
Sustainability of Female Workforce in the Ready-Made Garment Industries of Bangladesh

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Abstract: The Ready-Made-Garment (RMG) industries have emerged as the most promising sector in the socio-economic context of Bangladesh. Among the employee of this sector, maximum numbers are female which prefaces women empowerment as well. Despite being large in numbers, female workforce faces various types of difficulty in their workplace both physically and mentally. In addition, gender discrimination is severe in this sector. It was found that wages discrimination between male and female employee increases with the skill levels. Male managers are paid 21% higher than female counterpart. Job type has great influence on workers. Male workers are found to be less in helper and sewing department by about 86% and 78% respectively. Higher salary discrimination was found in small industries than larger one.

Keywords: Ready-Made-Garment (RMG), Female Workforce, Industry, Wage

1. Introduction

In the last couple of decades, many female workers have been employed in Bangladesh which was found out in different studies. Employment, due to both basic need and self-dependent concept, has expanded in an unprecedented manner in the formal export-based sectors, particularly in RMG manufacturing. Until July-September 2011, there were 5150 garment factories registered with the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) contributing 78.97% of the country's export earnings. This tremendous success is greatly attributable to women workers who account for the lion's share of the total labor force employed in the sector. As per current estimation, about 80% garments workers are women among 3.6 million workers [1]. But women were exploited easily due to lack of technical knowledge and training. Globalization as manifested in the RMG sector, failed to offer opportunities to the female labor force. Garment industries exploit them using cheap source of labor [2].

The growth has indeed been phenomenal since the RMG industry began modestly as late as the 1970s. The

experiences of the early exporting countries indicate that the increasing cost competition in the export markets lead entrepreneurs to search for newer source of cheap labor. In this country, women are vulnerable group of people being likely to be affected more adversely. Therefore, women are ready to work for low wages and for longer hours under inhospitable conditions of work. Their 'oriental docility' normally does not let them join unions and agitate against the management [3-5]. Women are ignored socially, neglected politically, deprived legally, exploited economically and oppressed religiously [6]. The early decades of the twentieth century, most of the female workforce in the garment industry was made up of young single women from the rural areas for which the only alternative employment was domestic service [7]. Women working in the garment sector migrate from rural areas. The growth of the RMG sector provides an unprecedented employment opportunity for women. Occupational segregation rather than pay discrimination of primarily to blame for gender differentials in wages in the urban labor market [8]. The situation may be worst in the informal rural labor market which is characterized by unskilled labor. However, the rapid growth in female labor dominated and export based manufacturing

industries are now also raising new issues and concerns about evolving industrial relations in the RMG sector and their possible future consequences for wages and labor productivity in general and changing working conditions for the female labor forces.

Around the mid-1980s, when some new generation Bangladeshi entrepreneurs, a majority of whom started operating primarily as local suppliers of these 'buying houses', joined the RMG manufacturing sector; followed suit in terms of labor practices. Except for a few relatively new garment manufacturers, all preferred cheaply available imported raw materials. All of them also employed mainly unskilled teenage girls or young women, drawn primarily from the rural areas. There were some reasons for this deliberate feminization of the work force. It was perceived by the garment factory owners that, as standing pointed out with reference to export-led industrialization, these poor women had been socially and economically oppressed for so long that they were certainly to have low 'aspiration wages' when they took up their jobs and low 'efficiency wages' once they were in employment.

Women workers face wage differentials, insecurity and discrimination at various levels and places. They also face a variety of challenges both at work and home in coping with their daily responsibilities. Researchers have suggested a number of potential reasons for women choosing to work in the Bangladesh RMG sector because of economic hardship [9, 10]; because the family is unable to provide those [11]; and as a means of increasing marriage potential [12]. Women are still under strong patriarchal control and caught between traditional values (saving for dowry and marriage) and modernity (earning through factory work) [11]. They have little or no control over their income [10]. They are burdened with a double day's work, face discrimination at work in terms of wage differentials and gender difference, work in poor conditions, and cannot feel safe on the streets. They are denied reasonable legal support [11]. In a study, it was shown that female garment workers are subjected to violence in both home and workplace in Bangladesh [13]. They stated that, in both case, female experienced same type of violence like emotional, physical, sexual, and economic and four overlaps in violence were reported in both place though they are considered distinctively. Another research study showed that, sexual and physical violence in workplace is a global incident though it varies by country and workplace [14]. Health hazards prevalence study of female workers in garment industries was reported in a study in two districts of Bangladesh [15]. It was found that, female workers in garment industries suffer from various type of health complexities like headache, hand pain, respiratory difficulties etc. the drivers were identified as exposure to particulate dust, micro-fibers, high sound, and chemicals. This paper focuses on the problems faced by the female workers at the workplaces, the effects of the problem towards the industry and productivity, priority on delivering direct benefit to the female workforces, recommended steps to their rights and legal protection.

2. Materials and Methods

Some RMG industries were selected in Gazipur district for the research works considering the problems that faced by the female labor forces. Primary data were collected personally from the respondents through a sample survey with the help of a structured and pre-tested oral interview schedule. In some cases, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used to get a reasonably true picture of the stated purpose. Tabular form was used for a substantial part of data analysis. Relatively simple statistical techniques such as percentage and arithmetic mean or average were considered to analyze the data.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1. Male Verses Female Worker's Scenario

Many organizations have studies on different RMG industries to depict the actual scenario of various aspects. From those studies, it is known that there has not been a healthy growth of trade unionism within the RMG industries and this has led to the creation of a pervasive patron client list nexus of interested male outsiders and mostly female garment workers. With some exception, the discrimination between male and female is more prominent in the employees of higher skill level and reduces as the skill level reduces. Helpers of both genders who are at the bottom of the skill ladder enjoy same level of wages whereas male supervisors possessing high levels of technical and managerial skills enjoy a major wage advantage over their female counterparts. In this connection, a case study of NEWAGE Group, a leading exporter of RMG of Bangladesh, where employed over 4000 people of whom about 70% are females. Table 1 shows the Discrimination Index (DI) of average wages of the various groups of employees as compared with their male counterparts.

Table 1. Gender scenario and Discrimination Index (DI) of average wage in RMG industry.

Sl. No.	Employment Group	DI of Average wage	
		Male	Female
1.	Supervisors	100	79
2.	Sewing Dept	100	97
3.	Finishing Dept	100	88
4.	Cutting Dept	100	89
5.	QC Dept	100	95
6.	Helpers	100	100

The above scenario exists in the most RMG industries, where managerial skills enjoy a 21% wage advantage over their female counterparts. The equivalence of wages at the helpers' level is perhaps a result of the minimum wages for non-skilled labors fixed by the government and enforced by very strict monitoring mechanism of the buyers to ensure compliance with their code of conduct.

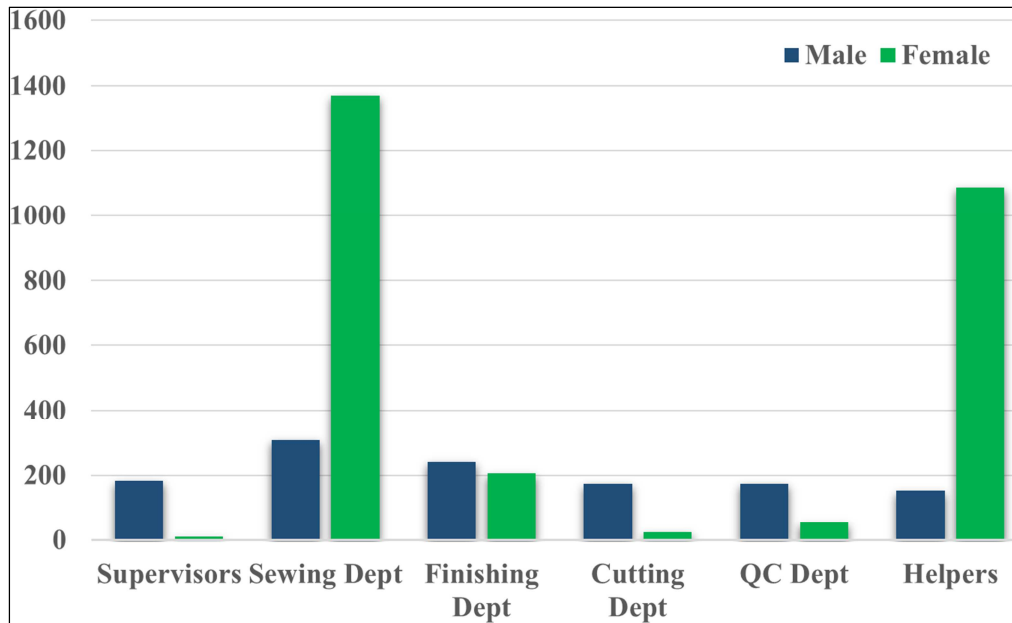


Figure 1. Gender scenario in RMG industry.

Figure 1 shows the gender scenario in RMG industry. Maximum 86.02% less male workers work as helpers and 77.52% less male workers works in sewing department in comparison to female workers. Controversially, higher numbers of male workers are engaged as supervisor than female workers. Similar scenario is found in cutting and QC department. Small difference in gender is observed in finishing department. Only 17.48% higher male workers are found in this department. So highest gender discrimination is

vivid in supervisor level.

Figure 2 shows the salary discrimination scenario in RMG industry [16]. From the Figure it is seen that 28.31% workers said that they have been discriminated in salary, based on gender. The rate of discrimination is higher mostly in small industries comparative to large industries. Negligible number of workers expressed salary discrimination based on gender in case of large industries.

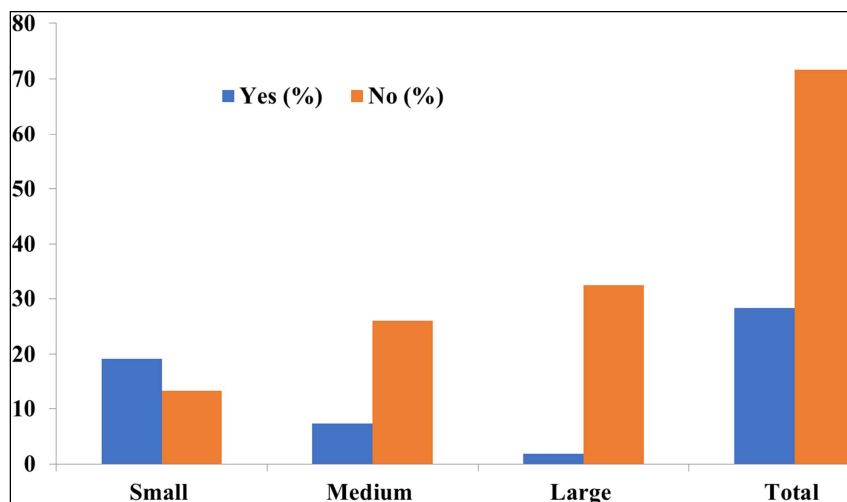


Figure 2. Salary discrimination scenario in RMG industry.

3.2. List of Problems Faced by Female Workers in RMG Industries

(a) The existing male dominated garment federations mostly have not been successful in addressing the main concerns- working activities of the female workers. According to law, women work is prohibited after 8 pm. But at times the women workers are asked to work

until 10 pm or 11 pm. Even in some cases they work the whole night.

(b) Female employees face discrimination in wage fixation, wage computation, overtime and bonus etc. over male employees. Management does not pay the monthly wage and overtime payment within 7th of the next month. In hundreds of smaller factories monthly

wages and overtime payments remain outstanding for 2/3 months. Besides, a large number of the garment factories are not following the new minimum wage fixed at BDT 5300 (US\$ 68).

- (c) In many cases, maternity leaves are absent. Though 87.3% of the female workers received maternity leave contractually, only 43% were granted paid maternity leave. Beside this, many factories do not have the day care centers. Due to lack of day care centers for children in the workplace, mother workers couldn't take care of her baby properly in the factory premises.
- (d) Women faced sexual harassment in the workplace by the male labor and also by the management in RMG industries. About 3% women have faced sexual harassment at their workplace. This is mainly molestation, touching or brushing against parts of the body. Moreover, about 4% men and 17% women reported that someone in their workplace had complained of sexual harassment. Most workers were not satisfied with the response of the management and fellow workers to such incidents. A survey noted that they also suffered from work-related harassment in their respective workplaces. The most common types of work-related harassments are (i) Heavy, additional workloads are to handle by 43% women and by 34% men (ii) Extra hours without extra pay is handled by 27% women and by 20% men (iii) Men suffered from being given work that requires them to stand for long hours (34% time) while women suffered from being shifted repeatedly from their normal place of work (35% time).

Living and housing problems are faced by the female worker (migrants) especially in urban areas for the lack of proper accommodation. Actually, it is terribly expensive for a single woman to rent an accommodation on her own. It is also difficult to find a landlord who would let out his place to a single woman. Figure 3 shows the living scenario of the garment workers in pie chart.

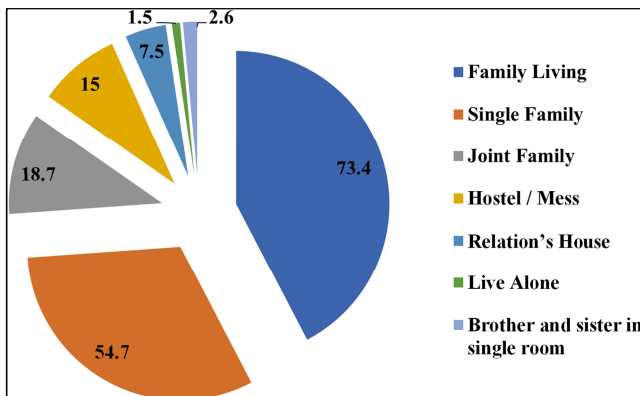


Figure 3. Living scenario of the garment workers.

Maximum 54.7% female workers live in single family without any support where as 18.7% live in joint family. Many property owners are now interested in building mess for garment workers and the demand for these mess are on

the rise. Mess is a dormitory type group house where people live, not necessarily female garment workers only. However, living in the mess is quite insecure for women, as terror or local touts mostly own these messes. Women, staying there, are often easy prey because of its motel-oriented atmosphere where anyone can stay overnight and disappear the following day. No one ensures security for the residents either. These messes are very cramped and there are no recreation facilities. Female workers live in a mess environment about 15%. This is probably because living alone for a young female worker, particularly unmarried females, is not only a camp or tent but also very insecure in Dhaka in general. Yet, it is shown in the Table 2 [17] that women's living in mess has almost doubled from 7.6% to 14.9% between 1990 and 1997 in non-EPZ factories due to factory employment. The rate is also increasing day by day.

Table 2. Residence of Women Workers (Non-EPZ).

Type of residence	1990	1997
House (with family)	81.7	72.3
Mess	7.6	14.9
Relative House	9.0	7.7
Factory Accommodation	1.1	0.6
Other	0.6	4.5

Table 3. Garment Workers Mode of Commuting, 1997.

Communication Mode	Non-EPZ (%)		EPZ (%)	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Walk to work	57.9	68.9	7.4	7.6
Walk and rickshaw	3.7	7.0	3.7	3.3
Walk and bus	21.6	15.5	3.7	3.3
Bus/tempo	4.2	2.1	3.7	2.2
Factory Bus	0.5	-	77.8	79.3
Rickshaw	6.3	2.8	-	2.2
Other	5.8	3.7	3.7	2.1

- (e) Many factories don't have the transportation facilities for the workers as a result worker struggle to reach the workplace from different areas by walking, using public transport, which reflects that the worker starts her duty with tiredness. Table 3 [17] shows that female workers in non-EPZ area reached to their work places almost by walking (68.9%) and they have no facilities of transportation by factory buses.
- (f) Most of the women cannot manage highly paid jobs because of their low level of education. Also, they do not understand the organizational behavior, culture, rules, and regulations and discipline properly, for which they face problems in the workplaces. From these perceptions, they are keen to educate their sons and daughters so that they may not face the same disadvantage, and this is not gender specific. Apart from the workplaces, because of an unequal balance of power between men and women in the household most of the married female workers are satisfied with the dowry they gave for their marriage. Female's lower educational attainment may partially account for wage disparity. However, increased education has not proven to narrow the male-female wage gap, the study report

on the state of woman workers in RMG sectors findings from a recent Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) study.

- (g) Generally, the recruitment procedure in the RMG factory is done informally. In most cases recruitment has done without providing any appointment letter to the both female and male workers. Only 26.4% workers, of which 27.3% male and 25% female, received appointment letters. As the garment workers, do not have appointment letters to use as proof of employment and the government turns a blind eye to their plight, owners of the garment factories can terminate workers at any time without serving any notice.
- (h) In RMG industries about 51% of workers do not enjoy weekly holiday due to additional work and overtime.
- (i) The calculated exploitation of the societal vulnerability of female laborers in order to undermine existing labor standards.
- (j) Lack of medical and lunch facilities.
- (k) In most cases, female workers contribution/job is not recognized. Female workers don't have any proper recognition both socially and nationally.

3.3. Suggested Recommendations

The problems discussed in the previous section could create serious situation i.e. labor grievance and disputes in the workplace. Grievance and disputes originates from employee dissatisfaction associated with terms and condition (work environment, proper supervision, work group, wages, holidays, uncertain death of co-worker etc.) of employment. Labor grievances and disputes are harmful for the industry as well as for the export earnings and it has impact on both the work and the workers. Recently, RMG sector in Bangladesh is facing various types of problems such as loss of interest in work, lack of morality and commitment, low productivity/turnover, substandard quality of production, increase in absenteeism, indiscipline, unrest, accident etc.

3.4. General Viewpoint

Discrimination has a significant effect on the competitive RMG sector in Bangladesh; it needs to be removed from the sector. For this purpose, following criterion fulfilled-

- (a) To follow the factories, act 1934 (XXV of 1934) for regulating working conditions in the RMG factories. Health hygiene (cleanliness, ventilation and temperature, artificial humidification, lighting, drinking water etc.), safety, welfare, working hour's etc. factors should be applied properly.
- (b) Internationally, resist move to link trade with labor standards. Instead improve monitoring and surveillance by the International Labor Organization (ILO), as there is evidence that most governments respond to complaints presented under the formal procedures of the ILO. In addition, the ILO could provide technical

assistance to the Least Development Countries (LDCs), which may lack the required skills. If monitoring and surveillance do not work effectively, the issue of strengthening ILO enforcement powers may be considered. In addition, every organization should follow the labor laws of ILO such as wage, holidays etc.

- (c) To issue appointment letters to the workers for the recognition of their job.
- (d) Ensure basic education or vocational training for building knowledge, skill development, attitude, business counseling, networking and development of professionalism.
- (e) Organizations should pay the monthly wage and overtime payment within 10th of the following month.
- (f) RMG industries should provide transportation and accommodation facilities for its worker as capable as they can for getting higher performance and output from the workers in the workplace and ensuring social securities.
- (g) To provide medical facilities for better mental and physical strength. Besides in-house lunch facilities could be provided, as it requires.
- (h) To ensure job security through job contacts and factory laws.

3.5. Gender Equality Viewpoint

Wage discrimination between female and male has a significant effect in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. The qualities of female workers like amenability to repetitive work and docility that made competitive from male workers in this sector. Affirmative policy measures are therefore needed to encourage the females to join the productive export-oriented sector by elimination of gender discrimination. To achieve this end, positive policies in the following areas are required to be pursued:

- (a) Ensure to recognize the working activities, job details of female workers socially and nationally.
- (b) Ensure the access to finance - micro-credit as well as providing collateral free loans of bigger amounts to the females' workers in case of their urgent need.
- (c) Encourage the females to join the productive export-oriented sector by elimination of gender discrimination and develop mechanisms to create women headed businesses.
- (d) To facilitate and promote marketing of the RMG products that being manufactured by the female worker and encourages for women dominated businesses.
- (e) Develop marketing and sales infrastructure to facilitate and promote marketing of products produced by women.
- (f) Encourage in join the trade/labor unions and develop leadership styles and behavior for better bargaining power.
- (g) Develop institutional capacity and encourage creation of women entrepreneurs' associations.
- (h) Ensure security of female workers en-routed to their

workplace.

- (i) Encourage freedom of association.
- (j) Maternity leaves for the female workers should be as per government rules and regulations with pay.
- (k) Harmonious industrial relationship needs to develop in the organizations so that the female workers do not face any sexual harassment or molestation in the workplace.

4. Conclusion

The rising participation of female labor force in RMG sectors shows that there has been a major change in social norms. Of the regular female workers, most are employed in the manufacturing sector, particularly in RMG industries. The contribution of female workers in RMG sectors is increasing day by day and the major part of the total export earning is coming from this sector, which helps to increase the employment and economic growth of the country. Therefore, the owners of RMG industries should provide and maintain proper facilities to the female workers for their betterment as well as to reach the maximum level of productivity. In addition, the associations such as FBCCI, BGMEA and BKMEA should take necessary measures for solving existing problems of RMG industries. Besides, the government of Bangladesh should adapt rules and regulations for the rising RMG industries for ensuring increasing employment, favorable working environment and wage discrimination.

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