

Aligning employer concerns with worker protections is key

In conversation with Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, head of the Labour Reform Commission and executive director of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS)



Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed

The Daily Star (TDS): Why is labour sector reform the most urgent priority?

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmed (SSUA): Bangladesh has undergone a major political transformation, driven by students, workers, and the public, all united in the pursuit of a non-discriminatory and equitable society. These issues did not emerge overnight. Bangladesh's history is deeply tied to workers' struggles, evident in the Liberation War, the 1954 elections, and the 21-point charter—all centered on equality and ending discrimination. Tea garden workers, sanitation workers, agricultural and industrial labourers have long faced exploitation and harsh conditions.

Workers have repeatedly fought against injustice, but systemic discrimination

remains unresolved. Fragmented struggles—farmers' movements, workers' protests, and the fight for independence—have shaped our long-standing pursuit of equity. The events of 2024 result from continuous struggles and sacrifices. To realise our aspirations, we must address their root causes. Inequality is deeply entrenched, requiring not just reform but a transformation of the world of work. Time is slipping away—without action, we risk falling further behind.

TDS: Which areas has the commission identified for reform in both the formal and informal sectors?

SSUA: Exploitation of workers, systemic discrimination, lack of protection, and deprivation of basic rights remain critical



▲
Labourers are waiting along a road in Mirpur, expecting to be chosen by employers.

PHOTO:
PRABIR DAS

issues. While modern industries have created jobs, they have also deepened inequalities—not just between employers and workers but within the workforce itself.

Take maternity leave, for example. Government employees receive six months of leave, private-sector workers are entitled to four months (often not granted), and informal-sector workers—who make up 85% of the workforce—get none. This disparity highlights how even fundamental rights are unequally distributed. Motherhood is a societal responsibility, because the child is part of the society. However, our system has created disparities even in such fundamental areas through law.

Inequality extends to employment structures as well. Permanent and outsourced workers often work side by side in government offices, yet the latter receive no job security, bonuses, or maternity benefits. Even the Prime Minister's Office

employs outsourced workers under these conditions. Additionally, a recent government directive banning direct recruitment for fourth-grade positions blocks low-income families from securing government jobs.

Informal workers face even greater challenges. If a rickshaw puller can no longer work due to age or health, there is no pension or safety net.

Meanwhile, the formal sector is not as structured as it seems. Only 15% of workers are covered by labour laws, and even among them, disparities exist. A major portion of the formal sector is not even included under labour laws, such as journalists, junior officers in banks, factory supervisors, and mid-level managers. In the formal sector, a joining letter should be given, and a certificate should be provided stating the worker's employment history. Termination must follow a proper process. At the manufacturing level, there is no mechanism for grievance redressal.

Exploitation takes many forms, but fragmented grievances prevent a unified movement for change. If combined, the scale of injustice would be overwhelming. For example, four re-rolling mill workers died this year, and factory accidents continue unchecked. Minimum wages exist across 47 sectors, but disparities persist, revealing the formal sector's hidden informality.

Creating a non-discriminatory Bangladesh begins at home. When children witness the humiliation of domestic workers, they internalise and normalise exploitation. These ingrained biases later extend to the workplace, perpetuating systemic discrimination.

Our commission has been tasked with creating recommendations, but the problem is far deeper than anticipated.

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» A dedicated wing within district-level labour offices could be created to handle complaints from informal sector workers, such as domestic workers and street vendors, with a specific day each week set aside to resolve their cases.

» Addressing systemic inequality requires a comprehensive solution. The most urgent priority is to ensure a dignified, non-discriminatory, and ethical society for every worker.

» We aim to shift to universal labour protection, ensuring all workers—formal and informal—have access to social security, fair wages, recognition, representation, safe conditions, and protection from exploitation.

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ছোট ছোট সঞ্চয় একদিন স্বপ্নের সমান বড় হয়। অবসর জীবন বা ভবিষ্যতের নানাবিধ প্রয়োজন পূরণে যেকোনো পেশার মানুষ এই স্কিমে সহজেই সঞ্চয় শুরু করতে পারেন। সর্বনিম্ন ২০০ টাকা থেকে সর্বোচ্চ যেকোনো পরিমাণ টাকা এই অ্যাকাউন্টে মাসিক কিস্তিতে জমা করে মেয়াদ শেষে পাচ্ছেন শরী'আহসম্মত মুনাফা। সেলফিন অ্যাপেও এই অ্যাকাউন্ট খোলা যায়।

