Moni, Bangladeshi Mother: Poor wages and harassment in the workplace

THIS STORY IS PART OF ILRF'S MOTHERS' STORIES SERIES. EVERY DAY BEFORE MOTHER'S DAY, A WORKING MOTHER AROUND THE WORLD WILL BE HIGHLIGHTED. To read other stories, click here.

My name is Moni and I am 35 years old. I am married and have a 15 year old son. After the death of my father, and in need of money to feed my family, I was forced to leave school and work at Giant Garments Ltd. I was only 14 years old at the time. I am still currently working here as a sewing machine operator. I am paid on average BDT 4059 per month (59 USD) which is determined by my production capacity. When I started at the factory my salary was only BDT 1650 per month (24 USD). I am now a senior operator. I work 8 hours per day on quieter months but when there are more orders, I work 12 to 18 hour shifts. In total, including weekends and days of leave, I work 11 months of the year. I am a permanent laborer however the company has yet to issue me with an appointment letter. My entire salary goes towards feeding and raising my family. However, the amount I earn does not cover my all of my monthly expenses.

On an average day I wake up at 5:00am as I need to cook for my family, fetch water, shower, and do laundry. I leave for work at 7:00am. From 1:00-2:00pm I have lunch, which I bring from home. After work I make my way to the shops to buy vegetables, rice, and daal to cook for dinner. When I arrive back home I cook, clean and make sure my son does his homework before going to bed.

The women at my factory are entitled maternity leave but I couldn’t enjoy this leave myself. Workers are also entitled to sick leave but this right is also not respected most of the time. Most the time workers are not treated with respect and the workload is unfair. I was discriminated against when I tried to form a union with my coworkers. Management mentally harassed me by giving me more production loads than I could handle. I was verbally harassed at the time of my pregnancy and have witnessed many workers being hassled in a similar manner. During the first four months of my pregnancy, management would shout at me for needing to use the bathroom. They used obscene language and threatened to fire me.

Women in my factory do not have the same opportunity for promotion as men do. The only promotion I have been offered in 16 years was as an incentive to not form a trade union, which I turned down. I have managed to successfully form a registered union with my coworkers. In the process many workers were laid off and many had to find other factories to work for in order to survive. Every day I fight for union rights and legal rights in the workplace. However, the constant fear that the factory will be shut down by the company, still haunts me.

Since the global economic crisis, my factory has had fewer orders and thus less work hours. However, the result is late pay and I am often left fighting for my salary at the end of every month. Like me, many other women in my factory are treated without dignity. If I could make a change I would establish individual and union/collective bargaining rights and urge buyers and international workers rights groups to keep orders coming into the factory so that we may stay out of fear of the factory closing down.

Moni works with the Bangladesh Center for Worker Solidarity (BCWS). The BCWS was borne out of a worker movement to form the first trade union in a factory sourcing for a garment retailer. Since the early 1990s, the BCWS has had a long tradition of advancing workers’ rights by documenting labor abuses and violations and strengthening the capacity of workers to advocate for themselves and advance their own interests. Learn more about BCWS.
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