

Empowering Women, Empowering Workers

The Impact of Female Leadership in Functioning Sexual Harassment Complaint Committee

ETI Bangladesh



The factory was established in 1997. The factory formed Sexual Harassment Complained Committee (SHCC) in 2019 but the committee was not functional as well as the committee chair was a male. The factory was

nominated by its brand for the "Gender Sensitive Workplace Program" funded by NORAD and implemented by ETI Bangladesh to ensure a gender friendly work place in 2021.

One of the main objectives outlined by the program is to ensure women of the workplace program factories are empowered to take on leadership/representative roles.

According to the objective and High Court ruling, the male chair of the SHCC was replaced with a female chair.

The new female chair was brought up in Dhaka city by her loving and supportive family. She has always had the knack and passion for fashion design. After finishing her 12th grade, she, unlike most of her peers, decided to study fashion designing which is almost impractical in a society so driven towards making ends meet. Her love for clothes and craft and endless conversations about silhouettes solidified her yearn for working in the same sector where she will be immersed in clothes hence, she decided to work in a garments factory where her wish will be fulfilled.

Previous Context

Upon joining the factory as a merchandiser, she was filled with hope and optimism for her future. However, she soon encountered the challenges of misogyny in the workplace. Despite her advantageous background and education, she faced ridicule, intimidation, and denial of collaboration from her male colleagues. This realization brought to light the systemic nature of the issue, leading her to question the extent of mistreatment faced by the female production workers.

She spoke with the workers and uncovered the widespread nature of inappropriate behavior and mistreatment experienced by the female staff. In response, she brought her findings to the attention of the Factory management and was subsequently appointed as a member of the Harassment Complaint Committee (SHCC).

Unfortunately, her efforts to make a positive impact were met with obstacles as the limitations of the committee became evident. The workers, particularly the women, were not adequately informed of the committee's existence and were not properly trained. The high migration rate among workers and a lack of communication made it difficult to raise awareness. Furthermore, the previous male chair of the committee failed to effectively address worker grievances, causing discomfort among workers when discussing sensitive issues. As a result, the workers, including the women, lacked trust in the committee, including its male chair from the senior management team.

She realized that the root cause of these problems was the lack of awareness and understanding of gender equality, gender sensitivity and its importance in the workplace by the Factory management. This lack of understanding led to a lack of proper policies and procedures in place to address such issues.

It was evident to her that the SHCC is not fulfilling its intended purpose of addressing worker needs. Despite these challenges, she remained steadfast in her determination to bring about a positive change for the women in the factory and raise awareness about the importance of gender equality in the workplace.

The female chair says, *"After seeing the condition of the sexual harassment committee and the factory environment itself, I wanted to make the committee accessible to workers, especially women, and help in creating a better work environment for these women."*

Intervention

As part of its commitment to increasing gender sensitivity and female empowerment in the RMG supply chain, the Ethical Trading Initiative Bangladesh (ETI Bangladesh) is supporting its member brands and supplier factories to establish functional grievance handling mechanisms by forming and mainstreaming the Sexual Harassment Complaint Committee (SHCC). Realizing the importance of a systemic approach to achieve this goal, as a dedicated advocate for gender equality she volunteered to serve as the Chair of the SHCC.

However, she faced resistance from the previous male chairperson and the senior management team, who believed that a woman could not effectively lead the committee. To address these concerns, ETI Bangladesh initiated a dialogue with the management to educate them on the importance of having a female chairperson and a sufficient number of female members in the SHCC. Through advocacy meetings, they highlighted the following key points:

- The role of a female chairperson in addressing and preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.
- The importance of recognizing and addressing the unique experiences and perspectives of women.
- The benefits of having a diverse and inclusive sexual harassment complaint committee.
- The role of a women-led committee in challenging biases and considering all perspectives.
- The impact of a well-functioning SHCC in promoting transparency and accountability in the workplace.
- High Court ruling on SHCC

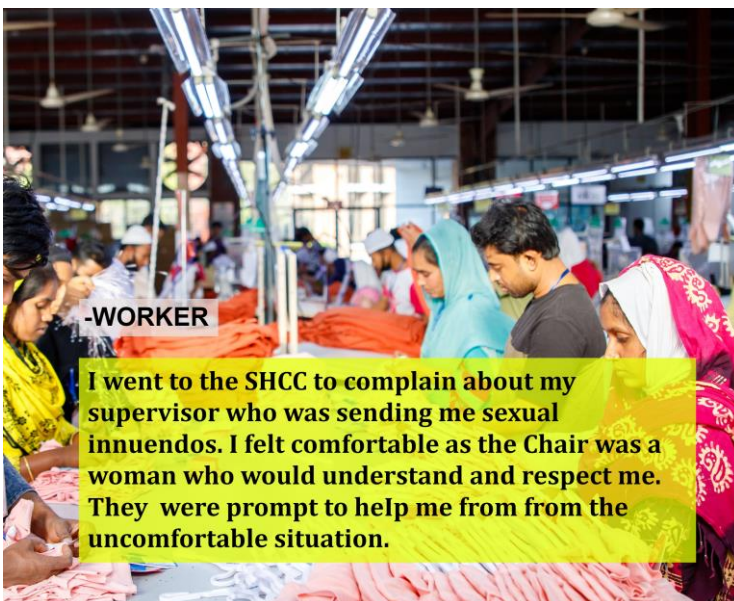
As a result of these efforts, she was successfully onboarded as the SHCC chairperson and received comprehensive training on the duties and responsibilities of the SHCC, including gender and sexual harassment, related laws and policies, and the process of receiving and handling complaints and how to design and implement interventions and align them with their regular meeting agendas for further follow up. The ETI Bangladesh program team also provided ongoing advisory support and guidance to help her fulfill her responsibilities as Chair. As a female the helm of the SHCC, she believed the factory will start taking a significant step towards promoting gender equality and creating a safe and respectful workplace for all employees.

SHCC chair says, *"I was aware of certain things but my knowledge was not as in depth to lead the committee which was compensated by the trainers. I did not know before there are laws that safeguards women at the workplace. I learned the importance of meeting minutes and how to follow up agendas and follow up with the victims. I learned to create workplan for the committee and also how implement them."*

With the help of ETI, she also joined an SHCC network platform where SHCC members of other factories shared their experience, learnings and best practices. She adds, *"The network really helped me to think what possible interventions I can replicate from them. I even presented in hopes that like me, someone would also be benefitted from our SHCC practices."*

Impact

After being appointed as the chairperson of the SHCC, the female chair took an active role in creating a



supportive and inclusive environment for workers. She worked closely with ETI Bangladesh to develop and implement customized interventions aimed at increasing awareness about gender-based violence and the role of the SHCC in addressing these issues.

Under her leadership, the SHCC launched a series of awareness-raising activities, including announcements over the PA system, group discussions with workers,

and the display of posters advertising the members of the committee throughout the factory. The committee also provided individual counseling to workers who needed support.

As a result of these efforts, the number of workers coming forward to report incidents of harassment and other forms of gender-based violence increased dramatically. From 2021 to 2022, the SHCC was able to resolve nearly 100 complaints, including four severe cases of sexual misconduct faced by women in the workplace.

According to the SHCC chair, the impact of these interventions has been significant. Before the reforms, she says, *"The workers, especially women, did not feel safe in the factory environment, and due to this and the lack of a place for these problems to be shared and resolved, the female worker migration rate was 25-30% per year. Now it is only 7-8%."*

Evaluation by ETI Bangladesh indicates that the awareness of the SHCC among workers has increased from 12% to 100%, and the willingness of workers to report incidents has also risen from 12% to 100%. These results demonstrate the effectiveness of the female chairs' leadership and the importance of having a female chairperson and diverse committee in addressing and preventing sexual harassment in the workplace.

Challenges

In the factory the production workers are paid based on the number of clothing items they produce in a day. These workers come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, where their primary source of income is critical for supporting their families and their basic needs. This can create a challenging environment for the SHCC, particularly when it comes to addressing issues of gender-based violence and harassment. The women workers, in particular, are often more vulnerable and reluctant to speak out against inappropriate behavior due to the fear of losing their income. This can result in a submissive attitude towards such behavior and a sense of acceptance as a means of securing their livelihood.

To address this challenge, the SHCC must adopt a more proactive and nuanced approach in engaging with the workers, especially the female workers. This may involve creating a safe and supportive environment through one-on-one discussions, conducting outreach activities, and providing education and training to workers on their rights and the resources available to them. By creating a more empowering and inclusive

workplace culture, the SHCC can help to ensure that all workers, including women, feel safe and empowered to report incidents of harassment or abuse. This will not only lead to a reduction in such incidents but also promote a more positive and productive work environment for all workers.

The sensitive nature of complaints and the male-dominated senior management team initially made it difficult for female workers to trust and effectively use the SHCC as a grievance handling mechanism. The programme team had to invest significant time advocating for the factory senior management to understand the importance of a grievance mechanism that was mostly comprised and led by women. Eventually, the SHCC became largely comprised and led by women, including a female chairperson. This change has helped to ensure that all workers, including women, feel safe and empowered to report incidents of harassment or abuse, resulting in a reduction of such incidents and a more positive and productive work environment for all. Despite the challenges, the SHCC has successfully created a safer and more empowering workplace culture, benefiting the workers and the factory as a whole.

Sustainability

Under the guidance of the new female chair, the factory's SHCC has developed a comprehensive 2023 work plan in collaboration with ETI. The plan prioritizes training and education for the production workers on topics such as gender equality, gender-based violence, the role and function of the SHCC committee, and relevant laws. To this end, two members of the SHCC have received master trainer training from ETI, with the goal of creating additional master trainers within the committee.

The SHCC is also committed to providing worker support and advocacy services, aimed at helping workers understand and address the underlying causes of their experiences and difficulties, which often stem from past traumas and family circumstances. Regular follow-ups with management and HR are also part of the plan, ensuring that everyone is aware of the SHCC's work and progress, and to facilitate the timely provision of support from higher-level decision-makers.

In order to promote a more inclusive and gender-sensitive work environment, the SHCC is also taking steps to engage men in the conversation about gender equality and to challenge harmful attitudes and behaviors. Regular group discussions with supervisors are planned to help create a more gender-sensitive floor environment, and to support a positive shift in perceptions and attitudes towards women.

Project Learnings

Management Perception: Continuous advocacy and engagement with the management can play a significant role in promoting female leadership and establishing a gender-sensitive workplace. This can be achieved through consistent and persistent dialogue with the senior management, highlighting the benefits of having female leaders and the positive impact it can have on the workplace environment. Best outcomes come when the dialogue is supported by relevant research and best practices in the industry to showcase the importance of gender diversity and equality in the workplace. Additionally, the program team can work more closely during their advocacy meetings with the management to address their concerns and provide support in the implementation of initiatives aimed at promoting female leadership and establishing a gender-sensitive environment. Regular follow-ups and progress reports are important to demonstrate the positive outcomes and impact of these initiatives on the workplace, further reinforcing the importance of gender equality and diversity. With continuous advocacy and engagement, the perception of the management can gradually change, leading to a more inclusive and gender-sensitive workplace.

Perception of Supervisor: The supervisors of the factory stated that the sexual offenses that occur in any scenario, most of the blame is to be given to female as they provoke such actions. The supervisors were unruly and had temper on their nose when any woman would come with any complaint. To change this perception, just supervisor training was not enough. The project officers followed up with the supervisors every month and created a bridge between the SHCC and supervisors to ensure they are aware. In this particular factory, the awareness was not enough to change their action. Program team realized that the only way the supervisors would listen to them is through incentive. The program officers made the supervisors aware of the result of the gender sensitive work environment and how it would lessen their workload. After they understood a better work environment ensures increase in productivity, they finally were open to the idea of creating an environment that is gender friendly.

Economic Condition and Submissive Behavior: Factory production workers come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and rely heavily on their income to support their families. The program team has observed, in this context, many workers, particularly women, may feel reluctant to voice concerns or objections, even in the face of mistreatment, as they prioritize their financial stability over other considerations.

This submissive behavior has significant impacts on the work environment, as it creates a power imbalance that can make it difficult for SHCC to engage workers in meaningful conversations or advocate for their

rights. The pressure to maintain their wages can cause workers to endure inappropriate behavior and reinforces the notion that their livelihood is more important than their personal well-being.

However, with increased awareness of gender sensitivity and workers' rights, the program team has observed a shift in behavior among the workers. Women are starting to feel more empowered to speak out against mistreatment and are taking steps to protect their rights. While the economic circumstances continue to be a challenge, the aim of the management and committee such as SHCC should be to support workers in advocating for their rights to help them understand that they are entitled to a good work environment and creating a work environment that is respectful and fair.