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Addressing Labor Productivity for the Sustainability of the Garment Industry in Bangladesh

Shahidur Rahman
Department of Economics and Social Sciences
BRAC University
shahidur@bracu.ac.bd

Sabrina Fatema Chowdhury
James P Grant School of Public Health
BRAC University
sabrinafatemachowdhury@gmail.com

Abstract

Bangladesh has emerged as a lower-middle income country and depends on its export earnings mainly from the ready-made garment (RMG) industry. However, one of the key challenges to the sustainability of this industry is its low labor productivity. This article addresses this problem and questions what factors contribute to lower labor productivity in Bangladesh's RMG industry. This research question has been investigated by conducting a management survey in which qualitative responses were analyzed. Based on the perceptions of senior management, the study finds that a combination of economic and social factors determines labor productivity in this industry. Although entrepreneurial strategy can control some of these factors, instruments such as offering incentives to workers, external factors such as education levels in the country, or the culture in the workplace cannot be influenced. This article contributes to the literature on sustainability challenges to entrepreneurship in the global supply chain, the upgradation by entrepreneurs in the global value chain, and the role of entrepreneurs in the development of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. Understanding the difficulties in producing a skilled workforce from the point of view of entrepreneurs may show the pathway for policymakers to deal with this challenge of sustainability.

Keywords: Labor productivity, upgradation, entrepreneurs, Bangladesh ready-made garment industry, sustainability

Introduction

Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in South Asia with pessimistic predictions by development economists that its economy would collapse. This pessimism was based on several predicaments such as high population growth, scarce natural resources, predominantly rural regions, a large poverty rate and traditional agricultural sector, and almost no industrial base (Rahman, 2021). Defying overwhelming odds, Bangladesh has graduated from a least developing country to a lower-middle-income country in 2021 (World Bank, 2021), 50 years after its independence. One of the pillars of this remarkable transformation is the contribution of the ready-made garments (RMG) industry. From less than a million-dollar industry in the early 1980s, the Bangladesh RMG industry is now a \$30 billion industry under the commandment of an entrepreneurial class for the first time in the industrial history of Bangladesh (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association [BGMEA], 2020a). Although the sector's growth is stable, the lack of skilled labor in comparison to competing countries has been a major issue in the sustainability of the success of this sector that has been achieved so far. It is the third -largest exporter of garments (World Trade Organization, 2019) but also the country with the lowest labor productivity. In 2018, Bangladesh's labor productivity per hour was priced at \$3.4 while Vietnam, India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and China were priced at \$4.7, \$7.5, \$7.7, \$4.1, \$15.9, and \$11.1 respectively (Asian Productivity Organization, 2018). In this context, this article aims to explore the reasons for lower labor productivity in the Bangladesh RMG industry. The central research question is what factors determine the industry's labor productivity. This topic is investigated by conducting a qualitative study of the perspectives of entrepreneurs regarding labor productivity.

This article contributes to knowledge in three ways. First, it adds to the literature on the sustainability challenges of entrepreneurs in the global supply chain. In the current era of globalization, the production process is taking place beyond the boundary of a single country. This transboundary production not only opens up opportunities, but also brings challenges; corporations in the global supply chain are deeply concerned about ways to ensure sustainability (Bush, Oosterveer, Bailey, and Mol, 2014; Rahman, 2021). For sustainability, corporations have integrated economic, social, and environmental initiatives to upgrade the production process. Research on upgrading global value chains (GVCs) initially began with a focus on economic dimensions (Giuliani, Pietrobelli, and Rabellotti, 2005) and has expanded to consider social and environmental upgrading (Barrientos, Gereffi, and Rossi, 2018). A key aspect of upgrading has been to examine how firms can learn through their participation in value chains (Pietrobelli and Rabellotti, 2011) and consider upgrading as a process or an outcome (Khan, Ponte, and Lund-Thomsen, 2020). Since corporations are paying attention to upgrading for sustainability in the current regime of globalization, what challenges the entrepreneurs or senior management encounter in the process of upgradation is also a matter of concern. From this point of view, this article seeks to understand the challenges of sustainability for entrepreneurs, focusing on the constraints of up-gradation in Bangladesh's RMG industry.

Second, the existing literature shows that entrepreneurial strategy for upgrading plays a key role in labor productivity (Ahmed and Peerlings, 2009; Alam, Alias, and Azim, 2018; Centre for Policy Dialogue [CPD], 2018; Fukunishi, 2014; Macchiavello, Menzel, Rabbani, and Woodruff, 2015; Samaddar, 2016). This article also supports this finding. However, what is missing in the current literature is the consideration of the role of external factors beyond the control of entrepreneurs.

Third, the majority of literature on Bangladesh's RMG industry studies its economic and social impact on the country, women empowerment, working conditions of this industry, and labor governance (Anner, 2015; Kabear, Huq, and Sulaiman, 2020; Moazzem and Azim, 2018; Majumder, 2001; Oxfam Australia, 2019; Quddus and Rashid, 2000; Rock, 2001). There has been limited research on the strategy of entrepreneurs in this sector with a particular focus on labor productivity. Listening to entrepreneurs' views regarding the opportunities and constraints for sustainable value chains is imperative since the top management executes different initiatives in the factories offered by different stakeholders (Lund-Thompson and Nadvi, 2010; Gereffi and Lee, 2016).

Business analysts have continuously stressed the importance of higher labor productivity - a key sustainability challenge - in the RMG industry to achieve shorter lead times and competitive pricing (Islam, 2019). With declining garment prices around the world, it is crucial to upgrade companies to be competitive in the global market. What obstacles entrepreneurs face in Bangladesh's highly labor-intensive garment sector remains a critical goal for the sector's survival in today's fast-fashion business model.

The article is organized into five parts, beginning with the entrepreneurial strategy of upgrading to enhance labor productivity in the global supply chain, followed by an overview of Bangladeshi entrepreneurs and their role in the development of the industry. The study's method is presented in the third section. The next section presents findings organized into two parts: internal factors under the control of entrepreneurs and external ones beyond their control. The fifth section illustrates a discussion of the findings in two ways - contribution to the literature, limitations, and further research - and is followed by a conclusion in the last section.

Entrepreneurial Strategy for Up-Gradation and Labor Productivity

To integrate sustainability into the business of corporations, Elkington (2004) introduced the concept of "Triple Bottom Line (TBL)" which refers to the interactions among the environmental, social, and economic values that produce a variety of opportunities and challenges for organizations. Economic upgrading can be defined as the process through which firms move from low value-added to high value-added activities along the global value chain (Gereffi, 1999), or, in other words, innovations that increase value-added (United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2006). It is considered a "key means of success for actors in global value chains" (Moazzem and Sehrin, 2016). According to International Labor Organization (ILO) (1999), social upgrading focuses on decent work with its four pillars, which include employment standards and rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue. Environment upgrading aims to conserve and increase resources rather than depleting them and doing so, painting an image of green industry (Hawken, 1995).

Traditionally, it was thought that social upgrading introduced by entrepreneurs within global value chains would affect economic advancement. Bernhardt and Milberg (2011) used an international dataset to investigate the relationship between economic and social upgrading in global value chains across sectors and countries. Economic upgrading was described as an increase in global export market share and export unit value, both of which are linked to labor productivity. Increased jobs and real incomes were two important determinants of social advancement. However, studies have revealed that the relationship between economic and social advancement is not always linear. For example, a clear economic improvement in the mobile phone market did not result in much social improvement. Furthermore, while there seemed to be a positive correlation between economic improvement in the apparel market and social indicators, several countries experienced social deterioration along with economic upgrading in this sector. From the context of entrepreneurial or management practice, Bloom et al. (2017) examined whether the use of more formal management methods, such as tracking, targeting, and incentives, were associated with firm success, and they found mixed but generally positive results. Similarly, another study on occupational safety and health (OSH) management by Samaddar (2016) found that there is a similar and positive relationship between worker productivity and the working environment, a finding backed up by the Better Job Vietnam program (ILO, 2016). According to this report, staff in factories with a better working climate meet their daily output targets forty minutes sooner. Labor productivity is also affected by the worker turnover rate. According to a report by the World Bank (2012), high workforce turnover is one of the key reasons for the garments sector's lack of investment in enhancing labor productivity. Longer working hours, excessive overtime demands, and a lack of awareness about living and working conditions are reported as a few of the key causes of higher worker turnover among rural migrants. According to this report, workers often had to deal with disputes with supervisors, which grew worse over time because of cultural clashes with foreign male supervisors. All the above factors led to a decrease in worker capacity growth, resulting in lower labor productivity (World Bank, 2012).

To sum up, while some studies argue that workers' social benefits do not guarantee high labor productivity (Bernhardt and Milberg, 2011), most research reveals a positive effect of working conditions on labor productivity (Bloom et al., 2017; ILO, 2016; Samaddar, 2016; World Bank, 2012). We do not have concrete evidence that ensures a higher outcome from labor at workplaces if entrepreneurs provide a well-conditioned working environment. This means that there are other factors related to workers' productivity and we need to explore them to better understand the process. This knowledge is crucial mainly for countries like Bangladesh where the economy depends greatly on the development of the RMG industry.

The Bangladesh RMG Industry and the Emerging Entrepreneurial Class

By using the Multi-Fiber Arrangement (MFA), establishing a Dosh-Daewoo collaboration, and supportive government policy, the garment industry had replaced jute as Bangladesh's dominant export sector since the 1980s (Rahman, 2014). The industry has had a significant economic effect on the country in terms of export earnings and jobs. RMG's contribution to GDP has increased from 3.5 percent in 1990 to 11.17 percent in 2018, and export earnings have increased from less than USD \$40 million in 1985 to \$32.92 billion in 2018 (BGMEA, 2020b). The RMG industry employs four million people, 60 percent of whom are women (ILO, 2020a). According to previous surveys, 80 percent of workers were women, but new data shows that the proportion of women working in the country's RMG sector is decreasing, and has been declining since 1990 (ILO, 2020b). Perhaps most significantly, the garment industry's growth has caused a social shift in Bangladesh by providing significant female jobs outside the home and creating an entrepreneurial class for the first time in the history of Bangladesh.

When the garment industry started its journey, conditions were not favorable for entrepreneurs. They encountered government policy that discouraged exports, high prices for imported raw materials, uncountable bureaucratic problems, unavailability of modern technology, and most importantly, they had a lack of experience in the garment industry. This was challenging for early entrepreneurs who took a risk and invested in this export business. Over four decades later, there are now first-generation and second-generation entrepreneurs (Rahman, 2021). The first-generation entrepreneurs came from diverse backgrounds, with no prior experience in this sector, and have worked hard to set up their factories. Their children, on the contrary, have become second-generation entrepreneurs who joined the family business enthusiastically and, in some cases unhappily, after completing higher education overseas (Rahman, 2021).

These entrepreneurs have made enormous changes in the nature of work over the years. The reasons for doing so vary – from three to four seasonal demands every year coming from consumers to changing fashion trends in six weeks as a result of the fast fashion business model, which involves shorter lead times at lower prices owing to several factors such as, pressure from buyers, certification of all types of compliance regulations, wage hikes for workers, and increasing demand for telecommunications services (Anner, 2018; Rahman and Rahman, 2020; Rahman, 2014; Taplin, 2014). To stay competitive, factory management has introduced cutting-edge machinery, increased the role of industrial engineers, trained human resources, and produced intricate garments to move up the value chain (BGMEA, 2020b). Now that automation is poised to take over most manual work and intensified competition is in place, there is no denying the need for an effective entrepreneurial upgrading strategy to increase labor productivity and ensure sustainability. The above-mentioned literature in the previous section shows that labor productivity can be improved by the entrepreneurial strategy undertaken to improve working conditions (CPD, 2018; Macchiavello et al., 2015; Bloom et al., 2017; Samaddar, 2016). However, there is no denying that there are also internal and external factors that determine productivity and are beyond the control of these entrepreneurs.

Methods

To understand the entrepreneurial strategy, a senior management survey was conducted in 2017. During the survey period, RMG factories were going through inspections by transnational initiatives and were under tremendous pressure to improve labor standards. In such a situation, the factories were unwilling to participate in surveys and reveal information concerning labor standards to outside researchers. Therefore, we invited a large number of factories relative to our target sample size, assuming a low response rate. Initially, invitation letters were sent to 1,200 factories to participate in our survey. However, only 38 responded and gave their consent to participate. Together with the approach of inviting the factories via letters, a snowball approach was later used to get access to garment factories, relying on social networks and individual connections. Finally, senior management of 152 factories agreed to participate in the survey. The factories are located in four districts of Bangladesh – Dhaka, Narayanganj, Gazipur, and Chattogram. A senior manager from each factory was interviewed by two researchers for approximately 1.5 hours. The term “senior manager” here mainly refers to owners, directors, and managing directors of the garment company – all together they are referred to as entrepreneurs, and strategies formed by them are treated as entrepreneurial strategies.

Two questions directly related to labor productivity from the management survey were used to inform this article. The first was a coded structured question to factory management: how efficient can you say your manufacturing workers are in terms of production quantity and quality compared to other similar factories in Bangladesh? This question's responses were divided into two categories: more productive and less productive, taking into account comparable factories. The responses were tallied in percentages to determine the factory's level of productivity.

The second open-ended question was: why do you think your factory is more or less productive? Since they were busy and did not want to have an open discussion about this technical issue, not all entrepreneurs replied to this question. Those who replied, regardless of whether they gave a short or long answer, were selected for this article's thematic review. The responses were extracted to a different file and organized into three orders. In the first order, key terms related to the reason for labor productivity were identified and they were arranged into two themes in the second order – internal and external factors. The overarching dimension of such classification was explained in the last order: internal factors were those strategies that were under the control of entrepreneurs and the external factors were beyond their control; these are distinguished in Figure 2.

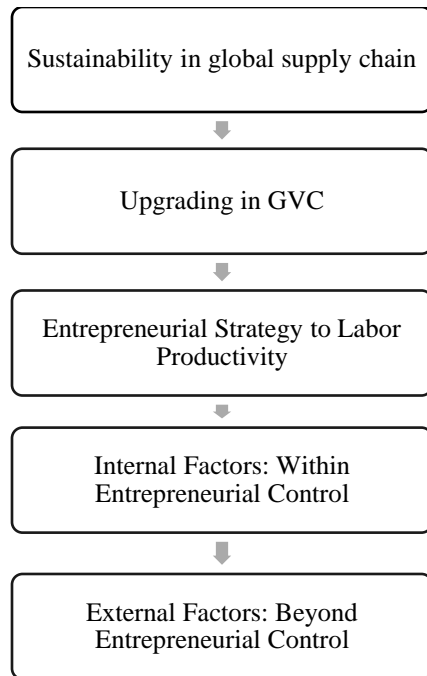


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

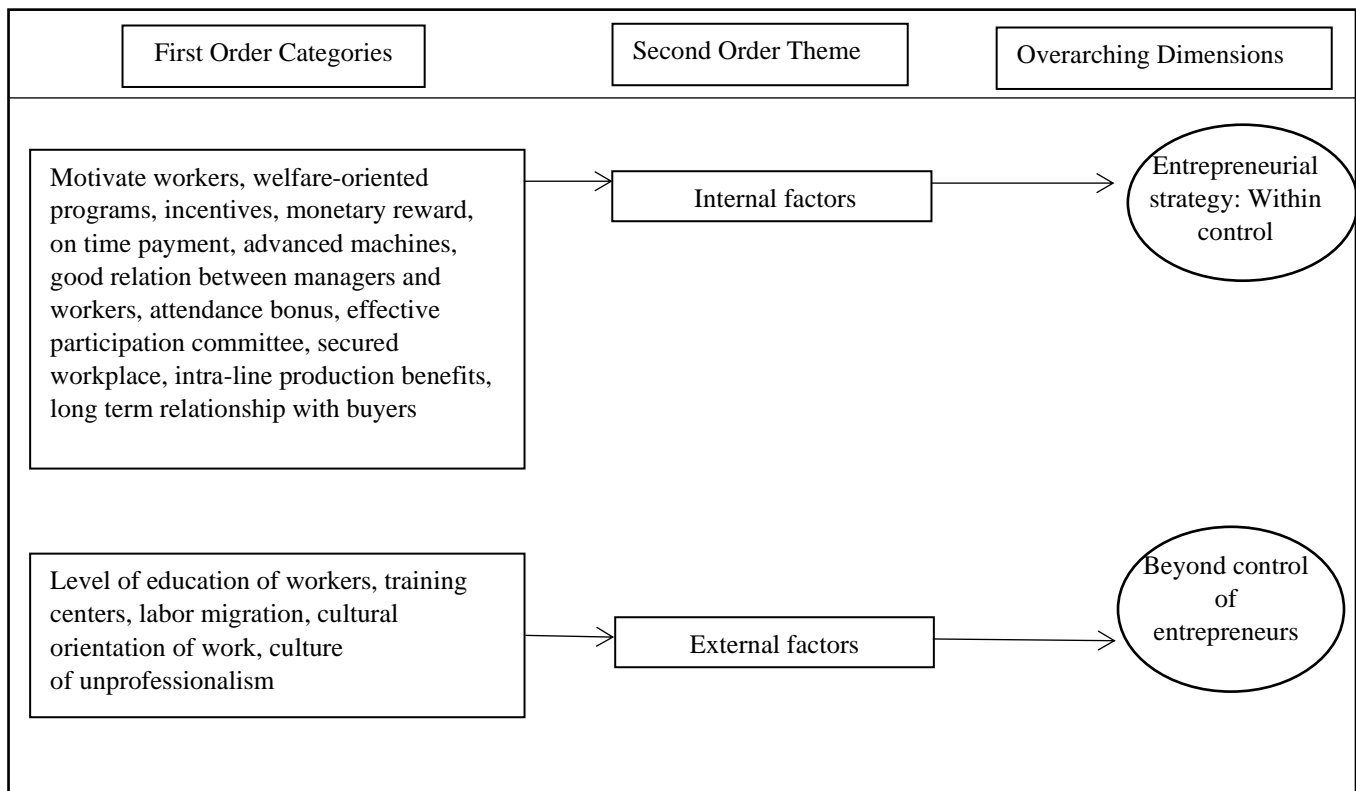


Figure 2: Thematic Arrangement of Qualitative Data

Findings: Entrepreneurial Strategy to Labor Productivity

According to the management survey, 43 percent of factories claimed they were more productive than their counterparts, indicating that management was happy with the level of productivity in their facilities. This meant that 57 percent of the factories were less productive, and in some cases, even after spending ample resources on worker welfare, their productivity remained similar to that of other factories who never took any such investment. Our qualitative research shows that a variety of variables are linked to labor productivity. These include workers' education, training center, culture towards work, migration of workers, long-term relationships with buyers, and management strategy. Below we detail the two categories that these variables have been placed within.

Internal Factors: Within Entrepreneurial Control

This study finds that the aim of entrepreneurs, in alignment with the demands of stakeholders, is to improve the working environment and ensure worker protection in alignment with the Bangladesh Labor Act of 2006 and seven core ILO annual conventions. As part of the entrepreneurial strategy, factory management has introduced compliance and welfare programs to encourage workers to be efficient. This strategy has sometimes succeeded in retaining skilled workers who contribute to productivity. Apart from basic compliance problems, different factories have various welfare services available including day-care centers, wellness checks, subsidized food stores, canteens, annual sporting, and cultural programs. These can motivate workers to stay committed to the enterprise. Entrepreneurial strategy tells us that on-time pay is the most important motivator for workers. Workers who are paid on time are psychologically stable because they know they will obtain their paycheck within the first week of the month and can pay rent for their homes. They then have a better relationship with their landlords since they earn a reputation as reliable tenants. This also leads to their receiving patronage from landlords in times of crisis. In this regard, one of the factory owners stated:

"We ensure that our workers receive their paychecks on time every month. Workers feel safe and secure working here because they know when they will be paid and that they will not be paid late. As a result, the worker will focus entirely on their job, and the factory receives a higher level of productivity from them."

The provision of different benefits, such as monetary rewards for punctuality, extra festival bonuses, and reimbursement for meeting production targets, encourages workers to be more productive. This is how an executive director of a garment company described his experiences:

"Workers receive rewards such as the Hajira (attendance) Bonus, which is tied to on-time entry into the factory. By punching their cards on their way in, every worker receives a Tk 50 Hajira bonus, allowing a worker to earn up to Tk 1,400 just from their arrival bonuses, while in other factories, the maximum bonus they receive for the month is only Tk 200. Other benefits exist, such as the bonus for piece rate jobs, and a 2 per cent bonus on their earnings."

Certain factories have been able to remain efficient because of such an effective entrepreneurial strategy. Other internal factors that influence labor productivity are organizing the factory layout inefficiently, the type of machinery used, and how production workers, mid-level management, and top-level management interact. To meet the expected goal, the operational management is closely monitored, and operator ability tests are conducted regularly. A recent addition is the hiring of an industrial engineering team to assure a planned process control system with upgraded machinery. To close the distance between workers and managers, adequate resources are provided to train mid-level management. Some factories have frank, regular two-way contact between workers and managers, which includes a substantive discussion of workplace problems. Employees are informed about bonuses and rewards in all departments, so they can see the value of their efforts. According to one entrepreneur, "the management strives to reduce any gaps and disputes among workers from all departments, as well as improve the workforce's work performance, resulting in higher production."

There can be variations in efficiency across production lines within the same factory due to supervisory skill differences. Workers want to do just what middle management tells them to do. Since middle-management employees come from a variety of backgrounds and ranks, each one has a unique attitude and mindset, which has a different impact on productivity.

As an entrepreneurial strategy to encourage workers to concentrate on their work, leading factories have also introduced fingerprinting for workers, ensuring that workers' attendance is recorded transparently and that they receive an attendance bonus. They have installed new automated machines that can count output. Workers may claim their production on their own, rather than relying on their supervisor's testimony. Workers are pleased because these well-managed factories have an effective participation committee (PC), an alternative to a labor union. They are free to raise any problem and file grievances in a grievance box. Such good practices for workers contribute to higher labor productivity (Hossan, Sarkar, Atiqur, and Afroze, 2012). According to the senior management of the surveyed factories, entrepreneurial strategies such as a secure working environment, intra-line production benefits, along with other rewards, and a good partnership among managers, supervisors, and workers contribute to lower labor turnover and higher productivity.

A good partnership is also essential between entrepreneurs and buyers, and this is related to labor productivity. Research shows that efficiency increases when a factory has the same buyer for a long time. The benefit of establishing a long-term buyer is that workers are comfortable with their style and the factory layout does not need to be changed often. One managing director echoed this:

“We used to carry orders for a small number of buyers, and our workers tended to manufacture the same goods throughout the year. They were well-known for their design, and they could often produce at their full speed. However, we’ve been working with different buyers for the past three years, and even for the same buyers, the design has changed. Because of the new design, the same workers would have to follow a new design in a month. This slows down the manufacturing process because they aren’t used to doing this form of job, and production is delayed. As a result, workers are less productive.”

Another entrepreneur said, “workers are generally effective when they are making a single product. When they generate several items at the same time, however, they become less productive.”

These comments imply that the longer-term relationship with buyers creates a positive perception about suppliers that can be attributed to two interrelated dynamics – mutual understanding and trust between two parties and large orders that enable higher productivity (Schüßler et al., 2019). In the absence of a longer-term relationship with buyers, the RMG firms do not get regular orders, there may be long gaps between orders, routine work is disrupted, and the workers do not keep themselves busy throughout the year. This affects the momentum of work and demotivates workers, particularly during off-peak times. To avoid this situation, and ensure higher productivity, a long-term relationship with buyers is essential. This study finds that the leading factories have a healthy business relationship with a few buyers. Because the volume of the order is always large, often not less than 1 million pieces, and there is hardly any need for change in style, it is easier for the workers to produce the same product in large quantities rather than producing different products in smaller quantities. When firms have these types of buyers, labor productivity is always higher.

External Factors: Beyond Entrepreneurial Control

Despite the fragile state of business and an inadequate industrial base, the RMG sector requires workers who have a certain level of education not only to be aware of their rights but also to acquire the skills available and needed in today's factories. Simple literacy and numeracy have been listed as priority skills for garment factory workers (World Bank, 2012). Workers with no basic education face difficulty in absorbing the information they obtain from various types of training provided by management, business associations, government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Bangladeshi garment workers have an average of 5.9 years of education, with just 16.9 per cent completing grade 10 or higher (Kabeer et al., 2020). Workers are unable to get the most out of the training provided by the management to improve their skills. A factory owner expressed his dissatisfaction on relationship between productivity and workers' lack of literacy:

“Workers are almost ignorant; it is often difficult for them to have the benefits of training. We offer different training services for them, but they are not yet ready to use them because they don’t have a minimum education. We are moving to automation to produce high-end complicated garments. For that, you need skilled workers, but we have a limited supply of such educated skilled workers.”

Another owner said: “We spend a lot of money on the health of workers, but the returns are not sufficient. It is the country's overall challenge, as our lowest level of education is extremely low. That is why we lack a sufficient supply of skilled labor.”

This is a structural problem of the country over which the entrepreneurs have no control. Another area of concern is the unavailability of adequate numbers of standard training centers to upgrade workers' skills. Entrepreneurs of large garment companies are trying to address this deficiency by establishing training schools on their premises, but most factories are still without such facilities, relying on the outside resources such as The Center of Excellence for Bangladesh Apparel Industry (CEBAI). This center was founded in 2014 by BGMEA with the help of SIDA, H&M, and the ILO (CEBAI, 2018). It offers instruction based on the National Technical and Vocational Qualification Framework's curricula. BGMEA has been implementing various skill development programs for garment workers and management through several training centers across the country with the help of the government of Bangladesh and development partners. In addition, "*Sudokkho*," an initiative run by Swisscontact, the British Council, and the Bangladesh government's Directorate of Technical Education (DTE), offers efficient in-factory training to improve worker productivity in 120 factories (Swisscontact, 2016, 2019).

Although the country has a variety of training facilities, the number of training centers is insufficient in comparison to the size and scope of the industry. In small and medium garment factories, there is almost no in-house training program for employees to increase production. Financial solvency is cited as a major explanation for not providing training. But surprisingly, some factories reported negative effects from training in their workplaces, leading to a lack of interest in their part in training workers. According to a director of a company, a mid-level employee was sent to Taiwan for a three-month paid training program in his factory. When he returned, he told the owner that he wanted to marry, and he was given an additional Tk. 10,000. He never returned to work. The interviews with management find that there are many examples of workers leaving a factory after completing training because they could now obtain a better paying position at another company. Training therefore seemed to have a negative effect on worker retention.

Another external factor that the management command has no direct control over is preventing the migration of workers from one factory to another. One of the key reasons for low labor productivity in Bangladesh's RMG sector is the high labor turnover rate (Afroz, 2017). There are many implications of voluntary employee turnover – delays in production, increased production cost and production loss, higher recruitment and training cost, and damage to a factory's/organization's reputation (Hossain and Mahmood, 2018). The authors also found that late or overdue wage payments and failure in the implementation of standard working hours contributed to voluntary turnovers while higher wage rates for overtime and voluntary overtime helped in retaining workers.

Our study reveals that almost every factory has a high turnover rate, ranging from less than five per cent in factories with a good working environment to more than 10 per cent in average factories. Even the leading garment factories are unable to slow down this labor migration because of the prevailing culture among workers to shift to another factory for a minimum advantage. Productive and qualified workers move to other factories due to the scarcity of skilled workers in the industry. The existence of thousands of factories provides an opportunity for ordinary workers to switch workplaces if they are dissatisfied with their current employer. This mostly affects factories that are noncompliant and unable to provide additional overtime opportunities to workers. Since it is difficult to retain workers, especially skilled workers, labor productivity suffers, and it is often a waste of resources for management. As discussed above, investment in training can lead to trained workers moving to another factory in search of a better wage. Few factories profit because the same workers stay with them for a long time and are familiar with their process and method. The top management of a few factories explained this migration problem:

"They switch effortlessly from one factory to the next, unconcerned about their job; in reality, they have been known to threaten factory management with quitting."

"Some minimum-wage employees are switching jobs for a pay raise of just 100 BDT. The newly replaced worker may not be as productive as the previous one. It takes time for the newer one to get used to the new system. As a result, the factory's production suffers."

"The majority of the workforce is 'moving workers,' which means they move from one factory to another in search of a better wage or benefits. As a result, these workers lack professional skills and commitment, and you cannot expect the plant to run smoothly according to your wishes if they are included. As a result, the production goal is reduced, and it is often lower than the average."

Other studies agree with the effect of high worker turnover on labor productivity, as identified in this article. High labor turnover was described by many managers as a major impediment to productivity-enhancing skill training programs (World Bank, 2012). It breeds negativity among current employees and saps motivation (Holtom, Mitchell, Lee, and Inderrienden, 2005). According to a report based on Chinese final production, testing, and packaging

facilities, a high-turnover rate in the workforce causes productivity disturbances (Moon et al., 2019). To increase labor productivity, management needs to offer incentives to increase the average length of working period of a worker in a factory. The benefit of this practice was explained by a senior manager:

“We have noticed that people who work for a long period are more productive. We may ask the workers to work longer shifts or even overtime during a crisis. Workers who worked in reciprocity were able to consider the owners' predicament and offer everything. As a result, there is a close connection between the duration of workers' shifts and their output capacity.”

Workers who have been working in a factory for longer periods are clearly more productive as they are familiar with the processes of production and the management strategy. However, it is crucial to bear in mind that long shift in working hours, which is also against the law, could harm productivity. According to Bangladesh Labor Act 2006, an adult worker is entitled to work for eight hours, and the limit of working hours (including overtime) shall not exceed ten hours (Government of Bangladesh, 2006). Despite the law, workers may have to work for more than ten hours in many garment factories in the country, usually in the form of compulsory overtime without their consent (Alam et al., 2018). Such a working environment makes the workers exhausted, leaving them with insufficient energy to focus on their jobs.

One more factor that is outside management control and contributes to lower labor productivity is the cultural orientation of workers. Because of the absence of a professional work culture in the industry, first-generation factory workers are not familiar with professionalism. Workers' attitudes about their jobs play an important role in ensuring that the manufacturing process runs smoothly. “Non-productive time is very high,” one of the managers argued, claiming that most workers lack a professional mindset. Workers tend to keep themselves occupied by gossiping. They have no sense of responsibility. Some factories' workers are careless, uninterested in their jobs, and inattentive, resulting in lower productivity and a higher rate of product rejection. This trait can be construed as inherently cultural. In addition, some factory employees can be dishonest or have deplorable attitudes. As one manager explained,

“If a worker is producing 350 pieces per hour and another worker just next to him/her is producing 200 pieces per hour, the latter will advise the former not to produce more than 200 pieces per hour, claiming that the extra pieces will be useless to him/her.”

Discussion

The first contribution of this article is to the literature on the sustainability challenges of entrepreneurs in the global supply chain. As discussed above, the majority of literature on this area focuses on the nature of three dimensions of upgrading challenges for sustainability - social, economic, and environmental upgrading – and the relation between one with another. These studies examine what type of activities entrepreneurs are executing in their workplaces and how it affects the firms but there have been limited studies on what challenges the entrepreneurs encounter in the process of up-gradation. From this context, this article shows that entrepreneurs also face challenges that they do not have full control over. These structural drawbacks appear to be obstacles for the entrepreneurs in upgrading the factories. Although some studies have pointed out that the structure of this sector has helped Bangladesh to attain remarkable growth in the last three decades (Gereffi and Frederick, 2010), those have more to do with infrastructure and policies such as, duty drawback facilities, tax holidays, cash assistance, income tax rebates, creation of export processing zones, and zero tariffs on machinery inputs (Ahmed, 2009; Rahman, 2014). The structural problems the entrepreneurs highlighted in this article have not caught the attention of policymakers.

The second contribution of this study is to research labor productivity. The entrepreneurial strategies revealed in this article are supported by other research. The positive relationship between improved working conditions and financial rewards and labor productivity, discussed in Bloom et al. (2017), is confirmed from the findings in our study. That punctuality is rewarded and increases productivity is also in line with the findings of Ahmed and Peerlings (2009) and Alam et al. (2018), and Hossain et al. (2012). According to a survey by CPD (2018), which was carried out in different types of factories, it was found that large enterprises lead upgrading efforts by offering various services, which is possible because of their financial capacity. Our study finds that only the leading factories are financially stable and strategically successful in motivating workers with various rewards to ensure that a productive workforce contributes to the company's development. Fukunishi's (2014) research backs up our finding that a lack of incentive to create a training culture leads to high labor turnover in Bangladesh's RMG sector. A culture of unprofessionalism found in this study is corroborated by Rajib and Adnan (2016). Their research demonstrates that excessive

socialization and focus on work results in lower efficiency and leads to more alterations (defective sewing operations). This also disrupts workers who are mindful and leads to a higher rate of movement of people in the sewing line to transfer the defective unit for corrections, the excessive unfolding of various completed procedures, and unnecessary bottlenecks in the production line. Distracted workers lead to further rejections and modifications because they pay too little attention and do not thoroughly inspect the sewn garment when handing it on to the next process operator. Quality checkers notice several changes at the end of the line and give the garment back to the appropriate operator for adjustments, which reduces the sewing line's efficiency (Rajib and Adnan, 2016).

However, there are areas where this article disagrees with previous research. For instance, although the Bangladesh RMG industry has ratified the core ILO convention, management has been accused of unjustified hiring and firing practices, with retrenched workers often not paid (Rashid, 2006). However, our study finds that getting a salary on time in some factories has had remarkable effect. Payment within the first week of the month has enabled the workers to better organize their household expenditures as well as pay their rent on time, which has motivated them in their jobs. Another example of disagreement with the current research is the relationship between unsafe workplaces and labor migration to other factories. There can be different reasons for the migration of workers, including poor working conditions; the existing literature indicates that the RMG industry is seriously deficient regarding the healthcare of its workers and safety in the workplace (Haque and Azmat, 2015). However, migration to other factories after getting better training is something new and not explored in the existing research.

What is also missing in the existing literature is the role of buyers in the process of upgrading labor productivity as part of addressing sustainability challenges the entrepreneurs encounter in their factories. We already know that different domestic and international stakeholders have the power to influence entrepreneurs and the success of an organization relies on the extent to which entrepreneurs or the senior management responds to the implementation of the demands of key stakeholders (Islam and Deegan, 2008; Ullmann, 1985). For the long-term sustainability of the industry, management must develop a good relationship with powerful stakeholders such as buyers (Haque and Azmat, 2015). The pressure from them can improve companies' social responsibility and result in the introduction of welfare-oriented programs to motivate workers (Perrini, 2006). These studies showcase how buyers can influence the suppliers to be compliant, but little knowledge has been generated on the nature of buyer-supplier relationships and their effects on labor productivity. Garment supply chains are complicated, including a combination of short-term, market-based buyer-supplier relationships and longer-term, trust-based buyer-supplier relationships spread over many countries (Helfen, Schüßler, and Sydow, 2018). For the sustainability of the industry, a long-term relationship with lead buyers is very important considering other sustainability challenges. In this context, this article indicates that the possibility of higher labor productivity is greater when a supplier establishes a long-term business with a buyer.

The third contribution of this article is to the literature on the Bangladesh RMG industry. Although the sector's growth is stable, after encountering the challenges of COVID-19 with generous support from the government, there is serious concern about the Bangladesh RMG industry's long-term viability, which is dependent on three factors: rising enforcement costs, price compression, and a fast fashion business model. One of the ways to address these issues is to produce a skilled workforce that will be more productive. However, there is very limited research on labor productivity in the Bangladesh RMG industry. With growing consumer demand for new apparel at a faster rate and a cheaper price, manufacturers have had to shorten their lead times, and to tackle these business changes, a skilled workforce is essential. Workers must adapt quickly to the constant changes in style and increase output speed. Upgrading the skills of workers to ensure higher productivity is an important part of the company in this fast fashion model to stay competitive in the global market, as is evident in this study.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sets out to explore the upgrading challenges the entrepreneurs encounter in the Bangladesh RMG industry with a particular focus on labor productivity. To comprehend this problem, this study has examined the experiences of entrepreneurs who are also referred to as "top management" or "senior management" in the process of upgrading labor. The findings are significant for the sustainability of the industry. In this concluding section, we pull together our findings to make several general points about labor productivity of the workers in our study. Different external factors such as the level of education of workers, availability of sufficient training centers, presence of a culture of professionalism in factories, and labor migration have influenced the degree of labor productivity in the industry. Higher labor turnover or migration is common in this sector and also is related to facilities offered by the management

such as better wages or safe and healthy working conditions. The provision of different motivational incentives such as financial rewards for punctuality, extra festival bonuses, and incentives for meeting production targets have also encouraged workers to be more productive. To lower labor turnover and increase productivity, the factory management has stepped out with a strategy that facilitates better working conditions, reward-based work, good relationships among workers, and long-term business relationships with the buyers.

It is time for policymakers to address the above-mentioned findings effectively. We understand that structural problems such as improving the level of education of workers cannot be eradicated overnight. Despite several measures taken to enrich the quality of education as prescribed in SDG, a leadership role needs to be executed by the state to link the education system with the industry. Supportive public policy is not enough. Rather, systematic implementation of policy to improve the relationship between technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions and industry can make an impact. We have to create a space for the management to participate in designing curriculum and training, aligning them with market needs and changing technology. Experts from the relevant fields can share their knowledge to build a concrete long-term strategy.

The fast fashion trend is rising in tandem with bulk orders, owing to regular shifts in customer taste and affordability. Consumers have shown a strong desire to receive the latest fashions faster and at a lower cost, requiring shorter delivery times from manufacturers. Management and workers must adapt quickly, with a steeper learning curve due to the constant changes in design, all while striving to increase productivity. There is no way to deny the fact that the export-oriented garment industry, the driving force of the development of Bangladesh, should respond proactively to upgrade labor productivity, a key sustainable challenge of the sector.

The survey questionnaire was primarily designed to explore the impact of transnational governance on the global garment supply chain. For this reason, the majority of questions addressed labor governance and compliance. Only two questions were related to the concern of this article. If there were more questions on labor productivity, the scope of this study would be widened. Another limitation of the study is the application of more than one method to understand why labor productivity is higher or lower in the factories. The inclusion of interviews of key policymakers as well as a focus group discussion of workers would present a different perspective of the problems studied in this article. These issues were not covered due to time constraints.

As mentioned above, further research is needed to understand workers' views of the factors related to labor productivity, because there could be some insights into the relationship between entrepreneurs or top management and workers. Another area that can be of importance is to examine the projects that have been operated by different stakeholders and how these initiatives impact labor productivity. For example, management spoke positively about Swisscontact's initiative "Sudokkho" (mentioned above) but the effect of such an initiative or that of entrepreneurial strategy on productivity is little known or understood. This article indicates the importance of external factors that are beyond the control of entrepreneurs, but a comprehensive study can be conducted on mapping the resources available and the access of the entrepreneurs to those resources. This is crucial because entrepreneurial inequality is becoming a problem, which means that entrepreneurs who are close to power dynamics are more likely to avail the resources, projects, initiatives, information, etc. introduced by national and international stakeholders. In this process, entrepreneurs of small and middle factories are left behind.

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