



WOMEN WORKERS IN THE READY-MADE GARMENTS INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH: THE CHALLENGES OF EMPOWERMENT USING AMARTYA SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh's Ready-made garment (RMG) industry is one of the noteworthy sectors contributing to economic growth, industrialisation, and foreign exports. It is also the world's second-largest apparel market after China. The question is whether it also empowers disadvantaged women from rural Bangladesh who make up most of the workforce. After the overwhelming tragedies of the Tazreen Fashions Fire in 2012 and Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013, international buyers, human rights agencies, donor agencies and other stakeholders raised concerns about unsafe working conditions and poor compliance facilities for female workers. The thesis evaluates the progress of women workers towards economic, social and political empowerment in the presence of human right violations that obstruct achievement of full empowerment. By using Amartya Sen's capability approach as a lens to conceptualise empowerment, the thesis explores how employment in the RMG industry contributes to the everyday lives of women workers. It finds that the RMG industry enhances the economic and political ability of women to realise new practices of agency and renegotiate their social roles to formulate and chose strategic life options. The thesis concludes that women's full empowerment vis-à-vis men is yet to be achieved because human rights violations remain in the RMG industry, which is a reflection of society. The findings of the thesis will be useful for policymakers to ensure better working conditions and to protect the rights of women RMG worker through reducing human rights violations. Future research will investigate whether progress is made towards women workers' comprehensive capabilities.

Keywords: RMG Industry, empowerment, human rights violation, women workers, capability, gender inequality.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Aziza Rahman
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ARDC	Asian Disaster Reduction Center
BAL	Bangladesh Awami League
BBS	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics
BEPZA	Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority
BFWE	Bangladesh Federation of Women Entrepreneurs
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garments Manufactures and Exporters Association
BIDA	Bangladesh Investment Development Authority
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association
BNP	Bangladesh National Party
BWCCI	Bangladesh Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industry
CAP	Corrective Action Plan
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue
DIFE	Department of Inspection for factories and Establishments
EPZ	Export Processing Zone
EU	European Union
GSP	Generalised System of Preferences
HCR	Headcount Rate
HIES	Household Income and Expenditure Survey
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IFC	International Finance Corporation
IGC	International Growth Centre
ILO	International Labour Organization
LDC	Least Development Countries
MFA	Multi-Fibre Arrangement
NTPA	National Tripartite Plan of Action
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategic Papers
QLFS	Quarterly Labour Force Survey
RMG	Ready-made Garments
SVRS	Sample Vital Registration Survey
TI	Transparency International
TIB	Transparency International Bangladesh
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
USTR	United States Trade Representatives

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Made in Bangladesh, a Wake-Up Call for the Fashion Industry

In 2013, the Rana Plaza building in Dhaka, Bangladesh, collapsed, a heartbreak which killed 1136 garment workers and injured around 2,500. It turns out that this tragic event caused the Western world became sensitive to the working conditions that exemplify the Readymade Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh. A study by Nimbalker, Mawson & Harris (2016, p. 4) claimed that the Rana Plaza incident shook them to improve the human rights of workers throughout the whole apparel industry supply chain. More than 60 million people were employed in the textile, clothing and footwear industry globally in 2015, and the leading garment producing countries were China, Bangladesh and India respectively (Clean Clothes Campaign 2015). The textile and clothing industry is known as a "buyer-driven chain" wherein the big retailers in Europe, US market, Canada, Japan, Australia etc. determine production locations, products and prices. The most labour-intensive parts of the supply chain are in developing countries and the majority of garment workers work are in Asian factories. Bangladesh Garments Manufactures and Exporters Association (BGMEA) assertions that the RMG industry in Bangladesh played a crucial role in uplifting the national economy, becoming the single biggest export earner and providing about 81% of total export earnings in 2016-2017 (BGMEA 2018). The RMG industry employed four million workers (BGMEA 2018). Approximately 80% of garment workers are women from poor, rural households (World Bank 2017). Although the garments industry played a crucial role in the state's export-oriented development and economic growth strategies, industrialisation, empowerment of women, and workers health, safety and working conditions were very poor and unsafe (Ali & Medhekar 2016, p. 1178). The problem is that because of human rights violation in RMG sector, improvements in the socio-economic capabilities of women were hindered. Due to a lack of workers' rights, forced and child labour, and exploitation the fashion industry became unethical. Thus, the thesis explores the RMG industry in Bangladesh, focusing on women's socio-economic empowerment and how it is obstructed by human rights violations.

The broader impacts of employment in the RMG industry on the daily lives of women workers are not addressed properly in existing studies. There are several reasons for the increase in the number of women employed in the industry. Bangladesh is one of the most vulnerable states to climate change and disaster-prone states in the world (World Bank 2018). Notably, natural disasters, i.e. floods, cyclones and river bank erosion cause homelessness in poor, rural areas. The homeless enter the capital Dhaka city in search of works and better lives (World Bank 2007, p. 13). Large numbers of women and girls become garment workers for both push factors, such as poverty, financial crises, unemployment, illness and death of the household head, in addition to pull factors, such as the desire to improve their standard of living through social and economic advancement, and saving for their dowry (Kibria 1998, p. 1). The status of women in Bangladeshi society is determined by the social construction of gender. Due to patriarchal rules and norms, women are

subordinate to men in society, resulting in a lifelong dependency. The livelihood of women often declines in both social position and material conditions and they fear their own selves deprived of male security (Kabeer, Mahmud & Tasneem 2011, p. 7). Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) of Bangladesh reported that twenty-four-point three percent of the population were below the poverty line in 2015 (HIES 2016, p. 40) and particularly poor women in Bangladesh were further marginalised because they are poor and less empowered than men (Mahmud & Tasneem 2014, p. 92). Women RMG workers are challenging traditional social norms and customs by deferring their early marriage, enhancing decision making capability and working with men in the workplace in ways that were thought impossible at the start of the 21st Century. Arguably, employment in the RMG industry is reducing the social exclusion of women in Bangladesh (Khosla 2009, p. 289), though there is little analysis on how the RMG industry enables women to re-negotiate their roles in society, which often suppresses them, or the impact of work in risky, unsafe conditions. By using Sen's capability approach, the thesis analyses how the RMG sector enables women to enhance their social and economic positions, yet constraints like human rights violations obstruct attainment of their full capabilities.

The health, safety and working condition of workers in the RMG industry do not comply with global standards including, for example, minimum standards of building and construction law, large huge number of poor women are employed in the RMG industry with very low wages, a miserable working environment, and they are victims of abuse and harassment by the factory owners (Ansary & Barua 2015, p. 425). The negligence of the associated stakeholders towards the physical and workplace safety compliance issues caused different industrial tragedies in RMG factories in Bangladesh. The Rana Plaza accident in 2013 and Tazreen fire in 2012 are used to explain how the lack of human rights contributed to these disasters. In 2012, a fire at the Tazreen Fashion factory killed 117 and injured 200 workers (Ahmed 2012). The eight-story Rana Plaza collapsed on 24 April 2013 because of violations in building construction and over tenancy. It was the deadliest occupational accident in the history of Bangladesh's RMG industry, as well as for international apparel industry (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 579). The casualties are a result of serious human rights violations which take their toll on RMG workers and their families. Quelch (2013) argued that in order to improve workers' workplace safety and human rights aspects, Western retailers and manufacturers should exercise more influence on their suppliers and subcontractors. After the Rana Plaza collapse, several initiatives were adopted by the government, factory owners, RMG associations, international labour organizations and multinational buyers in order to improve workplace safety compliance in the RMG industry. These include the National tripartite plan of action (NTPA), the EU Sustainability Compact, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) plan of Action, the Accord and the Alliance initiatives, ILO initiatives with the support of Canada, Netherlands, United Kingdom and other ongoing initiatives by many development partners such as Germany, UNIDO, Denmark, Sweden and USA (Moazzem & Islam 2015, pp. 17-30). Moreover, another buyer such as Australia concerns the issue of Rana Plaza and after that they graded Australian apparel company those have been

connecting to the supply chain of Bangladesh and other countries according to the Australian Fashion Report 2016 in order to address forced labour, child labour, exploitation and labour rights such as policies, knowing suppliers, auditing and supplier relationships and worker empowerment (Nimbalkar, Mawson & Harris 2016, p. 5). The existing challenge is to drive for achieving sustainability in the RMG sector by improving compliance after ending support from external partners (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 582).

This paper builds on Amartya Sen's capability approach to analyze the empowerment of women RMG workers. The capability approach was pioneered by the Nobel laureate economist Amartya Sen in the 1980s as an alternate method of welfare economics (Sen 1985). Amartya Sen devised the capability approach initially to empower theory and introduce together a range of thoughts. The capability approach in its subsequent form is concerned with how to upgrade human development, agency and freedom of individuals to desire a life they value not only focusing on resources they possess (Sen 1999, p. 74). The World Bank defines empowerment as an individual's physical, human, social and political assets and capabilities (World Bank 2002, p. 10). The approach also stresses gender equity, freedom of choice, rights, human development and individual well-being as means of ending poverty. The three main concepts of functioning, capability and agency are defined as defining people's wellbeing. First, Functioning refers to the different effects an individual may attain, such as sound health, shelter, a good job, participating in social activities, travelling, voting. Secondly, capabilities refer to actual freedoms and opportunities to achieve outcomes, such as the opportunity to be healthy, the opportunity to travel, and the freedom to participate in society (Sen 1999, p. 75). Thirdly, an agent, in Sen's terms, is a person who 'acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives' (Sen 1999, p. 19). The extent to which individuals can produce capabilities from resources is controlled by numerous factors. These are individual, social and environmental (Sen 1999, p. 70). Therefore, before exploring the empowerment of women RMG workers, their political, cultural, social and economic backgrounds are discussed to understand the context more clearly and suggest effective policies. What are the capabilities valued by RMG women workers? Unfortunately, Sen abstained from defining a universally valid, prescriptive list of functionings and capabilities. Rather he argued that such judgements are essentially context-dependent and a concern for public reasoning (Sen 2005, cited in Miles 2014, p. 1045). Thus, the thesis explores accepted factors raised by the secondary literature. Social, economic and political empowerment is discussed, as are human rights violations such as freedom of association, forced labour, gender discrimination, child labour, criminal justice, a living wage and workplace safety. These prevent women from achieving well-being.

Thus, in summary, the thesis explores how women employment in Bangladesh's RMG industry facilitates social, political, cultural and economic empowerment. It also explores the presence of ongoing human rights violations which limit empowerment. In order to do so, the thesis explores conditions in the RMG industry. It identifies changes in the economic freedom and decision-making

power of women workers, but questions the facilities provided by owners and the general working environment, where women are often harassed. What improvements are needed to ensure a decent working environment?

Women garment workers mainly produce apparel for multinational fashion brands in Australia, Europe and USA, taking advantage of lower prices, the absence of labour laws, unhealthy workplace and unsafe standards, poor building standards, long working hours and low wages (Ali & Medhekar 2016, p. 1178). The applied purpose of the thesis is to learn the lessons of the Rana Plaza Tragedy, to develop proper ethical, labour-laws, and health and safety standards for workers, and to pressure large multinational companies to better monitor their supply chains. The thesis recommends safeguarding the rights of women workers who are sewing clothes for fashion-conscious customers in developed nations. Future research should investigate inclusive growth options for workers, and how to stimulate inclusive sustainable business opportunities for the export-led garment industry.

1.2. Research Methodology

The reliability of research depends on the methodology used in the study. It should allow the researcher to collect valid and reliable information for analyzing and arriving at evidenced-based conclusions. The research question and its connection with the research problem determine whether the research should be qualitative or quantitative (Marshall 1996, p. 522). If an investigator aims to explore society's life stories or what individuals do in their daily lives, life, whether at home, in the workplace, or other open and private spheres, then qualitative research is a suitable method (Silverman 2005, p. 6). Qualitative researchers frequently desire to infer a public's behavior in respect of the customs, values and culture of the group in question (Bryman 2012, p. 620). This thesis uses a qualitative research method comprising different secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journals, government and international organizations reports, books, the web, social media and newspaper reports and commentaries.

1.3. Outline of the thesis

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One introduces the topic of this thesis. Chapter two states the research of the earlier literature. Chapter three argues the current research with the potentiality of Sen's capability approach for this study. Chapter four discusses the political, social and economic background of Bangladesh, and the historical development of the RMG industry. Chapter five applies Sen's capability approach to determine the extent of women workers' empowerment, and how human rights violations obstruct empowerment. Chapter six discusses some human rights violation in related to the RMG sector and reviews existing laws, buyer initiatives and challenges, and progresses for improving women workers' rights. Chapter seven concludes the thesis.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Since 1980s, apparel industry has been playing a crucial role for the economy and society of Bangladesh. The role of women in RMG industry is vibrant because more than 80% of the total workforce are women in this sector (BGMEA 2018). Women's involvement in the RMG sector as well as their contribution to the country is well-discussed in literature. The reasons behind increased women's participation in RMG sector and how it contributes to their economic, social and political empowerment have been assessed in these well-researched literature. This chapter provides a brief review of the literature that follow the emergence of the RMG sector in Bangladesh and the reasons for women's involvement in this sector. In addition, it will be reviewed how literature addresses the consequences of the human rights violations in RMG industry that affect women empowerment.

Significant studies (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004a, p. 95) demonstrated that the growth of the ready-made garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh opened possibilities for poor, predominantly, women to lead an improved life during the 1980s. With the advent of the RMG industry since the 1980s, women workers contributed significantly to industrialisation as well as social change (Feldman 2009, p. 268). It was reported in 2004 that a total of 1.8 million workers were employed in 3480 factories of which 1.5 million were women (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 137). According to the further, rapidly growing RMG industry made a meaningful contribution to foreign exchange earnings as the second highest source of foreign exchange after remittances (Muhammad 2011, p. 23). The World Bank estimated in 2006 that about 10 million people worked directly or indirectly in the RMG industry accounting for about 40% of industrial employment (Shoma 2017, p. 119). In 2010, RMG sector employed 3.6 million people whereas women account for 80% of work (Berg, Hedrich, Kempf & Tochtermann 2011, p. 7). Previous studies by (Kibria 1995, p. 289; Amin *et al.* 1998, p. 188; Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 149) stated that the speedy growth of RMG industry was facilitated by several factors: low labour cost, insufficient employment opportunities for women, merely technology-based, less capital used, economic transformation and policies that encouraged the growth of this particular industry. Moreover, they characterised women in Bangladesh as lower level job skills, lower education levels and increasing demand for dowries at times of marriage. As a result, they were highly attractive to the RMG industry (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 147). Thus, the RMG industry was a significant employment opportunity for women workers in Bangladesh.

A study by Kabeer and Mahmud (2004a, p. 97) investigated and empirically compared women garment workers socio-economic backgrounds, earnings and working environments and contributions to the household income who worked in the global market as well as the domestic market of Export Processing Zones. They accomplished that most of the young women workers in RMG sector worked in EPZ who belonged to poor families in the remote part. The factors determining women to work in the RMG industry include both push factors, such as poverty, financial crisis, unemployment, illness and death of the household head, and pull factors, such as the desire to

improve the standard of living through social and economic advancement and savings for the dowry (Kibria 1998, p. 2; Amin *et al.* 1998, p. 194). Initially, rapid growth was facilitated by the availability of cheap labour and easy access to foreign markets via the Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA). With low labour costs and high production capacity, Bangladeshi garments remained globally competitive after the MFA was abolished at the end of 2004 (Yunus & Yamagata 2012, p. 1). A study by (Hossain 2012, p. 3) stated that women from the most underprivileged parts of society were particular beneficiaries of engagement in the RMG industry as they increased their earning power their participation in decision making at home and public sphere. Thus, the involvement of women in RMG sector in EPZ and other factories has increased due to poverty, cheap labour, family status, fewer employment opportunities, less education and skill aspects.

The literature on the RMG industry assessed the impact of women employment on education, youth, health issues, fertility and marriage, and women's position in society and in their families. There is an indication that more families in Bangladesh were supporting girls' education with a view to employing them in the RMG industry (Amin *et al.* 1998, p. 185). The RMG industry accelerating the movement of women from household activities to industry workers. This movement was considered to be a process of empowering women through paid employment. A recent study by Heintz, Kabeer and Mahmud (2017, p. 3) found that hierarchical relationships between men and women exist in the society which obstructs women from participating broadly in economic, social and political activities. They also claimed that involvement of women in the RMG industry increased women's earnings which lead to an upgrade in their status in family and decision-making activities. Women and girls had better access to nutrition than before, improving their health and that of their children (Amin *et al.* 1998; Rashid 2006, p. 157). While some problems prevailed in the industrial environment, the literature concluded that the impact on the status of women was positive rather than a barrier. Garments workers were thus changing social norms and traditions in many ways by delaying marriage, increasing decision making power and enjoying greater economic independence, which helped reduce previous social exclusion (Khosla 2009, p. 289).

A study by Kabeer, Mahmud & Tasneem (2011, p. 39) argued that since 1980s women's waged work in garment sector empowered women even in a reasonably Bangladeshi conservative society through securing economic return and work that had significant effects on women's lives. However, they recommended that several factors such as women's consciousness, material security, well-being and capacity to renegotiate women's existing and new relationships need to be transformed to achieve the empowerment in women's lives. Hossain (2012, p. 3) claimed that women's RMG work increased a source of political power as its more collective consequences on citizenship and political agency. Wilson (2014, p. 359) examined a critical analysis of the women RMG workers empowerment dynamics by using Naila Kabeer's empowerment definition. Wilson argued that women's work in RMG industry had not fully transformed gender-related barriers and women's status in their lives rather it increased women's capability to express choice and acted upon those choices.

However, women workers in the RMG industry were viewed as most vulnerable to fragile legal provisions and weak compliances enforcement (Ahmed 2004, p. 38). This was connected with issues such as poor working environment, low skill levels, less education, inadequate childcare and healthcare facilities, low wage-type jobs, informal employment, sudden termination and irregular payments. Kabeer (2005, p. 20) found that women in the RMG industry worked mostly in exploitative environments involving health hazards and many women workers complained about their prolonged working hours (Kabeer 2005, p. 20). Moreover, a significant study by Naved *et al.* (2018, p. 154) claim that wage discrimination, job insecurity, overtime without reasonable payment, violent attitudes and sexual harassment exacerbated the vulnerability of women workers, challenging their rights, benefits and opportunities. Furthermore, inadequate safety measures in the RMG industry for which careless owners were associated often caused accidents such as fires and building collapses (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 578). Wilson (2014, p. 373) claimed that gender wage gap in the RMG industry limited the empowerment of women workers, who remained in a poorer position regarding male worker. Ali & Medhekar (2016, p. 1183) argued that respecting workers' rights and higher wages required to ensure better health and secure working environment as well as worker's quality of life and standard of living which would avoid Rana Plaza tragedy in the upcoming days. All these pieces of literature describe the miserable working experiences of women workers' in RMG industry, but they did not address how these issues affect women's empowerment process.

Several studies described the difficulties faced by women garment workers in the working place (Majumder & Begum 2000; Siddiqi 2003). The rapid employment of women workers in the RMG industry whilst a benefit for deprived, unemployed women was paradoxically also a reflection of the uneven treatment of women both within this industry and outside world (Amin *et al.* 1998; Kabeer & Mahmud 2004). Absar (2002, p. 3012) argued that garment women workers exploitation began with the recruitment process, as most did not receive formal contract papers. They suffered gender discrimination in the wage gap and lack of opportunities for promotion to higher positions (Absar 2001, p. 5). Moreover, most of the RMG factories were overcrowded and had polluted air quality and hot and dusty sections on the same floor (Majumder & Begum 2000, p. 15). Insufficient toilet facilities for women workers were observed in many factories. This uncongenial factory environment affected their health, with women suffering from fevers, eye infections, anaemia, diarrhoea, typhoid, headaches, jaundice, back pain and skin diseases (Ahamed 2012, pp. 12-13). Sometimes women were oppressed by sexual and verbal subjugation by their male supervisors and managers (Hossain & Al-Amin 2012). As a consequence of sexual harassment, many women reported fear, humiliation, embarrassment, anxiety, failure to focus on work, a drop-in productivity and depression (Siddiqi 2003).

A study by (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004, p. 152) stated that the absence of trade union in the workplace created limited voice and rights for women workers and absence of representation voice creates a barrier for women workers to systematise themselves as a group and eventually they may have little

power to confront the RMG owners in order to secure their right as garment workers. Furthermore, because of wicked construction legislation, fire and collapse of structures are common in the RMG industry and compensation system following such occurrences are rare even in the case of demise of the workers (Ahamed 2012, p.13). In 2013, the collapse of the Rana Plaza building including five garments factories in Bangladesh caused the massive deaths of 1136 RMG workers together with injuries of around workers (Shoma 2017, p. 124). The study by (Ali & Medhekar 2016, p. 1178) recommended that women RMG workers' rights should be protected through developing formal principled, existing labour law, safety principles for every factory worker, strengthening monitoring process etc. A recent study by (Barua and Ansary 2017, p. 578) claim that Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 is the consequences of non-compliances of Bangladesh RMG sector and to mitigate the existing challenge maintaining compliance in this sector with the support of external partners are necessary. The recent study by Shoma (2017, p. 118) argues that insufficient law-making implementation for confirming labour powers generally overlook women RMG workers voice and rights in the RMG industry of Bangladesh. Recently, different media report, Human Rights Watch reports and other international agency continuously report on the women's human rights violation in RMG sector particularly after Rana Plaza tragedy and Tazreen Fashions Fire, although literature on women empowerment in RMG sector is yet to address the human rights violation issues properly.

The reviewed literature discusses that women employed in RMG industry have been economically empowered due to their increased income although their social empowerment is debatable. Positive changes such economic, social and political capabilities of women's lives have been revealed to some extent, but it is not sufficient and updated to comprehend the actual impact of women's employment in RMG industry. Considering the necessity of intensifying the focus on women's social and economic inclusion, this paper suggests that the impact of the RMG industry on women's lives may be more substantial than has been before thought to be. The paper investigates whether the presence of women workers in the RMG industry of Bangladesh is a mean of socio-economic empowerment of women and development of Bangladesh. Moreover, the literature infers that working conditions and fewer women worker's voice is questionable to undermine the socio-economic changes of women status.

CHAPTER THREE: SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH: ITS POTENTIAL FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN WORKERS

3.1. Introduction

Amartya Sen is viewed as one of the important intellectuals and observers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries (Walker & Unterhalter 2007, p. 1). Prominent as a Nobel Prize-winning economist and a political thinker, he is one of the major contributors to recognising, specifying, and lobbying against different practices of global inequality. Introducing the idea of human well-being is a significant theme of his work that departs from other approaches in welfare economics and political philosophy. Sen deals with standards of living and social justice as fairness (Walker & Unterhalter 2007, p. 1). His capability approach centres on equality, freedom and rights as both the ends and means of development of the primary purpose of development is poverty reduction. The literature on Sen reflects on the propositions of the capability approach for empowering women. Before studying the implication of the capability approach for women working in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, this chapter discusses some of Sen's fundamental concepts and basic terms.

3.2. What are Capabilities?

Capability is defined as "a person's ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being; it represents the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be" (Sen 1993, p. 30). Accordingly, opportunities or freedoms are two important aspects of the capability to realise whatever a person contemplatively considers esteemed. The implication of the idea differs from the concept of others deciding what is fair in the allocation of resources, regardless of gender. Its main belief is that in the process of evaluation individuals must think about themselves not as a way to economic progress or societal steadiness but as a way of ending problems. We should gauge an individual's independence as taking the right decisions and efforts to eradicate barriers to freedom which, in turn, magnify nation's capabilities (Walker & Unterhalter 2007, p. 2). The paramount strength of Sen's framework is that the approach is flexible and presents a wide range of diversity, which accepts investigators to develop and operate it in various different techniques (Alkire 2002, pp. 8-10). Evaluating capabilities varies with different perspectives, but the approach has the flexibility to be understanding of the diversity of human and social interactions, the mixture of trade-offs between societies the obligations that one prioritises as valuable for oneself and others, and an approach of equalising not only outcomes, but reasonable capabilities (Walker & Unterhalter 2007, p. 3). Instrumental freedoms, including 'political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees, and protective security' tend to the comprehensively diverse types of political fairness for and capability of each person (Sen 1999, p. 38). Sen frequently specifies examples of fundamentally valuable capabilities such as an individual is being capable to live long, well nurtured, read, write and communicate and so forth (Sen 1984, p. 497; Clark 2002) however he

declines to recommend an exclusive list of capabilities as 'objectively correct' for applied and strategic purposes (Sen 1993, p. 47; Clark 2002, p. 54). According to Walker and Unterhalter, Sen's approach deals with an inclusive normative context to theorise and assess individuals' well-being and common provisions that equalize human capabilities (Walker & Unterhalter 2007, p. 3). This approach discusses the dissimilarities between capabilities of an individual and functioning outcomes (Sen 1980). Capability and functioning depend on individual circumstances, social conditions and economic freedom, not only outputs. Sen emphasises that capabilities reflect an individual's true chances or affirmative freedom of choice between life styles (Sen 1985, p. 10). On the other hand, for assessing well-being or human development require a broad and more diverse set of capabilities (Sen 1993, pp. 40-42). For instance, empowerment of women RMG workers in Bangladesh and Cambodia may not be evaluated in the same way. The approach evaluates women's individual empowerment and, similarly, recognises disadvantages, prioritising them over outcomes and aggregate statistics. Gender, inequality, standards of living, social justice and rights are some significant aspects of this approach, stressing the liberties that men and women experience in different societies which are not determined by gaps in income or resources (Sen 1992, p. 122).

The capability approach has been critiqued from different perspectives. One critique of Sen's capability approach is the manner of explaining issues for evaluation or the issue of "how far Sen's framework is operational" (Sugden 1993, p. 1953). Many criticsers have condemned Sen's framework for failing to provide a comprehensible list of essential capabilities (Nussbaum 1988, p. 176; Qizilbash 1998, p. 54). The other issue is that for evaluating capability framework, the informational requirement is extremely high (Alkire 2002, pp. 193). Notwithstanding these functioning problems, many reliable innovation efforts have been made to gauge well-being in the functioning as well as capability. The capabilities approach to human development by Martha Nussbaum argues that many developing countries suffer acute capability failure which cannot be measured by the usual indicators of poverty (Nussbaum 2000, p. 5). It is the blend of poverty with different forms of gender inequality that has severe impacts on what women are able to do and be. These include domestic violence and low literacy rates related to patterns of internal family allocations and the absence of social and political freedoms which act as obstacles to the employment of women. Therefore, Nussbaum recognises the concept of central human capabilities, with raising each person's capabilities as the eventual political goal. She generates an "open-ended and humble" list which allows options for future extension and modification, as well as for the local differences in explanation and implementation, although it is unclear who will undertake revisions, when and why (Nussbaum 2000, p. 77). The difference between her and Sen's approach is that Nussbaum has a threshold level of capabilities; she does this as she desires the list of capabilities to develop a base for citizen demands. She proposes ten central human capabilities, which are life expectancy, being able to participate effectively in political activities, to improve capabilities for health, physical integrity, feelings, ingenuity, thought, emotions, practical motivations and relationships and constitutional assurances incorporating for all citizens compulsory rules and principles (Nussbaum 2000, p. 78-

80). Sen and Nussbaum have a distinctive approach to determining capabilities. Sen's approach supports participating in human progress, while Nussbaum is concerning with rational thinking. Sen with his different studies from 1992 to 2005 explored the significance of community participation and negotiation in attaining cherished capabilities for different conditions and circumstances. Sen's capability approach is intentionally unfinished, but workable solutions are possible based on social justice (Sen 1999, p. 242). Women in Bangladesh have a commendable capability to overcome social, economic and political barriers to becoming prominent garment worker and reaching a valuable state of greater empowerment and greater economic freedom, respect, social status and voice than before (Khosla 2009, p. 289).

3.3. Women Empowerment & Gender Inequality

Empowerment of deprived and marginalised women in society is a well-known problem in development studies and to restate the term empowerment, the notions of power, agency, class and gender need to be restored in politics (Cornwall & Anyidoho 2010, p. 148). Violence against women and gender discrimination are two important obstacles for empowering women. Kabeer embraces "empowerment as the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability" (2005, p. 13). Likewise, Abdin argues that women empowerment involve providing power to maximise abilities (Abdin 2008, p. 1) Moreover, empowerment can be achieved at the individual and collective level, according to the World Bank, with the economic, societal and political levels interconnected (World Bank 2002, p. 10). The magnitude of women liberation is linked to society's policies and principles and whether they approve women's voices and craft prospects for women to discuss together their current positions, discover the powers they possess and formulate policies to attain women's positive transformation (Mosedale 2005, p. 250). These concepts of women empowerment are imperative when discussing women working in Bangladesh's RMG industry, their access to income across social divides, personal and community lives, and ability to make choices (Kabeer 1999, 2001 & 2005). Mosedale (2005, p. 250) and Abdin (2008, p. 1) explore in what ways women workers consider strategic necessities and social status, their opinions as powerlessness, and their economic freedoms which ensure sustainable welfare. They discuss affirmative achievements as negotiating abilities to upgrade their status and progress in terms of taking decisions within the family, at the workplace and in society more broadly. The increased participation of women in the RMG industries has allowed them to take reproductive health decisions, postpone early marriage, increase their purchasing power, help aged parents, access a bank account, send daughters to school and participate in health and education development (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 152; Khosla 2009, p. 293; Feldman 2009, p. 280; Wilson 2014, p. 22).

3.4. Human Rights Violation

Many workers from deprived socio-economic backgrounds are employed in the RMG industry. Worker's health, security and employment conditions are extremely miserable and not well-protected

by labour laws, let alone their enforcement (Ali & Medhekar 2016, p. 1178). Deficiencies in the routine assessment of and compliance with the Bangladeshi buildings and factories codes resulted in the collapse of the eight-story Rana Plaza and factories in 2013, killing 1100 workers and injuring 2500. Greater protection of women workers' rights is absolutely essential, not least because it is a global issue, with expensive global brands and 'trendy' buyers from industrialised countries (Ali & Medhekar 2016, p. 1190). According to the ILO, women workers do not have appropriate living wage standards (The World Bank and International Finance Corporation 2011, p.12). Nor do women workers actively join trade unions in order to improve their labour rights (Human Rights Watch 2015, p. 4). The tragic Rana Plaza accident gained international attention, raising diverse and difficult questions about millions of workers, owners, brands and buyers; indeed, the entire supply chain of the RMG industry of Bangladesh. Reflecting the standpoint of the RMG industry in Bangladesh, various national and international reform commitments and initiatives were undertaken to upgrade workplace safety for around 4 million RMG workers and to keep the confidence of international buyers (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 579).

According to Kabeer's 2005 study, though the voices of women workers in the RMG industry were being heard in family life the overall achievements through employment were negligible, which means they were less empowered (Kabeer 2005, p. 24). Sen's (2001) standpoint is that globally wherever people are living is characterised by entrenched inequalities between men and women (Sen 2001, p. 466). Sen argues that women especially experience inequality in all phases of their lifecycle in fundamental needs, opportunities, skills, and domestically (Sen 2001, pp. 466-468). Violence against women and sexual abuse are also manifestations of gender inequality. Women are habitually paid lower than men for doing equal or similar work, and possibilities for development are often blocked by men (Lorber 2010, p. 5). Therefore, the empowerment of women RMG workers in Bangladesh is paradoxical.

3.5. Conclusion

Capability describes individual's ability to perform valuable activities or achieve respected status for existence. Sen's capability approach talks about gender equality, standards of living, social justice and rights as well as well-being. The process of women empowerment might be achieved through this approach. Women who are working in RMG sector have been achieved economic liberty, decision-making power at the household level and social status partially. The unsafe working condition and violations of workers' rights are barriers to achieve this women empowerment. As Sen's capability approach stresses all the above-mentioned issues, it is used in the thesis to analyse the potential for and challenges of women garment workers empowerment. The thesis concludes that women are empowered, but it is constrained by ongoing human rights violations in the garment sector.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE RMG INDUSTRY IN BANGLADESH

4.1. Introduction

The previous chapter has introduced the Sen's capability approach and its potentiality to assess the empowerment of women garment workers in Bangladesh. The discussion of women workers empowerment is very much context-specific, that needs to elaborate the background aspects of Bangladesh which might influence the RMG industry and women's empowerment process. This chapter will provide an overview of Bangladesh's demographic, political, economic and social background and the evolution of the RMG industry. In addition, Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA) and Export Processing Zones (EPZs) are two important arrangements connected with the emergence of RMG sector which is also discussed here.

4.2. Demographic Context

Bangladesh is the eighth most populous nation globally, at 158.9 million, with a total land area of 147,570 sq. km, or about twice the size of Tasmania (Statistical Pocket Book 2016, p. 3). From Map-1 showed on the following page, the Bay of Bengal dominates the coastline of Bangladesh. On three sides, Bangladesh borders India, in addition to a short southeastern boundary with Myanmar. The capital city, Dhaka, is situated, in the centre of the country, and it is where most economic activities are located. The capital is severely overpopulated, which is increasing daily as many poor moves from rural areas with the aim of improving their lives (Cities Alliance 2016). The coastal features of Bangladesh are marked by natural hazards such as floods, earthquakes, drought, salinity intrusion, fire, tsunamis, cyclones, storm surges and river bank erosion. Bangladesh is recognized as one of the most vulnerable countries in the world (Asian Disaster Reduction Center n.d.). It is also known as the land of rivers, with their sediments having made fertile land that is best for agriculture. After achieving independence in 1971, significant economic and social development was achieved in terms of reducing the maternal and child mortality rates, increasing education, disaster management and rice production self-sufficiency (United Nations 2013). The adult literacy rate increased from 51.6% in 2004 to 72.3% in 2016. Average life expectancy was 71.6 years in 2016 compared with 46.88 years in 1972 (Sample Vital Registration Survey 2016, p. xxviii). Despite its large rural population and overcrowding in Dhaka, Bangladesh achieved remarkable progress in reducing the official poverty rate (daily income of US\$1.90 per capita) from 44.2% in 1991 to 13.8% in 2016-2017 (World Bank 2018a). In term of human development, Bangladesh ranked 139th out of 188 countries in the 2015 Human Development Index 2015 and was categorised as 'medium human development country' with a score of 0.579 (UNDP 2017).

Map 1: Map of Bangladesh



Source: Google map

Speedy growth facilitated Bangladesh to improve its lower middle-income per capita rank in 2015. In 2018, Bangladesh satisfied each of three eligibility measures for graduation from the UN's Least Development Countries (LDC) list for the first time and was on the pathway to graduate to a middle-income country in 2024 (World Bank 2018a). The competitiveness position of Bangladesh improved with US\$1514.6 GDP per capita and 7.3% GDP growth in 2017. Nonetheless, Bangladesh ranked well behind competitor countries in South and East Asia (World Bank 2018b, p. 1).

4.3. Political Context

Bangladesh's political stability is absolutely crucial for understanding the daily life of people and how the RMG industry is affected by the system. Bangladesh gained independence just four decades ago in 1971. Earlier, it was one of the main areas colonized and ruled by from 1757-1947. Subsequently, in 1947 it was established as East Pakistan. Political and economic segregation between the East and central hub of West Pakistan resulted in inequality and rupture, and a war of liberation in 1971 with India as an ally (Lewis 2011, 73-74). After Bangladesh's independence in 1971, concerns were raised about the new country's economic viability. It was characterized as the "test case of development" and a "bottomless basket" by World Bank economists and Henry Kissinger, former US Secretary of State (Cited in Islam 2016, p. 29). Compared with its shaky economic condition, Bangladesh had very powerful political leaders, beginning with Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He was the founder of Bangladesh and the leading political party Awami League and the first President of Bangladesh (William 2009). After that, he was the Prime Minister of Bangladesh and due to his immense popularity among people of Bangladesh, he was given the honorary title of "Bangabandhu" (Bhatnagar 1971). Because the country was extremely poor and volatile, and a famine in 1974 was worsened by a massive flood which caused 1.5 million deaths, intensifying the prevailing crisis (Lewis 2011, 73-74). Consequently, on 15 August 1975, President Bangabandhu and his family were killed in a coup which produced a leadership vacuum and a period of quasi-military rule after the ideals of the Liberation War (Islam 2016, p. 36).

After the war of liberation, a presidential system of government was established with a unitary state. During 1975-1990, transitory martial law, three successful revolutions and thirty unsuccessful ones were observed, triggering political and economic instability (Lewis 2011, 107-108). The long period of martial and quasi-martial rule was over in 1990 with a united effort from the Bangladeshi political parties and civil society advocates. In 1991, the nation observed parliamentary elections and parliamentary democracy system was reinstated (Ali 2016, p. 78). The name of the governing party of Bangladesh is Bangladesh Awami League (BAL) led by Sheikh Hasina whereas the opposition party is Bangladesh National Party (BNP) led by Khaleda Zia. The election of the Tenth Parliament on 5 January 5, 2014, was tainted because the major opposition party BNP did not participate in the general election and was therefore absent from the Parliament (Islam 2016, p. 68). During the election period, the opposition party called many political activities against the government such as arsons, hartals (strikes and blockades) that disrupted the country. After the election in 2015 from January to December, political unrest touched a crisis point, which led to 153 deaths and injured 6318 people of Bangladesh (Ain o Salish Kendra 2016). During the political turmoil, the RMG industry suffered financially as strikes and transport blockades stopped garments from being dispatched in a timely fashion from the ports (*Deutsche Welle* 2015).

According to the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, all RMG industry's activities, regulations and rules are being executed (Bangladesh Labour Act 2006). Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 comprises

“Provisions of maternity benefit, workers health and hygiene issues, safety, special provisions relating to health hygiene and safety, welfare, working hour and leave, wages and payment, wages board, workmen’s compensation for injury by accident, trade unions and industrial relations, workers participation in companies profit, regulation of employment and safety of dock workers, provident funds, apprenticeship, penalty and procedure” (Bangladesh Labour Act 2006).

In 2013, the act has been amended with the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 87 and 98 which provides the right of workers freedom of association (ILO 2013). The government in Bangladesh can be characterized as a fight among traditional elites controlled by lobbying state organisations, including the judiciary and bureaucracy, over national resources. This undermines the rule of law (Transparency International 2015, p. 1). According to Transparency International’s 2017 Corruption Perceptions Index Bangladesh ranked 143rd out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2018). A study by Transparency International Bangladesh (2012, pp. 6-7) reported that 97% of Members of Parliament were connected with unlawful activities; of them 76.9% took advantage of their roles on local election panels; 75.5% misused development undertakings for their own personal gain; 70.6% were involved in criminal acts and corruption; 69.2% manipulated procurement decisions; and 62.2% manipulated local elections. Corruption is a major problem at all levels of society. The implementation of the rule law, political stability and anti-corruption are essential for betterment of the garments sector, as well as the nation.

4.4. Social Context

Most Bangladeshis are Muslims representing over 90% of the population though there are 8.5% Hindus and remaining (Christian, Buddhist and Ethnic minorities) are estimated to account for almost 1% of the population according to the last Population and Housing census 2011 (Statistical Pocket Book 2016, p. 51). Lewis (2011, p. 13) stated that as a low lying riverine state, and for thousands of years the very fertile ecology involved people mainly in agriculture. This has not changed. He further mentioned that Bangladesh increased food production noticeably, improved key export activities such as readymade garments and shrimp and developed the healthcare and education sectors. Nevertheless, Beit’s study in 2011 (Cited in Lewis 2011, p. 13) showed that Bangladesh faced ongoing problems, and the resilience and creativity of its people was recognized as a "laboratory for innovative solutions in the developing world". The influence of religion in creating Bangladeshi identities has long been a topic of open debate. Bangladesh is noticeable as a very patriarchal society with gender being a crucial consideration in determining social roles, duties and power relations inside the family and work (Bridges, Lawson & Begum 2011, p. 461). The conventional Bangladeshi view that males should be the key breadwinner holds true in many parts of the country, especially in the rural belts, with a woman’s role being domestic rather than economic. Women are not only accustomed to trusting men for social position and respect but are also reliant on them for

ensuring economic safety and overall protection (Salway, Rahman & Jesmin 2003, p. 897). These strong cultural norms in many households are reinforced by following ‘purdah’ or covering with a hijab. This constrains a woman’s movement, often excluding her from open spaces and limiting her to work in the family (Kabeer 2000, p. 87). As we shall argue, these hierarchies and social status is changing as women are employed in the RMG industry, enhancing their social empowerment in the family and public sphere.

4.5. Economic Context

Raihan (2016, p. xviii) stated that economic development since the 1990s created employment opportunities in agriculture, the rural non-farm sector, urban informal and formal sector, and the urban formal sector, predominantly in the RMG industry. The Bangladesh economy was able to maintain sustained economic growth. Real GDP growth accelerated to 7.28% in 2016-17 from 6.0% in 2012-13 (Bangladesh Economic Review 2017, p. 17). The industry sector influenced significantly the rate of growth because of its rising share of GDP, increasing to 32.42% in 2016-17 from 30% in 2009-2010 (Bangladesh Economic Review 2017, p. 4). The export sector is the engine of industrial growth, in particular the RMG industry, which contributes 80.6 percent of the total export earning of Bangladesh in 2016-2017 (Centre for Policy Dialogue 2017, p. 17).

Bangladesh’s progress in reducing poverty can be contributed mostly to an increase in cash income from industrial labour and the growth of the labour market, including the development of the RMG industry, global labour mobility, remittances and rapid urbanization (UNDP 2017a, p. 11). Bangladesh’s demographic transition also contributed as the working age population grew faster than the total population rate. Table 1 reveals that poverty dropped to 24.3% in 2016 compared with 31.5% in 2010 using the headcount rate (HCR), or the percentage of people living below the poverty line based on preliminary results of the Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2016 (BBS 2016, p. 40-41). The annual reduction in poverty was estimated at 1.5%. During 2010-16, poverty prevalence declined from 17.6% to 12.9%. Poverty in urban regions dropped to 18.9% in 2016 from 21.3% in 2010, in rural regions the decline was quicker; from 35.2% in 2010 to 26.4% in 2016. Nonetheless, the poverty rate was notably higher in rural than in urban areas.

Table 1: Head Count Rate (CBN) of Incidence of Poverty

Residence	Upper Poverty Line		Lower Poverty Line	
	2016	2010	2016	2010
National	24.3	31.5	12.9	17.6
Rural	26.4	35.2	14.9	21.1
Urban	18.9	21.3	7.6	7.7

Source: HIES 2016 and HIES 2010, p. 41

A study by Saleh (2014, p. 7) showed that the unemployment rate in Bangladesh was 4.58% In 2010 which was lower than the standard unemployment rate 5% but it did not show the true picture of the labour inefficiency which remained in the labour market. The data hides, however, a large number of underemployed workers 20.31% in 2010, indicating underutilisation of skills and low-skilled jobs. Recent quarterly report (Bangladesh Bank 2017, p. 3) states that another significant source of earning foreign currency after RMG export is remittance. Bangladesh was ranked 8th among remittance-receiving states in 2015. Remittances by migrant workers and the RMG industry contributed significantly to Bangladesh's economic and social development. Bangladesh Bank (2018) estimates that monthly wage earner's remittance is US\$1482.85 million in January May 2018. Bangladesh is studied as a motivation for and also challenge for legislators and practitioners in the field of development. Although efforts to promote economic growth, human progress and decrease vulnerability, which was surprising, Bangladesh faces great challenges with about 22 million people still below the poverty line. The World Bank (2018a) concludes that elimination of obstacles to greater economic growth, such as limited access to affordable power, weak transportation infrastructure, unavailability of serviced land, changeable and complex business rules, fast urbanization and vulnerability to climate change and natural disasters is essential.

4.6. Advent of RMG Industry in Bangladesh

The RMG industry in Bangladesh began in the 1980s and in 2010, it was the world's second-largest textile exporter after China (BGMEA n.d.). Recently, the RMG industry in Bangladesh has briskly settled. The rise of RMG industry in Bangladesh can be sketched with the influence of global and national policy levels. Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, p. 136) argued that at the global level, after imposing export quotas on some early apparel industrialized countries in East Asia, there were searching for new quota-free locations to set up the garments manufacturing plants. For example, Bangladesh was Daewoo from South Korea and Daewoo was made an agreement with the Dosh Garments (a local Bangladeshi firm) in 1978 for providing free training related to RMG production and marketing. After that, many new garment factories were built in one year. Whereas Yunus and Yamagata (2012, p. 2) claimed that at the national level the Bangladeshi government prioritized development of the RMG industry through a succession of industrial policies, including the 1982 New Industrial Policy, the 1986 Revised Industrial Policy, the 1999 Industrial Policy and the 2010 Industrial Policy. The Industrial Policy 2010 mentions for forming economic zones, industrial parks, high tech parks and private Export Processing Zone (EPZ) for some sectors such as textiles, ceramics and pharmaceutical in order to speedy and steady industrial improvement of the nation (Industrial Policy 2010, p. 5). The rapid growth of the RMG industry was vital to Bangladesh's export policy. According to the Export Policy 2015-18 article 1.1.06; one of the important objective states that "to make export trade unhindered by ensuring compliance in the export-oriented industry and consolidate the position of Bangladesh in the competitive global trade" and article 1.1.08. described the importance of involving women force in Bangladesh export-related industries and trade (Export

Policy 2015, p. 1). The speedy growth and the boosted export competitiveness of the RMG industry in the post-multi-fibre agreement period were significantly facilitated by three factors: low labour costs, technological development, and the government's economic transformation policies (Alam & Natsuda 2016, p. 316).

Bangladesh is characterised as the labour-surplus country, but the problem is associated with "disguised unemployment, underemployment and low returns to labour" (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 147). Moreover, payments of women labour remain to be lower than those of men labour as women have less education and limited productive opportunities. A previous report by Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (1996) found that men underemployment rate was 12% in 1995-96 paralleled to 71% for women and men unemployment rate was 8 % paralleled to 31% for women. So, the pool of women from mainly the countryside made available a large, illiterate and cheap workforce for the RMG industry, which required very low skills (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 147). The RMG industry was the largest sector for women job creation and selecting into this reserve pool of women workforce in the countryside. Bangladesh's comparative advantages saw the industry flourish. Previously, women facing the absence of freedom in society and high rates of domestic violence had limited access to alternatives. The RMG industry in Bangladesh is the leading sector in terms of employment, production and export earnings. In 2013-14, this sector employs four million people whereas women accounted for 80% of employment (BGMEA 2014). Through RMG employment, women earned income for a more independent individual living and lifestyle instead of remaining at home and dependent on the male bread winner (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 154-155). But after the collapse of the Rana Plaza in 2013, Barua and Ansary (2017, p. 579) found that the RMG industry was forced to several major challenges to occupational health and safety arising from non-compliance with and non-enforcement of international standards and codes.

4.7. Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA)

In explaining the rapid development of the RMG industry, two significant international arrangements were crucial; the EU's Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for quota-free and duty-free access in European markets and the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA) allowing quota-free access to North American markets (Kathuriat 2003, p. 70). Since the 1960s, apparel and garments exports ruled by importing states in the way of imposing several restrictions. Initially, MFA aimed to protect their domestic apparel industries from outside competition through imposing quota ceilings on the big garment exporters at that time (Kathuriat 2003, p. 65). Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, p.135) stated that

"MFA in 1974 is the agreement set the acceptable rate of increase in exports from developing to developed countries at 6 per cent a year and allowed importing countries to impose 'quotas' or quantitative restrictions on the volume of exports from any particular country which grew at a rate higher than bilaterally agreed levels".

The quotas comprised exceptions for least developed economies such as Bangladesh. Therefore, Sonobe, Mottaleb and Amin (2018, p. 31) asserted that the availability of cheap labour and quota-free access made it an attractive place for foreign investment in the sector until the MFA concluded at the end of 2004. Nonetheless, wages in the industry remained among the lowest in the world up to 2004 and high production capacity, maintaining its international attractiveness (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 146). The international policy shift in 2004 and Bangladesh's diminishing advantage of secure export quota did relatively little harm to the RMG industry (Yunus & Yamagata 2012, p. 1). The RMG sector of Bangladesh successfully overcame all the post-MFA challenges and with low labour costs and high production capacity still remain globally competitive.

4.8. Export Processing Zones

Export Processing Zones (EPZs) were established in 1983 to promote, attract and facilitate foreign investment through the provision of infrastructure, facilities, administrative and support services and a congenial investment climate (Bangladesh Investment Development Authority 2017). According to the Bangladesh Bank FE Circular No. 37, dated 10 May 1983 EPZ were established,

“By an act of Parliament, namely, the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority Act, 1980 (Act. No. XXXVI of 1980), Export Processing Zones shall be established in Bangladesh under the auspices and supervision of the Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority” (Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority n.d.).

According to Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority (BEPZA 2018), in 2018, 8 EPZs offer a large variety of tax incentives and benefits for foreign investors, such as tax holidays, duty-free imports of raw materials, joint venture facilities, exemption from the dividend tax, and duties on exports. In 2017-2018, the total number of employees in the EPZs was 487,067, mostly women. Total investment was US\$4.5b and total exports were US\$62.83b, of which the largest share was from the apparel industry in 2017-2018 (BEPZA 2018). Common apparel exports include shirts, trousers, jackets, t-shirts and sweaters, of which around 64% went to the EU, 18% to the US and 3% to Canada in 2017-2018 (BGMEA 2018). Non-traditional markets such as Australia, Brazil, China, Japan, Russia and Turkey accounted for 15%. (BGMEA 2018). The international brand products made in Bangladesh's EPZ and garments industries include Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Lafuma, H & M (Sweden), Gap, Brooks, J. C. Penny, Walmart, Kmart, Big-W, Target Australia, Ospig (Germany), Mother Care (UK), Lee, Wrangler, Dockers, Nba, Tommy Hilfiger, Falcon (USA), Edie Bauer, Eagle, Releigh (UK), Emmilee, Free Spiril (UK), Miles (Germany), American Eagle, Hi-Tech (UK), Philip-Maurice (UK), Wins Moren and Decathlon (BEPZA 2014). The Export Processing Zone Authority is the government body that inspects and supervises compliance of enterprises with social & environmental laws, and occupational safety & security in order to maintain harmonious labour-management & industrial relations in the EPZs (BEPZA 2017). However, according to the Solidarity Centre (2014), apparel and other workers the EPZs are covered by distinctive, much weaker sets of labour laws than workers elsewhere. Workers outside the EPZ are allowed to form trade unions while

EPZ workforces must form weaker worker's welfare associations. In practice, owners do not allow workers to form associations easily and leaders of associations were often dismissed. Consequently, most of the worker's association in the EPZs persist only on paper (Solidarity Centre 2014).

4.9. Conclusion

Although geographically Bangladesh is in a vulnerable situation, its economy is progressing significantly where RMG has a noteworthy contribution. With the advancement of this area, it has been positively changed the social structure and status of the women. The RMG industry in Bangladesh flourishes is mostly because of its competitive advantage in terms of overpopulation and cheap labour. At present, wages in this sector are second lowest globally and RMG sector provides highest employment opportunities for the poor rural women of Bangladesh. Moreover, the enhancement of this sector facilitated by two important aspects GSP and MFA. The Government of Bangladesh has been patronised this sector through forming appropriate industrial policy, establishing EPZs, promoting different incentives to the owners of the factory. The state has created an industry-friendly environment for RMG sector which encourages many foreign investors to invest in Bangladesh that influences the economic structure of Bangladesh. Next chapter will analyse elaborately how women's economic, social and political empowerment affected with the employment of RMG industry.

CHAPTER FIVE: APPLYING SEN'S CAPABILITY APPROACH

5.1. Introduction

This chapter turns into an argument about the broader outcomes of women's RMG industry employment for expanding economic, social and political empowerment and gender equality by applying Sen's capability approach. A study by Kabeer, Mahmud and Tasneem (2011, p. 39) claimed that women's paid work in garment sector from the 1980s economically empowered women in a comparatively conservative society, as secure economic return and work noteworthy effects on women's lives. But again, they recommended that in order to achieve sustainable change in women's lives a variety of factors is necessary such as women's awareness, physical security, well-being and capacity to renegotiate their existing and new relationships. Sen's capability approach explores two key aspects; "well-being and the freedom to pursue well-being". It indicates

"The wellbeing of a person can be seen in terms of the quality of the person's being and capability is, thus a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person's freedom to lead one type of life or another" (Sen 1992, pp. 39-40).

Sen's approach has no specific set of standards to evaluate the capabilities of women. Hence, some common aspects that are introduced by scholars and crucial the RMG industry are identified to develop the argument. It is essential as a reminder that the study lacks reliable quantitative data on women's employment in the RMG industry. It utilises critically instead of qualitative academic research.

5.2. Economic Empowerment

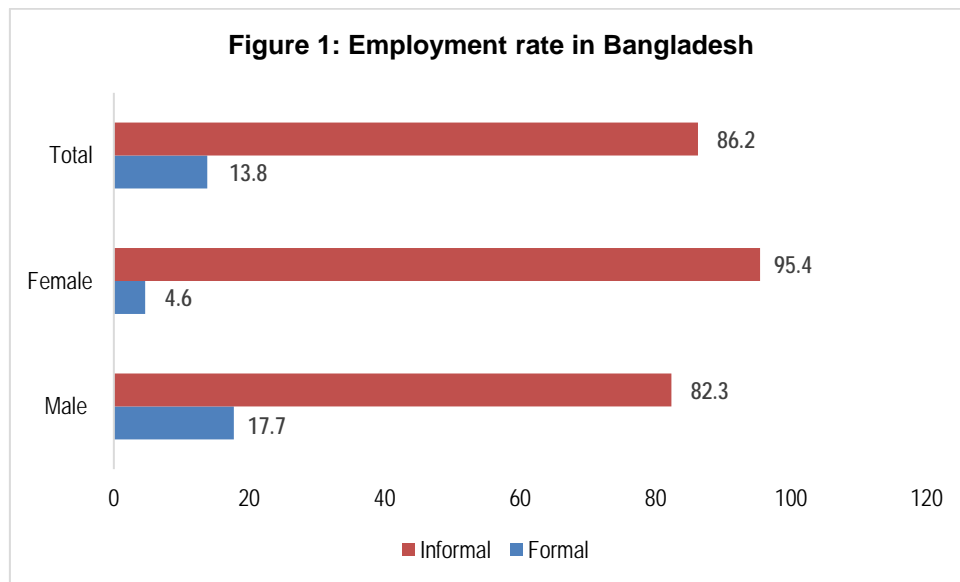
"Without my wife's income, we would have been on the streets today".

- Milon, survivor of Rana Plaza Collapse face economic hardship and dependent on wife's income

Source: *Al Jazeera*, 24 April 2014

Sen (1999, p. 39) refers 'economic facilities' "to the opportunities that individuals respectively enjoy to utilize economic resources for the purpose of consumption, or production, or exchange". Rich qualitative evidences about the inspirations of young women who migrate from less developed rural parts to the capital in search of paid RMG industry work recognized economic necessity as the main driving influence (Amin *et al.* 1997, p. 188; Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 148; Feldman 2009, p. 284). Since the independence of the country in 1971, the number of women in waged work was very small and limited to negligible informal menial jobs which did not figure in the national accounts (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 147). Ahmad's study in 1991 (Cited in Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 148) stated that in 1985-86, the share of women in agriculture employment was only 11% and manufacturing sector

was 55 % compared to working men. The women in garments work increases gradually from the 1990s to onwards. Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, p. 148) showed that in the mid-1990s, the women contribution in newly setup RMG sector was 39% which rose to 60% in 2000. The present situation is shown in Chart-1 that women in Bangladesh (95.4%) are mainly involved in informal employment while only 4.6% worked in the formal sector in 2015-16 according to the last Quarterly Labour Force Survey (BBS 2016, p. 59). The number of formally employed persons as a percentage of total employment is extremely low in all sectors; 2.1% in agriculture, followed by 10.0% in industry and 29.4% in services (BBS 2016, p. 62). Women employed in the RMG industry realized a very noticeable transformation in the gender structure because of the increasing rate of women employment in formal work and access to the manufacturing sector. Women received higher wages in RMG factories than the wages they would receive in rural areas, where alternative occupations were not available (Kabeer & Mahmud 2004, p. 150). A previous significant study by (Amin *et al.* 1998, p. 199) claimed that work in the RMG industries boosted women's expenditure on meeting basic needs and family obligations, bearing the costs of their children's schooling and private tutor expenses, saving money for dowries. In addition, single girls entered the RMG industry and remitted a portion of incomes to their families in rural areas. However, over time, living wages or payments were not adjusted for inflation, which made workers' survival more difficult (Khosla 2009, p. 293). Amongst 4222 RMG factories, a total of 4 million workers were employed in 2013-2014 creating paid employment for more than 3 million (80%) mostly poor and vulnerable women (BGMEA 2014).



Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey Bangladesh 2015-16

5.3. Social Empowerment

Studies by (Kabeer 1999, pp. 436; Kabeer, Mahmud & Tasneem 2011, pp. 15-20; Sen 1992, p. 39) indicate that to analyse the social empowerment of women RMG workers in the public sphere five important factors need to be explained; the standard of living; the gender wage gap; occupational mobility; opportunities for social interaction; and experience of new social relationships. Furthermore, how RMG employment affected both single and married women's lives at the household level is also explained through five factors; control over one's life; devotion to daughters; decision-making at the household level; reductions in domestic violence; and reductions in the burden of unpaid care work. The following explores whether the RMG industry empowered women to achieve new practices of the agency by renegotiating their roles to take strategic life options which were previously decided by family members or society.

5.3.1. The impact of the RMG Industry on Women Workers in the Public and Private Sphere on their Lives

5.3.1.1. Standard of Living

The international group manifestly deems 'living wage' as a human right and many international conventions and declarations recognizes the necessity to provide living wage to workers such as United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948), American Declaration on the Rights and Duties of Man (Organization of American States 1948), European Charter (Council of Europe 1961), United Nations International Covenant on Economic and Social Cultural Rights (1966) and American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Additional Protocol (Organization of American States 1988) (Anker 2011, p. 3). According to Article 23 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (1948):

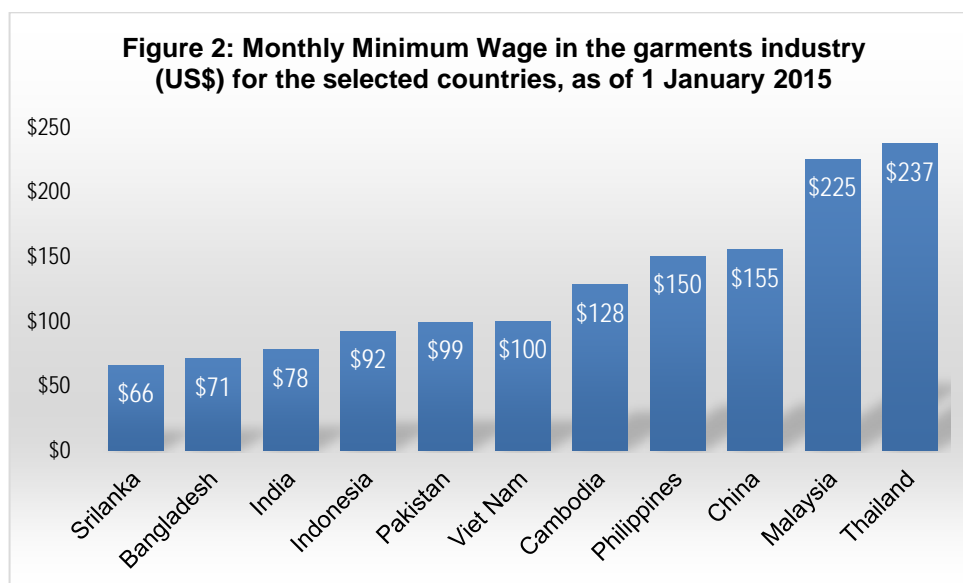
"Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity" (United Nations n.d.).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) also recognises a living wage as a human right and include in the ILO Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization 2008 (Anker 2011, p. 3). According to Article 3 of the ILO's Minimum Wage Fixing Convention No. 131 (1970), states that two elements should be taken into consideration in determining the level of minimum wages:

- (a) "The needs of workers and their families, taking into account the general level of wages in the country, the cost of living, social security benefits, and the relative living standards of other social groups;
- (b) Economic factors, including the requirements of economic development, levels of productivity and the desirability of attaining and maintaining a high level of employment" (ILO n.d.).

So, a living wage indicates to a sufficient income for labourers to enable them by meeting basic necessities such as food, water, shelter, clothing, power, healthcare and education for themselves and their dependents, while having some emergency savings. It also stresses a decent lifestyle with economic development and participation in social and cultural life. The right of workers to receive a

living wage and the responsibility of business organizations and governments to confirm ILO provisions is protected in the basic tools through which the international community expressed basic human rights and the rights of labour (Worker Rights Consortium 2013, p. 13). Nevertheless, the truth for a large percentage of apparel industry workers in many countries is that salaries are so small that workers and their dependent families persist in a poverty cycle. From Figure 2, the minimum monthly wage for the RMG industry in Bangladesh was US\$71, the second lowest for manufacturing in the world in 2015 (ILO 2015). Because a majority of workers in the global apparel sector are young women, problems with low wages are worsened because they are already disadvantaged in their search for decent work and the chance for their families to escape poverty (Nimbalker, Mawson & Harris 2016, p. 11).



Note: All rates presented are referred to the lowest skill grade for new entrants. For countries with decentralized minimum wage systems, figures reflect relevant rates in the main garment-producing locations.

Source: ILO compilation from official national sources as cited in ILO, 2015.

Since 2000, RMG industry wages in Bangladesh were the lowest in the world. Khundkar (2002) claimed that Bangladesh paid lowest wage US\$0.15 an hour compared with US\$0.30 in Nepal, US\$0.35 in India, US\$0.35 in China, US\$0.45 in Sri Lanka and US\$16 in the US. Bangladesh, the world's second highest clothing industry supplier, wages were only 14% of the living wage (Worker Rights Consortium 2013, p. 3). After the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, the international focus was placed on the absence of 'living wages.' Global network Clean Clothes Campaign which works for improving working conditions, empowering for rights and women showed that garment workforces were fixed at an average monthly rate of BDT 5,300 (US\$68) on 21 November 2013 from BDT3000 (USD \$39) on 1 November 2010, lower than the national poverty line of BDT6,336 (US\$78) (Clean Clothes Campaign 2013). Inflation was 7.5% in 2013 and from October-December in 2017, average annual inflation dropped to 5.5% from 5.9% (UNDP 2017a, p. 5). Wage increases were less in real terms due to increases in the cost of living. On 21 September, law enforcement agency and labour

official reported that approximately 50,000 RMG workers claimed in a rally to increase their minimum monthly wages and protested in Dhaka (*The Reuters* 2013). This problem resulted in social unrest in December 2016 over the increase in the monthly minimum wage to a mere BDT 16,000 (US\$203) (*BBC News* 2016). Although the increase was relatively 'generous', the existing minimum wage is remained distant from what is considered to be a living wage.

5.3.1.2. The Gender Wage Gap

A persistent gender wage gap in the RMG industry limited the empowerment of women workers, who remained in a poorer position vis-à-vis male worker (Wilson 2014, p. 373). A study by the ILO in 2008 claimed that Bangladeshi women received an average of 21% less per hour than men. With regards to differences in age, educational background, industry occupation and geographic location, an estimated gender wage gap was 15.9% to 23.1%. Gender-based industrial discrimination meant the overall wage gap was 7% (Kapos 2008, p. 21). According to the International Growth Centre blog post, Bangladeshi women were salaried less and occupied more junior positions than men (IGC 2018). The reasons for the persistence of the gender wage gap include faster growth in the female labour force because of social changes prioritising women's work, high rates of female unemployment and underemployment, high poverty rates in women workers' households, which reduces their negotiating position, and work divisions along gender lines (Rahman & Islam 2003, cited in Kapos 2008, p. 3). Although this study is not exclusive to the RMG sector, it does a significant gender wage gap in manufacturing where the RMG industry plays a key role. Wage disparities persisted significantly in the RMG industry as women machine operators and helpers earned only 71 and 53% respectively of the earnings of their male counterparts (Khatun *et al.* 2007, p. 42). A study by Majumder and Begum (2006) argued that wage differentials may have spread over time. Skill differences became an important reason for gender-based wage gaps in the RMG industry (Ahmed & Maitra 2010, p. 112). This implies that occupational segregation persisted in the RMG industry keeping women workers by limiting the work they can perform.

5.3.1.3. Occupational Mobility

Although women workers in garment factories are subject to inequalities in terms of wages and gendered structures which constrain their empowerment, increasing occupational mobility and was a signal, no matter how feeble, that a process of empowerment may have begun (Kibria 1998, p. 7; Wilson 2014, p. 373). Amin *et al.* (1998, p. 192) found evidence of occupational mobility in the RMG industry in 1996. Women sought promotion, they argued, creating a growing aspiration which was different from and not available in many occupations such as household work (Rashid 2006). On a broad economic scale, a paper by Al-Samarrai (2007) argued that because of an improvement in the place of women workers in occupation hierarchy, the visible wage gap among workers decreased from 52% in 2000 to 32% in 2005 (Cited in Kapos 2008, p. 3). Moreover, an increasing number of women entrepreneurs promoted different initiatives, including the Bangladesh Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (BFWE), the Bangladesh Women's Chamber of commerce and Industry (BWCCI)

and the Grameen Foundation (World Bank and IFC 2011, p. 22). Though from a patriarchal society's standpoint women in higher positions than men are not the norm, women challenged this norm helped more to formulate strategic life choices.

5.3.1.4. Social Interaction

A significant study by (Kabeer, Mahmud & Tasneem 2011, p. 7) mentioned that sometimes the purdah obliged to ensure women remained economically reliant on men, kept them subordinate by isolating them and determining what expected social behaviour was. Covering women's head and body with purdah is a part of Bangladeshi religious and cultural norms that control sexuality by curtailing interactions with men (Amin *et al.*1998, p. 186). Wilson argues that working in the RMG industry, women challenged social norms, traditional identities, gender roles and status while negotiating structures and voicing strategic life choices often in defiance of patriarchal religious practices and restraints on social mobility (Wilson 2014, p. 374). Siddique argues, by way of contrast, that women workers were stigmatised by their communities. Work with men not only challenged the purdah but allowed women to adopt comparatively sexualised images of themselves. Sometimes, women workers faced common social criticisms. Their morality was questioned because night shift workers lacked male protection (Siddiqi 2000, p. 16).

Bangladeshi men's attitude towards women garments workers were mixed because many thoughts that women in open areas were more sexually accessible (Hossain 2012, p. 25). Studies by (Hossain *et al.* 2009; Human Rights Watch 2015, p. 26) indicated that harassment and abuse of women workers inside factories was an issue for both smaller suppliers and bigger factories with improved working conditions. The urban, liberal middle class was conflicted culturally; urbanization was not usually accepted easily, and rural people feared 'ruination' of young women by urban living (Hossain 2005). Men's attitudes were often based on the teachings of religious right activists who considered RMG employment as a sign of deep flaws in western ideology (Shehabuddin 2008, p. 1297). Thus, the increased mobility and wage independence challenged established cultural or religious and social norms, reducing constraints on expressing strategic life choices through empowerment (Wilson 2014, p. 375). Women previously insulated in the private sphere, gained greater mobility of movement travelling to work, resulting in what Hossain dubbed "the feminisation of public space" (Hossain 2012, p. 27). Women working in the RMG industry nonetheless were vulnerable to a backlash and different forms of exploitation. In Bangladesh, around three-quarters of women garment workers experienced verbal abuse and 20% of them underwent physical abuse which signals that gender-based violence among women is very high (*The Daily Star* 2017). Most public places were usually not safe for them. A recent study by Naved *et al.* (2018, p.150) claims that women's garment work experiences different forms of emotional, physical, sexual and economic violence in the family and factory that shapes for many reasons. They identify some of the important reasons which are patriarchal norms, dominant complaints of women RMG workers as sex workers,

economic violence to limit mainly women's liberty and women's attitude to continue working. Improvements in one area were often counterbalanced by setbacks in others.

5.3.1.5. Experience to New social Relationships

Employment of women in the RMG industry extended capacities to articulate strategic life choices, as women found new relations beyond patriarchal structures (Wilson 2014, p. 378). A study by Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, p. 153) stated that trade unions in Bangladesh were tremendously male dominated which represented the patriarchal attitudes of the broader society and women's problems such as harassment, maternal leave, child care, toilet facilities were not filled seriously. A study by Dannecker (2000, p. 32) found that most garments workers migrating from rural areas created new relationships with co-workers and senior women workers, sharing their problems rather than with male-dominated trade unions. He evident that Bangladesh Independent Garment Worker Union is such type of union established by four women garments workers who are teaching other women workers about their legal rights, permitting new relationships to form and openings to increase in self-sufficiency. This type of informal union network enabled women to exercise new forms of power and agency. Although this increased the potential of women workers to harness collective power still more years will require to flourish the women leadership (Khosla 2009, p. 295).

5.3.1.6. Power Over One's Life

The question is whether the RMG industry enhanced the socio-economic independence of young female garment workers, improving their self-esteem and decision-making power. A study by Kabeer and Mahmud (2004, p. 153) claimed that in the earlier decades of the RMG industry, women's social potential increased, according to study, as they became capable of determining their own individuality, becoming more socially reflexive and gaining respect from others for economic contributions as an earning family member. Other visible changes included job designations, use of Dhaka's more 'sophisticated' urban dialogues, and dress. City attire favoured the more comfortable, confident and modern salwar kameez dress over the long cloth saree (Amin *et al.*, 1998, p. 195). Mills called this type of economic independence "new autonomy", where women were involved in shaping consumption choices related to globally oriented standards of modernity (Mills 2003, p. 50). Thus, the process of empowerment of garment workers through paid work increased the potential to articulate life choices and exercise greater control over their lives.

Social change negotiating women's roles was manifest further in the choice delay marriage and childbearing (Rashid 2006, p. 159). In the early 1970s to 1990s, girls traditionally got married at adolescence, moving quickly from childhood to womanhood (Amin *et al.*, 1998, p. 185). In addition, paid work allowed women to gain access to better nutrition and health facilities, with generation to generation consequences (Ahmed, Hasan, & Kabir 1997, p. 1332). At independence, Bangladesh had the highest fertility in the world, with a rate of 147 per 1000 girls in the 15-19 age group (Rashid 2006, p. 151). The tradition of early marriage began to change slowly and is enjoyed by all girls, not

just garment workers (Khosla 2009, p. 294). Working in the RMG industry enabled women to choose the time to marry and choose whom to marry. Patriarchal family norms and a dearth of opportunities about future monetary returns discouraged spending on girls' health and basic education. Traditional marriage customs such as the dowry and the groom's household approval of the marriage dealings meant that girls were more of an economic burden on the parents (Kabeer, Mahmud & Tasneem 2011, p. 7). According to Article 2 of the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 (Act No. xxxv of 1980), define 'dowry' as

“Any property or valuable security given or agreed to be given either directly or indirectly-(a) by one party to a marriage to the other party to the marriage; or (b) by the parents of either party to a marriage or by any person to either party to the marriage or to any other person” (The Dowry Prohibition Act 1980).

Article 3 and 4 of this act includes the provision of “penalty for giving and taking dowry and penalty for demanding dowry”. Although the practice of dowry in marriage became illegal under the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, it was practiced widely in rural areas. Thus, families often conceded to send their young daughters to work in the RMG industry (Hossain 2012, p. 22). A recent study by Heintz, Kabeer and Mahmud (2018, p. 285) argues that in recent years women enjoy some positive changes in their life like increasing female education, using mobile phones and getting electricity facilities, migrating for garments works, rising young women's sharing of paid work and all these craft them to become self-employment in public spheres and outside their household. Therefore, once they had no choice in early marriage, but after gaining employment in the RMG industry, women achieved greater choice than their peers.

5.3.1.7. Devoting in Daughters' Education

Kabeer *et al.* (2013) stated that in Bangladesh, traditional patriarchal norms fostered preferring sons rather than daughters, resulting in a higher rate of female mortality, which Amartya Sen labelled the “missing women” and severe gender discrimination (Cited in Wilson 2014, p. 382). The term “missing women” refers a deficit in the number of women in large part of Asia and North Africa which arises from sex bias relative care measuring through sex ratios and sex-selective abortions and insufficient healthcare and nutrition for girl children (Sen 2003, p. 1297). Studies by (Amin *et al.*, 1998, p. 198; Khosla 2009, p. 294) claimed that more families are spending in girl's education with a view to occupy them in the RMG industry. Hossain found credible reasons why accessibility of RMG industry employment improved opportunities for predominantly primary and lower secondary education among girls (Hossain 2012, p. 25). On the demand side, a girl's parents' opinion was assumed to have been shaped by RMG industry jobs requiring at least basic schooling (Blunch & Das 2007; Kabeer & Mahmud 2009, p. 13). On the supply side, there is no direct evidence to confirm that RMG industry employment influenced education levels. Nonetheless, the Government's education policy in partnership with the garment owner's association (BGMEA) undertook a number of initiatives for expanding girls' education; such as the Female Secondary Stipend program, which included a clear understanding of the emergent demand for women workers (Mahmud 2003). Therefore, as families

acknowledged the value of investing in their daughter's education, the daughters were able to make their own life choices.

5.3.1.8. Decision Making at the Household Level

While RMG industry employment likely expanded the decision-making power of women at the household level, it did not indicate necessarily control over how the income was spent. Kabeer's (1997, p. 286) early study of garments worker identified two key ways of household decision making that women participated in; family income management and sovereign income management. Kabeer interview showed one girl named Hanufa had spent money on her family and due to her husband's insufficient earnings, she kept some money for her personal consumption and often hide her overtime earnings. Though women did not enjoy full power over their earnings, due to unequal power relationships, the employment in the RMG industry facilitated them to confront challenges through expressions of opposition (Wilson 2014, p. 384). Upgrading women's status inside the family encouraged collective negotiating power. Amartya Sen's cooperative conflict model claims that economic and extra environmental factors contribute to negotiating power and rights to household property (Sen 1987, p. 44). He argued that when distinctive household members disagree over preferences, consensus will arise through bargaining and negotiation. Women renegotiated patriarchal influences through improving their bargaining position within the family, improving the capacity to make life choices.

5.3.1.9. Reduce Partner Violence

Heath's study (2014, p. 32) on the impact of women employment in the RMG industry on partner violence revealed that women with less bargaining power were at higher risk of domestic violence after entering the labour market because partners seek to control their enlarged bargaining power. This indicates that women struggled with unequal power relations before employment in the RMG industry, while an upsurge in bargaining power was a signal to men to use violence to prevent change. On the other hand, women's increased negotiating power within family environment or relationship had a direct influence on their relationships where women are abused (Wilson 2014, p. 384). An earlier 1997 study by Kabeer (1997, p. 294) demonstrated that garment employment was involved in Aleya and Renu's decision to leave their violent husband which informed less violence in their relations. Kabeer also claimed that with the RMG employment, a process of transformation of women occurred at the individual level as they excised their decision on continuing their relationship or leaving an abusive relationship. Another study by Kabeer, Mahmud and Tasneem (2011, p. 35) reported that women in formal employment participated more likely in household decision making, to maintain their own savings, higher levels of public mobility, lower levels of domestic violence and control over their life. Moreover, a seminal study by Kabeer (2014) revealed that women who are able to earn money outside the home tend to contribute more to domestic decision making, retain savings, experience lower levels of domestic violence, have greater freedom of travel, and practise greater control over personal incomes. Women were better equipped to take the risk of being the

sole breadwinner of the household (Kabeer 2014, p. 67). Though patriarchal norms and customs prevailed in society, women were capable of making more choices regarding abusive relationships, reducing the level of domestic violence.

5.3.1.10. Burden of Unpaid Care Work

RMG industry employment enabled women to work both in the home and outside. Women in many societies continue to perform most of the unpaid care work in addition to their labour force contributions (Kabeer 2007, pp. 3-4). This limits women's right and prospects, and their potential and life choices. Diane Elson (2000, p. 28) reproved that

“If too much pressure is put upon the domestic sector to provide unpaid care work to make up for deficiencies elsewhere, the result may be a depletion of human capabilitiesTo maintain and enhance human capabilities, the domestic sector needs adequate inputs from all other sectors. It cannot be treated as a bottomless well, able to provide the care needed regardless of the resources it gets from the other sectors”.

A significant study by Mahmud and Tasneem (2014, pp. 90-91) mentioned that in Bangladesh women generally spend much time to work inside the home including both waged and unpaid self-employment or working in the family farm or doing domestic works which were labelled as 'non-market or unreproductive work'. According to Kabeer and Natali, attaining gender equality, mostly in education and employment, coincides with economic development, while the inverse is not inevitably the case (Kabeer & Natali 2013, p. 3). As women partook in the reproductive economy through employment in the RMG industry, this paid work increased their workloads, women often involuntary to work a double shift (Hossain 2012, p. 57). Women often lived public and private double shifts Kabeer (2014, p. 67) explained how married women were able to maintain paid work after confirming their husband's request/demand not to disregard their family responsibilities. Kabeer (2014, p. 62) claimed that the shifting pattern of the worldwide labour market 'pushed' women to engage into formal economy together with the increased informal economy that appeared women as the 'flexible labour force par excellence'. The imbalances in gender-based unpaid domestic work do not fade with economic development. Another study by Mahmud and Tasneem (2014, p. 96) claims that women RMG industry workers often did the household chores in the morning, working twelve-hour a day seven day a week. Therefore, employment in the RMG industry is of itself unable to transform socially structured gender roles and responsibilities, although women are now part of the reproductive or paid economy.

5.4. Political Empowerment

Employment of women in the RMG industry is part of a new form of citizenship. The idea that women's primary role is reproduction appears to have shifted and been prioritized in the national Poverty Reduction Strategic Papers (PRSP) 2005 and PRSP-II in 2009 (Cited in Hossain 2012, p. 28). According to the PRSP-II in 2009, in order to eliminate gender-based discrimination from Bangladesh, a two-folded approach was introduced which described firstly, gender issue was

incorporated into all the thematic policy backgrounds covering sectoral involvements. And secondly, a specific matrix entitled ‘Women’s Advancement and Rights’ was initiated to ensure gender equality in actions of all sectors of the economy. In 2008, Bangladesh approved the ‘National Policy for Women’s Advancement’ (NPWA) which intended to reduce all types of discrimination against women through empowering women to remain equal participation for development (PRSP-II 2009, p. 61). According to Siddiqi (2009, p. 164), the presence of women from wide-ranging backgrounds in the RMG industry enriched Bangladesh’s ‘brand’ by signaling a distinctive blend of social improvement with moderate Islam. Kabeer and Kabir (2009, p. 56) argued that RMG workers also became progressively conscious of their human rights as citizens and the importance of their roles in the domestic economy. Similarly, Khosla (2009, p. 295) argued that although women’s political activities increased because women RMG workers became more cognisant of their rights in the export processing zone factories nurturing future female leadership, it would take more years to realise the potential women leadership. Tangible evidence from of the women worker’s political empowerment in the RMG industry their ongoing protests in the industry to set a higher minimum wage. On 23 September 2013, many RMG factories in Bangladesh were enforced to shut down and thousands of RMG workers demanded for a monthly minimum wage of US\$ 100 and during this protest time, many workers were injured and arrested by law enforcement agency (*The Reuters* 2013). Table-2 showed that notable successes include nearly doubling of the workers minimum wage from 1994 to 2013 and providing subsidized food in the garment factories to protect against rising food prices.

Table 2: Worker’s wage pattern in the RMG industry of Bangladesh in several years (wages in US\$ in 1994, 2006, 2010 and 2013)

Grade	Wage 1994 1US\$ = Tk.40	Wage 2006 1US\$ = Tk.69.46	Wage 2010 1US\$ = Tk.70	Wage 2013 1US\$ = Tk.77.68	% Change of wage in 1994 to 2013
Grade: I	117.5	74.0	132.86	167.35	42.43
Grade: II	85.0	55.3	102.86	140.32	65.08
Grade: III	52.5	35.3	58.86	87.60	66.86
Grade: IV	42.8	32.4	53.76	82.65	93.11
Grade: V	36.3	26.7	49.36	77.78	114.27
Grade: VI	33.0	26.7	45.86	73.10	121.51
Grade: VII	23.3	23.9	42.86	68.22	192.79

Source: BGMEA; Ali & Medhekar 2016, p. 1179

ILO (2013) reported that Bangladesh reviewed the amendments of the labour act 2006 which was adopted on 15th July 2013 after the Rana Plaza Tragedy. The amendment is to approve workers’ freedom of association in RMG industry that allows them to form workers trade union to shield their fundamental human rights and collective bargaining by following the “ILO Convention 87- Freedom of association and protection of the right to organize convention and 98- Right to organize and collective bargaining convention” (ILO 2013). Kabeer (2000, p. 387) stated that political empowerment centred on improving workers’ rights through national politics rather than worldwide advocacy around labour standards. Positive moves were made after 2013 to onwards in ensuring

compliance in the RMG industry such as ensuring safety and construction standards on RMG factory, workplace security, the safety of workers, ethical situations facilitating more constructive arrangements between workers and owners in many large factories (The accord 2013). Women's political empowerment can be evidenced in PRSP policy papers, through participating protest activities to increase minimum monthly wage, getting fundamental rights to form trade unions and improving workers compliances but there are many more things to achieve the potential political empowerment.

5.5. Conclusion

This chapter argued that the experiences of women RMG industry workers and its direct impacts on empowering women in society and their personal lives were wide-ranging and contradictory. Women enjoyed relatively more economic independence, wages were insufficient compared to the standard of living. The RMG industry provided women with the opportunity for occupational mobility, though the gender gap in wages remained. Whereas previously women were confined to the private sphere, they began to attain new identities and relationships in the workplace. Women's private lives are more empowered, with greater choices in childbearing, choosing a partner and when to marry, decision making power, and ability to lead as the family breadwinner. Society's view changed towards the reproductive role of women. Men acknowledged women's contributions, and domestic violence lessened. Parents saved towards their daughters' education and health care. Nonetheless, the position of women in public and private domains, compared with men, was not transformed entirely, as women remained responsible for unpaid care work. On the basis of Sen's capability approach, the chapter concludes that women workers in the RMG industry were more capable in many ways than earlier periods, but due challenges were not fully empowered to ensure their wellbeing in life and society.

CHAPTER SIX: HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN BANGLADESH'S RMG INDUSTRY

6.1. Introduction

This chapter explores human rights violations in RMG industry. After the disasters of the Tazreen Fashion Factory Fire and Rana Plaza Collapse, it was evident that workers faced many waves of abuse of their human rights. According to Sen's capability approach, freedom of choice and wellbeing are interrelated issues. Hence, human rights violations obstruct not only women workers' empowerment but also impede their wellbeing. Violations can be explained in many ways, but this chapter focusses on instances related specifically to the garments sector, including; absence of freedom to form trade unions, forced labour, workplace gender discrimination, criminality and poor workplace health and safety.

Case Study I: Tazreen Fashions Fire Tragedy

On 24 November 2012, a devastating fire at the Tazreen Fashions Ltd factory just outside Dhaka killed at least 120 workers and severely injured 300. Tazreen Fashions Ltd was one of Bangladesh's largest RMG companies, and a sister company of the Tuba Group established in 2010. The factory's annual turnover was around US\$36m, producing products for famous global brands for major outlets including Walmart, C&A, KIK GMBH, Teddy Smith Ace, Infinity Women, Li & Fung, Karl Rieker, Dickies, IKEA, the U.S. Marine Corps and Carrefour. The factory employed over 1200 mostly women, comprising around 95 percent of the workforce. When the fire began in a downstairs part of the building, the factory manager ordered exit doors locked, which is common practice in Bangladesh over concerns about stealing products in emergency situations. When the fire spread workers on upper floors were unable to escape. Many died of burns, asphyxiation or were injured jumping from the upper floors. Subsequently, many workers were unable to return to work because of their injuries or were so traumatized they will never in return to work. On the night of the fire, workers were kept at the factory to complete a big Walmart order. Many workers did not receive promised compensation.

Source: Bergman and Rashid 2012; Asia Monitor Resource Centre 2013; Australia Bangladesh Solidarity Network 2014a

Figure 3: Tazreen Fashions Fire Building 2012



Source: IndustriALL Global Union, 19 November 2015

Figure 4: Tazreen Fashions Fire Inside 2012



Source: *Dhaka Tribune*, November 24 2017

Case Study II: Rana Plaza Collapse

On 23 April 2013, workers in the big factory and shopping complex in Savar on the outskirts of Dhaka, known as Rana Plaza, noticed cracks in the walls and columns of the eight-storey structure and the entire factory was evacuated. On the lower floors of the plaza, some shops and a bank were sealed immediately, except the garment workers employed on the upper floors were ordered to return to work. According to the testimony of a surviving worker, the factory manager threatened to withhold monthly pay if they did not return to work the following day. The RMG factories in the Plaza manufactured apparel mainly for Canada, Italy, Ireland, Spain, the UK and USA. Big brands included Benetton, Bonmarché, El Corte Ingles, Joe Fresh, Mango, Matalan, Primark, The Children's Place, and Walmart. The Rana Plaza collapsed at 9 am on 24 April. The death toll was 1129 workers with approximately 2,512 injured, though many workers were missing. Worker protests after the collapse were extensive and spontaneous, leading to a sizeable increase in the minimum wage and the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety through the collaboration of different stakeholders. During the two years after the fire, the government, owners, external retailers and donors discussed worker's occupational safety and well-being, though a lot remained to be done to improve the workplace environment and workers' rights.

Source: Bloomberg 2013; Australia Bangladesh Solidarity Network 2014b; Human Rights Watch 2015

Figure 5: Rana Plaza Collapse 2013



Source: *The New York Times*, 24 April 2013

6.2. The Right to Form Trade Unions

“I was terrified...Whoever raises their head suffers the most.”

- A former Bangladesh union member

Source: Human Rights Watch (HRW) interview with a former factory worker, Dhaka, October 11, 2013, Human Rights Watch Report 2015, p. 30

Women garment workers suffered violence, coercion and fear of losing their job when agitating for a trade union (HRW 2015, p. 30). Under enormous global pressure to restructure the RMG industry after the Rana Plaza tragedy, Bangladesh Parliament passed revises to the Labour Act 2006 on 15 July 2013, reform changed 87 sections of existing laws and the act making it easier to form a trade union (HRW 2013). The amendment is known as Bangladesh Labour (Amendment) Act 2013, (Act No. 30) and enacted on 22 July 2013 (Bangladesh Gazette 2013, p. 1). Consequently, the number of trade union registrations increased from 85 in 2013 to 416 in 2015 though this did not cover the 4,500 RMG factories (HRW 2015, p. 30). Though the industrial climate for forming trade unions improved, many unions complained that factory owners continued to practise threats, physical assault, and compulsory dismissal of union leaders and members in order to stop union activities and, sometimes, to prevent registration. For example, garments union leaders at a factory situated in Gazipur tried to establish a union in January 2014 but were brutally assaulted, and their efforts led to many workers being sacked (HRW 2015, pp. 33). One of the female union leaders was beaten while she was pregnant, forced to work at night, and was eventually fired, without getting all her due wages, as she wouldn't agree to stop unionising (HRW 2015, p. 8). Because of protests against 'poverty wages', the President of the Garment Workers' Unity Forum was arrested and jailed seven times. There are dozens of similar cases of threatening, attacking and firing union leaders for pursuing their legal rights (HRW 2015, pp. 34-35).

Despite revisions to the labour law, it does not comply fully with international labour standards in terms of freedom of association. The two significant International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions for labour rights are Nos. 87 and 98 comprising freedom of association and the right to organise and collectively bargain respectively. These were ratified by Bangladesh in 1972 and oblige the government to adopt legislation that allows its citizens the full right to form and to enter organisations according to their own desire, together with specify safeguards against acts of anti-union discrimination (ILO 2013). The new law amendment kept the provision of 30 percent membership for organizing a trade union which reasonably refutes the sense of free trade unionism (*The Daily Star* 2013). In addition, the amendments did not extend freedom of association and collective bargaining rights to garments workers in the Export Processing Zones, which clashes fundamentally with Article 23 of the worldwide Declaration of Human Rights. It states that "everyone has the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests" (UN n.d.). Therefore,

there was clear progress in amending trade union laws after 2013, but continuing abuse by factory owners which limited the development of trade union activities.

6.3. Forced Overtime

Forced labour refers to individuals who are forced to perform work under threat of violence or intimidation. Examples include slavery, human trafficking, and bonded work (ILO 2014). In RMG factories, compulsory overtime was a common example of forced labour. A previous study by Ahamed (2012, p. 8) revealed a majority of factories flouting average working hours. Moreover, factory management set the daily target for workers and if they failed to reach it within the stipulated time, they were forced to complete the task without any overtime payment. Workers declining to do additional shifts may be fired or received lower wages. In some factories, women were forced to work night shifts and sometimes locked the factory gates (Ahamed 2012, p. 8). According to a Human Rights Watch Report (2015, p. 28), many workers complained of late-night working hours vary from 12 to 17 hour working days without proper payment; of working during holidays; and of reduced or no pay for the extra hours. According to the Bangladesh Labour Laws, Article 100 refers 'daily hour'

“No adult worker shall ordinarily be required or allowed to work in an establishment for more than eight hours in any day: Provided that, subject to the provisions of section 108, any such worker may work in an establishment not exceeding ten hours in any day” (Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, p. 54).

Thus, labour law mentions a standard working day should not be more than 8 hours and overtime should not be exceeding 10 hours. The law (chapter ix), Article 102-103 has provision for one day off a week, to that total working week should be a maximum 60 hours. Furthermore, the consent of women workers is required for night shifts between 10 pm and 6 am according to the labour law (Bangladesh Labour Act 2006, p. 54).

6.4. Workplace Gender Discrimination

Workplace discrimination against women exists in many RMG factories in Bangladesh, in particular, pregnant workers. Human Rights Watch reported that women workers experience verbal and physical abuse by factory managers and supervisors for missing production targets, requesting leave, working slowly due to physical illness, or arriving late (HRW 2015, pp. 26-28). Moreover, though the labour law permits a total of 16 weeks of paid maternity leave, was frequently refused and women felt humiliated for asking. One union leader stated that she involuntarily resigned during her pregnancy without any maternity benefits (HRW 2015, p. 24). A survey by Democracy International conducted in 2014 selected 150 factories and 1508 workers. It found that 34% of respondents were harassed by factory supervisors, 25% experienced sexual harassment, 37% complained about the absence of paid leave, and 29% percent about the lack of maternity leave. In addition, women faced discrimination in promotion to higher positions and payment. A study by the International Growth Center (2014) showed that while 4 out of 5 production line workers in RMG

factories were women only 1 in 20 were supervisors. Women's lack of skills and inability to develop their careers were obstructions to becoming supervisors. In addition, women line operators receive only about 60 percent of their male counterparts. Due to women's lower education levels and a lack of training opportunities, men got the more technologically skilled jobs while women remained in low-skilled work.

6.5. Criminal Injustice

A large number of unsettled and unfair trials in the RMG industry raised doubts about the reliability of the judiciary and protection of workers' basic human rights. In April 2012, Aminul Islam, an active and fearless trade union organiser for the not-for-profit Bangladesh Centre for Workers Solidarity (BCWS) was murdered, with his body showing signs of torture (HRW 2015, p. 7). According to *The New York Times* (2012), during his lifetime, he tried to ensure labour integrity, relentlessly motivating garment workers to participate politically. In 2010, two other organisers, Babul Akhter and Kalpona Akter, along with Aminul Islam were charged with different criminal offences, strenuously denied, including attempted murder, criminal coercion and violations of rules against government employees. In 2011 Islam was arrested by the National Security Intelligence or N.S.I. (*The New York Times* 2012). Many international buyers, human right activists and donors demanded answers to Aminul Islam subsequent murder, but it remained unsolved (HRW 2015, p. 79). The consensus is that the murder was a warning to trade unionist that they may face trial or worse if agitating to improve working conditions (*The New York Times* 2012).

The Tazreen Factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse highlight the protracted legal system. After fourteen months, the Tazreen Factory owner Delwar Hossain was taken into police custody in February 2014 and accused of death by negligence. After six months was awarded bail, despite his 1600 garments workers going on an 11 days hunger strike because they had not been paid (*The Guardian* 2014). The President of the Garment Workers' Unity Forum claimed that the owners were playing "dirty politics" by withholding workers' payments while receiving bail (*The Guardian* 2014). After the Rana Plaza collapse and due to drawn-out judicial processes, the owner, Sohel Rana and 37 others had not been punished for their alleged crimes in 2017, with appeals in the higher court (*Al Jazeera* 2017). With regards to the update of the Rana Plaza trial procedure, police filed two cases against 41 people along with the Rana Plaza building owner Sohel Rana (*The Dhaka Tribune* 2018). The charges were for murder and building code violation which supposed to start on 18 September 2016 but still, it did not begin. The High Court stayed by following the writ petitions against seven accused persons challenging the legality of the order for the allegation of the murder case. The murder case is still pending in Dhaka District and Sessions Judge Court. The court placed charges against 41 alleged persons on 18 July 2016 (*The Dhaka Tribune* 2018). On 14 June 2016, another case on violation of building codes placed charges against Sohel Rana and 17 other people in the Dhaka Additional Chief Judicial Magistrate Court but the trial procedure did not proceed yet

because of some revisions challenging the order (*The Dhaka Tribune* 2018). At present, most of the alleged persons are on bail, seven accused runaway, two dies and the main accused person Sohel Rana is in jail.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights under article 7 and 9 states that

- “All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.
- No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile” (United Nations n.d.)

Though it declares that everyone is equal before the law and is entitled to equal protection without discrimination and no one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile, many union leaders detained in Bangladesh for protesting against low wages or participating in strikes even though they were following their lawfully entitled rights. Factory owners have considerable political influence in Bangladesh which is a barrier to laying charges for violations of workers’ rights health and safety (HRW 2015, p. 11).

6.6. Workplace Health & Safety

After the Tazreen Factory fire and Rana Plaza collapse, the RMG industry was forced to tackle non-compliance of workplace security and occupational health and safety global standards (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 579). The challenges received greater public scrutiny because of factory accidents, political unrest, insufficient energy causing regular blackouts, some key purchasers turning a blind eye, and failures to comply with prescribed standards in the building and construction codes, (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 579). After the Tazreen factory fire in 2012 hat exposed the industry to the gaze of the global media, there was no meaningful improvement to the death toll up to 2015, summery statistics can be seen from Table 3 deaths and injuries among RMG workers from 2012 to 2015 (Compiled by Solidarity Center, Washington 2015).

Table 3: Accident Reports in the RMG industry, 2012-2015

Reason	Death	Injuries
Collapse	1110	2605
Fire	34	985
Other	0	40-600

Source: Solidarity Center 2015

Four million, mostly female RMG industry employees, worked in dangerous and often deadly surroundings, among the poorest in the world. Substandard buildings with no emergency procedures or training, faulty cabling, old and badly maintained factory equipment, insufficient and locked fire exits, and over-crowded workplaces were common (Clean Clothes Campaign 2012, p. 2). A study by Akter *et al.* (2010, p. 70) on women’s occupational health and safety in the RMG industry

uncovered a lack of hygienic and congenial working conditions. With washroom facilities were inadequate and clean water for drinking and washing was scarce, affecting health and strength, reducing productivity. Many women suffered from several disorders and illness, including bone and back pain, malnutrition, forced abortions, eye strain, flu, dermatitis, respiratory problems, fever, gastric and abdominal pain, and hepatitis (Ahmed & Raihan 2014, p. 54). Human Rights Watch (2015, p. 29) argued that a common complaint was not providing clean drinking water and toilet facilities in clear breach of the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006. However, after the Rana Plaza collapse, different collaborative initiatives on improving health and safety conditions were proposed by the government, ILO, EU and buyers. Therefore, creating a safe and secure working environment in the RMG industry remained challenge and women workers continued suffered as a consequence.

6.7. Reform and Progress after the Rana Plaza Tragedy

Following the Rana Plaza collapse, the government and stakeholders were challenged to find solutions to the problems in the RMG industry of Bangladesh. A diverse range of reform initiatives to improve occupational health and safety was announced (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 579). 'Fourth Monitoring Report on Moving Beyond the Shadow of the Rana Plaza tragedy: In Search of a Closure and Restructuring Strategy 2015' prepared by a civil society think-tank Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) Bangladesh reviewed all the reforms and progress after the tragedy up to April 2015 (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 5). According to the mentioned report of CPD, first, a National Tripartite Plan of Action (NTPA) comprising the government, RMG workers and owners was released in July 2013 regarding fire safety (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 17). The NTPA integrated 25 separate commitments into policymaking and legislation, administration and implementation (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 23). Secondly, under the process of NTPA implementation, relevant stakeholders such as the EU and ILO, in cooperation with the government, reached a consensus around time-bound activities called "The Sustainability Compact: Compact for Continuous Improvements in Labour Rights and Factory Safety in the Readymade Garment and Knitwear Industry in Bangladesh" (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 20). Its goal was to better support labour laws and make business more accountable. Thirdly, the condition for reinstating Bangladesh's Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) status in the US, market, as requested by the US Trade Representative, was implementation of a 16-point the United States Trade Representative (USTR) Plan of action within one year (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 17). USTR action plan also prioritized the improvement of fire and building standard of RMG factories, labour inspection, labour law reforms and freedom of association and collective bargaining rights of workers in EPZ factories etc. (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 20). GSP offers duty-free access into the US market for selected 5,000 products of 122 countries in the world including Bangladesh's RMG products which prerequisites to be renewed periodically through the approval of the US Congress (*The Independent* 2016). The GSP facility for Bangladesh was postponed in June 2013 following the Rana Plaza building collapse in April because of meagre labour rights and dangerous working conditions in RMG factories (*The Daily Star* 2018).

Furthermore, in order to improve workplace safety, two distinctive factory inspection programs were initiated: The Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety and The Alliance for Bangladesh, where the ILO plays the key coordinating role. The Accord was initiated on 15 May 2013, with the collaborative participation of eight trade unions and over 190 clothing firms from over 20 countries in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia (The Accord 2013). The Alliance was a legal agreement among 26 North American apparel retailers and brands to improve and promote the December 2013 Bangladesh Workers Safety Initiative (Alliance n.d). Considerable progress was made in preparing diverse proposals after the Rana Plaza disaster, exemplifying how global strength can transform local weakness.

6.7.1. Amendment of Labour Law

In order to protect workers' rights, factory owners were made lawfully liable for basic workplace safety measures. The government amended the Bangladesh Labour Law on 15 July 2013, to approve the establishment of a trade union in the RMG industry (Bangladesh Gazette 2013). Subsequently, the number of trade union registrations increased, trade union formation remained difficult (ActionAid 2016, p. 13). According to the Human Rights Watch (HRW 2016), the situation in EPZ is worse as the existing law does not permit workers to form unions rather workers only form 'Workers Welfare Association' which is inadequate to meet the international standards on freedom of association. The USTR action plan proposed three plans for improving the labour rights of EPZ area such as bring the EPZ law into conformity with international standards due to giving the same freedom of association rights enjoyed by other workers in the country, until the EPZ law is repealed or overhauled, new regulations confirm transparency in the execution of the EPZ law require the same inspections standards and procedures as in the rest of the RMG sector (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 20). However, significant efforts are still important to ensure that international labour standards are valued, and workers are fully capable to have their rights with regards freedom of association and collective bargaining (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 580).

6.7.2. Governmental Authority Upgrading

Upgrading the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) into a Directorate was one of the important suggestions encompassing the three initiatives; NTPA, USTR and European Union Sustainability Compact (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 17). The DIFE's capacity building under the Ministry of Labour and Employment was strengthened in December 2013 to provide better administration services for ensuring workplace safety. A seminal study by Barua and Ansary (2017, p. 580) stated that DIFE developed proper policy and planning procedures in collaboration with other government departments, private donors and the ILO. Moreover, they reported that DIFE approves 679 new supervisor positions comprising 392 new inspectors in 2015. After April 2014, DIFE launched a publicly accessible database and website listing 1006 out of 3743 factories to report labour, fire and building inspections (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 18). However,

reviewing and adjusting licensing and fire, electrical, chemical and environmental safety related certification procedures were only partly completed (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 24). Therefore, the capacity of the Ministry of Employment and Labour had to increase to ensure persistent RMG industry compliance with standards.

6.7.3. Status of Safety Assessment and Remediation

After the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013, all the stakeholders agreed on a fire and safety assessment regime for all export-oriented RMG factory buildings and National Tripartite Action Plan for Building was adopted (DIFE 2018). Under this proposal, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology (BUET) was involved in handling building assessment on behalf of the National Tripartite Committee (NTC). In addition, two alliances of international buyers such as accord on Fire and Building Safety (Accord) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Workers Safety (Alliance) were liable for overseeing fire and safety assessment, a process initiated by the DIFE (DIFE 2018). After inspecting a company, it was necessary to share the inspection report with owners, the associated brands and worker representatives. Consequently, based on the report's recommendations, factory owners and brands prepared comprehensive corrective action plans (CAP) with a budget and timeline (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 581). If a factory was identified as vulnerable, it was evacuated and referred to a review panel for issuing immediate corrective procedures. Up to 16 March 2016, a total of 1549 factories fire and safety inspections were undertaken and DIFE followed up 809 factories. Of 809 factories, 107 factories were fully remediated, 422 factories remediated more than 50 percent and 111 factories remediated more than 80 percent according to the CAP (DIFE 2018). Recent Alliances Annual Report (2017, p. 3) reports that Alliance assesses total 785 factories of them corrective action plan completes for 234 factories, 162 factories suspend. Recent Quarterly Aggregate Report by Accord (2018, p. 4) estimates that 1620 factory inspects under the program and up to 1 April 2018, 1545 factories inspection report and CAP publish.

Substantial progress was made to reach factory assessment targets, though the garments associations Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA) were not able always to provide a complete list of factories. Some were not association members. Moreover, implementation of new fire safety measures was expensive. Factory owners required local bank loans. International organizations such as International Finance Corporation (IFC), Agence Francaise de Development (AFD), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), and the Accord and the Alliance supported loans to local banks which disbursed them (Barua & Ansary 2016, p. 581). The government promised to establish a specialized bank for the RMG industry to support easy loans (*The Daily Star* 2015). A study by Barua and Ansary (2017, p. 581) mentioned that while that was a positive initiative, financial provisions were insufficient compared with necessities which were a big challenge.

6.7.4. Initiatives by the ILO and Other Development Partners

A series of initiatives were undertaken by the ILO, with financial support from development partners and international agencies, to improve working conditions and restructure for the RMG industry (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 28). After August 2015, the ILO delivered ongoing support for DIFE capacity building to conduct effective and independently follow-up fire safety inspection reports. The ILO deployed a group of master trainers to train RMG garments mid-level managers, chief supervisors and workers. The ILO International Training Centre (ITC) prepared a roadmap for the 2015 DIFE Labour Inspection Plan and provided training programs (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 28). To provide rehabilitation, skills training, job replacement and micro-credit facilities to victims of the Rana Plaza Collapse in 2013 and Tazreen Fashions Fire in 2012, major donors funded projects included; 'Improvement of Working Conditions in the RMG Sector', funded by the ILO, the UK, the Netherlands and Canada from 2013 to 2016; Better Work and Standards (BEST), funded by the EU, Germany, Norway and the UNIDO from 2008 to 2015; Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) by the EU from 2007 to 2015; and Promotion of Social and Environmental Standards in Industry (PSES) funded by Germany and the EU' (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 29). After the Rana Plaza collapse, the integrity of the global fashion industry was questioned, resulting from efforts to support the rights of apparel industry workers. For example, Baptist World Aid Australia is an international aid and development organisation intending to end poverty globally and working in 18 countries of Asia, Africa and the Pacific. The Australian Fashion Report 2016 which was prepared for the Baptist World Aid Australia and launched in 2016 on the eve of the third anniversary of the Rana Plaza collapse. The Australian Fashion Report 2016 assessed 87 companies and graded them from A to F on the basis of the effectiveness of their labour rights management systems to lessen the risk of exploitation in their supply chains (Nimbalkar, Mawson & Harris 2016, p. 7).

6.7.5. Support for Victims of Rana Plaza Collapse and Tazreen Factory Fire

Moazzem and Islam (2015, p. 10) found that immediately after the Rana Plaza Collapse short-term monetary payments were made by local and donor organisations through the Rana Plaza Donors Trust Fund, comprising the Bangladesh Prime Minister's Relief Fund, BGMEA, Primark and a number of non-governmental development partners. Their support helped families of the dead and injured, though some families did not receive support as many bodies remained unidentified. In terms of long-term benefits, 3 years after the tragedy, 21.4% of survivors found employment in the RMG industry or in a small business after receiving entrepreneurial development training (Barua & Ansary 2017, p. 582). But because of physical and mental scares, many victims remained jobless. Therefore, progressive contributions to victims' long-term livelihood were inadequate (Moazzem & Islam 2015, p. 36).

After the Tazreen Factory Fire in 2012, development partners including European Retailer C&A, Hong Kong-based Li & Fung, the BGMEA, IndustriALL Global Union, and Amsterdam based Clean Clothes Campaign and the Prime Minister's Fund announced provision of full and fair compensation

to victims of Tazreen fashions until November 2014 (HRW 2015, p. 68). But in the victims' opinion, the compensation was insufficient to cover medical expenses and currently or compensate the misery and pain of not being able to return their work (HRW 2015, p. 70). Another challenge is that some companies claimed that they were unaware that their RMG products were manufactured or stored in the Tazreen Factory and declined to pay compensation, including Walmart. IndustryALL concluded that the industry failed to pay full and fair compensation (HRW 2015, pp. 69-70).

6.8. Conclusion

This chapter observed common human right violations in the RMG industry. From the case study of Tazreen Factory Fire and Rana Plaza Collapse, it was argued that workers' safety facilities did not conform to international labour rights and working in poor and risky buildings compounded their vulnerability. If strong trade unions had existed in the RMG industry, the workers' voices may have prevented such disasters from happening. Forming trade unions in the EPZ area was not allowed and outside the EPZ trade union leader faced much resistance from management to form a trade union and run its activities. Sometimes trade unions were male-dominated and women's problems were not addressed appropriately. Forced overtime, insufficient maternal provisions, low wages, occupational gender discrimination, lack of pure drinking water and toilet facilities affected greatly women workers' livelihood and rights. Women also faced mental and physical harassment by supervisors and unsafe working conditions caused many illnesses.

Freedom of choice and ensuring well-being are important conditions for achieving empowerment based on Sen's capability theory. However, women workers lack freedom of choice and ongoing human rights violations inhibit empowerment in many ways and impede the realisation of women RMG workers wellbeing. The two disasters highlight the challenges facing the RMG industry, although the series of reform and restructuring initiatives by the government, the ILO, donor agencies and international retailers to enhance occupational health and safety and mitigate the human rights violations are in the right direction.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

This thesis explored how women employment in the RMG industry of Bangladesh contributes to their social, political and economic empowerment and whether it is affected negatively by human rights violations. Amartya Sen's capability approach was used to assess empowerment focusing mainly on the freedom, dignity and opportunities of women. It can be debated whether measuring empowerment of an individual or group of workers is empirically possible, and whether one's judgement of empowerment is mostly subjective. Sen's conceptualisation of empowerment as freedom of choice allowed the thesis to analyse the changing dynamics of women workers' economic, political and social power from a Bangladeshi perspective. As the RMG industry is one of the most significant sectors of the Bangladesh economy and a majority of workers are women, the findings of this thesis will be beneficial for policymakers to improve women's status as well as the overall working environment of the RMG industry.

The thesis began with the question whether Bangladesh's demographic, political, economic and social context affected the evolution of the garment sector, identifying in particular the vulnerability of women's employment. The characteristics of Bangladesh include overpopulation, a disaster-prone environment, low education levels and an unskilled workforce, falling but prevalent poverty, a democratic but often unstable political situation, a rigid patriarchal society, dependence on the informal economy, and a lack of formal employment and cheap labour. All are contextual characteristics shaping the evolution of Bangladesh garment sector. Moreover, the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA), Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and setup of Export Processing Zones (EPZ) were three significant arrangements which advanced the RMG industry. Women from the most deprived parts of society were the main beneficiaries of employment opportunities in the RMG industry and Bangladesh's subsequent rapid economic growth.

The thesis argued the RMG employment increased women's individual economic empowerment. However, unequal power relations between men and women defined gender roles and impacted greatly the processes of social empowerment. This is obvious in the public and private spheres of women garments workers. In terms of a living wage, the new wage declaration after the Rana Plaza tragedy unfortunately ensured that garment workers would continue to live in poverty and deprive them of their dignity. A wage gap persists in the RMG sector, limiting empowerment and keeping women in an inferior position vis-à-vis men. Though women's RMG employment is subject to inequalities in many areas such as wages and their gender roles, occupational mobility is present, indicating that women who seek promotion are a positive inspiration that will increase their entrepreneurship skills and strategic life choices. Previously, cultural norms and religious values limited women's opportunities for social interaction by being restricted to household activities and covering themselves with the veil. Subsequently, women challenged social norms, traditional identities, gender roles and status, and religious practices as they moved outside the home to the

workplace and migrated from rural areas to the cities. In the workplace and living areas, women established social connections with many co-workers, making new friends and relations beyond the patriarchal structures of society. Their collective bargaining power, leadership qualities, legal rights and self-sufficiency all increased. Nonetheless, women faced new forms of exploitation, such as abuse and harassment in public spaces, indicating that gender-related constraints on social interaction were not easily transformed.

The impact of RMG work on the private lives of women workers is noteworthy. Due to patriarchal norms, girls mostly experienced discrimination in access to health, education and other facilities, which Sen describes as “missing women” in the development process. The process of empowerment of RMG women workers enlarges the potential to articulate and make life choices regarding marriage, reproductive health, investing in girls’ basic schooling and greater control over their lives. The greater economic independence or ‘new autonomy’ enjoyed by young women worker noticeably improves their self-esteem and decision-making power in the household. In addition, according to Sen’s cooperative conflict model, as women are economically dependent on RMG employment, their bargaining position in the family and rights to household property increases. Moreover, women struggled with domestic violence due to unequal power relations in society. But a shift in the domestic balance of power was confirmed by women’s employment in RMG sector. Women are more capable of making choices about staying in abusive relationships, resulting in a decrease in domestic violence. Finally, it was found that employment in the RMG industry was not able to transform socially structured gender roles and responsibilities regarding unpaid domestic chores performed mainly by women. After discussing all the issues, it can be concluded that women’s RMG employment amounted to significant progress in improving gender relations inside and outside the household in Bangladesh.

Women’s RMG sector employment may have wider impacts on society in respect of women’s citizenship rights and political power. Political empowerment of RMG women workers occurs because many policy papers recognise their value as respected citizens and key actors in the apparel sector. Evidence for the vibrancy of women’s capacity for politics and leadership was manifest when workers took responsibility for improving their human rights in the Export Processing Zones and others RMG industries and continued protesting for increases in minimum wage. Improvements in worker’s right and compliance issues are addresses in many of the Government’s national policy papers. Factory owners were forced to address this matter more seriously, signalling the progress of political empowerment of women RMG workers.

Although RMG work in Bangladesh remains tough and exploitative, it is evident from the thesis that women are more empowered with increasing economic independence, and greater social and political status inside and outside, especially when compared with the choices for other women in what remains a poor, patriarchal society. From the case study of the Tazreen Fashions fire and Rana

Plaza Collapse, it is evident that garment workers were subjected to human rights abuses, including the lack of freedom to form trade unions, forced overtime, workplace gender discrimination, criminality and predominantly poor and unsafe working environments. According to Sen's approach, women workers lack freedom of choice, gender inequality and existing violations of human rights limit empowerment processes and further impede realization of the wellbeing of women workers. Many issues are interrelated with the capability approach. Therefore, further research is necessary to assess the capabilities more concisely. Nonetheless this thesis demonstrated that by addressing the gaps and improving the working rights and environment through a series of initiatives by the government of Bangladesh, the ILO, donor agencies and international retailers aimed at reforming and restructuring the RMG sector are making progress.

RMG sector allowed Bangladeshi women to realise new practices of agency and to renegotiate their social roles as they were empowered to formulate and to choose strategic life options which were earlier decided by their family members or society. Therefore, it can be concluded that though women RMG workers are progressing in terms of social and economic empowerment, full empowerment is not yet achieved, since human rights violation remain in the garment industry and in the society.

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