



Exploitation of Women Workers in the Mongla Export Processing Zone, Bangladesh

Labour FPAR Country Briefer

Rapid Industrialisation in Bangladesh and its after-effects

Since the 1980s, the Bangladesh Government has been taking special steps to set up Export Processing Zones (EPZ) within the country. The idea behind the establishment of EPZs was to increase the inflow of foreign direct investments through Industrialisation.¹ Initially, three special zones were set up in Chittagong (Halisahar), Dhaka (Savar) and Khulna (Mongla). The Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) started from 1983-84 while the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ) started from 1993-94.

Bangladesh promulgated the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) in 2006² to accomplish its national obligation as a member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). However, workers and owners of industrial units under the Bangladesh Economic Zones Authority can only follow the Bangladesh EPZ Labour Act 2019³. Under this policy, workers are not allowed to form or join a trade union, and are given no outlet for collective bargaining.

The introduction of two types of labour laws within a single country is nothing but a violation of the basic fundamental rights of workers. Many women EPZ workers are stuck in unbearable working conditions. Not being able to voice their problems has created barriers for them to get decent work, and making them dependent on their male counterparts for economic support. Additionally, there is no scope to protest this discrimination or establish their rights through movement building in this law.

¹Bangladesh Bank. (n.d). Export of Export Processing Zones (EPZ). . Bangladesh Bank. <https://www.bb.org.bd/en/index.php/econdata/epzexp>

²The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. https://betterwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Bangladesh-Labour-Act-2006_Eng.pdf

³Staff Correspondent. (2019 September 29). EZs to run under EPZ Labour Law and not Bangladesh labour law: Labour Leaders oppose. NewAge Business. <https://www.newagebd.net/article/85993/ezs-to-run-under-epz-labour-law-not-bangladesh-labour-law>



Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) in the Mongla Export Processing Zone (EPZ), Bangladesh

The research area for FPAR is *Mongla* EPZ which is situated in the Bagerhat district in Khulna. A total of 5,338 workers are working in the region, where 1,967 (36.8 per cent) are male and 3,371 (63.1 per cent) females. The research was conducted with the women workers of Mongla EPZ. These workers are from the manufacturing industries of luggage, jute, garments, cookeries, oil, tobacco and car seat heaters.

FPAR was undertaken with the women workers of the areas, in collaboration with BINDU. The research was conducted with the hope of creating a woman-friendly working environment as well as

increasing the participation rate and decent work conditions of women in the labour force. The impact objective of the research aims to mobilise 200 women workers in Mongla EPZ to advocate for an amendment to the EPZ Act, particularly on the right to organise.

The pre-research preparations were divided into two parts; meeting with the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) and meeting with the EPZ women workers. The pre-research consultation meeting with the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) in Mongla was held to learn about the services of BEPZA to EPZ workers. Another main objective of this meeting was to identify the problems of women workers in that area. According to BEPZA management, they make certain to quickly address the complaints filed by the workers. The authority claimed that, *'We have a strong complaint response mechanism and try to solve every problem of the workers'*. They continued that, *'...though in the EPZ area, there is no trade union, we take the problems from individuals and solve the problems immediately'*. The second meeting was held with seven EPZ women workers in their community, as EPZ authorities had drawn restrictions on entering the industry. During these meetings, women workers shared their challenges regarding the lack of labour unions, low wages, poor accommodation services, limited rest periods and overtime work. One worker shared, *'Our work is target basis and if we work more, then we can earn more. Though our industry gives a rest time for 15 minutes, we don't take rest if we take rest, then we will earn less.'* These challenges can not be addressed if there is no space for them for bargaining. Workers stated that all the problems that they are experiencing can be minimised if they had a labour union or if they have the right to organise.

Based on these findings, questions for the main enquiries were discussed. The FPAR

started with the objective of understanding three major questions:

- ◇ What impact have EPZ policies had on EPZ women workers' right to organise?
- ◇ What are the most effective advocacy strategies for making an amendment to the EPZ Act, particularly on the right to organise?
- ◇ What is the present status of women workers' capacity for worker mobilisation?

The FPAR surveyed a total of 50 women workers of Mongla EPZ. For the quantitative method, FPAR applied questionnaire surveys, and for the qualitative method, the study used Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and interviews. Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been applied to gather the data. These methods helped women workers collectivise and analyse their own situation.



Key highlights: Mongla EPZ in Bangladesh are havens for worker exploitation and profit maximisation by industry



A. Perpetrating Child Labour and Age-based Discrimination within the factories

The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) does not allow workers less than 18 years of age to work in the factories. The restraint has created a new situation within the factory. During one of the FPAR group discussions, it was found that girls are now forced to provide false information about their age in the recruitment process. They usually make a duplicate birth certificate with false age information and submit it during their recruitment. Among 50 respondents, we found that eight per cent of women workers are below 18 years of age. The higher

percentage of women workers falls within the 18-25 age limit and their percentage is about 64 per cent. Only four per cent of respondents are more than 36 years of age. These figures prove that factory authorities prefer and turn a blind eye on the illegal employment of younger people or child labour as they are cheaper and easy to exploit. It was also found that when these young people get older, factory authorities fire them because they claim that older workers serve lower work productivity.



B. Women workers are concentrated in lower positions with a lower income range

FPAR found that most women workers have been occupying the positions of helper and operator. Some women workers said that they were newly informed about the kind of work that they were getting into and so they ended up working in a low paid position on the factory floor. Higher positions like that of 'supervisors' and 'quality checks' were rarely offered to women. Women workers were rarely promoted to higher positions even when they had been in the job for a while and had developed a skill set. Women are discouraged from taking up work in some of the light or hard engineering industries, following the general stereotype of women not being able to do such heavy work.

The stereotype is rooted in patriarchal values in the community, which also reflects in people's decision making in sending their children to school. On the education front, the FPAR found that 40 per cent of women workers in the EPZ have completed JSC (Junior School Certificate-Class 8), 12 per cent have completed primary schooling, 24 per cent have completed SSC (Secondary School Certificate-Class 10), 22 per cent have completed HSC (Higher School Certificate-Class 12) and two per cent of women workers are illiterate in this economic zone. The patriarchal structure of the education system prioritises men over women. This often results in the formation of biases such as light and hard engineering industries hiring men more as compared to women and child labour of girls. The FPAR discovered that 80 per cent of workers in those industries are men.

On the income front, participants of the FPAR shared that new workers start at a monthly salary of BDT 6,200 (USD 73) in the 'Labour' position. The survey respondents are paid a maximum of BDT 10,200 (USD 120) per month. The highest percentage of workers (52 per cent) get BDT 8,200 (USD 96) per month. The salary barely meets their needs to survive. These salary scales are different compared to the other EPZs in the country, as shared during the research. Almost 96 per cent of workers shared that they are not satisfied with these salaries, and BEPZA authorities have taken no initiative to revise the salary scales. One worker stated that, 'I am a new worker in Mongla EPZ and before joining here, I worked in Chittagong EPZ. I have noticed wage variance in Chittagong EPZ to Mongla EPZ. In Chittagong EPZ, a new worker gets 8,200 BDT (95USD) but in Mongla, a new worker gets 6,200 BDT (73 USD) per month. It is very much difficult for us to maintain our livelihood with this wage'.

Patriarchy and capitalism shape how society undervalues women's work putting women in low-wage sectors. Compared to other EPZs in Bangladesh, the wage of workers in Mongla EPZ are below the minimum wage (6,800 BDT) and far below a living wage. In addition, all of women's unpaid work in the manufacturing industry creates more surplus value for the capitalists in the global supply chain model.



C. Absence of workers' mobilisation in BEPZA

The FPAR study revealed that only 14 per cent of participants have heard about the BLA. During the FPAR interviews, all women workers shared that, they do not have any membership in the Workers Welfare Association (WWA), nor heard the name of WWA before.

Workers Welfare Association (WWA) is the only recognised tripartite mechanism in the Export Processing Zone in Bangladesh. According to Bangladesh EPZ Labour Act, WWA is the 'Collective Bargaining Agent for the industrial units inside EPZ'. The authority claims that they treat WWA as Trade Union in BEPZA.

The situation proves the ineffectiveness of WWA within Mongla EPZ. The FPAR participants, who were aware of the work of the WWA, were the ones who have worked previously in another EPZ (Chittagong) in Bangladesh, where they have been witness to different strikes/movements regarding establishing workers' labour rights.


The absence of rights to organise and a lack of awareness about the BLA, have resulted in lower standards of labour rights protection. The industries do not provide any allowance or incentives to the workers. No medical or sick allowances have been provided by the companies. According to the policy, companies have to provide health insurance to the workers but they have been denied these facilities. Workers claimed that they did not know anything about insurance facilities. Because workers do not have any union or association, they are unable to have their voices heard.

D. Almost non-existent and inefficient basic amenities for EPZ workers


Housing & Child Care Facilities: Women workers that were interviewed during the FPAR usually live in a slum area near the EPZ or in a faraway village where the living cost is low. Out of the 50 women participants, almost 86 per cent shared that they are household heads, some of whom are single mothers while some have ailing husbands. Among them, about 36 per cent of women (18 out of 50) have children less than eight years old but the EPZ does not provide any space for their children. Women said that they have to go through mental stress especially when they remain worried about their children during work hours.

Transport Facilities: None of the FPAR participants said that they were happy with the transport facilities of EPZ. People who live at a far distance (Maximum 30-45 km) have said that they have to pay a high price for transport facilities. Others who live near the EPZ area do not access transport facilities yet they have to spend about USD 12 every month for transport purposes. Usually, a group of women workers would make a contract with a local bus to travel to their work. In the morning and evening, everybody gathers at a predetermined single point, and the bus picks them up from that point every day.

The ineffectiveness of WWA leads to women workers having no participation opportunities in decision-making. In the EPZ area, all the decisions are made by the BEPZA authority and the company owner. Due to the lack/absence of association or labour union, there are no opportunities for women's leadership. However, the FPAR believes that there are many potential women leaders who can and will play an active role in bringing the amendment of EPZ policies.



**“নারীবাদী অংশগ্রহণমূলক কর্ম গবেষণা
শ্রম অধিকারের উপর- ২০২০-২০২২:
বিশেষ অর্থনৈতিক অঞ্চলে নারীদের শ্রম অধিকার”**



মূল অনুসন্ধান

নারী শ্রমিকদের উপর বৈষম্য

- বয়স, শিল্পের ধরণ ও অবস্থান অনুযায়ী নারীরা বৈষম্যের স্বীকার হচ্ছেন। শিল্প কল-কারখানাগুলোতে ১৮-৩৫ বছর বয়সী নারীদের অধিকার দেওয়া হয়। বাংলাদেশের প্রেক্ষিতে এই বয়স সীমাকে “যুব” বলা হয়। এই ইপিজেড শ্রমিকদের প্রায় ৮৮% নারী যুবক শ্রমিক। ৩৫ এর উপরের নারীরা এই এলাকায় চাকরি থেকে বঞ্চিত হন।
- জরিপে দেখা যায় অধিকাংশ নারী শ্রমিকরা হেলপার বা অপারেটর পদে অধিষ্ঠিত হয়। ২% নারীরা তাদের পদ সম্পর্কেও জানেন না। সুপারভাইজার বা কোয়ালিটি চেকের এর মত উচ্চ পদে নারীদের চাকরীর সুযোগ কম দেখা যায়। সাধারণত নারী শ্রমিকরা শ্রমিক পদে চাকরিতে যোগদান করে এবং সবেশে তারা অপারেটর পদে পদোন্নতি পান।
- কিছু শিল্প কল-কারখানায় নারীদের অংশগ্রহণ একেবারে নাই।

নারী নেতৃত্বে অনুপস্থিতি

- কোন সমিতি, সূচক বা শ্রমিক ইউনিয়ন না থাকায় নারী শ্রমিকদের কোন নেতৃত্বে সুযোগ নেই। বিইপিজেড কর্তৃপক্ষ সাময়িক শ্রমিকদের মত নিয়ম পালন করে যেখানে নেতৃত্ব বিকাশের কোন সুযোগ নেই। দেখানো তারা আওয়াজ তুলতে ভয় পায় এবং তারা একাকী বোধ করে সচ্ছলিতভাবে কিছু করতে গেলে। তবে গবেষণার মাধ্যমে দেখা যাচ্ছে যেখানে অনেক সম্ভব নেত্রী রয়েছেন তারা ইপিজেড নীতিমালা সংশোধনের জন্য গুরুত্বপূর্ণ ভূমিকা পালন করতে পারেন।

সিদ্ধান্ত গ্রহণে অংশ নেই

- সিদ্ধান্ত গ্রহণে নারী শ্রমিকদের কোন অংশগ্রহণ নেই। আসলে ইপিজেড এলাকায় সব সিদ্ধান্ত গ্রহণ করেন ইপিজেড কর্তৃপক্ষ এবং কোম্পানির মালিকরা। শ্রমিক ইন্স্যুতে কোন সিদ্ধান্ত গ্রহণের ক্ষেত্রে শ্রমিকদের অংশগ্রহণের সুযোগ নেই।

সুপারিশ : বিইপিজেড এর কর্তৃপক্ষের কাছে

- বিইপিজেড এর কর্তৃপক্ষের উচিত একটি মনিটরিং মেকানিজম প্রতিষ্ঠা করা এবং শিল্পকারখানার অভ্যন্তরে সচ্ছলতা জানতে শ্রমিকদের কাছ থেকে নিয়মিত মতামত নেওয়া এবং অবিলম্বে ব্যবস্থা গ্রহণ।
- নারী শ্রমিকদের বয়স, অবস্থান ও ক্ষমতা অনুযায়ী কোন বৈষম্যমূলক আচরণ না করা।
- নারী শ্রমিকদের মালিকের সময় তাৎক্ষণিক সহায়তা ও স্বাস্থ্য সেবা পাওয়ার ব্যবস্থা করা।
- মাতৃবান্ধব পরিবেশের জন্য শিশুসহ কেন্দ্র স্থাপন করা।
- শুধুমাত্র ইপিজেড এলাকায় নয়, বাড়ি থেকে ইপিজেড এলাকা পর্যন্ত নারীদের যৌন হয়রানির বিরুদ্ধে নিরাপত্তা প্রদান করা।

Medical Facilities: The EPZ authority provides primary medical facilities to the workers. Thirty-two per cent of workers said that they are satisfied with the facilities while 68 per cent were not. The workers, who were not satisfied, demanded a complete hospital within the EPZ area so that they and also their family members can get treatment from the medical centre.



Incentives and Allowances: Benefits for the workers of the enterprises in EPZs under BEPZA-2018 include gross wage, food or food allowance and transport or transport allowance- which shall be provided by the enterprises under the EPZ. However, none of the FPAR participants said that they had received such allowances. The EPZ policy also emphasises insurance coverage, especially health insurance. However, 100 per cent of the workers have claimed that they are not getting any insurance facilities from the industry.

Rest time: According to EPZ policy 2019, workers should be given 30 minute lunch breaks in case of five hours of working. Workers should be provided with an one hour lunch break in case of six hours of working time. In case of eight work hours, workers should be given two rest times and an one hour lunch break. However, as per the findings of FPAR, rest time is provided differently by different factories. Some factories provide 30 minutes, some are 50 and some are 60 minutes. The women workers said that in order to fulfil their targets. The target varies according to industry, and in most industries, workers' wages depend on the number of targeted products. Even if the industry provides rest time, workers who are working on the required number of targets do not have time to rest. If they do, then they cannot fulfil their targets and that means wage deduction.

Growing organising power and solidarity

Among 50 participants, only six per cent (three out of 50) said that they have previous experience in worker mobilisation. They have volunteered for their community's activities before especially in empowering and engaging the youth. They have also contributed to movement building for the betterment of public service. The FPAR discovered that they are potential leaders of future advocacies for decent work in the EPZ area.

BINDU has organised capacity-building trainings for 20 women workers. These trainings became a space for women workers to participate, express their problems, and have a discussion about solutions to their problems. As a result, , these women workers were prepared for advocacy efforts within

their factories. They even prepared posters and slogans during these training sessions in order to mobilise other women workers for furthering their advocacy efforts.

Women workers now feel more confident in claiming their rights and making their voices heard. Three women workers also consented to capture their statements and videos at national and international level advocacy events. Women workers acknowledged the role of BINDU and APWLD in motivating them to claim their rights and providing a platform for them where they can mobilise, build their knowledge.



Recommendations

Policy Recommendation for the National Government:

1. Amend the EPZ Labour Act 2019 to allow workers' right to organise through unions in each factory within the EPZ area.
2. Maximise the function of WWA as a tripartite body in industries while ensuring it represents genuine women workers' voices.
3. EPZ Labour Act should incorporate the highest percentage of labour representatives' participation in labour rights-related decision-making process without any influence and intimidation from the management or authority.

Recommendation for BEPZA Authority:

1. End any form of discrimination based on age, contractual status and position of women workers in EPZ area
2. Provide menstrual hygiene and healthcare facilities within industries
3. Establish a child care centre to provide support to the mothers within the industry.
4. Ensure a living wage that allows workers and their families have sufficient income to cater for their basic needs
5. Establish a strong complaints response mechanism to protect workers' rights and access to justice.
6. Provide transport facilities for all the workers of their EPZ.
7. Provide safe and secure environment both in the workplace/BEPZA area and in their commute to and from home.
8. Provide an orientation to new workers about insurance and incentive facilities so that workers are aware of their rights and can claim them when needed and required.
9. Establish a monitoring mechanism and take regular feedback from the workers to know the violence within the industries and take immediate action.
10. Create scorecards which can determine the industries or companies who comply with decent working environments and who do not. This would ensure that a monitoring mechanism is in place and timely actions are taken for industries that are not doing well in providing decent working environments.





About BINDU

BINDU is a non-political and non-profit organisation in Bangladesh, comprising youth committed to protecting women's human rights and ensuring gender equality, sustainable development, better quality education and a safe and hygienic environment. Their FPAR will aim to investigate, document, and advocate for women's labour rights and gender-related issues, such as sexual harassment, and violation of human rights in SEZs in Bangladesh.

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About APWLD

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist organisations and individual activists. For over 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice. This FPAR is part of APWLD's Women Organising Workers Programme. APWLD worked with and supported seven partner organisations from five countries in Asia to conduct Labour FPAR on Special Economic Zones (SEZs) between 2020 and 2022.

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