

Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository

---

9-26-2022 2:00 PM

## Localized Activism in the Bangladeshi Garments Industry: Mobilizing the Labour Movement from the Ground Up

Raisa Masud, *The University of Western Ontario*

Supervisor: Beckett, Greg, *The University of Western Ontario*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in  
Anthropology

© Raisa Masud 2022

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd>



Part of the [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Masud, Raisa, "Localized Activism in the Bangladeshi Garments Industry: Mobilizing the Labour Movement from the Ground Up" (2022). *Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository*. 8920.  
<https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/8920>

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact [wlsadmin@uwo.ca](mailto:wlsadmin@uwo.ca).

## Abstract

This thesis is based on research conducted between the summer and fall of 2021, and it investigates the global garments industry from the perspective of local labour organizers and activists in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is the second-largest producer of fast fashion and textile in the world, employing millions of garments workers across the country. Moreover, the long history of industrial disasters, such as the infamous case of the Rana Plaza collapse, make Bangladesh a valuable site for unravelling the layers of exploitation and vulnerability associated with wage labour in the global assembly line. The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse killed over a thousand garments workers and left behind trails of loss and trauma. Given the rise of factory disasters in the garments industry and the timing of this research being situated amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, this thesis analyzes the challenges facing Bangladeshi garments factory workers and their capacity to collectivize in the industry to claim their rights as citizens. Additionally, the author investigates, how do local activists mobilize the *sromik andolon* (labour movement) on the ground amidst continued corporate and state-led violence in this neoliberal supply chain? Lastly, the author enquires, why is the localized labour movement essential for Bangladeshi garments workers, and wage workers more generally? Exploring the experience of industrial disasters as key moments for generating new forms of worker activism, this thesis explores how garments workers and local activists develop a nuanced and critical understanding of what the readymade garments industry means for workers in Bangladesh and argues for an ethnographic approach of “listening to the local” as a vital source of understanding the lives of workers and activists.

## Summary for Lay Audience

From factory collapses to the continued battle for adequate wages and rights for workers, over the years, the Bangladeshi garments industry has witnessed many shifts and altercations. A few matters became apparent while ‘listening’ to the narratives of local labour organizers who are fighting for workers’ rights on the ground in Bangladesh. Local activists deem the Bangladeshi labour movement as a fundamental tool for mobilizing wage workers’ rights in Bangladesh and across the global garments industry. The intent of this research is to provide a richly detailed, locally driven interpretation of how the garments sector in Bangladesh operates as part of the fast fashion industry. Furthermore, by focusing on the knowledge and experiences of grassroots activists, we not only gain a grounded perspective but also a critically important one, as locals can describe and even theorize how global capitalism takes shape in the apparel supply chain.

Bangladeshi labour activists are aware of the abstract, top-down, and western-centric approaches pursued by global and national players, which challenges their labour movement on the ground. The aim of this research is to pursue a group-up approach and address the various initiatives organized by the local labour organizers who have direct and detailed experience with the Bangladeshi garments sector. The data collected from this research will reveal how informants speak and think about the social, political, ethical, and economical aspects of the fast fashion supply chain and the Bangladeshi garments industry.

## Acknowledgments

I am humbled to be surrounded by a community of inspiring, supportive, and thoughtful people, to whom I owe many thanks. I want to first extend my utmost appreciation to my supervisor, Dr. Gregory Beckett, whose guidance made this entire journey an exceptional one. Greg, you have inspired me in many ways; to show kindness, to think outside the box, and to question what is ordinary. For all of this and more, thank you.

I want to thank my advisor, Dr. Randa Farah, for showing me so much compassion and sharing her wisdom with me. Randa, I am sincerely grateful for your guidance, you are an inspiration. I also would like to thank my senior colleague from the department, Hana S. Ahmed, for all the support and thoughtfulness.

I extend my gratitude to all my informants, for sharing their time, stories, memories, and insights.

Thank you to my teachers and colleagues, at the Department of Anthropology at Western University, for the amicable learning experience.

Lastly, thank you to all my mentors, family members, and loved ones for everything in between.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Summary for Lay Audience.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv-v
<b>Chapter One: Introduction Entering the Bangladeshi Garments Industry Amidst the COVID-19 Crisis .....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Getting Insight into Global Factories: Learning from Saira about the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh.....	3
1.2. From Colonialism to Capitalism: the Indian Subcontinent and Bangladesh’s Neoliberal State Formation: A Brief History .....	9
1.3. War-torn Bangladesh and Women’s Memoir .....	11
1.4. Theoretical Fields – Colonialism, Capitalism, Crisis, and Haunting.....	20
1.5. Methodologies .....	22
<b>Chapter Two: Supply Chain Capitalism and Corporate Social Responsibility – Continuing my Conversation with Saira about Crisis.....</b>	<b>29</b>
2.1. The Historical Relocation of Garments Factories: Not in My Backyard! It is Cheaper Over There! .....	32
2.2. The Case of the Rana Plaza Collapse .....	40
2.3. A Continuum of Colonialism: History Repeats at the Level of Transnational Policy Making .....	44
2.4. Concluding Thoughts – The Rana Plaza Collapse and the ACCORD versus the Alliance Debate .....	52
<b>Chapter Three: “Bangladesh is being sold for parts”: Neoliberalism, the Nation-state and the (Un)Making of the Readymade Garments industry .....</b>	<b>55</b>
3.1. A National Crisis: Miah Bhai describes his memories from the Rana Plaza Collapse.....	57
3.2. Disaster Capitalism: Nine Years Post-Rana Plaza Collapse .....	61

3.3. Post-Colonial State and Export-led Garments Sector: The Rise of the Bangladeshi Neoliberal Government.....	72
3.4. Pre-to-Post-Colonial Bengal: Ruling of the British Empire and Partitioning of the Indian Subcontinent.....	76
3.5. Concluding thoughts on National Players, Industrial Crisis, and International Policies.....	87
<b>Chapter 4: Bangladeshi Labour Activists in the face of “Crisis”: Theories of Global Capitalism from the Ground Up .....</b>	<b>89</b>
4.1. From Disaster Capitalism to Localized Activism: The Rana Plaza Collapse and the Formation of Sromik Sheba.....	90
4.2. Grassroots Advocacy: Localized Approaches to Disaster Relief and Combatting Ordinary Violence .....	96
4.3. Local Activists Define Crises: Taslima Akhter and Sromik Sheba .....	104
4.4. Concluding Thoughts: Shifting Towards a Localized Representation of Bangladeshi Garments Workers.....	109
<b>Chapter Five: Conclusion The Bangladeshi Garments industry in the 2020s .....</b>	<b>120</b>
5.1. Male Husbands and Female Workers: Eating Chicken Feet as Bonus .....	124
5.2. CONCLUDING REMARKS.....	127
<b>References.....</b>	<b>131</b>
<b>Appendix.....</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitae .....</b>	<b>141</b>

# Chapter One: Introduction

## Entering the Bangladeshi Garments Industry Amidst the COVID-19 Crisis

*“It feels like there is a FOR SALE sign on Bangladesh. People's rights, choices, and interests are nowhere on the table. With the pandemic and everything that happened over the last few years, it showed very clearly that the lives of garments workers, their health, and their well-being is not at all of interest to the factory owners or even to the Government of Bangladesh. The garments industry is one of the major areas which keeps Bangladesh's economy alive. However, we are basing it on the lives of these workers.*

*Basically—the female workers, unskilled, and uneducated—only coming to Dhaka or suburbs with social networks of village relatives, living a very precarious life, a very vulnerable life. And for the sake of just having their freedom of buying a purse and lipstick, or, some chicken, someday.”*

– Salma Apa

On March 26, 2020, the Government of Bangladesh announced a nationwide lockdown in response to the first wave of the coronavirus. The employers' organization Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) immediately shut down all garment factories following this announcement (Kabir et al. 2020, 48). Subsequently, due to the COVID-19-related closures and layoffs, ten million garments workers headed home to their villages from the outskirts of Dhaka city. This pandemic forth brought new concerns facing garments workers and other wage workers while exposing the exacerbation of specific issues that existed in the pre-pandemic era. Those preexisting issues include, but are not limited to, joblessness, zero breaks, hunger, unstable employment, exposure to hazardous working conditions, gender-based violence, unsafe travel routes to and from work—all, -in addition to fear of contracting and spreading coronavirus (Kabir et al. 2020, 48; Sarker 2020). In Chapter One, I will begin by addressing how the various bureaucratic actors including international corporations and Bangladeshi national players responded to the initial challenges brought forth by the global pandemic that directly affected the garments workers who are placed at the bottom of the global supply chain. The COVID-19 crisis will be my entryway to inquire about the implications of gendered, racialized, and classist violence and exploitation facing Bangladeshi garments workers

and the repetition and continuity of such experiences. Additionally, by presenting the case of the coronavirus pandemic and the challenges it posed upon Bangladeshi garments workers, I will address the visible and ongoing forms of systemic barriers and “ordinary violence” (cf. Beckett 2020), that have become normalized (Perrow 2004) in the garments supply chain. Furthermore, I will highlight how these matters can be traced back to the historical and colonial forms of state-led, gendered, and racial exploitation that can be found “haunting” Bangladeshi workers who are employed in this lucrative industry (cf. Kilroy-Marac 2018).

In 2022, the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II was celebrated across the globe by various supporters of the monarch. A few months following this event, the Queen passed away at the age of 96, at the Balmoral Castle in the United Kingdom. This event too was solemnly observed across the globe by the followers of Her majesty, especially those fifty-six Commonwealth Nations that are made up of sovereign, “independent” post-colonial states such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Kenya, and other settler-colonial nations including Canada and New Zealand. These events while memorialized by many, also led to several uprisings amongst Indigenous populations where I am situated in Canada, in South Asia, and across the globe. The dynasty and impudence of the British Empire and the succession of violence unleashed upon colonies (including the Indian subcontinent) and their inhabitants for several centuries, for example, still resonates with the conditions of subjugation facing certain populations in those regions today (cf. Chakrabarty 2018; Lowe 2015; Wolfe 2006; Stoler 2004; Spivak 1988). It is said that most of the wealth acquired by the Crown was stolen from these countries that are currently identified as suffering, impoverished, corrupt, or underdeveloped. Black, Indigenous, People and Women of Colour continue to demand for acknowledgement and repatriation for the colonial violence that was imposed by the British Empire. These matters are relevant in illustrating a detailed story and to address some of the compelling historical traces of violence and desolation that countries like Bangladesh have suffered due to colonization, where matters of famine, flooding, poverty, and discrimination have become ‘commonplace’ and ‘ordinary.’ It is with this consideration and awareness of chronological events that have shaped the conditions of peoples and systems, that I began my ethnographic research on the Bangladeshi garments industry.



## 1.1. Getting Insight into Global Factories: Learning from Saira about the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh

The unpreparedness of national and international governments and institutions in maintaining their citizens during a global pandemic became evident in 2020. Meanwhile, the media and news outlets became flooded with debates over vaccine hesitancy and mask regulations rather than addressing the limitations of the state in mismanaging the spread of the coronavirus. The pandemic brought forth many new beginnings, such as the adjustment to a virtualized lifestyle with the increase of technological advancements making it simpler to live at and work from home. However, the crisis did not affect everyone evenly. In certain parts of the world, companies adapted to provide remote work opportunities to their employees, schools became virtualized, and people switched to ordering their foods, groceries, household supplies, clothing, and more, online. Meanwhile, other economies and communities suffered the pre-conditions of an upcoming global recession. In Bangladesh particularly, the coronavirus pandemic exacerbated already existing forms of precarity, adding an acute crisis to the already present chronic ones. The COVID-19 crisis exposed the repetition of events from the past, particularly in the way national and international governments overlooked the poorest regions, workers, and inhabitants while overseeing the global emergency. In the next section, I turn to my conversation with one of my informants to address what could be observed in Bangladesh on the ground during the pandemic.

Following the initial spread of the coronavirus and lockdowns declared in March 2020, Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina responded to the economic crisis by announcing an allocation of stimulus funds dedicated to the garments sector to cover unpaid wages. Allegedly, these funds did not reach the garments *sromik* (labourers), which led to nationwide demonstrations and protests organized by labour activists and workers (Kabir et al. 2020, 48). The two trillion-dollar global garments industry witnessed brands canceling orders for at least 20-30% of pre-produced products, resulting in factory closures and affecting the livelihoods of garments workers (Tanjeem 2021). Suddenly, during the summer of 2020, while Bangladesh witnessed a peak in COVID-19 cases, the employers' organization Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing and Exporters Association (BGMEA) declared a reopening of factories to process former orders while threatening workers to return to work if they wanted to keep their jobs

(Kabir et al. 2020, 48). To elaborate on the next part, I will refer to an interview with one of my informants who shared with me their observations from the aftermath of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and its implications upon Bangladeshi garments workers.

Saira is a leading expert, and researcher in Bangladesh who has worked on projects supported by local Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and research institutions on issues surrounding gender equality. More recently, Saira began investigating the trade union movement in the ready-made garments sector and the condition of women's labour rights. In fall 2021, near the end of September, I had the opportunity to interview Saira on Zoom where we engaged in a thoughtful and enlightening conversation. During that one-hour call, she shared with me the intricacies of the treatment that faced garments workers following the spread of the coronavirus in Bangladesh. Saira told me that, "while the entire country was under lockdown, suddenly, the garments factories were opened. The garments workers who were outside the city had to travel back. Here, there was a major communication gap between trade union leaders and the workers—*those who are average labourers and cannot participate with any unions because the factories that they work for prohibit it.*"

Saira is a modern scholarly woman who works at BRAC, an NGO based and founded in Bangladesh. She is a Research Coordinator for the NGO's Division of Investigatory Development. Saira expressed similar sentiments towards Bangladeshi garments workers' rights and women's equitable access and lack thereof. She provided her input on the uncertainties of labour organizing in the garments sector—along with interventions that could minimize the risks and challenges facing garments workers. While working with a team and observing the trade union movement in the garments sector during the coronavirus pandemic, Saira and her team observed that negotiations about the reopening of factories were taking place at a national level, where workers were unwelcomed. The matter of whether the factories would be opening was appearing all over social media and on online news channels. The decision was made to reopen the factories. Then later, based on the scrutiny surrounding the factories' reopening that was circulating on social media, factory owners agreed to delay the opening and keep their factories closed for one more week. Saira exclaimed: "was there no way for the union leaders to inform the garments workers who had gone back to their villages that they were trying to make these negotiations? Could they not have informed the workers that they are trying to delay the

reopening at this time, so stay put as they work to keep the factories closed? But no.” As there were no modes of transportation running at the time, thousands of workers resorted to taking long and painful journeys to return to the suburbs. They walked through risky routes for hundreds of miles to return to the factory towns located on the outskirts of the country’s urban center—Dhaka city. Saira disclosed her skepticism toward the power and capacity of trade unionists in Bangladesh as they failed to simply inform the workers about the delays in factory openings.

At this stage in our conversation, I felt frustrated. This was my tenth interview, yet, it was the first time I had learned that the COVID-19 lockdowns led garments workers to have to walk for miles to return to the factories in fear of losing their jobs. Only for there to have been an enormous miscommunication, causing workers to suffer in a loop of crisis. It became clear to me from these encounters, the layers of challenges and limitations local labour organizing is in Bangladesh where garments workers are prohibited by their employers from participating in any unions. The news of factory openings being delayed appeared on social media before it made it to the workers who are immediately affected by the decisions, which is both jarring and telling of the weaknesses of transnational labour organizing (Kang 2021). There was a lot that I learned from Saira, and from all my informants, about the strength, resilience, and prowess of local labour organizing which received my full attention and analysis for the purposes of this research.

Shortly after, Saira summarized for me how the conditioning of the international economy and the role of transnational corporations has influenced Bangladesh’s enlistment as a global producer of fast fashions throughout the years:

In 2008, when the economic depression occurred, at that time, many people including economists, speculated that the garments industry might crash. After the 1990s and since the early 2000s this industry grew quite rapidly, therefore, during the depression, people assumed that there would be a decline. But the reason the industry survived and “upore uthe gelo” (drastically inclined) is because of the exploitation of cheap labour, that is the only thing that made this possible. Now [in September 2021], the same thing is happening with the overpacking of orders. During the first year of the coronavirus pandemic, there was a lot of havoc over the lack of orders and cut downs by brands. However, now the workload has gotten even heavier. The working hours used to be 8 AM-5 PM, now they are 8 AM-7 PM. Employees are not being compensated for the additional hours that they are working at the factory.

Saira highlighted to me that the struggles facing garments workers in Bangladesh are multifold. Furthermore, during times of crisis like the pandemic, there is an exacerbation of violence disrupting the lives of wage workers, whether due to budget under-cuts or overpacking of orders, workers are regularly placed at the bottom of the barrel in the supply chain. While commenting on the rapid growth of the garments industry in Bangladesh, Saira confided in me that most researchers and academicians in Bangladesh are compelled to criticize these issues in a very “hush-hush way.” Additionally, most activists and local labour organizers in Bangladesh resonate with a sense of ‘broken democracy’ that prevents Bangladeshi citizens and global wage workers from collectivizing. The government sees the garments industry as key to Bangladesh’s nationhood and economic status, therefore, open, public criticism of the sector is systematically proscribed. Labour activists and garments workers have limited room to mobilize on the ground, and collective organizing is often framed as a threat to the national economy and the mode of capital accumulation on which it is based. In this way, the system repeatedly violates, suppresses, and attempts to silence workers.

### The COVID-19 Crisis in the Bangladeshi Garments Industry

The timeframe of the pandemic heavily interceded with the timing of my research for this thesis, which began in mid-2020. As such, this research was profoundly shaped by the context in which it was conducted. Throughout the pandemic, Bangladesh steadily grasped onto its position as the second largest producer and global exporter of fast fashion (Swazan and Das 2022). This economic enfranchisement was beneficial for a select few players in the global supply chain. As quoted by my informant Saira, the garments workers were placed in destitute conditions throughout this lockdown. Scholars argued that the post-COVID-19 conditions were significantly worse for wage workers as they are enduring an ongoing hunger pandemic, alongside stolen wages, joblessness, and more (Sarker 2020; Kabir et al 2020). The coronavirus aftermath has thus shone a new light on the difference in the distribution of wealth and access to one’s full rights as citizens in post-colonial states like Bangladesh during the era of mass consumption led by capitalism (cf. Brown 2010; Harvey 2006; Sassen 2002). Yet, such disruptions in the global supply chain point to the structural issues that persist beyond moments of crisis such as the pandemic. This thesis will explore how such moments of crisis and disaster can mediate our understanding of those broader structures and relations, doing so from the

perspective of an ethnography of the garments industry from the standpoint of the main producers of ‘value’ in this economy—the garments workers and the local labour activists who are found forwarding workers’ demands (cf. Graeber 2001).

In this thesis, I will build on the anthropological works of Chloe Ahmann (2018) in addressing moments of rupture and crisis, and apply the concept of crisis, disaster, and ordinary violence by Greg Beckett (2020) to present a handful of events that occurred in the garments industry that garnered national and global attention. Namely, the 1990s child labour accusations facing the Bangladeshi garments industry, the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse and its aftermath, and the COVID-19 pandemic and implications on garments workers, to highlight levels of precarity facing average wage workers vs. how national and international players in the supply chain respond to these events. I will pursue these events or “moments of crises” as a lens to critique the overall structure of this neoliberal industry and its weaponization of capital to exploit labour in the supply chain. Additionally, by referring to scholars who are experts on the global supply chain (Siddiqi 2015; Chowdhury 2018; Anner 2019; Kang 2021; Tanjeem 2021), and by engaging with the conversations I had with local informants, I will conclude on the significance of listening to the voices of local players who are intrinsically familiar with the conditions of the garments industry and global capitalism. I will argue that the Bangladeshi garments industry and the global supply chain is sustained through the exploitation of racialized, gendered, and colonized labour. This is systemically enabled through neoliberal control over the capital that displaces labour in the supply chain, and ultimately eliminates Bangladeshi garments workers’ capacity to unionize, compelling them to remain chained to cycles of poverty (Kang, 2021). Furthermore, outsourcing and ‘spatial strategies’ are manipulated by transnational corporations that control capital to further fragment the transnational labor movement, in Bangladesh and across the globe (Anner 2019). Currently, Bangladeshi garments workers are struggling in a state where their labour rights are weak, the room for collectivizing is limited (Kang 2021), and their employers prohibit them or threaten to fire them for speaking up about their rights and demands. Nevertheless, garments workers are bound to return to the factory for work to facilitate their survival and to feed their families.

This thesis is a story about the Bangladeshi garments industry, but it simultaneously tells a story about the world, the global supply chain, and capitalism in the 2020s. It connects those

consumers who are online shopping or roaming around the malls in metropolitan cities such as New York, Sydney, or Toronto, to the garments workers who are producing those products while sitting in a sweatshop on the outskirts of Dhaka, in Savar, Ashulia, or Gazipur. I will demonstrate the significance of ‘listening’ to local activists and workers on their demands for higher wages and improved working conditions, to produce a theory of global capitalism from the ground up (cf. McGranahan 2018). Today, the global supply chain connects garments workers to shoppers around the world, although not always in visible or clear ways. Transnational corporations and brands like H&M, Walmart, and Zara look for the lowest wages to gain the highest profits. That means they seek out wage workers from the world’s most economically disenfranchised groups and regions, which in turn means that garments workers are (and have historically been) from racialized and gendered populations located in colonial and postcolonial contexts (Kang 2021; Tanjeem 2021; Anner 2019; Chowdhury 2018; Karim 2014). The global supply chain produces a distance between the producer and consumer, enabling corporations to manipulate the imagery of “saving” the ‘vulnerable’ and ‘unskilled’ women workers by providing them with jobs while hiding the exploitative profiteering mechanisms that corporations pursue (Chowdhury 2018; Siddiqi 2015; Karim 2014; cf. Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). The global nature of the system makes some of these struggles facing wage workers invisible, by deploying ‘spatial strategies’ and manipulating ‘geographies of unevenness’ by maintaining a great distance between producers and consumers (Prentice 2021; Lewis 2019; Karim 2014). That distancing permits corporations to deny any responsibility for the millions of factory workers whose labour they extract (cf. Ong 2007). Throughout this thesis, I will weave in the historical underpinnings that have guided Bangladesh’s current state-formation while outlining how Bangladesh became the second largest producer of global garments and top exporter to the US (United States) and Canada. Additionally, international corporations and national governments (in Bangladesh and in the United States, for example) attempt to hide corporate exploitation by appealing to ideas of national economic development, job creation, and capitalism and wage work as “saving” vulnerable and or unskilled women workers. It is significant to trace the chronological events and historical moments that have led to the recycled imagery of the vulnerable woman of colour whose labour gets commodified to produce wealth for capitalist players in the supply chain.

In 2022, the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II was celebrated across the globe by various supporters of the monarch. A few months following this event, the Queen passed away at

the age of 96, at the Balmoral Castle in the United Kingdom. This event too was solemnly observed across the globe by the followers of Her majesty, especially those fifty-six Commonwealth Nations that are made up of sovereign, “independent” post-colonial states such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Kenya, and other settler-colonial states including Canada and New Zealand. These events while memorialized by many, also led to several uprisings amongst Indigenous populations here in Canada, and in South Asia. The dynasty and impudence of the British Empire and the succession of colonial violence unleashed upon colonies (including the Indian subcontinent) and their inhabitants for several centuries, for example, still resonates with the conditions of subjugation facing certain populations in those regions today (cf. Chakrabarty 2018; Lowe 2015; Wolfe 2006; Stoler 2004; Spivak 1988). It is said that most of the wealth acquired by the Crown was stolen from these countries that are currently identified as suffering, impoverished, corrupt, or underdeveloped. Black, Indigenous, People and Women of Colour continue to demand for acknowledgement and repatriation for the colonial violence that was imposed by the British Empire. These matters are relevant in illustrating a detailed story and to address some of the compelling historical traces of violence and desolation that countries like Bangladesh have suffered due to colonization, where matters of famine, flooding, poverty, and discrimination have become ‘commonplace’ and ‘ordinary.’ It is with this consideration and awareness of chronological events that have shaped the conditions of peoples and systems, that I began my ethnographic research on the Bangladeshi garments industry.

## 1.2. From Colonialism to Capitalism: The Indian Subcontinent and Bangladesh’s Neoliberal State Formation: A Brief History

Before I delve into the intricacies of lived experiences of the garments workers and the local activists whose narratives empowered me to produce this thesis, I will briefly articulate a list of key dates, years, and moments in history that have shaped and contributed to the current state of the fast fashion industry where Bangladesh is the second-largest producer (Swazan and Das 2022). I will return to these key moments throughout the thesis to indicate continuities, connections, and repetitions between the past and the present, and the way Bangladeshi wage workers are depicted and treated, nationally and globally.

There is a vast literature on the complex history of the independence and partition periods of Bangladesh. My goal here is to provide a brief context for the focus of my analysis, which will

consider how Bangladesh's past has shaped not only the contemporary garments sector but also the national government, economy, and the formation of "citizenship" (cf. Brown 2010; Sassen 2002). In the grand scheme, the sentiments that resulted in the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) in 1947, and the ethnoreligious conflicts inflicted by the British empire's divide and conquer ruling, played an enormous role in the ailments facing the region and its inhabitants today (Lewis 2019, p1958; Rajan 1969). In the case of Bangladesh, following the India-Pakistan partition, the state fell under the rigid dictatorship of the West Pakistani military regime. Meanwhile, there remained a 2,204 km (about half the width of the United States) distance between the two geographic bodies. It remained this way for twenty-four years, while Bangladeshis (East Pakistanis) continued to struggle for their rights, language, culture, and independence. In 1971, Bangladesh gained its independence after years of suffering under the Pakistani dictatorship. There were hopes of assembling a socialist governing system that centralized the needs and well-being of *all* citizens post-independence (Muhammad 2020).

The era of partition and state formation in the mid-twentieth century was around the same time when developmental projects were being capitalized and governmental entities were being subsumed by privatization (corporate interests), alongside the tactful introduction of International NGOs (INGOs) by the West (Lewis 2019, p1958). Post-WW2 was a period of expanding the notion of 'nation-states' with an interest in "decolonizing" formerly conquered regions to ensure independence from European hegemony (cf. Sassen 2002). Meanwhile, American neoliberalism began to expand, and corporations reimagined 'the global' as increasingly one place, therefore easier to expand and commodify already inhabited regions (Ong 2007). To retain corporate sovereignty over post-colonial states, transnational corporations entered the market with increased neoliberal logic to intercede in smaller economies like Bangladesh (cf. Standing 2014, 5; Ong 2007). Since Bangladesh's independence, the country has been exposed to several Western neoliberal structural adjustment plans and economic projects (Lewis 2019; cf. Ong 2007). Bangladeshi state players such as factory owners and ministers of parliament are found looting the profits of these rigid systems that were set in place by colonialism, military dictatorship, and patriarchal oppression against Global South women (Chowdhury 2018). I aim to address these matters and their build-up more thoughtfully throughout the chapters in this thesis. The representation of Bangladesh as a place where 'disaster,' 'corruption,' 'patriarchy,' and 'crisis,' takes place is systematically enabled by the



post-colonial state of Bangladesh that overlooks the conditions of its citizens and sides with the western corporations to retain national profits, and is inconsiderate towards garments workers, and wage workers more generally (Tanjeem 2017; Siddiqi 2015; cf. Beckett and Wagner 2022).

The dream of an independent Bangladesh “Shadhin Bangla” involved ideas of liberty, growth, and development for all Bangladeshis; however, that dream did not last long (Muhammad 2020). Political restructuring and inter-governmental warfare between competing political parties in the past four decades provoked hopelessness amongst Bangladeshis who for the most part consider the national government untrustworthy. In 2022, two of Bangladesh’s largest economic sectors are 1) the Temporary Foreign Worker program—currently booming with migrant workers going to the Middle East and sending back remittances while living very precarious lives abroad, and 2) the Readymade Garments Industry that expanded significantly in the 80s–90s and is feminized in global contexts (Karim 2014). According to my informants, these sectors are employing enormous numbers of precarious workers who produce the bulk of Bangladesh’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (cf. Standing 2014). Consequently, little provisioning is done on part of the Bangladeshi government in maintaining the rights of these workers. Both sectors are export-led, privatized, and outward-facing—much like the people, labour, and production of ‘value’ in Bangladesh.

### 1.3. War-torn Bangladesh and Women’s Memoir

The notion of Shadhin Bangla (independent Bengal) altered over the years in both meaning and value for average Bangladeshis. As I mentioned earlier, the Pakistani military government was considered too rigid and conservative for Bangladeshis, cogitating the rising middle class and expansion of liberal ideologies that had already saturated the Bengal region (Rahman and Langford 2014, 174). Additionally, these discrete identities, class, gender, religious, and ethnic divisions, were further instilled through British colonialism and the divide and conquer ruling system which distracted the masses from seeking their rights (Hossain 2010). In the mid-twentieth century, Bengalis were known for being highly educated—although, the Western interpretation of the Indian subcontinent remained rather simplistic, as illiterate, or uncivilized (Muhammad 2020). Many Bengali women, mainly from upper classes, were educated while women in neighbouring regions were battling for the same rights, nevertheless, there remained

several gender, class, and ethnoreligious gaps that contributed to the formation of the women-dominant garments labour market in Bangladesh in the 1980s (Chowdhury 2018; Karim 2014; Abu-Lughod 2013; Siddiqi 2009). Before I return to the readymade garments sector, I will be referring to a case study conducted by Yasmin Saikia (2004) to identify the historical role and contributions of Bangladeshi women towards Bangladesh, compared to how their positionality is represented nationally and globally. This is significant in informing the evaluation of racialized women and their social and/or economic contributions to key historical moments.

In 1999, almost twenty-eight years after Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan, Saikia (2004) received a summer research grant permitting her to travel to collect the narratives of Bangladeshi women and their accounts of the civil war in 1971. Before this, there were no archives of women's experiences from the liberation war (Saikia 2004, 277). Saikia (2004) highlighted that in post-war Bangladesh, the building of the national identity represented the oppositional political powers in dichotomous and patriarchal ways. The first group was made of Bangladeshi soldiers who formed a guerilla militia called the liberation army "*Mukti Bahini*" endorsed by the Awami League and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (father of current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina), who was declared the founding father of Bangladesh. The Mukti Bahini were (and are) widely celebrated as war heroes, in comparison to the second group—the Pakistani military who were given the culprits' status (Saikia 2004, 275). This is significant, as these divisions would, over time, come to characterize the interparty rivalry that defines Bangladeshi politics and people's mistrust of the government. Additionally, the key concern that Saikia's (2004) research emphasized was the absence of women's narratives, as it is essential to archive the narratives of different voices in building an authentic memory of nation-building and women's contributions. Controversially, the 200,000 cases of rape that were suffered by Bangladeshi women during the war received *selective recognition* by national players including the Awami League to evoke anger against Pakistanis and generate national unity (Saikia 2004, 277). This aspect of selective recognition is crucial and can be similarly detected when the current Bangladeshi national players are celebrating the garments industry in affiliation with the country's growing GDP, however, the state is rather hands-off when it comes to attending to workers' rights or demands.

Overall, Saikia (2004) encountered several barriers in accessing women's accounts of the war. She traveled from village to village and wherever she entered, a large crowd of men gathered, commanding her to listen to their heroic stories rather than the women she intended to learn from (2004, 279). She was told that women would not speak up, nevertheless, this was falsified by the informants who shared their narratives of rape, pain, and torture, with Saikia, although in fragmented bits from the memories that still lingered (2004, 280). These women had been silenced for several decades—some of them were raped by both Bangladeshi and Pakistani men (Saikia 2004), nevertheless, very few people are aware of this matter. By listening to survivors, it is possible to build a 'language' of communication for atrocious events such as the war crimes from 1971 (Saikia 2004, 280), similarly to industrial disasters that are seen repeating across the apparel industry, such as the Rana Plaza collapse tragedy, which I return to throughout this thesis.

The strategic silencing, "othering," and selective recognition of women's contributions as deemed beneficial by the government, is what Elora Chowdhury (2018, 48) calls the 'paradox of celebration and suffering' (Saikia 2004; Sassen 2002, 49). The paradox or 'politics of seeing and not seeing' enables patriarchy, capitalist development, and human suffering to propel—as observed in the ways that the post-colonial Bangladeshi nation-state was formulated and is maintained today with its reliance upon export-led industries for economic development at the cost of safety and security for Bangladeshi wage workers (Siddiqi 2015 in Chowdhury 2018, 51; Brown 2010). Social and environmental conditioning can veil a group or society's memory and awareness of 'truths,' about themselves and others, and thus, personal suffering consists of social elements (Brison 2002; Das 2001; and Kleinman 1996, in Saikia 2004). For example, the history of brutality that faced Hindu-Bengalis during the civil war was articulated by Saikia's informants. Mathumita, shared the pain she bared from being abused because her brothers were found supporting the Mukti Bahini—after she was raped, Mathumita dragged herself across the floor to save her 11-year-old-brother (Saikia 2004, 282). The systemic silencing of women's narratives and the erasures of women's abortion and pregnancy reports, all to ensure the 'honor' of the Bangladeshi peoples, demonstrates the primary targeting and subjugation of Bengali women—specifically from lower classes, Hindu families, and other superfluous groups (Saikia 2004, 284). Meanwhile, the rape counts of Bangladeshi women are only emphasized when negotiating the state's patriotism and need for external aid. Nevertheless, textbooks, media tales,

and testimonies from soldiers all avoided the brutalities faced and sacrifices made by Bangladeshi women who contributed to the nation's liberty in quieter ways (Saikia, 2004). I will display how this similar patriarchal character is visible in the Bangladeshi garments industry. During moments of crisis or disaster, the media channels and INGOs monetize from the imagery of helping or saving poor and vulnerable women in developing states (Lewis 2019), meanwhile, the demands and voices of local garments workers and activists, are strategically silenced and overshadowed.

In post-colonial Bengal, by the devising of the *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) 'new woman' identity that borrowed tremendously from the Victorian "new woman," the state dichotomized the representation of Bangladeshi women (Chowdhury 2018, 48). The Bengali *bhadramahila* who is 'smart, sophisticated, and virtuous' was pitted against two other types of women—the 'poor, uneducated, and uncivilized,' woman in Bengal, who would be targeted for recruitment in the growing national garments industry, and the sexually liberated and promiscuous Western woman (Chowdhury 2018). The effect further increased the importance of class divisions and of the rural-urban social and spatial divide within Bangladesh (Chowdhury 2018, 47). The *bhadramahila* may appear disassociated from western saviours and completely 'anticolonial,' however, the 'victim-saviour complex' of colonial feminism produces a South Asian woman trope that celebrates the neoliberal 'new woman' identity while simultaneously overlooking the violence it triggers (Chowdhury 2018, 49). The 'logic of capitalism' both liberates and victimizes Bangladeshi women in the same sentence (Chowdhury 2018, 49). Furthermore, Bangladeshi women are not only pitted against other women, but western feminism also universalizes the violent male counterpart rhetoric, therefore, South Asian men are blatantly criminalized and presented as oppressive and patriarchal (Chowdhury 2018). The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse exposed these dichotomies alongside the multiple axes of violence facing Bangladeshi women who are burdened by corporate and global patriarchy, alongside social and kinship responsibilities (Chowdhury 2018, 48).

One of my informants, Miah Bhai (*bhai means brother in Bangla*) shared with me his memories of the Rana Plaza collapse aftermath and how national players including employers' organizations like the BGMEA reacted to the globally recognized disaster. These institutions (BGMEA) verbally represent garments workers on the international front and in meetings with

international brands and buyers. However, the BGMEA attempted to hide the magnitude of the Rana Plaza catastrophe to protect the reputation and liability of western brands by shutting down the factory collapse site and prohibiting the counting of dead bodies immediately after the collapse. Nevertheless, local labour activists like Miah Bhai continued counting the bodies until they reached more than double the number of what the authorities had formally declared. Saikia's (2004) case study showed us how women's voices, roles, and experiences have been systemically suppressed since the formation of the Bangladeshi nation-state, exposing a continuity of state-led patriarchal violence that can be traced further back to the era of British colonialism (Chowdhury 2018). Likewise, the narratives I collected from my informants on their memories and affiliations with the Bangladeshi garments industry, will emphasize the demands and voices of gendered workers and the labour activists who are representing them.

#### Shifting from Past to Modernity: A Brief Statement on the Entry of NGOs and Top-Down Development in Bangladesh

Following Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan in the 1970s, Bangladesh was referred to as a "bottomless basket" for charity by Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State. The news depicted Bangladesh as a sob story of hungry and impoverished women and children who required saving from their unfortunate conditions. Neoliberal market practices induced by western corporations which sought after the cheap and abundant labour found available in South Asia, normalized the saviour complex and the ability of quasi-governmental actors including INGOs, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Bank to enter Bangladesh (Lewis 2019; Karim 2014). These players deployed neoliberal tactics to take over the market and other governmental responsibilities, such as the provisioning of basic human rights including access to food, nutrition, education, employment, and health care, for citizens and workers (Lewis 2019; Karim 2014; Abu-Lughod 2013). Through these neoliberal modes of individualizing sufferings, struggles, and demands—across race, class, and gender—western corporations came to dominate the global supply chain and Bangladesh's economy, employment, and labour movements. In the 2020s, the Bangladeshi government struggles to maintain its relationship with its citizens whilst quasi-governmental actors deploying Westernized modes of development pervade the region. An uncertain, anti-democratic, and clouded socioeconomic and political climate faces Bangladeshis

where workers like the garments factory employees who are producing immense wealth and value for the industry, have little to no room to claim their rights as full citizens.

By the turn of the century, Bangladesh witnessed a steady GDP growth and substituted its “underdeveloped” status for a “model” developing nation with two of the largest women-centric development projects: i) micro-finance and ii) readymade garments (Karim 2014, 54). In the 1980s, the Bangladeshi garments sector began to flourish, offering the world’s cheapest labour with essentially zero regulation over labour standards (Karim 2014, 54). In addition to the advertisements for saving third-world women and children, western corporations used this opportunity to promote the hiring of women garments workers in regions where labour organizing appeared to be limited, as a lucrative opportunity to accumulate profits (cf. Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). Meanwhile, millions of Bangladeshis, mainly women, and girls with limited economic opportunities, started to arrive on the outskirts of Dhaka city in search of factory work. In the 1990s, the Bangladeshi textile industry reached a critical moment and was condemned for practicing child labour. Western brands immediately turned all blame onto the country and displayed a hands-off approach on the matter (Tanjeem 2021; Absar et. Al 1999). In 1992, in response to the heated criticism facing American brands regarding their tolerance for child labour, the US government enacted the Child Labor Deterrence Act, also known as the Harkin Bill (named after Iowa State Senator, Tom Harkin) (Tanjeem 2017; Absar et al. 1999). This bill prohibited the US government from allowing the import of garments from Bangladeshi factories that were suspected of practicing child labour (Tanjeem 2017).

As a result, tens of thousands of *shishu sromik* (child labourers) lost their jobs (Tanjeem 2017; White 1996). Later, a handful of the *shishu sromik* who had lost their jobs due to the Harkin Bill were selected by INGOs to address the pejorative conditions of women and children in developing countries and represent Bangladeshi garments workers globally. Among those selected to represent Bangladeshi women garments workers were, Kalpona Akter who later founded the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity, and Najma Akter, who is the chair of the Awaj Foundation. Both Najma and Kalpona are globally renowned for their contributions to women’s liberation in the garments industry. Additionally, they are two of the few women trade unionists in the country. The question of child labour and the international response to it in the 1990s was thus a moment of rupture that has continued to have a significant impact on labour

organizing in Bangladesh. As my informants repeatedly noted, certain NGO-associated activists, many coming from the 1990s era, retain a virtual monopoly over media representation, large-scale funding, and more. However, local activists argue that NGOs often publicize policies that are deemed beneficial by western corporations and governments, rather than listening to Bangladeshi garments workers themselves. Many of these NGOs were beneficiaries of western donor groups in the 90s, where the focus was on gender issues; consequently, their agendas are mainly based on the interests of the donors and their distanced understanding of Bangladeshi women's and workers' obstacles (Karim 2014, 58). Moreover, most NGO activists in Bangladesh are English-speaking, unlike majority of the garments factory workers, who only speak in Bengali. This language gap, in addition to other barriers, produces a distance between those representing and those being represented in the garments industry (Karim 2014). This can be described as a direct threat to labour organizing, disabling people from different classes from collaborating on their efforts, resulting in a chain of violence for young women workers in the supply chain (Karim 2014). By contrast, majority of the local activists organize and mobilize in Bengali/Bangla. In addition, local labour organizers are keen on engaging in inter-class solidarity, such that the conditions and demands of Bangladeshi garments workers can be addressed and prioritized by the players in the supply chain.

In my conversations with local labour organizers, I learned about the fragmented labour movement in Bangladesh. As activists described it, there are two main types of labour organizing that can be observed. The initial method of advocacy is based on NGO-affiliated and donor-funded organizations. I collaborated with a few activists who are situated in this way—Saira, who worked at BRAC's research division, and Fariha who was an advocate and organizer for Naripokkho. These NGOs were founded in Bangladesh (rather than outside of it). These activists are fluent in English and are involved in projects aimed to specifically aid women garments workers. As Bangladeshi women, Saira and Fariha were familiar with the intricacies of lived experiences of garments workers and the acute sense of crises that workers endure. Both community leaders have extensive comprehensive knowledge and critical takeaways on Bangladesh's export-led industry, furthermore, many activists shift between working with NGOs and organizing independently—hence why there exists an overlap in the types of activism that can be observed. However, the main criticism of NGOs (as an institutional model) made by the second group of activists, who are mainly independent labour organizers, is that NGOs are

generally donor-driven and privatized. For example, they provide medical care or education to communities, including to garments workers, when it should be the responsibility of the Bangladeshi government to fulfill the rights of its citizens. Additionally, local activists stress that NGOs are known to lend aid and action following a disaster rather than working on preventative measures to produce and provide sustainable tools to communities, empowering them to live independently without donor dependence. Local activists make it their goal to disassociate from these players, for the most part, and to condemn the (in)actions of state-led actors such as the Bangladeshi government. Local activists focus instead on demanding increased wages for workers, so that, workers can live self-sufficiently. While there is some overlap between actors who are NGO-involved and the local organizers, for the most part, NGOs like BRAC and Awaj are criticized by other activists for receiving a larger platform than the local activists and for their ties to the national and foreign governments, corporations, and international donors. Local advocates are seeking systemic and political changes to centralize the voices of Bangladeshi garments workers. Multiple local activists claimed that since they mainly speak in Bangla (their efforts do not translate to other global actors) and *refuse* to accept funding from western NGOs such as USAS, the localized labour movement gets subsidized and overshadowed by western modes of development.

Local activists argue that during disaster aftermaths, such as following the Rana Plaza collapse, workers were intentionally distracted by news and media outlets that chose to fixate on their tragedies, making workers repeat their tales of loss and grief, keeping them occupied from organizing their efforts and mobilizing their demands. In 1994, the minimum wage in Bangladesh was set at \$11 per month, which was raised to \$67 per month following the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, despite the workers' demand for \$100 (all amounts are in USD) (Karim 2014, 54; cf. Perrow 2004). In April 2022, I attended a handful of conferences commemorating the 9<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse, where several Bangladeshi scholars, activists, and independent labour organizers were present and engaged in discussion. The topic of NGOs doing the job of the government arose, as people discussed who should be responsible for providing for workers. At the conference, participants stressed that activists like Najma Akter, and her NGO Awaj Foundation, were promoting promising and positive efforts in the community. Awaj Foundation provides free health services to aid garments workers and their families (Awaj Foundation 2022). However, during the conference economist Anu Muhammad highlighted that



the government of Bangladesh appears immensely proud of the garments industry in terms of the revenue it brings in for the nation, yet when it comes time for providing access basic services for garments workers, the government appears inactive and inattentive. Meanwhile, NGOs are deemed necessary to fulfill those gaps. NGOs play this buffering character which ultimately weakens the role of the government in neoliberal economies like the garments sector, attributing to the slow demise of nation-states (cf. Schuller 2012; Brown 2010; Sassen 2002). This hampers and disables workers from acquiring their rights as citizens while being curtailed or chained to a pejorative system or industry that commodifies their labour. Local activists challenge this abstraction and distancing between Bangladeshi citizens and the government by holding the state-led players accountable and by reiterating their responsibility over workers.

The different organizing methods I encountered during my fieldwork made it clear that those who are described as national players by local activists—such as the Bangladeshi government, the MPs (Ministers of Parliament), the national factory owners and managers, and third-party players like NGOs and Trade Unions—are devoted to maintaining the Bangladeshi garments sector largely as it already is. My informant, Fariha, who works with Naripokkho, a community-based women’s organization dedicated to advancing women’s rights, has done incredible community-level advocacy for garments workers in Bangladesh. Fariha emphasized that the crucial matter here is to sustain the Bangladeshi garments industry so that workers can have jobs. While this is true, this same sentiment is criticized by local activists, who argue that the fast fashion industry is likely to shift away. Local activists do not simply want to retain the garments industry as it is; rather, they find it vital to command fair wages and treatment for all wage workers. Localized activism seeks to provide immediate relief and aid during disasters, demand justice, raise the minimum wage, and mobilize action to achieve long-term improvements to Bangladeshi workers’ rights. The goal of local activism is thus quite different. For local activists, mobilizing means that even if the industry were to shift away to other places (which is already the case), workers and Bangladeshi citizens can continue to receive their deserving rights, wages, severance, etc.

In this section, I outlined a few significant characteristics of the Bangladeshi garments industry that became apparent as I delved into my fieldwork, such as the two different modes of labour activism that is prevalent in Bangladesh. I will elaborate on this in the next section where

I will describe my engagement with informants, the local labour organizers on the ground whose experiences informed my analysis. However, before that, I will name the theorists whose works shaped my thinking, and the main texts I will be borrowing from to analyze the case of the neoliberal garments industry that subjugates wage workers; describe the remnants from the colonial era that still shape the treatment towards racialized and gendered bodies today; and lastly, present the importance of revitalizing listening local actors and pursuing a grounded approach to activism. Next, I will describe the methodologies I applied to collect my data which not only informed my findings but also influenced the way I decided to divide this thesis into scales that replicate the global supply chain. The informants I spoke with theorized the condition of the Bangladeshi garments industry from their nuanced perspective and lived experiences as local labour activists who are fighting for the rights of garments workers. My informants described the three scales: the global, the national, and the local, and how the various players from these scales navigate the Bangladeshi garments industry and who ultimately represents the workers.

#### 1.4. Theoretical Fields – Colonialism, Capitalism, Crisis, and Haunting

In my thesis, I refer to several streams of thought including theories on colonialism, racialization, and ‘Othering’ (Gayatri Spivak; Chandra Mohanty; Edward Said; Dipesh Chakrabarty) that are the root of violations facing Bangladeshi garments workers; global capitalism, neoliberalism, and uneven geographic development by David Harvey (2006) and Mark Anner’s (2019) theory of western corporation’s spatializing techniques that promote ‘price and source squeezing’ to accumulate the highest profits while maintaining a distance between the consumer and producer. The theory of state formation, citizenship, and post-coloniality by Wendy Brown (2010), Saskia Sassen (2002), and Gupta and Ferguson (2004), will be applied to analyze the role of the Bangladeshi national players and the Government to scrutinize the positionality of post-colonial states in maintaining their ends of the global supply chain. The condition of gendered and uneven distribution of labour by Carla Freeman (2000) and Aihwa Ong’s (2007) theory on the neoliberal supply chain that is used to manipulate labour in smaller economies will be applied to address the discriminatory treatments facing workers in this gendered economy. As I get closer to the ground, I will refer to the works of scholars who are familiar with the condition of Bangladeshi peoples, wage workers, and women labourers in the apparel industry such as Dina Siddiqi (2009);

2015), Nafisa Tanjeem (2017; 2021), Youbin Kang (2021), and Elora Chowdhury (2018); and the materiality of INGO domination and western saviour complex as observable in Bangladesh by David Lewis (2019). Additionally, as mentioned earlier, I will refer to the theories of Chloe Ahmann (2018) where she highlights that moments of crisis can cause rupture to the routinely forms of struggles facing subjugated communities, and both local activists and other (capitalist) institutions can use those moments to their advantage to further their agendas. These moments of crisis can include events such as the Rana Plaza collapse or the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on workers in the garments supply chain. Continuing with this idea of crisis, I will refer to Greg Beckett's (2020) theory on disasters and ordinary violence, and the concept of "normal accidents" by Charles Perrow (2004) to disclose that these struggles facing subjugated gendered workers in the garments industry continue beyond ruptured moments. Lastly, to analyze this complex system, I will refer to some historical moments of crises that have faced the global garments industry within and outside of Bangladesh. In doing so, I will interrogate the similarities in the forms of violence facing Bangladeshi garments workers in the twenty-first century, which resemble what Katie Kilroy-Marac calls "colonial haunting," where the struggles that faced native inhabitants during the colonial era resonate with the forms of ongoing violence facing the regions and its peoples today (Kilroy-Marac 2018). Bangladeshi apparel workers regularly confront layers of gendered, racialized, and classist violence, despite so, millions of workers continue to be employed in garments factories. To answer why this is the case, Chapter Two—The Global, will address the limitations of a top-down, western-centric approach, that refuses to 'listen' to garments workers and their demands to maintain hierarchies between corporations and global wage workers (cf. McGranahan 2018). In this thesis, I argue that we cannot fully theorize the condition of labour in the garments industry from the global perspective. The Bangladeshi labour moment has been suppressed for several decades while garments workers are prohibited by their employers from speaking up or demanding their rights. The state-led players proceed with violence attempting to silence workers and activists from mobilizing their agendas. Local Bangladeshi labour organizers assemble their efforts to uphold the rights of the wage workers who are being subjugated, often by risking their lives. Yet the contributions of local actors receive limited national or international attention. By contrast, throughout this thesis I will emphasize the voices, memories, experiences, and demands of local labour activists who are representing Bangladeshi sromik. Localized activism advocates for the

fulfillment of rights for all citizens, including garments workers, who deserve a rightful wage, safe working conditions, the ability to afford living costs, and to receive equitable compensation for any loss or trauma endured from working in factories. Therefore, by centering the localized *sromik andolon* (labour movement) I argue that we get a better understanding of the experience of garments workers and of the necessary changes to this capitalist industry that repeatedly places workers in vulnerable circumstances. Now I turn to the next section in this chapter, where I describe the methodologies that I applied to collect primary data for the thesis.

## 1.5. Methodologies

Initially, when I began this research, I aimed to travel to Bangladesh and interview Bangladeshi garments workers and NGO groups to collect their accounts of the fast-fashion and garments supply chain. I intended to connect with a handful of activists whose names are popularly known, globally celebrated, and formally associated with garments activism in Bangladesh, such as the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) led by Kalpona Akter, and the AWAJ Foundation led by Najma Akter. While it would have been a great privilege for me to connect with these NGOs, due to the unexpected challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct my research in such a way. Unfortunately, I was unable to travel to Bangladesh to conduct fieldwork or conduct my research as I had initially imagined.

Nevertheless, soon, a colleague from my department placed me in touch with a Bangladeshi scholar and labour activist who is differently situated than the former groups of organizers I just mentioned. In a phone call, anthropologist, and advocate Saydia Gulrukh, provided me with a synopsis of the Bangladeshi garments industry and the labour movement from her unique standpoint. Gulrukh highlighted the ongoing issues workers were facing at the time of our conversation in April 2021. She mentioned that the garments workers in Bangladesh were the only active participants producing for the economy at the time—amidst strict pandemic lockdowns. Furthermore, workers were demanding a proper break for the upcoming Eid-UI-Fitr festival, to avoid taking unsafe hazardous travel routes when they head back to their villages to see their families. However, these demands were not fulfilled. According to Gulrukh, union representatives soon announced that early dispersals would not be provided, thereby, forcing workers to pursue riskier modes of travel. Later, Gulrukh provided me with a contact list of

people who are well versed and knowledgeable about the Bangladeshi garments industry and labour activism from a local point of view. This encounter snowballed into eleven interviews, fifteen Zoom calls, dozens of hours of virtual participant observation, hundreds of hours of data compilation and transcription, and overall, a critical awareness of localized activism in the face of global capitalism. I will be using pseudonyms to replace the names of my informants and any institution or organization that they may be affiliated with, to ensure their privacy.

I conducted a dozen semi-structured interviews between August-October 2021. The criteria for participants included anyone who self-identified as an activist, advocate, or labour organizer, and had any familiarity with the fast fashion industry, specifically in Bangladesh. I had the opportunity to speak with scholars, academicians, labour activists, local organizers, NGO workers, entrepreneurs, and more. The interviews were conducted online using Western University's Zoom platform and lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. During this time the participants and I engaged in critical discussions regarding the condition of work for Bangladeshi garments workers.

In this thesis, I will present the narratives and stories shared by my informants, most of whom were locally situated and present during and following the multiple cases of disasters that effected the Bangladeshi garments industry, such as the 2012 Tazreen Factory fire, the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, and others. Miah Bhai, Onik, Salma Apa (*apa* translates to sister in Bengali), to name a few, were involved in the formation of a key activism group in Bangladesh, whom I call the *Sromik Sheba* (Labour Care) team. The *Sromik Sheba* group was made up of Bangladeshis who were passionate about achieving labour rights in the country, they came from varying professions in academia, anthropology, advocacy, politics, and more, and most had careers beyond labour organizing. The team was formed following the Rana Plaza collapse where the members conjoined their efforts and worked tirelessly and continuously for six months to provide aid and relief to the victims of the disaster. Some of these same individuals worked on relief projects following the Tazreen Factory fire, the Tuba crisis, and other industrial disasters. Taslima Akhter, Rehnema Ahmed, Moshrefa Mishu, Saydia Gulrukh, and Shabujul Islam, to name a few, are the activists behind the revolutionary efforts formulated by *Sromik Sheba*. These names may be recognizable to those familiar with Bangladesh's *sromik* on the ground. The efforts forwarded by the *Sromik Sheba* team following the Rana Plaza collapse was a key event

that many of my informants referred to during their interviews, alongside a few other key moments and disasters that lingered in their memories. Furthermore, I learned that local activists are highly vigilant and aware of the forms of violence and mistreatments that face average wage workers, and what their demands are. Locals are cautious of national players and transnational corporations looking to accumulate wealth at the expense of the worker. Local activists continue with their agendas mindfully, to increase the national minimum wage and provide better rights to workers while they are at their jobs, thereby, challenging the state and promoting workers' rights and well-being. In this thesis, the local activists in Bangladesh who are attentive to the needs of Bangladeshi garments sromik and seek to find opportunities that will promote independence for labourers, are the main theorists of global capitalism and its influence upon the lives of average wage labourers in developing regions.

#### Chapters and Scales: The Global, The National, and the Local

Throughout my research, local activists repeatedly pointed out the visible scales and gaps that are apparent in the garments industry. While there are dozens of players in the garments supply chain, only a few of them have the privilege to jump scales. These scales were described like this to me: at the top of the chain, in the global, there are transnational corporations who are the main beneficiaries of the wealth produced by the sector and are known to promote distractions in the supply chain (such as producing western policies, introducing NGO-led development, circulating imageries that promote the saviour complex on the news and media, and more) in their search for the cheapest labour. While there are several locally led NGOs that are doing incredible work to produce knowledge and provide resources to garments workers, local organizers are skeptical that NGOs can bring any long-term improvement in the lives of workers, considering how their agendas are generally scripted by western actors. Secondly, there are national players, which in this case includes the Bangladeshi government, the factory owners, and subcontractors. These actors are profiting from the industry, although their profits pale in comparison to the enormous amounts of wealth that western corporations are accumulating. Nevertheless, the national players in Bangladesh want to maintain the garments industry and see it thrive, because for them it contributes to the country's GDP, which ultimately fills the pockets of only a handful of people. Many NGO-led activists share this sentiment of needing to retain the garments industry in Bangladesh at any cost, in order to provide jobs to workers. However, local labour activists argue

that providing jobs to people is not the same as fulfilling their rights. Thus, local activists criticize state-led players' devotion to maintaining the garments industry as it is, rather than paying rightful wages to workers, giving them breaks during work, and paying them severance when they get fired. Additionally, certain players in the industry, such as NGO activists, can jump scales and thus they play a significant role in maintaining neoliberal, export-led economies (Lewis 2019). NGOs are heavily criticized by local activists for promoting westernized modes of development that have limited translation in the lives of Bangladeshi garments sromik. Similarly, trade unions are criticized by Bangladeshi activists for being male dominated while representing the garments industry, which has historically employed mainly women and girls. The few women trade unionists in the country, such as Kalpona Akter, are platformed for their affiliation with western institutions such as INGOs. Western-funded, English-speaking activists are also highly criticized by local labour organizers, who argue that NGO-based actors tend to misrepresent the needs and demands of Bangladeshi garments workers on the national and global front. Lastly, and the most important scale that I will emphasize in this thesis, is the local. The local is where the Bangladeshi garments workers and labour activists are situated. These individuals are highly vigilant and critically aware of the ins and outs of the garments industry, what it feels like to be a wage worker in the 2020s, and what would help improve the lives of garments sromik. This thesis is an attempt to listen to and learn from them.

Following large-scale disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse, western brands and governments produced policies like the ACCORD and the Alliance, which were meant to promote safer work environments for garments employees. However, locals described these policies to be weak and inept. My informant, Maisha, highlighted that most of the local political labour organizers in Bangladesh 'refuse' (cf. Simpson 2007) to accept funding from or affiliations with the NGO model. This is because accepting funding generally leads their agendas to get overwritten., as NGOs steer advocates to promote those same westernized policies that display zero improvements in the lives of Bangladeshi garments workers. Consequently, local activists accept their status of receiving less limelight than the activists who are NGO-affiliated and receive large-scale funding and global attention. Nevertheless, when it comes to disaster aftermaths or in ordinary moments of violence facing Bangladeshi wage workers, it is the local labour activists who are seen organizing and standing alongside workers and demanding fair wages and treatment.

These scales—the global, the national, and the local—represent the distance between the consumers and the producers in the global garments sector. At the bottom of the chain, at the local level, we find the garments workers and labour activists, the true producers of value and wealth in this economy. The closer we get to the ground, the more nuanced the narratives become in theorizing the conditions of exploitative wage work and the gendering in the global supply chain. The chapters in this thesis exposes this distancing and ‘othering’ of workers and uses moments of rupture and crisis to make visible the layers of social, economic, racial, and gendered, discrimination facing Bangladeshi garments workers in the 2020s. Chapter Two: The Global, will address the international relocating of the garments industry over several decades, outlining the forms of precarity and vulnerability that became apparent as this capitalist industry shifted time and time again, to acquire the cheapest labour. Additionally, when any disaster transpired in the industry, the responses from international players in the supply chain, including brands, and western governments, followed a top-down hands-off approach, producing abstract policies that had limited significance to the lives of the workers on the ground. The reason the responsibility of international brands and North American buyers got overshadowed could be due to their abstract approaches—they tend to feel out of reach from national and local players. The data I have collected (both contemporary and archival) suggests that international brands and buyers are annually cutting costs of production and seeking cheaper sources of labour—a phenomenon called ‘price squeezing’ (Anner 2019). The site of producing the bulk of global readymade garments and fast fashion has changed several times, as American corporations shifted their extraction of labour from local factories in the US, to Mexico, then to Bangladesh, Vietnam, China, and others. The industry will likely shift away once again attaining even cheaper sources of labour for western corporations to accumulate wealth. However, it is essential to consider the compelling case of the Bangladeshi industry, to recognize the efforts of Bangladeshi players in maintaining this industry despite major threats of losing the economy. Furthermore, by shifting away from the globalized perspective where the consideration toward garments workers’ lives is rather abstract and commodified, I will emphasize the desperate need to fulfill the rights of labourers within the national realm by listening to local demands.

In Chapter Three: The National, I will address the roles and responsibilities of the Bangladeshi national players who are involved in maintaining the garments industry. These players include the Government of Bangladesh, employers’ organizations like the BGMEA and



Bangladesh Exporters Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA), subcontractors, national factory owners, and factory supervisors. Most of these players are beneficiaries of the Bangladeshi garments industry, therefore, deem it essential to maintain the industry by any means. National players like the Government of Bangladesh are embodying the limited capability of neoliberal states as they are mainly controlled by the movement of capital that is dominated entirely by corporations (Tanjeem 2017; cf. Ong 2007; Harvey 2006; Sassen 2008; Graeber 2001). Transnational economies like the garments industry surpass any national authority, placing wage workers in ‘precarious’ conditions where their human, labour, and gender rights are challenged (cf. Standing 2014). Meanwhile, NGOs and other external players are introduced and relied upon to fulfill those gaps between the citizens and the state. Hence why it is mandatory to turn to Chapter Four: The Local, which will disclose my ethnographic findings as I connected with local labour activists in Bangladesh to learn their narratives.

In Chapter Four: The Local, I will elaborate on what I learned by engaging with local garments activists, scholars, and labour organizers. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed various layers of injustices that garments workers endure and combat, such as; garments workers’ inadequate access to healthcare or vaccines; the premature reopening of the garments factories with improper social distancing regulations while the rest of the country was in lockdown; the expectation for workers to pursue overcrowded transport routes to and from work; the ongoing burdens of the double shift facing women employees; demands of overpacking orders while working overtime, and much more (Leach 2022; Hoskins 2022; Sarker 2020). Garments workers in Bangladesh are facing double subjugation through the gendering and racialization of populations in post-colonial states and their employment in capitalist industries that enable corporations to profit through exploitation and domination of the working classes (cf. Ong 2007; Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Freeman 2000). Women garments workers in the Bangladeshi industry are placed in vulnerable situations (Chowdhury 2018; Siddiqi 2015), and as observed, these matters become excruciating during ‘moments of crisis’ like the coronavirus pandemic as described above (cf. Beckett 2019; Ahmann 2018). Women and girls employed in Bangladeshi garments factories are struggling to make ends meet—most of them are suffering from hunger, starvation, and poverty, while also struggling to feed their families and children (Kabir et al 2020; Chowdhury 2018; Karim 2014). The key takeaway from my fieldwork and findings highlights that for activists and organizers in Bangladesh, such as the Sromik Sheba

team, the local labour movement is pivotal as it provides a basis for collective action, bargaining, organizing, and support in moments of crisis for Bangladeshi workers. Meanwhile, garments workers are forbidden by their factory supervisors and managers from speaking up about their rights and participating in unions. Because of these constraints, local activists are a key voice for workers who receive little to no room for political organizing. Local committees and independent political labour organizers like Sromik Sheba, mobilize during and following moments of crisis to defend against structural violence, thereby producing room for political organizing that is not only about higher wages and improved working conditions for workers. Rather, local labour organizing summons the possibility for people to negotiate, confer, work towards, and claim their rights as citizens and raise awareness on these matters before the nation-state and transnational corporations through inter-class solidarity and advancement of workers' rights.

## Chapter Two: Supply Chain Capitalism and Corporate Social Responsibility – Continuing my Conversation with Saira about Crisis

The global garments industry has witnessed several shifts and changes over the years. For the Bangladeshi garments sector, more particularly for the workers, the major conflicts challenging their condition are the fragmented labour movement and the prolonged limitations to transnational labour organizing (Kang 2021). Saira worked for BRAC (a renowned microfinance concentrated NGO and international development agency) as a leading research expert on the sustainability of Bangladeshi women's economic rights, including within the garments sector. Saira and I engaged in a critical discussion during fall 2021, few months before the world entered another global recession in 2022, where she mentioned that the international economic condition drastically influenced all aspects of the industry—and to simply demand “systemic change” is wishful thinking. Throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic, and in response to the piling challenges facing the national garments sector and Bangladeshi factory workers, locally, people placed one-sided pressure on the national garments factory owners to take accountability. However, according to Saira and other scholars in the field, the entire responsibility cannot be placed solely upon Bangladeshi national players. European and North American brands and their buyers have an enormous responsibility for this supply chain. Saira suggested that we must think collectively in configuring the responsibility of brands and the buyers that represent them. To gain greater insight into how the garments supply chain functions, it became crucial to analyze the roles of the actors who are differently situated in maintaining the global supply. Therefore, in this chapter, I will begin by identifying and scrutinizing the roles and responsibilities of a handful of key international players such as transnational corporations, brands, and buyers, western governments, International Governmental Organizations (IGOs) such as the IMF and World Bank, and lastly, INGOs. Certain players such as NGO groups and trade unionists can be observed jumping between scales more freely, unlike others, depicting a that certain actors have more rights and say over the conditions in the industry than others. Additionally, I will emphasize that certain moments of crises and disasters can be identified as definitive events in the garments industry that shaped the upcoming shifts, movements, and negotiations that came to impact and define the lives of ordinary workers in the Bangladeshi garments factories. I will identify how these responses during and after moments of disaster

ultimately had limited positive influence on the lives of Bangladeshi garments workers and were not considerate of their conditions, placing them in further vulnerable positions within the garments supply chain and labour industry. Global players' responses to crises are defined as intangible and lacking translation, according to local activists. These negotiations made by international players do not cogitate the conditions of workers. Thus, it is mandatory to pursue a more niche approach to identifying labour demands and how to effectively attend to their rights.

My conversation with Saira further informed me about the ongoing gaps in planning and implementation between various players in the readymade garments sector—the international brands, western governments, IGOs, NGOs, garments factory owners, trade unionists, the Government of Bangladesh, and finally, garments workers and the local activists who represent their demands. The forms of 'ordinary violence' such as joblessness, unstable work conditions, poverty, gender discrimination, unpaid wages, and more—are not novel phenomena; workers in the global supply chain are familiar with these conditions. The 'normalization' of 'ordinary violence' facing wage workers in the Global South is a result of neoliberal economic structuring that involves 'spatializing techniques,' where the transnational business model is deployed by global western corporations and international buyers (Tanjeem 2021; Kang 2021; cf. Beckett 2020; Ahmann 2018; Ong 2007; Perrow 2004; Ferguson and Gupta 2002).

The year 2022 marked the 111<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in Manhattan, NY, which resulted in 146 garments worker fatalities (Cornell University Industrial and Labor Relations School 2018). This case has become a touchstone for thinking about how unethical labour practices are often key factors in industrial disasters because they can lead to "normal accidents" (Perrow 2004). It is also an interesting case for revealing the long history of how factory owners (and capitalism more broadly) use disasters as opportunities to expand capital accumulation—in this case, by relocating their factories to regions that have less oversight or regulations and cheaper labour costs (in this case, to the West Coast, but in later instances, the garments sector has repeatedly relocated to other countries). In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, at the time of the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, majority of the garments purchased by North Americans were produced locally. Yet, by the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, those market practices had significantly shifted, as the garments sector moved to new and cheaper sites of production in the Global South. In this sense, the contemporary garments sector has emerged through the same

processes that have given rise to the most recent era of globalization under neoliberalism (see Harvey 2006). The global garments sector, like global capitalism in general, has thus been defined by a rapid increase in demand for cheap and replaceable labour and the neoliberal transformation of the state. As Saskia Sassen (2007) has noted, the latter has led to the denationalization of territories and the rights of citizens.

Throughout this period of the globalization of the garments sector, the key productive sites for the industry have repeatedly shifted, moving from country to country, to permit transnational corporations to acquire cost cutting measures by exploiting labour in geographically distant regions where the opportunity to unionize is prohibited, enabling brands to avoid taking responsibility over workers (Tanjeem 2017). Furthermore, through these spatial techniques, brands sought to avoid any backlash coming from consumers and citizens regarding unethical labour practices, as well as for the capitalist disasters that transpire, such as factory collapses and fires that immediately affect and haunt factory workers (Anner 2019; cf. Klein 2007). In the last two decades since the industry settled in the outskirts of Dhaka, Bangladesh, garments factories have witnessed countless disasters and workplace crisis. Bangladeshi garments workers are placed in vulnerable working conditions where the profitability of capitalist brands is distinguished as more valuable than the lives of wage workers who produce for the economy (Ahmed, Tanjeem, et al. 2020). The 2013 Rana Plaza collapse garnered media attention across the globe as well, and it came to be known as one of the largest industrial disasters in the twenty-first century. The event appeared in the media as a capitalist scandal that exposed the corrupt practices led by western corporations which violate human rights, and this heightened the harsh criticisms facing Euromerican brands and international governments regarding their transnational labour regulations (Tanjeem 2017, 45).

Chloe Ahmann (2018, 144) argues that a crisis is a privileged “moment of rupture” that calls for attention and brings contradictions to light. As scholars continue investigating the normalization of these axes of violence that racialized, gendered, and economically subjugated groups face, the COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a punctuated ‘moment of crisis’ that gave insight into the normalcy of the forms of inequality, precarity, and structural violence that global wage workers routinely encounter (cf. Ahmann 2018; Perrow 2004). Additionally, the frequency of these forms of violence such as joblessness, wage issues, inflation, discrimination, inadequate

health care, etc. depicts the ‘ordinariness’ of exploitation against women of color (Chowdhury 2018; Karim 2014; Siddiqi 2009; cf. Beckett 2020; Ahmann 2018, 144). In the next section, I will present a historical analysis of the shifts and movements as observable across the global transnational garments industry—these moments of rupture both enabled and challenged the normalcy of violence facing those garments workers who are producing clothes for western closets (cf. Ahmann 2018; Perrow 2004).

## 2.1. The Historical Relocation of the Transnational Garments Industry: Not in My Backyard—It is Cheaper Over There!

The ready-made garments industry is a multi-trillion-dollar business sector. Over the last few decades, the industry has witnessed rapid changes at distinct levels, including in production strategies, consumerism, and business models. The industry is dominated by European and American Transnational Corporations (Tanjeem, 2017). These corporations and their associated brands seek ‘network capitalism’ where various transnational players are involved in maintaining the economy (Wills and Hale 2005 in Tanjeem, 2017, 37). Euro-American corporations promote neoliberalism and practice lucrative tactics such as relocating to cheaper sites of labour to lure in smaller economies (Anner 2019; Tanjeem 2017; cf. Ong 2007). Corporations tend to own multiple brands and businesses, meanwhile, buyers represent the brands on the global front. These corporations intervene in the Least Developed Countries with the ideas of building new economies and providing jobs to those who were formally excluded from wage work such as women and girls from lower classes (Lewis 2019; cf. Freeman 2000). The recruiting of garments workers is generally targeted at racialized and gendered groups who are identified as ‘illiterate’ and ‘unskilled,’ (Karim 2014), which allows corporations to ‘sell’ employment in garments factories as a promising and progressive move for governments of Least Developed Countries (cf. Ong 2007; Harvey 2006). Additionally, bringing garments sector jobs to developing countries is often marketed as a benevolent act on part of international corporations and their brands. Nevertheless, fundamentally brands are seeking competitive, cheap, and replaceable labour supplies from distant geographic locations (Tanjeem 2017, 37; cf. Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). In the 2020s, China and Bangladesh hold the titles of being the largest global exporters of clothing, whilst Vietnam, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Cambodia, and others, remain competitive producers of readymade garments. The geographic location of garments factories in lesser

developed countries and post-colonial states permits the extraction of cheap and replaceable labour from workers who are considered ‘unskilled’ and lacking literacy or unionizing capacity (Prentice 2021; Kang 2021; Lewis 2019; Ong 2007; Harvey 2006).

The key feature of the garments industry is its transnational business model that grants brands the ability to shift their site of production to even cheaper sources of labour with little to no oversight or accountability (Kang 2021; Tanjeem 2017). In a neoliberal economy, those with bigger pockets control the political and economic negotiations; similarly, in the apparel industry—transnational companies like GAP, H&M, and SHEIN, can control where and how capital flows, and when it stops. Since the 1970s, the Government of Bangladesh has pursued various neoliberal economic tactics to attract foreign economic relations. In Marxist anthropology, to understand any society it is suggested that we must investigate how that society reproduces to sustain itself (Graeber 2001, 24). In a capitalist economy, one can analyze a society’s inequalities and forms of exploitation by tracing the state and ‘capital,’ as there is a ruling class that maintains coercion to extract surplus from those who do most of the productive work (Graeber 2001, 24). Whereas the Bangladeshi garments industry follows a neoliberal market approach that promotes a mode of governing where the state is responsible for preserving capitalism within the region (cf. Harvey 2006)—thereby, the Government of Bangladesh is compelled to compete for and remain in coerced economic relations with Euro-American brands. Furthermore, by doing so, the Bangladeshi government performs a mediating role between local labour markets and global capital. The ruling class in the neoliberal Bangladeshi state is protected by western capital, meanwhile, the national sphere accommodates free-market practices, evasion of taxes, reduction of tariffs, and other such barriers for international brands. Thereby, safeguarding the flow of economic relations and accumulation of wealth for a select few players in the supply chain. I will analyze the role of the key national players more closely in Chapter Three, however, in this chapter, it is significant to continue examining the roles of the international players in the chain.

While the brands are receiving tax exemptions and competitive labour costs from various post-colonial countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Vietnam, new modes of control and subjectivity are introduced by the neoliberal national states to repress workers’ rights and accommodate the western corporations’ demand for cheapest and replaceable labour (Anner

2019). Bangladeshi garments workers are often depicted in masses (like other generic representations of Global South women), especially following a disaster when thousands of people might be framed only through their collective suffering. Local activists argue that this form of misrepresentation erases the individuality of the worker, their struggles, and their demands. Additionally, these distorted images inform the sorts of oversimplifications that are produced in media and on the news about garments workers who are described as “unskilled” (Karim 2014), yet, fulfilling most of the productive work in the supply chain. Furthermore, the transnational business model enables this dominance over workers’ rights and representations while brands continue shifting toward further deregulated locations to secure the extraction of the cheapest sources of labour (Prentice 2021; Tanjeem 2017; Ong 2007; Harvey 2006; Tsing 1994).

The current situation of the garments industry has a history and I want to address a few significant moments in the historical development of the global readymade apparel sector over the last century, to highlight certain patterns that became apparent and to connect them to the case of Bangladesh to situate it within the larger, global history. In the next section, I will address the movements and relocations of the readymade industry from place to place, and the worsening occupational risks that can be observed by analyzing the forms of ‘crisis’ facing garments workers (cf. Ahmann 2018).

### Factories in the Global: Sweatshops, Relocations, and the Top-Down Mediation

As noted above, one place to begin the history of the current readymade garments sector is with the case of one of the most infamous disasters in the industry, that made global news headlines and received backlash for labour mistreatment. In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist factory caught on fire in New York City (Prentice and De Neve 2017; Cords 2022; Liebhold 2018; Akter 2014; McEvoy 1995). The exit routes in the factory were locked and jammed, leaving limited emergency escapes for workers, posing them with inescapable and life-threatening challenges (Liebhold 2018). The fire resulted in nearly 150 casualties for garments factory workers, most of whom were young migrant women (Liebhold 2018). This key characteristic of hiring young migrant women was definitive of the unethical practices and commodification of low class,



racialized women's labour, and it continues to be a defining characteristic of the garments industry today.

The Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire caused a social awakening amongst Americans and brought about changes to the state's labour rights and regulations. However, these new regulations were deemed 'too costly' by factory owners who responded instead by moving production to the West Coast (Akter 2014). The Triangle Shirtwaist 'incident' became a classic example of industrial disasters and an early encounter of what is possible through global capitalism—the tendency for an industry to relocate its factories to lesser audited manufacturing locations to evade environmental and labour regulations (Anner 2019; Prentice and De Neve 2017). Additionally, the 1911 disaster became a touchstone case for disaster capitalism, and it resonates with the forms of normalcy of factory collapses, fires, and other avoidable “accidents” (cf. Klein 2007; Perrow 2004). By the mid-20th century, the rising costs of factory regulations imposed by the US government threatened corporate profits, consequently, the garments factories relocated once again and this time to neighbouring Mexico (Akter 2014).

The relocating of garments factories to Mexico increased steadily from the 1960s onward, resulting in the appearance of the 'maquiladora system' across the United States-Mexico border (Domínguez et al. 2010). In 1994, Canada, Mexico, and the United States signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—a multilateral trading policy that made it easier for North American corporations to relocate operations to Mexico to take advantage of lower labour costs and to avoid millions of dollars in taxes and tariffs (cf. Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). Furthermore, while this negotiation allowed Mexico to attract foreign investment, it came at a much larger, unspoken cost. Hundreds of export processing zones (EPZs) appeared near the border over the next few decades—fostering an economic boom due to the neoliberal export-led business strategy practiced by the Mexican government (Domínguez et al. 2010). EPZs are typically located on the outskirts of towns where the extraction of cheap labour is easier to enforce due to the lack of auditing or oversight, in addition to the absence of unions (Neveling 2015; Domínguez et al. 2010). In Chapter Three, I will return to discuss the relevance of EPZs in the case of Bangladesh, where I will present a third factor that gets utilized by the Bangladeshi state to ensure the maintenance of its lucrative economic functions, that is the role of subcontractors. As for the case of the Mexican readymade garments industry—as experts had

predicted, the early 2000s financial crisis facing Mexico and the enforcement of labour laws were deemed too costly, thereby provoking corporations to move again, this time to Asia, where a number of countries were seeking global capital investment by offering low labour costs and cheap production sites. And so, the garments industry moved once again, securing even cheaper labour sources. This time, one of those enticing sites was discovered outside of Dhaka, Bangladesh (Akter 2014).

There are similarities between the two countries—Mexico and Bangladesh—including their literacy rates, gross domestic product, human development index, and the hiring of gendered and racialized workers (Domínguez et al. 2010). However, maquiladoras in cities like Tijuana in the 1990s operated under quite a different sociopolitical climate than present-day Dhaka (Domínguez et al. 2010). The garments/textile industry in Bangladesh is more dispersed and volatile for workers, meanwhile, the Bangladeshi government and other state players are determined to maintain the economy to accumulate national profit. In her book, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*, based on an ethnographic analysis of a handful of East-Asian countries, Aihwa Ong (2007), critiqued the market practices pursued by neoliberal economies and argued that western corporations enter smaller economies to dominate their labour markets and acquire cheap and replaceable labour. Corporations arrive to promote opportunities for growth and employment for populations who were formally disengaged from the economy, specifically targeting women and girls (Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). Meanwhile, those workers become the ‘exception to neoliberalism’ as their rights as citizens in their current state get revoked while they are working in volatile conditions in the global sweatshops, producing for western corporations that deem them ‘unskilled’ and replaceable (Ong 2007; Karim 2014). As I will soon reveal, this is particularly relevant to the case of the Bangladeshi garments industry where transnational corporations entered by initially promoting ideas of modernity and offering factory jobs to unskilled informal workers. However, rather than building a stable local economy, the neoliberal model of export-led development restricted sustainable development from materializing in Bangladesh, alike other post-colonial regions (Tanjeem 2017).

The global supply chain is heavily influenced by international relations and global economic structures, as my informant Saira had disclosed. The enlistment of China and Vietnam

to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and 2007 increased competition among garments suppliers (Anner 2019, 4). Consequently, this increased power asymmetries between brands, factory owners, and workers and symbolized the three scattered and displaced scales within the industry: the global, national, and local (Anner 2019, 4). Since certain countries could not cut enough costs, the economy relocated several times, such as in the case of Mexico, and other states like the Dominican Republic, where thousands of maquilas were left stranded and workers turned jobless overnight (Anner 2019, 5). This continued relocating of the factories, leaving behind trails of unrecognized voices of workers who were violated by other global supply chain players, exposes the sense of “haunting” that is prevalent across the apparel supply chain (cf. Kilroy-Marac 2018).

The global corporations, Western governments, NGOs, development practitioners, and other globally situated players promote the neoliberal model of export-led production as an opportunity to develop national economies, and they claim that the industry will modernize the access to employment for informal workers (cf. Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). The garments industry is an assemblage with various powerholders and in this capitalist sector, major corporations such as Walmart have the capacity to constitute economic, political, and social changes transnationally, exposing power imbalances between developing economies and western corporations (Anner 2019, 3). Through the maintenance of these global economies as mandated by corporations, western brands and governments can accumulate exceptional rates of profit (Ong 2007), meanwhile, the normalcy of violence and forms of accidents facing garments workers in the global supply chain continue to increase (cf. Perrow 2004).

### Continuing Factory Relocations: Fewer Labour Regulations and Higher Corporate Profits

In this section, I will examine how the garments industry came to settle in Bangladesh more than three decades ago, following several relocations, and has since received recognition for being the second largest exporter of fast fashion. Furthermore, I will address the general social, cultural, and political conditions and climates in Bangladesh that have made factory disasters possible and ‘normalized’ (cf. Perrow 2004), subsequently, I will analyze how these events led garments workers into further vulnerable conditions. This will be followed by a critical case study of the

Rana Plaza collapse that transpired in 2013 in Savar, Bangladesh which is a touchstone event that is heavily critiqued and remembered by the local labour activists and scholars.

Mark Anner (2019), Professor of Political Science at Pennsylvania State University, argued that IGOs such as the ILO and the World Bank only recently began acknowledging the hierarchies between international brands and post-colonial economies such as Bangladesh. Transnational corporations are assured exponential growth in profit margins while average retailers without at least a few billion dollars in the bank simply cannot compete against Google, Amazon, or Walmart (Anner 2019, 3). Subsequently, there is a visible rise in larger mergers and fewer corporate competitors (Anner 2019). Nevertheless, *competition exists elsewhere*, between manufacturers in post-colonial nation-states who are interested in attracting those global brands and their buyers (Anner 2019; cf. Sassen 2008; Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Therefore, the success of western corporations is synonymous with the decreasing wages being offered and the increased levels of exploitation facing garments workers in post-colonial states (Anner 2019, 3). With advancements in ‘trade rules’ power imbalance is increased between global supply chain players in the global, national, and local arena, meanwhile these scattered scales result in ‘price squeezing’ and ‘source squeezing’ by brands (Anner 2019, 5). Source squeezing allows corporations to give shorter notices for changing orders (Anner 2019) as observed during the COVID-19 pandemic with the quick cutbacks on orders by brands like H&M which resulted in joblessness and unpaid wages for marginalized workers (Antara and Sultan 2021; Tanjeem 2021; Sarker 2020). In the global garments industry today, the pace of fast-fashion markets and the quick turnover in the number of clothing designs means that the pressure falls on factory workers to work faster and to over-produce with shorter deadlines and interrupted wages (Tanjeem 2021; Anner 2019, 6).

These systemic issues in the global readymade garments industry have specific effects in Bangladesh, where many factories are unable to keep up with global demand, even with a 70-hour work week. As a result, many textile factories have turned to using subcontractors to fill orders (Tanjeem 2021; Anner 2019; Tanjeem 2017). Conditions in subcontracted factories are subpar and worse than in factories that are regulated by Bangladeshi national employers’ organizations such as the BEPZA or BGMEA. The subcontractors are made up of third-party players that are neither approved nor audited by brands, although brands are aware of this grave

issue (Anner 2019, 7; Tanjeem 2017). I will return to the issue of subcontractors and the role of key national players in the Bangladeshi garments industry such as employer's groups, in Chapter Three: The National. As violations of the law can be detected across scales, factory owners and supervisors work their level best to prohibit workers from unionizing (Kang 2021). Unions are viewed as disruptions to wages and production in terms of organizing strikes and protests—therefore, the continued hiring of 'unskilled' young workers who are taken out of school is a lucrative scheme used by transitional corporations to further exploit gendered and racialized labour (Kang 2021; Chowdhury 2018; Siddiqi 2009).

These new modes of exploitation apparent in the garments sector harken back to a key feature from the Triangle Shirtwaist factory incident—that is the prevalence and 'normalization' of accidents and disasters in garments factories and the possibility for quick relocating (Prentice 2021; Harvey 2007; Perrow 2004). Since the fire that struck the New York City factory in 1911, the garments industry witnessed countless disasters that have killed or injured thousands of wage workers across the transnational garments supply chain. In the next section, I will be taking a closer look at a few specific cases of disasters and crises that have transpired in the garments industry in Bangladesh. As the case of COVID-19 illustrated, the workload for garments workers in Bangladesh has risen significantly compared to before the pandemic (Antara and Sultan 2021; Tanjeem 2021). These punctuated moments of crises are an important analytic lens for understanding how global players and international institutions react to disasters and how their responses impact garments workers on the ground.

So far, I have provided a more general briefing about the global apparel industry and the shifts and multiple relocations it has witnessed, alongside the cases of industrial disasters that have become far too common, placing workers in the utmost vulnerable conditions. As mentioned above, in Bangladesh, the economy is working *against* the workers and *for* the corporations who are demanding the cheapest labour. This highlights the limitations to regulating labour laws and rights across the supply chain. Furthermore, since the industry has shifted between so many different countries, national players are continually afraid of losing the economy to another competitor. The ever-present threat of relocating and poor working conditions for labourers induces vulnerability, additionally, it becomes clear that the repetition of factory disasters is not at all accidental, rather they are an intrinsic feature of the system, and

what Charles Perrow (2004) calls “normal accidents.” In 2017, over 70% of the clothing purchased in the United States were imported from top labour rights-violating states in the Global South (Anner 2019, 21). The global supply chain exposes a continuity of violence facing racialized, gendered, and economically disenfranchised bodies—additionally, garments workers are expected to interpellate their identity as wage workers and suppress their demands, revealing the forms of colonial subjugation and ‘Othering’ to enact this oppressive system (Millar 2018; Karim 2014; Bauman 2013; Nixon 2011; Said 1978). As Anner (2019) argues, the neoliberal fast fashion industry is duly unjustifiable in terms of the destruction it poses upon the rights of workers by commodifying their labour (cf. Ong 2007; Graeber 2001). Consequently, while workers continue to battle ordinary violence in the form of hunger and wage-lessness (due to wage-theft, unpaid wages, insecure working conditions, and firings), atop of disastrous events and factory collapses—the larger concerns regarding sustainable vs. fast fashion are entirely under corporate control.

Disasters are a step away from ordinary forms of violence such as hunger, poverty, or harassment, which wage workers encounter regularly. However, when a factory collapse kills hundreds or even thousands of workers while those factories are found supplying popular western brands, it can create a different form of awakening on an international scale. Collective organizing post-disaster done by concerned global citizens can put pressure on international brands and institutions to develop policies attending to the demands of wage labourers. In this way, disasters are an important moment for revealing wider structural issues and for potentially addressing not only vulnerability to disasters but also everyday forms of labour exploitation and precarity in the garments industry. The Rana Plaza collapse (on which more below) was followed by the formation of a new policy—the ACCORD on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. The ACCORD was heavily celebrated in the West, yet it was defined as impractical and inoperable by workers, activists, and even factory owners in Bangladesh. Furthermore, it could not implement any ground-level changes to improve the lives of workers (Tanjeem 2021; Anner 2019). In the next section, I will present the case of the Rana Plaza collapse and analyze the complex overlapping of voices and narratives that could be unraveled when approaching the Bangladeshi readymade garments industry from an ethnographic lens.

## 2.2. The Case of the Rana Plaza Collapse

On April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013, an eight-story garments factory building located in a Savar, Bangladesh, collapsed, resulting in more than 1,134 fatalities, and wounding more than 2,500 individuals, with injuries ranging from minor to life altering (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). The building housed several garments factories across different floors, all owned by various Bangladeshi *bebshashis* (businessowners). A few days before the collapse transpired, workers had observed cracks on the walls and ceilings of the building and informed management about the matter (Thapa, Human Rights Watch, 2018). On the day of the collapse, many workers had refused to enter the building under such hazardous conditions, yet they were threatened and forced to enter by their supervisors (Thapa, Human Rights Watch, 2018). To this day, the Rana Plaza event is globally recognized as one of the largest industrial disasters and a devastating tragedy in the history of the garments industry. According to the Clean Clothes Campaign, twenty-eight international retail brands were contracted with the factory at the time of the collapse. Additionally, the disaster was labeled as an ‘unintentional’ ‘incident’ by all parties (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). The Rana Plaza collapse was a large-scale disaster in terms of its magnitude as well as the number of lives affected directly by the event. The collapse, therefore, created a shift within the industry and initiated a global awakening regarding the tolerance of mistreatment toward garments workers and the exploitation imposed upon racialized and gendered bodies by Western corporations. International pressures enforced political changes to be pursued by international players.

In response to these pressures, dozens of international brands such as Children’s Place, Gap, Canadian Tire, Sears, Target, including others, conjoined to produce and implement the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety and the ACCORD on Fire and Building Safety in all factories that are regulated by Bangladeshi Employers’ Organizations. In Chapter Three, I will return to critically examining the positionality and responsibilities of employers’ organizations in the Bangladeshi garments industry—alongside other national players that aid in maintaining this economy. Nevertheless, the ACCORD and the Alliance were produced as legally binding policy agreements negotiated only between certain transnational players—such as brands, trade unions, and NGOs, whereas Bangladeshi garments workers were represented by state-led players such as BGMEA and BKMEA (Tanjeem 2021; Kang 2021; Anner 2019). The intention of these policies

is to ensure safety and adequate working conditions in Bangladeshi factories for garments sromik. However, before I can turn to elaborate on the usefulness of these western-centric policies in affecting positive change in the lives of fast fashion workers, it is important to recognize that the Rana Plaza collapse was not the first nor last disaster of its kind. In fact, a handful of parent company names that appeared from the Rana Plaza collapse were found linked to other factory disasters in Bangladesh, including the Tazreen Fashions factory fire in the Ashulia district that killed 117 workers and injured many in November 2012, the fire at Tung Hai sweater factory in Mirpur District, where eight workers lost their lives, and other similar disasters (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). These events disclose the continuities of mistreatment facing wage workers that can be traced back to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in 1911. Furthermore, these disasters expose and normalize the forms of violence facing gendered and racialized workers in the Global South and resemble the remnants of colonial haunting while trembling the garments industry. What do these repetitions in industrial disasters reveal about the normalcy of violence facing wage workers in the global supply chain?

Companies like Walmart, the Children's Place, Primark, Loblaw & Mango, and JC Penny were amongst the brands whose names were listed at the site of these disasters. Some of these companies are notorious for their ongoing scandals involving negligent management practices of global factories and the exploitation of workers (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). Additionally, while the ACCORD and the Alliance, and other international policies are expected to improve factory conditions, 'price' and 'source squeezing' by brands remains stagnant (Anner 2019, 14). With the cost of inflation and additional budgetary expenses introduced by the ACCORD, national factory owners were burdened with the increasing cost of maintenance. Meanwhile, brands continued seeking sites with reduced production costs and fewer auditing opportunities (Anner 2019 15). The volume of orders in the apparel industry remained unstable while 'source squeezing' permitted brands to easily shift locations or cut back orders as deemed necessary. At the same time, policies like the ACCORD and the Alliance, which added to the cost of regulating factories increases, placed increased costs and financial burdens on national factory owners, manufacturers, and suppliers. As a result, when suppliers experienced price squeezing from buyers, they turned to subcontractors who relocated production to buildings with suboptimal or haphazard working conditions to convene low production costs (Tanjeem 2021; Anner 2019, 16). In the case of Bangladeshi garments workers, a clear pattern can be observed



where workers find themselves in unsafe working conditions, meanwhile, they are forced by supervisors to risk their lives to produce fast fashion for the supply chain.

Many owners and suppliers in Bangladesh state that they are running their factories at a great personal cost, to maintain export-led business relations with foreign investors and in hopes of receiving favourable contracts in the future (Anner 2019, 17). With the amount of international coverage, the Rana Plaza collapse received, many scholars and activists across the globe imagined that it would help strengthen and secure the opportunity for workers to unionize, collectivize, and demand adequate rights and compensation. Before the collapse, only 100 garments factories in Bangladesh were unionized, a seemingly sparse number compared to the whooping 440 unions that formed in 2018 (Anner 2019, 19). Although there was a momentary shift in treatment toward unions following the collapse, that sentiment did not last, as my informants attested. As international attention faded away from the Rana Plaza collapse, anti-union repression increased, and union applications were being turned down once again (Anner 2019, 19). Additionally, labour reforms were not implemented within the factories during this time as various controversies transpired amongst transnational players—notably, these policies completely overlooked the role of subcontractors (Tanjeem 2021).

There were several international institutions that attempted to regulate this capitalist global supply chain. The most important ones, such as the United Nations' guiding principles on Business and Human Rights, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) guidelines for brands and buyers, and the International Labour Organization's (ILO) labour codes for countries, which were all designed to foster increased integration into the global economic order and to mitigate issues pertaining to matters affecting international players in the global supply chain. Even when they did set out limits or regulations (or "best practices"), these institutions are criticized for their inadequate implementation strategies and for permitting transnational corporations to avoid taking accountability for supply chain workers (Hira and Benson-Rea 2017). Issues surrounding free-riding by certain self-interested companies who expect others to follow the rules so that they do not have to hamper collective action (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). The international community's response to the Rana Plaza collapse focused on making modifications to Bangladesh's incompetent labour laws. However, as research shows, the policies formulated in response to these moments of disaster can be very

costly, and the burdens are placed upon national players, who resort to cost-cutting measures to maintain their export-led business relations. Furthermore, if Bangladesh attempted to implement certain reforms to provide better conditions to workers, the costs of the reforms would lead brands and buyers to relocate through ‘source squeezing’ which would not resolve the violations of workers’ rights that are currently taking place (Anner 2019). In reality, brands have already shifted to other countries for cheaper sites of labour—where working conditions are more volatile, and workers are paid even less than they are in Bangladesh. On an international scale, the forms of oppression facing racialized and gendered subjects in post-colonial regions are reproduced through relocation.

In an industry as large as the readymade garments sector, there should exist a regulatory system that holds all members of the supply chain accountable, to allow a more socially conscious and ethical transnational economy to function. The status-quo which permits the dismissals of jurisdictions and exempts western brands from paying taxes and duties must be amended to avoid ‘price squeezing’ and to decrease preventable deaths and injuries for garments workers (Anner 2019; Martin and Bravo 2016). Holding global actors accountable can be difficult and it is the duty of international and national players in the global supply chain to collaborate and ensure that the voices, rights, and demands of factory workers are being prioritized and fulfilled while maintaining this industry. Now, let us take a closer look at how those global concerns about labour and industrial disaster have taken shape in Bangladesh before and after the Rana Plaza collapse.

### 2.3. A Continuum of Colonialism: History Repeats at the Level of Transnational Policy Making

When a crisis occurs, the reaction from international institutions often takes shape in the form of policies produced by transnational actors. When the Rana Plaza factory collapsed, average people such as American consumers and Bangladeshi citizens put tremendous pressure on brands and international and national governments to improve working conditions for garments factory workers in the global supply chain. This resulted in brands, NGOs, and trade unions coming together to formulate the ACCORD and the Alliance (Tanjeem 2021; Kang 2021). Throughout this thesis, I will continue to critically analyze the relevance and efficacy of the ACCORD and the Alliance policies and their effectiveness in instilling systemic change within garments

factories, by referring to scholars who have conducted extensive research on these policies. However, in this section, I will take a step back to probe other forms of ‘crisis’ that have molded Bangladesh’s present stance as one of the largest producers of global garments in the 2020s (cf. Ahmann 2018).

I will begin by presenting a case of a crisis that faced the Bangladeshi garments industry in the 1990s. This historical event in the 90s caused an awakening alike the Rana Plaza collapse and the 1911 Shirtwaist Factory fire—to which western institutions responded by producing more policies intended to amend the imminent issue. What sort of issues did garments workers confront when the industry had initially shifted from Mexican maquiladoras to Bangladeshi factories? In this section, I will analyze the 1990s Child Labour Deterrence Bill which was formulated in response to the accusations of child labour practices in Bangladeshi garments factories (Tanjeem 2021; Absar et al. 1999). A significant aspect of this movement was its influence upon the changing dynamics of Bangladeshi garments workers’ representation across the globe. As novel neoliberal modes of activism penetrated the post-colonial state, individuals who were closely affiliated and represented by western NGOs came to represent Bangladeshi garments workers’ rights (cf. Lewis 2019). Meanwhile, these NGO-led actors were reiterating the westernized policies that were imposed by international corporations in the supply chain. Furthermore, historical evidence is significant and telling of what may befall the Bangladeshi garments industry in the future. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize the pattern of neoliberal policy formations that have been introduced over the years in attempting to mitigate the exploitation of workers, however, how much direct impact do these policies have upon the lives of workers? The formation of western neoliberal policies intended to maintain global factories and workers shall be closely assessed in this chapter, beginning with the Harkin Bill.

In the early 1990s, Bangladesh was employing over 750,000 factory workers, at least 10% of whom were child labourers (White 1996, 833). Most of the workers in apparel factories at the time were women and girls, and many were as young as eleven years old (White 1996, 833). As the issue gained attention in the media in the North, average citizens began to blame brands for their unethical practices. This event functioned as a ‘moment of rupture’ that brought about changes to the functioning of the garments industry (Ahmann 2018). In 1992, in response to the heated criticism facing American brands regarding their tolerance for child labour, the US

government found it mandatory to produce the Child Labour Deterrence Act, also known as the Harkin Bill, which was named after the Iowa State Senator in the US, Tom Harkin (Tanjeem 2017; Absar et al. 1999). This bill would prohibit the US government from allowing the import of garments from Bangladeshi factories that were suspected of using child labour. Furthermore, this Harkin Bill outlawed workers under the age of fifteen from working in garments factories (White 1996, 833). Absar et al. (1999), argued that the Harkin Bill was limited as it was determined to prohibit child labour rather than proposing regulatory changes intended to benefit those vulnerable workers employed in the factories. The bill aimed to prevent importing goods from places that were associated with child labour practices and threatened to boycott Bangladesh as a production site (Absar et al. 1999, 986). Eventually, this act attributed child labour as “Bangladesh’s problem,” painting a narrative of Bangladesh as a failed state with unethical employment practices while safeguarding the western brands and easing them from taking responsibility for workers (Tanjeem 2017).

#### The Harkin Bill, A.K.A. The Child Labour Deterrence Act

In 1995, one of the main employers’ organizations, BGMEA, was obliged to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the International Labour Organization and UNICEF (Absar et al. 1999, 986; White 1996, 833). According to the MOU, BGMEA was obliged to remove all underage workers from their factories, offer a stipend to those families losing their sources of income, and to ensure that the children are placed in schools (Absar et al. 1999, 986). Nearly 55,000 children lost their jobs as a result; however, these children were not placed in schools, as had been promised, nor did they or their families receive any compensation (White 1996). The Harkin Bill failed to acknowledge the socioeconomic conditions that propel children in post-colonial states to participate in wage labour (Absar et al. 1999). Moreover, many of these children consequently turned to other sources of employment that were more precarious, hazardous, and exploitative than the garments industry, such as brickwork, sex work, or working as a domestic servant for middle- or upper-class families (Tanjeem 2017). While these US domestic policies like the Harkin Bill and the ACCORD were mandated by global players and expected to be institutionally implemented in factories, Bangladeshi garments factory owners were the ones compelled to upkeep the costs of applying such changes (Mahmud and Kabeer 2003 in Tanjeem 2017, 50). Additionally, these policies had a limited impact on the factories

located in export processing zones and little to no impact on subcontracted factories (Tanjeem 2017, 50). There are thousands of workers employed in these subcontracted factories, but due to the informal or unofficial nature of the work, they remain largely invisible to or ignored by global policy negotiations. Overall, corporate codes enable consumers to feel guilt-free while placing the entire liability of worker safety and responsibility upon suppliers (Tanjeem 2017, 50-51). Meanwhile control over capital rests with western corporations.

In keeping with neoliberal and colonial ideologies, by placing blame on Bangladesh western brands were able to avoid taking responsibility—facilitating the shift in attention away from matters of corporate greed and the demands of fast fashion workers (Tanjeem 2017, 263). Additionally, the media’s reiteration of Bangladesh’s incompetency in failing to fulfill the rights of its citizens, which compelled children to turn to factory work, it normalized the need for outside intervention by international players—creating room for NGOs and other developmental agencies to insert themselves as key actors (Lewis 2019; Tanjeem 2017, 263; Siddiqi 2009; cf. Perrow 2004). In my conversations with Bangladeshi garments activists in 2021, I learned that child labour in Bangladeshi garments factories remains abundant and not much has changed since the passing of the Harkin Bill. However, the Harkin Bill did result in some changes within the garments industry—except not in the ways it intended to. The Child Labour Deterrence Act garnered tremendous media attention and spurred INGOs to get involved to help “aid” the matter. A handful of child labourers who were affected by the Harkin Bill were promoted by NGOs and turned into labour activists. These activists would soon come to figure as the global representatives of Bangladeshi garments workers. This might indeed be one of the most significant consequences of the act in Bangladesh—it resulted in the endorsement of certain NGO-based activists who came to define the political climate for apparel factory workers in Bangladesh (and beyond).

Kalpona Akter—a former child labourer turned activist, and founder of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers’ Solidarity (BCWS) is a familiar public figure within the Bangladeshi garments industry and beyond. Akter experienced years of threats and difficulties and was arrested several times for demonstrating for workers’ rights, as she dedicated her life to bringing justice for Bangladeshi garments sromik (Akter 2014). Following the Rana Plaza collapse, Akter was invited to tour a number of countries and several US states to talk about the experiences of

workers and highlight their needs. Akter's advocacy aimed to get brands to sign the ACCORD to ensure safety for workers in Bangladesh (see UN (United Nations) Women, 2016). Kalpona Akter authored a book called *Invisible Hands: Voices from the Global Economy* which I read in 2017 in a second-year Political Science classroom. As a second-year undergraduate student at the University of Toronto, reading this book expanded my interest towards and awareness of the transnational supply chain and the experiences of garments workers. When I embarked upon my graduate school journey in 2020, my hope for this thesis was to receive the opportunity to interview Kalpona Akter and collaborate with her NGO, BCWS, during my fieldwork. It would have been a great opportunity for me to learn from Akter, however, as mentioned earlier, due to unexpected challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I was unable to conduct my research in such a way. Unfortunately, I was unable to reach Kalpona Akter or BCWS even through email. Nor was I able to travel to Bangladesh to conduct fieldwork.

Nevertheless, following my conversation with activist Saydia Gulrukh, I received a contact list of people who were differently situated than the former group of activists, who are well versed in the Bangladeshi garments industry and familiar with the local labour movement. From there, the conversations snowballed which led me to collaborate with and learn from my informants during fieldwork. My conversations with informants widened my knowledge about the gaps that appeared when observing the forms of activism taking place in the Bangladeshi garments industry, and how it has evolved over the years from the era of the Harkin Bill to the celebration of the ACCORD, to its complete abolition (see Tanjeem 2021; Tanjeem 2017). Several informants shared with me that certain televised and marketed names of activists are not necessarily the only ones who are representing garments workers on the ground. There are other, not so internationally celebrated, activists who stand alongside garments workers and aid them in navigating their rights as they continue to face ordinary forms of violence in the fast fashion supply chain. Miah Bhai who was of my key informants, stated that the activists in Bangladesh who are doing the lion's share of work—by protesting for workers' rights and aiding workers in accessing those rights—are not represented by the media, nor do they receive much funding. NGO-funded groups and individuals generally focus on mandates that are emphasized and deemed valuable by the international community, including policies such as the Harkin Bill, the ACCORD, and the Alliance. However, local activists are aware of the physical and mental needs of the factory workers and attend to provide worker relief in basic regards—such as access to

food, shelter, physical safety, increased wages, job security, and more. I will elaborate on the different forms of activism evident across the Bangladeshi garments industry in Chapter Three, where I look closer at the conditions and efforts of those who are more locally situated in the supply chain. Here, I want to explore further how certain NGO-led activists promote western, neoliberal projects in Bangladesh by advocating for the implementation of policies like the Harkin Bill, and later the ACCORD. As noted above, these policies intend to assuage the guilt of western consumers and safeguard jobs in the west by maintaining positive Corporate Social Responsibility profiles for the brands they represent, rather than considering the well-being of garments workers in post-colonial states (Rahman and Langford 2014, 182).

So far, I have presented the case of the Harkin Bill, which was a signed agreement between global brands and international institutions to prohibit trade relations with countries practicing child labour. This bill was created in response to accusations of child labour in Bangladeshi textile factories in the 1990s. However, as highlighted, these westernized policies fail to address the conditions of labourers on the ground. In attempting to dismantle inequalities facing children by prohibiting them from working in factories, the Harkin bill displayed an intention to safeguard children in third-world countries. Nevertheless, by placing the blame upon national players and firing tens of thousands of children the Bill and other similar policies managed to avoid any responsibility toward garments workers. Ultimately, the proposition to protect children was overwritten by corporations saving face. As time went on, many of the child workers who were supposed to be “saved” by the Act ended up working in more volatile conditions in informal sectors, while the remaining garments workers continued to face precarious and exploitative conditions in the apparel factories (Tanjeem 2021, 263).

#### Trade Union Imperialism and NGO Representation of Garments Workers in South Asia

The garments sector is often characterized as being women dominant. In 2001, it was still the case that majority of the workers employed in these factories were women (Khan 2001 in Rahman and Langford, 2014). However, all my informants who are intimately familiar with the garments industry from a local angle said that the 80-20 gender gap (80% women to 20% men) is no longer the case. In fact, in the 2020s the number of men and women working in the sector and the gender division of labour in garments factories is closer to 60-40. Nevertheless, the

feminization of labour in representing the industry contributes to the commencement of other Structural Adjustment Programs and the interference of western actors including NGOs. Bangladesh displays a historically weak labour movement enabling the saturation of American imperialism through institutions, for example, the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) which is the largest federation of unions in the United States (Rahman and Langford, 2014). The AFL-CIO enforces the United States' foreign policy goals upon Bangladesh's labour movement, and this is called 'trade union imperialism' (Rahman and Langford 2014). I will not spend long elaborating on trade union imperialism, (Jack Scott 1978; Don Thompson and Rodney Larson 1978; Kim Scipes 1989; Roger Southall 1995, in Rahman and Langford 2014), however, this had a significant impact on Bangladesh's labour movement. Trade union imperialism, which has existed since the Cold War era, plus the presence of colonialism, militarism, and dictatorship in Bangladesh throughout the 80s–90s, has prohibited the sromik andolon from flourishing (Rahman and Langford 2014, 170). In this domineering system, imperialist influence is advanced by not only the post-colonial state of Bangladesh (that is in a perpetual state of coloniality—cf. Brown 2010) but also by quasi-governmental actors (e.g., USAID (US Agency of International Aid), the AFL-CIO, and others) and INGOs (Scipes 1989 in Rahman and Langford 2014, 172). These events eventually shaped the trade union movement and workers' representation in Bangladesh.

Local labour activists define the Bangladeshi trade union movement as repressive, top-down, and male-dominated, meanwhile, a handful of women unionists in Bangladesh were founded by Western players. In 1997 there were 3,000 factories producing garments and only 24 unions to represent them (Rahman and Langford, 176). Following the Rana Plaza collapse, joint efforts by ACCORD and Alliance audited roughly 2500 factories, however, this only covered half the workers as the remaining 2 million workers were employed in subcontracted factories (Kang 2021; Tanjeem 2021, 264). Nafisa Tanjeem (2021, 263-264) argued that Bangladesh's transnational labour movement deploys a 'spotlight approach,' starting with the 1990s anti-child labour campaign, corporate codes of conduct that do not consider subcontractors such as ACCORD and Alliance, and supply chain capitalism—individualizing the narratives of workers to minimize their demands. Additionally, the AFL-CIO produced a project called Solidarity Centre that is funded extensively by the government and a key member of the Solidarity Centre (important for AFL-CIO's functioning) is the Bangladesh Centre for Workers' Solidarity led by



Kalpona Akter, who is one of the few women trade unionists in the country (Rahman and Langford, 181). A handful of these names have come to represent workers on a global scale before transnational allies, most of whom are English-speaking (Karim 2014, 60; Kang 2021, 10; Tanjeem 2021, 265).

In 2010, while Kalpona Akter and her colleagues, Babul Akhter, and Aminul Islam were protesting outside the Nassa Global Wear factory in Ashulia district, they were arrested and detained (Clean Clothes Campaign, Geertjan, 2010). These events would soon reveal the insecurities within the Bangladeshi labour movement, and the gaps between players such as trade unionists, workers, and brands. Kalpona and her colleagues were arrested, charged, and eventually released. In 2012, BCWS organizer Aminul Islam was brutally murdered (Manik and Bajaj 2012; Rahman and Langford 2014). At the time, activists such as the BCWS members perceived this event as a threat to their agendas (Manik and Bajaj 2012). AFL-CIO protested this case in 2012, alongside other cases, such as the murder of trade unionists in Guatemala's banana industry (Manik and Bajaj 2012). Following the tragic demise of Aminul Islam—whose death captured the Bangladeshi national's attention in 2013—the Obama administration threatened to add tariffs to 5000 items exported from Bangladesh if they continued abusing these trade unionists (Rahman and Langford 2014, 182). This case received tremendous attention and spotlight, following which, Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter were able to use the momentum to reregister BCWS and begin their efforts once again (Rahman and Langford 2014). It was more critical for AFL-CIO and the US administration to protect its neoliberal functions by maintaining these state-led actors such as BCWS than to protect the Bangladeshi union leaders. Similarly, the ILO and Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), conserve the pockets and jobs in the US by continually exploiting Global South actors in the supply chain such as these NGO-affiliated trade unionists (Drake 2013 in Rahman and Langford 2014, 182). Trade union leader and my informant, Miah Bhai, shared with me that he regularly faced threats and violence in his experience while working in the textile industry. However, according to Miah, only certain cases receive special attention because of their connection with Western players and NGOs, such as the case of Kalpona Akter and her colleagues at BCWS. This is how exploitable the state functions are under a neoliberal regime, disabling the agency of workers and controlling the agendas of labour activists and trade unionists who are meant to represent the garments workers.

These issues raise moral concerns regarding the mistreatments and misrepresentations of workers in Bangladesh and across the supply chain.

Eventually, the Harkin bill and additional international policy formations affected the overall structure of workers' representation and labour activism in the Bangladeshi garments industry, with the entrance of neoliberal modes of intervention (cf. Lewis 2019). NGOs and western philanthropes entered Bangladesh to “save” third-world women and children (Siddiqi 2009; cf. Abu Lughod 2013). This led to the formation of novel modes of advocacy that were entirely influenced by Western actors (see Lewis 2019). The labour rights agenda within the Bangladeshi garments industry was completely overshadowed by westernized modes of development—creating a gap between workers' demands and the issues receiving ‘spotlight’ and media coverage locally and abroad (Tanjeem 2021). Before I wrap up this chapter, I want to briefly return to the Rana Plaza collapse ‘incident’ once more, as this case has become a touchstone issue for how people perceive the Bangladeshi apparel industry and how they speak about the situation facing garments factory workers.

## 2.4. Concluding Thoughts – The Rana Plaza Collapse and the ACCORD versus the Alliance Debate

One morning in February 2022, I had just woken up and found myself passively scrolling through my Facebook newsfeed. When I came across this news article titled “রানা প্লাজায় প্রাণ গিয়েছিল মেয়র, এবার আগুনে মরেলেন মা,” “Their daughter had died during the Rana Plaza collapse, this time, the mother dies in a fire.” This article written by Shamsujaman Savar was published online by Prothom Alo, Bangladesh's leading liberal newspaper. In the article, Savar (2022) shares the narrative of Mohammad Abdul Hamid, a street vendor who sells *chanachur* (Bombay mix) on the roadside. In April 2013, the eight-story building called Rana Plaza collapsed in Savar, Bangladesh, killing “1,134” garments workers (although it is assumed that more lives were lost to this event) and injuring thousands of others (Akhter 2022, p8). One of the persons to have lost their lives during this tragic industrial disaster was Hamid's 13-year-old daughter, Shathi Akter, who was employed in one of the factories. Hamid and his wife, Shahanara Begum, a shoe factory employee, were living in grief over the loss of their beloved daughter. Before Hamid could recover from this trauma, he was faced with another brutal reality check. On February 23rd,

2022, Uniworld Footwear, an unauthorized shoe factory in Ashulia, Bangladesh, on caught fire and resulted in three fatalities and over twelve workers being injured (BD News 24, 2022). In an unfortunate turn of events, one of the workers who passed away was Hamid's wife, Shahanara (Savar 2022). Conversations with workers following the fire outbreak found that many of the employees in Uniworld Footwear were child labourers like Shathi (Savar 2022). Hamid expressed his deep sorrow from bearing the loss of his child and now his wife and he said that he was losing his mind trying to cope with these multiple traumas (Savar 2022). There are millions of people across Bangladesh and across the apparel supply chain who, like Hamid, sent their loved ones to work in factories, only for them to never return or to undergo tremendous life-altering injurious in the process. Furthermore, ongoing scandals of factory disasters display the continuity of unethical labour practices—including child labour, hazardous work conditions, stolen wages and relief funds, and more, facing workers, specifically women and girls in global factories.

The Rana Plaza collapse was a devastating tragedy, but it is not a singular event. Still, throughout this thesis, I will return to the case of the collapse as a critical lens through which to analyze the reactions from transnational players including brands and international institutions, and their attempts to mitigate future disasters. Furthermore, the usefulness of the ACCORD and its predecessor, the Alliance will be closely examined. They are both global framework agreements that were signed between international brands and trade unions to ensure the safety of workers following the multiple factory disasters that took place in Bangladesh throughout the 2000s–2010s (Kang 2021; Tanjeem 2021). Moreover, I will distinguish the forms of continuity of colonial and patriarchal violence toward wage workers in the Global South that appear during these moments of rupture or 'crises,' followed by the procession of westernized modes of aid, intervention, and policies (Ahmann 2018). A historical case highlighting the inadequacy of western policies in implementing ground-level changes to improve the lives and conditions of garments workers was produced through the pursuance of the Harkin Bill. It revealed that these policies do not aid workers, they permit western brands to avoid taking accountability for the safety and well-being of apparel factory workers. Consequently, workers in the global supply chain find themselves in more precarious and vulnerable conditions with the widening power gap between international players such as Euro-American brands and national and local stakeholders (Prentice 2021).

In the next chapter, I will present my conversations with local scholars to build my argument on the inadequacy of western policies such as the ACCORD and the Alliance. The data presented will emphasize the inefficiency of these policies in producing sustainable improvements in the lives of garments workers. Ultimately, although highly celebrated in the west for its novel and transformative approaches to transnational labour regulation, the ACCORD failed to address the gaps within the fast fashion industry that dislocates workers in the global supply chain and places them in vulnerable conditions (Tanjeem 2021; Kang 2021; Lewis 2019; Anner, 2019). Additionally, issues concerning most national and local players, such as the role of subcontractors, are completely ignored by policies like the ACCORD (Tanjeem 2017). I will highlight the limitations and challenges of westernized policies, and in response, offer a contrapuntal perspective that engages with ideas and remarks made by local and national scholars, thinkers, and activists. I will emphasize the significance of taking a bottom-up perspective that an ethnographic approach enables. Overall, I will distinguish the need for a localized point of view in producing preventative measures intended to protect workers in global factories, meet their demands for day-to-day survival, and present a distinctive theory of global capitalism from the ground.

## Chapter Three: “Bangladesh is being sold for parts”: Neoliberalism, the Nation-state and the (Un)Making of the Readymade Garments industry

My investigation of the garments industry aims to highlight how Bangladesh became the second-largest exporter of fast fashion over the last few decades (Rahman and Langford, 2014; Karim, 2014). To understand the full picture, I begin with a short synopsis of the history of post-colonial state formation and economic development projects in Bangladesh, as the country’s political conditioning pre-and post-independence has influenced its entry into the era of neoliberal economization (Chowdhury 2018; Karim 2014; Ong 2007). The Global South is generalized and presented as underdeveloped, developing, or lesser developed—a discourse that refuses to acknowledge the four hundred years or more of European colonialism that subdued and plagued the region (see Chakrabarty 2018). Any ‘post’-colonial state, such as Bangladesh, is a state that has bled through the nefarious tactics exerted by European colonialism—including the extraction of lands, resources, and labour (cf. Lowe 2015). The exploitation of bodies, specifically of women of color, has been essential to this long history, and the current trope of the ‘new woman’ who produces for the economy and gets manipulated to extract profits (Chowdhury 2018; Siddiqi 2009; cf. Brown 2010; Abu-Lughod 2013). In this sense, American-led neoliberal globalization is heir to European colonialism and imperialism. The neoliberal market ideals targeting certain populations in Lesser Developed Countries for employment is a tactful and lucrative tool weaponized by transnational corporations to commodify racialized bodies and their labour for profit (Ong 2007; Freeman 2000). Garments factories currently in Bangladesh are productive sites that exude ‘colonial haunting’ and make visible the forms of violence that sustain these neoliberal economic systems (cf. Kilroy-Marac 2018; Gordon 2008; Williams 1991).

In this chapter, I will examine the Bangladeshi garments industry by analyzing the national scale and will inquire about how the historical complexities mentioned above characterize the roles of key national actors and players. These players include the Government of Bangladesh, ministers of parliament, employers’ organizations like BGMEA and BKMEA, factory owners and supervisors, and the subcontractors who are appointed to complete projects that are deemed too costly by others. In my account of the garments sector at the national level, I will draw on my interviews with Bangladeshi activists, such as Rizwana, who described the apparel industry as an

“archetypical sector that exposes the unwavering dominance of international corporations and buyers over transnational economic markets and profit margins.” National players including the government of Bangladesh and the factory owners are considered *matha noto* (head-bowed or restricted) by the demands set by buyers who represent corporations and brands like Walmart, Gap, and Zara. The relationship between national players, buyers, and transnational corporations needs addressing when considering the exceptional neoliberal projects Bangladesh has witnessed since the 1970s—such as microfinance, advancement of export-led businesses, NGO-led ‘developments’, and more (Lewis 2019; Karim 2014). The garments industry is a neoliberal economic system that has developed in a political climate where Bangladeshi sromik are prohibited from organizing or speaking their truths (Kang 2021; Tanjeem 2017). To elaborate on this, I will outline key moments in Bangladesh’s political and economic history, as it went from being under British occupancy as ‘Greater India,’ to Pakistani military ruling as ‘East Pakistan,’ to an independent nation-state after partition. This history highlights the continuities of colonial and patriarchal ‘haunting’ that pervade the Bengal region today and directly affects the lives of sromik (cf. Beckett 2020; Kilroy-Marac 2018; Ahmann 2018; Chakrabarty 2018). As we will see, aspects of that colonial and postcolonial history are reproduced in the contemporary forms of violence and subjugation facing racialized and gendered workers in Bangladeshi textile factories. Throughout this chapter, I will draw on my conversations with activists like Miah Bhai, a trade unionist in Bangladesh who feels like “*Bangladesh is being sold for parts.*” Additionally, I will refer to those key moments of disasters that wounded the garments industry since its relocation to Bangladesh, specifically the Rana Plaza collapse which many of my informants described as the most harrowing experience to have witnessed. In this capitalist economy, these moments of crisis are part of the system, they are repetitive and commonplace. Furthermore, these events ultimately influence the shape of the transnational garments industry, leading it to shift to lesser audited areas, while leaving behind trails of ‘haunting,’ that local apparel factory workers and activists must deal with.

Over the past decade, the cost of producing garments has increased but the prices offered by brands to national manufacturers remain exceptionally low and are annually decreasing (Anner 2019, 15). In this chapter, I will apply the term ‘disaster capitalism’ to emphasize the constrained relation between the national level and the global level, and how the nation-state’s limited role and the domineering neoliberal economic structures have shaped the garments sector

(cf. Imperiale and Vanclay 2020; Schuller and Maldonado 2016; Klein 2007). I will analyze a select few cases that I have mentioned in the previous chapters, where a disaster has shaken the Bangladeshi garments industry, and highlight that transnational corporations are quick to pull away during these “moments of rupture” (cf. Ahmann 2018). This results in cutbacks on a national scale leading to employers’ organizations firing thousands of workers, or national factory owners having to fulfill economic gaps. One main case that I will inspect is the Rana Plaza collapse that led to the formation of the ACCORD and the Alliance, where policy-related costs fell directly upon Bangladeshi factory owners who could not bear these burdens (Kang 2021). Furthermore, when the issues of building safety arose, brands ‘squeezed’ their prices once more, leading Bangladeshi factory owners to relocate to cheaper building sites and to turn to subcontractors to minimize costs (Tanjeem 2021, 264; Anner 2019, 6). Some factory owners are known to take orders at a deficit to merely safeguard factory operations—and they ‘hope’ for better contracts in the future (Anner 2019, 17). To unwarped what resulted in these national insecurities to rise, it is crucial to address some of the historical reasons that led to this.

### 3.1. A National Crisis: Miah Bhai describes his memories from the Rana Plaza Collapse

It was an early morning in September 2021 when I received an unexpected phone call. I did not realize I would be conducting an interview until it had already begun. Miah Bhai and I had been texting back and forth for a few days by then through WhatsApp—we were having difficulty finding a suitable time for us to connect. Before I knew it, technological disruptions began to get in the way as it was the only interview that I could not record or transcribe. It was a disrupted morning, one of those moments when virtual research felt tedious or unfeasible. However, these mundane moments of fieldwork are often the ones I missed the most. Looking back at it, these moments of interruptions are comparable to the disruptions that many anthropologists face while conducting fieldwork on the ground. Entering the field with expectations that would not be fulfilled, sitting through extremely long, dull meetings one after the other, wishing to speak with someone only to be turned away, or sitting under the scorching sun for hours doing participant observation, etc.—are all familiar arenas for anthropologists. Still, speaking with Miah Bhai truly opened my heart. There were several parts of that call that I could not capture in their full essence, nonetheless, there were other parts that will remain with me vividly for the rest of my

life. The timing that day was off—it was 9:00 am EST (Eastern Standard Time) for me and closer to midnight for Miah; the methods were interrupted—I could only hear his voice but even that came broken at times, nevertheless, the spirit of the conversation was clear and heartfelt. These moments of profound engagement and dialogue with my informants left the rough edges of virtual fieldwork at bay.

Fast-forwarding to the phone call now. Miah Bhai rang me as I was sitting on my balcony drinking *cha* tea. When I received the call, I quickly grabbed whatever writing utensils I could find around me and began to take notes. This would be my fifth interview and I knew that I would not be able to record our conversation and could only hold onto what I had written down during that long-distance call. Nevertheless, as the interview transpired and Miah and I exchanged words, strangely I felt taken back. It felt as though I was in Bangladesh, near my house in Malibagh, Chowdhury Para, taking a rickshaw ride down Shiddeshwari Road as I passed by the crowded bazaars and food carts near Mouchak Market. It was the first time in ten years that I felt as though I was present in the flesh, standing amidst the heat, dust, and hustling streets of the city where I was born, Dhaka. At times I sat in awe, other moments had me shaken to my core. In that one-hour phone call with Miah Bhai, I learned more than I could have imagined. Although initially, I had felt sorry for myself for being unable to record that call, soon I felt fortunate simply to have had it at all.

Miah Bhai, a trade unionist, has been heavily involved in providing food, water, shelter, and more to Bangladeshi textile workers, and protesting alongside them since the early 2010s, alongside other grassroots activists in Dhaka. He opened a few pockets of organizing called *shakhas* (branches). Miah and his colleagues have established an ongoing page called “Freedom for Garments Workers” on Facebook. Additionally, they continually work towards finding remittance opportunities for workers who were fired or injured, and their families. Furthermore, Miah Bhai worked with groups and individuals who are invested in areas such as worker well-being, health and wellness, and maternal, newborn, and child health. They have organized several protests over the past few years in attempts to raise the minimum wage, which at the time in 2021 was around 8,000 Takas or \$96. Miah argued that the monthly salary for workers should be 16,000 Takas or \$186, minimum. However, the employers’ group, Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) fought against them during the protests,



which led to the loss of lives of several activists. The BGMEA is known for crashing protests and putting an end to them, as these employers' organizations are heavily influenced by international players and brands who are opposed to the idea of paying workers, according to Miah Bhai.

Miah Bhai was part of a group of eleven activists whom I call *Sromik Sheba*, or labour care—although, the group did not have an official name. Sromik Sheba was involved in organizing a massive portion of the relief funds and aid for workers following the Rana Plaza collapse. I was fortunate enough to speak with a few different members of this group, including Salma Apa, Onik, and Miah Bhai. Some of the other members of this group, I have cited throughout this thesis, and others I have heard of, connected with, or learned from through additional means. Miah, a trade unionist shared upfront that few people are a fan of him or his field of work, but he is used to it and believes his work is valuable. Miah Bhai was present at the site of the Rana Plaza collapse, as well as other factory disasters and calamities. But, Miah says, “there was nothing like the sight of the Rana Plaza aftermath.” Miah witnessed skulls of dead sromik falling from the ceiling. No one had the time to consider or process their feelings of shock, trauma, or disgust at that moment—as too many lives had already been sacrificed.

The Sromik Sheba team was formed of various independent actors who were simply passing by or happened to arrive at the scene of the collapse. Many of them described the collapse site as one of the most traumatic experiences that changed the shape of their lives. Miah Bhai explained to me how the authority and police wanted to shut down the site and stop counting the dead bodies once they had reached five hundred. However, the Sromik Sheba team—formed of average citizens and advocates, people who gathered from different classes, religions, backgrounds, and professions—congregated their skills to direct the scene of the aftermath. Sromik Sheba continued to count the dead bodies of workers until they reached “1,134”. Nevertheless, it is believed that way more lives have been lost during and following the Rana Plaza collapse. In Chapter Four, I will present a story that my informant Onik shared with me, about his friend Himu, and how the collapse altered his life. This devastating eight-story-building collapse wounded people in distinct ways. Miah Bhai and the Sromik Sheba team witnessed first-hand what many of us learned about on the news and in textbooks in the days and years to follow.

The Rana Plaza disaster killed half the number of people that 9/11 did, yet according to my informants, the collapse fails to be acknowledged for its magnitude and its ramifications upon the lives of average Bangladeshi sromik. Perhaps it is simply due to the ‘value’ or lack thereof that is associated with human lives due to colonial and patriarchal hierarchization of bodies based on race, class, gender, etc. (cf. Rajan 1969; Ahmann 2018; Agard-Jones 2017; Graeber 2001). The ‘othering’ and exoticization of racialized bodies perpetuated by colonial actors reduce people of colour to stereotypical representations—depicting non-white peoples and cultures as ‘uncivilized,’ ‘patriarchal,’ ‘backward,’ (Said 1991; Spivak 2003; Mohanty 1984), and therefore ‘exploitable’ (Lewis 2019, Chakrabarty 2018). As western news and media highlighted, 9/11 was initiated by brown people, resulting in the loss of lives for many white people (and others), however, the disasters in the apparel industry are kind of a reverse situation. In the garments sector, white people profit from the exploitation of people of colour, specifically women of colour, and thus, this colonial subjugation continues to get hidden under the rug as much as possible to maintain white supremacy and elitism globally.

This collapse was not the first nor last of its kind, as there have been many disasters of its sort, before and after, within Bangladesh and in other parts of the world, and within the fast fashion industry as well as in other global factories. For example, in July 2021, a Shezan Juice Factory in Narayanganj, Bangladeshi caught fire, resulting in the death of three workers and injuring more than fifty people (Rita 2021). The domineering practices exhibited by factory owners and supervisors who lock fire exits to prohibit workers from taking breaks, and limit adherence to safety protocols—stimulate the normalization of these disasters (Rita 2021). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a handful of parent company names that appeared from the Rana Plaza collapse were also found involved in multiple other factory disasters throughout the early 2010s (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). These brand names include Primark, Loblaw & Mango, Benetton, JC Penny, etc., and some of these companies had ongoing scandals regarding their negligent management of global factories, (Comyns and Franklin-Johnson 2016). Nevertheless, western brands refuse to take responsibility for their (in)actions, and thus the entire expectation of maintaining garments factories and directing the aftermath of disasters falls immediately upon national actors. As recalled from the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in 1911 that resulted in the relocating of factories from New York City to the West Coast, these events display the same forms of underlying conditions and vulnerabilities, normalizing violence facing

wage workers. Subsequently, the annual global recognition given towards large-scale disasters tells the tale of colonial hierarchization of bodies. An event that threatens western actors occupies (and deserves) greater action and coverage than any factory disaster facing poor, gendered, and racialized sromik working in factories in developing countries (cf. Agard-Jones 2017).

The international response following these disasters does not vary drastically from one calamity to the next. While the Rana Plaza collapse garnered tremendous media attention due to its magnitude, in 2022, few of the promises made by national and international players to the victims of the disasters and their families, have been fulfilled. Moreover, there are only a handful of local actors actively seeking remittance opportunities or organizing protests alongside the sromik. Nevertheless, one key difference between the Rana Plaza collapse and other factory disasters was the international response it garnered—as the disaster threatened western corporations’ legitimacy and revealed its exploitative strategies. This ‘moment of rupture’ resulted in the formation of a few international policies including the ACCORD in April 2013, followed by the Alliance, only a few weeks later. As previously stated, these neoliberal transnational policies had limited effect on preventing disasters or providing relief to victims of these events. In the next section, I want to explore how the Bangladeshi government and other national players responded to the Rana Plaza collapse. What measures were taken following the disaster on a national scale? What remittances were given to the victims and their families? What has changed or remained the same in the Bangladeshi garments industry since 2013?

### 3.2. Disaster Capitalism: Nine Years Post-Rana Plaza Collapse

The term ‘disaster capitalism’ was coined by activist Naomi Klein (2007) to distinguish the features of a neoliberal economy where following a ‘shocking’ or catastrophic event, the responses from the state evoke further oppression against the average peoples and works in favour of the corporate players (Schuller and Maldonado 2016; Klein 2007). This is relevant in the case of the Bangladeshi garments sector and the disasters it has witnessed. April 23, 2022, marked nine years since the devastating Rana Plaza collapse. The *Bangladeshi Garments Workers Solidary* (BGWS) hosted several events including panels, protests, and more to observe the occasion. I attended a handful of the panels led by Taslima Akhter (Lima Apa) who was one

of the key organizers behind Sromik Sheba, and others. There were other recognizable names of scholars and thinkers on the panel including Dina Siddiqi, Nafisa Tanjeem, Rehnuma Ahmed, and Anu Muhammad. During the panel, Muhammad, who is an economist, stated that the main causes behind the Bangladeshi apparel industry's untethering conditions (that bring in profit only for a select few players) are the fragmented labour movement and the limitations of trade union work. Furthermore, he mentioned that the Rana Plaza collapse was the largest industrial disaster in the garments industry, enough to shake western brands and result in the production of the ACCORD and Alliance. However, the Bangladeshi government has yet to raise a hand in favour of the victims, despite the episodic disasters that have transpired since. Muhammad referred to the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in NYC and the drastic changes it brought and compared it to the limited concerns of the Bangladeshi state for its citizens. During COVID-19, Hashem Foods, a six-story-building that was built illegally outside of Dhaka, caught on fire, and killed fifty-two factory workers—including Laizu Begum's 11-year-old nephew, and Bilal Hossain's 13-year-old daughter (BBC News Asia 2021). The fire blazed for 24 hours before it was extinguished (BBC Asia 2021). These disasters are 'normal accidents' (Perrow, 2004). The panel discerned that the oppositional political parties (Bangladesh Nationalist Party, Jamati Islam, and the Awami League) weaponize *sromik* (workers/labourers) and their demands to gain votes. Therefore, until workers can unite independently, the labour movement cannot succeed and will remain *pongu* (disabled).

How can workers take control of the movement? Taslima Akhter (Lima Apa) added that a young garments factory worker named Rehana was recently fired from the factory following posting a Facebook status about their unlivable wages amidst the rising living costs in Bangladesh. The news and media are found repeating the same narrative of 'fear,' 'loss,' and 'grievances,' distorting the image of Bangladesh as a hapless place where terrible things happen (cf. Beckett 2020). What the media should be highlighting, Lima Apa asserted, are the deplorable wages offered to workers by western brands and Bangladeshi factory owners. Hashem Foods employees, many of whom were children as young as 11, were paid less than \$0.24 per hour (BBC Asia 2021). In Bangladesh today, workers and activists are prohibited from speaking up; anyone who is seen questioning the neoliberal state is quickly dismissed by state-led players. Lima Apa voiced the amount of stress she embodies daily, regardless, she says the fight must go

on. Thus, in 2022 BGWS's slogan is "*Mritoder Shoron Koro, Jibitoder Jonno Lorai Koro,*" which translates, "Remember Those that have Died, and Fight for Those Who are Alive."

After the Rana Plaza collapse, workers were kept distracted by Western media channels and outlets that made them repeat their tragic stories and struggles, rather than gathering workers to collectivize and claim their rights, exclaimed someone during the commemoration event. Western corporations hinder labour activism to their benefit by keeping supply chain workers disconnected. This is pursued tactically so that local demands get overwritten by transnational solidarity efforts post moments of crisis. International media fixates on policies like the ACCORD and blames national players for the corruption and misery facing factory workers (Rahman and Langford 2014, 170; Tanjeem 2021). Bangladeshi state players are seen as puppets of these western transnational corporations by local activists and labour organizers—whatever the corporations demand the privatized institutions and post-colonial state players like employers' groups and factory owners are compelled to fulfill. What resulted in this national crisis where Bangladeshi garments workers are prohibited from organizing and collectivizing their demands, and the overarching "helplessness" narrative that is deployed to speak about the region more generally? In the next section, I will provide a brief chronological synopsis of Bangladesh's historical state formation and political partitioning that became definite features of the country's economic relations in the global arena, which influenced the representation of Bangladeshi people and garments workers globally.

### How the World Remembers Bangladesh: From an "Underdeveloped" State to a Competitive Global Producer of Fast-Fashion

Bangladesh has long been an object of international concern that is framed in terms of humanitarianism, suffering, and of victims who are portrayed as in need of saving by westerners. In this section, I will elaborate on the entrance of western NGO-based development in Bangladesh following independence. Moreover, the promotion of western donor dependence (Lewis 2019), and the increased convoluted relations between opposing political parties within the country (which was prompted by British partitioning), produced several barriers between the Government of Bangladesh and its citizens. Eventually, neoliberal, and outward-facing industries

came to saturate the country's economy, which as I argue, only benefits a select few players, while enabling a chain of workers' rights violations.

After a nine-month-long, cold, and brutal war, on December 16, 1971, Bangladesh—formerly known as East Pakistan—received its independence from West Pakistan's military dictatorship (Huda 2019). The war resulted in mass casualties for millions of average civilians and soldiers in Bangladesh. Today, many Bangladeshis recall the war as a form of genocide against their people. On August 1, 1971, singer-songwriter and lead guitarist of the Beatles, George Harrison, in collaboration with Indian sitarist Ravi Shankar, hosted the Concert for Bangladesh in Madison Square Garden before 40,000 people (about twice the seating capacity of the arena). The concert was one of the first of its kind, and it raised \$250,000 for Bangladesh relief. These funds were overseen by UNICEF and were even followed by the publication of an album, in addition to several other events such as the formation of the George Harrison Fund for UNICEF (UNICEF USA 2021). This fund continues to provide aid to various countries and communities in need, including the recent Rohingya Refugee Crisis occurring across the Myanmar-Bangladesh borderlands (UNICEF USA 2021).

Following the philanthropic endeavors forwarded by Harrison and UNICEF in 1971, American folk singer Joan Baez (1977) published “Song of Bangladesh,” in light of the outbreak of war and famine facing the region. The lyrics included the following:

The story of Bangladesh

is an ancient one, again made fresh

By blind men who carry out commands

Which flow out of the laws upon which nation stands

Which is to sacrifice a people for a land

Bangladesh, Bangladesh

Bangladesh, Bangladesh

When the sun sinks in the west

Die a million people of the Bangladesh.

The song addressed matters of famine, flooding, and civil war, along with the dangers of violence, exploitation, and corruption facing the Bangladeshi region and its people. These events and the Western humanitarian concern with Bangladesh correspond with the era of expansion of North American neoliberalism (cf. Ong 2007) and the international development rhetoric involving NGOs that sought to ‘save the third world’, meanwhile, maintaining western hegemony over these regions’ cultures and economies (Lewis 2019). This moral concern for the people of Bangladesh in the 1970s went hand in hand with the presence of colonial haunting resonant in the structural relations of exploitation and extraction that led to the long “underdevelopment” in the region (Lewis 2019; cf. Kilroy-Marac 2018; Gordon 2008; Chakrabarty 2018). Quickly, Bangladesh was recognized as a global basket case as my *Ammu* (mother) recalls it. White developers representing western NGOs entered the region with intentions of modernizing the state and helping improve the lives and conditions of Bangladeshi people, specifically women, and children.

Bangladesh is a developing country and globally scrutinized for its ‘under-development,’ poverty, unstable political climates, corruption, lack of democracy, and a widening gap between the governing state and its citizens (Muhammad 2020; Prentice 2021; cf. Sassen 2008; Sassen 2002). These conditions make room for international actors—private corporations, NGOs, and global organizations such as UNICEF—to easily enter Bangladesh with socio-economic development plans involving neoliberal modes of dominance cloaked under terms resembling ‘equality’ and ‘modernization’ (Lewis, 2019; cf. Brown 2010; Ong 2007). As I have mentioned, American-led neoliberalism uses international organizations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to intervene in post-colonial economies to expose developing nations to exceptional trade policies, enabling international corporations to maintain a top-down economic grip (Ong 2007, 1). Arguably, the International Labour Organization (ILO), Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and other international organizations and frameworks favour protecting the jobs of American corporate players rather than safeguarding the lives of ordinary Bangladeshi workers (Drake 2013 in Rahman and Langford, 182).

As of 2022, two of Bangladesh's largest economies i) the Temporary Foreign Worker program and ii) the Readymade Garments are employing enormous numbers of precarious workers who produce the bulk of Bangladesh's national revenue. Furthermore, both sectors are export-led, privatized, and outward-facing, therefore, little provisioning is done on part of the Bangladeshi government in maintaining the rights of these workers. The representation of Bangladesh as a place where 'disaster,' 'corruption,' 'patriarchy,' and 'crisis,' takes place is systematically enabled by the post-colonial state of Bangladesh that overlooks the conditions of its citizens and sides with the western corporations (Tanjeem 2018; Siddiqi 2015; cf. Beckett and Wagner 2022). In the next section, I will analyze the roles of a handful of national players and how these state-led actors respond following moments of crisis.

As witnessed by activists during the Rana Plaza collapse, the BGMEA and government authorities attempted to shut down the body count of victims to protect the identities of corporations such as H&M and Zara. Nevertheless, this disaster was televised globally for months to follow, additionally, several restoratives and remittance opportunities were promised to the victims. Rather than fulfilling these empty promises—the western colonial state reiterated the imageries of Bangladesh as suffering and victimized and described the fast fashion industry as women-dominated and feminized. All these characteristics functioned as what Siddiqi (2015) calls the “politics of seeing and not seeing,” to permit the enactment of colonial tactics and exploit racialized, gendered, and classist labour (cf. Beckett and Wagner 2022; Ong 2007; Freeman 2002). The post-colonial state of Bangladesh has limited say in its own economic affairs; capital is controlled strictly by western corporations (cf. Standing 2014). Therefore, to ensure its position as a leading global producer of textile, state players must concede to the demands of international brands (cf. Brown 2010, 8; Sassen 2008; Sassen 2002, 45). Today in Bangladesh, the responsibilities of the national government—such as providing health care or aid to sromik—are overseen by NGOs such as Awaj Foundation led by Najma Akter (Karim 2014, 56). Akter's celebratory work is worth acknowledging. However, as Muhammad (2022) noted, it is important to acknowledge that the national government has failed to provide basic human rights to all citizens, including garments workers, meanwhile, the same state players are known for frequently boasting about the capacity of the apparel industry in terms of the revenue it produces. This reveals the submission of the nation-state to corporate demands, in addition to the commodification and subjugation of Bangladesh garments labourers.



There are several limitations and challenges as expressed by scholars and activists that limit the labour movement in Bangladesh. Many of these conditions are maintained by post-colonial state players, including the Bangladeshi government and employers' groups, to profit from these lucrative systems. Meanwhile, a handful of NGO-led and western-funded actors represent garments workers internationally, and since non-Bangladeshis are not fluent on the dynamics of labour activism in the region, they remain uninformed that certain activists are distinguished for stealing spotlight from local activists and sromik on the ground (Kang 2021, 10). This leads to the oversimplification of workers' rights and demands by western players who are unfamiliar with the ongoing conditions in Bangladeshi garments factories, which results in the repeated subjugation and impediment to the working classes and to the local sromik andolon. These issues could be a compilation of many issues that faced Bangladesh, such as the accumulation of inter-party rivalry, assassinations of party leaders, or the concern that some of these actors were against Bangladesh's independence and preferred Pakistani and British rule. Most Bangladeshis today believe that most parliamentary players have become corrupt and inseparable from the capitalist state. At one-point Miah Bhai said to me "*buddhijibira shob bikrito hoye geche*"—all the war heroes of Bangladesh have become sellouts—as he let out a sigh. The Bangladeshi government proclaims it follows the same values from the independence era of restoring a "*shonar/shadhin Bangla*" golden liberated Bengal—while functioning as a neoliberal economic state (Muhammad 2022). However, by 1975, most economists and politicians who had promoted socialism had either called it quits or were fired, and with them gone the 'socialist dream' experienced a short and swift demise (Muhammad 2022). One key matter that Professor Dina Siddiqi warned me about during a phone call, was to be mindful when criticizing these nation-state players and to avoid single-handedly blaming only factory owners. Siddiqi was my first informant, and her contributions heavily influenced my research. State actors are seen looting the profits of the rigid systems set in place by colonialism, military dictatorship, and gendered discrimination against Global South women (Karim 2014). However, the one-sided blame that Bangladeshi national players face in maintaining the fast fashion industry further promotes western brands to play a hands-off role in attending to the garments factory workers. I aim to address these matters and their build-up more thoughtfully in this section.

Moments of crises such as the Rana Plaza collapse are treated as unstoppable rather than preventable and the result of an accumulation of corporate decisions (cf. Ahmann 2018; Chakrabarty 2018). The representation of Bangladesh as a place where ‘disaster,’ ‘corruption,’ ‘patriarchy,’ and ‘crisis’ happens not only overlooks the perpetuated violence promoted by western brands and national players, (Tanjeem 2017; Siddiqi 2015), but also fails to display the solidarity efforts and coming together of average Bangladeshis (from across age, class, gender divides) to provide aid and relief during the coronavirus pandemic for families in need, argued Lima Apa during the conference. During the Rana Plaza collapse and its aftermath, Miah Bhai, Onik, and other activists saw how the BGMEA and governmental players like the Ministers of Parliament (MPs) sent the police and army to the streets and the collapse site to shut down the body count of victims. Nevertheless, the local activists continued their search until they reached “1,134.” People do not turn powerless during disasters; rather, they often act out of feelings of mutual solidarity, helping each other survive and recover (Solnit 2009 in Beckett and Wagner 2022). The collapse and its aftermath were the subject of much media attention around the world for months afterward. Additionally, several restorative and remittance opportunities that were promised to the victims by global and national players, did not reach the workers for the most part. If these proposals and promises went unfulfilled, what, then, did happen following the Rana Plaza collapse at a national and state level?

### Making of the Neoliberal State and Global Industrial Disasters

Newly after Bangladesh’s independence, the country opened its markets to foreign investment, and the garments industry was a major focus for transnational corporations seeking cheap labour costs. In 1977, the BGMEA was founded, followed by the BEPZA in the 1980s, along with a handful of other employers’ groups that came to represent Bangladeshi workers in the global supply chain. As national players such as Bangladeshi manufacturers and factory owners sought to attract foreign investment by submitting to the demands of western brands, the normalization of hazardous and unsafe working environments facing workers increased. Soon, the Bangladeshi readymade garments sector witnessed a drastically widening power imbalance between Western brands and national players. This resulted in an accumulation of industrial disasters including factory collapses, fires, and other calamities. The 2012 Tazreen factory fire in Ashulia, Bangladesh, for example, killed 112 garments factory workers, and inspired demonstrations and

protests across the country that were led by garments workers and labour activists seeking relief for the victims of the disaster. The issue of relief for the Tazreen victims was still unresolved in 2013 when the Rana Plaza building collapsed. The latter became notoriously known as the worst industrial disaster to ever affect the fast fashion industry and its workers. Beyond the 1,134 confirmed casualties, the collapse affected the lives of millions of people in Bangladesh and its enormity even disrupted those players sitting at the top of the global supply chain although they were physically distant from where the disaster transpired (Tanjeem 2017). As discussed previously, the sheer scale of the disaster provoked a global humanitarian response that repeated the tropes from the earlier humanitarian responses that faced Bangladesh in the 1970s. This in turn led American brands, NGOs, and trade unions to produce two policies in response: the ACCORD on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Anner 2019, 13), which were touted as protecting workers.

The promoters of these policies say they were intended to ensure safety for garments workers and maintain adequate working conditions in Bangladeshi factories. However, Kang (2021, 4) argues that the ACCORD was not created with locals in mind and that there were significant power imbalances at play between capital, labour, and the state when negotiating these transnational policies. The ACCORD set out to cover 1600 apparel factories in Bangladesh by 2017. In total, 71 suppliers were terminated, although only *seven* out of 1360 factories addressed all issues and were approved by the engineering team, others witnessed closures or relocations (The ACCORD in Tanjeem 2017, 54). The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker safety, which was formed a few months after the ACCORD, also sought to address safety concerns. But it was a commitment rather than a signatory deal, intended to improve working conditions for Bangladeshi garments workers (Tanjeem 2017, 55). The Board of Advisors for the Alliance includes representatives from major NGOs like Care Bangladesh and BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee), as well as from employers' organizations such as Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) and BGMEA (Tanjeem 2017, 55-56). The Alliance did not include independent workers' representatives and, much like the ACCORD, was focused primarily on applying westernized codes of conduct and ensuring the continuation of neoliberal modes of development that 'essentialize' the struggles of apparel workers and third world women (Chowdhury 2018; Tanjeem, 2017; Abu-Lughod 2013; Siddiqi, 2009). International groups as well as grassroots NGOs such as BCWS (led by Kalpona Akter),

emphasized the improvements of the ACCORD over the Alliance (Tanjeem 2017, 46). However, many local Bangladeshi scholars and activists bunched the ACCORD and Alliance together in critiquing their limitations (Tanjeem 2017, 46). Additionally, while certain NGOs and international organizers preferred policies that sought to blame brands, local players were highly cognizant and critical of the discrepancies within the industry and acknowledged that focusing on brands has limited ground-level impact on workers' lives, due to the role of subcontractors (Tanjeem 2017, 37). Thereby, local labour activists centralized their efforts by holding national players accountable for the mistreatment facing factory workers and citizens and demanded improved salaries and working conditions for wage labourers.

In this global supply chain, a “bottom-up” approach is necessary to investigate the subcontracting practices that influence management structures and sustain the fast fashion industry (Wills and Hale 2005 in Tanjeem 2017, 37). Tanjeem (2017) borrows the term “network capitalism” from Wills and Hale (2005) which describes the novel capitalist modes of accumulation that emerged in the 1970s, in which various transnational players are involved in maintaining any economy. In the garments sector, transnational corporations and western brands increasingly rely on subcontractors to run their factories. Those subcontractors handle employment, factories, and other key aspects of production, which allows brands to avoid knowledge or responsibility of what is happening on the ground, all while in turn ensuring their access to cheap sources of labour from distant geographic locations (Wills and Hale 2005, 5, in Tanjeem 2017, 37). Subcontractors create another layer or gap between apparel factory workers and western brands. Physical factories are no longer directly maintained by corporations, so focusing on getting them to sign the ACCORD or the Alliance has limited meaning for local activists or workers (Tanjeem 2017). Subcontracting is thus a stark example of the challenges posed by neoliberal structures of governance and the gaps produced by uneven development and geographic displacement (Prentice 2021; Harvey 2006). Consequently, this hampered traditional methods of labour organizing that would permit workers to unionize and ensure representation (Kang 2021). The United States-based transnational labour organizing practices and neoliberal policies such as the ACCORD and the Alliance strategically overlook local realities of subcontracting—thus, they are unable to fully understand how production through subcontracting impacts the safety and security of garments workers in Bangladesh (Tanjeem 2017, 47).

While the international community celebrated the ACCORD for what some saw as its revolutionary labour regulating motto, it did not lead to any substantive institutional changes on the ground. Moreover, it was perceived as an abstract policy by local activists, who could barely tell it apart from the Alliance (Kang 2021). In 2018, Smart Jeans Factory Ltd. filed a lawsuit stating that the ACCORD illegally suspended its relations with their factory despite the owner Mostafizur Rahman's full compliance with all the policy regulations (Mirdha 2017; Kang 2021, 2). Additional complaints from other national players, factory owners, and labour activists arose, with many arguing that the corporate codes enforced by the ACCORD were inefficient and illegitimate (Kang 2021, 2). Following these litigations, in fear of losing the ACCORD, the members of the Readymade Garments Sustainability Council (RSC) brought in local players, including the employers' groups BGMEA and BKMEA, to administer regulations (Kang 2021, 2). The lack of presence from independent activists in the RSC depicts the hierarchical relations between players from distinct levels and class brackets. Additionally, it emphasizes the role of capital, labour, and the post-colonial state in maintaining those hierarchies (Kang, 2021, 4).

By 2020, the ACCORD had audited 2159 factories, 91% of which witnessed the implementation of new regulations, while 156 factories were ordered to close, and another 159 relocated (Kang 2021, 7). Factory owners could not (or would not) afford the structural costs imposed by the ACCORD, such as having multiple fire-exits. Consequently, many Bangladeshi factory owners had to take out loans to sustain their businesses (Kang 2021, 7). In addition, factory owners and supervisors deemed the requirements placed by the ACCORD wasteful and unnecessary. They argued that they were better informed on what the factories and the workers needed, compared to national or international players in the supply chain, and they complained that they had not been consulted when these policies were initiated (Kang 2021, 8). In some cases, factory owners managed to fight against the ACCORD, such as in the case of Smart Jeans Factory Ltd. Overall, owners have sought to use the employers' organizations, notably the BGMEA, as an institutional means to gut the ACCORD (see Kang 2021). The case of the ACCORD is telling because it shows the inadequacies of such policies in directing ground-level changes—they overlook local intricacies such as the subsequent role of subcontractors, the concerns of factory owners who are more familiar with the demands of workers, and overall, these policies misrepresent and overshadow the demands of garments factory workers in the global supply chain. The ACCORD was overturned before the end of the decade (Lewis 2019).

Going back to the Rana Plaza collapse that provoked majority of these initiatives and civil lawsuits that were made against players who were found affiliated with the disaster, including factory owners and managers, many of which are still moving through the courts (Ahamad and Islam 2019 in Prentice 2021). Several families of victims have filed claims against corporations located in Canada and the United States—where Bangladesh is the second largest producer (Rahman and Langford 2014, 169)—seeking damages for the loss of their loved ones, although most of the claims have been unsuccessful due to limited witnesses to attest on behalf of workers (Prentice 2021, 15). Through “geographies of unevenness” brands’ responsibility over global factory workers becomes highly avoidable, meanwhile, enforcing transnational or even national jurisdiction within the global supply chain to enforce safety for workers is becoming nearly impossible (Prentice 2021). In practice, by 2017 the ACCORD had run its course, amid concerns that the policy was too expensive and arduous for state players to comply with the regulations. As well, the policies had a limited impact on the improvement of working conditions for workers (Tanjeem 2021; Kang 2021; Lewis 2019). But the ACCORD did help reveal a key part of the story, which is the significant role played by the state itself as well as by employers’ organizations and other national-level groups in the maintenance of the garments sector. It is to a discussion of the role of employers’ organizations such as Bangladesh Garments Manufacturing and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and other state players that I turn to next in this chapter.

### 3.3. Post-Colonial State and Export-led Garments Sector: The Rise of the Bangladeshi Neoliberal Government

In this section, I will elaborate on the roles and responsibilities of all the key national players who are responsible of the upkeep and maintenance of the Bangladeshi apparel industry and provide a brief history on the formation of the Government of Bangladesh. After Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, national politics quickly came to center around a two-party system, with the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as the leading center-right party and the Awami League on the left (Rahman and Langford 2014). The BNP was initially led by West Pakistani conservative politics and supported by the United States. Meanwhile, the Awami League was chaired by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and initially formed of communist and liberal nationalist thinkers who promoted the formation of the guerrilla militia group called the *Mukti Bahini*. The Awami League won by majority post-Independence (Rahman and Langford 2014, 174). Since

independence, the country has observed six five-year development plans, the first of which differed tremendously from the rest (Muhammad 2020). The first plan was focused on a socialist framework (Muhammad 2020). That first program also included support for expanding the region's agricultural sector, my *Baba* father tells me. The first plan was drafted by economists focusing on areas for social development; these people joined out of passion and patriotism rather than bureaucratic professionalism (Muhammad 2020). However, these 'socialist dreams' were short-lived. Some critics have suggested that the socialist national plan was characterized by its "unrealistic idealism" and that already by 1971 too many people were profiting from trade and increased privatization (Muhammad 2020). By 1974, Bangladesh signed the Multi-Fiber Agreement that, like NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) in the 1990s, was designed to protect North American brands from paying taxes and tariffs. In short, the postcolonial state, despite its official ideology, has always played a key role in the liberalization of trade for the garments sector (Lewis 2019, 1964).

Despite being recognized for its socialist ideals, the Awami League is criticized for historically suppressing workers' rights, controlling labour unions, and forcing Awami League demands to be centralized (Rahman and Langford 2014, 174–5). Sheik Mujib, popularly known as Bangabandhu—who is titled the "*jatir pita*" founding father of Bangladesh—was assassinated in August 1975, before completing his first term as Prime Minister. The Awami League was defeated and replaced by a military government—this group was renamed a few times, until 1977 when they formed the BNP led by Major General Ziaur Rahman, (Rahman and Langford 2014). My *nanu* (maternal grandmother) told me that during Zia's rule, she could not leave the house to even buy milk for her daughters. Throughout the occupancy of this military regime, the Bangladeshi labour movement was downright suspended. Around this time, inter-union rivalry became normalized while corruption and nepotism became definitive features of Bangladeshi state politics (Rahman and Langford 2014, 175).

In 1981, Zia was assassinated, and President Sattar from the BNP took over, until the government was overthrown by another military coup d'état a few months later, led by Army Chief Hussain Muhammad Ershad (Rahman and Lanford 2014, 175). Ershad formed the *Jatiya Party*, and his regime was heavily influenced by Bangladesh's history of military occupancy under the Pakistani administration, as well as British colonial partitioning (Rahman and

Langford 2014). It was during this tumultuous period in the 1970s and 1980s, while coups and military governments shaped national politics, that the World Bank entered Bangladesh with several neoliberal development projects, including structural adjustment programs, micro-financing, and more mercantilist type export-led businesses (Muhammad 2020; Lewis 2019; Chakrabarty 2018). Intermediary tactics were deployed by American corporations, enabling IMF and the World Bank to capture authority over Bangladesh's 'development,' and things only worsened from here (Muhammad 2020). According to Muhammad (2020), corruption expanded during this time along with the formation of the super-rich class and 'neoliberalism for the poor'—through increased urbanization and a shift away from agriculture to other neoliberal privatized sectors such as garments production and the Temporary Worker Program—all of which were claimed to promote GDP growth (Lewis 2019; Karim 2014, 57). From this period onward, development in Bangladesh has been exclusively associated with the growth of the national GDP, with little regard given to other measures of national life, such as the quality of living for citizens and wage workers (Lewis 2019, 1971). It was under these political and economic conditions that the global garments industry gained traction and began planting its roots in Bangladesh (Rahman and Langford 2014, 1975).

The current Bangladeshi government, which is led by the Awami League and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, has a big place in my house and with my parents. As I was writing this chapter, I had to stop a few times to question 'the truth' as my family members and I entered several "passionate" discussions regarding blind nationalism vs. what the textbooks cannot tell you. I probed my parents on the legitimacy of their faith in the Awami League government given the criticisms they are facing. Baba tells me that I was not there when Jamaat-e-Islami (Islamic movement from the British India era founded in 1941) formed in Bangladesh around 1975, and how tyrannical and domineering their philosophies were. Between 2001-6, Jamaat-e-Islami experienced its largest succession in partnership with the BNP, however, since 2010, the members of Jamaat were found affiliated with war crimes from the era of independence (Islam 2021). These groups weaponize religion to oppose Bangladesh's liberation and continue to restrict women's rights and access, Baba told me.

The advancements proposed by PM Hasina's advocacy for the Bangladeshi people and the legacy of her father, known as the *jatir pita* (nation's father) Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur



Rahman, continues to inspire and enlighten many older generations of Bangladeshis, including my Generation X parents. This is in keeping with the struggles and sacrifices of their parents (my grandparents) who witnessed and endured the liberation war between Pakistan and Bangladesh, 51 years ago. Comparably, the garments industry is a source of national pride for Bangladesh, and it is regularly celebrated, advertised, and associated with conversations about Bangladesh's growth and prosperity. However, as the old socialist values faded with the advent of neoliberal development plans, permanent industrial jobs were slowly replaced by temporary, outsourced, and insecure employment sectors (Muhammad 2020; Lewis 2019). While Bangladesh's agricultural practices suffered cutbacks and impoverished conditions for farmers, two main streams of GDP growth emerged as central to the Bangladeshi economy—migrant workers going to the UAE, and the export-led apparel industry.

The garments industry exuded new and modern characteristics, such as the opportunity for formal employment for 'unskilled' and 'illiterate' women (Karim 2014). Alongside microfinance, the apparel industry remained a leading focus of women-centric development projects in Bangladesh (Karim 2014, 54). In 2005, the value of Bangladesh's garments industry grew from \$3.5 billion to \$10 billion within one year (Karim 2014, 54). Since then, over the last two decades, the industry has grown exponentially, as western clothing brands have found Bangladesh as a site for cheap and exploitable labour with little to no governmental oversight (Karim 2014, 54). These neoliberal industries occupy spaces and evaluate them as "states of exception" where anything abides, (cf. Agamben 2008). Therefore, when disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse takes place, brands can easily place blame upon national actors. The state of exception is a space outside of the law and the sovereign reach of the nation-state, but at the same time, it is also like a space of immunity or indemnity—that protects the corporations and allows them to shift the responsibility to the government, even when the government cannot easily enforce regulations or protections (Agamben 2008). Meanwhile, inter-governmental politics suffers from rivalry and mistrust of the common people upon the neoliberal state and state-led players. Transnational corporations condemn turbulent political conditions in countries like Bangladesh and use the opportunity to make regions compete for their investment, while factory workers are placed in cruel and discriminatory conditions.

In Bangladesh, the first wage board for garments workers was created in 1994 and the monthly salary was set at \$11; it increased to \$22 in 2006, then \$37 in 2010, and then \$67 following protests after the Rana Plaza collapse—still, ranking it a world-wide low (Karim 2014, 54, 3). This makes me think back to my conversation with Miah Bhai, who had told me that in 2021 the wages for workers were around \$3.2/day or \$96/month. Miah Bhai and Sromik Sheba members, including Taslima Akhter, wish to see the wages raised. During the pandemic, while Miah Bhai was protesting alongside other activists to raise the minimum wage, BGMEA authorities stopped the protests and launched attacks that resulted in the death of several protestors. Miah Bhai suffered several beatings at the hands of these organizational players who are affiliated with the Bangladeshi government and therefore have operational authority over state entities such as the police, armies, and more. Moreover, the BGMEA launched an industrial police program hiring over 3,000 deputy personnel to “maintain order in industrial zones” (BGMEA 2020). However, the BGMEA refutes any accusations regarding shutting down labour organizing and protests (Chua 2020). Any efforts that could prevent workers from producing ‘value’ for the national economy or that could be seen as a threat to Bangladesh’s export-led business model, are viewed as highly contentious and disfavoured by institutions like the BGMEA. These institutions answer to international corporations and reproduce colonial mentalities in viewing Indigenous lands, resources, and peoples, as commodifiable (cf. Lowe 2014; Wolfe 2006; Rajan 2001). Employers’ organizations thus play a key role in maintaining and policing the fast fashion sector. To fully understand their relationship with the state and foreign capital, it is important to address that local labour activists in Bangladesh estimate that at least one-third of the garments factory owners in the country are currently also Ministers of Parliament (MPs). In effect, the state *is* the garments businesses and *vis-à-vis*. What is more, the BGMEA, BKMEA, and other employers’ organizations operate as alternative governments in Bangladesh (Antara and Sultan 2021, 3). To understand better the relationship between the state and the garments sector, it is necessary to assess the role of the employers’ organizations in Bangladesh in greater detail.

### 3.4. Pre-to-Post-Colonial Bengal: Ruling of the British Empire and Partitioning of the Indian Subcontinent

One classic example of the commodification of labour in Bengal is presented by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018) in his investigation of the Jute Mills in Kolkata that survived between the 1890s and 1940s. The hiring target for these mills constituted a very niche socioeconomic and political group of the poorest workers with a lack of class consciousness (Chakrabarty 2018, 11). These workers were mostly illiterate and recognized as ‘unskilled,’ similarly to the Bangladeshi workers who are employed in garments factories today (Chakrabarty 2018; Karim, 2014). The philosophy of this market was to exploit cheap labour. Additionally, the jute mills were maintained by the Indian Jute Manufacturers/Mills Association (IJMA) (Chakrabarty 2018, 15), whose role in the supply chain can be compared to the Bangladeshi employers’ group BGMEA.

Chakrabarty (2018, 15), argued that national institutions like IJMA (and BGMEA in the case of the Bangladeshi apparel industry) embody a ‘mercantilist’ economic approach that derives from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century trade systems, associating increasing exports with national wealth and prosperity. The Indian subcontinent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was unfamiliar with the bourgeois ideas of ‘individualism’ or ‘equality,’ therefore the hierarchization of bodies or the presence of inequality was considered the norm, and not shocking to its regional inhabitants (Chakrabarty 2018, xxi). Consequently, in the 1920s–30s, western notions of equality and creating job opportunities for populations who were formerly disenfranchised from producing for the formal economy (such as lower-class women) were presented through a colourful lens and it was easily marketable to many South Asian and Indian state players. This longer history of commodifying South Asian men and women’s labour by individualizing their voices and demands (Karim 2014; cf. Chakrabarty 2018; Spivak 2003), would later reappear in my research. The cultural connotations of pre-capitalist practices proscribed the populations in Bengal from organizing to their utmost capacity and benefit—once western capitalism had already permeated the region (Chakrabarty 2018, xxi). Even in the 2020s, the social stratification amongst and within South Asian communities (e.g., Indians, Pakistani, and Bangladeshis) remains rigid, especially amongst the middle-to-upper-class groups who are incredibly careful not to associate themselves with the lower classes. Without the formation of alliances amongst different classes, wage workers found it difficult to organize and mobilize around their needs and priorities,

preventing them getting their demands heard on a national scale. In this section, I will investigate the overlap of historical, structural, and cultural issues present in Bangladesh that prevent workers from accessing their rights in this transnational corporation-driven global supply chain, and how national actors play a key role in maintaining this system. As it will become clear, export-led production in general and the readymade garments industry have been central to the story of the development of a national economic model since Bangladesh's independence.

International brands intentionally select areas of production where auditing and factory regulations are limited, off-loading the corporations of any responsibility for workers. Therefore, employers' organizations including the BGMEA, BKMEA, BTMA, and BEPZA, are assigned to provide local-level administration (Kang 2021, 2). I have referred to these institutions several times already in this thesis. Now, I want to elaborate on my findings by asking the following questions: who are these institutions; what roles do they play in the Bangladeshi garments industry; and how are they perceived and described by local activists? To answer these questions, I will refer to my conversation with two differently situated activists, both of whom are experts on the Bangladeshi garments industry and labour movement: they are Rizwana and Saira.

In the 1990s, BGMEA was responsible for maintaining twenty-eight percent of all garments factories (Tanjeem 2021, 263). By 2010, there were 5600 factories enlisted under BGMEA (Rahman and Langford 2014). This accounts for only half of all factories since majority of the workers in Bangladesh today are employed by subcontractors (on which more below). The factories listed under BGMEA, or under the Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA), are generally considered to be better maintained than subcontracted factories, for which there is little to no regulatory oversight (Tanjeem 2021, 264). Nevertheless, these institutions embody the post-colonial state and can be oppressive in nature (Rahman and Langford 2014; cf. Brown 2010). Recall, for example, the discussion in chapter one regarding the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. On March 26, 2020, the Bangladeshi government declared strict lockdowns, leading BGMEA to shut down all the garments factories, as ten million Bangladeshis returned home from Dhaka (Kabir, Maple, and Usher 2020, 48). Suddenly, while the spread of the virus was at its peak during the summer, BGMEA ordered the reopening of the factories. Supervisors called and demanded workers return to work, threatening they

would lose their jobs if they did not return (Kabir et al. 2020, 48). During this period, all public transportation was still closed, so apparel factory workers were compelled to walk back to the factory towns surrounding Dhaka on foot.

This is how Saira, a leading researcher on the garments labour movement, described the situation:

The thing we noticed during the corona pandemic is that the treatment that workers had to face. Suddenly, while the entire country is under lockdown, the factories were reopened. The garments workers were outside of the city and had to come back. Here the gap we noticed is that communication was an issue, between trade union leaders and the workers (those who are average labourers and cannot participate with any unions because the factories they work for do not allow it). How wide is this communication gap?

Well, at the national level while these negotiations were taking place regarding whether the factories will be opening. There were posts appearing in newspapers and on social media. We were observing—once they said that the factories will be opening, then the decision came that the opening will be deferred by a week. The news of that one week of delay, was flooding social media as people were criticizing the situation. This had a substantial impact which obliged factory owners and groups to change our decisions, since the public was getting so upset that how could this be? As these negotiations were taking place, at that point I had this question within myself that I tried to mention in my research as well that, was there no way for the trade union leaders to inform the garments workers who had gone back to their villages, of the news that, *okay we are trying to keep the factories closed, so please hold back, and do not return to work just yet.* We saw that no, thousands of workers, they walked on foot—basically at that time there was no transportation, during the national corona lockdown, even if they could somehow afford it. Meaning, rickshaws, cars, vans, trucks, bus, absolutely nothing was running. So, they walked mile after mile, *some of them had to walk 200-300 miles to reach the factory districts.* They just walked. And when they reached Dhaka in the middle of the night after their miles-long walk, they came to find that the factories were not opening. They will remain closed for one more week. At that point, they had to turn back. Those who did not want to return, they attempted to stay in Dhaka at the houses they maybe rent in the city during work. We were watching on the news that at that point the *bariwalas* (tenants) were not allowing workers to enter since everyone was afraid of contracting the virus at that point. The *bariwalas* said “they walked through crowds to get here, if we allow them to enter this could expose those who are here to the virus.” So, what did the workers have to end up doing? Many of them spent the entire night sitting along the sidewalk. They could not enter their rental units, and so eventually, they headed back to their villages.

The fact that garments workers were forced to walk for hundreds of miles only to be turned back, is a glaring example of the power of the state and the employers’ organizations, as well as their failures to attend to workers’ needs or be responsible for worker safety. It reminded me of the

IJMA at the Jute Mills in Kolkata (Calcutta), as discussed by Dipesh Chakrabarty (2018). If the IJMA played a key role in maintaining the colonial economy, today the BGMEA plays a similar institutional role in upholding the neoliberal economy, *and anything that could threaten its functionality, or the profitability of the export-led apparel sector becomes a threat to the nation and the state*. The key difference, though, is that there is no longer a single colonial power but an array of corporate interests and powerful international and national actors and institutions who require cheap labour to be readily available to them.

In my quest to learn more about how the garments sector operates, I had the opportunity to speak with a leading Bangladeshi American scholar named Rizwana. Rizwana and I got along from the beginning. They had so many insightful contributions to make, it was only my second interview and I had learned a lot. I turned to Rizwana and said, there seem to be so many global and national players, who would you define as the state that is responsible for the workers? Rizwana replied that she thinks, in the case of the Bangladeshi fast fashion industry, it is a very confusing and convoluted state because there are many overlaps in roles and players. For example, the former mayor of Dhaka North was also the CEO of BGMEA until 2017. She noted:

I mean if you look at the makeup of our parliament members, more than one-third of our parliament members own garments factories. *So, to some extent, garments factory owners, they are the government, they are the state*. And when we talk about another state and its role in protecting government workers, you are basically going back to the garments factory owners, again and again because they run the state.

Rizwana explained that the political climate can be quite intimidating as a scholar. People are allowed to criticize the state, such as the Bangladeshi government or a particular institution, however, it is unacceptable to criticize the people or players in it. Many scholars have received tremendous backlash for attempting to raise awareness about these matters. Rizwana concluded: *“Garments factory owners in Bangladesh are the state. They exploit workers and act as the voice of garments workers through organizations such as BGMEA, BKMEA, etc.”* Rizwana and her colleagues have experienced more direct repercussions, including having publications they wrote removed from online newspapers because they criticized particular figures from the employers’ organizations and ‘named names.’

Rizwana described it this way:

So, if you criticize the state, say you mention the Bangladeshi state should be doing this, or that, then to some extent it is permissible. However, if you directly quote those folks, or even in other cases, if it is not related to the work you are doing, and you become critical of the army for example—I mean you cannot say those things. So, going back to your question about who you see plays the role of the state, I mean, I will say it is garments factory owners and managers who basically have total control over what the state does. And, oftentimes within Bangladesh, those same names who are exploiting the workers, when it comes to the question of appealing to the international community, they tend to be the voice of workers.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the BGMEA published a heartfelt video requesting international buyers to not cancel the orders of workers so that they can pay their bills and afford to survive. The deeply charismatic appeal of the video as though these employers' groups deeply care for the workers is problematic. Considering, BGMEA is known for preventing workers from protesting, resulting in people like Miah Bhai, Saydia Gulrukh, Shabujul Islam, and other labour activists risking their lives when protesting for workers' rights and demands.

Just look at what BGMEA did in the last couple of years. Like when workers were organizing for the wage movement, BGMEA kept repeating that 20,000 Taka is impractical, 16,000 Taka, is impractical, and 8,000 Taka, perhaps can be managed. Therefore, ultimately, it's BGMEA that is doing everything to ensure the minimum wage is not raised or is minimally raised. And all the things that were happening during our call-in summer of 2021, such as forcing workers to come back to the factory while the Delta variant was killing so many people and with vaccination, discrepancy, we have not yet achieved that rate of immunity. So, whilst all these things are happening—what are the garments factory owners and employers' groups doing to remedy the situation? Nothing. Yet, when it comes to the question of whether orders should be canceled, which would lead garments factory owners to lose money, in that case, they tend to suddenly care for the voices of factory workers and try to appeal to the international community that, okay, do not cancel our orders as it will hurt the workers—when really it is to save their pockets.

Rizwana clarified what majority of texts and publications on the apparel industry do not cover, regarding the convoluted labour movement where workers and activists are outright beaten or fired for criticizing the national players and factory owners who are maintaining the capitalist industry in Bangladesh. Meanwhile, the nationalistic progress in terms of GDP growth that the garments industry and workers produce is tactically marketed by the national government; and the imagery of helpless workers who need the industry for sustenance is reproduced by both national and global players.

Before I wrap up my analysis of the employers' organizations, I will shortly turn back to my interview with Miah Bhai whose trade unionist experience exposed him to learning about the

insides of two of Bangladesh's largest export-led businesses. According to Miah Bhai, in the two main economic sectors in Bangladesh, the garments industry and the temporary workers' program, both industries treat workers like "*twenty-first-century slaves*." The Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agency (BAIRA) recruits Bangladeshi sromik through recruitment agencies where Bangladesh's strength is described in terms of "manpower" or the number of available recruits (BAIRA 2022). While manpower describes the strength of Bangladesh's population density, it is worth recognizing that the trade union sector receives national and global scrutiny for being thoroughly male dominated, therefore, the usage of these terms should be further problematized. Nevertheless, continuing with Miah Bhai's analysis of the Bangladeshi migrant workers program, in 2021, Pakistani workers were paid \$1200, Indians received \$1400, but Bangladeshi workers only received \$400–500. Until the 1980s, migrant workers in Bangladesh were treated and paid well; comparatively, in the 2020s, their wages are disproportionately low. Miah Bhai further exclaimed that people from other countries get paid more than Bangladeshis, even though several BAIRA members are also the ministers of Bangladesh. "*They are so powerful . . . we average people cannot compete*," he exclaimed. According to Miah, any time apparel workers, labour activists, or trade unionists enter the streets to protest for higher wages or remittances following injuries, losses, or layoffs, facing workers, the BGMEA is known for stopping these demonstrations by force.

Both industries—the garments sector and the temporary worker program—are equally volatile and exploitative in their own ways, especially considering the factory owners are the state and fulfill the roles of MPs and MPPs. Miah Bhai expressed his frustration that these people have so much power in their hands, yet they continue suppressing worker's rights. As he viewed it, these powerful players bend laws and regulations to increase profit much of which comes at a cost for workers who are uninformed of these changes for the most part. The close alignment between the government, factory owners, and employers' organizations meant that workers' rights were getting repeatedly violated and or overlooked. Indeed, he said that the government was working for the interests of factory owners and others profiting from the apparel sector, rather than advocating for the rights and interests of workers themselves. When factory owners hold seats in the government, they can alter parliamentary laws, labour laws, and all such processes concerning the rights and security of average wage workers to their own advantage and to promote other capitalist players. "*Buddhijibira shobai bikrito hoye geche*" translates: all the



war heroes of Bangladesh are now sellouts, Miah exclaimed; “*the heritage of Bangladesh is getting sold.*” The government is “*matha noto*” (obedient) to the garments bebsahis, additionally, certain governmental players are direct beneficiaries of these key industries. Two of my informants shared that to them, it feels as though Bangladesh (and Bangladeshis) is being commodified and *sold for parts*. One key aspect of that vulnerability and exploitation arises from the intricate relations and (mis)alignments between the Bangladeshi government, factory owners, and subcontractors. It is to a discussion of the role of subcontractors in the garments sector that I now turn to.

### Neoliberal Exceptions: Subcontractors in the Bangladeshi Garments industry

At the time in 2021, when I initially began my fieldwork, I was curious to learn more about the exceptional conditions facing apparel factory workers that overwrite the forms of ordinary violence they encounter (cf. Beckett 2020; Ahmann 2019; Agamben 2008). International criticisms of the garments industry often garner attention toward export processing zones (Neveling 2015), however, as I unraveled through my research, an exceptional zone or space where the vulnerability of workers increases can be formed anywhere. Nevertheless, while speaking with Rizwana, I learned the different ways that EPZs are described and conceptualized in the context of Bangladeshi garments production. Subcontractors and export processing zones (EPZs) are different institutional arrangements and are responsible for distinct types of factories—EPZs are maintained by employers’ groups such as BEPZA and BGMEA, while subcontracted factories are completely unregulated (Anner 2019). Subcontractors will locate the cheapest vacant lot as a location for a factory and hire workers for temporary periods until their orders are completed. After that, workers are let go and left to seek alternative means of income. In chapter one, I discussed how EPZs are heavily scrutinized by Western scholars. Much of that criticism has focused on how EPZs operate as a kind of space of exception. Yet, in Bangladesh, factories located in EPZs are better maintained and frequently deemed safer for workers than the factories in the expanding sector of subcontractors (Anner 2019). My research looks to shift away from a narrower focus on the exceptionality of EPZs (which do allow factories to be exempt from certain kinds of laws or regulations) and to expand the theory of exception (Agamben 2008). Undeniably, in the case of the Bangladeshi garments sector, the subcontracted factories are perhaps *more* exceptional spaces. Rizwana shared with me that many activists and

workers are not too concerned about EPZs, instead, they view the 50% of apparel factories that are under subcontractors, as the more pressing issue. Rizwana visited one such factory and described it as exceptionally dangerous, but Global North players and institutions tend to avoid the topic of subcontractors altogether.

When Rizwana went on her field visits to factories, the owner happened to be one of her neighbours; he had limited knowledge about the sort of work that Rizwana was doing but was kind enough to show her around. Rizwana described her visit to the subcontracted factory outside Dhaka this way:

At the factory, I saw that it was on a high-rise building that was under construction. It was not even finished yet. And they put some heavy machinery in the building where they were producing those clothes. They were probably coloring the clothes or whatever at that time but there were these extremely heavyweight machineries set-up in that building. So that is just one of the examples of how subcontractors actually work. Therefore, I would say it is complicated because from a global perspective, EPZs by default are an exploitative mechanism of suppressing workers' rights and so on. But at the same time when you do your field work, I mean, it is suppressing workers' rights, but it is fascinating that there are more dangerous violations to workers' rights that are happening in those factories that subcontract. And you know what—

Rizwana took a big pause before finishing her sentence.

Okay, this is mind-blowing...so to some extent, it used to be a taboo to speak about subcontractors in the global north. Additionally, around American-based labour groups such as the ILRF—these organizing spaces would not allow people to address the subject of subcontractors. Why? Because those North American based organizations are trying to push the western brands to take responsibility. However, it is quite an easy fix for brands like Gap and Zara to avoid the responsibility by saying something like: *“It is not our fault that subcontractor is messing everything up. These subcontractors are not regulated, and it is the fault of the Bangladeshi government. Therefore, we, the brands did not know that the company we were contracting from, subcontracted the order to another smaller firm. We had nothing to do about that.”* It is an extremely popular excuse used by those local North American brands. Therefore, the North American Labour Rights Activists used to get mad when someone mentioned subcontractors as it disrupted their agendas.

If you go to Bangladesh. I mean subcontractors, they were a huge problem!! Subcontracted factories are not regulated. It is interesting that those factories that are already under ACCORD and Alliance are receiving massive amounts of attention from the global community. A lot of them have improved their building and fire safety and so on . . . but subcontractors are basically staying out of the whole thing. So, it is interesting that in Bangladesh this is a huge issue. I mean talk to those local garments labour rights

organizers; they will tell you that subcontractors are a huge problem. But in North America, it is like “we don't talk about that,” (laughs).

This is certainly how Miah Bhai characterized things as well. He described the state of Bangladeshi garments workers in 2021 as characterized by abnormally low salaries (wages are a key issue for him and other activists). Yet, within the Bangladeshi national garments sector, salaries in EPZs were slightly higher and they provided better (but by no means perfect) environmental conditions for workers. Subcontracted factories were comparably much worse.

Miah stated that:

*Labour laws bolte kichui nai* (there is no such thing as labour laws here). Of course, that does not mean that conditions are particularly good in the employers' organization regulated factories, just that the subcontracted factories are especially dangerous and exploitative. Of the four thousand factories currently under BGMEA's occupancy (aside from all the factories that are subcontracted), the majority do not follow proper labour rights. *Overall workers are treated like slaves*. The workers receive zero breaks for using the toilet or at all, additionally, the toilets are extremely far away and distant. All that seems to truly matter here is what the government wants (which is fulfilled by garments factory owners).”

Then, I asked, who are these garments factory owners?

Factory owners in Bangladesh are part of a complex chain of relationships, and many of my informants shared that the garments factory owners and employers' groups function as alternative governments; in a sense, the factory owners are the state (Antara and Sultan 2021, 2). In 2005, as the Bangladeshi garments industry was flourishing, most of the apparel factories were owned by Bangladeshi manufacturers in partnership with South Korean, Chinese, and Indian business investors (Karim 2014, 54). Heaps of South Korean capital was invested in building and expanding the fast fashion industry in Bangladesh during the era of trade liberalizations (Lewis 2019, 1964). That capital investment helped lure in western brands beguiling them with cheap and replaceable labour; practically no oversight by governmental entities; and little or no room for labour organizing (Kang 2021; Karim 2014, 54). At the same time, the labour movement in Bangladesh has been fractured since the 1990s, when it was torn into two visible groups: NGO-affiliated activists on the one hand, who often had ties to national and international players, and local activists and grassroots organizers on the other hand, who were much more clearly based in local communities. The NGO-affiliated group has typically

been well-funded, and their agendas have focused on issues of corporate responsibility and the role of brands and international actors in the supply chain. NGO-affiliated groups have been the key promoters of international policies such as the ACCORD (and, in an earlier moment, the Harkin Bill) (Kang 2021; Karim 2014). By contrast, local labour activists and grassroots organizers have remained largely independent of NGOs and international support. They are comprised mainly of independent activists who are locally situated, and their efforts are focused on raising inter-class awareness amongst all Bangladeshis to inform others of working conditions in the factories. They are less concerned with international policy or corporate actions; instead, their primary goal is to build a local labour movement, and they thus share concerns with traditional labour movements and trade unionists, even if they have expanded their efforts to consider the full range of economic and social issues facing garments workers. Local activists seek to hold corporations and factory owners responsible for the treatment of workers and, above all, to hold the Bangladeshi government responsible for fulfilling its obligations to its citizens (Kang 2021; Karim 2014, 59). In Chapter Four, I will elaborate on the fragmented sromik andolon in Bangladesh.

Factory owners are known to disapprove of both sorts of labor organizers and movements, although, the NGO modes of activism can at times resonate with the national government's own rhetoric, and the idea that external agencies (NGOs and civil society, the market) should take up the role and function of the neoliberal state (cf. Lewis 2019; Anner 2019; Harvey 2006; Sassen 2002). This can be described as 'denationalization' (Sassen 2007). Nevertheless, as I learned during my fieldwork, there is considerable overlap in the roles and responsibilities of factory owners and government officials. Factory owners (similarly to employers' groups) are known for barring workers from organizing and publicizing their demands. These state-led players argue that these demonstrations (or fulfilling these rights for workers) will lead them and the Bangladeshi state to lose the garments industry and thereby go bankrupt (Karim 2014). The evidence is critical—Bangladeshi factory owners are extremely wealthy in comparison to apparel factory workers, whose labour produces the profits for the industry (and the nation). Nonetheless, the earnings of factory owners are comparable to petty change next to the large profits made by transnational corporations and brands such as Gap, Walmart, or H&M (Karim 2014, 59).

The intermediary economic position of factory owners helps explain why they resisted the ACCORD, which they argued was awfully expensive for them, alongside fulfilling all other factory running costs. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi *bebshashis* were obligated to comply with these regulations and maintain good relations with western corporations to maintain trade relations. Bangladeshi state players like garments factory owners are often presented as repressive and patriarchal, and post-colonial states like Bangladesh are vilified in the news and on western media and are presented as suffering in perpetual states of ‘crisis’ (cf. Ahmann 2018). While it is true business owners are seeking to accumulate profit, nevertheless, the positionality of Bangladeshi factory owners is more complex, as they are trying to uphold the country’s export relations and maintain jobs for garments workers. Observations collected from the experiences of informants during and following the capitalist disasters that shook the Bangladeshi garments industry show how western corporations respond to these events with abstract policies that do not listen to the demands of national or local players and with a discourse that depicts the industrial failures as “Bangladesh’s problem” while playing a hands-off role when it comes to fulfilling workers’ rights (Tanjeem 2017). Meanwhile, the western media and internationally funded groups were criticized by locals for circulating terrifying post-disaster imageries and narratives of those who suffered losses from these factory ‘incidents’ (Lewis 2019), which according to local activists diverts attention away from grassroots organizers from conjoining their efforts and demanding remittances, rights, and improved wages for workers. Rather, the corporations are seen shifting away to further lucrative regions and seeking cheaper sources of labour to avoid criticism and hide from public scrutiny by elongating the distance between the producers and consumers in the industry (Anner 2019). The intention of the fast fashion supply chain is not to provide economic opportunities for disadvantaged communities such as Bangladeshi women garments workers; rather, it is to secure ongoing sources of profit for transnational corporations (Tanjeem 2017). Meanwhile, the Bangladeshi government, employers’ organizations, factory owners, and other third-party players such as subcontractors, are afraid of losing the industry to other competitive post-colonial states where the profit margins are higher and the condition of work for employees is similar or worse than in Bangladesh.

### 3.5. Concluding thoughts on National Players, Industrial Crisis, and International Policies

In this chapter, I presented the roles and responsibilities of the key national players who are present in maintaining this lucrative economy—the Bangladeshi garments industry. The narratives I have highlighted disclose how post-colonial states' representation are exploited by global brands and institutions to portray Bangladeshi sromik as passive recipients of aid, and national factory owners and governmental actors as corrupt and patriarchal oppressed from whom the workers need 'saving' (Lewis 2019; cf. Said 1978). However, as the data I have presented discloses—not all politically powerful players in Bangladesh are corrupt; rather these actors are attempting to maintain an economic sector that employs millions of vulnerable groups in the region. Transnational corporations continue to avoid taking responsibility for workers, meanwhile, western institutions and NGOs can avoid addressing more critical matters such as the dominance of subcontractors in the Bangladeshi apparel industry. International players fixate on policies like the ACCORD and Alliance that are intended to 'fix' or 'remedy' disasters, but these policies add tremendous costs of maintaining factories that national factory owners are compelled to fulfill, thereby driving even more of them to turn to subcontractors. Meanwhile, these policies do not attend to the demands of workers who are seeking improved wages, job security, and better treatment as citizens and labourers. The opportunity for wage work in factories as presented in case of the fast fashion industry is exploitative, it manipulates the labour executed by colonized, racialized, and gendered groups. The association of 'value' within this industry differs significantly based on the subject group. Therefore, it is vital to take a ground-up approach and listen to locals, such as labour activists in Bangladesh who are intimately familiar with the intricacies of factory work and continue to mobilize the demands of wage labourers.

## Chapter 4: Bangladeshi Labour Activists in the face of “Crisis”: Theories of Global Capitalism from the Ground Up

In the previous chapter, I presented the roles and responsibilities of the key national players who are present in maintaining the Bangladeshi garments industry. In this chapter, I will pursue a ‘contrapuntal’ ethnographic approach (Daswani 2019; cf. Li 2020; Said 1993), to highlight gaps in the global and national scales, based on the narratives I have collected from informants who are familiar with the conditions of Bangladeshi workers or *sromik* on the ground. A ‘contrapuntal perspective’ can make visible the hierarchical power relations amongst players in a system (Daswani 2019; cf. Li 2020; Said 1993), specifically in the apparel supply chain, in this case. Additionally, I will emphasize the desperate call for listening to local voices, workers, and activists, to gather a nuanced understanding of what is needed to improve the conditioning of lives of Bangladeshi citizens and wage workers in similar circumstances. The gaps between players from different scales materialized as I delved deeper into my conversations with informants, the local activists, and thinkers who are at the forefront of advocating for labour rights and demanding increased wages for workers. Local activists are well-versed in the social, cultural, political, and economic underpinnings of the lives of Bangladeshi factory workers. Therefore, they have a nuanced understanding of the needs of garments workers, and wage workers more generally. International policies like the ACCORD are negotiated between a secluded group of players in the global supply chain, driven by transnational corporations, and forwarded by NGOs, and other state-led actors such as employers’ organizations (BGMEA), who claim to represent Bangladeshi workers on a global scale. As I have been arguing throughout this thesis, the case of the Bangladeshi garments labour movement illustrates that some of these players are unfamiliar with the nuances on the ground, whereas others are actively ignoring certain issues through their political and economic stance that warrants ignorance toward certain parts of the system. However, these complexities are what define the lives and livelihoods of apparel factory workers and lifelong labour activists who dedicate their time to demanding equal rights for wage workers, locally and globally.

Actors at the global level tend to perceive labourers through NGO-driven modes of development and all-too-often they reiterate the equivocal yet enticing imagery of western actors like George Harrison and western agencies like UNICEF, with their focus on “saving” global south players, specifically poor and uneducated Bangladeshi women (Chowdhury 2018; Siddiqi 2009; cf. Said 1978). For example, following the Rana Plaza collapse, the ILO raised \$30 million in voluntary donations provided mostly by global brands, enabling brands to blend ‘soft regulation,’ business, and corporate social responsibility, all while, reproducing a top-down western saviour complex (Blair cited in Prentice 2021, 14). Consequently, the ‘universalization’ of labour standards and supply chain capitalism takes the place of the Bangladeshi state’s responsibility for its citizens, including garments workers (Prentice 2021, 14). As a result, NGOs come to embody a necessary role within the state by upholding the rights of access to food, water, healthcare, education, and other basic necessities to Bangladeshi citizens (Lewis 2019; Karim 2014). Yet, as we have seen in the previous chapters, the responses from global and national players amidst crises have time and time again appeared as ineffective and inadequate in serving and protecting apparel factory workers; these band-aid solutions failed to address that people’s rights can only be fulfilled at a local level (Lewis 2019). Now, let us take a closer look at the engagements and commitments of localized approaches to labour activism, that get stronger following moments of rupture, however, the efforts of local organizing are not only limited to moments of rupture. Localized activism goes beyond providing crisis relief, rather, it intends to see long-term and fiscal development and improvement in the conditioning of Bangladeshi labour rights, and attain higher wages for workers, whether the garments industry remains in Bangladesh or not. The rights and treatment of Bangladeshi wage workers and citizens are central to local labour activists.

#### 4.1. From Disaster Capitalism to Localized Activism: The Rana Plaza Collapse and the Formation of Sromik Sheba

The conversations I had with my informants—Onik, Maisha, Salma Apa, Joy, and others—altered the way I think, speak, define, and understand the garments industry. Additionally, their words highlighted for me the fragmented labour movement in the industry, and the voices that get buried under abstract policies and discussions about capitalism and neoliberalism. An ethnographic approach recognizes the strength and passion behind localized approaches to labour



activism that can completely emasculate those former conceptions about Global South players and garments factory workers. How do Bangladeshi labour activists talk about their encounters with the state and how they experience capitalism? Anthropological research promotes ground-up methods of conducting research, where I learned that local activists are pragmatically focused on wage workers at a physical level. They are informed by and aware of how national and international scales may be influencing the local situation. Local activists are not absorbed by abstract policies or theoretical generalizations about ‘neoliberalism,’ ‘gender equality,’ or ‘human rights’—they have greater, more fundamental concerns to administer, such as whether garments workers are able to feed their families, or if they can safely transit to and from work. Capitalism seeks to turn ‘work’ into abstract labour measured in time and paid (if at all) in wages, but this results in the erasure of the worker’s skills and aptitudes (Millar 2018; Federici 2017; Harvey 2006; Graeber 2001). Capitalist relations thus turn meaningful social relations into abstract things that can be commodified. In the case of the apparel industry, as the product (garment) moves through the supply chain, it ends up further and further away from the particular people and place where it was produced.

To move beyond dominant western representations of post-colonial states and Global South actors, then, it is necessary to work against this abstraction and reification and to focus on the local level, on the narratives of those who have tackled these capitalist disasters, and on the concrete realities of time, place, memories, and lived experience. Additionally, how activists describe their efforts, and the condition of garments work can be applied to develop a critical theory of global capitalism and the commodification of colonized labour at large, by those who have daily encounters with the industry. The further one shifts away in the supply chain from the local towards the national or the global, the more abstract those experiences of the worker and activist become. It is these experiences that continue to ‘haunt’ the global industry as a continuation of colonial and patriarchal subjugation of Global South wage workers, specifically women (Akhter 2021; cf. Kilroy-Marac 2018, Gordon 2008). In my analysis, I draw on anthropological modes of investigation that can show the ambiguities and contradictions between the various scales within the industry—the global, national, and local. Additionally, as my conversations with informants will highlight, these scales and players are deeply entangled and inseparable—they continually influence one another in the maintenance of this neoliberal supply chain.

Global and national players can be observed avoiding taking responsibility for workers and prohibiting workers from collectivizing as their main intention is to practice extractive capitalism and accrue profit. Sustainability or ethical production and consumption are not the goals of these corporate chains. Based on the ethnographic data I have collected, I will highlight the significance of listening to local actors including Bangladeshi apparel workers and labour activists, to recognize their hopes, dreams, and demands. In this chapter, I will shift my tone from the previous chapters, as I drift away from the dominant narratives about the fast fashion industry, to make space for the voices of those who have direct experience with the garments industry and who can clearly identify and define the needs and demands of Bangladeshi garments workers. In what follows, I will present the lived experiences of local actors who have nuanced knowledge, analytic understanding, and direct and intimate familiarity with the gaps, meaningful silences, demands, and intricacies that are found in the crevasses of this large-scale industry. Moreover, while listening to local voices, I will emphasize the ‘politics of refusal’ practiced by my informants and myself as we deny the dominant narrative of Bangladesh and Bangladeshi people as ‘defenseless,’ ‘hopeless,’ and in a constant state of ‘crisis’ (cf. Simpson 2007). As anthropological research shows, the whole picture is much more complex, as are the lives of Bangladeshi garments sromik. I will begin with a short synopsis of some of my encounters with informants, the majority of whom are Bangladeshi labour organizers who were present during the Tazreen factory fire in 2012, the Rana Plaza collapse, the Tung Hai factory fire in 2013, the Tuba crisis in 2014 that led to 1,500 workers going on a hunger strike, and many other moments of crisis. Local activists continue collaborating their efforts to produce relief funds to aid and support Bangladeshi apparel workers, their families, and the victims of factory disasters. As I hope to show, moments of crisis can be mobilized by local activists to bring about meaningful change that is reflective of the needs of Bangladeshi garments workers (cf. Ahmann 2018).

#### Onik’s Memories from April 24, 2013 – The Rana Plaza Collapse

On that day, I was heading home from a friend’s place which is about an hour away from the site of the event where the eight-story garments building called the Rana Plaza collapsed. I was five minutes far from that place and then suddenly—there was this—I do not recall exactly, however, the ground began to shake, and momentously, everything stopped, including the traffic. And as I started going towards the source of it, where people were pointing, I saw white ashes. The entire area had already filled up with cloud-like

smoke from the crashing piles of cement falling from the building. Bodies of dead workers laid bare, some of them looked like—if there is a bag full of puffed rice and someone were to poke a hole in the bag, how the rice would look falling from that hole—that is how the insides of workers appeared falling from the holes and gaps in their skin and bones. I witnessed tons of workers jumping from the fourth floor in an attempt to save their lives.

The sheer detail with which Onik described his memories reminded me of the vividness of the site of the collapse. I tried to capture his words as I continued scribbling down anything I could on my notepad. At times I paused, simply to take in the depth and dread with which Onik made his decision to attend to the victims of the disaster.

At the time, I had my camera with me, but I could not capture any images that day. I could not find it in me to think to take any photographs on that first day. There were thousands of people going inside trying to find their loved ones. By the end of the night, I began to get some of my senses back, then I started thinking about photographs and those sorts of things. One of the things that haunt me to this day is that I could not eat. That day, the next day, and for many days to come, I could not eat. Especially *bhaat* (rice), I could not tolerate the sight of rice, even though it is a staple food in Bangladesh.

Those who rushed in to help at the site of the collapse experienced forms of persistent trauma that have lasted longer than the media’s attention or the international community’s concern. For those on the ground, those most directly impacted by the disaster, the Rana Plaza collapse inspired a new generation of grassroots activists to join together, to work to provide for those injured or affected by the disaster, and to hold the perpetrators responsible for their inactions. Local organizers and labour activists continued their conjoined efforts for six months following the collapse, working to offer immediate and temporary relief for those who lost their family members, those who were injured, or affected by the event whatsoever.

After Rana Plaza happened on April 24th, for over six months I was there every day. Most nights I crashed at my friend’s place nearby. What would happen is every day around 2 pm, I would go to the restaurant that is a few minutes away from the Rana Plaza. Then every time I ordered some food, whether it was fast food or otherwise, I would just vomit. Especially the rice, just by looking at *bhaat*, I would vomit, because of the amount of flesh I saw that day—open flesh—that every time I would see rice, I would just recall the flesh. I could not fathom anything else. And everything would begin to smell like flesh. At the end of the day, when I would get up to leave, the scent would still linger with me throughout the one-hour ride home. That is how intense the whole event was.

After going back and forth a few times, I decide to ask Onik, “At the time you were attending Pathshala (post-secondary school in Bangladesh) for photojournalism. What happened after that, how did this event—the Rana Plaza collapse—impact your own life?”

Onik continued:

Well, I was not able to attend any classes for six months. Then I tried to upcycle the photographs that I had taken for the classes I had, but I was not personally ready to accept that “*I want to photograph in this way*” because this [reusing photographs from disasters like the Rana Plaza collapse] looks like trauma porn, for me at least.

I wanted a unique way to express myself through photography. So, I quit school. I was not able to continue any longer. I collected these objects I found from the collapse site, such as human skulls, people’s used vanity bags, teapots, and all sorts of things such as lipstick, bra, undergarments, and an entire skull with hair still attached. So many things that I collected, I gathered all of them and kept them in my bedroom. I kept all this for about six months after the Rana Plaza collapsed. Then, I photographed them. I tried to tell a story in this way. But of course, this is such a massive event.

This is when Onik decided to share with me the story of a close comrade. He told me:

I know someone personally; his name was Himu. After Rana Plaza, he committed suicide. He was so mental. He was one of the people who went inside and cut someone’s sleeve to get them out of the building. He was not a doctor or anything. He just saw a common handsaw, like a child’s tool, it was not meant for cutting through a bone. It was not electric or anything. So, he had to go through that, which later killed him. So regardless, the number of people killed that we see publicized, “1,134” is not even accurate. For there were so many passive killings. So many families will never stand up and it will take them a few generations to get back from that loss... So, all these things were very heavy for me. I could not even go out for six months. I completely changed the style of my photography; I dropped out of doing any kind of journalism work. I used to do photojournalism work for various outlets prior to the collapse, but after that, I stopped.

Words failed to define how I was feeling while Onik described what he witnessed at the site of the Rana Plaza collapse. That day, I learned about activists like Himu who saved the lives of those attempting to escape the collapse site, only for the trauma of the event to result in him committing suicide. The idea of lives that are lost in this way being passive, as in they are unaccounted for when the media reiterates the memory of “1,134 deaths” only, had not occurred to me before this. Nevertheless, I wished I could reduce the pain that Onik and his counterparts endured. Yet, all I could do was take a pause in silence and ponder, how many Himus have been lost in this way?

My initial memories of learning about the disastrous conditions of factory work in the readymade garments supply chain began with a case study of the Rana Plaza collapse. Thus, it made sense for me to begin my inquiry there as well. While there are countless events like the Rana Plaza collapse, some receive coverage while most are deliberately swept under the rug. In some cases, these horrific tragedies may only receive annual recognition on the calendar date they occurred.

However, for those who have direct experience with these disasters, their take on the matter is drastically different. The informants I spoke with cannot choose to disassociate from the memories of these events, nor can they put aside the socioeconomic, political, or health implications that such disasters imposed on them. Onik, who was attending Pathshala—South Asian Media Institute in Bangladesh—dropped out of school shortly after witnessing the Rana Plaza massacre. Speaking with Onik was one of the most emotional and enlightening encounters of my life—the honesty and conviction with which he shared his story and the tragedy of what he had witnessed, was trembling. Shortly after our interview had ended, I recall quickly putting my laptop away and crying to myself while laying with my head facing the pillow. Whilst I did not want Onik to see me this way, my heart was breaking while he described to me the losses, memories, and traumas, as well as the common humanity that brought everyone together to give a lending hand during a disaster. Something so life-changing had happened to these people. I commemorate my opportunity to speak and learn from Onik, and all my informants. These individuals, and the Sromik Sheba team, gathered around to assemble relief projects aimed to provide aid to all the victims of the disaster, including the workers and their families.

As mentioned earlier, shortly following the collapse, once they reached a death toll of 500, the authorities, including the BGMEA, made an announcement that the search was over and that there were no more bodies left at the site. Miah Bhai says that the authorities were uninformed and lazy because following their announcement Miah uncovered two skeletons with his own hands. Sromik Sheba, along with the average civilians who gathered out of sheer humanity, continued to count the number of dead bodies until they reached 1,134. Although it is believed that many more lives were lost to that collapse. On that day in April, 1,300 people went missing, and 1,134 names were declared by the ground teams including Sromik Sheba. To this day it is believed that several hundred people remain missing, in addition to the 1,134 dead bodies that were collected. There are no certainties of whether these missing persons are dead or alive.

I recall my conversation with another activist, Joy, who is a Bangladeshi American academician. Joy was exceptionally critical of the western news and media outlets following these disasters that depicted Bangladesh as “*a pathological place where terrible things happen.*” Accordingly, western media fails to address the efforts and contributions of local activists who

work(ed) tirelessly to provide on-the-ground support to fast fashion workers. Onik alongside Sromik Sheba contributed their skills and tools, they gathered at the site of the collapse for six months, providing small aid and relief to the victims and their families. Whether it was providing some money to a former worker to enable them to pay for their daughter's dowry, or to buy a new Singer sewing machine for a victim's family to produce passive income, the Sromik Sheba team assisted in any way possible. The dominant media representation of these catastrophic events can appear rigged once these local points of view are considered. According to grassroots organizers, the western media's representation of Bangladeshi sromik as weak and defenseless, the NGO-based "band-aid fixes" that repeatedly follow disasters (and that fail to prevent workplace calamities), and the production and implementation of unaudited international policies such as the ACCORD, all fail to acknowledge workers' demands or recognize the role of local activists.

#### 4.2. Grassroots Advocacy: Localized Approaches to Disaster Relief and Combatting Ordinary Violence

In this section, I will answer the following questions, how do local activists organize following these disasters? How do their efforts vary from the promises and avoidable regulatory policies that are introduced by the global and national players and NGOs? I will begin by going back to my interview with Onik, who was a young undergraduate student at the time of the Rana Plaza collapse. This disaster radically altered Onik's life, alongside the lives of tens of thousands of innocent people. I present Onik's memories of the formation of Sromik Sheba after the Rana Plaza collapse and the mobilization of localized activism and reflect on the contributions of these actors—including my informants, Onik, Miah Bhai, Salma Apa, and the other members of Sromik Sheba team some of whom are labour activists, anthropologists, academicians, scholars, and advocates for Bangladeshi wage workers, including garments sromik. Taslima Akhter, Rehnuma Ahmed, Moshrefa Mishu, Saydia Gulrukh, and Shabujul Islam, to name a few, are the activists behind the revolutionary efforts formulated by groups like Sromik Sheba. These names may be recognizable to those familiar with Bangladesh's *sromik andolon* labour movement. The Sromik Sheba team united their efforts and worked tirelessly for the next six months to assist the victims of the Rana Plaza collapse. Some of these same individuals worked on relief projects following the Tazreen factory fire, the Tuba crisis, and other industrial disasters.

## Local Labour Rights Movement and Involvement from Sromik Sheba

International and national aid efforts failed to reach many of the victims who were immediately impacted by the collapse event. However, local activists like Onik, Miah Bhai, Salma Apa, and others, worked tirelessly to raise funds and provide relief to those garments sromik who were injured and to the families of those who lost their loved ones to the disaster. This highlights the discrepancies involved in international aid and policy interventions, as local activists are the ones aware and familiar with the ordinary needs of apparel workers, and how to assist them during moments of crisis (cf. Beckett 2020; Ahmann 2018; Schuller 2012). However, a significant matter of account is that the Sromik Sheba team did not limit their focus only to the Rana Plaza collapse. Rather, they expanded their movement to address the chain of disasters that have occurred in the Bangladeshi fast fashion industry and to hold state-led actors accountable for the lives of garments workers.

I asked Onik to describe to me how the independent activists, local organizers, and labour advocates, decided to collectivize and conjoin their skills and efforts. He responded this way:

The second day after the Rana Plaza collapse, I met this anthropologist and teacher from Jhangirnagar University for the first time. I knew of her work for a long time. In Bangladesh, she is one of the leading female voices against all sorts of atrocities. Her name is Rehnuma. She was very delighted to meet me and was very jolly-minded. We were discussing how we can ‘archive’ all this and what we can do. On the second day, there were thousands of people all around the building searching for their family members and loved ones. All the photostat stores where you can get a Xerox copy done—were all overcrowded. People who are lining up, printing flyers stating “Shondhan Chai” which means “I’m looking for” this and this person, from this address, please contact me if seen, etc.

What was more intense was that some of these flyers did not even have a phone number, because the person who printed them was in such a hurry that they could not even remember to include a phone number or leave any contact information. They mostly saw that this is what others are doing in search of their loved ones, therefore like everybody else, they also began printing and thought it would help. At the sight of this, Rehnuma turned to me and said, “we should document this,” and then immediately at the thought of documenting all of this clicked in my mind that, “oh, I should photograph all the fliers.” So, from that night onwards, I began photographing every single unique flyer.

In the beginning, I would look for unique flyers but later, I just could not keep track of what unique was anymore. All the names began to get blurry and started to sound the same to me. I was unable to identify what was unique anymore. So, I started

photographing some things repeatedly. I took around 3,050 individual photographs over a few months. Soon, a group of dozen [Sromik Sheba] was formed of people from different means of life, including anthropologists, artists, politicians, advocates, teachers, and myself being the youngest member. We all got together and started sorting things. We were trying to provide information to those who needed it and assisted with all sorts of things. Later, we formed a website with a list of names of missing persons called “24 April.” This was our direct involvement. This took around six months to construct.

We communicated with many victims. We called them and talked to the families. We investigated whether any information was still missing. Additionally, we developed another section of our work focusing on how many people are still missing after three to four months. This went on for a long time. At the same time, when I was not doing that, I would just ask my friends, friends’ friends, and relatives, for money and donations. With what we collected, we would go immediately to those families and ask them directly, “what do you need?” Someone would need a sewing machine, another needed money to get their daughter married, one survivor needed mental and psychological help as they had been continually cutting themselves since surviving the collapse, and we assisted them in accessing psychological therapy.

That was one of the aspects where I tried being directly involved. But of course, those efforts are so random. Not everybody or even a percentage of people was able to receive help like that. It is so individual, here and there.

Onik’s memories from the efforts that he and the Sromik Sheba team performed following the disaster and for the months and years to follow, were similar to how some of the other informants also described their experiences. Local activists made it their goal to hold national players accountable like the government of Bangladesh, employers’ groups, and national actors who only figuratively represent workers but promote international policies (as these actors are more reachable and less abstract than the international players). The Sromik Sheba team confronted the normalization of disasters and mistreatments facing workers, especially the victims of these industrial massacres (cf. Perrow 2004; Rajan 2019). Furthermore, rather than focusing solely on the Rana Plaza aftermath, the local organizers found it crucial to represent the garments workers and speak against the ongoing normalcy of violence and passivity associated with the lives of wage workers, while centering their agendas around demanding higher wages and improved treatment for Bangladeshi citizens.

Onik described their work this way:

Our website came out. Two people from our group, Saydia Gulrukh and Shabujul Islam, went and fought the cases regarding the Tazreen fashion fire in 2012. While they were doing that, everybody was contributing in their own way, by collaborating independent



efforts. Rehnema would write something, Taslima Akter, she is a photographer and politician—she was constantly joining protests. I was still photographing and then showcasing them. I organized exhibitions and even recommended that exhibition called “*1,134 Lives Not Numbers*” which happened at my school, Pathshala South Asian Media & Institute. I was the one who proposed the idea to Taslima Apa that we should host an exhibition, in 2014. We collaborated with a few institutions and scholars, to host art installments and crowdsource donations. Overall, these efforts created a bit more awareness. I guess.

However, when I met people on the East Coast in the USA, I quickly learned that very few people are aware of these issues. This is not only Bangladesh’s matter, it is everybody’s matter. Bangladesh is producing an excessive number of garments to satisfy the pressures and demands coming from the top of the supply chain. In attempting to fulfill those pressures, this [Rana Plaza] destruction happened.

Onik’s account of the efforts of the members of the Sromik Sheba team challenges the empty promises made by national and global players in the industry. The \$30 million that brands donated through the ILO covered wages that would have been paid to workers had Rana Plaza remained intact (Prentice 2021). Nevertheless, no further compensation was provided for the pain, suffering, and trauma endured by the families of the deceased workers (Prentice 2021, 14). Additionally, my informants mentioned that how much of these donations and compensations make it to the pockets of workers remains uncertain. Meanwhile, local activists in Bangladesh aid workers and their families at an immediate and more intimate level, sometimes even out of their own pockets. They are familiar with the needs of workers and assist victims of industrial disasters and their families in accessing those needs—whether it be money, food, or help with securing a simple doctor’s appointment.

Initially, when I first began the interview with Onik, I was taken aback by the depth and definition that his contrapuntal perspective provided regarding the ongoing forms of crises as visible in the Bangladeshi apparel industry. His experiences and knowledge made for a nuanced and critical vantage point that differed drastically from what I had read in the textbooks or watched on the news. I decided to ask Onik about his viewpoint on (inter)national NGOs and their presence in the Bangladeshi apparel industry. I asked: “Can you tell us a little bit about your understanding of the NGO sector in Bangladesh, how the NGO-players are contributing to labour activism, and what your thoughts are on the matter?”

Onik responded: “Personally, I think, and I do not know if this has any value, but I will speak through photography. The way the National Geography channel approaches wild animals, the Western media’s depiction of trauma in “third world countries” is also the same.” He continued:

Consider the event of 9/11 and how it is represented in media. Half the number of lives that were lost during 9/11 was the death toll from Rana Plaza (alone). So, it is a big event. However, the representation is drastically different.

In Rana Plaza, corporations are some of the main players. As for the NGO, it has no proper structure in Bangladesh, whatsoever. The amount of money they can spend, that is how they define the progress; however, NGOs cannot meet any needs or requirements for Bangladeshis. NGOs do not have the power to criticize anything, the change that is needed, it is not grants or resources, it is policy that needs changing. Therefore, we do not need NGOs. We need someone who can point out accountability. Someone who can recognize that yes, Rana Plaza occurred, and we need to hold the criminals responsible. Put aside the foreign players, we can address that later. Let us begin with Bangladesh.

Why don’t they strip their wealth and money by seizing their assets, liquidate it to cash, and hand it out to those who deserve it? The Bangladeshi government was not providing much funding or aid post-Rana Plaza collapse.

The reason that I had to go through that six-month process is that I do not even know if that helped in any way or not. Since we are unable to hold those who are responsible accountable, we as in a few individual independent activist groups in the corner of Dhaka.

Onik’s statement on NGOs defining their progress based on the amount of donations they could collect or spend was a critical one, as it resonated with the way Anu Muhammad had described the national government’s perception of the garments industry as successful sheerly due to the amount of GDP it accumulates. In the capitalist supply chain, the evaluation of any system or enterprise is based on the profits generated by corporations, disassociating workers from their rights as citizens and commodifying their skills and labour. The lack of accountability and displacement of factories to unaudited territories where the rights of workers can be easily overridden in favour of capitalists, is an indispensable tool manipulated by corporations to dominate the neoliberal transnational economy (Tanjeem 2017; cf. Ong 2007). Meanwhile, labour activists, and grassroots organizers display their agency as they refuse to follow international agendas to promote transnational policies. Instead, they continue fighting for the demands of garments sromik and working to provide a voice for ordinary Bangladeshis. While

contributing their own time, efforts, and skills, activists contribute deeply to uphold the local labour movement in Bangladesh. Although, they feel uncertain and doubtful about how much impact their contributions will have, given that a majority of the pocket-holders in the industry act in self-interested ways and manipulate the imagery of needy garments factory workers to sustain the oppressive industry.

Onik paused for a moment, before recalling another story from the Rana Plaza collapse:

On the first night, I went to the school where all the dead bodies from the collapse were lined up. It was a scene of genocide. Thousands of people with passport-size photos or flyers, walking around and calling their family members by their names, in hopes one will respond. They were going through the dead bodies to search for their loved ones, however, some of the dead bodies did not even have a face. Some did not have a head attached, others were missing limbs. All the bodies were covered. The whole place smelled just like genocide to me.

When I went inside to the computer room, I noticed that they were counting the dead bodies—and deciding who was taking it or not taking it. Since every time you take a dead body home, they are given, it is not more than 10,000 taka or \$120. The administrators were keeping tallies on a blackboard at the school with chalk. You can always erase it and there is no proof. Sometimes the news would come that somebody took the wrong dead body, or fraudulently claimed a body to retrieve the money.

All sorts of chaos were taking place and we decided we needed to do something to aid matters. However, the NGOs and non-profit players were absent at this time. They were not there. Nor do they have the resources or nuanced awareness of how to set up a camp and help assist in these processes during disastrous events like the collapse. Therefore, NGOs cannot help when needed. When do they come? They come later to do some statistical studies and display model help.

Disasters such as Rana Plaza happen repeatedly across the Bangladeshi garments sector, even if the various disasters are not all as large or as devastating. Therefore, there should be dedicated funding to help prevent disasters and provide aid during the aftermath of “normal accidents” (cf. Perrow 2004). This might include, for example, having a dedicated hospital for garments workers to receive medical attention. These prevention strategies can be implemented by the government. However, according to local organizers, NGOs do not produce tangible and permanent solutions. Onik wrapped up his thoughts by stating that “western NGOs, they give painkillers. They do not solve cancer. Even though cancer, in this case, is very much curable. Of course, we cannot prevent earthquakes or tsunamis. But before that, there are so many things like Rana Plaza that could easily be prevented. Yes. 1,134 people should not have died.”

Furthermore, he added that although he does not feel he is in the position to speak on behalf of garments workers, he defined the current state of Bangladeshi sromik as “backboneless.” By providing local structures that enable garments workers and their children’s access to education, food, residence, and healthcare, “their backs can be strengthened, therefore when things fall down, it will not be as horrific as Rana Plaza.”

I stumbled upon repetition across my conversations with informants, regarding the influence of NGO-based activists and trade unionists who represent Bangladeshi garments workers on the global front and are criticized for overshadowing the demands of local activists and labourers. Some of these activists and unionists recognize the flaws in their field and choose to organize independently and contribute to efforts such as Sromik Sheba. Nevertheless, certain NGO activists receive a greater platform due to their various affiliations and funding relations with western actors, as well as their fluency to speak and negotiate in English. Furthermore, the global media and news repeatedly represents Bangladeshi workers as feminized and helpless, by reiterating the number of lives lost or making sromik repeat their narratives of trauma, rather than emphasizing the ongoing forms of violence workers are facing in the industry. A localized approach steps away from speaking for the workers and instead positions the workers as the agents of change. These actors are locally situated, regularly meet with wage workers, converse with them in Bengali, and ensure that workers are included in organizing the sromik andolon. Since publicizing workers’ demands can lead to threats and abuse, workers generally speak through local organizers and labour activists who willingly risk their lives to mobilize grassroots agendas that may be perceived as a threat by the national government and state led players. By highlighting the demands of sromik—including increased minimum wages so that workers can afford food, shelter, health care, and other ordinary needs and necessities for themselves and their families—local activists make it their goal to treat workers as rightful citizens and agentic thinkers. Localized activism often emerges in moments of rupture, but it also surpasses the events of disaster. Indeed, local activism always looks beyond the disaster, and aims instead to consolidate worker support and workers’ rights. Local activists argue that wage workers deserve to continue living adequately beyond moments of crises, and even after the garments industry shifts away.

In the next section, I will draw out some of the main themes expressed by Onik to show how what he is describing is a split or fragmentation in labour activism and the representation of garments workers. The fragmented labour movement in Bangladesh is described in this way: there are two identifiable groups of garments and labour activists that are distinguished by my informants, the local labour activists. The first group includes NGO-represented, English-speaking players who are more familiar with policies like the ACCORD and the Alliance and the differences between the policies; the second group is made up of local labour activists and groups like Sromik Sheba and is known for challenging the Bangladeshi government, employers' organizations, and other national players. The second group of activists evoke fear amongst national players who are highly opposed to criticism, and "have laws refuting critique" according to Miah Bhai. Meanwhile, local organizers amenable refuse to take funds from western players even if that means less recognition for them, as NGO affiliation is criticized for overshadowing local agendas, movements, and workers' demands.

#### Fragmented Labour Movements: NGOs vs. Localized Activism

In conversation with Onik, I asked him, to explicate the gap between those who represent Bangladeshi apparel workers on an international scale and those who are holding up the demands of workers on a local pragmatic scale. Onik replied: "Very few researchers spend time studying who is the leader of this whole movement. That is where western media, NGOs, and trade unions fail. Some activists are comparable to celebrities on tour, traveling to spread the one selective message that they have been endorsed for. Bangladesh has a few of these activists who are very smart, talented, and have good intentions, however, they enter these western realms, receive honorariums, and their policies immediately change." While garments workers are protesting on the streets demanding fair wages and bathroom breaks, these "poster children" activists, as Onik described them, are most often expected to advocate for the same western policies that, like the ACCORD and the Alliance, do not 'listen' to locals. These celebrity activists or poster children and NGO activists maintain positive relations with governmental players, whereas local activists are the ones openly criticizing the state's inactions toward garments works, and defaming ministers and employers' groups for corruption.

Onik described to me the sorts of players whose agendas receive the national and international spotlight, versus local voices that get left out of the equation:

There are draconian laws by the Bangladeshi government that forbids criticism against state players. Their fear includes more people finding out, feeling angry about it, and protesting. Moreover, there are great leaders in the apparel industry who are not NGO-based or internationally famous. Amazing and dedicated leaders. But they do not have that English-speaking power. Some of these independent activists were former garments workers that have dedicated their lives to labour activism. One of them is Shabujul Islam, or Shabuj Bhai from Sromik Sheba.

Labour activists and workers in Bangladesh feel as though they have no room to breathe or speak up, whatsoever. In the next section, I will investigate the forms of mistreatment facing Bangladeshi garments workers by referring to a key thinker and activist from the field named Taslima Akhter (popularly as Lima Apa by many). I did not have the opportunity to interview Lima Apa, who was described to me as an extremely busy individual by my informants. Nevertheless, it was a pleasure for me to extend my research upon Akhter's exemplary contributions as a leftist politician and labour activist with a large following across Bangladesh and beyond. Taslima Akhter was one of the founding members of the Sromik Sheba team. She continues to play a leading role in providing immediate relief for apparel factory workers during ongoing crises—like hunger or wage-lessness—and following disasters like the Rana Plaza collapse and the Tazreen Fashions factory fire.

#### 4.3. Local Activists Define Crises: Taslima Akhter and Sromik Sheba

Disasters produce moments of possibility for collective organizing, as shown by the work of the Sromik Sheba team post-collapse as well as by the work of other local labour activists whose efforts I will refer to in this section, including Taslima Akhter (Lima Apa), and Maisha who was one of my informants. The Rana Plaza collapse was one of the dozens of events that affected the fast fashion industry, however, it also became a touchstone event leading to new forms of activism.

I learned quite a lot during my interviews with Bangladeshi and North American academicians and activists. They shared with me their knowledge regarding the fragmented labour movement that they have observed, how the activist groups developed, and whose voices and which issues receive global attention vs. what gets overshadowed. My informants guided me in depicting for

my readers the issues affecting Bangladeshi garments workers as presented in the global context and media, in comparison to the ongoing demands of garments workers based on how the industry functions on the ground. Through my conversations with informants, I repeatedly heard about “turf wars” and disputes between various groups seeking to represent Bangladeshi apparel workers. Local activists like Onik and others described certain NGO-funded groups (whether they were operating at the national or international level) as “celebrity activists.” Those highly visible activists were continually featured in news and media stories. One example that people often referred to when talking about this mode of activism is Kalpona Akter, whom I formerly discussed. Akter is famously known for confronting western brands post-Rana Plaza collapse, and campaigning outside of the Children’s Place Headquarters in the US, while touring the states to promote the ACCORD. Akter—who is a former child labourer turned activist—was present during the formation of the Harkin Bill in the 1990s. Today, she is the chair of the NGO called the BCWS, additionally, she is one of the only women trade unionists in Bangladesh. Akter is described by local activists as having close funding relations with western donors, and through her NGO, she performs initiatives intended to promote workers’ rights and improve factory conditions.

In contrast to the more well-funded, highly visible activists who work with NGOs, there is another kind of activism at the local level, one that is characterized by independent, community-driven efforts and may be found affiliated with committees like *Sromik Sheba*. Some of the known names of labour activists in Bangladesh include Taslima Ahkter, Moshrefa Mishu, Shabujul Islam, Saydia Gulrukh, along with others. These individuals regularly protest and organize to aid Bangladeshi workers in attaining rightful wages, fulfilling their daily survival needs, and in holding national players accountable. However, the second group of activists are not nearly as popular or renowned as Kalpona Akter from an international point of view. Shabujul Islam or Shabuj Bhai was a *shishu sromik* (child labour). Nevertheless, since he did not “fit” to represent the gendered garments industry in the 90s and early 2000s, his story did not receive the same amount of recognition as someone like Kalpona Akter. Still, Shabuj bhai continues to promote labour rights within and across Bangladesh, often by risking his life and wellbeing. Shabujul was one of the founding members and key organizers behind the *Sromik Sheba* team, which was formed of various independent actors and activists who gathered from different social positions, classes, and professions. The organizers all shared a similar passion

and desire to promote workers' rights and reach rightful compensation for the loss workers have endured. Many of these activists have other occupations, careers, and hobbies, and in forming the Sromik Sheba, these members collaborated on their ideas to develop strategic plans—with what limited time, money, and resources they could access—to provide immediate relief to the victims of disasters like the Rana Plaza collapse, along with other ordinary disasters and forms of violence (cf. Beckett 2020).

Taslima Akhter for example is a local activist who attends to the needs and demands of workers on the ground. Akhter and other grassroots activists prioritize goals and initiatives that do not receive international attention or funding. Local activists follow a different agenda—moving away from what they see as a fixation on brands and international policies like the ACCORD and focusing instead on the inadequacies of national authorities and governments. However, these critical differences can become difficult to translate for non-local players, as some people can stumble over minor details, such as the similar last names between these completely differently positioned activists. Nevertheless, local activists like Lima Apa and Sromik Sheba demand changes that are feasible and that can be implemented at the local scale where they will directly benefit apparel factory workers and promote their well-being. These activists focus on the ordinary, day-to-day needs and requests of garments workers. This includes workers' access to healthcare, food, shelter, education, and anything that resonates with the realities of everyday life for workers and their families.

#### Maisha Recollections: Local Activists Refute Addressing ACCORD's (Il)legitimacy

Maisha is a Bangladeshi American woman working as a professor at a university in Denver, Colorado. She traveled to Bangladesh to conduct fieldwork for her Ph.D. dissertation on the garments industry, and what she discovered on the ground was shocking. At the time, Maisha was representing a USA-based organization named United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), which assigned Maisha the task of filming a video of local activists speaking about the ACCORD. However, when Maisha landed in Bangladesh and connected with the local activists, she learned that locals were uninterested in addressing their concerns to Western brands regarding signing the ACCORD. Rather, the local activists were determined to promote their agenda where they intended to hold the national players such as the Bangladeshi government,



MPs, and local factory owners, accountable for the wages and remittances they owed workers and their families.

Maisha described the situation this way:

I remember the very first day of my fieldwork in Bangladesh. There was a rally that was organized by a group of organizers called the AA—Activist Anthropologists—consisting of academicians, activists, journalists, and development professionals. At the time, they were working with the Tazreen fire survivors, and they were trying to put pressure on the government so that workers receive their compensation. I knew that there would be a rally held in front of the Jatiya (National) Press Club, so, I went there, and I met a few of the activities and workers. I went ahead and interviewed them.

The whole rally was about compensation. Workers were talking about how they were suffering. They are not getting the money to pay their bills and since they are ill, they cannot work and are suffering, and so on. When I was asking about the suffering, they were talking about their health problems, their food insecurity, job insecurity, and all these other things. They were not talking about the building and fire safety right away. The workers were not talking about brands—they were describing how the factory owner closed the door and there were no fire exits, so they had to resort to jumping out of the window resulting in injuring themselves. They kept reiterating that the factory owners are horrible, the Bangladeshi government is horrible, and there was not one mention of brands.

Later, I met one of the organizers of Activist Anthropologists—I went up to her [and] introduced myself. I expressed that I went to work in solidarity with them so, whether it would be possible for them to connect. She said to me “so, you’re like one of those folks who are basically advocating for ACCORD?” I said yes. She replied, “can I ask what it is exactly that you’re trying to do?” I said, well I thought ACCORD is a good thing, but what do you think?” Then, she mentioned to me that this entire “ACCORD thing” and talking solely about the X number of fire exits—that differs tremendously from the workers and their priorities are. Additionally, whenever this ACCORD is talking about how to ensure safety and security such as through fire exists, oftentimes those garments factories following the ACCORD will just install a ladder and call it an exit. This was around 2013–14 when the ACCORD was still formulating. So, the AA (Activist Anthropologists) organizer said, the ACCORD has no clue what they mean by building and fire safety. There is so much international attention and pressure put toward the implementation of the ACCORD, so much money and energy being invested towards it, yet look at these workers, she said. The workers, they do not have food, they do not have jobs, they are suffering. Meanwhile, this ACCORD is hurting our movement.

When Maisha returned home, she reflected upon the difference between the matters she was asked to highlight for the international campaign she was representing, compared to the issues on the agenda for Bangladeshi garments workers and labour activists and their demands. Maisha

found that most local activists—minus the NGO-led activists like Kalpona Akter or Najma Akter who are promoters of the ACCORD—were confused about the difference between the ACCORD and the Alliance. Local leftist labour organizers spoke critically about the ACCORD and the Alliance and did not distinguish between them. Maisha said that local activists would frame things as “the ACCORD and Alliance are doing x, y, and z and it is overshadowing our movement. ACCORD and Alliance are getting so much energy that it is hurting our cause.” While NGOs and international organizations acknowledged the ACCORD as much better compared to the Alliance, at the local level, *both* policies were viewed as equally bad and equally problematic. As of 2022, the ACCORD and Alliance have both been suspended, making evident the insufficiency of the western corporate social responsibility approach to making a visible and quantifiable impact in the lives of the same people the policies intended to benefit and protect.

Certain NGOs support westernized policies like the ACCORD and receive funding from the ILO and ILRF (International Labor Rights Forum) to promote their agendas. In North America, Bangladeshi garments workers were represented by these ‘celebrity activists’ as Onik described them. Comparatively, activists like the members of Sromik Sheba do not share the same kind of network and they do not receive the same funding or media coverage. Still, it is these local activists who are the ones who have been working tirelessly since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic to attend to those workers who lost their jobs (at least the ones they could reach) and to aid them in any way possible. Meanwhile, NGO-led activists are condemned for their provisioning of band-aid solutions and for reiterating the narrative of Bangladeshi women and sromik as ‘needing saving,’ which normalizes the promotion abstract policies that have limited impact on the ground. Additionally, the role of NGOs makes room for the entry of external actors to fulfill the role of the Bangladeshi state. Very few individuals outside of Bangladesh, specifically in North America are aware of the efforts of independent organizers like Sromik Sheba, who refuse to accept funding from international human and labour rights groups. “When you are not in that kind of western funding relationship, your name, your exposure, the kind of work that you're doing, the local context, it doesn't get highlighted in the Global North,” Maisha explained. While Maisha was in a meeting with members of the Activist Anthropologist group and the matter of foreign funds was raised, these local political organizers quickly “refused” to work with western NGOs such as the USAS (cf. Simpson 2007).

My informants disclosed that local activists are at times approached by larger organizations, but they actively refuse international funding as it could cost them to lose their agendas while their demands get overwritten by western policies. Western donors expect submission in exchange for funding—they want local activists to prioritize the agendas of international brands and governments rather than enabling apparel factory workers and activists to vocalize their demands (cf. Bernal and Grewal 2014; Schuller 2012). Western actors attempt to keep the labour movement immobilized and direct attention towards (pointless) debates that will keep people occupied (for example, the debate over whether the ACCORD is better than the Alliance). However, locals are aware that both policies are ineffective in the context of Bangladesh, especially since both the policies and the NGOs who back them completely overlook the role of subcontractors, who are notorious for employing workers under hazardous conditions. North American organizations continue to reproduce the image of helpless Bangladeshi people (recycling colonial tropes in the process), all while focusing attention on western policies that have limited impact on the ground. Abstract discussions of human rights and gender equality can shift attention away from the demands of actual workers and activists. By contrast, local activists prioritize holding Bangladeshi state players, such as factory owners and Ministers of Parliament, responsible for the suffering and exploitation that garments workers face. Maisha’s academic activism led her to conclude that “Bangladesh will eventually lose the garments labour market—cheap labour is not sustainable unless we think about alternative economies. We should be investing in and initiating knowledge economies.”

#### 4.4. Concluding Thoughts: Shifting Towards a Localized Representation of Bangladeshi Garments Workers

In this section, I will address some of my concluding remarks from the data I collected, that reiterate the main objectives behind the localized labour movement in Bangladesh that seeks to attain sustainable growth and development by improving the rights and treatments of apparel factory workers, and wage labourers more generally. In this chapter, I aimed to highlight how moments of crisis such as the devastating Rana Plaza collapse, can be mobilized by local activists. These collaborative efforts of independent local organizers can bring about significant and meaningful changes that reflect the needs of Bangladeshi garments sromik. Onik who was a young man when the Rana Plaza collapsed, was devastated by the tragic aftermath, to the point

where he dropped out of post-secondary school while continuing to attend to the lives of apparel factory workers. Onik and the Sromik Sheba team returned to the site of the disaster for six months to provide aid and relief to the victims. By way of contrast, most international and national aid funds did not reach garments workers; instead, NGO-based activists focused on promoting the ACCORD over the Alliance. As Maisha's research and fieldwork shows, most local activists were unfamiliar with or did not care about the differences between those policies, and they criticized them unanimously for sidelining the localized labour movement in Bangladesh. As I have shown above, local activists had differing agendas that included holding accountable certain national players such as the Government of Bangladesh, employers' organizations, and other actors who only figuratively represented workers. By confronting the state, the Sromik Sheba team like other local labour activists, challenge the normalcy of violence that garments workers and other wage workers in the country face regularly. Additionally, they continually show up and provide relief and aid following disasters and crisis. Some activists, such as Onik, suggested that since disasters have become commonplace and many are un-accidental in the fast fashion supply chain, there should be dedicated funding provided by the Government of Bangladesh that permits garments workers to access health care and education, in addition to better wages so they can live dignified lives.

Here, I want to shift slightly to describe my conversations with Salma Apa, a Bangladeshi scholar, social scientist, and a key figure in the local labour movement. Salma Apa is a Professor of Political Science at a leading university in Bangladesh. Her focus is mainly on labour movements and protests, and she self identifies as an activist herself. Additionally, Salma is heavily involved in theatre, and along the way, these three aspects—research, activism, and theatre—collided in her life, although this was not always the case. Salma Apa has worked extensively in the garments industry and intimately connected with garments workers to gather a nuanced perspective about the condition of factory work in Bangladesh and the demands of garments sromik. We met over a Zoom call in the first week of August 2021, where she shared with me her various involvements within the garments sector and her research, specifically on gendered labour in the industry. I asked Salma Apa to describe to me how her involvement initially began with the apparel sector, to which she responded that her journey started similarly to many other Bangladeshis. The ongoing inhumane conditions facing factory workers and the repetition of “accidents” (cf. Perrow 2004) and human-caused disasters in the Bangladeshi

apparel manufacturing industry have pulled the heartstrings of many. Salma Apa was amongst those who found it pivotal to centralize these issues and bring the matters to the forefront, even though her familiarity was with environmental justice movements, not labour movements. In 2012, around the same time that Salma Apa wrapped up her Ph.D. Viva, the Tazreen Factory fire transpired.

Salma reflected on the Tazreen Factory event and told me:

At the time, I was in England when I saw the news on social media. I felt incredibly angry about this whole situation then how the workers are never treated as humans rather than as numbers. I returned to Bangladesh in December 2012. As I was working on making minor corrections on my Ph.D. thesis and I was involved in theatre, I have a group for whom I wrote a play on the Tazreen fire. That play was a truly angry place, we were all angry at the time.

Shortly after Salma Apa's return, in January 2013, another "accident" appeared—the SMART Export Factory in Mohammadpur, DHK caught fire, resulting in seven sromik fatalities (Al-Mahmood 2013). Salma Apa noted that the Tazreen Factory that was in Ashulia (on the outskirts of Dhaka) was quite well documented, but the fire at the SMART Factory did not receive the same level of attention. Following these events, Salma Apa and her team conducted their first show for the play based on the Tazreen incident. The show began in April 2013; it was a street play that required Salma Apa to conduct a significant amount of research. She contacted activists who were present at the site of the fire, spoke with community players, and more. Within a few weeks of the show, the Rana Plaza collapse took place.

Following the collapse, Salma Apa went to the site as an activist, alongside other members of groups she is a part of including some of her friends and colleagues, and other activists. She told me: "We were all devastated, shocked, and angry. We did a lot of work on Rana Plaza, even though it was difficult to decide where to start working." This is when Salma Apa began to think about matters of human rights violations, labour rights, and vulnerabilities of women garments workers, more specifically. She wrote small pieces of articles for different magazines and journals. Later, she was part of a team that was commissioned to conduct a study on the vulnerabilities of women garments workers in Bangladesh. The investigation lasted between 2013–16. Their team attempted to capture a total picture of the Bangladeshi apparel industry from the ground. Salma described the work this way:

We tried to cover all types of factories—small, medium, large and jute, sweater, trousers, etc. This was a project for which we worked extensively on garments workers from 2013-2016. Additionally, I was writing up some things so that the activists could benefit from those writings. I did a review of the laws of Bangladesh that were supposed to be upholding the rights of labourers, and addressed how and where they failed, and those sorts of things.

In 2016, Salma Apa and two colleagues published a book based on the findings of their research. After that, Salma continued working on labour rights. She was involved with projects related both to garments workers themselves as well as the washing practices in the factories and the issues of water usage, sanitation, and hygiene-related issues. Salma and her team worked with apparel workers in Tongi—a suburban factory town outside of Dhaka—enabling workers to produce their own play based on their take on these matters. These events were all documented and shown to buyers and retailers in the West, according to Salma Apa. These are the different modes of activism pursued by local activists like Salma in face of disasters that appear in the Bangladeshi garments industry. NGO-based representation of the fast fashion industry is explicitly feminized; meanwhile, portraying the industry as a woman-dominated sector and the passivity associated with women’s lives, has normalized the succession of violence facing these already “weak,” “vulnerable,” and “impoverished” groups. While the nationalist representation of the Bangladeshi apparel industry is depicted as an economic boon to the country, local activists continually emphasize that the sector is selectively profitable for only a handful of players at the expense of safety and security for workers. As we were wrapping up our Zoom conversation, I finally asked Salma Apa to comment on what she thought had changed, if anything, since the Tazreen factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse. She told me:

There were changes, I would not say that there were not, there were changes.

Our survey was done after the Rana Plaza and obviously after Tazreen. We had found that at least none of the floors where the factory workers were working in our sample, were locked from the outside. So, this is something that has changed since Tazreen. Since, during Tazreen, the workers were locked from outside. However, we have seen that in other non-apparel factories, these similar hazardous practices have continued.

I thought about all that she had told me. I said: “Yeah, I heard similar things about the Shezan Factory fire that happened in the Narayanganj District in Bangladesh in July 2021, that killed three workers and injured more than 50 people.”

She replied: “Yeah. So there, there were doors that were locked from outside. So, perhaps some of the reasons why the apparel industry has started following those protocols is due to the pressures from the retailers from the West, the ACCORD and Alliance, and the aftermath of those. Some of the factories had to improve their safety measures and had to take some steps. However, if you think in terms of their decision-making capability or the vulnerability of garments workers, that has not decreased. Workers’ wage-related vulnerabilities are still there.”

After that, Salma Apa shifted to describe to me how garments workers experience factory work. She told me that experiences are “buried,” yet, when one speaks with women garments workers, interacts with them, or just seeks to learn from their experience, what can be learned through those interactions is extremely different from the corporate point of view or even the perspective of factory owners and supervisors. Since the majority of apparel factories are located in rural districts and factory towns, garments workers move away from their families to live in dingy rental apartments with dozens of others. She said:

The life that these women have, their lives are so precarious, their vulnerability is so much that it hurts because their wages are exceptionally low, and their living conditions are unbelievably bad.

And often [they] have to depend on the *bariwalas* landlords who are often connected with the owners. Workers experience a secondary layer of exploitation because these landlords are immensely powerful, and they decide who lives in one place and how. They can throw out any woman anytime they want. The living expenses are remarkably high, even months before their real wages increase, the cost of amenities and bills increases. Their lives are very precarious, and our research shows that there is a lot of micronutrient deficiency, the toilets are in a terrible condition. On average, 20 women use one toilet, and they often have health hazards, or health problems that you would not normally find elsewhere. When we were doing the survey, first we wanted to use the WHO industrial Worker’s Health Index, so that we would have certain kinds of health ailments and diseases that we expected Industrial Workers to have. But in our pilot, we found out that none of what was outlined were the cases for these women.

The health implications of working in hazardous factories are a familiar concern for garments sromik in Bangladesh, one that can be traced back to what maquiladora workers in Mexico faced in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Domínguez et al 2010). Consequently, as I was collecting secondary research, I found it more accessible to find data and articles outlining the health and physical concerns associated with working in factories for garments industry workers, as highlighted by many international institutions and NGOs. However, it was rather difficult to find data on the

social, political, and economical underpinnings that lead young women to seek employment in industries where they are undervalued (cf. Saikia 2004). Nevertheless, the issues facing Bangladeshi garments sromik are regionally specific. The data Salma's team collected sampled mainly young women and girls and based on those narratives they made takeaways regarding the condition of factory work in Bangladesh. Currently, there can be found second and third generations of young women who are employed in garments factories.

Salma continued, telling me more about the specific health and safety issues facing workers:

The garments workers we sampled from were noticeably young, at least for the most part. And so, they did not show hypertension, heart-related, problems or other big issues. Their health issues were not very fatal ones, but they would have to spend a lot of money to buy medication, over the counter for things such as headaches, indigestion, and problems that you cannot easily fix. For example, if they were suffering from issues that required a one-stop surgery to fix, however, what they are facing cannot be fixed with surgery. These are issues that are persistent, they continue, and they do not have proper treatment. Over-the-counter drugs are something that they can access therefore they continue purchasing them to aid with minor relief, as they cannot afford to lose work for illnesses or feeling unwell. They suffer from issues like headaches, gastrointestinal problems, or UTIs, these are illnesses that are not quite common among other industrial workers.

However, malnutrition and working condition related vulnerabilities were there, and we found unmistakable evidence of it. Additionally, we found that their mobility was always dependent on how safe they felt when they went to work. While in our sample it was insignificant in terms of statistical importance when it came to the number of women who said they were sexually harassed inside their workplace, however, there was a significant reporting of sexual harassment experienced on the way from home to work. There was harassment such as verbal abuse by superiors which is quite rampant. Moreover, women workers felt safer in larger factories than in medium-sized sweater factories. For example, because medium-sized sweater factories are more of a seasonal kind of factory (often subcontracted), in those factories, workers are more marginalized than in others. In sweater factories they do receive an income for the season, however they are not formally employed. Therefore, their employment-related security is lower in medium-sized sweater factories where there are about 100–200 of sromik working.

The factory owners' conception and statements about women workers always appeared negative. They never wanted workers to speak out. In one of our interviews, one owner said to me the reason they choose to hire particularly *young* women is because they have good eyesight but also because they are more likely to follow instructions and not skip any steps in the process of production. So, I asked him, "Why do you think it's only the women that do not skip steps?" to which he replied, that men always skip steps and argue that they understand things better, and of course, women do not argue, they work.



Women work more calmly and are more likely to listen to and follow instructions, according to this owner.

*Which I think says a lot about why these women are truly recruited.* Furthermore, we found that most women are recruited through their own social networks, like their cousins or women from the same village who has been working. Additionally, a good percentage of these women who are working in the factories are below the age of 18. Although that percentage is greater in earlier studies, we think it is still an important part to highlight.

We know that these women are put into the factories forging their real birthdays and everything. However, many self-reported that they were below the age of 18. So, these are sort of my experiences from the survey.

While the legal age of employment in Bangladesh is 14 years old, many families are compelled to send their children to work due to hunger, starvation, and poverty. Therefore, there is a prevalence of *shishu sromik* child labourers in Bangladesh, including in the apparel sector. Being a woman in a post-colonial state has its own set of cultural, patriarchal, and economical obligations that one must overcome or fulfill to be considered an acceptable member of society. However, in many instances, it is the post-colonial, capitalist system that continues to hinder women and reproduce detriments to their access to health, wealth, food, and shelter, and subjecting women of colour to cycles of generational suffering and trauma. Nevertheless, Bangladeshi women garments workers display tremendous courage, strength, will, and resilience when they decide to return to the site of factory work. In Chapter Three, I argued that the narrative of third-world women needing saving has been continually manipulated by western to justify exploitative economic development schemes. The Rana Plaza collapse brought this “paradox of suffering” to light that chains women garments workers to a system of oppression where they are burdened by corporate and global patriarchy, as well as familial and kinship responsibilities (Chowdhury 2018, 48). By drawing on the analytical language used by Bangladeshi labour activists who are pragmatically situated and familiar with the nuances of experience of factory work and conditions facing apparel workers, I argue that an ethnographic approach to defining capitalism can emerge. According to Salma Apa, the age and social conditions of young women and girls get manipulated by international and state players to extract profits, as young girls are trained to be less combative and not speak out of turn. However, the feminization of the garments sector is deeply problematic, as it diverts attention away from the more crucial areas that require attention, such as creating a knowledge economy so that workers can be skilled and independent, and raising the minimum wage to enable workers

to live dignified lives. Furthermore, by investing on the healthcare, education, and salaries of workers, the government of Bangladesh could produce a stronger economy that is more sustainable in the long run.

I want to end, then, with a consideration of the issue of gender in the garments sector and amid garments factory workers, to address the current trends that were highlighted in my conversation with informants. Local activists consider it important to resist the western-centric imagery of poor Bangladeshi women workers needing saving. As a framework, that view fails to capture the ingenious and meticulous ways these workers survive in an industry that seeks to commodify their body and labour. Bangladeshi garments sromik are not voiceless victims; rather, their voices, demands, and the forms of ordinary violence they experience regularly are deliberately overshadowed and prohibited by national and international players, so that factory owners and transnational corporations can continue to accumulate profits at the expense of precarious modes of production. I will draw on the work of my informants, especially Salma Apa, to explore the issue of gendering in the Bangladeshi apparel industry.

Workers in Bangladeshi garments factories are often expected to suffer silently, and any attempt to protest is immediately resolved by firing the employee. Recall for example the case I discussed in Chapter Three of Rehana, who was fired by his factory manager for posting a Facebook status about his unpaid wages. Workers are also exposed to hazardous conditions in factories (Akhter 2022, 7). Meanwhile, subcontractors are left out of most discussions by governmental agencies, corporations, NGOs, and trade unions, although subcontracted factories are notorious for hiring child labourers and paying lower than the national wage (Tanjeem 2017). In a single fiscal year, the Bangladeshi garments industry witnessed 28% growth and went from being worth \$15.54B in 2021 to \$19.9B in 2022, it is likely that the industry will continue growing (Akhter 2022, 6). However, these surges in value do not reflect the staggeringly low wages offered to workers amidst the rising costs of household staple items such as water, grains, and gas—making survival unaffordable for workers (Akhter 2022, 6). This raises the question, who are the workers currently employed in Bangladeshi garments factories, and how are their lives evaluated in this capitalist industry? (cf. Millar 2018; Graeber 2001).

Currently, four million workers are recognized as working in the garments sector (by employers' organizations/ACCORD, etc.), although this data is missing the other additional six million workers who are indirectly linked to the industry (Akhter 2022, 9), including those workers in subcontracted factories. One key aspect to highlight as we shift away from the dominant NGO representation that presents the apparel industry through a feminized and exploitable lens is the subjecthood and gendering of workers. Garments workers in factories in countries like Bangladesh are spending 12-14+ hours producing “micro-trend” items for American shoppers most of which is likely to experience a short lifespan before ending up in landfills in other countries, disclosing a chain of oppression and violence (Voyles 2015; Wright 2013; Rajan 2019).

The suffering and sacrifices of women of color are essentialized in economies like the Bangladeshi garments sector, even as the position of women in the industry is applied to amplify nationalistic ideas of progress and economic transformation (Karim, 2014; Wright 2013; Spivak 2003). Historically, the Bangladeshi garments industry has been unequivocally gendered and women made up majority of the workforce between the 1990s and 2000s; these ‘female workers’ were perceived as ‘boons’ to lure in profitable business (Karim 2014). Nevertheless, throughout the new millennium, Bangladeshi women’s labour distribution has shifted. Where the industry once witnessed an 80% female dominant workforce, in 2022, the gender distribution has shifted, with only 58% of Bangladeshi apparel workers being women and girls (Akhter 2022, 9). The issue appears when one gets closer to the ground to recognize how the two opposing forms of activism can impede the growth and prosperity of workers in Bangladeshi factories. While local organizers are aware and attentive to the gendered needs of workers in the industry, the western activists continue to address the industry as “women dominated” and “feminized” to gather funding and increase dependence rather than promoting workers’ agency. Meanwhile, these depictions of “unskilled workers” can hinder progress in terms of endorsing labour rights or raising the minimum wage for workers. As my research reveals, the continued gendering of the garments sector results in the normalization of violence and disasters facing workers rather than enabling workers to organize and mobilize independently.

Voiceless or Un-Voiced? The Dismemberment of the Bangladeshi Garments Worker Identity in the Global Supply Chain

While garments workers may be globally represented by NGOs using old colonial tropes, and at times they get misrepresented because those same NGOs assume they understand the workforce, but do not, local activists explicate their strength by holding the national players accountable. The rights of citizens can only be provided at the state level, and yet neoliberal development models reduce the authority of the national government over its citizens and expect NGOs to fill the gaps and administer the needs of workers. The women workers are depicted as producing ‘value’ for the economy while being represented as being ‘saved’ by this neoliberal industry that flourishes through exploitation (Chowdhury 2018; Siddiqi 2009; cf. Millar 2018; Abu-Lughod 2013; Bauman 2013). Historically, as presented in the case of Saikia’s (2004) research on Bangladeshi women’s contribution to the liberation movement—it is evident that the narratives of racialized women often get overwritten and tactically erased to maintain patriarchy (cf. Spivak 2003; Mohanty 1984). Therefore, it is crucial to produce opportunity and space where women workers, and wage labourers in general, can vocalize and speak freely about their needs and contributions. This is what local activists are working towards.

For now, there is an open empirical question of why the gender dynamics are shifting and what that means for the women who are leaving. Additionally, workers are further prohibited from organizing, collectivizing, or voicing their rights and demands without receiving threats, harassment, or other forms of violence from their employers. This controversial issue of discrimination against gendered workers depicts how the fast fashion industry reproduces broader ways that women are commodified and represented, not as themselves speaking their own voices. Rather, they are claimed through the capitalist use of their bodies to generate value for corporations, by colonial-humanitarian-NGOs whose concern is to save them, and by the nation’s historical claim of the role and place of women’s bodies in the founding of Bangladesh. Let us now listen to a woman who has done extensive research on the gendered role of Bangladeshi women in the garments industry and speak about the matter more explicitly.

Local activists such as the Sromik Sheba team and activists such as Taslima Ahkter, Moshrefa Mishu, Shabuj Shahidul Islam, Saydia Gulrukh, along with others, provide a voice for ordinary Bangladeshis and forward the localized labour movement. The activists I have named and those I had the privilege of interviewing and learning from, contribute their own time, efforts, and skills, and are passionate about upholding Bangladeshi workers’ labour rights. Although, at times these

activists encounter doubts and uncertainties, specifically considering that majority of the pocket-holder in this lucrative industry can be found acting in self-interested ways, repeatedly, at the cost of lives and well-being of ordinary sromik in global factories. Meanwhile, the imagery of the vulnerable and poverty-stricken worker at times of crisis gets manipulated by global actors to assert the need for this domineering neoliberal supply chain that is “providing jobs” to workers. One of the key characteristics of this transnational economy that I have mentioned includes the lack of accountability and the easy dislocating of factories to unaudited areas, such that, capitalist players can bend the rules in their favour to acquire profits (Tanjeem 2017). In contrast, local labour activists and grassroots organizers such as Saydia Gulrukh, and my informant Miah Bhai, are found risking their lives to mobilize the demands of workers for higher wages and proper remittances, while being abused and harassed by state-led players. Nevertheless, local labour activists continue fighting for the rights of all Bangladeshi wage workers and make it their goal to provide a voice for average Bangladeshis. They refuse to accept external funding that will cause them to become sell-outs to western agendas, even if that comes at a cost of losing the spotlight to other highly visible NGO-based activists. The demands of garments workers are not specific only to their needs; rather, it is suggestive of a vision for national economic development, one that can continue when the garments industry moves on, as seen in the case of Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### The Bangladeshi Garments industry in the 2020s

In this thesis, I have presented the case of the Bangladeshi garments industry and the various disasters that have occurred in the sector over recent decades, to demonstrate how moments of crises have both contributed to and disrupted the localized labour movement and the installment of adequate labour rights in the country. What we gained from this analysis was to listen to and learn from the efforts of local activists who are at the forefront of the Bangladeshi labour movement. This provided insight into the gaps in the system and answered why the apparel supply chain fails to provide for garments workers and is labelled as an unethical and unsustainable industry by many. Furthermore, one significant takeaway is that the national and international players can benefit from listening to the perceptions of local activists and pursuing a ground-up approach to achieving labour rights. My informants argued that following disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse, the global news and media attempted to distract workers by intentionally making them reiterate their narratives of suffering and poverty. This dismissed the urgency for collectivizing and organizing amongst the working classes following a moment of rupture that appeared as a large industrial scandal. Global capital, however, manipulates moments of disaster for its own ends, to extend capital accumulation and worker exploitation by relocating to lesser audited areas where workers' rights can be easily compromised. These disasters have become commonplace, much like the ordinary forms of violence that garments sromik are struggling with each day—which induces their hunger, illnesses, unsafe living conditions, poverty, and more. In this concluding chapter, I will turn to my conversation with a few activists who are differently situated to provide some closing remarks regarding how local activists envision the future of the Bangladeshi garments industry to unfold.

While capitalist players in the industry weaponize moments of rupture to make matters worse, local activists use these moments to make demands before national governments and state players, seek ethical rights for Bangladeshi citizens and sromik, and lastly, occupy space on before the media to advance the sromik andolon/labour movement which centers around the long-term needs of wage workers. Nevertheless, the minimum wage in Bangladesh remains staggeringly low, a condition that places workers, many of whom are coming from marginalized communities, at the bottom of the supply chain where their rights as workers and citizens both

get dismissed. Following a disaster that signifies the volatility of the apparel industry, international players are more concerned about saving face and avoiding blame, rather than taking accountability for the lives that were disrupted. This resulted in the production of certain westernized policies such as the ACCORD or, in an earlier moment, the Harkin Bill. These policies do not prohibit disasters or discriminatory labour practices from taking place; rather, the policies protect western corporations from any blame and place the responsibility of attending to workers entirely upon national governments and factory owners. Furthermore, these moments of crisis are critical in shaping the industry, as was in the case of the Harkin Bill, which contributed to the entry of NGOs that intended to stop child labour in the region. Those NGOs founded a handful of activists, trained them to speak and negotiate in English, and applied to promote the policies that are mentioned above. These activists came to represent Bangladeshi garments workers on a national and global scale. Nevertheless, local activists distinguished this as a key issue that resulted in “turf wars” and suppressed their agendas, as local organizers do not engage in the same funding relations which result in the promotion of western-centric policies. Instead, local organizers focus primarily on establishing workers’ rights and raising the minimum wage in Bangladesh.

Consider this rough snapshot of the situation, as described in the preceding chapters. National players express great pride in the garments industry, arguing that it provides jobs for millions of workers (albeit at a larger unspoken cost). In the global supply chain, national players thus become key brokers who take on the role of mediating the industry, making Bangladeshi workers available for global corporations. Whenever a disaster takes place, these actors including the factory owners and employers’ organizations such as the BGMEA, work their level best to hide the magnitude of these disasters, as Miah Bhai recounted. Moreover, national players are given the responsibility of firing thousands of workers whenever there are cutbacks, such as following the COVID-19 pandemic, and for threatening workers to come back when the industry begins running again, as Saira described. The Bangladeshi garments industry was feminized from its initial entry into the region, and as Salma Apa argues, the trope of the South Asian women’s submissive role gets manipulated by these capitalist players to normalize violence against wage workers, all while permitting corporations and corrupt nationalist players to accumulate wealth. The Bangladeshi national players take considerable pride in distinguishing the garments industry as prospering when speaking in front of global news outlets, yet they

strictly focus on the GDP and national economic growth, ignoring the demands of garments sromik and the activists who represent them. For example, following the Rana Plaza collapse, the minimum wage was raised to \$67 per month, although workers had demanded \$100 (Karim 2014, 54). Since then, the country's labour rights situation has not witnessed much improvement, and it is plausible that the apparel industry has become *more* volatile and repressive for workers, and for women. This could be one possible explanation for the noticeable drop in the number of women enlisted to work in garments factories, as some of my informants had mentioned. Moreover, the Rana Plaza collapse case revealed the lack of usefulness of western-centric policies like the ACCORD, which was criticized for creating additional expenses for national factory owners, much of which they could not fulfill. This led garments *beshashis* (businessowners) to turn to subcontractors. Subcontracted factory conditions are far more dangerous and exceptional, where workers' rights are nowhere to be found. Most western and national actors are criticized by local activists and thinkers for overlooking these critical issues such as the role of subcontractors, by fixating on abstract policies that do not meet the needs and demands of Bangladeshi apparel factory workers. Local activists, as Maisha quoted, are extremely critical of these western policies and argue that these movements subsequently dominate and overwrite their agendas and demands on the ground. Additionally, the case of the COVID-19 pandemic illustrates how garments workers in Bangladesh are experiencing a significantly increased workload compared to the pre-pandemic era (Antara and Sultan 2021; Tanjeem 2021).

Looking at the garments sector through punctuated moments of crisis can provide a vital analytic lens for understanding not only how global players and international institutions reacted to disasters, but also how local activists and workers utilized these moments to defend their agendas. The latter can include matters of raising the minimum wage, providing health and social benefits to workers, having dedicated funds for emergency responses whenever factory disasters transpire, training garments workers with soft and hard skills that can be transferable beyond the apparel industry, creating spaces for people from different classes to organize and demand equal rights for citizens, and more. As embodied by the actions pursued by the Sromik Sheba team, localized activists emphasized that the lives lost to these industrial massacres, such as the number that continued circulating following the Rana Plaza collapse, "these are 1,134 lives, not numbers," which was the headline for their subsequent project. This number does not begin to



cover what Onik described as the “passive lives” that were lost and went unaccounted for following the disaster, such as the death of his comrade, Himu. Maisha shared with me that local activists refuse to affiliate with western NGOs or name-brand institutions as they tend to pull focus away from what workers need on the ground. Although it can be assumed that the garments industry will likely shift away to a cheaper site of labour, the millions of workers will remain. Thus, local activists make it their central goal to hold the national and international actors accountable, and demand improved wages, rights, and treatments for wage labourers, such that, Bangladeshi citizens can live dignified lives, as deserved.

What, then, can we do? The two main stances that appeared from my field research are these; 1) a dystopian truth about hyper-exploitation where the corporate dominates all ends of the supply chain, and 2) a feeling of hopelessness, fixated on the dreams of a better future and the dying hopes of workers as they continue suffering from ordinary forms of violence. There is a space in between these, however, where political action and tangible solutions are being produced and provided at a more intimate and grounded level—the space of localized activism. The global situation is frightening in scale and scope and seems unapproachable from every angle. Transnational corporations and powerful states have designed the global economic system to be such that they are hard to pin down or hold accountable. Therefore, the other scale, the local, and the efforts appearing at that level are crucial to strengthen the wage worker movement in Bangladesh, and to mobilize the garments worker movement internationally. Thus, the localized labour movement is a key place where workers can organize to bring forth quantifiable changes. Of course, there remain very real structural limitations. Fast fashion is a repetition of this dystopian, colonially driven exploitative system. It continually shifts away, moves around the world, and repeats harm in various places, across the bodies of those who are rendered abstract labour power, sites merely for the generation of corporate profit. This violence is intrinsic to the system, to the global supply chains, and to these colonial and imperial institutions. Localized activism challenges this sense of colonial supremacy.

Even though the debates over abstract western policies and the NGO-level work can at times overshadow the wage labour movement in Bangladesh, local actors are active and engaged in attending to garments workers at a more intimate level. This is because people organizing on the ground are familiar with and aware of the inequalities that are intrinsic to these systems.

They know quite well how the industry treats workers as objects and as instruments of accumulating profit, not subjects. By individualizing their struggles and making them repeat their sorrows on the news, western media erases the larger systemic issues that are oppressing workers, such as stolen wages, long working hours, receiving zero breaks, the role of subcontractors, and the dominance of westernized activism in Bangladesh. Nevertheless, in the local, we shift away from that top-down sentiment that makes the workers seem distant; rather, in the local, workers are the champions of their tales and can voice their demands. Garments workers and labour activists work to address these ordinary demands of workers by holding national players accountable, increasing the minimum wage, giving workers breaks, and fulfilling their rights as citizens. In this final concluding chapter, I want to turn to an excerpt from my conversation with Salma Apa, who has conducted extensive research on the Bangladeshi garments industry where she gathered incredible insider knowledge on how workers, specifically women workers, survive day-to-day. This will highlight the ordinary struggles that workers in the supply chain endure, and what appears to be central to the localized labour movement in Bangladesh that aims to fulfill the rights of all wage workers.

### 5.1. Male Husbands and Female Workers: Eating Chicken Feet as Bonus

Listening to garments workers and their demands becomes crucial when building initiatives or projects aimed at benefiting those on the ground. Moreover, before I wrap up this thesis, it is important that I turn back to the issue of gendering in the apparel industry. There has existed a long history of women's participation in the garments industry due to several social, cultural, economic, and political conditions, and the continued mistreatment and feminization of the garments industry requires further condemnation. Even though number of women garments workers in Bangladesh may have slowly decreased, the industry remains women dominant. However, it is significant to recognize that this shift in gender enrollment in the industry could be the result of further precarity, patriarchal oppression, and vulnerability facing Bangladeshi women workers. The forms of violence women and girls face while working in these factories are multifaceted. Women tactically seize selective opportunities to survive mindfully in this exploitative industry that seeks to loot their labour for profit at the expense of their bodies and then present them as passive victims needing saving.

There exists a double standard in the way that women are used or claimed as making an essential contribution to the nation. On the one hand, women are seen as essential (to the nation itself and to the national economy); on the other hand, women are rendered as passive, and denied their subjectivity and voice. Recall, for example, the case of the civil war in Bangladesh, with women's memoirs being selectively addressed when the government and national players wanted to promote nationhood and solidarity amongst Bangladeshis. However, women's accounts of the war and their demands for repatriation or recognition received limited space, as Saikia (2004) highlighted. Similarly, in the garments industry, the booming status of the industry in terms of bringing in profits for national players and growing the GDP is promoted while describing the Bangladeshi garments sector. However, the demands of workers get sidelined, or even brushed off, while the efforts of labour activists get challenged by state-led players who fear losing the industry. Bangladeshi women and apparel factory workers contribute tremendously to the symbolic and material value of the nation. Perhaps it is time that we listen more closely to them. I turn, again, to Salma:

These women have learned, and they also train others to remain more passive, and not talk back to men in the area. And their stories are amazing, we did this play on based on their stories and it had to do with water-related issues. The neighborhood did not have enough reliable sources of fresh water. The women have a lot going on, just to get their rights as citizens or as tenants of those houses that needed water supply. But using that as a sort of weapon, the workers reported to us that the landlords sexually harassed them, and made improper proposals to them, such as: if you listen to me, I will give you water, if you do not listen, then I will not.

Think about the fact that the landlords will count the number of shoes outside, and they might actually charge you for having too many people over at home. Everything gets charged. A major part of their vulnerability is their income because they earn so little, and if you compare it with the amount that they have to spend to get all the things that they need even to survive...it is absolutely amazing how they survive and they survive only on rice and daal (lentils) and shukti (dried fish). And that is like the nutrition that they get. And it will be fixed [a good meal] if they can get chicken legs. Not like drumsticks. But the feet.

You would see, if you go to their marketplaces, you will see people selling chicken feet, which are not really a product most people will buy from the market. So, this is something that is sort of waste, people will throw out. And that is what is being sold in those markets, and they are quite prominent.

Another thing I always find interesting in these neighborhoods is [that] women must marry to keep themselves secured. They pay their husbands to remain their husbands.

During our first study, we met women who paid their husbands to remain their husbands. Because without husbands, they will be vulnerable to other predators. But husbands are kind of like a seal or a shield that will protect them from other men approaching them with bad intentions. This is also something I was really stunned to find, but it has been going on for a long time as I always see this.

There was a case where the woman reported to us that her husband left her in the village with three children and came to Tongi to work. She followed him and came to Tongi and saw that he was staying with another woman, and she was devastated but she had to stay here because she could not go back. So, she got a job and then tried to get her husband back, but he did not come back. However, he contacted her recently before we were interviewing her, maybe two or three days before we met. So, he called her and asked her if she can afford to pay him 2,000 Takas per week, then he will come back from that other woman and be her husband, which is interesting. It is quite evident among many of the women that I have seen, and I have talked to.

Women garments workers in Bangladesh have developed nuanced and resilient ways of surviving and coping with the layers of violence and struggles that they face day to day. They strategically outsource their safety by trading portions of their income and paying for men in their work towns to fulfill the role of “husbands” so that they can continue earning an income despite the malicious intents of sexual predators. The representation of the garments industry as a feminized sector is weaponized and manipulated by brands and factory owners to ensure the production of cheap and exploitable labour, propel the exploitation of women, attempt to erase women’s voices, and normalize the accidents, disasters, and mistreatments facing workers in the global supply chain (Karim 2014; Saikia 2004). Nevertheless, in contrast, local activists like Salma Apa make it their fundamental goal to ensure the voices of women garments workers and their experiences receive a platform for their voices. Listening to women workers will not only improve the condition of this feminized industry, but it will also ensure that all wage workers in Bangladesh are receiving their full rights as citizens and labourers. Bangladeshi apparel factory workers are severely underpaid, their salaries do not cover basic survival needs, especially with the rising cost of living in 2022. The income workers are receiving can barely afford to buy them chicken feet from the market, something everyone else had discarded. This is a moral concern for not only the garments workers, local labour activists, and factory owners, rather, it is a human rights issue that must be addressed by everyone in the supply chain, including global brands and western consumers. Bangladeshi garments workers and women wage labourers are producing fast fashion for the global supply chain, therefore, their voices, rights, and demands should be addressed and adhered to accordingly by the players in the national and international sphere. To

shift away from top-down narrative, in this thesis, I have tried to give as much space as possible to women workers and to their own ideas, desires, and accounts of their lives and of the garments sector. I have done that by foregrounding the stories of prominent grassroots activists who do not just speak for workers but also speak *with* and listen to them. As activists and workers have continually noted—and as I have argued throughout this thesis—we can only hope to fully understand the realities of garments workers’ lives and of the garments sector within the global capitalist system if we listen closely to those most directly and immediately impacted by that system, the sromik (workers).

## 5.2. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, my research on the Bangladeshi garments industry highlighted the significance of listening to local actors and activists who are familiar with the ins and outs of the living conditions of garments workers and their demands from their employers. With the changes apparent in consumption habits and the expansion of capitalism that permits transnational corporations to accumulate wealth, wage workers such as garments sromik in Bangladesh under a continuous state of exploitation led by capitalism. Meanwhile, in the era of instant gratification as the newest, trendiest, quickest, cheapest, and most accessible commodities are circulating, companies that can produce the most products for the least costs, are winning, against all other competitors. Most small to medium scale companies cannot stand a competition against corporate giants such as Amazon, Walmart, and in the more recent years, the growth of the Chinese fast-fashion retailer, Shein, which has placed thousands of companies out of business. By 2021, Shein had surpassed Amazon in sales. The company has also reconfigured capital accumulation and modes of production in the global apparel industry, and it has been continually criticized for exploiting workers and paying them slave wages (Holmes 2022). As I have shown with the case of the Bangladeshi garments industry, the expansion of capitalist relations of production has prompted a certain devaluation of labour that is most profitable only for a select few, such as transnational corporations compared to the overworked garments sromik in Bangladeshi factories. Beyond Bangladesh, the case of Shein and the promotion of fast fashion illustrates clearly how the global garments sector is built based on modes of capital accumulation that suppress wages, exploit precarious workers, and reproduces (and even intensifies) colonial forms of subjugation of the poor, people of colour, women, girls, and other marginalized subject

groups. While corporations practice hands-off tactics to avoid responsibility and appear as “distant” and “unaware” as possible, national governments like the Bangladeshi employers’ groups, factory owners, Ministers of Parliament, and more, are expected to fulfill the role of overcoming that distance and attending to the needs of workers. However, since this is a capitalist supply chain, the corporations have hired buyers who make countries like Bangladesh, China, and Vietnam, compete to offer the cheapest labour. Miah Bhai shared that in Bangladesh, “buying houses” appeared where buyers that represent western brands and clientele, make local factory owners and producers compete and auction off the most inexpensive labour, the cheaper the labour cost the more likely to attract business. As a result, the labour movement gets suppressed and the demands of garments workers get overwritten by media outlets and NGO activists who are promoting westernized policies that are deemed ineffective by locals.

The western hegemony and colonial haunting are prevalent in Bangladesh, which enables the maintenance of skeptical imagery depicting Bangladeshi women as needing saving, rather, Bangladeshi women workers deserve a higher living wage with which they can fulfill their own needs and the needs of their families and their communities. Nation-states that are in a perpetual state of coloniality (cf. Brown 2010) are dominated by corporate monopoly and western investment. Thereby, governmental (and certain non-governmental players) observe and comply with top-down demands, which distances wage labourers in the supply chain, outlawing their access to citizenship, rights, and generational growth. In Bangladesh, for the government, employers’ groups, NGOs, and other state-led actors, maintaining the lucrative apparel industry is crucial to maintain export-led revenue production, while simultaneously forbidding workers from participating in the sromik andolon.

By controlling workers via their stomachs, starving them, and threatening them with the fear of joblessness, factory owners, employers’ groups, and other national players ensure workers continue returning to work. Whenever workers organize or attempt to mobilize their demands, these national groups like the BGMEA are known to stop these protests by “letting out the police” like dogs to chase down the protestors. The national sphere and central actors are afraid of losing the economy; however, workers must receive the space to mobilize and publicize their demands and speak up about the deplorable conditions they are expected to work in. Bangladeshi garments workers are asking for the bare minimum in many ways; these workers are

not unskilled, rather they are the most profitable workers in the entire supply chain. Many of them are working beyond 12–15 hours a day with no toilet breaks while facing major wage undercuts and receiving threats of getting fired for speaking up. Recalling the narrative of the young woman, Rehana, who was fired for posting about their stolen wages as a Facebook status, this depicts the limited space for labour organizing in Bangladesh, and the unsafe, precarious conditions Bangladeshi sromik are placed in. Garments workers are routinely reminded by their employers that they are prohibited from organizing, much like millions of wage workers across the globe. By controlling people's wages, producing distance between players, and weakening the labour movement, major corporations continue dominating the markets and industries and alter them to their advantage. When crises or disasters appear, like the case of the Rana Plaza collapse, corporations are quick to act as though they were unaware of these “unforeseeable events” and “normalizing accidents” that were preventable in the first place (cf. Perrow 2004; Beckett 2020). In short, the system creates disasters that are then manipulated to reproduce the system, enabling corporations to shift their production to cheaper, lesser audited areas, such as the rapid uprise in the number of subcontracted factories that have appeared since the ACCORD regulations took place in Bangladesh.

By contrast, local activists, scholars, and thinkers use moments of crisis to generate new forms of organizing and to mobilize to collectively address the needs and demands of Bangladeshi sromik. Additionally, these activists who are marching alongside garments workers, providing them with food, money, and aid, in any form possible, are the true producers of achieving labour rights in Bangladesh and beyond. Moreover, Bangladeshi labour activists recognize the strength, wit, and power of Bangladeshi sromik, specifically in their unity. Through fieldwork, I observed that Bangladeshi sromik, specifically women labourers, are highly agentive thinkers and players in the global labour market. Although, the number of women enlisting in the garments industry has slowly decreased over the last few years and increased in terms of men's participation. There could be an array of reasons driving this change in gender dynamics. Nevertheless, my research addresses the significance of listening to garments workers and providing them livable wages with which they can survive to escape the layers of misogyny and violence that faced Bangladeshi women and wage workers. Local activists challenge the neoliberal state and national actors and demand improvements in Bangladesh's labour rights.

In this thesis, I have argued that it is essential to adhere to the demands of the localized labour movement in Bangladesh. Local organizers such as the Sromik Sheba team, consider the *sromik andolon* on the ground pivotal for providing a basis for collective action, bargaining, and organizing, for Bangladeshi wage workers. Recalling Rehana's story, the young woman who faced immediate repercussions for voicing their concerns about unfair wages over social media, and was fired by their employer, it exemplifies the limited room for workers to mobilize their demands virtually or in person, without risking their safety or source of income. Consequently, workers and activists, even certain advocates who are NGO-affiliated but organize independently outside of their work, find it difficult to openly criticize certain matters or address the forms of corruption that is visible across the national supply chain. This is because the Bangladeshi government alongside other state led players, perceive the garments industry as and intertwined with the country's progress and development, and thus, they resort to punishment or intimidation tactics to suppress those who are viewed as a probable 'threat' to the economy. In this way, the precariousness affiliated with the export-led garments industry in the post-colonial state of Bangladesh, becomes visible, where seeking justice for workers and demanding labour rights is considered threatening to the maintenance of national revenues (cf. Ong 2007; Harvey 2006; Sassen 2002). In this context, local activists play a crucial role, as they defend the rights and demands of workers who receive little to no room for political organizing, while holding national players accountable for the mistreatment facing Bangladeshi citizens. Local committees and independent political labour organizers such as Sromik Sheba, conjoin their efforts during and after moments of crisis to combat structural violence. Local actors hope to see the labour movement get stronger and grow its roots in Bangladesh such that wage labourers can lead better lives and receive adequate compensation. Grassroots activists continue marching forward with their efforts by addressing and recognizing the limitations of the nation-state, holding the government accountable, and generating awareness about systemic barriers to labour organizing through inter-class solidarity. By mobilizing the demands of workers, the local *sromik andolon* in Bangladesh aims for the advancement of worker's rights for all wage labourers across the country, and across the transnational garments supply chain.



## References

- Absar, S. S. (2003). Health Hazards and Labour Laws in Bangladesh: A Narrative-based Study on Women Garments Workers. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 31(3), 452-477.
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2013). *Do Muslim women need saving?* Harvard University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2008). *State of exception*. University of Chicago Press.
- Agard-Jones, V. (2013). Bodies in the System. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 17(3), 182-192.
- Ahmann, C. (2018). “It’s exhausting to create an event out of nothing”: Slow Violence and the Manipulation of Time. *Cultural Anthropology*, 33(1), 142-171.
- Ahmed, S. I., Tanjeem, N., Sania, A., & Amin, M. R. (2020, May 10). COVID-19 and the economisation of life in Bangladesh. *The Daily Star*.  
<https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/covid-19-and-the-economisation-life-bangladesh-1901326>.
- Akhter, T. (2022). When will we hear stories of workers’ lives truly improving? *The Daily Star*.  
<https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/when-will-we-hear-stories-workers-lives-truly-improving-3015901>
- Akhter, S., Rutherford, S., & Chu, C. (2019). Sufferings in silence: Violence against female workers in the ready-made garments industry in Bangladesh: A qualitative exploration. *Women's Health*, 15, doi.1745506519891302.
- Anner, M. (2019). Squeezing workers’ rights in global supply chains: Purchasing practices in the Bangladesh Garments Export Sector in Comparative Perspective. *Review of International Political Economy*, 27(2), 320–347. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2019.1625426>.
- Al-Mahmood, S. Z. (2013). New Bangladesh Fire Kills 7. *The Wall Street Journal*.  
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323829504578267630667074360>.

Antara, I. J., and Sultan, M. (2021). Chapter VIII: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Ready-Made Garments Sector in State of Governance in Bangladesh 2020–2021: Governing COVID19 in Bangladesh: Realities and Reflections to Build Forward Better. State of Governance report series, *BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)*.

Baez, J. (1972). Bangladesh. *A&M Records*.

BAIRA. (2022). Bangladesh Association of International Recruiting Agencies (BAIRA). <https://baira.org.bd/dir/history-and-background>.

Bauman, Z. (2013). *Wasted lives: Modernity and its outcasts*. John Wiley & Sons.

BBC News Asia. (2021). Bangladesh factory fire: Owner arrested after blaze kills 52. *BBC News World Asia*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57790294>.

Beckett, G. (2019). *There is no more Haiti*. In *There Is No More Haiti*. University of California Press.

Beckett, G. (2020). Unlivable Life: Ordinary Disaster and the Atmosphere of Crisis in Haiti. *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 24(2), 78-95.

Beckett, G. and Wagner, L. (2022). Haiti Beyond Crisis. *Cultural Anthropology*. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/haiti-beyond-crisis>.

Bernal, V., & Grewal, I. (2014). *Theorizing NGOs: States, feminisms, and neoliberalism*. Duke University Press.

BGMEA. (2020). Industrial police launched. *The Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA)*. [https://bgmea.com.bd/index.php/page/Industrial\\_police\\_launched](https://bgmea.com.bd/index.php/page/Industrial_police_launched).

Brown, W. (2010). *Walled states, waning sovereignty*. Princeton University Press.

Comyns, B., & Franklin-Johnson, E. (2018). Corporate reputation and collective crises: A theoretical development using the case of Rana Plaza. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 150(1), 159-183.

Cords, S. (2022). Remembering the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. *The Progressive Magazine*. <https://progressive.org/latest/remembering-the-triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire-cords-220416/>.

Chakrabarty, D. (2018). *Rethinking Working-Class History*. Princeton University Press.

Chowdhury, E. H. (2018). Made in Bangladesh: The romance of the new woman. In *Rethinking New Womanhood* (pp. 47-70). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Chua, J. M. (2022). BGMEA Refutes Bangladesh Police Reports of Brewing Labor Unrest. *Sourcing Journal*. <https://sourcingjournal.com/topics/labor/bangladesh-garment-factory-labor-unrest-police-coronavirus-bgmea-222201/>.

Daswani, G. (2019). On the Whiteness of Anthropology – Sur la blancheur de l'anthropologie. *Everyday Orientalism*. <https://everydayorientalism.wordpress.com/2019/07/08/on-the-whiteness-of-anthropology/>.

Domínguez, E., Icaza, R., Quintero, C., López, S., & Stenman, Å. (2010). Women Workers in the Maquiladoras and the Debate on Global Labor Standards. *Feminist Economics*, 16(4), 185-209. Doi:10.1080/13545701.2010.530603.

Federici, S. (2017). On Primitive Accumulation, Globalization and Reproduction. *Friktion: Magasin for køn, krop, and kultur*. <https://friktionmagasin.dk/on-primitive-accumulation-globalization-and-reproduction-c299e08c3693>.

Freeman, C. (2000). *High tech and high heels in the global economy*. Duke University Press.

Gordon, A. (2008). Chapter 1: Her Shape and His Hands. In *Ghostly matters: Haunting and the sociological imagination* (pp. 3-28). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Graeber, D. (2001). *Toward an anthropological theory of value: The false coin of our own dreams*. Springer.

Ferguson, J., & Gupta, A. (2002). Spatializing states: Toward an ethnography of neoliberal governmentality. *American Ethnologist*, 29(4), 981–1002. <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.2002.29.4.981>

Harvey, D. (2006). *Spaces of global capitalism*. Verso.

Hira, A., & Benson-Rea, M. (Eds.). (2017). Governing corporate social responsibility in the apparel industry after Rana Plaza. *New York: Palgrave Macmillan*. DOI: 10.1057/978-1-137-60179-7.

Holmes, J. (2022). SHEIN: The Perfectionists of Manipulation and Exploitation. *Critical Reflections: A Student Journal on Contemporary Sociological Issues*.

Hoskins, T. (2022). Violence against women garments workers increased during pandemic. *Open Democracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/violence-against-women-garment-workers-increased-during-pandemic/>.

Hossain, M. (2010). *From protest to freedom: A book for the new generation: The birth of Bangladesh*. Mokerrom.

Huda, T. (2019). Remembering the Barbarities of Operation Searchlight. *The Daily Star*. <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/perspective/news/remembering-the-barbarities-operation-searchlight-1719859>.

Islam, M. N. (2021). Political Islam in South Asia: A critical appraisal of the Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami. *International Area Studies Review*, 24(4), 314–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/22338659211018320>.

Imperiale, A. J., & Vanclay, F. (2020). The mechanism of disaster capitalism and the failure to build community resilience in post-disaster situations: Learning from the L'Aquila earthquake. *Disasters*, 45(3), 555-576. Karim 2014

Kabeer, N. (1991). Cultural dopes or rational fools? Women and labour supply in the Bangladesh garments industry. *The European Journal of Development Research*, 3(1), 133-160.

Kabir, H., Maple, M., & Usher, K. (2020). The impact of covid-19 on Bangladeshi readymade garments (RMG) workers. *Journal of Public Health*, 43(1), 47–52. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdaa126>.

- Kang, Y. (2021). The rise, demise and replacement of the Bangladesh experiment in transnational labour regulation. *International Labour Review*, 160(3), 407-430.
- Kilroy-Marac, Katie. 2018. *An Impossible Inheritance: Postcolonial Psychiatry and the Work of Memory in a West African Clinic*. University of California Press: Introduction, Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Interludes.
- Klein, N. (2007). Disaster capitalism. *Harper's Magazine*, 315, 47-58.
- Leach, F. (2022). They slap us, force us to work- Bangladeshi Garments Industry COVID Crisis. *Euro News*. Date Accessed: June 11, 2022. <https://www.euronews.com/green/2022/01/26/they-slap-us-force-us-to-work-bangladeshi-garment-industry-covid-crisis>.
- Lewis, D. (2019). 'Big D' and 'little d': two types of twenty-first century development? *Third World Quarterly*, 40(11), 1957-1975.
- Li, V. (2020). Globalorientalization: Globalization through the Lens of Edward Said's Orientalism. *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 51(1), 3-30.
- Liebhold, P. (2018). Why the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Makes for a Complicated History. *The Smithsonian Magazine*. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire-makes-complicated-history-180971019/>.
- Lowe, L. (2015). *The intimacies of four continents*. Duke University Press.
- Manik, J. A., & Bajaj, V. (2012). Killing of Bangladeshi Labor Organizer Signals an Escalation in Violence. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/10/world/asia/bangladeshi-labor-organizer-is-found-killed.html>.
- Martin, J., & Bravo, K. E. (Eds.). (2016). *The Business and Human Rights Landscape: Moving Forward, Looking Back*. Cambridge University Press.
- McEvoy, A. (1995). The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911: Social Change, Industrial Accidents, and the Evolution of Common-Sense Causality. *Law & Social Inquiry*, 20(2), 621-651.

- Millar, K. M. (2018). *Reclaiming the Discarded*. Duke University Press.
- Mirdha, R. U. (2017, October 15). Hc questions legality of Accord's 3yr extension. *The Daily Star*. Retrieved March 4, 2022, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/business/hc-questions-legality-accords-3yr-extension-1476484>.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 333-358.
- Muhammad, A. (2020, November 25). From 'socialism' to disaster capitalism. *The Daily Star*. Retrieved February 4, 2022, from <https://www.thedailystar.net/opinion/news/socialism-disaster-capitalism-2012313>.
- Neveling, P. (2015). 10 Export processing zones and global class formation. *Anthropologies of class*, 164.
- Nixon, R. (2011). *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Harvard University Press.
- Ong, A. (2007). *Neoliberalism as exception: Mutations in citizenship and Sovereignty*. Duke University Press.
- Perrow, C. (2004). A personal note on normal accidents. *Organization & environment*, 17(1), 9-14.
- Prentice, R., & De Neve, G. (Eds.). (2017). *Unmaking the global sweatshop: health and safety of the world's garments workers*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Prentice, R. (2021). Labour Rights from Labour Wrongs? Transnational Compensation and the Spatial Politics of Labour Rights after Bangladesh's Rana Plaza Garments Factory Collapse. *Antipode*, 53(6), 1767-1786.
- Rahman, Z., & Langford, T. (2012). Why labour unions have failed Bangladesh's garments workers. *Labour in the Global South*, 87-106.

Rajan, S. R. (2001). Toward a metaphysic of environmental violence: The case of the Bhopal gas disaster. *Violent environments*, 380-398.

Rajan, S. R. (2019). *BHOPAL AND BEYOND*. The Angry Earth: Disaster in Anthropological Perspective, 139.

Rita, S. (2021). 3 workers die in Shezan juice factory fire in Narayanganj, 50 injured. *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://archive.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/2021/07/08/2-workers-die-from-sejan-juice-factory-fire-in-narayanganj>.

Said, E. (1978). Introduction to Orientalism. *New York: Pantheon Books*.

Said, E. (1993). Culture and Imperialism (London: Chatto and Windus). *Culture and Imperialism*, 1-28.

Saikia, Y. (2004, October). Beyond the archive of silence: Narratives of violence of the 1971 liberation war of Bangladesh. In *History Workshop Journal* 58(1), 275-287. Oxford University Press.

Sarker, M. R. (2020). Labor market and unpaid works implications of Covid-19 for Bangladeshi women. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(S2), 597–604. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12587>

Sassen, S. (2002). The repositioning of citizenship: Emergent subjects and spaces for politics. *Berkeley journal of sociology*, 4-26.

Sassen, Saskia. (2007) Denationalization. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*.

Sassen, S. (2008). Neither global nor national: novel assemblages of territory, authority and rights. *Ethics & global politics*, 1(1-2), 61-79.

Schuller, M. (2012). *Killing with Kindness*. Rutgers University Press.

Schuller, M., & Maldonado, J. K. (2016). Disaster capitalism. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 40(1), 61-72.

Savar, S. (2022). রানা প্লাজায় প্রাণ গিয়েছিল মেয়র, এবার আঙুনে মরেলেন মা. *Prothom Alo*.

<https://www.prothomalo.com/bangladesh/district/%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A8%E0%A6%BE-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B2%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%9C%E0%A6%BE%E0%A7%9F-%E0%A6%AA%E0%A7%8D%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%A3-%E0%A6%97%E0%A6%BF%E0%A7%9F%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%9B%E0%A6%BF%E0%A6%B2-%E0%A6%AE%E0%A7%87%E0%A7%9F%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%8F%E0%A6%AC%E0%A6%BE%E0%A6%B0-%E0%A6%86%E0%A6%97%E0%A7%81%E0%A6%A8%E0%A7%87-%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%B0%E0%A6%B2%E0%A7%87%E0%A6%A8-%E0%A6%AE%E0%A6%BE>

Siddiqi, D. M. (2009). Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving? Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era. *Feminist Review*, 91(1), 154-174.

Siddiqi, Dina M. (2015) "Starving for justice: Bangladeshi garments workers in a 'post-Rana Plaza' world." *International Labor and Working-Class History* 87: 165-173.

Simpson, A. (2007). On ethnographic refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice' and colonial citizenship. *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, (9).

Spivak, G. C. (2003). Can the subaltern speak?. *Die Philosophin*, 14(27), 42-58.

Standing, G. (2014). The precariat. *Contexts*, 13(4), 10-12.

Stoler, A. L. (2020). Carnal knowledge and imperial power: Race and the intimate in colonial rule. In *The New Imperial Histories Reader*, 177-194. Routledge.

Swazan, I.S., Das, D. (2022). Bangladesh's Emergence as a Ready-Made Garments Export Leader: An Examination of the Competitive Advantages of the Garments Industry. *JGBC*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s42943-022-00049-9>



Tanjeem, N. (2017). Can workers of the world unite? A multi-sited ethnography of transnational labor organizing across the apparel commodity network. PhD Dissertation. *Rutgers The State University of New Jersey-New Brunswick*.

Tanjeem, N. (2021). The labor of fashion, transnational organizing, and the global COVID-19 pandemic. In *The Routledge Companion to Fashion Studies*, 259-268. Routledge.

Thapa, T. (2018). Remember Rana Plaza: Bangladesh's Garments Workers Still Need Better Protection. *Human Rights Watch*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/24/remember-rana-plaza>.

Tsing, A. L. (1994). From the margins. *Cultural Anthropology*, 9(3), 279-297.

UNICEF USA. (2021). The George Harrison Fund. <https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/usa/george-harrison-fund>.

Voyles, T. B. (2015). *Wastelanding: Legacies of uranium mining in Navajo country*. U of Minnesota Press.

Wolfe, P. (2006). Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native. *Journal of genocide research*, 8(4), 387-409.

White, B. (1996). Globalization and the child labor problem. *Journal of International Development: The Journal of the Development Studies Association*, 8(6), 829-839.

Williams, P. J. (1991). *The alchemy of race and rights*. Harvard University Press.

Wright, M. (2013). *Disposable women and other myths of global capitalism*. Routledge.

# Appendix



**Date:** 22 July 2021

**To:** Professor Greg Beckett

**Project ID:** 118721

**Study Title:** An Ethnography of Global Capitalism: Local and Global Activists on the Demands of Bangladeshi Garment Workers

**Short Title:** An Ethnography of Global Capitalism

**Application Type:** NMREB Initial Application

**Review Type:** Delegated

**Full Board Reporting Date:** 06/Aug/2021

**Date Approval Issued:** 22/Jul/2021 23:42

**REB Approval Expiry Date:** 22/Jul/2022

Dear Professor Greg Beckett

The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the WREM application form for the above mentioned study, as of the date noted above. NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the expiry date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

This research study is to be conducted by the investigator noted above. **All other required institutional approvals and mandated training must also be obtained prior to the conduct of the study.**

**Documents Approved:**

Document Name	Document Type	Document Date	Document Version
Participant Recruitment Email_RM	Recruitment Materials	27/Jun/2021	
Interview Guide_RM	Interview Guide	28/Jun/2021	
Participant Recruitment Email:Bangla_RM	Recruitment Materials	22/Jul/2021	2
LOI and Verbal Consent_RM	Verbal Consent/Assent	22/Jul/2021	2

No deviations from, or changes to the protocol should be initiated without prior written approval from the NMREB, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard(s) to study participants or when the change(s) involves only administrative or logistical aspects of the trial.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario. Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB. The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 00000941.

Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Ms. Katelyn Harris, Research Ethics Officer on behalf of Dr. Randal Graham, NMREB Chair

**Note: This correspondence includes an electronic signature (validation and approval via an online system that is compliant with all regulations).**

# Curriculum Vitae

**Name:** Raisa Masud

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:** University of Toronto  
Toronto, Ontario, Canada  
2016-2020 B.A.

Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada  
2020-2022 M.A.

**Honours and Awards:** Canada Graduate Scholarship-Masters  
2021-2022

Ontario Graduate Scholarship  
2020-2021

**Related Work Experience** Teaching Assistant  
Western University  
2020-2022

## **Presentations:**

Masud, Raisa. (2022). Global Capitalism and Wage Labor: Garments Workers' Return to Factory Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Awarded "1<sup>st</sup> Place Paper Presentation". Medusa 2022: *University of Toronto Anthropology Graduate Conference*.

## **Publications:**

Pennesi, Karen E., Afrin, I., Hamam, F., Maharaj, B., **Masud, R.**, Meléndez, Luis., Parra, N., and Piskor, A. (2020). Improving Supports for Diverse Women Entering Executive Roles *Anthropology Publications*. 70. <https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/anthropub/70>