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## Industrial Safety At The Workplace

Labour intensive, low technology manufacturing gives a win-win partnership opportunity between underdeveloped or developing economies and the developed ones. While these help economic growth for the developing / under-developed countries through the engagement of abundant workforce with very low capital investment, the developed world gets the advantage of low-cost sourcing to fuel their insatiable consumption needs. However, in the process, what gets compromised is health-safety-environment at the workplace

Apparel manufacturing is one such labour-intensive industry which keeps moving from developed to developing countries. With China, the largest apparel manufacturer and exporter even today, becoming more and more expensive with its economic growth, Bangladesh has become the most lucrative sourcing destination for all developed countries (“What Makes Bangladesh — A Hub Of Garment Manufacturing?” 2019). I will be discussing in this report perils attached to the economic needs of “sourcing cheap” vis-à-vis “responsible sourcing”, which the globally renowned brands and retails should follow.

Companies, broadly, have two aims, to be competitive in their business and to be sustainable with adherence to social welfare on humanitarian grounds. Western companies, who primarily imported from Bangladesh, chose to be commercial over holistic by sourcing cheap labour and other resources without concerns over subcontracting, inadequate working conditions and wages (“Occupational safety and health in the textiles, clothing, leather and footwear sector” 2019). Moreover, developing countries like Bangladesh are primarily focused on providing food and shelter to their citizens and often compromised on their physical safety and wellbeing (Sobuj, K. M. Mostafizur. 2011). It is important to realise that industrial safety and development extremely important on social and humanitarian grounds. Physical safety should not be sacrificed or compromised in order to benefit financially

In FY 2019, manufacturing sector accounted for 24.2% of Bangladesh’s GDP. 45% of manufacturing GDP and 7% of total GDP came from export of garments alone (Business Today, 2019). The manufacturing industry accounts for 11.6% of all industrial employment with the industry employing nearly 5 million (Ali & Habib, 2012). Bangladesh’s garment industry has contributed to over 80% of its total exports since FY’13 (Business Today, 2019). Bangladesh exports its apparel products worth nearly \$5 billion per year to the United States, European Union (EU), Canada and other countries of the world and it is the sixth-largest apparel supplier to the United States and EU countries (Ali & Habib, 2012).

In this front, I will be talking about an incident that took place in Bangladesh. The deadliest structural failure accident in modern human history and the destructive garment factory disaster is ‘The 2013 Dhaka garment factory collapse’. Often referred to as the 2013 Savar building collapse or the Rana Plaza collapse caused death of 1,134 people and left about 2,500 people injured. Originally Rana Plaza was built for commercial purposes and not for factories. The foundation was said be not strong enough to either carry the weight or sustain the vibrations caused by heavy machinery. The additional three floors, on which the factories were running, was built without a permit. Moreover, even though signs like cracks on wall were indications of the forthcoming disaster, the owners had neglected the warnings leading to the 2013 fatal

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incident.

The Rana Plaza accident was one of many other incidents which put industrial safety on a global spotlight i.e., poor labour practices, safety standards and other policies that might be hindering the progress and development of this industry (Ahmed & Paul, 2012). The government, the importing companies, and other stakeholders of these labour-intensive countries should take more initiatives to ensure non-compromise of industrial safety. Had the existing policies been in place prior to the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, the accident could have been completely avoided and saved hundreds of lives.

Another huge industrial accident which took place around the same time was the '2012 Dhaka garment factory fire' in Tazreen Fashion factory, Dhaka. This accident resulted to the death of at least 117 people and over 200 injured ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019). The factory was flagged with an 'orange' grade in May 2011 by a Walmart ethical sourcing official for 'violations and/or conditions which were deemed to be high risk' and received a 'yellow' grade, medium risk rating, in August 2012 which was connected to the 2012 factory fire ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019). The fire started due to a short circuit on the ground floor of the 9-storeyed factory building. As the building was filled with yarn and fabric, the fire spread very quickly and took firefighters close to 17 hours to fully extinguish it ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019). Due to the fire starting on the ground floor, all exits from the building were blocked, trapping all the on-site workers inside ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019). Three supervisors of the factory were later arrested on account of criminal negligence ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019). Moreover, when the fire alarm had gone off, the factory manager had asked the workers to carry on working as "The fire alarm had just gone out of order" ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019).

These two incidents indicate the poor working conditions in Bangladeshi factories, from little enforcement of safety laws, and overcrowding to locked fire doors were common causes for these incidents ('2012 Dhaka garment factory fire', 2019). Other developing countries like Pakistan and China are also in dire need of laws and policies to improve the safety conditions of their labourers. Data suggest that nearly 2600 fatalities were recorded in China in the construction industry alone. Although the Ministry of Health takes numerous steps towards safety, industrial/construction safety was not of high priority.

Lack of industrial safety of labourers in Bangladesh, like other developing countries, was thus not new as the existing labour and factory laws, policies and regulations were not strictly adhered to. These disasters, among the worst industrial accidents on record, awoke the world to the poor labour conditions faced by workers in the ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019). In the absence of a well-functioning labour inspection system and of appropriate enforcement mechanisms, decent work and life in dignity are still far from reality for the vast majority of workers in the garment industry and their families ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019). Since the Rana Plaza disaster, over 109 more accidents have occurred among which 35 were textile factory incidents where 491 workers were injured with death of 27 others ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019).

During the 2012 and 2013 incidents, the only form of monetary protection available to workers and their dependants was through the labour code, which requires employers, when liable, to provide specified payments to injured workers or survivors. However, amendments to the labour code stated the employers to insure themselves against liability, but this obligation was not in

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force when the Tazreen caught fire, or when Rana Plaza collapsed ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019). The monetary compensation estimated are also extremely minuscule and are paid in form lump sums, offering insufficient protection to recipients against health and poverty in medium and long terms. The system is also inundated by numerous practical application issues like circumvention, lack of proper implementation, and absence of useful recourses, which often resulted to rare instances where legal entitlements came through ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019).

Despite the losses suffered by the victims of the Tazreen and Rana Plaza accidents and their survivors, no compensation was paid under the labour code provisions on employers' liability. A handful of international importers and local players compensated the victims in the months following the disasters, however only on voluntary basis.

In order to redress the situation more effectively and to ensure that injured workers and dependents of the deceased were effectively compensated, 'both financially and in respect of medical and other relevant care', along with the aim to prevent similar incidents to occur in the future, both global and local stakeholders collaborated and agreed to an unprecedented coordinated framework ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019). With the ILO (International Labour Organisation) acting as a neutral chair, an arrangement, convened by the IndustriALL Global Union, was adopted which provided a singular approach to compensation in application with not only the ILO standards, but also with the Employment Injury Benefits Convention, 1964 ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019). An ACCORD (Action for Community Organisation, Rehabilitation and Development) on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh was drawn immediately after the Rana Plaza disaster ("Major Retailers Join Bangladesh Safety Plan" 2013). This was initiated by H&M and Inditex. It was legal binding of retailers to help finance fire safety and building improvements in the factories they use in Bangladesh ("Major Retailers Join Bangladesh Safety Plan" 2013). It was soon joined by other major companies like C&A, Primark, and Tesco. The ACCORD consists of independent, rigorous factory safety inspections with public reports and compulsory maintenance underwritten by Western retailers ("Major Retailers Join Bangladesh Safety Plan" 2013). This legally binding contract also prohibits retailers to do business with any factory that refuses to follow the required safety measures, and also allows workers and their unions to have a voice in industrial safety ("Major Retailers Join Bangladesh Safety Plan" 2013).

This arrangement led to the formation of the Rana Plaza Coordination Committee which consisted of representatives of the Bangladesh government, 220 international brands, national employers, various unions and international and local non-governmental organisations ('The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety', 2013). A total of 34 million US dollars was paid out to families of the deceased and to the injured workers from the collapse by October 2015 ('The Rana Plaza Accident and its aftermath', 2019).

As mentioned, the United States and the European countries are the major importers of textile and garment from Bangladesh. Large brands like Walmart, Gap, Target, H&M, Zara, UNIQLO, Cotton On and Macy's are major importing companies of apparel from Bangladesh. When the 2013 Rana Plaza incident happened, many of these companies had taken a step back from actively participating in improving the industries' condition in Bangladesh. It is important to note that numerous North American brands, in specific Walmart, did not sign the accord. Officials from Walmart said that they had launched an 'enhanced safety programme' earlier that year in 2013 and had flagged factories that did not meet their safety standards ("U.S. Retailers Offer

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Plan for Safety at Factories” 2013). According to critics, Walmart did not want to bind itself to a 5-year contract with the prospect of paying up-to US\$500,000 annually towards development of safety measures ('Bangladesh Factory Safety Accord', 2019).

One agreement that had previously aimed to improve industrial safety was the “Convention on the Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents” is a United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) convention that took force from 19th April 2000. This convention aims to prevent accidents from occurring, reducing their frequency and severity and trying to mitigate their effects if possible. It promotes active international cooperation between countries, before, during and after an industrial accident. States or certain regional organizations that have signed the Convention take measures to prevent industrial accidents that can have transboundary effects and to prepare for and respond to, accidents if they occur. This convention, however useful, did not play any role during the recurring disastrous incidents in Bangladesh.

As of 2018, Bangladeshi garment factory workers can see significant improvements in their workplace safety ('After the Rana Plaza Collapse, Are Garment Workers Any Safer?', 2018). A report by Mark Anner who is the director of the Center for Global Workers' Rights at Penn State states that the accord has increased the safety of more than 2.5 million labourers in Bangladesh (Anner, 2018). As a result of the accord, over 73% (97,000) of risks at factories in Bangladesh have been successfully prevented (13). An additional 12,000 hazards have reportedly been addressed.

The challenges, however, are still there. Even though the working conditions have enhanced, wages are stagnant, the rate of growth of unions are extremely slow and overtime without pay has increased due to fast fashion's strict deadlines. The risk for incidents like Rana Plaza to occur has dropped substantially but the risk still exists. Around 155 factories were running in multipurpose establishments which were not properly equipped for operating machinery. Since the ACCORD in 2013, the number has dropped by 49% to 79 factories in the span of 5 years ('After the Rana Plaza Collapse, Are Garment Workers Any Safer?', 2018). Unions played a huge role in the improvement of the workers but by 2015, when the government deemed the Rana Plaza no longer to be a major issue started suppressing new organisation of unions. Additionally, wages are a very small portion of the fast fashion clothes' prices and increasing the wages twice or thrice won't impact the companies heavily. However, wages have remained stagnant since the initial increase in 2013. Workers of H&M, Gap and Zara have demanded their wages to be increased threefold to which H&M has promised to increase their pay to a living pay but no actions have been taken towards it, deeming it to be a publicity stunt.