

OPINION

International Women's Day is just around the corner. Every year this day brings with it a fresh calculation of the triumphs and losses of the women's movement. We reassess its agenda, its momentum and its boundaries. Discussions about gender flourish – we talk about inequity, sexual violence, rape, acid violence, unequal domestic burdens, discriminatory inheritance laws, maternity leaves, day cares, sexual objectification. This is also a good time to talk about exactly how important economic empowerment is for a woman to live with dignity as an autonomous citizen.

industry, they go from being unrecognised for their domestic work to being valued for their labour. The inclusion of all classes of women in the labour force has also caused a shift in paradigm for society, and led to a change in women's lifestyle and agency. Even if it isn't practiced in reality, a clause for equality for women has been introduced in all workspaces. The introduction of women as a worker in the economy is a big milestone for the women's movement.

The more economically independent women get, the louder their voices are. However, even as women earn a living

within the framework of a patriarchal state, they haven't fully gained equality in decision-making within the household. How to spend their hard-earned wages is still decided by their husbands or the man of the house. With the threat of economic insolvency hanging over their heads, many women are still afraid to take decisions about their own lives.

It is not easy for a woman worker to sustain her family on wages as low as Tk 5,300. The disengagement of the labour and women's movements has made it very difficult for female RMG workers to take a stronger stance against oppression

of their gender in the country, hit the streets, it becomes imperative for women rights activists to join the movement. Women workers are not just oppressed as labour – they are oppressed as women too. The downtrodden women who are attacked on multiple fronts are at the forefront of the struggle for women's emancipation.

History has shown us that the ones who have nothing to lose are forced to be in the frontline of battles. They are brave; they don't fight for change from the comforts of their middle class lives.

Taking all these into consideration, if the battle for economic empowerment is a women's issue, then why weren't rights activists raising their voices too? If the women's movement remains locked within the confines of middle class and upper class then it can't advance like it

WHY HIGHER MINIMUM WAGE IS ALSO A WOMAN'S ISSUE

TASLIMA AKHTER

Following the December 2016 protests by garments workers for a higher minimum wage in Ashulia, it has become imperative to evaluate how, if at all, the issue of wages is related to the women's movement. The garments workers had demanded their minimum wage be increased from Tk 5,300 to Tk 16,000. Different labour unions and organisations had joined the protests. A majority of the demonstrators were women. So why was the women's rights movement least affected by their protests? Have women workers disappeared from the women's movement? If that is not the case, why didn't we see women's rights institutions standing in solidarity with the workers in Ashulia? When factory owners and state actors came down on the protesters, oppressed them, attacked them, arrested them and sued them, women too were not spared. Then, why didn't the women's rights activists take to the streets for them?

Who is the fight for women's economic independence for, then? Is it only limited to the struggles for middle-class women? It goes without saying that a women's movement must be intersectional. When the majority of the women are working class, the women's movement cannot advance without including them. Then the question arises – why is the women's movement so disengaged with that of workers?

The ready-made garments (RMG) industry has expanded in the country since the 80's. It is our workers who stitch the "Made in Bangladesh" tag we are so proud of onto the clothes. These clothes then go to the markets in Europe and the United States of America. Our workers are a part of the globalised economy. More than 44 lakh young workers power this industry and women make up around 80 percent of the workforce. This industry allowed us access to the untapped potential of the women labour force.

When women step out of the confines of their homes and enter the apparel



PHOTO: TASLIMA AKHTER

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by their owners and state structures.

Economic independence and stability allow women to make decisions on their own and take stances against all that society puts on her. Yes, it is true that economic empowerment alone cannot bring emancipation for women; it is, however, a prerequisite. In addition, we need to challenge existing patriarchal structures and institute new values by bringing about a change in state policies.

It is not possible to further the movement for an equal and just society while excluding the women of the working class – the women who make up the largest share of the population. So when RMG workers raise their voices demanding an increase in the minimum wage, they are, in fact, fighting for their autonomy. The demand for higher wages is, therefore, a demand of the women's movement as well. When women, who represent the vast majority

should. The majority of the women are working class. Therefore not including them into the women's movement also threatens its validity. The movement has to take this seriously and profess solidarity with the RMG workers' struggle.

In 1857 in New York, spinning factory women workers gave their lives to police brutality while trying to protest long hours and inhuman working conditions. Many were arrested. Following that, International Women's Day has been commemorated all over the world since 1911. The women workers who started the journey of March 8 are the predecessors of today's protesters. Bangladesh workers will play a central role, not only in the women's movement, but in the democratic transformation of society in general. Bangladesh waits for that day.

The writer is a photographer and labour rights activist.



A GALA AND THE TALL TALE OF HAPPY WORKERS

The usual extravagance and aplomb of the Dhaka Apparel Summit – an annual gala organised by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) hosted on Feb 25 – was marred this year by the awkward news that major international brands might boycott the event. Brands like H&M, Zara, C&A and Gap, which represent billions of dollars in annual ready-made garments purchases from Bangladesh, pulled out, apparently in response to national and international campaign against the crackdown on union activists and workers since December 2016. This, of course, upset the BGMEA for whom the summit is an auspicious occasion to bring together relevant stakeholders (but not workers) in the RMG sector and brag about, among other things, its "laudatory" efforts to protect workers' rights. Bringing worker's issues to the forefront put a damper on the festivities and so the BGMEA scamped to appease national labour leaders. We do not know what took place behind closed doors, but the labour leaders, who for the first time in years had some leverage from mounting international pressure, came out of the meeting with an agreement almost as flimsy as Donald Trump's ego.

At this point, assuming you haven't already lost interest and moved on to the Entertainment or Sports pages of the newspaper, you might be asking yourself, "What crackdown? What mounting international pressure? How have we been oblivious to this prior to the news of the brand boycott?" If you're the sort who tries to keep abreast of current affairs, you might vaguely remember something about wage related strikes in Ashulia and mass termination of workers back in December and wonder: "Does this have anything to do with that? But I haven't seen anything in the news since December..."

You wouldn't know it from the coverage in our beloved mass media, which supposedly puts the interests of the masses above those of the ruling class, but there has been systematic repression of labour leaders and workers in Ashulia, Gazipur and Chittagong since the wage strikes in December last year. More than 1,600 workers have been "temporarily suspended" (read: dismissed) from their jobs for participating in the strikes. At least 34 labour leaders and workers have been arrested thus far and cases have been filed against hundreds of "unnamed" others. As many as 10 cases were filed against eight labour leaders, under The Special Powers Act, 1974, a black law usually reserved to



MANIPULATED IMAGE: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

harass the political opposition, and various sections of the Penal Code. Three labour leaders were arrested from Gazipur, even though they were nowhere near Ashulia at the time, and charged with political cases from 2015. Last month, nine labour leaders were picked up by the police in Chittagong from their office as they were conducting a workshop on trade union rights and charged with a case from 2016.

There can be little doubt, to anyone familiar with the long history of repression of labour activists in the country, that these cases were filed to intimidate and harass union activists and send a strong message to all to refrain from organising and protesting in the industrial belts. Despite the severity of the situation, except for a couple of media outlets which published news about the initial arrests and suspensions, there has been no comprehensive report or follow-up on the Ashulia crackdown, even when international powerhouses such as *The Guardian* or *The New York Times* picked up the story and even ran editorials on it.

The offices in Ashulia and Gazipur have been closed since December. In many instances, the police forcefully shut down the offices, gave orders to the landlord to no longer rent to workers' federations and threatened federation

leaders with arrests if they opened the offices without permission. Meanwhile, intelligence agencies have been asking different federations to fill out a form with over 30 questions in an attempt to gather information on each of its members.

All of these don't make it to our ears because, frankly, we do not care about our workers. We do not care about their freedom of speech and freedom of association because those constitutional

unions and NGOs will *not* be allowed to operate anymore in Ashulia and other industrial areas, adding that these entities have set of offices to "mislead the workers in various ways" (Bdnews24, Feb 24, 2017). The BGMEA, too, has blamed NGOs for "instigating" the Ashulia wage protests.

First of all, there is no evidence that NGOs or unregistered unions mobilised the workers in December any more than

guarantees apply only to the crème de la crème of our civil society. We do not care if workers cannot sustain their families with the current minimum wage of Tk. 5,300 at a time when the cost of living is increasing at an alarming rate (the 50 percent gas price hike being a case in point). We do not care that Bangladesh's minimum wage (US\$68/month) is the second lowest among the top ten apparel-exporting countries because, well, why should workers be so greedy (to paraphrase some of our policymakers) when they should be grateful that they have jobs?

What we do care about is what our buyers think. And so, to appease them, the BGMEA and the government agreed last week to release the remaining detained from jail and reinstate the suspended workers. However, the distinction that's getting lost in the over-enthusiastic media coverage of this agreement is that "released on bail" is not the same as the cases being dropped. There is no guarantee when, if at all, these criminal charges will be dropped.

Also worrying is the fact that the agreement only guarantees the opening of offices of registered trade unions. The State Minister for Labour and Employment Md Mujibul Haque (Chunnu) announced, on February 24, that unregistered trade

registered unions did (why, then, did the government arrest labour leaders of mostly registered unions?). Secondly and more importantly, mobilising workers or organising peaceful protests is not a crime under the existing laws of the land. Our policymakers and businessmen would do well to remember that the freedom of association, much as they huff and puff, is enshrined in our constitution and that we are still, despite all odds, a democratic nation.

In a highly politicised climate where, more often than not, the most owner-friendly of unions get registrations, the announcement that unregistered unions can no longer operate in the area is a cause of major concern and a sign that the situation of workers in the RMG sector will only deteriorate in the near future. Furthermore, the unsubstantiated attack on NGOs, only months after the institution of the controversial Foreign Donations (Voluntary Activities) Regulation Act 2016, reeks of paranoia befitting an authoritarian state, not a democratic one.

But these are not the issues that make it to the limelight. What makes it to the news are heady promises, false hopes and the tall tales of happy workers, live from the fancy gala at the ballroom of Pan Pacific. ■