

Trade Unions in Bangladesh: Promoting Safe and Healthy Workplaces in the Ready Made Garment (RMG) Sector

Foreword

This advocacy tool draws on the experience and progress in building the capacities of trade unions with the support of the ILO ACTRAV, the ILO RMG Programme in Bangladesh and ACTRAV Turin to strengthen their organizational and technical competencies to promote occupational safety and health.

In recent years, the RMG sector in Bangladesh has experienced a high number of workplace accidents including the fire at Tazreen Fashions and the collapse of Rana Plaza, a single incident that claimed the lives of over 1,200 workers. These events have had tremendous impact on workers' safety issues and in the overall RMG sector in the country.

A Joint Tripartite Statement by the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), adopted in 4 May 2014 helped catalyse the process of the development and improvement of policies, advocacy work and capacity building in the RMG industries, but more work remains to be done.

Given the large presence of women in the RMG sector, efforts to raise awareness and build campaigns will give special attention to the new generation of women who are making their initial steps in the workplace as well as in the trade union activities. We wish women to take part in processes and to make their voices heard to improve working conditions, including Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) in the RMG sector. As part of the UN system in Bangladesh, the RMGP supports the Government of Bangladesh in achieving its five years' plan and especially SDG Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth).

The main purpose of the advocacy tool is to highlight the important role and responsibility that unions could continue to play in building proper workers' awareness and action on OSH, building a preventative culture and helping establish OSH committees in workplaces. Trade unions are a centre piece in building safer workplaces.



"We cannot wait for future disasters before we act to make the world's factories and workplaces safe and decent places to work. Better working conditions are in everyone's interests; a safer industry does not mean a less profitable one".

Guy Ryder, Director General ILO

UNION workplaces are
SAFER workplaces.



Bangladesh celebrated National Occupational Safety and Health Day on 28 April 2017

Bangladesh RMG sector at a glance

RMG Sector:

- Over 3,500 exporting factories
- Around 4.2 million workers
- 55%-60% women

Export and Trade union presence

- 24.5 billion USD total RMG export earnings (2013-14)
- 80% of national export
- 3.5-4% factories with union presence



Case study 1

OSH Training Follow-up phase



After participation in training activities under the ILO's RMG programme, trade unions have been more active and better equipped to promote better working conditions and replicate the content of the learning to other workers. This case shows the training follow-up.

The follow-up actions of an OSH training will be as follow:

1. Train union leaders at factory level about occupational health and safety issues;
2. The trade union has to ensure that trade unions representatives have a voice in the safety committee
3. Undertake periodic union activities (every three months) in non-unionised

factories to raise workers' awareness on safety committees and support workers to form OSH committees;

4. Work actively to resolve safety issues in factories, including providing legal assistance if necessary, and inform buyers and Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety.

According to Ms. Rahman, a trade union trainer, "*we are getting good results in raising awareness on OSH among workers and promote a safety culture, but a lot has to be done. We are ready to work with government and employers to make sure that OSH is respected and safer workplaces are guaranteed to workers*".

Source: China R., RMGP programme, Dhaka, March 2017.

Building Union Capacity through Improving Working Condition in the RMG Sector

As part of the ITCILO capacity-building support, in partnership with ILO Country Office for Bangladesh, ACTRAV Turin, delivered a number of training activities targeting trade unions and workers' organisations to enable them to promote OSH.

The activities involved a core group of committed and dedicated trade unionists: workers, supervisors and managers in the RMG sector to improve safety in the workplace, especially focusing on prevention.

The core group comes mostly from affiliated unions under the National Coordination Committee for Workers'

Education (NCCWE) and the Industrial ALL Bangladesh Council (IBC). Since the project started in 2014, 64 core trainers, of whom 31 were women, have attended the training. These trainers are now actively promoting the implementation of appropriate OSH actions and programs in RMG workplaces.

In addition, the capacity building may have an indirect impact on promoting access to unions and their services. Qualified members for the core group carried out follow-up activities at the union and enterprise level with the support of the ILO.

Trade Union Capacity Building on OSH.

Actual total target beneficiaries are 2,355 NCCWE and IBC members

Female: 1,560;
Male: 790 affiliated union organizers

26 women leaders/organizers, including 11 from NCCWE and 15 from IBC



Key point.


If you are working in the RMG sector or any other sector in Bangladesh, no matter what age or gender, you are entitled to rights and dignity at work, including the right to join a trade union and to work free from unlawful discrimination and harassment.

As indicated by examples in this material, trade unions are valuable partners to promote and implement OSH in the workplace.

Focus on OSH activities in the workplace: views from Social Partners

In the four years since the Rana Plaza disaster there has been a lot of focus to improve the safety and overall workplace situation in the RMG sector, and in other industrial sectors in Bangladesh.

The ILO and social partners have been very active and supportive of such activities. Employers now understand that a safe and healthy workplace is a prerequisite for efficient productivity and smooth operation of an enterprise.



It is our firm belief that working together with the development partners and the government, we shall be able to bring in the required reforms at the workplace, and industrial accidents of such scale will not happen again.

Salahuddin A. K. Khan
President, Bangladesh Employers' Federation



Key point.

Scientific evidence and workers' perception show that when workers are represented by trade unions on occupational health and safety issues, their working environment is significantly better than where they are left alone with their concerns.

An independent study by Stanford University found that "unionisation in mining operations predicts 18-33 percent drop in traumatic injuries and 27-68 per cent drop in fatalities".

Source: Morantz A., Stanford University, 2011.

Owners/managers can inform workers about necessary actions to take to improve the safety of factories in many ways. The better-informed workers are, the easier it is to gain their involvement.

The attention on OSH contributes to create the enabling environment for engaging workers and employers in social dialogue and dispute prevention.

Effective social dialogue is the cornerstone of the policy process. It is essential for credible and effective OSH policies formulation and implementation. Trade Unions understand the importance of fostering together a preventive safety and health culture which also strengthens workplace occupational safety and health (OSH) systems.

Overall, some progress has been achieved in the following areas:

- Updating the National OSH Profile and developing a National Plan of Action on OSH.

- Working with employers' organisations to cascade basic OSH training to 750,000 – 800,000 workers in 585 RMG factories.

- Providing OSH capacity building to master trainers from NCCWE and IBC who will pass on these skills to some 3,000 workers.

- Developing an OSH KIT for initiating and building capacities of Safety Committees at factory level.

- Preparing advocacy and outreach campaign on OSH to help foster a culture of OSH in the country.

- Supporting the establishment of Safety Committees in Better Work factories.

- Raising women workers' issues such as sexual reproductive health rights, sexual harassment, adopting a gender approach to OSH, leadership and communication skills.

- Outreaching training activities through the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) involving NCCWE and IBC affiliated union targeting 2,355 workers at factory level.

Case study 2: Favouring OSH policies



Sahida has worked for the Solar Garments Limited since 2005. There are 250 workers in the factory, of whom 205 workers are women. She participated in at the training on workplace health and safety by Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation, funded by ILO. She learnt that staying safe in factories and working in conducive a environment are the legal rights of all workers. Sahida herself provided the manager with the list of Safety Committee members and discussed its role with them.

Afterwards, Sahida and the Safety Committee members went to see the factory owner and informed him about the following actions:

1) the Safety Committee provided three adjustable fans and replaced three new fans,

2) the Committee removed scattered wire and sewing machines now fitted with needle guards;

3) a guard has been placed on the exit staircase.

Sahida would like to see more Safety Committees in the RMG sector because she thinks that is beneficial for both employers and workers. Sahida said to the manager that if workers worked safely they wouldn't get ill. She affirmed that it would increase productivity and workers will feel safe in their workplace. After several discussions about workers' rights and the potential strike actions, the manager took steps to resolve the issues.

Souce: Morion F., RMGP programme, Dhaka, March 2017.

Unions in the forefront

The role of trade unions in Bangladesh, now more than ever, is crucial to ensure that the rights and interests of workers in the country are safeguarded and protected. Trade unions have made the following as their priorities:

- Improve working conditions, provide input on legislation and policy design;
- End violence and harassment against women and men in the workplace;
- Promote Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) awareness, capacity, and systems;
- Increase the direct interaction between employers' and workers' organisations on issues relating to labour inspection and OSH, which are two relatively un-controversial subjects among the social partners (compared to e.g. strikes and wage increases).
- Upgrade workers' skills, rehabilitation and skills training for victims.
- Mainstream gender issues in all

policies and programmes, including collective bargaining to promote women workers' rights.

Trade unions have placed OSH at the core of their functions and responsibilities.

Trade unions' activities must be focused, rights based, efficient and aligned with regulatory measures provided in the Bangladesh provisions provided in the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) and the Labour Rules (2016).

In addition, capacity building efforts have made significant impact on union actions and activities. According to OSH trainers interviewed in Dhaka in March 2017, since the OSH training activities begun, more than 1,300 workers, mostly women, have become members of registered RMG unions for the first time. Activities carried out also allowed unions to join and cooperate with other stakeholders. As an example, unions celebrated OSH Day last 28 April 2017, together with social partners and civil society, as a part of the OSH media campaign.

Key point.

OSH is a good recruitment and organising tool,
it is a personal as well as a collective issue.

Ask workers what their main problems are and inform them
how the union can support them.



Case study 3: Improving working conditions




Since 2009 Anju has worked at Jesus Fashion Limited. She attended the OSH training organized by Bangladesh Garments and Industrial Workers Federation supported by the ILO and BILS. The training raised Anju's awareness about the importance of occupational risks and hazards so much that she wanted to teach and sensitize other workers about the importance of preventive measures to avoid accidents in factories.

Anju spoke to the factory manager, about setting up a Safety Committee. She provided the names of workers and she negotiated a successful agreement based on women workers' demands. The Safety Committee brought to the factory safe drinking water, replaced old fans with new ones and installed one more adjustable fan to cope with the heat during working hours;

they removed cartons from the staircase and walking areas; they placed a guard at emergency exit and kept the exit door always open. Anju is now the President of Jesus Fashions Trade Union but still believes that there is a need to continue follow-up training, particularly about safety provisions under the labour law.

Source: Mosammat Anju Begum, Jesus Fashion Limited, Dhaka, March 2017.

What more needs to be done



There are still some challenges with owners who are afraid that if unions form in their factories that productivity will suffer but the opposite is true. We need to show that unions will be good for business. More Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining will help lead to Decent Work and better factory productivity.

*Alhaj Sukur Mahmud
President of JSL (Jatiyo Sramik League)*

According to comments offered by OSH trainers, future capacity building activities should involve:

- **More inclusive training, especially at the factory level.**
- **More in-depth knowledge on labour law and legal provisions.**
- **Participatory learning methods for adults, especially visual (photos and video) to keep workers engaged.**
- **Further OSH-related materials which integrate discussion about workers' rights and industrial relations.**

Work is now underway to build a dedicated multi-disciplinary safety agency so that the competencies

and skills developed over the 2013-2017 are combined in one agency that can manage structural and fire safety in industrial production. Towards supporting RMG affiliated unions, the new ILO programme on Social Dialogue and Industrial Relations (SDIR Project) has established Workers Resource Centres, a joint platform for advocacy, capacity building, labour dispute settlement and collective bargaining.

The key tasks are to consolidate the good work achieved so far and to further build a sustainable regulatory framework for the long term. By doing so, we will create significant and positive OSH changes for the workers employed in the RMG sector in Bangladesh.



Future areas of Union action on OSH

1. Identification of risks
2. Information and training
3. Participation in Safety Committees in the workplace
4. Organisation of actions, evaluation and follow-up
5. Building a culture of respect towards the health, safety and well-being of workers

Where to find more information and Ideas

Since March 2017, trainers can access capacity building materials through ILO's E-platform <http://www.ilo.org/dhaka/lang--en/index.htm> both in English and Bengali, including the following:

- Publications, manuals, legal instruments on labour inspection and OSH;
- Standard procedures and tools to ensure consistency in labour inspections;
- Good practices on labour inspection and OSH;
- Self-study materials.

The ILO is ready to continue its support towards the enhancement of working conditions and labour rights in Bangladesh.

A new ILO social dialogue initiative funded by Sweden and Denmark will focus on the development of dialogue mechanisms and relations at workplace level between employers and workers over the next few years.

Meanwhile, ILO's RMG programme is set to enter a second phase to carry on its work to enhance workplace safety and governance.

You can find more information about the projects and materials developed through the ILO website and ILO Country Office in Bangladesh website.

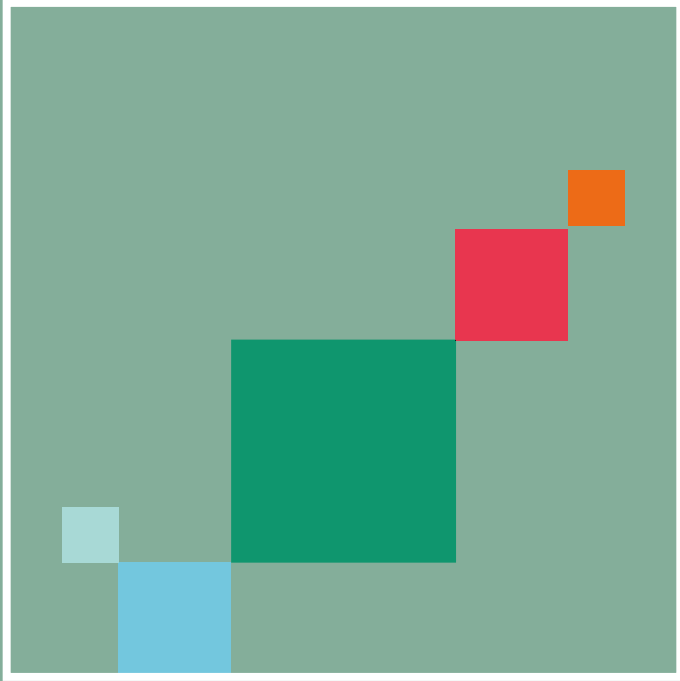
ACTRAV-Turin also created a virtual space to provide a collection of some good examples which tap into emerging practices and contribute to implement social dialogue in Bangladeshi RMG sector.



Covers of visual aids material for ILO RMG workers produced under the project

***Impossible to
achieve OSH
without
trade unions***

Source: International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC)



ILO's activities to improve working conditions in the Ready Made Garment Sector as well as to improve labour rights and social dialogue are supported by

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