

Gap and Walmart in Bangladesh: A History of Irresponsibility and Empty Promises

In evaluating the significance of the latest unenforceable worker safety promises from Walmart and Gap, it is crucial to bear in mind the dismal track record in Bangladesh of these two corporate giants. For more than two decades, workers in Bangladesh have been dying in preventable fire and building safety accidents. Gap and Walmart have known for years about the danger to workers in the Bangladesh garment industry, yet they have done nothing meaningful to fix the problem. In fact, despite the numerous promises both companies have made to improve worker safety, the death toll has continued to rise at an increasing rate: 1,268 workers have been killed in the last three years at factories that produced for Gap or Walmart.

The following examples illustrate why unenforceable worker safety pledges from Gap and Walmart should be viewed with great skepticism:

- Walmart has been producing clothing in Bangladesh for nearly a quarter of a century, a period during which workers have died year after year in factory fires. Yet prior to 2013, Walmart [never carried out dedicated fire safety inspections](#) in any of its factories. It only admitted that such inspections are essential in the face of massive public scrutiny arising from the Tazreen fire.
- At an [April 2011 meeting in Bangladesh](#) to discuss a plan to improve fire and building safety, at which labor rights organizations implored Walmart and other buyers to make a commitment to pay for urgently needed safety renovations, Walmart rejected the proposed initiative. Walmart *admitted* that “very extensive and costly” repairs and renovations were needed in many factories. Yet, incredibly, Walmart said it had no intention of paying for any improvements, insisting that it was “not financially feasible for the brands to make such investments.”
- Instead, according to [Walmart’s own website](#), in 2011, the company made an “educational film” program to increase fire safety awareness amongst its suppliers and workers in garment factories in Bangladesh – a film that unsurprisingly did nothing to prevent the deaths of 112 workers at Wal-Mart’s supplier, Tazreen Fashions, in November 2012.
- The Tazreen Fashions factory [had been audited repeatedly by Walmart](#). These audits had identified serious fire safety hazards that the company never effectively addressed. Although Walmart claimed it had, for unspecified reasons, told suppliers to stop using the factory at some point before the fire, factory records and evidence recovered on site proved that at least six Walmart suppliers were sourcing Walmart goods from Tazreen in 2012 and that Walmart was the biggest producer in the months leading up to the fire.
- Despite being the biggest producer at Tazreen Fashions, Walmart still has not paid a penny in compensation to the families of the 112 workers who died. Nor has the company contributed any assistance, financial or otherwise, to the more than 200 workers who were injured in the fire. [Walmart refused to even attend a meeting](#) to discuss compensation for the injured and the families of the dead.

- On May 14, 2013, Walmart finally [announced](#) that it would conduct in-depth safety inspections at all 279 of its Bangladesh facilities. Walmart promised to do this within six months and to begin posting inspection results on June 1, 2013. It is now July 10 and not a single inspection report has been posted nor has Walmart announced any steps it has taken to address any fire and building safety violations uncovered in its inspections.
- Walmart has released a list of factories in Bangladesh banned from manufacturing its clothing. Yet the company has offered no indication that it made any effort to actually address fire and building safety issues at these factories – nor any evidence that the factories to which it shifted production are any safer than the ones it left.
- In January 2013, Walmart claimed it was instituting a zero tolerance policy for unauthorized subcontracting in Bangladesh. Yet, according to import data, the [company continued to accept large orders](#) from at least two of the factories that were supposedly on its list of banned factories.
- In 2010, Walmart suppliers Nassa Group and Envoy Group instigated criminal charges against Kalpona Akter, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) and Babul Akhter, General Secretary of the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation. Both Ms. Akter and Mr. Akhter were arrested and imprisoned for nearly a month. Even though no legitimate evidence was presented in support of these charges, Walmart refused to compel its suppliers to withdraw them.
- A fire in December 2010 at the Ha-Meem Group’s “That’s It Sportswear” factory, a supplier to the Gap, killed 29 workers and injured more than 100. After the fire, Gap stated that it had inspected the factory as recently as that summer and apparently considered the factory safe enough to continue using it as a supplier – despite the lack of properly constructed exits and despite illegal construction on the upper floor. Indeed, Gap had repeatedly audited the factory, yet never addressed these hazards.
- On December 14, 2010, immediately after the fire at That’s It Sportswear, Gap posted a [statement](#) on its website, saying: “We and our partners understand this is the time to identify real, long-term solutions for Bangladesh and we are committed to doing so.” Yet for two years, Gap initiated no new steps to address work safety, despite another fatal incident at a Gap factory in late 2011. It was not until labor rights groups were poised to criticize Gap’s refusal to reach agreement on a binding safety agreement that the company finally announced a supposed inspection and renovation initiative in September of 2012.
- Gap’s September 2012 initiative was supposed to include a comprehensive inspection and renovation program at its Bangladesh factories – yet, nearly a year later, the company has yet to cite a single example of a factory where renovations have been carried out.

Relevant News Articles

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