

2015 Women's Empowerment Principles Annual Event
Unlimited Potential: Business Partners for Gender Equality
Kalpona Akter's presentation on 'Not Business As Usual' panel

Introductory remarks

Twenty years ago, when the Beijing Declaration was developed, I was 18 years old. A few years prior, I had been fired from a garment factory in retaliation for trying to form a union in my factory. I had attended only five years of primary school before entering the workforce at age twelve. In the beginning I earned \$6 a month working for companies like Walmart. It wasn't enough to feed my mom, my younger siblings and my disabled father. At 18, I had already been married, in what became an abusive relationship, and left the relationship. Even though I had been blacklisted from working in any garment factory ever again, I decided to not put up with abuse. I became an organizer to try to make conditions better.

Twenty years later, there is much less child labor in the garment industry, though it still exists in other industries such as domestic work. The government has taken initiatives to include more and more girls in education and is providing some subsidies. The mentality that girls don't need to get education because they're just going to get married has changed. NGOs have played a very important role in these achievements.

But there is still a long road ahead for women's empowerment. Women workers are silenced, in the factories and at home, through violence or the threats of violence, by means of fear – of being tortured at work, of losing our jobs. We face sexual harassment. We are told we are worth less, we shouldn't speak, we shouldn't be leaders.

I know that change is possible, which is why I am glad to be here with you today. Global corporations have a tremendous influence on Bangladesh's economy and women's well-being. Garments are 80% of our exports and women are 80% of the industry's 4 million workforce. The industry continues to expand rapidly, despite the Rana Plaza building collapse – the deadliest disaster in the history of the global garment industry.

The building collapse was not an accident. It was the result of complete negligence from the building owner, factory owners, government and the multinational buyers, whose audits had failed to address the blatant and pervasive building code violations.

To make real changes in the industry, it is critical that corporations ensure living wages, rather than creating programs aimed to address the poverty caused by the low wages they pay. Workers' voices – especially those of women workers – need to be included and listened to, both on the factory floor where their rights to form unions and collectively bargain must be respected – as well as through agreements between unions and corporations addressing conditions in multiple factories. A tremendous achievement following Rana Plaza is the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, which nearly 200 apparel brands and retailers have signed, together with unions, to make factories safer. After the US suspended Bangladesh's GSP trade benefits, workers were initially able to gain many more factory level unions; however, workers

are now facing increasing retaliation when they organize, including threats, beatings, and robberies. When global corporations take meaningful action in their global supply chains, in line with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Women's Empowerment Principles, truly listening to grassroots women workers' voices, much can be done to improve livelihoods and lives.

Introduction of Mahinur Begum

Since the Rana Plaza collapse, survivors like Mahinur Begum here, who was only 16 years old when she was forced inside the cracking building and trapped under the rubble for nearly 24 hours, continue to struggle to get full and fair compensation. Unfortunately, the government doesn't have a system for workplace injury compensation and hasn't paid the victims from the donations it collected, and so we have had turn to the multinational companies to ask them to ensure fair compensation for the injured workers and families of the deceased. Most Rana Plaza buyers haven't willingly paid into the ILO-managed fund, even though among them are huge companies like Walmart, Benetton, Children's Place, JC Penney, Inditex and Mango, any one of which could easily fill the \$9 million gap remaining in the Fund before the second anniversary if they had enough will to act.

For people like Mahinur, who earned less than \$100 per month, and is too traumatized to return to the industry, from which she is blacklisted anyways, receiving her fair compensation means at least not being in such a dire economic situation. Some Rana Plaza survivors have been homeless or have had to pull their kids out of school and send them to work to try to get by.