

POST-RANA PLAZA DISASTER

Securing positive dynamics in RMG sector

FARAH KABIR and SHUBHOMOY HAQUE

READYMADE Garment (RMG) industry is one of the major contributors to Bangladesh economy in terms of employment, production, export and foreign exchange earnings. RMG contributes 13% of GDP, adds value to 78% of total exports and employs around 4 million workers, mostly women. Moreover, it has also created employment in related services. Bangladesh foreign currency earning has increased as a result.

Unfortunately, issues like poor working conditions in the workplace, lack of labour rights and worker unrest have left negative perceptions about the sector. Bangladesh is often criticised for its poor workplace standards in the factories and unfriendly conditions for the workers. The RMG sector came under national and international spotlight for its unsafe workplace after the Rana Plaza Building collapse at Savar on April 24, 2013. So far, the total number of deceased stands at 1,135.

In the last one and half years, the Rana Plaza incident has overshadowed discussions and deliberations related to the sector. It has also created scope for collaboration of the stakeholders and for undertaking various initiatives. Rehabilitation and reintegration of the workers are on-going. A number of positive changes can be seen in the RMG sector. The amendment of Labour Law 2006 was one such step. Bangladesh Parliament passed the Bangladesh Labour Law (Amendment) bill in 2013. Since the amendment, there has been a dramatic increase in new unions being formed and registered. In 2013, 96 new trade unions were registered with the Bangladesh Department of Labour (DoL) and, presently, 222 unions in the RMG sector are registered with DoL. Although there are debates regarding this sudden emergence of unions, the newly formed unions are challenged with estab-

lishing rights of the workers.

Increase in minimum wage was a significant change last year. RMG workers put forward their demand claiming that minimum wage should be \$100 a month. After several meetings, the Official Wage Board proposed a 77% rise in the minimum wage for garment workers, which is equivalent to \$66.25 per month. Pressure and movement of the workers led to the readymade garment factory owners agreeing on November 13, 2013 to pay Tk. 5,300 as minimum wage for entry-level workers.

In November 2013, three parallel safety pacts were tentatively agreed on common standards for plant inspections in the country. Experts from the three groups -- the Accord on Fire and Safety in Bangladesh, led by the European retailers; the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, led by American retailers; and the GoB led National Tripartite Action Plan—reached an agreement. Two big groups of retailers have already finished inspecting nearly 1,700 factories. The Alliance, representing 26 US-based garment retailers and brands, also completed initial inspection of 587 factories in July. The Accord, a platform of 189 European retailers and brands, recently completed inspection of 1,106 factories.

Representatives from the government, the garment industry—local and international—trade unions and non-governmental organisations came together in September 2013 to form a multi-stakeholder body named 'Rana Plaza Coordination Committee.' Between March 24 and September 15, 2014, a total of 2,832 claims were received from dependents of the deceased or missing workers, as well as from the injured workers. On April 22, 2,340 claimants were paid Tk. 50,000 through bKash. After a further 655 claims were received and verified, Tk. 50,000 was paid to the beneficiaries through the Dutch Bangla Bank. On October 1, 2014, 1,552 family members and dependants of the



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deceased workers and 35 injured workers were paid the 2nd installment through their bank accounts. All the payments have been funded through the 'Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund,' which was set up to receive voluntary donations from donors from around the world.

RMG sector has the scope of expanding its business opportunity, increasing production and attracting more foreign investment. The manufacturers have taken various measures in an effort to tackle the negative situation in the industry post-Tazreen and Rana Plaza disasters. They are working on a roadmap to increase export and earn \$50 billion by 2021 from garment export. The industry now requires long-term changes towards an accountable garment industry. Positive, relevant and responsible partnership of the stakeholders may be the key to restoring the image of RMG sector and building an image of a responsible sector.

Beside improvement of existing policy/legal environment, implementation of existing law and policy is crucial to bring the expected changes. Investment-friendly legal and policy environment in line with the international conventions, e.g. ILO C 121, and better institutional settings need to be ensured too. It's time for rethinking the compensation framework for workers and establishing a central RMG labour welfare fund.

Smart investment in infrastructure, development of communication and transportation, generation of power (to ensure constant power supply in the industry) are required for scaling-up productivity. Besides, use of new technology also needs to be encouraged to enable the industry to move towards modern environment of production.

Since a satisfied labour force is a prerequisite for sustainability and for increasing production, emphasis on trust building among the workers

cannot be overstated. The practice of safety and security in the factories needs to be promoted by taking up extensive awareness campaigns. Moreover, capacity development initiative for the workers and factory management, and developing a comprehensive database of all the RMG workers, will bring greater returns.

The recent dynamics in garment industry have created a space for shifting responsibility of the stakeholders. Besides the traditional responsibility of the government, local manufacturers and the international buyers, the consumers should also come forward and play a new role in social responsibility. The representatives of workers and manufacturers should take initiative for effective negotiation with larger companies and investors for raising social commitment, perhaps revisiting the profit margin for the company and offering a portion of profit to workers as their contribution towards the welfare of the workers.

The RMG sector has evolved since the '70's even in the absence of legal and policy framework. More than 5,000 factories, representing the industry, have become an almost inseparable part of the global value chain. The trend of its stable growth indicates Bangladesh's potential to become the leading global player in readymade garments trade. It is important to seriously consider scope of development in all aspects. The risk of industrial disasters like fire and building collapse remains a common threat to the stakeholders. Issues like workplace safety, minimum wage and democratic participation of the workers require more attention and commitment. A responsible role of stakeholders is essential to address the existing challenges in the industry.

The writers are Country Director and Monitoring Expert -- LES (Rana Plaza) Project at ActionAid Bangladesh, respectively.

Gender equity in schools in Muslim countries: It can be done

NIAZ ASADULLAH

MUSLIM countries worldwide have problems with gender equality. They dominate the bottom ten countries in the Global Gender Gap Report and none of the ten most successful countries offering equal opportunities for men and women is Muslim. Girls lag behind boys in school attendance, making up 54% of the out-of-school child population in the Arab states, a figure that has not changed since 2000. Of the ten countries that fare the worst for child school attendance rates, seven are Muslim. These are Nigeria, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Cote d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Niger and Yemen: countries that are often considered hotspots for acts of violence against women and school girls.

The near-fatal attack on Malala Yousafzai by a Taliban gunman in Pakistan two years ago reminds us of the challenging circumstances in which girls attend school in many Muslim countries. Her subsequent fight for education for girls and children worldwide won her this year's Nobel Peace Prize. Earlier this year, as many as 276 school girls were abducted for similar reasons in the Borno state of Nigeria. Their captors from the extremist Boko Haram group consider secular education a grave threat to Islam. Frequent attacks on schools in Nigeria have forced many parents to withdraw girls

from education. In some states schools have even closed down for fear of insurgent attacks. More recently a Boko Haram-style armed group warned schools in Pakistan against co-education. It's little wonder Nigeria and Pakistan together account for a quarter of the world's out-of-school children.

Why this inequity in Muslim nations? In many Muslim countries women are subjected to patriarchal norms and varying degrees of restriction on economic participation. This reduces the value of girls' education in society. Some scholars blame culture and religion for this problem. Others say the economic structure of some Muslim countries is not conducive to women's development. They argue patriarchal norms persist because oil-rich economies limit the role of women in the paid workforce and restrict women's participation in politics.

Not all Muslim nations suffer gender inequity in education:

Within the Middle East, a region widely considered to lack progress in girls' education, Turkey is very close to eliminating the gender gap in schooling. In Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain and Libya, more girls are in secondary school than boys and there is gender parity in primary enrolment. Much clearer success stories are emerging outside the Arab world. In Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim country, equal

numbers of girls and boys are in school. In neighbouring Malaysia, boys even lag behind girls at almost all levels of education.

In the Borno state of Nigeria, half of ten-year-old girls remain out of school, a situation Malaysia overcame nearly three decades ago. A similar pattern is visible in Bangladesh where girls outnumber boys in primary as well as secondary school. Neither religious orthodoxy nor income poverty could keep girls away from schools in this Muslim majority nation.

What explains these contrasts within the Muslim world?

The answer lies partly in different policy choices. Even though public spending on education hasn't increased significantly, the Bangladesh government prioritised women's development through gender-responsive budgeting and partnered with non-state providers to make up for gaps in public investment. The government introduced nationwide scholarship schemes for school-aged girls. NGOs were also encouraged to run development programmes targeting girls and women in rural communities. The coordinated push for greater educational opportunities for girls was matched by large-scale deployment of rural women as providers of social services as well as micro-entrepreneurs.

This helped to quickly shift the cultural norm

in girls' social participation. The absence of such a "big push" in Pakistan probably explains why it has fallen behind Bangladesh in terms of girls' education. The Global Gender Gap index ranks Bangladesh (75) much higher than other Muslim majority countries such as Saudi Arabia (127), Iran (130) and Pakistan (135).

Malaysia's approach to girls' education was more conventional. Inspired by the success of high-performing East Asian economies such as South Korea, Malaysia prioritised education for all. Long before experiencing double-digit growth rates, Malaysian education spending was much higher than that of other developing countries. According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, by 1970 gross female primary school enrolment in Malaysia was nearly three times higher than that of Nigeria.

In Malaysia, democracy, development and equitable growth in early years reduced the demand for extreme views. This may explain why female schooling has never been undermined in Malaysia by religious extremism or violence caused by "Islamic" radical groups like Boko Haram. What is happening in Nigeria is a reflection of long-term deprivation of basic health and education services. Despite plentiful natural resources, human development was never a priority. The country's oil rent was not used productively to build schools and boost

literacy rates.

The absence of a functional democracy, poor governance and widespread corruption may have fuelled demand for a puritanical Islamic regime and allowed extremists groups like Boko Haram to thrive. Boko Haram has emerged in the poorest part of Nigeria where nearly three-quarters of the population live in abject poverty. Nigeria remains one of the few developing countries where more than 20% of primary school-aged children will remain out of school by 2015.

The success stories of Indonesia and Malaysia highlight the importance of sustained public investment. And Bangladesh proves that if gender equity is prioritised, rapid progress is possible despite limited economic capacity. These three countries show that neither poverty nor patriarchy can stand in the way of women's development in Muslim societies. The lesson for the rest of the Muslim world is that schooling gender gaps can be narrowed, as long as there is a political consensus on achieving education for all. A lack of consensus can encourage religious extremism and opposition to inclusive development. This will further limit the prospect of women's empowerment through education.

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QUOTABLE
Quote

If one way be better than another, that you may be sure is nature's way.

Aristotle

BEETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker

HENRY

by Don Trachte

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

ACROSS

1 Launder
5 Tries for flies
10 Killer whale
11 Medal recipients
13 Kitty cry
14 Snappy answer
15 Indigestion aid
17 56, in old Rome
18 Countries
19 Storage spot
20 Nettle
21 Scrabble tile holder
22 Showed again
25 Challenges
26 Foreboding sign
27 Crow cry
28 Beanie or beret
29 Wood shop sweepings
33 Young fox
34 Pressing condition
35 Bring out
37 On the summit of
38 Feel empathy
39 Queue

DOWN

40 Discourage
41 Future flower
1 Grown girl
2 Sports setting
3 "Ivanhoe" author
4 From Maui, say
5 Become smaller
6 Hoe targets
7 Museum focus
8 Strip of icons
9 Military stint
12 Smells terrible
16 Field crop
21 Injustices
22 Porch chair
23 Wrote to, in a way
24 Gator or gecko
25 Hip-hop pal
27 Ford's successor
29 Hotel option
30 Loosen, as laces
31 Crumpet's cousin
32 Used a keyboard
36 Mouse chaser

CRYPTOQUOTE

8:30

WY NXJKB, SKO'FD ZUOEJZ U BDNNKY UYC ZJDY EWM DY U ZDNZ. WY BWQD, SKO'FD EWM DY U ZDNZ ZJUZ ZDUXJDN SKO U BDNNKY.

- ZKH AKCDZZ

Yesterday's answer

CRYPTOQUOTE

8:30

A XYDLBAAXR is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

Yesterday's CRYPTOQUOTE:

THE WHOLE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION IS TO TURN MIRRORS INTO WINDOWS.

-- SYDNEY J. HARRIS

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Dr. Md. Rezaul Karim completed his BDS from Dhaka Dental College & Hospital (under Dhaka University) before pursuing higher studies in different corners of the globe to further his knowledge and education in dentistry. He first completed his FRSH from England in 1992 before going on to do his DDS from Denmark in 1996 and finally, his PGT from Mumbai. He then returned back to Bangladesh, where he now lends his medical expertise and vast worldly knowledge to budding medical graduates as an Associate Professor at the Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU).

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