

Socio-Economic Conditions of the Female Garment Workers in the Capital City of Bangladesh

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Abstract

The Ready Made Garment (RMG) has been placed largest export earnings of Bangladesh where 4,825 garment factories are running, employing over three million people of which 85% workers are women. RMG industry is considered as the back bone of the country's economy while it plays great role for many people socio-economic wellbeing at the back door. This article depicts the socio-economic conditions of female garment workers in Dhaka City of Bangladesh. We found that women are doing work on an average 11.12 hours/day in the garment factory/industry but they receive average salary less than Tk. 7000 per month. It is notable that they maintain a very critical life managing hardly for their own and family expenses. So minimum wage should be fixed by the government for their better standard of living.

Key Words: Socio-economic condition, female garments worker, readymade garment, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The Ready Made Garment (RMG) has been placed largest export earnings of Bangladesh. The first garment factory opened in 1976. The industry has grown dramatically over the past 35 years, which can be treated as a life blood of the Bangladesh economy. The industry deserves special connotation for at least three reasons: (a) it is the single largest earner about 77 % of the yearly foreign exchange earning of the country; (b) it has been the fastest growing industry in the recent years; (c) The industry employees about 3.6 million people and the growth rate of RMG export was over 20% in the last two decades (BGMEA, Members' Directory 2010-2011). In Bangladesh the industry was expanded mainly on the easy availability of labor especially of the female labor accessibility. The RMG industry created employment opportunities i.e. especially for female workers and now this sector is considered as one of the main sources of employment for female workers of Bangladesh. This industry has provided the largest employment opportunities for women in the industrial sector where more than 85 percent of the production workers are women (Islam and Zahid, 2012).

These women have a great role for strengthening the RMG industry by the fact that the poor unskilled women have few alternatives or/and no better employment opportunities. Employers prefer female workers not only because they are cheaper and abundantly available, but also because they are more vulnerable, docile and manageable than male workers. They accept without protest the flexible terms of employment and are also seen less likely to be organized and susceptible to “anti-management propaganda” from outside (Khan 2001). In this context, this study was undertaken to assess the socio-economic conditions of the female garment workers in the Dhaka City area.

2. Methodology of the Study

For assessing the socio-economic condition of the female garment worker, a survey was conducted in the Dhaka city. Female workers were selected as sample because of their high percentages of participation as production workers in RMG factories. The survey covered total number of 80 respondents, which were drawn from 10 garment factories situated in different locations of Dhaka metropolitan area using a convenient sampling technique. Data were collected during 03 March to 25 March, 2012 where a self-constructed questionnaire was used to collect primary data considering the objective of the study. A set of factors that influence socio-economic conditions of the livelihood have been selected from each respondent respectively for the study purpose. These included age, level of education, marital status, family members, previous jobs, service length, migration status, religion, residence information, decision making power, medical facilities, reasons for absent in the work place, transportation facilities, wage, overtime, maternity leave and child care facilities, income and expenses problems faced by them and related solutions. Simple statistical technique like frequency distribution, percentage of frequency was used to analyze the collected data.

3. Result and discussion

3.1 Socio-Economic Background of the Respondents

Most of the female workers are very young. The result shows that average age of the female garment worker is 23.68 years. The study found that 92.5 percent of the female workers are aged less than 30, while only 7.5 percent of the workers are aged above 30 years (Table 1). This implies that female workers cannot work in the garment fully for long time because of occupational hazards and the employers do not prefer aged experienced workers in the factories may be to reduce cost by employing fresh workers at low remuneration. Most of the aged female workers complained that the management intentionally behaves roughly so that they quit the job. But management claims that young workers are more productive than aged workers.

In case of the level of education, the average schooling of the workers is 6.84 years. The survey indicates that of the total workers surveyed 2.50 percent are illiterate, 35 percent of the workers have primary education, and 48 percent have secondary education, while only 2.50 percent have higher secondary education (Table 1). As their level of education is low, their working efficiency and working capacity is also low. For this, they have less bargaining power; they get poor remuneration and facilities from employers. Even they cannot explain what kind of jobs facilities they have in their present working place.

Both married and unmarried workers are working in the garments factory. Among the female workers surveyed, 55 percent are married and 45 percent are unmarried (Table 1). It can be noticed that almost half of the female workers are unmarried those are working in the RMG industry and helping their family as well. Sometimes they harass by their male counterpart. Married women are now increasingly entering into the job market especially in the RMG sector. They suggested that there is need to change in the mindset of the industry owner that married women are less committed to the labor market.

Various surveys have shown that migrant workers have dominated the garment industry in Bangladesh. According to Ali et al. (2008), most of the workers migrate from rural area to Dhaka city. This survey also shows that about 46 percent of the female workers originated from rural areas as their first working place. About 53 percent of the workers originated from Dhaka city though part of them migrated from rural areas but now they are migrate from one industry to another (Table 1). There is a trade-off between greater demands of the labor in the RMG sector and lacking of employment opportunities in rural area. So many people especially the women migrate from rural to urban area because of their poverty, employment opportunity and better livelihood and so on. The survey found that almost 98 percent of the workers are Muslim and other 2 percent are from Hindu religion (Table 1).

This is because Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country and 90 percent of the total populations are Muslims. But one thing can be mentioned here that the 02 Hindu respondents opined that they did not face any problem in their factory due to religious identity.

One of the common problems faced by working women in the garment industry is the lack of proper accommodation. Table 1 shows that about 71 percent female workers live in house with family though these houses are not well developed. This kind of housing is mostly common for the worker where most of family member earns and get rent a house that has facilities of water supply, electricity etc. About 24 percent female workers lived in mess and most of them are unmarried. Mess is a dormitory type group house where people live not necessarily female garment workers only. Many of the property owners are now interested in building mess for garment workers as the demand for this mess are increasing. About 5 percent lives in the relative house and in the housing accommodated by the factory. But factory accommodation is not enough only a very few garment industry provides accommodation for their workers.

The survey found that almost 78 percentage of female worker commute to their workplace solely on foot and 15 percent very rarely use rickshaw or bus that almost 93 percent female worker usually walk to their work place and also back to home (Table 1). The workers were found to be living closer to their work place. Only about 8 percent workers were found who use bus provided by the factory.

Bangladesh has a very cheap labor market. The survey has verified the truth. Almost 69 percent female workers are getting 3000 to 7000 taka as per month salary and almost 31 percent are drawing more than seven thousands taka in a month (Table 1). The average salary has been estimated as Taka 6455.94 (US\$ 78.83) per month.

Table 1 Distribution of Female Garment Workers in Dhaka city according to the Selected Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	Respondent		Mean
		No.	Percent	
Age group (years)	15-20	28	35.00	24
	21-25	28	35.00	
	26-30	18	22.50	
	31-35	03	3.75	
	36-40	03	3.75	
Education level	Illiterate (0)	02	2.50	6.84
	Up to Primary (5)	28	35.00	
	Up to SSC (6-10)	48	60.00	
	Up to HSC (12)	02	02.50	
Marrital status	Unmarried	36	45.00	-
	Married	44	55.00	
Migration status	Rural to Dhaka City	43	53.75	-
	Within the Dhaka City	37	46.25	
Religious status	Muslim	78	97.50	-
	Hindus	02	2.50	
	Others	00	00	
Residence	House	44	55.00	-
	Mess	29	36.25	
	Relative's House	02	2.50	
	Factory Accommodation	02	2.50	
	Slum	03	3.75	
Mode of communication	Walk to work	62	77.50	-
	Walk and Rickshaw	10	12.50	
	Walk and Bus	02	2.50	
	Bus/Tempo	03	3.75	
	Factory Bus	06	7.50	
	Others	04	5.00	
Salary per month (in Taka)	3000 - 5000	29	36.25	Taka 6455.94 (US\$ 78.83)
	5001 - 7000	26	32.50	
	7001 - 9000	12	15.00	
	Above 9000	13	16.25	

Source: Field Survey, March, 2012

3.2 Job Experience

Experience is an extra advantageous factor for getting a job and getting more amount of remuneration in any organization. The survey found that 40 percent of the workers were unemployed or have no previous work experience in garment industries. Therefore, in most cases they are not capable of providing expected performance to the employer and hence being deprived appropriate remuneration. About 43.75 percent of female workers had past experience of 1 to 3 years and 68.75 percent have 1to3 years of present working experience in the garment industry (Table 2).

Table 2 Job Experience of Female RMG Workers

	No experience	Less than 2 years	2-3 years	4-5 years	6-7 years	Above 7 years
Past Job Experience	32 (40.00)	18 (22.50)	17 (21.25)	7 (8.75)	9 (11.25)	4 (5)
Present Job Experience	00 (00)	29 (36.25)	26 (32.50)	8 (10)	8 (10)	9 (11.25)

Source: Field Survey, March, 2012

Figures within parentheses indicate percentage of the frequency

3.3 Control Over and Participation in Decision Making

Control over their earnings and a greater role in household decision making is important measures of economic empowerment of female workers. In Bangladesh, women's role in household decision making is usually much more limited than men's. The survey data shows that over one-third (35 percent) of the women working in the garments has got the opportunity to participate in household decision making with full control over expenditure of their earnings compare to before employment situation (Table 3). More over 37 percent of women participate in a joint decision making (with their husband) role over expenditure of their earnings whereas before employment they were not able to participate at all. Still almost 5 percent worker has no role in decision making about the spending of their earnings and has to completely hand over this income to their husband. However, for the rest (21 percent) workers have to discuss with their family members like with parents or elder brothers.

Table 3 Control Over and Participation in Decision Making

Indicators	Before Employment	After Employment
Takes Decision Alone	22 (27.5)	28 (35.00)
Takes Decision your husband only	00 (00)	05 (6.25)
Your husband make consultation with you	00 (00)	30 (37.50)
Make discussion with family members	58 (72.5)	17 (21.25)

Source: Field Survey, March, 2012

Figures within parentheses indicate percentage of the frequency

3.4 Health Condition of the Garment Workers

The survey has been tried to measure the health impact of female workers in the garment industry. For this measurement, incidence of illness as well the reason for taking leave from work and medical expenses of garment workers were analyzed.

To determine the health condition of the garment workers before and after employment in the garment industry, the workers were asked whether they suffered more from ill health now than before joining the garment industry. In response to this question the majority of the workers said that they had more sound health before entering the garment industry. However, their health deteriorated after they joined the garment industry. Table 4 compares the health condition of the workers before and after they joined the garment industry. It can be clearly seen from the table that 56 percent of the workers had fairly good health before joining in the garment factory. But it came down to 16 percent after joining in the industry. Only 6 percent of the workers reported that they often experienced various illnesses even before joining the industry. But after joining the industry the figure rose to as high as 21 percent. About 84 percent of the female garment workers experienced various illness, either often or sometimes after they joined the garment industry (Table 4).

Table 4 Health Conditions of Garment Workers Before and After Employment in the RMG

Illness Experienced	Before Employment	After Employment
Often	5 (6.25)	17 (21.25)
Sometimes	30 (37.50)	50 (62.50)
Very rarely	45 (56.25)	13 (16.25)
Not reported	00 (00)	00 (00)

Source: Field Survey, March, 2012

Figures within parentheses indicate percentage of the frequency

The reasons for taking leave in a month may be another yardstick to measure the extent of adverse health impact of wage employment on the garment workers. It emerges from Table 5 that the most important reasons for taking leave was own illness that was the highest percentage (73), the second and third important reasons for leave was to family busyness and went to village (Table 5). Women workers have the additional responsibility of looking after the family members. And as most workers are migrants from rural areas; they have to go to the village to maintain bondage with their families.

Table 5 Reason for Taking Leave in Garment Industry

Reasons	No. of Workers	Percentage
Own illness	58	72.50
Family busyness	16	20.00
Went to village	11	13.75
Others reasons	5	6.25

Source: Field Survey, March 2012

3.5 Medical Facilities and Expenses of the Female Worker

The survey found that almost 90% of the industry has medical doctor but they are only for primary aids and 10 percent of the industry still has not any medical doctor available in the firm (Table 6). No firm has facilities for the intensive medication of the workers.

Table 6 Availability of Medical Doctor and Pattern of Services Provided

Pattern of Medical Services	Availability of Medical Services	
	Yes	No
Primary Medical Services	72 (90)	8 (10)
Intensive Medical Services	00	00

Source: Field Survey, March 2012

Figures within parentheses indicate percentage of the frequency

The survey found that average medical cost per month of the female worker was 497.5 taka but they are getting only 200 taka as medical allowances according to the wage structure of the RMG workers recommended by the wage boards, 2010. From the Table 7, it is apparent that almost 96 percent of the worker has to pay medical cost in a month in between 0 to 1000 taka.

Table 7 Medical Expenses of Female RMG Workers in the DMP Area

Amount of Money spend (in Taka)	No. of workers	Percentages
0 – 500	54	67.50
501 -1000	23	28.75
Above 1000	03	3.75
Total	80	100

Per month average expenditure for medication is Taka 497.5

Source: Field Survey, March 2012

3.6 Working Days and Working Hours of Female Worker in Dhaka Metropolitan Area

In Bangladesh many people claim that owner of the RMG industry exploit the workers in term of working hours and days that is why the above two questions were set to analyze the real situation. The survey found that average working hours in a day is 11.21 hours and overtime work hour were found 3.1 hours in day. From Table 8, it is evident that almost 68 percent workers have to work 26 days in a month and almost 23 percent of the worker work more than 26 days in a month. Table 8 also shows that almost 69 percent workers have to work 11 – 12 hours in a days. But according to section of the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA) of 2006, no adult worker shall ordinarily be required or allowed to work in an establishment for more than 8 hours a day. (BEF, 2009). However, the salary of the worker is very low so they always try to earn some extra amount from overtime.

Table 8 Per Month Working Days and Working Hours of Female Garment Worker in Dhaka City

Per month working days	No. of workers	Percentages	Per day working hours	No. of workers	Percentages
Less than 26	08	10	8 hours	01	1.25
26	54	67.50	9 – 10 hours	16	20.00
27	02	2.50	11 – 12 hours	55	68.75
28	14	17.50	13 – 14 hours	08	10.00
29	01	1.25	Average working hours/day: 11.21 hours		
30	01	1.25	Average over time work hours:3.1 hours		

An average working day/month: 26.1 days

Source: Field Survey, March 2012

3.7 Maternity Leave of Female Workers

Maternity leave is a basic and humanitarian right of the female garment workers. However all the garment factories in the study has maternity leave facilities but all of the industry are not giving maternity leave to their workers with pay as they claimed. Those farm which are giving with pay leave they only provide regular salaries to their workers and 20 000 taka for the delivery. Table 9 shows that 60 percent of the workers are getting 4-month maternity leave and 32.5 percent get 3 months.

Table 9 Maternity Leave of Female Worker in Dhaka Metropolitan Area

Leave Structure	No. of workers	Percentages
1 – months	02	2.50
2 – months	4	5.00
3 – months	26	32.5
4 – months	48	60.00

Source: Field Survey, March 2012

3.8 Problems Faced By the Female Workers

Though some improvements have been done, female workers are still facing some problems which make their livelihood in struggle. The following are the problems faced by the female workers:

- It was found that the female garment workers faced housing and transportation problem to live in and commuting to their working place.
- In the RMG industry some female workers complained that cost of living in Dhaka city is so high.
- The RMG workers reported that they are always worried about their job because any time they can be suspended from their job.
- The RMG workers are faced with the problems of getting salary in time.
- Most of the workers are worried about their future because they cannot save so much.
- They felt headache for sound pollution in their workplace. Physical weakness and eye trouble was reported by the workers. They got illness when they work continually onward. But most of the RMG industries are lacking proper medical facilities.
- It was painful for them to work without sitting that is only standing.
- During the survey most of the worker complained that their wage is less comparing their labor.

- The female workers claimed that supervisor behaves very roughly and badly to the workers especially to those who are a bit aged workers.
- Sometime line chief or supervisor beat the workers.

Conclusion

RMG sector has already recognized as the most important economic strength of Bangladesh which is contributing three-fourth of export earnings and where 3.6 million people are working, of which 85% are women. Due to participation in this income generating sector their life and status in the society got upgraded. But still majorities of women are disadvantaged and economically poverty stricken categories women folk. However, largely, the condition of female garment workers is very frustrating because of mainly low wage and salary, poor working environment, limited housing facilities, lack of medical facilities, low level incentives and so on. Therefore this study suggests some recommendation which will improve their livelihood. The major recommendations are as follows:

- Regularly long working hours and overtime hours create many problems in their families and health. So working hours should be minimized by increasing regular salary.
- To provide housing and transportation facilities by the respective owner
- To increase the present wage and need to ensure the minimum wage for them
- To ensure the payment of salary in the due date
- To save a portion of their salary in the account created by the owner
- To prevent sound pollution in the working place and need to ensure proper medical facilities
- To take punitive measures against guilty supervisor for their misbehave
- To determine a target based bonus system as well as other incentives such as leaves, health benefit and so on
- The government and BGMEA should be aware of the violations of the labor law against the poor female workers.

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