

Trade Unions, NGOs, and Transnationalization: Experiences from the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh

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Summary

The recent factory collapse in Bangladesh raises questions about the promotion and protection of workers' rights and about the relevant actors who support workers' interests. As trade unionism in the Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) sector is very weak, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) recently turned to the factories to provide support. Simultaneously, reports about poor working conditions have increasingly gained the attention of international labor organizations as well as transnational civil-society actors. This paper aims to show the effects of this transnationalization process. It particularly focuses on the issues of workers' organization and mobilization as well as on the relation of trade unions and NGOs since these are influenced by international collaboration most of all. Given the high percentage of women workers in the RMG sector and the common stereotyped portrayal of the "Third World woman," it further evaluates the gendered implications of transnational support. The article will demonstrate that transnationalization is a highly ambivalent process which, on one hand, provides resources and windows of opportunity for trade unions that can be useful regarding the realization of the right to freedom of association. On the other hand, however, these processes further undermine trade unions' already weak position in the RMG sector.

Manuscript received on 2013-06-30, accepted on 2013-12-04

Keywords: Bangladesh, labor activism, NGOs, RMG industry, trade unions, transnational) civil society, transnationalization, transnational governmentality, women in trade unions

Introduction

With at least 1,127 people killed and 2,500 injured, the building collapse in Savar — an industrial suburb of Dhaka — on April 24, 2013 is not only Bangladesh's worst factory disaster yet, but also the deadliest tragedy in the history of the global garment industry (Yardley 2013). The widespread violation of building codes as well as health and safety regulations in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector

* I am grateful to the two guest editors – Carmen Brandt and Kirsten Hackenbroch – for their valuable suggestions and comments on the first draft of this article. I also wish to thank the anonymous reviewer for his or her helpful comments.