

The fight for a decent living

NGOs help disabled people find jobs in garment factories

SOHEL PARVEZ

EVERY morning, hundreds of garment workers scurry to reach their factory gates on time. But not Shahida Akhter; she has to take a rickshaw to avoid being late.

She works as a helper at a garment factory. The job has given new meaning to the life of a physically challenged person.

"When I got the job, some of my mates laughed it off, as I could not walk. But I proved them wrong. Now they behave cordially with me," said a pleasant Shahida.

The 20-year-old works at New Prince Apparels in Badda, Dhaka, drawing a monthly salary of Tk 4,000-Tk 4,500. The income has relieved her of much of her dependence on family for a living.

"Half the money I earn goes for rickshaw rent. Even then, I am happy as I can earn."

However, getting the job was not easy. She had to visit quite a number of factories, sometimes even facing negative social attitudes.

"We faced quite a bit of hassle in ensuring a job for her. We were even denied entry to a couple of factories. One guard at a factory even thought she was a beggar," said Md Al-Amin, also a physically challenged person. He works as a community mobiliser at a non-government organisation, ADD International, which works to promote the rights of the disabled.

The organisation provided a month-long training on how to operate sewing machines to Shahida, along with a couple of hundred other disabled persons. The objective was to place them in jobs in the major export earning garment industry that employs 3.5 million workers.



A physically challenged Shahida Akhter works at a garment factory in Badda, Dhaka.

In addition, the NGO provides training to disabled persons so that they can start small businesses.

So far, it has trained 700 disabled, physically challenged, hearing or visually impaired persons.

Of them, 235 landed jobs in garment factories and the rest are engaged in small businesses such as street tea stalls, vegetables trade and tailoring.

It is with the effort of Economic Empowerment of the Poorest (EEP) or Shiree programme that supported ADD to help the disabled in the city in getting income opportunities and coming out of poverty.

Shiree, a partnership between UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the Bangladesh government, aims to lift one million people out of extreme poverty by 2015.

The initiative to reduce poverty in the city comes at a time when an insignificant portion of the over 20 million disabled get support from the state's Tk 25,371 crore safety net fund for the poor, according to ADD.

The amount is 2.13 percent of the country's nearly \$120 billion gross domestic product.

In Dhaka, 1.5 million people with disabilities live in extreme poverty and 10 percent receive support from the safety net.

ADD says income opportunities for people with disabilities, mostly living in slums, are limited and they have to run their lives simply depending on other's sympathy -- their parents, relatives or the immediate community, including begging on the streets.

Shahida came to Dhaka four years ago from her home district in Comilla to find a way to make a living. Since then, she has been living with her elder sister.

Satisfied with Shahida's performance, her owner at New Prince Apparels increased her wages this month, said Rafiqul Islam, production manager at the factory.

"She can deliver just as well as

the other workers in the factory. We are quite happy with her performance," said Islam. The only problem that Shahida faces is that she cannot walk fast, he added.

"We will hire more disabled people if our factory expands," said the official of New Prince Apparels that has 150 workers.

He said other garment factory owners can provide jobs to the disabled if they wish.

"It should be done from a humanitarian point of view. The disabled can be placed in a position that does not affect production."

Like Shahida, visually impaired Morsheda Akhter and hearing impaired Sumi Perej also have jobs at garment factories.

Including overtime, Morsheda gets Tk 6,000 a month on average by working at a garment factory, Prominent Fashion.

With the money she earns, she has to buy medicine and food for her mother and bear other expenses. She is the only bread-earner in her family.

At work, she sometimes faces difficulties in differentiating colours. "If there is a yellow sticker on white fabric, it becomes difficult for me to mark it," said Morsheda, who lost her left eye to typhoid.

Despite the problems, the job has given her a lifeline to fight poverty. "My mother is sick now and has no job. My job has helped us make a living."

Shazia Omar, head of advocacy of Shiree, said ADD has demonstrated a model that can successfully bring the disabled in extreme poverty into the mainstream economy.

"Such models should be replicated through partnerships between NGOs and companies to facilitate the disabled poor in getting jobs," she added.

Jaguar Land Rover ready for any suppliers' strike



A model looks on at the new Jaguar F-Type car at the vehicle's launch in Mumbai yesterday.

AFP, Mumbai

JAGUAR Land Rover Plc, owned by India's giant Tata group, said Monday it is ready to deal with any disruption at its British plants if employees of delivery partner DHL go on strike.

DHL's logistics workers at Jaguar's plants in Britain have voted to strike to push their demands for significantly higher pay.

DHL workers -- who deliver parts to the carmaker's production lines and often work closely with JLR workers -- are demanding a rise in salaries and similar terms and conditions to put them on the same contractual footing as JLR employees.

"We are preparing for a potential disruption (of production). We have plans in place should that situation arise," a JLR spokesman told AFP in India's financial hub Mumbai.

DHL has about 1,800 workers at JLR's three main factories at Castle Bromwich and Solihull in the Midlands and at Halewood on Merseyside.

The spokesman, speaking as Jaguar launched its sports convertible, the F-Type in India, declined to disclose JLR's production capacity at these factories.

Variants of the F-Type vehicle will sell for as much as 16.1 million rupees (\$264,000) in India.

JLR has urged the workers at DHL, part of German-based delivery giant Deutsche Post, to return to negotiations to reach "a satisfactory outcome for all parties".

Jaguar India reported a 68 percent rise in sales in the first quarter of this fiscal year, JLR's India vice-president Rohit Suri said, declining to give the number of units sold.

Ethiad Airways posts record results for Q2

STAR BUSINESS DESK

ETHIAD Airways yesterday announced its strongest second quarter and half-yearly financial performances on record, reflecting continued solid growth in its airline alliance strategy and global cargo operations.

The national carrier of the United Arab Emirates achieved an 8 percent increase in Q2 2013 passenger revenues, generating \$921 million, up from \$855 million in the same period a year ago.

Passenger revenues for the first half of 2013 reached \$1.8 billion, up by 12.5 percent from the first half of 2012, the airliner said in a statement.

In Q2 of 2013, revenue generated by codeshare and equity alliance airline partners was \$184 million, up by 25 percent in the same period of 2012.

Codeshare is an aviation business arrangement where two or more airlines share the same flight.

Partnership revenue comprised 20 percent of the airline's total passenger revenue in both Q2 and the first half of 2013, according to the statement.

The company's Q2 and half year results were achieved despite the continuation of unsteady economic and geopolitical factors, with air fare yields slightly lower for the quarter, compressed by strong competitive capacity growth and resultant price competition, said James Hogan, president and chief executive officer of Etihad Airways.

"Despite the tough global trading climate, we have still achieved record, double digit growth in both Q2 and the first half of 2013."

"This reflects not only the continuing popularity of our Abu Dhabi hub, but the growing maturity of our airline partnership strategy and the strength of our cargo operations, which continue to well exceed industry growth rates."

Hogan said a significant achievement in Q2 was the improved contribution of the Etihad Airways equity alliance partners, in particular Germany's airberlin, which has become the largest codeshare contributor.

"This reflects increased connectivity between the integrated networks of the two airlines." Etihad Airways increased its codeshare partnerships during Q2, adding Serbia's national carrier, Jat Airways, and announced new partnerships with Air Canada, South African Airways and Belavia of Belarussia, all to take effect during Q3.

With these inclusions, Etihad Airways will have 45 codeshare partners and a virtual global network of more than 350 destinations. In Q2, Etihad Airways' available seat kilometres -- reflecting network seat capacity -- rose by 13 percent to 17.2 billion from 2012.

Red tape, graft: India no super market for Wal-Mart

REUTERS, Mumbai

WAL-MART'S India expansion is stalled.

When India announced last September that it would allow foreign supermarket chains to take majority ownership of their local operations, it marked a victory for Wal-Mart Stores, which had spearheaded efforts to open the market and said its first retail store would open within two years.

Now, two sources within the Bentonville, Arkansas-based company's Indian unit say it is unlikely to apply for its first retail store licence before March 2015. The company has said it needs a further 12 to 18 months after winning government approval to open each store, which means its first retail outlet in the country would open in 2016 at the earliest.

Meanwhile, Bharti Enterprises, its local partner in an existing wholesale business, is reconsidering its commitment to their joint venture given the heavy investment requirement and distant prospects for returns, four sources with direct knowledge of the matter said.

Bharti denied that it is looking to exit the tie-up and said it remains fully committed to the joint venture, and a Wal-Mart spokeswoman declined to comment on what she called speculation.

The latest developments stem from an ongoing internal bribery probe relating to its Indian operations, still-evolving rules governing foreign participation in India's retail sector, and national elections due by May 2014 that could result in the controversial retail reform being reversed - and any newly opened supermarkets being shut - the sources said.

The delay and faltering partnership mean Wal-Mart may miss out on the "first-mover" advantage in a country considered the last great frontier for global retailers.

If Bharti pulled out, Wal-Mart would be forced to find a new partner from a tiny pool of large local retailers to meet the requirement that a local firm owns 49 percent of the business.

On June 26, Wal-Mart



REUTERS/FILE

A customer shops at a Best Price Modern Wholesale store, a joint venture of Wal-Mart Stores Inc and Bharti Enterprises, at Zirakpur in the northern Indian state of Punjab.

announced that Raj Jain, who led its India push for the past six years, had left the company.

The world's biggest retailer named Ramnik Narsey, who recently joined the company after heading the Indian operations of Australia's Woolworths Ltd, as interim India chief, without explaining the change. Jain did not answer repeated calls to his mobile phone and the company declined to make Narsey available for comment.

Narsey headed the consumer electronics wholesale business of Woolworths in India for fifteen months, before it was sold to the Tata Group, offering little insight into what his appointment might mean for Wal-Mart's India rollout.

"It will take lot more than a management change to fix things," said Devangshu Dutta, who heads Bangalore-based retail consultancy Third Eyesight.

"Wal-Mart is being investigated for breaking entry rules, bribery and these are problems that are much larger than any individual or the changes he can quickly bring about," he said. Wal-Mart has said

it is in compliance with India's foreign direct investment guidelines.

The US retailer is currently investigating bribery allegations in its Indian operations.

With 1.2 billion people and 90 percent of its \$500 billion in retail trade done at mom-and-pop shops, India is potentially lucrative for retailers such as Wal-Mart, Carrefour SA and Tesco Plc. But no global supermarket chain has applied to enter because of regulatory uncertainty.

Wal-Mart's local joint venture partner Bharti, one of the few large-scale retailers in India, is getting cold feet because of the additional investment required to run retail operations.

Bharti, controlled by billionaire Sunil Mittal, wants to consolidate its balance sheet and sharpen its focus on Bharti Airtel Ltd, the biggest telecoms operator, which has \$12 billion in debt, sources said.

"The JV is under review. Bharti is taking a closer look at it because it wants to move out," said a senior official at Bharti Wal-Mart Pvt Ltd,

declining to be identified.

With high costs and narrow margins, most big retailers in India lose money. The Bharti Walmart wholesale joint venture lost 2.77 billion rupees on sales of 18.8 billion rupees in 2011, according to the most recent regulatory filing.

"Bharti will continue to look at divestiture," said another source with direct knowledge of the matter. "The plan is to make it a focused business rather than the hands and legs going in all directions."

There is no certainty that Bharti will exit the wholesale joint venture after the review, the sources said.

Wal-Mart's internal crackdown on bribe-paying has also slowed expansion plans in a country where paying bribes is seen as a standard cost of doing business, according to retailers and industry officials. Reuters reported in May that retailers in India often pay so-called "speed money" to smooth the process of obtaining dozens of permits.

The US Foreign Corrupt Practices Act forbids American firms from

paying bribes. Wal-Mart launched a global review of corruption last year after a New York Times report on bribery at the company's Mexico operations. Its lawyers flagged India among the countries with the highest corruption risk.

In November, Bharti Walmart, the company's India joint venture, suspended employees including the chief financial officer as part of an internal investigation into bribery allegations in India.

More than 15 attorneys from US law firm Greenberg Traurig are now working with the Indian business to help strengthen compliance, a Wal-Mart spokeswoman said.

Wal-Mart, which has run wholesale stores in India since 2009, has not opened a new one since October despite its stated plans to open eight in 2013. It has 20 such stores in India.

In response to questions from Reuters, Wal-Mart said its India wholesale store rollout had encountered delays but did not say how many it will open in 2013.

"We are in the process of implementing additional controls for our new store permit and licensing program to ensure the process is handled appropriately and in full compliance with all laws and regulations," the Wal-Mart India spokeswoman said.

"As we develop and implement enhanced procedures for obtaining licenses, there have been some temporary delays in store openings," she said in an e-mailed statement.

At its Rajahmundry wholesale store in Andhra Pradesh, Wal-Mart has not sold fresh fruits and vegetables since October as it has been unable to acquire a licence from the state Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee, according to a company source. APMC officials declined comment.

In the same state, Wal-Mart's wholesale store in Hyderabad is only open six days a week because it has been unable to secure a 365-day operating licence, the person said.

In both cases, according to the company source, the licence has been held up because Wal-Mart won't pay a bribe.