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Compliance issues in health and safety environment of knit composite garment industries in Bangladesh: A case study

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Abstract

Health and safety issues in the commercial and industrial sectors, particularly in ready-made garment organizations, pertain to the science and art of preserving and enhancing the well-being and convenience of employees. It ultimately plays a role in improving the quality and productivity of the organization. The main objective of this study is to evaluate the compliance issues in the health and safety environment of a Knit Composite ready-made garment organization in Bangladesh by comparing with the relevant sections of the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006. The study is a case study in nature, so it has been confined to a single-knit composite garment organization. Data have been collected from primary sources, i.e., face-to-face conversations with the individual and groups of employees, and from some common secondary sources, i.e., Bangladesh Labor Code 2006, different books, publications, and websites. The collected data have been analyzed qualitatively. The study found that, though the organization is trying, it still cannot properly maintain its health and safety environment as per the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006. Some areas of the factory premises were found dirty, dusty, and untidy. Temperatures in some vital areas could not be controlled because of hot conditions. Though some precautionary equipment is given to the workers, it is provided in limited numbers and is not available in time. Some operational units had inadequate space. It is therefore recommended that to ensure a safe exit in case of any emergency, the management should adopt specific practices and controls so that passageways are provided on the needle detector room and the west side of the finishing section.

Keywords: *BKMEA, Compliance, Health and Hygiene, RMG, Work Safety*

1. Introduction

It is acknowledged that health and safety in commercial and industrial settings are of utmost importance. The garment industry in Bangladesh has a more promising future in the age of globalization. Besides Bangladesh, the outside world uses ultra-modern technologies in the knit, woven, and denim clothing industries. It must

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employ the newest, most advanced technology in the ready-made clothing industry to thrive in the global free market. Certain standards regarding the health and safety of Bangladeshi workers were specified by the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006 and the Labor Rules 2015. Cleanliness, ventilation, temperature, protection from dust and fumes, waste disposal services, artificial humidification, overcrowding control, proper lighting, safe drinking water supply, presence of a sufficient number of latrines and urinals, spittoons, and personal protective equipment (PPEs) are all covered by the Act. In commercial and industrial settings, the topic of health and safety pertains to the science and art of maintaining and enhancing the well-being and comfort of workers.

1.1. Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are:

i. to evaluate the compliance issues related to the health and safety environment of the surveyed knit composite ready-made garment organization in Bangladesh;
ii. to compare the health and safety maintenance system of the surveyed knit composite ready-made garment organization with the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006;
iii. to find some limitations (if any) in this regard and to provide necessary recommendations to improve the health and safety environment of Bangladesh's knit composite ready-made garment organization.

1.2. Methodology of the study

The present study is a case study and qualitative in nature. To complete the study, the researchers used both primary and secondary data sources to obtain prominent information that can fulfill the study's objectives.

Primary sources of data: The primary sources include face-to-face personal conversations and group interviews of workers; conversations with the employees of different departments; observations on environmental behaviors, facts, and actions; and the present condition of the programs and case study of the surveyed organization.

Secondary sources of data: The secondary sources include annual reports, various official documents of the surveyed organization, related books, journals, publications, and other sources like online reports and various websites.

Sampling technique: A total of 60 respondents were selected as the sample size based on judgmental sampling from both managerial-level employees and workers of the surveyed organization.

Data analysis: The present study is a case study, so the data are qualitative in nature. The collected data have been analyzed qualitatively by comparing the respondents' observations and opinions with the necessary sections of the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006.

1.3. Scope and limitations of the study

The present study is confined to a single-knit composite ready-made garment (RMG) organization in Bangladesh, namely the Rupashi Group. The study only covered compliance issues related to the organization's health and safety environment. To conduct the study, managers, employees, and workers of both male and female sexes have been covered. The present one is a case study. Therefore, only a few aspects and sections of the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006 have been analyzed, and other provisions could not be taken into consideration.

The present study has some limitations. The researchers have faced some problems during the study. Some desired information could not be elaborated due to the confidentiality of the business. That is why the study could not be prepared to the best of the researchers' expectations. Though the given period by the employees in the surveyed organization is satisfactory, it is insufficient. Many practical matters have been written from the researchers' own observations that may vary from person to person. However, the mentioned limitations did not play a significant role in the present study.

1.4. About the surveyed organization

Rupashi Group is the name of the surveyed Ready-made Garments (RMG), which has been producing and exporting knit clothing since 1993. The Rupashi Group is a local, fully private limited company. The organization's sole investor is its chairman and managing director. At every level of management, the organization is well-structured and staffed by a team of qualified and experienced managers. Since its founding in 1993, the Rupashi Group has established a stellar reputation in the ready-to-wear sector. It began at Fatullah in Bangladesh's Narayangonj district with just 4 sewing lines and 390 workers. Today, the Rupashi Group employs 14250 people and operates 78 sewing lines in Narayangonj.

Concerns of Rupashi Group are: (i) Textile Industries, (ii) Garment Industries, and (iii) Garment Accessories. The Group Members of Textile Industries of the surveyed organization are: Rupashi Knitting & Dyeing Ltd., Rupashi Packaging BD, Rupashi Design & Printing, Rupashi Embro World, Rupashi Washing. On the other hand, the Group Members of Garments Industries are: Rupashi Knitwear Ltd. (Unit 1 & 2), Rupashi Fabrics Complex (Pvt.) Ltd., Salman Knit Composite, Sadia Knit Composite, Shoeb Knit Composite Ltd., Abiko Knit Composite Ltd. Again the Group Members of Garments Accessories of the

Rupashi Group are: Rupashi Label & Printing, Smocking. The important Customers of Rupashi Group are: ZARA (Spain), Tom Tailor (Germany), TAKKO Fashions (Germany), Calzedonia (Italy), ZEEMAN (Netherlands), Forever 21 (USA), Silvian Heach (Italy), KAPPA (Germany), SOGO (Canada), Tema (Turkey), BCBG (USA), Charles Vögele (Switzerland), Tally Weijel (Switzerland), New Yorker (Germany), Jordache (USA), Hockey Canada (Canada), US POLO (USA), ALCOTT (USA), NEXT (Turkey), Riachelo (Brazil), Giordano (Hong Kong).

2. Conceptual framework and literature review

2.1 Concept of health and safety

Health and safety, often known as workplace health and safety (WHS) or occupational health and safety (OHS), is the field that focuses on the welfare, health, and safety of those who work or are employed.

The degree of a living organism's metabolic and functional efficiency is known as its health. It refers to a person's or a community's capacity for self-management and adaptation in the face of social, mental, or physical change (Wikipedia).

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is more than just the absence of illness or disability; it is a condition of whole physical, mental, and social well-being. Occupational health addresses all facets of occupational health and safety, particularly on hazard prevention. Occupational health, a multidisciplinary area of medicine, aims to enable people to perform their jobs in the least harmful way to their health (World Health Organization, WHO).

The three primary goals of occupational health are (i) preserving and advancing the health and productivity of employees; (ii) improving the workplace to make it safer and healthier; and (iii) developing work organizations and work cultures in a way that supports workplace health and safety, which in turn fosters a positive social climate, smooth operations, and possibly increased productivity of the endeavors. In this sense, "working culture" refers to a reflection of the fundamental value systems that the initiative in question has accepted. In practice, this culture is represented in the management systems, personnel policy, participation principles, training policies, and project quality management (International Labor Organization, ILO).

Promoting and maintaining the highest level of physical, mental, and social well-being among employees in all occupations; preventing health deviations among employees due to working conditions; protecting employees from risks resulting from factors that negatively impact their health; placing and maintaining

employees in an environment that is appropriate for their physiological and psychological capabilities; and, in summary, adapting work to man and each individual to his job are the goals of occupational health (International Labor Organization, ILO).

2.2 Compliance related to health & safety

Standards for compliance are set by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA). These include requiring factories to have basic fire equipment, alternate stairs, a layout plan approved by the relevant authority to ensure safe building construction, group insurance for workers, a hygienic sanitation facility, a first aid appliance, minimum wages, and flexible work schedules. Numerous international compliance organizations, such as the ILO and ISO 14001, are well-known. Government agencies and RMG factory owners can ask for assistance raising their products' environmental and industry standards. (Rahman and Hossain, 2010).

All international customers have compliance as a top priority, thus Bangladeshi producers need to arm themselves with these resources to keep their sector vibrant. Compared to non-compliant manufacturers with the same investment, complying factories have a substantially greater yearly turnover. However, complying factors must be implemented to meet the buyer's requirements. The corporate sector, government, and development partners are working to meet all of the law's obligations. The 2006 Bangladeshi labor law is a robust law that complies with the majority of international norms. Manufacturers should take advantage of the fact that they are just a few steps away from reaching international standards by adhering to this rule. To maintain its current market position and grow into new areas, Bangladesh must contend with all of the major competitors in the quota-free apparel industry (Baral, 2010).

According to the German Embassy (2010), PROGRESS, a collaborative effort between the German Federal Ministry and the Bangladesh Ministry of Commerce, has subsequently focused entirely on social compliance and is supporting the government in the following areas: media campaigns, training and retraining for compliance inspectors and advisors; the introduction of a new monitoring and evaluation system; and the implementation of the new labor law.

A study on the health and safety conditions of the RMG sector in Bangladesh that focused on a single clothing company was carried out by Rashid and Rashid (2015). The analysis discovered that the clothing organization is not appropriately adhering to the applicable code and regulations. The report recommended that to improve the general health and safety conditions of

Bangladesh's garment industry, the government, interested stakeholders, and garment organizations should be sincere.

The Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Council (BGWUC) claims that Bangladesh's garment workers might be the world's most underprivileged workforce. Most receive the lowest pay globally, between $14 and $16 monthly. The BGWUC website states that many of the factories in this area do not have any worker health and safety precautions, and only a small number adhere to international standards.

The discussion above has shown that, as far as the researchers are aware, no thorough study has been done on the compliance issues with the current relevant laws (i.e., Bangladesh Labor Code 2006 with the most recent amendment) regarding the health and safety environment of the surveyed organization, i.e., Rupashi Group. To close the gap, research must be done.

3. Analysis and findings of the Study

After conducting the study, it was found that the surveyed organization has its own Health and Safety Policy with the necessary aims and objectives of the health and safety programs covering the essential responsibilities of both managers and workers. The researcher tries to find out the application of this policy. It has also been found that, to implement the health and safety policy, the surveyed organization has formed a separate safety committee comprising twelve members taking from different departments of the organization (e.g., Executive Director, Sr. Operator- Sewing, Welfare Officer, Sr. Operator- Sewing, Poly Women, Folder, Q.I- Cutting, Q.I- Sewing, Safety Officer, Housekeeping In-charge, Production Manager and Executive- Compliance). The organization has developed separate activities and programs to achieve its health and safety goals. Among the other programs, some important programs regularly implemented by the organization are: Fire Drills, Electric Wiring & Earth Lines, formation of a Safety Committee, repainting or Varnish, Cleaning Working Floors, Spittoons Cleaning, Building Safety Assessment, Electrical Thermal Scanning, Hazard Risk Identification Assessment, Awareness, Fire Risk Assessment, etc.

The surveyed organization has claimed that it manages it professionally and maintains almost the same standard according to the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006. The surveyed organization has its own health and safety policy with necessary aims and objectives of the health and safety programs covering the essential responsibilities of both the managers and workers. The researchers tried to find out the application of the said policy. It has also been found that to implement the health and safety policy, and the surveyed organization has formed a separate safety committee comprising twelve members drawn from different departments of the

organization. It has been discovered that the investigated organization is dedicated to upholding standards in the majority of the sector, including: cleanliness, ventilation and temperature, waste disposal, lighting, drinking water, latrines and urinals, spittoons, personal protective equipment (PPEs), etc., in order to maintain the health and safety environment appropriately. However, in certain instances, the organization did not adhere to the pertinent provisions of the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006.

The following are the findings of the present study, which have also been compared with the relevant sections of the Bangladesh Labor Code 2006:

i. The sweepers clean every sewer, privy, and other annoyance every fifteen days. In this respect, the organization is adhering to Section 51 of the Bangladesh Labor Code (BLC) 2006, which deals with neatness and cleanliness.
ii. The factory management repainted or revarnished the interior wall, partitions, all ceilings, and the top of the room and walls of their production facility, despite some places being discovered to be dusty and unclean. Its inside walls are typically varnished every two years. Thus, the organization complies with BLC 2006 Sections 51(a) and (d).
iii. 34 ventilators are set up in each production unit to regulate the temperature of 320 workers, and 16 large windows are also connected to it. Thus, the organization is nearly adhering to the BLC 2006's ventilation and temperature-related part (part 52). The exception is in certain critical industrial units where the heat makes temperature control impossible.
iv. The finishing section's ironmen and heavy machine operators have complained that the oral saline provided to workers involved in ironing and heavy machinery is either insufficient or non-existent. This constitutes a breach of BLC-2006 Section 58(4).
v. The latrines and urinals are washed once a day. So the organization is following the Section 59(d) of the BLC 2006.
vi. Aisles marks (passageways) are not provided in the needle detector room, west side of finishing section on the ground floor of shed # 1, which violates Section 62 of the BLC 2006.
vii. Moreover, eye guards are not installed on 25 of 65 over lock machines, 15 of 35 flat lock machines; furthermore, 2 of 8 rib cutter (Piping) machines do not have cutter guards and 30 of 265 sewing machines do not have pulley covers. So the organization is partially following the Section 63 of the BLC 2006.
viii. An eye wash facility seems insufficient in the spot removing room on the ground floor shed # 1, which also violates the relevant section (Section 78) of the BLC 2006.

ix. Workers are provided with certain protective gear while they are at work, such as an oxygen mask, gloves, aprons, goggles, and a particular cap. However, employees stated that the administration frequently fails to supply any protective gear. They are only given the equipment on certain days, and there aren't many of these facilities. Accordingly, the examined organization is not appropriately adhering to Section 78A (1, 2, & 3) of the Act.
x. It has also been found that the spot-removing room on the ground floor of shed # 1 is not designated and dedicated to the storage of such substances; a worker is using a thinner and spot lifter. The shed is open on 2 sides and upper side. This is a violation of the Section 78(b) of the BLC 2006.

4. Recommendations

The surveyed organization's health and safety environment can be improved by implementing the following suggestions.

i. The cleanliness of the production house's walls and roof should be a higher priority for factory management, as occasionally, the sweeper's carelessness compromises the cleanliness system. Inside the facility, factory management should be required to varnish at least once every 14 months.
ii. Management should be more concerned about cleaning drains in a timely manner when needed. Drains should be washed once in every week.
iii. In order to improve the ventilation and lighting systems, management should also install a contemporary roof air space system.
iv. Factory management should constantly provide sufficient precautionary equipment in the workplace; for example, special cap, gloves, aprons, goggles, oxygen mask, etc. must be ensured to the workers.
v. Factory management should provide sufficient oral saline to the finishing section's heavy machine operators and ironmen.
vi. Management should be more concerned about cleaning urinals and latrines, which should be washed thrice daily.
vii. Management has to adopt practice and control to ensure that protective safety devices are provided on all required machines; for example, a needle guard, eye guard, cutter guard, and pulley cover should be ensured for overlock, flat lock, plain, and rib cutter machines of the sewing section.
viii. Management has to adopt practices and controls to ensure the use of spot-removing chemicals in a separate designated area away from the production floor.
ix. Management should adopt practices and controls to ensure the increase of eye wash facilities (minimum 3 eye wash facilities) in the spot removal room.

x. It is recommended that management adopt practice and control to ensure that aisle marks are provided on the needle detector room and west side of the finishing section for safe exit in case of emergency.

5. Conclusion

The studied organization (Rupashi Group) is one of Bangladesh's leading RMG manufacturing organizations. The organization is trying to follow the rules and regulations strictly imposed by BKMEA, BGMEA, Bangladesh Labor Code, and other relevant rules. Interactions between the human resource department and all other departments were quite good, and they helped each other follow the direction the management gave to accomplish the task. Therefore, it has been noted that the organization under study supports creating a safe and healthy work environment because it will encourage employees to put in more effort to meet the organization's business objectives and make them more fit and motivated to execute their jobs.

According to the observations from the above case study, it can be concluded that workers, especially female workers, need to upgrade their skills in the garment industry to comply with health, safety, and welfare standards. The RMG industry in Bangladesh should ensure a proper health and safety working environment, which is an important compliance issue. By doing so, the quality and productivity of the RMG industry in Bangladesh could be ensured and improved.

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