Why are there no women on the RMG minimum wage board?



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Mohsina Begum is in her 40s; she has been in the RMG sector, stitching away for 18 years. She works almost 12 hours a day and receives Tk 18,000-20,000 a month, with overtime. Of her salary, Tk 8000 directly goes towards rent, and the rest is simply not enough to sustain her family, she told The Daily Star. She joined a garment workers' minimum wage protest in Mirpur at the end of October. Just like Moshina Begum, Laili Begum took to the streets as she could not afford her daily necessities, including proper meals and her children's tuition fees. Her children had to drop out of school.

This is an issue for female workers as much as it is for male workers.

On November 1, the government formed a new six-member wage board to revisit the wages of garment workers. All six members of the board are men, and they will decide what workers, many of whom are women, will be paid from January 2027 amid persistent protests by the latter.

When we look at the data, we can say that women built this industry. A recent report states that about half of the approximately 40 lakh garment factory workers are women, who contribute to over 80 percent of the country's export income, which translates to roughly $39 billion last financial year. Women's contribution has been used as a handy tool to make the Bangladeshi government, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) and various clothing brands look good. They have been advertised as the public face of success, but where are they when it matters the most?

New York University (NYU) Scholar Dina Siddiqi explains that every wage revision since 1994 followed mass protest and repression. Women have been at the forefront of the same protests since 1994. In November 2023, as workers rejected Tk 12,500 and held out for Tk 23,000, 23-year-old sewing operator and mother of two, Anjuara Khatun, was shot dead during a protest in Gazipur. Her husband blamed the police and told AFP that she was shot in the head. In other words, women also pay for each wage settlement when they protest.

The current wage board has been created under Section 138 of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. It is constituted by a chairperson, an independent member, two employer representatives, and two worker representatives. A district and session judge chairs the board, with a university teacher as the independent member, the secretary-general of the Bangladesh Employers' Federation, and a director of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association representing owners, and the president of Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal, and the general secretary of the Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation (BGIWF) representing workers. While the new board saw these positions duly filled, its gender composition again left women workers entirely unrepresented.



FILE PHOTO: **PALASH KHAN**

Women garment workers, along with their male colleagues, blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway in Gazipur on November 3, demanding fair wages.

Representation on the wage board means that the government and the employers know whose voice needs to be heard. The voices present in the meeting are the voices that get counted, and when women are being sidelined despite being on the streets demanding a liveable wage, it is of utmost importance to listen to them. Or else, the hypocrisy of advertising women's contribution to make the employers look good on paper but making decisions for them without giving them a floor to speak is laughable.

In 2006, Nazma Akter, the then president of National Garment Workers Federation, was appointed as one of the workers' representatives on the board. The then women's affairs secretary of Jatiya Sramik League Shamsunnahar Bhuiyan was on the 2018 board; in 2023, however, the board was again devoid of any female representation. To be effective, representation, whether male or female, must go beyond token appointments. Representation does not automatically mean that the person has the capacity to be firm on decisions. In fact, unions have previously complained that the appointees reflect official preferences more than the mandate from the workers. Even then, female representation matters, despite the fact that, Section 138 of the labour law does not mention anything on gender composition.

One reason why it matters is that those on the board must be genuinely accountable to the workers they represent. And there are capable women who can speak for the workers, so proper representation can lead to proper decisions eventually. Take, for example, Nazma Akter, who began factory work when she was 11. Later, she founded the Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation after facing persistent discrimination as a woman labour leader. Her organisation boasts over 70,000 women members. Taslima Akhter, president of the Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati and a former Labour Reform Commission member, was demanding a quick wage board in August. Then there is Kalpona Akter, president of BGIWF, whose general secretary now sits on the board. All this is to say that there is no shortage of women who could do the job.

These women are quoted in reports of almost every protest, but they are missing from places where it matters the most, especially when increased automation has started to cut down the number of women in the RMG workforce. Dina Siddiqi mentions Jacquard machinery, which simplifies textile production. Male labour is recruited specifically for this. She believes a "re-masculinisation" of garment production is underway. The wage board is emulating the same phenomenon.

In this connection, it is important to ask whether labour unions, from which workers' representatives on the board emerge, are themselves adequately representative of women workers. Despite the improved legal conditions for workers, including women, to organise and participate in trade unions following the 2026 Labour Act amendment, there is still considerable room for improvement. Practical difficulties continue to persist to this day. According to a 2025 BILS policy brief based on a 2024 field survey, 79 percent of respondents, who were workers and workers' representatives, reported women's presence in trade union executive bodies. However, the study did not establish what proportion of executive positions women actually occupied. There is an important distinction between women's presence in union leadership and their actual influence over decision-making. Without reliable and updated data on their share of leadership positions and the extent of their involvement in unions in general, it is difficult to assess how adequately their interests are represented.

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Since the late last century, Bangladesh's RMG industry has tremendously profited from women's labour. For four decades, women mostly ran the wheels of the sector, which propels Bangladesh's economy. If they are indispensable to building the sector and, in turn, the economy, why are their voices absent when it comes to deciding what their labour is actually worth?

New port rules, but where are the safeguards against monopoly?



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The government's new rules for appointing berth, terminal and ship-handling operators at Chattogram port are a welcome step. As *The Daily Star* reported on November 8, the Chittagong Port Authority (Appointment of Berth, Terminal and Ship Handling Operators) Rules, 2026, issued by the shipping ministry through gazette notification on November 5, introduce a formal framework for licensing, selection and supervision.

This is the first time gazetted rules have been formulated to govern the licensing and appointment of private operators. However, one crucial question remains: where are the safeguards against monopoly and excessive concentration in container terminal operations?

I raised this concern in a previous column in this daily, titled "Foreign or local, Bangladesh cannot afford a port monopoly". The nationality of an operator matters less than the competitive structure of the market. The country must not confuse the arrival of several international operators with the creation of genuine competition. The new rules, according to the above-mentioned report, provide for open tendering under the public procurement framework. Applicants generally require an operator's licence before bidding, while international terminal operators may be appointed through a separate statutory route with government approval.

Transparent appointments are important. However, competition for a concession is not the same as competition between terminals once those concessions are awarded. The former determines who secures a contract, while the latter assesses whether traders and shipping lines can choose among efficient, independently managed facilities for years to come. Even a fairly conducted tender could strengthen market dominance if its winner already controls substantial handling capacity through another terminal or an affiliated company. Hence, any licensing or appointment system should assess market concentration before awarding a concession, rather than investigate misconduct only afterwards.

Here, India's experience provides some insights. Recognising this danger, the country issued the Policy for Preventing Private Sector Monopoly in Major Ports in 2010, restricting the sole private operator handling a particular cargo category at a port, along with its associates, from bidding for the next terminal handling the same cargo at that port. The idea was to establish independent competitors rather than allow successive concessions to accumulate under common control.

The application of India's policy has evolved, so it should not be portrayed as a permanent blanket prohibition across all its ports. Nevertheless, its underlying principle remains useful: competition should be built into the concession structure.

Bangladesh could adopt a similar safeguard, adapted to local conditions. An operator already controlling a major container terminal should not automatically be allowed to control another competing terminal in the same relevant market. Where an exception is justified, an independent assessment should establish that it would not substantially weaken competition. The test must also cover subsidiaries, joint ventures, consortium partners and common beneficial ownership. Separate corporate names don't necessarily represent separate commercial interests.

The Competition Act, 2012 already offers a legal foundation for the country. Section 15 addresses anti-competitive agreements, Section 16 prohibits abuse of authority, and Section 21 addresses combinations harmful to competition. These protections should be explicitly reflected in terminal concession policy, with a defined role for the Bangladesh Competition Commission.

Before awarding a major concession, the government should review a bidder's existing terminal interests, affiliated businesses, current and projected capacity, and possible links with shipping lines and inland logistics facilities. An independent competition assessment should form part of the decision-making record, regardless of whether selection takes place through tendering or another lawful investment route. This is not an argument against successful operators or foreign investment, but for applying consistent rules to everyone.



An operator already controlling a major container terminal of a sea port should not automatically be allowed to control another competing terminal in the same relevant market.

FILE PHOTO: **RAJIB RAIHAN**

A trader's right to choice

The public benefit of a landlord port model should ultimately be measured at the cargo owner's end. Importers, exporters and shipping lines need alternative terminals offering reliable vessel handling, predictable delivery, and transparent commercial conditions. Without realistic alternatives, a dominant operator may face little pressure to improve its performance.

Independent terminals can compete through higher crane productivity, shorter vessel waiting times, more efficient gates, and attractive service terms. Where prices are market-responsive, competition can also put downward pressure on commercial charges. Of course, statutory tariffs require separate regulatory decisions. Even when tariffs are fixed, better service can reduce the overall cost of moving cargo.

But competition is ineffective when shipping lines face exclusive arrangements, related-party preferences, discriminatory access, or inadequate inland connections. A terminal cannot be considered a practical alternative merely because it has a different signboard. Traders must have meaningful choices in the services they can actually use.

This matters especially for the country's export economy. Delays, uncertainty and avoidable logistics charges eventually affect factory competitiveness, imported input costs, and consumer prices. The aim should be an open market that rewards efficiency instead of protecting market power.

A landlord needs independent oversight

The Chittagong Port Authority will remain the owner and guardian of strategic public infrastructure while private firms increasingly operate its terminals. That makes concession oversight more important. Every major agreement should include measurable investment and productivity obligations, non-discriminatory access, clear rules on related-party dealings, controls on ownership changes, transparent complaint procedures, and enforceable remedies. Publicly reported performance indicators would help distinguish efficient operators from those merely benefiting from their market position.

However, an authority that awards concessions and earns revenue from them should not be the sole judge of whether the resulting market remains competitive. A structured review involving the Bangladesh Competition Commission and sector specialists would provide an essential check. The legal framework should also distinguish ordinary five-year operator appointments from long-term infrastructure concessions that require more complex investment and risk allocation.

The newly issued rules are a starting point, not the final architecture of landlord-port governance. The government should now adopt explicit anti-concentration tests for future terminal awards, scrutiny of common ownership, independent competition reviews, and safeguards to ensure fair access for shipping lines and cargo owners. Existing lawful contracts should be respected while future decisions protect the market as a whole. The country should not replace a public monopoly with private monopolies. The true test of reform is whether traders have genuine choices, receive better services, and face lower overall logistics costs.