

Covid-19: The role of global clothing brands/retailers in vaccinating and providing financial aid to the RMG workers in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present a critical analysis of the vaccination program of Bangladesh Ready-Made Garments (RMG) workers from the point of view of stakeholder participation. At least six million RMG workers are currently employed in about seven thousand RMG factories in Bangladesh. Since the emergence of Covid-19, Bangladesh has been going through some difficulties in administering the Covid-19 vaccine. It has indeed resulted in RMG workers being excluded from the vaccination program. The Bangladesh Government and global clothing brands and other (Western and European) countries ignored their responsibility to carry out the Covid-19 vaccine for the millions of RMG workers in Bangladesh. Getting RMG products from vaccinated factories in Bangladesh is essential. Amid the pandemic crisis, it was also crucial to provide adequate financial support to Bangladeshi RMG workers. This article helps to understand the analysis from the theoretical perspectives of CSR and how national and international stakeholders can help to immunise RMG workers in Bangladesh. Finally, this article will make some recommendations for Bangladesh RMG partners nationally and internationally.

Key words:

Bangladesh RMG, OHS, Covid-19 vaccine program, global clothing brands and their responsibility, Bangladesh Government, RMG factory owners and BGMEA responsibility

Introduction

The pressure of the pandemic in the world has brought a severe challenge while the garment industry of Bangladesh faces its challenging situation. The RMG workers are starving but still working hard to regulate the global market being active. However, the sector needs flexibility, sustainability, labour welfare and financial support, infrastructural improvements and diversification, and adequate regulation.

The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry and its rapid development in Bangladesh have resulted from globalisation and neoliberalism, which was a new political and economic dogma that restructured the global market in the 1980s (e.g., Harvey, 2007; Munck, 2010; Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Ullah, 2020 a,b). The Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) provides the impetus for the early development of the garment industry in Bangladesh. However, the formation of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and its free trade agreement with its member countries was the turning point in the massive development of the Bangladesh RMG industry (see Yang & Mlachila, 2007; Alam, Selvanathan & Selvanathan, 2017; Anner, 2020). Approximately seven thousand RMG factories employ six million workers (see Labowitz, 2016), accounting for more than 80 per cent of the country's export earnings with a 13 per cent contribution to the national GDP. The industry is standing as the country's economic backbone, with revenue expected to reach US\$50 billion by the end of 2021. However, due to Covid-19, the expectation of getting the 50 billion targets has been tremulant (Haque & Gopalakrishnan, 2019; Rahman & Ishty, 2020).

Since the inception of RMG in Bangladesh, its compliance, low wages and meagre working conditions have sparked a contentious debate and anger among human rights activists and anti-sweatshop campaigners, trade unions and consumers locally and globally (Butler, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013, 2015; Kabir et al., 2019). International clothing brands and retailers take the most financial advantage of their exploitation, while local RMG employers are also ignorant about RMG workers' safety, better wages and other basic needs (Muhammad, 2011; Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021; Ullah, 2021). Nonetheless, two colossal accidents at Tazreen Fashions in 2012 and Rana Plaza in 2013 shook the whole world; consumers, for the first time, found out where their beautiful dresses were made and the hardship of RMG workers. The Rana Plaza disaster killed 1,133 RMG workers (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019; Rahman & Rahman, 2020) and left thousands of RMG workers brutally injured and permanently disabled. The research suggests that Tazreen Fashions and Rana Plaza victims received inadequate financial compensation from global clothing brands such as Walmart (Rahim, 2017; Blanchard, 2019). The Bangladesh Government and RMG employers were committed to bring the industry under proper surveillance and ensure the national Labour Act and the ILO conventions are well respected; it has not been the case yet (see, e.g., Rahman & Rahman, 2020).

RMG workers often end their fortunes in factory accidents. The previous factory disasters in Bangladesh were largely artificial because these factory accidents could have been prevented by proper surveillance. However, after the Rana Plaza building collapse, global clothing brands faced extreme criticism for their unethical sourcing (see Crinis, 2019; Rahman, 2019) from low-regulated countries, including Bangladesh. So, with a five-year initial plan, two private monitoring agencies (Accord and Alliance) led by Western and European clothing brands came to Bangladesh to monitor the RMG sector, mainly the OHS issues. The Bangladesh Government's monitoring agency, which is the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) is now mainly responsible for the RMG safety regulation under the Remediation and Coordination Cell (RCC). However, recent scholarship argue that DIFE is not a credible body for monitoring the vast RMG sector with its limited resources and unskilled workforce (see Barua, Wiersma & Ansary, 2017; Rahman, 2019; Bair, Anner & Blasi, 2020).

The safety of RMG workers is a significant issue that was very prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic. Several national and international media (e.g., Islam & Hashan, cited in *The New Age*, 2021)) have published news about the Covid-19 vaccine for RMG workers in Bangladesh. Since they are at high risk of becoming infected, this article aims to argue for the participation of stakeholders in the vaccination program of RMG workers. Further discussions will show whether Bangladesh RMG stakeholders, primarily global clothing brands, could be more accountable for RMG workers' health safety and their sustainable well-being in Bangladesh.

The theoretical framework utilised in this article (CSR)

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a corporate concept by which business leaders integrate social and environmental concerns into their business activities and interacts with various social partners (see, e.g., Hamidu, Haron & Amran, 2015; Frynas & Yamahaki, 2016). The concept of CSR existed in the corporate world for more than a century. However, academically, it was first coined in 1953 by the American economist Howard Bowen. Bowen, for the first time, more precisely and academically talked about the Social Responsibilities of the Business. Thus, Bowen was often cited as the father of CSR. In 1970, CSR had been popular in the United States. But, in 1971, the Economic Development Committee introduced it as a tool for eradicating social obstacles beyond the state government's initiatives. Since the 1980s, CSR continued to evolve as more organisations began to incorporate social interests into their business practices, allowing them to become more responsive to stakeholders. However, CSR is not a very clear concept to academics and non-academics because of its complex applications. Thus, it is essential to know what is the definition of CSR. In line with Bowen's statement:

The obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, to make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society (Bowen, 1953 cited in Hamidu, Haron & Amran, 2015, p. 84.)

The above definitions of CSR reflect the need to take care of society by formulating policies towards annihilating social problems. CSR is also considered a panacea that will address the global poverty gap, social exclusion, and environmental degradation (see, e.g., Van Marrewijk, 2003; Amoako & Dartey-Baah, 2020). In 1991, University of Pittsburgh Professor Donna J. Wood published "*Corporate Social Performance Revisited*", which revealed a new CSR model and provided a framework for assessing the impacts and outcomes of CSR programs. And then again, in the same year, a Business Management Professor from the University of Georgia, Archie B. Carroll, published a remarkable article, i.e., "*The Pyramid of Corporate Social Responsibility*", stated what should be the role of organisations. A bit later, his theory was well followed while creating CSR policy and well-known organisations, e.g., Wells Fargo, Coca-Cola, Walt Disney, and Pfizer, incorporating this concept into their businesses processes (see Thomas, 2019).

Again, the multinational organisations were urged to keep the core content of ethical business and to do the following for their business practice:

- *"Sustainable development practices;*
- *Transparency and accountability;*
- *Maintain good stakeholder relationship management;*
- *Advocacy on different aspects of human rights, justice and democratic principles;*
- *Compliance with accepted international standards on CSR, and;*
- *Ethical business practice" (cited in Hamidu, Haron & Amran, 2015, p. 84).*

Nevertheless, globalisation and neoliberalism have severely limited the role of global CSR as the global market is more competitive than ever before (see, e.g., Ireland & Pillay, 2010). David Harvey, a British scholar, did not see globalisation as a positive change because it caused more instability worldwide (see Harvey, 2007). Global apparel companies, in many cases, refrain from expanding their CSR role and deliberately deprive RMG workers by providing low wages and inadequate other social benefits (Crinis, 2019; Ullah, 2021b). Bangladeshi RMG workers are the best example of exploitation and modern slavery (Human Rights Watch, 2015; Oosterhoff et al., 2018). While the CSR theory suggests that giant corporations would have been interested in expanding their CSR role to reduce the world's poverty gap, on the other hand, it is exacerbating poverty because global capitalist most ignominiously pay low wages and meager benefits to the workers, mainly to RMG workers in Bangladesh (Ireland & Pillay, 2010; Ullah, 2020 a, b). Ullah (2020a) argues that global supply chains have never been responsible for extending their substantial helping hands, e.g., financial support to improve the RMG workers' livelihood in the last 40 years or more. Ullah (2020a) further suggests that RMG workers live in a dark present and has no idea about the future where their primary concern is inadequate facilities (see, e.g., Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021). The question is, how this situation can be changed? Thus, this article argues whether apparel brands and retailers worldwide should have been more responsible for vaccinating and providing financial support to the RMG workers in Bangladesh amid Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature

RMG workers' livelihood amid Covid-19

While RMG workers' livelihood is compromised with a lot of impediments, the Covid-19 pandemic made it worse. Between March and June 2020, brands cancelled multi-billion dollar clothing orders from Bangladeshi RMG manufacturers. As a result, by September 2020, more than 357,000 garment workers had lost their jobs, and many more were forced to accept lower wages. The current investigation manifested that the total textile exports for 2020 have declined by about 17 per cent (see Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021). With the fear of the Covid-19 pandemic and its adverse effect on the market, in early March 2020, Bangladeshi factory owners began receiving notices from the brand to delay order shipments (see Mullins, 2021; Roshitsh, 2021). But, a more critical decision yet to come from the international clothing brands followed by the end of April 2020, when about US\$3.2 billion worth of orders had been suspended or withdrawn, which made it so much more difficult for the RMG workers. By May 2020, Bangladeshi workers had lost about 30 per cent of their wages, estimated at US\$502 million. The dramatic economic shocks suffered by the workers have led to severe compromises in consumption and loss of wealth (see Mullins, 2021; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2021).

A recent survey report conducted by UC Berkeley-BRAC in mid-2020, showing that 82 per cent of Bangladeshi RMG workers interviewed said their income in April-May 2020 was lower than in February 2020. In addition, about 77 per cent said it was challenging to feed each family, and 69 per cent of workers ate less protein-dense foods (meat, fish, eggs and milk) from

February to May (cited in Mullins, 2021). Another report published by *The Business Standard*, a leading English Newspaper in Bangladesh, revealed that the poverty rate was 40 per cent in 2005, which dropped to 20.5 per cent in 2020, but it went to 40 per cent again. The reason for the higher poverty rate was when the whole country was locked up due to the spread of Covid-19, people were left without jobs and income in early 2020. As a result, in just five months of the pandemic, the poverty rate was severely curtailed from 20.5 per cent to 40.9 per cent in August 2020 in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the country is still pursuing a strict lockdown policy to control Covid-19. However, RMG workers are at serious risk of losing their jobs or not yet being vaccinated. A distorted national vaccine policy has put millions of RMG workers at risk, and they still do not know whether they will ever be vaccinated (see Ahmed, 2021; BBC News, 2021).

Bangladesh Government's vaccine policies and management

The Bangladesh Government was working to vaccinate all its citizens in early 2020, leading to a commercial agreement between the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine manufacturer Serum Institute of India (SII). Although most Bangladeshis did not believe in the effectiveness of the Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine, all eligible Bangladeshis were encouraged to take up the jab as part of the compulsory vaccination program. So, about 5.5 million people received at least one dose of the vaccine, although about 50,000 people received two shots until Islam published a report in *Deutsche Welle* (DW) in April 2021. Nevertheless, when India faced high Covid-19 infection across the country, SII abruptly stopped supplying Oxford-AstraZeneca Covid-19 vaccine to Bangladesh, creating a challenging situation for 167 to 170 million Bangladeshis. According to the business agreement between the Bangladesh Government and SII, it was supposed to supply 5 million vaccines between January and June 2021. However, SII has given only seven million vaccines to Bangladesh (see Islam, 2021).

The critical point is whether Bangladesh will sooner or later receive the promised vaccine from India. Many assumed, that it has been a challenge for Bangladesh to get all the vaccines from SII as the Covid-19 situation went out of control in India, which means their internal requirement for jabs is also very high. According to ABC News, by early June 2021, the death toll rose to 359,676 out of 29.2 million confirmed cases (see ABC News, 2021). On the other hand, Bangladesh had no substantial plan B for the vaccine program, so it is unclear whether the Bangladesh Government will receive the Covid-19 vaccine from other sources or countries. Nevertheless, in July 2021, Bangladesh received 2.5 million doses of the Moderna vaccine from the US government as per the COVAX facility, which predominantly low and middle-income countries usually receive (see Kamruzzaman, 2021). But, the question is whether such a gift can serve the need for mass vaccines in Bangladesh?

Although the roadmap of the vaccine program is not very clear, total vaccine management and its conservation facilities are also inadequate in Bangladesh. For example, the *Dhaka Tribune* published a report in early January 2021 stating that Bangladesh had minimum cold storage or proper storage system for preserving Covid-19 vaccines. In this situation, the

question is how Bangladesh would ensure Covid-19 vaccine for its 167 to 170 million people, including RMG workers (see, e.g., *Dhaka Tribune*, 2021; Amanullah, Hasan & Ullah, 2021).

Most importantly, garment workers are not getting enough information about the vaccine against Covid-19, and many do not have access to the vaccine. According to a Dhaka-based research non-profit South Asian Network on Economic Modeling and Microfinance Opportunities, only two per cent of garment workers in Bangladesh have been vaccinated against Covid-19. The report includes insights from 1,285 workers surveyed across the industrial sector in Bangladesh, including Chittagong, Dhaka, Gazipur, Narayanganj and Savar (Roshitsh, 2021).

On the other hand, Vietnam and China came across some excellent initiatives to vaccinate their RMG workers. For example, the Vietnam General Confederation of Labour encourages workers to buy vaccines; employers/traders agreed to pay for jabs to vaccinate their workers. The Vietnam Textile and Garments Group (Vinatex), which employed 150,000 workers, announced that country's textile and garment industry - which has 2.5 million workers would have been vaccinated by their initiatives (Chau, 2021).

Cambodia also being ahead with their vaccination program for the RMG workers. For example, the Cambodia Covid-19 vaccination project launched in June 2021 resulted in garment workers now have jabs in their arms. Such initiative was a rare highlighted for the Southeast Asian country's \$7 billion garment sector, representing the nation's largest employment sector and 16 per cent of its gross domestic product of Cambodia. Nonetheless, Cambodia got all its vaccines from China and India (see Chua, 2021).

Another excellent example of the world's only private Covid-19 vaccination project launched in Indonesia in May 2021. Research shows that 10 million workers registered to receive a Chinese-developed jab. The program, however, run by the Indonesian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (KADIN), lobbied the national government to allow its workers to track vaccines instead of waiting in the official queue quickly. Another example of CSR revealed by Unilever Indonesia, one of the first to vaccinate workers at the Bekasi factory outside Jakarta, was a great initiative and hoped to boost Indonesia's workers' immunity. A great example of CSR (see Hodge, 2021).

Surprisingly, RMG workers in Bangladesh remained without vaccination. It seems that neither the Bangladesh Government nor even any international conglomerates took any substantial strategy to vaccinate RMG workers. Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), and even the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FBCCI) failed to show any pathway to vaccinate their workers while the government lost track of vaccinating most Bangladeshis. Therefore, during the Covid-19 pandemic, whether big clothing brands and retailers should have played a more constructive CSR role in vaccinating all RMG workers in Bangladesh is an open call.

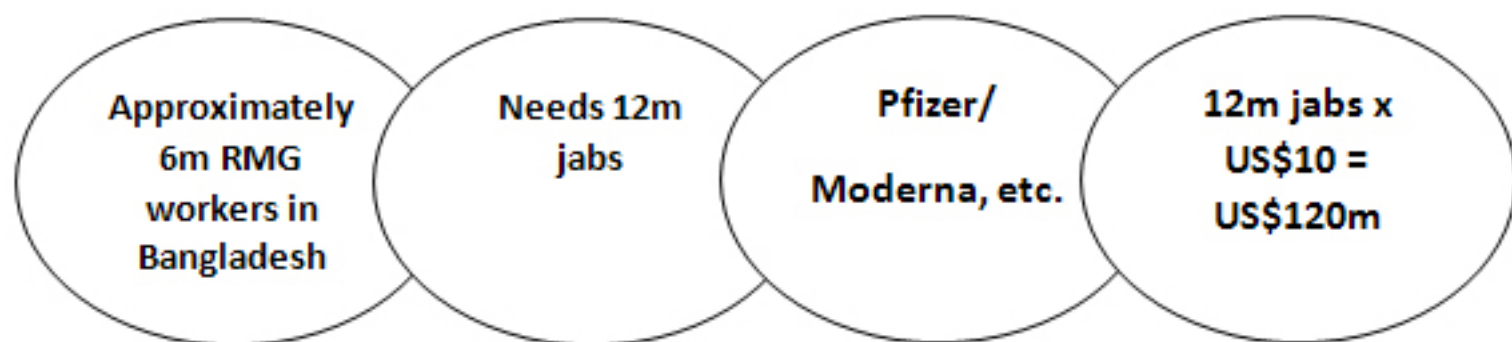
A critical analysis from the perspectives of global supply chains

Most Western and European consumers were unaware of Bangladeshi sweatshops before the Rana Plaza disaster. RMG workers in Bangladesh make beautiful dresses while they have been given meagre benefits in return. Nevertheless, the efforts of RMG workers have made big brands financially healthier, and they have become the world's leading capitalists with the nexus of the local (Bangladeshi proto-capitalists) (see, e.g., Muhammad, 2011; Ullah, 2020). However, scholars have claimed that the supply chains are still abstaining from ethical business in developing countries, mainly in Bangladesh (see Crinis, 2019; Anner, 2019; Rahman, 2019).

The current research reveals that the global apparel market will be growing from 1.5 trillion in 2020 to about 2.25 trillion by 2025 - it means the worldwide demand for apparel and footwear growing every day (Shahbandeh, 2021). As mentioned earlier, Bangladeshi garment workers are at the bottom of this race where brands and retailers are the most profit takers. Bangladeshi RMG employers also profit from the RMG industry despite their call on low prices from the global clothing brands. But the question is, how much will an RMG worker benefit from this economic cycle (see Rahman & Yadlapalli, 2021).

A further explanation has emerged from the neoclassical economic dogma for the increasing gap between the workers and executives in income (see Munck, 2010; Hirst & Thompson, 2019). For example, *Oxfam Australia* (2018) reported that a top Australian fashion company CEO could earn up to \$2,500 an hour compared to garment workers in Bangladesh. In other words, with the current minimum wage of garment workers in Bangladesh will have to work for 10,000 years and do more in a year to reach the Australian CEO (Head, 2018). On the North American side of the world, the Walmart family secure US\$100M a day, turning them into the world's wealthiest dynasty. Ullah (2021) argued that giant multinationals make an uneven profit by exploiting workers around the world. For example, through the Bloomberg reports, the Walmart family's fortune has risen from US\$39 billion to about US\$191 billion - a profit of nearly 400 per cent since it peaked on the list in June 2018, whether it has been ethical. The number increased rapidly in August 2018, when Walmart reported an 11 per cent rise in its stock after an excellent earnings report was published, revealing the family's total wealth to US\$ 163.2 billion (Ullah, 2021).

As discussed earlier, the Bangladesh Government mostly lost track of vaccinating all its citizens, and RMG workers are now at risk when working in factories. Bangladeshi RMG workers still produce Western and European garments in this critical time, which means RMG workers are still contributing to run both the internal and external economy. However, the brands rescinded the order without considering that their inhumane decision would have left thousands of workers without any jobs not to have bread and butter for their families (see Clean Clothes Campaign, 2020). It is also essential to think that the Bangladesh Government continuously shows their negligence on RMG workers vaccination and other

Figure 1: The tentative economic model of vaccinating RMG workers in Bangladesh

financial supports. At the same time, local RMG employers and global RMG buyers, i.e., global apparel brands and retailers' negligence also being despicable while they mostly remained silent to help RMG workers more seriously.

The simplistic economic model (Figure One) explains how RMG workers in Bangladesh can be vaccinated and the project price equation. For example, suppose one hundred garment companies are outsourcing from Bangladesh. So, if we divide \$120 million by the top hundred companies like Walmart, Levi's, Adidas, Nike, Zara, and H&M, each company has to pay only $120,000,000 \div 100 = 12,00,000$.

Directions for future research

The author of this article must suggest that this article should be considered from its limitations, as it was written from secondary data. However, potential researchers who have an interest in this area may conduct an in-depth qualitative study. The further empirical study may discuss the role of the big clothing brands in Bangladesh and whether they will consider expanding their CSR budget for immunisation and other necessary benefits of RMG workers.

Recommendations and conclusions for the global apparel brands/retailers and other stakeholders of the Bangladesh RMG

- International apparel brands need to establish a "VACCINE BANK" in a joint initiative of international apparel brands, local and international trade unions and Western and European countries. They should provide free vaccines to the Bangladesh Government to ensure the safety and well-being of all RMG workers;
- International big clothing brands should offer other financial support to the Bangladesh RMG workers to continue their RMG production amid Covid-19 in Bangladesh;
- If necessary, the European Union will need to create a joint force between the ILO, WHO, global brands and the Government of Bangladesh and BGMEA to arrange and manage the vaccination program for RMG workers;
- The central priority of the Government of Bangladesh's vaccination program should be not only RMG workers but all citizens;
- The Bangladesh Government should take or buy vaccines, especially from different countries of the world, instead of depending on any particular nation. The Bangladesh Government should increase the vaccine storage system as soon as possible so that they can store the vaccine for a certain period;
- The Government of Bangladesh should form a task force, which may include military and paramilitary forces, NGOs, local health centres and clinics for vaccination programs;
- The Government of Bangladesh, most importantly, needs to create an OHS culture in the nation to prevent current and future pandemics like Covid-19;
- The Government of Bangladesh should also make many extra efforts and reform the health sector with some good policies and control corruption.

Finally, global apparel brands and retailers, BGMEA and RMG employers need to step up with their support and assistance so that the Bangladesh Government can find ways to implement a vaccine program for RMG workers. RMG is the country's economic backbone. It has created millions of jobs and contributed a lot to the national GDP, not only for Bangladesh but also globally. Thus, RMG stakeholders locally and internationally, mainly big apparel brands and retailers in the West, Europe and other countries, must be responsible for providing free vaccines to RMG workers during the Covid-19. While RMG workers are vaccinated, it will ensure safe and sustainable RMG products for Western and European consumers.

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