Helpline 50–Factory Pilot Phase Completed

Additional Factories Continue to be Introduced to Helpline as Part of Alliance Fire Safety Training

The Amader Kotha Helpline pilot period is now complete and assessment activities in the 50 pilot factories have begun. Early results are positive. An overwhelming number of workers interviewed have demonstrated that they know about the Helpline, have received the Helpline card with the number on it, and understand how the Helpline is to be used.

The Helpline project team’s focus has now shifted to improving call management and to examining how call handling procedures can be refined to enhance effectiveness of investigations and reporting.

The Alliance fire safety training teams continued to introduce the Helpline as part of its fire safety training in November. The Alliance has set a goal of completing this second wave of fire safety training in 250+ factories by the end of 2014.

HELPLINE ACCESS JULY-NOVEMBER

It has been an eventful year for the Amader Kotha Helpline. We began operations in July after designing an initial set of operating protocols. We built the technology infrastructure to support calls from workers, to capture their concerns and to communicate back to them. We trained hundreds of thousands of workers on the purpose of the Helpline and how to use it. Our call handling team collected thousands of test calls and hundreds of substantive concerns from workers about safety and other matters. Importantly, we provided timely information to factory managers and the Alliance about problems identified by workers, resulting in safer and more humane conditions for workers.

During the first five months of operations, there have also been some bumps along the road. A small handful of factories expressed their reluctance to adopt the Helpline in their factories at this time; we hope that these attitudes will soon shift now that it can be demonstrated

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KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:

- 12 urgent issues were reported to Amader Kotha in November, six pertaining to worker safety. Worker safety issues included concerns about building integrity during ongoing factory renovation and blocked factory egress routes. These and other urgent issues were reported to the Alliance, who investigated and mitigated each.

- The Helpline is now available to 450,000+ workers across 251 Alliance factories. Workers from 59 non-Alliance factories have also used the Helpline.

- 2,924 calls were placed to Amader Kotha in November, for a total of 6,000 calls received to date.

- 128 substantive issues were reported to the Helpline from workers at Alliance factories this month. The most reported issue included active fires outside factories, at locations such as warehouses, markets and nearby homes. Worker complaints about employment termination were also common.

- The majority of calls made to Amader Kotha continues to be test calls placed by workers and factory managers as they learn about and then want to better understand how the Helpline operates.

- Following trends from previous months, workers prefer to call the Helpline from outside their factories, with call volumes peaking at 12:00 pm and 4:00 pm, respectively. Women made up 30% of callers in November, similar to October.

NOTE: Detailed call data is provided to the Alliance for distribution to Alliance member companies after factories have had the opportunity to verify and respond to information provided by workers.

Please see the adjacent visualizations for further information on Helpline usage.
A CLOSER LOOK: Pilot Trends and Takeaways

This month we take a closer look at trends from Amader Kotha’s four-month pilot period. The analysis reviews all calls received by the Helpline from July-October, 2014, including calls from workers at both Alliance and non-Alliance factories. More than 165,000 at 142 factories had access to Amader Kotha by the pilot period’s conclusion.

CALL VOLUME.

- The Helpline received 3,076 calls during the pilot period and placed an additional 1,800 calls to factories, workers and other stakeholders while investigating reported issues. On average, each substantive issue required four additional calls made by Helpline staff before closing the case.
- Amader Kotha experienced over 80% month-on-month growth in calls during the pilot period. This is partially explained by an increased number of factories launched in the latter half of the pilot period. However, generally speaking, call volumes from factories launched early in the pilot period held constant across the pilot.
- Workers’ calling patterns remained consistent during the pilot period. Workers tend to call the Helpline during the day, with peak call times around noon and 4pm. Workers also tend to call Amader Kotha from outside their factory.
- The Helpline received calls from workers at non-Alliance factories. For example, workers at 31 non-Alliance factories used Amader Kotha in October. This suggests workers are talking about the Helpline with their peers outside their factory and/or continue holding on to their Amader Kotha instruction cards after switching employers.
- On the other hand, the Helpline received no calls from some factories where Amader Kotha was launched during the pilot period. Assessments are ongoing to understand why this is the case. The Helpline is aware of incidents where factory management either prevented the distribution of Amader Kotha instruction cards and/or instructed workers not to keep cards on their person. The Helpline team is working with factory management and the Alliance to identify and resolve these and other implementation challenges.

ISSUES REPORTED.

- 255 substantive issues were reported to Amader Kotha during the pilot period. The number of issues reported increased from four in July to 123 in October.
- Amader Kotha’s primary mandate is capturing safety-related workplace issues from workers; 40 such issues were recorded during the pilot period. Urgent safety issues were often received in clusters, with many workers calling at once to report the same issue. The most notable urgent safety issue reported during the pilot period involved tainted drinking water at a factory, leading to many workers becoming severely ill.

Note: The Helpline’s approach to categorizing reported issues was modified following the pilot period, based on actual issues reported and learning from the pilot period. New call categorization was put in effect in November and will be used moving forward.
Alliance staff communicated with factory management about the problem, ensuring uncontaminated water and medical services were made available to workers. Worker concerns about their factory’s structural integrity and exit routes were also prevalent during the pilot period.

- In addition to safety issues, many workers also called the Helpline to communicate labor and family-related issues. **215 non-safety issues were reported during the pilot period**, the most common of which were complaints about compensation, unfair employment termination and verbal abuse in the workplace.

**HELPLINE USERS.**

- **One in three callers to the Helpline over the pilot period were women.** This may not be reflective of the breakdown of men and women’s issues, as there were instances of men calling on behalf of women. Lower mobile phone ownership and/or phone familiarity among women may partially explain this trend.

- **There was no statistical difference between the types of issues reported by men versus women.** The top three issues reported by each gender involved compensation, employment termination and verbal abuse at work. Men and women also opt out of providing demographic information at a similar rate.

**USE OF INTERNAL GRIEVANCE MECHANISMS**

- **About two in three callers were willing to share demographic information with the Helpline**, such as their age, name, factory identification number and calling location. This trend was consistent over the course of the pilot.

- **Many workers contact Amader Kotha after first using grievance mechanisms available at their factory.** 40% of callers who reported substantive issues during the pilot period had already reported the same issue to someone at their factory before calling the Helpline. Workers with more tenure at their factory were more likely to take this approach than newer tenured workers. Interestingly, workers bypass internal mechanisms and directly contact the Helpline more often when dealing with safety issues than when confronted with non-safety issues.

- **Workers have found test and general inquiry calls to Amader Kotha useful.** 30+ workers who called to test the Helpline during the pilot period also called back on a later date to report a substantive issue.

Amader Kotha is actively conducting post-launch assessments across factories involved in the pilot period included. Assessments involve both face-to-face interviews and automated phone-based interviews (using interactive voice response technology) designed to learn more about workers’ and factory managers’ experience with Amader Kotha. Data gathered from these assessments has and will continue to inform enhancements to existing Helpline training, call-intake and reporting protocols.
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.

Information about Amader Kotha is publicized in factories.

that the Helpline constructively contributes to management knowledge about the workplace. We had to refine our initial approach to training in order to better gain the trust of workers and managers. Our technology infrastructure had to be augmented to account for the frequent power outages that occur in Bangladesh.

Phulki has been able to exceed its target goal of directly training 10 percent of the factory’s workforce (after which a Lead Trainer/Peer Trainer system trains the rest of the workforce) in the pilot factories and has put in place a team Helpline Representatives to personally respond to calls from workers.

Good World Solutions has created and evolved a practical, well-functioning technology platform that allows for call intake, analysis and reporting. Importantly, Good World Solutions has begun to use its interactive voice recognition technology to survey workers perceptions about the Helpline and related issues.

Clear Voice has provided global project team coordination and support, drawing from years of experience in building the trust of workers and factory managers in Bangladesh and other countries. Together, each of the protect team partners have contributed to a shared vision of how the Helpline can best protect workers.

What is the most important thing we have learned since the Amader Kotha Helpline began operating?

The answer is simple.

Providing an opportunity for workers to express their concerns not only has intrinsic value but it has the very practical impact of driving improvements in safety and other conditions in Bangladesh’s ready-made-garment sector.

-Doug Cahn, Clear Voice