

REPORT

ADVOCACY WORKSHOP

"CLEAN CLOTHES: IMPROVE OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH COMPLIANCE OF READY MADE GARMENTS WORKERS IN BANGLADESH"

01 August 2015

Venue: BRAC Inn Centre
Dhaka, Bangladesh



BASUG e.V. organised an advocacy workshop on 'Clean Clothes: Improve Occupational Safety and Health Compliances of Readymade Garments Workers in Bangladesh' at the conference room of BRAC Inn Centre in Dhaka, Bangladesh on Saturday, 1st August 2015. The workshop was a part of BASUG's project on Clean Clothes with the support of German International cooperation agency, Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH and Centre for International Migration and Development (CIM). The objectives of the project among others are: to create awareness and improve occupational safety and health compliances in the Readymade Garments (RMG) sector and ensure social security of the RMG workers in Bangladesh.

Information Minister of Bangladesh, Mr. Hasanul Haque Inu attended the workshop as chief guest. The opening session was addressed by BASUG Chairman, Mr. Bikash Chowdhury Barua, Executive Editor of International Network of Alternative Financial Institutions (IFAFI), Mr. Atiqun Nabi while media expert, Mr. Muhammad Jahangir was the moderator. The second session was addressed among others by BASUG Advisor and Director Projects, Dr. Ahmed Ziauddin, Deputy General Manager of Bangladesh Bank, Mr. Md. Ashraf Alam, Advisor of GIZ, Dr. Naushad Faiz, Director of BRAC Diversity and Migration Program, Ms. Sheepa Hafija, chief of Action Aid, Ms. Farah Kabir and Garments workers leader, Ms. Najma Akhtar.

About 70 representatives from garments sector, development organisations, human rights organisations, government offices and agencies took part in the workshop held with the support of international cooperation agency of Germany GIZ and Centre for International Migration and Development CIM. A documentary film produced by BASUG Germany on the safety and health issues in the garments industries in Bangladesh was screened after the opening ceremony.

Addressing the workshop **Information Minister of Bangladesh, Mr Hasanul Haque Inu** said, most of the workers employed in more than five thousand garments factories are women. As a consequence the economic condition of women has improved on the one hand and on the other hand women have been empowered. So for the sake of development of the women community, we have to keep the garments industry alive, active and profitable. The Minister added, in this age of globalization Bangladesh government has taken a number of realistic steps to make the garments sector advanced so that they can meet the international standard and level. Under this initiative, he said, more than two hundred inspectors have been trained up to watch the safety measures in the garments factories. Moreover, there is a provision of trade union to demand the due rights of the garments workers in Bangladesh and complying with the standard of the International Labour Organization (ILO) there are rules of minimum wage, fixed working hours and health facilities for the workers. But we need to realise these rules and regulations properly, stressed Minister Mr. Inu.



(Photo: Information Minister Mr. Hasanul Haque Inu (2nd from left) is speaking at the workshop. From right are: Media expert and moderator, Mr. Muhammad Jahangir, BASUG Chairman, Mr. Bikash Chowdhury Barua, the Minister & INAFI Executive Director, Mr. Atiqun Nabi)

The Minister was critical of Bangladeshi mass media of crying up with negative image of the situation of garments workers in Bangladesh. He said, the media in Bangladesh is showing the dead bodies or even burnt bodies in their outlet. Even when a girl is coming out from the debris of Rana Plaza, some journalists were asking her questions and about her feelings. This, he added, cannot be supported from the perspective of humanity.

Minister critical of western buyers

In his speech Minister Inu demanded increased price of Bangladesh products from the buyers for the benefit of the garments workers. In this respect, he criticized the policy and strategy of the Western buyers, who are making huge profit buying the Bangladeshi garments products at a cheap rate through tough bargaining. The western buyers, he complained are not paying the ethical price for the workers. He said, the Western buyers are demanding the safety, health, fair wage and environment for the workers, but they do not agree to pay a bit higher price for the workers.

He added, the garments industry in Bangladesh has grown up without any right plan and structure. It has developed here and there just hiring some buildings. So we are to work a lot to develop all suitable facilities for this industry. We have already overcome the challenge of child labour. Now we are trying to comply with other international standards. But the international community is crying without logical support and help. Actually I want to say, there is a conspiracy against our garments industry.

“Will stop garments production if buyers don’t pay good price”

I warned, “if you do not increase the price of our products, we will take our steps, we will stop garments production. Then what will you do, you will remain without clothes. So we strongly demand to increase the price of our products and it will be helpful for us to offer more facilities to our workers”. The Minister said, ‘the present government updated the labour law and offered opportunities for the trade union. We have also increased the measures for safety in work place. We have done it for our own interest.’ He added, we will work in our own way, gradually we are improving and we will develop the situation. But surely we will not go alone in the age of globalization. We will work in hand and hand with the international friends. But do not try to dictate us, you can help us through mutual bargaining. You can also help us through training the workers for the right way of trade union activities. We are also trying to

relocate the leather and garments industries through planned structure. Then all problems in these sectors will be solved.

Ms Farah Kabir, Country Director of Action Air said that her organisation has been campaigning for the ethical price for the garments products. She mentioned about the rush of the European customers at the Primark shops in the European countries including UK, where large number of customers are going to buy cheap products. In this way the European buyers are making good profit. But they are starting hue and cry only when some accident takes place in Bangladeshi. If they consider the ethical payment for the Bangladeshi workers and the human rights of the garments workers of our country, the Western buyers should come ahead with the ethical price for the products. Ms. Kabir stressed the need for safe transportation, housing and health insurance for garments workers. She also demanded the government of taking initiative to implement the national occupational health policy and building codes to comply with the safety standard in the garments factories.



(Photo: Information Minister, Mr Hasanul Hoque Inu and Founder Chairman of BASUG, Mr Bikash Chowdhury Barua at the opening session of the workshop)

The working sessions of the workshop were moderated by development and media expert Mr Muhammad Jahangir and Program Officer of INAFI Bangladesh Ms. Tasnuva Farhim. The Founder Chairman of BASUG, Mr. Bikash Chowdhury Barua and Executive Director of INAFI Asia and Bangladesh, Mr. Md Atiqun Nabi presented welcome address in the opening session.

Earlier, in his speech **Mr Md Atiqun Nabi, Executive Editor of INAFI** introduced the main theme of the workshop and the background and activities of INAFI and thanked the entrepreneurs and workers of the garments sector for their huge contribution to the economic development of Bangladesh.

Mr Bikash Chowdhury Barua, Chairman of BASUG in his welcome speech presented some background and activities of BASUG and said, ‘we are Bangladeshi and at the same time we are diaspora in Europe. We meet the buyers, customers and policy makers of European countries and also of Bangladesh. Referring to the accidents at the garments sector BASUG chair said, we had to face a lot of questions and still there is a negative campaign against the garments industry of Bangladesh. So we want to highlight the reality. We want to reach all sectors concerned through advocacy workshops, media campaign and communication materials to present the reality and to encourage them to come ahead with positive initiative to change the situation of the garments workers. He said, ‘this week we visited two garment factories in Chittagong and we were impressed to see the safety measures there like wider passage, emergency exit, fire extinguisher, security mask, clean and healthy environment in the factories. We want that all garments factories follow their path.’

[DOCUMENTARY FILM](#)

After the first session, the 19 minutes long Documentary Film on ‘Safety & Health issues of Garments workers in Bangladesh’ was screened. The film is made in Bengali with English sub title by BASUG with support from CIM-GIZ. The film gives a clear picture of the prevailing safety and health situation of the

RMG workers, suggests how to improve the situation and avoid accidents in the factories. It interviewed the garments workers, trainers, owners, BGMEA leaders, exporters and manufacturers both in Bangladesh and Europe. The film was shot in both locations. The film has come up with a number of suggestions to avoid recurrence of fatal accidents in the garment factories which caused many deaths in recent years. It also shows a story by 3 female garment workers on how one of their sisters died in the fire incident while working in the factory. The documentary film shows on what to do and not to do if there is any fire incident in the factory. The 19-minute long Documentary film, with the title “Andharey Alor Poth” (English title-Silver Lining in Dark Sky) was appreciated by the participants in the workshop.

PANEL DISCUSSION

BASUG Advisor and Director Projects, Dr Ahmed Ziauddin, Deputy General Manager of Bangladesh Bank, Mr Md Ashrafal Alam, Country Director of Action Aid, Ms Farah Kabir, Director of Gender Justice, Diversity and Migration Program, Ms Sheepa Hafija, Independent Consultant of GIZ, Mr Noushad Faiz and Project Coordinator of BASUG Germany, Mr A H M Abdul Hai spoke on the topic in the panel discussion.



(Photo: From right are: Ms. Sheepa Hafiz of BRAC, Mr. Noushad Faiz, Advisor GIZ, Dr. Ahmed Ziauddin, Advisor & Director Projects of BASUG and Bulbul Zaman, Board Member of BASUG)

In his speech **Dr Ahmed Ziauddin** said, this initiative was taken as a responsibility of Bangladeshi diaspora. As after every incident and accident we are to face questions and criticism about the situation in the garments sector of Bangladesh in the European countries. As a diaspora organization BASUG has the opportunity on one hand to communicate with the policy makers, garments owners, trade union leaders, workers and also at the same time with the European buyers. On the other hand BASUG has also responsibility to clarify the situation among all these stakeholders in Bangladesh as well as in Europe. From this consideration, he added, BASUG has taken up this project and engaged all sectors concerned for the interest of the workers and owners of the RMG sector, as well as for the sake of the economy and development of Bangladesh.



(Photo: From left are: Ms. Farah Kabir, Mr. Ashrafal Alam, Mr. AHM Abdul Hai, Mr. Jahidul Haq, Ms. Najma Akhtar and other participants)

In the panel discussion **Mr Ashrafal Alam** presented the role and initiatives of the central bank of Bangladesh for the safety and security and health service of the garments workers. He added, there are about five thousand and five hundred garments factories in Bangladesh. Among them 42% factories are located in some sort of rented buildings.

With the cooperation of Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), Bangladesh Bank (BB) has taken initiative to identify the unsafe factory buildings in terms of earthquake resilience and physical safety issues. Moreover, under this project it tries to improve the safety measures, in some cases through modifying the infrastructure and also in some cases through building it anew, if the situation of the existing

building is very fragile and dangerous. In this respect BB, JICA, Power and Water Development Board (PWD), Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters



(Photo: BASUG Project Coordinator, Mr. AHM Abdul Hai speaking at the workshop of BASUG)

Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). Through BGMEA we asked for the application to be brought under this initiative. We received application from five hundred and fifty factories. But considering the legal approvals and fulfilling the building codes and regulations, we selected less than one hundred factories, which will be receiving this safety improvement grants from BB and JICA funds. For this safety improvement work the factory owners will get the loan from BB for about 10 per cent interest rate, while the average interest rate for any loan is about 14 per cent. Moreover they will get this loan for about 15 years period, while the average loan period in Bangladesh is about five years.

Mr Alam added, finding a good response in this respect JICA has come up with the offer of more funds for urban building safety program, which includes RMG factory buildings. Moreover, French Development Bank (AFD) has also agreed to invest 60 Million Euro in Bangladesh. Out of it 20 Million Euro will be spent for the capacity building of the factory owners, management and safety financing authorities. Moreover, the interest rate may be reduced to 6 to 7 per cent, if the garments owners return the loan for the safety measures in the stipulated period and plan. AFD will help those 1500 non-compliant factories, which have been identified by the Accord and Alliance inspection and they are in a condition that if they cannot comply with the safety standard in one year, they will be shut down.

Mr Alam also urged, as the chief guest and other speaker demanded, if the international buyers pay increased price or fair price for Bangladeshi garments products for the interest of workers, it should be ensured, that the fair price or increased amount is properly transferred to the workers.



(Photo: Participants and organisers of the workshop during the break of the workshop at BRAC Inn, Dhaka)

Ms. Sheepa Hafija of BRAC in her presentation emphasized on the safety and health compliance for the main factories and also in the outsourcing or sub-contracting factories. She added, since there is rule that every institute in the country must have committee which will work to make the work place free from any sexual harassment, the garments factories also must ensure that workers are not sexually harassed. She demanded the skill development opportunities for the garments workers. She also said, if the garments owners and management pay some money to the workers for their snacks or lunch, the workers, especially

the women workers in our country will not spend that money for food. Rather they will save that money for their family. So instead of giving money for food, the factory management should offer food at the factories at the time of lunch break. Only then workers can eat properly and if they are in sound health, they can also work properly.

Mr. Noushad Faiz, advisor of GIZ appreciated the documentary film of BASUG on the safety and health issues for the garments workers. He added, it has addressed rightly the safety and health problems existing in the garments industry and also the instruction or way out how the workers can save themselves from the risks and solve these problems in the days to come. He added, after two devastating incidents in garments factories two safety agreements have been signed and formed to inspect the situation in the factories. The fire safety force has been alerted on this issue. Moreover, the fire safety inspectors were only 55 earlier. But now more inspectors have been trained up and now their number has reached 265.



(Photo: Chief Guest Minister Hasanul Hoque Inu with BASUG and INAFI officials during tea break at BRAC Inn)

President of United Garments Workers Federation and Chief of Awaj Foundation Bangladesh, Ms Najma Akhtar expressed deep concern about the situation of the garments workers in Bangladesh. She claimed, ‘the incident in Rana Plaza is not an accident. Rather it is a murder’. As first day the people came to the vulnerable situation of the building, the garment workers did not want to go to work she claimed saying, ‘but the workers were forced to work in that vulnerable building on the day of incident’. She also stressed on the responsibility of the European Union in respect to the safety and health facilities for the garments workers in Bangladesh. Because 70% of the textile business of Bangladesh is in Europe. She demanded suitable environment of trade union for the garments workers. She opined, if the right of trade union was ensured, such an accident would not have taken place and the union leaders could protest the unfair and forced labor by the factory managers. Ms. Akhtar also warned the risk of losing market in the international level, if the problems including safety, health hazards, corruption, unfair management and the lack of implementation of the existing rules and laws are not addressed and solved at a fast pace. She added, now-a-days the production rate in the garments factories is going down. The reason is the unhealthy situation of the workers. They are suffering from malnutrition, lack of pure drinking water and sanitation. When workers are sick or weak in health, they cannot produce high quality products at a higher rate of production. She urged the garments owners to respect worker as human being and as human resource and not to exploit them in various ways.

Among others Senior Assistant Secretary of Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturing and Exporters Association (BKMEA) Mr Ayub Ali, Owner of a garments factory Mohosin Hoque Wapu, Chief Executive of ENDEAVOUR, Mr Khalilur Rahman Chowdhury, Former Deputy Director General of Bangladesh Betar and Poet, A K Zahidul Hoque, Executive Director of People’s Oriented Program Implementation (POPI), Mr Murshed Alam Sarker, Representative of CREED, Mr Solaiman Khan, Representative from Padakkhep Manabik Unnayan Kendra, Mr Amal Kumar Shil and Chairman of WARBE Development Foundation, Mr Sayed Saiful Haque took part in the open discussion.

The relation between garments owners and workers, the realization of the existing rules and laws, minimum wage, sanitation in the work and living place for the workers, necessary training and skill development facilities, better housing place and integrated effort in bargaining with the international buyers are significant issues, among others, which were emphasized in the open discussion session.

Mr Murshed Alam Sarker said, ‘we wake up only after a grave incident, but before any serious damage we do not take any initiative to prevent it in Bangladesh. After the collapse of Rana Plaza the voice came up from many corners. But we are not doing anything as precautionary for the damage of any earthquake.

From some survey we found, if any earthquake happens at about 6 point, about 80 per cent of the buildings in Dhaka will be damaged. Capital Development Authority (RAJUK) is mainly liable for this situation. People do not follow the building codes in construction and RAJUK is doing nothing against it. So we must take some initiative against this situation before any large scale earthquake happens here.'

Mr Sayed Saiful Haque emphasized on the problem of using old machineries and instruments in the garments factories, which are creating environment pollution, safety risk and also damage to the health of workers. So he urged the garments owners and management to avoid the use of old and expired items or machineries and to replace the machineries regularly to ensure the safety and health compliance of their employees. He also urged the Bangladesh government and Bangladesh Bank authorities to facilitate the investment of the expatriates in the garments sector in Bangladesh for the betterment of the workers and of this industry.

Poet A K Zahidul Hoque narrated the incredible suffering of the garments workers in their housing and working places for the lacking of enough sanitation facilities. He also stressed on the role and responsibility of the officials of the Bangladesh embassies located in the European countries and on their engagement in the negotiation process with the buyers of the Bangladeshi garments products.

Mr Ayub Ali informed, when a knitwear factory wants to become a member of BKMEA, they are bound to fulfill the safety and health compliance of the garments workers. So the knitwear companies mostly comply with the safety and health standard in Bangladesh. He also emphasized on the use of green technology and zero hazardous chemicals for the betterment of the safety and health issues of the garments workers.

Factory owner **Mr Mohosin Hoque Wapu** pledged to ensure the extra payment to his workers, if he gets some extra price particularly for the betterment of the garments workers. Even he proposed to make a government arrangement like card system, so that when some buyers pay some fair price or extra price for products for the sake of safety and other facilities for the workers, the workers may get this extra money direct from the government mechanism. He expressed his eagerness to extend his support to workers of his factory for the safety and health compliance in all respects.



At the end of the discussion Project Coordinator of BASUG Germany, **Mr AHM Abdul Hai** confirmed that the discussion, concerns and recommendations from BASUG workshops have been documented properly and these findings would be submitted to different stakeholder in Bangladesh and also in the European countries. He also informed that the recommendations and findings documented from the advocacy workshop on the same topic held earlier in Hamburg have already been distributed among the German stakeholders including the German Development Minister Mr. Gerd Müller and German Family Affairs Minister Ms. Manuela Schwesig.

[MEDIA COVERAGE](#)

The workshop in Dhaka got wide media attention (both printing and electronic) Bangladesh, Italy, France and Germany. Two Bangladeshi TV channels (which are regularly watched by Bangladeshi people and migrants across the country and also in Europe including Germany) covered the workshop program with detailed news and videos. Even the Bangladeshi national TV channel Bangladesh Television (BTV) broadcast news continuously from 14:00 pm till morning of the next day. This TV news broadcast through

BTV has also been relayed by all other TV channels (about 40 TV channels) giving much highlight in certain news hours.

Another popular private TV channel of Bangladesh, SATV broadcast the news of the Dhaka workshop from their channel on the day of workshop, 01 August 2015.

The news of the event was also covered by the following online news media:

1. The link of the English news about the Dhaka workshop before the workshop, published in The Deutsche News based in Bonn, Germany

<http://deutschenews24.de/english/detailsnews.php?nssl=6766aa2750c19aad2fa1b32f36ed4aee&nttl=02072015634>

2. The link of the Bengali news about the Dhaka workshop, published in the Daily Samakal from Dhaka, Bangladesh

<http://www.samakal.net/2015/08/02/152764>

3. The link of the Bengali news about the Dhaka workshop, published in the online media Shomoy News based in Rome, Italy

<http://www.shomoynews.com/?p=7063>

4. The link of the Bengali news of the Dhaka workshop, published in The Deutsche News based in Bonn, Germany

<http://deutschenews24.de/detailsnews.php?nssl=dc87c13749315c7217cdc4ac692e704c&nttl=030820151295>

(Report by: AHM Abdul Hai, Project Coordinator, BASUG e.V. Germany)

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