



Beyond The Factory Floor: A Case Study On Women's Leadership And Inclusion



Photo 1: Aerial view of the Savar Tannery Estate

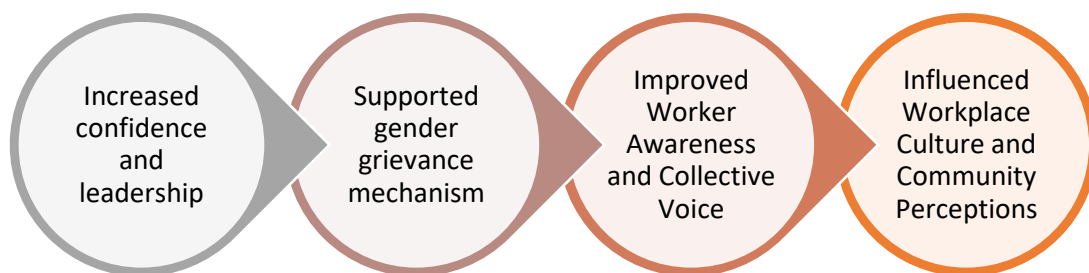
Gendered Workforce Structure in the Tannery Sector

Bangladesh's tannery sector operates within a complex industrial and social landscape. Workforce composition, employment structures, and representation systems all shape the everyday realities of workers. Women's limited involvement in this sector is closely linked to the nature of the work, patriarchal social structures, and deeply rooted cultural norms. The tannery estate has a predominantly male workforce. 44.1% of workers reported having a permanent contract. This figure was notably higher among male workers (48%) compared to women workers (25.4%). Women are mostly engaged as part-time employees and are disproportionately offered non-permanent contracts¹. The absence of a formal contract limits their access to job security, benefits, and opportunities for career growth. Alongside these structural dynamics, worker representation mechanisms play a critical role in shaping workplace conditions. The Tannery Workers Union (TWU) has represented workers' rights since 1982. The union has been active in addressing discrimination, advocating for worker welfare, and functioning as the collective bargaining agent for the tannery industry. Within this structure, a

¹ Findings from ETI Bangladesh's Endline Studies (2026)

dedicated women’s committee has been formed to ensure that women workers have a platform to organise, participate in awareness activities, and engage in leadership spaces at the factory level. The tannery executive committee consists of twenty-five members, two of whom are women². It is within this context that the SMEP funded “*Improving Environmental and Social Conditions in the Savar Tannery Estate*” project began working with workers and institutions in the Savar Tannery Estate. Through targeted training interventions and institutional advocacy, this project sought to strengthen worker capacity, promote gender inclusion, and support the establishment of formal mechanisms for addressing gender-related grievances. Nasrin Begum³’s story illustrates how these interventions translated into change on the ground.

Telling Nasrin’s Story



The Beginning

Nasrin Begum has been working at the Savar Tannery Estate since 2018. From the beginning, she was connected to the trade union, but in the early stages, she remained shy and reluctant to participate. She avoided events and union activities. Her daily work as a tannery worker was already demanding, leaving little room for additional responsibilities. As a woman in a sector where leadership had always been shaped around men, stepping into union spaces felt socially unfamiliar and uncomfortable to her.

² KII With Tannery Worker’s Union Representative (2026)

³ Pseudonym used to maintain privacy

Gradual Transition from Participation to Leadership

Over time, with encouragement from fellow TWU members, she began to attend meetings and trainings hosted by local NGOs regularly. This gradual exposure helped her become familiar with discussions and worker-related issues.

“By attending different trainings and programmes, I learned how to speak, how to protest, how to demand women’s rights, and how to raise issues properly,” Nasrin explained. “Previously, women workers were afraid to speak. Now I tell them: learn from me, one day you will stand where I stand.”

She slowly learned to express her opinions and engage in conversations. This marked a change in her personal confidence and willingness to participate. Her growing participation drew attention from local NGOs, who began inviting her to external events and trainings. Through these engagements, she gained knowledge on workplace rights, gender issues, and institutional mechanisms for protection. These mechanisms are formal structures established within a workplace to ensure workers have a safe and official channel to report and address concerns. One such mechanism is the Anti-Harassment Committee, a body mandated under Bangladesh labour law, responsible for receiving complaints, investigating incidents, and resolving cases of harassment or misconduct in the workplace. Understanding the importance of such committees became a key part of her learning.

Strengthening Capacity through SMEP Intervention

Through the SMEP programme, Nasrin attended trainings on Green Social Dialogue, Environmental and Social Management Systems (ESMS), and Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence (HREDD). These trainings marked a turning point in how she understood her role as a worker and as a woman in the tannery sector.

The Green Social Dialogue and ESMS training helped Nasrin understand that workplace concerns can be resolved through communication, consultation, and collective problem-solving. She gained a deeper appreciation of the role workers can play in decision-making and learned about the relationship between environmental sustainability and worker wellbeing. Building on this, she began advocating these ideas among her fellow

workers and encouraged them to use collective engagement as a means of addressing workplace concerns. The HREDD training deepened her understanding further. She learned how workplace practices can affect both workers and the environment, the importance of identifying risks before they cause harm, and how grievance mechanisms can protect workers when things go wrong. The training also strengthened her awareness of the specific challenges faced by women workers and the need for safe and inclusive workplaces. As a result, she became more proactive in raising concerns, promoting worker participation, and encouraging fellow workers to use available mechanisms to address grievances. At the SMEP Project's UN 16 Days of Activism discussion session, Nasrin attended as a panel speaker, representing her tannery before a wider audience. She spoke about how gender-based violence affects workers inside and outside the workplace and raised awareness of emerging risks in the digital age, including online harassment, misuse of personal photos or information, and harmful behaviour on social media. For someone who once avoided union meetings out of shyness, her presence on that panel reflected how far she had come through the SMEP programme's support.

Forming the Anti-Harassment Committee

Before SMEP's intervention, workers were shy about reporting sexual harassment in the factory, and no dedicated Anti-Harassment Committee existed. Gender-sensitive grievances were handled through the labour officer, HR and compliance team, and the trade union. While the union provided a platform for workers to raise concerns around gender-based violence, it did not offer a specialised mechanism for addressing them. Nasrin understood that the absence of reported cases did not guarantee that such issues would not arise in the future. The SMEP programme played a direct role in shaping this understanding. Through SMEP's trainings, Nasrin learned that establishing an Anti-Harassment Committee was both a preventive measure and a legal obligation under Bangladesh government law. Equipped with this knowledge, she raised the issue as a member of the safety committee, communicated the importance of forming the committee to factory management, and shared informational leaflets from local NGOs within the factory. At the same time, SMEP was independently advocating for the

establishment of anti-harassment committees across the sector, creating institutional pressure that aligned with Nasrin's ground-level efforts. Through this combination of worker advocacy and SMEP's support, the committee was formed, introducing a formal and specialised system within the factory to address gender-related grievances. Nasrin now serves as president of the Anti-Harassment Committee, selected through management recommendation. She is also a member of the safety committee and the women's committee within the Tannery Workers Union. Her responsibilities include addressing harassment-related cases, holding awareness sessions with women workers from both her tannery and the TWU, and ensuring workers know the proper channels for filing complaints. Her dual role as a trade union member and committee president strengthens her effectiveness. Her standing within the union gives her recognition when engaging with management and allows her to connect worker concerns with institutional processes. She consistently shares knowledge from SMEP trainings and TWU events with her fellow workers. She frames collective action simply: *"a lone worker is like a single stick, but together, workers are strong like a fist."* As a result of her efforts, workers are increasingly raising their voices collectively through the union and using formal systems to address grievances.

Observable Changes in Workplace Behaviour and Systems

Following the formation of the Anti-Harassment Committee, several changes became visible in the factory. Worker awareness of the committee rose from 2.5% at baseline to 9.5%. Women workers developed a stronger sense of security knowing a formal space existed to raise concerns. This was reflected in how women understood the committee's functions. By endline, 100% of women identified informing management and letting them handle the case as a key function of the AHC, compared to 13.3% at baseline, an increase of 86.7%. Additionally, 36.7% identified functions such as recording complaints, assisting in finding solutions, and advising perpetrators to change their behaviour, compared to 33.3% at baseline. Supervisors who previously shouted at workers reduced this behaviour over time, reflecting a shift toward more respectful conduct on the factory floor. Nasrin holds regular sessions with women workers from both her tannery and the TWU. She explains clearly that any form of misconduct, including inappropriate behaviour,

unwanted physical contact, or other forms of harassment, must be reported and will not be tolerated. She encourages workers not to wait for others to act. When incidents occur, she guides them to raise concerns immediately and then seek support from the committee. She has observed that when workers speak up collectively, others join in, bringing matters forward through the committee before they escalate. Her leadership has produced concrete results. In one case, a workplace relationship escalated when a male worker began threatening a female colleague. Nasrin facilitated a consultation process that resolved the matter without further escalation. This kind of case handling builds trust in the formal grievance system and encourages workers to use it. It is important to note that Nasrin does not receive any financial or other benefits within the factory for her involvement in the union or the committee. Her work is driven by commitment rather than incentives.

Life Beyond the Tannery Estate



Photo 2: Community surrounding the Tannery Estate

Beyond the workplace, Nasrin's influence extends into the community. She is recognised as a respected individual, and community members often approach her with domestic disputes, particularly those involving gender-sensitive matters. Her experience in handling workplace issues has contributed to this trust. Her family is aware of her role

and responsibilities. Her husband is supportive of her work and encourages her participation in events. He takes pride in her achievements and has motivated her to take on leadership roles, including standing for the presidency of the Anti-Harassment Committee. He collects pictures, news clips and videos of her active participation and often shows them to their neighbours. This reflects increased social recognition and acceptance of her leadership role beyond the workplace. Her leadership is influencing community perceptions about women's roles and authority.

Way Forward

Nasrin Begum's journey reflects a gradual process of change shaped by learning, participation, and action. Through SMEP's training interventions, she moved from initially avoiding engagement to taking on formal leadership roles. Along the way, she contributed to stronger workplace systems and greater awareness among workers. A key outcome of this journey has been the establishment and effective functioning of the Anti-Harassment Committee. Through this formal structure, workers now have a recognised channel to report misconduct, seek resolution, and ensure that grievances are handled through a defined process. Alongside this, workers have developed greater awareness of their rights and the processes available to them when concerns arise. These changes have extended beyond the factory floor. Nasrin's leadership, strengthened through SMEP's support, has influenced worker behaviour, organisational practices, and community perceptions. Workplace conduct has improved, more workers are raising concerns through formal channels, and women's leadership is increasingly recognised both within the factory and in the wider community. Her experience demonstrates that individual initiative, when supported by trade unions, committees, and targeted training interventions like those provided by SMEP, can contribute to safer and more inclusive workplaces. It also shows that sustained engagement and collective participation can lead to tangible improvements in workplace practices and support the continued advancement of gender equality and social inclusion within the tannery sector.