



The Problems of Garments' Workers in Bangladesh: A Survey

Md. Nazim Uddin Bhuiyan FCMA

Professor, Dept. of Accounting & Information Systems
University of Dhaka
nazim15765@gmail.com

Arobindu Dash

Lecturer, Department of Psychology
College of Arts & Science (CAAS)
International University of Business Agriculture & Technology (IUBAT)
arobindupsy@iubat.edu

Abstract

Garments Industry or Ready-made Garments (RMGs) is major export earner and employment provider in the economy of Bangladesh. It has played an important role in the economic development of Bangladesh in the recent past. Our garments' workers are the nucleus of this sector and now, their problems, betterment and sustainability should be focused. The main objective of the present study is to highlight the problems and perspectives of garments' workers in Bangladesh. A total 100 respondents were used in this study. A picture of the problems and severity of those came out. As being an important sector, these should be specially taken care of by the policy makers. This study reveals a partial picture of the reality in the RMG sector and opens the door of further research in garment sectors. The government should invest in designing new policies that improve the workers' conditions, and also in informing the workers of their rights.

Keywords: RMGs, Garments workers, Problems in RMG sector, TIB, Sustainability, etc.

Introduction

Ready-made Garments (RMG) emerged as an industry in Bangladesh in the 1980s. After 1990s, Bangladesh started moving towards industrialization and garments industry played a vital role in this revolutionary journey (Rahman & Owen, 2007). Today, our GDP's 80% is covered from this sector. It is the urgency of time to study this field more and more, so that we can ensure a healthy and smarter workplace and sustainable RMG sector. Actually, Garment workers are the nucleus of this sector. If we can detect their problems, ensure their betterment and motivate towards work by creating a friendly work environment, we can undoubtedly get better output from this marginal workers (Adekola & Sergi, 2016). Rana Plaza incident created international concern about human security in this sector in Bangladesh six years ago in 2013. International Community suggested Accord and Alliance agreements ended in the last year (2018). According to Transparency International, Bangladesh (TIB) report, RMG workers are paid 26% less in Bangladesh (Daily Star, 26.04.19). This study basically focuses on workers' problems and on the basis of problems, specific intervention would also be identified.

It is well known that most of the garments' workers come from very marginal level to change their lot. But how much they can change their lot? It is a common big question. They serve this sector; try heart and soul to improve their conditions. But the reality is that they shine in very little cases (Kanter, 2003), as their salary increases very slowly on the basis of experience, but their day to day expenses increase very fast. As a result, they have to live in the circle of poverty. Due to such financial crisis, they can't fulfill their basic needs properly (Narayan & Patel, 2000). They are not concerned with their food, clothing, accommodation, health & hygiene, etc. This deprivation makes these people deviated from the mainstream society. But their contribution to this society is significant. It is high time, to focus on these people who are deprived from their rights over the couple of years. Our study is basically focusing in this sector where we will try our level best to understand the nature of problems of our RMG workers, their present situations and their potentialities. Del Carpio,

Messina & Sanz-de-Galdeano (2014) proposed that wages are higher when the minimum wage is set to a higher level or standard level, as employer, in that case, fails to exploit the workers. Moreover when the introduction of minimum wage is common knowledge then firms increase the wage even beyond the minimum; the asymmetry of information plays an important role in the wage settings and it might have a negative effect on wage. They also stated that this phenomenon is found mostly in developing countries, because workers have less access on information and less knowledge about public policies. Berik & Rodgers (2010) found that lack of workers' awareness about their rights limits the adherence to committees and unions, because of the fear of being discriminated by their supervisors. Moreover workers are subjected to verbal and physical abuses and to penalties for mistakes or failure to achieve production targets. They also proposed that the freedom of association, right to strike and collective bargaining is very restricted in Bangladesh. Moreover, the unions in Bangladesh are among the weakest in Asia; also the World Bank recognizes this pattern explained by the limited activity and effectiveness of trade unions (Berik & Van der Meulen Rodgers, 2008). Kucera (2002) explains how declining compliance with labor standards, which are guaranteed by unions, causes erosion of workers' condition. Vaughan-Hitehead (2011) stated that in Bangladesh, workers are mostly organized in committees rather than trade unions, which are growing only lately. The weakness of the collective organization of workers is given not only by the fractioning in small and many committees that lose significantly in power, because of their size, but also there is almost no collective agreement among them. For this reason, workers' position becomes weak in front of negotiation tables. Stronger unions would have an effect on the macro and micro economic levels. At the macro level, stronger workers' power would improve the workers condition bringing more stability, less conflict and social distress that would attract brands that agreed with responsible sourcing (Stiglitz, 2002). At the microeconomic level, stronger union bargaining power would bring to an increase of workers' wages, more job security and would improve working conditions (Rodgers & Berik, 2006).

The main objective of this study was to know the problems of garment workers in Bangladesh. Under

this study, there had been some other specific objectives and these are the followings:

- To highlight the present socio-economic conditions of garment workers in Bangladesh.
- To analyze the present features of working environment and security system of garment workers.
- To find out the workers' problems in the garments sector and available opportunities.
- To represent the perceptions of garment workers.

Methodology

Sample & the Population:

A total of 100 garment workers (respondents) were used in this study who were selected on convenient sampling from slum areas in the Dhaka city who have worked at the garments industries as worker for at least one year. The age of the respondents ranged from 13 to 40 years, the mean age being 24.65 years. 53% respondents' age were below 20, 38% respondents' age ranges were 21 to 30 and the rest 9% respondents' age ranges were below 30. Among 100 respondents, 47 were married and 53 were unmarried. Most of the respondents (77%) were females. Educational qualification of the respondents ranged from grade 3 to grade 10. Among them, 82% had primary education and the rest 18% had secondary education. Most of the respondents (63%) had middle size family (family members within 4-6), 12% respondents had small size family (family members within 1-3) and 25% respondents had large size family (family members within 7-9).

Design:

Convenient sampling was used and a picture of perception about problem was attempted.

Procedures:

At first, respondents were selected in this study who has worked as garment workers for the last one year (at least) from the slum in the Dhaka city. They were then asked a set of structured questions (having both open-ended and close-ended questions) focused on the work situations. This has taken around 12-15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. This data was collected through one to one basis.

Results

01. Work-experiences of the Respondents

In Table 1, it is noticed that most of the respondent's, i.e., 66%, work experiences ranged from 1 to 5 years,

23% respondents' work experiences ranged from 6 to 10 years, 11% respondents' work experiences ranged from 11 to 15 years.

02. Working hours of the Respondents

In Table 2, most of the respondents (59%) work 11-12 hours in a day, 37% respondents work 9-10 hours in a day, 2% respondents work 7-8 hours in a day and the rest 2% respondents work 5-6 hours in a day.

03. Mode of transport used by Garment workers

Table 3 -6, reveal that most of the garment workers (86%) join their workplaces by walking and for this reason, most of them (54%) join their workstation in late. Most of the workers (72%) are not concerned about their corresponding trade unions and 92% workers donot know about any workplace related laws or acts.

04. Personal hygiene of garment workers

In case of personal hygiene issues (Table 7 - 9), it was found that most garment workers, 47%, are working in inadequate light and air environment. Almost all, 87%, have separate toilet system, but the number of toilets are few. A single toilet is used by 36-40 workers in most cases, 31%.

05. Scenarios of workplace harassment

Table 10-12 show workplace harassments are common in garments, 68%, which is mostly attempted by workers' supervisors, 37%. At the same time, economic exploitation, 33%, is much more common in garments industry.

06. Workplace safety and security conditions

In case of workplace safety and security conditions (Table 13 - 16), most garments have mostly fire accident concerns (83%) than any other causes. Accident precautionary steps are spread mainly by announcement (53%). Most workers (80%) believe that authorities have no security concern regarding their women workers. Most workers (50%) seek sound fire security than other securities.

07. Workplace proactive facilities for garment workers

Tables 17 - 19 present the facilities that a worker gets from the industry. Most workers (79%) feel that they are being economically benefited. Most workers (93%) are not got any medical services in workstation and most (52%) rely on pharmacy for their medical services.

08. Payment systems in garment sector:

In case of monetary systems (economic benefits) (Table 20 - 23), most workers (61%) do not know owner's viewpoint regarding to their overtime payments. Most workers (32%) are paid less than their male counterpart and are not pay full monthly salary. Most workers get their monthly salary in the month's second week and most workers (89%) are not satisfied regarding their existing salary.

09. Policy relaxation to support workers

Tables 24 -25 show managerial treatment towards their workers. Most workers get one time break during lunch period (91%) and most workers believe that their management behavior is good enough.

10. Garment workers viewpoints for the development of garment sector

For developing this garments industry (Table 26 - 30), most workers (70%) demand governmental supports and steps for raising their salary (87%). They urges NGOs should take step regarding health and sanitation services (34%). Most workers (50%) demand to get doctor placement for medical services at their workstation and a large number (40%) believe that working environment will be increased by proving overall services.

Discussion

The main aim of this study was to identify the problem of garments' workers in Bangladesh. We also tried to explore the real scenarios of garments sector with some specific aims, such as, the present socio-economic conditions of garment workers in Bangladesh, the present working environment of garment workers, the present security system and safety of garment workers, the opportunities in garment sectors and the workers' problems in garments sector. A total of 100 respondents were chosen for this study. It is known that though our journey in this sector is not new, we failed to develop experienced workforce in the meantime. After certain duration, they quit/are fired from this industry (see Table 1). We also found that most workers (59%) have to do their task for 11-12 hours time daily, which is really inhumane practice and violation of labor act (Table 2). We also found that most workers (81%) have to do overtime to mitigate their day to day expenses. In case of overtime payment, most garment workers donot understand the employer's attitude. That's why they may feel uncertainty about their work and life. They

(91%) get work-break only during lunch time. That's why they may feel much more work pressure and their fatigue may reduce their performance. Most workers feel that their working environment has little lighting and air ventilation system. Unsound environment acts as obstacle to performance. Though garments industries' toilet system are separated for male and female, 36 to 40 workers use a single toilet which is pretty tough to ensure personal hygiene of the garment workers. It is very threatening that most workers especially women workforce (68%) are harassed (physically, mentally, economically and sexually) at their workplace. In most of the cases, they are harassed by their immediate supervisor (37%). 33% workers marked economic exploitation is more common scenario in such harassments. But, it is also shown that their management team's (higher authority) behavior is good enough. In this perspective, we observed the difference of attitude among workers towards their senior management and the first line management. They feel that the more the senior management is good enough, the more their first line management is bad and cruel. Most workers (83%) are concerned about fire security which is really a positive sign. In case of emergency situation, public announcement (53%) is much more common strategy in garments industry. Most workers (86%) use walking as their mode of transport that's why they arrive their work station at late in the morning. Only 28% workers are informed about their trade union activity which is very shocking. Women workers security is very negligible (80%) in the garment sector. Economic oppression is very common in garments industry, such as, less paid women (32%), not pay full monthly salary (32%) and not pay timely (28%). They are paid mostly (83%) at the second week of the later month. It is a matter of great sorrow that most garment workers (89%) are not satisfied about their monthly salary. They get mostly economic benefits (79%) from their workstation and medical services are very poor (7%). That's why; they go to their nearest pharmacy (52%) and homeopathy (29%) for their health complications. They feel that Govt.'s (70%) necessary steps are very vital for the development of this sector. At the same time, NGOs should focus mostly on their health and sanitation issue (34%). Most garment workers expect from their management to ensure permanent doctor placement (50%) at their workplace. Subsidiary services (40%) should be included for garment workers for the

improvement of the garments' environment. They want fire security (50%) and emergency gateway (36%) from their authority. Finally, our most workers (92%) aren't concerned about labor law.

There were also a few limitations in this study. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small. It was pretty tough to collect primary data from large sample. Secondly, the data were collected from slum areas in the Dhaka city where most of the respondents were same level workers. So, this chunk of group was much more homogeneous. Finally, we used non-probabilistic sampling (convenient) for the study. For these, in consequences, we might miss some relevant scenario on the data which requires further investigation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study makes a highlight on the problems of our garments' workers in more in-depth manner. This study will enrich knowledge in understanding the existing problems and also show sight to overcome them for the betterment of our garment sectors. Policy makers and relevant authority should be more attentive to solve problems of RMG for sustainability of this sector. 

References

- Adekola, A., & Sergi, B. S., 2016. *Global Business Management: A cross-cultural perspective*. Routledge, NY, USA.
- Berik, G., & Rodgers, Y. V. D. M., 2010. Options for Enforcing Labour Standards: Lessons from Bangladesh and Cambodia. *Journal of International Development*, 22(1), 56-85.
- Berik, G., & Van der Meulen Rodgers, Y., 2008. The Debate on Labor Standards and International Trade: Lessons from Cambodia and Bangladesh (No. 2007-03). Working Paper, University of Utah, Department of Economics, USA.
- Del Carpio, X., Messina, J., & Sanz-de-Galdeano, A., 2014. Minimum Wage: Does It Improve Welfare in Thailand?
- Kanter, R. M., 2003. Challenge of Organizational Change: How Companies Experience it and Leaders Guide it. Simon and Schuster.
- Kucera, D., 2002. Core Labour Standards and Foreign Direct Investment. *International Labour Review*, 141 (1-2), 31-69.
- Narayan-Parker, D., & Patel, R., 2000. *Voices of the Poor: Can Anyone Hear Us? (Vol. 1)*. World Bank Publications.
- Rahman, Belal, A., & Owen, D. L., 2007. The Views of Corporate Managers on the Current State of, & Future Prospects for, Social Reporting in Bangladesh: An Engagement-based Study. *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, 20(3), 472-494.
- Stiglitz, J. E., 2002. Information and the Change in the Paradigm in Economics. *American Economic Review*, 92(3), 460-501.
- Van der Meulen Rodgers, Y., & Berik, G., 2006. Asia's Race to Capture Post-MFA Markets: A Snapshot of Labor Standards, Compliance, and Impacts on Competitiveness. *Asian Development Review*, 23(1), 55.
- Vaughan-Whitehead, D. (Ed.). (2011). *Work Inequalities in the Crisis: Evidence from Europe*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Appendix :Tables of data

Table 1: Work-experiences of the respondents

Work-experiences	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
1 to 5 years	66	66
6 to 10 years	23	23
11 to 15 years	11	11
Total	100	100

Table 2: Working hours of the respondents

Working hour (s)	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
5-6 Hours	2	2
7-8 Hours	2	2
9-10 Hours	37	37
11-12 Hours	59	59
Total	100	100

Table 3: Different modes of transport

Mode of transport	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Walking	86	86
Rickshaw	02	02
Bus	11	11
Leguna	01	01
Total	100	100

Table 4: Awareness about work-place related laws

Awareness about work-place related laws	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Yes	05	05
No	95	95
Total	100	100

Table 5: Possibility of workplace accidents and causes

Possible causes of workplace accidents	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Fire	83	83
Earthquake	06	06
Others	11	11
Total	100	100

Table 6: Benefits received by workers

Benefits received by workers	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Economic benefits	79	79
Health facilities	15	15
Transport facilities	03	03
Accommodation facilities	03	03
Total	100	100

Table 7: Attitude about overtime payment

Attitude about overtime payment	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Assure to pay latter	25	25
Don't know owner's viewpoint	61	61
No opinion	14	14
Total	100	100

Table 8: Perception about initiator for development of RMG sector

Initiator for development of RMG sector	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Government	70	70
NGOs	06	06
Both	24	24
Total	100	100

Table 9: RMG owners steps to promote health services

RMG owners steps to promote health services	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
Medical center establishment	42	42
Doctor placement	50	50
Payment of allowances	08	08
Total	100	100

Table 10: Workers opinion for the improvement of RMGs' environment

Satisfaction about current salary	Frequency (N=100)	Percentage (%)
More Light & air provision	37	37
Increasing overall facilities	40	40
Enhancement of Security measures	23	23
Total	100	100