

ADDRESSING SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY IN BANGLADESH'S RMG INDUSTRY: CHALLENGES, CRITIQUE, AND RESEARCH PATHWAYS

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Abstract

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has become a cornerstone of the South Asian economy, establishing the country as the world's second-largest garment exporter after China. The sector's rapid expansion is driven by an abundant supply of skilled, low-cost labour, allowing Bangladesh to deliver affordable, high-quality apparel to global markets. Yet, this economic achievement has often entailed high social costs. The relentless focus on minimising production costs and maximising efficiency has led to compromised labour rights, inadequate workplace safety, and broader social welfare concerns. The 2013 Rana Plaza tragedy, which claimed the lives of more than a thousand workers and injured countless others, starkly underscored the urgent need for greater social accountability in the industry. Most existing research concentrates on the economic and operational aspects of the RMG sector, offering only a surface-level understanding of its social sustainability challenges. This study addresses this gap by critically examining social sustainability practices in Bangladesh's RMG industry, focusing on the structural,

organisational, and policy factors that impact worker welfare, safety, and labour rights. Additionally, the study introduces a theoretical framework to guide the sector toward socially responsible and sustainable growth, enabling it to remain globally competitive while safeguarding the lives and livelihoods of millions of workers. By embedding social sustainability at the heart of its operations, Bangladesh's RMG sector can sustain its economic prominence and make meaningful contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly those related to decent work, gender equality, and inclusive economic growth.

Keywords: Social Sustainability, Ready-made garments (RMG), Sustainable Development Goals, Social Welfare, Social Indicators, Women entrepreneurship

Introduction

Sustainable development remains a pressing and largely unresolved challenge in South Asian countries, a region home to nearly 25% of the world's population and with an average population density of 362.3 people per square kilometre (Cheriyana & Simi, 2023). The countries comprising South Asia—India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives—face unique and complex obstacles to achieving sustainable growth (Sadiq et al., 2024). Among these nations, Bangladesh stands out with an exceptionally high population density of 1,165 people per square

kilometre, one of the highest in the world (Islam et al., 2022). This demographic pressure intensifies the need for effective and equitable development strategies (Islam, 2024). In recent decades, Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector has emerged as a cornerstone of the country's economy (Hasan et al., 2020; Nishat & Haque, 2025; Iqbal, 2026). The RMG industry now accounts for approximately 84% of Bangladesh's total exports, making the country the world's second-largest garment exporter after China (Economics Observatory, 2025). The sector has played a pivotal role in driving economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction. However, this rapid expansion has also brought a host of sustainability challenges to the forefront (Annie, 2020; Nishat & Haque, 2025).

Despite remarkable achievements in export growth, the RMG sector in Bangladesh has been plagued by persistent social sustainability issues (Huq et al., 2014; Khan et al., 2024). Exploitation of labour, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, and gender inequality remain deeply entrenched problems (Siddiqui & Uddin, 2016; Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). For years, these concerns received limited attention from both domestic policymakers and the international community (Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020). The situation changed dramatically in 2013, when the catastrophic collapse of the Rana Plaza building—which housed several garment factories—resulted in the deaths of more than 1,100 workers and injuries to thousands more. This tragedy forced global stakeholders, including activists, brands, and sustainability scholars, to confront the urgent need for sectoral reforms (Uddin et al., 2023).

The Rana Plaza disaster served as a wake-up call, highlighting the dire consequences of neglecting social sustainability in favour of rapid

economic gains (Huq et al., 2016). Since then, the RMG sector in Bangladesh has been under intense scrutiny, prompting a range of initiatives to improve factory safety, labour rights, and gender equality (Fontana & Dawkins, 2024). Nonetheless, significant challenges remain. Enforcement of labour standards is often inconsistent, and many workers—particularly women, who make up a majority of the workforce—continue to face discrimination, low wages, and limited opportunities for advancement (Schneider, 2023). Achieving sustainable development in South Asia, and particularly within Bangladesh's RMG sector, requires a multi-faceted approach (Islam, 2024). Policymakers, industry leaders, and international partners must work collaboratively to ensure that economic growth does not come at the expense of workers' rights, social equity, and environmental stewardship (Malik, 2025). A comprehensive focus on social sustainability is essential not only for workers' well-being but also for the sector's long-term resilience and competitiveness (Huq et al., 2016; Alamgir & Alakavuklar, 2020; Iqbal, 2026). As the world moves towards a more inclusive and responsible model of globalisation, Bangladesh's experiences offer important lessons for other developing countries seeking to balance growth with sustainability.

In this chapter, the author presents a critical, in-depth perspective on social sustainability practices in the Bangladesh RMG sector. This analysis is situated in the context of recent challenges following the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the ongoing political unrest and rapidly shifting geopolitical dynamics affecting Bangladesh. By examining these intertwined issues, the chapter aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of how social sustainability is being shaped, challenged, and redefined in this crucial sector. The chapter is structured to guide the reader through both

conceptual foundations and applied discussions. The second section delves into the underlying theoretical concepts that underpin the subsequent analysis. Important frameworks and scholarly perspectives are explored, providing readers with the necessary context to engage with the complexities of social sustainability in the RMG sector. The third section specifically addresses key social sustainability concerns, with a particular focus on gender equality (Sustainable Development Goal 5) and the reduction of inequalities (Sustainable Development Goal 10). This part draws on recent data, case studies, and policy developments to highlight the sector's persistent challenges and emerging opportunities for advancing social objectives. Following this, the fourth section presents a detailed discussion of the chapter's theoretical contributions, outlining implications for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and researchers. This section also identifies potential future research directions, emphasising areas where further investigation could yield significant benefits for both the academic community and practitioners in the field. The chapter concludes by synthesising the main findings and reflecting on the broader significance of social sustainability for the Bangladesh RMG sector in a changing global landscape.

Theoretical Background

Sustainable Development

Sustainable development has gained significant attention from activists and policymakers in response to growing social disparities and inequalities worldwide (Hopwood et al., 2005; Akhtar & Rashid, 2024). Over the last few decades, while increased focus has been placed on consumerism and economic growth, these advancements have often come at the expense of

social justice and environmental sustainability (Huang & Rust, 2011; Fioramonti et al., 2022). Many societies continue to face exploitation and struggle to secure access to basic human needs such as safe drinking water, clean air, daily meals, and nutritious food (Ergene & Ergene, 2025). Other persistent challenges include inadequate education for all, limited employment opportunities, and widespread discrimination based on gender, caste, and religion (Saifuddin et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2023). These issues are especially pronounced in Bangladesh and neighbouring countries such as India, Myanmar, parts of Africa, and other developing nations (Deriu, 2026). For many of these countries, sustainable development remains an aspirational goal rather than a realised achievement (Greig & Turner, 2024). Sustainable development can be understood as holistic progress that balances economic growth, environmental protection, and social well-being (Hirai, 2022; Henderson & Loreau, 2023). Recognising the importance of this balance, the United Nations has established 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to serve as a framework for creating a more equitable and sustainable world for everyone (Sorooshian, 2024; Bāk, 2024).

Sustainable development in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) sector remains a critical challenge, demanding a comprehensive, collaborative approach from all stakeholders (Salman et al., 2025). Deep-rooted social issues have created a vulnerable workforce, enabling factory owners to exploit labourers who have limited alternatives (Husain, 2024). Over the past few decades, other industries in Bangladesh have not developed sufficiently, leaving workers with few employment options and little bargaining power (Khaled & Ansar, 2024). This situation is exacerbated by widespread social unawareness and limited access to

education, which perpetuates cycles of exploitation and poverty (Uddin et al., 2023). Factory owners often exploit these conditions, prioritising profit over employee welfare (Frenkel et al., 2022). Additionally, government officials sometimes exploit the system, perpetuating corruption and enabling factory owners to prosper at the expense of the workforce (Huq et al., 2016; Frenkel et al., 2022; Uddin et al., 2023). As a result, millions of labourers endure long working hours for minimal wages in unsafe and unhygienic environments (Islam, 2024). Despite being the world's second-largest exporter of ready-made garments, Bangladesh continues to struggle with ensuring fair labour practices and sustainable growth in the sector (Ahmed & Arun, 2023). Real progress requires greater government oversight, enforcement of labour laws, investment in education and skills training, and a collective commitment from brands, factory owners, and international partners to prioritise worker rights and well-being (Frenkel et al., 2022). Only through such comprehensive efforts can sustainable development become a reality for Bangladesh's RMG sector.

Social Sustainability

Social sustainability represents the social dimension of the triple bottom line (TBL), which emphasises the well-being of people while also protecting the planet and ensuring economic prosperity (Abraham, 2024; Kumari et al., 2025). Although social sustainability is arguably the most crucial pillar of sustainable development, it often receives the least attention (Gallardo-Vázquez, 2025). In many cases, the social aspect is overlooked or compromised in favour of economic or environmental priorities (Adebayo, 2025). Social sustainability encompasses a wide range of issues, including human rights, fair labour practices, community engagement, equity, access to resources, and quality of life (Dempsey et al., 2011). It is concerned not

only with meeting individuals' basic needs but also with promoting social inclusion, justice, and long-term resilience within societies (Weingaertner & Moberg, 2014). A socially sustainable approach seeks to ensure that all individuals, regardless of background, have opportunities to thrive and participate meaningfully in their communities (Kohon, 2018). This involves fostering safe and healthy environments, supporting education, enabling access to healthcare, and building strong social networks (Hutchins & Sutherland, 2008). One of the main challenges to achieving social sustainability is the tendency to prioritise economic growth or environmental targets over social goals (Spangenberg, 2004; Leal Filho et al., 2019).

For example, large-scale development projects may create jobs and boost economic output but can also displace communities, undermine cultural heritage, or worsen social inequalities if not managed responsibly (Yang & Koondhar, 2024). Similarly, environmental conservation efforts that do not account for the needs and voices of local populations may inadvertently marginalise vulnerable groups (Adom et al., 2025). Therefore, a balanced approach to sustainability must consider social impacts alongside economic and environmental outcomes (Andersson et al., 2022). Furthermore, social sustainability is critical for the long-term success of organisations and societies (Ahsan, 2024). When social factors are neglected, problems such as inequality, poor health, lack of education, and social unrest can undermine progress in other areas (Adebayo, 2025). By contrast, investing in social sustainability can lead to more cohesive, resilient, and prosperous communities (Barron et al., 2025). Businesses that embrace social sustainability can benefit from stronger stakeholder relationships, enhanced reputation, and greater employee satisfaction and

retention (Suriyankietkaew et al., 2025). In simple words, social sustainability is an essential component of the triple bottom line and sustainable development. It requires deliberate effort, inclusive policies, and a commitment to equity and well-being for all. Only by elevating the social dimension to the same level of importance as economic and environmental considerations can we build a truly sustainable future.

Social sustainability within Bangladesh's RMG sector remains a significant challenge that demands urgent attention from all stakeholders (Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019). However, persistent issues such as low wages, inadequate workplace safety, insufficient social protection, and limited access to healthcare continue to undermine the well-being of workers and their families (Fontana & Dawkins, 2024). Although the situation improved after the 2013 Rana Plaza incident, recent events, such as COVID-19 and ongoing political unrest, have once again exacerbated social sustainability concerns (Ahmed, 2025).

Social Sustainability and Ready-Made Garment Sector in Bangladesh

Social sustainability within the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh has gained significant traction both domestically and internationally, particularly following the catastrophic collapse of Rana Plaza in April 2013 (Huq et al., 2016; Velluti, 2024). The tragedy, which claimed over 1,100 lives and injured more than 2,500 workers, exposed the deeply entrenched vulnerabilities within Bangladesh's garment industry, from unsafe working conditions to the systemic exploitation of a largely female workforce (Ozkazanc-Pan, 2019). It served as a global wake-up call, prompting governments, international buyers, and civil society organisations to reassess the human cost of fast-fashion supply chains

(Frenkel et al., 2022). In the years that followed, meaningful progress was made through landmark initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, which collectively inspected thousands of factories and mandated structural remediation (Nolan, 2022). Labour rights organisations also pushed for higher minimum wages, better grievance mechanisms, and stronger enforcement of existing protections (Syed, 2023). While these efforts brought incremental improvements, they were far from sufficient to address the deep-rooted social inequalities that continue to plague the sector (Syed & Karim, 2025).

The situation was further compounded by the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, which devastated the global apparel industry (Uddin et al., 2023; Su et al., 2024). International orders were cancelled overnight, leaving millions of Bangladeshi garment workers — the vast majority of whom are women — without wages, severance, or social protection (Tejani & Fukuda-Parr, 2021). Factories closed abruptly, and workers were pushed further into poverty with little to no safety net (Hossain, 2021). The pandemic laid bare the precariousness of informal and semi-formal employment arrangements that dominate the sector, and highlighted the urgent need for more resilient and inclusive labour policies (Alam et al., 2022). More recently, political instability and civil unrest in Bangladesh have added yet another layer of uncertainty to an already fragile ecosystem (Hossain, 2025). Factory disruptions, supply chain delays, and investor hesitancy have collectively strained the RMG sector's recovery (Ahmed, 2025). Amidst this turbulence, gender equality — a cornerstone of social sustainability — has suffered a notable setback (Ahmed et al., 2025). Women workers, who constitute approximately 60 to 80 per cent of the RMG workforce, have been disproportionately affected by job losses, reduced working hours, and

increased incidents of workplace harassment (Hossain et al., 2025). Social inequality has widened, with marginalised groups bearing the heaviest burden of economic shocks (Fontana & Dawkins, 2024).

Addressing social sustainability in Bangladesh's RMG sector, therefore, requires a multi-pronged approach. Stakeholders must prioritise fair wages, safe working environments, gender-responsive policies, and robust social protection systems (Uddin & Hoque, 2025). International brands and retailers must also accept greater accountability through transparent sourcing practices and binding commitments to worker welfare (Mehedi et al., 2025). Without sustained and coordinated efforts, the cycle of exploitation and vulnerability will persist, undermining both the sector's long-term competitiveness and the well-being of the millions who depend on it.

Discussions

This chapter reflects on the social sustainability journey of Bangladesh's RMG sector, with a particular focus on two deeply intertwined challenges: gender equality and social inequality. These issues have long plagued the sector and the broader region, yet they continue to resist meaningful resolution despite periodic surges of global attention. The chapter traces a historical arc through three defining moments that, each in its own way, have reshaped the trajectory of labour rights and social progress in the RMG industry. The first is the Rana Plaza building collapse of 2013 — a catastrophic industrial disaster that claimed over 1,100 lives and galvanised international scrutiny of working conditions in Bangladesh's garment factories. In its aftermath, the global community demonstrated an unprecedented level of commitment to reform, with major brands,

governments, and civil society organisations rallying around initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety. For a time, it appeared that the momentum for structural change was irreversible.

The second defining moment is the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed the profound fragility of the gains made in the post-Rana Plaza era. As global demand for garments collapsed overnight, millions of RMG workers — the majority of them women — faced sudden job losses, unpaid wages, and a near-total absence of social protection. The pandemic did not merely pause the reform agenda; it actively reversed much of the progress achieved, leaving the most vulnerable workers further marginalised.

The third moment is the recent political upheaval in Bangladesh, marked by widespread resentment against the autocratic governance of Sheikh Hasina and the eventual destabilisation of her administration. This political turbulence inflicted serious damage on the RMG sector, disrupting production, deterring investment, and deepening labour precarity. Women workers, who constitute a significant majority of the RMG workforce, bore a disproportionate share of this burden. Denied fair wages, adequate safety protections, and meaningful representation, they found themselves at the intersection of economic exploitation and political instability.

Taken together, these three episodes reveal a troubling pattern: the global community's commitment to social sustainability in the Bangladesh RMG sector has proven reactive rather than systemic, surging in response to visible crises but failing to sustain the structural reforms necessary to address the root causes of inequality. This chapter seeks to examine this pattern critically, explore the lived experiences of workers — particularly women — and consider what a more durable and equitable approach to

social sustainability might look like for the sector going forward. The remainder of this section is organised as follows. The next part of this section situates the discussion within the existing theoretical literature, examining how the critical narrative developed here contributes to and extends ongoing debates around social sustainability, labour rights, and gender equity in global supply chains. This is followed by a subsection on practical implications that draws out actionable insights for managers, brand owners, and policymakers seeking to move beyond compliance-driven approaches toward more transformative and inclusive models of governance. The chapter then examines the limitations of the current analysis and outlines directions for future research. Given the complexity and evolving nature of the issues examined, there remains considerable scope for scholars to deepen our understanding of how political instability, global economic shocks, and structural gender inequality interact within export-oriented industries like the RMG sector. It is hoped that the directions proposed here will encourage researchers to engage more rigorously with the lived realities of workers — particularly women — whose voices have too often been marginalised in both academic and policy conversations. Ultimately, this chapter aims not only to document what has gone wrong but to contribute to a constructive conversation about what a genuinely sustainable and equitable future for Bangladesh's RMG sector could look like.

Implications for Theory

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical foundations underpinning the arguments and narratives developed throughout this study. Given the complexity of the subject matter, no single theory is sufficient to capture the full range of dynamics at play. Instead, the analysis draws on multiple,

complementary theoretical frameworks that together offer a more complete and nuanced understanding of the issues under examination. Each of the theories discussed below has been selected for its particular relevance to the core themes of this work — including global economic structures, labour exploitation, gender inequality, and development in the Global South. By situating the discussion within these established theoretical traditions, this chapter provides the analytical tools necessary to interpret the empirical findings presented in subsequent chapters. The key theories that inform and shape this study are as follows:

Global Commodity Chain Theory

Global commodity chain (GCC) theory offers a powerful framework for understanding how developing nations became integrated into the world economy following the strategic decisions of industrialised countries to relocate their production bases in pursuit of lower costs (Clancy, 1998; Gereffi, 2002). Popularised by Gereffi (1996), the theory maps the full range of activities involved in bringing a product from conception to the end consumer and, critically, examines who controls and benefits from each stage of that chain. At its core, GCC theory explains the phenomena of offshoring and outsourcing that emerged as multinational corporations sought to reduce labour costs by shifting manufacturing to countries with large pools of low-wage workers (Gereffi et al., 2005; Ambos et al., 2019; Boschma, 2022). Rather than viewing this as a neutral economic process, the theory draws attention to the unequal power dynamics between the “core” nations that govern the chain and the “peripheral” nations that perform its most labour-intensive tasks under highly exploitative conditions (Lund-Thomsen, 2026).

This theory is particularly instructive in understanding the rise of the RMG industry in Bangladesh (Rahim, 2020). From the 1980s onward, global fashion brands and retailers based in North America and Europe outsourced the bulk of their manufacturing to Bangladesh, drawn by its exceptionally low wages and weak regulatory environment (Anner, 2020). As a result, Bangladesh became one of the world's largest garment exporters, yet the workers at the bottom of this chain — disproportionately women and children — bore the greatest costs (Iqbal, 2025). Women, who constitute the vast majority of the RMG workforce, have long faced poverty-level wages, unsafe working conditions, and limited labour protections. Child labour, driven by household poverty and the absence of enforced compulsory education, further entrenched the cycle of exploitation. GCC theory thus provides a critical lens for tracing how global economic structures, rather than local factors alone, produced and perpetuated these conditions of vulnerability.

b. World-systems theory

Chirot & Hall (1982) argue that world-systems theory is highly relevant in explaining the persistent social and income inequalities that characterise developing nations, particularly those in the Global South. The theory gained significant prominence in the early 1970s, largely through the foundational work of Immanuel Wallerstein (see Wallerstein, 1976), who offered a structural alternative to the prevailing modernisation theory as a framework for understanding global inequality. Unlike modernisation theory, which attributes underdevelopment to internal cultural or institutional deficiencies, world-systems theory locates the root causes of inequality in the exploitative relationships between core, semi-peripheral,

and peripheral nations within the capitalist world economy (Wallerstein, 1987).

In the context of Bangladesh, world-systems theory provides a compelling lens for examining the RMG sector — one of the country's most economically significant industries (Rahman & Mridha, 2025). The sector's rapid growth has been driven largely by its integration into global supply chains dominated by multinational corporations headquartered in core nations. While this integration has generated substantial export revenue and employment opportunities for Bangladesh, it has also entrenched a pattern of labour exploitation that reflects the country's peripheral status within the world-system. Workers in the RMG sector — the vast majority of whom are women — are subjected to low wages, poor working conditions, and limited labour rights, all of which serve to maximise profit extraction by transnational capital at the expense of local labour.

c. Neoliberalism & Globalisation Theory

Neoliberalism and globalisation theory have gained significant prominence, largely due to the concerted efforts of the United States and the United Kingdom to liberalise their economies and open access to global markets (Kotz, 2002). Rooted in the principles of free trade, deregulation, and reduced state intervention, neoliberalism emerged as the dominant economic paradigm from the late 1970s onwards, championed by figures such as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (Fourcade-Gourinchas & Babb, 2002). These policies reshaped the global economic order, encouraging developing nations to integrate into the world economy through structural adjustment programmes and trade liberalisation (Radice, 2008). Within this framework, capitalist economies have made significant

inroads across the developing world (Mudge, 2008). A notable exception, however, is China, which has maintained considerable state control over its economy while simultaneously leveraging globalisation to fuel its own industrial growth (Strange, 2011). China's managed approach to market integration stands in contrast to the more open, market-driven models promoted by Western institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

This broader context of neoliberal globalisation provides a critical lens for examining the remarkable growth of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. The influx of foreign capital, driven by the search for low-cost labour markets, transformed Bangladesh into one of the world's leading garment exporters. On one hand, this integration into global supply chains has fuelled economic development, generated employment — particularly for women — and contributed substantially to Bangladesh's GDP. On the other hand, it has also exposed deep structural inequalities, with workers frequently subject to poor working conditions, suppressed wages, and limited labour rights — a pattern consistent with broader critiques of capitalist exploitation of resources and labour in the Global South. The RMG sector thus serves as a compelling case study of the dual nature of neoliberal globalisation: a force that simultaneously creates opportunity and perpetuates systemic inequality.

d. Institutional Theory

Institutional theory, following DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) seminal work on institutional isomorphism, argues that external pressures shape an organisation's strategy, aligning its policies and decisions with prevailing norms. The first of these is coercive pressure, which originates from

government and regulatory bodies and is particularly pronounced in developing nations where the state exerts considerable influence over industry and organisational behaviour (Kauppi, 2013). The second is normative pressure, which stems from trade associations and shared professional or educational backgrounds that shape managerial beliefs and, in turn, influence strategic decision-making within organisations (Kauppi, 2013; Huq & Stevenson, 2020). The third is mimetic pressure, which arises when organisations emulate peers' practices to remain competitive (Kauppi, 2013; Huq & Stevenson, 2020). In Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector, coercive pressure has proven considerably less effective than normative and mimetic pressures (Azizul Islam & Deegan, 2008; Huq & Stevenson, 2020). This is largely attributable to systemic governance failures, whereby corrupt institutions have enabled the exploitative practices of certain RMG firms to persist unchecked (Siddiqui & Uddin, 2016). Despite the widespread and visible exploitation of women and underage workers, conditions in the sector remain deeply challenging (Faruq & Hoque, 2026). The Rana Plaza disaster and subsequent incidents — further exacerbated by recent political instability — have laid bare the sector's structural fragility (Hossain, 2019). Institutional theory thus offers a compelling explanation for the current state of the RMG industry (Bhuiyan et al., 2023) and for the incremental progress that has occurred in response to external pressures generated by whistleblowers, labour rights activists, and international advocacy efforts that have drawn attention to these ongoing crises (Lotfi & Walker, 2025).

Nevertheless, institutional theory has notable limitations (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). As Colwell and Joshi (2013) argue, the theory does not adequately explain how external pressures are translated

into concrete policy or decision-making outcomes within organisations. To address this gap, some scholars (see Colwell & Joshi, 2013; Greenwood & Hinings, 2014; Dubey et al., 2019) highlight the role of leadership and organisational culture as critical mediating factors that shape how institutional pressures are ultimately interpreted and acted upon.

Implications for the Managers and the Policymakers

Managers in the RMG sector have a great deal to learn, not only about operational efficiency and supply chain dynamics, but also about the human dimension of their industry (Uddin et al., 2023). Ultimately, the lives and well-being of workers must be placed at the center of every business decision (Tarafder & Burgess, 2022).

Cost competitiveness is widely recognised as the primary differentiator in the global RMG market (Hasan et al., 2020). However, it is increasingly clear that the long-term sustainability of Bangladesh's RMG industry cannot rest solely on cost reduction. The future of this sector depends heavily on whether focal buyers — international brands and retailers that source from Bangladeshi factories — are willing to offer fair compensation, improved benefits, and meaningful support to the workers who power their supply chains (Lund-Thomsen & Nadvi, 2010). Women workers, who constitute the vast majority of the RMG workforce, are particularly vulnerable. Without adequate investment in their health, safety, and economic security, the sector risks perpetuating a cycle of exploitation that undermines both human dignity and long-term productivity.

Beyond the factory floor, structural reform is urgently needed at the policy level (Islam & Stringer, 2020). Policymakers must take decisive

action to dismantle the complex networks of corrupt officials and intermediaries who continue to exploit workers and obstruct meaningful progress (Frenkel & Rahman, 2022). Corruption not only worsens the daily conditions faced by workers but also erodes trust in institutions and deters the kind of responsible investment that could transform the sector. Without strong governance, transparent enforcement of labor laws, and genuine accountability, the RMG industry in Bangladesh cannot sustain itself — let alone evolve into a model of ethical and competitive manufacturing.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This chapter aims to foster academic debate around the intersecting themes of social sustainability, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) — with particular emphasis on gender equality (SDG 5) and the reduction of social inequality (SDG 10) — and the RMG sector in Bangladesh. As one of the world’s largest garment-exporting nations, Bangladesh occupies a critical position in global supply chains, making the social sustainability of its RMG sector a matter of both local and international concern.

In this study, the author draws on a critical review of published academic literature, industry reports, and policy documents to examine the social sustainability challenges facing workers in the RMG sector. The analysis is structured around three pivotal events that, in distinct ways, have each exposed and deepened pre-existing vulnerabilities within the sector. The first is the Rana Plaza building collapse in April 2013, a tragedy that claimed over 1,100 lives and brought global attention to the hazardous working conditions endured by garment workers, the majority of whom are women. The second is the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered

widespread factory closures, mass layoffs, and the suspension of wages, disproportionately affecting women workers and other economically marginalised groups. The third is the student-led protests against the Sheikh Hasina government, which, alongside rising communal tensions and escalating geopolitical friction between Bangladesh and its neighbouring nations, has further destabilised the operating environment for the RMG sector. Amid this political turbulence, the efforts of activists, labour unions, and NGOs working to improve the rights and working conditions of vulnerable workers have been significantly curtailed.

Taken together, these three crises illuminate a recurring pattern: that systemic shocks — whether structural, epidemiological, or political — consistently set back progress toward social sustainability in the RMG sector, with women workers bearing a disproportionate burden of the consequences. Despite a growing body of literature on labour rights and supply chain ethics, significant gaps remain in our understanding of how these compounding crises interact and of the long-term implications for gender equality and social inclusion. This study, therefore, warrants deeper critical investigation. A qualitative research approach is particularly well-suited to this inquiry, as it allows for a nuanced exploration of lived experiences, institutional responses, and structural barriers that quantitative methods alone cannot fully capture. Furthermore, several of the theoretical frameworks identified in this review require empirical validation through longitudinal data, which would enable researchers to track changes in social sustainability outcomes over time and assess the durability of reform efforts in the sector.

Conclusion

As this chapter draws to a close, the author reflects on the academic dialogue this work seeks to advance with a deep sense of scholarly purpose. The central ambition of this chapter has been to contribute to the theoretical understanding of social sustainability — not as an abstract ideal, but as a lived, contested, and often fragile reality for the women and vulnerable workers employed in Bangladesh’s RMG sector. One of the most pressing concerns this chapter has sought to illuminate is the presence of significant gaps in the existing literature — gaps that tend to go unnoticed precisely because they arise amid chaotic economic environments and the compounding pressures of polycrisis events. Whether it is the structural devastation of the Rana Plaza collapse, the economic ruptures of the COVID-19 pandemic, or the political instability generated by civil unrest and regional geopolitical tensions, each crisis has had the effect of displacing attention away from the long-term, systemic work required to advance gender equality and social inclusion in global supply chains. Organisational researchers, labour activists, and NGOs alike find their focus fragmented and their resources stretched under such conditions, leaving critical advocacy and scholarship deprioritised at the very moments when they are most urgently needed. It is the author’s sincere hope that this chapter catalyses renewed and focused scholarly debate on these enduring, unresolved issues. The questions raised here — concerning the resilience of social sustainability frameworks, the adequacy of existing protections for women workers, and the capacity of institutions to respond meaningfully to compounding crises — deserve sustained academic attention. Future research, particularly work grounded in qualitative methodologies and longitudinal data, will be essential in translating these theoretical insights into evidence-based recommendations that can meaningfully improve the conditions of those most affected.

Declaration

Microsoft Copilot, embedded in the Microsoft Office suite, was used solely to refine language and ensure consistency in writing. All content, arguments, and critical analysis are entirely my own. The purpose of this chapter is not to critique any particular sector or community, but to advance academic discourse and foster theoretical dialogue among researchers and scholars.

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