

Testimony of Reba Sikder
Former garment worker at Ether Tex factory at Rana Plaza, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Senate Foreign Relations Committee
Prospects for Democratic Reconciliation and Improving Workers' Rights in Bangladesh
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Testimony provided verbally by Reba Sikder in Bangla, then transcribed and translated into English.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

I am 18 years old and was born in Gopalganj, a district just south of Dhaka. My parents could not afford for me to attend school after third grade, so at the age of eight I began working as a domestic worker. In 2008, I moved to Dhaka because my cousin said I could earn more money there. I started working in a garment factory when I was 14 years old. In 2012, I began working as a sewing machine operator at Ether Tex, a clothing factory on the sixth floor of Rana Plaza. I earned 3,800 taka (US\$49) as a base salary and with overtime, I earned approximately 8,000 taka (US\$103) per month. I usually worked 14 hours per day, six to seven days per week. My regular shift was from 8:00am to 10:00pm but sometimes I would work as late as 3:00am if the factory was rushing to finish an order.

On April 23, 2013, I reported to work as usual. During the day, my colleagues and I heard that a massive crack had appeared in one of the columns of the building. Management allowed us to leave but with the strict instruction that we must return to work the following morning. When I arrived at Rana Plaza on the 24th, I found many workers standing outside, refusing to enter the building because they believed it was unsafe. However, my line chief insisted that if we did not return to work we would not get paid our wages for the month and also would not receive our overtime benefits. I saw one of the production managers slap a female worker who refused to enter. One of the managers announced to us that the building had been inspected and was safe and that we needed to get to work because we had to meet our shipment deadline. Finally, despite our fears about the cracked column, my colleagues and I entered the building and began to work at our machines. Within 15 minutes, the electricity went out and the generator was switched on. Moments later, I heard a loud noise, like an explosion, and the building collapsed.

In those first seconds, surrounded by the sound of the building crumbling, my colleagues and I began to run towards the stairs. Suddenly, caught on a sewing machine, I fell to the floor, landing on top of two male and three female colleagues. The two men died instantly and I passed out. When I awoke, I heard one of my coworkers crying for help and asking for water. I said, "I am sorry, I cannot help you, my foot is pinned beneath the machine." Then he handed me his cell phone and asked me to give it to his mother. He spoke to me for a few minutes and then fell silent and I realized that he had died. I started screaming for help and asking for water because I was so thirsty. Some workers lying near me responded that they did not have any water. I said, "Please, whatever you have, please give it to me. I am so thirsty, I am dying." Then one of my coworkers gave me her urine to drink.

Finally, I was able to move the machine off of my foot and I started crawling towards the sound of other workers' voices. I crawled a little further and reached a small opening that was created by the columns and walls that had fallen. There were 30 other workers in this small area. I did not know how much time had passed since the collapse, but one of the workers checked her cell phone and told us that we had been trapped for two days. I could not believe it.

We began looking for a way to escape and we found another worker who was trapped and asking for help. We told her that we could not help her because there was barely enough room to move around and she said, "If you cannot help me, at least I can help you escape from this place because I saw many workers go this way," and she pointed us in the direction that the other workers had gone. It was very dark and we had to crawl a long way. I began to cry because I thought I would never escape and would never see my parents again. Finally, we felt some air coming from the outside and crawled towards it. We yelled for help and about 30 minutes later some members of the Army rescue team came and were able to get us out. Of the 30 workers who were trapped in that small space, only six of us survived.

It was not until I was rescued that I realized that my ankle was broken and I began to feel tremendous pain. I was rushed to the hospital where I was able to contact my family. I had to have surgery on my ankle and I still bear the scars from the column that cut my neck. I have almost constant pain in my lower back and both of my ankles still hurt. I have difficulty sleeping and often experience nightmares. But what has been most debilitating is the trauma and panic I still feel, which has made it virtually impossible to find new work. I feel afraid just looking at tall buildings and I am scared to go inside. I worry there will be another collapse.

Once I was discharged from the hospital, I went to live with my parents in their village in Gopalganj. Both of my parents are elderly and cannot work. After the accident, I received 30,000 taka (US\$390) in compensation from Primark. When I was in the hospital, I was given 10,000 taka (US\$129) from the Prime Minister's fund. But my family and I had to use all of this money to cover our living expenses and now we have nothing. My younger brother, who works at a jute mill in the Khulna area, sends home 2,000 taka (US\$25) per month to our family. We live on a small patch of land where we are able to grow a small amount of rice, which we must split with our landlord. It is extremely difficult to live off the money that my brother sends home every month.

My life has been so incredibly hard in the last year and my heart breaks even more for all the other workers and families affected by the Rana Plaza building collapse. Because of the accident, I no longer have any hopes or dreams for the future like I did before.

I would like to ask the US government to help ensure that the brands – including the American companies Children's Place, JCPenney, Cato Fashions and Walmart – that benefited from the work of my colleagues and me pay us full and fair compensation. Please think about the workers who have lost their limbs, their feet and their hands, and about the families who have lost their sons and daughters, wives and husbands. Please think about their pain and how they are forced to live. I would also urge the US government to tell American brands to sign the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. This is the only way to prevent future workers and their families from suffering the same tragedy that I have experienced.