

POPULAR SCIENTIFIC ABSTRACT

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Lens of Labour – the effects of social audits in the Bangladeshi garment industry through the eyes and voices of garment workers.

In this PhD dissertation, I examine the impact of social audits on the well-being of garment workers in the Bangladeshi garment industry. Over the past decades, the use of social audits by multinational corporations has increased significantly, positioning these audits as essential tools for ensuring compliance with labour standards. Despite their widespread adoption, the effectiveness of social audits in genuinely improving working conditions remains contested. My research explores the mechanisms through which social audits influence working conditions and the well-being of garment workers, providing a comprehensive understanding of their potential and limitations. To investigate the role of social audits, I employ a mixed-methods approach, utilising a systematic literature review, qualitative interviews, and photovoice narratives. I frame the research within the theoretical perspectives of critical realism, social well-being, and self-efficacy, providing a multifaceted lens to analyse the lived experiences of garment workers. In my first paper I conduct a systematic literature review to evaluate the current state of knowledge on the effects of social audits, highlighting the significant gaps and biases in existing research. My second paper uses photovoice narratives to capture the voices of garment workers, exploring how financial stress, life agency, and (lack of) empowerment shape their experienced well-being in life and at work. Finally, my third paper investigates the dynamics of worker interviews during social audits, examining factors influencing worker responses and the ability of audits to reflect the true conditions and priorities of workers.

My findings reveal that while social audits have the potential to promote social compliance, their current implementation often fails to address the complex and nuanced aspects of workers' well-being, potentially leading to emotional stress and health issues. The research presented emphasise a need for a more inclusive, worker-centric social compliance framework, integrating mental- and physical well-being, transparency and accountability while recognising workers as active change agents in that process. By amplifying the voices of workers and addressing overlooked aspects of their well-being, I find social audits may evolve into a tool that genuinely improve working conditions and promote social sustainability in the global garment industry.

My dissertation contributes to the broader discourse on global supply chains and labour standards by emphasising the importance of integrating workers' perspectives into social compliance frameworks. By highlighting the limitations of traditional social audit practices and proposing ways forward for their improvement, I aim to foster more equitable and effective social audits in the global garment industry.