



Summary Project Evaluation Report



**STRENGTHENING THE CAPACITY OF
INDEPENDENT WORKERS' ORGANIZATIONS IN
BANGLADESH'S READYMADE GARMENT
SECTOR AND EXPORT PROCESSING ZONES**

Conducted by:



Capacity Building Service Group (CBSG)

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Acronyms and Definitions

AFL-CIO	American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations
AGWF	Akota Garments Workers Federation
BEPZA	Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority
BFWS	Bangladesh Federation of Workers Solidarity
BGIWF	Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation
BIGUF	Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies
BNGWEL	Bangladesh National Garment Workers Employees League
BRGWF	Bangladesh Revolutionary Garments Workers Federation
CBA	Collective Bargaining Agent
CBSG	Capacity Building Service Group
DRL	Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, US Department of State
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
GoB	Government of Bangladesh
ILO	International Labour Organization
JDL	Joint Director of Labor
KA form	Initial WWA membership registration form
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MIS	Management Information System
NGWF	National Garment Workers Federation
OHS	Occupational Health and Safety
RMG	Ready Made Garment
SC	Solidarity Center
SGSF	Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation
ToT	Training of Trainers
UFGW	United Federation of Garments Workers
WWA	Workers' Welfare Association

Executive Summary

Background

Solidarity Center is an international nonprofit organization that works with trade unions and federations, non-governmental organizations, community organizations, and the Government in Bangladesh. It has been implementing the project titled "Strengthening the Capacity of Independent Workers' Organizations¹ with the Bangladesh's Readymade Garment Sector and Export Processing Zones" (often called as DRL Project) in Dhaka and Chittagong from July 2013 to December 2014. The project works with the trade union federations of RMG sector and Workers Welfare Associations (WWAs). The US Department of State's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor (DRL) supported the project with a grant amount of \$495,000.

The project

Following a strategic approach, the project envisaged building institutional capacity of independent worker organizations in a way that enables them to serve workers more effectively on a sustainable basis. Main focus of strengthening trade unions is to increase memberships and enhance leadership capacity including developing women leaders to engage in constructive and effective bargaining with the industry owners and their associations and to advocate collectively for work place improvements. The project has three interrelated strategies – a. strengthening the capacity of trade unions; b. increasing participation and skills of women to become active organizers and leaders of the workers' organizations; and c. improving capacity of workers' organizations to utilize legal measures to protect workers' rights.

Evaluation Purpose and Methodology

The main purpose of the evaluation is to assess the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of the strategies set out in the project to achieve the expected impact. This evaluation primarily adopted qualitative investigation methods. They included desk research, Key Informant Interview (KII), Focus Group Discussions (FGD), Direct Observation, and a Rapid Survey with the RMG workers and activists.

Major Findings and Analysis

The strategic importance of this project is that it has addressed the need for strong and independent workers associations to protect workers' right and ensure their legal entitlements. The project is implemented in a context where the RMG sector occupies a pivotal position in the Bangladesh economy, contributes about 80% of country's export earnings, and creates employment opportunities for approximately 4 million people - a vast majority of them are young and about 80% of them are women.

The project's activity delivery mechanism included: supporting paid organizers, organizing roundtable and seminars with follow-up meetings and group discussions. This "Project

¹ Workers' organizations" include trade unions, as well as workers welfare associations, which are present in export processing zones.

Evaluation” revealed that within the project period, all the project activities have been accomplished against target², covering expected number of participants with fair balance between male and female in the project activities. Trade union federations, workers associations, organizers, and union leaders are now better equipped with organizing tools and techniques. They are now more prepared to face organizational challenges at the field level. There have been significant improvements achieved on gender awareness and legal aspects of collective bargaining.

Under the objective one, the project has delivered its targeted outputs in the capacity building of the allies’ federations and the plant level unions for expanding memberships, developing leaderships, and registering unions with the government. Participants of various training, seminars, and roundtable discussions have become more active in union related activities and played significant role to form new unions and enroll new members. In other words, trainings and other events were very relevant and conducted effectively.

The workers also demonstrated their skills in organizing negotiation meetings with the employers to engage in effective bargaining. Roundtables and stakeholder dialogues have helped union and federation leaders contributed to enhanced communication and sharing among themselves as well as with other stakeholders. This has contributed to union and federation level strategic planning and actions.

Altogether 156 unions were newly registered within the project period, of them this project alone has contributed for registration of 37 (7 in Chittagong) unions under five federations. It is worth to mention that 51 unions (with membership of 14,446 workers, female, 9,134) have submitted application to the registration authority. In the EPZ, the project facilitated to form 4 WWAs and another one is in the process of getting approval. Hence, the project strategy of supporting union federations with paid organizers has proved quite effective.

The project succeeded to facilitate five Workers Welfare Association in Dhaka EPZ (with membership of 2,820 workers - female 1,750) while in Chittagong it is yet to facilitate any WWAs with this project support. SC has recently re-established an office near Dhaka EPZ with provision of legal counseling, and has planned to increase its presence in the EPZ areas to address the growing demand of the workers.

The roundtable meetings/conferences have been proved to be a unique approach aimed at jointly addressing the challenging situations of the RMG sector by creating forum of federation representatives for enhancing intra-federation communication, ensuring participatory monitoring of the project activities and exchanging experience. This has demonstrated its value as an effective tool in creating a cohesive forum of active RMG workers and union activists.

As a result of interventions under objective 2, the evaluation found that targeted beneficiaries have developed understanding on the concept of gender equality, which has immense importance in the Bangladesh Garments sector, as 80% of its working forces are women. Significant behavioral changes that were visible include: trained workers became more apt at articulating their issues and concerns using women’s rights, legal benefits of women workers, etc.

Many workers came across with the evaluation team reported that their actions resulted in many positive changes at the plant level, such as women workers receive honor at the factory, family and community, working conditions of women have improved. In addition, arbitrary termination of female employees has reduced as owners are paying more attention to comply

² Annex-1 contains activity-wise performance analysis.

labor law. There have been increasing practices of paying termination benefits for the female workers.

The inclusion of men together with women leaders/activists in the gender training created an enabling environment for increasing women's participation in Workers' Rights movement. The gender training was an effective tool to sensitize male dominated federation and union leaders and to increase more women workers at the leadership level. Besides, introduction to the gender concept have created strong sensitization among the men and women members of unions.

Under the legal aid support program (objective 3), TOT manual development is a significant achievement of the project. SC has included its experiences with worker related legal issues and ensured participation of union leaders and legal experts in developing this manual.

Federation leaders appreciated the paralegal concept of the project as this works well to address huge demand for legal support by the RMG workers. The evaluation observed that more legal cases are now being supported by the federations than any time before. The project also prepared a paralegal training manual specifically for the garments sector. This manual may become an important resource for the RMG sector worker rights initiatives.

The project initiative to train lawyers and trade union activists has been proved effective as this has equipped labor-rights advocates, particularly from the trade unions and WWAs, to assert claims for and on behalf of workers before their employers, the legal systems, and the alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms within and outside the court. This has allowed 24 workers to avail legal support without facing complex legal systems.

With regard to impact, the project interventions contributed to raise awareness of both unionized and non unionized RMG workers on labor laws, entitlements of benefits and unionization process and allowed grief workers to avail legal protections.

Project Management

DRL project is managed under a shared management arrangement. Project has been implemented in a teaming approach comprising the senior program officers, program officers and legal counselor under the strategic leadership of country program director.

The evaluation team observed that DRL management has requisite experience and capacity to execute the project activities. Most of the staff members were found to have strong background and professional competencies. SC staff members have long standing experience of working on workers' right issues and RMG sector, while BILS has rightly complemented by bringing professional excellence in the implementation of gender and women participation activities. The project has implemented monitoring and evaluation activities as per plan laid out in the project document with due delligence.

Summary Recommendations

The DRL project has demonstrated strong impact to improve rights and entitlements of the garment workers through capacity building of unions and federations. This resulted in increased union membership, enhanced unions' capacity to negotiate with management and resolve issues amicably.

DRL project successes needs to be carried forward to address the gigantic challenges existed in the garment sector. The Solidarity Center should design and implement a follow on project to consolidate the results with the current federations while expanding its outreach to new unions. While designing and implementing a follow on project, following issues should be considered:

- Emphasizing on competency based training and capacity building program specifically for the union leaders.
- Strengthening follow up and on site assistance to the training participants to support capacity building to face real life challenges.
- Equipping federations and provide some resources so that they can play increased role project implementation.
- Including 'Right to Information' Act 2009 for the federation leaders so they can use specific rules and clauses to hold government officials accountable to federation related tasks.
- Involving factory management in the "Women Committee" to ensure that factory management is supportive to the gender issues.