

Promoting Child Rights

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Businesses have a role to play in ensuring children's rights

MD FAZLUR RAHMAN
BANGLADESH is far from introducing comprehensive policies on child rights in its business organisations as the country is still struggling to eliminate child labour from industries, especially from informal sector.



Child labour engaged in hazardous die-casting work PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

Bangladesh's businesses still prioritise child labour. As a result, they are far from meeting all internationally recognised labour standards, which would not only prevent them from engaging child labour but also make them respect all aspects of lives that affect children directly and indirectly. Some leading chamber leaders and businessmen have also admitted that they would take some more time before Bangladesh can actually enforce a comprehensive policy on child labour that respects all rights of children and protects them from all forms of abuses. There are over 60 million children in Bangladesh, which is nearly 40 per cent of the country's total population. And half of these children continue to live below the poverty line, according to Save the Children.

Bangladesh's child labour issue has also drawn attention at the recent hearing on the country's human rights conditions at US Congress.

Eric Biel, the acting associate deputy labour undersecretary for International Affairs, told the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission on July 19 last that child labour, unsafe working conditions, and impediments to form union persist in Bangladesh, particularly in the ready-made garment and shrimp processing industries.

Biel said the US Department of Labour's Bureau of International Labour Affairs (ILAB) is compiling information on forced and child labour in the garment and shrimp industries of Bangladesh.

At the same hearing, Tim Ryan, Asia regional programme director of the American Center for International Labour Solidarity, said child labour in the ready-made garment sector has decreased, but at least 7 million children still work in Bangladesh, mostly in agriculture, manufacturing, mining, domestic service, hotels and restaurants, and shrimp and the seafood industries.

The Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission was established in 2008 to promote internationally recognised human rights norms in a non-partisan manner.

Till date, recognition of the responsibility of business towards children has often been focused on preventing or eliminating child labour. This is the picture not only of Bangladesh but also in many developed countries.

While reinforcing standards and actions necessary to prevent and eliminate child labour, United Nations Children Organisation (UNICEF), the Global Compact and Save the Children have formulated a guideline for the industries, which, if enforced properly, can help establish child rights.

"The Children's Rights and Business Principles" also highlight the diversity of ways in which business affects children. This includes the impact of overall business operations such as products and services and their marketing methods and distribution practices as well as through businesses' relationships with national and local government, and investments in local communities.

UNICEF thinks respecting and supporting children's rights requires businesses to both prevent harm and actively safeguard children's interests. By integrating respect and support for children's rights into the core strategies and operations, they can strengthen their existing corporate sustainability initiatives while ensuring benefits for their business.

Such efforts can build reputation, improve risk management and secure their 'social license to operate'. A commitment to children can also help recruit and maintain a motivated workforce. Supporting employees in their roles as parents and caregivers, and promoting youth employment and talent generation are just some of the concrete steps that businesses can take, according to the UN agency.

Considering how products and

services can better meet children's needs can also be a source of innovation and create new markets. Finally, working for children helps build strong, well-educated communities that are vital to a stable, and inclusive and sustainable business environment.

Bangladesh has, however, made quite a number of progresses.

The country has made significant progress towards attaining the child-related Millennium Development Goals. Primary school enrolment has been rising, with 86 per cent of primary school-age girls and 85 per cent of primary school-age boys enrolled in 2009. Bangladesh has achieved close to target gender parity in primary and secondary education.

Latifur Rahman, chairman of Transcom Group, one of the leading business groups in Bangladesh, said from a business perspective, there is no competition between what is social responsibility and what is good for business.

"A responsible business ensures that products and services are safe for everyone. A responsible business does not employ a child as a labourer."

The winner of Oslo Business for Peace Award 2012 said Bangladesh has almost eliminated child labour from the formal sector.

"We have a control in organised sector. The country's child labourers are mostly employed in the unorganised sector such as small factories and services sector. And I do not see any mechanism to stop it."

Rahman said people should keep in mind that these children are not doing jobs for fun. "This is a basic question we have to address. We have to strengthen our efforts so that we can keep them in school. We will have to give financial incentive so that parents do not send them for work."

He said businesses should also receive support from government policies and regulations in order to protect child rights. "We need to have consciousness as a nation."

He stressed on the importance of ensuring education of children so that they become more productive citizens of the country.

Rahman said development partners also need to work in the rural areas where there is vast number of child labourers.

Shirin Sharmin Chowdhury, State Minister for Women and Children Affairs, said the present government

would gradually eliminate child labour in line with its pledges made in the election manifesto.

She said Bangladesh's child labour issue has to be considered in the light of the country's total situation. "We cannot say that we should be able to eliminate it overnight. It may not be possible. There are still about 30 per cent people below the poverty line and many of them are women and children."

She said the country's child rights situation would improve in parallel with the improvement in poverty scenario, and child abuse would be eliminated.

"Thirteen per cent of children in Bangladesh are still involved in child labour. Child labourers are frequently denied an education and are vulnerable to violence and abuse."

Chowdhury said the government has taken up some projects to withdraw 55,000 child labourers from the risky working condition, and bring them back to normal life.

The minister said many children are still stuck in risky job situations and the government is giving priority to withdraw them from those situations.

She said about 15 lakh to 20 lakh children are still involved in risky works. The government has formulated a Child Labour Elimination Policy to eradicate the social menace.

For Chowdhury, child rights are a major issue, which covers their education, health, nutrition and entertainment needs. "If the country can ensure women-friendly and child-friendly environment then the child rights will be easily ensured."

The government has taken up some awareness raising programmes about the issue, she told The Daily

Star last week.

Chowdhury said the business community is also doing some activities dedicated to the welfare of the children under their corporate social responsibility.

"The businesses have a role to play and some of them are doing the work. On behalf of the government, we are also encouraging the businesses to do more as we want that the private sector comes forward."

"Thirteen per cent of children in Bangladesh are still involved in child labour. Child labourers are frequently denied an education and are vulnerable to violence and abuse, according to the UNICEF."

Business leaders also said time has come for them to concentrate on all aspects of child rights, rather than only remain committed to stopping use of children as labour in the industries.

Shafiqul Islam Mohiuddin, president of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), said the BGMEA has created a model for the whole world when it began eliminating child labour from the RMG units.

"We rehabilitated the children. We arranged education for them. Some of them returned to factories after completing education and some have moved to other areas," he said.

He said everybody has to think about Bangladesh's socio-economic condition when it deals with all forms of child rights. "The garment industry has played a key role in eradicating child labour from the industry. But there is a national deficiency in fighting child labour across the country."

Asif Ibrahim, president of Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), said when ILO convention was made effective, BGMEA actively took steps and eliminated child labour from the sector.

"The businesses also took measures and monitored the situation."

He said the country's business community are concerned about child rights. "We are conscious about their rights. At the same time, I also think that we need to do more to protect and uphold their rights."

"The business community should lead from the front in protecting all aspects of child rights," said Ibrahim, who is also a leading exporter of apparel products.

national laws to protect child rights, he claimed.

Tariq-ul-Islam made the observation while talking to The Daily Star on the issue of Children's Rights and Business Principles.

Asked about the overall scenario of child rights in Bangladesh, he said, "I think the practice of protecting child rights has gained momentum over the years. Now people are much more aware than before."

The main concern of the government is to end child labour in the country. That is why the existing laws in Bangladesh mainly focus on elimination of child labour, he said.

"As child labour is the main form of violation of child rights, our existing laws strictly prohibit child labour both in formal and informal sectors," he said.

Apart from enforcement of laws, the government, in collaboration with the non-government organisations, is conducting different advocacy campaigns to discourage child labour and to protect child rights, he said.

He also opined for strengthening such advocacy programmes



Tariq-ul-Islam, Secretary, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs talks to The Daily Star

"Child labour is the main form of violation of child rights"



Child labour performing risky welding job. PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

across the country in large scale to make people aware about child rights.

Replying to a question, Tariq-ul-Islam said the government has taken many initiatives to protect child rights especially the rights of marginalized and underprivileged children because they are the most vulnerable to exploitation.

"Children are often engaged in different hazardous jobs. We lay top most priority to resist appointment of children in hazardous jobs," he said.

"Aiming to facilitate due care

"The government, in collaboration with the non-government organisations, is conducting different advocacy campaigns to discourage child labour and to protect child rights."

introduced maternity allowance so that the mother does not face hardship to take care of her baby properly," he said.

With the aim to check school dropout rate of children the government has taken different initiatives including midday meal, stipend and others.

"We will introduce education centres for children in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna. These centres will be introduced in Dhaka, one each in Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna," he said.

The centres will surely benefit the marginalised and underprivileged children, viewed Tariq-ul-Islam.

"Companies must abide by rules to ensure rights of children"



Dr Syed Ferhat Anwar, Professor, Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka talks to The Daily Star

small organizations involving children to earn greater profits. Children are also used to reduce costs and ensure trained and trusted future employees.

Companies must abide by rules of employment to ensure rights of children, he said, adding Non Government Organisations (NGOs), operating in various levels of schools, could train up children to ensure long-term relationships and availability of trained manpower.

Pointing out that very few companies provide scope for decent work and compensation plan, Syed Ferhat further said, strategic moves can easily help ensure children a



Dr Syed Ferhat Anwar, Professor, Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka talks to The Daily Star

"Promotional strategies can be built by involving children and using their imagination. This will help protect children from campaigns that may harm them."

Mentioning that awareness building on environmental pollution for children is negligible, he said companies can adopt programmes to improve environmental performance.

Playgrounds and parks can be leased out to schools and community to support children's right, he added.

Mentioning that security has been another major hurdle for children, Syed Ferhat said this task has to be performed by the community at large through community policing.

Regarding protection of children during emergencies, he said though over the years businesses have been involved in disaster management, these initiatives are merely based on promotional campaign.

"The corporate sector of today should be more proactive rather than reactive. They should start involving in the business of building preventive measures rather than wait for the calamities to descend on them and react", he added.

Syed Ferhat further suggested that the government and the development partners along with the human rights activists should consider if their business to team up with the corporate sector for taking things forward to protect and fulfill children's rights.

Some businesses have started to respect child rights

PANKAJ KARMAKAR
FOLLOWING massive campaign of different rights bodies and government directives, a number of trade bodies are now running their businesses respecting and supporting children's rights.

As a result of their rapid physical and psychological development, children have survival and development needs that differ from those of adults, they think.

All societal actors, including business bodies, must comply with national laws and respect international standards on children's rights, they viewed.

Talking to The Daily Star, Rahimafrooz CSR (corporate social responsibility) Manager Junayed Masur, said they fully comply with all the national laws and international standards on children's rights in running their business.

"We fully follow the labour laws and regulations of ILO (International Labour Organisation) in running our business. We never do anything that violates children's rights," he said.

"We have strong business principle to protect, promote and respect children's rights. We are committed to protect the best interest of children,

promote their survival, growth and well-being," he maintained.

"We strictly avoid child labour in each of our factories, outlets and other trading houses. The percentage of child labour in our business group is completely zero. If any one wishes to investigate this we will surely welcome," he said.

Apart from refraining from appointing child labour, Rahimafrooz also conducts different sorts of campaigns against child labour.

"We try to make people aware about the adverse effect of child labour. We launch different campaign programmes in the communities located adjacent to our factories in Savar," he said.

In case of emergency, the company lays top most priority on protecting children and women as children are more marginalized and vulnerable compared to adults.

Rahimafrooz never publicises any advertisement and campaign that violates or threatens human rights. While developing advertisements, marketing strategies or promotional materials of the company, it always keeps in mind children's rights, he claimed.

Apart from business policies, Rahimafrooz runs two projects for

250 underprivileged children, who reside in slums, informed Junayed, the CSR manager.

These projects will help the children to have quality education and to improve their standard of life as they the future of the country, he said.

Talking to The Daily Star, former president of the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FCCI) Anisur Huq said, "Not only his company but also most companies with good standards always feel concerned about protecting child rights in running their businesses."

"Particularly in my company, if anyone tries to appoint any child labour, he or she will surely loose the job," said Huq, also the chairman of Mohammad Group.

"It is my strict order not to appoint any child labour because the major tool of child rights violation is child labour," he viewed.

"We have adopted our business policy in compliance with the national and international laws for protecting child rights," he said.

He also felt that corporate business should be formulated in such way so that the child rights are fully protected and respected.

- ### ALL BUSINESS SHOULD
- 1 Meet their responsibility to respect children's rights and commit to supporting the human rights of children
 - 2 Contribute to the elimination of child labour, including in all business activities and business relationships
 - 3 Provide decent work for young workers, parents and caregivers
 - 4 Ensure the protection and safety of children in all business activities and facilities
 - 5 Ensure that products and services are safe and seek to support children's rights through them
 - 6 Use marketing and advertising that respect and support children's rights
 - 7 Respect and support children's rights in relation to the environment and to land acquisition and use
 - 8 Respect and support children's rights in security arrangements
 - 9 Help protect children affected by emergencies
 - 10 Reinforce community and government efforts to protect and fulfil children's rights

Many businessmen are yet not aware of child rights

MAHBUBUR RAHMAN KHAN
EVEN though children are a key stakeholder in businesses as consumers and young workers, they are being deprived of their rights in wholesale since most of the businessmen are unaware of child rights.

To contain children's right violation and increase awareness, coordinated efforts among the stakeholders are needed, observed right activists.

Businessmen engage children in hazardous work as child labour is lucrative to them as cheap workforce. On the other hand, many parents often push their children even into dangerous works to meet financial crisis.

From Hazaribag to Sowarighat or Nawabpur to Sadarghat children are found working in hazardous environment in different industries and manufacturing units. Some are found collecting and drying toxic leather while some are working as helper of truck or human-hauler. Not only that, children are engaged in risky works in different industries including engineering workshops; balloon, glass and battery manufacturing factories.

Mamun, 13, who works at HH Automobile Engineering Workshop in Jatrabari in the capital was found risking his life in welding a bumper of an auto-rickshaw without wearing

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any protective glasses.

Usually his job is to load and unload materials with adult workers on and from trucks. Sometimes he does welding when his boss takes a nap at noon.

He told this correspondent that his father who was an auto-rickshaw driver lost a leg in an accident and mother works as a domestic help. "I can't tolerate hunger. If I don't work here I'll have to starve", Mamun said, adding that he has three younger siblings at home.

"My family was modestly well-off. I went to school. But after my father's accident we become poor", said Mamun. He gets Tk 400 in a week.

In response to questions, propri-

document which is compatible with the existing international legal commitments and statements around children's rights.

With reference to the importance of child rights and business ethics, UNICEF Representative Pascal Villeneuve in a workshop said, "Child rights are an essential investment in our sustainable future. Human rights apply to all children. Safeguarding these rights helps build strong, well-educated communities that are vital to creating a stable,

inclusive and productive business environment."

Continuous dialogue with the corporate houses is required on the issue as it would not be realistic to expect that the private sector will be able to adopt all the principles at once.



Playground occupied for other purposes depriving children of recreation. PHOTO: TAMIM JAMSHED