

The Scenarios of Labor Movement in RMG (Readymade Garment) Sector in Bangladesh

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Abstract: The recent sharp rises of protest and movement bar the production abruptly in the RMG (Readymade Garment) yard hampering the ultimate boom of this sector. Though this sector is labor-intensive and a great source of industrial employment, it often fails to fulfill the expected production within the lead time with the recurrence of protests and movements. Thus, the aim of the study is to find out the real scenario of Labor movement in RMG Sector occurred in the last few years to know the reasons for movement and generally who join the protest. Systematic and contextual data on RMG sector from the Daily star, renowned English daily, has been extracted to find answers of such questions. The context of the labor movement has been explored through content analysis. Then the profile of protestors and their organizations has been furnished. It has been observed that in the past few years especially in 2010 and after, there has been a great rise of movement and the number of protesters as well. The workers also protested merely to ensure their basic requirements. Moreover, it is really a very interesting finding that the women workers played core role in the repertoire and they are in the forefront and unfortunately are the worst sufferers of the movement.

Keywords: Industrial employment, Labor-intensive, Labor Movement, Protest, Lead time, RMG (Readymade Garment),

Date of Submission: 05-12-2018

Date of acceptance: 22-12-2018

I. INTRODUCTION

Ready-Made Garment sector that contributes around 80 percent of total exports in Bangladesh garments industry is now laying in its pick contributing great in the GDP (Ahmed 2009, Islam et al. 2012). The RMG sector receives more than three fourth (about 81.32 percent) of total export earnings and becomes the prime foreign currency earner of the country (Bangladesh Bank 2015, Siddiqi 2005). The enormous growth happens merely for the export-quota system and the availability of cheap labor (Haider 2007). This sector creates the opportunity for the millions of unemployed especially the women to have industrial employment (Absar 2001, Vijayabaskar 2002, Siddiqi 2000, Amin et al. 1997). At present they are getting a huge participation in the labor force moving out of low productivity to higher productivity (Al-Samari 2006). Women have acquired greater financial autonomy, admiration, social status and “voice” than before (Khosla 2009). RMG industries are playing significant role in the national economic growth in terms of export earnings, employment generation, poverty alleviation, inequality reduction and empowering the woman (Rahman and Hossain 2010). The size of employment was about 2 million in 2007 with a 24 percent yearly growth of employment (Rahman et al. 2008) while it surpasses of about 3.5 million workers in recent years in about 5,000 factories, moreover, there are only about 140 unions, and out of them only 20-30 are active (Pratap and Bose 2015). More than 80 percent workers are women in these industries (Kaniz Farhana et al. 2015). These women have to work in exploitive condition while they have been complaining against long working hours (Kabeer et al. 2004). Generally female workers do not get handsome salary without higher administrative positions (Kabeer et al. 1991). The owners and managers feel that women are deft of sewing, more patient and controllable than men (Paul-Majumder and Begum, 2000). Women face extreme exploitation as they do not have technical knowledge and training (Ali et al. 2008). Therefore, it has been harsh reality that the workers don't have their basic requirements from the owners who have been blessed with surplus. The owners have been ignoring the demands of workers over the years as the capitalist always do (Ali et al. 2008). While the industrialists' wealth increases to the unprecedented level, the lives of the workers remain in the vicious circle of abysmal poverty and deprivation (Chowdhury et al. 2010). As a result, there is observed agitation and anger among the workers in RMG sector of Bangladesh who spring for protest and run amuck involving in disputes and getting involved in violent protest (Uddin and Jahed 2007). Consequently, it creates sudden halt in production process as workers

often strike to protest against management (Huda et al. 2007). Dannecker (2002: 201-253) emphasized that workers do not get the minimum wage fixed by government of Bangladesh. She interviewed some workers and revealed that workers received on average too lower than the minimum wage. Workers often have to sign that they get a particular wage but in fact get less. "The majority of the workers had less per month than the minimum wage fixed, even though the minimum wages in the garment sector are already lowest in our country". In her book she demonstrated that most of the workers cannot receive their salaries and overtime money on a regular basis. She also argued as a punishment the worker's salary is often reduced because of coming late, talking with others and not to fulfilling the target according to supervisors. Dannecker (2002) argued that financial punishment is used as weapons for maintaining rules and regulations in garment sector. In her book she explored that the working hour in the garments sector are so high than the working hours in other sectors. Dannecker (2002) also blamed employers that they rarely presented overtime on the time card and most of the time workers are not informed in advance why they have to stay longer. Another problem mentioned was that the workers of majority of the factories are deprived of minimum snacks even during the Ramadan. Other problems are maltreatment of managers or officers to workers, lack of trade union, plot, not executing labor laws, unruly character of the workers and political intervention, moreover, they are bound to work long hours with no sick leave, weekend holiday, annual vacation, pension, bonus, festival allowance (Hasan et al. 2015 and Islam et al. 2010). For these reasons, the RMG sector has been marked by fierce workers' movement since 2006 (Hasan et al. 2012, Nuruzzaman and Haque 2009). Moreover, the issues concerning rising labour movements are certainly not an indication of labor problem rather it is the biggest threat to social stability (Pratap and Bose 2015).

Objectives:

This research will focus on the 'Labor Movement in Ready-Made Garments sector of Bangladesh: 1992-2013.' The research objectives are as following:

1. To find out the real scenario of labor movement in recent years in RMG.
2. To know who join RMG workers' protest.
3. To know the reasons for their involvement.

II. METHODOLOGY

In this research, the choice of research method is guided not merely by the research field of interest on specialization but also by the nature of the problem being studied. Since it is difficult to gather first-hand data on labor movement due to the suddenness of these events, this research relies on a data set collected by the students of Department of Sociology, University of Barisal as part of their course work. The dataset consists of physical copies of all news of protest in twelve newspapers of Bangladesh over the period of twenty years. The Daily Star has been drawn purposively to collect news items reporting any sort of protest events around the RMG premises of Bangladesh. To recapitulate the research objectives of the study, the content of the news has been analyzed to explore who joins the RMG protests and the reasons for their involvement. This research is designed in order to get comprehensive picture of labor movement by deploying content analysis.

As the researcher has conducted his research based on newspaper data, all the news about any protest around the RMG sectors are included in the study universe.

By using descriptive statistics, complex relationships between labor protest and the exploitations faced by the workers have been explored.

From systematic data search of newspaper, 161 acts of protests are yield. These are all the protest that occurred in the readymade garment industries over the years.

Statistical computation has been done in this study for the analysis and interpretation of data.

Limitations:

A significant limitation, a newspaper has limited space, has been acknowledged. When a report on labor protest comes over the Newspaper, an editor might decide not to run the story because space has been filled with reports judged more important. For a single reason, the protest can be run through for a few days. That would generally warrant newspaper space as long as this case is known to all. Moreover, national coverage is much easier, but international coverage is more problematic (Mueller 1997, Wolley, 2000). Sociologists have generally used newspaper to identify local or international event. As a result, the researcher have chosen newspaper data as there is a scarcity of access to collect data on protests beyond newspapers as they have no exact time to occur.

III. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The number of incidents of protests and movements

There have been exactly reported 161 incidents (Table-1) of protest and movements on the Daily Star till December, 2016. Before 2000 frequencies are at its lowest ebb with 16 (9.9 percent) reported events only. But substantially, there have been the dramatic rise of protest in the subsequent years in (2005-2009) and 2010 and after. More significantly, the swift rise of protest in the last yearly cohort; 2010 and after, is observed with 79 incidents covering about 50 percent of the total cases. A table is adorned below to have a further insight into it.

Table 1: Total number of cases of labor movement in Readymade Garments (RMG) in Bangladesh from 1992-2013

Year Cohort	No. of Incidents	Percentage
Before 2000	16	9.9
2000-2004	14	8.7
2005-2009	52	32.3
2010 and after	79	49.1
Total	161	100.0

Source: The Daily Star

Overall, it appears (Table-1) that the occurrences of protest have gone up with the passage of time especially 2010 and after.

Garment workers who join the protest

Though labor movement costs high for the workers, they cannot help themselves from galvanizing their protests against the owners who only thinks of their own profit and mal-practice to achieve wealth. The workers struggle against both the owners and the police forces in unfavorable circumstances. Since this sector employs very young people, the protestors are young too. The results (Table-2) show that both the workers and the leaders attend the protest events. When the protests get violent, the name of the leaders is hardly found in the reports. They always sit behind the curtain. It is found that before 2000, the workers and leaders would raise their voices united but after 2000, the news reports the workers only protesting against their rival. It is observed that leaders have hanged up their boots. It is clear that the leaders' appearances are not seen. Any of the following can be the explanation: either the leaders do not want to be named to avoid follow-up retaliation by the police forces or they are probably taking advantages from other forces not to create unrest in the RMG sector or these movements truly lack leaders.

It is also found that the protestors join the protest both in organizational banner and independently. There have been several workers' organizations and workers of several factories with no specific name of their industries also have staged protests. About 75 percent cases of protests were organized by workers of several factories without a banner of any organization. National garments workers' federation (NGWF), Bangladesh garments worker's unity council (BGWUC) other organizations like-Garments Shramik Sangram Parishad, Bangladesh Garments Shramik Aikka Parishad, BD Textile Workers League, Jatiyatabadi Shramik Dal, Dhaka City Garments Workers Welfare Association etc. cover about 15 percent. Another organization Bangladesh Garments Workers Unity Council (BGWUC) and others are relatively low at their participation.

Table-2: Name of organizations staging the protests

Name of Organizations	No. of Participation	Percentage
National Garments Workers' Federation (NGWF)	25	14.8
Bangladesh Garments Workers Unity Council (BGWUC)	7	4.1
Workers of several factories (anonymous)	127	75.1
Others	10	5.9
Total	169	100.0

Source: The Daily Star

To sum up, it is lucid that most of the protests have been staged by the workers of several factories without the banner of any organization to hide their organizational name or there is a tendency from the organizations to hide it to avoid follow up retaliation.

The news reports often reported the number of protestors present in any event of protest (Table-3). The numbers ranges from as low as 30 people to more than 5000. Out of 161 cases, about 55 percent events involved 2000 to 4000 protestors (Table 3). We can see lowest frequencies of events having more than 4000 protestors.

Table-3: Number of protestors in each movement over the years.

Number of Protestors	Frequency	Percentage	Year			
			Before 2000	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010 and after
1-1000	30	18.6	15	10	2	3
1001-2000	12	7.5	0	2	6	4
2001-3000	47	29.2	0	2	34	11
3001-4000	43	26.7	0	0	8	35
4001-5000	15	9.3	0	0	2	13
5000 above	14	8.7	1	0	0	13
Total	161	100.0	16	14	52	79

Source: The Daily Star

The number of protestors exceeds 2000-4000 in most of the cases that is about 90 cases with 55.9 percent. It is also observed that the number of protestors increased with the passage of time. All the 26 cases had 4000-5000 above protestors happened in 2010 and after. Before 2000, in each of all the 15 cases, there are 1-1000 protestors but exceptionally one is 5000 above. In 2000-2004, there are 14 cases of which 10 cases have 1-1000 protestors in each and others have (1000-3000) protestors.

There have been 34 cases of (2001-3000) protestors in 2005-2009. In 2010 and after, there are 35 cases which had (3001-4000) protestors (Table 3). Over the years, higher turn outs in protest events has increased steadily especially in the 2001-4000 protestors category. However, categories are showing lower turnouts (1-1000 protestors) have declined steadily.

It can be concluded from the data that the number of protestors increases dramatically after 2005.

Notable participation of women

The female workers are seen to grab the front-stage of protest albeit both the male and female join the protest. The women workers join the protest without any prior preparation, sometimes; they have little or no experience. In all 161 cases of protest, 100% presence of women is observed. Although Dannecker (2002: 201-253) expected that women are not likely to join a protest as they are womanish, uneducated and shy, my findings are contrary to her. She also noted the dogmatic rural Muslim attitude of the females bar them from joining resistance and they are more likely to conform than resist Dannecker (2002: 201-253). Contrarily, my observation defies this as the women have innate inclination in attending protest even in violent ones. However, they are the worst sufferers when such protests turn into violent. The male protestors sometimes utilize women to accelerate more participation and avoid the wrath of police forces by putting them in the front. If the agitation gets repressed, these females are the first to suffer.

The reasons for protest

Sometimes workers are misguided to protest hearing rumors. When something abusive occurs in the industrial premise, the workers often do not wait, they start protesting right away. Though the workers can hardly succeed in overcoming a major movement against the owners, they continue trying. They constantly protest to achieve their goals. It is found that workers' demands are basic and payable. They dispute the decision for having no implementation of labor law. Around 12 percent (Table-4) protests are caused by it. About 29 percent protests demand the implementation of minimum wages. Other causes are payment of arrear salaries, demanding Eid bonus, weekly day off, payment of overtime, expressing shock and protest over death and demanding compensation for death, allowance and other facilities, safety measures, showing threat of greater movement, withdrawal of false case and reinstallation of job, protesting repression on fellow workers, protest against sexual harassment. From the data that most of the protests are staged for the demand of salary related issue and demanding Eid bonus or for raising wage. Working conditions or sexual harassment does not draw much attention of the workers for having larger protest. Data shows (Table-4) that after 2010 protest caused 43 times out of 65 for minimum wage and salary. Female workers are sometimes harassed either by the fellows or by the administrative personnel in the industry. Thus creates the way of further protests. The workers protest for the implementation of labor law, weekly day off, payment of overtime, payment of arrear salaries, implementation of minimum wages and raising wage, Eid bonus, expressing shock over death and demanding compensation of death, allowance and other facilities, safety measures, submitting memorandum, showing threat of greater movement, withdrawal of false case and reinstallation of job, attack on fellow workers, against sexual harassment. Implementation of minimum wages and raising wage has the highest frequency with 29 percent cases using this. Payment of arrear salaries and several points demand with implementation of labor law and submitting memorandum happen are also important (17 percent and 12 percent respectively).

Table-4: Protestors' reasons for protest over the years

Reasons for protest	No. of occurrence	Percentage	Year			
			Before 2000	2000-2004	2005-2009	2010 and after
Implementation of labor law	28	12.3	11	5	4	8
Payment of arrear salaries	39	17.1	5	4	14	16
Implementation of minimum wages and salary hike	65	28.5	1	2	19	43
Demanding Eid bonus	22	9.6	3	1	8	10
Death and compensation of death	14	6.1	2	3	2	7
Allowance and other facilities, Weekly day off and Payment of overtime	18	7.9	5	2	3	8
Safety measures	4	1.8	0	3	1	0
Withdrawal of false case and reinstalling of job	12	5.3	0	1	6	5
Protest for attack workers and harass them sexually	15	6.6	0	0	8	7
Others	11	4.8	2	3	3	3
Total	228	100.0	16	13	52	79

Source: The Daily Star

From the table, we can say most of the movements are caused for the demand of salary related issues. Demanding Eid Bonus is also dominant.

While protesting the protestors change their course on the streets as well as in the industrial areas. The workers try hard to make the owners to understand and to solve but generally in vain. In 2010 and after, the dominant protest tactics is implementation of minimum wages and salary hike and so is in 2005-2009 where before 2004, it is rare. The second highest demand is payment of arrear salaries is also high in both cohorts. But it is observed that before 2000, the most used tactics are several points demand with implementation of labor law and submitting memorandum and it runs down later with slightly rise in 2010 and after.

Overall data shows, with the passage of time, the several points demands with implementation of labor law and submitting memorandum runs down while specific type of demand hikes up mostly the salary related issue and Eid bonus.

Protestors are always in catch 22 situations whether they will protest first for salary or the working conditions even for sexual, physical and mental abuse. The industrialists waive all the demands and they know better about which side of their bread is to be buttered. When workers become hell-bent on breaking the resistance, the industrialists manage the leaders. In recent years, workers protest violently with a lot of energy and enthusiasm as they are getting more resistance.

IV. OVERALL FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

RMG (Readymade Garment) sector is the highest exporter making up about three quarters of total exports and the industry is a symbol of dynamism in the world economy. It is the main formal sector creating employment opportunities for the poor, especially the female workers. But it faces problems with the recurrence of protests in the recent years.

The study shows that the workers of this sector do not get their minimum rights and privileges. The industrialists are still cheating and they certainly try to obstruct the workers' views on the finesse skullduggery of exploiting workers.

Owning a handsome wage is not a luxury rather an exigency but industrialists never expect the frail workers to contravene their will by protesting over the issue of wage, bonus and overtime salaries. Workers work in the doldrums. Low wage, irregular payment and sudden closure of the factory without any prior notification compel them to take the street. The government left the issue of labor rights hanging in the air over the years.

Workers become insensate while working in the horrible conditions. Even they do not get any iota of owners' sympathy. It is found that there has been a sharp rise of protest in the recent time which is impediment to the growth of this sector. All the workers, especially, the female workers play vital role in the protest except a

few leaders of workers' organizations. Women are the vanguard both in the production and in the protest. This trend could be best matched with the paradigm of women empowerment and emancipation.

The confluence can shock the economy, especially when combined with recurrence with protests. Problems of this sector remain unsolved. The consequences of miss management of such a combustible event will literally destroy the rising economy.

V. CONCLUSION

Humans are not pigeons, nor some kind of reward based automaton, they revolt and protest to protect their rights. Humanity has historical experience of fighting against tyranny. The research shows that the portraiture of labor movement in RMG sector has changed dramatically. The labor movements are erratic and unpredictable, but it occurs frequently all the year round. Workers urge the owners to fulfill their demands but owners are stubborn not to accede in any proposal. The nature, tactics and outcome of the protest have been varying from the earlier period. The more the workers are forced to give away their position, the more they protest. They are constantly harried by their owners of their rights and privileges. They proliferate in numbers especially the women and protest.

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Ashikuzzaman. "The Scenarios of Labor Movement in RMG (Readymade Garment) Sector in Bangladesh. " *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*. vol. 23 no. 12, 2018, pp. 59-65.