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War on Want's partner the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) has been fighting for the rights of garment workers in Bangladesh since 1984. Based in Dhaka, the country's capital, and with 7 branches nationwide, it is the largest trade union federation in the Bangladeshi garment sector, with more than 27,000 members.

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Registered Charity No. 208724 Company Limited by Guarantee Reg. No. 629916

Cover image: Rana Plaza building collapse, Bangladesh, April 2013 © A.M Ahad/AP/Press Association Images

Design: www.wave.coop Published: April 2014 Printed on recycled paper

Never Again

Making fashion's factories safe



Never again: a summary

The fashion industry has failed to respect workers' rights to safe conditions and decent pay throughout its history. From the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York in 1911 that killed 146 workers to the poverty pay of the sweatshops of old East London, the history of the fashion industry is littered with examples of its exploitation of the people that make our clothes.

The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in April 2013, the worst disaster in the history of the fashion industry, was also the most graphic display of its failure to ensure the most basic of workers' rights. The building housed five garment factories. Over 1,100 people were killed and 2,500 people were injured in the disaster. The majority of the victims were young female garment workers.

As the shocking images of the collapsed building, the efforts to rescue those trapped in the rubble and the grief of those who survived were seen around the world, people joined together to demand an end to such appalling working conditions. **Under enormous pressure, over 150 companies took the unprecedented step of joining a legally-binding agreement with trade unions to make their supplier factories safe through the Bangladesh Safety Accord.**



A worker threads her sewing machine on the production line, Bangladesh

This comprehensive agreement could change the fashion industry forever, moving beyond the corporate-controlled voluntary codes of conduct and supplier audits that have so clearly failed to deliver real changes in the lives of millions of garment workers.

Yet some companies have failed to join this historic project, and are instead trying to undermine it by promoting their own rival plan, a plan based on the same voluntary approach that failed to prevent the Rana Plaza collapse. Gap is foremost amongst these companies, having joined together with Asda's parent company Walmart to devise a rival to the Accord. Gap's plan is a sham which offers nothing new for the millions of Bangladeshi garment workers who still live with the daily threat of dangerous and deadly working conditions.

While the fashion industry was forced to face up to factory safety in Bangladesh, wages across the fashion industry remain appallingly low. Despite recent increases in the minimum wage, garment workers in Bangladesh are still paid as little as £42 a month, Sri Lankan workers just £53 a month and Cambodian workers £60 a month. These wages fall well below a living wage that would allow these workers to live a life of basic dignity, with an income that covers basic essentials like housing, food, education, healthcare and savings.

Such low wages also result in workers being forced into hazardous work. Earning poverty pay, they can't afford to risk the loss of income from refusing unsafe work or not obeying their managers' demands to work in dangerous conditions. Ensuring workers are paid a living wage is a vital part of ensuring workers are able to work in safe conditions.

The workers who make the clothes on sale on the UK high street must be guaranteed safe conditions and be paid a living wage. Yet despite huge public pressure and the clear failure of company-led efforts to ensure respect for workers' rights, companies like Gap are still putting workers' lives at risk and the industry is still failing to meet workers' right to a living wage. Left to their own devices these companies will always prioritise their profits over the rights of workers.

The only way to ensure all clothes sold on the UK high streets are made in decent conditions is for the UK government to intervene and demand action from brands and retailers. The UK government must demand they join the Bangladesh Safety Accord and pay their workers a living wage – and we must take action to demand this from the government. Only through campaigning and demanding change will we ever see a fashion industry that respects the rights of the people who make our clothes.

A disaster, but not an accident

On 24 April 2013, over 1,100 people were killed and 2,500 were injured in the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh; the majority of the victims were female garment workers. The building housed factories making clothes for Benetton, Primark, Matalan, Mango and other major brands and retailers supplying the UK high street. This deadly disaster, the worst in the history of the garment industry, was not an accident; it was predicted and was entirely preventable.

The day before the disaster local authorities recommended suspending all factory operations until building inspections could be completed after workers reported massive cracks in the building. The following day the ground and first floors of the building which contained shops and a bank were empty as workers were told to stay away. However **workers in the garment factories were forced to return to work under threats of dismissal or the loss of a month's pay.**

The warning signs of disaster were clear long before cracks appeared in the walls. The building was never intended for industrial use; the weight of the machines and workers was almost six times more than the building was built to bear. In addition, the building owner had illegally constructed a further two floors to the building without planning permission. Yet these risks were never spotted by the brands and retailers that sourced from the factories, despite the building having been audited twice.

The Rana Plaza disaster was not an isolated incident; in a country where an estimated 90% of buildings do not meet building regulations, disasters are a regular feature of an industry that employs nearly four million people. Just five months before the Rana Plaza collapsed, 112 workers died in a fire at the Tazreen Fashions factory. Despite fire alarms sounding in the building, managers turned up a radio to cover the noise and told the employees to remain at work. Once workers began to flee the fire they found that gates inside the building were locked, leaving many to jump to their deaths to escape the burning building.

Such disasters are not unique to Bangladesh; wherever the garment industry operates similar stories emerge. In September 2012 a fire in Pakistan killed 259

of the 600 workers trapped in a garment factory where doors were locked, there were no fire exits and the windows were barred.



Family of Rosina Akter

The supervisors told me “don't worry, just keep working”

Rosina Akter worked in a garment factory on the second floor of the Rana Plaza building, along with her mother and younger sister; she was four months pregnant at the time of the disaster. It took rescuers five days to find her lifeless body in the rubble.

Her sister, who was also pregnant at the time of the disaster, was lucky to be rescued within hours of the collapse suffering only minor injuries. She recalls going to work at 8am, then asking her managers to be allowed to leave the factory as the building appeared unsafe. Instead of allowing them to leave, her supervisor said “don't worry, just keep working.” Just a few hours later, the building collapsed, trapping her and over a thousand other garment workers inside.

A broken system

The Rana Plaza disaster was the most graphic demonstration of the failure of the fashion industry to respect the rights of workers in its supply chains. Over the last two decades, the fashion industry has responded to campaigns and exposés with an ever increasing array of voluntary, corporate-led initiatives based on 'codes of conduct' and supplier audits. This approach has always been driven more by a desire to protect companies' reputations than a genuine attempt to transform workers' conditions.

Audit failure

As an example of how superficial supplier audits can be, Mango's official response to the Rana Plaza disaster stated that "it would have been impossible to detect the structural defects of the collapsed building, since Mango would not have been able to ascertain that the owners of said building had built three storeys more than is permitted". Any audit that cannot check such basic information about factory construction has little if any hope of ensuring workers' safety.

Yet corporate auditing schemes aren't just undermined by their lack of rigour; it is now widely acknowledged that suppliers can all too easily falsify the results. It is common practice for factory owners to keep two or even three sets of records on workers' pay and hours to meet the demands of different auditors; in fact the staff of human resources departments in many garment factories are now primarily concerned with meeting the needs of auditors rather than dealing with workforce issues.

These flaws are compounded by audit companies' lack of independence and transparency. Suppliers usually have to pay for and choose the auditors; unsurprisingly this leads to suppliers preferring cheap auditors who can be relied upon to give their factory a clean bill of health. The results of these audits are then only shared with the factory and buyers, neither of which are required to act on the findings or share them with workers or local authorities, meaning that audit results can never be verified.

Ultimately audits are window dressing, presenting a show of tackling the most visible and superficial issues, while leaving the underlying causes of workers' rights violations untouched.

Rights denied

The real driver of the violations of workers' rights is the structure of the fashion industry. As a UK parliamentary report into the Rana Plaza disaster found: "buyers drive the supply chain and set the terms of the competition... suppliers and workers are the weakest actors, subject to hand-to-mouth contracting and footloose sourcing practices". This environment is created by brands and retailers' relentless pursuit of low cost; on average one third to three quarters of a brand's suppliers change every year as they continuously search for cheaper prices to increase their profits.

It is impossible to fully understand disasters like the Rana Plaza collapse or the Tazreen fire without also understanding the lives of garment workers. In both cases there was little attempt to collectively refuse unsafe work or to demand explanations, as worker organisation and representation are frequently repressed in an industry where workers' rights to organise and collectively bargain are routinely ignored.

Garment workers around the world also face appallingly low wages – in Bangladesh the starting wage is just £42 a month. This is well below a living wage that could allow them to live a life of basic dignity, estimated to be as much as £200 a month in 2013. Nearly 80% of women garment workers in Bangladesh work until 8pm or 10pm, after starting at 8am, in order to earn enough to provide for their families. These exploitative conditions are one of the main

reasons why garment workers couldn't afford to risk their managers' threats of docked pay and returned to work before the Rana Plaza collapsed.

Voluntary codes of conduct and company-controlled audits will not change the fashion industry. **Only by holding companies to account for their failures and allowing workers to organise in trade unions to secure their rights – such as safe work and decent pay – will the fashion industry begin to change.**



Tazreen Fashions factory

© Laila Blanchi / Mar on Want

A model for the future: the Bangladesh Safety Accord

The aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster saw an outpouring of popular anger and outrage from trade unions, campaigners and citizens around the world, demanding change so that these appalling tragedies would never happen again. In the weeks and months after the building collapse, under huge pressure from over one million people who signed petitions or took part in protests and demonstrations, over 150 major brands and retailers joined a union-led initiative to make Bangladesh's factories safe – the Bangladesh Safety Accord.

The Bangladesh Safety Accord is a unique and unprecedented project to bring brands, retailers and unions together to make factories and workers safe. It is the first time that brands and retailers have ever dealt with organised workers in Bangladesh, and by February 2014 the Accord covered 1,600 factories employing around half of Bangladesh's four million garment workers.

The Accord represents more than just a ground-breaking project to make Bangladesh's factories safe; it represents **a chance to change the fashion industry forever, ending the reliance on the voluntary codes of conduct and audits that have so clearly failed to ensure workers' rights are respected.** One of the most important breakthroughs in the Accord is the fact that its terms are enforceable – these brands and retailers have now made legally enforceable commitments to improve factory safety. Big companies can no longer turn a blind eye to unsafe working conditions.

The Accord's structure also works to support the grassroots trade union movement. The Accord's guarantee that unions will have access to factories to conduct training on workers' rights and safety offers real potential to organise at the factory level. Ultimately it will be through this empowerment and organisation that Bangladesh's garment workers, like all workers around the world, will be able to secure their rights.

While the Accord only covers safety issues in one country, it could represent a model for the future, of binding regulation with trade unions at its heart. It could also be extended across countries and beyond safety to other labour issues like wages, working hours and discrimination; tackling the abuses of all garment workers' rights around the world.

Key features of the Bangladesh Safety Accord:

- **Independent inspections** undertaken by experts organised through the project, no longer paid for and accountable only to the buyers and suppliers.
- **Public reporting of inspections** ending the silence and secrecy of corporate audits and ensuring results can be independently verified.
- **Mandatory repairs** and renovations to all hazards identified; no longer will factory owners, brands and retailers get to pick and choose whether they tackle unsafe conditions.
- **Financing for repairs** from the brands and retailers that source from Bangladesh. Contracts must ensure that prices are sufficient for factory owners to be able to cover the cost of eliminating hazards and buyers are required to ensure that funds are available for one-off repairs and improvements.
- **Led by trade unions**, the representatives of the workers, who initiated the development of the Accord and make up half of the governing committee.
- **Trade union access** to all factories covered to educate workers on protecting their rights and ensuring factory safety.
- **The right to refuse unsafe work** is guaranteed for all workers.
- **Buyers commit to sourcing from Bangladesh** for five years and commit to working with factories to make them safe. This means that workers' jobs in Bangladesh are safeguarded and that brands and retailers must fix problems in their supply chains not just cut their contracts and leave workers in the same unsafe conditions.
- **Legally binding enforcement** of these commitments on the brands and retailers. Disputes within the Accord are dealt with through internationally-recognised arbitration processes, the results of which are enforceable in the courts of the home country of the brand responsible.
- **Workers' representatives can initiate enforcement** proceedings against companies that fail to comply with their obligations under the Accord.

More information about the Bangladesh Safety Accord and the full list of companies that have joined is available at bangladeshaccord.org

Gap's shame

Despite the horrendous death toll of disasters in Bangladesh and the huge public response, some companies have refused to join the Bangladesh Safety Accord, and Gap is foremost amongst them.

Gap is one of the largest buyers of clothing from Bangladesh and first came under pressure from campaigners for factory safety after a fire at That's It Sportswear on 14 December 2010 killed 29 workers trapped inside a locked stairwell gate on the ninth floor. The factory had been inspected for Gap just months before. The following year another two workers died in a stampede inside another factory supplying Gap in Bangladesh.

After this spate of disasters Gap had been in negotiations with unions as part of the precursor to the Bangladesh Safety Accord, even before the Rana Plaza collapse. Yet after a year and half of talks the company walked away from the table, refusing to sign any binding agreement and refusing to allow unions access to their supplier factories to train workers on safety issues.

Not content with abandoning negotiations to found the Bangladesh Safety Accord, Gap joined with Walmart to develop their own rival plan: the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. As well as undermining the unity of approach developed by the Accord, Gap and Walmart's rival plan falls short of the standards set by the Accord.

At its heart, Gap's plan is just another voluntary corporate-run factory auditing scheme, dressed up to look like more than it is. The brands and retailers choose the auditors, pay the auditors and control the inspections. Worker representatives and trade unions are not part of their plan and have no role in its governance. Brands and retailers in the scheme are not obliged to pay for any repairs or factory improvements; instead it is the factory owners who bear responsibility for financing any improvements.

There is no mention of the right to refuse dangerous work, no guarantee of union access to factories, no commitment to stay in Bangladesh and no

commitment to work with factories to make them safe. Worst of all, the terms of Gap's plan are unenforceable; any company can leave whenever it wants as long as it pays its administrative fees for the operation of the scheme.

Gap has rejected a historic and comprehensive safety plan that represents the future of the fashion industry and has instead stuck to the same model of voluntary corporate-led initiatives that have so clearly failed. It's new plan is a sham, designed to put a new face on an old broken system. The company is putting the workers that make its clothes at risk, and is undermining the Accord's work to change the future of the fashion industry.



Demonstration outside Gap store in London

Government intervention

Years of voluntary corporate-led initiatives, not just in the fashion industry, have clearly shown that some companies will always fail to respect human rights. Companies will always put profit first, even when that comes at the expense of workers' rights and safety. The workers who make the clothes on sale on UK high streets must be guaranteed safe working conditions and be paid a wage that allows them to live a life of dignity. The only way this can be achieved is if the UK government regulates the fashion industry to require all companies to ensure workers' rights are respected in their supply chains.

In 2008 the UN concluded a landmark report on business and human rights that found that the gaps in corporate governance created by globalisation have led to a “**permissive environment for wrongful acts by companies of all kinds without adequate sanctioning or reparation**”. The report set out the UN's framework on business and human rights; of states' duty to protect human rights, corporations' duty to respect those rights, and the need for access to justice for people whose rights are violated.

This report was followed up in 2011 with the UN's Guiding Principles for implementing the framework, including for governments to act to ensure businesses respect human rights. While many campaigners criticised the report's recommendations for not going far enough to call on governments to regulate businesses, the framework was widely welcomed for its clear critique of the failure of voluntarism and the need for states to act to ensure human rights are respected.

The UK published its action plan for implementing the UN Guiding Principles in September 2013. Despite the critique levelled by the UN and the evidence for the failures of the current corporate-led voluntary model, these concerns went unrecognised in the UK government's plan. The plan maintains the government's status quo; that the UK government has almost no role in protecting people around the world from the abuses of human rights by UK companies.

As well as failing to acknowledge the UK government's responsibility for the impacts of UK businesses, the plan also promoted some of the worst examples of voluntary self-regulation. One example highlighted repeatedly in the plan is a new proposal for voluntary self-regulation of private military and security companies – mercenaries – where the companies would write and police the rules for the industry, with no binding enforcement. The government's plan

ignores much of the UN's analysis and represents more of the same corporate-led voluntary approach that has so clearly failed.

The UK government has pledged that it will produce an updated action plan by the end of 2015, representing a key opportunity to shift the government's approach to one that will lead to real change in the way the fashion industry operates, towards a model that will uphold human rights. To do this, the new action plan must:

- Recognise the limitations of voluntary corporate-led approaches to ensuring respect for workers' rights, and their failure to deliver improvements in conditions for people who work in the supply chains of companies operating on UK high streets.
- Show the government's support for the Bangladesh Safety Accord, both through financially supporting the Accord's work, as well as requiring all brands and retailers on UK high streets – like Gap – sign the Accord.
- Demand all clothing brands and retailers ensure all workers in their supply chains are paid a living wage, which allows them to live a life of basic dignity with an income sufficient to cover basic essentials like housing, food, healthcare, education and savings.



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In the long-term, radical change is needed to ensure UK businesses, including the fashion industry, respect human rights. Ultimately the UK government should legislate to ensure companies can be held to account for their violations of human rights in other countries and in their supply chains.

Take action

The UK government will only change their policies to demand companies respect workers' rights if they are forced to do so by public pressure, so we need as many people as possible to take action.

Email your MP

Email your MP and ask that they write to William Hague, the Foreign Secretary and minister responsible for the UK government's business and human rights action plan, demanding that the UK government requires all brands and retailers to join the Bangladesh Safety Accord and ensure workers in their supply chains are paid a living wage. waronwant.org/lovetofashionhatesweatshops

Order materials

Order more copies of this booklet and other campaign materials for your trade union branches, events, stalls, student unions, church, local group, family and friends. waronwant.org/materials

Organise an event

You could hold your own Love Fashion Hate Sweatshops stall, event, clothes-swap, club night or fundraiser. If you want tips on how to run a successful event in your area email takeaction@waronwant.org or call 0207 324 5059.



Meet your MP

If you've got more time, set up a meeting with your MP to discuss the issues and ask them to call on the government to act. Meeting your MP is one of the most powerful ways of influencing them, and this booklet can give you the information you need to make your case. If you'd like any more support or advice email takeaction@waronwant.org or call 0207 324 5059.

Boycott isn't the answer

When faced with the widespread exploitation of workers in the fashion industry it can be a common response to want to boycott clothes made in sweatshops or to boycott particular brands or retailers to avoid buying into an abusive system. But boycotting sweatshop goods doesn't tackle the problems that drive workers' rights violations and can actually worsen conditions for the people who make our clothes:

- Boycotting brands won't stop their bosses profiting from exploitation; they will pass on the hit to their suppliers, squeezing them harder to produce clothes at lower cost, so the effects will be passed on to the workers before they hit the brands' profits.
- Boycotting brands can lead to them cutting orders, which can either increase pressure on suppliers or risk putting workers out of jobs.
- Boycotting all bad brands isn't possible; no companies on the UK high street can guarantee workers' rights are respected throughout their supply chains.
- Boycotts don't challenge the structure of the fashion industry that allows workers' rights violations to happen.
- Boycotts aren't what the workers are calling for; they want our solidarity to take political action to change the industry, rather than just changing our shopping habits.