

Report of Field Research in Dhaka, Bangladesh (October 1, 2014 to January 15, 2015)

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Thesis Topic

Labour Conditions: A Case Study of the Readymade Garment Industry in Bangladesh

Abstract:

In order to gain empirical knowledge for my master thesis on the labour conditions of the Readymade Garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh, I made an extensive field research from October, 2014 to January, 2015 with the financial support from the World University Service, Stube Hessen. The objective of my master thesis research is to investigate what has changed in the policies of national and international actors related to the Bangladesh RMG industry in improving the labour conditions after the two prominent accidents of 'Rana Plaza' and 'Tazreen Fashions' and how the much applauded 'Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety' (Accord) and the 'Tripartite National Plan of Action' (NAP) are working toward establishing workplace safety in the RMG sector. For this during my field research I have conducted structured and semi-structured interviews of the garment workers, owners, trade unionists, government officials and civil society experts. I have also observed the actual working conditions through extensive field visit at several RMG factories under the initiatives of Accord and NAP. Beside my field research my working as a research intern in 'Updating the Occupational Safety and Health Profile of Bangladesh'; a collaborative research work carried out by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) and supervised by the International Labour Organization, Bangladesh Office has helped me a lot in fulfilling my key research objective. Despite a few negative experiences my overall field research was a great success in finding heuristic solutions to my research questions along with strengthening the theoretical framing and conceptualizing my thesis work.

Aim of Field Research:

In this era of globalization social political and economic forces have pushed labour more in its insecure and hazardous form which is apparent in the low-skilled labour intensive industries of the developing and least developed countries. These industries are playing a pivotal role in their economic growth by joining in the global production chain. For some countries they are functioning as the only rung on their ladder to industrialization. But at the same time lack of reasonable labour standards in these industries have now become one of the most thriving challenges in order to uphold their industrial growth. This is the case for the RMG industries in Bangladesh. Ready-made garment is the leading export earning sector which accounts more than 80 percent of the total export earnings of the country. The industry has also provided employment to 3.6 million people and among them 2.8 million are woman. Despite this significant success lack of 'social compliance' which implies secure working conditions, protective health and safety measures, freedom of association and provision of collective bargaining, minimum wages and free from child labour, forced labour and excessive working hours have brought about serious concerns both in the national and international level. In the last twenty years, several incidents of factory fires, collapse of the factory building due to the unplanned building structure, incidents of stampede due to the fear from fire and building collapse have taken away thousands of workers' life. The most notable among these incidences are the fire in 'Tazreen Fashions' on November, 2012 and the collapse of 'Rana Plaza' building on April 2013 which took the lives of more than one and half thousand workers and left more than three thousand

seriously wounded. After these massive casualties some notable changes in the policies of the related stakeholders of this sector are noteworthy and some initiatives have taken to improve workplace safety of the RMG industry. Among them most notable is the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety signed in May 13, 2013. It is a legally binding agreement signed by over 150 apparel corporations around the world, two global trade unions- IndustriALL and UNI Global Unions, civil society networks and a number of Bangladeshi trade unions in order to ensure safe workplace for the RMG workers. The Accord is seen as a ‘breakthrough’ international agreement which has set a new international negotiating precedence in industrial relations between multinational corporations and international trade union organizations. A huge inspection program with making public reports on fire and building safety status of the factories along with strengthening workers representation in this process is underway as planned by this accord. From the national part, a Tripartite National Plan of Action (NAP) on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh is the major initiative taken by the Government of Bangladesh, representative of workers and owner of the RMG industry. The NAP is also devoted to enhance the workplace safety of the RMG industry in three fundamental areas like legislative and policy related issues, administrative issues and issues related to practical activities implementation. As my research objective is to find out whether these initiatives has brought any significant changes in the labour conditions of the RMG industry, so field research was an imperative part of my thesis. The core aim of my field research was to collect primary data on the implementation of the Accord and the NAP through conducting structured and semi-structured interviews of the garment workers, owners, trade union leaders, government officials and the civil society experts. Another aim was to gather empirical data on the actual working conditions of the RMG factories through observation and examine the implementation of the Accord and NAP according to their reports by inspecting the factories.

Schedule of Activities

Date	Activities
11/10/2014-17/10/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Established primary contacts with the garment workers, owners and trade union leaders Started working as a research intern at BILS project ‘Updating the Occupational Safety and Health Profile of Bangladesh’
19/10/2014-28/10/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted structured interviews with seven garment workers of six industries
08/11/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspected an Accord covered garment industry, examined the implementation status of the corrective action plans (CAPs) suggested by the Accord and conducted semi-structured interview with the garment owner
22/11/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspected a NAP covered garment industry, examined the implementation status of the corrective action plans (CAPs) suggested by the NAP and conducted semi-structured interview with the factory manager
04/12/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspected an Accord covered garment industry, examined the implementation status of the corrective action plans (CAPs) suggested by the Accord and conducted semi-structured interview with the compliance manager of the industry
05/12/2014-13/12/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted structured interviews with five garment workers of three industries
17/12/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspected a NAP covered garment industry, examined the implementation status of the corrective action plans (CAPs) suggested by the NAP and conducted semi-structured interview with the factory owner

26/12/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted semi-structured interview with the President of Independent Bangla Garment Workers Employee Federation
29/12/2014	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted semi-structured interview with the Acting Secretary General of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation
05/01/2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted semi-structured interview with the Joint Secretary (Labour), Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh
10/01/2015	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conducted semi-structured interview with the Additional Research Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue, a civil society think tank

Assessment of Success:

The field work was an imperative part according to my research design and I have gained a lot of necessary information and empirical data during my field research. My inspection to the garment factories and interviews with the factory owners has helped me to assess the development and implementation of the initiatives taken through Accord and NAP. It has also helped me to grasp the actual working conditions through observation. Interviews with the trade union leaders has helped me to analyze the present status of collective bargaining and freedom of association along with the role of the unions in implementing the initiatives that are taken to improve the workplace safety. Interview with the government official has supported to develop concepts about the mechanisms that are working in implementing the initiatives and the reasons behind the slow progress of the NAP. My interview with a civil society expert has aided me a lot in analyzing the overall finding from my field research. Finally my working as an intern at the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies contributed tremendously in getting free access to the government offices and RMG factories for collecting necessary information and inspecting them more smoothly.

Evaluation of experience

My visit to Bangladesh, my home country for my field research was very enjoyable, productive and enriching experience. My exchange of ideas with the representatives from all the related stakeholders of the RMG industry has enhanced my knowledge about the labour conditions of the products produced through the transnational value chain. This is my first advanced academic field research done practically by applying qualitative methods. It has also enriched my professional, communication and organizational skills. However it was not so easy to get into the garment factories for inspection and conducting interviews with the garment owners. Most of the factory owners with whom I have contacted had refused to let me do the inspection in their factory. It was pretty hard to establish an appointment with the Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Also a trade union leader has given me appointment several times but subsequently failed to meet that.

Last of all I am very much grateful and extending my deepest thanks to the World University Service, Stube Hessen for helping me in conducting my field research for my M.A thesis.