Participant Organizations:
Labor Unions, NGOs, Civil Society, Brand Representatives, Training Organizations, ILO, Fire Safety Experts, and Alliance Staff
Abbreviations and Acronyms:
AFBWS  Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety
NTPA  National Tripartite Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh
ILO  International Labor Organization
CAP  Corrective Action Plan
BGMEA  Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association
IRIs  Industrial Relations Institutes
FOA  Freedom of Association

Acknowledgements:
We would like to thank and acknowledge all roundtable participants for offering their valuable time and active engagement. We would especially like to acknowledge representatives from the Alliance and Accord member companies, and our external stakeholders including:

- International Labour Organization (ILO)
- Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)
- Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra
- Garment Sramik Trade Union Congress
- Bangladesh National Garments Workers Employees League (BNGWEL)
- Phulki
- Impactt Limited
- CARE Bangladesh
- BRAC
- Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ)
- High Commission of Canada
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (the “Alliance”) is one of the key industry initiatives that are committed to improving worker safety in the Bangladeshi garment industry. As part of the Alliance’s commitment to developing and implementing its programs in dialogue and collaboration with stakeholders and experts, the Alliance held a stakeholder roundtable in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 26th, 2014. This first roundtable was organized as a forum for participants to learn about the Alliance’s Worker Baseline Survey and program components, and for the Alliance to gain input from stakeholder organizations engaged in similar issues to inform its approach to worker participation and empowerment. This report presents the discussion highlights and recommendations from the event.

The Alliance presented findings from its Worker Baseline Survey (completed in January 2014), which was driven by the recognition that, in order to build and implement programs that improve the welfare and empowerment of workers, we first need to understand workers’ mindset, concerns, and awareness today. The key takeaways from the survey were introduced to set the context for participants to discuss and provide recommendations in three areas to help guide the Alliance’s activities:

I. Assessing the Level of Worker Empowerment in Factories
II. Setting up Safety Committees in Factories
III. Including Workers in the Factory Safety Assessment Process

Each of these three areas is critical to ensuring that workers are empowered with the knowledge, attitude, and communication / participation structures to contribute maintaining a safe working environment for themselves and their fellow workers.

Roundtable participants were extremely forthcoming and constructive in the working sessions and provided valuable input to the Alliance’s approach in all of the programmatic areas. Highlights included:

- Overall, most participants agreed with the need for Alliance to engage more consistently with the industry and the Bangladesh Government, and to communicate not only on its commitments but, more importantly, on the Alliance efforts that are underway to achieve its objectives. Increased communication and consultation can open up more opportunities to partner and learn from existing efforts.
- Participants identified different ways to communicate safety issues found during safety inspections with workers in factories, and the need to incorporate worker participation in workplace safety committees in a credible manner.
- Union participants emphasized the need to work closely with them, particularly on the validation of any efforts to improve worker participation and empowerment. They also expressed a desire and need to build relevant approaches and frameworks for worker empowerment programs in close partnership with the unions that exist at the factory level.
With the entire Bangladeshi RMG industry focused on improving worker safety and building local capacity to sustain this improvement, there are multiple opinions on the best approach, as well as opportunities to pursue synergy and collaboration rather than duplication. With the industry working towards common goals, the Alliance is committed to engaging stakeholders—through forums such as this roundtable—to learn from and about complementary efforts, and to further constructive dialogue and more widespread cooperation.

I: INTRODUCTION

As part of the Alliance’s commitment to collaborating with other stakeholders in its work, a stakeholder roundtable was convened in Dhaka, Bangladesh on February 26th, 2014. This initial roundtable was organized as a forum for interested stakeholders to learn about the Alliance’s activities, and for the Alliance to generate discussion and recommendations from a wide range of respected stakeholders and experts. Participants were invited from labor unions, civil society organizations, NGOs, training organizations, Alliance and Accord member companies, and the ILO.

Following the completion of the Alliance’s Worker Baseline Survey—which surveyed over 3,200 workers on their perspective of and experience with health and safety risks in RMG factories—we focused our first roundtable on how to incorporate worker voice and representation in our current and future programmatic efforts, and how our efforts can contribute to the broader, shared goal of worker empowerment. After an informative presentation of the survey results, roundtable participants joined smaller group discussions focused on:

- Assessing the Level of Worker Empowerment in Factories
- Setting up Safety Committees in Factories
- Including Workers in the Factory Safety Assessment Process

Going forward, the Alliance aims to continue with a series of such stakeholder roundtables on a regular basis. The topics will be determined based on the Alliance programs that would benefit most from such a level of stakeholder dialogue and consultation—and would be of most interest and relevance to a broader audience.
II: MAINTAINING OUR FOCUS ON WORKERS - WHAT WE HEARD

The Alliance’s Worker Baseline Survey results underscored the lack of knowledge, empowerment, and sense of responsibility that Bangladeshi garment workers commonly experience, as well as their heightened exposure to safety risks. The survey also revealed a lack of effective worker representation structures within factories, with a low percentage of workers reporting that they would take safety concerns to worker representatives. The results and learning from the survey provide an opportunity to ensure that the Alliance’s programs are guided by workers’ perspectives and designed to improve key deficiencies—and provide a baseline for impact measurement.

The implications of the survey findings set the stage for discussion on steps that the Alliance and other stakeholders can take to ensure that our work continues to keep workers’ interests and empowerment front and center. This section attempts to provide a synopsis of the lively discussion around each of the three topics, highlighting recommendations and practical next steps.

I. Assessing the Level of Worker Empowerment in Factories

Workers play a critical role in contributing to a safe workplace, and particularly in raising concerns about unsafe conditions so that they can be addressed. In order to effectively utilize available communication channels, workers must be empowered to voice their concerns. The survey results indicated, however, that workers possess a limited sense of responsibility for health and safety in their factories and think that there is little that can be done to change the outcomes of fire accidents—which suggests that there is significant room to change workers’ view of their potential to improve the safety of their own workplace.

In order to design effective initiatives and later measure their impact, the first group focused on how to assess the level of worker empowerment in factories. Participants were asked to specifically consider:

- The present state of worker empowerment, informed by the Worker Baseline Survey and the impact of trainings that have been commonly conducted
- Collective goals and an overall vision for worker empowerment
- The process for improving worker empowerment, and
- How progress can be validated, and who can (or should) provide that validation

Key Survey Findings

Lack of responsibility & empowerment:
Over half (54%) of workers do not feel responsible for health and safety and majority of workers (73%) think that some fatal fire accidents cannot be prevented.

Need for effective, trusted safety committees:
Only 17% of workers would talk to their worker representatives about safety concerns.

Significant gap in workplace safety knowledge:
Only 2% of workers surveyed could correctly identify common fire hazards.
KEY TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Agreement on the need for a baseline survey.** Participants were in overall agreement that a baseline survey is necessary to more comprehensively assess the current status of worker empowerment so that progress can be tracked. Participants emphasized that the baseline evaluation should include both workers and employers to gain a clear, holistic picture of attitudes and views towards worker empowerment in the workplace.

2. **Need to better understand existing worker representative platforms and their structure.** The group agreed that not enough is known about how existing worker committees are formed and operate. In factories where worker representative platforms exist, there is a need to look at how workers become involved—i.e. whether they are chosen by management or elected. To understand and assess the structure and functioning of existing committees, participants suggested a review of meeting minutes and any related materials and tools used for committee management and operation.

3. **Need to evaluate existing communications framework or general factory culture.** Participants also emphasized the importance of assessing overall factory communication channels and culture to see whether feedback mechanisms, two-way communication, and a culture of respect exist within the workplace.

4. **Greater stakeholder outreach and consultation will improve coordination and impact.** Participants emphasized that there are a number of related initiatives focusing on worker empowerment and industrial relations in the garment sector. The Alliance should consult other stakeholders in the industry to understand the various initiatives underway. Specific recommendations included:
   - Reaching out to the BGMEA Labor Cell, Solidarity Center, Government Industrial Relations Institutes (IRIs)
   - Engaging the Government more with related policy analysis and recommendations
   - Establishing points of contact between the Alliance and unions. One possibility is to establish zone-specific Alliance offices for closer union collaboration.
   - Increasing coordination and collaboration amongst Alliance, Accord, and the NTPA

5. **Develop training for both worker representatives/unions and management.** Training for management should focus on FOA and the importance (and benefits) of engaging with workers, both individually and through unions or democratically elected worker groups. Such training programs should emphasize how and why management should respect workers’ right to collectively voice concerns without fear of retaliation, as well as how to allow for regular and open dialogue about safety. Conducted through the worker safety committee platform, training for workers should focus on their roles and responsibilities related to safety, and how to raise issues effectively and engage effectively within the committee (and the skills needed to do so).

6. **Clarify and strengthen the Alliance’s commitment to enforcing Freedom of Association (FOA).** Participants expressed interest in and desire for the Alliance to more
clearly state its position on trade unions—and how the Alliance will work with or involve them—and workers’ right to organize.

7. **Identify ways in which the Alliance Worker Helpline can be used to enable worker empowerment.** The Alliance will be implementing a helpline that workers can call to voice concerns—and that can also be used to send information to workers. Participants suggested that the helpline could be used to provide (upon request) referrals to government agencies and the labor inspectorate, and to understand the state of factory communication / grievance mechanisms (through analysis of complaints and their rate of resolution). Consultation of stakeholders—such as the ILO and local labor organizations—can identify resources for helpline callers and inform interpretation of issues raised through the helpline.

8. **A validation mechanism is necessary to evaluate progress in worker empowerment.** Such a validation mechanism should incorporate various sources of information and who can provide it, such as:
   - Document review of meeting minutes, member roles and responsibilities, and implementation process
   - Self-reporting by the safety committee
   - Assessments by external third parties, especially unions and zone contacts (in cases where there is union collaboration points in different industrial zones)
   - Observation of developing culture at workplace by external technical experts
   - Development of a multi-source online tool that could facilitate the communication mechanisms

II. Setting up Safety Committees in Factories

The Alliance is committed to ensuring the effective functioning of democratically elected worker safety committees in all factories producing for its members.

In light of pending legislation regarding guidelines for safety committees, the Alliance sought (and continues to seek) stakeholder input to inform our approach to setting up safety committees in factories. Within this discussion, participants were asked to consider:
   - How factories should conduct elections, and which laws or conventions should be followed
   - How to involve unions, especially when they are not present in most factories
   - The structure and functioning of committees, and training needed to support their effectiveness
   - Validation of progress, and which standards and stakeholders should play a role in determining their existence
KEY TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **There is a need to create awareness about the purpose of safety committees and combat misinformation.** Currently, there are many efforts where factories have set up different committees, leading to committee fatigue and potential misunderstanding about or confidence in safety committees. Both management and workers, therefore, need to be informed on the differences between existing platforms and the level of engagement for each.

2. **It will be important to ensure that management’s resistance to committees does not stall their establishment.** Participants recognized that currently, most committees are selected and controlled by factory management. As guidelines are developed for holding committee member elections, they should consider (and aim to account for) the possibility that management may try to prevent elections from taking place in the prescribed manner in order to delay their establishment. The pending legislation regarding safety committee establishment will, of course, guide how this is ultimately approached.

3. **Safety committee structure and formation should include unions and government where possible, and follow local law.** Amidst concerns about the integrity and acceptance of elections, the group agreed that elections are necessary and should follow Bangladeshi law. Although unions are present only in a limited number of factories, they should be represented on the safety committees where possible and constitute a fixed percentage of the membership. Participants also suggested that safety committees be chaired by the Managing Director of the factory in order to expedite decision-making and to ensure buy-in at the top level. To ensure adequate representation and continued functioning, participants recommended incentives for gaining participation. As it will be important to align with Bangladeshi law, participants recommended drafting a policy paper to articulate collective stakeholder recommendations on safety committee set-up to the government and engage policymakers.

4. **Training for committee members is necessary to ensure that they have adequate safety knowledge and soft skills.** Training content should be developed input from relevant stakeholders and leverage existing trainings. Topics suggested by participants include: how to raise and follow up on safety issues, preparation of action plans, roles and responsibilities of members (and skills required), and specific safety issues. Participants agreed that a Train-the-Trainer model would be best to build capacity at the factory level so that they can then train staff internally and on an ongoing basis. The Alliance could develop a common standard / set of training materials, and evaluate / select training partner organizations.

5. **Credible third-party oversight is necessary.** Participants recommended that safety committee set-up include third-party oversight of the process, implementation, and continued operation through ongoing oversight and checks. While safety committee self-reporting should be required, participants agreed that this would not be sufficient for true validation.
III. Including Workers in the Safety Assessment Process

Involving workers in factory safety assessments offers a unique opportunity to ensure that worker representatives are aware of safety-related risks in their factories and can play an active role in informing other workers and helping to contribute to remediation and ongoing maintenance. The Alliance is committed to involving worker representatives in the factory safety assessment process, and ensuring that they are part of the findings and Corrective Action Plan (CAP) review process—this commitment is reflected in the Alliance’s Members Agreement and Assessment Protocols. Unions also expect that the Alliance assessment process will integrate worker representatives, and will include steps for sharing findings with workers following the assessment.

In discussing how to include workers in the safety assessment process most effectively, this group was asked to consider:

- Worker population considerations and existing representation structures (e.g. unions and/or safety committees) to identify who should participate
- Communication mechanisms for sharing serious findings/risks, CAPs, remediation progress—and interim approaches if safety committees are not yet established
- Internal and external expectations (and objectives) for reporting and transparency
- How to balance workers’ and management’s interests during the assessment process

KEY TAKEAWAYS & RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Guidelines for involving workers in safety assessments should support and follow clearly defined objectives.** Participants agreed that workers might not need to be involved in all aspects of the assessment process, and that participation of the various factory actors might differ. This group agreed that including workers in the assessment process should: provide an opportunity for workers and managers to learn simultaneously, provide a mechanism to build trust between management and workers through a shared understanding of safety deficiencies and remediation expectations, and help build workers’ awareness of safety issues / concerns in their factories so that they can help disseminate this knowledge to other workers.

2. **Worker involvement should maximize opportunities for participation, but may vary from factory to factory.** Participants agreed that worker representatives should be involved in the opening and closing meetings of the assessments, and that other workers would also be involved through interviews. Where unions and participation and/or safety committees are present, respective representatives should be involved. Participants suggested that worker representatives be included in the entire assessment (i.e. to shadow the assessment) so that they could better understand the conditions being assessed. From a practical standpoint, this level of involvement might be limited to select representatives, but could be piloted to better understand the benefits and practicalities of such involvement.
3. **There is a need to provide more guidance on how to share findings and CAPs with workers, and ensure that this is being done effectively.** Participants voiced concerns about the process for sharing assessment results and CAPs in factories, with the workers, as this is critical but has not been regular practice—a greater focus on establishing guidelines for this is needed. While participants agreed that transparency is important, they thought that factories might be hesitant to be fully transparent for fear that workers might overreact or panic. Participants emphasized that, as findings and CAPs are shared, it will be important for the assessors and factory management / technical staff to help clarify technical questions and risk levels to ensure understanding and avoid misinterpretation.

4. **Reporting needs for the key stakeholder audiences may require different reporting formats, which should be standardized.** It was recommended that reports should be made available online (in English and Bangla), but that the information would need to reach workers in a different manner. Sharing findings and CAPs within a factory can help to communicate timelines, responsibility, and contribute to internal accountability. The group suggested that simplified versions (in local language) would be needed, and could be posted on a central notice board with each factory. Progress reports should also be shared, especially if there are serious issues that require prompt action. Ensuring that workers are aware of serious issues found in their factory (and remediation status) is tied to the ability to enforce workers’ right to refuse dangerous work without fear of retaliation. The existence and functioning of worker safety committees would provide a mechanism for worker representatives involved in the assessment process to remain apprised of remediation efforts, and to therefore help keep other workers informed of progress.
NEXT STEPS

1: Incorporate Existing Efforts into Programmatic Areas and Avoid Duplication
Participants have raised the issue of multiple and overlapping training programs in the industry. They recommended that the Alliance take into account what has already been done and take steps to counter training and initiative fatigue. Rather than create a comprehensive training from scratch, it was suggested that the Alliance conduct an inventory of existing materials, programs, and best practices as a foundation to build on. It is advised that in addition to cataloguing the different training programs, we also aim to analyze what caused some trainings to fail to achieve the desired impact.

Meetings have been conducted with key players and there is ongoing engagement to take stock of existing training programs and the organizations involved in them. An inventory of training programs is being compiled, and this list will be shared with the Alliance member companies.

2: Conduct Baseline and Impact Evaluation; Collaborate with the ILO
In order to assess level of worker empowerment and state of management-worker dialogue at the factory level, participants have agreed on the importance of first assessing the current situation so that the Alliance can track progress and program impact in factories producing for its member companies.

There is ongoing engagement by the Alliance with the ILO to pilot approaches for assessing worker empowerment in factories over the next few months. This process—and the tools and methodologies used—will be undertaken under the guidance of the ILO.

The Alliance will continue to engage with organizations such as the ILO, Solidarity Center, and NGOs, as well as explore the potential of working with Government Industrial Relations Institutes (IRIs).

3: Improve Communications with Supply Chain and Key Stakeholders
The need for improved, proactive communication has been emphasized by all stakeholders. Interactions with local industry players/stakeholders and member company representatives indicate a significant gap in knowledge about the Alliance and the status of its work on improving worker safety. Suggestions to improve awareness include the following:

- Communicate to local member company representatives about Alliance plans for incorporating worker voice, including details on the helpline
- Provide regular updates to member company representatives in Dhaka (which have already begun) so they are better equipped to answer supplier questions
- Create an Alliance FAQ document to be shared with all stakeholders

Although most of these communications are in place, this feedback is taken very seriously and an expedited process for following through with each of these suggestions is being developed.
A comprehensive communications strategy encompassing the above-identified areas is being put into place.

4: **Engage with the Local Government**
There is a desire for consistent and proactive engagement with the Bangladesh government voiced by local stakeholders. All in-country stakeholders emphasized the need to do more outreach to the government, so that the Alliance is not seen as working in isolation. Stakeholders recommended that the Alliance pursue the following through its engagement with the government:
- Draft and share policy paper on the establishment of safety committees, especially as legislation is currently being development by the government
- Engage with the government of Bangladesh to push the industry to move away from the multi-storied factory model (and to create policies that enable such a shift)
- Work closely with the government wherever possible, especially to explore opportunities to build the capacity of their Labor Inspectorate to conduct inspections—e.g. by organizing shadows of Alliance assessments so that the Labor Inspectorate can gain more experience (as well as share the responsibility/liability)

A policy paper will be put together, with stakeholder consultation, and shared with the Government of Bangladesh.

5: **Work to Develop a Uniform Industry Framework for Safety Committees**
Stakeholders favor and advocate for a uniform industry approach, and have advised the Alliance to adopt an approach to safety committee establishment and oversight that is in line with other initiatives. While the Alliance plans to develop its approach in keeping with the Bangladesh labor law, stakeholders acknowledge that if the government does not provide clear guidelines on the election process for worker participation in the safety committees, waiting for this legislation cannot stall the election process.

In light of the various committees that may be found within factories, roundtable participants agreed that the safety committees’ responsibility should be focused on occupational health and safety (OSH) activity. They also suggested that while management would be best positioned to appoint the technical team to participate in the safety committee, workers should be empowered to nominate and elect their own representatives.

The Alliance will work with other industry players in the development of the safety committee framework to ensure a consistent approach.

*IMPORTANT NOTE - The government regulations are currently being drafted. Participants caution, however, that if the law fails to conform to ILO Conventions and meet internationally accepted standards, this potential discordance may complicate how the Alliance and other initiatives proceed.*
6: Involce Labor Representatives in Program
Union participation was integral to the stakeholder roundtable, and representatives offered extremely constructive feedback and advice regarding the role that they could play in validating any of the work related to worker empowerment, worker inclusion in inspections and remediation, and safety committee set-up.

Interested unions will be invited to participate in all related programmatic activities and any approach developed for safety committee set-up, worker participation mechanisms, and validation would strive to include their active participation and input. Efforts will continue to recruit and invite more unions and labor organizations to engage and work with the Alliance. The Alliance will also rely on labor members of its Board of Advisors for guidance on relevant local stakeholder engagement.

THE WAY FORWARD

With the conclusion of our first stakeholder roundtable in-country, we are grateful for the constructive, thoughtful input and discussion and look forward to incorporating recommendations in our programmatic efforts. Although this was the first forum in which the Alliance invited such a diverse group of stakeholder organizations and companies to learn about and provide input on Alliance activities, it is our aim to continue engaging with these stakeholders in Bangladesh on a more regular basis and organizing similar roundtables on a quarterly basis. In the meantime, the Alliance welcomes and encourages one-on-one outreach by any of the participant organizations, as well as by the readers of this report.

For questions and comments please contact info@afbws.org

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Recent years have marked several tragic factory disasters in ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which together took the lives of more than 1,200 people.

That is why, leading North American apparel companies came together to form the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety. Alliance’s goal is to ensure that safe workplaces in Bangladesh become the rule, and not the exception, for all women and men employed in the Bangladesh RMG industry.

In November and December 2013, the Alliance conducted a worker survey to measure the knowledge, awareness, experience and perception of factory fire and building safety risks amongst Bangladeshi RMG workers. This brief summary provides some of the key findings resulting from the survey.

There is a significant gap in workers’ knowledge on fire safety.

- 2% can correctly identify common fire hazards.
- 39% do not know how to react in case of an emergency.
- 34% know the basic components of fire.
- 32% say that if a fire alarm sounds, they would “wait and see.”

Workers do not feel empowered.

- 54% do not feel responsible for health and safety.
- 73% think that some fatal fire accidents cannot be prevented.
- 17% only would talk to their workers representatives about safety concerns.

Focus group discussions show worker committees are often inactive.

Workers do not receive sufficient training.

- 45% have never been trained on fire safety.
- 87% have done fire drills.

However, focus group discussions show fire drills are often not properly executed.

The training workers received has not significantly improved their knowledge & awareness.

- 3% Can Recognize Fire Hazards
- 2% Can Recognize Fire Hazards

Trained 55%
Not Trained 45%
The survey was conducted with a stratified random sample of 28 factories from an overall list of 625 factories and included a total of 3207 workers. An additional 101 workers participated in the focus group discussion.

The results presented in this report will guide the Alliance in the design and implementation of its training and assessment activities, and will serve as a baseline to which all future survey results will be compared. The Alliance will regularly repeat this survey in order to assess whether its initiatives create the desired impact.

For a complete version of the survey report, please visit the Alliance Website (www.bangladeshworkersafety.org) or contact us at info@afbws.org.