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Manusher Jonno Foundation



The Daily Star

The situation of women workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh



Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF) and The Daily Star jointly organised a roundtable titled "The situation of women workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh" on July 8, 2018. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Mandatory gender-sensitive training for all workers is needed.
- Long-term skill development plan is required for keeping pace with the automation process.
- Dedicated workers' accommodation, hospitals and educational institutions should be built in the newly constructed industrial zones.
- Raising awareness among the owners and the mid-level management is a must to ensure workers' rights.
- Set a standard of education for female garments workers.
- Improve safety and security of the places female garment workers live in.
- More Day Care Centres are needed at community level.
- Strengthen formal complaint mechanism in factories.

Brigadier General (Rtd.) Shahedul Anam Khan, Associate Editor, The Daily Star

I want to thank everyone for sharing their valuable time with us as we discuss the important issue of the situation of female workers in the RMG sector of Bangladesh.

Shaheen Anam, Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

We cannot overemphasise the role of the garments sector in the overall development of the country, as this sector has significantly contributed to women's empowerment by creating employment opportunities for them. To ensure a continued growth of this sector, workers, factory owners, Government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) need to work together.

Rina Roy, Director, Programme, Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF)

MJF, with the support of the European Union and Terre des Hommes-Italia, commissioned a study on garment workers' rights situation under the project "Jukta Hoe Mukta" (United We Stand). The study was carried out on the basis of two surveys conducted in four different areas of the country, namely Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chittagong. In both surveys, a sample of 385 workers were selected using appropriate sampling methods.

The study found that while 72.70% of the workers in Dhaka and Gazipur said that they did not have a job contract, the rest 27.30% claimed to have signed contracts with their employers. The picture for Chittagong and Narayanganj is slightly better. In these two areas, 40.51% of the workers had their contract papers while 59.49% did not have a job contract. When we talk about ID cards, 72% of the workers in Dhaka and Gazipur, and 84% in Narayanganj and Chittagong had them. More percentages of the workers have claimed to own ID cards than appointment letters, but only having ID card isn't enough. During the last wage increment in the garment sector, many workers were demoted as they did not have any contract papers. To tackle such irregularities, it must be made mandatory for every worker to be given an appointment letter.

When it comes to salaries, according to our Labor Law, workers must be paid by the 7th of each month. In Dhaka and Gazipur, 43% of the workers are getting paid on time, while in Narayanganj and Chittagong it reaches 64%. It was reported that 29.70% of the workers often get salary cut for various reasons in Dhaka and Gazipur. For Narayanganj and Chittagong, this figure is slightly higher (40.80%).

In case of effectiveness of ongoing inspection routines, the study found that a good percentage of the workers were aware of the inspection status of their factories while a minority were unaware of the situation. But the number of workers interviewed during inspection is still poor which indicates the need for engaging workers in the inspection process.

Our survey showed improvement in fire and security system inside the factories. In terms of installing a workable emergency gate which is kept open, 87.70% of the workers in Dhaka and Gazipur reported that the gate remains open, while 6.70% reported that this may not always be the case. In Narayanganj and Chittagong, 79.60% have reported that the emergency gate is kept open.

A good 83.90% of the workers in Dhaka and Gazipur reported that their extra hour at the workplace is paid as overtime (OT), while 16.10% of them did not get paid for extra hours. Figures for Narayanganj and Chittagong show 84.10% of the workers getting their extra hours paid as overtime, while 15.90% of them did not get paid. Overtime is supposed to be double to per hour regular wage. In Dhaka and Gazipur 84.10% of the workers get equal to per hour regular wage, while only 15.80% of them get double to per hour regular wage. In Narayanganj and Chittagong, on the other hand, 64.50% of the workers get equal to per

hour regular wage and 35.50% of the workers receive double to per hour regular wage.

In Dhaka and Gazipur, 50% of respondents said that they get a 'tiffin' bill, while 15% get transport allowance. In Narayanganj and Chittagong, 61% get the 'tiffin' bill, and 36% get transport allowance.

The study also covered other rights related issues such as maternity leave, gender-based violence and sexual harassment, toilet facilities, living conditions, trade union participation and so on. The detailed study report is available in the booklet titled "Garment Workers' Rights: Situation analysis in Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chittagong."

Nazneen Shifa, Research Scholar, Centre for Women's Studies, JNU, Delhi

Violence against women (VAW) in the garment sector is so prevalent that it is quite tough to figure out the exact number of women being abused on a daily basis. However, it is understood that gender-based violence (GBV) is enmeshed with the regular working environment of the factory. In some cases, sexual harassment at factory level is even normalised (i.e. workers can't easily recognise whether it is harassment or not). In their interviews, many workers have said that verbal abuse containing swear words in cases of mistake made by a worker is as "normal" as the work itself, and it was reported that female workers are more exposed to such harassment. Generally, workers did not mention such behaviour as harassment. They think only something as intimidating and serious as bodily violation or rape attempts can be considered sexual harassment or violence.

Nazma Akter, President, Somnilito Garments Sramik Federation (SGSF)

My own findings have led me to believe that situation of workers' rights is better in Dhaka and Gazipur than Chittagong and Narayanganj.

It is often told that workers see garment factory work as a stepping stone for finding work elsewhere. But the fact is that the hazardous work environment and rampant violation of workers' rights in garment factories deter workers from choosing it as a lifetime profession.

I defer the comment that women workers are not willing to join trade unions. I have seen many female workers leading trade unions in various factories.

Our workers are forced to work overtime on Fridays to be eligible for leaves and holidays which they should be getting anyway. There is no accountability in this regard.

Unfortunately, we are still fighting for minimum wage instead of improving the living conditions for these workers. There is no point of updating technology in factories if the workers' minimum requirements are not fulfilled.

Dr. Khondaker Golam Moazzem, Research Director, Centre of Policy Dialogue (CPD)

We can categorise our findings into three different sections. The first one is access to facilities and rights. Like any workplace, the RMG sector also requires certain facilities and rights for its workers, such as proper toilets, day care centres, maternity leave, holidays, overtime and so on.

We need to ensure whether or not our garment workers are able to access these facilities. Second, are these facilities sufficient and adequate? Third, what is the overall quality of such amenities? Factory inspections need to be thorough, where the workers' overall opinion is taken into account to assess the functionality of these facilities. Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) needs to update their inspection process. We should also categorise factories according to their compliance status and find solutions accordingly.

Another aspect which needs to be looked at is the education level of female garment workers. Generally, women join at a younger age than men, thus, making them less career

oriented. I would request the Ministry to set a standard of education for the female garments workers. Every female garment worker should pass at least eighth grade. It would help spread female education in the rural areas as well as create opportunities for them to get higher skilled jobs in the factories.

All the stakeholders related to the RMG sector must take proper initiatives to make sure extensive training is provided to less skilled workers, particularly women, whether it's on-the-job or after work.

Maheen Sultan, Visiting Fellow (BIGD), BRAC University

Women workers don't usually want to be supervisors for many reasons: lack of family support, loss of benefits, separation from co-workers, etc. are some of the major ones. Specific guidelines should be given to supervisors so that they are clear about their duties. This could possibly lead to have more women supervisors.

I have heard of stories of women being harassed at the hostels where they stay, and during their commute to and from work. When we talk about sexual harassment of garment workers, this issue should be considered seriously. Complaint mechanism in factories is still very poor. Workers are afraid of making complaints and factories also refuse to register complaints as they are afraid of audit and inspection teams. They prefer to deal with such things informally. We should look into these issues seriously and take steps to strengthen formal complaint system in factories.

Finally, is the law taking its course according to the High Court's guidelines on sexual harassment? If it did, it would be helpful for the Government, workers, and the owners of these factories as well. We should start thinking of workers' rights as a positive demand.

Dr. Ruchira Tabassum Naved, Senior Scientist, ICDDRDB

There is immense pressure on workers and managers to keep production at a high level. My research shows that 63% of managers admitted to have been abusing workers in the workplace. 74% of women workers admitted to have witnessed abuse in their factories. Managers seem to believe that the only way to get workers working properly is to abuse and use bad language. Such factories seem to follow the path our society laid out, with the men controlling everyday affairs and the women under immense pressure to perform their job. Both, management style and attitude towards workers, particularly female workers, need to be changed to improve the rights situation of garment workers.

Silvia Rovelli, Project Manager, Terre des Hommes Italia

Talking about the achievements of "Jukta Hoe Mukta" project, on one side in terms of increasing the garment workers' awareness of their rights, 60 Workers' Groups have been formed both in Dhaka and Gazipur. Notwithstanding several challenges, 1,200 workers have been involved and many of them are now able to raise issues related to their working environment with the factories' mid-level management. On the other side, to increase the awareness of the mid-level management and sensitize them, as they are mainly men and the ones primarily involved in the everyday work of the female workers, it is planned to involve some of them in a training on gender and VAW. Last but not least, through the project, Day Care Centres have been established in Gazipur at community level. Compared to the original number, working women asked for more of this kind of services to be possible for them to work without tension while their babies are properly taken care of.

Md. Mujibul Haque MP, State Minister, Ministry of Labour and Employment

I want to thank everyone present here, and I would particularly like to thank MJF and The Daily Star for organising such an important discussion.

When accusations are made against the present situation of our factories, one must not forget what these factories looked like in the past. The compliance status of our factories has improved a lot. Still there are some gaps which we are sincerely trying to bridge. When we conduct a research, we should segregate compliant and non-compliant factories. Cross generalisation does not help to go forward.

We have strong laws but their implementation remains poor in Bangladesh. For example, according to the Labour Law, every business organisation is legally bound to give 5% of its profit to its employees. In reality few organisations follow that rule. We exempted garment factories from this provision after the Rana Plaza accident when they faced severe business constraints. But now the government charges 0.03% from their export income to create insurance and welfare funds for the workers.

At present, maternity leave is not considered as a right in the Labour Law. It is included as a benefit. The Government is bringing an amendment to this making it a right and thus mandatory for every factory to provide paid maternity leave. The government is also establishing hostels for female workers in various industrial zones of the country. There are many such initiatives that need to be highlighted to encourage the Government to do more. Finally, I would urge all to work together to improve the situation of workers in the RMG sector.

Laila Jasmin Banu, Programme Manager, Governance and Human Rights, Delegation of the European Union to Bangladesh

The European Union has been supporting several organisations working on the rights of RMG workers in Bangladesh. Terre des Hommes Italia is one of them, implementing 'Jukta Hoe Mukta' (United We Stand) project in partnership with Manusher Jonno Foundation and Phulki.

Many studies highlighted the needs of training to the mid-level management. They are mainly responsible for day to day management of the factory and workers during their working hours at the factory floor. The Government and factory owners should have provision to organize extensive training for the mid-level management on workers' right issues.

Women need to be encouraged to take part in learning how to handle different kind of machineries. They should be provided appropriate training. Different organisations, including Manusher Jonno Foundation, are involved in projects that develop women's skills, but more needs to be done in a coordinated way, involving the Government and factory owners.

Sarawat Binte Islam, Senior Project Manager, Manusher Jonno Foundation

As MJF, through the "Jukta Hoe Mukta" project, we are providing two months training to women interested in joining the garment sector, especially on how to handle different kind of machines. In addition, it is needed to change the negative perception that the garment industry is unsafe for women workers. Due to this perception, in fact, girls and women from relatively well-off backgrounds do not enter this field. Apart from making our factories women-friendly, we need to improve safety and security of the places female garment workers live in.

Asgar Ali Sabri, Director - Programme, Policy and Campaigns, ActionAid Bangladesh

We need to involve female garment workers and their representatives in both formulation and implementation of any plan to upgrade their rights situation. To tackle the challenge of

automation, we need to devise a long-term strategy for developing the skills of our female workforce.

Working mothers in the garment sector should be given incentives as they are doing both the job of a mother and a worker.

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, Executive Director, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies - BILS

We need to address the "disguised violation" of workers' rights. It often happens that pictures of workers who are fired are distributed around, leaving them unable to find work in that particular locality.

Factories are being moved out of Dhaka, but facilities for workers and their families are not being provided there. Even in the 1960s, the industrial areas used to provide education, health and recreation facilities for the workers. Nowadays, we speak of development and advancement but the truth of the matter is that the overall situation has deteriorated for them. We must ensure basic amenities such as health, transport and safe housing for the workers in all the industrialised zones.

Arafat Ahmed, Director, Arrival Fashion Limited

When we started out back in 1998, regulations weren't as strict as they are now, as we mostly worked with traders. Gradually, as we started working with retailers, it became mandatory to follow the Labour Law. The mentality has changed a lot in the past 20 years.

Elections are held regularly in my factories and I am glad to inform you that women have been elected as leaders in the past elections.

Owners are also under pressure from buyers to go for automation. But I still try to have women doing jobs which could possibly be done with machines. I have personally observed women workers at my factories operating more than 2 or 3 machines and they are very eager to learn how to operate new machines, which is a positive sign for the future.

Patience is needed when it comes to developing suburban areas, which are seeing new factories being established. One must not forget that these suburban areas, such as Gazipur, were largely underdeveloped just a decade back. An overhaul of the transportation system would be helpful to owners and workers alike, especially in industrial areas.

Md. Shamsuzzaman Bhuiyan, Inspector General, Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments - DIFE

When factories are shifted outside Dhaka or urban centres, owners hardly think about the living condition of the workers. As a result, factories are not being built in clusters and workers have to suffer for that.

Although the inspection status has improved over time, we still face obstacles when it comes to dealing with the status quo. We face severe shortage of manpower. There are also many legal loopholes through which perpetrators can get away. Alliance and Accord are capable of creating more pressure than us when it comes to certain matters in relation to workers' welfare. The inspection process needs to be revamped in such a way that DIFE can warrant a greater control over the factories.

If the owners do not agree, workers' rights cannot be protected. Therefore, the owners and mid-level management of garment factories need to be made aware of sexual harassment and workers' rights issues. Awareness building programmes need to be carried out in a coherent manner, involving all the key stakeholders.

Shaheen Anam

A safe, decent and women-friendly working environment is the need of the day for all the women who work in the garment sector. Mandatory gender-sensitive training for all workers, including mid-level management, is needed.

Our workers need to be trained to keep up with the technological advancement and automation process. The Government should formulate a long-term plan to address this issue. Buyers insist on compliance but why do they not consider that if they keep on reducing their rates, how will the factory owners be able to afford compliance?

Finally, I would like to add that much more access should be given to factories in order to spread awareness about workers' rights issues.