

‘Workers must be allowed to speak up’

In light of the recent development in the RMG sector, where factories have started to open, Taslima Akhter, president of Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati (BGWS), talks about the workers’ protest and their demands and plights in an interview with Aliza Rahman of The Daily Star.

Is there any truth to the oft-repeated statements of “outsiders” causing unrest, or is this a way to undermine and eventually suppress the RMG workers’ demand for fair wages?

Not only the garment sector, but demands are also being raised from various sectors following the mass uprising. For the past 15 years, people have been unable to speak openly due to the lack of freedom of expression, and workers are no exception. There was a pervasive fear of losing one's job if one spoke up or voiced a demand. After the uprising, workers have started to speak out. They are raising both short- and long-term demands, including payment of dues, immediate factory-based assessment and wage adjustment, all of which are justified.

In the new political landscape of Bangladesh after August 5, there are still challenges. On September 17, a worker's life was lost amid clashes. The control of scrap fabric business and the political interests of the ousted fascist government are at play. Efforts are being put into diminishing the achievement of the mass uprising by manipulating the workers’ movement and anger. We think workers should be careful not to let their genuine demands get lost amid allegations of “outsiders,” “provocateurs” and “conspiracies.” To restore a healthy and fear-free work environment swiftly, it is crucial for the interim government and entrepreneurs to take immediate steps to address the workers’ demands and make long term commitments.

Positive steps must be taken through discussions with all stakeholders, including workers and labour leadership involved in the sector. Repressive language or tactics in response to workers’ demands will benefit no

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As is well-known, in the absence of proper trade union practices and organisations, workers often rely on spontaneity. Therefore, opportunities for workers to speak out and organise proper unions must be expanded. If workers remain alert, organised and united, they will protect their livelihood and the industry too. It is the responsibility of both the owners and the government to investigate and act against those who seek to exploit the current situation for their own benefit at the expense of workers and industries. We must move away from the old practice of dismissing workers’ demands by placing the blame on others.

What are some of the demands being made by the workers?

A key demand of the workers is the payment of overdue wages. It is heard that around 26 percent of the factories have still not paid their workers. Besides, fear of unemployment is increasing due to the closure of several factories, including that of Salman F Rahman, the industrial adviser to the former prime minister. Additionally, some factory-based demands have been raised, including tiffin bill, attendance bonus, holiday allowance, and maternity leave. The claims are emerging as survival liabilities in the current market. In a number of factories, some factory-based demands have been met. Owners have announced an increase in tiffin bill and attendance bonus.

In the past two weeks, more than 150 RMG factories were closed at different times. In some factories, the owners closed under Section 13.1 of the Labour Act. Entrepreneurs in this sector, including the owners of Beximco, receive bank loans, but workers’ demands remain pending. In such a situation, it is necessary to pay the arrears promptly. A long-standing demand of the workers has been for a rationing system, which is urgently

needed, because the workers demanded a minimum wage of Tk 25,000 last year, but a wage of Tk 12,500 was approved. It goes without saying that it is difficult to survive at this wage at present. It is important to ensure a good working environment by opening the factories after considering the workers’ demands one by one, including wage evaluation. If the factories are closed, both the workers’ livelihood and the country's export will be affected.

What multifaceted challenges do the workers face, and how has the past regime’s actions caused harm?

For more than 15 years, the previous government has been heavily partial towards factory owners. A significant segment of the MPs were owners in the RMG sector, which made the previous government seem as though it was the owners’ government. In 2023, when RMG workers protested for a wage of Tk 25,000, false cases were filed against hundreds of them, including labour leaders. Four workers lost their jobs, and many others lost their lives, and many others lost their jobs. The wage board, along with representatives from the workers, owners, neutral representatives and the government, appeared to act in the interest of the owners, stifling the workers’ voices.

In our industrial sector's history, two of the worst incidents that killed workers occurred during the previous regime: the Tazreen Fashions fire (2012) and the Rana Plaza collapse (2013). More than 100 workers were killed in the Tazreen fire, and over 1,100 were killed in the Rana Plaza disaster. Justice for these tragedies is still pending. Tazreen Fashions owner is out on bail and has become the president of the Matsyajibi League, while Rana Plaza owner Sohel Rana is in jail, but many others involved have been released on bail.

It should also be noted that beneficiaries

of the previous fascist regime worked to divide the labour movement in various ways. In industrial areas, the ruling party, its privileged groups and factory owners collaborated to suppress workers’ efforts to organise. The vicious cycle was kept running

so that there would be no real, honest leadership. The authoritarian government supported the so-called “labour leaders” and pocket unions that opposed the workers’ voices, using money and fear to control the movement. The biggest challenge now will be to dismantle these entrenched syndicates. The interim government must ensure that no new syndicates emerge to control the labour movement or the industry.

The syndicates formed under the previous government to control the labour movement and scrap fabric business are now destabilising the industrial sector for their personal and collective gains. Only an aware, well-organised democratic movement can truly develop this industry. A real movement with honest leadership, representing the interests of both workers and industry, is essential. Therefore, both the government and employers must ensure that genuine leadership operates beyond self-interest and is committed to the welfare of workers.

Why is it that pressure can't be exerted on buyers? If the export sector is harmed, workers will also be severely harmed. Why is it that this angle seems to be somewhat ignored in the current discourse?

The buyers are mostly focused on taking the lion's share of the profit. However, they are reluctant to take responsibility for the rising prices of apparels or other crises. Since the Covid pandemic, buyers have consistently shifted all the blame for the workers’ hardships to local entrepreneurs and the government during various crises, including the Russia-Ukraine war and inflation. But buyers also have to accept this responsibility. During any crisis that affects the industrial sector, buyers should

play a role in supporting the industry and its workers, rather than simply cancelling orders. Both the government and entrepreneurs must take steps to address this.

Bangladesh is a part of a global supply chain. To grow in this sector, we need to be more skilled in negotiating with buyers. At the same time, the responsibility and accountability of buyers must be established in a more structured manner. It is crucial for everyone to recognise that if exports suffer, it will negatively impact not only the workers and owners, but also the industrial sector and the country's economy as a whole.

Inflation hit a 12-year high in Bangladesh this year. How has the lives of RMG workers been impacted by such developments, particularly considering their low wages?

The pressure of inflation and rising commodity prices are a significant burden on people. Even the middle class is being forced to cut back on their household budgets. Needless to say, one of the hardest hit are the workers, including RMG workers who are struggling to survive on Tk 12,500 a month. Whenever there is a wage increase movement, the government promises a rationing system, but it is never implemented.

Despite RMG workers playing a crucial role in the country's economy, their basic rights—such as access to food, clothing, healthcare, education, and entertainment—are not addressed in either their wage structure or government initiatives. In the new Bangladesh, workers hope that the interim government and factory owners will consider the interests of both the workers and the industry. Wages should be reassessed, and new working conditions should be established so that workers are not blacklisted for speaking up and have the right to express themselves freely. If workers are freed from the fear of layoffs, retrenchment, attacks and lawsuits, they will be able to play a more active role in the development of the industry and production.

The never-ending fight for women’s clothing autonomy



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MAHIYA TABASSUM

Every time I casually reveal that I once wore burqa and hijab, the reactions I get are a mixture of surprise and bewilderment. It's a chapter of my life that fills me not with shame, but with a deep-seated resentment—a resentment born from the realisation that my clothing choices were dictated not by personal or religious convictions, but by fear and harassers.

I was in eighth grade when my mother purchased three custom-made burqas for me. Her motivation wasn't rooted in religious observance or cultural tradition. Instead, it was a desperate attempt to shield me from the relentless street harassment that took a toll on my mental health and, subsequently, my academic performance. My parents had exhausted every other option: confronting the harassers who could be identified immediately, seeking help from law enforcement, and even personally escorting me to school and coaching classes. The burqa was their last resort.

But could this “sartorial armour” protect me? The harsh reality is that it could not.

A 2020 Pew Research Center study reveals a troubling reality: women in 56 countries faced social hostilities due to their attire being deemed either too religious or too secular. This bidirectional pressure demonstrates that the real issue is not about specific clothing choices, but about control over women's bodies and autonomy. Whether a woman chooses to wear a burqa or a bikini, she often finds herself subject to judgement, harassment, and even violence.

My personal experience also illustrates this pervasive problem. It has forced me to confront a critical question: does religious attire truly safeguard women from sexual harassment, let alone the objectifying male gaze? My observations and the experiences of other women in my community led me to a resounding “no.” I've witnessed women in burqas and niqabs/hijabs face harassment

ranging from catcalls to unwanted physical contact. The clothing that was meant to protect us became, in some cases, a target for those seeking to enforce their views on women's modesty.

Again, the reasons women choose to wear religious garments are diverse and complex. While the majority do so out of genuine religious conviction, there also coexist other reasons—for instance, a friend who confided in me said she used it as a shield to “wear whatever I want beneath it and not get judged for my clothes.” But using such attire as a defence against harassment is a deeply troubling societal failure.

Moreover, women who wear burqas and hijabs increasingly face a different kind of harassment—mostly from racists and Islamophobes. In many Western countries, Muslim women have reported verbal abuse, physical assaults, and discrimination in public spaces and workplaces simply for wearing religious attire, such as a niqab or burqa. This harassment not only violates these women's right to religious expression, but also forces them to choose between their faith and their safety. It's a stark reminder that the policing of women's clothing isn't just about modesty or secularism, it's often a vehicle for broader prejudices and attempts to control women's presence in public spaces.

Conversely, women who choose to dress in ways deemed “too secular” face their own set of challenges. They're often blamed for any harassment they experience, with their clothing choices used as a justification for inexcusable behaviour. This dual pressure—to be neither too covered, nor too exposed—creates an impossible standard that traps women in a lose-lose situation.

A few years ago, at one of my previous workplaces, a male colleague made an inappropriate comment about my body structure and vocally “advised” me not to wear “tight-fitting” clothes. Yes, a male

colleague was directing me on what I should wear when clearly, I was not violating the dress code of the company I was employed at. My personal stories of being forced to wear a burqa to avoid harassment or being advised on what to wear at the office are stark illustrations of a widespread phenomenon. Instead of addressing the root cause—the behaviour of harassers—society often places the burden on women to modify their

appearance. This approach perpetuates the dangerous prejudice that a woman's clothing is responsible for the actions of those who harass or assault her.

Research consistently debunks this notion. A study by Jane Workman and Elizabeth Freeburg found that people were more likely to blame rape victims who wore shorter skirts. However, this perception flies in the face of reality. Research shows no correlation between a woman's attire and her likelihood of being assaulted.

Even in ostensibly progressive environments, the problem persists. In

December 2017, US Congresswoman Marcy Kaptur shocked fellow lawmakers when she said that the revealing clothing that some members and staffers wear is an “invitation” to sexual harassment. She made the comments during a private Democratic Caucus meeting to discuss sexual harassment issues, according to a report by Politico. The incident shows how deeply ingrained these harmful attitudes are, even among those who

should be champions of equality.

The neurological argument that men are more visually stimulated than women, as suggested by studies from the National Library of Medicine, is often misused to justify harassment. While biological differences exist, they do not negate personal responsibility or the capacity for self-control. A civilised society must expect and demand that all individuals, regardless of gender, exercise restraint and respect.

The consequences of this clothing-based oppression are far-reaching. It limits women's participation in public life, affects their



FILE PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

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educational and career opportunities, and perpetuates a cycle of inequality. Moreover, it diverts attention from the real issues: the behaviour of harassers and the societal structures that enable them.

In a world where freedom of expression is championed as a fundamental human right, women continue to face an insidious form of control: the policing of their clothing. This issue transcends cultures, religions and political systems, revealing a deeply rooted societal problem that demands our attention and action.

To address this complex issue, we need a multifaceted approach. We must incorporate comprehensive programmes teaching respect, consent, and gender equality from an early age. We must also focus on legal reforms, such as stricter enforcement of anti-harassment laws and removal of clothing-based defences in assault cases.

As a responsible citizen, we must promote narratives that emphasise personal responsibility for one's actions, regardless of others' attire. Media also plays a significant role here. We must challenge and change the portrayal of women in the media to focus on their capabilities rather than appearance. Moreover, the matter of implementing and enforcing clear guidelines at workplaces against harassment and discrimination based on clothing should not be taken lightly anymore.

The right to choose one's clothing without fear of harassment or assault is not a luxury; it's a fundamental aspect of personal freedom. As a society, we must recognise that the fabric of oppression is woven not by the clothes women wear, but by the attitudes we perpetuate. It's time to cut through these harmful narratives and create a world where women are judged not by their hemlines or headscarves, but by the content of their character and the merit of their actions.