

EXHIBITION



Beyond the sewing machine – ILO Exhibition

Igniting the blazing trail towards promoting gender equality, a photo exhibition, Beyond the Sewing Machine, was arranged by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on Wednesday, March 7, 2018.

Aligned with International Women's Day and hosted at the residence of the Ambassador of the Netherlands, the exhibition shone light on the work done to empower women as part of the RMG programme, launched by ILO.

Partnered with the embassies of the Netherlands, Canada and the United Kingdom, gracing the event were dignitaries of the diplomatic community such as Anne-Laure Henry Greard, the Ambassador of the Netherlands and Senior Operations and Programme Support Officer of the RMG Programme. Moreover, noteworthy employees and workers of the RMG sectors were also present.

In response to the disastrous collapse of the Rana Plaza building in April, 2013, ILO launched the Improving Working Conditions in the Ready-Made Garment Sector Programme later that year. Striving towards safer and improved fire and building safety in Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector, the RMG programme was nothing short of a phoenix rising from the ashes. With the objectives taking place in phases, the photo exhibition marked the successful end of the first phase of the programme, highlighting deserving success stories and achievements. With the second phase already underway, the masterpieces of the evening was all about empowered women as a product of the tremendous work carried out by ILO's RMG programme.

Out of the many achievements scored under its belt, ILO's RMG programme has inspected factories to ensure safety, closing 39 factories failing to meet safety standards, rehabilitating injured workers, and providing necessary psychological and medical support and remediation of factories.

The ILO's RMG programme has even helped reform the governmental institute of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments to help it become a more credible and accountable body with better inspection tools and more focused foundational training programmes.

Actions of the first phase also emphasised gender issues and a more gender inclusive workplace in factories. Empowering female workers was yet another major success of the first phase of the RMG programme. And this was the special aspect of the entire exhibition: women empowerment.

Brilliantly captured by photographer Naymuzzaman Prince, the photos showcased the empowered roles female employees were motivated to take on in factories. Whether the stories were of a worker solving a dispute, a seminar on psychological counseling, an employee riding a motorcycle to work, or simply a supervisor chatting with a subordinate behind a sewing machine — at the centre of it all stood a woman taking charge in all her glory.

Shammin Sultana, a programme officer and gender specialist poured in her two cents, "The main motive of the event is to showcase our progress and what we have managed to achieve so far. Conveying our stories of pride and joy through the powerful medium of photographs can speak to the audience and tell the right narratives."

Shipra Chowdhury, Training Officer at Better Work Bangladesh, a programme working closely with ILO and dedicated to improving work conditions at the factory-floor level also shared, "With the number of female leaders being very low in factories, the reason is probably because they feel they can't fulfill the responsibilities of the job. They haven't found their voice yet. That is what we focus on at training sessions. And now, we can see more and more women making the jump from the sewing line to supervisory positions."

Akhlima, the worker climbing the ladder at a factory for

Next Sourcing Limited shares her story of empowerment, "Starting off as a sewing operator, I've been working for Next for six years now. I used to wonder how my supervisor could do it all. I could never imagine myself in his shoes. But now, I see the change and stride in myself the training programmes that have been brought on by ILO. I've been promoted to a supervisor now and I can safely vouch for the safety conditions in the factory I work at."

The closing speeches at the event were delivered by the Ambassador of the Netherlands among others. Reflecting back, she says, "In the photos, you'll be able to experience how a female worker has developed skills and accessed promotion. Only a confident, knowledgeable and empowered worker can take control of their own lives."

And with a few more weighted and ecstatically appreciative words from the empowered female workers relentlessly slaving away in the RMG sector, the evening finally drew to a delightful end.

By Ramisa Haque
Photo: Naymuzzaman Prince/ILO



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