

Rana Plaza Disaster and Thereafter: Evaluating Efforts to Manage Safety and Social Security in the RMG Sector, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Export oriented readymade garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh has flourished at a rapid pace utilising elastic supply of cheap female labour. Despite its grand success and world recognition, this industry encounters criticism for not maintaining minimum safety standard within factories. Industrial hazards are frequent in this sector, often ending the lives of workers and making the survivors and dependent family members vulnerable. Taking Rana Plaza disaster as a case study, this article illustrates how the RMG workers are compensated for the loss of their lives and livelihoods and how much progress has been made until April 2016 to ensure workplace safety in the RMG sector.

Key Words: RMG worker, safety, vulnerability, social security, local manufacturer, global retailer

Introduction

It was a gloomy evening of December 2014. We stopped by Savar market on our way to Dhaka to find out Rana Plaza. The local people immediately took us to a nearby site just beside the main road. Where was Rana Plaza? Yes, we identified the spot finally. It was an empty 'ground zero' like area filled with water and next to it were the piled rumbles of a huge collapsed building, assemblage of manufacturing factories and belongings of the workers were scattered here and there. The area was enclosed by a thin iron rope. We found newly established shops alongside the rope that literally made the spot invisible from the roadside. Only a shabby small monument, erected in the memory of the victim workers, provided a glimpse of the horrific event.

It took us back about two years ago – in early 2013. The nine-storey Rana Plaza building that housed 5 garment factories, a commercial bank and a market, collapsed in the morning of 24 April. The collapse resulted in the deaths of at least 1,134 and injury over 2,500 people (RPCC, 2016; Solopova, 2013). Relatives and friends of the workers rushed to a nearby

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school premise where the dead bodies were kept for identification. They ran between the hospitals, clinics and to the accident spot for the news of those who were working inside the complex in that morning. All the crying, shouting, prayers of people and roaring of machines fell silent twenty days after the accident with the official closure of rescue operation (Savar rescue operation, 2013).

It was not the first incident of building collapse in the female dominated RMG industry of Bangladesh. In April 2005, at least 64 garment workers were killed when a building of Spectrum Garments factory located at Savar – just few km away from the Rana Plaza – collapsed. Less than a year later, in February 2006, another accident took 21 lives as Phoenix Textile Mills building collapsed (Mobarok, 2014). However, Rana Plaza tragedy jolted the entire world. Since the disaster various steps have been taken to compensate the affected workers and mitigate the risk of further industrial accidents. In this backdrop, this paper aims to follow up workers' situation in the RMG sector since the massive disaster of Rana Plaza analysing the role of key stakeholders (i.e. local manufactures and global brands) in addressing workplace safety and vulnerabilities arising out of industrial shocks.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, we have provided a brief overview of the RMG industry of Bangladesh exploring the significance of cheap and elastic labour supply in making the global-local venture a grand success. This section is followed by a review of existing safety situation in the RMG sector and its resulting consequence. Next we have provided an analysis of Rana Plaza disaster drawing attention to the role of global retailers and local manufacturers in compensating the affected factory workers. After that, we have interrogated the standpoints of different stakeholders on maintaining international safety standard in the RMG sector. The article concludes following a discussion of workers' dire livelihood needs that substantially contributes to the sustenance of high labour exploitation in the RMG industry of Bangladesh.

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The theoretical orientation of this research originates from Amartya Sen's ideas of capability. Sen's Capability Approach (1980) focuses on a person's actual freedom of doing things that she/he actually values (Kabeer, 2000). The concept of freedom is embedded in Sen's definition of capability, which he takes further in his book 'Development as Freedom' (1999). Acknowledging the complex global context of increasing linkages across countries and the conditions of unprecedented opulence and remarkable deprivation, destitution and oppression, Sen stresses on expansion of freedom or the removal of unfreedoms 'both as the primary end and as the principal means of development' (Sen, 1999 in Agarwal *et al*, 2006).

The notion of freedom, according to Sen, is a positive one. Sen argues, allowing people the freedom to lead lives that they have reason to value means removing unfreedoms such as malnutrition, premature morbidity, disease, unemployment and political oppressions.

Positioning himself against welfarism, Sen emphasises people's agency to the expansion of freedom or removal of unfreedoms in advancing human capabilities. He also recognises, as noted by Mariane T. Hill (in Agarwal et al, 2003), the importance of social institutions (i.e. democratic institutions, civil liberty and a free press) and state interventions to development through their effects on enhancing and sustaining individual freedom.

Sen is in favour of economic globalisation and associated industrial development in developing countries. According to Sen's economic and moral thoughts, global industries can bring positive outcome under a social profile, given that each agent who participates in it respects the moral standards resulting from a common code of ethics, and that state and supranational organizations exert a more effective function in regulating and monitoring (Pagliari, Bucciarelli, & Alessi, 2011).

Sen's capability approach (1980) drive us closer to the barriers erected by the society against full justice. Sen enables us to study how institutions, physical structures, and disasters stand in the way of human well-being (i.e. experience of good quality life) and expose them to conditions that threaten their existence (Choudhury *et al*, 2016). Eventually, we are encouraged to study vulnerable condition of individuals/groups in the face of natural or human-made shocks/risks/disasters.

The term vulnerability, opposed to security, generally refers to exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulty in coping with them. Sen (1981) proposes to explain vulnerability as a lack of entitlements to things while Chambers (1989) mentions that vulnerability does not mean lack or want but exposure and defencelessness. According to Chambers, vulnerability has two sides: the external side of exposure to shocks, stress and risk; and the internal side of defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss. Chambers further mentions that loss can take many forms - becoming or being physically weaker, economically impoverished, socially dependent, humiliated or psychologically harmed.

In this study, we have used the term vulnerability to refer to the lack of entitlement to safe work environment and social security benefits, which exposes the RMG workers and their family members to the threats of physical and emotional losses and affects their resilience (i.e. the capacity to recover). To investigate the root cause of workers' vulnerability, we have concentrated on analysing safety management within factories. By safety management, here we mean not only arranging safety materials or PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) inside factories but also to the demonstrated commitment of the top management towards safety. Hence, proactive safety management refers to paying attention to compliant building infrastructure, preventive maintenance of building and equipment, regular audit and inspection of workplace and safety equipment as well as building awareness among management personnel and workforce about safety (Wagenaar & Hudson, 2013). This definition of safety encourages us to examine the role of different actors within the apparel value chain (i.e. the buyers, factory owners, management officials and also the workers) as well as other important actors (i.e. state and non-state bodies and institutions) in addressing safety and enabling

workers' freedom of choosing and achieving a life they have reason to value. Although Sen emphasises human agency as the key to social change, in this article we will highlight how the RMG workers feel constrained to exercise agency to remove barriers to freedom.

We have followed qualitative methodology for this research with an aim to generate an in-depth understanding of safety situation in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. Data had been extracted both from secondary and primary sources. Our choice to make use of secondary data was motivated by their easy accessibility. Newspaper articles were utilized mainly to build the chronology of events, confirm facts, and to obtain narratives on the suffering and coping mechanism of affected workers of Rana Plaza disaster.

We followed reports on RMG safety issue published in two leading national daily newspaper of Bangladesh: The Daily Star and Prothom Alo, from 24 April 2013 to March, 2016. Relevant data had also been extracted from the reports published in the Dhaka Tribune and the Guardian through internet search. We took note on more than 30 newspaper reports, which enabled us to get a clear picture of the underlying causes of Rana Plaza disaster and the vulnerable condition of the affected workers and their dependents. We also became able to identify significant events happening after Rana Plaza building collapse to compensate the affected Rana Plaza workers and to mitigate safety risks in the RMG sector.

For adding first hand insights and experiences, we conducted semi-structured one-to-one interviews with ten female RMG workers, involving a university student as a research assistant. In a view to get closer to the realities of workers under different factory environment, the respondents were selected from 10 different factories (6 were from the large factories inside Dhaka EPZ area and 4 were from small factories of Mirpur area). Snowball sampling method was followed to select those workers and their interviews were conducted in December, 2015. In the interviews, the workers shared their knowledge about safety, their day-to-day exposure to safety risks and their participation in factory safety management. They also provided their opinions about the value of factory work and their relationship with management officials. The workers also shared their opinions on Rana Plaza disaster and their feeling about the affected workers.

To draw on the perspectives of key stakeholders of RMG business, eight Key Informants Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with two factory owners, two managers, three labour leaders, and one academician cum researcher. The participants of KIIs were selected by convenience sampling method. Principal researchers conducted the interviews in two phases: in January 2015 and in March 2016. The interviews were focused on safety and compliance related developments in the RMG sector of Bangladesh after Rana Plaza tragedy. Participants provided feedback on their own experience and observations about motivation and barriers to maintaining minimum safety standard within factories. They also provided opinions on labour rights and the process of compensating the Rana Plaza workers. All interviews were transcribed by the principal researchers for analysis.

RMG Industry of Bangladesh: A Sudden Miracle or a Sustainable Venture?

Utilising elastic supply of cheap female labour, RMG industry emerged in Bangladesh in the late 1970s when many East Asian firms relocated their production sites here as a means to readjust with MFA (Multi-Fibre Agreement) import quotas imposed by the advanced industrialised nations (Kabecr & Mahmud, 2004; Titumir, 2003; Chowdhury, Ahmed, & Yasmin, 2014). Within a very short span of time, the industry appears as the major industry of Bangladesh contributing to the largest share in export (Bhattacharya, Rahman, & Raihan, 2002). In FY 1983-84, RMG industry represented only 5% share in total export that amounted 31.57 million US\$ while in FY 2000-01 the share reached more than 75% of total export which was equivalent to 4,859.83 million US\$ (Titumir, 2003). At present, RMG sector contributes to more than 80% of total export from Bangladesh (Islam & Hossain, 2016). This industry continues with around 5,600 factories and 4.4 m workers (of which 3.8 million are women).

The garments industry of Bangladesh was never a planned venture. The East Asian entrepreneurs who began the journey relocating manufacturing units from their countries, were crudely governed by the rule of economic rationality. They successfully implemented 'cheap' labour exploitation strategy by maintaining hazardous factory infrastructure, low payment, exhaustive production quota, and informal hiring and firing system (Khan, 2002). The workers had neither been brought under any social security coveragenor allowed to form trade union to protect their rights (Feldman, 2009). What all these issues have in common is overlooking the existing legislation, the rules of social accountability and safety compliance (Wahnström, 2015; Mariani, 2013; Rashid, Ahmad, & Sarkar, 2014).

A real breakthrough occurred in the RMG sector of Bangladesh in 1984-85 when leading international retailers, especially from the value sector, starting to source from Bangladesh (IDLC, 2013). Bangladesh entered the lower end of 'buyer driven' global value chain (Anner, 2012; Gereffi & Memedovic, 2003) of apparel industry. The country suddenly experienced mushrooming of garments factories across Dhaka city, over an extended area outside of EPZ (Export Processing Zones). A new generation of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs appeared in the scene. To an increasing level of profit and continuous expansion, they remained almost reluctant about improving factory infrastructure and working conditions (Ahmed, 2001; Feldman, 2011). Global retailers paid little attention to these local realities. They only showed principal concern forthe quality and price of products (Hossain, 2013). Hence, factories had been located in congested rented spaces within commercial or residential high rises. Until present, the national building code (i.e. Bangladesh National Building Code, 1993) is merely followed by local entrepreneurs taking the advantage of the country's weak law and order situation and corruption. The industry continues growing up in unplanned way without assuring very basic building safety requirements (Uddin, 2015). The following section elaborates this point discussing how safety is perceived and practiced within factories and its consequences.

Poor Safety Culture in the RMG Sector

From the very beginning, the globally renowned industry has been encountering harsh critics for not having standard arrangements in terms of workers' safety and rights (Ahamed, 2013; Hossain, 2013). Several studies carried out on RMG industry confirm that safety becomes an important concern for the factory owners only when the buyers want to see safety measures. In other cases, they are driven by the need of acquiring certificates from ISO or other quality certification system. Management of factories tend to make quick arrangement to install some safety equipment such as fire extinguisher, first aid boxes or emergency exit signs prior to any audit by their buyers or certification body. Once the audit is over and certain certification requirements have been completed, no additional efforts are made to maintain the safety management system (Clifford & Greenhouse, 2013; Wadud *et al.*, 2014).

Only a few factories in Bangladesh maintain international standard while very few have implemented safety measures. After Rana plaza disaster, BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association) has developed a three-tier system for rating factories based on size, quality and safety (IDLC, 2013). Tier 1 factories are located in EPZ in purpose made buildings using the latest safety protocols with the ability to implement whatever reforms are deemed necessary by the buyers. There are also a number of good quality factories outside EPZs ranging from large to medium size in terms of production. They fall under tier 2. The majority of factories outside EPZs are small in size and many deal solely in subcontracts. These factories, under tier 3, usually operate in buildings that have not been designed to bear loads required by garment factories (Reinhardt & Herman, 2014).

Many of these factories are not registered and there is no official source of information about them. The middle and large factories survive on these subcontracting units by passing their huge work order which need to be delivered within days. Some suppliers are transparent, they share the information with their brands, and others do it secretly. According to newspaper reports, these factories are in the most dangerous situation (Karmakar, 2016). They are typically characterised by a number of maladies including congested air circulation, non-ventilated working space, poor natural and artificial lighting system, narrow/insufficient escape route and poor wiring and electrical design (Ahmed & Hossain, 2009; United States Senate, 2013). In many factories the emergency gate is locked during working hours so that the workers cannot skip work anyway. Such a practice increases the number of deaths/injury from an accident.

Fire accidents and collapse of factory buildings are common in this sector (see Table 1) and for little knowledge about how to deal with emergency situation, loss of lives are much higher than it could be. Many of these workers died being stamped when coming out hurriedly or being locked inside the factory as the emergency exit was closed; there are also instances of jumping off the roof (Choudhury *et al.*, 2016).

Table 1: Major Accidents in RMG Sector since 1990 to 2013

Year	Garment Factory	Type of incident	No. of Death
2013	Ether Tex Ltd, New Wave Style Ltd, New Wave Bottom Ltd., Phantom Tac Ltd (The Rana Plaza Tragedy), Savar	Building collapse	1134
2013	Tung Hai Sweaters Ltd., Dhaka	Fire	9
2013	Smart Export Garments, Dhaka	Fire	8
2012	Tazneen Fashion, Dhaka	Fire	113/126
2010	Ha-Meem Clothing Factory, Dhaka	Fire	29
2010	That's it Sportswear, Dhaka	Fire	29
2010	Eurotex, Dhaka	Fire	8
2010	Garib&Garib Sweater Factory, Dhaka	Fire	21
2006	KTS Garments, Chittagong	Fire	65+
2006	Phoenix Textile Mills, Dhaka	Building collapse	21
2005	Sun Knitting, Narayanganj	Fire	20
2005	Spectrum Garments, Savar, Dhaka	Building collapse	64/80
2004	Chowdhury Knitwear, Narsingdi	Fire	23
2001	Kafrul Capital Garments, Dhaka	Fire	26
2000	Macro Sweater, Dhaka	Fire	23
2000	Globe Knitting, Dhaka	Fire	12
2000	Chowdhury Knitwear and Garment Factory; Dhaka	Fire	48
1997	Shanghai Apparels, Dhaka	Fire	24
1997	Rahman & Rahman Apparels, Dhaka	Fire	22
1997	Tamanna Garments, Dhaka	Fire	27
1997	Jahanara Fashion, Narayanganj	Fire	20
1995	Lusaka Garments, Dhaka	Fire	22
1996	Pallabi/Suntex Ltd, Dhaka	Fire	14
1996	Tahidul Garments, Dhaka	Fire	14
1990	Saraka Garments, Dhaka	Fire	32

Source: RPCC 2016; Islam, 2014; Datahub, 2014; Chowdhury *et al*, 2016

Undoubtedly, the number of deaths mentioned in the above table shakes our mind but these are only the number of deceased workers, the missing (supposed to be dead) and injured workers are not included in the list for not having any official estimate for most of cases.

The deadly Rana Plaza disaster took place due to the faulty design and construction of the building where the factories were located. As mentioned earlier, the building owner illegally added floors to the structure and allowed the factories to install heavy equipment such as generators that the building was not designed to support (Uddin, 2015). Cracks were found few days before the accident. Although the workers were afraid of working there, they were pushed to do so by the factory management. So the accident does not only reflect the

consequence of a faulty building design, it also reflects the negligence of the management who did not care of the lives of the workers. The next section traces out the vulnerabilities of the workers arising out of the massive disaster.

After Disaster: On-going Tragedy

Rana Plaza building collapse disrupted the entire function of the factories housed at that building causing massive economic loss of the factory owners and global firms. For the workers the loss was more massive. Conducting a research among 181 Rana Plaza survivors, Fitch *et al.* (2015) found that one year after the incident, the prevalence of probable PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder, which has been reported to be associated with depression, substance abuse, sleeping difficulty, difficulty in finding employment, and an overall decrease in perceived health status) was very high (60.2%) among the survivors. Along with physical suffering and economic insecurity, social complications have been added to the lives of the female survivors. We have selected two different stories from the numerous reports published in newspaper to articulate the adversities brought about by the accident. Following is one of them:

Salma went to bed with Babu [her husband] around 11:45pm on Thursday [24 January 2016]. After getting up at around 6:00am, Babu found his wife hanging from the ceiling with a scarf Babu told police that his wife had been suffering from severe headache due to her injuries from the Rana Plaza tragedy and she might have committed suicide as she could not bear the pain anymore. (Injured worker, 2014)

Multi-faced complications of a female survivor were reflected in another report:

Farida [pseudonym] was trapped inside the factory. Heavy machinery fell on her head and back, severely injuring her and leaving her unable to walk properly, suffering from head pains and blurred eyesight. She was rescued from the rubble after two days. Her in-laws did not contact her and offered no support. Her husband complied with their treatment of her, burning their marriage contract. Farida's own family is too poor to support her (Solopova, 2013).

On-going struggles of many survivors came out in the words of a workers' federation leader we interviewed:

Those who have become handicapped are not able to continue their treatment. They do not have adequate money to buy medicine. Just after the incident, many provided support. But as time is going, people are forgetting what happened. Now no one is extending support to the Rana Plaza survivors [Translated by researcher 2].

The leader further described the situation of family members of the dead and injured workers saying:

I keep regular communication with the families. They also call me frequently. Many families are merely surviving. Children are missing nutrition. Their schooling has been impacted badly. I know the family of a deceased worker at the Rana Plaza who left three daughters. Their mother is not sure how she will raise the girls. She may arrange early marriage for them [Translated by researcher 2].

It is true that the families of officially documented workers had received some assistance from various sources but the families of the missing workers received much sympathy but no support, in the absence of hard documentary proof (Lest we forget, 2015). They are in a more horrible situation.

A survey conducted with over 1414 Rana Plaza survivors and 794 family members by the ActionAid Bangladesh (2015), revealed that the survivors of Rana Plaza were still in a traumatic state that barred them from going back to factory work again. Receiving training on small business and entrepreneurship development from NGOs, only few of the survivors have become able to turn back. According to the survey, initially these survivors received fund from several sources but now they are facing fund shortage. For this reason, they are unable to speed up their venture and ensure its sustainability. They need financial assistance or loan. So again the question comes: who will provide them? The next section details out the compensation process to show how the workers have been constrained to cope with or recover from disaster-induced losses.

Paying off the Workers: The Compensation Drama

Rana Plaza housed five garment factories including the New Wave factory, which supplied clothes to major global retailers such as Mango, Primark and Canadian supermarket chain Loblaws. There was EtherTex Ltd, which manufactured garments for Walmart and C&A. The building also housed Phantom TAC, a joint venture knit factory with a Spanish textile company. However, only Primark took quick steps to stand beside the victims. For nine months after the accident, the company paid monthly salaries at a rate of US\$ 38 for 3,600 workers. In an interview, Paul Lister, Primark's general counsel acknowledged their moral responsibility saying:

When you know where your clothes are made, then you take responsibility for the results of where your clothes are being made. We have said very clearly that we would work to support the workers — and the families of the workers — in our supply chain (US retailers, 2013).

Famous brands like Walmart, Sears and Children's Place had not agreed to compensate the victims. Likewise, factory owners did not come forward to compensate the workers. After Rana Plaza disaster, a committee was formed with the directives of the court to fix the amount and form of compensation. When we asked about the amount of compensation package suggested by the court, one of the prominent economists of Bangladesh, and a member of the committee said:

Initially the committee proposed to provide BDT 20 lakh [USD 25.5 thousand] to the families of the deceased workers of Rana Plaza. It was assumed that average age of the workers was 20 and they could earn for at least 20 more years before retirement. The committee first suggested additional BDT 5 lakh [USD 6.4 thousand] as the compensation for pains and sufferings of the family members but finally reduced that compensation for the objection from ILO representative. Finally, we proposed a compensation of BDT 15 lakh [USD 19.1 thousand] [Translated by researcher 2]

Unfortunately, the guideline of the court was never followed. In the months following the collapse, some family members of affected workers obtained financial help from various organizations, social workers, BGMEA, some buyers and philanthropists (Lest we forget, 2015) but there was no fixed amount or transparency in the ways of compensating. For example, BGMEA provided lump sum amount from solidarity fund and fund from abroad. The organisation also disbursed some money in the form of salary to the victims (CPD, 2014). As of July 2013, a total of 1,016 persons belonging to the families of 777 victims reportedly received BDT 100,000 [around US\$ 1,275] from Bangladesh Prime Minister's Relief Fund. These families have yet not received the amount fixed by the court which is reflected in the words of a workers' federation leader:

Reality is different in the ground. I know several Rana Plaza survivors who did not receive any compensation other than the initial payment from the Prime Minister's Relief Fund. [Translated by researcher 1]

Another leader added:

We wanted at least BDT 27-28 lakh [USD 34-35 thousand] for each deceased, including for those who have become permanently disabled. However, they received only BDT 1 - 2 lakh [USD 1.2 - 2.5 thousand]. This is not even compensation. It is donation. Compensation should be given by the owners, BGMEA & the Buyers. [Translated by researcher 2]

Finally, in September 2013, a multi-stakeholder Rana Plaza Coordination Committee (RPCC) was formed with representatives from Government, workers' union, industry, employers' organizations, international and national relevant NGOs, and a number of global brands (RPCC, 2016). In January 2014, RPCC established Donor Trust Fund and pledged for \$30 million dollar from global fashion brands either producing or not producing in Rana Plaza. However, responses from all brands were not same. A newspaper article stated:

Some brands donated dramatically less than their calculated total. For example, Walmart, the world's largest retailer with net sales of \$482.2b donated an estimated \$1m (After two years, 2015).

In June 2015, RPCC announced that they had adequate fund to provide compensation to Rana Plaza victims (RPCC, 2016) but it was not clear who contributed how much in that fund and most importantly, it came in the form of charity. The buyers/brands and garment

owners associated with the disaster did not shoulder the obligation to compensate or rehabilitate the affected workers and their family members. Therefore, even if some money is going to be paid, it will not create any positive instance for the future. If there occurs another disaster like Rana Plaza, it is not clear who will be the ultimately responsible. No formal arrangement has been developed yet.

Rising Safety Concern in the RMG Sector

Rana Plaza disaster raised global consciousness about industrial safety. After the accident, western consumers, at an increasing rate, started checking labels for the country of origin or question brands and retailers about their production conditions and supply chain. According to the key informants we interviewed, since Rana plaza disaster, foreign retailers and brands have been showing increasing concern about safety issue before placing any order. They are demanding safety compliance expanding audits. Currently, initiated by global retailers and brands, two groups commonly known as Accord (Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh) and Alliance (Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety) are working in Bangladesh to improve safety condition in the garments factories. Accord is supporting predominantly European buyers and represents more than 180 global garment brands, while Alliance is a group of 28 North American apparel companies, retailers, and brands. Together Accord and Alliance initiatives cover 2,000 RMG factories with 3 million workers. By now they have completed inspection in almost all of the factories, and published Corrective Action Plans (CAP) (Table 2).

We also find proactive state initiatives to address safety issues in RMG factories. With funding from ILO, a National Tripartite Action Plan for Building and Fire Safety has been adopted by the Ministry of Labour and Employment to conduct building assessment with focus on structural integrity, fire and electrical safety. This is also called as National Initiative, and is coordinated by the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE). As of March 2016, over 1,500 RMG factories had been inspected by the National Initiative (Table 2).

Other notable Government initiatives after Rana Plaza disaster are: (a) amendment of Labour Law to ensure safety, welfare and right and promoting trade unionism and collective bargaining, (b) up gradation of DIFE from directorate to department, and recruitment of additional inspectors, (c) creation of publicly accessible database of RMG factories by DIFE with support from ILO, and (d) adjustment of minimum wage for RMG sector (Ministry of Labour & Employment, 2015).

Table 2 Safety inspection and corrective action implementation status for RMG factories in Bangladesh after Rana Plaza disaster till March 2016

	Accord*	Alliance**	National Initiative***	Total
Total covered factories	1,676	790	-	-
Workers	2 million	1.2 million	-	-
Inspected factory****	1,326	661	1,549	3,536
Deficiencies				
Total deficiencies	95,293	56,846	-	-
Average deficiency per factory				
All type	70	86	-	-
Structural	14 (20%)	17 (20%)	-	-
Electrical	32 (46%)	37 (43%)	-	-
Fire	24 (34%)	32 (37%)	-	-
Corrective Action Plan (CAP)				
Published CAP	1,358	591	1549	3,498
CAP fully completed	2(<1%)	0(0%)	-	-
CAP on schedule	161 (12%)	NA	-	-
CAP behind schedule	1,182 (88%)	NA	-	-
CAP complete 61% or more	-	19 (3%)	-	-
CAP completed 21-60% or less	-	384 (69%)	-	-
CAP completed 20% or less	-	154 (8%)	-	-
Suspension or termination of business by signatory companies	13	42	-	-
Fire safety training	-	1.1 million (93% workers)	-	-
Average estimated cost of remediation	-	US\$250,000 to US\$350,000 (20 to 27 million BDT)	-	-

Source:

* Accord – Quarterly Aggregate Report and website. Retrieved on March 21, 2016, from <http://bangladeshaccord.org/>

**Alliance – Second Annual Report, Sept, 2015, and website. Retrieved on March 20, 2016, from <http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/>

*** National Initiative. Retrieved on March 16, 2016, from <http://database.dife.gov.bd/>

**** Accord and Alliance have some common factories where only one of them conducted inspection.

Table 2 summarises the safety inspection conducted by Accord, Alliance and National initiatives. As reflected in the table, over 3,500 garment factories had been inspected so far by the three entities. CAP were also prepared and published for most of the factories. Unfortunately, limited data is available from the National Initiatives for analysis. Accord and Alliance identified over 150,000 deficiencies in those factories under their coverage. Their

findings suggest that on an average there are at least 70 deficiencies in a factory. Out of 10 deficiencies, 2 are related to structural safety while 3 are related to fire safety.

Following their inspection, Accord, Alliance and National Initiatives sent recommendations to the national Review Panel to close operation for at least 150 RMG factories because those are very dangerous to operate. So far, the Review Panel closed full operation of 39 factories, and partial operation of 42 factories. Rest of the factories are allowed to operate with recommendations. A significant number of workers (6,177) lost their job because of such closures.

Slow implementation and closure of corrective actions in many factories raises question about the impact of inspection initiatives. Table 2 suggests that not even 1 (one) percent factories have fully completed their CAP. Accord reported that at least 88% of factories are behind schedule for CAP implementation. Accord and Alliance signatory companies have suspended or terminated of business with at least 55 factories. Those factories either did not cooperated with Accord and Alliance for inspection or did not implemented CAP. When asked why you have not completed CAP, a management representative of an Accord enlisted factory said that they could not fully complete the CAP because of funding issue and the huge cost of safety improvement is a major concern for most of the factories. Since the brands are not interested to pay more for per piece of order, the sole responsibility comes to the owners' shoulder. In the words of a factory owner:

Cost has been increased for addressing the current safety and social compliance requirements. Modern criteria for safety have created additional requirements for safety equipment. For example, now 6 fire extinguishers are required for the same floor area for which previous requirement were 4. In addition to fire hose, fire sprinkler is a requirement now. One of my friends has invested BDT 11 crore [USD 1.4 million] for fire safety equipment in his factory [to address the requirement from Accord/Alliance].

Buyers [through Accord and Alliance] and Government [of Bangladesh] are providing some loan for safety equipment but those benefits are going mainly to the big garments factories. Small factories are not getting much benefit. [Translated by researcher 1]

In this connection, another management representative said:

There are several barriers to implementing CAP. One of the major issues is that most of the factories do not have access to adequate fund without buyers' guaranty. When factories are going to Bank for loan required for safety and compliance related improvement, bank is asking for buyers' guarantee. But the buyers do not give guarantee for such loan.

Another major issue is that most of the improvements are time consuming to implement - particularly the structural improvements. It is difficult to continue operation and at the same time fixing structural problems such as retrofitting. A garments cannot be closed for 3 months. In some cases, it

might be possible to fix one floor at a time but that would be challenging as well. Production of the factory will be impacted anyway.

As I know only 1-2% factories have completed all of the action times. Overall 10% factories are making good progress. But nearly 90% factories cannot implement the action items for different bottleneck. [Translated by researcher 2]

Tension now exists in the RMG sector regarding the activities of Accord-Alliance. In July 2015, BGMEA president resigned from Alliance by disagreeing with its activities. In the previous month, the Finance Minister of Bangladesh termed the recent activities of the Accord and Alliance as “nooses” in the growth of the country’s RMG sector (Muhith terms, 2015). Recently Commerce Minister of Bangladesh has stood against the potential extension of Accord and Alliance after expiry of their tenure in July 2018. Obviously, the stand of the Government will encourage garments factory owners to continue business as usual without taking care of safety issue seriously. However, it is encouraging to see that a significant portion of the RMG factories of Bangladesh has been inspected and CAP has been developed for most of them. Many of the new generation garment entrepreneurs now possess a positive attitude towards safety. The previously quoted factory owner said:

Entrepreneurship is changing now. The previous generation of garment owners were different. They mainly thought that they were earning, they did not need to make additional investment for safety. But now second and even third generation of entrepreneurs are running the factories. They are coming to the industry with foreign education and experience. They observe global situation. The trend is changing. Global competition is also there. They have to implement safety anyway [to address the requirements from buyers]. [Translated by researcher 2]

However, to many, the situation has changed a little. In the words of a trade union leader:

I can see only few visible improvements. Accord and alliance have made some difference. But it is not adequate to avoid accidents like Rana Plaza. We have not taken the lesson to our heart. We thought everything in Dhaka will be changed after Rana Plaza - just like the fire incident in a garment factory in New York in around first quarter of the 20th century, because of which industrial practice in the city changed forever. People who were responsible for Rana Plaza have not been trialed yet. Even if only execution of law becomes stronger, we could avoid such incidents. We demand at least the guarantee of workers’ life. [Translated by researcher 2]

Until present, at least 742 subcontracting factories are left out of the inspection conducted by the entities mentioned above (Karmakar, 2016). Arguably, these factories have the worst standard of safety and working conditions. Therefore, even if it is less likely that the factories which have undergone inspection and adopted mitigation measures will not face severe accidents in near future, still there is a high possibility of major accident in the small subcontracting units. Another Rana Plaza tragedy can happen any time.

The Culture of Conformity

Our interviews with key informants reveals that overall factory management considers safety as an optional issue. Therefore, they try to minimize time and resource allocation to ensure safety at workplace. In the present arrangement of RMG industry, workers do not have options. If they want to quit one factory for safety concerns, there is no guarantee that the other factory is equipped with proper safety management system (Padmanabhan *et al.*, 2015). All the workers we interviewed expressed deep concern about their life remembering the horrific Rana Plaza accident but they knew little about their own factory condition. One of the workers said:

I have not yet faced any accident while working in garment sector. I heard once fire broke out in my factory but it was quickly taken under control. Now our factory is safe. [Translated by researcher 1]

Farida, another worker who was working in a compliant factory was satisfied with factory fire safety management system. She said:

Yes, we have fire extinguishers in our factory. It was shown to the workers. I had seen it also. We know how to save ourselves from fire because we are given fire training every month. [Translated by researcher 1]

However, among the workers we did not find adequate knowledge about building safety. They all had a blind faith in factory owners and managers who are supposed to play key role in assuring workplace safety. In the words of another worker, Rubi:

I think my factory building is safe. If there is any massive crack, they [the management] would close it. [Translated by researcher 1]

In this regard, Nasrin said:

I felt pity for the workers of Rana Plaza. They were like us. The same thing may happen to us. My factory building is not too old. I guess my factory building is safe. Nobody comes to check it. If anything wrong happens, the management will close it. [Translated by researcher 1]

Hence, the possibility of hazardous consequences and expected outcomes (death, injury, loss of livelihood, economic insecurity) remains high in the RMG sector. Rubi, a garments worker, pointed to the underlying 'cheap' labour exploitation mantra of the management and the crying need of the workers which resulted in the massive disaster of Rana Plaza:

I know about Rana Plaza. The workers did not want to enter the building. They were forced to do so. These are nothing but trick to kill people. The Rana Plaza workers were told that they will not get salary. The workers were helpless. How can we pay our room rent, manage our survival without salary? Everything in our life depends on our salary. [Translated by researcher 1]

Ironically, in some cases the rising safety concern has affected the workers negatively. According to a claim made by BGMEA, since the collapse of Rana Plaza building, a total of 174 readymade garment factories had been closed down due to lack of orders and non-

compliance with the rules. What is alarming is that around 95,000 workers had lost their job following factory closures (Ovi, 2014). Needless to mention, there exists no formal arrangement to compensate these workers. This crude reality manifests the powerless condition of RMG workers who do not have effective trade unions to ensure their rights (HRW, 2015a; HRW, 2015b).

Conclusion

This article provides a dismal picture of workplace safety in the RMG sector of Bangladesh analysing how global buyers and local manufacturers work in a concerted way to sustain poor safety management within factories for profit maximization. Referring to the implications of poor safety management, this article unfolds a condition of 'unfreedom' for the workers: chances of being killed or disabled due to hazardous factory condition, deprivation of justified compensation for physical and emotional losses, and lack of associational activities for claiming their rights. All these, as shown in this article, make the factory workers vulnerable, i.e., on one hand, their presence in unsafe factories makes their lives and employment at risk. On the other hand, under poor safety management workers remain either less unaware of their rights or unlikely to resist if those rights are violated. Thus, the RMG workers of Bangladesh, especially the workers of small subcontracting units, remain vulnerable to industrial hazards/disasters.

The accounts of vulnerability presented in the article unfolds that Rana Plaza disaster has severely affected workers' personal and family survival and well-being by exposing the workers to a number of physical and emotional losses including untimely death, bodily injury and psychological harms. A lack of entitlement to social security benefits has pushed them towards more vulnerable condition; there are very few instances of turning back.

Obviously, the experiences of Rana Plaza workers once again justify the need to improve safety management in the RMG sector. However, as revealed by the study, little progress has been achieved to improve factory environment following the massive disaster. Although there are guiding policies to ensure safety in the RMG sector, their implementation is not up to the mark. The factory owners are unwilling to shoulder the cost of compliant factories while there is no indication from the global retailers to share it. The workers are under risk but they are not in a position to bring about change in poor safety management. The programs of Accord and Alliance raise the hope of a good safety culture but resistance to Accord/Alliance activities apparently marks threat to its sustainability.

Given this situation, a remarkable change in poor safety management is very difficult to attain within the existing structure of RMG industry. However, it might be achieved, in light of Sen's work, by a more strong role of international bodies (e.g. ILO) to bind the global retailers and local manufactures to remain attentive to globally accepted safety standard and labour rights. At local level, strong regulatory role of state agencies can contribute significantly to pro-active safety and disaster management. At the same time, workers' agency is highly important to bring about policies towards transformative change. Hope this article will inspire future research and policy formulation on improving working conditions in the RMG sector of Bangladesh.

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