

ECOTEXTILE

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NEWS

Voices from Rana Plaza **A Decade Later**



SPECIAL REPORT:
On the ground in Dhaka, Bangladesh

Remembering

**April
2013**

The collapse

**May
2013**

The Accord on
Fire and Building
Safety is founded

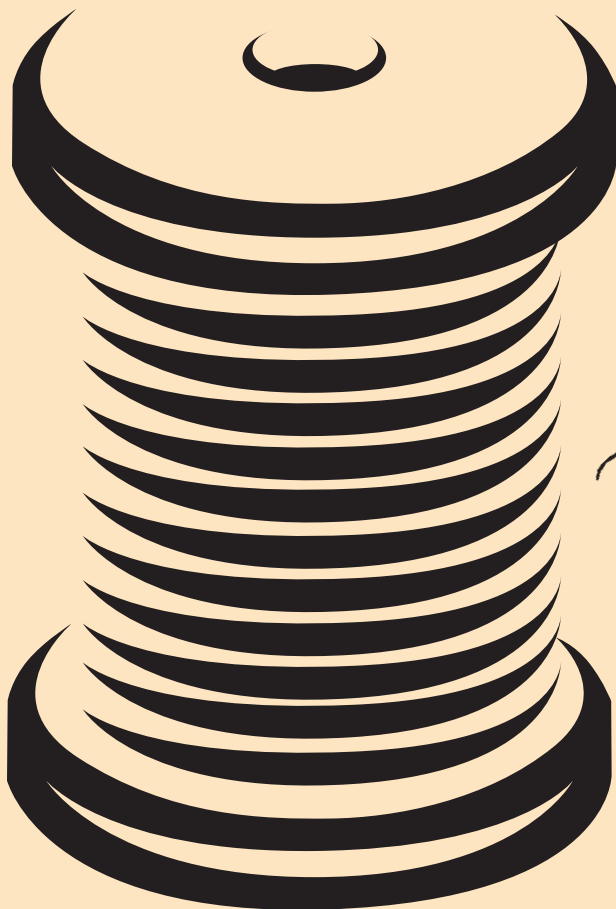
**July
2013**

The Alliance for
Bangladesh Worker
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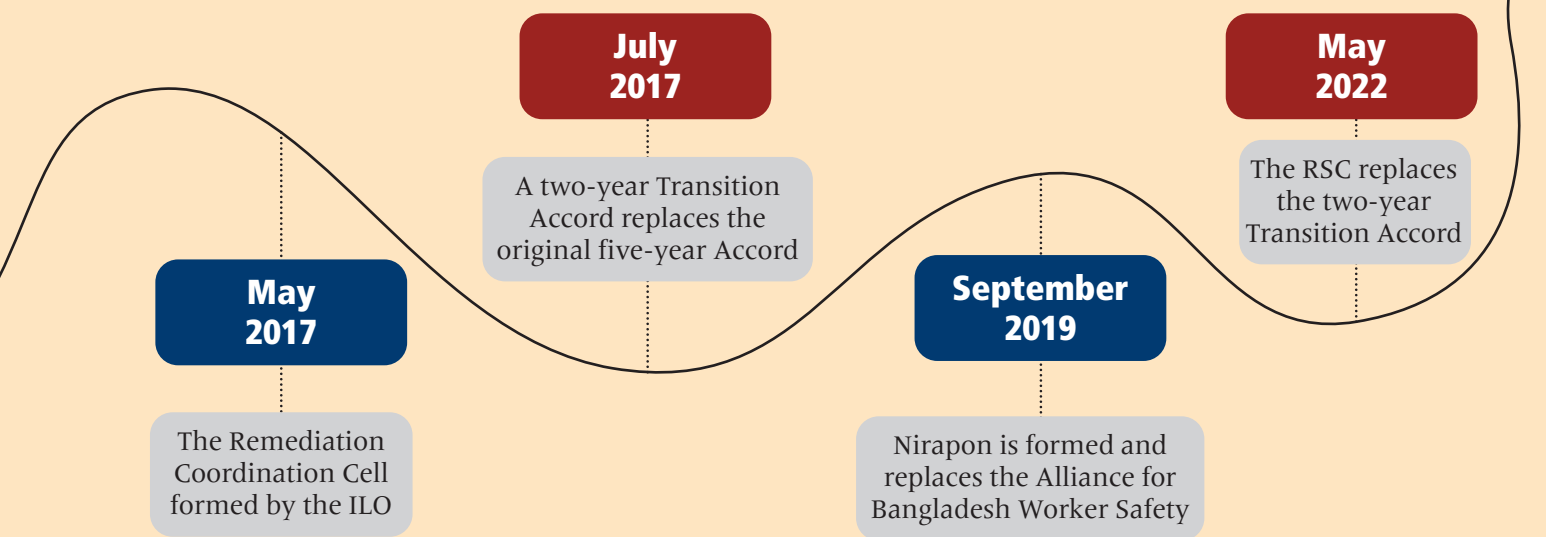
In this special feature, *Ecotextile News* speaks to some of the victims of Rana Plaza on the site of the disaster in Dhaka, along with other Bangladesh industry stakeholders whose voices are not often heard.

Built on wetlands in 2006, with a permit for five floors, the Rana Plaza building housed multiple businesses within its walls – including a bank, various shops, and garment factories. It provided many jobs for many workers within the Savar district, north of Dhaka, Bangladesh.

But during construction of the building, the owner, Soel Rana, ordered three more floors to be built on top of the approved five in



Rana Plaza



a decision, that would bring the building crashing to the ground just six years later.

On 24th April 2013, at least 1,132 people were killed and more than 2,500 were injured as the eight story Rana Plaza building collapsed on top of them.

It's been widely reported that the day before the tragedy, workers on all eight floors were removed after cracks appeared in the walls and that later that day an engineer reportedly deemed the building structurally sound – workers were then ordered to return.

On the morning of the disaster, workers within the garment factories in the upper levels of the building voiced fears about the safety of the building as cracks began to tear through weight-bearing walls, pillars and floors.

According to reports, many workers told management they didn't want to return to the building because of the cracks. But they were ordered back to their posts, with threats to their jobs and pay if they refused. Later in the morning, the power to the building cut off, the

cracks widened, and concrete fell onto workers below.

Within 90 seconds, the eight-story building collapsed, changing the conversation of worker safety, supply chain transparency and industry responsibility forever.

In the wake of the tragedy, organisations across the globe rallied and emerged to ensure that accountability and consequences were faced by the fashion industry, and specifically by the brands whose incessant demands for more garments at ever cheaper costs had put a pressure on factories that was literally strong enough to crack concrete.

The Accord

In 2013, a legally binding five-year Accord on Fire and Building Safety was established in Bangladesh to identify safety issues within garment factories, and to commit funds to remediate risks. By 2015 over 200 brands had signed the accord and donated to the cause. Since 2020, the Accord's operations have been undertaken by the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), a tripartite body representing factory

owners, brands and trade unions.

But it's not just the fashion industry which has been forced to face the consequences. On July 18th 2016, Dhaka District and Sessions Judge SM Quddus Zaman began to put the murder case filed by the police in 2015 to 41 accused individuals, including building owner Sohel Rana, who as of 2023 is still to hear his fate.

Now, 10 years on from the tragic collapse of Rana Plaza, *Ecotextile News* marks the anniversary with a special section of articles, interviews and images, and asks the key questions: What's changed in 10 years? What lessons have been learned? And, more importantly, what more needs to be done to protect the health and safety of garment workers?

From our Voices of Bangladesh feature, a 'Hard Talk' with researcher Prof. Rashedur Chowdhury, to an on-ground update from contributor Lavina Muth, this special section of *Ecotextile News* commemorates and honours the lives changed and lost in the devastating disaster that was Rana Plaza. ■



Image: © Lavinia Muth

Rana Plaza revisited

German auditor Lavinia Muth last set foot in Bangladesh a decade ago –just days before Rana Plaza became the garment industry’s worst ever disaster. She returned to Dhaka for *Ecotextile News* to see what’s changed.

Simon Glover reports

The first time Lavinia Muth visited Dhaka was to assess conditions in the city’s garment factories on behalf of a consumer magazine in Germany. She recently returned because she felt it important to learn how things had changed in the 10 years since Rana Plaza.

“I always stayed in contact with people. And now, working in sustainability, I just felt like I needed to go back. I was like, OK, if we do something in this industry with regards to sustain-

ability or trying to uplift workers, we have to do something in Bangladesh,” she explained.

“Because it’s the second biggest exporter of garments in the world and likely to stay the second biggest for the next 10 years at least. So whatever green factory you build in Portugal, does not really change the industry. What changes the industry is doing something over there, in my opinion.”

This would be an easy article to write had Muth

▲ Lavinia Muth in Dhaka with representatives of the BGMEA, UNU-FLORES and journalists at the LEED-certified Snowtex Outwear factory.

“**You talk to Bangladeshis on the street and everybody knows about Rana Plaza and everybody knows about the pitfalls of global garment supply chains**”

found dark and dangerous sweatshops on her first visit but in actual fact, even a decade ago, Bangladesh’s leading export orientated factories were already well equipped and efficient workplaces where the main worker concerns were the wages.

“I had been doing the job for two-and-a-half years, still a little green behind the ears and driven by white saviourism,” she said. “I visited two factories, two vertical set-ups, in 2013. I had never seen such a modern set-up in my whole life, one had a school and a kindergarten.”

These days, Bangladesh has 180 garment factories which carry the US Green Building Council’s LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification – the most of any garment-exporting country in the world. Muth visited four factories and each one was impressive.

But Dhaka is also home to smaller factories where such conditions are a distant dream for those employed in often dangerous and dingy conditions. These factories, many of which are believed to sub-contract work from the export manufacturers, do not tend to open their doors to outsiders.

“It’s an unknown fact,” said Muth on sub-contracting. “Definitely, I didn’t hear that from the big factory owners but talking to NGOs and unions, yes of course. It’s not even illegal, you know, it’s often legal. But somehow they’re not disclosed and that’s why they’re not audited or trained or visited.”

Muth readily admits this lack of disclosure limits the picture she was able to glean of the current state of the industry, but she did notice changes.

“I think there are a couple of things changed, mostly awareness. You talk to Bangladeshis on the street and everybody knows about Rana Plaza and everybody knows about the pitfalls of global garment supply chains,” she said.

“A lot of Bangladeshis are really ashamed of what happened there, and that really feels weird to me, I feel ashamed about what happened at Rana Plaza because I know the reasons. So it’s weird on the ground when Bangladeshis are like: ‘We’re really bad people, we treat our people so badly’.

“And what has definitely changed as well is union membership and union registration, that’s at least the feedback I received from unions and a couple of NGOs.

“Until Rana Plaza, the government restricted union registration but thanks to Rana Plaza there was a huge shift, the whole world was looking and then the government had to allow unionisation. And that’s really good.

“In terms of working conditions, this really did not change. What did change, and this I think also has to do with unionisation, is that I believe that workers feel more empowered and supported. Which is a good thing.

“Obviously the minimum wage has doubled and there are big export companies

► Solar panel rooftop of the LEED-certified Tarasima Apparels factory on the outskirts of Dhaka.



Image: © Lavinia Muth

“At the end of the day I don't think that any Bangladeshi garment worker receives a living wage, nobody

▼ Street tailors in Dhaka. Manual textile labour is sown into the very fabric of Bangladesh.



Image: © Lavinia Muth

with vertical set-ups. And I do believe some basic social working conditions did change because auditing is stricter.

“But at the end of the day I don't think that any Bangladeshi garment worker receives a living wage, nobody. And I don't think that any Bangladeshi

garment worker actually is able to develop a better life.

“And then the pandemic hit so a lot of things got worse again. A lot of garment workers were dismissed. We know about the cancelled orders that brands didn't pay for. Now there's recession, it's a big thing, everybody in Bangladesh is talking about it.

“They are aware of how the global economy works. So it's not so easy as just asking for higher wages if the factories are not able to pay them. This was the answer I received from everybody. The BGMEA, unions, NGOs, even workers are aware that brands are not paying enough for the products they are buying.”

There are, of course, a number of elephants in the room here. First, are factory owners sharing the benefits of being the world's second largest producer of garments fairly with their workers? Secondly, how far can wages rise before Bangladesh is no longer the second largest producer?

Muth says garment workers' take on this **1**



Image © Lavinia Muth

◀ Production line of the Tarasima Apparels factory, Dhaka.

Amirul Haque Amin is the president and co-founder of the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF).

“They are aware of how the global economy works. The BGMEA, unions, NGOs, even workers are aware that brands are not paying enough for the products they are buying

◀ Lavinia Muth at the Rana Plaza site with Afia, 17, who was orphaned by the disaster which claimed the lives of both of her parents.



Image © Lavinia Muth

▼ Workers applying potassium permanganate to finish denim at a Tarasima Apparels denim mill, Dhaka, Bangladesh.



Image © Lavinia Muth

depends on their situation and experiences. Some blamed their employers for their pay and conditions, whereas others believed the brands they made clothes for were responsible by driving down prices.

During her time in Dhaka, Muth had the emotional experience of visiting the site of the Rana Plaza disaster where she met survivors and relatives of victims (p: 44).

“I called **Amin from NGWF**, the trade union, and I said I want to go there with a local person, can you help me? And then he called me back and said he didn’t find a translator but he gave me his 19 year old son for the day instead.

“I went by Uber to the union and then we went together to Rana Plaza. And they had everything organised, because they’ve got an office around the corner, so there was the representative of this union and then there were the survivors.

“After a couple of hours I asked Amin’s son, what am I supposed to do, shall I invite them for lunch, give them some money, some reimbursement because they are here and not working right now? They were responding to my stupid questions. How do you feel, what happened that day...

“I asked the ladies, the survivors, what would they hope for on the site, which is still empty. I asked if they wished for a memorial park or something like that. They were all telling me that what they would really like was a new building where they could live.” ■



Image: © Lavinia Muth

Voices from Bangladesh

Here we publish the recorded opinions of some key individuals in the Bangladesh garment sector who were interviewed on the ground in Dhaka by Lavinia Muth on behalf of *Ecotextile News*.

▲ Lavinia Muth at the former Rana Plaza site in Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh with survivors Taslima, Nilufa and Anjura.

“The garment buyers have done an injustice to us

New homes for survivors and orphans of the Rana Plaza disaster on the site of the former factory building would be a fitting memorial – say the survivors.

On the spot of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Dhaka, beside a worker’s memorial to those who perished, survivors of that fateful day ten years ago told *Ecotextile News* new homes should be built for those who were injured.

“We never received adequate compensation from the government and we can’t work in the garment sector anymore operating machines due to our physical and psychological injuries,” said one woman, who was accompanied by Kabir Hussein from the NJWF who authenticated their claims to be genuine survivors.

“Neither can we get work in the rural areas as we have no agricultural skills. We simply live in poverty and work irregular hours as maids or cleaners – we cannot work long shifts anymore.”

According to the NJWF, there were 4,000 survivors of the Rana Plaza factory collapse back in April 2013 – which is more than double the official government statistics. A government that the survivors we spoke to criticise for being slow to process compensation claims – if at all – and who reserve scorn for factory owners and their overseas customers.

“The garment buyers have done an in-justice to us. We didn’t get proper justice, relief or compensation as ❶

we still cannot work," they all agreed. "It's the same with the factory owners." A lengthy court case is still ongoing 10 years later to find out exactly who was responsible for the collapse.

"Every year on 24th April us survivors gather on this spot to talk about our lack of rights and we express this to any media present, but mostly we don't get any feedback from the government. We remain very disappointed. The media seems to only want to

cover the dead, but not those of us that survived and are still suffering."

One solution, they suggest to us, would be for the Bangladesh government, along with buyers and brands to contribute to building homes for the survivors and orphans on the disused spot of the Rana Plaza complex where we were talking. "This place should be re-built for their homes and for the survivors to have somewhere comfortable to live," they

say, adding that it would be a fitting tribute to both the living and the dead of the Rana Plaza disaster from government, brands and buyers who all benefit greatly from the Bangladesh garment sector.

Meanwhile, the NJWF continues to gather evidence and file cases on the behalf of survivors, but progress seems distant. "Our mental and physical health is getting worse day by day, and we are also tired of asking for government help – nothing is really happening."

Perhaps it's time for a campaign to see any donated funds go direct to those survivors and their families, rather than third parties? The survivors of Rana Plaza felt that idea would be a very good one – and by far the most appropriate.

Khadiza Akter

Khadiza Akter is the treasurer of Awaj Foundation and the vice president of Sommolito Garments Sramik Federation in Bangladesh. She started her career as a child worker in the garment sector when she was 11 years old, often working with her mother. After working in the factory for nine years, she decided to get involved in trade unions and organising workers.

Looking back after Rana Plaza and around the development of the Accord, Khadiza remains sceptical about the effectiveness of current initiatives around worker safety in Bangladesh. "When the Accord was working it was good, but there was pressure from the government to fade this out and instead it started the RSC – let's see what happens with this going forward," she said, indicating that the people she represents were disappointed to see this change.

Going back to Rana Plaza, Akter acknowledges that two big changes occurred immediately after the tragedy. "Number one was before, there were hardly any unions, and factory owners were not aware of building safety issues. Since then, we have seen safety increase in every factory and buildings are checked for problems. Right after the incident, however, there was an unwritten direction from the government not to allow union registration," she claimed. A move that clearly did not work, since before Rana Plaza there were just 12 garment worker unions – now she says there are 105, including the NGWF (National Garment Workers Federation), see right.

Yet she also says that there's still an imbalance in the power between workers, owners and the brands who source garments in Bangladesh.

"Our foundation is very aware of the economic pressure, post-pandemic, and the recession, and we are very 'pro' more orders for Bangladesh, yet we see that orders are decreasing, and workers are still fired or dismissed very easily because factory owners fear they will lose business. Brands still have the power, and they still do not pay enough for the goods they buy."

But surely the newly implemented social compliance audits improve working conditions at factories? "Mainly they don't," claims Akter. "They are not that effective. In the time of the Accord these types of controls were much better, but now that the RSC has been implemented, not anymore."

Akter also notes how the much-vaunted women empowerment programmes must still take place outside the garment factory environment, "because women have to be able to talk in confidence and in a relaxed way, free from intimidation (by men)."



“
In the time of the Accord these types of controls were much better.”

Amirul Haque Amin

Amirul Haque Amin is the president and co-founder of the National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), the largest national trade union in Bangladesh with a membership of over 95,000 workers.

The NGWF was the organisation which put the memorial monument of the hammer and sickle at the former Rana Plaza site (*pictured on the cover of*



Babur Rahman

Babur Rahman is the Bangladesh representative and country manager for the Amsterdam-based Fair Wear Foundation.

In terms of improvement post-Rana Plaza, Babur Rahman says that in most cases garment manufacturers “invested a lot to really follow the requirements of the Accord or the RSC but have not really followed up later.” However, he does note a “change in the overall mindset” of the manufacturing industry, which he calls “super-positive.”

“Since Rana Plaza, many suppliers have learned about legislation that impacts the industry and are focusing on ‘sustainable’ business. There’s been a cultural shift among garment suppliers,” he says, yet he feels that improvements are still required when it comes to grievance mechanisms from suppliers to brands. “We want to stay the second biggest clothing exporter, we want to collaborate to change, we are open to negotiate,” he notes.

Meanwhile, Karen Diaz, an external relations officer at the Fair Wear Foundation, speaking to us on the sidelines of an industry event in Dhaka, noted: “There’s very much this feeling of, we cannot continue with ‘business as usual’ if we are to maintain that competitive advantage.”

Diaz says collaboration between industry associations and factories is one way forward. “In terms of them coming together and finally speaking to one another, it could look like ‘hey you’ve got Inditex as one of your largest suppliers – we do as well, we’ve had contracts with them forever’.” Meanwhile in a competitor country such as Morocco that isn’t the case at all. “So that type of communication where suppliers can unite, share that knowledge and experience they’ve had with different brands makes a huge difference, and means being able to negotiate better terms.” In contrast to the views of the unions quoted earlier, Diaz sees this approach as a “potential huge shift in that power deck,” but also like the unions, still thinks that there’s a huge power imbalance between buyers, suppliers and workers.

Diaz was fronting the ‘Industry We Want’ initiative at the Dhaka event saying that the project would spotlight more of these types of collaborations and alliances and she wants further alignment on standards such as purchasing practices, “because that is really the key lever for creative or social and environmental improvement”.

“Suppliers don’t have enough margins to think all that much about social and environmental improvements if they are constantly trying to meet these order deadlines that are impossible,” she noted.



“**There’s been a cultural shift among garment suppliers.**”

this special feature, page 37).

Like Khadiza Akter, Amirul Haque Amin says that post-Rana Plaza, the old power imbalances between workers, factory owners, and brands still dominate the Bangladesh garment sector. He says that if brands want to be good allies to empower workers, they need another level of transparency to how they operate.

“Real transparency would mean that when they book orders with the factory, they also consult with the local union and/or federation in front of the industrial”

► Lavinia Muth at the former Rana Plaza site in Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh with Rana Plaza victims orphans (left to right) Nafiz (18), Lavinia Muth, Afia (17), Bijoy (18), Parvez (12), Kabir Hussein, NJWF.



management where they should all discuss the price of labour for an order – not necessarily all production costs, but certainly the labour. It would be good to know the labour costs for each product and then the owners cannot hide what they are getting paid for labour costs. What are the brands paying them for labour? Why won't they reveal this, so that they can make sure workers are actually paid this?"

He says unions are still in a 'battle' to increase prices for workers (wages), but

brands will often reduce the originally agreed price later as the order is in production. "That's the reason we need a fair price and to know what that will be. It's important to be more transparent."

Whether that's workable or not is a moot point for some, but margins can be reduced by the brands if required, he says, it just needs more planning. "They could look to reduce their profit even by a small amount, it would create a window for the owners to use this amount to increase the worker's salary."

It may sound obvious, but this is still a common complaint from workers and unions in Bangladesh where salaries are still very low – and as a result – industrial action and activism is still very high.

When asked about the government and politicians and how they can help, it was pointed out that several politicians have direct links to the garment industry – some own factories directly or indirectly. Amin says this was an issue when it came to the Accord. Was the Bangladesh government behind ditching the Accord in favour of the RSC – and what is the NGWF opinion of the RSC?

"The RSC and Accord are totally different," says Amin. "The Accord was a result of the legally binding agreement between the brands and the trade unions. But the RSC is not legally binding. Also, in the RSC there are three parties: brands, factory owners and the union – so brands there are also owners, they are also capitalists – the difference is there are bigger (brands) and smaller capitalists (factory owners), but they are both capitalists," who "outnumber the unions" in negotiations.

What he does acknowledge, after Rana Plaza, though, are "improvements in building, electrical and fire safety," and that, before the disaster, unionisation of the workforce was very hard. Echoing the comments of Khadiza Akter he said: "There was an unwritten order from the government to prevent unions forming. This has now changed." ■

Miran Ali

Miran Ali is a vice president of the BGMEA and is managing director of the Bitopi Group. Two of his factories are rated LEED Platinum, Remi Holdings Ltd, and Tarasima Apparels Ltd.

Although there are plenty of stakeholders in Bangladesh willing to trash the replacement of the Accord with the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC), Miran Ali is a staunch defender of its emergence in a post-Rana Plaza world.

Noting how the Accord was an agreement between just two parties – the unions and the brand signatories – he complains that this left the garment industry without a voice. "Approaching an issue as challenging as industrial safety in a country as challenging as Bangladesh without the ones actually spending money fixing the factories was a fundamental error," he said.

Ali pointed to the rate of factory completion of initial corrective action plans under the Accord saying that it had essentially flatlined. "Because the Accord was not a service delivery organisation, it was an advocacy organisation which did service delivery on the side. The RSC is a service delivery organisation," he explained.

Ali says the service that the RSC delivers is two-fold. "A safe workplace and a safe way for workers to report violations of any nature." He claims that it has done a relatively good job despite starting up operations during COVID and says the rate of closing the initial issues has got much better. "Because the focus now is on engineering. Building safety is an engineering problem. The error with the Accord was dealing with it as an advocacy issue – principals and movements and morality and all that. All true. But the solution is an engineering issue: the sprinklers, fire doors ... it's all engineering. You need to deal with engineering first."

He does admit that the RSC has had "some troubles", reflecting the thoughts of some of those we spoke to, but adds "that will be always there in any organisation which is tripartite and representing different interests, but the essential engineering work is going very well".

Right now though, on the RSC website, we note that as we went to print, there were still 1,011 facilities still 'behind schedule on remediation', out of 1,823 RSC covered factories, with 147 on track, according to the RSC's own website. All of them have inspection reports.



“The error with the Accord was dealing with it as an advocacy issue.”



Image: © Lavina Muth

Bangladesh 'box ticking' not enough

Professor Rashedur Chowdhury conducted an unparalleled research project with over 400 people whose lives were irrevocably changed by Rana Plaza. Reflecting on what's emerged since the 2013 disaster, he sat down with David Styles to share his thoughts.

Rashedur Chowdhury grew up in south-eastern Bangladesh but, having spent recent years working in academia throughout Europe and the United States, currently calls the southeast of England his home.

Having experienced life in both a garment-producing hotspot and western nations synonymous with supersized shopping habits, Chowdhury knows the impacts of fast fashion throughout the world.

Nevertheless, the events

which took place in Dhaka on 24 April 2013 still shocked him to his core. It was, however, not the factory collapse itself but the reaction of the corporate world that prompted the academic to embark on a research mission which ended up compiling one of the largest datasets of victim testimonies since the Second World War.

Miracle cures

The celebratory tone which greeted the formation of the Accord on Fire and Building

▲ The site of the former Rana Plaza building is now used to grow vegetables. Survivors want it for housing (see page: 43).

▼ Professor Rashedur Chowdhury, Business and Management, University of Essex.



Safety in Bangladesh along with the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety never sat well with Professor Chowdhury.

"As a Bangladeshi, not even as a researcher, I was amazed that so many people were just blindly accepting that these institutions were going to change the supply chain and building safety," he recalls.

His perception is that many brands were eager to become signatories of such agreements as a way to "cool down the outcry about compensation" which was gaining traction as activist groups took up the victims' cause.

"All you had to do was look at who was behind the Accord and Alliance. There were lots of very powerful brands all trying to claim they were sorting it out," he notes. "I wish there was a magic formula to become saints overnight. I'm not so sure there is."

If avoiding vast compensation pay-outs was the goal, Chowdhury's interview data would suggest that was frequently achieved.

One interviewee was left needing a metal rod fitted in her spine due to the injuries sustained at Rana Plaza. She received approximately US\$500; an amount deemed sufficient due to her losing no limbs. "The type of disability she has is more than losing limbs because you can't do anything after that," Chowdhury states.

The University of Essex academic also questions the legitimacy of the 'formula' used to calculate what victims were due. He feels that if workers had been in a better socioeconomic **1**

position, and therefore able to sue the organisation, they would have received far more compensation.

Reality check

Chowdhury believed meaningful change didn't require oversight bodies like the Accord or Alliance to be established because he was sure that companies would deem it "too risky" to continue operating as they had been – for fear of being associated with a similar catastrophe.

While undertaking fieldwork, his theory was corroborated during a conversation with a senior executive at one of the world's largest corporations operating in the fashion field. In this discussion the industry figure admitted that the day after Rana Plaza his company severed ties with 40 per cent of its suppliers.

"The reason we did that," the source told Chowdhury, "is because we know who the bad suppliers are. We are not stupid."



▲ The NGWF team in Dhaka.

“We know who the bad suppliers are. We are not stupid.”

While some big players may well have quickly ended contracts with factories considered to be falling below moral or even legal standards, Chowdhury says this does not mean those facilities are cut out altogether. Instead, he claims that, "subcontracting of subcontracting" will simply put further distance between brands and such operators.

Despite having been repeatedly confronted with corporate callousness

throughout his research into Rana Plaza, the academic knows not all failings are acts of cynical business practice.

"The geographical dissonance between suppliers and the head offices of western brands means there is not always the understanding of what is going on," he concedes. "Yes, there will be times when a CEO or team of executives will go to visit a facility, but they will only get a snapshot and inevitably they will be shown a particular facility that is actually very good."

Long shadows

The collapse, 10 years ago, of one makeshift Dhaka factory building has cast a very long shadow over the ready-made garment workforce in Bangladesh, with the industry's shared psyche never having quite recovered.

One factory owner told Professor Chowdhury that the slightest sign of an earthquake – not uncommon in Bangladesh – now sees workers bolting for the exit in fits of panic. This, the factory boss says, never once occurred before 2013.



“Workers have realised they need to care about themselves. They now know there is nobody there to take care of them,” Chowdhury notes.

The academic’s extensive fieldwork also highlights a trust deficit within the majority female workforce. Based on the hundreds of interviews conducted with garment workers, he tells *Ecotextile News* that it is widely understood that officially reporting complaints would simply “bring more troubles”.

Of all the evidence gathered during his research, one strand which troubled Chowdhury more than most was that not a single Rana Plaza survivor said they had ever met their production targets. This, following further investigation, was due to the prevalence of factories setting unrealistic goals that neither the machine nor human operating them can reach.

“What I found extremely heart-breaking was that so many of these workers died believing they had never worked hard enough,” he explains. “Forget about the physical injustice, I think this is deeply disturbing because it is so morally wrong to tell someone they didn’t work hard when they gave their life for these factories and brands.”

What now?

A “box ticking” culture evident throughout the fashion supply chain is part of what Professor Chowdhury argues must change if the next 10 years is to deliver the meaningful change so many people had



▲ Employment injury workshop, Dhaka, Bangladesh.

“What I found extremely heart-breaking was that so many of these workers died believing they had never worked hard enough

hoped for in the decade following 2013.

“If we have so many concepts – social entrepreneurship, CSR, sustainability – how are we still in the same sort of situation where income inequality and poverty are increasing? Not only in developing countries anymore, even in the developed world. If all these magical concepts are working, why is nothing changing for the better?”

The answer, he believes, is simple.

“If corporations decided to, they could curb exploitation and sort out the supply chain. You don’t need CSR to prove you’re a good person. You don’t need the Accord, the Alliance, anything. We don’t need any more artificial, imposed mechanisms. If you’re really serious about solving your problem, you will get on and solve your problem.

“But why would anyone actually do this with the way incentive structures are built? You can make quick money, satisfying your shareholders in the process.”

Governments must also

step up if systemic change is to be realised, Chowdhury argues. “Do we need regulation? Yes. But when the Rana Plaza collapse happened, there was already enough regulation. It’s about whether the regulation is implemented and enforced. You can have the best governance system in the world, but if the people who are in charge of it don’t have good intentions then it will never work.”

Nevertheless, despite the stark testimonies and evidence he has encountered during his research, the University of Essex academic still has hope that things can improve.

If multinational corporations can set aside an exclusively fiscal focus, governments root out corruption and the fashion industry ends its obsession with vapid buzzwords, Professor Chowdhury has faith that things can start to look up.

“The real solution is people taking responsibility, which is exactly what didn’t happen after Rana Plaza and has to occur now.” ■