

Not a chance. Unless home working is recognised as a form of labour, change will be hard to come by. While there are hundreds of thousand of people working inside homes, none of them have a legal agreement with their employers on terms of employment, even the most progressive of employers don't have such an agreement. And without that they are at the complete mercy of their employers.

It is difficult to estimate the exact number of underage workers working at homes all across the capital city as there is no official government data on it but on the basis of a survey conducted by SHOISHAB Bangladesh in 2000 of 10,000 middle-class households there were around 300,000 child home workers in Dhaka alone. Ensuring the rights of these children is beyond anyone's reach as there is no scope for official accountability. Although almost all forms of labour are under the jurisdiction of trade unions, no such unions exist for home workers. Most of these home workers are completely illiterate which make them easy targets for exploitation. Parents of these children (most of whom are girls) are usually the poorest of the poor who give up their children thinking that it is a safe place for them to work (as opposed to working in garment factories or shops) and also takes the burden off them for another mouth to feed. The children have to do back-breaking work from very early in the morning to very late at night with very little free time, and virtually no scope for education. They are abused, verbally and physically, by all members of the family. The males of the family sometimes take advantage of their vulnerability to exploit the girls sexually. And many simply become part of the statistics of never-to-be-convicted murderers.

According to a study conducted by labour rights group The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) at least 17 per cent of home workers in the country are subjected to sexual abuse while 47 per cent of them are assaulted physically every year. 63 per cent of home workers were forced to work 'beyond their physical abilities'. Most have to work long hours between 12 and 18 hours a day - for little pay. 83 per cent of them were mercilessly scolded even for small mistakes, 40 per cent of them felt insecure while 68 per cent suffered from depression. From different national newspapers the study also found that between September 2000 and September 2004 97 home workers were brutally tortured (severely beaten up, poured hot water on, scalded with hot iron or injured with a sharp object), 139 were killed, 40 were raped and nine went missing.

We can either add to these statistics by being completely complacent of the whole issue or do something to change it, by becoming aware, ourselves, and those around us. Home workers will still be there to help us around the house, but at least they can be given the respect they deserve.