

## ROLE OF READYMADE GARMENT SECTOR, IN CHANGING THE LIVELIHOOD PATTERN OF RURAL WOMEN: AN ANALYSIS OF GARMENT WORKERS IN BANGLADESH

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### ABSTRACT

The study reveals that, Readymade Garment (RMG) sector has positively influenced the socio-economic condition of women garment workers. Employment opportunities for women in the garment industry have created the scope to cross the threshold of economic space. In Bangladesh, the readymade garment sector plays a significant role, in creating employment opportunity of women and accelerating economic growth as well. Women could ensure the sustainable livelihood, after getting employment in the garment industry. It could be mentioned that, sustainable livelihood is the combination of concept of capabilities, equity and sustainability. As, three concepts has played as a role of means and ends of livelihood. In this paper, sustainable livelihood, measured through analyzing the four indicators of socio-economic condition, which are income, health, education and decision making power. This paper relied on secondary sources, for instance- articles, research reports, thesis papers and newspapers, related with women garment workers. There are four millions of workforce in the RMG sector, of which, 80% are women, who are considered as 'the engine of growth' of the garment industry

**KEYWORDS:** Readymade Garment, Sustainable Livelihood, Socio-Economic Condition

### INTRODUCTION

Rapid growth of Readymade Garment (RMG) industry, in Bangladesh has opened the new opportunity of women, to enter in the formal labour market. Export oriented manufacturing has been a key driver of industrialization, in developing countries and providing women, with formal labour market opportunities, which were previously not available to them (World Bank, 2011). In 2013, there were over 5000 factories employing 3.6 million workers, of which, 84 percent are female (BGMEA, 2014). Employment opportunities for women in the garment industry have created a scope, to cross the threshold of economic space. Principally, economic capability plays an important role to empower the women. Women empowerment is considered as one of the important tools that promote development by reducing household poverty. The Platform for Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women recognized that, the empowerment of women was a critical factor, in the eradication of poverty (United Nations, 2009).

The potential contribution of garment industry on women empowerment is not limited to employment opportunities. Besides, it gives them some form of practical freedom and personal enjoyment such as going to public spaces like restaurant, market place and theatres (Karim, 2014). Furthermore, couples are now aware of the importance of shared responsibility. For example, when women need to work until night, their husbands perform domestic activities, such

as preparing meals and feeding their children (Karim, 2014). This indicates a change in the age long stereotyped gender division of labour. Several years ago, the above scenario was almost unthinkable for Bangladeshi rural women, because of cultural norms which inhibited women to go outside their homes (Kibria, 1998; Karim, 2014). The existence of the garment factory also raises women's sense of fellowship. For instance, women workers go together to the work place as well as sit together and this gives them a venue, to exchange their ideas as well (Karim, 2014). Moreover, women are now more assertive in raising their voices for improving benefits and working conditions (Kibria, 1998; Hossain, 2012). It is also noteworthy that, the presence of trade union plays a significant role, in taking collective action in favour of women workers.

However, women especially rural women of Bangladesh are discriminated in everyday life by the society. The extent of discrimination is now decreasing but it was tremendous before the economic empowerment of women. This discrimination made women more vulnerable and at the same time almost all rural women were dominated by men. In fact, they were not well accepted by the society and were seen as an economic burden (Sultana, 2010). Simultaneously, parents perceived sons as more capable to carry out the family name. Women therefore received less value and were neglected by parents. For instance, one woman expresses her vulnerability in this way, "When I delivered a daughter for the third time, I was so upset that I refused to see her. I have an anxiety for two daughters, particular for their marriage and dowries. Even my husband beat me for delivering again as he expected a son who will help us in earning for the family and also provide the security in our old age" (Interviewed with Momtaz Begum) (Sultana, 2010).

Given this situation, this paper examined the role of RMG sector on the livelihood pattern of women. For examining the role of RMG sector on the livelihood pattern of women, this paper analyzes-

- Living condition of women before and after flourishing RMG sector of Bangladesh
- Relation between RMG sector and livelihood pattern of women, with a special focus on the vulnerability

## METHODS

This paper is prepared, on the basis of secondary data. Both qualitative and quantitative data is used for assessing the socio-economic condition of women before and after emerging the garment industry. Moreover, secondary data is used for understanding the concept of livelihood approach, describing the situation of garment industry and status of women worker. Secondary data is collected by reviewing and analyzing the articles, research reports, thesis papers, and newspapers which is mentioned in the reference section and in many cases citation is used as well.

In this paper livelihood can be defined as social sustainable livelihood which mainly cover the capabilities, equity and sustainability issues. These issues has briefly discussed in below. Many socio-economic indicators influence the livelihood pattern of rural women. However, this paper gives focus on the impact of RMG industry on socio-economic condition of women garment worker to ensure the sustainable livelihood. Socio- economic condition has been analyzed considering the four indicators, i.e. income, health, education, decision making power; because capabilities are related with the income, health, education; equity and sustainability are related with the decision making power as well.

This paper has been structured in different sections in explaining the socio-economic condition of rural women before and after flourishing RMG sector and linkage between livelihood patterns, especially focuses on vulnerability of rural women. Firstly, the relationship between RMG sector and poverty reduction has briefly discussed in this paper.

Thereafter, the situation of the RMG sector, employment opportunities of women worker, and the concept of livelihood pattern has explained respectively. The socio-economic condition of rural women before and after the flourishing of RMG sector of Bangladesh, mainly focusing on income, health, education, and decision making process, has analyzed also.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The idea of sustainable livelihood was first introduced by the World Commission on Environment and Development, and the concept was expanded by the UNCED. The broad goal of the idea is to reduce poverty i.e. poverty will be reduced by achieving sustainable livelihood. Generally, sustainable livelihood can be defined ‘a means of gaining a living’ (Chambers and Conway, 1991). In a macro sense, it is the combination of the concept of capabilities, equity and sustainability (Table-1). These three concepts play as a role of means and ends of livelihood (Chambers and Conway, 1991).

**Table 1: Three Main Concept of Sustainable Livelihood**

Concept	End	Means
Capabilities	Livelihood provides the support for creating and enhancing the capabilities	Enable a livelihood to be gained
Equity	Adequate and decent livelihood for all	Equity in assets and access are preconditions for gaining adequate and decent livelihoods
Sustainability	Sustainable Stewardship of resources is a value in itself	Provides condition to be sustained for future generation

Source: Collecting information from Chambers and Conway, 1991

Before working with the garment industry, rural women had no financial capacity to cope with the vulnerable situation and they had no decision making power to recover from the stress and shocks (kibria, 1998; Hossain, 2012; Karim, 2014). In this context, women were facing many challenges to achieve the sustainable livelihood strategies. However, employment opportunity in garment industry empowered women economically. Economic empowerment is the major instrument, to give the strength for taking or making decision. As a result, women can participate in the decision making process of household and sometimes she takes decision alone by applying her judgment.

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After flourishing the RMG sector, women received the employment opportunity which empowered them economically. In this situation, they portrayed themselves as an asset not burden for the family by assisting their household in many ways, especially financially. Within the financial capacity, they maintained their own living standard and also provide financial support to their family who are mostly lived in the rural area. This financial support is changed the livelihood pattern of their family including hers also. In this section, I would like to analyze the socio-economic condition of rural women before and after flourishing the RMG sector of Bangladesh on the basis of four social and economic indicators.

**INCOME**

Before increasing the garment industry, it was a common scenario that women in rural areas engage in domestic chores such as, cooking, washing, sewing, cleaning, and child caring, but these activities were not well appreciated because these was non-monetized household activities (Sultana, 2010). In fact, they had no income sources to establish themselves

as earning members of the family. Very few women were working outside the house. On the other hand, boys were treated as earning family members and were considered as an asset. However, the percentage of working women has been increasing since 1985. I can find a correlation between the increasing number of garment factory and female employment as a ratio of total employment (Table-2).

**Table 2: Relation between Percentage of Female Labor Force Participation and the Number of Garment Factories**

Year	Female Labor Force Participation (%)	Number of Garment Factories
1981	4.1	47
1984	8	385
1996	50.6	2503
2000	51.8	3480

Source: Collecting information from Hossain, M and Clem T, 2003: 7; Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh, 2013; BGMEA, 2013 and <http://garmentsacknowledgement.blogspot.com/2012/01/in-1950s-labors-in-western-world-became.html>

Actually, RMG plays a prominent role in empowering the rural women by providing the opportunity of employment. All women worker are coming from the poverty affected family so that, they give financial support to their family for achieving the better livelihood. However, the amount of salary is very low and it is difficult to enjoy a better standard of livelihood. For example, Bangladeshi garment sector workers earn some of the lowest wages in the region. “As of August 2013, the monthly minimum wage for entry-level workers in the garment sector was US\$39 per month – about half of the lowest rate in other major garment-exporting countries, such as Cambodia (US\$80), India (US\$71), Pakistan (US\$79), Sri Lanka (US\$73) and Viet Nam (US\$78)” (ILO; 2013). However, RMG sector opened the close door of economic empowerment of women.

## HEALTH

The RMG industry is mainly situated within the urban area. For this reason, women garment worker mainly migrated from the rural area. In the rural areas of Bangladesh has no proper medical facility in order that, peoples come to urban place when they feel sick. So, it is easy to women garment worker to get medical facility from the urban area. It can be mentioned that many garment industry has provided medical doctor to ensuring the primary health care service of workers. A research study revealed that, 90% of the garment factory has appointed the medical doctor (Sikdar et al., 2014). Furthermore, few garment industry has ensured daily groceries for the workers, with nominal prize. It has fulfilled the basic need of human body. For instance - *DBL group (one garment factory) is established ‘fair price shop’ on its factory compound. It also has guaranteed workers necessity, by buying the essential commodities from the shop, with nominal prices. The group gives high subsidies to the shop, where all daily groceries are available* (BGMEA, 2014).

## EDUCATION

In Bangladesh, low literacy rate is influenced by the poverty. Poor people want to spend time and money for meeting their basic need, like- food, shelter, cloth etc. than in the education sector. In this regard, girl child did not get the equal opportunity in access to education, like boy child because parent supposed to give the proper facility for son education. Also, Role of women in the traditional societies was one the important reason in the lower participation of women in education (Sultana, 2010). In fact, traditional ideology and conservative behavior against the notion of women

development because educated women are often notice as a threat to the traditional male dominated society because it increase the bargaining capacity of women and ensure the greater participation in the decision making process (Hossain, M and Clem T, (2003)). However, few garment factories build schools for the workers and the children of workers. For example, *Viyellatex Group (one garment factory) has established schools for the workers and their children. Aim of these school to facilitate proper education for workers and the children of the workers. So, the mothers and fathers employed in the Group have the satisfaction that, by working in the Group they can ensure quality education and safer future for their daughters and sons which is the dream of every parent irrespective of caste and creed (BGMEA, 2014).*

Also after emerging the garment industry, women are conscious about their human right and they also take care about the education of siblings, children also. Therefore, I observed the correlation between the number of women workers in RMG Sector and education attained by females but I do not find the causal relation.

**DECISION MAKING POWER**

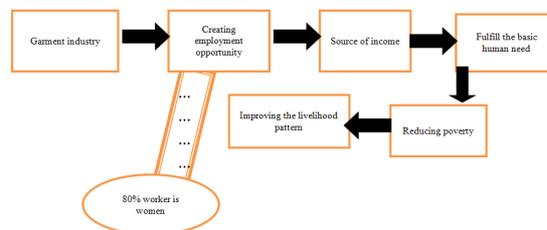
Decision making power of women is the main indicator of empowerment. In a patriarchal society, like Bangladesh, generally, all decision are made by male but women garment worker has got the opportunity to participate in the decision making process in the household and sometimes they takes decision alone. They control their earning also. According to a survey data<sup>1</sup>, ‘Over one third (35 percent) of the women working in the garments, has got the opportunity to participate in household decision making, with full control over expenditure of their earnings, compared to before employment situation’ (Sikdar, M. et al. (2014) (Table- 3).

**Table 3: Control Over and Participation in Decision Making of Female Worker**

Indicators	Before Employment (%)	After Employment (%)
Take decision alone	27.5	35
Take decision your husband only	-----	6.25
Your husband make consultation with you	----	37.50
Take decision after discussing with family members	72.5	21.25

Source: Sikdar, M. et al. (2014)

Finally, it has been observed (Figure-1) that, women could be fulfilled the basic need and reduced poverty also after getting the job (Figure-1). Simultaneously, it makes positive change in the livelihood pattern of rural women (Figure-1). Now, socio-economic indicators have been analyzed below. In fact, these indicators are influenced by the RMG sector, in changing the livelihood pattern of rural women.



**Figure 1: Positive Change in the Livelihood of Women by Creating Employment Opportunity in RMG Factory**

<sup>1</sup>This survey was conducted on the female garment worker in the Dhaka city during 3 March to 25 March 2012. The respondent number was 80.

Source: Collecting information from BGMEA 2013, and Heath 2014, Razzaue, A. and Eusuf, A 2007.

## CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we have looked at the three dimensions of sustainable livelihood strategies, such as- capability, equity and sustainability, in relation with the four socio-economic indicators (income, education, health, and decision making power) of the livelihood, which are changed by influencing of RMG industry. **Firstly**, capability concept is related to the three socio-economic indicators of livelihood, such as- income, decision and making process. Women workers have been earning a fixed wage on appointment, in the garment factory. This fixed income source has built up her confidence and empowered financially, to live a better live. In addition, sometimes they save money to cope up with and recover from stress and shocks. Furthermore, without economic empowerment, vulnerable women cannot establish their decision but economically capable women worker could be played major role in making decision about their household. In this regard, capabilities played a very significant role like the End of the Livelihood Approach. Moreover, without the earning capability, women cannot establish their control over the family assets and resources because financially weak or helpless women are always exploited by the powerful men domineers. So, capability to earn is crucially essential for raising strong and powerful voice of the woman. In this point of view, earning capability is the Means of Livelihood Approach.

**Secondly**, in this study, Equity Concept of Livelihood is related to health services, and education housing facilities. Equity in assets distribution will ensure if empowerment is taking place in the sphere of women's life. RMG industries not only empowered the women economically but also strengthen their voice against exploitation and increased the consciousness about their rights. As a result, women realized to ensure their equal rights in assets distribution. Furthermore, RMG industries have created the opportunity for better accommodation, education and health services for the garment workers. Mainly, productivity of RMG depends on the status of the garment workers, so employers are aware of their better health, housing and education facilities. In this context, garment industry owners are ensuring in equity in housing, health and education by establishing school, apartment house and introducing the health insurance. This is the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) of garment owner as well. In this regard, equity plays a means of the livelihoods. Moreover, garment factory located in the urban area. Usually, in Bangladesh, the urban environment is polluted than the environment of rural area. On the other hand, adequate medical facility has received in the urban areas people especially in the capital city where is situated most of the garment factory because better hospital and diagnostic centre located in the capital city of Bangladesh. On the other hand, end of the equity is the sufficient and decent livelihoods. Without ensuring better health, education and accommodation; decent livelihood could not achieve.

**Thirdly**, sustainability means to create better scope for the future generation. This opportunity gives them better living condition. Though, in this paper, I cannot analyze the direct relation with RMG sector and sustainability. However, we can observe that savings and insurance of women worker gives opportunity to sustain the future generation. In fact, rural women are working in the garment factory not only for the betterment of their present situation but for ensuring the sustainability of future generation also. For instance, after getting the job in garment industry, they could expend income in education purpose for their children and younger siblings whose are future generation of society.

In brief, we can say, women garment workers livelihood pattern is changed by the influence of RMG sector.

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