



OUR LIVES, OUR FIGHT FOR DIGNITY

আমাদের জীবন, আমাদের সম্মানের জন্য লড়াই- বাংলাদেশী নারী পোশাক শ্রমিকরা তাদের অধিকার চায়

BANGLADESHI WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS DEMAND THEIR RIGHTS



Women working in Bangladesh's garment factories have a story to tell. It is a story of young girls and women leaving family in rural areas to come to the city for work, a story of exploitation and harassment in unsafe sweatshops earning a handful of dollars a day. It is also the story of courage and the struggle to find a voice in trade unions to protect their safety and rights. In this story, international solidarity plays an important part. Following the Rana Plaza tragedy*, coordinated campaigns around the world have led to tremendous improvements in building safety in Bangladesh.

Who better to tell the story of Bangladeshi garment workers than the workers themselves?

The Steelworkers Humanity Fund asked our partner, the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity, to help us learn about the lives, struggles, current challenges and hopes of Bangladeshi garment workers. We asked them to do it through photos. This booklet gives you a unique glimpse into the reality of women leaders, their everyday story of challenge, change, and their fight for rights.

It is a struggle we share because it involves us. We buy the garments sewn in Bangladesh. And as consumers we can – working together – have enormous influence over corporate decisions, so that tragedies like the Rana Plaza never happen again.



*On April 24, 2013, the Rana Plaza clothing factory in Bangladesh collapsed, killing 1,129 garment workers, the majority of them women, and injuring thousands of others.



BANGLADESH CENTRE FOR WORKER SOLIDARITY

Steelworker members, through the Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF), support Bangladeshi garment workers' fight for their rights in a project with the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). The objective of this joint project (also supported by the Canadian Labour Congress and other Canadian affiliates) is to provide training as well as legal and organizational support to workers so that they understand and can exercise their human rights and the rights set out in Bangladeshi labour law. BCWS provides training and support to organize democratic unions to give workers a voice and is focused on women's leadership. All of the participants featured in this booklet have benefitted from this training and are now elected members of their factory's joint participatory committee, representing their fellow workers and their demands.

Kalpona Akter, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity is a tireless advocate for women's leadership and worker rights.





**“BEING A LEADER, I FEEL PROUD AS I
HAVE NEGOTIATING POWER AND CAN
REPRESENT MY UNION MEMBERS AT
THE NEGOTIATION TABLE”**

SABINA



Sabina has been working for 6 years in Lufa Garments Ltd. as a Quality Inspector. Her usual work shift is 10 hours a day, 6 days a week. Including overtime, her income is between Canadian \$130 and \$140 a month, which supports her whole family. Not being able to afford a caretaker in Dhaka, Sabina had to leave her then 3-month-old daughter in her village with her mother. Since then, due to travel costs she has only been able to visit her once or twice a year during holidays.

Sabina is the joint secretary of her factory union. Under her leadership, workplace safety in the factory has been a key issue of contention with management.





**“IT MAKES MY DAY WHEN I SEE MY
CO-WORKERS SMILE AFTER HELPING
THEM RESOLVE THEIR COMPLAINT
WITH MID-LEVEL MANAGEMENT”**

SHIMA



Shima has been working at Cosmopolitan Industry Limited as a Quality Inspector for over 7 years. She works 60 hours a week for a salary of \$170 a month, including overtime. Her son, father, mother, sister, father-in-law and mother-in-law depend on her and her husband's income. Her current salary makes it hard to meet all of her and her family's needs and has Shima worried for her son's future.

In her workplace, Shima plays an important role in resolving wage issues. She is a strong leader in the factory and is working hard to organize a union.





“WHEN I THINK WHAT WE ARE CONTRIBUTING TO THE INDUSTRY AND WHAT WE GET IN RETURN, IT MAKES ME PROUD WHEN I NEGOTIATE WITH MANAGEMENT ABOUT OUR PROBLEMS AND WIN”

SALMA



Salma is a Machine Operator at Rose Garments Limited. She started working at the factory 6 years ago in order to be able to provide for herself and her son following her divorce. Working 10 hours a day, 6 days a week, with her monthly salary of \$186 she provides for her father, her mother, her son and her younger brother. The highlight of Salma's day is when she talks with her son, who is staying with her parents outside of the city.

Salma helped negotiate with the factory management for her coworkers to have access to medical leave with pay. She has also been working actively to form a union.





“IT SADDENS ME WHEN MY COWORKERS SHARE THEIR PERSONAL PROBLEMS AND I CAN’T HELP THEM, SO I HOPE OUR NEW UNION WILL HELP US RESOLVE THEIR COMPLAINTS”

BRITSY



Bristy has been working as a Quality Inspector at Pearl Garment Limited for the past 5 years. Bristy works 10-hour shifts, 6 days a week, and her monthly wage is \$155, including overtime. Her parents depend on her income. She spends about a third of her monthly earnings on the rent for their house. The high cost of rent is an important issue for Bristy and her family, with whom she shares an apartment along with other workers.

Bristy specializes in occupational health and safety, and is active in the creation of a new union in her factory.





MANY OF MY CO-WORKERS DO NOT WANT TO ORGANIZE AND JOIN A UNION BECAUSE THEY ARE AFRAID – WE HAVE TO GET OVER THIS FEAR”

REHENA



Rehena started working in the garment industry 7 years ago. She has been working as a Machine Operator at Best Shirts Ltd. in the outskirts of Dhaka for 5 years. She works between 8 and 12 hours a day and gets paid between \$155 and \$185 a month. Four of her family members depend on her and her husband's income. Rehena has two sons, but she can only afford to keep the younger one with her, so the oldest lives with his grandmother.

Rehena is actively working to organize a union in her factory.



TAKING ACTION IN SUPPORT OF BANGLADESHI GARMENT WORKERS

Action on international solidarity makes us as Steelworkers stronger in our home communities. Engagement brings new people into the union, builds new skills among our activists, and wins new allies and new public respect for our union.

In the case of the Bangladeshi garment workers, circumstances may be different, yet Canadian women are engaged in the same fight for respect, safe workplaces free from violence, intimidation and harassment, child care, and fair wages.

As Steelworkers, we can build power to affect change and help Bangladeshi workers fight for their rights.

The clothing companies and brands that control global supply chains are sensitive to their public image. They want us to purchase their brands. That gives us leverage – if we act collectively. In the same way politicians worry about what we think. They want our votes.

**YOUR INDIVIDUAL AND YOUR LOCAL UNION'S
INVOLVEMENT IN INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS MAKE A
HUGE DIFFERENCE. YOU WON'T BE WORKING ALONE –
YOU WILL BE PART OF A COORDINATED
NETWORK OF ACTIVISTS.**

To get involved, stay informed, and receive campaign tools and materials, please contact your USW staff representative, or in Canada the Steelworkers Humanity Fund at humanityfund@usw.ca.

For more information on current campaigns visit:

- International Labour Rights Forum at www.laborrights.org
- Clean Clothes Campaign at www.cleanclothes.org
- Maquila Solidarity Network at www.maquilasolidarity.org
- Worker Rights Consortium at www.workersrights.org
- IndustriAll Global Union at www.industriall-union.org/action-on-bangladesh





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