WHS AWARENESS OF GARMENTS WORKERS IN BANGLADESH: EXAMINING THE GENDER DIFFERENCEIN PERCEPTION

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Abstract - Despite the RMG sector's extraordinary success, there remain serious concerns related to WHS including the lack of social compliance, poor working conditions and safety issues. This research is aimed to understand the current level of awareness of health and safety training in the RMG manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. Furthermore, this research aims to explore the level of awareness about Workplace Health and Safety among male and female workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh.The data was conducted using a questionnaire from 315 garments workers. The response rate was 69%. They were working in 21 different large export-oriented garment factories that supply top fashion brands around the world. Out of 315 respondents, 64% (n=202) were male and 36% (n=113) were female respondent. The result found that employee awareness of Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) has a statistically significant difference between male and female. Female workers are more aware of workplace health and safety compared with male workers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh.

Keywords - Bangladesh, Ready-made garments, workplace health and safety.

I. BACKGROUND

The RMG sector's contribution to Bangladesh's economy fails to reveal the various government policy and financial incentives that have not assured the safety and rights of RMG workers. Unhealthy and unsafe working conditions and gaps in social compliance have been impeding the growth of the RMG sector (Ahmed and Hossain, 2006). The sector is valued as a highly cost-saving and competitive industry; however, the lack of proper safety culture in Bangladesh and the RMG sector's cost-cuttingmeasures significantly affect workers' health and safety. Indeed, the injuries and deaths from recent tragedies in Bangladesh have proved the need for immediate structural safety measures for workers. The state intervention and regulation are inadequate and are not properly targeted to improve the situation. If Bangladesh government and private sectors delivered proper training programs aimedat workers, these incidents could be minimised.

In the RMG sector, most injuries and deaths are caused by fire (e.g. from smoke inhalation). In 2013, tragically, numerous RMG manufacturing factory-based fires have led to the deaths of large numbers of employees. It is important to recognise that garments are easily flammable; therefore, fire is frequent and common in the RMG in Bangladesh,hugely affecting the safety and health of workers, at times leading to injuries and death. Therefore, fire safety is mandatory, and significantly so in manufacturing factories. On principle, those responsible should be severely punished by safety regulatory authorities for safety lapses arising from any acts of commission or omission (Sakenaite and Vaidogas, 2011). However, this is not the case in Bangladesh's RMG industry. Despite the RMG sector's extraordinary success, there remain serious concerns related to WHS including the lack of social compliance, poor working conditions and safety issues. These are reflected by the recent tragedies of the Tazreen Fashions factory fire, which involved national stakeholders, and the Rana Plaza building collapse (Anbarasan, 2012). Unfortunately, five such deadly incidents claiming hundreds of human lives took place in Bangladesh between November 2012 and May 2013.The main reasons for the magnitude of fatalities from these disasters were the high density of employees in factories, together with the lack of proper safety precautions (Ahmed and Hossain, 2006). These recent disasters have put labour law violations and worker safety in Bangladesh in the limelight, resulting in debates both at home and abroad. Consequently, international stakeholders such as producers, trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), buying houses, employers' associations and governments have aimed to resolve these issues.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This research is aimed to understand the current level of awareness of health and safety training in the RMG manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. Furthermore, this research aims to explore the level of awareness about Workplace Health and Safety among male and female workers in the RMGsector in Bangladesh.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The safety is mandatory and a significant function for production. Lapses in safety are a serious issue and individuals responsible are usually harshly penalised by authorities of safety regulation for any acts of commission and omission. Indeed, a proper work health and safety (WHS) plan with a clearly written statement and intent of action for safeguarding the

occupational injury and illness and accident, shows the commitment of an organisation to WHS (Dragano, Wahrendorf and Siegrist, 2011).

Employees are kept healthy and safe when the business promotes safe work practices, provides a safe working environment, and offers sufficient equipment and tools as well as ongoing education and training. This is done by first recognising the hazards, educating people about the hazards and putting controls in place to remove the hazards, and finally estimating the control's effectiveness. An effective WHS management system will strengthen staff, reduce illness or injury related to working, develops the business culture as a whole and assure legislative compliance. According to McKinnon (2013), a healthy and safe workforce is better for business. Off the job, health and safety is the expansion of on the job safety culture of an organisation. Off the job, programs educate staff about bringing their healthy and safe practices of the workplace to their families and homes. A developing number of businesses now regard off the job health and safety essentials to better management of health productivity, costs and gains. Off the job health and safety programs can help develop lives, as well as the wellbeing of employees and their families. Robbins et al (2013) have stated that ensuring workplace safety and health relies on setting up behaviours and attitudes that reduce injuries and accidents.

Hanson et al (2000) stated that with careful and proper planning and adopting fully trained representatives for safety, most of the firms have started to rewrite the policy statement and develop their own procedures of safety to achieve their specific needs. According to Smallman and John (2001), the planning and implementation of health and safety programs in the industry should incorporate a thorough induction training for all new entrants, to make sure they know and understand the WHS aspects of their work and the implications. The companies should also offer refresher courses to reinforce the learnings. - identify hazards; control risks; assess risks; deal with hazardous events and evaluate WHS conditions. In addition, knowledge of WHS is needed for safe work practices in how to control for risks and for understanding WHS standards and legislation etc. (Smallman and John, 2001).Similarly, Bull (2001) pointed out that awareness among employees about health and safety programs is necessary to reduce accident rates in the garment industry.

Not surprisingly, hazard awareness had increased among employees after safety and health programs were conducted in the industry. After these training programs, workers seemed to show more precaution in their activities and there was a perceived rise in employee productivity with a general enhancement in morale and improved relationships between management teams and the workforce.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The primary research has beenconducted in Bangladesh – using a closed-end questionnaire.Sukamolson (2010) argues that quantitative research is good for achieving six types of result: arriving at a quantitative answer; studying numerical changes; conducting audience segmentation; quantifying opinions, attitudes, and behaviors to find out how the whole population feels about a certain issue; explaining some phenomena; and, lastly, testing hypotheses. Quantitative methods are better than qualitative methods at explaining cause and effect; they provide estimates of populations at large; they show the extensiveness of people's attitudes, and their results can be condensed into statistics. Additionally, they allow for comparisons between groups using statistics; they provide precision because they are definitive and standardized, and they can answer questions regarding numbers and frequency. Quantitative research is good at furnishing broad information about issues or problems from various units, but is too shallow to explore them in depth; it is also good at testing theories and hypotheses, but it does not develop them (Sukamolson, 2010). The subjects' occupation mandated that they are surveyed at their workplaces – RMG factories in the vicinity of Dhaka – where the RMG factory belt is located. The five-point Likert scale questionnaire has been distributed among workers, supervisors and managers - from export-orientedreadymade garments factories in Bangladesh.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data was conducted usinga questionnairefrom 315 garments workers. The response rate was 69%. They were working in 21 different large export-oriented garment factories that supply top fashion brands around the world. Out of 315 respondents, 64% (n=202) were male and 36% (n=113) were female respondent. 25.7% (n=81) are aged between 15 to 20 years old, 38.7% (n=122) are aged between 21 to 30 years old, 34% (n=107) are aged between 31 to 40 years old, and only 1.6% (n=5) are aged above 41 years old. Therefore, the majority of respondents are aged between 21 to 30 years in the sample. Out of 315 respondents 8.6% (n=27) have had less than a year work experience, 49.5% (n=156) have work experience between 1 to 5 years, 29.2% (n=92) have work experience between 6 to 10 years of work experience, and 12.7% (n=40) have above 10 years of work experience. This study examines if there is a difference between male worker and female worker in relation to awareness of health and safety. The result found that employee awareness of Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) has a statistically significant difference between male and female ($p=0.022$, $P < 0.05$,).Female workers ($M= 4.09$) are

more aware of workplace health and safety compared with male workers (M= 3.94). This study has further investigated the level of perception between male and female workers about WHS. Female worker (M=4.4) has a higher perception of "My company has a health and safety policy" compared with Male workers (M=4.3, P=0.02). In response to the question "My company has a dedicated WHS manager", the female has a higher score (M=4.3) than male (M=4.1, p=0.035). Female workers have scored higher (M=4.5) compared with male workers (M=4.3, p=0.02) while we asked: "My company provides training on WHS to the employees". In response to the question "My company has safety procedures and instructions on how to carry out each job", the female has a higher score (M=4.2) than male worker (M=4.0, p=0.00). The final question in this group was "Safety is a key priority in my company's corporate plan", where the female has a higher score (M=4.2) than a male worker (M=4.0, p=0.00).

This research has examined if there is any difference between female worker and male worker in their perception about the implementation of WHS in the RMG sector. Four questions were asked in this group using a five-point Likert scale. In response to the question "My company has communicated the safety plan and priorities to all employees", the female has a higher score (M=4.3) than a male worker (M=4.1, p=0.02).Female worker (M=4.2) has a higher perception of "My company provides relevant facilities for employees who have a disability" compared with Male workers (M=4.7, P=0.00). Furthermore, Female worker (M=4.1) has also a higher perception of "My company provides rehabilitation programs for injured employees" compared with Male workers (M=3.7, P=0.00).The final question in this group was "My company provides alternatives work which is suitable for injured employees", where the female has a higher score (M=3.9)compared withthe male worker (M=3.6, p=0.00). It is worth to note the overall response score dropped for both male and female workers in alternative job arrangement issue.

The next set of questions were targeted to assess the level of WHS awareness and workplace culture among garments workers. The study has found that there are statistically significant difference exists between male worker and female worker on the awareness of health and safety and workplace culture. Female worker (M=4.1) has a significantlyhigher understandingof the issue "I know how to report health and safety incidents" compared with Male workers (M=3.7, P=0.00). Similarly, in response to the question "I know how to raise safety concerns", the female has a higher score (M=4.1) than a male worker (M=3.8, p=0.00).Female workers have scored higher (M=4.1) compared with male workers (M=3.9, p=0.00) while we asked: "I have received health and safety training".Remarkably, Male workers have scored higher (M=3.1) compared with female workers (M=2.7, p=0.00) while we asked: "injuries in my workplace are from poor employee training and awareness". Apparently, female workers are receiving more training compared with male workers on WHS. However, the overall score for both male and female workers have sharply fallen for this question. This is may be due to the reason that workers are not aware of the significance of training in improving work performance and safety. Both male (M=3.9) and female (M=4; p=.28) have a nearly similar level of agreement on the issue "Employee have the freedom to openly discuss health and safety issues". However, this response was not statistically significant. The statistical insignificant result may be due to the non-existence of culture of open discussion in the RMG sector. The final question in this group was "The needs of male and female employees are recognised by our company's workplace", where the female has a higher score (M=4.1)compared withthe male worker (M=3.9, p=0.01).

The final group of questions were targeting to assess perception of training needs among workers in the RMG sector. The first question was "Employees require work-specific health and safety training". Female workers have scored higher (M=4.4) in compared with male workers (M=4.2, p=0.00). It is to be noted that the overall score for training requirement is much higher in compared with previous questions. That implies that both male and female workers are in need of work-specific health and safety training. Remarkably, Male workers have scored higher (M=3.6) in compared with female workers (M=3.4, p=0.03) while we asked: "External training would be better than in-house training". However, there was an overall drop in the score for both male and female on the issue of external training needs. In response to the question "on-site workplace training with practical sessions would be most effective", the female has a higher score (M=4.3) than male worker (M=4.1, p=0.01).The final question in this group was "Formal workplace training is needed with qualifications that are nationally recognised", where the female has a lower score (M=3.5)compared withthe male worker (M=3.8, p=0.00). However, there was an overall drop in the scores for both male and female on the issue of formal training needs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It has become evident that the health status of female garment workers is impedingtheir job performance. In 2014, Ahmed and Raihan conducted a study into the healthstatus of female workers in the garment sector of Bangladesh. In this study, 200 femalestaff were surveyed to determine the state of their health as factory workers. The studyfound that the majority of female workers were affected by healthproblems and disease.The result has concluded that employee awareness of Workplace Health and Safety (WHS)

has a statistically significant difference between male and female.Female workers are more aware of workplace health and safety compared with male workers. This study has also found that female worker and male worker have a difference in their perception about the implementation of WHS in the RMG sector where female workers are more aware than male workers. It is worth to note for both male and female workers were less aware of any alternative job arrangement issue for WHS. In general, female workers are more aware of WHS awareness and workplace culture compared with male workers. Remarkably, Male workers were more concerned about poor employee training and awareness. This research found that both male and female workers are in need of work-specific health and safety training. This study has found that Male workers have slightly more preference for External training than female workers. In contrast, female workers have more preference for on-site workplace training for WHS. Apparently, both male and female were less interested in the issue of formal WHS training. Moreover. The study has found that workers are not aware of the significance of training in improving work performance and safety.

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