THE ENGINE THAT DRIVES THE ECONOMY

The RMG industry in Bangladesh has been built The over a period of four decades through the dedication and hard work of entrepreneurs and employees without much support from the government and other local or international organisations. The collapse of Rana Plaza, however, has given rise to a lot of issues that concern all key stakeholders including retailers, consumers, workers, factory owners, governments, NGOs and international organisations. Rubana Huq shares with the *Star* what needs to be done to modernise the RMG industry. She is the managing director of Mohammadi Group, a position she has held for the last eighteen years, empowering several thousand women who manufacture and export a million pieces of ready-made garments every month. Rubana Huq is also a poet having won the SAARC literary award in 2006 and is currently a PhD candidate at Jadavpur University, India.



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Rubana Huq

What are the key areas for intervention to make the growth in the garment industry sustainable in the long run?

Bangladesh cannot afford to be the low end supplier anymore. A lot needs to be done in order to improve productivity, skills and marketing strategy. The manufacturers along with the government need to invest in branding Bangladesh globally with a focus to produce products that would have the label: 'Made in Bangladesh with Pride'. The government needs to allocate high lands (not like Baushia in Munshiganj) in places and encourage special RMG clusters equipped with proper infrastructure so that the weaker and smaller factories can relocate.

Both the manufacturers and the government need to work hand in hand and engage in economic diplomacy so that the global image of Bangladesh RMG sector can be salvaged. The brands could raise consumer awareness and share their supply chain strategies with more transparency with the clients. They could also partner in projects that involve improving non-wage benefits (setting up schools, hospitals, low cost housing etc) for the workers and work together with the owners in bettering the lives of the workers.

What can the garment industry do to make itself more transparent and accountable?

The garment industry can begin by stop being defensive. It is time we wake up to our altered realities where "business as usual" does not happen to be the case anymore. The real change can only be initiated from the industry itself. The manufacturers have to be helping each other out and plan on mentoring and monitoring smaller manufacturing units. If 250 responsible manufacturers can guide and take responsibility of 10 factories each, our RMG reality would change within 6 months. I think that it is imperative for manufacturers to bridge with labour. That is a key area through which we can all gain accountability. By giving labour access to negotiations, through Workers Participatory Committees or through Trade Unions, the manufacturers would gain instant credibility. There is an acute lack of research in RMG. The manufacturing community should encourage more research to be done in their factories so that well researched studies can emerge from the sector which will give a transparent and honest insight to stake holders.

How can the trust between employees and the owners be rebuilt?

Trust can only be built and re built through all parties staying engaged in dialogue. In many instances, the mid level management in the factories abuses power. Consequently, many deviations happen even without the owner's knowledge. One single message to the mid level management of having good practices in the factory will change the scenario. Owners could also press the brands for participating to match the owners' contributions to build a Workers' Welfare Fund. More incentive based payment systems could be introduced so that the workers' skills and productivity improve. Last but not the least, the workers need to feel the sense of ownership in the factory. Only then can real change occur. ■