CHAPTER 20

Creating Inclusion for Transwomen at Work Through Corporate Social Responsibility: The Contributions of Bandhu in Bangladesh

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INTRODUCTION

“If [a] new transgender generation were given work opportunities, I am sure they will not be a part of the so-called Hijra culture […] We want [the] opportunity to work for both public and private sectors so that we can resolve our issues ourselves” (Tanisha Yeasmin Chaity, transwoman and official at the Bangladesh National Human Rights Commission, cited in Cassell, 2018).

In late 2013, the Bangladeshi government acknowledged transwomen and transmen (transgender individuals) as a separate gender. While their recognition has been acclaimed globally for its promise to alleviate their suffering and vulnerability, to date, transwomen in Bangladesh continue
to struggle with limited access to the labor market and pervasive discrimination (Anam, 2015; Hossain, 2017; Jebin & Farhana, 2015). Knight (2016), for instance, highlights that their “employment opportunities are often limited to begging or sex work” (p. 7). When transwomen secure jobs in private and public organizations, on the contrary, they are quickly dismissed due to their often gender non-conforming orientation that stirs disapproval and social exclusion (Alizai, Donesy, & Doane, 2017; Stenqvist, 2015; Wallen, 2020). As a result, many transwomen in Bangladesh give up their hope of a different life and resign themselves to serving their own community for survival (Haq, 2015; Jebin, 2019).

With the purpose of better understanding how to create inclusion in organizations for transwomen in South Asia and specifically in Bangladesh, this chapter showcases the contribution of Bandhu. 1 Bandhu is a Bangladeshi non-governmental organization (NGO) that is fully community-based and entirely devoted to the provision of services on sexual and reproductive health and rights and to ensuring the well-being of the gender diverse 2 population (Bandhu, 2019). Focusing on Bandhu holds particular relevance because of its pioneering achievements and its ongoing contribution to the lives of transwomen and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 1 (No Poverty), 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), 5 (Gender Equality), 10 (Equality), 16 (Peace, Justice and Stronger Institutions), and 17 (Partnerships) (Bandhu, 2017, 2020).

To better understand Bandhu’s contribution, however, this chapter uncovers the life stories and challenges of Shima and Dilruba before and after finding employment. They are two transwomen and the first beneficiaries of a corporate social responsibility (CSR) project 3 where Bandhu holds a leading and implementing function since 2018. While explicitly centered on creating inclusion for transwomen at work, this

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1 Bandhu is an abbreviate form of Bandhu Social Welfare Society.

2 The term “gender diverse” is assigned in medicine to people for whom “the assumption that one’s gender identity will accord with assigned sex (where a penis is taken as indicating a male and a vagina is taken as indicating a female) is incorrect” (Riggs, Coleman, & Due, 2014, p. 230).

3 CSR projects can be defined as those projects that a company conducts in cooperation with relevant stakeholders and that pertain to the integration of social, environmental, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities toward society into its operations, processes, and core business strategy (Rasche, Morsing, & Moon, 2017).
CSR project is implemented by Bandhu in collaboration with USAID—a US-based international development organization—and Denim Expert Ltd.—a company in Chittagong specializing in the manufacture and export of denim bottom apparel and garment washing.

While shedding light on Bandhu’s approach as part of the CSR project to navigate Shima and Dilruba’s challenges after their recruitment, this chapter highlights Bandhu’s overall contribution to empower and improve the lives of transwomen in Bangladesh. Hence, it represents an important learning tool for those interested in human rights and in understanding how to better create inclusion for transwomen at work in South Asia.

**Literature Review**

**Transwomen and the Hijra Community in South Asia**

While transgender individuals are broadly defined in sociology as “people whose gender identity does not necessarily correspond to the sex category” (Schilt & Lagos, 2017, p. 427), male-to-female transwomen in South Asia are often recognized as third gender (Kalra & Shah, 2013; Khan et al., 2008). This label comprises individuals who are neither male nor female and have an inner psyche and behavior that is non-conforming, often above and beyond the bipolar gendered society (Anam, 2015; de Lind van Wijngaarden, Schunter, & Iqbal, 2013; Hamzić, 2019). Nonetheless, what makes transwomen in South Asia different from transwomen in the Western world is a shared and collective culture that is manifest through an institutionalized system defined as the Hijra community or Hijra culture (Abdullah et al., 2012; Goel, 2016; Hossain, 2018; Sultana & Kalyani, 2012). This has existed in South Asia for millennia (Aziz & Azhar, 2019; Haq, 2015) and has generated significant fascination among scholars due to its “strong historical fairy-tale inceptions” (Goel, 2016, p. 535). Originated in India from Hinduism, this culture was credited with the ability to bless households with prosperity and fertility, but also to curse them with misfortune if they do not meet their demands (Alizai et al., 2017; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). While transwomen in the Hijra community have been studied for sacrificing their male genitalia and for their impotence (Aziz & Azhar, 2019; Nanda, 1986), today they take very different decisions about their bodies
Hossain (2012), for instance, differentiates between non-emasculated or *janana* and emasculated or *chibry* transwomen in Bangladesh. However, their heterogeneous degree of gender nonconformity and body decisions fuel confusion. For instance, many transwomen in South Asia are incorrectly equated with other gender minorities such as the *Kothis*, or men who enjoy sex with men (Boyce, 2007; Kalra & Shah, 2013). Still, both in public and in the literature, they are all essentialized as part of the *Hijra* community and are often labelled as *Hijra*. Although the majority of transwomen in South Asia are connected with the *Hijra* community, not all of them are and want to be called *Hijra*. This lack of detail was recently highlighted by Tanisha Yeasmin Chaity, a transwoman and government official working in the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh. During an interview, she argued that “I describe myself as a transwoman, but traditionally we are called *Hijra*. But *Hijra* is a culture, not an identity […] I wanted a normal life” (Cassell, 2018).

Despite the allegorical image of the *Hijra* community in history, transwomen in South Asia today have become “the most excluded of the excluded” (Khan et al., 2009, p. 448). They suffer from poverty, social marginalization, and discrimination that are often caused by the dislike of their non-conforming orientation and its alleged connection with sexual amorality (Hall, 1997). Saeed, Mughal, and Farooq (2018, p. 1067), for instance, note that transwomen often suffer from a systemic bias and a higher level of stigmatization in comparison to their LGB counterparts because they “have been consistently associated with sex work.”

Notably, their suffering starts during childhood. As they begin to exhibit girlish behavior, they are both humiliated and ridiculed by peers and relatives (Wallen, 2020). Both Saeed et al. (2018) in Pakistan and Khan et al. (2009) in Bangladesh, for instance, pinpoint that feminine boys are scolded by parents because they are afraid of their neighbors’ criticism, which is perceived to potentially dent the honor of their household.

As they begin transitioning, transgender girls are abandoned by their family and are forced to drop out of school (Jebin, 2019; Wallen, 2020). Although many get breast implants and undergo hormone therapy later in life, transitioning for many South Asian transwomen is not necessarily associated with gender reassignment surgery but with decisions pertaining to clothing, lifestyle, and gender orientation. This happens at
a much younger age compared to transwomen in the Western world—often between ten and fifteen years old (Nanda, 1986). Hossain (2012, p. 497), for instance, explains that transwomen take a decision about genitalia later in life, but these are also personal and do not accord them a “more authentic status.” Due to the lack of social and material support, transgender girls seek informal assistance in their districts from similar peers who help them connect with a maternal leader or guru (Hamzić, 2019; Haq, 2015; Sultana & Kalyani, 2012). The Hijra community is characterized by a relational system that hinges on seniority and that is administered by a guru. She retains the right to allow new members into the Hijra community as one of her followers or chelas (de Lind van Wijngaarden et al., 2013). Because they are expected to provide lifelong services and earn money for the guru, the acceptance of a new chela hinges on her ability to bring in money. As Nanda (1999, p. 44) synthetizes, “the connection of guru to chela is the foundation of the economic benefits gained by joining the Hijra community.” In Bangladesh, transwomen in the Hijra community collect money though their Hijragiri rituals. These are public performances as badhai—singing and dancing as a form of blessing for babies—or cholla—demanding money on the road, during weddings and other events (Hossain, 2012, 2017). In exchange for their work, chelas are expected to be taken care of by their guru, who trains them and ensures a welcoming environment for them in the Hijra community (Aziz & Azhar, 2019). Nonetheless, gurus often take advantage of them. They demand their chelas to continuously pay money as part of their implicit relation, often forcing them to engage in sex-related and illicit activities to maximize their income. Khan et al. (2009, p. 445), for instance, highlights that transwomen in the Hijra community in Bangladesh are “forced to have sex with men who paid money to gurus.” On the contrary, transwomen who disrespect their guru are expelled, with little opportunity to return (Nanda, 1999; Sultana & Kalyani, 2012). Although the Hijra community symbolizes a contested environment, it has a double connotation for transwomen facing exclusion in society. On the one hand, it has a physical and material meaning, being linked with the shared buildings or dera where transwomen dwell and feel at home. Concurrently, it offers a social space where transwomen spend time with each other and learn how to comply with those seniority principles that guide internal promotion (Abdullah et al., 2012; Hamzić, 2019). Subsequently, accessing the Hijra community is often portrayed
as an opportunity for transwomen and their only way to survive (Khan et al., 2009; Knight, 2016).

The Problem of Employment for Transwomen in Bangladesh

While transwomen in all South Asia suffer from discrimination, their inclusion in organizations as possible avenues for emancipation lacks scrutiny. Bangladesh is an important context of inquiry because of the government’s recent (2013) acknowledgment of transgender individuals as having a separate gender. This has represented a major change in direction for a country where section 377 of the Code of Criminal Procedure condemns carnal intercourse between same biological individuals (Islam, 2019; Stenqvist, 2015). Although some scholars have accused this acknowledgment as having brought little improvement to transwomen (Anam, 2015; Knight, 2016), it is also recognized for potentially engendering new job opportunities in private and public organizations (Hossain, 2017; Jebin & Farhana, 2015). To date however, Bangladeshi transwomen struggle to access jobs and retain them (Hossain, 2016) even though they openly disclose their wish to be hired (Alizai et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2009). Officially, their difficulty in finding jobs is predominently attributed to their lack of formal education and training, which they could not obtain because of bullying from colleagues and teachers (Abdullah et al., 2012). According to Stenqvist (2015), education is, however, a pretext for not hiring transwomen. Regardless of their school attendance or current abilities, transwomen in Bangladesh are frequently perceived to be “not valuable as employees or as the receivers of training efforts” (p. 32). This is often exacerbated by their feminine behavior at work but also their flamboyant way of living that creates misunderstandings, social exclusion, and violence (Jebin, 2019; Wallen, 2020). Because of their inability to work, most transwomen keep serving their gurus or engage in sex work (Haq, 2015; Stenqvist 2015). Only a few transwomen who come from wealthier families continue to study. These eventually cover positions in human rights NGOs such as Bandhu and conduct an independent life detached from the Hijra community (Cassell, 2018; Hossain, 2018).
Bandhu: A Human Rights Pioneer in Bangladesh

Bandhu was founded in 1996 with a mission to provide services on sexual and reproductive health and rights and to ensure the well-being of the gender diverse population in Bangladesh. With more than 300 part-time staff, Bandhu formulates a strategic plan every five years (the current one lasting until 2021) and is now focused on:

- improving access to quality health services,
- protecting human rights and ensuring access to justice,
- allowing access to social entitlements and social protection.

Bandhu aims to achieve these pillars by building capacity for communities and stakeholders, advocating for affirmative action to create an enabling environment for the sexual and gender diverse population (mainly via policy changes) and developing other organizations’ capabilities and knowledge management (Bandhu, 2020). Apart from its pioneering efforts in ensuring health and human rights for the gender diverse population in Bangladesh, Bandhu is of core importance due to three key competencies that make its performance superior vis-à-vis other NGOs in the country:

- **Community-based structure.** Bandhu is a fully community-led NGO. It manages 34 field health centers in 22 districts of Bangladesh and collaborates with a capillary network of 26 community-based organizations (CBOs) by training them and continuously communicating with them. For instance, one of these CBOs is “Sustha Jiban,” which is famous for its executive director Miss Boby Hijra, and which aims to eradicate discrimination, ensure equal rights in society while also ensuring the sexual health of transwomen in the Hijra community in Dhaka and adjacent areas (Mamun, Heyden, & Yasser, 2016; Shustha Jibon, 2010). By collaborating with CBOs, Bandhu controls the territory and ensures that transwomen in Bangladesh have access to basic health and consultation services. As the director for policy advocacy and human rights at Bandhu explained:

  We work in particular with community-based organizations. These are organizations providing services and sensitization at the local level. We want to develop their capacity and it is through them that
we ensure our services. We mainly focus on transwomen and the Hijra community, but when we design any capacity building training, we include all gender minorities.

- **Human potential.** Bandhu is constituted by a body of highly motivated individuals who often are part of the gender diverse populations it aims to empower. While acting as a reference for the gender diverse population, Bandhu provides direct and indirect opportunities for those who have enough education and seek to make a change in their life and in the lives of other minorities. For instance, Tanisha Yeasmin Chaity worked as one of Bandhu’s employees in Dhaka before becoming a government official in the Bangladeshi National Human Rights Commission (Cassell, 2018). Bandhu’s human potential is summarized by the project manager, specialist, and civil society advisor of USAID in Bangladesh who is cooperating with Bandhu:

  Bandhu is the champion here in addressing the issues of the gender diverse population. Its expertise, policies, and processes are very advanced and proactive for Bangladesh. But its staff are the key. In particular, their excellent leadership and commitment. They have been serving with Bandhu for a long time. Also, they are both professionals and activists at the same time. Their whole organizational vision, mission and the passion through which they pursue goals such as inclusion and rights of transgender people is what makes Bandhu a strong and competent civil society organization.

As a Junior officer at Bandhu also noted:

I discovered Bandhu during for my first HIV test. They suggested me to join and I found many friends. Bandhu is our own organization. Here we can talk about anything—our life, our problems. And we get answers. Bandhu is a pioneer organization in Bangladesh for our transgender rights. This is the first and last place where we share our feelings. We expect a lot from Bandhu and Bandhu is doing a lot for us.

- **Collaborative planning.** With the specific purpose of protecting human rights and ensuring access to justice for the gender diverse population, Bandhu also collaborates with different partners and
organizes consultations based on the involvement of stakeholders in Bangladesh. This is both to sensitize stakeholders at different levels, and also to urge the enactment of laws. These range, for instance, from talks with the Ministry of Social Welfare of the Bangladesh government and with the National Human Rights Commission, to meetings with district judges and law enforcement agencies to sensitize them and raise awareness of the rights of the gender diverse population (Bandhu, 2019). As the executive director of Bandhu noted:

We do advocacy programs by inviting important stakeholders from different sectors. We invite the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Police Department, the Education Ministry. We actually have consultations with the government to produce the anti-discriminatory laws of the country for the third gender. But we are not alone. We take the lead but there are some human rights-based organizations that collaborate with us. Some have limited skills but we support their growth and they support us.

**Bandhu’s Implementing Function in the CSR Project and the Lives of Transwomen**

As part of its collaboration with stakeholders, Bandhu received a grant in 2015 from USAID. This is an international development organization based in the US, focused on promoting and demonstrating democratic values abroad, and advancing a free, peaceful, and prosperous world (USAID, 2020). Part of the grant was assigned to creating education on transwomen issues, improving their access to public services, and advocating for human rights. Together with USAID, Bandhu co-organized a job fair in 2017 with about 20 apparel companies. This was purposed to sensitize them about the vulnerability of the transgender population but also to discover if they wanted to host a CSR project focused on offering new employment opportunities for transwomen. In this CSR project, Bandhu acted as implementer, trainer, and expert. During this event, Bandhu and USAID communicated with Denim Expert Ltd., which agreed to partake in the CSR project. With about 1,900 workers, Denim is a company in Chittagong specializing in the manufacture and export of denim bottom apparel and garment washing. Shima and Dilruba are the
first two beneficiaries of the CSR project and the first two transwomen hired in September 2018.

**Tales of Transwomen: The Life of Shima**

Shima was raised in a village in Noakhali district (between Dhaka and Chittagong) in a large and middle-income family. Her father was a primary school teacher and her mother was a housewife. They had other sons and daughters. Between the age of ten and eleven years old, her parents realized that her femininity was not temporary. Although she was biologically male, Shima was always convinced she was a girl and her parents, who tried to be accommodating, also addressed her as a girl. To avoid any suspicion about her orientation, they prevented her from spending time outside the house and meeting with others apart from her close friends. During her adolescence she discovered she was not a girl. As Shima revealed:

I knew my body was different, but I still thought I was a girl. At the age of 14 my girlfriends had menstruation. But I did not have it. Then my mom said: “Don’t worry, it will happen. And if it doesn’t happen, don’t worry. But don’t tell others about it.” I thought: “Why should I tell lies?” Then I realized my mom was hiding something from me. In this way, I understood I am a transwoman.

Although Shima’s parents knew about her orientation, they did not abandon her. With the unexpected death of her father after she passed her intermediate exams at school at the age of eighteen, the situation changed. Shima’s brothers and sisters started to voice their fears about not being able to marry and that their relationships with neighbors were at risk because of her. Subsequently, Shima decided to move to Chittagong where she was hosted by other relatives. During that period, she kept looking for jobs but she could not find any. One day, she saw some transwomen begging for money on the road. She stopped and talked to them. After they realized she could be one of them, they introduced her to their guru who agreed to take her in the *Hijra* community as a *chela*. Shima was sent to Bandhu right after that to receive a medical checkup and test for possible sexually transmitted diseases. Bandhu provides immediate support for all members of the *Hijra* community and represents a point of reference. Shima’s *Hijra* community was composed of 400
transwomen. Shortly after her arrival, however, the guru asked her to work as sex worker. Although she did not want to do it, she was compelled to serve her guru. As Shima noted:

The guru was living in one room but had four extra rooms. This is where we did the entertainment. She asked for 5000, 4000 or 3000 taka for three or two hours. The clients were truck drivers, private sector men and students. The guru called us: “You come”. We could not do anything against her will and she was getting the money.

After six months, she decided she did not want to live with the other transwomen in the community. She could not accept the impositions of her guru and, because she came from a middle-income family, she struggled with the poor hygienic conditions in the dera. Most transwomen could not shower for days and lived in very precarious conditions. At the same time, Shima longed for an autonomous life outside the community, where she could be seen as an independent woman “with dignity” and not just as a Hijra community member. Although she eventually managed to convince her guru to let her live outside the dera, she was still expected to send in money periodically. During one of her periodical health checks, Bandhu informed her about a new position at Denim Expert Ltd. Excited, she immediately applied through Bandhu and received an offer of employment shortly thereafter.

Tales of Transwomen: The Life of Dilruba

Dilruba was born as biological male in Mirpur, Dhaka, in an underprivileged household. While her father worked in a small shop, her mother was a housewife and she had two sisters. When she was nine years old, her mother passed away and her father decided to remarry. At that time, she started to feel that she was not a boy. She wanted to be like her sisters and started to behave in a more feminine way. With the goal of shifting her orientation, her stepmother started to beat and torture her. At twelve years old, when she started to transition and wear feminine garments in public, her stepmother abandoned her. Alone and without any support, Dilruba started to beg among the shops and markets in Mirpur. Fortunately, she met an older transwoman who agreed to accept her in her house. As Dilruba described:
Parents have responsibility for their children until age eighteen. But for poor families, it does not matter. And we were a poor family. After my stepmother abandoned me at twelve years old, I met one transwoman begging in the street. That transwoman had a home near where I lived. She agreed to give me shelter.

That transwoman communicated with other peers until the guru in a Hijra community in Chittagong decided to welcome her. After only five days, Dilruba was sent there and started a new life as an active member of the Hijra community. She started to earn money for her guru while engaging with badhai and cholla. A few months after her initiation, she started to feel confused. Her guru sometimes treated her like a daughter, but she also felt she was being taken advantage of by her guru. For instance, she was asked to clean the floors in the dera but when she tried to resist, she was beaten by the other transwomen. Although she collected 25000 taka (about 300 US dollars) from the street every month, she had to hand that money over to her guru. She could not go to school and be educated and her guru did not allow her to walk to other places alone. She always had to be with a group of peers. At night, she had to drink and engage in entertaining activities with clients. Exhausted both physically and mentally, Dilruba escaped from her Hijra community and left Bangladesh to go to Punjab, India. However, after three months, the guru in Chittagong managed to transfer her back. As Dilruba explained:

I could not stand the pressure and I crossed the border illegally. I went to India for three months. I learned Hindi and I joined the Hijra community there. They also do a lot of dancing, singing when a child is born. And I survived by asking for money during these activities. But the gurus are interconnected. They are powerful and have a strong network. When the Bangladeshi guru circulated my picture on social media, the Punjab guru understood that I was hiding. She sent me back.

Although Dilruba desired to live on her own and be recognized as independent woman, she could not leave the community. For almost ten years, she served her guru. During one of her health checkups with Bandhu, when she was 22 years old, Dilruba was notified by Bandhu employees about a new CSR project starting at Denim Expert Ltd. and the fact they were looking to employ transwomen in the factory. Attracted by the opportunity to start a new life on her own, Dilruba managed to
prepare a CV and to hand it over to Bandhu, which helped her receive a job offer.

**Creating Inclusion for Transwomen in Organizations**

*The Challenges of Shima and Dilruba After Their Recruitment*

Today, Shima works as a product safety assistant and has also been assigned as manager of the housekeeping department. Similarly, Dilruba supervises 35 cleaning operators and assists all officers’ material needs. After their recruitment by Denim Expert Ltd., however, they faced three main challenges:

- **Challenge of gurus.** When Bandhu confirmed their new appointments, Shima and Dilruba were introduced to each other and decided to share an apartment near the factory to commute more easily. Due to fear, both Shima and Dilruba did not let their gurus know about their decision to work and live independently. They changed phone numbers and official residences, hoping their guru would have somewhat understood their wish. But the gurus found out about them through their own Hijra network. They sent their *chelas* to search for them and, after discovering what had happened, they threatened to abduct and kill them. The aggressive reaction of the gurus is exacerbated by the fact that *chelas* represent an important source of income that is necessary for them to manage the *Hijra* community. As highlighted by the training and counselling manager at Bandhu:

  Gurus depend on their *chelas*. The *chelas* go out and collect money. Most of it is given to their gurus. So, if her *chelas* are allowed to have jobs and leave the *Hijra* community, who will work for the gurus? Although some gurus support employment, most gurus do not accept to let them go.

- **Challenge of workers.** When joining Denim, Shima and Dilruba entered an environment to which transwomen had never had access before. Shima and Dilruba struggled because of the pervasive lack of knowledge and poor acceptance of their gender non-conforming
orientation. While many workers expressed their fears, fueled by stereotypes and traditional beliefs, others refused to speak with them. The manager of human resources and compliance at Denim Expert Ltd. synthetized it like this:

Harassment against transwomen at work is persistent in Bangladesh—verbal and physical. This is mostly in the apparel sector where thousands of people who could not afford to go to school work together. Initially, when Shima and Dilruba joined our factory, our workers said: “No. If you recruit transwomen, we will not work.” Many workers have the perception that: “Oh my god, transwomen. They are coming. Let’s leave this place.”

- **Challenge with lack of social network.** Because transwomen in Bangladesh are often abandoned by the families, the Hijra community often represents the only safe space where they can establish social relations with similar peers and forge friendships. As a consequence of their departure from the Hijra community, this social structure also went missing. Shima and Dilruba started to struggle with loneliness, with the difficulty of keeping in touch with their past friends and meeting other transgender individuals in society, possibly leaving a lasting imprint on their psyche and mental health. The brief account of Dilruba indicates the vulnerability associated with the lack of a social network:

  When I lived in the Hijra community in Chittagong, I had so many friends. We were always together. Now I am alone. I don’t know many mainstream people. I had a relationship with a guy, but he took my money and left me. I particularly miss my best friends—five transgender girls. We were like family members in the Hijra community and they loved me so much. I don’t see them anymore.

**Bandhu’s Approach to Facilitating Transwomen Inclusion in the CSR Project**

In line with Shima and Dilruba’s experiences, Fig. 20.1 summarizes the challenges transwomen face upon recruitment, but also Bandhu’s approach in mitigating them and enabling the CSR project. Bandhu’s approach is clarified in Fig. 20.1.
Consulting with gurus to prompt change. Bandhu aims to overcome the challenge of gurus through consultations and the creation of an ongoing collaboration with them. These meetings are predominantly focused on shifting mindsets and helping them understand the importance for transwomen to find employment in society and to be recognized as independent individuals. Simultaneously, Bandhu is also keen to ascertain the continuity of the *Hijra* community in the future as key social spaces that many transwomen need to overcome the most difficult period of their lives, when they are abandoned and face poverty. Although this is a long-term solution, this helped Shima and Dilruba gain support and respect for their decision from the broader Hijra community. The team leader at USAID in Bangladesh, who works on transwomen inclusion and participated in Bandhu’s consultations with gurus, underlined that:
As transwomen communities in Bangladesh are often led by senior leaders called hijra gurus, it is critical to work with them and help them understand disadvantages of Hijra begging over employment. Bandhu got the acceptance of Denim Expert Ltd. to employ more transwomen community members, while also organizing a training for Denim workers to ensure necessary transwomen workplace integration. However, as many gurus oppose longer-term employment over begging, Bandhu played a critical role in helping them understand the advantages of decent employment. They organized one event with the progressive and the less progressive gurus and facilitated discussion on hijra employment. One important feature of Bandhu’s consultations is that they often bring community members, who are the best in telling their life stories and in advocating for specific issues. This approach proved to be effective in increasing awareness and supporting changes by engaging community members instead of just having outsiders speaking about certain issues.

Conducting workshops to sensitize workers. Bandhu creates workshops in the factory to sensitize workers about what it means to be transwoman and the challenges associated with it. Most of the workshops, to date, have been centered on role play activities where workers can pose questions, explain their disagreements but also enjoy their time together. These were helped by the presence of expert trainers from Bandhu who were leading the sessions and engaging workers. Crucially, Shima and Dilruba have been taking a leading role during these workshops, revealing their stories, and taking questions from workers and discussing their situations. Although it would be improper to claim this is enough to erase all verbal or physical abuses again them, these workshops contribute to breaking the ice and helping Shima and Dilruba gain respect. The executive director of Bandhu explained one of the sessions that he helped administer:

We provided first an orientation to the senior members and the workers at Denim on sexual orientation, gender identity and human rights. We also invited the transwomen from the Hijra community. We generally do it so that a dialogue can start. The workers expressed their fears, the reasons for their attitudes. Shima and Dilruba responded very well, asking why perceptions are so negative for transgender individuals only. Through this ongoing and hands-on process, we improve relationships with workers and minimize cases of harassment.

Offering a new social space. In order to alleviate the social exclusion that comes with leaving the Hijra community, Bandhu tries to make sure
that transwomen are not left alone and tries to involve them in its organization as part of its transgender group. In this way, it helps them create new connections and make sure that they can have a life outside the Hijra community. Shima and Dilruba, for instance, keep in touch with other transwomen employees. They are involved in activities focused on the improvement of transgender individuals as a whole, particularly those aimed at sensitizing transwomen on the importance of actively seeking work and having jobs. In the specific case of Shima, being with Bandhu helped her understand she has a mission in life and that is about creating change for other transwomen. As she noted:

When Bandhu does any meeting with transwomen inside or outside the Hijra community, they call me. I am very excited about that. I can go with Bandhu and provide motivational speeches, as I did before in Bashundhara (Dhaka). Bandhu keeps me informed about trainings and its activities. Now my life has changed. Because I have no one in my life, I want to help others through Bandhu. I want transwomen in Bangladesh to change their life and work outside the Hijra community.

**Conclusion and Chapter Takeaways**

This chapter sheds light on the work of Bandhu and its implementing function in a CSR project for transwomen. Specifically, it analyzed the contribution of Bandhu to create inclusion for transwomen in Bangladesh through the life stories and challenges of Shima and Dilruba—the first two transwomen involved in the CSR project and their primary beneficiaries. Finally, this chapter offers four important takeaways for industry practitioners, government professionals, activists, and educators interested in human rights and how to better create inclusion for transwomen at work in South Asian contexts:

1. **Sensitizing gurus without jeopardizing the Hijra community.** This chapter unveils the exploitative behaviors against transwomen of many gurus, which prevent them from seeking jobs. However, it also highlights the relevance of the Hijra community as a social space where transwomen can be together and forget about the discrimination they suffer in their daily life. This conforms with the scholarly accounts that accuse gurus of misbehavior and violence (Knight,
but also adds to the literature that highlights the essentiality of the Hijra community for the survival of transwomen (Hossain, 2012; Jebin, 2019; Khan et al., 2009). The example of the ongoing consultation of Bandhu with gurus shows that organizations and individuals should be aware of the importance of involving gurus when seeking to facilitate transwomen inclusion in South Asia, without, however, compromising the continuity of the Hijra community.

2. Transwomen inclusion should align with training workers on gender nonconformity. This chapter illustrates that the lack of education and awareness of gender nonconformity among workers can easily nullify inter-organizational efforts. The case of transwomen in Bangladesh adds evidence to the literature that highlights the problem of transwomen in retaining jobs because they are often ridiculed and harassed at work for their femininity and non-binary orientation (Jebin, 2019; Stenqvist, 2015). While drawing on the continuous efforts of Bandhu to sensitize workers, this chapter indicates that organizations and individuals must be aware that creating inclusion requires a major change in the organizational environment. Achieving this goal in South Asian contexts might be particularly difficult given the existence of pervasive and traditional beliefs against transwomen that fuel stereotypes and represent a major barrier to their emancipation.

3. Collaboration is key for change. Although this chapter was specifically focused on the implementing function of Bandhu, it was thanks to the collaboration developed with USAID and Denim Expert Ltd. that Bandhu was able to advance transwomen inclusion as part of the CSR project. As Bandhu understood that supporting transwomen and the gender diverse population in Bangladesh is hardly achievable on its own (Bandhu, 2019), this chapter prompts organizations and individuals to focus on inter-organizational collaboration as a more effective means to initiate sustainable change for gender minorities at work.

4. Transwomen are individuals and not all of them are “Hijra.” The stories of Shima and Dilruba in this chapter exhibited their desire to be respected as individuals who have their own gender and sexual orientation as well as identity beyond the Hijra community. This somewhat aligns with Tanisha Yeasmin Chaity’s claim that transwomen in Bangladesh should be respected for their own
identity regardless of their connection with the Hijra community (Cassell, 2018). Although the Hijra community is a core social foundation, this chapter indicates that essentializing all transwomen in South Asia as Hijra is incorrect and violates the desires of those who aim to be viewed as different. Organizations and individuals should assign great importance to the way they frame their communication when addressing transwomen in South Asia. Downplaying their individual orientation while aggregating them in line with collective and cultural traditions can inversely fuel a rhetoric of disempowerment that dents their emancipation and reinforces stereotypes.

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