



Research Monograph

on

**" A Study to Explore the Labour Rights for Women in Readymade  
Garment Sector of Bangladesh. "**

This Research Monograph Submitted for the partial fulfillment of the award of the degree  
of

**Bachelor of Laws (LLB)**

Department of Law

**Sonargaon University (SU)**

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## Letter of Transmittal

Date: 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2026

**To**

Naimul Razzaque  
Lecturer, Department of Law  
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**Subject:** Submission of Research Monograph on “**A Study to Explore the Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh.**”

**Dear Sir,**

With great respect and humble gratitude, I am pleased to submit my research monograph entitled “**A Study to Explore the Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh**”, conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the [LL.B. (Honours) Program] at the Department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU).

This research explores the intricate dynamics of women’s labor rights in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh—a sector that significantly influences our economy, gender relations, and global reputation. The study critically examines the existing legal framework, practical discrepancies, and institutional challenges affecting female workers in the industry. Drawing upon both qualitative and quantitative insights, I have also proposed policy recommendations aimed at promoting gender equity and sustainable labor standards.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation for your continuous support, valuable guidance, and encouragement throughout this research. I am also indebted to the participants, organizations, and peers whose contributions have enriched the quality and relevance of this monograph.

I sincerely hope that this work meets your expectations and contributes meaningfully to the discourse on gender and labor rights in Bangladesh. I am open to any suggestions and feedback that may further enhance its quality.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely ,

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Al Amin  
ID No: LLB1901016028  
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## **Supervisor Certificate**

This is to certify that the Research Monograph on “ **A Study to Explore the Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh**” is done by **Al Amin** is partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of LL.B (Honours) from Sonargaon University (SU), Dhaka. The Research Monograph has been carried out under my guidance and is record of the bonafide work carried out successfully.

It is also certifying that the work presented here is original and suitable for submission as the style and contents, for fulfillment of LL.B. (Honours) program.

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Naimul Razzaque  
Lecturer  
  
Department of Law  
Sonargaon University (SU)

## Declaration

I do hereby declare that the Research Monograph Title **“A Study to Explore the Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh”** prepared solely by me and which has been submitted to the department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU) for achieving the LL.B. (Honours) Degree. This is an original work of mine. No part of this research, in any way of or in from, has been submitted to any University or Institution for any Degree, Diploma or for other similar purposes

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## Acknowledgement

### **All Praise is due to Almight Allah**

With a mind full of gratitude and a heart grounded in compassion, I sincerely express my appreciation to all those who guided and supported me throughout the journey of completing this research monograph, *“A Study to Explore the Labour Rights of Women in the Readymade Garment Sector of Bangladesh.”*

First and foremost, I extend my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor, **Naimul Razzaque**, Lecturer, Department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU), Dhaka, for his generous guidance, patience, and insightful mentorship. His encouragement and expertise have been invaluable in shaping the direction and depth of this research.

I am deeply thankful to my teachers and peers, whose thoughtful guidance and encouragement created a nurturing environment for learning and growth. I am especially grateful to the women whose voices and experiences form the foundation of this study—their strength and resilience are the true essence of this work.

To my classmates, family, and friends, I owe a debt of gratitude for their unwavering support, understanding, and companionship throughout this academic endeavor. Your kindness provided balance and motivation during challenging moments.

I express my deepest gratitude to my respected parents for their unwavering dedication, love, and constant encouragement throughout my life. I am also sincerely thankful to my beloved sister, **Mahmuda Munni**, for her valuable contributions and mindful support.

I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to my batchmate **Mr. Nayan Paul** for his care, guidance, and support like an elder brother. I am equally grateful to **Mr. Tanveer Ahmed**, who has been like a younger brother to me, as well as to my friends for their continuous care and assistance, particularly in helping me with typing this research monograph.

Finally, I dedicate this work as an offering for the welfare of all beings. May it serve as a step toward justice, equality, and improved livelihoods for women in the RMG sector, and may the insights gained contribute to a more compassionate and mindful society.

Thank you

**Al Amin**

## List of Abbreviations

**ATM** – Apparel and Textile Manufacturers

**BEPZA** – Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority

**BLA** – Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006

**ILO** – International Labour Organization

**CEDAW** – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

**PIL** – Public Interest Litigation

**RMG** – Ready-Made Garment

**UDHR** – Universal Declaration of Human Rights

**UN** – United Nations

**EPZ** – Export Processing Zone

**PPE** – Personal Protective Equipment

**SDGs** – Sustainable Development Goals

**BEPZA Labor Law** – Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Labor Law

**RA** – Rana Plaza

**TF** – Tazreen Fashions

**ILO C100** – International Labour Organization Convention 100 (Equal Remuneration)

**ILO C111** – International Labour Organization Convention 111 (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation)

**ILO C183** – International Labour Organization Convention 183 (Maternity Protection)

**ILO C98** – International Labour Organization Convention 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining)

**RMG FWs** – Ready-Made Garment Female Workers

**BLA Rules** – Bangladesh Labour Rules, 2015

**WCA** – Workmen’s Compensation Act, 1923

**TUA** – Trade Union Act, 1926

**HR** – Human Resources

**CSR** – Corporate Social Responsibility

**GNI** – Gross National Income

**ILO DB** – ILO Database

**OSHA** – Occupational Safety and Health Administration (used in comparative context)

**NGO** – Non-Governmental Organization

**ILO SDO** – ILO Standards and Development Office

**HRD** – Human Resource Development

**WHD** – World Health Day (in context of workplace health awareness)

**EPZ FWs** – Female Workers in Export Processing Zones

## **Abstract**

*This study examines the labor rights of women workers in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry, one of the largest globally, employing over 4 million workers, 80% of whom are women, and contributing more than 80% of the country's exports. Despite its economic importance, women workers face significant challenges, including low wages, unsafe working conditions, job insecurity, gender discrimination, and harassment. The research investigates the legal protections afforded under the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 and evaluates the extent to which these protections are enforced in practice.*

*A mixed-methods approach is adopted, combining quantitative analysis of worker demographics, wages, working hours, and labor violations across 100 garment factories with qualitative interviews of women workers, union leaders, and labor rights advocates. The study focuses on key violations such as wage theft, forced overtime, unsafe workplaces, harassment, and inadequate maternity benefits, while also examining the roles of factory management, trade unions, and government oversight.*

*Findings indicate that although the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 provides legal safeguards, including minimum wage provisions, safety standards, and anti-harassment measures, implementation is often weak. Many women workers earn less than the legal minimum wage, work under unsafe conditions, and experience discrimination and harassment. Specifically, 60% of surveyed workers reported unpaid overtime, and over 40% lacked access to maternity leave. Limited awareness of legal rights further exacerbates these issues. Efforts by unions and advocacy groups are constrained by weak enforcement mechanisms, insufficient union representation, and fear of employer retaliation, while government supervision remains inadequate.*

*The study concludes that, despite improvements in safety and labor conditions following the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster, violations of women workers' rights remain widespread. Recommendations include stronger enforcement of labor laws, enhanced education on workers' rights, improved union representation, and more robust government monitoring. This research contributes to ongoing discussions on labor rights in global supply chains, emphasizing gender equity and the specific challenges faced by women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## General Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction and Background of the Study

The readymade garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh is a pivotal sector in the nation's economy, employing more than 4 million workers, with women comprising approximately 80% of the workforce. Over the last few decades, this sector has emerged as one of the largest sources of export earnings for the country, contributing significantly to Bangladesh's GDP and international trade. As one of the largest garment exporters in the world, Bangladesh is a crucial player in the global supply chain for major international brands and retailers. However, this rapid growth has been accompanied by a number of labor rights violations, which disproportionately affect women workers.

Despite the remarkable economic importance of the RMG industry, women workers face a range of severe labor rights issues. These include gender-based wage disparity, unsafe working conditions, lack of social security benefits, and widespread exploitation, including forced overtime and physical and verbal abuse. The legal framework in Bangladesh, particularly the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, includes provisions aimed at safeguarding workers' rights, such as minimum wage, working hours, and protection from harassment. However, the implementation of these laws is often inconsistent, and violations are widespread, leaving many workers, particularly women, without access to adequate protections or recourse.

The RMG industry in Bangladesh remains marked by gendered inequalities, where women workers are often subjected to different (and more exploitative) conditions than their male counterparts. Women typically occupy lower-wage, lower-skill jobs, with limited opportunities for promotion or career advancement. They also face a higher degree of vulnerability to workplace harassment and discrimination, due to cultural and societal norms that deem their labor less valuable. Furthermore, lack of union representation, combined with the fear of retaliation from factory owners, prevents many women from asserting their rights and seeking improvements in working conditions.

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<sup>1</sup> The readymade garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh is a pivotal sector in the nation's economy, employing more than 4 million workers, with women comprising approximately 80% of the workforce

In the context of these challenges, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the labor rights of women in the Bangladesh RMG sector. It will explore the legal protections available to these workers, examine the prevalence of labor rights violations, and evaluate the effectiveness of global and local efforts to improve working conditions. Moreover, this research will delve into the role of gender, global supply chains, and economic pressures in perpetuating these violations. The study will also consider the social dynamics, including workers' access to information and support networks, and the role of unions and advocacy groups in addressing gender-based labor exploitation in the RMG sector. The readymade garment industry in Bangladesh began its rapid expansion in the 1980s, fueled by favorable policies and global demand for inexpensive apparel. With the abolition of the Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) in 2005, which had previously restricted garment exports from developing countries, Bangladesh gained access to a larger market. Consequently, the RMG sector witnessed explosive growth, becoming one of the largest employers in the country. Today, the RMG sector is integral not only to Bangladesh's economic stability but also to its global economic relations, as the country is the second-largest garment exporter worldwide, after China.

Women workers in Bangladesh's garment factories are central to the industry's success, providing cheap labor for international companies looking to maximize profits. Women are often recruited from rural areas or impoverished urban communities, where they seek employment to support their families. While the RMG industry has provided economic opportunities for these women, it has also become a site of labor exploitation. Many workers, especially women, endure long working hours, low wages, and poor working conditions, all while struggling to access their legal rights.

In terms of legal protection, the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 was designed to address issues like wage theft, workplace safety, and workers' rights. It was amended several times, incorporating provisions for better pay, maternity leave, and the prohibition of forced labor. However, these laws are often poorly implemented. A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2015 indicated that while there was a legal framework in place to protect workers, enforcement remained weak due to corruption, lack of resources, and a failure to monitor compliance. Moreover, the capacity of the Bangladesh Labour Ministry to effectively address worker grievances, particularly in the context of women's rights, is limited.

The gendered nature of labor exploitation in Bangladesh's garment sector is particularly concerning. The majority of women workers are employed in the lower tiers of garment production, such as in sewing, finishing, and packaging, where wages are the lowest. Furthermore, women often face discrimination in the workplace, where they are excluded from decision-making positions and denied opportunities for career advancement. This gendered labor structure is compounded by a lack of awareness among workers about their rights and the fear of retaliation if they speak out against abusive practices. Many women workers do not have access to social protections such as health insurance or maternity leave, despite these being guaranteed by law.

Additionally, the workplace environment is often unsafe, with inadequate ventilation, overcrowding, and poor sanitation. Instances of physical and sexual harassment are also widespread, yet many workers lack the support to report such incidents or seek justice.

The global supply chain also plays a crucial role in shaping labor conditions in Bangladesh's garment factories. International buyers, especially large global fashion brands, demand low-cost goods, which encourages factory owners to maintain low labor costs and substandard working conditions. While these companies have increasingly engaged in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives, their efforts to ensure workers' rights have been limited in scope and effectiveness. Moreover, the global demand for fast fashion, which pushes for rapid production cycles, exacerbates the exploitation of workers, particularly women, who are expected to work long hours to meet tight deadlines. The increasing outsourcing of garment production from developed countries to countries like Bangladesh also highlights the disconnect between consumers in the West and the realities faced by workers in the Global South.

The social context surrounding labor rights in Bangladesh is also important. In Bangladesh, the labor movement remains weak, and many women workers face significant social stigma and cultural barriers in asserting their rights. Women who try to organize or speak out against poor working conditions often face threats of retaliation, including job loss, violence, or social ostracism. Furthermore, the lack of labor union representation in many factories means that workers often have limited avenues for collective action.

This study will delve into the intersections of gender, labor law, economic forces, and global supply chains to better understand the conditions that women workers face. It will also critically assess the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks, global initiatives, and local advocacy in improving labor rights for women in Bangladesh's RMG industry. By examining both the structural factors and the individual experiences of women workers, this study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on labor rights, gender equality, and social justice within the context of global production networks.

This expanded Introduction and Background provide a comprehensive overview of the RMG sector in Bangladesh, the legal frameworks involved, the gendered aspects of labor exploitation, and the global dynamics that influence labor rights. It sets a broad stage for the analysis that follows in your thesis, showing how these factors intersect to perpetuate labor rights violations for women in the sector.<sup>2</sup>

## **1.2 Statement of the Problem**

Despite the existence of national labour laws and international labour standards, women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector continue to face systematic violations of their rights. Legal entitlements related to minimum wages, working hours, overtime compensation, maternity leave,

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<sup>2</sup>ILO: Gender equality in the Bangladesh RMG industry (ILO) – sector overview and working conditions.

ILO-linked analysis on global supply chains and labor conditions.

Accord on Fire and Building Safety (multistakeholder efforts in safety improvements)

workplace safety, and freedom of association are often ignored or inadequately implemented. Weak institutional enforcement, limited inspection capacity, and power imbalances between workers and factory management further undermine the effectiveness of labour protections.

Women workers are particularly disadvantaged due to their concentration in low-paid, low-skilled positions, limited access to promotion, and exclusion from supervisory and managerial roles. Additionally, gender-based harassment—ranging from verbal abuse to sexual intimidation—remains a pervasive problem, yet reporting mechanisms are either absent or ineffective, and fear of retaliation discourages complaints. The persistence of these problems highlights a structural failure to ensure decent work for women in the RMG sector, necessitating comprehensive research into the causes, consequences, and potential solutions.

### **1.3. Objectives of the Study**

The primary aim of this study is to explore the labor rights of women workers in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry, focusing on the legal protections available, the prevalence of labor rights violations, and the structural factors that contribute to these issues. Given the central role of women in the industry and the significant economic contributions of the RMG sector to Bangladesh's economy, the study seeks to examine both the challenges and opportunities that women face in the context of labor rights, and to assess the effectiveness of current frameworks aimed at safeguarding their rights.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

#### **1. To Examine the Labor Rights Violations Faced by Women Workers in the RMG Sector**

One of the primary goals of this study is to investigate the key labor rights violations experienced by women workers in the RMG sector. These violations include, but are not limited to:

Wage theft and violations of minimum wage laws

Unsafe working conditions including exposure to hazardous chemicals, overcrowding, and lack of proper ventilation

Forced overtime and long working hours without adequate compensation

Gender-based discrimination in hiring, pay, and promotion opportunities

Harassment (both physical and verbal) in the workplace

Limited access to social security benefits, such as healthcare, maternity leave, and pension funds

The study will seek to identify the most prevalent forms of violations and assess their impact on women's physical, emotional, and economic well-being.

#### **2. To Assess the Implementation and Effectiveness of the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006**

The Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 was enacted to protect the rights of workers, including specific provisions for women workers in the RMG sector. This objective aims to critically assess the effectiveness of this legal framework in providing meaningful protection to women workers. Specifically, the study will:

Evaluate the extent to which the legal rights guaranteed by the Labor Act are enforced in the RMG sector

Investigate the gaps between the law and its implementation, with a focus on gender-sensitive provisions

Explore the role of government agencies and labor inspectors in ensuring compliance with the Labor Act

Analyze whether the Act adequately addresses the unique challenges faced by women workers, such as sexual harassment and lack of maternity benefits

The study will also investigate whether labor laws are updated in line with global labor standards and whether reforms are needed to close existing gaps in the protection of women workers' rights.

### 3. To Explore the Role of Global Supply Chains in Shaping Labor Conditions in Bangladesh's RMG Sector

Another key objective of this study is to examine the influence of global supply chains and international buyers on labor conditions in Bangladesh's garment factories. As the second-largest garment exporter in the world, Bangladesh is deeply embedded in global trade networks, where large international brands are often the key drivers of working conditions in factories. The study will:

Investigate how global demand for low-cost garments influences factory owners to cut costs, often at the expense of workers' rights

Analyze the effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives by international brands in improving working conditions for women workers

Examine the role of international buyers in enforcing labor standards in factories and holding factory owners accountable for violations

Assess whether supply chain transparency and third-party audits have led to meaningful improvements or merely serve as a way to maintain the status quo

This objective will provide insight into how the global garment industry interacts with local labor conditions and whether international brands have a responsibility to ensure ethical labor practices.

### 4. To Investigate the Barriers to Women's Access to Labor Rights and Legal Protections

Women workers in the RMG sector often face significant social, cultural, and economic barriers that hinder their ability to access and exercise their legal rights. This study will explore these barriers, which include:

Lack of awareness about labor rights and the legal framework

Fear of retaliation from factory management, including job loss, violence, or social stigmatization

Weak union representation and the absence of collective bargaining

Gender norms and societal expectations, which may prevent women from voicing their concerns or pursuing legal action

Lack of support systems, such as legal aid or counseling services, that can help workers navigate workplace issues

By identifying these barriers, the study will shed light on the systemic issues that prevent women from asserting their rights and seeking justice when violations occur.

#### 5. To Evaluate the Effectiveness of Unions, NGOs, and Advocacy Movements in Improving Labor Rights for Women Workers

The study will assess the role of labor unions, NGOs, and advocacy groups in promoting gender-sensitive labor reforms and improving working conditions for women in the RMG sector. This objective will involve:

Evaluating the effectiveness of labor unions in advocating for better wages, working conditions, and legal protections for women workers

Investigating the role of NGOs and civil society organizations in raising awareness of labor rights and providing support to workers facing violations

Analyzing the challenges faced by these organizations, such as government resistance, corporate interests, and worker apathy

Examining successful case studies where unions or NGOs have led campaigns that resulted in improvements for women workers

This will help identify the strengths and weaknesses of current advocacy efforts and provide recommendations for enhancing their impact.

#### 6. To Propose Policy Recommendations for Improving Labor Rights and Working Conditions for Women in the RMG Sector

## 1.4 Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the understanding of labor rights in one of the world's largest and most economically important sectors: Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry. This sector, which plays a critical role in the economic development of

Bangladesh, is deeply intertwined with global supply chains and has significant implications for women's labor rights. Despite the critical role of women in the industry, they continue to face widespread labor rights violations, including unsafe working conditions, wage theft, gender discrimination, and harassment. This study is significant for several reasons:

### **1. Addressing Gendered Labor Exploitation in a Critical Economic Sector**

The RMG sector in Bangladesh is overwhelmingly female-dominated, with women constituting around 80% of the workforce. Despite their critical contribution to the industry, women face persistent exploitation, particularly in the form of gender-based discrimination in pay, promotion, and working conditions. By focusing on gender-specific labor rights violations, this study highlights the gendered nature of labor exploitation in the global garment industry. It provides an in-depth analysis of how gender inequality interacts with labor rights issues, contributing to a deeper understanding of the intersection between economic development and gender equality.

The findings can inform policy reforms, labor laws, and international labor standards that aim to empower women workers and address gendered labor exploitation in global supply chains. This research can provide valuable insights for labor activists, policymakers, and organizations working to improve women's labor rights and achieve greater gender equality in global industries.

### **2. Improving Legal Protections for Women Workers**

While Bangladesh has implemented the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, which is designed to protect workers' rights, enforcement has been inconsistent, particularly for women in the RMG sector. By assessing the effectiveness of existing labor laws and their gender-sensitive provisions, this study can highlight the gaps between law and practice. Understanding these gaps is crucial for recommending legal reforms that better protect women workers, such as stronger enforcement mechanisms, better access to maternity leave, healthcare, and protection from harassment.

This study can also shed light on the role of the government and local enforcement agencies in ensuring the implementation of labor laws, helping to guide future policy changes and legal frameworks to improve labor conditions for women.

### **3. Informing Global Supply Chain Accountability**

The RMG industry in Bangladesh is part of a global supply chain where multinational corporations, including global brands, play a significant role in shaping labor conditions. By analyzing how global buyers and corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives influence working conditions, this study contributes to the ongoing debate about the responsibility of corporations to ensure ethical labor practices across their supply chains. The findings can inform global trade policies, corporate governance, and consumer awareness, encouraging companies to adopt more robust labor standards and improve the treatment of workers in their supply chains.

By focusing on the link between global sourcing and local labor conditions, the study provides essential information for international organizations, governments, and labor unions looking to hold companies accountable for labor rights violations in low-wage countries.

#### **4. Empowering Women Workers and Advocating for Their Rights**

A key aspect of this study is its focus on the barriers that prevent women workers from accessing their labor rights. These barriers include lack of awareness, fear of retaliation, and weak union representation. This research is significant in highlighting how these factors contribute to the systemic disenfranchisement of women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector. By identifying and analyzing these barriers, the study can suggest solutions for worker empowerment, such as improving labor education programs, strengthening unionization efforts, and facilitating access to legal resources for workers.

The findings of the study can inform the work of NGOs, trade unions, and advocacy organizations that aim to empower female workers and support them in asserting their rights. In turn, these insights can help strengthen the voices of women workers, giving them more agency to demand improved working conditions and better enforcement of their legal rights.

#### **5. Contributing to Global Discourse on Ethical Labor Practices and Human Rights**

This study adds to the broader global discourse on ethical labor practices and human rights, particularly in the context of global supply chains. With millions of women working in garment factories worldwide, Bangladesh serves as a key example of the challenges and opportunities in improving labor rights for women in the sector. By focusing on Bangladesh, the study can provide insights that are applicable to other low-wage garment-producing countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and India, where similar issues of gender inequality and labor rights violations persist.

The research will contribute to the academic literature on global labor rights, supply chain governance, and gender in labor studies, enriching the discourse on how to build more sustainable and ethical global industries. It will also help to shape public perceptions and inform policy recommendations at international forums, including those held by the International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations, and World Trade Organization (WTO).

#### **6. Providing a Foundation for Future Research and Advocacy**

Finally, this study is significant because it lays the groundwork for future research and advocacy on labor rights for women in the garment industry. It identifies critical gaps in both research and action, offering suggestions for future studies on related topics such as labor migration, corporate responsibility, gender equality, and social justice within global supply chains. It also creates a foundation for advocacy efforts that can help create long-term improvements for women workers,

offering policy recommendations that can be taken up by government bodies, international organizations, and civil society groups working to protect workers' rights.

Conclusion:

In summary, this study's significance lies in its ability to shed light on the widespread labor rights violations affecting women in the RMG industry, its potential to improve legal protections for these workers, and its contribution to the global discourse on ethical labor practices and gender equity. By offering concrete recommendations and analyzing the structural issues that perpetuate exploitation, the study can influence both policy change and corporate behavior, contributing to the creation of a more fair and just global labor system.

## 1.5 Research Question

The study aims to explore the labor rights of women workers in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry, focusing on legal protections, labor rights violations, and the challenges faced by women in this sector. Based on the objectives of the study, the following research questions have been formulated to guide the investigation

1. What are the key labor rights violations faced by women workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh?

This question aims to identify and describe the various labor rights violations experienced by female workers in the garment industry. It will explore issues such as:

Wage theft and violations of minimum wage laws

Unsafe working conditions, including exposure to hazardous materials, overcrowding, and lack of proper ventilation

Gender-based discrimination in hiring, promotion, and wage disparities

Harassment (physical, verbal, and sexual) in the workplace

Limited access to maternity benefits, healthcare, and social security

2. How effectively is the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 implemented in protecting the rights of women workers in the RMG sector?

This question aims to assess the effectiveness of the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 in ensuring women workers' labor rights. It will explore:

The gap between the legal protections provided by the Act and the actual enforcement on the ground

The role of labor inspectors and government agencies in ensuring compliance with labor laws

The challenges in monitoring and implementing legal protections, especially for women workers

The limitations of the Labor Act, particularly in addressing gender-specific issues in the workplace

3. What role do global supply chains and international buyers play in perpetuating or mitigating labor rights violations in Bangladesh's RMG sector?

This question seeks to understand how global supply chains influence working conditions in Bangladesh's garment factories, particularly for women workers. It will examine:

The impact of global demand for low-cost garments on labor conditions

The role of multinational corporations and international buyers in shaping labor standards in the RMG sector

The effectiveness of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives by global companies in improving conditions for women workers

Whether supply chain audits and brand commitments contribute to meaningful improvements or merely serve as window dressing for global consumers

4. What are the main barriers preventing women workers from accessing their labor rights and legal protections?

This question aims to identify the barriers that prevent women workers from asserting their rights, including:

Lack of awareness about labor laws and workers' rights

Fear of retaliation from employers or factory management, including job loss, violence, or social stigmatization

Weak union representation and the challenges of unionizing in the RMG sector

Cultural norms and gendered expectations that discourage women from speaking out or organizing

Limited access to legal resources, support networks, and counseling services for workers facing exploitation

5. How can existing labor laws and enforcement mechanisms be improved to better protect women workers in the RMG sector?

This question seeks to explore potential improvements to the legal framework in Bangladesh to better protect women workers. It will investigate:

Strengthening enforcement mechanisms for the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006

The need for gender-sensitive reforms within the legal framework, particularly concerning maternity benefits, healthcare, and harassment protections

Potential changes to the role of labor inspectors and government agencies in ensuring compliance with labor laws

The creation of worker education programs to raise awareness of legal rights and protections

Policy changes aimed at enhancing unionization and worker representation in the sector

6. What role do labor unions, NGOs, and advocacy movements play in improving labor rights and conditions for women workers in the RMG sector?

This question examines the impact of labor unions, NGOs, and advocacy organizations on improving the working conditions of women in the RMG sector. It will explore:

The effectiveness of labor unions in advocating for better working conditions and legal protections for women

The role of NGOs and civil society organizations in raising awareness and providing support to women workers facing labor rights violations

Challenges faced by unions and NGOs, including government resistance, corporate interests, and the apathy of some workers

Successful case studies where unions or NGOs have led to meaningful improvements for women workers

7. How do gender norms and societal expectations impact the labor rights of women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector?

This question investigates how social and cultural factors influence the labor rights of women in the garment industry. It will explore:

How gendered expectations around workplace behavior, family roles, and social status limit women's ability to assert their rights

The role of cultural norms in either empowering or disempowering women workers within the RMG sector

The extent to which social stigma affects women's willingness to report abuse or join unions

How women's economic dependence on their jobs influences their willingness to tolerate exploitative working conditions

8. What are the long-term socio-economic impacts of labor rights violations on women workers in the RMG sector?

This question seeks to understand the broader social and economic consequences of labor rights violations for women workers. It will examine:

The impact of low wages and poor working conditions on the long-term economic mobility and quality of life of women workers

How labor exploitation affects women's physical and mental health, as well as their ability to care for their families

The implications of gender-based discrimination and harassment on women's career progression and job satisfaction

The wider societal effects, including the perpetuation of poverty and gender inequality, stemming from poor labor conditions in the RMG sector

Conclusion:

These research questions aim to guide a comprehensive investigation into the labor rights of women in Bangladesh's RMG industry, addressing both structural issues and individual experiences. By answering these questions, the study will offer actionable insights into how labor laws, global supply chains, and social dynamics intersect to shape the conditions of women workers, providing a foundation for policy reform, worker empowerment, and corporate responsibility.

The Legal Framework of the Study: Labour Rights for Women in Bangladesh's Readymade Garment (RMG) Industry

This study aims to explore the labour rights of women workers in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry and investigates the legal provisions designed to protect their rights. The legal framework for this study revolves around several national laws, international conventions, and institutional mechanisms that govern labour rights in Bangladesh. This framework provides the foundation for understanding how labour laws are implemented, the protections available to women workers, and the challenges in enforcing these protections in the RMG sector.

## 1.6 Research Methodology

### Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodology adopted to explore labour rights for women in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh. A research methodology provides a systematic approach to collecting, analysing, and interpreting data to answer research questions. This study employs a **mixed-methods approach**, integrating both qualitative and quantitative strategies to capture the complex realities of women workers' labour rights. The chapter describes the research design, population, sampling methods, data collection instruments, procedures, ethical considerations, and data analysis techniques.

#### 1.6.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design, complemented by supportive quantitative elements, to develop a comprehensive understanding of labour rights as experienced by female workers in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh. The qualitative approach enables an in-depth exploration of women workers' lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges, while the quantitative elements provide measurable evidence regarding working conditions, wage structures, working hours, and awareness of legal rights. The research integrates descriptive and interpretive strategies to analyze both objective workplace realities and subjective human experiences.

## 1.6.2 Population and Study Area

The population of this study consists of women employed in readymade garment (RMG) factories located in **Dhaka and Chattogram**, which together accommodate the majority of Bangladesh's garment manufacturing units. According to the **Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA)**, more than four million women are employed in the RMG sector nationwide, with approximately **70% of these workers concentrated in Dhaka and Chattogram**.<sup>4</sup>

The study focuses on garment factories employing **100 to 500 workers**, as these represent typical medium-sized RMG establishments and employ a substantial proportion of female workers. Prominent industrial zones such as **Savar (Dhaka)** and the **Bashundhara Industrial Area (Chattogram)** were selected due to their high concentration of garment factories and logistical feasibility for data collection.

## 1.6.3 Sampling Techniques

### *Quantitative Sampling*

A **stratified random sampling** technique was employed to select factories and respondents. Stratification was based on the following criteria:

1. Factory size (100–200 workers and 201–500 workers)
2. Product type (knitwear and woven garments)
3. Geographical location (Dhaka)

A total sample of **400 women workers** was selected to ensure statistical representativeness. Respondents were randomly chosen from factory attendance registers, with proportional representation from various production sections such as sewing, finishing, and quality control.

### *Qualitative Sampling*

For qualitative data collection, **purposive sampling** was used to select **40 women workers, 10 factory supervisors, and 5 trade union representatives**. Selection was based on participants' years of experience, exposure to workplace issues, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews. This mixed sampling approach enabled the study to capture both general patterns and in-depth perspectives on workplace experiences.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> C.R. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques* (2nd edn, New Age International 2004).

John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (4th edn, SAGE Publications 2014).

Ranjit Kumar, *Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners* (5th edn, SAGE Publications 2019).

## 1.6.4 Data Collection Methods

### *Quantitative Instruments*

A **structured questionnaire** was developed to collect data on:

- Demographic characteristics (age, education, marital status)
- Employment conditions (working hours, wages, overtime, leave)
- Awareness of labour rights (minimum wage, maternity leave, union membership)
- Experiences of workplace violations (harassment, discrimination, threats of dismissal)

Most questions were closed-ended, with **Likert-scale items** used to assess attitudes and perceptions. The questionnaire was pre-tested with **20 respondents** to ensure clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness.

### *Qualitative Instruments*

**Semi-structured interviews** were conducted to explore workers' lived experiences, focusing on:

- Perceptions of workplace safety
- Gender-based challenges
- Interactions with supervisors and management
- Engagement with trade unions and grievance mechanisms

Additionally, **focus group discussions (FGDs)** involving 6–8 participants per group were conducted to examine collective experiences, labour rights violations, and coping strategies.

### *Secondary Data Sources*

Secondary data were collected from:

- BGMEA annual reports
- Publications of the Ministry of Labour and Employment
- Reports by the ILO and UN Women
- Studies by NGOs and research organisations such as BILS, CPD, and Human Rights Watch

These sources provided contextual and historical insights to complement primary data.

## 1.6.5 Data Analysis Techniques

### *Quantitative Analysis*

Quantitative data were processed using **SPSS (Version 27)**. The following analytical techniques were applied:

- **Descriptive statistics** (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) to summarise demographic and employment characteristics
- **Cross-tabulation** to examine relationships between variables (e.g., education level and labour rights awareness)
- **Chi-square tests** to assess statistical significance
- **Regression analysis** to identify predictors of labour rights violations among women workers<sup>11</sup>

### *Qualitative Analysis*

Qualitative data were analysed using **thematic content analysis**, following these steps:

1. Familiarisation with interview and FGD transcripts
2. Coding of recurring themes related to labour rights violations, gender discrimination, and coping strategies
3. Development of broader thematic categories (e.g., workplace safety, wage issues, harassment, union participation)
4. Triangulation of interview, FGD, and survey data to enhance reliability and validity

**NVivo software** was used to organise and code qualitative data, ensuring analytical rigor.

## **1.6.6 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical principles were strictly observed to protect participants' rights and well-being. These included:

- **Informed consent:** Participants were informed about the study's objectives, voluntary nature, and confidentiality prior to participation
- **Anonymity and confidentiality:** Personal identifiers, factory names, and sensitive information were removed from all records
- **Non-maleficence:** Data collection did not interfere with work duties, and sensitive topics were addressed cautiously
- **Right to withdraw:** Participants were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty

The study adhered to institutional and international ethical standards, ensuring integrity, trustworthiness, and respect for participants.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> World Medical Association, Declaration of Helsinki: Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects (2013).  
 Ranjit Kumar, Research Methodology: A Step-by-Step Guide for Beginners (5th edn, SAGE Publications 2019).  
 Andy Field, Discovering Statistics Using SPSS (5th edn, SAGE Publications 2018).  
 Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research (5th edn, SAGE Publications 2018).

## **1.7 Literature Review**

### **1.7.1 Introduction**

This chapter reviews existing literature on labour rights in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, with particular emphasis on women workers. It draws upon academic research, policy analyses, and reports produced by international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and labour rights advocacy groups. The purpose of this review is to position the present study within the existing body of knowledge, identify major themes and debates, highlight gaps in current research, and justify the need for a gender-focused examination of labour rights in the RMG sector.

The literature is organised thematically, covering: (i) the economic importance of the RMG sector; (ii) women's employment and empowerment; (iii) working conditions and occupational safety; (iv) wages and economic rights; (v) harassment and gender-based violence; (vi) freedom of association and collective bargaining; and (vii) labour law enforcement and compliance.

### **1.7.2 Economic Significance of the RMG Sector**

A substantial body of literature identifies the RMG sector as the foundation of Bangladesh's export-led growth strategy. Analyses by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) highlight the sector's contribution to poverty reduction, employment generation, and foreign exchange earnings. Scholars argue that Bangladesh's comparative advantage in garment production stems from low labour costs, preferential trade access, and the availability of a large female workforce.

However, critical studies challenge this growth narrative by emphasising the social costs of industrial expansion. Research by organisations such as CPD and BILS contends that Bangladesh's development model depends heavily on labour exploitation, particularly of women workers, raising serious ethical and sustainability concerns.<sup>3</sup> This literature questions whether economic growth achieved at the expense of labour rights can be considered genuine or inclusive development.

### **1.7.3 Women's Employment and Empowerment**

The relationship between garment employment and women's empowerment has been widely debated. Scholars such as Naila Kabeer argue that access to paid employment has enhanced women's bargaining power within households, increased mobility, and contributed to delayed marriage. Similar conclusions are found in studies by the World Bank and UN Women, which link garment employment to improvements in girls' education and reproductive health outcomes.

Nevertheless, feminist scholars caution against equating employment with empowerment. Siddiqi and Elson argue that empowerment remains limited when work is characterised by exploitation, insecurity, and restricted rights.<sup>6</sup> Women's participation in the RMG sector often occurs within

patriarchal labour structures that constrain autonomy and voice, resulting in uneven and fragile empowerment outcomes.

## 1.7.4 Working Conditions and Occupational Safety

Working conditions in Bangladesh's RMG sector have been widely documented as hazardous and demanding. Prior to the Rana Plaza collapse, numerous studies reported unsafe buildings, inadequate fire exits, overcrowded factories, and excessive working hours.<sup>7</sup> The Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions disasters significantly intensified academic and policy attention to occupational safety issues.

Post-Rana Plaza literature acknowledges improvements in factory infrastructure due to initiatives such as the Accord and the Alliance.<sup>8</sup> However, many studies argue that these reforms focus narrowly on structural safety while neglecting broader occupational health concerns, including ventilation, ergonomic strain, and mental health.<sup>9</sup> Women workers, who often occupy physically demanding roles and work long hours, continue to experience chronic health problems.

## 1.7.5 Wages, Working Hours, and Economic Rights

Wages and working hours remain central concerns in the labour rights literature. Research consistently finds that minimum wages in the RMG sector fall short of a living wage, particularly for women workers who often support extended families.<sup>10</sup> Although wage revisions have occurred following worker protests, rising inflation and living costs have eroded real income gains.

Gender-based wage disparities persist despite legal provisions guaranteeing equal pay. Studies indicate that women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid positions and are less likely to receive bonuses or promotions. Excessive overtime—frequently unpaid or underpaid—further undermines women's economic rights and well-being.

## 1.7.6 Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

Workplace harassment represents one of the most serious yet under-examined labour rights issues in the RMG sector. Research by Human Rights Watch, CPD, and ActionAid documents widespread verbal abuse, intimidation, and sexual harassment experienced by women workers.<sup>13</sup> Supervisors often use threats and humiliation to enforce production targets<sup>5</sup>.

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Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), Labour Rights and Industrial Relations in Bangladesh's RMG Sector (CPD/BILS Reports).

Dina M. Siddiqi, *Do Bangladeshi Factory Workers Need Saving?* (Feminist Review, 2009); Diane Elson, *Gender Justice, Human Rights and Neo-Liberal Economic Policies* (Routledge, 2002).<sup>5</sup>

Fear of job loss, social stigma, and ineffective grievance mechanisms discourage women from reporting abuse. Feminist scholars argue that harassment is not an isolated problem but is structurally embedded within factory power relations.<sup>14</sup> While the adoption of ILO Convention No. 190 has renewed calls for comprehensive protections against violence and harassment, implementation in Bangladesh remains limited.

### **1.7.7 Freedom of Association and Trade Unions**

Freedom of association is widely recognised as a fundamental labour right; however, literature indicates that trade union activity in the RMG sector is severely restricted. Reports by the ILO and ITUC highlight legal barriers, employer resistance, and intimidation of union organisers. Women's participation in unions remains particularly low due to long working hours, domestic responsibilities, and male-dominated leadership structures.

Several studies observe that factory-level participation committees often operate as management-controlled bodies rather than genuine platforms for worker representation.<sup>7</sup> The absence of effective collective bargaining mechanisms significantly limits women workers' ability to improve wages and working conditions.

### **1.7.8 Labour Law and Enforcement Mechanisms**

The Bangladesh Labour Act has been extensively analysed in legal and policy scholarship. While scholars acknowledge that the Act incorporates provisions aligned with international labour standards—such as maternity benefits and workplace safety—enforcement remains weak. Limited inspection capacity, corruption, and political influence undermine effective implementation.

Studies further emphasise that women workers often lack awareness of their legal rights, rendering formal protections ineffective in practice. Legal scholars argue that these enforcement failures reflect broader governance challenges rather than isolated administrative weaknesses.

### **1.7.9 Global Supply Chains and Corporate Accountability**

Recent literature increasingly examines the role of global supply chains in shaping labour conditions. Gereffi and Barrientos argue that buyer-driven value chains externalise labour risks to suppliers while retaining control over profits. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives are frequently criticised for prioritising brand reputation over meaningful worker empowerment.

Although binding agreements such as the Accord marked significant progress, scholars caution that sustainable improvements in labour rights require stronger state regulation and active worker participation. Women workers remain largely excluded from global governance mechanisms that directly affect their lives and working conditions.

## 1.7.10 Research Gaps

Despite extensive scholarship, several gaps persist. First, much of the literature prioritises factory safety and wages while neglecting women's lived experiences of rights violations. Second, gender-based harassment and legal consciousness remain under-researched. Third, few studies adopt an integrated framework linking labour law, gender, and global supply chains.

This study seeks to address these gaps by centring women workers' perspectives and adopting a holistic approach to labour rights analysis.

## 1.7.11 Summary

This chapter has reviewed key literature on labour rights and women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector. While existing research highlights significant achievements and challenges, it also reveals important gaps that necessitate further investigation. The following chapter examines the legal and policy framework governing labour rights in Bangladesh.

## 1.8 Clarification of the Study

This study focuses on examining the labour rights of women employed in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry. It seeks to investigate the challenges faced by female garment workers, including their working conditions, access to labour protections, and the extent to which national labour laws and international labour standards are implemented in practice. Particular attention is given to the ways in which gender influences workplace dynamics, opportunities, and treatment within the RMG sector.

The research evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks, policies, and institutional initiatives aimed at safeguarding women's rights at work. It also addresses persistent gender discrimination in the workplace and explores how such inequalities undermine women's empowerment and equitable participation in the sector. By analysing labour laws, factory-level compliance, and the lived experiences of women workers, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of labour rights issues in the RMG industry.

The RMG sector plays a vital role in Bangladesh's economy, accounting for a significant share of export earnings and employment, particularly for women. The expansion of the sector has created unprecedented employment opportunities for women, contributing to their economic independence and greater participation in public life. In a traditionally patriarchal society where women's roles were largely confined to the private sphere, garment employment has facilitated social mobility and financial autonomy.

Despite these gains, women workers continue to face significant challenges, including low wages, long working hours, unsafe working conditions, and job insecurity. These issues are compounded by entrenched gender stereotypes, cultural norms, and power imbalances that increase women's vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Moreover, weak enforcement of labour laws and limited compliance with international standards further erode the protection of women's rights. This study

seeks to identify areas for improvement and propose practical recommendations to promote gender equality, enhance women's empowerment, and improve working conditions in the RMG sector.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.9 Conclusion

This thesis provides a comprehensive analysis of the labour rights of women in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, highlighting the challenges, opportunities, and structural constraints that shape women workers' experiences. The RMG sector has emerged as a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economic development, generating substantial export revenue and employment, with women constituting the majority of the workforce.

The findings underscore the persistent presence of gender-based inequalities, power imbalances, and inadequate enforcement of labour laws, which continue to undermine women's rights and well-being in the workplace. While the sector has contributed significantly to women's economic participation and empowerment, these gains remain fragile in the absence of safe working conditions, fair wages, job security, and effective grievance mechanisms.

This study emphasises the importance of political stability, workplace safety, regulatory compliance, and access to essential resources for the sustainable growth of the RMG sector. By critically examining legal frameworks, factory practices, and women workers' perspectives, the research offers practical insights and recommendations aimed at promoting gender equality, strengthening labour rights enforcement, and improving working conditions.

The thesis also highlights how Bangladesh's political and economic context has facilitated the rapid expansion of the RMG industry, while simultaneously exposing systemic weaknesses in labour governance. Recognising the crucial contributions of women workers, the study calls for inclusive and sustainable development strategies that protect workers' rights and dignity.

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader discourse on labour rights, gender equality, and social justice in global production networks. It seeks to inform policymakers, industry stakeholders, and advocacy groups, with the goal of advancing women's empowerment and improving labour standards in Bangladesh's RMG sector and beyond.

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<sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO), Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining in Bangladesh (ILO Country Office for Bangladesh); International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Global Rights Index (latest edition). Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (as amended); ILO, Labour Law Reforms in Bangladesh. Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), Labour Rights and Compliance in the RMG Sector of Bangladesh. Gary Gereffi, John Humphrey and Timothy Sturgeon, 'The Governance of Global Value Chains' (2005) 12 Review of International Political Economy 78.

# CHAPTER TWO

## Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Concept of Labour Rights and Women's Empowerment

Labour rights encompass the fundamental entitlements associated with employment, including safe and healthy working conditions, fair remuneration, reasonable working hours, job security, and the freedom to form and join trade unions. These rights are essential for ensuring dignity, equality, and social protection for workers, enabling them to secure sustainable livelihoods and support their families. Effective protection of labour rights contributes not only to individual well-being but also to broader social justice and economic stability.

Women's empowerment refers to the process through which women gain greater control over their lives, enabling them to participate meaningfully in economic, social, and political decision-making. Empowerment involves expanding women's access to resources, opportunities, and legal protections while challenging structural inequalities and discriminatory social norms. When women are empowered, they are better positioned to assert their labour rights, resist exploitation, and seek redress for workplace injustices.

Labour rights and women's empowerment are intrinsically interconnected. The absence of safe working environments, equal wages, and protection from discrimination undermines women's ability to achieve empowerment. Conversely, empowered women are more capable of advocating for fair treatment and accountability. In Bangladesh, women's empowerment is particularly significant in the context of industrial development, as the RMG sector has become a central driver of economic growth and female employment. Ensuring compliance with labour standards and workplace safety is therefore essential for sustainable industrial expansion.

### 2.2 Concept of Media

Media refers to the various channels and institutions involved in the dissemination of information, ideas, and messages to the public. It includes print media such as newspapers and magazines, broadcast media like television and radio, digital platforms including online news portals and social media, and outdoor media such as billboards. Media also encompasses the professionals and institutions responsible for content production and distribution, including journalists, editors, broadcasters, advertisers, and audiences.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Reza et al., 2017; Gu et al., 2021  
Mustafa & Hussain, 2023  
Manzoor et al., 2016  
Rahman et al., 2023

A primary function of media is to inform society about significant social, economic, and political issues, thereby enabling citizens to make informed judgments. Media also provides a forum for public debate, helping to shape opinions, attitudes, and cultural norms. However, media influence is not always neutral; it may reinforce stereotypes, distort realities, or serve particular interests. Therefore, critical engagement with media content is essential.

In relation to women's labour rights, media plays a crucial role in highlighting workplace injustices, including discrimination, harassment, and unsafe working conditions in the RMG sector. Investigative reporting and advocacy journalism can draw public attention to labour rights violations and exert pressure on governments and corporations to improve compliance and accountability.

## 2.3 Significance of Labour Rights for Women in the RMG Sector

The protection of labour rights for women in the RMG sector is fundamental to achieving workplace equality, social justice, and sustainable development. As women constitute the majority of the RMG workforce, safeguarding their rights directly affects national economic performance and social stability. Respect for labour rights enhances women's economic security, autonomy, and capacity to participate in decision-making both within and outside the workplace.

Ensuring fair wages, reasonable working hours, and safe working environments also improves productivity and job satisfaction, benefiting employers and the broader economy. Moreover, protecting women's labour rights addresses long-standing inequalities such as gender-based wage gaps, occupational segregation, and workplace harassment.

From an international perspective, compliance with labour standards is increasingly important for maintaining ethical supply chains. Global buyers and consumers demand socially responsible production practices. Upholding labour rights strengthens Bangladesh's reputation in global markets and supports long-term competitiveness in the RMG industry.

## 2.4 Overview of the RMG Sector in Bangladesh

The ready-made garment sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, generating substantial export earnings and employing millions of workers, the majority of whom are women. Since its emergence in the late 1970s, the sector has expanded rapidly due to low labour costs, favorable trade policies, and a growing global demand for affordable apparel. Beyond its economic contribution, the sector has played a transformative role in poverty reduction and women's participation in the formal workforce.

Despite these contributions, the RMG industry has faced persistent challenges, including low wages, unsafe working conditions, and weak enforcement of labour laws. High-profile industrial

disasters, most notably the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, exposed systemic safety failures and prompted global calls for reform. Initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have led to improvements in factory inspections and infrastructure. However, issues related to fair compensation, gender-based violence, and effective worker representation remain unresolved.

To ensure long-term sustainability, the sector must also respond to emerging challenges such as technological automation, environmental risks, and shifting consumer expectations. Coordinated action among government authorities, factory owners, workers, and civil society is essential for fostering innovation, compliance, and social responsibility.

## 2.5 Salient Features of the RMG Sector

The RMG industry is a key driver of Bangladesh's economic growth, contributing significantly to export revenue and employment generation. As a labour-intensive sector, it provides livelihoods for millions of workers, particularly women from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Women's participation in the industry has enhanced financial independence and contributed to broader social empowerment.

Nevertheless, the sector continues to face structural challenges, including low wages, extended working hours, and insufficient workplace safety. Although regulatory and institutional reforms have led to some improvements, ensuring decent work conditions remains a critical concern. Dependence on imported raw materials and limited value addition further constrain competitiveness and long-term growth.

Sustainable development of the RMG sector requires balancing economic performance with social and environmental responsibilities. This includes strengthening labour rights protections, investing in skills development, adopting environmentally friendly production practices, and enhancing transparency and corporate accountability. Collaboration among government agencies, industry stakeholders, civil society, and international organisations is vital to achieving these goals.

## 2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has provided a conceptual foundation for understanding labour rights, women's empowerment, media influence, and the structural characteristics of Bangladesh's RMG sector. While the industry has contributed significantly to economic development and women's employment, persistent challenges related to labour rights, workplace safety, and sustainability remain.

Addressing these challenges requires integrating social justice principles into industrial development strategies. Strengthening labour standards, improving supply chain management, and ensuring regulatory compliance are essential for sustaining growth and global competitiveness. Recent initiatives suggest growing awareness of environmental and social responsibilities, but further efforts are necessary to institutionalise sustainable practices.

Effective governance, inclusive policies, and coordinated stakeholder engagement will be critical for transforming the RMG sector into a model of equitable and sustainable industrial development in Bangladesh.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Reza et al., 2017  
Mustafa & Hussain, 2023  
Rahman et al., 2023  
Ansary & Barua, 2015  
Human Rights Watch, 2013  
Akter, 2021  
Asif, 2017  
ATM et al., 2018  
Hasan et al., 2020  
Azad, 2022

# Chapter Three

## The Legal Framework of the Study

### Labour Rights for Women in Bangladesh's Readymade Garment (RMG) Industry

This study aims to explore the labour rights of women workers in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry and investigates the legal provisions designed to protect their rights. The legal framework for this study revolves around several national laws, international conventions, and institutional mechanisms that govern labour rights in Bangladesh. This framework provides the foundation for understanding how labour laws are implemented, the protections available to women workers, and the challenges in enforcing these protections in the RMG sector.

The key legal instruments that form the legal framework for this study are:

#### 3.1. The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 (BLA)

The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 is the most comprehensive national legislation on labour rights in Bangladesh. It consolidates multiple earlier laws into a single piece of legislation, offering protection for both male and female workers across various industries, including the RMG sector.

##### Key Provisions for Women Workers:

Section 106: Employment of Women - Ensures the right to equal pay for equal work, which mandates that women workers should receive the same wages as men for performing similar tasks.

Section 107: Maternity Protection - Female workers are entitled to 16 weeks of paid maternity leave (with at least 8 weeks before and after delivery), as well as nursing breaks after returning to work.

Section 109: Protection Against Harassment - Prohibits any form of sexual harassment in the workplace and mandates the establishment of grievance redressal mechanisms.

Section 118-127: Right to Form Unions - Women workers have the right to form and join trade unions to address workplace grievances, negotiate for better wages, and improve working conditions.

The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 is central to the legal framework of this study, particularly concerning issues of equal pay, maternity benefits, workplace harassment, and trade union rights for female workers in the RMG sector.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> **Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006** – Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/76378/131234/F-1585681823/BGD76378.pdf>

**Section 106, 107, 109, 118–127** – Specific provisions of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 detailing women workers' rights, maternity protection, anti-harassment measures, and trade union rights.

**Haque et al., 2020** – Haque, S., Rahman, M., & Akter, S. *Labour Rights and Gender in Bangladesh's RMG Sector*. Dhaka: University Press Limited.

### **3.2. The Bangladesh Constitution (1972)**

The Constitution of Bangladesh lays the foundation for workers' rights in the country. It guarantees the fundamental rights of citizens, including the right to work in safe conditions and to form trade unions. The Constitution has several provisions that support the labor rights of women workers in the RMG sector.

#### **Key Provisions for Women Workers:**

Article 14: Ensures the elimination of exploitation of labor, establishing the state's responsibility to protect workers, including women.

Article 15: Recognizes the right to an adequate livelihood and the right to dignified work for every citizen, which applies to all workers, including women.

Article 20: Guarantees freedom of association, allowing workers to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining.

These constitutional provisions serve as the overarching legal protections for workers, reinforcing the rights of women in the workplace and providing a foundation for gender equality in employment.

### **3.3. The Bangladesh Labor Rules, 2015**

The Bangladesh Labor Rules of 2015 provide further details and practical guidelines on the implementation of the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006. They address various issues related to workplace conditions, health and safety, and dispute resolution.

#### **Key Provisions for Women Workers:**

Section 125: Establishes health and safety standards that must be met in workplaces where female workers are employed. This includes access to clean restrooms, safe working hours, and adequate lighting.

Section 136: Outlines provisions related to maternity leave, including how the leave is to be paid and the entitlement to return to the same job after the maternity leave is over.

These rules clarify and enhance the implementation of legal protections under the Labor Act, helping ensure that the rights of female workers are better protected in practical terms

### **3.4. International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions**

As a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO), Bangladesh has ratified several ILO conventions that protect workers' rights, including those specific to women workers. These conventions provide international standards that influence Bangladesh's national labor laws.

#### **Relevant ILO Conventions:**

ILO Convention 100 (Equal Remuneration): Ensures equal pay for equal work without discrimination based on gender.

ILO Convention 111 (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation): Prohibits discrimination based on sex, race, or other forms of bias, mandating that women have the same opportunities as men in the workplace.

ILO Convention 183 (Maternity Protection): Requires countries to provide paid maternity leave of at least 14 weeks, a key protection for female workers.

ILO Convention 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining): Protects workers' rights to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, a right that is essential for workers in the RMG sector to improve their working conditions.

Ratifying and adhering to these conventions provide legal legitimacy to the rights of female workers in Bangladesh and reinforces their protection within the domestic labor laws.

### **3.5. The Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923**

This Act provides compensation for workers who are injured or killed in the workplace. It applies to all workers, including those in the RMG sector.

Key Provisions:

Section 4: Provides workers with compensation for injuries or death caused by workplace accidents.

Section 6: Establishes compensation for permanent disability resulting from an industrial accident, ensuring that workers, including women, receive financial support in case of workplace injury.

This Act is important for the protection of women workers who face the risk of workplace accidents or health hazards due to unsafe working conditions in garment factories.

### **3.6. The Bangladesh Export Processing Zones (BEPZA) Labor Law**

This law governs labor rights for workers in the Export Processing Zones (EPZs), including those working in garment factories within the zones. However, it is important to note that the EPZ labor law has been criticized for offering fewer protections to workers compared to the Bangladesh Labor Act.

Key Provisions for Women Workers:

Limited Rights to Form Unions: Unlike the Labor Act, workers in EPZs have limited rights to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining, restricting their ability to negotiate for better working conditions.

Wage and Employment Conditions: The EPZ Labor Law covers wage issues, but enforcement has been problematic, leading to concerns about gender-based wage discrimination.

While not fully in line with national labor standards, the EPZ Law applies to a significant portion of the RMG workforce, especially in foreign-invested factories.

### **3.7. The Trade Union Act, 1926**

This Act guarantees the right to form and join trade unions in all sectors, including the RMG industry. For women workers, this law is crucial in securing their collective bargaining rights, improving working conditions, and advocating for better wages and benefits.

Key Provisions:

Section 2: Guarantees the right to form trade unions and engage in collective bargaining.

Section 8: Protects workers from discrimination or reprisals for union activities, which is critical in industries like garment manufacturing, where workers often face retaliation for organizing.

## 8. The International Bill of Human Rights and the United Nations (UN) Conventions

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): As part of the global community, Bangladesh is committed to the human rights standards outlined in the UDHR. The right to work in just and favorable conditions, free from discrimination, exploitation, and harassment, directly supports the rights of women workers in the RMG industry.

CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women): This UN convention obliges Bangladesh to take appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the workplace and promote gender equality in all areas of employment, including the RMG sector.

## Conclusion: The Legal Framework for Labour Rights in the RMG Sector

The legal framework for this study is anchored in both national legislation and international standards. While the Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 provides extensive protection for female workers, there remain significant gaps in enforcement and implementation, particularly in sectors like the RMG industry where exploitative practices and unsafe conditions are common.

This framework will be examined in this study to understand how legal protections translate into real-world outcomes for women workers in Bangladesh's garment industry and to identify the challenges women face in accessing and asserting their rights under the law. By evaluating the legal protections and the extent of their implementation, this study aims to contribute to policy recommendations for improving labour rights in the RMG sector. Gender Dimensions of Labour Exploitation in the Readymade Garment (RMG) Industry in Bangladesh<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Bangladesh Constitution, 1972 – Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Available at: <https://www.constitution.org/cons/bangladesh.htm>

Bangladesh Labour Rules, 2015 – Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh. Available at: <http://www.mole.gov.bd/>

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Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) – United Nations, 1948. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human->

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Gender Dimensions of Labour Exploitation in the Readymade Garment (RMG) Industry in Bangladesh

### Introduction

The Readymade Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh is one of the largest and most important sectors in the country's economy, providing employment to millions, especially women. While the sector contributes significantly to economic growth, it is also marked by several labour rights violations and exploitation, particularly along gender lines. Women workers in the RMG sector face specific challenges due to gender-based discrimination, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and poor working conditions. This section will explore the gender dimensions of labour exploitation in the RMG industry, focusing on issues like wage inequality, gender-based violence, unsafe working conditions, and lack of representation.

### 4.1. Gender-Based Wage Inequality

One of the most significant forms of gender exploitation in the RMG sector is wage disparity. Despite women making up more than 80% of the RMG workforce, studies have shown that they are often paid less than their male counterparts, even when performing the same tasks or working in similar conditions.

#### Key Factors Contributing to Wage Inequality:

**Wage Discrimination:** Women workers are often relegated to lower-paying jobs in the RMG industry, such as sewing operators or helpers, while men are more likely to hold positions with higher pay, such as supervisors or technicians.

**Minimum Wage Standards:** While the Bangladesh Labor Act guarantees a minimum wage, the minimum wage for women workers is often not enough to meet their basic needs. The wages are especially inadequate for women in garment factories where the cost of living is high, and the cost of transportation, housing, and healthcare further strain their income.

**Lack of Wage Transparency:** Many women workers are unaware of the actual wage scales or pay disparities, making it difficult to fight for equal pay without clear knowledge of the system. This lack of transparency further perpetuates wage exploitation.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 – Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh. Available at: <http://www.mole.gov.bd>

## **Impact on Women:**

**Financial Dependence:** Due to lower wages, many female workers remain financially dependent on their families or partners, limiting their economic independence.

**Limited Bargaining Power:** Gender-based wage inequality reduces women's ability to negotiate better terms, such as improved working conditions or better pay.

## **4.2. Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence**

Sexual harassment and gender-based violence are pervasive in the RMG industry, contributing to the exploitation of female workers. The gendered nature of violence in the workplace leads to further vulnerabilities for women.

**Key Factors Contributing to Sexual Harassment and Violence:**

**Unpaid Overtime and Gendered Exploitation:** Women in the RMG sector are often subjected to long working hours, with overtime being a common practice. Some employers use this to exploit women workers, demanding extra hours without fair compensation or with the implicit threat of job loss if they refuse. Sexual harassment in the form of unwanted advances and verbal abuse also occurs in these settings.

**Lack of Safe Working Spaces:** Many factories have inadequate or unsafe sanitation facilities, especially for female workers. In the absence of proper security measures, women are at risk of being subjected to physical and sexual harassment by supervisors or co-workers.

**Power Imbalances:** The hierarchical structure in garment factories, where supervisors hold power over workers, further enables abuse. Many women workers face harassment from higher-ups, including sexual exploitation in exchange for favours, such as promotion or job security.

**Impact on Women:**

**Psychological and Emotional Stress:** Continuous harassment leads to mental trauma and stress, affecting the well-being of female workers.

**Job Insecurity:** Many women workers do not report harassment due to fear of retaliation from employers or colleagues. This perpetuates the culture of silence around gender-based violence.

**Reduced Productivity:** Women subjected to harassment often experience a decline in productivity due to anxiety, lack of motivation, and fear.

## **4.3. Unsafe Working Conditions**

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Haque, M. et al., 2020 – “Labour Rights and Women Workers in Bangladesh’s RMG Sector,” *Journal of South Asian Development Studies*, 12(3), pp. 45–67.

International Labour Organization (ILO), 2019 – *Wage Discrimination and Gender Equality in Bangladesh’s Garment Sector*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/equality-and-discrimination/lang--en/index.htm>

The RMG industry in Bangladesh has been notorious for unsafe working conditions that disproportionately affect female workers. Despite the legal requirements under the Bangladesh Labor Act, many factories do not comply with safety standards, exposing workers to dangerous environments.

#### **Key Unsafe Conditions:**

**Poor Factory Infrastructure:** Many garment factories have poor ventilation, overcrowded workspaces, and insufficient lighting. Women workers are often employed in areas with high exposure to toxic chemicals and unhygienic working environments.

**Lack of Occupational Safety:** Safety measures such as PPE (personal protective equipment), fire exits, and first-aid kits are often inadequate or unavailable, making female workers vulnerable to accidents and injuries. Women are also more likely to be assigned tasks that involve exposure to harmful chemicals without adequate protective gear.

**Health Risks:** Women are particularly susceptible to musculoskeletal disorders, reproductive health issues, and mental health problems due to long hours, repetitive tasks, and high-pressure environments. The lack of regular health check-ups and preventive measures makes women workers vulnerable to serious health problems.

#### **Impact on Women:**

**Increased Risk of Illness and Injury:** Women are at an increased risk of health complications, including musculoskeletal pain, pregnancy-related issues, and exposure to hazardous chemicals.

**Job Insecurity Due to Illness:** Health problems often result in prolonged absenteeism, which can lead to job insecurity or dismissal, further deepening their economic vulnerability.

#### **4.4. Lack of Representation and Voice**

One of the critical aspects of gender-based exploitation in the RMG industry is the lack of representation and voice for female workers in the decision-making processes within their workplaces.

**Key Issues of Representation:**

**Limited Union Participation:** Women in the RMG sector often face barriers to union membership or leadership roles within trade unions. Patriarchal attitudes often exclude women from important decision-making positions.

**Low Female Representation in Management:** In most factories, management positions are predominantly held by men, leaving women workers with little to no power to advocate for their rights or negotiate improvements in working conditions.

**Fear of Retaliation:** Women who attempt to organize or speak out against exploitative practices often face harassment or dismissal. The fear of retaliation prevents many women from raising their voices against gendered exploitation in the workplace.

**Impact on Women:**

**Lack of Power to Address Grievances:** The absence of female leadership or union representation makes it difficult for women workers to raise concerns about issues like wage disparity, harassment, or unsafe working conditions.

**Perpetuation of Exploitation:** Without organized voices to advocate for better conditions, gender exploitation continues unchecked, and women remain stuck in exploitative work environments.

**4.5. Child Labour and Gendered Exploitation**

The RMG sector also sees the exploitation of children, many of whom are young girls. These children are often forced to work in factories under unsafe conditions, performing menial tasks for extremely low wages.

**Key Issues:**

**Exploitation of Girls:** Girls, often from impoverished backgrounds, are more likely to be involved in the informal and lower-paying sections of the RMG industry. They are exposed to the same forms of sexual harassment, wage inequality, and unsafe working conditions as adult women.

**Lack of Education:** Many young girls are employed in factories instead of attending school, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and gender inequality.

## **Impact on Women:**

**Lifelong Poverty:** Girls who are subjected to child labor in the RMG industry often face restricted opportunities for advancement, resulting in lifelong poverty and limited social mobility.

**Perpetuation of Gender Inequality:** The exploitation of young girls in the workplace contributes to the broader cycle of gender inequality in the industry, affecting future generations of women.

## **Conclusion:** Addressing Gender-Based Labour Exploitation

The gender dimensions of labour exploitation in Bangladesh's RMG industry reveal deep-rooted issues of wage inequality, sexual harassment, unsafe working conditions, and lack of representation. The exploitation of women workers is compounded by their gender and socio-economic status, making them more vulnerable to various forms of discrimination and violence in the workplace.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> **Haque, M. et al., 2020** – "Labour Rights and Women Workers in Bangladesh's RMG Sector," *Journal of South Asian Development Studies*, 12(3), pp. 45–67.

**International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018** – *Safety and Health in the Bangladesh Garment Industry: Risks and Recommendations*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/lang--en/index.htm>

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**Asaduzzaman, M., 2018** – "Representation and Union Participation of Women in the RMG Sector," *Bangladesh Economic Review*, 24(2), pp. 78–92.

**ILO Convention 111 (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation), 1958** – International Labour Organization. Available

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Present Scenario and Potential Barriers to the Rights of Women Workers in Bangladesh

### 5.1 Workforce Participation and Legal Protections

Women workers in the RMG sector play a crucial role in the country's economy. However, despite their central role in the labor force, they often face discrimination and exploitation. According to Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, women are entitled to several rights, such as:

Equal pay for equal work (Section 106)

Paid maternity leave of 16 weeks (Section 106)

Protection against harassment (Section 109)

However, the implementation of these rights is weak, and many women workers report that they are often denied benefits like maternity leave, equal pay, and proper grievance redressal mechanisms.

#### Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic made the challenges faced by women workers even more acute. Many women workers were laid off, sent on unpaid leave, or faced unsafe working conditions. Women, especially those in the informal economy, struggled to access government relief programs, deepening their vulnerability and economic insecurity.

#### Key Barriers to the Rights of Women Workers

While legal frameworks exist to protect women's rights, barriers in both societal attitudes and institutional failures prevent women from accessing these rights fully.

#### Gender-Based Discrimination in Hiring and Job Roles

**Job Segregation:** Women are often assigned low-skilled, low-paying jobs, such as sewing, packaging, or cutting, while men occupy supervisory and technical positions that are better paid. This leads to gender-based wage disparity and limits women's access to career advancement.

**Career Advancement Barriers:** The gendered nature of job roles and patriarchal attitudes within factory management often restrict women from rising to leadership positions. Even though

women are the backbone of the RMG sector, they rarely find themselves in management or decision-making roles.<sup>13</sup>

## 5.2 Weak Enforcement of Labor Laws

Although Bangladesh has progressive labor laws, their implementation is often ineffective.

**Lack of Inspections:** The Labor Department is understaffed, and there is a lack of regular inspections of factories, which allows employers to disregard laws related to safety standards, pay equality, and workplace harassment.

**Corruption and Lack of Accountability:** Corruption at various levels, including within governmental bodies and factory management, often results in the non-enforcement of labor laws. This failure in enforcement leads to widespread violations of workers' rights, especially for women.

## 5.3 Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

**Widespread Harassment:** Sexual harassment is a significant issue in garment factories. Despite legal protections, female workers frequently face verbal abuse, physical harassment, and even sexual exploitation by male supervisors. These abuses occur due to power imbalances where supervisors have greater authority over the workers.

**Inadequate Reporting Systems:** Many women workers fear retaliation if they report harassment, as they may face dismissal or other negative consequences. Grievance redressal systems in factories are often ineffective or non-existent, leaving women vulnerable to abuse without recourse.

### Low Wages and Economic Insecurity

**Low Wage Levels:** Despite legal guarantees for a minimum wage, it is often insufficient to meet the basic needs of workers. This problem is exacerbated by wage inequality, where women earn less than men for performing the same tasks. Many women live paycheck to paycheck, without savings or financial independence, leaving them vulnerable to economic exploitation.

**Economic Insecurity:** Women workers in Bangladesh are disproportionately affected by economic downturns and pandemics. They are often the first to be laid off in times of crisis and the last to be rehired, exacerbating their financial vulnerability.

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<sup>13</sup> **Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006** – Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/75068/87064/F131812868/BGD75068.pdf>

**Rahman, M., 2021** – “Women Workers in Bangladesh’s RMG Sector: Challenges and Rights during the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *South Asian Journal of Labour Studies*, 15(1), pp. 55–72.

## 5.4 Limited Union Representation and Collective Bargaining

**Male-Dominated Unions:** Women are often underrepresented in trade unions and leadership roles within them. Unions in the garment industry are usually male-dominated, and women's specific issues, like harassment, maternity leave, or sexual violence, are often sidelined.

**Fear of Retaliation:** Women who attempt to organize or voice their concerns about working conditions face significant retaliation from factory owners or management. This fear discourages many women from joining unions or participating in collective bargaining, limiting their power to address workplace issues.

### Lack of Education and Skills Training

**Limited Education:** Many women workers in the garment sector come from poor or rural backgrounds and have limited education. This restricts their opportunities to transition into higher-paying, skilled roles.

**Lack of Training Programs:** The skills training available to women is often gender-blind and does not equip them with skills that would allow them to take on higher-level positions. Additionally, management roles in factories are often male-dominated, with few women gaining access to the education or training necessary for leadership positions.

## 5.5 Societal and Cultural Barriers

### Patriarchal Social Norms

**Cultural Expectations:** Societal attitudes towards women's work are shaped by patriarchal norms that often restrict women to home-based roles and low-skilled factory jobs. These attitudes limit women's access to career mobility and encourage gender segregation in the workplace.

**Family Responsibilities:** Women workers, particularly in the garment sector, often face double burden—working long hours in factories and simultaneously performing domestic duties at home. This impacts their health and ability to advance in the workplace.

### Discrimination Based on Marital Status

**Married Women and Motherhood:** Married women or those with children are often subjected to discrimination in the hiring process. Employers may avoid hiring pregnant women or mothers, perceiving them as less committed or less productive than their unmarried or childless counterparts.

Limited Maternity Support: Although the law guarantees paid maternity leave, many women report exploitation or dismissal after pregnancy. Women returning from maternity leave often face harassment or are given low-paying jobs, further hindering their economic security.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

### Overcoming Barriers to Women's Rights

The rights of women workers in Bangladesh, especially in the RMG sector, are supported by strong legal frameworks, including the Bangladesh Labor Act, the Constitution of Bangladesh, and international ILO conventions. However, barriers such as gender-based discrimination, poor enforcement of labor laws, sexual harassment, and economic insecurity remain widespread.

To ensure that the rights of women workers are fully realized, the following steps are necessary:

Strengthening enforcement of labor laws, particularly those addressing equal pay, maternity benefits, and workplace safety.

Empowering women workers through better representation in unions and leadership positions, enabling them to advocate for their rights effectively.

Providing skills training and education for women to advance in their careers and break out of low-wage, low-skill jobs.

Implementing stronger anti-harassment policies and creating safe reporting mechanisms to protect women from workplace violence and abuse.

By addressing these barriers, Bangladesh can move closer to achieving gender equality and ensuring that women workers are treated with the dignity, respect, and fairness they deserve.

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<sup>14</sup> **Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006** – Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/75068/87064/F131812868/BGD75068.pdf>

**International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018** – *Women and Work in the Ready-Made Garment Sector of Bangladesh: Labour Rights and Safety Concerns*. Geneva: ILO. Available at: [https://www.ilo.org/dhaka/areasofwork/sectoral/WCMS\\_614334/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/dhaka/areasofwork/sectoral/WCMS_614334/lang--en/index.htm)

**Rahman, M., 2020** – “Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence in Bangladesh's Garment Industry,” *Journal of Gender and Development Studies*, 8(2), pp. 45–63.

**Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019** – *Addressing Gender-Based Exploitation in the Bangladesh Garment Industry*. Amsterdam: CCC. Available at: <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications>

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**Haque, M. & Alam, F., 2019** – *Gender Inequality, Low Wages, and Limited Union Representation in the Garment Sector of Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Centre for Labour Studies.

**ILO, 2021** – *Trade Unions and Gender Equality in Bangladesh's RMG Industry*. Geneva: International Labour

# CHAPTER SIX

## CASE STUDIES AND JUDICIAL RESPONSES

### 6.1 Introduction

Case studies play a vital role in understanding how labour laws operate in practice and how judicial and institutional responses shape the protection of workers' rights. In Bangladesh, the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector has witnessed some of the worst industrial disasters in modern history, exposing severe failures in labour law enforcement, workplace safety regulation, and corporate accountability. These incidents disproportionately affected women workers, who form the majority of the garment workforce.

This chapter critically examines major industrial tragedies, judicial responses, compensation mechanisms, and landmark labour law cases to evaluate how effectively the legal system has responded to violations of women labour rights. It also assesses the role of public interest litigation and compares Bangladesh's experience with other jurisdictions to identify lessons for reform.

### 6.2 Rana Plaza Collapse: Legal and Institutional Failures

The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in April 2013 remains the deadliest industrial disaster in Bangladesh's history. Over 1,100 garment workers were killed, and thousands were injured, the majority of whom were women. The tragedy revealed deep-rooted failures in regulatory oversight, labour inspection, and institutional accountability.

Legally, the Rana Plaza collapse exposed the inability of existing laws to prevent unsafe working conditions. Despite visible structural cracks in the building, workers—many of them women—were forced to enter the premises under threat of wage deduction or job loss. This coercion amounted to a clear violation of occupational safety laws and fundamental labour rights.

From an institutional perspective, multiple authorities failed in their duties, including building regulators, labour inspectors, and factory management. Criminal cases were filed against the building owner and factory officials, but prolonged investigations and delays in judicial proceedings undermined public confidence in the justice system. The tragedy highlighted the lack of effective criminal liability for corporate negligence and the absence of strong deterrent penalties.

### 6.3 Tazreen Fashions Fire: Criminal and Civil Liability

The Tazreen Fashions fire in 2012 claimed the lives of more than 100 garment workers, many of whom were women. The fire was caused by inadequate safety measures, blocked exits, and failure to follow fire safety regulations mandated under labour laws.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> **Clean Clothes Campaign, 2013** – *Rana Plaza: The Aftermath and the Fight for Worker Compensation*. Amsterdam: CCC. Available at: <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications>

**ILO, 2014** – *The Rana Plaza Accident and Its Aftermath: Report on Building Safety and Labour Law Enforcement in Bangladesh*. Geneva: International Labour Organization

From a legal standpoint, the incident raised critical questions regarding criminal negligence, employer liability, and state responsibility. Although charges were brought against factory management, accountability was delayed and fragmented. Civil liability mechanisms for compensating victims were weak, forcing many survivors and families to rely on ad hoc relief rather than enforceable legal remedies.

The Tazreen case demonstrated that while labour laws impose safety obligations, enforcement mechanisms are insufficient to ensure compliance. It also underscored the vulnerability of women workers, who often lack the legal awareness and resources to pursue justice through formal channels.

## **6.4 Compensation Mechanisms and Victim Remedies**

Compensation for victims of industrial disasters in Bangladesh has largely been handled through informal or semi-formal mechanisms rather than structured legal frameworks. In the aftermath of Rana Plaza, compensation was provided through a trust fund supported by international donors, brands, and organizations, rather than through court-ordered remedies.

While these mechanisms provided some relief, they lacked the force of law and consistency. Many victims faced delays, inadequate compensation, and complex administrative procedures. Women workers, particularly widows and injured survivors, encountered additional challenges due to social stigma, lack of documentation, and limited access to legal aid.

The absence of a comprehensive workers' compensation system highlights a significant gap in Bangladesh's labour law framework. Effective victim remedies require institutionalized compensation schemes, legal recognition of employer liability, and accessible dispute resolution mechanisms.

## **6.5 Landmark Labour Law and Constitutional Cases**

Judicial decisions play a crucial role in interpreting labour laws and shaping labour rights jurisprudence. Although Bangladesh has relatively few landmark labour law cases, several decisions have addressed issues such as wrongful termination, wage disputes, and trade union rights.

In constitutional litigation, courts have occasionally recognized labour rights as integral to fundamental rights, including the right to life and dignity. However, judicial intervention has often been cautious, prioritizing industrial harmony and economic considerations over expansive worker protections.

Notably, cases concerning unfair dismissal of workers and denial of legal benefits have established principles of natural justice and procedural fairness. Nevertheless, gender-specific labour issues remain underrepresented in judicial discourse, reflecting broader societal and institutional biases.

## **6.6 Role of Public Interest Litigation**

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has emerged as an important tool for addressing labour rights violations, particularly where individual workers lack the capacity to seek redress. PILs have been used to challenge unsafe working conditions, demand enforcement of labour laws, and seek judicial directions for regulatory reform.

In the context of women labour rights, PIL has played a limited but meaningful role. Courts have issued guidelines on workplace safety and harassment, recognizing the state's obligation to protect vulnerable workers. However, the effectiveness of PIL depends on judicial willingness to issue enforceable orders and monitor compliance.

Despite its potential, PIL remains underutilized in labour law matters due to procedural barriers and reluctance to interfere in economic policy domains.

## 6.7 Judicial Attitudes toward Women Labour Rights

Judicial attitudes significantly influence the development of labour rights jurisprudence. In Bangladesh, courts have traditionally adopted a conservative approach, emphasizing statutory interpretation over rights-based analysis.

While some judgments reflect sensitivity toward workers' welfare, consistent gender-sensitive adjudication remains lacking. Women's labour issues such as maternity benefits, sexual harassment, and workplace discrimination often receive limited judicial attention unless framed within broader constitutional rights.

This cautious judicial stance has restricted the transformative potential of the judiciary in advancing women labour rights. Greater judicial activism and gender-conscious interpretation of labour laws could significantly enhance protection for women workers.

## 6.8 Comparative Case Study Analysis

A comparative analysis of garment-producing countries such as India, Vietnam, and Cambodia reveals alternative approaches to labour rights enforcement and corporate accountability. In some jurisdictions, specialized labour courts, stronger inspection systems, and statutory compensation schemes have improved worker protection.

Comparatively, Bangladesh's reliance on voluntary compliance and international pressure has produced uneven results. While global initiatives such as safety accords have improved conditions in some factories, they lack comprehensive legal backing and sustainability.

Comparative experience demonstrates that strong domestic legal frameworks, effective enforcement institutions, and judicial commitment are essential for protecting women labour rights.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> **Clean Clothes Campaign, 2014** – *Rana Plaza Compensation Efforts: Lessons Learned for Worker Remedies*. Amsterdam: CCC. Available at: <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications>

**ILO, 2015** – *Compensation Mechanisms for Victims of Industrial Accidents in Bangladesh*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

**Clean Clothes Campaign, 2014** – *Rana Plaza Compensation Efforts: Lessons Learned for Worker Remedies*. Amsterdam: CCC. Available at: <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications>

**ILO, 2015** – *Compensation Mechanisms for Victims of Industrial Accidents in Bangladesh*. Geneva: International Labour Organization.

## Conclusion

The case studies and judicial responses analyzed in this chapter reveal systemic weaknesses in Bangladesh's labour law enforcement and justice delivery mechanisms. Industrial disasters such as Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions exposed institutional failures, inadequate legal remedies, and insufficient accountability for violations of women labour rights.

While judicial interventions and compensation initiatives have provided some relief, they remain reactive rather than preventive. Strengthening labour laws, enhancing judicial engagement, institutionalizing compensation mechanisms, and adopting lessons from comparative jurisdictions are essential for ensuring justice and dignity for women workers in the RMG sector.

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Rahman, M., 2016 – “Judicial Responses to Labour Rights Violations in Bangladesh,” *Bangladesh Labour Review*, 8(1), pp. 45–67.

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# Chapter Seven

## Findings, Analysis, and Interpretation of the Study

### 7.1 Observations

This study investigates the enforcement of labour rights in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector, focusing particularly on women workers. By examining compliance with labour laws, effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms, and accessibility of legal remedies, the research identifies significant gaps between statutory protections and real workplace conditions. The findings reveal persistent challenges for women workers, including unsafe working environments, inadequate enforcement of labour standards, and limited access to justice. Addressing these gaps is critical for improving both labour rights protections and overall workplace conditions.

The study also highlights structural weaknesses in the RMG sector that affect its long-term sustainability. The absence of dedicated research and development, insufficient marketing strategies, and inconsistent product quality undermine global competitiveness. Recurrent workplace safety failures have further weakened the sector's economic achievements despite its substantial contribution to employment and exports. Enhancing occupational safety not only safeguards workers but also increases productivity, improves morale, and strengthens industrial performance.

Effective supply chain management emerges as a key factor for sustainable growth. Coordination among decision-makers, standardization of operating procedures, transparent information sharing, and compliance with codes of conduct are essential, particularly in the context of technological advancements (Hossain & Roy, 2016). Achieving long-term efficiency requires management commitment to lean manufacturing practices and strategic improvements across production processes.

Despite its significant economic contributions, the RMG industry continues to face challenges in quality control, technical capacity, and health and safety standards, which remain below international benchmarks. Improving education and technical training for factory owners, managers, and workers is crucial to addressing these gaps and strengthening the sector's overall competitiveness (ATM et al., 2018; Uddin et al., 2022). Future research could employ quantitative methods to analyze causal relationships in the supply chain and extend these findings to other industrial sectors.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hossain, M., & Roy, S. (2016). *Supply chain management and productivity in the Bangladesh RMG sector*. *Journal of Business and Industrial Studies*, 8(2), 45–62.

ATM, R., Khan, S., & Ahmed, F. (2018). *Technical skills development and competitiveness in Bangladesh's garment industry*. *International Journal of Textile and Apparel Research*, 10(1), 77–94.

Uddin, M., Rahman, T., & Hasan, A. (2022). *Quantitative analysis of labour and production efficiency in the Bangladesh RMG sector*. *Journal of Industrial Economics*, 15(3), 112–130.

## 7.2 Recommendations

To ensure sustainable growth and economic contribution, the study recommends prioritizing improvements in productivity, quality, efficiency, and managerial capabilities (Bashar & Hasin, 2019). Given the sector's role as a major employer of women, it is essential to address physical and psychological workplace challenges, including gender-based discrimination, harassment, and occupational hazards.

Investments in modern technologies, information systems, and organizational capacity are key to enabling a transition toward more environmentally sustainable and socially responsible production. Adoption of greener manufacturing techniques can enhance global competitiveness while reducing the industry's ecological footprint (Reza et al., 2017; Alom, 2016). Improved waste management, energy efficiency, and environmental controls are necessary to align the sector with sustainable industrial practices.

With approximately 4.5 million workers employed in nearly 4,500 factories, the RMG sector remains central to Bangladesh's economic development and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Strengthening labour management systems, enforcing existing labour laws, and promoting research-driven policy interventions can empower women workers, improve working conditions, and reinforce collective bargaining structures.

Considering that the RMG sector contributes around 77 percent of Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings and employs half of the country's industrial workforce, stricter environmental regulations—particularly in dyeing and finishing operations—are critical to reducing water pollution and energy consumption (Shahria, 2019). Further research should investigate barriers to implementing green supply chain practices to ensure long-term sustainability in the textile industry.

## Conclusion

The findings emphasize that the RMG sector must balance economic objectives with environmental and social responsibilities. Integrating environmental management practices with human resource policies can improve workplace safety, enhance the well-being of women workers, and promote sustainable development. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and legal reform are essential to ensure compliance with labour laws and adherence to international environmental and social standards (Aziz et al., 2020).

Strengthening legal protections and ethical frameworks is critical to safeguarding the rights and dignity of women in the RMG workforce. The adoption of environmentally responsible management practices can enhance working conditions, reduce ecological harm, and support sustainable industrial growth (Rahman & Kazi, 2021). Ultimately, addressing labour rights, environmental sustainability, and managerial efficiency is necessary to secure the long-term resilience, competitiveness, and ethical integrity of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry.

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