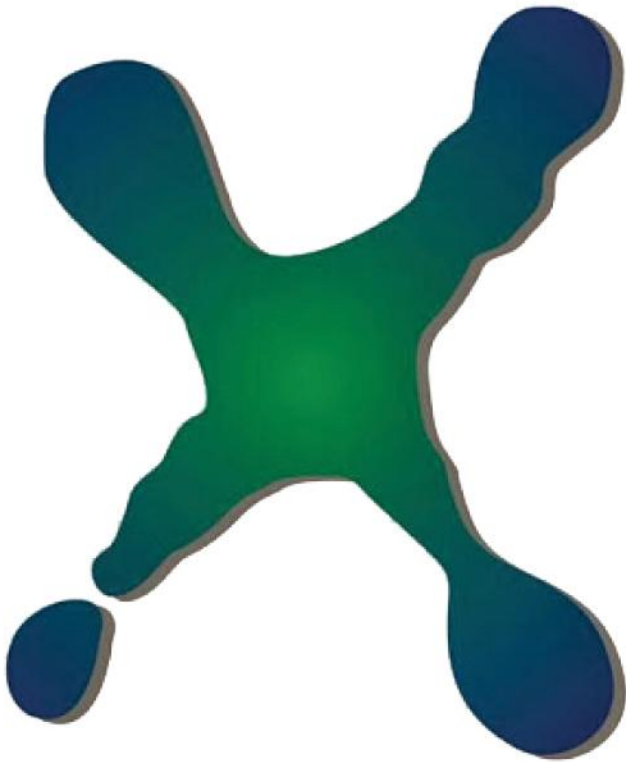


SWEATFREE TRIBE
INTERVIEW SERIES
PRESENTS



AN INTERVIEW WITH
Judy Gearhart

www.ethixventures.com

Garment worker deaths in Bangladesh have been dominating the headlines. What is ILRF doing to bring a stop to these factory workers' murders by factory owners and managers?

I went to Bangladesh one month after the horrendous Rana Plaza collapse that killed close to 1,200 workers to meet with workers, unions, and NGOs in order to update them and seek additional input from them on the [Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh](#) (many had advised closely on the principles and visions in previous versions). Three weeks ago we hoped to have 4 brands and 100 factories join the Accord; now there are 41 brands and more than 1,000 factories that will be involved. There is a planning team of 6 labor and 6 business representatives who will be pinning down specific plans and interpretations of the Accord between now and mid-July.

Bangladesh is buzzing with discussions about what to do next. One such discussion, convened by the Policy Research Institute of Bangladesh to discuss the "Post Rana Roadmap", included factory owners, brands, trade unions and human rights groups. Employers talked about how this is now really a wake-up call; many said that if the Tazreen fire that killed 112 workers hadn't already been a wake-up call, the Rana accident really had to be the beginning of significant change. It is encouraging and necessary that the Bangladeshi employers are now putting forward much more significant proposals than before; most of the talk is about seeking investments in infrastructure, moving factories, and raising the minimum wage. Few discussed more punitive kinds of prevention measures. There was some discussion about criminal charges having been filed against the owners of Rana and now finally Tazreen, but virtually none about the need to ensure victim compensation funds are sufficient.

Currently Bangladeshi law requires a payout to a deceased worker's family that equals approximately three years of salary. There are no compensation requirements legally for injured workers, although some contributions from charities and Li & Fung (a buying agency) helped cover initial medical bills and a few months of support – not enough to cover continued convalescence and the lost ability to work. Currently, there is some discussion about what to do for the many amputees from Rana Plaza, but Tazreen workers are already forgotten. There was no acknowledgement of the fact that many of the injured Tazreen survivors, 6 months later, are running out of money, still suffering from their injuries and having to pull their children out of school due to lack of income. We continue to call on brands – such as JC Penney, Children's Place,

Cato Fashions, Sears and Walmart – that had product in Tazreen or Rana to contribute to the victims' compensation funds. Walmart has disclaimed responsibility for their product having been produced in Tazreen because they had disapproved of the factory. American companies have a long tradition of helping out in the communities with which they are associated when tragedy strikes, yet Walmart breaks with that culture in the case of Tazreen. As if approval lists and management errors somehow make it ok for Walmart to ignore the plight of workers who made their clothes - who were in effect, part of Walmart's global community.

The moment for change is urgent in Bangladesh and it will be critically important that Western brands and consumers continue to help Bangladeshi worker organizations drive change. Asking Western brands to join the [Bangladesh Safety Accord](#) is a critical way to do that. Bangladeshi employers are just beginning to study the Accord, what it will require of them and what it will offer in terms of support for renovations. Meanwhile several employers asked why there can't be one initiative instead having to also look at Gap's program and Walmart's (two companies investing in their own, separate initiatives). Several employers expressed outrage at Walmart's recent transparency announcements and what they called its 'blacklisting' of factories it no longer approves; this move will more likely force those factories to close or cut margins further rather than invest in worker safety. Effectively, this kind of blacklisting increases the risk to workers because no mechanism is in place to inform workers about the problems or support them in finding safer jobs.

Our clients buy USA Made and Union Made in a concerted effort to combat unsafe working conditions. How much of "The West's" products are made in Bangladesh- a global apparel hub?

We can't really estimate how much of Western products come from Bangladesh, but I can say the country is the second largest apparel exporter in the world after China and that most experts in Bangladesh estimate US brands buy around 40% of the countries apparel exports. European buyers are the majority buyers there.

You have tirelessly fought for human and labor rights as an activist and organizer for ILRF, Social Accountability International (SAI), and ILO's International Program to Eradicate Child Labor (IPEC). What do you feel is possible, and positive, coming out and developing from these tragedies?

When I worked for ILO/IPEC I saw how global campaigns to eradicate child labor can sometimes have unintended consequences if the right supports aren't in place and local partners are not guiding the process. For example, youth who had gone as far as they could in school, aged 15 to 17, were kicked out of the Honduran apparel industry one week to the next after the Kathy Lee Gifford scandal revealed children making clothes for her label in 1995. At SAI, I tried to leverage a more incremental approach to change, working with garment worker unions to train workers on how to use codes of conduct to file complaints and negotiate better terms. But those complaint systems were never as effective as we'd hoped; we could never correct for the limits of the confidentiality framework that makes systems like this attractive to companies. We experimented with and advocated for worker and union involvement in auditing and for audit reports and corrective action plans to be shared with workers and unions, but those measures were never adopted at a system-wide level.

It is so clear now, after Tazreen, that we cannot allow companies like Walmart to inspect a factory, find a problem and then walk away without telling anyone. Despite our best efforts to push for this, none of the voluntary, confidential compliance programs have involved workers and their organizations systematically in the inspection and change implementation process. And now after Rana, it is even clearer that the incentives structures around corporate compliance programs are deeply flawed. Take the Rana factory managers, for example: One morning during my trip I met a line supervisor standing with other survivors at the Rana Plaza site. He said that on the day of the collapse, he went to his manager and asked if they could stop work for the day since there was a crack in the building. His manager said no; they had work to get done. Five minutes later the building collapsed and the line supervisor was trapped for several hours. If only that manager would have taken another course of action. But at that point, he probably had production deadlines to make and a delay could have meant a loss in future orders.

We need to change that dynamic, where managers plough forward to meet the brand's terms despite having to cut corners. The voluntary corporate compliance programs that exist today risk incentivizing corruption because brands ask suppliers to add on social compliance programs without negotiating a better price or longer term buying commitment. Some may make a good faith commitment, but there is no contractual commitment for the brands to stick it out if the factory has to make repairs. This is why the [Accord](#) is so

important; brands that sign on are making that contractual commitment. Whatever our criticism may be of the brands implicated in Rana Plaza, we all know as Westerners that had the manager called JC Penney's or Loblaw's and said "We have a crack in the building, your Joe Fresh order will be late" that those brands would have said "Ok, don't put the workers in danger." Last April 24th, however, the factory manager likely knew he could delay once but that he might risk losing the subsequent order because his ratings as a supplier would take a hit for failing the 'on time delivery' criteria of the brands.

What do you want our clients and fellow human rights advocates to take with them in the wake of the current events of Bangladesh and the global garment industry (complex)?

There are three ways you can help out today:

- Please urge Gap and Walmart to sign onto the Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety Accord by [signing this petition](#), [delivering a letter to a store manager](#), and joining us in a Day of Action on June 29.
- Please call on [Children's Place](#) to pay compensation to Rana Plaza victims and join the Bangladesh Safety Accord.
- Make a contribution to ILRF. So far we have raised more funds for our Bangladeshi partners than we have for sustaining the US pressure campaign. We will continue to seek funds for both, so [please considering making a contribution](#).

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