

Survival within irregularities, non-compliance and apathy:

RMG workers' share their stories

Nijera Kori

2018

Contents

INTRODUCTION	2
a. THE RMG INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH	3
b. SYNOPSIS OF WORKERS' STATEMENTS FROM THE EVENT	5
i. Subcontracting	6
ii. Pressure for increased production.....	6
iii. Living Standards.....	7
iv. Dismissals and Threats	7
v. Refusal to grant leaves and other administrative issues.....	8
vi. Sexual Harassment.....	8
vii. Distrust of Law and Helplessness.....	9
c. TWO WORKERS' TESTIMONIES	9
i. Hamida's Story.....	9
ii. Salma's Story	10
d. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	12

INTRODUCTION

On November 2, 2018, an event titled "Women in RMG: Life experiences and the path ahead", was organised jointly by One Billion Rising, Sangat, Sojag, Nijera Kori and Christian Aid at the Liberation War Museum Auditorium at Agargaon, Dhaka. Approximately two hundred RMG workers, both men and women, most of whom were not organised under labour unions, were invited to the programme, where the film *Ekti Shutor Jobanbondi* (English: *Testimony of a thread*), produced by Sara Afreen and directed by Kamar Ahmed Simon was screened. After screening, workers were invited to share their views and experiences regarding various issues of significance to them and the garments sector as a whole, including those of minimum wage, living and working conditions, and the responsibility of owners and middle-managers.



Nijera Kori Coordinator Khushi Kabir speaking at the event.

RMG is now the largest export earning industry in Bangladesh, accounting for over 80 percent of the total earnings. In 2017, OBR conducted a similar programme with female migrant workers (remittance earning constitutes about 12 percent of Bangladesh's GDP).

In the backdrop of the discussions and the film, the broader context of the industry post-Rana Plaza loomed large, as did the more recent issues such as the minimum wage revision in 2018. What emerged from the workers sharing their experiences, and the spontaneous participation of the audience in response, was a picture of an industry plagued by irregularities in following existing laws and policies, not to mention its refusal to address to the full extent the issues of working conditions and living wages of its workers.

This report provides—alongside a brief context of the industry and its recent developments—a synopsis of the major issues that were shared by the RMG workers at the event. Narratives of two workers, exemplifying the extent of the irregularities, working conditions and the low standard of living, are also given.

a. THE RMG INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH

Depending on who you ask, the garments industry in Bangladesh is a major success story of the country's exemplary development or an industry plagued by irregularities and exploitation of cheap labour. Globally, the country is the second largest RMG exporter in the world. The industry employs over 4 million workers, the majority of whom are women ("Study: Rights of Bangladesh's female RMG workers still unmet", *Dhaka Tribune*, Feb 2018).

The industry grew with little oversight and regulations, and thus suffers from structural flaws in ensuring working conditions and ensuring fair living wages. The industry came to the global

limelight when in 2013, a factory building collapsed in Savar killing over 1100 workers. This was not the first time that poor working and safety conditions in factories had led to death of workers—in 2012, a fire in a factory in Savar killed 117 workers—but the scale of the disaster was a turning point in the discourse about the industry.

Since then, there has been some international pressure on the industry to reform. Given the backlash (such as the scrapping of GSP privileges in June 2013) that the industry was confronted with, and under the Accord and Alliance initiatives to oversee and penalise non-compliant factories, there was some improvement in the overall safety and working issues in factories. But now, permission for Accord to continue its inspection work in Bangladesh is uncertain, and the court could issue a restraining order on its operations ("Update: What is happening with the Bangladesh Accord?", Fashion United, Dec 3, 2018)

Larger issues such as the right of workers' to unionise, fair wages and harassment remains concerns according to studies. A recent study titled "State of Rights Implementation of Women Ready-made Garment Workers", funded by Austrian Development Cooperation, Karmojibi Nari in collaboration with the European Union and CARE Bangladesh found that women in the sector have experienced: verbal harassment (84.7%), mental harassment (71.3%), physical harassment (20%), sexual harassment (12.7%), and physical harassment(52%), from supervisors. A 2018 report by Oxfam found that Bangladesh's RMG workers are the lowest paid in the world—that the wages are so low that “on average, it takes just over four days for a CEO from the top five companies in the garment sector to earn what an ordinary Bangladeshi woman garment worker earns in her whole lifetime” (“Reward Work, Not Wealth”).

In September 2018, the minimum wage of RMG workers was revised from Tk 5300 to Tk 8000 (for the lowest grade). Experts and activities have pointed out that the newly revised minimum wage is far from being a proper living wage—the debate about minimum wages in the country remain on the issue of subsistence rather than minimum standards of living ("Decent living through revised wages: 'Fair price' first", *The Daily Star*, Sep 2018). This is in contrast to the demands of the trade unions, which had demanded that the wage be set at Tk 16000.

Industry owners on the other hand have been arguing that further increase of wages would severely harm the industry, and have also pointed out that there is too much of a focus on the negatives of an industry which is so important to the country's economy. But these claims have been widely challenged, and the industry continues to benefit from various national policies: just before the wage increase, the government had the source tax on export of apparel from 0.7 to 0.6 and corporate tax for the sector from 15 to 12 percent, giving in to RMG owners' demands (*Prothom Alo*, September 11, 2018).

Five years after Rana Plaza, the international pressure for compliance and fair wages seems to be decreasing. Although minimum safety standards have been implemented in major factories, in sub-contracting factories, workers continue to work in unsafe conditions ("Workers at 3,000 subcontracting RMG units in danger", *New Age*, April, 2018).

b. SYNOPSIS OF WORKERS' STATEMENTS FROM THE EVENT

What the workers' present at the discussions had to say were in line with the major criticisms of the industry, some of which have been mentioned above. The issues range from the specific to the structural, and can be summed up by what one worker said: "We are earning a lot for our country, but it is only the owners who are benefitting from it."

The key issues mentioned by workers can be grouped as follows:

i. Subcontracting

It was mentioned that even though compliance issues were better than pre-Rana Plaza in most factories, in sub-contracting factories there has been little improvement. According to one worker, owners of these factories, to which work for international buyers is outsourced from other factories, continues to use the excuse of lower prices to skirt around paying less. Thus, even the negligible rise in minimum wages has not fully benefitted workers in sub-contracting factories. Since the wage revision, there has been increased pressure from owners to workers of these factories for higher production on similar grounds. While labour laws provide for certain amenities and benefits to RMG workers, these are largely absent or not complied to in these factories according to workers. Workers also said that safety standard are not complied with in these factories. This is consistent with previous studies which has shown that 700-800 small, sub-contracting factories are outside the national monitoring plan that was set up post-Rana Plaza (Khondaker Golam Moazzem, *The Daily Star*, 2017).

Another issue which was mentioned in regards to sub-contracting factories was the of child labour in unsafe working conditions without training in operating machinery which could lead to accidents.

ii. Pressure for increased production

As with sub-contracting factories, according to most workers there has been a consistent and unrealistic demand for increased production since the minimum wage was revised. This issue was mentioned by every worker who spoke. The general argument is, since owners are now bound to pay more, workers should be increasing production consistently—an argument which

does not stand since the minimum wage is by definition that lowest amount that HAS to be paid, and is not in any way linked to the production quantities. As workers also pointed out, these extra work load has also contributed to health issues for workers.

iii. Living Standards

The issue of how the rise in minimum wage, and the low wages in general, have not helped in raising the living standards of workers was also brought up. With the rising costs of nutritious food and housing it is difficult for workers to lead a decent life. Workers talked about how the wages, far from being enough to ensure health and education of family members, is sometimes not even enough for a healthy meal. Most workers mentioned education of their children as a priority, and that the minimum wage is simply not enough to ensure their quality education.

iv. Dismissals and Threats

There has also been a rise in the number of people being laid off since the minimum wage was revised. The speakers mentioned specific instances of how owners and middle-managers have been using dismissal as a threat to keep workers from protesting unfair work conditions. Many factories have actually stopped taking in helpers (the lowest tier) and are investing in machinery so that they do not have to pay the revised minimum wages. Fewer number of men are being employed now, as they are seen as being more vocal by factory owners. One worker mentioned that he had been threatened inside and outside the factory for speaking up about irregularities.

Most of the workers also mentioned horrific irregularities in dismissal processes. Workers are being forced to sign their resignation letters, and owners have been continuously looking for excuses to lay-off workers they consider problematic.

Workers also mentioned that they cannot join trade unions for fear of losing jobs—although unionisation is legal, the challenges for workers organising remains in the form of threats, and dismissals from jobs.

v. Refusal to grant leaves and other administrative issues

Workers, especially women, presented specific examples about how the administration refuses to grant leaves to workers, even in critical cases. This issue was supported by everyone from the audience too. Excuses and threats are made to workers for not coming in, even in medical emergencies. One example presented was of a pregnant worker who was dismissed before the end of the month so that management would not have to grant her a maternity leave or pay the full severance money. Another worker mentioned a colleague who was made to work till 8-months of pregnancy and then compelled to resign. In cases where workers ask for medical leave, management influences the factory health workers to not approve the leave according to workers. One woman, whom the management wanted to fire for not being able to come in for medical reasons, was physically threatened into signing her resignation letter.

vi. Sexual Harassment

According to both women and men, sexual harassment and unwarranted behaviour from middle-management continues to be the norm in many factories. Workers said that, on the pretext of low-performance, female workers are approached with inappropriate propositions by managers. Groping or touching inappropriately with the excuse of helping workers was also mentioned. Women in such cases have little recourse from the administration—in one case when a worker protested sexual harassment, she was fired instead of the manager. According to workers, their helplessness in these situations is because workers, especially new helpers, are seen as easily

replaceable. The use of language towards workers is in general abusive and derogatory according to most workers, especially women.

vii. Distrust of Law and Helplessness

A general distrust of the law and judicial process was also expressed in the discussions. One worker mentioned that after she was wrongfully fired from her job, she had filed a case, but the law enforcers were bribed. The long court processes were also mentioned as a barrier to workers seeking legal help, since they could not afford to keep going to court instead of working.

c. TWO WORKERS' TESTIMONIES

Below, a narrative of the experiences of two female workers who spoke at the event are presented as examples of the extent of abuse and uncertainty they work under. Both their names have been changed.

i. Hamida's Story

Hamida worked in the same factory in Mohammadpur for over seven years, from 2010 to January 2018. She and her husband worked in the same factory. Although the factory provided transportation for workers to get to work, due to them being inadequate, many workers needed to take rented vehicles. One day, while going on their way to the factory, their rented vehicle had an accident on the road. Though there were no casualties, she became unconscious from it. She was taken home. Other workers, on their way to the factory in the factory-provided vehicle witnessed the accident.

Hamida and her husband could not go into work, and after seeking medical help, went back home. In this time, her husband was called from the factory asking why he was not showing up

to work. He explained the situation, and workers who had seen the accident testified to the truth of it.

However, when her husband managed to go to the factory after three days, he was called in by the administration and accused of lying. He was asked why Hamida was still not in, and the factory sent someone to their house. She was asked to talk to administration. Seeing bruises on her face, the management then kept insisting that the reason Hamida could not come in was that her husband had been hitting her. Then they asked her to work.

Because of the injuries she had suffered in the road accident, Hamida could not work properly—her eyes kept watering, interfering with her work. Seeing this, she was asked to instead work as a helper for a few days. When she said that given her condition, she would not be able to, the management asked her to take leave for 2-3 days and then come in.

When she still couldn't work, she was asked to leave. When she demanded severance pay, she was denied that as well. She tried going in afterwards a few more times, but was not given any work.

She said: "The benefits we are promised in our contracts, we are not getting those. We want to say that we want to work together for the owners. We also need to be together to demand our rights from the owners—if we do, they are bound to comply."

ii. Salma's Story

Salma who regularly attended the workers Women's Right Cafes (meeting places for RMG workers established by ActionAid Bangladesh in Dhaka and Chittagong where they can meet and discuss issues and rights) always encouraged other workers from her factory to visit them as

well. After work, she would take interested women to the Cafe. But the owners did not like this. After she got off work around 6 one day, she was taking around a dozen women to the nearby Cafe, when the factory guard saw them.

The guard called up the parents of one of the workers and insinuated that Salma was taking their daughter at night to questionable places. When the parents confronted Salma, she explained its purpose to them. The next day, she asked the guard why he had made the suggestions—he got angry and started threatening her. She went into work, but in the meantime, the guard called the GM of the factory and complained about Salma, saying that she had misbehaved with him. Salma was taken off work and told to sit quietly in a corner by a staff, threatening her: "when the GM comes, he will see what to do with you." When the GM arrived, they started misbehaving with her, accusing her of misbehaving. She explained that she had not misbehaved at all, and that they could check the CCTV footage to confirm. But they would not listen and demanded that she sign a paper. When she asked what it was, she was told that she had to resign.

When she refused, she was forced to sign it amidst verbal abuse. They grabbed her hand and tried to make her sign, but when she wouldn't, they just wrote her name themselves and told her to leave. She says that in a previous incident, when someone tried to touch her, she had complained. So she had already been targeted, and they were already looking for an excuse to get rid of her. Under the excuse of misbehaving with the guard, the owners and management forced out a worker who was not only conscious of her rights, but also encouraged other workers to organise and discuss these issues. She is currently unemployed, and trying to find work.

d. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The issues that workers at the event talked about are not isolated cases—the ubiquity of their prevalence was acknowledged by all workers present, and studies and research about the RMG industry reveal the same. This is the problem of an industry which has been solely driven by profit, protected by its economic earnings to the nation, and which has utterly disregarded its workers unless compelled. While owners can point to compliant factories where safe working conditions and workers' rights are respected, the industry as a whole reveals a different picture. These are structural issues of industry regulations and respect to workers' rights. The revised minimum wage is too low for improving workers' living conditions. In these regard, some key changes that the industry needs are:

- Re-evaluation of the minimum wage to a minimum living wage, taking into consideration workers' access to health, education and other basic needs.
- Proper implementation of existing labour laws and guidelines so that factories cannot cheat workers of their rights to leaves, severance pay etc.
- Streamlining workers' access to justice so that workers are not barred from seeking justice due to concerns of earning a living.
- Setting up a mechanism for monitoring of sub-contracting factories to ensure their compliance with safety and labour laws.
- Workers must be allowed to organise, without threat of any kind, and trade unions must be strengthened and encouraged.
- Sexual harassment complaint cells must be ensured in every factory, and effective steps must be taken by the state and owners to protect women workers.

