

**EU Trade Policy Expectations vs. Ground Realities: Human Rights and Labor
Standards in Bangladesh's Fashion Industry**

Rahat Md Yasin

Student ID: 22314037

Department of International Relations, Tokyo International University

International Relations of Europe

Prof. Christopher Lamont

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Abstract

The European Union (EU) integrates and promotes human rights and labor standards in its trade agreements and frameworks with its trade partners. The EU has an established trade relationship with Bangladesh under the GSP, especially through the "Everything But Arms" or EBA scheme, whereby Bangladesh gets duty-free and quota-free access for all goods except arms into the EU market. As a result of these benefits, Bangladesh is one of the main suppliers of ready-made garments to the EU. Ideally, the EU's human rights and labor standards should be applicable to over 4.1 million workers in Bangladesh's garment industry. But, in reality, workers face low wages, poor working conditions, low union participation, and gender-based discrimination, and these are just a few indicators that showcase a big gap between EU trade policy promises and what's actually happening in factories. In this article, I look at how the EU's trade policies face challenges like weak government systems, social and economic inequalities, and pressure from global market competition. This paper uses the Global Experimentalist Governance (GXG) framework to discuss the potential of the European Union to pass from pure altruism to actually making long-lasting changes in the factories. The related policy recommendation was made, too, which attempted to reshape the trade policy of the European Union into a genuinely human rights-based one by measuring coherence between the policy objectives set up by the European Union and actual facts on the ground at the site of production. Finally, it provides policy recommendations for sustainable and ethical labor reforms, calling for coordination among governments, NGOs, and international stakeholders in protecting labor rights within the global supply chain.

Keywords: European Union, trade regulations, Bangladesh textile sector, labour standards, human rights, international supply chain.

EU Trade Policy Expectations vs. Ground Realities: Human Rights and Labor Standards in Bangladesh's Fashion Industry

In 2013, a factory building named Rana Plaza in Bangladesh collapsed and 1,138 garment workers died, shocking people all over the world. It showed the real cost of the country's ready-made garment (RMG) industry. The European Union (EU) buys the most clothing from Bangladesh—about 80% of the country's exports. This industry employs over 4.1 million workers, most of them women (Reza & Du Plessis, 2022). The Rana Plaza incidents made people wonder: how can we have economic growth while still protecting workers' rights?

The EU's strong trade relationship with Bangladesh based on the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), especially its Everything But Arms (EBA) program. Under the EBA initiative, Bangladesh, allows exporting almost all products other than arms to the EU at zero duties and quantity restrictions. Thus, the EU has turned out to be the leading trade partner of Bangladesh in the apparel industry. More specifically, in 2022 alone, Bangladesh exported over 90% of its garments to the EU, valued at more than €23.9 billion (European Commission, 2023b).

The EU is not just a big buyer; it also wants to set an example by promoting human rights and good working conditions in global supply chains through its trade policy.

Notwithstanding all these various efforts by the European Union, workers remain underpaid, suffering dangerous conditions, and with no unionizing power to protect them. The question now becomes one of whether the EU can actually use its strength to promote trade that truly respects the rights of workers.

European Union Trade Policies and Bangladesh's Situation

The European Union's trade policies link economic benefits to compliance with international standards on labor rights, human rights, and environmental protection, creating a framework for accountability and progress. The EU's "Enhanced Engagement" system monitors progress in these areas, which includes efforts to end child labor, ensure the right to form trade unions, and improve worker health and safety. In the 1990s, the EU began adding human rights and labor standards to its trade policies. These labor principles come from ILO conventions that focus on allowing workers to form unions, ending forced labor, stopping child labor, and ensuring equality (ILO, 2019). These standards are also in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (Kashyap, 2023). It says that both governments and businesses have a responsibility to protect human rights and provide solutions when rights are violated (Bartels, 2014).

The EU also supports corporate social responsibility (CSR) by pushing businesses to review their supply chains and carry out social audits. These checks are supposed to ensure that companies meet labor standards set by groups like Amfori BSCI and the Fair Labor Association (ILO, 2019). The EU has the authority to revoke trade advantages if a nation violates its standards. For example, in 2020, the EU restricted Cambodia's Everything But Arms (EBA) privileges due to systematic human rights violations (European Commission, 2023b). Private initiatives, like social audits and codes of conduct, help fill the gaps when governments do not enforce labor laws well. However, these measures faced problems because different buyers have different standards (Vogt, 2017). Government oversight in countries like Bangladesh is sometimes weak too (ILO, 2019). Audits by groups like the Clean Clothes Campaign have found many cases where safety and wage standards weren't followed (ILO, 2019).

Bangladesh has made significant progress to follow EU trade requirements. Structured discussions, monitoring visits, and technical help all count as forms of enhanced engagement under the GSP. These efforts have led to changes in Bangladeshi laws, including new labor regulations and worker safety guidelines. It introduced a National Action Plan (NAP) for the labor sector. It also ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) standards on forced labor and the minimum working age. Bangladesh still behind in meaningful union participation within Export Processing Zones (EPZs) and child labour continues to pose a serious challenge (ILO, 2019).

Bangladesh's Fashion Industry Landscape

The fashion industry, especially the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, is really important for Bangladesh's economy. It is one of the fastest-growing industries which makes up more than 10% of the country's GDP (Islam, 2020). The RMG industry helps Bangladesh's financial stability by bringing in 84% of Bangladesh's foreign money (Swazan & Das, 2022). The industry employs about four million people, most of them being women from rural areas, which helps reduce poverty and empowers women (Islam, 2020). In 2017, the industry made \$29 billion from exports, making Bangladesh the second-largest clothing exporter in the world (Islam, 2020).

However, the RMG industry relies a lot on low wages, which creates big problems. Workers in this industry usually earn less than \$70 per month (Jalava, 2015), which makes it hard for them to be financially stable. Even though the wages are low, the RMG sector still provides many jobs and helps the economy grow. Working conditions for RMG workers in Bangladesh are often very tough. They have to work in unsafe environments, for long hours, and for wages that are not enough to cover basic needs (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The monthly

minimum wage of \$68 is one of the lowest in the world, showing that workers are not fairly paid for their hard work (Islam, 2020).

There have been some terrible incidents that show how unsafe the working conditions are. For example, the Rana Plaza factory collapse in 2013 killed over 1,100 workers, and the Tazreen Fashion factory fire in 2012 killed 112 workers (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Many factories do not have fire safety measures or union protections, which makes these kinds of tragedies worse, especially since many unsafe factories are in poor areas (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The RMG sector also has problems like child labor and discrimination against women. Women workers being paid less than men and not having enough maternity leave (Moin Uddin et al., 2022). Many factory owners use subcontracting to avoid following the rules, which makes the situation even worse for workers (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Bangladesh has labor laws, like the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006 (updated in 2013), which follow International Labour Organization (ILO) standards. However, these laws are not enforced well, so they do not really protect workers (Moin Uddin et al., 2022). The law says that workers should have safe workplaces and the right to join unions, but these rights are often ignored, especially in smaller factories (Islam, 2020). Corruption among factory owners makes it hard to make real progress. International efforts like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety have brought some important changes, but they mostly depend on outside help and lack local support, which makes it difficult to create lasting change without stronger local enforcement (Jalava, 2015).

The Gap Between EU's Expectations and Bangladesh's Reality

It highly contrasts with what the EU would expect regarding trade, human rights, and work conditions in the garment industry of Bangladesh. Human rights protection and responsible business conduct are integral components of EU trade policy. However, a number of obstacles

have made it difficult to implement these regulations in Bangladesh (Khan & Wichterich, 2015). Instead of making real changes, many EU brands focus more on following the rules just to protect their reputation (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2014). The Rana Plaza disaster is a major example of these problems. Even though there were safety inspections and promises to follow corporate social responsibility (CSR), unsafe working conditions continued. This led to a terrible tragedy with many deaths (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). Another problem is unauthorized subcontracting. Many factories pass their work to smaller, unregulated factories—something that EU policies have had a hard time tracking and controlling (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

Bangladesh's role in the global garment industry is risky because of the tough competition, which makes manufacturers reduce costs, often at the expense of workers' rights (Anner, 2019). Big international buyers want cheaper products, which forces suppliers to take shortcuts, leading to low wages and poor working conditions. These unjust procurement practices frequently result in unrealistic output targets, making life even more difficult for workers (Sinkovics et al., 2016). The way Bangladesh's supply chain works also adds to the problem. It is spread out and not well-organized, which allows work to be given to factories that are not properly monitored. These places often have labor abuse and safety violations. This lack of oversight makes it hard to have the accountability and transparency that EU trade policies aim for (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2014). Islam and Deegan (2008) explain that many factories have very little supervision, which makes it even harder to ensure fair practices.

The Bangladeshi government also has a part in this matter. Factory operations are unaccountable due to weak labor law enforcement and insufficient regulatory authority. Corruption and a lack of transparency make it even more difficult to implement national action plans and international accords such as the EU Sustainability Compact (Khan &

Wichterich, 2015). Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) say that the government's failure to enforce workplace standards is a big reason why working conditions remain poor.

Multinational corporations (MNCs) also contribute a lot to this imbalance. They have a lot of power over suppliers and often set prices that do not cover the cost of fair labor conditions (Anner, 2019). This forces suppliers to cut shortcuts, sacrificing workers' rights and safety merely to continue in business. The lack of equitable pricing mechanisms exacerbates the situation, resulting in increased exploitation (Hossain, 2018).

Corporate social responsibility (CSR) projects frequently appear to be effective in theory but fail to deliver results in practice. According to research, many of these initiatives focus on metrics, such as the number of audits performed, rather than addressing fundamental issues such as union repression or wage fraud (Sinkovic et al., 2016). Donaghey and Reinecke (2018) argue that focusing solely on compliance results in surface-level adjustments rather than meaningful gains, leaving workers exposed to abuse.

Impact of the Gap

The fashion industry in Bangladesh has benefited from increased export volumes due to trade benefits from Europe, in the form of GSP, among others; however, the labour has gained very little from such benefits (Curran & Nadvi, 2015). Most garment workers, especially females, still earn extremely low wages, too low for a satisfactory lifestyle hence still under the poverty line (Takinami, 2023). In addition, the lack of sufficient labor protection within the garment sector-a sector representing 80% of national exports-creates an increasingly wide gap between the rich and the poor (Zamfir, 2018). With regard to Bangladeshi manufactures, there are still numerous barriers to overcome, such as "being forced to work excessively long hours and to endure hazardous working conditions," despite trade policy from the European Union citing improved labor standards (Muchlinski & Arnold, 2024). The catastrophic Rana Plaza incident in 2013, which resulted in the deaths of more than 1,100 workers, highlighted

the severe neglect of safety regulations (Kenner & Peake, 2017). These incidents showed how the global supply chain put profit before human lives.

The difference between the EU's ethical trade policies and what actually happens on the ground makes its trade practices seem unfair (Bonelli et al., 2024). The EU's inconsistent enforcement of human rights rules with its trading partners weakens its image as a leader in protecting workers' rights (Zamfir, 2018). Programs like the Bangladesh Sustainability Compact were supposed to improve factory safety and workers' rights, but they have not been very successful, raising questions about how effective the EU is in solving these big problems (Kenner & Peake, 2017). If the EU does not take strong action on human rights issues, it could lose its moral leadership in global trade talks (Zamfir, 2018)

Efforts to Bridge the Gap

The European Union (EU) has been working hard to make the labor situation better in Bangladesh's fashion industry. After the Rana Plaza building collapsed in 2013, the EU, along with the Government of Bangladesh and the International Labour Organization (ILO), started a program called the Sustainability Compact. The Accord works to continually improve labor conditions with respect to basic workers' rights and workplace safety in Bangladesh's ready made garment sector. Undoubtedly, this Compact focuses on workers' rights protection, structural safety, and ethical business practices. Technical assistance, training, and resources for a safer workplace have been extended by the European Union under this program. The EU has been in deep cooperation with those responsible in the government of Bangladesh to see that the international labor standard is adhered to in the country. They held regular meetings to evaluate progress and discuss the obstacles facing the reforms of labor laws. The EU also utilizes its trade policies, like the EBA initiative, to encourage Bangladesh to adhere to human rights and labor standards. It has brought on the

expected impacts of change in labor-related legislations and also implementations of the same legislation in line with ILO standards.

The international pressure and activism resulted in different chronological flows, which ensured some important changes to Bangladeshi labor legislation. In 2018, it was amended with regard to the easing of the procedures of registration of trade unions and provided special interest with regard to occupational safety and health. These changes aimed to solve issues like child labor, discrimination, and workers' rights to form unions. Even though these changes were made, there are still challenges in putting these laws into action, and reports show there are gaps in how well the laws are followed in factories. On the other hand, Bangladesh also took some steps regarding safety in the RMG sector. In this regard, Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh was established in the year 2013. This is a binding agreement between global brands and trade unions to ensure occupational safety for workers. More than 2,000 factory inspections were thus conducted, and a lot of work went into renovating buildings, electrical safety, and fire safety. In addition was the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety driven by North American companies to improve safety through training and detailed inspections.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international groups have played a big role in improving labor standards. Groups like Human Rights Watch and the Clean Clothes Campaign have done research and spread awareness about labor rights problems in Bangladesh's fashion industry. The Clean Clothes Campaign has helped create more international awareness, which puts pressure on both the Bangladeshi government and international brands to make real changes.

These partnerships between NGOs, international groups, and local stakeholders are a source of significant input in terms of capacity building and compliance monitoring. Program examples by the ILO include labor inspector training, workplace safety improvements, and

improvements in employer-employee communication. Other initiatives, like the Better Work Bangladesh program, have given the manufacturing facilities assessments, advisories, and training that help the factories to improve labor conditions in these factories, hence making them more competitive. Partnerships like this have helped establish better institutions and have introduced a culture of compliance in the industry.

Critical Analysis

The European Union has also tried to develop labour conditions and human rights in Bangladesh's garment industry by making some trade policies, including the Generalized System of Preferences. The results of such effort were mixed; in some cases the safety standards indeed improved after the collapse of Rana Plaza also says Scheper, 2017; but often these policies cannot catch the bigger problems that lie deep. Alamgir and Banerjee, 2018, indicate that these steps do little in changing the conditions of the workers since such efforts make companies look good without necessarily changing the unfair pricing or buying practices.

Dependency theory explains the asymmetry within the trade relationships between the European Union and Bangladesh. The Bangladesh garment industry is so dependent on the European market that it becomes unequal, as it allows Western companies to put in place policies and directives, which are meant to trim costs rather than protect workers' rights (Taplin, 2014). Social compliance audits, which are a big part of EU policies, have been criticized as being mostly for show and not really helping to make things fairer (Islam et al., 2017). This situation keeps Bangladesh dependent on the EU, making it hard for the country to get better deals or enforce stronger labor laws.

The global demand for cheap, trendy clothes also adds to these problems. Western shoppers want affordable and fashionable clothing, which puts pressure on factories in Bangladesh to cut corners, leading to unsafe working conditions and low wages (Donaghey & Reinecke,

2018). While programs like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety have made factories safer, they don't fix the bigger economic issues that come with the fashion industry (Scheper, 2017). Many consumers know about these unfair practices, but that knowledge rarely leads to changes in buying behavior (Taplin, 2014).

Different theories help explain the challenges of EU-Bangladesh trade policies. Realism suggests that the EU mainly cares about its own economic interests, often putting market stability before workers' rights. Liberalism, on the other hand, talks about the role of international agreements like those from the International Labour Organization (ILO) that aim to create cooperation (Rock, 2003). However, the implementation of those agreements is hard to implement in Bangladesh because of insufficient local practice and prevailing inequalities. Human rights associated theories claim that labour rights are universal, but the gap is huge and regular between the international standards and local practices, especially due to bad governance entailed (Kabeer, 2004).

Recommendations

The EU is the biggest trading partner of Bangladesh, so it should lead in making sure labor rights rules are followed in trade agreements. Even though the EU has added rules about sustainable development, labor, and the environment to most of its free trade agreements, enforcing these rules is still a problem (Kenner & Peake, 2017). This can be seen in how International Labour Organization (ILO) standards are applied differently among trade partners like Bangladesh. The EU could reduce tariffs step by step if Bangladesh shows improvements in labor rights, which would encourage compliance (EPRS, 2021). Also, setting up independent monitoring with third-party auditors could make these rules stronger and more trustworthy (McGrath et al., 2021). The Bangladesh Sustainability Compact is an example of how government and non-government groups can work together, but it also shows the need for better accountability (Kenner & Peake, 2017).

Trade opening requires attention to ethical concerns, such as human rights and labor standards. Bangladesh is granted trade preferences under the EU's GSP, pending its compliance with the latter's international labour standards (EPRS 2021). However, some critics argue that weak enforcement mechanisms allow the exploitation of labor. To fix this, the EU needs proof that working conditions are actually improving, and it should balance trade policies with ethical concerns just as much as economic benefits (Kenner & Peake, 2017).

The EU is also important for sustainable development in Bangladesh, especially since Bangladesh depends a lot on exporting garments to Europe. Programs like the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety show how working together can solve big problems in supply chains. Expanding these programs to include local unions and NGOs could help enforce labor rights better (Kenner & Peake, 2017). Furthermore, providing financial and technical assistance for employee training and sustainable production practices can enhance safety and sustainability within the industry (EPRS, 2021).

The institutional changes will align the Bangladesh labor laws with the international standards. The Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining, although two of the basic conventions, have not been included in the Bangladesh Labour Act. These issues can be fixed by improving inspections, hiring more inspectors, and giving stronger penalties for not following the rules (McGrath et al., 2021). Also, creating systems to solve disputes would help protect workers' rights (Ferdous, 2024).

Teaching workers and employers about labor rights can help create a culture of following the rules. Educational programs can empower workers to know and demand their rights; training programs help employers avoid unintentional violations (Ferdous, 2024). This is important if fair labor practices are to be achieved across the industry (Kenner & Peake, 2017).

It's where industry-led initiatives leverage technological capabilities in the form of blockchain, making supply chains more transparent. This means manufacturers could regulate themselves while still following international labor standards. Encouraging voluntary codes of conduct can also work alongside government oversight to improve accountability (McGrath et al., 2021).

Big companies need to make sure their businesses and supply chains are free from unfair labor practices. This means ensuring minimum wages, benefits, and safe working conditions. The Fairtrade movement has highlighted the importance of fair pricing and worker benefits. Such movements set good examples for responsible corporate behavior (Khan et al., 2019). Transparency is very important for making sure labor and environmental standards are met. Technological innovations, such as blockchain, facilitate organizations in monitoring their supply chains in real time, thereby reducing the possibilities of labor exploitation and building trust among multiple stakeholders involved in the process (McGrath et al., 2021). Ethical sourcing should, therefore, not be tied to mere rule following but extended to include childcare, health insurance, and safety training for workers that will better improve their lives. Such are also believed by Khan et al. (2019) and McGrath et al. (2021) to enhance brand reputation for companies around the world.

Labor reforms will work best when international groups like governments, corporations, and civil society organizations work together. The Bangladesh Sustainability Compact was another good example of how multi-stakeholder approaches work in the field of better labour conditions (Kenner & Peake, 2017).

The International Labour Standards set by the ILO and other agencies are helpful to overcome the lacunas on enforcement over different geographical regions. It should, however, be supported by strong monitoring mechanisms to ensure compliance (EPRS, 2021, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper highlights the visible difference between the promise of European Union trade policy and the actual experiences of garment workers in Bangladesh. While the European Union frameworks champion human rights and labor standards, the concerns on the low wage, unsafe working conditions, and limitations on freedom of union in Bangladesh signal a system which failed to bring real changes. The findings of this paper talked about the need for better accountability, more ethical buying practices, and strict enforcement. Solving this gap between policy and reality , the EU can truly make trade policy a real tool for justice and equality: having strong control, better protection of workers, and working together with locals. The EU should push the trade relations, not just for economic reasons but also to stand up for fairness and respect for all workers in the global supply chain.

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