

## **Garment Factory Disasters and Its Consequences on the Victim's Lives: a Case of Rana Plaza Collapse Victims**

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### **Abstract:**

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry is the highest grossing industry in Bangladesh, a country that is still going through its developing phase. The garment industry is, also, the first industry in the country's history to employ a large number of female employees. Thus, this industry is giving poor, illiterate, rural women of Bangladesh the chance to contribute to their family income and the confidence to strive toward economic independence. Nevertheless, sudden industrial disasters like fire or collapse take away their hopes and freedom and leave them with despair and uncertainty. This is what the victims are going through when an eight story factory building in Savar<sup>1</sup>, Bangladesh caved on April 24, 2013, leaving more than thousands of garment factory workers for dead and more than two and a half thousands injured. When such disasters occur in a garment factory the victims of those tragic events not only suffer from death, incurable injuries, loss of income, death of major earning family member and mental wounds but they, also, bring social, economic, and familial consequences to the victim's lives. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to shine a light on the experiences of the victims in the aftermath of Rana Plaza Collapse. The victims are still suffering from the consequences of that disastrous event every day of their lives and the stories of their constant struggle need to be heard.

**Key words:** Garment Industry, Garment Industry Disasters, Female workers, Rana Plaza Collapse, Victim's Struggles

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Bangladeshi garment industry has single-handedly created job opportunities for millions of individuals and a lot of women working, living in the city, and providing for the family that did not previously exist in this country (Bangladesh Economic Review, 2019; The World Bank & IFC, 2011; The Guardian, 2013). Even though working in a garment factory is hard, the women working in this industry have more optimism and independence than what they contained before. The RMG sector has, therefore, contributed to the empowerment of women who were previously bound to work within their household.

In spite of all these promising attributes, the garment industry of Bangladesh has endured many factory disasters over the years (The Guardian, 2012; Akram, 2013; Mobarok, 2014; Hasan et al., 2017; Saxena, 2020). However, the collapse of Rana Plaza was momentous because of the extent of human lives and potential lost in the catastrophic event. After the Rana Plaza building collapsed it was all over the news. There were momentary updates on every TV and radio channel of Bangladesh and every newspaper of the country had the news printed on the front page. The event was circulated all over the world.

This created a demand to reorganize the whole garment industry and the way the industry manages its labor force most of whom are women. But, despite some attempts to strengthen the safety measures to limit factory mishaps that cause immeasurable pain and sufferings to the workers, the garment industry is still an aerie of disasters (Dey & Basak, 2016; Saxena, 2020). So, my goal, here, is to demonstrate how the respondents of my study suffered and are still suffering from the consequences of the Rana Plaza collapse that keeps them from living a normal and well-rounded life to stimulate effective actions to secure the welfare of the living organism of this vital industry.

### **II. METHODOLOGY**

As my study was constructed around the experiences of Rana Plaza collapse victims, I used purposive sampling method to achieve my sample population. I selected respondents who were directly affected by the tragic incident and were still suffering from the consequences of the unfortunate occurrence. I used participant observation, case study method, and life history method to acquire detailed knowledge about my respondents'

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<sup>1</sup> Savar is an industrial city residing 24 kilometer northwest of Bangladesh's capital Dhaka

experiences regarding their life, their attitude toward the garment industry, before and after the Rana Plaza Collapsed. I choose the 'Bou Bazar' slam of Savar as my study area because significant number of garment workers, including many of the Rana Plaza victims and their families live in this slam. I went to the slam and participated in the respondents' daily activities to collect in-depth accounts of their experiences.

### **III. THE GARMENT INDUSTRY AND FACTORY DISASTERS**

Since its inception in the late 70s, the garment industry of Bangladesh has surpassed all expectation in terms of its success and its impact on Bangladesh's national economy. Even in the post MFA<sup>2</sup> era the garment industry of Bangladesh rose to overcome the challenges of open trade system and came out victorious (BGMEA<sup>3</sup>, 2020; Joarder et al., 2010). This success of the country's highest grossing industry was possible due to the relentless labor of the factory workers. But, it's a matter of great regret that these workers face one of the worst work environments which causes frequent factory accidents and disasters.

The garment industry is expanding in a rate that is too high for the country to accommodate. As a result the garment factories are growing up in areas and buildings that are not suitable for housing such lager establishments. Therefore, accidents and mishaps have become a pathetic element of the garment industry costing the lives and wages of millions of people whose only source of income is their physical ability.

2013 saw the biggest tragedy in garment industry's history when an 8 story factory building in Savar, Dhaka caved on April 24 causing the death of approximately 1,135 people and another 2,500 people were injured (Mobarok, 2014). According to ILO, the garment industry of Bangladesh has been subjected to more than 109 factory disasters between the years 2013 to 2018. So, it is easily comprehensible that the biggest industrial of the country's history failed make the garment industry aware of the consequences the victims of these factory disasters face. Therefore, we need to bring forth the immeasurable cost of garment factory disasters on the victims' lives to minimize these kinds of horrific incidents.

### **IV. RANA PLAZA COLLAPSE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR THE VICTIMS**

When I started my field research among the victims of the 2013 industrial disaster, I knew I would have to encounter some horrific accounts of that event, but never did it cross my mind how devastating they can be. Many of the respondents got really emotional as they were retracing the incidence and its horrible experience and the consequences it brought to their lives. In addition to various physical injuries, loss of income, and lose of vital earning members of the family, it has left its victims with mental sears which they will carry for the rest of their lives.

#### **Loss of Working Ability**

The poor people of Bangladesh do not possess much cultural, social, or economic capital. Their only resource of income is their physical labor. When they suffer from physical injuries and lose their workability, they lose the only source of their livelihood. The victims of Rana Plaza crash suffered from numerous physical injuries and a huge number of the victims have lost their working ability due to such injuries.

The victims I'd talked to suffered from physical injuries such as broken leg and arms, broken hips, fractured ribs, blow to the head, fractured arm, cuts on the body, paralyzed body parts, etc. Many of them are still recovering and others have lost the hope of recovery as a result of their inability to support the treatment required. This has seriously altered their workability. Rosia Begum (24) said, "*After I recovered, I took a job at a garment factory named 'signature'. But after a little while, my hand and back started to hurt and I passed out from the pain. After that, I got fired from the job.*" So, as the victims are unable to work, they have lost their source of income and now find themselves in a new grave of agony.

#### **Case Study**

Mossamot Aktara Begum is a 35 years old woman. She came to Savar from Rampur. She lives with her husband and two children. She and her husband also have to support her father-in-law and mother-in-law who live in the village. She worked on the third floor of Rana Plaza at Phantom Apparels Limited as a sewing operator. She worked there for two years before the crash. One of her brothers-in-law also worked with her in the factory.

On the day of the crash, she went to work in the morning but did not get inside the building immediately because she saw other workers outside. Most of them did not go inside. They were scared as cracks appeared in the building the day before. However, her line chief told her to go in otherwise she wouldn't get her due salary.

<sup>2</sup> MFA - The Multi-Fiber Arrangements, quotas introduced by the United States and Europe to facilitate textile and clothing industries in under developed countries.

<sup>3</sup> BGMEA - The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. It was established in 1983 to promote the garment industry.

So she went in and started working. Suddenly she heard a loud noise and started to run. At the staircase, she reached out her hand for her brother-in-law, but right then the ceiling fell onto her. She was inside the building for three days. She was taken to the hospital after rescue and she received extensive treatment there which cost a lot of money.

Still, her face and left hand were paralyzed and she has got little strength in her left leg. As a result, she can't walk, eat, or do anything properly. She can't move her left eyeball. She needs surgery for her eye and her hand but can't afford it. Now, she can't get a job because she doesn't have the ability to perform various tasks. She says, *"what will the garment factory do with me? They want workers who can work properly and efficiently. I can't eat quickly or walk up the stairs; I can't work with my left hand. Why would they hire me?"*

She has two growing children and the in-laws to support. But she can't even afford to take care of her own family and send her children to school. She says *"I came to the city in the hope of educating my children. Now that hope is gone. Now I can't even feed them because I can't work"*.

### **Mental Trauma**

A traumatic event is most likely to leave some mental scars. The dreadful event of Rana Plaza collapse has also left its numerous victims with mental scars that are hunting them, keeping them from going back to their previous state of mental conditions and thereby, to their normal life. Most of the respondents of my study claimed that they are afraid to even enter a building. Rosia Begum stated, *"I only took the job at 'signature' garment because it is in a tin shed"*. Shirin Akter, who was a teenager at the time of the crash, said that the first thing she did after getting some compensation money through bKash is to buy a mobile phone. Because, when she was trapped inside the building the only source of light was the mobile phone of a boy next to her. She said that little source of light kept her from losing hope. So, she brought a mobile phone for herself in case she gets into another such crash.

Kokon Mia worked on the 6th floor of Rana Plaza along with his wife, who died in the crash. He was stuck in the building for six hours. He said, *"I don't want to work in the garment industry anymore. I've decided to go back to my village and maybe work as a cart driver."*

### **Case Study**

Mahmuda Akter Alpona is a 22 years old female who came to Savar from Mymensingh district of northern Bangladesh. She lives with her husband, her mother, and her 2 years old son who was born two months after the Rana Plaza collapse. She and her husband also have to take care of her father-in-law and mother-in-law. They live in the village on a small piece of land they own. They have no cultivable land. Alpona worked at Rana Plaza for 3 years as a sewing operator. She started working there because her husband had severe eye problems and could not work on a regular basis.

On the day of the crash, Alpona went to work as usual. She did not know that a crack had appeared in the building the day before as she was sick and missed the previous day of work. She said that before she could sew more than 20 pieces she heard a loud noise and then everything went dark. She could not run fast as she was pregnant at the time and so, got down to the floor. Suddenly, she said, she felt the ceiling was right above her head. She said, *"There were 13 of us in the place. We could not see anything so we counted by listening to each other's voices. But seven people died before the rescue team found us. We were there among the dead bodies for hours. I was horrified."* she said she still feels nauseous when she thinks about that experience. Often she dreams of those she worked with and they call her to join them. Sometimes she starts walking in her sleep to join them.

A year after the incident she took employment in another garment factory. But she could not concentrate on the work because she was so afraid that the ceiling would fall. She also said, *"The sound of the machines, the fans, the lights, the voices of so many people scared me. So, I quit the job."*

During my visit to the ground where Rana Plaza once stood, I encountered a woman named Opomai Khatun. She is a 55 years old widow who still wanders around the Rana Plaza area in search of her son who worked on the third floor of the building. She never found his body, therefore she can't get closure. One of her relatives told me that she sits and cries in front of the Rana Plaza for days at a time without eating or sleeping. Then they have to forcefully bring her home. They tried to send her to her village in Rampur but she always comes back after a few days.

### **Uncertain Future**

The poor victims of the Rana Plaza have suffered from various physical and mental injuries that prevent them from leading a normal life. The people that used to work at the Rana Plaza are suddenly out of work because their place of employment has been destroyed and they are finding it hard to obtain a job because of their physical and mental injuries. Although some have recovered from their injuries and mental trauma, the garment companies don't want to hire them because they (factory officials) think they won't be able to keep up with the pace or be efficient workers.

Most of the people I have talked to had received an amount of 50,000 taka ( about 590 dollars) as compensation for the event and some of them had received another 45,000( about 590 dollars), but they could not tell me from where the money had come from. They just told me the money came to the bKash account they were told to open after the crash. But some of the victims also said that they did not receive any money other than what the company owed them in salary. But this little amount of money is not sufficient to ease their lives. Many of the victims had to have surgery and are still under treatment which cost a lot of money and the absence of jobs and social, cultural, economic resource makes it even tougher for them to survive.

Nearly everyone I have talked to doesn't possess any cultivable land or domesticated animals to live off of. Some possess a small piece of land which is hardly enough to build a homestead. So, for these destitute people, who came to the city in search of a better life, a hopeful future, all their dreams are suddenly lost in the air. Victims, who had the dream to educate their children so they won't have to suffer as their parents, are now worried if they would be able to feed them (children). Their future is now a blur to them; it has become a realm of uncertainty where there is no hope or aspiration.

### **Case Study**

Mossamot Sabana Katun saw the ray of a better life after she started working in the garment industry. Although it was hard work and took long hours, the job gave her family some economic and social position. They could afford to rent a two-room house and pay for their children's education. They also brought a TV set and could send regular financial help to the in-laws living in the village.

But now they are in tons of debt because of the medical bills of her treatment. On the day of the collapse, the ceiling fell onto her head. Initially, she was in the hospital for three days. But she continuously experiences periods of hysteria and dizziness. So, she has to see doctors and take regular medication. She now fears that they will lose the house any day as they can't pay rent for several months at a time. Her son, who just appeared in the JSC examination, got GPA 5 and a scholarship at the PSC examination. Sabana hopes he will score a good result in the JSC also but she doesn't know how long she can manage to pay for her son's education. She fears her son may have to get a job and her 9 year old daughter has to quit school any day because she can't work for the family. She has no hope of educating her 2 years old daughter since she can't even feed her well.

When I asked her about her opinion on returning to her village she said that returning to the village is not an option for her because they have no means of income there. Her husband may work as a day laborer but she knows it will not be sufficient for the whole family. She said, "*What will we do in the village? We have no cultivable land there, no cows, no goats, no nothing.....*" When I asked her about her future plans she just let out a deep sigh and looked at me in desperation as she had no answer for me.

### **Pressure to Get Married**

Child marriage is a cruse in Bangladesh. It's a common occurrence within the Bangladeshi poor families to marry off the daughters even before they turn 18. But research has shown that after the bloom of the garment industry, the early marriage rate has decreased as daughters working in the garment industry can contribute to the family income and, therefore, become valuable members of the family. The garment industry provides women from marginalized families with some economic independence, which in turn gives them some decision making power about when they want to get married(The World Bank & IFC, 2011; Billah & Manik, 2017). But, when their source of income disappears, all of a sudden the pressure to get married comes on to them.

The unmarried female victims of Rana Plaza tragedy that I've talked to expressed the same view. They claimed, that their family did not put any pressure on them to get married when they were working and supplementing the family income. Now, as they can't work or don't want to work, their parents are viewing them as extra mouths to feed. So, the pressure to get married is compressed on them daily.

#### Case Study

Nazma Akter is an 18 years old female. She used to work on the 7th floor of Rana Plaza at 'New Wave Style Limited'. She worked there as a folding man. She has five sisters. She lives with her parents and three sisters. Her elder sister is married and lives elsewhere. She studied up to class 8. She used to earn up to 9,000 TK (about 100 dollar) each month. So, she had some sort of decision making power in her family.

But now that source of income is lost. She does not want to work in the garment industry anymore. She wants to go back to school and study, so she can do something better in the future. However, she said that now as she is not working her parents are pressuring her to get married. She said, "*Now that I just sit around the house not contributing to the family income, my parents think it is better that I get married.*"

#### Divorce and Abandonment

Divorce is another consequence of the Rana Plaza collapse. Victims, who have lost their working ability and physical strength to maintain the family, are facing the threat of divorce and abandonment. Among the marginal families of Bangladesh, abandonment is a widespread phenomenon. The incident of abandonment among the Rana Plaza victims, especially towards women who have a hard time fulfilling their wifely duties, is acute. Also, when husbands cannot earn enough to support their family, they feel ashamed and desert the family.

Another form of abandonment is carried out by the victims who have parents and in-laws to support. Some respondents said that they used to send money to their relatives living in the village. However, now they have no possible way to send them any financial support.

#### Case Study

Sopna is a 27 years old woman who worked on the 6th floor of Rana Plaza for 3 years and on the 3rd floor for 9 months before the collapse. She came to Savar about 12 years ago with her family. She had six siblings. One of her sisters died in the crash. She was trapped in the ruin for four days. Her leg got stuck in a machine when she started to run. So, she could not move. She was badly injured in her leg and still can't use it properly.

She got married about 6 years back and has a five years old daughter. Five months after the crash, she was forced to join the garment industry because, as she put it, her husband was not a good person. But she had to quit because she could not take the long hours of working. She could not perform her wifely duties well, so her husband left her and got married elsewhere. She does not know what she will do. She can't turn to her family because her father does not have a permanent job and she has three little siblings who have to be taken care of by her father.

#### Problem with Family

Family is the one we think will guide us and support us. But this is not always the case, especially for the poor destitute people of Bangladesh, who hardly have enough to maintain their own families. A lot of the victims of the Rana Plaza Tragedy are facing problems with their families because they are in no condition to work or in a truckload of debt and asking for support from their family.

There is another incident that I came to know through my study that is 'betrayal by family members'. Some victims complained that their family members took their information saying they would help them get compensation and never gave them the money they got.

#### Case Study

Afroja is a 29 years old woman who used to work at the Rana Plaza. She came to Savar from Khulna located in southern Bangladesh. She has a son and two twin daughters. She was abandoned by her husband some years before the crash. She lived with her mother, brothers, and their families. Her brothers and their wives did not mind her living with them before, because she earned for herself and for her children as well.

But now that she is handicapped and can't work or earn money, her brothers and their wives don't want to live with her anymore. At first, they used to behave very roughly with her and her children, implying that they do not want them (Afroja and her children) living with them anymore. But Afroja did not leave because she had nowhere else to go. So, the brothers left with their families, leaving afroja, her children, and her mother to starve, to suffer, and to waste away.

#### Decreased Status in the Family

Most of the garment factory workers come from marginal families that do not possess much social, economic, and cultural capital. So, a regular source of income is most valued in these families. Therefore,

workers of the garment industry acquire a certain amount of importance in their family which in turn gives them increased status in the family (Billah & Manik, 2017). But when they lose their jobs and the ability to work they become a burden to the family and lose their status as a valuable member of the family.

The respondents of my study express a similar attitude toward their current status in the family. Victims who can't work or do not want to work in the garment industry because of their mental trauma say they are sometimes subject to abuse and harassment. Their family members do not pay heed to their opinions and wishes as much as they used to. Many respondents say they feel despondent and humiliated because of their current status in the family.

#### **Difficulties with the In-Laws**

Several victims I've talked to are responsible for taking care of their parents and in-laws. The female victims claimed that they may have somehow managed to give financial support to their in-laws in the past, but it is now impossible for them to continue that support. When they earned through their garment factory jobs which supplemented their husband's income, they could spare some money to give to the in-laws.

Now as they can't send them any money the in-laws blame them. Mahmuda Akter Alpona said that her in-laws do not talk to her anymore because they can't pay them any money. But, before when they called they always spoke with her. Now they just speak with her husband and do not even want to know how she is doing. She said, "*I, myself, feel bad because I can't help them. But what can I do? My husband can't work regularly and I have a baby boy. How can I possibly support them?*"

#### **Loss of major earning member**

A lot of families have lost their major earning member due to the Rana Plaza collapse. These families are now faced with a catastrophe from which there is no straightforward path out. When the major earning member of a family dies the family suddenly finds itself facing a large income gap. If the deceased person has school-going children then the children's future becomes uncertain as the source of their educational support abruptly disappears. If the wife is unemployed then the catastrophe becomes more acute, because then the family is left with no source of income and support. Sopna said two of her sisters also used to work at the Rana Plaza. One of them was seriously injured and the other sister died. Now her family has lost three earning members and is faced with demise. Now her little siblings can't go to school as it is no longer affordable and they have to help around the house.

#### **Case Study**

Sikha Akter is a 32 year old woman who lost her husband in the Rana Plaza crush. She has a 10 year old daughter. She said her husband worked in Rana Plaza for a long time at 'Phantom Apparels Limited' as a supervisor. She was a housewife, so her husband was the only earning member of the family. She and her husband also had to look after her father-in-law and mother-in-law.

Now she has no source of income except for the money she got as compensation. She knows it's not nearly enough to bring up her daughter. She can't take care of her in-laws anymore. Of course, she has brothers who help her. But, still, her fears for her daughter's future are ever-present in her mind.

### **V. CONCLUSION**

The garment industry is truly important for the economic and social development of Bangladesh. The industry is not only creating a plethora of job opportunities for poor, illiterate people of this country, it is also giving women a chance to improve their social standing. But, instead of acknowledging all these positive notions, we are being forced to focus on the ways garment factory workers are suffering, enduring a dangerous work environment every day that can shatter all they hold dear at a moment's notice. This shouldn't be the front image of a country's highest producing industry. And the continues suffering from the Rana Plaza Collapse victims presented here should be a weak up call for the industry to take adequate measures to protect its most valuable component, its labor force.

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