

Project Title: Aftermath of Rana Plaza: Can the Binding Accord Improve Global Workplace Standards

Abstract:

When the building with garment factories in Savar, Bangladesh collapsed on April 24, 2013, the world observed the tragic death of over 1,200 workers. Since then, many have asked what could have prevented this tragedy, and how could the deplorable labor standards in the garment industry in Bangladesh be improved. Local labor organizations and international labor rights organizations have called for stricter safety enforcement measures, including holding retailers on the global labor supply chain responsible for workplace standards. Labor advocates in Bangladesh have discouraged calls for consumer boycotts of retailers here in the United States and in Europe for fear that those companies would leave Bangladesh in search of cheaper labor, devastating Bangladesh's garment industry labor force. One such measure that has been advocated by the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity is the Accord on Fire and Safety in Bangladesh in partnership with labor and non-profit organizations, and retailers. This is an historic binding agreement among labor advocates and global chain suppliers to improve workplace standards. Such a multi-national and multi-party labor agreement has never existed. In contrast to the Safety Accord, U.S. retailers like Children's Place, Gap and Walmart have joined the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety advocating for a non-binding monitoring group as the ideal regulatory mechanism for improving workplace safety standards called the Bangladesh Worker Safety Initiative. Given the existence of two parallel mechanisms in the garment industry, it is a unique time to study the impact of these proposals on improving labor standards for not only Bangladeshi workers, but also workers globally. While both proposals operate in the private regulatory sphere as opposed to the nation-state legislative sphere, they both reflect different views on how to improve workplace standards within that private sphere. The Accord seeks to bring the agreement into similar force as a law, with remedies for enforcement in arbitral forum. In contrast, the Safety Initiative does monitoring and provides loans to companies to make necessary safety repairs. In labor and employment law, this reflects a long-standing tension on how labor laws interact with free market private regulation, and in particular in a transnational setting. The research project will center on the impact of both the Safety Accord and Safety Initiative on the ground in terms of improving workplace standards. I will interview relevant stakeholders including workers, trade unions, and garment factory owners who are under the Accord or the Initiative. I will gather data on the workplace conditions on factories that produce garments for companies under the Accord and compare them to the factories that produce garments for signatories to the Initiative. Without field research, it is difficult to assess which mechanism is in fact more effective. My research project on assessing the impact of these mechanisms on the ground will inform future public policy decisions on improving global workplace safety.