

ACTION BRIEF

Getting it Right

Struggles, Stories and Strategies from
Dhaka's Informal Women Workers



1 Invisible Workers



Juli Rani Das, Mani Rani Das and Nipa Rani Das, Ganaktuli City Colony, members of Dalit Women Forum

Bangladesh is an extremely poor country and 84% of its 137 million people live on less than \$2 a day.¹ Its economically active population is around 60 million,² but unemployment and, more significantly underemployment, remain a huge problem as the economy is unable to absorb new entrants to the labour force. 90% of Bangladesh's labour force work in the informal sector³ and the contribution of the informal sector to Bangladesh's Gross Domestic Product is around 40%.⁴ The informal sector is defined as economic activity that is unregulated and is not taxed, supported or monitored by the

government – it is very diverse and includes agriculture, construction and homeworking. Put simply informal workers rights are not recognised and therefore workers are not able to exercise those rights.⁵ The current global economic crisis is further increasing the number of informal workers in vulnerable employment.

There is a lack of reliable data, but current estimates put the number of women working in the informal sector in Bangladesh at around 10 million. These women work in unregulated jobs such as farming, vending, shrimp cultivation, rag picking, brick breaking, sex work, tailoring or domestic services. The majority of these women are poor, excluded and vulnerable. They share a common experience of low pay, long working

1 2008 UN Human Development Report – <http://hdrstats.undp.org/indicators/24.html>

2 According to the latest Labour Force Survey in 2000 done by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics the total estimated civilian labour force of the country is 60.3 million of which 37.81% female.

3 International Labour Organisation Bangladesh Overview – <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/region/asro/bangkok/arm/bgd.htm>

4 Over the last five years the relative share of male informal employment has declined from 77% to 73% while female employment in the sector has increased from 22 to 26%.

5 Organising Informal Women Workers by Dan Gallin and Pat Horn – <http://www.ifwea.org/resources/PDF/ResourceLibrary/Gender/20050rgnznglnfrmlWomenWorkers.pdf>



hours, dangerous and unprotected working conditions, inadequate shelter and health care, and the constant threat of eviction from homes and workplaces. Their lack of political power, organisation and engagement in local and national political processes further increases their invisibility and isolation.

Everywhere in the world, there are people working in conditions that should no longer exist in the 21st century, for income that is barely enough for survival... Increasingly, rather than informal work becoming formalised as economies grow, work is moving from formal to informal, from regulated to unregulated.⁶

Women often remain invisible and unrecognised as workers, both because they

are women, and because work in the informal economy is often hidden.⁷ The marginalisation of women workers is further perpetuated by society's perception that women's primary function is to fulfil domestic and caring roles so women's earnings and their role in the economy are often viewed as extra or periphery, even if in reality they are the main provider. Women workers are not only concentrated in the informal economy, they are in the more precarious forms of informal employment, where earnings are the most unreliable and the most meagre.⁸

The Constitution of Bangladesh recognises the basic rights of workers⁹ however existing labour laws¹⁰ are outdated, are not enforced, and do not recognise informal work. Despite the number of informal women workers and the massive contribution they make to the economy, their role and needs have been ignored or excluded from public policy debates. Presented as difficult to reach, informal women workers often fall through the gaps between policies, ministries and programmes that aim to support vulnerable sectors of society.¹¹

The complexity of the poverty and exclusion that informal women workers face lies at the heart of Bangladesh's failure to meet its Millennium Development Goals and to comply with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, which it ratified in 1984.

Bangladesh's urban population is rapidly increasing¹² and with a population of 13 million, Dhaka is one of the world's fastest growing cities, drawing between

6 From UNIFEM's Progress of the World's Women Report 2005 – Women, Work and Poverty http://www.unifem.org/attachments/products/PoWW2005_eng.pdf

7 As above

8 As above

9 Article 14, 15, 20(1), 34(1), 37 and 38

10 Such as Industrial Relation Ordinance 1969, Workers Compensation Act 1923, Payment and Wages Act 1936, Maternity Act 1939, Factory Act 1965 and Employment of Labour 1965.

11 Interventions by Dhaka City Corporation to address urban poverty are often marked by ingrained corruption and a lack of coordination between different agencies.

12 Urban growth has averaged at 6% annual growth over the last three decades. Addressing the Urban Poverty Agenda in Bangladesh: Critical Issues and the 1995 Survey, the University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1997.

300–400,000 migrants from rural areas every year.¹³ Some women arrive with their husbands, but it is increasingly common for widowed, unmarried or divorced women to come to Dhaka alone. The majority find work in the informal sector.

Within this context, this Action Brief explores a groundbreaking and creative model for change. In 2006, five small community based women's organisations came together in Dhaka to form the Partnership of Women in Action (PaWA). This Action Brief shares both the strategies they have developed that are

already improving the lives of women workers, and their policy recommendations that will ensure women workers become visible, valued and protected in future.

Supporting informal workers, especially women, must become a central issue to Bangladesh's national development agenda if it is to reduce urban poverty and promote gender equality. This Action Brief aims to provide some initial lessons for how to achieve this goal.

Problems faced by informal women workers in Bangladesh include:

- > No formal contract, protection, compensation or benefits (e.g. health, maternity, childcare or pensions).
- > A lack of regular work and very low or late pay – leading to poverty and inadequate food, health, housing and education for workers children.
- > Exploitation, abuse, sexual violence, discrimination and harassment.
- > Low levels of education, skills, training, and lack of access to credit and equipment to raise incomes.
- > Health problems from poor working and living conditions.
- > Dull, repetitive or dangerous work.
- > Isolation – workers are unorganised and unrepresented.
- > Lack of access to domestic and international markets.
- > Limited choice and options for employment due to gender stereotypes about what constitutes suitable 'women's work.'

In 2009 PaWA interviewed 270 informal women workers across Dhaka – 32% had a monthly income of less than 1000 Takas (100Taka = £1), 82% had no savings, 50% were illiterate, 4% had attended secondary school, 38% lived in slums and 78% were dependent on local drug stores for their health care needs. Almost all had migrated to Dhaka due to the lack of jobs in rural areas.

Street vending is one of the largest sectors of the informal economy in Bangladesh and the low cost of entry and flexible hours make it an attractive option for women. Women are more likely than men to operate in insecure or illegal spaces, trade in less lucrative goods, generate a lower volume of trade and work as employees of other vendors – as a result they tend to earn less. Women vendors often struggle to find a secure space to sell goods, face eviction, suffer from a lack of services (e.g. water, toilets) and are at high risk from respiratory problems.¹⁴ Young single women in Dhaka often receive unwanted attention and sexual harassment.

13 Research done by Nagorik Uddyog revealed that the major reasons people come to Dhaka are the lack of employment opportunities, floods, river erosion, seasonal unemployment and landlessness in rural areas.

14 WIEGO Fact Sheet on Street Vendors – http://www.wiego.org/publications/FactSheets/WIEGO_Street_Vendors.pdf

2 In from the Margins



PaWA's May Day Rally, 2009

The Partnership of Women in Action (PaWA) coalition brought together the Dalit Women Forum (Dalit Nari Forum), Independent Children and Women Workers Forum (Mukto Shishu o Nari Sramik Forum), Women Learn to Live (Banchte Shikho Nari), PaWA Uddyog (focussing on domestic workers) and the Floating Women Workers Development Centre (Bhasoman Nari Sramik Unnyon Kendra). Abandoned, widowed and divorced women who come independently to Dhaka refer to themselves as 'floating.'

PaWA was founded by Nagorik Uddyog and One World Action with financial support from The Robert Gavron Trust and through One World Action's Programme Partnership Agreement with the UK Department for International Development. From the outset, all involved wanted to avoid a relationship of dependency. The aim was to establish a strong, self sufficient and independent coalition, capable of supporting its members to claim their rights, take collective action to influence policy makers and alleviate the poverty and discrimination poor

working women face. In 2008 PaWA was formerly registered with the Government of Bangladesh as the PaWA Trust.

PaWA's member organisations are spread across Dhaka and are headed by women who formerly worked in the informal sector or in garment factories. Although each organisation has a different focus depending on its membership base (e.g. migrants, Dalits, homeworkers) its members are all informal workers or un/underemployed women seeking work in this sector.

Before the formation of PaWA these organisations had no external resources, were extremely fragile, had weak organisational structures and limited office equipment. Through joining together they have developed their capability and expertise to support members, identify common agendas and take collective action. All organisations now have secure rented rooms, full time staff, governance procedures and audited accounts. Each organisation has several thousand members and PaWA has a small central office where they conduct trainings and meetings.

Before, women in the slums would ask what is the benefit of joining? Why should we go with you? But now they are inspired and committed to our organisation.

Rina, Assistant Co-ordinator PaWA Uddyog

The following key lessons and strategies have been developed by PaWA during their first three years:

▶ **Importance of linking grassroots organising, personal empowerment, claim making and advocacy**

Income security will always be a priority for informal sector women however we realised that without increasing the level of social consciousness and building the capacities of our organisations, any income generating schemes would not be sustainable. So PaWA places equal weight on human rights training, organisational development, income generation and advocacy.

Moni Rani

Co-ordinator Dalit Women Forum

PaWA have adopted an integrated rights based approach that aims to build their members confidence, capacity and meet their basic needs. This is in parallel to longer term lobbying and campaigning to address the exclusion of women workers. PaWA have organised numerous events around International Women's Day, Labour Day and International Hawkers Day, including seminars, workshops, rallies and press conferences on issues such as housing, domestic workers and labour laws.

Informal women workers themselves are best placed to know the solutions to their own problems, and so PaWA's philosophy is to accompany and empower women so they can voice their demands directly to decision makers, and ensure that urban development programmes are informed by their needs.

PaWA do not want to set up parallel services that are the state's responsibility to provide – instead they want to lobby and work in partnership with local authorities to implement services, and to make them more

accessible, responsive and accountable to the needs of women.

We are starting to build up relationships with local councillors so that when we have problems – for example accessing safety net programmes – we can call on them. We have successfully lobbied for disabled and older members to receive entitlement cards and for 30 others to get work building roads through the promised employment guarantee working 100 full days or 150 part time days with the government. There are some progressive policies in place but the challenges lie in implementing them.

▶ **Trying to meet the multiple needs of informal women workers**

We have conducted trainings and established small scale businesses. We have also had training in human rights and literacy – women now feel able to raise their voices. I was in the dark but now I am in the light.

Lovely Yasmin

Independent Children and Women Workers Forum

PaWA's members have many priorities – for construction workers, it might be child care while they work, for street vendor's, protection from eviction, for homemaker's, adequate lighting and regular work. These are in addition to problems shared by all members such as poverty, illiteracy and domestic violence.

For very small, under resourced community organisations it is incredibly challenging to respond to these different needs. However, PaWA has worked with their members to evolve a range of different services and initiatives. These include providing human rights and literacy training, legal and health advice, setting up crèches, support with family mediation and setting up simple financial services so for the first time women can access credit, save or take out insurance. Some members have now opened bank accounts and formed savings. So far PaWA have distributed 500 identity cards to their members which is

an important first step in women identifying themselves as workers and accessing the benefits to which they are entitled.

48 members who work as vegetable vendors used to pay 20 Taka per day as a bribe to the police – now they are organised they can refuse and so they don't pay this anymore.

Jahanara, Floating Women Workers Development Centre

PaWA have started an adult and child literacy programme in different areas across Dhaka. Most Dalit women speak Telegu or Hindi – for women who have been living in Bangladesh for fifty or sixty years this is the first time they have been taught Bangla.

Baby Rani, Team Leader, Dalit Women Forum

A military-backed caretaker government came to power in January 2007 and ruled Bangladesh under a state of emergency until national elections in December 2008. The caretaker government banned all political and trade union activities, large gatherings and imposed new limits on press freedoms. It is against this backdrop that PaWA had to adjust and limit their campaigning for two years.

The caretaker Government evicted many slums, settlements and business locations without any rehabilitation policies. PaWA responded promptly with the demand of proper rehabilitation even in a state of emergency when constitutional and citizen's rights were denied. The 2008 National Development Policy for Women came under threat from Islamic fundamentalists. However PaWA with other national allies protested against this and lobbied the Government to implement the policy.

Zakir Hossain, Chief Executive, Nagorik Uddyog

▶ **'We can't campaign on an empty stomach!' – Providing regular work and job opportunities**

Informal women workers struggle to find regular or enough work, and when they are working are often very badly paid. PaWA aim

to give their members new skills, upgrade existing skills and support their members to establish small businesses to earn a regular daily wage. Training courses are given in block batik, sewing, spice grinding, handicrafts and candle making and PaWA also provide equipment and materials. Members are now making affordable products which are in high demand in poor urban areas. Although at very early stages, these small scale businesses have started to generate income for both organisations and members.

I used to work in a restaurant earning 50 TAKA a day. I worked very hard from early morning to evening. I used to have to travel a long way to work and now I am really happy that I can stay close to home, work at the centre with my friends and earn more money.

Rohima, member of Floating Women Workers Development Centre

We produce 125kg of candles per day. Hotels, markets and wholesalers are now coming to buy candles from the office. We also sell them in local markets and door-to-door. This earns around 300 taka a day for our group of 5. My husband and community used to be angry about me coming to the PaWA offices but this is changing slowly and my husband now enjoys spending the money. I am earning 2,300 taka a month and the money I earn is helping my family to survive – I recently sent one daughter to school, I've bought clothes for my children and myself.

Rekha, Team Leader Floating Women Workers Development Centre

Women are strengthening their position within their families and communities. When we work with women and provide them with work, community leaders get angry because they feel threatened – they don't want the community to come into the light because they want to keep things as they are.

Mirana, PaWA Uddyog

I am 20 years old, am married and 6 months pregnant. I have been a member



Members of the Independent Children and Women Workers Forum doing Karchupi (fine sewing work).

of the Independent Children and Women Workers Forum for 2 years. I left school early and am not an educated person but now I am the office secretary. I received training in block printing and batik and am now earning. PaWA is a platform where the rights of women in the informal sector are protected – we get job security, training, we organise and mobilise. Our aim is to become more protected and secure. When I see the reports of women being raped, tortured and burnt with acid I realise we need to fight to end violence against women.

Hamida

► Focussing on organising

PaWA believe that informal women workers will always be isolated, exploited and invisible if they are unorganised. Organising is therefore at the heart of everything PaWA does. By providing a safe space, where women can discuss issues and learn from each other, members have already seen the benefits in working together. This has also developed members' confidence and has changed their position within their families and communities.

Organised and well organised are two different things. Now we are well organised – women are making claims, they have more information. Their families question them – where are you going? What are you doing? But then they see PaWA on TV or in the newspaper and they understand.

Firoza

Women Learn to Live

We are paying the price for 'religious fundamentalism' – husbands and fathers prevent many women from leaving their homes. This has got worse and we spend a lot of time persuading family members to



allow their wives, daughters and sisters to become members. We have to show that our centre is a safe, women only space. If a woman protests in our campaigns and becomes an activist then the families worry about their reputation and their chances of getting married. There is a fatwa against some of the members around family issues. Girls used to stay in their own homes and not speak up against their husbands or fathers. Now they are more aware, more independent and earning their own money. This is a significant change and over the last year we have raised awareness, provided capital and human rights training. Now it is not so easy to control these women.

Mitu

Floating Women Workers
Development Centre

► **Building Regional Allies, Communicating and Networking**

PaWA have put time into learning from other countries experiences and resourcing regional exchanges. They have been inspired by the Self Employed Women's Association in India (SEWA), a trade union movement of self-employed women workers which began in 1971 and which now has one million members. In March 2007 a delegation from PaWA visited Gujarat to hear first hand about SEWA's experiences.

PaWA produce regular newsletters, booklets and posters and have started to sensitise parliamentarians, civil society and NGOs to the issues facing their members. They have also established strong working relationships with NGOs, journalists, academics and local government officials which are enabling PaWA to maximise their impact. This has also enabled them to get free support, for example legal aid to tackle issues around domestic violence, child marriage, dowry and claiming alimony.¹⁵

¹⁵ PaWA works closely with Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable, Shaishob Bangladesh, Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust, Coalition of Urban Poor, Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, Domestic Workers Rights Network, Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights and Social Action Committee.

Domestic violence is a massive problem. We have one advocate giving free legal support who comes regularly to the office. We have also established an advisory committee which includes lawyers. Last week one member was beaten by her brother in law. The centre intervened to prevent this happening again and was able to get an apology – it is very rare that poor women will ever receive an apology.

Rahima

Member of PaWA Uddyog

We try and solve family disputes and have been able to put positive pressure on families and husbands. Our office is near the police station so we also refer cases to them and accompany women to the police station.

Lovely Yasmin

Independent Children and
Women Workers Forum

PaWA and their members face numerous future challenges, which include:

- > A lack of financial resources and small buildings mean they are unable to expand, fully meet the needs of current members nor reach out to new members. Small amounts of capital can also lead to frustration for members who have been trained in new skills but then lack the necessary equipment to set up businesses.
- > A lack of marketing and business skills to develop successful market linkages and assess and identify new job opportunities.
- > High levels of domestic violence.
- > High costs of medical fees and lack of access to health care.
- > Recent inflation and increased costs of basic goods.
- > The lack of political will to focus on poor women and therefore PaWA's continued need to focus on raising the profile and visibility of informal women workers.

বাসার গৃহশ্রমিকের সাথে আপনি



কী করবেন

- ১৪ বছরের নিচে হলে বা মেয়ে গৃহশ্রমিককে পিছে ছাড়া ও বিপদজনক কাজ করানো না।
- কাজ করার আগেই কী কাজ করতে হবে, কতক্ষণ করতে হবে, মজুরি এবং অন্যান্য সুযোগ-সুবিধার কথা শিখিতভাবে জ্ঞানিয়ে দিন।
- অনিয়মিত/ ঠিকে গৃহশ্রমিকের আস-যাওয়ার সময় ঠিক করে দিন। স্থায়ী গৃহশ্রমিকের ক্ষেত্রে মাসে অন্তত দু'দিন ছুটি বরাদ্দ করুন।
- গৃহশ্রমিককে কসরে ২ বার বেতনের ৫০% উৎসব ভাতা প্রদান করুন।
- গৃহশ্রমিককে কোন ধরতে, বাসার টিকানা ও কোন নম্বর লিখতে/ কলতে শেখান এবং পরিবারের সাথে নিয়মিত যোগাযোগের সুযোগ করে দিন।
- গৃহশ্রমিকের বাবার ও অন্যান্য প্রয়োজনের সিকে লক্ষ্য রাখুন। তাকে পরিবার পরিচ্ছন্ন থাকতে শেখান এবং প্রয়োজনীয় উপকরণ দিন।
- বাসার ছুটিভার, মারোয়ান ও মন্ত্রার সেকালসারের মাধ্যমে নারী গৃহশ্রমিকরা যাতে কিপনে না পড়ে-এ ব্যাপারে তাদের সতর্ক করুন।
- রাতে শোয়ার জন্য স্নান্য ভাণ্ডা, নিরাপদ জারগা দিন। অসুস্থ হলে চিকিৎসা করান এবং খিদোনদের সুযোগ দিন।
- গৃহশ্রমিককে 'কাজের লোক' না বলে 'গৃহ-সহকারী' করুন।

কী করবেন না

- বাড়িতে কোন জিনিস হারানো পেলে উপযুক্ত প্রশ্ন না থাকলে প্রথমেই গৃহশ্রমিককে সন্দেহ করা অন্যায্য।
- গৃহশ্রমিকের সঙ্গে পড়ার অন্যান্য পরিবারের সদস্যদের নিয়ে পরনিদা-পরচর্চা থেকে বিরত থাকুন।
- অপমানজনক কথাবার্তা করা বা পায়ে হাত তোলার পর্ষিত অপরাধ।
- গৃহশ্রমিকের মজুরির নির্ধারিত টাকা আটকিয়ে রাখবেন না।
- ২/১ দিন কাজে অনুপস্থিতির জন্য বা অন্য কোন অজুহাতে গৃহশ্রমিকের মজুরি কাটবেন না।
- বাড়ির সকলে মিলে গৃহশ্রমিককে অববরত আদেশ করবেন না। তাকে পরিবারের একজন মনে করুন।
- হঠাৎ গৃহশ্রমিককে বদল দেবেন না। তাকে অন্য কাজ খুঁজে নিতে অন্তত একমাস আগে নোটিশ দিন।

 পার্টনারশিপ অব উইমেন ইন একশন
Partnership of Women in Action (PaWA)

আন্তর্জাতিক নারী দিবস - ২০০৮

 নাগরিক উদ্যোগ
NAGORIK UDDYOG

বাড়ি নং ৮/১৪, ব্রহ্ম বি, লাঙ্গলমাসা, ঢাকা ১২০৭

Poster designed by PaWA to highlight issues facing domestic workers



In May 2007 PaWA organised a workshop with 19 disabled working women. Below are extracts from the workshop report:

We wanted to hear the voices of the marginalised of the marginal. From women who work from dawn to dusk begging on the footpath while exposed to embarrassment and harassment. The workshop looked at their sources of income, levels of social security, attitudes towards them and to discuss forming an organisation of disabled women.

I am Hamida and am 36. I am forced to beg on the streets of old Dhaka where people call me 'Baki', a highly derogatory Bangla word. I have 3 children and my husband left me 10 years ago. I want to become a maid but because of my slightly deformed mouth people are not prepared to hire me. My story has never been told. Our community has very negative attitudes towards disabled people despite numerous programmes and campaigns over the last decades.

I am Ayesa and am 36. I am lame and survive through begging. I was working in a Bidi factory in Sharupkathi – as a working woman I had self-satisfaction and was not dependent on people's pity. However when the factory closed I moved to Dhaka with two little children and my husband left immediately. Darkness grasped my world and I was forced to take up begging.

Poor disabled women have little understanding about their rights and privileges as citizens and do not think of themselves as citizens of Bangladesh. Political parties have in the past paid them to attend rallies and to vote. Lots of promises were made by the political leaders but none have been realised. When asked about the definition of a happy and prosperous life, one of the participants came up with the following list and everyone agreed – to have a permanent residence, a small business, a bank account and education for our children.

Participants agreed to form an organisation to sit together every month and to start to explore what they can do to improve their lives and livelihood through dialogue, discussion and collective efforts.



Front from left: Kakoli Rani Das, Protima Rani Das and Sangita Rani Das.
Back from left: Bebi Rani Das, Sajani Rani Das, Koushila Rani Das and Suitee Rani Das, all members of Dalit Women Forum

Dalit Communities in Dhaka

There are an estimated 5.5 million Dalits (former untouchables) in Bangladesh. Though they have played a significant role in the country's development, Dalits are incredibly poor. In Dhaka, Dalits live in chronic poverty in government colonies and are deprived or excluded from adequate housing, health care, employment, sanitation, transport and from participating in public spaces or places of worship. Dalits often have difficulty enrolling or accessing schools and hospitals and approximately 96% of Dalits are illiterate. Dalit communities experience daily insecurity, uncertainty and violence from the public, police and officials with usually no recourse to justice. Dalit women, excluded both by caste and gender, face multiple forms of discrimination, untouchability and violence.

Many Dalit women work as public and private sweepers, although as competition for jobs increases these jobs that were traditionally done by Dalits, are increasingly difficult to secure. The Dalit Women's Federation, part of PaWA, is based in one of the Dalit colonies in central Dhaka.

We want our children to have the opportunities of education – to be teachers, doctors and engineers – the chances which we didn't have. Dalit women are often confined in rooms, not allowed or able to leave their houses. With the support of my father I was the first girl from my community to go to school. With the encouragement of my family I set up a group for Dalits. There is now a more favourable attitude to women in the community. It is very difficult to get work and prices of everything are continuously rising. We want to influence policy to focus on all excluded communities.

Moni Rani, Founder of Dalit Women's Forum



Minu Rani Das, Ganaktuli City Colony, member of Dalit Women Forum

Extracts from interviews with other members of the Dalit Women's Forum:

I travel a long way to work as a sweeper in a market. I am employed by the City Corporation and have to work everyday. Many things were hidden from me before – now I know about my rights, I understand my social situation and we tell each other about our problems.

I am from the shoemaker's caste. I passed my second grade certificate but I had no chance to continue as it is too expensive. There are free places available and so I went to the Commissioner to ask for one of the places – all I needed was his signature on the form but he threw the paper at my face and told me 'I cannot do this for untouchable people.'

We do vote but political parties often try to bribe us for our votes but we don't accept. They tell us that they will kill us if we don't vote for them. We could not even think about standing for power – we don't have enough money or support from other political parties.

The problems are very specific for Dalit women who also experience discrimination from their own communities – Dalit women have problems understanding their own situation but they are now more aware, there is more consensus and they have become more demanding due to the meetings, trainings

and campaigns. They now go outside their houses and it is an incredible precedent for Dalit women to earn their own money. This is the first time that they have understood the lives they lived before were not human lives.

I am 30 and have 2 sons and 1 daughter. I live in Nazira Bazaar Sweepers Colony and have been a member of the Dalit Women's Forum for 2 years. Before I joined PaWA my husband's family tortured me – both physically and mentally. But I then received training in skills and capacity building and now have learnt protect myself. I make and sell candles in my area and now just live with my immediate family. When I came to the Forum I felt power and decided that I couldn't stay with my in-laws anymore. In the future I would like to learn more skills and develop my organisation. I want freedom and independence. I would like to open a beauty parlour and learn dancing. The main problems we face as Dalit women are poverty, discrimination, no hospitals, a lack of education beyond primary school and poor housing.



Kaushila Rani Das, Ganaktuli City Colony, member of Dalit Women Forum

3 Time for Justice



Members of the Floating Women Workers Development Centre

Much of the work carried out by women in Bangladesh has either been largely underestimated or simply gone unaccounted for in national statistics... Without reliable statistics and a specific gender analysis of socio-economic data it will be difficult to formulate appropriate policies and programmes that address the needs of its economic players, especially those who are disadvantaged, including income-poor women... Women are economic agents who contribute to their households and the economy, and should be targets of economic as well as social policies.

International Labour Organisation¹⁶

The contribution of women in the informal sector to national development is conventionally underrated because in many activities the role of these women remains unaccounted, undermined or relegated to minor importance. For faster economic growth and development there is a crucial need to convert informal employment into formal employment.

Dr Abdul Hye Mandal, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies

¹⁶ Measuring Gender Dimensions of the World of Work in Bangladesh, ILO 2006 <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/employment/gems/download/bangladesh.pdf>

Recommendations from the Partnership of Women in Action:

For the Bangladesh Government to:

- ▶ Develop legal frameworks, comprehensive policies and allocate adequate budgets to protect and support informal workers. Implement a Social Security Act for Informal Workers (similar to the Act passed in India in May 2008). Revise National Labour Laws to include informal workers, particularly focusing on the provision of social protection, benefits, adequate low-cost housing and health care, and special measures to support Dalit, older and disabled women.
- ▶ Include informal women workers within the the National Women's Policy.
- ▶ Develop mechanisms to monitor the working conditions and security of informal sector workers.
- ▶ Ensure that all urban development programmes and municipal bodies are informed by the needs and solutions of informal women workers and that workers are represented on decision making bodies.



Rekha Hasan, Floating Women Workers Development Centre

- ▶ Implement the ILO's recommendation – *To enhance the gender sensitivity of data collection, analysis, presentation and dissemination of labour force statistics in Bangladesh.*
- ▶ Establish safe and permanent zones for women street vendors in all urban areas.

Human rights organisations are pushing for changes in labour law policies. While this is useful, in order to bring about real changes and establish rights, what is needed first and foremost are workers own organisations and to bring informal workers into the trade union movement.

Zakir Hossain

Chief Executive, Nagorik Uddyog

For donors, NGOs and civil society to:

- ▶ Provide funding and support to organisations of informal sector women workers.
- ▶ Support women workers to improve their knowledge, expertise and skills so they are able to compete more effectively.

- ▶ Fund and conduct research and analysis into the situation and contribution of informal women workers in Bangladesh to inform future advocacy and provide a rationale for action.
- ▶ Provide low interest loans to informal women workers.
- ▶ Campaign for policy change and ensure greater awareness amongst policy makers and practitioners.
- ▶ Carry out budget analysis on government and donor support to the informal economy to inform future advocacy.
- ▶ Encourage traditional trade unions to co-operate with women informal workers.
- ▶ Support regional and international exchanges to share best practices.

PaWA's ability to combine advocacy with grassroots organising and poverty alleviation programmes, has proved an effective model in improving the lives of some of the most marginalised women in Dhaka. Despite the future challenges PaWA are aiming to consolidate and build on their successes over the coming years – strengthening their organisations, improving the lives of poor women and campaigning to change policy and practice so that informal women workers have a voice, in Dhaka and beyond.

We hope that in the future we can become a self dependent organisation and consolidate and grow – to develop skills and provide employment for members as well as campaigning for women's human rights and addressing issues of violence. We are very confident that with PaWA as an umbrella organisation we can achieve this. There is so much potential – we have many dreams and ambitions for going further.

Lovely Yasmin

Independent Children and Women Workers Forum

The 'ACTION BRIEF' series is for policy-makers and civil society organisations. It draws on the experiences and analyses of our partners, One World Action, academic research and current debates.

The 'ACTION BRIEF' series proposes a clear set of action points that can contribute to development policy-making, planning and financing.

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