After Rana Plaza

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After Rana Plaza: Bottom Up Not Top Down To Ensure Workers Safety

By Henrik Maihack

On the morning of the 24th of April 2013, the nine-storey Rana Plaza building collapsed, killing 1137 people, and injuring more than 2500 workers. Images of this tragic event were broadcast to the world. When the dust settled, it became clear that this was not just a Bangladeshi tragedy, but an international one: 29 international fashion brands sourced garments from the different factories housed in the faulty building. Rana Plaza was depicted in international media as a "wakeup call", an "eye opener", the end of "business as usual" in the global garment supply chain, and that there would be a change to the way clothes are produced.

Shortly after, promising steps were taken. The government of Bangladesh amended the labor law and started hiring additional factory inspectors. The minimum wage was increased. The owner of the Rana Plaza building was arrested and is currently awaiting his trail. However, actions didn't stop at the national level. Only a month after Rana Plaza, the legally binding Accord on Fire and Building Safety ("The Accord") was agreed upon between international trade unions, Bangladeshi trade unions, and international brands and retailers with several NGOs as witnesses and the ILO as the chair.

By involving trade unions representing workers on the shop floor as equal partners, the Accord is a milestone in ensuring safer working conditions at the bottom of the supply chain. More than 1000 factories have been inspected so far by the international engineering team of the Accord, with more inspections to follow. After every inspection the engineering team develops specific and transparent remediation plans if necessary, which are then simultaneously communicated to factory owners and unions. International brands must financially support remediation.

The Accord has achieved what years of voluntary Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) measures or social audit initiatives launched by international brands did not. It has improved safety in garment factories in Bangladesh and has done so with

accountability, demonstrating what can be achieved when brands and trade unions work together in a legally binding framework. And the Accord is good for business too: In October 2014 the garment employers' association, BGMEA, admitted that factories that were inspected by the Accord have received an increasing amount of orders from international brands having convinced them that they are safe.

With improved safety, garment exports from Bangladesh have increased to 24.5 billion US dollars. The growing industry currently employs more than four million workers, which is one of the factors that have seen Bangladesh reduce poverty and improve on several socioeconomic fronts. The importance of the RMG industry for Bangladesh is easily agreed upon by trade unions, factory owners and development experts. While fire and collapse of buildings in Bangladesh have become less likely thanks in large part to the Accord, what else needs to happen to prevent such tragedies in the future?

There is often a misconception in the West that changing working conditions in countries like Bangladesh, Cambodia or Pakistan is solely dependent on enlightened consumers and the good will of international brands that feel the pressure from their customers. While continued consumer pressure, rather than boycotting, is important – as are instruments such as the Accord – these are only part of the solution. Even more important is the role of workers in changing the conditions that need to be changed. Also, workers need to be able to influence decisions, which directly affect them.

Fast fashion requires tight deadlines, keeping up with mostly Western consumers' fast-changing tastes. Getting clothes from the factory floor to the shelf, the burden ultimately falls on workers who are pressured by factory owners to produce the clothes, and in turn are pressured by brands to deliver orders. This can simply be unrealistic and lead to dangerous decisions. The day before Rana Plaza collapsed, the structural integrity of the building had already been questioned by workers and engineers, as cracks in the wall were discovered. Workers who didn't want to enter the building because of safety concerns were confronted by factory management with the choice of either coming into work or losing their jobs. They did not have a collective voice to refuse entering an unsound workplace. Not a single worker killed or injured was a member of a trade union. Had they been, the death toll of Rana Plaza would probably not have been as high.

Trade unions have the power to represent the concerns of workers, and in turn workers can take collective action on decisions that affect their safety, including the refusal to enter a faulty building. Sustainable change can't be achieved by well-meaning consumers trying to figure out where and what to buy, nor by brands that make their good will to workers a selling point. Better working conditions can only be achieved when workers at the beginning of the supply chain have a bigger say over the conditions, which they believe are acceptable to work safely in. Bottom-up, not top-down is the way to go. This bottom-up approach, however, requires solidarity from elsewhere.

There is good news coming out of Bangladesh that workers are making use of the amended labour law and are organizing to more effectively advocate for better working conditions. In the months after Rana Plaza, Bangladesh has experienced a growing number of trade union registrations in its textile sector with more and more workers becoming union members. While representative unions are one of the best early warning systems to prevent catastrophes like Rana Plaza, they also function as a mechanism to avoid often-violent conflicts on the streets in front of Bangladesh's garment factories through mediating between workers, employers, and police. Unions and factory management can then jointly identify and address existing grievances before violent skirmishes happen outside factory gates. An atmosphere of social partnership for peaceful industrial relations that allows for dialogue and compromise is ultimately good for workers and the growing RMG industry in Bangladesh. There is only one area where no compromise is possible and that is workers' safety and dignity.

Despite first successes, still less than five percent of the workers in Bangladesh's RMG industry are organized in trade unions. The "window of opportunity" post-Rana Plaza is closing, and in order for the trade union movement in Bangladesh to grow, established trade unions in the country must prove to workers that they can represent the interests of members, with the on-going solidarity and support of the international movement. At the same time, employers need to change their attitude. Many factory owners in Bangladesh continue to perceive unions as a potential threat to their business and measures are sometimes taken to prevent their formation.

Brands can also make a difference if they remind the factories they source from of the importance of upholding international labour standards and encourage engagement with workers' representatives. They can also place more orders at factories with independent and free trade unions or withdraw orders from factories, in which trade unions rights are undermined by management. If brands truly want to meaningfully contribute to this process, such a gesture should not be voluntary. Governments in countries hosting brands could look into better ways of demanding accountability from these brands for what happens further down the supply chain. The globalization of trade has to be accompanied by a globalization of accountability. Why for example, is it not possible to take a brand to court in Germany or the UK when workers are injured because of unsafe work places in a South Asian factory they are sourcing from?

Responsibility ultimately lies with the profit. And the biggest profit in the garment industry is not made in Bangladesh. The challenge remains that workers in Bangladesh and other producing countries have little negotiation power compared to decision-makers in the headquarters of international brands who have immense powers over the working conditions in the countries they source from. Trade unions in Bangladesh are limited to negotiating with factory owners in Bangladesh that control only a small margin of the overall profit of a piece of garment.

The Accord is an example for how trade unions from Bangladesh can become equal partners along the international supply chain but this agreement will end in four years. Similar international agreements could be developed covering additional sectors and countries or building upon existing agreements and conventions to incorporate the emerging issues of a complex, global supply chain. So far, while things have changed in Bangladesh's RMG sector, more needs to be done. And the best starting point to do this is where garments begin to be produced: with workers on the factory floor.

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After Rana Plaza: Business As Usual?

By Michael Sommer

More than one and a half years have passed since 1137 garment workers lost their lives and more than 2500 people were injured in the Rana Plaza industrial disaster – only five months after a fire at Tazreen factory killed 112 workers. These disasters sent shockwaves around the world, and shed light on the exploitative and often dangerous working conditions of Bangladesh's growing RMG industry.

For years Bangladeshi trade unions, together with their comrades in the international labour movement, had voiced their concerns about dangerous working conditions in this sector of the Bangladeshi economy. Yet it took a manmade disaster like Rana Plaza to finally begin long overdue efforts to ensure better working conditions in the country's RMG sector. It is important that both global and national stakeholders take responsibility for moving this push for workers' rights forward.

Compensation for the victims of Rana Plaza is the first priority. International brands have so far failed to provide adequate funding to ensure that all the survivors and the families of the 1137 victims are able to receive payments to cover loss of income and medical expenses. A trust fund that was agreed upon between brands, the government of Bangladesh, employers, national and international trade unions as well as NGOs, and administered by the ILO, was established after the incident to collect the necessary 40 million US dollars to compensate victims and their families. As it stands, less than half of the required amount has been paid into the fund. It is shameful that those injured and the families of the deceased workers perpetually await rightful compensation while brands continue to generate large profits. There is a need for continued international pressure on brands to finally pay what they have committed to.

In Bangladesh itself one of the most important actions is making sure the 'Accord on Fire and Building Safety' 2013 ('The Accord') is fully implemented. The Accord is a legally binding agreement between international trade unions, Bangladeshi trade unions, and international brands and retailers. The International Labour

Organisation (ILO) acts as the independent chair. It includes a central and equal role for workers and worker representatives, including direct trade union participation in factory training. For too long the industry relied on one-off safety audits in its factories, conducted by auditing companies created and funded by brands themselves. The Accord instead pushes for strong industrial relations with trade unions as equal partners, which can replace flawed auditing models and conduct constant safety inspections in a context where workers are empowered to refuse dangerous work.

The Accord is a crucial first step to ensure better working conditions for the RMG sector, and efforts should continue until the conditions and provisions of the Accord are met, and workplace safety and workers' rights in the factories satisfy international standards. It is a matter of concern that other international inspection initiatives after Rana Plaza do not involve trade unions as equal partners. There are no compromises possible when the health and safety of workers are in danger, even if improvements mean additional costs for brands and factory owners. Consumers are increasingly interested where and how their clothes are produced. That is why the image of an industry that strives for profits at the price of risking workers' lives is surely neither desirable nor profitable, especially in an industry that is so mobile with brands threatening to move elsewhere if the image of Bangladesh's RMG industry worsens further.

The responsibility to protect workers primarily lies with employers and with the government entrusted to implement and enforce labour laws, and bring the labour law in line with binding ILO conventions. So let us look beyond the Accord at what can be done by stakeholders in Bangladesh. Factory and building owners were the main culprits at Rana Plaza and Tazreen, but no less culpable are the international brands with big orders, and tight deadlines that exploit lax safety standards and labour laws. The most effective way to improve working conditions is to provide legal and political space for trade unions to organize workers and negotiate with factory owners as equal partners in a trustful social partnership.

Ensuring that work places are safe and wage growth remains at a socially and economically sustainable level requires reliable cooperation and accountability between workers and employers; this is the basis of industrial relations. Recent incidents in several garment factories where workers used their right and freedom

to associate, but were subsequently fired by the factory management, beaten, or arrested by police are worrying and unacceptable. The potential of the industry is limited without the cooperation between social partners from a unified trade union movement, the BGMEA/BKMEA and the government.

It is why international solidarity remains so important, which enables the labour movement in Bangladesh to lobby more effectively for the institutionalization of channels and forums for dialogue, such as a tripartite mechanism between government, employers and workers. In a country where the labour force increases by 2.1 million per year and 87 percent of workers still have to make a living in the informal sector, it is in the interests of the government, workers, factory owners and brands to have a growing and prosperous RMG industry that provides much needed employment and contributes to the country's economic growth. However how this growth is managed will determine not only its sustainability but also avoid unnecessary deaths.

Historically, workers' rights were often born out of tragedies like the fire at the Triangle Waist factory in the United States in 1911, which led to improved safety measures to protect American workers. They are not intended to be an ideological battleground. Workers' rights are human rights and as such are a pillar of a just and equitable society. On the morning of April 24, 2013, the workers of the five garment factories in Rana Plaza had no choice but to enter a building deemed unsafe by inspectors the day before, due to intimidation, and threats of job loss and withheld pay. There was no trade union to speak on their behalf, as none of the workers at Rana Plaza was a trade union member. These workers have become part of one of the worst industrial disasters in the world. It was manmade and preventable, and we cannot with good conscience accept business as usual. Over the last 100 years, from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City in 1911 to Rana Plaza in Savar in 2013, time and again profit has been privileged over people. We know better, so why don't we do better?

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Workplace Injury Insurance Must Be Part Of The Rana Plaza Legacy

By Gilbert Houngbo

In the months since the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, which killed over 1,100 garment factory workers and injured some 2,500 more, there has been a concerted effort to improve safety standards and working conditions in the country's ready-made garment (RMG) sector.

Brands and retailers joined the government and employer and worker organisations in Bangladesh, as well as multilateral organisations, international partners, regional institutions and global unions to address the immediate needs and the longer-term challenges brought on by the tragedy.

True, there have been frustrations and delays along the way. Raising sufficient funds for compensation payments has been slower and more complex than it should have been, for example. But there have been positive changes. The Bangladesh Labour Act has been amended to strengthen fundamental rights, with improvements in relation to occupational safety and health, freedom of association and collective bargaining. As of the end of September, over 2,000 safety inspections have been carried out with some factories being closed permanently, while many others improved safety conditions.

The minimum wage for RMG workers has increased and the labour inspection system has been upgraded. Victims of the accident have received rehabilitation, training and counselling, to help them to regain employment and become self-sufficient again. And most surviving victims and families of those who died have been awarded compensation, with the claims process due to be completed over the coming weeks.

But for Rana Plaza to leave a lasting legacy, much remains to be done to ensure that the progress made thus far is sustainable and to achieve further improvements in occupational safety and health, working conditions, and respect for labour rights.

A Lasting Legacy Of Change

As we move forward, the focus needs to be on the better management of international supply chains across all sectors, with workers' safety and conditions at the heart of it. Prevention is key but it is just as important to be prepared in case of future accidents. This can be done through an employment injury insurance (EII) scheme that spreads the risks across all employers at the national level. Such a scheme would provide an immediate response in terms of compensating those directly affected by workplace accidents.

These types of schemes are widely adopted across the world and provide reliable, low cost and no-fault accident compensation insurance for workers. Indeed, most countries that relied on commercial employer-liability insurance in the past have now converted their legislation to establish national EII schemes. This is because it is less costly to employers in the long run and no worker is left behind. Most national EII schemes cost no more than 3 per cent of the total wage bill, which is a sound investment when compared to the potential reputational damage for companies and the impact on workers.

The government of Bangladesh has shown keen interest to work with the ILO in setting up a national EII scheme. The ILO Convention on Employment Injury Benefits (No. 121) provides an internationally recognized normative reference to guide the government and social partners in designing national EII benefits and their delivery tailored to local realities.

What is needed now is the firm commitment of international partners, brands and retailers, alongside national counterparts, to help get a national EII scheme off the ground. Bangladesh could in turn provide a much-needed example for those other emerging export-oriented economies that do not have workplace insurance schemes in place.

The effective implementation of the Labour Act and a national EII scheme would ensure that Rana Plaza is not only remembered as one of the worst industrial accidents of its kind, but also a turning point for workers in Bangladesh.

Gilbert Houngbo is ILO Deputy Director-General for Field Operations and Partnerships.

Lessons From Rana Plaza: The Need For Global Regulation

By Maarten Keune

The Bangladesh garment industry has in recent years been affected by a number of terrible accidents, most notoriously the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in April 2013, resulting in the death of over 1,100 workers with many more injured. The Rana Plaza collapse has led to outrage across the globe concerning the abysmal safety and working conditions, the extremely low wages and the long working hours in the Bangladeshi garment factories. It also refuelled the debate on the responsibilities of the various actors involved.

The Bangladeshi government is under accusation for its failure to enforce the law, inspect factories and address abuses, for the low minimum wage, and for the excessive influence of economic interests over politics. Bangladeshi factory owners are accused of greed, indifference and ignorance. The major global clothing brands and retailers are also accused of greed, of pushing for ever lower prices from their suppliers without considering the social and safety consequences, and of being unwilling or unable to enforce labour standards in their supply chain. And, finally, (Western) consumers are accused of ignoring the suffering of workers that make their clothes and of preferring low prices over global social justice. All these accusations are to a large extent true. And they are neither new nor specific to the Bangladeshi garment industry. As the latest ILO's World of Work report shows, exploitation of workers, working poverty and unsafe working conditions – although some improvement can be observed – are still widespread in many developing countries.

What is new in Bangladesh, is that the outrage following the Rana Plaza catastrophe has not simply died down and disappeared, as happened so often in the past. It has resulted in a series of initiatives aimed at compensating the victims and improving safety and working conditions in the sector. They include, among others, legislative changes, a rise of the minimum wage, and the setting up of new trade unions. New is also that global brands and retailers have been thoroughly implicated in the response to the disaster. Those that had an involvement with

Rana Plaza are expected to pay into a compensation funds for the workers and families affected. Also, under the auspices of the International Labour Organisation, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety was developed, an agreement that aims to make factories in Bangladesh safer, including independent safety inspections and public reporting of their results. The Accord has been signed by some 150 global brands and retailers who agree to improve fire and building safety in Bangladesh, targeting in particular their supplier companies. A similar agreement (the Initiative) was signed by a number of US brands and retailers.

It is encouraging that these initiatives have been taken and that serious and innovative efforts have been made to prevent more Bangladeshi factories from collapsing or going up in flames. It is promising to see that, apart from all the suffering, the deplorable Rana Plaza drama has had at least some positive effects. It is equally promising that the major global players in the industry are very explicitly drawn in. But will these efforts indeed lead to a substantial improvement in the situation of Bangladeshi workers?

One has to question the scope and effectiveness of the post-Rana Plaza initiatives. Reports from NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Clean Clothes Campaign show that one and a half years after the collapse many victims still await compensation and that many global brands and retailers have not made their contribution to the compensation fund. Also, the application of the labour law remains problematic and trade union freedom is still under pressure. Concerning the Accord and the Initiative, inspections have covered only a small part of the garment companies and focused largely on building and fire safety, without touching upon wages, working hours, etc. And where these inspections have resulted in factory closures, workers generally have not been offered new jobs or received compensation.

Hence, with some noticeable exceptions, the initiatives are subject to severe limitations both in scope and in implementation. For now, they seem to have resulted in little improvement in the lives of garment workers and their families, and exploitation continues largely as before the collapse. It is no surprise, then, that the anniversary of the collapse was marked by massive protests demanding real compensation for the victims and real improvements in safety, wages, working conditions and workers' rights, protests that continue until today. If the government, the global brands and retailers want to salvage some of their credibility they should

urgently respond to these protests by realizing their initial promises and expanding them into a more comprehensive and effective strategy.

And then there is the larger question whether the initiatives taken following Rana Plaza, even if their implementation improves, have or do not have the potential to improve the position of Bangladeshi workers in the long run. The circumstances in the Bangladeshi garment industry are to an important extent the result of the development model of Bangladesh and its place in the global organisation of trade and production. With its export-based growth model it is very dependent on developments of the free trade-driven world market and on the behaviour of investors and clients. It is at the bottom of the garment supply chain, an extremely competitive, cost-driven industry.

The global brands and retailers are only interested in Bangladesh-based suppliers because they can get away with ever-lower prices. These low prices are the key to the abuse and lack of safety in the Bangladeshi factories. Indeed, if the recent attempts to improve the situation in local companies will lead to a substantial rise in costs, the global brands and suppliers will most likely move to cheaper alternatives. They are already increasingly sourcing from suppliers in countries like Myanmar and several of the Sub-Saharan African countries to this effect. As long as they can they will roam the globe for the cheapest suppliers without any serious consideration for the social effects of their behaviour; the problems that occur in Bangladesh will simply be relocated to another poor country. And Bangladeshi workers and their families will be without jobs and income.

Hence, it is time that Rana Plaza is taken as a starting point for a renewed debate on how global trade and production can be regulated to promote decent work also at the lower end of global supply chains. The aftermath of Rana Plaza clearly shows that self-regulation by private companies through corporate social responsibility will not do the job, and neither will single governments or consumers. Rather, it points to the need to (re-)consider more comprehensive and effective multilateral approaches to take basic labour standards and minimum working conditions out of global competition, for example through social clauses in general or sectorial WTO agreements.

The strong post-Rana Plaza commitment of the international community to improving global labour standards and working conditions should be used to discuss such alternatives that go beyond the present, often not very effective, efforts to remedy the problems in Bangladesh and beyond.

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Tragedies Like Rana Plaza Highlight Need For Economic Change

By Joseph Allchin

Unpredictable events often induce the most radical change. For Bangladesh and its garments industry it could well be that the improvements in standards, as a result of the Rana Plaza tragedy, end up being just the stimulus to help the country's manufacturing sector evolve; from the huge and perhaps burdensome focus solely on low-end garments.

Garments are of course Bangladesh's largest export industry accounting for around 80% of exports. The sector's exports are growing robustly too. In 2013, a year plagued by instability, exports grew in value by some 11.7%, according to HSBC Bank. Needless to say growth of the country's GDP was less than half that. Whilst in the first five months of 2014, the value of the country's garment exports grew by 13%.

This is a continuing trend; the garments sector outperforming the rest of the economy. While garments exports grew robustly, private investment was down in 2013. In other words, more was made (and sold) with less going into making those garments whilst wages and inflation continued to rise. As garments flew out and imports slowed at the same time, this meant that the Taka gained value, relative to the dollar. This is sometimes called the 'Dutch disease' – whereby the export of a particular commodity raises the value of the currency and thereby makes other exports less competitive.

This only leads to one thing; the cost of a Bangladeshi sock being more expensive, despite being made in in the same conditions, and by a worker who will be paid virtually the same amount (inflation will soon catch up with the minimum wage rise). The answer to this is to attempt to move up the production 'food chain'. The Accord gives Bangladesh the perfect opportunity to push upwards and work with better standards – making them the norm.

The garments sector has to date arguably been cosseted. Bangladeshi government policy has helped the trade by providing generous tax incentives while the country has one of the lowest tax to GDP ratios on the planet at around 10%. This has obvious ramifications, from aid dependence to run basic social services, such as health care, to a woeful lack of infrastructure. The lack of taxation also means that imports are heavily taxed. A mobile phone in Bangladesh for instance has more import duty on it than anywhere else on the planet.

To maintain price competitiveness, imports for export only garments are not taxed; you can import your cotton for a shirt that is destined for export, tax free, provided 100% of the products (the shirts) are exported. The government has and is creating special economic zones, with lax laws and extra gas and electricity connections (another ramification of a small tax intake is a severe shortage of combustible energy supplies).

The nature of power in Bangladesh is such that the sector, as one of the most profitable ventures going has come to be dominated by patronage politics, that has been successful in capturing much favour from policy makers – perhaps in an unaccountable fashion. This has meant that, as Rana Plaza exposed, inspections and standards were not being met.

In other words, industry has arguably become lax – or perhaps functional within systems which, writes the London based development economist, Dr Mushtaq Khan

> favour the construction of pyramidal patron-client factions that compete for the capture of public resources in ways that are relatively unconstrained by economic viability considerations.

This is not new, controversial or unpredictable. The rational impetus for business is most often short-term profit. Short-term profits are usually not gained by making investments in safety or standards when few competitors are doing likewise. This is particularly so when borrowing is so expensive in Bangladesh; borrowing from a bank can cost as much as 18% in interest. However, this will naturally lead to greater consolidation, and less capital intense manufacturing. This would also suggest that workers will gradually become better trained and more formalised. Essential ingredients for a more productive capable setup.

Thus, the external pressure creating an imperative of better standards could be just what the Bangladesh manufacturing sector needs. With the luxury of a demographic dividend and the prospect of China shedding possibly up too 85 million manufacturing jobs Bangladesh needs better standards to take advantage of those prospects. Meanwhile the stick of international brands finally demanding better standards, may be the spark that pushes Bangladesh towards higher and more lucrative manufacturing operations.

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Industrialisation And Female Empowerment: Evidence From The Bangladeshi Garments Sector

By Filippo Sebastio

Gender Empowerment And Equality In The Ready Made Garment (RMG) Sector

A slew of industrial accidents such as the Tazreen factory fire and the recent collapse of Rana Plaza have cast the Bangladeshi garment industry in a negative light, with international media reporting extensively on the hazardous working conditions.

A fair amount of media attention has focused on the shattered lives of women employees as a result of these fatal accidents, as these women represent the backbone of the textile industry's workforce. It remains therefore a priority that on-going improvements of the working conditions, especially in factories used for subcontracting such as Rana Plaza, and efforts to demand fair compensation for the 2500 injured workers and the families of the more than 1100 deceased workers, occupational health and safety conditions are further strengthened.

However, the impact of industrialization on the lives of many women is often not clearly understood by international opinion. Hence, it is important to conduct a comprehensive analysis and consider what policies can actually improve the lives of the large female workforce beyond the necessary improvements with regard to occupational health and safety (OHS) such as international and national building inspections along with OHS trainings for workers and the management.

Gender Empowerment And The Garment Industry

Since the 1980s, RMG was the first industry to provide large-scale employment opportunities to women in Bangladesh, in a country where women traditionally did not work outside their home. Recent research by Professor Rachel Heath (University of Washington) and Professor Mushfiq Mobarak (The International Growth Centre and Yale University) draws attention to the significant benefits of

having access to factory jobs on gender empowerment, even beyond the income opportunity, from data spanning thirty years in Bangladesh.

Comparing girls living in areas within commuting distance to a factory to both their brothers and to other girls from villages not within commuting distance, Mobarak and Heath found a systematic effect of proximity to garment factories on the postponement of marriage and childbirth age. These effects were even more striking for girls aged between 12 and 18, where early marriage is more likely to have detrimental effects on a girl's level of educational achievement and resulting job opportunities.

Analysing retrospective data, Mobarak and Heath find that roughly 14.8 percentage points of the national gain in girls' enrolment rates over that period, can be attributed to the growth in the garment export industry. The study also highlighted how the proximity to garment factories is associated with a reduced gender-education gap.

Such evidence sheds some light on how the RMG sector has contributed to female empowerment across and within Bangladeshi households. As factories open up and economic opportunities reach villages, households decide to invest in the education of daughters, due to the perceived increase in returns from schooling in the labour market.

Furthermore, as girls find jobs in the garment sector, they tend to postpone marriage and childbirth. Strikingly, the effect of taking up a job in the garment sector on the postponement of marriage and childbirth tends to be larger in the households where women had no previous experience of work outside of home.

Gender Equality In The Factories

Whereas a job in the RMG sector has therefore contributed to the empowerment of women who had previously been bound to work in their household, empowerment often stops when it comes to the equality of opportunities within RMG factories in Bangladesh. From data collected within factories, 4 out of every 5 production line workers are female, whilst just over 1 in 20 supervisors is a woman. If indeed workers were promoted on the basis of merit, this would mean that currently 95

percent of the managerial talent in factories emerges from 20 percent of the workforce. This begs the question as to whether it is efficient for factory owners not to invest in women, whilst the industry suffers from a scarcity of skilled workers.

Recent research has also brought to light how gender discrimination affects the lives of the female operators and the potential repercussions on the efficiency in the sector. Professors Christopher Woodruff and Rocco Macchiavello (The International Growth Centre and the University of Warwick) have evaluated a training program that trains female sewing machine operators to become line supervisors. The study investigates the impact of skill investment on female workers versus male participants and the effectiveness of female trainees who are subsequently promoted to supervisory roles. According to the study, vocational training has positive effects on gender equality as more than half of the female trainees were promoted after receiving the training.

Different experiment setups that Woodruff and Macchiavello explored suggested that after being trained, female trainees are as much or even more effective than male supervisors and that there are no differences between male and female trainees with regards to line-level efficiency, absenteeism or quality.

However, their research also draws attention to the predominant bias against women taking on the role of supervisors. Promotion rates for the female trainees in their experiment proved to be significantly lower than for male trainees and hints of resistance to the promotion of female operators were detected amongst male colleagues. Hence there is significant evidence that traditional gender roles perpetuate employment structures within factories and limits the career prospects of women entering the sector as line operators.

Three quarters of the workforce will remain unskilled without adequate training, further perpetuating a vicious cycle within factories. Due to the gender bias within factories, women do not invest in the skills required to become supervisors, as they do not expect to have opportunities for career progress. Male employees on the other hand, enter factories with a significantly higher expectation of becoming supervisors. It is not surprising then that women initially require more training en-route to becoming supervisors. With weaker career prospects, women are also likely to leave when offered better opportunities elsewhere. Consequently, garment

factories face high turnover rates, leading to large costs in terms of resource and efficiency losses. A story emerges then of an industry that has fuelled economic growth in Bangladesh, yet that has been unable to exploit its full potential because gender inequality still persists.

The Way Forward

Mushfiq and Heath claim that the expansion of the garment industry had a far bigger role to play in increasing female educational attainment and decreasing early marriages and fertility rates during the 20-year period than most other educational policies. Mubarak and Heath's research also shows how international boycotts on trade in garments with Bangladesh, as a response to poor and unsafe working conditions, have the potential to do more harm than good to women in Bangladesh. Since the expansion of the industry has largely contributed to the emancipation of adolescent girls, a sudden halt would put these gains at risk. This reinforces the importance of garment associations, trade unions and factory management establishing health and safety measures to ensure a safe and sustainable RMG industry.

Also, whilst it is the responsibility of government, factory owners and international brands to do everything in their power to guarantee decent and safe working conditions within the factories, more actions can be taken. In fact, international brands that outsource production to Bangladesh could also benefit from encouraging garment business associations to invest in their female operators. Bangladesh has long suffered from a negative reputation due to the working conditions in factories. By investing in social programs such as female training, international brands could together restore the deteriorated image of "Made in Bangladesh" garments and increase their appeal amongst concerned consumers.

Also, while the industry has rewarded girls that have had access to more job opportunities, factory management has failed to provide equal opportunities and the resulting career development to female workers, as compared to men. These measures would not be sustainable if garment associations and the government of Bangladesh do not work closely to change the cultural norms inside factories. Social awareness programs on traditional and social media aid in breaking down

the barriers to gender equality within factories. Within garment workers' unions, perceptions towards female workers also need to progress. Male workers need to view their female counterparts as less of a threat and more of a resource that should be highly regarded, in order to improve efficiency within this key industry in Bangladesh.

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This project also included two video contributions, broadcasting the views of local activist and Western consumers, and responses by some of the brands that produced at Rana Plaza. These contributions can be accessed here: http://www.socialeurope.eu/hot-topics/rana-plaza/

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