

OHS Initiative for Workers and Community Hires Staff, Initiates Start-Up Activities

The Bangladesh OHS Initiative now has four staff members working on the launch of its ambitious program for 2017. The Governing Board approved these plans at its February 5th meeting in Dhaka.

With the first year's funding committed by the end of 2016, the OHS Initiative for Workers and Community hired four highly qualified and energetic staff members to start up the only OHS effort in Bangladesh to focus directly on the workers themselves. Project Coordinator Shabiha Sultana and a Training Manager, Financial Officer and Administrative Assistant are organizing the grassroots-level "train-the-trainer" program on workplace health and safety with six leading labor, women's rights, public health and occupational health and safety (OHS) organizations in Dhaka. Our sincere thanks to Sushmita Preetha of the Dhaka office of the Worker Rights Consortium for the staff photo and profiles of the Initiative staff members:



To better participate in struggles for workers' rights, she completed a post graduate diploma course at the Bangladesh Institute of Management in 2015 on "Social Compliance" and subsequently applied to the OHS Initiative. She hopes to make lasting changes in the garment sector by helping to create an institutional framework for workplace safety.



Shabiha Sultana,
Project Coordinator

Shabiha Sultana completed undergraduate and graduate studies in Public Administration at the University of Dhaka. She began

her career in 2007 at Palli-Karma Sahayak Foundation, a development organization focused on microcredit, as Monitoring Officer. Two years later, she joined BRAC, the world's biggest non-profit organization, as a Team Leader, where she designed and implemented the Urban Ultra-poor Program. She also worked as Humanitarian Program Coordinator of Oxfam Great Britain, Program Coordinator of Pidim Foundation and coordinated a project on "Promoting Democratic and Decentralized Local Governance" for the Municipal Association of Bangladesh. Her work has focused on rural and urban poverty, reproductive health, inclusive education for children with disabilities, and welfare of the elderly.

After the collapse of Rana Plaza, Shabiha decided to dedicate her time and energy towards empowering Bangladeshi workers and ensuring them safe workplaces.



Md. Masud Parvez,
Training Manager

A graduate of National University, Md. Masud Parvez has been working in the development sector for the last 14 years. He was a Campaign Consultant

for BRAC's "Promoting Safe Road Code Project" prior to joining the OHS Initiative. He also worked as Coordinator (Formal Sector) of Community Participation and Development (CPD) and Coordinator- Capacity Building of Dhaka City Corporation in the ILO-funded project, "Prevention and Elimination of Worst Forms of Child labor in Urban Informal Sectors of Dhaka City Corporation." During his work at these organizations, he developed an expertise on program management, planning and implementation as well as in capacity-building and training.

Masud's motivation to serve disadvantaged populations led him first to efforts to eliminate child labor. Unavoidably, he became familiar with the RMG (Ready Made Garment) supply chain and the exploitative conditions under which workers live and work. As he struggled to institute Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

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Member organizations of the OHS Initiative

The OHS Initiative for Workers and Community consists of six Bangladeshi non-governmental organizations. These organizations each have one representative on the Initiative's Governing Board and the California Collaborative has a seventh seat on the Board. The Initiative's member organizations are:

Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS) is one of the country's most prominent labor rights groups. Former garment workers founded BCWS in 2001 to improve working conditions and promote workers' rights by building the capacity of workers to advocate for themselves, and providing services such as labor rights education, leadership training and legal aid.

Bangladesh Institute for Labour Studies (BILS) provides research and information on labor laws and economic issues to unions and worker organizations in a variety of industrial sectors. BILS is widely respected among labor groups and works in an ecumenical fashion with all sectors of the fractured labor movement in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh Occupational Safety, Health and Environment Foundation (OSHE) is a leading OHS non-governmental organization that conducts training, research, policy advocacy and support services for workers in the garment and shipbreaking industries, among other sectors.

Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK) is a public health organization with clinics and hospitals serving Bangladesh's poor, including workers in many industries. GK's health facilities in Dhaka and Savar have also treated Rana Plaza collapse survivors and their families, as well as injured workers in numerous other industries.

IndustriALL Bangladesh Council (IBC) is made up of more than 20 trade unions in the garment, chemical and metalworking industries, including a dozen unions in the garment industry. The IBC is the national council of unions affiliated with the Geneva-based IndustriALL Global Union.

Naripokkho is a women's organization that provides information, training and support on gender issues for women workers on topics such as domestic violence and social discrimination. Naripokkho works with garment workers and their families in the Savar industrial area of Dhaka, including survivors of the Rana Plaza building collapse.



Role of California Collaborative

The California Collaborative, formed in 2015 to support the creation of the OHS Initiative, consists of four OHS organizations in the state of California: Hesperian Health Guides in Berkeley; Labor Occupational Health Program (LOHP) at the University of California at Berkeley; Labor Occupational Safety and Health (LOSH) program at the University of California at Los Angeles; and the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network (MHSSN) in Berkeley.

The California Collaborative raised the \$53K needed to fund the first year budget of the Initiative in the summer of 2016, and is actively fundraising for the budget for years two and three of the Dhaka project.

The Collaborative will also work with the staff and Governing Board of the Initiative to provide technical assistance, as requested, on both OHS and pedagogical issues, and to provide appropriate curriculum and teaching materials. It is also developing and maintaining the webpage of Bangla-language OHS materials.

In addition, the MHSSN hosts a quarterly conference call for OHS professionals in North America to report on OHS issues in Bangladesh, covering activities of the OHS Initiative as well as other national and international efforts to improve workplace safety and health in Bangladesh.

initiatives in the RMG sector, he became increasingly frustrated with the factory owners who earn billions of dollars but remain unwilling to invest in improving the workers' plight. He felt that he needed to work towards transforming the mindsets of people in the RMG sector.

As a training manager at OHS Initiative, he believes that he has a rare and important opportunity to empower workers to stand up for their rights and sensitize profit-driven management to change their exploitative ways.



Sitara Ferdous Shimla, *Finance Officer*

Sitara Ferdous Shimla graduated from Stamford University and completed her Chartered Accountancy Course from S.H Khan & Co. She then worked as Sr. Accounts Officer of Bangladesh National Woman Lawyers Association (BNWLA)

and is currently the Accounts Officer for the OSHE Foundation as well as the OSH Initiative.

Fascinated with numbers since childhood, Sitara is thrilled to have found a way to use her love for numbers in service of the people of her country. Working at the OSHE Foundation opened her eyes to the tremendous challenge of safeguarding occupational health and safety in Bangladesh. She believes that efficient and transparent management of financial resources can play an instrumental role in ensuring the success of the project and guaranteeing that workers' lived realities are transformed. She hopes that as the project matures, it will become a truly self-sustaining Initiative.



Sadia Afrin, *Administrative Assistant*

Sadia Afrin completed her undergrad (2012) and graduate studies (2015) in Business Administration from University of Liberal Arts of Bangladesh (ULAB). She has worked in Prodigisoft BD as a

Data Management Executive and Standard Chartered Bank as a Client Center Officer.

However, she felt that she could contribute more to society if she dedicated her time to a non-profit organization. In her role as administrative assistant, she hopes to support the project and, by extension, workers and the larger community. Although she feels she has a "small role to play" in the project's success, she believes it is a stepping stone towards taking on a bigger role in implementing safe workplace practices and worker empowerment.

February Governing Board Meeting

Convened by Chair Tamanna Khan of the women's rights organization Naripokkho and Secretary Repon Chowdhury of the OSHE Foundation, the Governing Board met in Dhaka on February 5th with the Initiative staff and visiting funder Bruno Deceukelier of the Belgium-based World Solidarity Movement.

The Board approved the staff's first quarter work plan presented by Project Coordinator Shabiha Sultana. The key start-up activities include:

- Meeting with each of the Initiative's six member organizations to gather the priority OHS topics from each and to advance the selection of the first class of training participants;
- Establishing an expert Curriculum Advisory Committee to work with the Training Manager in the development of topic modules, materials, and lesson plans on both workplace safety and occupational disease;
- Launching a website and electronic flyer to publicize the Initiative and promote the OHS themes;
- Recruiting the first class of training participants – five people from each of the six member organizations – for the "train-the-trainer" course. This will prepare participants to conduct their own OHS workshops and become OHS resources for their organizations and its members and supporters; and
- Celebrating a launch ceremony in March or April to publicly announce the start of the OHS project for workers, their organizations and their communities.

The initial focus of the OHS Initiative will be on the 4 million workers – 80% of them women – in Bangladesh's Ready Made Garment industry in Dhaka and Chittagong. As the project develops, it will expand to other major industries such as tanneries, construction and ship-breaking, where workers also face widespread hazards to safety and health.

The February 5th Board meeting took place under the shadow of the national crackdown on garment workers and their unions, making attendance impossible for the IndustriALL Bangladesh Council representative. Board members voiced their opposition to the repression and extended their solidarity to the garment workers under attack.



Funds needed for Years Two and Three

Planning for an expansion of Initiative staff by hiring additional trainers in both years two and three, the budgets for the Initiative increase to \$65,000 in year two and \$78,000 in year three. The fiscal years for the Initiative begin on January 1, 2018, and January 1, 2019.

Two first-year funders have generously committed to continue to contribute funds: IOSH in the UK will donate 5,000 British pounds each year and the WSM in Belgium will contribute 8,000 Euros in each of the two years. This leaves \$49,400 to be raised this year and \$62,400 during 2018.

Renewed appeals will be made to other first-year funders to continue their support as well as reaching out to new potential contributors. The start-up plan for the OHS Initiative calls for it to become increasingly self-sustaining after its first years of operation.

ILO grant for research and report-back

The Dhaka office of the International Labor Organization has given a six-month grant to the OHS Initiative to research OHS resources in Bangladesh, and management and workers needs for OHS training and technical assistance. The Initiative will publicly report on their findings in June 2017 and discuss how government, employers and worker organizations can promote and implement OHS in Bangladesh. The ILO's grant also supports the launch of the OHS Initiative in the areas of curriculum development and outreach to potential participants in the train-the-trainer course.

This ILO grant to the fledgling OHS Initiative is strong vote of confidence in the project's orientation toward workers and community members, and of its pathbreaking work of bringing together diverse civil society organizations with the goal of improving the lives of Bangladesh's garment workers.

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