

Employee Health and Safety: A Review of Recent Policies and Practices in Selected Garment Factories of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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Abstract: It is widely accepted that a safe and healthy workplace is key to ensure employee engagement. As manufacturing organizations are more prone to industrial accidents, the study focuses on the different employee health and safety initiatives taken by several garment factories of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The study uses both primary and secondary data. A complete questionnaire was set for personal interview. OHS manual, audit reports, websites, journals, Labor Act 2006, text books, gov't publications etc. are among secondary source used. Finding of the study does not portray something very good. Existence of short and poor quality policy, unfurnished medical room, same happens with the first aid boxes, problems with temperature, ventilation, noise and lighting etc. are most common complications. Although the government has taken several actions along with international bodies, effectiveness of those activities is questioned. A unique guideline for safety improvement, training arrangement for employees, close monitoring of safety and health issues can prove very effective. There is urgent need for concerted action in the sector that envisions a decent work environment.

Keywords: Safety, Health, Accident, Risk Assessment, Legal Compliance, Personal Protective Equipment.

INTRODUCTION

Garment making is the most globalized industry. Almost every country, irrespective of its stage of development, is involved in garment manufacturing and trading. Historically, almost without any exception, textile/RMG was the first industry a country was able to develop which eventually led to the development of other industries. This industry needs low level of technology, and its investment requirement is relatively small. A garment factory can be started as a very small unit; therefore, entry to this industry is within the reach of many entrepreneurs. In terms of investment risks, both entry into and exit from RMG industry are relatively less expensive.

Readymade garments are the most important export item from Bangladesh, yet the working conditions and fire safety records in the factories are often not up to the standard [1]. The ready-made garments (RMG) industry has made significant contributions to the country's economic development over the last four decades. But this will come undone unless Bangladesh can make progress on workplace safety compliance and labor rights [2]. In 2016, the RMG sector earned about US\$28 billion in export income compared to only US\$12,000 in 1978. Duty-free market access under the Multi-Fiber Arrangement,

zero tariff access to a number of developed country markets and competitive labor costs gave Bangladeshi manufacturers a comparative advantage over other countries.

The RMG sector has played a crucial role in earning foreign exchange for the country, improving the balance of payments and alleviating poverty for a large section of the population through employment generation. The sector now employs about 4 million workers compared to only 120,000 in 1985, and about 80 per cent of garment workers are women from poor rural households.

Bangladesh is now estimated to have between four and five thousand garment factories, ranging from large first tier suppliers to small factories largely operating as subcontractors to bigger clients [3]. But in recent few years this industry is facing threat by inadequate safety issue, bad working environment and demolishing workers' rights [4].

Lack of safety measure causes catch fire in garment factories which caused hundreds of workers death in the recent years [5]. Each day there is some news of industrial deaths but after an interval a massive loss is there. Accidents and ill health are costly to

workers and their families. They can also hurt companies because, in addition to the costs of personal injuries, they may incur far greater costs from damage to property or equipment, and lost production [6]. With very few exceptions, employers have to have liability insurance cover for injuries and ill health to their employees. They will also have insurance for accidents involving vehicles and possibly third-party and buildings insurance. And all these have forced health and safety at workplace a burning issue at our garment factories now a day.

In order to regain reputation and enhance investor confidence, multinational companies took the lead in establishing their own codes of conduct [7]. Some survey shows at present there are more than 400 social responsibility-related codes of conduct, standards and systems worldwide, most of which are management systems or codes of conducts established by nongovernment organizations, international buyers and brand owners, including some third party certification systems[8].

Safety is a buzzword now a day. Many foreign buyers are now emphasizing more and more on health and safety of the workers [9]. But it is seldom found in our country. Many factories feel reluctant to provide the basic facilities. The study is intended to get a better picture of employee health and safety in garment factories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Safe work is one of the central rights of the workers. Work-related safety and health is an imperative module of decent work agenda. It means the condition of workstation where workers work is free from all kinds of hazards and risks. Safe work environment confirms safety and health for everyone at work avoiding hazards and risks. Risk comes in many forms—repetitive tasks, long hours of work, exposure to harmful substances like gas and fumes, noise, insufficient lighting, damage to equipment, and psychological and physical oppression [10]. It is estimated that globally around 160 million people are affected by avoidable occupational diseases and more than two million workers die from work related accidents each year [11].

Health is defined as both physical and mental wellbeing while safety is the control of unplanned events. A risk is the chance of something happening that will have an impact on objectives. It is measured in terms of consequences and likelihood. In the OHS context, risk should be thought of as the OHS consequence of a given severity, and the likelihood of that particular consequence occurring. Risk is closely associated with hazard. A hazard is a source of potential harm or a situation with the potential to cause

harm. Imminent danger is a condition where an accident is about to occur.

The Bangladesh Ready-Made Garment industry has grown over the space of a few short decades to become the second largest in the world [12]. The RMG sector has become a key driver of the Bangladesh economy and the nation's development. RMG exports totaled USD 34.14 billion (2015-16) accounting for over 80% of the nation's export earnings and employing around 4 million workers, an estimated 55-60% of whom are women [13]. Considering the economic situation of the world, Bangladesh is still lying in the developing stage. So, it is predicted that by far the occupational health and safety service in Bangladesh is in the developing situation [14]. Safety lapses are serious matters and the authorities concerned are harshly punished by the safety regulatory authorities. Unfortunately in Bangladesh, state safety regulation and intervention are extremely poor. Like everything else, it is also relegated more to a routine than any prevention or inspection function - based only on the whims and desires of the factory owner [5]. Over decades, no worthwhile safety audit has been seen, not even any kind of investigation or positive measures from the RMG factory owners or inspection authorities who are primarily responsible for safety in the work place [15].

International Labor organization (ILO) [16] estimates that over 11,000 employees agonize fatal accidents and an additional 24,500 die from work related illnesses across all segments each year in Bangladesh. It is also projected that more 8 million workers suffer wounds at work – many of which result in perpetual disability [17]. Although little investigation has taken place in Bangladesh, it is internationally recognized that most occupational deaths and injuries are entirely avoidable, and could be avoided if employers and workers took simple initiatives to reduce hazards and risks at the workplace.

However, it should be noted that European brands and buyers formed the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety while North American brands and buyers initiated a platform namely the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety and National Tripartite Action Plan for Building and Fire Safety was adopted by the government of Bangladesh to ensure workplace safety in RMG industry. Accord, Alliance and NAP completed inspection of around 3600 factories; of them only around 1 percent were found vulnerable and shut down immediately. Moreover, remediation in the factories which got Corrective Action Plan (CAP) from the safety platforms is going on [18].

Objectives

- To analyze the health and safety policy of selected companies

- To have an idea about different risk assessments made by the organizations for minimizing accidents
- To examine the provisions of compliance requirements meet by the organizations regarding occupational health and safety

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is exploratory in nature. To find out how the employees are being treated and get a real scenario, both primary and secondary data is needed. The collection method for those two types of data was different. A complete questionnaire was prepared for personal interview. Each respondent were asked accordingly and the responses were gathered instantly. After personal interview is over, experience survey was conducted. Consulting several officials like Chairman, Managing Director, Managers and the Departmental Heads contributes significantly. For this research, secondary data was collected from a variety of sources; such as, OHS manual, audit reports, websites, journals, Labor Act 2006, text books, gov't publications etc. 150 employees from 9 different factories were chosen using convenience sampling method. Tables and figures were made using MS Excel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Health & Safety Policy

Physically and mentally healthy workers can pay their full concentration to work. As a result they are happy with their productivity and management. It becomes a moral duty of the management to ensure a safe and healthy work place. That is why there are several policies followed by the companies regarding workers' safety and health aspects of the workplace. Common policies followed by most of the companies are given bellow.

Fire and machine safety

There will be two emergency exit/emergency evacuations way in each and every floor. At least one fire evacuation drill will take place in a month. Fire alarm switch must be posted in every floor. So whenever there is an emergency, workers can come out safely. During the drill, workers are told to maintain discipline and fire evacuation plan posted on the floor. No one is permitted to stay inside the factory during the evacuation drill. Fire extinguishers will be checked monthly by the supplier and refilled once a year. The extinguishers should be placed in such a place that it can be reached easily.

Each cutter man must wear metal hand gloves; cutter and scissors should be tied with tables. However, mask is must for all the workers. Female employees

have to wear scarf provided by the company. There will be a machine operating instruction with each and every machine. Before start working, workers must remind those carefully. A checklist must be prepared for periodical update of different electrical goods. Every week the electrical installments are checked by company electrician. They check, take corrective action and sign on the pad.

Spot removing

A separate room will be allocated for spot removing, there must be a good ventilation system, enough air passing capability and well lighted. For spot removing section, workers must use their personal protective equipment, such as musk, hand gloves, apron, glass etc. Usage of safe chemical spot lift must be ensured to remove the spots.

Water facility

Facility of potable drinking water is must. Each floor will have two jars/containers of pure drinking water. And the area will be marked both in Bengali and English. The place should be kept clean and water must not fall down. Every day the glasses will be cleared and washed.

Toilet

Each floor will have sufficient toilets. Male and female toilets will be different and marked. Toilets will be cleaned thrice a day. Supply of water in adequate will be there. For each toilet, a pair of sandal should be given. A sweeper will be responsible to maintain and check the toilet.

Medical center

Each floor will have at least one first aid box. Company doctor and nurse facility will be made available. In each floor there will be a number of certified first aiders. They may be called any time if anyone is wounded at the factory. There shall be a medical room at convenience floor where a doctor and a nurse will sit during office hours. Some medicine will also be provided to workers for free. An agreement will be made with local standard hospital for treatment at lower cost.

Risk Assessment

It is good news that many of the companies have the risk assessment. For the purpose of compliance they have done that. Besides for each section different assessment is posted on walls. But the posted papers are so small that they cannot get the attention of the target group. Risk assessment for different sections is as follows

Table-1: Risk Assessment for Finishing Section

Machine	Possible Risk	Person at risk	Prevention
Iron	Heat from Iron	Ironman	Rubber mat under iron operators
Spray Gun	Spray may touch hand or other parts of body	Tag man	hand gloves for spray gun operators
Tag Gun	Finger cut from the needle of tag gun	Spot remover	Use scissor, cutter, knife etc. tying it with a string
Spot remover	Respiratory problem because of spot remover	Boiler operator	Put standard operating procedure at boiler room.
Thread sucker	Electric shock	All workers of the section	
Boiler	Falling of Scissor, cutter or knife from table		

Table-2: Risk Assessment for Cutting Section

Machine	Possible Risk	Person at risk	Prevention
Cutting Machine	Finger Cutting,	Cutting Man	Ensure the use of hand gloves and mask
Scissor	Falling of Scissor from table	Cutting supervisor	Use scissor tying it with a string
Lay-clip	Electric Shock	All workers	Ensure the use of hand gloves and mask

Table-3: Risk Assessment for Sewing Section

Machine	Possible Risk	Person at risk	Prevention
Sewing Machine	finger cut by needle	Operators of sewing section	Use of needle guard
Electric Motor	needle may hurt eye if it is broken	Assistant operator	Use of eye guard
Sewing Iron	finger cut by the knife of overlock machine	Maintenance people	Cover motor pulleys
Scissor	finger may get smashed by snap machine		Rubber mat under iron operators
Cutter	clothes may go inside the motor pulley		Use scissor, cutter, knife etc. tying it with a string
Knife	electric shock from iron		
Others	Heat of iron		
	Falling of Scissor, cutter or knife from table		

Legal Compliance

The first step to comply with legal requirements is to screen local laws and regulations. In our country the Chapter 5, 6 and 8 of Labor Law 2016 [19] is all about health, safety and welfare activities. They have sorted it out. Moreover another requirement from the buyers is to hang relevant Code of Conduct like Business Social Compliance Initiatives (BSCI) at the factory premises. Some of the factories surveyed have also done that. At the entrance of each floor there, on the wall, is a signed copy of the code.

The next stage they have done is that whether they are fulfilling the applicable laws and regulations or not. In some areas like overtime and welfare facility, they are facing some problem. Sometimes the overtime exceeds the limit by almost double. Besides, the child care facility is not up to the mark. It was found that organizations were doing well in terms of First aid and Medical room, Lighting, Spot removing, Safety for ironman etc. Areas like Dining room, sanitary facility, Temperature and ventilation, Noise, usage of Personal protective equipment (PPEs) needs improvement. Firefighting equipment, drill, evacuation plan etc. are in serious state.

Usage of PPE not monitored

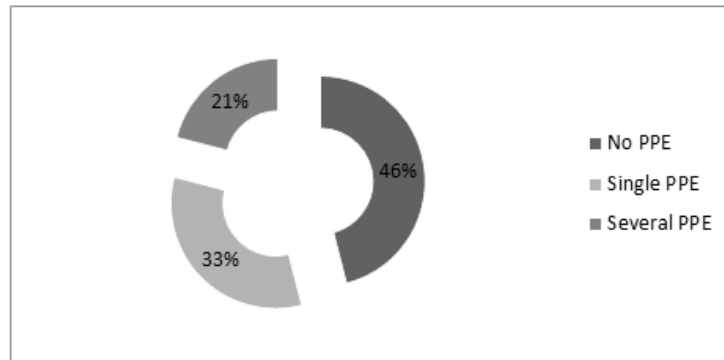


Fig-1: Employees' usage of PPEs

A large number of candidates were found not to use PPE. Some were not at all eager to wear masks while it was a burdensome for cutting assistant to wear hand gloves. Impact of those is very much harmful for health. The survey reveals 46 % employees use no PPE, 33% have single PPE and 21% use several PPEs.

No awareness

Health and safety is a matter which needs attention of everyone [20]. The managers, supervisors and workers all are responsible to do that. But it seems

like no one is really aware of what is going on around. They just come and go finishing their work. What is health and what is safety they don't really care. From the questionnaire it is found that only 23% of the employees think of their health at workplace, 41% said they have not thought of that before, 30% were totally ignoring the issue while other 6% refused to answer. It indicates that there is a lack of arrangements regarding the awareness. They should really think of this issue while considering recruitment and training



Fig-2: Employees' awareness status regarding their safety

Minimum training

A rule exists there in our labor code that employees must be trained in time of recruitment about the machines they will be handling [21]. The training will include detailed description, possible risks, means to avoid the accident and standard operating procedure [22]. But there is a minimum training. In reality it cannot be called training. When a worker is selected,

he/she is asked to go to HR department. Then the officer briefly tells about some rule and disciplinary procedures and that's all. It is not acceptable. The survey reveals that only 24 says they were given instruction about safety, 59 says they had a minimum instruction, 46 had no training at all, 21 cannot remember exactly what happened then.

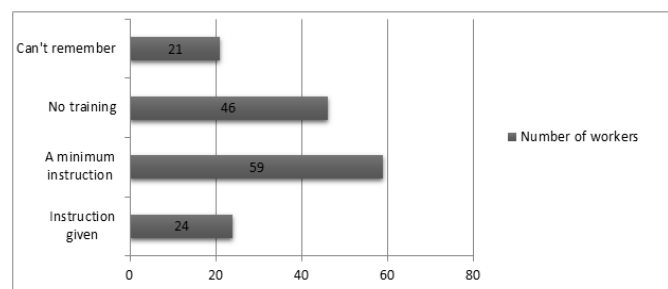


Fig-3: Employees' training status regarding their safety

Unsafe sitting arrangement

Evacuation during an emergency is very important. Within a very short time all the workers must move to an assembly point. For this workplace needs to

be safe and free from obstacle. The workers at many of the factories are blocked by pile of goods in many times. They have a poor sitting arrangement.

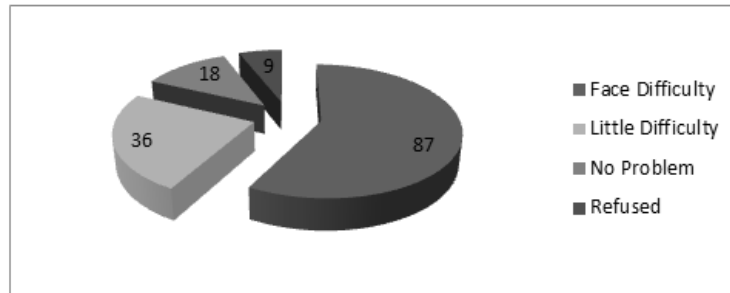


Fig-4: Employees’ response regarding their sitting arrangement

The operators can work sitting but the helpers have to keep standing all day long. Sometimes they get stuck in time of lunch. If it happens during normal time then what might happen is easily understood. When they were asked about this matter they gave varying answers. Among the respondents 87 agreed that they face difficulty in escaping, 36 replied they have a little difficulty, 18 had no problem and other 9 had no reply.

Poor management of amenities

Workplace amenities are must for any kind of factory. Employer cannot avoid his responsibility just making those facilities, proper management is also

necessary. Toilets and washing facilities are the most common amenities. Companies surveyed have a good number of toilets and wash rooms, but their management is not good enough. Often spills are beside the places. In front of the drinking water taps it is also seen. There is a possibility of slip. Besides, the inside condition of the facility is not appropriate. Basins are not functioning properly, no sandal is provided, and odor is coming and so on. Most of the respondents agreed about the poor condition of toilets and wash rooms (108). 27 told it is found clean seldom and 15 other did not care of what is going on.

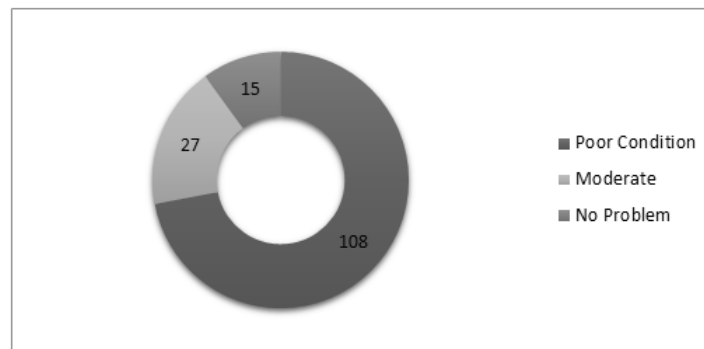


Fig-5: Employees’ response regarding amenities management

CONCLUSION

There is a clear disparity between the policies prepared by the companies and actual practice. Some of the factories were doing better while others lack noticeable improvements. There is no doubt that health and safety matters. We can’t think of ignoring it now a day. Accidents and ill health are costly to workers and their families. They can also hurt companies because, in addition to the costs of personal injuries, they may incur far greater costs from damage to property or equipment, and lost production. Although the study cannot be taken as fully representative to reveal current practices throughout the country, it shows practices happening in many of the factories. There are negative findings along

with positive ones too. But major finding is that the employers are more liable for poor condition in their factories. With very few exceptions, employers have to have liability insurance cover for injuries and ill health to their employees. Bangladesh having regard to the ILO Conventions, ratified 35 Conventions including seven Core Conventions [22]. The existing labor law of the country is exhaustive and it covers different fields of employment and occupations. The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006 has been enacted by the Parliament after repealing twenty-five age-old labor laws.

The government of Bangladesh needs to fully implement the commitments to improve factory safety

across all industries in Bangladesh. Having a safe working environment which is free of structural, electrical and fire-related hazards is a basic right of the workers. All the workers in the country should be protected under the initiatives of responsible authorities not just those covered by brand-led safety initiatives. When everyone will work with the aim to promote national branding, improvement in GDP margin, labor friendly law will be implemented in its true nature; the factories will be more compliant and attractive to international markets.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Improvement of existing health and safety policy in mandatory. Only a one page policy is not good enough to handle such a big issue. The policy should address all the aspects of health and safety. It must also take consideration of different laws, code of conducts, other necessary regulations etc.
- Providing of personal protective equipment in adequate number must be a priority. All the sections and employees should be taken into consideration while finding the PPE requirement. Workers need to be given the PPEs with a written document showing their receiving.
- Regular training should be arranged for maintaining safety issues. A training plan for next six month covering the employees of all section is necessary to make.
- Walkways, stairs and aisles should be clear always. No good should be kept there for a while. Anytime there may have an accident and it may block the evacuation.
- Enforcement of existing laws must be ensured.
- Awareness from all the stakeholders is highly needed.

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