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LEGAL COMPLIANCE WITH OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH IN READY-MADE GARMENT FACTORIES OF BANGLADESH: EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED INDUSTRIAL ZONES

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1. Introduction

The ready-made garment (RMG) sector is a cornerstone of Bangladesh's economy, contributing over 80% of the country's exports and providing employment to millions, particularly women (BGMEA, 2024; World Bank, 2023). Despite its economic significance, the sector is fraught with occupational risks, including workplace accidents, fire hazards, and ergonomic injuries, highlighting the critical need for effective Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) governance (ILO, 2022; Hämäläinen, Takala & Kiat, 2022). Catastrophic events such as the Tazreen Fashions fire (2012) and the Rana Plaza collapse (2013) exposed severe shortcomings in workplace safety standards, weak enforcement of OSH regulations, and widespread non-compliance among factory owners (Hossain & Alam, 2018). These incidents drew global attention to the hazardous working conditions of garment workers and underscored pressing concerns about the effectiveness of Bangladesh's OSH laws and their implementation mechanisms. Ensuring safe and healthy working environments is not only a legal requirement but also a moral and economic imperative, as effective OSH practices promote worker well-being, productivity, and sustainable industrial development (ILO, 2022). Bangladesh enacted OSH laws under the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, along with related regulations, to ensure safe working conditions in factories. The Act outlines specific provisions concerning fire safety, building integrity, ventilation, working hours, occupational diseases, and compensation for work-related injuries. Despite this legal framework, practical enforcement remains a significant challenge. Empirical evidence suggests that many factories, particularly small and subcontracted units, frequently fail to comply fully with statutory OSH requirements (Ahmed & Hossain, 2021).

Previous studies have highlighted multiple barriers to effective OSH compliance, including weak institutional capacity, corruption, inadequate labour inspection, lack of awareness among workers, and reluctance among employers to invest in safety improvements (Islam et al., 2019;

Rahim & Chowdhury, 2022). While several surveys and assessments have been conducted by international organizations, there remains a lack of comprehensive, locally grounded research focusing on compliance patterns across key industrial zones, particularly Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur. These regions represent the heart of Bangladesh's garment production network and collectively account for a substantial portion of national garment exports (Export Promotion Bureau, 2023). Studying these areas can provide valuable insights into the current status of OSH law enforcement and compliance behaviour among factory owners. Against this backdrop, the present study seeks to assess the extent of compliance with occupational safety and health laws in RMG factories located in Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur. It aims to identify existing gaps between statutory requirements and actual practices, and to explore the factors influencing compliance levels. The study also evaluates the role of government agencies, factory management, and workers' participation in maintaining safety standards. By combining legal analysis with empirical evidence, the research aspires to contribute to the broader discourse on labour governance and industrial safety in Bangladesh. In doing so, this study responds to an urgent need for evidence-based policy recommendations that can strengthen the implementation of OSH laws and promote sustainable industrial practices. As Bangladesh moves toward its goal of achieving upper-middle-income status by 2031, ensuring a safe and compliant workplace in its largest export industry is indispensable. The findings of this research will therefore serve as a valuable resource for policymakers, industry leaders, trade unions, and international development partners working toward improving occupational safety and health standards in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

2. Objectives

The purpose of this study is to systematically evaluate the current state of OSH compliance in Bangladesh's readymade garment industry, focusing on factories located in Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur district of Dhaka division. Accordingly, this research has been designed around the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the status of compliance with existing Occupational Safety and Health laws in selected readymade garment factories
2. To identify the key factors influencing OSH compliance
3. To propose actionable policy recommendations aimed at strengthening OSH compliance frameworks and promoting a sustainable culture of workplace safety in the RMG sector

In achieving these objectives, the study seeks to generate effective insights that can guide

policymakers, factory owners, and development partners toward more effective implementation of OSH laws. The outcomes are expected to contribute meaningfully to the national dialogue on labour governance, enhancing the overall safety, productivity, and international credibility of Bangladesh's garment industry.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Global Literature

Globally, occupational safety and health compliance has emerged as a critical pillar of sustainable industrial growth. The International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasizes that ensuring safe working conditions is both a fundamental human right and an economic necessity that directly influences productivity and social stability (ILO, 2022). Studies from industrialized nations have demonstrated that strong regulatory frameworks, coupled with consistent enforcement, lead to lower accident rates, reduced absenteeism, and enhanced worker morale (Clarke & Ward, 2019). However, in many developing economies, the enforcement of OSH laws remains weak due to institutional constraints, lack of resources, and informal employment structures. Global literature also highlights the role of globalization and supply chain governance in shaping compliance behaviour. Scholars argue that multinational brands exert significant influence on suppliers in developing countries through codes of conduct, audits, and certification systems (Locke, 2013; Bartley, 2018). However, these market-based approaches can produce uneven outcomes. factories linked to major buyers tend to comply more due to reputational pressures, while smaller subcontracted units often remain outside formal monitoring systems (Anner, 2020). Moreover, the literature points to a growing trend of "audit fatigue," where compliance becomes procedural rather than substantive, raising questions about the sustainability of externally driven reforms (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018).

3.2 Regional Literature

In the South Asian context, OSH governance in export-oriented industries shares similar challenges—rapid industrialization, low-cost competition, and weak institutional oversight. Research on India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Cambodia reveals widespread non-compliance with OSH laws, particularly in garments, textiles, and leather sectors. The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh (2013) triggered renewed attention to OSH compliance across the region, leading to the proliferation of safety accords, buyer-driven inspection systems, and voluntary codes of conduct (Islam & Deegan, 2022).

Comparative studies indicate that while these initiatives have improved awareness and

infrastructure, long-term compliance remains hindered by systemic factors such as corruption, informal employment, and the absence of effective social dialogue (Khan et al., 2020). In countries like Vietnam and Indonesia, government–industry collaboration and international partnerships have enhanced OSH performance (Nguyen et al., 2021). In contrast, South Asian countries continue to rely heavily on donor-supported and brand-driven initiatives rather than institutionalized state enforcement. This suggests that while global supply chain pressure can trigger short-term reforms, sustainable compliance requires a strong national legal framework, effective inspection systems, and worker empowerment (Rahman, 2022).

3.3 Bangladesh Literature

The readymade garment industry in Bangladesh represents the backbone of the national economy but also the epicentre of workplace safety concerns. The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 constitute the principal legal framework for regulating occupational safety, fire prevention, ventilation, sanitation, and compensation for occupational injuries. In addition, Despite this comprehensive legal architecture, enforcement remains inconsistent. Studies indicate that compliance levels vary significantly across factories depending on ownership, size, and buyer affiliation (Hossain & Alam, 2018; Ahmed & Hossain, 2021). The Rana Plaza and Tazreen Fashions tragedies exposed deep-rooted weaknesses in regulatory enforcement, corruption, and negligence among inspection authorities (Barua & Ansary, 2019). In response, two major initiatives—the Accord on Fire and Building Safety (2013) and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (2013) introduced independent inspections and remediation programs across thousands of factories. These programs significantly improved structural and fire safety compliance, yet they primarily covered export-oriented factories linked to international brands (Barua et al., 2020). Following the expiry of the Accord and Alliance, the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) was established in 2020 as a national tripartite mechanism involving brands, factory owners, and labour representatives. While the RSC continues inspections and remediation, recent reports suggest that smaller subcontracting units and informal factories remain largely outside its purview (RSC, 2021; CPD, 2023). Furthermore, most studies emphasize visible safety issues—building integrity, fire exits, and emergency preparedness, whereas broader occupational health issues such as ergonomics, chemical exposure, and mental health receive less attention (Yuan et al., 2022). Research by Rahim and Chowdhury (2022) and Islam et al. (2019) further highlights institutional weaknesses such as inadequate inspector training, overlapping mandates between ministries, and limited worker participation in safety committees. Additionally, a culture of non-reporting persists, where

workers often avoid raising safety concerns due to fear of job loss or retaliation (Khan & Hoque, 2021). These findings suggest that while progress has been achieved in the post-Rana Plaza era, systemic and behavioural barriers continue to impede full OSH compliance in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

3.4 Literature Gap

Although the literature provides valuable insights into OSH governance and compliance dynamics, several critical gaps remain unaddressed. First, most global and regional studies focus on the structural aspects of OSH governance, such as the role of brands, legislation, and audits but pay limited attention to local implementation realities within specific industrial zones. The diversity of compliance outcomes across factory clusters suggests that local contexts matter, yet systematic comparisons between major production hubs such as Dhaka, Ashulia, and Gazipur remain scarce.

Second, the existing Bangladesh-focused literature is dominated by case studies of high-profile incidents or Accord/Alliance-covered factories. There is a paucity of research on small and medium-sized factories and subcontractors, which represent a significant portion of the industry but often operate informally and outside formal inspection networks (CPD, 2023). Without data from these units, national-level compliance assessments may present an incomplete picture. Third, most studies concentrate on physical safety—fire exits, building design, and electrical safety—while neglecting occupational health dimensions such as ergonomic strain, air quality, noise exposure, and psychosocial well-being. These aspects are crucial for sustainable OSH compliance and long-term worker health (Yuan et al., 2022). Fourth, few studies integrate a legal compliance perspective that compares statutory requirements under the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 with actual workplace practices. A legal–empirical approach can provide clearer insights into where and why gaps persist between law and implementation. Finally, policy recommendations in existing research often remain broad, emphasizing capacity building or training without identifying context-specific and actionable strategies. There is a clear need for research that translates findings into concrete policy and operational recommendations tailored to the realities of Bangladesh's industrial zones. Given these gaps, the present study seeks to provide a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of OSH law compliance across factories located in Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur, three regions that collectively represent the industrial core of Bangladesh's garment sector. By combining legal review, field-level data, and stakeholder perspectives, the study aims to contribute original insights that can guide both national policymakers and international stakeholders in

strengthening the governance of occupational safety and health in Bangladesh's RMG industry.

4. Methods and Materials

4.1 Study Design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the compliance status of Occupational Safety and Health laws in the readymade garment industry of Bangladesh. The qualitative approach was selected because OSH compliance is a complex and context-dependent phenomenon that involves perceptions, behaviours, institutional relationships, and power dynamics among different stakeholders. Qualitative inquiry allows a deeper understanding of how laws are interpreted and implemented at the factory level, beyond numerical indicators (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research explored workers' and management experiences, enforcement mechanisms, and governance challenges related to OSH compliance. The study focused on two categories of factories, export-oriented factories and subcontract factories—to capture variations in compliance culture, resource allocation, and external monitoring.

4.2 Population of the Study

The research was conducted in three major industrial regions of Bangladesh- Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur district of Dhaka division which collectively represent the country's primary RMG production belt. These locations were chosen because of their high concentration of garment factories, long history of industrial activity, and frequent engagement with both domestic and international buyers (BGMEA, 2023). The selected sites also provided diversity in factory scale, workforce characteristics, and market orientation. A total of eight factories were purposively selected for this study: four export-oriented factories and four subcontract factories. The participants included a broad range of stakeholders including workers, supervisors, compliance managers, as well as representatives from Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), government inspection agencies and trade unions. These participants were purposefully selected due to their professional experience, authoritative roles, and direct engagement with OSH issues within the RMG sector. The diversity of participants helped to triangulate perspectives and enhance the validity of findings.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected between March and October 2025 using four qualitative techniques: Focus

Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), In-depth Interviews (IDIs), and Non-participant Observation. Three FGDs were conducted, each consisting of 8-10 participants. Two groups comprised workers from subcontract factories, and one group included workers from export-oriented factories. Inclusion criteria required participants to be at least 18 years of age, in accordance with the legal working age provisions of Bangladesh. Participants were also required to be actively employed in an RMG factory at the time of data collection and to have a minimum of one year of continuous work experience in their current institution. Two KIIs were conducted with officials from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) and BGMEA. The KIIs focused on institutional enforcement mechanisms, inspection challenges, and inter-agency coordination. A total of eleven in-depth interviews were carried out with supervisors, compliance officers, trade Union Leaders, Employers, Labour Law Experts, Lawyers of Labour Court and medical officers. Non-participant observations were also conducted in all eight factories. Observations focused on physical and environmental aspects of workplace safety—such as building layout, ventilation, sanitation, fire exits, and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). Field notes were maintained to capture interactions, behaviours, and non-verbal cues that might not have been explicitly mentioned in interviews. All interviews and FGDs were conducted in Bangla and later translated into English for analysis. Prior to fieldwork, data collection tools were reviewed by two academic experts in occupational health to ensure content validity and ethical compliance.

4.4 Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis was used to examine qualitative data from FGDs, KIIs, and IDIs. Verbatim transcripts were manually reviewed to identify key issues, which were organized into themes and subthemes reflecting workers' experiences, factory practices, and policymakers' perspectives. FGDs captured collective experiences, IDIs individual accounts, and KIIs institutional insights. Themes were triangulated with policy documents and legal frameworks to contextualize OSH practices and compliance dynamics in Bangladesh's RMG sector.

4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the concerned committee of the Binary University Malaysia. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and written consent was obtained prior to participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained, and no identifying information about individuals or factories was recorded. Interviews were

conducted during non-working hours to avoid interference with production schedules. Special sensitivity was observed when interviewing female workers to ensure comfort and privacy. Data were securely stored and accessible only to the research team.

4.6 Limitations

While the qualitative design offered deep insights into OSH compliance dynamics, the study was limited to a small sample of factories in three regions. The findings, therefore, may not be generalizable to the entire RMG sector. Nonetheless, the purposive selection of diverse factory types and stakeholder groups enhances the depth and relevance of the results, providing a strong foundation for further mixed-method or quantitative research in this area.

5. Results and Discussion

This section presents the comprehensive findings derived from a rigorous manual thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected for the study. The analysis revealed two major thematic domains regarding OSH compliance in the RMG sector of Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur:

1. Compliance status with existing OSH laws
2. Challenges and barriers to effective OSH governance

The findings are presented below with illustrative quotations and observations, followed by discussion in relation to the global, regional, and Bangladesh-specific literature.

5.1 Compliance Status with OSH Laws

This theme captures significant deficiencies in OSH compliance in Bangladesh's ready-made garment sector. The findings reveal widespread inadequacies in access to safe drinking water, ventilation and temperature control, healthcare services, sanitation and hygiene, and occupational health protection, with conditions being particularly poor in sub-contract factories. These shortcomings reflect weak compliance with the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, and expose workers to heightened health risks.

Access to safe and cool drinking water emerged as a major concern, especially during the summer months. Despite legal provisions requiring the supply of cool drinking water in large factories, many workers reported receiving warm or insufficient water, while others expressed doubts about its purity. As one female worker from a sub-contract factory stated, *"We usually bring drinking water from home as there is no sufficient supply of pure drinking water."*

Poor ventilation and excessive heat were also frequently reported, particularly in sub-contract

factories. Workers described working long hours in congested rooms with inadequate airflow, leading to dehydration, illness, and reduced productivity.

Healthcare facilities within factories were found to be largely inadequate. Although the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 mandates a sick room with a dispensary and qualified medical personnel in factories employing more than 300 workers, most factories—particularly sub-contract units—failed to meet these standards. Doctor visits were irregular, nurses were often absent, and first-aid boxes were either insufficient or poorly equipped. Such deficiencies significantly undermine workers' access to timely medical care and increase vulnerability during workplace emergencies.

Sanitation and hygiene conditions further reflected weak legal compliance. While most factories provided separate toilets for male and female workers, many participants—especially from sub-contract units—reported unhygienic conditions, inadequate cleaning practices, and the absence of basic supplies such as soap.

Fire safety emerged as a critical concern, particularly regarding workers' preparedness and the functionality of safety measures. Participants from export-oriented factories confirmed the presence of fire-fighting equipment; however, most admitted they lacked the knowledge to operate fire extinguishers, and several reported that no fire drills had been conducted in the previous year. Observations further revealed blocked fire exits, insufficient fire-fighting devices, and the absence of designated fire assembly points in some factories. A compliance manager acknowledged that the lack of a proper assembly point poses a serious safety risk during emergencies. These findings indicate partial and largely procedural compliance, with limited emphasis on practical training and effective evacuation planning. Fire safety conditions were considerably worse in sub-contract factories. Many participants reported the absence or non-functionality of fire extinguishers, alarms, and accessible exits, and stated that fire drills were either never conducted or performed only during inspections. As one participant explained, *"We never had a fire drill. I don't even know where the fire extinguisher is kept. If there's a fire, we'll panic and run—there is no training or proper exit."* This lack of preparedness constitutes a clear violation of fire safety obligations under the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, and places workers at significant risk.

Marked disparities were also observed in building conditions and machinery safety. According to a Labour Inspector, export-oriented factories—particularly those subject to international buyer inspections—generally maintain safer infrastructure, follow building codes, and use machinery equipped with safety guards. In contrast, sub-contract factories often operate in poorly maintained buildings with outdated and hazardous machinery. Workplace conditions

were further aggravated by excessive noise and overcrowding. Several participants reported constant exposure to loud noise from old or malfunctioning exhaust fans, contributing to headaches, stress, and hearing problems. Congested production floors were common, with many factories failing to meet the legally prescribed minimum space per worker.

The provision and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) also revealed mixed compliance. While some export-oriented factories supply PPE, workers' usage remains inconsistent. A welfare officer observed, *"We provide PPE, but sometimes the workers are negligent in using them... As a result, they occasionally sustain minor injuries or suffer from illnesses caused by exposure to dust."* In contrast, PPE was largely absent in sub-contract factories, where workers commonly reported needle injuries, burns, and dust-related illnesses due to the lack of basic protective gear.

Significant disparities in working conditions, welfare provisions, and occupational safety were observed between export-oriented and sub-contract garment factories. Workers in export-oriented factories generally reported standard working hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 or 5:00 p.m., whereas those in sub-contract factories frequently worked 10 to 12 hours daily, often without overtime compensation or proper rest breaks. Such practices contravene the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, which regulates working hours, rest intervals, and overtime payments. Female workers were particularly affected, as long shifts and high production targets, combined with domestic responsibilities, resulted in severe physical and mental exhaustion, disrupted breastfeeding, and heightened stress. One worker from a sub-contract factory noted, *"It's difficult to work 12 hours or more a day... We often fall sick, and even then, we don't get leave when we need it."*

Leave entitlements were also inconsistently applied. While export-oriented factories largely permitted sick leave, sub-contract factory workers reported limited or no access to leave, often facing wage deductions for absences. Maternity protections under Section 46 of the Bangladesh Labour Act were frequently ignored, with pregnant women forced to resign and re-employment contingent on employer discretion. Compensation for work-related injuries was similarly inadequate, particularly in sub-contract factories, exposing workers to financial hardship.

Collectively, these findings indicate that deficiencies in occupational safety, welfare provisions, and social protection are rooted in broader structural weaknesses in enforcement and governance. Reliance on buyer-driven compliance, limited state oversight, and insufficient managerial commitment have produced a fragmented and unequal OSH system in Bangladesh's RMG sector, disproportionately affecting workers in subcontracted factories. While export-oriented factories often demonstrate better compliance due to buyer pressure,

persistent gaps in training, enforcement, and implementation remain. In contrast, subcontracted units experience weak oversight and systemic non-compliance, undermining workers' health, safety, and dignity.

5.2 Challenges and Barriers to OSH Compliance

Several interrelated barriers emerged from the qualitative data:

5.2.1 Irregular Inspection and Monitoring

According to the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006, Inspectors from the Department of Inspection for Factories and Establishments (DIFE) are responsible for monitoring and ensuring the implementation of legal provisions in all factories. However, during Focus Group Discussions, most workers reported never seeing government officials inspecting their workplaces. In rare instances of inspections, officials reportedly spoke only with employers, ignoring workers' perspectives. Inspections typically occurred only after accidents or major incidents. Employers admitted that no DIFE inspector had visited their factories in years.

DIFE officials reported significant challenges in enforcing OSH regulations. Severe staff shortages leave Chattogram's 1,200 factories supervised by only 23 inspectors, and Narayanganj's 3,400 factories by 14 inspectors. Inspectors' wide jurisdictions, covering multiple regions, make regular inspections nearly impossible. Enforcement is further hindered by factory owners' political influence, which often obstructs thorough inspections. A DIFE official noted: *"We want to conduct thorough inspections, but in many cases, we face undue interference. Political connections and influence from powerful factory owners often obstruct our work."*

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) emphasized the need for government capacity-building and collaborative regulation. A BGMEA representative stated: *"The government has insufficient capacity to monitor the working environment of the factories with only one hundred labour inspectors for over 5000 factories in Dhaka. Without sufficient oversight, there is little incentive for employers to be accountable. Factory practices are driven by buyers' demands, not government regulations."*

5.2.2 Lack of Legal Awareness and Training

Many participants reported minimal understanding of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) provisions under the Bangladesh Labour Act. Workers in sub-contract factories had never received training on OSH or labour laws, leaving them unaware of their rights and safety measures. Supervisors, compliance officers, and welfare officers were typically the only staff

with clear knowledge of legal provisions, while many employers themselves lacked sufficient awareness.

Despite Section 348 of the Bangladesh Labour Act mandating government-organized training for officers, workers, and employers, such initiatives were rarely observed in practice. A welfare officer highlighted the inadequacy of current training programs: *“Existing training initiatives are insufficient to ensure workers’ awareness and compliance. Limited training opportunities for DIFE inspectors themselves further weakened enforcement capacities (Akhter, 2019; Chowdhury et al., 2020).*

5.2.3 Inadequate Penalties and Legal Consequences

The Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006 prescribes fines ranging from BDT 5,000 to BDT 25,000 for serious violations such as breaches of occupational safety, non-payment of wages, or denial of leave. However, these fines are extremely nominal for large factory owners and have little deterrent effect. While the Act provides for imprisonment in certain cases, such sanctions are rarely imposed. Courts often resort to issuing warnings or minimal penalties. This leniency allows employers to violate workers’ rights with little consequence, weakening the rule of law in the labour sector. The Act does not contain provisions for progressive or escalating penalties in the case of repeat violations. Employers who continuously ignore labour standards face the same level of punishment each time, which fails to create meaningful accountability. This legal gap allows persistent offenders to operate with impunity, making violations a manageable cost of doing business rather than a legal or ethical concern. The absence of cumulative consequences undermines the credibility and effectiveness of the law.

5.2.4 Unmonitored Subcontract Factories

According to Mapped in Bangladesh (MiB), as of June 2022, 1,104 out of 3,861 mapped garment factories functioned as non-member units, employing approximately 0.22 million workers, 40.53% male and 59.47% female (RMG Bangladesh, 2022). These subcontractors often operate in older or poorly maintained buildings and remain largely invisible within formal supply chain audits, posing substantial risks to worker safety and Bangladesh’s international reputation. These factories often lack fire safety, first aid, proper ventilation, maternity benefits, and adequate healthcare facilities. They are typically unregistered, excluded from BGMEA or BKMEA membership, and evade inspections.

A DIFE official noted: *“Many of these sub-contracting units are not even formally registered. Without proper registration, we cannot officially inspect them, and as a result, they continue*

their operations without complying with even the minimum legal standards.”

Workers in sub-contract factories are highly vulnerable, often informally employed, paid below minimum wage, and denied basic rights, with no legal recourse in case of accidents or disputes. Workers in sub-contract factories are highly vulnerable, often informally employed, paid below minimum wage, and denied basic rights, with no legal recourse in case of accidents or disputes.

5.2.5 Corruption and Influence within Enforcement Agencies

Corruption and political influence undermine enforcement effectiveness. Inspectors were reported to accept bribes, conduct superficial inspections, or visit factories selectively, often coinciding with festivals such as Eid. A labour lawyer observed:

“There is a tacit culture of negotiation between factory owners and inspectors... violations are deliberately overlooked in exchange for unofficial payments.”

Judges and trade union leaders emphasized that employer mindset, viewing compliance as an economic burden rather than a legal obligation, perpetuates non-compliance. DIFE’s complaints mechanisms and accident reporting systems remain ineffective, further limiting accountability.

5.2.6 Employer Attitudes and Profit-Driven Priorities

Many employers in the RMG sector are primarily focused on fulfilling international orders and maximizing profit margins. Compliance with labour laws is often viewed as a secondary concern—something to be managed only to the extent required by buyers. When buyers do not strictly monitor labour practices, factory owners are less likely to invest in worker welfare or safety improvements. In some cases, employers disregard legal obligations altogether, especially in sub-contract factories, which operate under even looser scrutiny. This profit-first mentality leads to widespread underpayment, overwork, and unsafe working conditions for workers.

The above results illustrate the persistent duality in OSH compliance across Bangladesh’s RMG sector. Export-oriented factories generally comply with core legal and buyer-driven standards, while subcontract factories remain vulnerable to safety risks. This supports previous literature highlighting the “buyer-driven compliance” model as effective for certain hazards but insufficient for systemic improvements in the wider industrial ecosystem (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018; Anner, 2020). Moreover, the study highlights institutional and behavioural determinants of compliance. Weak inspection regimes, limited resources, and management

prioritization of production over safety contribute to uneven adherence. Worker knowledge and participation, while slightly better in export-oriented factories, remain insufficient to create a proactive safety culture.

The thematic analysis also highlights a gap between legal provisions and their practical implementation. Although the Bangladesh Labour Act stipulates comprehensive OSH requirements, the effectiveness of these laws at the factory level is heavily influenced by enforcement practices, awareness, and organizational safety culture.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1 Recommendations

Based on the findings of this qualitative study, a series of actionable recommendations are proposed to improve compliance with OSH laws in Bangladesh's RMG sector. These recommendations address the multi-level challenges identified, targeting government institutions, factory management, workers, and international stakeholders.

6.1.1 Strengthening Institutional Capacity and Regulatory Enforcement

- DIFE should increase inspection frequency, particularly targeting subcontract factories which are currently under-monitored. Resource allocation for hiring more trained inspectors and providing mobility support will be crucial.
- Establish uniform inspection checklists and reporting formats to ensure consistency in assessing compliance across factories. Integration of digital reporting systems could enhance transparency and accountability.
- Inter-agency collaboration between DIFE, fire services, and labour ministries should be formalized to prevent overlapping responsibilities and improve enforcement efficiency.

6.1.2 Promoting Management Commitment and Organizational Safety Culture

- Factory owners and managers should undergo periodic OSH training to improve awareness of legal obligations and ethical responsibilities toward workers.
- Development of recognition schemes or certification for high-compliance factories could encourage management to adopt proactive safety measures.
- Both export-oriented and subcontract factories should allocate dedicated funds for PPE, fire safety infrastructure, ergonomic adjustments, and health services.

6.1.3 Enhancing Worker Awareness, Participation, and Empowerment

- Structured training sessions for workers should be conducted, including practical demonstrations of fire drills, chemical handling, and ergonomic practices.
- Formation of participatory safety committees, including elected worker representatives, can create channels for reporting hazards and facilitating dialogue with management.
- Clear policies must ensure that workers who report violations are protected against discrimination or dismissal, promoting a culture of accountability and empowerment.

6.1.4 Expanding Buyer and Stakeholder Engagement

- International brands and retailers should include subcontract factories in compliance programs to mitigate safety gaps in informal supply chains.
- Multi-stakeholder initiatives involving government, buyers, factory associations, and NGOs can provide technical support, capacity building, and emergency preparedness training.
- Linking export privileges or preferential contracts to verified OSH compliance could encourage factories to maintain higher standards.

6.2 Conclusion

This study provides an in-depth qualitative examination of OSH compliance in Bangladesh's RMG sector, comparing export-oriented and subcontract factories in Savar, Ashulia, and Gazipur. The findings reveal a dual-tiered compliance landscape: export-oriented factories generally meet basic legal and buyer-driven standards, while subcontract factories often operate with minimal oversight and insufficient safety measures. Institutional factors such as limited inspection capacity, irregular enforcement, and weak coordination among regulatory bodies, combined with managerial priorities emphasizing production over safety, create persistent compliance gaps. In addition, workers' limited awareness and participation further hinder the development of a proactive safety culture. The study underscores the gap between the legislation and the actual practice, highlighting that the mere existence of OSH laws does not guarantee effective compliance. Multi-level interventions—strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing management commitment, empowering workers, and engaging international stakeholders—are essential for creating safer work environments. By implementing the recommended measures, policymakers, factory owners, and industry associations can reduce occupational hazards, protect worker well-being, and enhance the overall sustainability and international reputation of Bangladesh's RMG sector. These findings

contribute to both scholarly understanding and practical policy guidance, emphasizing that achieving consistent OSH compliance requires coordinated, systemic, and context-sensitive strategies rather than reliance on isolated interventions.

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