

RIGHTS investigation

Harassment and hazards of working women in Bangladesh

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BRAVING family and social hurdles increasingly, Bangladeshi women are leaving kitchens to catch up with outdoor jobs and business. Educated women are no longer willing to stay at home and spend their lives condemned as housewives. Today's women are assuming new roles and struggling hard to balance their careers with the traditional job of bringing up the children.

According to statistics provided by the Directorate of Women Affairs, there are 2,995 women among 59,177-gazetted officers in 33 ministries of Bangladesh, while 17,233 among 30,126 non-gazetted officers in addition to 30,000 low-grade female employees. Although actual figure is unavailable, many more women work in the booming private sector. More statistics released by Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) showed that among the garment workers across the country, women account for about 15 lakh. According to the 1995-96 report of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, female labour force participation rate is 51 percent. Of this, 63 percent are engaged in agriculture-related works, 27 percent in service sector and 10 percent in industrial activities. The report bracketed about 31 million female workers within the age-group of 20 to 49 years. However, with more and more womenfolk coming to employment, harassment of women in their workplaces is mounting in Bangladesh. Women of all ages endure various types of harassment in offices and factories. Young and unmarried women are the worst victims.

In Bangladesh, there is no definition of harassment of women workers in offices and factories. Men find it natural to offer free drive and lunch or dinner to their female employees or colleagues spend more time gossiping at the table of a female employee. There is nothing wrong in making passes to the women at work. Once a woman allows a male colleague to buy a lunch, the next day he will invite her to dinner. If it is, a real dating it is fine. However, in most cases the goal remains to exploit her physically. While the white-collar employers do still coat their intentions with offers such as dinner and taking for a ride, it is difficult story for women, say at the garment factories, where the harassment are allegedly more obvious. The tales of harassment go unnoticed in many cases because the women are afraid of losing their jobs and public shame.

Take the case of Sheuli. It was late in the evening when Sheuli, a pretty young woman, was still working at her Motijheel office. She did not mind when her employer, a 50-year-old man, had promised to drive her home. Soon she realised it was a mistake. "As I was working on the computer, I felt a hand touching my shoulder," recalled Sheuli. "looking back I was startled to find my employer standing behind me smiling." For the first few minutes, Sheuli, an unmarried woman in her mid 20s, was too terrified to protest. "But it was not long before I gathered my courage, stood up and asked the man to get lost," said an angry Sheuli, who since then left the private company in search of another job.

Women in Garment Factories

Some 15 lakh female workers are employed in the country's sprawling readymade garment manufacturing industries where they work in various capacities and different working hours. Eighty-six percent of the garment

workers are rural women. Apart from the uncongenial working conditions, these workers are often maltreated by their superiors and male colleagues.

The female workers, particularly the younger ones, mostly feel insecure and often fall prey to the lust of their employers or others. Quite often, they lose their jobs for no fault of their working capabilities. According to a survey, 75 percent of the female workers are ready to work overtime to earn some extra money but they do not avoid the risk of sexual harassment.

Most Bangladeshi garment workers are young girls from rural families and their another problem is accommodation. They have hardly anyone to offer a house to live in.

Barely one year ago, Nurjahan Begum, a young garment worker, lived in a crammed mess-house where she dreaded the lack of security. "The



Women protesting discrimination and hazards in the street

mess-house was like a hell. We had to go out of our room at night to use the toilet that was in an open space. My three colleagues and I had rented the small and filthy house at Tk 1200 per month and it was not possible for me to reside in a better house as my monthly income was only Tk 1800," Nurjahan said.

She said 12 families used to live in the house. "It was, in fact, a slum... there was no security, particularly for women. We could not sleep without tension although we returned home exhausted working throughout the day," recalled Nurjahan.

A few years ago a devastating fire broke out at Jahuri Mohalla slum in Muhammadiupur area, which is, in fact, an abode of female garment workers. Of the 300 slum dwellers, almost all escaped unharmed but two young sisters could not. They used to sleep locking the door from inside for lack of security. When the fire broke out they got unnerved and failed to find out the key. They were roasted alive.

However, to ensure a secure accommodation for the city's vulnerable

women garment workers, Nari Uddug Kendra (NUK) has opened four hostels in the city accommodating nearly 600 workers. NUK launched its project in 1991 opening the first hostel in Dhaka City's Mohakali area with only 21 garment workers. Now four hostels are run by NUK in rented city houses.

Apart from the garment workers, the educated but single working women find accommodation a difficult job. Take the case of Shamima. As a university student, Shamima stayed at a dormitory. She overstayed at the dormitory even after graduation. The authorities at the dormitory asked her to vacate her room the moment information of her getting a job reached them. It took six more months for her to get a seat at a women hostel, where she pays Tk 350 a month.

Women in Banks, NGOs and other business firms

The tales of harassment of women are not confined to the garment sector alone. It has been going on in almost all places, even at times in very reputed and respectable establishments.

In 1990, a widow working as a typist in a well-known NGO was sexually harassed by her Director's Personal Secretary. When the matter became known, the secretary disappeared from the office. Consequently, she could not follow up any legal course against him. Neither she was helped by her office in this regard. Her colleagues only sympathised her. The woman who later gave birth to a boy child said, "First I felt the blunt of physical abuse and now, the pain of an undesigned mental agony".

Another young lady, aged 27, working in a business firm as Media Executive, spoke of similar circumstances.

She said, "I'm always subjected to verbal abuse by my male colleagues. I cannot work in peace as I always fear that they might try to sexually harass me one day." She went on to say that her boss and her colleagues particularly get annoyed with her when she refuses to attend meetings called in the evening. "They even advise me to report to the office early in the morning and take breakfast with them," she added.

A 36-year-old lady and mother of two children also spoke of harassment by her male colleagues in her office, a reputed public sector corporation. She mentioned that as she does not give in to their various "invitations", she is often put into official troubles. She narrated one such incident regarding the facility of commuting by office transport. After she has disagreed with certain indecent proposals to her colleagues, she was denied the facility, which she had been enjoying for several years.

When she brought the matter to the knowledge of her boss, it was not given any attention at all. Even the letter of complaint she wrote was stolen from the file at the superior's office. She felt that a conspiracy was going on against her. She said her complaints of sexual harassment by her male colleagues were never given due attention by her boss, who incidentally was also a female.

"Like me," the woman continued, "many other female workers are subjected to different kinds of harassment in the office. When any complaint is made to the higher authority, the punishment takes place only in transferring the person concerned to another department." She questioned, "is it the solution to end harassment of women in workplaces?" For another 27-year-

old woman, the job as a junior Accounts Officer at a branch of Agrani Bank in Dhaka meant the beginning of a new career. Not long after Anima was worried and unhappy. "For the first few days, I was so excited that I forgot everything else. I made phone calls to my relatives and took friends to restaurants. But soon I realised that I'm not in a proper place," said Anima who joined the bank along with another female officer in September 1998.

She alleged that she has been facing various types of harassment in her office since joining the bank. "There are some senior male colleagues in our office who always try to dominate us. They changed our desks so frequently that it took months for us to pick up the banking job."

More embarrassing for them is that some of their male colleagues behave with them with salacious attitude. Anima said, "in the first month of my joining the office, the Foreign Exchange Manger (FEM) of the bank told me and my other female colleague to attend a party at a city hotel to be organised in honour of a bank client. As newcomers, we could not refuse his offer or order. We met the client at a luxurious restaurant along with the FEM and discussed some official matters. But while we were returning home after the lunch, we heard the FEM saying to go for a long drive with us. A few days later the FEM asked the two female colleagues to go with them on a long drive and they turned down his offer outright. Angered by their refusal, the FEM threatened them of terrible consequences. "I'll damage your career," he warned them. The two female officers ultimately had to seek help from higher authorities for protection.

Another female employee of the bank alleged that one day their Assistant General Manager (AGM) called her in his chamber on the plea of official work and then started talking about personal matters. "Why don't you get married? Don't you have any biological demand?" she quoted their AGM. The employee, who would not disclose her name, said she has never seen her any female colleagues or female bank clients to come out from his chamber with a smile. Anima further alleged that her male colleagues always cut jokes with them with indecent words and try to talk to them standing or sitting as close as possible. She said there is no separate toilet for female staff in their office and they feel insecure in using toilet.

"Usually, we need to keep a female colleague on guard outside the toilet before we go to use it," Anima said. After completion of her master's degree, another smart girl Mita joined an interior decoration firm in Dhaka in 1997 but she could not continue the job as its owner used to force her to go to different firms with him in his car. She later joined an NGO as an administrative councillor where she had to go on field tours once a week. Again, she was forced to quit the job as some junior colleagues misbehaved with her. She said every Friday she had to go on field visits with a junior male colleague in their official car but she found her male colleague totally a different man outside the office. He tried to touch her whenever he found her alone. She used to work in her office up to 8-9pm and one day she heard two of her junior colleagues saying, "let us try to convince Mita to enjoy with us and she may agree as she is still unmarried in her 30s." Mita quit the job the following day.

A News Network investigation. In the next episode, the investigation will cover other sectors including journalism and different types of harassment the working women have to face in their day-to-day life.

CNHRI corner

Sri Lanka: High-ranking police preventing work of National Human Rights Commission

ASIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

ON 22 January 2002, Mr. Nimal Punchihewa, an inquiring officer of the Sri Lankan National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), was conducting an inquiry into a complaint of illegal arrest against three policemen of the rank 'Officers in Charge of Police' (OICs). The Assistant Superintendent of Police (ASP), Rannal Kodituwakku (who had been called as a witness) entered the room, disrupted the inquiry, used abusive language against the inquiring officer and walked away with the three police officers facing the inquiry. Earlier, the NHRC had ordered these police officers to not interfere with the complainant, as there was no criminal charge against him. The three officers have, however, proceeded to arrest the complainant in defiance of the NHRC order.

ASP Kodituwakku later made a complaint at a police station against the inquiring officer and tried to summon the inquiring officer to the police station for a 'police inquiry'. This, however, has been resisted by the NHRC. The car license number of the NHRC inquiring officer was taken down by ASP Kodituwakku (an obvious threat) and the inquiring officer was forced to change vehicles to avoid possible harm.

Background

To appreciate the gravity of this affront to the authority of the NHRC, it must be noted that ASP Kodituwakku is the son of the present Inspector General

of Police (IGP), which is the highest police position in the country. This incident can cause tremendous discouragement to the people seeking redress against human rights violations, in a country where very grave violations take place in great numbers. Given the stature of ASP Kodituwakku, it is believed that no serious action will be taken against him by the police. The adverse consequences to the NHRC in Sri Lanka, if no proper action is taken against this assault on its independence and the attack on the security of its officers, will be enormous. If the commission's authority is allowed to be undermined by such open abuse and insult, there will be serious harm to the public image as well as, more importantly, public confidence in this institution.

Incidentally, there is also a pending inquiry against ASP Kodituwakku for maintaining a torture chamber.

The NHRC of Sri Lanka is a national institution based on the Paris Principles. It was inaugurated in 1994 under heavy national and international pressure in response to the colossal number of human rights abuses taking place in the country since the late 1980s. Since its inception, it has been under heavy pressure from the perpetrators, who are mostly law enforcement officers, and from politicians. These pressures have hindered its development. ASP Kodituwakku's open defiance of the NHRC occurs within this context.

The mandate and powers of the Sri Lankan NHRC are mentioned below.

Sri Lankan NHRC: Mandate and Powers

The mandate and powers of the commission are outlined in Sections 10 and 11 of the act:

"The functions of the commission shall be:

(a) to inquire into, and investigate, complaints regarding procedures, with a view to ensuring compliance with the provisions of the Constitution relating to fundamental rights and to promoting respect for, and observance of, fundamental rights;

(b) to inquire into and investigate complaints regarding infringements or imminent infringements of fundamental rights, and to provide for resolution thereof by conciliation and mediation in accordance with the provisions hereinafter provided;

(c) to advise and assist the government in formulating legislation and administrative directives and procedures, in furtherance of, the promotion and protection of fundamental rights;

(d) to make recommendations to the government regarding measures which should be taken to ensure that national laws and administrative practices are in accordance with international human rights norms and standards;

(e) to make recommendations to the government on the need to subscribe or accede to treaties and other international instruments in the field of human rights; and

(f) to promote awareness of, and provide education in relation to human rights.

For discharging its functions, the commission may exercise any or all of the following powers:

(a) investigate, any infringement or imminent infringement of fundamental rights in accordance with the succeeding provisions of this act;

(b) appoint such number of subcommittees at provincial level, as it considers necessary to exercise such powers of the commission as may be delegated to them, by the commission, under this act;

(c) intervene in any proceedings relating to the infringement or imminent infringement of fundamental rights, pending before any court, with the permission of such court;

(d) monitor the welfare of persons detained either by a judicial order or otherwise, by regular inspection of their places of detention, and to make such recommendations as may be necessary for improving their conditions of detention;

(e) take such steps as it may be directed to take by the Supreme

Court, in respect of any matter referred to it by the Supreme Court;

(f) undertake research into, and promote awareness of, human rights, by conducting programs, seminars and workshops and to disseminate and distribute the results of such research;

(g) award in its absolute discretion to an aggrieved person or a person acting on behalf of an aggrieved person, such sum of money as is sufficient to meet the expenses that may have been reasonably incurred by him in making a complaint to the commission;

(h) do all such other things as are necessary or conducive to the discharge of its functions."

Section 14 of the act, dealing with terrorist organisations, is as follows:

"The commission may, on its own motion or on a complaint made to it by an aggrieved person or group of persons or a person acting on behalf of an aggrieved person or a group of persons, investigate an allegation of the infringement or imminent infringement of a fundamental right of such person or group of persons caused:

(a) by executive or administrative action; or

(b) as a result of an act which constitutes an offence under the Prevention of Terrorism Act No. 48 of 1979, committed by any person."

The commissioners can be removed by Parliament only under special circumstances. The commission has wide powers of investigation and of collecting evidence and is expected to interact in many ways with the courts in Sri Lanka. The commission can recommend that various actions are taken for violations, but it cannot punish anyone. The commission, through its nationwide network of offices with coordinating and investigative officers, is already at work in the matter of detentions and so on. The educational and preventive work, however, has not yet been developed. The commission would welcome interaction with international and regional organisations with a similar mandate. Closer relationships will also develop between the commission and local and other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in this field.

Campaign for National Human Rights Institutions (CNHRI), a joint initiative of 'Law Desk' and 'Law Watch, A Centre for Studies on Human Rights Law', is aimed at promoting the cause of institutional protection of human rights in Bangladesh. The network (CNHRI) will act initially as a pressure group to establish an independent National Human Rights Commission and a credible Office of Ombudsman in Bangladesh. The Law Desk is interested to receive your opinions, suggestions and writings on national human rights institutions. Selected entries will be published in LAW AND OUR RIGHTS <www.dailystarnews.com/law> We invite readers' contribution to this specialised column at <lawdesk20@hotmail.com> or <lawwatch2001@yahoo.com>

LAW watch

Asian human rights defenders under attack

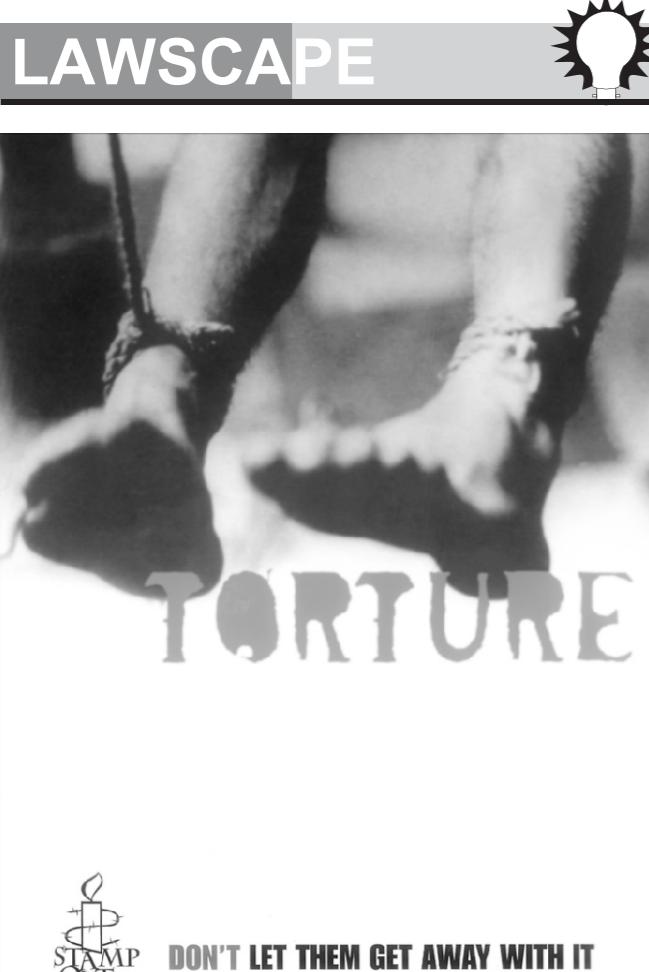
FORUM ASIA

At the end of a two-day long recent Consultation on "Toward More Effective Protection of Human Rights Defenders in Asia" in Bangkok, representatives of dozens of rights organisations from eighteen Asian countries and peoples' groups urged governments in the region to improve their rights records and to protect human rights defenders from violent reprisals. At the meetings, attended by U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Special Representative on Human Rights Defenders, Ms. Hina Jilani, participants called for increased international cooperation to end attacks on individuals and groups striving to defend and promote human rights in the region.

In the past year, many individuals in countries from India to Indonesia have been killed in the course of monitoring and reporting on rights abuses. Six aid and rights workers were killed in Aceh and another six activists working on environmental issues and community rights were killed in Thailand alone. Throughout the region, thousands of others continue to suffer from defamation campaigns, harassment, obstacles to freedom of association, threats, assaults, loss of liberty, and even murder and "disappearances," all because they are fighting for universally recognized rights.

In recognition of such threats to rights organizations and others who champion human rights, in Asia and across the globe, the U.N. General Assembly in March 1999 adopted the Declaration on the Rights and Responsibilities of Individuals, Groups, and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Special Representative Hina Jilani began her work in September 2000.

Among the individuals and groups most often singled out for attack in Asia have been activists championing the environment, indigenous rights, women's rights, labor rights, and basic civil and political rights in conflict areas such as in Sri Lanka, Aceh and Papua in Indonesia, and Mindanao in the Philippines. Individuals working to monitor abuses by military governments, including the Burmese military regime, in closed political systems such as China, and against minorities such as Dalits ("Untouchables") in South Asia have also been particularly vulnerable.



DON'T LET THEM GET AWAY WITH IT



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