

UN & Global Governance

HUMAN RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH



Craig Ward
Grace Milne
Jessica Saram
Sheung Wan Ho
Yim Fong Hung



Create change



UNITED NATIONS

BACKGROUND

This project investigates the challenges against and opportunities for global governance in Bangladesh. It specifically focuses on human rights in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry.

Global governance is a concept with a wide range of definitions (Finkelstein 1995; UNDP 1997; World Bank 1993). For this project, it is referred to as the interactions between different political institutions in both domestic and international contexts. Governments are no longer the sole decision-makers in society; there are many other actors that have a decision-making role in the ways in which countries are governed. These actors can be found both inside the country in question and around the world, usually with vested interests in a particular outcome.

Bangladesh was selected as a case study because it is a democratic country that faces a wide range of issues: high levels of political corruption, a rapidly growing economy, and climate change. In particular, the rise of the RMG industry has allowed it to enter and become competitive in the global economy. Therefore, this project aims to delve into the RMG industry and review the role that global governance may play in making Bangladesh a safer, more stable country.



THE THREE FORCES OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

1. The International Financial System

The global market interacts with most countries in the world and as such, changes to the global economy are not confined within national borders. Economic shockwaves, positive or negative, impact others on a global level. The RMG industry constitutes 77% of Bangladesh's exports and attracts a significant level of foreign investment. (WTO 2008).

2. The United Nations Development Agenda

The Sustainable Development Goals endeavour to utilise development to create a more sustainable planet in many areas, including but not limited to health, poverty, education and freedom. The RMG industry gives Bangladeshi citizens an opportunity to engage in the global market and improve their standard of living by earning a wage. However, their working conditions are less than favourable.

3. International Non-Government Organisations/Civil Society Organisations

Advocacy is hugely significant because large parts of the world lack individual agency. These organisations assist to voice the plights of the vulnerable and marginalised. Human rights for workers within the RMG industry are advocated for by international charitable organisations.

RESEARCH AIMS

- To understand the dynamics of global governance through a case study – the ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh.

- To explore the role of nation-states, international and transnational institutions and civil society in world order on the three dynamics of global governance: the international financial system, the United Nations Development Agenda and international non-government organisations/civil society organisations.

METHODS

1. Desktop Analysis

This project consists mostly of qualitative materials, such as published pieces of academic work.

2. Purposive sampling

The RMG industry in Bangladesh has been chosen as a case study, owing to its connection with all three dynamics of global governance.

3. Thematic approach

The literature sources that have been chosen have been categorised according to the various factors that contribute to their approaches to human rights of the garment industry based on thematic coding.

4. Interviews

Two interviews were conducted based on interviewees' first hand experiences of Bangladesh and their opinion on human rights.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the challenges to and opportunities for global governance in Bangladesh?

How do the three dynamics of global governance – the international financial system, the United Nations Development Agenda and international non-government organisations/civil society organisations – shape human rights in Bangladesh?

FINDINGS

- The weak democratic system in Bangladesh is insufficient to ensure the representation of workers' rights in the RMG industry. In spite of Bangladesh being a democratic country, its political system is rife with corruption. This manifests in ways such as rigged elections, police corruption and lack of democratic processes.

- Multinational corporations are hugely influential in Bangladesh. They have a vested interest in keeping production costs low in the RMG industry and therefore exploit workers for cheap labour and quality products. The majority of these workers are women.

- These workers are usually underpaid and overworked, and work in unsafe conditions. The collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 is a prime example of the exploitation that occurs. These human rights abuses prevent Bangladesh of becoming a safe country where citizens can enjoy universal human rights.

- Human rights are not adequately attended to by the Bangladeshi Government and it is instead non-government organisations who advocate for human rights. However, once these organisations stop pressuring the government because they believe the issue has been solved, the Government tends to return to neglecting the issue.

- Global governance is both a challenge and an opportunity in Bangladesh. The challenges are that the Government is highly corrupt and influenced by a variety of non-state actors that have a vested interest in the RMG industry. This has caused mass human rights violations that the Government appears to have no interest in preventing. The opportunities are such that international bodies – such as the United Nations and charities – can pressure the government into upholding human rights. In this sense, the issue is a double-edged sword that must be handled with extreme care.



FUTURE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Whether this could take place through a formalised Global governance institution, or if global institutions need to work to shape the attitudes and priorities of governments at a state level.

REFERENCES:

Finkelstein, Lawrence S. 1995. 'What is Global Governance?' *Global Governance* 1(3): 367-372.

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 1997. *Governance for sustainable human development*. UNDP policy document. New York.

World Bank. 1993. *Governance*. Washington, D.C.

World Trade Organisation (WTO). 2008. *Textiles*. Accessed 12 October 2016. Available at https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/textil_e/textil_e.htm

Our sincere thanks to our academic adviser Professor Adil Khan, our industry partner Rumayz Chowdhury from the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction and the 505C3201/3211 course coordinators Associate Professor Lynda Cheah and Dr. Sarah Bennett