


Forum: The Third General Assembly Topic:

# Addressing Labor Rights Violations and Unsafe Working Conditions in Fast Fashion Supply Chains in Bangladesh

Chair

## Introduction

Labor rights violations and unsafe working conditions continue to be a major problem in the fast fashion industry, especially in Bangladesh. The country's ready-made garment (RMG) industry is one of the largest in the world and is a key part of its economy, it employs over 4 million workers, most of which are women, and generates around 80% of Bangladesh's export earnings. Bangladesh is the world's second-largest exporter of ready-made garments after China, providing jobs for many people and earning a lot of money through clothing exports. Many well know international fashion brands rely on factories in Bangladesh because production costs are low and clothing can be made quickly. These factories supply clothing to customers around the world. However, the pressure to produce big amounts of clothing at low prices often leads to poor working conditions and the mistreatment of workers including low wages, excessive working hours, and unsafe factories making this not only a national issue but also an international concern that affects global supply chains, businesses and consumers.

The main problem in Bangladesh is how RMG industry face many problems such as, low wages, long working hours, forced overtime, unsafe factory buildings, and limited access to healthcare and other basic rights. In some factories, workers are not allowed to join labour unions or speak up about unsafe conditions without fear of losing their jobs. Women make up most of the garment workforce, making them especially exposed to discrimination, harassment, and unfair treatment. Although working conditions have improved in some factories since the Rana Plaza disaster, wages stay unbalanced. In 2024, the Fair Labor Association reported that the new minimum wage for garment workers is still 51.8% below the estimated living wage for Dhaka meaning workers continue to struggle to meet their basic needs.

In the past, this issue gained worldwide attention after several major factory accidents. For example: the collapse of the Rana Plaza in 2013, which killed more than 1,100 workers and injured thousands more. The disaster showed the dangerous conditions of the RMG industry and led to

increased pressure on governments, factory owners, and international clothing brands to improve workplace safety. Since then, safety inspections and labour reforms have been introduced, but many challenges stay, especially in smaller factories throughout global supply chains.

This issue strongly connects to this year's AMMUN theme, "Moderating Morality," because it shows the conflict between low-cost production and the responsibility to protect workers' rights and safety. While fast fashion companies seek to maximize profits by reducing production costs, they also have a responsibility to provide fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for workers' rights. Resolving this issue requires balancing economic interests with ethical responsibility

## Definition of Key Terms

### Fast Fashion:

A business model in the clothing industry where brands produce enormous amounts of trendy and low-cost clothing quickly. This model relies on fast production cycles and cheap labour to meet high consumer demand.

### Supply Chain

The full process of making and delivering a product, from raw materials to the final item sold in stores. In fast fashion, supply chains often include multiple countries and factories, making it hard to track working conditions.

### Garment Industry

A part of manufacturing that focuses on producing clothing. In Bangladesh the garment industry is one of the most important parts of the economy.

## Labor Rights

Basic rights that protect workers including fair pay, safe working conditions, reasonable working hours and the right to join unions and speak up about workspace issues.

## Worker Exploitation

The unfair treatment of workers, often involving low wages, unsafe conditions excessive working hours or denial of basic rights.

## Minimum Wage

The lowest legal amount that employers must pay for workers. In many developing countries, minimum wages in the garment sector are often considered too low to cover basic living costs.

## Living Wage

A wage that is high enough for workers and their families to afford basic needs, such as food, housing, healthcare, education, and transportation.

## Collective Bargaining

The process through which workers, usually represented by labour unions, negotiate with employers for better wages, working conditions and benefits

## Subcontracting

The practice of hiring another factory or company to complete part or all a production order. This can make it harder to check labour standards and working conditions.

### Human Rights Due Diligence (HRDD):

A process in which companies identify, prevent, reduce, and address the negative impacts their business activities may have on workers' rights and working conditions. HRDD is promoted under the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and encourages businesses to take proactive steps to respect human rights throughout their operations and supply chains.

## General Overview

### Origins and Background of the Issue

Labor rights violations and unsafe working conditions in Bangladesh's fast fashion industry have developed over several decades as global clothing brands moved production to developing countries to reduce manufacturing costs and increase production efficiency. This process, known as outsourcing, allowed international fashion companies to produce larger of clothing at lower prices while helping Bangladesh become one of the world's largest garment exporters. The growth of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector has played an important role in Bangladesh's economy, employing around 4 million workers and contributing around 80% of the country's export earnings, according to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA).

International frameworks such as the ILO (International Labour Organisation) Core Labour Standards and the UN (United Nations) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide guidance for protection workers' rights. The ILO standards promote basic labour rights, including freedom of association, fair treatment and the elimination of forced child labour. The UNGPs (United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights) encourage companies to respect human rights by identifying and addressing risks to workers throughout their supply chains through HRDD.

Although the industry created millions of jobs, especially for women, it also increased pressure on factories to produce clothing quickly and cheaply. The fast fashion business model relies on low production costs and rapid manufacturing, which has often resulted in low wages, excessive working hours and unsafe working conditions. During the 1980s and 1990s, Bangladesh's

garment industry expanded rapidly because of globalization, foreign investment, and trade agreements such as Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA). However, labour protections did not develop at the same pace. Weak enforcement of labour laws, limited factory inspections and widespread poverty left many workers with little choice but to accept poor working conditions.

To improve worker protections, Bangladesh introduced the Bangladesh labour Act of 2006, which created rules on wages, working hours, workplace safety, and workers' rights. However, enforcement remained inconsistent, and many factories continued to ignore safety regulations while workers often feared reporting violations because they could lose their jobs.

The COVID-19 pandemic made labour rights problems in Bangladesh's RMG industry even worse. In 2020, many international fashion brands cancelled or delayed clothing orders because demand for clothes decreased in the world. As a result, many factories closed temporarily or reduced production causing thousands of garment workers to lose their jobs or work fewer hours. Many workers also faced delayed or unpaid wages making it hard to afford basic needs. The pandemic showed how decisions made by global fashion brands can effect the lives of workers in Bangladesh. It also showed the need for stronger labour protections, responsible purchasing practices and better support for workers during times of crises.

The issue gained worldwide attention after the Rana Plaza factory collapse on 24 April 2013, when an unsafe factory building in Savar collapsed despite visible structural cracks. The disaster killed over 1,100 workers and injured more than 2,500 making it one of the deadliest industrial accidents in history. It exposed major failures in workplace safety, factory inspections and government oversight.

Following the disaster, organizations such as ILO and the UN created stronger measures to improve worker rights and corporate responsibility. Initiatives including the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety needed independent factory inspections and safety improvements while the UN guiding principles on Business and Human Rights encouraged companies to carry out Human Rights due diligence throughout their supply chains. Although these reform s have improved conditions in many factories' poor enforcement, low wages, and unsafe working conditions remain significant challenges today.

## Sub-topic 1: Improving Wages and Working Hours for Garment Workers

Low wages and excessive working hours are among the most common labour rights issues faced by garment workers in Bangladesh. Although the garment industry provides employment for millions of people, many workers earn wages that are not enough to cover basic living expenses such as food, housing, healthcare, and education. In 2023, the Bangladeshi government increased the minimum monthly wage for garment workers to 12,500 Bangladeshi taka, following large scale protests from workers demanding better pay. However, many labour rights organizations and trade unions argue that this amount stays below the actual cost of living, meaning that many workers still face financial difficulties despite working full time. This creates a situation where workers depend on overtime hours to afford necessities.

Excessive working hours are connected to the low-wage problem because many garment workers rely on overtime payments to increase their monthly income. According to

Bangladesh's Labor Act, the standard working limit is 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week, with overtime limited to 2 added hours per day and a maximum, of 60 working hours per week. Workers who complete overtime should receive twice their normal hourly wage. However, these legal protections are not always effectively enforced across the garment sector. Many factories run under pressure from international fashion brands to produce huge quantities of clothing quickly at low prices. This pressure can encourage factory managers to demand longer working hours, especially before major fashion seasons or deadlines. Some workers may feel unable to refuse overtime because they fear losing their jobs or facing negative treatment from supervisors.

The problem is not only the existence of labour laws but also the challenges in monitoring and enforcing them. Bangladesh has thousands of garments factories, including subcontracting facilities that can be hard to regulate. Reports from the ILO and other labour organizations have found continued concerns about unpaid overtime, wage violations, limited worker representation, and weaknesses in factory inspections. Limited resources, fear of retaliation among workers and the dependence of the economy on garment exports can make it hard to ensure that every factory

follows labour regulations. As a result, some workers stay exposed to unfair working conditions even when legal protections exist.

Improving wages and regulating working hours are essential steps toward protecting workers' rights and creating a more sustainable garment industry. Higher wages would reduce workers' dependence excessive overtime and improve their ability to afford basic needs, while stronger enforcement or working hour regulations would reduce exhaustion workplace accidents and health risks. Governments must strengthen labour inspections and ensure that factories follow national laws, while factory owners must provide fair wages and safe schedules. International fashion brands also have a responsibility to support ethical production by paying suppliers monitoring working conditions and ensuring that their supply chains do not depend on worker exploitation. Addressing wages and working hours is therefore not only about improving conditions for individual workers but also about creating a more responsible global fashion industry.

## Sub-topic 2: Ensuring Safe and Regulated Working Conditions

Unsafe working conditions stay a major concern in Bangladesh's garment industry. Many factories have faced problems such as poor building structures, overcrowded workspaces, blocked emergency exits, fire hazards, and a lack of proper safety equipment. These conditions put workers at risk of serious injuries or even death, especially during industrial accidents.

Although safety standards have improved since the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, many factories still struggle to meet national and international safety requirements.

Effective regulation and regular inspections are essential to ensuring that factories provide a safe working environment. Government authorities handle enforcing labour laws and building safety standards, while factory owners must keep safe facilities and provide workers with proper training and protective equipment. International fashion brands also have a responsibility to check

the factories they source from and ensure that their suppliers follow ethical labour and safety standards.

Strengthening workspace safety protects workers' health and well-being while helping create a more responsible and sustainable fast fashion industry. Better regulation, stronger enforcement, and greater accountability throughout the supply chain are key to preventing future accidents and ensuring that workers can carry out their jobs in safe and dignified conditions.

### Sub-topic 3: Strengthening accountability of Global Brands and Factory Owners

Global fashion brands and factory owners play an important role in protecting the rights and safety garment workers. Many international brands outsource their production to factories in Bangladesh to reduce costs and increase profits. However, the pressure to produce large amounts of clothing quickly and cheaply can encourage factories to ignore labour laws, pay low wages, and overlook workplace safety to meet tight deadlines.

To address these problems, global brands must take greater responsibility for the conditions in the factories they work with. This includes regularly monitoring suppliers, ensuring that factories follow labour laws and international standards and ending business relationships with suppliers that keeps violating workers' rights, including the right to join trade unions.

Stronger accountability throughout the supply chain helps ensure that both companies and factory owners are held responsible for labour rights violations. Greater transparency, independent inspections and stronger enforcement of labour regulations can encourage ethical business practices while protecting the well-being and dignity of garment workers.

## Major Parties involved:

### Bangladesh

Bangladesh is at the centre of this issue because it is the world's second largest exporter of ready-made garments. The garment industry employs over 4 million workers and is one of the country's largest sources of export earnings. While the industry has helped reduce poverty and

create jobs, Bangladesh continues to face criticism over low wages, unsafe working conditions weak enforcement of labour laws and restrictions on workers' rights. Since the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, the government has introduced labour reforms and improved factory inspections, but many challenges remain, particularly in smaller factories and throughout the supply chain.

## The United States of America (USA)

USA is one of the world's largest consumers and importers of fast fashion. Many American clothing brand source garments from factories in Bangladesh because of lower production costs. USA have encouraged improvements in labour standards through trade policies, international partnerships, and support for workers' rights. However, the demand for inexpensive clothing from US companies also contributes to production pressures that can lead to labour rights violations.

## European Union (EU)

The EU is one of Bangladesh's largest exports markets for clothing. Through trade agreements and development programs, the EU has supported improvements in workplace safety, labour inspections and workers' rights. The EU has also introduced supply chain laws that require companies to identify and address human rights risks in their global operations. At the same time, European brands continue to rely heavily on low-cost manufacturing in Bangladesh.

## China

China plays two important roles in this issue. It is one of Bangladesh's largest suppliers of textiles and raw materials used to produce garments, with China providing a significant share of Bangladesh's imported fabrics, yarn, and machinery needed for the Ready-Made Garment sector (RMG). At the same time, China is the world's largest clothing exporter, making it a major competitor to Bangladesh in the global fashion market. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO) China stays the leading exporter of clothing worldwide, while Bangladesh ranks among to exporters. This competition to attract international fashion brands can increase pressure to keep

production costs low, which may contribute to lower wages and unsafe working conditions. Chinese investment has supported Bangladesh's garment industry, but stronger labour protections are needed to ensue economic growth does not harm workers' rights.

## India

India Is a neighbouring country with a large textile and garment industry. It supplies Bangladesh with cotton, yarn and other raw materials used in clothing production. India also faces similar labour rights challenges in its own garment sector and has introduced initiatives such as the National Guidelines on Responsible Business Conduct (NGRBC) which encourage companies to improve worker safety, fair wages, and human rights practices. Through regional organizations such as SAARC India workers with Bangladesh on economic development labour standards, making it a key regional actor in addressing labour rights issues in the fast fashion industry.

## Germany

Germany is one of the largest importers of Bangladeshi garments within the EU and is home to many international fashion retailers. The German government promotes responsible business practices through supply chain legislation. German companies are therefore expected to take greater responsibility for labour conditions in overseas factories.

## United Kingdom (UK)

The UK imports large quantities of clothing from Bangladesh and is home to several major fashion retailers. The UK government supports international efforts to improve labour rights and has encouraged companies to increase transparency in their supply chains. British consumers and civil society organizations have also played an important role in raising awareness about ethical fashion and worker exploitation.

## Timeline of Events

| Date | Event |
|---|---|
| 24-04-2013 | The Rana Plaza Disaster: A commercial building housing several garment factories collapsed. Many people died, and this disaster created serious problems in the global fast fashion industry. For example: Unsafe working conditions, poor building standards pressure on workers and low wages. |
| 05-2013 | After the Rana Plaza disaster, this Bangladesh Accord was created to improve safety in Bangladesh's garment factories. This accord aimed to ensure safe working conditions. This accord has led to thousands of factories safety inspections, many dangerous factories repaired or closed and improve workplace safety for millions of garment workers. |
| 2013-2018 | This was a five-year program which focused on improving factory safety in Bangladesh. It provided training for workers and factory managers on workplace safety. This helped train workers in safety. |
| 2013-2020 | Several legislative reforms were made after the Rana Plaza disaster which was made to improve worker safety. This included amendments to the Bangladesh labour act in 2013, making it easier for workers to form trade Unions. |
| 2021-2023 | The RMG sustainability council (RSC) was created to ensure safety and sustainability in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry. This was aimed to identify any risks. |

## Possible Solutions

### Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework A/HRC/17/31

The United Nations could encourage Bangladesh and international fast-fashion companies to fully implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, requiring companies to identify, prevent and address human-rights violations throughout their supply chains. This could include mandatory human-rights due diligence, independent factory inspections, transparent reporting and effective grievance mechanisms for workers. The approach could build upon the Bangladesh Accord, which introduced independent inspections, remediation requirements and a worker complaints mechanism following the Rana Plaza disaster. The Accord demonstrated that companies can be held accountable for safety conditions in their supplier factories rather than relying solely on voluntary corporate audits

### Human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises A/HRC/RES/44/15

The UN could encourage Bangladesh, international brands and trade unions to establish a legally binding safety framework for garment factories, drawing directly from the successes of the 2013 Bangladesh Accord and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2013–2018). The Bangladesh Accord used independent inspections, publicly reported corrective action plans, worker safety committees and a complaints mechanism, while the Alliance provided another model of coordinated factory-safety monitoring involving major US retailers. The UN could recommend that these mechanisms be incorporated into a permanent national system, with companies facing consequences if suppliers repeatedly fail to correct serious violations. This would move the industry away from voluntary corporate responsibility towards enforceable obligations.

## Possible Solutions

Future solutions to address labour rights violations and unsafe working conditions in Bangladesh's fast fashion supply chains should focus on improving regulations and increasing accountability. Governments in Bangladesh and importing countries along with international organizations such as the International Labor Organization (ILO) should create and enforce laws requiring fashion brands to take responsibility for their supplier factories. Independent organizations

would carry out regular inspections, while companies fail to meet safety and labour standards would face financial penalties or restrictions. This would help solve the problem of unsafe factories and prevent brands from avoiding responsibility for poor working conditions.

Another important solution is improving workers' rights, wages, and overall quality of life. Bangladeshi government agencies, factory owners, and labour organizations should work together to create living wages, provide benefits such as healthcare and paid leave, and protect workers' freedom to for unions. Workers should also have safe systems to report abuse or dangerous conditions without losing their jobs. This would directly address problems such as low wages, worker exploitation and the lack of protection for employees in the garment industry.

Finally, promoting transparency and sustainable practices within the fashion industry can help prevent future abuses. International fashion brands should be required to publicly disclose their supplier's factory conditions and labour practices while governments and consumer organizations monitor compliance. This would allow consumers to make more ethical choices and pressure companies to improve their supply chains. By reducing the demand for extremely cheap clothing and encouraging responsible production, this solution would help create safer and fairer working conditions for garment workers in Bangladesh.

## Guiding Questions

1. What is the country's relationship with the fast fashion industry and global garment supply chains?
2. Does the country import clothing from Bangladesh and how dependent is it on Bangladeshi garment production?
3. What position does the country have on protecting labour rights and improving worker safety in developing countries?
4. Has the country supported international agreements or organizations that improve garment factory safety such as Bangladesh Accord?
5. What laws does the country have to prevent companies from using unsafe suppliers?

6. How does the country ensure that businesses respect workers' rights within their international supply chains?
7. What is the country's stance on increasing wages and improving benefits for garment workers?
8. Does the country support stronger international regulations requiring fashion brands to take responsibility for their suppliers?
9. How does the country balance economic growth, affordable clothing, and the protection of workers' rights?
10. What solution does the country support to reduce unsafe working conditions in fast fashion industry?

## Appendix

- Bangladesh Garment Industry Sustainability Compact https://www.ilo.org/publications/sustainability-compact-bangladesh-rmg-industry
- 2013 Bangladesh Safety Compact https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/ilo-eu-bangladesh-government-adopt-new-compact-garment-factory-safety
- Bangladesh Garment Industry Timeline https://www.ilo.org/resource/chronology-recent-events-bangladesh-ready-made-garment-rmg-sector
- Sustainability Compact Review https://www.ilo.org/meetings-and-events/4th-review-sustainability-compact-garment-sector
- Bangladesh Garment Workers' Minimum Wage https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/statement-minimum-wage-bangladesh-ready-made-garment-rmg-sector
- About the RMG Sustainability Council https://rsc-bd.org/about-us/
- Garment Workers' Rights and Safety https://rsc-bd.org/workers/
- Worker Safety Complaints https://rsc-bd.org/health-safety/
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