

Workplace Safety in the Garments Sector of Bangladesh: Challenges and Measures

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Abstract: Workplace safety is a very significant issue for every institution and that phenomenon is much more critical in the garment sector. The current study aimed at investigating the safety issues in the garments sector of Bangladesh. Qualitative research approach was selected as the avenue for the study. Data were collected through in-depth interview taken from 10 key employees of 10 garments factory of Dhaka Division. The findings shows that workplace safety is concerned to a large number issues which are mainly connected to the building structure, equipment settings, fire safety, physical and mental health safety etc. It was found that most of the compliance factories generally maintain the common safety issues though maximum small garment factories do no maintain a minimum safety standard. It was recommended that government authorities, BGMEA, garment owners, management as well as the workers should be more cordial and conscious to follow the workplace safety protocols.

Keywords: Workplace safety, garments, compliance

INTRODUCTION

Garments sector of Bangladesh plays a key role regarding the overall economic development of the country and this sector is growing very fast with great achievement (Rahman & Hossain, 2010). Recently, Bangladesh has expanded its exports of RMG to a number of new countries like Korea, Australia, Russia and Japan that indicates the immense prospects of this field (BGMEA, 2016). Due to the continuous growth of the garments industry, a large number of people are getting job opportunity on regular basis and according to the report of BKMEA (2018), this number is more than four million. Along with the success rate of this sector, it is also facing some disastrous incidents as well with the death and injury of thousands of workers and the core reasons are unawareness and unwillingness of workplace safety issues that specially refers to individuals' comfort, protection and wellbeing (Huda, 2016). According to WHO (2010), the reputation and widening of an industry depends on the workers' safety and health issues. It is also evident that safe and hygienic workplace works a very significant catalyst to increase gross production of an industry (Morillas et al., 2013; Robson et al., 2016; Harvey & Gavigan 2014). A number of incidents affected the reputation and production of the garments sector of Bangladesh including the fall down of Spectrum factory in 2005 ruining the life of 64 workers,

severe fire incidents of Tazreen fashion causing the deaths of more than 300 workers, severe collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013 with the killing of more than thousands of people etc. (Nawaz et al., 2019; Greet De & Prentice, 2017; Paul & Rocha, 2017). According to the recent report of the Bangladesh Fire Service and Civil Defense (2021), among all the reputed export related garments factories, a notable number faced fire incidents in recent years and that percentage increased in 2020-2021 (BILS, 2021). All these incidents had immense impact on the garments of Bangladesh affecting top to bottom connected to this sector (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2014; Ashraf & Prentice, 2019). As a result, several initiatives have been taken such as Accord on fire and building safety (Accord), Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance), the National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA) on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity to keep the factories and workers safe from these kind of serious incidents (Labowitz & Baumann-Pauly, 2014; Ansary & Barua 2015). For ensuring workplace safety, it is the duty of the authority to inspect the issues that can make any hazard situation or be the reason of workers' injury or ill health (Pellicer et al., 2009). Even, the workers should be aware of their duty regarding the safety measure when they are working with different machineries and tools (Dembe et al., 2005).

LITERATURE REVIEW

There have already been conducted a number of research in the field of workplace safety in home and abroad though the specific study in the arena of the garment sector of Bangladesh is not sufficient. This section of the study has dealt with the review of a number of existing literatures in the respective field. ILO (2015) reported that garments sector of Bangladesh is facing great risk regarding the safety issues and health issues compared to some other countries of the world. It is also mentioned that there is a notable history of different kinds of accidents in the garments sector of Bangladesh since very beginning because of the fatal condition of structural and legal procedures. According to Zin and Ismail (2012), Rules and regulations for workplace security and health maintenance should be practice all over the world and these phenomena mainly connected to the institutional working environment and style, workload, production, structure etc. Hansen and Tickner (2007) mentioned that the higher authority of every factory/company should give much importance on the safety issues from themselves and that should be maintained by their active involvement with cordiality though there are many factories where the top management are very much careless about the health and safety issues of the workers. Authorities should be strict to the process of the workplace safety measures. If they can truly collaborate with the factory management then there must be created a good practice of safety culture. Such practice can truly decrease the number of accidents at workplace and make the workers feel safe during working (Friis, 2014). According to Wachter and Yorio (2013), workplace safe procedure can easily indicate how the factory is capable to make the employees assigned for respective works and how they will accomplish those tasks. Muschara (2013) suggested that the organizations can apply different tools to detect the errors that can lead the workers to any accidents as well as the employees should be well trained to take wise decision if there is any kind of safety issue. Goelzer et al. (2001) advocated for the sufficient lighting in the work area as well as to keep the whole working area calm to make the environment safe and healthy for the workers. According to Shikdar and Sawaqed (2003), all kind of basic facilities for emergency medical support should be available with the full-time doctor and nurse support as well as minimum updated first aid support should be kept in every floor of the factory. Khan (2020) opined that though a great number of factories are setting fire and other safety equipment at workplace, the degree of maintenance is weak in most of the cases and there are not much efficient people to handle that equipment. According to Samaddar (2016), garments sector of Bangladesh is the biggest issue for the overall economic development of the country though the workers who are the key player there are deprived of so many rights specially, they do not get standard safety and treatment at their workplace and the incident of Rana Plaza, Tazrin Fashions etc. are the true evidence of this. Such kind of issues really lower the capacity of the workers at workplace.

OBJECTIVES

- a) To investigate the issues related to workplace safety in the garments sector of Bangladesh
- b) To find out the challenges regarding the workplace safety in the garments sector of Bangladesh
- c) To recommend guidelines for initiating and implementing sufficient workplace safety measures in the garments sector of Bangladesh

METHODOLOGY

Based on the objectives and the background of the current study, qualitative research approach was applied to conduct the study. Qualitative data were collected through in-depth interview of 10 key employees from ten garments factory of Dhaka Division, Bangladesh. As well as another focus was given on the existing literatures including dissertation, papers, articles, expert opinion etc. in the respective field.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Almost all the participants of the study mentioned similar issues intensively connected to workplace safety in the garments sector of Bangladesh. Regarding the complete safety protocols, they mentioned some segments that include individual physical and psychological safety maintenance, Building structure, fire safety as well as health safety. Regarding the individual safety maintenance, they mentioned some significant points that should be given much importance. Those phenomena are concerned to wearing relevant dress or additional things for the enough protection of the finger, eyes, respiratory tract and other key parts of the body that can get connected to any risky part of a machine. They said that each garment factory uses some machineries and tools that should be operated very professionally otherwise the operators may be seriously injured in some cases that often happens when an operator does not follow safety measure deliberately or be subconscious or unconscious while working.

For psychological safety, they talked on working environment, salary and other benefits, weekly holidays, working hour, recreational activities, availability of baby care center, sexual abusing etc. Systematic management of these phenomena can motivate a worker for his highest effort. Some participants shared that the workers mainly work for money and when they do not get proper wage, they feel unsecured and even in some cases they feel unsecured regarding the continuation of work. Friendly working environment make them feel energetic and if they have some recreational involvement, they feel relax at the workplace that improve their positive feelings. One of the participants importantly disclosed that in some cases, female workers are abused by their immediate seniors and by the co-workers even though nowadays most of the factories deal the issue very seriously. Other participants said that most of the factories does not have baby care center that make the mothers anxious about their babies kept in some other places. One of the participants unfolded another important issue that when a mother does not get maternity leave with pay, she really falls in serious trouble and that kind of practice is very common in many garment factories in Bangladesh.

Regarding the building structure, they emphasized over regular building code, space, ventilation, number of stairs, collapsible gate, lighting facility, doors facility etc. Most of the participants opines that building structure is a big issue for workplace safety because when a building is built without proper building code it may collapse easily not only because of natural disaster but also for the use of heavy machineries. They said that in most of the cases the number of death and injury increases because of unavailability of more space, sufficient number of stairs and doors. Even in some cases collapsible gate and the exit of the stairs are locked and the person to open this is unavailable that make much hazard during any accident

For fire safety issues, they mentioned some points including the availability of fire distinguishers, management of all kind of chemicals, condition of electric lines, training on fire safety, maintenance of generator and boiler, smoking inside the factory, fire safety equipment, fire exit root etc. Most of

them said that it is the most significant issue for a garment factory to maintain all kind of fire safety with proper maintenance because every factory deal with such things that can be the reasons of more fire accident is there is any kind of mismanagement. Specially, most of the cases fire originates from faulty electric line and that get much furious when it gets connected to reserved chemical of the factory and in maximum cases, death and injury increases for the insufficient fire distinguisher, a smaller number of emergency fire exit, untrained workers and the inhuman and unprofessional initiative of the higher authority in some cases.

Regarding the health issues, they pointed out the availability of toilets, washing facility, water supply, treatment facility including first aid and hospital transferring vehicle facility, availability of doctor and nurse, temperature, workload etc. One of the participants said that still there are so many factories where there is no sufficient number of hygienic toilets, washroom and water supply for the workers. Most of the participants mentioned that few factories have treatment facilities inside the factory with both the doctor and medicine service but most of the factories does not have enough facility except very surface level first aid facility. Even, some cases workers feel sick for unhealthy temperature and workload as well.

Finally, most of the participants of the study opined that there have been occurred a number of accidents in several factories and still continuing because of the proper implementation of the safety protocols though most of the factories now maintain minimum standard of safety protocols and as a result the number of accidents are decreasing. They opined that almost all the compliance factories are now trying to maintain safety protocols though in some cases the lack of trained manpower to maintain all the safety issues, lack of the good will of the management as well as in some cases lack of the proper management of the safety tools are the major reasons behind the accidents. Majority of them mentioned that most of the small factories does not care about the safety issues because their inability to maintain such big issues as well as sometimes they think that they need not to follow all those bindings as they mostly do contractual production work. In most cases, workers feel unsecured from most of the perspective in this kind of small factories.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, it can be said that workplace safety is a big issue that is connected to the concern of all the stakeholders. Any kind of mismanagement in this regard can make dangerous situation with the loss of wealth as well as lives. It is the positive sign that most of the factories are being aware of workplace safety nowadays. So, all kind of safety measures should be ensured and practice at every garment industry of Bangladesh.

However, the participants offered some suggestions regarding the workplace safety in the garments sector of Bangladesh which are as follows:

- a) Government authority, BGMEA and other respective bodies should be very strict regarding the proper safety protocol in the garments sector of Bangladesh.
- b) Factory related law enforcing agency should inspect the factories on regular basis.
- c) Owners and the high officials should be much more cordial regarding workplace safety maintenance
- d) Employees should be provided regular training on workplace safety dealings
- e) Labor law should be strictly followed in every factory.
- f) Workers should be much aware about their rights and safety.
- g) Every factory should have a medical corner with sufficient facility.
- h) Regular rehearsal on safety issues should be practiced.
- i) Fire alarm system should be available in every floor.
- j) All kind of machineries and chemical use should be done very systematically.

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