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ILO (INTERNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZATION) ACTIVITIES UPHOLDING WORKERS' RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH AFTER THE RANA PLAZA TRAGEDY

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Abstract

This research identifies ILO activities in enforcing the rights of workers in Bangladesh post the Rana Plaza Tragedy in 2013. The Rana Plaza tragedy, which led to the deaths of more than 1,100 garment workers, most of whom were women, exposed poor working conditions and widespread human rights violations in the sector. This study uses a qualitative approach with descriptive analysis methods, through collecting secondary data from ILO reports, academic journals, and news about related parties. This research was analyzed using the role theory of international organizations. The research results show that the ILO plays a significant role in promoting improvements in occupational safety and health standards through activities and various other initiatives. The ILO is also active in advocating for the rights of workers, including efforts to ensure safety, job security, and reduce gender discrimination in the workplace. In conclusion, although the ILO has made a positive contribution to improving working conditions and rights of workers in Bangladesh following the Rana Plaza tragedy, the sustainability and effectiveness of this initiative is dependent on the commitment of all stakeholders in overcoming existing structural and cultural barriers.

Keywords: ILO, Workers' Rights, Garment Industry, Bangladesh, Rana Plaza, Working Conditions

Abstrak

Penelitian yang berjudul "Kegiatan ILO (International Labor Organization) Menegakkan Hak Pekerja di Bangladesh Pasca Tragedi Rana Plaza" bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kegiatan International Labor Organization (ILO) dalam menegakkan hak-hak pekerja di Bangladesh pasca tragedi Rana Plaza pada tahun 2013. Tragedi Rana Plaza, yang menyebabkan kematian lebih dari 1.100 pekerja garmen, yang sebagian besar perempuan, mengungkap kondisi kerja yang buruk dan pelanggaran hak asasi manusia yang meluas di sektor ini. Studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode analisis deskriptif, melalui pengumpulan data sekunder dari laporan ILO, jurnal akademik, serta berita tentang pihak terkait. Penelitian ini dianalisis menggunakan teori peran organisasi internasional. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa ILO berperan signifikan dalam mendorong peningkatan standar keselamatan dan kesehatan kerja melalui berbagai kegiatan dan inisiatif lainnya. ILO juga aktif dalam mengadvokasi hak-hak pekerja, termasuk upaya untuk memastikan keselamatan, keamanan kerja, dan mengurangi diskriminasi gender di tempat kerja. Kesimpulannya, meskipun ILO telah memberikan kontribusi positif untuk meningkatkan kondisi kerja dan hak-hak pekerja di Bangladesh setelah tragedi Rana Plaza, keberlanjutan dan efektivitas inisiatif ini bergantung pada komitmen semua pemangku kepentingan dalam mengatasi hambatan struktural dan budaya yang ada.

Kata Kunci: ILO, Hak Pekerja, Industri Garmen, Bangladesh, Rana Plaza, Kondisi Kerja

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is a developing nation recognised as one of the leading producers of ready-made garments (RMG) globally. Since the Bangladeshi government implemented an industrialisation policy in 1973, the RMG industry has emerged as the predominant source of export revenue in this South Asian nation. The expansion of the RMG business in Bangladesh is mostly attributed to the availability of inexpensive labour, especially female labour (Sikdar, Sarkar, & Sadeka, 2014). This sector has generated substantial employment prospects for millions of individuals in Bangladesh. Nonetheless, although the RMG business is the principal source of export earnings, its expansion and success have not resulted in societal advancement regarding equitable employment, just compensation, and secure working environments (Khan & Wichterich, 2015). The RMG industry in Bangladesh has a protracted history of labour rights infringements, non-adherence to safety regulations, and workplace incidents, all of which have exacerbated the plight of workers.

Employees in the RMG industry frequently encounter inadequate working circumstances, characterised by exploitative hours, hazardous settings, restricted freedom of association, discrimination, and violence, including sexual harassment (Afrin, 2014). Transgressions of labour rights and employment concerns were prevalent until a significant catastrophe revealed an alternative facet of Bangladesh's garment sector to the global audience. On April 24, 2013, the eightstory Rana Plaza commercial building, situated on the periphery of Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh, fell. This incident constituted the most catastrophic industrial accident in the history of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment sector and ranks among the deadliest industrial disasters globally (Barua & Ansary, 2017). This terrible event epitomised the inadequate working conditions in the Bangladeshi garment sector and garnered international attention. Global audiences observed with disbelief and dread as media reports disclosed a death toll of 1,134 individuals (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024). This catastrophe signified a pivotal moment for reform in Bangladesh's clothing sector. International entities, comprising nations and global organisations, did not remain passive in response to this catastrophic event. Subsequent to the catastrophe, the United Nations (UN) significantly contributed to the protection of workers' rights via several entities and legal frameworks, as delineated in the UN Charter and the Philadelphia Declaration, which underscore the UN's objective to advance social justice universally (Supiot, 2020). The International Labour Organisation (ILO), a specialised department of the United Nations, has spearheaded global initiatives to reform the textile sector in Bangladesh. The ILO, established in 1919, possesses its own mandate inside the United Nations. This mandate is to provide possibilities for all individuals to secure decent and productive employment under conditions of freedom, equity, security, and dignity, so reinforcing its foundational mission that social justice is crucial for universal and enduring peace. The principal objectives are the promotion and actualisation of core workplace principles and rights; enhancing opportunities for both women and men to attain decent employment and income; broadening social protection for all; and reinforcing tripartism and social discourse (United Nations, 2013).

The ILO is the sole UN institution that employs a tripartite arrangement. The ILO unites governments, businesses, and labour leaders from 187 member nations to establish labour standards, formulate laws, and create programs that advocate for equitable employment for all individuals. The ILO promotes the enforcement of international norms regarding workers' rights, occupational safety, and acceptable working conditions via conventions approved by member states. Governments of ILO member states may ratify 188 treaties created from 1919 to 2007, in addition to 199 recommendations. When a nation ratifies a convention, it indicates its dedication to enforceable responsibilities, ongoing oversight, and scrutiny by the ILO (Standing, 2008).

Sovereign governments must adhere to norms established by international organizations, as this demonstrates their dedication to global responsibility and the safeguarding of human rights, particularly the rights of workers. By adopting and implementing international standards established

by the ILO, states bolster their reputation in the global arena while enhancing domestic conditions concerning occupational safety, human rights, and workers' welfare. The expansive formulation of ILO Conventions and Recommendations permits states with differing goals to either adhere to or assert adherence to them. Governments may ratify conventions they consider necessary or acceptable and may decline to ratify those they find unsuitable (Standing, 2008).

Bangladesh has been a member of the ILO since June 22, 1972, and has ratified 35 ILO treaties, encompassing 7 of the 8 fundamental treaties. The ILO established an office in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on June 25, 1973 (ILO, 2024). The Bangladesh Decent Work Programme for 2012-2015, aligned with the ILO's mandate for Bangladesh, functions in collaboration with the government, employers' associations, and labour organisations. The initiative emphasises five key domains: fostering productive employment via sustainable enterprise advancement and skills enhancement; advocating for and executing fundamental workplace principles and rights through robust social dialogue; broadening social protection for workers and their families, encompassing migrant labourers; forming robust, representative organisations for employers and workers that can impact economic, social, and governmental policies; and ratifying and enforcing International Labour Standards (ILO, 2015).

Subsequent to the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013, the ILO has intensified its efforts to enhance working conditions and safety within Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry. On May 4, 2013, the government, employers' associations, and labour organisations executed a Joint Statement, facilitating the establishment of this premier ILO initiative to enhance the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity (Zaman, 2013). The program seeks to furnish technical assistance to the government, employers' organisations, and workers' organisations to enhance workplace conditions and safety, encompassing fire safety and structural integrity evaluations; fortifying labour inspection systems; and providing education and training on occupational safety and health, as well as fundamental principles and rights at work. It encompasses rehabilitation and skills training for victims of workplace accidents, in addition to the initiation of the Better Work Bangladesh (BWB) initiative (ILO, 2015).

2. Literature Review

The author conducted a literature review to collect data from several prior studies, analysing both the limitations and merits of existing research. The author identified multiple scholarly articles examining the ILO's operations in member states, its role and conventions in Bangladesh, and its influence on workers' rights in analogous industries in other nations. The referenced scientific literature is as follows:

Initially, Standing (2008) elucidates that the ILO is an international organisation established in 1919 to enhance global labour standards. Every June, over 3,000 delegates from 180 member nations convene in Geneva for the International Labour Conference (ILC), where they deliberate on diverse labour concerns and social policies for a duration of two to three weeks. The ILO operates as a framework to govern the national labour market through the formulation of Conventions and non-binding Recommendations pertaining to labour practices. From 1919 to 2007, the ILO promulgated 188 Conventions available for ratification by member states, in addition to 199 Recommendations. Upon ratifying a convention, a country undertakes binding duties, is subject to periodic monitoring, and may be examined by the ILO. The ILO advocates for tripartism, facilitating organised collective bargaining at both national and sectoral levels. Hovary (2018) observed that tripartism is codified in the ILO constitution, which consists of three components: the Governing Body, the International Labour Conference (ILC), and the International Labour Office. The Governing Body and the ILC are composed of three distinct groups, with the Governing Body

including 28 government representatives, 14 employer representatives, and 14 worker representatives. The ILC comprises delegates from each member nation, consisting of two government delegates, one employer delegate, and one labour delegate. Both institutions fulfil essential functions, as decisions on all issues are made either by agreement or by vote.

Moreover, Hossain, Ahmed, and Akter (2010) examined Bangladesh's implementation of the amended Bangladesh Employment Act of 2006. This Employment Act is seen as a progressive advancement as it conforms to the employment legal framework established by the ILO's fundamental Conventions. Bangladesh has ratified the following core Conventions of the ILO: C029 - Forced Labour; C087 - Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise; C098 - Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining; C100 - Equal Remuneration; C105 - Abolition of Forced Labour; C111 - Discrimination in Employment and Occupation; and C182 - Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. Nonetheless, the Bangladesh Employment Act has deficiencies regarding its scope and adequate legal safeguards. Fahim (2020) notes that Bangladesh has not ratified one of the eight ILO core Conventions pertaining to the minimum age of employment. Moreover, Bangladesh's Labour Law is inapplicable to the informal sector, even though informal workers represent a significant portion of the nation's workforce. Consequently, infringements of labour legislation and workers' rights persist in Bangladesh's labour sector.

Kamp's (2023) study examines the effects of ratifying ILO Conventions broadly, with a focus on the prospective ratification of ILO Convention No. 190 and its Recommendation No. 206, aimed at enhancing gender-based worker protection in Bangladesh. Reasons for implementing ILO Convention No. 190 include workplace violence, especially sexual violence directed at female employees. Violence and harassment are implicitly addressed in other ILO Conventions, including ILO Convention No. 111 concerning discrimination. Nonetheless, these procedures are inadequate to safeguard all employees, regardless of gender, who encounter workplace violence. Consequently, the adoption of Convention No. 190, which explicitly addresses violence and harassment, is imperative. Gender-based violence and harassment necessitate focused intervention to address the broader problem of workplace violence and harassment.

Nonetheless, the reality is that Bangladesh continues to uphold ideals that contradict the fundamental principles of the ILO. The equality that the ILO aims to attain through the involvement of all stakeholders, as seen by the tripartism it advocates, can be theoretically accomplished. However, when divergent values are present inside a nation, the actual situation frequently varies considerably. Despite Bangladesh's ratification of ILO Conventions, the prospect for successful implementation remains constrained by enduring internal challenges that impede the enforcement of these principles. The fundamental problems reside in governmental structure, corruption, historical backdrop, and entrenched patriarchal structures that are challenging to alter. In addition to the absence of legislative safeguards, there are intrinsic issues that impede the state's capacity to safeguard workers.

A study by Matsuura and Teng (2020) demonstrates that, despite the economic expansion in Bangladesh largely propelled by female workers in the RMG sector, there has been no notable progress in gender equality or decent work conditions for either women or men. Women continue to be predominantly employed in low-wage and entry-level roles. Both men and women endure verbal abuse and humiliation, whereas female workers report incidents of sexual harassment with restricted access to protection or justice. The survey reveals a lack of progress in the representation of women in managerial or leadership roles within the RMG industry. Enhancing labour conditions in the RMG sector has been a fundamental component of the ILO's development goal in Bangladesh. Significant efforts are still required to attain gender equality and satisfactory employment within the sector. To achieve this objective, the RMG sector must be converted into a more gender-responsive workplace. Policymakers, employers' and workers' organisations, development partners, and other

stakeholders must collaborate to bridge this gap by engaging in discussions, formulating, and executing more robust measures to attain gender equality and equitable employment for all workers.

Additional findings concerning the situations of ILO member nations within analogous industries, as evidenced by the research conducted by Anner and Dutta (2019), indicate that India ranks among the 20 countries with the highest incidence of workers' rights violations globally. India has neither ratified ILO Convention No. 87 concerning Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, nor Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining. The ILO Committee has encouraged the government to consider enacting legislative measures that promote the prevention of anti-union discrimination, including the establishment of appropriate punishments for such actions. The Committee's views elucidate the reasons for the minimal union membership in the textile sector, indicating that fewer than two percent of Indian garment workers are unionised. The national and state governments of India can enhance trade union rights by implementing more efficient enforcement of labour regulations. Pertinent research by Kolben (2004) examines the ILO's involvement in executing a worker monitoring initiative in Cambodia. The ILO associates commerce with workers' rights and factory oversight, highlighting that such oversight offers factory owners personal incentives to uphold workers' rights due to the pressure from buyers seeking favourable ILO reports.

The researcher intends to examine the ILO's involvement in safeguarding workers' rights inside Bangladesh's garment sector following the Rana Plaza disaster, informed by many literature reviews. An examination of the scientific literature disclosed numerous parallels concerning the challenges encountered by garment workers in Bangladesh and the role of the ILO as an international organisation in enhancing working conditions. This study will examine the role and strategies employed by the ILO to tackle workers' rights abuses in Bangladesh subsequent to the Rana Plaza disaster.

3. Research Methods

This study will utilise the theory of the role of international organisations. Clive Archer defines an international organisation in his book International Organisations as a formal and enduring entity established through an agreement among members, both governmental and non-governmental, from two or more sovereign states, with the objective of pursuing and attaining shared goals. International organisations can be categorised into three primary roles: as instruments, arenas, and actors (Archer, 2001).

Furthermore, Kelly Kate S. Pease elucidates in her book International Organisations: Perspectives on Governance in the Twenty-First Century that both traditional and modern scholarship on international organisations is influenced by academics from diverse theoretical frameworks, thereby shaping their comprehension of international relations and the function of international organisations within these dynamics. The notion of international organisations originates from various theoretical perspectives. Pease emphasises that the theory of international organisations can be comprehended through many fundamental views in international relations. She asserts that, from a liberal viewpoint, there are multiple assumptions regarding international organisations. Liberals contend that non-state actors, like multinational companies and international organisations, play a crucial role in international relations. This does not undermine the significance of states; rather, it indicates that other entities can have considerable influence, occasionally rivalling that of nations.

Secondly, liberals perceive the state as a dynamic organism, composed of individuals and conflicting interests within society. Numerous interests have transnational links that transcend national boundaries. Domestic variables can impact decision-making processes, in conjunction with

foreign issues. Comprehending the individuals and factions vying for governmental authority is crucial for grasping state behaviour in international relations. The third assumption posits that international relations encompass a combination of cooperation and conflict.

The fourth assumption of the liberal perspective posits that several issues can prevail in international politics, with governments pursuing other objectives beyond security, such as wealth, development, prosperity, and environmental sustainability. Social and economic themes are crucial in the study of international relations as they constitute an essential component of global society. Liberals perceive international organisations as instruments that assist states in addressing collective action dilemmas and peacefully resolving crises. International organisations are significant in their own capacity, collaborating with countries while also functioning autonomously. Liberals assert that international governance relies on the interactions among many entities, including individuals, interest groups, government agencies, intergovernmental organisations (IGOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and multinational corporations (MNCs), which engage in competition and collaboration to establish and advance the 'international common good' (Pease, 2002).

The liberal viewpoint on international organisations is pertinent to this study as it elucidates how the ILO's position as an international entity in its contributions to Bangladesh corresponds with its foundational ideals. The ILO's problem-solving methodology via tripartism embodies the theory's premise that international relations encompass not only state actors but also individuals—such as workers' rights—business entities, specifically garment factories and brands, and the international organisation, the ILO itself.

This study employed a qualitative approach, with a literature review as the method for data gathering. Qualitative research entails investigating natural phenomena or symptoms. It is essential, realistic, and must be performed in the field rather than in a laboratory. This form of research is commonly termed naturalistic inquiry or field study. Bogdan and Taylor (1982) define qualitative research as a methodology that generates descriptive data through written or spoken language from humans and observable behaviour, adopting a holistic perspective on context and subjects. In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research emphasises achieving an in-depth comprehension of an issue rather than pursuing generalisation. It employs comprehensive analytical methods, scrutinising issues individually, grounded in the conviction that each problem possesses distinct characteristics. Consequently, the result of research employing a qualitative methodology is not a generalisation, but an extensive comprehension of the issue under investigation (Dr. H. Zuchri Abdussamad, 2021).

The data collection strategy employed in this study is a literature review. This technique seeks to gather, assess, and integrate material from diverse literary sources pertinent to the subject 'International Labour Organisation (ILO) Activities to Uphold Workers' Rights in Bangladesh Following the Rana Plaza Tragedy.' The literature review methodology employs pre-existing data. This study utilises secondary data, comprising written documents including journal articles, books, research papers, and pertinent official news related to the selected issue. The literature review method is advantageous in directing further research by pinpointing concerns or gaps for potential contributions.

4. Results and Discussion

Bangladesh Law and ILO Conventions

The International Labor Organization (ILO) aims to promote decent and productive employment opportunities for all workers in Bangladesh. Since Bangladesh became an active ILO

member state on June 22, 1972, it has ratified 35 ILO conventions, including seven fundamental ones, except for the convention on minimum age for employment. ILO's technical cooperation activities in Bangladesh focus on improving working conditions and workers' rights, with a particular emphasis on the ready-made garment sector (ILO, 2019). To support this goal, the Bangladesh Employment Act of 2006 was revised to align more closely with the ILO's core conventions (Hossain, Ahmed, & Akter, 2010). The Employment Law has undergone several amendments in 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013, and 2018. As a result, the 2006 Employment Law is a comprehensive piece of legislation that covers key international labor standards, including employment conditions, working hours and leave, industrial relations and trade union activities, minimum wages, occupational safety and health, maternity benefits, industrial dispute resolution mechanisms, labor administration, and more (Fahim, 2020). However, in practice, this Employment Law still does not fully meet ILO standards.

One of the significant weaknesses of the Employment Law is the absence of an effective implementation mechanism. The penalties stipulated in the law, such as imprisonment, are unrealistic and fail to address workplace accidents resulting in injury or death. Moreover, the current employment policy imposes restrictions on taking legal action (Syed, 2023). In practice, workers in the garment and construction sectors lose many of their rights, such as not receiving appointment letters or identity cards, non-compliance with OSH standards and social security provisions, limited space for association and collective bargaining, and weak protection from labor law enforcers and the judicial system (Hossain, Ahmed, & Akter, 2010). Employer negligence, complicated regulations, and legal ambiguity exacerbate workers' suffering. Across the private sector, employers hire workers on a short-term basis, leading to serious injustices, including low wages, long working hours, insecure employment, gender discrimination, hazardous working conditions, minimal social benefits, and weak legal remedies. These are common risks faced by workers in private companies in the country. Additionally, workers' associations, such as trade unions, do not function effectively, leaving them unable to voice workers' concerns (Fahim, 2020).

Bangladesh's ratification of ILO conventions alone does not guarantee effective implementation. While Bangladesh has ratified several conventions, their practical enforcement has often fallen short of expected standards. In this regard, there is a need for stricter monitoring by the ILO to ensure compliance with ratified conventions. Additionally, the ILO can provide technical assistance to countries like Bangladesh to enhance compliance and foster dialogue between governments, employers, and trade unions, with the aim of creating a better workplace environment. By strengthening monitoring, facilitating complaints, and offering technical support, the ILO can help improve labor law compliance and promote a safer, fairer working environment for all (Syed, 2023).

The Function of the ILO Prior to the Rana Plaza Catastrophe

The government has commenced labour law reforms to rectify several deficiencies in the 2006 Labour Act via a tripartite consultative procedure (ILO, 2012). The ILO has facilitated such efforts via the Bangladesh Decent Work Programme for 2012–2015, executed in partnership with its tripartite stakeholders: the government, employers' organisations, and workers' organisations. The program emphasises five key priorities: fostering productive employment via sustainable enterprises and skills enhancement; advocating for and executing fundamental workplace principles and rights through robust social dialogue; broadening social protection for workers and their families, including migrants; forming strong and representative employers' and workers' organisations that can impact economic, social, and governmental policies; and ratifying and enforcing International Labour Standards (ILO, 2015). It is anticipated that, with the assistance of

the ILO and other pertinent partners, the concerns highlighted by the ILO Committee on Freedom of Association will be resolved in both legislation and implementation in Bangladesh as an initial measure.

The Function of the ILO Subsequent to the Rana Plaza catastrophe

Prior to the Rana Plaza catastrophe in April 2013, the ILO had been actively engaged in enhancing labour standards in Bangladesh, despite the persistent issues within the textile sector. After the catastrophe, the ILO intensified its engagement in Bangladesh via diverse national and international efforts focused on enhancing safety standards and workers' rights. Promptly following the accident, the ILO dispatched a senior mission to Dhaka, headed by the Deputy Director-General for Field Operations, Gilbert Houngbo. The mission culminated in a Joint Statement, executed on May 4, 2013, by the government, employers' associations, and labour organisations, delineating a six-point response agenda (Zaman, 2013).

The Joint Statement mandated the Government of Bangladesh to formulate and present a set of reforms to its Labour Code. The ILO replied to the revisions announced on July 15, 2013. The response agenda mandated an evaluation of all operational RMG factories for fire safety and structural integrity, along with the identification of requisite measures to rectify any identified issues. The government was mandated to enlist an additional 200 inspectors within six months and to elevate the Department of Chief Inspectors of Factories and Establishments to a Directorate. This enhancement would entail a sufficient annual recurring budget to facilitate the recruitment of a minimum of 800 inspectors and the establishment of requisite infrastructure for the effective operation of the Directorate (Zaman, 2013).

The National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the Garment Sector in Bangladesh, alongside the Joint Statement by the Tripartite Partners (government, employers, and workers) with the ILO, are essential references for enhancing labour standards, encompassing freedom of association and occupational safety and health, in Bangladesh's RMG sector (ILO Joint Statement, 2013). On July 25, 2013, progress was achieved when the government, employers, and workers concurred to amalgamate this plan with the Joint Statement to formulate a comprehensive National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the RMG sector (Zaman, 2013). A rehabilitation skills training program will be initiated for personnel disabled by the Rana Plaza collapse and those who have lost their employment due to the accident.

The Joint Statement's agenda suggests that the ILO and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) contemplate initiating a Better Work Programme for Bangladesh. Better Work is a collaboration between the ILO and IFC focused on advancing adherence to international labour standards and boosting competitiveness within global supply chains (Zaman, 2013). Bangladesh is dedicated to enhancing its partnership with the ILO and other national agencies to advance the framework for occupational safety and health, including the ratification of further relevant ILO Conventions (ILO Joint Statement, 2013).

5. Analysis

Following the Rana Plaza disaster, the ILO, as a global entity, significantly contributed to tackling labour concerns and safeguarding workers' rights in Bangladesh. A six-point response agenda was formed to safeguard workers' rights in the country through the National Tripartite Action Plan on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the garment sector and the Joint Statement by Tripartite Partners (government, employers, and workers). The National Tripartite Action Plan is

regulated by a multifaceted accountability framework, with the National Tripartite Committee tasked with its execution (Khan & Wichterich, 2015).

ILO Inspection and Rehabilitation of Garment Factories

Bangladesh's garment sector has been widely recognised for its hazardous working environments (James, Miles, Croucher, & Houssart, 2018). The nation's economic expansion and achievements in the garment industry have not been paralleled by social advancement in aspects such as equitable employment, adequate wages, and secure working environments. The ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh has a protracted history of abuses concerning labour rights and safety standards, resulting in catastrophic workplace incidents as an unavoidable outcome of the industry (Khan & Wichterich, 2015). Following the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, national employers' and workers' organisations, along with international entities such as the global buyers' community and the ILO, applied considerable pressure on the government to enhance occupational safety and health and overall working conditions in factories (N, Hasan, & Tawhidul, 2022).

In late 2013, with technical support from the ILO, efforts commenced under the National Tripartite Action Plan on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the RMG sector to evaluate the structural, electrical, and fire safety of 3,685 export-oriented garment factories (Zaman, 2013). The ILO's primary objective was to prevent any clothing factory from experiencing a collapse like to the Rana Plaza disaster. Every inspected plant was provided with a comprehensive report on the results, which included a corrective plan and an implementation timeline, if required. This report is dispatched to both the pertinent factory and the brand it supplies, and it requires the signature of the head of the applicable trade union (James, Miles, Croucher, & Houssart, 2018).

In the last decade, advancements have occurred, including the formulation of a National Occupational Safety and Health (OHS) policy and a National Action Plan. The National OHS Policy and Action Plan have delineated key areas and strategic measures to guarantee a secure work environment for employees and the industry (ILO, 2023). All factories must possess essential fire prevention equipment, including smoke detectors, fire doors, and fire extinguishers. Training occurs biannually to aid employees and factory management in using safety equipment, responding to emergencies like fires, and understanding self-protection measures during workplace incidents (N, Hasan, & Tawhidul, 2022).

Compensation for Victims

The ILO conventions explicitly state that race and gender should not be factors leading to disparities in compensation, employment, or career opportunities (Syed, 2023). Following the Rana Plaza incident, a significant effort was undertaken involving the ILO as a neutral party, along with national and international trade unions, employers' and industry associations, brands and retailers, NGOs, development partners, and the Bangladesh government, represented by the Ministry of Labor and Employment, to provide compensation to the families of victims and injured workers (Barua & Ansary, 2017).

The compensation payments are intended to assist victims, their families, and dependents in making claims. The amount of compensation for each beneficiary is determined through a medical assessment, with follow-up support provided if necessary. The payments are funded by the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund, which has been opened for donations from any organization, company, or individual wishing to provide financial and medical support to the victims or their families (ILO, 2015). As of October 2015, compensation payments have been completed, with over USD 34 million disbursed (ILO, 2023).

Another step forward for the victims of the Rana Plaza tragedy is the government's launch of a pilot scheme in June 2022 to provide compensation in the form of a monthly income to permanently disabled garment workers or eligible relatives of workers who die due to garment-related accidents or work-related diseases. The scheme is supported technically by the ILO and the German cooperation agency, GIZ. To succeed, the program requires full backing from the government, employers, and trade unions, as well as transparency in its administration and operation. If successful, the program will pave the way for the introduction of a permanent, compulsory occupational injury insurance scheme in Bangladesh, significantly improving workers' rights in terms of social protection (ILO, 2023).

Factory Inspection Reform

Another response to the Rana Plaza tragedy and poor working conditions in Bangladesh was the reform and strengthening of the country's Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), providing it with more budget, authority, and staff. In collaboration with the ILO and other partners, the government began a vigorous effort to significantly improve its planning and operational mechanisms (Barua & Ansary, 2017). Over the past 10 years, there has been a significant increase in inspection capacity in Bangladesh. DIFE has increased the number of inspectors from 92 to 393, of which 57 are women (Gov. Bangladesh, 2024).

Inspections focused on RMG factories, as this industry domain generates almost 80% of Bangladesh's total export earnings (N, Hasan, & Tawhidul, 2022). Around 3,780 actively exporting factories were assessed through the Government-led National Initiative supported by the ILO. Between 2013 and 2015, factories found to pose life-threatening hazards to workers were immediately closed by the labor inspectorate. The remaining factories, if their hazards could still be minimized, underwent a comprehensive remediation process (ILO, 2023). In addition to increasing the number of inspectors, the existing systems were also modernized, including the Labor Inspection Management Application (LIMA), launched in 2018, and an online fire licensing platform that increases transparency, generates real-time data, and streamlines processes (Moazzem, Halim, & Shafayat, 2018).

Pushing for Amendment to Bangladesh Labour Law

The Bangladesh Labour Act has faced criticism for its deficiencies in implementing national labour policy and for exposing discrepancies between these policies and the standards established by the ILO. To rectify these deficiencies and enhance adherence to labour policy in Bangladesh, a significant measure is required: a thorough amendment of the Bangladesh Labour Act to ensure conformity with ILO fundamental principles and conventions. A comprehensive evaluation is necessary to confirm compliance with international labour norms (Syed, 2023).

After the Rana Plaza collapse, a Joint Statement released by the ILO urged the Government of Bangladesh to propose revisions to the Labour Law. The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was revised on 16 July 2013 to improve worker safety, welfare, and rights, and to foster trade unionism and collective bargaining (Gov. Bangladesh, 2024). Revisions to the Bangladesh Labour Act and the Bangladesh Labour Regulations, which oversee the Act's enforcement, along with modifications to the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Act, have enhanced workplace safety and workers' rights. The modifications entail the obligatory formation of Safety Committees in workplaces employing over 50 workers and the reduction of minimal membership criteria for the founding and registration of trade unions (Kusmawan & Rasyidah, 2023). This will facilitate the ILO's oversight and regulation of garment factories in Bangladesh.

Promoting Social Dialogue to Call for Workers' Rights

Promoting fundamental rights at work through effective social discourse is a priority of the Bangladesh Decent Work Programme 2012–2015, executed in partnership with the ILO's tripartite members, including the Government and Employers' and Workers' Organisations (ILO, 2015). Establishing trade unions is a method to facilitate successful social interaction. Labour organisations in Bangladesh's RMG industry are restricted to factory-level unions, which can only be established if 30 percent of workers endorse their creation through voting. Consequently, a maximum of three unions may represent employees in any factory, leading to multiple union federations frequently in conflict with one another. Politicised, ineffective, and disjointed labour organisations provide minimal protection for labour activists who face intimidation, detention, and, in some cases, torture or murder, allegedly at the hands of police or hired enforcers employed by factory owners (Manzur, Brown, Knudsen, & Remick, 2017).

The Rana Plaza catastrophe marked a pivotal shift in the perspective of ready-made garment factory owners, who had previously exhibited significant resistance to labour legislation, particularly regarding trade unions, perceived as enhancing prospects for workers. Subsequent to the 2013 revision of the Labour Law in Bangladesh aimed at streamlining the registration process for trade unions, there was a notable rise in the quantity of unions within the garment sector (ILO, 2015). According to the modification, employees were no longer required to obtain the plant owner's consent to establish a union. Workers could immediately seek authorisation from the Directorate of Labour (Manzur, Brown, Knudsen, & Remick, 2017). As of February 28, 2023, following the modification, there were around 1,201 registered trade unions in the clothing sector, with 97% being active (ILO, 2023).

Launch of Better Work Bangladesh Program

The initiation of the Better Work Bangladesh (BWB) program is a significant ILO effort to safeguard workers' rights following the Rana Plaza disaster. BWB is a prominent initiative launched by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) to advocate for workers' rights in Bangladesh. Launched in 2014, it became fully operational by late 2015 to foster a more competitive garment industry that ensures decent employment and improved circumstances for workers, while also advocating for sound business practices among factories and brands. These objectives are attained through tripartite partnership to promote economic development in Bangladesh (ILO, 2023).

During the initial phase of the BWB programme (2014–2017), the initiative supported the ILO in aiding the Government of Bangladesh to enhance the alignment of the nation's Labour Law with international labour standards, encompassing compensation, contracts, gender inclusivity, occupational safety and health (OSH), and working hours. This period witnessed modifications to the Labour Law and enhancements in trade union registration standards to align more effectively with the ILO's fundamental principles on Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining (Bangladesh - Better Work, 2024).

The second phase of the Better Work Bangladesh initiative (2018–2021) highlights three principal areas: factory-level services, BWB's impact on the garment sector, and the empowerment of women workers, who constitute the majority in the industry (Kusmawan & Rasyidah, 2023). Better Work Bangladesh prioritises the enhancement of working conditions and opportunities for female workers, focussing on productivity and career progression, the eradication of discrimination, and the improvement of health and safety, all while ensuring no gender bears an excessive burden (Bangladesh - Better Work, 2024).

The Better Work Bangladesh program collaborates with UNICEF via the 'moms@Work' initiative, which advocates for breastfeeding and maternity rights for working moms in 103 textile factories, helping over 6,500 pregnant and nursing women. The initiative has significantly enhanced circumstances for working moms on maternity leave rights, childcare, employment protection, and health benefits. It has subsequently grown to encompass around 450 participating factories. Better Work Bangladesh collaborates with 48 companies and retailers, affecting almost 1.3 million workers, of whom 50 percent are women (Kusmawan & Rasyidah, 2023). Better Work Bangladesh can be considered as an effort improvement toward woman's right in Bangladesh.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Rana Plaza factory collapse illuminated the severe circumstances endured by workers in Bangladesh's garment sector. This underscored the essential function of the ILO, an international entity committed to safeguarding workers' rights and enhancing global working conditions. Public pressure, intensified by media coverage, along with the ILO's responsibilities, compelled the organization to act on workers' rights in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

The study indicates that the ILO has been instrumental through multiple activities, including factory inspections and enhancements, worker compensation, reforms in inspection protocols, advocacy for amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Law, and the promotion of social debate regarding workers' rights. The ILO initiated the Better Work Bangladesh (BWB) program, which has substantially influenced working conditions in the garment sector. The organization has facilitated the attainment of safer, fairer, and more equal working conditions for employees while reinforcing the legal and social frameworks that underpin them.

From the perspective of the theory of the role of international organizations, the ILO exemplifies how such entities function as platforms for cooperation, norm-setting institutions, and facilitators of policy implementation. As a norm entrepreneur, the ILO has played a pivotal role in shaping labor standards and advocating for regulatory changes, ensuring that national labor policies align with international human rights principles. Moreover, the ILO's engagement in Bangladesh illustrates how international organizations can exert influence through technical assistance, capacity building, and multilateral collaboration. Nevertheless, despite these advancements, challenges persist, requiring sustained efforts to ensure the continuous protection and promotion of workers' rights across all industrial sectors. This underscores the ongoing necessity for international organizations to adapt and reinforce their strategies in response to evolving global labor dynamics.

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