USAID’s Workers’ Empowerment and Participation Activity First Year
Success and Support in COVID-19 and Beyond

IN THE FIRST YEAR of the four-year Workers Empowerment and Participation activity (WEP) in Bangladesh, the Solidarity Center-implemented U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) project reinforced the skills and knowledge of workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) and shrimp and fish processing (SFP) sectors by customizing capacity building activities. The project, which builds on the strong foundation WEP established between 2015 and 2019,* successfully defended workers’ rights even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this unprecedented crisis, trade unions and Worker Community Associations (WCAs) have been a lifeline for workers, their families and their communities. Worker Community Center (WCC) leaders have helped workers and community members get through this unprecedented situation through advocacy, networking and remediating worker complaints.

Throughout the project’s first year, the WCCs have identified, cultivated and empowered leaders in the community to extend their rights beyond the factories. Throughout, the seven WCAs community leaders have built strong social networks that advocate for worker rights and help residents connect to community resources. These WCAs have increased the capacity of leaders and workers in the community to solve community concerns and work toward developing a sustainable organization.

The multi-year WEP project is grounded in the well-founded understanding that if unions and WCAs can enable RMG and SFP workers to build their capacity to negotiate with employers, work collectively and advocate efficiently in their workplaces and in their communities, they will be empowered to protect their rights, promote their interests and improve labor and living conditions. As such, the WEP activity seeks to strengthen the capacity of independent trade unions, trade union federations and worker community associations in the RMG and SFP sectors to collectively advocate for their rights and interests, and to enhance productive interaction with management to constructively participate in improving industrial relations.

The stories and data presented here are a small sample of WCC and union leaders’ continued efforts to protect worker rights, build collective power and improve their communities.

* The Solidarity Center implemented the U.S. Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Workers’ Empowerment Program (WEP) Components 1 and 2 from 2015 to 2019, which improved working conditions for workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) and shrimp and fish processing (SFP) sectors in Bangladesh. Through both components of the first two WEP projects, worker leaders from the RMG and SFP sectors made significant improvements in their workplaces and throughout their communities by promoting community engagement among their co-workers and their communities. The Solidarity Center is now building on the efforts initiated in the first WEP project as part of the first phase of the current USAID WEP activity that commenced in August 2019.
### Year One: WEP Success by the Numbers

<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>21 NEW UNIONS</strong> and worker-driven organizations organized in the RMG and SFP sectors and 12 new RMG unions registered</th>
<th><strong>27,213 WORKERS covered by unions in more than 200 factories</strong></th>
<th><strong>2,209 NEW COMMUNITY MEMBERS actively participating in WCAs</strong></th>
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<td><strong>18 INDEPENDENT WORKER ORGANIZATIONS</strong> now supported by USAID to promote international labor standards</td>
<td><strong>15 UNIONS/PARTICIPATION COMMITTEES</strong> engaging in negotiations with management for improvements/benefits for workers</td>
<td><strong>98 LEGAL COUNSELING SESSIONS for 454 workers (242 women)</strong></td>
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<td><strong>104 WOMEN</strong> elected to leadership positions</td>
<td><strong>20 WORKERS (11 women) from 16 factories received $9,338 in unpaid wages and compensation</strong></td>
<td><strong>5 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS engaged in advocacy initiatives received USAID assistance</strong></td>
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<td><strong>15 ADVOCACY CAMPAIGNS</strong> initiated</td>
<td><strong>65 WORKERS’ LEGAL ISSUES resolved</strong></td>
<td><strong>37 COURT CASES resolved in which 41 workers received $10,835</strong></td>
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<td><strong>39 WORKER-LEADERS TRAINED</strong> with USAID assistance to advance outcomes consistent with gender equality or female empowerment at public and private organizations</td>
<td><strong>12 COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AGREEMENTS and Charters of Demand (from workers to employers) now include provisions to promote gender equality and inclusion in the workplace</strong></td>
<td><strong>SOLIDARITY CENTER-TRAINED PARALEGALS counseled 1,076 workers and helped write 513 complaint letters and 447 grievance letters to management in the past year</strong></td>
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Collective Action Ensures Safety at Workplace

At Bright Sea Food Ltd., some 26 workers toil in freezing conditions during their shifts and each year, the company provides them with warm jackets to protect them on the job. But when they received new jackets last December, they realized the quality was poor. They rejected the thin jackets and refused to start their regular shift at the cold storage section. Three worker-leaders discussed the situation with their co-workers and decided to bring their concerns to top management, ultimately speaking with the factory director. After listening to the workers and checking the quality of the product, the factory director instructed his staff to provide improved jackets by the end of the afternoon. With this assurance, workers returned to work and within a few hours, they received warm replacement jackets. Workers felt empowered that they successfully joined together to address a serious occupational safety and health issue. Using leadership and negotiation skills gained through WEP training, workers at Bright Sea Food Ltd. are confident that they can use collective action to advance their rights and well-being in the workplace.

Worker Community Centers Raise Awareness on COVID-19

In July 2020, the Solidarity Center delivered 30,000 COVID-19 awareness leaflets to its partners in Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, Ashulia, Savar, Chattogram, Khulna and Jashore.

The leaflets, distributed to thousands of workers and community members by WCC Coordinators and trade union federation organizers, highlight key safety measures during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as proper hand washing, social distancing, covering the mouth while sneezing or coughing and wearing masks at all times when outside the home.

“It’s important for us to do our part to get accurate information to everyone in the community to help stop the spread of this deadly virus. Our WCC leaders and members have extensive networks, and we love raising awareness and helping our community.”

—Rita Saha, WCC Coordinator, Rupsha.
A Step Forward to a Harmonious Relationship in the Workplace

In Ashulia, Bangladesh, 1,500 garment workers achieved a ground-breaking contract on February 6, 2020, at Donglian Fashion (BD) Ltd. The Donglian Fashion (BD) Ltd. Sommilito Sramik Union (DFLSSU), an affiliate of the Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation (SGSF), signed a two-year collective bargaining agreement with factory management after a series of lengthy negotiations throughout 2019. SGSF is a USAID grant implementing partner.

The agreement:

• Subsidizes food for all workers in the factory canteen
• Establishes a day care center for children younger than age six
• Ensures women workers will receive free ultrasound examinations during their pregnancy and free monthly sanitary napkins
• Establishes an Anti-Harassment Committee to prevent sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence at work, along with an office for the union, including furniture, inside factory premises, and daily time off for union leaders during work hours to conduct union functions

“This is a significant achievement for all working women as this success was spearheaded by women leaders who are at the top positions of their union.”
—Nazma Akter, SGSF president

United to Prevent Gender-Based Violence: Hasina’s Story

In January 2020, Hasina (not her real name), who works in a shrimp processing factory, was on her way back home from work at night when a colleague at the same factory came by a motorcycle and stopped her. He grabbed her hand and tried to force her onto the motorcycle. Nasima, a local community leader from the USAID-funded and Solidarity Center-implemented WCC, saw the exchange and confronted the man. She warned him to stop harassing Hasina and also gathered other residents in the area to support Hasina. Together, they admonished him and made sure that he would not disturb her in the future. Such actions are uncommon in Bangladesh, where it is difficult for women to speak out.

Since then, Hasina says her co-worker has stopped harassing her and she feels much safer at work and as she walks to the factory and back. The courage and quick thinking of Hasina and Nasima helped prevent gender-based violence and harassment from continuing and, as news of their action spread throughout the community, other women joined with Hasina to express the abuse they were facing. They were empowered to oppose other harassers at work and in the community.

“The WCC training sessions helped make me more confident and brave, and have helped me understand GBVH,” said Hasina. “This has made it easier for me to handle tough situations at my workplace and in the community.”
PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

☑ Bangladesh Independent Garment Workers Union Federation (BIGUF), a Solidarity Center implementing partner, won the reinstatement of 23 union members and leaders in Ityadi Jeans Limited factory in Chattogram.

☑ Workers’ collective action at Bright Sea Food Ltd. ensured they received warm jackets to wear in frigid workplaces.

☑ Solidarity Center partners distributed 30,000 COVID-19 awareness leaflets to community members.

☑ WCA leaders distributed aid to 40 worker families during the COVID-19 pandemic.

☑ A WCA leader helped reduce rent for RMG workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

☑ A WCC leaders’ request leads to local counselor taking action to clean sewage line in Tongi.

☑ SGSF assisted unions in negotiating collective bargaining agreements with Natural Denims Ltd., Donglian Fashion (BD) Ltd. and Hop Lun Apparels Ltd.

☑ A WCC leader united with community members to prevent a case of gender-based violence against one of its members.

☑ WCC leaders assisted a pregnant mother by taking her to hospital, where she delivered a healthy child.

☑ A pregnant WCC member received virtual prenatal health service through WCC support in Fatullah, Narayanganj.
Leaders Reinstated Through Union Action

After garment workers at Ityadi Jeans Limited in Chattogram formed a union and applied for union registration on September 15, 2019, factory management began to threaten and intimidate workers involved in union activity—and within days illegally terminated several union leaders. Their families were also harassed by unknown individuals at their homes. The union filed an unfair labor practice (ULP) complaint with the Department of Labor (DoL) seeking its intervention. BIGUF, a Solidarity Center implementing partner, negotiated a settlement with factory management and DoL officials in which management agreed to reinstate, with back pay, 23 of the terminated workers, including the union officers.

Community Members Clear Sewage with Assistance of Local Counselor

The Roads and Highways Department of the Ministry of Road Transportation has recently reconstructed the road between the Tongi WCC and the Dhaka-Mymensingh Highway. However, the sewage system along the road was fully blocked by garbage and plastic. Community leaders and WCA leadership contacted the local City Corporation Ward Counselor requesting the sewage be cleared. After hearing the unified voice of the community association, the counselor agreed to pay for a cleaning service. To show solidarity, the counselor was present along with the other community members during the cleaning project and supervised the initiative.

Union Succeeds in Getting Workers Owed Wages and Benefits During COVID-19 Crisis

AFCO Abedin Garments Ltd was on the verge of permanently closing in April 2020 due to the cancellation of orders by its buyers. Initially, management did not agree to provide any benefits to workers nor mention honoring outstanding wages. Garments Workers Solidarity Federation (GWSF) negotiated with management and encouraged the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments and BGMEA to intervene. Eventually, management agreed and signed two Memorandums of Understanding with the workers of the factory in a multi-stakeholder meeting. The factory cleared all payments to workers on May 21, 2020. Through the MoUs, GWSF achieved the following:

1. The factory will pay the workers 60 percent of their salary for April 2020.
2. The factory will pay the workers in lieu of notice, one-month basic salary and 60 percent of the basic wage for each full year of service.
3. Seven days’ annual leave will be paid to workers who are entitled to get this benefit.

Preventing Child Marriage in Tongi

Desperate to make ends meet, Jesmin Akter’s father sought to arrange a marriage for her. Jesmin, a grade nine student in Ershadnagar, Tongi, tried to convince him to let her stay in school, but he refused to listen. She sought assistance directly from the WCC and shared her concern with the WCA leaders and members. WCAs are designed...
to promote civic engagement and collective action around important social issues in worker communities. The members met Jesmin’s parents on her behalf and strongly encouraged them to halt the child marriage. As a result of this community intervention, Jesmin’s parents decided not to pursue the marriage and allowed her to continue with her education. Jesmin is happy that she will be able to pursue her dreams and not be forced into something which she did not want.

Workers’ Collective Action Ensures Victory

Natural Denims Limited Sammilito Garments Sramik Union (NDLSGSU) successfully signed its second collective bargaining agreement with Natural Denims Ltd. factory management on January 13, 2020.

The agreement:
• Sets a seven percent annual wage increase—higher than the 5 percent set by the Minimum Wages Board
• Establishes a factory Grievance Resolution Mechanism
• Forms an Anti-Sexual Harassment Committee
• Ensures women workers receive free sanitary napkins
• Provides free ultrasound tests/examinations for all pregnant workers

SGSF General Secretary Nahidul Hasan says this collective bargaining agreement “incorporated benefits for workers far above basic labor law protections and it is truly a woman-friendly agreement.”

Union Ensures Safety of Workers

Hop Lun Apparels Ltd. Sammilito Sramik Union (HLALSSU) successfully signed a 24-point collective bargaining agreement with Hop Lun Apparels Ltd. factory management on June 6, 2020. With this contract, the union achieved substantial gains for more than 2,000 workers.

Aklima, union president, says, “When we submitted demands and negotiated with management, we gave special emphasis on the issues of women. The guarantee of promotion of women to higher posts and the establishment of sexual harassment committee will empower the women and provide safeguards against sexual abuse and harassment in our factory.”

WCC Leaders Ensure Safe Childbirth

A garment worker in Boardbazar, Gazipur, was nine months pregnant and struggled to find a clinic that could assist her with delivery of her child at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, she turned to the WCC, the only organization able to assist her.

After the worker contacted the WCC leaders for assistance, WCC leaders took her to nearby Marie Stopes Clinic. She was diagnosed with a hemoglobin deficiency and the doctors urgently referred her to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH).

WCC leaders quickly negotiated with the clinic to provide her an ambulance at a manageable price and accompanied her to DMCH. After ensuring she was admitted, WCC leaders solicited blood donors for her,
and she ultimately delivered a healthy baby girl through Cesarean section.

“I will never forget the help you have given me, she told WCC leaders. “Without you by my side at that time I don’t know if my baby would have seen the light of day.”

WCA Leader Provides Assistance with Reducing House Rent in Hemayetpur

During the novel coronavirus lockdown, the great majority of garment workers received only 60 percent of their wages as factories shut down. Misanur Rahman, a garment worker and WCA executive board member in Hemayetpur provided key assistance to workers struggling to pay their rent. He worked with a local union leader to convince a landlord to reduce rent in April and May for 40 workers. Misanur also assisted another co-worker by convincing the landlord to reduce rent, a move that also assisted garment workers renting 30 rooms from the same landlord.

Negotiating Resolution to Workplace Abuses

Garment workers and union leaders trained in negotiating skills under the WEP program utilized their ability to constructively engage with management to protect the rights and safety of workers, and to ensure compliance with the labor law at the Bellissima Apparels Ltd. garment factory. After a woman garment worker was verbally abused by a line chief in January 2020, a union leader who had participated in the WEP program spoke out. He also was verbally abused. The union registered a formal sexual harassment complaint against the line chief and the CEO suggested a settlement and ordered the accused to apologize to the workers for his behavior. Judging the line chief’s response to be insufficient to address the severity of the problem, the union stood firm and pushed for stronger action, eventually resulting in the line chief being dismissed from his post. At this same factory, workers demanded factory management pay them the legal minimum wage. When management did not take action, union leaders met with them again and noted that continued non-compliance with the minimum wage law might lead to collective action in the form of a protest. The next day, management added $4.72 to their monthly wages.

Poppy Receives Virtual Prenatal Health Service Through WCC Support

Poppy is an active member of the Fatullah WCC, Narayanganj. Her husband lost his job due to COVID-19 mass terminations. Poppy experienced health issues while pregnant, and needed prenatal health advice. However, the outbreak of the virus in Narayanganj and financial constraints prevented Poppy from obtaining health services. Desperate for assistance, she called the WCC staff for advice. The WCC coordinator called a Bangladesh Rural Advance Committee (BRAC) health worker and connected Poppy by mobile phone with a BRAC health worker. After the telemedicine call, the coordinator followed up with Poppy, who told the coordinator she had been doing well since receiving the advice from the health worker. Poppy says WCC support enabled her to receive essential medical care at no cost and without leaving her home during the pandemic.

WCA Leaders Distribute Eid Gifts to Financially Struggling Workers

WCA collections provided 40 families of garment workers with vermicelli, powdered milk, sugar, oil and soap as Eid gifts during Ramadan. The families needed food and supplies as they struggled to make ends meet during COVID-19 factory closures. Led by Sharifunnesa, WCA president and President of the Donglian Fashion BD Ltd Workers Union, Didarul Alam at Stitch Magazine Co. Ltd. and Mahfuza Begum at Fun Factory Ltd., the WCA collected $160 in individual contributions between $1.18 and $1.77 and distributed the items on May 21, 2020.

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