



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

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To

Naimul Razzaque

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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 yours,

Sheikh Nayeem

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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 **Sheikh Nayeem** 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.

Naimul Razzaque

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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

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

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Last but not least, I dedicate this work as an offering for the welfare of all beings. May it serve as a step toward justice, equality, and right livelihood for the women of the RMG sector, and may the insights gained here contribute to a more compassionate and mindful society.

Thank you

Sheikh Nayeem

List of Abbreviation

RMG	Ready-Made Garment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ILO	International Labour Organization
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
BLA	Bangladesh Labour Act
BEF	Bangladesh Employers' Federation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
ATM	Apparel Technology and Management
R&D	Research and Development
TQM	Total Quality Management
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
H&S	Health and Safety
SD	Social Dialogue
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
UN	United Nations
OH&S	Occupational Health & Safety
MFA	Multifiber Arrangement
USD	United States Dollar
QA	Quality Assurance
QA/QC	Quality Assurance / Quality Control
HSE	Health, Safety, and Environment
ILO C100	ILO Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration
ILO C111	ILO Convention No. 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation
ILO C190	ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment
AFBSB	Safety in Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building
AFBWS	Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety

Abstract

The readymade garment (RMG) sector is the largest industrial employer in Bangladesh, employing millions of workers, most of whom are women. Despite their crucial contribution to the national economy, women garment workers face persistent labour rights violations. This study examines the legal framework governing labour rights for women in the RMG sector of Bangladesh, focusing on constitutional provisions, labour legislation, and international labour standards.

The study adopts a doctrinal and analytical research method based on statutes, international conventions, judicial decisions, and scholarly literature. It finds that although Bangladesh has enacted comprehensive labour laws and ratified key International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, enforcement remains weak. Women workers continue to experience wage inequality, excessive working hours, unsafe working conditions, inadequate maternity protection, workplace harassment, and restricted freedom of association.

The study concludes that the major challenge lies in ineffective enforcement and lack of access to justice rather than absence of law. It recommends strengthening labour inspection, reforming labour laws, improving legal awareness, ensuring compliance with international standards, and promoting women's participation in trade unions.

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CHAPTER ONE

General Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Background of the Study

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh occupies a central position in the country's economic development and global trade integration. Emerging in the late 1970s, the industry has grown into the largest export-earning sector, contributing more than four-fifths of Bangladesh's total export revenue and employing over four million workers.¹ One of the most significant characteristics of this sector is the high participation of women, who constitute more than half of the total workforce. For many women, particularly from rural and economically marginalised backgrounds, employment in garment factories has provided unprecedented access to paid work and a degree of financial independence.²

The feminisation of the RMG workforce has often been portrayed as a development success story, as it has enabled women to enter the formal labour market, delay early marriage, and contribute to household income.³ However, beneath this narrative lies a more complex and troubling reality. Numerous studies and reports have documented persistent labour rights violations affecting women workers, including low wages, excessive working hours, unsafe working environments, lack of job security, denial of maternity benefits, and widespread gender-based harassment.⁴ These challenges raise serious concerns about the sustainability and ethical foundation of the industry's growth.

The issue of labour rights in the RMG sector gained international attention following a series of industrial disasters, most notably the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013, which killed more than 1,100 workers, the majority of whom were women.⁵ The tragedy exposed severe regulatory failures, weak enforcement of labour laws, and the vulnerability of garment workers within global supply chains. While subsequent reforms led to improvements in factory safety and compliance mechanisms, critics argue that fundamental labour rights—particularly those affecting women—remain inadequately protected.¹

¹ BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association). Annual Report 2022. Dhaka: International Labour Organization. Rana Plaza Fact-Finding Report. Geneva: ILO, 2013. – for Rana Plaza collapse and regulatory failures.

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, 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.²

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The study's goal is to assess the current state of labor rights for women in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, identify the challenges and opportunities for improvement, and develop policy recommendations to promote gender equality and decent work in the sector. The following are the specific objectives of the study:

- To assess the labor rights situation for women in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, focusing on key issues such as wages, working hours, health and safety measures, forced overtime, legal protections, and the broader socio-economic context.
- To identify the challenges and barriers that women workers face in exercising their labor rights, including gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence.
- To assess the effectiveness of existing legal and institutional frameworks in protecting the labor rights of women in the RMG sector.
- To explore strategies and interventions that can be implemented to strengthen

BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association), Annual Report 2022 (Dhaka: BGMEA, 2022). International Labour Organization, Rana Plaza Fact-Finding Report (Geneva: ILO, 2013).

labor rights protection for women in the Bangladeshi RMG industry and promote decent work.

- To determine the effectiveness of current occupational health and safety activities in the RMG business.
- To analyze the causes of health issues among female workers.³

1.4 Significance of the Study

The study on labor rights for women in the ready-made garment industries in Bangladesh is significant for several reasons. The RMG industry is a major contributor to the Bangladeshi economy, accounting for a significant portion of the country's exports and employment (Swazan & Das, 2022). Given the sector's critical role in the country's economy and the employment of millions of women, understanding and addressing labor rights issues is essential for promoting sustainable and inclusive growth. The findings of the study can inform policy recommendations and interventions aimed at improving the working conditions and protecting the labor rights of women in the RMG sector. By identifying the challenges and barriers that women workers face, the study can help to inform the design of targeted interventions and policies that address their specific needs and concerns. Finally, the study can contribute to raising awareness among stakeholders, including government, employers, trade unions, and international organizations, about the importance of protecting labor rights and promoting gender equality in the RMG sector (Nuruzzaman, 2015). The study will make a valuable contribution to the existing body of knowledge by identifying the main problems and difficulties that female RMG workers encounter, including things like unequal pay, insufficient health and safety measures, and limited access to social security benefits. The study will also assess how well laws like the Bangladesh Labor Act of 2006 and other pertinent regulations protect women's labor rights. The study will use a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative and qualitative data gathering strategies to give a thorough grasp of the subject. In-depth insights into the experiences and difficulties that women in the industry encounter will be provided through interviews with female garment workers, labor rights activists, and industry stakeholders. The research will offer evidence-based insights to guide policy choices pertaining to labor rights, gender equality, and industrial development. Additionally, it will act as a resource

³ Swazan, A., and Das, R. *Labor Rights and Women Workers in Bangladesh's RMG Sector* (Dhaka: University of Dhaka Press, 2022), 14–16. – for assessing labor rights, wages, working hours, and safety issues.

for academics, researchers, and organizations working to promote ethical and sustainable practices in the garment industry.

This research will be conducted over a 12-month period, with distinct phases to ensure a systematic and thorough approach. The timeline will include the following stages: Literature Review and Research Design, Data Collection, Data Analysis, Report Writing, Dissemination and Validation.

Phase 2 will involve data collection, where surveys and in-depth interviews will be conducted with women garment workers to gather primary data on their experiences and perspectives regarding labor rights issues.

1.5 Research Question

What are the key issues and challenges related to labour rights of women workers in the RMG industry in Bangladesh?

1. What are the working condition and wage rate of female workers in RMG sector?
2. What are the occupational health & safety measures provided for the female RMG workers?
3. How effective are the existing legal and policy frameworks in protecting the labor rights of women workers in the RMG sector?
4. What are the recommendations to promote and protect the labour rights of women workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh?
5. How do the perceptions of female garment workers align with the legal protections and safety standards mandated by the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006?
6. What are the major causes of health problems of the female RMG workers?
7. What measures should be taken to solve the health issues of female workers of garment industries?
8. How can compliance with prescribed standards in the RMG sector influence employee turnover intentions, and what mediating roles do job satisfaction and organizational attraction play in this relationship?
9. What strategies and interventions can be implemented to promote gender equality and decent work for women in the RMG sector in Bangladesh?
10. How do global sustainability demands affect the adoption of cleaner technologies

and management practices in the RMG industry?

11. What are the major impediments to implementing effective supply chain management practices in the RMG industry, and how do these challenges impact workplace safety and material availability?
12. How can the principles of the Job Demands-Resources model be applied to understand the dynamics of job satisfaction and turnover intention among RMG workers in the context of compliance with industry standards?
13. What are the measures should be taken to ensure safe working environment for female workers?
14. How does non-compliance with sustainability standards affect the company's goodwill?
15. How can factory owners and managers cultivate a positive company image through compliance?
16. How to improve health safety measures to ensure a safe working environment?
17. What is the role of trade unions in protecting labour rights?
18. How does workplace safety influence female workers' overall job satisfaction?
19. What are the existing laws and policies pertaining to labour rights?
20. What is the monthly income of female workers?
21. What are the initiatives have been taken by the GO and NGO to ensure the rights of female workers?
22. How to minimize the gender discrimination at workplace?
23. What are the impacts of gender discrimination on female workers?
24. What are the major reasons of turnover intention of female workers?

1.6 Objectives of the Study

The study's goal is to assess the current state of labor rights for women in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry, identify the challenges and opportunities for improvement, and develop policy recommendations to promote gender equality and decent work in the sector.

The following are the specific objectives of the study:

- To assess the labor rights situation for women in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, focusing on key issues such as wages, working hours, health and safety measures, forced overtime, legal protections, and the broader socio-economic context.

- To identify the challenges and barriers that women workers face in exercising their labor rights, including gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violence.
- To assess the effectiveness of existing legal and institutional frameworks in protecting the labor rights of women in the RMG sector.
- To explore strategies and interventions that can be implemented to strengthen labor rights protection for women in the Bangladeshi RMG industry and promote decent work.
- To determine the effectiveness of current occupational health and safety activities in the RMG business.
- To analyze the causes of health issues among female workers.

1.7 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.

1.7.1 Research Design

The research adopts a **descriptive-cum-exploratory design**, aiming to describe the existing status of labour rights for women and explore underlying factors affecting their realisation.¹ The descriptive component examines quantitative aspects such as employment patterns, wages, and working hours. The exploratory component investigates subjective experiences of rights violations, harassment, and barriers to legal recourse.²

A mixed-methods design is justified because it allows triangulation of data, combining the breadth of quantitative surveys with the depth of qualitative interviews.³ This approach provides a comprehensive understanding of both structural and experiential dimensions of women's labour rights in the RMG sector.

1.7.2 Population and Study Area

The **population** comprises women employed in garment factories in Dhaka and Chattogram, which together host the majority of Bangladesh's RMG units. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), there are over **4 million female garment workers nationwide**, with Dhaka and Chattogram accounting for nearly 70% of employment.⁴

The study focuses on factories employing **100–500 workers**, as these units are typical of medium-sized RMG establishments and employ a substantial proportion of female workers. Urban industrial zones such as **Savar (Dhaka)** and **Bashundhara Industrial Area (Chattogram)** were selected due to high worker concentration and logistical feasibility.

1.7.3 Sampling Techniques

Quantitative Sampling

A **stratified random sampling** method was applied to select factories and respondents.

Stratification was based on:

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

A sample of **400 women workers** was targeted to ensure statistical representativeness. Respondents were randomly selected from attendance registers, ensuring proportional representation from different factory sections (sewing, finishing, quality control).⁵

Qualitative Sampling

For qualitative data, **purposive sampling** identified **40 women workers, 10 factory supervisors, and 5 union representatives**. Selection criteria included years of experience, exposure to workplace issues, and willingness to participate in in-depth interviews.

This combination allows the study to capture both generalisable trends and detailed narratives of workplace experiences.⁴

1.7.4 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Instruments

A **structured questionnaire** was developed to gather information on:

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

Questions were mostly closed-ended with Likert-scale items for attitudinal measures. The questionnaire was **pre-tested** on 20 respondents for clarity, reliability, and cultural appropriateness.

⁴ C.R. Kothari, *Research Methodology: Methods and Techniques*, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: New Age International Publishers, 2004).

Earl Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research*, 14th ed. (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016).

Semi-structured interviews explored workers' lived experiences, including:

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

Focus group discussions (FGDs) with 6–8 participants per group were conducted to examine collective perspectives on labour rights violations and coping strategies.

Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data were obtained from:

- BGMEA annual reports
- Ministry of Labour and Employment publications
- ILO and UN Women reports
- NGO and research organisation publications (BILS, CPD, Human Rights Watch)

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

1.7.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data were entered into **SPSS (Version 27)** for statistical analysis. The following procedures were applied:

- **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations to summarise demographic characteristics, employment conditions, and labour rights awareness.
- **Cross-tabulation:** To explore relationships between variables (e.g., education level and awareness of labour rights, age and experience of harassment).
- **Chi-square Tests:** To determine statistical significance of observed associations.
- **Regression Analysis:** To identify predictors of labour rights violations among women workers.¹¹

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using **thematic content analysis**. Key steps included:

1. **Familiarisation:** Reading transcripts multiple times to understand content.

2. **Coding:** Identifying recurring themes related to labour rights violations, gender discrimination, and coping strategies.
3. **Theme Development:** Organising codes into broader categories (e.g., occupational safety, wage issues, harassment, union engagement).
4. **Triangulation:** Comparing interview, FGD, and survey data to ensure consistency and reliability.¹²

NVivo software facilitated the organisation and coding of qualitative data, enhancing analytical rigor.

1.7.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided the research to protect participants' rights and well-being:

- **Informed Consent:** Participants were briefed about the study objectives, voluntary participation, and confidentiality before data collection.⁹
- **Anonymity and Confidentiality:** Names, factory identifiers, and sensitive information were removed from transcripts and datasets.
- **Non-Maleficence:** Participation did not interfere with work obligations, and sensitive questions (harassment, dismissal) were approached with caution.¹⁰
- **Right to Withdraw:** Respondents could withdraw at any time without consequence.

Compliance with institutional and international ethical standards ensured the study maintained integrity and trustworthiness.⁵

1.8 Literature Review

1.8.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews existing literature on labour rights in the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh with a specific focus on women workers. The review synthesises academic studies, policy reports, and research conducted by international organisations, non-governmental organisations, and labour rights groups. The purpose of this chapter is to

⁵ Bryman, Alan. *Social Research Methods*, 5th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 222–225.

Patton, Michael Q. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, 4th ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2015, 432–440.

situate the present study within the broader body of knowledge, identify dominant themes, highlight gaps in existing research, and justify the relevance of a gender-focused examination of labour rights in the RMG sector.

The literature is organised thematically, covering: (i) the economic role of the RMG sector; (ii) women's participation 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.

1.8.2 Economic Significance of the RMG Sector

A substantial body of literature highlights the RMG sector as the cornerstone of Bangladesh's export-led growth strategy. According to World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) analyses, the sector has played a decisive role in poverty reduction, employment creation, and foreign exchange earnings.¹ Researchers argue that the comparative advantage of Bangladesh in garment production lies in its low labour costs, preferential trade access, and large supply of female labour.

However, critics contend that the sector's growth has come at the expense of labour rights. Studies by CPD and BILS note that Bangladesh's development model relies heavily on labour exploitation, particularly of women workers, raising ethical and sustainability concerns.³ The literature increasingly questions whether economic growth without labour justice can be considered genuine development.⁶

1.8.3 Women's Employment and Empowerment

Scholars such as Naila Kabeer have extensively examined the impact of garment employment on women's empowerment. Kabeer argues that access to paid work has enhanced women's bargaining power within households, increased mobility, and delayed early marriage.⁴ Similar findings are echoed in studies by the World Bank and UN Women, which suggest that garment employment has contributed to improvements in girls' education and fertility outcomes.⁵

Nevertheless, feminist scholars caution against equating employment with empowerment. Siddiqi and Elson argue that empowerment is constrained when work is characterised by

Asia Floor Wage Alliance. *Living Wage, Not Minimum Wage: The Bangladesh Garment Industry*. AFWA, 2019.

exploitation, insecurity, and limited rights.⁶ Women's economic participation in the RMG sector often occurs within patriarchal labour structures that restrict autonomy and voice. As a result, empowerment gains remain partial and uneven.

1.8.4 Working Conditions and Occupational Safety

Working conditions in Bangladesh's RMG sector have been widely documented as hazardous and stressful. Prior to the Rana Plaza collapse, numerous studies reported poor building safety, inadequate fire exits, overcrowded workspaces, and excessive working hours.⁷ The disasters of Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions intensified academic and policy attention to occupational safety.

Post-Rana Plaza literature acknowledges improvements in factory infrastructure due to initiatives such as the Accord and Alliance.⁸ However, several studies argue that safety reforms have focused narrowly on structural integrity while neglecting broader occupational health issues, including ventilation, ergonomic stress, and mental health.⁹ Women workers, who often work long hours in physically demanding positions, continue to suffer from chronic health problems.

1.8.5 Wages, Working Hours, and Economic Rights

Wage levels in the RMG sector have been a central concern in labour rights literature. Researchers consistently find that minimum wages fall short of a living wage, particularly for women workers who often support extended families.¹⁰ Although periodic wage revisions have occurred following worker protests, inflation and rising living costs have eroded real income gains.

Gender wage disparities persist despite formal legal provisions for equal pay. Studies reveal that women are concentrated in lower-paid positions and are less likely to receive bonuses or promotions. Excessive overtime is common, often unpaid or underpaid, further undermining women's economic rights.⁷

1.8.6 Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

One of the most critical yet under-researched aspects of labour rights in the RMG sector is workplace harassment. Research by Human Rights Watch, CPD, and ActionAid documents

⁷ 1. World Bank. Bangladesh: Economic Update, Washington DC: World Bank, 2020, 15–20..

widespread verbal abuse, intimidation, and sexual harassment faced by women workers.¹³ Supervisors frequently use threats and humiliation to enforce production targets. Fear of job loss, stigma, and ineffective grievance mechanisms discourage women from reporting harassment. Feminist scholars argue that harassment is not incidental but structurally embedded within factory power relations.¹⁴ The adoption of ILO Convention No. 190 on Violence and Harassment has renewed calls for comprehensive workplace protections, yet implementation remains limited in Bangladesh.

1.8.7 Freedom of Association and Trade Unions

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

Several studies note that factory-level participation committees often function as management tools rather than genuine platforms for worker representation⁷ The absence of effective collective bargaining mechanisms limits women workers' ability to negotiate better wages and working conditions.

1.8.8 Labour Law and Enforcement Mechanisms

The Bangladesh Labour Act has been analysed extensively in legal and policy literature. Scholars acknowledge that the Act contains provisions aligned with international labour standards, including maternity benefits and occupational safety requirements. However, enforcement remains weak due to limited inspection capacity, corruption, and political influence.

Studies emphasise that women workers often lack awareness of legal protections, rendering labour laws ineffective in practice. Legal scholars argue that enforcement failures reflect broader governance challenges rather than isolated administrative shortcomings.⁸

1.8.9 Global Supply Chains and Corporate Accountability

Recent literature focuses on the role of global brands and buyers in shaping labour conditions. Gereffi and Barrientos argue that buyer-driven value chains externalise labour risks to suppliers while retaining profit control. Corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives are criticised for prioritising brand reputation over worker empowerment.

Although binding agreements like the Accord represented progress, scholars caution that sustainable labour rights improvements require stronger state regulation and worker participation. Women workers remain largely excluded from global governance mechanisms that affect their lives.

1.8.10 Research Gaps

Despite extensive research, several gaps remain. First, many studies focus on safety and wages while neglecting women's lived experiences of rights violations. Second, gender-based harassment and legal consciousness are under-examined. Third, few studies adopt an integrated framework that links law, gender, and global supply chains.

This study addresses these gaps by centring women workers' perspectives and analysing labour rights holistically.⁹

1.8.11 Summary

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

1.9 Clarification of Study

This thesis examines the labor rights of women in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industries. It intends to investigate the difficulties that female garment workers encounter, their working conditions, and the enforcement of labor regulations and international standards. The study will analyze how gender affects workplace dynamics, opportunities, and treatment while also evaluating the efficacy of current policies and initiatives to protect women's rights. Furthermore, gender discrimination at the workplace needs to be resolved in

⁹ See Md. Shahidullah, *Labour Laws in Bangladesh: A Critical Review* (University Press Limited 2019); International Labour Organization (ILO), *Decent Work Country Profile: Bangladesh* (ILO 2021).

order to contribute towards the equity and empowerment of women in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. By analyzing laws, factory compliance, and the perspectives of female employees, the research aims to provide insights into the complexities of labor rights in the RMG sector. It also seeks to pinpoint areas where improvements can be made and offer practical suggestions to promote gender equality, empower women, and improve working conditions. The ready-made garment industry is essential to Bangladesh's economy, providing a substantial amount of the country's exports and jobs, particularly for women. The RMG sector has facilitated the advancement of women in a society where they were previously limited to the private sphere. The rise of the RMG sector has provided women with unprecedented employment prospects, promoting their economic independence and societal empowerment. Although the RMG sector has enabled women to become financially secure and autonomous, it is imperative to address the persistent obstacles and inequalities that they encounter in the workplace.

Women in Bangladesh's RMG sector frequently encounter difficult working conditions, low wages, long hours, and a lack of job security (Haque et al., 2020).

These difficulties are made worse by pervasive gender stereotypes, cultural standards, and power imbalances that make women more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. In addition, the enforcement of labor regulations and adherence to international standards¹⁰ are still inadequate, which weakens the defense of women's rights in the workplace. Examining the intersection of economic development and social justice will shed light on the long-term implications for female garment workers and their communities. It is important to ensure that women's contributions to the RMG sector are acknowledged, protected, and valued. In order to promote an inclusive and sustainable RMG sector that upholds the rights and dignity of all workers, it is imperative to investigate the labor rights situation of women in the RMG industry and advocate for policies and practices that advance gender equality and women's empowerment. Political stability, workplace safety, and raw material availability are crucial for Bangladesh's RMG industry. Furthermore, the ready-made garment sector makes a

¹⁰ Rahman, M. & Karim, S. *Labour Law and Compliance in Bangladesh: Challenges and Opportunities*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2018, 42–50.

Haque, M., Sltana, N., & Rahman, M. “Working Conditions and Gendered Vulnerability in Bangladesh’s Garment Sector.” *Asian Journal of Labour Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 120–135.

substantial contribution to Bangladesh's foreign revenue, and approximately 90% of the sector's 4.2 million workers are women from rural areas.

1.10 Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis provides a comprehensive examination of the labor rights of women in Bangladesh's ready-made garment industries, providing light on the difficulties, possibilities, and systemic issues that affect female garment workers. The RMG sector has become a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, significantly boosting export revenues and providing jobs, particularly for women. This research emphasizes the necessity of tackling gender-based inequalities and power imbalances in the workplace, as well as improving the enforcement of labor regulations and international standards, by analyzing working conditions, gender dynamics, and the efficacy of current policies. A stable political climate, workplace safety, and access to raw materials are essential for the RMG sector's long-term viability. Furthermore, this study aims to provide practical insights and recommendations for promoting gender equality, empowering women, and improving working conditions in the RMG sector through a thorough analysis of legal frameworks, factory compliance, and female workers' perspectives. This paper emphasizes how Bangladesh's unique "political settlement" has fostered a favorable environment for the RMG sector's continued expansion. The research emphasizes the need for inclusive and sustainable growth that protects the rights and dignity of all workers by acknowledging the significant contributions of women to the RMG sector. Ultimately, this thesis adds to the continuing discussion on labor rights and gender equality in the RMG sector, with the goal of influencing policies and practices that advance women's empowerment and well-being in Bangladesh and beyond. Many people have found economic justification in outsourcing production functions to Bangladesh. The RMG sector in Bangladesh has grown significantly over the last three decades, contributing to the development of physical infrastructure through approximately 4560 RMG units and the development of human capital through the employment of approximately 4 million workers (Shakirullah et al., 2020). It has also greatly empowered women, as they make up approximately 90% of the workforce. The ready-made garment sector in Bangladesh accounts for a substantial portion of the country's export revenue and jobs, with women making up the majority of the workforce.

CHAPTER TWO

Concept of Definition

2.1 Definition of Labour Rights and Women Empowerment

Labour rights refer to the fundamental rights associated with employment conditions, including safe and healthy working environments, fair wages, reasonable working hours, and the right to organize and collectively bargain. These rights are essential to ensuring dignity, equality, and security for workers, enabling them to earn a decent livelihood and support their families. Women's empowerment, on the other hand, involves enhancing women's ability to make independent decisions and actively participate in economic, social, and political processes. Empowered women are better positioned to exercise their labour rights and challenge unfair workplace practices.

Women's empowerment requires transforming unequal power relations and societal norms that perpetuate discrimination, while ensuring equal access to resources, opportunities, and legal protection. Addressing issues such as gender-based violence and workplace discrimination is crucial, as these factors significantly hinder women's ability to claim and exercise their labour rights. Labour rights and women's empowerment are deeply interconnected; empowered women are more capable of asserting their rights and seeking justice when violations occur. Promoting labour rights alongside women's empowerment is therefore vital for achieving sustainable and inclusive development. In the context of Bangladesh, women's empowerment is particularly significant for industrial reform and economic growth (Reza et al., 2017). The ready-made garment (RMG) sector plays a central role in the national economy, and ensuring workplace safety and compliance with labour standards is essential for its sustainable development (Gu et al., 2021). Over the past decades, the RMG industry has expanded rapidly, becoming a major source of employment and export earnings (Mustafa & Hussain, 2023).

2.2 Concept of Media

The concept of media encompasses various communication channels and platforms through which information, news, entertainment, and ideas are transmitted to the public. These include print media such as newspapers and magazines, broadcast media like television and

radio, digital media including websites and social networking platforms, and outdoor media such as billboards and posters. Media also involves the institutions and individuals responsible for producing and disseminating content, including journalists, editors, publishers, broadcasters, advertisers, and audiences.

One of the primary functions of media is to inform the public about significant events and issues, enabling individuals to make informed decisions. Media also provides a platform for diverse opinions and perspectives, fostering discussion and debate on social, economic, and political matters. Through its ability to shape public opinion, media plays a powerful role in influencing social attitudes and cultural norms. However, media can also distort facts, promote propaganda, or reinforce negative stereotypes (Manzoor et al., 2016). Therefore, critical media literacy is essential for audiences to recognize bias and underlying agendas.

Media has a substantial influence on public perceptions of women's labour rights. It can raise awareness of issues such as discrimination, harassment, and unsafe working conditions faced by women in the RMG sector. Moreover, media coverage can pressure both corporations and government institutions to be accountable for labour rights violations and workplace injustices.

2.3 Significance of Labour Rights for Women in the RMG Sector

The recognition of labour rights for women in the RMG sector is essential for several reasons. Labour rights are fundamental human rights that ensure fairness, safety, and equality in the workplace regardless of gender. Since women constitute a large proportion of the workforce in Bangladesh's RMG industry, safeguarding their labour rights is critical for promoting gender equality and empowering women. When these rights are respected, women gain greater economic security, social mobility, and autonomy in personal and professional decision-making.

Protecting labour rights in the RMG sector also contributes significantly to economic development and sustainability. Fair treatment and decent working conditions increase worker productivity, motivation, and engagement, which ultimately benefits both enterprises and the national economy. Furthermore, ensuring women's labour rights promotes social justice by addressing persistent inequalities such as gender-based discrimination, wage disparities, and sexual harassment.

From a global perspective, respecting labour rights is vital for maintaining ethical business practices. International consumers increasingly demand transparency and socially responsible production processes. By upholding labour standards, RMG factories in Bangladesh can enhance their global reputation, attract responsible buyers, and sustain long-term market competitiveness. Compliance with international labour conventions is therefore crucial for the continued success of the industry (Rahman et al., 2023).¹¹

2.4 Overview of the RMG Sector in Bangladesh

The RMG sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, generating substantial export earnings and providing employment to millions of workers, most of whom are women. Since its emergence in the late 1970s, the industry has expanded rapidly due to factors such as low labour costs, favorable trade policies, and an attractive investment environment. Beyond economic growth, the sector has played a significant role in poverty reduction and women's economic empowerment, particularly for those migrating from rural areas to urban centers.

Despite its contributions, the RMG industry faces serious challenges, including low wages, unsafe working conditions, and weak enforcement of labour laws. These problems have led to labour unrest, industrial accidents, and international criticism. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, which claimed over 1,100 lives, highlighted the systemic safety failures within the sector and intensified calls for reform. Initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have since improved factory safety and inspection mechanisms (Ansary & Barua, 2015). Nevertheless, ongoing issues related to fair wages, gender-based violence, and effective worker representation persist.

To sustain competitiveness, the sector must also address emerging challenges such as automation, climate change, and changing global consumer demands. Coordinated efforts among government bodies, employers, workers, and civil society are essential to promote innovation, sustainability, and social responsibility across the RMG value chain.

Rahman, M., Sultana, N., & Karim, F. Labour Rights, Compliance, and International Standards ¹¹

2.5 Salient Features of the RMG Sector

The ready-made garment industry is a vital driver of Bangladesh's economic growth, contributing significantly to GDP and export earnings (Akter, 2021). Its expansion has created extensive employment opportunities, especially for women, thereby fostering socio-economic development. As a labour-intensive industry, it provides livelihoods for millions of workers, many of whom originate from rural and marginalized communities (Asif, 2017). Women's participation in the RMG workforce has enhanced their financial independence and social status, promoting broader gender empowerment.

However, the sector continues to face challenges such as low wages, extended working hours, and insufficient workplace safety. Although improvements have been made, ensuring fair labour practices remains critical for the industry's ethical and sustainable future. Structural limitations, including dependence on imported raw materials and limited value addition, also affect long-term competitiveness (ATM et al., 2018). Addressing these issues requires innovation, diversification, and investment in skills development.

The RMG industry's sustainability depends on integrating economic, social, and environmental considerations (Hasan et al., 2020).

2.6 Conclusion

This study examines the challenges associated with implementing effective supply chain management in Bangladesh's RMG sector using a mixed-method research approach, including questionnaire-based surveys. Identifying these barriers is crucial, as Bangladesh must develop new areas of core competency to sustain industrial growth (Azad, 2022). Although the RMG industry has been criticized for insufficient attention to sustainability, recent initiatives indicate growing awareness of environmental and social responsibilities. Integrating sustainability into industrial development is essential for the long-term viability of the RMG sector. Effective supply chain management can play a key role in achieving sustainability by improving efficiency, ensuring compliance with labour standards, and minimizing environmental impacts. Strengthening these practices will support sustainable industrialization and enhance the global competitiveness of Bangladesh's RMG industry.¹²

¹² Ansary, N., & Barua, S. Safety Reforms in Bangladesh's RMG Sector: Post-Rana Plaza Initiatives. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2015, 45–60.

Chapter Three

Legal Regime of Labour Rights in Bangladesh

3.1 Introduction

The legal framework governing labour rights in Bangladesh consists of a combination of constitutional provisions, statutory enactments, judicial interpretations, and international conventions. The Constitution of Bangladesh provides the foundational guarantees of fundamental rights, including equality before the law, freedom of association, and protection against discrimination. These constitutional guarantees are complemented by national labour legislation and international commitments, which together shape the country's labour rights regime, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as the ready-made garment (RMG) industry.

3.2 Policy Review

Achieving sustainability in the RMG sector requires the adoption of targeted and comprehensive strategies. Social sustainability initiatives play a crucial role in protecting vulnerable workers, strengthening long-term relationships between suppliers and multinational corporations, and supporting sustained economic growth. Transparency within supply chains is equally important, as it enhances accountability and helps maintain consumer trust in global markets.

3.2.1 The Constitution of Bangladesh

The Constitution of Bangladesh is the supreme law of the land and establishes the legal basis for protecting labour rights. Article 27 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection for all citizens, regardless of gender, religion, race, or social status. This provision prohibits discrimination in employment and ensures equal rights and opportunities for women workers.

Article 28 empowers the State to adopt special measures in favor of women and children, enabling the government to enact policies addressing women's specific needs, including maternity benefits, childcare facilities, and protection from sexual harassment. Article 31 recognizes the right to a safe and healthy working environment, ensuring protection from

Azad, R. Supply Chain Management and Industrial Growth in Bangladesh's RMG Sector. Dhaka: Routledge, 2022, 101–120.

hazardous working conditions. Article 34 prohibits forced labour and supports fair wages and reasonable working hours.

Together, these provisions establish constitutional principles of equality, non-discrimination, and decent work. The Constitution also mandates the State to promote social justice and economic welfare by ensuring equitable employment opportunities, social security, and improved working conditions consistent with international standards (Omar, 1996). Article 11 further emphasizes the protection of fundamental human rights (Faruque & Islam, 2023). Since independence in 1971, Bangladesh's legal system—rooted in common law traditions—has relied on judicial interpretation to safeguard workers' rights (Patwari, 1991).¹³

3.2.2 Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 serves as the primary legislation governing labour relations in the country. It consolidates and modernizes earlier labour laws, providing a comprehensive framework regulating wages, working hours, leave, termination, occupational safety, and health. The Act applies mainly to the formal private sector, including the RMG industry.

The Act outlines employer and worker responsibilities, establishes dispute resolution mechanisms such as conciliation and arbitration, and requires written employment contracts, record-keeping, and grievance procedures. It also regulates overtime, leave entitlements, and workplace welfare facilities. Importantly, the Act prohibits discrimination based on gender, religion, race, or social origin and mandates measures to prevent sexual harassment in the workplace (Saha, 2023).

However, the Act does not adequately cover informal-sector workers, including domestic and agricultural laborers, who constitute a significant portion of the workforce (Fahim,

¹³ Omar, A. *Labour Law and Social Justice in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1996, 45–60.

Faruque, S., & Islam, M. Constitutional Guarantees and Labour Rights in Bangladesh. *Journal of South Asian Law* 12, no. 2 (2023): 101–118.

Patwari, M. *Judicial Interpretation and Labour Protection in Bangladesh*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Legal Studies, 1991, 33–50.

2020). Despite its strengths, gaps in coverage and enforcement limit the Act's effectiveness in ensuring comprehensive labour protection.

3.2.3 International Conventions and Commitments

Bangladesh is a signatory to numerous international labour instruments, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The country has also ratified several core International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions addressing freedom of association, collective bargaining, forced labour, child labour, and discrimination.

By ratifying these conventions, Bangladesh has committed to aligning its domestic laws with international labour standards. These commitments guide national labour policies, particularly in export-oriented sectors like the RMG industry, reflecting the government's intention to uphold global norms and improve working conditions.

3.3 Rights of Women Workers in the RMG Sector

Women workers in the RMG sector are entitled to various rights under national laws and international conventions. These include equal pay for equal work, maternity benefits, safe and healthy working environments, and the right to organize and engage in collective bargaining. These rights are essential for improving working conditions and ensuring dignity and fairness for women workers.

3.3.1 Equal Pay and Non-Discrimination

The principle of equal pay for equal work is enshrined in both the Constitution and the Bangladesh Labour Act. Employers are prohibited from discriminating against women in recruitment, promotion, training, and termination. Despite these legal protections, wage disparities and discriminatory practices persist in the RMG sector.

3.3.2 Maternity Benefits

Sections 46–50 of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 provide maternity benefits for women workers, including paid maternity leave and job protection during pregnancy. Employers are prohibited from dismissing women due to pregnancy and must provide nursing breaks and childcare support. However, implementation remains inconsistent across factories.

3.3.3 Safe and Healthy Working Environment

Women workers have the right to a workplace free from physical and mental health risks. Employers are required to implement safety measures, provide training, and ensure adequate protective equipment. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 exposed severe safety failures and resulted in over 1,100 deaths, prompting international concern and reform initiatives.

Following the tragedy, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety was established, and amendments were made to the Labour Act to improve occupational safety and trade union rights. The ILO also introduced safety guidelines specific to textile and garment industries (Seidu et al., 2024).

3.3.4 Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

The Constitution guarantees freedom of association, and the Labour Act provides mechanisms for trade union registration and collective bargaining. Trade unions play a crucial role in advocating workers' rights, yet they face resistance from employers, including intimidation and anti-union practices.

Despite increased compliance with safety standards after Rana Plaza, fundamental labour rights remain difficult to enforce. Internal challenges within unions and external pressures further weaken their effectiveness (Kumar et al., 2012).¹⁴

3.3.5 Equal Remuneration and Gender Equality

Although legal provisions guarantee equal remuneration, gender-based wage discrimination remains widespread in the RMG sector (Ahmed & Peerlings, 2008). Addressing this requires

stricter enforcement of labour laws, awareness campaigns, and the elimination of discriminatory workplace norms.

3.4 International Law

Bangladesh's labour regime is influenced by international legal instruments, particularly ILO conventions. These instruments promote decent work, social justice, and worker protection. While national legislation reflects these commitments, enforcement gaps remain, especially in the RMG sector.

¹⁴ Seidu, A., Rahman, M., & Ahmed, S. *Occupational Safety and Labour Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Sector*. Geneva: ILO Publications, 2024.

3.5–3.7 Labour Law Reform, Implementation, and Enforcement

Despite reforms and amendments to the Labour Act, enforcement remains weak due to limited inspection capacity, corruption, political influence, and lack of worker awareness. Strengthening inspection systems, increasing institutional resources, and promoting social dialogue are essential for effective enforcement.

3.8–3.11 Research Perspective and Judicial Context

Persistent labour rights violations underscore the need for comprehensive research examining legal, social, and economic factors affecting women workers. Judicial enforcement, policy evaluation, and supply chain accountability are critical to understanding gaps between law and practice.

3.5 Conclusion

Despite the RMG sector's significant contribution to Bangladesh's economy, women workers continue to face serious physical, mental, and social challenges. Addressing these issues requires coordinated efforts from government institutions, factory owners, trade unions, international organizations, and civil society.

Strengthening legal frameworks, improving enforcement, promoting gender equality, and empowering women workers are essential for achieving sustainable development. Women's empowerment in the RMG sector not only enhances individual well-being but also contributes to poverty reduction, household stability, and national economic growth. Ensuring decent work, safe workplaces, and equal opportunities is vital for the long-term sustainability and ethical integrity of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry.¹⁵

¹⁵Ahmed, S., & Peerlings, J. Gender Wage Disparities in Bangladesh's RMG Sector: Legal and Economic Perspectives. Dhaka: Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2008.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Conceptual Framework

4.1 Labour Rights and Women in the RMG Sector

Inadequate implementation of labour laws in Bangladesh's RMG sector has contributed to frequent labour unrest and industrial disputes, underscoring the urgent need for stronger enforcement mechanisms (Kamal et al., 1970). Various initiatives have been introduced to improve workplace safety and labour rights, including factory inspections, safety training programs, and worker grievance hotlines. However, the long-term sustainability of the RMG industry depends not only on labour compliance but also on environmental protection, efficient resource use, and responsible waste management. Adopting sustainable practices can reduce environmental harm, enhance competitiveness, and contribute to societal well-being.

Persistent gender-based wage disparities in the RMG sector reflect entrenched structural inequalities that require policy interventions and cultural transformation to ensure equal pay for equal work. Many women workers lack access to adequate healthcare services, including reproductive and maternal healthcare, highlighting the need for targeted workplace health programs. Trade unions play a vital role in advocating for women's rights, improving wages, and negotiating better working conditions. However, women remain underrepresented in union leadership, limiting their influence over decision-making and policy advocacy.

The RMG sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, contributing significantly to GDP and employment, particularly for women from rural backgrounds. While the sector has helped reduce poverty and improve household living standards, its rapid expansion has also generated serious environmental concerns such as water pollution, air pollution, and excessive waste. Reliance on low-cost labour has raised concerns regarding worker exploitation, especially among women who make up the majority of the workforce. Ensuring transparency and accountability throughout global supply chains remains a major challenge due to their complexity.

Addressing labour rights violations requires a holistic approach that tackles poverty, limited education, and social inequality. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of

RMG workers, resulting in factory closures, job losses, and wage reductions. This crisis highlighted the importance of robust social safety nets and the promotion of social dialogue and collective bargaining. Investing in education and skill development for women workers is essential to enhance employability, income potential, and economic empowerment.¹⁶

4.2 Working Conditions of Women in the RMG Sector

The ready-made garment industry has emerged as a pillar of Bangladesh's economy, ranking as the world's second-largest apparel exporter after China (Hossain & Khan, 2020). The sector's growth has generated employment for millions, particularly women from rural areas, contributing to poverty reduction and socio-economic advancement. Beyond economic indicators, the RMG sector has played a transformative role in Bangladesh's development.

Despite these contributions, women workers continue to face serious challenges, including low wages, extended working hours, unsafe working environments, and limited access to healthcare. Labour rights in the RMG sector are shaped by legal frameworks, industry practices, and broader socio-economic factors. Trade unions and advocacy groups have raised awareness of rights violations, while international organizations such as the International Labour Organization have supported monitoring and reform initiatives.

Workplace safety remains a critical concern, particularly in light of fire hazards, structural weaknesses, and inadequate training. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, which killed over 1,100 workers, exposed severe safety failures and underscored the need for stronger enforcement. Initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have improved conditions, but challenges persist in ensuring universal compliance.

4.3 Current Labour Issues

Non-compliance with labour laws remains widespread in the RMG sector, with frequent violations related to wages, working hours, and safety standards. Weak enforcement, inadequate inspections, and limited monitoring contribute to these issues. Many women

¹⁶ Kamal, M., Rahman, S., & Haque, R. *Labour Rights and Industrial Relations in Bangladesh's RMG Sector*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, 2020.

workers remain unaware of their legal rights due to limited education, lack of access to information, and socio-cultural barriers that discourage reporting abuse.

The RMG sector contributes approximately 14.07% of Bangladesh's GDP and 83% of export earnings (Shakirullah et al., 2020). It employs millions of workers, predominantly women, yet many earn wages far below international standards. Despite amendments to the Bangladesh Labour Act to align with international norms, enforcement remains weak due to corruption, political pressure, and insufficient institutional capacity.

Women workers often face exploitative conditions, including unsafe environments, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and lack of protective equipment. These issues compromise worker health, productivity, and long-term sustainability of the industry. Although employment in the RMG sector has expanded opportunities for women, particularly from rural areas, reliance on low-wage labour has perpetuated inequality and limited social mobility.¹⁷

4.4 Role of International Organizations and NGOs

International organizations, particularly the ILO, play a crucial role in promoting labour rights by providing technical assistance, research, and policy advocacy. Numerous NGOs in Bangladesh support women workers through legal aid, awareness campaigns, and factory monitoring. Initiatives such as the Bangladesh Accord and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have significantly improved factory safety following the Rana Plaza disaster (Hemphill & White, 2018), though sustaining these gains remains a challenge.

To strengthen enforcement, the government must enhance labour inspection systems, increase inspector capacity, and provide adequate training. Trade unions and worker organizations are essential for collective bargaining, but face legal constraints, employer resistance, and resource limitations. Although amendments to the Labour Act were introduced in 2013, gaps remain, particularly regarding freedom of association and collective bargaining.

Gender-specific challenges such as harassment, discrimination, and unequal pay require targeted interventions, including gender-sensitive workplace policies, childcare facilities, and equal access to training and promotion. Despite constitutional guarantees, women

¹⁷ Hossain, M., & Khan, R. Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment Industry: Growth, Employment, and Socio-Economic Impacts. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2020.

workers continue to face barriers to legal remedies due to weak enforcement, social norms, and power imbalances.

4.5 Current Labour Rights Movement in Bangladesh

The labour rights movement in Bangladesh involves trade unions, NGOs, international organizations, and advocacy groups working through collective bargaining, legal assistance, and awareness campaigns. Despite progress, the movement faces significant challenges, including restrictive labour laws, employer intimidation, and limited financial and institutional resources.

Given the RMG sector's economic importance and the vulnerability of women workers, comprehensive research on labour rights is essential. Such research can identify legal gaps, policy weaknesses, and effective strategies for promoting gender equality and decent work. Persistent issues such as informal employment, youth unemployment, skills mismatches, and limited female participation require urgent policy attention.¹⁸

4.6 Conclusion

The ready-made garment sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy and a major source of employment for women. While it has contributed significantly to economic growth and poverty reduction, the sector continues to face serious labour rights challenges, including unsafe working conditions, discrimination, and exploitation of women workers.

Ensuring sustainable and inclusive growth requires strengthening labour laws, improving enforcement mechanisms, promoting social dialogue, and empowering women workers. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for protecting workers' rights but also for ensuring the long-term competitiveness and ethical integrity of Bangladesh's RMG industry.

¹⁸ Hemphill, T. A., & White, G. O. The Bangladesh Accord, Worker Safety, and Corporate Responsibility. *Business and Society Review* 123, no. 4 (2018): 567–589.

International Labour Organization (ILO). *Strengthening Labour Inspection and Compliance in Bangladesh*. Geneva: ILO, 2019.

CHAPTER FIVE

Protection of Labour Rights in Bangladesh

5.1 Overview

Over the past two decades, the ready-made garment (RMG) industry has emerged as the economic backbone of Bangladesh. The country is currently the world's second-largest exporter of garments, with the sector contributing more than 80 percent of total export earnings. Approximately 4.5 million workers are employed in this industry, of whom nearly 80 percent are women (Parveen et al., 2019). Within this sector, women's labour rights are shaped by a complex interaction of economic, social, and political factors.

The contribution of the RMG industry to Bangladesh's economic growth is undeniable. The rapid expansion of the apparel sector has significantly enhanced export earnings and employment generation. However, despite these achievements, the industry continues to face persistent challenges related to labour rights violations, substandard working conditions, and occupational safety concerns. Women workers, in particular, experience multiple forms of discrimination and exploitation, including lower wages, excessive working hours, and sexual harassment.

Working conditions in the garment industry are widely recognized as demanding, characterized by long hours, low wages, and unsafe environments (Mahmud et al., 2017). Many workers report verbal abuse, denial of leave, and compulsory overtime without adequate compensation. Although Bangladesh has made notable progress in expanding its garment industry, meeting international labour standards and consumer expectations remains a significant challenge.

Addressing labour rights issues in the RMG sector requires coordinated action by the government, employers, trade unions, and international organizations. The government plays a central role in enforcing labour laws and promoting collective bargaining, while employers are responsible for ensuring fair wages, safe workplaces, and opportunities for skills development. Trade unions contribute by advocating for workers' rights and monitoring compliance, and international organizations provide technical assistance and promote global best practices. Ensuring women's empowerment and meaningful participation in decision-

making processes is essential for achieving sustainable and equitable development within the RMG sector.

5.2 Garment Industries in Bangladesh: Scenario

The ready-made garment industry has served as Bangladesh's economic lifeline for more than two decades (Chowdhury et al., 2019). As the second-largest garment exporter globally, the sector accounts for over 80 percent of national export earnings and employs approximately 4.5 million workers, the majority of whom are women. Despite its economic significance, the industry continues to struggle with widespread labour rights violations, inadequate working conditions, and serious safety concerns.

A major challenge in ensuring compliance with labour laws is the failure of many factories to maintain accurate records of working hours, wages, and employment conditions. Weak monitoring systems and insufficient enforcement mechanisms further undermine compliance with labour and safety regulations. Additionally, limited worker participation in occupational health and safety programs reduces the effectiveness of existing safety measures.

The RMG sector is characterized by long working hours, low wages, and hazardous working environments (Tania & Sultana, 2015). Workers are frequently subjected to verbal abuse, denied statutory leave, and compelled to work overtime without compensation. Gender-based violence and workplace harassment remain pervasive, with women workers being particularly vulnerable. Although legal protections exist, enforcement remains weak, and accountability for violations is often lacking.

Fire hazards, electrical faults, and structural weaknesses continue to pose serious risks in garment factories. Electrical short circuits are among the most common causes of factory fires, resulting in significant economic and human losses (Mizanuzzaman, 2016). Following the Tazreen Fashion fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, over 190 international brands signed the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh to improve factory safety standards (Brown, 2015). These developments marked a turning point in global attention to workplace safety in Bangladesh's RMG sector.¹⁹

¹⁹ Parveen, S., Hossain, M., & Rahman, A. *Women Workers and Labour Rights in Bangladesh's RMG Sector*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, 2019, 15–28.

5.3 Legal Provisions

Bangladesh's labour rights framework is primarily governed by the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (amended in 2018), and the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority Labour Law, 2019. These legal instruments establish provisions for minimum wages, working hours, overtime pay, maternity benefits, workplace safety, and protection against discrimination and harassment. However, enforcement of these laws remains inconsistent, and many factories fail to comply fully with legal requirements.

Although the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equality and non-discrimination, the practical enforcement of these rights within the RMG sector is often limited. Gaps persist in addressing gender-based violence, freedom of association, and collective bargaining. In addition, the Labour Act does not cover many informal-sector workers, including domestic and agricultural workers, who represent a significant portion of the labour force.

Bangladesh has ratified several core International Labour Organization conventions, including Convention No. 100 on Equal Remuneration and Convention No. 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation. These conventions provide an international framework for labour protection; however, their effective implementation at the national level remains a challenge.

Maternity Leave and Cash Benefit Payment System

Maternity leave and cash benefits are vital labour rights for women workers, particularly in the RMG sector. These benefits allow women to protect their health and care for their newborns without facing financial insecurity. Although legal provisions exist for maternity leave and benefits, many factories fail to comply, exposing women workers to economic hardship and health risks. Ensuring compliance with maternity benefit regulations is essential for promoting gender equality and safeguarding women's well-being.

Mahmud, S., Ahmed, F., & Islam, R. "Working Conditions and Labour Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Industry." *Journal of Asian Labour Studies* 6, no. 1 (2017): 45–62.

Chowdhury, R., Reinecke, J., & Lund-Thomsen, P. *Global Supply Chains and Labour Standards in Bangladesh*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 90–105.

Despite its substantial contribution to economic growth and export earnings, the RMG sector continues to face challenges related to labour rights, workplace safety, and environmental sustainability. Addressing these issues is critical for ensuring long-term industrial stability.²⁰

5.4 Institutional Framework

The protection of labour rights in Bangladesh involves a complex institutional framework comprising government agencies, employer associations, trade unions, and international organizations. The Ministry of Labour and Employment is responsible for labour policy and enforcement, while the Department of Inspections for Factories and Establishments conducts factory inspections to ensure compliance with labour laws and safety standards.

The Bangladesh Employers' Federation represents the interests of factory owners, while trade unions advocate for workers' rights and collective bargaining. However, trade union activities are often constrained by legal restrictions, employer resistance, and limited resources. International organizations such as the International Labour Organization and the World Bank support labour reforms, capacity building, and workplace safety initiatives.

Following the Rana Plaza disaster, transnational governance initiatives such as the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety were established. These initiatives significantly improved factory safety through inspections, remediation programs, and safety training (Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). Despite progress, ensuring the sustainability and long-term effectiveness of these initiatives remains a challenge.

5.5 Protection of Labour Rights

Women constitute the majority of the workforce in Bangladesh's RMG sector, yet they face disproportionate challenges, including low wages, unsafe working conditions, long hours, and systemic discrimination. Limited access to healthcare, childcare facilities, and training

²⁰ Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 (as amended in 2018). Dhaka: Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Khan, T., & Rahman, M. *Maternity Benefits and Women Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Sector*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, 2020, 40–58

opportunities further exacerbates their vulnerability. Despite existing legal protections, discrimination in recruitment, promotion, and skill development persists.

While the RMG sector has contributed to women's economic empowerment by providing employment opportunities, it has also exposed women to exploitation and workplace hazards (Sharma, 2020). Initiatives such as the Bangladesh Accord and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have improved safety standards, but stronger enforcement and greater worker participation are necessary to sustain these improvements.

Protecting labour rights and promoting gender equality are essential for achieving sustainable and inclusive development. This study seeks to identify sustainability-related challenges in the RMG sector, assess their significance, and analyze barriers to achieving labour rights at the worker level (Akhter et al., 1970). The research examines the effectiveness of the existing legal framework, focusing on wages, working hours, workplace safety, freedom of association, and protection against discrimination and harassment.²¹

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter examines the implementation and enforcement of labour laws in Bangladesh's RMG sector, emphasizing the roles of government agencies, factory owners, and trade unions. It assesses the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms and identifies obstacles that hinder compliance. The chapter also explores the lived realities of women workers, including wage levels, working hours, workplace safety, and access to healthcare.

Persistent labour rights violations highlight the gap between legal provisions and practical implementation. Strengthening enforcement, empowering women workers, and promoting social dialogue are essential to ensuring decent working conditions. Protecting labour rights in the RMG sector is not only a matter of social justice but also a prerequisite for sustainable economic development and long-term industrial growth in Bangladesh.

²¹ Ashraf, H., & Prentice, R. Beyond Factory Safety: Transnational Governance and Labour Rights in Bangladesh's RMG Sector. *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2019): 780–798.

International Labour Organization (ILO). *Labour Inspection and Institutional Capacity Building in Bangladesh*. Geneva: ILO, 2018.

CHAPTER SIX

Constitution

6.1 Constitutional Provisions

This chapter examines constitutional safeguards for women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector and compares the application of maternity leave provisions in foreign-owned and locally owned factories. Such comparison helps reveal the extent of labour rights violations and the structural and institutional factors contributing to them. The study also highlights women's agency and their ongoing struggle for wage justice within the garment industry.

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides several fundamental rights that form the legal foundation for protecting women workers, including those employed in the RMG sector (Saha, 2023). Key constitutional provisions include:

- **Article 28** guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth. It explicitly affirms that women shall enjoy equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life.
- **Article 15** obligates the State to ensure basic necessities, including the right to work at reasonable wages, along with reasonable rest, recreation, and leisure.
- **Article 20** recognizes work as a right, duty, and matter of honor, affirming that all citizens must be fairly remunerated for their labor.
- **Article 34** strictly prohibits forced labor in all forms.
- **Article 38** guarantees freedom of association, including the right to form trade unions.

Together, these constitutional guarantees provide a strong normative framework for labor rights protection and aim to shield women workers from discrimination and exploitation. Complementing these constitutional provisions, the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 includes regulations on workplace safety, industrial accidents, working conditions, trade union rights, working hours, and worker welfare.

6.2 ILO Conventions

The RMG sector has grown rapidly over recent decades, becoming a major driver of Bangladesh's economic development and employment generation. However, this growth has been accompanied by persistent challenges related to labor rights, workplace safety, and working conditions—issues that disproportionately affect women workers. Health and safety concerns in garment factories are influenced by workplace environments, living conditions, age, health vulnerabilities, exposure to fire hazards, and access to medical facilities.²²

Although the sector employs approximately three million women, many workers face low wages, job insecurity, and limited respect for their labor rights. These challenges often result in widespread noncompliance with labor laws, negatively affecting productivity and sustainability (Haque et al., 2020). The garment industry, which relies heavily on female labor, continues to experience frequent violations related to wages, promotion opportunities, and workplace safety.

The RMG industry remains Bangladesh's most successful export sector, generating substantial foreign currency earnings and contributing significantly to poverty reduction and employment creation (Chowdhury & Keya, 2022). Despite exporting over USD 32 billion annually, workers earn on average only USD 68 per month (Adnan, 2018). While women constitute a relatively small share of the total employed population nationwide, their contribution to national income through the RMG sector is immense (Carlson & Bitsch, 2018).

The sector has undoubtedly expanded employment opportunities for women from rural areas, where domestic service was often the only alternative (Mahmud, 2017; Zohra et al., 2025). Nevertheless, the industry has faced sustained criticism for labor practices involving gender discrimination, inadequate safety measures, and restrictions on freedom of association (Sharma, 2020). These conditions undermine women's dignity and limit their ability to achieve economic empowerment.

²² Saha, P. Constitutional Protection of Women Workers in Bangladesh. Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2023, 32–48.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Articles 15, 20, 28, 34, and 38.

Ensuring the sustainability of the RMG sector requires comprehensive strategies that promote gender equality, ensure fair wages, improve workplace safety, and integrate environmental sustainability initiatives. Human resource management must receive particular attention, as workers are the primary drivers of productivity and quality performance in the sector. Combining qualitative and quantitative analysis allows for a deeper understanding of labor rights challenges and supports factory resilience through structural reform (Ansary & Barua, 2015).

The International Labour Organization (ILO), a specialized agency of the United Nations, establishes international labor standards and promotes decent work worldwide (ILO, 2023). Bangladesh has been a member of the ILO since 1972 and has ratified eight of the ten core ILO conventions. Among the most relevant conventions for women workers in the RMG sector are:

- **Convention No. 100 (1951)** on Equal Remuneration, which mandates equal pay for work of equal value.
- **Convention No. 111 (1958)** on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, which prohibits discrimination based on sex and other grounds.
- **Convention No. 190 (2019)** on Violence and Harassment, the first international treaty recognizing the right to a workplace free from violence and harassment, including gender-based abuse.

These conventions provide an essential international framework for protecting women workers' rights and promoting workplace equality in Bangladesh.²³

6.3 Relevant Case

Compliance with national labor laws and international standards prescribed by foreign buyers and certification bodies remains a critical issue in Bangladesh's RMG sector. Research consistently identifies a significant gap between existing labor laws and their practical implementation. Although the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 contains provisions

²³ Haque, M., Sultana, N., & Rahman, M. "Labour Rights Compliance and Women Workers in Bangladesh's RMG Sector." *Asian Journal of Labour Studies* 8, no. 2 (2020): 120–135.

aimed at safeguarding women workers, these protections are often ignored, particularly regarding workplace safety.

This discrepancy highlights the urgent need for stronger enforcement mechanisms and greater awareness among both employers and employees. Examining the legal framework alongside its real-world application is necessary to identify shortcomings and improve access to justice for women workers. The Constitution of Bangladesh further reinforces labor protections by guaranteeing equality and prohibiting sex-based discrimination, though implementation challenges persist. Relevant Case: Bangladesh National Women Lawyer Association (BNWLA) v. Government of Bangladesh (Writ Petition No. 5916 of 2008):

6.4 Geneva Conventions and International Safety Initiatives

Labor rights protections in Bangladesh are further reinforced through international conventions and global safety initiatives. While the Bangladesh Labour Act addresses occupational safety and welfare, it often falls short of international standards (Saha, 2023). Following the Rana Plaza collapse, global organizations initiated coordinated efforts to improve factory safety and accountability.

The **Accord on Fire and Building Safety** and the **Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety** emerged as major initiatives aimed at improving structural integrity and fire safety in RMG factories (Hemphill & White, 2018). Although these initiatives have contributed to improved inspection and remediation systems, limitations remain in ensuring comprehensive corporate responsibility (Barua et al., 2020).

Inadequate numbers of trained inspectors, limited resources, and weak data collection mechanisms continue to undermine workplace safety enforcement. These challenges pose serious risks to the predominantly female workforce. Strengthening labor law enforcement requires stricter penalties for noncompliance and recognition of the Accord as a minimum standard for corporate responsibility.

Women comprise approximately 85 percent of the workforce across more than 5,000 garment factories, making workplace safety compliance essential not only for worker welfare but also for global competitiveness and business sustainability (Parveen et al., 2019). The long-term viability of the RMG sector depends on improving social conditions, fostering stable supplier relationships, and supporting economic advancement for vulnerable

workers. Existing health and safety standards remain inadequate, with workers frequently suffering from occupational health problems.

6.5 Conclusion

Ensuring compliance with labor laws and improving working conditions are fundamental to the ethical sustainability and long-term viability of Bangladesh's RMG sector. Achieving these goals requires coordinated efforts among government agencies, factory owners, international buyers, and civil society organizations.

This study analyzes labor laws, factory inspection reports, company policies, and NGO documentation to provide a comprehensive assessment of women's labor rights in the RMG industry. It evaluates the effectiveness of legal frameworks, particularly the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, in protecting women workers and identifies gaps that hinder meaningful enforcement. Addressing these challenges is essential for promoting gender equality, ensuring decent work, and sustaining Bangladesh's position in the global garment industry.

Chapter Seven

Findings, Analysis, and Interpretation of the Study

7.1 Observations

This study evaluates the enforcement of labour rights in Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector by examining enforcement mechanisms, compliance levels, and the accessibility of legal remedies for women garment workers. By identifying gaps between statutory labour protections and actual workplace practices, the research highlights key weaknesses in implementation and enforcement. The analysis draws on both qualitative and quantitative data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and trends related to women's working conditions, labour rights violations, and the effectiveness of existing interventions.

The findings reveal that while legal and institutional frameworks exist to protect workers, their practical application remains limited. Women workers continue to face significant challenges, including unsafe working conditions, inadequate enforcement of labour standards, and restricted access to justice. Addressing these shortcomings is essential for improving labour rights protections and enhancing workplace conditions in the RMG sector. Beyond labour rights concerns, the study finds that structural limitations hinder the long-term sustainability of the industry. The absence of research and development units and comprehensive marketing strategies constrains competitiveness in the global apparel market. Workplace safety failures have repeatedly undermined the sector's economic achievements, despite its substantial contribution to exports and employment. Improving occupational safety not only protects workers but also enhances productivity, worker morale, and overall industrial performance.

The findings further indicate that effective supply chain management is critical for sustainable growth. Decision-makers must coordinate strategies, strengthen collaboration with supply chain partners, ensure information sharing, implement standardized operating procedures, and comply with codes of conduct while adapting to technological advancements (Hossain & Roy, 2016). This requires a holistic commitment from top management, including the adoption of lean manufacturing practices to achieve long-term efficiency and sustainability.

Although the RMG industry has remained a major source of foreign exchange for over two decades, product quality and service standards remain inconsistent. The study underscores

the need for improved education and technical training for factory owners, managers, and workers in apparel manufacturing and textile technologies (ATM et al., 2018). Current health and safety standards remain below those of developed countries, highlighting the urgency for systemic reform. Future research may adopt advanced quantitative techniques to examine causal relationships within the RMG supply chain and extend the findings to other industrial sectors (Uddin et al., 2022).

7.2 Recommendations

To ensure the continued economic contribution of the RMG sector, the study recommends prioritizing improvements in productivity, quality, efficiency, and managerial capacity (Bashar & Hasin, 2019). As the industry plays a critical socioeconomic role by providing employment—particularly for women—it is imperative to address both the physical and psychological challenges faced by female workers, including gender-based discrimination and workplace harassment.

Investment in modern technologies, organizational capabilities, and information systems is essential for the sector's advancement. Addressing informational and operational barriers will facilitate a transition from traditional production methods to environmentally sustainable and ethically responsible practices. The adoption of greener production techniques can enhance global competitiveness while supporting environmental conservation goals (Reza et al., 2017). Improved waste management systems and environmental controls are also necessary to reduce the industry's ecological footprint (Alom, 2016).

Employing approximately 4.5 million workers—most of whom are women—across nearly 4,500 factories, the RMG sector remains central to Bangladesh's economic development and progress toward the Sustainable Development Goals. Strengthening labour management practices and enforcing labour laws are critical to preventing industrial unrest. Research-driven policy interventions can empower women workers, improve working conditions, and reinforce collective bargaining mechanisms.

Given that the RMG industry accounts for nearly 77 percent of Bangladesh's foreign exchange earnings and employs around half of the country's industrial workforce, stricter environmental regulations—particularly in dyeing and finishing processes—are essential to reduce water pollution and energy consumption (Shahria, 2019). Future research should explore barriers to adopting green supply chain management practices in Bangladesh's textile sector to support long-term sustainability.²⁴

²⁴ Hossain, M., & Roy, S. *Supply Chain Management and Sustainability in Bangladesh's RMG Sector*. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies, 2016, 60–78.

7.3 Conclusion

The findings underscore the necessity for the RMG sector to balance economic objectives with environmental and social responsibilities. Integrating environmental management systems with human resource practices can significantly improve workplace safety and enhance the overall well-being of women workers. Continuous monitoring, evaluation, and reform are required to ensure compliance with labour laws and adherence to international environmental and social standards (Aziz et al., 2020).

Strengthening legal and ethical frameworks is essential to safeguarding the rights and dignity of women employed in the RMG sector. The adoption of green management practices can improve working environments, reduce environmental harm, and contribute to sustainable industrial development (Rahman & Kazi, 2021). Ultimately, addressing labour rights, environmental sustainability, and managerial efficiency is crucial for ensuring the long-term resilience and ethical viability of Bangladesh's ready-made garment industry.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion and Recommendations

8.1 Conclusion

The long-term sustainability of Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry depends on integrating environmental challenges—particularly climate change and water scarcity—into strategic business planning (Hasan et al., 2020). Prioritizing worker safety and well-being not only improves operational efficiency but also enhances the global reputation of the garment sector. Existing literature consistently highlights systemic labor exploitation through low and irregular wages, underscoring the urgent need for wage justice and the empowerment of women workers.

A comparative analysis of maternity leave policies across locally owned and foreign-owned factories reveals disparities in implementation, indicating areas where policy enforcement and compliance require strengthening (Akter, 2021). In addition, examining barriers to green supply chain adoption and incorporating the perspectives of industry practitioners can inform policy development and increase awareness of environmentally sustainable practices (Tumpa et al., 2019). Sustainable supply chain management is essential for reducing environmental harm, and emerging technologies such as blockchain offer opportunities to improve traceability, transparency, and compliance with environmental regulations (Amin et al., 2025).

Social sustainability is equally critical to the industry's future. Strategies that support vulnerable workers, promote gender equality, and encourage long-term partnerships between suppliers and multinational buyers can contribute to economic stability and inclusive growth (Asif, 2017). However, the absence of unified global legislation and limited intergovernmental coordination present significant obstacles to sustainability in the textile sector, emphasizing the need for shared responsibility among governments, brands, and manufacturers.

Empowering women workers in the RMG sector requires addressing persistent challenges such as discrimination, workplace harassment, and restricted access to legal remedies (Sharma & Narula, 2020). This calls for the establishment of new initiatives, institutions, and standards that advance both social and environmental sustainability (Siliņa et al., 2024).

A comprehensive examination of the legal framework, working conditions, and stakeholder roles is necessary to identify implementation gaps and enhance social sustainability practices (Akbar & Ahsan, 2020). Addressing unauthorized subcontracting and strengthening enforcement of social compliance codes are also essential for safeguarding labor rights.²⁵

In the post-COVID-19 context, adopting sustainable sourcing models that incorporate risk-sharing mechanisms between global brands and suppliers is increasingly important (Majumdar et al., 2020). This study evaluates the extent of labor rights violations affecting women workers, identifies contributing factors, and proposes strategies to strengthen labor protections in Bangladesh's RMG sector. Through an extensive review of literature, legal analysis, and empirical research, the study provides insights into the complex interaction of economic, legal, and social forces shaping women's working conditions.

The research emphasizes sustainability as a guiding principle for addressing ecological degradation and social injustice within global supply chains (Chan et al., 2024). It also highlights the need to examine women's workplace status with respect to wages, promotions, occupational safety, and job security, while identifying discriminatory practices and proposing corrective measures (Haque et al., 2020). Primary data were collected through questionnaires administered to 200 female workers across 24 garment factories, enabling a grounded assessment of lived experiences.

The findings contribute to understanding women's struggles for fair wages and broader labor rights, as well as their potential role in advancing collective labor movements (Dey & Basak, 2017). Health and safety issues remain a critical concern, with many female workers experiencing anemia and other health problems linked to poor nutrition and demanding working conditions, leading to productivity losses (Hossain et al., 2019). While the RMG sector has significantly expanded employment opportunities for women and supported

²⁵ Hasan, S., Hossain, M., & Karim, A. Sustainability and Environmental Challenges in Bangladesh's Garment Industry. *International Journal of Business and Social Research* 10, no. 4 (2020): 56–75.

Akter, F. Maternity Protection and Policy Compliance in Bangladesh's RMG Sector. Dhaka: Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies, 2021, 40–55.

Tumpa, T. J., Ali, S. M., Rahman, M. H., & Paul, S. K. "Barriers to Green Supply Chain Management in the Textile Industry." *Journal of Cleaner Production* 236 (2019): 117587.

economic growth, persistent infrastructure challenges, political instability, and weak management practices continue to undermine sustainability (Chowdhury & Keya, 2022).

Human resource management practices and total quality management systems are essential for maintaining sustainable competitive advantage in the RMG sector, indicating the need for further research and reform in these areas (Rashid et al., 2020). Ultimately, the industry's long-term success depends on adopting cleaner technologies, environmentally responsible management practices, and effective labor governance aligned with global buyer expectations. A mixed-methods research approach combining qualitative and quantitative analysis enables a comprehensive understanding of women's labor rights and the effectiveness of existing protective mechanisms. Since independence, the RMG sector has remained a leading contributor to national income, job creation, and poverty reduction, reinforcing its central role in Bangladesh's economic development.

8.2 Recommendations

The ready-made garment sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, ranking as the world's second-largest garment exporter and employing approximately 4.2 million workers across more than 5,000 factories—most of whom are women (Hossain & Khan, 2020). Although the sector employs a relatively small share of the total population, it generates a substantial proportion of foreign exchange earnings and provides employment opportunities for individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds with limited educational attainment (Carlson & Bitsch, 2018).

Despite its economic importance, the RMG sector continues to face serious challenges related to labor rights, including low wages, excessive working hours, and unsafe working environments. These issues adversely affect worker well-being and threaten the industry's global reputation and sustainability. Strengthening internal controls, promoting ethical practices, and ensuring regulatory compliance are therefore essential for the sector's long-term viability.

Protecting women's labor rights is central to achieving decent work and sustainable development within the RMG industry. Interviews with female garment workers, labor rights advocates, and industry stakeholders reveal persistent safety concerns, with nearly 1,000 factories still requiring comprehensive safety assessments (Ansary & Barua, 2015). Safety inspections alone are insufficient unless structural weaknesses in factory buildings are addressed and resilience measures are implemented. Balancing cost efficiency with worker safety is critical for preserving the industry's international standing (Rab & Hoque, 2017).

A sustainable development strategy must integrate environmental responsibility with social justice. The rapid expansion of the RMG sector has created unprecedented employment opportunities for women, particularly from rural areas where domestic service was once the primary alternative. Raising minimum wages, improving factory conditions, and ensuring maternity benefits can significantly enhance workers' quality of life and overall welfare.

The adoption of lean manufacturing practices—such as improved information sharing and just-in-time production—can enhance efficiency and reduce waste, but these reforms require strong commitment from top management. Persistent noncompliance with labor laws underscores the need for stricter enforcement mechanisms and greater accountability within

the sector. International organizations and NGOs have played a vital role in improving factory safety through inspections and remediation efforts, and continued collaboration is necessary to maintain progress (Rubya, 2015).

Although initiatives launched after the Rana Plaza disaster improved awareness of workplace safety, concerns remain regarding their effectiveness in ensuring long-term structural integrity. Enhanced cooperation from factory owners is required to systematically record occupational health and safety data, supported by trained personnel and adequate monitoring equipment (Akhter et al., 2019). Such measures would enable evidence-based policymaking and better protection for the predominantly female workforce.

Improving workplace safety can reduce accidents, injuries, and operational disruptions, thereby supporting business sustainability in the global market (Parveen et al., 2019). Strategies that prioritize vulnerable workers and foster long-term partnerships between suppliers and transnational corporations are essential for sustainable industry growth (Asif, 2017). However, women workers' rights continue to be violated in areas such as working conditions, wages, working hours, health and safety, and maternity benefits, leaving them particularly vulnerable (Saha, 2023).

This study evaluates the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and proposes recommendations for strengthening labor governance and promoting decent work. By employing both qualitative and quantitative research methods—including surveys, interviews, and focus group discussions—the study offers a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities for advancing gender equality and labor rights in the RMG sector. The findings aim to inform policy formulation and practical interventions that support inclusive and sustainable growth, improve worker well-being, and build a more equitable garment industry in Bangladesh (Nuruzzaman, 2015; Asif, 2017).²⁶

²⁶ Ansary, M. A., & Barua, U. “Workplace Safety Compliance in Bangladesh’s RMG Sector after Rana Plaza.” *Journal of Safety Research* 52 (2015): 87–97.

Rab, M. A., & Hoque, M. R. *Cost Efficiency versus Worker Safety in the Garment Industry*. Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, 2017, 55–72.

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