

Comment and Controversy

**BANGLADESH: CURRENTLY THE WORST,
BUT POSSIBLY THE FUTURE'S BEST**

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ABSTRACT

Garment workers in Bangladesh producing clothing for international brands have experienced repeated factory fires and building collapses in the last 10 years, resulting in more than 1,600 deaths and hundreds of disabling injuries. After the Tazreen Fashion fire in December 2012 and the Rana Plaza building collapse in April 2013, more than 190 international clothing brands and retailers signed an “Accord on Fire and Building Safety” with two international union federations. Full implementation of the provisions of the Accord would change “business as usual” in Bangladesh’s garment industry and set a positive example for other countries and other industries with global supply chains. The components, challenges, and controversies of the Accord are detailed in the article.

Keywords: worker health and safety, environmental health, science policy, public health history

Over the last decade, garment workers in Bangladesh have been ravaged by fire after fire in apparel factories that have left hundreds of workers—mostly young women—dead, badly injured, or disabled for life. With the signing in May 2013 of the five-year Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety, garment

factories in Bangladesh may eventually become the safest set of apparel workplaces in the world.

There are tremendous challenges for the Accord’s full implementation—the lack of resources in a very poor country; a government notorious for corruption; very harsh industrial relations practices by Bangladeshi factory owners; a bad case of “buyer’s remorse” among some of the international clothing brands who signed the accord in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza building collapse; and vulnerable workers who desperately need work—but this may be the best chance we have ever had to improve working conditions in the global garment industry, the originator of the term “sweatshop.”

The causes of the factory fires and the deaths of more than 1,600 garment workers in the last decade are well known to everyone involved in the industry. These include: improper storage of large quantities of flammable materials; numerous unprotected ignition sources, including damaged or overloaded electrical circuits and equipment; the lack of effective fire suppression systems, such as sprinklers; insufficient exits and the widespread practice of locked metal gates leading to exits and staircases; the lack of fire doors to contain and isolate fires; and the lack of emergency evacuation plans, employee training, and practice drills.

Virtually every garment factory that has erupted into flames in the last decade was previously inspected by in-house auditors of the international clothing brands or retailers sourcing from the plant, or by third-party “social monitors” of the now \$10 billion-a-year “corporate social responsibility” (CSR) industry, which monitors and certifies international corporate supply chains.

Despite scores of CSR audits, obvious death-trap garment factories continued to receive ever-growing orders from international clothing brands. If the CSR audits found any hazards and proposed any rededication steps, they were not public information, and no significant changes were made in the physical plant or work practices in the inspected facilities that later caught fire or collapsed. After every industrial disaster, the clothing brands and retailers have made another round of promises, none of which were implemented.

THE ACCORD: COMPONENTS AND CHALLENGES

The straw that broke the camel’s back was the combination of the Tazreen Fashion fire in December 2012 (112 dead with 53 burned beyond recognition) and the Rana Plaza building collapse (1,134 dead) in April 2013. In May 2013, the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety (“The Accord”) was signed between two European-based international union federations—IndustriALL and UNI-Global—and now more than 190 international clothing brands and retailers.

The Accord breaks the mold of all previous post-disaster promises by brands because the legally binding agreement requires the brands and their contract factory managers to actually change business practices in 1,800 factories and address some of the underlying issues that affect the 2 million workers in those factories. If fully implemented, the Accord will change garment supply chain factories in Bangladesh, and could hold important lessons for other countries, industries, and supply chains.

The text of the Accord [1] requires brand signatories, factory owners, and the Accord's staff to implement a comprehensive set of actions:

- the brands will provide an annual fee for the five-year tenure of the agreement, generating significant resources for Accord offices to function;
- the Accord will conduct independent inspections of all 1,800 factories with qualified Bangladeshi and international fire, electrical, and structural engineers;
- the Accord will publicly post inspection reports on its website with findings, photographs, required corrective actions, and timelines;
- the brands must work with factory owners (some of whom are quite wealthy) to ensure the hazard corrections are completed—and the brands are responsible for paying for these repairs if the factory cannot;
- the brands must work with the inspected factories, and continue to source from them, for two years after the initial inspection, unless the factory refuses to make the mandated corrections; and
- the brands and their factory subcontractors must respect and implement the rights established for workers in factories producing for brands which are signatories to the Accord, including the right to participate as observers in the Accord inspections; to participate in factory health and safety committees (required by the Accord and by Bangladeshi law); to receive health and safety training; and to exercise the “right to refuse unsafe work,” both individually and collectively.

The Accord has established and staffed an office in Dhaka, funded by the brand signatories, to implement the terms of the Accord. The Dhaka office conducted 10 initial inspections in November 2013, and the full-scale factory inspections began in February 2014 and were to continue at a pace of 60 plants a week to September 2014. The inspection reports are posted on the Accord's website and make for interesting reading and viewing for anyone interested in what Bangladesh's garment factories look like and the hazards involved.

There are a number of challenges facing the Accord's Dhaka office in successfully implementing this five-year program. Bangladesh is a very poor country with few resources and very limited occupational health and safety capacity. The government, deemed by analysts as one of the most corrupt in the world, is not accustomed to protecting garment workers. Some of the Accord's

190 brands have developed a bad case of “buyer’s remorse” and have tried to reduce or limit their responsibilities under the agreement they signed.

Moreover, this groundbreaking initiative has generated controversies. Some critics have said the Accord constitutes the “privatization with corporate funding” of what should be government responsibilities—health and safety inspections and mandated corrective actions, creating and maintaining effective health and safety committees, and ensuring workers’ rights in the country’s garment factories. Garment workers face other health and safety hazards on the job beyond fire, electrical hazards, and building structural integrity, which are the sole focus of the Accord. Also, the underlying causes of bad working conditions in global supply chains—the brands’ relentless drive for the lowest possible production costs, and sourcing practices such as inflexible delivery times and quality standards—are not addressed by the Accord.

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

But something different had to be tried, and sustained over a five-year period, if a decade’s worth of entirely preventable deaths and disabling injuries caused by garment factory fires in Bangladesh are to end. If this program of genuinely independent inspections, public reporting of the results, mandatory repairs financed by the brands, and workers’ participation in effective plant health and safety programs can be implemented in the garment industry in Bangladesh, many lives will be saved and an important example will be set for other countries and other industries with global supply chains.

Occupational health and safety (OHS) professionals in the developed world have an important role, and responsibility, to play in helping the Accord’s program to succeed. Bangladesh’s OHS community is small, and the awareness of and expertise in key OHS concepts and practices is very limited among all of the critical players—government, employers, and workers.

Starting in May 2014, OHS professional associations and organizations in the United States have begun working together in specific projects to help strengthen the regulatory capacity of the Bangladesh government, provide consultation and technical assistance to both large and small factory owners, and offer training and support to build the local capacity of worker organizations (union- and community-based). Additional projects and initiatives are always welcome, and not only for Bangladesh but also for other countries and for all global supply chains where workers pay a high price in factory fires and building collapses.

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NOTE

1. "Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh," May 13, 2013, www.bangladeshaccord.org (accessed August 18, 2014).

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