

Nirapon's vision for a safer apparel sector in Bangladesh – Interview

By Hannah Abdulla | 24 July 2019

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Bangladesh's newest safety monitoring initiative, Nirapon, has come under fire since its launch earlier this year, with much of the criticism around its focus on monitoring rather than overseeing factory remediation, and the fact it doesn't name or shame non-compliant suppliers. But in a candid interview with just-style, CEO Moushumi Khan suggests getting supplier buy-in and encouraging them in the right way to be compliant is a key factor in increasing workplace safety in Bangladeshi garment factories.

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest ready-made garment exporter, the sourcing go-to for many major apparel brands and retailers including the likes of H&M, Gap and Primark. The textile and apparel sector is the major driving force of the country's economy, contributing around 20% to Bangladesh's GDP and employing around 20m people.

But the sector has not had the smoothest run. As a country, Bangladesh continues to struggle with infrastructure problems, widespread corruption, insufficient power supplies and reliability, and slow implementation of economic reforms. And safety remains an issue in the country's clothing factories. This year alone, fires have broken out at three separate sites, once again prompting international stakeholders to raise concerns over working conditions.

The real catalyst for change, however, came around six years ago when the Tazreen factory fire and the Rana Plaza factory building collapse led to the loss of at least 1,249 garment workers. The incidents prompted the launch of two fire and building safety initiatives – the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety – tasked with inspecting and overseeing remediation work at factories used to supply the world's leading fashion brands and retailers.

The two came to the end of their five-year terms last year, prompting concern for much of the industry and posing the challenge of how do brands continue to ensure the safety of the workers that produce their clothes?

One solution is [Nirapon, a voluntary programme that launched in March](#) and is tasked with overseeing ongoing safety, training and helpline efforts in Bangladesh ready-made garment factories.

Led by Moushumi Khan, it is backed by over 20 brands and retailers including former Alliance members such as The Children's Place, Walmart, VF Corp, Nordstrom, Target, Macy's, JC Penney, Gap Inc and Li & Fung among others.

For her part, Khan brings over two decades of legal, international trade, non-profit, strategy and governance experience to the Nirapon team. A University of Michigan Law School graduate, she served as the country director for The Foundation for Charitable Activities in Bangladesh, an American non-profit that supports Bangladesh's socio-economic development. She was also recruited as the first director of legal and compliance at Bangladesh-based international development organisation BRAC from 2010-2014, and was the secretary to the BRAC Governing and BRAC International boards.

Safety monitoring

"Our job is monitoring," she starts to explain, noting the initiative is different from the Alliance, whose role was to highlight necessary remediations and ensure that they were attended to. "The genesis of Nirapon is these safety monitoring visits. That's really the crux of our model."

The "voluntary" aspect of the programme has already sparked some concerns, with stakeholders questioning the effectiveness of such an initiative if it does not force suppliers to tackle safety issues in their factories.

In April, Linda Yanz of the Maquila Solidarity Network, said [the Accord remained the "only credible instrument preventing factory incidents"](#) in a country where the government's inspection agencies do not yet have the capacity or willingness to enforce safety measures." She added: "Companies that source from Bangladesh and think that less transparent or non-binding alternatives might provide the same level of protection for their workers, and brand reputation, risk seeing tragedy strike again in their supplier factories."

But Khan confidently points out clothing suppliers in Bangladesh are more than aware of the risks of non-compliance. Despite Nirapon not holding brands to account through naming and shaming, the programme still encourages compliance from its member suppliers. In a nutshell, Nirapon observes the situation on the ground and reverts to the brands, ultimately providing sourcing recommendations to its member brands based on which factories are and are not compliant. Then the ball is in the court of the brands who have committed not to source from any factories that are non-compliant.



Nirapon CEO, Moushumi Khan

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"We tell the brands whether the factories are satisfactory, satisfactory without comments, whether we were unable to verify, or if they are non-compliant. And based on that, the brands make their sourcing decisions," says Khan.

Nirapon succeeds the Alliance in so far as it will oversee the 600 member factories that fell under the latter's scope. Khan says the vast majority of Alliance member supplier factories have met their corrective action or remediation plans and so are unlikely to require any "remediation", something its critics are failing to recognise. But what about beyond the 600 factories? How can it take the initiative to scale?

It is a challenge Khan is keen to embrace. Beyond Nirapon's 21 brand members – whose supplier factories it is monitoring – it will also monitor non-brand member factory groups: factories that have become a Nirapon member, for example, but aren't yet affiliated to a particular brand. This hasn't happened to date but it is something Nirapon is open to.

"We very much believe that this is a transition model to increase the number of factories that our brands can source from," asserts Khan. "The model is different because we are attracting more brands. Not just the ones that we had before."

Working with local organisations

But what is Nirapon's positioning in terms of working with other organisations in the country such as the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), government bodies and the Remediation Coordination Cell (RCC).

In short, it doesn't work with any of them, as it functions entirely independently. But it is fully supportive of the existing systems, says Khan.

Like the Alliance, which worked with different stakeholders, the government has been "quite well disposed" where Nirapon is concerned.

"We actually have had meetings with the highest level of government officials, they have been extremely supportive of what Nirapon does," says Khan. But at the same time, "they very much understand the need for independence and they have been supportive of that."

And she is eager to reiterate again that while the Accord is a remediating organisation, Nirapon is not.

"We're a monitoring organisation. It's not actually a false distinction because Nirapon is an organisation that is very much looking to build on the remediation that has already happened. We value working with the ILO, the Accord, with everybody. But the fact of the matter is we are independent and must remain so to be credible."

Referring to the RCC, Khan says as of yet there's been no discussion between the two bodies to work collaboratively, but it's something she would "absolutely" be open to.

"We haven't been formally asked, but I would collaborate on anything that is actually something we have a shared interest in."

In May, the Accord announced it has [struck a deal with the BGMEA](#) in a move that paves the way for the Accord to continue its operations for a transition period of 281 days. During that time, a national RMG safety entity - the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) - will be established which, after the transition period, will take over all Accord Bangladesh operations and will inherit the Accord infrastructure and staff.

The RSC will be governed by a structure consisting of representatives of the BGMEA, global brands, and global and national trade unions. It will work in cooperation with the Government of Bangladesh to ensure the work of the RSC complements the work of the GoB Remediation Coordination Cell.

It is important to highlight that as of yet, Nirapon is in its early stages and has not started direct operations – so gauging its progress at this stage is difficult. Currently, the focus is on-boarding factories seeking out brands to source from them and then entering them to monitor compliance.

In terms of the actual operation, Alliance engineers would previously visit the factories and carry out remediation measures. Under Nirapon, local engineers that are trained and vetted will carry out inspections with Nirapon engineers doing final verifications. This is something Khan says will commence in the next month.

Supplier reaction

So what has been the response to the introduction of Nirapon from factory owners in Bangladesh?

"They [factory owners] are keen to know what the process is and when it kicks off. They know the Alliance did a great job and there's a good body of work for us to build on. The overwhelming response [from supplier factories] that we have received has been very positive. They've shown willing. In short, it has been an overwhelmingly positive start for Nirapon.

"I just want to stress how excited we are because I personally see this as a mission, and I'm just very committed to building it. We are trying to build local capacity, so I'm extremely excited about the journey. I don't kid myself that it's going to be easy, but I definitely acknowledge that this is a journey, that this is a transition. I am extremely heartened by the goodwill of a lot of the partners, and I'm ready to work with everybody to help build a safety and sustainable local culture of factory safety in the R&D sector,"Khan concludes.

"The government very much understands the need for independence and has been supportive of that"

