Trade Unions, NGOs, and Transnationalization: Experiences from the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh

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Summary
The recent factory collapse in Bangladesh raises questions about the promotion and protection of workers' rights and about the relevant actors who support workers' interests. As trade unionism in the Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) sector is very weak, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) recently turned to the factories to provide support. Simultaneously, reports about poor working conditions have increasingly gained the attention of international labor organizations as well as transnational civil-society actors. This paper aims to show the effects of this trans-nationalization process. It particularly focuses on the issues of workers' organization and mobilization as well as on the relation of trade unions and NGOs since these are influenced by international collaboration most of all. Given the high percentage of women workers in the RMG sector and the common stereotyped portrayal of the "Third World woman," it further evaluates the gendered implications of transnational support. The article will demonstrate that transnationalization is a highly ambivalent process which, on one hand, provides resources and windows of opportunity for trade unions that can be useful regarding the realization of the right to freedom of association. On the other hand, however, these processes further undermine trade unions' already weak position in the RMG sector.

Introduction

With at least 1,127 people killed and 2,500 injured, the building collapse in Savar — an industrial suburb of Dhaka — on April 24, 2013 is not only Bangladesh's worst factory disaster yet, but also the deadliest tragedy in the history of the global garment industry (Yardley 2013). The widespread violation of building codes as well as health and safety regulations in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector

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was by no means a secret, however. In view of the numerous and recurrent factory incidents, this tragedy was more or less predictable. Only five months earlier — on November 24, 2012 — 112 people died in Bangladesh's deadliest factory fire in the Ashulia district on the outskirts of Dhaka, and in 2005 at least 64 workers were killed in another factory collapse in Savar. Comprehensive statistics on Bangladesh's RMG incidents and its victims have yet to be compiled. However, on the basis of conservative estimates, the statistics regarding factory fires show that at least 1,000 garment workers have lost their lives and 3,000 workers have been injured in more than 275 incidents since 1990 (cf. Claeson 2012: 19).[1]

These numbers raise questions about the promotion and protection of workers' rights as well as the actors who support workers' interests. As trade unionism in the Bangladeshi RMG sector is very weak, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) recently turned to the factories themselves to provide support of their own. Simultaneously, reports about poor working conditions have increasingly gained the attention of international labor organizations and transnational civil-society actors. This paper aims to show the effects of this transnationalization process. It particularly focuses on the issues concerning workers' organization and mobilization and the relation of trade unions and NGOs since these bodies have been influenced by international collaboration most strongly.[2] Given the high percentage of women workers in the RMG sector — the industry currently employs more than four million workers, 80 percent of whom are female (BGMEA 2013a) — and the common stereotyped portrayal of the "Third World woman" (Mohanty 1984), it further evaluates the gendered implications of transnational support.

The article will demonstrate that transnationalization is a highly ambivalent process, which, on one hand, provides resources and windows of opportunity for trade unions that can be useful regarding the realization of the right to freedom of association. On the other hand, however, this process further undermines trade unions' already weak position in the RMG sector.

Taking the Savar tragedy as a point of departure, I will first evaluate recent developments in the industry and introduce the relevant actors. Thereafter, as the impact

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1   Estimations are based on media reports, among other things, which do not cover every single factory fire that has ever broken out. Therefore, as Björn Claeson (2012: 19) and Anu Muhammad (2011: 25) indicate, the numbers of factory fires and workers who have been killed or injured in them are most likely to have been underestimated. These figures also do not include the trade unionists and workers who have been killed or injured in clashes with the police during protests for better working conditions and a higher minimum wage.

2   This paper is based on continuous research and fieldwork that took place in Dhaka between 2010 and 2012. During my fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews with trade unionists, NGO representatives, researchers and representatives of development agencies. Since most of the interviewed labor activists operated in an extremely hostile environment – many of them had already faced spurious charges, intimidation and persecution – I decided to anonymize the respective interviewees.

of transnationalization on social-mobilization efforts could already be observed in Bangladesh's developmental NGO sector, I will describe its transformation through past experiences, which are similar to current developments. Against this backdrop, I examine the role of trade unions in the RMG industry and discuss their relation to domestic labor organizations as well as (transnational) NGOs. In this section, the impact of international support on the position of women in trade unions is also discussed along with problems of representation in anti-sweatshop campaigns. In this context, I elaborate on the appearance of transnational governmentality as well as the role of the Bangladeshi state. The final section proposes ways of strengthening the role and capacity of actors who aim to support worker's interests.

The tragedy and its aftermath: actors and measures

It might be presumed that the Savar tragedy should serve as a turning point for factory owners, international buyers and, indeed, the Bangladeshi government, stimulating these actors to take immediate measures which could prevent such incidents from recurring. However, the steps that have been taken two months after the disaster took place are widely considered insufficient (cf. Morshed 2013; Parvez and Saha 2013).[3] The most pressing issues are the implementation of effective health and safety regulations, the allowance of trade unions at the factory level and raising the minimum wage. The formation of trade unions at the factory level is a basic right which is constantly and strategically denied to workers. Moreover, many of the fatal tragedies could probably have been prevented if a workers' representation had existed. In the case of the building that recently collapsed in Savar and in other cases as well, it was reported that employees had noticed the hazardous situations and informed the management, which disregarded their concerns (Al-Mahmood 2013). On April 23, a day before the building in Savar collapsed, garment workers and other employees who worked for banks and insurance companies at offices in the business complex named Rana Plaza detected huge cracks in the building and consequently evacuated it. While employees from other companies were not asked to return to their workplaces on the following day, company officials of the garment factories simply ignored the imminent danger and told the workers their monthly salary would be withheld if they refused to go back to work again. Thus, the workers who had already escaped from the building were pressurized into returning to their workplaces, which soon turned out to be a death trap (ibid.). Since none of the garment factories located in the Rana Plaza building were unionized — a status that actually applies to almost all the country's RMG factories — there were no employee representatives who could have insisted on the workers' fundamental right to a safe workplace. Thus, the urgency of forming trade unions at the factory level

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3   This article was submitted on June 30, 2013.

was dramatically demonstrated once again. At present, however, the percentage of organized labor in Bangladesh's RMG sector is exceptionally low. In 2009, it was estimated that only 120 out of more than 4,500 factories were affiliated to trade unions and consequently fewer than five percent of the workers were unionized (Faruque 2009: 24). Furthermore, due to the various restrictions and problems that trade unionists and workers who aim to establish in-plant unions face,[4] most trade unions operate outside the factories. In light of the recent tragedy, the government has amended the Labour Act of 2006 and indicated its intention to raise the minimum wage.[5] Labor representatives welcomed a new section of the Labour (Amendment) Act 2013, which repeals the previous provision to provide employers with the names of any workers who intend to form a union, but they also pointed to the fact that other provisions which hinder the formation of trade unions were still in place. This particularly applies to the 30-percent minimum membership requirement to form a union and to the prohibition of trade unions in export-processing zones (Parvez and Saha 2013; Ulla Mirdha 2013).

After consulting the International Labour Organization (ILO), the Bangladeshi government furthermore approved the hiring of 1,000 additional inspectors. Up until recently, the Ministry of Labour's Inspection Department employed 18 (sic!) inspectors who were responsible for the monitoring of an estimated 100,000 factories (Schneider 2013; Human Rights Watch 2013). Given the country's experience with monitoring practices,[6] it cannot be presumed that inspections are very thorough, however. To put it briefly, although some steps have been taken, they still do not meet requirements that could guarantee workers' safety and the right to organize, which could ultimately strengthen the role that trade unions play in the sector. The same applies to the recently approved *Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh*, which does provide a role for labor unions in inspection programs, but is nevertheless an accord in which multinational companies are free to participate on a voluntary basis. Consequently, although 100 global brands chose to sign the legally binding agreement in the wake of the Savar disaster, major North American retailers such as *Walmart* and *Gap* declined to do so (Greenhouse 2013). Thus, although this safety accord, which was initiated by two global unions (IndustriALL Global Union

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4 The major problems are employers' hostility and provisions by the Labour Act of 2006, which sets a minimum membership requirement of 30 percent of the workers employed at a factory for union registration, for example (Faruque 2009: 12f.). Furthermore, trade unionists heavily criticize the registration process with the Ministry of Labour due to its requirement to inform factory owners about the involved workers, which frequently leads to their dismissal.

5 At 30 euros a month, the minimum wage is still the lowest in the world, even though it was raised in 2010.

6 It is reported that the inspectors usually announce their factory visits in advance and aim at maintaining a good relationship with the respective management (Human Rights Watch 2013).

and UNI Global Union), shows significant differences[7] with respect to inadequate corporate-driven Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programs,[8] there is reason for concern that, like other voluntary initiatives (cf. Barrientos and Smith 2007; Finnegan 2013), it might not meet its goals.

In view of the absence of labor unions on the factory level, this vacuum has been partially filled by internationally funded NGOs that offer training on various issues and also provide basic services such as health care and childcare. Although these services are much needed and are generally welcomed by workers, NGOs' increased activity in the RMG industry is also viewed skeptically. Trade unionists particularly criticize their lack of commitment, a supposedly de-politicized stance and, most importantly, the additional barriers against organizing that are seen to evolve due to NGOs' involvement. Thus, far from detecting a "social-movement unionism" (Waterman 1999), which might consist of coalitions between NGOs and trade unions, among other things, with a few exceptions, the relationship between the two actors tends to be competitive and adversarial (see also Rahman and Langford 2010).

The critical assessment of NGO activities needs to be seen in a bigger historical and political context regarding the development of Bangladesh's NGO sector, namely its processes of institutionalization and internationalization, which unfolds decisively different normative notions of certain civil-society actors between perspectives from the global South and North. In this context, the Eurocentrism that underlies the assumption regarding the close correlation between a strong presence of NGOs and democracy is revealed. While in one context NGOs are widely seen as progressive societal actors who make the state accountable (see Keck and Sikkink 1999; for example), in another, they are criticized for acting as "parallel states" which lack any accountability (Spivak 1999: 357). This particularly applies to the context of Bangladesh, where the NGO sector is exceptionally large and influential. Many Bangladeshi NGOs regularly receive funds from international donors. As a result, a significant de-politicization of developmental NGOs, which mainly focus on the rural population of Bangladesh, has been observed (Feldman 2003; Kabeer et al. 2010; Stiles 2002).

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7   Unlike CSR programs, the Safety Accord is legally binding, requires independent safety inspections with public reports and aims at strengthening unions through their involvement in the inspection process. It is, however, focused on safety issues and does not address other workers' rights violations such as harassment or excessive working hours (cf. Greenhouse 2013).

8   The Rana Plaza tragedy is further evidence of the insufficiency of CSR initiatives: two of the factories in the building had been inspected and approved by the Business Social Compliance Initiative and another one had passed an inspection by the Service Organization for Compliance Audit Management (Manik et al. 2013).

Transnationalization and the transformation of Bangladesh's NGO sector

A closer look at Bangladesh's societal fabric reveals the gap between the highly normative accounts of civil society and the realities on the ground. In classical liberal thought, civil society is regarded as a separate realm, which is distinct from the state, the household and the market. It is supposed to act as a watchdog, ensuring the accountability of the state to its people. Thus, this view of civil society assumes a close correlation between a strong presence of civil-society actors and democracy. Although theorists have questioned such a normative notion of civil society and its application to countries of the global South (e.g. Chatterjee 2003 and 2004), it continues to be a key element in development theory and practice, where it is considered pivotal to the advancement of human rights, democracy and development. Since the late 1980s, development think-tanks have placed a great deal of emphasis on the strengthening of civil society as one or possibly even *the* most important goal of development practice (cf. Chandhoke 2007: 611ff.).[9] Consequently, development agencies have increasingly bypassed the state and funded NGOs, which are assumed to be the main actors of civil society.[10] In Bangladesh, as elsewhere, this has led to a mushrooming of NGOs. With approximately 22,000 NGOs working on its territory, Bangladesh has more NGOs per capita than any other developing country (DFID 2005: 1, cited in Kabeer et al. 2010: 7) and is therefore referred to as the "NGO capital of the world" (Karim 2001: 96).[11] In view of the substantial growth of partnerships between NGOs and official donor agencies, it is stated that NGOs have become the "primary partners of official agencies wishing to support social development work in Bangladesh" (Sobhan 1997: 4).

In contrast to liberal assumptions, the evaluation of several decades of NGO growth and activity seems to be rather disillusioning. Although scholars pay credit to the work of NGOs regarding the progress made in meeting at least some of the Millennium Development Goals, they are also highly critical of the extensive roles NGOs play in the delivery of basic services (Kabeer et al. 2010: 45). Within this context, the main concerns revolve around three phenomena. The first one is the emergence of a parallel or "franchise" state, as Geoffrey Wood (1997) puts it, which

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9   The increased interest in civil society in countries of the global South needs, of course, to be contextualized within the so-called Washington Consensus, the rise of neo-liberalism and structural adjustment programs (cf. Chandhoke 2007; Eade 2001). However, the strong presence of NGOs in Bangladesh also has its roots in its vital history of welfare initiatives as well as in the War for Independence in 1971 and its aftermath (cf. Lewis 2011: 113ff.)

10 Many scholars (e.g. Chandhoke 2007; Feldman 2003; Lewis 2004) point to the flattening of the concept of civil society through the conflation of NGOs with civil society.

11 Although the proportion of Bangladeshi NGOs that receive foreign financial assistance is relatively low – 2,252 NGOs were registered with the NGO Affairs Bureau (NAB) in July 2013 and are therefore eligible to receive foreign funding (NAB 2013) – there has been a significant increase over the last 20 to 25 years (Kabeer et al. 2010: 13f.)

undermines the role of the state as well as the accountability link that is supposed to exist between citizens and the state.[12] The second concern relates to the negative consequences that NGO initiatives have on civil society as a whole. In contrast to the classical liberal view, scholars have pointed out that there is hardly any evidence which underpins the correlation of an increase in NGOs with the strengthening of civil society. On the contrary, it was established that NGOs have developed rather adversarial relations with other civil-society actors in many cases, which holds particularly true for the labor movement (Stiles 2002: 839). The third criticism concerns the de-politicization of NGOs as a result of the processes of institutionalization and internationalization. Socially oriented development NGOs such as Nijera Kori, for example,[13] have reported that they have been pressurized by foreign donors to refrain from making any radical political statements (Stiles 2002: 843). Although Nijera Kori has successfully resisted this pressure, it has been observed that other organizations have "gradually abandoned social mobilisation and collective action strategies for a narrower focus on service delivery and microcredit provision" (Kabeer et al. 2010: 3). Naila Kabeer and her colleagues go even further in stating that almost all former politically committed organizations have either sacrificed their social-mobilization approach, given in to pressure from donors or simply collapsed. Thus, they conclude that "social mobilisation organisations have all but disappeared from Bangladesh" (ibid.: 47). Similarly, the trade unionists I interviewed criticized NGOs for their lack of political commitment. However, trade unions have also been accused of not addressing workers' interests properly.

Trade unions in Bangladesh and processes of transnationalization

Bangladeshi trade unions have been the object of severe criticism, which mainly revolves around two issues: their close affiliation to political parties and the neglect of female workers' issues (Dannecker 2002; Mahmud 2010). In order to understand the politicization of trade unions, we need to take a closer look at the wider global economic context of this phenomenon as well as its historical and political context. Zia Rahman and Tom Langford (2012) point to the strong influence of British colonial rule on labor movements and trade unions, for example.

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12 In her research on micro-credits and gender relations in rural Bangladesh, Lamia Karim (2008) has revealed how neo-liberal policies – i.e. the failure or withdrawal of the state from the welfare of its citizens – contribute to the phenomenon of NGOs as "shadow states" (ibid. 8).

13 The organization's name (the transliteration from Bengali is "nijerā kari") can be translated as "Let us do it on our own" or "We do it ourselves" and reflects its emphasis on self-reliance as one of its core principles. According to Kabeer (2003: 3), Nijera Kori has been able to maintain its independence and social-mobilization approach by choosing its (international) partners with deliberation, for example. Nowadays, *Nijera Kori* primarily works in rural Bangladesh and is one of the few NGOs that refuses to implement micro-credit schemes.

Bangladesh's trade unionism has evolved in its large industries such as jute and cotton textiles, which have long been important. Although it is reported that unions initially contributed to the stability of colonialism (Rahman and Langford 2012: 89), later on, they actively participated in anti-colonial resistance movements. Hence, the aim of trade unions, which were mostly associated with the left parties, was twofold: they opposed colonial rule and represented the interests of workers. Nonetheless, the first commitment was given higher priority and consequently, unions came to play a crucial role in national politics, but were found to be rather absent at the factory level (ibid.). When British colonial rule ended, the unions continued to be present on the national political stage. Organized workers and labor leaders took part in the mass uprising of 1969 and the Bangladesh Liberation War, which led to independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, it is reported that after independence, all of Bangladesh's governments influenced and abused trade unions in order to limit their political and economic power. In many cases, corrupt representatives were installed and top labor leaders bribed, which caused the unions to lose their credibility and play a dwindling role in the economy. The World Bank's privatization projects and the rapid implementation of the International Monetary Fund's Structural Adjustment Programme were facilitated in the process (Muhammad 2011: 23). Zia Rahman and Tom Langford (2012: 95) state that labor movements came to a standstill, particularly under the rule of Ziaur Rahman (1975–1981), who first implemented neo-liberal policies in the country. It was during this period — namely at the end of Ziaur Rahman's regime — that transnational corporations established their first business ties with Bangladeshi RMG suppliers. Since then — more than three decades later — trade unions have hardly set foot in the respective factories, which have now mushroomed to about 5,000 (BGMEA 2013b).

In addition, the male domination of trade unions led to further reluctance to organize on the part of women workers; they came to realize that some of their main concerns such as sexual harassment, housing, maternity leave and childcare were largely ignored by the unions (Dannecker 2002: 221ff.). However, it has been reported that this has changed over the last couple of years and more progressive unions have started to get women workers more involved in their policy-making processes and consequently address their issues in a more adequate manner (Kabeer and Haq Kabir 2009: 19). The number of female trade unionists is also increasing now, and female labor leaders of various federations and trade unions have developed networks in order to support each other. One of these networks has been strengthened through the support of INCIDIN,[14] a research NGO, which provided the female labor leaders with capacity-building programs and various other forms of assistance. These programs were funded by Oxfam and are still continuing, albeit on a smaller scale as

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14 The acronym INCIDIN stands for "Integrated Community and Industrial Development Initiative in Bangladesh."

the funding itself has ended.[15] The female labor leaders certainly appreciate the network and support offered by the two NGOs; some of them faced various forms of sexist discrimination on their way through the union hierarchies.[16]

Furthermore, transnational linkages between labor organizations have also been shown to enhance women's participation in trade unions. A female trade unionist, for example, stated that without the training and support of the AFL-CIO's Solidarity Center,[17] she would not have been able to participate in male-dominated trade-union activities. She furthermore reported that the support she received was essential in helping her become part of the union's leadership. She claims to have gained much more self-confidence as well as improving her professional and social status, stating that her position in the federation has been the fulfillment of a dream:

> So, here I am! Since I became president, I have been having [all kinds of] new experiences by attending various meetings and programs. Foreigners have come to us from many other countries. They want to know about issues regarding the RMG sector and want to work on them. This interaction and communication with them is also a new experience. I didn't [use to] have the capability to meet and work with them, but now I do and they show me respect. […] I never imagined that someone like me, a girl from the village, could even do a job in Dhaka city or go somewhere and act like a president or leader. […] This almost seems unreal; it's as if a dream has come true!
> (female union president, Dhaka, March 4, 2012)

Other female labor leaders who gained their positions without collaborating with foreign organizations were not as enthusiastic as the quote above might suggest, but mentioned that linkages with international labor organizations, advocacy networks or progressive NGOs have helped them obtain greater recognition in a male-dominated trade union environment. Hence, despite the adversarial relationship described above, productive interaction also exists between trade unions and domestic as well as internationally operating social-mobilization NGOs, which share their ideas for social change.

In the face of recurrent factory incidents and employment-law violations, transnational civil-society networks such as the Clean Clothes Campaign have increasingly tried to put pressure on the Bangladeshi government as well as on transnational corporations. All the trade unionists I interviewed highly appreciated this support, especially when they had to face spurious charges or even arrest. They reported that in those situations the urgent action taken by the respective networks was helpful in generating transnational public awareness, which ultimately contributed to the

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15 Interview with Nasimul Ahsan, Head of Advocacy, INCIDIN Dhaka, February 27, 2012.

16 Interview with four female labor leaders at the INCIDIN office in Dhaka, March 19, 2012.

17 The Solidarity Center is an NGO affiliated with the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), the largest federation of unions in the United States. However, the Solidarity Centers around the world receive the largest part of their funding from the US government. The NGO has therefore been heavily criticized – particularly during the Cold War – for promoting US foreign policy under the guise of worker solidarity (Scipes 2012).

release of the arrestees. These experiences are consistent with the findings of Robert Wells, who, after evaluating the results of various anti-sweatshop campaigns, claimed that Northern support was often of significant importance to at least some of the workers' or trade unionists' aims (Wells 2009: 572). Nonetheless, he also pointed to a "hierarchy of perception" regarding the contributions of labor advocates from countries of the global South and North, which tends to minimize the role of Southern workers and labor leaders and hence leads to privileging of the North's agency. He states: "Yet, in each case, the Northern dimensions of this transnational labour politics were not the primary variables; instead they were *auxiliary* to what were predominantly *local* struggles by workers and their allies" (ibid.). Against this backdrop, he argues that the "most pressing issue is that of how to build more effective processes and forms of transnationally co-ordinated global labour solidarity" and concludes "that this globalisation from below will need to be built on foundations that are centred in local Southern workers' struggles" (ibid.: 577). While examining the campaigns by Northern anti-sweatshop "transnational advocacy networks" (TANs), however, it was observed that the campaign's key features tended to be characterized by a victimized portrayal of female workers rather than by depictions of their struggles. Highly problematic representations of workers, which resemble colonial narratives, were detected in this context.

Anti-sweatshop campaigns and the problem of representation: gendered implications of transnational support

So how are women workers represented in the campaigns of the anti-sweatshop movement? To answer this question, one needs to take a closer look at the logic of these campaigns. According to Ethel Brooks (2007), who analyzed three transnational anti-sweatshop campaigns, they are characterized by two essential features. First, they are based on a consumer-oriented political strategy. This means that they appeal to consumers' sense of responsibility, i.e. the feeling it is necessary to refrain from buying clothes which are produced under exploitative conditions in countries in the global South. By way of influencing consumer preferences, such movements aim to place pressure on the companies to improve working conditions. Second, due to the consumer-oriented strategy, these campaigns rely heavily on testimonies by workers, which can be circulated globally in order to increase consumer awareness. For the sake of gaining public attention, workers' statements are used in a very selective, abridged manner. The emphasis here lies on the image of female workers as helpless victims of both economic globalization and patriarchal tradition, which exacerbates their oppression. Accordingly, the factory is portrayed as a place which is dominated by various forms of harassment and physical violence such as sexual harassment or beating. It is in this context that Dina Siddiqi (2009) and Naila Kabeer (2004), who conducted extensive fieldwork in Bangladeshi garment factories, have criticized the "language of horror" that is often employed by activists. Although they

clearly state that working conditions in Bangladeshi factories are by no means ideal, they strongly disagree with this one-sided representation as it carries with it various dangerous implications at many levels. On the level of symbolic politics, it clearly stands in the tradition of the — to use Chandra Mohanty's term — image of the "average Third World woman" (1984), who is incapable of pursuing her rights. A sense of superiority is produced by this, which leads to the belief that her living conditions can only be improved by intervention by the global North. This obligation to "save" workers has not always achieved what was intended, however. A telling example is where child workers in Bangladesh were supposed to be protected by American lawmakers. In 1993, the so-called "Harkin Bill" (officially known as the Child Labor Deterrence Bill) was presented in the US Senate by Tom Harkin. The Bill, which was strongly supported by the US-based anti-sweatshop movement, proposed a ban on imports to the United States from countries that use child labor at any stage of production.[18] After the United States and other foreign buyers declared that they would boycott products from the Bangladeshi garment industry as long as children were involved in their manufacture, about 50,000 children lost their jobs in the factories. Consequently, the children had no other option than to sign up for other income-generating activities such as brick-breaking, domestic service and rickshaw pulling, which in some cases put them in even more danger than before (Siddiqi 2009: 159).

Another negative consequence of the specific representation of workers in the global South can be seen in the perception of workers' agency and mobilization. Brooks (2007) identifies a major problem in the clear division of labor that she detected in transnational advocacy of anti-sweatshop movements. Here, the political activism is exclusively assigned to actors from the global North. Those in the global South, however, are merely supposed to deliver the information and testimonies needed for activism in the global North. This distribution of tasks ultimately privileges the agency of the Northern activists. Against this backdrop and alongside the campaigns' emphasis of the victimization of women and child workers, this kind of activism hardly leaves any space for the agency of workers. Thus, Brooks claims that organizing among female garment workers as well as their participation in workers' struggles are "de-emphasised in favour of highlighting their identities as workers in the new sweatshop" (2007: xxix). It can therefore be observed that rather than supporting workers' organization, transnational activism may actually end up obscuring their agency and mobilization. Hence, the logic and political strategy of the campaigns raise questions about adequate forms of representation and activism

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18 The proposed bill should certainly not be understood as a mere act of altruism, but also as part of a protectionist agenda. What is important in this context, however, is that anti-sweatshop activists were also in favor of the boycott.

as well as appropriate forms of transnational co-operation. Nevertheless, trade unionists in general certainly do not refuse transnational co-operation.

Between internationalism and competition: the role of transnational co-operation

With a few exceptions, the overwhelming majority of people I interviewed embraced the idea of transnational co-operation. In this respect, of course, one needs to differentiate between different forms of co-operation and various types of organizations.

The labor leaders stressed the point that international co-operation should not solely be reduced to financial flows. In contrast, they emphasized the need and importance of international linkages and exchange with other labor organizations in order to learn from each other's struggles. Thus, their idea of international co-operation clearly stands in the tradition of workers' solidarity and internationalism. My interviewees appreciated collaboration with foreign trade unions and international labor organizations, even though some of them mentioned the existence of conflicting interests due to protectionist policies. In contrast to this, several labor leaders were strongly critical of other actors in the field, especially regarding the involvement of foreign or even company-funded NGOs. This attitude is illustrated in an interview in which a male trade unionist criticizes the fact that such NGOs are not only undermining the role of trade unions, but are also discouraging workers from actively pursuing their rights. By providing services such as free meals, health care, childcare and daily allowances for workshop participation, he stated, NGOs were creating an appeased atmosphere, which would ultimately result in a condition that facilitated exploitation:

> NGOs […] are damaging the fighting spirit of the workers. […] So many NGOs are working in our country, but there is very little progress regarding working conditions. This creates obstacles for trade unionists. When we tried to organize the workers at the factory level, [we found that] there were already three NGOs working at that unit. […] They arranged a workshop […] and they gave them lunch and some pocket money every day. But when *we* tried to organize the workers, they asked us: "Why don't you give us any money?" But it's not a question of money; it's a question of dignity. […] We should fight for our rights. […] This [kind of mindset] is [being] damaged by NGOs; they only want to create a friendly atmosphere in the workplace. But when workers are exploited, peace only ensures the profits of the exploiters. What NGOs do is create a peaceful atmosphere at the workplace. We think that this will encourage the peaceful exploitation of the workers.
> (interview by the author in Dhaka on February 20, 2012)

Despite the positive experiences described earlier in this paper, the quote above reflects a view of NGOs widely shared among the trade unionists I interviewed. As already indicated, the criticism mainly revolves around three phenomena: first, the de-politicized agenda of most NGOs, which consequently leads to a neglect of

pressing issues, such as the demand for a decent minimum wage; second, the appeasement of workers through social benefits; and third, the undermining of trade-union activities on the factory level.[19] In addition, although other trade unionists indicated experiences similar to those described above in several of my interviews, some of them also found ways to refuse and oppose forms of marginalization and pressure. One labor leader, for example, stated that a foreign NGO had once tried to influence their agenda strongly and de-politicize it. As a result, his trade union had simply ended their co-operation.

A female trade unionist reported that she had decided to leave the federation for which she had worked for many years because the Solidarity Center that funded the organization required staff to refrain from certain political activities:

> Our donor organization told us that they would inform international organizations and that those organizations would help us to improve the workers' situation and increase their salaries, for example. But we wanted to raise our voices and go out on the streets because everything else just takes too much time and the owners should know that the workers are suffering and need better salaries. That is why we wanted to go on the streets. There were several incidents when we initiated rallies […], but our donor organization didn't like that. I left the federation because I didn't like this policy. They don't like the street movement and they don't like it when workers raise their voice against the owners. I thought if they go on with that policy, the workers would never be able to live proper lives.
> (interview by the author in Dhaka on March 16, 2012)

Although the interviewed labor leader consequently set up a new union that gives her the freedom to pursue her preferred mobilization agenda, which has proved to be one of the most successful strategies in Bangladesh's RMG industry (cf. Rahman and Langford 2013: 102), this example illustrates the potential divisive effects of international influence. This is particularly alarming since the multiplicity of trade unions already creates severe obstacles for effective organizing (ibid.: 100f.).

In this context, David Lewis draws attention to one important aspect: "NGOs may act as organizational spaces for activism, but [they] also present spaces in which governmental power can be projected" (Lewis 2010: 176). He refers to Foucault's concept of governmentality and states that the NGO sector's role "in containing or 'disciplining' activists seeking to challenge or redefine governability" needs further exploration (ibid.). A further consideration of the various actors involved — such as multinational companies, (company-funded) transnational NGOs and foreign governments, (international) labor organizations and development agencies of importing countries — also needs to be taken into account with respect to the highly internationalized RMG industry. In the past, however, governmentality studies mostly confined their research on the territorially sovereign nation state in Western

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19 As most of the organized garment workers cannot afford to pay membership fees, the financial situation of trade unions is dire.

contexts and thereby neglected transnational or global modes of government, which predominantly affect countries of the global South (Lemke 2007: 46). With this in mind, James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta (2008) introduced the concept of "transnational governmentality," which explicitly aims at examining the implementation of neo-liberal governmentality in "weak states" such as Bangladesh. Hence, for further research this transnational analytical frame promises to grasp different forms of governmentality in a wider and more comprehensive way.

Nonetheless, although the capabilities of the Bangladeshi government are, of course, limited and the state is situated in a transnational nexus of hegemony and power, the reference to Bangladesh as a so-called weak state should not play down the state's responsibility and means regarding the protection of its activists and workers. In view of the fact that approximately 30 members of the Bangladeshi Parliament — i.e. about nine percent of the total number of MPs — are garment-factory owners (Yardley 2012), it is worth assessing whether Bangladesh can be considered a "cunning state."

Is Bangladesh a "cunning state"? Of weakness and brutality

The Bangladesh Ministry of Labour's Inspection Department lacks the capacity to carry out safety inspections in each of the country's many RMG factories. Other government branches, however, certainly do not lack the capacity to persecute labor activists in an extensive and aggressive manner. Several labor advocates I interviewed in Dhaka reported of police surveillance, intimidation, spurious charges, arbitrary detainments and even torture.[20] Moreover, the government does not appear to be powerless when its policemen violently crush protests by garment workers on a regular basis. Only six weeks after the Savar building collapsed, about 50 people were injured when the police opened fire and used teargas against them in order to stop a demonstration by hundreds of workers and relatives of victims who had been killed or injured in the disaster and who demanded compensation (Burke and Hammadi 2013).

The performance of the Bangladeshi government illustrates Shalini Randeria's analysis of "cunning states which capitalize on their perceived weakness in order to render themselves unaccountable both to their citizens and to international institutions" (2003: 28). With reference to Partha Chatterjee's work (2004), she challenges widespread views that claim the decline of the state and loss of its sovereignty under

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20 The still unsolved murder of the trade unionist Aminul Islam, who worked for the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation and the Bangladesh Center of Worker Solidarity, is a sad testimony to the hostile environment in which labor advocates work. Aminul Islam, who was charged with instigating protests calling for a higher minimum wage in the summer of 2010, amongst other things, was detained and tortured by the police and intelligence forces in the same year. His tortured body was found near a police station in April 2012 (Manik and Bajaj 2012).

the conditions of globalization. Furthermore, although admitting the inadequacies of governments in the global South, she reveals the ways in which the respective states, which are widely considered to be mere victims of neo-liberal economic globalization, remain active agents in "transposing neoliberal agendas to the national and local levels" (Randeria 2003: 1). Nevertheless, it undoubtedly holds true that the capacities of the Bangladeshi government — which is ranked as a "weak" or even "failed" state in accordance with highly disputable categorizations (Foreign Policy 2013) — cannot be compared to emerging states or even states of the global North, which are perceived as "strong." Additionally, it should also be mentioned that the increasing influence of neo-liberal policies in Bangladesh was not only pushed by the respective governments, but also by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Chowdhury 2011: 255). Nonetheless, to put it mildly, the Bangladeshi government has hardly made any serious effort to protect workers within the scope of its means. Although Sheikh Hasina — the country's prime minister — expressed her sympathy with the workers during the labor unrests in 2010, the government was not only reluctant to negotiate a decent minimum wage which could have actually ensured the livelihood of the workers, but also rejected demands to amend the Labour Law, which hinders the formation of trade unions in the sector (Alam 2010). Furthermore, although various local and international organizations have repeatedly called on the government to improve the inadequate safety-inspection system applied to factories, no action of this kind has been taken.

Randeria's analysis is focused on India and she explicitly claims that countries like Bangladesh or Benin — which she would most likely not consider "cunning states" — are far less powerful when it comes to the refusal of international organizations' policies (Randeria: 30). However, one should not underestimate Bangladesh's scope with regard to labor-law reforms and labor activists' protection. I therefore argue that even though Bangladesh might be considered a "weak" state, it is still "strong" enough to deliberately neglect its responsibility towards its citizens. Randeria puts it like this: "Weak states cannot protect their citizens, whereas cunning states do not care to" (ibid.: 34).

Moreover, as I have shown in this paper, the present and previous governments have contributed to the trade unions' lack of credibility, which still considerably affects their position in the sector as well as their credibility among relevant transnational actors.

Conclusion

Due to the negative image of trade unions in Bangladesh, some researchers and policy advisers suggested to focus solely on NGO activities in order to improve the workers' well-being. Although my own research and that done by others has shown that some progressive domestic and international NGOs are doing valuable work which is appreciated by workers as well as labor leaders, I would also point out that there are highly problematic consequences of pursuing such a strategy — it can

undermine the already marginalized position of trade unions, for instance. Furthermore, NGOs' suggestions may end up working in the interests of private entrepreneurs such as factory owners or other business representatives who prohibit union activities and strategically propagate a negative image of trade unions to justify their own measures. Nonetheless, the experiences of female labor leaders, in particular, indicate that capacity-building programs and the formation of networks with the help of NGOs can strengthen their positions in male-dominated unions. Furthermore, these strategies have also proven to be effective in several other countries (cf. Britwurm et al. 2012: 58f.). Therefore, transnational civil-society actors should rather appreciate the transformation of the Bangladeshi trade-union scene and support genuinely committed unionists in order to organize the workforce and strengthen their bargaining power. Such a focus on workers' struggles could also help to overcome the problematic effects of (mis-)representation of female workers as well as the hierarchy of perception regarding the respective contributions of activists from the global South and North. Ultimately, trade unions are the only legitimized bodies that can formally represent the workers' interests. Therefore, trade unions cannot simply be bypassed in order to solely rely on other organizations' voluntary involvement — especially not since NGO activities as such can certainly not be regarded as a panacea for the rural or urban poor.

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