

# **Social upgrading in the Bangladeshi garment sector since Rana Plaza: Why some governance matters more than others**

Nora Lohmeyer, Elke Schuessler, Naila Kabeer<sup>1</sup>

## **Abstract**

Recent research has highlighted several pathways to social upgrading in global supply chains. We take a closer look at recent developments with regards to these pathways in the Bangladeshi garment industry. Focusing on the variety of different potential paths allows us to take the initiatives of different actors as well as their interplay into account. Building on our own empirical research as well as other recent studies, we show that – especially since the Rana Plaza factory collapse – improvements can be observed with regards to outcome standards (e.g., working hours, building safety, etc.) but are still lacking in other areas, including important process rights. In analyzing these developments, we show that a hierarchy exists between different paths that have contributed to these improvements. While several paths to social upgrading have been activated since Rana Plaza, the extent to which this is the case differs. Critically, in Bangladesh, those paths that matter the most for the overall governance arrangement remain the least activated. We argue that the identified hierarchy therefore limits possibilities for more comprehensive and sustainable social upgrading. We conclude by formulating policy recommendations to support upgrading in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

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<sup>1</sup> Nora Lohmeyer, Assistant Professor of Organizational Design and Development, Nijmegen School of Management, Radboud University, Heyendaalseweg 141, 6525 AJ Nijmegen, Netherlands.

Elke Schüßler, Professor of Business Administration, Johannes Kepler University, Glaserstr. 38, 4040 Linz, Austria.

Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development, Department of Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science, 50 Duncan Terrace, London N1 8AG, UK.

## **Introduction**

Workers in global garment supply chains suffer from frequent labor rights violations, including low wages, excessive overtime, abusive behavior by superiors, as well as health and safety risks. Trade unions and NGOs have long been concerned about a downward spiral in labor standards within global production. These conditions have come to global attention due several deadly factory accidents, with the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 alone leading to the death of more than 1.000 people.

Given these issues, inquiring into strategies to improve working conditions in global supply chains remains a theoretical and societal imperative. In this vein, scholars and practitioners alike have shown interest in social upgrading initiatives in global supply chains. While upgrading more generally refers to the move to higher value-added activities in production, social upgrading refers to a repositioning of workers with regards to their working conditions as well as process and outcome rights (Barrientos et al., 2011). Social upgrading might involve improvements in measurable standards (e.g., type of employment or wages) as well as enabling rights (e.g., freedom of association, collective bargaining) and is intricately linked to the decent work agenda of the International Labor Organization (ILO).

Particular attention has been paid to the various pathways through which social upgrading can be achieved. While earlier research viewed social upgrading mainly as a consequence of economic upgrading, more recently alternative pathways have been conceptualized (see especially Gereffi & Lee, 2016). In this paper, we shed light on recent developments with regards to different pathways to understand the potentials and limitations for meaningful social upgrading in the Bangladeshi garment sector. Particularly, we ask whether the underlying governance arrangements have changed sufficiently and reflect on how they would need to change further.

Building on data from a large comparative research project as well as other recent empirical research, we shed light on the achievements that have been made with regard to different pathways and their effects on workers after the Rana Plaza factory collapse. We show that improvements can be observed regarding outcome standards (e.g., working hours, building safety, etc.) but are still lacking in other areas, including important process rights. Our chapter will take a closer look at these changes, using the framework of pathways to social upgrading, introduced by Gereffi and Lee (2016), and specify where further improvements are needed to support upgrading in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

Our results add to extant literature by empirically investigating recently conceptualized paths to social upgrading, shedding light on the role played by different actors and private, public,

and societal initiatives. Taking both the vertical and horizontal relationships between those actors as well as the interplay of different initiatives into account allows for a more holistic view on social upgrading as a basis for better understanding the governance conditions for social upgrading (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). In our case, looking at the overall governance arrangement allows to identify a hierarchy between different paths, that is, to better understand the relative importance of different paths as well as their interdependence in either supporting or hindering each other's further development. Our analysis therefore makes the case for taking the mutual dependencies of different paths into account when designing governance mechanisms to social upgrading.

In the following, we will begin by positioning our study in extant literature on social upgrading in global supply chains with a particular focus on the garment industry and then provide insights into our data and methodology. We will present our findings by focusing on the six pathways to upgrading outlined by Gereffi and Lee (2016). The chapter ends with a discussion of our findings as well as the formulation of policy recommendations.

### **Different Trajectories to Social Upgrading**

When it comes to the question of how social upgrading can be brought about, different trajectories have been discussed. Early upgrading literature assumed a close link between economic and social upgrading, with the latter seen as an almost automatic consequence of the former (e.g., Knorringer and Pegler 2007; Puppim de Oliveira 2008). It has, however, been shown that the relationship may be complicated by factors such as the type of employment (e.g., informal vs. formal work) or gender (e.g., male vs. female workers), highlighting the importance of additional factors influencing social upgrading and, thus, the need for a more fine-grained understanding of different trajectories leading towards social upgrading (see Barrientos et al., 2011; but also Anner, 2020).

In this light, Gereffi and Lee (2016) have highlighted several alternative trajectories towards social upgrading. The *market-driven path* relies on market mechanisms, i.e., consumers and buyers rewarding suppliers with better working conditions, thereby potentially incentivizing investments in working conditions by suppliers. The *corporate social responsibility (CSR)-driven path* relies on the compliance regime of Western lead firms, i.e., mostly lead firms imposing codes of conducts on their suppliers. The *multi-stakeholder path* relies on the collaborative efforts of a diverse set of actors, jointly working towards the improvement of working conditions, with the main strengths (especially compared to the CSR-driven path) being the

collective nature of these multi-stakeholder initiatives. The *labor-centered path* relies on the important role that labor activists and unions can have in promoting social upgrading (see also Lakhani et al., 2013 focus on qualification of workers as relevant factor for their working conditions). The *cluster-centered path* is initiated by cluster firms in production clusters to improve working conditions within the cluster, i.e., highlighting that leading suppliers can be standard makers as well, with the key mechanism of this path being cluster-based collective actions toward the improvement of labor conditions. Lastly, the *public governance path* highlights that – despite the increasing importance of social and private modes of governance – public regulations remain important for social upgrading, e.g., through effective implementation of labor law that cover all suppliers under their jurisdiction (as compared to only a few that form part of agreements or multi-stakeholder initiatives (MSIs)).

Gereffi and Lee (2016) hereby assume that the strength of each path depends on governance arrangements, which are marked by local (horizontal) and global (vertical) public, private, and social arrangements. For instance, economic upgrading is most likely to occur where power asymmetries between lead firm and supplier are low (Gereffi et al., 2005). The garment industry has been described as an example of “captive governance,” with large power asymmetries existing between powerful lead firms – usually Western MNCs – and suppliers (Gereffi et al., 2005). The captivity of suppliers in these relationships results from the combination of their limited capabilities and low barriers of market entry on the one hand, and high dependence on lead firms organizing complementary activities and providing detailed product specifications on the other. Such private governance arrangements are embedded in social (e.g., civil society) and public (local, regional, national, transnational regulation) governance systems.

In a (mostly literature-based) comparative study of economic and social upgrading in four industries (automobile, garment, electronics, IT) and six countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, China, India, South Africa, Vietnam) (see Dünhaupt et al., 2020), the Bangladeshi garment industry has been described as experiencing low economic and social upgrading, with the latter including little increases in real wages, little union power and only small improvements of working conditions mostly regarding fire and building safety. The authors suggest that upgrading in Bangladesh can be related to agreements such as the Bangladesh Accord. Building on these ideas, and our own empirical data on Bangladesh garment workers collected in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza disaster, our aim in this chapter is to look in more detail at social upgrading outcomes in this industry in the light of different initiatives and pathways.

We find this conceptualization of different pathways a fruitful theoretical lens as it allows us to take the different private, public, and societal actors involved in upgrading initiatives as well

as their interactions into account. On the one hand, this allows us to compare different initiatives and evaluate their potentials and shortcomings. On the other hand, this allows us to shift the focus from looking at isolated initiatives and sub-groups of actors towards a more integrated view that sees them as a part of an institutional infrastructure (Waddock, 2008) or texture of transnational regulation (Pries & Seeliger, 2013) as well as embedded in broader politico-economic conditions. This helps in understanding the interplay between different upgrading initiatives as well as the conditions for their effectiveness.

## **Methodology and Data**

Our data stem from a large comparative research project seeking to understand the responses of lead firms, suppliers, and policy makers to the Rana Plaza disaster in Bangladesh in 2013 as well as resulting changes in working conditions for garment workers in Bangladesh's garment export factories ([www.garmentgov.de](http://www.garmentgov.de)). As part of the project, our research team collected interviews with 79 lead firms in four countries (Australia, Germany, Sweden, UK), a survey of 152 factory managers, a survey of 1,500 garment workers employed in over 200 Bangladeshi garment factories (and additional follow-up interviews), and 70 interviews with stakeholders (non-governmental organizations, unions, industry experts, investors, and government representatives). Parts of the findings have been presented in the final project report of the Garment Supply Chain Governance Project<sup>2</sup> as well as in project-related publications (see e.g., Frenkel, Rahman, & Rahman, 2020; Kabeer, Huq, & Sulaiman, 2019; 2020; Oka, Egels-Zandén & Alexander, 2020; Rahman & Rahman, 2020; Schuessler et al., 2019a, 2019b, 2020).

## **Social Upgrading in the Bangladeshi Garment Industry – An Unlikely Case?**

In the following, we are going to discuss the different social upgrading trajectories for the case of the Bangladeshi garment sector based on our own and others' research. We argue that – mainly as a result to the CSR-driven and multi-stakeholder paths – improvements with regards to relevant outcome standards can be observed in garment factories. However, given the specific conditions of this country and sector, most other paths towards social upgrading remain weak, with more systemic changes (e.g., regarding process rights) unlikely to occur.

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://www.wiwiss.fu-berlin.de/forschung/Garments/Medien/04-09-Changes-in-the-Governance-final.pdf>.

## Economic and Social Upgrading in Bangladesh: Status Quo

When it comes to economic upgrading in the Bangladeshi garment sector, Moazzem & Sehrin (2016) argue that the sector has made significant strides in terms of process and product upgrading, less so, however, in functional upgrading. That is, while investments have been made with regards to technology and productive capacity (process upgrading) and the composition and complexity of products has changed as well (product upgrading), little changes have occurred when it comes to overtaking new functions from buyers, such as research and development, design, or marketing (functional upgrading). The authors furthermore caution hopes for further upgrading, given “that the factors that have thus far contributed to product and process upgrading [i.e., investments in technology, machinery, and human resource development, preferential market access, and policy support by the Government, the authors] may not be adequate for further upgrading in the value chain.” (p. 90) The authors highlight that especially investments in ensuring physical and social compliance, i.e., worker safety and security in the workplace and better living and working standards, would be necessary (ibid.). The original idea of social upgrading based on these advancements in economic upgrading thus seems unlikely in Bangladesh, given that the government seeks to achieve its ambitious sector growth goals on a strategy of gaining competitive advantage through low wages, which are often not sufficient to provide a livelihood.

At the same time, involvement in the garment sector has brought many benefits especially for women. Studies have shown that the sector offers women from poorer households greater regularity of wages, more social benefits and a higher level of rights (e.g., paid leave, maternity leave, medical care) as well as a greater willingness to take collective action in defense of them than other forms of employment available to them (Kabeer and Mahmud, 2004; Mahmud and Kabeer, 2003). It has also been associated with reduced levels of domestic violence, increased female education and postponement of age of marriage and childbearing (Salway et al., 2005; Heath & Mobarak, 2015).

The Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 has shifted the world’s attention to the situation of garment workers in Bangladesh. Since then, a multitude of public and private governance initiatives, both local and global, have been developed to make factories in Bangladesh safer. While the multitude of initiatives being implemented after Rana Plaza makes it difficult to tease out the causal impact of particular initiatives, our large-scale worker survey showed some relevant improvements (see Kabeer et al., 2019, 2020). Most importantly, we see relevant improvements with regards to *outcome standards*, including bonuses and overtime pay, social

benefits and job security as well as health and safety issues. While workers received an average basic salary of 7,200 takas per month, this wage is 53% of the ‘living wage’ estimated by the Global Living Wage Coalition (13,620 Takas) and just 20% of the 36,385 takas estimated by the Asia Floor Wage (see Schuessler et al., 2019b).

However, we see less improvements in terms of *process rights*. The latter include workers’ knowledge about worker rights to representation and participation in decision-making that affects their work including general treatment by management. On the question of knowledge, many more workers (71%) knew about company codes of conduct than about national labor laws (40%). At the same time, responses to questions about trade unions revealed widespread lack of knowledge among workers about their presence and functions with very few (5%) workers reporting a union in their factory. There was much more positive evidence on the existence and roles of worker participation committees (WPCs) (see discussion below). On questions of dignity and respect in the workplace, a high percentage of workers (over 73%) reported having experienced abuse and mistreatment at their current factory. This included mainly verbal, but also some reports of physical abuse. Reported abuses were mainly linked to failure to meet production quotas, with most (80%) workers identifying supervisors as the main perpetrators. However, many workers (57%) reported some improvement in supervisor behavior since Rana Plaza.

These results show clear limits to the extent of social upgrading that has been achieved, particularly regarding process rights. The current Covid-19 crisis provides further evidence for the limited structural improvements achieved in global garment supply chains to date. Below we examine the role the different social upgrading paths have played in leading to these outcomes in recent years (2013-2020) and reflect on whether the underlying governance arrangements have changed sufficiently as well as how they would need to change further.

### **Market-driven path**

This pathway depends on the demand for garments produced with high social standards being strong enough to force cluster firms to improve labor conditions (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). In the garment industry, this pressure has always been low, an exception being the intense campaigns against child labor in sports supply chains in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These had triggered a first wave of corporate codes of conduct being developed by lead firms, thus pushing them to pay closer attention to labor standards in their supply chains (Fichter & Sydow, 2002). Yet, since then evidence has amounted to show the ineffectiveness of codes (e.g., Barrientos &

Smith, 2007; Locke, 2013; Locke et al., 2009). While they have indeed led to stronger compliance measures on the side of the lead firms, compliant suppliers have rarely been systematically rewarded (e.g., Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014), thus not activating the market-driven pathway based on clear incentives for cluster firms to improve labor standards. Conversely, a focus on cost competitiveness and low wages accompanied by a pronounced integration of women – as the more ‘docile’ workers – into the garment labor force marks many cluster strategies in the global south (Munir et al., 2018). End consumers, with the exception of a niche market for fair trade garments, have fully embraced the fast fashion business model, marked by a double pressure on prices and lead times (e.g., Taplin, 2014).

Since Rana Plaza, little has changed about this market dynamic. Based on an analysis of institutional and regulatory responses to Rana Plaza in Germany, Lohmeyer and Schuessler (2018) conclude that dominance is given to production-oriented measures, i.e., attempts to regulate labor standards at the point of production by auditing and monitoring supplier factories. Yet, such measures do not provide clear economic incentives for social upgrading. Instead, lead firms’ purchasing practices are tied to a double or triple squeeze on prices, lead times and fluctuating orders that negatively affect working conditions (e.g., Anner, 2019, 2020). Rana Plaza did, however, intensify attention to compliance (see also next section). Especially firms with low prior baseline standards were pushed by media and stakeholder pressure resulting from the Rana Plaza factory collapse to strengthen their supply chain and sourcing policies (Schuessler et al., 2019a). Yet, continued pressure on purchasing prices and additional cost incurred by remediation and compliance activities may limit suppliers’ capacity to upgrade, as our data suggests. Our factory manager survey showed that a third (33%) of factories earned between 0 and 2% annual profit; 38% between 2 and less than 5%; while only 24% of factories reported a profit of 5% or more. These factories now have to invest in improvements, e.g., in building structure, but only 12% of lead firms in our sample paid higher purchasing prices for garments to support factory improvements and only 25% directly paid for factory initiatives regarding workplace or building safety. Lead firms consider themselves as stuck in a hypercompetitive market, and lead firms’ profit margins reach beyond 5% only in the case of the largest and most profitable players.<sup>3</sup> Thus, without more systemic changes in business models, the market-driven path is unlikely to intensify social upgrading for garment workers.

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<sup>3</sup> See e.g., [http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~adamodar/New\\_Home\\_Page/datafile/margin.html](http://pages.stern.nyu.edu/~adamodar/New_Home_Page/datafile/margin.html).



## CSR-driven path

The CSR-driven path relies on Western lead firms' implementation of CSR policies and practices (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). In global garment supply chains, Western lead firms have for a long time mostly relied on codes of conducts and related auditing and monitoring approaches to social compliance. As argued above, although attention to compliance has intensified since Rana Plaza due to a fear of reputational damage, CSR policies and practices remain decoupled from purchasing practices, thereby keeping in place many of the practices that lie at the roots of substandard working conditions in garment factories (e.g., Amengual et al., 2020). Some firms have recognized these limitations, not least because they became evident in the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory itself – a factory that only few days before it collapsed had been audited. As research from our project shows, some lead firms try to go beyond compliance by engaging in capacity building or even advocacy (Oka et al., 2020) – on their own or together with other stakeholders (see next section). The capacity building approach implies a shift from 'policing' suppliers towards building more commitment-based relations based on information sharing and problem solving between buyers and suppliers. The advocacy approach goes one step further, including firms engaging in brand advocacy and pressuring governments to take regulatory action – mostly in producer, but more recently also in buyer countries (e.g., Oka, 2017; LeBaron & Rühmkorf, 2019). In recent years, groups of brands have for instance engaged in writing letters, talks with government officials or boycotts in response to governments' handling of striking workers (see e.g., Oka, 2017 for the case of Cambodia; Oka et al., 2020, pp. 1318-1319, for the case of Bangladesh).

Our research also suggests, however, that there are limits in terms of the variety of initiatives that lead firms can engage in. For instance, German lead firms in particular reported that they feel stretched between their engagement in the Accord, the German Textile Partnership, and other initiatives, indicating a need to shift resources between initiatives rather than continuously expanding their portfolios. Furthermore, lead firms indicated a discrepancy between expectations on what they should do and what they perceived they can do given competitive pressures in the retail sector:

*It's important to check what we can and cannot realise. NGOs can say 'But you have to do this and that'. But then I say: 'You need to get to know the market. We want to do a lot, but I cannot hire 20 people just for travelling around and checking what's happening in tier 2 factories.' (...) I have Lidl sitting on my neck with calculations that we simply cannot achieve.*

*(Procurement Manager, German Firm Lead Firm, Interview 20 April 2016)*” (cited in Schuessler et al., 2019b, p. 29)

This quote indicates how the CSR path is tightly linked to the market path. While advocacy and capacity building show lead firm’s awareness regarding the limitations of unilateral code-based approaches to improving labor standards and that – at least among some front-runner firms – experiment with going ‘beyond compliance’, both are limited in contributing to social upgrading for garment workers.

### **Multi-stakeholder path**

This path relies on the force of multiple stakeholders on different levels and from different societal spheres cooperating to set, implement and monitor standards for better working conditions in factories (Gereffi & Lee, 2016; see also Dünhaupt et al., 2020). While some MSIs, such as the Fair Wear Foundation, still work on the basis of codes of conduct, others are geared towards more active advocacy interventions in production countries. Oka (2017), for instance, describes the UK’s Ethical Trade Initiative’s intervention in Cambodia to express concerns regarding the violent crackdown of minimum wage strikes through military police, in which five garment workers were killed, more than 30 workers wounded and 23 detained for months without trial, and to request release of detained worker activists. Egels-Zandén and Lindholm (2015) paint a rather bleak picture on code-based MSIs, arguing that they only marginally improve worker rights on a very general level.

Since Rana Plaza, several new MSIs were founded. In 2014, Better Work (BW) – a multi-stakeholder initiative that includes unions, buyers, manufacturers and governments into the development of measures for labor standard improvements – has been rolled out in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh and other countries, BW provides worker education and trainings, e.g., on communicating and conflict resolution at work and at home. With findings on working condition-outcomes of the Better Work Bangladesh program being somewhat inconclusive, Pike and English (2020) nevertheless see relevant effects on the empowerment of women workers participating in the BW program, mainly “through an increase in effective communication, and through a decrease in household level impacts of financial instability and precarity.” (p. 31) The authors highlight that without accordant changes at the broader societal level – e.g., in gender norms and gendered division of labor – results from work-related improvement programs will necessarily remain limited.

Probably the most discussed MSI governance model that has been formed in response to Rana Plaza is the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety (Accord). The Accord was funded by over 200 lead firms together with the IndustriALL and UNI global union federations. With its large-scale inspection program, the Accord aimed at improving safety and health of garment workers in Bangladesh, with a particular focus on building safety. Factory owners covered by the Accord are accountable to improve safety through an inspection and remediation process whose results are publicly available. The Accord was accompanied by a second initiative driven by a smaller group of mainly US-based firms, the Alliance for Worker Safety, which did not include unions (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). While the Alliance had less accountability measures than the Accord as it was not legally binding or did not foresee any sanctions in case of non-compliance, both initiatives benefit from their collective enforcement.

Views on the Accord differ. Some have criticized the Accord for its lack of inclusion of local actors (Zajak, 2017), especially women labor leaders (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019) or have argued that the Accord is too limited in scope, covering only a small part of the country's garment factories (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2015). Also, it has been argued that the Accord leaves power relations between buyers and suppliers unchanged (Scheper, 2017). By many, however, the Accord has been hailed as an institutional innovation (Anner et al., 2013; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2015; Bair et al., 2020), with observers pointing to the importance of its legally binding character (Anner et al., 2013) and collective as well as union-inclusive character (Ashwin et al., 2020). Due to its legally binding and collective character, the Accord was able to overcome many of the problems associated with lead firms' prior approach of unilateral compliance monitoring, such as the lack of expertise and effective sanctioning (Donaghey & Reincke, 2018).

Created as a five-year initiative initially, views differed on how to proceed with the Accord. While government officials and industry representatives were in favor of ending the Accord (Bair et al., 2020, p. 987), with the latter favoring the creation of a 'brand-led multi-stakeholder forum,' labor representatives were divided, with some remaining skeptical towards the Accord, others being in favor of its extension (Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019, p. 291). However, the Accord was further extended through 2018 and, in January 2020, it was agreed upon that the Accord will transition into a new institution—the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Sustainability Council—which will provide domestic employers and the government with a strengthened role.

In line with others' observations, our analysis also suggests that there has been a tendency for power asymmetry between lead firms and suppliers to increase after Rana Plaza. While engagement in the Accord fostered longer-term relations and mutual understanding between

buyers and suppliers as well as trust and continuity of orders, it intensified the “sourcing squeeze” (Anner, 2018; 2020) exerted by lead firms on suppliers. In contrast, the collective power of suppliers was weakened by their representative organizations, the BGMEA and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) being formally excluded from Accord and Alliance decision-making, although they were consulted from time to time. Yet, due to the collective (and in the case of the Accord union-inclusive) nature of these initiatives, the multi-stakeholder path bears some promise for changing existing governance arrangements in global garment supply chains and for social upgrading – especially if extended to other issues beyond building safety.

### **Cluster-driven path**

This path relies on suppliers themselves engaging in initiatives to improve working conditions, thus, acting as standard setters rather than standard takers (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). This pathway therefore might involve labor standard oriented action by individual suppliers as well as by local business or employer associations but is also related to questions of suppliers taking ‘ownership’ of other actors’ initiatives (e.g., buyers’ compliance or capacity building initiatives). The effectiveness of this paths then relies on the pressure exerted by buyers, the capacity and willingness of suppliers as well as governance arrangements at the local cluster level. As discussed above, much of the growth of the Bangladeshi garment sector is based on a low-cost strategy, pushed by both the government and industry associations. However, we can observe some changes that have promoted a ‘climate of compliance’ among factories and, more recently, seem to have promoted the seeding ground for a number of cluster-driven initiatives to appear.

Research from our project shows that in the aftermath of Rana Plaza (Rahman & Rahman, 2020; Schuessler et al., 2019b), relationships between buyers and suppliers changed towards what we call ‘asymmetric cooperation.’ That means that buyer-supplier relationships tend to be longer-term and cooperative, reflecting buyers’ desire to reduce switching costs and ensure compliance with basic building safety and labor standards and resulting in continuity of orders. But at the same time suppliers profit margins have declined and the power of buyers over suppliers has tended to increase, for instance through buyer collaboration in the Accord. In terms of social upgrading, the longer-term and cooperative relations might create a time-horizon and the stability for suppliers to engage in social upgrading themselves or take ownership of their buyers initiatives.

Part of this climate of compliance are several more recent initiatives that engage in promoting knowledge around compliance-related issues among both factory managers and workers. For instance, in May 2015, the Bangladesh Employers' Federation (BEF) and the International Labor Organization (ILO) signed an agreement to deliver trainings on occupational safety and health to mid-level and line supervisors in 400 factories, enabling them to train 750,000-800,000 workers. In a similar vein, in December 2019, BGMEA has signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Unilever Bangladesh to engage in promoting sustainable development goals (SDGs), especially around SDG 3 (Ensure good health and promote well-being for all at all ages); SDG 6 (Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all); SDG 12 (Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns); and SDG 17 (Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development). In addition, Unilever Bangladesh will make its products available at discounted prices to garment workers and has signed independent MoUs with garment factories to improve livelihoods of their workers through different initiatives.

Other initiatives seek to strengthen the compliance-related discourse and exchange on the cluster level. One initiative featuring prominently on industry-related discussions in the media is for instance the Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE), founded by entrepreneur, Mostafiz Uddin, managing director of Denim Expert Limited, which has received global media attention for being the first Bangladeshi business to join initiatives such as the Sustainable Apparel Coalition or the Zero Discharge of Hazardous Chemicals (ZDHC) Foundation. The BAE organization engages in learning and networking events for Bangladeshi factory owners and managers, addressing issues around economic (e.g., offering trainings on innovation and technology) and social upgrading (e.g., offering workshops to promote industry sustainability and capacity building). BAE organizes several high-profile multi-stakeholder industry events (Bangladesh Denim Expo, Sustainable Apparel Forum) and collaborated with BGMEA and other partner organizations on annual events like the Dhaka Apparel Summit.

In sum, while cluster actors have caught up with regards to fostering a discourse on compliance and have started to engage in capacity building, more systemic social upgrading is limited by suppliers' continued dependency on Western lead firms.

## **Labor-centered path**

While workers are usually seen as the least powerful actors in global supply chains, their situation still differs between countries and sectors (e.g., Anner, 2015). In the Bangladeshi garment sector, the situation of labor unions and workers has been described as comparatively weak. Anner (2015) refers to the labor control regime as one of ‘market despotism,’ with the strong interrelationship between the state and employers hampering the formation of unions and reinforcing the oppression of unions where they exist. This regime contributes to an only limited implementation of labor law, marked not least by exceptionally low and highly fragmented unionization, weak industry unions, and high thresholds to form factory unions. For example, a 30% (since recently 20%) threshold for union formation at the factory level as well as continued intimidation of workers when they try to register to a union places a high burden on workers to formally organize. Absence of strong unions implies that collective wage bargaining is inexistent, while the national minimum wage is still far below the living wage level and raises are often absorbed by rising rents (Kabeer et al., 2020). Despite these difficulties, the number of unions has been increasing after 2013 (e.g., Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2015). Anner (2018) reports an increase in union presence in RMG factories from less than 100 prior to Rana Plaza to 440 in early 2018 (Hossain et al. 2018 observe a similar increase but report the existence of over 500 unions). However, several conditions remain in place that limit further organizing and the influence of existing unions. Our own research shows that workers have limited knowledge about unions and often lack a clear worker identity (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2018) making worker organization a difficult matter. Furthermore, Connell (2020) reports that even where attempts to build factory unions are made, there is still a high rejection rate for applications and for unjustified reasons with limited scope for appeal (see also Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019, p. 287). It remains to be seen whether initiatives such as a public online database for union registration or the recently adopted standard operating procedures (SOPs) against unfair labor practice and anti-trade union discrimination launched by Bangladesh’s Department of Labor (DoL) with support of the ILO will help in providing guidance and improving transparency of the union registration process. Recent research suggests that this is not the case (Bair et al., 2020, p. 983). Furthermore, reports of yellow unions (i.e., unions installed by or tightly controlled by management) as well as suppression of worker activists and violent crackdowns continue to amount in the post-Rana Plaza era as well (e.g., Siddiqi, 2017; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). For instance, Ashraf and Prentice (2019) report how, when in 2016 and 2017 worker unrest in the industrial district of Ashulia peaked over minimum wage requests, poor working

conditions and the death of one overworked worker, factory owners suspended more than 1000 workers and the government arrested labor organizers and detained workers, displaying “authoritarian tactics of labor suppression” (p. 94).

Apart from the above-mentioned initiatives seeking to improve the situation of unions in the garment sector, our own work as well as the work of others also shows the importance of looking at other than the traditional ways of organizing. Quayyum (2019), for instance, shows that women workers in the Bangladeshi RMG sector are gradually building ‘an infrastructure of working-class dissent’ by engaging in other than the formal ways of mobilizing and organizing. That is, they make use of institutions such as intergenerational households of women garment workers, workers’ centres or developmental NGOs, often to get legal support, use day care facilities or partake in learning and education. Quayyum (2019) argues that by offering relevant services to women garment workers, these institutions play a critical role in the formation of networks, systems of support as well as platforms for the exchange of common working-class experiences, ultimately becoming “potential sites of open discussions of activist knowledge and strategy.” (p. 847) These informal – strongly relationship-based – ways of organizing are crucial for the female garment workers, as the Bangladeshi trade union movement remains largely male-dominated. Quayyum (2019) concludes that while the effectiveness of these infrastructures remains to be seen, recognizing the importance of such less formal ways of organizing is crucial for understanding the developing infrastructure of dissent in the Bangladeshi garment sector.

In a similar vein, our own research on the transnational worker network ExChains (Lohmeyer et al., 2018) highlights the importance of facilitating interactive processes among workers along the supply chain as well as less formal relationships between workers and local unions as a relevant supplement to higher level organizing. Such bottom-up approaches, which allow for the realization of shared experiences and the realization of short-term improvements, allow for the emergence of worker identities and relationships of solidarity where these do not exist. They thereby build the seeding ground for more formal organizing processes both on the local and transnational level as well as the promotion of longer-term goals. However, given the small-scale nature of initiatives such as ExChains as well as the sheer number of garment workers in Bangladesh, results remain necessarily limited in scope.

Our worker survey found very little evidence of trade union membership within the factories but focus group discussions suggested that a number of unions operated outside the factories and provided dismissed workers with support. Independent leftist unions appear to have been far more active in promoting workers’ rights in the garment sector than mainstream registered

unions. The massive protests by thousands of RMG workers in 2006 was led by two independent leftist unions who had been involved in the incidents that precipitated the initial strikes and were able to rapidly mobilize militant mass action on a scale never previously seen in the Bangladesh RMG industry. The government responded to these protests by setting up a minimum wage board to oversee the setting of minimum wages. Since then, minimum wages have been increased a number of times, but each raise was preceded by a period of agitation.

By contrast, most factories reported WPCs. These had been set up by the 2006 Labor Law to provide a platform for social dialogue. It stipulated that WPCs should be set up in any factory which had 50+ workers with at least as many workers' representatives as employers' representatives. Workers' representatives were to be nominated by trade unions within the factory. Since most factories did not have unions, in practice, they appear to have been nominated by employers (see also Bair et al., 2020). A 2014 amendment of the labor law made open election of workers' representatives to WPCs mandatory. Our WPC-related focus group discussions with workers suggested that most committees were generally approached about more routine complaints, such as fresh soap in the toilets, replacing water filters or reprimanding abusive supervisors. There were some examples of WPCs taking on more significant issues such as salary raises and unfair dismissals. Our survey found that workers in most factories, particularly those associated with multi-stakeholder initiatives, reported election to WPCs. These factories were also more likely to report effective WPCs. In fact, we found that factories that reported effective WPCs, according to various criteria, were also more likely to report improvements on a range of conditions since Rana Plaza: health and safety, behaviour by managers and supervisors; job security and timeliness of payments; and sexual harassment. This may reflect more enlightened management and/or more engaged buyers. These were a minority of factories, however. A more common story was that WPC members were not given any time or incentives to perform their duties and hence made very little difference. Anner (2018) furthermore reports that workers participating in safety committees often face repression or have been fired (p. 13). Thus, the labor-driven path, to date, still seems limited in its potential to bring about social upgrading.

### **Public governance path**

The public governance path relies on public regulations, most importantly national labor law, including actors such as government ministries, supreme courts as well as labor inspectors on national and local levels (Gereffi & Lee, 2016). In Bangladesh, the economic development strongly depends on the garment sector, which accounts for around 80% of the country's export



revenue. This means that the garment sector is high on the Bangladeshi government's agenda and a number of initiatives were started in recent years with the aim to improve wages and working conditions for garment workers.

In the aftermath of the Rana Plaza factory collapse a few developments have taken place. Most importantly, since 2013, the government increased the minimum wage in the garment sector and made several amendments to the Labor Act, including the one for the Export Processing Zones (EPZ Labor Act). While these are promising developments, these initiatives largely lack ambition. Even after several raises of the minimum wage and although the monthly income for garment workers at the entry level lies above the gross national income per month (Ahmed & Nathan, 2014, p. 8), Bangladeshi garment workers still remain among the lowest paid garment workers worldwide (Barrett & Baumann-Pauly, 2019, p. 9). Within Bangladesh, however, garment workers tend to earn more than the average per capita income for the country (Ahmed & Nathan, 2014, p. 8). Furthermore, while the threshold for the formation of factory-level unions was lowered from 30% to a still fairly high 20%, the prohibition of trade unions in EPZs was kept in place. Rather than strengthening unionization, under the new labor code (as well as the new EPZ Labor Act) worker participation committees are required in every factory with more than 50 employees and allowed in EPZ factories.

A similar conclusion can be drawn for another public-governance response to the Rana Plaza factory collapse, the Compact for Continuous Improvements in Labour Rights and Factory Safety in the Ready-Made Garment and Knitwear Industry in Bangladesh (Compact, for short). The compact was founded by the Bangladeshi government, representatives of the European Union and the ILO, in July 2013. The goal of the Compact was to improve labor standard enforcement, building on extending inspection and remediation efforts as well as reforms of the labor code. Part of the efforts under the Compact was the government's inspection program (known as the 'National Initiative'), which involved among other investments in the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (DIFE), including increasing the number of labor inspectors as well as providing trainings to them. Relatedly, DIFE together with the ILO has launched an electronic Labor Inspection Management Application (LIMA) to improve the collection, storage and analysis of labor inspection data to enhance industry transparency, provide information on occupational health and safety and streamline factory safety processes. Despite all these efforts, however, Bair et al. (2020) conclude their comparison of the Compact and the Accord, that not only has the Compact been less effective in reaching its goals compared to the Accord, but it also has undermined the efforts of the Accord to improve worker health

and safety, e.g., with labor law provisions for the election of WPCs in the Compact negatively affecting the Accords' institution of safety committees.

This lack of ambition can be explained by several factors. First, the Bangladeshi government continues to build the growth of the sector on a low-cost strategy. This strategy depends on a cheap and flexible workforce and, therefore, hinders efforts to systematically working towards social upgrading. Second, the close-knit industry-state nexus, where members of parliament are also owners of garment factories, has allowed the industry elite to influence legislative processes, further hindering labor-centered improvements (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). Third, with garment production striving rather than vanishing after Rana Plaza and trade-related threats from Western governments remaining unrealized, international leverage seems to be deteriorating (Bair et al., 2020). With these conditions remaining in place, it is unlikely that the Bangladeshi government engages in more systematic efforts to socially upgrade garment workers.

Western governments, in turn, can create stricter regulations for lead firms to ensure better labor standards and guarantee human rights in their global supply chains. Steps in this direction have already been taken with the UK and Australian Modern Slavery Act or the French Loi de Vigilance (Evans, 2018). Furthermore, through sustainable public procurement initiatives Western governments might increase the market for fairly produced garments, thus strengthening the first driver we discussed.

### **Discussion: Towards a Hierarchy of Paths**

Our analysis of the six different social upgrading paths outlined by Gereffi and Lee (2016) reveals a rather patchy picture (see *Table 1*). Pushed by the global attention to the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013, some form of activity can be observed for most of the six paths: from changes in labor law and legal minimum wages (public governance path), via an increasing 'climate of compliance' among suppliers (cluster-driven path), to an intensification of both formal and informal organizing (labor-centered path). Involved in these paths are all the actors described as important by Gereffi & Lee (2016), either in unison or in various collaborative constellations: lead firms, suppliers, consumers, workers, labor unions, industrial and employer associations, governments as well as international and non-governmental organizations.

**Table 1: Paths to social upgrading in Bangladeshi garment industry**

	<i>Key actors</i>	<i>Key developments</i>	<i>Current role</i>	<i>Importance for governance arrangement</i>
<i>Market-driven path</i>	Buyers, consumers, suppliers	High competition for both global buyers and suppliers, trend of fast fashion	Very weak, if not counterproductive	Very important
<i>CSR-driven path</i>	Global buyers	Compliance, capacity building and advocacy	Strong	Important
<i>Multi-stakeholder path</i>	Global buyers, IndustriAll	Accord, Alliance	Strong	Important
<i>Labor-centered path</i>	Workers, labor unions	Increase in number of labor unions, informal organizing	Weak	Very important
<i>Cluster-driven path</i>	Suppliers, BAE, BEF, Unilever Bangladesh, ILO	Climate of compliance, MoU, trainings, networking	Weak	Important
<i>Public governance path</i>	Bangladeshi government, DIFE, ILO	Labor law, Compact, National Initiative	Weak	Very important

Yet, while several paths are activated, the extent to which this is the case differs (see Table 1). Most developments seem to have occurred within the CSR-driven and especially the multi-stakeholder path. The CSR-driven path has pushed lead firms to not only strengthen their compliance initiatives but – at least for some firms – to experiment with going ‘beyond compliance’ and engage in capacity building and advocacy. The multi-stakeholder path has brought about a shift towards more collective and union-inclusive initiatives, marking an important advancement as compared to prior unilateral, firm-driven initiatives and bringing about relevant improvements in terms of outcome standards. Other paths, however, seem particularly weak. Especially the market-driven path seems limited by the confluence of competitive pressures on

both lead firms and suppliers and the lack of incentives for suppliers and consumer pressure on lead firms to invest in labor standard-focused improvements. The public governance path seems to be similarly weak, with little pressure from Western governments and a lack of capacity and willingness on the side of the Bangladeshi government to protect worker rights. Also, the cluster-driven and labor-centered paths remain weak. Taken together, our findings suggest a hierarchy of paths to social upgrading in the Bangladeshi garment industry.

Identifying this hierarchy is not only relevant in terms of comparing levels of activity across paths and thereby determining which of the paths need further activation. Such hierarchy is also relevant because the different paths depend on each other and thereby facilitate or limit each other's further development. The cluster-driven path for instance depends both on the market-driven and the public governance path. Without these latter paths providing the necessary incentives (market) and pressure (public governance), the cluster-driven path is unlikely to develop further momentum. For instance, without suppliers' profit margins rising, their leeway to improve labor standards beyond minimum compliance levels remains limited. Likewise, without public regulation levelling the playing field, low labor standards will remain a cost saving strategy. Similar holds for other paths: the CSR-driven and multi-stakeholder paths for instance, are unlikely to pass a certain threshold and deliver sustainable effects without a strong push from either market or policy (or labor, which itself depends on the former two to become stronger). For instance, the achievements made by the Accord might be unstable as they are neither anchored in effective process rights nor government support and lead firm purchasing practices remain unchanged. Our analysis therefor suggests that not only are the market-driven and public governance paths the least active, they also do matter the most as they take an important enabling role in the overall governance arrangement. Without the market-driven and the public governance paths becoming more activated it is unlikely that more systemic and sustainable forms of social upgrading will occur in the Bangladeshi garment sector. To conclude with and add to Gereffi and Lee (2016): not just "governance matters" but some governance matters more than others.

Following from our analysis, it seems important to activate the weaker pathways, with particular focus on those paths that take an enabling role for other paths' development. For the public governance path, further action needs to be taken by regulators in both Bangladesh and buying countries to make labor standards a pre-competitive issue. For the market-driven path, firm-level changes in factories and lead firms to improve productivity and to systematically promote social upgrading need to be complemented by industry and societal-level changes in

business models and production and consumption behaviors. At the same time, mechanisms need to be introduced which facilitate worker voice.

However, our analysis further suggests that more than activating single paths, it is important to work towards “complementary and synergistic governance” (Gereffi & Lee, 2016, p. 35), acknowledging the mutual influence between different paths. With regards to the interplay of the different paths, it is important to acknowledge that both positive as well as negative spillover effects might occur. For instance, our research provides evidence that especially those lead firms that already had some experiences in working together with other lead firms as well as global union federations (e.g., in the realm of the Accord or as part of global framework agreements) have developed the trust to tackle complex problems such as living wages in a collective and union-inclusive manner (Ashwin et al., 2020). This suggests positive spillover effects across initiatives, with experiences in past initiatives allowing for the creation of new initiatives. In other cases, however, negative spill-over effects can be observed as well. Bair et al. (2020) reveal how public governance (labor law) interferes with private governance (the Accord), with labor law provisions for the election of WPCs negatively affecting the Accords’ institution of safety committees. Our analysis therefore shows that in taking further efforts to improve workers’ lives, mutual dependencies, and unintended consequences of different paths to social upgrading are important to consider.

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