



Webinar: The Labor of Fashion, the Global COVID-19 Crisis, and the Politics of Resistance in Bangladesh

Panelist Transcript

Moderators

- **Dr. Elora Chowdhury**, Professor, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, University of Massachusetts, Boston
- **Dr. Durba Mitra**, Assistant Professor, Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Harvard University

Panelists

- **Taslima Akhter**, Photographer and Organizer, Bangladesh Garments Sramik Shanghati
- **Barrister Jyotirmoy Barua**, Advocate, Supreme Court of Bangladesh
- **Dr. Seuty Sabur**, Associate Professor, Department of Economics and Social Sciences, BRAC University, Bangladesh
- **Dr. Dina M. Siddiqi**, Clinical Associate Professor, Liberal Studies, New York University
- **Dr. Nafisa Tanjeem**, Assistant Professor, Global Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Lesley University

The global apparel industry is currently facing an unprecedented crisis resulting from the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Major fashion retailers in the Global North are closing their stores and laying off workers. Thousands of workers are currently out of work and facing a unique livelihood, as well as a health threat. This discussion addresses how we can engage in dialogues and organizing across borders to simultaneously hold the global retailers, governments, and factory owners accountable for ensuring workers' safety and wellbeing.

BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION:

Chelsea Ferrell: Hello and welcome to today's seminar on the Labor of Fashion, the Global Covid-19 crisis and the Politics of Resistance in Bangladesh. I'm Chelsea Ferrell, the Assistant Director of the Lakshmi Mittal and Family South Asia Institute at Harvard University. The mission of the institute is to engage through interdisciplinary research to advance and deepen the understanding of critical issues relevant to South Asia and its relationship with the world. As part of this engagement, the institute is running a series of spring and summer on a number of topics related to COVID-19. We're so glad you joined us today and please check our website for any future webinars.

A couple of housekeeping items for today, today's session will be recorded, we'll make this recording available on our website in coming weeks. During the Question and Answer session, you can submit questions directly to moderators via the Q&A function on Zoom. Due to the large number of attendees at today's seminar, we unfortunately will not be able to cover all questions. There will be a short survey automatically sent to you at the end of this session. We would ask that you kindly fill this out.

Without further ado, I would like to introduce the moderators of today's panel: Dr. Elora Chowdhury and Dr. Durba Mitra. Dr. Elora Halim Chowdhury is Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Her teaching and research interests include gender, cultural violence and human rights in South Asia. Her recent books include *Transnationalism Reversed: Women Organizing Against Gendered Violence in Bangladesh* and *Interdisciplinary Approaches to Human Rights: History, Politics, Practice*.

Dr. Durba Mitra is the Assistant Professor of Studies of Women, Gender, and Sexuality, Harvard University and Carol K. Pforzheimer Assistant Professor at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard University. Dr. Mitra's book *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* published by Princeton University Press in 2020 demonstrates how ideas of deviant female sexuality became foundational to modern social thought.

Thank you being with us today Dr. Chowdhury and Dr. Mitra and I would like to now turn this over to Dr. Chowdhury.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you. Good morning and I should also say good evening to all our guests from South Asia. A very warm welcome to our panelists and gratitude to the South Asia Institute for hosting today's webinar on the Labor of Fashion, the Global Covid-19 crisis and the Politics of Resistance in Bangladesh. It has been an absolute honor to plan this event with Chelsea Ferrell, Assistant Director and Selmon Rafey, Program Coordinator of the institute as well as my friend and colleague Dr. Durba Mitra, who is a Professor of Women, Gender, and Sexuality at Harvard and is co-chairing the session today with me.

So, the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic has posed an unprecedented crisis in the global apparel industry. We are seeing major fashion retailers in the global north closing their stores and laying off workers. Northern-based brands are canceling, suspending orders or delaying payments. The current crisis is markedly different that 2013 and audiences will remember of course when the northern brands demonstrated strong public commitment for protecting the safety and security of Bangladeshi garment workers after the collapse of Rana Plaza, the deadliest industrial disaster that killed over 1100 workers and injured over 2500.

Bangladesh is the world's second largest readymade garment exporter after China, 81% of the country's exports are from the RMG sector and the textile and apparel sector contributes around 20% to Bangladesh's GDP employing 4 million workers. There are reports suggesting nearly one million workers have lost their jobs, workers are not getting severance pay or even their regular pay. On top of the health threat, they are also facing the impact of loss of livelihood.

The first case of Covid-19 was identified in Bangladesh on March 8 and the Prime Minister announced a general holiday or a nationwide lockdown on March 23. Since then there has been significant confusion in communication and policies among the government, the Bangladesh garment manufacturers and expert association or the BGMEA, the nationwide trade organization of garment manufacturers in Bangladesh, the factory owners, regarding factory closures, workers' wages, the distribution of the government's stimulus package and more recently reopening of some factories and implementation of safety measures.

By bringing together labor rights organizers, legal experts and critical scholars today, we hope to address some critical questions. Is it time that we move beyond a spotlight approach of focusing on one actor of the apparel supply chain at a time? Can we engage in effective dialogue and organizing across borders to simultaneously hold global retailers, governments, factory owners accountable for ensuring workers' safety and well being? What does transnational resistance that is mindful of the power differences between labor organizers in the north and the south look like? What modes of dissent to and engagement with power structures if any are we seeing at this moment unfolding in Bangladesh and across national borders? What are the optics, what are the ground realities and what are the possibilities? So, I now turn to Dr. Mitra for introductions.

Dr. Mitra: Thank you so much Dr. Chowdhury for organizing this incredible event with such expertise that reaches across questions of labor, law and of course transnational feminism. Today, I have the privilege of introducing our panel of esteemed colleagues. These include Taslima Akhter who was born in 1974, she is the chair of Garment Workers' Rights Organization in Bangladesh Sramik Shanghati, Bangladesh garment workers solidarity. Taslima is also a freelance photographer who currently works as a tutor at Pathshala South Asian Media Institute. She has been documenting garment workers' lives and struggle through her photojournalism for 12 years. One of her photos Final Embrace, which I think we all are familiar with became the iconic photo of the Rana Plaza collapse where more than 1,175 workers died. Taslima is the editor of the book Rana Plaza Collapse 24th of April Outcries Thousand Souls. She also serves in an editorial role for the website www.athousandcries.org, you'll see that it has the same subtitle from her book. As part of working with the community, she coordinates memorial quilt projects.

Jyotirmoy Barua is a Supreme Court lawyer in Bangladesh with specializations in human rights violations including gender-based rights, labor rights, freedom of expression, ICT law among many other forms of expertise. She's also a member of South Asians for Human Rights and a Coordinator of Life and Nature Safeguard platform in Bangladesh, a human rights and environmental rights organization mainly working on displacement.

Dr. Seuty Sabur is currently an Associate Professor of Anthropology and Coordinator of Social Sciences in the Department of Economics and Social Sciences at BRAC University. She is an active member of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, the first women's organization in Bangladesh and an ally of garment solidarity since the Rana Plaza collapse collaborating with them on fundraising, rescue operations and assisting in the production of an archive of those killed and affected by the catastrophe. For the past few years, her core research interest has

been the metropolitan middle class of Bangladesh, she is currently working on her upcoming book, which we're all looking forward to Marriage and Friendship: Social Networks of the Bangladeshi Affluent Middle Classes. She has been writing on recent social movements such as the Shahbagh uprising, gender construction of the nation, culpability and critiquing political forces in Bangladesh.

Dr. Dina M. Siddiqi is Clinical Associate Professor of Global Liberal Studies at New York University. A member of NYU Society of Fellows, she is also a fellow at the Center for Study of Social Difference At Columbia University and on the advisory board of Dialectical Anthropology. Dr. Siddiqi has been writing about the garment industry for over 20 years. Her article the logic of sedition re-signifying Insurgently about Bangladesh garment factory is set to come out next year.

Dr. Nafisa Tanjeem is Assistant Professor in Global Studies and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Lesley University. Dr. Tanjeem's research and key interest include transnational feminist theories, transnational social justice movement, globalization and feminist politics, comparative political economy, critical based theories and South Asian studies. Her current book project examines transnational labor activism and activist discourses developed in relation to the deadliest garment industrial disaster in the human history - the 2013 collapse of Rana Plaza, a factory building housing five garment factories in Bangladesh.

As you can see, we have an extraordinary collection of experts speaking on all sorts of issues today and I want to welcome them, and I look forward to learning and hearing from you. I think we can proceed to our first speaker. Our first speaker is Taslima Akhtar, if you want to take it up.

Taslima Akhtar: I want to give a special thanks to Professor Elora Chowdhury and Nafisa, Dina Siddiqe and all of you who are at today's discussion. I think this discussion is very important for Bangladeshi people, it's not only for Bangladeshi people it's important for global audience also because we are going to discuss about the Bangladeshi government workers who make clothes for American market and European market. They make clothes and they stitch, made in Bangladesh in t-shirts and through stitching this brand name and through the whole process they become the part of globalization. Before discussing about the Covid situation and what's going in our life, I want to share with you a little about our Bangladeshi garment workers.

All of you know that more than four million workers are in this sector and near about 60% are women and Bangladeshi garment workers, they are more than 84% export income for our country. By sacrificing their youth, sacrificing their life, they are working from dawn to dusk with only 94 dollars each month. This is their wage and they are the cheapest labor of the world. so, they make Bangladesh renowned to the world and they are very much important for our economy but when Covid started to hit our country, when all people in our country panicked, the health situation how they can secure their health, that time our garment workers who don't have any time or any scope to think about their health because all of you know that in our country more than 2.5 billion dollars-worth international order's cancelled. And our owners already, Elora was saying that 8th March first in our country identified and our government declared a holiday and a lockdown from 25th March and then all factory workers opened, government declared lockdown and they closed all governmental office, non-governmental office, school, college, university everything but they were not ready to close the factory.

They tried to say that they cannot stop factory because if they close the factory then the economy will collapse. So, when all people in the country were panicked that time our garment workers, they were bound to think about their livelihood. Corona actually changed all of our lives, it has changed our everyday, every moment but our garment workers, they are in rush every time, every moment from March to June to save their livelihood. And they don't have any time to seek any place in a quiet environment to think how they can save their health and last few months, I think all of you will agree that we have heard about thousands time social distancing but this social distancing term is very much a luxury for garment workers. Because they cannot maintain any kind of social distancing and they cannot think about health safety measures because their livelihoods are at risk.

When corona started to hit our country, that time they started to fight against layoffs, against termination, against wage condition because all these things make their life more vulnerable. And all of you know that corona will infect all people from East to West. This virus is not any class-biased virus so it will affect all of us, it has already started to affect people from poor, people from rich, people from east, people from west, all kinds of ethnicity, gender, everybody is infected by this coronavirus but no doubt that working class people are more vulnerable to the situation through this coronavirus and our Bangladeshi garment workers, they are also facing a very critical time through this period. So, we think that Bangladeshi garment workers who contributed a lot

to develop our economy and who are the backbone of our economy now they are under pressure, they are under threat and our owners, government and also international brands nobody is taking the responsibility and they are not sure about what they are going to do.

Sometimes we see that they are passing the ball, they are not taking responsibility, they don't have any unified, they cannot take unified decision of what they will do. Sometimes they say they don't need to close the factory, sometimes they say yes now this is the time to close the factory and when they declare that the yes the owner of BGMEA, maybe you know the owners' association, after few days of coronavirus period in Bangladesh, they requested all owners that this is the time to close the factories. When they declared this, few owners closed the factory and the garment workers they went back to their village, after a few days they again started to open all factories and all garment factory workers they started to work, they started to come back to factory by any way and it created a big risk for the community because you know that more than 4 million workers are working in this sector and if we count their family members and other people who are engaged with this sector, it's a big number within our population and in our country more than near about 161 is our population.

So, when they started to come from village to factory and they take a life risk, they don't take life risk only for them, they also make a situation which can spread the virus. This whole situation made very chaotic situation in our country and our government declared two lockdowns, it I think not effective worked out and for that reason if we look what's going on in this time, we see that the number of corona infected people are increasing and now near about 80,000 people infected and near about thousands people died in Bangladesh. So, this is the situation and from Bangladesh garment workers' solidarity and many other garment workers' organizations, from the very beginning we tried to say that and we demanded that the factory owners and our government should close the factories, lockdown factories for a few times and try to effectively run the lockdown but we saw that they cannot continue this and this situation made the whole sector in a vulnerable situation.

When we talk about our garment workers, they contributed to this sector for the last 40 years and this is a time to take responsibility of their livelihoods because this is not the time to go outside on streets because garment workers when they are not getting their wage properly, they are under threat of terminations and layoffs, they go frequently on streets and they were going protests and still they are doing protests. We think this is not the time to go out and make gathering but they don't have any way because when they're hungry they don't have time to think about their safety, health conditions and other things. Two days ago, I was in front of our national press club and I saw that more than 1100 workers were there and they came from 30 km distance and they took public transport and they came in front of the national press club to demand their five months' pending wages. So these are the situation going on in our country, when I saw, when I looked at the workers' faces and their eyes, I felt so hopeless and it was devastating that workers had to take the risk, life risk, to come in front of the press club because they are not getting their wage properly and they are under threat.

Just before few days the owner of BGMEA, the president of BGMEA, she declared that still termination is not working, they will terminate workers from June. I think these kinds of declarations mean something different to workers, when they started to terminate, they give a declaration that they will vote for termination. In this pandemic situation, workers will not think about their health, we also saw that government and owners, they are trying to hide the actual numbers of corona infected workers and corona infected people and they are trying to hide the whole health situation, they don't want to make this issue bigger.

So, when they give threat that they are going to terminate workers, workers also start to work as much as possible because they don't want to lose their jobs, so they're also trying to hide that they are also infected because I talk with workers every day and they share with me that everyday a few workers go back home with symptoms of corona but they are not interested to go for testing because there is a huge harassment for testing and testing scope is not available for workers. So, it is not an easy thing, if they think that they test for Covid if they get the positive result then they will lose their job. So, they are not interested to Covid test, but they are leaving with corona symptoms and they are spreading within their community because they live in a high-density area and they also work in a factory where a million workers work together. So, these are the things going on.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you. Thank you Taslima. I think it would be nice to segue into Jyotirmoy's segment now.

Jyotirmoy Barua: Thank you, thank you Durba and thank you South Asia Mittal Institute for giving me this opportunity to share my views here. As you have heard Taslima, she has given a very vivid picture of what is happening with the garment workers in Bangladesh. I'm just trying to give you some insight about the laws and

what are those laws the government is actually following during this Covid-19 situation. To start with, we have one pandemic law which has been enacted in 2018 and there are some legal provisions where the health bosses, the health ministry and directorate of the public health department, they have got the power to decide on the pandemic situations but in Bangladesh since 8th of March there has been no such legal implication of this pandemic law in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh, instead of using this pandemic law or we have another in 2012 which is the Disaster Management Act 2012, we really could use them to handle this Covid-19 situation, but the government did not utilize these two laws rather they declared general holiday for everybody. But surprisingly when we say nationwide national holiday, these garment workers and certain mega project workers were excluded from this general holiday for some unknown reason. So, it was not stated in the government statement but unofficially they had been working till, we had workers unrest in this mega project and also in the garment factories. As you can see people have been agitated for giving their wages which have been due for the last three months or even for the current month, they didn't get any pay. It happened in the end of March or beginning of April, people agitated in front of their factories, they have been arrested for making demands for their wages some other due wages. If I may give you some example of these cases, I have, we have a report, certain group of researchers have already published a report this week on Covid-19 human rights violation issue and there is a list of certain cases. I am just going to give you four examples of how many cases and how the factory owners responded to the garment workers.

In Medlar Apparels Ltd in Ashulia, the owners filed a case against 100 named workers and 200 unknown workers, so that is one case in Ashulia. In Gazipur Consist Apparels against 203 garment workers, including three leaders named Jalal Hawladar, Shaheen and Jahangir. In Gazipur, over 13 workers have been sued for demanding their wages. In Gazipur again, Louistex Garments, for demanding to pay their 60% of their wages, at least about 53 workers have been sued on 8th of May, and another one in Gazipur, Libas Garments, 12 to 13 garment workers have been sued for demanding their wages. This is just a short list; we had faced disinformation from the daily newspapers.

And another one I should to specifically mention here, one garment leader Shaheen Mandal, he has been picked up by the law enforcement agencies and for 24 hours the family members have not known his whereabouts and at some point of time on 20th of May, he has been forward to the Ashulia police station and then only his family members came to know that he has been basically handed over to a police station and he has been sent to the Navinagar healthcare center in Ashulia. That means he has been tortured in the police custody and fortunately we have a law in 2019 which prohibits custodial torture and death, and there are certain legal provisions we need to follow but we really don't see this law in action. This is my point, we have laws, we have certain safeguards but those are not in action and if I go onto the next stage of these laws, starting leaders and workers have been sued under Digital Security Act as well, this is another draconian laws we have been fighting since 2018.

We had its predecessor ICT ACT 2006 Section 57 was a really dangerous section we had over there and it has been replaced with this new law in 2018 Digital Security Act spread over probably four sections, that section 57 has been replaced in four sections in this Digital Security Act. The result remains the same, whoever expresses their opinions, whoever raises their voice against some sort of corruption, illegality then he has been dealt with in this Digital Security Act and the dilemma is the cases travel by a special tribunal created under this law to try these Digital Security cases, they don't really allow them or grant bail of these workers then we have to go to the next tier of the court district's highest court, the sessions court, they also don't really entertain these bail applications, the only option left with us is to go to the higher court, like a division under the Supreme Court of Bangladesh. In the meantime, it takes three to four months to move to the higher courts and due to this Covid-19 situation regular courts are not working only virtual courts are working with limited access of these bail applications and other applications.

So, if you were charged with a Digital Security Act, that means you will have to suffer pre-trial detention at least three to four months. If you are lucky enough to get bail in higher court then yes, there is a chance to get out of jail on bail. These are the situations now and most importantly, the public healthcare policies which have been in place in Bangladesh have not been considered in case of these garment workers and also those mega project workers because we have been told to maintain social distancing in every sphere of life, you know in a highly dense, highly populated country like ours and working conditions that have been in the factories, it is quite impossible to maintain social distancing and that's why, that's how actually these garment workers contacted Covid-19 and at least about more than 200 I think 68% people have contacted Covid-19, garment workers. This is only because we did not consider about their public health and we did not consider about their

right to life which is guaranteed by the Constitution of Bangladesh, and this right to life is an inalienable right and it does not have any conditions attached to it.

So, the government and all other institutions are supposed to honor this right to life of the garment workers irrespective of their class, their identity or whatever it is. If a person is a citizen of Bangladesh, then he has these protections from the Constitution of Bangladesh, but this is only by the book. This is only in the book and it's not in practice, so the legal implication is very poor here, if we consider other legal provisions, you'll see the same sort of mismanagement, lack of coordination is happening here and if we come to the layoffs and other the salary or retrenchment of these workers, we have a labor law from 2006, there are certain sections, certain provisions which the owners were supposed to follow but in April I think 70 to 80% factories had declared layoffs without following the government directions. Government only declared inner holiday, it did not declare any lockout or all the other provisions which were available under the pandemic law 2018. So, the garment owners basically did not have that luxury to declare layoffs to be picking strictly at the point of core.

Then if we look into the examples of other neighboring countries, like in Pakistan, the Pakistan labor ministry declared that, they issued basically a gazette notification that no factories can declare layoffs and up to 3rd of May, and in India there has been advisory directive from the government to not to layoff and if we take the example of UK, the same sort of advisory directives have been issued to factories, all sorts of factories, not only garments, all sorts of factories for the labors and government declared 80% of wages, the factory owners had to bear 20% of the wages, so these are the examples.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you Jyotirmoy for pointing out inconsistencies and we will certainly revisit them. I think it's a good moment to move to our next speaker, Seuty.

Seuty Sabur: Hi! Thank you Durba and Elora and South Asian Institute to host us. I will summarize some of Taslima's points and try to look into the rhetoric of life and livelihood. If you look into the data what it doesn't tell is that it's not the lives of four million garment workers, it's the life of their family and others. If we go back to the timeline how it all happened which already discussed by Elora and Lima a couple of times, and I will just connect the dots here. The first thing, I mean the general lockdown, what happened after general lockdown, I mean we see that stimulus packages have been announced by the prime minister. We see our beloved leader of BGMEA crying out loud to the buyers to not let go of our hands and stay with us. And they managed to bring back H&M, CNA, and other big brands to buy back the products they had already ordered which was in process.

What we also see is that they actually pushed government to offer the stimulus package which is a hefty amount, close to 8.5 billion dollars as a soft loan. Now the question is, with this stimulus package, with this cry and all of this what did actually this BGMEA, government and other bodies and other actors do to help out the workers? The answer is nothing actually. What we see is when the general lockdown was announced, there was absolutely, the workers had been working throughout the March and they didn't get the pay, and they had to go back home and when social media was teaching us how to maintain social distancing, this whole evacuation of Dhaka by garment workers on mass was, outraged the elites and middle classes that these are bodies which are cause of the pandemic, they don't know what they are doing, these are the illiterate people, these are the ignorant people.

Now, look at the rhetoric, the middle class, the media, and the state, everybody is shunning the workers where we are not acknowledging the fact that it is impossible to live with 95 dollars per month when you don't have the salary of that month at hand, and after paying the credits and everything, what you're left with is actually run mostly for 10 days in a month and it is impossible to live in Dhaka city with that much money in hand. So, they have chosen the easiest option which is to go back instead of living in a limbo, but what happens next is even more interesting and that actually is really frightening because we see the hundreds and thousands of workers paraded back on 4th of April then on 15th of April and basically what we see is that they were asked to leave because there was a miscommunication, quote-unquote miscommunication, among BGMEA, the owner and the worker so they don't get the pay till April 4 they don't get the pay of March and we have to remember that 72% of these workers have been living without pay for over three to four months and only a handful of few factories actually paid for the March salary, that's about it.

Unfortunately, when we look at the actors who are acting in the field, in the political field here is the trade unions who are negotiating, it's BGMEA government and some other bodies, regulatory bodies and workers. So, basically the workers and the trade, the only people who can negotiate between workers and the state and BGMEA is the trade union people, which is already corrupted. The neo-liberal regime, the trade union

movement, has been corrupted, so the representative that we see in the trade union, it's shamelessly, they're voting for opening up the out of 20 trade union representatives 11 of them voted in for opening the factories and only nine said it is not okay because you are actually pushing people into peril and taking the risk, increasing their health risk in the pandemic.

Now, the problem here that the onus of, how to, who gets affected is put on the able-bodied people, so basically the workers are the one who are here to, it is their duty not to get affected and be the able bodies to work in the factories while we the elite, and the owner can sit in the back in our safety net. And that is the problem with this whole situation and what this pandemic has actually exposed us to is this whole problem of how we are identifying these bodies and what happened is that when this official lockdown was over, the factories were opened, the worker came back and resumed their work and the number of infections soared. Garment solidarity already has a study which talks about the numbers of how people are getting affected but interestingly, again our beloved leader in BGMEA actually talking about the hard immunity and this special kind of immunity this worker has so people, the body which has been shunned two days back for creating and being the cause of the pandemic and the dirty body who are the cause of the pandemic becomes this essential body because this essential body would actually run the factory, the machines running. And so they become not only the essential, they all of a sudden overnight become the able bodied citizens here.

Now the thing is, we are talking about able-bodied citizens, we are absolutely forgetting the things they are entitled to as a citizen, it's not even talking about, the problem with the rhetoric is that we are this disposable body which was yesterday becomes able body through the rhetoric and through the rhetoric of the garment owners and state and we actually switch between the rhetoric whenever it suits to us. The problem here is that when we are not treating the workers as fellow citizens, we are actually stripping away their basic right and entitlement, the entitlement that legally bind the owner and the buyer to give them the furlough partial payment for the furlough and also I think it's called, let me check with the terminology, severance pay. So, they're supposed to, by law they are entitled to get the partial payment for the furlough from the buyer and owner is supposed to give the severance pay, none of this is happening.

The problem with the profit centricity and this rhetoric of competitive market and thin margin is making this worker even more vulnerable but also it is disguising the strength that factory owner would have in the bargain. I mean when you are talking about the thin margin and profit in competitive market, you are essentially not bargaining for the worker but your profit and that is the problem because fast fashion needs you as we need them so it's basically it's a symbiotic relationship that we own, so if we look into the sector, if we look into the global supply chain then you cannot have this fashion industry surviving without us. So, the bargain from the BGMEA and government should have been to claim their side of the demand and claiming the basic right and entitlement for the worker instead of basically having these miscommunications and making this worker even more vulnerable.

My problem here is that we know this capitalism is extremely cruel but the thing is we are not helping in this factor, neither state neither BGMEA being responsible enough and they are trying to put the blame on buyers' shoulders but when we talk about supply chain equally, everyone is equally culpable. So, we need to really, okay thank you.

Dr. Chowdhury: This is really fascinating, and I know that we have more speakers talking about rhetoric and the language of capitalist development. So, we'll move to Dina.

Dina Siddiqi: Thank you, that's a very nice segue. Thank you everybody, I wanted to thank the South Asia Institute and also Durba, Elora and especially Nafisa for bringing us all together. She did a lot of the initial work and I'm appreciative of having a chance to have this amazing conversation. I am far away, I'm going to talk more about what hasn't changed under after Covid and also the spaces that may have opened up and I'll try to be brief, I've written up some comments I don't know how it'll go.

So, the pandemic, despite all the deaths and destruction it has unleashed has actually also had a powerfully illuminating effect. It is forced into popular discourse and imagination at least having to think about inequality usually things that are invisible, are not seen, especially in relation to the structural violence of the economy. I think we are in a different phase now, whether we are in the US or in South Asia, it is not as easy as it was before to just not think about which bodies are likely to be infected, who is left to die, and who is allowed to live. One thing I think the pandemic has done, it has punctured a whole set of liberal and imperial myths around neoliberal capitalism and third world women need to be saved, especially amidst the Muslim women. These

myths have become very much our common sense and they produce popular consent to otherwise exploitative systems.

The first myth is the empowerment of women, especially of Muslim women being lifted or lifting their families out of poverty through factory work, and I'm not saying that individual women have not actually changed their lives but there have been very few structural changes but if you read the New York Times or something, just from last week, there was this whole the framing is very much about how the factory work will just lift the women, and the family and the nation out of poverty, right and it's most recently embodied in for instance Nike's girl effect initiative, which at least we in the US have heard a lot about. And in Bangladesh, I think another powerful set of myths have gone around about the garment industry and the empowerment of women to the extent where the very powerful owners' lobby, the BGMEA until recently it could do no wrong.

For brands paying, what these myths have done is that they justify cheap, radicalized labor, they justify paying factories as little as possible because there is this idea, it's almost like you're doing, corporations are doing a favor by being in Bangladesh. Okay, but what other speakers have referred to is right now we see the big brands have actually broken their contracts, they refused to pay for goods that they actually had contractual obligations to take on and to pay for and they've done this. By doing this first of all, they make their priorities clear, they have made clear that what they're really interested in is in profits and that they're so called ethical business model is secondary. It's not a priority but it's a secondary model when it's convenient.

So, it's very interesting because what we see is when they don't pay up, I think this is our chance to really, I see some audience questions about what can consumers do or what can people in the United States do? Well, we have to stop thinking these corporations as doing good, as capitalism as being beneficial for both sides, it's a very unequal system. And this myth of free and equal trade, I think we really need to attack this, how is it that corporations can just do this? Not pay after signing contracts? They can do it because trade rules are made by the powerful, for the powerful. There's something called a clause which I did not know about before the pandemic called the 'force majeure,' which actually says, which gives companies sort of a way to slip out of their contracts in case there are disasters, it's a very vague kind of clause, but it's a loophole. Now, any other way I would think you know, that to me seems pretty criminal but we don't call it criminal, we just call it going by the rules of trade or free trade. We need to think about it and hopefully, we're beginning to move away from an unquestioning acceptance of this idea of corporate benevolence which we really do have in the United States.

We're really talking about United States here because this is where I live and work, so this idea of corporate social responsibility has had extremely pernicious on transnational organizing and I know Nafisa is going to talk about this later and solidarity. We see this in the wake of the much-celebrated accord on fire and building safety for instance. It's very popular, it was very popular with European and American leftist activists and somehow, and of course it was necessary, we needed the building safety and fire safety but it didn't address the key structural aspects of workers' lives that made them so desperate that they were desperate enough to enter a building that was, obviously had cracks in it, okay. It didn't address, somehow the accord became the solution to Bangladesh' garment industry problems. It became the solution, not inside Bangladesh a lot of people weren't necessarily talking about it, but Europe and North America to the exclusion of talking about other things, other issues. And the result is 25 years later, we see exactly the same set of problems, we see exactly what hasn't changed after 2013, in particular.

No, lack of payments, backlisting, firing if you speak up, all of these things that were there 25 years ago when I first started field work, they are there, the accord basically, as many many people have shown, the accord rendered technical what were essentially political problems. And more importantly, I think the accord really left the supply chain intact. Seuty was talking about how we need to talk about all aspects of the the supply chain, I totally agree and I will get to the BGMEA in a minute but I think one of the things that the pandemic has laid bare, another myth, about the supply chain as sort of an equal opportunity a way of producing goods it's supply chain that the current pandemic has shown the extreme asymmetry in supply chain capitalism, okay because there is that asymmetry really affects laboring bodies and places like Bangladesh.

The tremendous power that brands have over local manufacturers means they can push down prices as much as they like and local factories don't want to lose their profits then pass on the burden to workers by increasing individual quotas, hiring workers, this is exactly what happened after Rana Plaza and Lima and others can talk about this, you know, long before any Covid crisis at the same time Nike and other companies were giving money for training on sexual harassment or maternity payment, most of these brands were pushing down buying prices which actually did have a very bad effect on a lot of factory owners but ultimately on garment

workers. Now this is really well documented, Mark Anner has actually documented how abuse in factories is related to this lowering of prices, it's documented but it's so interesting that it never reaches northern audiences, it doesn't that the focus on the accord sort of, as I said, crowded out these other things. And partly of course the question of what global audiences see, this is, there are some things that global audiences just don't see.

Dr. Chowdhury: Dina, I'm having to move our next speaker, but this question of optics is really critical and we're going to come back to it.

Dina Siddiqi: Sure, I guess I didn't get your message either. Okay.

Dr. Chowdhury: Nafisa?

Nafisa Tanjeem: So, I wanted to focus on the question of who is speaking for whom in the landscape of garment labor organizing during the global Covid-19 crisis. And before I address this, I want to briefly touch upon what happened in France's national labor organizing after the collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 and before this Covid-19 crisis. And, thank you so much Dina for already touching upon it and I'll just be brief.

So, the Accord Alliance they both put this disproportional amount of spotlight on transnational labor organizing and they focused mostly on the questions of building and fire safety of garment factories. The leftists, progressives, labor rights circle lauded Accord, which is basically a legal binding agreement between brands and local and international labor rights group for being a major breakthrough and game changer and they mostly focus on creating an alliance for merely adapting a corporate social responsibility model. But both Accord Alliance relied on governance mechanism to exclusively shine the spotlight on a technocratic definition of workplace safety, that is building and fire safety in this case while ignoring other forms of safety, such as living wage, job security or safety from sexual harassment. So, there was a huge disconnection between France's national organizing efforts and Bangladeshi grassroots organizing initiatives, small grassroots, non-cosmopolitan Bangladeshi labor rights groups, for example Taslima's organization, they mostly focus their organizing energy on addressing the exploiting practices of garment factory owners and the Bangladeshi government and addressing brands often remains out of their purview.

On the other hand, transnational leftist progressive organizing initiatives centered their energy on pushing global brands to take the responsibility while to some extent giving benefits of the doubt to the local suppliers and the Bangladeshi government. The question is how does this disconnection and the difference, and the priorities between local and global labor organizing initiatives affect workers' experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. As of today, according to the BGMEA website, 1150 factories reported a total of 3.18 billion dollars' worth of cancellation or of suspension of orders which affected 2.28 million garment workers.

In a recent interview with NY Times, Rubana Haq, the president of Bangladesh garment manufacturers and export association said: "For them (which basically means the global brands)" and then she said "it's a question of survival of the business for us it's the survival of our 4.1 million workers." First of all, I would argue that it's not a simple us versus them question, workers and factory owners can't be clubbed within the same "us" despite the brutal impact of the series of suspensions and cancellation of orders on the Bangladeshi garment industry, the BGMEA and Bangladeshi garment factory owners will continue to have a tremendous amount of power and control over the garment workers. And, also the question is not necessarily a binary one between a business versus survival because European and American retailers are also struggling to pay their to the workers at a mass scale and many of these workers have already been laid off and many are depending on unemployment benefits, which are obviously not enough considering the extent of the crisis, many of the workers are organizing with their unions, their allies, they are staging strikes, demanding fair treatment from the retailers and demanding their right for "survival." And in the same way, and unlike the way Rubana Haq, the president of BGMEA framed it in Bangladesh, it's not just a question of survival for workers, it's also a question of business as well. In fact we do see that the question of "business" is carefully appropriated by the narrative of the "survival" of workers and how exactly is this happening.

And here I find feminist historian Michelle Murphy's framing of economization of life very helpful, so economization of life can be explained governance mechanism through which the protection of the national economy and the owning class is justified through the narrative of preserving lives of disposable, feminized workers. It's a mechanism through which economic matrix are used to determine who would stay at home and stay safe from the contagion and who gets to work and remains exposed. So, in Bangladesh, on one hand, we see that garment workers' livelihoods are threatened as they are left without work and income and on the

other hand their cramped house, their workplaces offer little to no protection from the contraction of the coronavirus. But BGMEA is overwhelmingly focusing on the economic wellbeing of workers, ignoring the health safety they are experiencing. And, in fact, just a few days ago, Rubana Haq, the president of BGMEA, basically said that the actual number of Covid cases amongst garment workers is far less than the projected number because and I am quoting her here “poor people have a certain form of power, they know how to fight, they are aware, and they just believe that they won’t get sick.” So, going back to what Seuty was talking about, the bodies of garment workers were not just described as able bodied, it seems like they have some kind of a supernatural power that they just believe that they won’t get sick and they don’t get sick. And the statement doesn’t take into consideration that the wait list for getting a Covid test is really long, it gets super expensive if you want to get the tests done through private channels. There are many workers who get sick and die and we would never know the actual numbers because these workers were never tested.

And in another video message to international buyers, Rubana Haq said we will have 4.1 million workers literally going hungry if we don’t all step up to our commitment to the welfare of the workers. I would argue that this hyper focus on workers’ economic welfare, this humanitarian survival narrative as circulated by BGMEA perfectly aligns with their business interests as they are historical track records for protecting workers safety and security and wellbeing are very, very questionable. Why is the same BGMEA which vehemently resisted providing garment workers the living wage and raising the minimum monthly salary to \$200 a month and eventually they settled down to \$95 a month just one and a half years ago. Now they are using the language of workers’ survival and welfare as their business as usual gets threatened by the global Covid-19 pandemic.

And the interesting thing is, if you think about what the international media is doing, think about NYTimes, Guardian, Forbes, Fortune, Al Jazeera, they are covering how the suspensions and cancellation of orders and irresponsible behaviors of the retailers are threatening the Bangladeshi industry but the coverage, I would argue, that the coverage is really crucial but very few of these international media actually reached out to garment workers on the ground and enquired about their experiences and very few actually touched upon all the things that Taslima, Jyotirmaya, and Seuty just talked about.

So, I would end with saying just three things, first of all, this simplistic and opportunistic framing of welfare ignores a more critical, complicated and structural dialogues about the failure of the just in time in production in the global supply chain and it doesn’t take into consideration the roles of the retailers as real as BGMEA, Bangladeshi garment factory owners and Bangladeshi government. The second thing I wanted to talk about is that the current Covid crisis demonstrates an overwhelmingly disproportionate amount of global attention to a strictly technocratic form of safety and security through which it demonstrates that the technocratic focus in Accord alliance does very little to provide workers with a safety net to take care of their jobs, their physical and emotional wellbeing. And lastly, it’s a very broad comment but I think it’s really important to say it out loud that exclusively focusing on the garment industry and trying to provide garment industry-specific solutions will not bring sustainable changes because the problem lies in the larger capitalist neoliberal structure of the society and the way we naturalize the free market economy, the widespread privatization, the shrinking state, the nonexistence of social security and our over reliance on corporate philanthropy, goodwill of NGOs and individual charities for advancing structural deep-rooted challenges. So, I’ll just stop there, thank you.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you Nafisa and thank you to all of our panelists for that extremely rich and informative session and I’m not going to make any attempt to capture themes or go over them because there are just so many. I’m starting to look at the questions from our audiences and I see that many of them are around three themes that all of you touched upon and maybe I’ll just say the three themes very briefly. One has to do with the particular movement of the Covid-19 crisis because as you know as Taslima said at the outset, there is some significant difference between what happened in 2013 and what is happening now in the sense that the focus may have been more on Bangladesh whereas now we’re seeing sort of a global impact of the virus on the supply chain. So, what are some of the ways that resistance on the ground and across borders can look like, effective resistance.

Secondly, there are questions about the language, the rhetoric, the optics, and certainly the inconsistencies of these as many of you have laid out very clearly, this narrative of suffering of us versus them and who does it really serve, and also these paradoxes right? The development paradoxes that after 40 years of this industry, we are still seeing the framing of workers as Seuty said at one moment as contagion but on the next as heroic super bodies who can survive anything and continue on this path of cruel development.

There are also questions about the selective enforcement of law as Jyotirmoy was talking about that we have these pandemic laws, the disaster law, and if we look at regionally what has India done, what has Pakistan

done and how are we using or not using effectively at all these laws, or instrumentally using them and who are they actually serving. And thirdly, we also see a dimension of I should say a notion of solidarity. So, if any of you want to speak to that as well that you know what does this moment say about the possibility of transnational solidarity and care. So, I just want to give a minute or two to see that if any of you want to respond to one another, any questions or comments you have to what you said, and we can take a minute to do that.

Taslina Akhter: I want to share a few things. I want to give a special thanks to Seuty and Nafisa, I totally agreed with Nafisa that when the Covid crisis come to us it's not same to owner and workers, from the very beginning workers side we tried to say that the first priority should be the health concern because the garment workers, they are not only profit making tools, they are human beings, they are citizens. The attitude of owners towards the workers that they are like only like a tool, like a machine who can make profit and we demanded that owners and government should ensure workers 100% wages in this pandemic time but they are not ready to give the 100% wages. And, owners from the very beginning tried to say that they are not able to give one month's salary then what were they doing in the last 40 years?

We also tried to say that they should make emergency fund, they don't have any emergency fund, they are not able to give one month's salary and if they are not able to do anything for the workers then government should take the responsibility. Government should bound owner to contribute for workers and also the owner and government should bargain with the international brands because international brands, they are taking the lion part of profit from this sector but they are not taking the responsibility and Bangladeshi garment workers, they are the cheapest labor of the world. So, this is not the issue about the Bangladeshi people who wear Bangladeshi products, they should know about the story behind that t-shirt, I think.

So, I want to give special thanks to the South Asian Institute and I think through this discussion we can make a solidarity breach with Bangladeshi people and international audience to save our workers' rights. In our country, Bangladeshi garment workers, they cannot practice their trade union rights, which is a very important thing in this sector, I think. So, we don't have any scope to express our freedom of expression that already Jyotirmoy Das said I think we need to work on these issues together. Thank you.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you Taslima, any other comments from the speakers?

Seuty Sabur: I want to add with Taslima because I think it's a high time also when I talk about the equal culpability of each actor embedded within the field, I also meant that this is also the time to push for, not only minimum wage but as a trade unionist and global solidarity, whoever is showing global solidarity to bring out the question of insurance in this crisis. Even after Rana Plaza, as Taslima and Nafisa both said that after Rana Plaza, we are only talking about the technicalities and compliances but workers' safety and ensuring their life is absolutely essential, I think the pandemic has made that even more clear and how much one can exploit the worker that has to be questioned if not anything else. Thank you.

Dina Siddiqi: I'll just add something? Just very quickly, it's very clear that 2013 left structures intact. Whatever the accord did, it was very corporate-centric right but there is a larger question here is this industry is 40 years old, we keep talking about how it has helped to grow the economy but I think it's very important to try and rethink what we mean by sustainable development because how is it that 40 years later we can't produce the funds for workers that you know if this is a successful industry then why don't we have a system in which workers are not paid enough that they have some wages, that they have some cushion or job security. It's been 40 years, these are not new issues, our ideas of what constitutes development and progress really needs to be rethought and I think this is what we are seeing. I'll just leave it there.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you. So, shall we move to the audience questions? I wanted to start with a question for Jyotirmoy actually and perhaps we can go back to where you left off Jyotirmoy. You were just starting to talk about some of the laws in the region versus what we are seeing in Bangladesh and if you see any possibility of perhaps transregional cooperation here?

Jyotirmoy Barua: I have seen that question in Questions and Answers box. It is quite difficult in our legal system, we are asked whether there is any international legal tool to force the vocal RMG owners to comply with them but in our legal system, if an international law is not incorporated into our own legal system then it has no effect, you cannot enforce it in Bangladesh. Even if it is a UN treaty or any other sort of treaty where Bangladesh already signed that contract or party to that contract or rectified its provision. Unless or until it is incorporated into our national law, you cannot enforce it. So, it is quite difficult even if you are for the regional

corporation, until or unless we ourselves decide that we are going to keep these people alive and survive this industry working together, this is not going to work basically.

If you've seen the way they have been working, as I said earlier that though the government declared national holiday for everybody, general holiday for everybody, but in terms of mega project workers and the garment workers, they were not getting this benefit of holiday. There have been layoffs, they have been facing persecution for raising their demands for paying their arrear wages. Because of this sort of treatment, you can see what sort of power these RMG owners hold at the moment in Bangladesh power structure. If you look into the percentage of member of parliament and their professions or what they do, most of them are RMG workers now. It used to be, 10 years back, it used to be only 30%, probably now it is more than 60-70%, most of them are RMG factory owners. So, that's why you can see, they are kind of not on the leash, they can do whatever they want, whatever government decides, they can decide their own way of working things out. So, that's why I was saying from the very beginning that we have certain laws in our country but not in practice, they don't have any application in reality.

One of my friends in the Question-Answers box are asking in this Covid-19 pandemic situation whether state of emergency, which can be declared under the Constitution or the lockdown, can we enforce fundamental rights in this moment in the high court division? This is the only forum according to our constitution where we can enforce our fundamental rights. To be honest with you, due to the Covid-19, court was not functioning properly and after a certain period of time, virtual court has been running with a very limited scope and due to this nonfunctioning of the regular court system, we could not enforce the violation of fundamental rights as I have already pointed out in my presentation from the reports which have been published by certain researchers this week. We could not go to the high court for enforcing the fundamental right as if this is some undeclared state of emergency going on in our country because we could not enforce it. And, only a single judge bench is running as virtual court, you know for compiling or getting an order of this fundamental rights issue, you definitely need a division bench, two-judges court. We don't have a two-judges court running at the moment, we only have a single-judge trying to dispose of urgent matters, very important matters at the moment.

So, two other things I have to just quickly wrap up is that in case of state emergency which can be declared under the Constitution, you don't have any fundamental right during that is state of emergency. But government is mistakenly using this word war against the Covid-19 pandemic, this is definitely not a war, this is a pandemic situation. In pandemic, you cannot just describe a pandemic as a war and this lockdown cannot be used as a parallel to state of emergency. So, lockdown is a lockdown for a temporary period to settle the situation in a pandemic and there are certain rights which you enjoy during this period. And if I clearly mention again about the disaster management act 2012, it has all the clearly defined rights and the particular laws though it has certain limitation as well.

But coming to the point of legal right, you can still enforce certain rights, but government has not been using any of this, either of these laws to settle this Covid-19 situation. They are just using randomly their prerogative powers and declaring holidays and asking people to stay at home and whenever people are coming out doing their regular thing, for no reason they are being arrested by the police, humiliated by the police. These sorts of inconsistent actions were taken against the general public, including the garment workers and all others. So, this is quite difficult, when we are talking about international law or the regional corporation, I don't know how this is going to work when we have law that is not in action in our country, we did not see it in the last three four months, since end of March.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you. I think it's a good moment to, maybe I'll ask Nafisa to take this question then about transnational legal avenues open here since Jyotirmoy has already talked about national and regional. The person who is asking the question is saying that here the US is also woefully behind, so this maybe a moment of moving beyond the western inclination to save others but rather to life each other simultaneously, and do you see that there is anything in the horizon that transcends the technocratic focus of the accord and alliance.

Nafisa Tanjeem: Thank you for asking such an important question. When I talk about taking transnational initiatives, I think we should approach the question with a little bit of caution because oftentimes we come up with ideas like okay, universal social fore ease the solution to address this but we forget that individual realities of those individual countries and individual contexts are very different. Before we start thinking about adapting a transnational approach to address it, I think those local specificities are really important to address. Accord to some extent was a really good initiative considering it tried to work in collaboration with international labor rights groups, multinational corporations, local and global labor rights organizers but what fell short was the

top-down approach of doing this transnational solidarity where they really local grassroots voices and specifically garment workers and ask about what they actually need and how safety and security would look like for them.

So, in terms of transnational solidarity, and can I also touch on a few other questions that I'm seeing here. People are asking questions about what I can do on my part, what people in north America or in the West can do, whether there are ways to merge Black Lives Matter movement with garment worker rights movement. So, maybe I'll just briefly catch up upon what can you do first. So, first of all I guess all of us need to acknowledge that what can I do is sort of this really individualistic neoliberal notion that if I can just do my own part correctly, it's going to solve the problem. That just doesn't solve the problem, your government needs to do something, the corporations you are buying your products from, they need to do something, labor rights organizations, global and local labor rights organization they need to do something and it sounds extremely complicated, so maybe I'll just talk briefly about the things you can do while acknowledging that all of us have to do our parts to make sure that those things are addressed.

Ethical consumerism is at times promoted highly to kind of think about what you can do to "help" those workers, but ethical consumerism only goes unto a certain level and to be honest in Bangladesh, those garment workers need those jobs, so just boycotting corporations doesn't solve the problem and it kind of puts the power back to consumers and doesn't take into consideration what workers are doing, what local labor rights organizers like Taslima and others are doing. So, what can you do? You need to study and please don't, and I'm specifically speaking to western audience, please just don't read the western news sources. There are plenty of writers, journalists and scholars, they are writing from Bangladesh who are writing on what's happening in Bangladesh it's really important to learn from the local sources and I think it will give you a very interesting and multilayered perspective of what's happening and what you can do.

So if you look at the western sources, they are just talking about oh hold the brands responsible but that's not the only story and I guess it is pretty clear from this panel that there are so many intricate layers, try to support grassroots organizing initiatives and that might mean donating to organizations like organizations that Taslima is leading and there are many grassroots organizations in Bangladesh, sometimes they look for translators, they want to circulate their narratives online, so if you have free time you can volunteer for those organizations. You can circulate their stories, if you are a social media user go to the websites of those organizations, go to their Facebook pages and then circulate the narratives and try to learn different layers of struggles.

Also, here in north America, we need to put pressure on the brands, and how can you do so? Maybe you can write to your Congress and House Representatives, ask them not to take funding from exploitative corporations, maybe you can push them to bring bills that you make those corporations accountable for workers. If you are a student, if you are a professor, if you're working at a university setting, there are student groups like United Students Against Sweat Shop that organize in different universities and they try to hold their universities liable for ensuring that the clothing and the material that are sold on campus are sourced from corporations that are trying to protect workers' rights.

So, maybe you can engage with organizations where you can open a local chapter in your campus and then take it from there. If you are a writer, try to write about it, if you are a journalist then to cover it, if you are in social media, tweet about it. If you are in Bangladesh, try to work with local grassroots organizations, you can try to participate in rallies, in protests, in online demonstrations. You can do a lot of things while staying at home as well, I mean all of these organizations, they are doing different, they are organizing different events, they are doing Facebook live, you can participate in those initiatives. Don't just rely on donating for workers when there is a disaster, you need to actively engage in labor movement and challenge the hegemony of BGMEA, it's an extremely powerful body in Bangladesh, they have so much of close ties with the government and collectively we need to challenge the hegemony. So, yeah.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you Nafisa. So, in the interest of time, I'm going to ask two more questions from the audience. The first one I think I'm going to ask Taslima and Seuti, if you can comment on this. So, the question is asking how we can build value for what is made by garment workers as pushing down prices relates in large parts to consumers' willingness to pay. Looking longer term, fast fashion may not come back as it has been, what discussions are taking place about these options for these talented workers such as developing handcraft, textile enterprises. Perhaps you know the looking ahead, the change that we will inevitably see in fast fashion and how are workers on the ground and policy makers are perhaps thinking about that. So, Seuty and Taslima if you can speak to that. We'll start with Taslima?

Taslina Akhter: Already I think Nafisa said many things and gave some suggestions. Sometimes when we try to say that international consumers they think maybe they don't need to buy clothes and products from Bangladesh and I don't think that boycott is a solution because it will destroy the industry, consumer should raise their voice about the pricing, they can make pressure on brands and they can talk about fast fashion. Fast fashion is also creating tremendous pressure on our workers and I want to add with Jyotirmoy Das where he replied on Abul Azad Kalam's question about international law. There is no international law that can make responsible to brands buyer and the whole supply chain but French parliament, they introduced a new law named Due Diligence Law and the European Union, they are also trying to introduce this law.

After Rana Plaza collapse, there was an agreement named Rana Plaza Agreement, through this agreement international brands, buyer donated funds for the victims of Rana Plaza but that was not compensation that was donation. And sometimes when these kind of things happen like Rana Plaza collapse or fire in any factory or Covid situation which affected garment workers hugely, that time people think where they can show their empathy, they can show their sympathy do charity for our workers but our workers are not beggars. I think we should remember these things, they are not beggars, they are fighters, they are fighting for their rights so when we talk about Bangladeshi garment workers when international consumer they were also talking and thinking to do something, we think we should show our respect that our Bangladeshi people, garment workers, citizens of Bangladesh, they want to protect their dignity which is very important for us. That's all.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you. Seuty?

Seuty Sabur: I'll be very quick, what I don't believe is that we are putting onus on the consumers when we talk about the pay rise and other things because it's not even one percent of the total production costs. One cloth that you buy, only one percent goes to the worker, not even one percent. So, if you look into the division of how pricing is done, that's a whole different ballgame altogether and it's a different mathematical question. I think we need to question the actors in the field who are operating within the field and who are the people who can voice not only workers' rights but also talk about equity within the field, the political fields that these movements are entrenched in.

I think it's important to actually revive the trade union movement because I think one of the major problems within the neoliberal economy and the shrinking of the state as Nafisa also mentioned is that most of the trade unions movements have been either silenced or corrupted. And that is very crucial, that have the politics back in the center of discussion because we are talking about the technicalities, we are talking about the economics but we are not talking about the social impact and the politics and that has to be the center of this discussion and I would end that question here.

Dr. Chowdhury: Thank you Seuty. I think I'm going to turn to Dina for our final question. I think there are a couple of questions here about some of the myths that you were talking about in your comments, particularly if you can shed some more light on the particular myths that are being illuminated at this moment and perhaps as we talk about myths and realities, what would you like to see change in this framing of these myths, which obviously many presenters today have talked about that they do serve a purpose, some of these myths they are very instrumental in serving a particular narrative about workers, about Bangladesh, about the industry. To you, Dina.

Dina Siddiqi: Thank you. The first thing I want to say is this idea, this fear, one of the things we do is generate fear. What will happen if you do something or not do something. It's interesting what we take for granted, for instance this idea of raising garment workers' wages will mean higher prices of clothing. It will mean higher prices if we assume that the brands and the manufacturers are not willing to cut down on the amount of profits that they have. I think it's interesting if you look at the extraordinary profits, Seuty was just referring to it I suppose in a different way. Paying workers more does not mean that prices of cheap clothes have to go up, it just means that a Walmart or a CNA or a Mohammadia group has to cut down a little bit on the profit that it makes, right. Why do we have to maximize profits, this is why I keep saying, we have to really think this particular kind of neoliberal logic, that's one thing.

There's also the myth of state protection I should say, the US is not the only militarized police state. Bangladesh right now, Jyotirmoy talked about this, I don't think it's just in a Covid emergency and I really appreciated his taking down the war metaphor, we are not in a war, we maybe in a state of emergency. I think the laws that we have on the books, there is this idea that the state will automatically protect garment workers, it's just not true. The blurred lines as everybody said between the state and the BGMEA that makes it very hard. Who is

the industrial police for? We live in a place where it's impossible to have industrial dissent, labor dissent without having the Digital Security Act. I think one of the things we need to see in Bangladesh when we're thinking about reframing is the problem of garment workers and their rights is not an individual problem, not just at the industry we have to look, if a garment worker gets on the street, which is the only way he or she is heard. They'll be picked up by 10 different laws which Taslima and Jyotirmoy know very well and they'll be booked. I've been looking at First Information Reports of garment workers who were picked up and it's so interesting the Digital Security Act, under which if you say anything against the government you will be picked up, but there are these older colonial laws of rioting and whatever else but the government makes workers who are on the streets, who are trying to get their rights, they are framed as conspirators and "deshdrohi" against the national interests.

I think we need to start thinking about what the myth of the national interests which carries so much. What is the national interest, is the national interest just keeping the industry alive or is it about actually having bodies that are citizens' rights? So, garment workers, there's always been moral panic around garment workers from a very long time, they are either national heroes or dangers, polluting dangers to the national body.

I think it's time that we start thinking about how to reframe our priorities inside Bangladesh about what the national interest is and when we're talking about transnational solidarity and what I would like to see reframed is thinking not in these single issue terms how am I going to help, how can I help a garment worker but understanding how garment workers, thinking more systemically. I know we're out of time.

Dr. Chowdhury: On that note, I would, unfortunately we have to close today, we are all out of time. I would just like to close by reminding everyone about what Nafisa said earlier, as we think about the disciplinary issues to pay attention to not only the global media but also all kinds of media, local medias too. So, thank you South India Institute and thank you to all of the wonderful panelists and my session co-chair Durba. I thank everyone immensely.

Dr. Mitra: Thank you all so much.