

ELEVATION IN STATUS OF RMG WORKERS

Social attitude changed, female workers are building good families

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How do the workers themselves view factory work in the Ready-Made-Garments (RMG) sector?

While carrying out a study, we have found that the social attitude towards female work in factories has undergone a sea-change over the last three decades. Traditional stance on female participation in the modern factory settings in the 1980s and 1990s often produced negative social image of 'spoiled girls'. First-generation RMG workers had to fight hard against such conservative pressures. This is no longer the case with the new generation of female workers.

When asked about whether such a negative image still persists in the society, many were surprised to hear that such image once existed. About half of the respondents said no such image currently exists and another 45% conceded that it exists but in a negligible degree. The improved social perception about the female work in RMG factories is also reflected in the rating of self-esteem. Contrary to the widely held misperception, 54% of the female workers expressed 'satisfaction' about their jobs; this may be compared to 'dissatisfaction' rating of only 15%. Similar ratings was also expressed in relation to

satisfaction about the work environment, notwithstanding the 'sweat factory' image circulated in some circles, especially after industrial accidents in the recent years.

Only 5% of the RMG workers reported earning 'no respect' and another 36% reported 'low respect' shown to them by the rest of the society. In contrast, 55% of the workers reported earning 'moderate level of respect', which is a clear progress over the benchmark of the 1990s.

Of course, one could argue that the initial condition of these workers were so appalling that work in RMG factories was seen by many of them as a route to attaining a better future. For most of the female workers, the RMG work provides an opportunity to move up the poverty ladder and gain economic and social freedom previously not available to them.

But this does not mean that the wage work in factories is without pitfalls. This is partly indicated by the response to the follow up query about whether they want to work after 35. Only about one-tenth of the RMG workers responded in affirmation--a surprisingly low level of positive response considering the relatively high initial satisfaction

over factory jobs noted earlier. What explains the puzzle of positive livelihood assessment in the short-term combined with negative livelihood assessment in the long-term?

A complex set of supply and demand side-factors explain such unusually low positive rating regarding long-term job prospect in the RMG sector. First, there are supply-side factors that evidently discourage factory work for the older workers. Marriage as a social institution reduces labour supply of the female workers: this has been cited as the likely deterrent in at least 46% of worker responses. Health concerns also figure noticeably in 14% of the cases. But there are also demand-side factors that discourage female participation in RMG work after a certain age. About 15% of the responses stated that employers do not like older workers.

Also contrary to the popular image of the 'adolescent unmarried' garment worker, a significant proportion of the female workers (42%) are married. This share has gone up with the previous estimate of 38% from 1990 (Zohir and Paul-Majumder 1996), but the share of married workers is predicted to rise with the age of the worker. It is nevertheless remarkable that

although underage workers constitute 33% of the sample, they constitute only 3% among married workers. This is in contrast to rural areas where most of the marriages – 70 according to the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) – take place before the legal age of 18.

Even in the age group of 18-24, only 44% of women workers are found to be married. It is only in the later age groups, when the prospects for sustaining/finding factory work may become increasingly slim, that marriage turns out to be an attractive option for the overwhelming majority of female workers. All this evidence indirectly implies that RMG work may delay age-at-marriage and hence may contribute to higher future well-being—controlling for other correlates—in terms of less reproductive burden and higher individual freedom and agency.

The other prevalent view on the female RMG workers is that they are essentially slum dwellers with the very poor living standards associated with slums and squatters. That may have been true of the first generation female workers active in the 1980s and 1990s, but it is certainly not true now. About 62% of the female workers of RMG live in non-slum areas or low-income settlements. Overall, 86% reported access to supply water; 90% have reported 'legal access' to electricity; and 77% reporting 'legal access' to gas connection. As expected, access to water-sealed sanitary latrine is also very high (about 86%); the only problem seems to be the congestion—with an average of 16 people using the same facility.

Educational level of the RMG workers has increased remarkably over time. In 1990, as many as 38% of the female RMG workers did not have any exposure to formal education. By 1997, the matched share had dropped to 22%; in 2014 survey, it gets reduced further to only 7%. Currently, about 48% of the



female workers have at least some level of secondary (post-primary) education. The corresponding share of female workers with post-primary education is much higher for advanced factories in Gazipur and Ashulia. This suggests the possibility that positive human development effects of the demand originate in the modern industrial settings.

Most of the female workers have rather limited prior job experience: about 70-75% of them have less than 4 years of work experience and 94% of them fall within the category of 'below 10 years' of experience. The work force is still marked by high turnover rate, even though they have rather limited work history: 60% of the female workers have changed their work place at least once and about 15% have changed their factories at least thrice.

Networking is an important factor in getting access to RMG jobs. Only a fifth got jobs through their own efforts. Kinship networking – help of close relatives (24%) and 'someone

from the village' (15%) played an important part in this, together accounting for about 40% of the responses for workers engaged in compliance factories. However, other forms of networking are becoming increasingly noticeable in the case of RMG workers. For instance, peer networking ('support from another RMG worker') accounts for 35-37% of responses in both types of factories.

One reason why female workers continue to prefer RMG work over other alternatives is the significant positive effects that such work has on their individual well-being and agency. For many of these workers, work in RMG factory is the first job. We have asked the respondents to state their monthly income in their very first job in RMG sector as well as their current income. The average income of the female workers in the RMG sector was Taka 3442 in their very first job, which has grown to Taka 6687 now. The increase has been recorded both in basic pay and in overtime earnings, reflecting



gains due to recent increase in minimum wage in 2013.

RMG workers spend 36% of total monthly spending on food and about 23% on house rent. Transport came low on the chart not because transportation is easy and available for the female RMG workers but because the latter tend to reside in close proximity to the jobs from where they can go to work by foot.

A typical female RMG worker spends about 10% of their expenditure on self-appearance – clothing (7%) and toiletries (3%). We assume the aggregate size of the RMG workers to be 4.4 million and 80% of them are women. Taking the average spending per female worker from our sample survey as a yardstick, we find even the 3% spending norm on toiletries would generate an annual demand of Taka 711 crore, most of which are for locally produced toiletries produced by multinational factories.

Interestingly, an RMG female worker spends significant amount every month – mostly by Bkash (popular

mobile banking route) – to remit money to parental household residing in villages. This accounts for 17% of their monthly expenses, third only in significance after food expenses and house rent.

Most of the female workers of RMG sector are migrants from outside of Dhaka. Only 14% claimed to be Dhaka residents; 5% of the migrant workers came from the Dhaka district, but the share of the Dhaka division has been the highest in the sample (43%). This is followed by Barisal division (26%), Rangpur (14%) and Chittagong division (7%). Most of the migrants are of recent origin—the average length of stay in Dhaka city for the entire sample being 6.2 years. This is indirectly supported by the age distribution of the migrant workers.

Female workers engaged in the RMG sector have higher levels of empowerment, however measured, than the rural women engaged in unpaid work and self-employment. Workers have greater say over a range of decisions taken at the

household, community and workplace levels. Relatively 'high empowerment' has been recorded in the following areas: control over spending of own earnings (94-96%), choice of jobs (87-96%), decision to seek health care provider/ treatment (87-88%), decision to go outside of house (82-88%) and purchase of daily necessities (95-97%). 'Moderate' empowerment is reported by following decision areas: 'overall family maintenance' (54-74%), education of girls (48-54%), education of boys (47-55%), child nutrition (51-61%), and change of residence (56-75%).

Increased female labour force participation, and accommodation of that female workforce in the RMG sector, plays an important role in the achievements in poverty reduction and overall human development situation. The growth of RMG sector had a beneficial effect on poverty reduction effort, as 90% of RMG workers are female migrants from rural areas. Three-quarters of them come from landless and/or poorer strata (Afsar 2001).

Before joining RMG, the economic situation of workers' households was precarious. About 80% of them were persisting below the food-poverty line: 17% of the workers' households lived in extreme food-poverty and another 63% lived in moderate food-poverty. These workers, on average, have been engaged in RMG sector for about 4 years. The poverty status of the sending (parental) household has changed significantly in this period. Currently, the proportion of parental households persisting below the food-poverty line has come down to 43% from 80%. Consequently, the share of households residing in 'breakeven' status (neither deficit nor surplus) has increased from 19 to 36%. It would appear RMG work has reduced poverty in the parental households almost by half in just 4 years! ■■