

Business Leadership: Case Study #4

Ethics Summative Project - H&M Ethics Case Study:



Most of H&M's "best" factories in Bangladesh still don't have working fire exits

Author: Marc Bain

Factory fires pose one of the greatest dangers to Bangladesh's garment workers.

After the 2013 factory collapse at Rana Plaza, more than 200 clothing brands from around the world signed a binding commitment to create (pdf) a Bangladeshi garment industry "in which no worker needs to fear fires, building collapses, or other accidents that could be prevented with reasonable health and safety measures."

The first brand to sign the commitment was H&M, which is the single largest buyer of garments from Bangladesh. But a study released Oct. 1 (pdf) by the Clean Clothes Campaign, in collaboration with several labor groups, says the company is "dramatically behind schedule" in making actual improvements in the factories it sources from. Many of those delayed improvements would ensure worker safety in case of a fire.

What's more worrisome, the report only looked at H&M's "Platinum" and "Gold" suppliers—the factories that supposedly boast the highest standards in labor and environmental protections. They account for 56 of the 229 factories H&M uses in Bangladesh.

About 61% didn't have fire exits that met the accord's standards, which demand that fire exits have enclosed stairwells and fire-rated doors. Without those measures, exits can quickly fill with smoke in a fire, effectively trapping workers on a factory's upper floors.

It's not a small risk. Factory fires are a persistent hazard in Bangladesh, as the New York Times noted after the 2012 fire at Tazreen Fashions that killed 112 people.

"[Lack of appropriate fire exits] is the defect that has been the primary culprit in virtually every mass fatality fire in the Bangladesh garment industry," the report states, estimating that this violation alone puts nearly 79,000 workers' lives in danger.