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Fabric of Inequality: The Struggles of Ready-Made Garment Workers in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) is considered as a key contributor of economic growth of Bangladesh, providing jobs to over 4 million workers and a bulk of them are women. The sector – despite its role in driving economic expansion and alleviating poverty – is characterized by low wages, long working hours, unsafe conditions and limited workers' rights. Centered only on secondary data from journals, reports, newspapers and credible websites, the paper looks into the continued struggle of garment workers for socio-economic and work place rights. Using a desk review and two case studies, the study highlighted unethical labor practices and hazardous working conditions in RMG sector. The data show that global brands, factory owners, and regulatory bodies are involved in the chain of exploitation and gender inequity in this industry. The research highlights the critical importance of better labor standards, fair pay and effective enforcement to protect workers safety and dignity. The insights generated by the research could stimulate policymakers to ensure justice and equality in the RMG sector.

Keywords: Ready-Made Garment, Labor rights, Wage constraints, Gender inequality, Workplace safety, Bangladesh.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh's transition from an agro-based economy to an industrializing one marks a critical phase in its economic development(Kumar & Kumar, 2024). Since independence in 1971, agriculture served as the country's principal economic sector and the primary livelihood source for most citizens (Islam et al., 2022). However, in recent decades Bangladesh has progressively shifted from an agro-focused, aid-reliant economy toward a more trade-driven structure (Ahmed et al., 2023). The rapid expansion of the export-oriented ready-made garments (RMG) industry has played a pivotal role in driving this structural transformation (Rahman et al., 2017). Bangladesh's RMG sector is a global powerhouse. Today it is the world's second-largest garments exporter, behind only China (Economics Observatory, 2025). Remarkably, the industry has come to account for roughly 80–84% of Bangladesh's export earnings (WEF, 2024). Over the past four decades, export value form RMG sector has lifted from a few million dollars in the early 1980s to nearly $47 billion by 2023 (Nasrin et al., 2025).This export boom was blazed by pro-market reforms of the 1980s and 1990s that welcomed foreign investment into textile manufacturing (Rahman & Al-Hasan, 2019; WEF, 2024).Garments manufacturing now employs on the order of four million workers in Bangladesh. Roughly 60–80% of garment workers are women (Economics Observatory, 2025; World Business Report, 2023). Bangladesh has emerged as a rapidly expanding economy, with the RMG sector serving as a central driving force behind this growth and strengthening the global recognition of the "Made in Bangladesh" brand. The industry has become a vital pillar of the national economy, accounting for a substantial share of the country's export earnings. It has also played a transformative role in the nation's socioeconomic development by generating extensive employment opportunities, particularly for women from low-income and low-literacy backgrounds (Islam et al., 2016). As a major global apparel sourcing destination, the RMG sector contributes 10.35% to Bangladesh's GDP and continues to grow at an annual rate of around 7% (Light Castle, 2023). Despite notable reforms aimed at enhancing worker welfare, numerous challenges still undermine the overall well-being of RMG employees. Workers continue to face multidimensional hardships that affect their daily lives and long-term prospects. Concerning health and nutrition, many endure long working hours, insufficient lighting, poor ventilation, and overcrowded sanitation facilities. Additionally, ensuring a safe and respectful work environment remains difficult, as reports of workplace harassment—often perpetrated by supervisors—are still prevalent (Dash et al., 2019). Bangladesh's economic dependence on RMG makes workers' conditions a matter of both national and international concern. The World Economic Forum notes that garment produces about 84% of Bangladeshi export revenues (WEF, 2024), underpinning nearly all of the country's growth. This success story is often celebrated as a driver of poverty reduction and female employment. Economists warn that the industry's rapid expansion rests on an unsustainable reliance on low pay and poor working conditions (Economics Observatory, 2025). In short, Bangladesh's global leadership in clothing exports is built on the backs of millions of low-paid workers. The plight of these workers, their exploitation, rights abuses and vulnerability have far-reaching implications for human welfare and the viability of the industry.

In recent years, tragic events and worker protests have drawn international attention, highlighting how worker conditions and industry practices are deeply intertwined. Understanding this plight historically and today is essential for predicting the sector's future and for formulating solutions that protect labor rights while sustaining economic growth (Economics Observatory, 2025). Concerns over fire hazards persist in many workplaces, largely due to inadequate safety measures. Economic empowerment also remains a major challenge, as high employee turnover, unclear overtime policies, and dissatisfaction with low wages undermine workers' financial stability. In terms of equality, acceptance, and social rights, incidents of discrimination and harassment—often driven by supervisory staff—are commonly reported. Moreover, limited knowledge of labor laws and frequent job shifting restrict opportunities for education and professional growth among RMG workers. Although the literature on the ready-made garment (RMG) sector has predominantly focused on its economic significance, insufficient attention has been given to the socio-economic inequalities and institutional limitations affecting workers. In particular, research examining the structural roots of workers' deprivation and inequality remains limited. This review addresses this gap by synthesizing evidence from peer-reviewed articles, policy reports, and related documents to identify key factors driving inequality in the RMG sector. The article concludes by offering policy-relevant recommendations to mitigate these inequalities in this economically vital industry.

1.1 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article has followed desk review. A desk review involves gathering and examining information and data that are already available from existing sources (Mae, 2024; Nicolas, 2024). As the objective of this study is to review available information, experiences and recorded evidences on the problems experienced by RMG workers, desk review is suitable for this article. Given the vast body of secondary data available—such as academic publications, policy documents, NGO and government reports, and media investigations—a desk-based approach allows for a comprehensive synthesis of diverse perspectives without the constraints of fieldwork. This approach is well adapted to investigate longer-term structural problems, such as labor exploitation, gender inequality and working conditions, which are extensively covered in previous research. By critically reflecting on and systematically assembling existing sources, the desk review helps the researchers to make sense of patterns, policy gaps and institutional failures, providing an informed evidence-based account of how socio-economic inequalities are built into Bangladesh's RMG industry.

2. CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Emergence

Bangladesh's garment industry emerged in the late 1970s as a small, export-oriented sector. Its early development was led by Nurool Quader Khan, who in 1978 sent 130 trainees to South Korea to learn RMG production, resulting in the establishment of Desh Garments with technical and marketing support from Daewoo Corporation of South Korea (Islam et al., 2016; Rahman et al., 2017). Other pioneers included Akhter Mohammad Musa, Mohammad Reazuddin of Reaz Garments, Md Humayun, and Mohammad Fazlul Azim. Reaz Garments transitioned from a local tailoring enterprise founded in 1960 to export production in 1978. At that time, only nine export-oriented factories operated, generating exports of approximately USD 1 million (Rahman, 2023; Swazan & Das, 2022). The Multi Fibre Arrangement (MFA) of 1974 further facilitated sectoral growth by encouraging production relocation from quota-restricted countries such as South Korea to Bangladesh. Supported by trade liberalization, government incentives, and duty-free imports during the 1980s, the sector expanded rapidly and became a major export earner by the mid-1980s, with female entrepreneurs and workers playing a significant role in its economic and social transformation (Hossen, 2014; Sajjad Hossain et al., 2016).

2.2 Wage constraints

In the 1980s, government initiatives such as tax incentives and the creation of export processing zones were instrumental in securing foreign investment in Bangladesh's textile industry. The industry's growth was phenomenal – within ten years, garments made up about 60 percent of exports, and by the 2010s, they comprised about 80 percent (Economics Observatory, 2025). However, the industry's early years were characterized by poor working conditions. Workers often had to work 12-14 hours per day, including mandatory overtime, with low wages (Alam et al., 2011; Rahman, 2020). Even in the last decade, when the ready-made garment industry had developed under more significant global scrutiny, labor issues remained widespread. More than a decade after the 2013 legal changes, there was minimal adjustment. One key issue that has remained constant throughout is the low wages. Labor groups and unions have been demanding monthly minimum wages of about 23,000 BDT to afford living amenities (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Saleh, 2024; The Guardian, 2023).

Workers routinely report that their pay cannot meet housing, food, healthcare or education needs(The Business Standard, 2025). The government's five-year wage revision process has often been contentious. Against the backdrop of workers struggling with the unchanged minimum wage of BDT 8,000 set in 2018, the recent wage announcement by the government's wage board generated disappointment rather than relief (The Business Standard, 2023b). On November 7, 2023, the minimum wage for RMG workers was revised to BDT 12,500. Although this marks a significant increase, it still falls short of the workers' demand for BDT 23,000. As a result, many RMG workers continued their demonstrations, expressing frustration that the government's decision did not meet their expectations (The Daily Star, 2023). Wages were kept extremely low to maintain competitiveness. For example, by 2010 the minimum wage for unskilled sewing operators was set at BDT 3,000 per month or 38 USD only, at that time (Bossavie et al., 2023). Bangladesh's RMG industry, recognized as the world's second-largest apparel exporter, has long benefited from offering some of the lowest minimum wages in the global garment sector(The Business Standard, 2023).

Yet the long-term viability of this cost-based advantage is increasingly uncertain, as maintaining low wages raises serious concerns about the welfare of the workers who sustain the sector. With intensifying global competition, the ethical dimensions of Bangladesh's wage structures demand greater scrutiny.

In late 2023, when authorities finally raised the minimum to 12,500 takas from 8000, garment workers held peaceful strikes demanding much higher pay (Prothom Alo, 2024). These protests were met with severe crackdown. Police fired on crowds, killing four workers and hundreds of protesters were beaten or injured. Ten thousand workers now face criminal charges for labor organizing (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2025; The Guardian, 2023). Amnesty International described this as a deadly outcome on wages made worse by the price workers are paying for speaking out (Amnesty International, 2023; The Guardian, 2023). The recent events echo an earlier cycle (2018–19) when 50,000 workers went on strike and over 10,000 were dismissed or charged after raising wage demands (Amnesty International, 2023; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2025). Such recurring repression highlights how difficult it remains for workers to claim even legally-sanctioned rights (Amnesty International, 2023; Solidarity Center, 2024).

2.3 Gender disparity

Women workers frequently report widespread discrimination and inadequate enforcement of formal labor protections. Despite legal provisions guaranteeing maternity leave, compliance remains weak, with many employers compelling pregnant workers to continue working or to leave their jobs. Female workers also face verbal and sexual harassment both within factory settings and during their commutes, significantly compromising their safety; however, such incidents are often underreported and consequently underrepresented in official records. Moreover, the dual burden of paid factory labor and unpaid domestic responsibilities results in chronic fatigue, as many women lack adequate rest periods or sufficient time to spend with their children outside of work (Akhter et al., 2017; Rahman & Al-Hasan, 2019). Social and gender norms further intensified workers' vulnerability, as the RMG workforce largely comprised young women—predominantly aged 18–32—with limited formal education. Female workers were concentrated in low-paid positions such as sewing operators and helpers, while men, though a numerical minority (approximately 15%), disproportionately occupied higher-paid supervisory roles. Overall, the rapid expansion of the garment industry from the 1980s to the 2000s relied heavily on low-cost female labor and weak enforcement of labor regulations. Workers' rights to unionize were legally constrained, and union presence remained limited; although the National Garment Workers' Federation (NGWF) was established in 1984, trade unions remained small and ineffective until the early 2010s due to restrictive legal frameworks and employer resistance (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

2.4 Labor rights violations

In practice, labor rights in Bangladesh are severely constrained despite formal legal guarantees. Employers routinely exploit loopholes in the labor law, while union officers face threats, transfers, arbitrary dismissals, and violence (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Solidarity Center, 2024). Entire sectors, notably Export Processing Zones, remain effectively closed to unions, and legal provisions allow broad punitive action against workers involved in protests or strikes, fostering fear and suppressing collective action (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Shurokkha, n.d.). Although the labor law was amended again in 2023, labor leaders informed a visiting European Union delegation that the reforms remain unfavorable to workers. A major concern is the continued requirement for high consent thresholds to form unions—20 percent in factories with fewer than 3,000 workers and 15 percent in larger factories—despite long-standing demands for their removal (The Daily Star, 2023a). Violence against union organizers remains widespread; in June 2023, veteran unionist Shahidul Islam was beaten to death after demanding unpaid wages, allegedly by management-linked actors (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024a). During the national minimum wage protests of October–November 2023, at least four workers were killed, and authorities filed at least 35 criminal cases implicating tens of thousands of workers, many linked to factories supplying major global brands (Amnesty International, 2024). By late 2023, over 40,000 workers faced fabricated charges for peaceful protest (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2025). These patterns demonstrate that structural barriers and state–corporate alignment continue to undermine genuine freedom of association in Bangladesh (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Solidarity Center, 2024).

2.5 Workplace safety concerns

Workplace safety concerns in Bangladesh's garments industry remain a significant issue, characterized by frequent accidents, inadequate safety measures, and poor regulatory enforcement. From 2005 to 2013, approximately 1512 workers were killed due to factory building collapses, fires, boiler blasts, and other industrial accidents(Ekramuzzaman, 2024; Wadud et al., 2016).Government action to enforce safety and rights is weak and often ineffective. The situation worsened tragically on April 24, 2013, when the Rana Plaza building collapsed, killing at least 1,134 workers. This catastrophe exposed the negligence of factory owners, the government and international buyers. Initially, there were calls to boycott Bangladeshi garments, but instead, stronger interventions were introduced. Organizations like the Accord and Alliance were formed to oversee factory building safety. This event marked a turning point, forcing stakeholders to seriously address structural safety and labor standards (Rahman, 2023). Just months before the Rana Plaza collapse, a devastating fire at Tazreen Fashions claimed the lives of more than a hundred workers who were unable to escape due to blocked exits and locked doors. These two major industrial tragedies in the Dhaka area highlight severe failures in workplace oversight and represent stark cases of business-related human rights violations. Together, they reveal the human consequences of weak regulatory systems and emphasize the urgent need to strengthen occupational safety measures in line with international business and human rights standards for Bangladesh's workforce(Amnesty International, 2024). Although some progress has been made in improving working conditions, many longstanding issues persist. The Labor Act 2006 (amended in 2023), lacks a comprehensive mechanism for compensation and insurance during injuries, disability, or job loss. While appointment letters are mandatory, 50% of workers lack them, limiting benefits access (Shurokkha, n.d.).

2.6 Health implications

In 2022 alone, a survey by news outlets found that 967 workers died in workplace accidents across Bangladesh including non-garment industries (Amnesty International, 2023). Millions more have sustained serious injuries on the job. General safety standards are often substandard. Many factories lack functioning fire alarms, sprinklers or clear exit routes. Overcrowding and building code violations are pervasive. For example, Tazreen Fashions (2012) and Rana Plaza (2013) are the two biggest known disasters. Both involved locked or blocked exits (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019, 2024). Outside of disasters, workers regularly report minor injuries such as needle pricks, lacerations, breathing problems from dust and long-term issues like hearing loss. In 2022, the government reported only that over 900 workers died in all workplace accidents. Which highlights the systemic neglecting habit of occupational safety (Amnesty International, 2023).

Although there have been some improvements in safety in recent years, garment workers are still exposed to health hazards(Yuan et al., 2022). Workers' everyday experiences performing their tasks take a toll on their physical health, their working hours are long and excessive, oftentimes exceeding the legal rates during production peaks. Workers perform intensive physical activities such as standing at sewing machines, lifting, and moving burdensome fabric rolls for 10 to 12 hours a day(Zaman et al., 2024). Stressful work is tiring and exhausting, with more than 68% reporting headaches, 51% back pain, and 55% somatic symptoms. While physical health is evidently affected, psychosocial pressure is noted as well. Intense work is often accompanied by tough managerial pressure, with reports of bullying and abusive behaviors despite the presence of social support(Dreher et al., 2022). Furthermore, many factories remain characterized by the absence of good air quality, lack of appropriate lighting, excessive heat, and noise. During peaks, workers are in some cases required to partake in long shifts or attend work with short or no notice without proper overtime pay.

2.7 Child Labor

Child labor remains a largely overlooked problem in Bangladesh's RMG sector, particularly in subcontracted and informal production sites. Research shows that all minors interviewed in these supply chains were engaged in illegal work, most commonly in unregistered small workshops or home-based units. Children between eight and fourteen are increasingly drawn into hazardous tasks that jeopardize their physical health and emotional development. The continued presence of child labor is closely linked to deep-rooted poverty, weak implementation of labor laws, gaps in policy enforcement, and community-level acceptance of children's work. These young workers often face highly unsafe environments, where they operate risky machinery, handle chemical materials, and work excessively long hours. Such conditions push many children to leave school prematurely, which restricts their long-term opportunities and undermines their intellectual growth. Their wages are extremely low—frequently beneath legally mandated minimums—and payment is often irregular or delayed, reflecting the broader exploitation embedded in informal segments of the garment supply chain (Norpoth et al., 2014)

2.8 Implications upon LDC graduation

Bangladesh's graduation from Least Developed Country (LDC) status in 2026 is expected to create major challenges for the RMG sector, primarily due to the withdrawal of preferential trade benefits such as Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), which currently allows duty-free entry into key markets like the EU and the US. Losing these advantages will likely make Bangladeshi apparel less competitive, raising prices and risking declines in demand and market share. Increased compliance and quality requirements will further raise production costs. These pressures may affect the industry's workforce, as factories could reduce expenses through layoffs or cost-cutting measures. To remain competitive, the sector will need substantial investment in technology, skill development, and improved infrastructure. Although progress has been made in sustainability—such as expanding green factories—the industry still relies heavily on state support, especially over the past decade, unlike more self-reliant garment-producing countries (Textile Focus, 2024).

3. CASE STUDIES

The plight of the RMG workers has contained a prolonged history with severe tragic events and sufferings along death. Some of the plights have been highlighted here as case studies, which was being conducted earlier by several authors, agencies and so on.

3.1 Rana Plaza Tragedy

A defining and devastating moment occurred on 24 April 2013, when the Rana Plaza building in Savar, on the outskirts of Dhaka, collapsed. The eight-story structure contained five garment factories, along with several shops and a bank on the lower levels. Although large cracks had been discovered on the building the day before—prompting the lower-floor occupants to evacuate—factory authorities dismissed the danger and instructed workers to return the next morning. Only a few hours into the shift, the entire building gave way. The disaster claimed approximately 1,134 lives and left nearly 2,600 others injured. Many survivors remained trapped beneath the rubble for extended periods, and some even had to amputate their limbs to free themselves(Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024).

The human toll was horrific and instantly galvanized global attention. Media coverage showed images of thousands of distressed families and scenes of desperate rescue, making Rana Plaza the deadliest industrial disaster since Bhopal (1984). Investigations revealed multiple causes. Illegally added floors, poor-quality materials and violated building codes made Rana Plaza vulnerable. Emergency exits were inadequate or locked, further trapping victims inside. Factory owners' malpractice such as forcing attendance despite danger was widely condemned. Many western brands were implicated after media found their labels on garments in the rubble (Changala, 2023).

In response, pressure mounted on international buyers and the Bangladeshi government. The aftermath included immediate and longer-term measures. Within weeks, over 200 garments companies agreed to form the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, commonly called as The Accord, a legally binding five-year agreement to inspect and improve factory safety. The Accord was created in May 2013 to combat the man-made disasters in the future and ultimately covered over 1,600 factories (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024).

Its members committed to fund repairs, conduct inspections and publicly report progress. At the same time, North American brands which was led by Gap and Walmart launched a similar initiative known as the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, commonly called as The Alliance. Unlike the Accord, the Alliance's commitments were criticized as weaker and non-binding (Kayser, 2016). But it also performed inspections on many factories. By mid-2016, over 200 global retailers had joined one or both programs. Meanwhile, the government pushed through a labour law amendment in July 2013. But as Human Rights Watch noted, this still left many restrictive clauses in place, for example, it left the 30% union threshold largely intact and did not eliminate anti-union bans in export zones (Human Rights Watch, 2013).

Within Bangladesh, Rana Plaza spurred some concrete changes. The Rana Plaza Arrangement was set up to coordinate compensation. Over $30 million was raised for victims' families and injured workers (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024). Building inspections were stepped up such as government teams shut down hundreds of factories deemed unsafe in the following years. The minimum wage for RMG workers was substantially raised (from 3000 to 5300 taka in late 2013) after nationwide protests (Bossavie et al., 2023). It was about a 77% increase, though still a low absolute amount. The concept of worker safety committees in every factory was reinforced both by law and by Accord procedures to monitor conditions (RSC, n.d.).

At a societal level, Rana Plaza shifted discourse terms like the sweatshop and the fast fashion became widely associated with the Bangladeshi industry. Consumer and labor organizations intensified campaigns demanding ethical sourcing and living wages. In sum, Rana Plaza's legacy was to force stakeholders such as government, industry and brands to acknowledge the untenable status quo. Nevertheless, many critics point out that deep change remains incomplete. Even years after Rana Plaza, numerous factories still struggle to meet basic safety standards and workers continue to voice fears that corners will be cut if new incidents occur (Bossavie et al., 2023; Kayser, 2016). The UK, through the Department for International Development (DFID), has committed up to £4.8 million over three years to an International Labour Organization initiative aimed at strengthening Bangladesh's National Action Plan on Fire Safety and Structural Integrity. In addition, the UK has introduced an £18 million programme focused on enhancing skills training in the garment and construction industries. Through these targeted efforts, the UK continues to support the RMG sector, recognizing its significant contribution to social progress and the empowerment of women(UK Government, 2014).

3.2 Tazreen Factory Fire

On 24 November 2012, a fire broke out at the Tazreen Fashions factory, located in Dhaka's Ashulia industrial area. The blaze swept quickly through the building. Alarmingly, many exits were locked or blocked, trapping workers on upper floors. Dozens of desperate employees jumped out of barred windows from the 3^{rd} and 4^{th} floors. In total, at least 112 workers died in the blaze and dozens more suffered severe injuries. To be more specific, the particularly broke bones and head wounds from the falls. The scene was horrifying, bodies of young women scattered on the ground and survivors with spinal injuries and burns. Tazreen was a sweatshop, producing for major global brands. Auditors later confirmed linked orders for Walmart via BRAC-USA, El Corte Inglés, German discounter KiK, C&A and others. It was one of the deadliest fires in Bangladesh's industrial history, preceded only by smaller incidents like the 2010 Spectrum Dyeing fire, which about killed 64 people on board (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019).

On the policy side, Tazreen underscored the need for fire safety enforcement. Discussions of safety standards had already been occurring through the Accord concept originated even before 2012 (Kayser, 2016). But, Tazreen added urgency. The tragedy revealed how even a single locked door could mean death for hundreds. It prompted many global brands to finally take notice of Bangladesh's safety deficits. Still, because Rana Plaza was larger and later, Tazreen faded somewhat from public memory and systemic reforms remained slow. Even today, Tazreen survivors lament that its lessons were not fully learned as they still await justice. But the factory owner's trial has been repeatedly delayed (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019).

From 2011 to 2012, Walmart's auditors conducted several inspections at the Tazreen factory, and during at least one visit identified serious safety concerns that resulted in an orange rating. These issues included missing fire alarms, an insufficient number of extinguishers, and cluttered pathways that could obstruct evacuation. The factory also lacked proper emergency exits, and its stairwells emptied onto the ground floor instead of leading outdoors. However, Walmart's audits did not explicitly assess whether functional emergency exits were in place. Instead of addressing these risks—which might have reduced the scale of the later tragedy—Walmart eventually removed Tazreen from its approved supplier list in 2012. Despite this, some Walmart-affiliated suppliers continued to purchase from the factory (WSR, 2017).

The immediate aftermath of Tazreen was chaotic. Families of victims had no recourse for compensation. Local unions and NGOs began documenting the tragedy, campaigns were launched demanding brand accountability. Clean Clothes Campaign and IndustriALL union worked with survivors to identify the buyer companies and pressure them. Eventually, using momentum from Rana Plaza negotiations, a Tazreen Claims Administration Trust was established in 2015 to compensate survivors and victims' families. By mid-2016 this Trust paid out loss-of-income and medical compensation to injured workers and dependents of the dead. Notably, some brands such as C&A, Walmart's suppliers contributed to the fund. But others implicated, including U.S. and European retailers have not fully paid what victims say they owe (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019).

In the aftermath of the Tazreen fire, Walmart asserted that the factory was no longer authorized to manufacture its products, claiming that a supplier had improperly subcontracted production there in violation of company policy. However, documents recovered from the site revealed that at least three Walmart-affiliated suppliers continued to source from Tazreen even after it had reportedly been removed from the approved supplier list. More than a year and a half before the fire, Walmart had already recognized that many of its factories in Bangladesh required major structural and safety upgrades, yet no significant action followed. An internal email from a Walmart executive in December 2012 further acknowledged that fire and electrical safety were not included in the company's ethical sourcing audits. During a meeting in Dhaka in April 2011, Walmart also declined to help fund safety improvements, arguing that such investments were not financially sustainable for the brands (WSR, 2017).

The Tazreen Factory fire and Rana Plaza disasters after taken together, symbolize the worst of the garment industry's failures. They led directly to new safety initiatives such as Accord, Alliance, and later the RMG Sustainability Council. These was taken as the stronger victim compensation mechanisms. However, they also exposed long-standing negligence. Before Rana Plaza, the burning of Tazreen should have been a clear warning, yet it took a building collapse with ten times the casualties for real action to happen. These cases highlight why the plight of RMG workers cannot be ignored. It also teaches us that when safety is ignored, the costs are paid in human lives (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019).

4. FINDINGS

The desk-based review of secondary sources demonstrates that even though the RMG sector is the most crucial export industry in Bangladesh, its underlying economic development continues to be predicated upon structural inequalities. Overviews of reports, academic research, and NGO findings reveal seven integral and interlinked narratives: discrepancies in wages, a lack of proper enforcement mechanisms, obstacles related to unionization, gender disparity, occupational health and safety risks, prevalence of child labor, and vulnerabilities related to post-LDC graduation.

4.1 Wage Disparity and Economic Insecurity

Evidence indicates a persistent and widening gap between the legal minimum wage and the living wage for RMG workers. Despite an increase to BDT 12,500 in 2023, the minimum wage remains well below the estimated living wage of BDT 23,000 (Human Rights Watch, 2023; The Daily Star, 2023b; The Business

Standard, 2025). The wage-setting process has been criticized for prioritizing political and competitiveness concerns over workers' welfare (Saleh, 2024), while recurrent protests in 2018–2019 and 2023 underscore deep worker dissatisfaction (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2025). Consequently, the review finds that economic growth in the RMG sector has not been accompanied by social justice or equitable wage distribution.

3.2 Deficiencies in Labor Inspection and Regulatory Enforcement

Although the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, amended in 2023, provides a legal framework for occupational safety and workers' rights, enforcement remains weak due to limited institutional capacity and political interference (Human Rights Watch, 2013; Shurokkha, n.d.). Disasters such as the Tazreen Factory Fire (2012) and the Rana Plaza collapse (2013) revealed deep governance failures marked by corruption and inadequate oversight (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019, 2024b; Wadud et al., 2016). While post-disaster initiatives improved safety temporarily, inspection effectiveness has declined following their dissolution (Kayser, 2016; RSC, n.d.). Consequently, many factories still fail to meet basic safety standards, reflecting an inspection regime that remains reactive rather than preventive.

4.3 Barriers to Unionization and Collective Bargaining

The findings reveal major legal and structural barriers to union formation. One of them is the requirement that the current law demands from 20 to 30 percent of workers' approval to register a union, a high threshold in large factories where workers are intimidated or dismissed (The Daily Star, 2023a; Solidarity Center, 2024). Workers who attempt to form a union are harassed or murdered, such as trade unionist Shahidul Islam in 2023 (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2024a). The majority of the independent unions have been largely unable to access Export Processing Zones limiting the workers' access to decent wages and collective bargaining. Lack of real freedom of association perpetuates an unequal power structure in which owners and international purchasers determine wages and policies (Amnesty International, 2023).

4.4 Gender Disparities and Workplace Harassment

While the RMG sector has been characterized by an overwhelmingly feminine workforce, with women accounting for 60-80 percent of workers, gender inequalities remained pervasive on multiple levels Akhter et al., 2017; Economics Observatory, 2025). On the one hand, women remain segregated on low-skill and low-paid sewing and helpers' jobs, while men occupy supervisory positions that offer higher pay and more robust job-level security. On the other hand, the review highlights to a high prevalence of harassment and discrimination against women and frequent denial of maternity benefits (Rahman & Al-Hasan, 2019). For instance, employees are pressed to resign when they become pregnant, and few factories have childcare facilities or a clean and safe space for rest. Second, female employees must also work unpaid in the home, which, in combination with the above factors, exacerbates fatigue and health-related issues. Thus, the findings suggest that women, despite their numerical edge, are the most disadvantaged segment of the RMG workforce, constrained by both structural and cultural barriers

4.5 Occupational Health, Safety, and Well-being

Although some reforms have been implemented, occupational hazards continue to be rampant. For example, between 2005 and 2013, over 1,500 RMG workers were killed due to factory fires, collapses, and explosions (Ekramuzzaman, 2024). The Rana Plaza incident underscored the costs of neglect, and recent surveys suggest that many factories still do not have proper ventilation systems, safety training, or functional fire equipment (Zaman et al., 2024; Yuan et al., 2022). Common health complaints include back pain, headaches, respiratory problems, and psychological distress (Dreher et al., 2022). Moreover, daily working hours often exceed the legal limit of eight hours per day, increasing exhaustion and the probability of accidents and injuries (Sultana, 2023). Compensation is not consistent, with many employers lacking the formal letters of appointment that would offer them legal protection (Shurokkha, n.d.). These results indicate that occupational health and safety reforms remain superficial and unevenly enforced.

4.6 Persistence of Child Labor in Informal and Subcontracted Units

Children are employed in the garment industry even though child labor is outlawed. Research indicates that as many as eight-year-olds work sub-contracted and home-based informal garment production lines in dangerous conditions with no safeguards (Norpoth et al., 2014; Hoque, 2024). This is due to poverty, lax regulation, and societal tolerance. Child workers are paid much less than the legally set minimum wage, their earnings are delayed, and they have fewer educational opportunities. As a result, poverty is passed down from generation to generation. The continued existence of child labor highlights the lack of oversight, as well as the inability of global brands to govern extended supply chains beyond first-tier firms.

4.7 Emerging Challenges and Post-LDC Graduation Vulnerabilities

Bangladesh's graduation from Least Developed Country status in 2026 will create new structural risks. For instance, the elimination of preferential trade privileges, primarily under the Generalized System of Preferences, will make exports more expensive and workers' production cost in local currency relatively more expensive to afford daily needs (Textile Focus, 2024). Due to this loss, owners may decide to keep wage suppression and jobs cut, and rising costs of implementing international labor and environmental standards, which small-scale factories will find difficult to bear. The overall scenario suggests that, without appropriate government measures, post-LDC changes will exacerbate the precarity of garment workers' jobs and lives.

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this review highlight that the hardships faced by Bangladesh's garment workers are not isolated problems but interconnected structural issues rooted in the very foundations of the RMG industry. Despite policy reforms, market growth, and heightened global scrutiny, the daily realities faced by workers show that meaningful change has been uneven and, in many cases, superficial. The evidence suggests that the sector's economic dynamism continues to be driven by suppressing labor costs, limiting worker voice, and prioritizing production targets over worker well-being (Human Rights Watch, 2023; Saleh, 2024; The Guardian, 2023).

The wage issue demonstrates this structural imbalance clearly. Even after the latest increase, the minimum wage remains far below living wage estimates, leaving workers in chronic financial insecurity. This gap signifies more than economic hardship—it reflects the limited bargaining power of labor in a system where employers and state actors share incentives to maintain low production costs. The recurrent wage protests, often met with intimidation or violence, point to a systemic suppression of workers' attempts to influence wage-setting processes (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2025; Amnesty International, 2023). Similarly, the continued prevalence of unsafe working conditions highlights enduring weaknesses in regulatory oversight. Although major disasters triggered important reforms, inspection systems remain under-resourced and susceptible to political pressure. Safety violations—poor ventilation, blocked exits, overcrowding—persist because regulatory bodies lack coercive power, and brands often externalize responsibility within fragmented supply chains (Clean Clothes Campaign, 2019; Zaman et al., 2024). This reflects a broader governance challenge: worker safety improves only when global pressure is strong, not through consistent national accountability.

Unionization barriers further reinforce the asymmetric power dynamics. Strict registration requirements, surveillance, and harassment of organizers effectively prevent workers from forming collective platforms. As a result, grievances remain individualized, and wage or safety negotiations occur with minimal worker participation (Solidarity Center, 2024). The killing of a labor organizer in 2023 underscores the risks associated with challenging existing structures.

Gendered hierarchies intensify these inequalities. Women dominate lower-paying roles and face greater risks of exploitation due to limited mobility, childcare burdens, and weak enforcement of protections such as maternity benefits (Akhter et al., 2017). Their marginalization is not incidental—it is embedded in the organization of factory labor. The persistence of child labor in subcontracted units indicates systemic blind spots in supply chain regulation. Informal production environments fall outside regular monitoring, revealing the limitations of compliance-driven approaches (Norpoth et al., 2014). Bangladesh's upcoming LDC graduation may amplify these structural vulnerabilities. The loss of trade preferences could trigger cost-cutting strategies that disproportionately affect workers unless the industry upgrades production and strengthens regulatory enforcement (Textile Focus, 2024).

Overall, the discussion suggests that Bangladesh's RMG sector remains locked in a low-cost, low-rights equilibrium. Sustainable transformation requires shifting from compliance-based, externally driven reforms toward systemic strengthening of labor governance, worker voice, and social protections

6. WAYS FORWARD

To effectively tackle the difficulties faced by garment workers in Bangladesh, it is essential to implement comprehensive reforms that encompass national policy adjustments, improvements in employer practices, enhancements in global governance, and increased accountability from brands. The subsequent measures have been derived from the recommendations of experts and established global best practices.

6.1 Strengthening Labor Law and Enforcement

Bangladesh must align its labor laws with international standards, ensuring full protection of freedom of association and collective bargaining. Enforcement agencies—particularly labor and factory inspectors—require expanded capacity and authority. The legal workweek should strictly follow an eight-hour day and 48-hour week, eliminating voluntary overtime provisions and ensuring proper overtime pay. Regular unannounced audits, backed by strong penalties, are essential given current inspection gaps. Bangladesh should ratify and implement core ILO conventions, including C.155 and C.81, and remove bureaucratic barriers to union registration as recommended by the ILO. Further reforms to the Bangladesh Labor Act (2006, amended 2023) should close loopholes, strengthen union rights in EPZs, and prevent misuse of strike restrictions (Human Rights Watch, 2013; ILO, 2013).

6.2 Ensuring Living Wages

Wage-setting must become more frequent, transparent, and participatory. The current minimum wage (BDT 12,500) covers only a fraction of living costs, showing the inadequacy of the five-year revision system. Annual or biannual updates tied to inflation and living-wage benchmarks are urgently needed. Buyers should incorporate fair wages into pricing, consistent with frameworks like the UNGPs and OECD guidelines (Swedwatch, 2024). Global brands must adopt binding living-wage commitments. The Labor Reform Commission (2025) recommends a permanent national wage commission, mandatory inflation-linked raises, and penalties for delayed payments.

6.3 Improving Workplace Safety and Compensation

Ensuring safe factories requires strict enforcement of fire, electrical, and structural safety standards. Inspections must be frequent, public, and tied to meaningful sanctions. Unsafe buildings should be upgraded or closed. The RMG Sustainability Council should be institutionally strengthened with trained worker representatives to monitor daily hazards. Compensation for injuries and fatalities must be aligned with ILO Convention 121 and raised significantly from current inadequate levels. DIFE should conduct routine and surprise inspections using updated life-safety checklists, while also providing safety training. Confidential complaint mechanisms and strong legal consequences for violations are essential. The Labor Reform Commission (2025) also calls for compulsory insurance, an emergency wage fund, and a national digital worker database.

6.4 Promoting Freedom of Association

Stronger protections are needed for union organizers, including penalties for employer retaliation. Government, BGMEA, and independent unions should engage in structured social dialogue. Buyers can strengthen compliance by requiring proof of good-faith union relations. Legal reforms should decriminalize peaceful strikes and streamline union registration. The LRC (2025) proposes relaxed membership thresholds, faster registration decisions, and protections against arbitrary termination.

6.5 Advocating Gender-Sensitive Policies

Factories should ensure maternity leave, childcare facilities, anti-harassment committees, and equal promotion opportunities. Reforms should mandate 180 days of paid maternity leave, functional creches, menstrual leave, paternity leave, and monitored harassment-prevention systems (LRC, 2025).

6.6 Eliminating Child Labor

Bangladesh must strengthen enforcement of its National Plan of Action on child labor, focusing on subcontracted factories. Buyers should implement remediation protocols, and suppliers must ensure age verification and collaborate with NGOs to transition child workers into education (Hoque, 2024).

6.7 Improving International Cooperation and Corporate Accountability

International initiatives like the Accord show that cross-border pressure can improve factory standards. Future efforts should emphasize strong due-diligence requirements, including alignment with the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD). Brands must adopt binding commitments rather than relying on audits alone. Multilateral agencies such as the ILO, World Bank, and UN Women should continue supporting programs like Better Work Bangladesh to enhance safety and skills across the sector.

6.8 Mitigating LDC Graduation Impacts

With the loss of trade preferences, the industry must move toward self-reliance, innovation, and diversification. Greater foreign investment, joint ventures, and technological upgrading will be essential to maintain competitiveness (Textile Focus, 2024).

7. CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's RMG industry represents a paradox. It has lifted millions out of poverty and propelled the nation's economy. Yet it has done so on the back of millions of overworked, underpaid and vulnerable workers. The story of the RMG sector in Bangladesh is marked by both resilience and pain. From the ashes of colonial-era exploitation, the industry emerged as a lifeline for millions. Yet, this progress has been shadowed by enormous sufferings, collapsed buildings, factory fires and lives lost due to systemic negligence. While reforms like the Accord have gone through incremental improvements, the recent wage protests and inflation crisis reveals how fragile these gains are. Workers earning BDT 12,500 still tackles with hunger, while executives and global brands reap billions. This disparity is not just an economic failure, it is an intense moral crisis.

In recent years, labor unrest and global scrutiny have prompted some improvements such as higher wages, more inspections and a few legal reforms. Yet the fundamental problems remain - workers still struggle to earn a living wage, face health and safety hazards. A garment industry that ignores its workforce's plight is ethically untenable. Dissatisfied workers and eroding international reputation could eventually endanger the industry's durability. The sacrifices of past victims would then lead to a safer, fairer industry that continues to deliver prosperity without repeating its tragic history. The women who power sewing machines today may become tomorrow's managers or union leaders or policymakers, if given the tools to rise. The world watches, clad in clothes stitched by Bangladeshi hands. It is time for this world to provide justice for the hands that dress it. The garments we wear should carry not just labels but legacies of fairness for the people of our industries.

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