



“They don’t give us”

Garments workers’ rights in Bangladesh

ORIGINAL PHOTO: REUTERS (MANIPULATED BY STAR WEEKEND DESK)

MAHMUDUL H SUMON

The Tazreen factory fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013 have, amidst all the needless destruction and devastations of lives, at least brought Bangladesh's apparel industry under some kind of scrutiny. It paved the way for the Accord on Fire and Building Safety (ACCORD) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (the Alliance), two “foreign” monitoring mechanisms (according to government vocabulary) to begin their work in the country. These mechanisms provided an opportunity for collaborative work to take place between national and international multi-sectoral stakeholders such as international rights groups and civil society as well as brands and retailers.

Although unique in its scope, the idea of corporate involvement in the global production network is not new altogether. In fact, the issue of private regulation through the different corporate codes has

given rise to diverse views and debates on the respective role that private and public actors should play in global production networks in general. It has provided a contrasting assessment of what effects these initiatives could and did produce.

Palpauer (2017), for example, has noted two paradigms in this regard. On the one hand, you have the cooperative paradigm which “emphasises the beneficial nature of these initiatives”. In this view, multi-sectoral initiatives are considered to foster an evolution from confrontation toward “collaboration” between firms and civil society organisations, where NGOs facilitate the “ethical learning” of corporations. The other paradigm known as “structural power” asserts that the cooperative model lacks a mechanism to compensate for “deep inequalities” embedded in Global Production Networks (GPNs). Rodriguez-Garavito (2005: 210 cited in Palpauer 2018: 61) points out that in the cooperative approach there is the “absence of institutional designs” for including workers as fundamental

actors and worker empowerment as their central goal. Critical positions within the structural power paradigm also argue that private monitoring “institutionalises workers’ vulnerability” by “enforcing manufacturers’ accountability for workers without those workers’ knowledge or consent” (Palpauer 2017).

Both the Accord and the Alliance can be seen as an outcome of what may be called a cooperative paradigm where collaboration is sought between firms, civil society and NGOs. In fact, an attempt to have a legally binding document which will hold the brands and retailers responsible for the shoddy practices in their sourcing firms in the global supply chain has been a long-standing demand by some international campaign groups and rights organisations. The sad events of the Tazreen fire and Rana Plaza collapse perhaps only expedited the process.

From the sector leaders of readymade garments in Bangladesh, there is an indi-

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1992

The government accepts five demands of SKOP and signs an agreement with the commitment that within September national minimum wage will be declared. Other two important demands were amendment of Labour Code and opening up of all closed and weak industries.

1995

SKOP issues 8-point demand that urges the government to respect and implement the agreement signed on July 6, 1992 and later with the labour organisations of different industries.

1999

An agreement is signed between SKOP and the government which stipulates that the government would declare a national minimum wage within October 31 of the year.