



Journal of Social and Political Sciences

Haque, Muhammad Faizul, Sarker, Md. Atiqur Rahman, Rahman, Md Syfur, and Rakibuddin, Mohammad. (2020), Discrimination of Women at RMG Sector in Bangladesh. In: *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, Vol.3, No.1, 112-118.

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.03.01.152

The online version of this article can be found at:

<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

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Discrimination of Women at RMG Sector in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Women are discriminated in professional, personal and community levels by their male counterpart across the globe in general. More specifically, women are not treated equally at workplace in many societies due to the dominance of patriarchal social system and traditional norms. Women equity and empowerment are spoken widely, but these are not practiced in reality. The primary aim of this study is to explore the women's current position and status at the workplace in Ready Made Garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh in terms of wages, promotions, safety and security. Secondly, this paper highlights the challenges that women face at RMG. This paper adopts qualitative approach to study this crucial issues. This study also congregates and analyses the most pertinent data both from the existing literature and primary sources. In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) have been conducted among the female RMG workers appointed in different industrial zones in Bangladesh. This study has some remarkable findings such as, a) women employee do not get proper respect at workplace from their male colleagues. b) Women are often harassed verbally by their male coworkers. c) Owners, managers and supervisors have the bad intention to fulfill their sexual desire with female workers. d) Male supervisors often force their female subordinates to do overtime till the late night. e) Though female workers are doing the same job, but they do not get proper justice in terms of getting desired job posting, salary on time and promotions based on their skills and competencies. Finally, this study focuses on resolving the issues of gender discrimination at the workplace and contributes towards the equity and empowerment of women in RMG sector in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Discrimination, Equity, Empowerment, RMG and Women

Introduction

In the 21st century one of the main objective of achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across the globe is women's participation at the workplace. A proper job and source of income are the main components for women's economic development or empowerment (Svarer, et al., 2017). It is next to impossible to empower women in economic sector without creating a congenial working environment for women at the workplace. However, Bangladesh is receiving largest percentage of foreign revenue from the Ready-Made Garment sector (RMG). The total number of workers in this sector is approximately 4.2 million, where more than 90% workers are female who came from rural areas of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the working environment in this sector is unfriendly and unhealthy for women to work comfortably and the labor rights and social compliance are violated (Ali, et al., 2008; Rubya, 2015). Women are contributing side by side to earn this huge amount of foreign revenue in every financial year which makes a stable GDP of Bangladesh.

Nonetheless, female workers are facing sexual harassment, pay inequity and improper benefits like maternity leave and daycare which is truly unfortunate and unacceptable (Haque, et al., 2019; Hossan, et al., 2012). The role of women on economic development in Bangladesh cannot be denied. Their efforts and contributions at RMG sector are highly remarkable. The skills, competency and learning behavior of female workers are comparatively better than their male counterparts. However, female workers are not well protected in terms of their safety, security and benefits. Women are often facing discrimination at the workplace and treated as disgraceful in comparison to their male co-workers particularly at RMG sector in Bangladesh (Islam, 2016; Mustafa, et al., 2016). Insufficient payment, wage delay, few promotions, inadequate health service, reluctance in maternity leave and unhealthy working environment are very common in this sector. Thus the image of RMG sector is getting worse internationally and it reduces the business prospect in recent time. It is also inhuman as the rights of women workers are violated. This current study emphasizes primarily to explore the women's current position and status at the workplace at RMG sector in Bangladesh in terms of wages, promotions, safety and security. It also identifies the specific areas where female workers are discriminated. The study also finds the ways to eradicate discrimination to women at the workplace.

Literature review

Discriminating to women at the workplace is very common phenomenon around the world and Bangladesh is not behind in this realm. The participation of women as manufacturing workers in RMG sector is increasingly visible in Bangladesh (Islam, 2016). Most of the female workers are from poor rural family and they are under privileged (Mustafa, et al., 2016). Most of them are illiterate and unaware of their rights. They do not have any other option rather migrating to industrialized areas for work which often gives them tedious, hazardous and unhealthy life (Islam, 2016). Many organizations have been working for women's progress and advancement since the 20th century. One of the commissions, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) was basically established in 1946 as a sub-commission of the commission on human rights (Badamasuiy & Shu'aib, 2012). Article 7 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and Article 26 of the 1966 International Convention on Civil and political Rights (CCPR) was formed to eradicate discrimination against women in every aspect of their life (Nielsen, 1994). Consequently, it was determined through SCW to produce a single and comprehensive instrument which eliminates all forms of discrimination against women in all sectors based on their qualification and speciality rights (Badamasuiy & Shu'aib, 2012). The International Women's Rights Action Watch (IWRAW) was formed in 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya. It was formed under the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1992; Freeman, et al., 2012), with the main purpose of producing policymakers, scholarly students and activists who will work on human rights issues for decades to come. UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) was formed in 1945 with 54 countries. The objective of ECOSOC is to examine inequalities between men and women caused by financial problems. In 1976, another institution was established under the United Nations named the International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). This institution is

highly focused on women's progress and advancement to allow them to participate in social activities through research and training and this was monitored by the government of each respective country.

However, among the south Asian countries, Bangladesh is one of the largest populated country in this region. In terms of rapid economic growth in Bangladesh, the manufacturing industries i.e., jute and jute related goods, leather related products, home textile, footwear, garments, etc. are highly contributing to this realm. Among these industries, the RMG sector is the most influential and successful industry that has a greater contribution in national GDP development. (Ali & Islam, 2017; Hossain et al., 2012). The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) conducted a survey on the wage gap between men and women in the garment sector from 2009 to 2010. In the RMG sector, the monthly wage for men is Taka 6,161 (BDT), which is approximately US\$75 per month. In contrast, women are getting lower than men, which is only Taka 4,264 (BDT) or US\$52 per month (ADB Briefs no. 68. October 2016, p. 7). It clearly shows from the data that the wage gap between men and women is quite high approximately US\$23. In RMG sector, women are usually exploited by the factory owners who give them lower wages. Hence, it is less attractive for women to work outside the home. In addition, it is found from the various studies that the law enforcement bodies for industrial rules and regulations are quite lenient and tranquil in concerning for disparity at work environment, health and safety in RMG sector of Bangladesh (Kabir et al., 2018). Discrimination of women at workplace is very common scenario across the world, particularly in RMG sector in Bangladesh. Before discussing in detail about the discrimination to women at workplace in RMG sector in Bangladesh, it is very much needed to highlight briefly about the definition of gender discrimination.

The meaning of 'gender discrimination' is "a situation in which someone is treated less well because of their sex, usually when a woman is treated less well than a man" (Cambridge Dictionary,). For instance, at the workplace, women are getting less salary than their male counterparts for the same work. It could also be in different types of discrimination in human life which are made by fellow humans to the opposite sex (women).

According to CEDAW, the definition of gender discrimination is:

For the purposes of the present Convention, the term 'discrimination against women' means any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex, which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment, or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil, or any other field (UN Women, 1981). Fatma Osman Ibnouf defines the meaning of gender discrimination as "the structural system of domination of women by men in all areas of aspects of life (which is also referred to as gender inequality) which has existed throughout history and has been labeled patriarchy" (Ibnouf, 2015).

Nevertheless, researchers define gender discrimination as, *any sort of action that is considered as a violation or creates an obstacle against women's rights in every aspect of human life, in terms of participation in education, politics, economics and social activities*. Women most often are discriminated at work. Though, sexual harassment is the common violence against women, there are many other areas where women are discriminated in RMG sector of Bangladesh such as inequality in pay and promotion, inadequate safety and security, long work duration and unhealthy work environment (Haque, et al., 2019; Hossan, et al., 2012). Therefore, the issue of injustice to women needs to be addressed and resolved in order to ensure equality and empowerment of women.

Methodology

This study congregates and analyses the most pertinent data both from the existing literature and primary sources of data through four In-depth Interviews (IDIs) and four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) held between October and December, 2019. Data have been collected from the female RMG workers and supervisors appointed in

different industrial zones in Bangladesh. The identities of the workers participated both in FGDs and IDIs are kept anonymous and their opinions and comments are only used for this academic research purpose. Collected data have been analyzed thematically and backed by existing literature.

Findings and discussions

There are various types of discrimination exists in RMG sector in Bangladesh. During the FGDs in every session all the participants have shown their agony and dissatisfaction for the injustices take place at their work. The challenges women face at RMG in Bangladesh are discussed below with special focus on some critical areas.

Women at RMG work more hours than their male counterpart and they are often bound to do extra hour beyond their regular work schedule (F.1.3; F.2.6; F.3.3 & F.4.5). There are many causes which affect women's participation in the workplace. Long working hour often have negative impact on their family life which specifically affect their children's mental and physical health since they cannot take care of their kids properly (F.1.6; F.2.5; F.3.1 & F.4.1). Women often quit their job when they get pregnant or have infants at home (Tania and Saidur, 2017). For women, working such long hours creates lots of problems for their families because they could not take care of their household chores. According to interviewee P1, *"I start my day at 4 am. I prepare the food for everyone in the family and clean the house before I leave for work, which starts at 8 am. I finish my duty at 8 pm most of the day and return home at 9 pm. I cook again and clean. Do other household chores. After dinner and prayer, I go to sleep at 12 am. Do you think I am living life? I feel like my life is a curse."* The interviewee was crying silently after the comment she made and the room became quite all in sudden. Since women have the major role to play in home making, it is expected that their time after and before work should be sufficient enough for family duty and rest.

Female employees are not only deprived at the workplace by getting lower salaries compared to their male counterparts but they are also not getting their salary on time. According to the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA, 2006, Chapter-10, Section-121), workers should be paid within seven days after the wage period expires. Interviewee P3 has stated as *"I always wait for second or third week of the next month for my previous month salary. Since I am the only bread earner of my family of three children without husband who left me for another woman, I am living life starving sometimes. I feel sorry and I cry every night when I see I cannot afford enough food for my children"*. Many women working at RMG are the only earning person for their family (F.1.3; F.2.4 & F.4.2). But the salary of RMG workers is not sufficient enough for standard of living (F.4.4). It is claimed that women at RMG are discriminated with pay and other employment benefits.

Uncongenial working environment is one of the most challenges issue for women at the workplace to continue their work. It is noticed that most of the time unpleasant working environment is seen where men and women are working together, particularly in the field of tradable sectors in many developing countries. Many RMG factories do not ensure health and safety issues in Bangladesh. According to the interviewee P4, *"In my factory, both men and women use the same toilets. We feel uncomfortable to use toilet during periods. Sanitary items and toiletries are not provided at work. We even do not get the soap for hand wash after the toilet use"*. P2 says, *"we have common dining and rest area for both men and women. Our male colleagues often give us bad look and try to touch our body while at common room where there is no CCTV camera"*. There is lack of ventilation and sunlight inside many RMG factories (F.1.1; F.2.2 & F.4.4). Dehydration and heat stroke are very common among the workers in RMG factories which also affect the physical and mental health of the workers. This uninviting working atmosphere creates a negative impact on women's mind and they do not feel safe to work (Ali, et al., 2018; Begum, 2014). The same comments are made by the participants of FGDs and they opine that uncongenial working environment is a barrier which discourages women from participating at the workplace and makes a bit awkward for women to work. Thus, the RMG management authority should focus in these areas stated above to avoid labor unrest.

Conclusion

From the above mentioned issues, it can be concluded that working condition for women at RMG sector in Bangladesh is not favorable at all. Women employee do not get proper respect at workplace from their male colleagues. They are often harassed both verbally and physically by their male coworkers. Owners, managers and supervisors have the bad intention to fulfill their sexual desire with female workers. Male supervisors often force their female subordinates to do overtime till the late night. Though female workers are doing the same job, but they do not get proper justice in terms of getting desired job posting, salary on time and promotions based on their skills and competencies. The work environment is uncongenial for women at RMG sector. There is a lack of hygiene, safety and security. Since, the injustices are made toward women due to gender, it goes beyond humanity and legal aspect. Everyone must be paid based on their productive work not based on their gender. Working environment must be comfortable for women and the management should take initiative to stop sexual harassment and violence against women. Women's health and safety need to be given more attention in RMG sector along with other employment benefits such as maternity benefit, day care facilities for working mothers, pay on time, revised pay based on inflation etc. This study could not have collected data exclusively from every industrial zones through several data collection methods due to time limitation and restriction of RMG authorities. Thus, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to represent total population. Further study can be done with more sample especially from RMG authority (owners and managers), legal experts and government representative from labor department for more accurate and valid data which will sketch the real scenario of women's work life at RMG sector in Bangladesh.

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Appendix

Appendix-I: List of Participant in Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation	SL/ Code	Designation
	FGD-1 on Female Workers in RMG Factory-1 at Gazipur, Bangladesh on 22/10/2019		FGD-2 on Female Workers in RMG Factory-2 at Savar (Dhaka), Bangladesh on 29/10/2019		FGD-3 on Female workers in RMG Factory-3 at Narayanganj, Bangladesh on 05/11/2019		FGD-4 on Female Supervisors from different RMG factories in Dhaka Division held at local restaurant in Dhaka, Bangladesh on 07/11/2019
F.1.1	Finishing Worker	F.2.1	Packaging Worker	F.3.1	Sewing & Machine Operator	F.4.1	Supervisor (Sewing)
F.1.2	Sewing Worker	F.2.2	Cutting Operator	F.3.2	Finishing Worker	F.4.2	Supervisor (Quality Control)
F.1.3	Cutting Operator	F.2.3	Production Worker	F.3.3	Machine Operator	F.4.3	Supervisor (Cutting)
F.1.4	Quality Control Assistant	F.2.4	Sewing Worker	F.3.4	Quality Control Assistant	F.4.4	Supervisor (Finishing)
F.1.5	Machine Operator	F.2.5	Lasting Worker	F.3.5	Cleaning Worker	F.4.5	Supervisor (Sewing)
F.1.6	Office Assistant	F.2.6	Quality Controller	F.3.6	Cutting Operator	F.4.6	Supervisor (Packaging)

Appendix-II: List of Participants (Female Workers) in In-depth Interviews

SL/Code	Participants' details	Date
P1	Office Assistant in a RMG factory in Narsindi, Bangladesh	08/12/2019
P2	Machine Operator in a RMG factory in Rupganj (Narayanganj), Bangladesh	09/12/2019
P3	Cutting Worker in RMG factory in Savar (Dhaka), Bangladesh	10/12/2019
P4	Sewing & Machine Operator in a RMG factory in Kachpur (Dhaka), Bangladesh	11/12/2019