



Examining the Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Workers in Garment Factories of Bangladesh: An Empirical Study

Milton Costa*

Deputy Superintendent of St. Xavier's Twin Hostels, Kolkata and Research Scholar in Commerce, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, India

*Corresponding author: Milton Costa, Deputy Superintendent of St. Xavier's Twin Hostels, Kolkata and Research Scholar in Commerce, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata, India; Email: [miltoncosta142\[at\]gmail\[dot\]com](mailto:miltoncosta142[at]gmail[dot]com)

Abstract

Bangladesh is an emerging economy which is fast growing, courtesy, the sector of readymade garments (RMG) which has helped the nation unshackle itself from the stranglehold of poverty. The RMG sector has been driven largely because of a huge proportion of women workers who form the cream of workforce in garment factories. In this light, it is almost imperative to talk about the women workers who work in the garment factories of Bangladesh. The present research study is attempted to find out the socio-economic conditions of women workers of garment factories of Bangladesh by examining and analysing the various socio-economic factors concerning the women workers. An in-depth survey done of a large number of women workers in Bangladesh fulfils our endeavour.

Keywords: Bangladesh; Garment factories; Women workers; Socio-Economic conditions

Introduction

It is a no-brainer that industrial sector forms the backbone of the economy of all nations, especially the developed countries. Unlike few countries of the world, where agricultural sector plays a more prominent role as witnessed in all developing countries, Bangladesh has been such a country which has been heavily reliant on industries when compared to agriculture. The crux reason behind this is that Bangladesh has a shortage of labour force as well as agricultural land, meaning it has a low land-man ratio. When talking in the light of industrial sector in Bangladesh, it is noteworthy to mention that the garment sector which was non-existent in the 1980's, has actually grown at an impressive rate of 17% every year since then. The garment industries of Bangladesh is a source of employment for close to 5 million people and was the first to provide employment opportunities to women in massive scale breaking the jinx of women working outside their home. Women form the fulcrum of the garment industries in Bangladesh. In fact, the employment of the women in the garment sector of Bangladesh has been instrumental in the country's declining poverty over these years. Truth to be told, the

growth and development of Bangladesh garment industry has been characterized by measly wages, poor labour legislation and unskilled women work force. There has been myriad viewpoints expressed towards employment of women workers in Bangladesh garment factories. Most of the people have opined the feminisation of the garment sector as a positive step towards women emancipation, but it has also increased to some extent the chances for exploitation of women workers of garment industry.

Literature Review

A closer analysis of existent literature would actually reveal that the study done on garment factories run by Church does not exist at all, albeit there are studies which has previously conducted on garment industry. This is a major research gap which has been identified and accordingly a holistic survey of literature has been conducted to get an in-depth view of the scenario of the socio-economic conditions of women workers in Bangladesh garment factories especially those run by Churches. The garment sector was virtually non-existent in 1980 [1]. The industry currently employs almost 5 million workers in Bangladesh, and was the first to provide employment opportunities to women in large-scale

Received date: 27 January 2021; **Accepted date:** 01 February 2021; **Published date:** 06 February 2021

Citation: Costa M (2021). Examining the Socio-Economic Conditions of Women Workers in Garment Factories of Bangladesh: An Empirical Study. SunText Rev Econ Bus 2(1): 123.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51737/2766-4775.2021.023>

Copyright: © 2021 Costa M. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

in a country where women traditionally have not worked outside the home [2]. Women are the driving force in the garment industry in Bangladesh. Paper further noted that the country experienced a dramatic growth in garment exports in the 1980s and 1990s [3]. Five million people are directly or indirectly involved in garment industry. Of all workers in garment industry, 80% are female workers. Stressed on the economic incentives like provision of exchange rate adjustment, lower interest rate, duty drawback scheme, bonded warehouse scheme, tax holiday for export industries, back to back letters of credit, customs duty exemption, export credit facilities for the development of garment industry [4]. Wage employment in the garment industry of Bangladesh has improved in the standard of Living of female workers significantly [5].

Objectives

- To explore the various factors that affects the socio-economic condition of the female workers in Bangladesh garment factories.
- To prune out the differentials in facilities and working conditions of female workers who are employed in several privately-operated garment factories, as well as those operated by the Church.

Research Methodology

For the purpose of data collection, both primary as well as secondary data has been resorted to. Secondary data has been used to establish a concrete structure of the theoretical base of the present research study. Several books, articles, journals, blogs, project thesis have been enquired into to gain a robust

understanding of the theoretical base of our endeavour. Data from BGMEA (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association), BKMEA (Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association), BGBA (Bangladesh Garments Buyers Association), and EPB (Export Promotion Bureau) in Bangladesh, have been consulted. Primary data has been collected through the help of a questionnaire by convenient sampling method, where 192 respondents who are Bangladeshi female workers employed in 10 different garment factories predominantly belonging to districts of Dhaka, Savar and Gazipur have been chosen. Then again 168 female workers working in the garment factories run by Church parishes in 5 districts of Dhaka, Dinajpur, Khulna, Rajshahi and Natore have been chosen. All the respondents were surveyed by the help of a questionnaire which was given to them to be filled by them and face-to face interviews. All the data collected has been meticulously processed by using statistical software packages of IBM’s SPSS 23.0 and STATA [6,7].

Presentation and interpretation of data

As is evidenced from the above table, women workers of a very young age group are seen working in garment factories of Bangladesh of both the Church owned and Non-church owned ones. However, the study confirms that more young people exist in non-church garment industry. We also see women of older age group working in Bangladeshi garment factories mainly in Church-run garment industry. It is also witnessed women above 50 years of age working in garment factories owned by Church. According to our field survey, a reason for this is that their houses are adjacent to the churches and they find it extremely convenient being under the direct control of Church (Table 1,2).

Table 1: Age group according to ownership (in %).

Age group							
Ownership	0-20	21-25	26-30	31-40	41-50	Above 50	Total
Church	32	21	34	45	29	7	168
	(19.05%)	(12.5%)	(20.24%)	(26.79%)	(17.26%)	(4.17%)	(100%)
Non-church	68	62	50	11	1	0	192
	(35.42%)	(32.29%)	(26.04%)	(5.73%)	(0.52%)	(0%)	(100%)
Total	100	83	84	56	30	7	360
	(27.78%)	(23.06%)	(23.33%)	(15.56%)	(8.33%)	(1.94%)	(100%)

Source: Author's Field Survey, 2018.

Table 2: Percentage of religion %.

Percentage of religion %				
Ownership	Muslim	Christian	Hindu	Total
Church	19	148	1	168
	(11.31%)	(88.1%)	(0.6%)	(100%)
Non-Church	158	13	21	192

	(82.29%)	(6.77%)	(10.94%)	(100%)
Total	177	161	22	360
	(49.17%)	(44.72%)	(6.11%)	(100%)

Source: Author's field survey, 2018.

Table 3: Marital Status of the Respondents %.

Marital Status of the Respondents %				
Ownership	Unmarried	Married	Divorced/Deserted	Total
Church-owned	36	130	2	168
	(21.43%)	(77.38%)	(1.19%)	100
Non-Church	72	110	10	192
	(37.50%)	(57.29%)	(5.21%)	100
Total	108	240	12	360
	(30%)	(66.67%)	(3.33%)	100

Source: Author's field survey, 2018.

Table 4: Percentage of educational qualification as per ownership%.

Percentage of educational qualification as per ownership%						
Ownership	Illiterate	Primary	Secondary	Higher Secondary	Graduation and above	Total
Church	7	76	79	6	0	168
	(4.17%)	(45.24%)	(47.02%)	(3.57%)	(0%)	(100%)
Non-Church	22	95	62	9	4	192
	(11.46%)	(49.48%)	(32.29%)	(4.69%)	(2.08%)	(100%)
Total	29	171	141	15	4	360
	(8.06%)	(47.5%)	(39.17%)	(4.17%)	(1.11%)	(100%)

Source: Author's field survey, 2018.

Table 5: The type of the family.

The type of the family			
Ownership	Nuclear	Joint	Total
Church owned	161	7	168
	(95.83%)	(4.17%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	184	8	192
	(95.83%)	(4.17%)	(100%)
Total	345	15	360
	(95.83%)	(4.17%)	(100%)

Table 6: Family income in terms of ownership in percent.

Family income in terms of ownership in percent							
Ownership	Below 6000	6001-10000	10001-15000	15001-20000	20001-30000	30001-60000	Total
Church owned	6	46	63	45	8	0	168
	(3.57%)	(27.38%)	(37.5%)	(26.79%)	(4.76%)	(0%)	(100%)
Non-Church owned	2	11	54	85	30	10	192
	(1.04%)	(5.73%)	(28.13%)	(44.27%)	(15.63%)	(5.21%)	(100%)
Total	8	57	117	130	38	10	360
	(2.22%)	(15.83%)	(32.5%)	(36.11%)	(10.56%)	(2.78%)	(100%)

Table 7: Family income of different religion.

Religion	Below 6000	6001-10000	10001-15000	15001-20000	20001-30000	30001-60000	Total
Muslim	3	17	48	76	24	9	177
	(1.69%)	(9.6%)	(27.12%)	(42.94%)	(13.56%)	(5.08%)	(100%)
Christian	5	39	60	47	10	0	161
	(3.11%)	(24.22%)	(37.27%)	(29.19%)	(6.21%)	(0%)	(100%)
Hindu	0	1	9	7	4	1	22
	(0%)	(4.55%)	(40.91%)	(31.82%)	(18.18%)	(4.55%)	(100%)
Total	8	57	117	130	38	10	360
	(2.22%)	(15.83%)	(32.5%)	(36.11%)	(10.56%)	(2.78%)	(100%)

Table 8: Frequency of sickness in terms of ownership in percent.

Ownership	Very rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Not applicable	Total
Church owned	15	68	10	5	70	168
	(8.93%)	(40.48%)	(5.95%)	(2.98%)	(41.67%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	30	89	11	7	55	192
	(15.63%)	(46.35%)	(5.73%)	(3.65%)	(28.65%)	(100%)
Total	45	157	21	12	125	360
	(12.5%)	(43.61%)	(5.83%)	(3.33%)	(34.72%)	(100%)

Table 9: Role in the factory in terms of ownership in percent.

Ownership	Helper	Cutter	Stitching	Supervisor	Operator	Quality controller	Cleaner	Total
Church owned	0	4	155	9	0	0	0	168
	(0%)	(2.38%)	(92.26%)	(5.36%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	35	19	68	17	34	13	6	192
	(18.23%)	(9.9%)	(35.42%)	(8.85%)	(17.71%)	(6.77%)	(3.13%)	(100%)
Total	35	23	223	26	34	13	6	360
	(9.72%)	(6.39%)	(61.94%)	(7.22%)	(9.44%)	(3.61%)	(1.67%)	(100%)

Table 10: Written contract according to ownership in percent.

Ownership	Yes	No	Total
Church owned	0	168	168
	(0%)	(100%)	(100%)
Non-Church owned	80	112	192
	(41.67%)	(58.33%)	(100%)
Total	80	280	360
	(22.22%)	(77.78%)	(100%)

In the above table, it is evident that a huge chunk of the respondents in our study working in garment factories owned by Church are mostly Christians while those working under the Non-Church owned ones are mostly Muslims (Table 3).

As per the above table, it is observed that majority of our respondents working in Church-owned and Non-Church owned

factories are married while myriad women are unmarried (Table 4).

According to the above table, it can be inferred that albeit there exists women without any education who are working in garment factories, but there are also women who are at least qualified at the primary level or at the secondary level. We even see few

women who have qualified higher secondary level of education while some have also attained higher education (Table 5).

As per the above table, we can see that almost all families, irrespective of age, are nuclear families or single families as compared to the category of a joint family which accounts for only a measly proportion of the total respondents surveyed (Table 6).

From the above table, we can see that most of the respondents belong to mediocre low income group. Women workers of both Church owned and Non-Church owned garment factories largely belong to an income group of 10001-15000 and 15001-20000. We also see a good proportion of respondents (n=27.38%) belonging to an income group of 6001-10000 in Church owned factories as compared to Non-Church ones. A reason for this could be that women prefer to work in Church owned factories not only because of money but also for a plethora of other non-monetary facilities offered (Table 7).

From the above table, it is evident that a healthy proportion of respondents belonging to an income group of 15000-20000 are Muslims and Christians. These two religion also has its respective adherents working in garment factories also belonging to a lower income level of 10001-15000 (Table 8).

According to the above table, women workers both in Church owned factories as well as Non-Church owned factories have an impeccable record in terms of a healthy life. Respondents have put their views forward about their frequency of sickness as we see myriad respondents have said that they seldom fall sick while

most of the respondents opined that they fall sick occasionally (Table 9).

From the above table, we can see that almost all the women workers of Church owned factories work in the stitching department while only a few are supervisors or coordinators and hardly any women doing work of cutting and trimming. But if we compare this with Non-Church owned factories, we see all women are moderately distributed across all departments of the garment factories. A reason for this is that Church owned factories have many machines and equipment which makes work easier for women workers so that they do not have to do any additional works. This is missing in Non-Church owned garment factories which is labour intensive and do not have a rich arsenal of machines and equipment and hence have to depend on their women workers (Table 10).

According to the above table, we can see that most of the women workers working in garment factories do not have a contract while some women workers in Non-Church owned factories have a contract which is missing in the factories which are owned by Churches (Table 11).

We again see that most of the respondents do not have a permanent job in the factories they are working. But, we see a mediocre proportion of respondents working in Non-Church owned garment factories who do have a permanent job, which is entirely missing in the case of Church owned garment factories (Table 12).

Table 11: Is job permanent as per ownership in percent.

Ownership	Yes	No	Total
Church owned	0	168	168
	(0%)	(100%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	74	118	192
	(38.54%)	(61.46%)	(100%)
Total	74	286	360
	(20.56%)	(79.44%)	(100%)

Table 12: Salary in the Church owned garment industry in terms of hour.

Hours of job	0-4000	4001-6000	6001-8000	8001-10000	10001-15000	Total
4 hours	6	3	0	0	0	9
	(66.67%)	(33.33%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(100%)
5 hours	12	11	0	0	0	23
	(52.17%)	(47.83%)	(0%)	(0%)	(0%)	(100%)
6 hours	10	16	1	0	1	28
	(35.71%)	(57.14%)	(3.57%)	(0%)	(3.57%)	(100%)
7 hours	15	28	2	1	0	46
	(32.61%)	(60.87%)	(4.35%)	(2.17%)	(0%)	(100%)
8 hours	21	24	11	6	0	62

	(33.87%)	(38.71%)	(17.74%)	(9.68%)	(0%)	(100%)
Total	64	82	14	7	1	168
	(38.1%)	(48.81%)	(8.33%)	(4.17%)	(0.6%)	(100%)

Table 13: Salary in the non-church owned garment industry in terms of hour.

Hours of job	0-4000	4001-6000	6001-8000	8001-10000	10001-15000	15001-22000	Total
8 hours	2	14	24	16	7	3	66
	(3.03%)	(21.21%)	(36.36%)	(24.24%)	(10.61%)	(4.55%)	(100%)
9 hours	0	9	12	7	2	0	30
	(0%)	(30%)	(40%)	(23.33%)	(6.67%)	(0%)	(100%)
10 hours	0	13	29	28	3	5	78
	(0%)	(16.67%)	(37.18%)	(35.9%)	(3.85%)	(6.41%)	(100%)
11 hours	0	6	1	2	3	0	12
	(0%)	(50%)	(8.33%)	(16.67%)	(25%)	(0%)	(100%)
12 hours	0	2	1	0	1	2	6
	(0%)	(33.33%)	(16.67%)	(0%)	(16.67%)	(33.33%)	(100%)
Total	2	44	67	53	16	10	192
	(1.04%)	(22.92%)	(34.9%)	(27.6%)	(8.33%)	(5.21%)	(100%)

Table 14: Dismissal from job in terms of ownership (%).

Ownership	Yes	No	Total
Church owned	0	168	168
	(0%)	(100%)	(100%)
Non-Church owned	54	138	192
	(28.13%)	(71.88%)	(100%)
Total	54	306	360
	(15%)	(85%)	(100%)

Table 15: Do you spend money for your family as per ownership (%).

Ownership	Yes	No	Total
Church owned	167	1	168
	(99.4%)	(0.6%)	(100%)
Non-church Owned	191	1	192
	(99.48%)	(0.52%)	(100%)
Total	358	2	360
	(99.44%)	(0.56%)	(100%)

Table 16: Do you spend money for your family as per religion (%).

Ownership	Muslim	Christian	Hindu	Total
Church owned	19	148	1	168
	(11.31%)	(88.1%)	(0.6%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	158	13	21	192
	(82.29%)	(6.77%)	(10.94%)	(100%)
Total	177	161	22	360
	(49.17%)	(44.72%)	(6.11%)	(100%)

From the above table, it is evident that most of the women workers in Church owned garment factories generally work less than 8 hours a day and their salary do not exceed Rs.6000 per month. A reason for this is that Church owned garment factories try to compensate their remuneration for the other non-monetary facilities that they render to their workers. We also see a good proportion of respondents who work more than 8 hours a day and quite a few of them get a monthly salary between 6000-8000. A very good attribute of Church owned factories is that they offer flexibility in work timings catering to the needs and attention of myriad women workers who might not be able to work more than such amount of time (Table 13).

In the Non-Church owned factories, there do not exists working hours less than 8 hours a day. Most of the respondents secure a monthly income in the range of Rs.6000-Rs.8000 and Rs.8000-Rs.10000. quite a few of the respondents also belong to a lower income group of Rs.4001-Rs.6000. Few respondents also secure an income between Rs.15001-Rs.22000 (Table 14).

As per the above table, it is evident that women workers in Church owned garment factories enjoy a peace of mind when talking in the context of job security. No women working in Church owned garment factories has been dismissed from their job. While only a small proportion of women workers belonging to Non Church owned garment factories has been dismissed. It shows that garment factories in Bangladesh have a very low labour turnover ratio (Table 15).

From the above table it is evident that more than 99% of the respondents spend their money for their family which reflects their character of being family oriented. Both women workers of Church owned and Non-Church owned garment factories spend their income towards their family (Table 16).

From the above table, it is evidenced that most of the women workers working in Church owned factories are mostly Christians while those working in Non-Church owned garment factories are mostly Muslims. These respondents spend their income towards their family reflecting their proclivity towards their family (Table 17).

Table 17: How much do they save as per ownership (%)

Ownership	10%	20%	30%	40%	NA	Total
Church owned	43	90	2	19	14	168
	(25.6%)	(53.57%)	(1.19%)	(11.31%)	(8.33%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	31	93	5	25	38	192
	(16.15%)	(48.44%)	(2.6%)	(13.02%)	(19.79%)	(100%)
Total	74	183	7	44	52	360
	(20.56%)	(50.83%)	(1.94%)	(12.22%)	(14.44%)	(100%)

Table 18: How much they spend for own as per ownership (%)

Ownership	Up to 30%	up to 50%	up to 80%	Up to 100%	Total
Church owned	162	6	0	0	168
	(96.43%)	(3.57%)	(0%)	(0%)	(100%)
Non-church owned	184	7	1	0	192
	(95.83%)	(3.65%)	(0.52%)	(0%)	(100%)
Total	346	13	1	0	360
	(96.11%)	(3.61%)	(0.28%)	(0%)	(100%)

It is evident from the above table that a whopping proportion of respondents belonging to both Church owned and Non Church owned garment factories at least save 20% of their salary. Many respondents even save 40% of their income. This reflects their conservative nature to mobilize savings and keep it reserved for future (Table 18).

From the above table it is evidenced that majority of the respondents both working in Church owned as well as Non-Church owned garment factories spend at least 30% of their income. Very rarely do women workers actually spend half of their income. This again reflects of their conservative nature.

Findings and Discussions

The current research study is a very distinct one as the study emphasizes purely on Bangladeshi women workers who are working in garment factories. This endeavour was an effort to probe into the various socio-economic factors of women workers of Bangladesh garment factories. We have explored many crux socio-economic factors like salary, savings, health, designation and job security and various other demographic variables like age, income and religion which have an impact on the socio-economic conditions of such women workers. We have evidenced that there are certain differences as well in the socio-economic conditions of women workers working in Church owned and Non Church



owned factories. Women workers in Church owned garment factories enjoy certain flexibility in working hours as they even workers are paid money even if they work for 4 hours in a day. This is something which is missing in the Non Church owned garment factories as women workers work at least 8 hours a day and a shorter duration of working hours are not available. We have also seen that the Church owned garment factories are capital intensive where women workers do not have to do odd jobs manually themselves and this is another crucial social aspect of work which is clearly missing in the Non Church owned garment factories as they are labour intensive. We also see that there only a few respondents in our study working in Church owned garment factories who are illiterates as compared to those working in Non-Church owned garment factories thus reflecting the amount of importance that Church owned factories pay to education. The only weaklings of the Church owned garment factories lies in that there is not even a single worker who has been employed on a permanent basis and there does not exist any contractual obligations both which have been fulfilled by Non-Church owned garment factories.

Conclusion

The socio-economic conditions of workers is always an intriguing subject of study and will always continue to be in the domain of economics. Albeit, there exist many other such socio-economic factors which have not been addressed in the current research study, nevertheless, such factors can be pruned out in future researches. Women workers of Bangladesh form a very crucial component of a potent workforce. In fact, women workers of Bangladesh garment factories form the fulcrum of such sector. Their importance is highly reflected in the ever increasing economy of Bangladesh who depends to a large extent on its industries especially garment industries. From being an economic dreg to an emerging economy, the stunning transition should be credited to the women workers without whom the emergence of a new Bangladesh would have been impossible.

References

1. Mostafa R, Klepper S. Industrial development through tacit knowledge seeding: Evidence from Bangladesh garment industry. *Management Sci.* 2017; 64.
2. Wahra GN, Rahman F. A Right to live: Girl workers in the Bangladeshi garment industry. *Gender Development.* 1995; 3: 54-59.
3. Siddiqui D. Do Bangladeshi factory workers need saving Sisterhood in the post-sweatshop era. *Feminist Review.* 2009; 91: 154-174.
4. Roy D. Poverty alleviation and trade policy reform in Bangladesh: Some selected issues. *Bangladesh Development Studies.* 1996; 24: 189-205.
5. Majumder P, Zohir S. Dynamics of wage employment: A case of employment in the garment industry. *Bangladesh Development Studies.* 1994; 22: 179-216.
6. Absar SS. Women garment workers in Bangladesh. *Econ Political Weekly.* 2002; 37: 3012-3016.
7. Heath R, Mobarak AM. Manufacturing growth and the lives of Bangladeshi women. *J Development Econ.* 2015; 115: 1-15.