



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Role of participation committee in developing workplace condition, safety and welfare services in Ready-Made Garment Industry of Bangladesh

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Abstract

An abstract is a summary of entire paper should be written in Cambria with font size- 10. The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh plays a crucial role in the country's economy. Nonetheless, it frequently encounters challenges concerning workplace conditions, safety standards, and welfare services. This study investigates the participation committee's (PC) role in ensuring sustainable working conditions, workplace safety, and welfare within Bangladesh's RMG industry. Employing a qualitative research approach, the study conducted interviews with 30 respondents using semi-structured questions and employed a convenient sampling technique to select participants. The findings reveal that the participation committee has notably enhanced workplace safety in the RMG industry. Through active involvement, the committee has fostered improved communication between management and employees, leading to better working conditions, the eradication of labor rights neglect, and strengthened enforcement of national employment and labor regulations. The paper concludes by stressing the necessity for collaborative efforts involving stakeholders at various levels to consistently enhance workplace conditions, safety standards, and welfare services in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment industry. Originality in a study on participation committees in Bangladesh's ready-to-garment industry lies in presenting innovative approaches, methods, or insights, addressing literature gaps, or exploring uncharted territories, thus enhancing welfare services and workplace health and safety.

Keywords: Participation Committee; Workplace Condition; Safety and Welfare services; Ready-Made Garment Industry,

1. Introduction

Bangladesh, a developing nation abundant with opportunities, relies heavily on its RMG industry for economic growth and job creation (Mondal & Denich, 2010). This industry, which began modestly in the late 1970s, has rapidly expanded into a major economic powerhouse. By 2023, Bangladesh's RMG industry accounted for a staggering 84.6% of total exports (Chowdhury, 2023), employing approximately 4.4 million people directly, with an additional 20 million employed both directly and indirectly (Islam et al., 2016). Despite fluctuations in the number of manufacturers, the RMG sector consistently propels Bangladesh's economy forward, emerging as its largest export earner.

In the fiscal year 2023-2024, RMG exports reached \$24.49 billion, a 14% increase, albeit falling short of the initial \$30.5 billion target (BGMEA, 2024). Nevertheless, the resilience of the RMG industry is evident in its sustained growth despite missing export targets. Beyond economic benefits, this industry has played a pivotal role in job creation, poverty alleviation, and women's empowerment (Rahman, 2015). While the industry's growth is commendable, concerns persist regarding labor standards, trade unions, and working conditions, particularly in light of past incidents. Despite efforts to improve factory working conditions, challenges remain, with limited progress in enhancing the standard of living for the most vulnerable workers, lacking social security and insurance (Azad et al., 2022).

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In response, the Bangladeshi government has undertaken measures to enhance worker safety, including amendments to the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA) of 2006, aimed at strengthening factory inspection mechanisms (Hossain & Shirazi, 2018). However, labor-related issues persist, highlighting the need for further regulatory improvements in areas such as union function, minimum wages, accident compensation, and factory inspection procedures (Aktar & Abdullah, 2013).

One significant amendment to the BLA in 2013 mandates the establishment of PC in businesses with fifty or more employees, aiming to promote mutual trust and cooperation between workers and management (BLA, 2006). Despite the legal requirement for PC formation, previous studies have shown varied perceptions regarding the practical roles of PC practitioners in ensuring workplace safety in the RMG industry (BLA, 2006). Consequently, there remains a lack of clarity regarding the specific responsibilities of PC practitioners in this context. This study seeks to address this gap by elucidating the roles and impacts of PC practitioners in promoting good labor practices and industrial relations within Bangladesh's RMG industry.

2. Literature Review

The RMG sector has been a driving force in Bangladesh's development, elevating the nation's global status with the "Made in Bangladesh" label and transforming its reputation from a "bottomless basket" to a "basket full of wonders" (Anner & Bair, 2022). By 2021, Bangladesh had achieved middle-income status, largely propelled by the RMG industry's significant contribution (Anner & Bair, 2022). Originating in the 1960s, the RMG sector transitioned into an export-oriented industry in the late 1970s, emerging as Bangladesh's largest export-driven sector (Chowdhury et al., 2018).

The RMG industry, synonymous with the clothing sector, has introduced significant societal changes in Bangladesh. Employing approximately 7.5 million individuals indirectly and 4.4 million directly (Anner, 2020), it comprises a substantial portion of Bangladesh's economy. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) comprises 1,006 factory members, while the BKMEA has 512, with an additional 584 factories not affiliated with either association (Maped in Bangladesh, 2020; Chowdhury et al., 2020).

The management of industrial relations (IRs) is intrinsically linked to a nation's labor laws and significantly impacts workplace dynamics. IR, a multidisciplinary field, explores all facets of workplace interactions, underscoring the importance of each individual's role in fostering a positive labor relations environment (Ahammad et al., 2017). The continuous growth of Bangladesh's apparel sector is attributed to increased value addition, with raw material imports accounting for a significant portion of RMG export revenue (BGMEA, 2023).

Despite challenges in traditional markets, Bangladesh's garment exports to emerging economies have surged, contributing to the sector's overall growth. Non-traditional markets have become increasingly important, with revenue from such markets totaling US\$6.37 billion in the fiscal year 2021–2022. Overall RMG earnings in the preceding fiscal year amounted to US\$46.99 billion, with non-traditional markets contributing 17.82% of total earnings (BGMEA, 2023).

2.1 Labor Practices in the RMG Industry of Bangladesh

In recent times, Bangladesh's RMG industry has emerged as a significant player in the global apparel market. Originating in the late 1970s, the RMG industry of Bangladesh swiftly became a key driver of export revenue, job creation, poverty reduction, and women's empowerment. The United States of America (USA) and the European Union (EU) stand as the primary export destinations for Bangladeshi RMG products (Rahman & Hossain, 2010). However, the future trajectory of Bangladesh's RMG industry hinges not solely on the availability of cheap labor and lenient governmental policies but also on adherence to ethical conduct standards. International buyers have exerted immense pressure on Bangladeshi RMG firms to comply with their codes of conduct, necessitating a focus on improving factory working conditions (Haider, 2007).

The high unemployment rate leaves workers with limited employment options, contributing to significant labor turnover in the apparel sector (Hossain et al., 2012). Shockingly, a large proportion of workers—74% in knit companies, 68% in woven businesses, and 81% in sweater factories—do not receive formal appointment letters (Rahman & Moazzem, 2008). Additionally, Bangladesh's wage rates have risen compared to those of competing nations due to a shortage of skilled workers, eroding its labor cost competitiveness. Given the labor-intensive nature of the garment industry, Bangladesh requires a skilled workforce (Abdullah, 2005).

Despite its prominence, the RMG sector faces mounting pressure from both international and domestic bodies to comply with labor standards while grappling with everyday management issues between management and workers (Bescond

& Mehran, 2003). A significant managerial challenge lies in balancing industry competitiveness with the imperative to enhance wages and working conditions as stipulated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) standards (Khondker, 2015). Prior studies suggest that improved labor practices may enhance labor productivity by promoting workers' health, well-being, and organizational commitment. However, increased labor productivity may not necessarily translate into successful competition for foreign orders, which are often price-sensitive.

Responding to international media scrutiny and tragic events within Bangladeshi organizations, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) enacted new legislation on pay and working conditions in the RMG sector in 2013. The minimum wage set for the Bangladeshi RMG sector at TK5,300 per month (approximately US\$2.17 a day) places workers above the "working poor" category defined by the ILO's income standards. The assessment of Bangladesh's labor standards progress and prospects remains mixed (Khan, 2019). Challenges persist in the implementation, monitoring, and enforcement of labor practices, posing obstacles to the improvement of labor standards in the Bangladeshi RMG sector, particularly concerning workplace health and safety and worker living standards (Lerche, 2012).

Trade unions within the Bangladeshi RMG sector often face opposition from factory owners, leading to union avoidance tactics and discouragement of worker union membership. The rejection rate for union registrations is alarmingly high, and covert tactics are employed to discourage new union formation. Approximately 20% of listed trade unions are registered and active in RMG organizations, with business owners attributing increased labor unrest to union activity. The visible resistance of RMG owners to unions, coupled with deteriorating law and order in Bangladesh, has instilled fear among union leaders and members.

2.2 Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh

The Bangladesh Accord was established to ensure the safety and well-being of workers in Bangladesh's garment industry. Following the collapse of several industry buildings in the early 2000s, the Accord gained momentum, particularly after the catastrophic collapse of Rana Plaza in 2013, which resulted in the loss of 1,100 lives and numerous injuries. Signed by numerous international firms and supported by key Bangladeshi stakeholders, the Accord stands out for its legally binding nature. Signatory brands commit to independent factory inspections and necessary remediation as part of the five-year agreement (Beierlein, 2020).

As the initial five-year period concluded, preparations were made for a transition agreement, allowing the Bangladeshi government to assume the Accord's responsibilities and operations. However, the government has hesitated to sign the revised agreement, leading to a legal dispute. Despite filing an appeal with the High Court, the hearing has been postponed multiple times, leaving the future of the agreement uncertain (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2018).

2.3 Participation Committee

These committees, comprising both workers and management within a factory, serve as platforms for workers to voice their concerns and are believed to enhance worker satisfaction and productivity (BLA, 2006 (Am., 2013)). They facilitate dialogue between these two groups to address production-related issues faced by workers. Originally rooted in Europe, similar committees, known as PCs have now gained global prominence, often serving as alternatives to trade unions. The legal framework, functions, and structures of PCs vary from country to country. In Europe, PCs were established to promote democracy and worker representation on the factory floor, while in Asian countries like Bangladesh, they were instituted by the state administration to maintain peace and reduce the influence of labor unions. In nations where trade unions are prohibited, such as China, committees serve as the sole mechanism for workers to voice their concerns in the workplace.

Recent research has highlighted shortcomings in current factory social audits, particularly in assessing workers' Freedom of Association (FoA) rights, drawing attention to the role of PCs. This allows factory management to establish PCs without formally recognizing genuine trade unions, while still appearing to respect workers' rights to association. Additionally, Western companies may encourage the formation of such committees as a solution to factories' refusal to acknowledge existing unions or to address concerns about corruption within local unions, as perceived by Western brands. Despite being seen as substitutes for trade unions, there is ongoing academic debate regarding the efficacy of PCs in addressing labor issues and whether they can effectively replace trade unions.

2.4 Objectives of the Study

The research gap and problems statements lead the objectives of the study which are as follows:

- To identify the contribution of PC in ensuring workplace condition, safety and welfare services in RMG Industry

of Bangladesh.

- To investigate the practical role of the PC practicing for in ensuring workplace condition, safety and welfare services in RMG Industry of Bangladesh.

3. Methodology of the Study

This study adopts a qualitative approach to achieve its objective, utilizing an interpretive paradigm to understand the role and applications of PCs in the RMG industry. A thorough understanding of the nature and effectiveness of PCs in industrial settings necessitates qualitative exploration. Face-to-face, in-depth interviews using semi-structured questionnaires were conducted to delve into issues related to PC roles and their impact on the RMG sector. Primary data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, preceded by a meticulous review of existing literature to inform the development of interview questions.

Open-ended interviews were conducted with 30 respondents, selected using a convenient purposive sampling method. Respondents were encouraged to record information using mobile devices, and subsequent transcription and translation from Bangla to English were carried out. A diverse range of stakeholders, including employees, managers, labor officers, trade union (TU) leaders, lawyers, factory owners, and buyer representatives, participated in the study to ensure comprehensive coverage of relevant perspectives.

Data analysis commenced with the categorization and comparison of acquired data sets, followed by the identification of emerging themes through coding analysis. Thematic analysis was then employed to address research issues, with interviews evaluated thoroughly to extract key insights. The resultant thematic framework facilitated the interpretation of findings, allowing for connections between theoretical concepts and practical applications. Finally, the study's primary research questions were addressed, with results compared to existing literature to ascertain areas of agreement or divergence. The following figure 1 shows the chronology of data analysis and discussion of this study.

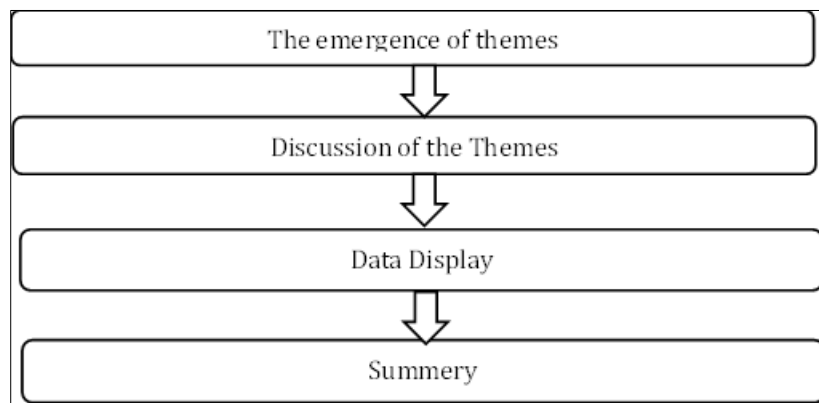


Figure 1 Chronology of Data Analysis and Discussion

4. Results and discussion

Conformance to standards is implied by compliance. The applicable national law, ILO conventions pertaining to labor standards and rights, fair labor practices, working conditions, building codes, worker safety and health precautions, environmental protection concerns, and buyers' codes of conduct are all considered standards in the apparel industry. Wages and benefits, risks and safety, health and sanitation, human rights, etc. are all included in social compliance (Alam, et.al., 2017). The PC is now playing vital roles in ensuring social compliance issues such as Workplace Conditions, Safety Issues and welfare Services.

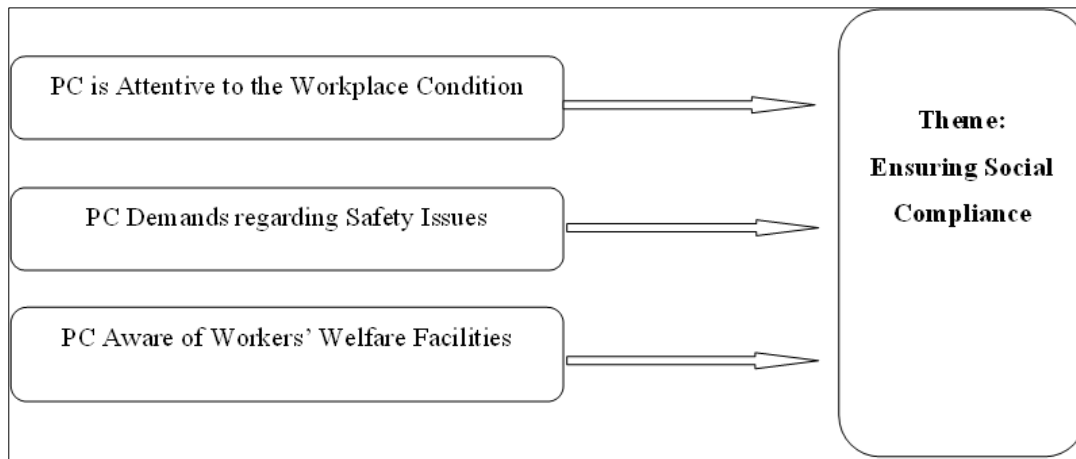


Figure 2 Theme 4 and Subcategories

Source: Developed by Authors

4.1 PC is Attentive to the Workplace Condition

A safe workplace is a fundamental entitlement of employees. A society must guarantee a respectable job that upholds people's social standing and self-respect in order to accomplish social fairness. An organized and spotless work environment allows employees to perform better and generate more. A safe workplace is also necessary to maintain excellent health and prevent workplace accidents. A person's access to other necessities is hampered by injury and illness, which raises the cost of health care. Two big projects named "Accord" and "Alliance" were introduced by international investors in 2013. More than two hundred retailers serving consumers in Europe, North America, and Asia agreed to sign the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in May 2013. The main objective of the initiative is to establish a safe and sustainable clothing industry in Bangladesh, where "workers don't have to worry about building collapses, fires, or other incidents that could be prevented with appropriate health and safety precautions.

"OWRMG2, PC3, GA1 and GA2 stated

"The workplace condition has been changed dramatically in the garments factories in Bangladesh. After the imposition of compliance regarding improvement of workplace condition and other workers' health and safety related issues, many factories have adopted this compliance ordained by "Accord" and "Alliance". However, the establishment of PCs in the garments industries has geared up this improvement process. Moreover, workers health and safety issues are directly related to the basic rights of the workers and PCs negotiates safety issues with the management frequently."

4.2 PC Demands regarding Safety Issues

The topic of health and safety can be difficult. There is frequently misinformation regarding what is necessary to address it effectively. Health and safety is frequently the first issue that businesses address since it seems to be the most urgent. But frequently, just the risks that are immediately obvious are the focus. Companies frequently lack the managerial structures and technological know-how necessary to effectively analyze and reduce health and safety risks throughout their operations. Some aspects of health and safety are relatively simple and have obvious evidence. Do you have enough fire extinguishers in your building? Are there preparations for a fire escape? Are accident and medical treatment logs up to date and accurate? Do employees have the proper personal protection gear? Other elements, meanwhile, are more difficult to see. As an illustration, consider the negative impacts of chemicals used at work, diseases that appear decades later, or anomalies in children born to workers. RMGs must be aware of such industry-specific risks. Additionally, even the visible aspects require knowledge and care to be handled correctly. What more firefighting tools are required, and how can you tell? Are the exits in a suitable location? What are the smoke detectors' technical specifications? An expert's last line of defense against impacts is personal protection equipment. So, the solution requires more than just observation; it also requires careful study and purposeful action. This calls both technical know-how and managerial mechanisms. The best method to deal with systemic issues is to implement management systems. Effective training, policies, and processes are essential for sustained performance. A good system will shield users from harm. The fundamental difficulty is frequently management's willingness to spend the necessary funds and time to health and safety issues. When you are deciding on production goals, do not forget about health and safety procedures. PC is dedicated to performing at the highest level of health and safety. It establishes precise performance

goals for every activity. Additionally, it identifies, communicates, and teaches all employees and management about the dangers.

By the statement of LLC 2

“Buyers are playing a vital role in the RMG industry of Bangladesh after the Rana Plaza disaster. The buyers have given more attention towards the safety issues because it builds positive employee relations, reduce employee turnover rates and labor unrest, enhances worker productivity, increases outsider interest, create valuable reputation for the company. In this regard, the PC is playing a vital role to reduce the gap between the employees and the employers. By the help of PC platform, now both parties have the opportunity to one to one communication concerning any safety issue of the factory.”

Above statement supported by OWRMG2 and told that

“We never compromise anything with the safety of the workers. Workers health and safety issues are given the best priority. Actions are taken immediately to resolve any hygiene and safety related issues in the factory. Such initiatives have been geared up by the pressure of PC.”

PC4 added the above statements

“We are very much concern regarding the workplace safety and health in the factories. The factories have to fulfill the Accord and Alliance guidelines to operate their industry. If there, any problem or disappearance then we take it very seriously. As the stakeholder of the RMG industry of Bangladesh, we promote the trade union activities for the betterment of workers.”

4.3 PC Aware of Workers' Welfare Facilities

Employee welfare packages can enhance employee productivity. Workers' welfare facilities include, but are not limited to, free medical facilities, and housing facilities, amongst others. The welfare of workers should be of the utmost priority at all times in an organization as this will be an incentive to improve the efficiency and dedication of the employees within the organization. 'Welfare' is a term that refers to the desirable state of existence, which involves physical, moral, mental, and emotional conditions of an employee, all of which directly and indirectly affect employee productivity. PC pays attention to the workers' welfare facilities of the organization because a happy and satisfied employee will reciprocate by giving the best performance.

PC10 and GA1 discussed

“Workers demand about the medical and pension facilities. We raised this issue in the PC meeting and the management showed a positive attitude regarding such facilities. The organization immediately approves the demand of the medical facilities and committed to consider the pension facilities positively.”

The RMG sector in Bangladesh still suffers from poor working conditions, negligence of labor rights and weak enforcement of laws. Working with each other, the actors come into conflict over their respective interests. Trade union is an organization of workers bargains on behalf of union members with the employer and negotiates labor contracts with employers. It is the core party to IRs. Such forum is traditionally formed to protect their members' interests and to defend themselves against the injustices, exploitations and abuses by their employers and thereby attempting to maintain check and balance in the IRS. But the roles of TUs bring to us the issue of debate particularly in the RMG industry of Bangladesh. In practice there currently is an absence of strong independent TUs.

To address the matter, the Bangladesh government announced that it would review the law in order to safeguard workers' safety and rights at work, and that the law would be revised accordingly. As a result, as per BLA 2006 and amendment 2013, enterprises and factories shall form active PC. ILO Conventions 87 and 98 have failed to protect the rights and congenial working environment of workers in the RMG industry of Bangladesh.

This study found that the PC helps promoting safe and healthy working conditions, and to protect and promote the health of workers in the readymade garments industry in Bangladesh. One of the prominent implications of PC is the enhancement of productivity among the workers maintaining a balanced relationship with the management. It always gives the best priority to the safety and health related issues by taking an immediate and quick action.

5. Conclusion

Bangladesh has emerged as a central hub for the RMG manufacturing sector, where PCs wield significant influence and potential to enact positive transformations. They play a pivotal role in fostering welfare services, ensuring safe working conditions, and cultivating secure environments within Bangladesh's RMG industry. Upon closer examination of their functions, challenges, and effectiveness, several key insights emerge.

PCs serve as essential mechanisms for fostering communication and collaboration between companies and employees, facilitating constructive engagement on issues related to welfare services, safety protocols, and working conditions. Strengthening PCs' advocacy for workers' rights and interests necessitates providing them with robust representation and training. PCs prove most effective in driving substantial change when equipped with requisite skills, knowledge, and representative diversity mirroring the workforce. Challenges such as employer resistance, resource constraints, and inadequate legal enforcement present formidable obstacles for PCs, requiring sustained efforts to foster cooperation, build trust, and advocate for supportive legislation.

Employing a range of tactics—from routine inspections to dialogues with management, employee education, and advocacy for policy changes—PCs address critical issues including social security, fair wages, health risks, and workplace safety. Achieving lasting improvements in safety standards, welfare provisions, and working conditions demands collaborative endeavors involving various stakeholders such as international partners, employers, government agencies, workers' associations, and civil society organizations.

Despite challenges, PCs play a crucial role in driving positive change and advancing worker well-being within Bangladesh's RMG sector. By addressing concerns, empowering stakeholders, and fostering collaboration, PCs contribute to creating more equitable, secure, and healthy workplaces in the RMG industry. The pursuit of sustainable development and inclusive growth in Bangladesh's RMG sector hinges on sustained backing and investment in PCs, alongside broader initiatives to strengthen regulatory frameworks and encourage social dialogue.

Implication

The goal of this research is to create a more thorough comprehension of the influence of PCs and IRs on Bangladesh's RMG sector. As was previously indicated, the literature that was already in existence lacked a recognized theoretical framework for the study of IRs in Bangladesh's RMG business. This study advances our understanding of IRs in general and the theory of IRs in relation to Bangladesh's RMG industry in particular. It enhances the theory of IRs by incorporating the theory of strategic choice.

The study emphasizes how crucial it is to have supportive legislative frameworks that acknowledge Participation Committees' contributions to bettering social services, safety requirements, and working conditions. It is imperative for policymakers to give precedence to the empowerment of PCs by means of legal provisions, capacity building efforts, and enforcement mechanisms. Companies in the RMG sector ought to appreciate the importance of Participation Committees as collaborators in fostering a positive workplace culture. Collaboratively interacting with PCs can improve labor standards compliance, boost productivity, and improve the company's reputation for corporate social responsibility. The formation and maintenance of Participation Committees are greatly aided by labor unions and organizations. Driving genuine change requires giving employees the tools they need to speak up, voice their concerns, and fight for their rights.

Compliance with ethical standards

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