

Fact Sheet on

MONITORING WORK AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THE READYMADE GARMENT INDUSTRIES OF BANGLADESH

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MONITORING WORK AND WORKING CONDITIONS OF WOMEN EMPLOYED IN THE READY-MADE GARMENT INDUSTRIES OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) industry plays a significant role in the country's economy by earning the lion's share of export income (81.23%) and creating jobs for millions of people. RMG directly employs 4.2 million people (European Commission 2016) – of whom the majority are women.¹ Women RMG workers are plagued with various problems, such as insufficient wages, irregularity in timeliness of wage payments, and unsafe working conditions. They have additional concerns in the areas of workplace discrimination and career prospects; harassment; working hours, including breaks; occupational health and safety; welfare provision; social protection; and freedom of association, collective bargaining and social dialogue. Although gender-based wage discrimination is seen less frequently nowadays, discrimination persists in other forms – women are forced to work overtime more than men, and the cut from the overtime allowance is greater for women workers than for men. Women workers face severe discrimination with regard to their scope for promotion, and their career prospects are limited; a study found that only 5-10 percent of women workers become supervisors (*The Daily Star*, 8 March 2015). Women workers' workplaces are not free from sexual harassment, which ranges from simple insults and demeaning remarks to unwelcome touching and grabbing.

Despite legal provision, there are still variations in implementation of maternity leave – factories violate the provision in different ways, e.g. unpaid leave or payment for fewer months than legally stipulated. Few RMG workers have access to daycare, and in many garment factories, mothers do not have space or time to breastfeed; breastfeeding rates among working women in garment factories can be as low as 10 percent (UNICEF 2015). Workplaces are not gender-sensitive – there are insufficient numbers of toilets for women; no availability of sanitary napkins at the workplace; and most of the factories also do not arrange women doctors. Furthermore, women workers are generally underrepresented in different channels of negotiation and bargaining (e.g. trade unions, participation committees, safety committees, welfare committees, and canteen management committees).

Bangladesh is signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Following the eighth periodic report of Bangladesh, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women recommended that the State party: (a) take effective measures to monitor and improve the working conditions

¹ It has been widely understood, though based on limited data, that women made up around 80 percent of the labour force of the garment industries. Recent data, however, shows a much lower percentage. A 2015 survey by Asian Centre for Development reported that 65 percent of workers in the RMG sector were women. The 2016 study by EC puts the number at 55 percent. In the factories under the ILO RMG programme (Better Work Bangladesh), it was found that 58 percent of the labour force consisted of women.

of women in the informal and private sectors, by ensuring regular labour inspections and social protection coverage; (b) address the gender wage gap by applying gender-neutral analytical job classification, evaluation methods and regular pay surveys, and establishing effective monitoring and regulatory mechanisms for employment and recruitment practices; (c) regulate and monitor the working conditions of women employed in the garment sector, in order to protect them from unsafe labour conditions, through regular inspections and increased fines for abusive employers; (d) remove all obstacles to the establishment of trade unions; (e) adopt and implement specific legislation concerning the protection of women from sexual harassment in the workplace in accordance with the High Court Division guidelines.

Against this backdrop, the present study is an endeavor to unearth the prevailing situation of women workers in the garment sector in terms of their working conditions. The findings of this study would be instrumental in recommending policy options to improve the conditions. The main objective of this study is twofold:

- to explore and document the working conditions of women employed in the RMG sector in Bangladesh; and
- to prepare a set of recommendations to be placed before the government for improving working conditions for women RMG workers.

This study employs a quantitative approach. The study team carried out a questionnaire survey to collect necessary information. A set of sample survey questionnaires was prepared and administered to collect data from 1,012 garment workers from 100 factories (at least 10 workers from each factory) located in Dhaka. Factories were selected randomly from different zones of Dhaka and respondents from those factories were chosen purposively based on availability, accessibility, and their willingness to give answers (Table 1).

Table-1: Distribution of respondents according to survey location

Study area		Number	Percent
Dhaka	Zone 1 (Mirpur-13, Kafrul, Vasantek, Kochukhet, and Pallabi)	349	34.5
	Zone 2 (Mirpur- 1, Shah Ali, Darus Salam, Rupnagar)	178	17.6
	Zone 3 (Savar, Ashulia, DEPZ)	360	35.6
	Dhaka-4 (Tejgaon and Mohakhali)	125	12.4
	Total	1,012	100

KEY FINDINGS

Personal information of women workers

Age distribution: Women RMG workers are mostly young. Ninety percent of women workers are in the 18-35 age group. Only 7.6 percent are aged over 35 years.

Education: The largest segment of women workers (40%) has primary-level education, followed by junior secondary level (23%). About one in every five women workers (20.7%) did not attend school, and can sign their names only.

Number of family members: Family size among the workers is larger than the national average. Women workers' families are comprised, on average, of 4.48 members, whereas nationally the household size is 4.04. However, four- to five-member families are common among workers (50.9%). Women workers with a family of six or more members comprised 22.6 percent of respondents.

Dependent family members: Workers' families have on average 2.32 dependent members. The largest contingent of workers has two dependent members in their families. One in every four workers has three dependent members. Sixteen percent of workers have four or more dependent family members.

Income-earning family members: Workers' families have 2.18 income-earning members on average. Two thirds of workers have two earning members and 22.5 percent of workers have more than two income earners. In 11.2 percent of cases, the respondent was the only income earner.

Work and Workplace-Related Information

Type of factory: The majority (72.7%) of the women work in woven factories. Women workers working in knit and composite factories account for 18.9 percent and 8.4 percent respectively.

Work experience in the RMG sector: The average work experience of women in the RMG sector is 5.8 years. More than one third of respondents (36%) has three or fewer years of experience. One in every four has been working for seven to ten years. Women workers with more than ten years of RMG experience comprise 11.8 percent.

Work length in the current workplace: The average work experience at current factory is 3.38 years. However, about half of the respondents (49.6%) have one to three years of experience at their present workplace. Very few women (4.2%) have more than ten years' experience at the present factory.

Number of factories where respondents had worked: The largest proportion (37.6%) of women has experience of working in only one factory, followed by two factories (34.8%). Those with experience of work in three or more factories comprise 27.6 percent.

Working Conditions of the Factories

Employment Contract: Violations of employment contract-related provisions are evident.

- More than one third (36.5%) do not have a letter of appointment.
- A large majority (72.9%) do not have a service book.
- One in every four women workers is not provided with a pay slip.

However, identity cards and attendance cards are provisions which are mostly implemented, with 89.2 percent of women workers in possession of them.

Wages and benefits: About 16 percent of workers reported that their wages and overtime pay are overdue often or always. However, 84.2 percent of workers stated that wages and overtime are not overdue.

In the month preceding this survey, the average personal income of women workers was Bangladeshi Taka BDT. 10,417.32. About 50 percent of women reported an income of BDT 8,001-12,000; 23.3 percent of workers earned BDT 8,000 or less. About 27 percent of workers had a personal income over BDT 12,000.

- Knowledge among the women workers about calculation of overtime compensation is poor – two in every three women do not know the calculation method.
- Workers generally receive a festival bonus (85.3%), though about 15 percent said that they do not.

In the month preceding this survey, workers' monthly average family expenditure was BDT 17,906.49. The monthly family expenditure was BDT 12,001-20,000 for 48 percent of workers, while 28.2 percent of workers had expenditure over BDT 20,000. At the other end of the scale, 17.6 percent of workers' family expenditure was less than BDT 12,000.

Working hours, leave and rest

Violations of national legal provisions and international norms are common. The majority (61%) of the workers work ten hours daily. One in every three workers has to work more than ten hours.

- Almost all workers (95%) do overtime work.
- 87 percent of workers claim that overtime is mandatory.
- Interestingly almost all workers (96.3%) prefer to work overtime hours.

Women workers get lunch breaks, with the exception of a very negligible proportion (0.5%). However, other than lunch, 95.6 percent of workers are not provided with an opportunity to take rest.

There are wide variations in the practice of leave provisions. Among several types of leave, a weekly holiday is the most enjoyed. Many workers are even unaware about the practice of leave at their workplaces.

- 98 percent of workers get a weekly holiday.
- 68.7 percent of workers get casual leave, but 18.2 percent do not know whether casual leave is available.
- 96 percent of workers get sick leave, though many claim that it is not paid leave.
- 77.9 percent of workers get annual leave, but many of them stated that they are paid money instead of taking leave.
- 70.5 percent of workers get maternity leave, while 17.8 percent of workers are unaware of the availability of maternity leave at their workplace.

Night duty is mandatory for a large proportion of women workers. In other words, when night duty is scheduled, these workers are left with no options but to do it. There are workers who lack awareness in this regard. A lack of awareness was also found among many workers regarding the practice of taking written consent from workers for night duty, and the majority of the workers claimed that employers never solicit written consent from them.

- Night duty is mandatory in the opinion of 43.6 percent of workers.
- 14.1 percent of workers do not know whether night duty is mandatory.
- 54.8 percent of women workers stated that their employers never obtain their written consent for night duty.
- 23.1 percent of women are unaware of the practice of obtaining written consent for night duty.

Safety at Work

Employers often do not provide workers with information regarding risks at the workplace; 34.3 percent of workers claimed that their employers do not inform workers in this regard.

RMG workers who have experienced or observed accidents at work (needle pricks, cuts to fingers or hands, fractures of legs or hands, fire) are quite high, at 40.3 percent. There are also workers who don't know whether any accidents have occurred in their workplaces.

Most workplaces maintain or have made available different facilities or arrangements for ensuring workplace safety. However, it remains the case that some factories have still not made sufficient arrangements.

- 97.8 percent of women workers stated that their workplaces have fire extinguishers.
- Around 10 percent of workers reported that their workplaces do not have emergency exits.
- 20 percent of workers do not get training for risk prevention/reduction.
- PPE is available at 94.4 percent of workers' workplaces.
- Evacuation plans are in place at 93.5 percent of workers' workplaces.
- About 15 percent of workplaces do not hold fire drills.

Availability of safety committee

Although workplaces have to have safety committees, in accordance with the Bangladesh Labour Act, 10.1 percent of workers noted that their employers had not delivered on this. The lack of awareness among workers about safety committees is also significant; one in every five workers does not know whether safety committees exist at workplaces. About half (50.5%) of respondents claimed that they participated in safety committee activities.

Workplace environment

Workers have diverse opinions on the conditions in their workplace environment. The majority of the workers perceived the conditions as good except for sound and temperature, which they tended to rate as moderate.

- Women workers reported the availability of first aid, canteen, and separate lunch areas at 88.6 percent, 83.3 percent, and 86.3 percent respectively.
- Only 2.4 percent of workers reported that accommodation facilities were available.
- 55.6 percent noted an absence of recreation facilities.
- Daycare is not available at the workplaces of 35.7 percent of workers. Although 64.3 percent said that it is available, they added that in most cases workers hardly get the chance to use it.
- Breastfeeding corners are absent from the workplaces of 57.1 percent of workers.
- 60 percent of workers said that they do not get any special treatment or facilities during menstruation. The remaining 40 percent are only allowed to rest for some time.

- About two thirds of workers consider that conditions of cleanliness are good.
- 54.2 percent consider sound conditions as moderate.
- 53.6 percent consider temperature conditions as moderate.
- 51.9 percent of workers consider ventilation conditions to be good.
- 80 percent of workers consider lighting conditions to be good.
- 55.7 percent of workers consider conditions of dust and fumes as good.
- 78.4 percent of workers perceive humidity conditions as good.
- 76 percent of workers consider their working space to be good.
- 30.7 percent of workers consider the condition of drinking water as bad.
- 66.5 percent of workers consider the state of separate toilets to be good.

Workplace harassment and discrimination

Women's workplaces are not free from harassment, and they experience different forms of harassment in them. Of these, verbal abuse and harassment is the most common form.

- Four out of every five women workers reported verbal harassment.
- Two out of every three women workers spoke of psychological harassment.
- Physical harassment was reported by 23.8 percent of workers.
- Sexual harassment was observed by around 18 percent of workers.

Despite having evidence or awareness of harassment in different forms, most workplaces lack an anti-harassment committee. Most workers are not aware of one.

- The majority of workers (54.2%) do not know whether an anti-harassment committee exists at their workplace.
- Around 24 percent of women workers said that their workplaces have anti-harassment committees.

Employers do not provide women workers with any transport facility when they work at night; 75.9 percent of workers claim that they do not have such a facility, and the rest (24.1%) do not know whether such a facility is provided.

Welfare provisions and social protection

Welfare provisions are being implemented or made available at varying degrees at the workplaces. However, 100 percent availability has not been reported by women workers for any of the welfare-related provisions or facilities. It is important to note that first aid, canteen, and separate areas for lunch are the most available facilities, whereas accommodation is the least available facility.

Women workers are mostly deprived of social protection-related facilities at the workplace. Striking in this regard is a high prevalence of ignorance or unawareness among workers concerning such facilities.

- About 58 percent of workers do not know whether a provident fund is available.
- 63.8 percent do not know whether a welfare fund is available.
- 62.6 percent do not know whether health and life insurance is available.
- 69 percent do not know whether group insurance is available.
- Around 64 percent do not know whether accident insurance is available.
- Around 66 percent claim that gratuity is given.
- 21.5 percent claim that compensation is not given.
- Maternity leave with pay is available at the workplaces of 90.5 percent of workers.

Workers' organizations at the workplace

Workers' organizations or committees are available at the workplaces of the majority of workers (76.1%), but 16.3 percent do not know whether organizations or committees exist at their workplace. Among different committees and associations, participation committees are the most common, followed by OSH committees. Trade unions are the least available workers' associations at workplaces.

Women workers mostly are not members of the organizations and committees available at workplaces. Only about one in every ten women workers belongs to one.

Workers generally do not face any repercussions for speaking up on work and workplace issues (80.2%). Only about one fifth (19.8%) of the women workers faced them.

