

I am [INAUDIBLE] Khan, and I'm doing a Ph.D. At MIT Sloan. Prior to starting the Ph.D., I worked as a policy advisor with the Dutch government and Bangladesh between 2013 and '15. During the course of my work, I interacted with many stakeholders working on occupational safety and health issues at the workplace and workers' rights, particularly in the Bangladeshi textile sector. Amongst the stakeholders, was Miss Nazma Akter a prominent member of the Bangladesh labor movement. In a sector that is largely dominated by men, she stands out as the country's most respected and influential female labor leader. She began her working life at the tender age of 11, in a small garment factory in Dhaka. As she grew older, she started to speak out against the injustices at the workplace. For this, she often faced brutality from thugs hired by the factory managers, and even the police. She eventually left the workforce, and went on to starting the AWAJ Foundation with some other coworkers. AWAJ Foundation is an organization which fights for workers' rights and helps settle worker disputes in factories. The organization has been active in mediating numerous activities on wages, overtime, holidays, and maternity leave in factories. Despite the hardships of working in the garment sector, Miss Akbar is not against garment factories, which she believes empower women by giving them greater choice and opportunity. However, she is resolutely against exploitative and dangerous working practices, and strives to ensure that women get treated fairly. I had the opportunity to speak with her, in Bangladesh in January 2016 on a number of current issues facing the Bangladesh labor movement. As a worker in Bangladesh, Ms. Akter is vocal on the subject of the exploitation of cheap labor by the first oil companies. And eloquently puts forth the conflict between the vested interests groups and Bangladeshi workers in the factories.

Thank you to MIT to give me the opportunity. As you know, the most of the production country where producing the garments is the buyers an international and fresh and original. They're coming to me because of the cheap labor. Especially the Bangladesh is the cheapest all over the world. So that means that globally, people are addressing us. [INAUDIBLE] and pull and pull. So, if you're addressing this kind of world, there is no human interaction, there is no worker [INAUDIBLE], there is not decent working conditions. This is the global problem who is created by the global people and global business community and the legislation. So that need to be addressed. How people have to get the decent working condition. A decent working condition. Living condition. Because that is very needed to for us. And in many cases the Bangladeshi and other branches, the business people are so powerful in the parliament, in the government. Also, they're highly educated. That is the problem with this. The politics is always favored for the big business. Secularism and globalization is a big, bad impact for the general people and for the working people. So how we have to get the equal rights. And we have to be thinking about the respect and dignity. Not only the profit and profile. Because capitalism has only two results. One is profit. Another is the control. So they have both, and we are hungry. So we need to stop the hunger. And we need to be decent. And ensure the nutrition.

She goes on to elaborate on the specific challenges she faced in her work, and the kind of disputes she has observed.

As you know, the workers has main fundamental right to collective bargaining that negotiation and the union right. Which is very challenges and difficult for us, because when the workers are organize the union, most of the case there are finding that union busting from the men is meant. As is the local politician, and local people. And their fear, they're given threat, they're beaten, they're given the different types of pressure, and abuse. And they file a false case. And this is very difficult to organize. And as activist, and leader, we are also facing problem also. With as many cases as I told before, [INAUDIBLE] powerful, and they also the only ones that's involved in the parliament and the power. So that kind of difficulty we are facing. In many cases, they're so difficult, and challenges many workers are the facing. They are also-- [INAUDIBLE] one or two countries safe again, because it's very threatened what they're like. So, these are the challenges we need to ensure. And corruption is it one of the big problems, and government is not serious about the workers issues, than the business profit. So we want to build a relationship and worker-management dialogue in same platform. It will be helpful for the productivity, as well as the workers' happiness. So if that begin, the sustainable development comes after. We built one part, only the manufacturer are taking their own decision, their won things. It will not work, because the manufacturer always want [INAUDIBLE]. Maximum things, like when we are asking for the workers benefit. That is honest minimal things. So how we have to get the maximum. And how we to get that. [INAUDIBLE].

The Rana Plaza incident, where over 1,100 workers died when their factory collapsed, resulted in many initiatives-- both within Bangladesh, and abroad. And money poured in from many sectors. When I asked her what she thought of those initiatives, she was skeptical. She also had high expectations from the meeting of the sustainability compact held in Bangladesh in 2016. The compact was an agreement signed between the governments of Bangladesh, the EU, and the US, following the Rana Plaza collapse, in an effort to improve working conditions in the textile sector.

After Rana Plaza collapse, lots of initiating taken by Bangladesh, and all the world. It is so many meeting, so many seminars, so many things agreeing, and so many funded and support we got. But the real things, and real effort was not done. Many cases, we found many days is not that much. So our request, the money should be utilized the right person, workers as the industry. But in many cases, it's not working. In many cases, found is like an eyewash or trying to be useful in this use.

As you know, the third Compact Sustainability meeting will be held on 28th of January, Dhaka, Bangladesh. We are expecting-- to the Compact meeting-- the Bangladesh government, and you'll get an American delegate.

Already you know the sustainable development goals. There are 17 goals. The goal number 8 is a decent one.

So we wanted the decent ones-- addressing and how to implement. And we want to be living with-- we want freedom of association and fundamental rights. And we want better workers-management relations. And people are very poor-- want a better living condition, as in these safety issues.

When I asked her about how to improve worker-employer relations, she had important insights about how to build relationships that benefit both parties.

If we really want a functional workers-management relation, that is-- that part, we need to educate all of them. And also we need to create a workers-management relation culture, because that is the big problem.

And management needs to be positive thinking and positive way to accept the issues. Because always they are thinking we are invested-- we are not listening to anyone. The workers have to be listening.

So that type of culture and motivation-- also need, as the global suppliers and the buyer have also responsibility to ensure these kind of things. But in many cases we found they are absent.

So everybody needs to be working together. As the workers representative, we need a constructive union. And also management has to be constructive, as does the buyer. So-- and government should be supporting all of them. I think this way we can overcome. If there was one party to initiate it, it will not work.

She ends with a strong message to the new generation in the West-- the current and future consumers of textiles, who will play an important role in determining the future of global supply patterns.

As you know, most of the goods are produced by the young boys and girls. And that is the important issue, because they don't get proper education and proper food and nutrition. That is why they need to be voluntarily early retirements because of the malnutrition and high production pressure.

My request to all the young consumers who will be the next generation leaders of taking that responsibility-- you have to respect your young friends and colleagues who are working in Bangladesh, how to ensure their [INAUDIBLE] end of their life, and workplace safety and other issues. Because the young generation can take all that initiating, because you are the consumer. And you are the right people. So please try to be ensured and while carefully to safe working conditions and decent living conditions.