

This April marks four years since the Rana Plaza tragedy – the deadliest structural failure in modern times, surpassed only by 9/11, that failed to shake mankind out of its apathy. The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety was signed and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety was founded in 2013. We saw more workers unionise post-Rana Plaza than in the multiple decades before. But has the condition of Bangladesh: workers really changed significantly since then?

Chaumtoli Huq explores the reality of the workers' rights movement in the garments industry of Bangladesh in her 2017 documentary *Sramik Awaaz* or Worker Voices. Chronicling the experiences of workers in their workplaces, personal lives, and organising efforts, *Sramik Awaaz* depicts the many layered barriers they must confront.

The men and women in the film each have their own tale to tell, their own testament of perseverance. "When I joined Jeans Care, I saw line supervisors bullying the operators, assaulting the boys and girls, kicking them out without pay. They would force us to sign blank papers, and abuse us without any reason. It was hard to witness because I was abused by my ex-husband in the same way. So I began to speak up against this abuse," says Shornali Yasmin, a member of Sommilito Garments Sromik Federation (SGSF). Another member, Md. Mostofa Kamal, was stopped at gunpoint one day after work for his association with a trade union. "They told me not to enter the factory the next day. They would shoot me if I did. I filed a GD at the police station. When the owner realised he could not get rid of me through blackmail, he fired me," he recounts.

The film portrays a stark image of the workers trapped in a spiral of insufficiency – one without an end. "Economic self-sufficiency depends on nutrition, food, housing, education, healthcare, leisure activities – but we do not get these at all. With such low wages, half of it is spent on rent. There is no

place in the factory to keep one's children, so they are sent to the village so we have to send money there too," explains Nazma Akter, trade unionist and founder of AWAJ Foundation.

The list of abuses trails on. If a worker goes to the toilet or goes twice in the same hour, overtime is slashed. If an employer finds out that a worker has joined a trade union, he increases the workload. If an employer notices a woman is pregnant, she is fired. Daycare centres are for show and maternity benefits are denied. Employers are untouchable, even though the government has permitted the formation

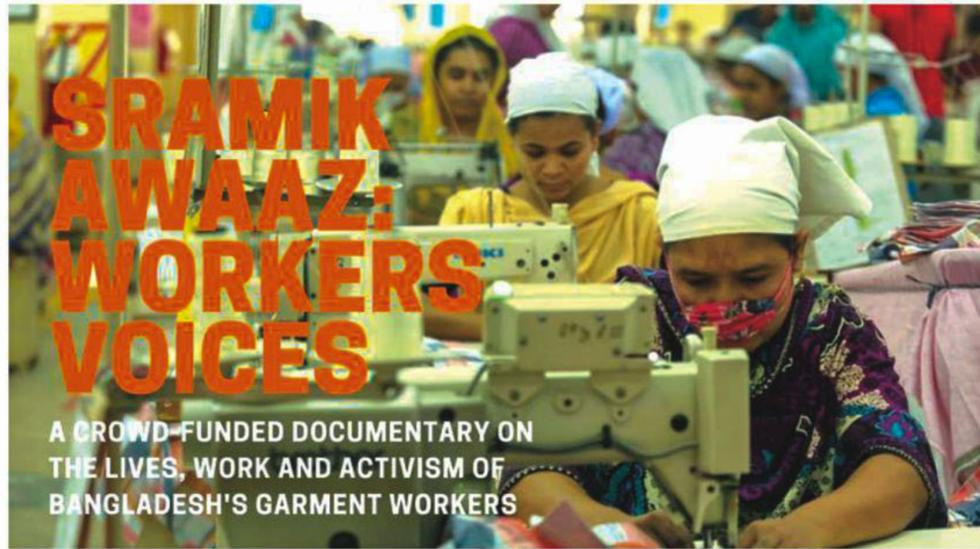
of trade unions since the 60s. In many cases, the owners themselves are MPs and ministers.

Sramik Awaaz bravely lays bare the lack of obligation felt by the owning class and the government, and makes an earnest call to action to a country of 5000 factories and four million garments workers to unify and mobilise. The interviews also put forward clear policy prescriptions on improving the rights of workers and bring up the issues raised by low wage workers around the world. As Nazma Akter so aptly puts it in the documentary, "If the labourers all around the world like USA, Europe,

SRAMIK AWAAZ

THE UNHEARD FOUR MILLION

AMIYA HALDER



Australia and Canada are not unified against the multinational corporations and local suppliers to fight for our rights, nothing fruitful will happen in Bangladesh or even Asia."

To this end, screenings of the film have been scheduled in New York, Washington, Austin and Melbourne so far. Recalling the response in her community to Rana Plaza, Tiffany Williams, Deputy Director of Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), who organised a viewing in Washington on April 10, commented: "What I observed here was a brief period of the expected human reactions: shock and outrage and sadness. I also saw a fair amount of momentum building up around 'responsible consumerism' as a direction to take after the incident. Americans have deep moments of empathy, but, eventually, a short memory for how things like this happen in the first place – namely ruthless, rigged, and racist systems in the global economy." She expressed hopes that the screening and discussion will stir up new energy around what being an ally looks like in this shared global struggle for worker rights.

Saurav Sarker, a Washington-based activist, echoed Chaumtoli's vision of the worker's movement: "I hope that worker-to-worker dialogues that can help build solidarity and a movement to protect and promote workers here, there, and everywhere will come to fruition. I believe this is the only effective safeguard for the wellbeing of workers at the end of the day."

A film that centres the voices of the workers themselves, *Sramik Awaaz* is an opportunity to hear more from the experts in an arena where policy organisations tend to take up space when they ought to listen more. Let's hope the screenings help to build momentum towards more transformative changes in the garments industry and engender the kind of cross-border dialogue that can enrich our worker's valiant efforts.

Amiya Halder works as In-Charge for The Daily Star's weekly career supplement Next Step.

মাদার বহুদন নাম

কালার গার্ড

কাপড়ের রঙকে রাখে নতুনের মতো বাক্বাকে

মাল্টি বুস্টার

কাপড়ের যে কোন দাগ-ময়লাকে নিমিষেই দূর করে

Fast wash
Brilliant White
DETERGENT POWDER

সবচেয়ে ফাস্ট, সবচেয়ে কার্যকরী ..