

★ FEATURE

From Planning to Implementation: The Alliance Worker Helpline Hits Major Milestone

After months of intensive planning and stakeholder engagement, the Alliance Worker Helpline, or Amader Kotha, is up and running. Amader Kotha is a safe, reliable communication channel workers across Bangladesh can use to report on issues at their workplace. The information collected by Amader Kotha serves as a business intelligence tool for factory managers that helps save lives and protect property. Amader Kotha relies on the simple use of mobile phone technology.



Doug Cahn and Tom Rausch, together with several members of the project team, at the inaugural Amader Kotha team meeting in Dhaka, April 2014.

Our team focused on several aspects during the projects planning phase. These include the development of operational protocols, creation of training materials, recruitment of Helpline representatives and building of telephony infrastructure.

The project team also listened carefully to the needs of manufacturers and Alliance member companies. Consultations took place with the BGMEA (February 2014), Alliance member company representatives in Dhaka (February and April 2014) and Alliance member companies in New York (March 2014). Our team received valuable input from Alliance staff and the Alliance Helpline Subcommittee throughout the planning phase.

Fifty factories have been selected to participate in the project's (six-month) pilot period. All factories are geographically concentrated in the areas of Savar, Gazipur and Dhaka city, and produce for more than one Alliance member company. The Alliance arranged for a single Dhaka-based Alliance company representative to act as the liaison between the Amader Kotha team, the pilot factory and other Alliance companies.

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AMADER KOTHA: Enabling Trust of Managers and Workers

Creating an environment of trust between workers and managers in factories is a challenge in many supply chains across the world. This is particular true in Bangladesh, where a history of labor unrest and safety disasters has underscored tensions. Implementing a Helpline in this context can be a challenge.

Factory managers legitimately fear deliberate false claims about their factory, which could be made when information is provided to the Helpline. If not managed properly, with adequate precautions for validation, false claims could unfairly affect a factory's business.

Equally, workers fear that factory managers may not support their use of a Helpline since information from workers, however truthful, could be viewed as unwelcome. Workers are concerned that intimidation, or even termination of employment, could result.

To address this dilemma, Amader Kotha will work with factory managers to adopt policies

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TECHNOLOGY BRIEFING

Amader Kotha was built on top of a technology platform designed for usability, reliability and scale. The platform employs a mix of voice over internet protocol (VoIP), short message service (SMS) and interactive voice response (IVR) technologies to deliver a seamless experience to callers. It enables callers anywhere in Bangladesh to reach an Amader Kotha representative 24/7, and allows our representatives to close the loop with callers via voice, text and/or IVR-driven “customer satisfaction” surveys. All interactions with callers are captured and saved in an encrypted database, and can be accessed via a web-based graphic user interface (GUI) both by Amader Kotha staff located in Dhaka, as well as the larger, global Helpline team.



An Amader Kotha representative receives training on call in-take procedures.

Redundancy has been built into the platform at all levels to ensure downtime is avoided in the event of service outages. Multiple work stations, servers, power backups and service providers have been incorporated into the platform for this purpose. This is particularly relevant in the Dhaka context, since power outages and interruptions to telephonic communication are common place.

At present, the platform supports three Amader Kotha representatives operating simultaneously. However, it has the bandwidth to support as many as twenty in the future. Furthermore, the platform was architected with learning and process iterations in mind. We expect the technology needs of Amader Kotha to change over time and the platform has been designed in a way that new modules and expanded capacity can be easily integrated.

A LOOK AHEAD

Over the next several months, our team will be visiting factories to introduce Amader Kotha to factory managers and workers. After launching the service in 50 factories during the pilot period, the goal is to then rapidly expand coverage after that.

The in-factory training will begin by explaining Amader Kotha to factory managers and planning with them to organize an approach to worker training that will limit production disruption. The project team will use a train-the-trainer approach to spread the news about the Helpline throughout the factory.

Amader Kotha representatives respond to calls from workers beginning at 8:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. on workdays and weekends. An Amader Kotha representative will be ‘on-call’ after hours in case of emergencies. Throughout the pilot process, the project team will be learning from its experience so that it can adapt the initiative as needed.

Thanks to all partners for their support to get us to this point. 🙏

For more information, see:

<http://www.bangladeshworkersafety.org/programs/worker-helpline> or contact us by email at: WorkerHelpline@afbws.org.

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WHO ARE WE?

Amader Kotha, or “Our Voice” in Bangla, is a unique collaboration among three project partners—Clear Voice, a project of The Cahn Group that operates hotlines and builds effective grievance mechanisms in supply chains; Phulki, a respected civil society organization working to improve the lives of workers and their families in Bangladesh; and Good World Solutions (GWS), a non-profit organization whose flagship tool—Labor Link—has reached over 100,000 workers. Each partner brings years of experience building innovative, best-in-class labor compliance programs in supply chains.

Our name—Amader Kotha—was selected after consulting with Alliance member staff in Bangladesh and Phulki, our NGO project partner in Bangladesh. Together with our new logo, we are well positioned to communicate the shared value that Amader Kotha brings to all stakeholders who seek to promote safeguards for Bangladeshi workers.

MEET THE TEAM

Under the direction of Phulki Executive Director and Ashoka Fellow, Suraiya Haque, Phulki have recruited highly experienced professionals with exceptional listening, management and training skills to the project team. They will be responsible for the day-to-day work of introducing the Helpline in factories and responding to calls from workers.

Mohammad Rashedul Islam was hired as project manager for Amader Kotha. Before joining Phulki, Rashed worked at the British High Commission in Dhaka as consular assistant and trade and investment officer. His experience resolving wide-ranging needs of the High Commission make him the ideal person to undertake the day-to-day responsibility as the in-country contact for the Helpline. He received his MBA from London South Bank University.

Syeda Aysha Kanij, Afroza Khatun and Dodul Majumder were also recruited to Amader Kotha. The trio brings both public and private sector experience to the project team, as well as strong communication and interpersonal skills. They also have strong educational backgrounds, with degrees spanning finance, education and history. Syeda, Afroza and Dodul will liaise with factory management and workers virtually as Helpline representatives and face-to-face during Amader Kotha factory launch visits.

Meet the rest of the Amader Kotha team in future newsletters! 

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that support the Helpline and impose disciplinary measures on managers who violate the factory’s commitment to permitting workers to use it free from intimidation or penalty. At the same time, factory managers can take comfort that they have the opportunity to validate the veracity of claims made through the Helpline.

As we learn and grow during the pilot period, the project team will be watching and listening closely to workers and managers – along with Alliance member companies – so that our shared experiences maximize the effectiveness of our efforts to create trust in the workplace. 