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Decent Work and Social Justice for All

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) hosted a national symposium on September 4, 2026 in Dhaka, titled "Future of Work: Decent Work and Social Justice for All." The event brought together government representatives, employer, worker, and civil society stakeholders to address the rapidly evolving labor market. Discussions focused on two primary priorities: strengthening social dialogue for inclusive labor governance and expanding universal social protection to safeguard workers against ongoing economic, technological, and environmental transitions.

In his welcome remarks, BILS Executive Director Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed highlighted the closure of more than 400 garment factories and the resulting job losses. He called for a system to provide workers with timely information about potential layoffs and available support, stressing the need for a life-cycle-based social protection system.

ILO Bangladesh Country Director Max Tunon said the future of work concerns not only employment opportunities but also the quality of jobs. Highlighting widespread informality, he stressed institutional capacity, accountability and political commitment, while identifying the National Social Dialogue Forum as an important platform for tripartite engagement.

Md Saidul Islam, additional secretary-general of the Bangladesh Employers' Federation, identified informal employment and Bangladesh's LDC graduation as major challenges, calling for coordinated action by the government, employers and workers.

Md Abdur Rahim Khan, additional secretary at the Ministry of Labour and Employment, said decent work policies must address emerging challenges from climate change and technological transformation alongside compliance with international labour standards.

Advocate Shamsur Rahman Shimul Biswas, MP, stressed adequate wages, workers' income security and effective implementation of recent labour law amendments. Referring to workers' demand for a monthly national wage of Tk 30,000 and rising inflation, he called for stronger social dialogue and shared responsibility in protecting workers' rights and offring social protection.

Chief guest Dr Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir, adviser to the prime minister, called for a sustainable, welfare-oriented economy that protects rights and promotes humane development. He highlighted the garment sector's contribution to women's formal employment and stressed domestic resource mobilisation to invest in skills, productivity and social protection.

Mesbahuddin Ahmed, senior joint convener of the National Advocacy Alliance for Workers' Rights, said continued identification of emerging labour challenges and cooperation among government, employers and workers were essential to ensuring decent working conditions.

At the closing session, Lotte Ellegaard, head of SRO-Asia at the Danish Trade Development Agency, emphasised strategic investment, formal job creation and skills development. Drawing on Denmark's experience, she said effective social dialogue depends on trust, mutual respect and strong representative institutions.

Dr Mahdi Amin, adviser to the prime minister, underscored accountable governance, workers' participation in policymaking, women's empowerment, childcare support and social protection. He reaffirmed the government's commitment to workers' rights and industrial stability.

BILS Secretary General and Prime Minister's Adviser Nazrul Islam Khan called for collective action to address automation, artificial intelligence, digitalisation and the just transition. He also stressed the need to strengthen national dialogue mechanisms and expand workers' organising rights, noting that many workers remain unorganised and inadequately represented.

The symposium sought to consolidate recommendations from the two thematic discussions, identify priority actions and stakeholder responsibilities, and build consensus around an outcome document to guide future action on labour reform, social dialogue and universal social protection.

KOHINOOR MAHMOOD, *Director, BILS,* moderated the whole event.

Social Dialogue for Inclusive and Decent Workplaces

The first thematic session, titled "Shaping the Future of Work: Social Dialogue for an Inclusive and Decent World of Work," featured a keynote presentation and panel discussion moderated by Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, Executive Director of BILS. The session explored emerging labour market challenges and emphasised social dialogue, collective bargaining, institutional readiness and skills development for an inclusive transition.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For social dialogue

- Implement a robust labor information management system and mandate impact assessments before introducing AI or automation into workplaces.
- Operationalize the National Social Dialogue Forum to guarantee tripartite (government, employer, worker) collaboration in labor governance and policymaking.
- Establish a unified digital database mapping workers' skills and employment statuses to seamlessly connect them with jobs and social security.
- Strengthen Public Employment Services and mandate employer-led reskilling to create structured pathways from informal to formal employment.

Ananya Raihan (Keynote Speaker)
Chairperson, i-Social
Bangladesh's future of work is shaped by technological, environmental, and demographic shifts. To ensure a fair transition, social dialogue among the government, employers, and workers is vital. He advocated for active labor market policies and updating the National Employment Policy every three years. Key institutional reforms, such as adding four departments to the Ministry of Labour, creating dedicated desks for informal workers, and establishing an interoperable National Workers' Registry will strengthen labor governance and protect all workers.

Mesbahuddin Ahmed
Senior Joint Convenor, National Advocacy Alliance for Workers' Rights
Ensuring a just transition is essential as Bangladesh moves towards a greener, sustainable economy. Workers must not be left behind during these economic and environmental shifts; their livelihoods and fundamental rights must be actively protected. Furthermore, reskilling, upskilling, and continuous skills development are crucial for preparing the workforce for emerging employment opportunities. Effective social dialogue among the government, employers, and workers, aligned with the Labour Reform Commission's recommendations, is necessary to address transition challenges and guarantee inclusivity.

Md. Abdus Samad Al Azad
Director General, Department of Labour (DoL)
Addressing changing labor market needs requires stronger institutions and stakeholder collaboration. Public Employment Services must be digitalized and strengthened, utilizing reliable labor market data to guide skills development and employment planning. Furthermore, employers share the responsibility to reskill and upskill their workers, helping them adapt to ongoing digitalization. Appropriate policies, targeted budgetary allocations, and continuous tripartite consultations are essential. The Ministry of Labour and Employment must play a central, coordinating role in implementing these vital initiatives.

Nada Aridhi
Technical Specialist, LAWC Cluster, ILO Bangladesh
A human-centered approach must remain central to the future of work, ensuring workers' voices shape policies and legislation. To address emerging employment forms, social dialogue must be strengthened at national, sectoral, and cross-border levels. Declining trade union density and limited collective bargaining remain significant challenges. Consequently, new labor groups, including gig and platform workers, must be integrated into these discussions alongside traditional tripartite constituents. Ultimately, reliable data, extensive research, and technical expertise are essential for effective dialogue.

Saad Mohammad Chaudhary
General Secretary PUWF / ILO-GB Member, Pakistan
Technological advancements, including AI and automation, must actively support decent work, social justice, and inclusive development. Workers and trade unions require a meaningful role in workplace digitalization decisions. Rigorous labor-impact assessments are necessary before introducing major technological changes to evaluate their effects on employment, wages, safety, and labor rights. Furthermore, lifelong learning, reskilling, and social protection must be strengthened for displaced workers. Transparency and strict accountability in algorithmic management and digital surveillance are equally critical for fairness.

Dr. Pravin Sinha
Secretary General, NLLA & IIRA, India
Effective social dialogue requires stronger institutional coordination and meaningful participation from the government, employers, and workers in policymaking. Bangladesh faces major challenges regarding its large informal sector and lack of reliable labor data. Preparing for LDC graduation is vital due to its implications on trade and employment. In labor-surplus economies, automation must be introduced carefully to mitigate job losses. Technology should ideally be leveraged in ways that actively support employment generation rather than unnecessarily displacing the human workforce.

Yasunobu Aihara
President, Japan International Labour Foundation (JILAF)
Social dialogue and sustainable social protection are essential for managing technological change. Despite progress in Bangladesh's labor standards, informality, insecure employment, and limited collective bargaining remain concerns. Introducing AI without worker consultation, unequal training access, and unclear regulations present further challenges. Workers must participate in digitalization decisions. To ensure technological progress benefits everyone, stronger AI literacy, robust skills development, and clear regulatory frameworks are needed, all supported by continuous and inclusive social dialogue across the employment spectrum.

Dr. Nazneen Kawshar Chowdhury
Executive Chairperson, NSDA
Skills development must lead to sustainable employment; training alone is insufficient without practical application. Currently, about 74% of individuals receiving competency-based certifications through targeted job placement initiatives successfully enter the labor market. These recognized certificates significantly improve employment prospects both domestically and abroad. To connect training with actual industry demands, stronger collaboration among the government, private sector, and stakeholders is essential. Increased industry participation guarantees that skills development directly translates into meaningful and long-lasting employment opportunities for workers.

Challenges and Readiness for Universal Social Protection

The second thematic session featured a keynote presentation by Mostafiz Ahmed and panel discussion moderated by Dr. Jakir Hossain, Professor at the University of Rajshahi. The session examined gaps in social protection coverage, particularly for informal and vulnerable workers, and explored pathways towards universal, life-cycle-based protection, with emphasis on sustainable financing, stronger governance and emerging labour market risks.



RECOMMENDATIONS

For universal social protection

- Enact a legal framework for extending sustainably financed social security to all workers including informal, gig, and migrant workers.
- Integrate existing benefit databases and leverage mobile banking for transparent, secure social protection disbursements.
- Establish living-wage mechanisms and design comprehensive protections addressing women's specific life-stage vulnerabilities.
- Develop targeted income support and retraining programs for workers displaced by technological automation or climate changes.

Mostafiz Ahmed (Keynote Speaker)
Professor, Jagannath University
Universal social protection is essential to ensuring a just world of work in Bangladesh. Existing programmes must be strengthened to address workers' needs and vulnerabilities. Key priorities include enacting a Universal Worker Social Protection Act, introducing a national minimum wage, standardising workplace injury compensation and protecting workers against unemployment. Expanding pensions, healthcare, maternity and paternity benefits, childcare, affordable housing and educational support is also necessary. Stronger protections are needed for workers with disabilities and migrant workers, including insurance, compensation and reintegration support.

Razequzzaman Ratan
President, Socialist Labour Front (SLF)
Comprehensive social protection and labor rights are essential, especially for informal and vulnerable workers. He emphasized four key priorities for worker protection: recognition, registration, remuneration, and rights. Formalizing informal employment, ensuring fair wages, and protecting migrant, female, and gig workers from job loss are vital. Direct payment mechanisms prevent intermediaries from withholding earnings. Additionally, post-retirement security, reasonable working hours, child protection, and ensuring women workers receive fair pay, dignity, and workplace safety require immediate attention.

Ruben Korevaar
Programme Lead, Mondiaal FNV, Netherlands
Social protection must reach low-income and informal workers through better program coordination. While the National Social Security Strategy provides a framework, fragmented initiatives create coverage gaps for Bangladesh's large informal workforce. Drawing from Germany's experience, he highlights the importance of contributory social protection and shared responsibility among the government, employers, and workers. Rather than just temporary financial assistance during hardship, robust social protection provides security and stability, strengthening worker participation and contributing to broader economic growth.

Syed Saad Hussain Gilani
Programme Manager, ILO Social Protection
Social protection must comprehensively cover both formal and informal workers. The Employment Injury Scheme pilot effectively demonstrates the value of social insurance and employer contributions. Bangladesh urgently needs a dedicated legal framework and institutional mechanism for worker-focused social protection. A tripartite council involving the government, employers, and workers would significantly strengthen coordination and accountability. Furthermore, creating a unified worker database and utilizing accessible mobile financial services will make it easier for workers to receive benefits efficiently.

Shaheen Anam
Executive Director, Manusher Jonno Foundation
Low-income and informal workers urgently require coordinated access to social protection. Women workers face severe additional challenges, including inadequate wages, safety concerns, unpaid care burdens, and climate-induced displacement. Beyond statutory minimums, living wages demand greater attention as living costs rise. Social protection for women must address their specific needs across different life stages, particularly vulnerabilities tied to employment and unpaid care work. Stronger monitoring, strict accountability, and effective resource allocation are necessary to ensure this critical support reaches them.

Virjesh Upadhyay
Director General, Dattopant Thengadi Foundation, India
India's experience demonstrates the immense value of universal worker registration based on a "one worker, one identity" principle. A comprehensive database tracking occupation, skills, and migration history effectively connects workers with employment opportunities and targeted social security services. Bangladesh can draw useful lessons from this approach while tailoring it to its unique labor market and institutional context. Developing a worker-centered registration mechanism will provide a robust foundation for improving social protection access across all employment categories.

Dr. Sabur Ghayur
Chairman, Center for Labour Advocacy and Dialogue, Pakistan
A unified, portable, and trusted social protection system is essential for Bangladesh. Drawing on Pakistan's experience, implementing a single, integrated worker and beneficiary registry can reduce fragmentation and vastly improve program delivery. Social protection benefits must follow workers across employers and locations, utilizing mobile financial services for easy access. Transparency, public trust, and institutional autonomy are equally vital. Consolidating overlapping programs and introducing state co-contributions for informal workers will make social protection more accessible and financially sustainable.

Md. Forhad Siddique
Inspector General, Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments
Sector-specific interventions are urgently needed to extend social protection across Bangladesh's diverse workforce. Currently, DIFE maintains a database of approximately 700,000 workers, providing a solid foundation for developing a central worker registry through NID verification and database integration. Better coordination among existing benefit mechanisms, including the Employment Injury Scheme, the Sramik Kalyan Foundation, and various factory-level programs, can significantly improve coverage. Ultimately, a unified system will streamline worker identification and simplify access to essential social protection benefits.