

## Lives touched by the project

### Case-1

In 1983, Siddika Mohol (45), joined in a govt. service under T&T as a telephone operator. She comes from a very typical lower middle class Muslim family. In student life, she did not have any freedom. Other than going to school/college, she was not allowed by the family to go outside alone. As a result, except educational knowledge, she did not get much knowledge about rest of the world. After completing higher secondary education, she started trying to get a job for supporting her family financially as well as to be self-dependent. She got success immediately and got job. She was being enjoying her job until 1987 while introduced night shifting duty for women operators.

At the very beginning of her service life, she came to know about the workers union of T&T named 'Bangladesh Telecommunication Workers and Employees Union. During first few years, though some of the trade union activists tried to motivate her, but she did not show any interest about trade union. Actually, till then she did not have any clear knowledge about trade union or its role. While the BJSD started campaigning against night shift duty for women operators, Siddika got interest on trade union first and became curious to know about the union, its activities and role towards workers. A senior female colleague, who is a leader of the basic union of T&T affiliated with Jatiotabadi Sramik Dal (BJSD) helped her to know about the basic union. By the encouragement of that leader, she started participating in different activities of the union.

In 1989, Siddika got married and her typical conservative husband did not allow her to involve in trade union activity. As a result, she compelled to avoid the union activities, though a fascination has already been grown in her mind. Day by day she almost detached from the trade union. Though she compromised for the interest of family life, but failed to keep it continue at last. In 2000, a big change has taken place in her family life. She divorced her husband. In the same year, she formally joined in the basic union of T&T affiliated with Bangladesh Jatiotabadi Sramik Dal (BJSD), a national trade union federation of Bangladesh.

During the time, though she participated in several activities of the union, but did not get enough knowledge about national and international standards of labour rights and labour movements, labour law or even the activities of national trade union federations, until involve with BILS activities. Till then by the basic union leaders, she got a little knowledge only about the general activities of the union.

Siddika came to know about BILS in 2001. The same senior women leader, who helped Siddika earlier, brought her to participate in a 5-day seminar in BILS that was the beginning of her with BILS.

In the mean time, in 2000, with the support of Commonwealth Trade Union Council-CTUC, BILS has started a project called BILS/CTUC-Women Workers'

Development Project (WWDP). The project aims to create awareness among the women workers and to motivate them to join trade union to ensure their rights.

In 2001, through the project, a team formed consisted of 24 women trade union activists from the National Trade Union Centers. The team received a Training of Trainers (TOT). The training includes trade union issues e.g. labor law, different sections of the laws that made obstacles in accessing the workers rights provided by the law, international standards of labour rights, women workers rights etc.



*Siddika participating in training of BILS/WWDP*

The training contributed to develop each of the participants' skill in organizing, collective bargaining and training conduction. As a whole the training build their capacity to act as a Trainer. As per plan of the project, these 24 women activists were divided into four groups and given responsibilities on four separate issues (i.e. Development of Women Leadership, Gender Equality & Women Workers Rights, Occupational Health and Safety and Organising the Unorganised) to work on.

The team provided training to the plant level trade unionists on 4 selected topics. Siddika received training on 'Development of Women Leadership.' Siddika got interest in every topics of the training sessions, she got new and newer knowledge on different workers rights and trade union issues. At the last day of the training, through a discussion circle the participants have identified and prioritized a problem existing in their workplaces. They also have developed a plan to bargain with the management to ensure the rights of the workers working over there. Siddika selected for the group responsible for the issue of 'Occupational Health and Safety.'

Siddika organised 12 among her women colleagues and organized 4 discussion circles to identify the problems existing in their workplace. Through the discussion circle, they identified numbers of problems existing in their workplace. Then they identified 'unavailability of the pure drinking' as the most prioritized problem. In the discussion circle, they have identified different techniques to apply in bargaining with the management. After competing entire plan, they have raised the problem issue to the management and demanded to allot fund for ensuring pure drinking water for the staff. As usually, the management was being trying to avoid the issue. But along with the group, Siddika was being continuing pressure to the management for the same. She formally sat with the management for several times. In bargaining and negotiating with the management she used all of her knowledge and skill gained through the training. At last, the management compelled to allocate money for ensuring pure drinking water for the staff. This success made Siddika more confident about organizing and collecting bargaining. She proved her capability by the success.

Day by day, as much as Siddika's involvement with the activities of BILS-WWDP has been increasing, her involvement with basic union and national federation

has also been increased. Using her gained knowledge, skill and experience as well as support by the project she has played a vital role in organising the women workers of T&T and formed a Women Committee under her basic union affiliated with BJSD. She has selected as the Organizing Secretary of the committee.

As part of the project activity, she contributed actively in organising 5 days seminar on the selected issue 'Occupational health and Safety.' Moreover, she organized and facilitated numbers of discussion circles at rank and file level trade union activists.

In 2005, the project conducted a study and on the basis of the study findings developed a Common Minimum Demands for Women Workers. To campaign in favour of the demands, the project formed a Campaign Team consists of the most capable and active women leaders. Considering the performance, Siddika selected as a vital Campaign Team Member. The project started campaigning to fulfill the demand of maternity protection for the casual women workers. As a team member, Siddika played a vital role in organising and awareness raising of the workers in favour of the demand. She acted as the Coordinator of the team responsible for collecting information about the maternity protection condition for the casual workers of T&T. During collecting the information she found a pregnant casual worker, who was being suffering due to not getting maternity leave. Through that casual worker had a pregnancy complex and doctor advised to take rest, she compelled to do work on a regular basis. Siddika took initiative from her union and raised demand to the authority to approve that workers maternity leave for 4 months with full payment. Regarding the raised demand, she met with the authority for several times to create pressure. In the mean time Siddika became such keen in collective bargaining that the authority compelled to approve the demand at last.

Nowadays, Siddika is not only a member of the campaign team of WWDP, but also an active part of the national trade union movement of Bangladesh. Beside national level programmes, she has participated in different international program



*In Japan, Siddika sharing her experience in the exchange of view on labour situation, organised by JILAP*

## **Case-2**

Along with Siddika Mohol and other trade union activists, Shahin Akhter Parvin (40), nominated by Bangladesh Jatio Sramik Jote (BJSJ) as a member of the BILS-WWDP campaign team and received Training on 'organised the unorganised.'

In 1984, Shahin started her working life as a machine operator in Kaderia Textile Mill, a government operated textile mill in Bangladesh. In 1992, she joined with the workers union of Kaderia Textile. Then out of the total 4000 workers, only 100 were female. In 1998, she participated in the election of the workers union, but failed due to negative attitude of the male workers. In 2002, government has taken initiative to close down the mill and like other workers she lost her job. Then for the survival, she has taken a job in a NGO, as an organizer.

From the beginning to till she has participated numbers of training and campaign activities of BILS-WWDP, which enhanced her knowledge, experience and skill about the workers rights, women workers rights, trade union activities and related other national and international issues related to the workers. But the project especially enhanced her skill in organising. She has assigned by the project for campaigning on the maternity protection of the women workers of readymade garments.

Shahin selected 10 garments in Tongi area for starting her campaign activity. At the beginning she has collected information about the existing status of the maternity protection in the selected garments. She found that most of the garment does not have any practice of maternity leave for the women workers. If any worker becomes pregnant, she compelled to leave the job. With the knowledge achieved by the training of the project, she started to organize the women workers of the selected garments and conducted different discussion circles to raise their awareness on the right of maternity protection. She has distributed numbers of leaflets provided by the project to aware the workers.

In 2010, she organized a human chain in Tongi, zone near by Dhaka, as a part of her campaign plan an industrial to create pressure on the employers to ensure the maternity leave for the women workers. To highlight the programme, Shahin managed to bring the local Ward Commissioner along with some other local influential people in the human chain. During the time of human chain, number of women workers came out after completing their shift duty. On the way back to home, they found the human chain and placard with slogans to ensure the maternity protection of the women workers.



Shahin (first one from left side) Participating in a rally

Slowly one by one the women workers started to join in the human chain and at the end it became a huge gathering. From the chain Shahin has given a speech about right of maternity protection. She called to the workers to be organized and to create pressure on the employers to ensure women workers maternity rights. Her speech drawn attention of all the workers presented over there. Though it has started raining then, but most of the women workers were being standing up to the time. After that human chain numbers of employers called Shahin to stop her activity. But Shahin did not go back from her position.

As a result of her regular campaign activities Sardar Garments approved maternity leave for some of the pregnant women workers, which encouraged Shahin to continue her campaign. After that some of other garments approved maternity leave for pregnant women workers. She suggested the workers to inform the employers in written while become pregnant.



*Shahin participating in training (2nd row, 3rd one from right side)*

Till day, her campaign brought numbers of successes. A mentionable number of garments factory provided maternity leave with pay for the pregnant women workers working in Tongi area.