

Technical Paper

Rights, Benefits and Social Justice: Status of Women Workers Engaged in the Shrimp Processing Industries of Bangladesh

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Abstract

Labour rights and benefits and safety at work across the industrial sector in Bangladesh have been a key areas of concern and has attracted attention from various national and international labour rights organisations and also from buyers and consumers globally. After the tragic incident of a building collapse, killing more than a thousand garment workers at Dhaka in April 2013, the Generalised System of Preference (GSP) facility was suspended for Bangladesh by US markets; which also had ramifications on the labour non-compliance in the shrimp processing sector. The shrimp and seafood industry has been a very promising economic sector from which the country receives the second largest foreign exchange earnings. The inability to respond to the evolving needs of social compliance and implementation of labour rights made the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) to collaborate with the Bangladesh government and the export industry in developing manuals, training of trainers on the labour laws and also aid in their implementation. In this study an attempt has been made to assess compliance with labour rights legislation, and the benefits accruing from them by interviewing workers across selected shrimp processing factories. Though the assessment revealed perceptible progress, it still leaves much to be desired. Awareness has generally been raised, but many top executives are still not convinced and carry strong patriarchal views. The government has amended the labour laws, which require adequate vigilance and inspection to achieve better compliance, to benefit millions of poor workers engaged in this sector.

Introduction

The labour standards and work place safety has emerged as a serious issue for Bangladesh due to two tragic and deadly industrial accidents; the fire at Tazreen Fashions killing 112 workers on 24 November 2012 and the collapse of Rana Plaza, a poorly constructed eight-storied building on 24 April 2013 killing more than 1130 factory workers. Although it was mainly due to non-

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compliance to safety and building laws, it also was a reflection on the poor importance given to labour laws.

Bangladesh receives its second-largest foreign exchange earnings, after garments, through export of processed seafood including shrimp. In 2011-2012, the country had earned about 600 million USD by exporting 92,489 tonnes of processed shrimp and fish. The shrimp and seafood export earnings is consistent with a steady average growth of around 8% per year over the last three decades. There are 90 shrimp processing plants in the country, of which 74 have approval to export to European Union (EU) countries. Over 80% of the shrimp and seafood are being exported to EU countries, while the US market share is only about 4%, while other countries account for the remaining 16% of exports (DOF 2013). There are over a million people involved in the entire shrimp value chain including farmers, fry producers, depot owners, transport workers and many other traders engaged in ancillary activities. It is estimated that there are over 50,000 workers employed in processing factories alone, of which more than 70% are women. Permanent employees are mainly men, while about 80% of the casual contract workers are women, who are not supported directly either by the factory or by the contractors and are kept outside the purview of labour rules.

Fair wages and labour rights in the industry have been key areas of concern for buyers, consumers and civil society organisations in the country, as well as in the main importing nations the EU and the US. Both the seafood processing and the readymade garments sector have been under constant scrutiny from foreign buyers for violation of work safety, gross labour non-compliance and deprivation of other rights and benefits. The US had suspended Bangladesh's Generalised System of Preference (GSP) temporarily after the Rana Plaza accident. The US Trade Department is reviewing the government initiatives towards restoring the labour standards and safety before restoring the trade privilege. It is worth mentioning here that the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) raised the issue of exploitation of shrimp workers and filed a petition against Bangladesh with the office of US Trade Representative in 2007 to withdraw GSP facility (SC 2012).

The issue of compliance with labour laws has long been overlooked, both by the industry and the government departments who are supposed to regulate the industry. During the mid-1980s, the contribution of the industry sector including the fisheries was between 16 to 17% of the country's GDP, which doubled to about 31% in 2012 (MOF 2013). However, the institutional framework to enhance and support this growth has not been adequate. Rather, the regulatory bodies have been weakened, exposing a political reluctance on the part of the government to regulate the industry. Some estimates are that, over 50% of posts are currently unfilled in different departments under the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOL&E). No new recruitment or promotions have taken place for a long time and the incumbent officers, who are still young, tend to quit in search of better opportunities elsewhere with their educational & skill sets. As a result, the shrimp processing industry, seemingly not very different from the garment sector, has been trying to escape from social compliance and has been internalising their business issues through unfair labour deals across the shrimp processing sector. This is in spite of strong criticism regarding violation of work safety, non-compliance of labour laws and other deprivations.

Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used to carry out the study. The attempt was to assess the socio-economic conditions of workers, including their rights and benefits. The workers were interviewed during the training and awareness programmes undertaken by 'Better Work and Standards Program – Better Fisheries Quality' (BEST-BFQ), a project of United Nations Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) for Bangladesh, supported financially by the European Union and Norwegian Development Agency, NORAD. Personal interviews were conducted with over 1800 workers and other staff belonging to 28 selected shrimp processing factories located in five coastal districts. This was done during the factory based labour law training conducted for 59 batches of workers and other staff during the period July 2012 to November 2013 (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of respondents chosen for the study.

SL	Region	Number of factories	Number of batches	Workers trained		
				Women	Men	Total
1	Khulna	15	29	551	345	896
2	Chittagong	13	30	547	365	912
		28	59	1098	710	1808

During the two day training program for a group of 30 workers per batch, the participants were interviewed individually about their age, education, wage, leave and other entitlements and their problems at the work place. Structured questionnaire and open check list was used to collect information and anonymity, and secrecy were ensured for each interviewee. For better understanding, interviews with factory officers, managers, owners and industry leaders from Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association were also conducted, along with practical inspection of office records, personal file, pay roll, leave register etc. from individual factories. For policy issues, interviews with the Department of Fisheries (DOF) officials and field officials from the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOL&E) regarding the roles of the government, frequency of inspection, amenities provided, budget allocation and availability of manpower was conducted. This was possible because of the involvement of officers (from the Fish Inspection and Quality Control (FIQC) and MOL&E), as resource persons for training programmes organised for the workers inside the premises of the processing factories.

Results and discussion

The shrimp and seafood industry has been a very promising economic sector from which Bangladesh receives its second largest foreign exchange earnings, after readymade garments. The post-harvest shrimp processing industry has been quite responsive in recent years, in terms of better social compliance and improving labour standards. This has been due to reasons like the petition lodged by the Solidarity Centre, US in 2007 against Bangladesh and demanded withdraw of the GSP facility, on the charge that there exists child labour in shrimp processing factories.

Bangladesh denied the charge and demanded further investigation. Meanwhile, the industry also became cautious about the issue of child labour in the processing industry. During the inception of the Bangladesh Quality Support Program (BQSP) Fisheries project, UNIDO 2006-2010, the processing industry did not allow any project personnel or foreign consultants to enter the processing plants. Prior written permission had to be sought through the Fish Inspection and Quality Control (FIQC), Department of Fisheries (DOF) to visit any shrimp processing factory. Subsequent years has shown that the industry has become accommodative of the BEST project, which was able to carry out about 60 factory based labour laws trainings on inside factory premises from then on, and also allowed their labour workers and other staff to receive training for two consecutive days. The training was an opportunity to give hands-on support on how to improve the labour standards through compliance of labour rules.

UNIDO objectives and interventions

UNIDO had come forward aiming to provide technical assistance to the shrimp industry to improve its compliance level in order to increase competitiveness in the international seafood market. There were interventions both in Khulna and Chittagong region, the major shrimp processing zones of Bangladesh. The interventions included Training of Trainers, follow-up training for mid-level industry officials and factory-based training in labour laws and labour rights for processing workers and staff. Through the Training of Trainers training, 78 trainers from government departments were trained in a five day course and 217 mid-level officers from 51 processing units were trained for two days. Over 1800 workers and staff from 28 selected processing factories were trained, in 59 batches, on factory-based labour laws in the training programmes held inside factory premises. Five training programmes were organised for the Trade Union (TU) leaders, of the country's shrimp processing factories (Table 2) from 13 TUs registered officially. Apart from this, a couple of awareness meetings with the top level stakeholders including owners, managers and Bangladesh Frozen Foods Exporters Association (BFFEA) leaders were organised to inform them about the progress made thus far and to develop suitable solutions for the remaining challenges. Better compliance with labour laws is related to increased expenditure in most cases, which requires the consent of the owners as well.

Socio-economic status of women workers

The workforce employed in the shrimp processing industry is predominantly made up of women, most of them uneducated. Poverty, unemployment and a discriminating job market for women workers in rural areas compelled many of them to migrate to the urban industrial areas. The trend of urban migration by the women workers started from across the rural areas of Bangladesh during the mid-1990's. They resort to industrial jobs in the urban areas to escape from hunger, deprivation and negligence prevalent at their homes. Industrial employment is seen as a good indicator for women's empowerment and social development in Bangladesh, but how far this development is just, equitable and socially inclusive is questionable, at least in the case of women workers engaged in the shrimp processing industry. There is evidence indicating widening inequality resulting in social exclusion, which are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Table 2. List of labour law training and awareness activities taken under BEST-BFQ, UNIDO.

	Activities	Participants	Location	Number of events	Number of persons
1.	Training of Trainers (TOT)	Inspectors, MOL&E Quality Control Officers FIQC, DOF; Executives from Processing Factories & NGOs	Khulna Chittagong	04	78
2.	Follow-up Training	Mid-level Officials from shrimp processing factories	Khulna Chittagong	10	217
3.	Factory Based Training	Workers and Staff from shrimp processing factories	Cox's Bazar Khulna, Jessore Bagerhat Chittagong Cox's Bazar	59	1808
4.	Trade Union Training	Trade Union Leaders from shrimp processing factories	Khulna Chittagong	05	100
5.	Compliance Officer's Training	Compliance Officers/HR Managers	Khulna Chittagong	02	36
6.	Labour Contractor/Supervisor Training	Labour Contractor, Sub-Contractor & Labour Supervisor	Khulna Chittagong	02	40
7.	Compliance Review Meeting at Deputy Chief Inspector Office, MOL&E	Compliance Officers/HR Managers	Khulna Chittagong	02	32
8.	Awareness Meeting	Owners, Managers, Compliance Officers/HR Managers	Khulna Chittagong	06	170

From the Labour Force Survey 2010, it is evident that there is gradual shift of labour away from agriculture sector, including women's labour. Women's share of the total workforce in urban areas rose from 26% in 2003 to 36% in 2010 (BBS 2012). According to a recent estimate, about 50% of industrial workforce in Bangladesh is comprised of women.

Work in urban areas has given women a little more independence than that was available in rural areas, though they are forced to live in urban slums. The unmarried girls accumulate their wages to meet the expenses of their marriage, which is a big social burden in poor communities. It was found that 45% of women workers in seafood processing plants were unmarried in Khulna and 53% in Chittagong region. This could be the strong indication of how the working girls and women are forced to work to save for their dowry. The working wife and mother spends her income for the family, for educating the children, to meet the expenditure on health and helping the family to attain a level of resilience against financial shocks and threats. The survey revealed that 54% of the women workers from Chittagong region and 31% from Khulna region have their own cell phone. Nowadays, a cell phone is not only used for communication, it is also used widely to send money quickly through a system called mobile banking. Most working girls now tend to

wait and choose eligible bachelors as husbands, compared to the previous practice of marriages arranged by parents and relatives.

Girlhood is seen as a curse in most poor families in rural Bangladesh due to the inability of women to earn a living and the burden of dowry that falls on the family at the time of marriage (UNICEF 2010). On the other hand, boys are regarded as a sign of 'family fortune' due to masculinity, meeting the responsibility for continuing the family lineage and socially acceptable earning ability from jobs of some kind. Girls have to leave the parental house and must live with the husband's family. This tradition of discrimination between boys and girls tends to make the girl children, especially in poor families, to be neglected and subordinated within the family and in the society, often compelling them to opt for urban migration. During the investigation some examples were observed where working women and girls working in the shrimp processing industry are fighting against the oppression of dowry, early marriage and patriarchy.

Demographic factors

There are three types of workers engaged in the processing factories: permanent workers directly on the rolls of the factory, permanent workers under a labour contractor and casual workers under a labour contractor. It is estimated that 70-80% of the total workforce are under labour contractors. But neither the factory nor the contractors provided accurate information on the number and type of labour because of the sensitive nature of the labour issue.

It was observed that the shrimp processing industry had been losing labour which was probably related to the unstable and intermittent labour demand, depending on seasonality of the shrimp harvest. Working in chilled conditions and with wet raw material may also be another reason for labour dropout or out migration from the shrimp processing industry. However, it was also observed that there was a gradual increase in permanent labour compared to casual labour over the years. Though there is no previous evidence or studies, the assessment was that the general tendency of factories was to keep the permanent labour to a minimum and accomplish the major work through casual contract labour, during the peak harvest of shrimps. This helps the owners to keep labour costs to a minimum, while the deprivation of labour benefits to a large section of workers continues under the pretext of intermittent supply of raw materials. It was observed that a worker who had been working for many years in the same factory as a casual worker under labour contractor, had not been entitled to the basic privileges provided in labour laws, i.e. to be promoted or recognised as a permanent worker. Moreover, in order to hide this picture of deprivation, under reporting of contract labour was observed in most of the factories.

For the purpose of the training under the project, it was decided to keep spending of scarce resources and technical assistance for the permanent workers so that the industry continues to benefit in the long run. Both the FIQC and MOL&E field officials suggested selecting more regular workers for better knowledge sharing at the end of project. Thus, the majority of the participants were permanent workers, and two-thirds of them were women workers. Based on this, over 1,800 workers and staff were trained, of which about 86% were permanent workers of the factories, while only 8% and 6% of the participants were permanent workers under contractors and casual

workers under contractors, respectively. About 61% of trainees were women and 39% men workers.

Age composition

Majority (60%) of the workers from Chittagong region were young and fell in the age group of 18-25 years, while 57 % of the workers trained from Khulna region fell in the age group of 26-40 years. There was, however, no child labour (age below 14) in Khulna region while 8 girls below 14 were found to be working in Chittagong region during this study. Further, 74 (13.5%) girls between 14-17 years of age were from Chittagong region while 4 girls and 3 boys in this age group were observed from Khulna region (Table 3). In spite of the strong campaign in recent years against the use of child labour across the shrimp processing industry, it appeared that the processing plants situated in remote areas like Sunamgonj and Cox's Bazar in Chittagong employed child labour, which may be partially related to the poverty in the region where children are forced to support families and also because of little or no vigilance from the government inspection departments. It is to be mentioned here that adolescent (14-18 years) workers are allowed to be employed under special conditions, as per the country's Labour laws.

Literacy status

In terms of education, workers from Khulna region are better educated when compared to Chittagong region. It was found that 63% of women workers and 18% of men workers from Chittagong area were illiterate, while only 27% women and 7.5% men workers from Khulna region were found to have had no schooling. The mean number of schooling years was 8.84 for the men workers against 4.78 for women at Khulna region, while for Chittagong region the mean schooling years were 7.98 and 2.75 for the men and women workers respectively (Table 4).

Table 3. Distribution of processing workers received training according to their age group.

SL	Age group	Khulna		Chittagong	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
1	< 14	0	0	8	0
2	14-17	4	3	74	0
3	18-25	217	88	332	131
4	26-35	254	158	109	140
5	36-40	52	47	17	33
6	> 40	24	49	7	61
Total		551 (61.5%)	345 (38.5%)	547 (60%)	365 (40%)

Labour rights and benefits

Depending on the scale of operation, profitability of the business and availability of raw materials, there are variations across the processing factories in terms of labour rights and benefits. The rights and benefits affecting the socio-economic status of workers include their appointment

letters as a job security document that describes the work, gives details of the wage, hours of work, weekly holiday, number of days as paid leave and also gives some disciplinary instructions. This appointment letter is instrumental for protecting the rights of workers. A report by Solidarity Center 2012 says that 86% of workers in the Khulna region did not have any letter of appointment as of 2010. In the present study, it was observed that majority of the workers (79%) in the Khulna region had received appointment letters and 94% of them were also provided with identity cards. In the Chittagong region, only 31% of the workers received an appointment letter, although 54% of them were provided identity cards. The difference between the two studies can be explained by the fact that this study had 86% regular workers interviewed at work while the Solidarity Center study covered all workers and interviewed them outside their work place.

Table 4. Educational status of processing workers received training.

SL	Years of schooling	Khulna		Chittagong	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
1	0	148	26	343	66
2	1-5	200	41	91	40
3	6-10	167	177	98	153
4	11-12	25	55	5	53
5	>12	11	46	10	53
Total		551	345	547	365
Mean schooling year		4.78	8.84	2.75	7.98

However, the shift towards better compliance around Khulna region can be seen as the result of recent awareness and training programmes, along with pressure from the national and international labour rights organisations to enforce labour rules. The employers around Chittagong region were found to be not too willing to abide by labour rules and were reluctant to give the workers their lawfully due benefits.

Wage

The study found that the average wage paid in Khulna is BDT 3589.00 per month (46 USD) for women workers, which is 61% that of her male counterpart who is drawing BDT 5878.00 per month (76 USD). In Chittagong region, the average wage is BDT 3928.00 per month (50.6 USD) for women workers which is only 57% that of her male peers and equal to BDT 6847.00 per month (88.3 USD) (Table 5). The variation in wages among the men and women workers is partly due to the patriarchal attitude of employers and partly due to the better skill and education of men workers. The regional variations are also along expected lines due to differentials in living costs between the two regions. Chittagong being a port city and the second largest city of the country has a higher cost of living. Average labour wage levels in the shrimp processing sector, however, is higher than government declared minimum wage of BDT 2645.00 per month (34 USD). No one had reported receiving less than the minimum wage in Khulna region while 53 women (9.7%) and 3 men workers from Chittagong region reported receiving wage below the minimum wage declared by government. One reason could be the availability of cheap migrant labour in

Chittagong from neighbouring Myanmar which is ready to accept jobs in the processing factories for low wages.

Table 5. Wage disparity among the processing workers received training.

SL	Wage per month (BDT)	Khulna		Chittagong	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
1	2645<	0	0	53	3
2	2646-3500	367	22	210	34
3	3501-5000	159	152	230	110
4	5001-7500	22	104	45	120
5	>7500	3	67	9	98
	Total	551	345	547	365
	Mean wage per month	3589	5878	3928	6847

Note: 1 USD = 77.5 BDT in April 2014.

Leave and allowances

The situation as far as provision of leave and allowances is concerned are better in Khulna compared to Chittagong region. Such entitlements are usually mentioned in the appointment letter issued to the workers. Since Chittagong factories lag behind in issuing appointment letters and identity cards, it is only to be expected that leave provisions and allowances are also largely ignored. As the shrimp processing activities are subject to availability of raw materials and the shrimp harvesting season is limited to 5 to 6 months in a year, leave facilities in tune with lean periods are the norm in most of the shrimp processing factories, except for a few plants working round the year. There is mutual understanding between the employee and the workers that they will work extra hours during the peak harvesting season when factories receive good amounts of raw materials, while less work and more relief period allowed during lean and off-season periods. The casual workers prefer to do more hours of work as their wage is calculated on a piece rate basis, and for more earnings more work has to be carried out. Most of the factories claim that they have provision for maternity leave, though practically there is not much evidence of providing the benefits to the women workers from Chittagong region. Deputy Chief Inspector, Factories and Establishments, Department of Inspection, Khulna Division disclosed that total amount of maternity leave benefit paid was BDT 52,000 in 2010 and BDT 462,000 in 2011 from the shrimp processing factories around Khulna region. This sharp increase in payment of maternity benefit by the processing factories can be attributed fully to the BEST-BFQ Project activities along with the monitoring from Department of Inspection, MOL&E.

Since most of the factories are short of raw materials, the management claims that there is no need for overtime work and usually no overtime allowances are offered. If a worker works for two hours more than normal working hours during the peak harvest days, the wages she or he earns for those extra hours can easily be recovered by the factory during the lean season when there is less raw material and less work. It was observed that lumpsum overtime allowance had been paid in case of few factories during peak season. Similarly, a lumpsum festival bonus is also allowed

in most factories during *Eid* and *Korbani*; two major festivals for the Muslims in Bangladesh, though a provision for such bonus is not mentioned in the labour laws.

Compensation for accidents

Social security and compensation for accidents is very crucial for workers. In a country where industrial deaths and injuries are high, the labour laws provides for only BDT 100,000.00 (1282 USD) as compensation for accidental death of a worker and BDT 125,000.00 (1600 USD) for those disabled for life. The actual compensation, however, often stood at two to three times more than the prescribed amount, when industrial deaths have occurred by accident in the past. Higher compensation provisions have been demanded strongly by various activists and sections of the civil society, including the Trade Union leaders. However, there was no response regarding compensation amount received by the participants during this study.

Working conditions

The physical environment and work safety across the shrimp processing industries are better compared to other industries in Bangladesh. The structural developments in the shrimp processing sector in Bangladesh happened after 1997, as a result of the European Union (EU) ban on shrimp and seafood import from Bangladesh. The industry had to undergo serious overhauling by upgrading the infrastructure and machinery, including modernisation of internal layouts of the factories as per EU and Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) requirements. The shrimp processing industries in Bangladesh were then approved by the EU and it qualified for the withdrawal of the ban in 1997. The structural up-gradation and maintenance of the processing environment are prerequisites for handling of perishable raw materials like seafood. This also gave the workers comfortable, clean, healthy working conditions.

Safety and labour standards

Most of the shrimp processing factories are two storied buildings where the production work is done on the ground floor while the office and administrative blocks are situated on the first floor. Apart from illnesses due to working in chilled condition and wounds and scars on the hands from continuously working in peeling and de-heading, the shrimp processing industry is considered safe from risks related to building and fire safety, the two main threats generally levelled against the garment industry. Due to the forced infrastructural upgradation as a result of the EU ban in 1997, the shrimp processing industry had to follow the stipulated regulations and upgrade infrastructure including design and structure of the plants to return into the business.

Trade union

Trade Unions (TU) are officially allowed in the shrimp processing industries and there are 13 registered TUs as of 2012. Most of the TUs are new and only few TUs have actually shown some promise in redressing issues of the workers in workplaces. There are complaints that the TUs are domesticated by the industry owners to make them benign or harmless. Intimidation and risk

of dismissal was a major observation during this study, and in few cases TU leaders have been sacked in Khulna region (SC 2012). It is true that there has been no labour unrest across the shrimp processing industry, while widespread unrests have often been recorded across the garment industries in the recent past. The TU experience in Bangladesh industrial sector has not been very favorable. During the early 1980s, the Jute industry and nationalised banking sector have had TUs and Collective Bargaining Agency (CBA) in all the units of these industries. Strong politicisation of TUs and irresponsible actions by CBA leaders caused massive losses and destruction of the industry, while the TU and CBA leaders reportedly made illegal earnings. The fear of evolution of similar TU and CBA across the growing industry in Bangladesh can prove to be counterproductive.

Child labour and forced labour

The issue of child labour has been raised against the shrimp processing industry of Bangladesh. Verite (2012) attempted to explore existence of child labour and forced labour across the entire shrimp value chain and observed that there existed forced labour in the form of long working hours in processing and child labour, generally accompanying working mothers under a labour contractor. The current survey, however, did not find child labour across the factories in Khulna Region, while a small percentage of women workers were girls below 14 years in Chittagong region. Issuing appointment letters and identity cards have helped in reducing child labour. The introduction of compulsory birth registration programme by the Government has also been instrumental in controlling child labour as no manipulation is possible in date of birth to falsify age claims. Forced labour was also not observed in the factories surveyed. The workers enjoyed full liberty to quit their job at any time, if they could earn better wages in any other works. Labour drop-out is very common in Chittagong area, where alternative job options are available.

Gendered discrimination

The issues of labour rights and their benefits have usually not been looked at from gendered point of view by the entrepreneurs in Bangladesh. Creation of employment has always been considered a laudable accomplishment as perceived from an economic point of view. Labour rights and benefits and social discrimination that occur in the course of its implementation have not been looked at seriously because of the patriarchal notion that the creation of job is sufficient as far as an unemployed person is concerned. So, entrepreneurship has usually been patronised by the public sector government departments for the growth and development of the country.

During this study, many factories were identified where there were either no or few women workers employed under permanent pay roll. The permanent men workers are entitled to paid leave, use free canteen services and enjoy other privileges constituted by the management. On the other hand, hundreds of women workers are engaged through labour contractor as casual workers, but have never been promoted to permanent workers. The argument of by the management is that “*jobs are created for women workers. They should feel lucky because thousands of people including women are still unemployed*” or “*There is no hard and fast rule that we have to employ equal number of men and women under my factory*”. In one statement during factory inspection, one General Manager stated “*we have 2500 women workers in this factory, all are childless and*

hence we do not need any child care room". In another case, all of 155 permanent workers under a shrimp processing factory were men, with over 300 women casual workers under a labour contractor and the owner claimed his factory had better compliance. Deliberate gender discrimination is thus common in the shrimp processing factories.

Violence against women

This study also explored if there were cases of violence against women, especially common in the case of casual women workers under labour contractors. At least 70 women workers reported verbal abuse and harassment by their male counterpart, supervisor or by bosses. Thirty women respondents reported physical harassment, while nine young women workers reported sexual abuse at their work place. In majority of the cases, the victims are young and unmarried. It is true that women earn a monthly wage and are treated better in their families. They can spend their own income and take part in decision making within her family. Yet she has to face negligence, deprivations and violence at her work place when compared to her male counterpart. There are NGOs and individuals who came forward to assist victims lodging cases as per laws. Such actions are expected to be a deterrent to potential violators. However, the victims often do not want to come out in public fearing social stigma that may follow the disclosure of the incidence of violence and harassment.

Changes towards better compliance

There has been a change in terms of compliance of labour laws as observed from the factories during this study. A number of factories have appointed 'Compliance Officers' to look after labour laws and human resource management. Record keeping in precise formats in tune with compliance requirements for inspection is also being followed. Similarly, there are examples of processing factories that have started planning their own training programmes on labour laws. Training manuals developed by UNIDO are being used to impart in-house training for their workers and staff with the help of trained trainers. Some of the factories, both in Khulna and Chittagong, were seen using display boards announcing their labour policy along with photographs and news clips on the labour laws training, to demonstrate their changed attitude.

Challenges

There are no dearth of laws to govern the industry sector in Bangladesh. The issues arise when the industry units tend to bypass official rules. It is important to bring changes through political commitment and increased vigilance and inspection by the Government agencies to ensure labour rights and consequent benefits and social justice in the society, particularly for the women employed in the sector. The top management should also understand the value of better compliance and recognise that their reputation in the international market is linked to this. Among the most immediate needs to be addressed are wage revision, parity of wages between men and women, profit sharing and extending other employment benefits to the workforce engaged in the shrimp processing sector. Both the Government and the industry should work towards increasing the supply of raw material round the year, to ensure continuous employment. Research and

development is needed on new value added products so that the industry can diversify and also keep production going throughout the year and workers can have sustained livelihoods. Finally, an industry with better compliance should be able to fetch premium prices from the markets.

Conclusion

Labour standards and work place safety have emerged as serious issues for Bangladesh due to the recent industrial accidents and subsequent GSP suspension by the US government. The final withdrawal of GSP facilities in US and EU export market has been a driver in securing favourable work environment as per acceptable global standards. This has also been a reason for fixing the weakness in terms of complying with the building codes, and fire safety in the industry.

There have also been efforts by the Government to make necessary amendments to existing labour laws and it has been comprehensively revised and came into effect in July 2013. The shrimp and seafood industry falls under the purview of being monitored for labour compliance, as long as they want to export. It is, therefore, imperative to continue support to the shrimp and seafood industry to keep them up-to-date on matters related to better compliance in respect of amendments made in the labour laws. However, vigilance is needed, as the export sector will continue to have compulsions to keep costs low to ensure profits. There is also need for strong policy frame work and political commitment to enforce the rules, to see that the labour are not deprived of their rights.

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