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# A Community Approach – Reaching the Workers, Strengthening Engagement – Social Media, Volunteers and Women Cafés





**The 2020 – 2024 interventions from the STILE project connected with many previous efforts to reach out, inform and strengthen the agency of workers towards a constructive social dialogue and more participation.**

One tool to achieve this had been and was also in this project the Women Cafés set up, run and implemented by NGOs. Another tool was to design and implement campaigns through different social media elements. This is where the community volunteers emerged. The third tool was to work directly with the Factory based Committees and strengthen their role as a relevant representation space of worker's interest.



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## Through the Different Interventions We Achieved, for Example:

- More than 5 million people reached
- Mili Drama Series (9 +1 Episodes), one of them with a famous production team, which lead to more than 4 million views!
- Onboarding and committing the local volunteers after they participated successfully in a TV quiz organized by the project.
- Coaching and training the factory committees offering the owners a permanent online access to the learning materials, which lead to different measures in factories (competition was organized to document it) and community level
- Educational Ludo board game (standard size and life-size)
- “Two Minutes School” is available through a YouTube channel for the workers.
- Training through Women’s Café to strengthen the workers voice
- Counseling and support for workers



STILE

An unimpressive, but highly representative story of the continuous challenges workers face is that of Khodeza Akter's (pseudonym). At 23 years old, Khodeza's journey from a rural area to Dhaka in search of livelihood culminates in a significant encounter with the Pallabi Women Cafe under the STILE project.

Initially finding stable employment in Dhaka's garment sector, Khodeza's life took an unexpected turn due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the closure of her workplace. Post-lockdown, she returned to Dhaka, joining Rio Fashion Limited. It was during this period that she learned about the services offered by the Pallabi Women Cafe, including training on crucial topics like anti-harassment.

Upon becoming aware of her rights, Khodeza learned about the service benefit rule, entitling workers to a one-off payment after five years of service. Encouraged by her peers and the legal counsellor at the Women's Cafe, she formally resigned from her previous employer to claim this benefit. However, the factory management initially refused to release the funds due to her. The legal counsellor and the cafe manager at Pallabi Women Cafe intervened, applying pressure on the factory management. This advocacy resulted in a partial victory for Khodeza, who received 35,000 taka of the 72,000 taka owed to her.

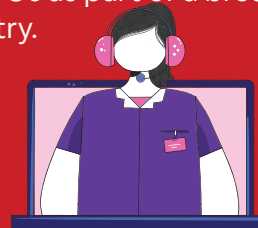


## Tool 1 Women Cafés as a Multidimensional Safe Space

In Bangladesh's textile and garment factories, 52% of the workforce consists of women. Workplace harassment is a common challenge, that many sensitive factory managements and multiple projects are addressing. These cases often stay unreported because of the fear of negative consequences affecting the victims working contract, societal stigmas, or other forms of harassment.

Women's Cafés were first established in 2010 by GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit) GmbH through different NGOs as part of a broader programme to support female workers within the RMG industry.

Currently, many NGOs include these in their portfolio, under names like Workers Café, One Stop Service Center, Workers Community Centers. These are rented 2 or 3 room apartments in the vicinity of various factories and workers will attend after their shifts in the evenings, for trainings or some other events. While it is true that the cafés initially provide a safe and supportive environment for female factory workers and have since evolved into a platform for women's empowerment, they are mostly visited upon invitation and when activities like legal assistance, trainings or other events take place.



### One Stop Service

Under the STILE project 2020-2024, 12 Women's Cafés across Dhaka and Chattogram were supported, managed by different NGOs: **SRS, Karmojibi Nari, OWDEB**, and **Songshoptaque**. Services include social interaction opportunities, training on environmental, social, legal, and gender-related topics, childcare facilities, counselling, and legal advice.

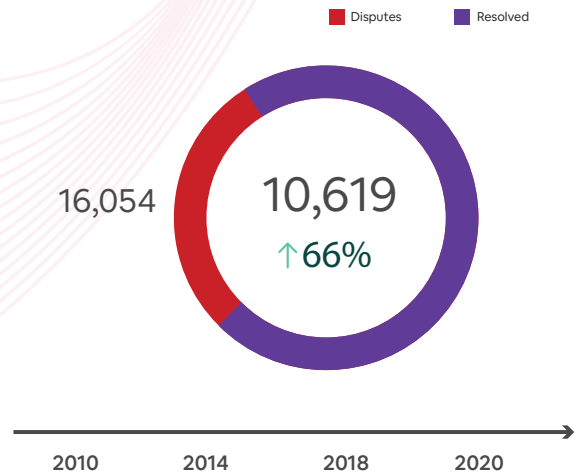



From January 2022 to October 2023, a total of 34,954 workers received training through these Women's Cafés. Advocacy efforts extend to community and factory levels through participation committees, anti-harassment committees, and safety committees. Notably, 207 conflicts with workers were successfully resolved during this period.

Workers often report grievances such as delayed wages, rude behaviour from supervisors or colleagues, dismissal, non-payment of overtime, denial of leave benefits, issuance of show-cause notices, sexual harassment, and family conflicts.

In a longer perspective, our GIZ database shows that between 2010 and 2020, a total of 16,054 disputes were filed in textile and RMG factories through Women Cafés. Of these, 10,619 (66%) were resolved, resulting in the recovery of BDT 381,522,762 on behalf of the workers.

### Dispute filed in Textile and RMG factories through Women Cafés





## Women's Cafés have Developed the Following Strategies for Addressing Worker Grievances:

- Café managers engage directly with factory management to resolve issues.
- If initial efforts fail, cases are escalated to NGO lawyers, who intervene with the factory.
- Legal notices are issued if factories do not respond positively, and legal action may be pursued through labour courts.
- In cases involving family-related grievances, café managers facilitate discussions and encourage victims to seek legal assistance when necessary.





**At the end of the project, the unsolved challenged remained :** how can these service be sustainable? They fully depend on project funds. We have tried for more than a decade to explore different avenues of income generation.

**Our four NGO partners developed the following sustainability hypotheses:**

Monthly costs of running one such space amounts to 200.000 – 500.000 BDT (aprox 1700 – 4000 EUR) if it directly engages 200 workers and indirectly 1000.



Since the workers are in the factories during daytime, this is the space for eventual income generation, through:

- Primary School & Drawing class session with fees.
- Pre-primary School & Drawing. /Cultural Activities based centre for the kids ( 3 to 6 years) of garment/ industrial workers where admission subsidised fee per student TK. 50 Tk.
- Cosmetic corner-shop & Beauty Parlor for training and service purpose.
- Day care center.
- Sewing Machines for income generation of Aged-out or Unemployed RMG workers.
- Secondhand Wardrobe and Washing Machine Service
- Workers Catering Service.
- (Getting sponsorship).

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Considering the sustainability challenge, the upcoming project (2024-2027) will continue to engage, with a special focus on legal assistance – and consolidating the core of the second tool: the community based volunteers.

## Tool 2 Campaigns, Media and Community volunteers

The original project setup included a broad outreach to workers and a specific process for reacting to the pandemic.

Two parallel communication efforts came together: in the context of a Covid-Prevention campaign, “Ami Nargis” (I am Nargis) was created and later developed into the core of a massive Facebook community. That group was attracted by different quizzes. Winners of these quizzes later participated in a full TV show. From the participants of that TV game show, 15 individuals emerged as the leading community volunteers. Triggering their commitment enabled implementing a multitude of activities on the ground.

For conveying the messages under the Women Café support, another character, “Mili” was created that was at the center of storytelling which culminated on a YouTube based episode that reached more than 4 ml views: [link](#).







Employing the concept of infotainment, both approaches present the life of fictional workers, Nargis and Mili, through a comic series and acted YouTube episodes, effectively conveying important topics like grievance mechanisms, the potential of factory committees or, for example, specific protective workwear in an engaging manner.

By consuming online content and learning about the issue of potential workplace harassment in a safe space such as the home, the hurdle of a Women Cafés visit can be reduced. Connecting the infotainment to social media groups also allowed the workers to get informed about trainings as well as community activities surrounding this topic.

While the Mili community was triggering the active involvement in Women Café based activities and the Nargis community extended beyond the pandemic prevention thanks to the growing involvement of the community-based volunteers, ultimately both campaigns aimed for engagement in changing things for the better, both at factories and in the surrounding communities. Many measures could be traced to this engagement. The most successful factory-based measures were selected in a competition with an award ceremony that brought together management and workers representation. Examples:





## Tool 3 Factory Committees

Considering the challenges involved in unionization and workers representation, the STILE project tried to enhance the eco-system for social dialogue and to strengthen the different factory-based committees: Participation, Safety and Complaints/Anti-Harassment.

MoUs were signed with BGMEA and BKMEA and Member factories. The project updated the association trainers, who then unfolded training and coaching elements at the factory levels. This included not only the general aspects of social dialogue or the specific mandates of the different committees, but also a comprehensive documentation through protocols of meetings, proposals and addressing specific issues.

The documentation of the Committee topics and decisions should be filed with the Department of Labor (which does not always happen). Many factories still seem worried to document any wrongdoings to avoid scaring brands or buyers away. However, in times of enhanced human rights due diligence, constructively engaging with risks and harassment can be an asset.

Acting through the BGMEA/BKMEA trainers and onboarding the owners/management by providing them virtual access to all learning materials, was a relevant success factor of this part of the intervention.



## Data on Committee Interventions

Handing over:

- The Woman Café method is being implemented in many projects from different donors in Bangladesh. STILE supported a learning exchange with similar approaches in Myanmar and Cambodia.
- Under the STILE II phase (2024-2027) the intensification and scaling of the community-based volunteers with a focus on referral services (to legal assistance, psychosocial support and others) is foreseen.
- The community-based volunteers have been cooperating with BBC Media under the Oporajita project (H&M Foundation) and can be used for (a) disseminating specific messages in the communities and (b) getting authentic feedback for research or monitoring perspectives from within the apparel workers communities.

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