



A Guide to Ensuring Gender Equality for Women Workers in Trade Unions in Bangladesh

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Context

Bangladesh has seen a significant increase in women's participation in the workforce in recent years. According to the International Labour Organization, it increased by 35 per cent between 2008 and 2017, while male employment increased by only 11 per cent. Women are the majority workforce in the garment sector, which is the most important industrial sector in the country, accounting for more than 80 per cent of export earnings.

Despite the recent progress, women's share of the labour market continues to be quite small. Women still comprise less than 30 per cent of the workforce in the country, and more than 90 per cent of working women are in the informal sector.

Plenty of research has looked into the sociocultural barriers, such as religious beliefs and patriarchal norms, that impede women's participation in the workforce. Little attention, however, has been given to women's participation in trade unions.

Trade unions in Bangladesh are formed at three levels: (i) basic unions at the enterprise level; (ii) industrial unions at the sector level; and (iii) national unions. The number of trade unions in Bangladesh is small, at 7,885 unions for approximately 200,000 industrial units engaging both men and women workers. According to a 2002 study, less than 10 per cent of salaried workers belong to a trade union, and among trade union membership, less than 6.3 per cent is female. Yet, trade unions hold enormous potential to improve working conditions and empower women to be drivers of change in their industries.

To understand the barriers to participation that women face in trade unions, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung undertook a qualitative study in 2018 on the status of women workers in unions in terms of membership and leadership. The study focused on four formal sectors: garment, construction, tannery and transport. Representing various age groups and social status, women and men workers, executive committee members and trade union members were interviewed individually and in group discussions. The research primarily focused on the following questions: (i) How many factory and sector- and national-level trade unions and federations exist, and what is the situation of women representatives in them? (ii) How do women workers perceive trade unions, and what benefits have they received so far from unions? (iii) How do sociocultural norms affect the participation of women in a trade union as a member and as a leader? (iv) What can be done to facilitate women's equal opportunity in the workforce and in trade unions?

Based on the findings of that research, this guide describes the biggest barriers that women encounter to participating in and taking up leadership in a trade union. It then provides recommendations for what trade unions, union federations and labour rights groups can do to promote gender equality within trade unions. We believe that implementing these changes will not only make trade unions more women-friendly but they will also increase the overall effectiveness of unions in ensuring the welfare of workers.

Major challenges that women experience in the workplace

Our research on the garment, construction, tannery and transport sectors found that women workers not only face the same challenges as men in these sectors but they also suffer from additional gendered disadvantages.

Common challenges confronting workers:

- low wages;
- lack of job security;
- lack of formal appointment letters;
- occupational health and safety issues (lack of proper sitting arrangement, lack of safety equipment in the construction and tannery sectors, lack of proper ventilation in the workplace, etc.);
- inadequate or no sick leave; and
- lack of onsite medical facilities.

In addition, women workers face a range of gendered issues in the workplace:

- sexual harassment;
- verbal abuse by supervisors and male co-workers;
- lack of maternity leave and benefits;
- lack of or inadequate day-care facilities;
- inadequate toilet facilities (lack of separate toilets for men and women) and restrictions on toilet use, which particularly impacts the health of pregnant workers.

Patriarchal perceptions that undervalue women's work lead to women experiencing gendered discrimination in the workplace: They are not given opportunities or mentorship for career advancement and are often perceived as less valuable than male workers by their supervisors and co-workers. At the same time, women themselves often internalize the patriarchal mindset, which undermines their confidence and prevents them from coming forward to take up leadership in the workplace.

Biggest barriers confronting women in joining a trade union

Our research found that most women workers in the garment, construction, tannery and transport sectors have no association with a trade union. Lack of awareness about trade unions, perceptions about unions and structural barriers prevent them from participating.

Lack of knowledge about trade unions

Lack of information is one of the main reasons that women do not or cannot participate in trade unions. With the exception

of the garment sector, in most cases women are employed informally. This means that they work in shifts or are employed for a limited number of days. Most women working in the garment, construction, tannery and transport sectors have a rudimentary level of education and are not aware of their rights under the labour laws. Therefore, most of them do not have the knowledge necessary to participate in or to form a trade union.

Poor image of trade unions among workers

Our research found that many women fear losing their job if they join a trade union. Because laws against unjustified termination are poorly implemented and women workers already feel vulnerable in the workplace due to unequal power dynamics with male supervisors, these fears are justified.

Trade unions also have a poor image among workers. Many trade unions in Bangladesh are highly politicized and associated with political leaders who are favourable to employers. Trade unions are often seen as pursuing the interests of politicians and employers rather than of workers.

Even if trade unions are not affiliated with political interests, they often do not work for the well-being of all workers. Beyond responding to urgent situations, trade unions have few activities for improving working conditions. This is especially true for women. Due to the lack of women's representation in trade union leadership, unions usually do not pursue issues important to women workers, such as maternity benefits or childcare. As a result, women are reluctant to pay union membership fees because they do not see much benefit in belonging to a union.

“In our tannery, the employer does not want to recruit women as they cannot do heavy work. The employer considers women's recruitment as his 'loss', and we have very limited option of work here. We also have no women leaders in our union, and I have seen women discouraging or envying other women who have expressed their interest to become a leader. Women also prefer men to be their leader because we think men are more capable, powerful and strong to take decisions.”

— *Mila, tannery worker*

Lastly, trade unions are often seen as troublemakers because they take overly aggressive positions towards employers rather than engaging in negotiations. Women involved in trade unions are perceived as being “aggressive” and of “bad character”. This negative perception of women in trade unions also discourages other women workers from joining.

Lack of structure in trade union activities

Among the trade unions in Bangladesh, there is a lack of structured activities and timetable. Meetings are typically arranged on an urgent basis and often late at night. This makes it impossible for many women to attend due to their responsibilities at home, childcare duties and safety concerns about travelling late into the night.

Discrimination against women’s leadership

The male-dominated culture within trade unions discourages women from speaking up or coming forward for leadership positions. Our research found that women serving as president or a union executive committee member had worked more than two or three decades to acquire this position, whereas young men could become an executive committee member within a few years. Nepotism also keeps men in power in trade unions and excludes women who do not have access to the same power networks.

Male trade union members often oppose the idea of women’s inclusion in leadership positions due to socially constructed power structures. Women are perceived as being more comfortable with their traditional household role. As union leaders, they are viewed as limited to thinking only about women’s issues. On the other hand, male leaders are seen as being capable of providing leadership on both male and female workers’ issues. Male leaders are not burdened by household duties or personal security concerns after hours and therefore can be available for union activities at any moment. The fact that women are not able to do the same is seen as a huge shortcoming in their leadership capacity.

Due to internalized patriarchy, many women workers also hold similar views on women’s leadership. Our research found that women workers often believe the stereotype that women work less than men and are less capable in organizing a union. They perceive women as lacking in courage, inner strength and negotiation skills to meet the demands of leadership.

These discriminatory attitudes towards women leaders among workers and within unions prevent women from joining unions and succeeding as union leaders.

Sexual harassment and lack of safety

Women workers encounter sexual harassment in their workplace, and it is also prevalent in unions. When women attend trade union meetings, they are likely to experience continued abuse from their manager and co-workers.

As noted, attending union meetings, which often occur late at night, is also a safety hazard for women because they are likely to encounter sexual harassment and violence on public transportation or on the street.

Conflicting commitments at home

Due to patriarchal norms, women are expected to bear the majority (if not all) of the burden of household chores and care work in their family. Women across all social classes are expected to prioritize their household responsibilities over work. In the case of working women, this means they have little to no time left in the day to participate in union activities. In most situations, women do not receive the support they need from their family in terms of sharing household duties so that they can participate in a trade union.

Trade union recruitment strategy

Patriarchal perceptions affect the recruitment strategy of trade unions. Trade union leaders do not perceive women as possessing adequate negotiation skills. Because women bear the majority of household responsibilities, they are also thought to have less time to dedicate to union activities or participate in trainings to improve their negotiation skills. As a result, trade unions often do not target women workers for membership recruitment.

Inadequate legal framework for women’s inclusion in trade unions

Under the Bangladesh labour laws, there is no specified quota for female workers’ membership in trade unions. Only 10 per cent of executive committee members are required to be women. The lack of a legal requirement for women’s inclusion does little to motivate trade unions to prioritize the recruitment of women workers. Similarly, at the leadership level, the requirement of only 10 per cent of women in executive committees only reinforces the status quo of nominal inclusion of women as trade union leaders.

Women in trade unions — Success stories

Despite the challenges to joining a trade union, there are examples of unions benefiting women workers. After becoming involved in a union, women have discovered a range of benefits, including learning more about their rights, such as maternity leave, severance payment, reduction in gender-based violence at work, reduced working hours, more career advancement opportunities and improved wages.

Women trade union leaders in the garment sector have negotiated ground-breaking collective bargaining agreements that have not only improved working conditions for all workers (for example, with an increased number of paid leave days and wage increases), they have also been successful at gaining concessions on issues specific to women workers, such as improved maternity benefits, day-care facilities and relief from physically taxing work during pregnancy. These women leaders demonstrate that when women are given the space to engage and take leadership, trade unions can become a powerful force for the benefit of both male and female workers.

Case study: One woman overcomes all odds to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement in her factory

Morjina started working in the ready-made garment sector as an operator in 2004. A mother of two children, she moved to Dhaka from Dinajpur for garment work. She has no formal education because her parents were too poor to send her to school.

Although Morjina had been familiar with unions, her interest in organizing developed in the aftermath of the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013. At the time, she was working in a factory that was not unionized, and there was little awareness among workers of the labour laws and their rights. After the Rana Plaza disaster, the government raised the minimum wage in the ready-made garment sector. At Morjina's factory, however, the new minimum wage was not implemented. She had heard that Awaj Foundation helps workers learn about their rights and unionization. She took the initiative and paid for the transportation fees of more than 40 co-workers to take them to the Awaj office on a weekend for training.

After that training from Awaj, Morjina and her co-workers decided to establish a union in their factory. Morjina took the pivotal role of paying for the printing of forms and more transportation costs for trips to the Awaj office and convincing fellow workers that they would not lose their jobs if they unionized. Her lack of education meant that she could not do things like fill out paperwork for the union application, but through her determination, she found a way by seeking help from others. Within one month, she collected enough signatures in her factory of more than 1,600 workers to apply for a union.

Morjina faced fierce resistance from the factory owners. She was threatened with termination, and workers who were participating in the unionization effort were physically intimidated and even beaten by thugs enlisted by the factory owners. She was not deterred. Eventually, the owners were forced to agree to her demand to establish a union.

As president of the Sommolito Sramik Union, Morjina negotiated a collective bargaining agreement at the factory in 2017. The agreement includes a 7 per cent annual wage increase (the legal requirement is 5 per cent), increased attendance bonus, day-care facilities and increased overtime payment. As a result of the union, the workers are also much more aware of their rights and are now more likely to speak up and demand accountability if their rights are violated.

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Case study: Woman trade union leader negotiates a collective bargaining agreement that sets an example of what is possible in the garment sector

Bilkis Begum is a 30-year-old mother of one child. She works as a machine operator in her factory. Bilkis noticed that workers at her factory experienced such problems as not being given leave days they were due, a festival bonus or the annual wage increase mandated by law. But she did not know how to approach the management to solve these issues. With the help of labour rights organization Awaj Foundation and its trade union federation, SGSF, she learned the specifics of the labour laws, how to negotiate with management and how to form a union.

To convince her co-workers to come on board with her, Bilkis spoke to them during lunch hours, after work and at community gatherings. She shared what she had learned about the benefits of unionization with other workers. Although it was time consuming and hard work, she managed to collect enough signatures to submit a union application and received the registration.

In the beginning, the factory owner and management were not supportive of the union. After a while, they realized that the union did not present any unfair demands from the workers. When there was unrest in other factories in the area, SGSF helped mediate conflict between its workers and the management.

After developing a cordial relationship with management, Bilkis negotiated a collective bargaining agreement between the workers and management. This agreement contains provisions that are particularly targeted towards women workers, such as the employer paying for the ultrasound check-up of pregnant workers and relief from physically taxing work after the sixth month of pregnancy. In an industry in which women are still routinely dismissed when they become pregnant, this is an extraordinary achievement. The collective bargaining agreement also has increased annual wage increments, festival holidays and paid leave beyond what the employer is obligated to provide by law.

The performance of this union and its ground-breaking collective bargaining agreement is now an inspiration to others, and workers from neighbouring factories regularly come to Bilkis for advice. She even presented this success story of productive cooperation between workers and management at the United Nations Forum on Business and Human Rights in Geneva in November 2017.

Recommendations for improving women's inclusion and leadership in trade unions

To improve women's participation in trade unions, a multipronged approach is needed to remove structural barriers and encourage women to participate. The following suggestions are intended for trade unions, trade union federations and labour rights groups to consider how to increase women's participation and leadership in unions.

1. Awareness raising and recruitment

To inform women workers about trade unionism, unions should undertake awareness-raising campaigns that prioritize women. The campaigns should focus on issues important to women workers, such as pregnancy and maternity benefits, job security, working hours and how unions can bring about positive change in these areas. Training sessions should be provided by unions and labour rights organizations on the country's labour laws and the rights and responsibilities of workers.

Trade unions can also use the example of successful women trade union leaders, such as the case studies presented here, to encourage more women to engage with a trade union. Women union leaders from other factories, or even other sectors, can be used as role models and invited to speak to workers to motivate them to participate.

Trade unions should aim for membership that reflects the composition of the workforce. In sectors in which 50 per cent or more of the workers are women, a trade union recruitment strategy should aim for at least 50 per cent women's membership.

2. Improving the image of trade unions among workers

To encourage women to participate, trade unions need to shed the image of being unaccountable, corrupt and troublemakers.

Monthly trade union meetings in which members can raise issues important to them and where there are mechanisms that track progress on these issues will create trust between workers and union leadership. Transparency in union elections and decision-making processes can assure workers that the unions are working for them and not as an agent of the employer. Federations can increase accountability by monitoring their affiliated unions and remove members or leaders who are proven to be corrupt.

To remove the impression that unions are troublemakers, they need to demonstrate that they constructively engage with employers through regular meetings instead of only taking disruptive actions when problems arise. In consultation with their members, they should develop a priority list of issues and engage in collective bargaining.

To make themselves appealing to women workers, unions need to proactively take up issues that are important to women,

such as separate and sanitary toilet facilities, maternity benefits and day-care facilities.

3. Women-friendly schedule of activities

When scheduling meetings and activities, trade unions should keep in mind the safety concerns and home duties of women members. For example, meetings should be arranged immediately after working hours (around 5 p.m.) and not exceed two hours. If late-night meetings need to be called in an emergency situation, then transport service should be provided for women members. The location of the meeting should be close to the workplace so that travelling time can be reduced to incentivize women to participate.

Childcare facilities should be arranged by the union during meeting times so that women members can participate without being worried about the well-being of their children.

4. Community outreach

Due to patriarchal norms, women are responsible for the majority of household work. Without reducing this burden, it would not be possible for women to engage in additional activities after work, such as trade union meetings. Trade unionism is also viewed in most communities as men's activity, and women who participate in it are thought to be of bad character.

To remove these patriarchal barriers and stigma, trade unions should proactively reach out to communities and families of women members to help them understand the importance of unions and why women should participate in them. They should help raise awareness among communities on women's leadership and how that can have a positive impact in the workplace and the community.

At the same time, trade unions should arrange gender-sensitivity training sessions for husbands and encourage them to share the burden of housework. Families also need to be assured that safe transportation and other safety measures will be provided for women workers when they participate in union meetings and activities.

5. Changing the masculine culture of unions

To increase women's participation and leadership, the masculine culture of unions needs to change. The perception of a union

leader is a man who can instigate strikes, participate in street protests and is in a hostile relationship with the employer. This culture needs to evolve towards more professional unions that are more interested in engaging in social dialogue and bargaining through a constructive process. This will also create an environment in which women are more likely to be interested in becoming union leaders.

Our research found that sexual harassment is commonplace in unions. Unions should take a zero-tolerance policy towards sexual harassment and create accountability mechanisms in which anyone engaging in this type of behaviour is held accountable. Tackling gender-based violence in the workplace should be taken up as a priority by all unions to demonstrate to women workers that their safety and well-being are priorities.

Nepotism within unions is a big barrier to women's leadership. Trade union federations need to ensure that accusations of nepotism are dealt with seriously in their affiliated unions and that men and women have equal opportunity to become union leaders if they have the capacity.

Our research found that many unions still do not meet the minimum requirement of having 10 per cent women members in their union executive committee. Federations should ensure that all of their affiliated unions follow the law on women's inclusion in executive committees.

6. Capacity building of women workers

While many women might have the desire to become a union leader, they lack the skills for leadership. Trade unions, in partnership with labour rights organizations, should arrange for leadership development training among women union members.

At the same time, gender-sensitivity training needs to be provided to male union members so that they work regular meetings instead of only taking disruptive actions when problems arise.

7. Advocacy for changing legal frameworks

Trade union federations and labour rights organizations should engage in advocacy for a supportive legal framework that encourages women's participation and leadership in trade unions. Specific areas of advocacy that unions can prioritize include:

i. Increasing the legal quota for women in executive committees: The law requires that only 10 per cent of women need to be members of union executive committees. Labour rights advocates argue that this requirement is too little to ensure that union leadership reflects the interest of women workers. Raising the legal minimum will also create incentive for unions to recruit and nurture more women leaders.

ii. Setting a quota on women's membership: There are no legal requirements on the composition of union membership. Union federations and labour rights organizations should advocate for a legal quota stating that at least 50 per cent of the members are women, where relevant.

iii. Stronger anti-gender-based violence laws: Gender-based violence in the workplace and within unions is a major impediment to women's participation in union activities. Stronger anti-gender-based violence laws will make workplaces safer for women and also encourage them to join a union and come forward for leadership positions. Unions in Bangladesh should advocate for the ratification and implementation of the International Labour Organization Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190), which will establish a strong legal framework to reduce gender-based violence in workplaces.

iv. Job security: Our research found that informalization and lack of job contracts is a big impediment to women joining a union. When workers are afraid that they can lose their jobs at the whim of the employer, they are much less likely to join a union. Reducing the use of informal or temporary contracts and increasing the prevalence of job contracts can encourage more women to participate in a union.

v. Other issues: To increase women's participation, union federations and labour rights organizations also need to advocate on a range of structural issues that impede trade union activities. These include (but are not limited to):

- increasing freedom of association by making it easier to register unions;
- legal accountability for employers who unjustly fire workers;
- safe transportation for women workers who are required to work in the evenings;
- improved maternity leave and benefits for women workers; and
- adequate employer-provided day-care facilities in workplaces.