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Drishtipat Launches in London with very successful event on Bangladesh's garments industry

In the height of the recent unrest in the Bangladesh garments industry, London chapter of Drishtipat, a human rights organization, was launched by organizing a major event titled "Keys to a sustainable and strong future for Bangladeshi garments industry". In a packed house, a major attraction of the event was a dance drama titled, "The Girl with the red ribbons" which was based on the real life incident of a garments worker from Mirpur. This was followed by a slideshow on the issue and a lively panel debate with 6 panelists who represented the different stakeholders in the industry. The attendees were Neil Kearney, General Secretary from International Labour and Garments Workers Federation, Lakshmi Bhatia, Global Partnership Director from Gap Inc, Naila Kabeer, a researcher from IDS, Jenefa Jabbar from BGMEA, Saida Muna Tasneem from the Bangladesh High Commission and Martin Hearson from Clean Clothes Campaign.

The play was written by Eeshita Azad and was directed by Leesa Gazi and the choreograph was done by Sultana Sharmin Jhara. The songs in the play ranged from Rabindranath Thakur to Suman Chatterjee to Moushumi Bhowmik to Shah Abdul Karim. Similarly poems ranged from traditional to contemporary -- all well suited for the theme. The 40 minute drama had added background score by Tadhin Project and the lighting was done by Katryn. Altogether the production was hailed by all as very well knit and well made. It was very effective in putting in a human face to the issue. The effect of the drama was palpable on the audience face. One of the audience member Khadija Rahman from BSK commented later:

With your absolute spot on dramatisation of Jamila's life and slide show -The issue that you have high lighted yesterday was so effective that -I am sure people are having difficulty in sleeping tonight. My mother is a sleeping partner of a garments factory in Bangladesh – I phoned her as soon as I got home. I felt so ashamed and felt some how responsible for the miseries of fellow human beings. I understand that government, buyers have vital roles to play in order to make changes in our valuable work forces' work conditions ,but I also think we need to alter our culture of exploiting the poor and need learn to treat less privileged "social under classes" as equal .

After the drama, Drishtipat executive director Asif Saleh, introduced Drishtipat and its projects to the audience and said it is out of the passion for Bangladesh and its people, Drishtipat had been born. He stressed on its non-partisanship and asked everyone willing to make a difference to join Drishtipat. This was, then, followed by the slideshow on the issue prepared by Faisal Gazi. It gave the background on the debate which was moderated by novelist Tahmima Anam and Asif Saleh.

The debate was started with the question on current workers unrest. To this Neil Kearney, who visited Bangladesh 9 times in the past year, gave a long list of issues that were the cause of the worker's grievances. BGMEA representative Barrister Jenefa Jabbar responded with the actions they have taken to mitigate the problem. MS. Jabbar promised that all of these agreements will be implemented within three months. The government representative, Saida Muna Tasneem, the political counsellor, was asked about the government's role in the implementation of the agreement and compliance. She mentioned some recent initiatives like the task force formed by the commerce ministry. Laxmi Bhatia, from Gap, who was representing the buyers and who came from India for this mentioned how the consumer is becoming more aware of where the companies are getting their supplies from and companies are listening. So its imperative Bangladesh pays proper attention to compliance. Also she stressed the importance of ALL the companies be serious about compliance issue. Jenefa made a point strongly at this point saying that if the companies are willing to not squeeze the suppliers for every penny in price, BGMEA would make sure all the compliance issues are taken care of in no time. Martin Hearson highlighted that ultimate power to convince the buyers should lie with consumers and he wanted everyone to be not just concerned with value but rather focus on the company's social responsibility. Neil Kearney, at the end, summed up the meeting at the end saying that he was more optimistic than before. This time he saw the urgency among everyone to pay attention but he said we must keep the pressure on for results. All the participants agreed that the it is critical for the Bangladesh that this industry thrives and for that everyone needs to move forward. Drishtipat stressed that compliance is the key to create a strong and sustainable industry and both buyers and the manufactureres need to really address this by being serious about. Drishtipat also

announced that the launching of the industry monitoring blog and promised a follow up report in October.

The program was attended among other by both the mainstream and Bangladeshi press, Amnesty representative for Bangladesh Abbas Faiz, councilors Murad Qureshi, and Sandra Kabir and other respected people from the British-Bangladeshi community and was regarded as a very different blend of awareness campaign by the expatriate Bangladeshis.