

EXISTING WORKFORCE NUTRITION POLICIES IN BANGLADESH AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT



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KEY MESSAGES

- Most people spend 1/3 of their adult lives at work. By leveraging the workplace as a connector to people, we can bring access to and knowledge about healthy nutrition to millions of people around the globe through **workforce nutrition**.
- Major opportunities to further expand workforce nutrition policies include **setting nutritional standards** for institutional canteens and/or incentivising subsidized healthy meal options through **Fair Price Shops**, including nutrition indicators in **labour inspections**, and requiring provisioning of **medical facilities** on factory premises.
- With supportive policies in place, even greater impact can be achieved when ensuring minimal **accountability** and **compliance mechanisms** against these policies.

SETTING THE SCENE

Malnutrition in all its forms, from undernutrition to micronutrient deficiencies and overnutrition, is a global public health burden. It is estimated that 2 in 3 women of reproductive age are affected by nutrient deficiencies¹. In Bangladesh, the Global Nutrition Report in 2021 highlights the high prevalence of anaemia among women of reproductive age (37%) with limited progress on meeting targets to reduce Non-Communicable Diseases such as diabetes². Although the rate is lower than the regional average, prevalences of overweight and obesity are increasing rapidly among adolescents (9% and 3%), adult women (22% and 6%) and adult men (18% and 3%). Never has there been a greater need to engage all actors and options to address the malnutrition burden the world faces. People spend one-third of their adult lives at work, therefore, by leveraging the workplace, access to and knowledge about healthy nutrition can be brought to millions of people around the globe. Workforce nutrition is an opportunity to deliver proven benefits for employers, workers and communities. A definition and framework for workforce nutrition can be found [here](#).

In recent years, Bangladesh has piloted a number of workforce nutrition interventions that have generated much interest among country-based manufacturing organisations as well as global buyers, especially in the Ready-made Garments (RMG) sector³. Improved action in the policy arena could help start or scale up existing workforce nutrition programmes and contribute to addressing the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth).

WIN-WIN-WIN APPROACH

As elaborated in a [GAIN evidence brief](#)⁴, poor-quality diets and insufficient food quantity are linked to reduced work capacity. This suggests that the malnutrition burden can be partly addressed through a win-win-win approach which improves individual lives, business outcomes, and national economies. Individual outcomes observed as a result of workforce nutrition programmes have included increased job satisfaction, reduced sick days, higher consumption of healthy foods, and increased duration of exclusive breastfeeding, amongst others. Business outcomes are reduced

¹ Stevens, G. A., Beal, T., Mbuya, M. N., Luo, H., Neufeld, L. M., Addo, O. Y., ... & Young, M. F. (2022). Micronutrient deficiencies among preschool-aged children and women of reproductive age worldwide: a pooled analysis of individual-level data from population-representative surveys. *The Lancet Global Health*, 10(11), e1590-e1599.

² Global Nutrition Report. Bangladesh. 2021. <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/asia/southern-asia/bangladesh/>

³ Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition (GAIN). Improving the Nutritional Status and Work Productivity of Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh: A Pilot Study. 2017





⁴ Nyhus Dhillon, C. & Stone, G. The evidence for workforce nutrition programmes. 2019. <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/evidence-workforce-nutrition-programmes>

absenteeism, enhanced productivity, reduced medical costs, and significantly lower rates of accidents and mistakes, which together could lead to an increase in the national GDP ⁵. **Therefore GAIN, as part of the the Workforce Nutrition Alliance, urges Bangladesh’s regulators and policymakers to support employers by further developing and implementing public policies for improved workforce nutrition.**

IMPROVING WORKFORCE NUTRITION-RELATED POLICIES

An outline of the four nutrition pillars for workforce nutrition and the related existing policies in Bangladesh is presented in Table 1. Based on an analysis of these policies, the table also provides opportunities to further employer-driven approaches to improve nutrition among formal worker populations.

Table 1: Existing policies and opportunities for policies on workforce nutrition in Bangladesh for the different nutrition pillars based on analysis of national labour and nutrition policies

Nutrition pillar	Existing workforce nutrition-related policy components	Opportunities to further strengthen policies on workforce nutrition
Healthy Food at Work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In establishments with >100 workers, an adequate number of canteens needs to be established ⁶. Workers representation in canteen management committee is mandated ⁷. There is reference to the supply of nutritious foods by the canteen ⁸. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mandate employers, across more sectors, to apply minimal nutritional requirements to canteen offerings based on Dietary Guidelines for Bangladesh ⁹. Incentivise employers to subsidise healthy meal options available at or near the workplace. This may include Fair Price Shops to make safe and nutritious foods more available to workers. Include and standardise of nutrition-related indicators in the checklist of Labour Inspectors.
Nutrition education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The need for public awareness campaigns on healthy eating choices is reflected in policy ¹⁰. Health promotion and risk reduction through healthy diets and exercise is identified as an action area ¹¹. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Incentivise employers and worksites to reinforce government mass media campaigns for workers on healthy eating and good nutrition.
Health Checks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No direct reference found under existing laws, rules, or policies on the inclusion of health checks in worksites, aside from occupational health checks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require employers to cover workers' health check costs and/or of nutrition counselling (either for all workers or at least those at risk, as identified by health checks). Require employers to make provisions for setting up a medical center in the factory premises (encompassing both regular and emergency care).
Breastfeeding Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Law requires 16 weeks of maternity leave (8 weeks prior to birth and 8 weeks post birth) ¹². Law requires full pay provided during leave for first and second child (not for subsequent children) ¹³. Law mentions provisioning of a conducive atmosphere for breastfeeding and a separate screened room where breastfeeding can be carried out with privacy ¹⁴. Establishments with over 40 workers must provide a creche or child support facilities ¹⁵. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extend maternity leave to 18 weeks as per International Labour Organization recommendation 191. Include of nursing breaks/reduction of working hours for breastfeeding mothers. Consider parental leave for supporting spouses, suggested for at least 2 weeks. Require non-dismissal policy of women who announce their pregnancy through to at least 1 month post maternity leave.

⁵ Lambrechts, M. & B. Stacy. Increasing productivity and reducing vulnerable employment. Atlas of the Sustainable Development Goals. 2020. <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdgoalatlas/goal-8-decent-work-and-economic-growth/>

⁶ Bangladesh Labour Act. 2006. Section 92.

⁷ Bangladesh Labour Act. 2006. Section 92 (2)(b).

⁸ Bangladesh Labour Rules. 2015. rule 89.

⁹ Bangladesh Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Diabetes, Endocrine and Metabolic Disorders (BIRDEM). (2013). Food-based Dietary Guidelines for Bangladesh.

¹⁰ Bangladesh Second Contry Investment Plan 2016-2020.

¹¹ Bangladesh Multi-sectoral Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Non-communicable Diseases 2018-2025.

¹² Bangladesh Labour Act. 2006, Amendment 2018. Section 46.

¹³ Bangladesh Labour Act. 2005. Section 46, 48(2).

¹⁴ Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. Section 98 (1). rule 37 and rule 94(2) Bangladesh Labour Rules. 2015.

¹⁵ Definition creche: u/s Factories Act 1965, definition children's room u/s 94 Bangladesh Labour Rules. 2015.

A CALL TO ACTION

Bangladesh has taken several positive steps regarding workforce nutrition policies by mandating food provisioning through canteens, including workers representation, and improving breastfeeding and maternity entitlements. Further refining existing workforce nutrition policies to encourage minimal but broad workforce nutrition standards would help to address the burden of malnutrition. Essential considerations include the incentivization of subsidizing healthy meal options near the workplace, for example through Fair Price Shops, as well as the uptake of nutrition-indicators in the Labour Inspection checklist. In addition, refinements should support requirements for medical centres and subsidized facilities on factory premises to facilitate nutrition-focused health checks. Finally, even greater impact can be considered when expanding existing policies to include reaching workers in supply chains (as opposed to only those directly employed by the company) as well as ensuring minimal accountability and compliance mechanisms against all policies. When combined, these actions will contribute to healthier lives of citizens, improved commercial results and more stable labour relations.
