

## Multi Stakeholder Consultation on

# Safe Work at Garments Factories in Bangladesh: Lesson Learned from Tajreen Fire Accidents- Challenges and Way Forward



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***Organised by***

**BANGLADESH OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY, HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT FOUNDATION**

[www.oshebd.org](http://www.oshebd.org)

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### Safe Work at Garments Factories in Bangladesh: Lesson Learned from Tajreen Fire Accidents- Challenges and Way Forward

#### Background

A fire accident occurred in RMG factory named Tajreen Fashions on 24 November 2012 at Nischintapur, Ashulia, near Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh. A total of 111 workers lost lives and many workers were injured seriously. This accident created negative image of RMG sector globally.

Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) formed an investigation team for fact finding on this accident. The team had field level investigation for two weeks and prepared the report. To share this report OSHE organized a consultation on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2013 at CIRDAP Auditorium in Dhaka. A total of 100 participants from trade union, fire victim's family, NGOs, academic and research institute, media and international agencies participated in the workshop. The participants list is attached in Annex-1.

#### Objectives

- a) To share and disseminate the findings of investigation to stakeholders
- b) To get the feedback on the findings
- c) To identify the area of immediate actions
- d) To prepare an action plan

#### Consultation Format

The consultation started with an informal inaugural session where Mr. Md. Israfil Alam MP, Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on the Ministry of Labour and Employment attended as Chief Guest and Brig. Gen Abu Nayem Shahidullah, Director General of Fire Service and Civil Defense attended as Special Guest. OSHE Chairperson Ms. Saki Rezwana presided over the session. In his welcome address, Mr. Repon Chowdhury, Executive Director of OSHE mentioned the relevance of overall review regarding occupational safety in RMG and sought cooperation from stakeholders in developing action plan.



Remarks by Md. Israfil Alam, Chairperson of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Labour and Employment

At the outset of this session, a visual documentary named DEATH TRAP was screened where the vulnerability of victim's family, tragedy of missing people and overall situation was presented. It was a touchy enough with humanitarian appeal to stop killing in RMG sector.

The Program Schedule is attached in Annex-2

After screening of documentary, fact findings

report was presented by Mr. Omar Faruq, Program Manager of OSHE Foundation, followed by discussion by designated discussants and remarks by the victims.

### **Key Findings of Facts Findings**

- a) A total of 111 workers lost their lives, among them dead body of 58 persons were identified and handed over to their relatives and family members
- b) Sample for DNA test of 58 workers was recorded by Dhaka Medical College and they were buried
- c) Family of 43 deceased got Compensation of BDT 600,000 (each family received this amount). OSHE team identified 53 workers who lost their lives.
- d) Approximately the number of injured workers is 300, though BGMEA has prepared a list of 63 injured workers for compensation.

### **Causes of Fire**

- a) No emergency exits way
- b) Building code was not followed during construction of this building
- c) Cloth and cotton were stored in the ground floor which helped for spread out of fire
- d) High power electric generator was adjacent to the work station
- e) Gates were locked even after spreading of fire
- f) Out of 1200 workers only 40 had simple orientation on fire safety
- g) Inadequate fire safety materials
- h) Most workers lost lives due to suffocation
- i) No reserved water for fire mitigation

### **Suggestions to prevent fore accidents in RMG**

- a) Endorsement of National Occupational Health and Safety Policy
- b) Enforcement of Labour Laws
- c) To enhance the capacity of the Inspection Office under Ministry of Labour and Employment
- d) Introducing Mobile court for immediate punishment to responsible persons
- e) To ensure the practice of National Building Code
- f) Regular training on fire safety for workers
- g) Establish separate unit for warehouse and production
- h) Keep measures of emergency exits way

### **Remarks by Guest Speakers**

**Mr. Israfil Alam MP, the Chief Guest**

## Chair of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Labour and Employment

Mr. Israfil Alam MP, Chair of Parliamentary Standing Committee on Ministry of Labour and Employment appreciated OSHE initiative for independent facts findings and criticized the Investigation Report disclosed by Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) terming the accident as “sabotage”. He said the report has been designed to save the employer of the factory. Mr. Alam termed the BGMEA report as ill motivated, defensive and biased. He demanded immediate arrest of the owner of that factory for the interest of social justice. He also urged the labour leaders for greater unity to make strong pressure for maintaining occupational safety standard in the workplaces. He suggested BGMEA to develop a workers database in RMG sector.

### **Brig. Gen. Abu Nayem Md. Shahidullah, the Special Guest**

Director General, Fire Service and Civil Defense

DG, Fire Service and Civil Defense expressed his dissatisfaction on the unwillingness of garments owners for fire safety. Referring an example of unwillingness to show a documentary on fire safety, he said hardly 30% of the owners arranged this show though it was supplied by Fire Service Department without any cost. He disclosed that every year 1500 fire accident are taking place across the country. He emphasized on structural safety in the work places. 40 % accident occur due to electric short circuit. He mentioned that Fire Extinguisher is enough for immediate safety in fire accident. He suggested the concerned authorities not to release the permission before getting clearance for gas, electricity and fire safety from respected authorities.

### **Mr. Shukkur Mahmud, Chairman, NCCWE, Guest of Honor**

Mr. Shukkur Mahmud, Chairman of National Coordinating Council for Workers Education (NCCWE) emphasized on a National Policy for RMG Sectors. Criticizing the RMG owners Mr. Mahmud said that, the owners do not care the rules and regulations of the country. He mentioned that, owners of Tajreen Garments had permission of three stored building but it had eight floors. He proposed to conduct a nationwide survey on occupational safety in RMG and the factories that have no minimum safety standard, should be closed. He blamed the Government agencies for not carrying their responsibilities properly. He also suggested for establishing trade union in this sector instead of existing participation committee. He strongly demanded the arrest of the owner of Tajreen Garments.

### **Mr. Sanjiv Pandita, Director, AMRC, Guest of Honour**

Mr. Sanjiv Pandita expressed his deep concern over the unsafe and hazardous work condition in different workplaces in this region. Referring 100 years back fire accident in USA, he said same nature and trend is visible in this modern age also.

He wondered for not bringing positive changes in the workplaces as it happened in some other sectors.



Remarks by AMRC Director Sanjiv Pandita

He expressed his heartiest sympathy to the victims and wishes early recovery of the injured workers.

### Experience Sharing by Victims

#### **Morsheda, Age – 30, Sewing Operator, Tajreen Garments**

*I was working in the evening of that accident day. Suddenly I felt that fire is moving to me, I tried to go down stairs but I was not allowed by senior colleagues. Finding no other alternatives, I broke the glass of window with other workers and made a jump. I was able to save my life, but got injury seriously. I can not move my hands properly, partially I lost my eye sight.*

#### **Muhammad Syed Ali, Age – 40,**

*"I was working on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, suddenly I came to know about fire alarm and tried to go down in the ground floor, but my Factory Manager advised me not to move down. By this time smoke covered me and I was not seeing anything. Rapidly I rushed to window and escaped me by jump. I was injured and shifted to mother and child care center and moved to Dhaka Medical College and Trauma Center. BGMEA paid my treatment cost.*

#### **Md. Mominur (30) , Supervisor at Tazreen Fashion Ltd (injured worker):**

*"After hearing the siren I tried to seek permission to exit from my boss but he ordered me to stay until his permission. I took the life risk and jumped to outside. I saved my life but could not leave the injury, Till now I am not in normal situation, I feel serious pain generated in the wounded places in my body".*



Sharing of pathetic experience by Ms. Morshed, a victim of fire accident

### Panel Discussions

#### **Mr. Mahmudul H Summon**

Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University

**Mr. Mahmudul H Summon** shared his experience in conducting a survey on missing workers due to fire accident in that factory. He disclosed that 69 workers were missed and among them 78% were female. He also identified the closure of gates as major reason for mass causality. He blamed NGOs for unorganized emergency response and rehabilitation.

**Mr. Mohit Gupta, ANROEV:** In this session Mr. Mohit Gupta of ANROAB emphasized on coordinated efforts to ensure the work place safety in more effective way. He underscored the need for enforcement of laws and execution of penalty and punishment in case of not following the laws and rules.



Discussion by Mr. Mohit Gupta of ANROEV as panel discussant



Open discussion by the participants

## Open Discussion

Following comments were made by the participants during open discussion;

1) Dr. Ruhul Quddus, former Director of Labour suggested to activate Safety Council immediately

2) Ms. Tahmina, TU leader blamed Government for not taking care of safety issues in the industrial sector. She said DNA test for identifying the unidentified dead workers is a strategy for not paying compensation.

3) Engineer Hafizur Rahman of IEB said, compensation by Government ignore owners

responsibility and every worker deserve the rights to get appointment letter. He surprised on the trend that employers are serious about security rather than the safety.

- 4) Mr. Alauddin, a lawyer suggested to establish a hospital for RMG workers by BGMEA
- 5) Mr. Badrudozza Nizam, a TU leader proposed for BDT 2500000 as compensation for life loses of a worker.

## WAY FORWARD

1. To completely abide by all relevant local laws, regulations and procedures aimed at ensuring fire safety at every garments factories in the country
2. To establish a special labour inspection cell at the Department of Labour Inspection by government for RMG sector.
3. To prepare a Comprehensive Action Plan for Improvement of Occupational Safety conditions in RMG Sector
4. To establish the culture of accountability by owners in the area of safe workplace
5. To introduce a Trust Fund for welfare for the workers at RMG sector
6. To prepare a data base for all RMG workers across the country
7. To conduct a nationwide base-line survey on OHS status in RMG
8. To establish a specialized hospital for the RMG workers