

WORKERS' UNREST IN GARMENT INDUSTRIES IN BANGLADESH: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract *The present study was conducted with a view to explore the reasons behind workers' unrest in garment industries and to suggest measures that may be taken for minimizing these unwanted incidents. It was a combination of qualitative and quantitative data. Data were collected from 120 workers, 40 managers, 4 owners of four garment industries (two experiencing and two not experiencing unrest within last five years), and 3 leaders of owners' association. Results revealed that the major cause of unrest related to wage and timely payment. The other important reason included unhealthy relationship between workers and managers/supervisors. Production halt, unemployment problem and loss of revenue were the negative impact of unrest. The physical and psychological work environments of factory 'A' (having experience of unrest), 'C' and 'D' (having no experience of unrest) were much better than factory 'B', one having experience of unrest. Job satisfaction of workers with respect to job facet of 'supervision' differed significantly by industries experiencing unrest and those not experiencing unrest. Based on study findings, some recommendations were made to minimize workers' unrest in future.*

Keywords: *Workers' Unrest, Garment Industries, Physical Work Environment, Psychological Work Environment and Job Satisfaction.*

INTRODUCTION

The economy of Bangladesh is constituted by that of a developing country. Its per capita income rises to \$848 in the current fiscal year (2001-2012) from \$816 last year. The garment industry is the country's most important manufacturer, contributing around 78.06 percent to the total export earnings. In the fiscal year of 2012-2013, it exports \$ 19089.69 million (Export Promotion Bureau, 2012). This sector also contributes around 13 percent to the GDP, which was only around 3 percent in 1991. Garment sectors in Bangladesh have been under focus for last few years, because of the emergence of young entrepreneurs, cheap labour, favourable national policies, quota free access to US market and European Union (Quddus and Rashid, 2000). BGMEA (Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association) has predicted textile exports will rise from US\$7.90 billion earned in 2005-06 to US\$15 billion by 2013 (Hossain, 2009). In part this optimism stems from how well the sector has fared since the expiry of the Agreement on Textile and Clothing (ACT) of the world trade organization (WTO) and phase out of Multi-Fiber Agreement (MFA), in early 2005. In the 1980s, there were only 50 factories and employing only a few thousand people. Currently, there are about 4,500 garment factories with up to 10 million livelihoods. These people depend on this sector directly or indirectly. An overwhelming number of workers in this sector are women who come from rural areas. The readymade garments sector (RMG) has more potential than any other sector to contribute to the reduction of poverty.

Despite this phenomenal success of the garment sector workers' unrest is cause of a serious concern.

Workers' unrest is a social phenomenon of enormous complexity. Unrest is the term used to describe activities undertaken by the workforce when they protest against pay or conditions of their employment. It is the result of accumulation of genuine grievances over the year of a larger section of workers. The outburst of workers' violence drastically appeared in May, 2006 in the garment sector of Bangladesh, against their low wage. The agitated workers had reportedly set 14 factories on fire and damaged 70 others, including about 30 in the Export Processing Zone in Gazipur. This incident caused deaths to three workers, injuries to 150, arrest of another one hundred, and a halt to production in several hundred factories in the area, burning down thousands of pieces of finished products along the way ("DEPZ", 2006). Since then, there have been periodic protests by the workers. According to the report of World Bank, almost most of the unrest have centered on the questions of wages and due payment (Alternative Movement for Resources and Freedom Society, 2012). As income remained the all important means for satisfying human wants and needs, wage would continue to be major consideration.

These sorts of rising incidents of violence continue to hit the stability and normal working environment in the apparel sector in the country. It results in production halt, missed shipment, and revenue loss. So, global firms have hesitated to buy from the country. The international buyers are shifting

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their orders to other countries as the local manufacturers may not be able to maintain the lead time export products. Bangladesh, according to data provided by the BGMEA, in terms of value of exports stood sixth with \$1.62 billion earned from apparel exports to the USA during the period, while Vietnam stood second with export earnings of \$2.35 billion. Indonesia stood third with \$2.02 billion and Mexico third with \$1.99 billion. Vietnam overtakes Bangladesh as 2nd biggest apparels supplier to US because its apparel shipments increased by more than 26 per cent to 706 million square meters (Khan, 2009). This indicates that compared to other competing countries, now Bangladesh is lagging behind in earning from apparels export. The garment sector is not only Bangladesh's biggest foreign exchange earner, but also has played a key role in our developmental effort. Most of the workers come from such poor background that they are the only earners of their families. If these industries go on to close or strike, the workers suffer endless miseries.

Now the question is 'Why is there unrest in our garment industries?' This workers' unrest is not a sudden event in garments industry. There might be some reasons for this phenomenon. But it is a matter of controversy whether the predominant factors underlying labor unrest are economic or non-economic. It has still been a dearth of empirical evidence to point out the specific factors associated with workers unrest. So, considering the importance of the apparels sector for our national economy, it is imperative to conduct an empirical investigation to explore the causes of unrest in garments industries and the factors contributing to the same. The study would help us to better comprehend the reasons behind the problem so that we can minimize this unwanted incident. The findings of this research may contribute by offering suggestions to BGMEA and BKMEA (Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association), the government and management of the factories for taking appropriate steps in preventing incidents of unrest in the future.

The main objectives of the present study were to assess the causes of workers' unrest and understand the physical and psychological work environment in the garment industries. In addition this study was investigated whether workers' satisfaction with different job facets (work, pay, promotion, co-workers, and supervision) differed by organisations experiencing (within the last five years) and not experiencing workers' unrest. It was also conceived to recommend some measures that may be taken to minimize workers' unrest.

METHOD

Target Population

Employees and owners of garment industries around Dhaka city.

Sample

Two-stage sampling method was followed.

1. Garments selection: Two garments having experience of unrest during the last five years and two having no experience of unrest were purposively selected. These were respectively M.T. Sweaters Ltd. at Gazipur, Stitch & Style Ltd. at Mirpur-2 M, M Shirts Ltd. at Shewrapara and Poshak Knitwears Ltd. at Ashulia. In this paper, these four garment industries have later been symbolized by A, B, C and D. The year of occurring workers' unrest in factory 'A' was 2009 and it was 2010 in factory 'B'.
2. Respondents selection
 - (a) Employee selection: Convenience sampling was employed to select 120 workers and 40 managers from the four garment industries. Managers were taken as follows: 2 each from top, 3 from middle and 5 from bottom level of management. By socio-demographic characteristics, all the managers were male and their mean age was 38.68 years. For workers, 11.7% were male and 88.3 % were female and their mean age was 22.75 years. Their educational qualification ranged from illiterate to HSC level, job experience ranged from 1 to 60 months, monthly income ranged from 1662 to 20000 TK and monthly family expenditure ranged from 3000 to 150000 TK. By residential type, 93.3% workers lived in rented house, 4.2% in own home and 2.5% in government quarter. The marital status of the workers was as follows: unmarried (59.2%), married (38.3% and widow (2.5%). By number of children, 75.8 % workers had no child and 24.2% had child.
 - (b) The owners of the four garments were taken on census basis.
 - (c) Three leaders of owners' associations were selected by following convenience sampling technique. Two were taken from BGMEA and one from BKMEA.

Data Collection Techniques

This study was a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques:

1. A demographic information sheet was used to collect information about worker's age, gender, educational qualification, job experience, monthly income, monthly family expenditure, residential type, marital status, number of children etc.
2. Standardized questionnaire: Bangla version of Job Descriptive Index (Smith, Kendall and Hulin, 1969),

translated by Khaleque (1984) was administered to measure the job satisfaction of the garment workers (as cited in Khaleque, 1984). JDI consists of 5 subscales. There are 72 items. Each of the subscales work, supervision and co-workers consists of 18 items and each of the subscales pay and promotion 9 items. The scoring procedure is 'yes'=3, '?'=1 or 'no'=0 for positive items, and on the other hand, 'yes'=0, '?'=1 or 'no'=3 for negative items. Split half internal consistency co-efficient has been reported to be above 0.80. In addition significant convergent and discriminate validity also have been reported for the JDI.

3. Discussion with the workers using guide was used to comprehend their views regarding workers' unrest.
4. Interview using semi-structured questionnaires was employed to collect information from managers and owners about the underlying causes of unrest and possible remedies of unrest.
5. In addition to, in depth interview using guide was used to comprehend the views of the leaders of BGMEA and BKMEA (Owners' Associations) regarding labour unrest.
6. Observation following a checklist was used to understand the physical and psychological work environment including health care facilities and human relations for the workers in the industry.

Procedures

Before proceeding for data collection, the proper authorities of the garment industries were formally approached for permission. After having permission, the desired respondents were informed about the purpose of the study and their informed consent were taken. They were clearly told that the study was an academic exercise and no part of the information was used for any other purpose or no part of the information was disclosed to anybody else. Along this process, a good rapport was established with the willing participants. Before the final data collection, the data collection instruments which were developed by the researchers (except JDI) were field tested on a small group of garment employees. After that, necessary corrections were conducted and the final data were collected. Then the responses on the open ended items were examined and coded. The frequency of the responses were counted and reported in percentage form.

RESULTS

The data obtained from the present study are presented in two ways: qualitative and quantitative. However, it might be mentioned that out of four garment industries under

investigation, two had experience of workers' unrest during the last five years (factory 'A' and 'B') and two did not have such experience (factory 'C' and 'D'). For factory 'A', both the owners and managers observed 'late payment of Eid (Muslim Festival) bonus and wage to the workers' as the reason for the last episode of workers' unrest and for factory 'B', they mentioned 'demand by the section chief for extra money except overtime (OT) benefit and usual wage'.

Qualitative Analysis

Managers and Owners Responses Regarding Involvement of Related Parties in Workers' Unrest

The highest percentage of the managers in industry A (90.0%) reported 'old and new workers' as the major parties involved in workers unrest. Nevertheless, according to the highest percentage of managers in industry B (100.0%) reported that 'section chiefs' who were the major parties involved in workers unrest. Besides these, few managers of both organisations opined that unrest occurred because of labour organisation and terrorists group of surrounding area. In this context, the owners of both the organisations ('A' and 'B') also reported the same as mentioned by the managers.

Reasons Behind Worker's Unrest

According to the highest percentage of workers (93.3%), 'lack of a system for increasing wage' was the reason of workers unrest in garment industries. This was followed by 'inhuman treatment by the mid-level managers' (77.5%), 'unhygienic and insecure work environment' (44.2%), 'lack of promotional opportunity' (40.0%), 'lack of opportunity to express own ideas' (35.0%) and 'long working hour and job insecurity' (20.0%). In contrast, the major reasons of workers unrest, according to three leaders of owners' associations were as follows: 'involvement of international mafia circle' and 'failure to pay timely because of scarcity of power and gas'. On the other hand, according to the highest percentage of managers (100.0%), 'timely payment or prior notification for delay (if any) in payment' was the main cause for no labour unrest in industries of 'C' and 'D'. The other reasons for not having workers unrest in these industries included 'good relationship between owners, managers and workers', 'healthy work environment', 'bonus packages (daughter's marriage, hajj etc.) and 'arranged for recreation activities'. The owners of both the factories also observed the same as managers.

The Impact of Workers' Unrest

The highest percentage of the workers (92.5%) reported that 'temporarily unemployment of workers' was the

major impact of workers' unrest. This was followed by 'production halt' (72.5%). The managers and owners of factories A and B also observed 'production halt' as the negative impact of unrest. In this context, the three leaders of owners' associations interviewed opined that 'failure in timely shipment', 'suffering of the poor workers with their family members', and 'loss of revenue' were the negative consequences of workers' unrest.

Steps that May Be Taken by Owners to Minimize Workers Unrest

According to the highest percentage of workers (90.0%), owners can take 'initiative to increase wage and ensure promotional opportunities'. This was followed by 'timely payment to workers' (77.5%), 'providing weekly holiday' (65.0%), 'ensuring safe work environment' (55.0%), and 'taking strict action to discourage in human treatment to workers' (40.0%). The large majority of the managers of four factories opined that 'trying to pay in due time' and 'maintaining working hours according to labour law' could be the major steps that might be taken to prevent workers unrest in the future. Along with, the managers of factory B' (80.0%) reported 'trying to arrange weekly holiday'. The factory owners also observed 'trying to pay in due time' might be minimized unrest. In this context, the leaders of owners associations suggested the owners to change their exploitative behaviour toward the workers to prevent workers unrest in the future.

Steps that May Be Taken by BGMEA/BKMEA to Minimize Workers Unrest

The highest percentage of the managers from all the sample factories observed that 'BGMEA/BKMEA should listen to both parties' in order to minimize workers' unrest. This was followed by 'BGMEA should be honest'. The owners also responded the same as mentioned by managers of the four factories. In addition to the above steps the leaders of owners' associations interviewed (03) mentioned that 'the arbitration cell tries to meet up problem between owner and worker', 'BGMEA/BKMEA takes initiatives to train the workers effectively' and 'the task forces often visit different factories'.

Steps that May Be Taken by Government to Minimize Workers Unrest

According to the vast majority of workers (95.8%), government should 'take proper initiative to increase wage quickly'. This was followed by 'introducing rationing system' (29.2%) and 'arranging for provident fund' (28.0%) for the workers. In addition to this issue, the highest percentage

of managers of the four factories opined that government should 'take proper initiative to increase wage quickly'. The next higher percentage of the managers observed that govt. must 'arrange for continuous supply of electricity, gas and water'. In this context, the owners suggested 'ensuring law and order by the government'. The leaders of owners associations mentioned that government should 'ensure political stability' and 'arrange for uninterrupted supply of power and gas'.

Information Gained though Observation of Physical Work Environment

The physical work environment of factories A, C and D was relatively much better than factory "B". Factory B one of those that experienced workers unrest during the last five years, was having a poorer physical work environment as indicated by its level of cleanliness of the floor, toilet cleanliness and ventilation system. The factories A, C and D had well cleaned floor and organized furnitures and used phenyl to wash toilets. Facilities for pure drinking water, sanitary and separate toilet for male and female and first aid in emergency period were available in all four industries. All of these were smoking free area. More interestingly, it was also found that fire equipments existed in the factories but did not work properly. Along with there was no emergency exit.

Information Gained though Observation of Psychological Work Environment

The psychological environment of all the four sample factories appeared to be good in interpersonal relationship among workers. But the relationship between workers and managers of factories 'C' and 'D' was more intimate than that of factories 'A' and 'B'. In terms of element of 'workers involvement in problem solving', factories 'A' and 'C' had a participatory approach while factories 'B' and 'D' had not. Similarly, in terms of the element of recreational facilities, 'B' and 'C' did not have any opportunity. Sometimes factories 'A' and 'D' organized playing music in each floor. Moreover, factory 'D' arranged yearly picnic and gave some incentives; such as, 'arrange for dinner if there is night duty', 'provide extra incentives of Tk.300/= for regular attendance on all 30 days'. Factories 'A', 'B' and 'C' only gave overtime payment including night allowance.

Quantitative Analysis

Job Satisfaction of the Garment Workers

Table 1 indicated that job satisfaction of the workers with respect to the job facet of 'supervision' differed significantly by industries experiencing unrest and those not experiencing

Table: 1 Mean Difference in Satisfaction of the Workers with Different Job Facets

Job satisfaction facets	Respondents from organisations experiencing workers' unrest N=60		Respondents from organisations not experiencing workers' unrest N=60		t – Value
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
(a) work	34.60	6.872	33.70	6.735	0.724
(b) pay	4.77	2.49	5.13	2.58	-0.793
(c) supervision	30.68	4.69	33.10	6.06	-2.442*
(d) promotion	14.05	4.91	15.25	5.14	-1.307
(e) co-workers	40.82	4.52	40.38	5.75	0.459

*p<0.05

unrest ($t = -2.44$; $p < 0.05$). A comparison of group means further shows that satisfaction with 'supervision' was higher for workers of the industries not experiencing unrest ($\bar{x} = 33.10$) than the workers of industries experiencing unrest ($\bar{x} = 30.68$). However, workers' job satisfaction did not differ significantly with other facets of job satisfaction (i.e. work, pay, promotion, co-workers).

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted with a view to explore the reasons behind workers unrest in garment industries and to suggest measures that may be taken for minimizing these unwanted incidents. This investigation covered four garment industries situated in and around Dhaka city: two experiencing labour unrest during the last five years (Factories 'A' and 'B') and two did not have experience of unrest (Factories 'C' and 'D').

Reasons and Negative Impacts of The Workers' Unrest

Results revealed that late payment of Eid bonus and wage to the workers and demand by the section chief for extra money except overtime (OT) benefit and usual wage were considered by the managers and owners of factories 'A' and 'B' as the major reasons for the last episode of workers unrest in their industries. They also observed that 'section chief' and 'old and new workers' were involved in the last episode of unrest in these two industries. On the other hand, the managers and owners of factories 'C' and 'D' claimed that the system of 'timely payment or prior notification for delay in payment (if any)' was the main reason for which their organisation did not experience any unrest. Further, the leaders of owners' associations observed that 'involvement of international mafia circle' and 'sometimes failure to pay timely because of scarcity of power and gas' were responsible for workers' unrest.

Nevertheless, as viewed by the vast majority of the workers (93.3%) of the four factories under consideration, 'lack of a system for increasing wage' was the major reason of workers' unrest in the garment industries in our country. For example, during talking with the workers, one of them said, "Money is the main problem. My husband cannot afford to feed the children. We cannot eat fish in a week." This was consistent with ILO report where it showed that minimum wage in garment sectors of Bangladesh is the lowest of all competitors' countries at present that is only \$ 69. But in India, Pakistan, Vietnam, and China, it is respectively \$ 113, \$118, \$120 and \$204. On the other hand, in terms of profit margin, it is 3.2% in China, 11.8% in India but Bangladesh bears the highest (Selim, 2010). The garment workers are earning us the second highest foreign exchange, so why won't they be paid their due wages. The second highest percentage (77.5%) reported 'inhuman treatment by the mid-level managers' as the other reason of occurring unrest. As a consequence, another garment worker reported, "Supervisor cannot permit us to use washroom. So, we drink little water. As a consequence, most of us suffer from kidney diseases."

It was showed that almost all the unrest was centered because of wages. But, my question was why people not try to resolve this problem immediately. The official minimum wage has been set at 3,000 Tk. (£28) a month in 2010, up from 1662 Tk. in the first raise since 2006. But at present time the market price is very expensive and this amount is not sufficient for livelihood ("Bangladesh sets", 2010).

In this context, I want to add a different picture. According to BGMEA database, 599 incidents of unrest occurred in June, 2010 and these were not due to payment related reason. Actually, these might be instigated by other reasons (political instability).

Regarding the impact of workers unrest, a large number of workers viewed 'temporarily unemployment of workers' (92.5%) and 'production halt' (72.5%), as the negative consequences of unrest. The managers and owners also observed 'production halt' as a consequence of unrest. In

this context, the leaders of owners' associations considered 'failure in timely shipment', 'suffering of the poor workers with their family members' and 'loss of revenue' as the negative impact of labor unrest. Because of workers' unrest, our image in world market is becoming worse.

The Physical and Psychological Work Environment of The Factories

An effective work environment is vital to the success of business. The physical work environment of factories A, C and D was relatively much better than factory 'B'. Factory 'B' was having a poorer physical work environment as indicated by its level of cleanliness of the floor, toilet and ventilation system. Though the fire equipments existed in all the four garment industries, these did not work in emergency period due to lack of supervision. Moreover there was no alternative exit. This was supported by the few days ago occurring deadly incident and that was "Fire at Tazreen Garment Factory, Bangladesh on 23th November, 2012". This fire killed 112 workers (Alam, 2012). According to factory act 1965 in Labour Law 2006, it is ensured healthy and secure work environment for the workers (Khan, 2010). But the law enforcing agencies are not strict in enforcing factory laws; it appears that many of the problems are due to institutional failure.

Regarding the psychological work environment, all the four sample factories appeared to be good in interpersonal relationship of workers. But the relationship between workers and managers of factory 'C' and 'D' was more intimate than that of factory 'A' and 'B'. Along with the factory B was lagging behind in terms of the elements of 'workers involvement in problem solving' and 'recreational facilities'.

The Job Satisfaction of The Workers

The job satisfaction of the workers with respect to the job facet of 'supervision' differed significantly by industries experiencing unrest and those not experiencing unrest ($t = -2.44$; $p < 0.05$). The workers from organisations not experiencing unrest reported more job satisfaction with 'supervision' when compared with those organisations experiencing unrest. The finding through observation of psychological work environment also described the same picture. The co-workers relationship was good while the relationship between workers and supervisors was not. But their job satisfaction did not differ significantly with other job facets (i.e. work, pay, promotion, co-workers) because almost all the garment industry workers face the same problem in case of pay and promotion.

The famous Hawthorne Studies revealed that a happy or satisfied employee is a productive one and more committed to

his job. Following the Hawthorne studies, many companies in the USA and other developed countries adopted a paternalistic management strategy which emphasized a 'human relations approach – being nice to workers' (Schultz and Schultz, 2002). Zohir and Majumder (1996) studied on 635 garment workers and found that 57% female were more satisfied than male workers because of good behaviour of managers and high wages compare to other industries. Behaviour of management level employees is very important for workers satisfaction. Actually, many Bangladeshi garment manufacturers just try to impress foreign investors by making their industries attractive with all modern facilities. But in real, these are just eye-wash. A humanistic approach is lacking in our industries.

LIMITATIONS

It is important to note that though the study was a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches, it was largely a qualitative study. Sample size was small and drawn following non-probabilistic sampling techniques. Note that there may be some lacking on the part of the observer to observe the physical and psychological environment of the factories. These things may be properly addressed in a future study in this direction.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the study findings, there are some steps, as suggested by the workers, managers, owners and leaders of owners associations that may be taken to minimize workers' unrest in the future.

- Increasing wage and ensuring promotional opportunities;
- Ensuring timely payment to workers;
- Providing weekly holidays;
- Maintaining working hours according to labor law;
- BGMEA and BKMEA may try to listen to the parties involved in unrest;
- BGMEA and BKMEA may take steps to train the workers more effectively;
- Ensuring law and order by Government;
- Allowing trade unions to operate within the industries.

CONCLUSIONS

The garment industry occupies a unique position in the Bangladesh economy. But despite the phenomenal successes, at present this industry is gone through a great difficulty because of workers' unrest. So, the present study was taken into account to address the reasons behind this unwanted incident. We found that the major cause of unrest related to

wage and timely payment. The findings of this research may contribute by offering suggestions to BGMEA, BKMEA, the government and management of the factories for taking appropriate steps in preventing workers' unrest in the future. They would have to jointly work together to maintain competitiveness in the global garment market.

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