

# SAFETY FIRST

On May 12, just over a year after the tragic collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Bangladesh in which over 1,100 people were killed, the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) brought together parliamentarians, experts, campaigners and members of the fashion industry to highlight what health and safety improvements have been made so far in Bangladesh – and what remains to be done. **Photos by Paul Heartfield**



**A**fter opening comments from IOSH chief executive Jan Chmiel, highlighting the fashion industry's ability to impact workers' lives and that health and safety is a fundamental right, roundtable chair and *Total Politics* editor Sam Macrory, introduced Baroness Young of Hornsey. As the event's sponsor, she welcomed attendees and explained the purpose of the All-Party Parliamentary Group

on Ethics and Sustainability in Fashion, which she chairs. The APPG was active here and overseas, she said, and was working with ministers on the environmental and social issues that arise from the global fashion industry. She also reminded the audience that the Rana Plaza disaster wasn't first of its kind.

Baroness Northover, DfID spokesperson in the Lords, spoke next. She said the garment sector in Bangladesh was vital for the country's economic growth and the empowerment of its women but that "work should not kill". She then outlined some of the measures the UK government has taken to help Bangladesh's garment sector since the Rana Plaza collapse. These include: £4.8m of funding for the International Labour Organisation to improve fire safety and protect workers – funding which

has helped pay for a live database showing factory inspections and the recruitment of 135 factory inspectors, among other things – and also advice and support to help garment workers understand their rights, through the Creating Opportunities for the Poor and Excluded programme.

Shadow international development minister Alison McGovern followed. Fashion wasn't the kind of thing that usually made it onto the parliamentary agenda, she said, but now that it was, we must make the most of it, and seize the opportunity to bring together the high street and the supply chain. She said that although she didn't want to make this about party politics, she was disappointed by the government's rush to defund the International Labour Organisation at the start of



this parliament. She also said there were many short term issues to be addressed, but that two key things were needed long-term: transparency, and empowerment in producer countries.

Next to speak was Anne Main MP, chair of the Bangladesh APPG. She said her group had seen all manner of things on their trip to the country – including people working for free in the garment industry (people who were supposedly being ‘trained’), numerous buildings without fire escapes, and terrible examples of how vulnerable Bangladeshi women still were. Many female victims of the Rana Plaza collapse were, Main said, being targeted for their compensation money. She said she still wasn’t seeing the improvements she hoped to see and said a long-term strategy was needed to raise working conditions.

Joris Oldenziel of the Bangladesh Accord Foundation then explained the nature of the Accord – a legally binding agreement between brands and trade unions for an independent inspections programme – and gave an update on its work. He said 1,400 inspections had taken place to date, which amounts to around 460 factories inspected, and added that he hoped to have all the factories in the Accord inspected by the end of October. He said that in 10 instances, there had been a recommendation to close the factory, but that there was an agreement within the Accord to pay workers for six months during renovation.

Oldenziel was followed by Paul Lister, head of corporate governance at Associated British Foods, of which the clothing chain Primark is a subsidiary. Lister said that after the Rana Plaza collapse, Primark – which is a member of the Accord – looked at their supply buildings immediately. They also decided to employ a fire official. He spoke of his shock that though trade unions were involved, they often felt powerless. He also discussed the vulnerability of the women working in Bangladesh’s garment industry. He said it was important to remain in Bangladesh, and that firms taking their business elsewhere wouldn’t help the country’s garment workers.

Bianca Jagger was next to speak. She said she wanted to be at the event not just as chair of the Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation but as someone who has been involved in the fashion industry. Jagger said human rights violations in the garment industry must be addressed, that similar

conditions could be found not just in Bangladesh but in other developing countries such as India and Haiti, and that for millions of people, being part of a union was very difficult. As consumers, she said, we need a better understanding of the supply chain and we have a responsibility to know whether there is blood staining the clothes we are wearing.

Harold Tillman, former chair of the British Fashion Council, said that because of our buying habits, consumers were guilty of encouraging foreign countries to produce things as cheaply as possible. He said Britain as a country must change our habits.

The environmental journalist Lucy Siegle said that Rana Plaza was a ‘black box’ of the globalised fashion industry, and that we were at a really serious crossroads – not least because even since Rana Plaza the fashion industry has picked up speed. Some of the conditions people in the garment industry were working in were modern day slavery, she said, adding that it was imperative to have proper, paradigm-shifting changes.

Carry Somers, founder of Fashion Revolution Day, agreed, saying that this was the time for change, and that everybody needed to come together. She pointed out that garment workers tended to be among the most marginalised people on earth and many were affected by a lack of self-esteem. They could be told about their rights, she said, but they need also need the self-esteem to realise that their voices are valid. She added that one way to improve matters would be for customers to reconnect with the faces behind the clothes they were buying.

Somers was followed by Allanna McAspurn, CEO of the not-for-profit MADE-BY, who called for clearer statistics and said that indirect sourcing was a real problem in the fashion industry. Often, she said, brands didn’t understand who the voices were in their own supply chains.

Mike Gidney, deputy executive director of the Fairtrade Foundation said that while we were tackling some of the symptoms, we weren’t tackling the cause. He discussed just how long a history the cotton trade had of being exploitative, and said that just as Fair Trade had brought about a revolution of sorts in food, we needed the same for fashion. He said he was looking for leadership from fashion firms; that they shouldn’t simply wait for regulations, but take the initiative themselves.

In response to this, McAspurn said that brands

couldn’t do everything, and that massive infrastructure changes were also needed in countries like Bangladesh – to which Gidney replied that he wanted to see both things happen.

Lucy Shea, chief executive of Futerra, praised Fashion Revolution Day for couching its message in positive terms, and said we shouldn’t forget that the fashion industry did have some assets that other industries didn’t have. She said that in order to drive further change what was needed was to have “a clear ask”.

Next to speak was Esme Gibbins, communications manager of the Ethical Trading Initiative. She said the ETI were looking at specific supply chains, and that vehicles like the Accord were incredibly important. She explained how, with the help of funding from the Danish government, the ETI had begun looking at the issue of social dialogue in factories in Bangladesh.

When her turn came, Dilys Williams from the Centre for Sustainable Fashion said we needed to challenge the underlying model of fashion as consumption, and instead to see it as something of value.

## “Many female victims of the Rana Plaza collapse are being targeted for their compensation money”

Tim Wilson, director of Historic Futures, returned to the transparency of supply chains. Society barely knows the provenance of any of the products it consumes, he said, adding that he had spent the past 10 years trying to rectify that. There’s a genuine fear of disclosure, he said, and this acts as a block on the growth of transparency.

Heinz Werner Engel of the Ecoconseil Enterprise, which works to help development agencies make standards more accessible, said the fashion industry had not done its homework for the last 25 years. “We need a revolution indeed,” he said.

It was then time for Baroness Young to close the discussion. She thanked everyone for their contributions and said that one of the clear themes that had arisen from the roundtable was about governance in Bangladesh, and wondered how we could make the voice of the Bangladesh APPG stronger. She added that the debate around working conditions in the Bangladesh garment sector was a way of connecting young people to politics, because fashion was something that interested young people. She also raised the possibility of a private members bill as a way of rallying people, saying that parliament could show leadership and pull people together around the issue of health and safety in the fashion supply chain.

IOSH’s Jan Chmiel had the final word, saying he hoped everyone had gained some insights from the meeting and that he would like it to become an annual event, on the anniversary of the disaster. ■

## KEY PLAYERS AT THE ROUNDTABLE

Name	Position
Jan Chmiel	Chief executive of IOSH
Mike Gidney	Executive director of Fairtrade Foundation
Bianca Jagger	Founder and chair of Bianca Jagger Human Rights Foundation
Richard Jones	Head of policy and public affairs at IOSH
Paul Lister	Head of corporate governance at Associated British Foods
Sam Macrory	Editor of <i>Total Politics</i> magazine
Anne Main MP	Chair, APPG on Bangladesh
Esme Gibbins	Communications manager at the Ethical Trading Initiative
Allanna McAspurn	CEO of Made-By
Alison McGovern MP	Shadow minister of state, International Development
Baroness Northover	DfID spokesperson in the Lords
Lucy Shea	Chief executive of Futerra
Lucy Siegle	Journalist at <i>The Observer</i>
Carry Somers	Founder of Fashion Revolution Day
Heinz Werner Engel	Creator of Ecomapping, Ecoconseil Enterprise
Dilys Williams	Director of sustainable fashion, Centre for Sustainable Fashion
Tim Wilson	Director of Historic Futures
Baroness Young of Hornsey	Chair, APPG on Ethics and Sustainability in Fashion
Joris Oldenziel	Head of PA and stakeholder engagement, Bangladesh Accord Foundation
Harold Tillman	Former chair of British Fashion Council

# IT'S GOOD TO TALK

Establishing a conversation between different stakeholders is vital if working conditions in the Bangladeshi garment sector are to be improved. Following the roundtable, *Total Politics* caught up with four members of the panel to hear more about the issue from their different vantage points

## Baroness Northover, DfID spokesperson in the Lords

**D**uring the roundtable you discussed what the government is doing to support health and safety for Bangladeshi garment workers – what more is planned?

Obviously we were delighted when the Accord and the Alliance were set up to try to ensure standards in factories were far higher, and we've been very supportive of that – making sure factories are inspected, making sure you've got better health and safety in those factories, trying to make sure workers are aware of their rights and that they're able to take those further forward, because it's vital they

feel able to do that. It's by doing that that standards will improve.

It's also been very important for consumers to know where their clothes come from, and clearly brands are well aware that consumers may suddenly turn the spotlight on them. All of that acts as a very useful incentive to try to improve things, and we've certainly seen that happening

**"Clearly brands are well aware that consumers may suddenly turn the spotlight on them"**

through the companies involved in the Accord, and the fact that consumers are looking to see whether or not the companies they're buying from are involved in the Accord. **The Bangladesh APPG's report describes the country as being at a critical crossroads. Do you agree and how can real**

**impetus for change be achieved?**

One has to hope they're at a critical crossroads. Clearly what companies – those within Bangladesh and those outside – do is extremely important, and what the government of Bangladesh does is vital in this regard. The Bangladeshi government will not have enjoyed having the kind of spotlight on them that has occurred and we are supporting them to try to improve things, as well as supporting the Accord, which involves companies in ensuring factories are properly inspected.

**And what about when accidents do occur, and female victims are preyed on for their money or don't end up receiving their compensation?**

The Bangladesh APPG rightly highlighted the importance of the garment industry to women and we fully recognise that 70-80% of those working in this industry are women. While this is a good thing because it means that they're less likely to marry early and they have a bit more control over their lives, some of what we've heard today shows just how vulnerable women in Bangladesh still are – not least the problems they face with compensation. Unfortunately it's not surprising that there are challenges around women receiving their compensation, but it's vital that they do – that money is for them and we need to make sure that it goes to them and supports them properly. ■



## Alison McGovern, shadow international development minister

**W**hat more should the UK government do to support health and safety improvement in Bangladesh workplaces?

The fact is that a year after they came into power the UK government withdrew their funding of the ILO. That was a mistake and I think it should be revised. The government clearly has – through DfID – a lot of commitment, but I think what needs to happen is that all government departments should be working together: this is a massive industrial supply chain issue, so a lot more could be done across government, from BIS and the FCO, as well as DfID, so it's that cross-government working that I think is also lacking.

**What are biggest changes needed to help secure a safe future for Bangladesh garment workers – and how near**

**are they to being achieved?**

What we've heard this afternoon is that there's a massive job of work still to do to make sure factories in Bangladesh are safe. So right now there's an immediate pressure that should be brought to bear on all those responsible for making sure inspections happen through the Accord, and we've also got the immediate need of the people affected by disasters. The compensation fund needs to be filled and distributed in a proper and fair way.

There's also a bigger, long-term question about the inequality we see in the world – and the garment industry is just a classic example of that – where we've got people, mainly women, coming from very, very poor rural villages and going on to become ever so slightly less poor in an urban factory. We need to think about how, in the long term, we can help those women to argue for themselves: for better pay, better conditions and more control over their own lives. ■



## Paul Lister, head of corporate governance at Associated British Foods

**W**hat has Primark done so far to support improvements in health and safety in Bangladeshi garment factories – and what more is planned?

Fire was seen as the major risk, so very early on we hired an ex-fire official and we've gone round the factories with him. He's looked at health and safety, he's looked at fire, and the improvements have ranged from the addition of fire exits, to sometimes actually physically altering buildings to allow for evacuation areas. You can range from the small to the large, but each of the inspections we do – we do over 2000 a year – covers health and safety as a matter of course.

**Is every Bangladeshi factory which makes Primark clothes inspected?**

Absolutely, and some are inspected more and more often. It depends on the issue: if we find an issue we'll go back quickly, and depending on the issue, we'll keep going back. We've also looked at innovative ways of teaching fire evacuation, because people need to understand what it means. We've looked at plays to demonstrate it, for example, to show the workers what they're supposed to do.

On the structural integrity front, we've looked



at all the buildings and we've completed surveys of all the high risk buildings which are multi-storey, multi-tenanted building like Rana Plaza. We've got 88 factories in Bangladesh and we've done all of those to date, and then we'll progress further to roll that out across the region, based on priorities.

**What are the biggest challenges for Western retailers in securing safer work for the future and what more can be done to achieve that?**

I think it's one of education. We've just got to be completely vigilant, we've got to educate the workers, and the workers need to be represented. We've also got to continue to look at the factories on a constant basis. Sourcing in the developing world, you're always going to

## "We have looked at innovative ways of teaching fire evacuation"

find issues. A good brand will continue to look for the issues, and then will deal with the issues that it finds. Four million people depend on the garment trade in Bangladesh, and there is no other trade in the country, so we need to stay there. And if we stay there, we've got a duty to the workforce – a duty to make sure they've got a safe place to work. We can't just pull out and leave them to the vagaries of others who won't look after them or who won't care. ■

## Jan Chmiel, IOSH chief executive

**W**hy did IOSH organise a multi-stakeholder roundtable debate on this topic?

Our experience is that implementing lasting solutions is not always easy. I'm very keen to get as many of the key stakeholders as possible together to discuss this because the insights and the networking are invaluable. What we saw today is the government context, the role of NGOs, and then the perspective from business.

**"Globalisation brings with it many health and safety issues and there are no guarantees. We need more focused discussion, and must hope that it leads to action"**

I'd like IOSH to hold a similar roundtable debate on an annual basis, and in the future, I'd like to see more representation from business. Hopefully, as we run more of these events, there'll be more trust and more dialogue. I see it as a personal challenge of mine over the next year, to try and get

more business people involved, because it's an essential element. Everyone has a valid role to play and the shared goals are that we want to avoid disasters, protect people at work who produce our products and services, and support business. So I think gathering all these groups together is important and needs to include IOSH as the professional body, and health and safety experts – our members advise on managing the supply chains and systems and help to drive change. With 44,000 members around the world, whether it's at director or operational level, we're able to help lead and implement the necessary changes. If you put the right people in the room, I'm convinced you can get things to change.

**How can further health and safety disasters, like Rana Plaza, be prevented in other workplaces and countries? How optimistic are you?** Well, as we heard today from the Bangladesh Accord Foundation about the audits that they've conducted – worryingly, there are potentially still lots of disasters waiting to happen. And it's not just in Bangladesh – it's all over the world. IOSH doesn't only work with the



fashion industry, we work in all sectors, including construction and manufacturing. We know that globalisation and outsourcing bring with them many health and safety issues around the world and that there are no guarantees. We need more focused discussion, precisely as we had here, and must hope that this leads to action.

We need to look at different levels. One level is the context of what is required by society: what is it that stakeholders in this space want? What sort of regulation is appropriate? The second level is corporate responsibility: what role do organisations have? How do they embed that corporate responsibility into what they do? What sort of culture do they have, what sort of message are they sending through their organisation? And then thirdly, on a practical level, what are the technical solutions in terms of health and safety systems, supply chain management, audits, etc. So while there's no assurance that this will never happen again, we can have continual improvement. I think having these stakeholder meetings where we discuss these issues, means that, collectively, we can move things forward and make them better. ■

# OUT OF SIGHT MUST NOT MEAN OUT OF MIND

Britain can take the lead in promoting supply chain health and safety and sustainability, argues **Richard Jones** from the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health

**T**he textiles, clothing and footwear sector remains among the most labour-intensive, estimated to employ more than 60 million workers worldwide and providing a large source of formal employment in the developing world. Recent concerns have once again centred on supply chain health and safety, following the recent Rana Plaza building collapse in Bangladesh which killed over 1,100 workers and injured more than 2,500. Described as the world's worst garment industry disaster, such tragedies capture attention and motivate labour rights organisations to demand action from corporations and governments.

The historical context for health and safety in

ism. Among many changes since Thurlow's time is political recognition that CSR includes people's health and safety, with the Health and Morals of Apprentices Act (1802) passing easily, "...the House being quite convinced of its necessity."

With work-related CSR in Britain first legally enshrined within this act, there were a series of further laws covering factories and mines. These laws, the result of pressure from socially-minded philanthropists, constituted notable 19th century humanitarian reforms and CSR continued to develop throughout the Victorian period, with both legislation and voluntarism. The philanthropic legacy still exists today in the form of businesses such as Cadbury and Rowntrees, established by individuals whose strong religious principles informed their approach to workers and their families.

Increased globalisation means that CSR now operates across national and economic boundaries. While Britain's health and safety standards have steadily improved since the 18th century, and we saw the landmark Health and Safety at Work etc. Act (1974), the same standards have not been achieved globally. In recent decades, awareness of unsafe working conditions in industries like clothing manufacture has been raised by media coverage and activist campaigns targeting Western brands. CSR is cited as a driver to improving global standards with expectations that companies demonstrate responsibility to workers throughout supply chains and seek to protect their reputations by using manufacturers meeting minimum standards. Britain's long history in CSR should enable us to lead on this important topic.

The Bangladesh ready-made garment industry, with an estimated 5,000 factories, employing around 3.6 million workers (mostly women), is the main employment for the fast-growing

workforce. It generates approximately 75% of Bangladesh's total export earnings. Rapid growth in factories in recent years has resulted in buildings being converted, frequently without permits. Faulty electrics, inadequate escape routes and unsafe equipment result in widespread safety problems. In 2013, SOMO estimated that the Bangladesh Labour Inspectorate had fewer than 100 inspectors, highlighting factories producing 'around the clock',

with unauthorised subcontracting very common. The After Rana Plaza report flags up the 'critical crossroads' the Bangladesh garment industry has reached – with poor transport and power supply and concerns about poverty and corruption.

Shockingly, between 2006-09, 414 apparel workers died in factory fires in Bangladesh and 112 more were killed in a single incident in 2012. As well as these multiple fatalities in factories producing goods for western markets, problems came to international attention on 24 April 2013 when the Rana Plaza building collapsed. These serious failures have raised profound questions about the delivery of health and safety in CSR and supply chains, highlighted in an age of global 24/7 communications and given estimates that only 10% of the working

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population in developing countries are effectively covered by health and safety legislation.

It is increasingly acknowledged that allowing workers to be killed and disabled at work is socially irresponsible and unsustainable, squandering human talent and damaging our future. While on the other hand, better managed businesses are seen to thrive, contributing more to (and benefitting more from) sustainable economies and societies. Going beyond legal compliance on health and safety will help build a sustainable workforce in a globalised world in which there are extended, complex and sometimes unregulated supply chains. Recognising the many different cultural, political and infrastructure challenges, there is a need for coordinated action from governments, businesses, NGOs, health and safety advisers, engineers and other professionals, in order to ensure a safe, healthy and sustainable future. Out of sight, must not mean out of mind. ■

► **Richard Jones is head of policy and public affairs at the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health**



corporate social responsibility (CSR) in Britain is evident from 18th century lord chancellor Edward Thurlow's quote: "Corporations have neither bodies to be punished, nor souls to be condemned; they therefore do as they like". Subsequent centuries sought to address this with protective health and safety laws and societal pressure on corporate behaviour, including consumer activism and trade union-