

Tal av Nazma Akter, ordförande Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation, Bangladesh

Thank you brother and comrade Anders and also congratulations to my sister, elected the IF Metall president and general secretary. This means the union is getting big power, because women are in leadership.

Thank you also for inviting me to speak on behalf of workers in Asia and especially South Asia and Bangladesh at the IF Metall congress and I am very happy and proud to be here. IF Metall is our long-time friend and I have been working with them since more than 15 years and they are supporting us in solidarity as well as in lots of technical matters.

Today I am talking on behalf of Asia where the whole world is getting 80 percent of their production and where a number of females are working. Most of the countries are creating job opportunities for the rural migrant, moving to the urban economy to get a job. These are the advances, this is the women's empowerment, and women are gradually coming to the union movement for membership. So this is a good opportunity for us.

There are big challenges in our country as well as in Asia, because we are cheap labour. We are not getting sufficient wages, we are hungry, we do not have sufficient food, and that is the exploitation we suffer globally as well as in our country.

If we are talking about Bangladesh, we are in the ready-made garment sector. We are five million people working in the sector, where 80 percent are female. Minimum salary is €60 per month, which is not fair. That is why we need to fight to get better living wages and better living conditions.

This cheap labour makes for disaster. In 2013, I remember when 1,137 workers died in Rana Plaza and thousands of workers were severely injured. This kind of exploitation is created by the Corporate in Bangladesh as well as other countries.

We have to overcome this. Thanks to the European Union and also USA and other countries, who are supporting and trying to build good binding signings in accordance with the IndustriALL Global Union, more than 220 brand companies are signing, from across the world: Europe, USA, Australia, and some other countries.

After Rana Plaza there are lots of initiatives, lots of things going on. Before 2013 there were no trade unions organising or getting the trade union registration. After 2013 we are organising unions in Bangladesh, nearly 450 unions have been registered where 90 percent of the unions are affiliated with the IndustriALL Global Union.

We are fighting, still we have big challenges. The unions are not accepted, not recognised by the management or government, but gradually we are improving. A number of unions have signed agreements to increase salary and improve working conditions as well as other benefits, so these are the things and the journey we are doing in Bangladesh.

As you know, in 2015 the Global Framework Agreement was signed by IndustriALL Global Union and IF Metall. In April 2016, we had a workshop on the Global Framework Agreement in Bangladesh with IF Metall, IndustriALL and H&M, who have signed. In the workshop we talked about how we need to work on these issues, how we have to reduce the problems, how we can get a better industrial relationship together. In this regard we started work from 2016 and in a number of factories where the workers lost their jobs, we are trying to reinstate them or get the proper compensation.

Many women are exploited for maternity issues. We are also trying to ensure their maternity benefits and maternity leave, and also we have action plans like long-term/short-term freedom of association and collective bargaining, and building capacity for mid-level management as well as the union.

So these are the issues and the steps we are taking. In December 2016, when the workers raised their voices to increase their salary, the government thought no, this is not the time for this, and the manufacturers were not eager to ensure increase of salary. In Ashulia there was a riot and curfew. The police and the military all came to the industrial zone and suddenly tried to stop our union activities. 35 union leaders and workers were

arrested, all union offices and activities were banned, more than 1,600 workers were terminated, illegally dismissed, there was nothing to do. This is very difficult and dangerous for us because we cannot raise our voices, we cannot do anything, we are not happy with them.

The last few months were a very difficult time. We found IndustriALL Global Union supporting us and we are working on together. These are crucial issues, but we found a very strong and good thing when we signed the Global Framework Agreement.

We are happy with H&M signing the agreement. I also request other companies who have not signed this kind of agreement to please sign. It makes it easier to solve the problem. Sweden is a very important country for Bangladesh as well as other countries, because H&M is a big producer in Asia. This is why I request other countries to also support and sign the agreement.

Also, the Swedish government has started a programme in Bangladesh after the Rana Plaza collapse to establish social dialogue and industrial relations, and they have also taken other training and resourcing initiatives.

The Swedish government and IF Metall supporting us is very important and good for us for the industrial relation and to build union power. This is one country trying to help, but it is not sufficient enough because in Bangladesh, as well as the whole of Asia, we are producing 80 percent of the global production. This is why we need more respect and dignity, because the workers getting €60 per month needs to be changed and avoided. If this does not happen, what happened at Rana Plaza will happen again and again, maybe in Bangladesh, maybe in another country.

Most of the exploitation happens to women, because as you know, in this world, especially in Asia, our working women who are producing for the multinational companies or fashion retailers, are malnourished. Women are supposed to work for 60 years, but after 30 years they are automatically retired because they have no energy, they have no power, they have no health. The workers are getting very ill and this is not a fair world.

This is why we need to organise female leadership, we need to respect the female, and we need better education for the working people and especially the children, because our children are in a very vulnerable situation.

Look at the multinational yearly turnover and how much goes to the workers? From the t-shirt we make for 25 US dollars, \$3 go to Bangladesh or another production country. Where do the other \$22 go? That is the question we need to raise today.

Our workers are hungry, our workers are beggars, and our workers, when they raised their voices, were put in prison, the union activities were stopped, they lost their jobs, and a number of female pregnant women were also fired during this time, because they raised their voices for a higher salary. That is why we need to work together and show support and solidarity everywhere.

Nowadays, it is a big challenge we face globally. Union density is very important, but we found that the unions are not very united, we are not organising. Because the corporate power is the political power, it is the same platform. Look at the US election, look at Bangladesh where 80 percent of parliament members are the business people. How do we fight, if we are not united, if we do not raise our voices?

We need to be the global action together, because when the Multinational is talking they are united and use the same voice, but when we, the Union, talk, maybe our talk is different. So that is why we need to work together and to fight together.

As our brother Valter said, the IndustriALL Global Union has guiding principles, like defending workers' rights, building a union power, confronting the global capital, fighting precarious work, and sustainable industrial employment. If this is really what we want to do, we need to be united and we need to be strong.

Last month we had an executive meeting in Geneva with IndustriALL Global Union. We heard from the brother and sister in Brazil that they called for a general strike for their rights. This is why need a *global* general strike for the workers' rights. If we do a general strike all over the world, then the Multinational, all the corporate power and the political people, will realise how powerful we are.

Without us they cannot do anything, they cannot make the money. But we need that kind of strength and solidarity, and we need to take action. Please come and let us work together and fight for our rights, because without a fight it will not happen. Nobody is handing this kind of opportunity to us.

That is why we need your support, and as brother Anders said, I am the garment workers, I am the workers. We produce your goods, we produce your clothes, so I need living wages, I need freedom of association, I need respect, I need decent working conditions, I need a decent life, and I also need leadership as a woman. Because without it does not work. Please ensure that. This is the union, brother and sister, we need support from country to country.

Bangladesh has problems, they are trying to ship the business to Myanmar, from Myanmar to Vietnam, from Vietnam to Cambodia. They are playing with us, but we cannot do anything. So our exploitation is not only of Bangladesh, exploitation is moving all over the world.

How can we support and show solidarity to the workers in Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, and also in Africa, if we are not united, as long as we are not supporting, not giving women power and respect? It will not work. That is why, being a worker, being a woman, we need respect, we need fair wages, equality. Yesterday a brother from Sweden said that Sweden still has problems with the gender gap and female workers not getting equal wages. This is a shame.

So how do we overcome, how do we get better wages and better respect? Respect is an important thing, because cheap labour is not respect. That is why we need to get equal wages and a decent working life, because most of the female workers are living in the slum. Sanitation, nutrition and education are very challenging, because people are coming from the countryside and are migrants, but they are not respected.

We have no sufficient education, no sufficient food, and we cannot organise. How do we organise and how we can help the people in this world, because that is the solidarity we need? We need to work together and we need your support, we need your help, and we need to be informed. We see how the Global Framework is helping. IndustriAll are always ready to help people as well as companies, because we need sustainable industrial relations.

So that is why we have to work together and, again, please pay fair and respect us and freedom of association. In every factory, if women can raise their voices, if women can negotiate, that is a big, good thing, because women can do anything; they cook, they make the money, they do everything, they have education, they have power, they have a strong voice.

Please come together and show solidarity. Thank you all for giving me the opportunity to talk about our struggle, our fighting, and also thank you to the Swedish government and IF Metall for supporting us. And thank you to my great brothers Anders and Valter, and to all my sisters and brothers. Please come and let us all together do the global strike or take global action.

Thank you very much.