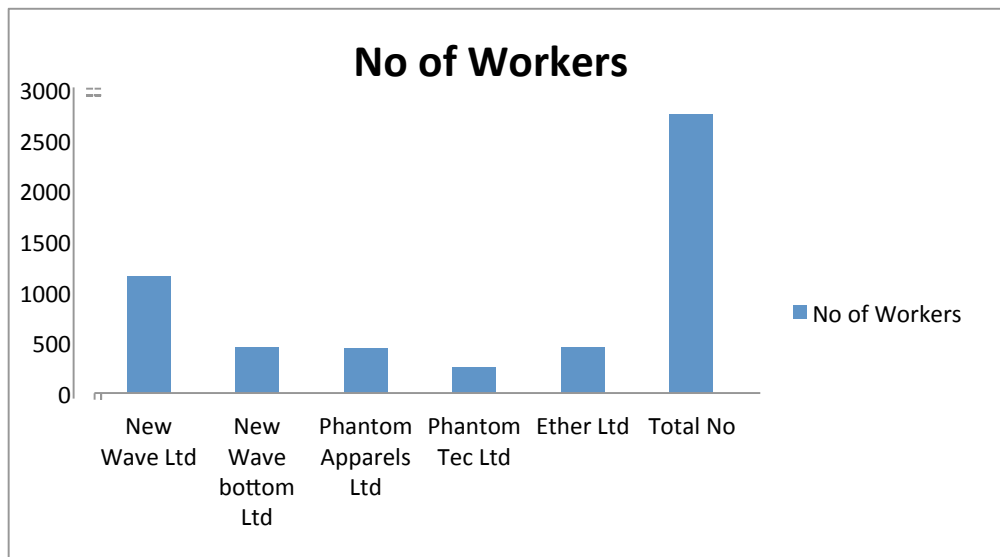


Chart 4 Number of workers in Rana Plaza (Source: CPD Report, 2013)

The total number of workers who died in the incident was 1135. There were an additional 2438 workers who were injured and 332 workers who remain missing (BGMEA Report). According to the information from the monitoring team, most of the workers recovered alive were severely injured. There were hand and leg injuries, trauma, severe backbone and head injuries, pelvic fracture, crush injury and compartmental syndrome (CPD monitoring report, 2013). Most of the workers were unmarried and came from various parts of the country to work in the capital city, Dhaka, as illustrated in Chart 4.

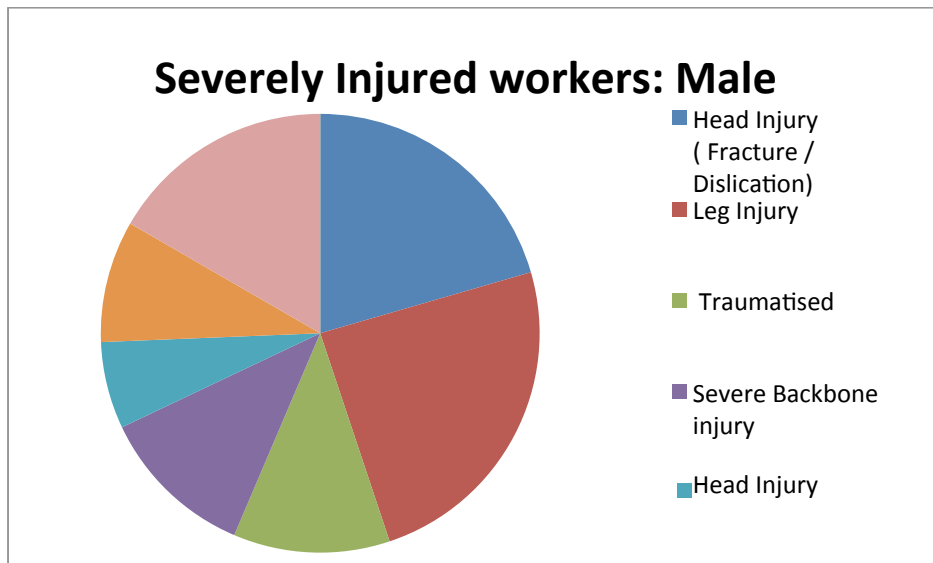


Chart 5: Ratio of injured male workers in Rana Plaza accident (Source: CPD Report, 2013)

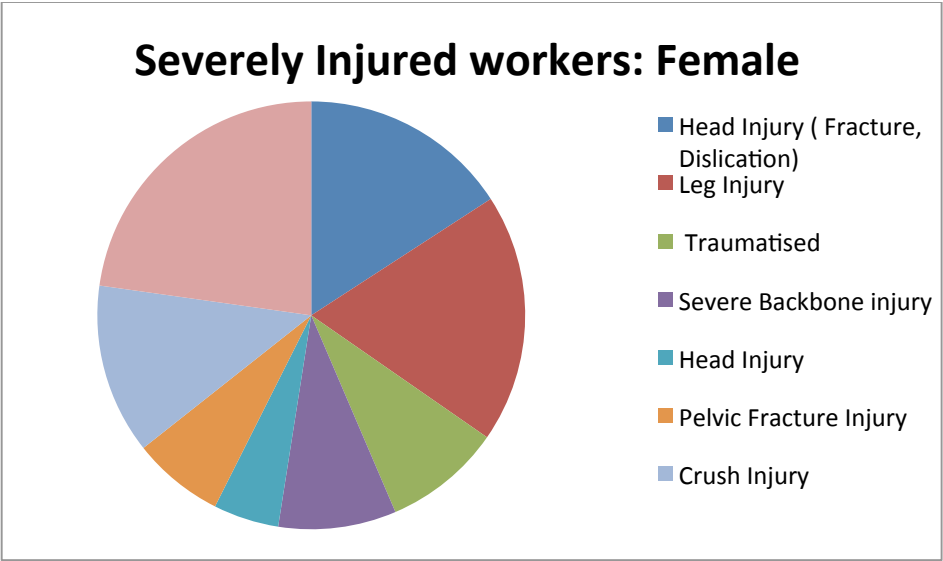


Chart 6: Ratio of injured female workers in Rana Plaza accident (Source: CPD Report, 2013)

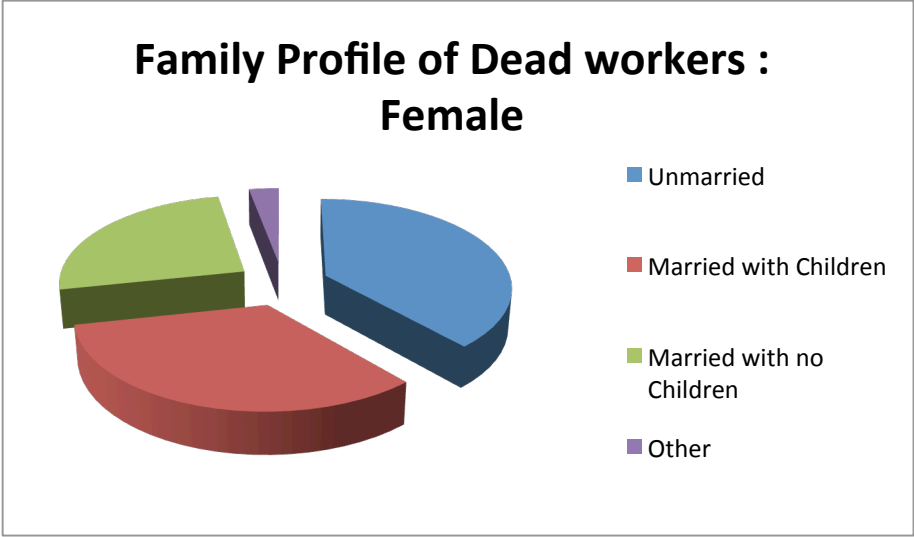


Chart 7: Family profile of dead female workers in Rana Plaza accident (Source: CPD Report, 2013)



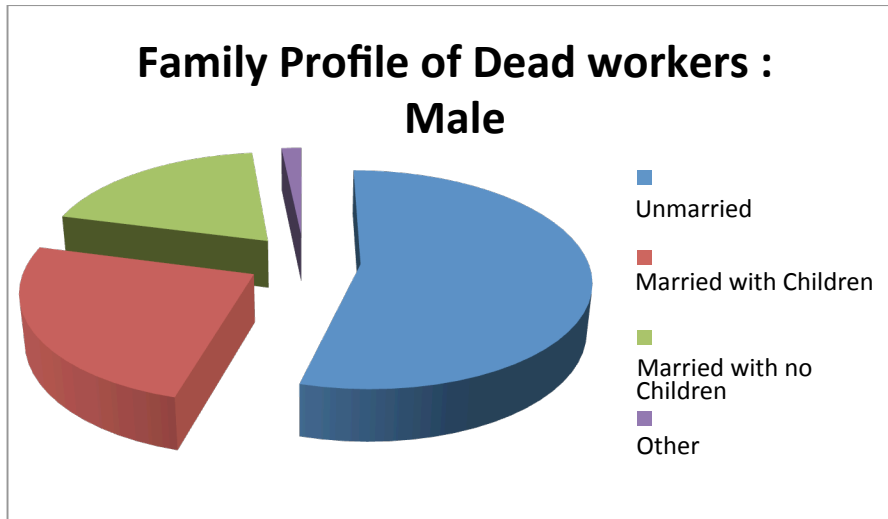


Chart 8: Family profile of dead male workers in Rana Plaza accident (Source: CPD Report, 2013)

The next section, Section 5, describes what followed the accident, by way of remedial measures, and their effects.

## 5 The Aftermath

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Figure 7: Rana Plaza victim (Source: BBC Bengali, Dhaka, 23<sup>rd</sup> April, 2014)

*Currently, compliance codes tend to be gender neutral, and most auditors are men. Not only are audits not effectively nuanced to glean accurate data on challenges women are more likely to face — sexual harassment, maternity leave, and equal pay for equal work — women are less likely to be forthcoming about these sensitive issues when being interviewed by men.*

*(Meiers, May 28, 2013: Harvard Business Review online, n.p.)*

## **5.1 Post accident remediation and safety measures**

Following the accident at Rana Plaza, the buyers, retailers and different organizations and associations around the world undertook several initiatives for the improvement of the garment sector. All of these stakeholders were enthusiastic in coming together to improve conditions in the sector. Thus, public pressure and international buyers' demands led to the adoption of a range of Corrective Action Plans (CAPs) and agreements through collaboration between the Bangladesh Government and various stakeholder organizations around the world (Wichterich and Khan, 2015). A series of significant actions have been taken by the Bangladesh Government, the private sector, international donors and intergovernmental organizations to address pressing problems in the garment sector. A recent study by the Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB) found that several industry stakeholders took a total of 102 initiatives of varying dimensions which address 54 out of 63 types of governance challenges. Of the 102 initiatives, 31 percent were implemented completely, 60 percent witnessed varying degrees of progress, while 9 percent remained unaddressed.

Amongst the important steps being taken are Bangladesh's National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA), the Better Work program by ILO, and the ACCORD, the ALLIANCE and the ILO sustainability Compact. These actions

plans are initiatives launched at international and national levels to bring about the desired change through CAPS, which have brought together buyers, factory owners, workers, the Bangladesh Government and international development partners to achieve the goal of rebuilding the RMG industry in Bangladesh into a safe and sustainable environment.

One of the main initiatives under the CAPs that has been acted upon so far is the factory inspection process. Along with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) and the ILO, the Bangladesh Government has inspected and given certificates of compliance to approximately 1500 factories, outlining further recommendations on how to comply with the regulations (Human Rights Watch Report Rana Plaza, 2015).

Some other remarkable action plans were initiated by ACCORD on fire and building safety in Bangladesh, the ALLIANCE for Bangladesh Worker Safety, and the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the garment Sector of Bangladesh (NTPA) and Bangladesh Sustainability Compact similarly articulated initiatives to improve labour conditions as outlined in Table 1 (ILO Evaluation report, 2016).

Table 1: Summary of the inspection report of ACCORD, ALLIANCE and NTAP

(Source: BGMEA Report: Rana Plaza and Way Forward, 2015)

|                       | <b>ACCORD</b>  | <b>ALLIANCE</b>  | <b>NTPA</b>   |
|-----------------------|--|--|---|
| Parties               | 18 EU and Global Brands, UNI Global, IndustriAll                       | 26 US brands, industry and other stakeholders                                      | MoLE / BGMEA / BEF BKMEA / ILO                              |
| Number of factories   | 1540   | 587  | 2007  |
| Inspected factories   | 1106   | 587  | 500   |
| Closed factories      | 18   | 8  | Red: 1%, Amber: 24%, Yellow-Green: 75%                      |
| Inspection completion | September 2014   | 10 July 2014   | 31 March 2015   |
| Website               | <a href="http://www.bangladeshaccord.org">www.bangladeshaccord.org</a> | <a href="http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org">www.bangladeshworkersafety.org</a> | <a href="http://www.mole.gov.bd">http://www.mole.gov.bd</a> |

**ACCORD** : This is the first legally binding multi-stakeholder agreement between international trade unions IndustriALL and UNI Global, Bangladesh trade unions and 180 international brands and retailers (companies). International NGOs, including the Clean Clothes Campaign and the Workers’ Rights Consortium and International Labour Rights Forum are witnesses to the agreement of ACCORD. This agreement of ACCORD aims to do an extensive inspection of the fire and building safety status of the factories, which will result in CAPs to ensure remediation of safety hazards for the workers. Thus, the agreement acknowledges that workers’ participation has to play a significant role in improving workplace safety.

**ALLIANCE:** The ALLIANCE for Bangladesh Worker Safety was founded by a group of North American apparel companies and retailers and brands who have joined together to develop and launch the Bangladesh Worker Corrective Action Plan (CAP), a binding, five-year undertaking that will be transparent, result-oriented, measurable and verifiable with the intent of improving safety in Bangladeshi RMG factories. The aim of this program is to significantly improve structural integrity, electrical and fire safety by guiding factories through the CAP process to ensure credible and compliant upgrades.

**National Tripartite Plan of Action:** The Ministry of Labour and Employment and International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted a Joint Statement of Commitment as a Tripartite Action Plan on January 15, 2013. Through the Statement, the Tripartite Partners committed to work together to develop a National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety.

Another remarkable initiative is the **Bangladesh Sustainability Compact** by and between the EU, Bangladesh, the US and the ILO. The project aims to improve the working conditions and to respect labour rights in Bangladesh's garment factories. The Compact has both short- and long-term goals and commitments related to three inter-linked pillars: 1) respect for labour rights; 2) structural integrity of buildings and occupational safety

and health; and 3) responsible business conduct (Bangladesh Sustainability Compact, Technical Report, 2015).

There have also been a significant number of initiatives taken by the Bangladesh Government and national stakeholders such as the minimum monthly wage for garment workers working in the lowest grade (Grade 7), which has been raised to Tk. 5300 (US \$69) from Tk. 3000 (US \$38); and it has been raised to Tk.6042 (US\$ 70) for (Grade 5) general operators from Tk. 3553 (US\$ 45). As well, the Bangladesh Government has adopted the 2013 Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act, which further strengthens fundamental rights, with improvements with regard to relation to occupational safety and health, freedom of association and collective bargaining. The amended labour law also provides for mandatory insurance for businesses with more than 100 employees (BGMEA Report, 2015).

Awareness at the factory workers' level has also been increased through various improvements of labour conditions. Factory owners have become more cautious in awarding subcontracts to smaller non-compliant firms. Owners are either avoiding sub-contractors or choosing only the compliant ones. Some manufacturers are trying to relocate their manufacturing units to more compliant buildings. Many exporters have started to invest in making their buildings more compliant by installing the

necessary fire safety equipment like sprinkler systems, fire resistant doors, emergency lights, etc. Also, the BGMEA has trained 1 577 mid-level management personnel from 2155 factories in crash (short term) training program. Table 2 shows the main developments that took place after the accident.

Table 2: Chronology of developments since Rana Plaza collapse

(Source: BGMEA Report: Rana Plaza and Way Forward, 2015)

| <b>DATE</b>                      | <b>Information /Event</b>   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| April 24, 2013                   | Rana Plaza building collapse  |
| May 4, 2013                      | Formation of NTPA   |
| May 13, 2013                     | Formation of ACCORD   |
| June 27, 2013                    | US Govt. notified the suspension of GSP   |
| July 8, 2013                     | Sustainability Compact declared in Geneva   |
| July 10, 2013                    | ALLIANCE of North America Retailers launched  |
| July 15, 2013                    | Government of Bangladesh Labour Act 2013 passed   |
| October 22, 2013                 | ILO launched a 3.5-year program on improving working conditions in the RMG sector aiming to support the NTPA                                |
| October 22, 2013                 | Better Work program launched by ILO   |
| November 21, 2013                | The Unified Standards for Structural, Fire and Electrical Safety developed by BUET, ACCORD and ALLIANCE                                     |
| January, 2014                    | Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund managed by ILO   |
| January 15, 2014                 | Labour Ministry of Government of Bangladesh upgraded the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) to a Directorate  |
| February 19, 2014                | ACCORD started factory inspection, listing over 154 factories where approximately two million workers work                                  |
| February 23-24,<br>December 7-9, | Exposition on International Fire and Building Safety, organized by ACCORD, ALLIANCE and BGMEA, held to raise awareness among factory owners |



| <b>DATE</b>                  | <b>Information /Event</b>   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 2014                         |   |
| March, 2014                  | ALLIANCE started factory inspections. They have covered 601 factories and have completed inspection of all the listed factories. They found only three factories vulnerable and closed them immediately.          |
| March 30, 2014               | Publicly accessible database launched in collaboration between ILO and MoLE   |
| April 15, 2014               | GOB submitted its progress on US Action Plan as required by GSP Action Plan   |
| April 19, 2014<br>(launched) | BGMEA's workshop and training on Labour Law and Industrial Relations for workers, participation committee and trade union representatives was held. Approximately 12 000 people from 3000 factories were trained. |
| April 23, 2014               | Employers' Seminar on Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining  |
| July 10, 2014                | ALLIANCE completed 100% safety inspections of its suppliers   |
| July 7, 2014                 | Cabinet approved the draft of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA) Labour Act  |
| December 7-9, 2014           | Dhaka Apparel Summit: the biggest gathering of concerned stakeholders   |

However, despite all these initiatives, very few post-accident initiatives specifically address women's interests, except the major initiative by ILO's "Promoting Social Dialogue and Harmonious Industrial Relations in Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment Industry." This is an inclusive effort to support improvement safety, working conditions and workers' rights in the RMG sector, including workers' and employers' rights to organize, bargain and dialogue at the workplace. This project aims to work with non-discriminative inclusive strategies for women where gender focus will be emphasized. As stated in the ILO Technical Report, "[t]he project achieves gender balance in the direct beneficiaries as well as full

representation of women workers' interests and requirements" (ILO Evaluation report 2016).

The project will focus on three specific outcomes:

- Sustainable improvement in social dialogue, workplace cooperation and grievance handling;
- Sustainable and effective mechanisms for conciliation and arbitration are established;
- Enhanced capacities of employers' and workers' organizations to dialogue and prevent and resolve disputes including those of gender concerns.

One aim of these outcomes is the development of dialogue mechanisms to improve relations between employers and workers, particularly in the workplace. Another aim is to help prevent disputes through the development of conciliation and arbitration mechanisms that are more trusted, transparent and sustainable. In achieving these outcomes, the project will focus intensely on building the capacity of workers and employers to engage in social dialogue and collective bargaining at the workplace and sector level and to make effective use of dispute prevention and resolution mechanisms (ILO Evaluation Report, 2016).

## **5.2 Issues with the remediation and safety measures**

It has been more than three years since the tragic Rana Plaza accident, but the debate in the aftermath persists. Although there have been a significant number of remediation action plans devised, a good number of these have not been executed as originally planned (ILO report, 2016; Khan and Rodrigues, 2015; Safety Watch Report, 2014; Motlagh, J., & Saha, A., 2014; Siddiqi, D. M., 2015).

The most prominent initiatives among all the CAPS are the ACCORD and ALLIANCE, National Tripartite Corrective Action Plan and the ILO. The common goal of all these agreements as noted is to carry out structural surveys and safety inspections of the factories. However, the implementation and duration of these programs is only five years, which makes this task very difficult and complicated to achieve. In a large arena, such as the RMG sector of Bangladesh, proper remediation action would require more than five years and plenty of resources and expertise to improve the safety standards (Al Bhadily, 2015). Mere five-year agreements cannot seek to build up local capacity and adequate safety measures. It is necessary to understand the root cause of the problem and proceed with a long-term plan that is sustainable and achievable.

Another challenge with the ACCORD and ALLIANCE action plans is the issue of remediation financing for the relocation of the factories. Under the CAP, factories are inspected against the ACCORD Building Standards and Bangladesh National Building Code and facilitated by the ILO between ACCORD, the National Tripartite Plan of Action and the ALLIANCE for Bangladesh Worker Safety. It was suggested by the plan that no factories can be run in one single shared complex/building (BGMEA report 2013). A shared building means a building that has shops or a bank or other businesses in the same premises with a garment factory. The recent survey of BGMEA, however, indicates that a considerable number of workers are in fact working in shared and converted factory buildings as shown in Chart 9.

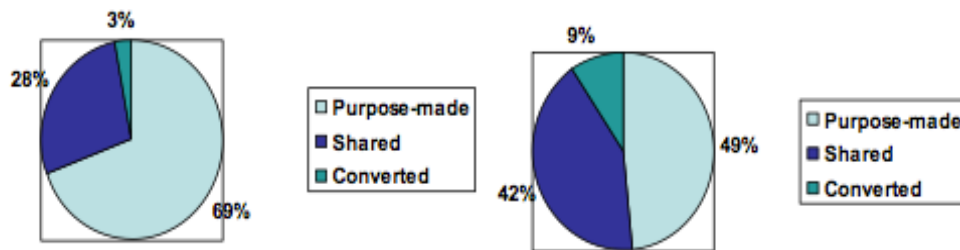


Chart 9: Ratio of building structures in Dhaka and Chittagong

(Source: BGMEA Report: Rana Plaza and Way Forward, 2015)

Table 3 shows the number and type of factories in the Dhaka and Chittagong regions (the two main manufacturing regions in Bangladesh). Table 3 also shows the number and percentage of workers in each type of factory in the Dhaka and Chittagong regions.

Table 3: Number and type of factories; number and percentage of workers

(Source: BGMEA Report: Rana Plaza and way Forward 2015)

|                                      | <b>Purpose-made</b>           | <b>Shared</b>               | <b>Converted</b>            |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Dhaka</b> (No. of factories)      | 143 factories                 | 56 factories                | 62 factories                |
| (approx. No. of workers)             | 2 51 680 workers <b>(88%)</b> | 87 510 workers <b>(66%)</b> | 11 370 workers <b>(54%)</b> |
| <b>Chittagong</b> (No. of factories) | 25 factories                  | 22 factories                | 50 factories                |
| (approx. No. of workers)             | 34 320 workers <b>(12%)</b>   | 44 990 Workers <b>(34%)</b> | 99 13 workers <b>(46%)</b>  |
| Total (No. of factories)             | 169 factories                 | 79 factories                | 112 factories               |
| Total No. of workers (approx.)       | <b>86 000</b> workers         | <b>32 500</b> workers       | <b>21 500</b> workers       |
| Grand Total No. of workers (approx.) | <b>00 00</b> workers          |                             |                             |

The relocation of these factories will incur a very substantial cost for the owners, and implementation of the CAP will similarly require large capital investment. An average factory with 5 to 30 lines of production capacity needs to spend US\$284 000 on fire safety measures alone. ALLIANCE estimated that an average of US\$250 000 would be needed for safety improvements of each factory (BGMEA report, 2015).

Table 4 shows the average remediation costs for different-sized factories. As Table 4 shows, the bigger the factories are, the more costs they incur for CAP.

Table 4: Remediation costs for an average factory in US dollars

(Source: BGMEA Report: Rana Plaza and Way Forward 2015)

| <b>Factory</b>   | <b>Fire safety cost</b> | <b>Electrical safety cost</b> | <b>Structural remediation cost</b> | <b>Total cost</b> | <b>Annual turnover cost</b> | <b>Number of workers</b> |
|------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Factory A</b> | 30 million              | 7 million                     | 19 million                         | 56 million        | 25 million                  | 2800                     |
| <b>Factory B</b> | 18 million              | 6 million                     | 2 million                          | 26 million        | 20 million                  | 800                      |
| <b>Factory C</b> | 6 million               | 2 million                     | 12 million                         | 20 million        | 14 million                  | 1600                     |
| <b>Factory D</b> | 12 million              | 6 million                     | 7 million                          | 25 million        | 12 million                  | 1300                     |
| <b>Factory E</b> | 14 million              | 5 million                     | 10 million                         | 29 million        | 5.5 million                 | 500                      |

A question that needs to be asked then is, “Who will pay for the costs of remediation and factory relocations?” Although the buyers and stakeholders including ACCORD, ALLIANCE, World Bank and Bangladesh Bank have promised to help, progress is still painfully slow. If a proper

mechanism cannot be implemented, then many small- and medium-sized factories will shut down due to the expense. It is likely that only large-sized factories will survive, given the investment and resources required for undertaking the corrective measures. The shut-down of small- or medium-sized factories will mean unemployment for at least a few thousand workers, the majority of whom will be women who are the breadwinners of their families.

In addition, ACCORD and ALLIANCE are only working with factories that are working directly with retail brands and, as such, cover only 1984 factories (Al Bhadily, 2015). And when an order is placed with a factory, quite often the orders are subcontracted to other factories, due to time constraints and limitations of capacity faced by each factory. Under the ACCORD or ALLIANCE guidelines, these subcontracted factories are excluded from their inspection, which means over 3000 RMG factory workers (on a single subcontract) are unprotected by either measures. Again, a huge percentage of the RMG workforce is not included in the whole picture.

The ACCORD introduced a financial liability program among the Western brands and companies to improve the work safety environment in garment factories (Al Bhadily, 2015). This program was adopted/accepted due to political and public pressure, but it was apparently an unpopular

move. The program may lead to the loss of the cost-advantage that the Bangladesh market currently enjoys, and could ultimately lead to loss of job orders nation-wide. Eventually, when the public pressure subsides, the buyers may find the market (Bangladesh) unattractive and may take their orders to other countries. Accordingly, these corrective measures, if not closely monitored, may result in the decline of market share for Bangladesh and thus contribute to an increase in unemployment. As Saxena rightly puts it, “any action that places limits on trade does little to improve labour rights violations, but in the long run, costs jobs, and hurts some of the most vulnerable sections of society (i.e. women working in the garment factories)” (2014, n.p. ).

Another major remediation act is the Bangladesh Labour law amendment in which significant changes have recently taken place in trade union registration under the new labour law act. Since January 2013, for example, a number of Bangladesh’s 309 trade unions have been registered, whereas during the past 30 years only 138 trade unions were registered. The BGMEA Report (2013) stated, “[a]doption of the Bangladesh Labour (amendment Act, 2013) further strengthens fundamental rights, with improvements in relation to occupational safety and health, freedom of association and collective bargaining.” The amended Labour Law also provides for mandatory insurance for businesses with more than 100



employees. But a recent report explains that ‘An evaluation of Sustainability Compact’ published by ILO, 2016, clearly argues on this issue. The ILO evaluation act clearly states that the labour law has failed to give the worker the basic labour right in including both national and international labour standards. The international labour organization raises a serious concern regarding the Bangladesh government’s failure of labour law amendment, especially regarding the trade union formation (ILO Evaluation Report, 2016).

As the ILO Evaluation Report (2016) states:

*The evidence is clear and compelling: it is still extremely difficult for workers to organize and form unions without retaliation and to bargain collectively over the terms and conditions of work. This means that any gains in building, fire safety and other conditions of work will not be sustainable, and cannot preclude future tragedies.*

## 6 Conclusion

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Figure 8: Relatives of the victims of the April 24 Rana Plaza building collapse hold lit candles as they gather to pay tributes at the venue in Dhaka, Bangladesh (Source: CBC world 25th October, 2013)

*Improved working conditions do not necessarily always translate into empowered workforce. We must look at the larger context and determine whether this will truly give workers—especially female workers—a voice. Much of the change that needs to take place will happen from within these countries; top-down programs with conditions attached by Global North will not make these changes sustainable.*

*(Saxena, 2014, n.p.)*

Women in all countries of the Global South are living under similar situations and facing comparable obstacles in the workplace. The collapse of Rana Plaza revealed the example of the labour conditions of one country—Bangladesh—but the same situation might exist in other countries as well. The accident not only tells us a story of an engineering disaster mixed with negligence and corruption leading to the collapse, but also clearly depicts a picture of human rights violations, absence of law enforcement and absence of workers' voices. On the morning of April 24, 2013, before the accident, some of the workers had protested and refused to go to work, citing the precarious condition of the building. But the factory management threatened to withhold their salary if they protested further. Anxious, due to safety reasons, but afraid of losing their jobs, the workers succumbed to this threat. It is this human rights violation of stifling the collective voice that protested against an unsafe work environment, as much as—or more than—the structural failures of the building, which led to the death of over a thousand and the maiming of twice that number when the accident occurred later that morning.

The real problem that led to the collapse of the Rana Plaza was, I argue, not so much due to the building structure itself, but rather to the lack of commitment at every level of the entire garment manufacturing sector to implementing fair and equitable labour laws and regulations. The labour

laws, building codes and factory inspection processes have always been there. The root cause of the accident was not a flaw in the labour laws or the building codes but in their lack of consistent implementation. There are regional labour officers, factory inspectors and labour welfare officers, but they are not active enough in ensuring minimal implementation of labour laws and regulations. Therefore, I argue that the accident was caused by lack of proper implementation of the labour laws, industrial acts, building codes and regulations. Promoting education and raising awareness of the importance of implementing labour laws and regulations would be one sure way to avert disasters.

As discussed earlier in the paper, with regard the implementation of the CAPs, it is probable that large-sized factories will survive, but a few thousand small- and medium-sized factories, which cannot afford the cost of the prescribed safety measures, will shut down due to poor and unsafe working conditions. This, in turn, will result in a few million workers, mostly women, being laid off, who can ill afford the resulting loss of earnings for economic, social and emotional reasons. As Saxena emphasizes, “[t]he welfare of millions of female workers and the development of our country depend on the health of the garment sector [because] ...if the factory closes down, the hardship ultimately falls on the workers” (2014, n.p.).

In retrospect, the prescribed CAPs actually have the potential to do more harm than good to the RMG sector, so the prescribed CAPs may not be the only option for improvement. This sudden halt in production may put all the gains of the RMG sector achieved so far at risk. The problems in this sector are rooted deep in the culture and practices that result in the workers not being heard but oppressed; not being valued but used.

Another very important feature worth re-iterating is the sheer number—almost three million—of female workers in this industry who are supporting the economy of the country. None of the amendments or action plans has been designed with a focus on the interests of this female labour force, with a view to including them in the dialogues or with the purpose of giving them the power or agency to manage their own safety. Despite all the CAPs, the level of trust between workers and employers is still low, and dialogue at the workplace is limited or lacking. Very little action focusing on women's needs and necessities has been taken. Women employed in this sector are illiterate or semi-literate and come from economically weak sections of society, which leave them with little bargaining power, and this has posed gender-specific challenges in the RMG sector (ILO evaluation report, 2016) Without ensuring a proper living for these nearly three million female workers, how can we ensure a sustainable future for an industry that is heavily dependent (80 percent) on a female workforce?

Noteworthy progress has been made in improving the working conditions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh, but owing to the gender-dependent nature of the RMG industry, reforms and action plans will be sustainable only if the cultural norms inside factories are changed. As this ILO report outlines:

*While notable progress is being made to improve the country's legal framework, enforcement mechanism, the safety of the factories and the capacities of workers' and employers' organizations, momentum must be maintained and more needs to be done to effectively realize the rights of Bangladesh garment workers, who are predominantly female, and require gender sensitive approach to address their capacity gaps to participate in workplace dialogue to improve their working conditions and labour relations.*

*(ILO Evaluation Report, 2016, n.p.)*

Therefore, within the industry, the factory and the garment workers' unions, perceptions towards female workers need to change. Proper training and emancipation through capacity building catered to women should be part of the plan. Also, the role of workers in relation to their conditions needs to be altered to include public forums for feedback. There has to be a system where workers are able to influence decisions and have the right to oppose or argue against management decisions. Furthermore, the level of trust between workers and employers is very low and dialogue at the workplace is very limited or lacking at every level of the RMG sector. There has to be a mechanism through which all stakeholders can work together with the

Bangladesh Government in devising a bilateral relationship where employee-employer trust is built and the employees' voices are heard. Meires' remarks, "[i]n a country like Bangladesh, it becomes more complicated, and the solutions require a whole new level of collaboration within business and across sectors, including government and civil society" (2013: n.p.).

Ensuring a sustainable future of fashion will only be achieved through reliable cooperation and accountability between workers and employers and the whole country itself, through a synergy of social, economic and industrial relationships and through the collective commitment of all stakeholders around the world. As Saxena argues, "[t]he slow making changes taking place in Bangladesh garment industry involve a much wider network of factors than private sector and the government alone" (2015, p. 160).

What is required is not merely a CAP, but an *inclusive* action plan that respects everyone's interests, particularly those of the vulnerable and the marginalized. These CAPs need to be supplemented with a spirit of collaboration amongst all concerned. Stakeholders at every level of the RMG industry and society in general need to wholeheartedly develop and implement an inclusive plan. This plan should include not only short- but also long-term strategies, with the objective of ensuring sustainable reforms and improvements in the years ahead and promoting social dialogue and

harmonious industrial relations in the Bangladesh RMG industry. The ultimate goal is a *sonar bangla*<sup>6</sup> (meaning golden Bangladesh) where women are happy and respected equally, if not more.

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<sup>6</sup>*Sonar Bangla* is a phrase that occurs in the national anthem of Bangladesh. This video depicts happy women dancing to its tune:  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LknudHKSwpI&feature=player\\_embedded](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LknudHKSwpI&feature=player_embedded).



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