

KUTUMBITA

An app changing the face of the apparels industry in Bangladesh

SHAER REAZ
THE DAILY STAR, DHAKA

On April 24, 2013, the eight-storey Rana Plaza building, just outside Dhaka, collapsed – trapping nearly 3,000 people inside. The building, a factory for world famous fashion retailers along the likes of Zara and Benetton, was clearly developing cracks in the days leading up to the worst industrial disaster in Bangladesh, but the factory owners and managers still forced their employees inside the building. The collapse took the lives of more than 1,100 people and injured at least 2,000 others.

The aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster was a litmus test for the developing nation. In the world's spotlight, Bangladesh would either have to grow above and beyond the common practice of treating labour as expendable in the path of progress, or big international business would be shamed by the world media into outsourcing production elsewhere. This was the reality of the apparels industry in Bangladesh four years ago.

Things have changed to some extent. While there are issues surrounding the remunerations to the workers who survived and the families of those who perished, as a whole, the attitude towards conducting business has changed on both sides of the retailer-contractor equation. Largely thanks to the role of labour rights organisations, NGOs, international watchdogs and some state-level intervention, the workplace is becoming safer for garments workers, risks on the factory floor are minimised, and factory safety policies are being implemented.

There's a fair share of private attempts at tackling the issues that Bangladesh's nascent industries are facing. Kutumbita is a tech startup headquartered in Singapore that focuses on empowering workers in the garments industry through an application designed to foster communication between employer and employee in firms which are too large for traditional communication channels. Kutumbita's product is an Android app, a channel which workers can use to voice their complaints and concerns to their employers, while a check-and-balance system ensures the employers act on the issues raised by their employees. This helps the management create the means for clear and equitable communication despite the size of the workforce and address the major issues in the garments sector in Bangladesh – from labour unrest to work-related grievances. While reporting a problem, such as the common occur-

rence of a blocked fire exit, the workers can attach images to better identify the problem and provide photographic evidence. Kutumbita is working on allowing users to upload video and audio along with complaint reports in an upcoming version. In short, Kutumbita tackles the challenge of logging grievances from a large non-desk worker population.

Kutumbita's app is more than a tool for communication. It can be used to send out emergency alerts from the management, inform workers of their rights, answer queries regarding safety laws, help workers access details about their

results for SQ Group, which has signed nearly 13,000 employees as the very first client of Kutumbita. This award-winning RMG manufacturer has already dispatched 3,000 handsets (which come as an optional bundle package) in collaboration with Kutumbita to its employees so that they can start using the app.

SQ is currently pushing notifications to workers via the app, scheduling training, accepting leave applications, registering complaints, and conducting surveys through the one-stop solution that is Kutumbita's app. Employees of SQ have received an optional bundle package from Kutumbita, consisting of a free entry level smartphone from WE and a SIM by Robi, the second largest telecom operator of Bangladesh. Each package comes with an 18-month installment plan, which ensures Kutumbita's package is not a financial burden on the workers if they choose to opt for it.

heard," he says. "With Kutumbita, we have a higher engagement rate with our employees, particularly the associates. Our operation costs have gone down significantly which is enhancing productivity," he adds.

Shahriar Rahman, Country Manager of Kutumbita, informs that Kutumbita is getting great response from buyers and manufacturers globally. "Kutumbita's mission is to convert the non-desk workforce to first-time technology adopter and make sure they are heard. And with our app, manufacturers are ensuring Higgs compliance and licensing cost of the app is much less compared to the benefit that you would be getting."

At present, there are over 4,000 garments manufacturing units in the country. According to estimates by labour rights groups, over half of these factories are at risk and the lack of fire safety, lack of policies for evacuation in case of emergency and lack of training all combine to make



A factory worker with the Kutumbita app.

COURTESY: KUTUMBITA

benefits, check schedules, work hours as well as time off and more. In doing so, the access barrier between the different levels of the organisation is thus removed, promoting transparent resolution of issues and mitigating labour unrest. At the same time, the workplace is made safer, workers' personal and professional lives are improved, global standards are met and firms have the scope of banking on the higher standards of their factories to gain an advantage when competing for contracts.

Putting the well-being of the workers at the forefront and establishing effective channels of communication have yielded

Because of Kutumbita's role in digitally empowering the workers of SQ, the apparels manufacturer now has a higher rating for their factories than before, yielding more revenue in the long run while giving their workers access to a platform which is designed to boost productivity and job satisfaction.

According to Warisul Abid, Director, People & Value Creation of SQ Group, this particular initiative reflects SQ Group's commitment towards excellence in compliance and employee satisfaction. "Being one of the world's most forward-moving RMG manufacturers, we wanted to take the next step to make sure our employees are being

the workplace extremely hazardous for the average worker in the apparels industry. There is a lot of work left to be done in fixing the problems, but Kutumbita's app presents a significant step forward in the right direction.

The role that Kutumbita plays in enriching the lives of garments workers in Bangladesh is invaluable. It's certainly trying to ensure that the future of Bangladesh is banked on an industry that no longer exploits its workers, rather gives them the necessary tools to change their lives for the better.

<https://kutumbita.com/>