

## **Status of Female Workers in Readymade Garment Sectors of Bangladesh: A Theoretical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

*Ready Made Garment is one of the leading sectors of Bangladesh economy which has a remarkable contribution to our foreign currency and export business. The expansion of Ready Made Garment sectors in Bangladesh has been possible due to available and cheap labour of women. This paper has usually been formulated on theoretical basis but has tried to show the present status of women in readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh through empirical data analysis collected from different authentic sources. The study actually described the contribution of women in garment sectors, their social, health, economic status, the participation of women in garment sectors, their legal rights in readymade garment sectors following national and international laws, policies, norms, rules and regulations etc. Besides, the core problems that women are facing in readymade garment sectors have critically designed with some recommendations to draw attention of government, garment owners and stakeholders.*

**Key Words:** Female Workers, RMG, Present Status, Contribution, Problems.

### **Introduction**

Readymade garment sector is the most leading and topmost manufacturing industries of Bangladesh which is remarkably contributing to the dynamic economy and GDP growth through exporting garments to foreign countries and earning foreign currency. The successful expansion of these sectors has been possible for the chief labour of garments workers. 80% of this chief labour comes through the hand of women workers. To keep the luminous face value of Bangladesh throughout the world, female workers are restlessly working in readymade garment sectors challenging the entire unfavorable social environment such as

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insecurity, scandal, disgrace, discrimination, harassment and violence etc. Social problems have not been able to stop them from this sector. Day by day the participation and contribution of women in readymade garment sectors is increasing in an alarming rate which results in carrying 13% GDP for Bangladesh out of which 10% comes directly through the hand of women workers. But the question is what we are giving to this women folk. The reality is that sometimes they are to lose their 'Abru' or smashed under concrete and are not given legal salary working for day and night.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The objective of this chapter is to give a clear idea about the present status of women in readymade garment sectors of Bangladesh. This chapter has basically been designed to show the contribution of women in garment sectors, their social, health and economic status and the participation of women in garment sectors. In this chapter I have also tried to show the legal rights of women in readymade garment sectors following national and international laws, policies, rules and regulations etc. Besides, the core problems that women are suffering from in readymade garment sectors have critically designed with some recommendations to draw attention of government, garment owners and stakeholders.

### **Methodology of the Study**

To shape this chapter into reality I have followed secondary method of data collection basing on theoretical and practical knowledge through adopting content analysis from several books, research papers, articles, journals, newspapers and websites etc. So the core base of this chapter is the methodology of content analysis and secondary analysis. But in this chapter I have tried to show the practical sites of women workers of RMG sectors in Bangladesh by representing different numerical or empirical data from several secondary sources.

### **Participation of Women in Garment Sectors**

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Sector in Bangladesh currently employs 4 million garment workers through its 5000 factories and it is a 100% export-oriented industry. It accounts for 76% of the total exports of Bangladesh. Women form over 90% of production workers in the Ready-Made Garment factories which constitutes about 80 percent of the total female employment in the country's manufacturing sector. Women work because of economic hardship and 91% receive minimum wages. Their

monthly income varies with occupation and overtime. On an average they earn from US\$20 to US\$70. Often with less than primary level education or no formal education, women migrate from rural to urban areas in search of work and better living conditions. They are pushed out of rural areas due to floods, cyclones and abject poverty. Garment factories employ them without any formal job contract. Thus, they are easily hired and fired. They are not provided with any compensation when they are laid off due to lack of shipment order. Women work merely here as helpers and less frequently as line supervisors. 10% GDP comes through the hand of women workers in garment sectors. The table shows present participation of women in garment sectors.

Table-1: Participation of women in garment sectors

Year	Garment Factories	Employment in million	Women workers in million
2010-2011	5063	3.60	2.80
2011-2012	5150	3.60	2.88
2012-2013	5190	4.00	3.00

*Source: BGMEA report- 2013*

### **Contemporary Reasons for Coming Women in Garment Sectors**

Bangladesh is a developing country. Here the human resources are available. But the country cannot provide all her people with jobs or works due to resource constraint. At the very constraint of resources, garment sectors have flourished here due to the availability of women's chief labour. As we also know that the production of garment is labour intensive, so it creates a great chance for women to get a job easily in this sector as they are mostly unemployed. Besides, women in rural Bangladesh are not much educated and literate. They are oppressed for different socio- economic reasons. Some core contemporary reasons for coming women in garment sectors are described below:

#### **1. Pushed by Poverty**

In Bangladesh 31.6% people live under absolute poverty. According to the report of BBS Labour Force Report-2012, 98% women are coming to garment sectors due to pushed by poverty. In the rural areas the scope of works is less for women that's why most of the women in rural areas are poverty driven. They usually live from hand to mouth. Those who are married, their husbands are also not solvent. So, women have to forward to urban industrial areas where jobs are available. To accommodate with urban life they enter into garment sectors and provide financial support to

their family. An empirical example can be seen that Lotifa and Arifa, ten years old children have to enter in garment sector due to poverty after the death of their mother in a sudden accident at Rana Plaza. (Source: Daily Porthom Alo)

## **2. Pulled by Opportunities**

As in rural areas women have fewer opportunities to show their potentiality in respective sectors, they are mostly attracted by the urban job facilities. So with less than primary level education or no formal education, women migrate from rural to urban areas in search of work to catch a better opportunity.

## **3. Easy to get a job in RMG sectors**

Another dominant reason of coming women in garment sectors is that in garment sectors jobs are available because it is a labour intensive product. Besides, there is no need of previous experience and higher education to get a job in garment sectors for women. Women with little or no education or illiterate can get a job easily in this sector. 85% female garment workers are uneducated or little learner. (Source: BIDS report-2013)

## **4. Empowerment of Women**

In the rural areas of Bangladesh women are neglected and are not given due respect to their works. Their works are maltreated and sometimes forwarded in wrong Turn. They realize that love and voluntary services are not the mechanism to draw their husbands mind and they also realize that they actually need to earn money for their empowerment. So to establish rights & empowerment of the women folk, they are entering into RMG Sectors. But according to the report of BBS-2011, 93.19% husbands don't see women's earning in good eye and 85% women workers have no control over their earning. (Source: violence Against Women Porthom Alo, 23-04-2014).

## **5. Dowry & Violence**

The demand of dowry is prevalent in the life of rural women of Bangladesh. In most of the cases it is seen that in rural areas parents of the groom cannot afford to manage the entire dowry demanded by the bride. That's why they can not engage in conjugal life. In the report of VAW we see 75% women in rural areas are the victims of violence due to demand of dowry (Source: violence Against Women Porthom Alo, 23-04-2014). These dowry driven women look for work in readymade garment sectors in Bangladesh.

## 6. To be self-reliant

According to Mackinsey survey report over Bangladesh garment industries shows that 85% of the female workers are now being self reliant working in RMG sectors. They are entering into this sector to empower themselves and to make them self reliant.

### **Types and Status of Women currently working in RMG Sector**

Readymade garment sectors are the most productive and potential sectors of Bangladesh economy. Though these potential sectors are basically run by the merit of our women workers who belong to different colours, creeds, groups, religions and status but the common thing is that their status may be different but their efforts to these sectors are not different at all. Generally divorced women, women dominated by their better half, poverty driven women, widow, orphan women, illiterate, little learner, unskilled, untrained, inexperienced women, women who are not married off due to dowry etc either for economic or for social reasons are working in these sectors. A report of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies is given below:

<b>Types of Women</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Divorced women	5%
Women dominated by their better half	50%
Poverty driven women	98%
Widow	5%
Orphan women	10%
Illiterate/little learner	70%
Women who are not married off due to dowry	75%

*Table-2 Source: BIDS Survey Report*

### **Social and Economic Status of Female RMG Workers**

Now women are no more burdens to our society. The scope of works in readymade garment sectors has widened the door of women to protect their social and economic rights. They are now becoming self-reliant, improving social status and contributing to their family income. Financial development of their life has made them able to improve standard of living, making their children educated and now they are seldom dominated by their better half.

### **Present Contribution of Women in Garment Sectors:**

In Bangladesh garment sectors have flourished due to the chief labour of our women workers. Believing the sense of empowerment and to bring

change in their social, economic and political life, they are coming out from the cocoons and four wall of their house. They are easily entering into these sectors and providing their best labour and contributing to our dynamic economic growth through earning foreign currency. Some core contribution of women in garment sectors are described below:

### **1. Providing Cheap labour**

Bangladesh is a third world country. Labor is cheap here particularly for women labour. Garment industries have flourished here due to cheap labour of women. According to the report of BIDS 2013, women workers of readymade garment sectors in Bangladesh are usually paid US\$ 20 dollars to 70 dollars.

### **2. Skill in sewing**

Bangladeshi women are traditionally expert in sewing. They are creative in clothing. With their creative work, here they play an important role in the success of garment sector. They are using their potentiality in this sector through providing their skill and knowledge. Thus they are contributing their potentiality to earn foreign currency for the country.

### **3. Attract the foreign investors**

Bangladeshi women are expert in garment related work. Bangladeshi government also provides training for them. So, with the training program they become an expert and asset to readymade garment sectors. Besides, investors always want to invest in labour oriented area. Bangladesh is enriched in labour due to the availability of women labour. As a result, foreign investors feel interest to invest in Bangladesh.

### **4. Earning foreign currency**

Bangladesh exports garment products. By exporting garment products, she earns huge foreign currency. Here women are like engine of RMG. So, there is no doubt that the participation of women in earning foreign currency is remarkable.

### **5. Adding value in GDP**

Garment industries added 13% of the total GDP in the year 2012-2013 and of them 10% GDP comes through the hand of women garment workers. AS women drive the garment sectors, it can be said that women are adding value in GDP.

### **6. Expansion of EPZ**

In Bangladesh there are nine EPZs. In these EPZs women are the main sources of labour. These EPZs are running successfully because of chief labour of women. So they are also adding contribution to expansion of our EPZs.

## 7. Increasing standard of living

In the past Bangladeshi women were confined in home. But now time has changed. Women are now working in different sectors. Among the sectors garment industry is one of them. According to the report of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, at present 70% garment women workers have little bit been able to maintain standard of living where as previously they couldn't. This is also a remarkable contribution of women in garment sectors in Bangladesh.

## 8. Increasing Face value of Bangladesh

As we know Bangladesh is known to the whole world as one of the leading garment exporting countries. Bangladesh exports RMG products in different parts of the globe. People of those countries praise the quality of garment products of Bangladesh. These quality garments are the gift of our Bangladeshi women. Thus the face value of women is increasing due to the contribution of women in garment sectors of Bangladesh.

## Legal Rights of Women in Garment Sectors

According to the labour law of 2006, 2010 & 2013, workers of garment sectors have been given due rights and status. Women have also given same status as like male workers in the prescribed labour laws. But the reality is that these are not in practices. A lot of Anomalies we see in the enforcement of these legal rights towards women. They are not given their opportunities as prescribed in the legal laws. Besides, the enforcement of legal laws in Bangladesh RMG sectors does not comply with international Standards. According to ILO convention particularly known as Magnacata for women's emancipation, Women workers will enjoy the rights given in the following table below:

Rights	Subject of the Convention	Year	Convention Number	Features of the convention
Fundamental Rights	Equal salary	1951	100	For the same kind of work both man and women will get equal salary.
Freedom of organization	Rights for organization	1948	87	To gain self interest
Maternity leave	Maternity security	1952	103	12 weak leave
Recruitment	Human development	1975	142	Training
Social compliance	Daycare center & other services	2006	123	Every compliance related services

Table-3 Source: ILO conventions- Legal Rights for women

## **Problems Currently Faced by Women in RMG Sectors**

The contribution of women in ready-made garment sectors cannot be described in words. Their inhuman labour has made possible for Bangladesh to earn remarkable foreign currency. That's why ILO has recognized the personification that the other name of ready-made garment sectors is women. But behind these inhuman and outstanding contributions of them they have to tolerate different problems which deter their smooth working capabilities. Some major problems are described below:

### **1. Monotonous nature of jobs**

In the garment industry women are mostly employed at the lower category of jobs like operator, finishing helper, polyer etc. The nature of these jobs is very monotonous since there is no possibility for personal creativity, expression and fulfillment in these jobs. An operator has to sew a small part of garment throughout her long working hours. It is very difficult for a female worker to maintain her patience for such a long time doing the same work repeatedly. Her monotony reaches the climax when she has to work at a stretch for more than 6 hours without any break. The case is similar with helpers. Sometimes they are not even allowed to go to the toilets or to drink water. The female workers become bored and dissatisfied with repetitive work. Sometimes they lose interest in work and become depressed.

### **2. Job insecurity**

Most of the jobs in the garment industry are temporary in nature. Workers are hired when needed and fired when the need is over. Therefore, garment workers suffer greatly from job insecurity. Their jobs are insecure not only because of the temporary nature of their jobs, but also because of the informal nature of recruitment. The garment industry belongs to the formal sector but workers employed in this industry do not receive appointment letters. Therefore, terms and conditions of their employment are unknown to them. They do not know for how long they will be employed, although a temporary female worker has the right to know the tenure of her employment. Because of this informal nature of their jobs, a report shows that about 60 percent of the female workers feared dismissal from their jobs. This condition of their employment causes one kind of mental harassment.



### **3. Sexual Harassment**

Sexual harassment is an important source of mental stress for female workers. The incidence of sexual harassment ranges from insults directed at a person's gender, suggestive comments or language and demeaning remarks to unwelcome touching and grabbing and other physical assaults. These types of sexual harassment female workers don't express because of their shyness. Sexual harassment is largely prevalent among the young garment workers. However, sexual harassment is not limited in the workplace. It extends to home too. The police, who could have protected them from this harassment are themselves involved in harassing the women garment workers.

### **4. Communication problem**

Most female workers travel to and from the workplace on foot. It has been estimated that on an average, a garment worker travels more than 5 kilometers a day on foot. This long distance travel is not only physically strenuous but also mentally stressful, since garment workers worry about attacks by mastsans is 74.4%, by touts 75.6%, harassment by police and boys is 25% ( Source: A report from BAU-2010).

### **5. Housing & Health problem**

In Bangladesh it has been found that about 88 percent women workers lived in unhygienic conditions of the slum areas. The rooms are very small. The most dangerous aspect of their living condition is the type of toilet they use and the number of users per toilet. Most of the female workers use 'katcha' toilet. In many areas only one toilet is used by many women workers. The condition of the toilet is very unhygienic. In most cases, urinary tract infection may result from the use of this unhygienic toilet. However, garment workers have access to safe drinking water. The workers drink water supplied by WASA or from tubewells which is not safe to drink unless boiled. All these unhygienic living conditions of the garment workers adversely affect their health status.

### **6. Bad behaviour of the co-workers**

Bad behaviour of the co-workers is another important cause of stress for female workers. In fact, for women garment workers the workplace is their second home, since they spend about 12 hours a day in this place. Hence, good relations among the workers is very important. But in many cases, the same does not happen. In many cases, the female workers are found to be brusque with each other. It is mainly because of the fact that

the workers cannot develop a sense of empathy, since the majority of the workers are migrants coming from different villages of the country. Most of them are very young and does not have any job experiences. They little know about the rules of co-existence. Besides, garment workers feel no attachment towards each other, since they do not stay long time in the same factory.

### **7. Overtime work**

The normal working hours in the garment factory is 9 hours a day usually from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is seasonality in its production, hence work hours vary accordingly. In the peak season the labour requirement increases. In this time the workers are required to work overtime. The extent of stress can be measured from the workers unwillingness to do overtime work and also from the workers job dissatisfaction due to the extended work hours. Besides, overtime work is also stressful for married workers, since they often have to face severe censure for reaching home late at night after finishing the overtime work. Female workers also encountered various mishaps while returning home late at night after finishing overtime work.

### **8. Overtime rate**

According to the Factory Act 1965, no person can be employed for more than 8 hours a day in a factory. Work in excess of these hours should be paid for at the overtime rate which is twice the basic salary. Usually the basic salary is considered to be 60 percent of the monthly pay. Thus a female worker should get 1.2 times her hourly pay for one hour of overtime. The basic salary of the garment workers is expected to be 45-47 percent of the total salary. But none of the female workers knew about their basic salary.

### **9. Pattern of diseases and illnesses**

Work in the garment factory severely affects women's health, as they are confined in a small factory. Moreover the hot and humid climate of Bangladesh makes the environment of these small factory buildings unhygienic and this condition is largely responsible for widespread prevalence of some illness and diseases among the garment workers. Prolonged standing is also common in the garment factory. According to occupational physicians, low back pain, sore feet, varicose veins, swelling in the legs, general muscular fatigue, headache and other health problems arise due to prolonged standing.

## **10. Low and irregular wages payment**

Another source of workplace stress for women garment workers is their low wages and irregular wage payment. Sometimes their salary is paid after the first week of the determined month which creates their job dissatisfaction.

## **11. Lack of Strong Social Compliances**

Women in garment sectors are not given their rights as prescribed in their legal rights. Still now, daycare center has not been established yet in every garment. Besides, structural environment are also not good at all. According to BIDS survey report 2014, 19% factories don't have approved structural factories designs, 14% factories without approved layout plans, only 19% factories have separate emergency exit, and in 13% factories workers cannot go to exit stairs directly from floors. These are also hampering women worker's flow of works. (Source: The daily Star 21 May 2014)

## **Recent Tragedies Happening in the life of Women Garment Workers**

Tragedy has become go of the day for women workers in RMG sector. In the sudden fire of Tajrin fashion 117workers were dead among them 101 workers were women. In Rana Plaza tragedy 1135 workers died among them 992 were women workers. In Spectrum Sweater, Ashulia tragedy 64 workers died, out of them 59 workers were women.(Source: porthom ALO).

## **Recommendations**

“Life is a tale told by an Idiot” this proverb is true in respect of women workers of garment sectors in Bangladesh. So many articles and researches have been conducted and developed to bring change in the life of women workers of garment sectors but results in no output. As like formalities I want to recommend some issues. “To be or not to be that is the question.” Whether it brings change in the life of women workers of garment sectors or not that is the ultimate question to all of us.

- ❑ First of all the physical environment of garments need to be refreshed and restructured.
- ❑ Salary of the women workers has to be increased.
- ❑ Day care centre needs to be established.
- ❑ The Rights of women workers prescribed in ILO Magnacata and labour law of 2006, 2010, 2013 have to be maintained within garment industries.

## A Theoretical Analysis

- ❑ Government should take proper regulative initiatives to protect garment women's right.
- ❑ Workers should be given transportation facilities by garment owners.
- ❑ Establishing strong social compliances basing on “Sobar upor manus sotto tahar upor nai” Quoted by Boru Chandridash.
- ❑ There is no specific women federation or union regarding RMG. It needs to be established by the endeavour of the government & RMG sector.

## Conclusion

From the above discussion it can be said that women are playing the leading role in keeping the luminous face of Bangladesh to the world economy. Their contribution to the growth of ready-made garment sectors is remarkable hallmark for our country. But behind their contribution a lot of problems are hindering their smooth working capacities. All the international and national stakeholders are now deeply concerned about the problems existing in the garment sectors of Bangladesh and they are urging us to establish friendly working environment in RMG sectors. But the reality is that we have not still been able to maintain a friendly working environment for this women folk.

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