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A Study on Occupational Health & Safety Practices in RMG Factories of Bangladesh in Accordance with Compliance after Rana Plaza Incident

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Abstract:

Since the 1980's, the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has experienced rapid growth and is at present ranked the second highest exporter in the world after China. The RMG industry has made a substantial contribution to the economy and society by primarily providing a source of employment for approximately above four million workers, mostly women. This staggering growth is undermined by the lack of safety in the factories and industrial accidents, which has defined the risks associated to RMG sector. These accidents shocked the country and the international community. In response to these accidents, the Government of Bangladesh and the development partners have mobilized unprecedented support and made commitments to improve working conditions and workers' safety in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. This paper is an attempt to verify the progress and implementation level of different initiatives taken by Bangladesh Government and the international buyers and retailers of RMG specifically in the field of occupational health and safety such as factory work environment, workers' health, safety and welfare situation as well as occupational health and safety management systems and training, after the horrible incident of Rana Plaza in April 24, 2013 near Dhaka, Bangladesh. A practical survey was done directly on RMG workers to approximate their knowledge level on compliance factors and their understanding and realization on the current practices of occupational health and safety in RMG factories.

Keywords: RMG, Occupational Health and Safety, Social Compliance, Code of Conduct

1. Introduction

The RMG industry has been Bangladesh's key export industry and a main source of foreign exchange for the last 25 years. As a result of an insulated market guaranteed by Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA) of General Agreement Tariff and Trade (GATT) and supportive policies of the Government of Bangladesh (GoB), it attained a high profile in terms of foreign exchange earnings, exports, industrialization and contribution to the GDP within a short period. In less than a decade, it increased its exports, foreign exchange earnings, and contribution to the GDP by 4.39 %. RMG exports reached a steadfast figure of USD 17.91 billion in the fiscal year 2010-2011 accounting more than 78% of national export earnings, which was about 4%-5% of the global total of such exports. It further contributes 10% to the country's GDP (Mahmud R.B., 2012). RMG products are exported mainly to the United States of America and the European Union. Bangladesh's garment industry provides employment to about than 3.6 million workers, which 2.8 million are women (Mahmud R.B., 2012). Workers in these garment factories are almost always illiterate. They have very limited knowledge of human rights, working conditions and labor standards. Despite the phenomenal success of the RMG sector, poor working conditions in the factories and a lack of Social compliance are serious concerns which have, since 2006, led to labor unrest and damage to institutions and property. As a result, there is a rising fear in Bangladesh that the readymade garments sector may face a decline in demand, especially after the tragic incident at Rana Plaza near Dhaka in April 24, 2013. Social compliance in the RMG industry is a key requirement for most of the world's garments buyers. It ensures labor rights, labor standards, fair labor practices and a Code of Conduct. This study is an attempt to identify workers' knowledge and realization about occupational health and safety practices in RMG industries from direct interviews and analyzing the overall situation of current occupational health and safety practices in accordance with compliance in RMG industry of Bangladesh. The research also tries to reveal the progress and improvements done in occupational health and safety standards as well as maintaining social compliances in RMG sector by the Government of Bangladesh, RMG owners, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporter's Association (BGMEA) and foreign stakeholders post the traumatic Rana Plaza disaster.

2. Purpose of the Study

The working environment in Bangladesh RMG sector is not up to acceptable standards in general. Health and Safety regulations, as prescribed in Factory Rules 1979 (Absar S.S., 2001; Begum A., 1995) are routinely ignored by management and are hardly enforced by government. Most factories do not have adequate ventilation and exhaust fans that leave the garments workers exposed to toxic substances and dust. Raw materials contain dust and fiber particles that hang in the air. Dye, a toxic substance emitted from colored cloth, spreads in the workroom. As a result, many workers suffer from constant fatigue, headaches, anemia, fever, chest, stomach, eye and ear pain, cough and cold, diarrhea, dysentery, urinary tract infection and reproductive health problems due to overwork, uncongenial working conditions, and wide-ranging labor law violations. In fact the Factories Act of 1965 sets the occupational safety and health standards in Bangladesh, but like every other aspect of the Labor Code, it is rarely enforced due to the lack of resources and corrupt practices in the system (Doshi G., 2008).

Moreover, many of the factories do not meet the minimum standards prescribed in building and construction legislation (Factory Rules 1979). As a result, fire is common, buildings often collapse and faulty building design regularly results in the death of workers. Compensation following an incident is rare. The Spectrum Factory building collapse of April 2005 killed 64 workers, injured over 70 and left hundreds jobless. Furthermore places of employment in the garments sector are notorious for fire, which are said to have claimed thousands of lives in the past two years, though exact figures are difficult to find. In addition, as for working conditions, they are one of the worst in the world. Frequent garments factory fires taking many of lives due simply to lack of safe exits being the burning example. The two recent devastating tragedies pathetically indicate the poor development of occupational health and safety situation in RMG factories of Bangladesh. In November 24, 2012, a fire broke out at Tazreen fashion in Ashulia, Dhaka, killed 124 RMG workers. The fire which started on the ground floor and was found to be caused by faulty wiring, blocked off all three stairwells within and hard to believe the factory had no emergency exits. Within six months in April 24, 2013, another tragic incident happened at Rana Plaza in Savar, Dhaka which had shaken the whole world. An eight story building housing several garment factories collapsed killing over 1,133 people. At least 2000 RMG workers were severely injured and some of them had permanent physical damage. The nine-story building was built on swampy land which had permission for six stories at most from Rajuk and Savar Municipality. It was also found later that the building was erected using sub-standard materials. These two very incidents brought the issue of social compliance and its maintenance and monitoring in RMG factories of Bangladesh in question. Moreover, compensation on following such incident is insufficient in this area. The violations of the occupational safety and health codes are flagrant, as evidenced by the types of tragic and preventable accidents that occur in Bangladesh factories (Majumdar, 2002).

Currently 60% of the factories are housed in purpose-made buildings and 40% in shared and converted buildings though the situation was opposite before Rana Plaza incident in April, 2013. International buyers and retailers do not want to place work orders in factories housed in shared and converted buildings and as a result, owners in the coming years would require to shift in purpose-made structures. An inspection in 2013 revealed that faults related to workplace safety and other compliance issues were found in at least 700 export-oriented apparel units out of 2400 factories in Dhaka and Chittagong. Bangladesh still can not claim that even one of its 4000 active garment factories is 100% safe or compliant, even after two years of Rana Plaza disaster. Important progress has been made but the fact that remediation works are behind schedule- with some over six months behind – is a serious problem. If we pinpoint the responsible parties for the death traps in garment factories of Bangladesh in general and Rana Plaza in particular, we find at least three groups from home and abroad. They include:

1. Owners of RMG factories, buildings and the BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association)
2. International buyers and brand retailers
3. The Government and its relevant agencies.

As an umbrella organization of garment owners, BGMEA has the responsibility of monitoring compliance and advocating for high industrial standards. They have a lengthy failure record in this regard; even the scale of Rana Plaza disaster could not change their attitude. On the contrary, this organization appears as the collective muscle of the influential owners to protect them from law. That has always encouraged owners to ignore safety rules. Regarding occupational health and safety practice in Bangladesh RMG factories, international buyers and retailers are not supposed to be unknown of the malpractices. Factories often accept abnormally low prices in an effort to attract buyers and grab orders. In turn and in order to maintain a profit rate, low cost suppliers often ignore safety measures and reduce workers real wage. Such cost cutting measures make the workers more vulnerable. Besides, a chain of subcontractors and agents work beside global brands and approved factory owners are also responsible for the tragic disasters happening in RMG factories of Bangladesh. Research on RMG sector found the largest factory groups in Bangladesh is featuring 'Showcase' factories with less compliant facilities as the productive engine of their operations. It is also found that some of the largest multi-national companies are heavily reliant on agents, matchmakers between buyers and factories to source their products.

Finally only the government has the legal authority and obvious responsibility to ensure safe environment in factories, job security of the workers, to carry out regular monitoring and when necessary bring parties to justice when they fail to follow the rules. If any disaster happens, the government as the sovereign authority must bear the responsibility to find out the wrongdoers, ensure compensation and work for necessary reforms. In practice, the government has played very little to change its callous and irresponsible attitude towards workers, to punish corrupt officials, owners and even have failed to formulate a reasonable compensation policy. Several studies show that with some of the world's lowest wages and no job security for its workers, the RMG industry of Bangladesh maintains one of the highest profits for owners, buyers and global retailers. Inhuman working conditions, low wages, verbal and physical abuse, irregular or non-payment of dues and the inability to organize are still common in many of the factories supplying world-class garment.

Bangladesh is committed to securing labor rights for the well-being of workers by virtue of ILO membership. In response, the Bangladesh government formed a Social Compliance Forum (SCF) and also constituted two task forces on a) labor welfare, and b) occupational safety in the readymade garments (RMG) sector along with a Compliance Monitoring Cell (CMC) to encourage compliance in the RMG sector. In addition BGMEA also formed a Safety Cell to protect fire-related emergency problems. With respect to the tripartite MOU (Memorandum of Understanding) BGMEA monitors started visiting factories to measure of Compliance and to ensure the implementation of minimum wages and other basic labor rights and to monitor the application of Labor Law in RMG factories (Choudhury R.S and Hussain G., 2005). But the concern is that both agencies are failing to perform their activities due to a lack of trained staff and labor inspectors, rigid structure and because they are overloaded by other responsibilities.

Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) set standards for compliance like factories must have alternative stairs, basic fire equipment, approved layout plan from concerned authority for ensuring safe building construction, group insurance for workers, hygienic sanitation facility and first aid appliance, as well as ensuring minimum wages and flexible jobs for the workers. There are many recognized compliance bodies worldwide like ILO, ISO 14001, WRAP, BSCI, ETI, SAI, FLA. Foreign buyers and brand retailers specially European and North American group even though imposes obligatory compliance policies like WRAP or BSCI in RMG factories, unfortunately those are not properly implemented or monitored according to policies. In this paper, the existing compliance practices of RMG factories in Bangladesh, particularly factories located in Dhaka city are examined. This paper also tries to reveal the acceptability of compliance provisions to the employed workers and analyses different aspects of occupational health and safety situations in overall RMG sector of Bangladesh.

3. Literature Review

Bangladesh is a small country in the world in size but with plenty of resources. The Ready Made Garments industry of Bangladesh brings Bangladesh into focus to many large countries in the world with its RMG products. Bangladesh is very much competitive in the Global RMG Market due to its cheap labor. Owners of the RMG factories are striving for the orders in this more competitive market, sometimes they overlook or pay very less attention on the compliance issues. For most of the world renowned buyers, compliance is a must to do business with them, but many factories are not following the requirements perfectly. Some factories are arranging their factories for the compliance audit, but later on after getting the compliance certificate or approval from the buyers, they started paying less attention on following the compliance requirements.

According to International Labor Organization (2010), buyers make sourcing decisions based on four factors: price, quality, how long it takes to get produce to the marketplace and social compliance, including compliance with labor standards. In order to export readymade garments, it is not only the quality parameters that are important towards acceptance of the product as per the intended end use, but also the working environment, in which the garments are to be produced, is equally important so that sweatshop concept is totally taken care of and the code of conduct must be stretched towards achieving the objectives of social compliance issues (Das 2008).

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) has formulated its own code of conduct for the industry, in collaboration with the major trade unions, and has set up a compliance unit that monitors labor conditions in its members' factories (UNIFEM 2008). In 2006, the Government of Bangladesh passed a labor code, Bangladesh Labor Law, 2006 (BLL 2006). It applies to all workers, and the new sections relevant to the garment industry include written contracts and identity cards, timely payment of wages, revised minimum wage, paid maternity leave and explicit laws against sexual harassment. Implementation of the BLL 2006 is monitored primarily by Ministry of Labor and Employment (MoLE) factory inspectors and BGMEA and BKMEA social compliance monitors. Besides inspecting and monitoring the status of the factories, BGMEA and BKMEA monitors provide advisory support to factory personnel so that they are able to implement the required, correct measures as stated in BLL 2006. The Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 is amended in the year 2013 with modification in some clauses and with more detail elaboration of many terms.

International Labor Organization (ILO) made a press release on 18th November 2013, which presents a path to sustainable growth in Bangladesh. The new study by the ILO's Research Department presents a series of policies to achieve both economic growth and decent working conditions in Bangladesh. According to the report, Bangladesh experienced relatively high economic growth over the past two decades, mainly due to garment exports. The country accounted for 4.8 per cent of global apparel exports in 2011, compared with only 0.6 per cent in 1990. But unregulated industry growth has contributed to poor working conditions in that sector, which have acted as an obstacle to sustainable development and, moreover, resulted in some of the worst industrial disasters on record. The report also mentioned that, recent accidents have brought the issue of occupational health and safety risks in the Bangladeshi garment sector to world attention, including a factory fire in November 2012 that killed 117 workers and the collapse of a building housing several RMG manufacturers in April 2013 that killed 1,129 workers – the latter being one of the worst industrial disasters on record. Although the government has taken some concrete action after Rana Plaza incident to address health and safety issues, poor conditions remain a challenge in many factories across the country, especially those in the RMG sector. The report warns that unless a comprehensive set of labor market and social policies are introduced, Bangladesh will be unable to maintain its economic momentum and improve living standards in a sustainable way. And while the RMG sector is central to the economy, new measures need to be far-reaching. It caused a negative impact on the overall business after the incidents of RMG industries in Bangladesh. For this, buyers are shifting their orders from Bangladesh and we are losing foreign currencies which are the back bone for our economy.

If we analyze the reasons of the accidents of the RMG industry, we see that one of the main reasons is the poor implementation of the occupation health and safety (OHS) parameters. OHS are directly relating to the workers of the garments factories as they are staying in the factories and in large numbers. And the workers are mostly affected for the incidents as they are mostly illiterate, not aware, not educated and not well trained to prevent the incidents and to rescue themselves from the incidents.

3.1. Compliance

'Compliance' is a very much common word at present mainly comes with the RMG industry, means 'acting according to certain accepted rules and standards'. Textile and Clothing (T&C) Compliance indicates international formulated standards and guidelines for the said industries. International Compliance Association (ICA) stated that, the term compliance describes the ability to act according to an order, set of rules or request.

Compliance means to comply with something or yield to the wishes of another. Compliance in the RMG industry ensures all labor rights and facilities according to the buyer code of conduct which also consider the labor and industry laws of the RMG producing country. The aim of compliance is to maintain strictly the labor law.

3.2. Compliance in Bangladesh RMG Industry

With the pace of supply, the social dimensions of the RMG industry are getting more attention from consumers, social workers, welfare organizations and international buyers. At present, many international buyers are demanding compliance with their "code of conduct" before placing any garment import order, whereas some buyers are accepting some fixed general standards of particular Code of Conducts.

Informal recruitment, low literacy levels, wage discrimination, irregular payment, force work and short contracts of service are very common practices in the RMG factories in Bangladesh. It is true that the country still enjoys some comparative advantage in manufacturing garment products based on low labor costs.

Rented factory premises, narrow staircases, low roofs, closed environments, absence of lunch rooms, unavailability of clean drinking water and absence of separate toilets or common rooms for female workers are other concerns in the garment factories of Bangladesh. Bangladesh RMG factories need to deal with these issues in order to remain competitive in the global market.

3.3. Social Codes of Conduct

Social and environmental standards as outlined in the Bangladesh Labor Law and Environmental Act set out minimum standards to which manufacturers in Bangladesh must adhere. In contrast, compliance with general codes of conducts, which usually contain standards slightly higher than those defined by the Bangladesh laws, is voluntary.

The social compliance status of the Bangladesh RMG industry refers to the extent to which the industry meets the requirements of the labor law and/or any other buyer-specific code of conduct or voluntary certification scheme. The current social compliance status of the industry is not satisfactory; there is an urgent need to improve the situation.

Generally, adherence by a particular manufacturer to a given standard or code of conduct is verified through periodic audits/inspections. These inspections are carried out by buyers and/or third party auditors nominated by the buyers.

3.4. Occupational Health & Safety (OHS)

Occupational safety and health can be important for moral, legal, and financial reasons. All organizations have a duty of care to ensure that employees and any other person who may be affected by the companies undertaking remain safe at all times. Moral obligations would involve the protection of employee's lives and health. Legal reasons for OSH practices relate to the preventative, punitive and compensatory effects of laws that protect worker's safety and health. OSH can also reduce employee injury and illness related costs, including medical care, sick leave and disability benefit costs. OSH may involve interactions among many subject areas, including occupational medicine, occupation hygiene, public health, safety, safety engineering, industrial engineering, chemistry, health physics, industrial and organizational psychology, ergonomics and occupational health psychology.

Since 1950, the International Labor Organization (ILO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have shared a common definition of occupational health. It was adopted by the Joint ILO/WHO Committee on Occupational Health at its first session in 1950 and revised at its twelfth session in 1995. The definition reads:

"Occupational health should aim at: the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations; the prevention amongst workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions; the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological capabilities; and, to summarize, the adaptation of work to man and of each man to his job."

The main focus in occupational health is on three different objectives: (i) the maintenance and promotion of workers' health and working capacity; (ii) the improvement of working environment and work to become conducive to safety and health and (iii) development of work organizations and working cultures in a direction which supports health and safety at work and in doing so also promotes a positive social climate and smooth operation and may enhance productivity of the undertakings. The concept of working culture is intended in this context to mean a reflection of the essential value systems adopted by the undertaking concerned. Such a culture is reflected in practice in the managerial systems, personnel policy, principles for participation, training policies and quality management of the undertaking. "Occupational health and safety (OHS) in the garment sector relates to: temperature, noise, light,

ventilation, machine, chemical, electrical, and fire safety; and ergonomics. OHS requirements and measurement parameters (if applicable) can be found in:

- i. The Bangladesh Labor Law 2006 (sections 51-94)
- ii. The National Building Code 2006
- iii. The ILO Core Labor Conventions (C155, C161)
- iv. Standards as given by the Occupational Safety and Health Authority (OSHA) of the US Labor Department
- v. International standards (SA8000, BSCI, ETI, WRAP, etc.) and buyers' codes of conduct.

Both employers and workers have responsibilities to contribute to a working environment free of health and safety hazards. OHS training to both mid-level management and workers raises awareness and reduces workplace-related accidents, injuries and diseases.

3.5. OHS Management System and Training

OHS management system is the structure of the management of all the parameters of Occupational Health and Safety. The guidelines and ways how the OHS parameters should be implemented in the factories are in the OHS management systems. It also includes the recoding of all events, incidents, training procedures, written program of safety and other OHS issues. To know about the standards and compliance requirements, the workers should be trained with full of details. The training should cover all the information about the facilities that they should get from the factories, operational trainings to run the production process smoothly, workers participation in the safety committee, training on first aid, fire fighting, emergency evacuation etc.

4. Methodology

4.1. Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A total of 200 workers to be interviewed from Ashulia, Savar, Kallyanpur, Mirpur & Malibagh readymade garment factories a systematic random sampling method is to be used where every worker are response appropriately.

4.2. Survey Instrument

Questionnaires will permit us to gather information that cannot be found elsewhere from any secondary information such as books, newspapers and internet sources. So the questionnaire survey is the most successful method for this study to collect the data. In this study research instrument is the questionnaire and the format was close-ended questions. Respondent had the choice to rank their feelings towards a particular statement. The scales have values such as Strongly Agree or Agree, Neutral, Strongly Disagree and Disagree. The questionnaire is 5 Point Liker Scale that consists of 30 questions. The scales that have been used are given below:

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree

This part talks about the methodology of this study. Methodology defines how we go through all the processes of research and how we proceed on. Here includes the steps of conducting research and the explanation of the sources of data. So, for describing it the part has highlighted the time period was required to conduct the study.

4.3. Data collection Procedure

4.3.1. Primary data

The primary data was collected by conducting survey and interviews.

4.3.2. Secondary data

For collecting secondary information, published journals, articles, internet and books were used.

4.4. Limitations

There are some limitations of this study. The study was limited by a number of factors. Firstly, the main limitation was of research was the collection of information, because most of the information was confidential. The authority cannot support us all information related to the study because they have to maintain their organizational policy. In spite of, during the survey period employees are forced by the management to provide answers in favor of them. Secondly, sample size was not adequate to present the proposed scenario. Thirdly, time constraint led to get narrower outcomes and finally, the knowledge constraint of employees were another limitation for this study. Some of the respondent did not properly answer the questions due to language barrier. They had problem with understanding research word.

5. Conceptual Framework

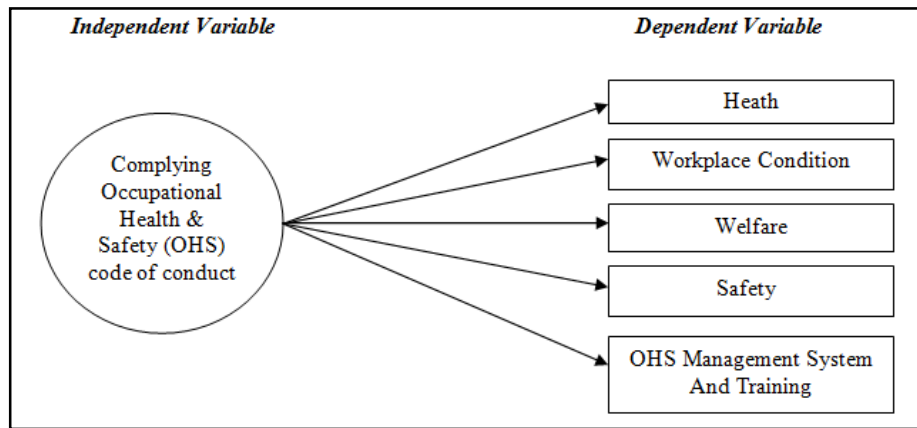


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

6. Quantitative Data Analyzing

Frequency Analysis

6.1. Gender

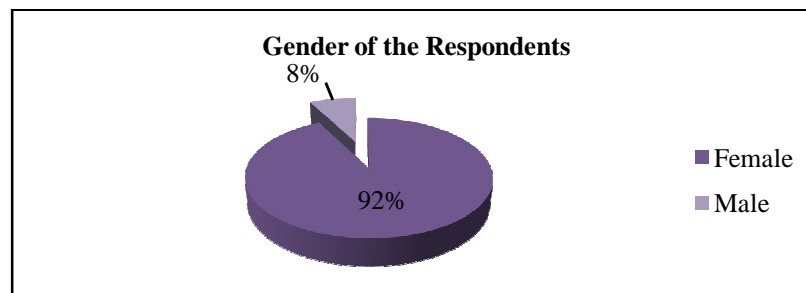


Figure 2: Gender of the Respondents in Pie Chart

The sample consists of 185 Female and 15 Male. 92.5% of Female 7.5% of Male participants participated in this survey. The percentage of respondents is shown in the pie chart.

6.2. Health

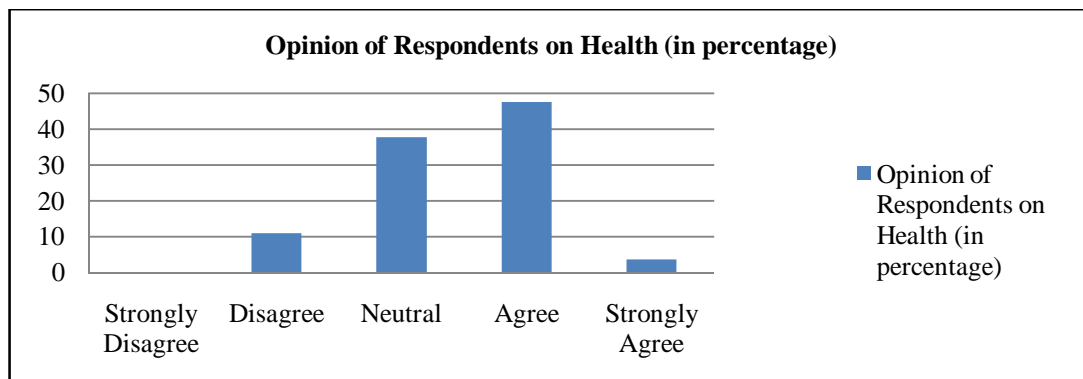


Figure 3: Opinion of Respondents on Health in Bar Diagram

Strongly Disagree = 0 (0%), Disagree = 133 (11.08%), Neutral = 452 (37.67%), Agree = 570 (47.5%), Strongly Agree = 45 (3.75%). This is graphically shown in Bar Diagram of Health.

- Interpretation: The graph represents 47.5% respondents are agreed with health issues and 37.67% respondents are thinking that it is difficult to perceive clearly.

6.3. Workplace Conditions

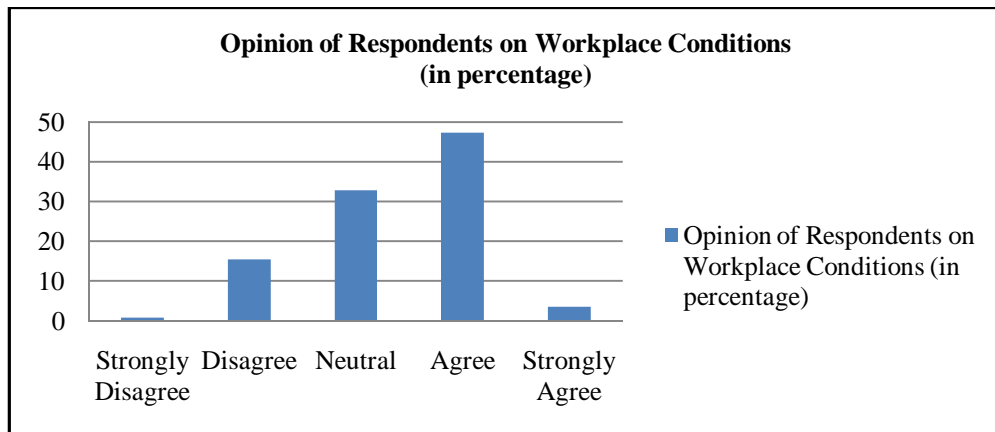


Figure 4: Opinion of Respondents on Working Conditions in Bar Diagram

Strongly Disagree = 11 (0.79%), Disagree = 217 (15.50%), Neutral = 460 (32.86%), Agree = 662 (47.29%), Strongly Agree = 50 (3.57%). This is graphically shown in Bar Diagram of Workplace Conditions.

- Interpretation: The graph represents 47.29% respondents are agreed with working environment issues and 32.86% respondents are thinking that it is difficult to perceive clearly.

6.4. Welfare

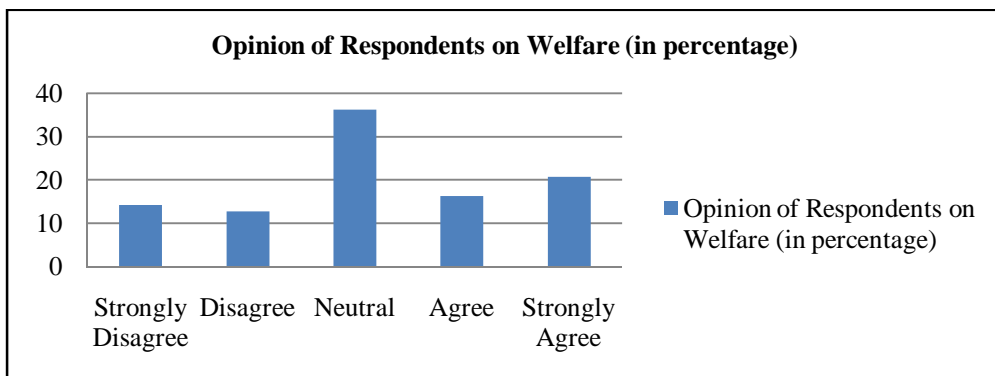


Figure 5: Opinion of Respondents on Welfare in Bar Diagram

Strongly Disagree = 142 (14.2%), Disagree = 127 (12.7%), Neutral = 361 (36.1%), Agree = 163 (16.3%), Strongly Agree = 207 (20.7%). This is graphically shown in Bar Diagram of welfare.

- Interpretation: The graph represents 20.7% respondents are strongly agreed with welfare issues and 36.1% respondents are thinking that it is difficult to perceive clearly.

6.5. Safety

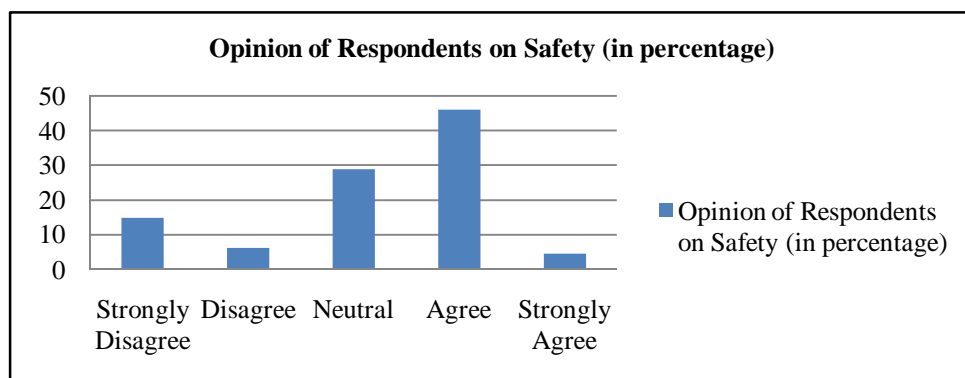


Figure 6: Opinion of Respondents on Safety in Bar Diagram

Strongly Disagree = 206 (14.71%), Disagree = 85 (6.07%), Neutral = 402 (28.71%), Agree = 644 (46%), Strongly Agree = 63 (4.5%). This is graphically shown in Bar Diagram of safety.

- Interpretation: The graph represents 46% respondents are agreed with safety issue and 28.71% respondents are thinking that it is difficult to perceive clearly.

6.6. OHS Management System & Training

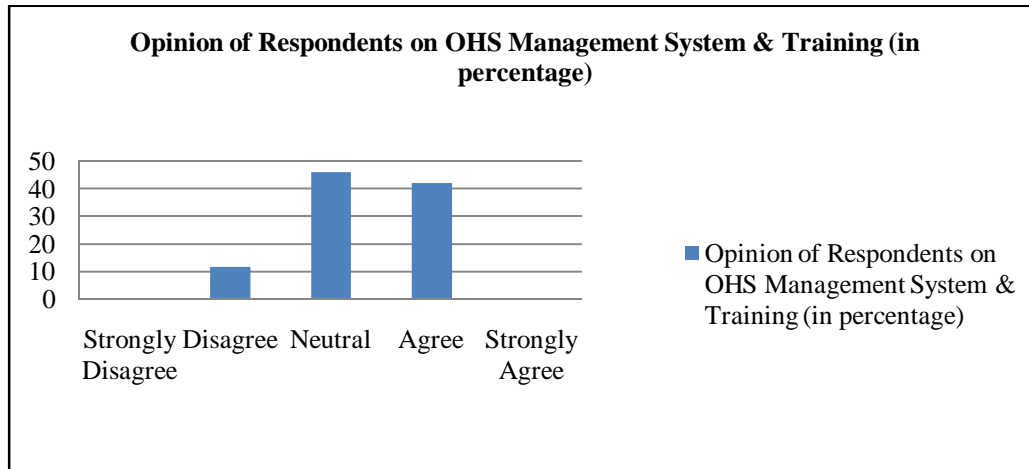


Figure 7: Opinion of Respondents on OHS Management System & Training in Bar Diagram

Strongly Disagree = 0 (0%), Disagree = 119 (11.90%), Neutral = 460 (46%), Agree = 421 (42.10%), Strongly Agree = 0 (0%). This is graphically shown in Bar Diagram of OHS Management System & Training.

- Interpretation: The graph represents 42.10% respondents are agreed with OHS Management System & Training issues and 46% respondents are thinking that it is difficult to perceive clearly.

6.7. Total Outcome of the Survey

We have taken responses from the workers/staffs who are in the large numbers in RMG factories and who are suffering more at the time of any incident. Respondents are agreed with the current issues on health, working environment, safety at their workplace. They gave neutral opinion on current issues on welfare and OHS management system & training.

Here, the perception of general workers about code of conduct implies are being maintained, but the real scenario is different. The workers have lack of knowledge about OHS issues, they are not literate and they had problem with understanding of research works.

As the outcome of the survey is not depicting the actual scenario, so we go for the secondary data from different articles, journals, publications etc to come to a recommendation about OHS issues of RMG industries in Bangladesh.

7. Discussion & Recommendation

Our study of occupational health and safety situation in RMG factories based on workers' perception did not provide us with the desired result due to the facts which have been mentioned in limitation portion of methodology of our study. It is clear from our survey that workers' do not have the minimal knowledge about occupational health and safety standards to be maintained in RMG factories. Even though some of the workers' seemed to be concerned about the unhealthy working condition and unfair welfare provision, they did not want to disclose the real situation while doing survey due to the fear of losing job or being harassed by the management later. Thus we could not proceed with the survey results to get the real picture of current occupational health and safety practices in RMG factories of Bangladesh. We had to use secondary data to come to a conclusion to our study.

The RMG sector is important for Bangladesh, but it should grow in a proper way by following rules and norms of business. Building of industries should be constructed as per the Building code and risk assessment should be done in a periodic way. All the buildings should have emergency fire exit and fire safety mechanism. The industries should organize simulation for emergency fire exit on a regular basis while the fire service and Civil Defense should supervise the entire process. Every organization should develop its contingency plan and execute it periodically. Unfortunately, there is no monitoring authority for effective implementation of the Bangladesh National Building Code. An authority should be established for the implementation of the building code along with execution of its framework. Rana Plaza incident is a lesson for us. It should always remind us the struggle to rescue victims from a single building. Thus it is not difficult to understand what will happen in the case of large scale disasters such as earthquakes if we do not follow proper compliance standards.

Even two years after the Rana Plaza collapse, some core issues including payment of rightful compensation to the victims and their families, proper implementation of labor law and workplace safety measures still remain unresolved. Although a number of initiatives have been taken and efforts are continuing, many promises still remain unfulfilled. However, safety measures are being improved with introduction of more stringent standards.

The European Union (EU) has suggested a set of short and medium-termed plan of actions, including framing regulations for the Year 2013 labor law reforms and ensuring workers' right to exercise trade union in apparel industry of Bangladesh. The most urgent action needed for the government is to pass the implementing regulations for the 2013 labor law reform. The fact that this has not happened yet is serious limiting the effect of the reforms. It's slowing efforts to set up a mature industrial relations system. It's impeding vital parts of the Better Work Program and it is hindering the setting up of factory committees to monitor occupational safety and health.

The second short term goal is for the government to effectively investigate and prosecute unfair labor practices. Those include anti-union discrimination and reprisals. Even more worryingly, they include violence against trade union members. This is essential and as long as workers who organize to defend their rights do not feel secure, then poor conditions will prevail. The government must show very clearly that violence and discrimination are not acceptable in today's workplace.

The EPZ law should be brought in line with international standards so that workers in EPZ factories can enjoy freedom of association and collective bargaining agent rights as other workers in the country. The draft law is now gathering dust at the ministry of law for scrutiny.

The government initiated a move to bring the factories that mainly do subcontract under regulations especially after the Tazreen Fashion fire incident that killed 112 workers, but the draft has not been finalized yet. The government-ILO joint program failed to complete assessment of the factories that remain outside the inspection preview of western retailers. Some 700 factories have so far been assessed while 1,000 others yet to be inspected mainly due to inconsistency in factory information including addresses and contact numbers and non-cooperation from manufacturers.

Regarding safety issues, another problem is yet to be addressed as some 800 factories that are affiliated neither with Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters association (BGMEA) nor with Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA). These units are still outside inspection programs carried out by ACCORD, ALLIANCE and NTPA. Due to the increasing business in RMG industry in Bangladesh, the numbers of garment factories are increasing significantly. There are many garment factories set up in highly dense areas without taking care of the environmental issues. Before starting any new factory, the environmental issues should be considered strictly and if found hazardous for environment or locality, then permission to set up new factory should strictly be prohibited.

Education level of the owners of the RMG industries is an important factor for the betterment of this industry. Education includes academic education as well as professional training for the RMG industry. The training should cover business issues, production issues as well as compliance issues covering occupational health and safety measures.

There is a monitoring cell comprising ministries and BGMEA. The buyers are not giving right considerations of the reports made by the monitoring cell. The cell should make as separate autonomous body for the RMG industry. The members of the cell should include engineers, consultants, experts in this industry, in construction as well as in compliance and human resource issues. There should be unnoticed and uninformed factory visit by the members of the monitoring cell and they will report to the Government and Government will take necessary actions based on the feedback of the monitoring cell.

There are different issues arise in factories for the betterment of the workers as well as for the company. The workers are chasing for their demands to be fulfilled, on the other hand, the employers/owners are in denial to accept those. Trade unions can help here to make a conclusion to such problems. However, trade unions need to be free from the influence of national political parties. Until now, very few factories got permission to start trade union and those factories that have permission for trade unions, its members are frequently been threatened or harassed by the owner groups. BGMEA and Government should have strict policies to protect trade unions and enforce law to save labor rights.

To increase awareness about the accidents that may frequently take place in factories such as fire breakout, fire drills should be arranged regularly. Participation in fire drills should be mandatory for everyone in the factory and make everyone understand about its importance. The records should be maintained properly and should be reported to the BGMEA or assigned institutes. Fire may cause due to short circuit in electrical wirings and this is a major reason of many fire incidents in RMG industry. So, good electrical materials should be used as wiring and switches. Electrical switch boxes should kept in separate room which is far from the stores. BGMEA, ACCORD, ALLIANCE and all other authorities should have strict monitoring on this issue to prevent fire related accidents in RMG.

Regarding worker's health issue, the working hours should be as per the labor law of Bangladesh. Working overtime should be a freedom of choice for workers, not forced or under threat. Working too many extra hours would affect workers' physical and mental health. The occupational health and safety regulation need to be enforced to solve this issue. No need to mention, trade unions would be greatly effective to protect workers' right regarding work hours.

In most of the garment factories, there are people in labor welfare department who work on the welfare issues of the workers. Due to lack of training and proper guidelines, welfare officers cannot do their jobs properly. Sometimes they are forced by the owner or senior management to do things in their favor which may deprive workers of their welfare benefits. The owners should give liberty to the welfare department to do their jobs as per the labor law. Organized and trained welfare department can help the workers understand about their responsibilities as well as their importance in the company. The department should make regular reports to the owners as well as to the monitoring cell.

In a positive note, in most cases, our factory owners do implement workers' safety measures. In fact at present (after two years of Rana Plaza incident) factory owners are more aware about the issue than ever before. ACCORD fire safety and building integrity and ALLIANCE for Bangladeshi worker's safety have commented that in the case of safety, Bangladesh RMG has improved a lot. But still much more needs to be done to completely ensuring work safety environment and workers' total safety.

At the end, the RMG factory owners need to stop their cruelty on their workers and start showing sympathy and humanity for their health and safety issues. They should realize maintaining compliance in proper way and implementing proper occupational health and safety standard in their factories not only would help them to get more appreciation and work orders from foreign buyers and brand retailers, which in turn contribute to increase national GDP but would also help gaining more efficiency and productivity from their workers.

7.1. Steps taken by Government and Other Related Stakeholders after Rana Plaza Collapse at Savar on 24th April 2013

(Source: Ministry of Labor and Employment website, As of 21 April, 2015)

- i. Amendment of Labour Law: The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 has been amended on July 2013 to ensure workers' safety, welfare and rights and promoting trade unionism and collective bargaining. In line with this, the National Occupational Health and Safety Policy has been adopted by the Government in 2013.
- ii. Trade union registration: After amendment of Labour Act, 2006 trade union registration situation in the RMG sector has got a momentum. Till 20 April, 2015 more than 300 new trade unions have been registered in the RMG sector. ILO has started training program for the office bearers of newly formed unions.
- iii. Formulation of rules: A committee headed by the Secretary, Ministry of Labour & Employment has been working to formulate the rules of the Bangladesh Labour Act. Consultation on the draft with different stakeholders is going on and hopefully the draft will be finalized within the shortest possible time.
- iv. Up-gradation of DIFE: The Government, through an accelerated process, upgraded the Directorate of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) to a Department with 993 staff. By this time one Additional Secretary level officer has joined as Inspector General. Recently with the help of Public Service Commission (PSC) government has recruited 218 Inspectors against vacant posts. Now total number of Inspectors working in this department is 285.
- v. Training Labour Inspectors: After up-gradation the DIFE, with the support of ILO, has arranged different trainings for the Inspectors.
- vi. Publicly Accessible Database: The DIFE with support of ILO, has developed a publicly accessible database of 3743 export-oriented RMG factories on 30 March 2014. The database is available at the website of the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishment (<http://database.dife.gov.bd/>). It includes related information of all export-oriented RMG factories including names and addresses, number of workers etc. It also includes summary safety assessment reports for 1006 factories (ACCORD of 607 factories; ALLIANCE of 154 factories and BUET of 244 factories) which may be viewed at the website of DIFE (<http://database.dife.gov.bd/reports/safety-assessment-reports>).
- vii. Hot line (help line): With the Department of Inspection for Factories & Establishments a help line, on pilot basis, has been established in RMG prone area at Ashulia, Dhaka on 15th March 2015. The number of the help line is 0800-4455000
- viii. Minimum Wages: The Government has declared the minimum wages for the workers of the readymade garments industry with an increase of 77% from the previous one. It has been implemented since 01 December 2013. Now the minimum wage of garments workers is Tk 5300/- which is about US\$ 68.
- ix. Additional Budget for the DIFE: The Government has allotted about 23 Crore for the DIFE for pay and allowances and other related activities in 2014-15 financial year which is about triple in comparison to 2013-14 financial year.
- x. Inspection Plan and Inspection Policy: Annual inspection plan for 2015 for the DIFE has developed and formulation of inspection policy is underway.
- xi. Regular inspections: Guided by the BLA, 2006 regular inspections are being carried out by the inspectors of DIFE. Enforcement of the law is ensured through inspections. In the current year a total of 7406 factories have been inspected. This includes 962 RMG factories. In case of noncompliance, the factory owners are noticed to rectify and cases are filed against the factory owners for failing to rectify. This year 330 cases have been filed against the factory owners for non complacence issues.
- xii. Tripartite National Plan of Action: A Tripartite National Plan of Action on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity in the RMG Sector was adopted with the assistance of ILO. To implement the Plan of Action a sixteen members Tripartite Committee headed by Secretary Ministry of Labour & Employment has been formed. In line with the Plan of Action ILO has been implementing a project "Improving Working Condition in the RMG Sector of Bangladesh" of \$24.5 million under the Ministry of Labour & Employment. The following areas of intervention have been identified in the project:
 - a. Verification of building and fire safety of the factories;
 - b. Strengthening inspection activities;
 - c. Training on Occupational Safety and Health;
 - d. Rehabilitation of the disabled and injured persons;
 - e. Implementation of Better Work Program.
- xiii. *Assessment on structural, fire & electrical integrity*: With the assistance of ILO and under the supervision on National Tripartite Committee (NTC), a plan for assessment of building, fire and electrical safety of all 3532 active export oriented RMG/Knitwear factories has been developed. A Common Standard has been developed for assessment of fire, electrical and building safety of the factories by all initiatives such as National Tripartite Plan of Action for Fire and Structural Integrity (NTPA); the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety (ACCORD); and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (ALLIANCE).

National Initiatives, ACCORD & ALLIANCE are carrying out the assessment for structural integrity, fire and electrical safety of the RMG factory buildings. In the meantime 2783 factories (845 under National Initiatives, 1291 by ACCORD and 647 by ALLIANCE) have been assessed.

According to the recommendation of Review Panel, 32 factories have been fully closed and 26 factories have been partially closed for safety reason. Assessment reports have been sent to concern factory for implementation of detailed engineering assessment and to the District offices of DIFE for close monitoring and supervision. All the factories have started remediation according to the recommendation of assessing authorities. In this regard DIFE has started monitoring those remedial measures taken by factory owners. Two taskforces are working to implement the remedial measures taken by the factory owners.

7.2. Other Activities by Government and Other Relevant Stakeholders

Sustainability Compact: Bangladesh, European Union, United States of America and International Labour Organization (ILO) have jointly adopted ‘Sustainability Compact’ with a view to take joint initiatives to improve labour welfare and safety of working environment in the RMG sector. A stock taking meeting held on 30th October 2014 in Brussels to review the progress of Sustainability Compact.

Bangladesh Action Plan: Bangladesh Action Plan 2013 proposed by United States of America to improve building and fire safety and working environment ILO, Development Partners and the foreign buyers have jointly taken the following initiatives:

- i. Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh signed by European buyers;
- ii. Bangladesh Safety Alliance signed by North American buyers;
- iii. Improving working conditions in the Ready-Made Garments Sector Project of \$24.5 million proposed by ILO;
- iv. A project of Tk. 100 crore of JAICA for factory building inspection and relocation;
- v. 205 million project of the United State of America to ensure workers right and improve fire safety.
- vi. A project by GIZ to rehabilitate the disabled workers affected by Rana Plaza collapse.

Garments Industry Village: A committee headed by a Director General of the Prime Minister’s office is functioning to establish a ‘Garments Industry Village’ on 530 acres of land at Baushia under Gajaria upazilla in Munshiganj district.

Activities of Department of Fire Service & Civil Defense: The Ministry of Home Affairs has approved in principle the proposal of establishing nine new fire stations for Department of Fire Service & Civil Defense. The number of inspectors has been increased from 50 to 268 in the Department of Fire Service and Civil Defense by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Increase of Inspectors of RAJUK and CDA: Two different proposals to increase the number of inspectors in the Rajdhani Unnayan Kartipakshya (RAJUK) and Chittagong Development Authority (CDA) have been approved by Ministry of Housing & Works.

(There are many others initiatives those have been instructed in the website which are out of scope to discuss in this paper.)

8. Conclusion

We should not forget that the “Made in Bangladesh” tag brings glory and economic prosperity for our country. We do not want to lose the existing market to Vietnam or India or China. So it is now the government responsibility to ensure a proper environment and amend the labor law by adding a special provision for industry compliance. The international buyers also have to stop unethical practice of collecting huge profits from RMG products at extra-low manufacturing cost while ignoring possible non compliance. As per McKinsey’s summer 2014 report, Bangladesh remains at the top of the list of apparel sourcing market expected to grow in importance in the next few years. Their forecast in 2011 mentioned Bangladesh on the radar-screen of all European and US apparel buyers and likely to grow nearly triple (USD 45 billion) by 2020. The “Benchmarking Study” published by US Fashion Industry Association (USFIA) forecast June 2014 shows that apparel retailing companies are not leaving Bangladesh and are committed to enforce compliances in export oriented RMG factories of Bangladesh. Despite the recent tragedies in different RMG factories of Bangladesh, Bangladesh still regarded as a popular sourcing for global apparel industries. If we take into consideration the above global giant’s report then what should we do immediately is to ensure ‘total safety’ (a new concept) in every RMG unit and all workers safety that will regain the global image of the country. Bangladesh now being on the watch list, international buyers and consumers would like to see effective steps taken in place to help avert a new tragedy. Just because of a few grossly non-compliant operators, the whole sector is getting a bad name and as such, running the risk of losing market. Under such circumstances restoring the image of the country’s RMG sector is now an urgent national task. The government, the RMG owners, workers’ representation and all other do need to put urgently their joint effort to facilitate sustained development of the country.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Sample Survey Questionnaire

MODULE 1: BASICS

1. Area Code:
2. Respondent's name (Male/Female):
3. Respondent's educational qualification:
- Code: {0= Illiterate; 1= Primary (Class 1-5); 2= High school (Class 6-10); 3= SSC/ Dakhil/Equivalent; 4= HSC/Fazil/Equivalent; 5= Bachelor, 6= Masters; 7= Medical/ Engineering; 8= Diploma/Polytechnic; 9= others}}
4. Religion: (Code 1= Islam; 2= Hindu; 3= Buddha; 4= Christian; 5= others)
5. Local address:
6. Area: 7. Phone No.:

MODULE 2: Survey Questions for RMG Worker

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
	Health					
1.	Are there enough First-Aid boxes available?					
2.	Is there any hygiene Drinking Water is available?					
3.	Is there sufficient number and good condition of Latrine and Urinal?					
4.	Is management provided enough Scarf-Mask?					
5.	Is management provided any maternity leave?					
6.	Are they provided sufficient snacks at overtime?					
	Workplace Conditions					
7.	Is there sufficient clean space at workplace?					
8.	Is there any sufficient ventilation system for work?					
9.	Is the humidity of workplace is comfortable?					
10.	Is there any Dust and Fume available at work place?					
11.	Is there sufficient number of Spittoon?					
12.	Is there any sufficient lighting system to work comfortably?					
13.	Is there enough space at workplace?					
	Welfare					
14.	Is Management treats fairly?					
15.	Is Management provided Wage/Bonus on time?					
16.	Is Management cooperating about Trade Union formation?					
17.	Is Management shows Empathy on personal issues?					
18.	Should needed a labor Trade Union?					
	Safety					
19.	Is there any well designed and good number of Stairs & Escape Route?					
20.	Is Exit gate always properly maintained?					
21.	Is there any Fire-Extinguisher equipment?					
22.	Is there any Flammable material in around?					
23.	Is organization practice Fire-Drilling periodically?					
24.	Is the building structure strong enough to support heavy equipment?					
25.	Is Management forced to work any safety issues?					
	OHS Management System & Training					
26.	Is there any guideline for OHS?					
27.	Is there maintain safety committee and quarterly meetings?					
28.	Is there any written safety program?					
29.	Is there any training on F/A, F/F, E/E?					
30.	Is there maintain any records?					
	Overall Comments on Occupational Health & Safety					
31.	The overall Health issues are good?					
32.	The overall work place condition issues are good?					
33.	The overall welfare issues are good?					
34.	The overall safety issues are good?					
35.	The overall occupational health & safety management system and training are good?					
*1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree						