

THE HIGH COST OF CHEAP CLOTHES

Four years after the collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory killed more than 1,000 people in Bangladesh, a Dhaka-based think tank continues to push for wholesale changes to one of the country's most important industries

POSTED BY NIKI WILSON ON APRIL 26, 2017

On the morning of April 24, 2013, a poorly constructed eight-storey garment factory known as Rana Plaza **collapsed** in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing more than 1,130 people in a crush of brittle concrete and rebar. It was the worst industrial disaster in the country's history, but the toll didn't end when the building fell. Many later died from injuries sustained in the collapse or were permanently physically disabled. Others developed PTSD or other mental health conditions from witnessing the event.

Among the survivors was a woman named Barsha,* who lost both her hands. After the disaster, her husband's family, with whom she lived, saw her as a burden because she could no longer contribute economically. "Her living conditions became much worse," says Khondaker Moazzem, research director at Bangladesh's **Centre for Policy Dialogue** (CPD), a think tank that focuses on development issues.

Following the tragedy, the government of Bangladesh, **development partners** such as the International Monetary Fund and apparel manufacturers such as JC Penny, Walmart and Joe Fresh, **promised** survivors financial compensation and aid, medical assistance and labour reforms. But as time passed, says Moazzem, many of these commitments waned.

Since the tragedy, the CPD, with funding from the **Think Tank Initiative**, has been evaluating and documenting the level to which those organizations have followed through on their commitments, as well as recording the journey of the disaster's survivors.

Moazzem says that as of April 2016, roughly half of the survivors still hadn't found jobs, whether because of physical injuries or mental trauma so severe that they weren't able to work. Those in the latter group didn't receive treatment for PTSD because they were deemed a lower priority than those with obvious physical injuries. And after what minimal funding that existed for PTSD and other related mental health issues ran out, many found the cost of such treatment was too high to continue.

And while almost half of the survivors remain unemployed, there are bright spots. A March 2016 **survey** conducted by Dhaka-based development NGO ActionAid Bangladesh found that the unemployment rate has gradually declined since 2013 and that the employment rate was steadily increasing. It also showed that the overall income of survivors was increasing compared to their income in 2013, 2014 and 2015. Meanwhile, at least two government of Bangladesh initiatives have been developed to meet the long-term financial needs of the victims (although implementation of these programs has been slow), some clothing-industry representatives have pledged millions of US dollars in assistance, and local and international organizations have aided with everything from helping survivors



The collapse of a garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on April 24, 2013, killed more than 1,130 people and prompted an ongoing reevaluation of one of the country's most important industries. (Photo: Jaber Al Nahian/Wikimedia Commons)

obtain prosthetics to supporting children who lost parents in the collapse.

The biggest challenge, however, is labour reform, where there's still a long way to go. "Workplace safety, employability, workers' income and livelihood, and workers' rights are still a prime concern," says Moazzem, pointing to many improvements that can be made in these areas. For example, he says the government of Bangladesh needs to develop more concrete guidelines and better safety-compliance mechanisms to ensure retailers obey the rules, while buyers and retailers should take on the broader responsibility of having third-party monitoring and auditing of their workplaces. "As a sector," he says, "they should draw negative attention to those who won't comply."

The difficulty, says Moazzem, is to ensure compliance with the rules while not having the cost of these efforts affect the approximately four million people that work in the garment-factory industry in Bangladesh, where the government has set an export target of US \$50 billion worth of apparel by 2021. If global chains were to take their business elsewhere, it would have severe socioeconomic repercussions for the country. This production pressure amplifies the need for a deadline to fully implement improvements that would restructure Bangladesh's apparel industry.

"I think it's really important that we see these issues from more than an economic point of view," says Moazzem. "It's also an opportunity for justice, gender equality and an improvement in the quality of employment for workers. In the end, such global-scale changes will create more sustainability within the apparel industry."

*To protect her identity, Barsha's real name has not been used.

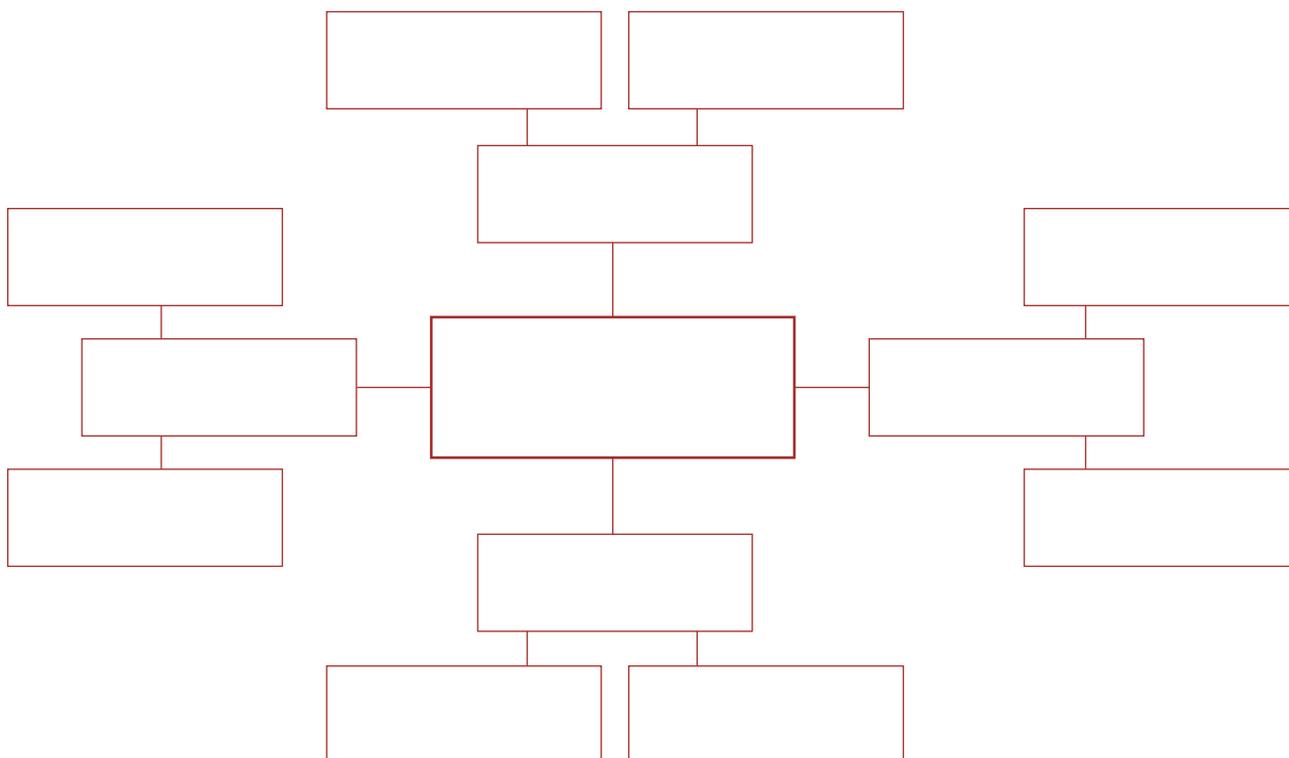
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READING AS THINKING

1. Before you read the entire article, think about the heading, "The high cost of cheap clothes." Discuss what that title implies.

2. A mind map starts with a central idea. From this idea, we note the important details in the branches and use the sub-branches to further demonstrate understanding. On the map below, use a combination of pictures and words to create a mind map that shows your understanding of:
 - a) The main idea of the article
 - b) Important details
 - c) Questions that you have
 - d) Connections between content in the article and your own life



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3. In the article, Barsha's real name is not used to protect her identity. What might be some issues that would arise if her identity was known?

4. Why would those with mental trauma be deemed a lower priority than those with obvious physical injuries?

5. Make a list of those who were affected directly or indirectly by the Rana Plaza collapse and explain how it might have affected them.

PEOPLE AFFECTED	HOW THEY WERE AFFECTED

6. Why do you think that commitments made by the government of Bangladesh, development partners and apparel manufacturers to survivors of the collapse waned in the months and years after the disaster?

7. As a consumer, how could you effect change to labour reform in Bangladesh?

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8. In the article, Khondaker Moazzem says that implementing improvements is more than an economic issue. Describe how doing so could be an opportunity for justice, gender equality and an improvement in the quality of employment for workers.

9. Create your own insightful question that you would include in this booklet for students to answer.

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Think-Pair-Share

10. *Think*

According to the article, the underlying challenge is labour reform. Khondaker Moazzem explains, “Workplace safety, employability, workers’ income and livelihood, and workers’ rights are still a prime concern.” Think of the difficulties that arise in balancing the economic state of Bangladesh and the wellbeing of the workers and their families. Using the table below, explain the actions that different stakeholders could take to help with this balance.

ACTIONS TO TAKE	
CONSUMERS	
GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH	
DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS	
APPAREL MANUFACTURERS	
BUYERS	
RETAILERS	
OTHER	

11. *Pair*

Compare your answers with a partner. Evaluate your combined actions and select those that you agree are the most pertinent. Discuss how feasible the actions chosen are.

12. *Share*

As a class, share the actions that the groups have deemed the most pertinent. Discuss how feasible the actions chosen are.

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ONLINE

1. Using [Google Maps](#), locate Dhaka, Bangladesh, and explore the city by using Street View and the satellite and map modes. Using the quick facts section and other research tools find the following:
 - a. The population
 - b. The neighbouring cities
 - c. The major bodies of water
 - d. The site where the Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed
 - e. The surroundings of the collapsed factory
 - f. The distance between Dhaka and the nearest large city
2. From the [development partners](#), choose one and find out more about what they do and how they could help with labour reform in Bangladesh.
3. Read more about the [Rana Plaza tragedy](#) and how it has become a symbol of global inequality.
4. Watch [the survivors tell their story](#) and call upon the brands for compensation.
5. Read [Shila Begum's survivor story](#).
6. Watch an [investigative report](#) by The Fifth Estate about clothing made in Bangladesh.
7. Read the [appraisal prepared by Clean Clothes Campaign](#) about the latest in compensation for the victims of Rana Plaza.
8. Read [a case study](#) using a sociological lens to interpret the tragedy.

