

Infrastructure Facilities in the Pre-Rana Plaza and Post-Rana plaza time period: A Study on the Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Even being the World's second largest apparel exporter from its origin Bangladesh garment industry is cuddled with labour problems. The apparel industry started its journey in the early 70s when the country also got independent. Hence, the new born country is weak in terms of its socio economical and political context, was not in a matured situation to take up labour problems. The garment industries infamous for the industrial calamities in which almost every incident happened due to the failure in infrastructure facilities. It is noted after the Rana Plaza incident a considerable improvement in the infrastructure facilities have occurred. The study divides the condition of the infrastructure into two heads- Pre Rana Plaza and Post Rana Plaza.

1. Introduction

The readymade garment industries of Bangladesh have surprised the international apparel sector by the tremendous growth they have gained during the first twenty years. With an unprecedented growth, the industry could not properly manage the labour problems in an efficient manner. In fact the labour mechanism and the government agencies were not able to deal with it owing to the fact that Bangladesh is a new born country. Among various other problems, the infrastructure facilities in the apparel sector has been criticized internationally due to its vulnerable nature and visible labor rights violation. . On April 24, 2014, the Rana Plaza building collapse killed 1132 people and injured more than 2500 mainly due to the unsafe building (ILO Official website). The International Labour Organization shows great concern over the occupational safety and health¹ which is reflected in the immediate responses taken by the International Labour Organization and other associated bodies. The responsibility of the industrial calamities directly fell on the shoulders of the incompetent infrastructure facilities and worst government mechanism. According to the study the word infrastructure facilities points to the building, emergency exit, ventilation and electricity facilities. The bad infrastructure facilities are the leeway of the hazardous nature of the industry. The Rana Plaza incident of the study divides the infrastructure facilities under two different time periods- pre Rana Plaza and Post Rana Plaza period. Shockingly, the World's second largest apparel industry accepted one of the largest industrial calamities of the country because of the corrupted government agencies and the weak labour laws. However, the national level campaigning by the nongovernmental organizations, self-help groups, and human rights associations followed by the international campaigning against the rights violations in the industry has given an additional attention to the apparel sector (Clean cloths campaigning Official web site). The industrial accident of Rana plaza made the sector a heated topic in the global apparel

market. Readymade Garment industry of Bangladesh is world's second largest apparel industry, with a number of international buyers. European unions and North American countries had boycotted the products from Bangladesh and US suspended the trade benefits over safety which really affected the international apparel movement and pushed the brands like Walmart, Wrangler to stake a position in the issue (Reuters 2013). The situation helped the industry to improve their working condition due to the series of protests. The letter which is sent by the 'clean cloth campaigning' to the ambassador of the alliance of Bangladesh workers safety certainly pointed out the negligence of the concerned authority on safety and security of the laborers. The letter critically looks at the fact that 62 percentage of the factories do not have viable fire exits (Alliance for Bangladesh workers safety 2016).

2. Materials and Methods

The first part of the study has employed the secondary materials and other studies whereas the second part of the study relies on the primary materials which are directly collected from the women workers of the apparel factories from Dhaka during my PhD field trip.

Infrastructure Condition in the Readymade Garment Industries: Pre Rana Plaza Time.

A series of fire accidents have been occurring in Bangladesh garment industry. The unsafe working conditions of garment industry kill people, the reports say. The below mentioned is a list of few fire accidents which came across the media.

- January 2005 – A fire at a garment factory outside the capital Dhaka killed 22 people and injured more than 50.
- April 2005 – At least 64 people were killed and about 100 injured when a garment factory building collapsed in Dhaka.
- February 2006 – Twenty one workers were killed and dozens injured when the Spectrum garment factory building collapsed in Dhaka.

¹ ILO estimates that 2.02 million workers die due to the work related accidents or disease which they usually get affected from the unhealthy working conditions. <https://www.ilo.org/global/standards/subjects-covered-by-international-labour-standards/occupational-safety-and-health/lang-en/index.htm>

- February 2006 – A fire ripped through a textile factory in the port city of Chittagong, killing 65 workers and injuring dozens.
- February 2010 - A fire at a garment factory in a Dhaka suburb killed 21 workers and injured about 50.
- December 2010 – A fire at the Sportswear factory supplying global retailers killed at least 26 people and injured about 100 just outside Dhaka.
- November 2012 - A fire at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Dhaka supplying global brands killed 112 workers and injured more than 150
- April 2013 - At least 1,136 people were killed and hundreds injured when an eight-storeyed building housing five garment factories supplying global brands collapsed on the outskirts of Dhaka.

Source : Star Online 13 October 2016.

Women workers face safety risks in the industry and suffer range from physical injuries, ranging from simple cut injury to slippery in ground related issues such as falling. Most of the women workers are assigned in the stitching departments and there is a possibility of finger cut injuries and other blunt injuries due to the use of old machineries. In addition to that the workplace is usually congested and suffocating and the worker is stuck between the machines and the co-workers causing an increase in the possibilities for accidents (Mahmud 2017). The insufficiency of fire exits, narrow fire gates and inadequate and locked gates create the hazardous work situation in the garment industry.

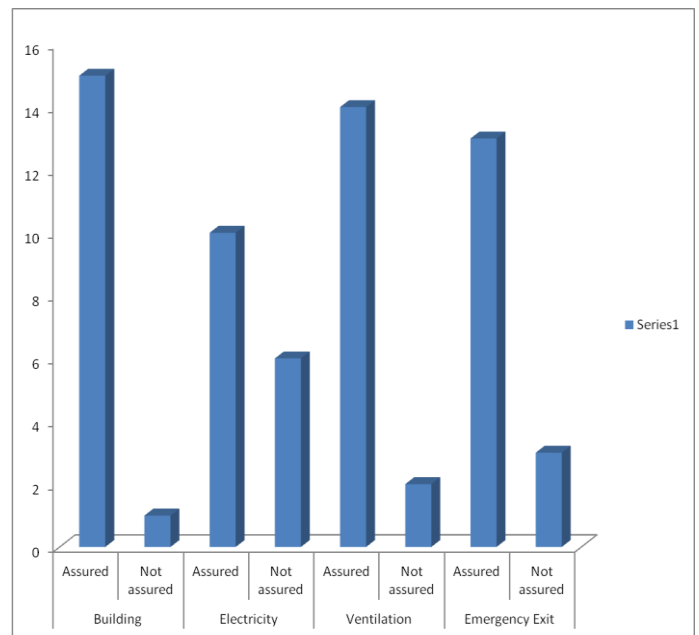
The studies which have been undertaken on the deadly accidents happened in the garment industry came up with shocking results. The article named the deadly incidents in Bangladeshi apparel industry and illustrating the cause and its effects of these incidents reveals (Hassan Muhammad Islam 2017) that while 94.2 percentage deadly incidents occurred due to the fire accidents, 3 percentage occurred in consequence of the building collapse which is constructed on without meeting the legal standards and the rest 3 percentage is with various other reasons. Bangladesh Labour Act is clear about the need of a fire exit and fire regulatory system in each garment factory shop which is visibly violating even the fiber and yarn easily catch fire (Bangladesh Labour act of 2006). The article adds that the fire accidents are very common in the garment industry owing to electric wire short circuit, caused by manual activities and boiler blast. But from the studies it is understood that the number of death due to the building collapse is greater than number of death caused in one fire accident.

Studies have been also undertaken on the health hazards faced by women workers in the apparel industry and suggest the idea that the female workers in the garment industry in Bangladesh are exposed to a wide range of physical health perils due to poor sitting arrangement, indigent dust and chemical management, and intense nature of the job. Apparently, the massive campaigning had happened on the garment industry concerning the infrastructure facilities and basic safety. The role of governmental impotency was crucial in most of the industrial accidents, such as Rana plaza accident and Tazreen fashion incident. The local municipal

authority of Savar upzilla, has given permission to Rana Plaza factory owners to build a five-storeyed building on one basement in 2005. When the time of accident the Rana plaza was a nine-storeyed building with more than 5000 workers and around 300 shops and a bank (Ansary, Barua 2015).

The infrastructure Facilities: Post Rana Plaza (current condition) Period Analysis.

The condition of building and other infrastructure facilities are discussed in the light of the governmental parameters. Selected women workers are interviewed and the result has been shown below. The general opinion of the women workers is that the condition of the building electricity and fire safety is better these days. The industry have seen bigger fire accidents due to unsafe wiring in the past. The poor condition of the building facilities were evident at the time of Rana Plaza accident which prompts the factory owners to maintain better building facilities. The worker opined at the time of interview that the factory management conducts fire drill every week or month. The worker could see a growing concern from the management. *The spacious working condition gives positive energy* said a women worker, *it used to be very congested, sticky and warm* she added. But most of the workers are not aware of the changing government policies at the core level and the international interference. But the workers could see new machineries coming up, constructions taking place and they could feel a slight change even in the pattern of conversation of the top authorities. A general apathy shows that the readymade garment industries of Bangladesh have seen a tremendous growth in terms of infrastructure facilities that happened immediately after the Rana Plaza and its aftermath. The following chart prepared on the basis of the responses have been collected from the field regarding the basic facilities like building, electricity and fire.



Source: Graph based on the response from the women work during field trip 2018 June July

Apart from Electricity, all other indicators namely Building, Ventilation, Emergency exit shows credible improvement. The electricity facility is provided in every factory. The means of

electricity is usually generator. The short circuit and spark are the primary factors that lead to big accidents. Safe wiring is crucial to make sure that the workers are safe at work. Studies say that fire accidents are more in number than building collapse. Tazreen factory incident was a major fire accident in the garment factories' history. One respondent says that there is no proper care to handle the fire problem. In every other factories there are fire extinguishers and workers are aware of their operations. Occasional fire drills also happen in the factory. The emergency exit was observed in 15 factories but one respondent opined that there was no proper emergency exit.

Nahidul Nayun Hassan is of the view that the Accord inspects the factory's working condition and provides safety and clearance certificate which facilitates the women workers, a better working condition. *The representative from Awaj foundation also goes with the inspection when the Accord conducts it. Accord has around 2000 factories which come under the working premises and it could make better results than Alliance, I could say,* Nayun added.

The provision of alarm to prevent industrial calamities brought up further positive changes in the infrastructure facilities of the garment factories. The export oriented factories have seen a lot of changes due to the international pressure especially in Dhaka, but still there are evidences about worse factory conditions on the other side of the country.

Reasons for the Infrastructure Development

Series protest and international level campaigning.

The country has seen a wide range of protests in regard to the Rana Plaza incident and its aftermath. The protests led by human rights activists, self-help groups and non-government organizations brought out a positive result and the international buyers of the garments in the foreign countries themselves supported the campaigning.

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Accord and Alliance.

Accord says that it is an independent, and legally binding agreement between brands and trade unions to work towards a safe and healthy garment and textile industry in Bangladesh. The ACCORD was born immediately after the building collapse of Rana Plaza holding a goal to keep the workers away from the fire accidents, building collapse or any other accidents which could be prevented with appropriate health and safety measures. ALLIANCE is a legally binding five year commitment to improve work place safety in Bangladesh. The role of Alliance and accord has played a vital role in the workplace improvement of the apparel sector in Bangladesh.

- Factory inspection:
- Monitoring remediation
- Safety training
- Resolving safety complaints
- Training
- Worker improvement:

Government Initiatives and Labour Laws.

The government has amended the act of 2006 after the incident, to bring changes in the industry. The government was aware of the failures of the Bangladesh labour act of 2006 and it helped the amendment to modify the existing framework. There are three amendments which have taken place after the Rana Plaza - on 2013, 2015 and 2018 respectively.

Non-Government Organizations and self-help Groups

The role of non-government organization and self-help groups are noted to make the positive changes. The organizations like workers' solidarity center, Awaj Foundation and international organizations can be counted in this regard. The organizations molds the leadership qualities, rights awareness and technical development in the country. In short, a more inclusive and humanitarian framework can guarantee safety to the workers to a great extent. Hence the Awaj Foundation is an organization founded and run by garment workers, the core level issues could be addressed (Official website Awaj foundation)