Ethical Trading Initiative

Norad

ethical trade norway

Ethical Trading Initiative Bangladesh
For workers' rights. For better business.

Green Social Dialogue

A study on knowledge, attitudes and practices of Bangladesh RMG workers in relation to climate change

Summary report

Contents

Overview

Bangladesh faces significant climate vulnerability due to its geography, population density, and climate-sensitive sectors namely agriculture and energy intensive industries. Experts predict widespread climate change impacts across Southeast Asia (ADB, 2017). The ready-made garment (RMG) industry leaves a significant environmental footprint with its resource-intensive operations impacting the climate through waste, water, and energy consumption. RMG, a major economic driver, is the largest industrial contributor to CO2 emissions at 15.4% (GCF, 2022). It generates 2.5 billion litres of polluted wastewater annually (BGMEA 2020) and contributes to air pollution. This has substantial human and business costs, affecting worker performance and industry worldwide.

The RMG sector employs 4 million workers, constituting 81% of Bangladesh's exports (BIDA, 2021). Climate events impact worker performance, recognized as a top threat to global businesses (World Economic Forum). Climate change may cause a 4.84% loss in working hours by 2030 due to heat stress (ILO, 2019). Extreme heat and flooding could erase $65 billion in apparel export earnings and 1 million jobs from Bangladesh, Cambodia, Pakistan, and Vietnam by 2030 (Cornell University). To address challenges, Bangladesh adopts a long-term strategy for water resource management and climate resilience. Bangladesh hosts the world's highest number of LEED-certified factories, with 195 as of April 2023. However, other factories have yet to address environmental concerns.

The Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) Bangladesh, in partnership with Ethical Trade Norway (ETN) and the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) is implementing a project titled “Decent work, gender equality and climate resilience - building a future for Bangladesh RMG workers”. This project is supported by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NORAD). One component of the project includes implementing a pilot initiative on ‘Green Social Dialogue’ in Bangladesh's RMG sector. The pilot aims to mobilise workers, management, and worker representatives, to address climate risks through social dialogue mechanisms. The plan includes enhancing workers' capacity to identify and prioritise climate change-related issues in their workplace and ensure workers voice.

Under the pilot, Innovision Consulting Private Limited conducted a need assessment. This report assessed knowledge, attitudes, and practices of workers in relation to climate change, waste management, water use and energy efficiency. It also explored integrating climate issues into workplace-based social dialogue.

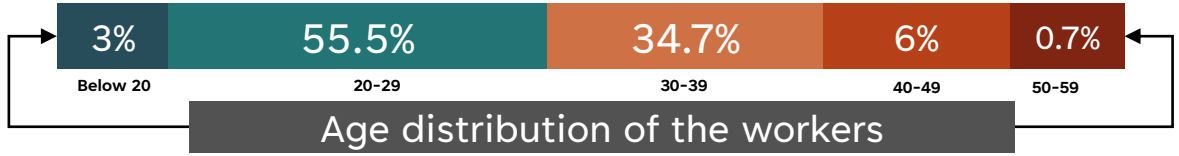
Methodology

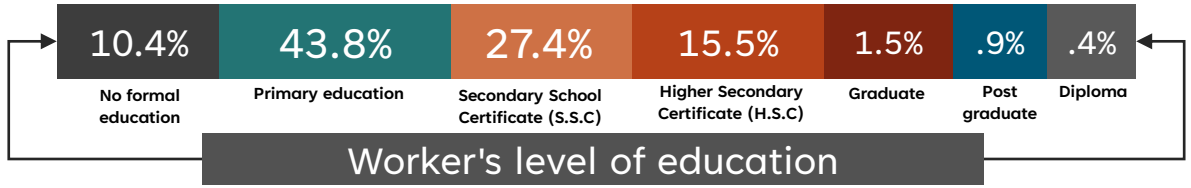
Objective of this study was to:

- Assess workers' knowledge, attitudes, and practices towards climate change.
- Explore ways to integrate climate change-related issues into workplace-based social dialogue.
- Generate recommendations for developing learning interventions, and selecting factories for pilot rollout.
- Establish a project baseline against key performance indicators.

The study adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods including a literature review, consultation with key stakeholders, a survey and focused group discussions (FGD) with workers, and in-depth interviews (IDI) with worker representatives and factory management using semi-structured questionnaire. 452 workers (general workers: 390, and workers' representatives: 62) were surveyed using proportionate random sampling at purposively selected 10 factories from three districts: Dhaka, Gazipur, and Narshingdi.

Demographic characteristics of sampled workers





61.2% of male workers completed at least secondary education, compared to 52.8% of female workers who completed only primary education.

The education levels of general workers and workers' representatives differed, 71% of general workers had primary to secondary school certificates, while 69.3% of workers' representatives held secondary to higher secondary certificates.

The average working experience of general workers was 4.6 years (4.36 years for males and 5.1 years for females), while worker representatives had an average working experience of 6 years.

Quantitative data collected by surveying:

10	392	62	199
factories	general workers	worker representatives	female worker

41% 59%
392 general workers

37% 63%
62 worker representatives

*Sex ratio in the ten factories: 47% male, 53% female

Qualitative data collected through:

20 FGD
- 10 FGD with 60 female workers
- 10 FGD with 60 male workers

30 KII
- 10 worker representatives
- 10 management
- 10 senior management

Main Findings

Social dialogue mechanism

The study explored the functionality of workplace-based social dialogue mechanism through:

- Examining workers' awareness of committees.
- Assessing workers' familiarity with committee members.
- Understanding the purpose of communication within committees.
- Evaluating workers' knowledge of roles and responsibilities of committee members.

The study took into account committees that prioritise environmental issues including environmental and management system committees (EMS), participation committees (PC) / trade unions (TU), and safety committees.

Type of committee

The assessment covered following committees:

8	2	10	3
Factories with Participation committee	Factories with Trade Union	Factories with Safety committee	Factories with Environmental management system committee

Workers' understanding of committee roles is limited, with better knowledge among worker representatives. Only 36.7% of sampled workers were aware of committees' and at least one role within them.

Meeting minutes from PCs, TUs, and EMS committees primarily revolved around workers' rights, fair pay, and leave policies, with little to no emphasis on environmental sustainability.

Committees are more effective in addressing workers' rights than environmental concerns.

Committee meetings lack environmental emphasis and focus on workers' rights.

84.7% of workers in factories with participation committees were aware of them, whereas 57.5% of workers knew about the trade unions in two factories.

Nearly half (49.1%) of the workers have no interaction with worker representatives. Among those who communicated, 64.8% expressed opinions, 37.8% solved problems, and 23% conveyed messages to management.

Main Findings

Knowledge on climate change

About 64% of the surveyed workers (79% male, 54% female) were familiar with the term climate change and environmental pollution, while 36.1% have not heard of the concept (21% male, 46% female).

Among those familiar with the terms, 25.9% (Male 27.4%, Female 14.4%) could respond with at least one effect of climate change, while 38% do not understand its effects despite having heard about it.

Most workers associated high temperatures (31%) with climate change, while few mentioned droughts (15.9%), heavy rainfall (10.4%), floods (5.2%), storms (8.7%) etc.

General workers (62.1%) and workers' representatives (75.8%) had heard about climate change, but understanding was low (61.2% and 51.1% respectively). More males (77.5%) than females (51.3%) understood climate change and its effects.

Who should be responsible for addressing climate change related issues?

42.7% of workers were unaware of climate change issues, especially among general workers (46.4%) compared to representatives (19.4%). Those with an opinion primarily indicated factory management (22.6%), supervisors (11.3%), and others (24.3%) should be responsible for addressing issues arising from climate change.

Only 12% of workers viewed themselves as duty bearers in addressing climate issues. Whereas none of the four TU respondents and five out of 34 PC respondents considered themselves ‘duty bearers’.

How are RMG workers learning about Climate Change?

Only 3% of the workers engaged had learned about climate change and its impacts through training and 2% through coordination meetings.

Workers learned about climate change mainly from mass media, educational institutions, and social media (58%).

40% heard about climate change through factory sources (11.8% from admin and HR, 7.6% from Participation Committee, 7.6% from safety committee).

Main Findings

Knowledge on waste management

Majority of workers (44.5%) lack knowledge on proper waste management methods. 33.4% of workers mentioned at least one appropriate method of waste management namely disposing in designated areas, segregation, burying etc. (13.5% mentioned two methods, 2.7% three methods).

9% of workers (Male 11.5%, Female 7.4%) received waste segregation related training (embedded with other training).

12% of workers (Male 11.9%, Female 11.7%) and 18% of worker representatives (Male 26.1%, Female 12.8%) received wastewater related training.

What do RMG workers think about plastic pollution?

41% of surveyed workers were unaware of plastic's role in environmental pollution (37% male, 52% male).

Nearly half of workers (49.8%) were unaware of any means of reducing plastic at the factory and community (39% male, 56% female)

Does the RMG sector reduce, reuse and recycle?

Reduce

Only 15.7% of workers had knowledge on factories' attempts to reduce waste.

Factories have been gradually switching to automation, particularly in the cutting and sewing section that increases efficiency, decreases human error, and reduces waste.

A few factories had an annual strategic plan to eliminate waste by upgrading production processes.

Reuse

The factories had no mentionable system or strategic plan in place to 'reuse' resources.

Only two factories were reusing jhoot, paper boxes, chemicals drums, and metal items but in limited scope. The remaining factories sell these materials to third parties.

A significant knowledge and practice gap found among workers to 'reuse' at their household level.

Recycle

The surveyed factories did not directly engage in recycling.

A circular system involved third-party agencies collecting and recycling waste, and selling it at the market.

Third parties processed sludge to remove pollutants and pathogens, creating products like cement sheets and bricks. Although, there's no factory monitoring system in place.

Main Findings

Workers' knowledge on water resource utilisation and energy efficiency

Workers mainly understand the importance of turning off water taps (64.6% at work, 56.2% at home).

Only two factories practice limited rainwater harvesting.

25.2% of workers lack awareness of poor wastewater's environmental impact.

12.1% of general workers and 17.7% of worker representatives received wastewater management training at factory.

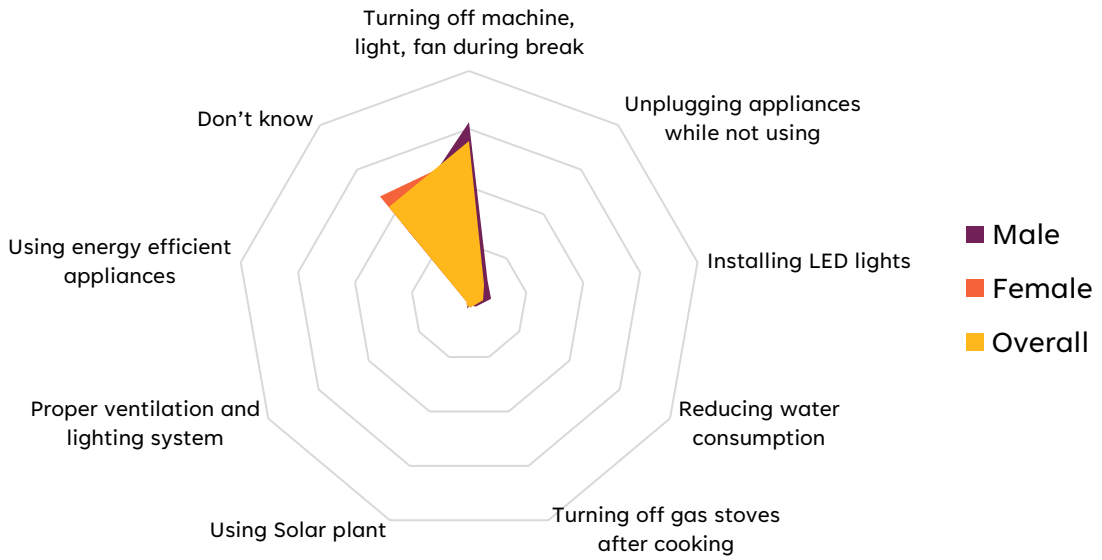
Knowledge of factory water conservation

Ways of water conservation at the factory level	Male	Female	Overall (%)
Turning off running taps and hoses while unused	45.3%	63.2%	64.6%
Turning off water when machines are not operating	8.5%	11.1%	11.7%
Through awareness building on water conservation	2.2%	2.3%	2.7%
Repairing leaks, faulty valves etc.	1.8%	0.8%	1.5%
Re-using water	1.5%	1.9%	1.9%
Don’t know	21.2%	30.8%	31.2%

Perspectives on management’s attempts to optimise water resource management

Ways to reach workers	General Worker	Worker representative
Awareness building	63.2	81.0
Discussion in meeting	26.8	50.0
Discouraging wasting water	12.3	11.9
Facilitating adoption of efficient water management mechanism	5.9	14.3
Factory visiting and monitoring	3.2	4.8
Promoting IEC/BCC materials	0.5	2.4
Don't know	28.6	9.5

Attitudes’ towards energy conservation mechanism



49.6% of general workers lacked awareness about the scarcity of natural gas

Main Findings
Qualitative findings

The following findings were gleaned through in-depth interviews with worker representatives and factory management using a semi-structured questionnaire.

Environmental awareness and management's perception

Factory management and top leadership demonstrate awareness of climate change and environmental issues.
Environmental challenges around the factory location, such as air pollution, waste burning, deforestation, and transport emissions, are acknowledged.
Designated officers ensure compliance with international standards for addressing generator and boiler emissions, dyeing steam, chemical odours, and dust.
Some factories intend to raise worker awareness and involvement in environmental issues through awareness-building and learning initiatives.

Waste management

Worker support is essential for waste reduction and reuse, but raising awareness and providing cost-effective technical support are challenging. Currently, only assigned workers receive waste segregation training, and no plans exist to educate general workers about waste management.

Many factories lack clear guidelines for environmentally responsible waste management, especially concerning third-party stakeholders.

Some aim for 100% water reuse using Zero Liquid Discharge (ZLD) plants, but methods for wastewater handling vary.

Some discharge treated water, others reuse it for cleaning, and some supply dry sludge to third parties without clear instructions.

Use of plastic and energy conservation practices

Efforts to reduce plastic use and conserve water are relatively limited.

Energy-saving practices involve EGB boilers, solar energy, LED lighting, and servo motors. Worker representatives play a significant role in energy conservation discussions.

Engaging workers in waste reduction and reuse requires addressing challenges and increasing awareness. Refresher training is essential to sustain behavioural change.

Social dialogue and workplace issues

Social dialogue mechanisms incorporate discussions on workplace safety, workers' rights, logistics, trust-building, and addressing issues related to discrimination. However, worker involvement in climate-related discussions remains limited.

General workers have limited direct involvement in discussions about energy-saving initiatives, with an awareness gap identified.

Environmental policies are in place. However, worker involvement is limited, and there is a gap in implementation. Although, few factories strictly follow buyers' guidelines.

Learning from the ongoing pilot implementation

The pilot developed and carried out behaviour change communication (BCC) campaigns and interventions that focused on knowledge sharing with factory workers. Three participant groups received customised direct training: Management and worker representatives (PC and TU).
Safety committee, maintenance, and technical teams.
General workers.

The pilot identified key thematic areas in the curriculum, focusing on climate change, global warming, waste management, natural resources, energy conservation, and environment-friendly social dialogue.

Subsequently, the pilot introduced ‘resource person training’, selecting participants from the direct training sessions. These trained people were then responsible for providing orientation to the remaining workers using pictorial flipcharts.

The utilisation of pictorial flipchart-based orientations significantly helped in simplifying complex and technical information. This approach made topics like climate change, global warming, energy conservation, and waste management more accessible to general workers in the factories, many of whom have educational backgrounds at primary and the secondary school certificate level. Moreover, the content focuses on how environmental issues can be addressed by workers and discussed in different committee meetings.

The three-day classroom-style training received positive feedback for its interactive and engaging content. Participants, including management, worker representatives, HR, admin, utility, and safety committee scored the training with an average rating of 4.9 out of 5. General workers also gave a positive rating of 4.9 out of 5.

Getting senior management involved in the direct training sessions was sometimes challenging, as they are vital to factory operations and are usually quite busy with their responsibilities.

As part of the training, a worker-led climate action plan was developed, involving worker representatives and factory management. This process facilitated productive discussions and enabled both workers and management to express their opinions, prioritise issues in their factories, set measurable targets, establish key performance indicators (KPIs), and designate responsibilities for achieving the targets.

Factories have been proactive in implementing climate action plans, with some fast-tracking their existing environmental initiatives. These climate action plans include KPIs aimed at reducing electricity and water consumption, generating clean energy, minimising production waste, integrating environment-related discussions into existing social dialogue mechanisms, and conducting outreach to raise awareness among the factory workers.

During the training, workers found content relevant to their personal lives, inspiring some to make changes at home, such as planting trees and using solar panels. Their motivation stemmed from recognising potential cost savings through energy-efficient practices.

The celebration of World Environment Day on 5 June has proven to be a valuable initiative. This celebration involves activities like rallies, tree plantations, PA system announcements, information board displays, quiz contests, and management and worker representative meetings. World Environment Day serves as an opportunity to engage and create a sense of ownership within the factories, encouraging them to celebrate it annually.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Brands

- Developing a comprehensive sustainability strategy that covers all aspects of a green transition for the supply chain; based on worker consultation and evidence-based analysis. The strategy should include short-term and long-term goals, indicators, targets, timelines, roles, responsibilities, budgets, and monitoring mechanisms.
- Taking a leading role in conducting workshops and training sessions to foster changes in values and attitudes toward sustainability for stakeholders across the supply chain. Workshops and training sessions will contribute towards raising industry stakeholders' awareness of Brands own sustainability strategy and policies, benefits of sustainable practices, ensure policy alignment and shared objectives
- Providing technical guidance and support to mitigate knowledge gaps. This can include, assistance in identifying cost-saving opportunities for factories to transition to sustainable practices and helping the factories develop sustainable business models
- Providing financial and technical support to increase the availability of skilled human resources by developing comprehensive training programmes and behaviour change communication campaigns within the supply chain.
- Along with long-term business commitment, providing premium prices for products from environmentally friendly factories. Premium prices are expected to encourage more factories to engage in greening initiatives. Furthermore, a long-term business commitment will enable the supplier to compensate for the initial investment required for green initiatives. Alternatively, brands can support suppliers to avail low-cost access to finance opportunities to invest in the green transition.
- Developing a common framework for green standards and certification procedures based on international best practices and market requirements. All firms would adhere to the same environmental benchmarks with a uniform standard. Moreover, a uniform certification procedure would make it easier and less costly for factories to obtain green certifications required by various buyers.

Recommendations for factories

- Establishing factory wise Environmental Management System (EMS) Committees to develop/review internal policies related to the green transition. A functional EMS Committee should include representatives from workers; and will help identify any ambiguities or contradictions and take timely actions to address them, promote and ensure and a conducive environment for green transition.
- Developing a comprehensive strategy that covers all aspects of a green transition for the factory; based on worker consultation and evidence-based analysis. The strategy should include short-term and long-term goals, indicators, targets, timelines, roles, responsibilities, budgets, and monitoring mechanisms.
- Developing specific policy for reducing waste including liquid waste. The policy should include but not restricted to Effluent Treatment Plant (ETP) sludge recycling, environment friendly recycling practices and continuous investment on evidence-based analysis on management and reduction of waste.
- Conducting workshops, training sessions, and campaigns to foster changes in values and attitudes toward sustainability for Managers, Supervisors and Workers. Regular workshops and training sessions will contribute towards raising industry stakeholders' awareness of the benefits of sustainable practices. Launching campaigns to promote sustainable practices and their importance can also be beneficial in spreading awareness in both factory premise and community.
- Adopting Just Transition Principals and promoting Social Dialogue by empowering and engaging worker representatives as part of the green transition strategy.
- Appointing "Green Ambassadors" among workers to promote green initiatives, provide training, and advocate for eco-friendly activities.

Ethical Trading Initiative

Norad

ethical trade norway

Ethical Trading Initiative Bangladesh
For workers' rights. For better business.

For human rights, for better business

ETI is a leading alliance of trade unions, NGOs and businesses, working together with key stake- holders to promote practical solutions to end the abuse of human rights at work.

Our vision is a world of work that protects human rights, ensures dignity for all, provides opportunity and is free of exploitation and abuse.

To learn more, please contact:

Email: abil.amin@etibd.org
Website: www.etibd.org