



Bangladesh Fire & Building Safety

On 24 April 2013 the Rana Plaza Building in Savar collapsed. At the end of last year and early this year, a number of factory fires took place, including the ones at Tazreen Fashion Limited and Smart Export Garments. Unfortunately, such tragedies are not incidents. Improving fire and building safety in the garment industry in Bangladesh is more urgent now than ever. It is a sector-wide challenge and requires a concerted effort over time and at a number of different levels:

Brand responsibility and Fair Wear Foundation

It is impossible to single out one actor or stakeholder group as the primary responsible to improve building and fire safety in Bangladesh. All actors need to proactively take their share of responsibility. This explicitly includes the international garment brands sourcing in Bangladesh.

Most of these have committed to upholding international labour standards, including a safe working environment for workers that produce their clothes. While brands' commitments to international labour standards are important, such claims usually only gain credibility when verified by a third party.

Fair Wear Foundation (FWF) is an international organisation governed by Business Associations, Trade Unions and NGOs. FWF verifies the social compliance claims of its member companies. In order to gain real insight into company performance, FWF's verification system exists at three levels; at the brand level (Brand Performance Check), at the factory level (social audits) and at the level of workers through a complaints mechanism.

FWF's approach

At the factory level FWF and its member companies conduct social audits. In addition to identifying issues that need to be addressed, an audit is part of a broader process aimed at fixing these problems. This process is explicitly collaborative: change can only happen if both factory management and workers are on board.

FWF thus checks that the monitoring process includes management and worker(representative)s and that remediation is action oriented and time-bound.

In addition to these social audits, FWF implements a complaints procedure in all countries where it is active. All employees of factories supplying FWF member companies have access to the local FWF helplines. FWF's complaints procedure is designed to ensure that workers in affiliated companies' supply chains always have recourse in instances of noncompliance, but only in instances where workers are not able to access local grievance systems.

Finally, FWF checks annually that brand companies' own business practices do not contribute to violations of the Code of Labour Practices, for instance through short delivery times or pressure on prices. Companies who do not meet FWF's strict requirements at the start of membership are expected to



improve their performance step by step. If they don't, membership is terminated.

As a number of FWF's member companies produce a considerable volume in factories in Bangladesh, FWF is engaging with these companies to pay extra attention to the following aspects of their work to ensure the safety of the workers producing their clothes:

- Transparency of factory lists: the first requirement of FWF membership is to make available to FWF a complete factory register. This means that FWF, as a trusted third party, can always verify whether one of its member companies is sourcing in a factory where problems occur.
- When serious non-compliances are found, FWF requires time-bound remediation plans and clarity on the consequences of failure to comply with remediation plans.
- FWF works to ensure buyers' commitment to maintain their production volumes to incentivise suppliers to make improvements and to maintain employment for the workers.
- FWF stimulates and rewards member companies for engaging meaningfully with their suppliers through for instance supplier meetings where issues such as the importance of labour conditions is discussed and explained.
- Through participation in FWF's Workplace Education Programme, companies contribute to proper worker representation and meaningful worker-management dialogue that drives change and supports improved conditions. Workers are not only those most at risk from fires and building collapses but when properly trained, organised and supported they are best placed to prevent fires, hold management to account and ensure sustainable improvement in the sector.
- FWF will continue to involve local stakeholders to disseminate information to workers listing the labour conditions and the phone number of the helpline to call in case of violation of these conditions.
- FWF will further enhance cooperation among stakeholders by organising and participating in round table meetings to share lessons learnt and good practices.

Additional efforts in Bangladesh

- FWF members are required, from the start of their membership, to monitor their supply chain (1st tier suppliers and subcontractors). In addition to the social audits by FWF's audit teams, FWF member companies have the option to arrange monitoring visits by FWF auditors to factories that have already been audited for the purpose of enhancing the prompt follow-up of fire and building safety.
- As part of these follow-up visits, FWF will assess the functioning of worker representation and provide FWF member companies and their suppliers with the information necessary to further improve this.



- FWF is investigating the possibility of adding extra resources to the current audit teams in Bangladesh to extend the factory audit in terms of fire and building safety.
- FWF is analysing all reports of audits done in Bangladesh by FWF's teams over the last three years. The analysis shows which factories were not compliant in terms of fire and building safety. FWF will pay follow up visits in the period May-August 2013 to track progress.
- FWF will ask its member companies to issue a statement to their agents and suppliers on the importance of good labour conditions (including fire & building safety) in relation to other topics such as production planning.
- FWF will distribute a checklist for Occupational Health and Safety to all its member companies in May 2013. The purpose of this checklist is to allow non-CSR staff of member companies, such as product managers and buyers who visit the factory often, to do a preliminary scan of elementary Health and Safety issues.
- To continue to focus FWF's and its member companies' efforts in Bangladesh, and to promote effective coordinated action, FWF is hosting a meeting for companies at the end of May 2013.
- A statement will be made by FWF in explicit support of the National Tripartite Plan of Action (below) and communicated to the relevant authorities.
- FWF will include information on the National Tripartite Plan of Action in its country study for Bangladesh, which will be revised accordingly.

Collaborative additional action

The number of different factories concerned, as well as the number of brands involved and the range of planned initiatives, calls out for a coordinated approach. It is crucial to ensure the maximum impact and efficient use of resources. The efforts already started to ensure collaborative action at the factory level can be used as a basis and enhanced to ensure effective support for the necessary investment across the sector. All actors, big and small, need to be able to make a meaningful contribution to improving fire and building safety.

In March 2013, the Bangladeshi government, employers and unions, signed the 'National Tripartite Plan of Action'. During a high-level mission by the ILO to Bangladesh, following the Rana Plaza building collapse on 24 April, an additional action plan was agreed upon.

Meanwhile, on 29 April 2013, IndustriALL Global Union and its NGO partners Clean Clothes Campaign and Workers' Rights Consortium met with the ILO, the German Agency for Development Cooperation (GIZ) and a group of international brands and retailers sourcing from Bangladesh to outline an agreement on fire and building safety in Bangladesh. The meeting was hosted by GIZ.



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The parties agreed to finalise the text and commitments by 15 May 2013. The agreement aims to support and enhance the National Tripartite Plan of Action that was agreed in March 2013 by the Bangladeshi government, employers and unions.

FWF supports this process to come to a broadly accepted agreement on fire and building safety in Bangladesh. FWF believes that the following elements should be embedded in the agreement:

- The agreement should be based on a multi-stakeholder approach both in its governance as well as when it comes to its operations.
- Mandatory and time-bound remediation.
- Binding dispute resolution.
- Support/alignment with the National Tripartite Plan of Action.
- Transparency which allows for immediate remediation efforts and inspection reports, both to the public and to workers and their organisations.
- Buyers' commitment to maintain their production volumes to incentivise suppliers to make improvements and to maintain employment for the workers.
- Proper worker representation and meaningful worker-management dialogue that drives change and supports improved conditions.

Once the text of the agreement has been finalised, FWF will further guide its member companies as to the necessary next steps.

FWF is intensively discussing with its stakeholders (including IndustriALL, the Clean Clothes Campaign and business associations) to come to a broad framework. In addition, FWF will seek a dialogue with the ILO in Bangladesh and Geneva to explore how it can most effectively support the implementation of the action plan in practical terms.