

MONITORING WORK AND WORKING CONDITION OF WOMEN EMPLOYED IN READY-MADE GARMENT INDUSTRIES OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry has been playing a significant role in economy by earning lion's share of export income (81.23 percent) and creating jobs for millions of people. RMG directly employs 4.2 million people (EC 2016)– of whom majority is women.¹ Women RMG workers are plagued with various problems (e.g insufficient wage, irregularity in timeliness of wage payments, unsafe working conditions). More Specifically, women workers have many issues that need to care especially in areas of workplace discrimination and career prospect, harassment, work and working time including rest, occupation health and safety, welfare provision, social protection and freedom of association, collective bargaining and social dialogue. Although gender-based wage discrimination is not seen that much now a day, discrimination exists in areas of equal treatment— women are forced to do overtime more than the men and the cut from the overtime allowance is more for women workers than men. Women workers face severe discrimination with regard to the scope of promotion and their career prospect is limited. A study shows that only 5-10 percent of the women workers to become supervisors (The Daily Star, March 8, 2015). Women workers' workplaces are not free from sexual harassment which ranges from simple insults and demeaning remark to unwelcome touching and grabbing.

Despite legal provision there is still variation in practicing maternity leave –there are factories that violate the provision in different ways e.g. leave without payment, payment for fewer months than the stipulated months mentioned in law. Few RMG workers get the day care and in many garment factories, mothers do not have space or time to breastfeed. Breastfeeding rates by working women in garment factories can be as low as 10 per cent. (UNICEF 2015). Workplaces of these workers are not gender sensitive— there are insufficient numbers of toilets for women; no arrangement of sanitary napkins at workplace; and most of the factories also do not arrange women doctors. Besides, disproportionate representation of women workers in different channels of negotiation and bargaining (e.g. TU, participation committee, safety committee, welfare committee, canteen management committee) is also widely marked.

Bangladesh is signatory of UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Following the eighth periodic report of Bangladesh the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommends that the State party: (a) Take

¹ It has been widely understood, though based on limited data, that women made up around 80 per cent of the labour force of the garment industries. Recent data, however, shows a much lower percentage. A 2015 survey by Asian Centre for Development reported that 65 per cent of workers in the RMG sector were women. The study by EC (EC 2016) puts the number at 55 per cent. In the factories under the ILO RMG programme (Better Work Bangladesh), it was found that 58 per cent of the labour force consisted of women

effective measures to monitor and improve the working conditions of women in the informal and private sectors by ensuring regular labour inspections and social protection coverage; (b) Address the gender wage gap by applying gender-neutral analytical job classification, evaluation methods and regular pay surveys and establishing effective monitoring and regulatory mechanisms for employment and recruitment practices; (c) Regulate and monitor the working conditions of women employed in the garment sector, in order to protect them from unsafe labour conditions, through regular inspections and increased fines for abusive employers; (d) remove all obstacles to the establishment of trade unions, especially for women employed in the agricultural sector; (e) Adopt and implement specific legislation concerning the protection of women from sexual harassment in the workplace in accordance with the High Court Division guidelines.

In this backdrop, present study is an endeavor to unearth the prevailing situation of women workers of garment sector in terms of their working condition. The findings of this study would be instrumental to recommend policy options to improve the condition. The main objective of this study is twofold:

- To explore and document the status of working condition of women employed in RMG sector in Bangladesh; and
- Prepare a set of recommendations that would be placed before the government for improving the working condition for women RMG worker.

This study employs quantitative approach. The study team has carried out questionnaire survey to collect necessary information. A set of sample survey questionnaire was prepared and administered to collect data from 1002 garment workers from 113 factories located in Gazipur and Narayanganj. Factories were selected randomly from different zones of these two locations and respondents of those factories were chosen purposively based on availability, accessibility, and their willingness to give answer (Table 1).

Table-1: Distribution of respondents according to survey location

| Study area | | Number of Factories | Number of respondents | % of Percent |
|-------------|--|---------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| Gazipur | Kaliakoir, Chondra, Mouchak, Konabari, Tongji, Pollibitdyut, Malaker Bari, Bord Bazar, Gazipura, Boro Bari | 85 | 761 | 75.95 |
| Narayanganj | Bondor, BSISIC, Cashara, Shibu Market, Adomji | 28 | 241 | 24.05 |
| Total | | 113 | 1002 | 100.00 |

KEY FINDINGS

Personal information of women workers

Age of women workers: Women workers are mostly young. The mean age of these workers is 24.81 years. 18-30 years is the age range of 85.9% workers. Only 10.2% women workers are over 30 years of age. Contrary, women workers of less than 18 years is 3.9%.

Education: Primary level education is the most common among women workers. 45.6% women workers are educated up to primary level. 27.9% worker have JSC level education, and 12.9% has secondary level education. 9.1% women worker of RMG can sign only.

Number of family members: The average family size of women workers is 4.51 which is larger than the national scenario (4.04). Majority (53.2%) of the women workers belong to families comprised of 4-5 member. Families of 6 and more member have been reported by 23.1 % women; and 23.8 % have families having less than four members.

Dependent member in family: Workers' family have on an average 2.42 dependent members. However, the largest segment (35.1%) of the workers have two dependent members followed by three members (27.1%). 11.4% workers have four or more dependent members.

Earning member in family: On an average, workers' family have 2.34 income earners. Majority (67.3%) of the workers have two earning members and 18.7% have three income earners. More than three income earners have been found in families of 9.2% workers.

Work and Workplace Related Information

Type of factory: Majority (51.5%) of the women work in knit factories. Women workers working in woven and composite factories are 29.0% and 19.5% respectively.

Work experience in RMG sector: Average work experience in RMG sector is not so long, 4.70 years. The largest section (46.4%) has 1-3 years experience. 25.3% workers have been working in RMG sector for 4-6 years, and 19% for 7-10 years. Only 6.9% workers have more than ten years of working experience in RMG sector.

Work-length in the current workplace: At the current/present factory, the average work experience of the workers is 2.47 years, where two-thirds (66.5%) of all workers have been working for 1-3 years, and 16.3% workers have 4-6 years experience. Only 10.3% workers have been found who have more than 6 years experience at their respective current factories.

Number of factories where respondents worked: Majority of the workers (55%) have experience of working in more than one factory, and the rests (45%) of women have worked

in one factory in their total experience of work in RMG sector. 34% workers have worked in two factories and 12.2% in three factories. Besides, 8.8% workers have experience of working in four and more factories.

Working Conditions of the Factories

Employment Contract: Violation of employment contract related provisions are evident. Among several employment contract related provisions service book is the least implemented, and in contrast, identity card is the most implemented.

- 29.3 % workers do not have appointment letter.
- 8% do not have identity card.
- 30% women are not provided with pay-slip.
- 90.1% do not have service book.
- 76.3% workers have attendance card.

Wage and benefits

22.6% report that wage and overtime is kept due--often or always. Where wage is kept due always for 9.6% workers. However, 77.4% percent worker claim that wage and overtime are not kept due.

In preceding month of this survey average personal income of women workers was BDT 10,549.51. A little less than two-thirds (64.1%) women's income was BDT 8001-12000. 11.8 percent worker earned maximum (upto) BDT 8000. 24.2 percent workers' had personal income over BDT 12,000.

- Lack of knowledge has been evident among many women workers about calculation of overtime compensation. 23.2% women do not know the calculation method.
- Workers (83.1 percent) generally get festival bonus, though not all. About 16.9 percent claimed that they do not get festival bonus.

In the preceding month of this survey workers' monthly average family expenditure was BDT 17,071.26. BDT 12001-20000 was the monthly family expenditure of 53.2 percent workers. 21.3 percent workers had an expenditure over BDT 20,000. On the other hand, 12.9 percent workers' family expenditure was less than BDT 12,000.

Working hour, leave and rest

The violation of national legal provisions and international norms is widely marked. Majority (52.2 percent) of the workers work 10 hours daily. More than one-third (34.2%) workers work more than 10 hours every day.

Almost all workers do overtime work which is mostly mandatory for the workers.

- 90.6% workers do overtime work.
- 80.9% workers claim that overtime is mandatory.

Interestingly, almost all workers prefer to work overtime hours.

- 91.4% workers prefer to do overtime.

Women workers get lunch break. However, except lunch break workers are not provided with opportunity to take rest.

- 100% workers get lunch break.
- 94.5% workers do not get chance to take rest, except the lunch break.

There is wide variation of in practice of leave provisions. Among several types of leave weekly holiday is the mostly enjoyed. In contrary, annual is the least frequent. Many workers are even unaware about the practice of leave at their workplaces.

- 99.6% workers get weekly holiday
- 79.2% workers get casual leave, whereas 10.7% workers do not know whether casual leave is given.
- 78.4% workers get sick leave, though not paid in most cases
- 38.8% workers get annual leave, and 21.1% do not know whether annual leave is given
- 70.2% workers get maternity leave, and 19.8% workers lack awareness on availability of maternity leave at workplace.

Night duty is mandatory for many women workers. In other words, when night duty is scheduled these workers are left with not options but to do night duty. There are workers who lack awareness in this regard. Lack of awareness has also been among many workers regarding practice of taking written consent from workers for night duty. However, largest segment of the workers claim that employers never take written consent from them.

- Night duty is mandatory in opinion of 30.7% workers.
- 10.7% workers do not know whether night duty is mandatory.
- 61.8% women worker inform that employer never take written consent for night duty.
- 35.4% women are unaware of taking written consent for night duty.

Safety at Work

Not all employers generally do provide workers with information regarding risks at workplace. 16.9% workers claim that their employers do not inform workers in this regard.

RMG workers who have faced/observed accidents (pricking of needle during work, cutting finger or hand, fracturing leg and fracturing hand, fire) at workplaces are quite high. 42.5 percent workers have this experience. There are also workers, though few, who don't know whether any accident took place at their workplaces.

Most workplaces maintain/have made available different facilities/arrangement for ensuring workplace safety. However, it is also true that still some factories have not made sufficient arrangement.

- 98.7 percent women worker claim workplaces have that fire extinguishers.
- About 5 percent workers' workplaces do not have emergency exits.
- About 15 percent workers' do not get training for risk prevention/reduction.
- PPE is available at 95.2% workers' workplaces.
- Evacuation plan is available at 91.9% workers' workplaces.
- About 14% workplaces do not arrange fire drill.

Availability of safety committee

Although workplaces have to have safety committees according to Bangladesh Labour Act, violation of legal provision is noticed by some workers. 7.1% workers informed that employers had not formed safety committees at their workplaces. Lack of awareness among workers about safety committee is also significant. 25.1% workers do not know whether safety committees exist at workplaces. 26.2% respondents claimed that they participated in the activities of safety committee.

Workplace environment

Workers have diverse opinion on condition of different factors that the workplace environment entails. Majority of the workers perceive that the conditions of various factors are good except for sound. Majority consider condition of sound is moderate.

- 50.4% workers consider that condition of cleanliness is good, 31.% as moderate.
- 44.1% percent consider the sound condition as moderate.
- 46.9% percent consider temperature condition as good
- Ventilation condition is good to 53.6% workers, and moderate to 37.5% workers.
- 62.2 % workers think that lighting condition is good.
- Condition of dust and fume is considered as good by 46.6 percent workers.
- 59.1 % workers perceive humidity condition as 'good'.

- Working space is considered good by 66% workers.
- 63.7% percent workers consider the condition of safe drinking water is good, 15.7% as moderate.
- State of separate toilet is considered as good by 67.8% workers, and as moderate by 13.6% workers.

Workplace harassment and discrimination

Workplaces of the women workers are not free from harassment. In other words, women workers experience different forms of harassment at workplace. Of the different forms verbal and psychological abuse/harassment are the most common ones.

- 63% women workers have reported verbal harassment.
- 60.7% women workers have talked about psychological harassment.
- Physical harassment has been reported by 23.6% percent workers.
- Sexual harassment has been noticed by 10.8 percent workers.

Despite having evidences/existences of harassment of different forms most workplaces lack anti-harassment committee. Even workers in a large number are not aware in this regards.

- Anti-harassment committee is absent at workplaces of 33 percent workers.
- Only 12.1% women workers have claimed that their workplaces have anti-harassment committees.
- 54.9% are unaware of availability of such committee.

Employers mostly do not provide women workers with any transport facility when they do the night duty, even many workers are not aware of this issue. 60.1 % workers claim that they do not get such facility. Availability of this facility has been reported by 1.4% workers, and rests (37.2%) do not know whether such facility is provided.

Discriminatory practice with regard to promotion of women in upper position is wide spread. 87.9% workers report discrimination in this regard. Some workers (11.2%) are not aware of this issue.

Welfare provisions and social protection

Welfare provisions are being implemented/available at varied degree at the workplaces. However, 100% availability has not been reported by women workers for any of the among several welfare-related provisions/facilities. Important to note, first aid, canteen, and separate place for lunch are more available facilities; whereas accommodation, and restroom are less available facility.

- 84.5%, 75.4%, and 69% women workers have reported respectively the availability of first aid, canteen, and separate place for lunch.
- Only 1.5% and 2% women respectively claimed the availability of accommodation facility and rest room.
- Day-care is absent at workplaces of 38.7 % workers. Although 49.8% claim availability, they further inform that in most cases workers hardly get chance to use day care.
- Breast-feeding corner is absent at workplaces of 55.2% workers, 10.6% are unaware of this provision.
- 80.2% workers claim that employers reduce workload during pregnancy.
- Recreation facility is absent at workplaces of 57.1% workers.

Women workers are mostly deprived of social protection related facilities at workplace. High prevalence of ignorance/unawareness among workers concerning the social protection facilities is a striking feature in this regard.

- Provident fund is absent at workplaces of 59% workers, and 24.7% are not aware in this regard.
- Welfare fund is absent for 58.6% workers, and 31.1% have no idea.
- Absence of health and life insurance facility has been reported by 62.1% workers; the rests (37.9%) do not know the issue.
- 55.9% workers report the unavailability of group insurance; and remaining workers (43.2%) do not know.
- 57.1% workers claim the unavailability of accident insurance; and 47.9% are unaware.
- About 53.7% claim that gratuity is given.
- 46.7% claim that compensation is not given; 44.8% are not aware.
- Maternity leave with pay is available at workplaces of 66.1% workers.

Workers' organization at workplace

Workers' organization/committees of different forms are available at workplaces of majority workers (72.2%). Many workers (16.9%) do not know whether organizations/committees exist at workplace. Among different committees/associations availability of OSH committee is the most frequent (65.07%), followed by participation committee (60.98%). On the other hand, trade union is available at workplaces of only 4.79% workers.

Most of the women workers generally are not members of the organization/committees available at workplaces. 76.21% are not members of any organization/association at workplace.