

SPEAK UP AGAINST VIOLENCE

Demanding Accountability: Protection and Advocacy for Violence-free Workplaces

INTRODUCTION

The Ready-Made Garments sector is playing an effective contributory role in ensuring employment generation, poverty reduction, economic growth and sustainable development. Women are undoubtedly at the frontline as key actors in this sector¹.

However, women are discriminated against at the professional, personal, and community levels in many ways across the globe. They are not treated equally at the workplace in many societies due to the dominance of the patriarchal social system and traditional norms. Women also face harsh and challenging conditions in their professional life, including sexual harassment and denial of maternity leave or benefits. Gender-Based Violence is a human rights violation, and its immediate and long-term effects on the physical, sexual, and mental health of women can be devastating, even leading to death².

To address and confirm actions for zero-tolerance against gender-based violence (GBV) at the workplace and in the community, workers need to understand what constitutes GBV, the power dynamic at play and how GBV impacts their lives and rights as women and workers.

For this purpose, **Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity-BCWS** organized 30 sessions with 150 participants from 20 factories (135 female and 15 male, in 10 groups, interviewed thrice) to contribute to a deeper



30 SESSIONS



150 PARTICIPANTS



**154 CASES
COLLECTED**

understanding of GBV in Bangladesh and an evidence base for subsequent research, advocacy and communication purposes. During these sessions held between October to December 2020 in Dhaka (Ashulia), Gazipur & Narayanganj districts, 154 cases were collected that occurred in communities, commutes and workplaces. These cases rather work as a reflection of the pain, anger, and vulnerability of the victims. These sessions, considered to be taboo otherwise, Female workers were unwilling to share their own stories due to stigma and fear of job loss. In most cases, workers shared their coworkers' incidents, that too during the third session.

1 https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---ilo-dhaka/documents/publication/wcms_754669.pdf
2 <https://actionaid.org/news/2019/80-garment-workers-bangladesh-have-experienced-or-witnessed-sexual-violence-and>



DEVOID OF SECURITY AT HOME

My name is Sultana. I'm 25 years old. I left my village to start working here at the Zamuna Garments factory to overcome poverty. The factory was closed during the pandemic, and the factory authority paid very little, not even enough to bear food expenses. It was also impossible to pay house rent at that time, with so little money being paid.

After four months, the house owner demanded the rent. I asked for some additional time and told him that I would pay all the due immediately after the factory's reopening. The owner said, "Meet me at night and I will not take your rent." I was horrified, and humiliated at such a proposal. "You are like my father. How could you think so? You should not ask me to do this," I told him. This made him angry. "I do not care about what I should do and what I should not. If you sleep with me, you will not have to pay the rent," was his reply.

"You must leave the room after paying the rent tomorrow," he said after I refused his obscene proposal. And this is not the only instance of harassment that I had to face. There is a grocery shop close to my rented room from where I buy the essentials. The shopkeeper would always act creepy whenever I was around. He would say the nastiest things, like "You're so beautiful, can't you give me a little?" I always declined his indecent proposals, and reminded him that he has a wife and children. "So what? Let us go for an outing. I will pay you Tk 500 (USD 5.82). You can feed your children well," he would offer, repeatedly. One day I snapped and told him that if he gave me Tk 1000 (USD 11.65) in advance, I would go with him. "No advance. First, you come with me and then I will pay," was what he replied.



THE WOMAN IS TO BLAME

My name is Sharifa Banu. I have been working Altra Fabric factory as an Sewing Operator for several years.

One day it got late at work. It was about 10:40 pm. It takes a fare of Tk 5 to go from the factory to my residence by bus. Tired after the day's work, I got on a bus to return home. There was very little room left and I was standing by holding the hanger, resting my head by my arm. The man standing behind pinched me on the hip. I felt a sudden rush of pain but was puzzled about what was happening. He did it twice. I looked at him and asked him to take his hand away, but he paid no heed. He continued pinching for at least five minutes. At one point, I lost my temper and pushed him

back. But what I forgot was that I am a woman.

All the passengers on the bus started blaming me after this. "Why did you push that aged person?" they asked. I was scared, and I hesitated. I told them "why don't you ask him". Sensing my diffidence, the men on the bus started talking in favour of the perpetrator. No one stood by me. "Women are to stay at home, especially after the evening. These notorious women screw up situations on the bus, the roads, and everywhere else," they said. "These women are from bad families. How will they be of any good?" It went on and on.



UNTOLD PRESSURE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE AT THE WORKPLACE

I am Rumi. Four months ago, I joined Best Way Limited as an operator. From the very beginning, I have been tolerating the abusive behaviour of several male colleagues here. Almost every day, they taunt me by saying that my husband doesn't look smart enough and that ours is quite a mismatch. Repeating such and other vulgar talks, they always try to convince me to agree to their inappropriate proposals.

One of those young men working at line quality once asked my phone number. I politely refused. A couple of days later, he proposed that I go on a date with him. I said no, again. I stopped talking to him and other men who will stare at me inappropriately. From then onwards, he regularly yells at me on lame excuses and little slips of my work, leaving no way for me to keep quiet about this. I asked him not to throw slangs at me, in the most civil

manner possible. But he only got rougher with his words.

I shared the issue with another operator working with me, who seems like a gentleman. He advised me to complain to the Production manager(PM). Unfortunately, I still do not dare to share my sufferings with the PM, because I have only been working here for four months. I'm still under my probationary period. After learning the experiences of my female colleagues, I now know that complaining during my probation may cause my own dismissal.

I am still not sure if I would be able to seek fair treatment even after my job is permanent. I feel this invisible, crushing pressure every day, but I think I may have to somehow survive through my vulnerability and the violence inflicted upon me, silently.



NO WAY WITHOUT THE VIOLENCE

I am Sofura Khatun, Worked as an operator, aged 25, from Gaibanda district. One night, I was going to Gobindanagar by bus. All the passengers of the bus were asked to get down a long way before reaching the destination, but the helper told me to stay seated. I asked why. "I will move you to another bus going to Gobindanagar," he replied.

I noticed that two more young men got on the bus at that time. "Where to?" they asked, and I told them. "This bus is not going to Gobindanagar," they said. They also asked me to put off my mask, saying it hid my face.

"Why should you look at my face?"

"I think you look beautiful," said one of the two.

I sensed danger and instantly got off the bus. Five young men had also got off the bus right before I did, and they helped me reach home.

After a few days, the bus driver's assistant from that bus called me on my phone. He took my number from me at the ticket counter that day. "There might be unknown problems on the journey," he said while taking my number. "Why did you get off the bus? You will be in trouble," he told me.

"You called in two more unknown men. I felt like I was in danger. So I left."

Later, I shared the situation with my uncle. We, women, are unsafe everywhere.

TYPES OF GBV AT WORKPLACE



Emotional Violence

- Making someone stand in front of the superior's room;
- Scolding/shouting using abusive language;
- Spreading rumours;
- Taking photos;
- Showing vulgar/untoward photos;
- Sending obscene/sexually explicit photos/SMS;
- Writing obscene/vulgar texts on bathroom walls;
- Threatening to fire someone from their job;
- Leering;
- Increasing workload due to sexual advance rejection;
- Eve-teasing, mugging or scaring someone of police harassment while they are returning home at night;
- Harassment during security checking;
- Not approving required leave;
- Increasing workload on pregnant women.



Physical Violence

- Finding excuses to touch different body parts;
- Poking head, pushing by grabbing shoulders/neck;
- Winking;
- Beating/physically assaulting;
- Calling into the chamber and molesting;
- Throwing things (such as thread ball) etc;
- Rubbing the back and pulling undergarments;
- Pinching cheeks.



Sexual Violence

- Leering and making unwarranted comments by male colleagues, senior officers;
- Sharing unwanted personal sexually explicit stories;
- Singing vulgar songs;
- Making sexually implicit comments;
- Giving proposal to establish sexual relationship;
- Giving proposal to accompany and stay-over at night;
- Calling or referring to someone 'Sexy Stuff'.



Economic Violence

- Forcing someone to resign after they refuse against sexual proposal;
- Not paying full salary;
- Not paying all their dues;
- Not providing maternity benefit in full;
- Illegally deducting from salary for days of absence.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADDRESSING GBV



Government

- Ratify ILO Convention 190 on Eliminating Violence in the world of work.
- Analyze the existing Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 and Labour Rules 2015 to adopt/reform and address violence and harassment at workplace.
- Raise mass awareness against GBV through audiovisual media, booklet, poster, online campaign following HC guidelines
- Develop a set of strong monitoring tools. Regular monitoring by DIFE focusing on GBV issues and High Court guideline 2009.
- Raising awareness against GBV in the workplace by Labour Department and develop a monitoring system.
- Develop a transparent and mandatory reporting system where factories are asked to submit their monthly Gender complaint reports.
- effective complaint committee as per the High Court directives (2009)
- Enabling workers to complain without reprisal
- Monitor GBV situation at workplaces by establishing an intuitive reporting process and develop a format by factory management to address GBV in the short term, mid-term and long term periods
- Adopting or reviewing organization policy regarding the prevention of violence at the workplace and initiating a zero-tolerance policy against GBV in factories
- Addressing the issues regarding the mental health of the workers, such as excessive production pressure, verbal sexual harassment etc
- Ensuring safe transportation facilities for female workers.



For Brands:

- Adopting zero tolerance policy of their code of conduct
- Adopting ZERO tolerance on GBV in brands business policy and their code of conducts.
- Access to remedy for rights holder without reprisal.



Factory

- Build the factories as gender-sensitive workplaces by forming a functional and



For Trade Unions and Worker Rights Organizations:

- Inclusion of women's voices in future negotiations through creating and promoting opportunities for women's leadership in worker representation and union
- Trade Unions, Labour Rights Organizations and Civil Society Organizations work together to achieve a GBV free workplace.
- Urging the government to ratify ILO C190 and pass a law regarding the prevention of GBV and sexual harassment at workplaces

The Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) is a prominent labor rights advocacy organization based in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The organization aims to empower and support workers who are seeking decent working conditions and to advocate domestically and internationally for greater respect for labor rights. BCWS especially emphasizes the rights of women workers, gender equality, participation of women workers in bargaining, and protecting the human rights of women and children. BCWS was founded in 2000.



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