

Article

Fashion diplomacy: Canada's shared role in supporting garment worker safety in Bangladesh

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Abstract

In this article, we investigate Canada's shared role in supporting worker safety and responsible fashion and apparel in Bangladesh. Drawing on two case studies, the Rana Plaza factory collapse and the COVID-19 pandemic, we investigate the Government of Canada's varied response to the impact of these crises on garment workers. To investigate this, and to advance our understanding of Canada's own role in supporting garment worker safety and agency in responsible fashion and apparel production, we turn to the concept of 'fashion diplomacy.' We argue that if Canada hopes to play a leading role in supporting responsible fashion and apparel practices in an ever-changing landscape, it must develop inclusive policy solutions capable of addressing the diverse and at times divergent interests of state and non-state actors both at home and abroad. In doing so, we identify possible strategies for Canada in addressing the new and emerging Indo-Pacific strategic environment.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous examinons le rôle partagé du Canada dans le soutien de la sécurité des travailleurs et de la mode et des vêtements au Bangladesh. En nous appuyant sur deux études de cas, l'effondrement de l'usine Rana Plaza et la pandémie de COVID-19, nous examinons la réponse variée du gouvernement du Canada à l'impact de ces crises sur ces travailleurs. Pour enquêter cela et pour avancer notre compréhension du rôle du Canada dans le soutien de la sécurité des travailleurs et de l'agence dans la production responsable de mode et de vêtements, nous nous tournons vers le concept de « diplomatie de la mode ». Nous soutenons que si le Canada espère jouer un rôle de premier plan dans le soutien des pratiques responsables en matière de mode et des vêtements dans un paysage en constante évolution, il doit élaborer des solutions politiques inclusives qui sont capables de répondre aux intérêts divers et parfois divergents des acteurs étatiques et non étatiques, tant au niveau du pays ou de l'état et à l'étranger. Ce faisant, nous identifions des stratégies possibles pour le Canada face au nouvel environnement stratégique émergent de l'Indopacifique.

Keywords: Fashion diplomacy, sustainable fashion, labour rights, cultural diplomacy, Canada, Bangladesh

Mots-clés : Diplomatie de la mode, mode durable, droits du travail, diplomatie culturelle, Canada, Bangladesh

Introduction

In 2018, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his family were mocked in international headlines for their use of traditional dress while touring India (BBC, 2018). While some accused the Prime Minister of engaging in acts of cultural appropriation (Bilefsky, 2018), others commented that Trudeau's actions played to his celebrity brand image (Lalancette and Cormack, 2020; Marland, 2018). Fashion is political, after all (Clark and Rottman, 2016), and the sartorial decisions of foreign dignitaries and their partners at global events and international summits have long been understood as politics in action (Behnke, 2016).

While it may be commonplace for media to remark on the strategic style choices of the political elite, academic literature is lacking when it comes to unravelling connections

between political power and fashion. Rather, these are debates that remain “relegated to the accidental, frivolous, and, at best, entertaining realm of political paraphernalia” (Behnke, 2016: 115). Indeed, as Steele (1991) has noted, academics have a history of taking fashion—the ‘f-word’—to be unserious. While the styles of those navigating diplomatic circles may be understudied, considered the “taken-for-granted facets of diplomatic culture” (Kuus, 2015), the politics of dress has been known to shape geopolitical relations (Behnke, 2016).

In this paper, we explore the concept of fashion diplomacy and Canada’s shared responsibility with respect to supporting the labour rights of garment workers across the global fashion and apparel industry. Specifically, we consider how the brand of Canada on the international stage—currently led by the “feminist hero” (Brill, 2017) Prime Minister Justin Trudeau—compares to its engagement with systems for responsible fashion. In investigating Canada’s role in supporting garment worker safety and agency in responsible fashion and apparel production, it is also important to consider the role non-state actors play in building agency. Relatedly, we also explore the (at times) divergent interests of state and non-state actors in pursuing these objectives both at home and abroad. In doing so, we ask the question: how can fashion diplomacy be used as a tool to support responsible fashion?

To answer this question, we turn to a case study within the Indo-Pacific context, and in particular, the ready-made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh. We examine the role the Government of Canada played in supporting building safety in the wake of the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, which killed more than 1,100 garment workers, and injured thousands more. While we look to the case of the Rana Plaza to contextualise current challenges facing garment worker safety in Bangladesh, and to show Canada’s shared-role in supporting worker rights, we also turn our attention to COVID-19 and the ways in which the global pandemic amplified structural inequalities already in place across global production networks (GPNs) (Brydges and Hanlon, 2020; Siddiqi, 2022).

As further means of introduction, it is necessary to situate our study in the broader academic discourse around the fashion industry. The global fashion and apparel industry is a multi-mediated landscape (Crewe, 2017). This means that the geographies of fashion should be seen in relation to the cultural economy, drawing attention to the complex nature of relationships between people and objects across space and time, and how these relationships impact policies, practices, and communications (Crewe, 2017). While different touch points across the sector may offer space for potential strategic interventions related to people and planet, we would argue it is necessary to consider a systems approach, across processes of design, manufacturing, distribution, consumption, reuse, and disposal, for example, in what Fletcher and Tham (2019) have termed “Earth Logic.” While the particularities of issues related to responsibilities throughout the various locations across the lifecycle of a product are unique, a systems approach understands that issues are also interconnected, stitched together through processes of globalisation, capitalism, and colonization (Bhambra, 2021; Tsing, 2009).

Within this context we consider how Canada’s commitment to feminist principles aligns with the realities of the global fashion and apparel sector. We question whether and how state and non-state actors alike foster notions of agency across borders and argue that if settler-colonial Canada is to harness fashion diplomacy as a strategic tool to support responsible fashion on the global stage, it must also look inwards to better understand dynamics within its own domestic contexts.

Our article connects with others across this special issue in various ways. As Nikku, et al. (2023) examine the landscape of Canadian disaster diplomacy in the wake of the 2015 earthquake in Nepal, we echo their calls for critical reflections on the role Canadian stakeholders might play in building—or failing to build—meaningful supports for agency. Williams and Haynes (2023) note Canada’s strategic role within the Indo-Pacific region through the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Although Bangladesh is not a member state of ASEAN, Canada’s engagement with the association is present, specifically through the Rohingya crisis (Williams and Haynes, 2023). While the Rohingya crisis falls outside the scope of our paper, we show the role alternate forums of dialogue have played within the region in the wake of disaster and crisis.

Furthermore, as Hanlon and Lien (2023) examine Canada’s relationship with China with regards to political and socio-economic relationships, they call for new, creative, and long-term approaches for engagement. Meanwhile, investigating ‘twinning relationships’ (long-term partnerships between two provinces or municipalities), Harrison and Huang (2023) have shown how people-to-people diplomacy can pave an important strategic avenue for non-central government diplomacy and draw attention to challenges relating to top-down interests versus bottom-up citizenship engagement. Kading and Thomas (2023) further unpack Canada’s vested interests within the Indo-Pacific region through immigration policies which are aimed at attracting new immigrants and international students. Ramraj (2023) draws attention to the role non-state and transnational actors (such as the Bangladesh Accord) can play in global governance where the state has failed to address global challenges, such as those which were brought on and/or amplified by COVID-19, while highlighting the importance of decentering Eurocentric lenses. Not only do our articles share questions and concerns related to Canada’s engagement within the Indo-Pacific region, they share calls for critical reflection on Canada’s part to better support agency through transnational, sustainable, long-term, and bottom-up cooperation.

Background

In the last 30 years, the global fashion and apparel industry has faced rapid transformation. Fast fashion is a concept that has come to describe rapid processes of production and consumption—whereby new products for consumption arrive daily in stores, catering to North American and European consumer demand (Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Clark, 2008; Fletcher, 2010). Under systems of fast fashion, styles are constantly changing, to ensure consumer demand for the latest trends is never extinguished, with individual items designed to be worn no more than seven times (McAfee et al., 2004). The system of fast fashion depends not only on consumer demand, but also on the extraction of natural resources and low-cost labour (Leslie et al., 2014).

Prior to the 1990s and the advent of fast fashion, garment manufacturing was a largely domestic activity. However, starting in the 1990s, in an increasingly competitive retail landscape, efforts to entice consumers to shop more and more frequently meant the industry grew increasingly driven by faster trends (Bhardwaj and Fairhurst, 2010; Barnes and Lea-Greenwood, 2006; Leslie et al., 2014). This resulted in a need to increase speed of production, as well as production lead times—so that factories were asked to produce more product in a shorter period of time (Tokatli, 2008; Bhardwaj and Fairhurst 2010; Taplin 2014). The

advent of lean-retailing and just-in-time transportation services led the industry to develop newer, faster, and more globalized industrial supply chains that could respond to consumer demands in real-time (Abernathy et al., 1999).

Outsourcing production to countries with low labour costs, such as Bangladesh, meant that companies could meet consumer 'needs' without compromising their bottom-line (Tokatli, 2008; Taplin, 2014). This is the very nature of 'supply chain capitalism,' which Tsing (2009) defines as "commodity chains based on subcontracting, outsourcing, and allied arrangements in which the autonomy of component enterprises is legally established even as the enterprises are disciplined within the chain as a whole." (Tsing, 2009: 148). As is the very nature of global capitalism, this system ensured certain stakeholders yield more power than others.

The global fashion and apparel industry today continues to reflect this evolution. It is a highly fragmented and globalized industry, where systems of design, production and manufacturing, distribution, as well as consumption, occur in multiple locations, traversing national boundaries where necessary, all fall in line with the logic of global capitalism (Tokatli, 2008; Crewe, 2017). Under this system, brands and retailers come to be associated with certain countries (for example, Sweden) with skilled design (Hauge et al., 2009), and others (for example, Bangladesh or Turkey) with low-cost production (Tokatli, 2008).

In this context, Bangladesh has become the largest producer of fashion and apparel products on the planet, second only to China (Donaghey and Reinecke, 2017; Kabeer, 2019). Since gaining independence in 1971, the country has experienced immense socio-economic growth, in large part due to the country's export-oriented RMG sector, driven by trade liberalization policies (Taplin, 2014). While a major source of employment, the country's RMG sector is made up of mostly women workers and has come to be defined by dangerous and unsafe working conditions and low wages.

This growth of garment manufacturing in Bangladesh coincides with its decline in countries such as Canada. In Canada, the garment manufacturing sector began to shrink in the 1990s with the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Today, 95% of the apparel sold in Canada is imported, at a value of \$12.7 billion (Industry Canada, 2021). This is compared to the Canadian apparel production capacity of \$2.4 billion (Industry Canada, 2021). And whereas the apparel industry exhibited "slow and stable growth" between 2016-2019 (Industry Canada, 2021), the impact of COVID-19 on the industry has been significant. Gross Domestic Product declined by 20.7% in 2020, while shipments decreased 19.6% (Industry Canada, 2021). The labour force shrunk by a staggering 17.8% and labour productivity fell 3.5% (Industry Canada, 2021).

It is against this backdrop that Fletcher and Tham (2019) have called for systemic change, drawing attention to the challenges embedded within models of production and consumption which assume exponential growth. Interventions, however, must (re)consider power dynamics, support a "feminist decolonial degrowth approach" (Dengler and Seebacher, 2019: 246), and help to (re)frame our understandings in non-linear terms, so that degrowth is not seen as something to be *achieved*, but rather as an *ongoing process* (Cheang et al., 2022). In confronting and dismantling Eurocentric understandings related to fashion, it is necessary to consider geographies of fashion as "sites of (micro) political problems and potentials" (Patchett and Williams, 2021: 198). Contextual and historical understandings of supply chain capitalism are essential to transnational efforts for systemic change. In the

context of Canada, efforts must also include critical reflections related to Canada's own problematic history with regards to the global social justice movement (Choudry, 2010).

When examining the ways in which Canadians engage with their clothing, it is necessary to understand how fashion lands in lives in unique ways; class-based dynamics, as well as constructions of gender, "race" and ethnicity, for example, play strong determining roles of power in relation to notions of consumer agency (McRobbie, 1997, Skeggs, 2004). By drawing attention to the ways in which both state and non-state actors mobilized both following the Rana Plaza collapse and in the immediate wake of COVID-19, this paper contributes towards understandings of Canada and its relationship with the Indo-Pacific environment. Here, fashion can be a useful tool, as we see how power moves across and within global systems of production, spanning geographic boundaries. Through fashion, Canadian consumers and businesses alike are engaged in Indo-Pacific relations in direct and indirect ways, in both material and symbolic terms.

Concepts and Approaches

The ever-shifting global landscape of the fashion and apparel industry calls for research that is attuned to geographies of fashion and the politics of consumption (Crewe, 2017), while unpacking the role elite political stakeholders play in both strategy and design. Yet, in the field of political science, fashion is said to have been ignored as a result of "the dominant modern rationalist understanding of politics and its concomitant rejection of aesthetics and representation as irrelevant to the constitution of political order" (Behnke, 2016: 115). Fashion, it appears, remains "the f-word" (Steele, 1991), despite evidence on the political importance of examining tensions related to symbolic power (Behnke, 2016; Kuus, 2015) and trade relations (Dubé-Sénécal, 2021; Badel, 2012) as well as across the culture industries (Crewe, 2017; McRobbie, 2016), to name just a few.

Pouliot and Cornut (2015) define diplomacy in terms of practice and analysis. In practice, it is seen as "a label that practitioners use in order to describe an array of socially organized and meaningful ways of doing things on the international stage" (2015: 299). They go on to note that, in practice, diplomacy produces embodied "forms of know-how and competence that are socially meaningful and recognizable at the level of action" (2015: 299). With regards to analysis, they note that while diplomacy was once understood strictly in the context of government agents, the category for analysis has widened to include other elite stakeholders (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015). Research into diplomacy holds a reputation for being the "poor child of International Relations (IR) theory" (Pouliot and Cornut, 2015: 297), with fashion diplomacy seen as uniquely understudied.¹

As an umbrella concept, fashion diplomacy, may be seen as a form of soft power (Nye, 2017), as it not only relates to dress as a social and political force, but also to the ways in which understandings of responsible fashion impact government agents as they work alongside other elite stakeholders to shape the very fabric of the global sector. Kuus (2015) flags how future research into fashion diplomacy should pay attention to recent shifts in

¹ This is a theme that was explored at the 2021 online public workshop "Fashion and Diplomacy" held through the Faculty of Humanities Department of Archaeology, Conservation and History at the University of Oslo, organized by Vincent Dubé-Sénécal and Madeleine Goubau. For details on the programme, see here: <https://www.hf.uio.no/iakh/english/research/projects/dematerialized-fashion-and-french-couture-subsidy/events/other/2021/fashion-and-diplomacy.html>

approaches to diplomatic studies, whereby there is (1) an emphasis on practice instead of the “scripts of international politics” (2015: 370) and (2) a decline in social science research focused solely on the state (2015). These are gaps we see to contribute to filling through this research.

Canada is not known as a global leader in fashion, as it does not house any of fashion’s world cities (Breward and Gilbert, 2006) or leading fashion brands. Rather, it falls firmly within the realm of being a ‘tier-two’ fashion market (Brydges and Hracz 2019). Yet, the geographies of fashion are ever shifting across a multi-mediated global landscape, where actors operating in a range of geographic contexts in the industry still play an important role in its functioning and operations (Crewe, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). With regards to building agency, the decisions of Canadian stakeholders, both state and non-state actors, are connected to the experiences of stakeholders in Bangladesh. As such, understanding practices related to fashion diplomacy requires an analytic lens which is attuned to structures of power.

Seen through the lens of symbolic power, Kuus (2015) draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1990) to consider how particular knowledge is held by elite stakeholders in relation to social status, where relations of power “operate through the idiom of style” (Kuss, 2015: 372). In the context of fashion, power is at play across such social forces as class, gender, age, and ethnicity (McRobbie, 1997, Skeggs, 2004). Moreover, commercial diplomacy can play a strategic role in structuring business sectors through international relations, as government and industry stakeholders work to shape how a state is branded on the international stage (Badel, 2012; Dubé-Sénécal, 2021).

Fashion is indeed political, where various agents, individuals, and collectives, negotiate their interests across space and time, and to demonstrate this, we need look no further than the very supply chains from which much of the clothing sold in stores and worn on a daily basis is produced. According to Tsing (2009), “an analysis of supply chain capitalism is necessary to understand the dilemmas of the human condition today” (Tsing, 2009: 148). Indeed, as Tsing (2009) has shown, “questions raised by supply chains are the key to deliberations on wealth and justice in these times.” (2009: 149). Supply chain capitalism is tied to racism and colonization from design—seen, for example, through what Pham (2017) has termed “racial plagiarism”—through until processes of disposal and recycling (Liboiron, 2021, Srivastava, 2021). And yet while the fashion and apparel industry can be understood as driven by a seemingly endless cycle of mass consumption and waste, it is also a space where meaning is made differently within specific contexts (Fletcher, 2016). Where fashion and apparel work to signal status, intertwined with such social constructions as class, age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, for example, it can play a role in how an individual comes to understand themselves and their bodies, in both symbolic and material terms (Barnard, 2010; Rocamora and Smelik, 2016).

We turn our attention now to the two cases of Rana Plaza and COVID-19, and question how stakeholder strategies aim to build agency. Thinking through fashion diplomacy offers some space to consider the role of agency in shaping policy preferences in the context of Canada/Bangladesh relations.

Drivers of Policy

The global fashion and apparel industry marks a clear site of intervention for Canada, whether that be through its alignment with ongoing commitments towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or through initiatives such as its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) (Global Affairs Canada, 2017; Cadesky, 2020), aimed at supporting women and girls internationally and confronting “the root causes of poverty” (Global Affairs Canada, 2017: vi). While Bangladesh may be seen as a strategic avenue to address inequalities related to garment production, it must be understood as part of a wider system. By drawing on two crises (the Rana Plaza disaster and COVID-19), we illustrate where and how agency has shaped Canada’s policy preferences, and how these preferences fail to go far enough in terms of achieving set goals.

Rana Plaza

The scale and scope of the Rana Plaza factory collapse brought international attention to labour rights violations in connection with the RMG sector in Bangladesh, and the everyday clothing items it produces, destined for consumption in Western markets. Canada was directly implicated and publicly tied to the disaster, through its association with Canadian retailer Joe Fresh, who was found to be producing garments in the building (Sisler, 2014; Clean Clothes Campaign, n.d.).

In the aftermath of the disaster, transnational labour rights advocates and stakeholders identified brands (such as Joe Fresh) that could be tied to the disaster, as they worked to map culpability for the destruction. However, the asymmetrical nature of power dynamics across global fashion and apparel supply chains ensured that liability could not land squarely on the shoulders of brands. With practices of contracting and subcontracting, the organizational structure of garment making under the logic of global capitalism enables companies and brands to avoid legal responsibility for their actions.

Even though a Canadian brand could be tied to the case of Rana Plaza, workers have no legislative recourse through the Canadian courts. Evidence of this can be seen in an attempted class action lawsuit brought forward in the Ontario Superior Court of Justice, against George Weston Ltd. and Joe Fresh Apparel Canada Inc., as well as Bureau Veritas, the company contracted to audit the factory (Supreme Court of Canada, 2016). Although garment workers in the building were making Joe Fresh clothing, items destined for Canadian consumers, the nature of contracting and subcontracting removed liability: Joe Fresh used a supplier to source its clothing, Pearl Global, who then outsourced work to New Wave (Meckbach, 2019). This ruling is not surprising and is reminiscent of cases from the 1990s. When a worker died in a factory making Nike shoes in Vietnam, for example, Nike’s response was simple: “We don’t make shoes” (McIntyre, 2011, citing Larimer, 1998).

Ultimately, given the failure of this approach and amidst global pressure from transnational labour rights organisers, two regulatory organisations emerged to tackle remediation: the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (henceforth the Accord) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (henceforth the Alliance). Both agreements were initially meant to run for 5 years: the Alliance is no longer active, while the Accord has since transitioned into the RMG Sustainability Council in Bangladesh, as well as a newly established International Accord for Health and Safety in the Textile and Garment Industry (The Accord, 2021).

One key difference between these two agreements, is that the Accord, unlike the Alliance, was legally binding, meaning that if you signed up for it, you had to stick out your membership for the full 5 years. Another key difference was that the Accord had worker representatives in their organizational structure. Despite distinctions between the Accord and the Alliance, both initiatives highlight brands as holding responsibilities to uphold certain standards, and both were voluntary. While attention was held on brands and industry stakeholders, it was directed away from governments; companies implemented private systems of compliance, ultimately failing to redress structural challenges related to the very make-up of global production (Ashwin et al., 2020; Kabeer, 2019; Siddiqi, 2022).

In the wake of the disaster, the Government of Canada was challenged to re-evaluate its domestic and international policies in relation to the global fashion and apparel industry. Canada supported labour rights in Bangladesh by partnering with a range of stakeholders to implement strategies aimed at improving worker safety and upholding international standards related to the labour rights of fashion and apparel workers. For example, Canada joined the Sustainability Compact, alongside the governments of the United States and the European Union to form partnerships with the Government of Bangladesh, backed by the support of the International Labour Organization (ILO) (ILO, n.d.a). The Compact is what Peake and Kenner (2020) identify as a “soft-law initiative” (2020: 195), aimed at supporting sustainable development by enhancing labour rights, securing safety at work, and facilitating responsible business practices amongst all relevant stakeholders.

In addition to the Compact, Canada supported safety at work through the ILO’s Improving Working Conditions in the Ready-Made Garment Sector Programme (the RMG Programme) as a donor, alongside the Netherlands and the United Kingdom (ILO, 2022). Canada’s role through these initiatives is not one of regulatory enforcement, but of partnership and facilitation, by working alongside other governments to support corporate governance in Bangladesh.

COVID-19

When COVID-19 began in March 2020, power asymmetries between stakeholders across the fashion industry’s highly globalised supply chains were once again highlighted. North American and European brands cancelled orders seemingly overnight, in some cases where products had already been produced, and orders already reportedly filled. Globally, estimates report 40 billion dollars in cancelled/delayed payments across garment producing countries (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021a). For Bangladesh, this was said to translate into over 1.44 billion dollars in cancelled/delayed orders, the financial ramifications of which were disproportionately felt by workers and businesses ‘at the bottom’ of production chains (Anner, 2020). Indeed, media outlets referenced the impact of the pandemic on workers as a humanitarian disaster (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021a).

With the logic of garment manufacturing under global capitalism, payments for orders are often not due until the products have shipped (Siddiqi, 2020b). Despite previously held commitments, brands exercised power in withholding payments. In some cases, even pivoting their production lines to produce face masks (Brydges and Hanlon, 2020), placing garment workers further at risk (Pham, 2020a). Media has reported that in 2020 Canada imported over 7 million dollars worth of face masks from Bangladesh (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021b). Faced with mounting pressure from transnational labour rights activists to #PayUP, some brands have since fulfilled their end of the contracts (PayUp, 2021).

However, payments and compensations for cancelled orders and lost wages only reflect immediate needs in the aftermath of the (still ongoing) COVID-19 crisis. Transnational labour rights campaigners and global unions are calling attention to the devastating impact of 'severance theft' on garment workers in Bangladesh, and elsewhere, highlighting how precarious employment contracts from contractors and subcontractors are not unique to crisis, but are commonplace, everyday, practice under the logic of supply chain capitalism (Pay Your Workers, 2021). As transnational campaigns draw attention to North American and European brands. Here again, responsibility is framed as landing squarely with the brands.

As this crisis is not over, the pandemic continues to challenge worker rights and safeties. Garment manufacturing in the country was exempt from certain lockdowns in 2021, as garment workers were called back to work (Star Business Report, 2021). With regards to vaccines, reports are now emerging relating to limited COVID-19 vaccine access for garment workers (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021b), with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) having called on foreign governments for assistance in securing vaccines for garment workers (BGMEA, n.d.), and Canada donating more than 2 million doses of AstraZeneca (The Government of Canada, 2022). Against this backdrop, a study from Bangladesh interviewing garment workers found the majority of study participants (84%, of 1,278 telephone interview respondents) reported concerns related to their safety at work under COVID-19 (Star Business Report, 2021).

In the context of Canada, the impact of the pandemic has been significant on the Canadian fashion industry and Canadian fashion designers, in particular. Nearly 90% of the Canadian fashion industry are firms of less than 9 people (Brydges, 2017) and many of these brands operate as slow fashion businesses. When the pandemic hit, Canadian retailers went into the first of many lockdowns due to stay-at-home orders, which required the closure of non-essential retail, including the fashion industry (Reuters Staff, 2021). When confronted with the COVID-19 crisis, however, the Government of Canada unlocked access to certain financial resources to support Canadian businesses and workers (The Government of Canada, n.d.). Meanwhile, industry colleagues across the global supply chain outside of Canada were locked out of these safety nets. Here again we see the asymmetrical nature of global production practices across geographic boundaries.

In Bangladesh, the national government announced financial support for workers, albeit this was found to be insufficient to tackle the scale and scope of the crisis (Sidiqqi, 2020b). For its part, Canada has continued its efforts to support garment workers in Bangladesh through the Sustainability Compact, which is currently in Phase 2 (ILO, 2022). Canada's ongoing engagement with both the Compact and the RMG Programme is focused on a post COVID-19 recovery (ILO, 2022, n.d.), and in supporting Bangladesh in a National Plan of Action on Occupational Safety and Health (ILO, 2022). Meanwhile, the European Union and Germany partnered with the Government of Bangladesh by donating a 113 million Euros grant to support a safety net for garment workers, as part of Team Europe's response to the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2020). These initiatives do not address root causes related to the unequal balance of power across the global sector.

Trajectory

In the wake of Rana Plaza, Baumann-Pauly et al. (2018) imagined a model of ‘shared responsibility’—one that would broaden the scale and scope of partnerships. While partnerships are necessary, Kabeer (2019) has shown, however, shared-responsibility models must address power dynamics and imbalances across all stakeholder groups, for example, between buyers and factory owners. With regards to building agency, the decisions of Canadian stakeholders, both state and non-state actors, are connected to the experiences of stakeholders in Bangladesh. Yet with respect to garment worker safety in the context of both Rana Plaza and COVID-19, Canada’s approach has been reactionary and disproportionate. As we have seen, crises draw attention to key challenges. However, these issues are not tied to a particular crisis. Rather, they are ever-present, rooted at the core of supply chain capitalism (Tsing, 2009).

Thus, there is a need to pay closer attention to power dynamics in and across the industry. Here it is necessary to question whether and how the strategies and actions of non-state actors support notions of agency with regards to worker safety. Fashion has been used as an instrument for elite stakeholders to advance political agendas which aim to promote their national sovereignty at high profile events (Behnke, 2016). It has also, however, been used to compromise state sovereignty. In the case of Rana Plaza, we see non-governmental organisations both from within and outside of Bangladesh partnering with corporate stakeholders with commitments to develop and deliver initiatives aimed at securing building safety (the Accord and the Alliance); in the context of COVID-19, we see corporations pivot production lines and withhold cancelled and delayed payment, prioritizing their own profits. As Siddiqi (2022) notes, the actions of stakeholders from the Global North have continued to impose policies and standards on stakeholders in Bangladesh, flexing power across the supply chain that privileges some bodies over others; with regards to agency, consumer interests are seemingly prioritized above the rights of garment worker. Although these tensions are ongoing, both the cases of Rana Plaza and COVID-19 draw these out (Siddiqi, 2022).

For example, we see that efforts designed to mitigate social and environmental externalities across the global fashion and apparel sector, often centre on corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategies, with codes of conduct implemented and third-party certification practices in place to monitor and processes. Research has shown the limitations of such approaches, however (LeBaron and Lister, 2015; LeBaron, Lister and Dauvergne, 2017; De Neve, 2009). Power dynamics across these schemes have shown how global governance itself has become outsourced, where elite stakeholders are engaged in “new social regimes of power and inequality” (De Neve, 2009: 63). Here, non-state actors are seen side-stepping the state, implementing their own systems of governance through strategies of CSR.

With regards to Rana Plaza, the Accord and the Alliance have proven insufficient, with respect to implementing systems for consistent financial support for workers, for example, such as emergency employment insurance schemes (Prentice, 2018a, 2018b), or by addressing buyer/supply dynamics related to cost-cutting and increasingly shorter production lead-times (Kabeer, 2019). Post-Rana Plaza, Prentice (2018a, 2018b) identified compensation schemes in Bangladesh as slow, confusing, and lacking. While stakeholders in Bangladesh have been working on worker injury assistance insurance programs (Prentice,

2018a), it is clear that injury assistance, even if meaningful, only captures a fraction of the necessary support needed to address unequal power dynamics related to financial safeties and risks across supply chain capitalism.

Confronted with the impact of COVID-19 on workers in Bangladesh, calls for policy reform from government, in partnership with industry, have also emerged (Chan, 2020; Lewis, 2020). While the Government of Canada has renewed its commitments to the RMG sector in Bangladesh through such initiatives as the Compact and the RMG Programme, it remains unclear whether/how effective these efforts have been at addressing root causes, and their role in supporting agency across stakeholder groups.

In attempting to mitigate the social and environmental challenges associated with the global sector, the Government of Canada must adjust its lens, with respect to both the range of issues it works to address, as well as the need to conduct meaningful stakeholder engagement. It is not enough to focus attention only on one site (whether Canada or Bangladesh), as the issues are rooted within a broader extractive system of global capitalism. Thinking through how strategies for responsible fashion align with Canada's strategic goals, 'fashion diplomacy' can play a powerful role for political engagement, leveraging the power of fashion to impact policy. When companies are understood as operating within both cultural and economic landscapes, supported and endorsed by administrative and government stakeholders (Badel, 2012), new opportunities for diplomatic analysis emerge.

Canada has potential to be a major silent player in this field. However, in order to be effective, it must engage strategically in such a way that better aligns domestic and international policy, while recognizing that the global fashion and apparel industry is in a state of crisis. If Canada aims to play a leading role in responsible fashion and apparel practices by supporting worker agency, it must develop inclusive policy solutions capable of addressing the diverse, and at times divergent, interests of stakeholders both at home and abroad. Responsible fashion diplomacy should therefore play a key role for Canada in addressing stakeholder relationships across the new and emerging Indo-Pacific Strategic environment. Canadian fashion diplomacy is about more than understanding the sartorial choices of the political elite as a "strategic tool" to advertise the latest in Canadian fashion talent (Friedman, 2016). It can also be seen as a pathway towards social change, both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

By unpacking Canada's reaction to both the Rana Plaza disaster and to the COVID-19 crisis, it becomes clear that when faced with a crisis, policy efforts have operationalized agency in unequal fashion across GPNs. The interests of domestic stakeholders (Canadian consumers and Canadian-based businesses, for example) are seemingly prioritised ahead of those of international stakeholders (such as garment workers). In prioritising domestic interests, Canada shirks responsibility and misses an opportunity to acknowledge and interrogate power asymmetries in connection to GPNs under the logic of supply chain capitalism. Not only does Canada undermine the integrity of its own efforts towards supporting garment worker agency, it presents new challenges to relations between Canada and the Indo-Pacific environment.

The global fashion and apparel sector is a strategic pathway for Canada to engage in proactive strategies that support systemic change, in line with its expressed commitments

to the SDGs. Canada has claimed that “[w]ithout concerted action [...], the SDGs will be unachievable.” (The Government of Canada, 2018). On this, we agree. If Canada wants to be a global leader in supporting the labour rights of garment workers, it must engage in efforts and strategies that acknowledge the asymmetries of power across GPNs.

Towards setting a new research agenda, we ask: what might Canada’s contribution to a shared responsibility look like? What roles and responsibilities do Canadians hold? And how might we evaluate Canada’s impact and complicity? Future interdisciplinary research is needed to better bridge analytic gaps related to understandings on the role fashion diplomacy can, and has, played in such areas. Specifically in the context of the political actions government agents undertake related to sustainable fashion. We echo calls from other scholars which have drawn attention to the Eurocentric and colonial power dynamics across supply chains (Ashwin et al., 2020, Kabeer, 2019; Siddiqi, 2020a, 2020b, 2022; Tsing, 2009; De Neve, 2009; Bhambra, 2021; Pham, 2020b, 2021). Future research into the nature of responsible fashion must work to dismantle structural inequalities.

In this paper, we have shown some of how Canada is engaged with the Indo-Pacific environment by drawing on two specific cases. As we have seen in the case of Rana Plaza, the Government of Canada leveraged the disaster to support labour rights and building safety in Bangladesh, as part of a wider portfolio on sustainability with various partnerships (the International Labour Organization, and the Government of Bangladesh) through traditional diplomatic channels via its High Commission in Dhaka. While these initiatives are tied to Canada’s international commitments to support human rights, and gender-based violence, they were focused only on Bangladesh as a site for reform. Then, when COVID-19 emerged, ongoing structural inequalities were once again highlighted, showcasing a lack of sustained engagement with structural issues woven across the global fashion industry—issues which transcend geographic boundaries.

As Chrystia Freeland, Canada’s Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, herself has claimed, the fact that Canada has a self-declared feminist for a Prime Minister “is important—and historic” (Global Affairs Canada, 2017: i). However, if Canada is serious about supporting garment worker agency, its engagement must reflect a commitment towards dismantling issues related to the very gendered, paternalistic, nature of the colonial global economy. This includes looking inwards to critically reflect on its own complicity throughout. In the context of COVID-19, structural inequalities have become ever more visible. Canada must adopt feminist strategies for social change which work toward dialogue with stakeholders across the entire sector, with a critical lens that is attuned to relations of power. This paper is an invitation for further research on the role fashion diplomacy might play toward achieving such aims, regarding relations between Canada and the Indo-Pacific environment, and beyond.

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