



# Summary Report

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## Lessons Learned from Participation Committee Meeting Minutes

Joint Ethical Trading Initiative Bangladesh



The Bangladesh economy remains highly dependent on the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, but an oversupply of unskilled labour, production overcapacity, and market forces have increased production pressure, driven down wages, and led to precarious work conditions. Low pay, job insecurity, lack of union representation and gender-based violence in the workplace are inextricably linked while a lack of education and awareness of rights and benefits on the part of workers has been a major obstacle in increasing worker voice.

For these reasons, the Joint Ethical Trading Initiative (JETI) has been delivering a social dialogue programme in Bangladesh since 2015 so far reaching 77 factories supplying to 14 different JETI corporate members. Social dialogue can enable the voice of workers to be heard as a basis for negotiating workplace policies, complaints systems and collective agreements. The programme aims to build the capacity and skills of factory managers, supervisors and elected worker representatives via training sessions expected to increase their knowledge of Bangladesh labour law and their respective roles and responsibilities within the committees while improving their communication skills including receiving and raising workplace issues.

Given the low presence of functioning trade unions in RMG factories in Bangladesh (only 7.2% of RMG workers are unionised), the Participation Committee (PC), a structure which each employer having more than 50 workers is legally obliged to establish, should serve as a platform where manager and worker representatives can discuss issues of relevance for the two parties. The PC does not have bargaining power to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement and cannot therefore replace a trade union. Nevertheless, despite its limitations, the PC can play a role in bridging the communication gap and create an environment of mutual trust and cooperation within the workplace, even successfully ease labour disputes, if made functional.

As part of the support to increase PCs' capacity to conduct social dialogue, the programme has distributed a meeting minute template and provided training on effective minute taking for relevant committee members. As the meeting minutes serve as a written record of the issues discussed, actions taken and potential disputes resolved, they serve as a reference to measure progress of the dialogue taking place between the workplace stakeholders. When written well, and when using a good meeting minutes template, minutes are a critical tool to use for future reference of actions agreed and for onwards communication within the workplace.

## Project Profile

ETI is part of a collaborative initiative introducing Social Dialogue (SD) programmes that empower low-income workers to engage with workplace-based solutions in the vast global supply chain of the readymade garment (RMG) sector. These interventions aim to improve dialogue between workers and management and build workers' capacity to represent their needs and access their rights.

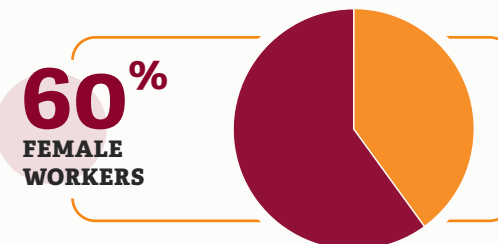
In Bangladesh, the RMG sector employs around 4.2 million people, 60% of them are female. The sector's growth has created a platform for 3.6 million women to engage in a new productive role in society, empowering low-income households to take home an additional wage. The sector earns more than 10% of GDP and shares 84% of foreign exchange earnings.<sup>1</sup> Given its size and prominence, the promotion of healthy industrial relationship is crucial to ensuring respect for workers' rights and sustainable growth of the sector.

With funding from UKAid Direct, NORAD, HSBC and Danida, ETI Bangladesh has conducted capacity building activities in 77 RMG factories in Dhaka to facilitate improved industrial relations by building a culture of dialogue between workers and factory management and raising awareness of worker rights issues common to the RMG

sector. Activities have included supporting participation committees (PCs) and trade unions (TUs) and facilitating the democratic election of PC/TU representatives in each factory, providing training to supervisors and worker representatives (WRs) with a specific emphasis on female WRs. The support has also included the development and implementation of a meeting minutes template to facilitate and monitor progress achieved by each PC / TU within the factories.

To assess whether PCs improved in their capacity to negotiate agreements and resolve issues through SD, and whether or why disparities exist between factory PCs, a team of consultants reviewed 249 meeting minutes (MMs) from 28 participating factories, documented over a two-year period from June 2019 to 2021.

### BANGLADESH RMG SECTOR 4.2 MILLION EMPLOYEES



<sup>1</sup> Islam, M.S. Ready-made garments exports earning and its contribution to economic growth in Bangladesh. GeoJournal (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-019-10131-0>

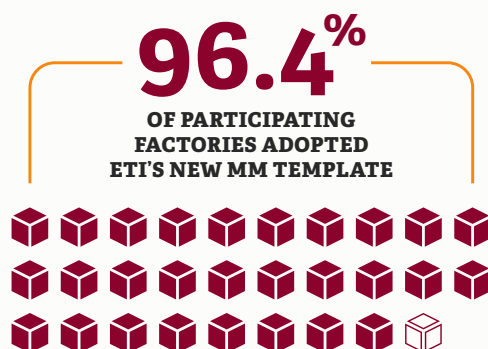
## Methodology

By capturing the exchange of information, issues raised, and decisions made in discussions between workers and management, MMs can provide a snapshot of the quality of SD in any workplace. In January 2021, ETI introduced a new “standard” MM template for factories as part of its SD programme. By providing a set structure, the new template aimed to eliminate inconsistencies or a lack of information which characterised the ad hoc formats of previous MMs; which in turn hindered monitoring of social dialogue and decision-making processes within factories. This analysis is based on a review of MMs recorded using ETI’s recommended template as well as previous ad hoc formats. No interviews or surveys were conducted for this analysis; however, consultation was sought from ETI Bangladesh to ensure understanding of the local context.



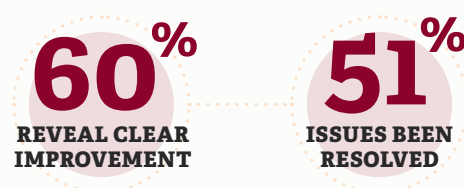
## Key findings

**Factories are open to adopting practices which facilitate social dialogue.**



In less than five months, 27 out of 28 participating factories adopted ETI's new MM template. While analysis shows that only ten of these factories are using the template accurately, this swift and steady take-up by most factories demonstrates clear willingness to change traditional practices in favour of new approaches to facilitating SD. Further training, ideally face-to-face, would benefit those 17 factories which have yet to grasp the full requirements of the tool.

**Use of a set MM template captures a clearer picture of social dialogue.**



MMs recorded without the new “standard” template fail to capture narratives around issue resolution. Both ETI and member brands voiced the difficulty this created in monitoring issues raised in supplier factories. Recent MMs from over half of participating factories (60%) using the new template reveal a clear improvement. Narratives capturing issues outline the discussion that took place, mention the status of issues, and or the resolutions reached. Analysis of these MMs also reveals over half (51%) of the issues captured have been resolved. It is possible that improved MM documentation may have increased resolution rates by improving the ability to monitor issues across MMs.



## Key findings



**The majority of issues are raised and resolved in 16 factories.**



MMs analysis shows that over 95% of issues raised are successfully resolved in 16 factories. This same group are also responsible for raising nearly 70% (257 of 368) of all issues captured during the period. It is likely that SD is more effective in these factories. This is even more likely when we consider that these 16 were the first to complete worker PC training, therefore likely benefitting from having more time to practice SD than the other 12 factories.

**Factories taking consultative decisions are better at issue resolution.**

### ISSUES RESOLVED



**MORE CONSULTATIVE DIALOGUE**

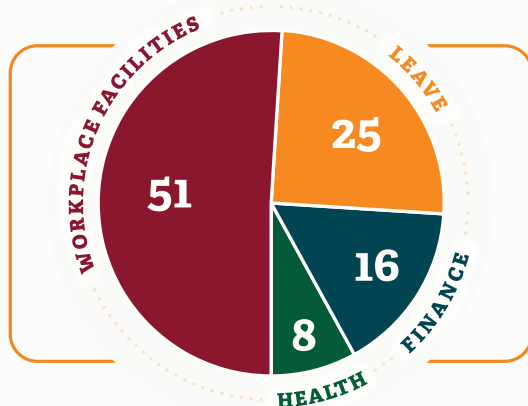


**LESS CONSULTATIVE DIALOGUE**

Analysis of MM narratives identified three dialogue processes that PC committees across different factories used in resolving issues: prone to more consultative dialogue; prone to less consultative dialogue; equally prone to both dialogues. Factories raising and resolving the most issues adopted a “more consultative” dialogue process while factories using a “less consultative” dialogue only resolved one fourth of the total issues brought to PC meetings. It may also follow that workers feel more encouraged to raise issues in factories where they are more likely to be consulted on resolutions.

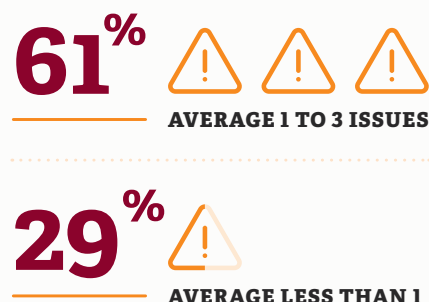
## Key findings

Workers key concerns remain the same, with recurring issues raised in meetings.



Across MMs workers continue to express similar concerns: over half of issues raised relate to workplace facilities (51%) while a quarter (25%) relate to leave. Other issues include finance (16%) and health (8%) amid COVID-19. The persistence of these concerns and repetition of basic rights-related issues, raises questions around the efficacy of issue resolution and sustainability of the solutions reached.

The average number of issues raised by worker representatives is low.

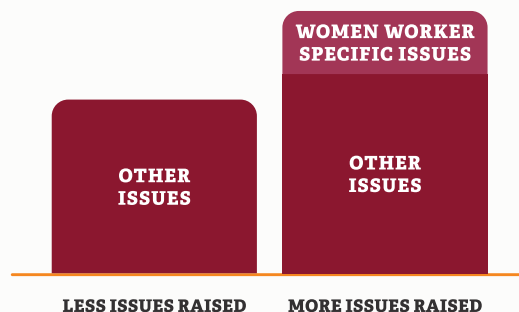


It is evident from the MM analysis that the average number of unique issues raised by PC worker representatives (PCWR) is less than two per PC meeting. That being said, the number of issues raised overall per PC meeting is also low. Only one factory averaged over five issues per PC meeting. More than half (61%) of the participating factories raised an average of 1-3 issues per meeting, with nearly one third (29%) raising less than one.



## Key findings

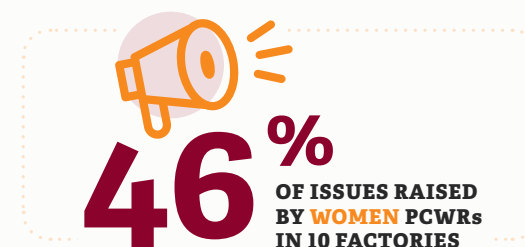
**Factories raising a larger number of issues are more likely to raise issues in relation to women workers.**



The MMs reviewed demonstrate that 12 factories raised 15 issues with specific reference to women workers. No difference was found between the type of issues raised - all remained workplace facilities and health related – however, the 12 factories raising them had raised almost half (167 of 368) of all issues captured. It is likely that factories raising a higher number of issues, may also be more open to bringing and discussing issues affecting women workers.



**Women PCWRs are playing an active role in social dialogue.**



### PARTICIPATION COMMITTEE BREAKDOWN ACROSS 28 FACTORIES

**57% MALE**

**43% FEMALE**

MMs show that there is a strong gender balance (female 43%, male 57%) across the PCs of all 28 factories. Women PCWRs from 10 factories voiced almost half (46%) of the issues raised by this group during the period. Training from this programme may have encouraged interest among women workers to enter a PC election and may also have increased their skills and confidence in voicing issues.

## Conclusions / recommendations

**It is clear participating factories have made progress facilitating social dialogue over the course of this programme.**

Over 77 factories now have an established PC, providing a fixed mechanism through which workers and supervisors can raise issues and voice concerns. Where issue resolution within PCs was initially hard to track, the implementation of a new template and training of PCWRs and supervisors has seen the emergence of clearer narratives among some PC MMs, from which ETI and brands can monitor issue progress.

Further work remains before all PCs can effectively raise, track, and resolve worker issues through social dialogue.



**What follows is a number of recommendations to move factory PCs forward based on our analysis:**

**1**

Further capacity building and training should be provided to all established or prospective PC representatives, this should cover:

- + How to capture and articulate issue narratives in meeting minutes and use a template to record, track and resolve issues raised.
- + The roles and responsibilities of PC representatives including the importance of raising pertinent and diverse issues within the PC.
- + Facilitating and participating in democratic social dialogue.

**2**

Further analysis and diagnosis of recurring issues raised in PCs should be conducted, to assist factories leveraging the PC system to generate sustainable solutions.

**3**

Regular monitoring should be done by factories, brands and ETI on issue resolution performance so that factories with low resolution rates can be supported to progress.

**4**

To facilitate for further gender equality within the sector, continued empowerment, and training of women workers to participate as PCWRs should be prioritized.

Joint Ethical Trading Initiative Bangladesh

