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Decent Work in
Garment Supply
Chains Asia



Sweden
Sverige

► Building back better with environmental sustainability and gender equality

Bangladesh country summary



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▶ Preface

The *Building Back Better with Environmental Sustainability and Gender Equality* Study is part of the Decent Work in the Garment Sector Supply Chains in Asia project. The four-year project was funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA) in collaboration with the ILO Regional Office in Bangkok aims to improve working conditions and rights of women and men workers in the sector in Asia through improved social dialogue, productivity, gender equality and environmental sustainability.

The project has four outcome areas:

1. Industrial relations,
2. Gender equality,
3. Productivity and competitiveness and
4. Environmental sustainability.

This work was led by Outcome 4 and Outcome 2 as a joint activity to access the double dividend in progressing enhanced environmental sustainability and gender equality in the garment sector. The aim of the study was to identify consensus among sector stakeholders for future priorities and recommended actions for different stakeholder groups to advance sustainability.

The Study uses a Delphi methodology – a well-established tool for iterative consensus-building among stakeholders – to identify the coalition of actors needed to help reform the garment and textile sector, and the key priorities that should be the focus of their related stakeholder action. The study involved 80 participants including enterprises (31 enterprises), trade unions, workers, industry associations, government officials and other relevant sector stakeholders. 40 per cent of the participants were women and 60 per cent men. Participants were drawn from Outcome 4's four focus countries – Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, and Viet Nam.

This report provides highlights of the Bangladesh country level findings of the Study, including stakeholder identified priorities and recommendations for enhancing environmental sustainability and gender equality in the sector in Bangladesh. The report is also available in Bangla language.

Separate country level reports are also available for the other three focus countries - Cambodia, Indonesia, and Viet Nam, with translated versions in relevant languages. A Synthesis Report is also available and provides regional level findings, priorities and recommendations drawing from empirical findings of each of each of the four focus countries. The Synthesis Report also provides a detailed explanation of the study methodology.

Recommendations for the textile and garment sector in the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery

“Build back better” is a term frequently used in recent global policymaking when referring to the need of societies and economies to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. In the global textile and garment sector, it has been employed to describe the need for a transformation to a more sustainable and resilient business model – one that reduces the environmental impact of production and consumption while redressing longstanding poor labour practices.

But when we drill down into the concept, what does “build back better” actually mean and who are we building back better for?

Crises provide a window of opportunity for stakeholders to come together and develop new or reprioritized shared interests to achieve recovery. Efforts that harness these new relationships and, importantly, include all groups – especially vulnerable and marginalized persons – can have better success than those that focus only on material or technological solutions.

But these new coalitions do not come about automatically. They typically require effort, time, orchestration and capacity-building. Thinking about how this is done in the context of the COVID-19 recovery should be a priority for the textile and garment sector as it looks to rebuild with sustainability at its core: Are all stakeholders part of the process? Do they all have the capacity to participate adequately and/or equally? As the majority of the sector’s workforce, are women workers participating in the process? What further steps and measures need to be put in place to ensure that collaboration and meaningful dialogue can take place?

This report uses a Delphi methodology, which is a well-established tool for iterative consensus-building among stakeholders, to determine the coalition of actors needed to help reform the textile and garment sector and what should be their priorities.

This Delphi study evolved from a workshop suggestion. The Building Back Better: Achieving Environmental Sustainability and Gender Equality in Post-COVID-19 in the Garment Sector in Asia workshop was a component of the Decent Work in the Garment Sector Supply Chains in Asia (DWGSC) Project, which the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency had funded in four countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia and Viet Nam. The workshop highlighted the double dividend from simultaneously progressing enhanced environmental sustainability and gender equality in the textile and garment sector.

The study involved 80 participants, including representatives of enterprises (31 owners and managers), several trade unions, workers’ organizations and industry associations along with government officials and other sector stakeholders. Of them, women accounted for 40 per cent. The participants were initially drawn from the Gender Taskforce, the Women’s Leadership Programme and the Textile and Garment Eco-Innovation Research Network (TERN), the three of which are also products of the DWGSC Project. Snowballing interview techniques were then used to find other participants. In each of the four countries, 20 stakeholders were interviewed.

The study focused on finding consensus for action relevant to environmental sustainability and gender equality.

Synthesis results on environmental sustainability

In each country analysis as well as the comparative analysis, the study participants single out environmental sustainability as a priority for action. It is an issue that is either emerging into the fore or under way in various forms at the enterprise and industry levels. The enterprise owners and managers in the study cited intrinsic internal motivations for undertaking related activities more often than external factors, such as brand- or buyer-led requirements. This finding shows that activities to build knowledge, awareness and intrinsic motivation of enterprises are important for enhancing environmental sustainability.

Across the four countries, 84 per cent of the enterprise owners and managers involved in the study cited environmental sustainability and increasing their performance in this area as a priority for their business. By country, there were differences, primarily in how waste and renewable energy and electricity sources are seen as opportunities. The differences relate to country- and locality-specific factors in the accessibility of renewable energy and energy efficiency equipment, as well as the availability of technical know-how and expertise in advising, installing and financing such opportunities.

At the regional level, the findings highlight environmental sustainability opportunities in the sector, providing opportunities for knowledge-sharing and capacity-building. The selection and implementation of opportunities depends on the availability of context-specific expertise and technology in each country's garment sector. This is especially the case when enterprise-level investments require large shared or common infrastructure investment, such as grid availability in the case of renewable energy, centralized water treatment facilities and waste and recycling infrastructure for recycling and circular economy activities.

A supportive ecosystem for sustainability is critical for progress at the enterprise and sector levels. There are many levers in creating this supportive ecosystem, with a conducive policy mix being critical. Such a mix must integrate environmental regulation with sector- or context-specific guidance, along with incentives and investment in skills development, knowledge creation and network-building. Due diligence obligations and sustainable purchasing practices from buyers and brands contribute to creating a supportive ecosystem if they also address cost- and benefit-sharing from the investment in this sustainability.

The impacts due to the lack of environmental sustainability fall disproportionately on the most vulnerable participants in the sector and the society, which in garment production means women and other marginalized groups. The benefits of enhancing environmental sustainability closely link to and mutually benefit from achieving gender equality.

Synthesis results on gender equality

Despite its highly feminized global workforce, the textile and garment sector is far from achieving gender equality. An estimated 80 per cent of workers in the sector are women,¹ although they are usually in low-paid roles with less employment security and subject to gender-based violence, harassment and discrimination.²

The advancement of gender equality and environmental sustainability are intrinsically connected. Not addressing the different needs and priorities of men and women can perpetuate the gender inequalities and lead to an “unjust” transition towards environmental sustainability across the sector. The textile and garment sector has been an important vector of employment for women and thus is well positioned to bring more progress to gender equality at work.

The Delphi study highlighted priorities for advancing gender equality in the sector, although they are not new or unknown. The issues include having clarity on the behaviours that constitute harassment, violence and discrimination, as well as the changes needed to reshape the cultural norms around unacceptable workplace practices. The deep power asymmetries in the labour force and the wider sector (which often follow gender lines) also need to be tackled so that victims and bystanders feel supported and empowered to report abuse when it occurs and seek recompense.

Capacity-building activities for multiple actors within the sector on gender equality and reducing violence, harassment and discrimination have demonstrated positive progress over the past decade. Successful capacity-building activities include the cocreation of gender equality policies and regulations and their implementation with enterprise owners and workers. Broader efforts that have proven effective include training and campaigns on gender equality, particularly those that involve actors at multiple levels of jurisdiction, such as government agencies, trade unions and industry associations.

The effectiveness of capacity-building activities is also determined by the internal resources available in specific enterprises. Similar issues of capacity were highlighted by the enterprise owners and managers in their ability to provide supportive family workplace policies. They argued that their limited business viability prevented them from investing further in their staff and supportive family policies and that the ability to maintain an adequate profit margin in the highly competitive marketplace of low-cost, high-volume throughput that many manufacturers operate in is very difficult. Addressing family-supportive work policies is another area where collaborative and networked governance could make progress.

Environmental sustainability and social responsibility programmes can focus on and build up internal resources and capabilities as well as compliance with legislation. New models for distributing the costs and benefits of achieving sustainability are needed because the existing ones have not led to significant progress in the sector on either environmental sustainability or social responsibility. One of the most common statements from the people participating in the Delphi study recognized the strong link between environmental sustainability and social responsibility in enterprises. As one interviewee noted, “The enterprises interested in environmental sustainability are also the ones interested in labour conditions.”

1 Better Work, “ILO 100: Ten Ways the ILO Has Transformed the Global Garment Industry” (2019).

2 ILO, *Moving the Needle – Gender Equality and Decent Work in Asia’s Garment Sector* (Thailand, 2021).

Recommendations from the study

These recommendations are for organizations that create and deliver sustainability programmes in the garment sector at the country and regional levels.

1. Assess and build collaborative capacity among sector stakeholders for designing and delivering stakeholder-led sustainability programmes that are inclusive and gender-transformative.
2. Strengthen governance arrangements in sustainability programme designs and execution to ensure that all stakeholders are involved in the process of creating activities that are truly created to support them, including women workers.
3. Include activities that recognize and incorporate the intrinsic motivations of participants for positive behaviour change – new and ongoing programme designs need to identify and catalyse these intrinsic motivations in enterprises and among individuals.
4. Develop both regional-level knowledge-sharing as well as tailored country- and sector-level environmental sustainability road maps to ensure they are inclusive and gender-responsive, with specific actions to address barriers, including awareness-raising, infrastructure needs and priorities, access to finance and investment readiness and skills-development strategies.
5. Develop a framework for regional industry knowledge-sharing on opportunities, including platforms for policymakers to design supportive policy mixes for environmental sustainability and gender equality in the sector.
6. Support ongoing collaborative, educational and capacity-building activities aimed at gender equality and tackling gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace. Addressing gender equality should be part of just transition planning. The International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) can provide momentum for a specific action agenda for gender equality.
7. Link programmes and (growing) industry advocacy on sustainable purchasing practices in the supply chains to the benefits available from these practices in achieving gender equality and family-supportive workplaces.

Bangladesh findings³

The Bangladeshi ready-made garment (RMG) sector has made progress in several areas of environmental sustainability and social responsibility. But the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have slowed the progress. Bangladesh has the largest number of Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design-certified factories (more than 150) in the world, with many other factories undergoing the certification process. However, gaps remain in mainstreaming environmental compliance in much of the RMG sector, including with most small and medium-sized garment factories. Decision-makers in these factories are either unaware or not yet interested in investing in achieving environmental sustainability. The Delphi study highlighted that a large section of its participants and most RMG factories in the study do not want to invest in environmental sustainability unless they are required to by their brands. Nor do they

³ The Bangladesh section of the report is drawn from the work of Mr Tamim Ahmed, who carried out the Delphi Study data collection in Bangladesh.

see short-term direct economic benefit from these investments.⁴ Many RMG enterprises consider environmental compliance as a non-core business issue and that it requires additional spending that is not available, especially nowadays as the overall sector recovers from more than two years of pandemic-related disruption.

Environmental sustainability

Good practices in environmental sustainability mostly focus on reducing emissions (investments for energy efficiency and use of renewable energy, etc.) rather than overall reduction of all pollutants involved in textile and garment manufacturing. The textile sector in Bangladesh is still considered separate from the garment sector. Thus, the sector and brand focus on RMG factories misses the supply chain link with the largest environmental impact. Study participants commented that brands and buyers do not consider environmental pollution of the backward linkage factories, and due to the difficulties in tracing them, these industries remain out of the formal monitoring of the Government's regulatory authorities. Although with more brands now considering scope 3 emissions, textile production and the environmental impacts of this production should become more evident.

Environmental compliance is further weakened by what the study participants described as an irregular and ineffective monitoring mechanism by the regulatory authorities. The participants noted that the irregular and ineffective monitoring by the regulatory bodies has provided opportunity for textile and garment factories to disregard their environmental responsibilities.

The outbreak of COVID-19 did not directly impact the status of the environmental practices of the RMG industry. The environmental pollution of this industry continues, similar to what was occurring in the pre-COVID period. However, given that factories were closed for a period during the crisis, the pollution level reduced to some extent. The pandemic may have had a significant impact on the ambitions of achieving environmental sustainability because, as the RMG factories struggled for survival during the lockdown periods, it was reduced as a priority. Due to the pandemic, final garment prices have decreased even though there has been an increase in the cost of production (price of raw materials, shipment, transportation, thread, etc.).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also created the risk of increased pollution in the RMG industry, compared to the pre-COVID period, particularly in waste production. The use of masks, hand gloves and sanitizer in the factories is creating additional wastage and pollution. Factory closures during the pandemic meant that some environment-related equipment, which needs to be in continuous operation, required additional maintenance and costs associated with factories being closed. This has led to increasing costs of environmental compliance at an already difficult time for the RMG enterprises.

In Bangladesh, the study identified several barriers to enhancing environmental sustainability in the RMG industry:

- the absence of an effective incentive mechanism in motivating RMG enterprises to be environmentally sustainable;
- the lack of accountability and weak monitoring of RMG environmental performance by government agencies;
- the limited role of brands in incentivizing environmental sustainability, including providing a premium price for sustainably produced items and using due diligence processes to ensure that

⁴ For example, suppliers only started using LED light, which requires less energy, extensively in their factories after the increase in the price of electricity.

- ▶ absence or underdeveloped nature of related industries required for environmental sustainability, including environmental management services and recycling services;
- ▶ the availability and accessibility of capital and credit support for suppliers and the absence of an appropriate legal framework to provide better credit access;
- ▶ lack of coordination among relevant government agencies, including those responsible for environmental regulation and monitoring, providing incentives for greening and trade and investment agencies;
- ▶ relatively higher upfront cost of investing in environmental sustainability compared with longer-term return on investment; and
- ▶ low awareness among suppliers about environmental issues, their impacts and how to address them, thus enabling apathy.
- ▶ Study participants cited several opportunities that could help enhance environmental sustainability in the Bangladeshi RMG sector. The increasing number of RMG green factories can influence environmental sustainability activities in two ways: One, by providing a “proof-of-concept effect” as evidence to other RMG factories that it is possible, within the existing market conditions, to invest in environmental sustainability. And two, although green RMG factories are not getting a significantly higher price from the brands for being green, there is evidence that they receive more orders because of their environmental investments.

The rising cost of production can be addressed by cleaner production and energy efficiency. Energy efficiency offers one way of balancing these increasing prices and is encouragement for investment in resource efficiency.

Globally, apparel brands have made several commitments regarding environmental sustainability, including many brands that have made significant emissions reduction targets (such as 50 per cent reduction by 2030). The study participants noted that if brands increased collaboration with suppliers to achieve these emissions reductions (alongside other environmental sustainability measures), it would greatly enhance the sustainability of the RMG sector. Some brands are planning to include environmental sustainability costs in their price, noting that in the longer-term environmental sustainability through energy efficiency as such are cost effective. This would provide a direct measure to increase the incentives for Bangladeshi suppliers to invest in environmental sustainability. Monitoring the performance of such incentives and extending this to a wider pool of suppliers will provide an avenue for increasing sustainability.

The Government has also been adopting policies to enhance environmental sustainability. Some of these policies include the creation of a credit fund (such as the Green Transformation Fund of US\$200 million) for investing in environmental sustainability (such as waste management, water conservation, energy efficiency, renewable energy, resource efficiency and recycling activities) and the exemption of tax (such as 2 per cent corporate tax cut for green-certified RMG factories). If the Government implemented policies for environmental compliance as per its global commitments, there could be a surge in the environmental compliance-related activities in the RMG sector.

The study participants pointed to the rapid upgrading of technology for environmental sustainability at the global level and thus in Bangladesh as another opportunity to enhance it. If the new technologies can significantly reduce the cost of production by ensuring efficient use of energy and these technologies are readily accessible in the domestic market, the participants noted that there would be strong demand from Bangladeshi suppliers to adopt them.

However, they also noted that the biggest opportunity lies with the increasing awareness of the significance of environmental sustainability and the need for environmental regulatory compliance among the enterprises. The participants emphasized that the awareness of environmental sustainability

among RMG owners is increasing because of more environmentally educated owners are coming into decision-making positions in the factories. But these numbers are coming from a low base of awareness. All the RMG enterprise owners and managers acknowledged interest in reducing waste, energy and investing more in renewable energy if they are provided adequate support.

The study participants highlighted several specific opportunities for addressing the barriers, specifically referencing the different roles and actions for different actors.

For government actors, building an effective suite of policies to incentivize the sector to make investments in enhancing environmental sustainability and social responsibility was mentioned as a priority. This would replace the existing system of tax break-based incentives and provide more comprehensive support as well as direct cash incentive and credit support (in the form of low interest loans and credit guarantees via private banks) for investments in environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

These incentives would need to be matched by stronger implementation and monitoring of the environmental standards and regulations by the Department of Environment. Increasing the effectiveness of the regulatory system in turn would require investments in increasing the skills, experience and resources available to public officials responsible for monitoring and enforcing compliance with environmental regulations. Gaps in these skills and experiences were cited as a critical constraint to improving environmental sustainability.

The Government, alongside civil society actors, could collaborate on developing data-sharing policies to ensure that enterprises, government agencies and the public have access to environmental data. These policies would increase the transparency of environment-related activities in the sector and enable government agencies to assist in monitoring (such as the Customs authorities monitoring the import of harmful chemicals) in the RMG sector.

International stakeholders and sourcing countries' governments can have a role in enhancing environmental sustainability and gender equality through due diligence requirements on brands and buyers to support sustainability-practising factories as well as including sustainable purchasing practices in international trade agreements and enforcing regulations and recourse for non-compliance. They can also help regulate responsible purchasing practices and ensure that responsible public procurement policies are implemented in their jurisdictions.

Brands and buyers can provide incentive or price premium that rewards factories that invest in enhanced sustainability practices, including both environmental sustainability and gender equality. Brands can consider initiatives other than price, such as ensuring that RMG factories that prioritize environmental sustainability and social responsibility receive long-term orders, larger orders or assistance to access low-interest credit support. Reducing carbon emissions, particularly scope 3 emissions, is rapidly emerging as a priority for brands and buyers. While this is an important issue, carbon emissions alone should not be the focus for collaboration with suppliers. Reducing all forms of pollution in the supply chain, including chemical and water pollution, should be included.

The four industry associations in Bangladesh⁵ should each take on a role in coordinating and convening stakeholders to ensure the provision of centralized effluent treatment plants in areas where clusters of factories are collocated. This would reduce the coordination and usage costs to individual factories.

These industry associations can also collaborate with the Government, brands, development partners and workers' organizations to develop and implement practical training and awareness-raising activities for enterprise owners and workers on environmental sustainability. The training should be comprehensive, and outcomes and improved performance should be regularly assessed.

The study participants all noted the need for a strong collective approach from all stakeholders in addressing environmental sustainability in the post-COVID-19 period. In this regard, building consensus

⁵ Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association, Bangladesh Textile Mills Association and Bangladesh Employers Federation.

among stakeholders, particularly around areas of agreement and disagreement, will be crucial in going forward.

Gender equality

There was disagreement among the study participants regarding gender equality in the Bangladeshi RMG sector, particularly the presence and degree of gender inequality. Despite this disagreement, they concurred that the participation of the female workforce at the managerial level is significantly low and needs to be increased.

The participants noted that the pandemic has significantly disrupted progress towards gender equality in the RMG sector. Although overall job losses due to the pandemic has been proportional between women and men workers in Bangladesh, the number of job losses was greater for women workers because of their larger numbers in the sector. In addition, the family of women workers suffered more because they were less likely to receive wages, entitlement benefits (in case of job loss), financial support, access to health care facilities and to meet their nutritional needs.

According to the interviewed suppliers, the prevalence of violence and harassment in RMG workplaces has reduced in the past few years. They noted that when violence or harassment does occur, there are now stricter measures to address it. However, other stakeholders interviewed highlighted that there are real gaps in the understanding of the occurrence and context of violence and harassment in factories. Increased work hours (including forced overtime), verbal abuse in the case of non-fulfilment of the target, etc., are some common forms of harassment induced by the pandemic situation.⁶ Workplace harassment is particularly gender-based because in most cases, men work as supervisors, and harassment tends to flow from (men) supervisors to (women) workers.

Climate change is likely to be a further stressor on the work environment in the textile and garment factories. A recent ILO working paper⁷ highlighted case study evidence from Bangladesh showing that climate change, particularly heat impacts, will further increase the incidence of gender-based violence and harassment in the garment sector. Because it is already pervasive throughout the garment sector and because perceived or actual lower productivity is a driver of violence and harassment in the workplace, falling levels of productivity due to climate change impacts (extreme weather events such as floods, storms and heat waves) has the potential to result in heightened levels of violence and harassment against women garment workers. The consequences resulting from these intersecting issues suggest that unless meaningful action is taken to curb the effects of climate change and violence and harassment, individually and together, the garment sector in Asia could face additional challenges in remaining competitive and viable in the future.

The interviews highlighted that stakeholders believe most factories do not have an effective anti-sexual harassment committee. Additionally, there is no requirement for factories in Bangladesh to support working parents and provide parental leave. The study participants commented that some factories, especially small and medium-sized factories, do not follow the maternity leave policy as per the law. In addition, most in-factory childcare services in the sector are of poor quality as is their infrastructure and child safety measures. They also emphasized that there is a tendency among enterprises to discourage workers in using onsite childcare facilities because it constitutes an additional cost for the factory.

6 Ibid.

7 Laurel Anderson Hoffner et al., "Turning Up the Heat: Exploring Potential Links Between Climate Change and Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in the Garment Sector", ILO Working Paper No. 31 (ILO, 2021).

The study participants cited the following opportunities for enhancing gender equality in the workplace:

- ▶ Invest in skills training for women. There is a need for female workers to have increased access to skills training opportunities (particularly for high-skill and highly paid jobs and tasks, where their participation currently is low).
- ▶ Adopt equality and equal opportunity policies and strategies and ensure that women workers are employed at different levels of RMG jobs, including by setting targets towards gender parity (between 45 per cent and 55 per cent of women or men). For example, there are usually no women workers in the cutting section. Employers need to ensure that they increase the ratio in these types of jobs gradually. Affirmative policies can be considered.⁸
- ▶ Ensure family-friendly environment for workers in the factory, built on dialogue that includes both women and men, such as facilitating access to quality childcare facilities, safe transportation, female-friendly toilet facilities and accessible health care facilities.
- ▶ Talk more about gender equality issues with all labour organizations working collaboratively under a common agenda for ensuring gender equality as part of workers' rights (this is directed to trade unions).
- ▶ Increase awareness with suppliers and workers on the importance and benefits of gender equality. Workers need to be aware of their rights, and brands, buyers, international and national development partners and NGOs should support this capacity-development.
- ▶ Ratify the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, 2000 (No. 190). Bangladesh is investigating ratifying this Convention, yet there was mixed awareness among the study participants of its importance. Several people referenced the Convention as important in tackling violence and harassment in the RMG sector.
- ▶ Provide gender-sensitive training for labour inspectors to ensure that they have the specific skills and knowledge in gender-related issues to identify and address these issues during labour inspections. Also target the recruitment of more women inspectors.
- ▶ Strengthen the mandate and accountability for relevant government agencies, including giving the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) the authority to bring sanctions against factories for malpractice, with DIFE also coming under increasing transparent oversight for performance on these issues.

⁸ The European Commission defined these as a policy or programme, with the goal of achieving a more equal society, that provides benefits to groups of individuals who are perceived to have been discriminated against in the past.

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