



# OUR VOICES, OUR SAFETY

Bangladeshi Garment Workers Speak Out

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY + RECOMMENDATIONS**

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## Our Voices, Our Safety

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Two and a half years after the Rana Plaza building collapse and the launch of the first industrial reform programs to address the pervasive fire and structural hazards in Bangladeshi garment factories, workers report they will not be safe without a voice at work. Fire, electrical, and structural safety in garment factories is essential and will save lives. But these renovations and repairs must be the foundation for additional reforms that address the intimidation and violence that keep workers silent, afraid to voice concerns and put forward solutions to ensure their own safety. A next phase of reforms must instill the lessons that respect for workers is as important to safety as are fire exits, that workers' perspectives on safety are as important as the findings of building engineers. Without it workers' lives and health will continue to be in jeopardy.

Between October 2014 and January 2015, the International Labor Rights Forum interviewed more than 70 workers with the assistance of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity. We set out to talk with them about fire, electrical, and structural safety issues. But almost all workers wanted to talk to us about more than the necessary technical repairs and renovations in their factories. This report is an attempt to do justice to their words and to tell the story of safety from the point of view of the workers we interviewed.

The workers we interviewed describe a chilling web of social relations of intimidation and violence that spans factories and apparel companies, workers' communities, government agencies, law enforcement, and even their families. The effect

of this web is that workers are silenced. They emphasize that until it is broken they cannot be safe. In the words of one worker, "We say nothing. They say everything. Then how would we say that it's safe?"

The workers explain that safety is never just a thing that is given them, but a process in which they are actively and vocally engaged. They tell us "how to be safe," a reciprocal process where factory owners and the government listen to workers and workers to them. Safety, the workers say, is fundamentally about mutual respect for their shared humanity and consideration for their different needs. This insight is at the core of these workers' understanding of safety.

Unfortunately, safety, as a process of reciprocity and mutual respect, is something the workers we interviewed rarely experience. Instead they report production targets and workloads so high managers prevent them from taking necessary restroom breaks, drinking water, leaving the factory at a reasonable hour, or getting leaves from work to attend to their own or their family members' medical emergencies. They tell us about wages so low they are effectively trapped in abusive conditions, and about sexual harassment and abuse for which the victims are blamed. In a word, instead of a safe working environment, they describe to us, with some notable exceptions, a state of abject powerlessness. This is the opposite of safety, from workers' point of view.

The social and economic issues that workers brought to the fore of our conversations about

safety are not only legitimate safety issues in their own right, but also indicators that fire and building safety could be in jeopardy in the long run despite the current reform efforts. Workers' heavy and increasing workloads and associated abuses reflect the industry's intense price pressures and compressed production schedules, which managers enforce on workers, demanding more pieces per hour, more hours per day, and less leave from work. These are the same pressures that originally caused factory owners in nearly every garment factory in Bangladesh to circumvent basic safety measures and could do so again when the attention of the world is turned elsewhere, and when the current reform programs come to an end. Indeed, there is growing evidence that these production pressures are already causing dangerous delays of essential safety repairs and renovations in most factories that are being investigated.<sup>1</sup>

The two main industrial reform programs, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, differ markedly in their attention to the social relations of violence and intimidation that threaten workers' safety. The Accord is a power-sharing agreement between apparel companies and unions; its premise is that companies and worker organizations should engage as equals in solving safety problems. The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety is an agreement among apparel companies alone and does not provide a meaningful voice to workers or trade unions.

Worker leaders in factories covered by the Accord program describe a new level of access to factory inspections and inspection results, unparalleled in industry social auditing, where audit reports are typically proprietary to the industry, workers excluded from inspections, and unions sidelined from remediation programs. They talk about the open collaboration between the Accord and signatory union federations, and describe several cases where the Accord and its signatory brands have defended workers against retaliation when they voiced safety concerns or partook in Accord

investigations. By contrast, the Alliance, in its promotional materials and according to workers we interviewed, appears to overlook incidents of harassment and violence against union members.

The next phase of safety reforms should build on the progress achieved under the Accord. The goal should be an end to the reprisals against workers who make their voices heard, and a safe working environment where factory owners and managers engage with workers with mutual respect. To achieve this goal, the Bangladeshi government must register unions according to the law, and investigate and publicly denounce factory owners for using thugs to silence workers through violence and intimidation. Factory owners must adopt a zero-tolerance policy for managers who threaten or inflict violence against workers, and urge the industry associations to do the same toward their members. Apparel brands and retailers must reform their purchasing practices to cease commercial demands that contribute to the silencing of workers, committing instead to prices and delivery times in line with the cost and time of producing goods in compliance with all safety and labor regulations. People everywhere can play a critical role in advancing these social safety reforms by holding apparel brands and retailers to account, urging meaningful action from governments, demanding that workers' voices be heard, always asking: Do we know what it means to be safe for workers?





## Our Voices, Our Safety

# RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Key steps for the Government of Bangladesh:**

- Exeditiously register unions that meet administrative requirements, and eliminate legal and administrative obstacles to union formation in consultation with independent union federations.<sup>2</sup>
- Investigate, hold accountable, and publicly denounce factory owners for using and employing local political leaders and hired thugs to silence workers through threats, intimidation, and violence, as well as police and security personnel for threatening or inflicting violence on people who engage in legitimate trade union activities.<sup>3</sup>
- Convene a wage board, with meaningful representation from independent union federations, with the goal of increasing the legal minimum wage for garment workers to a living wage, based on the demands and requirements of Bangladeshi workers and their unions.
- Work with women's rights organizations to develop necessary legal, policy, and administrative reforms, educational programs, and other governmental actions to address violence against women in the workplace, the community and the home.

### **Key steps for factory owners:**

- Adopt a zero-tolerance policy for managers who threaten or inflict violence against workers who join or seek to form unions and immediately sever ties to any political leader, thugs or others who threaten or inflict violence on workers to keep the union out of their factory.
- Request that the industry associations, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, adopt a zero-tolerance policy toward any member that uses threats, intimidation, or violence against trade union members, worker leaders, their families, and community members to prevent the formation of an independent union in their factories.
- Tell workers and independent union federations that they will remain neutral should workers wish to form a union in their factory, and implement that commitment.

### **Key steps for apparel brands and retailers:**

- Sign supplier agreements where prices cover the full cost of producing goods in compliance with all safety and labor regulations and where delivery deadlines are feasible without excessive workloads, overtime, or subcontracting. Assume financial responsibility for safety repairs as required under Article 22 of the Accord.
- Invite the factory union, the occupational health and safety committee, and/or a union federation to participate in social audits, and share the audit results with these organizations.
- Publicly disclose supplier factories to allow external monitors as well as workers themselves to report violations and hold buyers accountable for safety violations.
- Use contracts, commercial incentives and other forms of leverage to hold suppliers strictly accountable for complying with Bangladesh's laws on freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining.

### **Key steps for the US Government:**

The US Government should use its full range of trade, commercial, and diplomatic influence with the Government of Bangladesh and with apparel companies to ensure each party takes responsibility for ending the reprisals against workers who speak out in defense of their own safety. The US Government should specifically:

- Fully utilize existing trade and investment programs, including the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and the United States-Bangladesh Trade and Investment Cooperation Forum Agreement (TICFA), to require the Government of Bangladesh to ensure protection for all workers who seek to organize unions in defense of their own rights and safety.
- Ensure women workers have an equal ability to speak out without fear of gender-based violence or other forms of discrimination at work, and ensure safe, secure and confidential access to remedy when abuse occurs.
- Direct US international aid to provide support for safety programs that include workers in positions of leadership and authority and that actively protect workers who seek to organize unions in defense of their own safety.
- Place diplomatic pressure on Bangladesh to take concrete measures to address incidents of threats, intimidation, and violence against workers who seek to make their voices heard and organize unions to defend their rights and protect their safety.
- Ensure that federal procurement dollars only flow to suppliers who can demonstrate that their Bangladeshi supplier factories are inspected for safety standards violations and that violations are remedied in accordance with a time-bound action plan. This includes the US military exchange stores, which continue to source apparel from factories in Bangladesh that have not made critical safety improvements.

# Sample Worker Quotes from *Our Voices, Our Safety*

## Violence and silence

They are coming inside the factory, roaming, listening to who is saying what. They are local gang members, understand. They are roaming around like this. People can't say anything out of fear.

— Mamun Islam, knitting machine operator, 28 years old

The workers were told: “We’ll throw you into a 30 or 40-foot hole and your body will never be found again.” They were given 60,000 or 70,000 taka (US\$ 800 or 900) and they decided to take the money and to leave the factory and leave the union. They were so terrified that they didn’t even manage to communicate with the union federation for the next six or seven months.

— Laboni Akter, Senior Organizer, Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers’ Federation, 35 years old

This is our request to the government and the owners that we, the workers, don’t get beaten up by the police.

— Anika Kazi, sewing machine operator, 22 years old

## Poverty and silence

When is it going to fall down? Allah! So many people died by stairs like these. Who knows when we will die? But poor people do it accepting death. We have to save our stomach, thinking about the stomach.

— Rehana Uddin, wooling machine operator, believes she is 35 or 40 years old

## Gender-based violence

We women can only shed tears. Everyone is a victim of abuse: by their husbands, by the company, by the garment factory owners. If we could be a little liberated from this abuse, all women workers, wherever we are, whatever factory we work for, or maybe we work for a household, that would be the biggest achievement for me.

— Taslima Sultana, sewing machine operator, 31 years old

## End Notes and Photo Credits

<sup>1</sup> For example, Clean Clothes Campaign, International Labor Rights Forum, Maquila Solidarity Network, and Workers Rights Consortium. “Evaluation of H&M Compliance with Safety Action Plans for Strategic Suppliers in Bangladesh.” September 2015. <http://laborrights.org/hmcapsreport> (Accessed November 2, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> These steps can include: lowering the threshold for union registration from thirty to ten percent and eliminating other union registration requirements that violate ILO Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association; directing the Joint Directorate of Labour to establish consistent procedures to handle union registrations and prosecuting unfair labor practices; prohibiting the Ministry of Labour and Employment from providing the employer with a copy of the union registration petition and the names of worker representatives, and ensuring that the petition and names are kept confidential; directing the Industrial Police and local police to consistently accept “First Incident Reports” from unions regarding violence against union members and workers; establishing a tripartite independent committee to investigate rejected union registrations since 2013 to determine whether or not they were properly rejected, and to ensure registration of those unions that meet administrative requirements.

<sup>3</sup> This includes dropping the pending criminal charges against labor activists and advancing a transparent investigation of the murder of labor organizer Aminul Islam, bringing the perpetrators of this crime to justice.

## Worker voice and safety

We say nothing. They say everything. Then how would we say that it’s safe?

— Fatema Chokroborti, sewing machine operator, 27 years old

Safety means we all, brothers and sisters, are united, that the company listens to us, to the small demands we have, and we also get to listen to them. That’s how we want to be safe. ... We all—brothers and sisters and owners—we all might have desires. Both of us could mediate this thing by sitting together. Suppose we wanted two things. The company could tell us that, “Look, let’s you and us both survive. You take one, and compromise the other.”

— Surya Begum, knitting machine operator, believes she is 22 or 23 years old

I think that whatever problems there might be in our factories, we, the owners and workers, could solve them together. I had a big hope, and I believe it.

— Tareq Ahmed, quality inspector, 25 years old

## Unionizing and safety

It’s not possible doing it alone. For example, if I am alone in the factory and talk to two or three other people, my job will be gone. That’s why, I feel we need to unionize.

— Mohammad Rahman, linking machine operator, believes he is 26 or 27 years old

We managed to get our factory management to care about us. This is a major challenge: to get factory management to have a proper mindset about their workers, to understand that their workers should not be ignored and that they should live a life with dignity. If after all this suffering we could form trade unions in every factory, we could prevent more Rana Plazas and Tazreens from happening.

— Aleya Akter, factory union steward, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation, 29 years old

*“Our Voices, Our Safety provides the perfect combination of analysis and background of the Bangladesh garment factory situation and workers’ lived experience. Anyone who cares about garment workers and global development must read this report.”*

**-Kim Bobo, Founding Director, Interfaith Worker Justice**

*“This is a critical, devastating report and a rallying cry... Revealed here is a mind-blowing confluence of violence inflicted on the bodies and beings of women workers: intimidation, rape, silencing, harassment, beatings, torture, unsafe buildings, denial of breaks, dismissal of opinions, unequal pay, slave wages. Factory owners, huge corporate chains, retailers and consumers ourselves are all complicit in a system that denies workers their voice and full participation in their own futures and well-being. What if women in the west decided that we valued the women in Bangladesh who make our clothes more than we valued the items we were purchasing? What if, instead of dressing ourselves in the terror, pain, and abuse of the oppressed, we celebrated their talent, generosity and labor and rose with all our hearts for their rights, safety, value and dignity?”*

**-Eve Ensler, playwright and activist**

*“When I met with garment workers in Bangladesh, I heard similar stories of perseverance and courage amidst hardship that I will never forget. When these workers – mostly women – are seeking to change the harsh conditions by attempting to register unions or make bargaining demands, many are facing threats and firings. This report should be heard as a call to action for factory owners, apparel brands and retailers, and government to end this pattern of violence and intimidation and to ensure safety.”*

**-George Miller, U.S. Representative from California (1975-2015)**

*“It is the incredible bravery, determination and perseverance of these women workers that is the hope for meaningful and lasting change in the apparel factories. A core tenet of the occupational health and safety profession is that no factory-level safety program can be effective without the genuine participation of informed, knowledgeable and active workers in identifying and correcting workplace hazards. Bangladesh’s garment factories will not improve unless the women workers in them have a meaningful voice and are protected from retaliation and discrimination. This report is an invaluable contribution to highlighting the inescapable need for a central role for Bangladesh’s women garment workers in creating and maintaining safe and healthful factories.”*

**-Garrett D. Brown, Certified Industrial Hygienist and Coordinator of  
the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network**

*“This extensive and heart-felt report on the voices of Bangladeshi women garment workers is a must-read for anyone who is concerned about how and where their clothes are made and the inequities of the global garment supply chain. Real women’s empowerment in Bangladesh isn’t just about getting a pay-check, it’s about having a job with dignity, the right to form a union, and the responsibility of factory owners, western brands, and the Bangladeshi government to heed these calls for action. The power in this report is the garment workers’ voices themselves.”*

**-Liz Shuler, Secretary-Treasurer, AFL-CIO**

*“This report is a must-read for anyone interested in workers’ rights, particularly women workers. The struggles of the workers in Bangladesh and the incredible organizing they are doing is a calling cry for us globally to push for workers’ rights in terms of the right to work, rights at work, the right to an adequate standard of living, and the right to leisure. It requires international coordination and a regulatory framework that prevents the exploitation of workers all over the world.”*

**-Radhika Balakrishnan, Faculty Director, Center for Women’s Global Leadership at Rutgers University**

*“I am disheartened and outraged to hear of the blatant labor rights violations occurring in the garment industry in Bangladesh. The actions police and factory owners are taking to prevent union organizing and attacking workers’ rights are reprehensible. The actions of male factory managers in abusing female factory workers is despicable. I am proud to support ILRF in shining a light on these violations. Congress needs to take a bigger role in working with our trade partners and governments to improve labor standards in Bangladesh and around the world. We need to protect workers from harassment and ensure that workers have a safe space in which to organize. I am committed to working with my colleagues to promote trade that leads to better, safer and more just workplaces for everyone.”*

**-Jan Schakowsky, U.S. Representative from Illinois & Member of ILRF Board of Directors**

*“My hope is that this report will help get factory owners, apparel brands and government to ensure our rights, a living wage, and put an end to retaliation against trade unionists. A living wage would result in good production. Improved labor-management relations would increase productivity and bring peace to the industry.”*

**-Babul Akhter, President, Bangladesh Garment & Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF)  
and Secretary General, IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC)**