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▶ ISSUE BRIEF

# Understanding the Gender Composition and Experience of Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Workers in Bangladesh

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ISSUE BRIEF

# Understanding the Gender Composition and Experience of Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Workers in Bangladesh

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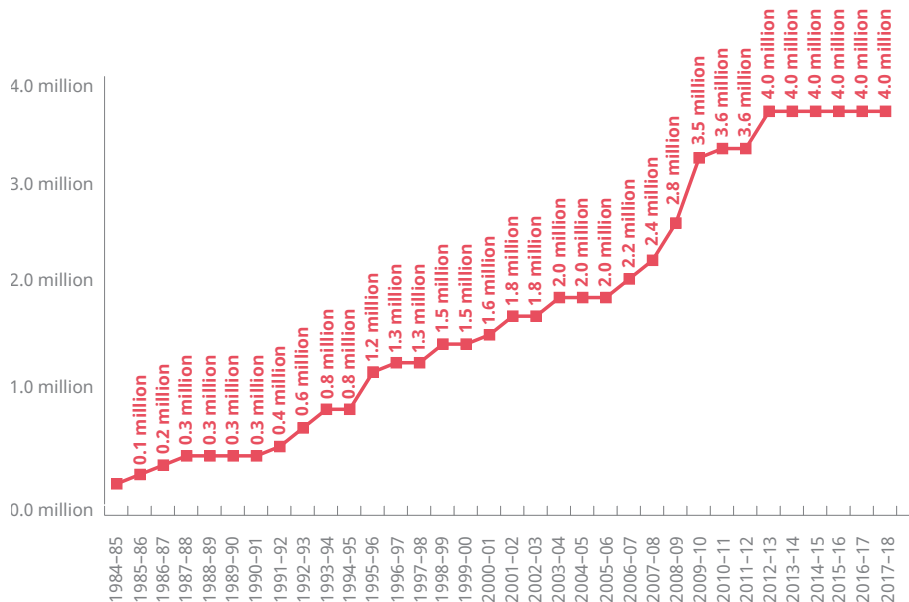




# ► Background

Bangladesh’s ready-made garment (RMG) sector is an important driver of economic growth.<sup>1</sup> From an industry that generated a few million dollars in export earnings in the 1970s, it is now an industry of US\$ 30 billion (2017–2018)<sup>2</sup> that accounts for 83 per cent of the country’s total export revenue.<sup>3</sup> Its growth has created significant employment opportunities (see figure 1), employing an estimated 4 million workers – a substantial proportion of Bangladesh’s total labour force of 69 million.<sup>4</sup> The sector’s expansion has specifically contributed to a rise in women’s employment, pushing Bangladesh’s female labour force participation rate up to 36.4 per cent in 2017. While this rate is lower than in South East Asia, it is higher than in other South Asian countries, such as India (20.8 per cent), Pakistan (21.9 per cent) and Sri Lanka (35.8 per cent).<sup>5</sup>

**FIGURE 1. Employment in the ready-made garment industry in Bangladesh (workers in millions)**



**Source:** Prepared by authors using BGMEA employment figures for 2018, available online, <http://bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/TradeInformation>

<sup>1</sup> According to the National Industrial Classification 2019 of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the ‘manufacture of wearing apparel (ready-made garments)’ is included under group 14, which includes three main sub-categories: (141) the ‘manufacture of wearing apparel, except for fur apparel’, (142) the ‘manufacture of articles of fur’, and (143) the ‘manufacture of knitted and crocheted apparel’.

<sup>2</sup> Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, “[RMG Industry: Trade Information](#)”, 2018.

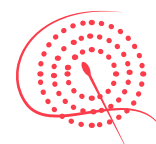
<sup>3</sup> Better Work, *An Industry and Compliance Review: Bangladesh*, 2019. Reporting period: June 2015–December 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, “[RMG Industry: Trade Information](#)”, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Latest figures from ILOSTAT for Sri Lanka (2016), Bangladesh (2017), Pakistan (2018) and India (2018).



Most workers in Bangladesh's ready-made sector are women. This is not unique to Bangladesh; worldwide, the industry tends to rely on low-paid female labour to compete and maximize profits in a highly competitive global market. In the 1980s and 1990s, estimates suggest that 90 per cent of apparel workers were women. According to the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), 80 per cent of the 4 million workers (that is, 3.2 million workers) employed in its members' factories are women.<sup>6</sup> Most are from impoverished or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.



**4 million**  
people in  
Bangladesh work  
in the ready-made  
garment sector

Other sources indicate that women make up a slightly smaller proportion of RMG workers. The 2012 Survey of Manufacturing Industries (SMI) by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) found that women represented 64 per cent of the RMG sector's 2,762,334 employees. In 2018, the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) found that the proportion of women workers declined from 58.4 per cent in 2012 to 53.2 per cent in 2016. A number of surveys and studies suggest that, while the proportion of women workers in Bangladesh's RMG sector continues to be significant, it has decreased since the 1990s.<sup>7</sup>



**Women**  
represent a  
significant, but  
decreasing,  
proportion of  
RMG workers

Nevertheless, as they comprise the majority of the ready-made garment workforce, it is clear that women workers have significantly contributed to the development of the RMG sector, and to the growth of Bangladesh's economy in recent decades. Although the sector has evolved to become an important driver of economic growth, employment generation and poverty reduction, significant concerns remain about whether or not its evolution has been accompanied by positive change for workers, particularly women workers, in terms of better working conditions and a better working environment.



**RMG  
sector's  
evolution**  
has not been  
sufficiently  
gender-  
responsive

For instance, the decreasing proportion of women workers in the RMG sector indicates that jobs that used to be held by women are increasingly held by men. This could suggest that the sector's evolution has not been sufficiently gender-responsive in a way that ensures equal opportunities and treatment for women and men.

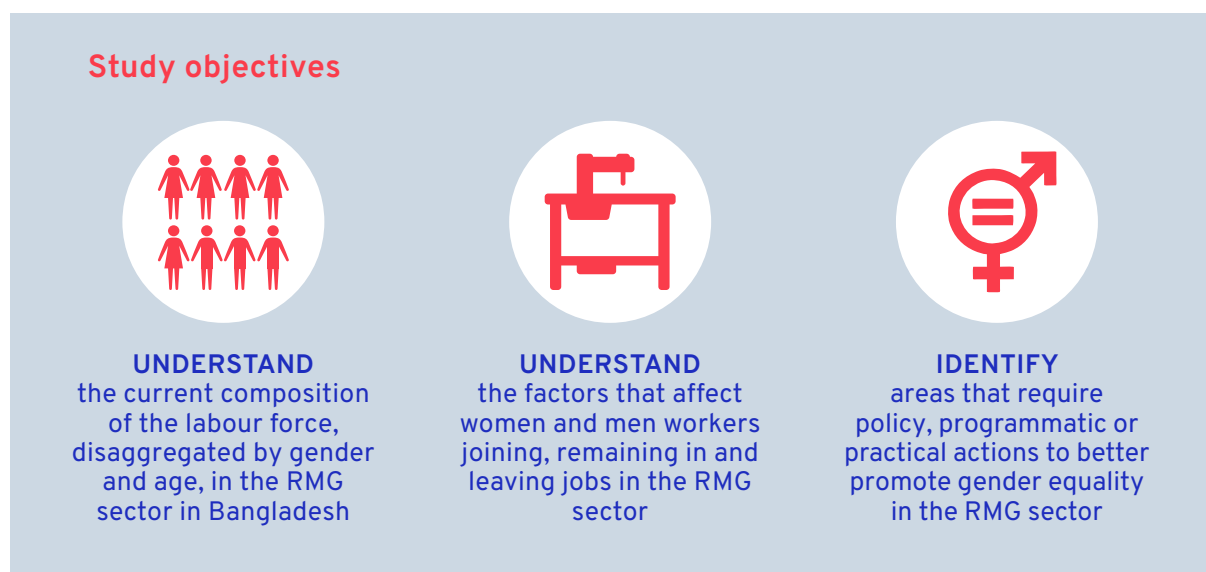
<sup>6</sup> World Bank, "Chapter 8: Bangladesh", in *Sewing Success? Employment, Wages, and Poverty following the End of the Multi-fibre Arrangement*, ed. Gladys Lopez-Acevedo and Raymond Robertson, 213–246 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

# ▶ Study on Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector

In this context, the International Labour Organization's (ILO) programme on Improving Working Conditions in the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh (RMGP) Phase II, in collaboration with UN Women Bangladesh, commissioned a study on the ready-made garment sector in 2017, while the field data collection was undertaken in 2018.

The study examined the factors that enable and inhibit men and women workers from accessing, remaining and advancing in jobs in the RMG sector. Recommendations based on its findings highlight policies, programmes and practices required to ensure that the RMG sector evolves in a way that promotes gender equality – so that the benefits of sectoral and economic growth are enjoyed equally by both women and men.



## Methodologies

The study gathered information by applying mixed methodologies, including: (i) a desk review of available data, (ii) a quantitative survey of factories and workers in the RMG sector using interview questionnaires, and (iii) a qualitative survey based on focus group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, and interviews with key informants. The surveys were conducted between May and June 2018.



## Study respondents

The study conducted: (i) a survey of 260 RMG factories using a questionnaire, (ii) a survey of 553 workers (268 men and 285 women), (iii) a survey of 80 former RMG workers (40 women and 40 men), (iv) five Focus Group Discussions with former RMG workers, (v) six in-depth interviews with RMG workers, and (vi) interviews with relevant stakeholders. See Annex 1 for details.

## Acknowledgements

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Various colleagues from the ILO and UN Women in Bangladesh contributed to the finalization of the Issue Brief. Shammin Sultana, Programme Officer Gender Mainstreaming, ILO RMGP II co-coordinated the original research and provided technical input. Belinda Chanda, Operations and Programme Support Specialist, ILO RMGP II in Bangladesh, provided close guidance, background research and technical input. Tapati Saha, Programme Analyst (Women's Economic Empowerment), UN Women Bangladesh, and Palash Das, Programme Management Specialist, UN Women Bangladesh, provided inputs to the original research and coordination support.

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## ► Key findings

### 1. The proportion of women workers in surveyed RMG enterprises declined between 2010 and 2018

There was little or no growth in employment in the ready-made garment sector between 2010 and 2018 (see figure 2), and the membership of garment factories in the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters' Association (BGMEA) declined from 5,150 (2010–2011) to 4,621 (2018–2019).<sup>8</sup> This reveals that fewer enterprises are operating in the sector compared to ten years ago, and that each enterprise employs a larger number of workers. Overall, the enterprises surveyed reported employing more workers in all production sections in 2018 than in 2010.



**60.5 per cent**  
of RMG workers were women in 2018

In terms of the gender composition of workers in the ready-made garment sector, the ILO's baseline study found that women represented 61.17 per cent of the sector's workforce in 2018.<sup>9</sup> Data collected by the study from 260 enterprises reveals that women accounted for 60.5 per cent of their workers in 2018, a decline from 63.4 per cent in 2010 (see table 1). Disaggregating the data by location area shows that women's employment share in the sector declined in Gazipur, Narayanganj and Chittagong, but increased by 1.7 percentage points in Dhaka between 2010 (57 per cent) and 2018 (58.7 per cent). In terms of production sections, the proportion of women workers increased in the 'packaging and printing' section – rising from 43.5 per cent in 2010 to 46.2 per cent in 2018 – but declined in all other sections. Considering the gender gap in labour force participation in Bangladesh (80.7 per cent for men and 36.4 per cent for women in 2017<sup>10</sup>), the proportion of women in the RMG sector is significant, albeit not as large as is generally perceived.



**Women's share**  
in RMG employment fell in most areas, except Dhaka

The vast majority (92 per cent) of enterprises surveyed have upgraded their technologies since 2010 for a number of reasons (see table 2). Production sections in which technology has been upgraded correspond to those in which women workers' share of employment has declined. Further investigation may be required to understand the possible impacts of upgrading technologies on employment opportunities for women and men in the RMG sector.



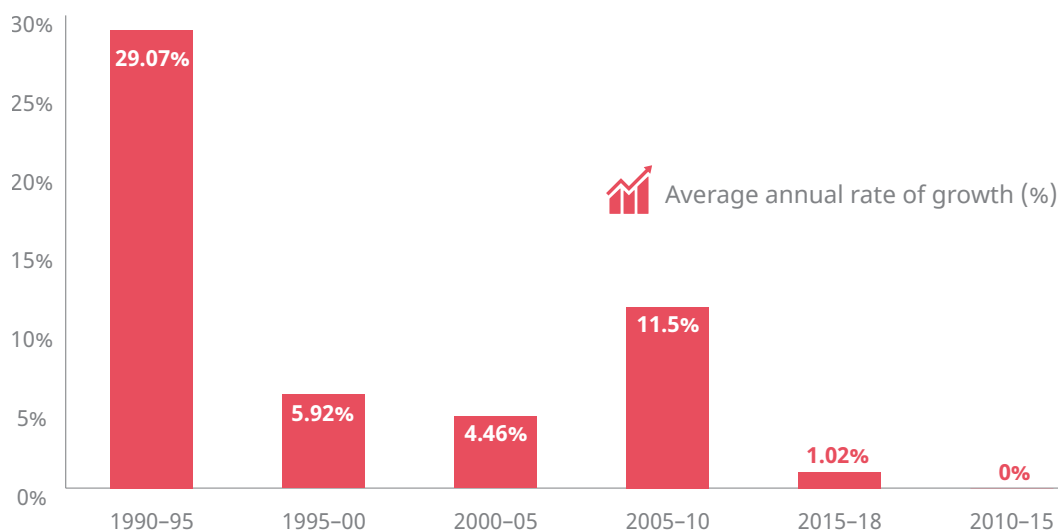
**92 per cent**  
of surveyed enterprises have upgraded technologies

<sup>8</sup> Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, "RMG Industry: Trade Information", 2018.

<sup>9</sup> ILO, *Baseline Study: Improving Working Conditions in the Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment Sector Programme*, 2019. Based on data collected between January and May 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Latest figures from ILOSTAT for Bangladesh (2017).

**FIGURE 2. Growth of employment in Bangladesh's RMG sector (1990–2018)**



Source: Authors' calculation based on BGMEA employment figures for 2018. Available at: <http://bgmea.com.bd/home/pages/TradeInformation>

**TABLE 1. RMG workers by major production sections, 2010-2018**

Production section	Average number of workers by section						Change in percentage points 2010-2018	
	2010			2018			Men	Women
	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women	Total		
<b>Sewing</b>	190 (29.9%)	446 (70.1%)	636 (100%)	325 (32.6%)	670 (67.4%)	995 (100%)	2.7	-2.7
<b>Knitting</b>	102 (57.6%)	75 (42.4%)	177 (100%)	154 (61.9%)	95 (38.1%)	249 (100%)	4.3	-4.3
<b>Cutting</b>	48 (59.3%)	33 (40.7%)	81 (100%)	82 (59.8%)	55 (40.2%)	137 (100%)	0.5	-0.5
<b>Finishing</b>	82 (37.3%)	138 (62.7%)	220 (100%)	162 (42%)	224 (58%)	386 (100%)	4.7	-4.7
<b>Dying</b>	177 (98.3%)	3 (1.7%)	180 (100%)	204 (98.4%)	3 (1.6%)	207 (100%)	0.1	-0.1
<b>Packaging and printing</b>	88 (56.5%)	68 (43.5%)	156 (100%)	109 (53.8%)	93 (46.2%)	202 (100%)	-2.7	2.7
<b>Washing</b>	110 (82.8%)	23 (17.2%)	133 (100%)	125 (82.9%)	26 (17.1%)	151 (100%)	0.1	-0.1
<b>Embroidery</b>	305 (98.7%)	4 (1.3%)	309 (100%)	452 (98.9%)	5 (1.1%)	457 (100%)	0.2	-0.2
<b>Total</b>	1,102 (36.6%)	790 (63.4%)	1,892 (100%)	1,613 (39.5%)	1,171 (60.5%)	2,784 (100%)	2.9	-2.9

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Enterprise level survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.



**TABLE 2. Major types of changes in machineries in surveyed enterprises in recent years**

Production section	Machine names <sup>11</sup>	Reasons
<b>Sewing</b>	Auto Plain Machine	Increased production in a shorter period of time
	Auto Flatlock	Fewer workers required, especially assistant operators/helpers
	Auto Overlock	
<b>Knitting</b>	Auto Knitting Machine	Fewer workers required for increased production
	Japanese Jacquard Machine	Improved quality of products
		Helps timely delivery
		Low wastage
<b>Cutting</b>	Auto Hand Cutting	Increased production in a shorter period of time
	Auto Lay Cutting	Fewer workers and helpers required
		Higher volume of cloth cut in a shorter period of time
		High quality cutting
		Low production costs
<b>Finishing</b>	Thread Sucking	Fewer workers required for quality checks
	Stem Icon	Increased production
		Less time required

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Enterprise level survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

## 2. Over 70 per cent of all RMG workers (both men and women) are 29 years old or younger, and more than half have no, or low, educational attainment

According to Bangladesh's labour force survey (LFS) in 2016, 71.5 per cent of women and 59.6 of men working in the RMG sector were 29 years old or younger (see table 3). Over 70 per cent of all workers surveyed by the study were in this age group (see table 4). The mean age of surveyed workers was 26.7 years for men and 26.6 years for women. In terms of educational attainment, nearly 60 per cent of all workers had at least completed their primary education. Among women workers, 29.1 per cent had no formal education or had not completed their primary education, far higher than among men (17.9 per cent).



**29.1**  
per cent  
of women RMG  
workers have had  
no education

<sup>11</sup> These are the common names popularly used for the machines. Their formal names may differ from the names reported by respondents.

**TABLE 3. Distribution of RMG workers by gender and age group, 2010–2016**

Age group	LFS 2010		LFS 2013		LFS 2016	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
15–19	9.2	22.4	10.8	22.2	14.3	21.7
20–24	14.4	17.3	20.8	26.1	20.2	25.4
25–29	12.7	15.9	22.4	22.2	25.1	24.4
30–34	11.6	15.7	18.4	13.5	15.5	12.9
35–39	13.2	18.0	9.8	5.2	10.5	7.9
40–44	8.3	4.9	6.6	2.5	6.1	3.2
45–49	15.0	3.5	4.6	6.1	4.1	2.5
50–54	10.3	1.5	2.6	1.0	2.1	1.0
55–59	4.7	0.5	1.6	0.5	1.2	0.5
60+	0.5	0.3	2.4	0.7	1.0	0.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Authors' calculation using Labour Force Survey (LFS) data, various years.

**TABLE 4. Age and educational qualification of survey respondents (%)**

Indicators	Men	Women	Total
<b>Age distribution (%)</b>			
15–19	11.6	7.7	9.6
20–24	32.5	31.9	32.2
25–29	29.1	31.9	30.6
30–34	12.7	15.1	13.9
35–39	7.5	9.8	8.7
40+	6.7	3.5	5.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Mean age (years)</b>	<b>26.7</b>	<b>26.6</b>	<b>26.6</b>
<b>Educational status of respondents (%)</b>			
No or incomplete primary education	17.9	29.1	23.7
Primary education completed	56.7	58.6	57.7
Secondary School Certificate (SSC)	17.2	10.5	13.7
Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC)	6.0	1.8	3.8
Bachelor's degree/diploma/higher education	2.2	0.0	1.1
<b>Total respondents</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>553</b>

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

### 3. For most workers, especially women, jobs in the RMG sector are their first formal sector employment

Before working in the RMG sector, most surveyed women workers were either engaged in household activities (42.1 per cent), unemployed (29.8 per cent) or students (23.2 per cent) (see table 5). This may indicate that a job in the RMG sector was the first paid employment opportunity in the formal sector for 95 per cent of the women interviewed, compared to 64 per cent of male respondents.



**95**  
**per cent**  
of women workers

One-third of men surveyed were engaged in other economic activities before joining the RMG sector. Their transition from work in other sectors to the RMG sector may indicate that men view RMG jobs as more attractive than employment in other spheres.

**64**  
**per cent**  
of men had their  
first job in the  
RMG sector

**TABLE 5. Previous occupations of respondents (%)**

Previous occupation	Men	Women	Total
Self-employed in agriculture	6.7	1.4	4.0
Day labourer	14.6	1.8	8.0
Self-employed in business	4.1	0.7	2.4
Employee in non-RMG work	4.9	0.4	2.5
Rickshaw/van/auto driver	3.0	0.0	1.5
Transport workers	0.4	0.0	0.2
Household activities	0.8	42.1	22
Unemployed	25.4	29.7	27.7
Student	37.6	23.2	30.2
Other	2.5	0.7	1.5
Total respondents (percentage)	100	100	100
Total respondents (number)	268	285	553

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

### 4. Close to three quarters of women workers are married, while the proportion of married men is little over a half of all male workers

Nearly three-quarters of surveyed women workers were married (73.3 per cent), as were over half of male workers (55.6 per cent) (see table 6). A further 5.3 per cent of women workers were divorced, widowed or separated.

The surveyed workers' average household size (3.6 persons) was smaller than the national average (4.5 persons) (see table 6).<sup>12</sup> Among married workers, nearly half of their spouses also work in the RMG sector (see figure 3). For women respondents with spouses working in the RMG sector, 36.5 per cent work in the same factory and 63.5 per cent in a different factory, whereas for men, 39.7 per cent of their spouses work in the same factory and 60.3 per cent in a different factory.

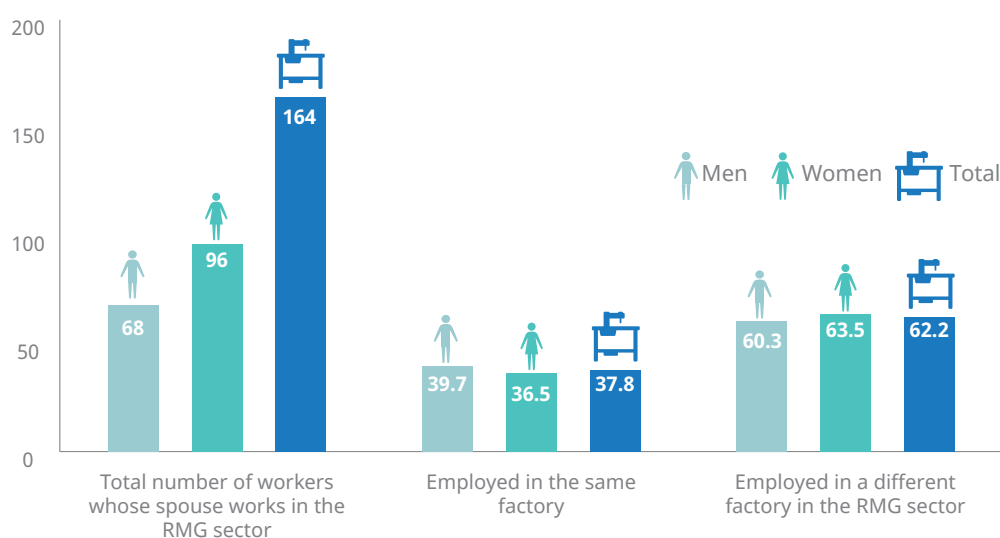
Nearly half (47.3 per cent) of married, separated, divorced or widowed women workers have one child, 17 per cent have two children, and 2.3 per cent have more than two (see figure 4). This indicates that two-thirds of married, separated, divorced and widowed women workers have child care responsibilities which they must balance with their employment in the RMG sector.

**TABLE 6. Household characteristics of the respondents (%)**

Indicators	Men	Women	Total
<b>Marital status (%)</b>			
Unmarried	44.0	21.4	32.4
Married	55.6	73.3	64.7
Separated/divorced/widowed	0.4	5.3	2.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Household characteristics of married workers</b>			
Average family size (number of members)	3.6	3.6	3.6
Average number of children (0-17 years) in the household	1.5	1.4	1.5
Average number of children under-five in the household	1	1.1	1.1

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**FIGURE 3. Surveyed workers whose spouses are employed in the RMG sector**

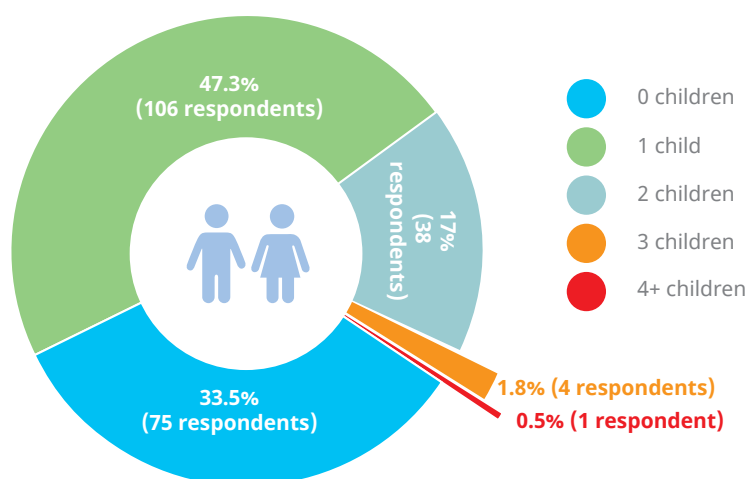


Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and World Bank, *Household Income and Expenditure Survey*, 2010.



**FIGURE 4. Surveyed women workers with children**



Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

## 5. Women workers are concentrated in low-paid jobs in the RMG sector

Most workers in the RMG sector are employed in the ‘production’ section. This is especially true for women workers (97.1 per cent) compared to men (80.8 per cent). The production section encompasses seven salary grades, wherein grade 1 is the highest paid, and grade 7 the lowest (see table 7).

The study’s enterprise survey reveals that there are more men than women in higher level positions (grades 1 and 2) in the production section, and far more women than men in lower level positions (grades 3 to 7). While 83.8 per cent of women workers surveyed are employed in grades 4 to 7, this is true for only 67.7 per cent of male workers (see table 8).



**83.8 per cent**  
of women workers  
are in low grades, vs

**67.7 per cent**  
of men

**TABLE 7. Minimum salary levels for workers of different grades per month (BDT)**

Grades	Gross wage 2010	Gross wage 2013	Gross wage 2018
Grade 1	9,300	13,000	17,510
Grade 2	7,200	10,900	14,630
Grade 3	4,120	6,805	9,590
Grade 4	3,763	6,420	9,245
Grade 5	3,455	6,042	8,855
Grade 6	3,210	5,678	8,405
Grade 7	3,000	5,300	8,000

Source: The Minimum Wages Board, Ministry of Labour and Employment’s data for 2010, 2013 and 2018.

**TABLE 8. Employment distribution of RMG workers, 2018**

Job categories	Men	Women	Total
A. Manager	11.4	0.9	6.2
B. Staff	7.2	0.7	4.0
C. Production worker	80.8	97.1	88.9
Grade 1	1.6	0.8	1.2
Grade 2	2.0	1.0	1.4
Grade 3	9.5	11.3	10.5
Grade 4	21.0	24.2	22.8
Grade 5	14.3	17.6	16.2
Grade 6	15.2	19.6	17.7
Grade 7	17.2	22.4	20.2
Apprentice	0.1	0.1	0.1
D. Non-production worker	0.6	1.4	1.0
Total employment (A+B+C+D)	100	100	100

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Enterprise level survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.



## 6. Women’s representation in managerial and leadership positions has not improved in the RMG sector

Slightly more women were ‘officers (junior/senior)’, ‘office assistants’ and ‘supervisors/senior supervisors’ in 2018 than in 2010. However, the proportion of surveyed women in most other managerial positions declined, and their overall average representation in such roles remained low and unchanged between 2010 and 2018 (approximately 9 per cent) (see table 9). This indicates no improvements in enhancing women’s representation in managerial and leadership positions in the RMG sector in the past decade. Other sources reaffirm that sectoral leadership roles are male dominated. For example, the Better Work compliance review report found that men held 95 per cent of line supervisor positions.<sup>13</sup>



**95  
per cent**  
of line supervisor  
jobs are held by  
men

The perceptions of women and men respondents shed light on gender-based stereotypes, discrimination and norms that affect workers’ leadership roles (see table 10). Most survey respondents (89 per cent of women and 87 per cent of men) believe that ‘men can work faster’ than women, and men’s ‘output is greater’ than that of women (80 per cent of both women and men).

A higher percentage of women respondents (73.7 per cent) than men (63.6 per cent) pointed out that men can work at night, while a greater proportion of male respondents noted that men do not face security problems when working or returning home late.

When asked why women ‘are not interested in becoming supervisors’, the ‘intense workload’ involved was highlighted by 67.7 per cent of women respondents and 51.4 per cent of men. Roughly 40 per cent of respondents suggested that women ‘do not feel qualified’ for these roles (see table 11). As supervisors require additional skills, such as basic accountancy and communication skills, women workers with limited education tend to lack the confidence to pursue such roles. More women than men respondents indicated that increased tension and stress prevented women from pursuing managerial positions. One-fifth of respondents suggested that ‘no overtime compensation’ was a key factor – that is, supervisors are often generally required to stay at work for more hours than operators with no overtime benefits.

<sup>13</sup> Better Work, *An Industry and Compliance Review: Bangladesh*, 2019. Reporting Period: June 2015–December 2018.

Focus group discussions with former RMG workers suggested that women do not pursue managerial roles because: (i) supervisors or line chiefs are required to work overtime, after regular working hours, (ii) women fear losing friends and peers if they advance to supervisory roles, and (iii) women lack confidence in their abilities to manage male workers. The second point speaks to the importance of support networks, as women operators are reluctant to be promoted to supervisory roles that would take them out of a large group of women operators to a small group of (largely male) supervisors.

Despite significant investments by government entities, national and international organizations to improve working conditions in the RMG sector, particularly after the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, gender-based challenges persist. These run the gamut from gender bias, such as the perception that men are somehow more capable, to barriers posed by gender norms. For instance, work schedules do not allow managers to balance both work and family responsibilities, and the fact that women are predominantly responsible for household care work.

**TABLE 9. Proportion of women in managerial and supervisory positions in surveyed enterprises, 2010–2018 (%)**

Job categories	2010	2015	2018
Director/owner/partner	14.7	11.9	11.6
Manager	3.6	3.9	3.6
Executive officer	8.5	8.1	7.0
Officer (junior/senior)	9.9	10.6	11.4
Office assistant	10.9	10.7	11.0
Line chief	6.3	6.4	6.4
Supervisor/senior supervisor	10.3	12.1	12.5
Average managerial and supervisory positions	9.2	9.1	9.1

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Enterprise level survey”, Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh, 2018.

**TABLE 10. Perceptions on ‘why more men occupy managerial roles’ (multiple responses)**

Factors	Men	Women	Total
Men can work faster than women	86.8	88.9	87.7
Men can work at night	63.6	73.7	68.2
Men’s output is greater than that of women	80.2	79.8	80
Men do not face security problems when they work or return home late	33.1	22.2	28.2

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh, 2018.



**TABLE 11. Perceptions on ‘why women are not interested in managerial roles’ (multiple responses)**

Reasons	Men	Women	Total
Not qualified	37.1	39.4	38.8
Intense workload	51.4	67.7	62.9
Increased stress	15.7	27.1	23.8
No overtime	21.4	20.6	20.8
Other	7.1	5.9	6.3

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

The study’s workers’ survey and focus group discussions reveal that both demand side and supply side factors are responsible for men’s dominance of supervisor positions. Both workers and staff members (including production managers, human resource managers and others) believe that male supervisors are able to exert more power as managers, are able to handle the stress of achieving production targets, and can stay at work for longer periods of time. These perceptions influence the promotion and recruitment of supervisors. However, interviews with production managers in several factories noted that existing women supervisors perform their roles well and achieve production targets.

Around 40 percent of workers surveyed indicated that discrimination affects prospects for promotion (see table 12). The existence of discrimination against women in promotion was highlighted by both women respondents (37 per cent) and men respondents (45 per cent). Neither men nor women respondents indicated that discrimination affects the promotion of male workers.

**TABLE 12. Opinions on discrimination against women and men in promotion**

Question: Is there discrimination against women or men in promotion?	Discrimination against women		Discrimination against men	
	Answers by men (%)	Answers by women (%)	Answers by men (%)	Answers by women (%)
Yes, there is discrimination	45	37	0	0
No, there is no discrimination	55	63	100	100
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

## 7. In higher level positions, women workers tend to be better educated than men

While women's representation in management and leadership positions is very limited, women in managerial roles tend to have more years of schooling than their male colleagues (see table 13). This may reflect discriminatory practices grounded on gender bias that regard men as more capable even when women have stronger academic qualifications.

For positions between grades 2 and 6, men tend to have more years of schooling than women workers, while average years of schooling are the same for both women and men in grade 7 positions.



**9 to 10 years**

of schooling are the average for women in high level positions

**TABLE 13. Average years of schooling for workers in different positions/grades**

Salary grade	Number of respondents		Average years of schooling	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Line chief	18	3	9.1	10.0
Supervisor	14	7	8.1	9.0
Grade 1	19	1	8.0	10.0
Grade 2	19	17	7.6	4.9
Grade 3	38	64	6.8	5.4
Grade 4	74	83	6.9	5.8
Grade 5	35	49	6.7	5.2
Grade 6	25	40	7.0	5.5
Grade 7	26	21	6.2	6.2
Total	268	285	7.2	5.7

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

## 8. More than one in every two RMG workers secured work through community, social and family networks. Women workers face barriers to their entry that are not experienced by men

Social networks are extremely important for securing employment in the RMG sector. Most surveyed workers (63.3 per cent of women and 57.8 per cent of men) secured their jobs following an introduction by neighbours, friends or relatives. Only 10 per cent of workers applied for jobs after seeing a job advertisement (see table 14).

**TABLE 14. How workers are hired by RMG factories**

Reasons	Men	Women	Total
Own effort	21.4	17.9	19.7
Through acquaintances and neighbours in their villages	22.0	26.8	24.4
Through a friend working at a garment factory	21.8	19.8	20.8
Through relatives or family members	14.0	16.7	15.4
By hearing about the job from others and applying	7.9	8.0	8.0
By seeing a job advertised at the factory gate and applying	11.4	10.3	10.9
Other	1.5	0.6	1.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

Financial reasons are the key motivating factor that prompted both women and men respondents to enter the RMG sector. Specific motivations include a desire to ‘meet basic family needs’, to ‘be self-sufficient and independent by earning an income’, to ‘financially support the family by working’ and to ‘increase the number of earners in the family’ (see table 15). A higher proportion of men were motivated by the respect associated with factory work, and higher salaries and benefits, indicating that jobs in the RMG are considered a more attractive option for men. In terms of who influenced their decision to enter the sector, both men and women respondents largely indicated that it was their ‘own decision’. However, the decisions of nearly 20 per cent of women, compared to 5 per cent of men, were influenced by their spouse (see table 16).

In terms of family-related obstacles to joining the RMG sector, a small proportion of men (less than 5 per cent) and women respondents (less than 8 per cent) indicated parental disapproval. Most male respondents (95.5 per cent) did not encounter any obstacles, as did a somewhat lower proportion of women (80 per cent) (see table 17). Women respondents listed obstacles that were not highlighted by men, such as disapproval from their spouse or in-laws, and the fact that they have young children. While almost all male respondents reported experiencing no societal obstacles, this was true for far fewer women (68.1 per cent) (see table 18). Roughly one in three women respondents experienced societal challenges, such as disapproval of their working outside the home, others ‘worry if I go away for work’ and religious objections to working in the public sphere.



**RMG jobs**  
are considered  
more attractive  
for men



**1 in 3**  
of women workers  
faced societal  
obstacles to  
entering the RMG  
sector

**TABLE 15. Factors that motivated workers to enter the RMG sector (multiple responses)**

Reasons	Men	Women	Total
<b>Pull factors</b>			
Want to be self-sufficient and independent by earning	66.4	71.9	69.1
There is more respect linked to working in a factory	39.9	29.1	34.5
High salaries and benefits	30.6	14.4	22.5
Looking for a better spouse	0.4	6.3	3.4
Freedom to move around	4.1	1.8	2.9
<b>Push factors</b>			
Want to meet basic family needs	79.9	94.0	87.0
Want to financially support the family by working	52.6	45.6	49.1
Want to increase the number of earners in the family	38.4	41.4	40.0
Father or main breadwinner passed away	4.5	2.5	3.5
Want to earn enough for a dowry	0.8	5.6	3.2
Forced to work by family members	1.5	2.1	1.8
Other	4.9	1.8	3.4

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**TABLE 16. Who motivated/influenced the worker to join the RMG sector**

Influencers	Men	Women	Total
Own decision	35.1	35.4	35.3
Parents	20.6	15.7	18.2
Spouse	4.8	19.1	11.9
Neighbours in the village	11.5	11.4	11.4
Friends	10.6	7.7	9.2
Brother/sister	7.1	6.4	6.8
Others	10.3	4.2	7.3
Total	100	100	100

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**TABLE 17. The biggest obstacle faced within the family to joining the RMG sector (%)**

Obstacles/challenges	Men	Women	Total
Parents do not approve	4.5	7.2	5.9
Spouse does not approve	0	1.3	0.7
Young children	0	6.2	3.3
In-laws do not approve	0	5.9	3.1
No obstacles	95.5	79.0	86.7
Other	0	0.3	0.2
Total	100	100	100

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**TABLE 18. Societal obstacles to joining the RMG sector (%)**

Obstacle/challenge	Men	Women	Total workers
People disapprove of my working outside the home	0.4	14.8	7.6
Others will worry if I go away for work	1.9	12.4	7.0
Blind religious faith regarding working outside the home	0	4.8	2.4
No obstacles	97.7	68.1	83.0
Total	100	100	100

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

## 9. Combining factory and household work, women have longer working days than men

While male respondents work slightly longer hours in factories, women's working days are considerably longer when the time they spend at work in factories is considered alongside their work within the household. Overall, women's working days are 14.1 hours long, compared to 12.9 hours for men (see table 19). Some women respondents explained that due to insufficient income, they do not have a personal cooking stove or toilet, obliging them to wake up earlier each morning to use a shared kitchen and sanitation facilities.



**14.1 hour**  
working days for  
women vs

**12.9** for men

**TABLE 19. Average time allocation for different activities (hours/day)**

Activities	Average hours per day		
	Men	Women	Total
Working in the factory	11.2	10.9	11.0
Household work	1.7	3.2	2.5
Entertainment/leisure	2.7	2.0	2.3
Sleeping	7.1	6.5	6.8
Other	1.3	1.4	1.4
Total	24	24	24

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.



## 10. Most RMG workers are satisfied with their current employer and jobs. Women workers report higher levels of satisfaction than men

Survey respondents expressed high levels of satisfaction with their current employers and at their current jobs, more so among women respondents (86.9 per cent) than men (84.5 per cent) (see table 20). Factors underlying job satisfaction include the timely payment of salaries and overtime, particularly among women workers. Other frequently cited reasons are also financial, including a festive bonus, regular weekly leave, the payment of minimum wages, and a regular attendance bonus (see table 21).

**TABLE 20. Job satisfaction with current employer or in current employment**

Level of satisfaction	Men		Women	
	Number of workers	%	Number of workers	%
Very satisfied	28	15.1	40	22.9
Quite satisfied	65	35.0	73	41.7
Roughly satisfied	64	34.4	39	22.3
Slight annoyed	21	11.3	17	9.7
Quite annoyed	8	4.3	6	3.4
<b>Total</b>	<b>186</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>100</b>



**86.9  
per cent**

of women workers report  
job satisfaction vs

**84.5  
per cent**

of men

**Source:** ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**Note:** The number of workers refers to those workers who responded to this question.

**TABLE 21. Reasons for job satisfaction (multiple responses)**

Reasons for satisfaction	Men	Women	Both
Salary is paid on time	82.5	88.8	85.7
Overtime payments are made on time	58.6	75.4	67.3
Festival bonus	43.7	41.8	42.7
Regular weekly leave	35.5	31.6	33.5
Minimum payment in line with government policies	30.2	29.8	30.0
Regular attendance bonus	25.0	26.0	25.5
Separate toilets for men and women workers	20.9	19.3	20.1
Clinics, doctors and medicines are available at the factory	11.6	16.1	13.9
Maternity leave provided	3.4	10.2	6.9
Day care/childcare facilities are available	2.6	8.1	5.4
Sick leave with payment	5.2	3.2	4.2
Medical allowance	3.0	2.1	2.5
Factory provides lunch/tiffin	3.4	1.8	2.5
Annual leave with payment	2.6	1.4	2.0
Other	1.5	0	0.7

**Source:** ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

Survey respondents' average monthly salary was higher for men (BDT 11,528) than women (BDT 9,208) (see table 22). A considerably higher proportion of women's salaries (53.1 per cent) were used to support family members in rural areas than men's (36.2 per cent). As women workers' incomes are lower than their male colleagues, women saved less (9.6 per cent of their income) than men (12.8 per cent), both in absolute terms and in terms of proportions of their salaries (see figure 5).

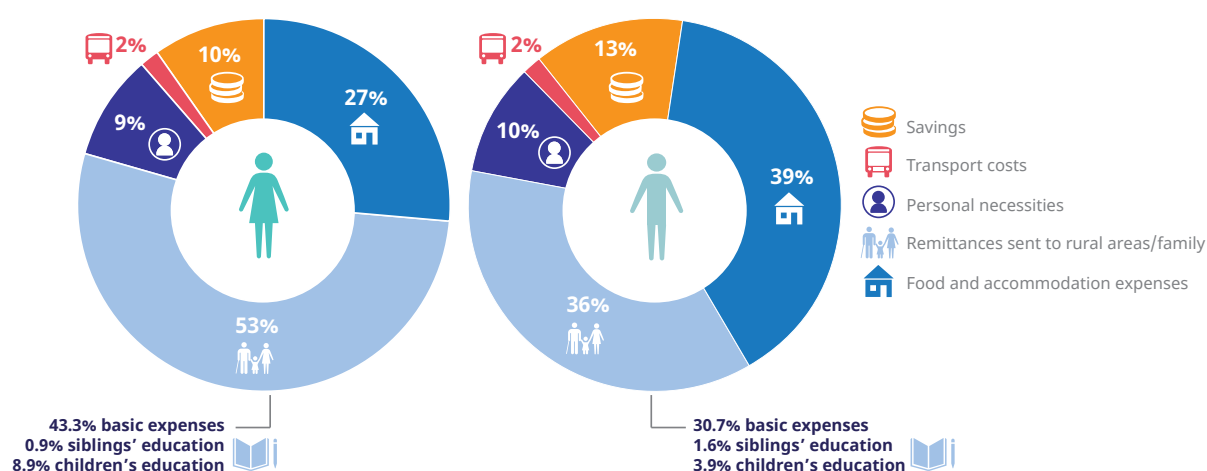
**TABLE 22. Workers' monthly income and expenditure by gender**

Monthly income and expenditure	Men		Women	
	Amount in BDT	% of total income/ expenditure	Amount in BDT	% of total income/ expenditure
<b>Monthly average income</b>				
Salary (including overtime)	11,528		9,208	
<b>Monthly average expenditure</b>				
Food and accommodation expenses*	4,536	39.4	2,441	26.6
Remittances sent to rural areas/family	4,169	36.2	4,863	53.1
- To meet basic expenses	3,544	30.7	3,969	43.3
- To meet siblings' education expenses	172	1.6	81	0.9
- To meet children's education expenses	453	3.9	812	8.9
Personal necessities	1,132	9.8	836	9.1
Transport cost	212	1.8	144	1.6
Savings	1,479	12.8	884	9.6

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

Note: When these estimates were calculated, the minimum wage was BDT 3,500, established in 2013.

**FIGURE 5. Women's and men's monthly income and expenditure**



Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

More women respondents than men linked their job satisfaction to the availability of ‘clinics, doctors and medicines at the factory’, maternity leave” and day care (see table 21). Working in the RMG sector has enabled most workers to improve their livelihood prospects (see table 23). While relatively few respondents highlighted the importance of health care, this is evidently more important for workers who have left jobs in the RMG sector. Focus group discussions with former RMG workers emphasized their aspiration to have access to health care and pensions in exchange for having contributed to the growth of the RMG sector (see figure 6).

**TABLE 23. Benefits of being employed in the RMG sector (multiple responses)**

<b>Benefits</b>	<b>Men</b>	<b>Women</b>	<b>Both</b>
Family’s financial crisis decreased	86.6	82.5	84.5
Can afford better clothes than before	49.3	48.4	48.8
Household food quality improved	31.7	39.3	35.6
Savings for the future	27.2	35.1	31.3
Household’s quantity of food intake increased	25.0	33.0	29.1
Higher levels of trust in workers if they try to obtain a loan	35.5	20.4	27.7
Ability to repay loans	26.5	21.8	24.1
Can afford education for children	13.1	17.2	15.2
Can afford better health care	14.6	8.1	11.2
Can afford to buy a television and other household appliances	11.2	7.7	9.4
Can afford to buy furniture	7.1	8.4	7.8
Greater ability of women to take decisions at the household level	4.1	11.2	7.8
Can build and repair their homes	7.8	4.9	6.3
Can purchase land	7.8	3.2	5.4
Can purchase livestock	4.1	5.3	4.7
Receive more respect in society	2.6	5.3	4.0
Increased capacity to provide a dowry	0.4	0.7	0.5
Increased prospects of ensuring a better spouse for their children	0.4	0.4	0.4

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**FIGURE 6.** Reflections by former RMG workers

“Even though life had not been very easy, I am still grateful to the RMG sector for everything I have now. I could marry off my daughter properly and built my own home with the money I earned from the garment sector work. It would have been much better if the garment authority arranged some pension or health care for workers who served the RMG for so long. It is said that Bangladesh has developed a lot through its RMG sector, but why is it that we, the garment workers, who dedicated our lives in the factories have no pension or health care benefits? Have we not done anything for our country? Where does all this money go then?”

— Former RMG worker (woman)

“I live in my house with my children in the village with the money I earned while working in the factory. My health condition is not very good and I feel it is much better if the workers who worked for 10 years in the RMG sector received pension or health benefits.”

— Former woman RMG worker (woman)

“Both me and my husband worked for over ten years at the garment factory but didn’t gain anything. We wasted our valuable time, money and gave a lot of efforts for literally nothing. In return, both of us had severe health issues and had to spend a lot of money for our treatment.”

— Former RMG worker (woman)

“I was able to save a handsome amount of money while working at the garment factory and I could build my own house in the village and bought a cow after retirement. I also bought a van for my husband for our livelihood. I am financially supporting my husband through poultry farming. However, my job in the RMG factory has badly affected my health and I do not have sufficient money for treatment. If the factories at least had a policy of health insurance for workers after their retirement, it would be very beneficial for people like me.”

— Former RMG worker (woman)

“The government officials work for the country and they get pensions and other services, but I have contributed to the development of my county for 10 long years and brought money from abroad, then why am I not getting any pension or health care facilities?”

— Former RMG worker (woman)

## 11. Workers change job within the RMG sector fairly frequently, largely to access better salaries and working conditions. Men tend to change jobs more than women workers

According to former RMG workers who participated in the study's focus group discussions, changing jobs is common in the sector. Workers generally expect a promotion or an increased salary as they become more experienced. As they may not get a raise or promotion in the same workplace, many find work in other factories within the RMG sector.

The behaviour of co-workers, supervisors, line chiefs, and production managers also prompt workers to switch jobs, as do benefits offered by a factory, and the distance they are required to travel to work (see table 24). More women workers than men were prompted to change jobs due to the misbehaviour of higher management, supervisors and other operators. For example, roughly 20 per cent of the women cited higher management's behaviour as a reason for moving to another factory, compared to 10.4 per cent of men.

In general, men changed jobs more often than women workers (see table 25). Most women focus group participants, who worked in the RMG sector for more than 10 years, switched companies an average of three times. They indicated that changing jobs was more common at the beginning of their careers when they joined any factory that would hire them, without comparing its facilities and benefits with those of other factories. First-time workers indicated that they had little bargaining power, which limited their choices, as most of them were unskilled. After gaining some experience, workers usually move to other factories, largely in search of higher salaries and better working conditions.



**20  
per cent**

of women workers  
left jobs due to  
management's  
(mis)behaviour



**TABLE 24. Reasons for workers leaving their last job (multiple responses)**

Reasons	% of cases		
	Men	Women	Both
Low salary	57.1	48.8	52.9
Not being promoted	40.5	36.4	38.5
Poor working environment in the factory	27.6	22.2	24.9
No increase in salary	22.7	21.6	22.2
No regular work at the factory	22.1	17.9	20.0
Poor behaviour of higher management	10.4	19.8	15.1
Misbehaviour of the supervisor/other operators	8.0	13.6	10.8
Poor communication	11.0	8.0	9.5
No overtime	11.0	7.4	9.2
Work pressure	10.4	6.8	8.6
Far from home	6.8	9.9	8.3
Irregular overtime pay and attendance bonus	2.5	6.8	4.6
No weekends	1.2	1.9	1.5
No place to live near the factory	0.0	0.6	0.3
Total number of respondents	265	267	532

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Workers' survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**TABLE 25. Number of job changes**

Number of job changes during employment in the RMG sector	Men	Women	Total
1-3	29 (72.5%)	34 (85.0%)	63 (78.8%)
4-5	7 (17.5%)	4 (10.0%)	11 (13.8%)
>5	4 (10.0%)	2 (5.0%)	6 (7.5%)
Average number of job changes	3.0	2.4	2.7
Total number of interviewed workers	40 (100%)	40 (100%)	80 (100%)

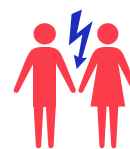
Source: ILO and UN Women, "Focus Group Discussions with former RMG workers", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

## 12. Both men and women workers experience harassment in the form of repeated insults and shouting, but only women workers have reported experiencing sexual harassment

Sixty per cent of both men and women workers surveyed experienced repeated insults and shouting from their supervisors or line managers (see table 26). Some focus group discussion participants who had worked as supervisors claimed that harsh words are seen as 'necessary' to ensure an appropriate level of output by workers, indicating a culture of unacceptable behaviours to meet output targets. Higher proportions of women workers reported experiencing physical violence and threats, and only women respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment.

During the focus groups, former RMG explained that a 'remand' system exists within factories, which is intended to make workers feel ashamed. This 'remand' is a punishment which compels a worker to stand for between 2 and 4 hours in a non-production floor and no one is allowed to speak to them. A worker may face a 'remand' for failing to achieve a production target, or for being unwilling to do extra work. When the 'remand' ends, the worker returns to their production floor and their co-workers generally laugh or joke about the punishment. One focus group participant recalled that he did not go to work the day after facing a 'remand', fearing insults from his co-workers. While this form of punishment is not very common, it merits immediate action by senior management to put a stop to the practice.

Widespread harassment and violence experienced by workers may reflect the fact that most workplaces lack policies and mechanisms to address harassment, despite rising attention to occupational safety and health – including fire exits, personal protective gear and fire-fighting devices, etc. (see table 27). The ILO's baseline study on the RMG sector identified a lack of relevant mechanisms and policies to address sexual harassment within companies in Bangladesh.<sup>14</sup>



**61.7  
per cent**

of men and women  
workers  
experienced  
harassment  
at work

**Sexual  
harassment**

was only reported  
by women



Most workplaces

**lack  
policies and  
mechanisms  
to address  
harassment**

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

**FIGURE 7. Reflections on harassment and violence**

“I started working at the garment factory in order to fulfill my family’s basic necessities, but was a victim of verbal and physical abuse most of the time.”

– 32-year-old woman worker, case study and focus group participant

**TABLE 26. Experiences of harassment/violence at the workplace (multiple responses)**

Harassment/violence	Men	Women	Total (as a % of total workers)
Repeated insults/shouting	60.3	62.8	61.7
Beatings/physical violence	2.2	3.4	2.8
Sexual harassment	-	3.0	1.6
Threats	3.0	4.1	3.6
No harassment experienced	34.5	33.5	33.9
<b>Reasons for harassment/violence (multiple responses)</b>			
Errors at work	72.1	72.8	72.5
Arrive late for work	32.7	24.6	28.3
Taking leave	10.3	17.4	14.2
Participating in labour movement activities	1.2	0.5	0.8
Others	3.6	13.3	8.9
<b>Harassment/violence perpetrated by</b>			
Supervisor	56.1	69.3	63.3
Line manager	15.2	22.0	18.9
Administrative officer	12.3	4.4	8.0

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Focus group discussions with former RMG workers”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**TABLE 27. Availability of occupational safety and health measures in workplaces (multiple responses)**

Indicators	%	
	Yes	No
Safety Committee at the factory	66.7	33.3
Workers’ Participation Committee at the factory	58.6	41.4
Emergency exits on each floor	96.8	3.2
Emergency exits kept open on each floor	97.2	2.8
Fire-fighting device at the workplace	94.2	5.8
Permanent doctor/nurse available at the workplace	72.2	27.8
Employees receive personal protective equipment from their employer	88.6	11.4
Use of personal protective equipment	81.1	18.9

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

### 13. Violence and harassment are major factors in men and women workers leaving their jobs. Pregnancy is the leading reason for women leaving the RMG sector, while work-related stress is the leading cause for men

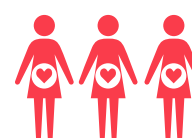
The study’s focus group discussions highlighted that work in the RMG sector is extremely physically stressful. As such, most women workers do not want to continue working in the sector until they reach the regular age of retirement. Women generally expect to have shorter careers in the sector and to leave their jobs at a younger age than men (see table 28).

**TABLE 28. Expected age and reasons for leaving the RMG sector (multiple responses)**

Leaving the RMG sector	Men	Women	Both
Expected age (average)	38.0	34.8	36.4
<b>Reasons</b>			
Getting older	21.3	37.9	29.8
Longer working hours	26.5	24.6	25.5
Will start a business	35.5	6.7	20.6
Switch to other jobs with a higher salary	32.8	7.4	19.7
No job security	21.3	16.8	19.0
Children will grow up and I would not like them to work in the RMG sector	5.2	31.9	19.0
Owners do not want to hire older workers	14.6	16.8	15.7
Society will condemn if you work at an advanced age	12.3	17.2	14.8
Negative effects on health	10.8	13.7	12.3
Want to get married and start a family	4.5	14.0	9.4
Supervisor/managers misbehave with workers	7.8	7.4	7.6
Other (low salary, risky workplace, misbehaviour, etc.)	8.2	7.0	7.6

Source: ILO and UN Women, “Workers’ survey”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

Of 40 women focus group participants, eight quit their jobs in the RMG sector for fear of miscarriage (see table 29). They highlighted how challenging it is for a pregnant woman to stand or operate a sewing machine in a continuous sitting position for up to 10 hours each day to fulfil high production targets. Participants reported witnessing cases of miscarriage, which they considered to be a result of heavy workloads and a lack of protective measures – as pregnant workers’ workloads and hours are not reduced. One male respondent attributed his wife’s miscarriage to her excessive workload in the RMG sector. The focus groups also indicated that many pregnant women workers avoid taking leave, even when they experience difficulties during pregnancy, to avoid losing their job.



#### Pregnant workers

face severe challenges, and are often pressured into quitting their jobs

Fearing miscarriages, other workers temporarily quit work during pregnancy and return after their child is more than six months old. Some workers delay pregnancy, planning to have children after several years of work, and only after quitting their jobs. The focus group participants indicated that many women workers would not quit if overtime were not compulsory during pregnancy, or if they were allowed short breaks.<sup>15</sup>

**TABLE 29. Main reasons for leaving jobs in the RMG sector**

Factors/reasons	Men		Women		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
<b>Push factors</b>						
Forced retirement/fired	2	5.0	3	7.5	5	6.3
Violence/harassment (verbal, emotional, physical) at the workplace	10	25.0	10	25.0	20	25.0
Workplace injuries/occupational disease	1	2.5	6	15	7	8.9
Work stress	15	37.5	6	15	21	26.5
Consequences of worker movements	3	7.5	1	2.5	4	5.1
<b>Pull factors</b>						
High living costs and limited salaries	3	7.5	1	2.5	4	5.1
Personal and family-related problems	3	7.5	6	15	9	11.6
<b>Combination of push and pull factors</b>						
Pregnancy, fear of miscarriage and work stress			8	20.0	8	10.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** ILO and UN Women, “Focus group discussions with former RMG workers”, *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

The study’s focus group discussions also highlighted that women are often reluctant to join trade unions, fearing potential negative repercussions, such as being fired. Employers tend to view trade unions in a negative light, considering them possible threats to the management. Given women workers’ relative vulnerability, they are at risk of becoming the first victims of retaliatory action. As a result, women are not sufficiently represented among union members. This means that issues that concern women workers, or suggestions on improving working conditions for women, are less likely to be brought up during negotiations with factory managers and employers.

Overall, RMG factory managers appear to view pregnant workers as inefficient. As supervisors and managers do not want to cut production targets, they sometimes pressure pregnant women to quit their jobs. One focus group respondent observed that, if women become slower at completing tasks during pregnancy, supervisors intentionally subject them to verbal abuse to prompt them to quit. As a result, pregnant women suffer in silence – much to the detriment of their own, and their child’s, health and well-being. For example, one former RMG worker did not ask for leave when she felt weak during pregnancy, as she knew from past experience that she may be fired or made to leave.

For men, work-related stress is a significant reason for leaving jobs in the RMG sector (see table 29). A higher proportion of women than men identified ‘family and other reasons’ as reasons

<sup>15</sup> RMG workers must maintain a line, or chain, of production. As such, it is difficult for managers to give breaks to one worker on the production line. Another challenge is arranging seating so that pregnant workers are comfortable and productive.



for leaving their work, which may be related to family care responsibilities. Workers who have left the RMG sector are generally in good health, although this is more common among men than women (see table 30). After leaving, men tend to be engaged in other economic activities, whereas most women are not and largely dedicate their time to household work.

**TABLE 30. Socio-economic conditions of former RMG workers**

	Men	Women	Total
<b>Current health condition (self-reported)</b>			
Excellent/better health condition (1+2)	35 (87.5%)	23 (57.5%)	58 (72.5%)
Good (3)	4 (10.0%)	9 (22.5%)	13 (16.3%)
Not good (4+5)	1 (2.5%)	8 (20.0%)	9 (11.3%)
<b>Current occupation</b>			
Self-employed in business	14 (35.0%)	6 (15.0%)	20 (25.0%)
Working in sectors other than RMG	9 (22.5%)	0 (0%)	9 (11.3%)
Private/government job	4 (10.0%)	6 (15.0%)	10 (12.5%)
Driver	6 (15.0%)	0 (0%)	6 (7.5%)
Households activities	1 (2.5%)	16 (40.0%)	17 (21.3%)
Unemployed	3 (7.5%)	11 (27.5%)	14 (17.5%)
Student	2 (5.0%)	0 (0%)	2 (2.5%)
Other	1 (2.5%)	1 (2.5%)	2 (2.5%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>40 (100%)</b>	<b>40 (100%)</b>	<b>80 (100%)</b>

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Focus group discussions with former RMG workers", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**FIGURE 8. Reflections on reasons for leaving jobs in the RMG sector**

"I have witnessed many workers face miscarriage[s] while working in the factory because of excess workload, so I didn't want to take any risk and decided to settle in the village before getting pregnant."

– Former RMG worker

"If the garment factories were more supportive towards the workers who are pregnant, then a lot of woman like me wouldn't have to go through the trauma of miscarriage or leave their work at such a young age. We have always been working at the factory through its good and bad times, but why doesn't the factory support us when we need special care?"

– Former RMG worker

"It is disappointing that supervisors indirectly force workers to quit their job if they become pregnant or of [an advanced] age. [...] During my last pregnancy, I asked the manager to reduce my workload since it was affecting my health. The manager didn't even hear my request and made me resign. I was really hurt by this and decided to end my career in the garment [sector]."

– Former RMG worker





• Please use the correct size and grade when  
servicing coffee machines and the  
Please Clean the Machine Before Starting the  
Work And Before Leaving The Work Station  
• Replacement of sugar, coffee capsules or  
Do not start the Machine without Heads Guard  
• Servicing coffee area must have correct  
• Use correct tools  
• Do not touch the

CRITICAL PROCESS  
কঠিন কর্মপ্রক্রিয়া





## ► Conclusions

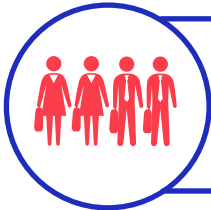
The ILO-UN Women study finds that the majority of workers in Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector are women, although the proportion of women has declined to 60.5 per cent in 2018, down from 63.4 per cent in 2010. Considering the overall gender gap in labour force participation, the share of women workers in the RMG sector remains significant, as is their contribution to the sector's expansion and the country's economic growth. The RMG sector is an important source of formal employment for people with little or no education, particularly for women workers whose prospects are limited due to entrenched social norms and male dominance of formal sector occupations. Working in the RMG sector was the first job for most of the women workers surveyed. By comparison, one in three men had previously been engaged in other economic activities, indicating that jobs in the RMG sector are considered relatively more attractive for men in Bangladesh.

Despite rising economic growth underpinned by women workers' contributions, the RMG sector has not yet evolved to advance gender equality or decent work for both women and men. Women workers remain clustered in low-paid, entry level positions. While the most men and women workers feel satisfied with their current work, they also reported a harsh reality – while many toil for hours each day, many cannot afford to live in accommodation with their own cooking or toilet facilities. Pregnant workers are either afforded no support or deliberately mistreated to induce them to quit their jobs. Both men and women are subjected to verbal abuse and humiliation, and women workers report experiencing sexual harassment with little recourse to protection or justice. The study also shows that there has been absolutely no increase in women's representation in managerial or leadership positions in the RMG sector during the past decade. Once they leave the sector, former RMG workers are largely left without health care or pensions, irrespective of their role in their country's economic prosperity.

Improving working conditions in the RMG sector has become an important part of the development agenda in Bangladesh. The study confirms that much more needs to be done to achieve gender equality and decent work in the sector. To this end, RMG workplaces must be transformed into gender-responsive environments. This transformation involves creating safe workplaces, free from violence and harassment and replete with operational safety and health standards. It requires ensuring maternity protection, supporting pregnant workers, and extending health insurance and pensions. It also means providing women with opportunities for skills development and career advancement, while engaging with men and managers to cultivate a culture of equality. Transforming factories into gender-responsive sites for decent work is vital for Bangladesh's RMG sector to remain competitive in the global market. Investments in the RMG sector have not sufficiently advanced gender equality; this needs to be taken seriously. Policy-makers, employers' and workers' organizations, development partners, and other stakeholders must work together to remedy this shortfall by discussing, developing and implementing stronger measures to achieve gender equality and decent work for all.

## ► Recommendations

Based on its findings, the study proposes 11 key recommendations to support decent work and gender equality in the ready-made garment sector, all with a view to realizing inclusive, sustainable development in Bangladesh.

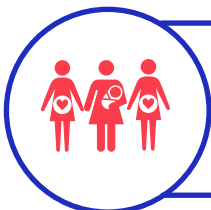


**RECOMMENDATION 1:** Implement stronger measures to realize a fair share of women's representation in the RMG sector, alongside accountability mechanisms to increase women's representation in higher level positions.

The fact that there has been no progress in the ratio of women in managerial and supervisory positions, despite advocacy and interventions by international and national organizations, is a grave concern. It appears that the progress has been made in safety standards since the Rana Plaza collapse – such as fire exit and fire-fighting devices, among others – indicating that progress can be made when strong measures and enforcement mechanisms are in place. This principle of setting targets and ensuring accountability for achieving these targets should also be applied to achieving gender equality in the RMG sector.

The Government, in consultation with employers' and workers' organizations should design, implement and enforce minimum standards on gender equality for RMG enterprises.

International buyers may consider only signing business contracts with enterprises that uphold certain gender equality standards, such as the fair representation of women in managerial and supervisory positions, the existence of a sexual harassment policy, the implementation of maternity protection, and the smooth operation of childcare facilities, etc.

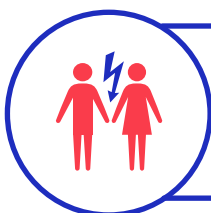


**RECOMMENDATION 2:** Implement stronger measures to ensure the implementation of maternity protection.

The Bangladesh Labour Act requires the provision of maternity leave and childcare facilities at workplaces. However, the inadequate implementation of maternity protection at the enterprise level is a major cause of women workers leaving jobs in the RMG sector.



A compliance review by Better Work found that 42 per cent of Bangladesh's factories do not comply with paid leave provisions, including sick leave and maternity leave.<sup>16</sup> The Government, employers' organizations and workers' organizations have an important role to play in ensuring the effective implementation of maternity protection measures. These include, for instance, transferring pregnant workers to safer forms of work, enforcing maternity leave, and preventing job loss due to pregnancy. Each stakeholder should develop and implement measures to ensure that all parties are accountable for supporting the effective implementation of maternity protection measures.



**RECOMMENDATION 3: Promote a workplace culture free from violence and harassment by raising awareness about unacceptable behaviour and introducing stricter measures to address violence and harassment in the world of work.**

The study shows that most workers have experienced some form of violence and harassment, and that many leave their jobs in the RMG sector due to work-related stress. Enterprise owners and managers need to introduce and promote a working culture free from violence and harassment. Workers' organizations should also raise awareness of unacceptable behaviours, so that workers can react appropriately when they are subjected to mistreatment. Both employers and workers' organizations need to ensure workers' access to assistance and recourse if they experience violence or harassment.



**RECOMMENDATION 4: Develop legislation that criminalizes violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and sexual harassment, in line with the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190).**

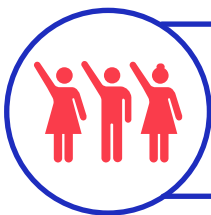
The review of the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) urges Bangladesh to address harassment and violence against women at work. Legislation criminalizing violence and harassment, particularly sexual harassment in the workplace, is urgently required to promote and protect the rights of all workers. As sexual harassment is commonly cited by women workers as a reason for leaving the RMG sector, such laws and their effective implementation are needed to ensure that women access, remain and thrive in jobs that contribute to Bangladesh's socio-economic development. The Government, in consultation with employers' and workers' organizations should initiate the process of implementing measures to address violence and harassment; this should include the development of legislation.

<sup>16</sup> Better Work, *An Industry and Compliance Review: Bangladesh*, 2019. Reporting Period: June 2015–December 2018.



**RECOMMENDATION 5: Strive to ensure workers' access to health insurance, pensions and social protection.**

Many former RMG workers highlight the injustice of their lack of access to health insurance and pensions after leaving the sector, despite contributing to its prosperity and national economic growth for years. Tripartite constituents should initiate discussions to design and implement measures that ensure workers' access to health insurance, pensions and social protection.



**RECOMMENDATION 6: Increase workers' – especially women's – participation in associations, and ensure that trade unions and participation committees enhance women's participation and address their concerns.**

The focus group discussions highlighted that women often fear joining trade unions, leading to their underrepresentation among union members. The regulation on trade unions specifies that, to create a union, the consensus of 20 to 30 per cent of workers is needed.<sup>17</sup> Thus, unions can be created with only, or a majority of, male workers in RMG factories. When membership is dominated by men, issues that matter for women tend to be overlooked or ignored.

To create decent workplaces for all, both women and men should be represented in trade unions and other organizational structures. Since women's representation continues to be low in trade unions and leadership positions in enterprises, the Government should introduce temporary measures to ensure women's fair representation. It is also vital to identify women's association or trade union leaders at different factories. They could mentor other women, both union members and workers, incentivizing them to actively participate in union activities and pursue leadership positions.



**RECOMMENDATION 7: Ensure women's access to training as part of lifelong learning.**

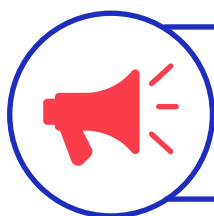
Different types of training are offered by a range of stakeholders in Bangladesh. The Government, with development partners' assistance, has taken a comprehensive, long-term approach to

<sup>17</sup>In accordance with the Bangladesh Labour Act Amendment 2013 and the adoption of the Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015. For more information, see: Better Work, *An Industry and Compliance Review: Bangladesh*, 2019.

supporting skills development in various sectors, including ready-made garments, through the Skills for Employment Investment Programme (SEIP). This programme offers 15 types of courses to strengthen the capacities of workers and mid-level managers. Many private training institutions offer courses on RMG operations, and a number of individual factories provide in-house training facilities on operational processes and safety issues. These examples demonstrate how enterprises can leverage existing solutions to enhance the skills of their workers, and better adapt to technological change.

As companies upgrade and adopt new technologies, they should invest in on-the-job training to enhance the skills of men and women workers. Designing appropriate machine layouts and working methods, paired with teaching workers new techniques and how to operate new machines, can increase productivity and efficiency, while reducing production costs. Training programmes should be designed in ways that ensure access for women by considering their family responsibilities and work-life balance. The Government should also promote workers' access to skills training that enables RMG workers to transition successfully to other economic sectors, without falling into poverty.

New training programmes should be designed that respond to the assessed needs of participants. Enterprise owners should accord time – and, if possible, financial support – for workers' capacity development. Factories should strengthen in-house training facilities to accommodate more women, such as by adding resting spaces for pregnant women, or breastfeeding spaces in the workplace. Training curricula should match the level of education of women participants.



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**RECOMMENDATION 8: Promote non-discrimination practices, including by raising awareness on unconscious bias among human resources staff and managers, to advance gender equality at the enterprise level.**

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While this study did not investigate the practices and perceptions of human resources staff and managers in RMG factories, women's limited representation in leadership roles indicates that more must be done to advance gender equality and non-discrimination in the world of work. The fact that women managers tend to be more qualified may indicate that women have to work harder, and pursue higher education, than men. It may also suggest that men continue to be selected as managers more often than women due to gender stereotypes and bias – men may be seen to be 'better suited' for managerial positions than women, however well-qualified. As such, employers and managers need to be aware of unconscious bias and proactively apply fair practices.

Employers' organizations and international organizations should consider training human resources staff and managers on what constitutes discrimination. Efforts to promote a stronger understanding of gender equality practices should also identify challenges to implementing equality measures, and ways to overcome these challenges. Relevant international standards

should be promoted in these processes, such as the ILO's Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), the Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100), the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183), and the Night Work Convention (No. 171), among others.



**RECOMMENDATION 9: Promote regular dialogue on addressing challenges and set realistic production targets that allow enterprises to ensure decent work for all workers.**

Production targets are often unrealistic, which causes work-related stress and sometimes prompts workers to change factories or leave the RMG sector altogether. To meet targets, managers often use verbal abuse as a mechanism for disciplining employees. While this report does not recommend abandoning production quotas, it suggests that buyers and enterprises should take into account what workers can realistically produce in a day, pay more overtime to incentivize workers, and apply other measures be used in conjunction. Abuse is never acceptable, and it diminishes productivity and profitability over time.

Manufacturers and brands can work together to create a more positive, inclusive and productive working environment, free from abuse and harassment. To this end, regular dialogue among buyers, enterprises, employers' and workers' organizations and the Government, is required to discuss challenges and implement joint measures to address them.



**RECOMMENDATION 10: Promote and ensure workers' access to affordable, quality childcare facilities.**

Companies should ensure that childcare facilities in factories are functional and meet international safety and health standards. Childcare facilities must comply with the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, particularly section 94, which states:

*In every establishment, where 40 (forty) or more female workers are ordinarily employed, one or more suitable rooms shall be provided and maintained for the use of their children who are under the age of 6 (six) years. These rooms will provide adequate accommodation, must have adequate lighting, ventilated and maintained in a clean and sanitary condition, and will be under the charge of women trained or experienced in childcare.<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> Government of Bangladesh, *Bangladesh Labour Act*, 2006.

New childcare programmes can be based on existing practices, including the Mothers@Work Programme, an initiative by UNICEF and Better Work Bangladesh, which strengthens maternity rights and supports breastfeeding in the workplace.<sup>19</sup> Other models of childcare facilities worth exploring include community-based day care facilities for factory employees.<sup>20</sup>



**RECOMMENDATION 11: Promote affordable housing and transportation for all workers.**

Affordable housing and transportation would reduce stress levels and contribute to a safer environment for workers to live, commute and work in. One potential option is for the Government to create transport and housing facilities, or to adopt policies that encourage companies to do so.

<sup>19</sup> International Finance Corporation, *Tackling Childcare: The Business Benefits and Challenges of Employer-Supported Childcare in Bangladesh*, 2019; ILO, *Asia-Pacific Employment Social Outlook*, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.





# Recommendation matrix

Sl.	Recommendation	Responsible actors	Recommended steps for key actors
<b>Issue: Fair share of women's representation in the RMG sector</b>			
1.	The Government and employers' and workers' organizations should discuss, design and implement stronger measures to realize a fair share of women's representation in the RMG sector, alongside accountability mechanisms to increase women's representation in higher level positions.	Government, Ministry of Labour and Employment  Buyers, brands	The Government should introduce minimum standards and take measures to ensure women's representation in the RMG sector.  International buyers may consider only signing business contracts with enterprises that meet gender equality standards (e.g. the fair representation of women in managerial or supervisory positions, the existence of a sexual harassment policy, the implementation of maternity protection measures, the smooth operation of childcare facilities, etc.).
<b>Issue: Safe pregnancy and maternity benefits at the workplace</b>			
2.	The Government and employers' and workers' organizations should discuss, design and implement stronger measures to ensure the implementation of maternity protection.	Government, employers' and workers' organizations	Develop and implement measures to ensure that all parties are accountable for the effective implementation of maternity protection measures (e.g. transferring pregnant workers to safer jobs, providing maternity leave, preventing job loss due to pregnancy, etc.).
<b>Issue: Workplace culture free from violence and harassment</b>			
3.	Promote a workplace culture free from violence and harassment by raising awareness about unacceptable behaviour and introducing stricter measures to address violence and harassment in the world of work.	RMG industry, enterprise owners and managers, workers' organizations	Enterprise owners and workers' organizations should ensure workers' access to assistance and recourse to justice when they experience violence or harassment.
4.	The Government should develop legislation that criminalizes violence and harassment in the world of work, including gender-based violence and sexual harassment, in line with the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190).	Government, Ministry of Labour and Employment, relevant line ministries	Effectively devise and implement legislation that criminalizes violence and harassment, especially sexual harassment in the workplace, to promote and protect the rights of all workers.
<b>Issue: Health Insurance and pensions</b>			
5.	The Government, employers' and workers' organizations should strive to ensure workers' access to health insurance, pensions and social protection.	Government, employers' and workers' organizations, RMG enterprises	Tripartite constituents should initiate discussions to design and implement measures for ensuring workers' access to health insurance and pensions – including after they leave the RMG sector.
<b>Issue: Women's participation in trade union</b>			
6.	Increase workers' – especially women's – participation in associations, and ensure that trade unions and participation committees enhance women's participation and address their concerns.	Government, trade unions, women trade unions leaders	Ensure women's participation in trade unions and increase women's representation in leadership positions at the enterprise levels. Encourage existing women leaders, union members and workers to take on more active roles.



Sl.	Recommendation	Responsible actors	Recommended steps for key actors
<b>Issue: Access to training and skills</b>			
7.	Ensure women's access to training as part of lifelong learning.	Government, RMG sector, factory owners	<p>Introduce training programmes to help workers to adapt to changing technologies and improve their productivity.</p> <p>Organize training programmes in a ways that enable women's participation by taking into account their family responsibilities and work-life balance.</p> <p>Continue the long-term, comprehensive approach to supporting skills development in the RMG sector through the Skills for Employment Investment Programme (SEIP).</p>
8.	Promote non-discrimination practices, including by raising awareness on unconscious bias among human resources staff and managers, to advance gender equality at the enterprise level.	Employers' organizations, international organizations	<p>Employers' and international organizations should train human resources staff and managers to improve their understanding of gender equality practices and workplace discrimination.</p> <p>Address challenges to implementing gender equality measures.</p>
<b>Issue: Encouraging social dialogue</b>			
9.	Companies should engage in regular dialogue on addressing challenges – with the support of the Government, and employers' and workers' organizations – and setting realistic production targets that allow enterprises to ensure decent work for all workers.	Manufacturers and brands, RMG sector	Manufacturers and brands should work together to create a more positive, inclusive and productive working environment, free from abuse and harassment, through tripartite discussions.
<b>Issue: Housing, transportation and childcare facilities</b>			
10.	Promote and ensure workers' access to affordable, quality childcare facilities.	Government, employers' organizations	Companies should ensure functional childcare facilities that are compliant with the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, and are based on existing good models such as the Mothers@Work Programme, an initiative by UNICEF and Better Work Bangladesh.
11.	Promote affordable housing and transportation for all workers.	Government, relevant line ministries	The Government should build affordable housing and transport facilities for workers, or adopt policies that encourage companies to do so.



# ► Annexes

## Annex 1. Sample frameworks

**ANNEX 1 TABLE 1. Quantitative study framework**

Sample	Information sought	Notes
<b>260 ready-made garment factories that have been in production for at least five years, based on the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association's (BGMEA) list of factories by type of product (woven, knitwear and sweaters) and region of operation</b>	<p>(i) Basic characteristics of the factories (production, exports and imports, workplace compliance, etc.)</p> <p>(ii) Composition of production and non-production workers (number of workers by age cohorts, salary grades and working sections, etc.)</p> <p>(iii) Upgrading of technologies (types of machineries, e.g. manually operated or automatic, and consequences of upgrading technology on employment, etc.).</p>	<p>The BGMEA provided a list of 620 RMG factories broken down by types (woven, knitwear and sweater). The quantitative study conducted a survey of a sample of 260 enterprises. Two separate questionnaires were used: one for management, and another for workers.</p> <p>According to the BGMEA, 4,621 garment factories were members of the association in 2018–2019.</p>
<b>553 workers (285 women and 268 men)</b>	<p>(i) Basic characteristics of workers</p> <p>(ii) Factors that motivated work in the RMG sector, and challenges faced when seeking work in the sector</p> <p>(iii) Workplace safety and benefits</p> <p>(iv) Worker satisfaction, women's empowerment, future career plans, etc.</p>	

**ANNEX 1 TABLE 2. Number of sample enterprises and workers in four locations**

Area	Number of sample factories				Number of sample workers (men/women)			
	Woven	Knitwear	Sweaters	Total	Woven	Knitwear	Sweaters	Total
<b>Dhaka</b>	59	48	12	119	143 (65/78)	89 (53/36)	28 (18/13)	260 (133/127)
<b>Gazipur</b>	41	26	8	75	85 (32/53)	70 (35/35)	10 (5/5)	165 (72/93)
<b>Narayanganj</b>	12	9	3	24	19 (8/11)	20 (10/10)	4 (3/1)	43 (21/22)
<b>Chittagong</b>	21	17	4	42	44 (24/20)	35 (15/20)	6 (3/3)	85 (42/43)
<b>Total</b>	133	100	27	260	291 (129/162)	214 (113/101)	48 (26/22)	553 (268/285)

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Enterprise level survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**ANNEX 1 TABLE 3. Size of sample enterprises**

Size distribution	Woven	Knitwear and sweaters	Total
Small (<=500)	20 (15.0%)	32 (25.2%)	52 (20.0%)
Medium (501-1000)	25 (18.8%)	33 (26.0%)	58 (22.3%)
Large (1000+)	88 (66.2%)	62 (48.8%)	150 (57.7%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>133 (51.2%)</b>	<b>127 (48.8%)</b>	<b>260 (100%)</b>

Source: ILO and UN Women, "Enterprise level survey", *Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*, 2018.

**ANNEX 1 TABLE 4. Qualitative study framework**

Source of information	Details	Information sought
<b>Five focus group discussions (FGDs) with former RMG workers</b>	On an average there were 16 participants per FGD. In total, 80 people (40 women and 40 men) who used to work in the RMG sector in Dhaka, Gazipur and Rangpur participated in the discussions.	Key factors that promoted workers to leave jobs in the RMG sector; their lives outside work; and how their lives compare before and after leaving the sector.
<b>Six in-depth interviews</b>	Six women who used to work in the RMG sector were interviewed, each of whom has roughly 10 years of experience in the sector.	Stories of former RMG workers, including factors that motivated them to join the sector; their lives and working environments within the sector; and their lives after leaving the sector.
<b>Questionnaire-based survey of former RMG workers</b>	80 former RMG workers were surveyed (40 women and 40 men).	Current socio-economic information on FGD participants, and their experiences and insights on why they – or other RMG workers – may leave the sector.
<b>Fourteen key informant interviews with academics, RMG enterprise owners, members of employers' organizations, and workers' union leaders</b>	14 key informant interviews (KIIs) explored perspectives on why women workers are increasingly leaving the RMG sector.	Respondents' views on the impact of technological advancements on gender-related aspects of employment, wage increases, the increase in male workers, and the hardships posed by the dual burden of household responsibilities and factory work on women, etc.

**ANNEX 1 TABLE 5. Number of focus group participants (former RMG workers) by area and gender**

Area	Men	Women	Total
Dhaka (Ashulia)	2	5	7
Gazipur	8	22	30
Rangpur	30	13	43
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>80</b>



## Annex 2. Case studies

The cases in this annex were collected through in-depth interviews conducted for this study.

### CASE STUDY 1 REZEKA

Rezeka is a 32-year-old retired ready-made garment worker who now lives in Moktarpara, Rangpur. Between 2002 and 2015, she worked as a folding worker in seven different garment factories. Her husband also worked in the RMG sector as an iron man. When she started working, Rezeka earned BDT 2,000 each month, which rose to BDT 7,500 at the time of her retirement.

For their first five years in the RMG sector, Rezeka and her husband worked at a garment factory in Narayanganj while living in a small room rented for BDT 600 per month. Overall, life was very difficult. With no one to look after their children in Narayanganj while the couple worked, and without a suitable environment for them to live in, their children had to remain in their village. When it rained, latrine water would seep into their room. Leeches thrived in the polluted water and once, when a small snake entered the room, Rezeka fainted. Ten families shared a single bathroom and kitchen, with long queues for both. Every day, Rezeka woke up at 5 a.m., joining the kitchen queue to cook for herself and her husband. Only much later, a few years before leaving her job, Rezeka and her husband moved to a tiny two-room apartment. While it cost them a significant proportion of their salaries, their children were finally able to live with them.

Rezeka experienced intense pressure at her jobs in garment factories. She worked overtime until 10 p.m. most days. The slightest mistake would unleash a torrent of verbal, or sometimes physical, abuse from supervisors. In general, Rezeka describes her supervisors as 'very inconsiderate'.

"I started working at the garment factory in order to fulfil my family's basic necessities, but was a victim of verbal and physical abuse most of the time."

"It is disappointing that supervisors indirectly force workers to quit their job if they become pregnant or old. Even if they are eligible and willing to work, they tend to de-motivate them."

– Rezeka, former RMG worker

Most factories paid workers overtime and bonuses. Rezeka recalls that one enterprise provided free meals, once a day, for all of their workers. However, the treatment of pregnant workers tended to be poor. If Rezeka felt unwell during pregnancy, she found it difficult to take leave. One factory was reluctant to let her join after taking maternity leave, prompting her temporarily quit work. During her last pregnancy, Rezeka asked the factory's management to reduce her workload, as it was affecting her health. They refused to listen and forced her to resign. Hurt by this mistreatment, Rezeka decided to end her career and settle in her village.

Rezeka's life has become less hectic after leaving the RMG sector. She is relieved not to have to pay high rents or wake up early to queue for shared cooking or bathing facilities. With her savings, she has built her own house and spends most of her days growing crops and vegetables. However, she believes that she was more financially stable working in the RMG sector and is searching for an appropriate opportunity to return to Dhaka. Rezeka feels that if RMG factories provided insurance or pensions for workers with over 15 years of experience, it would hugely benefit people like her.

## CASE STUDY 2 SHILA RANI DAS

Shila Rani Das worked in the ready-made garment sector for 30 years (1983–2013). Since retiring, the 48-year-old lives in Kartol Hindupara, Gazipur, with her daughter and husband, Nantu Sardar, who was also a garment worker.

Shila Rani joined the sector after her father suffered an accident, obliging her to earn a living. The house she lived in as a garment worker was extremely packed. Fifteen families shared the same kitchen and bathroom. To cook and bathe before leaving for work, she had to wake up at 4 a.m. every day.

"If we are capable of producing 100 items per day, then even if we force workers to produce 200 items it will not be humanly possible for them, they can at least produce an additional 50. Verbal or physical abuse will only de-motivate them and affect the working environment."

– Shila Rani Das,  
former RMG worker



Thanks to Shila's strong work ethic, she was quickly promoted to the position of sewing operator and, within the first four years of her working life, she became a trade union leader. During her career, she experienced extensive verbal abuse from factory supervisors, often for the slightest mistake. As a sewing operator in two factories, she was obliged to take on night shifts – the long working hours proved especially hard. If workers failed to meet production targets, their salaries were cut.

Once, she witnessed a supervisor punishing a pregnant co-worker, forcing her to work while standing on one leg. Unable to tolerate this abuse, Shila took her co-worker to the management to lodge a complaint. Ironically, both of them were fired for complaining, while no one was reprimanded for the severe punishment inflicted on a pregnant worker. When Shila was pregnant herself, she did not ask for any leave when she felt weak, knowing that she may be fired or forced to quit.

Once Shila Rani became a supervisor, she was expected to mistreat workers like other supervisors did. They would tell her that “you wouldn't be able to make the girls work if you don't misbehave with them” – that was their policy. However, Shila Rani was determined not to put unnecessary pressure on her workers. She knew that abusive behaviour fundamentally saps workers' motivation.

A few months before her retirement, she noticed that many young women who had recently joined the factory were made supervisors and sometimes received a higher salary than she did. She found that managers preferred younger women as supervisors as they deemed them 'more energetic' and 'livelier'. Stung by this implicit prejudice against older workers, Shila Rani decided to retire after 30 years in the sector.

Now, Shila lives in her own house with two rooms and a bathroom – built with the money she saved after a lifetime in the RMG sector. While Shila and her family live in one room, they rent out the other for BDT 1,500 per month.

Although her life has not been easy, Shila Rani is grateful to the RMG sector for enabling her to earn everything she has now. She was able to marry off her daughter well and build her own home. However, she believes that the RMG sector should arrange for pensions or health care for retired workers who, like her, have dedicated their lives to the sector.





## CASE STUDY 3 ATIKA BEGUM

For ten years, from 2006 to 2016, Atika worked in the ready-made garment sector. Now 30 years old and retired, she lives with her husband, Abdur Razzak – also a garment worker with 12 years of experience – and their two daughters, in Uttor Kholeya, Rangpur.

Atika initially joined a garment factory to provide for her family. Starting her career as a ‘poly-man’ with a salary of BDT 900, she rose through the ranks – from a sewing helper to an operator with a salary of BDT 7,000, including overtime.

In her decade-long career, she worked at three different factories. Each working day lasted 12 hours, from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. under high-powered light bulbs. Overtime meant even longer hours. Often, she had to work through the night to supply shipments, without being allowed take leave the next day.

During their time in the RMG sector, Atika lived in a room with her husband in a 24-room building. She describes it as ‘no less than a living hell’ as the building’s residents shared a single kitchen and bathroom. There were times when she would only eat one slice of bread a day.

When she became pregnant, she was granted maternity leave. Her factory had a day care centre, but it was overcrowded, unhygienic environment and had one aya [maid] to look after the children. As a result, Atika’s daughter remained with their extended family in her village. Both Atika and her husband faced verbal abuse and ill health, forcing her husband to undergo an operation to treat work-related injuries. When illness prevented him from working, management did not grant him compensation or leave. Both he and Atika were forced to resign. Disappointed, the couple decided to move back to their village.

Atika is happy to have made the move. She relishes not having to wake up before dawn to queue and cook before work. Her chronic headaches have subsided.

“Both I and my husband worked for over 10 years at the garment factory, but didn’t gain anything. We wasted our valuable time, money and gave a lot of effort for literally nothing. In return, both of us had severe health issues and had to spend a lot of money for our treatment.”

– Atika Begum,  
former RMG worker

She has taken out a loan to buy a van for her husband, and has planted vegetables in her house. Her husband provides for the family while she contributes a modest income selling vegetables in the local market. Atika is grateful that they decided to leave the RMG sector and move back to their village. While they remain poor, they are satisfied with what they have, mentally at peace and leading a happy life.

## CASE STUDY 4 ANOWARA BEGUM

Anowara Begum and her husband worked in the RMG sector for 10 years between 2003 and 2013. Now retired, 33-year-old Anowara lives with her husband and son in Moktarpara, Rangpur.

When she began work in the sector, she moved to Narayanganj where she and her husband lived in a room in a single-storey building – home to 20 families, with a shared bathroom and kitchen. As these facilities were far away from her room, she found it difficult to meet her basic needs, such as cooking or bathing.

Anowara initially joined the sector as a ‘checker’ in a t-shirt factory, with a monthly salary of BDT 1,500. Work was exceptionally hectic; she was required to check 300 t-shirts every hour. For the first five years, her salary did not increase at all. Eventually, she earned up to BDT 3,000 every month, including overtime and annual two bonuses. She joined a community of 11 women who used to deposit money each month to help them in times of need.

When she moved to another factory with a higher salary, her workload was even greater and she was routinely subjected to verbal and psychological abuse.

“Life would have been much better and stable if I had given the same amount of time and effort in my home in the village, instead of working in the garment factories.”

“No matter how much benefit the factory provides, there is no consideration for the workload. I have witnessed many workers going through a miscarriage while working in the factory because of excessive workload, so I didn’t want to take any risk and decided to settle in the village.”

– Anowara Begum,  
former RMG sector worker

Supervisors would not allow workers to sit, or even go to the washroom. During shipment, Anowara recalls having to stand for 24 hours while doing her work. Once when she took 'too long' to return from the washroom, the supervisor made her do sit ups holding her ears, and beat her up in front of everyone else. While this abuse devastated Anowara, she saw no avenue for recourse. Her factory had a medical centre where doctors provided medicines for workers, but they never suggested a short leave even when workers were seriously ill.

Unable to tolerate a torturous working environment, Anowara moved to another factory. Despite a similarly high workload, workers in this factory received daily meals, regular medical check-ups and an amount to cover 'conveyance costs'. Anowara eventually quit her job when she became pregnant. By the time she retired, she earned BDT 4,000 per month.

Using her savings, Anowara built her own home in her village, spent money for her child's health care, bought a cow and a van for her husband's livelihood. She continues to contribute to the family's income by rearing poultry. However, years of factory work have affected her health, and she does not have sufficient money for treatment. She highlights the need for health insurance policies for workers after retirement – an important consideration for both enterprises and the Government. Although they have relatively little money, Anowara is happy to have settled in her village and is unwilling to return to the hectic life she has left behind.

## **CASE STUDY 5 LIPI RANI MOHONTO**

Lipi Rani Mohonto quit her job in the RMG sector after suffering a miscarriage. The 23-year-old's decision to retire at an early age was not an easy one; her life has been filled with hardship.

Born in Syedpur, Nilfamari, Lipi Rani arrived in the city at the age of 13 with her heavily indebted family. Her father became a rickshaw puller and her mother started work at a nearby garment factory. It took Lipi a long time to adjust to city food, which was a world away from her village diet. She would often go an entire day without eating properly, affecting her health and leaving her weak. While her younger brother was sent to school, both Lipi and her elder sister Radha decided to join the RMG sector. With the help of a neighbour, the sisters started work in a t-shirt factory in 2013.

At first they worked as 'helpers', from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. with little overtime, earning BDT 2,500 each month. Lipi and her sister moved from their family's tiny single room – with little space for five people – to two rooms in a more secure neighbourhood. While it cost BDT 2,300 to rent per month, as Hindus they preferred the security of their new neighbourhood. Within a few months, Lipi developed jaundice. She became aware of her condition after a check-up in the factory's pharmacy. Unable to afford proper treatment, she remained at home during her illness. Rather than helping her, the factory deducted sick days from her salary.

"If the garment factories were more supportive towards the workers who are pregnant, then a lot of woman like me wouldn't have to go through the trauma of miscarriage or leave their work at such a young age."

"We have always been working at the factory through its thick and thin, but why doesn't the factory support us when we are in need?"

– Lipi Rani Mohonto,  
former RMG sector worker

Despite Lipi's initial lack of confidence, both she and her sister gained respect at the factory through their hard work and humble character. While Lipi continued working after she married, her newly married sister decided to leave the factory and live with her in-laws in Barisal. In time, the factory's working environment began to deteriorate, especially when Lipi became pregnant and grew visibly weak. She worked slowly and was not able to fulfill production targets. Supervisors who had once appreciated her work became verbally abusive, lashing out at her for the slightest mistake. Required to sew 300 pieces every day during her pregnancy, Lipi was not allowed to take leave or breaks if she fell ill.

One day, the pressure reached boiling point. She was putting 450 pieces in the store when her supervisor shouted at her for being slow. Panicked, she tried to hurry up; in a rush, she fell on the ground with all the materials she was carrying. She screamed in unbearable pain and lost consciousness. The next thing Lipi knew,, she had lost her baby.

The miscarriage haunted Lipi, prompting her to quit her job. "If the production was 200 pieces instead of 300 that time," she laments, "or if I could at least sit for two hours or if they took me to the hospital quickly that day, then I wouldn't have to face all this." Lipi continued to work for some time after the tragedy, before she and her husband decided to settle in their village. She now lives in Uttar Kheluya, Gazipur, with her husband, Shubroto Mohonto, and her in-laws. They live in a small house in the village, eating from their vegetable garden. Her husband drives a van to sustain the family; most of their income is spent on treatment for Lipi's health problems. She spends time with children in the village and hopes to have a child of her own. She does not plan to return to the RMG sector until after she becomes a mother.





## CASE STUDY 6 KHALEDA BEGUM

Khaleda Begum is a retired ready-made garment worker who lives in Lashkarpara, Rangpur, with her children and mother-in-law. The 44-year-old retired after 11 years in the sector, from 1998 to 2009. Her husband, Rafiqul Islam, continues to work as a security guard in a garment factory in Dhaka and sends her a small sum every month.

Khaleda and her sister were the first girls in her village to take intermediate exams in 1993. While she wanted to pursue a teaching career at the Brac School, her in-laws disapproved. Instead, she decided to take up work in a garment factory.

Her experience differs from that of other garment workers; keen to leave behind an unhappy life in her village, Khaleda was relieved to move to the city. She and her husband rented a small, window-less room for BDT 500 each month. With 25 similar rooms in the building, she had to wake up at 4 a.m. every morning day to cook and prepare for work.

Despite these hardships, Khaleda was glad to live her life on her own terms, free from her in-laws' disapproval and free to buy 'proper food' with her salary.

Both Khaleda and her husband joined a factory that produced sweaters as 'helpers' in Dhaka, earning BDT 2,500 per month. They were not entitled to overtime or paid leave. Unlike most of her co-workers, who were illiterate or had only completed their primary education, college-educated Khaleda was treated with respect and affection by other workers.

During her first pregnancy, she was granted unpaid maternity leave. The factory's day care centre enabled her to return to work, safe in the knowledge that her daughter would be looked after during working hours. However, during her second pregnancy, her husband convinced her to return to their village. She regards this as a terrible mistake, trapping her with in an unhappy life with her in-laws. Nevertheless, using her savings from her RMG career, she was able to build a house in the village.

"The government officials work for the country and they get pensions and other services, but I have contributed to the development of my county for 10 long years and brought money from abroad; then why am I not getting any pension or healthcare facilities?"

- Khaleda Begum,  
former RMG sector worker

In poor health, Khaleda believes in the need for pensions or health benefits for workers who have given over a decade of their lives to the RMG sector. As she raises her children in her village, Khaleda struggles with poverty every day, barely able to afford food for her household. She feels that her life would be much better if she remained a factory worker, rather than settling in her village.

## CASE STUDY 7 TANIA

Junior operator Tania spends her days making clothes for renowned international brands. Since May 2018, the 29-year-old has earned BDT 6,300 each month, working six days a week, with one day off every alternate Friday. She has worked in the ready-made garment sector for nearly six years.

Tania, her husband and their two children live in a small room, with brick walls and a tin roof, in Kazi Market, Gazipur. The environment is congested and ridden with mosquitoes. Although the family pays BDT 2,000 in rent per month, they share two toilets and a kitchen with four other families. She wakes up at 5 a.m. every day to cook and get ready for work, before walking 20 minutes to the factory. Tania is only able to go as a neighbour takes care of her children while she is at work.

Pressure at the garment factory tends to be extreme. Each worker is given a nearly impossible target to meet each day. As a junior operator, Tania joins the sleeves of t-shirts. While it is only humanly possible to join 70–80 sleeves per hour, she is regularly given targets of joining 100 sleeves every hour. These intense demands prevent workers from taking any breaks, even to go to the toilet, thereby harming their health. If Tania cannot meet a target, the supervisor subjects her to verbal and sometimes makes her stand in front of everyone else, embarrassing and insulting her.

“If I cannot finish the target any day, the supervisor makes me stand in front of everyone as a punishment or takes me in his room and verbally abuses me. I feel very embarrassed and bad about myself while standing in front of everyone.”

– Tania, RMG sector worker

Every worker is obliged to work overtime, regardless of whether they want to. They are rarely given a choice. After her regular work day, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tania is regularly forced to work until 8 p.m. If workers cannot fulfill a given target during overtime, they are forcibly made to meet the target in addition to their target for the next day, doubling their workload. During shipment periods, working hours are even longer; Tania routinely works until 10 p.m. or later.

Reluctant to return home alone at night, she usually asks her husband to pick her up from work. She says that it is extremely unsafe unmarried women workers to return home alone at night, as local men tend to disturb and follow them.

Supervisors tend to dislike pregnant workers, regarding them as 'slow'. Many coerce workers to quit their jobs. During Tania's pregnancy, she was granted maternity leave of three months and 14 days. After returning to work, it was extremely challenging to work overtime, until 10 p.m. every night, leaving her 3-month-old son at home. If she wanted to go home or take a leave, the supervisor would say, *"As you are always so concerned about your children and asking for a leave, why don't you just quit your job and take care of your family at home?"*

When her son was six months old, Tania left the factory. After a year and a half, she joined another enterprise, with a lower salary. With her current income, Tania is unable to save for the future. Most of her salary is spent on food, rent and basic needs. She is barely able to afford meat for her family, opting instead for cheap fish and vegetables. She estimates that, if her salary were increased to BDT 15,000, she would be able to afford an education and proper nutritious food for her children. She would be able to buy her son a bicycle that he so desperately wants. Tired of her supervisors' relentless verbal abuse, Tania plans to leave her job one day, when her husband's business becomes more stable.





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