



## Role of Garment Industry Authorities in Protecting the Rights of Female Workers: A Case Study in Dhaka City

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines the role of garment industry authorities in safeguarding the rights of female workers in Dhaka City, Bangladesh. Employing a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 200 female workers across five industrial zones through surveys, interviews, and observations. The findings reveal persistent challenges in working conditions, wage equity, maternity support, and awareness of legal rights. Despite reforms enhancing workplace safety and formal employment structures, gender-specific concerns such as harassment prevention and equitable wage policies remain inadequately addressed. Institutional responses, particularly from factory management and government bodies, are perceived as ineffective by the majority of workers. The study concludes with recommendations for stronger policy enforcement, legal literacy programs, and inclusive stakeholder engagement to promote gender-equitable labor practices in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector.

**Keyword:** *Female workers, Labor rights, RMG, Gender equity, Labor law.*

### INTRODUCTION

The ready-made garment (RMG) industry operates as the economic foundation of Bangladesh because it generates 80% of export revenues while employing 4 million workers, of whom 80% are women (Ahmad, M). The industrial sector executed two major achievements by transforming economic structures while introducing women into formal employment markets, thus changing their socio-economic status. The RMG sector operates at its full strength from garment manufacturing factories, which are predominantly based in Dhaka, while the city maintains its position as the industrial epicenter (Akhter, S., Rutherford, S., & Chu, C., 2019).

The RMG sector makes huge economic contributions to the country as it empowers women, but many issues exist in safeguarding employee rights, together with workplace conditions. Export-led economic development centred on the garment industry exists in Bangladesh, but its worker rights, alongside worker welfare, have neither coincided nor achieved the same level of industrial growth expansion. The application of labor standards, which appear in both the Bangladesh Labour Law 2006 and the ILO conventions (Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006) (ILO, Annual Report, 2023), shows irregular patterns of fulfilment in the industry. Most workers at these facilities spend ten to twelve hours daily in shifts while expressing salary concerns and lacking personal influence in decisions. The study by Ahmad M points to criti-

cal issues which require an assessment of garment authorities' ability to protect female employees' rights within Dhaka's industrial core zones.

The garment industry in Bangladesh gained international attention following several tragic incidents, most notably the Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 (ILO, Annual Report, 2013), which claimed over 1,100 lives. These incidents exposed severe deficiencies in workplace safety, labor rights, and regulatory oversight (BGMEA, 2022). In response, various stakeholders, including government bodies, factory owners, international buyers, and non-governmental organizations, initiated reforms to improve working conditions and strengthen labor rights protection. However, the effectiveness of these measures remains a subject of debate, particularly concerning female workers who face unique challenges, including wage discrimination, sexual harassment, inadequate maternity benefits, and limited career advancement opportunities (UN Women, 2021).

This research aims to examine the role of various garment industry authorities in protecting the rights of female workers in Dhaka city. By analyzing current policies, implementation mechanisms, and their impacts, this study seeks to identify gaps between policy and practice while offering recommendations for improved protection of female workers' rights. The findings will contribute to existing literature on labor rights in the global supply chain and provide insights for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and advocacy groups working to enhance the welfare of female garment workers in Bangladesh.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

To assess the current policies and practices of garment industry authorities regarding female workers' rights in Dhaka city

## **METHODS**

### **Study Design and Setting**

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative techniques to explore the role of garment industry authorities in protecting the rights of female workers in Dhaka City. The research was conducted from January to December 2023 and focused on five key industrial areas: Tejgaon, Mirpur-Shewrapara, Gulshan-Badda, Uttara, and Mohammadpur, selected for their high concentration of garment factories and accessibility.

The research identified two main variables: the dependent variable, which is the rights of female workers (including wage equality, workplace safety, maternity leave, protection against sexual harassment, career development, and social security); and the independent variable, which is the role of garment authorities (including wage policies, working conditions, maternity benefits, anti-harassment measures, training, and legal compliance).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Primary data were gathered through structured surveys with 200 female workers, key informant interviews with factory authorities, and direct workplace observations. Secondary data came from research papers, government and NGO reports, news articles, and relevant labor rights publications. Data were collected using structured interview schedules written in Bengali. The questionnaire included both closed-ended questions (yes/no, multiple choice, scale ratings) and open-ended questions allowing respondents to express their opinions freely. The questions were organized in sections covering general information, work environment, rights

and benefits, and workplace issues. The researcher personally collected the data. Additionally, observation techniques were employed to increase the reliability and validity of the information. Both the interview schedule and observation guidelines were pre-tested to ensure quality.

### Data Analysis

The collected data were classified based on various characteristics and presented and analyzed using different types of tables and figures. MS Word, MS Excel, and SPSS-23 programs were used for data presentation and analysis.

### Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents before interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity of the respondents were strictly maintained, and data were used only for research purposes. The research protocol was reviewed and approved by the appropriate ethical committee.

### Limitations of the Study

The study acknowledged several limitations:

- The researcher's limited experience in conducting research
- The sample size of 200 respondents might not be fully representative of the entire population
- Limited awareness among female workers about their rights
- Difficulty in maintaining a controlled environment for data collection
- Reluctance of some workers to answer certain questions, particularly regarding salary and harassment
- Time constraints affecting the use of all statistical methods
- Potential language and printing errors due to time limitations

Despite these limitations, the researcher believed that the mixed-methods approach and direct data collection would mitigate these constraints and would not significantly affect the main objectives of the research.

## RESULTS

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of female garment workers in Dhaka City reveals important patterns in age, marital status, and work roles. A significant majority (97%) of respondents are married, indicating major family responsibilities. Most workers (87.5%) fall within the 20–29 age range, reflecting the industry's preference for younger labor. In terms of job roles, the majority work as operators (63%), followed by helpers and ironers. Very few women hold supervisory or managerial positions, showing limited upward mobility within the industry.

**Table: Demographic Profile of Female Garment Workers in Dhaka City**

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Marital Status	Unmarried	5	2.5
	Married	194	97.0
	Divorced	1	0.5
	Total	200	100.0

Category	Subcategory	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	20–29 years	175	87.5
	30–39 years	23	11.5
	40–49 years	2	1.0
	Total	200	100.0
Position	Operator	126	63.0
	Helper	47	23.5
	Ironman	20	10.0
	Supervisor	5	2.5
	Cutter Master	1	0.5
	Manager	1	0.5
	Total	200	100.0

### Working Conditions and Rights Awareness

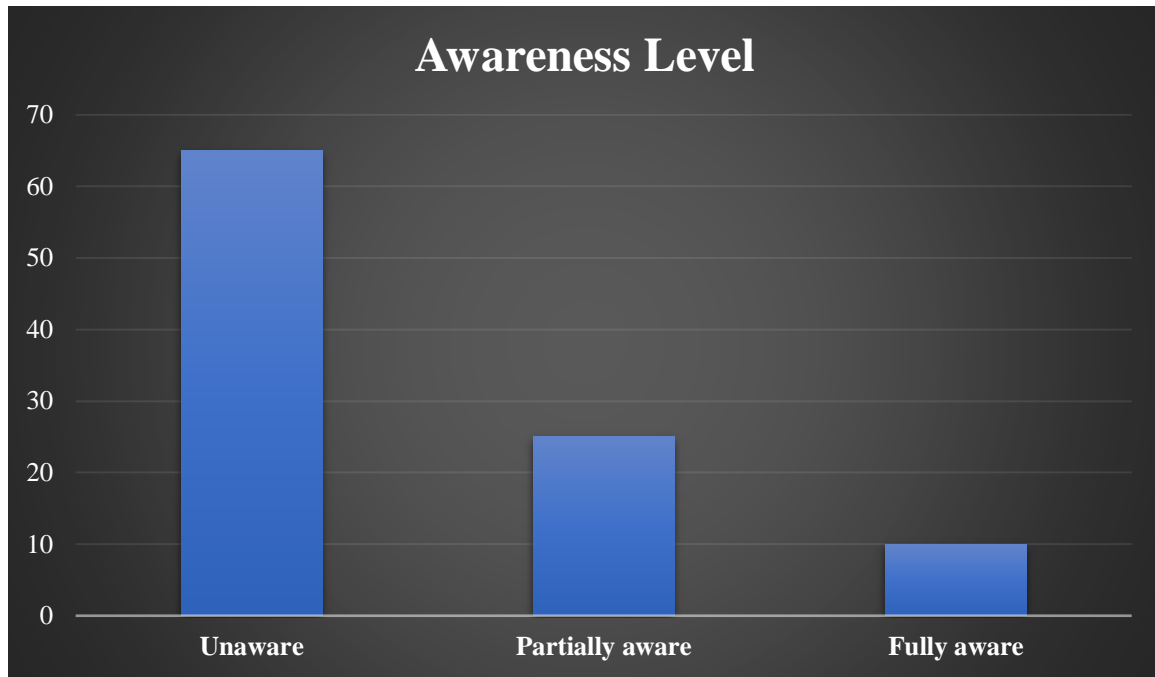
The research findings reveal concerning patterns regarding working conditions experienced by female garment workers in Dhaka City. As presented in Table 2, significant proportions of workers report inadequate working conditions across multiple dimensions. Notably, 61.5% of respondents indicated inadequate working hours, 58% reported insufficient break times, and 54.5% cited unsafe workplace conditions.

**Table 2: Working Conditions Reported by Female Workers**

Working Condition Factor	Adequate (%)	Inadequate (%)	Total (%)
Working hours	38.5	61.5	100
Break time	42.0	58.0	100
Workplace safety	45.5	54.5	100
Sanitation facilities	40.0	60.0	100
Maternity benefits	35.0	65.0	100
Wage payment system	30.5	69.5	100
Overtime compensation	25.0	75.0	100

Even more concerning are the findings related to specific protections for female workers, with 65% reporting inadequate maternity benefits and 60% noting insufficient sanitation facilities. Financial aspects show similar patterns, with 69.5% of workers reporting inadequate wage payment systems and 75% indicating insufficient overtime compensation.

A critical barrier to rights protection is the low awareness of labor rights among female workers. As Figure 1 indicates, 65% of workers are unaware of their full rights under labor laws, 25% have partial awareness, and only 10% possess comprehensive knowledge of their legal entitlements. This lack of awareness significantly hampers workers' ability to advocate for themselves and seek redress for rights violations.



**Figure 1: Awareness of Labor Rights Among Female Workers**

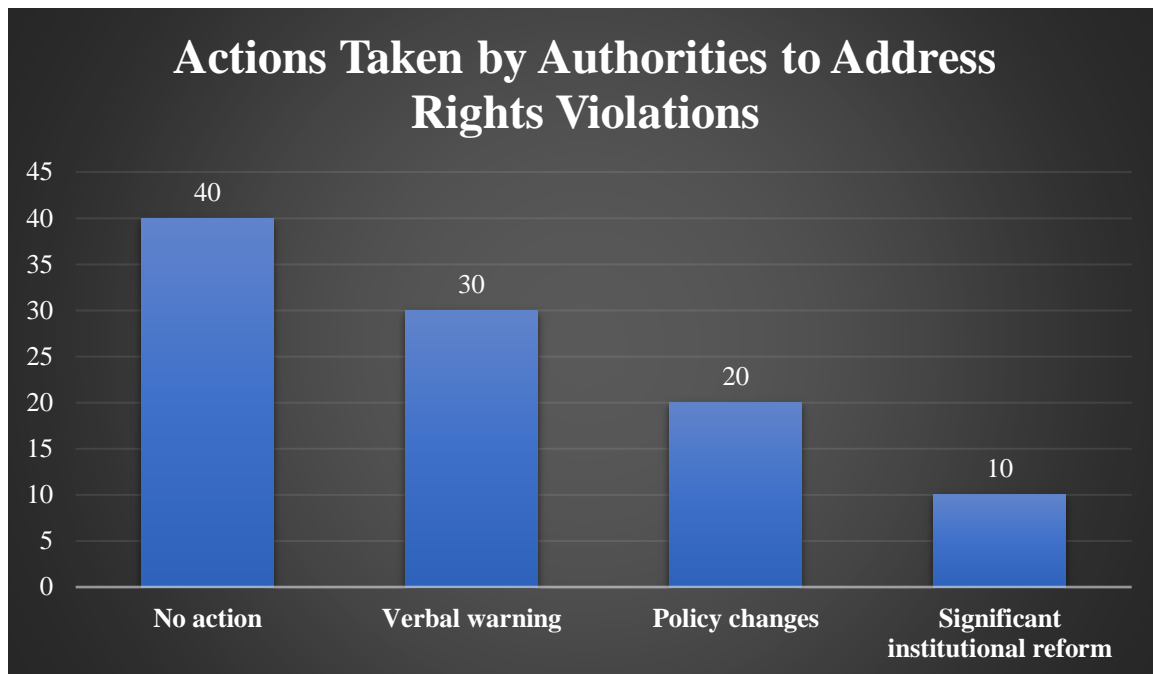
**Effectiveness of Protection Mechanisms**

The research assessed the perceived effectiveness of various authorities responsible for protecting female workers' rights. Table 3 shows that factory management, which has direct control over working conditions, was rated as "not effective" by 55% of respondents. Government bodies received similar negative assessments, with 45% of workers rating them as "not effective" and only 10% considering them "very effective."

**Table 3: Effectiveness of Different Authorities in Protecting Female Workers' Rights**

Authority Type	Very Effective (%)	Somewhat Effective (%)	Not Effective (%)	Don't Know (%)	Total (%)
Factory Management	15.0	25.0	55.0	5.0	100
Government Bodies	10.0	30.0	45.0	15.0	100
Labor Unions	20.0	35.0	35.0	10.0	100
NGOs	25.0	40.0	20.0	15.0	100
International Organizations	30.0	45.0	15.0	10.0	100

The research also examined responses to rights violations (Figure 2), revealing that 40% of reported violations resulted in no action, 30% in verbal warnings, 20% in policy changes, and only 10% in significant institutional reforms.



**Figure 2: Reported Actions Taken by Authorities to Address Rights Violations**

Table 4 presents the types of facilities reported by female garment workers as being provided by factory authorities. Out of 200 respondents, 185 workers confirmed having access to adequate food and drinking water, and 190 workers reported being provided a hygienic work environment, suggesting a general level of satisfaction in these basic areas. However, only 75 workers had access to proper rest facilities, indicating a lack of rest and recovery opportunities during shifts. Moreover, 135 workers received some form of healthcare support, which reflects partial compliance with labor welfare provisions. Although 80 workers mentioned other types of support, those were not specified in detail.

**Table 4: Facilities Provided by Factory Authorities to Female Workers**

Type of Facility	Number of Workers Benefited
Adequate food and drinking water	185
Hygienic work environment	190
Rest facilities	75
Access to health services	135
Other unspecified facilities	80

### Barriers to Effective Rights Protection

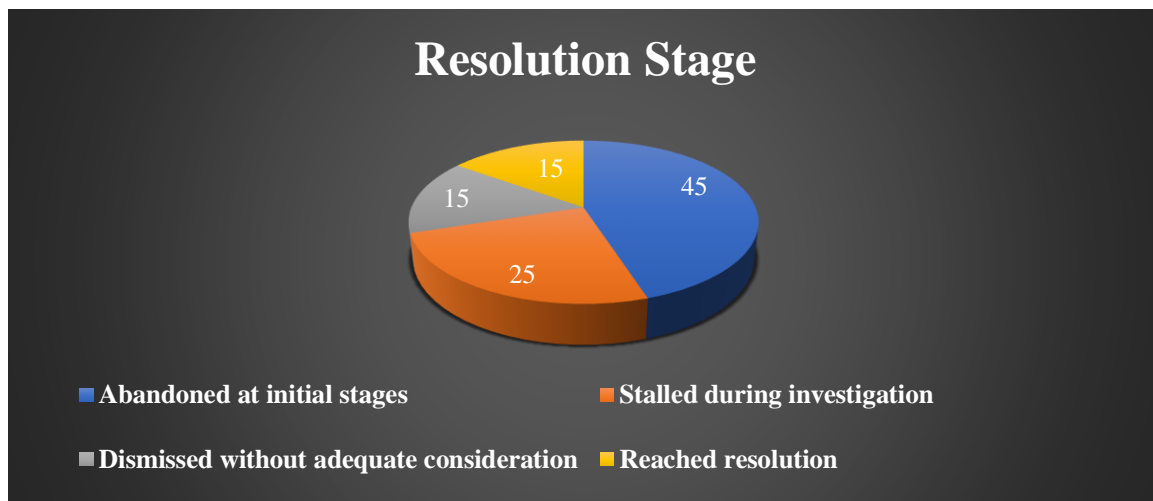
The study identified several key barriers to effective rights protection for female garment workers in Dhaka City. As shown in Table 5, these barriers vary in significance depending on the stakeholder perspective. From the workers' perspective, the most significant barriers include lack of awareness (75%), poor enforcement (65%), and corruption (70%). NGOs similarly identified poor enforcement (70%), corruption (65%), cultural factors (55%), and a lack of awareness (45%) as major barriers.

Factory management, however, emphasized economic pressures (70%) as the primary barrier, suggesting that competitive market conditions may create incentives to minimize labor costs at the expense of workers' rights. Government officials identified poor enforcement (40%) and economic pressures (35%) as key barriers.

**Table 5: Major Barriers to Effective Rights Protection as Identified by Stakeholders**

Barrier	Factory Management (%)	Government Officials (%)	Workers (%)	NGOs (%)
Lack of awareness	25.0	15.0	75.0	45.0
Insufficient legal framework	10.0	30.0	35.0	40.0
Poor enforcement	15.0	40.0	65.0	70.0
Corruption	5.0	25.0	70.0	65.0
Economic pressures	70.0	35.0	30.0	45.0
Cultural factors	30.0	20.0	40.0	55.0

The research also assessed the effectiveness of complaint resolution processes (Figure 3), revealing that only 15% of complaints reach resolution, with 45% abandoned at initial stages, 25% stalled during investigation, and 15% dismissed without adequate consideration.



**Figure 3: Complaint Resolution Process Effectiveness**

**Comparative Analysis of Rights Protection Before and After Rana Plaza**

The research examined changes in female workers' rights protection following the 2013 Rana Plaza collapse, which claimed over 1,100 lives and prompted significant reforms in the industry. Table 6 presents a comparative analysis of key indicators before and after this watershed event.

The data indicates substantial improvements in physical safety aspects, with building safety compliance increasing by 48 percentage points and fire safety measures by 50 percentage points. Employment formalization has also improved, with formal contracts increasing by 33 percentage points and regular wage payment by 27.5 percentage points.

However, progress has been more limited in areas specifically affecting female workers, such as maternity leave provision (18 percentage point increase) and anti-harassment policies (27 percentage point increase). Freedom of association, crucial for collective bargaining, shows the smallest improvement (16 percentage point increase), suggesting continued challenges in organizing workers to advocate for their rights.

**Table 6: Comparative Analysis of Female Workers' Rights Protection Before and After Rana Plaza**

Indicator	Before Rana Plaza (%)	After Rana Plaza (%)	Change (%)
Formal employment contracts	35.0	68.0	+33.0
Regular wage payment	45.0	72.5	+27.5
Building safety compliance	28.0	76.0	+48.0
Fire safety measures	32.0	82.0	+50.0
Maternity leave provision	40.0	58.0	+18.0
Anti-harassment policies	15.0	42.0	+27.0
Freedom of association	22.0	38.0	+16.0

## DISCUSSION

The findings from this study highlight the mixed performance of garment industry authorities in protecting the rights of female workers in Dhaka. While post-Rana Plaza reforms significantly improved safety compliance and formal employment (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2018), persistent structural issues remain, especially in gender-specific areas like wage fairness, maternity rights, and sexual harassment protection.

The demographic data reflect a workforce largely made up of young, married women with low education levels, consistent with previous research (Rahman & Langford, 2020). This combination of youth, gender, and socio-economic dependency increases their vulnerability to exploitation, with limited capacity to challenge labor rights violations (Ahmed, S., 2021)

Working conditions show significant inadequacies. More than 60% of respondents reported long hours, inadequate sanitation, and insufficient maternity provisions. These findings mirror previous assessments by Hasan and Mahmud (2017), who emphasized that Bangladesh's RMG industry frequently sacrifices worker welfare for production targets.

One of the starkest concerns is the lack of awareness among workers, as only 10% are fully aware of their rights under the Labour Law 2006. This gap severely restricts their ability to report abuse or demand improvements. Similar awareness deficits were documented in UN Women's (2021) assessment of gender-responsive due diligence in global supply chains.

Regarding institutional response, factory management and government bodies received poor ratings from the respondents, who viewed international organizations and NGOs as more reliable stakeholders. This aligns with findings by Saxena and Labowitz (2020), who noted that external monitoring often drives improvements more effectively than internal governance. The barriers to rights protection, especially poor enforcement and corruption, underscore systemic failures. These insights align with Khan and Wichterich (2021), who argue that despite legislative improvements, implementation mechanisms remain weak due to political and economic compromises.

While the Rana Plaza disaster acted as a catalyst for some reforms, especially in safety infrastructure, female-focused improvements like anti-harassment policies and maternity leave provisions lag. The relatively low progress in "freedom of association" (only a 16% improvement since 2013) is particularly troubling, as unionization is crucial for collective bargaining and long-term empowerment (World Bank, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals a complex reality where female garment workers in Dhaka enjoy partial rights protection under the current industrial structure. While initiatives related to union participation, maternity leave, and healthcare exist on paper and to some extent in practice, critical issues such as wage dissatisfaction, excessive work hours, limited awareness of legal protections, and token enforcement of labor laws persist. The findings highlight a disconnect between policy and practice, and underline the importance of accountability, worker education, and stronger institutional engagement. If the garment industry authorities are to truly support the female workforce that sustains the sector, their role must evolve from passive compliance to proactive advocacy and enforcement of equitable labor standards.

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