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Promoting Gender Equality in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment Sector: Gender Assessments of Factory Policies & Practices

Approximately 3.5 million women are employed in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, making them critical to the economic growth of our country. These women, who make up around 60-80% of the total workforce in the industry, continue to face severe gender-based challenges that threaten their participation in the labour-force.

To assess the systematic challenges affecting women workers in the sector, a gender assessment of 25 factories was conducted. This audit explored the gaps in policies and practices that contribute to gender inequality. This policy brief outlines key findings and policy recommendations that emerged to promote gender justice and strengthen factory accountability. The gender audit was led by the Shojag Coalition with EU support.

These are some existing national-level policies worth highlighting.

- **2011 National Women's Development Policy:** This policy emphasizes the protection and advancement of women's rights in Bangladesh. It aims to address gender disparities across various sectors, including employment and safety.
- **Action Plan of the 2011 National Women's Development Policy (2013):** This plan operationalizes the policy, with particular focus on implementing strategies that ensure the safety and empowerment of women workers, especially in the RMG sector.
- **8th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025):** The plan includes provisions for enhancing the safety, security, and representation of women in the workforce, aiming for improved gender equality and economic opportunities.

These policies, while robust on paper, have faced challenges in enforcement, especially in the areas of workplace safety and gender-based violence in the RMG sector. The report underscores the importance of more effective policy implementation to close the gap between national goals and the realities on the ground.

Key Messages

- **Lack of Policy Knowledge.** Currently practices at the factory level are ineffectively implementing our existing policies. To bring these policies into practice, awareness programs that might help change attitudes are needed. Budgets need to be put aside for education purposes.
- **Lack of Policy Implementation.** Factories lack clear anti-discrimination practices. For example, though maternity leave

policies exist, many women are unable to avail this benefit, and are instead asked to leave and return when they are ready to work again. Stronger incentives to put policies to practice are needed, as well as monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

- **Disempowered Staff.**

Most factory workers are unaware of existing laws and policies. They also do not have places to turn to learn more about these laws and policies. More mechanisms to support staff in accessing benefits and asserting their rights are needed.

- **Urgent Need for Action.**

Comprehensive improvements in policies, create awareness for the workers, sensitisation for the management, ensure disciplinary procedures, and infrastructure are necessary to keep women safe. Roadmaps for each factory and at the industry level for achieving gender inclusivity and safety are needed. Adequate grievance mechanisms need to be put in place.

- **Context Considerations Needed.**

Workers' rights and conditions need to be seen in a wider context, outside the factory boundaries. We need to consider the wider environment where they live and the routes they travel to work.

■ Methodology

The intervention involved conducting gender assessments across 25 RMG factories in Bangladesh to evaluate workplace policies, practices, and infrastructure from a gender lens. The assessments focused on key areas such as gender policies, disciplinary procedures, awareness and sensitisation processes, grievance mechanisms, and rights of female workers. Data collection included on-site evaluations, interviews with

management, workers, HR and compliance teams, as well as document reviews of company policies and risk assessment procedures. The study also incorporated feedback from factory Shojag Sathis (Human Rights Defenders) and local women's rights organisations and trade unions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of gender equality issues within these workplaces.

■ Findings from Gender Assessments

Gaps in Existing Policies.

- Most factories lack clear written policies and have inadequate grievance and monitoring systems. Furthermore, there is a significant disconnect when it comes to employees' understanding and practical application of these policies. Most factories lack a proper grievance mechanism that allows women workers to seek justice.
 - Only 2 out of 25 factories had a policy statement that reflected the commitment of

top management to ensure justice for women in the workplace.

- Only 6 out of 25 factories had a clear and written policy established on discrimination against women in hiring, firing, promoting, discipline and training.
- Only 2 out of 25 factories had a formal, non-retaliatory, and confidential system in place to report, investigate, and act against VAW.

■ Inadequate Disciplinary Procedures

- Disciplinary actions are not clearly defined or consistently applied, particularly concerning aspects related to recruitment, promotion, leadership, restricted working hour for the women workers and VAW. While committees aimed at addressing sexual harassment at factories exist, there are significant gaps concerning their functionality and effectiveness. Committee members often do not receive adequate training specific to handling cases of sexual harassment. This includes training on legal aspects, sensitivity training concerning victim handling, and conflict resolution.

- Only 1 out of 25 factories had a person assigned by senior management to ensure that no violence is conducted against women.
- Only 7 out of 25 factories had clear guidelines and proper training for committee members responsible for handling cases of sexual harassment.
- Only 1 out of 25 factories have functioning teams or committees to effectively deal with sexual harassment.

■ Female Facilities Deficiencies

- Facilities for female workers, such as childcare and washroom facilities are inadequate. The

availability and quality of maternity benefits and childcare facilities vary widely, impacting the

ability of female workers to balance work and family responsibilities effectively.

- Only 2 out of 25 factories had childcare facilities meeting the required standards for safety and quality.

- Only 10 out of 25 factories provided adequate maternity benefits or leave, significantly affecting the well-being of female workers.

■ Transport Insecurity

- For many workers, especially in regions where public or transit safety is a concern, the journey to and from work can pose significant risks. There is very little collaboration with local law enforcement or community organizations that have expertise in handling external security

issues. Such collaborations can enhance the practical aspects of training by providing real-world insights and support in managing external threats. Moreover, if factories provided their own transport, this may be more helpful in managing external threats.

■ Lack of monitoring

- Data-driven decision-making is essential for understanding trends, identifying areas of concern, and implementing timely interventions. Collecting data is a fundamental part of monitoring, but the effective analysis and utilization of this data to inform risk management is lacking in many factories. Inconsistent documentation and record-keeping practices further complicate the effectiveness of risk assessments and monitoring systems. Proper documentation is not only a compliance requirement but also a critical tool for tracking

trends over time, facilitating thorough investigations when incidents occur, and providing evidence for assessments and inspections.

- Only 1 out of 25 factories had an internal monitoring system in place to identify and record any potential VAW issues.
- Only 2 out of 25 factories conducted a detailed risk assessment of VAW specific to the organizational context.

■ Recommendations for Factory Owners

- 1. Establish Clear Accountability Mechanisms:** Define specific roles and responsibilities at all management levels to enforce gender equality policies. Include performance metrics that track policy enforcement and outcomes related to gender equality. Strengthen internal monitoring and risk assessment procedures to identify and mitigate risks related to gender-based violence. Factor in considerations such as: who will monitor the internal procedures, how will the accountability mechanism will be ensured?
- 2. Improve Grievance Mechanisms:** Establish accessible, confidential, and effective mechanisms for reporting incidents of discrimination or violence via existing committees. Make workers and unions aware of these mechanisms. Evaluations are essential to understand the effectiveness of various committees: identify areas for improvement, ensure that committees are fulfilling their intended roles.
- 3. Raise Awareness on Policies Related to Worker Rights:** Develop explicit guidelines addressing all forms of violence and harassment. Conduct regular training sessions on regulations and gender equality for all factory

staff. The entire team: owners, mid/ top-level management, and workers, should know their rights and the steps they can take when their rights are violated.

- 4. Upgrade On-site Facilities:** Enhance the quality and accessibility of essential facilities for female workers, including safe, clean, and private restrooms and changing areas, ensuring they meet top standards of hygiene and privacy. Ensure adequate childcare and breastfeeding areas.
- 5. Partner With Transport Agencies:** Factory policies neglect to consider worker safety to and from the factory. Factories should take steps to protect employees outside of the workplace by working with transport providers and law enforcement agencies.
- 6. Enhance Security Measures:** Implement additional security measures to protect female workers, especially if they are working overtime. Improvements might include better lighting in their neighbourhoods and on route to the factory. Establish factory-wise emergency helplines.
- 7. Undertake Legal Compliance Audits:**

Undertake a thorough audit of employment practices to verify compliance with local and

international gender equality and workers' rights laws. Promptly rectify any compliance issues.

■ Conclusion

To achieve a safer and more equitable working environment in Bangladesh's RMG sector, urgent and decisive action is required. Implementing clear anti-discrimination policies, enhancing grievance mechanisms, improving infrastructure for female workers, and raising awareness through comprehensive training programs are essential steps. The gaps identified in factory assessments demand immediate attention to prevent further marginalization of women and ensure compliance with national and international standards. DIFE, and the garments trade associations, have the responsibility of monitoring and ensuring enforcement of these policies, penalizing

factories that are non-compliant and assisting in the taking of remedial measures.

By embracing these reforms, the RMG sector can become a global leader in gender equality, transforming workplaces into models of inclusivity and safety. Now is the time for industry leaders, policymakers, and civil society to unite, driving the change that will not only safeguard women but also foster long-term economic growth and social progress. If we act now, the future of Bangladesh's garment industry can be one where every worker is valued, protected, and empowered.



Programs that raise awareness around policies and laws promoting a safer, more equitable workplace for women are critical. Women workers often do not understand that when they are being harassed, it is not something they have to tolerate meekly, that they can then ask for support.”

Sabrina Shormi

Manager, HR & Compliance, Hannan Group

■ About Shojag Coalition

Shojag Coalition is a network of organizations in Bangladesh dedicated to combating gender-based violence and promoting women's rights. It works to raise awareness, provide support services, and advocate for policy changes to create safer, more inclusive communities. Through collaboration and grassroots efforts, the coalition aims to drive systemic change and empower women across the country. The coalition

consists of Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST), Naripokkho, and Christian Aid. The coalition is almost at the end of a 36-month project co-funded by the European Union and Christian Aid titled 'Promoting gender justice for women workers in the Readymade Garment sector and advocating women's safety during local commute and public spaces in Bangladesh'.

■ Further Reading

Gaps in Existing Policies.

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 - Link: [ILO National Plan](#)
3. Government of Bangladesh. *National Action Plan on Business and Human Rights*.
 - Link: [NAP-BHR Bangladesh](#)
4. European Union. *Promoting Gender Justice for Women Workers in the Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh*.
 - Link: [EU Gender Justice Initiative](#)
5. The Daily Star. (2023). [Gender Equality in the RMG Sector: Progress and Challenges](#).
6. Dhaka Tribune. (2023). [Addressing Gender-Based Violence in Bangladeshi Factories](#).