



Sonargaon University (SU)

Research Monograph

On

"Labor Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh: A Study"

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

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Letter of Transmittal

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

Sir.

This is a great pleasure to submit the Research Monograph on "**Labor Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh: A Study**" as a partial requirement for the fulfillment of my LL.B. (Honors) 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,

.....

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Declaration

I do hereby declare that the Research Monograph Title "**Labor Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh: A Study**" prepared solely by me and which has been submitted to the department of Law, Sonargaon University (SU) for achieving the LL.B. (Honors) 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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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 himself 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. (Honors) program.

.....

Naimul Razzaque

Lecturer,

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Acknowledgement

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful". Praise by Allah & thanks to Allah for patronizing me to finish this Research Monograph. I am very happy to finish it. It is a great Research of my life. It is a long-cherished hope of my life to become a great lawyer. That's why I have admitted in the Department of Law in Sonargaon University (SU) to fulfill my dream. But through my whole study life in this field, I did not get much more opportunities to examine and show my knowledge and skill in this wide field. Lastly, I have got a great chance to make my study meaningful when I got the chance to prepare a Research Monograph on **"Labor Rights for Women in Readymade Garment Industries of Bangladesh: A Study"**

I acknowledge my grateful to respected course teacher, **Naimul Razzaque** for instructing me how to prepare a Research Monograph and his famous Books lectures on this subject help me to complete my task sincerely.

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Thank you

MD. Shah Faran

Abstract

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector is nothing short of remarkable. It generates roughly US\$39.35 billion in exports in 2025 and employs over five million people, with women making up 53 to 58 percent of that workforce¹. But behind these impressive numbers lies a troubling reality. This thesis examines the gap between what the law promises women garment workers and what they actually experience on the factory floor. Drawing on data from the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab, GoodWeave International, SANEM, the ILO, and peer reviewed research covering 2018 to 2026, I find systematic violations across five critical areas: pay, working conditions, safety, maternity protection, and the right to organise. Women earn 22 to 60 percent less than men for comparable work². Nearly one in four report frequent sexual harassment at work³. One third say their factories don't provide the maternity benefits they're legally entitled to. And workers who try to form unions face intimidation and dismissal. Fifty six percent of all workers have experienced threats or abuse at their current job; among those who reported abuse, 68 percent of adults and 90 percent of minors were women⁴. The law, on paper, is relatively progressive. The reality is something else entirely. Closing this gap will require more than legislative tweaks—it demands a fundamental shift in how labour rights are enforced, how corporations are held accountable, and how the industry governs itself.

Keywords: Labour rights, women workers, ready-made garment industry, gender equality, Bangladesh, working conditions, wage discrimination, sexual harassment, maternity protection

¹ For Fiscal Year 2024–25, total exports reached US\$48.28 billion, with RMG contributing US\$39.35 billion, or 81.49% of the total. See The Financial Express, 'Exports fetch \$48.28b in FY25,' July 3, 2025,

² A SANEM report found a **wage gap of 51–60% for women worker & A 2023 report from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) notes that women in the garment industry receive an average of 21% lower wage**

³ Frontiers in Public Health (2025)

⁴ "A 2025 study by the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab and GoodWeave International found that 56% of factory workers experiencing threats or abuse at their current job.

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List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Form
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BLA	Bangladesh Labour Act
BWB	Better Work Bangladesh
CCM	Comprehensive Complaints Mechanism
DIFE	Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEAR	Gender Equality and Returns
HREDD	Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence
ILO	International Labour Organization
MiB	Mapped in Bangladesh
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
RSC	RMG Sustainability Council
SANEM	South Asian Network on Economic Modeling

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) industry has emerged as the cornerstone of the nation's economic development since the 1980s. The sector contributes approximately 82% of Bangladesh's total exports and employs over 5.017 million workers.⁵ Women constitute the majority of this workforce, comprising 55.57% of all RMG workers according to official government statistics from 2024. Historically, women represented up to 80% of garment workers a decade ago, but this proportion has declined to approximately 54-56% in recent years.⁶

The post-Rana Plaza era (2013) marked a significant turning point for workplace safety in Bangladesh's garment industry, killing over 1,100 workers, prompted international intervention through the Accord on Fire and Building Safety, improving working conditions for over 2.2 million Bangladeshi textile workers through independent factory inspections and hazard remediation. However, while physical safety has improved substantially, fundamental labour rights issues for women workers remain persistently unresolved. The ready-made garment sector accounts for approximately 14.07% of Bangladesh's GDP and 83% of its total export earnings ([Shakirullah et al., 2020](#)).

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite comprehensive legal protections under the national (the constitution, the Labour Act, 2006) & international law (UDHR, ILO Convention, CEDREW) women workers in the RMG sector face systematic violations of their labour rights. These violations range from wage discrimination, unsafe working conditions, sexual harassment, and denial of legal mandated maternity benefits, obstruction of trade union formation and collective bargaining.

1.3 Research Objectives

Primary Objective:

To critically examine the extent and nature of labour rights violations for women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

⁵ The Financial Express, 'RMG industry lacks full database of workers & UN Bangladesh (2026)

⁶ (CPD) also confirms this peak at 80% in 1994

Specific Objectives:

1. Analyze the legal framework governing women's labour rights in Bangladesh's RMG sector, including constitutional provisions, the Labour Act of 2006, and international obligations;
2. To analyze wage discrimination patterns between male and female RMG workers;
3. To assess the prevalence and types of gender-based violence and harassment in garment workplaces;
4. To evaluate maternity benefit implementation against legal requirements;
5. To examine women's participation in trade unions and collective bargaining;
6. To investigate occupational safety improvements post-Accord and their impact on women workers;
7. To identify barriers to career advancement for women in supervisory positions;
8. To propose policy recommendations for strengthening women's labour rights;

1.4 Research Questions

1. What are the key provisions of Bangladeshi labour law relevant to women RMG workers, and to what extent are they actually implemented?
2. What is the magnitude of wage discrimination between male and female RMG workers?
3. How prevalent is gender-based violence and harassment in garment factories, and what forms does it take?
4. To what extent are maternity benefits implemented in compliance with Bangladesh Labour Act provisions?
5. What factors contribute to women's low participation in trade unions and leadership positions?
6. How have workplace safety improvements affected women workers specifically?
7. What barriers prevent women from advancing to supervisory positions?
8. How does Bangladesh's protection of women's labour rights compare with other major garment-exporting economies?
9. What policy interventions are necessary to ensure equitable labour rights for women?

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study makes several contributions to both scholarship and policy. **First**, it provides a comprehensive, empirically grounded analysis of women's labour rights in Bangladesh's RMG sector, synthesising data from multiple recent sources—including surveys by the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab, GoodWeave International, SANEM, the ILO, and peer-reviewed academic research. **Second**, it situates this analysis within the broader context of global supply chain governance, showing how the political economy of international trade shapes labour rights outcomes. **Third**, it offers comparative insights by examining labour rights regimes in competitor garment-exporting countries. **Fourth**, it provides actionable recommendations for policymakers, industry actors, and international buyers, NGOs, labour right groups. **Fifth**, this research will be beneficial for academics and students, who are interested in gender, labour law, and industrial sociology.

1.6 Scope and Limitations

This study focuses specifically on women workers in Bangladesh's export-oriented RMG sector. While it acknowledges the existence of home-based and informal workers in the supply chain, the primary focus is on factory-based workers, who make up the majority of the formal RMG workforce. The study covers the period from 2018 to 2026, drawing on the most recent available data.

A few limitations should be acknowledged. **First**, the study relies on secondary data analysis and does not involve primary fieldwork. **Second**, data quality and coverage vary across sources; some surveys have relatively small sample sizes. **Third**, the sensitive nature of labour rights violations may lead to underreporting. Fourth, the RMG sector is evolving rapidly—particularly with respect to automation, climate change, and regulatory reforms—so some findings may need updating.

1.7 Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into fifteen chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on labour rights, gender, and global supply chain governance. Chapter 3 Theoretical framework, Chapter 4 examines the legal and institutional framework. Chapter 5 describes the research methodology. Chapter 6 presents the employment profile of women in the RMG sector. Chapters 7 through 12 present empirical findings on wage discrimination, working conditions, sexual harassment, maternity protection, trade union rights, and access to

justice. Chapter 13 provides a comparative analysis with other garment-exporting countries. Chapter 14 discusses the findings in light of theoretical and policy debates. Chapter 15 concludes with summary findings, recommendations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Literature Review

The garment industry emerged in Bangladesh following the 1974 export processing zone establishment and gained momentum through the 1980s Structural Adjustment Programs. Women gain economic freedom through RMG industries (Kabeer, 2018). By 2024, the sector employed 5.017 million workers across approximately 4,600 factories. The industry's growth trajectory transformed Bangladesh from a poverty-stricken nation to a lower-middle-income country, with women's employment playing a central role in this economic transformation.

Goodweave's 2024 report found women earn 2,000 BDT (USD 18) less monthly than male counterparts.⁷ The Fair Labor Association's 2025 study documented that despite reduced frequency of explicit gender-based wage discrimination, women face overtime discrimination—forced to work more overtime with larger allowance cuts than men.

Research by FIDH and Odhikar (2024) identified widespread systematic violations including sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and dangerous workplaces. A comprehensive study released in 2024 found 45% experienced sexual violence/harassment, 22% psychological harassment, 17% verbal abuse, 9% economic exploitation, and 7% physical violence.

Business & Human Rights Centre (2026) reported 80% of female respondent's experienced workplace harassment/discrimination versus 45% of male workers. Karmojibi Nari's research documented that four out of five women faced verbal harassment, two out of three experienced psychological harassment, 23.8% reported physical harassment, and 18% experienced sexual harassment.

The Fair Labor Association and Awaj Foundation's 2025 study revealed most women lack knowledge of legal maternity leave rights, and many factories don't adhere to legal requirements for paid leave or onsite childcare. Despite 75% of factories providing daycare per

⁷ **Modern Slavery and Child Labor in Bangladesh's Garment Sector: Documenting Risks and Informing Solutions**

legal requirements, only 13% reported functional facilities, and most workers didn't know eligibility requirements.⁸

Women represent only 15% of total union members despite major workforce presence. Trade union participation rate is 12% of total labour force, 7.2% in RMG sector. Studies found only 5-10% of women workers become supervisors. This represents severe discrimination regarding promotion scope and limited career prospects. ETI report estimates women now comprise approximately 54% of industry, with significant implications for women's economic empowerment and family well-being. Nazrul Islam Chowdhury, state minister, confirmed 55.57% in 2024. Siddiq (2019) mentioned poor workplace safety still remains a concern. ILO (2023) reported that compliance has improved, but enforcement gaps persist. World Bank (2022) indicated that gender wage disparity continues.

2.2 Research Gaps

Existing literature reveals gaps in:

- Comprehensive analysis integrating multiple rights dimensions
- Post-2023 minimum wage implementation impact on women
- Intersectional analysis (age, marital status, migration)
- Effective enforcement mechanism evaluation
- Worker awareness program effectiveness assessment

3. Theoretical framework

3.1 Feminist Labour Theory

This study employs feminist labour theory examining how gender structures labour market experiences. The theory posits that women's work is systematically disadvantaged through wage discrimination, occupational segregation, and dual burden of work-home responsibilities.

3.2 Structural Violence Framework

Structural violence explains how institutional arrangements perpetuate harm against women workers through:

⁸ the **Fair Labour Association (FLA) and the Awaj Foundation** titled "*Maternity Rights and Childcare in Bangladesh: A Study of Workers in the Ready-Made Garment Sector*"

- Economic structures: Wage gaps, overtime discrimination
- Legal structures: Weak enforcement despite comprehensive laws
- Social structures: Normalization of harassment, promotion barriers

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining legal analysis, quantitative secondary data analysis, qualitative analysis, and comparative analysis. This design enables triangulation across multiple data sources and methodological approaches, enhancing the validity and robustness of findings.

4.2 Data Sources

Data sources include:

Legal Documents:

- Constitution of Bangladesh
- Bangladesh Labour Act 2006
- ILO Conventions and recommendations
- High Court judgments and guidelines

Quantitative Surveys:

- SANEM Quarterly Labour Force Survey (2022)
- SANEM-Microfinance Opportunities survey of 1,300 workers (2023)
- University of Nottingham Rights Lab and GoodWeave International survey of 2,000+ workers (2025)
- *Frontiers in Public Health* study of 332 female workers (2018/2025)
- IndustriAll Bangladesh Council survey of 850 workers (2025)
- Fair Labour Association/Awaj Foundation survey of 88 workers in 12 factories (2025)

Qualitative Sources:

- Worker testimonies and case studies
- Stakeholder interviews (cited in secondary sources)
- Focus group discussions (cited in secondary sources)

Reports:

- ILO Better Work Bangladesh reports
- RMG Sustainability Council documents
- Business and Human Rights Resource Centre reports

4.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and, where available, inferential statistics including multivariate logistic regression. Key variables analysed include:

- Wage levels and wage gaps by gender
- Prevalence of sexual harassment and associated risk factors
- Maternity benefit provision and utilisation
- Working hours and overtime
- Unionisation rates

Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying recurring themes across worker testimonies and stakeholder accounts. Comparative analysis examined labour rights regimes in Vietnam, Cambodia, and India using secondary data from ILO, World Bank, and other sources.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

As this study relies on secondary data analysis, it does not involve direct contact with human subjects. However, the research engages with sensitive topics including sexual harassment, exploitation, and violence. The study treats all data with respect for the dignity of workers whose experiences are documented. Identifying information has been anonymized in source materials.

4.5 Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, reliance on secondary data means that the study cannot control for all potential sources of bias in the original data collection. Second, the sensitive nature of labour rights violations may lead to underreporting. Third, sample sizes vary across studies, with some having relatively small samples. Fourth, the rapid pace of change in the RMG sector means that some findings may require updating. Despite these limitations, the convergence of findings across multiple independent data sources strengthens confidence in the conclusions.

5. Legal and Institutional Framework

5.1 Constitutional Guarantees

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh provides the foundational legal framework for gender equality and labour rights. Article 27 establishes that "all citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law." Article 28(1) explicitly prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth, while Article 28(2) empowers the state to make special provisions for the advancement of women.⁹

Despite these constitutional commitments, the gap between constitutional principles and implementing legislation remains significant. As one study observed, "though the Constitution of Bangladesh includes provisions on equal rights for females and males in all spheres of life and prohibits discrimination based on gender, these provisions are not matched in legislation". This constitutional-implementation gap sets the stage for the broader enforcement deficits documented throughout this thesis.

5.2 The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006

The Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) 2006, as amended, constitutes the primary legislative instrument governing employment relations. Several provisions are particularly relevant to women RMG workers:

⁹ The constitution of Bangladesh

Table 5.1: Key Provisions of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 Relevant to Women

Provision	Content	Legal Reference
Equal Pay	Male, female and disabled workers must be given equal wages for work of equal nature or standard	Section 345
Maternity Leave	16 weeks (8 weeks before, 8 weeks after delivery) for women employed for at least 6 months	Sections 46-50
Childcare	Factories with >40 workers must provide childcare for children up to age 6	Section 94
Protection Against Harassment	Prohibition of conduct towards female workers that is "indecent or repugnant to their modesty or honour"	Section 332
Working Hours	Maximum 8 hours/day, 48 hours/week; special provisions for women regarding pregnancy and overtime	Sections 100-109
Night Work Prohibition	No woman employed between 10pm and 6am without her consent	Section 109

Source: Bangladesh Labour Act 2006

Despite these provisions, implementation is severely deficient. The gap between legal entitlements and workplace realities constitutes the central finding of this study.

5.3 National Labour Policy 2012

The National Labour Policy 2012 provides a comprehensive framework for the promotion of decent work conditions, fair wages, gender equity, and the welfare of labourers. A key goal of this policy is to eliminate gender-based discrimination in the workplace and promote maternity rights and social protection for women workers¹⁶.

5.4 National Women Development Policy 2011

The National Women Development Policy 2011 aims to ensure equal rights for women in all spheres, including employment. It emphasizes economic empowerment through safe workplace practices, equal wages, and elimination of sexual harassment in the workplace.

5.5 EPZ Labour Policy (2019)

Workers in Export Processing Zones (EPZs), where many garment factories operate, were historically denied full trade union rights. The EPZ Labour Policy 2019 introduced some improvements, such as allowing Workers' Welfare Associations (WWAs), though these still fall short of guaranteeing full unionization rights as per ILO standards.

5.6 National Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Policy 2013

This policy was enacted to promote a safe and healthy working environment for all workers, particularly in industrial settings like garments. It seeks to reduce work-related accidents and injuries—common in the poorly regulated RMG sector.

5.7 International Obligations

International law plays a critical role in shaping the labour rights framework in Bangladesh, especially for women working in the readymade garment (RMG) sector. As a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and a signatory to multiple United Nations (UN) conventions, Bangladesh is legally and morally obligated to uphold international labour standards that ensure fair, safe, and non-discriminatory employment practices.

5.8 ILO Core Conventions

Bangladesh has ratified eight ILO core conventions, which are binding on member states. Among them, the following are particularly relevant to women's labour rights:

- Convention No. 100 (Equal Remuneration), 1951 – mandates equal pay for work of equal value.¹⁰
- Convention No. 111 (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation), 1958 – prohibits discrimination based on gender, race, religion, or other status.
- Convention No. 87 (Freedom of Association) and Convention No. 98 (Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining) – both provide the legal basis for workers to unionize and advocate for better conditions.

¹⁰ Convention (No. 100) concerning equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value

These conventions collectively uphold the principles of gender equality, workplace safety, freedom of association, and protection against exploitation—all crucial for safeguarding women in the garment industry.

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

Bangladesh ratified CEDAW in 1984. This treaty obliges the state to eliminate discrimination against women in all fields, including Article 11 employment. of CEDAW specifically addresses women 's rights to equal employment opportunities, the right to maternity leave, protection against harassment, and safe workplace environments.¹¹

5.10 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948

Article 23 of the UDHR states that "everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to protection against unemployment"²³. Though not legally binding, the UDHR serves as a foundational text for modern human rights and labour standards.

5.11 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966

Bangladesh is a party to the ICESCR, which guarantees the right to work, just and favourable working conditions, and equal pay for equal work. relevant to female RMG workers²⁴. Article 7 particularly affirms the right to fair wages, safe working conditions, and rest periods—all highly

5.12 Enforcement and Limitations

Despite being a signatory to these international instruments, Bangladesh has faced criticism for weak enforcement and limited compliance. Reports by international watchdogs have frequently pointed out the disconnect between treaty obligations and the real-world conditions faced by female garment workers, including wage theft, lack of maternity benefits, and denial of union rights.

¹¹ Bangladesh acceded to CEDAW on November 6, 1984

International laws and treaties thus provide a valuable framework for advocacy and reform, but they must be supported by robust domestic enforcement mechanisms to bring about meaningful change for women in the RMG sector.

5.13 Institutional Framework

Several institutions are charged with labour rights enforcement:

Table 5.2 National institutional bodies

Institutions	Role
Ministry of Labour and Employment	Primary policy-making and oversight
Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE)	Workplace inspections and compliance monitoring
Labour Courts	Adjudication of labour disputes
RMG Sustainability Council (RSC)	Safety monitoring and, since November 2025, labour rights complaints
BGMEA and BKMEA	Industry associations with compliance responsibilities

Despite this institutional architecture, enforcement remains weak. The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments lack the resources and political independence to effectively monitor compliance across thousands of factories. Labour courts are inaccessible to most workers. The RSC's expanded mandate faces resistance from industry associations.

5.14 The Implementation Deficit

The implementation deficit—the gap between what the law promises and what workers experience—is the central finding of this thesis. Multiple factors contribute to this deficit:

Weak Inspection Capacity: DIFE lacks sufficient inspectors, resources, and political independence to monitor compliance effectively.

Judicial Barriers: Labour courts are slow, expensive, and inaccessible to most workers, particularly women with limited resources and education.

Political Economy: The RMG sector's economic importance gives factory owners significant political influence, enabling them to resist enforcement.

Global Supply Chain Dynamics: Pressure for low prices from international buyers creates incentives for cost-cutting that undermines labour rights.

Cultural Norms: Patriarchal norms that devalue women's work and discourage women from asserting their rights reinforce patterns of discrimination and exploitation.

6. Employment Profile of Women in the RMG Sector

6.1 Workforce Composition

The RMG sector employs approximately four million workers, with women constituting the majority. Precise figures vary across data sources:

Table 6.1: Female Workforce Participation in Bangladesh RMG Sector

Data Source	Female %	Male %	Total Workers	Year
Mapped in Bangladesh (MiB)	57.7	42.3	3.04 million	2024
Apparel Resources	53	47	~4 million	2025
The Daily Star	56	44	~4 million	2025
UN Bangladesh	55	45	~5 million	2026
ILO Study	60.5	39.5	—	2018

The declining trend in female participation—from 63.4 percent in 2010 to 60.5 percent in 2018 to 53-58 percent currently—reflects multiple factors including automation, wage hikes attracting more male workers, and the disproportionate burden of childcare and household responsibilities borne by women.¹²

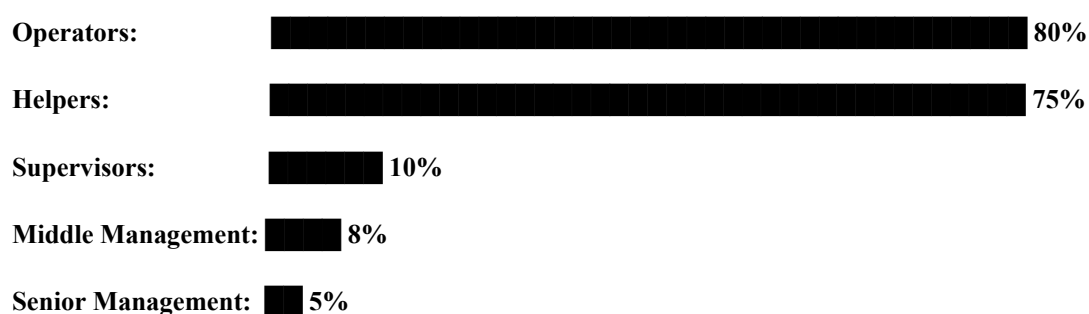
6.2 Occupational Segregation

Women are overwhelmingly concentrated in the lowest-skilled, lowest-paid positions. While women comprise approximately 80 percent of operators (machine operators), they constitute only 10 percent of supervisory roles or higher management positions. Only 1 percent of women hold top leadership positions.¹³

¹² the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI), GIZ, and Brac University

¹³ ILO/IFC 2018 report

Figure 6.1: Women's Representation across RMG Job Categories



Source: Compiled from multiple studies including BRAC University research and ILO Better Work data

This occupational segregation reflects both supply-side factors (women's lower educational attainment and limited skills training) and demand-side discrimination (employer biases against promoting women to supervisory positions). The ILO's GEAR programme has made some progress, training over 600 female sewing operators and promoting nearly 400 women to supervisory roles. However, these gains remain modest relative to the scale of the challenge.¹⁴

6.3 Geographic Distribution

RMG factories are concentrated in and around major urban centres. MiB mapping identified 3,555 export-oriented factories across the country, with the highest concentrations in Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj, and Chattogram. Of these, 2,720 are affiliated with BGMEA and BKMEA, while 836 are not associated with any trade body.

Working conditions and rights violations vary by location. A study on sexual harassment found that workers from factories located in Chattogram (a peripheral region compared to Dhaka) reported a higher frequency of sexual harassment than those in Dhaka.

6.4 The Declining Female Participation Rate

The declining female participation rate warrants particular attention. Several factors explain this trend:

Automation: Technological upgrades have triggered significant employment reduction, with women hit hardest due to their predominance in easily mechanised roles. A 2024 study found

¹⁴ The ILO-IFC Gender Equality and Returns (GEAR) programme

that technological upgrades triggered a 30.58 percent reduction in overall employment in several factories. Over 300 factories have closed or suspended operations, resulting in an estimated 200,000 job losses, with women constituting the majority of those displaced.

Wage Hikes: Minimum wage increases have attracted more male workers to the sector.

Childcare and Household Responsibilities: The lack of adequate childcare facilities forces many women to leave the workforce after childbirth.

Structural Discrimination: Women face systematic barriers to advancement, limiting their career progression and contributing to higher attrition rates.

The declining female participation rate has significant implications for both gender equality and the sector's sustainability. As one analysis noted, "Bangladesh's RMG sector risks losing orders after 2029 if garments factories don't implement HREDD and unless workers' rights are ensured".

7. Wage Discrimination and Economic Rights

7.1 The Gender Wage Gap

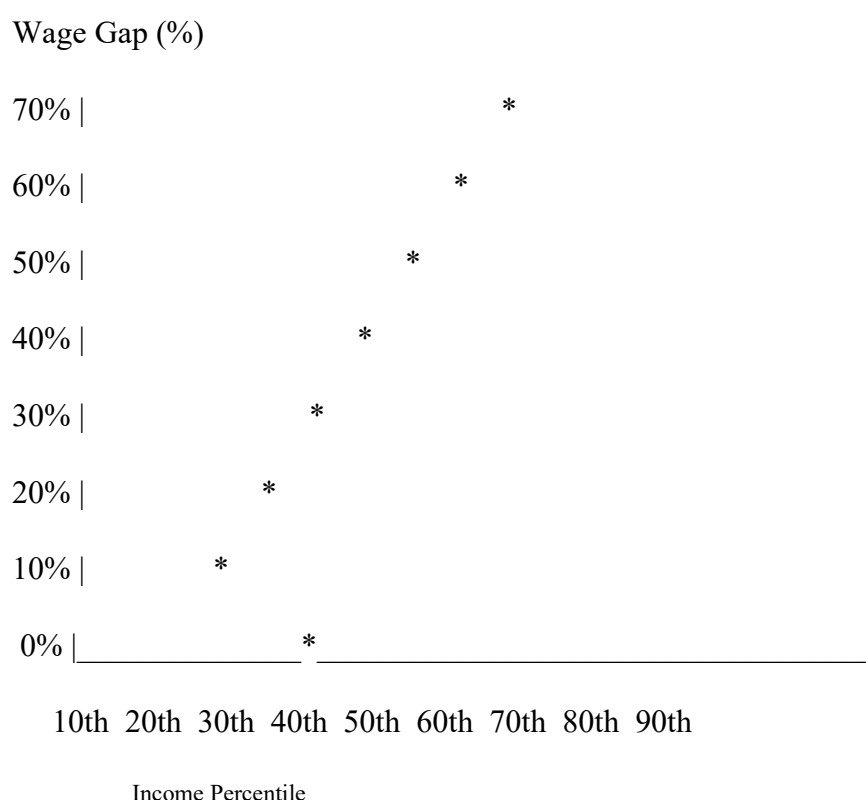
Despite constitutional guarantees of equal pay and Section 345 of the Labour Act prohibiting wage discrimination, women RMG workers consistently earn less than their male counterparts. The magnitude of this gap varies across studies but consistently demonstrates systematic discrimination.

Table 7.1: Gender Wage Gap Estimates in Bangladesh RMG Sector

Study/Source	Wage Gap	Methodology	Year
SANEM (Quarterly Labour Force Survey)	Men earn 43% more than women	National survey data	2022
The Business Standard	Men earn 22-30% more in base wages	Industry analysis	2025
GoodWeave/Univ. of Nottingham	Women earn 2,000 BDT (\$18) less/month	Survey of 2,000+ workers	2025
TBS News	22-30% base wage gap	Multi-sector analysis	2025
SANEM (Vol XII, Issue 6)	Persistent gap even after controlling foreducation/experience	Labour force survey	2025

The wage gap is not uniform across income levels. Analysis of the 2022 Quarterly Labour Force Survey data reveals that at the lowest income level (10th percentile), the wage gap is approximately 17 percent, but at the 90th percentile, it widens dramatically to 61.3 percent. This pattern—where the gap widens at higher income levels—suggests that gender discrimination becomes more pronounced as wages rise, possibly reflecting barriers to women's advancement into higher-paying positions.¹⁵

Figure 7.1: Gender Wage Gap by Income Percentile



Source: SANEM analysis of 2022 Quarterly Labour Force Survey data

7.2 Minimum Wage and Living Wage Deficit

The minimum wage in Bangladesh's RMG sector has been a persistent source of contention. Following protests in November 2023, the government increased the minimum wage to approximately 12,500 taka (US\$110-115) per month. However, this figure falls far short of living wage estimates.¹⁶

¹⁵ Analysis of the 2022 Quarterly Labour Force Survey data (SANEM)

¹⁶ The Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD), in a 2023 study

Table 7.2: Minimum Wage vs. Living Wage in Bangladesh RMG Sector

Category		Amount (BDT)	Amount (USD)	Source
Current Wage	Minimum	12,500	~110-115	Government notification
Living Wage Needed		19,217	~173	IndustriAll Bangladesh Council
Living Wage Range		19,200–26,000	~173–234	Global Living Wage Coalition
Decent Living	Standard of	22,000–27,000	~198–243	SANEM analysis

Workers generate approximately \$500 in output per month but receive a worker's share of approximately 27 percent. This disparity reflects deliberate wage suppression and weak labour rights. A survey conducted by IndustriAll Bangladesh Council found that 64 percent of RMG workers cannot meet all their daily essential expenses, 99.6 percent have no savings, and 100 percent are indebted. Additionally, 77.2 percent of workers perform overtime to meet family expenditures.¹⁷

7.3 Explanations for the Wage Gap

The gender wage gap in Bangladesh's RMG sector is attributable to multiple, intersecting factors:

Educational Attainment: A significant portion of female workers have only primary or lower education, while male workers tend to have higher educational qualifications. However, even after controlling for education, experience, and occupation, a significant unexplained wage gap remains, pointing to direct discrimination.

Occupational Segregation: Women's concentration in lower-skilled operator and helper positions, compared with men's greater representation in supervisory and skilled roles, contributes to aggregate wage differences.

¹⁷ The survey was conducted by the **IndustriAll Bangladesh Council (IBC)** across 850 workers in Dhaka, Gazipur, Ashulia, Narayanganj, and Chittagong

Discrimination: As the SANEM analysis concludes, "even after accounting for all these observable factors, there is still a significant portion of the wage gap that remains unexplained". This unexplained portion is attributed to gender discrimination.

Bargaining Power: Women workers have less bargaining power than men, partly due to weaker union representation and partly due to cultural norms that discourage women from negotiating wages.

Intersectional Factors: Women who are also climate-displaced migrants, members of minority communities, or home-based workers face compounded disadvantages.

7.4 Comparative Wage Analysis

The comparison with other garment-exporting countries is stark. Bangladeshi RMG workers receive the lowest minimum wage among major competitors.

Figure 7.2: Comparative Minimum Wages in Garment-Exporting Countries (USD/month)



Source: IndustriAll Bangladesh Council survey

The wage differential reflects not only different labour costs but also different labour institutions. Countries with stronger unions and collective bargaining mechanisms have been able to secure higher wages.

8. Working Conditions and Occupational Safety

8.1 Physical Working Conditions

Despite significant improvements in factory safety following the Rana Plaza disaster in 2013, working conditions remain challenging. The Accord on Fire and Building Safety, launched after the disaster, covered over 1,500 factories and brought substantial safety improvements.

However, approximately one-fifth of factories still fail to meet essential safety standards for fire, structural, and electrical safety.

Environmental hazards persist. The University of Nottingham/GoodWeave report found that among other dangers, "poor salaries at exporting and subcontracted worksites, dangerous labor for young workers, and exploitative workplace practices were present". The report documented that "100% of the minors interviewed during the study were illegally employed as child laborers in RMG factories". Thirty-two percent of adult RMG workers surveyed were being paid below minimum wage, and 7 percent of respondents' income left them living below the international poverty line.

8.2 Worker Fatalities in Bangladesh's Garment Industry: A Historical Record

The following tables and charts document the tragic loss of life among garment workers in Bangladesh. The data reveals a pattern of preventable industrial disasters spanning decades, with the Rana Plaza collapse representing the deadliest industrial accident in modern history.

Table 8.1: Major Garment Industry Disasters in Bangladesh (2000–2013)

Date	Incident	Location	Deaths	Injuries	Key Factors
25 Nov 2000	Chowdhury Knitwear & Garments fire	Narsingdi	46	100+	Short circuit; fire, smoke, stampede
1 Aug 2001	Factory fire	Kafrul, Dhaka	26	76	Unknown; smoke, stampede
8 Aug 2001	Mico Sweater Ltd. fire	Mirpur, Dhaka	28	100	Single exit locked
6 Jan 2005	Shan Knitting and Processing Ltd. fire	Narayanganj	22	50+	Fire; only exit issues
Apr 2005	Factory collapse	Dhaka	64-79	~100	Structural failure
23 Feb 2006	KTS Textiles fire	Chittagong	54-91	400	Electric short circuit; exit locked
Mar 2006	Industry fire	Gazipur	3	—	Only exit blocked by boxes
25 Feb 2010	Garib & Garib Sweater factory fire	Gazipur	21	~50	Fire
Jun 2010	Factory collapse	—	25	—	Structural failure
14 Dec 2010	Ha-Meem Group factory fire	Ashulia	26	—	Fire
24 Nov 2012	Tazreen Fashions fire	Ashulia	111-124	200+	Locked exits; inadequate safety measures
24 Apr 2013	Rana Plaza collapse	Savar, Dhaka	1,132-1,175	2,500+	Illegal construction; generator vibration; ignored warnings

Sources: Compiled from The Daily Star, NCBI/World Bank, Consortium News, IndustriAll, and HRW reports

Table 8.2: Comprehensive Fatality Statistics in the RMG Sector

Period/Statistic	Deaths	Source
Major fire incidents (1990–2012)	At least 500	Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies
Workplace deaths in RMG sector (2005–2021)	3,721	OSHE Foundation
Total workplace deaths across all sectors (2005–2021)	18,659	OSHE Foundation
RMG sector deaths (2017)	15	RMG Bangladesh
RMG sector deaths (2018)	10	RMG Bangladesh
RMG sector deaths (2019)	2	RMG Bangladesh
RMG sector deaths (2020)	1	RMG Bangladesh
RMG sector deaths (2021)	13	RMG Bangladesh
RMG sector deaths (2022)	4	CPD / RMG Bangladesh

Table 8.3: Violence Against Garment Workers (2025)

Period	Deaths	Injuries	Incidents
Jan–Aug 2025	66	773	149 violent incidents
July 2025	5	23	17 clashes
August 2025	2	30	20 violent incidents

Source: Bangladesh Pratidin

The OSHE Foundation documented that **3,721 workers died in the RMG sector alone between 2005 and 2021**. While annual fatalities in the formal RMG sector have declined significantly in recent years—from 15 in 2017 to just 4 in 2022—the legacy of major industrial disasters continues to cast a long shadow over the industry.

Notably, the Rana Plaza collapse remains the deadliest industrial accident in modern history, claiming between **1,132 and 1,175 lives** and injuring more than **2,500** workers, most of them women. Just five months earlier, the Tazreen Fashions fire killed **111 to 124** workers.

These figures, however, likely undercount the true toll. Many incidents in subcontracted factories, home-based operations, and the informal sector go undocumented. As one report noted, "little is known about worker exploitation in the RMG supply chain's secret, subcontracted tiers connected to international export".

8.3 Climate Change Impacts

Climate change is emerging as a significant threat to RMG workers' health and productivity. A 2024 survey of 1,000 workers found that 98 percent reported noticeable changes in workplace temperatures, with 85 percent experiencing extreme heat.¹⁸ The impacts are severe:

Table 8.1: Climate Change Impacts on RMG Workers

Impact	Percentage of Workers Affected
Noticeable temperature changes	98%
Experienced extreme heat	85%
Rise in climate-linked illnesses	78%
Forced to take illness-related leave	46%
Sharp productivity decline	27%
Slight productivity reduction	29%
Frequent insect infestations at home	41%

Source: Survey of 1,000 workers across Rampura, Ashulia, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chattogram (mid-2024)

Female workers were hit harder, with 17 percent more women than men reporting significant productivity reductions. The survey also revealed that 46 percent of workers did not receive adequate rest breaks—rising to 75 percent in Ashulia.¹⁹

¹⁸ Bangladesh: 98% of garment workers report 'noticeable changes' in workplace temperatures

¹⁹ Bangladesh: 98% of garment workers report 'noticeable changes' in workplace temperatures

The report also linked climate shocks to labour migration: three in four respondents said they joined the RMG sector because climate-related events had devastated their traditional livelihoods in agriculture, fishing, or other sectors.

8.4 Working Hours and Overtime

Excessive working hours remain widespread. Research by the University of Nottingham's Rights Lab and GoodWeave International found that "almost a third of factory-based workers report working more than ten hours per day, six days per week, which exceeds the maximum limit for regular and overtime hours set by international and Bangladeshi law and is an indicator of forced labor".

The Bangladesh Labour Act limits working hours to eight hours per day and 48 hours per week. However, enforcement is weak, and overtime work is pervasive. As noted, 77.2 percent of workers perform overtime to meet family expenditures.

8.5 Home-Based and Informal Workers

Beyond the factory gates, a significant population of home-based workers operates in the RMG supply chain. These predominantly female workers often operate "without legal status, fair wages or social protection". A study by the Bangladesh Labour Foundation revealed that home-based workers, 80 percent of whom are climate-displaced migrants, are paid a meagre average of BDT 4,000–5,000 monthly on a piece-rate basis.²⁰

These workers are unorganised, lack bargaining power, and are often unaware of labour laws, leading them to accept unfair terms and endure poor working conditions. They represent the invisible workforce that supports the visible garment industry yet remains entirely excluded from legal protections and social benefits.

9. Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence

9.1 Prevalence

Sexual harassment is pervasive in Bangladesh's RMG sector. A peer-reviewed study published in *Frontiers in Public Health* (2025) surveyed 332 female garment workers and found that

²⁰ Bangladesh Labour Foundation (BLF)

nearly one-quarter (22.0 percent) reported experiencing frequent sexual harassment inside the factory in the preceding six months.

A broader survey found that 84.7 percent of female workers experienced verbal abuse, 71.3 percent experienced mental harassment, 20 percent experienced physical harassment, and 12.7 percent experienced sexual harassment. Another study found that 76 percent of surveyed workers said that violence and harassment outside the factory was committed by stalkers, fellow workers and transport workers.

9.2 Perpetrators

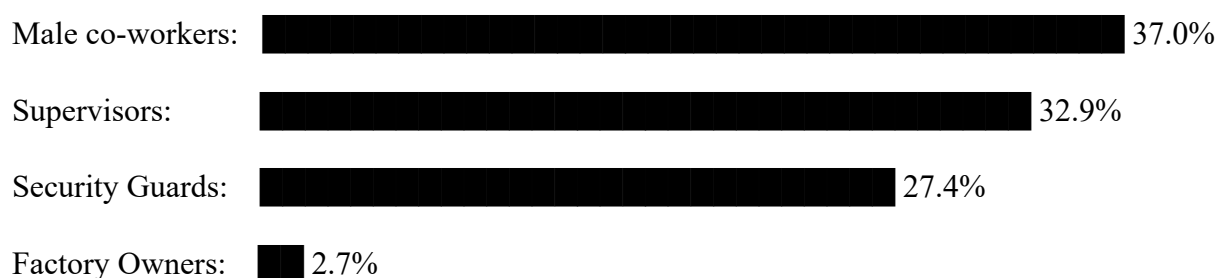
The perpetrators of sexual harassment are predominantly individuals in positions of power or authority within the factory hierarchy:

Table 9.1: Prevalence of Sexual Harassment by Perpetrator Category

Perpetrator Category	Percentage of Incidents
Male co-workers	37.0%
Supervisors	32.9%
Security guards	27.4%
Factory owners	2.7%

Source: Cross-sectional survey of 332 female RMG workers, 2018

Figure 9.1: Perpetrators of Sexual Harassment Against Female RMG Workers



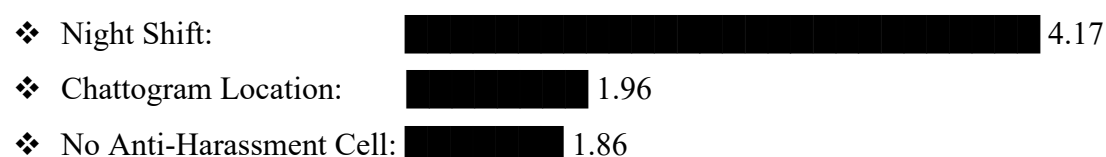
Source: Kabir et al. (2025), Frontiers in Public Health

9.3 Risk Factors

The *Frontiers in Public Health* study identified several risk factors associated with higher rates of sexual harassment:

- **Factory Location:** Workers in factories located in Chattogram reported higher frequencies than those in Dhaka (β 0.67, 95%CI 1.02, 3.76)
- **Night Shifts:** Working during night time was significantly associated with harassment (β 2.58, 95%CI 6.92, 25.18)
- **Absence of Anti-Harassment Mechanisms:** Non-existence of an anti-sexual harassment cell inside the factory was a significant risk factor (β 0.62, 95%CI 0.97, 3.55)
- **Marital Status:** Unmarried and young female workers experienced harassment at almost double the rate compared to married and older workers

Figure 9.2: Risk Factors for Sexual Harassment (Odds Ratios)



Source: Multivariate logistic regression analysis, Kabir et al. (2025)

9.4 Institutional Responses

The ILO has incorporated gender-based violence into its Occupational Safety and Health guidelines, creating new opportunities to address harassment in workplaces. The Bangladesh Labour Act's Section 332 and High Court guidelines (2009) provide a legal basis for action, though implementation remains weak.

Some progress has been made through factory-level initiatives. The Better Work programme has "diligently ensured women's inclusion in safety committees within factories, as mandated by national law, and the establishment of anti-harassment committees following court orders". However, as the study found, "workers' frequent experience of sexual harassment at the workplace was associated with... non-existence of an anti-sexual harassment cell inside the factory", indicating that many factories still lack these protections.

Gender Platform Bangladesh has drafted and submitted a law on the prevention of gender-based violence in workplaces, though it has not yet been enacted.

10. Maternity Protection and Reproductive Rights

10.1 Legal Entitlements

The Bangladesh Labour Act provides for sixteen weeks of paid maternity leave (eight weeks before and eight weeks after delivery) for women employed for no less than six months. Factories with more than 40 workers are required to provide childcare facilities for children up to age six.²¹

By contrast, female government officials are entitled to six months, or 180 days, of maternity leave under the Government Servants Leave Rules. This disparity between public and private sector maternity benefits has been a persistent source of criticism.

10.2 Implementation Gaps

Despite these legal provisions, implementation is severely deficient. A 2025 study titled 'Maternity Rights and Childcare in Bangladesh: A Study of Workers in the Readymade Garment Sector' found that most female workers surveyed did not know about their legal rights regarding paid maternity leave and that many factories did not adhere to legal requirements.

Key findings include:

- 66 percent of workers said factories provided maternity benefits, while 33 percent said benefits were not provided
- Almost all workers knew that factories offered maternity leave but were unaware of the amount of leave they were legally entitled to
- Benefits were provided arbitrarily and depended on the goodwill of welfare officers, managers, and factory owners
- Many factories set eligibility limits higher than the legal limit (six months of employment), depriving many female workers of benefits

²¹ The Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006

- 83 percent of surveyed workers said factory management gave maternity leave and 14 percent said there was no such provision
- Workload and pressure to meet targets were the same for pregnant workers as others
- 25 percent of respondents were given some form of accommodation during pregnancy, 16 percent had to sit on a stool, and 21 percent had to remain standing for long hours without any accommodation²²

Table 10.1: Maternity Benefit Implementation in RMG Factories

Indicator	Percentage
Workers reporting benefits provided	66%
Workers reporting benefits not provided	33%
Workers reporting management gave maternity leave	83%
Workers reporting no such provision	14%
Workers given accommodation during pregnancy	25%
Workers who had to sit on a stool	16%
Workers who had to remain standing, no accommodation	21%

Source: 'Maternity Rights and Childcare in Bangladesh' study, Fair Labour Association/Awaj Foundation, 2025

Labour rights platforms have demanded six months' fully paid maternity leave for RMG workers, noting that government institutions already provide six months while RMG workers receive only four.

10.3 Childcare Facilities

The requirement for childcare facilities in factories with more than 40 workers is widely ignored. Although 75 percent of factories provided daycare services as per the law, only 13 percent of respondents said these facilities were functional, and most did not know the eligibility requirements to enroll their children.

The study revealed that "a significant number of day care centres located in factories were used only during buyer visits to give the illusion that the factories complied with the legal

²² Study by the Fair Labour Association (FLA) and Awaj Foundation

obligations". Some factories also hired local children to populate the centres during buyer visits.

The study further found that "if a factory does have a day care centre, it may limit the age of the children allowed to attend in contradiction of the law. Often the age limit is three months, six months or one year". Under the Bangladesh Labour Act, factories must provide childcare for children up to age six.²³

10.4 The Disregard for Reproductive Roles

Qualitative research exploring maternity rights in the RMG sector reveals "the exploitation of cheap female labour alongside a disregard for their reproductive roles in this highly feminized RMG industry". The study, involving 20 female workers, seven factory staff, and three labour rights activists, found that women's reproductive needs are systematically ignored in workplace policies and practices.

The absence of adequate maternity protection and childcare facilities forces many women to leave the workforce after childbirth, contributing to the declining female participation rate in the sector. This represents not only a violation of women's rights but also a significant loss of human capital for the sector and the economy.

11. Trade Union Rights and Freedom of Association

11.1 Legal Framework

The Bangladesh Labour Act recognises the right to form trade unions, and recent reforms have attempted to ease some restrictions. However, the gap between legal recognition and practical exercise remains vast. As one report noted, "labour rights declined precipitously in recent years in Bangladesh RMG sector as union organisers now struggle while the authorities continue to curb freedom to associate, organise, and demonstrate".

11.2 Unionisation Rates

Unionisation rates in the RMG sector are remarkably low.

²³ "Maternity Rights and Childcare in Bangladesh: A Study of Workers in the Ready-Made Garment Sector," jointly conducted by the **Fair Labour Association (FLA)** and the **Awaj Foundation**

Table 11.1: Unionisation Rates in Bangladesh RMG Sector

Indicator	Percentage
Workers not union members	73%
Workers who are union members	27%

Source: Various surveys, 2024-2025

This low rate reflects not worker disinterest but systematic obstacles to union formation and membership.

11.3 Obstacles to Unionisation

Workers attempting to form or join trade unions frequently face intimidation, harassment, or summary dismissal. This environment is particularly stifling within Export Processing Zones (EPZs), where the application of labour rights often falls short of international standards.

The RMG sector has been described as "a notoriously anti-union sector". The suppression of trade union rights has been identified as a key factor perpetuating other labour rights violations, including wage discrimination, unsafe working conditions, and sexual harassment. Without collective voice, individual workers lack the power to challenge violations or negotiate better conditions.

11.4 Representation in Wage Boards

Labour leaders have alleged that workers' real representation has been ignored in wage board formation, with the government violating rules in appointing workers' representatives. This exclusion from decision-making processes perpetuates the marginalisation of worker voices in wage-setting.

The lack of genuine worker representation extends beyond wage boards to other governance mechanisms. While the RMG Sustainability Council has a tripartite structure involving industry, brands, and unions, the effectiveness of union representation remains limited by the broader constraints on trade union activity.

12. Access to Justice and Grievance Mechanisms

12.1 Available Mechanisms

While 61 percent of workers acknowledged that some complaint procedures are available, 39 percent reported that no such system exists, leaving them without effective means to address grievances. Where mechanisms exist, they are often inaccessible or ineffective.

The RMG Sustainability Council's Worker Complaints Mechanism, originally established under the 2013 Accord, provides a channel for workers to report violations. In November 2025, the mechanism was expanded to cover issues beyond occupational safety and health. The expanded Comprehensive Complaints Mechanism now covers unfair employment contracts, wages, benefits, leave, and freedom of association, collective bargaining, child labour, forced labour, and discrimination.

However, this expansion has faced resistance. BGMEA requested member factories not to respond to RSC's non-OSH-related communications. This resistance reflects the ongoing tensions between industry associations and labour rights enforcement mechanisms.

12.2 Barriers to Access

Female workers face multiple barriers to accessing justice:

- **Lack of Awareness:** Almost half (49 percent) of workers claimed they were not properly informed about workplace health risks. Similar lack of awareness extends to legal rights and remedies.
- **Fear of Retaliation:** Workers who report violations risk dismissal or other forms of retaliation.
- **Weak Enforcement:** Even where complaints are lodged, enforcement of remedies is inconsistent.
- **Culture of Silence:** Over 80 percent of garment workers have experienced or witnessed sexual harassment or abuse, yet fear of retaliation keeps many from speaking up.
- **Limited Legal Aid:** While legal aid clinics have been established to educate women about their rights under the Bangladesh Labour Act and protections against gender-based violence, coverage remains limited.

12.3 The Role of the RMG Sustainability Council

The RMG Sustainability Council represents a significant institutional innovation. Following the departure of the Accord and the Alliance, the RSC was established to conduct structural,

electrical, fire, life safety, and boiler safety inspections. The RSC also conducts safety training and operates an independent occupational safety and health complaints mechanism.

The expansion of the RSC's mandate in November 2025 to cover labour rights issues beyond occupational safety represents a significant development. However, the resistance from BGMEA raises questions about the effectiveness of this expansion.

13. Comparative Analysis

13.1 Regional Comparison

Bangladesh's labour rights record compares unfavorably with competitor garment-exporting nations in several respects:

Table 13.1: Comparative Labour Standards in Garment-Exporting Countries

Indicator	Bangladesh	Vietnam	Cambodia	India
Minimum Wage (USD/month)	67	~160	170	168
Unionisation Rate	~27%	Higher	Higher	Higher
Maternity Leave (weeks)	16	26	16	26
Female Workforce Share	53-58%	75-80%	>80%	35-40%
Ratification of ILO C.98	No	Yes	Yes	Yes

13.2 Lessons from Vietnam and Cambodia

Vietnam and Cambodia demonstrate that wages can rise, welfare programmes can expand, and disputes can be resolved without violence. Unlike Bangladesh, these countries have institutionalised meaningful welfare protections including social security, health insurance, and childcare.

In Vietnam, women still constitute about 75-80 percent of the garment workforce, but they benefit from higher wages and better social protections. Cambodia's higher minimum wage (US\$170 compared with Bangladesh's US\$67) reflects stronger labour institutions and more effective collective bargaining.

However, it is important to note that in Vietnam, "women remain concentrated in low-paid, repetitive tasks that are among the first to be mechanised", suggesting that gender inequality in the workforce is not unique to Bangladesh.²⁴

13.3 Implications for Competitiveness

Bangladesh's failure to protect labour rights poses significant risks to its competitive position. International buyers are under increasing pressure to ensure ethical sourcing, and supply chain violations quickly become global scandals in the age of social media.

The University of Nottingham/GoodWeave report offers specific suggestions for the Bangladeshi government, foreign purchasers, domestic clothing suppliers, non-governmental organisations, and trade unions to enhance supply chain transparency, carry out risk-based human rights due diligence, fairly compensate employees, prevent child and forced labour, and set up efficient grievance procedures.

The EU's new directives on corporate sustainability and human rights due diligence require brands to take responsibility for subcontracted factories, workers' rights, and environmental compliance. Failure to meet these standards could exclude Bangladesh from international markets.

14. Discussion

14.1 The Empowerment-Exploitation Paradox

The RMG sector has simultaneously empowered and exploited women workers. On one hand, it has provided formal employment to millions of women who would otherwise have no access to waged work. On the other, this employment occurs under conditions that systematically violate workers' rights. As one observer noted, "Bangladesh has lifted itself out of dire poverty on the back of these women's labour".

This paradox reflects the structural position of the RMG sector in the global economy. Bangladesh's comparative advantage is built on low labour costs, and this advantage is sustained through the systematic suppression of workers' rights. Breaking this cycle requires not merely piecemeal reforms but fundamental restructuring of the relationship between global buyers, factory owners, and workers.

²⁴ the National Social Security Fund (NSSF)

14.2 The Implementation Deficit

The gap between legal promise and workplace reality is the central finding of this study. Bangladesh has a relatively progressive legal framework—constitutional guarantees of equality, a Labour Act providing for equal pay, maternity leave, and safety protections, and ratification of key ILO conventions. Yet these provisions remain largely unenforced.

Multiple factors contribute to this implementation deficit:

- **Weak Inspection Capacity:** The Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments lacks the resources and political independence to effectively monitor compliance.
- **Judicial Barriers:** Labour courts are inaccessible to most workers, particularly women with limited resources and education.
- **Political Economy:** The RMG sector's economic importance gives factory owners significant political influence, enabling them to resist enforcement.
- **Global Supply Chain Dynamics:** The pressure for low prices from international buyers creates incentives for cost-cutting that undermine labour rights.
- **Cultural Norms:** Patriarchal norms that devalue women's work and discourage women from asserting their rights reinforce patterns of discrimination and exploitation.

14.3 Gendered Dimensions

The labour rights violations documented in this study are not gender-neutral. Women face distinct and heightened vulnerabilities:

- **Wage Discrimination:** Women earn less than men for comparable work, reflecting both occupational segregation and direct discrimination.
- **Sexual Harassment:** Women are disproportionately subjected to sexual harassment, creating a hostile work environment that undermines their dignity and wellbeing.
- **Maternity Discrimination:** Women face discrimination related to pregnancy and childcare, including denial of legally mandated benefits and threats of dismissal.
- **Limited Advancement:** Women are concentrated in the lowest-paid positions with limited pathways to supervisory or management roles.

- **Disproportionate Impact of Automation:** Women are disproportionately displaced by automation due to their concentration in easily mechanised roles.

These gendered vulnerabilities reflect and reinforce broader patterns of gender inequality in Bangladeshi society. Addressing them requires not only workplace-specific reforms but also broader social transformation.

14.4 Sustainability Implications

The labour rights crisis in Bangladesh's RMG sector has significant implications for the sector's long-term sustainability. As one report warned, "Bangladesh cannot build sustainable growth on labour exploitation".

The costs of labour rights violations are multiple:

- **Productivity Losses:** Poor working conditions, harassment, and health problems reduce productivity and increase absenteeism.
- **Industrial Unrest:** Unresolved grievances lead to strikes and protests that disrupt production.
- **Reputational Damage:** Supply chain violations generate negative publicity that can deter buyers.
- **Regulatory Risk:** Failure to meet international standards can lead to trade restrictions and loss of market access.

The sector's transition to automation and green growth presents both risks and opportunities. Automation risks further displacing women from the workforce, while green transition creates new roles in sustainability that are largely inaccessible to women.

15. Conclusions and Recommendations

15.1 Summary of Findings

This study has documented systematic violations of women's labour rights in Bangladesh's RMG sector across multiple dimensions:

1. **Wage Discrimination:** Women earn 22-60 percent less than men for comparable work, with the gap widening at higher income levels.

2. **Working Conditions:** Despite post-Rana Plaza safety improvements, working conditions remain challenging. Thirty-two percent of adult workers are paid below minimum wage, and 7 percent live below the international poverty line. Almost a third work more than ten hours per day, six days per week.
3. **Climate Change:** 98 percent of workers report noticeable temperature changes, 85 percent experience extreme heat, and 78 percent report climate-linked illnesses. Female workers are hit harder, with 17 percent more women than men reporting significant productivity reductions.
4. **Sexual Harassment:** Nearly one-quarter (22.0 percent) of women report frequent sexual harassment, primarily by male co-workers (37.0 percent), supervisors (32.9 percent), and security guards (27.4 percent).
5. **Maternity Rights:** 33 percent of workers report that legally mandated maternity benefits are not provided. Childcare facilities are often non-functional or used only during buyer visits.
6. **Union Rights:** Unionisation rates are extremely low (approximately 27 percent), with workers facing intimidation and dismissal for attempting to organise.
7. **Access to Justice:** 39 percent of workers report no complaint procedures exist. Fear of retaliation and weak enforcement prevent workers from accessing remedies.
8. **Automation and Displacement:** Technological upgrades have triggered a 30.58 percent reduction in employment, with women hit hardest. Over 300 factories have closed, resulting in 200,000 job losses, with women constituting the majority of those displaced.

The central finding is the profound gap between what the law promises and what workers experience—an implementation deficit that reflects weak enforcement, political economy constraints, and gendered power relations.

15.2 Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study proposes the following recommendations:

15.2.1 Legal and Regulatory Reform

1. **Strengthen Enforcement:** Increase resources and independence for the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments. Establish regular, unannounced inspections with meaningful penalties for non-compliance.
2. **Amend the Labour Act:** Extend maternity leave to six months in line with government employees. Strengthen provisions on sexual harassment with clear employer obligations and worker protections.
3. **Ratify and Implement ILO Conventions:** Ratify ILO Convention No. 98 on the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining, and ensure full implementation of ratified conventions.

15.2.2 Economic Rights

4. **Establish a Living Wage:** Set the minimum wage based on living wage calculations (currently estimated at 19,217-27,000 taka).
5. **Enforce Equal Pay:** Strengthen enforcement of Section 345 of the Labour Act prohibiting wage discrimination. Require regular gender pay audits with public disclosure.
6. **Address Occupational Segregation:** Implement training and mentorship programmes to enable women's advancement to supervisory and management positions. Expand the ILO's GEAR programme beyond its current reach.

15.2.3 Workplace Safety and Health

7. **Address Climate Impacts:** Develop heat stress prevention policies, including adequate ventilation, rest breaks, and access to drinking water. Address the 46 percent of workers who do not receive adequate rest breaks.
8. **Expand Safety Coverage:** Ensure all factories—not only those covered by the Accord/RSC—meet safety standards.

15.2.4 Gender-Based Violence

9. **Establish Anti-Harassment Committees:** Require all factories to establish functional anti-sexual harassment committees with worker representation, as mandated by law but currently absent in many factories.
10. **Strengthen Legal Protections:** Enact pending legislation on prevention of gender-based violence in workplaces. Establish a speedy trial system for cases of sexual harassment.
11. **Provide Accessible Grievance Mechanisms:** Ensure that 100 percent of workers have access to effective complaint procedures, addressing the 39 percent who currently lack any such system.

15.2.5 Trade Union Rights

12. **Protect Freedom of Association:** End intimidation and retaliation against workers attempting to form or join unions.
13. **Ensure Worker Representation:** Guarantee genuine worker representation in wage boards and other decision-making bodies.

15.2.6 Maternity Protection

14. **Enforce Maternity Benefits:** Ensure all eligible women receive paid maternity leave and that factories with more than 40 workers provide childcare facilities.
15. **Expand Coverage:** Extend maternity protection to home-based and informal workers.

15.2.7 International Accountability

16. **Strengthen Buyer Accountability:** International brands should implement robust human rights due diligence, including independent monitoring and remediation mechanisms.
17. **Support Industry-Wide Initiatives:** Continue and expand the work of the RMG Sustainability Council in investigating labour practices and notifying buyers of non-compliance.

18. **Address the "Race to the Bottom":** International buyers should pay prices that enable compliance with labour standards, rather than pressuring suppliers to cut costs.

15.3 Directions for Future Research

This study suggests several avenues for future research:

1. **Longitudinal Studies:** Track changes in women's labour rights over time to assess the impact of policy interventions, automation, and regulatory reforms.
2. **Intersectional Analysis:** Examine how labour rights violations intersect with other dimensions of identity including class, ethnicity, geographic origin, and climate displacement status.
3. **Buyer-Supplier Dynamics:** Investigate how global supply chain dynamics shape labour rights outcomes in Bangladesh, including the impact of EU human rights due diligence directives.
4. **Climate and Labour:** Further explore the intersection of climate change and labour rights, particularly given that three in four workers joined the RMG sector due to climate-related livelihood destruction.
5. **Effectiveness of Interventions:** Evaluate the effectiveness of existing initiatives (Better Work, RSC, GEAR) in improving women's labour rights.
6. **Automation and Gender:** Study the gendered impacts of automation on employment, skills, and working conditions in the RMG sector.
7. **Home-Based Workers:** Conduct systematic research on the conditions of home-based workers in the RMG supply chain, who remain largely invisible in official data.

15.4 Concluding Remarks

Bangladesh's RMG sector stands at a crossroads. The industry that has powered the country's economic transformation and provided livelihoods for millions of women faces existential challenges: climate change, automation, tightening international regulations, and growing demands for labour rights. The path forward requires recognition that economic growth cannot be built on the exploitation of women workers.

As Kalpona Akter, Executive Director of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity, has warned, "economic growth must not come at the cost of leaving workers behind". The challenge for Bangladesh—and for the international buyers, brands, and consumers who benefit from its garment industry—is to ensure that the women who stitch the world's clothes are not invisible in the story of the sector's success.

The gap between legal promise and workplace reality is not inevitable. It can be closed through political will, institutional reform, and collective action. The question is whether stakeholders—government, factory owners, buyers, unions, and workers themselves—will rise to meet this challenge before the sector's competitiveness erodes and the human costs become unbearable.

The women of Bangladesh's RMG sector have contributed immeasurably to the nation's economic transformation. They deserve not only recognition but also the full realisation of their labour rights—equal pay, safe working conditions, freedom from harassment, maternity protection, and the right to organise. Their struggle for dignity and justice is not merely a labour issue but a fundamental question of human rights and social justice.

Books

1. Hossain, Jahan, & Sobhan: Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh
2. Sector of Bangladesh

Statutes

1. The constitution of Bangladesh (Article 10,27,28,29,39)
2. The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 (Sec 45-46)
3. ILO Core Conventions
4. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), 1979 (Article 11)
5. Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), 1948 (Article 23)
6. International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966 (Article 7)

Policy

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17. Bangladesh Labour Act 2006. Sections 46-50, 94, 100-109, 332, 345.
18. Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Articles 27-28.

Appendices

Appendix A: Key Legal Provisions

Constitution of Bangladesh

- Article 27: Equality before law
- Article 28: Non-discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth

Bangladesh Labour Act 2006

- Section 46-50: Maternity benefits (16 weeks paid leave)
- Section 94: Childcare facilities for factories with >40 workers
- Section 109: Night work prohibition for women without consent
- Section 332: Prohibition of indecent conduct towards women workers
- Section 345: Equal pay for equal work

Appendix B: Data Sources and Methodological Notes

Survey	Sample Size	Population	Year	Organization
SANEM Quarterly Labour Force Survey	National	RMG workers	2022	SANEM
SANEM-Microfinance Opportunities	1,300	RMG workers	2023	SANEM
Frontiers in Public Health Study	332	Female RMG workers	2018/2025	Academic
IndustriAll Bangladesh Council	850	RMG workers	2025	IBC
University of Nottingham/GoodWeave	2,000+	RMG workers	2025	Rights Lab
Fair Labour Association/Awaj Foundation	88	Female RMG workers	2025	FLA

Appendix C: List of Acronyms

Acronym	Full Form
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BLA	Bangladesh Labour Act
BWB	Better Work Bangladesh
CCM	Comprehensive Complaints Mechanism
DIFE	Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
ESG	Environmental, Social and Governance
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GEAR	Gender Equality and Returns
HREDD	Human Rights and Environmental Due Diligence
ILO	International Labour Organization
MiB	Mapped in Bangladesh
RMG	Ready-Made Garment
RSC	RMG Sustainability Council
SANEM	South Asian Network on Economic Modeling

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