



STORIES BEHIND THE FACES

Building Fair and Safe Workplaces in Bangladesh's Factories



**EMBASSY
OF DENMARK**



As Bangladesh approaches its milestone of graduating from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026, the focus is shifting to sustainable, inclusive growth. Central to this transition is the recognition that a thriving industrial sector begins with a strong, well-supported workforce. Prioritising workers' rights, safety, and well-being is not just a moral imperative but a strategic foundation for long-term industrial success.

This E-publication explores real-world cases where dedicated contributions and initiatives have led to significant progress in social sustainability within the industrial sector. 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.

OSH in Action

Strengthening Worker Safety Across Bangladesh's Industries



Bangladesh's work 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 and increase the use of data for policy decisions. With this support, DIFE has formed OSH expert teams that train labour inspectors across the country, and NOSHTRI has grown into a national centre for industry-based OSH training and research. These developments have strengthened nationally managed systems, although further improvements remain necessary.

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.

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.



Mohammad Mahmudul Hasan
nspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE)



Now when I walk into a workplace, I can spot hazards the moment I enter. I know which machines pose danger, and I can guide factory owners on exactly how to eliminate the risks.

Boosting Inspection capacity for a safer tomorrow

When Mohammad Mahmudul Hasan first joined the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE), he often struggled to recognise workplace hazards. During his early inspections he was unsure which machines were dangerous or how accidents could be prevented. His experience reflected a wider national challenge. Repeated industrial disasters, including the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 and the BM Container Depot explosion in 2022, showed how limited inspection capacity put workers and industries at risk.

Mr Hasan's development is closely linked to the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between the Governments of Denmark and Bangladesh. Through the SSC, Danish labour inspectors worked with DIFE to develop practical OSH guidelines, checklists and training courses. The cooperation helped establish OSH expert teams in eight priority areas, such as chemical safety and construction safety. These teams now train inspectors and provide technical support across the country.

Mr Hasan was among the inspectors trained through this system. He explains that the new checklists and risk assessment tools help him identify hazards more clearly, discuss solutions with employers and follow up on corrective action. By 2024, the OSH Teams had trained 239 inspectors and updated or developed 13 OSH courses. About 70 per cent of inspectors have now received chemical safety training using SSC-developed materials. These changes show how OSH knowledge is becoming embedded within DIFE rather than limited to temporary projects.

Yet, Mr Hasan is frank about the pressures the system still faces. Bangladesh has about 74 million workers and only 436 labour inspectors. One inspector is responsible for nearly 170 thousand workers. Staff rotations and limited resources continue to restrict the number and depth of inspections. Whether the new structures will lead to better protection across all sectors will depend on sustained investment and a sufficient number of trained inspectors.

Despite these challenges, Mr Hasan remains hopeful. He sees each inspection as an opportunity to reduce risks and prevent harm. His experience illustrates how the SSC, national reforms and practical training have strengthened inspection capacity, while also showing that continued commitment is needed to ensure safer workplaces throughout Bangladesh.



Boiler Safety Training Reaches Workers on the Factory Floor

Anwar Hossain
Boiler Operator at Avani Textile



Before, I didn't really understand how a small mistake could cause a big accident. After receiving the boiler safety training, now I know exactly how to check pressure levels, valves, and safety systems and I never skip a single step.

When Mohammad Anwar Hossain begins his workday as a junior supervisor, he starts by checking boiler pressure, valves and gas lines. He did not always work this way. As a boiler operator, he often underestimated how quickly small faults could turn into serious accidents, a risk that has caused repeated boiler explosions across Bangladesh's industries. These incidents have affected workers and disrupted production, highlighting the need for better technical skills and safer routines.

This gap is what the National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute (NOSHTRI) set out to address as it began offering practical, industry-focused training. With support from the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between the Governments of Bangladesh and Denmark, NOSHTRI developed training courses on boiler safety, chemical handling, crane operation, construction safety and accident prevention. The SSC helped create eight courses, train master trainers and pilot the materials with workers from different sectors. By 2024, five types of training had been delivered to industries, and participant evaluations confirmed the value of the courses.

Mr Anwar's work changed after he received boiler safety training from NOSHTRI, developed under the SSC. Danish specialists supported NOSHTRI in creating material on boiler mountings, safety devices and correct testing procedures. The course gave him a clearer understanding of pressure management and early warning signs. He explains that this training shifted how he views risk, showing him that prevention starts long before visible damage appears.

He now follows a structured routine. Safety valves are tested every month, hydraulic tests take place every six months and all components are inspected regularly. His team reports issues immediately, and management addresses them without delay. During inspections, the Office of the Chief Inspector of Boilers (CIOB) has found the workplace compliant with required safety standards.

Mr Anwar's experience reflects a broader shift made possible by NOSHTRI's growing role. Between 2023 and 2025, boiler safety was one of several OSH courses formally added to NOSHTRI's training catalogue. The introduction of a fee-based model for pilot courses showed that industries are willing to invest in structured safety training. The World Bank's decision to collaborate with NOSHTRI for contractor training in 2025 also indicates increasing external recognition.

Yet challenges remain. Many workplaces still operate old boilers, and a large number of operators have not received certified training. Safety routines vary widely between enterprises. Continued training and stronger enforcement are needed for change to reach more workplaces, especially smaller factories that often lack resources.

Still, Mr Anwar remains committed. He describes each inspection round as an opportunity to prevent harm and protect his team. His experience shows how targeted technical training, supported by cooperation between Bangladesh and Denmark, is beginning to influence safety practices on the factory floor while highlighting the need for further expansion to cover more of the country's industrial workforce.



“Before, we didn’t really know how to assess risk properly. Now, we understand risk assessment like identifying the hazard, mitigating it, and ensuring every crane, lift, and lifting appliance is tested regularly.”



Md. Tahidul Islam

Assistant Inspector General (safety)
Industrial safety unit, DIFE
Boiler Operator at Avani Textile

Crane Safety Training Strengthens Inspection Practices

Mr Md Tahidul Islam, Assistant Inspector General (Safety) at the Industrial Safety Unit at DIFE headquarters, has spent many years inspecting construction sites and industrial facilities. When he first began this work, crane operations were among the areas where he saw the most frequent risks. Operators often learned on the job, lifting appliances were not always certified and inspection routines lacked the tools needed to assess complex lifting work. These gaps contributed to a pattern of crane-related incidents that affected both workers and project timelines.

In response to these challenges, the National Occupational Safety and Health Training and Research Institute (NOSHTRI) started expanding its technical training for high-risk sectors. With support from the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between the Governments of Bangladesh and Denmark, NOSHTRI and DIFE’s OSH Teams developed a set of practical courses for industry use. Among these were new modules on crane safety, boiler safety, chemical safety, accident prevention and construction safety. Danish specialists worked with Bangladeshi trainers to ensure the content reflected real conditions in the field and could be applied directly during inspections.

Mr Tahidul took part in the crane safety training from NOSHTRI, developed under the SSC. The course introduced structured methods for checking load limits, operator competence and lifting equipment. It also clarified certification requirements and inspection routines under national labour regulations. Before this training, inspections often relied on visual checks alone. The new tools helped him carry out more consistent and technical assessments.

He and his team began applying these approaches during field inspections. They now review maintenance logs, operator certificates, lifting plans and safety barriers in a more systematic way. At many worksites, warning signs, controlled lifting zones and documented tests have become more common. Between 2023 and 2025, crane safety became one of five NOSHTRI courses delivered to industry, and participant feedback was positive. The World Bank’s decision to work with NOSHTRI on training construction contractors in 2025 further demonstrates external confidence in the programme.

These developments mark a shift in how lifting work is managed, but challenges continue. Bangladesh has a large number of active construction sites, and not all operators or contractors have received certified training. Some enterprises still struggle with documentation or view safety as an additional cost. Limited inspection staff and heavy workloads remain barriers to regular follow-up.

Even with these constraints, Mr Tahidul notices steady change. Inspections are now more technical and evidence-based. Employers are more responsive when they see that better lifting procedures reduce delays and protect workers. For him, the move from basic inspection to risk-focused oversight is one of the most important developments in recent years.

He believes that with continued training and coordinated enforcement, the number of crane-related incidents can be reduced further. His experience shows how cooperation between Bangladesh and Denmark is helping build practical skills within the inspection system, while also highlighting the need for sustained effort so that safer lifting practices become standard across all worksites.

Making Safety Information Easier to Access

When Labour Inspector (Health) Pratishtha Barua joined DIFE's ICT Cell, she saw how often workers and employers struggled to find clear safety information. Many questions that reached the Labour Helpline could have been resolved if the website had been easier to navigate. For her, it was clear that better digital access would help people understand their rights and prevent accidents.

Her work coincided with a review of DIFE's website carried out under the Strategic Sector Cooperation (SSC) between the Governments of Bangladesh and Denmark. The SSC provided concrete recommendations to improve clarity, structure and access to occupational safety and health (OSH) content. DIFE acted on several of these suggestions, and Ms Barua helped implement them.

The updated website now brings key services into one place. Workers can submit complaints, renew licences and find OSH guidance online, while inspectors use the platform to access laws and inspection tools. Complaints made through the helpline are logged digitally and sent to district offices for follow-up. These changes make it easier for people to find reliable information without visiting offices in person.

The improvements reflect a wider effort to strengthen prevention and support Bangladesh's commitments under trade schemes. The introduction of SSC-recommended edits has made the website more user-friendly, and district offices update their local sites more regularly. Younger inspectors have adapted quickly and help others navigate the system.

Challenges remain. Not all workers are comfortable using online services, and the website and helpline still need better integration to ensure consistent information across both platforms. Ms Barua believes a single, centralised digital portal would help address this gap.

Even so, she sees the progress as an important step towards more transparent and accessible labour services. For her, clearer digital tools give both workers and employers a better chance to understand safety requirements and prevent harm.



In those days, people used to phone district inspectors just to ask how to apply for a licence or file a complaint," she recalls. "Now they can find everything themselves- from how to renew a factory licence to the full OSH guidelines-all in one place on the website.

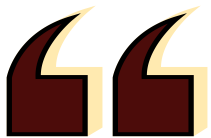
Pratishtha Barua

Labour Inspector (Health), DIFE



Strengthening Worker Voice to Improve Safety

Rakibul
Sewing Operator



Before, we didn't really know how to assess risk properly. Now, we understand risk assessment like identifying the hazard, mitigating it, and ensuring every crane, lift, and lifting appliance is tested regularly.

When Mohammad Rakibul Islam began his work as a line iron man, safety concerns were often left unreported. Workers had limited knowledge of their rights, and issues such as unsafe machinery, blocked exits or harassment rarely reached management. Without clear channels for raising concerns, many risks on the production floor persisted.

Positive changes began after the union and factory-level committees became active, supported by capacity-building delivered through the Government of Denmark and the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F). Training covered grievance handling, gender-based violence prevention and basic labour law, helping workers understand how to report hazards and participate in discussions on workplace conditions. This support strengthened the committees' ability to promote safer practices and negotiate improvements with management.

Today, workers can report safety issues directly, submit written complaints or contact the union or safety committees. Cases involving overtime, leave, discrimination or unsafe conditions are logged and investigated. Supervisory behaviour is monitored more closely, and misconduct is handled through formal procedures.

Safety routines are more structured. The Safety Committee carries out regular floor checks and monthly walk-throughs with management. Hazards such as missing guards, poor ventilation or blocked pathways are identified and corrected. Visits from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments provide further OSH guidance and Corrective Action Plans, which workers and management track together.

These developments show how stronger worker participation—supported by Denmark through 3F—can make OSH systems more responsive. Unions now record safety-related cases more systematically, and some workplaces have negotiated provisions that go beyond legal minimums.

Challenges remain. Not all workers feel confident using the reporting system, and cases of harassment still occur. Wages and long hours continue to place pressure on many workers, limiting their ability to engage fully. Continued training and more frequent inspections will be needed to ensure progress reaches every part of the workplace.

For Mr Rakibul, awareness has been key. He believes that active committees, regular dialogue and ongoing support will help create workplaces where every worker can raise safety concerns without fear.

Lessons 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.
- **Implement collaborative monitoring and accountability:** Co-lead regular fire drills, equipment inspections, and canteen hygiene checks by workers and management to ensure continuous improvement, transparent reporting, and swift corrective action in daily operations.

Actionable Steps for Sustained Improvement in OSH Practices

- **For DIFE and 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:**
 - Ensure the formation of yard-based safety committees in each shipbreaking yard, with provisions for worker representation in these committees.
- **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):**
 - Make the use of PPE mandatory and ensure the quality of the equipment provided.



Raising Voices, Changing Lives

How Social Dialogue is Empowering Workers in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the struggle for workers' voices to be heard has long shaped the country's pursuit of decent work and social justice. Social dialogue has become an important means of addressing labour rights, yet many workers, particularly in the garment sector, continue to face barriers such as weak union representation, limited awareness of their rights, and gender-based discrimination. With the support of the Government of Denmark through United Federation of Trade Unions (3F), unions have strengthened their capacity to engage in collective bargaining, resolve grievances, and promote gender equality at the workplace. These efforts have helped create a more inclusive culture where workers can increasingly influence the policies and practices that affect their lives.

The Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS) has played a central role in turning social dialogue into meaningful reform. Through the National Tripartite Consultative Council, BILS worked alongside union leaders, workers, and labour law experts to promote amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act that reflect the principles of Decent Work. This collaboration strengthened evidence-based advocacy and ensured that the concerns of workers were reflected in ongoing policy reforms aimed at improving fair wages, occupational safety, and social protection.

At the grassroots level, unions and initiatives such as the Workers Resource Centre (WRC) have translated these national efforts into real change for workers. Through training, mediation, and the establishment of women-led committees, thousands of workers have gained the confidence and capacity to raise grievances, negotiate fairly, and seek justice through dialogue. The WRC's success in resolving nearly half of all reported cases through non-judicial mediation illustrates growing trust in social dialogue as a practical solution. Together, these initiatives tell a story of progress and resilience, where workers who were once unheard are now actively shaping a safer and fairer future in Bangladesh.

Strengthening Worker Voice to Improve Safety and Fair Conditions

Mr Mukter Hossen, a quality inspector with nine years of experience, recalls a time when workers had little confidence to raise concerns. Production pressure was high, supervisors used harsh language, and safety problems often went unreported. Many issues such as harassment, long hours and unsafe practices remained unresolved because workers feared approaching management.

Support from the Government of Denmark through the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) helped shift this situation. Training for local unions focused on collective bargaining, grievance handling, gender-based violence prevention and compliance with labour law. The purpose was to build strong worker committees and improve safety and working conditions through structured dialogue.

With this support, workers formed a union, joined a federation and registered their organisation in 2022. The union and the factory-level committees, including the Women's Committee and the Sexual Harassment Complaint Committee, created clear channels for reporting concerns. Cases involving wages, overtime, discrimination or safety are now recorded and raised with management. Misconduct by supervisors is handled through formal inquiry instead of being ignored.

Through Collective Bargaining Agreements, workers have secured improvements that go beyond legal minimums. These include better wage increments, increased festival leave and maternity-related support. These outcomes reflect more active social dialogue and stronger worker participation.

Safety practices have also improved. Regular floor checks, fire drills, and inspections by DIFE help identify hazards and support compliance. Workers have suggested holding drills more frequently to build confidence and preparedness. Weekly awareness sessions help workers understand their rights, reporting procedures and OSH responsibilities.

Challenges remain. Some workers still hesitate to report harassment, and production pressure continues to affect workloads. Continued training, active committees and stronger oversight are needed to maintain progress.

For Mukter, collective voice has made the biggest difference. He believes that teamwork, awareness and regular dialogue are essential to sustaining a workplace where safety, respect and dignity are part of everyday life.



Before, we didn't have the courage to speak. Even if something was wrong, we kept quiet. Now, we can talk to them. They listen and they respond.

Mukter Hossen

Quality Inspector





Salauddin Shapon

President of the Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers' Federation (BRGWF)



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.

Strengthening Worker Voice to Improve Safety and Fair Conditions

Mr Salauddin Shapon, President of the Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers' Federation (BRGWF), has devoted his life to improving the lives of garment workers across Bangladesh. His leadership reflects a shift from confrontation to collaboration, where unions, management, and the government work together to ensure fair treatment and decent working conditions.

Over the years, he has seen how stronger unions and structured social dialogue have transformed the workplace environment. Workers now have platforms to voice concerns, discuss issues directly with management, and negotiate better terms through Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs). These agreements have secured higher wage increments, improved leave policies, and maternity benefits that go beyond the legal minimum.

The participation of women has also grown remarkably. Women are now part of committees and taking leadership roles, ensuring that issues like safety, discrimination, and harassment are addressed more effectively. The formation of functional Sexual Harassment Complaint Committees has encouraged more openness and trust, leading to safer and more respectful workplaces.

Through training and support from partners such as 3F and the Danish Embassy, trade unions have strengthened their ability

to handle grievances, engage in constructive negotiation, and promote safe, fair workplaces. This capacity building has made union leaders more confident and professional, turning dialogue into the main tool for problem-solving.

Positive changes are also visible at the factory level. Regular inspections, improved communication, and collaboration between workers and management have created safer, cleaner, and more disciplined environments. Supervisors' behaviour has improved, and workers now feel respected and valued for their contribution.

Mr Shapon continues to play an active role in national platforms such as the Ready-Made Garment Tripartite Consultative Committee (RMG TCC), ensuring that workers' concerns reach the policy level. His goal is to make social dialogue a permanent part of Bangladesh's industrial relations system.

He believes that the country's progress depends on cooperation built on trust and accountability. One of the changes, he says, is that workers no longer feel afraid to speak. The confidence to raise one's voice, and be heard, has become the foundation of a fair and dignified workplace.

Building Safer Workplaces Through Women's Leadership



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.



Arifa Akhter

Sewing Operator

Ms Mst. Arifa Akter works as a quality inspector and serves as Vice President of the Women's Community under the Bangladesh Revolutionary Garments Workers Federation. Through her role, she helps women workers speak up about safety, harassment and workplace concerns that were once difficult to raise.

Support from the Government of Denmark through the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) has helped build the capacity of women leaders like Ms Arifa. Training on collective bargaining, grievance procedures, gender-based violence and the use of factory-level committees has strengthened workers' ability to address problems in a structured and confident way.

Although her factory does not yet have a trade union, the Women's Committee and the Sexual Harassment Complaint Committee now provide a formal space for women to report concerns. Regular meetings have made it easier to raise issues such as supervisor behaviour, hygiene problems and maternity-related challenges. With these platforms and the federation's support, workers resolve most matters through discussion and follow-up with management.

Safety practices have also improved. Ms Arifa participates in quarterly inspections to check machine guards, fire equipment, washrooms and overall floor conditions. The use of protective gear and DIFE's periodic visits have helped reduce common hazards. When workers identified problems with the childcare centre, repeated engagement with management resulted in repairs and better conditions.

Despite these improvements, challenges remain. Some women still hesitate to report harassment, and production pressure sometimes affects workloads. Continued awareness sessions and more active committees are needed to strengthen prevention and support.

For Ms Arifa, the key to safer and fairer workplaces is collective awareness. She believes that when women understand their rights and speak together, they can drive meaningful change.

Mohammad Hadil Islam
Tannery Industry



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.

The Fight for Safer Work in the Tannery Industry

Mr Mohammad Hadil Islam has worked in the tannery industry since 1985. His job in the chemical colouring section involves daily exposure to dyes and cleaning agents, which has affected his breathing, eyesight and overall health. Over time, he developed illnesses such as jaundice and heart disease. Like many tannery workers, he learned that while sudden injuries receive treatment, long-term chemical-related health problems often remain unsupported.

These challenges helped shape his commitment to improving worker safety. As a union representative since 1995, he has taken an active role in raising issues related to OSH, wages and fair treatment. In his early years, management rarely responded to workers' concerns. Today, thanks to stronger dialogue and better awareness, issues such as paid leave, accident compensation and unsafe conditions are addressed more consistently.

His efforts have been strengthened by the wider work carried out through BILS with support from the Government of Denmark. The labour law reform initiative helped build union knowledge on rights, grievance procedures and OSH standards. Training and consultation meetings gave representatives like Mr Hadil the tools to understand the law, discuss chemical hazards more confidently and advocate for safer working environments.

Mr Hadil notes that these improvements are visible on the factory floor. Workers are more aware of risks, committees function more actively and management responds more quickly when problems are raised. However, key 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 still not enough to meet rising living costs, and many workers remain vulnerable.

Despite these difficulties, Mr Hadil remains hopeful. He believes that continued training, proper implementation of the revised labour law and regular inspections can create safer and fairer workplaces. He also believes that stronger OSH protections and active unions are essential for a more sustainable tannery sector.

His story reflects the broader need for a legal framework that protects workers from both immediate and long-term risks, and for continued collaboration between government, unions and partners to make decent work a reality in Bangladesh.





Sheikh Akram Hossain

Office Secretary of the Tannery Workers Union

Strengthening Worker Rights Through Law Reform and Collective Action



We once raised our voices in frustration, but now we sit across the table with facts, laws and mutual respect to find real solutions.

Mr Sheikh Akram Hossain, Office Secretary of the Tannery Workers Union, has spent many years advocating for safer and fairer conditions 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. These experiences shaped his commitment to union organising and to improving labour protections for tannery workers.

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 did not reflect basic principles of decent work, 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 decent work indicators, ILO conventions and SDG commitments.

Mr Akram explains that this work has changed how unions take part in national reform. The committee provides evidence, legal analysis and worker perspectives, which union representatives now use during formal amendment discussions. These proposals have strengthened the credibility of the workers' side, and several recommendations have already appeared in draft amendments since 2018. This shift has given unions a clearer role in shaping safer and fairer workplaces across all industries, including tanneries.

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.

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 believes that stronger unions and ongoing legal reform will help the sector move toward safer and more dignified employment.



Rafiqul Alam

Programme Manager
Worker Resource Centre (WRC)



Education, training, legal support and even help with organising unions are all under one roof. Workers know they are not alone

Mr Rafiqul Alam, Programme Manager of the Workers Resource Centre, has seen first-hand how difficult it is for workers in Bangladesh to access justice. For years, many workers faced dismissals, withheld wages, unsafe conditions and anti-union discrimination with no clear pathway for remedy. Labour courts remain overwhelmed, with thousands of cases waiting to be heard, leaving workers with little hope for timely resolution.

The Workers Resource Centre was created to bridge this gap. With support from the Governments of Denmark and Sweden through the ILO, the centre was established in 2017 as a joint platform for the National Coordination Committee for Workers' Education and the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council. Its purpose was to give workers a single, trusted space where they could seek advice, resolve disputes, and strengthen their capacity to negotiate safer and fairer working conditions.

The development of the Workers Resource Centre reflects years of advocacy by labour organisations for a more efficient system. Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment sector has long had low union density and workers often struggled to navigate the formal justice process. The centre's creation was a response to this reality. It aimed to make justice accessible and to reduce pressure on an overburdened labour judiciary.

One of the strongest outcomes of this work has been the paralegal network. Under the centre's training programme, 25 paralegals were certified in labour law and dispute resolution, with technical support from the University of Dhaka and the ILO. Equipped with digital case management tools, they assist workers directly in factories and communities, recording cases and helping resolve them through dialogue. By 2023, paralegals had handled more than 6,000 complaints affecting over 18,000 workers. Nearly half of these disputes were resolved outside the court system, showing the value of early intervention and social dialogue. Only a small share needed to be sent to government authorities.

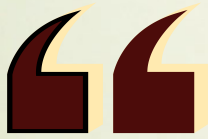
Mr Alam explains that this approach allows workers to secure remedy more quickly and helps prevent disputes from escalating. It has also encouraged unions to work together. The Workers Resource Centre functions as a shared platform for 26 federations, reducing fragmentation and building a stronger collective voice on national labour issues.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the centre helped workers secure wages and safety equipment through coordination with employers and government crisis committees. It also formed a Trade Union Rights Watch Team and a Women's Committee to address gender concerns and workplace risks faced by women.

As the centre looks to the future, it is expanding its work beyond the garment sector to include informal industries such as construction, domestic work and tanning. It is also promoting issues such as climate justice, just transition and responsible business conduct in supply chains. With guidance from Danish partners, the Workers Resource Centre has begun implementing a sustainability plan that includes contribution-based funding and revenue-generating training services.

For Mr Alam, the centre's purpose is simple. Workers need a place where they can raise concerns without fear and receive guidance that is grounded in law and respect. He believes that education, early dispute resolution and strong unions are key to building safer and more dignified workplaces across Bangladesh.

Building Fair and Accessible Dispute Resolution 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

Central Executive Member of the Samajtantrik Sramik Front Federation

Mr Mohammad Rahat Ahmed, a Central Executive Member of the Samajtantrik Sramik Front Federation, has been working closely with the Worker Resource Centre (WRC) since 2020. Before that, resolving workplace disputes in Gazipur was unpredictable. Complaints were handled informally, discussions ended without conclusions, and many workers simply gave up because they did not know where to seek remedy.

That changed when the WRC was established under a joint initiative supported by the Governments of Denmark and Sweden, with technical assistance from the ILO. The centre was designed as a common platform for major trade union federations, giving workers a place to seek guidance, raise complaints and resolve disputes through structured dialogue rather than confrontation. For Rahat and his colleagues, this marked a turning point.

Rahat was among the first thirty participants trained as paralegals in a ten-day course delivered in collaboration with the University of Dhaka. The training brought clarity, equipping him with skills in documentation, negotiation and digital case management. Instead of relying on verbal requests or unrecorded complaints, he now follows a clear, step-by-step method that ensures every case is tracked until completion.

This approach has made an immediate difference. Rahat recalls helping the family of a long-serving worker who had been struggling for years to recover unpaid benefits. Guided by the WRC process, he filed formal complaints, kept detailed records and engaged management repeatedly until the full payment was finally delivered. In another case, a dismissed woman worker—left without income—recovered her due wages after months of patient negotiation supported by the paralegal system.

Compared with taking disputes to court, the WRC model has proven faster, more accessible and far less intimidating. Workers now feel confident approaching Rahat because the service is voluntary, transparent and free of charge. Many are also reassured knowing that multiple federations work together through the WRC, reducing confusion and ensuring consistent support.

Since May, Rahat has worked on 27 cases using the WRC process, and the majority have already been resolved at the enterprise level. He believes this collaborative, evidence-based approach has strengthened trust between workers, unions and factory management. What once felt like a dead end has become a structured pathway for fair solutions.

Rahat hopes to see a WRC office reopened in Gazipur so that workers can access help more easily. For him, the centre has shown that when workers have the right tools—training, advice and a clear process—they can resolve disputes with dignity and confidence.



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.

Mst Tamiza Sultana

Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers' Federation (BIGWF)



From Informal Struggles to Organised Justice for Workers

When 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) immediately recognised its importance. Among them was Ms Mst 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 opened a new path to advocate for workers with clarity and confidence.

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 changed her approach entirely. 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. This outcome convinced her that preparation and professional dialogue were far more effective than relying on protests or informal negotiations.

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.

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.

Some challenges remain. 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.

For her, the WRC has reshaped the way worker advocacy functions. It has turned uncertainty into structure, fear into confidence and isolated efforts into collective action guided by knowledge and law.

Lessons Learned

- 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 sources beyond donor projects.

Recommendations

- 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.

A full-page background image showing a worker in a bright orange protective suit, a yellow helmet with a clear face shield, and white gloves. The worker is using a grey angle grinder on a metal surface, with bright orange sparks flying. The background is a blurred industrial setting with cardboard boxes and a red structure.

Hands Behind the Machines

Voices Behind the Change

Bangladesh'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.



Salauddin Shapon

President

Bangladesh Revolutionary Garment Workers' Federation
(BRGWF)



A transition is inevitable, but fairness is a choice. If we move forward without protecting workers, progress will lose its meaning.

Preparing Workers for Climate and Technology Changes

Mr Salauddin Shapon, President of a national garment workers' federation, has long focused on protecting workers' rights as industries evolve. In recent years, he has become concerned by two growing pressures on the ready-made garment sector: automation and rising heat on production floors. Both trends affect job security, workloads and workplace safety, yet many workers and union leaders previously had limited understanding of what these changes meant for them.

Support from the Government of Denmark through the United Federation of Danish Workers (3F) helped shift this. Training for trade unions clarified the concept of Just Transition and why it needs to be part of negotiations and social dialogue. The sessions focused on reskilling, job security and the OSH implications of both automation and extreme temperatures.

Through this support, garment-sector unions developed a shared position on Just Transition. They produced the country's first joint trade union paper on the topic, outlining priorities such as retraining before new technologies are introduced, redeployment rather than job loss and improved ventilation and heat-stress controls. Local unions have since begun including these clauses in Collective Bargaining Agreements.

Mr Shapon notes that these developments have strengthened workers' voices in factory-level discussions. Some committees now assess heat-related risks more systematically, and workers are more aware of how technological changes might affect their roles and safety. The push for dialogue has also helped unions advocate for regular reskilling opportunities to keep workers employable as production processes change.

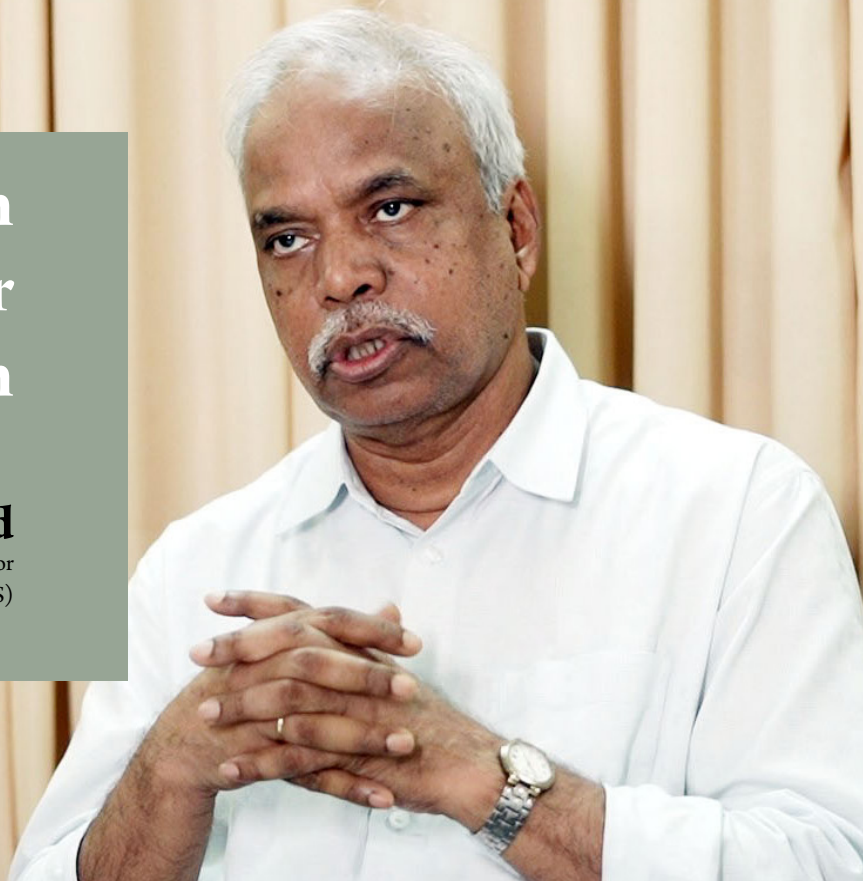
Despite these steps, challenges remain. Many "green" certified factories still lack strong worker-management dialogue. Retraining commitments are not always monitored, and OSH risks linked to heat and poor ventilation continue to affect worker health. Unions also need further support to engage employers on technology planning in a consistent way.

Mr Shapon believes a fair transition requires workers to be directly involved in shaping the process. He sees continued training, stronger oversight and active committees as essential for ensuring that climate and technology changes strengthen, rather than weaken, worker rights and safety.

Building Union Leadership for a Fair and Safe Transition

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed

Executive Director
Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS)



You may be aware, but if you do not know where to go, or whether institutional support exists, awareness gains you little.

Syed Sultan Uddin Ahmmed, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), has long worked to ensure that workers' rights remain central as industries evolve. In recent years, automation and climate impacts have created new pressures across sectors. Rising heat affects workers' health and productivity, and new technologies threaten job security. Yet many union leaders and workers had limited understanding of what a "Just Transition" meant for their livelihoods, safety and future.

Support from the Government of Denmark through BILS helped address this gap. With Danish backing, BILS developed union-friendly research, organised consultations and trained trade union leaders on the Just Transition agenda. The focus was clear: ensure workers are not left behind as industries adopt new technologies or shift to greener production processes.

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.

Mr Ahmmed notes that the process has strengthened unions' ability to speak on national policy issues. 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.

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 Ahmmed believes that lasting progress depends on informed workers and active social dialogue.

He sees continued training, deeper engagement with employers and stronger government coordination as essential to ensuring that climate and technology changes improve—not weaken—workers' rights, safety and future security.

Lessons Learned

- **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.

Recommendations

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 regulations.