

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh: Understanding through the case of Readymade Garment Sector

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### Abstract

Readymade garments (RMG) sector is the clothing industry that deals with mass-manufactured finished textile goods. Though initiated in the West, with the rise in demand for readymade garments worldwide, this sector has spread in the Third World countries as well. In Bangladesh, this has emerged to be the largest earner of foreign currency. Women are getting employed in large numbers in this sector. Hence, this has become the basic means of earning for them. Being emancipated financially, they now have a say in the matters of their families and in the public sphere. Therefore, it can be said that this industry is aiding women in Bangladesh to be liberated and empowered with a voice of their own. Based on this idea, I would like to examine the prospects these women have, after being involved in the RMG sector. Though the picture looks quite bright, to what extent is it true in a primarily patriarchal society? Has the government of the country taken any step for altering their status in the society? Are they really able to take a stand or still dependent on the male members of the family? How do the men in Bangladeshi society view women's public participation in the RMG sector? All these issues have been explored through the Bangladeshi women's experience.

### Keywords

Women's emancipation; readymade garments sector; men's role; gender inequality; Bangladesh

### Introduction

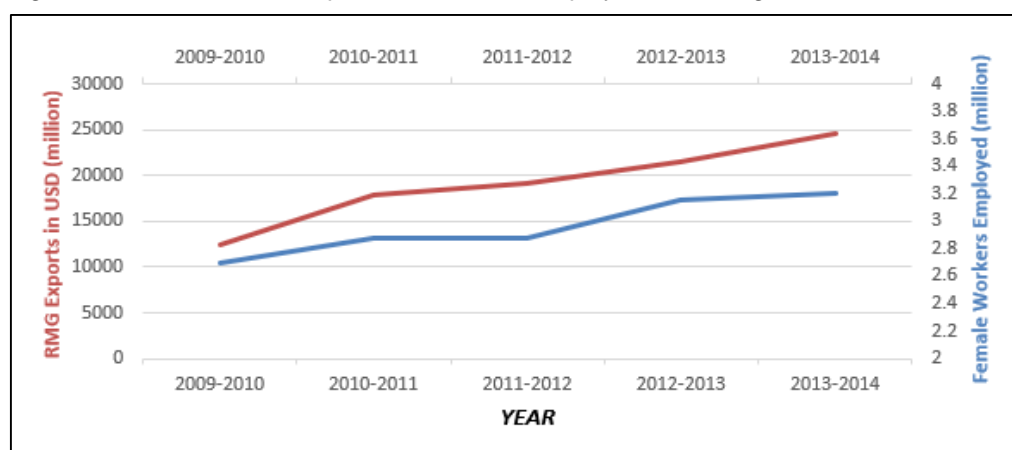
Bangladesh, after becoming independent in the year 1971, was considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world with no distinguished production supporting her progress. Even the jute industry, the only major export earner began to tear down. During this turmoil, the industry that not only contributed but also helped in rebuilding the economy of the nation-state was- the Readymade-made Garments Sector. At present, the ready-made garments industry accounts for 81% (Export Promotion Bureau Compiled by BGMEA, 2015) of total export earnings of Bangladesh, thus, becoming the largest earner of foreign currency. The apparel industry began its journey in the 1980's. The late Nurool Quader Khan was one of the eminent initiators of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. 'In 1978, he sent 130 trainees to South Korea where they learned how to produce readymade garments. With those trainees, he set up the first factory "Desh Garments" to produce garments for export' (World Bank, 2015: fifth para). After seeing the success of these pioneering industries, many new entrepreneurs began to build their own factories in the country, hence leading to advancement of this sector.

Readymade garments industry is the clothing industry that deals with mass-manufactured finished textiles products. Unlike custom tailored products according to specific measurements, they are generalised clothing based on anthropometric measurements. Though it was a concept first initiated in the West, to be precise in New York, USA in 1831, with the rise in demand of the RMGs worldwide, this sector has spread in the Third World countries as well. Apart from some unfortunate tragedies like the Tazreen Fashion factory fire (2012) and the collapse of Rana Plaza (2013), it cannot be denied that the RMG sector is of huge importance to Bangladesh, economically as well as socially (Chowdhury & Tanim, 2016; Rahman et.al. 2017). One thing that made this sector unique is how it has changed the situation and life of women in Bangladesh.

## Women and Ready-made Garments Sector

The readymade garments sector has paved the path for the development of that section of the society, which has been limited to the private sphere, i.e., women. Bangladesh being a developing state has not been able to provide the amenities required for the progress of women like, education, jobs, etc. But with the advent of the RMG factories, many women were able to utilize their proficiency and aptitude for the betterment of the family, society and country. Women, from lower to lower middle class in the urban and rural regions, are being employed in huge numbers in these garment factories (Figure-1). This has served to be the basic means of earning for these women and with financial independence they are not only having a say in their families but also in the public sphere. Women constitute about 80% of the working forces in this sector. With their increased participation, the export rate of the RMG sector has also shown a steady rise. During 2012–2013, we can see that there were around 3.1 million women employees (i.e. 79% of total employees) and the amount of RMG export to the GDP was about 21515.73 million USD (16.13% of total GDP). Then in the time-period 2013-2014, the data went up to 3.2 million female RMG workers (80% of total workers at the garments sector) and total RMG exports escalated to 24491.88 million USD (16.33% of total GDP). Therefore, presenting a directly proportional relation between the two variables. So, it can be said that RMG sector is helping the women in Bangladesh to be liberated and empowered with a voice of their own and in turn aiding in sustainable development of the country (Figure-1).

Figure 1. Growth of RMG Exports and Female Employment in Bangladesh



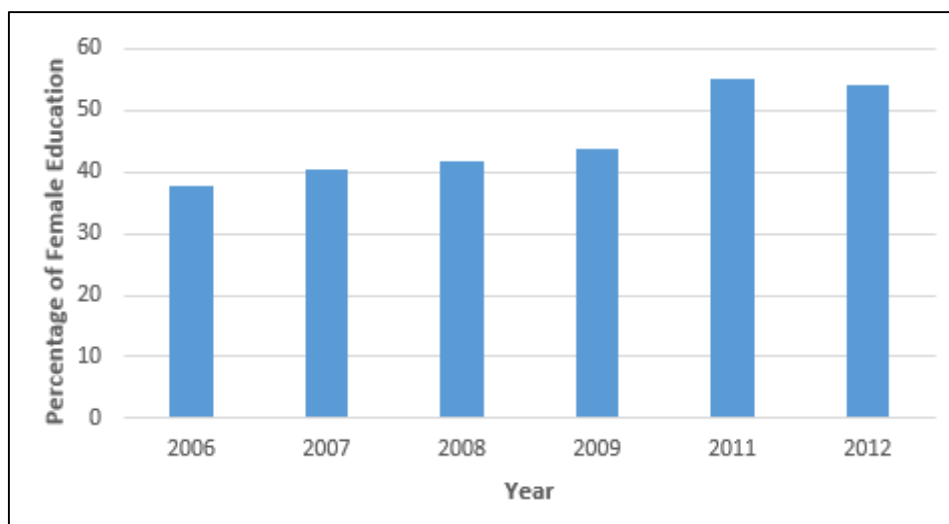
Source: Export Promotion Bureau Compiled by BGMEA & Rahman, Siddiqui 2015:7.

With increased participation of women in the apparel sector, it is seen that the collective decision-making has also affected the household's social welfare. Their bargaining power in the household has also augmented with their income and access to resources. This financial solvency helps them to decide how and where the money can be expended. Along with this, it is seen that women's capacity to save has improved manifolds. They tend to save 7.6% of their small income, thus, ensuring a better future for the family. This, in turn, would alter the traditional masculine principles through a broader social pressure. Thus, aiding in materialisation of 'women's empowerment' (Pitt et.al. 2006: 792). In an interview with S. M. Monirul Hassan, Professor, University of Chittagong, he made a remark regarding this-

“Women should realize that economic prosperity is an interdependent process. They should not be lagging behind thinking that men will work and it will happen. Women should come forward in the economic sphere too, that’s the way the whole country will develop. This is what we are observing in the Ready-made Garments sector. Thousands of poverty-ridden girls are coming to the RMG sector and they are contributing to the family, even sometimes, single-handedly. They are decision makers of the family too (Hassan, 2015).”

It has also been pointed out by researchers that the expansion of the garment industry has positively influenced female educational attainment and further aided in decreasing early marriages and fertility rates during the 20-year period than most other educational policies (Mobarak and Heath, 2014; Garai, 2015). Because of the growth of the RMG sectors female literacy rate has also risen by 15% (RMG Bangladesh, 2016). Women garment workers capable of understanding the importance of self-dependence, believe in providing the means to succeed to their children that they have been deprived in their childhood. Those who belong to the lower strata of the society now know that education is one of the most primal criteria to achieve them. Thus, when they started earning, they also aimed for their children’s education irrespective of their sex (Begum, 2015; Mohsin, 2015). On the other hand, many NGOs have realised the lacuna of illiterate female workers and began to provide education to these women in order to make them aware the importance of their rights (Ovi, 2018). Therefore, with the growth in the employment level of Bangladeshi women, we can see that the percentage of female education also has been rising above 50% since 2011 (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Growth of Female Literacy Rate.



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics & BMG Bangladesh 2016.

Another aspect that has undergone change is the issue of women’s movement in the outer world. Earlier, women’s mobility to any place outside the private arena was quite restricted especially in rural Bangladesh based on traditional and family norms. These notions and beliefs prohibited them to leave the family compound alone, without being accompanied by a male member, on grounds of safety and security. However, all these notions were challenged once the women started working in the RMG factories, as they had no option but to move out of their houses to earn their living. With women stepping out of their houses, they became more conscious of the situation of their family and society and they began to question their traditions and customs. Therefore, women’s access to resources, free mobility and awareness of family planning have carved out the materialization of women’s empowerment and involvement in the RMG industries is assisting them to realise it.

Amidst all these positive effects, there are certain areas, which serve as a stumbling block in women’s development in this sector. Surprisingly, empowerment often becomes a myth when it comes to the equality of opportunities within RMG sectors in Bangladesh. From data collected within factories, four out of every five production line workers are female, whilst just one in twenty supervisors is a woman (Mobarak and Heath, 2014). The ratio of male to female professionals at the managerial and HR managerial level are 190:1 and 176:17 respectively (CPD-RMG Study, 2017-2018). Thus, portraying huge gender imbalances in these levels of RMG sectors.

Another glaring problem is that of the income that women receive. Living in a developing nation like Bangladesh, female workers are expected to perform heavy duties with extra time but with lowest wage programmes. As they are limited to 'unskilled' or 'semi-skilled' job categories in the garment factory, the reward they receive is neither up to their level of investment of labour and time nor is it equal to their male counterparts. As per survey, there exists a 3% gap between male and female wage in the apparel industry and the payment of salaries is not as per the Bangladesh Labour Act (Ovi, 2018; Textile Industry, 2018). Their wages per day varies mostly from BDT 201-300 based on their ranks, which is less when compared to their male co-workers who get BDT 301-400 as their daily wage for doing the same amount of work (Ali, 2013). In a similar light, Prof. Sanjida Akhter, University of Dhaka, mentioned-

"Why women's participation is increasing in the RMG sector? Because women are easy to be exploited, their labour is cheap. They were suffering from different problems, like hunger, poverty etc. So, there is need for some money to survive at the very subsistence level and the entrepreneurs, i.e. RMG factory owners, got these emotions as their capital. They employed women in RMG sector as cheap labour. This RMG sector has become an important source of foreign currency which is a positive thing but along with this it has also led to forming a different kind of stereotype (Akhter, 2015)."

As women are generally involved in the helper-operator position and lower ranks in this sector, they are deprived of most of the human and labour rights. Moreover, there exists the notion that women are more into abiding instructions and following orders. Many RMG owners prefer women to male workers because they produce better quality works as their skills are set for doing these types of work like sewing, threading etc. and they excel at it (Kundu 2015). Along with this, health has become a vital concern for garment employees. In relation to health issues, including the history of accidents and killings in these sectors, Professor Samina Luthfa had pointed out that- "jobs in the RMG sector are risky and hazardous it doesn't take care of the safety of women. This vulnerability can't be solved individually. The government, owners and organizations need to take action about it" (Luthfa, 2015).

Here comes the question regarding the role of the administration and whether the Bangladeshi government is taking any action for improving the condition of the workers in the informal sector. The Constitution of Bangladesh provides a number of guarantees for the protection of workers. Article 20 discusses about how work is a right and duty of each individual of the nation-state. Article 34 clause 1 mentions that all forms of forced labour are prohibited. Article 29 clause 2(c) claims that any form of discrimination regarding employment based on sex or gender shall be an offence punishable under law (The Constitution of People Republic of Bangladesh, 1972). Despite the presence of such decrees, rights of female workers are continuously disdained because their enforcement by the government and the labour department is almost non-existent.

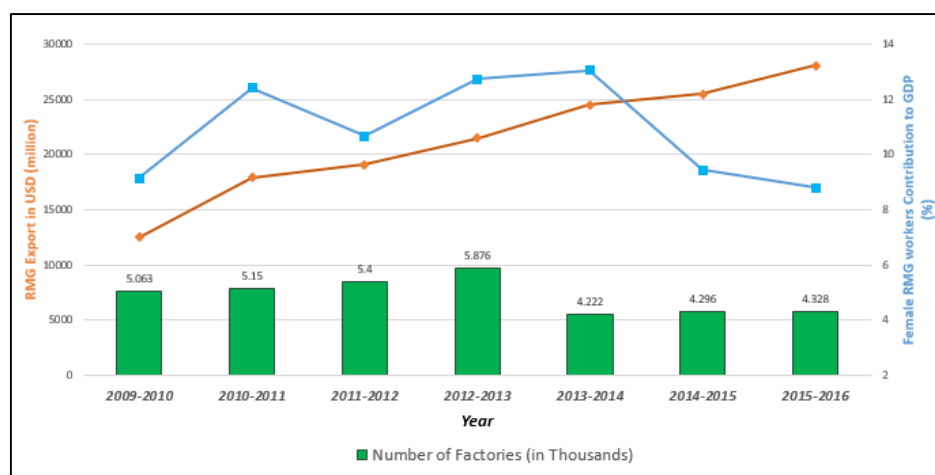
Based on the International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, the Bangladesh Labour Act/Law (BLA) was passed in 2006, to improve the condition of the working class of Bangladesh. Unfortunately, most of the women going to the garment industries generally lack the knowledge of its existence and thus, often fall victim to many forms of discriminations, like, unequal pay, unequal access to employment and promotional opportunities (Mazumder, 2015, Luthfa, 2015 and Akhter, 2015). According to the Bangladesh Labour Act, workers should be paid within seven days after the wage period expires (BLA 2006, Chapter-10, Section-121). However, the RMG sector rarely follows these rules and in cases where some women workers being the sole earners of the family, often struggle to fulfil the basic needs of their children. Apart from the unfair salary division based on gender as mentioned above, there are also other aspects which affect the lives of women workers at the apparel sector.

Though there is a mention of maternity leave and payment for new mothers in the Bangladesh Labour Law (BLA 2006, Chapter-4, Section-46), due to lack of execution of such policies, welfare of the majority of the female workers relies on the employer's desire, who can either accept the leave or reject it. Thus, taking a huge toll on the employees' mental and physical health. Though the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 has included a detailed chapter (No. 5) on the health and hygiene of the wage earners, yet unpleasant working environment is one of the challenges for women at the workplace. The lack of ventilation and sunlight

inside many RMG factories lead to dehydration and heat stroke among the workers, resulting in deterioration of their health conditions (Hasan and Mahmud 2017; Ahmed and Raihan 2014; Chowdhury and Tanim 2016). Chapter 9, section 101 of the Bangladesh Labour Law, also provides a condition for reasonable rest for better job productivity. However, when the workload increases, the extra working hour is often snatched from their resting time.

Moreover, it has been found that in terms of job security in the RMG sectors, it is women whose job is at stake always. Men are not only given preference at times of promotion or recruitment to supervisory positions, when dismissals happen, it is women who are fired first than their male colleagues, even if they are more capable (Chowdhury Repon et.al. 2015). This phenomenon came to prominence after 2013, when the Rana Plaza demolition happened, we find that the female employment rate strikingly fell from 80% (2013) to 64% (2014). Various factors led to this circumstance. After the unfortunate incidents of Tazreen Factory and Rana Plaza, we find that many RMG factories were closed down on the grounds of the health and safety rules. The number of factories in the RMG sector, saw a sudden fall from 5,876 (2013) to 4,222 (2014). We can clearly draw from this picture from this, that it was the women employees who had to pay the price. Another factor which might have affected the decline in female employees is the technological expansion happening in this sector. Though the employers preferred women more for their precision in the sewing and knitting jobs, with the advent of new technological machineries, rate of garment production continues to upsurge (24491.88 million USD (2013) to 25491.40 million USD (2014)). Thus, reducing the need of female workers' skills and instead of providing specific training and preparing them to handle the new devices, they are simply sacked for no fault of their own. Hence, resulting in considerable unemployment of women from the apparel sector (Figure 3).

Figure 3. RMG Exports, Female Workers' Contribution & the RMG Industry.



Source: Export Promotion Bureau compiled by BGMEA, Rahman, Siddiqui 2015:7, Textile Today 2018.

However, a recent amendment of the Labour law in September 2013, has supported with easy registration of more union membership, thus, leading to creation of women's trade unions in the garments sector. Though not sufficient enough, yet these trade unions are playing an active role to stop the exploitation against women and obtain rights at work (Chowdhury Repon et.al. 2015; Kundu, 2015; Garai, 2015). Apart from this, implementation of 'gender responsive labour market policies' (term used by Khatiwada ,2014) would help in more equitable employment outcomes and decent work for an individual irrespective of his or her sex. These kinds of rules will not only improve the working condition of the employees in the factories but also help realise the atrocities taking place in the factories against women and thus, inspiring towards their elimination.

### Men's Reaction to Women's Earnings in RMG Sector

Though there are certain aspects negatively affecting the lives of women workers in the RMG industry. However, the economic independence provided by this sector can't be negated. This has facilitated them to take equal stand with men in the society. How have men taken this change of situation is a question. The notion that men are least bothered with

women's progress is incorrect. Earlier men considered women to be inferior beings with lesser intelligence and capacity, this thought process has reformed. The growth in the monetary income, by their partners, has improved the standard of living of these families and this has been happily accepted by the Bangladeshi men. Therefore, it can be seen that salaried women, sometimes, have a constructive impact on their husbands and families.

Just like certain positive transformation has taken place in the society, various insecurities cropping in the minds of men, have exaggerated the struggle of women's employment in and beyond the RMG sector. Apart from receiving higher salary for same work along with additional job security, men in RMG sector often enjoy a much-privileged position when compared to their female counterparts. Direct or indirect social harassments in the work place such as eve teasing, discouraging and dispiriting the female workers by their colleagues and supervisors is also a reality. Discarding the BLA clause on health and security at the workplace, has given men the access to manhandle women when desired. There is no segregation of toilets or resting areas for both the sexes, thus, allowing men to often encroach upon women's privacy (Ali and Islam, 2017; Haque et.al. 2017).

Furthermore, women at the RMG sector are found to work more hours than their male counterparts. They are often bound to do extra time beyond their regular work schedule (i.e. continuing with their household chores). While a male worker in the RMG sector spends about 8-10 working hours, for a woman it extends to 15 hours a day! (Huq 2015; Haque et.al. 2017). In addition to this, they are often forced to work overtime by their male supervisors and they are not remunerated according to their labour. Starting from sexual harassment to physical and mental abuse, women in the RMG sector have reported to experience many forms of atrocities (Chowdhury Repon et.al. 2015; Akhter, 2015; Luthfa, 2015).

When moving out of the factory, their safety and security has also come under doubt, as they regularly fall victim to violence of different forms- humiliation, molestation, rape, etc. (Imtiaz 2015). However, the saddest part is, in certain cases women are not even aware of the fact that they are experiencing illicit behaviour by other men. Even if they realise that they are being abused, they rarely protest because of the fear of losing job (Chowdhury Repon et.al. 2015). They neither get help from their employers nor do their families support their claims. These types of actions not only demotivate the female employees of the RMG sector but also instil fear in their minds, hence, limiting their growth and progress in this field.

In the private sphere, the level of spousal arguments related to children, money and household chores can be observed. Even women who are capable of earning, do not have control over their income, as they have to hand it over to their husbands (Rosy 2015; Mazumder, 2015). They are still sufferers of domestic violence, and husband and in-law's domination still prevail. Along with this, women also fall prey to overburdening as their partners rarely share the household duties. Therefore, on one hand, men enjoy the salary earned by their wives, while on the other hand, for preserving their masculine ideals, they rarely or never lend their support in the domestic roles. Along with this, the contribution of the women, be it financial or physical towards the family, still remains invisible. The male members of the Bangladeshi society have accepted women doing job, but their support ends there. Hence, socio-economic participation of women can never lead to women empowerment, until and unless, the psychology of the male members of the society undergoes change.

## Conclusion

Empowerment is a multifaceted variable and 'women's control of resources, financial independence and freedom of movement and development of network' are the some of the measures to achieve it (Pitt et.al. 2006: 817). In Bangladesh, in this regard, the RMG sector is working to serve as a means for empowering woman. Her earning is not only expanding her power to purchase but also allowing her to explore her individuality and in turn participate in decision making, which would benefit her family and the society in a broader perspective. In spite of the existing conservative forces and religious fundamentalism, feminization of labour in the RMG sector could not be hampered, thus, leading to a steady growth in the economy of the country as well.

However, just economic independence is not enough to emancipate women. The men in Bangladesh should also be taken into consideration. Men here with time have supported their

partners to work in RMG sectors, as with more revenue, their standard of living has improved as well. But along with supporting women in this decision, they should also show some interest in sharing the domestic and caring responsibilities. When men change their mindset and come to the forefront to support their female counterparts, it is then true empowerment of women will take place.

In order to make the society aware of this, the initial steps should be taken at the administrative level. In this context, we find that the rules and regulations implemented at the apparel industrial areas are quite inconsistent and the women garment workers have very less scope to claim their rights and safety. It is the duty of the government to identify the forms of discriminations occurring against women in the informal sector and execute laws with strict actions. It is also the responsibility of the Ministry of Labour to check that the employers of the RMG sectors are abiding by the rules of the Bangladesh Labour Act regarding, wages and benefits, health and hygiene and ensure job security to deserving worker irrespective of gender. Along with this, NGOs can organise different programmes (in form of talks and plays) to make the Bangladeshi men understand how their behaviour towards women in their lives should actually be. Additionally, make them realise that their masculinity would never be questioned, if they support their partners in improving the condition of the house.

Therefore, it can be concluded that recognition and respect are the two key aspects to women's empowerment in the truest sense. When women's contribution in the private sphere will receive respect and their labour in the public sector will be recognised, it is then we can say women are being emancipated in Bangladesh. Women's true liberation lies not only in women discovering their capabilities and contributing to the welfare of a country, but it is also dependant on men of the society sacrificing and transforming their roles in the public and private arena. Both the sexes, have the capacity to improve the economy of a country and with this realisation, a nation-state will experience its over-all growth. The RMG factories have provided the path towards women's empowerment by introducing their financial independence. Now it is time to deal with the other factors hindering women's achievements in Bangladesh.

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