Stories behind the clothes we wear
We asked 10 questions to a garment worker to discover her stories

GEAR: 79 female workers promoted to supervisors
Helping female workers climb the career ladder through Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) initiative

Towards new frontiers of compliance
A closer look at the growth and triumph of a BWB partner factory over the past few years

BETTER WORK BUSINESS FORUM
Industry stakeholders met at BWB’s annual event in October to discuss issues critical for the sustainability of the RMG industry

INDUSTRY SEMINAR ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT PREVENTION
BWB partnered with H&M to offer a better understanding of sexual harassment and the prevention mechanisms in light of the High Court Verdict

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS WITH TRADE UNIONS
The promotion of sound Industrial Relations practices is a key dimension of our work in the industry

PARTNERING FOR SUSTAINABILITY
BWB partnered with the Sustainable Apparel Forum (SAF) 2019 held in Dhaka on 5 November

PROMOTING BOILER SAFETY
BWB organised an Industry Seminar on Boiler Safety on 10 October

INTEGRATED ADVISORY WORKSHOPS
BWB’s Integrated Advisory Workshops continue to build industry capacity
MESSAGE FROM THE PROGRAMME MANAGER

Dear friends and colleagues,

We hope 2019 has been a good year for you. Our focus on sustainability has defined our activities in 2019, as it will continue to do so. BWB’s sustainability strategy sees constituents and the private sector as being in the driving seat and defining their own version of sustainability. Governments, employers and labour are all elements of the same and further improves our Law and core labour standards. Companies and industrial framework and minds set to the process, as are the activities across the supply chain, our consultations, capacity-building initiatives and national level.

We look forward to working with you in 2020.

Anne-Laure Henry-Greard
Programme Manager
Better Work Bangladesh

STORIES BEHIND OUR CLOTHES

“I hope you love this dress as much as I enjoyed making it”

There are many stories behind each piece of clothing we wear. We asked 10 questions to Ayesha Akhter Nazma, a Trimming Operator at SQ Celsius Ltd located in Gazipur, Dhaka.

1. WHAT IS YOUR FAVOURITE ITEM OF CLOTHING? DESCRIBE IT TO US AND TELL US WHY IT IS YOUR FAVOURITE?
   
   I love Saree, especially the red ones. I have at least five red Sarees. I love this garment because it gives you an elegant look and provides endless matching possibilities.

2. WHAT DOES A TYPICAL DAY OF WORK LOOK LIKE FOR YOU?
   
   I arrive at work by 7:30 am. Then I look at the day’s target and get to work by 8:00 am. I love to walk in the lawn of the factory and hang out with colleagues during lunch break. I usually don’t miss my target and finish my work in time.

3. WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR THE WEEKEND/YOUR DAY OFF?
   
   Weekends are fun! I cook special dishes every weekend. I also try to spend more time with my husband and my eight-month-old daughter. Sometimes we go for shopping, visit relatives and attend weddings!

4. WHAT IS THE BEST THING ABOUT YOUR JOB? AND THE WORST?
   
   I get to meet new people here. As a Participation Committee (PC) member, it also feels good to be able to help others. The worst thing about my job is that I have to get up early in the morning!

5. DESCRIBE THE CLOTHES/SHOES YOU HAVE MADE OR HELP MAKE TODAY?
   
   Currently, we are making ladies sweaters on our production line. Made from very high-quality knit fabric, this burgundy sweater looks and feels very comfortable.

6. IF YOU COULD ASK THE PERSON WHO ENDS UP WEARING THIS ITEM OF CLOTHING A QUESTION, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
   
   Do you like this dress? I hope you love this dress as much as I did making it.

7. IF YOU COULD CHANGE ONE THING ABOUT WHERE YOU WORK, WHAT WOULD IT BE?
   
   I wish we had flexible working hours in our factory.

8. HOW DO YOU TYPICALLY SPEND YOUR WAGES?
   
   My salary is mostly spent on housing and food. But I save some money from my salary every month. I have already bought a piece of land in my hometown. I am saving to build a house on the land.

9. WHO DO YOU ADMIRE MOST IN THE WORLD?
   
   My parents. They are always ready to catch me when I fall.

10. WHAT ARE YOUR PERSONAL AMBITIONS/DREAMS FOR THE FUTURE?
    
    My dream is to give my daughter the best education possible so that she can live a happy and successful life.
The story of Better Work Bangladesh and SQ Group began in March 2015. Back then, the fledgling local branch of the UN programme was taking its first steps across Bangladesh’s garment sector, the second largest in the world, accounting for 6.5 percent share of the global apparel market. SQ Group, an entrepreneurial reality in the country. Still, the company felt something was missing in its day-to-day dynamics across its operations.

Backed by years of international results, Better Work launched its operations in Bangladesh, confident of its core message that compliance should not be considered a mere obligation, but a business necessity that makes factories more competitive. This was the philosophy SQ was looking for.

One of the leading apparel manufacturers in the country, SQ Group has been operating for the past 26 years, initially producing knitted sweaters for international buyers and later adding lingerie and shirts to its portfolio. Its work has been growing in size and quality. What began with an initial workforce of 150 knitting operators has grown to encompass 18,000 employees in the company’s different facilities. All are currently affiliated with BWB.

“Back in 2015, each brand we worked with had specific methods to assess compliance,” Abid says. “Different organizations used to carry out specific audits. But this was not helping us bring real, sustainable improvement to the way we managed our people and to social compliance.”

Helping each factory develop its own capacity is the ultimate power of Better Work, Abid says, adding the programme doesn’t help factories to face audits, rather it makes them aware of their own responsibilities and prepares them to be held accountable for their own actions.

One of the key manufacturing units of the group, SQ Celsius Ltd., shows the success of this factory-based Copernican Revolution.

Meanwhile, absenteeism has reduced by 1.5%, worker turnover rate has decreased by 0.5%, and the average contract length has also increased. Workers have become more committed, starting to see career prospects within our organization. These improvements have reflected on the overall company’s productivity.

BWB has conducted a series of training and seminars in SQ Celsius Ltd. over the years, touching on supervisory skills enhancement, skill development, grievance mechanisms, communication in the workplace and maternity protection.

“Thanks to BWB, workplace communication among our 3,400 workers, management, middle management, associates and operators vastly improved. We have created an environment where people feel free to share their thoughts and suggestions. The factory has eventually become self-reliant in terms of compliance.”

Warisul Abid
Chief People Officer
SQ Group
minimise the disruption caused by the technological progress across the industry.

The group has already carried out work in this direction. Still, more efforts are needed to transform today’s and tomorrow’s Bangladeshi workforce, Abid says.

BWB and its partners are currently calling on local factories to enhance trainings to prepare workers to face the automation process Bangladesh is witnessing to make the industry sustainable in the long term.

As one of the largest sweater manufacturers in the country, the knitting department of SQ Celsius Ltd. is fully computerised. In the past, one operator used to run a single machine, today the same operator runs ten.

“We guided our workforce through this production change and boosted our training centre to help workers acquire further skills for the new technological environment, eventually creating multitasking operators,” Abid says.

“This, in turn, has improved their employability and earning potential. Those who are not managing to adapt have been moved to different areas of production that still require manual work.”

Operator Md Shajahan Mia says he has seen his factory becoming increasingly efficient thanks to enhanced technology and automation over the years.

He is one of the around 400 workers who have been trained to operate on a fully automated production line. His section’s productivity has increased up to six times since the transformation project started four years ago. This has led to a higher salary, leading the operator to eventually rake in a monthly salary of USD235, compared to the previous USD165.

Workers say their impact is palpable.

Trimming operator Ayesha Akhter Nazma has been working in SQ Celsius Ltd. for the past nine years. Her husband also works here.

“Since the launch of BWB in our factory, workers have started to increasingly engage in open discussions with the management,” she says. “I’ve seen a breakdown of the many barriers that used to exist in the factory. Four years ago, the workers would not request more than what was necessary. Now, the employees have more confidence in communicating their demands, and the top management has started paying more attention to the workers.”

Nazma is also a member of the factory’s Participation Committee (PC), the representative worker-management body BWB helps establish inside its affiliated factories. The PC of SQ Celsius Ltd. recently suggested the management improve its drinking water appliances by ensuring the availability of liquid soap in all restrooms and replacing overused towels with electronic hand dryers.

Employees have also been lamenting the absence of ATM machines in the factory’s proximity. Following the PC’s request, a new ATM has been set up in collaboration with a local bank.

Operator Sahanaj Akhter, 28, says she has become the vice-president of the factory’s Safety Committee following BWB trainings.

Akhter proudly says the factory is now also granting “special leave” for those who have suffered a workplace injury. This type of leave doesn’t affect the worker’s regular leave, like sick, casual or annual vacation.

SQ Group’s Abid says the cooperation with BWB has boosted workers’ confidence and put the factory on a better footing to confront the new technological demands of the market.

**Warisul Abid**

Chief People Officer

SQ Group

The factory is a very fast-paced environment. It can be very stressful and, because of this, we can miss out on certain things. But BWB helps us focus on areas that we sometimes overlook amid our hectic activity. Its support changes and adapts to the market’s new demands. It is a strong ally to have to reach new and ambitious market goals.”

**Sahanaj Akhter**

Operator

SQ Celsius Limited

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machines, each producing an average of 300 pieces a day, against a maximum of 10 produced manually.
sustainability in Bangladesh’s RMG sector

BWB Business Forum 2019: Sustainability in Bangladesh’s RMG sector

Around 350 representatives from the Government, factories, brands, development organisations, employer organisations, trade unions and development partners gathered at BWB Business Forum on 3 October to discuss the critical issue of sustainability. The sessions were led by experts from the Government, factories, brands, development organisations, employer organisations, and trade unions. The forum aimed to strengthen collaboration with partner factories and contribute to the long-term prosperity for the industry. Learn more about the key highlights of the Business Forum.

Better Work Bangladesh organised five Integrated Advisory Workshops in 2019 to strengthen its collaboration with partner factories and contribute to the long-term prosperity for the industry. The workshops focused on Disciplinary Procedures, Chemical Management, Occupational Safety and Health Management and Human Resources Management.

Better Work Bangladesh continues to strengthen collaboration with Trade Unions to promote strong industrial relations in the garment sector. On 3 November, BWB organised a workshop with trade unions under the National Coordination Committee for Workers Education (NCCWE) to create a better understanding of Better Work and its work and discuss ways to work more closely to promote strong industrial relations in garment factories. Another daylong workshop was organised with trade unions under the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council on October 23. The objective was to build more collaboration and understanding of our shared goal of ensuring strong and effective industrial relations in the garment sector.

BWB partnered with the Sustainable Apparel Forum (SAF) 2019 held in Dhaka on 5 November to help facilitate a meaningful exchange of knowledge to demystify issues surrounding the sustainability of Bangladesh’s garment industry. Presenting the keynote speech at the event, BWB Programme Manager Anne-Laure Henry-Gérard affirmed the programme’s strong focus and commitment to driving sustainable change in Bangladesh’s garment industry. “Experience from the Better Work programme across nine countries shows that sustainable changes and improved working conditions benefit workers, their families and the environment.”

79 GEAR-trained female workers promoted to supervisors

A total of 79 female sewing machine operators were promoted to supervisory roles in 12 M&S suppliers factories as part of the Gender Equality And Returns (GEAR). GEAR is a special initiative of Better Work Bangladesh and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to promote career progression opportunities for female workers in the garment sector. Rolled out in 2016, the initiative was scaled up and a total of 106 female sewing operators were trained in 2019 to improve their skill set so that they can step up to supervisory roles. Meanwhile, BWB’s factory services have been helping to create a supportive and enabling environment to better support the career progression opportunity opportunities for the female workers. GEAR so far covered 54 factories (28 in the pilot phase and 26 in 2019). In 2020, GEAR is expected to enrol another 25 factories.

Sexual harassment prevention: Industry Seminar on High Court verdict

BWB in collaboration with H&M organised an Industry Seminar on 10 October on the High Court Verdict on Sexual Harassment Prevention. Around 40 garments factories, including 33 mid-level or higher level factories, attended the seminar. The seminar was designed to increase understanding of sexual harassment and implement mechanisms in light of the High Court Verdict. The ILO’s recent report on ways of combatting sexual harassment in the workplace was discussed.

Promoting boiler safety

BWB organised an Industry Seminar on Boiler Safety on 10 October. Approximately 50 participants from BWB partner factories and service provider organisations attended the seminar as well as Engineer Md. Ziaul Hoque, Deputy Chief Inspector of Boilers. Boilers, if not properly maintained, are a high risk to safety in garment factories and contain explosive properties. Boiler safety is one of the key areas of focus so
Better Work is a partnership between the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC). On-the-ground in eight countries across three continents, Better Work brings together all levels of the garment industry to improve working conditions and respect of labour rights for workers, and boost the competitiveness of apparel businesses.

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