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Ensuring safe workplaces for garment workers in Bangladesh

Fast fashion has a high price for the garment workers making our clothes. Behind the glitz and glamour of the fashion industry, garment workers risk illness, injury and even their lives working in unsafe factories.

The collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh in April 2013 cost 1,134 garment workers their lives, and injured nearly 2,600 more. The incident garnered worldwide attention and highlighted the appalling labour rights abuses at the heart of the fashion industry.

The Rana Plaza disaster provided a crucial turning point for garment workers' rights and led to the development of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Bangladesh Accord). The Bangladesh Accord and its transition agreement have delivered critical safety gains for millions of garment workers.

In September 2021, the Bangladesh Accord's successor agreement, the International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry commenced. The International Accord is vital in ensuring that workers' safety gains are maintained and progressed.¹



Over 150 international brands have already signed on to the International Accord, including many well-known Australian brands. We're calling on all Australian brands that produce in Bangladesh to stand up for worker safety and sign onto the International Accord.






1. Workers Rights Consortium (2021) Bangladesh Accord, <https://www.workersrights.org/our-work/bangladesh-accord/>

The Bangladesh Accord

On 24 April 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh, the worst garment factory disaster in history, shook the industry. Garment workers had been calling for better safety protections for many years. Only five months earlier, 112 garment workers, 200 were injured in a fire at the Tazreen Factory on the outskirts of Dhaka.

The Rana Plaza collapse highlighted the negligence of factory owners and international brands. Despite structural damage being discovered the day before the incident, workers were forced to continue working in an unsafe environment. This decision led to thousands of deaths and injuries that could have been prevented. Many survivors were trapped under rubble and heavy machinery for hours, or even days, and are now living with physical and emotional trauma from the incident. Eight years on, many injured workers have faced difficulties finding stable employment in the physically demanding garment industry – leaving them struggling to cover the costs of healthcare for their injuries.²

In the days and weeks following the Rana Plaza collapse, workers, unions and labour rights organisations led the development of the five-year Bangladesh Accord, with over 220 brands signing on. The Accord required that brands:

-  Enable independent building inspections on fire, electrical and structural safety;
-  Publish the results of safety inspections;
-  Contribute resources towards safety repairs;
-  Ensure fire and building and safety trainings for workers; and
-  Stop working with suppliers that do not uphold safety standards.

In 2018, 190 brands renewed their commitment to worker safety by signing on to the three-year Transition Accord, meaning that 1,000 suppliers are covered by the agreement.

Since the Bangladesh Accord was established, over 100,000 safety repairs were made across Bangladeshi factories, and at least 50 factories were evacuated because of safety concerns.³



Rana Plaza Survivor
Nurjahan (40)

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2. United News of Bangladesh (2021) 57pc Rana Plaza Survivors remain unemployed: survey, <https://unb.com.bd/category/bangladesh/57pc-rana-plaza-survivors-remain-unemployed-survey/67948>

3. Worker Rights Consortium (2021) Workplace Health and Safety, <https://www.workersrights.org/issues/workplace-health-and-safety/>

WORKER SAFETY ISSUES IN THE GARMENT INDUSTRY

Exploitation is at the heart of the garment industry, with poverty wages and unsafe conditions widespread. Garment workers' safety is put at risk when international brands seek out the lowest production costs in countries with weak labour protections and poor enforcement. Short and insecure contracts alongside union repression, means workers face the very real risk of losing their jobs if they raise safety and other labour rights concerns. This is why legally binding agreements like the Bangladesh Accord and International Accord are so important in ensuring safe working conditions for garment workers.

COMMON WORKPLACE SAFETY ISSUES



Structurally unsound factories



Workplace injuries from unsafe machinery and inadequate training



Working with hazardous chemicals without proper personal protection equipment



Poor ventilation and high temperatures



Inadequate bathroom breaks



Limited access to clean water



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International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry

The Bangladesh Accord brought about crucial building safety improvements, but more action is needed to address ongoing safety risks. In July 2021, an additional 52 garment workers lost their lives after being trapped inside a factory on the outskirts of Dhaka that caught fire.⁴

The International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry builds on the Bangladesh Accord and is crucial in ensuring that existing safety gains are maintained, and more action is taken to protect the lives and safety of garment workers across Bangladesh. Over time, the coverage of the new International Accord will also be extended beyond Bangladesh to include at least one other country, which is a promising step in ensuring all garment workers have safe working conditions.

FASHION BRANDS MUST STAND UP FOR WORKER SAFETY

The International Accord is a crucial agreement for worker safety in Bangladesh. But it will only be successful in achieving worker safety gains if international brands sign on.

Over 150 international brands have already joined the Accord, including Australian brands like Big W, Country Road and Cotton On. We're calling on all Australian brands to stand with the women workers making their clothes by signing on to the International Accord today!

4. ABC News (2021) Eight people charged after factory fire near Dhaka, Bangladesh, kills 52 people, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-07-09/bangladesh-fire-factory-deaths/100282784>