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Labour Rights and Workplace Conditions in Bangladesh's Garment Sector: Progress and Persistent Challenges

Mohammad Hanif Mojumder

PhD Scholar

Faculty of Law

Mangalayatan University, India

ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector occupies a paradoxical position within global capitalism. It is simultaneously celebrated as a driver of export-led growth and criticised as a site of chronic labour exploitation. Employing more than four million workers and accounting for the overwhelming majority of national export earnings, the sector has become central to Bangladesh's economic identity. Since the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, significant reforms have been introduced to improve workplace safety, regulatory compliance, and corporate accountability. These reforms driven by domestic regulation and transnational governance initiatives have produced measurable progress in occupational safety and health (OSH), factory inspections, and remediation systems. However, deeper structural challenges continue to undermine labour rights. Low wages relative to living costs, restricted freedom of association, excessive working hours, gender-based discrimination, and weak enforcement mechanisms remain pervasive. Moreover, global supply chain dynamics particularly buyer-driven price pressures and short lead times continue to incentivise labour-intensive cost-cutting practices. This article critically examines the evolution of labour rights and workplace conditions in Bangladesh's garment sector, assessing both achievements and persistent failures. Drawing on updated secondary data, international labour standards, and scholarly literature, it argues that post-2013 reforms have improved safety governance but have not fundamentally transformed labour power relations. The study concludes that sustainable improvement requires a shift from compliance-oriented governance to a rights-based model that integrates living wages, freedom of association, and responsible purchasing practices.

Keywords: Bangladesh, garment industry, labour rights, workplace conditions, freedom of association, global supply chains, occupational safety.

1. Introduction

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry has become the backbone of Bangladesh's economy and one of the most important production hubs in the global apparel supply chain. From a modest beginning in the late 1970s, the sector has expanded into a multi-billion-dollar industry supplying major international brands across Europe and North America. This rapid growth has generated employment opportunities, particularly for women from rural and low-income backgrounds, contributing to poverty reduction and social mobility (Kabeer, 2000). Yet the sector's development trajectory has been deeply contested. The same industry that created jobs and foreign exchange earnings has also been associated with unsafe factories, poverty wages, labour repression, and recurrent industrial unrest. The Rana Plaza disaster in April 2013, which killed more than 1,100 workers, exposed these contradictions to

the world and triggered unprecedented scrutiny of labour conditions in Bangladesh's garment sector (Siddiqi, 2015).

In the aftermath, a complex web of reforms emerged. These included amendments to labour legislation, expansion of factory inspection regimes, and the introduction of transnational safety initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety. Over the past decade, these reforms have reshaped the governance architecture of the industry. This article asks a central question: To what extent have labour rights and workplace conditions in Bangladesh's garment sector genuinely improved, and what challenges continue to persist? By analysing post-2013 developments, the study aims to move beyond simplistic narratives of either success or failure and instead offer a balanced, evidence-based assessment.

2. Methodology and Analytical Approach

This article adopts a qualitative doctrinal and analytical review methodology. It draws on secondary data from international organisations, government publications, peer-reviewed academic literature, and policy reports published between 2013 and 2025. The analysis is informed by international labour standards, particularly the International Labour Organization's (ILO) core conventions on freedom of association, collective bargaining, and occupational safety.

Rather than treating labour rights as isolated variables, the study employs a political economy framework, recognising that workplace conditions are shaped by interactions between state regulation, global supply chains, employer practices, and worker agency (Anner, 2020). This approach allows for an integrated understanding of both progress and persistent constraints.

3. Overview of the Bangladesh Garment Sector

3.1 Economic significance

The garment sector contributes over 80 percent of Bangladesh's export earnings and remains the country's largest industrial employer. Its success has positioned Bangladesh as one of the world's leading apparel exporters, second only to China in some markets. The industry's competitiveness is largely based on low labour costs, preferential market access, and large-scale production capacity.

3.2 Workforce composition

Approximately four million workers are directly employed in the RMG sector, with women constituting the majority. Female participation in factory work has altered traditional gender norms and increased women's economic visibility (Kabeer, 2000). However, women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid production roles and face heightened risks of harassment and job insecurity.

4. Legal and Institutional Framework for Labour Rights

4.1 Bangladesh Labour Act and Reforms

The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 forms the core legal framework governing employment relations, wages, working hours, trade unions, and workplace safety. Following international pressure after 2013, several amendments were introduced to strengthen provisions related to factory safety and union registration.

Despite these reforms, implementation remains uneven. Labour inspection capacity is limited, and enforcement mechanisms often lack deterrent power (ILO, 2020). Consequently, legal protections frequently exist on paper but are weakly realised in practice.

4.2 Minimum Wage Regulation

Minimum wage setting has been one of the most contentious aspects of labour governance. Periodic wage revisions have increased nominal wages, most recently in 2023. However, workers and labour advocates argue that statutory wages remain insufficient to meet rising living costs, particularly in urban industrial zones. As a result, many workers rely on overtime to achieve subsistence income, blurring the line between voluntary and compulsory overtime.

5. Progress in Workplace Safety and Compliance

5.1 Post-Rana Plaza safety initiatives

The most visible progress in the garment sector has occurred in occupational safety and health. Transnational initiatives introduced after 2013 established systematic factory inspections, hazard identification, and remediation processes. Thousands of factories underwent structural, electrical, and fire safety assessments, leading to the closure or remediation of high-risk facilities.

5.2 Institutionalisation of Safety Governance

Safety reforms have gradually shifted from ad hoc interventions to institutionalised governance systems. Regular inspections, public disclosure of remediation progress, and worker safety training have become more common. Compared to the pre-2013 period, catastrophic factory collapses have significantly declined, indicating genuine improvements in physical safety.

6. Persistent Challenges in Labour Rights

6.1 Low Wages and Economic Insecurity

Despite wage increases, garment workers continue to earn wages that fall short of living wage benchmarks. Inflation, housing costs, and food price volatility erode real income gains, leaving workers economically vulnerable. Wage protests remain frequent, reflecting unresolved tensions between labour costs and global price competition.

6.2 Working Hours and Labour Intensity

Long working hours and excessive overtime persist across many factories. Global buyers' demand for rapid production cycles often translates into intensified labour practices, particularly during peak seasons. These conditions contribute to worker fatigue, health problems, and reduced quality of life.

6.3 Freedom of Association and Collective Bargaining

Freedom of association remains one of the weakest dimensions of labour rights in the RMG sector. While union registration has increased since 2013, many unions face employer resistance, intimidation, or dismissal of organisers. In many factories, participation committees substitute for genuine collective bargaining, limiting workers' negotiating power (Anner, 2020).

6.4 Gender-based Discrimination and Harassment

Women workers face persistent gender-specific challenges, including harassment, wage discrimination, and limited career advancement. Although some factories have introduced grievance mechanisms, fear of retaliation often discourages reporting. Gender inequality thus remains embedded in workplace power structures.

6.5 Subcontracting and Informalisation

A significant portion of garment production occurs through subcontracting arrangements that fall outside formal monitoring systems. Workers in subcontracted units are often excluded from safety programmes, wage protections, and social security benefits, reinforcing a dual labour market within the industry.

7. Findings

Based on the analysis, the study identifies the following key findings:

Safety governance has improved significantly since 2013, reducing the risk of large-scale industrial disasters.

Legal reforms have not translated into full enforcement, particularly regarding wages and freedom of association.

Labour rights violations persist due to global supply chain pressures, especially buyer-driven cost and time constraints.

Women workers remain disproportionately vulnerable, despite their central role in the industry.

Subcontracting undermines regulatory coverage, creating pockets of extreme precarity.

8. Recommendations

8.1 Strengthen Living Wage Mechanisms

Minimum wage setting should be linked to transparent cost-of-living assessments and regularly adjusted to inflation. Sector-level bargaining mechanisms could reduce conflict and stabilise wage negotiations.

8.2 Protect Freedom of Association

Union registration processes should be simplified, and anti-union retaliation must be penalised. Independent trade unions should be recognised as legitimate social partners.

8.3 Regulate Global Buyer Practices

International brands should be held accountable for purchasing practices that contribute to labour rights violations. Binding due-diligence obligations can align commercial incentives with labour standards.

8.4 Address Gender Inequality

Factories must implement enforceable anti-harassment policies, promote women into supervisory roles, and ensure maternity and childcare protections.

8.5 Extend Oversight to Subcontractors

Regulatory and compliance mechanisms should explicitly include subcontracted factories to prevent the creation of an unregulated shadow workforce.

9. Conclusion

Bangladesh's garment sector has travelled a long distance since the Rana Plaza tragedy. Improvements in workplace safety demonstrate that reform is possible when political will, international pressure, and institutional mechanisms converge. However, safety alone does not constitute labour justice. Wages that fail to meet basic needs, restricted worker voice, and persistent gender inequality indicate that deeper structural reforms are required. For

Bangladesh's garment industry to achieve sustainable and ethical growth, labour governance must move beyond compliance checklists toward a rights-based model that empowers workers as active stakeholders. Only then can economic success be reconciled with social justice.

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