

December 2020
Number 7

Accountability Working Paper



Picturing Accountability: What We Learned from the Photography of the Rana Plaza Disaster

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Notes on Support

Support for ARC comes from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, and Open Society Foundations.

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About the Authors



Ismail Ferdous is an award-winning photojournalist based in New York City whose work covers social and humanitarian issues. While still living in Dhaka, Bangladesh, he began the project [The Cost of Fashion](#), a photo and video advocacy project after documenting the Rana Plaza factory collapse, the worst industrial disaster in history. He then continued working on the same issue with the [After Rana Plaza](#) project. The project continues to spread awareness about the fashion industry and its negative effects on workers in Bangladesh. Ismail has presented at [Tedx Maastricht](#) and his article about photojournalism was published in [Harvard Magazine](#). He is a regular contributor to *National Geographic* and has photographed for *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, Bloomberg News, MSNBC Photo, and Associated Press. Ismail's work has been exhibited at Photoville, United Nation headquarters, numerous Dysturb exhibitions, The Rencontres d'Arles, Photolux Festival Luca, The Gallatin Galleries NYU, Tokyo Photograph Art Museum, 25CPW Gallery New York, the World Bank headquarters, and the Powerhouse Museum, among others. Ismail's work can be viewed here: <https://iferdous.com/>.



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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for feedback on earlier versions of this paper from Angela Bailey, Julia Fischer-Mackey, Jonathan Fox, Judy Gearhart, Alan Greig and Allison Hess. All errors of fact or interpretation are those of the authors.

Warning

Readers and viewers should be aware that the images and topics included in this paper are likely to cause distress.

Summary

Visual evidence can be a powerful part of strategies for pursuing accountability and social justice, and with the means of recording and viewing images now literally in our hands, we are becoming ever more sophisticated makers and users of visual evidence. This essay examines the role of photography in creating visual evidence in support of struggles for accountability. It draws on one photojournalist's experience of photographing one of the worst industrial accidents in world history, the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh in 2013, as well as its aftermath in the lives of those affected.

Visual evidence frames accountability demands because it can produce powerful emotional and moral responses to social injustice, as was seen in the response to the video of George Floyd's murder; these responses make it possible to build solidarity across groups and geographies, as the Black Lives Matter movement showed. Yet activists have often struggled with precisely the problem of how to use images of pain and suffering, for fear of further victimizing their subjects or of inuring viewers to such images through their overuse or abuse. These are some of the thorny questions addressed here. Among the key themes of this paper is that it matters not only what the images depict, but why they were produced, and by whom. Images that promote accountability through solidarity are not (just) digital commodities to be circulated to support a particular struggle; they are a form of testimony or witnessing that is rooted in fellowship and humanitarian principles.

Yet while visual evidence can help frame and amplify accountability demands, pictures are rarely enough to hold the powerful to account. Bangladeshi garments workers have continued to face violations of their labor rights, despite a series of efforts to improve factory safety by governments, trade unions, and firms since Rana Plaza. Most recently, workers and local firms have struggled to get paid for clothes they have already produced, as international brands have refused to pay up at a time when the COVID19 pandemic has led to economic crisis and falling fashion sales. Images of clothing labels in the rubble of Rana Plaza fingered the brands involved in sourcing garments in the unsafe building, and in so doing may have tarnished their reputations briefly; but they had no lasting impacts on those firms' legal liability or profitability. Visual evidence plays its main role in framing the demands for accountability, we argue, by identifying and allocating responsibility, making plain the scale or severity of the human costs for failures, and by raising awareness and questions about how systems fail and who pays the price. Pictures allow us to see the human face of the tragedy and to remember the need for change. Pictures also let us see garments workers as they organize and fight for their rights, reminding us that they are not helpless victims, but agents of their own empowerment, despite the (visibly) great odds against them.

Based on the analysis here, a collaboration between a photojournalist who photographed Rana Plaza and a researcher who studied the disaster, we propose that accountability research could usefully pay more attention to the visual, artistic and cultural repertoires so often involved in accountability struggles. There is much to learn about how visual repertoires have been deployed. Those who commission photography in the pursuit of social justice could valuably strengthen their relationships with visual activists and photographers, helping them build sustained engagement with frontline actors. Popular music, street art and video all appear to have had powerful framing and norm-shifting impacts in accountability struggles; in part this paper is a call for the transparency, participation, and accountability field to invest in better understanding of how visual evidence works in accountability struggles, and how it might empower those facing powerful opponents. The ethics and politics of visual evidence are shifting fast with the social media age. Among the themes we address here are: how can activists on the frontlines of struggles for accountability navigate this terrain? What principles and practices are important?

Keywords: *Bangladesh, Rana Plaza, Industrial disaster, Labor rights, Apparel global value chains, Garments industry, Photojournalism, Photography*



I. Introduction: Why Images Matter in Struggles for Accountability

Visual evidence is prominent in the repertoires of recent struggles for accountability and social justice. The video of George Floyd being killed by an American police officer in May 2020, shot on the smartphone of a teenage witness, forever framed the casual racist violence of U.S. police brutality in our minds. Had the world not seen that murder take place in broad daylight and with apparent impunity, the worldwide reckoning with racism and white supremacy in the form of the Black Lives Matter movement would not have been so forceful. That so many people can now produce, share and view such images changes the dynamics of visual evidence in accountability struggles.

But how and under what circumstances does visual evidence aid struggles for accountability? How do activists and movements harness the power of images for social justice? What are the risks of using images in these ways? To answer these questions, this paper explores what has been learned from another instance of powerful visual evidence in a struggle for accountability, that of the photographs of the Rana Plaza factory collapse in Savar, Bangladesh, that killed 1,134 factory workers in 2013. These images drew international attention to the deadly inequities of power and profit that characterize fast fashion.¹ As with the murder of George Floyd, once viewed, the images left an indelible awareness of structural violence and injustice. But did photography of the disaster help garment workers and their allies hold the industry to account for one of the worst industrial accidents in world history? Has it changed the minds or behaviors of consumers? Are the firms and factories that enabled the disaster more accountable because they fear such images—or share in their pain?

This paper is a collaboration between a photojournalist, Ismail Ferdous, whose award-winning images of the Rana Plaza disaster were published and viewed widely, and a researcher, Naomi Hossain, who had studied the politics of the disaster and the industry. Ismail had reflected on his role as a documentarian and witness to the Rana Plaza disaster. As a researcher focused on

understanding and supporting struggles for accountability, Naomi saw an opportunity for the transparency, participation and accountability field to learn from Ismail's experiences, to make better sense of the potentials and perils of photography in such struggles.

What we learned from the photography of Rana Plaza

From thinking together about the role of photography in struggles for accountability we arrived at several conclusions.

First, in a digital era, the circulation of iconic images is likely to be profoundly important to the success of struggles for accountability. Amateur photography is more prevalent than a generation ago, and younger people are sophisticated producers, consumers, and distributors of visual evidence of social injustice. It is no coincidence that Ismail hosted his 'After Rana Plaza' project on Instagram; this gives the project a particular aesthetic and targets a younger and more visually sophisticated audience than Facebook or Twitter, or a regular website. Emotions and understandings of injustice are expressed visually in ways and on platforms unimagined a generation ago. The abstract concepts and wordy repertoires of the transparency, participation, and accountability field could learn from art and photography about how to use imagery to express complex ideas and to build support, particularly among younger populations.

But photographing injustice is no simple matter. Images can engender emotional and moral responses to injustices that help widen and strengthen support for accountability, as Black Lives Matter showed. Yet international activism has long struggled with the ethics of images of pain and suffering. Since Susan Sontag's seminal essay *On Photography* (1973), images of people in distress or victims of violence or disaster have been suspect: in viewing such pictures are we complicit in the pain of others? If such images empower

the photographer or the viewer over the subject, why depict them? The international media has often been more comfortable with publishing images if the victims of violence are from the global South, rather than from the North. Now that the internet has widened the possible audience for any image, it is no longer possible for a photographer or picture editor to know how or in what context an image may be perceived (Ritchin 2013). Nevertheless, our second conclusion is that visual evidence can be emotionally powerful and build solidarity across people and places *without* further victimizing its subjects. Our conversations brought us to the position that it matters not only what the images depict, but why and how they were produced, and by whom. Images that promote accountability through solidarity are not merely a bundle of pixels or digital commodities without histories or social context; at their most powerful, they are a form of testimony or witnessing that is rooted in fellowship and humanitarian principles.

A third conclusion was that images of the Rana Plaza disaster helped frame and amplify workers' demands for accountability. These were more than powerful images of spectacular disaster or unimaginable human pain: they drew connections and raised questions about the industry as a whole, juxtaposing fast fashion fabrics and labels against broken bodies and smashed concrete. The question always asked rhetorically of disasters—how could this have happened?—takes on a more forensic quality in many Rana Plaza pictures. It asks—how is it that stitching household-name-brand clothing—the most innocuous and wholesome of products—could be so hazardous?

Our fourth conclusion was the sobering recognition that visual evidence only works with other accountability strategies in place. Pictures of the effects of

wrongdoing are not sufficient proof. The many images of brand labels in the rubble of Rana Plaza were unpleasant for the firms involved. But none experienced a significant loss of business or other lasting ill-effects from such atrocious publicity. Many continue to operate in ways that abuse workers' rights with impunity; for instance, international brands have been accused of 'leveraging desperation' by failing to pay local factories and their workers during the COVID19 pandemic (Anner 2020). Pictures may be essential, but they rarely change the world on their own. So how can powerful visual evidence help activate pro-accountability measures?

Visual evidence, we argue, frames the demands for accountability: drawing connections and making plain the scale or severity of the human costs for failures, raising questions about the causes of and responsibilities for those failures, and about who pays the price. Our fifth and final conclusion is that because of this potential power, accountability action and research could pay significantly more attention to visual, artistic and cultural repertoires. Raising the emotional and moral stakes with respect to egregious failures of accountability has known risks, but it also offers the promise of raising awareness and building wider constituencies of support, helping set norms and standards, and raising the social and material costs to those who seek to evade accountability. The accountability field relies heavily on words and numbers in its strategies for calling the powerful to account. Financial accounting and legal liabilities offer formal entry points, but the Rana Plaza photographs show a more humane form of 'accounting.' Pictures can help frame accountability demands clearly and memorably, turning problems into intolerable wrongs demanding action. This is what happened, to at least some extent, in Rana Plaza.



II. Why Focus on the Photography of Rana Plaza?

The Rana Plaza factory collapse

Bangladesh has had many devastating disasters in its history, and a series of major garment industry accidents since the 1980s. But the collapse of the multi-storied building illegally used for factory production in Savar, north of the capital city Dhaka on April 24, 2013, was the worst disaster in the industry's history. Images of the disaster have become iconic of the uglier side of the fast fashion industry. Unable to take the weight of the multiple garment factories for which it had not been designed, the nine-story building collapsed on top of the workers. After a major crack had been discovered the previous day, the building was certified unsafe by the local authorities, who ordered it to be vacated. Other companies housed in the building told their workers to stay away. But under pressure from international buyers to meet production orders, the managers of garment factories pressured workers to show up for work. Fearful that they may lose their jobs, workers went to work despite the instructions of local authorities (Motlagh and Saha 2014).

The destruction was spectacular and horrific. Bangladeshis from all walks of life came to help or witness the tragedy. Condolences flowed in from around the world. For three weeks, images and video of the factory collapse dominated world news, as survivors and the dead were pulled from the rubble. The disaster remained newsworthy: in the month after the disaster, it made headlines in 49 major world English language newspapers.² The Government announced a day of national mourning and efforts to apprehend the building and factory owners (BSS 2013). Volunteers joined firefighters and the security forces in the search for survivors (Habib 2013; Habib, Alam, and Biplob 2013; M. Rahman 2013). Three weeks after the disaster, the rescue operation was called off. 1,134 people had been killed and over 2,500 were injured, many very seriously.

Media coverage focused at first on the human tragedy (Ahmed 2013; Habib, Hosen, and Karmaker 2013).

Soon, the structural and regulatory failures that had forced workers into an unsafe building came under the spotlight, and analysis started to connect the disaster and lack of workers' rights with the demands of global brands for rapid, low-cost production (Mirdha and Rahman 2013; S. Rahman and Chowdhury 2013). The drama and tragedy were indelibly marked on the world's imagination through powerful and moving photography and videography. Activists and photographers such as Taslima Akhter and Ismail captured images that told the world this was more than just a Third World tragedy, but one directly linked to the global garments trade, and therefore to international consumer demand for fast fashion (Holert 2019).

Picturing a Bangladeshi disaster as a failure of global systems

Bangladeshis facing natural disasters are frequently photographed, but the Rana Plaza photographs documented a distinctly unnatural disaster. Framed by smashed concrete, twisted steel, bright fabrics and brand labels, pictures drew attention to its man-made and industrial nature, and to the responsibilities for the disaster that lay far away—in the U.S. and Europe where parents shopped in the innocently-named The Children's Place, for instance. These pictures framed accountability for the disasters by pointing to a globalized export industry in which pressures to meet orders ended in death and injury of thousands, mostly young women.

The devastating pictures of the Rana Plaza contrast starkly with the usual associations of fast fashion— young people having fun, looking good, being the first with the latest thing. Here instead, the pictures showed that some young people faced deadly risks to ensure others got their cheap clothing fix. At fault here is not that young people buy cheap clothes, but that speed and low wages determine the profits of the fast fashion industry.



Figure 1. A worker leaves the site where the Rana Plaza garment factory building collapsed near Dhaka, Bangladesh. © Ismail Ferdous, 2013.

Photographs of a disaster are always of the moment. But Ismail's 'After Rana Plaza' project lets us hear the voices and see the survivors, making a crucial point that no financial or legal accounting of the disaster could: each individual story was a grave human tragedy. To view the photographs of people who had

lost someone two years past, and to hear their stories, was to reject the utilitarian calculations that policy-makers make about such disasters—for instance, that accidents are the price to be paid for a competitive industry. We are reminded that these 'victims' are all bearers of human rights, equally deserving of respect.



Figure 2. Relatives of missing workers in the Rana Plaza garment factory building that collapsed hold pictures of their family members in Savar, near Dhaka, Bangladesh. © Ismail Ferdous, 2013.

Rana Plaza was photographed for many news outlets, mostly by professional photographers and photojournalists. Ismail was one of a select group of Bangladeshi photographers whose Rana Plaza images reached a wider audience. Others in this group, such as Taslima Akhter and the Activist Anthropologist group of photographers and researchers³ have combined their skills as professional photographers with their involvement as activists. Ismail views himself not as an activist but as a photojournalist and ‘a story-teller,’ and it is his role as a photojournalist—a professional commentator rather than someone directly involved—that makes his learning relevant for accountability struggles.

Accountability for the disaster remains an ongoing struggle. Vulnerable as garment workers are to global economic volatility, COVID-19 has brought new disasters, highlighting again how unaccountable international fashion brands are, and how willing to leave

workers with nothing.⁴ Rana Plaza is an egregious case of accountability failure, in which among a range of repertoires, activists have found the imagery of the disaster a compelling way of attracting attention.

There is a rightful moral discomfort with the creation and viewing of disaster images, which risk framing people as victims. Such images have been particularly problematic in Bangladesh, where poverty, exposure to disaster, and exploitation have often led to imageries of victimhood that obscure people’s own agency and invite intervention from rich countries. Nevertheless, the Rana Plaza pictures remind us that disturbing images of people facing disaster must be made and seen. They help us access some of the emotion of that disaster and serve as a permanent reminder. But they also raise questions, including: how to navigate between the need not to victimize and further disempower people on the one hand, and serve as a witness on the other?



III. An Accidental Photographer and Teller of Untold Stories

The business school graduate

It is ironic that some of the most memorable images of industrial disaster should have been taken by a graduate of business school. But it is no coincidence: Ismail had long wondered about the lives of the garments workers he saw every day.

Ismail Ferdous:

[The garments industry] was not a topic or a story that I just jumped into because of Rana Plaza ... My uncles have been in this business since the 1990s, and I saw how they had built the factories ... So I had been to factories. And I had been thinking of these garment workers growing up in Dhaka ... you would see this huge line of factory workers going to the factory. You cannot miss them if you live in Dhaka.

And I was always asking questions. Like wow, so who are these people? What is their life? Just personal interest ... I would see them every day, but I would never hear their stories. So I was curious. As a photographer, a photojournalist, you have to be a very curious person. Like, living in the pandemic right now, I am not only thinking of how I can survive, I am also thinking of what I can make, how I can tell stories.

So—the interest was always there. And I photographed factories. But I had never done an in-depth story on the factories. It was early in my career. I had only been in photojournalism for two and a half years.

The desire to know and to ‘tell stories’ came from an artistic drive that brought Ismail up against the confines of middle-class Bangladeshi life:

It was very accidental. I went to business school. I was supposed to be a banker, following in my

family’s footsteps. My Dad retired from the Central Bank ... Growing up in Bangladesh, you don’t have access to a lot of other things. You just do whatever everyone else is doing. I went to painting class when I was in 6th or 7th grade. But it stopped because I had to be attentive to my studies. I come from a family where there is no example of an artist or a journalist or a photographer ... I went to business school and I was just not happy. Maybe I wanted to do something else, but I didn’t know.

At business school, Ismail joined the ‘very inspiring’ photography club. Soon he was running the club and teaching himself and other students photography. But after graduation, family pressures to get a job increased:

I was like ok, I will give myself a year and I will work as a photographer, a freelancer, I will make my own projects. And if I fail, I have a business degree, I can go back. So ... this is how I started. I didn’t look for jobs, I just started working on my personal projects, which I really believe in, working on my own craft and trying to tell stories. Because I had to prove that I can be a photographer, that I am a photographer and that I can be hired and commissioned.

‘A lot to learn about human beings’

Ismail had been published internationally and won grants for his work by the time Rana Plaza collapsed, but he was a ‘young, new photojournalist,’ only 24 at the time.

On 24th April [2013] I was home, working on my archive pictures. And my uncle knocked on my door, “did you see what happened, a factory collapsed in Savar.” So I rushed to the television and ... looking at the news for 10 seconds I thought—this is really intense. This is something big. It didn’t take me a minute to think about it—I grabbed my camera and one battery—usually I take three or four.

I took a CNG [auto rickshaw] to Savar. Then I was checking my mobile for online news. It sounds like total craziness because they cannot tell how many people are inside, the whole building collapsed. It just became a sandwich.

That's what I saw when I arrived there ... The road was closed, ambulances are coming, people are running around. I had not been to a warzone at that time, but it was so chaotic ... it felt like a warzone ... I saw stretchers coming out with bodies disfigured, severe injuries, people crying. It was a lot to process in that moment ... And I realized when I went behind the building that there were hundreds, I think thousands of people, screaming for their beloved ones to rescue them.

This picture was taken just at the time I arrived (Figure 3).

Ismail's pictures of the rescue raise important questions: where are the emergency services? Why are ordinary people having to help? An outsider perspective would have framed these questions, and correctly so. But Ismail identified another dimension of the story in this mass response, and he frames the story as one of ordinary people acting heroically to try to save those beneath the rubble. For Ismail, these were not only images of a disaster, but of an extraordinary human effort to help—'a call to humanity':

[Figure 3] is just incredible, right? They are just trying to save people however they could. So many rescue workers risked their lives. It was not only photographing this tragedy, this accident or this sad story. There was also a lot to learn about human beings and people—truck drivers, drug addicts, small kids, they all came to help people. It was a call for humanity. Some people just arrived and stayed



Figure 3. Rescue workers use cloth to bring down survivors and bodies after the Rana Plaza factory building collapsed in Savar, near Dhaka, Bangladesh, Wednesday, April 24, 2013. © Ismail Ferdous, 2013.

for months, just rescuing people. I met a 14 year old kid—I think this would never happen even in America I don't think, like a 14 year old kid he skipped class, from Old Dhaka, he came because he saw it on television, and he stayed there for three weeks. And he was not the only person. I met so many people. People came from Noakhali, people came from Chittagong, people came from Sylhet. They saw it on the television and they hopped on the bus, came to save lives ... And you see all these people are just the general public.

The heroism showed by the general public is something Ismail continues to document:

Still now I am in touch with most of the volunteers—they are like my brothers, I was so inspired by them. And they formed some collective, some group. One of them was featured on a TV ad last year ... they formed an emergency response team, funding themselves. All these young courageous people. Donating blood, going to different urban disasters.

This is the same person (see Figure 4 and Figure 5)—I met him when he was working during the collapse. He is a madrassah student, or teacher. He left the madrassah and came to help people. The first picture is two years later, and the second one was from during the collapse.



Figure 4. 'Really inspirational people': Mohammad Mobarak Hossain, a volunteer in the rescue effort. © Ismail Ferdous, 2015.



Figure 5. Mohammad Mobarak Hossain, during the rescue operation at Rana Plaza. © Ismail Ferdous, 2013.

These are really inspirational people, they have inspired my life.

These images tell a story about Bangladeshis and their response to crisis that is rarely told. While there is a disaster being witnessed, these are not the “[w]ide angle black and white shots and grainy, high contrast images [that] characterize the typical Third World helpless victim”, as the acclaimed photojournalist, activist, and teacher of photography, Shahidul Alam, has described (Alam 2007, 60).

Instead, through these pictures we witness a more complex disaster. In the early hours of the disaster we are shown a rapid and coordinated response in which ordinary citizens cooperate and innovate at speed and in total confusion. The adaptation of the length of fabric from a factory to be used as a chute (see Figure 3) to bring people down from the top floors of the disaster tells a story of ingenuity and resilience. Such images are consistent with what we know of the disaster coping capacities of Bangladeshis, a population much exposed to the disasters of ecology and precarity within the global economy (Hossain 2017). But we rarely see them

so compellingly depicted, nor do such images commonly reach an international audience. These speak of people whose stories are usually told in lazy visual tropes, or not told at all. Certainly, there are victims in these pictures, but they demand answers, not pity or charity.

Ismail is not the only photographer, nor even the only Bangladeshi photographer, to have pictured Rana Plaza as a demand for accountability. The Getty images picture file under 'Rana Plaza tragedy' records many images of the disaster, including many of collective action: efforts to gather, record, and display information; of anger and despair, too, but also of quite literal demands for accountability. Some include people protesting with hand-written signs. Some are in English, and clearly intended for an international audience.⁵ A majority appear to be by Bangladeshi photographers. They include gruesome images of bodies broken by collapsing concrete slabs and steel bars; such images, Ismail noted, would not be published by international media outlets if they featured people from the U.S. or Europe, but are publishable if they are from elsewhere. Among other questions we must ask is: who views and selects images the rest of the world sees? This continues to matter greatly, even if the digital revolution has meant images, including by amateurs and citizen-journalists, can be targeted to ever smaller key audiences. When picture editors view his portfolio, Ismail explained, they are sometimes struck by the similarities they see with the images of 9/11; this is a reminder that the editorial choices of major international news outlets are inevitably shaped by what they perceive to resonate with the viewing public in the global North, who remain their primary audience.

In reflecting on these Rana Plaza photographs, we sense a visual language different from the old view of victims and objects of charity. This language has been created by a generation of Bangladeshi photographers that has had the advantages of a pioneering effort to decolonize photography in the global South. Shahidul Alam, who was mentioned above, established a photography school for practitioners from across South Asia, and an annual international photography festival and a picture gallery in Dhaka.⁶ The influence of these initiatives on the Bangladesh photography world and beyond has

been marked. Ismail was not himself directly part of these initiatives, and forged his own path, mostly teaching himself with the help of the internet. Yet Naomi had been observing changes in how Bangladeshis were being pictured over the years since before Ismail was born, and so she could see how such an environment helped create a space in which he could experiment and approaches to which he could react. For Naomi, it was relevant that Ismail came of age in a time of great vibrancy and growth in Bangladeshi photography; his interest in photography was evidently stimulated by the brilliant and challenging work it was becoming possible to see in Bangladesh and beyond by the 1990s.

This fertile environment has nurtured a generation of photojournalists that is sophisticated artistically and politically. In an essay exploring the Rana Plaza photography of Ismail and Taslima Akhter, another international award-winning Bangladeshi photographer, Tom Holert (2019) observed that their images cannot be reduced to single elements or stories:

Both Akhter's and Ferdous's are multilayered visual practices, addressing multiple recipients. The two photographers (and other civil actors on the ground) insert themselves in and address a variety of aesthetic canons and expectations, local and global, professional and grassroots.

Holert also notes that by addressing multiple audiences, the pictures create links between and across actors:

Moreover, their works circulate in various social and activist networks, occasionally in the company of or in collaboration with other practitioners' work ... placed deliberately *between* and *across* constituencies. These practices [mix] author-based work with collective approaches, combining commercial photojournalism with both humanitarian iconography and the hands-on poetics of a political campaign (Holert 2019).

By speaking to different audiences with a common visual language, these pictures help tell a story about the transnational actors and actions needed to bring about accountability for a global disaster such as Rana Plaza.



IV. Witnessing Rana Plaza

White privilege and ‘fake nationalism’

Ismail believes it matters who takes the pictures, because that shapes how they see the world. He identifies a need for photography that is rooted in knowledge of context but which does not reject the benefits of the fresh perspective of the outsider:

When I started I was really stubborn about one thing—this is really important to me ... you see all these Western photographers go to places and come to my country and they do work and they get published. Which is great—I was inspired by them. But why can’t I do that, even though I come from Bangladesh? I know it’s challenging. I took this as a challenge ... I didn’t only want to cover stories in Bangladesh, I wanted to cover stories around the world. I know that things are way harder for me than for them [Western photographers], but that’s kind of inspired me.

This is a bigger claim than that local knowledge and talent should frame local photography: it says that not only is the Western gaze inadequate or partial when it comes to photographing the global South, but that Southern photography offers a fresh perspective on the West.

If you study photography you will see it is mostly what the Western photographers did, and we try to copy it. I’m not saying they are bad; they are amazing. Because of the opportunity they got, which is more than we got as South Asian photographers. At the same time, we have to create our own narrative. It is important—why is it for me to photograph America? Because I am going to see America way different from how an American sees America. I have faced so many situations where people are really shocked to find a Bangladeshi photojournalist. I remember when I was on the border of Syria and Turkey, staying in a warzone ... And there was a German who was surprised, he was like where are you from, and I told him and he said oh, I only know

Bangladesh as a place of floods, climate change. You must come from a well-off family, to be covering war in Syria and Turkey, places like that. I didn’t have an answer to that.

But also, at the same time I understood my own culture. Most of my work is still from my country. I think it is important—a lot of the time you meet a lot of Westerners who became photographers because they lived in India or Afghanistan. All these exotic places. And they overlook the stories in their backyard. I tell most of my important stories from my country. And then I started exploring other cultures. You see it is very common in America or in Europe [to photograph other societies]. [They are] based in exotic places and their white privilege means they get good access, nice treatment.

Ismail touches on a key concern about photography framed by an exclusively Western gaze—that it comes from a position of relative power and advantage, often distanced from the typically racialized subject. This can mean photographs reinforce stereotypical views, for instance, of people from the global South as victims of poverty or dictatorship (Ritchin 2013).

From his own experience, Ismail believes that being from the global South makes a difference to how he sees the stories, enabling him to view them from an unfamiliar perspective, and to uncover new angles and details. Ismail increasingly photographs people and places beyond Bangladesh, including the U.S.. But even when he photographs hardship or structural violence, the subjects are framed not as victims, but in vivid depictions of community solidarity and activism.⁷

Identities and perspectives are framed by class as much as race, nationality or gender, and it is from his own social class in Bangladesh that Ismail has faced the most criticism:

On Facebook my business school friends will be like “show some positive things of Bangladesh, show

some good things, you are creating a bad image of Bangladesh” ... I don’t want to convince them on social media because you can never win a fight on Facebook or social media ... I say—you only want to save the image [not to actually improve the situation]. This is a common thing—“you are making a bad image of our country.” It is such a fake nationalism.

Not surprisingly, garments factory owners have often been opposed to his images, but Ismail argues that Bangladeshis cannot enjoy the successes of the garments industry without taking account of its costs:

[W]hen these 1100 people died you don’t want to talk about it because it’s going to harm the image of the industry. I know this is sad, this is not comfortable for people to watch, but this is important, it is a global responsibility, a responsibility for everyone, if you don’t think about others, you only think about yourself, you will not understand the contribution of others that gives you comfort.

The images do raise a demand for global responsibility and make viewers think about who makes their clothes. But they also challenge a ‘fake nationalism’ which seeks to portray a thriving Bangladesh industry as without blemish, when it is at least partly based on the exploitation of its workers. Being a Bangladeshi photographer does not mean that the photographs taken will be comfortable or comforting for Bangladeshis, but that they stand a greater chance of telling the untold stories, and of asking the difficult questions we may wish to avoid.

Showing violence to demand answers

Even when the photographer manages to bridge some of the cultural and social distance from their subjects, ethical questions about photographing images of pain and suffering are unavoidable. This was clear in the case of a photograph of a young man and a young woman who had been killed in the disaster, and who in their final moments of life held each other for comfort or protection (Figure 6). The parts of the embracing bodies that are not buried beneath the rubble are coated in dust, making them somehow unrealistic and even beautiful. It is deeply distressing to view this image now, and the viewer may be inclined to look away.

Versions of this image are among the most famous pictures of the Rana Plaza disaster, and they have been discussed in depth. Taslima Akhter’s version of this image, entitled ‘Final Embrace’, won a World Press Award in 2014. Holert (2019) notes that both Taslima and Ismail’s images of Rana Plaza “move between the graphic and the aestheticizing, the victims of the structural violence of global capital and its local realities.” Both Taslima and Ismail are troubled by the versions of this image that they have produced, yet both also argue that their image bears painful but vital witness. Holert reports Taslima’s own response to her photograph:

I feel uncomfortable—it haunts me. It’s as if they are saying to me, we are not a number—not only cheap labor and cheap lives. *We are human beings like you. Our life is precious like yours, and our dreams are precious too.* They are witnesses in this cruel history of workers being killed ... If the people responsible don’t receive the highest level of punishment, we will see this type of tragedy again. There will be no relief from these horrific feelings ... As a witness to this cruelty, I feel the urge to share this pain with everyone. That’s why I want this photo to be seen (Holert 2019).

In working through the ethics and politics of the act of photographing these dead people, Ismail learned that his photography could act as a kind of witness, so that their deaths were unignorable:

It was the first day. After photographing for a few hours, I was ... not very sure how I was contributing. Am I just taking pictures, am I ... not helping? Or am I helping? ... I was mostly helping with the rescue. I think it was five or six in the afternoon, just before sunset ... [two of the volunteer rescuers called him over]. And I saw these two persons, one man and one woman and they were embracing each other. And it just took me to the moment of their dying—it was a call for saving lives, it kind of triggered me [I thought] my visual language, my taking pictures, my pictures, will create discussion, will create questions about the injustice that happened to these people. And that was kind of a turning point—I found a meaning for my presence in the Rana Plaza collapse. It gave me a purpose, that moment.



Figure 6. A man holds on to a woman, both victims of a building collapse, in the rubble of Rana Plaza garment factory in Savar near Dhaka, Bangladesh. © Ismail Ferdous, 2013.

Like Taslima, Ismail is aware of his power as a photographer, and understands that in order to act as witness, he must show the violence.

I didn't want to glamorize dead bodies. I don't like to take pictures of dead bodies. I deleted a lot of pictures of dead bodies which I had taken during Rana Plaza collapse because as a living human being you are so powerful ... I don't like the feeling of being so powerful in front of dead bodies. But that moment moved me, and forced me and gave me a purpose. I wanted to show that it was right there as I have seen.

These statements offer an insight into how it feels to be the one with the camera in hand and the chance to tell a terrible but vital story. What to do, how to respond, when faced with such choices, and how then to turn that story-telling into an act of witnessing—these are questions that Ismail and other photographers regularly face (Ritchin 2013). It still troubles Ismail, and this is what gives these images power.

This is a picture of dead bodies and it shows that you can be one of us. This picture can connect, it is almost like—I am not trying to beautify it—but it is

almost like a statue—they are trying to leave, they are trying to survive. It raises the question of injustice. Most dead bodies are gruesome and these are also gruesome. But this ... strikes you in a way that you feel that you could be one of them. That is my feeling, looking back at that picture.

...

For me it showed that we are for each other. Even in the moment of death they were one human being trying to help another human being. There is this kind of irony of greed and consumerism and capitalism of taking advantage of cheap labor or making money out of cheap labor and putting them in danger. It ... creates this irony. Even when dead, he was or she was for each other. Whereas humans are killing humans out of greed ...

Despite its horrors, the picture offers both a dramatic shorthand of the terrible disaster and a humanizing perspective on it. The figures may look like statues, but the viewer knows they are not, and hopes that in their moment of tragedy, they reached out to one another to help or comfort.



V. Scratching the Surface: What Difference did these Images Make?

Labels in the rubble

Tom Holert argued that the images made by photographers like Taslima Akhter and Ismail Ferdous could have been used as visual evidence in the pursuit of legal accountability for the disaster. Images of brand labels in the rubble of Rana Plaza can be found among the websites and materials of campaigns for justice and accountability in the global fast fashion chain. The workers' rights activist and former garments worker Kalpona Akhter described how she "spent days combing through the debris, gathering scraps of garments ... painstaking hours collecting brand labels from the rubble because I knew irrefutable evidence was required to hold brands accountable" (Akhter 2019).

Powerful images they may be, but they wield little power in a court of law. Legal liability for Rana Plaza has been impossible to prove beyond the immediate responsibilities for the building's structural integrity; no international fashion brands have been held accountable in a court of law for the bigger structures—the global fast fashion value chain—within which Rana Plaza's precariousness was housed. This is partly to do with how global value chains work: labor production processes are outsourced by global brands to factories in countries where wages are low; this ensures that any exploitation of the workers who make the clothes are geographically and legally distanced from the brands that profit from their low-waged work. It is also partly due to the difficulty of drawing a causal line between the collapsed building and the outsourcing practices of international brands. Workers felt forced to go to work in an unsafe factory building because they feared they would lose their jobs otherwise, because labor rights are weak and trade unions effectively banned. But while factory and building owners have faced criminal charges for the disaster, brands have faced down legal challenges.⁸ It was partly in response to the lack of legal liability for Rana Plaza that the Accord on Building and Fire Safety in Bangladesh, a novel, legally-binding arrangement between international trade unions and European brands, was set up (Anner, Bair, and Blasi 2013).

The real power of these images comes from how they depict the violence of the industry itself. As Dina Siddiqi has noted:

the widely circulated images of the deaths at Rana Plaza were unacceptable precisely for making visible the violent underbelly of transnational capital and rendering legible the violence that binds consuming bodies in the global North with producing bodies in places like Bangladesh (2017, 276).

Campaigners have used violent images to great effect. The Clean Clothes Campaign to pressure Benetton to contribute to Rana Plaza compensation funds subverted the memorably wholesome and cheerful 'United Colors' campaigns of the purportedly socially conscious brand. One mock-ad depicted a Rana Plaza survivor being treated on a stretcher, under the heading of 'United Survivors of Benetton.'⁹ Benetton eventually paid up, at least some of what was demanded, and the chief executive noted it was "a bit of a kick" [that] drove home the need for the Italian company to deal with unfinished business connected to Rana Plaza, from which it sourced about 266,000 shirts in the six months before the tragedy" (Kazmin 2015).

There is little evidence that other global brands sourcing in Rana Plaza or elsewhere in Bangladesh were damaged by accusations that they enabled the disaster; evidence suggests that share prices were unaffected by either the disaster, or by corporate efforts to address it (mentioned above) (Jacobs and Singhal 2017). Bangladeshi officials and factory owners have never indicated to Ismail that they were moved by the images, and he is accused of only telling negative stories about Bangladesh. On occasions when he has encountered international brands or Bangladeshi factory owners, they have tried to avoid him, or even to argue about the rights and wrongs of the industry. It is not clear that those with the means to profit from fast fashion are capable of seeing these images as the rest of us do. However, those of us who consume fast

fashion find them deeply shocking; over time, they may come to act as a check on consumer behavior.

‘The Deadly Cost of Fashion’

The images have been useful in the repertoires of campaigns and movements for workers’ rights in the garments industry. One project collected images of branded clothes, labels and paperwork from the rubble as “an important source of evidence to counter many of these denials [by brands that they produced clothes in Rana Plaza].”¹⁰ This collection has now been preserved as a Pinterest board, tagged under ‘garment industry,’ ‘cool pictures’ and ‘ethical clothing.’¹¹

Ismail does not consider himself an activist and insists that he is a photojournalist, however his images may have been used or interpreted. But he has gone further than most photojournalists, producing a hard-hitting short film called ‘The Deadly Cost of Fashion.’¹² This he co-directed with Nathan Fitch, who also collaborated with Ismail on their installation at New York Fashion Week in 2014, when images of the Rana Plaza were projected onto the Lincoln Center and stores that had sourced in Rana Plaza. In Figure 7, the bland innocence of the low-cost kids’ clothes retailer The Children’s Place is revealed to be a lie, as the images of pain suffered by those who made those cheap clothes are projected on to its brightly-lit surface.



Figure 7. Projecting images of Rana Plaza during New York Fashion Week, 2014. © Ismail Ferdous, 2014.

Kindling a fire

The Fashion Week initiative created a stir, but also showed how little impact the disaster had had on wider awareness. Ismail recounts:

People stopped in the street and asked what the hell and didn't know what was going on. The pictures are very sad in their way. It is sad. And they didn't know the story behind the pictures ... I talked to people. Most of the people didn't know. Some people knew but most did not ... And then we went to a shop in midtown, Children's Place (see Figure 7). It's one of the brands from North America that had clothes in Rana Plaza. And they were refusing to pay the compensation.

Labor organizations also showed up to the events at Fashion Week in New York, and organized a protest in support of workers' rights. What kind of an impact does Ismail think these images have had? Have they helped changed attitudes, raise awareness about the dangers of the fast fashion industry? Ismail continues:

I'm sure it does, you know. I have been reached out to by consumers. Regular public people. Text messages. Facebook messages, emails. Also fashion designers, ethical fashion designers. I am sure it has changed a lot people's minds. There is definitely an impact of this visual evidence. Of cheap labor. Fast fashion. So I believe it does. But it still takes time, won't change anything overnight. Everything is a process.

I would not say my one picture will change the world; I don't actually believe in it but sometimes people exaggerate these things. [But] photography has this power ... I am a visual narrator. My pictures, my stories will create discussion. They will agitate the surface, scratch the surface to raise all these undiscussed, overlooked, ignored important issues.

Ismail is moderately optimistic about the directions of change in the garments industry, saying, "it is pretty good, things are changing." Images humanized what were often abstract matters of global value chains; they showed faceless workers as active agents of their own empowerment, equipped to articulate and demand their rights. And changing the narrative is a long process:

So you asked me did the pictures really change [anything]. I believe it did change something. I hope so. I got some response from the people. Maybe it could be a kindle. And maybe it could light a big fire in 20 years.¹³



VI. Visualizing Injustice, Carrying it with Us

These images are troubling because when we look at them, we feel we are victimizing and dehumanizing people who have already lost everything. We feel bad, and so we should. Holert argues that:

the images *should* pose a problem, for their “violence” (as visual fact) could as well be read as a symptom of those who consume them from a geopolitical and geo-economic distance. In other words, the “violence” of the visual document registers the violence inflicted on the workers killed and harmed at the Rana Plaza factory and the social worlds that surrounded and sustained them (2019).

Or as Ismail put it, “it was right there as I have seen.” Our moral discomfort should not allow us to avert our gaze to unpleasant or painful truths.

Ismail’s pictures of the Rana Plaza collapse are embedded in a longer narrative arc about the disaster, following the story of the people who survived and those who were bereaved in the ‘After Rana Plaza’ project.¹⁴ A very different visual language is used here, with intimate portraits positioned above the words of their subjects, and an account of their lives before and since the disaster.



Figure 8. Parvin Begum consoles her daughter Rabeya Khanam, who survived the Rana Plaza collapse but suffers from emotional, mental, and physical trauma. © Ismail Ferdous, 2016.



Figure 9. A portrait of Fazle Rabbi, son of Fajlul Haq Khan and Rahela Khanam, lies on the bed as the only living attestation of the 13-year old boy who died while buried under rubble in Rana Plaza. © Ismail Ferdous, 2015.



Figure 10. On the day of the Rana Plaza collapse, Raihan Kabir, 24, was stuck under a heavy machine that is used to sew jeans and pants. It fell down on his legs, and he was entrapped for 14.5 hours until he was finally rescued. © Ismail Ferdous, 2016.

Ismail felt compelled to carry on telling this story, even though it re-created the trauma he had experienced in the original disaster:

I had only 30 or 40 families. And there are 4,000 or 5,000 families. I was going to do a hundred. But at some point I had to slow down, it was a lot. And it is so interesting that we talk about trauma ... Did I tell you before? Trauma is not only being like in a collapsed zone, not only about seeing dead bodies, taking pictures of dead bodies. Trauma is talking about traumatic events for days.

In 2015 I was going to different survivors' houses. It is so gruesome, so sad, so heartbreaking. All these stories. I had an assistant. I was sitting close to them and speaking to them and he was holding the microphone. He was shaking many of those times. He is not a journalist or photographer himself. Those are traumatic experiences.

... So I also had to stop at some point. It was just sad sad. The trauma continues from the people's stories. You carry it around.

The power of these images, and the work they can do to achieve accountability for disasters like Rana Plaza as well as other social injustices, seems to come from the careful work Ismail and others have done to ensure we, the viewers, also carry some of this around.

For photojournalists and for social justice activists and advocates everywhere, it is a challenge to keep attention on these big and complex global problems. It requires a constant creativity, a refreshing of repertoires, a search for new audiences and people to inform and mobilize. For Ismail, it is a struggle but also a passion to keep finding ways to tell these stories:

As a Bangladeshi photographer it was almost a responsibility to tell this long form story. To use my photography as a tool to keep going with the conversation of this important issue, of garment

factory workers' rights, of fast fashion. It felt like it was a responsibility to do that story, or that project. To use photography in a different way and keep the conversation going.

Ismail continues to photograph difficult and sensitive matters, and is currently photographing marginalized and impoverished communities within the U.S., as that country faces the COVID pandemic with disastrously incompetent policies. He may have trained his lens on

the richest country of the world, having learned his craft in one of the poorest. But in key respects, the themes of his work remain the same: the human effects of power wielded for profit, without care or accountability for those who are trampled or buried beneath. Ismail takes from his experiences of photographing Rana Plaza a sense that photographs can raise demands for accountability, and that they can do so without turning people into victims, while honoring and depicting the vital qualities of human agency and solidarity.



Figure 11. All the time Amena was under the rubble, she did not notice a rod was stuck in her leg; she can no longer work and worries about how her family will survive. © Ismail Ferdous, 2016.

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Endnotes

- 1 By 'fast fashion,' we can refer to the Merriam-Webster definition as: "an approach to the design, creation, and marketing of clothing fashions that emphasizes making fashion trends quickly and cheaply available to consumers"; from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fast%20fashion> [accessed 18th September 2020]. However, 'fast fashion' is generally understood to refer to the global apparel value chains, and the shift towards tighter time-lines, lower financial costs, disposability, and higher risks in the production chain. See Lucy Siegle (Siegle and Burke 2014).
- 2 According to a search of the Nexis news database [March 6 2019].
- 3 See Holert (2019) for analysis of the politics of Rana Plaza photography. Taslima Akhter's award-winning photographs can be viewed [here](#). Ismail Ferdous' archive can be viewed [here](#). The Activist Anthropologist collective does not have an online presence, but see <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/profile/saydia-gulrukh> and <https://vimeo.com/61968734> [accessed 16th September 2020] for details of their activism; also (Sumon, Shifa, and Gulrukh 2017) and (Siddiqi 2017).
- 4 <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/08/worlds-garment-workers-face-ruin-as-fashion-brands-refuse-to-pay-16bn>. Accessed 15 October 2020.
- 5 They do not seem to be intended for the majority of Bangladeshis who may not read English with ease. For a sample see <https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/rana-plaza-tragedy?family=editorial&phrase=rana%20plaza%20tragedy&sort=mostpopular> [accessed 18th September 2020].
- 6 Alam was named a Time magazine person of the year in 2018, his decades of work with photographers from around the South having come to global attention when he was arrested for posting live Facebook videos criticizing the government of Bangladesh. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/21/669868849/bangladeshi-photojournalist-and-activist-freed-after-107-days-in-prison> [accessed 18th September 2020].
- 7 See, for instance, his recent images of community fridges in New York City during the pandemic: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/10/no-one-should-go-hungry-sidewalk-fridges-of-free-food-help-americans-survive-pandemic> [accessed 16th September 2020]. Ismail's pictures of the Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd was murdered, around this same time, are very different images: richly colored and beautiful, rather than journalistic, they convey a sense of the dramatic intensity of the movement and the powerful emotions driving it: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBI7ZhJA3xL/> [accessed 16th September 2020].
- 8 A USD 2 billion suit against the Canadian retailers Loblaw and Joe Fresh, which sourced in Rana Plaza, was dismissed by a Canadian judge, accepting Loblaw's arguments that 'it had no obligation to take steps to protect the workers, let alone to check if the buildings where its products are made are likely to fall down' (Doorey 2017, 18). The companies' social auditors had the capacity to check the building standards among its other auditing requirements, but had chosen not to pay the few thousand extra dollars to do so, and refused any responsibility for the tragedy (Doorey 2017).
- 9 <https://www.popoffquotidiano.it/2014/12/10/strage-rana-plaza-benetton-continua-a-non-pagare/>. Accessed 31 July 2020.

10 <https://whatnotfashion.wordpress.com/2013/10/27/photos-fashion-labels-in-the-rana-plaza-rubble/>. Accessed 31 July 2020.

11 <https://www.pinterest.com/followthethings/rana-plaza-labels-in-the-rubble/>. Accessed July 31 2020.

12 <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/15/opinion/the-deadly-cost-of-fashion.html>. Accessed 31 July 2020.

13 For recent assessments of how the governance of the garments sector has changed since Rana Plaza, see (Bair, Anner, and Blasi 2020) and (Ashwin, Kabeer, and Schüßler 2020). If there is a consensus about what has changed since the disaster, it is that the initiatives and reforms put in place after the disaster have gone some way towards improving factory safety, in particular the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh. Workers have been more organized than before 2013 (Ashraf and Prentice 2019), and media coverage of their rights abuses and their struggles has improved (Sultan et al. 2020), raising awareness of the unjust and unaccountable practices of Fast Fashion. However, workers' rights remain weak, and workers have been dismissed or arrested en masse for protesting low wages or rights violations since 2013 (Hossain 2019). The COVID19 pandemic has brought a range of new threats to workers' rights, with brands cancelling orders that had already been manufactured and squeezing factories to accept lower rates, or even to operate at losses to maintain their relationships with the powerful international brands (Anner 2020).

14 <https://iferdous.com/after-rana-plaza>. Accessed 31 July 2020. Ismail says this is best viewed on Instagram, as it was designed for that platform: <https://www.instagram.com/afterranaplaza/?hl=en>. Accessed 31 July 2020.

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