



**BANGLADESH CENTER FOR
WORKERS SOLIDARITY**

From: Kalpona Akter
Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity

To: Mr Didier Reynders and Mr Thierry Breton
European Commission

Dhaka, 18 July 2021

RE: Sustainable Corporate Governance legislation

Dear Commissioner Reynders, Dear Commissioner Breton,

As the leader of the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity and a former child worker, I was happy to hear that European Union is going to introduce binding rules for garment companies and other businesses. Multi stakeholder initiatives, codes of conduct and corporate social responsibility altogether have clearly failed to protect workers' rights and lives, and I have been calling for binding rules for many years. Only a law that addresses the root causes of violations and has accountability at its core will truly transform and protect people's lives.

Many people around you right now are wearing clothes that were cut, trimmed and sewn in Bangladesh because my tiny country is one of the largest garment exporters. Garments represent more than 80% of everything that the country exports. They are therefore the backbone of the Bangladeshi economy. About four million people, mostly women, work in over 4,000 garment factories across the country.

I started working in the garment industry when I was 12 years old. Later my 10-year-old brother joined with me. Sending us to work was the only way for the family to have food on the table. We had no idea about rights. I worked over 400 hours in a month, standing on my feet for 12 or 16 hours, often getting slapped by the supervisors – nothing unusual. A few years later I learned about my rights, and I started informing my coworkers. But as soon as I organized a union and applied for registration, I got fired. Later I got blacklisted throughout the industry. All those are still very common.

Knowing the garment industry very well, it is clear to me that even binding rules will not make all human rights violations stop. That is why I am writing now, in solidarity with millions of people who still work in factories in Bangladesh. I call on you to make

sure that the rules you are going to introduce are strong, but that they also give victims of corporate abuses clear and straightforward access to justice in European courts.

Every April, when the survivors of the Rana Plaza building collapse get together in memory of those who had died in the rubble, I am reminded what happens if workers' safety and other rights are left to voluntary commitments, and what it takes for those injured and for victims' families to access any kind of remedy. I was reminded of this last week, too, when over 50 people died because they could not escape from the fire that broke out in a food and drink factory in Bangladesh. As in many other cases, the door was locked and there was no safe way out.

Rana Plaza collapse, the biggest disaster in the history of garment industry, took place in my home country on 23 April 2013. Many workers did not want to enter the Rana Plaza building that day because of large cracks in the walls. But they worked for poverty wages, just as workers in Bangladesh do today. They could not afford to miss the day's pay, as the factory owners threatened. More than 1100 people died in that deathtrap building and thousands were injured.

A few days later I was picking through what was left of the building. I was hoping to find labels from big brands like H&M or Nike, Benetton or Mango. Risking our lives like that was the only way to find out which companies sourced from the garment factories in the Rana Plaza building.

Those labels were the only hope for the survivors and victim's families to at least get some compensation. It took us weeks, but we found labels, tags and order sheets from more than 29 brands. Many of them had nice sounding codes of conduct. Those words made no difference for the workers who died and for the children who were left behind.

That traumatic digging through the rubble was only the beginning. It took two years of campaigning, public naming and shaming, and global mobilization, before brands paid into the Rana Plaza Arrangement compensation fund. Some never did. And to this day not a single legal case in Bangladesh against the owners and others implicated in the disaster has delivered justice.

Even the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety that was signed after the Rana Plaza disaster and has made factories safer for over two million workers is now in danger. Brands are refusing to extend it. They are using the new rules that you are working on at the European Commission as an excuse. But the Accord itself is a perfect example of how companies can ensure respect for human rights in practice even after those rules come into force years from now. We continue to fight for the Accord and appreciate the public support expressed by some European politicians.

Many other companies are not committed to any binding agreement in the first place. Only legislation can make them take human rights seriously, not only in their

headquarters but wherever their goods are made. That can be on factory floors as well as in people's homes.


Please remember the Rana Plaza victims and also do not forget about us who had to dig through the rubble of a collapsed factory to find out which brands should be called to account. The rules you are going to introduce should include mandatory value chain transparency. Activists like myself, politicians like yourself, the workers, consumers, and everyone else should be able to easily trace a company's production sites, or a T-shirt's origin and its journey through the value chain.

New rules will not make a difference for those who died in many other unsafe factories around the world. But if you make sure that every company has to identify, prevent and mitigate human right risks in its value chain, including the company's own purchasing practices, then you can help save and improve many millions of lives in the future.

I think about my own experience in a sweatshop and all the personal stories that I know through my current work, and I conclude: companies must be held liable for their due diligence failures, and grieving families, injured survivors and other victims of corporate abuse must be able to access courts and effective remedy.

I thank you for your consideration of this point of view and am available for any further information.

Yours sincerely,



Kalpona Akter
Executive Director
BCWS