

Bangladesh: Activism, Photography and Workers' Collective Leadership: A Conversation with Taslima Akhter

Saturday 8 July 2023, by [AKHTER Taslima](#), [KANG Youbin](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2023).

April 24th, 2023 marks the 10th anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse, which killed more than a thousand garment workers in Bangladesh.

With one of the lowest average wages in the world and the leading exporter of ready-made garments (RMG), Bangladesh has since been tied to the image of dead workers, fabric piles, and rubbles of cement by this deadly disaster. The second-most fatal industrial disaster in history was a catalyst for a global reckoning of the deadly externalities of the global garment industry.

In this conversation, Youbin Kang, a researcher who [studied](#) the transnational labor advocacy following the Rana Plaza collapse, spoke with Taslima Akhter.

A labor activist and photographer, Taslima Akhter is one of the most widely recognized figures in Bangladesh working on the ground in labor and gender justice spaces, including through her leadership of the Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity (BGWS).

Bringing decades of organizing experience and keen insight on the state of the garment industry current, and past, the conversation explores themes of organizing, activism, art, gender, autonomy, agency, and solidarity. It reminds us of the varied positionalities and rich tradition of radical organizing in Bangladesh. Grassroots activists have the most vested interests and immediate responses to ensure that garment workers' lives.

Youbin Kang (YK): I met you at an event presenting a documentary about fast fashion and Rana Plaza in Dhaka a few years ago. We spoke at length about your organizing work. Could you tell us about your leadership within Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity and the work you have been doing in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector?

Taslima Akhter (TA): I am the President of Bangladesh Garment Workers Solidarity (BGWS). In Bangladesh, 4 million workers work tirelessly from dawn to dusk, contributing to our country's economy and the global supply chain. I am inspired daily by the many young women workers who make up 60% of the labor force. Since 2008, I have been advocating for workers' rights with BGWS, primarily focusing on wages, working conditions, unionization, and protections against harassment.

Currently, the gross minimum monthly wage of 8,000 BDT (approximately \$74 USD) is inadequate for workers to maintain a decent standard of living. We are demanding that the minimum wage be increased to 25,000 BDT (approximately \$235), and we are organizing a united movement to achieve this goal. We believe that the government, owners, and buyers are responsible for improving workers' living conditions. So, we are building pressure and bargaining with local and international stakeholders to ensure workers' rights are upheld. This includes organizing protests, strikes, and struggles for wages, safety, and trade union rights, which are crucial for fair and just working

conditions.

My priority right now is to cultivate a collective leadership devoted to promoting workers' interests. We are aware of the traps set by owners and the government to create yellow unions (i.e. corrupt company unions) and divert workers' leaders from their strengths. Therefore, we want a group of leaders to lead a united movement for workers. To achieve this, we engage in frequent demonstrations and protests and regularly organize study circles, discussions, and workshops on legal rights, working conditions, history, and the theory of workers' movements. I am also interested in the future generation of workers, and we work with garment workers' children through cultural schools and other activities.

We are committed to preserving the history of workers' movements in Bangladesh, which is often omitted from mainstream history education. We believe that grassroots knowledge creation is essential for change, and we disseminate our findings through writings, posters, leaflets, and books. Some of our works, such as our publication on Rana Plaza, are translated into English and publicly available online. I always try my best to be a part of the struggle for workers' rights and look forward to making progress in the years to come.

This year we are focusing on this call: "Workers of the world unite & observe the Rana Plaza killing day globally. Remember the dead fight for the living, ensure 25,000 (215 USD) wage, ensure the highest punishment of perpetrators." We also believe that May Day and the 8th of March, international women's day should also be observed globally. By making the Rana Plaza anniversary a globally observed day, we could build solidarity with international allies, well-wishers, and other worker organizations.

YK: You told me your student activist background brought you to labor organizing. Tell us more about that transition and the relationship between the student movement in Bangladesh to the labor movement.

TA: I was actively involved in left-leaning student politics from 1994 to 2007. After completing my Master's and MPhil from Dhaka University, I worked with a women's rights organization that fought for floating women workers' rights. We believed that women's issues were not just a middle-class issue. Women's rights are also about organizing working-class women at the grassroots level. Although initially hesitant to get involved with garment workers' organizations, I ultimately founded an organization for workers' rights with several student activists in 2008. We aimed to work with both male and female workers.

The path of the working-class movement is more challenging than student politics. Still, I learned from my journey that the middle class has a significant role, namely collaborating with the working class to bring societal change. Maxim Gorky's "Mother" profoundly impacted my political activism, and I believe that a democratic transition requires the middle class to align itself with the vast population of working-class people. As a student activist, I served as a member and eventually became the president of the Bangladesh Chatra Federation. I have always believed in engaging with working-class people, which led me to join the 2006 wage movement, volunteer at an evening school for workers, and learn from the workers' movement and its leaders, such as Moshrefa Mishu.

In 2008, we founded our organization, BGWS, which focuses on workers' rights. I also resumed my photography studies at the Pathshala South Asian Media Institute. During my time there, I chose to document the lives of garment workers. I firmly believed that their movement was a critical issue in our country. The struggles of workers who earn more than 80% of the foreign export income for the country should be a concern for every citizen. Garment workers' issues are intertwined with questions of democratic transition and politics, citizens' rights, and gender issues. For me, it is both

political and personal.

In the labor movement, we often see students eagerly joining the workers' movement after completing their studies. For example, during the rescue mission of Rana Plaza, I worked with a group of students who were members of the organization, Bangladesh Chatro Federation, and with other young students for 17 days to rescue workers from the rubble, alongside local people, fire fighters, workers, army personnel, and others. However, due to the political environment of fear and the lack of democracy, the new student generation is not as interested in politics or the workers' movement. Nevertheless, I have longstanding hope that students from the middle class and the working class will be eager to fight for our country and for workers.

YK: Student protests are indeed very influential in democratic and labor struggles. You also mentioned your time at the Pathshala Institute, where you developed your photographic practice. Many activists mentioned your photographs when they suggested that I meet with you. Captured in the rubble of Rana Plaza, they caught the attention of many people worldwide. Could you tell us a little about your photographic practice and how that relates to your organizing work?

TA: [Photography](#) is crucial to my activism. There is no such thing as an innocent or neutral position for any photographer, journalist, or human being. Sometimes, we choose what to photograph based on the photography market or Western ideals rather than our interests or the benefit of the people. As photographers, we should question the role of photography and the photographer in our society and the relevance of our activities. Photography plays an essential role in preserving history. I learned from Pathshala how to use photography as a tool for activism and have since used it to capture critical moments.

[One of my most powerful photographs](#) depicts a couple's dead bodies under the rubble. The image caught the attention of a worldwide audience as two workers were, in their last moments, standing together and trying to save each other. The photo conveys that garment workers are working in unsafe conditions and that owners, governments, and buyers treat them as mere profit-making tools rather than human beings or citizens.

This photo has created a sense of social emotion within the local and global communities, fostering greater solidarity and ties than ever before for the sake of workers. Photography can play a crucial role in effecting change. Like film, painting, and many other artistic media, photography has its own language and methods of communication. A photographer should not just resort to earning a living from photography but also should strive to raise their voices, express their views, and relay their thoughts through this medium. A camera is just a tool, but the photographer behind it has ideas and feelings to create photographs representing their ideology, through which people can take initiatives towards change.

YK: Regarding labor politics, I know that BGWS is a large organization doing important work. However, it is not formally recognized under Bangladeshi Labor Law as a bargaining agent but more as a general solidarity union for many precarious workers employed in the industry. We also discussed about how this relates to the political orientation and commitments of BGWS. Please tell us more about this.

TA: As per our national constitution, we have the right to form organizations to express our collective voice and protect our interests, whether or not we are registered. Organizing is our constitutional right.

Effective unions are becoming increasingly limited in Bangladesh. The central labor battles are

being fought outside of unions in the streets, through legal and cultural battles. Although there are numerous active labor organizations, they struggle to secure trade union registration. Nevertheless, workers join unions not only out of necessity but also for their desire to stand tall with dignity. They have shown active engagement in recent years over wage struggles, protests over worker deaths, and during the pandemic. And their fight for fair labor practices continues.

Our country's trade union rights are limited, and unionization is much more complicated than it appears on paper. The right to unionize often depends on political processes, and being in the "good books" of the state-owner-buyer complex is required to secure trade union registrations. Although some factories allowed unionization after the Rana Plaza tragedy, most unions only exist on paper.

It is an open secret in worker neighborhoods that trade unions struggle to be democratic and effective. History has shown again and again how networks formed to crush movements ensnare workers in ways that make it impossible to get out. These syndicates produce their own "pocket," "payroll," or "pet" leaders who receive commissions and cuts, festival bonuses, mobile phones, and other gifts in exchange for ensuring that movements are snuffed out. The industrial police and various detective branches also work to keep workers living in fear.

At the same time, NGOs offer glamorous visions of a better life with their training programs for organizers and leaders, complete with expensive venues, food, participation honorariums, and workshops in luxurious hotels across the country and abroad. Even professors, intellectuals, and researchers who sing the praises of industrialists receive funding and gifts, and journalists also have their incentives. This works together to craft public opinion and maintain the status quo, backed by repressive state apparatuses and intimidation tactics.

Yet what has often played a decisive role in demanding, winning, and claiming rights is the movement's strength in the streets. The field of labor politics is complex, but we are working to develop a collective leadership committed to advancing workers' interests and avoiding the traps set by owners and the government. This is the complex field of labor politics.

YK: It has been ten years since the collapse of Rana Plaza. What, if anything has changed? Have you witnessed any improvements in the garment sector?

TA: 2013 indeed marked a significant turning point in the history of the labor movement, as it was the year that the Rana Plaza killing occurred, resulting in the loss of over 1,175 lives. This event highlighted the harsh realities behind the "Made in Bangladesh" label, causing the world to focus on the working conditions of Bangladeshi garment workers.

Since then, several changes have occurred, such as the establishment of Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh ("Accord") [1] and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety ("Alliance") [2], improvements in factory building structures and work environments, and the emergence of "green factories." However, the garment industry has become a \$100 billion industry for the owners, while the culprits of the Rana Plaza disaster have yet to be brought to justice. The workers who survived the building collapse continue to suffer from physical and mental wounds, even ten years later.

Furthermore, paper unions and participatory committees have increased, raising questions about their effectiveness and the inadequate wages set for workers. The demand for a higher minimum wage to meet daily needs has been ignored, and workers still need to receive proper compensation under the Labor Law. The perpetrators of the Tazreen-Rana Plaza disasters have not been punished, leading to the question of change or development for whom - workers or factory owners?

Although some improvements have been made in the garment industry since the Rana Plaza

disaster, a lot of work needs to be done to ensure living wages, fair working conditions, and just compensation for workers. The focus must be on ensuring that development benefits workers rather than just factory owners.

YK: Labor policymakers and academics have been keenly interested in the Bangladesh Accord as being an important regulation that came out of Rana Plaza. Could you tell me about the impact the Accord has had on your organizing work in the industry?

TA: After the tragic incident of the Rana Plaza killing in 2013, Accord and Alliance stepped up to ensure accountability within the supply chain. However, the Bangladeshi government has failed to take adequate initiatives to protect the workers in its factories. This lack of action raises concerns about the government's commitment to our economic self-reliance.

While Accord and Alliance have played an essential role in addressing the safety of the garment industry as a part of the global supply chain, it is imperative to establish a national committee comprising local experts to ensure the development of our national capacity.

YK: More generally, what are some of the biggest concerns on your mind concerning garment sector workers? What is behind their exploitation?

TA: Some of the biggest concerns regarding garment sector workers include poor working conditions, low wages, gender discrimination, restricted freedom of expression, and lack of labor rights. These issues affect not only the garment workers' well-being but also the economic and social progress of the country.

Gender, colonialism, and the subaltern positions of garment workers are interlinked and reinforce each other, leading to worker exploitation in the garment industry. This exploitation results from global capitalism that prioritizes profit over workers' well-being. We must advocate for workers' rights, fair wages, and safe working conditions to establish a more equitable and just system that values human dignity over corporate profits.

YK: To our international readers, who are at once concerned individuals, researchers, and consumers, what, in your opinion, could they do to ensure that people don't die at the workplace producing for the global garments supply chain?

TA: After the Rana Plaza killing, global consumers, concerned individuals, political and cultural activists, researchers, and advocates played an important role in addressing the safety and well-being of workers in the global garment supply chain. Holding brands accountable, supporting fair trade, and engaging with advocacy groups are effective ways for consumers to take action.

Likewise, researchers can contribute by studying the impact on workers and highlighting ways companies can improve their practices. Cultural and political activists can also raise awareness of the issues related to workers' living conditions. Finally, international readers can support grassroots organizations fighting for workers' rights. Our collective responsibility is to demand accountability and promote fair and ethical wages and labor practices to prevent workplace fatalities in the global garment supply chain.

Youbin Kang

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P.S.

Asian Labour Review

<https://labourreview.org/activism-photography/>

Footnotes

[1] The Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (the Accord), signed on May 15th 2013, is a five year independent, legally binding agreement between global brands and retailers and trade unions designed to build a safe and healthy Bangladeshi Ready Made Garment (RMG) Industry. The agreement was created in the immediate aftermath of the Rana Plaza building collapse. See:

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/the-accord-on-fire-and-building-safety-in-bangladesh/>

[2] Following the Rana Plaza building collapse, North American buyers and retailers formed the Alliance undertaking a five-year plan, which set timeframes and accountability for inspections, trainings and worker empowerment programmes in Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector. In 2018, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety has announced end of its tenure in Bangladesh. See:

<https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/bangladesh-alliance-for-bangladesh-workers-safety-announces-end-of-its-tenure/>