Despite the noteworthy achievements of the export-oriented Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh, which significantly contributes to the country’s economy, the apparel sector is facing a unique challenge with regard to availability of credible data on the actual number of factories as well as workers involved in this sector. Due to the absence of a comprehensive, credible, and dynamic data archive of producers involved in the apparel supply chain, a lot of debates and misconceptions have arisen based on conjecture and analysis of unauthenticated secondary information.

Major confusions and issues regarding the industry’s complex supply chain, especially indirect sourcing, authentic factory data, safety compliance, labor rights, etc.; have emerged largely after the tragic incidents of Tazreen factory fire¹ and Rana Plaza collapse². These unfortunate events severely damaged the reputation of apparel made in Bangladesh, and it was apprehended that these may lead to a decline in the future of the RMG industry.

Subsequently, various initiatives were undertaken by national and international organizations to tackle the issues arising from the fallout of the above events. It was also observed that the responsibilities of the key stakeholders in the industry have been shifting notably towards meaningful interventions. Various initiatives related to work-place safety, worker’s rights, and social compliance were taken up and suitable remediation strategies have already been identified by different platforms such as Accord, Alliance, PaCT, etc.³ Along with the conventional responsibility of the government, exporters’ associations, RMG producers, workers’ right-based associations and the international buyers, it is now obvious that the consumers and consumer platforms in the country of origins of the brands are also coming forward to play a more proactive role in promoting socially responsible sourcing practices.

Therefore, the transformation of the RMG industry is contingent upon a holistic understanding of and approach to the RMG ecosystem, and a commitment to meaningful and comprehensive interventions from key stakeholders in the supply chain continuum. This commitment depends on the collection and synthesis of quality data, shared agreement on the problems and solutions, investment in factory workers, particularly women as agents of change; and training of new, energetic talent with the technical expertise to work with factory owners to catalyze remediation, and to increase factory productivity levels to offset the falling price levels being paid to the RMG producers by the brands and other buyers.

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¹ URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2012_Dhaka_fire
² URL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Savar_building_collapse
³ Leonie Barry, “Bangladesh: Raising the Bar on Apparel Exports?”,
   URL: www.just-style.com/analysis/raising-the-bar-on-apparel-exports_id123853.aspx
The landmark initiatives undertaken by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Cambodia titled “Better Factories Cambodia” (BFC), and also similar initiatives in Bangladesh named “Better Work Bangladesh” are both useful models for the RMG industry in Bangladesh. BFC monitors factories, trains management and workers, and provides guidance and advice on factory improvements that help enterprises preserve profits while respecting workers' rights. Likewise, “Better Work Bangladesh” functions as a package of ILO initiatives that aimed at improving the country’s RMG industry’s conditions in the wake of major industrial disasters. These initiatives are expected to establish an environment of transparency and accountability as well as a comprehensive remediation process for the industry.

As there are disagreements among stakeholders (like the government, BGMEA, BKMEA, international research organizations, Alliance, Accord, etc.) regarding the actual number of RMG factories in Bangladesh, finding out the actual number of factories involved in apparel production is essential as the first step in identifying the overall remediation process for the garment sector in Bangladesh. A systematic mapping of RMG factories in Bangladesh (i.e. direct/indirect exporters, sub-contractors, local manufacturers, compliant/non-compliant factories, factories working in the backward-forward linkages, and so on) is a pre-requisite for creating an environment of accountability, transparency and responsible business reputation/position for the factory owners and brands as well.

PFMR’s goal is to create a transparent and credible database, which will help the stakeholders in identifying meaningful initiatives to improve working conditions in the Bangladeshi RMG sector by developing a mapping scheme, which offers access to robust information resulting in transparency of the RMG supply chain. This mapping initiative is expected to contribute to the current efforts underway by various stakeholders including the Government of Bangladesh, that are aimed at creating safer working conditions in factories and bringing respectability to the brand; “Made in Bangladesh”, in the global community.

The objective of the PFMR is to supply robust data to enable better evidence-based decision-making in the RMG sector with the fundamental belief that transparency and traceability leads to better long-term outcomes. The current pilot/planning phase of the project focuses on de-duping the available major lists of RMG factories through gathering relevant data, and developing an interactive, GIS-positioned, multi-layered, digital, updatable map of RMG factories in Bangladesh.

4. Better Factories Cambodia, URL: http://betterfactories.org/?page_id=979
5. Better Work Bangladesh, URL: http://betterwork.org/global/?page_id=5581
This initiative taken by CED-BRAC University (BRACU) and C&A Foundation is an important first step of collecting and disseminating credible information among all stakeholders, and thereby, making contribution to resolving the misinformation-based assertions that are now affecting the RMG industry in Bangladesh. PFMR started with piloting the research study to identify the feasibility as well as define the scope of extensive intervention throughout the country. The project consisted of the following tasks as project deliverables:

1. **De-duped List:**
   An analysis of cleansed and de-duplicated list of all listed factories under six (6) major organizations: Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers & Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety (Accord), and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance).

   **Output:** The analysis was based on secondary data available on the websites of the organizations mentioned above, or obtained officially from their authorities. CED-BRAC University found 8,020 RMG factories after doing wide-ranging manual de-duplication of factory data from the above six (6) lists, removing over 7,000 duplicate entries, categorizing them as “listed” and “unlisted” factories. The de-duping process was managed during February 2015 and October 2015. The reality is that the actual number of active factories at any given time is most likely to vary from that provided on the de-duped list. There was no undertaking to physically corroborate with the de-duped list to determine the actual number of functioning factories that exist out there.

2. **Physical Survey:**
   The questionnaire survey was conducted in two (2) Sub-Districts/Thana(s) of Bangladesh, namely, Mirpur Thana (and adjacent areas) and Kaliakair Thana. The rationality for such categorization is that these two areas represent the realities of both metropolitan city and a peripheral locale of the city, and the socioeconomic and geographical situations differ markedly from a very urban area to the peripheral. The survey effort included confirming the location of “listed” and “unlisted” factories in accordance to the de-duped list, plus other pertinent information necessary to have a fairly useful database. To find out the constraints of collecting data, CED-BRACU applied two (2) different methods in the two different research (and mapping) locations: “Snow Ball” for Mirpur and “Census” for Kaliakair.

   **Output:** The collection of factory information was conducted during mid-May to mid-July 2015 by a 15-member group of professional enumerators and graduate students (10 male & 5 female members), including 2 field supervisors. The survey took 22 working days for Mirpur and 14 working days for Kaliakair, in total 36 working days. The information collected through the survey questionnaire was consisted of: GPS locations of factories, cluster analysis, status of listed/unlisted factories, type of production/factory, numbers of workers, export destinations, brands/labels being produced, etc.

   In the two (2) areas, the survey found a total of 455 factories (Mirpur 317 & Kaliakair 138). The survey team was able to collect all the information under the questionnaire from 386 factories that provided access, whereas the team collected only GPS locations and postal address of the rest 69 factories that declined to provide access. Among the 455 factories, 140 subcontracting factories are found, of which 75 sub-contracting factories are not the members of BGMEA, BKMEA, DIFE, or EPB. It is also mentionable that due to accessibility issue, the enumerators had to visit several factories for multiple times to collect the data.

3. **Mapping Application:**
   Development of a digital mapping application (the map) with robust information and essential capabilities.

   **Output:** CED-BRAC University developed a comprehensive mapping application comprising an interactive web-based map (similar to the Google Map) on a global platform consisting of factory information, communication routes, tabulations, graphs, charts, layers, along with the options of search, comparison, multiple views, filtering, etc.
Hence, PFMR is envisaged to be the precursor to the eventual goal of remedial and reformatory strategies with a shared value approach, with the idea of achieving a sustainable and accountable business position for Bangladesh in the global apparel scene.

The output of the research project is a comprehensive interactive web-based map consisting of all the required factory information which will help establish transparency, credibility and awareness, and ultimately lead to the sustainability and competitiveness of the sector. Through this map, sector stakeholders will get access to credible information on the factory infrastructure, labour composition and a roadmap for improvements and remediation strategies. And there will be implications for policymakers, labourers, factory owners, and civil societies too.

Every project has its limitations and challenges, and the planning phase of PFMR has also faced major challenges of three (3) kinds: contextual, data collection, and technical. Convincing and incorporating the stakeholders, particularly trade associations; to the project, factory owners’ lack of enthusiasm to share data, lack of concrete and reliable factory database, structuring the map/data as per all stakeholders’ interests, developing a workable database update mechanism, factory owners’ fear of factory shut down, getting assistance from all the stakeholders, visiting factories for several times to collect the information, etc. are the notable challenges for the project at this moment.

By and large to broaden the research project beyond this planning phase (i.e. conducting the project throughout Bangladesh) it would require extensive support from the sector leaders and trade associations (like BGMEA, BKMEA) for collecting necessary factory data with accessibility and authorization from these private governance bodies of the sector.

BRAC University believes that along with the enormous success stories of the industry, conducting an extensive research project on the entire industry would be a pragmatic step towards finding alternatives to the prevailing working conditions in the Bangladeshi RMG sector, and for maintaining a competitive and viable position of the sector globally. It is hoped that the world will be more aware of the genuine progress made by the Bangladeshi apparel producers in bringing more transparency to this vital export earning sector, and respectability in the global community.

About Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED), BRAC University

Centre for Entrepreneurship Development (CED) of BRAC University started its journey in April 2011 with the view to encourage Bangladeshi entrepreneurs through engendering of entrepreneurial knowledge and skill so that the entrepreneurs can develop and grow their own businesses. It works for engaging promising Bangladeshi entrepreneurs in innovative thinking and to impart entrepreneurial knowledge and skills so that they can systematically develop and expand their own businesses. CED is committed to the qualitative improvement of entrepreneurship in Bangladesh and thereby its socio-economic development.