



PURSUING DECENT WORK IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYERS' VIEWS ON DECENT
WORK PRINCIPLES IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR IN
RANGPUR AND BARISAL, BANGLADESH

EMPOWER
YOUTH
FOR WORK



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SUMMARY

The Empower Youth for Work (EYW) programme in Bangladesh aims to make a positive impact on the lives of young women and men by improving employment or entrepreneurship opportunities. Oxfam's local partner organizations are working to support young men and women to gain employment, which in this context is mainly available in the informal sector. However, ensuring decent work in these jobs is challenging. The informal sector is not organized in a way that enables it to focus on the aspirations of employees in their working lives. Therefore we wanted to **gain an insight into the opinions, attitudes and practices of employers in the informal sector, in terms of the challenges and opportunities in creating decent work, both in their own organization and in their area of business (or 'sector')**.

In total, 32 interviews were carried out with employers in 10 different sectors. This report shows the patterns that emerge across the whole group of respondents and, where possible, we disaggregate by sector and region. This provides the EYW programme in Bangladesh with an overall picture of the role that principles related to decent work can play in the informal sector – based on first-hand testimony from employers.

We know that 'decent work' is a broad term that includes multiple aspects of work. However, the research shows that employers in the informal sector of Bangladesh have a narrow definition of decent work. They emphasize aspects related to **work environment, safety, hygiene and health** as the responsibility of the employer. In discussing these aspects, they focus on their own company's practices rather than formal policies and standards. Therefore, it is important for the EYW programme in Bangladesh to take a practical angle, to relate to the way in which employers consider safety and security at work, rather than focusing on formal rules and regulations.

Employers link **decent wages** to what is reasonable in relation to the profit a company makes. Equality in remuneration is linked to skills of workers, and not to age or gender. However, women are often seen as less skilled and therefore less able to perform certain (higher-paid) jobs. Hence, influencing the informal sector on decent wages may be more effective when national standards are linked to relevant skills and competences.

Equal opportunities and treatment of all women and men is not yet an issue considered by employers in the informal sector. They only view it from a protection angle, which sometimes even leads to discrimination against female workers. For EYW in Bangladesh, this is an important aspect to raise awareness on. Youth influencers feel that focusing on equal opportunities for young women and men in their influencing towards the informal sector can do the most to strengthen the EYW training programme. In doing so, it is important to take a context-specific approach, respecting the safety of women at work.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Bangladesh, informal employment is estimated to account for about 89% of the total number of jobs in the labour market¹. Those working in the informal economy include wage labourers, self-employed workers, unpaid family labour, piece-rate workers and other hired labour. While decent work² for all youth is a commitment from the Government of Bangladesh (National Youth Policy 2017), implementation of the policy is lagging behind, especially in the informal sector. Decent work for all in Bangladesh is only achievable if the informal sector also ensures that its workers can realize their rights and aspirations in their working lives. Oxfam's Empower Youth for Work (EYW) programme in Bangladesh aims to influence the informal sector to adopt the principles of decent work.

The EYW programme in Bangladesh aims to make a positive impact on the lives of young women and men by improving employment or entrepreneurship opportunities. The programme works, among others, in the Barisal and Rangpur regions. In both areas, Oxfam's local partner organizations are working to support young men and women to gain employment, which in these rural regions is more likely to be in the informal sector. Ensuring decent work in these jobs is challenging. However, despite the lack of focus on employees' rights and aspirations, the informal sector does offer important opportunities for employment and socio-economic empowerment for men and women.

To build on the above, the EYW programme in Bangladesh wants to understand the possibilities for and challenges to achieving decent work in the informal sector. Employers in the informal sector are the actors who can change the quality of the work placements they offer in their companies. To find entry points for influencing the informal sector, the EYW programme in Bangladesh carried out qualitative research to **gain an insight into the opinions, attitudes and practices of employers in the informal sector, in terms of challenges and opportunities in creating decent work in their SME and in their sector.**

The insights from this research will be used to promote decent work principles in the informal sector. The EYW programme wants to collaborate with the informal sector to translate decent work principles into daily practice.

¹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics - Government of Bangladesh (2010). *Bangladesh - Labour Force Survey 2010*. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/surveydata/index.php/catalog/1125/related_materials

² Decent work sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives. It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men (ILO definition).

2 METHODOLOGY

The research, albeit limited in scale, was an exploratory study to increase the understanding of decent work principles in the informal sector. It was conducted in Barisal and Rangpur, two districts that have high levels of informal sector employment opportunities and are part of the EYW programme in Bangladesh.

This study was a collaboration between Oxfam, two local implementing partners – RDRS and WAVE Foundation – and youth volunteers. Meaningful participation of youth was ensured in all phases of the research, from design to analysis and programme response formulation. Youth representatives were supported and coached continuously by Oxfam and partner staff to reach their full potential as researchers. The research activities took place over four months (June to September 2018). The research method, sampling and analysis are outlined below.

The research aimed to gain insights on decent work from the perspective of employers in the informal sector. Although the influencing strategy involves more actors, employers in the informal sector are a new group of actors that Oxfam and partners are liaising with, and they are one of the key stakeholders in realizing decent work for EYW graduates as most of them will become employed in the informal sector. Hence, we wanted to explore employers' attitudes towards decent work principles, its relevance for their particular sector and whether and how it is put into practice in their own small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Because of the exploratory, in-depth focus of the research, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the methodology.

2.1 SAMPLING

In total, 32 interviews were carried out with employers in 10 different occupational sectors.³ The sectors were selected depending on the type of industries in which EYW project youth are employed. Although the sampling approach tried to get a gender-balanced sample, the majority of the employers interviewed were male, since most business owners in Bangladesh are male. The female employers interviewed mostly work in traditionally female sectors such as tailoring and dress-making, artisanal handicrafts and beauty salons. Construction, auto mechanics, carpentry, welding, electrical work and mobile phone servicing are male-dominated sectors. The SMEs were also selected to represent a variety of business sizes, ranging from three to 156 employees. The SMEs in the construction and garment sectors were significantly larger than the SMEs in the other sectors. Table 1 below gives a full overview of the sample.

³ Construction, auto mechanics, carpentry, electronics, welding, mobile phone services, garment factories/shops, tailoring and dress-making shops, women's hairdressing and make-up salons, handicrafts.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

Occupation	Number of companies	Employer's gender		Average company size	Worker's gender		Age of workers		
		Female	Male		Female	Male	# of employees 29 and above	# of employees 15-29	# of employees below 15
Construction	5	0	5	55	0	274	182	85	7
Automechanic	1	0	1	7	0	7	2	5	0
Handicrafts	2	2	0	44	85	3	15	73	0
Carpentry	4	0	4	22	0	30	13	23	0
Welding	6	0	6	11	0	65	23	33	3
Electrical work	2	0	2	7	0	7	1	11	0
Garments Factory/ Shops	6	3	3	23	55	58	47	102	0
Mobile phone servicing	2	0	2	8	4	11	0	9	0
Women's hair and make-up	3	3	0	6	18	0	5	13	0
Total	31	8	23	-	162	455	288	354	10

2.2 ANALYSIS

All interviews were summarized and analysed in an analytical framework combining deductive and inductive analysis approaches. The analytical framework consisted of the aspects of decent work according to the ILO definition. The inductive analysis also allowed for new issues that came up outside of the scope of the ILO definition, that according to employers in the informal sector are part of decent work.

The research has limitations. It is not intended to be exhaustive – that is, we would expect new information to come up if more interviews are conducted – and it is difficult to disaggregate the data by sector or region. We do, however, see patterns emerge across the whole group of respondents, and where possible we have disaggregated by sector and region.

This research provides us with an overall picture of which aspects of decent work can play the biggest role in influencing the informal sector – based on first-hand testimony from employers. It gives us an insight into the narratives behind the choices SMEs make regarding decent work, and allows us to identify nuances between different types of businesses in the informal sector. The EYW programme in Bangladesh will use this knowledge to sharpen its influencing strategy, alongside its technical, contextual and experiential knowledge, to inform project implementation and development.

3 REALITIES AND AMBITIONS REGARDING DECENT WORK IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

This chapter presents the findings of the research. First it gives an insight into the opinions, attitudes and practices of SME employers in the informal sector, in terms of the challenges and opportunities they encounter in creating 'good' jobs in their occupational sector as well as in their organization. This includes discussing the overall work environment as well as equal and fair remuneration. Furthermore, it focuses on equality at work for women and youth, and highlights the aspects of decent work that are overlooked in the informal sector of Bangladesh.

3.1 THE MEANING OF DECENT WORK

Decent work is a broad term that, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), includes multiple aspects of work, namely productivity, fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives, and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.⁴



Figure 1: Aspects of decent work (ILO definition)

⁴ ILO (2019). *Decent Work*. Retrieved from <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang-en/index.htm>

However, the interviews show that the employers in the informal sector of Bangladesh have a narrower definition of decent work than that of the ILO. They emphasize aspects related to work environment, safety, hygiene and health as the responsibility of the employer. Section 3.2 will further explore the aspects of decent work that were mentioned in the interviews regarding a safe and comfortable work environment. Aspects related to fair income and productivity, e.g. decent wage, equal remuneration and decent working hours, were mentioned, but were seen as less important. The employers feel that other actors, such as the government, NGOs, contractors and others in the sector need to support them in improving these aspects of employment. They stated that it is difficult for individual employers to change these aspects, since they are driven by competition in their sector. Gender equality was discussed, since this is at the heart of the EYW programme and hence is an important subject for influencing. The interviews with employers demonstrate their struggles to address this, as presented throughout the results and specifically in section 3.3 below.

3.2 A SAFE AND COMFORTABLE WORK ENVIRONMENT

When asked what decent work means to them, most respondents referred to the importance of a **safe work environment** – including safety at work and safety to access work (the latter particularly for women). When referring to the practices in their own company, they stated that they face challenges providing safety equipment, since this is costly. According to the employers, this also applies to ensuring a safe environment for work. Employers would ideally like to offer a quiet, well-lit and clean workplace.

 *A ‘decent work environment’ means keeping the workplace neat and clean.” (Employer, garment sector, Barisal)*

“To me, a ‘decent work environment’ means there is a factory with ample light and air.” (Employer, handicrafts sector, Rangpur)

Employers also emphasized that a safe work environment has a place for treatment and a first aid kit in case of injuries. **“There should be a place for treatment. If anyone gets sick, she should receive first aid as soon as possible. Antiseptic is a must too”** (employer, handicrafts sector, Rangpur). **“If someone cuts herself with a needle she should have access to first aid in the form of Dettol or Savlon”** (employer, garment sector, Rangpur).

In reality however, their workplaces are often noisy, lighting does not always work properly and hygiene standards are not met. Overall, the respondents estimated that about 50–75% of informal companies meet safety standards. By contrast, one respondent thought only 30% of these companies meet safety standards (employer, handicrafts sector, Barisal). It should be noted that these perceived levels of compliance are based on employers’ (narrow) understanding of

“Those who aren’t following this (the regulations around decent work) are small entrepreneurs and they don’t have the necessary funds.” (Employer, construction sector, Barisal).

workplace safety and security, i.e. they are not based on standard universal rules and regulations. Although employers realize that many of them don’t meet standards, they feel powerless to change this due to resource constraints. Furthermore, not all employers feel responsible for providing decent work. Some say that the government or NGOs should ensure that standards are met.

Respondents feel it is difficult to guarantee women's safety to access the workplace. They think it is the responsibility of the family/husband to ensure the safety of their daughter or wife. Furthermore, they stated that women should be aware of their surroundings. As such, they place the responsibility for women's safety in accessing the workplace with women and their families. This may result in restricted mobility for female workers, diminishing their chances at the job market. Some employers stated that they have measures in place regarding women's safety, such as prohibiting women from working late hours or limiting the possibilities for interaction between male and female workers. However, even when the intentions behind them are good, these measures only serve to increase gender inequality in the Bangladeshi informal sector.

The importance of a **comfortable working environment** was also mentioned by many employers. This involves ensuring that there are facilities like a canteen with meals provided, a resting place, attractive decor, newspapers, air conditioning and music. *"We provide them [employees] with breakfast and snacks, and try to relieve them from any sort of stress"* (employer, beauty sector, Barisal).

Summary: Safety and security at work is well considered by employers in the informal sector. Although they face many challenges in meeting safety standards, they are aware of the need to work on and improve in this area. However, in their efforts to protect female workers they overlook aspects of gender equality in the workplace, which is an important aspect of decent work. Furthermore, the employers prefer to recommend certain practices rather than to discuss official safety guidelines and standards. This is typical of the informal sector, where formal rules and regulations don't seem to filter into practical implementation in the same way as they do in the formal sector. The subject of safety and security at work could be a good starting point when discussing decent work in the informal sector. Shifting employers' attitudes regarding women's safety is also important, to protect women's mobility to access work. It is necessary to take a practical angle, to relate to the way in which employers consider this subject, rather than focusing on formal rules and regulations. Taking a practical approach to safety and security at work may result in changes to contribute to decent work in the informal sector.

3.3 DECENT WAGES AND EQUAL REMUNERATION

In discussions about **decent wages and equal remuneration**, employers consider what is appropriate for their sector rather than government standards on minimum wage. As such, they determine a decent wage based on several factors: productivity, skills and experience, position in the company and profit/sales of the company.

Across the different sectors in the study, skills and experience seem the most important factor in determining wages. *"Skilled workers have vast experience. They can finish a job neatly and that's why they can earn a higher wage"* (employer, construction sector, Barisal). Most respondents stated that their company does not and cannot pay their employees a decent wage according to minimum wage standards. They said that the formal sector can pay a decent wage, but this is not possible for the informal sector due to high competition, low profits and/or lack of regulation regarding minimum wage in the sector.

 We aren't selling much. There are not many buyers in the village and sales are lower. We make a meagre profit and that's why we can't give more wages to our workers. I have to share the profit with the moneylender and workers." (Employer, carpentry sector, Rangpur)

"There is no government-mandated minimum wage here. So the owners set the wage at their will." (Employer, construction sector, Barisal)

Furthermore, only a few employers provide contractual arrangements for their employees. In the construction sector, most contracts are offered to men. It is interesting to note that mobile service companies offer similar numbers of contracts to men and women. The garment sector and beauty sector, which are female-dominated, offer contracts only very sporadically. Employers did not give clear reasons for whether or not they had a contract system in place. One employer stated that while their intention was to give contracts, only a few employees qualify for them.

"There is a contract-based recruitment system in our sector, but there are not enough people to qualify for the contract." (Employer, garment sector, Barisal)

One respondent stated that in principle, employers should pay **equal wages to men and women**; however, he does not employ women in his company. Four respondents (three from the garment sector and one from construction) stated that in their company there is no difference between the remuneration of men and women. These companies either have mixed employees or hire more women than men. However, from a sector perspective, five respondents (three from the garment sector, two from construction) stated that in general, women receive lower wages than men in their sector. Reasons given for paying men a higher salary include that men need more money: **"... men incur extra costs in drinking tea, other drinks, bidis, cigarettes etc."** (employer, garment sector, Barisal), and that men do the heavy work: **"males are good at heavy work. We delegate light work to women. That's why we pay women less"** (employer, garment sector, Barisal).

Some respondents also demonstrated negative views towards equal wages for men and women. This was particularly the case in the construction sector, where about half of the respondents expressed a negative view on female workers. They think that women are not fit for construction-related jobs, which results in lower wages for women.

 There is a difference between male and female workers. A woman gets one-third of a man's wage. Women can't travel 100 feet up and down with bricks." (Employer, construction sector, Barisal)

"Usually, females get less than males, as men can do heavy work. That isn't the case for females." (Employer, construction sector, Barisal)

Summary: Decent wages and gender-equal remuneration are both considered by the employers in the informal sector, but are not very popular subjects. Wages depend on how much profit the employer is making. The consensus appears to be that paying decent wages is only possible when there is enough profit. Decent wages are related more to the subjective worth the employer places on the skills and experience of employees, rather than to national or sectoral standards. Therefore, based on this

research, it seems that influencing the informal sector on decent wages will be more effective when national standards are linked to relevant skills and competences. Equal remuneration for women and men was not a topic many employers brought up spontaneously during the interviews. However, SMEs employing more women expressed a greater interest in equal remuneration. It is also important to note that in the construction sector we received mainly negative responses towards equal remuneration for women and men.

3.4 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES AND TREATMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND MEN

Equal opportunities and treatment of all women and men was an aspect of decent work which the interview guide asked specific questions about in case it did not come up naturally in the conversation. It was mainly discussed in relation to **equal treatment of women and men** in the workplace. As predicted, this topic did not come up spontaneously in relation to the individual principles of decent work, but employees considered it relevant for their sector and for decent work practices in their companies.

Many respondents focused on the appropriateness of certain type of jobs for women and girls. For example, in the mobile phone servicing sector, one employer said: ***“There aren’t many females in this sector. Girls in engineering! Doesn’t actually go! It looks odd. Imagine a female is working in the middle of the market! It would look weird! I haven’t seen any female who is skilled in hardware or software”*** (mobile services sector, Rangpur).

Employers also stated that villagers will criticize an employer who contracts women. While they acknowledged that ultimately villagers will place the responsibility with the family for allowing a female family member to work, and will look strangely at them, they felt that employers also need to be careful not to provoke disrespect from the community.

“Females can work here but the villagers won’t like it. They don’t want their daughters to work here. It looks odd (...). The problem is that families won’t allow their female members to work even if they want to. Villagers will point fingers at that family. Villagers are not at all welcoming when it comes to female workers. The family will lose its honour if a female member starts working. Females might work in towns, but that’s not going to happen here. Parents have to be more conscious and they have to understand that there is no problem if a female tries to work.” (Employer, carpentry sector, Rangpur)

In light of the social restrictions on women, employers often take a protective attitude towards their female employees. This was articulated most by employers in the construction sector and garment sector: ***“It’s hard to get female workers in this sector. Very few female workers come to this sector. If there are female workers, owners take necessary steps to protect them. Owners consider them as their sisters and are good with them. Usually, they are not given heavy work. They are allocated light work.”*** (Employer, construction sector, Barisal). It could be extrapolated that this protectiveness results in lower wages for women, as discussed above. The employers delegate low-paying jobs to women, based on their assumptions that women are not qualified and cannot be trained in certain male-dominated fields (electronics, construction, light engineering, etc.).

Other restrictions on women working include perceptions about how late it is appropriate for women to work, or the need for employees to arrange transport or accommodation for women when they need them to work late. Respondents were able to see more possibilities for employing women if they could have separate working places from men, including separate toilets and canteen, and organized transport to work. In line with this view, one respondent from the beauty sector and one respondent from the handicrafts sector said they preferred to hire only female workers in order to ensure their safety at work: ***“If there are male workers then females must be aware of their clothes. It might cause problems; that’s why we don’t recruit males. Men can work outside”*** (employer, handicrafts sector, Rangpur).

“Females can’t work late hours like males. Males can work until 12 midnight. Women have families. If a female worker works at night I can drop her off to her home.” (Garment sector, Rangpur).

“Females shouldn’t be allowed to work at night. You should set a time limit for female workers, from 7am to 5pm. All this should be done by government” (mobile services sector, Rangpur).

“If you consider our societal context, then we need to provide security on roads first, before we can bring women to work outside the home.” (Beauty sector, Barisal).

Another reason these two employers gave for preferring to employ female workers is that they feel women work harder: ***“Male workers [often] need a break to have a cigarette. Female workers don’t need these breaks. There are a lot of problems with male workers that are not true for female workers”*** (employer, handicrafts sector, Rangpur). In the country’s cultural context, hair and beauty salons are for same-sex clients only. Although not mentioned in the results, clients would probably not be comfortable receiving services from service providers of the opposite sex, which is presumably another important reason for only employing female staff in these businesses.

The patriarchal ideology underlying attitudes towards female employment leads to discrimination against women who want to work. One employer in the handicrafts sector stated that they don’t contract women who are pregnant or who have children aged under two because they have too much care responsibility. As care work is seen as the primary responsibility of women, and supportive systems are not in place, women need to juggle their responsibilities at home and to their employer. Employers complained that female workers bring their children to the workplace, saying that children disturb the work and it is also dangerous for them. Furthermore, they complained that female workers start late because they have to finish their domestic chores before work. In relation to this, employers stated that it is not worth investing in training for women and building their skills, since they won’t stay at work after marriage. Two respondents in the garment sector and two in the construction sector stated that they do not discriminate in recruitment. We cannot draw conclusions based on these findings, because the numbers are small, but they do suggest the diversity in opinions.

Summary: Employers in the informal sector are not yet aware of the issue of equal opportunities and treatment of all women and men. The respondents view the issue mostly from a protection angle, at times even leading to discrimination against female workers. This is an important aspect for the EYW programme to raise awareness on. When doing so, it is important to take a context-specific approach, respecting the safety of women at work. Employers feel it is important that third parties get involved to

realize decent work for women on an equal basis with men. They say that the government should create and enforce legislation to prevent sexual harassment of women, and that NGOs should raise awareness in the community and talk about social norms around women's economic empowerment to address inequality at work.

“Government and NGOs should come forward to ensure the rights of female workers.”
(Employer, construction sector, Barisal)

“NGOs should raise awareness about this. They should convince parents about this. You need to influence the parents first.” (Employer, carpentry sector, Rangpur)

In the discussions with the EYW team in Bangladesh, youth influencers identified this subject as the most interesting and potentially effective aspect of decent work to work on in terms of influencing the informal sector, as they think that social norms in this area are hindering the participation of young women in the workforce. Therefore, the EYW programme in Bangladesh will focus on gender equality in the workplace. Alongside this, Oxfam's EYW partners are working to promote the more equal distribution of care tasks between men and women, and feel that this focus on the informal sector can strengthen their work in the communities.

3.5 YOUNG WORKERS

The employers interviewed said even less about **equal treatment for young workers**. In the construction sector, some have a preference for employing older workers because they are more highly skilled: **“Those who are older are more experienced than younger ones. So older ones get a higher wage”** (employer, construction sector, Barisal). **“Young workers don't have the skills we need to flourish. They aren't skilled, and they get lower wages because of that”** (employer, construction sector, Barisal). However, others said they prefer young workers because they learn faster and can work with speed: **“Young workers learn faster than the old ones. Old ones have eye problems. They can't work with needles”** (employer, garment sector, Rangpur). In all sectors, skills are valued and respondents stated that skilled workers get higher wages and have more job stability.

“If a worker is skilled, he has job security. There are lots of garment factories out there. If you are skilled enough you can get a job in any of these factories. In Bangladesh, the demand for skilled labour is high. You have to gain these skills.” (Employer, garment sector, Barisal)

According to the employers, the demand for skilled workers is higher because they can do a better job, they don't need training and can attract more customers: **“Skilled workers can satisfy the customers. They can attract more customers. Unskilled workers can't do that. That's why the demand for skilled workers is high”** (employer, mobile services sector, Rangpur). **“In terms of skill, out of ten workers I will hire eight skilled workers, and two unskilled workers to assist the skilled ones”** (employer, garment sector, Barisal).

Unskilled workers receive on-the-job training. Respondents stated that this is costly and insecure, since some employees will leave after completion of the training. Therefore some employers pay very little

during the training phase, only allow training after one year of employment, or pay low wages until training costs have been recouped through the employee's work.

Summary: The equal treatment of young workers was not an explicit subject of the interviews with employers and the results do not give a very clear picture on this, with some respondents showing more positive views and others more negative ones. However, it is clear that skills are an important factor in recruitment in the informal sector, which provides an easy starting point for influencing: i.e. by showing the capabilities of youth as skilled workers. All employers involved in the study employ youth in the 15–29 age range. This is also promising for the youth who are trained in the EYW programme.

3.6 ASPECTS OF DECENT WORK THAT ARE NOT WIDELY CONSIDERED BY EMPLOYERS IN THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Other topics around decent work – such as **social security, freedom of association of workers, work that should be abolished** (*child labour, forced labour*) – were not brought up by most respondents, so are difficult to draw conclusions on. With regards to **social security**, some respondents in the construction sector stressed the importance of ensuring that medical aid is available in case of accidents. They stated that their company pays for the treatment costs. One construction company employer stated that sick leave is allowed, but is unpaid. He referred only to short-term sick leave (one or two days); long-term sick leave was not part of the discussion. **Freedom of association of workers** was only mentioned by the employers of three companies. The wording used by one employer is interesting; he talked about employers as “owners” who exploit their workers. Therefore, he says, workers should unite: **“There are some conflicts among the workers. They don’t get the wages they deserve from their owners. Owners try to exploit them. Workers should unite”** (employer, construction sector, Rangpur). Another employer said: **“I think a trade union for the workers will help the workers to get a decent working environment”** (employer, construction sector, Barisal). However, three respondents viewed freedom of association in relation to associations of employers, particularly in terms of benefitting their companies by ensuring that everyone follows the same rules.

 ***In Barisal we need an organization to maintain these rules and regulations. It would be great if all the salons followed certain rules.”*** (Employer, beauty sector, Barisal)

“Businessmen also have to work through various meetings to identify problems, and work accordingly.” (Employer, garment sector, Barisal)

“There is a union of owners. They can guide the interested owners.” (Employer, garment sector, Barisal)

Employers only mentioned **work that should be abolished** (such as child labour and slavery) in relation to practice in their own company. Two employers stated that they don't hire staff under the age of 18. Another employer admitted to recruiting workers from the age of 13, which is considered child labour under the ILO definition and is violating the rights of the child. Information about the companies involved in the research shows that four employ staff under the age of 15. However, we don't know what these children's work entails, and whether they are full staff or are only helping out for a little

pocket money. Further conversations are needed with the employers to clarify this concern.

4. CONCLUSION AND PROGRAMME RESPONSE

The EYW programme trains young people who, due to the work available where they live, are most likely to obtain jobs in the informal sector. Although we cannot control the working conditions of youth who graduate from the EYW programme, we seek to work with the informal sector to overcome challenges related to ensuring decent work for EYW youth and other workers. To enable the EYW team to link with the informal sector, this research aimed to gain an insight into the opinions, attitudes and practices of employers in the informal sector in relation to decent work. We wanted to explore the challenges and opportunities in creating decent work in the relevant informal sector areas and in the employees' own organizations, to formulate concrete suggestions for how the informal sector can translate the principles of decent work into daily practice. Figure 2 gives an overview of the importance that employers placed on each of the aspects of decent work in relation to their own company (the brighter the colour, the more an aspect was discussed). This is based on if and how employers brought these aspects up in the discussions.



Figure 2. Importance of aspects of decent work, according to employers in the informal sector

Decent work is a broad term that includes multiple aspects of work. However, the research shows that employers in the informal sector of Bangladesh have a narrow definition of decent work. They emphasize aspects related to work environment, safety, hygiene and health as the responsibility of the employer. In these aspects, they focus on concrete practices rather than formal policies and standards. The results suggest that change may be realized by starting decent work discussions around

companies' work environment, safety, hygiene and health. In order to protect and improve women's opportunities to access work, there needs to be a shift in attitudes, so that views on women's safety are not used to prevent women from working. It is also important to take a practical angle, to relate to the way in which employers consider this subject, rather than focusing on formal rules and regulations. The EYW programme in Bangladesh can link existing good practices to formal policies and standards to show how working conditions can be improved.

Decent wages and equal remuneration are both considered by the employers in the informal sector, but are not very popular subjects. The employers link decent wages to what they consider reasonable in relation to the profit that a company makes. Equality in remuneration is linked to skills of workers, and not to age or gender. Women are often seen as less skilled and therefore less able to perform certain (higher-paid) jobs. However, for SMEs that employ more women, we see more interest in equal remuneration. The research shows that influencing the informal sector on decent wages will be more effective when national standards are linked to relevant skills and competences. Furthermore, the construction sector may need additional attention, since employers in this sector are mostly negative towards equal remuneration of men and women.

Employers in the informal sector do not yet consider equal opportunities and treatment of all women and men as an important issue or something they need to improve on. The interviewees view gender inequality only in terms of the need to take measures for protection of women or to respect cultural traditions, sometimes leading to discrimination against female workers. It is important for the EYW programme to raise awareness on this aspect and to discuss social norms around unpaid and paid work in Bangladeshi society. When doing so, a context-specific approach is required, to respect the safety of women at work. In discussions with the EYW team in Bangladesh, youth influencers in the programme identified this as the most interesting and potentially effective aspect of decent work to influence on, since in their view this is the biggest obstacle to young women's participation in the labour market. Youth influencers also feel that in their work to influence the informal sector, a focus on equal opportunities for young women and men can do most to strengthen the EYW training programme.

4.1 WAYS FORWARD

In order to make the greatest contribution towards ensuring decent work in the informal sector, the Empower Youth for Work team in Bangladesh will:

- Incorporate the promotion of decent work in the informal sector into EYW's programmatic influencing strategy.
- Develop a manual on the decent work principles of the ILO, and deliver awareness training to both employers and employees so that both parties at least understand what decent work entails.
- Build the capacity of project staff and Youth Advisory Board members on decent work issues to enable them to work with informal sector employers and implement EYW's programmatic influencing strategy.

- Organize network meetings or dialogues involving stakeholders such as like-minded NGOs, local government and central government to put pressure on informal sector actors, relevant trade unions and policy makers, to ensure decent work conditions in all sectors.
- Engage Youth Advisory Boards in the monitoring and follow-up on progress of initiatives taken through the dialogues, and in meetings with network actors and stakeholders.

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