

Letter to the Editor

Status of Bangladeshi female ready-made garment workers

Sir,

Factory level workers help empower workers at shop floor level about health and safety. This is even better when owners work with them as a team. Training should not be about giving directions. Education has to be coupled with advocacy, training and empowerment. The empowerment of workers is for sustainable change focussing on long term betterment. The goal is capacity building and to make a skilled advocate. The final outcome is for structural provisions to improve and workplace practices to change. The medical services for the workers should also be in the agenda. Gender should be highlighted and women's health and safety should be in the fore-front. The empowered workers can now speak up for themselves. There is a diversification with different sectors. Everyone should be equipped with International occupational safety and health (OSH) standards.¹

To avoid accidents, workers now have access to personal protective equipment (PPE) of eye guard, middle guard and pulley cover. They are also aware that if there is a crack in the wall, there is no problem, but if there is a crack in the beam, roof etc. then there is an issue of accident. According to Bangladesh Labour Law, if there is a presence of 50 workers or more, a safety committee has to be there. There should be an employee union. Safe work and safe environment is a requirement for workers. The Bangladesh labour law 2006 has been revised in 2009, 2010, 2013 and 2018.²

The personal experiences shared by the workers reflect that they are now aware that they always have to wear PPE all the time and not only during buyer inspection. They are aware that if they do not wear mask, they will contract tuberculosis, and now COVID-19. If they do not wear eye guard, their eyes will be harmed. They are now trained to identify harmful cracks. They are now aware about better layout of machines to avoid accidents by trial and error. They are also aware about maternal health and maternity cover and also issue like not using stairs during pregnancy. The workers are trained to point out risks now. Many workers now feel that training will help improve economy and occupational health and safety due to training. The garments sector in Bangladesh is divided into three-accord, alliance and national.³

There is now continuous training including fire safety training. The world's seven to ten top companies are now in Bangladesh. There is now better fire safety and compliance issues. In an earlier case study of a factory fire,

it was found that fire service number was not available and the management people went down to smoke filled room.

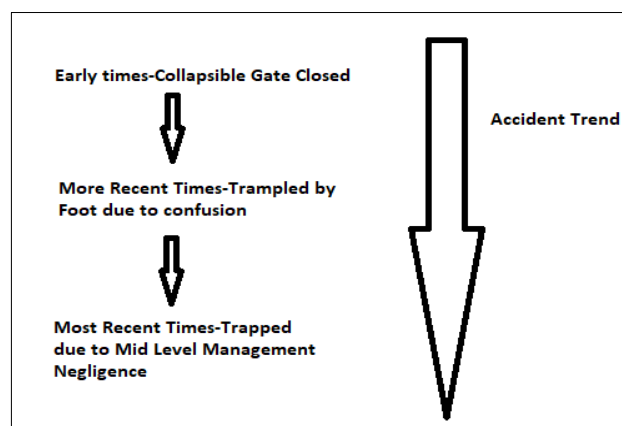


Figure 1: Accident trend of workers in RMG sector of Bangladesh.

It has been noticed that whenever fire safety trainings are stopped, after first being started in 2007, there is an increase in probability of fire incidents. The first fire accident was in 1990. ILO has put forward a national action plan for dealing with disasters in garment factories. Factories now have collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

If there is no trade union, there is no democracy. There is gender violence for 38% of female RMG workers. 67% women face harassment on way to work, of them only 3% can get legal help. The harassment of female workers should be looked into. There is a large number of female workers in the garments, tea and leather industries of Bangladesh. The tea sector allows all saved money to be taken on the day of the retirement of the worker, which is not prevalent in the garments industry as yet. 80% female RMG workers suffer from anaemia due to ill nutrition and 20% suffer from tuberculosis.⁴

Recommendations which can be put forward is to ensure women inspectors are taken for better empowered woman worker. 80/90 year old men head trade union of 25-30 year old women. It should be taken into consideration that workers are represented properly. Workers have to be well to lead life as workers lead economies. There should be a vision for the future. People should understand that fire is a physical hazard and worker wellness can also be affected by chemical and biological hazards. Ergonomic hazard can take up to 20 years to heal. Chemical hazard effects can crop up many years later. Union leaders should look at all

three types of hazards. Problem with ergonomic injuries is it can take place at home, so hard to provide compensation if problem is not pin-pointed. Fire exit costs should be quantified. This will make it sustainable. Bangladesh should become self-sustained so that workers do not need to migrate to other countries.

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Cite this article as: Shamsi T. Status of Bangladeshi female ready-made garment workers. *Int J Community Med Public Health* 2021;8:4644-5.