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# Sustainability of the RMG Factory Monitoring Regime Under Accord, Alliance and DIFE in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Case Review of Bangladesh's RMG Industry

ASM Anam Ullah<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong, Australia.  
Email: russell\_adib@yahoo.com.au

## Abstract

The Government of Bangladesh, RMG factory owners and international clothing brands from Western and European countries faced severe criticisms from consumers, trade unions and human rights organisations for inadequate factory monitoring in Bangladesh after the catastrophic Rana Plaza collapse in 2013. As a result, under intense pressure, the Government of Bangladesh allowed two private monitoring organisations (Accord and Alliance) led by European and North American apparel brands to monitor the RMG sector in Bangladesh. However, the Accord and Alliance conflicted with the Government of Bangladesh regarding the RMG factory monitoring program, resulting in the Alliance leaving Bangladesh in December 2018. The Accord's journey ends in mid-2020 in Bangladesh. The local monitoring agency, the Department of Inspection for Factory and Establishments (DIFE), operates under the Ministry of Labour and Employment in Bangladesh. The current research suggests that DIFE is not credible in monitoring local RMG factories in Bangladesh. Therefore, this article critically analyses factory monitoring in Bangladesh's RMG sector and presents evidence and data on whether the private initiative has been more successful than the traditional national approach led by the Bangladesh government. Moreover, recommendations are made to the Bangladesh government, RMG employers and international apparel brands on what should be done to ensure the safety of workers in the country's most important informal economic sector.

**Keywords:** Accord, Alliance, DIFE, Globalisation and Neoliberalism, Bangladesh RMG, Bangladesh Labour Act, ILO Conventions, OHS

## 1. Introduction

A group of young people with relatively little experience in industrial work and business, hoping to change their fortunes and the country's socio-economic conditions, started the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) business unplanned in the early 1980s (Ahmed, 2004; 2012; Ullah, 2023a,b,c.). In the 1980s, global trade followed a new politico-economic dogma, i.e., globalization and neoliberalism (Harvey, 2007; 2016). Scholars assume that the drivers of industry growth over the past 40 years are mainly the reason for this capitalist production system (Rahman, 2013; Harvey, 2016; Ullah, 2021, 2022, 2023a,b). Since then, the industry's low wages, poor

Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) and factory accidents have been part of the discussion among international scholars and anti-sweatshop campaigners (see Human Rights Organisation, 2013; Siddiqi, 2019). While local and international capitalists targeted poor and rural RMG workers for paying low wages by diminishing human and trade union rights, factory accidents were the main issue for the industry. Figure 1 in this article shows the short list of factory accidents and casualties of RMG workers between 2005 and 2013 (see also Human Rights Watch, 2013; Siddiqi, 2019; Rahman, 2019; Ullah, 2022a,b; Kabir et al., 2019; Kabeer, Huq & Sulaiman, 2020; Ullah, 2023a,b,c).

Previously, the Government of Bangladesh took a superficial initiative to bring the industry under control by forming the Law Commission in 1992 (Afrin, 2014). According to Afrin (2014), the International Labour Organisation (ILO) was in great logistic support in producing the Labour Act draft for the Law Commission in Bangladesh. Finally, two years later, the Law Commission submitted a suggestive report in 1994. With the suggestion of the Law Commission, after a long waiting period, in 2006, the Government of Bangladesh enacted the National Labour Act for the first time after the country's independence in December 1971 (see Faruque, 2009; Afrin, 2014). The 2006 Labour Act aimed to remove the considerable barriers and reduce the gap between workers and RMG employers, but it did not happen (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Bair, Anner & Blasi, 2020). Trade unionism was further discouraged by adding specific provisions, such as the participation of 30 per cent of workers in trade union registration, which made it difficult for trade unionism in Bangladesh (see Ashraf & Prentice, 2017; Siddiqi, 2017). Furthermore, despite the explicit provisions in the Labour Act regarding the timely payment of wages and bonuses to workers, most employers still needed to follow it. As a result, the conflict between workers and RMG factory owners or employers was common in Bangladesh (see Afrin, 2014; Siddiqi, 2019; Ullah, 2022).

Most importantly, after the enactment of the new Labour Act in 2006 (amended in 2013), scholars, trade unions, and other stakeholders of the Bangladesh RMG hoped that the new Labour Act would be a solid support to regulate the sector and reduce factory accidents. Nevertheless, this did not happen due to disrespect and inadequate National Labour Act 2006 enforcement. Despite so many other factory incidents in the sector (see Figure 1), these two significant RMG industry casualties in 2012 and 2013, the Tazreen Fashions and Rana Plaza, were the most dangerous in history (see Huq, 2019; Rahman & Rahman, 2020; Ullah, 2021). These two accidents killed over a thousand innocent RMG workers and caused thousands of other workers severe injuries. The aftermath of these two hazardous factory incidents has worried local and international stakeholders of Bangladesh RMG (see Accord, 2013, 2019, 2021; Alliance, 2018; Rahman, 2015; Rahman, 2019; Saxena, 2022; Hassan, 2022).

International consumers, trade unions and human rights organisations have criticised international clothing brands for outsourcing from unregulated and declassified factories in Bangladesh. In addition, they expressed their deep concern for industrial regulation and workers' welfare. As a result, with a five-year initial plan, two international private factory monitoring agencies (Accord, led by European clothing and fashion brands) and (Alliance, led by Western, mainly American Canadian and Australian clothing and fashion brands) were formed in 2013 after the Rana Plaza building collapse on 24 April 2013. However, preliminary investigations identified that Accord and Alliance could not fully complete their monitoring work but had been forced to leave Bangladesh by 2018 due to internal conflicts between the Government of Bangladesh and RMG employers and their parent organisations - Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) (see Saxena, 2019; Rahman, 2019; Siddiqi, 2019; Ahlquist & Mosley, 2021).

Scholars, anti-sweatshop campaigners, and Bangladeshi and international-level trade unions criticized the Government of Bangladesh and RMG employers for their intentional negligence of industry regulations. Even investigation shows that after the Rana Plaza incident in 2013, many factory accidents killed hundreds of innocent workers (see *NewAge*, 2016). However, there was no decisive policy to control factory accidents from the Government of Bangladesh, international apparel brands, or even the RMG employers (Islam & MacPhail, 2011; Anner, 2019; Kabeer, 2019; Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021). Therefore, this article aims to evaluate the performance in RMG factory monitoring between the Accord and Alliance. Moreover, in the absence of these

two internal agencies, this article also considers the current factory monitoring initiatives mainly led by the government agency DIFE. Finally, this article will draw recommendations for policy-makers, RMG employers, international clothing brands, Accord and other relevant stakeholders to consider the research results for future control and better sustainability of the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

## 2. Literature reviews

### 2.1. The growth of Bangladesh RMG and its working conditions

Bangladesh is the second-largest RMG-producing country globally, with over 7000 factories (Labowitz, 2016; Siddiqi, 2017; Huq, 2019; Ullah, 2021). There is a debate on the number of workers in the sector - nearly four million workers were employed between 2015 and 2016, but scholars argue with the numbers and claim that it will be higher than the 2015-16 estimation. For example, Ullah (2021) suggests that more than six million RMG workers in Bangladesh. It would be more if local Bangla factories are included which are not enlisted with either BGME, BKMEA or any Bangladesh's government agency. More than 80 to 84 per cent of the country's migrant rural women are mainly employed in the RMG sector because of low or insufficient job opportunities in the village town. Between fiscal year 2010-2011, Bangladesh exported RMG products worth USD 6.8 billion and USD 19.9 billion in 2012, which showed a 43 per cent increase in the last few years and recorded compound annual growth of 16.6 per cent. Bangladesh went to earn a total of USD 20 billion in RMG between 2012-2013 from RMG exports. However, during FY2019, RMG showed a magnificent growth rate and exported \$34.13 billion in RMG products globally, mainly to the USA and European countries. There is a prediction: if the global market remains steady, the Bangladesh RMG will reach 45 to 50 billion by 2022 or beyond (*Textile Today*, 2019; Rahman & Rahman, 2020; Ullah, 2021).

Despite the RMG industry's optimistic growth rate and steady business, its working conditions, meagre wages, and other fundamental rights are unpleasant (Siddiqi, 2019). Moreover, the RMG industry does not follow the National Labour Act and the ILO conventions, which has resulted in experiencing many brutal factory accidents (Rahman, 2019; Crinis, 2019; Kabir et al., 2019; Ullah, 2021). The following sections discuss the Accord, Alliance and DIFE's monitoring initiatives in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. However, before turning to that section, Figure 1 shows the most RMG factory accidents between 2005 and 2013, creating some understanding of the RMG workers' agony in the modern century.

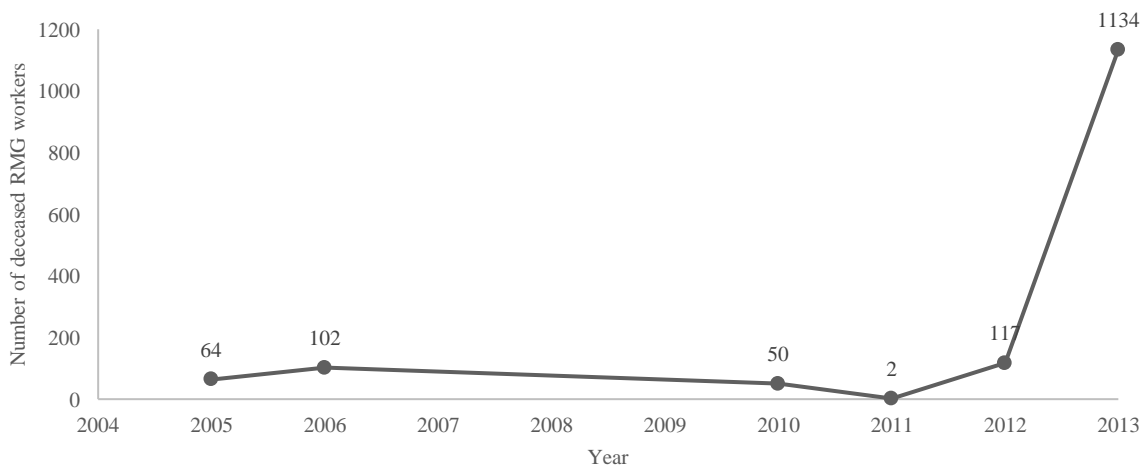


Figure 1: RMG factory incidents between 2005 and 2013

Source: (see Ullah, 2023b).

## 2.2. Accord on fire and building safety in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's Fire and Building Safety Accord was formed in a legally binding treaty (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). Around 220 global clothing brands/retailers, IndustriALL Global Union and UNI Global Union, and eight affiliated unions from Bangladesh formed the Accord led by mostly Western apparel and fashion companies towards a safe and healthy RMG industry. The agreement was signed on 15 May 2013 for an initial five-year plan. By December 2018, the Accord was supposed to leave Bangladesh. However, due to unfinished jobs by then, the Accord showed interest in returning and wanted to complete their unfinished task in RMG factory monitoring. Still, the Bangladesh Government, BGMEA and BKMEA did not reveal further interest in Accord's extension (Ullah, 2021).

Accord Bangladesh went to the High Court of Bangladesh. After a lengthy hearing, the High Court of Bangladesh ruled and allowed Accord to stay in Bangladesh for their transitional work with the collaboration of BGMEA. Then, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed in May 2019 between Accord and BGMEA to establish the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC). With this new agreement, the Accord continued factory inspections until 31 May 2020 and handed over their program to the BGMEA for conducting the monitoring under the RSC that began on 1 June 2020 (see, e.g., Morse, 2021; Accord, 2021). The Transition Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh was signed in 2018 by 190 brands and retailers to continue their support. However, 30 companies remained absent in the new transitional agreement.

From a literature note, in 2013, the Accord aimed to develop a program on the National Action Plan (NAP) to diminish workers' fear of factory fire and building collapse (Rahman, 2019). The NAP also included the ILO to play a vital role through the Bangladesh office and international office to ensure that programs foreseen by the signatories of the Accord get implemented. The Accord's RMG factory monitoring structure has worked in Bangladesh since 15 May 2013 and ensured:

**Scope:** The Accord agreement proposes that all suppliers manufacturing garment products for the signatory company take corrective action toward the remedy. RMG factories were initially classified into three levels, i.e., tier one, two and three. Tier one factories were selected based on the business agreements between the signing companies that had 30 per cent of the total annual production by Bangladeshi suppliers. The tier two factories were established based on long-term business agreements with the signing companies, which is at least 65 per cent of the combined production of tier One and two by Bangladeshi suppliers. Furthermore, finally, in tier three, the Accord inspection team will have a limited inspection that produces less than 10 per cent annually from Bangladeshi supplier factories. However, the Accord agreement does not suggest that it should not be assumed that "Tier Three" factories would be given less attention if they were found to be at high risk of continuing RMG production (Accord, 2021).

**Governance:** The Accord's Steering Committee (SC) and its structure are given in Figure III. The SC had an equal number of delegates, i.e., a maximum of three seats for each signatory. The ILO was the neutral chair to support the whole event. The SC was primarily responsible for selecting and appointing safety inspectors, evaluating performance reports of inspections, compensation and coordination. The SC took decisions with consensus, but in the absence of it, the majority voted towards the conclusion. Any dispute that occurred was initially intended to be reduced within 21 days with the consent of the SC. However, if the matter was complicated, the legal procedure was followed to resolve the issue in court. The SC has appointed advisory boards from brands, retailers, suppliers, government agencies, trade unions and NGOs. The Advisory Board has consulted with the SC to implement the NAP (Accord, 2021).

**Credible inspections:** SC appointed a qualified safety inspector who had fire and building safety expertise and impeccable certificate and was independent and not employed by the company at the same time. The chief inspector acted upon following the orders under the agreement's provisions. Unless there was no clear evidence of misconduct or incompetence on inspection, the SC did not intervene with the chief inspector in carrying out the duties prescribed in the agreement, such as inspection with schedule and report published. Within a period

agreed upon by the SC, but at most six weeks, the safety inspector published the inspection report to the public and the factory's remedial program (Accord, 2021).

**Remediation:** Tier one, two, and three factories needed corrective action within a certain period, with additional time for requests for effective remedies. Signing firms later inspect the factories to see if suppliers make corrections. The signing companies also monitored the employment relationship of the workers with the suppliers and whether the workers were paid proper wages and benefits during the remediation process. Failure to comply with the Accord standards resulted in a notification, warning and termination of business as described in Article 21 (Accord, 2021).

**Training:** Accord SC conducted fire and building safety training activities at tier one factory for managers, workers and security staff with the help of trade unions and local experts. The business of local suppliers with the signatory companies was to provide access to the training coordinator appointed by Accord SC (Accord, 2021).

**Compliance process:** Safety inspectors are primarily responsible for establishing a compliant process and process following the Accord SC guidelines. Workers at the supplier factory with the signatory companies were allowed to raise the issue confidentially if they found any irregularities and safety risks at the Tier factory. At the same time, the Tier factory had a hotline under NAP to communicate from time to time about health risks (Accord, 2021).

**Supplier incentives:** In order to comply with SC agreements and remedial programs in tier one and tier two factories, suppliers had the opportunity to negotiate with the signing companies in a variety of ways through other reward strategies, such as direct financial incentives or long-term business relationships (Accord, 2021).

**Financial support:** To conduct the total program according to the Accord Agreement, SC received financial support from each signing company on an equal share basis and paid up to US\$ 500,000 annually (Accord, 2021).

On 1 September 2021, a new Accord was formed in line with the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, i.e., the International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry (IndustriALL Global Union, n.d.). Initially, 77 brands and retailers signed the new Accord, but it managed 126 brands as signatories as of 23 September 2021 (see International Accord, n.d.). The International Accord aims to ensure safe work in Bangladesh and cover other garment-producing countries' work safety. However, two globally leading union bodies, i.e., IndustriALL Global Union and UNI Global Union, announced this as their excellent achievement to see brands' responsibility in workers' safety programs. In Bangladesh, the new International Accord would collaborate with the RSC to ensure workers' safety at the RMG factories (see International Accord, n.d.).

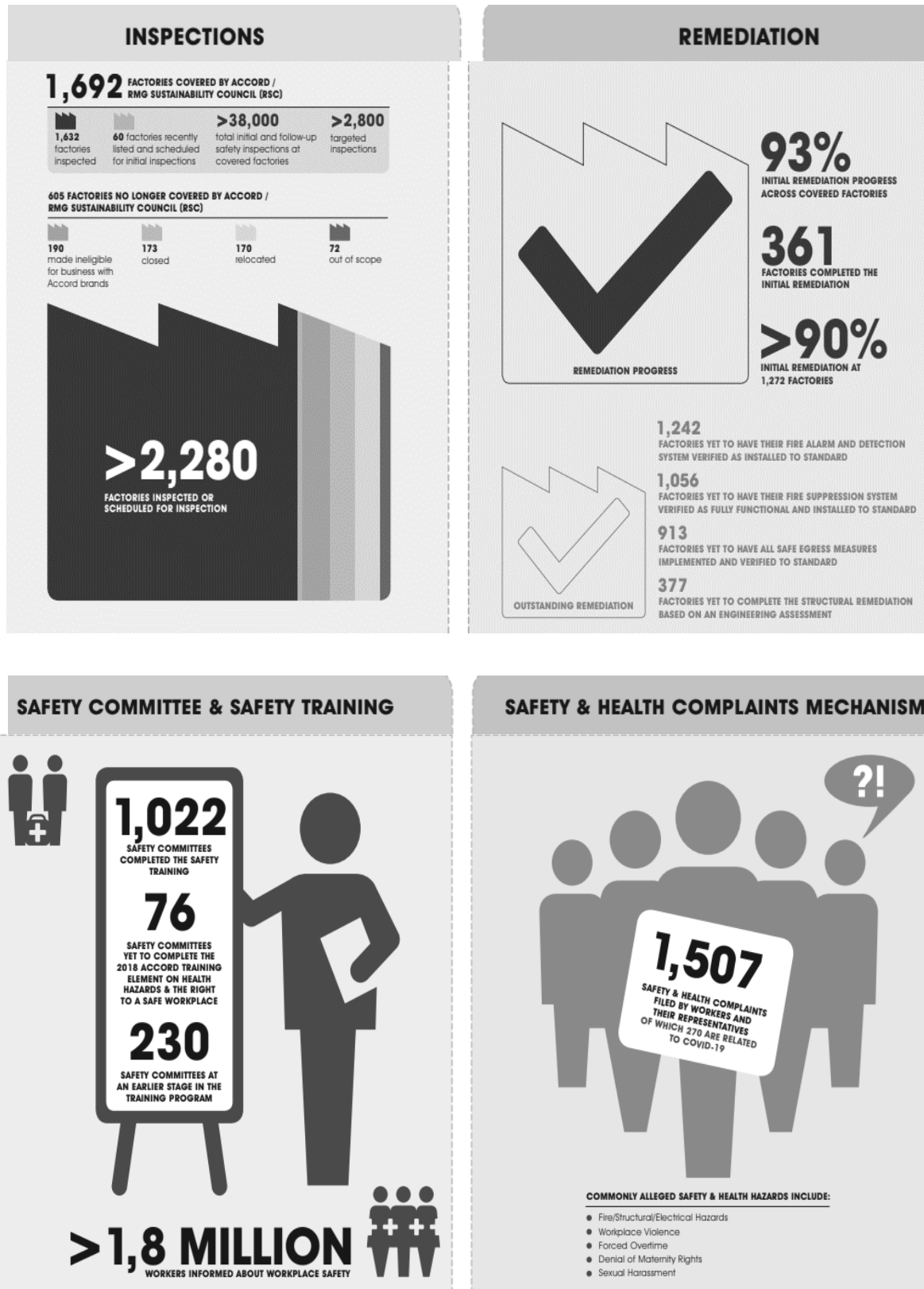


Figure 2: Accord's Steering Committee on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh at a Glance  
 Source: Accord Quarterly Aggregate Report 1 May 2021

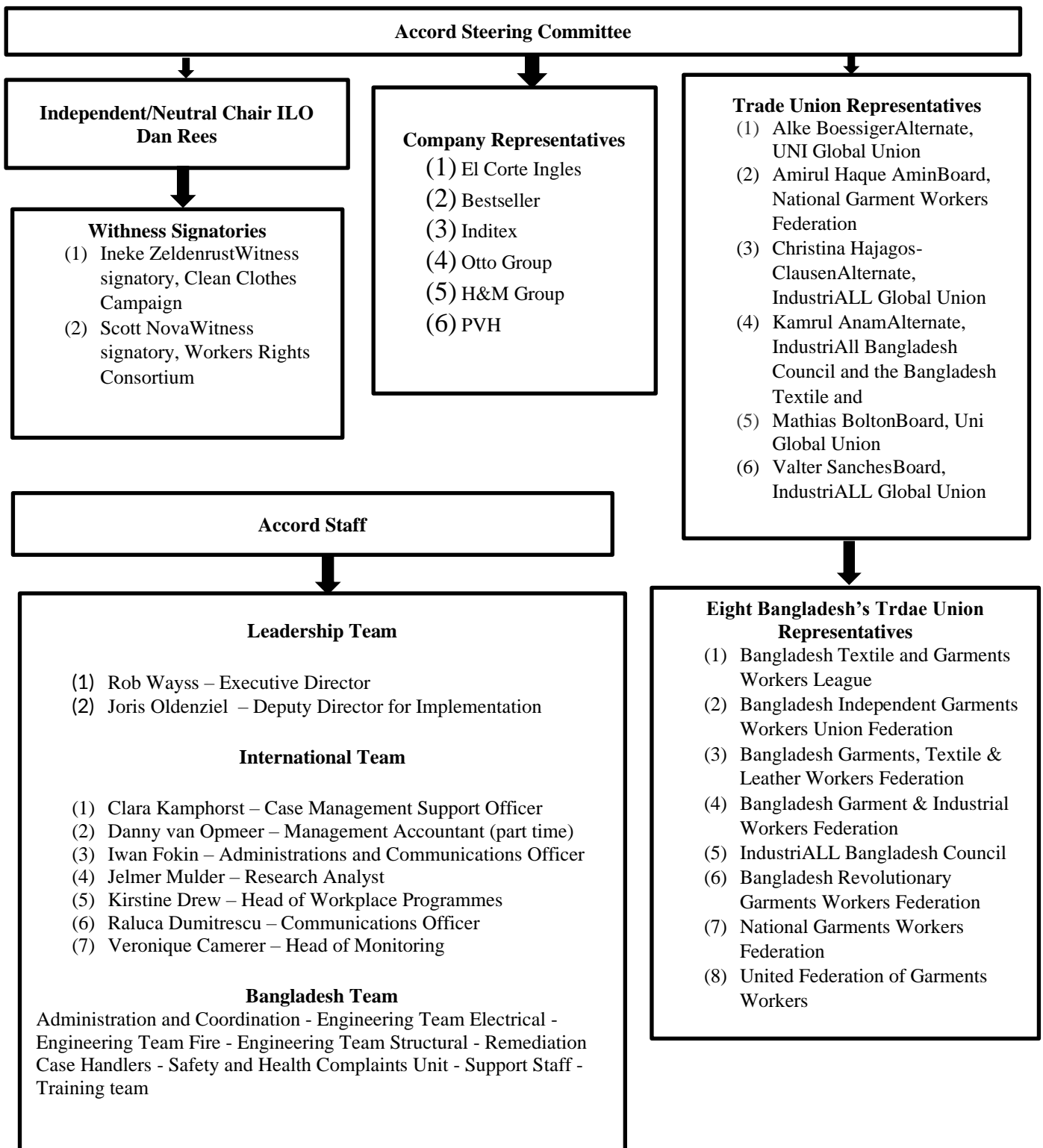


Figure 3: Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh at a Glance

Source: The author constructed the chart from Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (n.d.)



### 2.3. Alliance in Bangladesh from 2013 to 2018

Brands and retailers from the USA, Canada and Australia formed an Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety after the Rana Plaza incident in 2013. Alliance was a legally binding five-year plan, which ended in November 2018 with no further extension of their project. After the Rana Plaza incident, the Bipartisan Policy Center initiated and discussed with the former US Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME) and former US Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME). They both showed a strong track record of forging consensus-oriented solutions in their career path. The Alliance included Bangladesh and the US government, policy-makers, NGOs, members of civil society and labour organisation. A total of 26 brands and retailers were the initial signatories. However, the Alliance has 29 signatory members (see Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety n.d.). The main goals were to ensure the safety of workers, upgrade factories, educate workers, managers, and workers empowerment and build credible institutions that can enforce the National Labour Act to maintain a safe working environment throughout Bangladesh. Since July 2013, the Alliance has aimed to accomplish the RMG factory inspection through the following structure:

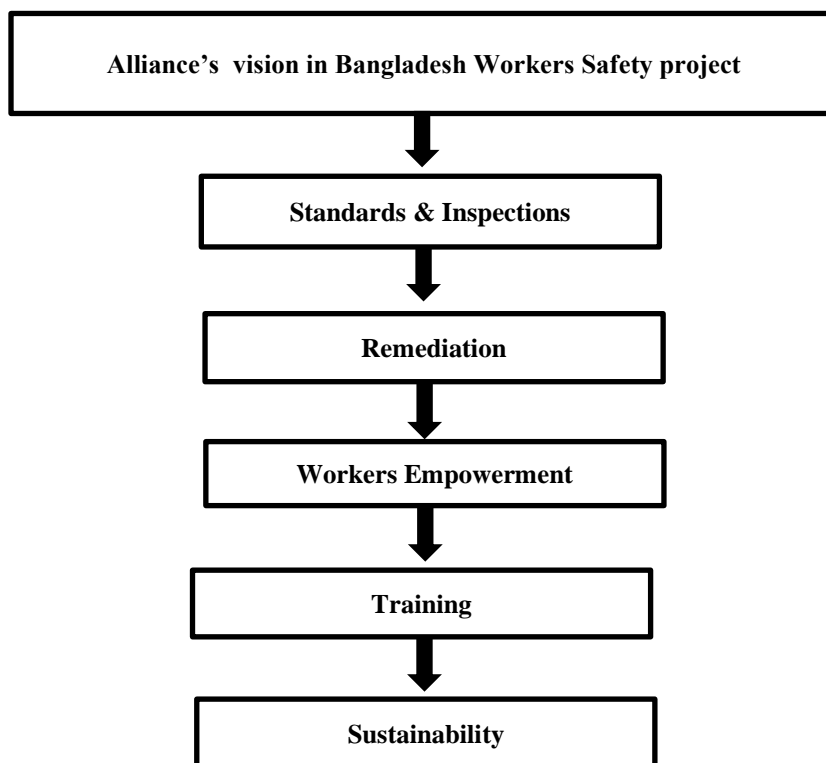


Figure 4: Alliance's work structure in Bangladesh

Source: The author constructed the figure from Alliance's official website (2018)

## Progress at a Glance

After five years, the Alliance is proud to have dramatically improved safety for millions of men and women who earn a living in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, and to have created a culture of safety that can be sustained over the long term.



**93 percent** of remediation is complete across Alliance-affiliated factories.  
**428 factories** have achieved completion of their initial Corrective Action Plans.



**Nearly 1.6 million** workers have been trained in fire safety.  
**More than 28,000** security guards have been trained in fire safety and emergency evacuation procedures.



**More than 1.5 million** workers in **1,017 factories** now have access to the Alliance's 24-hour confidential worker helpline, which has been transferred to local leadership and will soon be available to factories across the entire industry in Bangladesh.



Worker Safety Committees have been formed and are operating in **181 factories**, giving workers a seat at the table with management in resolving safety issues within their factories.



The Alliance **developed local training providers** to expand its worker training and safety committee programs beyond Alliance-affiliated factories and create a sustainable ecosystem of safety in Bangladesh.



Safety reforms have **rebuilt confidence in Bangladesh** among foreign buyers and solidified the country's standing as a global leader in garment exports.

Figure 5: Inspection progress by Alliance by November 2018

Source: Alliance Fifth Annual Report November 2018

There are some similarities and dissimilarities between the Accord And Alliance, mainly in the structure. Accord followed a more constructive organisational structure, which comprised the Steering Committee and Governing Body with a clear vision of adding trade unions to the program. On the other hand, the Alliance did not include the trade unions from international or Bangladesh. Then, for Accord, again, another strong criticism that the Accord underwent as they needed the Bangladesh Government, BGMEA, BKMEA and Bangladesh Employers Federation (BEF) in the steering committee, which was problematic in accomplishing monitoring in Bangladesh. The gap in monitoring and the acceptance of Accord and Alliance has been discussed later in this article while presenting empirical information from various respondents in Bangladesh.

2.4. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) - a regulatory agency in Bangladesh

The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) was established in 1969 by the Government of West Pakistan. DIFE consisted of (a) the Department of Labour, (b) the Department of Factories and Establishment Inspection, and (c) the Trade Union Registration Department. However, following ILO Convention 81, the West Pakistan Government separated the Department of Factory and Establishment Inspection, which was also in the 1969 Labour Policy of the West Pakistan Government. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the Department of Factory and Establishment Inspection was transferred to the Ministry of Labour the Department of Factory and Establishment Inspection. Then, it was renamed again after the Rana Plaza incident as the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments on 15 May 2014. It has 23 district offices across Bangladesh with 993 inspectors, each presided over by a Deputy Inspector General (DIG) (see, e.g., DIFE, n.d.; Ahmed, 2013; Tarannum & Ansary, 2018).

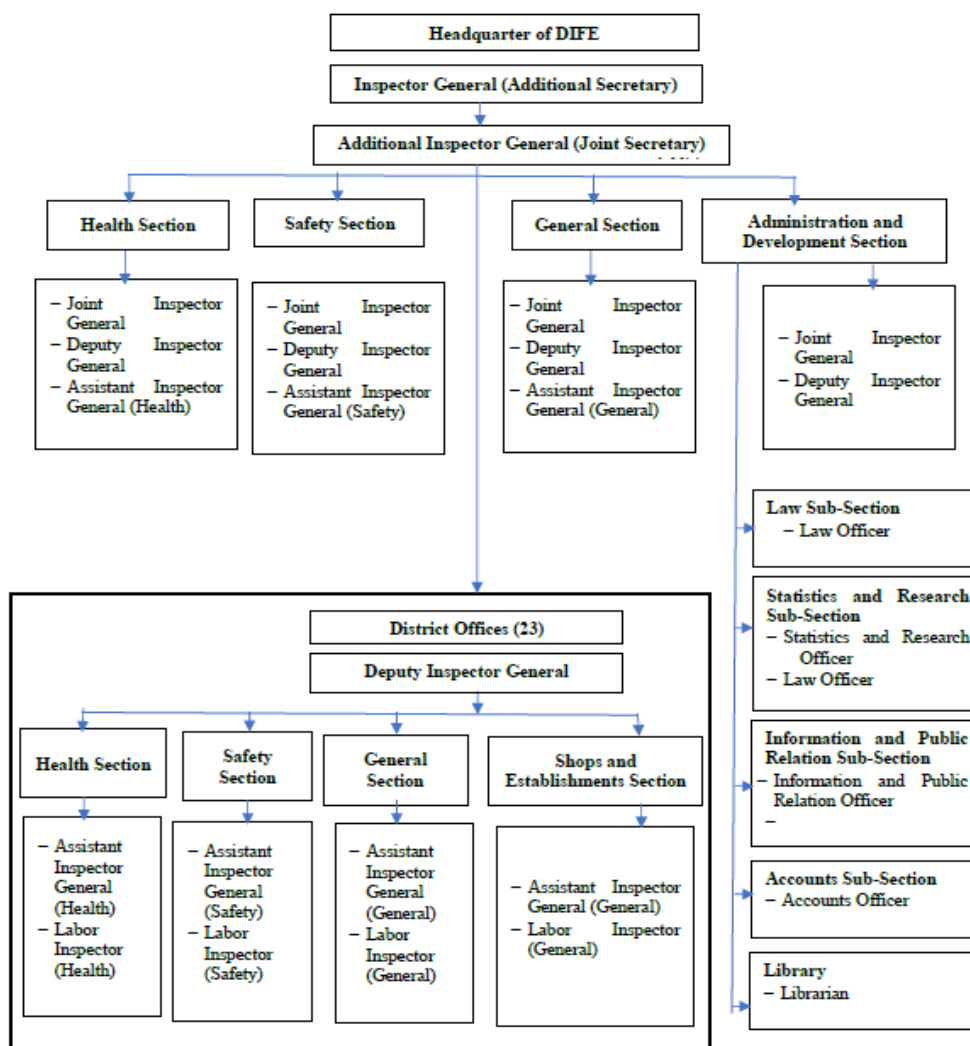


Figure 6: The organisational structure of DIFE

Source: Tarannum and Ansary (2018)

2.4. Methodology

The current article has followed a distinct methodology for the validity of the study findings and to create significant contributions to the knowledge for future social science researchers. Initially, the author used

secondary data from the systematic literature review, case studies in various countries, journals, research articles, newspapers, online news and survey reports, BGMEA yearly report and other publications. Then, empirical data from the fieldwork will be presented in this article following Yin (2003) to explore the real-life context of RMG workers in Bangladesh. Ethnographic data presentation is popular in qualitative, semi-structured and Case studies approaches, allowing researchers to explore the essential research questions, mainly when “why” and “how” questions are involved in social science research (see Ghauri, 2004; Yin, 2003; Jaunzems et al., 2017). The current article aims to assess the RMG sector’s monitoring regime led by the Accord, Alliance and DIFE since 2013. Therefore, the study will bring an understanding of the relevant stakeholders, such as trade union bodies, RMG workers and RMG factory owners in Bangladesh, to understand how they evaluate the current monitoring arrangements for the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Most importantly, it will allow the readers to understand how Bangladesh's RMG sector is currently being monitored.

### *2.5. Ethical Issues*

Ethical approval was sought for the present study in compliance with all ethical codes and obligations from the University of Wollongong, Australia. Consequently, for the validity of the present article and the confidentiality of the study respondents, the authors have de-identified the names of all respondents.

De-identification is a standard process in social science research. For example, the names of study respondents are not used when presenting data, e.g., the respondent's name is "Mr Max" but "Mr Robert" (see Kayaalp et al., 2014). I anonymously include all respondents' names and give a general indication of their expertise. To maintain the confidentiality of the study respondents, the ultimate obligation for a social-science researcher is to maintain confidentiality during and after the interview. To validate the current research, careful precautions have been taken before each interview to ensure that the interviews were conducted in a safe location and that the respondents felt comfortable answering (see Yin, 2003).

### *2.6. Data Analysis Technique*

After collecting empirical data, Nvivo11 was used to categorise themes and sub-themes, and then data was presented in a narrative format. Finally, the discussion and analyses were done by following a triangulation process for the authentication of the study.

### *2.7. Data presentations and discussions*

In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza incident, Accord and Alliance came to Bangladesh to monitor factories in the RMG industry. Since their emergence in Bangladesh, these two agencies have faced challenges and had conflicts with the Bangladesh Government, BGMEA and BKMEA. Therefore, the author wanted to know about Accord and Alliance from Mr John, a senior trade unionist in Bangladesh. He asserted:

After the Rana Plaza incident, consumers began to boycott Bangladeshi-made garments elsewhere because they identified that they were made in a non-compliant factory where workers were brutally killed. After that, we started the campaign with some of our foreign trade union friends, including Australia, to pressure the Bangladesh Government and factory owners to ratify their factories through the sign of 220 multinational apparel and fashion brands. The Accord and Alliance are the latest impacts of our previous efforts (interview 3 December 2017).

Understanding the above excerpt implies that John proclaimed - the Accord and the Alliance in Bangladesh were due to their strong protest after the Rana Plaza incident. However, the question is whether the trade unionists of Bangladesh could achieve this without the interests of the Government of Bangladesh, BGMEA and BKMEA. Trade unionism is not widespread in Bangladesh - their limitations on trade unionism are explicit (see Rahman & Langford, 2012; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). For example, Ashraf and Prentice (2019) found in their study that trade unionists in Bangladesh could only organize RMG workers for up to five to ten per cent in the last 40 years. Scholars argue whether this should be Bangladesh's most significant obstacle to trade unionism. Trade

unions' strong voice about industry regulation after the Rana Plaza incident was undoubtedly significant, but Mr John's statement is hyperbolic.

Recent scholarship argues that when the state fails to provide a healthy atmosphere for collective bargaining and when trade unionism is undermined, new arrangements of industry regulation arrive (see Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). For example, Western and European brands and retailers formed the Accord and Alliance for the RMG factory inspections (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). However, there were better ways to evaluate the backdrop of the development of the Accord and Alliance in Bangladesh than bringing the Accord and Alliance with the trade unions' voices. For example, the industry has had many calamitous incidents over the past few decades. Trade unions have not been able to bring any Accord or Alliance before the Rana Plaza incident to change the working conditions in this sector. Instead, the analysis suggests that the Bangladesh Government, BGMEA and BKMEA wanted to save their reputation in the world community for continuing the RMG business in Bangladesh that they lost due to their unethical behaviour (see Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). Mr John, as a signatory of the Accord, was happy to claim that Accord and Alliance were the repercussions of their strong voice, but the evidence does not prove it.

To check whether Accord and Alliance were helpful to different respondents, for example, Mr Max is an advocate for an NGO that works to establish the rights of RMG workers and provides legal assistance provided vital information during the interview with him. According to him, Accord and Alliances were problematic for Bangladesh. He believed that the Accord and the Alliance needed clarification and a clear ratification framework in factory monitoring. In addition, there needed to be a solution to bring factory standards from Western and European countries. For example, he further emphasized:

The Accord has caused severe problems for local factory owners. There is an apparent conflict of interest because factory owners are unsure whether to follow national building and safety codes or their Accords and Alliance (interview 11 December 2017).

From the above quote of Mr Max, it is understood that there was a coordination gap between Accord, Alliance and the Government of Bangladesh regarding factory inspection and following a common standard. Then Mr Max had another question to share his thoughts about why he thinks this miscommunication happened in factory monitoring in Bangladesh. Mr Max emphasizes:

The agreement was formed under the National Tripartite Plan of Action, NTPA. There is a National Tripartite Committee (NTC), and the Chairman of this Committee is the Secretary of the Ministry of Labour in Bangladesh. However, the NTC Chairman has shown negligence in coordinating with the Accord and the Alliance, resulting in problems in factory inspections and some problems for factory owners. It was difficult for factory owners to maintain the Accord and Alliance safety guidelines. Local authorities, such as the NTC chairman, have shown limited interest in disrupting the Accord and the Alliance's inspection process (interview 11 December 2017).

As mentioned earlier and exhibited in Figure III, Accord has followed industrial democracy mainly by forming an SC to conduct their RMG factory monitoring programs, which was praised. However, the Accord's decision not to include the Bangladesh Government and BGMEA, BKMEA and BEF has led to significant obstacles to factory monitoring. If the Bangladesh Government, BGMEA, BKMEA and BEF were added to the Accord's SC, the Accord could avoid the conflict it caused during the RMG factory inspection.

It was also fundamental to set a common standard for factory inspections between the Accord Alliance and the Bangladeshi regulatory framework. Accord classified RMG factories into three levels. However, the problem is that when Accord visits a factory under Tier One, Two or Three, they may also have a business relationship with the Alliance brands. Thus, when the Accord and the Alliance's inspection team visited the factory of the same suppliers, conflicts emerged to set their own Western and European standards, which needed improvement. In addition, the Alliance considered the building code of Bangladesh, which needed to be followed by the Accord, which also made some issues.

Given the Accord's decision to close the RMG factory, the NTC Chairman had nothing to do with the site of the Bangladesh Government, and the BGMEA had a low chance of intervention as per the Accord's treaties (see

Accord, 2013, 2019 & Moazzem, 2019). Moazzem (2019) identified that many small companies were closed down due to the high cost of the remedial program. Those incidents made the Bangladesh Government BGMEA, and BKMEA unhappy. Moreover, although there were indications of financial support for the tier one and two factories, the tier three factories needed more incentives, making it difficult to follow the Accord's remedy advice. It was a debilitated strategy by the Accord not to let BGMEA, BKMEA and the Bangladesh Government be a part of the monitoring process or include them in the Accord SC in 2013. If the Accord had consisted of them in the SC, the monitoring process would have been more effective.

The formation of the new International Accord could have been more problematic. There were some fundamental issues in the latest International Accord. For example, many garment-producing countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Indonesia, already have effective safety programs. The question is how the Accord will collaborate with existing safety projects (e.g., Better Work) run by different organisations such as the World Bank and IFC in those countries. The ILO was a neutral chair in Bangladesh's Accord on Fire and Building Safety program. However, the results of the ILO as a neutral chair or for providing technical support to the Bangladesh Government in the last seven years did not show satisfactory outcomes. It was thought that the ILO would successfully persuade the Bangladesh Government to ratify the ILO's three most important OHS conventions after the Rana Plaza incident, namely C155, C161 and C187, but this did not happen. The new Accord International incorporates the ILO to persuade its member countries to follow and respect the ILO conventions for the safety of workers, but the question is how reasonable it is, as the ILO continues to show less effective results in their tripartite mechanism of social dialogue (see Helfer, 2006; Standing, 2008).

However, several studies have shown that an industry like Bangladesh RMG needs a proper policy to see effective OHS practices and regulations (Ullah, 2023a,b). An essential aspect of this is to increase the price of RMG products. The author of this article also identified during the fieldwork in Bangladesh, which is the production costs that hinder maintaining OHS and the remediation advice of the Accord and Alliance (see Moazzem, 2019). Several trade unionists and RMG factory owners asserted that if the production costs of garment products are not increased, it will be challenging to address and maintain the proper safety for RMG workers in Bangladesh (see for example, Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018; Anner, 2019). For example, in their recent work, Rahman and Yadlapalli (2021) argue that in the price and profit-sharing process. Their study reflects that brands and retailers are the most beneficiaries. Other scholars (e.g., Ashwin, Kabeer & Schubler, 2020) found that brands are culprits and local suppliers in the low-regulated countries have the 'Porsches, Rolexes, and helicopters.

John, a senior trade unionist in Bangladesh, also emphasizes pricing issues to see sustainable RMG sectors' proper OHS practices and regulations. Thus, he said:

After all this, consumers are changing their attitudes toward Bangladeshi clothing positively. So, it is true that although, as I mentioned, OHS is related to factory capacity in the past and factory capacity also increases when buyers pay better prices; Otherwise, it may remain unchanged (interview 3 December 2017).

The price issue was intentionally ignored in the Accord and Alliance preambles. Surprisingly, the USA suspended the GSP in a call of a workplace safety issue. When Alliance completed their factory monitoring by December 2018, its report was satisfactory (see Alliance Fifth Annual Report, 2018). Why did the USA not restore the GSP for Bangladesh if this is the case? The cancellation of GSP could have been a better idea. Due to the GSP cancellation, many factories were closed, creating more problems for Bangladesh RMG workers. On the other hand, through the suspension of the GSP, Bangladesh had to pay more duties to the US government, further reducing workers' wages in Bangladesh. Moreover, Alliance only showed interest in continuing its program in Bangladesh in December 2018, which also created a big question of whether big brands from the USA are keen to solve the workplace issue in Bangladesh (see Kang, 2021).

On the other hand, DIFE, the regulatory body of Bangladesh, has shown the ineffectiveness of factory inspections in Bangladesh in the last few decades, especially since the 1980s. After enacting the Labour Act in 2006 (amended in 2013), it was genuinely expected that DIFE would become a credible monitoring body in

Bangladesh, but this did not happen. After 2006, there were many factory accidents, but the Bangladesh Government could not stop them by enforcing the National Labour Act and the ILO conventions (Bair et al., 2020). After the Rana Plaza incident, the Bangladesh Government took initiatives to reform the DIFE and increase its oversight capacity in the RMG sector. However, RMG is a vast sector, and other informal industries in Bangladesh are now relatively broad. This is a fundamental question of how DIFE will ensure improved service, mainly regarding factory monitoring with its limited staff.

Moreover, in the last seven years, DIFE has not shown credibility to scholars and other RMG stakeholders, such as trade unions in Bangladesh and overseas (InduatriALL Global Union and Uni Global), anti-sweatshop campaigners, European Union and even the ILO. Therefore, it raises whether DIFE can continue monitoring activities under RSC without an Accord in Bangladesh. For example, Ms Rita, a trade unionist in Bangladesh, emphatically stated that DIFE inspectors are not recruited through proper selection, where incompetent inspectors are appointed corrupt. On this basis, the author of this article questioned the DIFE staff, who emphasized:

The department has been restructured recently and lacks technical support and human resources. The government aimed to recruit more staff to monitor the RMG sector, but the process is slow. It used to be a small office, but the department's power increased slightly due to pressure and Bangladesh being a very dense country, especially after the Rana Plaza incident. Since the Rana Plaza incident, as the Bangladesh government has faced widespread criticism and pressure to monitor the factories properly, more inspectors have been appointed. However, it is still constrained (interview 5 December 2017).

Two points can be made from the above excerpt; first, DIFE did not act as a tenable monitoring agency in factory inspections and regulations since the RMG inception and had to wait until a major accident like Rana Plaza. Secondly, the Government of Bangladesh, Accord and Alliance still need to provide DIFE to build its credibility for conducting standard factory inspections set by Accord for RSC. Suppose a scholar visits the official website of DIFE to access any information that will disappoint them. DIFE's web page shows an unorganized one that needs more transparent quarterly reporting and maintains international standards. DIFE still needs to catch up as an acceptable monitoring agency. Surprisingly, there was a list of 993 inspectors on the web page. The DIFE office was recently called to know the total number of inspectors currently inspecting factories; the operator of the DIFE Bangladesh office said that now only around 600 inspectors are available out of 993, as others are official staff, e.g., clerks or drivers. A solid question arises as to whether DIFE can monitor a vast RMG sector with this bit of workforce. Of course, the Bangladesh Government's attitude draws upon their negligence before the Rana Plaza incident (see Siddiqi, 2019; Huq, 2019).

DIFE was mainly responsible for conducting the Tier Three factories. Those were not under Accord and Alliance and are mainly subcontractors. Then, by forming RSC, DIFE is now accountable for Tier One, Two and Three factories. However, the question is, without a true collaboration between the ILO, World Bank, ADB, IFC, national and international trade union bodies, and mainly with the support of BGMEA, BKMEA, Bangladesh Government and global brands, whether DIFE can change the working condition of the sector. It was a real shame when the Accord and Alliance did not care for the many small factories mainly working for the Tier One and Two big factories with direct business with Accord and Alliance. Previous factory incidents occurred in Tazreen Fashions and Rana Plaza, where the world's famous brands and retailers' goods were made, such as Walmart, Benetton and Primark (Mishra, 2019; FASHIONISTA, 2020). The question is why small factories were excluded from the remedy from Accord and Alliance's factory lists when DIFE and the Bangladesh Government could not fully comply. At least 3000 sub-contracting factories in Bangladesh remain vulnerable, and RMG workers pass their anxious time while working in those factories (e.g., Moazzem, 2019; Huque, 2018; Huq, 2019).

Despite such dilemmas in Accord and Alliance's RMG factories monitoring, following the Corrective Action Plan (CAP), which needs to be included in DIFE's initiatives was good. In 2017, the Remedy Coordination Cell (RCC) was established to conduct factory inspections under the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA). However, several studies have shown that compared to the performance of the Accord and Alliance towards the end of 2018-2020, the RCC's initiatives under the NTPA are still unsatisfactory (see Barua et al., 2018; Rahman & Rahman, 2021). The Accord & Alliance's quarterly report was also an excellent initiative to determine which

factories could follow up with CAP, despite the time given to the factories for remediation and other supports such as financial aid. However, such a strategy needs to be significantly included in DIFE.

Most importantly, when the author of this article visited Bangladesh between 2017 and 2018, some good and big factories were identified as an ideal factory that maintains international standards. Unfortunately, many small, medium and mainly sub-contracting factories do not follow ILO standards and the Bangladesh Labour Act (Haque, 2018). Even those little sub-contractors need proper education and knowledge about the ILO convention, Bangladesh Labour Act and other building codes and regulations. However, sub-contracting factories are a reality in Bangladesh, and their existence is essential in the socio-economic context of Bangladesh. Sub-contracting factories create low-paying jobs for the state's job seekers, mainly for the less educated and skilled people. So, on the one hand, the Bangladesh Government must uphold their existence; on the other hand, remedying numerous sub-contracting factories is a big challenge for DIFE. Therefore, the study has a valid question - how can DIFE change its regulatory strategies and become more credible to make the RMG industry more sustainable?

The author's observations, study findings from empirical information in Bangladesh and contemporary scholarship also indicate significant flaws in Accord, Alliance and DIFE's monitoring strategy (Rahman, 2019; Siddiqi, 2019). For instance, Siddiqi (2019) adequately evaluated private and government initiatives in RMG factory monitoring. However, in her analysis, all parties ignored the most critical issues for RMG workers, such as sexual harassment, wages, bonuses, and workers' right to form trade unions and organize collective bargaining (Ullah, 2021). However, in line with Siddiqi, the question is whether Bangladesh can increase the price of RMG products or increase it, which indirectly threatens to lose the competition in the global RMG market. Therefore, the Accord and Alliance initiatives seem to be piecemeal rather than a solution to the core problem that hinders OHS practice and keeps the workplace up to international standards (Siddiqi, 2019).

Most importantly, Accord International did not reveal the strategy of collecting funds for the Accord Foundation compared to Brand Finance (see Brand Finance Apparel 50 2021 Report). Brand Finance raises funds from the brands for marketing and advertising, product promotion, and other brands with the necessary financial support. Nevertheless, surprisingly, there is no foundation unlike "Brand Finance" for fair wages and social security for RMG workers, which produced a valid question for the Accord International Foundation on how they can do it. This is crucial to understand that RMG workers are starving due to the loss of work in the RMG industry in Bangladesh since the COVID-19 pandemic and urging global brands for more social security, which is a pity. However, international brands and RMG merchants made blotted promises in Bangladesh, while international brands remain silent about their moral duties (see Ullah, 2021; Mullins, 2021; *Prothomalo*, 2021; *BBC News*, 2021). For example, 7 October 2021 was the World Day for Decent Work, and IndustriALL Global Union published a report stating that RMG workers in Bangladesh have appealed for social security to the global brands for the COVID-19 impact on their livelihoods. An RMG worker lost her job two years ago as an operator in an RMG factory for a decade. When she lost her income, she struggled to manage her livelihood, thus:

I have three kids. My husband is paralyzed – very sick. I'm the only source of livelihood for the family. My kids are studying in school. I have to pay the doctor's expenses. There is so much expenses. I just can't bear it. The children are going to school. I need a whole lot of money, but I'm not getting anything (IndutriALL Global Union, 2021).

The above quote reflects the actual situation of most RMG workers in Bangladesh (see Huq, 2019; Siddiqi, 2019; Anner, 2020; Ullah, 2021). Bangladesh is a low-regulated country that provides low wages to RMG workers and opportunities for global brands to invest in industries like RMG. Nevertheless, international brands also neglect their minimum responsibility to ensure a better livelihood for RMG workers. So the question is how the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and its new development Accord International will provide the necessary support in the long run.

The Rana Plaza incident probably put Bangladesh, BGMEA, BKMEA, and other RMG employers on the back foot. The United States first suspended their GSP benefits on workplace safety issues for RMG workers. The EU was imposing trade sanctions and ending quota facilities under Everything But Arms (EBA), which did not



finally occur (see Kang, 2021). Immediately, in response to the Rana Plaza incident, the Bangladesh Government amended the Labour Act 2006 in 2013 and promised to bring more effective factory monitoring and regulatory strategies by empowering DIFE. Still, in the end, the promise was not kept. Trade unionism is still undermined and obstructed when RMG workers demonstrate their essential benefits from RMG employers, the Government, and even global clothing brands (see, e.g., Ashraf & Prentice, 2017; Anner, 2019; IndustriALL Global Union, 2021a,b; Ullah, 2021; Kang, 2021).

It is worth mentioning that when Accord and Alliance started RMG monitoring in Bangladesh in 2013, they needed to find adequate codes and significant guidelines in the existing Labour Act of Bangladesh or other organisational structures. As a result, Accord and Alliance had to bring international standards and adjust with CAP towards ensuring that factories are correctly remediated. Whether the newly amended Labour Act 2013 of Bangladesh maintains that international standard is another academic discourse. For example, according to Human Rights Watch, Bangladesh's Labour Act has significant flaws that hinder trade unionism and other workers' rights. Moreover, Accord and Alliance hired mostly expert engineers from Bangladesh's top university, the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET), to ensure they understand the international building standards for large-scale goods production. However, DIFE lacks this opportunity, putting this agency's reputation on factory inspection under a question mark. In this situation, the fundamental question is how DIFE can achieve the ultimate goal of seeing a sustainable RMG in the future in Bangladesh.

### 3. Recommendations and conclusions

This paper first reviewed the concept of labour governance as an application to understand better how multi-stakeholder initiatives were established regime to manage to monitor Bangladesh's RMG sector since 2013. Labour governance approaches link global production dynamics and regional economic, political and social structures to understand labour outcomes in the workplace. However, as research questions were to understand whether international labour governance approaches helped to control and see changes in Bangladesh as configured across time and space. Analysis revealed the often contested and sometimes ambiguous relationships between stakeholders and how they shape the progress and sustainability of multi-stakeholder initiatives in monitoring processes in an international set-up.

The analysis shows that while Accord and Alliance have shown some progress in factory monitoring techniques, these two non-governmental organisations have significant shortcomings discussed in this article. Nevertheless, despite some differences in their monitoring strategies between Accord and Alliance, DIFE, a Bangladesh government agency, has shown unsatisfactory factory monitoring results, questioning whether Bangladesh would experience casualties at other factories like RMG Tazreen Fashion or Rana Plaza. In order to refute this assumption, it is essential to see that every notable partner of Bangladesh RMG is working adequately with sufficient responsibility. Bangladesh is going through its transition period to become an industrial country. As a result, although the Bangladesh Government may ignore labour and industrial issues such as workers' safety and welfare, other stakeholders need to build a proper OHS culture and some institutions with financial and technical support that can adequately monitor RMG factories. Therefore, Accord, Alliance, international clothing brands and the Government of Bangladesh, BGMEA, BKMEA, BEF FBCCI, local and international trade union organisations, NGOs, and other international organisations such as the World Bank, ADB, IMF, ILO and WHO need to form a foundation for Bangladesh's RMG sector's substantial monitoring and regulation. Most importantly, the Government of Bangladesh must ensure the safety and regulation of the RMG industry for millions of workers and implement the National Labour Act 2006 (amended in 2013) and the ILO conventions for the sustainability of the RMG industry by strengthening DIFE's credibility in the factory monitoring process..

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