



Case Study: The Rana Plaza Disaster (2013)

Subheading: *A Tragedy that Shook the Global*

Garment Industry

Governance Imperative

Structure of presentation on case study

- Global perspective
- Thought provoking Incident
- Root cause
- Human right violations
- If brands were not responsible/ answerable
- Actions taken
- Bangladesh Accord and ICCR
- Lessons learnt
- Current status and media coverage

Asia's Global Clothing Trade – Bangladesh at the Forefront

Total Asian Clothing Export Market (2023):

- Asia dominates global apparel exports with over **\$400+ billion annually**
- **Key Players:** China, Bangladesh, India, Vietnam, Pakistan
- Major destinations: **U.S., EU, Australia, New Zealand**, among others

BD Bangladesh – A Global Powerhouse in Ready-Made Garments (RMG)

 **Total Exports (2023): \$47.38 billion**

World's **second-largest apparel exporter** after China

RMG sector contributes ~84% of total national exports

Top Export Markets:

- **United States:** ~\$9 billion
- **New Zealand:** \$380 million
- **Australia:** Significant share, steadily growing

Industry Highlights:

- Over **4 million workers** employed, majority women
- Supplies to **200+ global brands** (e.g., H&M, M&S, Adidas)
- Backbone of global **fast fashion supply chain**

-  **Conclusion:** Bangladesh is not just a major supplier — it's a cornerstone of the global clothing industry, powering shelves across the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand with its vast RMG ecosystem.

Bad day was here :

- The Rana Plaza disaster occurred on April 24, 2013, in Savar, near Dhaka, Bangladesh, when the eight-story Rana Plaza building collapsed, resulting in the deaths of at least 1,134 people and injuring over 2,500 others.
- The building housed several garment factories producing clothing for international brands, along with a bank and shops.
- The day before the collapse, cracks had been discovered in the structure, leading authorities to recommend evacuation.
- While the bank and shops closed, garment workers were instructed to return to work under threat of withheld wages, leading to the high casualty count when the building collapsed during the morning rush hour.
- However, reports indicate that, even a decade later, many challenges persist. Labor abuses, inadequate wages, and unsafe working conditions remain prevalent in some areas of the garment industry. Activists continue to advocate for stronger enforcement of safety regulations and better labor practices to prevent future tragedies

Root Cause – Unsafe Working Environment & Labor Exploitation

● Neglected Structural Warnings

- Visible cracks ignored despite expert advice
- Workers forced back under threat of wage loss

● Hazardous Working Conditions

- Overcrowded, poorly ventilated factories
- No emergency exits, safety drills, or evacuation plans

● Exploitation of Vulnerable Workers

- Low wages, excessive hours, no job security
- Women from low-income backgrounds, easy to coerce

● Absence of a Safety Culture

- No internal safety audits or grievance mechanisms
- Productivity prioritized over people's lives

Root Causes – Systemic Negligence & Power Imbalance



Regulatory Failure

- Illegal floors and structural overload
- No enforcement of building codes or labor laws



Fear-Driven Workforce

- No rights awareness or legal protection
- Workers stayed silent despite visible risks



Global Supply Chain Pressures

- Fast fashion brands demanded cheap, fast output
- Local suppliers cut corners to meet unrealistic targets



Power Imbalance

- Workers voiceless; no empowered unions
- Brands disconnected from ground realities

Key Human Rights Violations in the Rana Plaza Case

1. Right to Life and Safe Working Conditions

- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 3:** *“Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.”*
- Workers were forced into a structurally unsafe building despite visible cracks and clear warnings from engineers. This neglect led to the deaths of 1,134 people and injuries to over 2,500.

2. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Article 7:

recognizes “the right of everyone to the enjoyment of just and favorable conditions of work which ensure, in particular, safe and healthy working conditions.”

-  **Violation:** The factory owners and global supply chain actors failed to ensure basic safety, directly contributing to mass loss of life.

3. Freedom from Coercion :Workers were reportedly threatened with job loss or withheld wages if they did not return to work, even after safety risks were known.

- This violates **ILO Convention 155** on Occupational Safety and Health and the **ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work**, especially the freedom of choice in employment.
-  **Violation:** Workers' consent was obtained under economic duress, compromising their right to freedom from forced or coerced labor

4. Corporate Responsibility under the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs)

- These principles (endorsed by the UN in 2011) state that businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights, which includes:
 - Avoiding harm to workers directly or indirectly through supply chains
 - Conducting due diligence
 - Remediation for adverse impacts
-  **Violation:** Many international brands sourcing from Rana Plaza failed to implement due diligence mechanisms or ensure ethical compliance in their supply chain.

Conclusion: Was it a Human Rights Violation?

- Yes — emphatically.

The Rana Plaza tragedy **represents one of the most tragic and visible breaches of human rights in the global supply chain system**, and has since become a case study in how neglect, coercion, and systemic exploitation in the name of profit can destroy lives.

Actions Taken by Brands and Governments

Marks & Spencer and H&M:

- **Financial Contributions:** Both brands committed to improving factory safety in Bangladesh. Under the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, they agreed to contribute up to \$500,000 annually towards independent factory inspections and the installation of fire safety measures. [The Guardian+1The Guardian+1](#)

Government Initiatives:

- **Summoning Retailers:** The UK government summoned major retailers to ensure collective efforts in preventing future factory disasters. This led to agreements where brands, including H&M and Marks & Spencer, pledged funds for safety improvements. [The Guardian+1The Guardian+1](#)

Compensation for Victims and Families

- **Compensation Funds:** Efforts were made to establish compensation funds for the victims and their families. Brands were requested to collectively pay a portion of the total compensation, with other stakeholders, including the Bangladeshi government and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), contributing the remaining amount. [Clean Clothes Campaign](#)

Formation of Global Coalitions

- **Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh:**
 - Established in May 2013, this legally binding agreement between global brands, retailers, and trade unions aimed to ensure safer working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories. It mandated independent safety inspections and public reporting of findings. [Maquila Solidarity Network](#)
- **Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety:**
 - Formed by North American retailers, this initiative focused on improving safety standards in Bangladeshi factories, though it faced criticism for being less stringent than the Accord. [UNC School of Law Scholarship Repository+2Wikipedia+2Wikipedia+2](#)

Impact of the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety

What Was It?

- Legally binding agreement signed in **2013** by 175+ brands (H&M, Adidas, M&S)
- Aimed to improve **fire, electrical & building safety** in Bangladesh's garment factories

Key Features

- Independent factory inspections (38,000+)
- Public reporting & brand accountability
- Mandatory safety upgrades
- Worker training & Safety Committees

Results by 2018

- 90%+ safety issues resolved in 2,000+ factories
- 1.7 million workers covered
- Closure of unsafe factories

Legacy & Evolution

- Transitioned to **RMG Sustainability Council (2020)**
- **International Accord (2021)** extended to other countries
-  **Conclusion:** A landmark success in protecting workers' rights & holding global brands accountable.

Role and Effectiveness of the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR)

- **Bangladesh Investor Initiative:**

- Following the Rana Plaza collapse, the ICCR formed this initiative comprising over 200 institutional investors with assets exceeding \$4 trillion. The goal was to press global companies sourcing from Bangladesh to engage directly in reforming the apparel sector by joining the Accord. [ICCR](#)

- **Ongoing Advocacy:**

- The ICCR continued to assess progress and advocate for improved worker health and safety in the Bangladesh apparel sector, emphasizing the need for corporate accountability and sustainable reforms. [ICCR](#)

These collaborative efforts marked a significant shift towards prioritizing human rights and worker safety in the global garment industry.

Lessons Learnt from the Rana Plaza Disaster

1. Human Rights Must Be Central to Global Supply Chains

- Safe working conditions are not optional — they are a **basic right**, not a business compromise.

2. Corporate Accountability Requires Legal Binding

- Voluntary codes often fail — the **Bangladesh Accord succeeded** because it was enforceable.

3. Collaboration is Key

- Real change came when **brands, unions, civil society, and governments** worked together.

4. Workers Need Voice and Protection

- Empowering workers through **unions, safety committees, and grievance mechanisms** is essential.

5. Global Consumers Drive Local Impact

- Consumer awareness and ethical choices can **pressure brands to adopt responsible practices**.

Conclusion: The Rana Plaza disaster was a tragic wake-up call — but it also proved that global systems can evolve when human dignity is prioritized over profit.

Current Status of Worker Safety in Bangladesh – Progress & Achievements



RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) – 2020 Onward

- Replaced the Bangladesh Accord in June 2020
- A **national tripartite body** (brands, unions, manufacturers)
- Oversees factory inspections, remediation, training, and worker complaints



Achievements (as of Feb 2025)

- 21,000+ inspections by RSC; 66,000+ overall since 2014
- 140,000+ safety issues resolved
- Safer conditions for over 2 million workers



Tangible Improvements

- Installation of fire alarms, fire doors, emergency lighting
- Strengthening of buildings and electrical systems

Current Status – Challenges, Withdrawals & Global Expansion



Challenges & Criticism

- Concerns of "**backsliding**" in enforcement standards
- Perceived **weaker accountability** under RSC vs. original Accord
- **May 2021**: Global unions *IndustriALL* and *UNI* withdrew from RSC citing reduced enforceability



Global Expansion – International Accord

- **2021**: Launch of the *International Accord for Health and Safety*
- **2023**: Extended to Pakistan to replicate Bangladesh's safety reforms

Conclusion: Strong progress made, but sustaining safety gains depends on ongoing accountability, transparency, and worker representation.

Leading Media coverage

The Guardian:

“A nightmare I couldn’t wake up from’: Half of Rana Plaza survivors unable to work 10 years after disaster”

[Read the article](#)

Human Rights Watch:

“Decade After Rana Plaza, Safety Flaws Persist”

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TIME:

“Bangladesh Charges 38 With Murder Over the 2013 Rana Plaza Disaster”

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The New Yorker:

“After Rana Plaza”

[Clean Clothes Campaign+5](#)[The New Yorker+5](#)[Tishman Environment and Design Center+5](#)

Bloomberg:

- *“Rana Plaza Collapse a Decade On, Garment Workers Still Exploited”*

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SUSTAINABILITY

10 years since Rana Plaza, not enough has changed

Activists and academics reflect on the incremental progress made since fashion's deadliest factory collapse in 2013, and the challenges that still need to be addressed.

BY BELLA WEBB

April 24, 2023

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Family members of the victims of Rana Plaza building collapse, demanded justice for the deceased along with activists and journalists on April 24, 2015 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Belal Hossain Rana—PP/BI/Getty Images

BY AMANDA CALVO

JULY 19, 2016 1:25 AM EDT

A Bangladeshi court **charged 38 people** with murder Monday for the 2013 collapse of the Rana Plaza textile factory, which **killed 1,135 people**.

In total, 41 defendants are facing charges in connection with what is Bangladesh's **worst industrial disaster**, reports Reuters. Three of those people are accused of assisting plaza owner **Sohel Rana** in his attempt to flee the country. He was arrested after a four-day manhunt following the disaster.

Read More: *Dying for Some New Clothes: Bangladesh's Rana Plaza Tragedy*

Rana and 34 other people appeared in court Monday and pleaded not guilty. If

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A Decade After the Rana Plaza Collapse, Garment Workers Are Still Exploited

Building safety has improved, but the economics of the clothing industry remain stacked against the people who make most of what the world wears.



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