

## **Remembering the Rana Plaza Workers: Change or Status Quo?**

On the morning of April 24, 2013, the eight-story Rana Plaza garment factory collapsed in Dhaka, Bangladesh, killing 1,134 and injuring more than 2,000. Most of the dead and injured were young women. Images of this tragic event were broadcast to the world.<sup>1</sup> The horrific scene indelibly marked the psyche of a world often inured to tragedies in developing countries. Graphic pictures of the collapsed factory transformed Rana Plaza into a tragedy of international proportions as news spread of the 29 international fashion brands that sourced clothing from the factory. The Rana Plaza tragedy reminded the developed world of the unsafe working conditions and low wages at the base of the global garment supply chain.<sup>2</sup>

Ineke Zeldenrust of the Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), a global labor advocacy group, already knew far too well about the unsafe working conditions in the Bangladesh garment industry and the likely sequence of events leading to the disaster (see **Exhibit 1**).

When news of the Rana Plaza garment factory collapse broke, Zeldenrust immediately assessed the horrific ramifications. This was the proverbial “straw that broke the camel’s back” as her American co-workers would say in reference to their fears that a cataclysmic event would occur someday that would focus attention on the gap between impoverished garment workers in unsafe factories and the high-street “fast fashion” industry that fed the ready-made garment (RMG) supply chain. With the unprecedented scale and scope of the Rana Plaza tragedy, she knew urgent action must be taken immediately to implement a long-term, broad-based program to address the health and safety of workers in the garment sector.

How would she describe the pain and suffering of the workers’ families to “fast fashion” retailers? The retailers’ first reaction would be to protect themselves from legal liability. While the garment workers labored in unsafe conditions at the bottom of the global textile supply chain, retailers in the U.S., the UK, and the EU, at the top of the supply chain, were in an apparent arms-length relationship with the contractors and factory owners in Bangladesh.

The fast fashion retailers and RMG workers were literally and figuratively worlds apart. It was the difference between developing and developed economies and contrasting living standards neither could

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