

Compliance is key

A new campaign to ensure labour compliance in Bangladesh's economically vital shrimp processing industry, promises labour rights to women working in the sector

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Bangladesh receives its second-largest foreign-exchange earnings through export of processed shrimp and seafood. In recent times, however, fair wages and labour rights in the industry have been key areas of concern for buyers, consumers and civil society organizations in the United States (US) and the European Union (EU). Both the major export-oriented shrimp and seafood processing sector and readymade garments sector have been under constant threat from foreign buyers for violation of work safety, gross labour non-compliance and other deprivations. The issue of labour compliance has long been overlooked both by the industry and the government departments supposed to regulate the industry.

During the mid-1980s, the contribution from industry to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country was between 16 to 17 per cent, which doubled to about 32 per cent in 2012. However, the institutional support to embrace this industrial growth has not been adequate. Rather, the regulatory bodies have been weakened, exposing a political reluctance on the part of the government to regulate industry. Some estimates place over 50 per cent posts currently unfilled in different departments under the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MOL&E). No new

recruitment or promotions have happened in a long time, and the incumbent officers who are still young and skilled tend to quit in search of better opportunities elsewhere.

The shrimp and seafood export earnings have been maintaining more or less a steady average growth of around 10 per cent per year over the last three decades. There are 162 shrimp processing plants in the country, of which 74 have EU approval. It is estimated that there are over 50,000 workers employed in these processing factories, more than 70 per cent of whom are women.

Women workers, constituting the majority of the workforce engaged in the post-harvest shrimp processing industry, have neither been trained adequately on social compliance nor imparted skill training to improve their performance. Unlike men, most of the women in the industry are employed as casual workers, at lower wages, without being absorbed into the permanent workforce even after years of work.

In this context, a new campaign to raise awareness on labour rights is taking place in the country's shrimp processing industry. Rigorous efforts on training and motivation are being taken, using customized training programmes for workers and staff, with systematic monitoring and evaluation by the Fish Inspection and Quality Control (FIQC) Office, Department of Fisheries.

Training courses on labour laws conducted for government officials, executives and mid-level management up to the end of 2011 resulted in a good foundation for the actual implementation of labour rules. A total of 78 officers were trained under a Training of Trainers programme: 29 from MOL&E, 24 from FIQC, 20 from the major shrimp processing factories, and five from two non-governmental organizations. The objective was to prepare a pool of trainers to impart training on labour laws in future.

The training and awareness programme has, since July 2012, shifted emphasis to training workers in factories on their rights and obligations. The programme is jointly organized by the Department of Fisheries and MOL&E under a project titled "Strengthening of Compliance Level of Labour Laws across the Shrimp Value Chain in Bangladesh". With technical assistance from the Better Work and Standards Programme–Better Fisheries Quality (BEST-BFQ) of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the training courses are funded by the EU and the Norwegian Development Agency (NORAD). Shrimp processing factories hosting the courses are chosen on

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Participants from the shrimp processing industry at the labour laws training programme organized by BEST-BFQ project, Bangladesh

the basis of number of workers, processing and export performance, and management motivation.

Both contract and permanent workers are taken in but the aim is to ensure that the majority of participants are women workers. Office staff and junior executives are also included to enable their participation in fair labour management. Group work and individual participation are key elements of the course. The participant workers are asked to deliberate on, and discuss, the question: "What are your problems at work?" They are urged to also suggest possible solutions. The workers then present the results of their group work to the trainers and factory officials.

The participants are taught the basic provisions of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. The sessions cover areas related to Appointment Letter; Identity Cards; Wage Rules; Working Hours; Overtime; Leave Rules; Maternity Benefits; Baby Care; Occupational Safety; Compensation for Accidents; and Duties and Responsibilities of Workers. The mode of training involves lectures and discussions. The main learning points are reiterated several times to enable all participants to understand and remember them. At the closing session, the class is divided into two groups, each being asked to prepare 10 to 15 questions for the other. For every correct answer, 10 points are given. This gives participants a chance to reinforce their understanding.

A total of 46 batches of factory-based labour law training have been held in the regions of Khulna and Chittagong, covering 1,410 workers and staff from shrimp processing factories, during the period July 2012 to February 2013.

Labour training at factory level for the shrimp processing industry has been well accepted by the industry stakeholders. An External Evaluation Mission, commissioned

by UNIDO Headquarters, which carried out a field evaluation during the period 18 March to 4 April 2012, recommended that labour training be continued both at factory and residence or slum to benefit all workers.

The UNIDO initiative has encountered several positive responses. Twelve factories have appointed Compliance Officers for the first time in the Khulna region. These factories have prepared their own Annual Training Plan on labour laws. Similarly, in the Chittagong region, eight factories have appointed Compliance Officers, two of whom are women. MOL&E has also increased training and inspection activities across the shrimp processing industry after the UNIDO project. The Industrial Relations Institute (IRI) and the Labour Welfare Centre under the Department of Labour now offer five-day training on Labour Laws at the factory level in the regions of Chittagong and Khulna.

Certain challenges, however, remain. Contract workers—80 per cent of them women—working under labour contractors, have suffered intense labour law violation. Wages paid to labour contractors, as against work done by casual contract workers, is not subject to audit. Thus, it is unclear how much of the wage is deducted by contractors as commission. However, problems of non-compliance are less in the Khulna region, where 80 per cent of the industry is situated.

BEST-BFQ is trying to help the shrimp industry through technical assistance to improve its compliance level and hence to increase Bangladesh's competitiveness in the international seafood market. The industry is also trying to respond positively through better compliance. It is expected that this new participatory drive will offer a way forward in establishing better social compliance across the economically important shrimp processing industry in Bangladesh. ❏

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