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**Title:**

**Worker empowerment in Bangladesh: The European and North American initiatives for the garment industry.**

**Abstract:**

**Background**

After a series of garment factory disasters that had taken place in Bangladesh, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance) was formed by 29 large North American retail companies to improve worker safety in Bangladesh and the large retailers mostly from Europe formed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Accord) in 2013 to advance occupational health and safety in the Bangladesh garment industry and one of their mission was to empower the workers. This report focuses on Alliance's Worker Empowerment initiative—Worker Helpline and examines the types, contents and volume of calls received by it and to investigate the impact of Accord’s programs on improving safety and quality of the working environment in the garment sector.

**Methods**

All published reports of Alliance that are available online were retrieved. Data from each quarter (Q) in 2017, 2018, and 2019 were extracted in terms of (1) Total calls (2) Substantive calls, and (3) Safety calls (Urgent and Non-urgent).

All reports of Accord published and made available for the public were accessed and analyzed. Data were gathered and presented on 1) number of Safety Committees formed 2) Safety Training Programs conducted and 3) Safety and Health Complaints received.

**Results**

By 2019, Q3 Helpline covered 1.5 million workers in 1091 factories. In Q1 2017, there was 1 call made per 73 workers and 20 calls made per a factory whereas in Q3 2019 there was 1 call per 171 workers and 8 calls coming from a factory. In terms of safety calls, there was 0.59 calls/factory in Q1 2017 but went down to 0.17 calls/factory in Q3 2019. Helpline in 2019 Q3 received 1283 substantive calls; of that 189 were safety calls which included 18 urgent and 171 non-urgent calls. In Q1 of 2017, 32% factories did not make any calls and in Q3 2019, 62% of factories did not make any calls at all.

By 2021, a total of 1581 factories and 1.8 million workers were covered by Accord. By May, 2021, Accord formed Safety Committees and completed training sessions on these in 1022 factories (65% of the target). By 2020, the average number of total complaints received per factory was around two and the number of occupational health and safety (OSH) complaints -which was deemed to be dealt directly by Accord- was less than one per factory. The numbers of OSH complaints were less than two per 1000 workers and non-OSH complaints made up almost one third (25-35%) of all complaints during 2016 to 2019; however, in 2020 and 2021, non-OSH complaints constituted half (50%) of all complaints.

**Conclusions**

The worker empowerment initiative- Helpline-in Bangladesh initiated by the North American companies remained underutilized. Accord’s worker empowerment mission could not form Safety Committees or deliver training sessions in all its factories and the number and relevance of complaints received appeared to be low given the number of factories and workers it covered.