



OUT OF THE ASHES

*Creating change from tragedy in
Bangladesh's garment industry*

On the morning of 24 April 2013, thousands of factory workers went to work in the eight-storey Rana Plaza commercial building just outside of Dhaka. A few hours later the building collapsed, killing 1,137 people and injuring a further 2,500 workers. Most of those who died that morning were women.

Women make up 80 per cent of the 4.2 million strong workforce in the garment export industry and for many, these jobs are the first opportunity for economic independence and a job outside the home. Yet the Rana Plaza tragedy underlined what a double-edged sword this employment has proved to be. The industry has created tragically unsafe, exploitative and dangerous workplaces where women workers face poor pay, inequality, harassment and violence.

Today, while they are four out of five workers on the production lines of Bangladesh's 5,000 textile factories, only 1 in 20 supervisors is a woman.

Kalpona Akter, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) in her office

Photo: Saiful huq Omi/UN Women



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"The Rana Plaza disaster created a platform for workers to organize themselves."

"They are happy to give a woman a job operating a sewing machine, but less happy to see her become a supervisor," says Kalpona Akter, executive director of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, who began her working life on the garment factory floor aged 12. "Many of these women are forced to work in unsafe and unfair work environments because they have no ability to change things," she says.

The day before Rana Plaza collapsed the building had been condemned as unsafe, yet factory owners demanded the workers return to their machines.

"In Bangladesh the garment industry has never allowed workers to raise their voices, the political focus has always been on the growth of the industry and keeping the international corporations happy," says Kalpona. "It is this kind of power over workers' rights that created the environment in which this disaster was allowed to happen."

Yet Rana Plaza proved a turning point. The global outrage following the disaster led the Bangladeshi government to announce a raft of changes to its labour laws, including easing restrictions on workers forming trade unions, hiring additional factory inspectors and increasing the minimum wage for garment workers by 77 per cent.

At the same time, international clothing brands sourcing from Bangladesh joined with Bangladeshi and international trade unions, international worker solidarity movements and NGOs to create the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety.

The Accord aims to address the serious issues with health and safety in the garment sector through a system of independent safety inspections at factories, the findings of which are made public. The Accord also protects workers' rights by making companies legally responsible for making factories safe and protects their right to refuse dangerous work or to enter unsafe buildings.

What makes the Accord different from previous worker safety initiatives is that its commitments are legally enforceable through binding arbitration backed up by the courts of the home countries of the companies signed up to The Accord.

It also breaks new ground by putting workers at the centre of health and safety reform of the garment industry. The agreement is jointly governed by companies and worker representatives and includes a central role for independent worker representatives in its implementation.

So far more than 190 brands from over 20 countries have signed the Accord, covering 1,500 factories employing around 2 million workers. This year its network of 110 independent engineers have carried out inspections at hundreds of sites, identifying more than 80,000 safety issues and suspending production at 17 factories.

The aftermath of Rana Plaza has also created the conditions for garment workers to take advantage of the government's easing of restrictions on trade unions.

"The Rana Plaza disaster created a platform for workers to organize themselves," says Kalpona. "In the last two years about 200 new garment worker unions have been registered, where 65 per cent of the leadership and the majority of members are women. In 2014, these women union leaders have started collective bargaining with their respective factory managements, which is a positive sign that changes are starting in improving women's

rights at factory level. The challenge is how we can make these changes sustainable.”

These challenges are considerable. Despite the new labour laws, still only 5 per cent of garment workers and fewer than 300 factories are unionized. The UN-backed Rana Plaza Donors Fund, set up to provide injured workers and relatives of those who died with US \$40m of compensation is still \$9 million short of its target. A handful of prominent US brands who refused to sign the legally-binding Accord have set up a parallel worker safety scheme called the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, which could fragment political and corporate support for The Accord.

Yet there is continued optimism that out of the ashes of Rana Plaza, positive changes can endure.

“We have created a collective voice both locally and internationally and this continues to create momentum

for holding those wielding the power to account,” says Kalpona. She points to continued social media campaigns, online petitions and consumer actions led by international NGOs, worker unions and consumer groups, which are maintaining pressure on clothing companies to sign the Accord or pay compensation.

“The women on the factory floors in Bangladesh are beginning to feel like their voices are finally being heard,” she says. “And this is a real step forward.”

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Kalpona meets with union members in her office

Photo: Saiful huq Omi/UN Women

Story: Annie Kelly. For more information on the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, see www.bangladeshaccord.org; and on the campaign for compensation for the victims of the Rana Plaza disaster, see www.cleanclothes.org/ranaplaza