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## Rana Plaza: Bangladesh Garment Tragedy (A)

On April 24, 2013 the Rana Plaza factory building collapsed in the Savar industrial district outside of Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Over 1,100 people were killed in the worst industrial accident<sup>1</sup> since over 2,000 people were killed (and 150,000 injured) in the Union Carbide plant gas leak in Bhopal, India.<sup>2</sup> Most of the victims worked for the five garment factories housed in Rana Plaza, whose primary clients were European, US and Canadian firms. Export contracts to such firms had helped Bangladesh become the world's second largest clothing exporter.<sup>3</sup> Rana Plaza was not the first tragedy to occur in Bangladesh's garment industry, and without intervention, more might follow. Following the Rana Plaza disaster, international brand owners, domestic and foreign governments, labor unions and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), began to discuss responsibilities for improving conditions for Bangladeshi garment workers.

### The Bangladesh Garment Industry

Following independence from Pakistan in 1971, the Bangladesh government began privatizing industries to spur economic growth. The garment industry became a major force in Bangladesh after the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA) was enacted in 1974. The MFA regulated the sale of garments and textiles from developing countries to first world countries. The MFA, which was in effect until 2004, imposed quotas on garment exports from Korea, China, Hong Kong and India.<sup>4</sup> No quotas were imposed on Bangladesh's garment exports and its industry grew from \$12,000 worth of exports in 1978 to over \$21 billion in 2012. Even after the MFA expired, Bangladesh maintained export volume, thanks to its low labor costs. In 2012, Bangladesh was the second largest garment exporter in the world, after China.<sup>5</sup>

The garment industry was a major force in the Bangladesh economy. The industry employed 3.6 million people (and an additional 6 million, through indirect employment) or roughly 2% of the population.<sup>6</sup> The garment industry accounted for 13% of GDP.<sup>7</sup> It was the single largest source of exports, 78% in 2011.<sup>8</sup> (See **Exhibit 1** for growth in garment industry employment over time). Workers in garment factories were paid approximately 13% more than workers in other industries.<sup>9</sup> The vast majority of garment workers were women. In 2011, around 12% of Bangladeshi women between 15 and 30 years of age were employed in the garment industry.<sup>10</sup>

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### *Global Customers*

The majority of garments produced in Bangladesh were exported. In 2013, 2,000 out of 5,000 garment factories had export contracts, with many of the remaining 3,000 factories working as sub-contractors that provided additional capacity for the factories with international orders.<sup>11</sup> Some multinational brands imposed strict limitations on the use of sub-contractors in their contracts with primary suppliers, (in certain cases, processes existed for MNCs to grant permission for use of sub-contractors). It was also common for brands to employ agents to locate production capacity on their behalf. Nearly 90% of garments produced in Bangladesh were exported to the United States, Europe and Canada (see **Exhibit 2** for proportionate export volume). In 2012, the US alone received \$4.9 billion worth of garment exports from Bangladesh.

Many US and European fashion brands sourced items from Bangladesh. Brands with operations in Bangladesh included well-known global fast fashion labels H&M, Inditex (Zara), and Loblaw's (Joe Fresh); as well as other low-to-mid priced labels like Wal-Mart, Gap, and PVH (Calvin Klein, Tommy Hilfiger, Timberland). Many brands required garment production to align with the seasonal release of new clothing collections (in spring, summer, fall and winter). These production schedules caused large spikes in demand for capacity, with little room for errors, around the seasonal release dates, and lower demand at other times.

Low cost production and large capacity were key incentives for multinational corporations (MNCs) to produce garments in Bangladesh. The minimum wage in 2012 was \$37 per month, and had only increased by \$29 over the past 30 years.<sup>12</sup> In comparison, China, the largest clothing exporter, had a minimum wage four times that of Bangladesh, and saw its labor costs increase by 30% in 2011 alone.<sup>13</sup> As shown in **Exhibit 3**, Bangladesh's minimum and average wages were far lower than those of other developing countries which produced garments for export. Combined labor cost differentials were expected to help Bangladesh's garment industry to reach \$30 billion by 2015.<sup>14</sup>

### *Factory Conditions*

More than 1,000 garment workers were thought to have died and 3,000 to have been injured working in Bangladesh's garment industry since 1990.<sup>15</sup> (See **Exhibit 4** for a list of industrial buildings which had collapsed in Bangladesh.) The quick growth of the garment industry had resulted in fast construction of factories, often at the expense of adhering to building codes. The government feared foreign investment and export contracts would flow to other low cost garment producing countries if MNCs perceived Bangladesh's factory safety record and labor disputes as risks to their brands. In 2012, the US Ambassador to Bangladesh shared with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) details of a call he received from the U.S. CEO of one of Bangladesh's largest garment export customers. The CEO stated his concern that "the tarnishing of the Bangladesh brand may be putting our company's reputation at risk."<sup>16</sup>

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) claimed to regularly monitor member factories for safety compliance. However, it was unclear the extent to which compliance was enforced. Following the Tazreen garment factory fire caused by unsafe storage of flammable materials in November of 2012, which killed over 100 workers, BGMEA inspectors were sent to member factories to check labor and safety compliance. Four of the buildings inspected, belonging to BGMEA President Atiqul Islam, were found to have numerous violations.<sup>17</sup>

Numerous NGOs sought to improve labor and safety conditions for Bangladesh's garment workers. Care Bangladesh partnered with MNCs to create programs to help female garment workers develop leadership skills. The Global Women's Economic Empowerment Initiative, a partnership

between Care Bangladesh and Wal-mart, helped nearly 24,000 female garment workers learn their legal rights and develop communication skills.<sup>18</sup> Gap worked with Care Bangladesh to form the Personal Advancement and Career Enhancement Initiative for around 500 female garment workers employed in Gap's supplier factories.<sup>19</sup> Other NGOs, like the Awaj Foundation, empowered garment workers to understand and act upon their legal rights. The Awaj Foundation's network included 255, 719 garment workers and offered programs for workers on Bangladesh labour laws, fire safety, and health care services, among others.<sup>20</sup> The Worker Rights Consortium inspected Bangladesh garment factories for labor violations but, over three years, it had only checked the factories associated with three factory owners.<sup>21</sup> In 2007, the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity, (an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations,) petitioned the U.S. government to suspend trade privileges for Bangladesh, in light of worker rights violations in the garment industry.<sup>22</sup>

The Bangladesh government tried to suppress activities by labor unions and other groups who attempted to highlight poor safety conditions in the country's garment factories. Bangladesh police and security forces were suspected in the 2010 murder of labor activist Aminul Islam, the president of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation's in Savar and organizer of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity labor rights group. He was detained and beaten by Bangladesh security forces and his body showed signs of torture after being recovered in 2012.<sup>23</sup>

## Rana Plaza

On April 23, the day before the building collapse, workers observed cracks in the walls of the Rana Plaza building. The building housed five garment factories; as well as a bank and shopping mall.<sup>24</sup> That morning, an engineer who had previously consulted for Sohel Rana, the building owner,<sup>25</sup> deemed the building unsafe and recommended that the workers be evacuated.<sup>26</sup> Later that day, a local government official met with Sohel Rana. After the meeting, the official declared the building was safe, pending another inspection.<sup>27</sup> The workers of the Brac Bank branch heeded the advice of the engineer and vacated the building.<sup>28</sup> Garment workers were informed that they were expected to return to work in the building the next morning, to fulfill overdue orders, or risk losing their jobs.<sup>29</sup>

On April 24, 2013, the nine story Rana Plaza building collapsed, killing 1,100 workers and injuring 2,500 more.<sup>30</sup> Sohel Rana was in his office in Rana Plaza when the disaster occurred; he fled but was arrested later at the Indian border. The disaster was caused by numerous structural problems (see **Exhibit 5** for an illustration of the building):<sup>31</sup>

- Four additional floors were constructed illegally upon the existing four stories, with a ninth floor under construction.
- The building lacked the supporting walls needed to hold heavy industrial machines and generators used by the factories.
- The lot where Rana Plaza stood was formerly a pond, which was filled only with sand.
- Inferior building materials were used to construct Rana Plaza.

## Initial Reactions to the Tragedy

### *Garment Workers*

Following the collapse of Rana Plaza, rescue workers began excavating to locate the 3,200 employees estimated to have been killed or trapped in the rubble.<sup>32</sup> “I would never return to that death trap,” said a survivor, who had worked in the button division of one of the factories in Rana Plaza.<sup>33</sup> In the two days following the tragedy, thousands of garment workers rioted in the industrial districts in and around Dhaka, causing the closure of many local garment factories.<sup>34</sup>

None of the workers in the Rana Plaza garment factories belonged to a union. Under Bangladesh’s labor laws, 30% of the workforce had to petition in order for a union to be formed.<sup>35</sup> This was hard to achieve since, by law, the names on the petition were open to inspection by the factory owners. Workers had few opportunities to change the garment industry from within.

Alternative employment options were limited, even for workers who were not maimed by the building collapse. It was difficult to find other jobs which offered the salary needed to live in Dhaka. Many of those who chose to leave work in the garment industry after the collapse returned to their home villages in rural Bangladesh to work in agriculture. The Clean Clothes Campaign, a not-for-profit worker advocacy group based in Europe, estimated that \$71 million would be needed to compensate the victims who died or were injured in Rana Plaza.<sup>36</sup>

### *Consumers*

As news of the Rana Plaza collapse broke internationally, consumers who purchased products from MNC retailers with operations in Bangladesh expressed their concerns on the retailers’ websites and in social media. Many consumers condemned the retailers for taking advantage of Bangladeshi workers and sub-par working conditions, and a few inquired about the retailer’s supply chains safety programs.<sup>37</sup> In response, many retailers claimed ignorance of their own supply chains and blamed their suppliers for placing the retailer’s orders with unapproved and unsafe sub-contractor factories.<sup>38</sup>

A survey by Retail Week, an industry publication, found that 44% of consumers were no more likely to ask retailers where their clothes were produced than before the Rana Plaza disaster (in contrast to the 35% who said they were “a lot” or “a little” more likely to ask).<sup>39</sup> (See **Exhibit 6** for the survey question and results.). Some observers were concerned that certain consumers’ preference for low prices would be greater than their desire for safe production.

### *Bangladesh Government*

After the incident, the government moved to arrest the owner of the building, Sohel Rana, as well as the owners of the garment factories housed there.<sup>40</sup> The charges brought against Sohel Rana and the factory owners by the Labor Court were intended to punish negligence, rather than to compensate victims for loss of life or earning potential.<sup>41</sup> The mayor of Savar and the engineer who inspected the building the day prior were suspended.<sup>42</sup>

Rana Plaza revealed the extent to which the government organizations tasked with inspecting factories and enforcing the building codes were understaffed. Responsibility to inspect factories was split incoherently among different entities. Local government and the Ministry of Textiles both conducted random inspections; while some MNCs did their own audits, and other factories were inspected by the BGMEA. There was no comprehensive or coordinated approach to factory

inspections, and no organization had the resources to take on all of the inspections alone. The local Dhaka development organization, Rajuk, had only 40 inspectors for all of Dhaka's factories, estimated at 1 million (of which the garment industry represented only a small percentage).<sup>43</sup>

The government entities were not sufficiently staffed to inspect factories, let alone enforce building codes in non-compliant factories. Lack of resources was not the only barrier to enforcing building codes. More than 25 members of Bangladesh's parliament had a direct stake in the garment industry.<sup>44</sup> Officials from the inspection department said that factory owners were often given advance warning of inspections, since maintaining good relations with the owners was a priority for the department.<sup>45</sup> The government sought to avoid widely publicizing the scope of the non-compliance problem, for risk of scaring away foreign investment. The prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, stated in an interview with CNN, following the disaster, "Anywhere in the world, any accident can take place," she said. "You cannot predict anything."<sup>46</sup>

### *BGMEA*

The day following the tragedy, the BGMEA president Atiqul Islam announced the creation of three committees, intended to help the victims and families with treatment and compensation.<sup>47</sup> He pledged that the organization would pay for medical treatment for the workers injured by Rana Plaza and would also compensate the families of the victims.<sup>48</sup> The proposed compensation per deceased worker was equivalent to roughly seven months of salary. After the disaster, the BGMEA quickly assembled a team of engineers to inspect factories; 19 were closed as a result of the inspections.<sup>49</sup>

### *Global Labor Activists*

Activists called for reform of Bangladesh's strict thresholds for the formation of unions and for greater stringency of building inspections. None of the garment factories operating in Rana Plaza was unionized.<sup>50</sup> According to Brad Adams, the Asia director for the Human Rights Watch, unions could have saved worker lives: "Had one or more of the Rana Plaza factories been unionized, workers could have refused to enter the building the day it collapsed."<sup>51</sup>

Activists uncovered further holes in the rigor of the inspections process. Scott Nova of the Worker Rights Consortium revealed that, while many MNC audits evaluated important labor issues such as working hours and use of child labor, prior to Rana Plaza, most audits did not include any inspections of factory structure and safety.<sup>52</sup>

### *U.S. Government*

Prior to the disaster, the U.S. government was set to review Bangladesh's inclusion in the generalized system of preferences (GSP) in June of 2013. Participation in GSP granted Bangladesh tariff exemption on certain imports to the US. Worker rights and labor standards were considered as criteria for a country's inclusion in GSP, and the administration had been "concerned about the worker rights situation in Bangladesh for some time."<sup>53</sup>

## **The Way Forward**

MNCs with operations in Bangladesh had several options on how to respond to the Rana Plaza tragedy.

### *Business as Usual*

MNCs were not directly responsible for the disaster, and many MNCs that had already been conducting factory inspections (like Wal Mart) would continue to do so, and retain private records of infractions with no obligations to alert workers of safety hazards. There was low risk of consumers of the MNCs' products substituting for apparel not made in Bangladesh, as consumers, especially those with lower incomes, were unlikely to alter their purchase decisions based upon a garment's origins (and even if they wished to, the size of the Bangladesh garment industry made it difficult to avoid Bangladesh-made apparel).

### *Relocate Production*

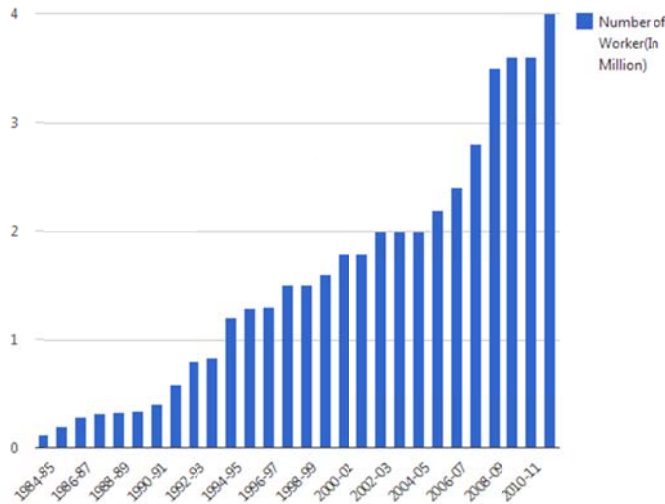
The Disney Corporation decided to shift all of its production away from Bangladesh to other, lower risk countries.<sup>54</sup> Due to the significant gap in labor costs between Bangladesh and the next cheapest supplier, Cambodia, shifting operations would incur higher production costs, but could lessen the risk of negative press or irresponsible labor practices tainting the Disney brand. (See **Exhibit 7** for example of production costs.) The larger the proportion of a retailer's supply chain produced in Bangladesh, the more costly to move production to another country (Disney's operations in Bangladesh were a relatively low percentage of its total garment production).

### *Collaborate to Invest in Safety Standards*

MNCs could decide to remain in Bangladesh and partner with factories to improve safety conditions in the garment industry. The Worker Rights Consortium, a labor advocacy group based in Washington, D.C., estimated the cost to improve conditions in all 5,000 garment factories at \$3 billion or \$600,000 per factory, paid over five years.<sup>55</sup> A sample of 300 factories in Dhaka revealed that about 90% of facilities were in need of serious repairs or demolition.<sup>56</sup> In order to sustain improvements in factory conditions, retailers (and/or the Bangladesh government) would need to provide for on-going inspections and enforcement. Not all factories had contracts with international retailers, although many sub-contracted from factories which did, so determining which factories belonged to each MNC's supply chain was itself a challenge. .

Factory owners were hesitant to invest large sums to improve safety unless they could be assured that their MNC customers would not shift contracts from their factories to lower cost, lower safety options. A 2012 study by the World Bank of ten of the largest Bangladeshi garment factories suggested some productivity benefits to factories that were in compliance with international labor standards. The return on investment (ROI) as shown in **Exhibit 8**, for compliant factories was 2:58; whereas non-compliant factories had an ROI of 1.94.<sup>57</sup>

**Exhibit 1** Bangladesh Garment Industry Employment



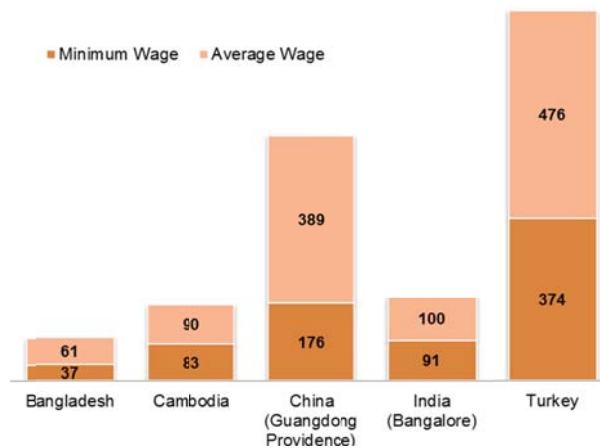
Source: BGMEA Statistics.

**Exhibit 2** Destinations of Bangladesh Garment Exports 2012

Destination	Percent of Exports (\$)
Europe	47%
United States	35%
Canada	5%
Other	13%

Source: BGMEA, via EPB, Compiled by: RDTI Cell, BGMEA.

**Exhibit 3** Garment Industry Monthly and Minimum Wages by Country

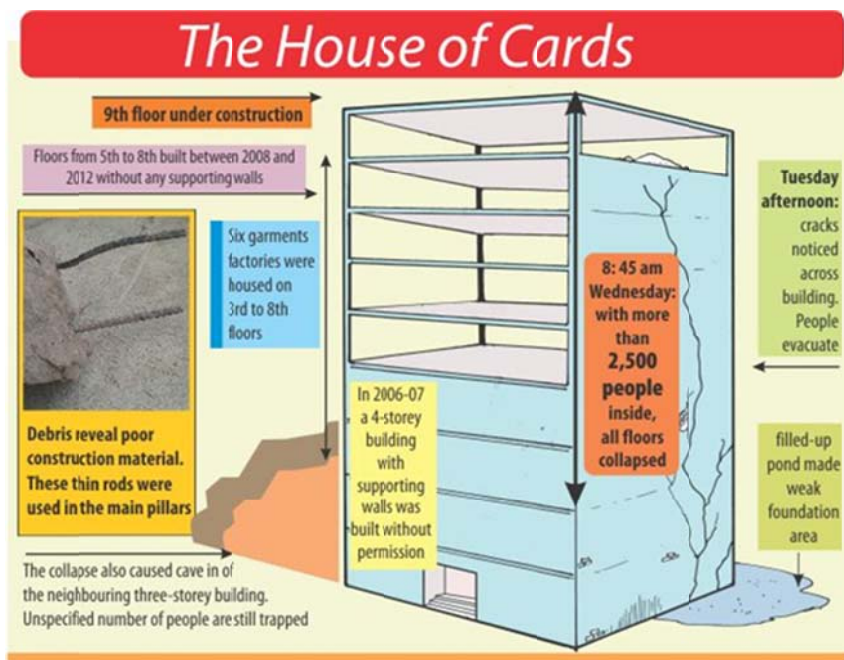


Source: Adapted from H&M, "Conscious Action Sustainability Report 2012," p. 49. 2012. [http://about.hm.com/content/dam/hm/about/documents/en/CSR/reports/Conscious%20Actions%20Sustainability%20Report%202012\\_en.pdf](http://about.hm.com/content/dam/hm/about/documents/en/CSR/reports/Conscious%20Actions%20Sustainability%20Report%202012_en.pdf). Accessed August 2013.

**Exhibit 4** Timeline of Bangladesh Building Collapses

Year	Building that Collapsed	People Killed
2004	Shankhari Bazar in Old Dhaka	11
2005	Spectrum Sweater Factory	64
2006	Phoenix Garments	21
2010	Begun Bari	23

Source: *Dhaka Tribune*, "Looking beyond Rana Plaza" July 29, 2013. <http://www.dhakatribune.com/safety/2013/jul/29/looking-beyond-rana-plaza>. Accessed August 2013.

**Exhibit 5** Causes of the Rana Plaza Collapse

Source: From Shaheen Mollah, Wasim Bin Habib, "It crumbles like a pack of cards," April 25, 2013, *The Daily Star*. <http://www.thedailystar.net/beta2/news/like-a-pack-of-cards-it-crumbles/>. Accessed August 2013.

**Exhibit 6** Retail Week Consumer Survey, May 2013

**Question: To what extent has the Bangladesh factory building collapse made you more likely, if at all, to ask retailers about where the clothes you buy are produced?**

Percentage <sup>a</sup>	Response
13%	a lot more likely
22%	a little more likely
44%	it has made no difference
7%	I have not heard of the Bangladesh Factory building collapse
14%	don't know

Source: ICM Research, on behalf of Retail Week, "Retail Week - May 2013, Bangladesh Building Collapse," May 2013. <http://www.retail-week.com/Journals/2013/05/14/w/e/m/ICM-Poll---Bangladesh.pdf>. Accessed August 2013.

<sup>a</sup>The survey was conducted online with 2025 respondents.



Exhibit 7 Cost of Garment Production in Bangladesh, 2013



**Monthly wages for garment workers**



**Munshi's Sepal Garments, one of Bangladesh's biggest apparel producers, makes these jeans for Asda, a Wal-Mart Stores subsidiary in Britain**

After materials, assembly, and 26¢ profit, Sepal sells the jeans to Hong Kong middleman Li & Fung for ...

Shipping cost, plus profit for Li & Fung and Walmart:

Asda store costs, profit, tax, and other expenses:

Price for Asda customers in Britain:

$$\begin{array}{ccccccc}
 \boxed{\$7.29} & + & \boxed{\$4.33} & + & \boxed{\$10.50} & = & \boxed{\$22.12}
 \end{array}$$

JEANS: PHOTOGRAPH BY AARON DYER FOR BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK; DATA: SEPAL GARMENTS, BLOOMBERG INDUSTRIES ESTIMATES

Source: *Bloomberg Businessweek*, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-06-06/correlations-perilous-arithmetic-for-bangladeshs-factories>.

**Exhibit 8** ROI for Compliant and Non-Compliant Garment Factories in Bangladesh, 2012<sup>a</sup>

Factory name	(A) Initial investment	(B) Initial investment for compliance (B)	(C) Annual running cost (C)	(D) Annual running cost for compliance (D)	(E) Annual Turnover (E)	(F) Annual Profit (=I)	(G) Profit-to-initial investment ratio (= F/A+B)
<b>Compliant Factories</b>							
Shine fashion	305.31	43.75	173.52	3.36	1000	836.58	2.40
Mascot Knit Ltd.	284.76	9.52	162.34	1.08	1000	716.4	2.44
Zaara Composite	280.88	3.57	199.88	0.72	917	676.76	2.38
Knit Plus Ltd.	274.82	0.71	196.56	1.68	875	789.75	2.87
Knit Asia Ltd.	273.83	0.29	159.41	0.84	950	768.52	2.80
Average	283.92	11.57	178.34	1.54	948.4	757.60	2.58
<b>Noncompliant Factories</b>							
Harun garments Ltd.	92.14		44.3		267	222.70	1.97
Alim Knit Wear Ltd.	113.10		64.43		250	185.57	1.23
Green Knit Wear	151.40		64.28		350	285.72	2.33
Step Two Garments	122.86		63.09		300	236.91	1.66
Texcon Textile Ltd.	142.75		64.68		375	310.32	2.49
Average	124.45		60.16		308.40	248.00	1.94

<sup>a</sup>All figures in US \$ million. Compliant investment implies the absence of child labor, health and safety or environmental issues, and harassment of employees.

Source: L.M. Baral, "Comparative Study of Compliant and Non-Compliant RMG Factories in Bangladesh," *International Journal of Engineering & Technology*, (2010), as compiled by World Bank, "Consolidating and Accelerating Exports in Bangladesh," Bangladesh Development Series, Paper No. 29, June 2012. [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2012/07/04/000333037\\_20120704022441/Rendered/PDF/708450NWP0BDS20tsinBangladesh0BDS29.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2012/07/04/000333037_20120704022441/Rendered/PDF/708450NWP0BDS20tsinBangladesh0BDS29.pdf). Accessed August 2013.

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<sup>6</sup> Bjorn Claeson, *Deadly Secrets*, (Washington, DC: International Labor Rights Forum, 2012), pp. 12-13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Mehul Srivastava, Arun Devnath, “Bangladesh’s Paradox for Poor Women Workers,” *Bloomberg Businessweek*, May 9, 2013, <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-05-09/bangladeshs-paradox-for-poor-women-workers>, accessed August 20, 2013.

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<sup>12</sup> Bjorn Claeson, *Deadly Secrets*, (Washington, DC: International Labor Rights Forum, 2012), p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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