



Research Monograph

On

A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh

Research Monograph Submitted for the partial fulfilment of the award of the degree

in

LL.B. (Honours)

Department of Law

Sonargaon University (SU)

Submitted by:

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ID No. LLB2203027047

Program: LL.B. (Honours)

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Submitted To:

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Date of Submission: 25/06/2026

Dedicated
to
My Beloved Mother, with Love and
Gratitude



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Letter of Transmittal

To

Naimul Razzaque

Lecturer,

Department of Law

Sonargaon University (SU)

Subject: Submission of Research Monograph on "A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh"

Sir,

This is a great pleasure to submit the Research Monograph on "A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh" as a partial requirement for the fulfillment of my LL.B. (Honours) course under the Department of Law of the Sonargaon University (SU).

I have given due efforts to make this Research Monograph as fruitful one and to make it as informative as possible. I hope that this paper will not be the formality of academic course completion rather it will be a source of information for other purpose on this topic.

Sincerely yours,

Ashikur Rahman Sarkar

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Program: LL.B. (Honours)

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Declaration

I hereby solemnly declare that the research monograph entitled “A Study on Labour Rights for Women in Readmade Garment Industries of Bangladesh” has been prepared solely by me and submitted to the Department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU), in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of LL.B. (Honours).

I further declare that this is my original work and has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, to any other university or institution for the award of any degree, diploma, or similar qualification. All sources of information used in this research have been duly acknowledged.

Ashikur Rahman Sarkar

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Certification by the Supervisor

This is to certify that the work presented in this dissertation is based on the work, carried out by the author herself under my supervision in Department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU).

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

Lecturer

Department of Law

Sonargaon University (SU)

Acknowledgement

In the name of Allah ,whose endless blessing and guidance enabled me to successfully complete this Research Monograph. It is a matter of great pleasure and a significant milestone in my academic life.Becoming a competent lawyer has always been a cherished dream of mine,and my admission to the Department of Law at Sonargaon University(SU) was a step towards fulfilling that aspiration.This research work has provided me with a valuable opportunity to apply me knowledge and skills in a practical and meaningful way.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my respected course teacher,Mr.Naimul Razzaque, for his invaluable guidance,constant support, and thoughtful instructions throughout the preparation of this research work.Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge my sincere appreciation to all the authors and researchers whose works have been consulted and have enriched this monograph.

Finally,I extend my heartfelt thanks to everyone who,directly or indirectly,inspired and supported me in completing this Research Monograph.

Thank You

Ashikur Rahman Sarkar

Abstract

The readymade garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh constitutes a central pillar of the national economy, contributing over 80% of total export earnings and employing more than four million workers. Notably, women—predominantly from rural and socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds—represent approximately 60–70% of the workforce. Their participation has significantly transformed economic structures and gender relations by challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and extending women’s roles beyond domestic spheres. Nevertheless, their socio-economic advancement continues to be constrained by persistent violations of labour rights, unsafe working conditions, and limited access to effective legal remedies.

This study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the labour rights of female RMG workers within a legal and socio-political framework. It critically examines relevant national and international legal instruments, including the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (as amended), corresponding rules and regulations, and international conventions such as ILO Conventions No. 100 (Equal Remuneration), No. 111 (Discrimination in Employment), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Employing a qualitative doctrinal methodology, the study integrates case law, policy analyses, reports from non-governmental organizations, academic literature, and expert opinions to identify the disparity between statutory protections and their practical enforcement.

The findings reveal a substantial gap between legal guarantees and workplace realities. Although statutory provisions ensure equal remuneration, maternity benefits, protection against workplace

harassment, and occupational safety, female workers frequently encounter wage discrimination, informal employment arrangements, limited union representation, and systemic gender bias. Common challenges include delayed or irregular payment of wages, denial of statutory benefits, unpaid overtime, and the absence of formal employment contracts, thereby exposing workers to exploitation and arbitrary termination.

Workplace safety remains a pressing concern, notwithstanding reforms initiated following major industrial disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013. While initiatives like the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have contributed to improvements, compliance remains inconsistent, particularly among smaller factories. Persistent issues include inadequate ventilation, insufficient lighting, overcrowded workspaces, excessive working hours, and unsafe emergency exits. Moreover, gender-based violence and sexual harassment are prevalent yet significantly underreported due to inadequate grievance mechanisms, a shortage of female labour inspectors, and fear of retaliation.

The study further identifies the marginalization of women in trade unions and collective bargaining processes, despite their numerical majority in the workforce. Structural, cultural, and institutional barriers—alongside male-dominated union leadership and concerns over job security—limit women’s participation and representation. Informal workers, particularly those engaged in subcontracting arrangements or home-based production, face even greater vulnerabilities, operating outside formal legal protections with minimal wages, excessive working hours, and no access to social security benefits.

Institutional limitations exacerbate these challenges, as the Department of Labour is constrained by insufficient funding, inadequate staffing, and

limited administrative capacity. Labour inspections are often irregular, superficial, or compromised by corruption, while access to legal redress remains slow, costly, and largely inaccessible. Additionally, the absence of sex-disaggregated labour data impedes the formulation of effective, evidence-based policies.

In light of these findings, the study proposes a series of comprehensive policy reforms. These include the amendment of the Bangladesh Labour Act to incorporate gender-specific provisions such as mandatory childcare facilities, menstrual leave, and strengthened anti-harassment safeguards. It further recommends enhancing labour inspection mechanisms through increased funding, specialized training, and the recruitment of female inspectors. The establishment of accessible, independent grievance redress systems, including provisions for anonymous reporting, is also essential. Moreover, formalizing informal labour arrangements and extending legal protections to marginalized workers are critical priorities. Promoting female leadership within trade unions through targeted training and affirmative measures is recommended to ensure greater representation and advocacy.

Ultimately, the study underscores the necessity of a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach involving the government, factory owners, trade unions, civil society, international buyers, and labour organizations. Without sustained and collective efforts to strengthen enforcement, improve working conditions, and address structural inequalities, the objective of ensuring equitable, safe, and dignified employment for women in Bangladesh's RMG sector will remain unattainable, thereby undermining both social justice and the long-term sustainability of the industry.

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Chapter1

Introduction

1.1 Background of the study

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector is one of the most important industries in Bangladesh and plays a major role in the country's economy. Since the 1980s, this sector has grown rapidly and become the largest source of export earnings. At present, the RMG industry contributes around 84% of Bangladesh's total export revenue and provides employment to more than 4.5 million workers. A large proportion of these workers are women, many of whom come from low-income families in rural and urban areas.

The growth of the RMG sector has created significant opportunities for women. It has enabled many women to enter the formal workforce for the first time, helping them become financially independent and contribute to their families' well-being. As a result, women's participation in the garment industry has positively influenced household income, children's education, and poverty reduction. It has also challenged traditional social norms regarding women's roles in society.

Despite these positive contributions, women workers in the RMG sector continue to face various labour rights challenges. Many female workers experience wage discrimination, workplace harassment, unsafe working conditions, limited maternity benefits, restrictions on trade union activities, and unfair termination of employment. Although Bangladesh has labour laws and is committed to several international labour standards, the implementation of these laws is often inadequate. Women workers, especially those with limited education and legal awareness, frequently find it difficult to claim their rights and seek remedies for violations.

The situation became more evident after major industrial disasters such as the Tazreen Fashions fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013. These tragic incidents resulted in the deaths of thousands of workers, many of whom were women, and exposed serious weaknesses in workplace safety and corporate accountability within the garment industry. The events also highlighted the urgent need for stronger protection of workers' rights, particularly for women.

Against this background, this study examines the labour rights of women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector. It explores the legal and institutional frameworks governing their employment, identifies the challenges they face in the workplace, and evaluates the effectiveness of existing protections. The study also aims to provide recommendations for improving labour laws, policies, and enforcement mechanisms to ensure greater justice, dignity, and equality for women workers in the **garment industry**.

1. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Annual Report 2023, Dhaka:

BGMEA, 2023.

2. Naila Kabeer, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka*. (Verso 2000).

3. World Bank, *Empowering Women in the Garment Sector*, 2022

4. Human Rights Watch, *Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most*, 2015.

1.2 Rationale and Importance of the Study

This study is based on the understanding that women workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector face a number of challenges that are closely linked to both gender inequality and labour rights issues. Although the garment industry has contributed significantly to the country's economic growth, the experiences and rights of women workers have not always received adequate attention in academic research. Most studies focus on the economic success of the sector, while the specific legal and social challenges faced by female workers are often overlooked.

The importance of this study lies in its attempt to examine the realities faced by women working in the RMG industry. Despite making up a large portion of the workforce, many women continue to experience unequal treatment in the workplace. They often face wage discrimination, limited opportunities for promotion, workplace harassment, and inadequate participation in decision-making processes and trade union activities. These issues affect not only their working conditions but also their overall well-being and dignity.

Another important aspect of this research is its evaluation of the legal protections available to women workers. The study examines the effectiveness of national laws, particularly the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, as well as Bangladesh's obligations under international labour and human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and relevant International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions. Through this analysis, the research seeks to identify gaps between legal standards and actual workplace practices.

This study is also important from a policy perspective. Its findings may help policymakers, labour rights organizations, human rights advocates, and industry stakeholders better understand the challenges faced by women workers and develop more effective measures to protect their rights. In addition, the study may contribute to ongoing discussions regarding ethical business practices and responsible supply chain management in the garment industry.

-
5. Rahman, M., and Bhattacharya, D., Bangladesh's Apparel Sector in Post-Rana Plaza Era, CPD Occasional Paper Series, 2020.
 6. ActionAid Bangladesh, Women in the Garment Industry: Realities, Challenges, and Prospects, 2019.
 7. Ethical Trading Initiative, Gender Equity in Global Supply Chains: A Business Guide, 2021.

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

<https://doi.org/10.1093/joccuh/uiae007>

1.4 Research Questions

Guided by the above objectives, this study addresses the following key research questions:

1. What are the main legal, constitutional, and institutional mechanisms governing labour rights in Bangladesh, and how effectively do they address gender-specific issues?
2. How has the evolution of women's participation in industrial labour, specifically within the RMG sector, unfolded over time?
3. What are the prevalent labour rights violations experienced by female garment workers, and which socio-legal factors contribute to their ongoing vulnerability?
4. To what extent do existing national laws and international obligations align with the enforcement, redress, and representation realities experienced by women workers?
5. What specific reforms legal, institutional, and policy-related are necessary to establish a gender-just and safe working environment in the garment sector? chQ

1.5 Scope and Limitations of the Study

Scope of the Study

This study focuses on the labour rights of women workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector. It examines relevant labour laws, workplace conditions, gender-based issues, compliance with labour standards, and available legal remedies. The research covers the RMG industry across Bangladesh, with reference to general trends and selected case studies. Although historical aspects are discussed, the main focus is on developments since 2000.

Limitations of the Study

The study is mainly based on secondary sources, including books, journal articles, legal documents, reports, and case law. Due to time and resource constraints, extensive field surveys were not conducted. In addition, changes in labour laws and industry regulations may affect the long-term relevance of some findings.

1.6 Methodology

This study follows a qualitative and analytical research methodology to examine the labour rights of women workers in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector. To achieve the objectives of the research, doctrinal, socio-legal, and comparative approaches have been adopted.

Doctrinal Legal Research:

The study analyzes relevant constitutional provisions of Bangladesh, particularly those relating to equality, social justice, and labour rights. It also examines the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, Labour Rules 2015, EPZ labour regulations, and subsequent amendments. In addition, international legal instruments such as ILO Conventions, CEDAW, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are reviewed to understand the international framework for the protection of women workers' rights.

Socio-Legal and Literature Review:

The research reviews books, journal articles, research papers, and reports related to labour rights and gender issues in the RMG sector. Relevant literature on feminist legal theory, labour movements, and the socio-economic conditions of women workers has been considered. Reports published by NGOs, trade unions, and human rights organizations have also been used to gain a broader understanding of the practical challenges faced by women workers.

Case Study Analysis:

To understand the realities of workplace conditions and labour rights violations, the study examines significant industrial incidents, including the Rana Plaza collapse (2013) and the Tazreen Fashions fire (2012). Information from published reports, media sources, and previous research has been utilized for this purpose.

Comparative Analysis:

The study also compares labour laws and enforcement mechanisms in Bangladesh with those of selected countries, including India, Vietnam, and Sri Lanka. This comparison helps identify existing gaps and highlights best practices that may contribute to improving the protection of women workers' rights in Bangladesh.

1.7 Organization of the Study

The study is organized into six chapters, each building upon the previous to present a thorough analysis:

Chapter 1: Introduction - Establishes the study's background, rationale, objectives, scope, and methodology.

Chapter 2: Legal and Institutional Framework Provides an overview of Bangladesh's labour rights regime, focusing on national and international legal provisions, enforcement bodies, and institutional mechanisms.

Chapter 3: Women's Participation in the RMG Sector Examines the historical growth of the garment industry and the changing role of women within it, addressing economic and social transformations.

Chapter 4: Challenges Faced by Female Workers Analyzes key issues such as wage disparity, unsafe conditions, harassment, denial of maternity rights, and limited access to justice.

Chapter 5: Case Studies and Comparative Analysis Discusses landmark events and compares Bangladesh's legal standards with other South Asian countries to derive policy lessons.

Chapter 6: Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion Summarizes key findings, identifies legal and policy gaps, and provides actionable recommendations for reforming the industry from a gender-rights perspective.

1.8 Literature Review

Existing literature on forced migration, refugeehood, statelessness, and the Rohingya crisis provides important theoretical and empirical insights into the experiences of displaced populations. Schechter (2000) and Lewellen (2002) discuss the historical development of refugee studies and argue that refugees occupy a liminal social position between displacement and reintegration. Lewellen further highlights the gendered nature of forced migration, emphasizing the greater vulnerability of women refugees and the impact of displacement on family and social structures.

Uddin (2015) examines the statelessness of the Rohingya people and their forced migration to Bangladesh. The study highlights the humanitarian support provided by Bangladesh despite not being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, while also discussing the socio-economic and environmental challenges created by the prolonged presence of Rohingya refugees.

Wolf (2017) analyzes the Rohingya crisis from a historical and security perspective, arguing that ethnic, religious, and political conflicts in Myanmar have contributed to one of the largest forced migration crises in Southeast Asia. The study also emphasizes the implications of the crisis for regional peace and security.

Overall, these studies contribute significantly to understanding the Rohingya refugee crisis. However, further research is needed to examine the contemporary legal, socio-economic, and humanitarian conditions of Rohingya refugees and their long-term impact on host communities.

1. Jim Schechter, "Anthropological Theory and Fieldwork: Problem Solving Tools for Forced Migration Issues," *Practicing Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (2000): 34–38.

2. Ted C. Lewellen, *The Anthropology of Globalization: Cultural Anthropology Enters the 21st Century* (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 2002), 163–181.

3. Nasir Uddin, "State of Stateless People: The Plight of Rohingya Refugees in Bangladesh," in *Rohingya Crisis in Myanmar: Seeking Justice for the Stateless*, ed. Nasir Uddin (Dhaka: Pathak Shamabesh, 2015), 65–88.

4. Siegfried O. Wolf, *Genocide, Exodus and Exploitation for Jihad: The Urgent Need to Address the Rohingya Crisis* (Brussels: South Asia Democratic Forum, 2017), 1–24.

Chapter 2

Legal and Institutional Framework of Labour Rights

2.1 Historical Literature Review

The development of labour rights in Bangladesh is rooted in a long historical process that began during the colonial period and continued through the Pakistan era and post-independence state formation. Labour legislation introduced under British rule primarily aimed to regulate industrial production and maintain order within the workforce. Although these laws provided limited protection regarding working hours and child labour, they paid little attention to workers' welfare and gender-specific concerns.

During the East Pakistan period, industrial growth increased the demand for labour, leading to the introduction of legal measures relating to wages, employment conditions, and trade union activities. However, weak enforcement and political constraints often limited the practical effectiveness of these protections. Women's contributions to labour movements remained largely unrecognized despite their growing participation in industrial and informal employment.

Following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, labour rights became linked with constitutional commitments to social justice, equality, and human dignity. Over time, various labour laws were consolidated into a more comprehensive framework, culminating in the enactment of the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. Nevertheless, the experiences of women workers reveal continuing gaps between legal guarantees and workplace realities.

¹ Chandavarkar, Rajnarayan, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay, 1900–1940* (Cambridge University Press 1994).

² Sarkar, Sumit, *Modern India: 1885–1947* (Macmillan 1983).

³ Kabeer, Naila, *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (Verso 2000).

2.2 Definition and Scope of Labour Rights

Labour rights refer to the legal and fundamental rights that protect workers in the workplace and ensure fair treatment, dignity, safety, and economic security. These rights encompass fair wages, reasonable working hours, safe working conditions, social protection, freedom of association, collective bargaining, and protection against discrimination.

In the context of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector, labour rights extend beyond traditional employment protections. They also include maternity benefits, protection from workplace harassment, access to healthcare facilities, childcare support, and equal opportunities for female workers. Since women constitute a significant proportion of the RMG workforce, labour rights must be understood through a gender-sensitive perspective that recognizes the unique challenges faced by women in employment.

⁴ International Labour Organization (ILO), Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (ILO 2022).

⁵ International Labour Organization, Labour Standards and Gender Equality (ILO Report 2018).

⁶ Feldman, Shelley, 'Crisis, Charity and the Rhetoric of Compassion: The Case of the Bangladesh Garment Industry' (2003) Journal of Contemporary Asia.

2.3 Overview of Labour Laws in Bangladesh

The legal framework governing labour relations in Bangladesh is primarily based on the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, which consolidated numerous previous labour laws into a single statute. The Act regulates matters relating to recruitment, wages, working hours, occupational safety, leave, welfare facilities, trade unions, and dispute resolution.

Subsequent amendments, particularly those introduced after major industrial accidents, sought to strengthen workplace safety and workers' rights. The Labour Rules, 2015 further provide procedural guidance for implementing the provisions of the Act. Despite these legislative developments, challenges remain in ensuring effective enforcement, particularly within export-oriented industries where labour rights violations continue to be reported.

⁷ Bangladesh Labour Act 2006.

⁸ Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015.

⁹ Rahman, Mustafizur, Bangladesh Labour Act: A Commentary (BLAST Publications 2015).

2.4 Gender Equality Provisions in Law

Gender equality is recognized as a fundamental principle within the legal framework of Bangladesh. The Constitution guarantees equality before the law and prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. These constitutional commitments are reflected in labour legislation through provisions relating to equal treatment, maternity protection, and workplace safety for women.

The Bangladesh Labour Act contains measures designed to protect female workers, including maternity benefits, safeguards against dismissal during maternity leave, and restrictions on hazardous work. Legal and policy frameworks also emphasize the prevention of workplace harassment and the promotion of women's participation in economic activities. However, significant challenges persist in translating these legal protections into practical outcomes, particularly within sectors where women occupy lower-paid and less secure positions.

¹⁰ Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, arts 27, 28 and 29.

¹¹ National Women Development Policy 2011.

¹² Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, Chapter XII (Maternity Benefits).

2.5 International Conventions Ratified by Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and has ratified several important international labour conventions. These include conventions relating to forced labour, equal remuneration, non-discrimination in employment, freedom of association, collective bargaining, and the elimination of child labour.

In addition, Bangladesh is a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which obliges the state to promote gender equality and eliminate discriminatory practices affecting women. These international commitments have influenced the development of domestic labour laws and policies and continue to serve as important benchmarks for evaluating compliance with labour standards.

¹³ ILO Convention No. 29 (Forced Labour Convention, 1930).

¹⁴ ILO Convention No. 100 (Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951).

¹⁵ ILO Convention No. 111 (Discrimination Convention, 1958).

¹⁶ Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979.

¹⁷ ILO Committee of Experts, Observations on Bangladesh (2022).

2.6 Institutional Structure: DoL, BGMEA, and BKMEA

The implementation and monitoring of labour rights in Bangladesh involve several governmental and non-governmental institutions. The Department of Labour (DoL), operating under the Ministry of Labour and Employment, is responsible for labour administration, trade union registration, dispute settlement, and enforcement activities.

In the garment sector, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) play significant roles in representing employers and promoting compliance with labour standards. These organizations often collaborate with government agencies, international buyers, and development partners to improve workplace conditions and industry practices.

Although these institutions contribute to the governance of labour relations, concerns remain regarding enforcement capacity, monitoring mechanisms, and accountability. Strengthening institutional effectiveness is therefore essential to ensuring the protection and promotion of labour rights, particularly for women employed in the RMG sector.

¹⁸ Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh.

¹⁹ BGMEA, Annual Report.

²⁰ BKMEA, Industry and Compliance Report.

²¹ Human Rights Watch, *Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most: Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories* (2015).

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE RMG INDUSTRY

3.1 Historical Context and Growth of the RMG Sector

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry has emerged as the most significant sector of Bangladesh's economy since the late 1970s. What began as a small export-oriented industry gradually developed into one of the world's leading garment manufacturing hubs. The expansion of the sector was influenced by globalization, favourable international trade policies, low production costs, and the availability of a large labour force.

During the 1980s and 1990s, government policies encouraging export-oriented industrialization, combined with growing demand from international buyers, accelerated the growth of garment factories across the country. As a result, the RMG sector became a major source of employment and foreign exchange earnings. Today, it contributes substantially to Bangladesh's export revenue and plays a vital role in national economic development.

One of the most notable features of this growth has been the large-scale participation of women workers. The industry created employment opportunities for millions of women who previously had limited access to formal employment. Consequently, the RMG sector has not only transformed the economy but has also contributed to social change by increasing women's participation in the labour market.

¹ Faruque E Ahmed, 'The Rise of the Bangladesh Garment Industry: Globalization, Women Workers, and Voice' (2004) 16(2) NWSA Journal 34.

² Dina M Siddiqi, 'Do Bangladeshi Factory Workers Need Saving? Sisterhood in the Post-Sweatshop Era' (2009) 91 Feminist Review 154.

³ World Bank, Bangladesh: Strategy for Sustained Growth (World Bank 2007).

⁴ International Labour Organization, Gender Analysis of the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh (ILO 2019).

3.2 Role of Women in the RMG Sector

Women constitute the majority of the workforce in Bangladesh's garment industry and are directly involved in various stages of production. Their contributions are essential to maintaining productivity and meeting the demands of global supply chains. Female workers are commonly engaged in sewing, finishing, quality checking, packaging, and other production-related activities.

The participation of women in the RMG sector has generated significant socio-economic benefits. Employment in garment factories has provided many women with a source of independent income, improved their decision-making power within households, and increased their access to education and healthcare for their families.

Despite these positive developments, women remain underrepresented in managerial, technical, and supervisory positions. Leadership roles within factories are still predominantly occupied by men. As a result, women often encounter barriers to career advancement, skill development, and equal participation in workplace decision-making processes.

⁵ Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, 'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing' (1981) 7 Feminist Review 87.

⁶ International Labour Organization, Gender Analysis of the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh (ILO 2019).

⁷ Clean Clothes Campaign, Breaking the Chains: Labour Exploitation in Garment Supply Chains (Clean Clothes Campaign 2021).

⁸ Dina M Siddiqi, 'Do Bangladeshi Factory Workers Need Saving? Sisterhood in the Post-Sweatshop Era' (2009) 91 Feminist Review 154.

3.3 Nature of Employment: Contractual, Informal, and Precarious

Employment conditions in the RMG industry are often characterized by uncertainty and vulnerability. Although labour laws require formal appointment letters, service records, and employment benefits, practical implementation remains inconsistent across many factories.

A considerable number of workers experience employment insecurity due to temporary contracts, irregular recruitment practices, and dependence on fluctuating export orders. Women workers are particularly vulnerable because they frequently occupy lower-paid positions with limited job security. In some cases, workers face difficulties in accessing benefits such as paid leave, maternity protection, provident funds, and compensation schemes.

The precarious nature of employment also affects workers' ability to assert their legal rights. Fear of dismissal, loss of income, or workplace discrimination often discourages employees from reporting labour rights violations or participating in collective bargaining activities. Consequently, employment insecurity continues to be a major challenge within the industry.

⁹ Government of Bangladesh, Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (as amended in 2018).

¹⁰ International Labour Organization, The Supply Chain Ripple Effect: How COVID-19 is Affecting Garment Workers and Factories in Asia and the Pacific (ILO 2020).

¹¹ Clean Clothes Campaign, Breaking the Chains: Labour Exploitation in Garment Supply Chains (Clean Clothes Campaign 2021).

¹² War on Want, Stitched Up: Women Workers and the Bangladeshi Garment Industry (War on Want 2016).

3.4 Gender-based Division of Labour

The organization of work within the RMG sector reflects a clear gender-based division of labour. Female workers are predominantly concentrated in labour-intensive production tasks, while men are more frequently employed in technical, supervisory, and managerial positions. This distribution of responsibilities is influenced by social perceptions regarding gender roles rather than objective assessments of skills and capabilities.

Women are commonly assigned sewing, thread cutting, finishing, and packaging duties, whereas men often perform machine maintenance, cutting operations, and factory management functions. Such occupational segregation limits women's opportunities for promotion and professional development.

The gender-based allocation of work contributes to broader inequalities within the workplace. Women frequently have fewer opportunities to acquire advanced technical skills and are less likely to hold decision-making positions. Addressing these disparities requires equal access to training, promotion opportunities, and workplace leadership roles.

¹³ Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, 'Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers: An Analysis of Women's Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing' (1981) 7 *Feminist Review* 87.

¹⁴ International Labour Organization, *Gender Analysis of the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh* (ILO 2019).

¹⁵ Dina M Siddiqi, 'Do Bangladeshi Factory Workers Need Saving? Sisterhood in the Post-Sweatshop Era' (2009) 91 *Feminist Review* 154.

¹⁶ Centre for Policy Dialogue, *Socio-economic Conditions of RMG Workers in Bangladesh* (CPD 2015).

3.5 Socio-economic Background of Female Workers

Most female workers employed in Bangladesh's garment industry come from economically disadvantaged households. Many migrate from rural areas to industrial centres in search of employment opportunities and improved living conditions. For a significant number of women, factory employment represents their first experience of formal wage employment.

Female garment workers generally have limited educational qualifications and often bear substantial family responsibilities. Many contribute directly to household income and support parents, children, or other family members. Their earnings frequently play a crucial role in reducing poverty and improving family welfare.

However, economic vulnerability remains a persistent concern. Many workers live in overcrowded housing conditions and face challenges related to healthcare, childcare, transportation, and rising living costs. Long working hours and demanding production schedules can also affect their physical and mental well-being.

Despite these challenges, women's participation in the RMG sector has contributed significantly to their economic empowerment and social visibility. Their involvement in industrial employment has altered traditional gender norms and strengthened their role in both family and society. Nevertheless, continued efforts are necessary to ensure that economic participation is accompanied by adequate labour rights protection, workplace safety, and equal opportunities for advancement.

¹⁷ Centre for Policy Dialogue, Socio-economic Conditions of RMG Workers in Bangladesh (CPD 2015).

¹⁸ UNICEF Bangladesh, Child Labour in Bangladesh: Current Situation and Challenges (UNICEF 2022).

¹⁹ BRAC Urban Development Programme, Living Conditions of Garment Workers in Urban Bangladesh (BRAC 2019).

²⁰ Save the Children, The Hidden Burden: Female Garment Workers and Family Responsibilities in Bangladesh (Save the Children 2021).

²¹ War on Want, Stitched Up: Women Workers and the Bangladeshi Garment Industry (War on Want 2016).

²² International Labour Organization, Gender Analysis of the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh (ILO 2019).

CHAPTER 4

Challenges Faced by Female Garment Workers

4.1 Structural and Systemic Discrimination: An Overview

Although women constitute the majority of the workforce in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry, they continue to face structural and systemic discrimination both within and outside the workplace. Deeply rooted patriarchal norms often shape perceptions regarding women's roles in society, limiting their opportunities for professional advancement and economic independence. Many female workers enter the garment sector from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and possess limited educational qualifications, making them more vulnerable to exploitation.

Discrimination is often reflected in recruitment practices, workplace treatment, promotion opportunities, and access to decision-making positions. Women are generally concentrated in lower-level production jobs, while managerial and supervisory positions remain largely dominated by men. Such structural inequalities reinforce gender-based hierarchies and contribute to the continued marginalization of female workers within the industry.

¹ Farhana Ahamed, 'Patriarchal Structures and Women's Labour Participation in Bangladesh' (2024) 12(2) Media and Communication Studies Journal 45.

² M Hossain, Women's Employment and Structural Discrimination in Bangladesh's Garment Industry (University of Mississippi 2023) 56.

³ Clean Clothes Campaign, Gender Discrimination in Global Garment Supply Chains (CCC 2024).

4.2 Wage Discrimination and Irregular Payments

Wage discrimination remains one of the most significant challenges faced by women in the garment sector. Although national labour laws require equal remuneration for equal work, disparities in earnings continue to exist in practice. Female workers are frequently employed in lower-paid positions and have fewer opportunities for promotion compared to their male counterparts.

In addition to wage inequality, irregular salary payments create considerable financial insecurity. Delayed wages affect workers' ability to meet essential expenses such as housing, food, healthcare, and education for their children. Many women rely solely on their factory income to support their families, making wage delays particularly harmful. Furthermore, overtime work is often necessary to supplement low wages, yet workers do not always receive adequate compensation for additional hours worked.

⁴ S Akter, 'Gender-Based Wage Inequality in the Garment Industry' (2025) 8(1) Journal of Labour Economics 33.

⁵ Young Power in Social Action (YPSA), Study of Deprivation on Female Garment Workers (YPSA 2021).

⁶ Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, ss 121–123.

⁷ 'Women in RMG Sector Get Lower Wages Than Men' The Financial Express (Dhaka, 28 June 2022).

4.3 Harassment and Violence at Workplace

Workplace harassment and violence represent serious violations of women's labour rights in the RMG industry. Female workers may experience verbal abuse, intimidation, psychological pressure, and, in some cases, sexual harassment by supervisors, managers, or co-workers. Such behaviour creates an unsafe and hostile working environment that negatively affects both productivity and well-being.

The fear of losing employment often discourages women from reporting incidents of harassment. Limited access to effective complaint mechanisms further contributes to underreporting. Consequently, many workers continue to endure abusive treatment in silence, which can lead to emotional distress, anxiety, depression, and diminished self-confidence.

⁸ Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), Workers' Rights and Gender-Based Violence in the RMG Sector (BILS 2018).

⁹ 'Discrimination of Women at RMG Sector in Bangladesh' (2024) Asian Institute of Research Journal.

¹⁰ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, Women Garment Workers Face a Hidden Mental Health Crisis (2024).

¹¹ Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, ss 332–333.

4.4 Unsafe Working Conditions

Despite notable improvements in factory safety following major industrial disasters, concerns regarding workplace safety continue to persist in certain segments of the garment industry. Female workers are often exposed to excessive heat, inadequate ventilation, poor lighting, and overcrowded workspaces. Long working hours under physically demanding conditions increase the risk of fatigue and occupational injuries.

Insufficient safety training and limited awareness regarding occupational hazards further increase workers' vulnerability. In some factories, emergency preparedness measures remain inadequate, raising concerns about workers' ability to respond effectively during accidents, fires, or other emergencies. Such conditions undermine the right of workers to a safe and healthy working environment.

¹² International Labour Organization, Safety and Health in the Bangladesh Garment Industry (ILO 2018).

¹³ T Rahman, 'Occupational Health and Gender Issues in Bangladesh's Garment Sector' (2019) 14(2) Bangladesh Journal of Labour Studies 23.

¹⁴ M A Mia, 'Labour Rights and Workplace Conditions of Female Garment Workers' (2023) Sonargaon University Journal 67.

¹⁵ Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, Part VIII.

4.5 Health Issues and Maternity Rights

The demanding nature of garment work frequently contributes to various health problems among female workers. Common health concerns include musculoskeletal disorders, chronic back pain, headaches, eye strain, respiratory difficulties, and stress-related illnesses. Repetitive tasks and prolonged periods of standing or sitting often aggravate these conditions.

Maternity protection remains another critical issue. Although labour laws provide for maternity benefits and leave, implementation is not always consistent. Some women encounter difficulties in accessing maternity benefits or experience pressure to resign during pregnancy. Inadequate childcare facilities also create additional burdens for working mothers, affecting both their employment stability and family responsibilities.

¹⁶ R Rahman, 'Health Conditions of Female Garment Workers in Bangladesh' (2024) MBSTU Journal of Science and Technology.

¹⁷ K Ahmed, Challenges Faced by Women Employees in Garment Production (2024).

¹⁸ Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, ss 45–50.

¹⁹ UNICEF Bangladesh, Women Workers and Childcare Challenges in the Garment Industry (UNICEF 2020).

4.6 Lack of Union Representation

Trade unions play an important role in protecting workers' rights; however, female participation in labour organizations remains limited. Many women are unaware of their labour rights or lack the confidence and support necessary to engage in union activities. Social and cultural barriers further discourage active participation in collective bargaining processes.

Where union representation is weak, workers often struggle to negotiate for better wages, safer working conditions, and protection against workplace abuse. The absence of strong female leadership within labour organizations also limits the ability of women workers to advocate effectively for gender-specific concerns.

²⁰ M Islam, 'Representation and Union Participation of Women in the RMG Sector' (2018) 24(2) Bangladesh Economic Review 78.

²¹ , Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most: Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories (2015).

²² Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, Chapter XIII.

4.7 Exploitation in the Informal Sector

A significant number of garment workers are employed in subcontracting units and informal production facilities that operate outside effective regulatory oversight. Workers in these establishments frequently experience lower wages, longer working hours, and reduced job security compared to those employed in larger, compliant factories.

The absence of written employment contracts and formal grievance mechanisms leaves many workers vulnerable to arbitrary dismissal and other forms of exploitation. Informal employment arrangements also limit access to social protection benefits, health services, and legal remedies available under labour legislation.

4.8 Intersectional Challenges: Gender, Class, and Migration

The challenges faced by female garment workers cannot be understood solely through the lens of gender. Many workers are internal migrants who relocate from rural areas to urban industrial centres in search of employment opportunities. Their experiences are shaped by the combined effects of gender, poverty, educational disadvantage, and migration status.

Migrant women often encounter difficulties related to housing, healthcare, transportation, and social support networks. Economic necessity frequently compels them to accept difficult working conditions, limiting their ability to challenge labour rights violations. As a result, multiple forms of vulnerability intersect to intensify the exploitation experienced by female workers.

²³ M Hossain, Labour Vulnerability and Informal Employment in Bangladesh (2023).

²⁴ The Daily Star, 'RMG Sector: Myriad Abuses Against Women Workers' (Dhaka, 2026).

²⁵ International Labour Organization, Women and Informal Employment in South Asia (ILO 2022).

²⁶ Farhana Ahamed, 'Migration, Gender and Labour Vulnerability in Bangladesh' (2024) 14(1) Development Studies Review.

²⁷ T Rahman, Gender and Migration in Bangladesh's Garment Industry (BRAC University 2019).

²⁸ The Business Standard, 'The Price of Inequality: Unpacking the Ripple Effect of Gender Pay Gap' (Dhaka, 2025).

²⁹ Work, Employment and Society, 'Gender, Migration and Labour Exploitation in the Global Garment Industry' (2025).

4.9 Legal Gaps and Institutional Weakness

Bangladesh has established a legal framework aimed at protecting workers' rights through labour legislation and regulatory institutions. Nevertheless, significant challenges remain in the effective implementation and enforcement of these laws. Insufficient inspections, limited institutional capacity, and lengthy dispute-resolution procedures often reduce the effectiveness of legal protections.

Many female workers lack awareness of their legal rights and available remedies. Fear of retaliation, financial constraints, and limited access to legal assistance further discourage workers from seeking justice. Strengthening enforcement mechanisms, improving institutional accountability, and expanding workers' access to legal support are therefore essential for ensuring meaningful protection of labour rights.

Conclusion

The experiences of female garment workers in Bangladesh reveal the complex and interconnected nature of labour exploitation within the RMG industry. Structural discrimination, wage inequality, workplace harassment, unsafe working conditions, health concerns, inadequate representation, informal employment practices, and weaknesses in legal enforcement continue to affect the lives of millions of women. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from the government, factory owners, labour organizations, international stakeholders, and civil society. Ensuring gender equality and effective protection of labour rights is not only a legal obligation but also a prerequisite for achieving sustainable and inclusive industrial development.

³⁰ Bangladesh Labour Act 2006.

³¹ Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015.

³² M A Mia, 'Labour Rights and Workplace Conditions of Female Garment Workers' (2023) Sonargaon University Journal.

³³ Prime University, Challenges in Implementing Labour Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Sector (2023).

³⁴ 'Labour Law Enforcement and Access to Justice in Bangladesh' (2024) Dhaka University Law Journal.

³⁵ Bangladesh Journal of Business and Economics, 'Legal Protection of Women Workers in Bangladesh' (2024).

CHAPTER 5

CASE STUDIES AND COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

5.1 Contextual Overview

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry has played a transformative role in the economic development of Bangladesh. As the largest export-earning sector of the country, it has generated employment opportunities for millions of workers, the majority of whom are women from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The growth of the sector has contributed significantly to poverty reduction, women's participation in the labour market, and national economic advancement.

Despite these achievements, the rapid expansion of the industry has often occurred without corresponding improvements in workplace safety, labour rights protection, and regulatory oversight. Weak enforcement of labour laws, inadequate monitoring mechanisms, and pressure from global supply chains have frequently placed workers in vulnerable situations. The industrial disasters at Rana Plaza in 2013 and Tazreen Fashions in 2012 exposed these structural deficiencies and drew international attention to the conditions under which garment workers operate.

This chapter examines these two major industrial disasters as case studies and evaluates their implications for labour rights, particularly the rights of women workers. It also compares Bangladesh's regulatory framework with those of other garment-producing countries to identify best practices and areas requiring further reform.

¹ Clean Clothes Campaign, Facts on the Garment Industry in Bangladesh (2023).

² Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Trade Information Report (2024).

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), Employment and Decent Work in the Ready-Made Garment Sector of Bangladesh (2023).

⁴ M Hossain, 'Readymade Garment Industry in Bangladesh' (2023) ResearchGate.

⁵ Bangladesh Journal of MIS, 'Revisiting the Rana Plaza Collapse Tragedy in Bangladesh' (2024).

5.2 The Rana Plaza Collapse (2013): A Landmark Failure

5.2.1 Background of the Disaster

On 24 April 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Savar, Dhaka, collapsed while thousands of workers were performing their duties inside five garment factories located within the building. The disaster resulted in the deaths of more than 1,100 workers and injuries to thousands more, making it one of the deadliest industrial accidents in modern history.

Investigations revealed that structural cracks had appeared in the building prior to the collapse. Although concerns regarding the safety of the building had been raised, workers were reportedly instructed to return to work. The incident highlighted serious failures in building regulation, factory management, and occupational safety oversight.

5.2.2 Legal and Institutional Response

The collapse generated widespread national and international condemnation. In response, significant reforms were initiated. Labour laws were amended, factory inspections increased, and international safety initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety were established.

These initiatives contributed to improvements in factory safety standards and compliance monitoring. However, concerns remain regarding the pace of judicial proceedings, accountability of responsible actors, and the adequacy of compensation provided to victims and their families.

5.2.3 Impact on Women Workers

Women constituted a substantial proportion of the victims. Many injured workers experienced long-term physical disabilities, psychological trauma, and economic hardship. Since many female workers were primary income earners within their families, the disaster had broader consequences extending to dependents and communities.

The incident demonstrated how workplace safety failures disproportionately affect women workers who often possess limited economic alternatives and bargaining power.

⁶ Wikipedia, 'Rana Plaza Collapse' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rana_Plaza_collapse accessed 7 June 2026.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, *Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most: Workers' Rights in Bangladesh's Garment Factories* (2015).

⁸ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Rana Plaza Victims and Compensation Fund Report* (2019).

⁹ Clean Clothes Campaign, *Rana Plaza: A Turning Point for Worker Safety* (2023).

¹⁰ Government of the United Kingdom, *The Rana Plaza Disaster* (2014).

¹¹ Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), *Labour: A BILS Journal* (2018).

¹² Ethical Trading Initiative, *A Decade On: Has the Garment Industry Learnt from Rana Plaza?* (2023).

5.3 Tazreen Fashions Fire (2012): Echoes of Impunity

5.3.1 Overview of the Incident

On 24 November 2012, a devastating fire broke out at the Tazreen Fashions factory in Ashulia, Dhaka. More than one hundred workers lost their lives, while many others suffered serious injuries.

Subsequent investigations indicated deficiencies in fire safety measures, emergency preparedness, and evacuation procedures. Reports suggested that workers faced difficulties escaping due to inadequate safety arrangements and management failures during the emergency.

5.3.2 Accountability Challenges

The Tazreen tragedy raised important questions concerning corporate accountability and state responsibility. Although legal proceedings were initiated, concerns persisted regarding delays in obtaining justice and the effectiveness of enforcement mechanisms.

The incident highlighted the limitations of existing regulatory institutions and the need for stronger oversight of workplace safety standards.

5.3.3 Lessons for Labour Rights Protection

The Tazreen fire demonstrated that workplace safety cannot be treated as a secondary consideration in industrial production. It underscored the necessity of effective fire prevention systems, worker training, emergency preparedness, and independent inspections.

The tragedy further illustrated how economic pressures may compel workers to remain in unsafe workplaces despite significant risks to their health and lives.

¹³ Worker-Driven Social Responsibility Network, Case Study: Tazreen Fashions Bangladesh (2023).

¹⁴ Amnesty International, The Rana Plaza Collapse and Tazreen Fashions Fire: An Interview with Taqbir Huda (2024).

¹⁵ New Age, 'Tazreen Fire Report' (2013).

¹⁶ Clean Clothes Campaign, Tazreen Fashions Fire Chronology (2013).

¹⁷ D M Siddiqi, 'Do We Really Care About Our Workers?' Dhaka Tribune (2015).

¹⁸ The Daily Star, 'Tazreen Fire: Justice Denied for 12 Long Years' (24 November 2024).

5.4 Judicial Remedies and Structural Barriers

Although Bangladesh possesses legal mechanisms for addressing labour disputes and workplace injuries, significant barriers continue to limit access to justice for workers.

Labour courts often experience procedural delays, resulting in prolonged litigation. Many workers lack financial resources, legal awareness, or institutional support necessary to pursue claims effectively. Women workers face additional obstacles, including social constraints, workplace intimidation, and unequal access to legal representation.

Compensation mechanisms have also been criticized for failing to provide adequate long-term support to victims of industrial accidents. While reforms have been introduced in recent years, gaps remain in implementation and enforcement.

These challenges indicate that legal rights alone are insufficient unless accompanied by accessible, efficient, and worker-friendly institutions capable of ensuring effective remedies.

¹⁹ The Daily Star, ‘Compensation Falls Short and Fails Workers, It Must Change’ (23 April 2026).

²⁰ Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), Labour: A BILS Journal (2018).

²¹ T Rahman, ‘Readymade Garment Workers and Inchoate Compensation Rights’ (2021) ResearchGate.

²² Tanim Chowdhury, ‘Industrial Accidents in Bangladesh Apparel Manufacturing Sector’ (2016).

²³ International Labour Organization (ILO), Bangladesh Garment Sector Injury Scheme to Include Commuting Accidents (2024).

²⁴ Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Labour Law Enforcement Survey (2023).

5.5 Comparative Analysis with Other Countries

A comparison with other garment-producing countries provides valuable insights into alternative approaches to labour governance.

Vietnam has integrated labour reforms into its international trade commitments and has expanded legal protections for workers. Although enforcement challenges remain, labour standards have increasingly become linked to international market access.

India has adopted various legislative measures addressing workplace harassment, maternity benefits, and labour welfare. Nevertheless, implementation gaps continue to affect workers in informal and export-oriented sectors.

Sri Lanka has generally maintained stronger compliance mechanisms within export manufacturing zones and has invested in worker training and skills development. Greater emphasis on human resource development has contributed to improved workplace conditions.

Compared with these countries, Bangladesh has made notable progress in factory safety following Rana Plaza. However, challenges relating to enforcement, labour representation, and gender equality remain significant.

²⁵ Textile Today, 'A Comparative Analysis of Bangladesh's Apparel Exports Relative to Key Suppliers in the US and EU Markets' (2026).

²⁶ Human Rights Watch, Vietnam Labour Rights Gaps (2022).

²⁷ International Labour Organization (ILO), India Maternity Benefits and Labour Protection Report (2021).

²⁸ International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), Global Rights Index: India (2023).

²⁹ Board of Investment (BOI), Sri Lanka, Export Factory Compliance Data (2022).

³⁰ ExploreTex, The 2026 Guide to the Bangladesh Garment Industry (2026).

5.6 Synthesis: Shared Regional Deficiencies

The experiences of Bangladesh, Vietnam, India, and Sri Lanka reveal several common challenges.

First, enforcement deficits continue to undermine labour protections despite the existence of legal frameworks. Second, workers often face obstacles in exercising freedom of association and collective bargaining rights. Third, economic competition within global supply chains can encourage cost-cutting practices that negatively affect workplace conditions.

For women workers, these challenges are often compounded by gender-based discrimination, unequal access to leadership positions, and social vulnerabilities.

Bangladesh's experience demonstrates that economic growth alone does not guarantee the protection of labour rights. Sustainable development requires institutions capable of ensuring compliance, accountability, and respect for workers' dignity.

³¹ Worker-Driven Social Responsibility Network, Case Study: Tazreen Fashions Bangladesh (2023).

³² Government of the United Kingdom, The Rana Plaza Disaster (2014).

³³ American International University-Bangladesh (AIUB), Occupational Health Risks among Garment Industry Workers in Bangladesh (2023).

³⁴ Wiley Online Library, 'The Effect of the Rana Plaza Disaster on Shareholder Wealth and Supply Chain Governance' (2017).

³⁵ Human Rights Watch, Whoever Raises Their Head Suffers the Most (2015).

5.7 Strategic Recommendations

Based on the findings of this chapter, several measures should be considered to strengthen labour rights protection in the RMG sector.

First, labour inspection systems should be further strengthened through increased resources, technical expertise, and institutional independence. Regular inspections must cover both registered factories and subcontracting units.

Second, access to justice should be improved through specialized labour tribunals, simplified procedures, and enhanced legal aid services for workers.

Third, worker participation should be encouraged by protecting freedom of association and promoting meaningful representation of women within trade unions and workplace committees.

Fourth, compensation systems should be modernized to ensure prompt and adequate support for victims of workplace accidents and occupational injuries.

Fifth, greater transparency should be established throughout global supply chains. International buyers and local manufacturers should share responsibility for maintaining safe and lawful working conditions.

Finally, gender-sensitive policies should be integrated into all labour governance mechanisms. Particular attention should be given to maternity protection, workplace harassment prevention, leadership opportunities, and social protection measures for women workers.

The implementation of these recommendations would contribute to a safer, more equitable, and rights-based garment industry capable of supporting both economic growth and social justice

³⁶ International Labour Organization (ILO), Bangladesh Garment Sector Injury Scheme to Include Commuting Accidents (2024).

³⁷ International Accord, 10 Years Since the Rana Plaza Collapse in Bangladesh (2023).

³⁸ BLAST, Labour Law Enforcement Survey (2023).

³⁹ Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), Annual Human Rights Report (2024).

⁴⁰ Naripokkho, Women Workers and Labour Rights Advocacy Report (2023).

⁴¹ International Labour Organization (ILO), Convention No. 87 on Freedom of Association.⁴² International Labour Organization (ILO), Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining.

Chapter 6

Findings, Recommendations, and Conclusion

6.1 Summary of Core Insights

The findings of this study demonstrate that women workers constitute the backbone of Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry and have played a crucial role in the country's economic development. Despite the existence of constitutional protections, labour legislation, and international labour standards, women workers continue to face numerous challenges in the workplace.

The research reveals that a significant gap exists between legal guarantees and practical implementation. Although the Bangladesh Labour Act provides protections relating to wages, maternity benefits, workplace safety, and freedom of association, many female workers remain deprived of these rights due to weak enforcement mechanisms and limited institutional accountability.

The study further finds that gender-based discrimination persists in various forms, including unequal wages, limited opportunities for promotion, workplace harassment, and inadequate access to social protection. Moreover, women working in informal and subcontracting arrangements are particularly vulnerable because they often fall outside the effective protection of labour laws.

The analysis of major industrial disasters such as the Rana Plaza collapse and the Tazreen Fashions fire also indicates that while improvements have been made in factory safety, broader concerns relating to workers' welfare, dignity, and participation in decision-making processes remain unresolved.

Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (Act No XLII of 2006), as amended by the Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Acts 2013 and 2018.

International Labour Organization (ILO), World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends for Women 2024 (ILO 2024).

Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), State of the Bangladesh Economy and RMG Sector Review (CPD 2023).

International Labour Organization (ILO), Improving Working Conditions in the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh (ILO 2022).

6.2 Identified Legal-Policy Deficiencies

The study identifies several shortcomings within the existing legal and policy framework governing women's labour rights in the RMG sector.

Firstly, there remains a considerable implementation gap between statutory protections and workplace realities. Many legal provisions exist only on paper and are not effectively enforced.

Secondly, labour inspection mechanisms suffer from inadequate resources, insufficient staffing, and limited monitoring capacity, which reduce their effectiveness in addressing labour rights violations.

Thirdly, existing laws provide limited protection against workplace harassment and gender-based discrimination. In practice, many women are reluctant to report abuse due to fear of retaliation and lack of effective complaint mechanisms.

Fourthly, informal and subcontracted workers continue to remain largely excluded from legal protection and social security benefits.

Finally, policy formulation is often hindered by the absence of comprehensive gender-disaggregated data relating to wages, workplace injuries, harassment, and other labour-related issues affecting women workers.

Fair Wear Foundation, Bangladesh Wage Ladder Report (Fair Wear Foundation 2022).

High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA) v Government of Bangladesh (Writ Petition No 5916 of 2008).

International Labour Organization (ILO), Decent Work for Home-Based Workers in Asia (ILO 2019).

UN Women Bangladesh, Gender Equality and Labour Market Assessment (UN Women 2021).

6.3 Strategic Recommendations

In light of the findings, several measures are recommended to strengthen the protection of women workers' labour rights in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

The Government should undertake further reforms to the Bangladesh Labour Act to address gender-specific concerns and ensure greater protection against workplace discrimination and harassment.

Labour inspection systems should be strengthened through increased funding, recruitment of trained inspectors, and regular monitoring of factory compliance.

Factory owners should establish transparent grievance mechanisms that allow workers to report violations safely and confidentially.

Trade unions should promote greater participation of women in leadership positions and actively address issues affecting female workers.

Comprehensive awareness programmes should be introduced to educate workers about their legal rights and available remedies.

Special attention should be given to informal and subcontracted workers by extending legal protections and social security coverage to these vulnerable groups.

Furthermore, the Government should improve data collection and research initiatives to support evidence-based policymaking and effective monitoring of labour rights conditions.

International Labour Organization (ILO), Convention No 100 on Equal Remuneration (1951).

International Labour Organization (ILO), Convention No 111 on Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) (1958).

United Nations, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) (1979).

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct (OECD 2018).

6.4 Institutional Responsibilities

The implementation of these recommendations requires the coordinated efforts of multiple stakeholders.

The Government of Bangladesh should strengthen labour legislation, enhance enforcement mechanisms, and ensure compliance with international labour standards.

The Ministry of Labour and Employment and the Department of Labour should improve labour inspection, monitoring, and dispute resolution processes.

BGMEA and BKMEA should encourage member factories to maintain compliance with labour laws and adopt gender-sensitive workplace policies.

Factory owners and management should provide safe working conditions, fair wages, maternity benefits, and effective protection against workplace harassment.

Trade unions and civil society organizations should continue advocating for workers' rights, providing legal support, and promoting awareness regarding labour standards.

International buyers and development partners should support responsible business practices and encourage compliance with internationally recognized labour rights standards.

Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of Bangladesh, National Action Plan on Labour Sector of Bangladesh 2021–2026.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Sustainability Report 2023.

International Labour Organization (ILO), Better Work Bangladesh Annual Report 2023.

UN Women Bangladesh, Women's Economic Empowerment Strategy Report (2022).

6.5 Concluding Analysis

This study concludes that while Bangladesh's RMG sector has significantly contributed to women's economic empowerment and national development, substantial challenges remain in ensuring the full realization of women's labour rights.

The legal framework governing labour rights is relatively comprehensive; however, weak enforcement, institutional limitations, and persistent socio-cultural barriers continue to undermine its effectiveness. Meaningful progress will require not only legislative reform but also stronger institutions, improved accountability mechanisms, and greater participation of women in workplace governance.

Ensuring decent working conditions, equal treatment, workplace safety, and effective access to justice is essential for protecting the rights and dignity of women workers. A more inclusive and gender-responsive labour governance system will not only improve workers' welfare but also contribute to the long-term sustainability and global competitiveness of Bangladesh's RMG industry.

Ultimately, the protection of women workers' labour rights should be viewed not merely as a legal obligation but as a fundamental requirement for achieving social justice, economic development, and sustainable industrial growth in Bangladesh.

Akhter S, Women's Leadership in Trade Unions in Bangladesh (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2020).

International Labour Organization (ILO), Bridging the Enforcement Gap: Labour Rights and Compliance in Global Supply Chains (ILO 2021).

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ILO Convention No 98 concerning the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining 1949.

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ILO Convention No 111 concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation 1958.

ILO Convention No 183 concerning Maternity Protection 2000.

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ActionAid Bangladesh, COVID-19 Impact on Female Garment Workers (ActionAid Bangladesh 2020).

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