

**BRIEF REPORT**

# The North American Helpline initiative in Bangladesh for garment workers

Hasnat Alamgir 

East West University, Dhaka, Bangladesh

**Correspondence**

Hasnat Alamgir, Department of Pharmacy,  
East West University, A/2 Jaharul Islam  
Avenue, Jaharul Islam City, Aftabnagar,  
Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh.  
Email: alamgir@ewubd.edu

**Abstract**

**Introduction:** After a series of garment factory disasters that had taken place in Bangladesh, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance) was formed by 29 large North American retail companies to improve worker safety in Bangladesh- the second largest ready-made garments producing country in the world.

**Aims:** This report focuses on Alliance's Worker Empowerment initiative—Worker Helpline and examines the types, contents and volume of calls received by it.

**Methods:** All published reports of Alliance that are available online were retrieved. Data from each quarter (Q) in 2017, 2018, and 2019 were extracted in terms of (1) Total calls (2) Substantive calls, and (3) Safety calls (Urgent and Non-urgent).

**Results:** By 2019, Q3 Helpline covered 1.5 million workers in 1091 factories. In Q1 2017, there was 1 call made per 73 workers and 20 calls made per a factory whereas in Q3 2019 there was 1 call per 171 workers and 8 calls coming from a factory. In terms of safety calls, there was 0.59 calls/factory in Q1 2017 but went down to 0.17 calls/factory in Q3 2019. Helpline in 2019 Q3 received 1283 substantive calls; of that 189 were safety calls which included 18 urgent and 171 non-urgent calls. In Q1 of 2017, 32% factories did not make any calls and in Q3 2019, 62% of factories did not make any calls at all.

**Conclusions:** The worker empowerment initiative- Helpline-in Bangladesh initiated by the North American companies remained underutilized.

**KEYWORDS**

Bangladesh, garment workers, worker empowerment

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance) was formed by 29 large North American retail companies including Canadian Tire, The Children's Place, Costco, Fruit of the Loom, Gap, Hudson's Bay, JC Penney, Kohl's, Macy's, Nordstrom, Sears, Target, VF Corporation and Wal-Mart to

improve garment worker safety in Bangladesh after a series of factory disasters had killed scores of workers.<sup>1,2</sup> Its stated vision was to “substantially improve worker safety in the garment industry by upgrading factories, educating workers and management, empowering workers, and building institutions that can enforce and maintain safe working conditions throughout Bangladesh”.<sup>3</sup>

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The Alliance provided a major and unprecedented opportunity to initiate and implement initiatives of substantial nature and scope to prevent further unfortunate loss of lives and suffering of workers. It also was a logical step for these companies to come together under one platform so as to pulling together their resources, expertise, goodwill, influence, and buying power. This was the first time the North American giant retailers seemed to have shown a sincere interest about improving the working conditions and health and safety of millions of workers in this developing country. Bangladesh became a global test case to see what the North American companies can or are willing to do to improve occupational health and safety at their global supply chain.

The Alliance completed its 5-year tenure in Bangladesh in 2018 and it is time to assess some of its initiatives since a lot of attention and debates were generated globally about its formation, objectives, and mission. An objective look at its initiatives and learning about what worked and did not work would benefit other national and international stakeholders in initiating similar interventions in the global supply chain. In this research report, we focus on Alliance's Worker Empowerment initiative—Worker Helpline “Our Voice” or “Amader Kotha” in Bangla that was designed to “provide a critical channel for workers to report important concerns within their factories, anonymously and without fear of retribution”.<sup>3</sup> The 24-hour Helpline “allows workers to bring attention to and seek resolution on substantive issues, ranging from factory fires and other urgent safety concerns to workplace abuse and wage compensation disputes”. Alliance introduced this Helpline to the workers as part of their Basic Fire Safety Training programs that they were extensively providing to all Alliance-affiliated factory workers. They explained to the workers about its formation, operations and purpose. Demonstration calls were shown in

these face-to-face sessions and all workers were given portable cards printed with the toll-free Helpline number to carry it all the time.

## 2 | METHODS

All published reports of Alliance that were available online were retrieved; data were extracted and then analyzed. Data from each quarter in 2017, 2018, and 2019 were gathered (except Quarter 3 of 2018 that was missing)<sup>4</sup>; the calls were grouped by (1) Total calls (2) Substantive calls and (3) Safety calls (Urgent and Non-urgent issues). Any calls made were considered in Total Calls category. From the Total Calls, issues related to termination, wages and benefits, verbal abuse, physical abuse, freedom of association, bribery/corruption, physical harassment and sexual harassment) and all safety related calls were put under Substantive group. Tables and graphs were created from these data to examine the trends. Within the Substantive group, Safety calls were then separated, there were (a) Urgent issues (active fire inside or outside factory, cracks in the walls, shaking of walls, inadequate health facilities, etc) and (b) Non-Urgent issues (occupational safety hazards, lack of drinking water, etc). There were Substantive calls that were not safety related in nature and were grouped under Non-Safety issues.

## 3 | RESULTS

The Helpline grew rapidly as more factories and workers were brought under this service; between 2017 Q1 and 2019 Q3 from 1,283,573 workers to 1.5 million and from 862 to 1091 factories were brought under this surveillance program. The total calls volume increased in the first four Quarters

**TABLE 1** Workers and factories covered under Helpline; calls per workers and calls per factories (data for Q3 2018 were not available and reported)

Quarter	Workers	Factories	Total calls	Total calls/worker	Total calls/factory	Safety calls	Safety calls/worker	Safety calls/factory
Q1 2017	1,283,573	862	17,484	73	20	508	2527	0.59
Q2 2017	1,309,261	900	17,739	74	20	449	2916	0.50
Q3 2017	1,369,886	933	24,180	57	26	375	3653	0.40
Q4 2017	1,426,672	954	26,395	54	28	489	2918	0.51
Q1 2018	1,473,561	990	20,908	70	21	582	2532	0.59
Q2 2018	1,491,582	1004	16,833	89	17	435	3429	0.43
Q3 2018								
Q4 2018	1,503,467	1032	13,517	111	13	301	4995	0.29
Q1 2019	1,500,000	1082	9708	155	9	373	4021	0.34
Q2 2019	1,500,000	1083	7558	198	7	279	5376	0.26
Q3 2019	1,500,000	1091	8771	171	8	189	7937	0.17

from 17,484 to 26,395 and then declined to 8771 in Q3, 2019 (Table 1).

### 3.1 | Total calls and Safety calls

Table 1 presents the findings on Total calls and Safety calls. When converted to calls/worker, it shows that there was about one call per 73 workers in Q1 2017; these calls volume went down, and in Q3 2019 there was only one call per 171 workers. In terms of calls/factory, it was about 20 calls/factory in Q1 2017 but it went down to 8 calls/factory in Q3 2019.

In terms of Safety calls, the volume of calls went down from 508 to 189 during this same period of investigation. There was one call per 2527 workers in the beginning but it decreased to only one call per 7937 workers. In terms of calls/factory, it was about 0.59 calls/factory in Q1 2017 but it went down to 0.17 calls/factory in Q3 2019.

### 3.2 | Types and number of calls to the Helpline

Figure 1 shows the numbers of different types of calls received by Helpline. Helpline in 2019 Q3 received 1283 substantive calls; of that 189 were safety calls which included 18 urgent and 171 non-urgent calls; 1094 of the substantive calls were considered to be non-safety in nature. The patterns remained similar for the last few years: urgent safety calls varied between 152 and 18 (decreased over time); non-urgent safety calls varied between 356 and 171 (decreased over time). However, the number of substantive calls remained somewhat steady (1370 to 1283 with few peaks like 1864 and 1968). The number of non-safety calls showed a similar pattern like substantive calls (from 862 to 1094).

### 3.3 | Calls vs no calls by the workers

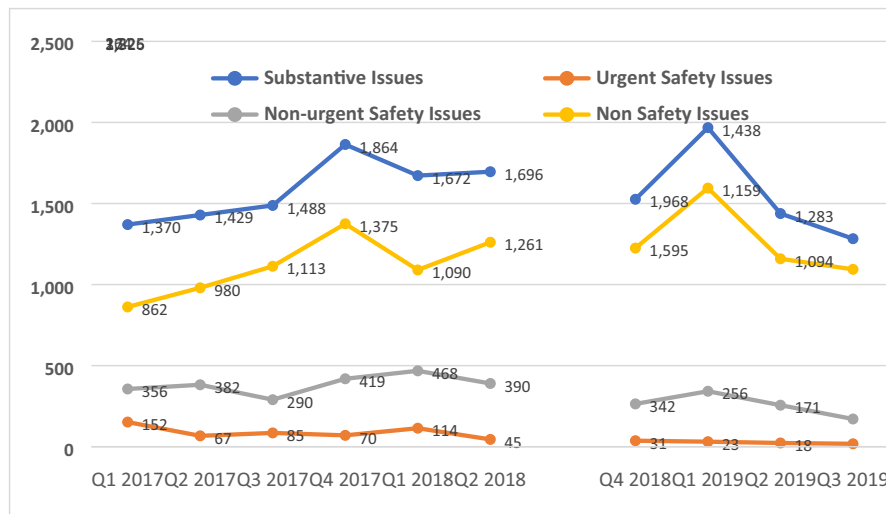
Figure 2 shows number of factories from where workers were making calls according the published statistics. In Q1 of 2017, workers from 32% factories did not make any calls at all and workers from 62% of factories did not make any calls at all in Q3 2019.

Although this research did not focus on caller profile, but a brief look at the Q3 2019 report suggests that 32% callers were women and 68% were men; 79% callers were between 19 and 29 years of age and only 19% calls were made from inside the factory (81% made from outside the factory).

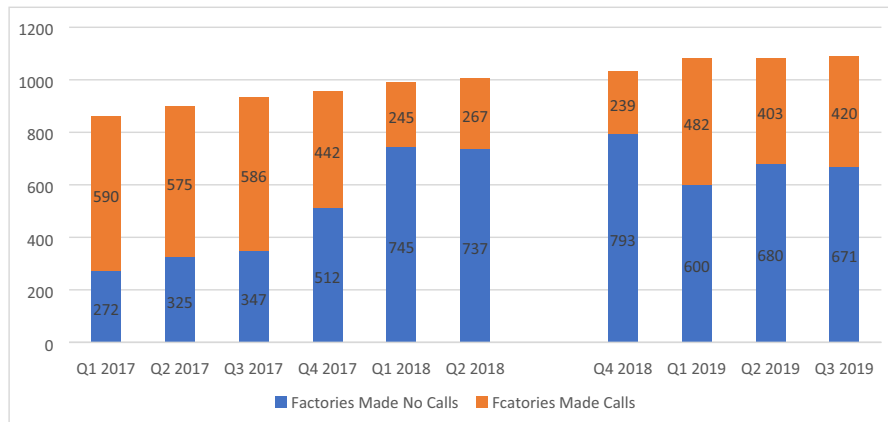
## 4 | DISCUSSION

The worker Helpline was a noble step toward empowering garment workers in Bangladesh as it was the first attempt to collect incident data and concerns directly from them. However, the numbers as examined in this report here have been very low compared to the number of factories and size of the workforce that were brought under this initiative. It begs the question about the sincerity, attention and effort of the North American companies and factory owners to make this program functional. It appears that they went too quickly for volume of coverage with regards to the number of factories and workers rather than emphasizing on the quality or substance of calls received.

The training workers received on how to use Helpline and on what to report might have been poor. It is possible that workers did not see the value of reporting or the program was not promoted well among the workers at the factory. They might not feel comfortable to make calls given the long-standing mistrust between workers and factory owners/management in this sector. Factory owners might



**FIGURE 1** Types and number of calls to Bangladesh garment workers Helpline (data for Q3 2018 were not available and reported)



**FIGURE 2** Workers from factories making and not making any calls to Bangladesh garment workers Helpline (data for Q3 2018 were not available and reported)

not have shown the good-will to make it functional, they might not have encouraged the workers to report, or they might not have taken prompt actions when calls were in fact made. Workers seeing meaningful and timely actions on their reports would have been motivated to make more calls and encourage others to make similar calls. In absence of visible or practical actions, they could lose interest after the initial momentum that it had created. There are two reasons why these call numbers have gone down (a) the safety situation really improved in the factories (b) the workers lost interest or are not motivated.

The North American companies with their tremendous political power, buying capacity and influence certainly did not do a good job in making this system fully operational. How realistic is the fact that not a single call was made on any issues from 671 factories in Q3 in 2019? Were there no safety or other issues of concern at any of these factories at all to report?

The results on caller profile suggest that women workers who make up the overwhelming majority of garment workers in Bangladesh were making only 32% of calls. Workers were making calls largely from outside the factory which means that they were not comfortable to call from inside the factory. These two findings suggest bigger underlying problems in this sector: lack of worker participation and absence of trust even in worker welfare programs. Also, women workers were not making proportionate number of calls which mean very few reports of verbal abuse, verbal harassment, sexual abuse, and sexual harassment were coming to Helpline; however, previous studies clearly verified that women factory workers in developing countries face multitude of abuses and harassment.<sup>5-8</sup> Training of workers on what should be reported is also essential.

The Helpline seems to have become a cosmetic effort of the Alliance. The series of garment factory disasters in Bangladesh created an enormous opportunity to make real changes to improve working conditions for the workers. The

North American companies could capitalize on this momentum. Yet, the achievement made in worker empowerment has been inadequate.

Any progress made in occupational health and safety sustains only in the long run when workers are open to report on the hazards and concerns.<sup>9-11</sup> In absence of any formal factory level injury, illness and hazard reporting system, this Helpline has the potential to become the only surveillance tool to understand, assess and act on health and safety issues at the garment factories. Data collected via Helpline could build capacity at these factories on decision making, policy formulation, and program implementation related to health and safety.<sup>9-11</sup>

To make Helpline more functional, the factory management needs to show its sincerity and seriousness about its functionality and reassert that they are not doing this only to meet the auditing or inspecting requirements of the North American companies or to please them. They must understand and appreciate that knowing about the hazards, high risk worker groups, and worker grievances is critical for them to take remedial actions and boost employee health, safety, morale. It will also help build company good will, reduce employee turnover and increase worker productivity. Once the factory owners are convinced, they can transmit its importance to the frontline managers, supervisors, and foremen who are in direct contact with the workers on a daily basis.

The calls must be kept anonymous and phonebooths can be positioned inside cafeteria, playground, stairs, roof, close to washrooms, and other places where workers will have the confidence that no one is monitoring their calls or their identity will not be disclosed. Report boxes in each floor, factory yard, elevators, or other open areas may also help if workers do not trust reporting it over phone.

This important initiative by The North American buyers was piggy-backed with their fire safety training program which diminished its relative importance. Separate training programs for workers on its use, importance, utility, and consequences

would result in better output and trained educators could show the workers hands-on on how to report an issue.

The North American buyers should encourage and incentivize factories that motivates its workers to report calls. Clearly, majority of the factories are not making any calls. When call volumes go down, there should be a feedback system established by Helpline to notify the factories that their workers are not calling. Also, when reports on safety issues are found to save property and lives, a reward system must be in place to treat the caller as a hero (if the caller can be identified without fear of retribution) and she should be considered as a safety champion for that month.

The receivers of these calls at Helpline should be also trained about how to create trust among the callers so that they can open up and share their grievance and issue with them. Unnecessary prodding for more information than the worker is comfortable to provide may shut down the caller's interest. A call duration should not take more than 1-2 minutes. Many factories now have health and safety committees that should have access to all these call reports that they must discuss in their weekly or monthly meetings. They can scrutinize these calls and reports and take actions when needed and also follow up on these in their next scheduled meeting. These active participation of health and safety committees in accessing and analyzing Helpline data will create a sustainable mechanism and strengthen both the committee operations and enrich Helpline's data quality. In case of abuse and harassment allegations, H&S committees must have a system to convey these incidents to upper management of the factory for further investigation and disciplinary actions. Taking visible and meaningful follow-up actions will undoubtedly increase the number and quality of all calls.

## DISCLOSURE

*Ethical approval:* Not applicable. *Informed consent:* Not applicable. *Registry and the registration no. of the study/trial:* Not applicable. *Animal studies:* Not applicable. *Conflict of interest:* None declared.

## ORCID

Hasnat Alamgir  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8532-2265>

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