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CAN WORKERS OF THE WORLD UNITE? A MULTI-SITED ETHNOGRAPHY OF  
TRANSNATIONAL LABOR ORGANIZING ACROSS THE APPAREL  
COMMODITY NETWORK

By

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Can Workers of the World Unite? A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Transnational Labor

Organizing across the Apparel Commodity Network

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Dr. Mary Hawkesworth

This dissertation analyzes transnational labor activism and activist discourses developed in relation to the deadliest garment industrial disaster in the human history - the 2013 collapse of Rana plaza, a factory building housing five garment factories in Savar, Bangladesh. The project takes an intersectional and interdisciplinary approach, involving two-year-long physical and digital ethnographic observation and interviews with Bangladeshi women garment workers, labor rights activists, researchers, and policy makers in Bangladesh and the United States. In this research, I ask what it means for grassroots labor organizers in the Global South, who are often restricted by national borders and neoliberal socio-economic-political forces, to engage in transnational solidarity building. I specifically examine why some grassroots organizing initiatives in the Global South can engage in solidarity building with transnational allies while others do not gain such access. Drawing on the case study of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh - a transnational governance structure that aspired to ensure safety and security for Bangladeshi garment workers after the Rana Plaza collapse, I argue that the post-Rana Plaza transnational

collaboration between workers and labor organizers in the Global North and the South reproduces a neoliberal attention economy where gendered and racialized Southern workers receive attention from their Northern allies only if they speak the preferred language, subscribe for a preferred politics, and mobilize donor funds in a preferred way. My ethnographic fieldwork documents how attention from the Northern allies often comes at the cost of losing attention from Southern workers and activists. Therefore, the neoliberal attention economy offers the impossible choice between engaging in transnational collaboration while losing material impact on the ground and focusing on grounded struggles while losing transnational allies.

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I dedicate my Ph.D. to all my teachers and mentors. I am here because of you. I need your best wishes as I move forward, as I assume the role of a college professor.

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## **Introduction**

The Tazreen factory fire, which killed more than 112 workers, and the Rana Plaza collapse—the deadliest garment industrial disaster in the history of humankind—which killed more than 1134 workers, revitalized transnational activist collaborations. Labor rights activists and corporations in the Global North developed unique solutions to ensure the safety and security of Bangladeshi garment workers. North American labor rights groups in collaboration with their European allies proposed the Accord for Building and Fire Safety in Bangladesh (the Accord) in 2013. Many prominent labor organizers in the North described the Accord as a “game changer” or a “breakthrough” agreement (Hensler and Blasi 2013, 5; Ryan 2013). They heavily lauded the Accord for its unprecedented provision of involving corporations in a legally-binding agreement to ensure safety and security for Bangladeshi garment workers.

While North American labor rights groups were pressuring transnational corporations (TNCs) to sign the Accord, it remained a vague concept for many progressive left-leaning grassroots labor organizers in Bangladesh. When I first visited Bangladesh as part of my fieldwork in 2014, I asked many grassroots labor organizers about their thoughts on the Accord and its rival the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety (popularly known as the Alliance). Most of my informants told me they had just heard about “the Accord” and “the Alliance” and they had heard that both were doing something to ensure safety and security of Bangladeshi garment workers. Nevertheless, they were not aware of the difference between the Accord and the Alliance—something which was being heavily debated in North American labor rights circles at that time. Most of the left-leaning

grassroots organizers I interviewed were more interested in collective mobilizing for minimum wage increases, harsher punishment for factory owners who violate building and fire safety codes, and proper compensation for Tazreen and Rana Plaza survivors and victims' families. A survey conducted by the Garment Workers Unity Forum in 2015 revealed that 98% of garment workers in Ashulia, Savar had not heard about the Accord or the Alliance (Garment Workers Unity Forum). I was intrigued by the gulf between Northern labor rights activists and Bangladeshi grassroots labor organizers in envisioning how to fight for garment workers' rights in the post-Rana Plaza world. This dissertation is an attempt to understand why priorities of Northern and Southern labor rights activists differ so significantly and what this difference means for transnational solidarity building.

Transnational solidarity building initiatives around the Accord campaign seemed to move well beyond consumer boycott movements of Bangladeshi garment products in the early 1990s, and the proliferation of voluntary, self-regulatory corporate codes of conducts in Bangladesh in the aftermath of the 1993 Child Labor Deterrence Act which is commonly known as the Harkin's Bill. Both consumer boycott movements and corporate codes of conduct relied heavily on the agency of consumers, corporations, and labor rights activists in the Global North to "save" Bangladeshi garment workers from deplorable working conditions. Their narratives often described Bangladesh as the site of the problem (Brooks 2007, Siddiqi 2009). The post-Rana Plaza transnational labor organizing centering on the Accord seemed to move away from these earlier tendencies. Rather than focusing on TNCs to pressure Bangladeshi factory owners and the government to assume liability for unsafe working conditions, proponents of the Accord directed their energy towards holding TNCs primarily accountable for the safety and security of garment workers.

Although the Accord relied on the agency of North American consumers, corporations, and activists, it consciously included workers' representation in transnational advocacy and in factory inspections and implementation efforts in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, however, left-leaning progressive grassroots organizers remained largely antagonistic towards the Accord as they probed its provisions and implications. The striking differences in strategies advanced by activists in the Global North and by grassroots activists on the ground to address the needs of Bangladeshi garment workers raise important questions about who represents garment workers and how those workers interests are conceptualized.

To begin to analyze worker interests and the politics of representation in the context of Bangladeshi garment workers, I followed the transnational activist trajectory of a labor rights activist named Kalpona Akter and her organization Bangladesh Centre for Workers' Solidarity (BCWS). Kalpona Akter is a popular face in North American labor rights circles. A google search for "Kalpona Akter" returns 60,000 results.<sup>1</sup> A YouTube search for her name shows a list of videos of Akter testifying at Wal-Mart's shareholders' meeting, attending demonstrations in North America, and receiving prestigious awards.<sup>2</sup> BCWS was virtually the only organization representing Bangladeshi garment workers in the North American Accord campaign. My encounters with Bangladeshi left-leaning progressive

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed August 22, 2017.

[https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF\\_enUS736US736&q=kalpona+akter&oq=kalpona+akter&gs\\_l=psy-ab.3..35i39k1l2j0i67k1j0.403.403.0.745.1.1.0.0.0.126.126.0j1.1.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..0.1.126.491S68u1tp8](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1CHBF_enUS736US736&q=kalpona+akter&oq=kalpona+akter&gs_l=psy-ab.3..35i39k1l2j0i67k1j0.403.403.0.745.1.1.0.0.0.126.126.0j1.1.0....0...1.1.64.psy-ab..0.1.126.491S68u1tp8)

<sup>2</sup> Accessed August 22, 2017.

[https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=kalpona+akter](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=kalpona+akter)

grassroots labor rights organizers during field research, however, left me with multiple questions: Why does Akter's stance on the Accord drastically differ from most of the progressive labor organizers in Bangladesh? Why does Akter get so much attention from North American labor rights circles, while other grassroots labor organizers remain largely invisible?

To answer these questions, I devoted two years to the ethnographic research of garment labor activism in Bangladesh and the USA. My research sought to answer a number of questions: Who acquires the authority to represent Bangladeshi garment workers in transnational organizing spaces and how do they gain that authority? What kind of access and resources do grassroots labor organizers need to cross transnational borders and participate in transnational labor activism? What challenges do neoliberal socio-economic and political forces pose for grassroots labor organizers who are restricted by national borders to engage in transnational solidarity building initiatives? This dissertation maps the terrain of various garment labor organizing spaces – both virtual and physical - in Bangladesh and the USA. I investigate and analyze the rhetoric that travels across those spaces, the sources of funding required to mobilize transnationally, and the power politics that undergird transnational activist networks.

### **A Note on Feminist Ethnographic Methodology**

My multi-sited ethnography of transnational labor organizing is based on a theorization of feminist commodity network analysis. A feminist commodity network analysis disrupts linear narratives of the social life of a commodity. Transforming the

concept of the network into an empirical study, however, can create methodological anxieties. Hopkins and Wallerstein aspire to “develop a mode of evaluating the entire network of commodity chains at successive points in time, so as to locate shifts in which chains are the major loci of capital accumulation” (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1994, 49 cited in Bair 2009, 15). Yet, most of the studies using a commodity chain/network framework focus on a single chain or a segment of a single chain (Bair 2004, 15). Drawing on Philip Crang’s discussion (2004), Hughes and Reimer ask the crucial methodological question, “How do we ‘do the whole of geography’? How can we think about, follow and embrace all connections, all of the time?” (Hughes and Reimer 2004, 13).

Rather than seeking to map “the whole of geography,” or follow “all connections all of the time,” I draw on Cindy Katz’s framing of critical topography to examine interconnections and disjunctures in different nodes of the apparel commodity network. A critical topography, which Katz frames as “countertopography,” provides methodological tools for developing gendered oppositional politics that move across scales and spaces. In particular, countertopography examines material and cultural effects of globalization on places that are constituted by both global and local forces of globalization (Katz 2001, 1213-1234). I chose multiple sites for this critical topography: Dhaka, Bangladesh, as well as New Jersey, New York City, Washington D.C. and Boston in the USA. I situate transnational labor activism in Bangladesh and the USA in relation to each other, analyzing various geographical scales to excavate structures and processes that produce and connect these places. I perform a detailed examination of different scales such as garment workers’ bodies, labor organizations, and communities that are embedded in these places. I deconstruct masculinist subjects of globalization such as TNCs and states. I also investigate

how gendered, raced, and classed performances of garment workers in Bangladesh and in the USA define different global practices. Along the way, I show how different places are shaped by common sets of global forces and how we could develop a globally sensitive politics that is grounded in these places.

My research is based on intensive ethnographic work at multiple locations. As a feminist ethnographer, my research design is flexible. It is improvised by my field experiences and various expected and unexpected leads. I went into the field with a set of intellectual concerns but without a specific goal, objective, or a formalized questionnaire. My field experiences shaped the direction of my inquiry and the kinds of data that I gathered for further analysis.

Fonow and Cook note that conventional ethnography does not recognize the possibility that a researcher might share an identity with her research subjects. Indeed, conventional ethnographic methods require a presumption of distance and difference to preserve objectivity and validate research findings (Fonow and Cook 1991 cited in Pillow and Mayo 2007, 161-162). As a feminist ethnographer, I do not try to maintain distance or adhere to a fictive objective position. I immersed myself in the landscape of Bangladeshi garment labor organizing, became a part of various protest campaigns, and tried to understand rationalities of various subject positions of my informants from their points of view. I also remained aware of my inability to make complete sense of all the complex situations my informants negotiated.

As a feminist ethnographer, I aspire to critically reflect on the nature of my relationship with research subjects and address issues of representation, reciprocity, and

power relations in my research sites. I was born, raised, and spent twenty-three years of my life in Bangladesh. My first language is Bangla, but I also speak fluent English. I am familiar with many Bangladeshi norms and values. I have been living in North America for nine years while pursuing graduate studies. Thus, I am habituated to the U.S. and Canadian life-styles as well. While completing my M.A. and Ph.D., I visited my home country every year for several months as a non-resident Bangladeshi. My continuous back and forth movement between Bangladesh and the USA constructs my subject position as an “outsider/within” in relation to labor rights organizers in both Bangladesh and the USA. That is why I do not follow any specific structure to dictate my position as an “insider” or “outsider.” I meet my informants as a fellow labor organizer who is involved with United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) and Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity, and as a social media activist who is an organizer of the Meye Network – the largest online community of Bengali speaking women, as a graduate student doing her Ph.D. in transnational labor organizing, a teacher who teaches part-time at Rutgers University and the University of Dhaka, and as a friend and ally who is interested in learning the informant’s point of view. All these multi-layered identities and affiliations afford me different levels connections (and disconnections in some cases) with my informants.

For example, in Bangladesh when I was a seasonal visitor during my graduate studies, my US-affiliation initially made some left-leaning labor organizers skeptical as they were expecting an uncritical celebration of cosmopolitan labor organizers, such as Kalpona Akter or Nazma Akter,<sup>3</sup> or the Accord for Building and Fire Safety in Bangladesh. It took time to build rapport with these organizers, share my critiques of transnational labor

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss both of their complicated subject positions in detail in chapter 3.

organizing, and find common ground. When I interviewed Bangladeshi garment workers, I remained conscious of my urban-educated-middle class position, which was very different from lived realities of most of the garment workers. Similarly, I negotiated my complicated “outsider/within” subject position in the USA as well. As a long-term organizer of United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), I was expected to be well-conversant in the language of North American transnational solidarity building, which means being highly celebratory of the Accord or Kalpona Akter who speaks for Bangladeshi garment workers. My critique of the Accord and of Akter made some of my North American allies uncomfortable. Nevertheless, I tried to explain my arguments, which inspired some of my allies to think beyond the hegemonic labor rights narrative while others decided to maintain their distance from me.

My feminist ethnography benefits from insights of the feminist social movement literature. Sarah Maddison describes how feminist understanding of social movements reconceptualizes hegemonies, discourses, and identities to challenge monolithic narratives of globalization and examines complexities and contradictions that shape interrelationships across different places (Maddison 2007, 393-94). That is why incorporating perspectives from feminist social movement research helps me understand conflicting interests of various actors and institutions in different nodes of the commodity network. It motivates me as the ethnographer to recognize voices of activists who articulate their commitments in non-academic language, value strategic relevancy of their initiatives, and adhere to the spirit of critical transnational feminist praxis.

I relied on a variety of data gathering methods in my feminist ethnography of the apparel commodity network. I specifically used participant observation, qualitative



interviews, feminist content analysis, and photography. Lichterman describes participant observation as, “Listening to people talking in their settings, on their own time, participant-observers have the opportunity to glean the everyday meanings, tacit assumptions, ordinary customs, practical rules of thumb that organize people’s everyday lives” (Lichterman 2002, 138 cited in Maddison 2007, 399). I participated in formal and informal meetings, social events, and protest campaigns in Bangladesh and the USA. Intimate participant observation offered me the opportunity to gain insights about various collective and contradicting place-making processes in my research sites.

In-depth and unstructured qualitative interviews afforded me access to narratives of experiential contradictions of research subjects in their own words (Reinharz 1992, 19 cited in Maddison 2007, 399). In Bangladesh, I conducted in-depth interviews with labor rights activists, garment workers, factory owners, and academicians. In the USA, I interviewed labor rights activists and scholars. Active listening was an important skill for me to conduct the qualitative interviews. It involved not only listening but also engagement via non-verbal gestures and expressions. As a feminist researcher, it was also important for me to look beyond spoken words to reveal implicit meanings and to listen not only to spoken words but also to gaps and silences of my research subjects while remaining conscious about my assumptions, biases, and stereotypes.

Feminist content analysis generates valuable insights for my ethnography. Following the recommendations of Shulamit Reinharz and Rachel Kulick, I analyzed the following kinds of materials: *written words* such as newspaper articles, reports published by international organizations, governments, and non-government organizations, annual reports, newsletters, conference proceedings, and research reports; *narratives and visual*

*texts* such as electronic media coverage, documentaries, and social networking websites; and *material culture and behavioral residues* such as workplace locations, spatial relations, formal and informal conversations, body language, and non-verbal communications. Using feminist content analysis, I interpreted these diverse texts while situating them in their socio-political contexts. I interrogated processes through which both contents and their meanings are produced and mediated. I compared, contrasted, and elaborated information gathered from participant observations and interviews, thereby developing a deeper understanding of my research contexts (Reinharz and Kulick 2007, 258-259).

Photography was another creative method for visualizing and materializing abstract concepts for me. Deborah Barndt used photography to visualize the hidden journey of a tomato from Mexico to Canada while illuminating individual and collective struggles of women workers in these two countries (Barndt 2008, 86). I follow Barndt's strategic use of photography to document gendered and raced lives of labor rights activists in various nodes of the apparel supply chain. I have included some of these photos in my dissertation. The photos not only elaborate and strengthen my findings but also invite readers to ponder uneven power hierarchies in relation to their subject positions.

My methodological journey was inspired by Deborah Barndt's concept of "border-crossing research." As Barndt notes, feminist research should challenge disciplinary, methodological, occupational, and geopolitical borders (Barndt 2008, 70-72). I attempt to challenge methodological borders by adopting the intellectual and political tools of critical transnational feminist praxis.<sup>4</sup> I draw on insights from interdisciplinary academic

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<sup>4</sup> Transnational feminist praxis is an intellectual and political tool which is aware about its different historical, political, and geographical locations. It encourages in-depth dialogues

scholarship as well as non-academic activist perspectives. Through this unique academic and activist collaboration, I aspire to destabilize conventional modes of knowledge production and advance research that can contribute to the transformative potential of a social justice agenda.

### **Chapter Overview**

The first chapter theorizes feminist commodity networks to critically examine workers' experiences in transnational labor organizing. Using the framework of "new global division of labor" (Coe 2011, 89-101) as a critique of the conventional understanding of "new international division of labor (NIDL), it argues that a feminist multiscale geographical critique of neoliberal globalization can reveal how workers in the Global North and the South are interconnected through a network of commodities. It

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and critical self-reflection of knowledge production and dissemination in transnational alliances and, therefore, attempts to bridge the gap between "local" and "global." Swarr and Nagar note that academic spaces of producing knowledge such as classrooms, seminars, conferences, workshops, and research sites are collaborative because these spaces create knowledge in cooperation with academic and non-academic communities. Nevertheless, the academic structure usually recognizes only individual academic merit. It immerses research subjects in "grounded struggles" and creates dichotomies such as "individually/collaboratively produced knowledge, academia/activism, and theory/method" (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 1-22). Swarr and Nagar propose to rethink these dichotomies with a view to resisting hierarchies of feminist knowledge production while acknowledging limits of such resistance. They acknowledge that transnational feminist praxis is not necessarily a readily available solution for hierarchies of knowledge production. Nevertheless, they focus on the dynamic feature of transnational collaboration which gives meanings to praxis in specific place, time, and struggle. They emphasize the necessity of working with the crisis of representation, understanding the unstable nature of praxis, and continuing a consistent commitment for producing self-reflexive and dialogic critiques instead of looking for resolutions (Swarr and Nagar 2010, 9).

proposes a network-based analysis of the trajectory of apparel instead of a chain-based model that often promotes a fixed, unidirectional, and vertical understanding of commodity relations. Most importantly, it examines the possibility of using feminist commodity network analysis to investigate transnational labor organizing in both the Global North and the South. Using analytical insights from networked activism (Wills and Hale 2005), new labor transnationalism (McCallum 2013), and transnational feminist frameworks (Briggs 2016), I explore how a feminist commodity network analysis can move beyond the dichotomy of “top-down” vs. “bottom-up” organizing strategies, examine cross-border as well as intra-movement dynamics, and challenge neocolonial and neoliberal trends in transnational labor organizing.

The second chapter specifically focuses on transnational labor organizing surrounding two transnational governance structures that became popular after the Rana Plaza collapse—the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. The chapter examines why US-based transnational labor organizing narratives held Western brands primarily liable for deplorable working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories, and devoted so much energy to establishing the difference between the Accord and the Alliance. It also investigates why many Bangladeshi scholars and activists remained skeptical about both the Accord and the Alliance and preferred to hold factory owners, the Bangladesh government, and the state accountable for ensuring workers’ rights. I demonstrate that the Alliance is a mere continuation of corporate codes of conduct, which rarely embrace workers’ meaningful participation and seldom impose legal responsibilities on corporations. Although the nature of the Accord differs from typical corporate codes of conduct, it faces significant

challenges in bringing long-term changes because of its selective choice of Third World activist allies, its lack of collaboration with workers and grassroots organizing initiatives, its limited understanding of local power dynamics and hierarchies, and its tendency to reproduce “the savior complex” through which those in the North seek to rescue those in the South.

The third chapter evaluates contemporary transnational activist collaborations that explicitly embrace norms of worker equality and solidarity, and focus on shop-floor activism and workers’ agency by incorporating Southern workers’ representatives in processes designed to hold manufacturers to account for worker safety. I argue that the apparent democratic collaboration between international labor rights groups and grassroots organizing initiatives often ignores “scattered hegemonies,” a term coined by Grewel and Kaplan (1994, 7), that exist in the complicated terrain of garment labor organizing in the Global South. Although contemporary transnational activist collaborations, most notably the Accord campaign launched after the Tazreen factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse, aspire to move beyond consumer-oriented models of protest campaigns and to challenge neocolonial power hierarchies that characterized previous consumer boycott movements and corporate codes of conduct, they fall far short of their aspirations. Although they espouse shop-floor activism and workers’ agency and incorporate Southern workers’ representatives in their transnational campaigns, they inadvertently attribute a singular view to garment workers in the Global South, positing universal and invariant desires, experiences, and struggles. They often fail to recognize how these “workers’ representatives” engage in asymmetrical power relationships not only with their Northern allies, corporations, and consumers but also with their Southern counterparts.

The fourth chapter turns attention toward post-Rana Plaza social media to investigate “virtual activism” that aspired to address concerns of Bangladeshi garment workers. It draws upon a cultural geographic understanding of place-making processes in social media to reveal how social media spaces are co-constituted and overlap with urban physical spaces. Rather than being “disembodied,” social media articulates an urban civic consciousness that produces and circulates hegemonic images of gendered and classed bodies and social relationships. Through case studies of social-media mobilizations following the Rana Plaza collapse and the prolonged nationalist “Shahbag protest” around capital punishment for convicted war criminals in Bangladesh independence struggle, I illuminate the dimensions and limitations of “neoliberal conformist voluntarism.” In these contrasting political contexts, microcelebrity-networked activism, fostered mostly by urban, middle class, educated men of Bangladesh, works within the boundaries of neoliberal, nationalist civic consciousness to represent, normalize, and appropriate bodies and lives of women garment workers. These microcelebrities operate without any grounded understanding of the social history or political economy of these workers’ day-to-day struggles. Despite the significant limitations of neoliberal conformist voluntarism, I suggest that the boundary of microcelebrity activism is not a rigid one. Workers, activists, academicians, and their transnational allies often pose critical challenges to the boundary and alter hierarchical gendered and classed power relations in virtual and physical spaces in different ways<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> An earlier version of chapter four was published under the title “Social Media and Conformist Voluntarism in the Neoliberal Era: The Case of Rana Plaza Collapse in Savar, Bangladesh,” in *Revealing Gender Inequalities and Perceptions in South Asian Countries Through Discourse Analysis*, edited by Nazmunnessa Mahtab, Sara Parker, Farah Kabir,

The fifth chapter analyzes transnational initiatives through which workers in the Global North reach out to workers in the Global South to collaborate with each other and address the suppression of labor rights in their respective contexts. This specific mode of transnational labor organizing challenges the dominant dichotomy between Northern consumers/activists/ corporations and Southern workers across the apparel supply chain. It acknowledges that Northern and Southern workers are connected through transnational networks of commodities and oppressed by neoliberal capitalist production practices. I analyze two experimental transnational solidarity building initiatives between workers in the production and the consumption nodes of the apparel supply chain, exploring the transnational collaboration between the Model Alliance, a New York-based non-profit organization promoting equity and sustainable practices in the fashion and modeling industries, and Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS), a Bangladeshi labor NGO promoting labor rights and leadership training for garment workers. I also examine the participation of Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of BCWS, in Wal-Mart's annual shareholder meetings and protest campaigns in collaboration with Wal-Mart retail workers in the USA. Despite their hopes of transcending trenchant inequalities, however, I demonstrate that transnational collaboration between workers in the Global North and South reproduces power asymmetries in different nodes of the supply chain. In the final section of this chapter, I consider what these case studies suggest for the possibilities of future radical coalitional practices in the era of neoliberal globalization.

## Chapter 1:

### **Feminist Commodity Network as a Tool of Analysis:**

#### **Exploring Transnational Labor Circuits**

As apparel - a transnational commodity - moves from Bangladesh where it is produced to the USA where it is consumed, it crafts material and social relations among workers who are involved with production, circulation, and consumption of apparel. These workers experience uneven impacts of neoliberal globalization as they work for transnational corporations and their local suppliers in different parts of the world. This chapter proposes a feminist commodity network framework to analyze gendered, raced, and classed meanings of everyday struggles and organizing experiences of the workers. A feminist commodity network analysis provides useful insights on how workers engage in solidarity building along the multi-sited and multi-layered trajectory of apparel in both the Global North and the South. It provides epistemological tools for exploring interconnections and ruptures of transnational labor organizing and unravels how transnational collaborative spaces challenge the linear understanding of “local” and “global.”

The chapter is composed of three sections. The first section provides a background on how contemporary globalizing forces are increasingly being shaped by neoliberal philosophies and policies, resulting in inequities in both the Global North and the South. Using the framework of “new global division of labor” (Coe 2011, 89-101) as a critique of the conventional understanding of “new international division of labor” (NIDL), it



highlights the gendered nature of neoliberal globalization. It argues that a feminist multiscale geographical critique of neoliberal globalization can reveal how workers in the Global North and the South are interconnected through a network of commodities. The second section develops a theoretical framework of feminist commodity network using critical feminist cultural geographical insights to explore how workers experience gender, race, and class oppressions in interlinked transnational spaces. It proposes a network-based analysis of the trajectory of apparel instead of a chain-based model that often promotes a fixed, unidirectional, and vertical understanding of commodity relations. The third section specifically focuses on the possibility of using feminist commodity network analysis to investigate transnational labor organizing in both the Global North and the South. Using analytical insights from networked activism (Wills and Hale 2005), new labor transnationalism (McCallum 2013), and transnational feminist framework (Briggs 2016), I explore how a feminist commodity network analysis can move beyond the dichotomy of “top-down” vs. “bottom-up” organizing strategies, examine cross-border as well as intra-movement dynamics, and challenge neocolonial and neoliberal trends in transnational labor organizing.

### **Neoliberal globalization and the new global division of labor**

As the hegemonic mode of political economic philosophy and practice in the contemporary world, Neoliberalism revives eighteenth-century classical economic theories. It suggests a state-supported institutional framework that mobilizes entrepreneurial freedom in a free market economy. Its goal is to translate individual well-

being and pursuit of private interest into collective social benefits. To achieve the goal, neoliberalism reformats existing institutions and power relations by diminishing state control, promoting privatization of enterprises, and reducing public spending on social security and benefits such as healthcare, education, and environmental protection (Harvey 2005, 2-3; Hawkesworth 2006, 7-8). David Harvey uses the evocative phrase “creative destruction” to describe neoliberalism’s disparaging transformation of “divisions of labour, social relations, welfare provisions, technological mixes, ways of life and thought, reproductive activities, attachments to the land and habits of the heart” (Harvey 2005, 3).

Neoliberalism relies on information technologies to minimize time and space restrictions for maximum intensity of market transactions. With the assistance of information technologies, neoliberalism aspires to increase its worldwide coverage and influence decision-making in the global market (Harvey 2005, 3-4). To exert control over a greater geographical area within a shorter period, it becomes intertwined with globalization that denotes “spatial extension of social relations across the globe” (James 2004, 29; cited in Hawkesworth 2006, 4). Globalization inspired by neoliberal ideologies promotes free trade of commodities and services, foreign direct investment, and cross-border competition. As a result, transnational corporations (TNCs) freely move from one country to another in search of favorable terms of investment and cheap, disposable labor. International financial institutions such as World Bank and IMF emphasize the importance of training workers to collaborate with the competitive structure of global capitalist economy instead of expressing “protest mentalities” (Bedford 2005; cited in Hawkesworth 2006, 8).

Neoliberal globalization increases inequities around the world and disproportionately affects disadvantaged groups of populations. A 2017 Oxfam report notes that the richest 1% owned more wealth than the rest of the world since 2015 and only eight men own the same amount of wealth as the poorest half of the world (Oxfam January 2017, 2). Both the Global North and the South<sup>6</sup> bear the brunt of income inequity created and sustained by neoliberal globalization. The Oxfam report further points out that the income growth of the top 1% has been 300% whereas the growth of the bottom 50% has been zero over last 30 years in the USA. Countries in the Global South also replicate similar patterns. For example, in Vietnam, the richest person earns more in a day than what the poorest person earns in 10 years (Oxfam, 2)

Neoliberal globalization is a gendered phenomenon. Gender operates as a mechanism of power within various processes of neoliberal globalization along with other social hierarchies such as race, class, sexuality, nationality, and ethnicity. Considering gender as an analytical category instead of cultural constructions of masculinity and femininity provides us a “heuristic device” to understand multilayered gendered dynamics

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<sup>6</sup> I acknowledge that the polarized classification of “Global North” and “Global South” fails to indicate that some wealthy countries such as Australia and New Zealand are located in the geographical Global South. It does not capture existence of the “North” within the Global South and the “South” within the Global North. It ignores what Shohat and Stam calls “Third Worldization” of a Second World that bears the brunt of neocolonial domination of the First World. It also clusters many Second World countries under the category of “North,” thereby ignoring the fact that it is the First World, and not the Second World, that violently exploited the Third World (Shohat and Stam 1994, 27). Echoing Chandra Mohanty’s reflection on the imprecise and inadequate nature of language that we use to distinguish between privileged and marginalized communities and nations (Mohanty 2003, 505-506), I recognize the political usefulness of loosely used metaphorical terms, such as the “Global North” and the “Global South,” in indicating differences between “haves” and “have-nots” while acknowledging that these terms at times promote essentialist binary worldviews. Remaining chapters of my dissertation further complicate straightforward categorizations of “North” vs. “South” and “First” vs. “Third” Worlds.

of neoliberal globalization (Hawkesworth 2006, 10). It helps us inquire how deregulated market structures and trade liberalization policies transform agricultural economies into manufacturing and service economies and increasingly engage feminine or feminized labor in both the Global North and the South. For example, women constitute 70% to 90% of workers in export processing zones (EPZs) located in the Global South (Milberg and Amengual 2008, 13). Similarly, in the Global North, Wal-Mart – for example – employs 813,000 women constituting 57% of total Wal-Mart workforce (Wal-Mart 2012, 3-4). Women’s increasing integration in labor force, a phenomenon which has been termed as the “feminization of labor,” does not bring only benefits for women. Feminization of labor culminates in women’s employment in flexible, low-paid, and temporary or part-time jobs with few or no benefits. Neoliberal market economy encourages TNCs to search for feminized and racialized labor around the world. TNCs use cheap, flexible, feminized labor in the Global South to manufacture products. While retailing these products for mass consumption in the Global North, TNCs again exploit disposable, feminized, and racialized workforce in this part of the world.

The vast literature on the new international division of labor (NIDL) examines implications of offshore production on workers in the Global North and the South. It suggests that falling profits in manufacturing, market saturation, and underconsumption in the North motivated TNCs to relocate production to the South where they take advantage of low-cost, semi- or unskilled feminized labor. It argues that NIDL resulted in widespread manufacturing job losses in the North. In the South, NIDL fostered a new form of “dependent development” which relied on export-oriented low-paid, low-skilled manufacturing jobs (Coe 2011, 89-101). However, a new international division of labor

overemphasizes the role of manufacturing job loss in the North and recruitment of female workers in the South. It ignores how transnational flows of trade and capital destroy employment opportunities in domestic agriculture in the South and exploit feminized and racialized workforce in the North. It fails to grasp complicated and rapidly shifting networks of the international division of labor and their different implications around the world. Dicken calls for an understanding of “new global division of labor” to address these limitations. New global division of labor refers to “...a highly complex, kaleidoscopic structure involving the fragmentation of many production processes and their geographical relocation on a global scale in ways that slice through national boundaries” (Dicken 2003, 9 cited in Coe 2011, 96-98). It, therefore, challenges nation- and TNC-centric framing of the division of labor by inquiring how neoliberal globalization gives rise to a complex division of labor in uneven but interconnected geographies. It proposes a holistic framework for examining networks of connections among transnational actors and institutions who are involved in production, circulation, and consumption of goods and services at different scales. This framework theorizes how different territorial structures capitalize on feminized labor and bear different implications for women workers who are interconnected through networks clustered around commodities or services. Being inspired by this framing of the new global division of labor, in the next section, I develop a feminist commodity network analysis. This analytical framework examines how workers in Bangladesh and the USA experience complex and overlapping global divisions of labor at a time when the Global North faces recession, debt crisis, and unemployment whereas some emerging economies in the Global South experience export-led relative growths accompanied by debt dependency and shrinking agricultural sector.

## **Towards a cultural geographical understanding of feminist commodity network analysis**

The feminist commodity network analysis I propose is inspired by a cultural geographical conceptualization of place and its role in shaping a globalizing world. Feminist geographers have theorized place as a container of geographical materialities and imaginaries formulating experiences of globalization. Doreen Massey argues that place is constituted by a dynamic constellation of social relations in an interconnected world. Place does not have any rigid boundary or static history and, therefore, it is not possible to ascribe a single and unique identity on a place. Massey questions straightforward identifications of “global” and “local” and refutes the notion of a hegemonic global place penetrating a vulnerable local one. Global and local places are interlinked through sensory engagement between human activities and globalizing forces. The collapse of borders between global and local places does not homogenize any place. Global and local places characterize uneven and unique geographical development in a world with diffused boundaries (Massey 1994, 146-156). A feminist commodity network analysis that builds on a critical feminist cultural-geographical understanding of place demonstrates how production and consumption relations in different nodes<sup>7</sup> of the commodity network are not rigid and bounded by material geographical spaces. Actors and institutions inhabiting various nodes assume diverse identities and organizing strategies depending on their fluid connections

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<sup>7</sup> I use the word “node” from a critical human geographical perspective. Node refers to a place where action and interaction occur (Fouberg, Murphy, and Blij 2009). In my research, node indicates a place in the commodity network shaping globalizing forces and is also shaped by globalizing forces in connection with other places in the network. A node is distinguished by its people, geography, or culture and serves some specific purposes (Rajan and Desai 2013, 9).

with various “global” and “local” solidarity building initiatives. The very “global” and “local” nature of these networks also continuously evolves to accommodate a wide range of ideological and empirical organizing strategies and concerns.

Richa Nagar et al. investigates how a feminist theorization of globalization can examine systematic gender and racial oppressions in interlinked places (Nagar et al. 2002, 257-284). Drawing on their insights, I argue that a feminist commodity network analysis, which is grounded on a feminist critique of material and discursive flows of globalization, is equipped to examine how gender, race, and class inequities are perpetuated in one place in connection with economic and cultural structures of other places. A feminist commodity network investigates experiences of global as well as local actors who are shaped by intersecting relationships of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality. Nagar et al. further notes that studies of globalization have widely focused on certain kinds of networks and flows such as technical, financial, corporate, trade, and production flows. Other kinds of networks and flows such as transnational labor activism and solidarity movements have not received much attention from the mainstream (Nagar et al. 2002, 257-284). I argue that a feminist commodity network analysis, on the one hand, challenges neoliberal and corporate-capitalist production and consumption relations. On the other hand, it complicates transnational solidarity building initiatives that challenge the hegemony of neoliberal corporate forces. Therefore, it offers a multiscale analysis of gendered, racial, and class power politics. It focuses on transnational connections and disjunctures in households, communities, and bodies, thereby transcending the physical and discursive border of the nation-state. In the way, it offers conceptual and methodological tools for challenging what Wimmer and Schiller call “methodological

nationalism.” Methodological nationalism refers to the widespread tendency in social science research to naturalize the nation-state. It disregards the significance of nationalism, considers the nation-state as the default unit of analysis, and constricts the scope of social studies within political and geographical boundaries of the nation-state. It defines space as an isolated and circumscribed entity, and therefore, denies possibilities of transnational linkages (Wimmer and Schiller Fall 2003, 576-610). The feminist theorization of commodity network overcomes methodological nationalism by inquiring how different local, national, and transnational scales are interconnected with and co-constituted by each other.

In this dissertation, the feminist theorization of commodity network I propose specifically examines the complex and contradicting experiences of globalization that connect or separate workers in Bangladesh and the USA, determine the nature of their relations, differences, and organizing strategies, and offer new possibilities for change. It specifically asks how gender, race, and class identities and performances create meanings of workers’ bodies and labor in both the Global South, where clothes are produced, and the Global North, where clothes are consumed. By looking at both the production and the consumption ends, the feminist commodity network analysis demystifies the hegemonic idealization of “Global North” vs. “Global South” and “First World” vs. “Third World” in binary terms that often portray the “First World” or “Global North” as the hub of global consumers and labor rights activists rescuing vulnerable, passive, and local women workers in the “Third World” or “Global South.”

Such a theorization of feminist commodity network also offers the scope to address three major limitations of international political economy and feminist literature:



First, mainstream international political economy has long been inspired by “rational choice individualism” and focused on relationships between states and markets. Critical international political economy challenges this tendency of the mainstream international political economy by drawing attention to the social nature of markets and states. However, Bedford and Rai argue that both mainstream and critical international political economy consider states and markets as major actors of capitalist relations. They ignore roles of individual beings and structural social relations such as gender (Bedford and Rai 2010, 1-18). The feminist commodity network analysis offers a holistic framework that extends the focus beyond capitalist production and social reproduction of states and markets and examines the nature of resistance that challenges the system from outside and within.

Second, hegemonic discourses of globalization usually identify capitalism as the main global driving force that formulates local forces such as kinship or culture. They prioritize capitalism and class relations over other forces such as sexism, caste-ism, or war while developing resistance narratives of globalization (Rajan and Desai 2013, 1-12). Escobar rightly argues, “The erasure of place is a reflection of the asymmetry that exist[s] between the global and the local in much contemporary literature on globalization, in which the global is associated with space, capital, history, and agency while the local, conversely, is linked to place, labor, and tradition – as well as with women, minorities, the poor, and one might add, local cultures” (Escobar 2001, 155-56 cited in Nagar et al. 2002, 277). Carla Freeman eloquently questions this compartmentalization of the global space and the local place in feminist interventions. She questions the tendency of distinguishing macro-analysis of economic forms of globalization from micro-analysis of women’s integration in the global economy as workers and members of Third World countries. Drawing on the

case study of Caribbean higglers (marketers), Freeman argues that globalization works through different economic and cultural moods that are simultaneously shaped by large-scale (read: global) actors and institutions as well as small-scale (read: local) individuals. Both global and local engage in webs of connected and complex interactions, challenge norms of global capitalism, and co-produce the very fabric of globalization (Freeman 2001, 1007-1037). Inspired by a feminist theorization of space, place, and globalization, the feminist commodity network analysis denounces the hegemony of global over local and reveals the global nature of the local and vice versa. In this way, it challenges the centrality of capitalism and reclaims places of globalization.

Third, Priti Ramamurthy argues that feminist literature on women and work has disproportionately focused on gendered relations of production. Most of the literature portrays the First World women as consumers and the Third World women as producers and providers of invisible and commodified reproductive services. A limited number of works that have been attentive to consumption patterns mostly deal with household needs and ignore desires in larger scales. These studies consider “nation” as the basic unit of analysis instead of inquiring into transnational implications of women’s struggle for resources. Ramamurthy also notes that there has been an excessive emphasis on women workers employed in export-oriented industries and services whereas gendered relations in domestic agriculture or service sectors have not gained much attention (Ramamurthy 2003, 524-550). The feminist commodity network analysis I develop addresses some of Ramamurthy’s concerns, if not all. It presents an integrated approach to examine women workers’ involvement with production and consumption relations in both the First and

Third Worlds<sup>8</sup> instead of beginning with production in the Third World and ending with consumption in the First World. It also examines collaborations and competitions that stem from gendered needs and desires in local, national, and transnational scales.

### **Operationalizing the feminist commodity network**

Women workers who work for TNCs in Bangladesh and the USA, in different capacities bear the burden of “lean” production.<sup>9</sup> When factories and corporations try to meet demands for faster, cheaper, and flexible production, they use women workers as a means to cope with the stress. Women workers serve as shock absorbers by accepting long working hours, insecure job contracts, low wages with few or no benefits, and lack of

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s definition of “Third World” which refers to “the colonized, neocolonized, or decolonized nations and ‘minorities’ whose structural disadvantages have been shaped by the colonial process and by the unequal division of international labor.” The formulation of “Third World” is not a mere economic, developmental, racial, cultural, or geographical category; it is based on a continuing history of structural domination (Shohat and Stam 1994). By the phrase “First World,” I refer to countries that have a legacy of colonization and are in a privileged position in the contemporary neoliberal world order.

<sup>9</sup> Lean production is a social and economic model of the division of labor. Womack et. al. note that lean production is excessively focused on producing the maximum amount of high quality output using the minimum amount and quality of resources. Employing the least amount of human resource, manufacturing space, investment, and technical knowledge, lean production aspires to achieve “perfection” involving endless product varieties, declining costs, and elimination of defects (Womack et. al. 1990, 13-14). Janoski and Lepadatu point out that lean production is associated with neoliberal manufacturing model of disciplining and exploiting workers. Although lean production at the Apple headquarter in California widely differs from lean production at an iPhone factory in China, it usually imposes stricter requirements for quality and cycle on workers. It often requires repetitive work and mandatory overtime, resulting in workers’ dissatisfaction and breach of workplace safety and security. It also dismantles trade unions by transferring assignments from permanent workers to contingent, subcontracted, and offshore workers (Janoski and Lepadatu 2014, 37-39).

unionizing opportunities (Raworth and Kidder 2009, 165-189). A feminist commodity network analysis can examine how women workers who are involved with apparel production and circulation at different scales are leaned on. Following Appadurai's eloquent formulation of "the social life of things" (Appadurai 1986, 3-63), I consider apparel as a "thing" and follow its social life circulating in different places. Apparel takes on different meanings as it comes across different places and people throughout its transnational trajectory from Bangladesh to the USA. My research specifically focuses on experiences and organizing strategies of women workers who invigorate multilayered meanings of apparel in various places. Using a feminist commodity network analysis, I challenge straightforward analytical distinctions between production and consumption relations by following apparel and its relationship with women workers from Bangladesh to the USA instead of tracing the function of its exchange.

Pursuing a multi-sited ethnography is one way to follow and analyze apparel's different meanings and identities along various trajectories of the apparel commodity network. According to George Marcus, multi-sited ethnographic research design provides scopes for using insights from world-system narratives. However, it departs from macro-political-economic theories of world-system analysis and grounds itself in contextual findings in diffused time and space. It can take unprecedented turns while examining politics of cultural formation across different sites. Ethnographers have been transforming the world-system perspective since the 1970s to accommodate the goal of tracing connections, meanings, and relationships in uneven and discontinuous geographies. They have produced micro-theories of social lives that signify dissolution and fragmentation. Many of them have used multi-sited ethnography as a tool to collapse the distinction between "system"

(read: global) and “lifeworld” (read: local) and reveal connections and disjunctures between them (Marcus 1995, 95-117). In my research, I adopt Marcus’s proposition of following the thing as a technique of conducting multi-sited ethnography and trace the trajectory of apparel in two different sites – Dhaka in Bangladesh and New Jersey/New York in the USA. I specifically focus on lives of women workers who are involved with production and circulation of apparel in different capacities. Like many multi-sited ethnographers,<sup>10</sup> I draw inspiration from Terence Hopkins and Immanuel Wallerstein’s concept of “commodity chain” which Marcus calls a “blueprint” for multi-sited research (Marcus 1995, 106-107). Wallerstein states:

Let us conceive of something we shall call, for want of a better conventional term, ‘commodity chains.’ What we mean by such chains is the following: take an ultimate consumable item and trace back the set of inputs that culminated in this item – the prior transformations, the raw materials, the transportation mechanism, the labor input into each of the material processes, the food inputs into the labor. This linked set of processes we call a commodity chain. If the ultimate consumable were, say, clothing, the chain would include the manufacture of the cloth, the yarn, etc., the cultivation of the cotton, as well as the reproduction of the labor forces involved in these productive activities. (Wallerstein 1977, 128 cited in Bair 2009, 7-8)

Hopkins and Wallerstein’s conceptualization of commodity chain uses the mainstream political economy framework to investigate processes that take place within the

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<sup>10</sup> Ethel Brooks, for example, conducts one of the first multi-sited ethnographies of consumer-oriented transnational garment labor organizing in El Salvador, Bangladesh, and New York City. Putting Gereffi and Korzeniewicz’s framing of historical and contemporary dynamics of commodity chains in conversation with Sassen’s analysis of international labor flows, she argues that commodity chains can reveal how working conditions at the site of production can influence consumers’ decision-making and corporate policy-making processes. Transnational protest movements attempt to influence transnational governance structures of the commodity chain by focusing on workers’ experiences, concerns, and working conditions (Brooks 2007, 22-23).

territoriality of the capitalist world-system. Its social and spatial configuration is usually shaped by temporal shifts in the world economy. It examines how the global division of labor evolves and how different activities in this division of labor receive unequal rewards in different spatial locations such as core, semi-periphery, and periphery (Bair 2009, 1-34).

Inspired by the world-system oriented commodity chain approach, Gary Gereffi and Miguel Korzeniewicz develop a framework for studying global commodity chains or GCCs. The GCC analysis categorizes two main patterns of chains: producer-driven commodity chains and buyer-driven commodity chains. It explores how raw materials and other inputs transform into final products in different geographical locations. It analyzes how specific players in the chain govern other participants and distribute values in different institutional contexts. In this way, it connects different actors across different spaces and the world markets. It also allows “to more adequately forge the macro-micro links between processes that are assumed to be discretely contained within global, national, and local units of analysis” (Gereffi, Korzeniewicz, and Korzeniewicz 1994, 2 cited in Bair 2009, 9-10).

The GCC literature has been criticized for several reasons. For example, it retains the world-system’s tradition of dividing the world into the core, semi-periphery, and periphery countries. It portrays a linear picture of how low skill and raw material based commodities are produced in peripheral regions and then are retailed and consumed in the capital-intensive core. It examines processes through which peripheral economies become sites of low-wage labor, export-led production, debt-alleviation-oriented development, and structural adjustment policies and does not shed any light on the core or semi-periphery. It exclusively focuses the buyer-driven approach, prioritizes macro-scale political economic factors, and lacks attention towards local specificities. In many cases, it assumes a

reductionist character, over-emphasizes economic adversities at the site of production, and ignores power relations in retail and consumption sites (Hughes and Reimer 2004, 1-16).

Parvati Raghuram advances four more critiques of GCC. First, GCC assumes that large-scale corporate producers exert total control over mass consumption. It does not analyze in what ways consumers can also make agential choices about consumption. Second, GCC narratives are mostly centered on transnational corporations (TNCs). It does not examine roles of small-scale producers in the commodity chain. Third, GCC considers producers and consumers as two mutually exclusive disconnected groups. It does not explore producers' participation or influence in consumption and consumers' participation or influence in production. Fourth, GCC analyzes Third World experiences only regarding the new international division of labor. Consumers in the Third World are left unaddressed (Raghuram 2004, 120-136).

By the end of the 1990s, some scholars preferred using the global value chain or GVC analysis instead of a commodity chain approach. According to them, GVC avoids the predicament of using the term "commodity" that very limitedly refers to low-value added primary products in the GCC literature. It overcomes the restricting approach of identifying either a buyer-driven approach or a producer-driven approach. It also offers a common typology for including work that studied international production networks without using the GCC analysis.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Bair notes that literature on the world-system tradition,

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<sup>11</sup> Bair points out that there has not been any common consensus on distinguishing the GVC analysis from the GCC analysis. While some scholars argue that GVC offers an extended typology to include different approaches for studying global production networks (Sturgeon 2009, 110-135), some others note that GCC and GVC could be interchangeably used without significant theoretical implications (Bair 2009, 12).

the GCC framework, and the GVC analysis often overlaps. Many researchers incorporate more than one of these three approaches in their research. They have chosen specific typology based on theoretical and analytical demands of their research area (Bair 2009, 11-14).

In my research, I combine insights from both the world-system tradition and the network analysis. Bair argues that the world-system theory does not focus only on the progressive movement of a commodity through its sequential phases of production, circulation, and consumption. Instead of just looking “forward,” the world-system analysis looks outward from a node and investigates which structures and processes create the product and relationships in that specific node. In this way, the world-system theory offers the scope to conceptualize the commodity chain as a web instead of a chain (Bair 2009, 15). Drawing inspirations from the world-system analysis, I use the analytical vocabulary of “network” to overcome the linear nature of the commodity chain. Developing a network based approach does not focus only on beginning and end points of the trajectory of the commodity. It widens the net beyond a linear chain and addresses experiences of various actors and institutions such as states, firms, workers, organizations, and consumer groups who are involved in production, circulation, and consumption of a commodity. It ascribes contextual meanings to times, places, and mechanisms that shape complex, interdependent, and multi-stranded webs of power relations between those actors and institutions (Hughes and Reimer 2004, 3-5; Jane and Hale 2005, 6). Barrett et al., for example, use a commodity network frame instead of a chain based model to review contemporary campaigns for ethical trade led by the fashion industry, small-scale farmers, and environmental activists. They argue that commodity network analysis is well-equipped to study campaigns and



movements because it considers consumer coalitions, unions, non-profit organizations, and media as active agents along with TNCs (Barrett, Browne, and Ilbery 2004, 19-38).

A fixed, unidirectional, and vertical chain-based model only focuses on flows of commodities and processes along the chain. It ignores the role of common elements that signify relationships in each node of the commodity chain. For example, “horizontal” dimensions such as place and gender rarely get attention in a commodity chain analysis (Bair 2009, 17). That is why Priti Ramamurthy describes the mainstream commodity chain analysis as the “realist” commodity chain analysis. According to Ramamurthy, the realist commodity chain analysis conceptualizes a unidirectional flow of investments from the First World to the Third World. It mostly describes how TNCs accumulate profits by overcoming protective national barriers, lowering labor costs, and increasing the flexibility of capital movement. It does not account for women’s experience in the new global division of labor. It fails to understand how women in export-oriented industries and households absorb burdens of neoliberal structural adjustment policies and restructuring. Ramamurthy proposes a feminist commodity chain analysis as a critique of the realist commodity chain approach. Feminist commodity chain analysis examines materially and culturally constructed power relations in each node of the commodity chain. It suggests interpretive methodologies to examine how commodities shape multi-sited production and consumption relations that are vital constituents of globalizing forces. It challenges master narratives of globalization by focusing on women’s body, labor, and gender ideologies (Ramamurthy 2003, 524-550).

Drawing on Ramamurthy’s formulation of feminist commodity chain analysis, I propose a conceptualization of feminist commodity network analysis that complicates one-

dimensional narratives of commodity circulation and does not privilege any specific site of production or consumption. It explores multi layered flows of commodities, information, social relations, identities, and knowledge that shape experiences and activism of women workers in different nodes of the transnational apparel commodity network. I adopt Hughes and Reimer's proposition of incorporating an actor-network approach, which is originally inspired by Bruno Latour's framing of actor-network theory (ANT) (See Latour 2005), in my feminist commodity network analysis. ANT challenges the conventional framing of the subject and includes both human and non-human (or "things" according to the previously discussed formulation of Appadurai 1986) actors who have agency in the network. It maps how key actors of globalization mobilize cultural meanings of commodities, shape technologies of distribution, and invigorate collective struggles in different networks (Hughes and Reimer 2004, 5). Jonathan Murdoch reminds us that ANT transforms the commodity network as long as the network is within the local and material reach of ANT (Murdoch 1997 cited in Hughes and Reimer 2004, 5). However, Lawrence Busch and Arunas Juska argue that contemporary technological advancements have extended the material and spatial reach of ANT which is now able to transform human and nonhuman actors from a distant location (Busch and Juska 1997 cited in Hughes and Reimer 2004, 5). Sarah Whatmore and Lorraine Thorne call this new productive potentiality of ANT "network lengthening," suggesting that networking lengthening could effectively deconstruct binary conceptualizations such as "core" vs. "periphery" in macro-theories of political economy and the GCC literature (Whatmore and Thorne cited in Hughes and Reimer 2004, 5).

Parvati Raghuram expresses her concern that ANT pays too much attention to human and non-human agential subjects, and therefore, converts production and consumption relations into a mechanistic framework. ANT ignores social interactions and processes that serve as backdrops of agents and their links with each other in different nodes of the network. Drawing on a Marxist analysis, Raghuram argues that ANT poses the risk of alienating workers from their labor. That is why engagement of producers of a commodity with consumption relations falls beyond the analytical scope of ANT (Raghuram 2004, 123). To address Raghuram's concern, I situate "perplexity" as the conceptual platform of my ANT inspired feminist commodity network analysis. According to Ramamurthy, perplexity refers to experiential paradoxes that actors of globalization face in their everyday lives. She defines perplexity as "the meeting point where multiple ideologies that constitute the subject – cultural practices, temporalities, and place – conjoin and diverge." A critical eye on perplexed subjects establishes them not simply as "speaking subjects" but as "subjects-in-contradiction." Perplexed subjects are involved in asymmetric and overlapping power relations. They are neither passive followers nor active resisters of globalization (Ramamurthy 2003, 525). An understanding of perplexity, therefore, revises ANT's tendency to overemphasize agential subjects by reframing the very notion of the subject. It unravels linguistic, spatial, and temporal mechanisms through which gendered and racialized experiences of women workers across the commodity network are constructed. It, therefore, overcomes Raghuram's worry that ANT inspired commodity network analysis would be disconnected from desire, loss, and feelings of actors of globalization.

### **Feminist commodity network as a tool to investigate transnational labor activism**

My focus on workers is inspired by a Marxist formulation of commodity fetishism which suggests that commodities are produced when products of labor are fetishized. Commodity circuits determine the relationship between these products of labor and different social actors including workers in different nodes (Marx [1867] 1992, 77 cited in Bair 2009, 31). As David Harvey suggests, consciousness about commodity fetishism excavates significant insights about labor relations. Asking his students where their last meal came from, he notes:

Tracing back all the items used in the production of that meal reveals a relation of dependence upon a whole world of social labor conducted in many different places under very different social relations and conditions of production....grapes that sit on the supermarket shelf are mute; as we cannot see the fingerprints of exploitations upon them or tell immediately what part of the world they are from....lift the veil on this geographical and social ignorance and make ourselves aware of these issues....[I]n so doing we have to...go behind and beyond what the market itself reveals in order to understand how society is working (Harvey 1990, 422-423 cited in Bair 2009, 31).

The feminist commodity network analysis that I propose builds on and simultaneously departs from Harvey's formulation of commodity chain. Harvey is heavily influenced by the world-system tradition of buyer driven commodity chain. He does not complicate binary constructions of "consumer" vs. "producer" or "First World" vs. "Third World." However, he makes a strong point about using commodity chain analysis as a mode of critical inquiry into social and geographical relations and the labor that sustain the system. I argue that Harvey's conceptualization could be used not only for revealing links between the Third World producers and the First World consumers but also for unveiling gendered and raced relations that connect or disjoint experiences, struggles, and activism of workers in both the First and Third Worlds.

Smith et. al argue that the mainstream commodity chain literature portrays workers as passive victims. They call for reversing the gaze and paying attention towards labor processes and organizing strategies of workers within the chain (Smith et. al 2002, 47 cited in Wills & Hale 2005, 6). Wills and Hale respond to this call and further argue that a focus on the network instead of the chain is helpful in devising strategies for political organizing addressing corporations and industrial relations. An emphasis on the network, according to Wills and Hale, is instrumental in responding to what they call “networked capitalism.”<sup>12</sup> They offer a conceptual tool called “networked activism” that can effectively respond to networked capitalism. Networked activism can unravel “hidden” operations at the bottom and provide a “bottom-up” understanding of global supply chains. It moves beyond the approach of looking at working conditions of workers and addresses management structures of the subcontracting industry. While Wills and Hale acknowledge that experiences of workers vary depending on their specific locations in the hierarchical subtracting chains, they promote the importance of developing an “industry-wide approach” (Wills and Hale 2015, 3-4). Their analysis inspires the conceptual framework of feminist commodity network I propose. While a feminist commodity network analyzes networked organizing strategies to subvert exploitative practices of networked capitalism, it moves beyond a “top-down” or “bottom-up” approach to look at transnational organizing networks. It illustrates how both the “top” and the “bottom” of transnational activist

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<sup>12</sup> “Network capitalism” refers a new mode of capitalism that emerged since 1970s. Networked capitalism is characterized by networked form, operation, and capacity of various transnational actors and institutions. In the era of networked capitalism, TNCs no longer run their own factories and directly employs large number of staff in production. They increasingly become dependent on subcontracting goods and services from suppliers dispersed across distant geographical locations and offering the cheapest price (Wills and Hale 2005, 5)

networks consist of complex and overlapping actors and institutions who interpret contextual meanings of women workers' organizing strategies in various ways. It also explores possibilities and limitations of industry-wide approaches that seek to improve working conditions for all workers in the commodity network. It inquires how those industry-wide approaches collide with grass-roots organizing initiatives and whether these grass-roots campaigns can make meaningful use of transnational activist networks.

Peter Waterman addresses the question of global labor solidarity through the concept of "internationalism." Waterman argues that the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed loss of protections for workers and unions offered by the nation-states with the advent of globalized and networked capitalism. As a result, labor became "a subject of and a subject for internationalism," requiring global planning and search for global alternatives (Waterman 1998, x). As part of this internationalist agenda, workers and unions engaged in international labor solidarity to obstruct capitalists from crossing national borders in search of cheap labor and exploiting workers in other countries. Initially, cross-border solidarity building initiatives were mostly confined within Europe. Later, European workers and organizers recognized that capitalism benefits through colonial subjugation of other parts of the world such as Latin America, Asia, and Africa. They felt the necessity to engage in collaboration with non-Euro-centric unions and organizers in the Third World. Based on his observations on the nature of these collaborations, Waterman suggests a new framework called "new labor internationalism" which recognizes vulnerable position of labor movement in a world characterized by economic crisis, technological advancements, and global restructuring and offers a critique of dominant traditional unions and labor organizations (Waterman 1998, 45-71). Wills and Hale echo Waterman's propositions and

argue that traditional unionism does not have necessary tools to address workers' concerns in a networked and subcontracted capitalism. In the traditional unionizing model, workers cannot access distant corporate employers and consumers. Consumers also cannot reach out to offshore factory owners and workers. To overcome this disconnection resulting from the geographical distance, Wills and Hale emphasize the importance of activist linkages between workers at the production site and consumers and activists at the consumption site (Wills and Hale 2005, 7-9). Angela Hale uses Waterman's concept of "new labor internationalism" to address the changing nature of labor relations in the apparel supply chain. She demonstrates how new labor internationalism inspires labor organizers to link workers in the Global South with consumers and activists in the Global North (Hale 2005, 40-68).

Jamie McCallum pushes the analytical framework of new labor internationalism further and proposes a theorization of "new labor transnationalism." McCallum argues that the framework of internationalism mostly refers to earlier modes of "bottom-up" cross-border union activities that gave rise to organizing strategies focusing on codes of conducts, social clauses, and trade-labor linkages. Most of these strategies often pay too much attention towards exploitative corporate practices and ignore the necessity of mobilizing workers and challenging discriminatory local laws and practices. The new labor transnationalism moves beyond the model of cooperation between various actors in the Global North and the South to face transnational corporations. It highlights transnational linkages that transcend national borders and connect global and local organizing spaces. McCallum challenges the tendency to romanticize new labor transnationalism as a bottom-up strategy emerging from the Global South. He recognizes the dominance of Northern unions and

strategies over transnational labor movements and advocates for transforming this “top-down” approach without reproducing a binary opposite of “bottom-up” approach that assumes a universal superiority of grass-roots struggles (McCallum 2013, 14-18).

The feminist commodity network analysis puts McCallum’s theorization of new labor transnationalism in conversation with a feminist conceptualization of “transnational.” Laura Briggs argues that the analytical tool of “transnational” has a dual character in feminist literature. On the one hand, it offers a critique of “international” or “global” feminism<sup>13</sup> that promotes a flawed notion of universal sameness of women. On the other hand, it often reproduces nation-state and border-centric politics and singular progress narratives of white, liberal, or Western feminism (Briggs 2016, 991). The feminist commodity network, which is inspired by a transnational feminist framework, complicates labor internationalism-inspired organizing models adopting a global feminist point of view. It addresses conflicting and contradicting interests of workers and activists involved in different nodes of the commodity network. It offers a critique of cross-border organizing in terms of a top-down unidirectional flow from Northern consumers and activists to Southern women workers. It also refrains from prioritizing bottom-up approaches by analyzing hierarchical power relationships between workers and activists not only at the “top” but also at the “bottom.” Therefore, it unravels how transnational organizing initiatives in both the Global North and the South often rely on modernity’s linear progress narratives and neocolonial and neoliberal worldviews.

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<sup>13</sup> Grewal and Kaplan argue that global feminism promotes a western imperialist understanding of universal women’s agency ignoring diversity and differences among women across various times and spaces. Global feminism inspires a vision of global sisterhood of all women around the world sharing similar values, experiences, and struggles (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 17).



Ethel Brook's multi-sited ethnography in El Salvador, Bangladesh, and New York City is one example of feminist interventions that uncover how transnational protest campaigns give rise to new imperial formations in the global garment industry. Brooks offers a nuanced critique of the way consumer-led transnational organizing increasingly becomes dependent on attacking brand image and corporate reputations, media campaigns, consumer protests, and boycott movements in the Global North, ignoring shop-floor organizing and grass-roots mobilization of garment workers in the Global South. Along the way, transnational organizing overemphasizes the authority of transnational corporations to hold garment manufacturers liable and improve working conditions in the supply chain. It also accords superior agency to First World consumers who can exert purchasing power, thereby rendering gendered and raced bodies of Third World women garment workers as passive victims (Brooks 2007, xiii-xxxiii). The multi-sited ethnography I conduct adopts feminist commodity network as a tool to investigate how dynamics that Brooks analyzed, which were based on transnational protest campaigns in the mid-1990s, continued to be reproduced or were transformed after the deadliest garment industrial disaster in the human history – the 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza, a factory building housing five garment factories in Savar, Bangladesh. The catastrophe killed more than 1134 workers (Hoskins 2015) and left nearly 2600 workers injured (Clean Clothes Campaign). After the initial shock, transnational responses mostly revolved around compensation management for workers and devising safety mechanisms for factory buildings. Drawing on two-year-long ethnography in Bangladesh and the USA, I critically engage with these transnational initiatives to address safety and security of Bangladeshi garment workers. I specifically look at two transnational governance structures – the

Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (also known as “the Alliance”) and the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (also known as “the Accord”).

A large number of studies have addressed limitations of transnational organizing initiatives such as consumer boycotts, corporate codes of conduct, social labels, and social clauses (For example, Brooks 2007; McCallum 2013; Bair et. al. 2014). After the Rana Plaza collapse, some transnational organizing campaigns have responded to existing critiques and moved away from approaches that privilege the authority of corporations and consumers in the Global North and ignore grass-roots resistance in the Global South. Inspired by Brooks’ multi-sited ethnography and using her study as a point of departure, I explore transnational activist campaigns that rely on democratic collaborations between international labor rights groups, corporations, and grass-roots organizing initiatives. Brooks investigates how imperial and colonial relationships are reproduced when Northern labor advocacy groups bypass the state and directly reach out to garment workers, NGOs, and unions in the Global South to put pressure on governments and corporations (Brooks 2007). In my research, I inquire what happens when Southern NGOs and activist groups initiate (or do not initiate) transnational activist collaborations with their Northern allies, thereby moving beyond consumer-oriented models of protest campaigns. Transnational organizing initiatives undertaken by workers and activists in the Global South do not automatically transform neocolonial and neoliberal worldviews. Although these initiatives offer new possibilities for re-centering the focus on shop-floor organizing, they raise critical questions about the nature of language, politics, and funding that Southern activists and institutions need to make meaningful use of transnational activist networks.

Brooks argues that the new international division of labor (NIDL) is reproduced in transnational protest campaigns (Brooks 2007, xxv). Transnational labor organizing is often characterized by a sharp division of labor where Euro-American activists and consumers arbitrarily decide organizing strategies targeting transnational corporations located in the Global North. Women garment workers in the Global South, regardless the nature of their participation in transnational activist campaigns, become responsible for generating testimonies to be used by their Northern allies to pressure corporations. Brooks reveals how this trend of testimony “generation by one group and narrativization by another” undermines the agency of women garment workers who do not usually have much access or control over the circulation of the information (Brooks 2007, xxv-xxvi).

In my research, I remain mindful of the critique of NIDL. Dooren argues that NIDL is not equipped to deal with complex trade patterns of the global garment industry because of its mechanistic tendency of presenting an oversimplified dichotomy between developed and least developed countries (Dooren 2003, 62). I argue that NIDL is also unable to capture complex transnational activist circuits because of its tendency to investigate labor relations at the site of production (read: The Third World) and activist and consumption relations at the site of consumption (read: The First World). In transnational protest campaigns, as Brooks argues, women workers’ testimonies follow the path of the capital from the Global South to the North (Brooks 2007, 160). In my research, I complicate the linear trajectory of testimonies from workers to activists and argue that testimonies do not travel only from the South to the North. I follow circulation of testimonies within various organizing spaces in both the Global South and the North. I demystify the universal category of “women workers” in the Global South and demonstrate how these workers are

engaged in complex hierarchical power relationships not only with their transnational allies but also with each other. My analytical framework is inspired by Elizabeth Friedman's conceptualization of "Transnationalism Reversed" and its feminist adoption by Elora Chowdhury (2011) to examine women's transnational organizing against gender violence in Bangladesh. The feminist commodity network analysis I propose is grounded on a feminist theorization of "transnational" that not only focuses on cross-border collaborations but also investigates what Chowdhury calls "intramovement, intraorganizational, intracampaign dynamics" (Chowdhury 2011, 2). Therefore, in my research, I demonstrate scenarios where workers and activists in the Global South appropriate bodies, labor, and testimonies of other Southern workers to achieve individual social justice agenda through transnational activist networks.

## Chapter 2:

### **Can transnational governance structures ensure workers' safety?**

#### **A critical look at the Accord and the Alliance**

On May 22, 2014, 114 US-based academicians and activists wrote a letter criticizing a report titled “Business as Usual is Not an Option: Supply Chains and Sourcing after Rana Plaza.” Published by NYU Stern Center for Business and Human Rights (Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly 2014), the letter says:

The report’s authors focus their criticism of business practices in Bangladesh’s apparel industry not primarily on Western Brands, but instead on the local factory owners and buying agents who are these companies’ suppliers.

....In conclusion, the report’s analysis of the causes of the country’s factory safety crisis and its evaluation of the initiatives underway in response is flawed and misleading. It obscures the central role of brand practices in creating the crisis....and blurs the profound differences between the Alliance – another unilateral and, for all practical purposes, voluntary corporate scheme – and the Accord, a groundbreaking labor-management contract that legally obligates brands, for the first time, to take financial responsibility for ensuring improved working conditions in their overseas contract factories.

One year later in May 2015, Samina Luthfa – a prominent social activist, writer, theatre director, actor, and Assistant Professor at the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh – published a critical comparative review of local and transnational laws and agreements established in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza collapse such as the revised Bangladesh labor law 2013, the National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the Garment Sector of Bangladesh (NTPA), the Accord on Fire and Building

Safety in Bangladesh (The Accord), and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (The Alliance). Published in a local journal, Professor Luthfa noted in conclusion:

Although the Action Plan, the Accord, and the Alliance were lauded widely, these agreements do not clarify and strengthen justification for workers' rights. The path to achieving those rights is also not clear.

....Those initiatives (the Accord and the Alliance) are mostly eyewashes in the name of corporate social responsibility of Western rich corporations and means to reduce the guilt of middle-class (Western) consumers. These are not groundbreaking agreements to protect workers' rights. If the government and factory owners of Bangladesh are given the scope to remain careless about protecting workers' interests, only relying on brands will not achieve workers' rights (Luthfa 2015, 30).

There are stark differences in the way Luthfa (and many other academicians and activists in Bangladesh<sup>14</sup>) view possibilities and limitations of transnational governance structures such as the Accord and the Alliance compared to US academicians and activists. As noted in the letter mentioned above, US academicians and activists tend to hold Western brands primarily liable for deplorable working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories. They were also strongly focused on establishing the difference between the Accord, which is a legally binding agreement between brands and unions to improve safety and security conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories, and the Alliance, which is created by brands unwilling to participate in the Accord and involves an inspection regime without any input from trade unions or any legal commitments (Ashraf 2017, 255-256). Bangladeshi scholars and activists, by contrast, tend to cluster the Accord and the Alliance together as ineffective, preferring to hold factory owners, the Bangladesh government, the

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<sup>14</sup> I observed this trend during my ethnographic fieldwork with labor rights scholars and activists in Bangladesh in 2014 and 2015.

state primarily accountable for ensuring workers' rights (See Luthfa 2015, Muhammad 2017).

Why do US-based transnational labor organizing narratives so strongly focus their criticism on transnational corporations and often ignore the way local realities, such as subcontracting, contribute to the deterioration of garment workers' safety and security? Why do some Bangladeshi scholars and activists remain skeptical about transnational labor governance structures, such as the Accord and the Alliance? In this chapter, I address these questions drawing on two years of ethnographic observation of various labor organizing initiatives in Bangladesh and the USA after the collapse of Rana Plaza. I conducted in-depth interviews with Bangladeshi and US labor rights scholars and activists, performed participant observation in meetings, protest campaigns, seminars, and exhibitions in Bangladesh and the USA, and did archival research on the labor-related news. My multilayered identities as a graduate student at a US university, a former organizer of United Students against Sweatshops (USAS), and an alumna and Visiting Professor of the University of Dhaka afforded me access to complex transnational activist networks.<sup>15</sup>

### **A brief history of transnational governance struggles in the Bangladeshi garment industry**

Jamie McCallum defines “governance struggles” as “a panoply of strategies to subordinate the rules-based logic of private companies to democratic oversight by workers

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<sup>15</sup> In the “Introduction,” I reflect on my complex, contradicting, and fluid transnational subject positions.

and their unions” (McCallum 2013, 3). McCallum identifies new trends in “governance struggles” that emerged with the advancement of neoliberalism and “worldwide tilt from states to markets” (Hewson and Sinclair 1999, 5 cited in Fichter, 108 and quoted in McCallum 2013, 3). As state protection for workers gradually disappears, workers become vulnerable to transnational capital. In the absence of viable international laws, non-state actors such as unions, corporations, NGOs and labor rights groups engage in cross-border governance struggles to address exploitative corporate practices and protect workers. As a result, a new kind of governance struggle emerges, which is private and transnational (Hassel 2008) in nature. This new model of governance struggle complicates traditional linear modes of labor organizing involving workers and employers by attempting to exert control over transnational corporate business practices. While transnational governance struggles can improve working conditions and ensure workers’ rights to some extent (Kay 2005, 2011 cited in McCallum 2013, 29), they often sustain power hierarchies among local, regional, and transnational actors and institutions and involve bureaucratic complexities (McCallum 2013, 28-29).

The history of transnational governance struggles in the context of the Bangladeshi garment industry can be traced back to the early 1990s, although these efforts took different forms. Here I will briefly discuss three modes of transnational governance struggle involving a boycott movement, corporate codes of conduct, and a social clause that attempted to improve working conditions of Bangladeshi garment workers.

Ethel Brooks examined the boycott movement in the context of the anti-child-labor campaign that began in 1992 and called for US and European consumer boycotts of clothing produced in Bangladeshi garment factories to end the employment of children



under fourteen years. The campaign was partly motivated by the fear of corporate downsizing in the USA and export of US-based manufacturing jobs to countries that provide non-unionized, feminized, and cheap labor. Although US labor unions and labor NGOs broadly used the human rights language of “protecting Bangladeshi children” in their campaigns, they collaborated with various US conservative and protectionist actors that were more worried about massive layoffs and corporate downsizing in the USA than defending Bangladeshi children from exploitative labor conditions. The campaign resulted in the introduction of “The Child Labor Deterrence Act,” which is commonly known as the “Harkin’s Bill,” in 1993. The Harkin’s bill prohibited importation to the USA of products that had been produced by child labor. In response to the Harkin’s bill, thousands of Bangladeshi child garment workers were fired and forced to take jobs as domestic workers, brick breakers, and even as sex workers. Bangladeshi NGOs, unions, and activist groups started protesting the situation. The language of protest was quickly picked up by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporters Association (BGMEA) as well. Later a “Memorandum of Understanding on the Use of Child Labor in the Export-Oriented Garment Industry in Bangladesh” was signed with the support of International Labor Organization (ILO), UNICEF, BGMEA, and the government of Bangladesh on July 4, 1995, to place underage garment workers in non-formal schools. Brooks points out that those non-formal schools were not regulated by the Education Board of Bangladesh, which made it impossible for child garment workers to continue higher education. Many of these children eventually joined garment factories when they turned 14. Transnational activist initiatives focused on child workers who worked in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector and constituted only 4 percent of all child workers in Bangladesh. These initiatives

undertaken by consumer rights groups and international labor rights NGOs never inquired why these children were forced to engage in paid work in the first place and did not propose long-term solutions. Despite those limitations, UNICEF, ILO, the Bangladesh government, and the US Department of State presented Bangladesh as a successful case study in the eradication of child labor (Brooks 2007, 1-25).

Simeen Mahmud and Naila Kabeer (2003) investigated that corporate codes of conduct from international buyers, which have proliferated in the Bangladeshi garment industry in the absence of robust labor legislation and implementation protecting workers' interests.<sup>16</sup> They note that garment factory owners do not necessarily consider corporate codes of conduct as an institutional mechanism to maintain labor standards. They view compliance<sup>17</sup> to codes of conduct simply as a means to survive in the competitive market. While corporate codes of conduct brought some limited improvements in factories that are mostly located in export processing zones (EPZs), these codes did not impact working conditions in subcontracting factories which constitute at least 28% of BGMEA enlisted garment factories.<sup>18</sup> They mostly focused on benefits, such as paid leave, maternity leave, overtime payment, and medical treatment, and ignored creating platforms for collective bargaining. Mahmud and Kabeer argue that corporate codes of conduct prioritize workers' welfare over ensuring their rights. They report that garment factory owners often view corporate codes as public relations stances that protect brand images and keep consumers

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<sup>16</sup> Less than 3% of workforce in Bangladesh is protected by existing labor laws (Mondol 2002, 121 cited in Mahmud and Kabeer 2003, 27).

<sup>17</sup> Mahmud and Kabeer point out that the language of compliance usually refers to compliance of voluntary corporate codes of conduct. "Compliance" in the garment industry context does not refer to allegiance to state labor laws that are obligatory in nature and apply to all citizens (2003, 3).

<sup>18</sup> Labowitz 2016.

guilt-free while transferring the cost of compliance to the suppliers (Mahmud and Kabeer 2003, 29-33). Mahmud and Kabeer's observations in the context of Bangladeshi garment industry echo Naomi Klein's critique of corporate codes of conduct. Klein argues that corporate codes of conduct are not laws and not drafted in collaboration with workers and activists. They are often crafted in a language that workers do not speak or understand. In many cases, public relations consultants from the Global North are recruited to compose these codes. Instead of bringing long-term structural changes in workers' lives, these codes are primarily aimed at avoiding troubles with corporate watchdogs and labor rights activists (Klein 2000, 430-431).

Naila Kabeer has also examined whether implementing a "social clause" to enforce global labor standards through international trade agreements and possible World Trade Organization (WTO) sanctions would serve the interests of Bangladeshi garment workers (Kabeer 2004, 3-35). The provision of enforcing a social clause on labor standards has been gaining widespread support in Northern labor rights circles since the mid-1990s. Proponents of the social clause were motivated by the possibility of building transnational solidarity with workers and improving working conditions. Southern labor representatives were skeptical, however, about protectionist implications of the social clause as global labor standards tend to favor producers in the Global North. Although many of the Southern organizers morally supported the social clause, they worried that the clause would likely to be dominated by powerful unions in the Global North, thereby creating a North-South divide in the global labor politics (McCallum 2013, 30-32). Kabeer argues that social clause proponents often compare wage and working conditions in Bangladesh with that in other parts of the world. Bangladeshi garment workers' decision to participate in the labor

market is not influenced by labor standards in other countries, however. It is rather determined by comparison with available alternative employment opportunities specifically in the informal economy. As long as the export sector offers better opportunities than what the informal economy provides, a continuing cheap pool of feminized workers with limited capacity to collectively bargain will remain available. Instead of a social clause, Kabeer suggests broadening the scope of labor standards beyond one industry at a time. She argues for a universal “social floor” that expands selective enforcement of labor standards and globally promotes all workers’ rights (Kabeer 2004, 24-28).

Dina Siddiqi has called attention to an additional negative consequence of these transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns: they use sensationalized narratives portraying Bangladeshi women as “the passive, helpless third world woman, always already sexualized and victimized, and preyed on by lustful and exploitative ‘native’ males, therefore urgently in need to rescue” (Siddiqi 2009, 158). While such a universal image of women garment workers may serve the strategic purpose of garnering support for transnational labor organizing, it reproduces the colonial and neocolonial image of the “Third World,” ignores complex realities on the ground, and urges Northern saviors to “save” Bangladeshi women workers (Siddiqi, 159). In the next section, I examine whether the Accord and the Alliance - two transnational governance structures that were adopted in 2014 and generated high hopes as well as critiques among transnational scholarly and activist circles - reproduce or challenge the trope of “saving” Bangladeshi garment workers. I map the complex and overlapping trajectory of transnational labor organizing around the Accord and the Alliance across the apparel commodity network. I use a feminist

commodity network analysis to identify different players in transnational activist networks and explore how they negotiate top-down and bottom-up asymmetrical power relationships. Along the way, I investigate how meanings of transnational governance structures, such as the Accord and the Alliance, circulate across borders and transform multilayered concepts of workers' rights, safety, and security.

### **The Accord and the Alliance: An Overview**

The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (popularly known as “the Accord”) was formally signed on 15 May 2013. According to the website of the Accord, “It is a five-year independent, legally binding agreement<sup>19</sup> between global brands, retailers, and trade unions designed to build a safe and healthy Bangladeshi Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Industry” (The Accord). The agreement runs an independent inspection program which is designed and implemented in collaboration with brands, workers, and trade unions. It publicly discloses all factory inspection reports and corrective action plans (CAP) on its website. It requires the brands to commit to ensuring necessary funds for remediation and maintaining sourcing relationships. The Accord democratically elects health and safety

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<sup>19</sup> On June 29, 2017, IndustriAll and UNI announced a renewed Accord which will take effect in May 2018 after expiration of the current Accord. The new Accord will extend the program for an additional three years. Scott Nova, Executive Director of Worker Rights Consortium, says, “The Accord is the antidote to the voluntary industry auditing schemes that failed miserably to protect workers in the years leading up to the catastrophic Rana Plaza collapse....The renewal of the Accord is a testament to the effectiveness of this model” (Labour Behind the Label 2017). However, membership of the Accord does not automatically extend to the new Accord. Previous member brands will have to sign the new Accord again. As of June 2017, 13 brands have signed the new Accord and eight more brands have committed to sign (Labour Behind the Label 2017).

committees in factories to identify, monitor, and act on health and safety risks. It also aspires to empower workers by running training programs and recognizing workers' right to refuse unsafe working conditions (The Accord).

Four international labor NGOs signed the Accord as witnesses. They are Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), Clean Clothes Campaign, and Maquila Solidarity Network. The union signatories include two global unions - IndustriAll Global Union and UNI Global Union - and eight Bangladeshi labor right organizations. As of July 2017, the Accord has been signed by over 200 brands, retailers, and importers from 20 countries. Twenty of those 200 corporations are from the USA (The Accord). The Accord covers more than 1600 garment factories in Bangladesh. As of April 2017, it inspected 1524 factories and fixed 77% of initially identified safety issues in those factories. It initiated "The Accord Safety Committee and Safety Training Program" at 480 factories employing more than 1 million workers. Under this program, 317 "All Employee Sessions" and 827 training sessions instructed workers in ways to deal with workplace safety issues (The Accord 2017, 4). The Accord found below-standard structural integrity and severe risk of structural failure in 39 factory building structures (The Accord, 9). Its signatory companies terminated business with 71 suppliers' factories for inadequate participation in the Accord (The Accord, 4). Only seven factories, however, have addressed all issues identified in the Accord CAPs and been verified by the Accord engineering team since its inception. Thirty-nine factories are currently on a timely track

to implement CAPs and 1360 factories are behind schedule (The Accord, 13).<sup>20</sup> Signatory brands have officially provided financial support in 58 cases only (The Accord, 14).

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, on the other hand, is a five-year commitment (not an agreement) to improve working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories. It was initiated by North American apparel retailers and brands in 2013. The Alliance is composed of 29 companies including Wal-Mart Stores, VF Corporation, Target Corporation, Sears Holding Corporation, Macy's, and Nordstrom. The Alliance's strategic pillars include standards and inspections, remediation, worker empowerment, training, and sustainability (The Alliance). It covers 765 garment factories and 1,274,612 garment workers in Bangladesh. It has completed inspection in 759 factories. Among these inspected factories, 40 factories have completed all critical CAPs and 97 factories have been suspended (The Alliance 2016).

The Alliance's Board of Directors includes Ellen Tauscher, the former U.S. Representative for California's 10<sup>th</sup> congressional district, and various representatives from transnational corporations (TNCs) such as Gap, Target, VF corporation, and Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. There are only two Bangladeshi nationals in the Alliance Board of Directors - a representative from BRAC which is an international NGO based in Bangladesh and a founder of a Bangladeshi textile company. The Board of Advisors includes a few Bangladeshi nationals including representatives from international NGOs such as CARE Bangladesh and BRAC, BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters

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<sup>20</sup> The Accord claims that being behind schedule does not necessarily mean there is no progress. 58% of those behind the schedule factories have fixed 75% of issues, 34% have fixed 50-75% issues, and 8% have fixed less than 50% issues (The Accord 2017, 14).

Association), BKMEA (Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association), and BUET (Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) (The Alliance). Thus, the Board of Directors and the Board of Advisors of the Alliance do not include any independent workers' representatives. The Alliance has a Board Labor Committee that includes representatives from five garment workers' unions and federations, but it does not include any international labor rights organizations (The Alliance). As such, the Alliance is unilaterally proposed, designed, and governed by TNCs with token representation from Bangladeshi NGOs, garment factory owners, and trade unions. Brands retain complete control over the inspection process and run a voluntary loan program to provide funds for renovations and repairs of garment factories (Clean Clothes Campaign). The approach of the Alliance mostly resembles a "Corporate Social Responsibility" model which has a proven history of failure in the context of Bangladesh (See Mahmud and Kabeer 2003). Although BSCI (Business Social Compliance Initiative) audited two factories at Rana Plaza, and Wal-Mart audited Tazreen Fashion, the corporate audit mechanism failed in both cases, resulting in catastrophic industrial disasters (IndustriAll 2013).

### **The Accord – A “Breakthrough” and “Gamechanger”?**

Owen Herrnsstadt, the international director of the International Association of Machinists (IAM), calls the Accord “a major breakthrough for global labor rights” (Hensler and Blasi 2013, 5). Tim Ryan, the Solidarity Center Asia Region Director, also describes it as “a game changer” (Ryan 2013). Since the inception of the Accord and the Alliance in 2013, a large number of US-based International labor rights NGOs, such as Worker Rights



Consortium, International Labor Rights Forum, Clean Clothes Campaign, Maquila Solidarity Network, and Labour Behind the Label, have strongly supported the Accord and vigorously criticized the Alliance. For example, IndustriAll Global Union's general secretary Jyrki Raina has noted that the Accord on Fire and Building Safety signed between global unions, more than 80 global fashion brands, and NGOs assures a legally binding process that the commitments to inspect and improve garment factories will be carried out. This is the highest possible standard and one the Walmart/Gap initiative should be seeking to replicate. Instead what it provides is a pale imitation in terms of commitment and transparency. The workers' and their unions' voices will be heard loud and clear in the Accord, but it will be muted in the plan presented by Walmart and Gap today (IndustriALL).

By contrast, Murray Worthy, a sweatshops campaigner of War on Want, characterizes the Alliance in the following terms:

This (the Alliance) is just more of the same corporate-dominated voluntary measures that were so clearly proven to have failed in the Rana Plaza disaster....Gap, Wal-Mart and the other brands behind the Alliance must scrap this expensive PR stunt and join the rest of the clothing industry in signing the comprehensive, legally binding and life-saving Bangladesh Safety Accord (McCauley 2013)

Some American retailers refused to sign the Accord and provided various reasons for their decision. Many corporations, including GAP and Wal-Mart, were worried about the legally binding nature of the Accord. Scott Nova, the Executive Director of Worker Rights Consortium, in an interview with Huffington Post noted:

In the context of negotiations with GAP, GAP was offered language that would guarantee them immunity from any lawsuit by any third party under the

Accord....They weren't even interested in discussing that language. What GAP wanted was a guarantee that they would never have to pay more than \$2 million per year to fix the factories (Short 2013).

The Accord imposes the responsibility of paying for necessary factory renovations on corporations. The Alliance, on the other hand, offers corporations the scope to work with the Bangladeshi government, factories, and international donors to secure financing (Short 2013). The Alliance discloses names of the factories on its website, but it does not point out the nature of specific hazards (Greenhouse 2013). The Accord is far more transparent regarding releasing names, addresses, and detailed unit reports. Accord signatories are supposed to contribute a maximum \$500,000/year. However, in the Alliance, the amount of contribution for individual companies is determined by the amount of their sourcing from Bangladesh. The Accord requires its signatories to continue sourcing from Bangladesh for at least two years and as long as it is "commercially viable," thereby reducing the scope for brands to leave the country (Clean Clothes Campaign 2013). The Alliance does not impose any such restriction. European retailers were enthusiastic about the Accord because they buy around 60% of the total apparel export from Bangladesh. Since US retailers buy 25% of the country's export, they were less interested in signing the Accord (Short 2013). Richard Trumka, the president of the AFL-CIO, notes that companies that sign the Alliance but fail to fulfill the expectations face no adverse effect. They are simply expelled from the Alliance. Companies can withdraw from the Alliance by paying a minimal administrative fee which could be as low as 5 million dollars. The "Worker participation committee" as proposed by the Alliance also has the possibility of downplaying the necessity of collective bargaining (McCauley 2013).

The Accord gained overwhelming popularity in US labor rights circles for several reasons. As a pioneering transnational labor governance structure, it addresses limitations of previous transnational governance mechanisms that were based on corporate codes of conduct or ethical consumerism. Jimmy Donaghey and Juliane Reinecke argue that the Accord is an example of industrial democracy<sup>21</sup> with some CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) elements involving workers as active agents. The Alliance, on the other hand, is a form of industry self-regulation using a CSR-oriented short-term approach that views workers as passive recipients. They further note that the Accord offers the opportunity to create a balance between labor and corporate interests. It allows unions to hold corporations liable for addressing compensation and remediation. The Alliance, by contrast, reflects a “soft” CSR-based voluntary commitment which is intended to protect brand image and brand interests instead of workers. For example, the “Board Labor Committee” of the Alliance involves token representation of workers as these workers and their unions have no institutional capacity to hold corporations liable (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 12-13). Bama Athreya and Brian Campbell point out that the “soft law” approach involving voluntary initiatives often fails to ensure workers’ rights. They call for “hardening” the soft law approach to engage corporations in binding responsibilities and ensure neutral mediation and arbitration with legitimate worker representatives (Athreya and Campbell 2014, 226-244). Following Athreya and Campbell’s reflections, I suggest

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<sup>21</sup> By “industrial democracy,” Donaghey and Reinecke refer to “democratic participation of worker representatives in the governance of labour conditions” (Kaufman 2000 cited in Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 3). Kaufman identifies four principles of industrial democracy: workers’ democratic participation in decision-making, the ability to hold the authority accountable, existence of a proper dispute-resolving mechanism, and collective organizing opportunity to ensure a balanced power relationship between workers and their employers (Donaghey and Reinecke, 3).

that while the Alliance reflects a corporate conscience-based approach to address safety and security of Bangladeshi garment workers, the Accord is a move toward a holistic approach that imposes legally binding responsibilities on corporations for the very first time in the history of garment labor organizing.

I also argue that the Accord is an innovative intervention to disrupt the binary mode of focusing on “worker vs. consumer agency” in transnational labor governance (Bair et al. 2014, 7). Most of the previous transnational governance struggles in the Bangladeshi garment industry, such as the 1990s consumer boycott movement of Bangladeshi garment products produced by child labor or the series of corporate codes of conduct, extensively represented market-oriented approaches that draw on the conscience of Northern consumers and corporations. The Accord campaign partially adopts the older market-oriented approach and relies on the ability of Northern consumers and labor rights organizations to pressure TNCs using purchasing power and preferences. For example, the United Students against Sweatshops (USAS), the USA’s largest student labor campaign organization with a presence in more than 150 college campuses, launched its “End Deathtraps” campaign in Fall 2013. As part of the campaign, it pressured US universities to cut ties with brands that refuse to sign the Accord (USAS). While using “consumer agency” is a crucial strategy of the Accord campaign in the USA, the Accord remains attentive towards ensuring workers’ agency and participation. Its field workers worked with 14 IndustriAll affiliates in Bangladesh and trained them on workers’ rights to participate in factory inspections under the Accord.<sup>22</sup> US labor rights organizations such as

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<sup>22</sup> Donaghey and Reinecke (2017, 16) note that there were actually very few cases where workers took a proactive role to collaborate with the Accord inspectors in factories.

International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), Worker Rights Consortium (WRC) and United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) frequently invited Bangladeshi labor rights activists and garment workers to attend rallies, demonstrations, and seminars in the USA and make their experiences heard. For example, Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, attended a series of US tours after the Tazreen factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse. She addressed US academicians, activists, students, consumers, government officials, and even Wal-Mart shareholders, shared her experiences as a child garment worker and labor organizer in Bangladesh, and emphasized the necessity of getting the Accord signed by US brands.<sup>23</sup> Because of the unprecedented example the Accord set by combining a market-oriented approach with social justice strategies and goals, which significantly differs from previous voluntary corporate codes of conduct and the contemporary Alliance, many Northern observers have called the Accord a “breakthrough” and “game changer” in the pathway to ensure garment workers’ rights in the Global South.

To grasp the intricate connections between consumer-agency and worker activism engendered by the Accord, it is useful to consider USAS mobilizing efforts on the ground in the United States and compare them to perceptions in Bangladesh. Toward that end, I recount my changing understanding of the Accord as it evolved through USAS activism and subsequent fieldwork in Bangladesh. I became personally involved with the Accord campaign as a member of the USAS chapter (local 109) of Rutgers University in February 2014. USAS started pressuring the university administration and the President in December

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<sup>23</sup> As part of my ethnographic fieldwork, I followed Kalpona Akter in her several US tours and conducted a series of interviews with her. My critical analysis of her involvement in transnational solidarity building initiatives is elaborated in the Chapter 3.

2013 to modify the University's code of conduct and include a requirement that the university's corporate licensees must sign the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. USAS organized rallies, flash mobs, letter signing and speak out events on campus for several months. The student activists marched into the university's President Robert Barchi's office, delivered letters, and held sit-ins.



The university's President's Office was locked down (Rutgers United Students Against Sweatshops Local 109, Facebook page, Photo posted on February 21, 2014)



USAS organizers negotiating with Greg Jackson, The Present's Chief of Staff (Rutgers United Students Against Sweatshops Local 109, Facebook page, Photo posted on February 21, 2014)



USAS organizers marching towards the President's Office at Rutgers (Rutgers United Students Against Sweatshops Local 109, Facebook page, Photo posted on February 28, 2014)

USAS organizers at Rutgers invited Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, and Reba Sikder, a Rana Plaza collapse survivor, to visit the campus and address the necessity of student activists' participation in the Accord Campaign. On 21 February 2014, Sikder shared her story of being stranded under the rubble of the collapsed factory building for several hours with an audience of more than 100 students and activists. Sikder's talk was followed by Akter who called upon the audience to think about responsibility in complex ways.

It is the time to think who are responsible for these (The Rana Plaza collapse and other garment industrial disasters)?....Are workers responsible for these? The workers denied working in the building when they saw the crack. However, they were forced to enter. They were told that they would not get paid for the month and they would lose their jobs if they do not go inside and work. Why were they forced? Because the factory was rushed to deliver shipments. And who were putting the rush on them? Nike, Polo, Adidas....

....So, let's talk about what students of this university can do. You just have to go to your administration to tell them that they should require their suppliers to sign the Accord on Bangladesh Fire and Building Safety.

Akter's framing of who should be the primary target of transnational labor organizing significantly overlaps with US-based labor rights activists who identify western brands as primarily liable for working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories, and therefore, prioritize brand-based transnational activism over addressing factory owners or unauthorized subcontracting in Bangladesh.<sup>24</sup> As a USAS organizer who was first exposed to the Accord campaign in the USA, I initially subscribed to this stance. I proposed to the Rutgers USAS chapter that I could conduct video interviews with Bangladeshi garment

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<sup>24</sup> See Letter to Center for Business and Human Rights, NYU Stern School of Business (2014).



workers during my Ph.D. fieldwork in Bangladesh. In these video clips, Bangladeshi workers could directly address US brands and express their concerns about safety and security conditions at the workplace. Rutgers USAS organizers gladly accepted my proposal. They thought such a video would be a powerful tool to make Rutgers administrators realize the importance of the Accord.

According to the plan, I attended a rally of the Tazreen factory fire survivors and their families on April 5, 2014 in front of the National Press Club at Dhaka. My goal was to conduct interviews with workers. The rally was organized by a Dhaka-based grassroots activist group called Activist Anthropologist. Placards held by workers included various questions and demands, such as, “Why delay compensation for missing workers’ families? Government, factory owners, BGMEA – Answer us!,” “Factory owner must bear the medication cost of the wounded workers,” “Despite high court order, why delay compensation?,” and “The Tazreen factory owner should be charged for running the factory without fire safety certificate.” To my utmost surprise, I could not find a single placard addressing brands or corporations. Even when the workers and activists were demanding compensations, they were mostly focusing on bureaucracy and corruption of the government, BGMEA, and garment factory owners.





The Tazreen factory fire survivors and their families demonstrating in Dhaka on April 5, 2014

I began conducting interviews after the rally. I reached out to several Tazreen factory fire survivors and asked them what kind of safety measures (নিরাপত্তা ব্যবস্থা in Bangla) they would want at workplace. Almost all of them started talking about the insecure nature of their jobs, absence of a living wage, and no compensation mechanism in case of an accident. I had to specifically ask them whether they noticed any building and fire safety hazards at their workplace. Only then they shared concerns about inadequate structural safety precautions and urged factory owners and buyers to be mindful about building and fire safety. These were the specific reflections that I needed for my Accord campaign in the USA.

After finishing the interviews, I went to meet the members of Activist Anthropologist who organized the rally. I introduced myself as a USAS organizer to one of them. I told her how USAS had been mobilizing for the Accord on campus and pressuring the university administration to cut ties with brands that did not sign the Accord.

The organizer gave me a very skeptical look and asked, “Can you please explain to me what exactly you guys are trying to do? The Accord is arbitrarily imposing safety and security standards, and I don’t understand how exactly they are translating those Western safety standards in our context. They did not ask our workers!”

I was startled, and I did not know what to say. From my North American leftist and feminist labor rights allies, including a few Bangladeshi labor rights activists who are frequent visitors to the US, I had come to perceive the Accord as unprecedented because it was formulated in collaboration with brands and workers’ representatives. It was deemed exceptional because it engages corporations in legally binding agreements to ensure safety and security in Bangladeshi garment factories. This organizer from Activist Anthropologist, however, clearly disagreed with this perception of the Accord. My interaction with Tazreen survivors and organizers from Activist Anthropologist profoundly shaped the direction of my Ph.D. fieldwork. I became interested in investigating how meanings of transnational governance structures such as the Accord and the Alliance travel across borders and how they shape multilayered agency and subjectivity of workers and activists in the Global North and the South.

The video clip I made was much appreciated by USAS organizers and used in the Accord campaign in several US college campuses. The way I selectively highlighted building and fire safety ignoring other “safety” issues, such as living wage, job security, and proper compensation mechanisms, however, raised critical questions about the politics of transnational solidarity building that I (and the Accord campaign) was engaged in.

Dina Siddiqi has questioned the slippery nature of “solidarity” that often replicates the Euro-American neoliberal politics of salvation/caring masked in the feminist language of global sisterhood (Siddiqi 2014, 292). She further argues that the hyper-emphasis on various competing and conflicting labor standards often relies on vertical solidarity building, ignoring everyday struggles of workers in a neoliberal global order (Siddiqi 2014, 295). Siddiqi’s cautionary note motivated me to reexamine the Accord campaign which vigorously uses the language of transnational solidarity building in various organizing spaces in the Global North and the South. In the next section of this chapter, I investigate whether the Accord campaign follows a vertical or horizontal solidarity-building model and whether it reproduces or transforms the hegemonic neoliberal mode of transnational private governance that tries to “rescue” Third World sweatshop workers (Siddiqi 2009). Following Lila Abu Lughod, Siddiqi draws attention to the politics of representation in global activism:

....representations of the unfreedom of others that blame the chains of culture incite rescue missions by outsiders. Such representations mask the histories of internal debate and institutional struggles over justice that have occurred in every nation. They also deflect attention from the social and political forces that are responsible for the ways people live (Abu Lughod 2013, 20 cited in Siddiqi 2014, 295).

I argue that the leftist, feminist proponents of the Accord campaign in the USA are, in most cases, careful about not singling out the Third World sweatshop and portraying it as “the ultimate other” – a tendency that was widely observed in the past consumer boycott movements (Brooks 2007, xix). US labor rights activists attempt to move away from the consumer agency-centric labor organizing model and actively incorporate Southern voices. For example, Bangladeshi labor organizers, such as Kalpona Akter from Bangladesh

Centre for Worker Solidarity, regularly attends various rallies, demonstrations, conferences, seminars, and meetings of the Accord campaign in the USA. The Accord also grants workers the right to be present during factory inspections, which never happened in previous social auditing models. It establishes a complaints mechanism through which workers, unions, and brands have the authority to accuse a factory of violating safety and security of workers (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 16-20). Therefore, the Accord presents a significant turn from highlighting “consumer agency” to “workers’ agency.” Nevertheless, my fieldwork in Bangladesh and the USA demonstrates that the notion of “workers’ agency” was translated and implemented on the ground in a very complex and contradictory manner. “Consumer agency” does not totally disappear in the Accord campaign. Even though the Accord shows dedicated efforts to modify the vertical nature of transnational solidarity building by including trade union representatives and international labor NGOs in its steering committee, it ironically loses its meaning without the willingness of TNCs to engage in a legally binding agreement. It, therefore, often places TNCs at the center of its interventions and uses “consumer agency” (for example, the USAS campaign as described previously) to subvert the authority of TNCs, thereby bypassing workers’ everyday experiences and grassroots organizing struggles in Bangladesh. It selectively includes Bangladeshi workers’ representatives who are willing to speak the preferred language of solidarity building of their transnational allies.

In response to Abu-Lughod’s critique, I propose that the Accord campaign aspires to challenge the rescue mission of “saving” Bangladeshi garment workers (Siddiqi 2009) and actively resists the tendency of viewing Bangladesh “as the particular site of the problem” (Brooks 2007, 3). The joint letter signed by 114 US-based academicians and

activists, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, establishes how the Accord proponents in the USA vigorously criticize the Alliance for putting the blame on Bangladeshi factory owners and subcontracting factories and not questioning the responsibility of Western brands. The Accord attends to the “global vs. local” split, which historically characterizes transnational solidarity building initiatives in the global garment industry (Brooks 2007, Siddiqi 2009), by including Bangladeshi and international unions and workers’ representations in its negotiations with corporations. When it tries to address asymmetrical power relationships among “workers,” “unions,” “factory owners,” and “corporations,” however, it inadvertently constitutes them as homogenous categories with universal experiences, desires, and concerns. Ignoring multilayered power hierarchies that shape those categories and overlooking the politics of access to transnational activist networks limit the Accord’s potential to be a “breakthrough” and “game changer” agreement in the history of labor organizing.

**“Workers’ justice starts with workers’ safety:”**

**Accord, Alliance, and the Bangladesh experience**

In the AFL-CIO quadrennial convention in Los Angeles in 2013, Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers’ Solidarity, addressed the US labor rights organizers and said, “Workers’ justice starts for me with workers’ safety” (Ryan 2013). In the absence of enforcement of comparatively decent labor laws of Bangladesh, as Akter argues, the Accord can be “a historical turning point.” According to her, the Accord can create political space for labor organizing and negotiating with owners

and managers to improve working conditions (Ryan 2013). Akter, who frequently visits the US (and other countries in the Global North) to represent Bangladeshi garment workers and whose organization is a close ally of many US labor rights NGOs and one of the most vocal proponents of the Accord in Bangladesh), seems to subscribe to the view that the Accord is, in fact, a “breakthrough” and “game changer.” What “workers’ safety” means in the context of Bangladeshi garment industry, however, and whether the Accord can ensure workers’ safety as a way to ensure workers’ justice demands critical scrutiny.

My experience of interviewing Tazreen survivors who defined “safety” primarily in terms of living wage, job security, and proper compensation reveals the limited scope of transnational governance structures such as the Accord and the Alliance. Hasan Ashraf (2017) argues that codes, labor standards, and international agreements do not capture how global value chains produce risks, pressures, and dangers shaping everyday lives, health, and well-being of garment workers. The Accord and the Alliance offer a very “narrow and technocratic” solution to safety and respond to what Ashraf calls “spectacular crisis events.” As a result, they depoliticize health and safety on the shop floor, ignore everyday systemic exhaustion of workers’ bodies, and produce a top-down approach (Ashraf 2017, 251). For example, from the inception of the Alliance until October 2016, its toll-free worker helpline “Amader Kotha” (“Our Words” in English) received 98,580 phone calls from workers reporting various work-related concerns. The Alliance classified only 21% of these calls as related to “safety” issues and identified the rest (79%) as “non-safety” issues (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 19). The Accord is not an exception either. Its Safety and Health Complaints mechanism received a total of 86 complaints in 2016. It identified

22 problems as “Non-OSH Complaints,”<sup>25</sup> which are not processed by the Accord. It forwarded most of these problems to its signatories and labor partners; no update about these problems are available on the website. The alleged “Non-OSH Complaints” include: “unfair dismissal from work,” “irregularities in wages and bonus payment,” “the factory is not paying overtime properly,” “non-payment of maternity benefits,” “there were internal union problems at the factory,” and “to assist in a private marital matter as complainant had a personal safety fear related to the same” (The Accord – Health and Safety Complaints 2016). The selective focus of the Accord and the Alliance replicates past trends of transnational governance struggles that attempted to ensure workers’ rights in the Bangladeshi garment industry through US-based consumer boycott movement. After the 1990s consumer boycott movement of Bangladeshi garment products to eradicate child labor, as Brooks notes, ILO-trained inspectors started inspecting factories and monitoring school programs for child garment workers in Bangladesh. These inspectors had the authority to report the status of child labor only. There was no way for them to report and address other workers’ rights issues including fire hazards, worker abuse, or withholding of wages in factories (Brooks 2007, 19). Therefore, transnational governance structures, even when they include selective workers’ representatives from the Global South, prioritize one problem in one industry at a time. They often use very narrow definitions of “safety,” “security,” and “rights,” which fail to develop a holistic approach to address workers’ concerns.

The Accord recruited four international engineering firms, which designed inspection plans, and hired twenty-five Bangladeshi engineers as the Accord staff.

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<sup>25</sup> OSH stands for “Occupational Safety and Health.”



BGMEA representatives expressed concern that the Accord might impose an American perspective on the building, fire, and electrical safety and ignore local realities. They urged the Accord to comply with the Bangladesh National Building Code (BNBC) (Ovi February 16, 2014). A dispute between the Accord and engineers from Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) supported the view that the Accord might propose an arbitrary Western safety standard. For example, the Accord suggested that the concrete strength of a factory building should be 1750 psi (pound per square inch) for brick-made structures whereas BUET engineers argued that a 2270 psi for stone-made structures and 2050 psi for brick-made structures are safe. Fifty percent of garment factories in Bangladesh would face closure if they had to follow the Accord's recommendation (Ovi May 14, 2014). When the Accord and BUET engineers failed to reach an agreement, the International Labor Organization (ILO) intervened to mediate the dispute. The Accord eventually agreed to accept BUET engineers' recommendations and decided to ensure 2370 psi for stone-made structures and 2050 psi for brick-made ones (Ovi May 16, 2014).

The concern over imposing Western safety standards was further heightened when the Accord provided a list of 55 suppliers for import of fire safety equipment.<sup>26</sup> Factory owner representatives expressed worry that the selected safety equipment suppliers might capitalize on the situation and charge higher prices, shrinking room for price negotiations. Some factory owners suggested that the Accord should provide a standard certification of safety products instead of releasing a selection of companies. A factory owner seeking anonymity said, "We do not want to run the risk (of not buying safety equipment from the

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<sup>26</sup> The list came with a disclaimer that it is not an endorsement or approval by the Accord. The Accord totally relied on the information provided by the suppliers and did not perform any independent quality check (Ovi November 14, 2014).

Accord recommended companies) since we have to get approval from the buyers' platform finally for installation of fire safety equipment" (Ovi August 31, 2014). Bangladeshi factory owners also noted that the cost of appointing an Accord engineer for retrofitting was a lot higher than the cost of employing a local engineer. Whereas local engineers charge Tk. 20 lakh (approximately USD 24,800) for retrofitting, Accord engineers ask for Tk. 70 lakh (approximately USD 87,000) (Khan June 10, 2014). BGMEA estimates that the Bangladeshi RMG sector will spend over Tk. 2410 crore (approximately USD 3 billion) for importing fire and safety equipment to comply with the Accord and the Alliance. This demand, in fact, opens a huge market for global suppliers of safety equipment (Ovi December 1, 2014).

US labor rights groups often point out that the Accord is superior to the Alliance because it requires corporations to pay for factory renovations. BGMEA estimates that the cost of remediation would be an estimated \$250,000 per factory and \$3 billion collectively (Saini 2015). There are not many differences between the Accord and the Alliance on the ground regarding paying Bangladeshi factories for remediation. Article 22 of the Accord allows the brands to "negotiate commercial terms with their suppliers which ensure that it is financially feasible for the factories to maintain safe workplaces...." (The Accord 2013, 6). Kalpona Akter, during a one-on-one meeting, notes that the inclusion of the word "ensure" gives brands the leeway to bypass their responsibility of providing funds. The Accord allows brands to "ensure" (and not "provide") funds by seeking alternative means such as "joint investments, providing loans, accessing donors or government support, through offering business incentives or through paying for renovations directly" (Accord 2013). Rob Wayss, the Accord Executive Director and Acting Chief Safety Inspector, says:

With every single factory that is inspected, we meet with the owner or the owner's representative, together with the lead brand, to explain the process after the inspection, how the Accord *verifies* things and what support we need from them and what they can expect from us. In those conversations, we *inform* the parties of their obligations and *discuss* the finances and our requirement that, before the corrective action plan (CAP) will be approved, they have to confirm – both with the factory owner and the brand – that the financing for the remediation is confirmed. We also *require* them to provide us information on the composition of the remediation.

In many cases, it is self-financed. (Saini 2014, emphasis added)

The Accord, therefore, merely *informs* corporations about their obligation to ensure funds, *discusses* various possibilities of funding with factory owners and brands, and *requires* updated information. It does not provide any financial assistance for factory renovation or workers' compensation in case of factory closure due to safety-checks in Bangladesh. The Alliance's stance is not very different. Whereas the complex language of the Accord tries to mask its tendency to defend brands, the Alliance straightforwardly uses corporate language to protect corporations. In an interview with Women's Wear Daily (WWD), Ellen Tauscher, the Board Chair of the Alliance, clarifies that the Alliance tries to bring in competitive and "corporate-quality lending" but does not donate money for remediation (Saini 2014). Some Bangladeshi factory owners reached out to brands for financial support for structural renovation, but all requests were refused. The owners are frustrated because the Accord and the Alliance spend thousands of dollars for running factory inspections but do not pay any fund for remediation (Ovi May 5, 2014).

Within the first year of its initiation, the Accord suspended 31 factories for structural flaws. Although these factories faced temporary suspension, 14000 workers lost jobs and experienced extreme uncertainty about getting wages (Ovi May 5, 2014). According to the article 13 of the Accord, signatory companies should require suspended

factories to pay workers for up to six months (The Accord 2013, 4). Donaghey and Reinecke note that the brands never made the necessary effort to ensure wages for workers of suspended or closed factories. It took a long time for unions to negotiate compensation. The situation became further complex when unions and factories had to negotiate with multiple buyers. The Alliance, on the other hand, processed compensation much faster (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 17-18). Ellen Tauscher, the Board Chair of the Alliance, took pride in the way the Alliance ensured compensation. She says,

We're the only group that pays people if they lose their job. So, where is the big labor organization called the Accord? They have got tens of thousands of people who have lost their jobs without compensation. We've compensated everybody who's lost their job for four months.<sup>27</sup> (Saini 2014)

Donaghey and Reinecke call the Alliance's stance regarding compensation a "brand benevolence" approach as it did not pursue workers or factory owners to negotiate with brands and relied on the goodwill of brands to act benevolently (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 17).

After the Tazreen factory fire, which claimed lives of more than 112 workers (Manik and Yardley 2012), and the Rana Plaza collapse, which killed more than 1134 workers (Hoskins 2015), Bangladesh came under the jurisdiction of three major governance initiatives: the Accord, the Alliance, and the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA). The Accord and the Alliance are transnational governance structures, whereas the

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<sup>27</sup> According to Donaghey and Reinecke, workers get two months of compensation directly from the Worker Safety Fund of the Alliance. However, they were supposed to negotiate with the factory owners to get the additional two months' salary. There is no reliable data on how many workers got full four months' salary as legal documentation is not easily available in Bangladesh and many workers change jobs quickly (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 17).

government of Bangladesh retains most of the control over the NTPA. The NTPA is supported by the ILO and funded by the Dutch and British governments (Saini 2014). Complying with three different kinds of governance structure seems challenging for many garment factory owners in Bangladesh. BGMEA representatives asked for uniform codes of conduct from the Accord and the Alliance, but their request was never addressed. There are almost 300 factories that fall under the jurisdiction of both the Accord and the Alliance. In such cases, the Alliance approved some factories that were later identified as “vulnerable” by the Accord. For example, after inspecting Dragon Sweater Bangladesh Ltd., the Alliance cleared the fire alarm control panel. The Accord, however, reported that the smoke alarm activated only a local alarm and did not provide notification to all occupants. There were also anomalies in inspection reports. For example, in one case, the Alliance reported “One Exit discharge on the ground floor is protected from the utility room and dining by the fire door,” whereas the Accord claimed that the exit stairs were not protected with a fire door in the same factory (Khan June 10, 2014). The Alliance avoided inspecting factories that were already reviewed by the Accord. The Accord, on the contrary, initially decided to inspect all listed factories even if they had already been assessed by the Alliance. Scott Nova, the Executive Director of the Worker Rights Consortium, claimed that the Alliance’s inspections were often “piggybacked” on previous assessments by Wal-Mart and not rigorous enough (Greenhouse 2014). This stance of the Accord initially gave rise to some tension with the Alliance. The Alliance claimed that the Accord was not abiding by the “verbal understanding” of not overlapping with the Alliance’s inspection (Khan 2014). The Accord later decided to avoid duplication in factories that had already been inspected by the Alliance (Saini 2015).

The Accord divides all garment factories in Bangladesh into three categories.<sup>28</sup> Tier 1 factories receive safety inspections, remediation, and fire safety training. Tier 2 factories receive inspection and remediation but no fire safety training. Tier 3 factories receive a limited initial inspection. The Accord states that if a Tier 3 factory seems high risk, it will be treated as a Tier 2 factory (The Accord 2013, 1-2). In this way, the Accord, at least on paper, intends to cover all garment factories, including suppliers that are subcontracted without the knowledge of the retailer. Khan and Wichterich identify 235 (4%) garment factories in Bangladesh as Tier 1, 1887 factories (35%) as Tier 2, and 3379 (61%) factories as Tier 3 factories (Khan and Wichterich 2015, 8). Their classification significantly differs from the Accord's classification, which counts a much higher number of factories as Tier 1 (30%) (The Accord 2013, 1). Khan and Wichterich note that all three tiers as distinguished by the Accord fall within Tier 2 as classified by Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, cited in Khan and Wichterich, 14). Thus, the Accord actually covers only Tier 1 and Tier 2 factories with direct business connection with TNCs in Bangladesh (Khan and Wichterich, 23). This fact runs contrary to the claim of many US labor rights scholars and activists that the Accord's requirements apply to any factory that produces the goods of

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<sup>28</sup> According to Kabeer and Mahmud, Tier 1 factories are mostly located in the EPZs (export-processing zones), owned by foreign or joint ventures, and deal directly with international buyers. These are usually bigger, efficient, safer, and more worker friendly factories. Tier 2 factories are medium and large in size and located outside the EPZs. They are owned by domestic entrepreneurs (2004 cited in Khan and Wichterich 2015, 7). The difference between Tier 1 and Tier 2 is usually determined by the way they take orders. Tier 1 factories book orders through international buying houses, whereas Tier 2 factories book limited number of orders through buying houses and take subcontracting assignments from Tier 1 companies (Bearnot). Tier 3 factories consist of the rest of the medium and small-scale factories with no direct link with international buyers. These factories rely on subcontracted orders from Tier 2 factories and maintain little to no labor standards (2004 cited in Khan and Wichterich 2015, 7-8).

any signatory brand – regardless the number of layers of subcontracting involved” (Letter to Center for Business and Human Rights, NYU Stern School of Business). The Accord and the Alliance exclude all Tier 3 factories constituting almost two-thirds of the total number of garment factories in Bangladesh. Tier 3 factories are inspected by the NTPA – the government controlled national tripartite plan. Khan and Wichterich argue that the NTPA’s inspections are not as robust as that of the Accord. Since all factories under the NTPA are subcontractors, they do not face any pressure from Northern buyers and labor rights activists to maintain safety standards. The NTPA does not monitor remediation, and there is no penalty for failing to meet the CAPs. NTPA represents the Bangladesh government’s immediate response to the potential suspension of US-GSP<sup>29</sup> for Bangladeshi garment products. It was not designed to bring long-term systemic changes in the Bangladeshi garment industry (Khan and Wichterich, 28-29).

Mainstream labor rights discourses in Bangladesh frequently use the single cluster “Accord and Alliance” to describe two very different (yet similar to some extent) transnational governance structures. The Accord is popularly known as the “European” initiative (although it has 20 American signatories), while the Alliance is described as the “North American” initiative. Some of the vigorous critiques of these initiatives in Bangladesh examine their neoliberal and imperial nature without differentiating their contrasting origins and modes of implementation (Luthfa 2015). On the other hand, North American and European labor rights discourses spend a tremendous amount of energy in

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<sup>29</sup> GSP (Generalized System of Preferences) was initiated by the 1975 Trade Act of the United States to eliminate duties on products imported from 120 developing countries. President Barack Obama suspended Bangladesh’s GSP privilege in June 2013 for failing to preserve workers’ rights (Office of the United States Trade Representative).

distinguishing the Accord from the Alliance and establishing how the Accord is much superior to the Alliance. The pro-Alliance group, which includes corporations and their allies, try to bypass their accountability by shifting focus towards the practice of subcontracting that flies under the radar, thereby holding Bangladeshi garment factory owners and the government of Bangladesh primarily liable for the current situation.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, proponents of the Accord, who include Euro-American labor rights groups, academicians, and activists, attempt to hold brands responsible. While doing so, they often describe subcontracting as a minor problem and portray garment factory owners and the government of Bangladesh as innocent victims of exploitative corporate practices (see, for example, Letter to Center for Business and Human Rights, NYU Stern School of Business). Frequently absent from both the pro-Accord and the pro-Alliance discussions is an integrated understanding of how global corporations, the local government, and factory owners jointly play roles in abusing disposable and feminized labor across the apparel supply chain.

The MOUs signed in the 1990s, corporate codes of conduct, the “social clause,” and the recent Accord and Alliance demonstrate limitations of transnational activist campaigns that prioritize non-state-actor-centric labor governance struggles. Codes of conduct, such as MOUs or the Alliance, rarely embrace workers' meaningful participation and hardly impose legal responsibilities on corporations. These initiatives resemble corporate public relations stances that are implemented in collaboration with international human and labor rights organizations as well as their Third World activist allies. Although

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<sup>30</sup> This view was expressed by a number of US corporate representatives who attended the “Sustainable Models for the Apparel Industry: Bangladesh Development Conference 2016” at Harvard University on September 24, 2016.



the nature of the Accord is different from MOUs and the Alliance, the Accord faces significant challenges in bringing long-term changes because of its selective choice of Third World activist allies, lack of collaboration with workers and grassroots organizing initiatives, limited understanding of local power dynamics and hierarchies, and reproduction of the savior complex at various levels.

### Chapter 3:

#### **Transnational Solidarity Building in an Era of NGOization of Labor**

##### **Movements**

Contemporary transnational activist collaborations, launched after the Tazreen factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse, try to move beyond consumer-oriented models of protest campaigns. These initiatives aspire to challenge neocolonial power hierarchies that permeated previous consumer boycott movements and corporate codes of conduct. Embracing norms of worker equality and solidarity, they try to focus on shop-floor activism and workers' agency by incorporating Southern workers' representatives in their transnational campaigns. How well do they succeed in realizing these objectives?

In this chapter, I investigate the politics of transnational solidarity building in garment labor organizing. I ask what it means for grassroots labor organizers, who are often restricted by national borders and neoliberal socio-economic-political forces, to engage in transnational solidarity building. I specifically examine how some grassroots organizing initiatives can engage in solidarity building with transnational allies while others do not gain such access. I am particularly interested in the rhetoric that travels across borders, the sources of funding required to mobilize transnationally, and the politics that undergird transnational activist networks.

To explore who has the access and resources to cross transnational borders and participate in transnational labor organizing, I attended a series of conferences, seminars, and demonstrations in the USA that addressed Bangladeshi garment workers' rights from

2014 through 2017. Some of these events featured Bangladeshi garment workers and labor organizers, who spoke about their experiences. Two prominent Bangladeshi women labor organizers appeared at many of these events: Kalpona Akter,<sup>31</sup> the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS), and Nazma Akter, the Executive Director of Awaj Foundation. Both are former child garment workers, who later became labor organizers. Kalpona Akter initiated the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity in 2001; Nazma Akter established her organization, Awaj Foundation, in 2003. Both speak fluent English and frequently travel to countries in the Global North. They are motivational speakers and well-versed in the language of transnational solidarity building.

Other grassroots labor organizers, whom I encountered during my fieldwork in Bangladesh, seldom appear before US audiences. These activists—many of whom are women—are affiliated with organizations such as Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Forum, Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity, and Activist Anthropologist, which are devising creative interventions to secure workers' rights. In 2014, for example, Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Forum organized 1600 garment workers whose salary, overtime pay, and Eid bonus had been withheld for three months by the Tuba Group, which was co-owned by Delwar Hossain who also owned Tazreen Fashions.<sup>32</sup> To secure what was owed them, the workers occupied the factory building and took part in a 14-day-long hunger strike. Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity has edited a comprehensive book, *Outcries*

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<sup>31</sup> In this chapter, I use first and last names to address Kalpona Akter and Nazma Akter to avoid confusion as they have the same last name (although they are unrelated). In other chapters where there is no discussion on Nazma Akter, I use Kalpona Akter's last name only.

<sup>32</sup> A deadly fire broke out in the Tazreen Fashions garment factory on 24 November 2012, killing more than 112 workers (Manik and Yardley 2012).

*of Thousand Lives* (হাজার প্রাণের চিৎকার), which presents interviews with and stories about survivors of and workers who were killed by the Rana Plaza collapse. To memorialize the tragedy, the book includes a comprehensive list (including names, addresses, photos, employer factories, and statistical analysis) of all workers who died from the collapse, as well as discussions of the experiences of primary responders, immediate Facebook posts from social justice activists right after the collapse, news and editorials, protest songs/poems/dramas, and art pieces. Activist Anthropologist, a grassroots group of academician-activists, has been identifying missing workers from the Tazreen factory fire and mobilizing Tazreen fire survivors to demand compensation from buyers, the factory owner, and the government. They filed Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the High Court of Bangladesh against Delwar Hossain, the owner of the Tazreen Fashions, and succeeded in charging him with criminal negligence. Despite this important work on the ground, none of these activists represent Bangladeshi garment workers in mainstream North American labor organizing platforms.

What factors enable certain labor organizers to develop global circuits? What strategies attract support in the Global North? How do those strategies affect workers in the Global South? To answer these questions, I begin by mapping the terrain of labor organizing in post-Independence Pakistan and subsequently in Bangladesh. I then examine NGOization of the labor movement in Bangladesh since the 1990s and its effects on the priorities labor organizing NGOs. The final sections of the chapter compare the operations, funding and issue agendas of Nazma Akter's Awaj Foundation and Kalpona Akter's Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity. I trace key differences between their commitments to nonconfrontational bureaucratic interventions and the more radical tactics

of labor organizers who eschew transnational solidarity. In the chapter's epilog, I return to the question of what gets lost in translation when Bangladeshi workers' rights rhetoric crosses international borders.

**“This is a mafia industry”:**

**The complicated terrain of garment labor organizing in Bangladesh**

During a meeting in Summer 2016, Taslima Akter, the coordinator of Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity, expressed her frustration about conflicting interests and modes of operation of various garment labor rights organizations in Bangladesh. She said, “This (the garment labor organizing) is like a mafia industry.”<sup>33</sup> She then began to unravel the complicated relationships between labor rights organizations, garment factory owners, the government, brands, and Northern labor rights groups. Why an important Bangladeshi labor rights activist would call the world of garment labor organizing a “mafia industry” demands critical scrutiny.

Trade unionizing in Bangladesh has historically been connected with a series of anti-colonial and nationalist struggles – first, against the British colonialism which ended in 1947, and then against the rule of Pakistan (then West Pakistan) over Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) which ended in 1971. Most of the trade unions were organized by leftist and nationalist political parties who were involved in anti-colonial struggles (Rahman and Langford 2012, 91). Trade unions have always been significant for political parties because

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<sup>33</sup> Akter, Taslima. (Coordinator of Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity), in discussion with the author. June 2, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

of the unions' capacity to mobilize a large number of workers on the streets. Trade unions' political importance eventually gave rise to "a peculiar mode of politicization and extreme partisanship" in Bangladeshi labor organizing (Siddiqi 2017, 65).

Pakistan became independent from the British colonial rule in 1947. After independence, the Pakistan state's hostile stance against the communist-leftist-progressive political bloc joined the Cold War trade union imperialism. During the Cold War, the US-based AFL-CIO appeared as a strategic tool to enforce the US government's militant anti-communism. In 1955, the AFL was merged with the CIO and aggressively started promoting "free trade unionism" (McCallum 2013, 22). Around the same time when Pakistan's military dictatorship institutionally started suppressing the progressive-leftist-communist bloc. The communist party was banned in 1954 and trade union organizing was banned in 1958, forcing leftist labor organizers to go underground. Against this backdrop, both the AFL-CIO and International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) became strongly active in East Pakistan, and the East Pakistan Federation of Labor (EPFL) became affiliated with ICFTU (Rahman and Langford, 93-94).

After the independence of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971, the Soviet-backed Awami League government nationalized 90% industries of the country. Although Awami League tried to introduce socialist economic policies and announced a relatively progressive labor policy, it soon got involved in authoritarian bureaucracy, corruption, and nepotism. The government collapsed all labor unions within one organization, which significantly shrank the scope for independent labor organizing. The Awami League government was overthrown in a military coup in 1975. General Ziaur Rahman assumed the state power and instituted martial law banning all trade unions. He lifted the ban in

1977 and initiated a registration mechanism that allowed only labor wings of political parties to register as labor unions. Some of the rightist and Pro-China leftist labor leaders expressed allegiance to General Rahman. The General was an avid supporter of widespread privatization prescribed by World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF). He sold most of the nationalized industries and opened the country's border for foreign investments (Rahman and Langford, 94-95).

After the assassination of General Ziaur Rahman in 1981, another military general H. M. Ershad captured state power and ruled till 1990. General Ershad continued General Rahman's neoliberal strategy of mass-privatization, sold state-owned firms to private bodies, and implemented structural adjustment policies (Rahman and Langford, 95-96). The country's adoption of neoliberal political-economic policies was accompanied by the mid-1980s Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA),<sup>34</sup> global recession, and transfer of manufacturing industries from South Korea and Taiwan to poorer countries. The larger political-economic transformations resulted in a dramatic rise of the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh (Siddiqi 2009, 160). During this time, progressive labor organizers attempted to initiate an anti-dictatorship movement against General Ershad. However, they were either convinced to join the government and collaborate or ruthlessly repressed by military forces. Bangladesh Workers' Party – a pro-China leftist political party – was the only labor union organizing garment workers, but the party was more interested in using workers for achieving political goals than in fighting for their labor

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<sup>34</sup> Multi-fibre Arrangement (MFA) refers to bilateral agreements or unilateral initiatives that establish quotas to limit imports to countries whose domestic industries were threatened by foreign imports. The MFA was initiated in 1974 and abolished in 1995 (World Trade Organization).

rights. As a result, garment workers' organizing never got priority in the mainstream labor organizing agenda in the 1980s (Rahman and Langford, 96).

The Ershad administration was overthrown by a powerful student movement in 1990. Since then, Awami League and BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) have been ruling the country. Both the political parties differ from their military predecessors regarding their allegiance to democratic values. Nevertheless, they continued the previous rulers' support for the free market economy and neoliberal economic policies. Neither of them made any meaningful contribution toward strengthening the labor movement in the country. Each of the political parties has its labor wing, which merely serves as a means to secure voters for respective parties (Rahman and Langford, 96).

Aside from Awami League and BNP sponsored labor unions, a limited number of leftist political unions have been active in Bangladeshi garment labor organizing. Most of them reject funds from foreign donors or corporations and rely on donations from trusted personal donors, well-wishers, and allies (Rahman and Langford, 101). These organizations differ from each other regarding their adherence to Stalinist, Maoist, Trotskyist, or other left political philosophies. Some of them do not have the necessary human resources to represent workers. The most prominent leftist political unions include Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Union Centre and Garment Workers Unity Forum. Even though these organizations have a sufficient number of members, they have been denied registration as unions because of their critical stance against the government (Long 2015, 46).



In recent years, left political unions led two major garment workers' protests in Bangladesh - the 2006 mass uprising of garment workers and the 2014 Tuba Protest. In 2006, workers from 4000 factories engaged in wildcat strikes, street demonstrations, and confrontation with armed law enforcement forces. Two left political unions – Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Forum and Bangladesh Garment Workers Trade Unity Council (BGWTUC) – played a key role in mobilizing workers and forcing BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association) to accept workers' demands that included increase in minimum wage, maternity leave, and the right to unionize (Siddiqi 2017, 72-74). In 2014, an alliance of eleven left-leaning organizations, including Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Forum, organized 1600 workers of five garment factories owned by the Tuba group.<sup>35</sup> The workers occupied a garment factory and participated in a hunger strike demanding three months of back wages and festival bonuses (Siddiqi 2015, 165-167).

Besides trade unions, there are politically affiliated and non-affiliated federations and NGOs that organize Bangladeshi garment workers. Federations and NGOs provide an alternative space for mobilizing garment workers against the backdrop of restrictive labor laws and policies hindering freedom of organizing (Saxena 2014, 103). For example, the labor law of Bangladesh requires at least 30% of the total factory workforce to sign up for union membership to get approval for registration. All union organizers must work at the factory. The list of union members is disclosed to the factory owner, which jeopardizes workers' job security in case of labor disputes (Long 2015, 42). Moreover, union

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<sup>35</sup> The Tuba group is co-owned by Delwar Hossain who is also the owner of Tazreen Fashions which caught a deadly fire in 2012 killing more than 112 workers.

organizing is legally prohibited in factories located in Export Processing Zones (EPZs). In those cases where unionizing is not a viable option, federations and NGOs play a significant role in creating formal and informal negotiation channels between workers, factory owners, and the government.

Since the foreign-donations regulation law of Bangladesh requires an organization to register as an NGO to receive foreign donations,<sup>36</sup> many federations opened labor NGOs so that they can receive funding for their transnational allies. These federations and NGOs have revolving doors between them. Nazma Akter, for example, runs Awaj Foundation – a labor NGO. She is also the Chair of Shommilito Garment Sromik Federation. She enlists workers, who seek support from her NGO, as members of her federation. Kalpona Akter initiated BCWS – another labor NGO - with a garment worker and labor organizer named Babul Akhtar. Babul Akhtar is now the Chair of Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF) and serves as an important ally of Kalpona Akter and BCWS. BCWS and BGIWF sometimes receive funding from the same sources. In this way, boundaries between federations and NGOs often get blurred because of various

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<sup>36</sup> Foreign-funded NGOs in Bangladesh were regulated by the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Ordinance, 1978. The government repealed this ordinance on October 5, 2016 and passed a new law called the Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Law 2016. The new law lists offences that can cause cancellation or withholding of registration of NGOs by the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB). The offences include “anti-state activities, making malicious and derogatory statements against the Constitution and constitutional bodies of Bangladesh, subversive activities, financing and sponsorship of terror and militancy, and trafficking of women and children” (Global Legal Mirror 2016).

formal and informal connections and collaborations between various local and transnational actors and institutions.

### **NGOization of labor movement in Bangladesh**

NGOization in Bangladesh significantly shapes priorities and modes of operation of labor NGOs. Bangladeshi leftist feminist scholars criticize the way NGOs foster neoliberal development, reproducing top-down imperialist dependencies with transnational NGOs, donors, and corporations (Karim 2004, 2008; Siddiqi 2006). Karim uses the term “postcolonial governance” to describe how NGOs govern as a shadow state and subject the population to various market-oriented disciplinary mechanisms. As the political left in Bangladesh is very fragmented, its legitimacy in bringing meaningful social change has been questioned since the 1990s. NGOs, therefore, have filled the vacuum and appeared as forerunners of progressive social movements (Karim 2008). NGO-driven social movements have not been successful in addressing structural inequities and bringing sustainable transformation, however. Nazneen Shifa calls the NGO-led feminist movement “9 am – 5 pm feminism” and argues that NGOization often reduces gender equality to some “tools and techniques,” blurring ideological aspects and erasing history and struggles of working class women (Shifa 2013). Shifa’s argument echoes the frustration of Nazma Akter, a popular garment labor rights activist in Bangladesh and abroad, as she said:

Mainstream women’s movement does not talk about our (garment workers’) issues. There are divisions between women’s movement and women workers’ movement. Women’s rights activists in Bangladesh talk about dowry, domestic violence, or

CEDAW ratification. Have you heard them talking about women garment workers' rights? Rich people don't do labor movement. We, poor people, do it.<sup>37</sup>

There are several reasons why the women's movement in Bangladesh has failed to address women garment workers' rights, finding it easier to talk about dowry or domestic violence in the family than the exploitation of women garment workers in the factory setting. Powerful male elites have historically dominated the heavily politicized sphere of labor organizing in the Indian subcontinent in the absence of an appropriate legal mechanism for ensuring social justice. They often used workers to serve their political agenda instead of fighting for labor rights (Rahman and Langford 2012, 92). Urban elites also dominate the booming NGO sector in Bangladesh where they appear as "saviors" of the working-class poor. NGOs focusing on gender issues are not an exception. Elora Chowdhury (2011, 160) has documented the class-based character of the Bangladeshi women's movement and feminist NGOs, which are powerfully influenced by secular modernist values that give priority to gender and religious discrimination but leave neoliberal capitalist exploitation out of its purview.

A staff member of Plan International Bangladesh, an influential international NGO, identified additional limitations of feminist NGOs. She noted that the NGO sector in Bangladesh made some significant contributions in rural areas in terms of ensuring women's education, labor force participation, access to microcredit, and stopping child marriage. However, NGOs are not equipped to deal with urban issues. Working in an

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<sup>37</sup> Akter, Nazma. (Executive Director of Awaj Foundation), in discussion with the author. June 9, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

industrialized urban setting requires innovation, research, technology, and resources – which are controlled by the government or corporations. Therefore, the capacity of NGOs to contribute to the urban sector is very limited. NGOs face significant obstacles in dealing with urban issues such as the profit-driven garment industry. Working with women garment workers is very different from working on child marriage and fighting against religious conservatives in the rural setting where NGOs do not have to deal with corporations that have powerful economic interests. To initiate structural changes, NGOs would have to confront corporations. However, the role of NGOs in Bangladesh is to facilitate and not to confront. Moreover, NGOs do not have the necessary expertise, information, and resources to facilitate negotiations between garment workers, corporations, and the government. Indeed, the staff member said:

We (Plan International Bangladesh) are not an activist organization. We do not collaborate with activists. Most of the issues we address are non-contentious. For example, we work on stopping child marriage. Who will tell you not to stop child marriage? Yes, religious zealots would tell you, but you will have many progressive allies to support you. We have some projects on garment workers, but we directly collaborate with factory owners. We do not work with any labor rights organization.<sup>38</sup>

Thus there has been a critical absence of sustainable working-class movements that prioritize workers' concerns over political gains and NGOs that have the necessary ideological and experiential tools and resources to confront profit-driven corporations and push for workers' rights in Bangladesh. The "American Center for International Labor Solidarity" (commonly known as Solidarity Center), a project of AFL-CIO, sought to fill

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<sup>38</sup> A staff member of Plan International Bangladesh, in discussion with the author. March 31, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee's name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

this vacuum when it started operating in Bangladesh in 1997.<sup>39</sup> Solidarity Center received extensive funding from the US government to promote “independent trade unions” worldwide (Rahman and Langford 2014, 176). The AFL-CIO has been widely criticized for practicing “trade union imperialism.” For example, Jack Scott describes how many US union leaders believed that US foreign policies would ensure “progress and civilization” in “backward” communities (Scott 1978, 12 cited in Rahman and Langford 2014, 172). Similarly, Kim Scipes has argued that US imperialist projects operate through labor NGOs, sidestepping relationship with the government. These NGOs exercise “political-economic-cultural” control rather than forceful manipulation (Scipes 2010 cited in Rahman and Langford, 172).

It is important to examine how US trade union imperialism was manifested in Bangladesh through Solidarity Center’s sponsorship of labor NGOs. Rahman and Langford point out that the AFL-CIO, first as the Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) and later as Solidarity Center, launched their funded unions and an NGO instead of collaborating with already existing unions and federations in Bangladesh (Rahman and Langford 2014, 183). It established Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU), which later became Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF) after its registration in 1997. Other NGOs and federations that are supported by Solidarity Center include Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), and Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) (Rahman and Langford, 176-177). Solidarity Center

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<sup>39</sup> AFL-CIO has been active in East Pakistan since 1960. It got a public face in East Pakistan with the establishment of Asian American Free Labor Institute (AAFLI) in 1967. Solidarity Center took over AAFLI in 1997 (Rahman and Langford 2014, 176).

maintained distance from left-leaning unions in Bangladesh, replicating the AFL-CIO's historic Cold War anti-communist stance. It established a patron-client relationship with certain labor organizers by providing funds for their paid positions, training, international travels, and food for members of their organizations. It discourages collective protest and instructs their allied labor federations and NGO to follow bureaucratic and legalistic means of negotiation (Rahman and Langford 2014, 183).

Some left-leaning union leaders expressed deep dissatisfaction about the intervention of Solidarity Center in Bangladeshi garment labor organizing. One of the leaders said:

Before NGO interventions, everything was all right. Workers raised funds themselves. They were perhaps starving, but they never stepped back from the movement. Things began to change since 1995 when Solidarity Center sponsored some labor organizations. Workers started getting food and bus fare to attend meetings. These transformations are very harmful to the movement. When our next generation assesses the labor movement, they will realize you should not rely on others for your organizing.<sup>40</sup>

Colin Long uses the term “NGO unionism” to indicate to how overseas funded NGO unions nurture links with transnational solidarity campaigns instead of addressing material concerns on the ground in Bangladesh. Long notes that operating as a labor NGO provides several incentives for these organizations. Bangladeshi garment workers are too poor to pay their union dues, which makes it challenging to run a workers' contribution-based labor rights organization. The labor NGO model, on the other hand, guarantees a

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<sup>40</sup> A grassroots labor organizer of a lean-leaning labor rights organization, in discussion with the author. June 7, 2015. New York City, United States. Interviewee's name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

frequent flow of donor funds (Long 2015, 48). Moshrefa Mishu, the President of Garment Workers Unity Forum – a left-leaning labor organization, said:

We have lots of limitations. We don't get financial donations. We don't have any international support. We run with the support of our friends. We can run only because our commitment is strong. If we had the resources to recruit organizers to travel around the country and organize workers, we would have been more effective. However, this is not possible for us.<sup>41</sup>

Support of powerful Northern labor rights allies can protect the local labor organizers from the repression of the state and the government (Long 2015, 48). For example, the Bangladesh government heavily targeted BCWS and its allies in 2010. Aminul Islam, a trade unionist, affiliated with BCWS and BGWIF, was detained by the National Intelligence Service of Bangladesh and later found dead (Rahman and Langford 2014, 180). Two other leaders of the same organizations - Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter - were arrested and imprisoned on ten criminal charges including attempted murder, criminal intimidation, violence against civil servants, and mischief causing damage. The NGO Affairs Bureau (NAB) also revoked BCWS's registration. The severe state suppression of labor organizers upset BCWS's Northern allies. International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) reached out to the US Trade Representative and threatened withdrawal of Generalized System of Preference (GSP) for Bangladesh.<sup>42</sup> The AFL-CIO urged eleven international industrial associations, nine European ambassadors, then Secretary of State

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<sup>41</sup> Mishu, Moshrefa. (President, Garment Workers Unity Forum), in discussion with the author. June 11, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

<sup>42</sup> Generalized System of Preference (GSP) refers to concessions that developed countries offer to selected developing countries. It allows duty-free or low-duty imports from these countries up to a certain quota (Business Dictionary).



Hilary Clinton to put pressure on the Bangladesh government. Kalpona Akter and Babul Akhter were eventually released, the criminal charges were dropped, and BCWS was re-registered. Such intense international support is highly unlikely for unions and federations that are not affiliated with Solidarity Center and do not have transnational exposure (Rahman and Langford, 80-81). Moshrefa Mishu, for example, was arrested five times during the 2006 mass uprising of garment workers. She was arrested and injured by the Police again during the 2014 Tuba protest. The news of her getting arrested and abused by the state force never made international headlines.

While Long recognizes the necessity of using transnational collaboration to pressure local governments and factory owners, he expresses concern about the way some of the Bangladeshi NGO unions prioritize appeasing guilt of Northern consumers over bringing structural changes at the grassroots level. These organizations prefer to distribute aid rather than organizing workers to challenge exploitative workplace norms. They must operate conservatively as their prime support base exists outside the country. They cannot afford to be too radical and to annoy the government. For this reason, the message of labor NGOs is “one of amelioration rather than transformation” (Long 2015, 48).

Elora Chowdhury cautions against dismissing NGOs’ potential to bring social transformations, however, calling for an investigation of the complex and contradictory roles of NGOs and their multi-layered power relationships. She recognizes that NGOs often run colonial top-down donor-driven projects that depend on aid, prioritize external agendas, and appropriate local visions. Nevertheless, she argues that NGOs do not necessarily have a monolithic structure, and some NGOs negotiate asymmetric terrains of power in creative ways while others cannot (Chowdhury 2011, 2-4). Following

Chowdhury's call, I draw on multi-sited ethnographic research and participant observation to examine various activist networks in Bangladesh and the USA. The remaining sections of this chapter specifically focus on two Bangladeshi labor NGOs – Awaj Foundation and Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity – that are engaged in transnational solidarity building initiatives in different ways. I question whether these labor NGOs uncritically accept their funders' neoliberal agenda or attempt to transform top-down power structures within their limited reach.

### **“Star of the labor movement” – Nazma Akter, Awaj Foundation**

In a summer morning in 2014, I went to Awaj Foundation in Mohakhali, Dhaka to meet Nazma Akter in her office, located on the third floor. While climbing up the stairs, I could not help noticing a few posters on the stairway. The posters featured large-sized photos of Nazma Akter at the center. They call everyone to join a specific garment workers' demonstration demanding living wages. I entered the office and saw another poster with the map of Bangladesh. The map was colored in green and red signifying the national flag. This poster also had Nazma Akter's photo at the center and photographs of Nazma Akter receiving awards, giving interviews, participating in talk shows, and traveling to foreign countries. At the bottom of the poster, there was a text saying “শ্রমিক আন্দোলনের নক্ষত্র” which translates as “Star of the labor movement” in English. Nazma Akter's self-proclaimed “star” status corroborates Dina Siddiqi's observation about the rise of cosmopolitan English-speaking charismatic Bangladeshi female labor organizers who frequently travel

to the West to represent Bangladeshi workers' gendered and racialized experiences in transnational solidarity circuits (Siddiqi 2015, 172).



Posters displayed at the office of Awaj Foundation

Nazma Akter was one of the leading organizers of Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union (BIGU) which became Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF) after its registration as a national federation in 1997 (Siddiqi 2015, 173; Rahman 2008, 92). BIGU/BIGUF was established by AAFLI with direct financial support from the US government. In collaboration with the US embassy and AAFLI, BIGU actively participated in the 1990s anti-child labor campaign which served as a protectionist ploy of US unions and corporations, prioritizing consumer agency, and ignoring shop floor organizing (Brooks 2007; Rahman and Langford 2014, 180). Like other Solidarity Center affiliated labor organizations, BIGUF receives funds to cover rent, salary, and training programs from Solidarity Center. It is widely lauded for its inclusion and training of women labor organizers in leadership positions (Rahman and Langford 2014, 177; Rahman 2008, 92). Nazma Akter eventually left BIGUF to open her organization – Awaj Foundation. She felt that BIGUF priorities were largely defined by its US-based funders, undermining workers' concerns on the ground (Siddiqi 2015, 173).

Awaj Foundation's current funders include a combination of local and global foundations, non-profit organizations, and transnational corporations such as Manusher Jonno Foundation, GIZ, CSI, Action Aid, Fair Wear Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Impact, C&A, and BSR (Awaj Foundation). In response to my question about using corporate funds to run workers' rights projects, Nazma Akter replied:

We provide cheap labor to these corporations. The brands make money on our vulnerabilities. So, they have a responsibility. I would not hesitate taking money from Wal-Mart because Wal-Mart should take care of the workers.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Akter, Nazma. (Executive Director of Awaj Foundation), in discussion with the author. June 9, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Nazma Akter deploys the language of corporate social responsibility (CSR) which relies on a myth of “win-win” situation where the corporation plays its part to be a responsible corporate citizen and workers benefit from corporation-funded welfare projects. Fleming and Jones argue that CSR relies upon tokenistic gestures to deal with perils of the global capitalism. Most firms use CSR for reputational purposes because it generates value regarding brand reputation, consumer loyalty, and employee motivation (Fleming and Jones 2013, 3). Instead of addressing what Fleming and Jones call “systemic negativity” of the world, CSR capitalizes on these negativities (Fleming and Jones, 5). Focusing on Wal-Mart in particular, Ngai-Ling Sum notes that Wal-Mart’s “self-policing” CSR regime is mostly “self-serving” as it plays a vital role in securing its stock market values and brand reputation (Sum 2013, 179). It has not been able to secure workers’ rights in its factories around the world (See Pier and Human Rights Watch 2007, Featherstone 2009, Lichtenstein 2011).

By contrast, Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity carefully avoids corporate funding. Its director, Kalpona Akter, offered her critique of using CSR funds for running NGO projects.

Some of the labor rights organizations in Bangladesh are very vocal in the media claiming that they do a lot for workers. However, they accept corporate money behind the scene. This is an ideological conflict. For example, I run anti-Wal-Mart campaigns. I am not an enemy of Wal-Mart. However, Wal-Mart does not respect workers’ rights, and I have a problem with that. I can’t take their money.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Akter, Kalpona. (Executive Director of BCWS), in discussion with the author. May 27, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

An organizer of Activist Anthropologist, a grassroots academic-activist group, specifically criticized Awaj Foundation's welfare-oriented approach that leaves systemic issues untouched. She said:

After the Tazreen fire, one of our activists went to Nishchintapur (where the factory was located) to collect information on missing workers and compensation status. She saw Nazma Akter distributing relief materials such as dry milk powder, blankets, rice, lentils, oil, and onions among workers. She heard Nazma Akter telling workers, "Why would you talk to them (Activist Anthropologist)? They would not be able to give you anything." Yes, we won't be able to give workers anything tangible. We are not an NGO. We don't have funds, and we don't run projects. But we are trying to stay beside workers and assist them in negotiating the compensation and litigation process with the government and the factory owner at different levels. You can't solve these problems with milk and eggs.<sup>45</sup>

Awaj Foundation runs various projects to enhance workers' personal, professional, and health-awareness training, provide health care and legal aid services, and address violence against women. The goal of its "UP!" project is, for example, to provide workers with "essential skills, expertise and confidence in the areas of finance, health and leadership." The project on "Violence against Women" engages workers in conversation with managers to address violence (Awaj Foundation). These initiatives share much in common with what Robyn Rodriguez characterizes as "confidence building exercises," which exclusively target workers and do not address systemic challenges that workers face in their everyday lives. As such, they are best understood as "neoliberal techniques of self-governance regulation" (Rodriguez 2010, 108). Following Rodriguez's critique, I argue that donor-funded short-term labor rights projects, such the ones run by Awaj Foundation,

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<sup>45</sup> An organizer of Activist Anthropologist, in discussion with the author. May 26, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee's name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

identify the body of workers as “the problem” to be addressed. Workers’ gendered and racialized bodies become the prime target of neoliberal governance, leaving the larger capitalist structure beyond redress. Ethel Brooks explored how transnational consumer boycott movements naturalized Bangladesh as the particular site of the labor problem, thereby justifying the US and European consumer and government interventions (Brooks 2007, 3). In a similar vein, Awaj Foundation projects, which extensively focus on capacity-building of individual workers, ignore systemic oppression perpetuated by factory owners, the government, and brands. In so doing, the Awaj Foundation shores up the neocolonial, neoliberal savior complex not only in interactions between Western brands/consumers and Bangladeshi workers but also in interactions between certain Bangladeshi labor organizations and Bangladeshi workers.

**“This is still 1911 for us”**

**– Kalpona Akter, Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity**

On September 17, 2015, Dr. Annelise Orleck, a History professor at Dartmouth College, gave a talk at Rutgers University on the global movement for a living wage. She enthusiastically mentioned Kalpona Akter and her engagement in transnational solidarity building in the presentation. Professor Orleck described how Kalpona Akter eloquently made the connection between the 2012 Tazreen factory fire in Bangladesh and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City by saying, “This is still 1911 for us.”

Drawing parallels between the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire and the 2012 Tazreen factory fire has become a popular trope in mainstream US labor rights discourses

since 2012. The Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire claimed lives of 145 workers—most of whom were young immigrant women. The factory owner kept the doors locked to prevent theft, which obstructed workers from escaping the fire. Many workers who could not escape jumped from the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> floors of the factory building. The tragedy gained widespread attention from labor rights advocates and the government, resulting in laws and regulations to improve working conditions (Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire). The Tazreen fire killed at least 112 workers. More than 200 workers were injured as they tried to jump off the locked nine-storied building in the absence of emergency exits (Bajaj 2012). The obvious similarities between two events that occurred more than a century apart in two different continents attracted the US labor rights activists' attention. On US college campuses, USAS organizers frequently showed a documentary featuring the parallels between the Triangle Shirtwaist and the Tazreen factory fires and urging students to participate in the Accord campaign. Robin Berson, a US-based artist, historian, and quilter, made two 10-by-7-foot memorial quilts. The Triangle memorial quilt featured photos of victims, notice for a memorial march, and pro-union quotes and the Bangladesh garment worker memorial quilt featured photos of dead and missing workers and three Bangladeshi labor rights activists – Kalpona Akter, Taslima Akhter, and Aminul Islam. Both the quilts were displayed together at various exhibitions across the USA. Berson calls the Tazreen fire and the Rana Plaza collapse “exported tragedy,” implying that labor suppression has traveled from the USA to “today’s sweatshops” such as those in Bangladesh (Boccella 2013).





The Bangladesh Garment Workers Memorial Quilt (Bangladesh Garment Workers Memorial Quilt)

Legislative reforms and labor organizing after the Triangle Shirtwaist fire resulted in decent wages, strong collective bargaining, and safety regulations in the USA by 1950s. These reforms had unintended consequences. Diverse brands and retailers moved production from the USA to countries such as Bangladesh where they could capitalize on cheap labor and unregulated workplaces. In the words of Nova and Wegemer:

Leading Western apparel brands and retailers have thus accomplished a perverse form of time travel: they have re-created 1911 working conditions for millions of twenty-first-century garment workers (Nova and Wegemer 2016, 18).

Dina Siddiqi, on the other hand, argues that it is “counterproductive, if not dangerous” to equate the Tazreen fire with the Triangle Shirtwaist fire despite visual and factual similarities. The Triangle Shirtwaist fire was a “domestic localized” process limited

within national borders. It happened against the backdrop of socialist radicalism, bringing forward the debate on the priority of labor vs. capital. The contemporary global garment factory, however, involves complex and multiple layers of transnational corporate actors, as well as activists, operating in neocolonial and neoliberal circuits. Moreover, parallels drawn between Triangle Shirtwaist and Tazreen generate an orientalist, linear, and evolutionary view suggesting that Bangladesh is still living the unjust economic and social relations that the USA has moved beyond (Siddiqi 2015, 168). Berson's description of the Tazreen fire as an "exported tragedy" erroneously suggests that the USA is no longer involved in labor suppression, masking the gendered, racialized, and classed labor exploitation that occurs routinely within the border of the USA.

Kalpona Akter and her labor NGO BCWS does not engage in any such critiques of US mainstream labor rights discourses, however, preferring to use language that is palatable, appealing, and makes sense to her transnational allies. I observed a classic example of Kalpona Akter's strategic use of language during her US trip in February 2014. Reba Sikder, a survivor of the Rana Plaza collapse, accompanied Kalpona Akter to Rutgers University. At the speak out event organized by the Rutgers USAS chapter, Sikder gave a testimony of her experience of being stranded under the rubble of Rana Plaza for two days. Sikder did not speak English. She gave her speech in Bangla which Kalpona Akter translated into English.<sup>46</sup> Sikder said in Bangla:

আমরা কোন ক্ষতিপূরণ চাই না। আমরা চাই যে বাংলাদেশে যতগুলো গার্মেন্ট ফ্যাক্টরি আছে সব নিরাপদে থাকুক। যাদের হাত নাই, পাও নাই, যারা মরে গেছে তাদের জীবন কীভাবে চলবে?... আমরা চাই আপনারা আমাদের পাশে থাকেন।

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<sup>46</sup> The speeches are available on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2CY9clpqIg&t=33s>.

We don't want any compensation. We want workplace safety for all garment factories in Bangladesh. Can you imagine how those without hands and legs and those families whose near and dead ones died will live on? We want all of you beside us. (My verbatim translation)

Akter translated it as:

Till now we have not received any compensation. I want...I definitely want compensation, for me, and for those workers who lost their legs, who lost their families. At the same time, I want a safe working place for workers in Bangladesh, and to have this we need your support.

The refusal to translate a priority for safety over compensation articulated by Sikder at a transnational solidarity-building event raises critical questions about how a labor rights activist from the Global South frames workers' concerns to draw attention from transnational allies in the North. Sumon et al. use the evocative phrase "regime of compensation"<sup>47</sup> to reveal how hegemonic discourses of compensation overshadow considerations of justice (Sumon et al. 2017, 148). They question the ethics of local as well as global advocates who address the mass loss of life in purely monetary terms, ignoring questions of accountability, litigation, and future prevention. They argue that compensation discourses "put a price on deceased workers, monetize grief, and dis-incentivize factory owners from focusing on prevention" (Sumon et al., 163). At an event organized by Secular and Democratic South Asia in Cambridge, Massachusetts on December 5, 2015, Saydia

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<sup>47</sup> Sumon et. al. build on the framing of "regime of live" proposed by Aihwa Ong and Stephen Collier (2004) to refer to "contemporary practices of life science, social administration, urban planning, and finance" (Sumon et. a. 2017, 156).

Gulrukh, an organizer of Activist Anthropologist – a grassroots academic-activist group in Bangladesh, said:

If it happened in America or Brussels or Berlin, probably we wouldn't talk only about money. The question of criminal liability would be the main concern. It seems like if this happens in a country like Bangladesh, giving some money or expressing grief is the easy way out.

Sumon et al. situate their arguments within the local context of Bangladesh where a complex web of corporations, NGOs, and the state monetize and depoliticize health and safety of workers, conflate questions of justice and compensation, and sidestep structural and systemic negligence (Sumon et al., 147-148). Gulrukh's reflection extends Sumon et al.'s critique of the compensation regime to the transnational level. After the Rana Plaza collapse, transnational labor organizing initiatives mainly focused on securing compensation for workers and ensuring safety and security of workplaces by holding brands responsible. They promoted narrow and technocratic definitions of "rights," "safety," and "security," which did not reflect workers' priorities and did not address broader issues related to structural and legal reforms.

Bangladeshi labor NGOs that setup their agendas in line with preferences of transnational solidarity networks gain visibility, resources, and platforms to express their concerns. Kalpona Akter, for example, is one of the strongest proponents of the Accord in Bangladesh. Her celebratory narratives about the Accord replicate the very way many Northern labor rights scholars and activists have called it a "breakthrough" and "game changer" (Hensler and Blasi 2013, 5; Ryan 2013). When I asked Kalpona Akter about

14,000 workers who lost jobs as the Accord suspended 31 factories for structural flaws in 2014 (Ovi May 5, 2014), she responded:

Some of these factories should close. If my workers die in those factories, it is better to lose jobs than dying. I am not unhappy. I think it's fine. The Accord ensures that the workers get their salaries if the factory is suspended from inspection.<sup>48</sup>

In practice, the Accord does not work as seamlessly as Kalpona Akter suggests. Unions and factories had to go through complex series of negotiations with multiple buyers for a long time to get salaries for workers who worked in the suspended factories. In most cases, brands never paid workers even though they were required to pay up to six months of wages under the Accord (Donaghey and Reinecke 2017, 17-18).

In her critique of the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, Kalpona Akter said:

The Alliance mostly copied and pasted everything in the Accord except the legally binding part. They brought in a non-binding agreement and spread the rumor in the country that the Alliance is a US initiative and the Accord is a European initiative as if both are the same.

....Just go and see their (the Alliance's) websites. Most of their unions are political wings of Awami League, BNP, Jamat, or Jatiyo party. They even have a union that delivered a congratulatory letter to the Prime Minister when we were arrested in 2010. These unions don't work at the grassroots level. They don't work with workers. They are puppets of corporations.<sup>49</sup>

Kalpona Akter's criticism of the Alliance is completely valid. A web analysis of the Alliance's website shows that the "Who we are" section of the website has been

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<sup>48</sup> Akter, Kalpona. (Executive Director of BCWS), in discussion with the author. May 27, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

<sup>49</sup> Akter, Kalpona. (Executive Director of BCWS), in discussion with the author. May 27, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

modified 21 times between November 10, 2015, and July 1, 2017.<sup>50</sup> On November 10, 2015, the Alliance website described the initiative as:

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety was founded by a group of North American apparel companies and retailers and brands who have joined together to develop and launch the Bangladesh Worker Safety Initiative, a binding, five-year undertaking that will be transparent, results-oriented, measurable and verifiable with the intent of improving safety in Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) factories. Collectively, these Alliance members represent the overwhelming majority of North American imports of RMG from Bangladesh, produced at more than 650 factories.

.... Supporting associations include: American Apparel & Footwear Association, BRAC, Canadian Apparel Federation, National Retail Federation, Retail Council of Canada, Retail Industry Leaders Association, and United States Association of Importers of Textiles & Apparel. In addition, Li & Fung, a major Hong Kong-based sourcing company which does business with many members of the Alliance, will serve in an advisory capacity (Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety).

On July 1, 2017, the modified website describes the Alliance as:

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance) is a legally binding, five-year commitment to improve safety in Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) factories. The Alliance was organized in 2013 through the Bipartisan Policy Center with discussions convened and chaired by former U.S. Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell (D-ME) and former U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe (R-ME), both of whom have a strong track record of forging consensus-oriented solutions. The collaborative process involved apparel industry companies and stakeholders including: the U.S. and Bangladeshi governments, policymakers, NGOs, members of civil society, and organized labor.

.... We partner with government, trade unions, and employers to ensure all workers are safe and their employment creates sustainable and positive economic development for Bangladesh. Through the Alliance's activities and partnerships, we strive for a safer garment industry where fire and building integrity issues no longer result in any injuries or loss of life (Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety).

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<sup>50</sup> The web analysis has been done using the website - [https://web.archive.org/web/\\*/yahoo.comhttp://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/who-we-are/about-the-alliance](https://web.archive.org/web/*/yahoo.comhttp://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/who-we-are/about-the-alliance)

The earlier version of the Alliance website notes that it is an initiative founded by North American retailers and brands. The later version presents it more like a collaboration between brands, governments, NGOs, civil society, and labor unions. The central role of brands was erased in the later version. The earlier version says that the Alliance is a “binding, five-year undertaking” whereas the later version includes the word “legal” and describes it as a “legally binding, five-year commitment.” The earlier version listed all the brand signatories of the Alliance. There was no mention of participation of workers or unions as partners. Nevertheless, the later version mentions how the Alliance partners with the government, unions, and factory owners. The transformation of language on the website, however, does not necessarily reflect core changes in policies and strategies of the Alliance over time.

Thus Kalpona Akter’s strong critique of the Alliance has valid grounds. What is puzzling, however, is her uncritical celebration of the Accord. Kalpona Akter emphasized that the Alliance includes heavily politicized unions and federations that have little to no connection with workers at the grassroots level. The Accord is also thoroughly politicized. IndustryALL Global Union, one of the major trade union representatives of the Accord, is heavily politicized. IndustriALL Bangladesh Council’s Chairperson is Nazrul Islam Khan, a well-known leader of BNP. Its Secretary General is Roy Ramesh Chandra, a prominent political leader of the ruling party Awami League. Chandra is also the President of United Federation of Garment Workers, a trade union representative of the Accord; and he is former General Secretary of Jatiya Sramik League (JSL), the labor wing of the Awami league. These intricate power relations and layers of political connection usually are seldom acknowledged in the normative transnational rhetoric of labor organizing.

North American labor rights activists heavily touted the Accord for its inclusion of international and Bangladeshi workers' representatives. They lauded the fact that the Accord involves trade unions in the factory inspection process, which is unprecedented in the history of social auditing models. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Bangladeshi workers in the Accord's trade unions representatives is still highly selective. Only unions and federations that are members of IndustriALL Bangladesh had access to core Accord meetings and negotiations. IndustriALL Bangladesh includes 21 labor federations that directly or indirectly support either Awami League or BNP. As a result, most of the left political labor organizations, who are critical of both Awami League and BNP, could not participate in the Accord. These complicated power hierarchies are largely indecipherable for North American labor rights allies. Bangladeshi celebrity labor rights organizer Kalpona Akter strategically omits these power asymmetries from her discussions of the Accord, just as Nazma Akter ignores those dimensions of the Alliance. They participate in co-production of monolithic, singular narratives of transnational solidarity building to make optimal use of transnational activist networks and achieve individual social justice agendas albeit in different ways.

The finanscape of Kalpona Akter's BCWS illuminates the organization's embeddedness within neoliberal governance.<sup>51</sup> Kalpona Akter strongly rejects corporate funds. Her international labor activist funders and supporters include International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), Jobs with Justice, 18 Million Rising, Clean Clothes Campaign, UNI

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<sup>51</sup> Arjun Appadurai uses the term "finanscapes" to refer to complex, fast, and complicated movement of the global capital (Appadurai 1990, 298).



Global Union, Oxfam, Maquila Solidarity Network, United Steelworkers, Canadian Union of Public Employees, and, most importantly, Solidarity Center which is closely aligned with the US-based AFL-CIO. As noted above, Solidarity Center funds BCWS and its close ally Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Federation (BGIWF) to pay for rent, training programs, salaries for union leaders, and weekly meetings. Rahman and Langford (2014, 177) point out that such financial assistance has strings attached: BGIWF is unable to take independent policy decision without the approval of Solidarity Center. For example, Solidarity Center encourages its sponsored labor organizations to avoid street demonstrations and militant protests. Although Kim Scipes suggests that the organizations' preference for bureaucratic and legalistic methods reflects imperialist agenda of "maintaining stability within countries of the US empires" (Scipes 2010, 111 cited in Rahman and Langford, 178), BCWS and BGIWF offer a different rationale for adopting Solidarity Center's anti-militancy stance. In the words of Kalpona Akter:

When workers participate in street protests, they get beaten and arrested. Some workers are terminated. They lose job security. Some are blacklisted in their factories. However, so-called leaders who lead these demonstrations are not affected. I have my ideological conflict here. I am not saying workers should not participate in street demonstrations. They will participate. But they should do it only in extreme cases. As long as I can fight with my voice, why should I do this (street protest)?<sup>52</sup>

ILRF praised the position of BCWS and mentioned in a letter to the Prime Minister of Bangladesh that:

BCWS....has demonstrated professionalism and effectiveness in advancing lawful means of redressing violations of worker rights and in so doing has contributed in

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<sup>52</sup> Akter, Kalpona. (Executive Director of BCWS), in discussion with the author. May 27, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

significant ways to compliance with the rule of law in Bangladesh” (ILRF 2012a cited in Rahman and Langford, 2014, 178).

While praising BCWS’s avoidance of militant tactics, however, ILRF and USAS frequently stage civil disobedience to bring public attention to their demands. At the USAS summer convention in Washington D.C. on August 9, 2014, for example, experienced student leaders offered workshops for student activists on various strategies of organizing rallies, demonstrations, street protests, and sit-ins. They covered topics such as how to speak with law enforcement authorities and the media during a protest and what to do in case someone gets arrested. More than one hundred USAS activists, who had attended the workshop, subsequently held a “flash mob” protest at a local T-mobile store to stand in solidarity with T-mobile workers as they struggled to organize despite vicious union busting.





USAS organizers organizing a street protest and flash mob in solidarity with T-mobile workers

Although BCWS strictly avoids all forms of street protests in Bangladesh, it has participated in street protests in the USA. During her US trip organized by ILRF and USAS, Kalpona Akter, along with student activists from Rutgers Chapter of USAS (local 109), went to the headquarters of Children’s Place in Secaucus, New Jersey to deliver a letter urging the brand to pay \$8 million compensation to Rana Plaza workers. At first, the police told the protesters to leave the building. Then someone from the Children’s Place decided to press charges. The police arrested 27 protesters, including Kalpona Akter and Mahinur Begum, an 18-year-old Rana Plaza survivor, for “illegal trespassing” (The Guardian 2015, New Brunswick Today 2015).

Why does BCWS carefully avoid street protests in Bangladesh but participate in collective demonstrations in the USA? Why is BCWS so keen about, as Kalpona Akter frames, “fighting with voice” whereas its close US allies, such as ILRF and USAS, frequently resort to civil disobedience? One might argue that organizing militant protests under a labor-repressive regime such as currently exists in Bangladesh would cost job

security and marginalize already vulnerable workers. Yet any such concern for worker safety in the context of protests must be weighed against the dangers they face on the job. It is also important to investigate the efficacy of “fighting with voice.”

Rahman and Langford have pointed out that bureaucratic nonconfrontational approaches to achieve workers’ demands have proven ineffective in Bangladesh in the past. In the absence of worker-friendly labor policies and implementation mechanisms, garment factory owners and the government have been reluctant to ensure workers’ rights unless they are pressured either by powerful Northern governments and labor rights groups or by strong civil disobedience from grassroots workers. The mass protest after the Saraka garments fire that killed 27 workers in 1990, the workers’ uprising in May 2006, and the latest Tuba protest in 2014 demonstrate how organized grassroots resistance can play a significant role in achieving workers’ rights (Rahman and Langford 2012, 102). In fact, leftist grassroots unions have a long history of mobilizing civil disobedience to press for workers’ safety, security, and rights in Bangladesh. For example, Moshrefa Mishu, president of Garment Workers Unity Forum, who was one of the main organizers of the 2006 mass uprising of workers and the 2014 Tuba protest, has been using civil obedience to fight for garment workers’ rights since 1995.

Saydia Gulrukh, an organizer of the grassroots academic-activist group Activist Anthropologist, expressed deep frustration about the inadequacy of legal mechanisms to ensure labor justice. She was particularly critical of the narrow instrumental focus of transnational initiatives to address workers’ safety. At “Beyond Tazreen,” a commemorative meeting organized by Alliance for a Secular and Democratic South Asia in Cambridge, Massachusetts on December 5, 2015, Gulrukh emphasized that since the

first factory fire broke out at Saraka Garments Ltd. in 1991, no factory owner has been convicted of negligence or for violating building and fire safety codes. This “culture of impunity” cannot be challenged by transnational governance structures such as the Accord or the Alliance. Transnational governance structures do not resist and transform the power structure but try to work through it.

When we talk about workers’ rights, when we talk about celebrating the amendment of the labor law of 2013 which allowed workers to form trade unions in the factory, we don’t speak about the unspoken structure of violence, the repression the workers face when they try to organize....Changing the law also needs the step of exposing the shadow world through which factories function at a very local level.<sup>53</sup>

She said in a separate interview, “I don’t think we have any other way left but to go to streets and throw stones!”<sup>54</sup>

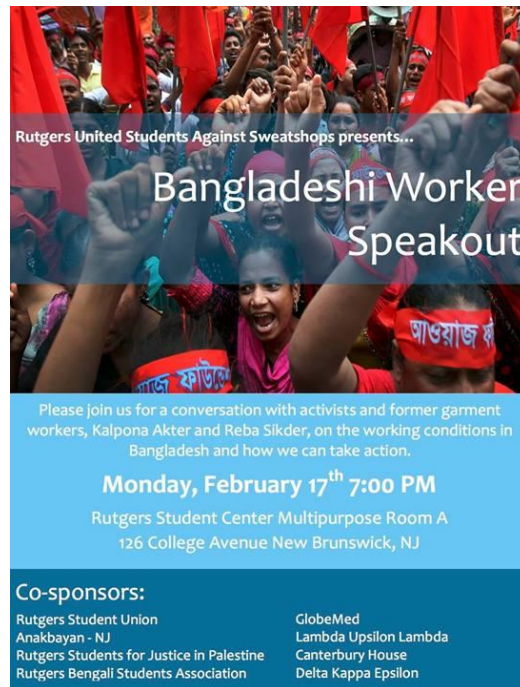
### **Epilogue**

A flyer for the 2014 “Bangladeshi Worker Speak Out” at Rutgers University organized by USAS illuminates the complexities of transnational labor solidarity building. USAS organizers distributed the flyer to Rutgers faculty members and students and uploaded it to the Facebook page of the Rutgers chapter of USAS.

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<sup>53</sup> Gulrukh, Saydia. (Organizer, Activist Anthropologist), in a presentation given at a commemorative meeting called “Beyond Tazreen” organized by Alliance for a Secular and Democratic South Asia. December 5, 2015. Cambridge, Massachusetts.

<sup>54</sup> Gulrukh, Saydia. (Organizer, Activist Anthropologist), in discussion with the author. May 16, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.



### Flyer for the Bangladeshi Worker Speakout event at Rutgers University

(Rutgers United Students Against Sweatshops Local 109, Facebook page, Photo posted on February 15, 2014)

The event flyer mentions that Kalpona Akter would be talking about working conditions of Bangladeshi garment workers and providing insights about how Rutgers students could take action in solidarity with these workers. The flyer features a photo of Bangladeshi garment workers participating in a demonstration and chanting slogans. Some of the workers are wearing red head bands with the name Awaj Foundation (আওয়াজ ফাউন্ডেশন) written in Bangla. As I noted above, Awaj Foundation is the labor NGO run by Nazma Akter – not Kalpona Akter. As detailed above, there are significant ideological and policy-related differences between Kalpona Akter and Nazma Akter—and how they run and fund their organizations. Awaj Foundation prefers to run donor-funded welfare-oriented projects for garment workers. The organization rarely participates in civil disobedience on streets to fight for garment workers' rights. Undoubtedly, the USAS

organizer at Rutgers, who designed the flyer, could not read Bangla and did not have any idea about local rivalries between Awaj Foundation and BCWS. As a consequence, these competing organizations were inadvertently conflated in the flyer. This is a small but classic example of how local intricacies and power asymmetries are erased in transnational solidarity building initiatives between Northern and Southern labor rights organizations.

Another telling example surfaced at the USAS summer convention in Washington DC in 2014. Organizers were assessing the “End Deathtrap” campaign that pressured US universities to make it mandatory for their licensees to sign the Bangladesh Accord. The presenters were aggrieved by the recently published report of the NYU Center for Business and Human Rights (Labowitz and Baumann-Pauly 2014), which made it seem “like the Accord was doing no good.” Rather than trying to investigate the substantive issues the report raised, the USAS organizers decried how the report “went against” them. At that point, I intervened. Drawing their attention to my recent Ph.D. fieldwork in Bangladesh, I documented how the Accord was arbitrarily imposing safety and security standards without considering workers’ priorities, and how several garment factories had been closed, costing workers their jobs without receiving any compensation as required by the Accord. I also pointed out that the Accord was selectively collaborating with labor rights groups that were fluent in English, received funds from northern allies, and subscribed to specific kind of politics. No one had been expecting such a critique in that setting. One of the prominent USAS organizers responded:

I understand that the Accord is not perfect and it will not dramatically change everything. However, this is what we have. Moreover, we need to motivate our students, and we need them to believe that they have the power to bring the change. So, when we organize, we can’t talk about how the Accord’s suggested concrete

density conflicts with the local standard. We must stay positive and tell our students, “The Accord will keep Bangladeshi garment workers safe.”<sup>55</sup>

The apparent democratic collaboration between international labor rights groups and grassroots organizing initiatives often ignores “scattered hegemonies,” a term coined by Grewel and Kaplan (1994, 7) that exist in the complicated terrain of garment labor organizing in the Global South. Although contemporary transnational activist collaborations, most notably the Accord campaign launched after the Tazreen factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse, aspire to move beyond consumer-oriented models of protest campaigns and to challenge neocolonial power hierarchies that characterized previous consumer boycott movements and corporate codes of conduct, they fall far short of their aspirations. Although they espouse shop-floor activism and workers’ agency and incorporate Southern workers’ representatives in their transnational campaigns, they inadvertently attribute a singular view to garment workers in the Global South, positing universal and invariant desires, experiences, and struggles. They often fail to recognize how these “workers’ representatives” engage in asymmetrical power relationships not only with their Northern allies, corporations, and consumers but also with their Southern counterparts. Missing these important political, economic, and social dimensions, proponents of transnational solidarity privilege certain labor rights questions while ignoring others. As the analysis in this chapter shows, “fighting with [multi-lingual] voice” translates into nonconfrontational tactics that sustain neoliberal governance, attracting

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<sup>55</sup> Organizer. (United Students Against Sweatshops), in discussion with the author. August 9, 2014. The USAS Summer Convention in Washington D. C.



transnational funding, while offering few concrete benefits to worker struggles in Bangladesh.

## Chapter 4:

### **Conformist or transformative? Virtual labor activism in a neoliberal era**

On April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza, a factory building housing five garment factories, collapsed in Savar, Bangladesh and claimed lives of at least 1134 people, most of whom were women garment workers (Hoskins 2015). This deadliest garment industrial disaster in the human history drew worldwide attention towards deplorable working and living conditions of women garment workers in the country.

Right after the collapse of Rana Plaza, the state of Bangladesh remained what Luthfa and Hossain describe as “apathetic, unmoved, and distant” (Luthfa and Hossain 2013). Non-state actors such as volunteers, non-government organizations (NGOs), and corporations primarily carried on rescue, relief, and rehabilitation operations. Many volunteers updated their Facebook statuses to disseminate information about what was needed by emergency responders at the site of the collapse. Social media celebrities, whom Zeynep Tufekci would call “microcelebrities” (Tufekci 2013), played a phenomenal role in disseminating information about what kind of rescue and relief support was needed on the ground.

In this chapter, I propose a cultural geographic understanding of the space of social media and explore place-making processes through which microcelebrities engaged in what I call neoliberal conformist voluntarism. Inspired by a middle-class urban civic consciousness, microcelebrities produced and circulated a homogenous cultural and ideological representation of women garment workers, which was disconnected from their

material lives and collective histories. To examine how gender, class, neoliberalism, and nationalism determine the politics of exclusion and inclusion in the space of social media, I analyze two cases of virtual activism, contrasting virtual mobilization around the Rana Plaza collapse with online mobilization contributing to the Shahbag protest concerning the penalties for war crimes committed during the Bangladesh independence struggle. I also consider some oppositional practices that challenge or reinforce the microphysics of power and politics of representation of garment workers in virtual and physical spaces in different ways.

### **Theorizing space, place, and social media**

From a feminist geographical point of view, place is a container where everyday discursive and material relations take place. Feminist geographers denounce notions of place defined by static boundaries or a rigid singular history. Place encompasses fluid interconnections in a globalizing world. For this reason, the binary division between “global” and “local” has been widely challenged in feminist literature. Both “global” and “local” places are co-constituted by each other, invalidating the hegemonic perception of a global place dominating a passive, inactive local one. Boundaries of the global and the local are always defused and malleable in the uneven nature of today’s globalizing world (Massey 1994, 146-156, Freeman 2001).

The feminist geographical conceptualization of place can be put in conversation with Veronica Barassi’s theorization of ethnographic cartography to develop a spatial conceptualization of the space of social media. Reviewing network analysis in social

movement literature, Barassi notes that structural determinism inspired by quantitative technologies heavily dominates the concept of network in relation to internet technologies. She is interested in understanding everyday human interactions and negotiations instead of organizational and communication structures. That is why she moves beyond a positivist approach and develops a qualitative theorization of the network in the study of social movements and media technologies. Barassi is influenced by Bruno Latour's argument that "the social" ought not to be perceived as structured reality, but should be theorized as "a very peculiar movement of re-association and re-assembling" and a "complex interconnection between human and non-human agents" (Latour 2005, 7 cited in Barassi 2013). She also combines insights from Harrison White's evocative formulation that "a social network is first and foremost a network of meaning" (White 1992, 97 cited in Barassi 2013). Barassi proposes a concept called "ethnographic cartography," inspired by the thinking of Latour and White, to explore how social movement networks are involved in practices and narratives of place-making and how the spaces created by different networking practices contain multilayered actions and meanings (Barassi 2013, 48-62). Barassi's theorization helps to analyze a spatial dimension that avoids techno-deterministic tendencies and does not consider social media networks simply as communication tools or technologies. It is useful for mapping everyday place-making processes through which multiple and overlapping spaces of social media networks are constructed, sustained, or destroyed.

Merlyna Lim also recognizes the emergence and necessity of a spatial turn in social network theories. Using Manuel Castell's (2004) explanation of how contemporary networked society transcends boundaries of time and space, Lim argues that the networked

society may have overcome limitations imposed by time and space, but it is not necessarily placeless. Networks connect different spaces where identities and meanings are formed in specific moments of time. Spaces of social media are not self-contained. They are interlinked with physical urban spaces (Lim 2014, 53). Different global and local forces influence how inhabitants of social media, as well as physical urban spaces, make agential choices about creating, circulating, receiving, or challenging different contents. According to Lim, urban civic spaces and physical interactions in these spaces are increasingly declining due to neoliberal economic-cultural factors such as urbanization, long working hours, or rapidly growing inequities. Simultaneously social media spaces, such as Facebook and Twitter, are becoming significant for nurturing everyday socialities. Lim cites Peter Marolt (2008) who says, “individuals continue to craft identities on their own, with one foot in their physical and the other in their virtual everyday lives” (Marolt 2008, 118 cited in Lim 2014, 53). Virtual space, then, is not a disembodied realm. The way people experience virtual space is material and bodily, which reinscribes or resists different kinds of identities and structures (Dunbar-Hester 2010, 22 cited in Hawkesworth 2012, 293). Social interactions, confrontations, and hierarchies are materialized and lived in both virtual and physical spaces, and it is important to analyze what Lim calls “dialectical interplay” between these spaces (Lim 2014, 51-72).

Lim further argues that neoliberal logic shapes everyday lives in social media spaces in the same way it configures physical space. Virtual places such as Facebook or Twitter are products of capitalist investments in a free market economy. These places capitalize on the free labor of individual users who live, breathe, and interact in these virtual places (Lim 2014, 56). Those who are proponents and beneficiaries of the values of capitalism,

neoliberalism, and individualism enjoy greater access to social media spaces. Zhang and Nyíri, for example, use the metaphor of “wall” to describe how an invisible and affective partition separates insiders from outsiders within the “wall” in social media as well as in physical spaces. Technological determinism, repressive regime, or individual interests are not enough to explain the politics and complexities of the wall. According to Zhang and Nyíri, the wall is constituted by “a complex web of internet technology, hegemonic discursive conditioning, emotional appeals, entangled moral sentimentalities, and various stimuli of recognition inspired by desires of cosmopolitan lifestyles both on- and offline” (Zhang and Nyíri 2014, 3). Drawing on the case study of China, the authors argue that insurgencies in the Chinese transnational civil sphere mostly take place within the wall, promoting a hegemonic nationalist, ethnic, and classed agenda and reinforcing boundaries of the wall. People who do not share the hegemonic discourses remain outside the wall (Zhang and Nyíri 2014).

Spaces of social media also produce and circulate hegemonic and counterhegemonic images of certain racialized or sexualized bodies. The way users negotiate with race, gender, sex, or class-based politics of exclusion and inclusion in these neoliberal domains reveals the microphysics of power and the politics of representation. To contest hierarchical power relations, it is important to challenge not only gendered, racialized, or classed codes of communication but the complex and contradicting social relations and practices that produce and disseminate these codes (Hawkesworth 2012, 292-293). Again, the politics of representation is not the sole means through which power hierarchies in social media spaces are created. The high cost of developing infrastructure, restrictions on so-called intellectual property, lack of decision-making power in ICT-related transnational

corporations (TNCs), and the necessity of knowing English for broadcasting messages result in disproportionate access and control of the global South, placing the global North in a privileged position in virtual spaces (Hawkesworth 2012, 299-300). A cultural geographical understanding of place, therefore, reveals how inequities are perpetuated in social media spaces in connection with the economic and cultural structure of physical spaces in a globalizing world. It demonstrates why consideration of structure, technologies, tools, or codes is not enough for challenging systemic gendered, raced, or classed oppressions in interlinked social media and physical spaces. It proposes a framework for examining actors who are shaped by material and discursive globalizing flows as well as cross-cutting relations of gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality in virtual and physical spaces.

Drawing on a case study of the use of creative new digital technologies in the anti-corporate globalization movement, Jeffrey Juris explores how government, police, and other state representatives often view independent new media as threatening because they mobilize activists and provide alternative news and information. Despite the existing digital divide in various parts of the world, as Juris argues, new digital technologies promote global connectedness and a horizontal mode of social movement organizing. Juris theorizes the “cultural logic of networking,” which refers to horizontal, connected, diverse, and open ties and circulations and decentralized, democratic, and self-directed networking among anti-corporate globalization activists using new digital technologies in creative ways (Juris 2005). In this chapter, I complicate Juris’s proposition of a horizontal, connected, and decentralized notion of digital networking. Inspired by Lim’s (2014) theorization of the spatial turn in social network theories, I argue that digital networks

contain overlapping spaces that simultaneously characterize horizontal and vertical relations, connected and disconnected actors, and centralized and decentralized institutions. Drawing on Lim's concept of "dialectical interplay" between virtual and physical spaces, I further suggest that these actors, institutions, and social relations constantly negotiate gendered, racialized, and classed identities and politics in various virtual and physical spaces, which eventually determine their inclusion, exclusion, or perplexed nature of affiliation with digital as well as physical networks. I elaborate my arguments by exploring who acquires the authority to appropriate bodies and experiences of Bangladeshi women garment workers in social media and whether virtual activism in social media replicates gender, race, class, and national hierarchies of physical spaces.

### **A brief history of social media in Bangladesh**

Internet was first introduced in Bangladesh in 1996 through very small aperture terminals (VSAT). The use of internet started accelerating only in 2006 after the country was connected to the Information Super Highway through the SEA-ME-WE 4 submarine cable (Chowdhury 2012, 5). The following table demonstrates the growth rate of Bangladeshi internet users.



## Bangladeshi Internet Users, 2000-2013

<u>Year</u>	<u>Users<sup>56</sup></u>	<u>Population<sup>57</sup></u>	<u>% of population</u>
2000	100,000	131,581,243	0.08%
2007	450,000	147,139,191	0.31%
2009	556,000	150,454,708	0.37%
2010	617,300	152,149,102	0.41%
2011	5,501,609	153,911,916	3.57%
2012	30,479,571	155,727,053	19.6%
2013	35,790,146	157,571,292	22.7%
2014	43,642,000	159,405,279	27.4%
2015	54,120,000	161,200,886	33.6%
2016	66,623,000	162,951,560	40.9%

Table 1 shows that the number of internet users has increased dramatically since 2010. The reason for this steady increase in the number of internet users is the deregulation of very small aperture terminals (VSATs) in February 2000 as a continuation of the government's neoliberal privatization and deregulation policies. There were approximately 105 independent service providers (ISPs) operating nationwide as of November 2010. Most of these ISPs were previously area-based, small, and privately-owned businesses. When transnational corporations (TNCs) entered the market, the small service providers were

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<sup>56</sup> Internet user data for the years 2000-2011 has been collected from the website of Internet world stats (Internet world stats: Usage and population statistics). Internet user data for the years 2012-2016s has been collected from the website of Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC).

<sup>57</sup> The World Bank. "Bangladesh.", accessed August 14, 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/country/bangladesh>

cornered. Citycell and GrameenPhone emerged as leading internet service providers in 2009 (OpenNet Initiative). Availability of low-cost made-in-China Android smartphones with the option of web browsing is another reason for the radical escalation of the number of internet users (ChinaDaily USA). As of June 2017, 93.6% internet users access the internet from their cell phones (BTRC). The country launched 3G mobile and internet technology in 2013 (Telecom Engine), which is expected to boost the number of social media users.

Facebook is the most widely used form of social media in Bangladesh. Even though it was originally meant for use as a casual friendship network, it gradually emerged as a popular microblogging site for forming and broadcasting opinions (Azam 2013, 5-6). There are approximately 26 million social media users in Bangladesh; 22 million among them are Facebook users and live in the capital city of Dhaka (Murad 2017). Among other forms of social media, Bangla blogs are commonly popular among social media users. The distinct characteristic of Bangla blogosphere is that community blogging is the dominant practice here instead of personal blogging. The first Bangla blog “somewhere in...” started its journey in December 2005 (Chowdhury 2012, 10). Since then bloggers have been raising their concerns about contemporary socio-economic-political issues in more than 36 community blogs (Chowdhury, 18).

Sebastián Valenzuela argues that most studies done on the relationship between social media and activist campaigns have been conducted on either mature democracies or authoritarian regimes. Scholars have not examined the context of social media in “third wave democracies,” countries that were democratized between the 1970s and 1990s (Huntington 1991 cited in Valenzuela 2013, 921). This study begins to fill that gap. As in

many other third wave democracies, democratization in Bangladesh has been halting and incomplete. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the country experienced a series of military coups. Democracy was finally restored in 1991. It never took a firm root, however, because of lack of commitment from political parties, corruption, neoliberal economic and political policies, and many other reasons (Rahman 2013). Against this backdrop, the government proposed the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Act to protect and control the misuse information in 2013. The law carries a minimum sentence of seven years and has been widely used by the government to silence scholars and activists criticizing the state (Amnesty International 2017).

### **Microcelebrity networked activism after the Rana Plaza collapse**

The state of Bangladesh has been implementing neoliberal structural adjustment policies (SAP) since the 1980s. SAPs have been characterized by cuts in government expenditure, currency devaluation, trade liberalization, withdrawal of subsidies, denationalization, and privatization of economic activities. Pro-market neoliberal reforms have not achieved distributional and social justice in Bangladesh. Instead, they resulted in sharp inequity in income and wealth distribution. Few hands accumulated a massive amount of wealth and resources, leaving the majority with acute deprivation and poverty (Nuruzzaman 2004, 33-54). Lamia Karim argues that neoliberal globalization in a post-colonial country like Bangladesh gave rise to a new kind of sovereignty with an “absent state.” Non-state actors such as non-government organizations (NGOs) gradually appeared as a shadow state, assuming the responsibility for providing the poor social services that

the state was supposed to deliver. Karim notes that these non-state actors often appear as a “progressive voice” of the society in the absence or gradual demise of progressive social movements (Karim 2008, 8).

Against this background, Samina Luthfa and Shahadat Hossain note that the state remained “apathetic, unmoved, and distant” even after the Rana Plaza collapse, the worst industrial disaster in terms of loss of human life in the history of Bangladesh. The immediate rescue, relief, and rehabilitation operations were primarily left to non-state actors. The local public hospitals were not equipped to provide emergency healthcare. Enam Medical College, an adjacent private health service provider, provided emergency care to the survivors, most of whom were women garment workers. Private healthcare facilities, such as Gonoshasthaya Kendra and Centre for the Rehabilitation of the Paralyzed (CRP), also supported long-term treatment and rehabilitation for survivors. Ripon Mia, who sustained a spinal injury and was sent to Dhaka Medical College, a public hospital, said,

“Nobody cared for me there (Dhaka Medical College), although I cried and cried for an hour due to pain. At last one of the doctors attended me and provided some medication. Once I felt better, I moved here (CRP) to get better treatment” (Hossain and Luthfa 2014).

The state failed to provide sustainable rehabilitation opportunities to help the survivors overcome physical, psychological, and economic distress. In the absence of state-sponsored initiatives, local and international NGOs offered employment training and rehabilitation assistance to help the survivors return to the workforce (Hossain and Luthfa 2014).

The way rescue, relief, and rehabilitation for the Rana plaza survivors were conducted primarily by non-state actors in neoliberal physical spaces of Bangladesh was intertwined with material and discursive interactions and relationships that were initiated and circulated in social media spaces right after the collapse. Volunteers who went to the site of collapse soon found out that the government and the army had neither necessary rescue equipment nor trained human resources to conduct successful rescue operations. Many were disappointed with the local administration of Savar and government security forces for not responding quickly and taking any effective initiative. During my fieldwork, a volunteer respondent, who is an architect by profession, said:

I rushed to the site of collapse when I heard the news. There were so many people roaming around, but none could tell me how exactly they were trying to proceed with rescuing. There was no plan. I went to the Chief of Fire Bridget and asked what their plan was. The Chief could not give me a definite answer.

On the first day, the army was there. Fire Bridget people were at least moving around, but the army guys were just standing still. The army had an engineering core. They had vehicles and tools. But they were doing nothing. I realized there was a huge problem! Either they could not follow the plan, or they did not have a plan.

I got furious when I saw that night some people bringing big bowls of dinner for some top-ranked army officials. Hundreds of people died. The area was filled with dust and smell from dead bodies. People who lost family members were crying. Volunteers like us did not get time to drink a sip of water. How could the army think of having dinner right across the site of collapse?<sup>58</sup>

The initial phase of rescue work during the first five days was mostly conducted by volunteers from different classes and strata of the society. Working class friends and family members of garment workers, who were stuck under the rubble, served as first responders.

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<sup>58</sup> A volunteer who participated in the post-Rana Plaza rescue and rehabilitation of garment workers, in discussion with the author. April 17, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee's name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

They went inside the collapsed building, broke beams and concrete structures, and rescued stranded workers. Urban, middle class, young, educated, and mostly male volunteers worked as secondary responders. They transported wounded workers to the hospital, collected information about dead workers and their relatives, and distributed food and water among responders and family members. They also surveyed what was needed by first responders and updated their Facebook statuses to disseminate the information. Many of these statuses went viral and were shared several hundred times by other Facebook users. NGOs, corporations, and private donors gathered information about what was needed at the site of collapse mainly from these statuses. The following screen shots illustrate the kinds of information provided by these online posts.

**Special Note** - As of this point (4 AM BDT, 27 APRIL 2013), the rescue mission **has everything it needs**. If you would still like to contribute, then consider the following -

**FOR BANGLADESHIS at home**

UPDATE (30 APRIL 2013) - IF YOU OR ANYONE YOU KNOW ARE WORKING ON CREATING A DATABASE OF THE DEAD AND THE INJURED, THEN PLEASE BE AWARE THAT THERE IS AN ONGOING EFFORT TO CONSOLIDATE ALL INFORMATION. EMAIL IRESH ZAKER AT IRESH611@GMAIL.COM OR PM HIM ON FB - <https://www.facebook.com/izaker?fref=ts>

UPDATE (6 PM BDT, 29 APRIL 2013) - NEED WHEELCHAIRS (TK 4450 EA) AND CRUTCHES (TK 250 EA) FOR REHABILITATION OF THE WOUNDED. IF YOU WANT TO BUY THESE, THEN CONTACT MR. JOSHIM AT 01712025723. THEY ARE BEING SOLD AT THE FOLLOWING LOCATIONS -

1. NATIONAL SCIENCE INSTITUTE (ADJACENT TO THE MAIN ROAD), SHER-E-BANGLA NAGAR, DHAKA-1207.
2. IN FRONT OF PONGU HOSPITAL, BESIDE AGARGAON PHARMACY, SHER-E-BANGLA NAGAR, DHAKA - 1207.

DROP-OFF POINT - ASIATIC SOCIETY, HOUSE 63, ROAD 7B, BLOCK H, BANANI, DHAKA. CONTACT - IRESH ZAKER, 01779012817 (courtesy - Iresh Zaker/Fb)

1. If you have not donated blood, and would like to, then you will have plenty of chances to do so in the coming days and months when the wounded will have to go in for follow ups or other surgeries. Submit your contact info and blood group type to the collection agencies as listed in the note (Sandhani/Asiatic Society/Quantum Foundation, etc.).

2. If you want to donate money, then please consider donating to long term funds for rehabilitation. A lot of the victims will remain physically debilitated and will not be able to support their family from now onwards. They will also need routine checkups, prosthetics/crutches/wheelchairs, medication on a regular basis, etc. For all these needs, some organizations have already outlined plans. A few of them are CommunityAction, Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC), Asiatic Society. Their contacts are in the note below.

If you know of any more, PM me so that I can update this section

Screenshot from a Facebook post titled “Savar Tragedy: How you can help as of NOW.” On April 25, 2013, Nafis Hasan posted this note compiling info on rescue mission updates, list of wounded and deceased workers, list of materials immediately needed at the site such as oxygen, wheelchairs, crutches, blood, money, dry food, medicine, torch lights, water, saline, and juice, list of NGOs and foundations that would help survivors with rehabilitation, where to go to donate blood for wounded workers, and how local Bangladeshis, the Bangladeshi diaspora, and foreigners could donate for the survivors. The status was updated with time stamps several times on April 26, 27, 29, and 30. It received 101 likes, 57 comments, and was shared 280 times (Hasan 2013).



A volunteer activist group called Shahid Rumi Squad posted this on April 26, 2013. The post asks for 30 cutting blades that were immediately needed at the site of the collapse. It also mentions information on the cost of each set of concrete cutters and iron cutters and where to order the cutters. It received 61 likes and was shared 146 times. Other Facebook users mentioned how many blades they had donated in the comment section (Shahid Rumi Squad 2013).

In one study, Jafar et al. analyzed 200 Facebook posts asking for rescue and relief materials during the first six days of the rescue operation. The posts were from users who actively participated in rescue and relief coordination. Jafar et al. notice that each of these posts reached 96,000 users on Facebook. The post with the highest number of shares was shared 700 times, thereby reaching approximately 136,000 people. The widespread coverage of these Facebook posts left an immediate material impact. For example, the



request for blood on the first day of the rescue operation was responded to by volunteers in only two hours. Similarly, the need for cutting equipment, food, medicine, and oxygen on the second day was fulfilled by private donors within twelve hours (Jafar et al. 2013, 3).

Table 2. Response time for rescue and relief materials

Day	Relief	Response Time
4/24	Blood	2 hours
4/25	Cutting equipment, food, medicine, oxygen	12 hours
4/26	Blood, cutting equipment, medicine, oxygen	8 hours
4/28	Wheelchairs, crutch	2 hours

Source: Jafar et al. 2013, 3

Zeynep Tufekci's framing of networked microcelebrity activism is helpful in understanding the dynamics of post-Rana Plaza Facebook-initiated relief and rescue coordination. According to Tufekci, networked microcelebrities are "politically motivated noninstitutional actors who use...social media to engage in the presentation of their political and personal selves to garner public attention to their cause, usually through a combination of testimony, advocacy, and citizen journalism" (Tufekci 2013, 857). She distinguishes networked microcelebrities from grassroots activists and spokespeople for social movements since the work of microcelebrities involves ongoing fan management and careful self-presentation within participatory spaces of social media and beyond. Tufekci argues that microcelebrities operate within an ecology of attention which refers to "the means through which a social movement can introduce and fight for its preferred framing, convince broader publics of its cause, recruit new members, attempt to neutralize opposition framing, access solidarity, and mobilize its adherents" (Tufekci, 849). The way microcelebrities decide to gain, deny, sustain, or manipulate public attention determines the extent of their success in accomplishing their goals. The alternative space of social

media offers microcelebrities an autonomous means for acquiring mass attention and diffusing their interpretation to larger audiences. It bypasses dependency on mass media intermediation, thereby unprecedentedly converting the monopoly of mass media to an oligopoly of social media. It networks microcelebrities not only with Western media, journalists, and broader publics but also with internal political publics. Tufekci points out that previously it had been the sole task of mass media to validate a movement as a legitimate one among a broader public. The space of social media has assumed the role of validating movements internally, which then provides a vehicle that enables microcelebrities to gain external validation. Social media spaces have also enlarged the scope for microcelebrities to recruit and broaden the base of supporters (Tufekci, 849-855).

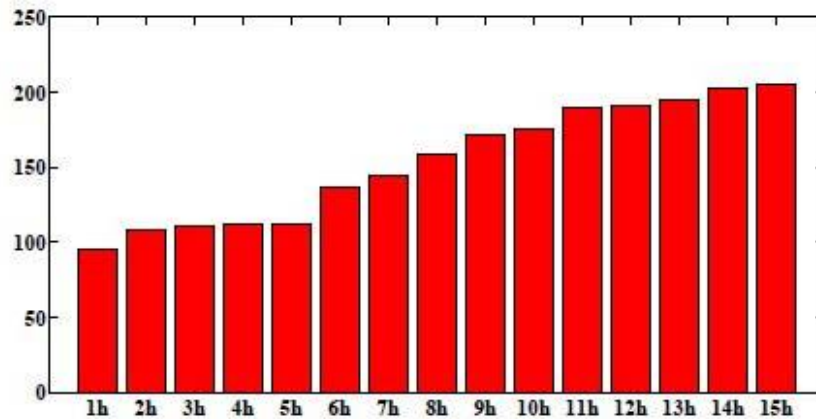
### **Conformist voluntarism in a neoliberal era**

Zeynep Tufekci's analysis of microcelebrity networked activism is grounded mostly in the context of repressive regimes where microcelebrities can unprecedentedly alter hierarchical power relations between mass media, institutions, and states. I argue that microcelebrity networked activism in the labor organizing context of a third-wave democracy like Bangladesh reveals some new dynamics of the way social structures, hierarchies, and relationships are formed and sustained. Inspired by Miriam Ticktin's framing of the politics and anti-politics of care (2011) and Dina Siddiqi's response to the question "Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving?" (2009), I propose that many networked microcelebrities and their urban, middle-class Facebook followers are involved in "neoliberal conformist voluntarism" to "save" Bangladeshi garment workers after the

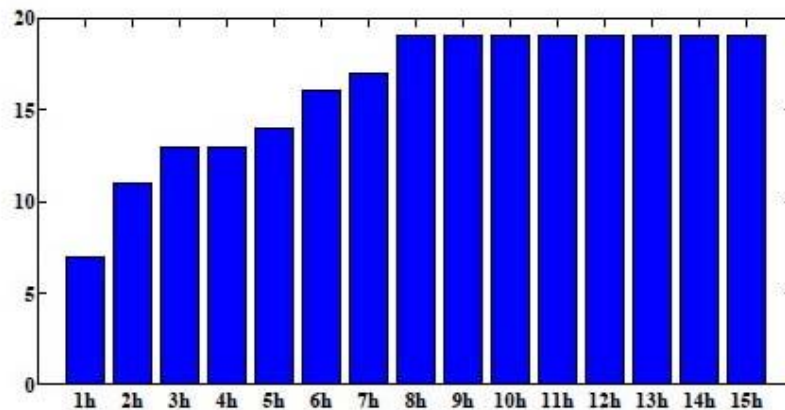
collapse of Rana Plaza. Neoliberal conformist voluntarism posits an apolitical moral imperative that promotes a class-specific, pro-capitalist, ethnocentric universalism, thereby reducing social justice to bootstrap upward mobility. It places benevolence and humanitarianism at its core without questioning the larger neoliberal governmentality as practiced by the state, NGOs, corporations, and local and transnational labor activists. As a result, it fails to transform the neoliberal regime that instigated a massive industrial disaster such as the Rana Plaza collapse and plays an inadvertent but active role in strengthening the status-quo. Siddiqi (2009) challenges the culture of global moralism that often shapes transnational leftist and feminist representation of Bangladeshi women garment workers as helpless victims of imperialism and capitalism waiting to be “saved” by their Northern moral allies. Following Siddiqi’s critique, I argue that the savior complex of global moralism is also replicated in the local context where neoliberal conformist voluntarism reproduces the language of salvation and leaves the dominant structural inequities unchallenged.

In a neoliberal state like Bangladesh where the government bypassed its responsibility of ensuring immediate and long-term rescuing, relief, and rehabilitation, and relied on non-state actors such as NGOs, TNCs, and voluntary participation of common people, the role microcelebrities played in disseminating information and coordinating rescue work was phenomenal. Microcelebrities mobilized their followers to come forward with whatever resources and skills they had to help the collapse survivors. Jafar et al. notice that assistance-seeking posts circulated swiftly through networks of microcelebrities instead of ordinary users’ networks. The following graphs compare average sharing of a post from a microcelebrity and an ordinary user. Jafar et al. find that a regular user’s status

was shared by 20 people on an average whereas a microcelebrity's status was shared by more than 120 people within 5 hours (Jafar et al. 2013, 4).



Number of shares (cumulative) with time for a microcelebrity user (Jafar et al. 2013, 4)



Number of shares (cumulative) with time for an ordinary user (Jafar et al. 2013, 4)

My ethnographic research in Dhaka and my examination of various social media platforms suggest that most of the microcelebrities of Bangladeshi origin were middle class, urban, educated, tech-savvy, and male. These microcelebrities turned the space of

social media into a ground for mobilization based on social capital. They inspired their followers to use their social capital to facilitate immediate rescue and rehabilitation assistance for garment workers, most of whom were women. The space of social media where microcelebrities interacted with their followers transcended the spatial boundary of the nation-state. Microcelebrities urged the Bangladeshi diaspora, especially those living in the global North, to use their social capital and transnational networks to raise funds. Bangladeshi immigrants' friends or family members who were living in Bangladesh and various charitable organizations such as Jago Foundation, Smile Bangladesh, or Sneha Foundation helped in coordinating and disbursing funds from the diaspora.

While I do not deny the significant role microcelebrity networked activism played in ensuring rescue and rehabilitation of garment workers, I question the long-term sustainability of the social capital-centric neoliberal conformist voluntarism it promoted. Based on my ethnographic observations, I complicate the local and global imaginaries it produced and circulated in virtual as well as physical spaces and the meanings it ascribed to women's bodies and labor as part of its neoliberal capitalist project.

In a study of the role of the British government in distributing social capital, P. A. Hall argues that Britain's middle class played a vital role in preserving and renewing the tradition of charitable activity, service organizations, and informal sociability (Hall 2002 cited in Law and Mooney 2006, 18). Bangladesh is currently observing a booming middle class with huge access to social capital due to the steady growth of financial, corporate, and professional service sectors.<sup>59</sup> Thirty million people, 20% of the total population,

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<sup>59</sup> According to OECD, social capital refers to “networks together with shared norms, values, and understandings that facilitate co-operation within or among groups” (OECD).

currently comprise the middle class in Bangladesh (Khan). As the neoliberal state increasingly eschews the responsibility of providing social security and services for the poor, the new middle class subscribes to a charitable, civic consciousness based on their social capital. The depoliticized and conformist nature of their voluntary service, which is conducted from a moral high ground, according to private convenience and preferences, poses no threat to neoliberal structures and systemic inequities.

Law and Mooney point out that the social capital-centric conformist voluntarism “legitimizes the intervention of the ‘haves’ in the lives of the ‘have nots,’ promising them not money, but to help them build social capital” (Law and Mooney, 2006). During my fieldwork at Dhaka, I encountered several microcelebrity activists and volunteers who told me that the survivors of Rana plaza did not have any idea about how to use donations productively. If not directed properly, the workers would end up spending the money to fulfill basic needs instead of investing it for long-term income generation. For example, one of the microcelebrities said:

Most of the low-income people tend to spend without earning, When I went to the Pongu Hospital (National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation), I saw that the survivors were physically and psychologically

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The term social capital received widespread attention with the publication of the best-seller “Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community” by Robert Putnam in 2000. In this book, Putnam argues that social, cultural, and technological developments such as two-career households, television, or relaxed suburban lifestyle have contributed to the demise of a sense of community or what he calls “social capital.” According to Putnam, erosion of social capital has deteriorated the quality of life of American communities. Putnam calls for “togetherness,” “social cohesion,” and “communitarism” to ensure higher participation and regain the sense of community. Vicente Navarro argues that Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital is bereft of an analysis of power, politics, and purpose. Putnam does not inquire how the growing alienation of citizenry results from competitiveness under capitalist structures and relationships; instead, he inspires accumulation of a new kind of capital which is not monetary but “social” in nature (Navarro 2002, 423-427).

exhausted during the first week. From the second week, they started competing with each other to access donations. Even when the doctor released them, they did not want to go home. They think if they go home, they won't get any further donation. If I give them Tk. 1 lakh, they would stop working and spend the entire money in three to four months and then ask for help again.<sup>60</sup>

The volunteers often arbitrarily decided whether to purchase a sewing machine for a woman survivor, a rickshaw for a man survivor, or a cow for a family. The decisions were made based on gendered and classed stereotypical assumptions and in the absence of reciprocal consultation with workers. Neoliberal conformist voluntarism rarely assessed why workers prioritize fulfilling basic needs instead of long-term investments and what suits their contextual needs most. Sumon et al. use the phrase “the compensation regime” to indicate the way a complex web of NGOs, corporations, and the state participate in charity in the absence of state enforcement of justice and workers’ rights. Workers are provided with “cash assistance,” “humanitarian relief,” or compensation to which they are legally entitled. Sumon et al. mention the example of a worker named Shahnoor who continued her physiotherapy even though she did not feel any improvement. It was necessary for Shahnoor to stay “ill” to be eligible to receive compensation. On this view, the compensation regime forecloses avenues for ensuring responsibility, accountability, and future prevention and responds to industrial casualty in exclusively monetary terms (Sumon et al. 2017). Following Suman et al.’s analysis, I argue that urban-middle class neoliberal voluntarism reinforces the hegemony of the compensation regime along with other non-state actors such as NGOs and corporations. The conformist nature of

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<sup>60</sup> An online activist who participated in the post-Rana Plaza rehabilitation of garment workers, in discussion with the author. December 7, 2013. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee’s name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

voluntarism rarely questions systemic oppression of workers. It normalizes the neoliberal state's avoidance of its responsibility to ensure the safety, security, and rights of garment workers and weakens possibilities of oppositional organizing in virtual and physical networked spaces. Moreover, the Rana plaza survivors were not the only garment workers bereft of rights and suffering from insecure living and working conditions in Bangladesh. Because the conformist voluntarism mostly focused on the Rana plaza survivors, and specifically on women garment workers among them, its influence remained confined within a symbolic level without addressing the systematic class and gender inequities that workers and labor rights activists confront every day.

The way neoliberal conformist voluntarism discursively and materially suppressed the heterogeneity of garment workers and reinforced neocolonial narratives can be best conceptualized using Chandra Mohanty's discussion on colonial feminist discourses. According to Mohanty, "Similar arguments pertaining to questions of methods of analysis can be made in terms of middle-class, urban African and Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture as the norm, and codifies peasant and working-class histories and cultures as Other" (Mohanty 1988, 62). Based on a hegemonic middle-class assumption about lives and struggles of women garment workers, neoliberal conformist voluntarism constructed discursive narratives that were presumed to apply to all garment workers. As cultural and ideological representations, these narratives disconnected garment workers from their material lives and collective histories. It was, therefore, not only corporations, politicians, or consumer and labor rights groups in the Global North who assumed what Mohanty calls "privilege and ethnocentric universality" while producing a reductive and



singular image of “Third World Women.” Scattered hegemonic spaces—virtual as well as physical—within the so-called Third World provided sites where urban, middle-class citizens constituted working class women garment workers as a coherent group with common interests and desires regardless of their multilayered axes of identities.<sup>61</sup>

### **Nation or class? Contentious priorities of neoliberal conformist voluntarism**

Just two and a half months before the collapse of Rana Plaza, the Shahbag protest took place in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The protest began on February 5, 2013, demanding justice for war crimes committed during the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. It was originally initiated by an online activist group called “Bloggers and Online Activist Network.” Using different social media platforms such as Facebook, blogs, and Twitter, the protest spread like wildfire. At its peak, it drew approximately 100,000 people who gathered at Shahbag, a major intersection at Dhaka.

The Shahbag protest initially demanded capital punishment for Abdul Quader Mollah, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment after being convicted of war crimes by the International Crimes Tribunal. Over time, it expanded to demand the banning of Bangladesh Jamaat-e-Islami, a fundamentalist Islamist political party, from politics, encouraging a boycott of all institutions affiliated with the party. The Bangladeshi diaspora also expressed solidarity with the protest, holding street demonstrations in cities like New

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<sup>61</sup> “Scattered hegemony” refers to “...the effects of mobile capital as well as the multiple subjectivities that replace the European unitary subject” (Grewal and Kaplan 1994, 7).

York, Toronto, London, Tokyo, and Sidney. Thousands of statuses, posts, tweets, videos, photos, and blog posts circulated in social media spaces, garnering support for the protest (Qayum 2013).

During my fieldwork, I noticed that urban-middle-class youth enthusiastically participated in the Shahbag protest both in social media and on the streets. The way they questioned the state in this instance differed from the way they responded to the Rana Plaza collapse. Exploring these differences can illuminate class-specific conceptions of “justice.” Although Shahbag protestors responded vigorously to injustices more than four decades-old, in social media spaces, such as Facebook or Twitter, very few questioned continuing injustices linked to the global structuring of neoliberal capitalism and its local implications or explored possibilities for unionizing to improve working conditions and defend workers’ rights. No concerted collective effort was made to resist the urge to boycott made-in-Bangladesh clothes or biased depictions of “blood clothes” in many parts of the Global North.

Left-leaning grassroots labor organizers freely shared their critiques of the Shahbag movement with me. An organizer of Garment Workers Unity Forum said:

Those youths are excited about creating a secular Bangladesh through ensuring punishment of war criminals. However, they don’t take initiatives for ensuring workers’ right to unionize or their safety and security. When we were demanding the minimum wage of Tk. 8000, a large number of these youths said we were demanding too much. I was disheartened. Many of them have become part and parcel of the dictatorial regime.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> An organizer of Garment Workers Unity Forum, in discussion with the author. June 11, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee’s name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

An organizer of Activist Anthropologist, a grassroots academic-activist group, said:

I could not own the Shahbag movement. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire killed 146 garment workers in New York City in 1911. The entire New York City was grieving and protesting on the day of the burial of those workers. When we went to bury unidentified dead bodies from the Tazreen fire, no one marched or protested with us. On the other hand, thousands of people protested in Shahbag for two months. I would call it class arrogance. In February 2013, we wanted to protest at Shahbag demanding justice for Tazreen workers. They (Shahbag protesters) did not even let us hold the banner.<sup>63</sup>

When I asked a garment worker named Faria, “Have you heard about the Shahbag protest? Do you know what they did? ” Faria replied:

Yes! I have heard about them. They donated blood for garment workers after the Rana Plaza collapse.<sup>64</sup>

The only connection that the garment worker felt with the Shahbag protest was established through the conformist voluntarist engagement of some of the Shahbag protesters. Why did the urban secular middle-class, educated youth of Dhaka city enthusiastically participate in the Shahbag protest both in social media and on streets whereas their roles were largely limited to neoliberal conformist voluntarism after the Rana Plaza collapse? Why were middle-class youth more invested in a nationalist movement to uphold secular values than a labor movement to ensure garment workers’ rights?

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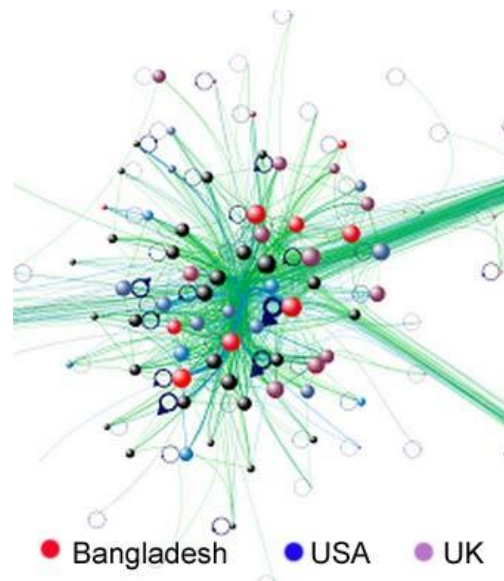
<sup>63</sup> An organizer of Activist Anthropologist, in discussion with the author. May 16, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee’s name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

<sup>64</sup> Last name unknown, Faria. (a garment worker at a factory in Shantinagar, Dhaka), in discussion with the author. September 21, 2013. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Juxtaposing online and off-line responses during the Shahbag protest and post-Rana Plaza rescue and rehabilitation offers some interesting insights.

Soon after the Shahbag protest began, the protesters found that the international (read: Western) media was not interested in highlighting the protest. Seuty Sabur (2013) argues that the international media such as BBC, CNN, or Al Jazeera did not cover the Shahbag protest as they did in cases of Iran's Green Revolution or Egypt's Tahrir Square protest. Drawing on Edward Said's arguments in "Covering Islam," Sabur points out that the Western media was more interested in portraying Shahbag in a way that matched typical images of "violent Islamists/cleric, brutal police, and hysterical mob setting fire to the vehicles." Because the nonviolent and secular spirit of Shahbag did not receive enough attention from the Western media, Shahbag protesters called for organized Twitter campaigns. Twitter is not a popular social media platform in Bangladesh. In comparison with Facebook.com, the most accessed website in Bangladesh, Twitter.com ranks 21<sup>st</sup> in usage (Alexa). Nevertheless, Shahbag protesters realized that it was necessary to use Twitter to raise their concerns and network with transnational allies because of Twitter's greater ability to reach out to the Western media, its option of carrying on conversations without being "friends," and its capability for searchable conversations. Several Bangla blogs published posts on how to use a Twitter account and a hashtag. Within a few days, the space of Twitter turned into a war zone where both pro-Shahbag and anti-Shahbag communities engaged in conversations and confrontations. Sabur notes that during the coverage of the Shahbag protest in Al Jazeera, "Stream" received 69 tweets with the #Shahbag every second (Sabur 2013). Between February and July 2013, there were some 26,000 tweets tagged with #Shahbag in Twitter (Anashua, 2013). The Bangladeshi

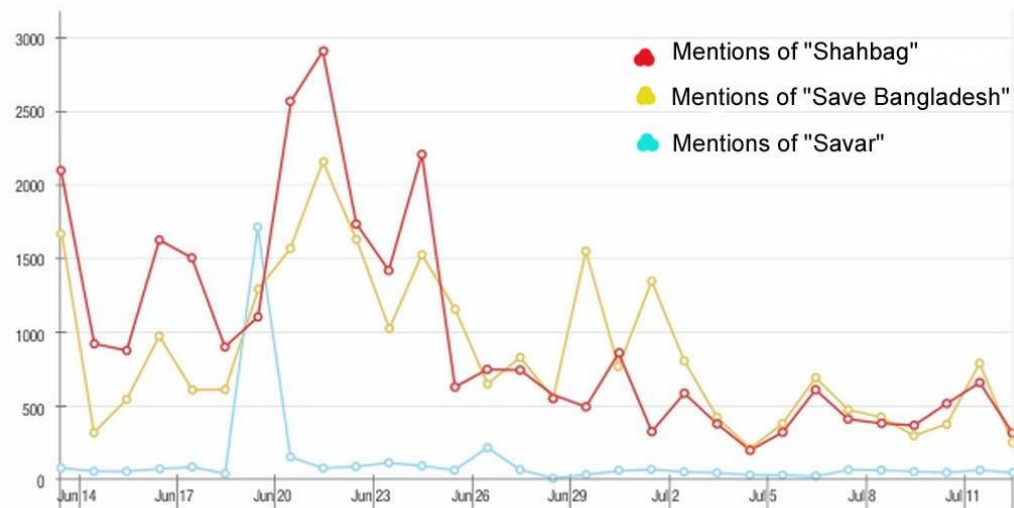
diaspora actively participated in the Twitter campaign. The following graph shows how the Bangladeshi diaspora living in the USA (the blue circles) and the UK (the purple circles) took part in the Twitter campaign along with Bangladeshis living in Bangladesh (the red circles).



Participation of Bangladeshis from Bangladesh, the USA, and the UK in organized Twitter campaigns during the Shahbag protest (Analyzing social network)

In contrast to the case of the Shagbag protest, most of the Bangladeshis living in Bangladesh and other countries did not take significant steps to mobilize transnational campaigns in social media after the Rana Plaza collapse apart from collecting donations for the survivors. Facebook was widely used to raise funds from friends and family members. As the individual donors were not seeking Northern activist alliances, they rarely used the platform of Twitter as they did during the Shahbag protest. The following graph compares three different hashtags on Twitter in 2013. #Shahbag was used by pro-Shahbag protesters, #SaveBangladesh was used by anti-Shahbag groups, and #Savar was used for

searching for emergency supplies and broadcasting live updates from the site of collapse (Anashua 2013). As the graph makes clear, #Savar did not receive as many tags as #Shahbag or #SaveBangladesh received on Twitter.



Comparison of #Shahbag, #SaveBangladesh, and #Savar on Twitter in 2013 (Anashua 2013)

Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson argue that the state plays an important role in the politics of place-making, establishing naturalized links between people and places. Observing the characteristics of 20<sup>th</sup>-century revolutions (and I would argue that their observations apply to 21<sup>st</sup>-century social movements as well), they point out that mobilizing large-scale political movements without reference to any national homeland has become very difficult (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 12). Gupta discusses multifaceted difficulties that were encountered during the attempt to mobilize people around a non-national collective such as the non-aligned movement. He further indicates that international working-class movements have not been historically as successful as

nationalist movements: “As generations of Marxists after Marx found out, it is one thing to liberate a nation, quite another to liberate the workers of the world” (Gupta 1992, 71). Gupta’s discussion is helpful in explaining why the Rana plaza collapse inspired urban, middle-class microcelebrities and their followers to participate in neoliberal conformist voluntarism rather than asking critical questions and exploring possibilities of transnational activist alliances as they did during the Shahbag protest. Juxtaposing the two cases of virtual activism offers some interesting insights about how the space of social media acquires distinct identities, giving rise to various layers of exclusion and inclusion based on nationalist or class-based preferences.

Seuty Sabur argues that the Shahbag protest involved people from different constituencies “from teachers to pathologists, owners of advertisement agencies to petty traders, doctors, home makers, and lawyers.” Nevertheless, most of them fell under the broad category of middle class and cultural elites of the small urban and metropolitan landscape of Bangladesh, or the Bangladeshi diaspora living in the global North. She mentions a Facebook status that stated how a rickshaw puller asked the passenger, “What is a blog?” The question of the rickshaw puller illustrates how different segments of the population, including women, elderly, and working class individuals, did not have access to social-media-based-opinion forming and circulating networks during the Shahbag protest. According to Sabur, the protest involved both physical and virtual spaces where alliances, as well as contentions among various factions of the middle class, were created. Together the middle class played a leading role in sorting out contested nationalist discourses and determining what an inclusive nation should look like (Sabur 2013, 14).

The Rana Plaza collapse was a distinctly working class (as well as gendered) issue. The plaza housed a bank and a shopping mall in addition to five garment factories (Habib). Immediately before the day of the collapse, bank and mall officials were instructed to evacuate the building. Factory managers, however, forced garment workers to enter the building and start working on the day of collapse although many workers were skeptical about building safety (Lazaro). It was primarily a gendered working-class population, specifically women garment workers, who suffered death in the collapse. These garment workers did not participate in discourses that circulated in the space of social media after the collapse. Their bodies, lives, and struggles were represented, normalized, and appropriated by urban, young, middle-class, and mostly male microcelebrities and their followers. Most of the microcelebrities, both from home in Bangladesh and abroad, were not engaged in labor or social justice activism, nor did they conduct in-depth research about the conditions of labor at Rana Plaza. The disconnection of microcelebrities from material experiences of garment workers influenced the kind of discourses they produced. The middle-class nationalist sentiment of microcelebrities and their followers, which instigated and sustained the Shahbag protest, was not sufficient to capture complex dynamics of history and political economy of the Rana Plaza collapse. Thus the microcelebrity-networked activism after the Rana Plaza collapse is distinctly different from the microcelebrity-networked activism Tufekci (2013) discusses in the context of repressive regimes. In a neoliberal democracy like Bangladesh, microcelebrity-networked activism is often shaped by a depoliticized civic morality, which is devoid of gender and class consciousness. Instead of altering hierarchical power relations, this civic morality defends the neoliberal interest and structures of the state, NGOs, and corporations.



## **Holes in the wall?**

### **Connections and disjunctures in virtual and physical activist networks**

In their comparison of the 2008 protest for defending the Beijing Olympics and the 2011 Jasmine Revolution in China, Zhang and Nyíri use the metaphor of the “wall.” This wall is not simply a partition between physical and virtual space, but it “encloses a realm of political possibilities where only claims that promote Chinese nationalism and its resurgence in the world can be articulated through public actions” (Zhang and Nyíri 2014, 115). Demands for revolutionary transformation are either suppressed by the Chinese state disciplinary apparatus or discredited by citizens as dangerous subversions. According to Zhang and Nyíri, an insurgency that arises in Chinese cyber-space does not necessarily pose any threat to the authoritarian regime. Instead, it addresses “outside enemies,” who have been conceptualized as the “West,” for dishonoring China’s progress (Zhang and Nyíri, 115).

Zhang and Nyíri’s framing of the wall is useful in understanding the politics of inclusion and exclusion within the space of social media in Bangladesh. I argue that the Shahbag protest fell within the boundary of the wall as it was articulated in strong nationalist terms. The protest had a clear “enemy” consisting of individuals, political parties, and their local, regional, and transnational allies opposing the nationalist consciousness of the liberation war of Bangladesh. In contrast, we do not observe any revolutionary mobilization in social media after the Rana Plaza collapse as the responsible “enemy” was not readily identifiable. A chain of blame games started right after the collapse. The garment factory owners and managers who forced workers to enter the

building were initially identified as the main villains. Later it was found that Sohel Rana, Secretary of the local student wing of the Awami League, illegally acquired the site and constructed the building in violation of the approved plan and building codes. Garment factory owners blamed TNCs and consumers in the Global North for their tendency to bargain for the lowest price. On the other hand, TNCs blamed the government and factory owners of Bangladesh for not complying with labor laws and corporate codes of conduct. To comprehend how different actors, such as consumers, TNCs, the state, or factory owners, located in different nodes of the apparel supply chain were individually responsible for the collapse, one needs a clear consciousness of how neoliberal structures and policies work at the global and local level to capitalize on cheap, feminized labor. Such an understanding was not reflected in discourses that neoliberal conformist voluntarism produced about women's bodies and labor in social media.

Nevertheless, I argue that there are holes in the wall that separates “insiders” from “outsiders” in spaces of microcelebrity-networked activism. The boundary of the wall is often defused, enabling some people (but not everyone) to move back and forth between spaces apparently protected for insiders and outsiders. During my ethnographic study, I noticed several interesting attempts to contest the boundary of the wall. Now I will specifically focus on two labor organizing examples that challenge the concept of microcelebrity conformist voluntarism and struggle to bring meaningful changes in the lives and working conditions of garment workers in two very different ways.

***BCWS and its transnational activist networks***

Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) started its journey in 2001. The organization was founded by three garment workers – Babul Akter, Sheikh Najma, and Kalpona Akter. Babul Akter is now the Chair of Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF), and Sheikh Najma moved to the USA as an immigrant. Kalpona Akter currently serves as the Executive Director of BCWS. Akter identifies BCWS as a labor education non-government organization (NGO), which is globally known for its programs on labor rights awareness-raising, leadership training, conflict resolution, night school, and daycare center for garment workers (Labour Behind the Label). During an interview, Akter noted that BCWS runs a computer course for garment workers to educate them about basic skills of computing and web browsing. The ultimate goal is to start a garment workers’ blog where they would post about their workplace experiences, grievances, and aspirations every day.

As noted in Chapter 3, BCWS works closely with Bangladeshi labor unions and federations such as Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation, Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), National Garment Workers Federation (NGWF), and Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers Federation. In the past, it collaborated with many local NGOs such Phulki, Karmojibi Nari, Nari Uddgog Kendra, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services (BLAST), Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) in various capacities. BCWS’s past and current international funders and/or allies include Solidarity Center, the Department for International Development (DFID), International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), Jobs with Justice, 18

Million Rising, Clean Clothes Campaign, UNI Global Union, Maquila Solidarity Network, OXFAM, Canadian Labour Congress, Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), among others. BCWS consciously refuses all corporate funding to avoid conflicts of interest. Kalpona Akter and workers affiliated with her organization frequently visit many countries, organizations, and universities in the Global North to participate in various transnational solidarity building initiatives.

Kalpona Akter makes creative use of various social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to network with her transnational allies. She notes that journalists from what she calls the “moral media” such as *New York Times* and *Democracy Now* that care about labor rights in the Global South follow her Twitter account.

When I write something about labor rights on social media, I must think hundred times. I can't just tweet any link because I don't know what's behind it. I tweet only about what I clearly know. My tweets are retweeted thousand times. Journalists instantly collect news from my tweets. Many people maintain connection with us via Twitter to stay updated about labor rights in Bangladesh. I don't remember how many thousands of interviews I had given after the Tazreen factory fire. I have given interviews to people from India, Korea, USA, Russia, and all over the world. In this way, we use social media to spread information. We have working networks in both Twitter and Facebook.<sup>65</sup>

My analysis of Akter's Twitter account reveals some interesting trends about Akter's social media networks.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Akter, Kalpona. (Executive Director of BCWS), in discussion with the author. May 27, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

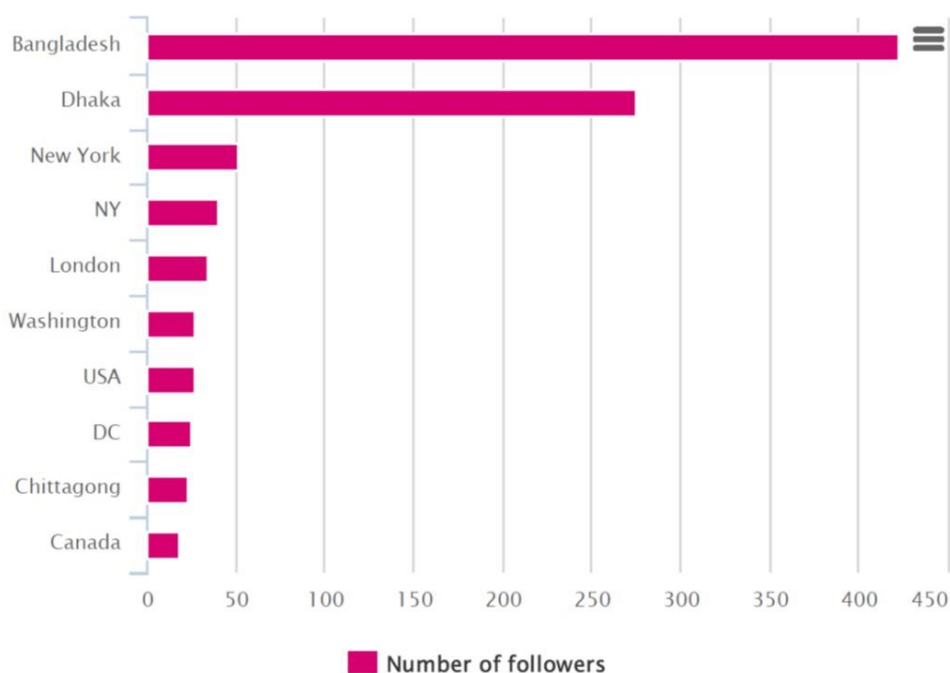
<sup>66</sup> The Twitter analysis was done on March 19, 2017 using a tool called “BirdSong Analytics” available at <https://www.birdsonganalytics.com/twitter-data/>.

### Who are Akter's Twitter followers?

The most frequently used words in the biographies of @kalponaakter's followers are **rights**, **bangladesh** and **social**.

rights bangladesh social human student  
 love justice views tweets fashion director workers union  
 music labor journalist global activist writer news work  
 editor new life trade working people international  
 endorsement simple opinions university sports good community  
 south politics organizer reporter national asia senior mine  
 member movement industry business based media education

### Location of Akter's Twitter Followers<sup>67</sup>



<sup>67</sup> BlueSong Analytics prepared the bar diagram using exact tags from Twitter users. That is why it created separate bars for New York and NY and also for “Washington” and “DC.” BlueSong Analytics is not programmed to merge two different tags, such as “New York” and “NY,” into one category.

*Location of Akter's Twitter followers (2)<sup>68</sup>*



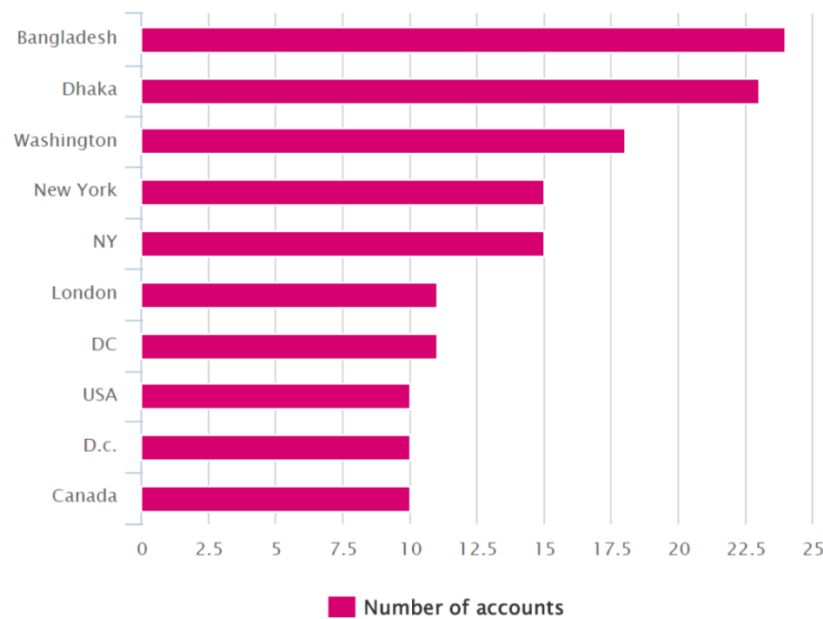
*Twitter accounts that Akter follows describe themselves as....*

The most frequently used words are **workers**, **rights** and **global**.



<sup>68</sup> BlueSong Analytics prepared the bar diagram using exact tags from Twitter users. That is why it created separate bars for New York and NY and also for “Washington” and “DC.” BlueSong Analytics is not programmed to merge two different tags, such as “New York” and “NY,” into one category.

*Location of Twitter accounts that Akter follows (1)<sup>69</sup>*



*Location of Twitter accounts that Akter follows (2)<sup>70</sup>*

Bangladesh Dhaka Washington New York NY  
 London DC USA D.c. Canada UK Global Worldwide  
 Ottawa Ontario CA Australia Paris New York City NYC France  
 England Earth Toronto Switzerland South Carolina San Francisco  
 Pittsburgh Michigan Melbourne MI LA Ithaca Detroit  
 Bangladesh. Üt: 45.416851 Zuccotti Park ZUG Yoniverse  
 Yesallwomen14@gmail.com Worldwide/bangladesh World Citizen Winnipeg  
 WI WA Vancouver Vancouver VA United States And Canada U.s.

<sup>69</sup> BlueSong Analytics prepared the bar diagram using exact tags from Twitter users. That is why it created separate bars for New York and NY and also for “Washington” and “DC.” BlueSong Analytics is not programmed to merge two different tags, such as “New York” and “NY,” into one category.

<sup>70</sup> BlueSong Analytics prepared the bar diagram using exact tags from Twitter users. That is why it created separate bars for New York and NY and also for “Washington” and “DC.” BlueSong Analytics is not programmed to merge two different tags, such as “New York” and “NY,” into one category.

Akter recollected one specific incident when she visited Tazreen Fashions after it caught fire on November 24, 2012. Akter suspected that the factory authority might try to clean up traces of TNCs outsourcing from the factory. She went to the factory on the morning of November 25<sup>th</sup> and collected burnt pieces of clothes with the tag “Faded Glory, Made in Bangladesh.” Faded Glory is Wal-Mart’s primary clothing brand. Akter requested a colleague to take a photo of her holding the piece of burnt cloth with the Faded Glory tag. She posted the photo on various social media platforms as well as mainstream news media such as Associate Press News. Wal-Mart at first denied that it was sourcing from Tazreen. Later evidence collected by Akter and other investigative journalists forced Wal-Mart to admit that they were, in fact, sourcing from Tazreen via subcontractors.



Kalpona Akter holding a burned piece of cloth with the “Faded Glory, Made in Bangladesh” tag at Tazreen Fashions (Democracy Now!)

Akter’s wider access to and popularity in the virtual space of labor organizing affords her means to transcend national borders and reach out to transnational allies and



sources of funding. On the one hand, Akter's engagement in transnational virtual and physical circuits of labor organizing creates possibilities for generating dialogues and cross-border collaboration between the Global South and the North. On the other hand, Akter's uncritical and celebratory acceptance of the Accord for Building and Fire Safety in Bangladesh, her refusal to use civil disobedience as an organizing strategy, the fact that her organizing priorities are dictated by her funders such as Solidarity Center in the USA, and her strategic use of palatable, appealing language in transnational activist circuits reveal the "reversed" outcome of transnationalization of women's organizing (Friedman 1999 cited in Chowdhury 2011, 8).<sup>71</sup>

### *Activist Anthropologist and the Thotkata blog*

Activist Anthropologist is an academic-activist group comprising graduate students, university professors, journalists, development professionals, and social justice activists in Bangladesh. The three most prominent members of this research and activist collective are Saydia Gulrukh, Nazneen Shifa, and Mahmudul Sumon. The activist anthropologists of this collective share a history of collaboration on women's rights, labor rights, indigenous rights, and other social justice movements since the 1990s. Gulrukh, for example, became involved in labor rights movement in the mid-1990s when the Harkin's Bill prohibited the importation of goods that were produced by child labor to the USA. She worked on a photo story project that demonstrates how the Harkin's Bill did not necessarily

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<sup>71</sup> Chapter 3 of this dissertation examines BCWS and Akter's complicated subject positions in transnational activist circuits in depth.

stop the use of child labor in Bangladeshi garment factories.<sup>72</sup> Child workers were still being recruited as “helpers.” Factory owners just forced them to take leaves during buyers’ inspections. Gulrukh and her activist allies also became involved in the anti-rape movement in the late 1990s. They protested a series of rapes committed by student leaders of Bangladesh Chhatra League, the student wing of ruling political party Awami League, on the campus of Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka. They continued their activist collaboration after a successful anti-rape campaign to bring back the Marxist and feminist activist tradition of the 1970s and 1980s Bangladesh.

Activist Anthropologist runs solely on the labor of love of its members. It does not seek any funds from the government, domestic or international NGOs, or international labor rights organizations in the global North. The members feel that avoiding the fund-driven model keeps their work distinct from the mainstream NGOized labor activism in Bangladesh. Their recent work involves ensuring proper treatment of and compensation for the survivors of the Tazreen factory fire that claimed lives of more than 112 workers (Manik and Yardley 2012), and taking legal action against the owner of the Tazreen factory, who violated building and fire-safety codes. For the first time in the history of Bangladesh, they succeeded in convicting a factory owner.

Activist Anthropologist’s virtual activism includes a community blog called “Thotkata – A Feminist Group.” The word “thotkata” refers to a person who is not afraid of telling “the just words.” Thotkata is an initiative to challenge the language of women’s

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<sup>72</sup> During my fieldwork in Bangladesh in 2015, I noticed child garment workers working in a Tier 3 factory that subcontracts for Tier 1 and Tier 2 factories. Tier 3 factories in Bangladesh are not subject to transnational activist or corporate regulatory codes of conduct.

empowerment that builds on neoliberalism, racism, classism, and violence. It questions the contemporary middle-class Bengali-women-dominated and West-centric NGOization of the women's movement and the way it replaces everyday grassroots resistance with project-based activities. It critiques the way indigenous women or transgender communities are transformed into mere "target groups" of "gender projects" in the mainstream gender and development discourse (Thotkata – A feminist group). Thotkata regularly publishes blog posts that advocate for rights of various marginalized communities such as women, garment workers, and indigenous communities in Bangladesh. Some of the posts analyze the political economy of women's involvement in the garment industry, complicate the concept of "empowerment" through garment work, and discuss loopholes of an NGO-led model for addressing labor and women's rights.<sup>73</sup>

Although Thotkata plays a significant role in subverting the neoliberal, neocolonial, and NGOized feminist discourses in Bangladesh, Saydia Gulrukh, a key organizer of Activist Anthropologist, remains critical of the role of social media in shaping labor activism.

Blogs definitely play an important role in citizenship journalism. However, in our country, you still must send a fax to the ministry for an appointment. They don't check their emails. If you want to leave a material impact, you must go from door to door.

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<sup>73</sup> For example, see "'Beauty' for the Owner, 'Deformity' for the Labor" by Saydia Gulrukh at <http://thotkata.net/2014/05/01/beauty-for-the-owner-deformity-for-the-labor/> (accessed June 20, 2014), "Victimhood in the name of empowerment" by Nazneen Shifa at <http://thotkata.net/2014/03/23/victimhood-in-the-name-of-empowerment/> (accessed June 20, 2014), and "Nine-to-five feminism and thoughts in the wake of Tazreen factory fire" by Nazneen Shifa at <http://thotkata.net/2013/05/18/nine-to-five-feminism-and-thoughts-in-the-wake-of-tazreen-factory-fire-3/> (accessed June 20, 2014).

Activist Anthropologist has 400 friends on Facebook.<sup>74</sup> But all of them would know the updates anyway as they all are interested in those matters. The places that we need to update most, such as the BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association), can't be reached through social media. We usually keep updating our allies on Facebook and don't reach out to people we challenge. That is why the discourse of the oppressor persists.<sup>75</sup>

Why is Kalpona Akter able to reach out to transnational activist networks worldwide but Activist Anthropologist's social media reach is mostly limited to its "friends"? Why can BCWS make creative use of social media to hold corporations responsible whereas Activist Anthropologist struggles to draw attention from the local garment manufacturers' association at Dhaka?

I argue that BCWS and Activist Anthropologist push what Zhang and Nyíri call the "wall," which separates hegemonic nationalist, raced, classed, and gendered discourses from resistance forces in social media, in very different ways. During personal interviews, Activist Anthropologist organizers expressed skepticism about the revolutionary potential of the kind of work that organizations, such as BCWS, do. Organizations that work at the grassroots level but depend on funding from their transnational alliances in the Global North are not always free to criticize limits of transnational organizing. Ethel Brook's critique of transnational organizing rightly applies in the case of BCWS as she says, "....what we see is not so new; rather it is a replication of globalization from above but framed as a new globalization from below" (Brooks 2007, 117). Activist Anthropologists

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<sup>74</sup> The number increased to 803 members as of August 15, 2017. Activist Anthropologist's Facebook profile is available at <https://www.facebook.com/tazreen.tuba>, accessed August 15, 2017.

<sup>75</sup> Gulrukh, Saydia. (Organizer of Activist Anthropologist), in discussion with the author. May 16, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

echo the critical tone of Brooks in their analyses of BCWS's celebratory acceptance of the Accord for Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh.<sup>76</sup> Nevertheless, they also accept the fact that BCWS has wider access to transnational networks of activists, academicians, and organizations who fight for rights of garment workers in the Global North. Activists from the Global North are more likely to follow the twitter account of Kalpona Akter instead of the Facebook profile of Activist Anthropologist. Creating Facebook events is the primary means for Activist Anthropologist to invite their friends and followers to participate in street protests. Facebook events do not reach garment workers who seldom use Facebook, have little time to spend on street activism on weekdays, and are sometimes skeptical about outcomes. By contrast, organizations such as BCWS can bring hundreds of garment workers to the street using their financial and organizational resources. They often provide snacks and transportations to workers to participate in the demonstration. As noted in Chapter 3, BCWS does not get involved in civil disobedience or street protests to resist oppressive corporations, factory owners, or the state in Bangladesh. I asked one of the organizers of Activist Anthropologist whether they would modify the strategy of avoiding donor funds given their stringent resources. The organizer said, "It is our vision to work at a small scale but leave a meaningful impact on workers' lives. It is important for us not to compromise with our ethics and values."<sup>77</sup>

The examples of BCWS and Activist Anthropologist extend Tufekci's argument about the distinction between networked microcelebrities and grassroots activists. In

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<sup>76</sup> Chapter 2 of this dissertation offers a detailed critique of the Accord for Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh.

<sup>77</sup> Shifa, Nazneen. (Organizer of Activist Anthropologist), in discussion with the author. May 26, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, urban cosmopolitan English-speaking former garment workers and current labor organizers, such as Kalpona Akter, have turned into microcelebrities and gained wide visibility in virtual as well as physical transnational activist networks. It is not possible to understand why they gain wider visibility in Twitter and Facebook-based activist networks without examining the nature of their material access and connections. The way these cosmopolitan labor organizers mobilize specific kinds of donor funds and speak specific kinds of language of transnational organizing, which appeals to Northern “fans” and gains attention from Northern allies, afford them the ability to frame the meaning of safety, security, and rights of Bangladeshi garment workers in both virtual and physical spaces. In this way, the distinction between networked microcelebrities in social media and grassroots activists in the physical space, as suggested by Tufekci (2013), often gets blurred in the world of garment labor activism. The space of social media is neither autonomous nor an oligopoly. It cannot always bypass the mass media, the state, NGOs, or corporations, but often is shaped by its relationship with these state and non-state actors. My ethnographic fieldwork demonstrates that networked microcelebrity activism may be successful in garnering attention from transnational networks if the local activist subscribes to the required politics. But it does not automatically reach out to what Tufekci calls “internal political publics” (2013, 859) in a developing country such as Bangladesh where most of the garment workers and many grassroots labor rights activists are not avid social media users.

Social media is an extremely contested space. A cultural geographic understanding of place-making processes in social media reveals how social media spaces are co-constituted and overlap with urban physical spaces. Urban civic morality significantly

influences interactions, confrontations, and hierarchies that are materialized and lived in spaces of social media. Exploring microcelebrity-networked activism is an exciting way to look at how urban civic consciousness produces and circulates hegemonic and counterhegemonic images of gendered or classed bodies and social relationships in social media spaces. Drawing on the case study of post-Rana Plaza neoliberal conformist voluntarism in comparison with the nationalist Shahbag protest in Bangladesh, this chapter argues that microcelebrity-networked activism, fostered mostly by urban, middle class, educated men of Bangladesh works within a boundary constituted by neoliberal and nationalist civic consciousness. It attempts to represent, normalize, and appropriate bodies and lives of women garment workers without any grounded understanding of social history or political economy of these workers' day-to-day struggles. Nevertheless, the boundary of microcelebrity activism is not a rigid one. Workers, activists, academicians, and their transnational allies often pose critical challenges to the boundary and alter hierarchical gendered and classed power relations in virtual and physical spaces in different ways.

## Chapter 5:

### Can workers of the world unite?

#### Workers (dis)uniting across the apparel supply chain

The dream of a global workers' movement to overthrow the dehumanizing practices of capitalist production has haunted radical labor activists' imaginations since 1848 and the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*. On February 21, 2014, Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of BCWS, resurrected that dream at the conclusion of her speech to the Rutgers University chapter of USAS as she urged everyone to chant together, “দুনিয়ার মজদুর এক হও!” (“Workers of the world, unite!”).

In this final chapter, I explore the prospects for transnational worker unity in the twenty-first century. Although the degradations of capitalist exploitation remain dire in many worksites across the world, the strategies to redress them remain markedly limited. The chapter begins with a synopsis of transnational solidarity-building approaches to garment labor organizing in Bangladesh. Recapping key arguments from earlier chapters, it delineates the limitations of consumer boycotts, corporate codes of conduct, “social clauses,” as well as the Alliance and the Accord. If these diverse efforts fail to remedy the abuses of global capitalism, are there other strategies that might be more successful?

To consider this possibility, I investigate two experimental transnational solidarity building initiatives that seek to establish ties among workers in the production and the consumption nodes of the apparel supply chain. First, I explore the transnational



collaboration between the Model Alliance, a New York-based non-profit organization promoting equity and sustainable practices in the fashion and modeling industries, and Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity, a Bangladeshi labor NGO promoting labor rights and leadership training for garment workers. Then, I examine the participation of Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity, in Wal-Mart's annual shareholder meetings and protest campaigns in collaboration with Wal-Mart retail workers in the USA. Despite the best of intentions, these transnational collaborations between workers in the Global North and the South fail to dismantle power asymmetries in different nodes of the supply chain. On the contrary, they reproduce neocolonial and neoliberal relations of domination. In the final section of the chapter, I provide a sober assessment of the transformative prospects of radical transnational coalitional practices.

### **Transnational solidarity building as experiments in Neoliberal Governmentality**

As discussed in Chapter 2, the history of transnational governance in the Bangladeshi garment industry can be traced back as early as in the 1990s. In 1992, the anti-child labor campaign began in the USA and called for a consumer boycott of Bangladeshi garment products made by children. The campaign resulted in "The Child Labor Deterrence Act" (1993), which was commonly known as the "Harkin's Bill," prohibiting the importation of goods produced by child labor to the US market (Brooks 2007). After the transnational consumer boycott of Bangladeshi garment products and the signing of a "Memorandum of Understanding on the Use of Child Labor in the Export-Oriented

Garment Industry in Bangladesh,” corporate codes of product proliferated in the Bangladeshi garment industry. In the absence of state enforced laws and policies, these codes became an institutional mechanism to ensure labor standards in garment factories. Nevertheless, corporate codes of conduct failed to bring long-term structural changes in garment workers’ living and working conditions. In most of the cases, these codes operated as public relations stances of transnational corporations (TNCs). They did not involve any legally binding responsibilities and did not include workers’ democratic participation (Mahmud and Kabeer 2003). Failure of corporate codes of conduct inspired transnational labor rights activists to explore further avenues for ensuring garment workers’ rights in the Global South. The “social clause” appeared as a popular proposition which suggested the use of international trade agreements and World Trade Organization (WTO) sanctions to implement labor standards. Southern labor organizers worried about protectionist implications of a social clause that might put developing countries, which do not provide resources to bring structural changes in the workplace, in a disadvantaged status (McCallum 2013, 30-32). The social clause addresses one industry at a time. It disproportionately focuses on the garment industry in Bangladesh, ignoring working conditions in the local non-manufacturing informal sector jobs such as domestic work, brick-breaking, or sex work. Because of the deplorable working conditions in the informal sector, the garment industry – which offers relatively better options – persists as a lucrative job opportunity for many Bangladeshi women who continue to offer cheap, flexible, exploitable labor with limited collective bargaining capacity (Kabeer 2004, 24-28).

Previous transnational boycott movements, corporate codes of conduct, and the social clause could not provide a sustainable mechanism to improve labor standards in the

Bangladeshi garment industry. The Tazreen factory fire, which killed more than 112 workers in 2012 (Manik and Yardley 2012), and the Rana Plaza collapse, which killed more than 1134 workers in 2013 (Hoskins 2015) illuminated the limited capacity of transnational governance structures to bring structural changes. International labor organizations, as well as corporations, became creative and proposed their strategies to address safety and security of Bangladeshi garment workers in a post-Rana Plaza world. Chapter 2 compared two transnational governance mechanisms—one proposed by corporations and the other supported by international labor rights groups—that became popular after the Rana Plaza collapse, “the Alliance” and “the Accord.”

North America based TNCs composed the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, popularly known as the Alliance, to address the heightened transnational ethical concern about Bangladeshi garment workers following the Rana Plaza collapse. The proponents of the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh or “the Accord,” comprised various international labor rights organizations, strongly criticized the Alliance. The Alliance is a corporate social responsibility (CSR) voluntary self-regulatory mechanism, which is mostly a continuation of previous corporate codes of conduct. It does not include independent union representatives as active agents of governance and does not impose adequate legal obligations on corporations to improve labor standards in Bangladeshi garment factories. The Accord, on the other hand, engages brands and local and global trade unions in a legally-binding agreement and runs independent safety inspection programs of Bangladeshi garment factories. It aspires to move away from the consumer-centric boycott model that prioritizes agency of North American consumers and labor rights activists and ignores shop floor organizing. It actively highlights workers’ agency

by incorporating Bangladeshi workers' representatives in its campaign and governance. Nevertheless, many left-leaning grassroots labor rights groups in Bangladesh remain critical about both the Accord and the Alliance for their narrow, technocratic interpretation of "safety" and "security," inadequate understanding of priorities of Bangladeshi garment workers and grassroots labor organizers, and selective choice of Third World allies.

Most of the above mentioned transnational protest campaigns replicate what Ethel Brooks calls "the new international division of labor in the politics of protest" in different ways. Brooks argues that US and European labor rights activists usually target consumers and corporations located in the Global North. They use testimonies of Third World women workers as raw materials to run their campaigns. In this way, they reproduce a "new international division of labor" (NIDL)<sup>78</sup> that appropriates bodies of Third World women for "maintenance, reproduction, and survival" of protest (Brooks 2007, xxv). Following Brooks's analysis, I propose that the 1990s consumer boycott movement of Bangladeshi garment products, the post-boycott movement proliferation of corporate codes of conduct, and the recent Accord and Alliance, overemphasize bodies, experiences, and struggles of Third World women. They investigate gendered and racialized labor relations only at the site of production (i.e., Bangladesh), thereby ascribing the role of workers mainly to "Third World women" (i.e., Bangladeshi women garment workers). They do not inquire how the new international division of labor racializes and feminizes workers in the Global North. They ignore the way women workers in both the Global North and the South are

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<sup>78</sup> The new international division of labor reveals how TNCs in the Global North take advantage of low-cost, semi- or unskilled feminized labor in the Global South, resulting in widespread manufacturing job loss in the North and creation of export-oriented, low-paid, low-skilled jobs in the South (Coe 2011, 89-101). A detailed critique of NIDL is included in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

interconnected through a network of commodities across the supply chain. They highlight how TNCs exploit cheap labor only at the site of production in the South without investigating how the site of consumption in the North also involves exploitation of racialized, feminized, and disposable workers.

For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, drawing parallels between the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire in New York City and the 2012 Tazreen factory fire in Savar, Bangladesh became a popular trend in post-Rana Plaza transnational labor organizing in the USA. Robin Berson, a US-based artist, historian, and quilter, called the Tazreen factory fire and the Rana Plaza collapse “exported tragedy,” implying that labor suppression had traveled from the USA to “today’s sweatshops” in Bangladesh and the USA had moved beyond the age of raced, classed, and gendered labor exploitation.<sup>79</sup> In another instance, Robert J.S. Ross, a Sociology Professor at Clark University, published an article titled “Bringing Labor Rights to Bangladesh” that examines achievements of what he calls the “groundbreaking Accord” (Ross 2015). Following Anne McClintock’s theorization of “panoptical time” and “anachronistic space,”<sup>80</sup> I argue that Berson’s formulation of “exported tragedy” and Ross’s evocative phrase “bringing labor rights to Bangladesh” promote a singular universal genealogy of labor history written from a panoptical privileged Northern point of view. These Northern scholarly and activist expressions situate Bangladesh in an archaic space where labor rights are non-existent. The

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<sup>79</sup> For a detailed critique of the comparison between the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire and the Tazreen factory fire, see Siddiqi 2015, 168.

<sup>80</sup> According to Ann McClintock, panoptical time refers to the way a point of privilege consumes the image of a global history (McClintock 1995, 37). Anachronistic space indicates the way colonial regulatory technologies situate colonized subjects, including women and the working class, in an archaic space that is outside the purview of the historical time of modernity (McClintock, 40).

representation of Bangladesh as an “anachronistic space” necessitates Northern labor rights interferences. It justifies so-called “groundbreaking” interventions, such as the Accord, and ignores the rich legacy of labor resistance in Bangladesh.<sup>81</sup>

Ross further states:

Two years after the April 24, 2013, collapse of the Rana Plaza building, Bangladesh has become *a laboratory to test* whether pressure from world-wide labor unions and NGOs in support of local unions and labor activists can improve life in the world’s sweatshops (Ross 2015, emphasis added).

The framing of Bangladesh as a “laboratory to test” whether Northern labor rights organizations can improve working condition of garment workers with the help of local labor rights groups raises critical concerns. Use of the Global South to test hypotheses of the Global North is not particularly a new phenomenon. Bangladesh has widely been used as a test case for various Northern experimental projects. Michelle Murphy traces the history of what she calls “experimental exuberance” in Bangladesh as the country turns into a global node for postcolonial neoliberal experimental practices. The country’s long history of colonization by the British and Pakistani rulers, postcolonial capitalist-modernist projects, and transnational imperialism resulted in a series of experiments involving family planning, population control, immunization, micro-loans, structural adjustment policies, NGOization, and so on (Murphy 2017, 78-94). Inspired by Murphy’s critique of the era of experimentality in Bangladesh, I argue that various transnational governance structures, such as transnational boycott movements, corporate codes of conduct, and the Accord, are

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<sup>81</sup> For a critique of the tendency of situating the Rana Plaza collapse as a moment of rupture and a detailed history of garment labor activism in Bangladesh, see Siddiqi 2017.

neoliberal techniques of governmentality relying on experimental collaboration among Northern corporations, Northern labor rights organizations, and their selective Southern allies. These governance structures legitimate continuing interventions of Northern external forces with the goal of reaching, in Murphy's term, "future-making assemblages" (Murphy, 80). As an experiment is a "selective practice of attention and inattention" (Murphy, 89), transnational governance structures, such as the Accord and the Alliance, pay selective attention to certain kinds of safety, such as building, electrical, and fire safety, while ignoring other kinds of safety, such as job security or safety from sexual harassment. They also selectively collaborate with Southern labor organizations that are located within their transnational financial, political, or linguistic networks, ignoring other grassroots organizing efforts.

The Northern panoptical view of representing Bangladesh as, in McClintock's term, an "anachronistic space" or the use of Bangladesh as a ground for, in Murphy's term, "experimental exuberance" reinforces a dichotomous division between Northern consumers/activists/corporations and Southern workers, where Northern actors develop experimental projects to rescue Southern workers from the archaic space they inhabit. After the Rana Plaza collapse, I noticed another mode of labor organizing that challenged the dichotomy between Northern consumers/activists/corporations and Southern workers across the apparel supply chain. I documented several transnational collaborative initiatives where workers in the Global North reached out to workers in the Global South to collaborate with each other and address suppression of labor rights in respective contexts. These initiatives acknowledge the way both Northern and Southern workers are connected through transnational networks of commodities and oppressed by neoliberal

capitalist production practices. They defy the notion that sweatshops had simply “traveled” from the North to the South. They problematize the neocolonial panoptical construction of Bangladesh as an “anachronistic space” and recognize deplorable working conditions of gendered, racialized, and classed labor force in the Global North. These cross-border collaborations between Northern and Southern workers challenge (or reinforce) the new international division of labor in the politics of protest in innovative ways. I argue that these initiatives decenter the nation, TNC, and transnational activist-centric framing of the new international division of labor and build on the conceptualization of a new global division of labor.<sup>82</sup> They recognize the complex and scattered structures of transnational production practices and acknowledge the way workers in the Global North and the South are embedded in uneven but interconnected geographies. Therefore, they have the potential to address the way various transnational capitalist territorial structures capitalize on feminized and racialized labor and bear different implications for women workers located in different nodes of the supply chain.

I further argue that transnational collaboration between workers in the Global North and the South to address workplace discrimination in respective contexts is a continuation of the previous experiment regime. Experiment does not inherently involve neocolonial and neoliberal worldviews and practices. As Murphy argues, experiment can be done in many ways, and it may entail possibilities for developing decolonial and other radical projects. Participation in an experiment does not automatically erase someone’s agency;

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<sup>82</sup> The new global division of labor refers to “...a highly complex, kaleidoscopic structure involving the fragmentation of many production processes and their geographical relocation on a global scale in ways that slice through national boundaries” (Dicken 2003, 9 cited in Coe 2011, 96-98).



rather it can be an “individual act of care, coping, collectivity, or aspiration....” (Murphy 2017, 81). Regardless of the oppressive or radical genre of experiment, according to Murphy, experiment always involves destructions and losses as it legitimizes continuous destruction and reconstruction of social relations at the micro level (Murphy, 82).

Drawing insights from Murphy’s theorization of experiment, I analyze two experimental transnational solidarity building initiatives between workers in the production and the consumption nodes of the apparel supply chain. First, I turn to the transnational collaboration between the Model Alliance, a New York-based non-profit organization promoting equity and sustainable practices in the fashion and modeling industries, and the now familiar Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity. Then, I examine the participation of BCWS Executive Director Kalpona Akter in Wal-Mart’s annual shareholder meetings and protest campaigns in collaboration with Wal-Mart retail workers in the USA. These experiments in transnational collaboration between workers in the Global North and the South illuminate the limits of possibility for radical coalitional practices in an era of neoliberal globalism.

### **“It’s an amazing relation!”**

#### **Bangladeshi garment workers meet American models**

During an interview with Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS), Akter mentioned her collaboration with a US model named Sara Ziff. In Akter’s words, “It’s an amazing relation!” She continued:

Sara Ziff read about the killing of Aminul Islam in the *New York Times*. The news shocked her so much that she immediately bought a ticket to come to Bangladesh. She just knew two names - Aminul Islam and Kalpona Akter. After coming to Bangladesh, she asked several of my colleagues, whose ideologies conflict with mine, about how to find me. Not so surprisingly, these colleagues told Sara that they didn't know anyone named Kalpona Akter. Sara couldn't find me that time and she left after a week and a half.

Later that year I went to the USA to work with some student organizers. I met a young man who told me about a model. I told him to put me in touch with the model and send an introductory email. He sent an introductory email after two days. Within 10 seconds of receiving the email, Sara Ziff replied, "Are you that Kalpona Akter I have been looking for? I went to your country to find you. How come no one knows you there?"

I told her to meet me in D.C. after two days. Sara took an early morning train to D.C. and met me at a local park. She asked me about Aminul and started crying. She videotaped an interview with me. I later collaborated with her on several occasions.<sup>83</sup>

Why did Sara Ziff, the founding director of the Model Alliance, know only two names - Kalpona Akter and Aminul Islam? Why do other names of Bangladeshi grassroots labor organizers not circulate in Northern media such as the *New York Times*? Why was Ziff surprised to learn that many people do not know Kalpona Akter in Bangladesh?

Why Akter's and Islam's names circulate in transnational activist circuits whereas other names do not require critical scrutiny of the neoliberal attention economy in which Akter and Islam are situated. By the phrase "neoliberal attention economy," I indicate a neoliberal transnational organizing space where grassroots labor rights organizations agree to mobilize donor funds in a certain way, frame social justice issues in donor-preferred language, and subscribe to donor-directed politics in exchange for individualized attention

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<sup>83</sup> Author interview with Akter, Kalpona. (Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity), May 27, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

from Northern allies. Both Akter and Islam are affiliated with BCWS – a prominent labor NGO in Bangladesh. As noted in previous chapters, BCWS receives funds from Solidarity Center, a non-profit US-based organization aligned with AFL-CIO. It closely collaborates with many other Northern labor rights organizations including but not limited to International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF), Workers Rights Consortium (WRC), United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS), Clean Clothes Campaign, and Maquila Solidarity Network. BCWS's widespread transnational financial and activist networks immerse the organization in a neoliberal attention economy, enabling it to attract attention from Northern workers located in other ends of the apparel supply chain and engage in transnational solidarity building.

Southern grassroots organizations that do not participate in the neoliberal attention economy stay outside the purview of Northern media. Stories of their experiences and struggles do not reach to Northern workers who are interested in finding Southern allies to resist exploitative corporate practices across the supply chain. For example, repression of labor organizers is not new in the history of Bangladeshi garment labor organizing. During my fieldwork in Bangladesh in 2014, three labor organizers I closely followed (Samina Luthfa – a professor at University of Dhaka, Saydia Gulrukh – an organizer of the Activist Anthropologist collective, and Moshrefa Mishu - the President of Garment Workers Unity Forum) were beaten by the police while participating in street demonstrations. Moshrefa Mishu has a long history of being arrested and tortured by the police. She was detained by state law enforcement forces during the mass uprising of garment workers in 2006, the garment workers' protest in 2010, and the Tuba protest in 2014 on various fabricated charges. None of these grassroots labor organizers made it to the headlines of the *New York*

*Times*. On the other hand, Aminul Islam, whose murder motivated Sara Ziff to come to Bangladesh and work with garment workers, was a trade unionist affiliated with BCWS. He was detained by the National Intelligence Service of Bangladesh on April 4, 2012, and found dead two days later. As of April 2017, no one has been charged with the murder of Islam. The government did not investigate the allegation of security forces' involvement (Human Rights Watch 2017). Islam's detention and killing drew strong critiques from Northern labor rights organizations and governments that usually fail to notice everyday struggles and repression of grassroots labor organizers who cannot or do not choose to be a part of the neoliberal attention economy.<sup>84</sup>



Police attacking Samina Luthfa, a Professor at University of Dhaka, and Saydia Gulrukh, an organizer of the Activist Anthropologist collective during the Tuba protest on August 6, 2014.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>84</sup> I have discussed how support of Northern NGOs protect certain local labor rights organizations, such as BCWS, from the state repression in Chapter 3.

<sup>85</sup> Posted August 6, 2014, accessed August 21, 2017, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10152532698621281&set=a.206404896280.166319.572366280&type=3&theater>

Akter suggested that labor organizers, whose political stances differed from hers, refused to provide information to Ziff about Akter. Hence Ziff was not able to trace Akter during the first Bangladesh trip. Although Akter's explanation of why Ziff could not find her at first might be true, it is also important to note that English speaking, well-traveled, transnationally connected, cosmopolitan former garment workers and current labor organizers, such as Akter, are more popular and visible in the Global North than in their home countries. An organizer of a small left-leaning labor rights group says:

Are they (organizers such as Nazma Akter<sup>86</sup> and Kalpona Akter) seriously involved in any labor movement in Bangladesh? No. Many of them have permanently settled in the USA.<sup>87</sup> They have earned a lot of money. Why do Euro-American labor rights groups pull them up from the grassroots and turn them into puppets? These organizers are only promoting neoliberalism. They frequently go to Europe and America and release statements and participate in human chains. Is this all you can do? On the other hand, we are fighting for garment workers here at the grassroots.<sup>88</sup>

Although calling Kalpona Akter a "puppet" oversimplifies her multi-layered subject positions,<sup>89</sup> it is worth inquiring why she is not visible on the streets and why her work does not appear to be "serious" to Bangladeshi left-leaning grassroots labor organizers. As noted in Chapter 3, Akter actively promotes "fighting with voice" and

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<sup>86</sup> Nazma Akter is the Executive Director of a labor NGO called Awaj Foundation. As discussed earlier in the dissertation, Awaj Foundation receives transnational corporate and activist donor funds to run a wide range of projects on welfare of Bangladeshi garment workers.

<sup>87</sup> The organizer was specifically indicating Sheikh Nazma, an early organizer of BCWS, who obtained permanent residency of the USA in 2010.

<sup>88</sup> Interview with an organizer of a small left-leaning grassroots labor rights organization, June 11, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh. Interviewee's name withheld to guarantee confidentiality.

<sup>89</sup> Kalpona Akter has strong critiques of the roles of corporations and their local suppliers and consciously refuses corporate funding to run her projects.

despises street demonstration. Akter's refusal to engage in civil disobedience can be traced back to Solidarity Center, one of her major funders, which endorses bureaucratic and legalistic ways to resolve workplace disputes. I argue that Akter's preference for "fighting with voice" idealizes a "modern labor subjectivity," a phrase borrowed from Dina Siddiqi (2017, 61), which is based on a logic of neoliberal self-regulation and responsabilization. As part of her NGO-run donor-driven projects, Akter trains garments workers on labor laws and labor rights to equip them with the necessary knowledge for bargaining with employers at a negotiation table. In this way, she disciplines workers to be responsible liberal subjects who stay off the streets and do not engage in civil disobedience. In the context of Bangladeshi garment labor organizing, which involves a long tradition of successfully mobilizing militant protests to establish workers' rights, Akter's neoliberal disciplining project is not considered "serious" by many left-leaning labor organizers.

**"Without knowing very much about Bangladeshi garment workers....I  
hopped on a plane and visited Bangladesh."**

– Sara Ziff, Founding Director, The Model Alliance

Sara Ziff's activist engagement grew out of her personal experience as a model. While working as a model, she carried a small video camera with her at work to document her life. Using the video clips, she later produced her feature documentary "Picture Me," which follows Ziff and her colleagues in the US modeling industry. Producing the

documentary is an attempt, in her words, to “give voice to my other co-working models.”<sup>90</sup> Ziff advocated for rights of child fashion models in New York and assisted in drafting legislation that offers federal protection for child models and performers (The Model Alliance).

Ziff first became interested in Bangladeshi garment workers’ experiences after taking a course on international labor rights taught by Professor Jennifer Gordon at Fordham Law School. She realized that models at the consumption end of the supply chain are the face of the brands Bangladeshi garment workers work for at the production end. She started thinking about using the visibility of models to speak for rights of Bangladeshi garment workers. In her words,

“I formed the organization (the Model Alliance) in February 2012. After a couple of months, I read about the horrible torture of Aminul Islam. I was kind of embarrassed to have spent so much time working on improving the conditions for a particular demographic who are relatively privileged. Without knowing very much about the situation in Bangladesh for garment workers, I was particularly moved by Aminul because he was organizing workers who made clothes for a brand I also worked as a face of. So, I felt the connection there. I pretty much immediately hopped on a plane and visited Bangladesh. Shortly thereafter, I connected with Kalpona Akter from the Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity.”<sup>91</sup>

Ziff wanted to assess the situation of Bangladeshi garment workers first hand. As she did not know anyone else, she sought to connect with Kalpona Akter – the Executive Director of BCWS, as her key contact in Bangladesh. Akter’s immersion in the neoliberal

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<sup>90</sup> Ziff, Sara. (Founding director, The Model Alliance), in Skype conversation with the author. June 29, 2015.

<sup>91</sup> Ziff, Sara. (Founding director, The Model Alliance), in Skype conversation with the author. June 29, 2015.

attention economy, as discussed in the previous section, made her visible and accessible to Ziff, a worker from the Global North looking for working-class transnational allies in anti-corporate struggles across the supply chain. In subsequent trips to Bangladesh, BCWS reserved hotels for Ziff and helped her arrange visits to garment workers' homes and conduct interviews. As a result, Ziff reached out to Bangladeshi labor organizers and garment workers whose interests and politics overlap with that of BCWS. It is not surprising that Ziff never got the opportunity to explore complicated power asymmetries characterizing Bangladeshi garment labor organizing since she relied on BCWS as her primary and only point of contact.

Does Ziff's initiative replicate the new international division of labor in the politics of protest? Ziff's attempt somewhat differs from the mainstream trend where Southern women workers' testimonies are appropriated by Northern activists and consumers to fit the needs of transnational protest campaigns. Although Ziff uses women garment workers' testimonies to justify her plea for organizing across the apparel supply chain, she investigates gendered labor relations both at the site of production and consumption. Her work challenges the binary division between Northern activists/ corporations and Southern workers as she continues to trace how female models experience discrimination at the consumption end of the supply chain. It is a significant contribution towards revealing how workers in the Global North and the South are interconnected through networks of commodities such as apparel.

Nevertheless, Ziff cannot entirely overcome her privileged Northern panoptical gaze for several reasons. She visited Bangladesh twice before 2014, and each of her trips did not exceed more than two weeks. Thus, she did not have enough time or resources to



unravel complex and contradicting priorities and power hierarchies in Bangladeshi garment labor organizing. Her key contacts came from a labor NGO, which is heavily immersed in the neoliberal attention economy and speaks a certain language that appeals to Northern allies. Therefore, she received very skewed views about multilayered struggles and priorities of Bangladeshi garment workers. Moreover, her Northern allies include labor rights organizations, such as International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) and Workers Rights Consortium (WRC) that selectively fund and collaborate with Bangladesh labor rights organizations, such as BCWS, which cater to their priorities.

In September 2013, shortly after the collapse of Rana Plaza, the Model Alliance organized a protest outside the Spring 2014 runway show of Nautica. American models and labor rights activists from International Labor Rights Forum (ILRF) joined Kalpona Akter from BCWS, building an unlikely alliance to resist corporate exploitation of feminized labor across the supply chain. While the Model Alliance took an exceptional initiative to highlight Northern and Southern workers' agential cross-border coalition, it lost its radical possibilities by exclusively proposing the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety to "save" lives of Bangladeshi garment workers. Ziff says at the protest:

It's important to remind everyone (that) since 2005 over 1800 garment workers have been killed in factory fires and collapses in Bangladesh, and it's also important to remind everyone the catastrophes could have been prevented with appropriate measures in place like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Ziff, preview of the documentary "Tangled Thread," 2014).

Ziff adopts the dominant Northern activist perspective that frames the Accord as a "breakthrough" and "gamechanger." Her collaboration with Northern labor rights organizations, such as ILRF and WRC, and Southern activist allies, such as BCWS, hinders

her from getting a holistic overview of how the Accord imposes a hegemonic technocratic understanding of safety and security and ignores local needs and priorities of Bangladeshi garment workers and factory owners.<sup>92</sup>



Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity, holding a banner that urges Nautica to “save lives” of Bangladeshi garment workers by signing the Accord. The protest was organized by the Model Alliance and their allies in September 2013 in New York City (Screenshot from the documentary “Tangled Thread: Labor rights, women’s rights, and call to action”).

Ziff shot a documentary called “Tangled Thread: Labor Rights, Women’s Rights, and Call to Action” during her Bangladesh trips. The documentary narrates the story of two labor organizers: Kalpona Akter, a former garment worker who organizes garment workers in Bangladesh, and Sara Ziff, a former model who organizes models in New York City.

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<sup>92</sup> For a detailed critique of the Accord and the Alliance, see chapter 2 of this dissertation.



Profile photo of the Facebook page of Tangled Thread (Tangled Thread)

Ziff recognized the gulf of difference between Bangladeshi garment workers and American models and acknowledged her privileged subject position during her interview with me and in the documentary “Tangled Thread.” She says:

I know that the garment industry here in Dhaka and the fashion industry in New York City are very different in many ways....(they are) the opposite sides of the world. The fashion industry is built on the backs of young women and men. Both industries in both sides of the world are trying to have a voice in their work (Ziff, preview of the documentary “Tangled Thread,” 2014).

Nevertheless, Ziff’s transnational organizing across the apparel supply chain could not avoid reproducing what Siddiqi calls a “culture of global moralism” where Northern

allies assume the moral obligation to “save” Third World women workers (Siddiqi 2009, 154). Ziff says:

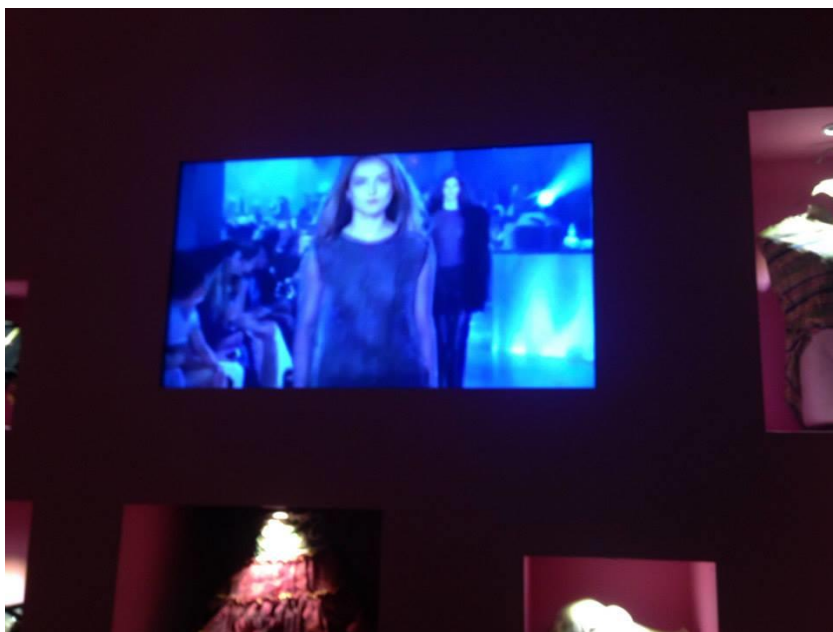
I came away believing that as the faces of the fashion industry, models are in a unique and powerful position to promote decent working conditions not only for themselves but also for the women who made the clothes we wear (Ziff, preview of the documentary “Tangled Thread” 2014 2014).

Ziff’s coalitional practices involved a top-down approach where Northern models appeared in Nautica’s Spring 2014 runway show and used their powerful positions to support Bangladeshi garment workers’ rights. By situating American models in a “powerful” position, Ziff inadvertently assumes a “powerless” status for Bangladeshi garment workers who cannot speak for themselves and other workers located at the other end of the supply chain. There was no evidence of the bottom-up involvement of Bangladeshi garment workers to demand fair treatment and equal opportunities for American models.

Interestingly, Ziff was not the only one who realized the way models at the consumption end of the apparel supply chain are connected with garment workers at the production end. During my fieldwork in Dhaka, Bangladesh, I attended a photography exhibition called “1134 – Lives, Not Numbers” organized by Pathshala South Asian Media Institute from April 22-24, 2014, to commemorate the first anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse. The exhibition displayed photographs of and artifacts collected from Rana Plaza victims and survivors. In a section of the exhibition called “Epitomb,” I noticed a TV screen displaying videos of American models walking on a runway. I asked Atish Saha, the

photographer and organizer who designed “Epitomb,” why he decided to show these video clips. Saha replied,

At the site of the Rana Plaza collapse, I found torn pieces of clothes bearing the tag of a foreign brand these models work for. I wanted to show the connection between Bangladeshi garment workers and these runway models.<sup>93</sup>



Videos of runway models displayed at the photo exhibition “1134 – Life, Not Numbers” at Pathshala South Asian Media Institute in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Saha is located outside the neoliberal attention economy of transnational protest campaigns. He is an independent photographer who struggled to raise funds to organize the photo exhibition “1134 – Lives, Not Numbers.” He was not affiliated with any Bangladeshi labor NGOs that are well-connected with Northern labor rights allies and

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<sup>93</sup> Author interview with Saha, Atish. (Independent photographer), April 22, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

speak the preferred language of transnational labor organizing. Nor had he the resources to cross the border by himself and reach out to American models as Ziff did in her collaborative work with Bangladeshi garment workers. Although Saha is a photographer and not a garment worker, his inability to engage in transnational solidarity building reveals why cross-border coalition across the supply chain is usually top-down and not bottom-up. It also demonstrates the way some actors (Akter, for example) in the Global South get more access to transnational activist networks than others.

### **Connecting garment workers with retail workers:**

#### **Organizing across the Wal-Mart supply chain**

Transnational organizing across the supply chain has widely targeted Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, biggest corporate employer, and third largest revenue-generating corporation (Stores 2012; CNN Money 2012). Workers who work for Wal-Mart in different capacities in different nodes of the supply chain have engaged in solidarity building to pressure the TNC to ensure labor standards. For example, on December 14, 2012, Wal-Mart retail workers and community supporters in ten countries across five continents observed a global day of action. They marched and rallied in front of Wal-Mart stores to protest Wal-Mart's global tendency to exploit its workers. Protestors held moments of silence to honor 112 Bangladeshi garment workers who were killed from the Tazreen factory fire just twenty days before (Making Change at Wal-Mart 2012). U.S. Wal-Mart retail workers' expression of solidarity with workers who produced clothes for Wal-Mart and were killed in the factory fire in Bangladesh offers another opportunity to explore

possibilities and contradictions of coalition-building across the transnational trajectory of apparel.



Protesters gathered outside Wal-Mart's federal lobbying offices in Washington DC. They delivered 200,000 signatures on a petition urging Wal-Mart to ensure safe working conditions in Bangladeshi garment factories (Teamster power 2012)

Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) has long been collaborating with Northern labor rights groups to resist Wal-Mart's exploitative supply chain practices. In 2010, BCWS's organizers – Kalpona Akter, Babul Akter, and Aminul Islam – were arrested and faced criminal charges for organizing Bangladeshi garment workers in factories that contract for Wal-Mart. International pressure from BCWS's Northern labor rights allies eventually forced the Bangladesh government and the Wal-Mart contractors to drop the charges. The next year, Kapona Akter visited the USA to attend the Wal-Mart shareholders' meeting. She specifically requested the TNC to cut ties with its contractors that filed charges against her and other labor organizers in Bangladesh (Claeson and Foxvog cited in Luce 2014, 189). Akter attended the Wal-Mart shareholders' meeting again

in Fayetteville, Arkansas in 2013 and called Wal-Mart for signing the Accord on Building and Fire Safety in Bangladesh. She said:

Don't you agree that the factories where Wal-Mart products are made should be safe for the workers? Wal-Mart would not have to bear the cost of the safety improvements alone. In the past few weeks, 42 companies have already signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety which represents a real commitment to workers' safety. But Wal-Mart is one of only a few major retailers refusing to sign (RespectRide 2013).



Akter protesting in Bentonville, AR with OUR Walmart workers<sup>94</sup>

Akter later joined OUR Walmart members in a demonstration at Bentonville, AR and urged Wal-Mart to prioritize workers over profit. Akter's collaboration with OUR

<sup>94</sup> Accessed August 22, 2017.

[http://reloadyoutube.com/inc/\\_related.php?id=ukfI6vIcwDc](http://reloadyoutube.com/inc/_related.php?id=ukfI6vIcwDc)



Walmart, a US-based workers' center mobilizing Wal-Mart workers, to resist Wal-Mart's exploitative supply chain practices in both the Global North and the South challenges the construction of "First World activist" fighting for "Third World worker" as promoted by the new international division of labor in the politics of transnational protests. Nevertheless, Akter simultaneously reproduces the division of labor as her testimonies were used to promote the Accord, which is Northern labor rights groups' preferred transnational governance structure to ensure Bangladeshi garment workers' workplace safety. Thus, Akter occupies an overlapping space where she juggles conflicting transnational subjectivities. On the one hand, her engagement in protests with OUR Walmart challenges the top-down approach of Northern and Southern workers' transnational collaboration illustrated by Sara Ziff's campaign. Akter subverted the rescue mission of Northern workers by protesting Wal-Mart workers' exploitation in the USA. However, she was able to do so because of her immersion in the neoliberal attention economy. She adopts language, funds, and politics of her Northern activist allies in exchange for attention, thereby acquiring the means to transcend national boundaries and mobilize transnational activist networks.

### **Towards a critique of global workerhood**

On February 21, 2014, Kalpona Akter, the Executive Director of BCWS, visited Rutgers University with Reba Sikder, a Rana Plaza collapse survivor. At a USAS sponsored event, she addressed the necessity of student activists' participation in the Accord campaign. The event was attended by more than 100 students and activists. At the

end of her speech, she urged everyone to chant together, “দুনিয়ার মজদুর এক হও,” which translates as “Workers of the world, unite!”

Can workers of the world unite? Can they engage in transnational solidarity building based on their common identity and shared experiences as workers? This chapter, and the dissertation more broadly has examined various experiments of transnational collaboration between workers in the Global North and the South. These experiments, on the one hand, entail the possibility of dismantling the hegemonic construction of the Global South as the site of the problem. They trace workers’ experiences across various nodes of the supply chain from the Global South to the North and vice versa. While doing so, they reveal limits of developing nation and TNC-centric analysis that does not question the way transnational capitalist territories and structures capitalize on gendered and racialized labor force in both the Global North and the South. Nevertheless, experimental coalition building projects do not challenge the neocolonialism and neoliberalism inherent in transnational labor organizing. Whether the experiment diffuses or reproduces power asymmetries between workers in the Global South and the North depends on the nature of participation of workers in the neoliberal attention economy. The neoliberal attention economy creates a space where Southern workers receive attention from their Northern allies only if they speak the preferred language and mobilize donor funds in a preferred way. My ethnographic fieldwork has documented how certain Southern labor rights organizations selectively receive attention from their Northern allies while others do not. Ironically, the attention from Northern allies often comes at the cost of losing attention from Southern workers and activists. Therefore, the neoliberal attention economy offers the impossible choice between engaging in transnational collaboration while losing material impact on the

ground or focusing on grounded struggles while losing transnational allies. Is it possible not to choose between these two options? Can workers engage in grass-root struggles while meaningfully collaborating with their transnational allies?

I argue that it is not possible to achieve both of the objectives at the same time as long as transnational organizing relies on the concept of what I call “global workerhood.” Drawing on the transnational feminist critiques of global sisterhood (Basu 1995, Chowdhury 2011), I argue that transnational solidarity building initiatives often rely on a universal notion of Third World/Southern workers with common histories and shared struggles. There is a significant lack of understanding of how local power asymmetries determine the nature of participation in transnational solidarity networks. While transnational organizing initiatives aspire to move beyond consumer’s agency-centric protest models and pay increasing attention to shop-floor organizing, their radical potential is obstructed by their inadvertent celebration of global workerhood.

Moshrefa Mishu, the first woman garment labor rights activist in the history of Bangladesh, eloquently said:

I have noticed that European and American progressive forces work with Bangladeshi groups who do not share their ideologies. When I visited Europe, I realized how massive the difference is! Those European activists are giving tremendous effort to transform their societies. But their Bangladeshi allies’ conflicting ideologies and activities promote neoliberalism in the labor movement. They don’t notice it.

Those who are working in the First World should come and find us and engage in solidarity building. The financial corporation is not our concern. It is more important for us to collaborate ideologically, politically, and culturally to build solidarity between Euro-American and Asian labor movements.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Author interview with Mishu, Moshrefa. (President of Garment Workers Unity Forum), June 11, 2014. Dhaka, Bangladesh.

How can Euro-American solidarity building initiatives engage in radical coalitional practices with grassroots organizations in the Global South? How can they move beyond the attention economy, which selectively prioritizes certain grassroots initiatives while erasing others?

It is important to engage in coalition building based on an in-depth understanding of differences between workers in the Global North and the South as well as among workers within the Global South. Global workerhood remains uncritically celebratory of common struggles, which often result in the choice of Southern allies whose priorities overlap with that of the Northern counterparts. The trend was observed in transnational solidarity building around the Accord campaign after the Rana Plaza collapse. North American labor rights activists, as well as workers, overwhelmingly reached out to BCWS, a grassroots labor NGO in Bangladesh, which replicated the Northern perspective of the way Accord would ensure safety, security, and rights for Bangladeshi garment workers. Whoever spoke against the Accord was assumed to have a pro-corporate, pro-capitalist agenda in North American labor rights circles. No serious effort was made to understand why some left-leaning progressive small grassroots labor rights groups in Bangladesh also remained highly skeptical about the liberatory potential of the Accord.

It is also necessary to consider the contemporary trends of NGOization of the labor movement in the Global South while engaging in transnational solidarity building around labor rights. NGOs in Bangladesh have been somewhat successful in addressing sexist violations and discrimination such as domestic violence or child marriage. Nevertheless, they face overwhelming challenges while addressing corporate-capitalist structures that exploit working-class women workers. There is also a critical absence of state enforcement

of labor laws and standards. Against this backdrop, labor NGOs emerge to fill the vacuum. Most of the labor NGOs are sponsored by either corporations or Northern labor rights organizations. Even NGOs that are funded by non-corporate sources fail to engage in radical coalitional practices as they face the risk of losing registration if they get involved in “anti-state” activities. Therefore, they carefully resort to bureaucratic non-confrontational ways of dealing with labor disputes, which has not been historically successful in achieving garment workers’ rights in Bangladesh. Left-leaning grassroots organizations that carefully stay outside the regime of NGOization can maintain their radical philosophies and practices. Nevertheless, they lose access to transnational activist networks as most of the transnational collaborative initiatives circulate within the NGO regime. There is also a snowball impact. Labor NGOs that receive transnational logistical and funding support become popular in the neoliberal attention economy. They gain attention not only from their Northern allies who provide funds but also from Northern voluntary grassroots initiatives that operate outside the transnational NGO regime. That is why unlikely alliances between donor-driven non-confrontational labor NGOs in the Global South and grassroots progressive radical activist initiatives in the Global North often emerge. The tendency frustrates many progressive grassroots labor rights organizers in the South. Nevertheless, their access to transnational progressive solidarity networks remains limited because of their rejection of the donor-driven NGO model.

Lastly, it is not just Euro-American labor rights circles that rely on global workerhood in their organizing initiatives. My ethnographic observations of labor organizing in social media have demonstrated the way many urban-middle-class educated self-proclaimed activists in Bangladesh also reinforce the notion of global workerhood as

they get involved in “neoliberal conformist voluntarism,” class-specific, pro-capitalist, ethnocentric universalism, thereby reducing social justice to boots-strap upward mobility. They often try to “save” garment workers based on a hegemonic middle-class assumption about workers’ struggles. There are, therefore, scattered hegemonies within the Global South where garment workers are constituted as a coherent group based on a universal understanding of global workerhood regardless of their multilayered axes of identities. It is important to subvert global workerhood not only between interactions of Northern and Southern actors but also among Southern actors.

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