



Case Study

Fire and building safety in the ready-made garment sector of Bangladesh



BETTER WORK



*The National Tripartite Plan of Action in Bangladesh's garment industry will affect more than **3.5 million workers** and improve fire safety and structural integrity in approximately **3,500 factories**.*

It is the first programme between workers, employers and the government of its kind in Bangladesh. Outside the country, it has also had an immediate impact on major international initiatives launched by buyers, governments and interest groups.



The second largest exporter of ready-made garments in the world

Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector has experienced rapid growth over the past 20 years. Now the country's largest export earner, the sector employs over 3.5 million workers - of which 80% are women - in 3,500 factories. Bangladesh currently ranks as the second largest exporter of ready-made garments in the world. In 2013, garment exports are estimated to have topped US\$21 billion, a significant jump from US\$19 billion in 2012.

This rapid and unregulated growth has also created serious problems. In the rush to meet export demands, many factories have been set up in buildings unsuitable for industrial purposes such as apartment blocks and office buildings. Many factory buildings struggle to cope with the heavy load of sewing machines, fabric and large numbers of workers, with exit and entry points not designed

for large numbers of workers to use at the same time and the need for industrial safety equipment never anticipated. In this context, the industry focus has always been on the contribution that the sector was making to employment and export earnings, and not on the safety of the factories.

In addition, while child labour appears to have greatly reduced in export factories, significant problems still exist around occupational safety and health, working conditions, wage payments, and the rights of workers to organise. In many factories, these issues are compounded by the absence of effective human resource management systems. Weaknesses in national labour law administration, industrial relations and social dialogue systems further worsen non-compliance with national laws and regulations.





Twelve months of tragedy

Bangladesh's garment industry has a long history of industrial accidents, but the fire at Tazreen Fashions in November 2012 which killed 112 workers was the first time that the national stakeholders and the international community paid serious attention. The tragedy occurred during a period in which Better Work was working with the tripartite partners in considering the establishment of a programme in Bangladesh. Recognizing the fire could be a watershed moment for the industry, Better Work, with the support of the ILO Country Office for Bangladesh, engaged with senior representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Employment and employers' and workers' organizations to develop a strategic response. As this response started to take shape, a second fire occurred at Smart Export Garments, killing a further eight workers. While this did not attract the same media attention, it did reiterate the urgency needed in organising a coordinated approach to improving safety in the sector.

In January 2013, government, workers' organizations and employers' organizations adopted a tripartite statement of commitment on fire safety in the work place in Bangladesh. In the statement, the partners recognized their individual and collective responsibility to ensure fire safety in every workplace

in Bangladesh and committed to the development of a National Plan of Action on Fire Safety. Following a number of meetings facilitated by Better Work and the ILO, the partners subsequently adopted the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety in the Ready-Made Garments Sector of Bangladesh. The Plan was formally endorsed by the Minister of Labour and Employment in March 2013.

Then an unprecedented catastrophe hit the sector; Rana Plaza, a building housing five garment factories, collapsed in April 2013. 1,132 people were killed and many more were injured, leaving hundreds of people permanently disabled. The collapse captured global headlines for months. Major media outlets such as the New York Times, El Pais, CNN, BBC, and Al Jazeera reported extensively on Bangladesh's garment sector, and for months the catastrophe dominated print, radio, TV and social media news stories. The continued reporting on the aftermath of the disasters is unprecedented. The resulting damage to the image of Bangladesh, and the garment sector in particular, is perhaps best illustrated by Bloomberg ranking the Rana Plaza collapse third amongst its 'Top 10 Reputation Crises of 2013'.






“ In the whole five years I worked in the garment sector I never thought of dangers at work. We never had any discussions on safety. ”

“The day of the fire was just like any other day. There was a fire alarm and we all got out of their seats but did not expect it was an actual fire. We heard fire alarms in the factory sometimes but management were never serious; they just sounded it but we were not asked to go outside. Sometimes we said to our management that they were not maintaining drills properly because we were not practicing leaving the factory but they said it was not important. After about five minutes we saw smoke. Everything started to go dark. We ran to the female stairs and found fire. We ran to the male stairs and found fire. The main exit was locked. Everyone was running in every direction, choking on the smoke, blinded in the darkness and scared. We ran to the sample room and broke the windows and jumped onto the roof of the building next to the factory, then onto the ground. I don't know where the managers were. It seems they got out through the main exit, locked it and left. Nobody really knows who locked the doors because we couldn't see any faces; it was just dark and full of smoke.

I do not really know what happened after I jumped. I broke my arm in many places and injured my back. They put a plate in my arm and said that after two years they will do another operation and take out the plate.

A lot needs to change in factories for us to want to go back to work. We are still scared. Big changes are not needed, just lots of small changes. Factories should be set up legally set up, they should have proper management and they should get checked for safety. I did not have any safety training and that is wrong, they only ever invited a small number of men, but women were never invited even though most of the workers are women. If I could get training and if they installed safety equipment, then we would go back to work. Work is so important and we want to go back to the factories, we are just scared. Work gives us freedom. Women in Bangladesh need the garments sector. It is basically our only way to become financially independent because we don't have scope for many other jobs. When we came from our village we had nothing, we came to Savar and now we are able to earn money. This is our life and this industry is what keeps our families alive. Without garments, we wouldn't be able to eat. We hope that the garments industry stays in Bangladesh and keeps growing. It is important for the poor people of Bangladesh. Many of them, like us, have nothing in their villages but because they have started work, they at least have food and can survive. If the industry goes to other countries, people will die. It is as simple as that.”

-Mahfuza Akter, former garment factory worker (Tazreen Fashions)




Although the National Plan of Action initially only covered fire safety, the partners extended its scope to include the structural integrity of buildings after the Rana Plaza collapse. This process was facilitated by a high-level ILO mission headed by Deputy Director General Gilbert Houngbo who visited Bangladesh directly after the collapse. A Joint Statement was signed which built on the National Tripartite Plan of Action and identified further key areas for action. These areas were then formally incorporated into the National Tripartite Plan of Action in July 2013.

The National Tripartite Plan of Action has two objectives:

- 1.** Identify activities that the tripartite partners commit to implement to improve fire safety and structural integrity in the RMG sector in Bangladesh; and
- 2.** Provide entry points for other stakeholders (buyers/brands, international development organizations, donors, etc.) to support implementation of the Plan of Action, and provide a coordination platform for stakeholders to initiate additional fire safety and structural integrity promotion activities.

The National Plan of Action included the establishment of a National Tripartite Committee to monitor implementation of the Plan. The committee was formally established in May 2013. The ILO accepted a formal request from the Ministry of Labour and Employment to assist in the implementation and coordination of the National Plan of Action. Better Work plays a lead role in the committee.



“No worker should be injured or die when they work in a garment factory. The National Plan of Action is a promise to our workers. The promise that we, together with the government and the unions, will do everything we can to make our factories safer places to work. It will take time and we will need help, but it is a promise we intend to keep.”

-Atiqul Islam, President, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA)

<i>Name</i>	<i>Event Type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Number of casualties</i>
Tazreen Fashions Ltd	Fire	24 November 2012	112
Smart Export Garments	Fire	26 January 2013	8
Rana Plaza <i>(housed 5 garment factories)</i>	Building Collapse	24 April 2013	1,132 (mostly RMG workers)
Aswad Composite Mills Ltd.	Fire	8 October 2013	7



“We developed the National Tripartite Plan of Action as a strategy to improve structural integrity and fire safety in the garment sector. As we progress, the joint approach enables us to focus our efforts, work in coordination with others, and demonstrate that we are committed and reliable trading partners. Better Work and the ILO were instrumental in the development and now in the implementation of the Plan.”

- Mikail Shipar, Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment

“Workers in Bangladesh should not have to worry when they go to work in the morning whether they will return home safely at the end of the day. We must all work together to make sure this will no longer be the case. The National Plan of Action plays a vital role in making sure this will one day soon be a reality for all workers in the garment sector.”

-Roy Ramesh, Industrial Bangladesh Council

The world reacts

Though acknowledging in the National Plan of Action that fire safety and structural integrity in the ready-made garments sector is first and foremost a national responsibility, the tripartite partners recognized that achieving this goal in a sustainable way would require local and international efforts. A number of major initiatives have since been developed that either support the implementation of the National Plan of Action or acknowledge its importance.

Bangladesh's Major Trading Partners

United States of America - 23% of exports

In June 2013, the US suspended Bangladesh's trade benefits under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) in view of "insufficient progress by the Government of Bangladesh in affording Bangladeshi workers internationally recognized worker rights". Though the culmination of a long-term review process, the tragedies of the Tazreen Fashions factory fire and the Rana Plaza building collapse undoubtedly played an important role in the decision. While the ready-made garments sector itself does not specifically enjoy US GSP benefits, their suspension was nevertheless damaging to the image of the sector.

US GSP Action Plan: In July 2013 the US Government published an Action Plan on Labor Rights and Factory Safety in Bangladesh, which, if implemented by the Government of Bangladesh, would form the basis for the reinstatement of GSP trade benefits. The Action Plan specifically encourages the Government of Bangladesh to implement the National Plan of Action and borrows a number of activities from it.

International Buyers

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety

In July 2013 the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety was launched by a number of North-American retailers and brands (currently 26), including Walmart, Gap, Target and JC Penney. It is a five-year programme under which signatory companies commit to ensuring the implementation of health and safety measures, mainly through undertaking factory safety assessments. The Alliance currently covers approximately 700 factories. The Alliance recognizes the importance of the National Plan of Action and states it will support its implementation.

European Union - 58% of exports

As the EU is Bangladesh's largest garment trade partner, access to its Anything but Arms trade benefits scheme is extremely important because it covers ready-made garments products. However, at the end of April 2013, the EU indicated it was considering "appropriate action", including through the GSP, "in order to incentivize responsible management of supply chains involving developing countries". This has widely been interpreted as meaning EU GSP could be reviewed if no action is taken to improve occupational safety and health and worker rights in the ready-made garments sector.

EU Sustainability Compact: In July 2013 the EU, the Government of Bangladesh and the ILO issued the Sustainability Compact for Continuous Improvements in Labour Rights and Factory Safety in the Ready-Made Garment and Knitwear Industry in Bangladesh. The Compact, which was later endorsed by the US Government, builds upon the National Plan of Action and borrows a number of activities from it.

The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh

In May 2013 two global unions (IndustriALL, UNI Global), a number of local unions, and a number of international brands and retailers (currently over 150, including H&M, Inditex, C&A and Primark) launched the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. This is a five-year programme under which signatory companies commit to ensuring the implementation of health and safety measures, mainly through undertaking factory safety assessments. The ILO acts as neutral chair of the Accord, which is estimated to currently cover approximately 1,700 factories. The Accord expresses support for the implementation of the National Plan of Action as well as the intention to coordinate with the national tripartite partners.



“When I was piled onto the mass of dead bodies on Adhur Chandra High School oval, I prayed with everything I had just for someone to notice I was alive. I was trapped in Rana Plaza for three days. I was smothered under dead bodies and without food or water, and I was so weak that I could not attract anyone’s attention. I never thought I would survive. I had been working in Phantom Apparels for four and a half years when the Rana Plaza building collapsed. I am still suffering from trauma now, and I still have injuries – like in my back I have pain, from being crushed under a pillar. This training is helping me to see things in a new way.”

-Minu Aktar, survivor of the Rana Plaza building collapse and beneficiary of ILO/BRAC skills development and re-employment support” See Minu and other survivors speaking about their experiences on the ILO website

International Labour Organization

ILO RMG Programme

In October 2013 the ILO launched the US\$24 million, three and a half year Working Conditions in the Ready-Made Garment Sector Project. This is designed to support the National Plan of Action in key areas by 1) providing technical support for building and fire safety assessments; 2) strengthening and supporting labour, fire and buildings inspections; 3) building occupational safety and health awareness, capacity and systems and 4) providing rehabilitation and skills training for the survivors of the recent industrial disasters. The programme is funded by the Governments of Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Better Work Bangladesh

The ILO and the IFC announced the establishment of a Better Work programme in Bangladesh in October 2013, as part of the ILO RMG programme. Better Work Bangladesh is currently funded by the Governments of the US, France and Switzerland, and, through the ILO RMG Programme, the Governments of Canada, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. Better Work Bangladesh complements the National Plan of Action by implementing factory level activities to improve compliance with national labour laws and respect for international core labour standards while promoting the competitiveness of participating factories.



What has been achieved?

The National Plan of Action contains twenty five activities to be implemented by the tripartite partners, individually or together. It will take years to improve structural integrity and fire safety to a level where every worker in the ready-made garments sector can go to work knowing with certainty they will return home safely to their families at the end of the day. The enormity of the problem is daunting, especially given the weak labour administration and social dialogue structures in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, the commitments made by the tripartite partners and progress so far in implementation are encouraging.

- **Labour law reform**

In July 2013 the parliament adopted a number of amendments to the labour law. The reforms constitute important progress in the areas of union registration, worker representation at factory level, and occupational safety and health, though more reform will be necessary to ensure national law is in line with relevant ILO Conventions.

- **Upgrading of labour inspectorate**

The Labour Inspectorate was formally upgraded to a Department in January 2014. Ultimately it will have 575 labour inspectors, whereas at the time of the Rana Plaza collapse there were only 55.

- **Factory assessments**

The National Tripartite Committee, Accord and Alliance all committed to undertake factory safety assessments. A harmonized minimum standard was agreed upon by all three parties to ensure a minimum of consistency between assessments to be undertaken. As of June 1, 2014, the Accord, the Alliance and the National Tripartite Committee, through the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, have undertaken a total of 1,300 safety assessments. These have led to (temporarily) suspended operations in only 19 factories, whereas in all other factories different remediation activities are being developed and implemented while work continues without imminent risk for the safety of workers.



“The Tazreen fire and the Rana Plaza building collapse shocked people across the globe. We hope the assistance we provide to our partners in the development and implementation of the National Plan of Action will contribute to ensuring the problems that lie at the heart of these tragedies will be rooted out for good.”

-Lejo Sibbel, Senior Design Advisor, Better Work Bangladesh

- **Rehabilitation of Rana Plaza survivors**

A needs assessment of approximately 1,500 victims of Rana Plaza was completed in September 2013, which found that almost 550 survivors are considered permanently or temporarily disabled. A Coordination Unit for the Rehabilitation of Victims of Rana Plaza has been established in Savar (the area in which Rana Plaza once stood) to provide information, support and referral services.

Skills development and re-employment support are being provided on an ongoing basis to over 300 survivors by the ILO, in conjunction with non-government organisations BRAC and ActionAid.

- **Compensation for Rana Plaza survivors**

International and national partners, with the ILO acting as neutral chair, agreed on a compensation mechanism for victims of the Rana Plaza collapse. Under the scheme, international buyers, and any other donors, can make voluntary contributions into the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund. Initial estimates are that US\$40 million will be required to compensate all victims.

- **National Occupational Safety and Health Policy**

Adopted in October 2013, the Policy covers all formal and informal sectors, not just the ready-made garments sector, and will guide all actions by government, employers and unions in relation to promoting and safeguarding safety and health in workplaces.

- **Mass worker awareness**

Immediately following the Tazreen Fashions fire, Better Work developed a fire safety animation to communicate basic safety messages to workers. It was aired during an episode of the popular “Gorbo” (meaning pride in Bangla) TV show, which is an American Idol style programme for garment sector workers. The ILO subsequently distributed almost 6,000 copies to its constituents and partners for use in their own awareness raising activities.

The support provided by the development partners, donors and international buyers for the implementation of the National Plan of Action should enable the social partners of Bangladesh to see through on each and every commitment they made. Better Work and the ILO will stand by their side every step of the way to provide continuous support so the social partners can keep the promises they made when they signed the National Plan of Action.

