

Youbin Kang
Scott Kloeck-Jenson Pre-dissertation Travel Fellowship (2017)
Dhaka, Bangladesh & Geneva, Switzerland

With the generous support of the SKJ Fellowship, I spent the summer conducting preliminary research in Dhaka, Bangladesh and Geneva, Switzerland. This fieldwork contributes to my ongoing research on the effects of transnational labor regulation in global supply chain dynamics. I was able to conduct around 40 additional interviews with key stakeholders of the case study, as well as build on my previous fieldwork completed in 2016. The grant also allowed me to develop networks and relationships with research assistants and translators that would be valuable for my future dissertation project.

The background and larger incentive of the project was sparked on the 24th of April, 2013. The deadliest industrial disaster to date in the world with a casualty of 1133 workers occurred in a collapsed building which housed multiple unauthorized floors of sewing facilities in Savar, Bangladesh. This tragedy, together with a previous fire in November 2012 at Tazreen factory that killed 117 workers created the unprecedented mobilization of transnational actors to regulate the industry's lack of safety structures and procedures in its factories. In the public field, the US and EU governments have leveraged labor clauses in trade agreements. In the private field, two multi-stakeholder initiatives have been implemented to inspect and remedy all export garment factories for building, fire, and electrical safety in Bangladesh. In the social field global union federations and unions in the West have been active in promoting programmes and funding for increasing trade union registration.

Given the developmental project of the government and the contentious politics of industrial relations, institutionalizing sustainable labor policies include how the extent of *consent* to the claims to legitimacy (Braithwaite 2002; Kolben 2007; Conti 2016) and on the other hand, the extent of *coercion* of economic sanctions (Dobbin, Simmons, Beth, and Garrett 2007; King and Pearce 2010; Locke, Qin, and Brause 2007) affect the implementation of transnational regulations. To this end, my project asks how the public and private transnational regulations introduced in Bangladesh shape the consent and coercion of local actors, namely factory owners and their representatives, and workers

and their representatives. In total, with this trip I conducted fieldwork between 2016 and 2017, gathering 80 interviews of brands, regulatory institutions, government administrators, factory owners, sourcing agents, unions, workers, and other civil society organizations. A content analysis of the 5 biggest Bangla and English newspapers are also planned to be used in the project, and is ongoing.

Through this trip, I was able to revise some of my thinking around coercion and consent in regulatory institutions. After this trip, I largely found that a disjuncture exists between the strategies used by the Accord and Alliance (private regulation) and those promoted by the Bangladeshi government and the ILO (public regulation). Private regulatory actors, the Accord and Alliance have used a coercion-based approach that includes bureaucratic processes and stringent inspections coupled with the immediate threat of economic sanctions. On the other hand, public regulatory actors have been pushing for an approach that includes consent-building through instilling the spirit of the law, self-regulatory approaches complemented with sparse governmental inspections and the threat of escalatory sanctions. The approaches have resulted in 1) the factory owners' active delegitimization of the Accord and Alliance and the strategies towards maintaining weak voluntary private regulations established by multinational brands previous to the Accord and Alliance, and 2) the worker's organizing strategies that are incentivized to take on a transnational route, characterized by the heightened level of cooperation with employers organizations and the prioritization of private forms of regulatory strategies at the factory level. The two divergent directions of workers and employers in Bangladesh suggest how the intertwined regulatory strategies of coercion and consent has resulted in a novel form of a regulatory conundrum within supply chain relationships in the garment industry introduced by transnational regulation. I plan to further build on this research in the future to look at the interactions of private and public actors, as well as their respective regulatory strategies to implement workers rights in a low-wage sector.