

OUT OF THE ASHES OF RANA PLAZA

We need a Workers' Memorial and National Labour Research Institute to remember Rana Plaza Workers

CHAUMTOLI HUQ



PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

Memorials serve as powerful remembrances for lives lost and as constant physical reminders to not allow such tragedies to repeat themselves. Memorials also create for workers and their families a respectful space to collectively mourn the senseless deaths. In addition, for families who have not been able to locate bodies, memorials can serve as the site where they can at least find some peace.

There is an age-old proverb, "Out of sight out of mind". This, I fear, is what is happening to the 1,134 workers who died in Rana Plaza, and the thousands who have been injured and are barely surviving.

It has been only four years since the horrific and tragic deaths of garment workers when the Rana Plaza building collapsed, and it seems that the workers are fading from our collective memory.

We have become anaesthetised to human tragedy, and so I can understand why many many in Bangladesh and the world may not know about Rana Plaza or would want to forget; that would be a shortsighted mistake.

In the United States, since 2008, the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition (RTFC) has been educating the public about the Triangle Shirtwaist garment factory fire in New York City that occurred on March 25, 1911. It was the deadliest industrial accident in the history of the city, and one of the deadliest in US history. The fire caused the deaths of 146 garment workers—123 women and 23 men. They died from the fire, smoke inhalation, or falling or jumping to their deaths. Most of the victims were immigrant women aged 16 to 23. A little over a century later, Rana Plaza witnessed deaths tenfold. We have not progressed, but we have moved backwards.

Not surprisingly, the fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory is often mentioned together with the Rana Plaza building collapse as an indication of how workers' safety is jeopardised in the name of industrialisation and economic progress. Following the Triangle Fire, there was an outpour of labour movement activism, which led to the passage of labour laws protecting workers' rights. The Rana Plaza tragedy also witnessed a global movement for workers' rights and activism. It led to some positive developments for workers, but much more remains to be done.

The work of the Triangle Fire Coalition reminds us that in addition to our present activism, we have to educate the public about the history of these tragedies, so that they are not repeated. They, too, have called for a memorial at the site of the factory fire with these goals in mind: (1) To honour the memory of those who died from the fire; (2) To affirm the dignity of all workers; (3) To value women's work; (4) To remember the movement for worker safety and social justice stirred by this tragedy; and (5) To inspire future generations of activists. "One of the reasons for the RTFC's push for a memorial is because people pass by the building where the fire occurred every day and do not recognize it as the site of the "fire that changed America," shares Joel Sosinsky, Board Member of RTFC. He continues: "People must be reminded that out of the ashes of the Triangle Fire the public outrage forced things to change for workers."

In 2013, immediately after the Rana Plaza tragedy, I called for a Workers' Memorial on the site of the disaster. The goals of the Triangle Fire Coalition can help guide us here.

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constant physical reminders to not allow such tragedies to repeat themselves. Memorials also create for workers and their families a respectful space to collectively mourn the senseless deaths. In addition, for families who have not been able to locate bodies, memorials can serve as the site where they can at least find some peace.

They serve as physical reminders that we should not let this tragedy happen again. It insists that we do not make Rana Plaza out of sight and out of our minds.

Bangladesh has a positive history of remembering those who have been killed or died for our nation including our Shaheed Minar, and sculptures of freedom fighters who fought for our liberation. Garment workers whose labour generates revenue and foreign currency for the economic health of the country should be remembered with equal prestige.

In addition to a Memorial, there must be a National Labour Research Institute that focuses solely on the lives of workers and labour conditions in Bangladesh, and has a mission to remember the workers who suffer in workplace accidents. In an interview for my documentary *Sramik Awaaz: Workers Voices*, Babul Akter, president of Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers' Federation (BGIWF), called for a similar institute of this type. He commented that while there are scattered NGOs focused on labour issues, the research is not at the scale that reflects the nuanced realities of the sector and workers' lives.

From my own research in Bangladesh from 2014 to 2015, I met with countless labour scholars and activists who are already doing this work, and could form a part of this Institute. I also observed the range of research and policy issues that should be focused upon. In many ways, my documentary is a small attempt to document the lives and organising of Bangladeshi garment workers. But my project should not be the only one; the Research Institute could produce more projects on workers in Bangladesh in all sectors. Such an institute would not only benefit Bangladesh, but it could be a vanguard institute globally connecting with similar labour institutes around the world.

The Rana Plaza site, which lays fallow, is a great location on which to build this memorial and research institute. The logistics of how to get this completed can be figured out by committed minds. With all the developers and construction companies building in Dhaka, and skilled architects and designers, surely we can marshal our resources towards workers. What we need is the political will and the mobilisation of worker groups to demand this. On this fourth anniversary of Rana Plaza, I call on us to pledge to make this Memorial and National Labour Research Institute a reality.

Chaumtoli Huq is an attorney/founder of Law@theMargins, a law and media organisation focused on social justice, and an adjunct professor at Brooklyn Law School. She produced the first documentary to fully explore the lives, work, and organising efforts of Bangladesh's garment workers called Sramik Awaaz: Workers Voices.

I have known the site of Rana Plaza in Savar for almost four decades now. I have to cross Savar to and from the Jahangirnagar campus every day but never noticed the building that later became infamous worldwide, i.e. Rana Plaza. So many changes have taken place here in the last two decades. Rivers and canals have almost disappeared, the remaining water bodies have turned ugly and poisonous. Instead the landscape is now scattered with high-rise

After the Rana Plaza disaster, citizens around the world voiced their outrage about the conditions of workers in this billion-dollar industry. In response to citizens' protests some initiatives were taken by global brands and retailers in garment-importing countries. Most important is the formation of the 'Accord' and the 'Alliance'. Both initiatives were planned for five years. They have created a short-term inspection and monitoring system

THE STRUGGLE CONTINUES

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buildings, factories and shopping malls. Land grabbers and environmentally hostile development have taken over.

Rana Plaza was an example of this. The land it stood on was grabbed, and all rules and regulations were flouted to build it.

I noticed the building site that housed five garment factories only after the horrific incident on April 24, 2013. Since then I have rarely missed stealing a glance at the site every time I pass it by. I find many women and men standing near the site – some crying, some praying, some looking blank. For many months, the remains of the dead would be found in the wreckage of Rana Plaza.

Within a month of the building's collapse, some young activists voluntarily erected a sculpture as a memorial. Many workers, organisations and citizens demanded confiscation of the land to build a permanent workers' memorial and create something to support the survivors, but the government, the BGMEA and the brands showed little interest. It was evident that these parties, which were either directly or indirectly responsible for the disaster, wanted to dissolve the very memory of it.

Recently, associates of Sohel Rana have begun building and renting out shops there. There are only a few tireless activists who regularly visit the place to remind everybody that we should not forget the killing field of a thousand workers – *that they are lives, not numbers.*

Despite global attention on the unprecedented disaster, the simple issues of compensation and rehabilitation have not yet been settled. I talked to many survivors and family members of the deceased workers, many of whom were betrayed by local powerful middlemen and given false promises. Many are still suffering from trauma and most of the survivors have not yet found a regular job. There is also a lack of transparency regarding the funds deposited and distributed.

Biscuits & Bread, ATN Food, Nabisco Biscuit, Aftab Foods, and BD Foods. As anthropologist Rahnuma Ahmed writes after visiting the factory, "Even though Tampaco claimed it met international safety standards and was fully compliant, the building did not have a proper staircase. A steel stairway had been added on the outside of the five-storied building structure, as had two lifts, which were used to convey ingredients for cigarette packet foils. Workers were not issued any appointment letters, there were no benefit schemes like provident fund, pension or insurance; workers were only issued ID cards with photos, no designation was mentioned. No service books either; employees and workers could only claim two months overtime pay, nothing else." (April 16, 2017, *New Age*).

Any attempt to form unions and organise protest against injustice is met with harsh measures. Workers are not

wage has not been raised since 2013. There is little doubt that "the crackdown is clearly intended to intimidate workers and keep Bangladesh a low-wage country" that benefits global brands and local owners (February 1, 2017, *The New York Times*).

Different estimates show that for every garment that is sold at USD 100 in the western market, the governments of those countries earn around USD 25, brands and buying houses make at least USD 50 and most of the rest go to owners, raw material suppliers, etc. For workers it comes down to less than USD 1. Monopolies like Walmart use their leverage to drag down prices of garments which has disastrous effects for workers in supplying countries. In order to maximise profit, local owners cut their cost in wages and security measures. It ultimately becomes a vicious global chain of high profits and abuse of workers' rights. Local and global profiteers share the cake at the cost of



PHOTO: STAR FILE

among selected factories, and they "conduct trainings for management and workers on fire and building safety, and provide some level of resources to their primary suppliers for remediation efforts."

Other than some model factories, which are merely eyewash, there has been little to no change. Deaths due to unsafe working condition and safety oversights continue – nothing has changed. On September 10, 2016 at least 32 people were killed in the Tampaco Foils factory fire. The list of clients of this deadly factory shows how an irresponsible, profit-driven global chain creates unsafe jobs. Their clients included British American Tobacco, Nestle, Essential Drugs Company, Akij Group, Pran Group, Ispahani, Cocola Food Products Ltd., Fu-Wang Foods Ltd., Abul Khair Group, Molla Salt, Haque

allowed to protest against unsafe working conditions, abuses or low wages till today. Recently, when workers walked out of factories to protest unsafe working conditions and low wages in Ashulia, the police and other forces swooped down on them and some 1,500 workers were sacked. The factories of the manufacturing hub in Ashulia produced clothes for brands like H&M, Gap, Walmart, C&A, Abercrombie & Fitch, and Tommy Hilfiger. More than 25 labour activists were charged with criminal complaints, some under the country's sweeping 1974 Special Powers Act. They were taken to police remand only to be given a 'lesson' through torture. It should be noted that till today more than 90 percent of Bangladesh's more than 4,500 garment factories do not have registered unions, conditions are worse in other factories. The minimum

millions of workers. This obsession with profits of state-sanctioned groups from home and abroad perpetuates the horrible conditions of workers in garment-exporting countries. Yes, the readymade garment industry is the mainstay of the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. But the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 exposed a structural problem not only in the factory building but also in the whole sector.

The industry is characterised by contradictions; it is booming yet disorganised, it is the highest export earner yet vulnerable. Growth and deprivation go hand in hand, like high profits and low wages, and more industrial police and limited factory inspectors.

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