

**SPOTLIGHT**



Most of the glass boys whose job is to fill water glasses at the tables, get Tk 4000-6000 per month for working 11-13 hours at a stretch.

# NO PLACE AT THE TABLE

NILIMA JAHAN

The news of losing his waiter gig struck 35-year-old Nesar Ali like a bolt. Nesar, who had never taken a day off in his four years at the restaurant, took seven days' leave from his owner for his sister's wedding back in the village. But after the wedding, he was stricken with chikungunya and had to take an additional four days of bed rest due to the intense joint pain. When he came back to Dhaka after 11 days, he found that he had been replaced with another worker. The employer didn't even notify him that he had been fired.

Nesar was desperate to find a new job, although he was still too weak to work. Having spent all his savings at the



wedding and with no place to live in, he somehow managed to get a job at a hotel in the Farmgate area. Here, he now gets Tk 6,000 per month, meals and a shared room. In addition to his wages, he gets tips of around Tk 2,500 to 3,000 from customers for the service he gives with a smile on his face. According to the last gazette of the labour ministry, skilled workers at hotels and restaurants in the divisional city and city corporation areas are supposed to get a minimum of Tk 9,900 as monthly wages.

"I don't know about any such order and my owner will also not pay us such a high amount. Rather, they believe that we earn a lot from the tips. They decide the salary of a worker after adjusting for the estimated earnings from tips," says Nesar. When I ask if this money is enough to support his family, 15-year-old Sabuj, whose job it is to fill water glasses at the tables, laughingly interjects, "Does

he have a family (meaning a wife)? He doesn't even dare marry on this small income."

Sabuj, who has been working for the last three years, filling water glasses and washing greasy pots and pans, gets Tk 4,000 per month. According to the last minimum wage set last year, an unskilled worker in the city corporation areas is entitled to a minimum of Tk 5,400 per month. Sabuj's luck is worse than Nesar's, as he does not get a chance to get tips from customers.

In rural or small-town areas, there are no fixed salaries for restaurant workers and the tips are also comparatively less. A small hotel in Kapasia Bazaar of Gazipur employs two boys to serve food to customers and wash dishes, but they only get Tk 30-40 every day, having no fixed salaries. The latest minimum wage, however, declares that even an apprentice

worker is supposed to get Tk 3,200 per month in the hotel and restaurant sector.

This is basically the picture of more than 1,100,000 people working in nearly 50,000 small restaurants, which offer traditional breakfast, and rice and curries for lunch and dinner. These workers don't have an appointment letter, identity card, register book, or a healthy (WC) work environment—in short, the benefits of a formal workplace. They are appointed without secure contracts and they remain vulnerable to exploitation, as the employer is not obliged to provide

the Bangladesh Hotel Restaurant Sweetmeat Sramik Federation (BHRSSF), informs *Star Weekend* that the owners have already settled the case by pressuring the family members of the victim. "As far as I know, they have settled the murder with an amount of Tk 42 lakh. But of this, only Tk 2 lakh has been paid to the victim's family. Since then we haven't been able to reach them as they have changed their contact numbers," he claims.

Many of the workers interviewed allege they don't get the minimum wage



any explanation or adhere to specific rules while terminating workers. Like other informal sector workers, they lack minimum legal protection as they do not fall under the labour law.

However, the approximate 1, 00,000 workers in the roughly 5,000 multi-cuisine restaurants in the city are luckier as they have at least some regulations compared to the so called '*Bangla Hotel*' or '*Bhaat-er Hotel*'.

Since child labour is available for cheap, an overwhelming majority of the owners of the hotel and restaurant sector are more likely to appoint child workers as "glass boys" or dishwashers. And it's not uncommon at all for these child workers to be beaten if they make a mistake or are unable to do their job properly. Many of them face difficulties in undertaking heavy work at the beginning.

In 2015, a 16-year-old "glass boy" Riyad, who worked at the Motijheel *Ghoroa Hotel*, was allegedly shot by the restaurant owner Ariful Islam. Riyad was severely beaten up at the mess where he lived with his co-workers at Swamibag, after the owner accused him of stealing a mobile phone from the restaurant. Although Riyad's brother Ripon filed a case against the owner of the restaurant, Wari police station could not provide any updates on the case. "The investigation officer (IO) and the then OC were transferred to other places, so we don't have any more information on the case right now," concludes the current OC of Wari thana matter-of-factly.

However, Abdul Khalek, president of

declared by the labour ministry. Khandaker Ruhul Amin, president of the Bangladesh Restaurant Owners Association (BROA) also admits that restaurant owners don't follow the latest minimum wage announced by the Ministry of Labour, as this sector is yet to receive industry facilities. "We are talking to the ministry so that they formalise the sector and ensure workers get appointment letters," says Amin.

"But I think, in most cases, they are getting more than what is said in the minimum wage," he muses.

However, the workers' federation president Abdul Khalek claims that the minimum wage board does not include a representative of the workers, and as a result the minimum wages declared are way too low. The only body representing the workers in the minimum wage board is the government-backed, politically-aligned Dhaka Mohanagar Hotel Restaurant Sramik League.

"The government created a board on their own and announced such a low wage for the hotel and restaurant sector that workers would not even be able to survive on it in the villages, let alone the more expensive cities. Besides, we wanted a wage that is consistent with the present market price, and asked for Tk 10,000, but no one paid any heed to our demand," he laments.

"But since they have already announced it, we are working to create board again and fighting for the workers to get the current minimum wage. Nothing has been going right. The owners are not even willing to give these

paltry amounts to the workers. At the same time, the ministry is busy with the garment sector and doesn't seem to be concerned about us [the restaurant sector]," he adds.

Although festival bonuses and overtime were mentioned in previous gazettes, these issues have been omitted from the last gazette. The federation is lobbying owners to provide two festival bonuses and fair wages for overtime, as most of the workers work 11-14 hours a day (in busy places, for nearly 15 hours). Although a few owners give a minimal

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amount to workers as tips during the festival, according to BHRSSF, till date, no worker has received any payment for working overtime.

*Star Weekend* also contacted the Deputy Inspector General Md Jakir Hossain, Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments, the responsible authority for ensuring minimum wages and other benefits of the workers. Hossain, however, admits that currently they are busy with the readymade garment sector. "I don't think we have been able to even inspect 20 percent of the hotels and restaurants in Dhaka, but if anyone complains to us about a specific issue of wages or other benefits, we try to address the problem," states Hossain.

If we look at occupational safety hazards in restaurants, it isn't just the cheap hotels but the posh hotels too which fail to maintain a satisfactory standard. Magistrates on drives have already sealed six restaurants this year, jailed four persons and fined them a total of Tk 47, 75, 000 for using textile dyes as food colour or for the unhealthy environment of their kitchens.

But how safe are these workplaces for the workers who work in such an environment for 13 to 15 hours a day? According to Dr Shahriar Hossain, secretary general at the Environment and Social Development (ESDO), it's a common misconception among people that restaurant workers are not vulnerable to health hazards. "But when a person uses spices in cooking, it has a toxic impact on the person who is

inhaling the element, as most of them don't wear masks. Maybe there's no overnight reaction, but the constant inhalation of such gases for long hours every day in a humid environment can create respiratory problems as well as affect the nervous system, which can lead to liver damage in the long run," says Dr Hossain.

On the other hand, the boys who wash the plates and glasses using harsh detergent and are exposed to other potentially dangerous chemicals like bleach used for cleaning the ovens and floor, can develop skin diseases, eye and nose irritation and so on. The stress of the job is a whole other issue. The constant noise and high level of sound in the kitchen, customers talking, staff shouting out orders and heavy workload at peak hours all cause mental fatigue. Apart from these, standing in the same place for a long time increases strain on the legs and feet, while the high temperature can cause heat strokes and heat stress.

"But no one is talking about it, and there are no regulations and no recommendations about what steps to be taken as precaution. In fact, the government ignores such aspects," comments Hossain.

But if a worker dies or became physically unfit, what recourse remains for them? Like other informal sectors workers, the labour department might help them get compensation worth Tk 2 lakh from the welfare fund, which was



PHOTOS: RAHAT KABIR



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created in 2016—every year at least 2,500 workers or their families access this fund. "But in reality, we haven't found any restaurant workers getting this money," says Abdul Khalek. "Some owners may give a very small amount, if and only if we put pressure on them."



Although in urban areas, the waiters get tips of around Tk 2,500 to 3,000 per month from the customers, in rural areas, the tips are comparatively less.

PHOTOS: KAZI TAHSTIN AGAZ APURBO