

Every garment unit must have a complaint committee

Maheen Sultan, Team Leader of Shojag Coalition and member of Naripokkho, shares with Naznin Tithi of The Daily Star the major findings of their recent survey on sexual harassment and violence against women in the RMG sector.

What are the major findings of the survey done by Shojag recently on sexual harassment and violence against women in RMG factories?

Shojag is working to end gender-based violence in our garments industry. It is a coalition of five organisations—Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), the Human Rights and Legal Aid Services (HRLS) Programme of BRAC, Christian Aid, Naripokkho (in the lead), and SNV Netherlands Development Organisation. Since the RMG sector is a major formal sector employer, the working conditions in this sector—both in terms of occupational safety and building safety and also in terms of compliance—have always been an issue of discussion. And as this sector is the biggest employer of women, there have always been concerns about workplace violence and sexual harassment that women workers have to face in factories.

We have conducted this baseline survey to know the current situation in the factories that we are working with. Our aim was to know what forms of violence and sexual harassment female workers are facing inside factories and also on their way to and from work.

Also, we have tried to find if they have access to legal aid and government support services such as health and psychosocial support, and whether they know about the use of internal factory grievance mechanisms. Ours is a two-and-a-half-year project. After completion we will know whether we have been able to make any difference in terms of workers' safety, awareness raising—both at the management and workers' level, increased reporting of harassment, etc, by comparing the situation as it is now to what we hope to achieve by the end of the project. We are working with compliant factories who are interested in addressing the issue of violence against women and where there are various mechanisms to prevent and redress sexual harassment. But even there, people are still not confident enough to bring it out into the open, report it and deal with it.

We found the situation regarding sexual harassment and violence against women much better than we had expected. Looking at other studies, we thought that women

would find the workplace more threatening. But we have found that 89 percent of the women feel secure in the workplace. They feel much more insecure outside the workplace. Twenty-two percent women have reported that they have faced physical, psychological or sexual harassment in the garment industry or on their way to and from work.

Workers are aware of the forms of abuse that are prevalent. Thirty-one percent have said that they know there is a committee to complain about sexual harassment. Although some are aware that they can go to the sexual harassment complaints committee to file complaints, they also think there is no point in going to these committees because they believe they won't get any justice. Of those who had experienced violence but didn't seek any kind of assistance in and outside the factory premises, 67 percent said they have a lack of trust in prevention bodies and 43 percent said they had filed complaints in the past but to no avail.

Although workers have said that complaint committees exist in their factories, what we

have found is that these committees only exist on paper and are not functioning. We are working closely with eight factories but in none of these factories have we found these committees functioning.

Why do you think the survey has found such a low rate of sexual violence whereas several other studies have found a much higher rate?

Surveys regarding violence or sexual harassment are always very difficult to conduct, no matter how professionally and scientifically they are done. Because of the sensitivity of the issue and the social stigma associated with the issue, women do not usually speak about the violence they themselves have faced or sometimes in group discussions they may even exaggerate the number of incidences and extent of the violence.

Hence, it is always difficult to get hundred percent reliable data, even with the most scientific methods. Figures even vary between qualitative and quantitative methods. The

situations in compliant and non-compliant factories are different. Conditions vary in factories in different parts of the country.

Twenty-two percent may seem like a very low rate. We know of many other studies which have found higher rates of sexual violence in the RMG sector. For example, BILS, Karmojibi Nari, Care and Oxfam have found much higher rates of violence than what we have found.

I think one of the reasons why we have found lower rate of sexual harassment is that our survey respondents work in the larger compliant factories which have better working conditions. The situation in the non-compliant factories or sub-contracting factories might be very different. The environment of many of these factories is not worker-friendly and there are not enough safeguards against violence.

Why do these large compliant factories not have sexual harassment complaint committees despite a High Court ruling in 2009 that said every factory must have such committee?

There is a provision in the High Court guidelines that each employer should set up a Sexual Harassment Complaints Committee where victims can lodge complaints. But as we see in many other cases, factories have such committees only on paper. The challenge for us will be to make sure that these committees function properly in a transparent manner. We want to ensure that women workers feel reassured that if they file complaints with these committees, they won't have to face any repercussions, the cases will be dealt with in a confidential manner and they will get justice. They will have to feel that it's their right to lodge complaints.

What should be done to make these committees effective?

The first thing we should do is let people know about these committees—both workers and the management staff. Although the workers are aware of harassment, there is less understanding of what is harassment at the supervisor or management level. They have to know what constitutes sexual harassment and violence against women and that there are legal measures to deal with this.

As for the factory owners, they must

understand that if they make these committees functional and can deal with these cases appropriately, it will be to their benefit and will increase workers' morale and productivity. It would be an achievement for them to have functioning and effective grievance mechanisms. We are working with 120 Shojag Sathis from among factory workers who will give support and advice to other workers on this issue. They will help and motivate workers to file complaints and inform them about where they can go for legal and psychosocial assistance.

What role should the government play here?

I think the government is very open and willing to work on this issue. They are already working with ILO and the UN. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) has requested BLAST to provide training to their inspectors as to what issues to look for in terms of sexual harassment. They need to give more importance to this issue so that the factory management know that they will be held accountable for what they are doing or not doing. In addition, if the government can formulate a law based on the High Court directives on sexual harassment, that would be a big achievement. Because no matter how much we argue that a High Court directive has force of law, people still do not consider it as binding as a law.

Do you think that engaging the trade unions in dealing with these issues is necessary?

The trade unions are very active in terms of wage negotiation and getting salaries on time. Talking with the trade union members, what we have understood is that some of them understand the issue of violence against women or sexual harassment in the workplace quite well. They don't have any doubt that they need to work on this. We have heard a few cases where trade union members have played a role in referring cases of sexual harassment and even rape to BLAST or Brac for legal assistance. But these are isolated cases. I think trade unions should bring the issue of workplace sexual harassment into their main agenda.

If the government can formulate a law based on the High Court directives on sexual harassment, that would be a big achievement. Because no matter how much we argue that a High Court directive has force of law, people still do not consider it as binding as a law.



Maheen Sultan

A case for cautious optimism

On Walmart and Amazon's possible entry into Bangladesh



MIR AFTABUDDIN AHMED

RECENT reports in the media have suggested that retail giant Walmart and e-commerce heavyweight Amazon are expected to enter the Bangladeshi market in the next couple of years. From a macroeconomic perspective, the proposed entry of these two firms is a reflection of

the strides made in Bangladesh's economy which includes increased digitisation.

Nevertheless, the entry of these powerhouses also poses challenges for firms and local players in the economy. Only time will tell how the entry of Walmart and Amazon will affect the Bangladeshi economy.

For the past two decades, the focus of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bangladesh has been on the production side of the economy. A particular emphasis on the low-cost structure of the domestic economy has led to Bangladesh concentrating on highly labour-intensive industries. It is certain that the country's rise to lower middle-income status with a GDP growth rate of seven-plus percent has been largely due to an integrated effort of foreign firms investing in Bangladesh's labour force and the willingness of local businesses to provide cheap yet quality products to the international market.

Nevertheless, the inclination of Walmart and Amazon to operate locally in Bangladesh, in addition to the existing operations of other international e-commerce companies such as Alibaba, is interesting. Just look at the numbers: 81.7 million internet users, 137.2 million mobile phone connections and 28 million social media

users. All this indicates an increasing preference of people to invest their time, energy and money in the digital economy, especially across the 18-35 age group which consists of a whopping 45 million people. With increasing nominal incomes, the attentiveness of global brands to Bangladesh does not come as a surprise; in fact it can be seen as an acknowledgment of the aggregate consumer base which is likely to ensure high levels of revenue for these firms.

But there remains a broader consideration. A decade or so from now, the consumer base will be even more tech-savvy. Investing in a climate where foreign products are indeed receiving more traction is a logical choice and a lucrative business opportunity for the likes of Walmart and Amazon. Annual private consumption expenditure in Bangladesh is reported to be USD 190.61 billion in 2018, an increase of USD 19.12 billion from 2017. Therefore, in the next few years, the country is forecasted to reach the USD 200 billion mark when it comes to consumption levels (CEIC Data). While final consumption expenditure was reported to be 75 percent of the nominal GDP figure in 2016, the share of consumption as a percentage of the GDP normally tends to be higher. A higher rate of inflation in recent years combined with the crisis in the banking sector and share market may explain the temporary fall in the percentage in this regard.

Yet, global firms may be willing to take the risk of investing in Bangladesh not simply because of the broad-ranging economic achievements of the country, but also due to a desire to invest in the future of Bangladesh, particularly due to its youth population and an environment where demand patterns suggest a shift towards more resourceful, tech-savvy, global products. One can appreciate the fact that Bangladesh is moving towards an

economy where consumption behaviour—and not simply the existence of cheap labour on the production side of the economy—will lead to both questions and answers regarding how FDI will be structured in the decades to come. The eagerness of Walmart and Amazon to enter the Bangladeshi market is therefore not surprising.

Beyond the business interests of foreign firms, there remain concerns with regard to their corporate social responsibility and sustainability models. Walmart is associated with providing consumers with relatively affordable products which comes at the cost of exploiting workers in countries like Bangladesh. The association of firms like Walmart and H&M with the Rana Plaza disaster is still fresh in our memories. The recent outcry about the working conditions and treatment of Amazon employees in the United Kingdom begs the question as to whether these firms are falling short of their mandated pledges to the stakeholders in the supply chain. Walmart fought hard, both openly and tacitly, against the Bangladesh government's decision to increase the monthly minimum wage to USD 43 for garment workers. Therefore, people have reason to be wary about the corporate philosophy of such foreign firms. If Walmart and Amazon do enter the Bangladeshi market, we sincerely hope that both the firms address the concerns people have about workers' exploitation.

Another big concern that remains is the effect of foreign competition on local firms. Local producers are demanding for legislation which can ensure the protection of domestic industries. The feeling is that once large firms enter the market, they tend to become a monopoly or oligopoly which makes it difficult for local producers to survive, let alone compete.

In July of this year, the Cabinet headed by Prime

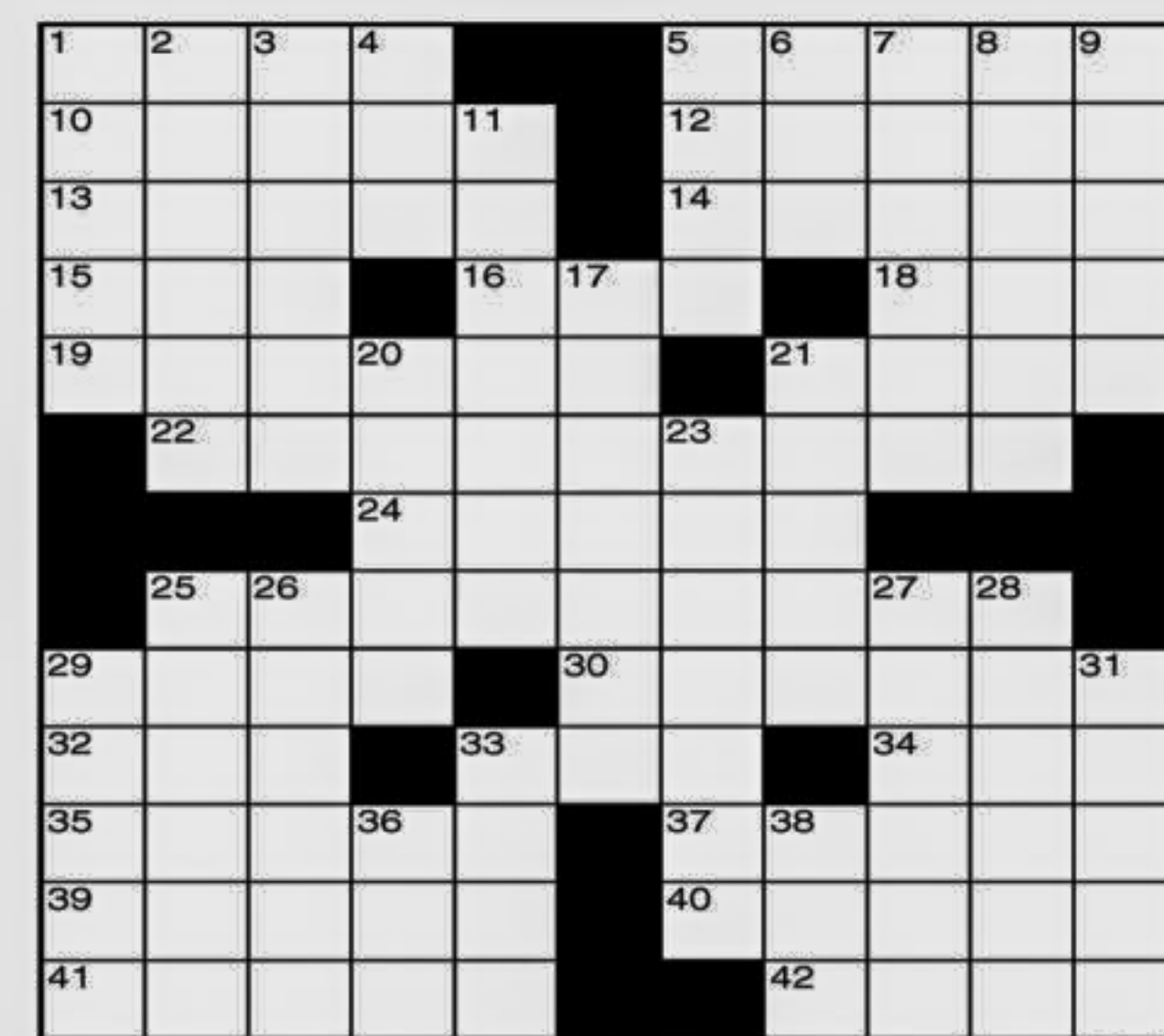
Minister Sheikh Hasina approved the Digital Commerce Policy, limiting FDI to a maximum of 49 percent in local e-commerce ventures. But the government has decided to reconsider the limit as some global actors with operating facilities in Bangladesh have voiced their concerns. The government now plans to allow foreign companies to own a hundred percent share in local e-commerce ventures and this of course is a cause for concern for local companies. The government should seriously consider legislating policies which, while ensuring that the lucrativeness of doing business in Bangladesh remains intact for foreign investors, does not come at the cost of the survival of up-and-coming local firms or adhering to labour standards.

In a recent World Bank report, Bangladesh was ranked 177th out of 190 countries in the Ease of Doing Business Ranking. It has fallen in the rankings in recent years with only Afghanistan performing worse among the Saarc nations. It is difficult to ascertain the exact figures, especially when income levels and GDP figures in Bangladesh are increasing. This goes to show the problem of focusing solely on nominal indicators. Local investors and businesses face numerous hurdles when trying to start a new business (getting electricity, paying taxes, etc). If firms like Walmart and Amazon were to enter the Bangladeshi market, the government would have a huge responsibility of ensuring that free and fair business practices prevail across the aisle, and domestic producers are protected. Allowing FDI with the sole aim of boosting nominal economic figures without considering the needs of local businesses and workers will not bode well for the economy in the long run.

Mir Aftabuddin Ahmed is a recent graduate of Economics and International Relations, University of Toronto. Email: aftab.ahmed@mail.utoronto.ca

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS**
- 1 Mangle
 - 5 California player
 - 10 Like excited fans
 - 12 Kitchen come-on
 - 13 Ham's need
 - 14 Make broader
 - 15 Numerical prefix
 - 16 Fourth-yr. students
 - 18 Tick off
 - 19 New York player
 - 21 Luggage
 - 22 Pitching need
 - 24 Playful mammal
 - 25 Frank
 - 29 Takes in
 - 30 "He did not just say that!"
 - 32 Crunch targets
 - 33 Common bill
 - 34 Go astray
 - 35 Bar buy
 - 37 Tybalt's killer
 - 39 Yawning, perhaps
 - 40 Some agents
 - 41 Worries
 - 42 Unexciting
- DOWN**
- 1 Best Picture of 1955
 - 2 Turkish peak
 - 3 Salt additive
 - 4 Avril follower
 - 5 Statutes
 - 6 "Exodus" hero
 - 7 Alaskan island
 - 8 Appear
 - 9 Puts in order
 - 11 Floral ornament
 - 17 Uses for support
 - 20 Drawer pulls
 - 21 Uncovers
 - 23 Ties down
 - 25 In addition
 - 26 Hesitant
 - 27 Lack of vitality
 - 28 Magic teammate, once
 - 29 No-no on some diets
 - 31 Most writing
 - 33 Betting info
 - 36 Fresh
 - 38 Make a choice



YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

ORDER OTTER
 NERVE LARVA
 STIES DREAD
 PEN TOSTADA
 ELK SAT DER
 CLIP REBID
 NED RON
 AGRIP OGRE
 MEW SOS WAX
 ARAMAIC AMT
 RATER ROTOR
 STEAM ARENA
 HERDS MARES