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HEALTH AND SAFETY COMPLIANCE IN THE READYMADE GARMENT SECTOR OF BANGLADESH: PRACTICES AND OBSERVATIONS

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BACKGROUND

Bangladeshi RMG accounts for the second-largest apparel manufacturer and exporter after China. The readymade garment (RMG) industry is considered as the backbone of Bangladesh's economy and is one of the key core drivers as far as the strength of the GDP is concerned. The key features of the RMG industry determines three assumptions firstly, that the RMG hub is a strong buyer-driven production chain; secondly, RMG thrives in this part of the world because of greater availability and accessibility of "cheap" labor pool, low wages and reluctance to unionization; thirdly, that the relations between the State and industry are governed to some extent by clientelism. Over the last decades, the growth of the sector has been spectacular. Currently, there are more than 5,000 garment manufacturing firms operating in Bangladesh. The RMG sector is accountable for creating employment for more than 4 million people. The garment industry of Bangladesh has very significant contributions to the country's development process in terms of foreign earnings, employment opportunities, women empowerment and bringing various other social changes. Despite all of these success and holistic development thanks to the RMG sector there are grey areas which are seldom looked at by the garment owners and policy makers, health and safety procedures are hardly given importance by the policy makers and parties associated to this industry. The working conditions in RMG factories have been repeatedly characterized by the Western media as prone to the workers due to the occurrence of violence and intense workload (Bajaj, 2010; Ethirajan, 2012; Yardley, 2012).

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METHODS

The case study aims to achieve dual objective of creating academic knowledge and develop assumption through questions in order to address and identify potential problems. In order to capture as many studies as possible and to limit biases caused by the study-identification process, the procedure was followed as proposed by Rosenbusch et al., (2011). A computerized keyword searches in the databases (e.g., ISI, Web of Knowledge, ABI, Google Scholar) was conducted to explore the highly pertinent studies on Health and Safety issues regarding RMG organizations operating in Bangladesh. Based on the situation developed in this case, we draw conclusion with the questions for further implication and justification. Moreover, regarding technicality this is a qualitative study predominantly and explore the health & safety compliance in the garments. In order to observe and elicit narratives from the real scenario of the garments we have conducted one focus group interview so that clarity could be obtain from the data collected.

INDUSTRY CONDITION

Working conditions are one of the primary determinants of employees' health (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2010; Rosengren et al., 2004). Hazardous hostile work environment (e.g. respiratory diseases in relation to occupational exposures) have been explored in a limited number of earlier studies in RMG settings (Ahasan et al., 2000; Khanam et al., 2008). According to Bangladeshi law, a standard workday was 8 hours, while a standard work week was 48 hours, which could be extended up to 60 hours, provided that workers were paid for working extra-hours. These legal limits were regularly violated and workers were forced to work up to 12 hours a day in order to meet export deadlines, and often were not compensated fully or on time (United States Department of State, 2012). Gopinath and Choudhury (2015) found in their study that the Ministry of Labor was ineffective at enforcing laws because of the inadequate number of labor inspectors. There were approximately 91 inspectors and 52 of them worked in the factories division (United States Department of State, 2012). Prior studies related to the sector only focused on the working conditions in the areas of job satisfaction (along with reasons for dis-/satisfaction), workers' perception of "prestige and honor in the society", and adverse events (e.g., like sexual harassment), respectively (Paul-Majumder, 2003). Whereas health and safety issues largely remains missing. There are 50,000 registered factories in RMG with only 20 occupational health and safety inspectors. (Cleason, 2012). On the other hand inspections were supposed to be unannounced, but in reality, many inspectors contacted factory owners beforehand. Moreover, officials were also

often unable to enforce laws because of extended legal battles in the event of law violations. The garment factory owners were politically very influential and often held parliamentary positions. Therefore the laws favored the owners more than the workers.

RMG INDUSTRY COMPETITION

The garment industry experienced changes from 2009 due to the global financial crisis and downward pricing resulted in constant pressure on global retailers to extract products from the cheapest manufacturers. In this event, sourcing departments put pressure on factories in the matters related to price and shorter lead times, and at the same time, demanded high-quality standards (Finnegan, 2013). Any rise in the operating cost resulted in retailers taking their business elsewhere. Bangladeshi factories, struggled to invest in improving working conditions with such low operational costs suggested by the retailers and sourcing departments. Owners, in turn, made employees work long hours. In Bangladesh, from 1983 to 2012, the number of garment factories increased from a mere 134 to 5,700. This intensified competition increased the bargaining power of western retailers to switch from one manufacturer to another. Such volatile purchase relationships not only increased the competition but also rendered the factory owners from investing in safety and reduced the buyers' leverage on the suppliers to ensure safe buildings and safe practices (Theuws et al., 2013). Al-Mahmood et al. (2012) present one argument in their study that …..

"Ifty Islam, managing partner at Asian Tiger Capital Partners, a Dhaka-based asset-management company, said, "It's hard to improve factory compliance and safety when there's ever-increasing downward pressure on the prices that global retailers are willing to pay".

INDUSTRY INCIDENT

In May 2011, Tazreen was audited for Canada's NTD Apparel Inc. and in their report they mentioned that workers at Tazreen were unaware of the escape routes, the exits and stairs were blocked and the factory did not have adequate equipment to tackle fire (Al-Mahmood et al., 2012). The fire safety concerns led to the Orange rating, i.e., a high risk safety rating. However, Tazreen's parent company's web site showed a better rating after two months, claiming to have made improvements. Yet, in December 2011, following another audit, Tazreen was cited for health and safety violations (Yardley, 2012), casting doubt on the reliability of information on the company's web site. These reports not only confirm poor infrastructure but also affirms the reluctance in monitoring and

administration from the regulatory authority. The aftermath was gruesome which resulted in two tragedies namely Tazreen Fashions and Rana Plaza incidents. It can be well argued that the current status of the garments workers would not have been possible to scrutinize if it wasn't for the phenomenon of Tazreen and Rana Plaza disasters. These two incidents have escalated awareness among various stakeholders of the sector, including Bangladesh government, ILO, foreign buyers, and factory owners to improve the working condition and ensure workplace safety for the workers (Uddin, 2014). Therefore, this study explores the issues of the workers' health and safety in the garment industry of Bangladesh.

FINDINGS

After the occurrence of the incidents, subsequently two major approaches were adopted by the stakeholders. Earlier, trade unions mostly existed in the public sector or in state controlled enterprises. Unionization was virtually non-existent in the private sector. Since the union formation was forbidden until 2004, but the emergence of international pressure government to allow approved workers' associations at individual factories. The 2006 Bangladesh Labor Act was also amended and the essence of unionization was later incorporated in the year 2013. For our observation and to explore the current practices of the industry we have selected Standard Garment in Mirpur area. To observe the health & safety practices in Standard Garments we use Labor act 2006 with the amendments of 2013 as a standard (Table I).

Table I: Health and safety compliance practice of Standard Garments (according to Labor act 2006 with amendment 2013, see appendix 1)

Section	Topic	Complied	Not complied
61	Safety of building & machinery	√	
62	Precautions in case of fire	√	
63	Fencing of machinery	√	
64	Work on or near Machinery in motion	√	
66	Self-acting Machines	√	
67	Casing of new machinery	√	

68	Cranes and other lifting machinery	√	
69	Hoists & Lifts	√	
71	Pressure Plant	√	
72	Floors, stairs & means of access	√	
75	Protection of eyes		√
76	Specifications of defective Parts etc.		√
77	Precautions against dangerous fumes	√	
78	Explosive or inflammable Dust, Gas, etc.	√	

Apart from the complied factors presented in the previous sections, few other issues come under observation.

- Workers awareness regarding the use of head mask, cutting gloves is very reluctant
- Drinking water facilities are moderate
- Children daycare facilities are available
- A Medical center is available
- A Training center is also available with the facilities for new workers

CONCLUSION

This company visit notwithstanding, we believe that more discussion and cooperation from the RMG organizations is required for further exploration. This study highlights only the limited issues of the labor act 2006 regarding the health and safety. However, the role of the regularity authority, awareness of the worker and willingness of the employer to take additional initiatives in order to ensure the worker's well-being, are still under consideration. Our study comprising of one focus group and individual company visit is merely adequate as a whole to comment upon the entire industry practices revolving around all the RMG factories. Therefore, few questions may arise from the findings.

- Does RMG organization have rigid policy in place to guide expectations, resource allocation and leadership accountability for practice?
- What have we learnt lately about RMG industry and the on-going practices? Does our Human Resource Management take in account these contents for further policy development?

- Do you think that the practices illustrated by the Standard Garments will be sufficient to follow success in RMG industry? If yes, why? If no, why not? What additional actions (if any) do you think will be necessary?

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APPENDIX I

Sections for Safety Measures

The safety provisions are absolute and obligatory in nature and the employer of every establishment is bound to follow them. They are contained in sections 61 to 78 in chapter V. The sections are as follows-

Section	Topic	Summary
61	Safety of building & machinery	● If inspector finds any building or part of a building, machinery or plant in establishment is in such condition that is dangerous to human life or safety he may serve a written order to the employer to take necessary measures in specified time. ● If inspector finds any building or part of a building, machinery or plant in establishment involves imminent danger to human life or safety he may serve written prohibition of its use

		until it has been properly repaired or altered.
62	Precautions in case of fire	● Every establishment shall be provided with escape stair and firefighting apparatus. ● Exit doors shall not be locked or fastened for easy & immediate opening. ● Exit affording means for escape shall be distinctively marked in red in Bangla language or by some other effective or clearly understood sign. ● Factory with fifty or more workers a firefighting demonstration must be held at least once in a year and a record shall be maintained for this purpose
63	Fencing of machinery	● Every moving part of a prime mover and every fly wheel connected to a prime mover ● The head race & tail race of every water wheel or water turbine ● Every part of electric generator, transmission machinery or any dangerous part of any machinery.
64	Work on or near Machinery in motion	● Worker wearing tight-fitting clothing whose name has been recorded in the registrar. ● Worker shall not handle a belt at a moving pulley unless the belt is less than 15 centimeters in width and unless the belt-join is either laced or flush with the belt.
65	Striking gear and devices for cutting off power	● Suitable striking gear ● Unused driving belts shall not be allowed to rest or ride upon shafting in motion

		• Suitable devices for cutting off power in emergencies from running machinery shall be provided.
66	Self-acting Machines	• No traversing part of a self-acting machine in any factory shall be allowed to run on its outward or inward traverse within a distance of eighteen inches from any fixed structure which is not part of the machine.
67	Casing of new machinery	• Encased to prevent danger • Machinery requiring frequent adjustment while in motion shall be completely encased.
68	Cranes and other lifting machinery	• Sound material • Properly maintained • Thoroughly examined by competent person • Shall not be loaded beyond safe working load
69	Hoists & Lifts	• Sound material • Properly maintained • Every hoistway and liftway shall be sufficiently protected by an enclosure fitted with gates
70	Revolving Machinery	• A room where process of grinding is carried on shall be permanently affixed to each machine in use a notice indicating maximum safe working peripheral speed.
71	Pressure Plant	• Safe working pressure is not exceeded
72	Floors, stairs & means of access	• Sound construction & properly maintained • Wide & obstacle free

73	Pits, sumps, opening in floors, etc.	● Securely covered & securely fenced
74	Excessive Weights	● No one will move any load which is so heavy or can cause injury
75	Protection of eyes	● Government may require that effective screens of suitable goggles shall be provided for the protection of the person in a process
76	Specifications of defective Parts etc.	● The Inspector may direct to furnish or remove dangerous conditions in any building or any part, machineries or plant.
77	Precautions against dangerous fumes	● No person shall enter or permitted to enter in any space in which dangerous fumes are likely to be ● Suitable breathing apparatus be kept ready for instant use
78	Explosive or inflammable Dust, Gas, etc.	● Effective enclosure of the plant ● Prevention of the accumulation of dust, fume or vapor ● Exclusion of all possible sources of ignition.