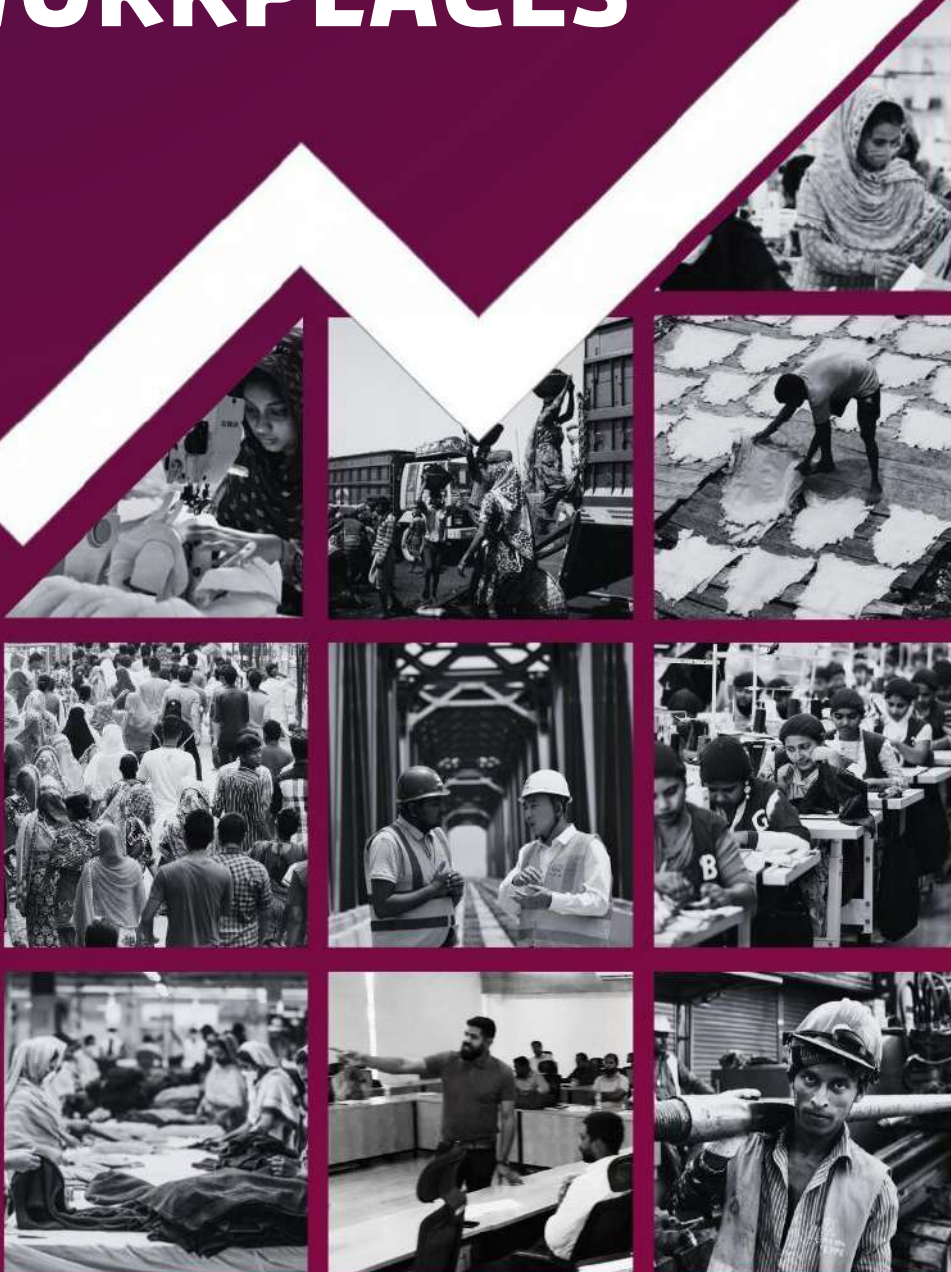




# 10 YEARS OF BUILDING SAFE AND FAIR WORKPLACES



**Published in March 2026 by**

Embassy of Denmark, Bangladesh and Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

**Embassy of Denmark, Bangladesh**

Bay's Edgewater, Plot No. NE(N) 12

North Avenue, 6th Floor

Gulshan 2, Dhaka 1212

Bangladesh

Phone +880 (2) 5566 8900

Accessibility statement (in Danish)

**Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)**

House 40/C, Road No 11 (new) Dhanmondi,

Dhaka- 1209, Bangladesh

Phone: (+88 02) 41021780-2

E-mail: info@cpd.org.bd

Website:www.cpd.org.bd

©Embassy of Denmark, Bangladesh

*Disclaimer: The views expressed in the case stories are solely those of the interviewees and do not necessarily represent the views of the Embassy of Denmark, Bangladesh, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), or any of the partners of this initiative.*

**Compiled and Edited by**

*Ema Akhter*, Dialogue Associate, CPD

**Design, Page Lay-out and Typesetting by**

Dialogue and Communication Division, CPD

Fahim Abrar, Embassy of Denmark

As Bangladesh approaches its milestone of graduating from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026, the focus is shifting to sustainable and inclusive growth. This transition brings new challenges because graduation will gradually reduce preferential trade benefits and concessional support, meaning that stronger domestic systems and higher social and environmental standards will become essential for maintaining competitiveness and safeguarding workers. Central to this shift is the recognition that a thriving industrial sector begins with a strong and well supported workforce. Prioritising workers' rights, safety and well-being is not only a moral responsibility but also a strategic foundation for long-term industrial success.

For more than a decade, Bangladesh and Denmark have worked to strengthen the sustainability of the industrial sector through diplomatic relations, development cooperation, and trade.

This E-publication explores cases where the cooperation and initiatives have led to progress in social sustainability within the industrial sector, but also where gaps remain. These cases are framed around three core themes: Occupational Safety and Health (OSH), Social Dialogue and Just Transition. Each theme illustrates how focused efforts have sparked meaningful change, offering valuable lessons and actionable insights for further progress.

Enjoy the read.

# ACRONYMS

3F	United Federation of Danish Workers
BIGWF	Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Federation
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies
BLF	Bangladesh Labor Foundation
BM	BM (as used in "BM Container Depot")
BRAC	BRAC (as used in "BRAC University")
BRGWF	Bangladesh Revolutionary Garments Workers Federation
BRT	Bus Rapid Transit
CBA / CBAs	Collective Bargaining Agreement(s)
DIFE	Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments
EBA	Everything But Arms
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
IBC	IndustriALL Bangladesh Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
KPI / KPIs	Key Performance Indicator(s)
LDC	Least Developed Country
NCCWE	National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education
NOSHTRI	National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute
OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
RMG	Ready-Made Garment(s)
RMG TCC	Ready-Made Garment Tripartite Consultative Committee
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal(s)
SDHIR	Social Dialogue and Harmonious Industrial Relations
SSC	Strategic Sector Cooperation
WRC	Workers Resource Centre

# TABLE OF CONTENT

<b>Change in Practice: Occupational Health and Safety .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Video on Occupational Health and Safety.....	2
7 case stories on Occupational Health and Safety .....	3-16
Lessons Learned .....	17
Actionable steps.....	18
<b>Change in Practice: Social Dialogue.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Video on Social Dialogue .....	19
8 case stories on Social Dialogue.....	19-35
Lessons Learned .....	36
Actionable steps.....	37
<b>Change in Practice: Just Transition .....</b>	<b>38</b>
Video on Just Transition.....	38
2 case stories on Just Transition.....	39-42
Lessons Learned .....	43
Actionable steps.....	44



## CHANGE IN PRACTICE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY

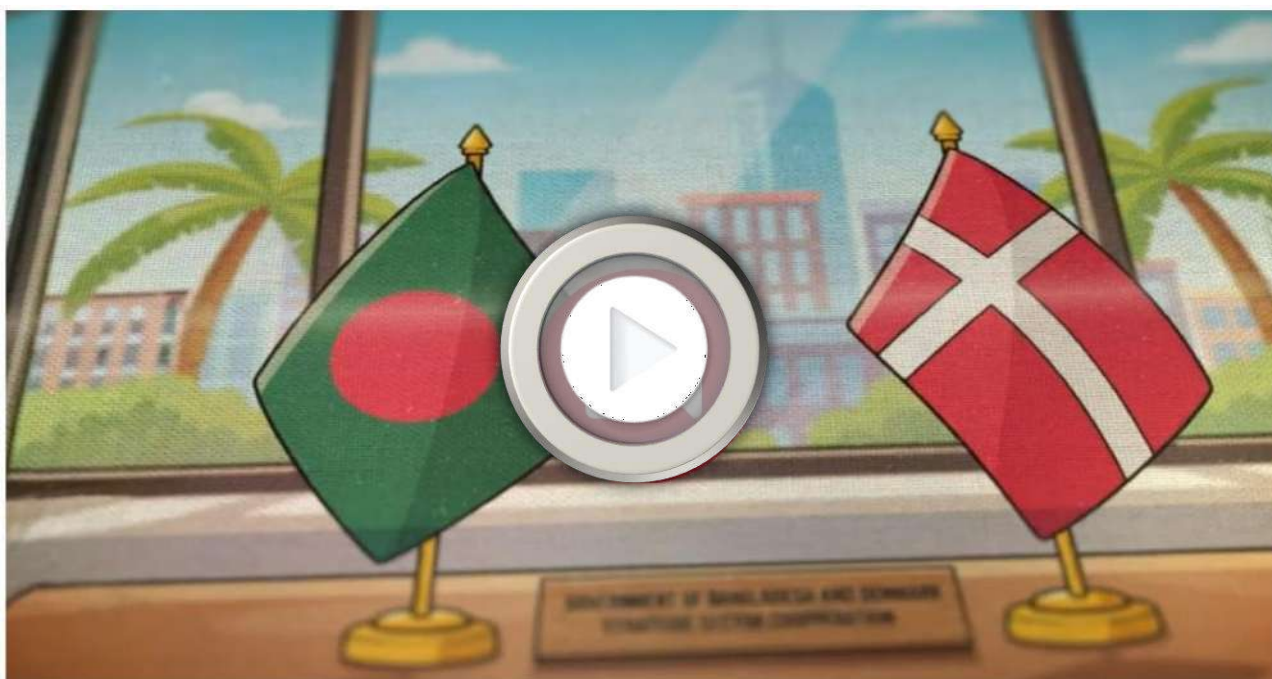
**B**angladesh's efforts to strengthen Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) systems gained new urgency after the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, which exposed serious gaps in workplace safety and oversight. Since then, government bodies, trade unions and international partners have worked to improve institutional capacity, worker participation and preventive practices.

A core element of this progress is the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between the Governments of Bangladesh and Denmark. Through the partnership, Danish labour inspectors and technical experts have supported the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) and the National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute (NOSHTRI). The cooperation has helped improve inspection systems, expand national training capacity. With this support, DIFE has formed OSH expert teams that train labour inspectors across the country, and NOSHTRI has started growing into a national centre for industry-based OSH training and research.

The SSC has also improved public access to OSH information. DIFE's updated website and helpline now provide clearer guidance on rights, hazards and preventive measures. Together, DIFE and NOSHTRI form a more reliable institutional base for professional standards, enforcement and evidence-informed policymaking. In the ready-made garment sector, Denmark's United Federation of Trade Unions (3F) worked with five national federations to strengthen worker involvement in OSH. Through the SSC, unions developed training for committee members on labour law, negotiation and grievance handling.

Using workplace data and structured dialogue, unions have begun engaging more directly with employers. OSH is now more commonly addressed in discussions between workers and management, though capacity and consistency vary across factories.

In the shipbreaking sector of Sitakunda, the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) has taken steps to improve safety in one of the country's highest risk industries. With Danish support, BILS helped form the Shipbreaking Workers Trade Union Forum and established the BILS and Danish Trade Union Development Agency OSH Centre. They introduced safety committees, provided training and carried out inspections. These measures have contributed to better access to safety equipment and support for injured workers. Conditions remain challenging, but workers now have stronger structures to raise concerns.



*Click the picture to see the full video on Occupational Health & safety*

Together, these experiences show how Danish technical support, Bangladeshi leadership and active worker participation can reinforce each other. The cooperation has helped create a more reliable OSH system, while recognising that continued effort is needed to address remaining gaps.



## CASE STORY: LEARNING TO SEE RISK

**B**angladesh's economy relies on more than 74 million workers, yet the country has only 436 labour inspectors. One inspector is responsible for nearly 170 thousand workers, which means that many high-risk sectors, including shipbreaking and tanneries, receive limited visits. Workers in these industries report that they would feel more confident if regular inspections and guidance were available. Factory owners also note that consistent inspections help them meet compliance requirements and avoid costly accidents. In practice, inspections can be rare, and both workers and employers are left to interpret safety requirements on their own.

When Mohammad Mahmudul Hasan joined the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), he often entered workplaces unsure which of the many hazards around him required urgent attention. He could see risks everywhere, but not always which ones were most likely to injure someone that day. High-profile incidents like Rana Plaza (2013) and the BM Container Depot explosion (2022) kept the question in the background of his work: what does an inspector need to notice first?

A significant shift began through the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between Bangladesh and Denmark. Danish labour inspectors collaborated with DIFE to introduce practical OSH guidelines, standardised checklists and updated training courses. DIFE also formed OSH expert teams across eight priority areas, including chemical safety, construction safety and machine safety. These teams now deliver training, provide technical guidance and support enforcement across sectors.

By 2024, the OSH Teams had trained 239 inspectors, and developed or updated 13 OSH courses. Approximately 70 per cent of inspectors have completed chemical safety training using materials created through this cooperation. For inspectors like Hasan, the practical outcome is simple: clearer checklists, sharper judgement, and more consistent decisions across sites.

**“ NOW WHEN I WALK INTO A WORKPLACE, I CAN SPOT HAZARDS MUCH FASTER. I KNOW WHICH MACHINES POSE DANGER, AND I CAN GUIDE FACTORY OWNERS ON EXACTLY HOW TO ELIMINATE THE RISKS. ”**

*Mohammad Mahmudul Hasan*

Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE)



However, the math still works against the inspectorate. With an insufficient number of inspectors, many factories receive infrequent visits, and daily risk management defaults to supervisors and workers. Workers often say they have little choice but to continue working despite unsafe conditions. More inspectors and continued training would mean more frequent visits and quicker course-corrections before hazards turn into injuries.

With sustained support from the Government of Denmark, Bangladesh can move closer to a future where workers operate machinery and manage chemicals without fear, and where employers' benefit from safer, more productive workplaces.





## **CASE STORY: STOP ACCIDENTS BEFORE THEY START**

**G**azipur alone has more than 3,150 boilers in factories, and inspectors have found that hundreds of them became unsafe or inactive in recent years. In 2017, a boiler explosion killed 13 workers and injured over 50 in a garment factory.

A year earlier, another blast in Tongi claimed 31 lives. Investigations in both cases pointed to expired boilers, damaged safety gauges and operators without proper training.

This was the environment in which Mr Mohammad Anwar Hossain started his job as a boiler operator in Gazipur. He operated boilers daily but did not fully understand the dangers. Like many operators, he learned on the job. Problems were addressed when something failed – leaks, pressure irregularities, unusual sounds

Anwar later attended a boiler safety course at the National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute (NOSHTRI). The course, supported through the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between Bangladesh and Denmark, taught him pressure control, valve testing and early warning signs. The training focused on routine checks, and acting before thresholds exceeded.

Mr Anwar introduced strict routines in his factory, such as monthly safety valve checks and regular inspections. He began logging readings systematically instead of relying on memory. His team began reporting issues promptly, and management acted faster because they could now identify risks clearly. Subsequent inspections from the Office of the Chief Inspector of Boilers found the documentation and safety procedures in order.



**BEFORE, I DIDN'T REALLY UNDERSTAND HOW A SMALL MISTAKE COULD CAUSE A BIG ACCIDENT. AFTER THE TRAINING, NOW I KNOW EXACTLY HOW TO CHECK PRESSURE LEVELS, VALVES, AND SAFETY SYSTEMS. I DON'T SKIP A SINGLE STEP.**



*Anwar Hossain*

Former Boiler Operator at a Garment Factory

Mr Anwar's experience is not yet universal. Many factories still operate older boilers, and not all operators have received formal training. The gap between trained and untrained operators remains visible. In high-pressure systems, that gap matters.





## **CASE STORY: LIFTING STANDARDS**

### **HOW BANGLADESH IS REINVENTING CRANE SAFETY OVERSIGHT**

**M**r. Md Tahidul Islam, Assistant Inspector General (Safety) at the Industrial Safety Unit at DIFE headquarters, inspects construction sites and industrial facilities across the country. While he had substantial experience in the field, he initially lacked the specific training to effectively inspect crane operations, one of the most high-risk areas he encountered. Many crane operators were self-taught, lifting equipment was often unregistered, and inspection routines were limited to basic visual checks. In 2022, at the BR construction site in Uttara, a crane mishandled a viaduct segment, crushing five people in a passing car. Other incidents followed, including a fatal accident in 2023 when a container fell during lifting operations.

On many sites, inspections focused on what was visible: rust, cables, structural cracks. Load calculations, maintenance logs and operator certification were not always reviewed in depth.

For instance, tower cranes used in high-rise buildings require a different safety protocol compared to mobile cranes employed in construction projects like the Elevated Expressway or the BRT project. Mr Tahidul later attended a crane safety training programme developed by the National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute (NOSHTRI) under the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between Bangladesh and Denmark.

The training focused on assessing crane load limits, ensuring operator competence, and implementing proper inspection routines in line with national labour regulations. The training introduced structured risk assessment: reviewing lifting plans, verifying load limits, checking maintenance records, and confirming operator competence before equipment was used.



**BEFORE, WE DIDN'T REALLY KNOW HOW TO ASSESS RISK PROPERLY. NOW, WE IDENTIFY THE HAZARD, MITIGATE IT, AND ENSURE EVERY CRANE AND LIFTING APPLIANCE IS TESTED REGULARLY.**



*Md. Tahidul Islam*

Assistant Inspector General (safety), Industrial safety unit, DIFE

After undergoing this training, Mr Tahidul and his team have applied these methods during field inspections. They now assess maintenance logs, verify operator certificates, and ensure lifting plans and safety barriers are in place. Inspections now extend beyond surface conditions to documentation and planning. For example, the application of controlled lifting zones and regular crane testing has become more widespread. However, the sector still faces challenges, including a shortage of trained operators and resistance from some contractors who view safety measures as an additional cost.

For Mr Tahidul, the difference lies in how risk is defined. A crane is no longer inspected only for visible defects; it is assessed as a system: machine, operator, documentation and planning.





## CASE STORY: BEFORE THE DATA



**B**angladesh's economy is powered by workers across both formal and informal sectors. Yet workplace risks remain alarmingly high. In 2023, a total of 1,432 workers died in work related accidents, a 48 per cent increase from the previous year's 967 deaths. The Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation reported that 1,103 of these fatalities occurred in the informal economy, while 329 took place in the formal sector.

Until recently, the country lacked a national institution capable of producing reliable occupational safety and health research to guide action. This gap made it difficult for policymakers, regulators and employers to respond effectively. Within this context, the National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute (NOSHTRI) began expanding its research role.

When Joint Inspector General Bulbul Ahmed joined the institute, he found strong commitment but limited structure. NOSHTRI had already developed 42 training curricula, yet lacked the analytical tools and research systems necessary for systematic national analysis. Through Denmark's SSC partnership with Bangladesh, NOSHTRI received support to establish eight specialised trainer groups comprising 64 master trainers. These teams now deliver training on chemical safety, construction safety, accident prevention, first aid, ergonomics, machinery safety, boiler safety and crane safety. Training demand has increased across heavy industry, the readymade garment sector and the informal construction workforce, where workers are becoming more aware and engaged.



**OUR RESEARCH WAS LIMITED. THE SSC PROJECT IS PROVIDING TRAINING SO THAT OUR RESEARCH OFFICERS CAN ACQUIRE THE SKILLS NEEDED TO IDENTIFY AND PRESENT RESEARCH PROPERLY TO THE RIGHT STAKEHOLDERS.**



*Bulbul Ahmed*

Joint Inspector General, NOSHTRI



NOSHTRI developed its first research strategy, drafted with support from Denmark's National Research Centre for the Working Environment. Consultations with Bangladeshi universities and coordination with ILO and GIZ ensured that the strategy reflected national priorities. A new structured reporting template enabled NOSHTRI staff to produce the country's first quarterly occupational safety and health reports, providing consistent data where little had existed before.

Several officials from DIFE, who completed MSc programmes in Denmark, have strengthened NOSHTRI's analytical capacity. Ahmed noted that workers who once ignored safety measures are increasingly applying them in daily practice. To build on this progress, NOSHTRI recommends establishing a centralised national database requiring all enterprises and government agencies to report workplace accidents and occupational safety indicators. Such a system would allow trends to be tracked across sectors rather than inferred from isolated incidents.





## CASE STORY: MAKING SAFETY INFORMATION EASIER TO ACCESS

**D**igitalisation In Bangladesh, many people now carry smartphones. According to Data Reported, by early 2024 there were 188.6 million mobile connections, more than 108 per cent of the total population and 77.36 million internet users, giving an internet penetration rate of 44.5 per cent. As internet access expands, workplace information increasingly moves online.

For years, workers and employers often lacked accessible, reliable information about workplace safety. Many calls to the Labour Helpline could have been resolved if OSH guidance were easier to find online. When Labour Inspector (Health) Pratishtha Barua joined the ICT Cell of DIFE, she saw these challenges first-hand. Routine questions like how to renew a licence, how to file a complaint, where to find safety guidelines, were directed to inspectors by phone instead of through a structured system.

Her work coincided with a review of DIFE's website conducted under the SSC between the Governments of Bangladesh and Denmark. The SSC provided practical recommendations to improve clarity, structure and access to OSH content. DIFE implemented several of these suggestions under Ms Barua's guidance.

The updated website now brings essential services into one place. Workers can submit complaints, renew licences and access OSH guidance online. Inspectors can find laws, inspection tools and up-to-date directives. Complaints submitted through the helpline are logged digitally and forwarded to district offices for follow up. Previously scattered information is now centralised and traceable.



**PEOPLE USED TO MAKE PHONE CALLS TO DISTRICT INSPECTORS JUST TO ASK HOW TO APPLY FOR A LICENCE OR FILE A COMPLAINT, NOW THEY CAN FIND EVERYTHING THEMSELVES - FROM RENEWING A FACTORY LICENCE TO THE FULL OSH GUIDELINES - IN ONE PLACE**



*Pratihtha Barua*

Labour Inspector (Health), DIFE

As the system expands, staff across different divisions are becoming more familiar with using digital tools in their daily work, and district offices update their local sites more regularly. At the same time, further work is needed to ensure seamless coordination between the website and the helpline so that users receive consistent and reliable information across both platforms.

Ms Barua believes a single, centralised digital portal linking the website, helpline and future tools would make OSH information easier to access for everyone.





## **CASE STORY: FROM SILENCE TO ACTION - HOW WORKERS ARE SPEAKING UP FOR SAFETY**



**W**hen Mohammad Rakibul Islam first began working on the production floor as a machine operator handling metal components, safety concerns rarely reached management. Workers had limited knowledge of their rights, and hazards such as unsafe machinery, blocked exits and harassment often went unreported. Without clear channels for raising issues, many risks persisted in the workplace.

Recent wage protests show the risks workers still face when they raise their voice. In 2024, Amnesty International reported that at least 131 people, including trade union leaders, were arrested in connection with labour protests, and many were charged with offences such as “illegal gathering” and “damage to property”. In that environment, internal reporting systems carry weight.

Unions and factory-level safety committees later became more active, supported by training delivered through the Government of Denmark and the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F). Workshops on grievance handling, prevention of gender-based violence and labour law helped workers understand how to report hazards and participate in workplace discussions. Committees began documenting complaints and raising them formally with management.

Today, workers can report safety issues directly, submit written complaints or contact the union or the committee. Cases involving unsafe conditions, overtime, leave or discrimination are recorded and investigated. Supervisory behaviour is monitored, and misconduct is addressed through formal procedures. Safety routines are now more structured. Committees carry out regular floor checks and hold monthly walk-throughs with management. Hazards such as missing machine guards, poor ventilation and blocked pathways are identified and corrected. Inspections from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) provide additional guidance, along with corrective action plans that are tracked jointly by workers and management.

Mr Rakibul has noticed the impact. Safety-related cases are now recorded systematically, and some workplaces have negotiated provisions that go beyond legal requirements. Workers are more confident about raising concerns, and dialogue with management has improved.

“ **BEFORE, MANY OF US STAYED SILENT. NOW WE REMIND EACH OTHER THAT SPEAKING UP IS OUR RIGHT** ”



*Rakibul*  
Sewing Operator at a Garment Factory

Challenges still exist. Not all workers feel confident using reporting systems, harassment continues in some places, and long hours and low wages limit participation. Mr. Rakibul says the system only works when workers trust that complaints will not be ignored or punished.





## CASE STORY: TURNING THE TIDE ON SAFETY IN BANGLADESH'S SHIPBREAKING YARDS

*Click the picture to see the full video on OSH conditions in shipbreaking sector*

**F**or decades, the shipbreaking yards of Sitakunda were among the most dangerous workplaces in Bangladesh. Workers dismantled large ships under severe risk, often without training, protective equipment, or formal contracts. Accidents were common, many went unreported, and injured workers and families of those killed had little support or access to compensation.

Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) began working in the sector in 2006, at a time when occupational safety and health conditions were extremely poor and workers had no effective representation. In 2009, BILS supported the formation of the Shipbreaking Workers Trade Union Forum (SBWTUF). Through later support from the BILS-DTDA project, with support from the Danish Embassy, SBWTUF became a collective platform for trade union leaders and worker representatives in Chattogram to push for safer yards and stronger accountability.

Mohammad Ali's experience reflects this change. He worked in shipbreaking for more than 16 years, starting as a general worker and later becoming a senior supervisor. He saw injuries and deaths, but also saw that workers had no trusted place to raise concerns. When organising began, it faced resistance from yard owners and contractors. Over time, more workers joined, creating a platform that had not previously existed.

Over time, this contributed to the formation of more than a dozen unions in the sector, strengthening representation where it had once been absent.

Since SBWTUF's creation, supported by BILS-DTDA, the safety landscape has improved in practical ways. Union representatives began engaging inspectors more regularly, and safety discussions became more routine on the yards. The BILS-DTDA OSH Centre in Sitakunda has supported coordination, grievance handling, and assistance for injured workers. Regular accident data collection and sharing has also made it harder for incidents to be hidden.

Reported workplace fatalities have declined compared to earlier years, with lower numbers recorded so far in 2025 through sector monitoring. Workers are now more likely to receive treatment and compensation after accidents, PPE use is more common, and safety officers and toolbox meetings are increasingly visible in many yards.

**“ AS LONG AS WE STAY ORGANISED AND WORK TOGETHER, I BELIEVE THE LIVES OF SHIPBREAKING WORKERS WILL CONTINUE TO IMPROVE ”**

*Mohammad Ali*

Founding Member, Shipbreaking Workers' Trade Union Forum (SBWTUF)  
and Member Secretary, Shipbreaking Safety Committee

Yet, temporary employment makes it hard to retain skilled workers, and job security, appointment letters, and stable working conditions still need attention. PPE use has improved but is not yet consistent everywhere, and quality equipment is not always guaranteed.

For Ali, the shift is visible in small details: more workers wearing helmets and gloves, more formal safety briefings before dismantling begins, and more cases documented instead of ignored. But he notes that without stable contracts and consistent enforcement, safety remains uneven across yards.



# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FRONTLINES

- **INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY IS KEY:** Strengthening institutions, like DIFE and NOSHTRI, is essential for creating lasting, self-sustaining changes in OSH. Moving from external support to internal ownership is critical for the long-term success of safety initiatives.
- **COLLABORATION WITH INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS:** The involvement of Danish experts, alongside organisations like ILO and GIZ, helped ensure technical expertise, quality assurance, and alignment with international standards. This collaboration proved invaluable in creating practical and scalable solutions.
- **DIGITAL RESOURCES ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY:** Improving digital platforms, such as DIFE's website and helpline, shows how small changes can have a significant impact on the accessibility and usability of safety information.
- **RESEARCH-BASED DECISIONS DRIVE CHANGE:** The development of NOSHTRI's research capacity shows that data-driven decisions and evidence-based policies can guide improvements in OSH, helping to shape better regulatory frameworks.
- **AWARENESS AND SKILL GAPS:** Most workplace accidents were caused by a lack of worker awareness and skill, highlighting the need for ongoing education and training.
- **IMPACT OF EMPLOYMENT SECURITY:** The lack of permanent employment undermines the retention of skilled workers, demonstrating the importance of job security for building long-term expertise.
- **PPE USAGE:** Although reluctance to use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was common, continuous training improved its usage, but more knowledge on occupational safety is still needed.
- **BEYOND SAFETY STANDARDS:** While improving safety standards is crucial, ensuring job security and sustainable employment opportunities is essential for retaining skilled workers in high-risk industries.
- **ESTABLISH CLEAR JOINT ROLES IN HAZARD MANAGEMENT:** Define specific responsibilities for management, union representatives, safety committee members, and workers to create a proactive framework for identifying, recording, and addressing workplace risks before they escalate.

# **ACTIONABLE STEPS FOR SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT IN OSH PRACTICES**

## **FOR DIFE & NOSHTRI**

- Mandate continuous professional development for labour inspectors, tied to performance evaluations and career progression, with NOSHTRI serving as the accrediting body.
- Introduce a legal requirement for all safety committee members in high-risk enterprises to undergo certified OSH training from NOSHTRI-accredited providers.
- Require all enterprises and government agencies to report workplace accidents and OSH indicators into a centralised NOSHTRI-managed database.
- Integrate DIFE's website, helpline, and future digital platforms into a single, centralised portal, linking helpline cases to the website with publicly accessible progress reports.

## **FOR POLICY MAKERS AND INDUSTRY LEADERS:**

- Prioritise long-term investments in OSH infrastructure, ensuring sufficient funding and staffing for organisations like DIFE and NOSHTRI to continue building capacity.
- Promote a culture of safety across industries by incentivising employers to provide OSH training and implement best practices.

## **TRAINING AND AWARENESS:**

- Establish a specialised training centre for the shipbreaking industry to educate workers on occupational safety and health hazards, with mandatory training before engaging them in shipbreaking yards.

## **LABOUR INSPECTION AND OVERSIGHT:**

- Expand and strengthen labour inspection under DIFE, ensuring an adequate number of labour inspectors.

## **WORKER REPRESENTATION AND SAFETY COMMITTEES:**

- Expand Ensure the formation of yard-based safety committees in each shipbreaking yard, with provisions for worker representation in these committees.

## **PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT (PPE):**

- Expand Make the use of PPE mandatory and ensure the quality of the equipment provided.



## CHANGE IN PRACTICE SOCIAL DIALOGUE

*Click the picture to see the full video on Social Dialogue*

**I**n Bangladesh, workers have long struggled to make their voices heard. Many, especially in the garment sector, face weak union representation, limited knowledge of their rights, and gender-based discrimination. Social dialogue, through conversations between workers, unions, and management, has emerged as a powerful tool for change.

With support from the Government of Denmark through the United Federation of Trade Unions (3F), unions have strengthened their ability to negotiate collectively, resolve grievances, and promote gender equality at work. These efforts are helping build a workplace culture where employees can influence policies that affect their daily lives.

The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) has played a key role in turning dialogue into real reform. Through the National Tripartite Consultative Council, BILS worked with union leaders, workers, and labour law experts to promote amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act that reflect the principles of Decent Work. This collaboration ensures that workers' concerns are considered in policy reforms on fair wages, workplace safety, and social protection.

Initiatives like the Workers Resource Centre (WRC) have brought these national reforms to life. Through training, mediation, and women-led committees, thousands of workers now feel confident raising grievances, negotiating fairly, and seeking justice. Nearly half of all reported cases are resolved through non-judicial mediation, showing that social dialogue is becoming a trusted, practical solution. Together, these efforts tell a story of progress and resilience. Workers who were once unheard are now shaping a safer, fairer, and more inclusive future in Bangladesh.



## CASE STORY: RAISING A CONCERN

**M**ukter Hossen, a quality inspector with nine years of experience in the garment industry, recalls a time when workers rarely raised safety concerns. Production pressures were high, supervisors were harsh, and safety issues often went unreported. Problems such as harassment, long working hours, and unsafe practices were ignored because workers feared speaking up. In many factories without active unions or collective bargaining agreements, silence was common.

Nationwide, union representation remains weak. Bangladesh has over 9,000 registered enterprise-level trade unions across various sectors, yet these unions collectively represent only about 5.1 per cent of all workers, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO). Only about 1.6 per cent of workers in Bangladesh are covered by collective bargaining agreements against this backdrop, Mukter's factory registered a union in 2022.

Unions and factory-level safety committees became more active, supported by training delivered through the Government of Denmark and the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F). Workshops on collective bargaining, grievance handling, gender-based violence prevention, and labour law helped workers understand how to report hazards and participate in workplace discussions. Workers began documenting complaints formally and raising them through recognised channels.

With this support, workers formed a union, joined a federation, and officially registered their organisation in 2022. Registration gave workers standing to negotiate formally and raise issues such as unsafe conditions, harassment and wages through collective bargaining mechanisms.

Through the union and factory-level committees, including the Women’s Committee and the Sexual Harassment Complaint Committee, workers now have formal channels to raise concerns. Issues such as unsafe practices, long hours, discrimination, and wages are systematically reported and addressed with management. Misconduct, once overlooked, is now handled through formal procedures.

“ **BEFORE, WE DIDN’T HAVE THE COURAGE TO SPEAK. EVEN IF SOMETHING WAS WRONG, WE KEPT QUIET. NOW, WE CAN TALK TO THEM.** ”



*Mukter Hossen*

Quality Inspector at a Garment Factory

Through Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs), workers secured provisions beyond legal minimums. Workers have won better wage increments, festival leave, and maternity support—benefits that are rare in industries with low union coverage. Safety procedures now include regular floor checks, fire drills, and inspections conducted by DIFE. Workers now participate in weekly awareness sessions to better understand their rights and responsibilities.

However, there is still work to be done. While many workers have gained confidence in raising concerns, some continue to hesitate, particularly when it comes to reporting harassment. Additionally, production pressures remain a challenge and continue to affect workloads. Mukter notes that committees only function when workers trust that complaints will be addressed without retaliation.





## CASE STORY: WOMEN LEADING THE WAY TO SAFER WORKPLACES



**I**n Bangladesh's garment industry, women make up about 53 per cent of the workforce, but they still face significant challenges. A recent survey found that 22 per cent of women working in the sector reported experiencing frequent sexual harassment in the workplace. These ongoing issues of harassment, discrimination, and unsafe conditions often silence workers, making it difficult for them to raise concerns. In this context, formal complaint mechanisms and women's representation within factory committees become significant.

Ms Arifa Akter, a quality inspector at a garment factory, serves as the Vice President of the Women's Community under the Bangladesh Revolutionary Garments Workers Federation (BRGWF). In her role, she supports women workers in raising concerns about safety, harassment and workplace treatment through formal channels.

Training supported by the Government of Denmark through the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) has contributed to strengthening women leaders like Ms Arifa. Training on collective bargaining, grievance procedures, gender-based violence, and the use of factory committees has provided women with the confidence to address problems in a structured and effective way.

While her factory does not yet have a trade union, the Women's Committee and the Sexual Harassment Complaint Committee provide formal spaces for women to raise concerns. Regular meetings offer an opportunity to discuss issues such as supervisor behaviour, hygiene problems, and maternity-related challenges. Through these platforms, cases are raised with management and followed up formally.

Safety practices have also improved. Ms Arifa participates in quarterly inspections to check machine guards, fire equipment, washrooms, and floor conditions. Protective gear and

visits from DIFE have helped reduce common hazards. When workers raised concerns about the childcare centre, repeated engagement with management led to repairs and better conditions.

“ **BEFORE, A WORKER WAS FACING HARASSMENT BUT DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. WE HELPED HER FILE A COMPLAINT THROUGH THE COMMITTEE. IT WAS HANDLED PROPERLY. THAT NEVER USED TO HAPPEN BEFORE. THEY LISTEN AND THEY RESPOND.** ”



*Arifa Akhter*

Quality Inspector at a Garment Factory

However, challenges persist. Some women still hesitate to report harassment, and production pressure continues to affect workloads. Arifa notes that committees only function when complaints are handled consistently and without retaliation.





## CASE STORY: IN THE NEGOTIATION ROOM: A JOURNEY TOWARD FAIR AND RESPECTFUL WORKPLACES

**M**r. Salauddin Shapon, president of a workers' federation, has worked for years in the garment sector. His approach emphasises negotiation between unions, management and government representatives on wages, safety and working conditions.

Over the years, he has witnessed how stronger unions and structured social dialogue have changed workplace dynamics in some factories. Workers now have platforms to voice concerns, discuss issues directly with management, and negotiate better terms through Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). As of February 2023, there were approximately 1,201 registered trade unions in the garment sector, with 97 per cent of them active. These agreements have led to higher wage increments, improved leave policies, and maternity benefits that go beyond the legal minimum.

However, despite this progress, many factories still lack active unions. As of 2016, only around 10 per cent of Bangladesh's approximately 4,500 garment factories had registered unions.

Women's participation has grown significantly in recent years. Women now hold leadership positions in committees, ensuring that issues like safety, harassment, and discrimination are addressed more effectively. Ensuring their voices are included in leadership has been key to creating safer, more respectful workplaces. Functional Sexual Harassment Complaint Committees have fostered trust and openness, leading to safer environments for women in particular. With training and support from partners such as 3F and the Danish Embassy, unions have strengthened their ability to handle grievances, engage in constructive negotiation, and promote safe workplaces. Union leaders are more confident and

professional using dialogue as the main tool for problem-solving.

At the factory level, improvements are visible. Regular inspections, better communication, and collaboration between workers and management have created safer, cleaner, and more disciplined environments. DIFE has reported an increase in inspections in recent years.



**THE PROBLEM IS NOT THE IDEA OF DIALOGUE; IT'S THAT WORKERS' VOICES ARE OFTEN HEARD BUT NOT CONSIDERED. TRUE SOCIAL DIALOGUE MEANS GIVING WORKERS REAL TIME AND OPPORTUNITY TO CONTRIBUTE, NOT JUST INVITING THEM TO A MEETING AND MOVING ON.**



*Salauddin Shapon*  
Worker Leader



Mr Shapon participates in national platforms such as the Ready-Made Garment Tripartite Consultative Committee (RMG TCC), where unions engage with government and employers. He believes that progress depends on trust and accountability.





## CASE STORY: THE FIGHT FOR SAFER WORK IN THE TANNERY INDUSTRY

**I**n Bangladesh's tannery sector, workers face more than the daily grind of manual labour, they confront a long-term health crisis. A recent study of tanneries in Savar found that nearly 9 in 10 workers reported skin problems and asthma, while more than 70 per cent suffered from jaundice and other systemic illnesses. Despite frequent illness, only about 56 per cent received any medical treatment, and fewer than 1 in 10 got treatment support from management. Another 2024 occupational safety survey revealed that more than 64 per cent of workers experienced allergies and 42 per cent reported respiratory diseases linked to chemical exposures, poor ventilation, and inadequate safety equipment.

Mr Mohammad Hadil Islam has worked in the tannery industry since 1985. His role in the chemical colouring section exposes him daily to dyes and cleaning agents, affecting his breathing, eyesight, and overall health. Over the years, he developed illnesses such as jaundice and heart disease. Like many tannery workers, he learned that while sudden injuries receive attention, long-term chemical-related health problems often remain untreated.

These challenges inspired his commitment to improving worker safety. As a union representative since 1995, he has actively raised issues related to occupational safety and health, wages, and fair treatment. In the past, management rarely responded to concerns. In recent years, discussions on paid leave, accident compensation and unsafe working conditions are more frequently documented and followed up.

Training and consultations have accompanied more structured dialogue on chemical hazards and compensation. Support from the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) and partners has included training on chemical hazards and labour law. Mr Hadil sees these changes on the factory floor. Workers are more aware of risks, committees are more active, and management responds more quickly to concerns. However, challenges remain. Many

tanneries still struggle with poor ventilation, unsafe chemical handling, and limited medical support for long-term illnesses. The minimum wage of BDT 18,000 is not enough for rising living costs, leaving many workers vulnerable.

**“ IF OUR WORKPLACES ARE SAFE AND HUMANE, WORKERS WILL GIVE THEIR BEST. WE DON'T WANT LUXURY – JUST THE RIGHT TO WORK WITHOUT FEAR OR HARM. ”**

*Mohammad Hadil Islam*  
Worker at a Tannery Factory

Mr Hadil sees these changes on the factory floor. Workers are more aware of risks, committees are more active, and management responds more quickly to concerns. However, challenges remain. Many tanneries still struggle with poor ventilation, unsafe chemical handling, and limited medical support for long-term illnesses. The minimum wage of BDT 18,000 is not enough for rising living costs, leaving many workers vulnerable.

Hadil says conditions have improved in some factories, but exposure to chemicals and inconsistent enforcement remain daily realities for many workers.





## **CASE STORY: STRENGTHENING WORKER RIGHTS THROUGH LAW REFORM AND COLLECTIVE ACTION**



**M**r. Sheikh Akram Hossain, Office Secretary of the Tannery Workers Union, has worked for years on labour issues in Bangladesh's tannery sector. His career began on the factory floor, where he saw first-hand how chemical exposure, long hours and limited rights affected workers' health and livelihoods.

As national discussions on decent work gained pace, Mr Akram and other union leaders saw that many of the problems workers faced were rooted in gaps in the Labour Act. Several provisions lacked clarity on enforcement and worker protections, leaving workers without strong protections on safety, grievance handling, working hours or fair treatment. To address this, BILS convened a Working Committee under the National Tripartite Consultative Council, with support from the Government of Denmark through BILS. The committee includes labour rights experts, academics and trade union leaders, and reviews the Labour Act against existing labour standards and international conventions.

Mr Akram says the committee has altered how unions engage in amendment discussions. The committee provides evidence, legal analysis and worker perspectives, which union representatives now use during formal amendment discussions. Union representatives now reference documented cases and legal analysis during negotiations, and several recommendations have already appeared in draft amendments since 2018.

On the ground, the Tannery Workers Union uses the training and support provided by BILS to educate workers about their rights, occupational hazards and grievance procedures. Workers now understand how to discuss chemical risks, raise complaints and negotiate on issues such as wages, festival leave and reinstatement. Union involvement also supports more regular inspections and better communication with management, which helps address safety gaps in areas like ventilation, chemical handling and emergency preparedness.

**“ WE ONCE RAISED OUR VOICES IN FRUSTRATION, BUT NOW WE SIT ACROSS THE TABLE WITH FACTS, LAWS AND MUTUAL RESPECT TO FIND REAL SOLUTIONS. ”**

*Sheikh Akram Hossain*

Office Secretary of the Tannery Workers Union



Mr Akram sees gradual but real change. Workers are more confident to speak up, and management is more responsive when concerns are raised with clear references to law and evidence. While challenges remain, such as inadequate housing and limited medical support for long-term chemical exposure, he notes that enforcement remains uneven and that legal reform alone does not guarantee safer conditions





## CASE STORY: HELPING WORKERS FIND JUSTICE

**I**n Bangladesh, workers often face a range of challenges such as unfair dismissals, withheld wages, unsafe working conditions, and anti-union discrimination. Unfortunately, many find it difficult to access justice due to overloaded labour courts and limited legal literacy. The Workers Resource Centre (WRC), established in 2017, provides a much-needed platform where workers can access legal advice, resolve disputes. Supported by the governments of Denmark and Sweden through the International Labour Organization (ILO), the centre has become a vital resource for workers across the country.

Mr Rafiqul Alam, Programme Manager of the WRC, has seen first-hand how workers in Bangladesh struggle to secure justice. Many of these workers face dismissals, unsafe working environments, and wage theft with little hope of resolution. For those who do try to pursue legal action, the path to justice is often long and difficult. The overloaded labour courts in Bangladesh only add to the frustration, leaving many workers disillusioned and without recourse. The WRC was established to bridge this gap. It serves as a joint platform for the National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education and the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council. One of the centre's key achievements has been the development of a paralegal network. With support from the ILO and the University of Dhaka, the WRC has trained and certified

25 paralegals in labour law and dispute resolution. These paralegals work directly with workers in factories and communities, offering legal advice and helping to resolve disputes. By 2023, the paralegals had handled over 6,000 cases affecting around 18,000 workers, with almost half of these disputes being resolved without the need for court intervention.

As Mr Alam points out, the role of the paralegals not only accelerates the resolution of disputes but also strengthens the collective voice of workers through the trade unions. The WRC acts as a hub for 26 federations. However, despite the progress made, several obstacles still stand in the way of broader success. The reach of union representation remains limited, with many workers still hesitant to seek help due to fear of retaliation from employers. Sectors like domestic work and construction are also often left out, meaning a large segment of the workforce does not benefit from the support the WRC provides.

“ **EDUCATION, TRAINING, LEGAL SUPPORT AND EVEN HELP WITH ORGANISING UNIONS ARE ALL UNDER ONE ROOF. WORKERS NOW KNOW THEY ARE NOT ALONE.** ”



*Rafiqul Alam*  
Programme Manager, Worker Resource Centre (WRC)

Additionally, anti-union practices and blacklisting continue to undermine the efforts of those workers who try to stand up for their rights, leaving them vulnerable to discrimination and exclusion.

The WRC is expanding services to informal sectors such as construction, domestic work and tanning, where formal grievance mechanisms are limited. Mr Alam says the effectiveness of the system depends on whether workers trust it enough to use it.





## CASE STORY: BUILDING FAIR AND ACCESSIBLE DISPUTE RESOLUTION FOR WORKERS

**M**r Mohammad Rahat Ahmed, a trained paralegal, has spent the last few years helping workers in Gazipur resolve disputes that often seemed insurmountable. Before the creation of systems like the Workers Resource Centre (WRC), workers faced many challenges in seeking help when denied wages, wrongfully dismissed, or faced unsafe working conditions. Many workers gave up or didn't know where to turn for assistance, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

The WRC was created with support from the Governments of Denmark and Sweden and technical assistance from the International Labour Organization (ILO). It provides a shared platform for major trade union federations where workers can raise complaints and seek mediation. With the training and tools provided by the WRC, Rahat now uses a structured approach to document and mediate disputes.

Rahat joined the paralegal network in 2020, where he received training in labour law, case documentation, negotiation, and digital case management tools. His work has had an immediate and lasting impact. One of his first successful cases involved helping a worker recover unpaid wages that had been withheld for months. Another case involved a dismissed female worker who had raised safety concerns in her factory. Rahat helped her secure the wages owed and facilitated her reinstatement.

By 2023, Rahat had handled 27 cases, most of which were resolved directly at the enterprise level. Compared to court proceedings, mediation at the enterprise level can reduce time and costs for workers.

“ EARLIER, WE USED TO SEND A NOTICE AND FORGET ABOUT IT. NOW, WE SEE IT THROUGH TO THE END, EVEN IF IT TAKES MONTHS. WE TRY EVERY POSSIBLE WAY TO SETTLE BEFORE GOING TO COURT. ”



*Mohammad Rahat Ahmed*  
Paralegal

However, workers in informal sectors such as domestic work, construction, and small-scale manufacturing often remain outside the reach of these paralegal services. Additionally, the fear of retaliation and anti-union sentiment remains a barrier, with many workers hesitant to seek assistance for fear of being blacklisted or dismissed.

Rahat says outcomes depend on whether workers are willing to document cases and pursue follow-up through the full mediation process.





## CASE STORY: TURNING STRUGGLES INTO JUSTICE FOR GARMENT WORKERS

**W**hen the Worker Resource Centre (WRC) began emerging as a new platform for dispute resolution, training and worker support, members of the Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Federation (BIGWF) recognised its relevance. Among them was Ms Tamiza Sultana, who had long assisted workers informally but often struggled to secure meaningful outcomes because there was no structured, reliable process for raising grievances.

The creation of the WRC through the Social Dialogue and Harmonious Industrial Relations (SDHIR) initiative, supported by the Governments of Denmark and Sweden and guided by the ILO, filled this critical gap. It offered a unified space for federations under NCCWE and IBC, introduced a trained Paralegal network and developed systematic methods for recording, tracking and resolving workplace disputes. For Tamiza, it introduced a more structured way to approach disputes.

She became involved around 2019, when BIGWF began collaborating with the Centre. Before receiving formal training, she helped workers based on experience alone, often relying on verbal discussions that did not lead to lasting solutions. The paralegal training organised with support from Denmark and Sweden. Over ten days, she learned how to write grievance letters, cite the correct legal sections, document cases properly and request structured meetings with management.

One of her first practical successes involved a couple who were dismissed without just cause. Instead of appealing verbally, Tamiza wrote a formal grievance, referred to the law and invited management to discuss the issue. The structured, respectful process made a noticeable difference. After the meeting, both workers were reinstated.

WRC processes have continued to strengthen her work. Letters issued through the Centre receive quick attention from factory owners because they follow a recognised procedure and carry legal clarity. Workers appreciate that the service is free, transparent and supportive, allowing them to seek justice without fear or financial burden. Disputes are often resolved more quickly than through the lengthy and costly court system, which many workers try to avoid.



**BEFORE, WE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO WRITE FORMAL GRIEVANCES. WE WOULD JUST ASK OUR SENIOR LEADERS FOR HELP. BUT AFTER THE TRAINING, I CAN NOW WRITE THE LETTERS PROPERLY AND EXPLAIN THE LAW TO MANAGEMENT. IT HAS MADE MY VOICE STRONGER**



*Tamiza Sultana*  
Paralegal



As she has grown in her role, Tamiza has also seen positive changes among workers. They now better understand their rights, feel encouraged to speak up and know how to document concerns properly.

She continues to guide them through each step so their cases receive fair and organised attention. Yet, certain factories operate without registration, and there are cases where workers have violated rules, making resolution difficult. Tamiza still ensures that every case is documented and that workers receive accurate guidance, even if immediate success is not possible.

Tamiza says the key difference is documentation. When complaints are written, referenced to law and followed up formally, management engagement changes.



# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FRONTLINES

- **THE POWER OF EVIDENCE-BASED ADVOCACY:** Proposals backed by solid data and justification allow workers to present their demands more effectively, gaining traction in policy discussions.
- **THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVE SOCIAL DIALOGUE:** Bringing together workers, employers, and the government in a structured dialogue process is key to creating laws that are both fair and practical.
- **THE NEED FOR CONTINUOUS ENGAGEMENT:** Sustained efforts in consultation and lobbying, supported by a well-informed and united workforce, are essential for achieving long-lasting reform.
- **UNION STRENGTHENING:** Building the capacity of unions to negotiate and enforce workers' rights is key to achieving better working conditions.
- **ENGAGING WOMEN WORKERS:** Establishing active Women's Committees and SHCCs has provided much-needed support for addressing gender-based harassment and discrimination.
- **PROACTIVE MONITORING:** The proactive stance of unions in recording and addressing grievances ensures that issues are not overlooked and are resolved promptly.
- **KNOWLEDGE EMPOWERS:** Paralegal services have proven effective in resolving disputes outside the formal system.
- **UNITY STRENGTHENS VOICE:** A unified platform for trade unions amplifies workers' collective power.
- **SUSTAINABILITY NEEDS DIVERSIFICATION:** Long-term success requires diversifying funding sourced beyond donor projects.

# **ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT**

- **STRENGTHEN SOCIAL DIALOGUE MECHANISMS:** Formalise and expand platforms for social dialogue, ensuring that workers' voices are always included in legislative processes.
- **BUILD CAPACITY FOR ADVOCACY:** Train workers and their representatives in effective negotiation skills, labour law understanding, and policy advocacy to enhance their influence on future reforms.
- **PRIORITISE INCLUSIVITY:** Ensure that all segments of the workforce, including informal workers and women, are adequately represented in the dialogue process to reflect the diversity of workers' needs.

## **FOR MANAGEMENT:**

- Enforce a zero-tolerance policy on discrimination and rights violations.
- Implement biannual supervisor training to refresh understanding of worker rights and proper management practices.
- Ensure that all worker-management committees meet regularly and adhere to clear redressal procedures.

## **FOR GOVERNMENT:**

- Empower the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) to conduct more frequent, targeted inspections on wage levels, on-time payments, and working hours.
- Strengthen penalties for non-compliance with labour laws and publish inspection outcomes to drive greater accountability among employers.

## **FOR INSTITUTIONS AND PARTNERS:**

- Institutionalise paralegal services: Formalise WRC's services as a key part of the Dispute resolution process.
- Strengthen referrals: Connect the Department of Labour's database with the WRC's system to streamline case referrals.
- Leverage union expertise: Encourage the use of WRC's trained master trainers for ongoing capacity building.



## CHANGE IN PRACTICE JUST TRANSITION

*Click the picture to see the full video on Just Transition*

**B**angladesh's industries are changing rapidly. Factories are becoming greener and more automated as the country works toward global sustainability goals. Yet amid this progress, an important challenge remains: ensuring that workers are not left behind. With support from the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) and the Government of Denmark, trade unions have stepped forward to lead a fair and inclusive shift known as Just Transition, which focuses on protecting jobs, rights, and dignity as technology and climate pressures reshape work.

Through collaboration, unions such as the Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers' Federation (BRGWF) formed a national platform to advocate for retraining, job security, and climate adaptation measures. Supported by 3F, unions began including Just Transition clauses in collective bargaining agreements, ensuring that automation brings opportunities for training rather than job loss. These steps turned the idea of fairness during industrial change into practical action.

The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) strengthened this progress through its Educate, Engage, and Influence model, which helped workers understand Just Transition and participate in shaping related policies. By raising awareness, encouraging social dialogue, and linking workplace experiences to national discussions, BILS and the unions ensured that workers' voices remain central to Bangladesh's sustainable future. Together, their efforts show that industrial progress and social justice can move forward side by side.



## CASE STORY: PROTECTING WORKERS AS INDUSTRIES CHANGE



**I**n Bangladesh’s garment-producing districts, Mohammad Salauddin Shapon recalls growing concern among factory workers as machines began replacing manual jobs and rising temperatures made production floors increasingly difficult to work in.

He notes that few workers initially understood what “just transition” meant. Automation threatened helpers and low-skilled workers, while excessive heat posed safety and health risks, yet union leaders lacked structured responses.

Training initiatives supported by international partners, including the ILO, focused on climate adaptation, reskilling and workplace safety. The training addressed climate adaptation, reskilling, job security and heat stress mitigation.

Unions in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector drafted a joint trade union paper outlining priorities related to technological change and workplace heat exposure. They emphasised retraining before introducing new technologies, redeployment rather than job loss, and ventilation improvements before workload increases.

As a result, some collective bargaining agreements now include clauses on reskilling, technological change and heat stress measures.

Recent reports show the urgency of these efforts. A 2025 study by the Department of Public Health and Informatics at Jahangirnagar University found that 82 per cent of workers in the RMG, leather and footwear sectors suffer from heat stress due to poor conditions and lack of ventilation. An even more alarming trend is the impact of automation: a joint research effort by the Bangladesh Labor Foundation (BLF), BRAC University and the Solidaridad Network Asia found that automation caused a 31 per cent decline in the RMG sector workforce, especially affecting helpers and low skilled workers.

**“ A TRANSITION IS INEVITABLE, BUT FAIRNESS IS A CHOICE. IF WE MOVE FORWARD WITHOUT PROTECTING WORKERS, PROGRESS WILL LOSE ITS MEANING. ”**



*Salauddin Shapon, President*  
Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers' Federation (BRGWF)

Under this new framework, workers are gaining more voice and better protection. In factories where just transition clauses have been incorporated, committees now assess heat related risks systematically. Workers report increased awareness of how automation and climate change might affect their jobs and safety. Some have received offers of reskilling or redeployment rather than facing abrupt dismissal; others have benefited from improved ventilation or scheduling changes designed to reduce heat exposure. Shapon says structured negotiation has increased union participation in discussions on technological upgrades and environmental compliance.

While not all factories have adopted these measures, implementation remains uneven. Shapon notes that without enforceable commitments, automation and climate pressures may continue to reduce jobs and strain working conditions.





## CASE STORY: DEFINING JUST TRANSITION



**S**yed Sultan Uddin Ahmed, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), has worked on labour policy and union development across sectors. In recent years, automation and climate-related pressures have affected working conditions and job stability. Rising heat affects safety and productivity, while technological upgrades have reduced demand for certain categories of workers.

Training initiatives facilitated through BILS addressed this gap. With Danish backing, BILS developed union-friendly research, organised consultations and trained trade union leaders on the Just Transition agenda. The training focused on reskilling, redeployment, heat-stress mitigation and social dialogue mechanisms.

Through this support, trade unions developed a shared understanding of Just Transition. Leaders from the ready-made garment, tannery and shipbreaking sectors took part in training and discussions.

BILS facilitated the creation of Bangladesh's first joint trade union position paper, outlining common demands on reskilling, redeployment, heat-stress management, OSH protections and social dialogue.

Local unions have since started to include Just Transition clauses in their collective bargaining agreements.

Unions now approach automation and climate risks with clearer strategies and better evidence. Some sectoral committees have begun engaging employers on reskilling needs and OSH risks linked to rising temperatures. A volunteer team has also been formed within the tannery sector to focus specifically on Just Transition issues.

**“ YOU MAY BE AWARE, BUT IF YOU DO NOT KNOW WHERE TO GO, OR WHETHER INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT EXISTS, AWARENESS GAINS YOU LITTLE. ”**



*Syed Sultan Ahmed*, Executive Director  
Bangladesh Institute for Labour Studies (BILS)

Despite this progress, he acknowledges that gaps remain. Many factory-level leaders still need support to understand the agenda. Not all sectors have developed their own Just Transition guidelines, and union participation in national green-transition processes is still limited. Legal frameworks also lag behind, with few policies mentioning Just Transition directly.

Mr Ahmed notes that without formal policy integration and enforcement mechanisms, Just Transition commitments may remain advisory rather than binding.



# LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE FRONTLINES

- **WORKER PARTICIPATION IS KEY:** Including workers in planning and decision-making around technological transitions ensures that their rights and safety are prioritised.
- **CAPACITY BUILDING STRENGTHENS NEGOTIATIONS:** Training union leaders on the just transition agenda has equipped them with the skills to advocate effectively for workers' rights.
- **SOCIAL DIALOGUE IS ESSENTIAL:** Regular bipartite meetings and active committees have been crucial in implementing just transition clauses and ensuring that agreements are followed through.
- **COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH:** A successful just transition requires addressing both environmental goals and workers' well-being, ensuring fairness in the shift towards more sustainable production.
- **EDUCATION AND AWARENESS ARE KEY:** Equipping trade union leaders with the knowledge and resources to understand the just transition is essential for meaningful change.
- **UNIFIED POSITION STRENGTHENS ADVOCACY:** Developing a joint position paper and promoting a collective understanding among unions ensures that all workers' voices are represented in the green transition.
- **SECTOR-SPECIFIC ENGAGEMENT IS CRUCIAL:** Each sector, such as RMG, tannery, and shipbreaking, faces unique challenges, and tailored solutions are necessary to ensure that no workers are left behind.
- **LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMING NEEDS PRIORITISATION:** While there is progress at the union level, legal and policy frameworks must be adapted to explicitly include just transition principles.

# **ACTIONABLE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUSTAINED IMPROVEMENT**

## **GOVERNMENT ACTION:**

- Embed the just transition in RMG regulations: Mandate worker participation in technology transition planning, prohibit forced layoffs, and require funded retraining and redeployment.
- Strengthen DIFE oversight: Expand inspections to include joint impact assessments, heat-stress and ventilation checks, and track KPIs for training, redeployment, and OSH.
- Verify delivery: Ensure robust monitoring to confirm that OSH upgrades and social safeguards in CBAs are fully implemented.

## **EMPLOYER ACTION:**

- **SET UP UNION-MANAGEMENT TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEES:** Prohibit unilateral dismissals and guarantee paid retraining and redeployment before automation.
- **INSTITUTIONALISE JOINT REVIEWS:** Conduct regular, documented impact assessments on reskilling, redeployment, and OSH improvements, with advance notice protocols.
- **RESOURCE ACTIVE COMMITTEES:** Ensure monthly meetings for safety and union committees, track action items, and share updates with workers.

## **LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMING:**

- **PRIORITISE LEGAL RECOGNITION OF JUST TRANSITION:** Advocate for the inclusion of just transition principles in national policies and legal documents, especially beyond the 2030 Prosperity Plan.
- **ENSURE COMPREHENSIVE COVERAGE:** Extend the just transition framework across key sectors (e.g., shipbreaking, tannery, RMG) and integrate them into relevant industrial regulation.