

As a recipient of an AIBS pre-dissertation grant, I conducted research in Khulna, Bangladesh for three months from September to December 2015. My objective was to collect information and to make contacts in preparation for my dissertation research which will analyze the extent to which workers in Bangladesh benefit from their engagement in export-driven shrimp production. On a day-to-day basis my research brought me to Rupsha, a slum community across the river from Khulna City where most of the shrimp processing factories are located and where many shrimp processing workers reside. I interviewed key stakeholders in the industry including workers, factory owners and NGO leaders. I shadowed field organizers from a labor NGO called SAFE as they visited workers in Rupsha, and I attended SAFE-sponsored training sessions about labor law and worker rights. I participated in an International Labor Organization (ILO) sponsored symposium where a lively and spirited discussion followed the presentation of a report about the state of worker rights within the shrimp industry. Finally, I met with a Bangla Language teacher for six hours each week.

The opportunity to conduct pre-dissertation research has contributed to my dissertation project in several important ways. First, and most importantly, I achieved an understanding of the conditions, wages, and power dynamics in the shrimp processing industry informed by interviews and observations in this field. This complemented and in some instances challenged what I had read about the industry in NGO reports and news articles. For example, recently, there has been a spate of labor legislation which on paper improves the position of workers within the industry. This legislation includes: the passage of comprehensive labor legislation in 2006, the introduction of a minimum wage in the shrimp sector in 2009, and a 2013 amendment giving temporary workers (the majority of the shrimp workforce) the same protections as permanent workers under the Bangladesh Labor Act. As I learned from interviews with workers, this legislation is not widely enforced. With regard to permanent workers, it appears that only about one fifth of shrimp processing factories in Khulna are following regulations pertaining to the minimum wage and working hours. As a result, the labor regime for permanently-employed shrimp packers entails an average of an 84 hour week! Because working so many hours leaves workers little time to take care of themselves and their families, many workers prefer the less remunerative day-labor peeling positions to fulltime factory work.

Second, conducting pre-dissertation research enabled me to refine the methodology that I am using for my dissertation. For example, before conducting pre-dissertation research, I was unsure about the extent to which it be necessary to conduct research both in workers' home villages and (what I assumed would be) their temporary residence near the factory. Social science research on export-industries has revealed the extent to which these industries are typically reliant upon a rural labor force which continues to receive support from farming communities (for example, in the form of sending rice for workers to eat; or elderly parents in the village providing childcare). I discovered in the course of conducting interviews that the majority of workers in the shrimp processing industry had only one residence. Those who lived in a slum-area mostly said they resided there because they (or in many cases) their parents did not own land or have a way to survive in their ancestral homes resulting in their permanent departure. Nevertheless, shrimp factories did draw labor from some nearby villages. These workers (who owned agricultural land in the village) were comparatively better off than those in the slum. These observations have contributed to my site selection for my dissertation project. I will conduct research in both the slums and villages near the factories. Ancestral homes farther from the worksite will not factor very strongly into my research as these don't provide a source of social or material support for workers (and the industry).