

Ready-Made Garments Sector of Bangladesh: Its Growth, Contribution and Challenges

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The ready-made garments (RMG) sector has a greater potential sector than any other sector in terms of employment and foreign exchange earnings to reduce poverty and make a contribution to the national economy. Based on secondary data, the study is intended to draw the scenario of RMG industry in Bangladesh, especially the growth, contribution, and challenges. It is the largest exporting industry in Bangladesh that has experienced tremendous growth during the last 25 years. Among the people of Bangladesh, about 4 million workers are directly employed in RMG sector. Therefore, the contribution of RMG in total export is increasing day by day. At present, 83.9% of national export in Bangladesh is contributed by RMG export although it was 3.89% in 1983-1984. In fiscal year (FY) 2017-2018, the percentage of ready-made garments (RMG) contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) is 12.26% but it was only 2.74% in FY 1990-1991. So, it indicates that RMG sector is the main contributor of Bangladesh's economy, especially in the export of the country. This sector also faces a lot of challenges, like unskilled workers, insufficient infrastructure, raw materials, energy crisis, safety issue, political crisis, and coverage of accord and alliance. To overcome these challenges, we need to take different steps from owners and major stakeholders.

Keywords: RMG, GDP, Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), growth, contribution and challenges

Introduction

Bangladesh is a developing country. Most of the people are still occupied in agriculture sector. But per capita land is very scant. Most of our farmers are the marginal farmers. As a result, people move out agriculture into industry. Therefore, agro-based economy of our country converted to the industrial economy which is the essential part of the development of a country. The ready-made garments (RMG) industry is played an important role among these industries. The export-oriented RMG sector in Bangladesh started its journey in late 1970s. At that time, there were only nine exporting garments industries in the country. But nowadays, the garments industries are grown up. The export-oriented RMG sector has made crucial contribution to transformation of the Bangladesh economy. The role of our RMG entrepreneurs, domestic fiscal and financial,

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within the domestic economy, and global market opportunities combined to create a story which is, to be honest and true, unparalleled in the developing world. When jute and jute goods were losing their traditional markets, with the prospect of drastic fall in forex earnings, it is the RMG sector which came in first to replace it, and then to overtake it. While traditional export sector could not yield expected results, the RMG sector gradually injected dynamism in the export as well as in the domestic economy through backward and forward linkage economic activities.

The RMG sector has emerged as the largest export earning sector of the country. This industry has contributed in socio-economic prospects, creating a huge number of employment opportunities mostly for the poor illiterate female workforce of the country. The industrial sector can provide high-wage employment for large numbers of workers and can raise social productivity by producing high value goods on a mass scale. Besides, poor countries can also earn valuable foreign exchange by exporting manufactured products and the ensuring foreign exchange can be used to invest in new vintage of machines and technologies that rapidly move up the technology ladder becomes possible. The importance of industrial development as an engine of Bangladesh's economic growth is also reinforced by growing realization that the development of agricultural sector, one of the mainstays of the country's economy, critically hinges on its backward and forward linkage with industrial sector. Thus, the RMG sector has played a vital role in empowering women by providing employment. The RMG sector of Bangladesh as employing the rural poor illiterate female workers is known for cheap labor and also producing low value garments. So, producing high value products remains a challenge for it. Besides, there is a high dependency on imported raw materials especially in case of woven garments that cause high lead time in production.

Literature Review

Literature review exhibits the overall scenario of the RMG sector in Bangladesh and its contribution to the Bangladesh economy. Hossain and Jagit (1988) said that low-wage labor has made Bangladesh one of the fastest growing garment exporting countries. Robbani (2000) examined that the major portion of foreign exchange earnings came from the RMG sector, thus it created a giant position in the economy. Rehman and Khundker (2001) stated that the RMG sector started its journey in the late 1970s as a small non-traditional export, with a small worth of US\$69,000, and by FY2002, exports have gone up to US\$4.5 billion. In the following years, the sector develops into an exclusive growth rate of 15 percent per annum. Azad (2001) said that the tremendous success of ready-made garment (RMG) exports from Bangladesh over the last two decades has surpassed the optimistic expectation. The impact of the garment industry of Bangladesh exceeds its considerable economic and financial success. The overall impact of the ready-made garment export industry is certainly one of the most significant social and economic developments in Bangladesh. Chowdhury, Ahmed, and Yasmin (2014) addressed the challenges of unskilled labor with low productivity which results in increased per unit cost of production. Rahman and Anwar (2007) highlighted weak and inadequate infrastructures, e.g., poor energy supply; poor port facilities are the common challenges facing by the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Haider (2007) said that the garment industry in Bangladesh which accounts for 75% of the country's export earnings was created only three decades ago. Berik and Rodgers (2008) addressed that Bangladesh RMG owners are very reluctant to invest in training and development facilities, although it revealed that training costs are directly offset by the productivity increase. Mohiuddin (2008) attempted to identify the prospects of Bangladesh's RMG industry in the post MFA period by analyzing the current scenario, strength and weakness of competitiveness in the world market in the coming years. Nuruzzaman and Haque (2009) said that the recent

years has dramatically changed the landscape of export composition of the country. Clark and Kanter (2011) found that the efficiency level judged by the productivity of Bangladesh RMG workers is not up to date or accordance to international level and it is just one-fourth of that of Chinese workers owing to workers' low literacy. Berg, Hedrick, Kempf, and Tochtermann (2011) stated five major challenges for Bangladesh RMG sector, such as weak infrastructures, compliance issues, low supplier and labor efficiency, insufficient backward linkage, and political & economic volatility. Chowdhury et al. (2014) pointed major challenges as utility crisis, such as oil and gas shortage, too much dependency on imported raw material, suppliers' inefficiency, low labor productivity, high interest rate, insufficient bank finance, and political unrest within the country. Hasan (2013) addressed that the single most challenge of Bangladesh RMG sector as the open competition emerged from the withdrawal of quota system under MFA agreement and the sustainability of the RMG sector under global market competition. Chowdhury et al. (2014) predicted that Bangladesh will enjoy increasing growth rates as its labor cost is its comparative advantage given the Chinese competitors are facing increased labor cost and unrest.

From the above literature, it is clear that different researchers have examined the RMG sector in different viewpoints. In this paper, the main objectives are to draw a brief scenario of RMG industry in Bangladesh. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To depict the history and growth picture of RMG sector in Bangladesh.
- To find out the economic contribution of RMG in Bangladesh.
- To explore the opportunities and challenges of RMG sector of Bangladesh.

Data Source and Methodology

Data were collected from secondary sources, such as various publications, research article and documents, Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), and the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). In our study, a descriptive technique was adopted to analyze and represent collected data and information in tabular form and represented by different graphs namely line diagram and bar diagram. Regression analyses are also used for showing contribution of RMG export to GDP.

Results and Discussion

Growth of Garments Industry in Bangladesh

The journey of the RMG industry was started in 1978 when Reaz Garments exported its first consignment in USA and earned 69,000 USD. But the actual milestone was led by the Desh Garments Ltd. established in 1979, the first 100 percent export oriented company. But nowadays, ready-made garments industry concaves up. The growth of garments sectors are shown below:

Number of garment factories in Bangladesh. Figure 1 represents the number of garment factories in Bangladesh from the fiscal year 1983-1984 to 2017-2018. The number of factories was gradually increasing up to fiscal year 2012-2013, decreased in fiscal year 2013-2014, and thereafter increased up to 2017-2018. Therefore, the growth factory showed a negative trend in year 2013-2014 due to utility crisis and strong inspection from the regularity body to identify the risky factories.

Number of workers in RMG sector. Figure 2 shows the number of workers in RMG sector of Bangladesh. From Figure 2, we can say that about 4 million workers are directly employed in RMG sector. The number of workers trend is upward trend, i.e., the number of workers has increased at faster rates and reaches.

Bangladesh RMG export to world. Table 1 represents the Bangladesh RMG export to world from fiscal year 2015-2016 to 2017-2018. We have shown that the major importers of RMG products from Bangladesh are USA and Europe. USA is the largest importer of Bangladeshi RMG products, followed by Germany, UK, France, and other E.U countries. But there are some other countries that have a contribution to the total RMG export of Bangladesh.

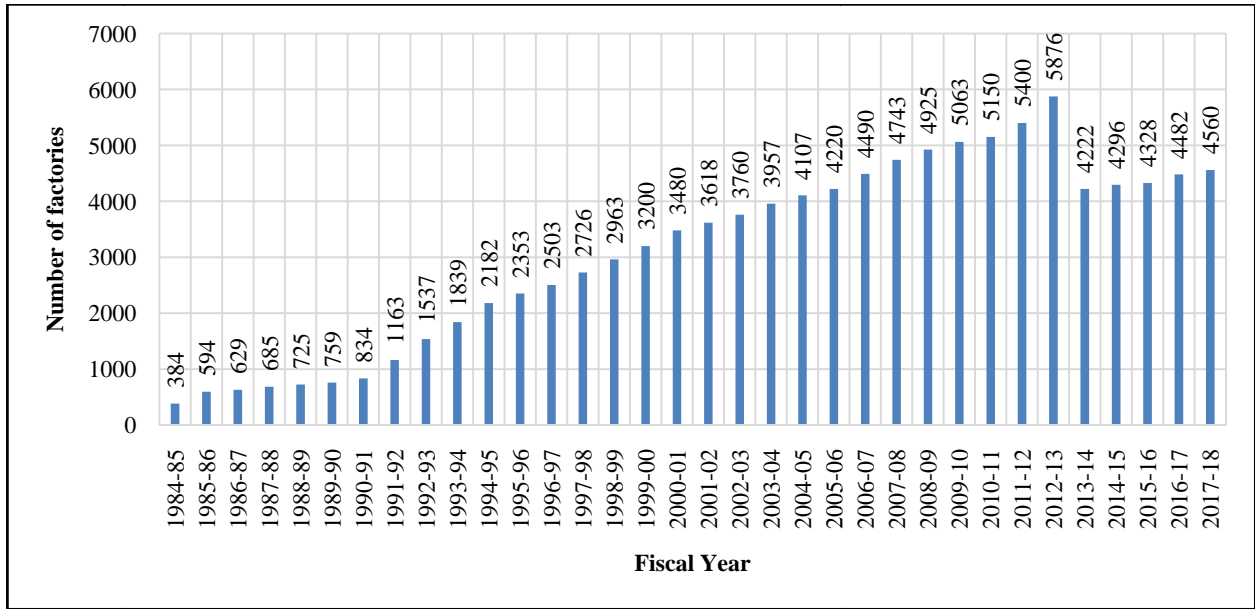


Figure 1. Number of garment factories in Bangladesh.

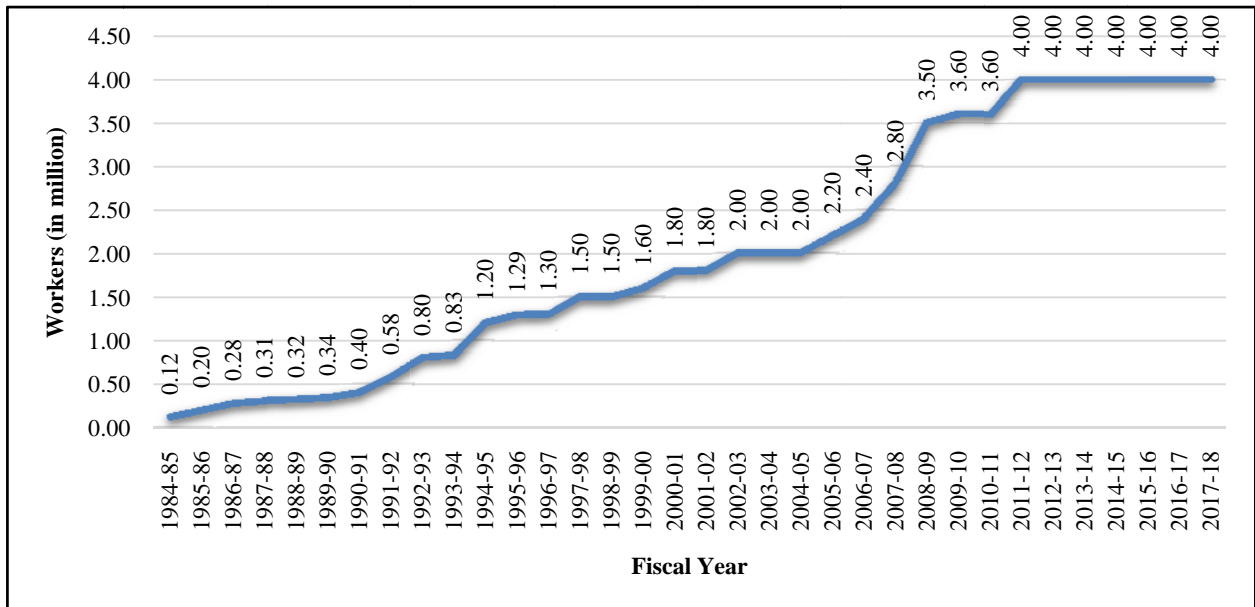


Figure 2. Number of workers in RMG sector.

Table 1

Bangladesh RMG Export to World from Fiscal Year 2015-2016 to 2017-2018

Million US\$	Woven			Knit			Total (Woven+Knit)		
	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018	2015-2016	2016-2017	2017-2018
EU countries	7,731.96	7,857.02	8,619.61	9,421.40	9,893.58	11,009.41	17,153.36	17,750.60	19,629.02
% of World	52.46	54.59	55.88	70.54	71.92	72.49	61.06	63.06	64.12
Growth%	18.60	1.62	9.71	6.49	5.01	11.28	11.63	3.48	10.58
USA	4,228.62	3,901.94	3,977.70	1,396.30	1,302.06	1,374.37	5,624.92	5,204.01	5,352.07
% of world	28.69	27.11	25.79	10.45	9.46	9.05	20.02	18.49	17.48
Growth%	6.49	-7.73	1.94	6.01	-6.75	5.55	6.37	-7.48	2.85
Canada	575.71	541.49	552.13	422.73	404.81	411.02	998.44	946.30	963.15
% of world	3.91	3.76	3.58	3.17	2.94	2.71	3.55	3.36	3.15
Growth%	5.64	-5.94	1.97	10.15	-4.24	1.53	7.50	-5.22	1.78
Other countries	2,202.46	2,092.14	2,276.81	2,114.99	2,156.79	2,393.71	4,317.46	4,248.93	4,670.52
% of world	14.94	14.54	14.76	15.84	15.68	15.76	15.37	15.09	15.26
Growth%	8.53	-5.01	8.83	12.58	1.98	10.98	10.48	-1.59	9.92
Grand total	14,738.74	14,392.5	15,426.25	13,355.42	13,757.25	15,188.51	28,094.17	28,149.84	30,614.76
Growth %	12.81	-2.35	7.18	7.47	3.01	10.40	10.21	0.20	8.76

Note. Source: EPB, Compiled by: RDTI Cell, BGMEA.

Contribution of RMG Sectors

The ready-made garments (RMG) industry contributes to the Bangladesh economy in a distinctive manner. The industry plays a significant role in terms of employment and income generation of millions of people especially the poor. Some contributions of ready-made garment (RMG) sectors to the national economy of Bangladesh are shown below:

RMG sectors contribution to export. RMG sector's contribution to country's export has experienced phenomenal growth over the years. It has evolved as the main export earning sector of Bangladesh.

Table 2 shows the comparative statement between RMG export and total export of Bangladesh and we can say that in 1983-1984, the garments exports are only 31.57 million and the share of national export is only 3.89%. The RMG export is increasing in a good way and it reached 30,614.76 and the share of national export is 83.49% as well as the major part of employment in Bangladesh getting from RMG sector. Table 3 shows that the monthly export performance of RMG of Bangladesh for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 in million USD. The RMG exports share in national export in fiscal year 2016-17 and 2017-18 are 81.23% and 83.49% i.e. RMG export is the largest sector of national export in Bangladesh.

Contribution of RMG industry to the GDP. Garments industry is the largest exporting industry in Bangladesh, which experienced phenomenal growth during last two decades. The sector has also played a significant role in the socio-economic development of the country. To show the contribution of RMG exports to GDP, graphical representation and regression analysis are used here.

Graphical representation. In such a context, Figure 3 shows the percentage of ready-made garments (RMG) contribution to gross domestic product (GDP) of Bangladesh. It shows that the percentage of ready-made garments (RMG) contribution to the GDP is 2.74% in FY 1990-1991. The contribution of RMG sector to GDP almost is given up growing pattern. In FY 2017-2018, the percentage of ready-made garments (RMG) contribution to GDP was 12.26%. Therefore, we can say that the RMG sectors play an important role in our national economy.

Regression analysis. Since the demand of RMG products is increasing day by day in the world, so RMG export helps to build up the economy of Bangladesh. To show the contribution and significance relationship between them, we have used here simple linear regression model where GDP is considered as the dependent variable (Y_t) and RMG export as the independent variable (X_t). The estimated regression equation is as follows:

$$\hat{Y}_t = 21482.86 + 6.22X_t$$

Table 2

Contribution of RMG in Total Export of Bangladesh

Year	Export of RMG (in million US\$)	Total export of Bangladesh (in million US\$)	% of RMG's to total export
1983-1984	31.57	811.00	3.89
1984-1985	116.2	934.43	12.44
1985-1986	131.48	819.21	16.05
1986-1987	298.67	1,076.61	27.74
1987-1988	433.92	1,231.2	35.24
1988-1989	471.09	1,291.56	36.47
1989-1990	624.16	1,923.70	32.45
1990-1991	866.82	1,717.55	50.47
1991-1992	1,182.57	1,993.90	59.31
1992-1993	1,445.02	2,382.89	60.64
1993-1994	1,555.79	2,533.90	61.40
1994-1995	2,228.35	3,472.56	64.17
1995-1996	2,547.13	3,882.42	65.61
1996-1997	3,001.25	4,418.28	67.93
1997-1998	3,781.94	5,161.20	73.28
1998-1999	4,019.98	5,312.86	75.67
1999-2000	4,349.41	5,752.20	75.61
2000-2001	4,859.83	6,467.30	75.14
2001-2002	4,583.75	5,986.09	76.57
2002-2003	4,912.09	6,548.44	75.01
2003-2004	5,686.09	7,602.99	74.79
2004-2005	6,417.67	8,654.52	74.15
2005-2006	7,900.80	10,526.16	75.06
2006-2007	9,211.23	12,177.86	75.64
2007-2008	10,699.80	14,110.80	75.83
2008-2009	12,347.77	15,565.19	79.33
2009-2010	12,496.72	16,204.65	77.12
2010-2011	17,914.46	22,924.38	78.15
2011-2012	19,089.73	24,301.90	78.55
2012-2013	21,515.73	27,027.36	79.61
2013-2014	24,491.88	30,186.62	81.13
2014-2015	25,491.40	31,208.94	81.68
2015-2016	28,094.16	34,257.18	82.01
2016-2017	28,149.84	34,655.90	81.23
2017-2018	30,614.76	36,668.17	83.49

Note. Source: Export Promotion Bureau compiled by BGMEA.

Table 3

Monthly Export Performance of RMG of Bangladesh for 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 in Million US (\$)

Export performance of RMG in FY 2016-2017 (in million USD)				
Year	Month	Knit	Woven	Total
2016	July	1,077.23	1,040.35	2,117.58
	August	1,395.61	1,330.68	2,726.29
	September	927.95	894.08	1,822.03
	October	1,134.35	1,021.19	2,155.54
	November	1,097.6	1,212.31	2,309.91
	December	1,180.84	1,397.51	2,578.35
	January	1,246.72	1,456.81	2,703.53
	February	1,015.95	1,209.7	2,225.65
2017	March	1,067.3	1,222.65	2,289.95
	April	1,110.62	1,097.86	2,208.48
	May	1,250.77	1,236.69	2,487.46
	June	1,252.31	1,272.76	2,525.07
Total FY 2016-2017		13,757.25	14,392.59	28,149.84
Share in national export (%)		39.70	41.53	81.23
2017	July	1,263.34	1,215.95	2,479.29
	August	1,605.53	1,439.45	3,044.98
	September	878.08	741.77	1,619.85
	October	1,239.25	1,054.36	2,293.61
	November	1,258.1	1,266.41	2,524.51
	December	1,350.97	1,459.58	2,810.55
	January	1,311.11	1,571.22	2,882.33
	February	1,219.28	1,381.63	2,600.91
2018	March	1,195.48	1,382.93	2,578.41
	April	1,219.15	1,251.97	2,471.12
	May	1,399.77	1,423.23	2,823
	June	1,248.45	1,237.75	2,486.2
Total FY 2017-2018		15,188.51	15,426.25	30,614.76
Share in national export (%)		41.42	42.07	83.49

Note: Source: Export Promotion Bureau compiled by BGMEA.

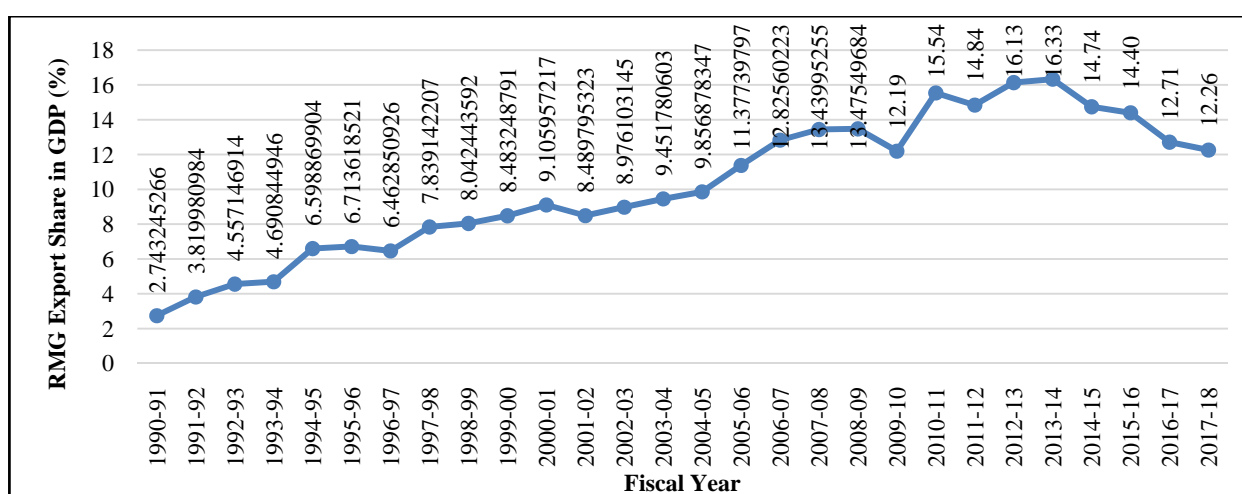


Figure 3. RMG exports contribution to the GDP.

Table 4

OLS Results

Variable	Coefficient	Std. error	t-statistic	Prob.	r	R ²	Adjusted R ²
C	21482.86	3505.996	6.127464	1.77E-06	0.98	0.96	0.95
RMG export	6.22	0.245597	25.32124	7.55E-20			

From Table 4, we can say that the value of $R^2 = 0.96$ indicated that 96% proportion of the dependent variable (GDP) is explained by the independent variable (RMG export) and is close to 1 therefore the model is better fit the data. There is highly significant relationship between GDP and RMG export since the values of correlation coefficient (r) is 0.98. The coefficient of RMG export measures that if the RMG export increases 1 USD, then on an average, GDP increases by 6.22 USD. Therefore, we can say that the contribution of RMG export to GDP has a significant relations and it helps us to the economy of Bangladesh.

Challenges of RMG Sector in Bangladesh

Since 2005 the RMG of Bangladesh has become the top export earner of Bangladesh and positioned itself in the frontline of the world apparel market. Some of the problems that threatened the remarkable success of Bangladesh garment sector that are the financial crisis of 2008, Tazreen fire accident, Rana Plaza collapse, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) and the withdrawal of generalized system of preference (GSP) by America. But every success comes along with the new challenges. Some of challenges are shown as follows:

Unskilled workers. Growth and development of an industry requires sufficient skills and expertise. However in spite of the growth of the industry, its development is constrained by lack of skilled workforce. Out of its current 4 million workers, 90 percent is women, most of who are illiterate, unskilled and come from the rural part of the country.

Insufficient infrastructure. Transportation Infrastructure: Infrastructure like transport and utilities is the single largest issue hampering Bangladesh's RMG industry. The Chittagong port, which handles nearly 85 percent of the country's trade merchandise, suffers from labor problems, poor management, and lack of equipment (World Bank, 1999). The alternative mode of transportation such as Bangladesh railways and Dhaka-Chittagong Airports provides very less carrying and handling facilities.

Safety issue. At the point of inception of the RMG industry, factory buildings were in an unplanned manner that resulted into conversion of common buildings for factory purpose. As a consequence, several disastrous collapses took place such Rana plaza and Tazrin incidents which took away thousands of lives and injured another thousand. These have brought the safety issue as a priority concern.

Raw materials. Bangladesh imports raw materials for garments like cotton, thread color etc. This dependence on raw materials hampers the development of garments industry. Moreover, foreign suppliers often supply low quality materials, which result in low quality products. Besides prices of cotton and other raw material used in textile industry fluctuate rapidly in Bangladesh.

Energy Crisis. Energy crises such as gas, oil, and electricity foiled the lucrative investment policy towards RMG sector development. Gas, oil, electricity, and water are the basic prerequisite of industrial development. The load-shedding of electricity caused a rapid decrease in production that led to reduced export supply. Gas and Electricity shortage and was unable to accept export orders from around the globe.

Political Crisis. Political volatility has a common issue in the country. According to European and US CPO report, (Berg et al., 2011) economy and political stability are the fifth in Bangladesh stated that they will

reduce the sourcing from Bangladesh if the political stability were to decrease. Political unrest, strike and corruption are the main obstacles to hamper economic growth.

Coverage of Accord and Alliance. The Accord and Alliance are now become one of the major challenges for Bangladeshi apparel industry. The Accord and alliance are two different independent organization empowered by apparel brands, retailers and importers both from Europe and USA. The objective of accord and alliance is to work towards a safe and healthy RMG industry in Bangladesh. So meet the guidelines and safety instructions regarding the fire and building safety of accord and alliance is a major challenge.

Conclusion and Recommendation

RMG sector has emerged as the single most important contributor towards employment generation, income and foreign earning, and growth of Bangladeshi economy. However, different factors such as weak infrastructure, lack of energy and supportive regime, inefficient management, and lack of industrial integration have prevented the RMG sector to realize its full potential. It is expected that over the next 20 years, international trade will become the lifeline of Bangladesh economy than today. The share of exports, especially ready-made garments, in GDP could be expected to increase many folds. Therefore, trade policy reforms at the border and within the border will have to be undertaken to utilize the potentials of garments industry and to grow the economy out of poverty and under-employment. It is also time to change the conventional trade and trade policies. Special focus should be given on RMG sector in Bangladesh's five-year plans and other longer-term plans to ensure a sustainable growth of the industry, which means incorporating RMG issues into every stage of the development planning cycle. Bangladesh economy may realize its development dream and enhance the standard of living and approach towards a middle-income economy.

RMG industry in Bangladesh has already proved itself to be a resilient industry and can be a catalyst for further industrialization of the country. To face the upcoming challenges in RMG sector, some new thinking and new directions in trade policy are as follows:

- To develop productivity and efficiency level, capacity building training and re-training activity for employers and workers in RMG sector should be undertaken.
- Multi-modal transport facilities, sound infrastructure facilities including consistent supply of energy through public-private initiatives is to be set up.
- Sound initiatives in research, training, and development to innovate new product ideas and to increase the workers efficiency are to taken especially by the BGMEA.
- The civil society and other socio-political stakeholders must take able initiatives to ensure congenial political environment to reduce corruption and maintain a trade supportive environment.
- RMG owners must pay adequate attention to workers welfare, safety, and health, and the buyers should help to increase the supply chain's efficiency through investment in backward industry.

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