



Large number of women behind sewing machines but few behind the desks

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Readymade garments (RMG) sector is one of the largest employers of Bangladesh, employing around 3.5 million workers in some 5000 factories. Majority of the MRG workers, 60-70 per cent, are females. It is widely recognised that the RMG sector is one of the greatest sources of earnings and empowerment for women. It is also the largest sector for women's participation in the formal labour market. However, most of the women in the RMG sector find themselves working in the production line, in the lowest-level positions; very few are found in management positions. According to International Labour Organisation (ILO) during the period between 2010 and 2018, the percentage of women surveyed in most managerial positions declined, and their overall average representation in such positions remained consistently low at about 9 per cent. However, the percentage of women working as professionals was around 38 per cent, as reported by Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2016-17. Why Bangladeshi women are virtually absent in managerial positions in the sector which is their largest formal sector employer is a question worth asking.

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) at Brac University offers Post Graduate Diploma on Knitwear Industry Management (PGD-KIM) to nurture the much-needed skilled workforce for the mid-to senior-level managers in the sector (currently the sector hires a considerable number of foreign professionals due to the existing skills gap). The programme is fully subsidised by the government and also provides stipends to the participants to compensate for their opportunity costs. While the primary targets of the

programme are those already employed in the industry, it is also open to freshers. Hence, there is no justification for individuals who aspire to establish their profession in this field to not apply for this programme. Between 2018 and 2021, around 1329 applicants took part in the admission test and among them only 10 per cent were female.

Recently, BIGD conducted a study to assess the impact of the programme on the employment outcomes of the participants. Of the 354 respondents in the study, only 5 per cent were females. More importantly, the study finds that the low representation is not due to women's lack of interest, rather the challenges they face in building a career in the sector. In other words, the study tries to answer why we have a large number of women behind the sewing machine but few behind the desk to run the office in the RMG sector.

Even among the small number of women participating in the programme, the gender gap is clearly visible: unlike men, most women were working in lower-level managerial positions. No woman in the study was found in senior official positions as against 3 per cent of the men. Also, more than twice as many men as women held upper-mid-level positions (47 per cent vs 16 per cent) like deputy manager, human resource (HR) manager, industrial engineering manager, and senior merchandiser. However, the ratios flip for mid-level and junior positions-84 per cent of the women vs 50 per cent of the men. These mid-level and junior positions include assistant managers, assistant deputy managers, assistant merchandisers, auditors, executives (marketing, quality, and lab), administrative officers, fabric technologists, etc.

Even when women wanted to remain in the sector, they did not aspire to move up the career ladder. The BIGD survey found that most women wanted to become managers, while most men aimed to be CEOs. Men's desired monthly salary in ten years was 11 per cent higher than that of the women.

So, the critical question is whether and why this sector is not ready to welcome more women in leadership positions.

When factory leaders were asked questions in this line, one RMG factory owner explained that women in management position often quit because of the socio-cultural reality. He explained: "There were five female employees in the senior management positions in my factory, but now only one is left. The rest of them got married and did not re-join after having children. All of them were from wealthy families. I do not know when the remaining one might leave. This is because of our socio-cultural barrier. Those who do continue can become the heads of various departments."

If so, why do these same socio-cultural barriers not impede female participation in the banking or other corporate sectors? The BIGD study reveals that the major concerns regarding women's progress in the workplace are not only limited to their own socio-cultural constraints but also the attitudes of the senior management towards women. A female merchandiser shared: "I have always been interested in the merchandising department. But the fact is- there is a hidden gender discriminatory environment where males are given priority at work by the factory authority. Although the buyers put pressure on the authority to give opportunities to women, in reality, the authority rarely provides women such scopes. I have seen that most of the circulars related to merchandising mention that only men can apply."

One popular wisdom suggests that the nature of work that does not allow women to participate in higher-level positions in the RMG sector, unlike other sectors. According to another female participant, "Men are able to work for long hours most of the time. Considering this, they don't want to promote female employees. Females are capable but can't spend long hours in the factory due to various reasons. Maybe this thought makes the authority promote male employees rather than females. Sadly, it discourages female employees."

Thus, even when women employees have equal skills and qualifications as their male counterparts, factory owners frequently promote men over women because men can work longer hours and even night shifts. Thus, unpredictable working hours also appear to hinder the career advancement of the women in this sector and, therefore, demotivate them.

The factors behind the slow growth of women in the RMG sector not only stems from socio-cultural barriers and stereotypical gender norms but the stereotypical views of the senior management towards female employees. Altogether these factors create structural barriers for women. As the RMG sector has a colossal impact on women's economic empowerment in low-income families, an inclusive and enabling environment in the mid- to senior-level positions can help female employees develop their skills.

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