

Business, responsibly

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Philanthropy and a respect for human rights go hand in hand with corporate goals



Protecting the rights of workers is imperative to making profits

Photo- RAJIB DHAR

In Bangladesh, businesses could play a vital role in protecting human rights through corporate social responsibility. We all know that the echo of businesses' role towards violating human rights has attained global attention after the Rana Plaza tragedy and the Tazreen Fashion fire incident.

The aftermath of these events have put enormous pressure on corporations and businesses, and, as a result, foreign buyers have introduced several compliance mechanisms for Bangladeshi textile exporters.

Those industrial disasters affirm strong testimony over how profit-making firms violate human rights in our country.

In general, it would not be an exaggeration that, alongside many positive contributions to our economy, our business sector is not free from the accusation of violating human rights, and is guilty of discrimination, sexual harassment, disregard for the workers' health and safety, blocking the formation of a trade union, and so on and so forth.

The point of hope, however, is that, despite being slow, some of our businesses are acting in more responsible ways, as a result of which concepts such as CSR have become common in our country.

The concept of corporate social responsibility refers to something where companies "do good" for the different stakeholders.

In Bangladesh, businesses have been engaged in humanitarian and philanthropic activities for a long time as part of their CSR. This practice is also rooted in the country's Islamic traditions – like offering Zakat to the poor.

However, what is lacking from this practice is a human rights-based approach, which requires businesses to show considerable respect for human rights.

This will increase access to the global market, and thereby increase profits.

There are three ways in which Bangladesh could integrate human rights-sensitive CSR. Firstly, the formation of trade unions is a major pre-condition to protecting human rights in workplaces.

Trade unions are not at a popular concept in our country.

If we concentrate deeply on the subject matter, we can see that in Bangladesh, employees and labourers don't really have enough rights to form or join trade unions. In most cases, authorities consider trade unions a problem.

The second way of establishing a human rights-sensitive CSR is the adoption of international CSR standards in the country. In Bangladesh, we mainly follow three international standards in this regard: ISO guidelines, UN global compact principles, and OECD guidelines.

Bangladesh has integrated itself into the global market from 1990s onwards, and till today, we have failed to formulate a CSR policy of international standards.

This is not at all inspiring for maintaining global competitiveness. Therefore, we need to develop a national CSR policy as soon as possible.

Otherwise, we would increasingly face challenges in the case of our acceptance in the global market.

We have already noticed how buyers in the RMG sector have threatened Bangladesh with quitting after the Rana Plaza tragedy. The only reason behind this is not having CSR policy.

Finally, we could also use our existing policies. Bangladesh already has many policies for different sectors which can protect human rights successfully.

These include: the Factories Act, 1965; Industrial Relations Ordinance, 1969; Employment of Labour Act, 1965; the Environment Conservation Rules, 1997; the Insurance Act, 1938; the Banking Companies Act, 1991, among others.

These policies underpin some responsibilities of businesses towards different stakeholders.

It will suffice to say that the overall rights situation in the Bangladeshi labour market is far from satisfactory, which is continually reiterated by our global business partners.

A formulation of a national CSR policy in accordance with international standards may build confidence in this regard.

Because CSR is not just a philanthropic issue, it is a long term strategic document for society and the environment, which will facilitate Bangladesh's ongoing journey towards attaining the sustainable development goals.

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