

Preventing Dropout of
Women RMG Workers

Policy Brief

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Preventing Dropout of Women RMG Workers: Proposed Solutions to Improve Worker Retention

The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector in Bangladesh is one of the key drivers of the economy employing 4 million workers, predominantly women. Though they make up 57% of the RMG sector, women workers suffer disproportionate risk of job loss and dropout, particularly during economic upheavals such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Inadequate maternity and childcare centre benefits, breast-feeding facilities, and work unsuitable for pregnant women, can make it difficult for pregnant women and young mothers to continue working. Provisions for special leave, restricted working hours and not always granted.

Misbehaviour of supervisors, lack of physical security on route to and from work, and sexual harassment grievances are not reported, recorded, or addressed. The skills and efficiency of women workers are not suitably rewarded or recognized in terms of pay or grade increases. Inadequate implementation of the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) and the absence of formal employment contracts further create a lack of job security.

This policy brief presents recommendations aimed at retaining women in the RMG sector by addressing systemic gaps and improving workplace protection.

Challenges

1. Weak implementation of the Bangladesh Labour Act (BLA) exacerbates women's vulnerability to layoffs and retrenchment. These gaps result in women workers leaving their jobs, for example, due to lack of childcare facilities and designated spaces for breast feeding.
2. Lack of formal employment contracts in Bangladesh's RMG sector, particularly women, vulnerable to labour rights violations, gender-based violence, and exploitation. This lack of formal contracts denies workers essential benefits and exposes them to a higher risk of job insecurity and other workplace abuses.
3. Limited awareness and access to grievance redressal mechanisms result in workers being unable to challenge unfair layoffs or secure their legal entitlements.
4. Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms are often ineffective due to power imbalances between workers and employers, so when disputes arise, women often end up leaving their jobs rather than finding resolution.
5. Sexual harassment, fear of violence and lack of redress are also causes of dropout for women workers. Safety from sexual harassment needs to be addressed, and the high court verdict on the issue needs to be made into a law.

Time to Act Now

Bangladesh is set to lose its Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) benefits by 2027, making compliance with human rights standards essential for the RMG sector, which exports 61% of its products to Europe. To ensure GSP compliance and improve labour conditions, it is crucial to implement the United Nations Guiding Principles (UNGP) on

Business and Human Rights by 2025. This effort will not only mitigate business risks but also enhance the retention of female workers. Increased enforcement of labour laws by authorities and education for factory owners are key steps in this transition.

Recommendations

1. Enforce Formal Employment Contracts for Workers

Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) and the trade associations should undertake stricter monitoring and enforcement of the Bangladesh Labour Act (Sections 5-9) to ensure all workers, receive formal employment contracts including ID cards and Service Books. This will protect workers' right to compensation and benefits during layoffs and retrenchment.

2. Strengthen Maternity Rights and Benefits

DIFE and trade associations should ensure proper implementation of the BLA (Sections 46-47) so that pregnant women receive full maternity benefits.

3. Expand Worker Awareness of Labour Rights and Grievance Mechanisms

Employers and trade unions should ensure regular worker training programs to increase awareness of rights under the BLA and improve workers' access to grievance

mechanisms. This will empower workers to challenge wrongful layoffs and ensure that they receive compensation when eligible.

4. Improve Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Systems

Ministry of Labour should mandate the use of ADR for labour-related disputes and ensure that negotiations are overseen by a neutral party, with virtual options available. Employers should strengthen training for trade unions and worker representatives to address power imbalances during dispute settlements.

5. Ensure Functional Sexual Harassment Complaint Committees

Many factories lack functional sexual harassment complaint committees, leaving women workers vulnerable. Enforcing the High Court guideline will help create a safer working environment, reduce workplace harassment, and improve female workforce retention in the RMG sector. Furthermore, the Ministry of Labour should enact a law based on the High Court guidelines.



Many women leave work because of family pressure. Our factory offers child-care facilities for children up to the age of six, but can you imagine, what if factories offered workers a school for their children to attend while they work? If the children could stay at school till evening, the mother would not be worried. Mothers do not feel safe leaving their children at home. Many women send their children to the grandparents in the village, but if the child is sick, the mother must leave work and go to the village. If their children were nearby and safe, the mothers could work without worrying.”

Sabrina Shormi

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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

1. CPD-Shojag Coalition: [Report on Corporate Accountability in the RMG Sector](#)
2. Labour Rights Issues During COVID-19 Pandemic: [A Memo from BLAST](#)
3. ILO: [Guidelines on Employment and Industrial Relations](#)
4. BRAC Institute of Governance and Development: [Report on COVID-19 Stimulus Package](#)
5. The Daily Star (2024). [Efforts to Retain Women Workers in the Garment Sector.](#)
6. Dhaka Tribune (2024). [Strategies to Prevent Dropout Among Female RMG Workers.](#)



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