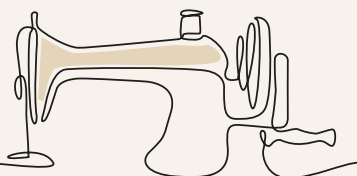


## Impact Story 3:

# IMPROVING THE NUTRITION STATUS OF READYMADE GARMENT (RMG) WORKERS IN BANGLADESH

## THE OPPORTUNITY

The ILO [reports](#) that over **3 billion** people are employed worldwide – **58%** of the global population spends at least one third of their adult life at the workplace. This makes occupational health a critical determinant of overall health and the work environment represents an enormous opportunity to improve nutrition. The messages, facilities, and food employees have access to in the workplace can powerfully shape their nutrition outcomes.



Evidence shows that improved nutrition improves workforce productivity. So, so it is logical in the short and longer-term that improved nutrition in the workplace should be of interest to businesses in terms of their status of responsible business and profitability. Evidence gathered by GAIN, mostly from higher income work settings, shows that the benefit cost ratios of investing in employee health range between 3:1-6:1. Improved workers' loyalty, reduced turnover, improved productivity are derived through improved workers' diet and nutrition. Could this be replicated in a lower income setting?

### Individual level outcomes observed:

- Increased job satisfaction
- Reduced sick days
- Increased wage earnings
- Better nutrition knowledge
- Higher consumption of healthy foods
- Adequate intake of energy and micro-nutrients
- Weight loss and mitigating the risks of non-communicable diseases (e.g. diabetes)
- Increased duration of exclusive breastfeeding

Figure 1: Individual level benefits from workforce nutrition (source: GAIN)

### Business level productivity outcomes observed:

- Reduced absenteeism
- Enhanced productivity
- Reduced medical costs from 25-30%
- Returns on investment of up to 6:1
- Significantly lowered rates of accidents and mistakes

Figure 2: Business level benefits from workforce nutrition (source: GAIN)

After the [Rana Plaza tragedy](#) in 2013 in Bangladesh, the Government of Bangladesh developed new standards for garment factory workers' conditions. GAIN, together with implementing partners: Business Social Responsibility (BSR), Innovations for Poverty Actions (IPA) Change Associates Ltd, Sobujer Ovijan Foundation (SOF), Research, Evaluation and Development Initiative (READI) and, the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, Bangladesh (ICDDR,B- evaluation partner) along with responsible Brands and Buyers worked collectively with the Government of Bangladesh (GOB)<sup>1</sup> to incorporate workforce nutrition programs as a priority.

The Readymade Garment (RMG) industry is the major economic driver of Bangladesh contributing to about **84%** of export earnings and **11.17%** of GDP (Gross Domestic Product)<sup>2</sup>. According to the latest, Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) statistics, Bangladesh's apparel exports surged 30.30 per cent to 23.99 USD billion from July 2021 to January 2022. Bangladesh is the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China. This sector employs about 3.5 million people and almost **61%** are female. Despite the strategic importance of the sector to the economy and to the well-being of millions of families, eight in ten ready-made garment workers in Bangladesh suffer from anaemia<sup>3</sup>, a condition which impairs both health and productivity.

1 GAIN has worked in collaboration with the Ministry of Labour and Employment (MoLE) and its associated agencies (Department for Inspection of Factories and Establishments (DIFE) and Department of Labour (DoL), and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) and its line agencies (National Nutrition Services (NNS), Institute of Public Health Nutrition (IPHN) and Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS), and the Institute of Nutrition and Food Science (INFS) taking the Workforce Nutrition agenda forward.

2 Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) statistics

3 <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31163648/>

## THE SOLUTION

Together with implementing partners and the Government, and working with 82,000 workers in 24 ready-made garment factories each employing 4,000-6,000 workers (mostly women of reproductive age), GAIN designed a Workforce Nutrition (WFN) model called "SWAPNO", a Bangla word (meaning "Dream"), which stands for "Strengthening Workers' Access to Pertinent Nutrition Opportunities".



Figure 3: Ready-made garment factory workers in Bangladesh

A series of interventions for the workers are implemented under SWAPNO:

- Boosting the desirability of healthy diets, nutrition and why it matters. Peer-to-Peer worker learning approach is the most effective method of providing education without hampering production time in a RMG factory setting.
- Creating a healthy food environment at the workplace to enable access to nutritious and safe foods. GAIN works together with the factory and the national experts to improve the nutritional content of meals provided, or alternatively to establish a food provision system, creating access for workers to a nutritious and safe meal or snack. All improvements in meals are either cost-neutral or at an acceptable cost to management.
- Diversify lunches to include fortified rice, edible oil fortified with Vitamin A and iodized salt instead of regular rice, oil, salt, and other food items.



Figure 4: Ready-made garment workers at lunch in a factory

- Facilitates the procurement of Iron Folate Acid (IFA) tablets for factories to be able to offer these to all female workers at no extra cost to them. Whilst the government of Bangladesh has set up a scheme in which any woman of reproductive age is able to request IFA tablets from local health clinics free of cost, many garment workers do not use this service owing to time constraints.
- Co-ownership of the programme by factory management and workers is key to success and sustainability and so we support the factory-led Nutrition Improvement Committee (NIC).
- Creating an enabling environment through capacity building of government functionaries and working closely with local and national government, as well as key private sector stakeholders to move the WFN agenda forward.

## THE IMPACT

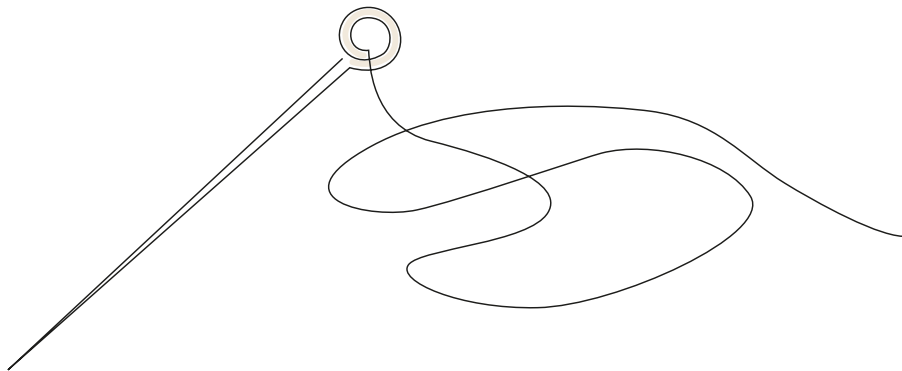
An [independent study](#) commissioned by GAIN and undertaken by the International Centre for Diarrhoeal Diseases in Bangladesh (icddr,b) examined anaemia rates in non-pregnant female ready-made garment factory workers in 4 major factories where the workforce nutrition program had run for 10 months.

The results showed that anaemia rates of women workers can effectively be reduced through a combination of interventions over a significant period. The results are striking for factories that provided improved lunches, iron folate acid (IFA) supplementation, and enhanced communication on nutrition the "difference in difference"<sup>4</sup> changes in the percent of workers with anaemia was **32%**. For factories that only provided IFA plus enhanced communication the change in anaemia rates was **12%**.

1 Difference in Difference compares the changes in outcomes (e.g. anaemia rates) over time between a population enrolled in a program (the intervention factories) and a population that is not (the comparison factories)

Therefore, anaemia reduced most significantly when the factory provided a freshly prepared, nutritionally enhanced diverse lunch with fortified rice combined with a weekly IFA tablet. But even among factories that do not regularly provide lunch, the provision of IFA and nutrition education was able to reduce anaemia significantly, but the rate of reduction was not as high as in lunch meal factories.

**Scaling of impacts:** Within Bangladesh, our workforce nutrition programmes are growing. Besides, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Government of the Netherlands, VF Corporation (from 2019) and the Auchan Foundation (from 2022) are supporting the scale-up within the readymade garment sector in Bangladesh. Bangladesh Government appreciates that a nutritious food system can play a vital role to ensure the health and wellbeing of the ready-made garment workers for sustainable growth of this sector. Following the ground-breaking approach of the Second National Plan of Action on Nutrition (NPAN2), the Workforce Nutrition model brings a collective action of ready-made garment factory owners, buyers, regulatory authorities, and development partners that is required to ensure access to nutritious and safe food. In collaboration with the Government of Bangladesh, GAIN will facilitate the scaling up of this model to workers in various workplaces by strengthening a Workforce Nutrition Alliance in Bangladesh led by the Government.



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