

Assessment of the current working condition of the garment workers and determining the importance of labor union for the improvement of working condition in the RMG industry of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The well-being of the workers is one of the most important issues in industries worldwide. The ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh is the backbone of the country's economy which has been facing challenges to ensure workplace safety of the workers. Also, there has not been a healthy growth of labor unionism within the RMG industry. Previous studies suggest that there is a widespread occupational segregation and gender discrimination in wage rates. The purpose of this study is to assess the current working condition of the garment workers in terms of health and workplace safety and gender discrimination. Another purpose is to determine the impact of labor union on improvement of the workers' condition. The study uses survey data from 203 responses to evaluate the working condition of the RMG industry. An exploratory data analysis was done to measure the occupational health and safety which was followed by a logistic regression to find out the relation between labor union and other variables. Results reveal that gender discrimination has been reduced greatly, fire, building and other workplace safety measures has been consistently improving and labor union has a significant impact on enhancement of betterment of the workers.

Keywords

Working condition, labor rights, occupational health and safety, trade union

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is the second-largest readymade garment exporter receiving the largest percentage of foreign revenue from the RMG sector. The RMG industry of Bangladesh with the remittance earning more than \$34 billion is heavily dependent on the female workers. The total number of workers in this sector is approximately 4.2 million, where about 85% of workers are female (Ovi, 2017; BGMEA, 2017). Unfortunately, this sector lacks to ensure decent work and gender equality. The working environment in this sector is unfriendly and unhealthy to work comfortably and labor rights and social compliance are often violated (Ali, et al., 2008; Rubya, 2015). The RMG sector did not offer opportunities to the feminine labor pool. They are exploited easily due to the lack of technical knowledge and training. Amongst the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set by the UN, goal no.5 states 'Gender equality' and goal no.7 is 'Decent work & economic growth'. These goals are interconnected as a proper job and source of income are the main components for women's economic development or empowerment (Svarer, et al., 2017). In most of the cases, the factory working environment is extremely dangerous. Fire accidents and building collapses are very common.

After the Rana Plaza incident in 2013, the government of Bangladesh, the European Union, and the International Labour Organization jointly issued an agreement in the month of July of the same year to promote enhanced labor standards and responsible business conduct in the readymade garments and knitwear industry in Bangladesh. The EU

Sustainability Compact contained a list of 29 activities. Over and above, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) asked the government to implement a 16-point action plan within a time frame of 1 year in order to restore the GSP facility in the US market (Moazzem & Islam, 2015). Furthermore, two factory inspection programs were established to make the workplace safer for workers. These are the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (Accord) and the Alliance for Bangladesh (Alliance). The Accord was a five-year-long independent agreement designed to build a safe working environment in the RMG industry (The Bangladesh accord on fire and building safety, n.d). Like the Accord, the Alliance was also a five-year-long agreement initiated to prioritize the Bangladesh Worker Safety Initiative (About the alliance for Bangladesh worker safety, n.d).

Subsequently, the Accord and the Alliance initiatives, Bangladesh Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) by ILO is being implemented for the period 2017-20 focusing on four key priorities and outcomes to ensure effective employment policies to enhance employability through skill development including for green growth, promotion of safe and clean working environment for all workers and in compliance with core international labor standards, promotion of fundamental principles and rights at work through social dialogue and tripartism and promotion of social protection for all workers and vulnerable groups including against climate change (Decent work in Bangladesh (ILO in Bangladesh), n.d).

1.1 Objectives

The objective of this study is to evaluate the current working condition of the workers in the RMG industry.

2. Literature Review

Over the years, it has been a great challenge for the Bangladeshi RMG industry to ensure an indiscriminate and healthy workplace environment for the workers which are the foundation of the SDG-5: gender equity and SDG-8: decent work and economic growth. Although the government and some national and international organizations are working hard, yet studies on gender equity and occupational safety have found significant discrimination between male and female workers & employees.

A study showed that 70% of workers had never got an appointment letter which means they do not have any proof and recognition of their employment (Mahmud & Afrin, 2017). According to a survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2005, only 28% of employees had a legally binding document appointment letter that confirms their employment (Berik & Rodgers, 2009).

Mahmud and Afrin discussed, 28.31% of workers reported that they had been treated unfairly based on their gender, especially the female workers. They face discrimination in wage fixation, wage computation, overtime, and bonus (Mahmud & Afrin, 2017). There are also complaints about workers not getting their salaries on time (Sarker et al., 2020). The Wage Survey of 2007 by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics reported that the women predominated job categories such as sewing operators and helpers generate lower monthly income than a job mostly staffed by men such as knitting operators (Berik & Rodgers, 2009).

51% of workers do not enjoy the weekly holiday whereas only 43% of females were granted paid maternity leave (Mahmud & Afrin, 2017). In the RMG factories of Bangladesh, pregnant female workers generally get maternity leave for thirty days to a maximum of sixty days, although the government rule of maternity leave is four months with pay. This insufficient pregnancy leave causes female workers to suffer from malnutrition and anemia along with other serious complications (Akhter et al., 2010).

In a survey on 180 garments workers, cent percent of the respondents reported they were victims of some sort of workplace violence. 66.7%, 58.3%, 84.4%, 68.9%, and 7.2% of them faced physical assault, unfair discrimination, monetary penalty, psychological harassment and, sexual harassment, respectively (Chaklader et al., 2011). The

number one barrier for the female employees in the Bangladeshi RMG industry is the organizational culture. It restricts female progression into leadership positions (Islam & Jantan, 2017). Female workers in the RMG industry do not get proper respect and are often harassed by male coworkers and superiors both physically and verbally. Male supervisors often force them to do overtime until late at night (Sarker et al., 2020). Lack of awareness among the workers about their rights restricts their conformity to committees and unions. There is also a fear of discrimination by their supervisors among the workers. Moreover, the workers are abused both verbally and physically by their superiors (Berik & Rodgers, 2010).

There are shortfalls of ventilation and sunlight inside many RMG factories. Many of them also do not have proper fire safety measures and also failed to ensure other basic health and safety issues. A study of 101 workers from 4 garment factories found that 34.65% of the respondents feel their job place is unsafe and insecure for them as they are anxious about electrical faults, fire accidents, building collapse, stampede, etc (Uddin, 2014).

However, it is believed that to ensure the international labor standards for the workers so that they can fully enjoy their rights, particularly the rights relating to freedom of association and collective bargaining, labor union or trade union would play a vital role. A stronger union would have an effect on the macro and microeconomic levels for upgrading the condition of the workers. At the macro level, stronger workers' power would ameliorate the workers' conditions and lead the way to more stability, less conflict, and social distress which eventually would attract brands that agreed with responsible sourcing (Stiglitz, 2002).

Furthermore, a stronger union bargaining power would substantially bring an increase in workers' wages and job security (Rodgers, Meullen & Berik, 2006). There is also empirical evidence of linking collective bargaining to a greater flow of information and coordination among the workers which would generate an improvement of workers' conditions (Aidt & Tzannatos, 2002). On September 15, 2015, the government of Bangladesh issued rules of the amended Labour Law regarding the establishment of trade unions in the RMG industry. In a very quick time, a total of 464 new trade unions were established whereas there were only 131 at the start of 2013 (Action Aid, 2016).

All the studies discussed above clearly indicate that there was a presence of significant discrimination in the RMG industry of Bangladesh. Also, the workplace environment was no less than risky for the worker's health and safety. Both hinder the process of achieving the SDG 5 and SDG 8. However, many international organizations as well as the local government have implemented some rules, regulations, and laws to develop a safer workplace environment and to reduce discrimination. But no recent study was done to evaluate whether the conditions have been ameliorated since the rules and laws were placed. This study, therefore, aims to investigate the current condition of occupational safety and gender equality to see whether working the conditions of the garment workers has improved and to determine the relationship between improvement of workplace safety and the presence of labor unions.

3. Methods

To assess the current conditions of the workers in the RMG industry, the study used a quantitative research method. A total of 14 variables such as presence of labor union, training for skill development of the workers by the authority, salary structure, salary on time, proper payment for overtime, political/racial/gender discrimination in salary, female toilet facility, pregnancy leave with payment, sexual/verbal harassment by the supervisors, fire safety equipments in the building, proper fire exit, wide staircase for movement, proper light and air in the workstation and recognition of employment (appointment letter at the time of joining). A questionnaire containing 23 questions were prepared for data collection. Each question had two answer choices for response, except for the demography related questions.

The collected data was analyzed with R on Rstudio version 4.0.0. First, an exploratory analysis was done which was followed by logistic regression analysis. A bivariate logistic regression was applied to see the significance of correlation of the dependent variables with the independent variable (presence of labor union).

4. Data Collection

Primary data were used for further analysis, although the reliability and the validity of the data were not tested. Based on the questionnaire, data on the variables for 60 garment industries were collected. A non-probabilistic convenience sampling technique was chosen. For this research, a total of 203 responses were collected. The respondents were from Dhaka (Savar, Ashulia & Mirpur) Narayanganj (BSCIC) and Gazipur (Tongi)- some of the country's largest regions for readymade garments factories. Workers from different garment factories were interviewed face to face to collect the relevant information. The interviews were conducted between 25th August and 10 September, inclusive. As it is seen in table 1, out of 203 respondents, 136 (67%) were female and 67 (33%) were male. 25 of the female workers were less than 21 years old, whereas 54 were within the age range of 21-30 years old, 42 were 31-40 years old, 15 were more than 40 years old. The median age of the female workers was 28 years. Out of total 67 male workers, 12 were less than 21 years old, 30 were between 21-30 years old, 24 were 31-40 years old and 1 was more than 40 years old. The median age for male workers was 29 years.

As shown in table 1, among the respondents, 109 female and 52 male were sewing operators. There were also 27 female helpers and 10 male helpers. 3 of the male respondents were store keepers and 2 (male) were poly man.

Out of 203 respondents 139 (94 female & 45 male) had an education equivalent to secondary school certificate, whereas 64 (42 female & 22 male) of the respondents had received higher secondary education (table 1).

Table 1 also shows that, 86 of the respondents were from Dhaka, out of which 58 were female and 28 were male. 80 (54 female & 26 male) respondents lived in Narayanganj. And 24 female and 13 male respondents were from Gazipur.

Table 1. Demographic of the respondents

Factors	Female (total 136)	Male (total 67)
Age		
Less than 21	25	12
21-30	54	30
31-40	42	24
40+	15	1
Median	28	29
Post		
Sewing operator	109	52
Helper	27	10
Store keeper	0	3
Poly man	0	2

Education		
Secondary (SSC)	94	45
Primary	42	22
Area		
Dhaka	58	28
Narayanganj	54	26
Gazipur	24	13
Percentage	67%	33%

5. Results and Discussion

There have been a numerous number of studies on the RMG industry to unfold the actual scenario of the working condition. From those studies, it has been found that there has not been a healthy growth of labor unionism within the RMG industry and this has led to the unwell workplace condition of the workers. This study revealed that even after the issue of amendment labor law by the government, only 67.5% of the respondents reported that their factories have trade unions or at least the workers know of. What is more sorrowful is that only in 10% of the trade unions have females in leadership positions (table 2).

With some exception, the discrimination in salary based on political/racial/gender is not prominent in the workers of lower skill level. Sewing operators and helpers of both genders enjoy the same level of wages. In table 2 it is stated that, 95.1% of the respondents reported that they have not faced any discrimination when it comes to salary. 91.6% of the workers' salary structure is according to the government regulation. However, 67.5% of the respondents answered that they do not get their salary on time. They usually get paid in the 3rd week of the month. Payments for overtime are also paid with the salary, although 20.7% of the respondents said their overtime remuneration amount is very low.

Table 2 shows that, female toilets are available in 90% (54 out of 60) of the factories. But the number of toilets are insufficient and those are filthy and unhygienic. This leads to health problems of the female workers. A report shows that the average female garment worker is absent for 3–5 days out of every month which hampers the production of the factory (Square toiletries 2018). Mentioned in table 2, 25% (15 out of 60) of the organizations, especially the smaller ones, do not provide any pregnancy leave with payment. Among the workers surveyed, 72.9% said that they were given maternity benefits while 27.1% said that the benefits were not provided. Out of 136 of the female respondents, 120 shared that they had been victims of sexual and/or verbal harassment by their superiors. The female workers are more likely to experience sexual violence whereas their male counterparts are verbally harassed.

As it is seen in table 2, fire safety equipments are present in 54 of the factories, however only 44 of those have proper and wide fire escape routes. Especially the small size factories are densely populated and do not have wide staircases. 20.7% of the workers said the staircases they use are not as wide as it should be for comfortable movement. These factories also lack proper movement of light and air in the workstations which lead to higher temperature and humidity inside the factory buildings.

Visible in table 2, 143 out of the 203 workers did not get appointment letters or formal recognitions at the beginning of their employment, however everyone got their ID cards provided by the authority.

Table 2. Questions asked to the respondents

Questions	Yes (%)	No (%)
Is there a labor union in your factory?	137 (67.5)	66 (32.5)
Are there females in the leadership positions of the labor union?	14 (10)	123 (90)
Do your employers arrange skill development training for the workers?	127 (62.6)	76 (37.4)
Do you get the salary as per government regulation?	186 (91.6)	17 (8.4)
Do you get the salary on time?	66 (32.5)	137 (67.5)
Do you get proper remuneration for the overtime duties?	161 (79.3)	42 (20.7)
Is there any political/racial/gender discrimination in salary structure in your organization?	10 (4.9)	193 (95.1)
Are there separate toilets for the female workers in the factory?	184 (90.6)	19 (9.4)
Are the female toilets clean or get cleaned regularly?	57 (28.1)	146 (71.9)
Are the number of toilets sufficient for the female workers?	98 (48.3)	105 (51.7)
Do your employers allow pregnancy leave with payment?	148 (72.9)	55 (27.1)
Have you faced sexual/physical/verbal harassment by your superiors?	120 (59.1)	83 (40.9)
Are there enough fire safety equipments in the factory building?	189 (93.1)	14 (6.9)
Is the fire escape route as wide as it should be?	149 (73.4)	54 (26.6)
Do you have a wide staircase for regular walk/movement in the factory building?	161 (79.3)	42 (20.7)
Is there enough light and air movement in the workstation?	148 (72.9)	55 (27.1)
Did you get an appointment letter when you joined the factory as a worker?	60 (29.6)	143 (70.4)

Table 3. Logistic regression analysis (* relatively less significant/** relatively more significant)*** relatively more significant)

Variables	Exp(B)	p-value
Training arranged by the employers	1.165	0.002***
On time salary	-0.4055	0.452

Salary structure according to govt. rule	-0.063	0.911
Proper payment for overtime	0.441	0.218
Discrimination in salary	0.3426	0.61
Female toilet facility	1.17	0.017*
Pregnancy leave with payment	0.1259	0.7
Harassment by superiors	-1.0956	0.001***
Fire safety equipments	18.39	0.009***
Proper fire escape route	2.07	0.0001***
Wide staircase for movement	1.523	0.016*
Proper light and air movement	0.75	0.364
Appointment letter or formal recognition	0.64	0.04*

Table 3 shows the exponential beta ($\exp(B)$) values of each of the dependent variables along with their p -value, which was found after applying regression analysis. Applying logistic regression analysis (bi-variate) on the data, it is found that 8 of 13 factors such as training provided by the authorities for skill development of the workers ($p < 0.05$), availability of female toilets ($p < 0.05$), sexual/physical/verbal harassment by the superiors ($p < 0.05$), fire safety equipments facility ($p < 0.05$), presence of proper fire exit ($p < 0.05$), wide staircase for walk ($p < 0.05$), proper light and air movement ($p < 0.05$) and appointment letter or formal recognition of employment ($p < 0.05$) have significant relations with the presence of labor unions in the garment factories. The */*** signs represent the significance of the variables in relation to the independent variable. The more stars, the more significant. Among the 8 significant factors, except harassment by the superiors ($\text{Exp}(B) = -1.0956$) all the factors are positively related to the presence of labor union, since they have positive exponential beta values. Presence of labor union decreases the incidents of sexual/physical/verbal harassment by superiors. On the other hand, presence of labor union augments training opportunities of the workers, availability of female toilets, fire safety facilities and employment recognition. The result concludes that labor union is necessary for better health and workplace safety of the workers.

6. Conclusion

The above study portrays that the labor laws are still violated in the small size factories, although the overall working condition of the country's RMG industry has seen a tremendous amelioration. The implementation of the labor law by the government, regulations by the Accord and the Alliance and the ILO conventions in the RMG industry of Bangladesh has significantly improved the workplace condition in terms of gender discrimination and, health and safety of the workers. However there are few areas where further attention is required. Since it is proven that labor union has a positive impact on improving the condition of the workers, the government must be diligent in implementing the labour laws to establish labor unions in each and every factory. The employers must use all the facilities provided by the government for the betterment of the female labor force.

This research is not free of limitations. One of which is sampling limitation. Only 203 responses do not represent a perfect picture of the whole country. Also, a convenience sampling technique was chosen because of shortages in research resources. Respondents were asked simple Yes/No questions which do not always make a good survey.

Future studies should include open questions or opinions for better results. Another limitation is the study focused on only a few variables, there are more factors left to determine the complete scenario of the garment workers.

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