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THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOME SELECTED SEA FOOD INDUSTRIES

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ABSTRACT

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The study was conducted in five seafood industries of Khulna region with a view to assess the status of the industries and the socio-economic condition of female workers. It was observed that most of the seafood industries were established after 1980 while only Bangladesh sea food ind. ltd. was established in 1969. In the seafood industries investigated women usually worked in all sections. Survey results found that majority of female workers were found to be young and 55% covered the age limit of 15-29. Amongst women workers, 88% were muslims and the rest were hindus while only 2 were christians. 55% of the female workers were divorced and oppressed by their husbands. 57% of them were illiterate while 23% were literate. 68% of the female workers had single family. 36% had families consisting of 3-4 members and 26% had 5-6 members of their families. Most of the female workers (88%) were of rural origin. 66% of female workers were recruited by contractors and 21% were recruited as causal employee. 78% of the female workers had to work for 8-12 hours a day. However, in comparison to hard work by the male workers, their incomes were very poor and ranged between 1400-2400 taka per month. The overtime rate was also low and varied between day and night. The paying system was very irregular and 94% of the female workers did not get payment regularly. 81% of the female workers were unsatisfied with their jobs and for this job mobility among the workers was high. 77% of the female workers changed industry to obtain better salary. 80% of the workers received training. 60% of female workers were the primary earner of their families, 33% contributed to family earning while only 7% played a key role in family decision making. Near about 100% female workers claimed that the management and co-male workers of the industry behaved very roughly with them. However, the overall status of the five seafood industries related to quality of seafood products was very high.

Keywords: *Female workers, seafood, social status*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

The world's fisheries make a major contribution to human nutrition as well as social and economic progress. Bangladesh is one of the smallest and poorest countries in the world, yet it has got the biggest flood plain in the world next to China and India (BFFEA, 1997). A part from that Bangladesh has about 1,440,000 ha. of coastal land under brackish water, marine aquaculture and a long coast line along the Bay of Bengal extending up to 200 nautical miles. These vast water bodies produced about 1.2 million MT of fish including shrimp which contributes 5.3% to GDP, 5.77% of total foreign exchange and 63% of animal protein supplement and about 12 million people are directly or indirectly dependent for their livelihood on fisheries sector (DoF, 2002). Production has increased almost five fold over the forty years from 20 million MT to 100 million MT by 1999 (DoF, 1999). In the year 2000-2001, fish production was 1.781 million MT, from which Khulna region contributed nearly 75% of the total shrimp production (DoF, 2002). The seafood industries have various sections which play a vital role in the ultimate quality of product thus enhancing the foreign exchange earning. These sections are receiving section, processing section, freezing section, packaging section, cold storage section and machinery section. Amongst these sections the most important one is the processing section. This section has realistic affect on the final product due to poor quality maintenance, unfair means of grading and weighing etc.

Seafood industries contribute immensely in the economic development of Bangladesh through earning enormous amount of foreign exchange. The roles of female workers in seafood industry have substantial influences in the quality of the product. Hence, the female workers role should not be undermined. Besides, the policy makers actively seek women because they represent a very vast population of the country. The management people prefer women as they are mostly suitable for processing activities, less mobile and less likely to engage in the union activities. Women play an important role in small scale fisheries, directly or indirectly, all over the world. In most fishing communities, men are engaged mainly in fish capture while women take part in a wide range of pre-harvest and post-harvest activities such as net making, fish handling, processing and marketing. In the seafood business, about one million workers are engaged, of which nearly 80% are women (Coulter and Disney, 1987). Most of the workers are illiterate and many of them do not know about their responsibility. However, the activities of female workers influence the socio-economic status of the industry. In spite of the important contributions made by the female workers, the seafood industries in Bangladesh is beset with numerous complains such as wide scale labour lawlessness including employment of child labour, exploitation by low wage and over work, large scale social in-security etc.

Bangladesh has a bright prospect of earning substantial amount of foreign currency through exporting of frozen fish products. Therefore, it is indispensable to improve the working environment in the seafood

industries especially for the female workers. The specific objective of the study was to assess the socio-economic condition of female workers in seafood industries i.e. age, religion, marital status, educational status, family types, earnings, job satisfaction and social status.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The major concentrations of the seafood industries are in Khulna and Chittagong. About 75% of seafood products are exported from Khulna region due to availability of raw materials. For the present investigation, five industries have been selected for detail survey about the status of seafood industries and about the status of women in seafood industry. The industries are situated in four districts i.e. Bagerhat Sea Food Industries Ltd. (BSFIL) of Bagerhat, MU Sea Foods Ltd. (MUSFL) of Jessore, Delta Fish Ltd. (DFL) of Satkhira and Bangladesh Sea Food Industries Ltd. (BASFIL) & Southern Foods Ltd. (SFL) of Khulna. In Khulna district the industries are situated on both the side of Rupsha river. Therefore, two industries (one from each side of the river bank) were selected.

All the collected information obtained from the industries were accumulated, grouped and interpreted according to the objectives as well as the indicators. Some data contained numeric and some contained narratives facts. The data were then presented in graphs and tabular form. For processing and analysis purpose, MS Excel and MS Word have been used. Descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviation, frequency distribution, cross tabulation, correlation, pie-charts, etc. have been used for data analysis and presentation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Status of female workers

Age distribution

The age distribution of female workers was same in all the sea food industries. The age limit of 25-29 was the highest in all the industries. The age limit of 40-60 was the lowest in BSFIL, DFL, MUSFL and SFL but in BASFIL the lowest lied between the age limit of 35-39 (Figure 1).

Majority of the workforce was found to be young and 55% covered the age limit of 15-29 while 7% of the workers were within the age limit of 40-60. Among the all age group the individual highest percentage (25%) of workers lied between the age limit 25-29 while lowest was 7% (age limit of 40-60). Islam (1975) found that about 80 percent working women are in 21-40 years age limit in garment industries. Salauddin and Shamim (1992) found that the dominated majority were in 21-40 age groups.

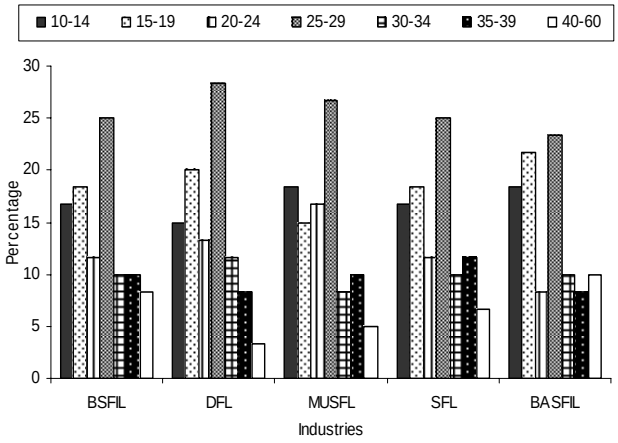

Figure 1. Age distribution of female workers in different sea food industries

Religious status

Figure-13(a) shows that most of the female workers were Muslims and the rest were of Hindus. Only in two industries (DFL and BASFIL) 2 Christian females (one from each industry) were observed. Above 80% of Muslim workers were observed in all the four industries except MUSFL (65% Muslim and 35% Hindus) because the owner of MUSFL was a Hindu. Among the five industries, the highest percentage Muslims were found to be in BSFIL (93.33%) while lowest in MUSFL (65%).

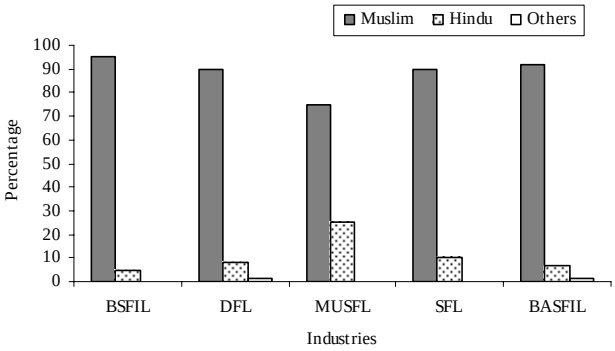

Figure 2. Religious status of female workers in different sea food industries

Marital status

Marital status of the female workers of different sea food industries is shown in Figure-3.

Education level

In sea food industries female workers play an important role in quality control of the processed product and work in vital section of the industry. But the educational status of the women workers of the sea food industries is not good and impressive.

Figure-4 shows that 57% of the women workers are completely illiterate and 23% can sign only respectively. It is clear that the formal education is extremely in critical position in poor working women. The literacy rate was much below than that of the national literacy rate which accounted to about 76% (BBS, 2002). About 75% of females left from school before passing class VIII.

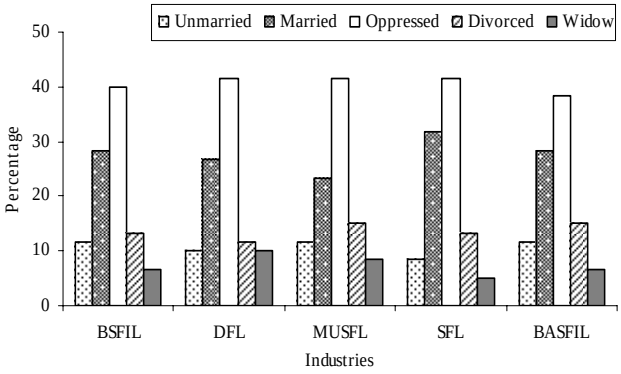

Figure 3. Marital status of female workers in different sea food industries

Family types

Type of family in relation to their environment is an important factor to consider the family. This factor is one of the causes for the female workers to join industries. Among the five industries, the highest percentages (78.33%) of single families were to be found in BSFIL while lowest (51.67%) in BASFIL (Figure 5).

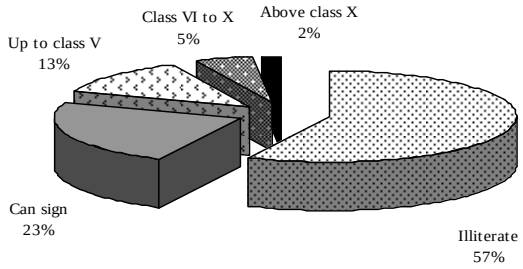

Figure 4. Education level of female workers

Family size

Family size is a very important parameter determining the socio-economic as well as living condition of female workers. In Bangladesh about 48% of the total population is female (BBS, 2002). The results revealed that most of the female workers family consisted of 3-4 members. Among the five industries it was highest in MUSFL and lowest in BSFIL (Figure 6).

Origin of female workers

Figure-7 shows that above 80% female workers of all the five industries lived in rural area. DFL is the only one industry where 100% were rural workers. This is attributed to the fact that it was is situated in rural area (20 km away from Satkhira district town). The highest percentages (21.67%) of urban female worked in BSFIL.

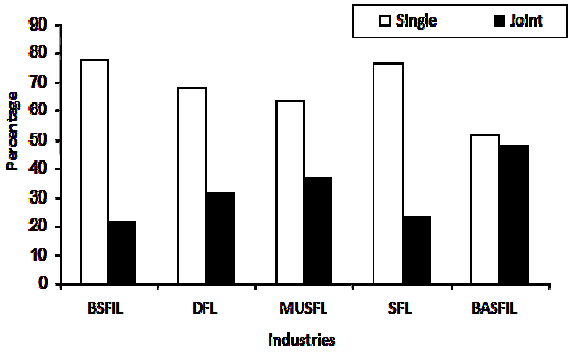

Figure 5. Family types of female workers in different sea food industries

Factory Norms Regarding recruitment and work schedule

Mode of recruitment

The results show that above 60% workers were recruited by the contractors in the five sea food industries as shown in Figure-8. About 10% of the female workers were recruited as permanent employee by the five industries. The highest number of permanent female workers were found in SFL while lowest were in DFL. The rest of female workers were found recruited by their relatives.

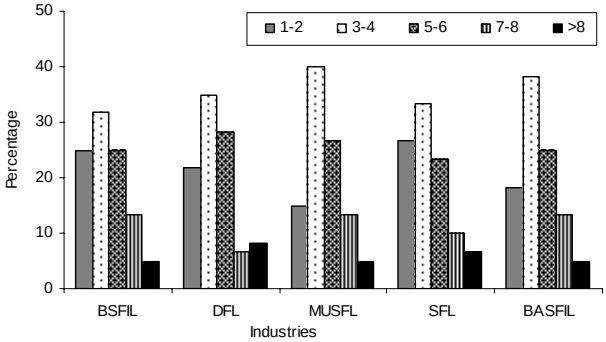

Figure-6. Family size of female workers in different sea food industries

Work hour

Working hours varied depending on the availability of raw material and raw materials availability depended on the lunar cycle. In new and full moon, the working hours were high. Two shifts of work were a norm in all the industries of the country. First shift started more or less at the same time (7.30-8.00 am). Figure-9(a) shows that in all the surveyed industries the work hours were in similar pattern and work hours varied between 6-8 hours. The working hours between 8-12 hours were found to be above 75% in all the industries. Among the five industries, highest percentages (86.67%) were found in DFL while lowest in MUSFL (75%). These types of workers were recruited by the contractors. It was also found that a few of the workers worked more than 12 hours.

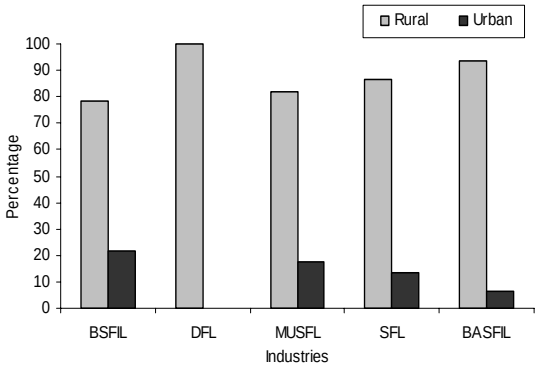

Figure7. Origin of female workers in different sea food industries

Factory norms regarding earning and related aspects

Monthly earnings

The female workers of the quality control section earned highest salary (Tk.1800.00-2600.00/month). Table-2 shows that the monthly earning of export graders was high in all the five industries surveyed and ranged between Tk. 1800.00 – 2400 per month while lowest in sorting section (Tk. 1400.00 – 1800.00 per month). Among the five industries, the highest salary (Tk. 2600.00/month) was provided by BSFIL while lowest salary (Tk. 1400.00/month) by DFL. This excluded overtime payment. Table 1 also shows that the level of income was comparatively higher in BSFIL and SFL. These results show similarity to the result of Salahuddin and Shamim (1992) where they showed that the level of income of women workers were very low (average 1499 Tk./Month).

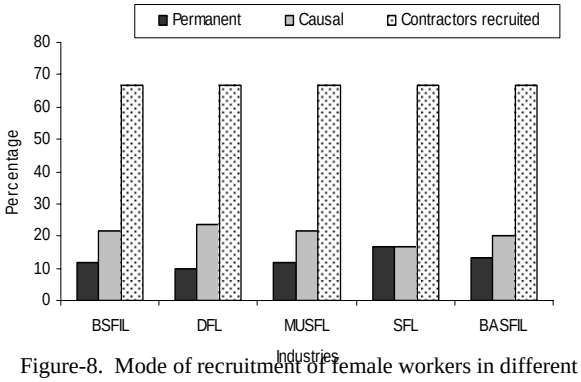

Figure-8. Mode of recruitment of female workers in different sea food industries

Overtime rate and workers attitude towards overtime

According to the Factory Act 1965, no person can be employed for than 8 hours a day in a factory. Work in excess of these hours should be paid for at the overtime rates, which is twice the basic salary. Usually, the basic salary is considered to be 60% of the monthly pay but no industry followed this act. Interestingly, none of the workers knew what their basic salary is. They reported their monthly pay as their basic salary. It has clearly been observed that the overtime rates varied low to high between day and night. The overtime rates were found Tk.12.00 per hour as highest and Tk.5.00 per hour as lowest. Among the five industries the highest overtime rates were found in SFL and lowest in DFL, MUSFL and BASFIL (Figure 3).

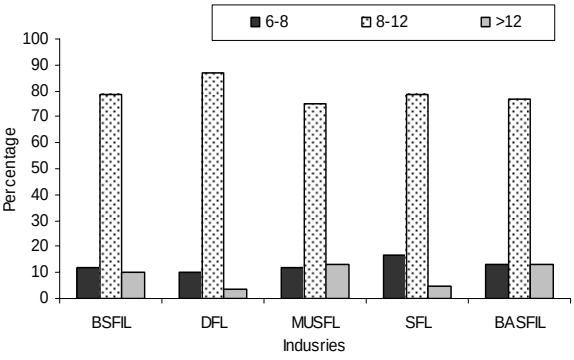

Figure 9. Working hour of female workers in different sea food industries

Table 1. Monthly earnings (Contractor's employee, without overtime pay)

Job category	BSFIL (Tk./Month)	DFL (Tk./Month)	MUSFL (Tk./Month)	SFL (Tk./Month)	BASFIL (Tk./Month)
Sorting	1200-1500	1500-1600	1000-1200	1500-1800	1200-1600
Grading	1500-1800	1500-2000	1500-1800	1600-2000	1500-1800
Beheading	1200-1500	1200-1500	1000-1200	1200-1500	1200-1500
Peeling	1000-1200	800-1200	800-1200	1000-1200	800-1200
Washing	1000-1200	800-1200	1000-1200	1000-1200	1000-1200
Panning	1200-1500	1000-1200	1200-1500	1200-1500	800-1200
Glazing	1000-1200	1000-1200	800-1200	1000-1200	1000-1200
Packing	1500-1800	1200-1500	1200-1500	1500-1800	1200-1500

During the study period women were asked how and why they needed overtime. All of them gave same reason. In regular time they were paid low wages. In all the industries overtime did not exceed 60 hours. It was often alleged that the workers in the fish processing industries were compelled to work overtime against their will. Figure-4(a) shows that among the five industries, only the workers of BSFIL worked overtime willingly due to regular payment. In DFL, the highest percentages (65%) of workers did overtime against their will (Figure-10).

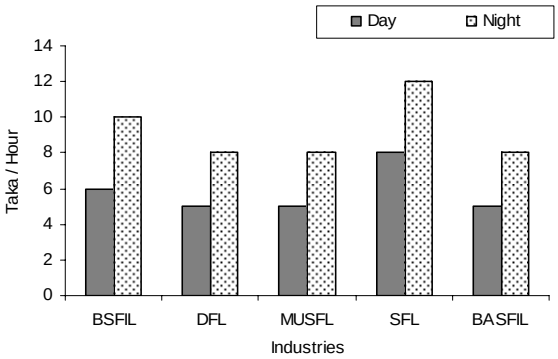

Figure 10. Overtime rate per hour in different sea food industries

On job training

From this study it is clear that 60% workers received training in the present industry while 24% workers had training from previous industry and 16% had no training as shown in Figure-6(b). In sea food industry training of the workers is essential because the female workers learn more hygiene and quality after joining the industry. As a result of a product indicated very good quality.

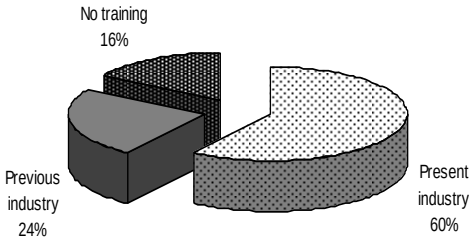

Figure 11. On job training of female workers

Job satisfaction

A global index of congenial work environment is the extent of job satisfaction. During the survey the workers were asked whether they were satisfied or unsatisfied with their present jobs. They reported that they were paid low wages and that were irregular payment and these rate were higher (88.33%) in DFL while lowest (68.33%) in SFL (Figure 12).

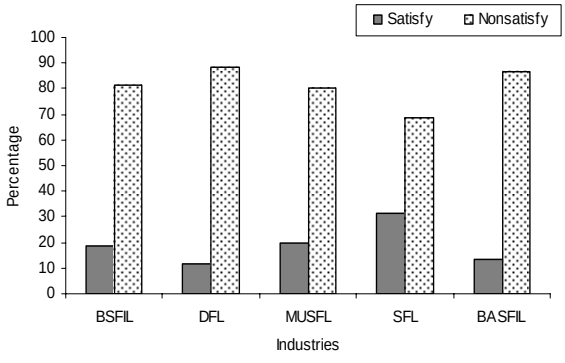

Figure 12. Job satisfaction of female workers in different sea food industries

Satisfaction is very relative issue. Most of the female workers in Bangladesh did not know about their rights. Female workers were observed to be satisfied if they get enough money to lead their life. Figure-8(b) viewed that above 80% of women workers were unsatisfied.

Status in the family decision making

It is quite common in Bangladesh to find that the husband or father usually decides how the income will be spent. Among the surveyed industry the high (10%) rate of decision-making were found in BSFIL while low (3.33%) in MUSFL as shown in Figure-8(a). The results revealed that among the five industries the rate of primary earner were found high in MUSFL (70%) while low in BASFIL (50%) as shown in Figure-8(a).

Status in the society

All the respondents replied in similar manner. It is all most same pattern in the entire respondent. They all reported that due to entrancing in the industry, they were treated as "muchua" though their economic healthiness increased. The unmarried women faced a lot of problem. One of the respondent said during the interview that she was going to leave her job in fish processing industry as the society thought that young girls underwent moral degradation by working in the industry. Her boyfriend was getting married to another woman. It is true that still now many young women faced great social difficulties when they returned to their villages. The poor working women have to undergo various types of harassment and social obstacles. Employed in similar works women have less wages than men. Lack of education, proper training and professional expertise forces them to choose a work with less pay (Ahmed, 1992).

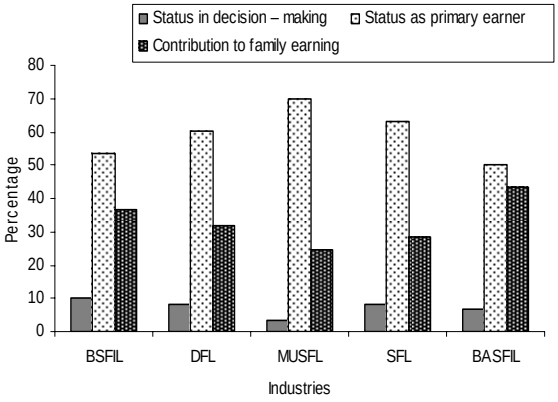

Figure 13. Social status of female workers of different sea food industries

About 80% of the total workforces were women. The role of the female workers in seafood industries had substantial influences in the quality of the frozen product. Hence, the socio-economic condition of these workers should not be ignored. The female workers suffered from many problems. In many cases, they could not understand their responsibilities. They were not always conscious about their duties. Because of their ignorance, they were deprived from their rights. An effective and integrated approach is immediately required for the protection of their rights in the industry. A set of recommendations has been proposed to improve the socio-economic condition and service facilities related to facts and findings from the present study as follows:

- The authority should recruit females who have minimum educational qualifications because they play vital role in the industry. In the case of prevalent workers, the illiterate workers can resort on various education programs offered by concern GO and Non Government Organizations. Now a days such organizations provide various type of formal and non formal education programs like adult education, elementary education etc.
- Weekly / monthly salary of the female workers should be increased. It should be for both of the permanent and temporary workers. The salary should be in conjunction with the profit of the industry.
- Daily working hours should be reduced in the case of temporary workers. For production purpose, overtime facilities could be increased both for the permanent and temporary workers during the season.
- Working hours and holidays should be in accordance with the international recommendation. International acceptable working hours and at least one day holiday should be given and overtime facilities should be increased.
- Job satisfactions of female workers were very low and for this job mobility were high among the temporary workers. Job mobility could be reduced by increasing the number of permanent workers to make the industry productive throughout the year.
- Individual workers should be trained on their specific work along with common training on sanitation. Since all the workers know that their activities influence the quality of the product so, special training on quality control should be required by the authority i.e. HACCP.
- Extra facilities such as bonus, medical etc. should be provided for both permanent and temporary workers. Childcare facilities should also be given to the female workers.
- The female workers were treated as lower status in comparison to co-male workers. Thus, status of the female workers should be regarded equal to that of the male workers.
- Recruitment of the female workers should be done through newspaper circulation instead of contractors. These female workers would then be free form the harassment of the contractors.

- Leisure time should be increased to 1 hour instead of 30 minutes. For recreational purposes the authority could provide a common room having TV, indoor game facilities. For relaxing purposes of the female workers during leisure period, the authority could also provide common room facilities.
- The female workers were treated badly by contractors and co-male workers. So, all types of harassment of the female workers in seafood industries should be observed and immediate action should be taken.

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