



Ensuring the rights of small-scale fishers for the sustainable fisheries sector in Bangladesh

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), in association with The Daily Star, organised a social dialogue titled “Ensuring the rights of small-scale fishers for the sustainable fisheries sector in Bangladesh” on November 29, 2022. Here we publish a summary of the discussion.



Nazma Yesmin,
Director, BILS
In our country, the ratio of the formal to informal sector is around 15% to 85%. The working patterns of fish workers are mostly informal, and despite the significant contribution of people working in the fishing sector to our national economy, their rights are often overlooked.

It is important to ensure the participation of all stakeholders to make the sector sustainable. There is a need to increase cooperation among stakeholders to improve the current situation of fishworkers and ensure their rights.

Although BILS began working on issues related to fishworkers in 2014, the organization has expanded its scope by working on various projects since then. Based on the knowledge and experience gained through working in the field level in the Sustainable Ocean project, we have developed a list of recommendations. We hope to work towards a sustainable fishing sector with the involvement of all stakeholders, including the government, owners, and fishworkers.



Rezoanul Haque Azom,
Sr. Officer and Project Coordinator, BILS

The Sustainable Ocean project is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and has the Danish Institute for Human Rights (DIHR) as an international partner. At the national level, the lead implementing organization is the Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF). The local implementing partners, BILS and COAST Foundation, worked in the Patharghata sub-district of Barguna and the Moheshkhali sub-district of Cox's Bazar, respectively.

For this project, we conducted several studies, including a situation analysis of human rights in the fisheries industry, a study on the human rights situation in the shrimp industry, a legal and policy analysis of the fishing sector from a human rights perspective, a study on the industrial marine fisheries sector, and a survey on the availability of fishworkers cards.

The fisheries sector is unique due to its different labour patterns. Regular

rights in the fishery sector. Some of the findings include the absence of written contracts, unfair wages, unsafe working conditions, no fixed working hours, fishing in dangerous conditions, child labour, lack of basic facilities such as housing and medical facilities, sexual harassment, and environmental degradation.

We also conducted a separate study on the human rights situation in the shrimp industry, which focused on three sources: factories, dipos (processing facilities), and shrimp enclosures. Generally, at the time of conducting that study, we found that 2 out of 3 workers did not have appointment letters. 72% of workers did not receive pay slips, and those who did receive them did not have working hours listed on them. Around 75% of factory workers tended to work overtime. 49% of workers claimed that they were not provided with personal protective equipment. According to 63% of workers, women did not receive equal pay for the same amount of work.

The findings of the study on the industrial marine fisheries sector in Bangladesh include an oversupply of industrial trawlers compared to fisheries resources, violations of laws, policies, and guidelines, illegal entry of vessels within Bangladesh's boundaries, lack of regular research continuation on fisheries resources, the destruction of small fisheries through illegal and unregulated fishing, and the negative

Without documentation, the owner of the trawler may deny the presence of the deceased or missing person on the vessel. These issues must also be addressed. We hope that government and industry leaders will work to ensure the rights, safety, and security of these people and make the process of obtaining aid more accessible, considering their literacy levels.



S M Zakir Hossain,
BILS Representative, Patharghata, and Social Welfare Secretary, Jatiya Sramik Federation

Many fishermen have drowned in the sea due to strong cyclones. When our fishermen are washed ashore in neighbouring countries, they are often mistreated by their coast guard and even imprisoned. In contrast, their fishermen are given food and shelter in our coastal areas. Additionally, there are some areas in the Sundarbans where trawlers are not allowed to take shelter, and if they do, they are heavily fined. In case of natural disasters, where will our fishermen go if our places impose fines upon us?

During the fishing ban, which lasts 207 days out of the year, fishermen are not allowed to fish. However, the government incentives provided to them are not sufficient. I recommend

enter the Sundarbans to seek shelter due to legal restrictions and the fear of litigation, which cost many of their lives. These restrictions should be lifted during times of natural disasters.

Because our boats are made of wood and considered outdated, we cannot get loans from banks. Our trawlers also do not have insurance, which traps our fishermen in debt for years.



Rezaul Karim,
General Secretary, Matshya Byboshayi Samity, Fisheries Ghat, Cox's Bazar

We have a friendly relationship with the fishworkers, and we are aware of their challenging living conditions at sea. They do not have access to weather forecasts. Researcher should speak directly with these fishworkers during the off-season when they are at home to learn about the challenges they face and their actual conditions while at sea.



Md. Shakil Akhter Chowdhury,
General Secretary, Bangladesh Labour Federation

Fishworkers make up 12% of our total workforce and around two crore people depend on this profession for their livelihood.

be provided to them for unfortunate events such as death or disappearance.

We have been advocating for a national minimum wage of 20,000 Taka, which if implemented will be applied for fisheries sector as well.

The labor law should be amended to include fishworkers and they should be granted the right to form trade unions. It is necessary to create an updated database of fishworkers so that they can access benefits provided by the government.



Md Ataur Rahman Khan,
Chief Scientific Officer (Planning and Survey), Department of Fisheries, Government of Bangladesh

I must confess that while we work for the benefit of fishermen and the fisheries industry, we have not properly defined fishworkers. As the focal person in the reform process, I will include today's points in the discussion with my Director General and recommend them for the next amendment of the fisheries policy.

Additionally, we are collaborating with various stakeholders to gather more information about the sector. The Department of Fisheries has started to support fishermen by issuing identity cards. So far, we have registered 17,37,786 fishermen across the country and provided identity cards to 14,20,000 individuals. Fishermen are provided with certain benefits through the government's social safety net programs, such as identity cards to access support during the off-season. Distributing identity cards is a top priority in the coastal region.

We have granted 400 crore Taka to provide micro credit, matching funds, and training to 450 fishermen's villages in 45 Upazilas. We also provide 86 kg of rice to card-holding fishermen. While I acknowledge that this amount of rice is not sufficient for them, the government can provide additional cash assistance during this period.

It is worth noting that while our fishermen are banned from fishing, fishermen from surrounding countries fish in our coastal waters. We must ensure that the fishing ban period is announced simultaneously in our neighbouring coastal areas. These issues need to be addressed through diplomatic channels.

It would be beneficial if fishermen could be included in insurance policies. After registering boats, we will provide a device to every vessel that will allow us to locate fishermen and gather their information.



Anwar Hossain,
President, Bangladesh Jatiyatibadi Sramik Dal and Chair of the Session

Sitakunda was once a prosperous area for fishing, but many species are now threatened with extinction due to the negative impact of the Chittagong Ship Breaking Yard. While distributing relief to fishermen who lived near the coast and were severely affected by the cyclone of 1991, I had the opportunity to witness the poor living conditions of the fishing community.

Millions of people rely on this sector for their livelihood, so it is important to listen to their voices at the grassroots level. It is crucial to bring the true conditions of their lives to the attention of the relevant authorities in order to ensure that their rights are protected.



Refayat Ullah Mirdha,
Senior Staff Reporter of The Daily Star & Moderator of the session

I believe the fishing sector can follow the example of the garment industry in terms of success through increased exports. The garment industry has had to focus on compliance in order to maintain its international markets.

Similarly, the owners of the fishing sector should consider exploring international markets for exports as a way to formalize the sector. This approach will enable them to receive more support from the government and improve the situation of fishworkers by ensuring compliance. Over time, this will help the sector to become formalised.



RECOMMENDATIONS

- A legal procedure must be established to properly define fishworkers.
- Fishworkers should be included in the Bangladesh Labor Act-2006 or a separate law should be enacted for them.
- The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics should update the list of fishworkers at least every 2 years through digital platforms.
- Regular research should be conducted in the areas of fisheries, biodiversity, and climate management and conservation.
- During fishing bans, social security allowances and skill enhancement opportunities should be provided to ensure alternative employment for fishermen.
- Fishermen should be provided with contract papers before going fishing.
- Appropriate measures should be taken to protect fishermen from natural disasters.
- Fishermen should receive at least 60 kg of rice and TK 5000 in cash during prohibition periods.
- The government should provide small loans to fishermen to allow them to do small businesses during the off-season.
- Modern fishing technology should be made available to fishermen.

working hours and holidays do not typically apply to fishworkers, and the breaks between work periods are also different. For example, when a trawler begins its voyage to sea, fishworkers must work uninterrupted for 15 to 20 days.

During our assessment of various government legal and policy documents, we found different terms used to refer to these people. The lack of a distinctive definition creates confusion about which group should receive privileges when benefits are given by the government. Therefore, we recommend using the term “fishworkers” to define fishermen, women fisheries workers and other labour force associated with fishing so that all of them can benefit.

We conducted 2,000 interviews in the Patharghat and Moheshkhali areas as part of a situation analysis of human

impacts of climate change and pollution.

To analyse the legal and policy framework for the fisheries sector in Bangladesh, we assessed the activities of government organisations, the citizen charter, and all relevant laws, policies, and rules.

We recommend creating an accurate list of fishworkers under the supervision of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. This list should be updated at least every two years. Additional recommendations include providing financial assistance for daily expenses along with food aid during the fishing ban, and ensuring sustainable alternative employment for fishworkers on an urgent basis to address financial crises during the fishing ban.

Other recommendations based on the project include including fishworkers in labor laws, conducting regular research on fisheries' stock, biodiversity, and climate management and conservation, providing social security allowances and skill development to ensure alternative employment for fishworkers during fishing bans, regularly inspecting shrimp enclosures, and ensuring the safety of fishworkers who put their lives at risk.



Mizanur Rahman Bahadur,
COAST Foundation Representative, Moheshkhali and Advisor, Cox's Bazaar Fishing Boat Workers' Union

During the fishing ban season, many fishworkers are unable to join alternative works due to their lack of skills beyond fishing. To meet basic needs, they often have to rely on loans, which can lead to a cycle of debt. This eventually decreases the quality of their living conditions. If we do not take initiatives now, we may face a shortage of fishworkers in the future.

Aid, such as rice, often only reaches a small number of fishworker families due to a lack of accountability among relevant authorities. The government should increase transparency in the distribution of aid by using digital platforms.

The lack of employment contracts makes it difficult to prove employment.

that at least 60 kg of rice and TK 5000 be given to fishermen during the ban period.



Naimul Ahsan Jewel,
General Secretary, Jatiya Sramik Jote Bangladesh

A centre should be established near fish landing to collect information about fishworkers and create a database. This would also help us provide compensation to the families of lost fishworkers.

The government should provide SME loans to fishermen to ensure their sustainable livelihood. The government could also provide small loans to fishermen to start small businesses during the off-season.



Chowdhury Ashiqul Alam,
General Secretary, Bangladesh Trade Union Shanga

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has adopted the Fishing Convention (C188) to improve the fisheries industry. However, Bangladesh has not yet ratified it. This convention covers both traditional and industrial fishing. There should be strong coordination among the Ministry of Labour and Employment, the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock Bangladesh, and the Ministry of Shipping to develop our fishing sector.

The employers often hide the fisheries IDs of workers to avoid responsibility in the event of an accident. It has also been noted that our neighboring fishing community has access to radar technology that helps them locate shoals of fish. This modern technology should be made available to our fishworkers as well.



Golam Mostafa Chowdhury,
President, Barguna Jele Matshya Trawler Malik Samity

During the last cyclone, our fishworkers could not

Fisheries contribute 3.5% of our GDP, so we cannot ignore them any longer.

The challenges faced by fishermen are significant. They do not have a minimum wage, and there is no framework for determining their vacation, holidays, and work breaks. Their health and safety should be ensured in case of accidents or other difficulties.

Bangladesh has ratified ILO Convention 138 to end child labour, but our fishing sector continues to rely on child labour to some extent, and this problem is growing.

The quality of life for fishworkers has been declining for years due to the debt trap. Our country cannot become a middle-income country without addressing the needs of these disadvantaged people.



Mostaq Ahmed,
Organising Secretary, Boat Malik Samity, Cox's Bazar

To ensure the food security of the entire nation, we must protect the lives and rights of our fishworkers.

Previously, it cost 50,000 Taka to send a boat to sea, but now it requires 300,000 Taka due to rising costs of goods and oil. We have to pay around 4,000 Taka per fishworker without any guarantee that they will catch fish.

Industrial fishing boats are highly efficient at catching all types of fish due to their advanced radar systems for locating fish. However, they only keep the high-quality fish and discard the rest, which is destructive and needs to be restricted.



Quamrul Ahsan,
President, Jatiya Sramik Federation

First of all, we need to establish criteria for defining a fishworker. The relevant government departments have a role to play in this regard. These people do not receive any documentation when they go to sea for fishing and do not have any place to rest. Compensation should