

REVIEW ARTICLE

**THE NEW WAGE STRUCTURE FOR THE FEMALE RMG WORKERS IN BANGLADESH:  
 NEW SCOPE OF EMPOWERMENT OR LEADING TO FURTHER CHALLENGES**

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ABSTRACT

Despite being the second largest exporter in the global apparel industry, Bangladesh is counted among the countries with lowest minimum wage. In spite of being the lowest paid female labour force compared to other apparel exporting countries, grass root female workers occupying almost 70% of the man-power proportion of RMG industry in Bangladesh is contributing to the country's wider economy and also their individual economic empowerment. A new wage structure for RMG workers was set in November, 2023 and practically implemented from January, 2024. This paper aims to identify the correlation between the monetary increment and its impacts on the empowerment of female RMG workers both in their private and professional spheres of life, focusing on the elements of empowerment, such as: resource, agency and outcome. This is qualitative research, especially focused on meeting the requirements of feminist research methodology, conducted among 15 female RMG workers of two knitwear industries located respectively in Gazipur and Sreepur, near Dhaka. In addition, the opinions of the decision-making persons associated to RMG sector was assessed while preparing the paper. The study depicts that economic enhancement can't be the sole indicator for ensuring macro-level empowerment in a working-class Bangladeshi women's life. Rather empowerment is influenced, allocated and practiced mostly in light of the socio-economic practices and the norms of classic South-Asian patriarchy.

KEYWORDS

Wage, Female RMG workers, Empowerment

1. INTRODUCTION


Wages are the prime working conditions that have the most significant direct and indirect effects in the lives of workers. Despite such importance, wage policy is a major problem in most of the countries of the world. As a result of wage parity, workers are pushed into the vicious cycle of poverty. (Haque, 2020). In addition, such parties may drive the vulnerability of forced labour. The provision of adequate wage was set in the Treaty of Versailles. As a result of deterioration of purchasing capacity during the 2008 inflation worldwide, the international community, led by the International Labor Organization, emphasised the introduction of a minimum wage structure to combat poverty. The International Labor Conference in 2009, adopted the "Global Jobs Pact" which refers to setting a benchmark of minimum wage structure as a key to combat the global economic crisis. (Haque, 2020). The minimum wage structure varies across geographical location and wealth size of a nation. In countries with huge land area, minimum wage structure varies according to specific payroll systems of state, province and city. For example: In the United

States, the federal minimum wage rate is 7.25 USD per hour, but it varies across states. San Francisco has a minimum wage of 16.99 USD per hour. On the other hand, New York has a minimum wage rate of 14.20 USD per hour. (SKUAD, 2024).

Bangladesh is third among the counties with lowest wages below 500 USD, after Albania and Argentina. Least developed countries like Bangladesh are well-known for cheap labour and apparel manufacturing worldwide. The RMG industry is the lifeblood of Bangladeshi economy since the decade of 1980s, when the country's economy shifted from an agrarian economy to the apparel industry. Followed by China, Bangladesh is the second largest garments exporter in the world. Despite such progress of this industry, the RMG workers in Bangladesh are one of the lowest paid workers compared to other garment export countries like: Cambodia, India, Indonesia (WRC, 2023). The historic process of setting minimum wage of RMG workers has been a gradual, rigid and continuous journey. Such as:



Source: The Daily Star, 2023

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As the Consumer Price Index has increased 35% over the last five years. As a result of major price hike and inflation, the workers were further pushed into poverty. The higher living cost left almost 4 million workers who manufacture apparels for world's largest brands, like: H&M, Inditex (Zara) etc. On October 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2023, the RMG Owners' Association proposed a wage structure of 10,400. The new wage structure is designed in the following way:

GRADE	DISTRIBUTION (in BDT)
5 <sup>TH</sup> GRADE (ENTRY-LEVEL)	TOTAL: 12,500 BASIC SALARY: 6,700 HOUSE-RENT: 3,350 MEDICAL ALLOWANCE: 750 CONVEYANCE: 450 FOOD ALLOWANCE: 1,250
4 <sup>TH</sup> GRADE	TOTAL: 13,025 BASIC SALARY: 7,400 HOUSE RENT: 3,700 MEDICAL ALLOWANCE: 750 CONVEYANCE: 450 FOOD ALLOWANCE: 1,250
3 <sup>RD</sup> GRADE	TOTAL: 13,550 BASIC SALARY: 7,400 HOUSE RENT: 3,700 MEDICAL ALLOWANCE: 750 CONVEYANCE: 450 FOOD ALLOWANCE: 1,250
2 <sup>ND</sup> GRADE	TOTAL: 14,150 BASIC SALARY: 7,800 HOUSE RENT: 3,900 MEDICAL ALLOWANCE: 750 CONVEYANCE: 450 FOOD ALLOWANCE: 1,250
1 <sup>ST</sup> GRADE	TOTAL: 14,750 BASIC SALARY: 8200 HOUSE RENT: 4,100 MEDICAL ALLOWANCE: 750 CONVEYANCE: 450 FOOD ALLOWANCE: 1,250

Source: The Daily Star, November, 2023

On November 12, 2023 the Government of Bangladesh declared minimum wage (5<sup>th</sup> grade) for RMG workers at BDT 12,500 per month, reducing the number of grades from seven to five. (The Daily Star, 2023). The first ever RMG industry began in 1976 and expanded based on the availability and accessibility of cheap female labour. Thus, the industry provided the largest employment opportunities to the most backward and oppressed group of society during the decade of 1980s and therefore among 4 million manpower, almost 3.2 million, especially the production workers are female labour force. (Female RMG Workers: Economic Contribution in Bangladesh, 2015).

This phenomenon has led women to play a dynamic role in national, international and household economies. Women would not be able to benefit from globalisation if women stay merely as development actors rather than being competitive to their male counterparts. Therefore, global policymakers emphasise the importance of placing the issue of women's empowerment for satisfying the lives of half the world's population. Therefore, women's empowerment is possible by integrating women in the mainstream development process.

According to Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies (BILS), 80% of RMG workers run out of money before the arrival of their next salary. Further they run into debt to carry out their expenses for the rest of the month. Sometimes due to unbearable poverty, the female RMG workers turn to sex work to make both ends meet. The active trade unions demanded BDT 23,000 per month to stay above the poverty line, some trade unions in fact asked for BDT 25000 as minimum wage addressing workers' cost of living. The branding strategy of brands and their pricing demands are exploitative in Bangladesh, in which the export-oriented RMG industry is accountable for 82% export. This makes the brand imperative to maintain competitive prices in international standards. (Worker Rights Consortium, 2023).

The US Office of Textiles and Textiles (OTEXA) showed that manufacturers are paid 14% less for women's cotton jeans and 26.5% less for men's woven cotton shirts. The brands have profited significantly through their price squeezing policy which led factory owners to cut down on expenses, especially wages of workers. Among the top apparel exporters in the world, Bangladesh has the second highest incidence of suppliers making unsustainable negotiations with buyers. Almost half of the factory owners are accepting orders below production costs. 17% of brands buying apparel from Bangladesh were willing to adjust prices and were paid to factories to accommodate minimum wage increase. (Worker Rights Consortium, 2023)

The female participation in R.M.G workers have continued to decline from 2015 to 53.89% in 2018 to 53.65% in 2021 respectively. The job dropout rates of 51% R.M.G workers were women, compared to that of male, which was only 49% in 2015, an increase in the rates of female workers stepping down from the R.M.G sector. The overwhelming majority of female workers left the sector voluntarily rather than being terminated by the authority. Reports suggest that 8% workers are willing to leave the RMG sector after one year and 27% of them within five years. Moreover, 15% female workers are anticipated to leave the RMG sector in the long run- in case of experiencing any harassment. (Textile Today, 2023). Another crucial factor behind the decline of female participation in the R.M.G is that the hierarchical upward mobility is extremely limited for female workers. 86% female workers join as helpers and 66% leave the job merely as operators. Only 1% is promoted to the mid-management or supervisory level. (Textile Today, 2023). Thus, women end their career after suffering the tiring working hours as well as insufficient wages and job benefits. On the contrary, the career-ladder is male-centric and as a result men end up being promoted and benefitted from different corporate aspects, such as: 95% of line supervisory jobs belong to the male. (Textile Today, 2023). The major reasons identified for women's massive stepping down from the R.M.G sector are: The child-care and motherhood responsibilities are the prime reasons for women's stepping down from the R.M.G sector. Pregnancy and unemployment caused due to pregnancy and after child birth. Age preferences by some authorities, such as: in most cases: authorities prefer unmarried workers and curtail married or pregnant employees from jobs. Soon after the government declared the new wage structure there were processions in different factories for further increase to cope up with the increasing living standard. Thus, the new wage structure might influence the degrees of empowerment for female RMG workers and might create new avenues of challenge.

A source of income with a handsome salary can be the basic element of women's economic empowerment. It is not possible to empower women in economic development without creating a convenient workplace environment. The workplace environment of the RMG sector is not favourable for women and often the labour rights of compliance are violated. Women are often facing discrimination at the workplace and are treated disgracefully compared to male co-workers. Low wage range, wage delay, insufficient health service are common discriminatory factors in this sector. (Haque, 2020). For the last four decades, the RMG industry has brought grass root women out from the four walls of the household challenging the patriarchal society. The grass root Bangladeshi women has earned a degree of autonomy and economic independence through the emergence of RMG industry as unskilled cheap labour. Research has been mostly conducted on the following issues, most recently into two correlations: home and work. Moreover, health issues, maternity issues, as well as mental wellbeing of RMG workers. Research is mostly conducted among the poverty-stricken, migrated women who shift from rural to urban settings to support themselves and their families. Researchers so far has focused on correlation between empowerment of female RMG workers and sexual violence at workplace. There is a study gap based on the correlation between the newly introduced wage structure and RMG workers' changing dimension of empowerment (Akhter et al., 2017).

Therefore, this paper shall help bridge the gap between the monetary enhancement and empowerment of the female RMG workers in Bangladesh. The objective of this research is to understand whether the new wage structure of the RMG sector creates a new degree of empowerment for female workers or further challenges their lives. To explore how the new wage structure empowers female workers in their professional lives, by assessing reaction and opinion of female workers on new wage structure, vantage point of associated parties, impact of trade union, opinions of upper hierarchy and career sustainability of female RMG workers. To identify how the new wage structure empowers female workers in their private lives by assessing the pattern of expenditure, saving attitude and access and control over assets of female RMG workers.

### 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Ready-made Garment (RMG) industry's impact on the economic and social status of working women in Bangladesh has been hotly debated. Bangladeshi daughters, wives, and mothers stayed home. Economic reforms in the 1980s produced jobs for impoverished, uneducated rural women in the ready-made garment industry, especially in cities. Women's gender roles have shifted due to paid labour. Women work to support their families but are isolated from their children (Akhter et al., 2017). Female rural migrant workers left due to poverty (Akhter et al., 2017). Women who have been able to find work in this field feel more secure in their financial situation. They are now more financially independent, which offers them more freedom to make important decisions about their homes and lives. They feel better about themselves now that they have more opportunities to interact with the public and are more aware of their autonomy (Akhter et al., 2017). To tightly regulate ready-made garment businesses and to enforce labour legislation to safeguard women's equal rights, most garment sectors have the political link which acts as a setback. (Islam, 2016). When it comes to the ready-made garment sectors, the state's role is also insufficient to achieve gender equality. The paper indicates that the removal of gender gaps has not occurred in tandem with the increasing feminization of employment in Bangladesh's ready-made garment sectors. (Islam, 2016). With an estimated 3.5 million workers in over 5,000 factories, the readymade garments (RMG) sector is one of Bangladesh's top employers. Sixty to seventy percent of RMG employees are women. The RMG industry is widely acknowledged as one of the most important economic drivers and equalisers for women. In addition, more women than any other industry are employed in this one. However, most women in the RMG industry labour in entry-level or lower roles along the manufacturing line; only a small percentage work in management. Between 2010 and 2018, the number of women polled holding management roles decreased, while their total average representation in such jobs remained continuously low at roughly 9%, as reported by the International Labor Organization (ILO). According to the Labor Force Survey (LFS) 2016-17, however, only about 38% of employed women were in professional occupations. (Ahmed and others 2023). They are suffering from a loss of physical strength and are becoming victims of a variety of health risks associated with industrial work. Their productivity and energy are significantly hampered as a result of malnutrition, long days of continuous effort, and an uncomfortable working environment. (Nisa, 2022). According to the findings of this study, female workers are more likely to suffer from health issues such as back discomfort, headaches, finger injuries, eye problems, chest pain, and dehydration as a result of working long hours and being subjected to excessive work pressure. The factory's female employees are subjected to sexual harassment at the hands of the production managers and other male officials. They have reported that they have not always gotten the correct amount of salary in relation to the number of hours they have worked. Because of their low income, they are forced to live from hand to mouth, which prevents them from eating meals that are rich in nutrients. They have not been provided with a enough amount of mental support to continue with this work. Additionally, they are victims of domestic abuse. (Sharmin et al., 2022) It was discovered by pregnant workers at all of the workplaces that they were required to labour in conditions that were both hot and uncomfortable. Respondents reported experiencing issues such as back discomfort, abdominal pain, leg pain, chest pain, swelling of the feet, weakness, and vertigo as a result of the prolonged sitting and standing positions required by their jobs. The majority of those who responded had to put in extra hours, which was a source of stress for them. This study aims at revealing the immediate consequences on the lives and workplace environment of female RMG workers influencing their newer degrees of empowerment.

Though female increased access to the labour market enables them to earn their livelihoods, it is not the wider scenario. By including migrated, local and grassroots level women, it overlooks the underneath power dynamics of socio-political systems, to perpetuate women's subordinate position in society, setting a "benchmark" for progress, placing women in the position of either "victim" or "saviour". Elora Halim Chowdhury highlights women as a category to be "intervened" upon and "empowered" by in the West biased development practice and the way power is exercised upon others. (Kabeer, 2010). Thus, this emphasises that, economic employment has no structural change in gendered power dynamics. (Rowlands, 1997). Moreover, there is a male breadwinner concept in Bangladesh. Female labour force is considered a cheap and secondary workforce. (Elson, 2014). The myth of women's nimble fingers resulting in belief that they can be paid less than men as they are docile with merely any voice at their workplace, adds a drawback in their career growth. Therefore, despite the economic empowerment of female RMG workers, their participation in making household and career decisions are extended by the patriarchal norms (Lim, 1983). Thus, the RMG sector might be considered as mere

monetary "resource" as female RMG workers, but fail to create scopes of "agency" for them. "Achievement" is the combined outcome of the proper implementation of agencies, such as: freedom of movement, access and control over one's own income and raising collective voices. The term "collective voices" in the context of Bangladesh might refer to women's participation in the trade unions to combat for proper wages and rights, but the systematic "patriarchal" institutionalisation of the trade bodies create a hierarchical bias where female RMG workers are suppressed by the trade union leaders.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 Research Design

Qualitative research design was found effective in exploring the female RMG workers' opinions, experience, reactions and future predictions about the new wage structure designed for the RMG industry (Haffejee and Levine, 2020; Leigh, 2023; Barnes, 2021). This study has taken feminist methodology into account. Generally, methodology is understood as a particular set of ways of doing research. However, a feminist research methodology is not a series of particular methods or guidelines for research. It is a way of knowing and seeking truth as well as commitment to use methods reflectively and critically with an aim to serve feminist aims of social justice (Ramazagnolu, 1992). The basic premise of feminist methodology is the epistemological belief that women can possess and share valuable experiences from their lives (Smith, 1987). Different methodological approaches that acknowledge gender sensitivity are compatible with the purpose of research. This research is qualitative in nature because qualitative research is particularly helpful in determining the meaning that individuals assign to the experiences they have.

#### 3.2 Subjectivity Of The Researcher

Subjectivity in qualitative research refers to the researcher's individual perspective, biasness and experiences that undoubtedly influence the research process. Therefore, as a beginner researcher, I acknowledge the subjectivity and my individual influences that were not harmful but influential towards shaping my research. The indicators to address my subjectivity during the research process might include my study area, previous experience of communicating with female RMG workers, and peer-connectivity with the owner's and feminist fraternity- which made my access easier. Thus, this subjectivity had an impact on my keen interest in choosing my area of interest for my research. The greatest bias of the paper is explicitly focusing on the issues of females, to serve the goals of feminist research properly.

#### 3.3 Study Location & Sample Size

The study has been conducted in Gazipur commercial area, opposite of Hurricane factory, about 27 kilometres from Dhaka at two knitwear manufacturing garments factories.

For KII	For IDI	
Profile of Study Location 3	Profile of Study Location 1	Profile of Study Location 2
1. The Cafe Rio, Mirpur, Dhaka	Interloop BD. Ltd	Needle Apparels Ltd
2. The Cafe Rio, Uttara, Dhaka		
3. Planners' Tower, Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue, Dhaka	Manpower: 650 Male: 260 Female: 390	Manpower: 261 Male: 125 Female: 136
4. Interloop BD Ltd, Gazipur.		

#### 3.4 Sources and Method of Data Collection

I have used secondary sources of data for my research. Available literature of national and international researchers based on female R.M.G workers, the recent knowledge production of articles, conference papers regarding the unpaid care work in Bangladesh and world-wide have been reviewed to have a clear understanding of the research context, facts and figures. First-hand data has been collected from the targeted participant using one-on-one in-depth interview technique as primary data collection technique. Research methods are the techniques to collect data to fulfil the research objective. Data collection simply refers to how information is gathered. It is the process of gathering and measuring information on variables of interest, is an established systematic fashion that enables one to answer stated research questions, test hypotheses and evaluate outcome. I have applied three prominent ways of data collection, such as: In-depth Interview (IDI), Focus-Group Discussion (FGD) and Key Informant Interview (KII).

In-depth interview is an open-ended, discovery-oriented method to obtain detailed information about a topic from a stakeholder. In-depth interviews are a qualitative research method; their goal is to explore in depth a respondent's point of view, experiences, feelings, and perspectives. These types of interviews are often conducted in order to narrow the focus of the research and determine the main objective of the research. Generally, the following steps are conducted during the in-depth interview, such as: developing sampling technique, preparing in-depth interview guidelines, conducting one-on-one in-depth interview, analysing data. The in-depth interview has been conducted among 15 female RMG workers from two knitwear RMG industries who have migrated from different locations of Bangladesh to Gazipur industrial zones in quest of livelihood, splitting their extended family structure to nuclear ones, shrinking the household sizes and ensuring economic subsistence for themselves and their families. The interviews were semi-structured in nature. It took four days to conduct the in-depth interviews. The average time for each interview was approximately 40-45 minutes. The fastest interview was conducted between 18-20 minutes only. The interview was scheduled in the following way: Despite being familiar with the first industry, I was willing to work with a new group of workers this time. Therefore, I went on a field visit on the first day. The following day, I interviewed four participants. On the third day, the interview went on a slow pace and I could interview only three participants. The next day also, only three interviews were conducted.

A focus group discussion is a qualitative research tool originated in sociology but also popular in the fields of business, marketing and education (Sago, 2012). FGD is prominently used to gather data prominently from a particular group of people on a predetermined topic in order to navigate the ground realities. In qualitative research, focus

group discussion is conducted in order to know the perception of the respondents, usually led by a moderator. I have conducted a focus group discussion among five female RMG workers. All the five participants migrated from different geographical locations but lived at a near distance to their workplace. As an interviewer, I gave stimulus questions to the group and insisted on their enthusiasm to participate in the discussion. Among the 5 participants, 1 of them was very active while the other 4 was somehow unwilling to answer at some point of the discussion. The focus group discussion was conducted in approximately an hour.

The data collected from Key Informant Interviews (KII) are qualitative in nature. KII are conducted among the people who are well-aware of the whereabouts of a specific community or industry. These informants usually have first-hand knowledge about the specific group of people. I have conducted KII among 6 participants. Among them, 2 interviews were conducted via telephone calls and google meets and the other 4 were conducted in-person. Each of my interviews took almost an hour on average. The tele interview took a bit more than an hour. And another online interview conducted via google meet took 25 minutes. I have decided to go for "purposive sampling" which would allow me to purposely choose the respondents relevant to my topic of research, according to my observation as an investigator followed by my pilot survey. As a researcher, I may face challenges to bring out the issues about how the new wage structure might create a new degree of empowerment for female RMG workers. I have tried to maintain diversity in sampling by choosing participants from the following stratifications during the in-depth interview, focus group discussion and key informant interview:

Stratifications	Participants
Geographical Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Greater Mymensingh: 5</li> <li>Northern Bengal: 6</li> <li>Southern Bengal: 4</li> </ul>
Religious Belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 reverted Muslim from Hinduism</li> </ul>
Age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Minimum Age: 19</li> <li>Maximum Age: 45</li> </ul>
Marital Status	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2 unmarried</li> <li>2 widowed</li> <li>1 abundant</li> <li>The rest of them are married</li> </ul>
Designation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highest Designation: Production Officer</li> <li>Middle Designation: Medical Officer</li> <li>The other participants are production-based lower hierarchy workers (1st-5th grade wage range)</li> </ul>
Department(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Quality</li> <li>Finishing</li> <li>Folding</li> <li>Production</li> </ul>
Wage range	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highest wage: 32,000</li> <li>Lowest wage: 8,200</li> </ul>

**3.5 Data Analysis Procedure**

After the collection of data, it is mandatory to analyse these data. In my study the collected data were analysed in a qualitative way. The main objective of analysing qualitative answers is to find the respondents' view of the world in general and of the topic in particular. For analysing qualitative data, some steps were followed. Firstly, I transcribed the recorded and noted data from the field. The data were ordered and organised through coding. I coded the data by arranging each participant's saying under each question and later arranging the similarity in the issues they were interviewed on. Data was thematically analysed eventually at

the preparation of the final report.

**3.6 Ethical Consideration**

Ethical standards must be maintained in doing research. It is the most important in qualitative research. The method of data collection makes the ethical issues more relevant. As I have conducted in-depth interviews, KIIs and a focus-group discussion among the participants, my reflexivity is of great concern in order to maintain the research ethics. Implementation of comprehensive measures to ensure ethical integrity throughout the research process was done. Prior to participation, all participants have been provided with detailed information about the study's objectives, the

nature of their involvement, potential risks, and benefits. This information was presented in a clear and understandable manner, suitable for the educational level of each participant. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and receive comprehensive answers to ensure they fully understand the study. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant, confirming their voluntary agreement to participate. For participants unable to read, the consent form was read out to them, where they signed with consent. The confidentiality of participants was protected. Personal identifiers were removed or altered in data generated from this study to prevent identification of individual participants. Data was stored securely, with access limited to the researcher himself. All electronic data was encrypted and password-protected, while physical documents were kept in locked cabinets in secured premises. Given the sensitive nature of discussing financial situations and workplace experiences, there may be emotional discomfort for some participants. The researcher is trained to identify signs of distress and provide participants with information on available support services if needed. Participation was completely voluntary, and individuals had the option to withdraw at any time without penalty. The study was designed to maximise potential benefits to participants and the broader community by generating knowledge that could inform policies and practices to support migrants and their families more effectively. Care had been taken to minimise any potential harm or discomfort to participants, with continuous monitoring throughout the study to address and mitigate any ethical concerns that arose.

### 3.7 Limitations of the Study

The findings of the study might not be defined in a broader context of all female garment workers, as the research was conducted among a small group of people. Time management was another challenge because there were consecutive Eid vacations, Ramadan as well as a transitory revolution throughout the country. As I've conducted a large part of interviews among grass root womenfolk, they were unaware of the term "empowerment" and so I had to carry on my interrogation using various interrogations using various indicators to define empowerment in my paper. While conducting focus group discussion, I've noticed participants being influenced by each other's opinion. While conducting key informant interviews, I've faced difficulties because I had to struggle to manage suitable time slots and manage time slots and communicate with them following their respective area of expertise. In a nutshell, the greatest drawback of the research is that a glass ceiling based on class and age existed while conducting the interviews.

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main objective of my paper is to find out whether the new wage structure will create a new degree of empowerment for female RMG workers. In order to dig in deeply into the findings, I've divided my main objective into two specific objectives, such as: finding out female RMG workers' empowerment both in their personal and professional lives as a consequence of the new wage structure. In addition, I've arrived to look into the fact whether there are new degrees of empowerment in the private sphere of female RMG workers due to their increased wage. In order to align my findings with the core objectives and the theoretical framework of the research, the findings section shall focus on two major segments, such as: Empowering the Professional Lives and Empowering the Private Lives. The term "empowerment in" here shall refer to the increased amount of wage and what avenues of empowerment it created for the female RMG workers. In order to focus on the enhancement of the monetary resource, the segment is divided into the following parts: Reaction and Opinion on New Wage Structure, The Vantage Point of Associated Parties, Impact of Trade Union, Opinions of the Upper Hierarchy, Career Sustainability. The relevant findings of this section are given below using pseudonyms of one-on-one interview and focus group participants and the names of KII participants with their prior consent.

### 4.1 Reaction and Opinion on New Wage Structure

While recording the reactions of the workers and opinions of the experts, the reactions of the workers (especially in the in-depth interviews) were sometimes identical and also varied to a great extent according to their respective context, age, marital situation and designation. On the other hand, while conducting focus group discussion, the participants often agreed with each other in most cases. The key informants gave a totally different outlook towards specific issues which was mostly identical as they share the same area of profession and professional designation often shaped their opinions. For instance, Rahima (29) has been working as an RMG worker for 7.5 years. She said in a neutral way. "Though the wage has increased Tk 3,773 compared to before, the daily expenses, especially the price of food products have increased. So, there are less scopes of enjoying the benefits of the additional amount." While asked further what she did

with the additional amount, she added that she bought her infertility medicines with the additional amount after the increase in wage. On the other hand, Kona (30), who is separated from her husband added a different vantage point regarding wage increase and said that it's great to have some more money because she is the only breadwinner for herself as well as her son and her ageing mother. Amina, a medical assistant, added her disappointment in this regard and added that, "I am not categorised as a "worker" and so my salary has remained unchanged for almost five years. The wage-increasing laws favour the workers only but not the other employees." As the Labour Act has only restricted monetary benefits of pregnancy up to two consecutive pregnancies, Taslima (31), who is going through her third pregnancy phase had a different outlook towards the increase in wage, "I am pregnant for the third time and I have been working in this factory for twelve years. I would not receive any maternity benefit this time, because it's available only for two consecutive pregnancies. But as the wage has increased recently, I shall just work for a couple of more months and then leave the job after Eid-UL-Adha, because I have reached my expected benchmark from my job." Jui (25) facing an unexpected grievance in her early life reacted differently to the new wage structure, "I became a widow only six months after my marriage. I've been working in this factory for two years and this is my first job. I am really happy with the wage increase because I don't want to bow to anyone for my expenses and so the increased wage is my last resort to survive." Rima (20) also had an identical tone similar to the previous participant as she is a victim of village politics and forced marriage. She said, "I escaped from my home due to a tumultuous situation with my parents. This job and the increased wage gave me new hopes to prove myself with my economic independence."

In addition to the in-depth interviews, the focus group discussion conducted among 5 participants showed the following vantage points: All five of them expressed their initial satisfaction on the wage increase and  $\frac{2}{3}$  of them also mentioned that increase in price of daily commodities can be a major barrier in enjoying the benefit of increment. Finally, in my in-depth interview with the key informants, they expressed the following outlook towards the new wage scale and its correlation with the "empowerment" of female RMG workers:

### 4.2 Accessing the View of the Associated Parties

While assessing the views of the associated parties, the KII informants expressed their opinions, such as: Biplob Chanda Shaha, a Social Compliance Auditor at Takko Fashion with 14 years of experience in Compliance and also a licensed law practitioner at the Judges' Court mentioned three associated parties with this wage movement, such as: Wage Board, Labor Organizations/ Trade Unions, Owners' Association (For example: Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporter's Association: BGMEA). According to him, "The trade unions first demanded 25,000 takas as minimum wage. The owners' association was keen to fix it within 11,000 taka. Finally, the wage board as a government representative mediated the minimum wage as 12,500 taka."

### 4.3 Impact of Trade Unions

All the informants, except the trade union leader, expressed negative vantage points towards the trade unions. Such as: Regarding the involvement of the trade unions, the auditor said in light of his experience, The trade unions mostly have the combined vested interest of themselves and the collaborated brands. 99% of the trade unions' authenticity is highly questioned and they are less bothered about the workers' interest and welfare. Rather they often manipulate the less educated female workers against their factories and hardly can find them any better option to earn their living. Sometimes many workers become vulnerable to sexual violence. Advocate Kawser Ahmed Tomal, an eminent labour law practitioner said, "You can never find out the real scenario of empowerment doesn't matter how much the wage increases; there are multiple unseen factors that indicates that the workers can never come out from the cycle of oppression and poverty." Regarding the workers' federation, the lawyer added, I have undergone bitter experiences while working with trade unions. And most of them demanded huge amounts of money, impossible for a worker to bear and thus she lost both her savings and her job. Thus, the workers are again into the poverty cycle and trade union doesn't have positive impacts on workers' welfare. The trade union leader didn't sound happy regarding the new wage: Rani Khan, an eminent trade union leader and secretary of Mukto Bangla Sramik Federation regretted that, "I think the wage should have increased a bit more. Because the living standard is very costly and difficult for a worker to afford." While asked whether the owners are worker-friendly or not she gave a diplomatic reply: 'Not all owners are hostile towards the worker. And we are not against the owners. We just want that both parties should survive with their best interest.'

#### 4.4 Viewpoint of the upper hierarchy

Most research is solely based on the voices of the lower hierarchy, working class voices. As a result, the voices of the decision makers are often marginalised. This part shall try to pen down the voices of the people involved in different decision-making positions of the RMG sector. Assistant Secretary of Research and Development in BKMEA said regarding the worker-owner future, The RMG trade is associated with the international economy. Due to the increase in dollar rate, it is difficult for the stakeholders to increase the wage. Furthermore, the buyers are unwilling to increase their price because they choose Bangladesh for cheap production cost. If this scenario continues, Bangladesh may lose buyer and its trade-friendly environment because the investors are getting discouraged. Shefa, a Production Officer reported regarding workers' productivity increase with the increased wage, "A few days after the wage increased, the workers' zeal for working developed more than before. But after a couple of months, it remained the same as before. It's not easy to change their expectation and skill as they are habituated to it." Md Shah Alam, Managing Director of an RMG industry added from an owner's perspective, We had to equip the workers with light mechanical equipment to increase their productivity. In light of my 40 years of experience I have witnessed that, the workers' productivity stops increasing after a certain period of time and no indicator can prove effective to push them increase their productivity. While inquiring the owner's trading interest of the owners in line with the new wage structure. Khandaker Lutfar Rahman, another entrepreneur said, "Buyers often blame us for low wages compared to other countries. But our worker efficiency is low compared to our competitors such: Vietnam." Flora Sumi Biswas predicted future of RMG in Bangladesh and grieved her experience I used to work in a reputed industry with a handsome salary. The owner layed out the factory soon after the new law of wage increment was implemented. In fact, the salaries of mid-management employees including me are pending. We can't blame the owners solely because the external factors are gradually getting rigid to continue RMG trade in Bangladesh.

#### 4.5 Career Sustainability

I wished to be a police officer when I was young. But while undergoing the recruitment process, I was captured by the corrupt middlemen who demanded a huge amount of money from my father. Afterwards I worked in an NGO for a few days and it requires a lot of mobility. Being born and married into a poor family I accepted the fate of an RMG worker and what I earn from here. I'm having complexities in having children. As soon as I am able to have a child, I shall dedicate my full time to my motherhood. Rahima narrated the irony of her fate and journey to become RMG workers. Khadija added naively: "I've no future plans. As soon as I'm able to mend my home at village and get married I shall leave the job." Taslima rejoiced in her struggle: "We have accumulated enough assets at our village to survive there. So, I won't work anymore after Eid UL Adha." Kona, abandoned by her husband and living as a single mother regretted that, "I don't feel like working for a single day, but I've to do it by fate. I shall stop working as soon as my son grows up." Putting motherhood at her first priority Nazma, a new mother said: "My child is 10 months old and it's difficult for me to leave her with anyone and even in the day-care because she is too young. So I've decided to leave the job after Eid UL Adha and work again when she grows up." Rani Khanan eminent trade union leader said that: "They are so naive that they even don't know what to do in the future." Farzana Yeasmin, Assistant Secretary of Research and Development BKMEA said that, "A woman can never progress without the support of family and society. A female RMG worker's highest aim can be to be promoted from helper to operator. She can't think of more regarding her career plans, because most of them lack in skill and education." She further added their health issues: There is an age-factor connected with the productivity of female RMG workers that depends greatly on their nutrition. There has been a nutrition camp earlier for providing folic acid and iron tablets to female workers. But this is just a mere try. Due to their lack of nutrition since childhood and intra household inequality their lack of nutrition is hard to fulfil and so their productivity deteriorates after 40. Regarding workplace environment she added her perspective: Maybe the verbal abuse has lowered a bit compared to before but it is still there. But there are many untold stories about Gender Based Violence inside and often outside the workplace which makes their lives vulnerable. And in case they want to combat it, they mostly have to lose the job. Moreover, they live in unhealthy slums as floating population. So, I think it is better for them to migrate to village. Therefore, increasing the wage cannot bring positive outcomes in the lives of female RMG workers without macro-level changes in the external and internal factors affecting their lives.

#### 4.6 Empowering The Private Lives

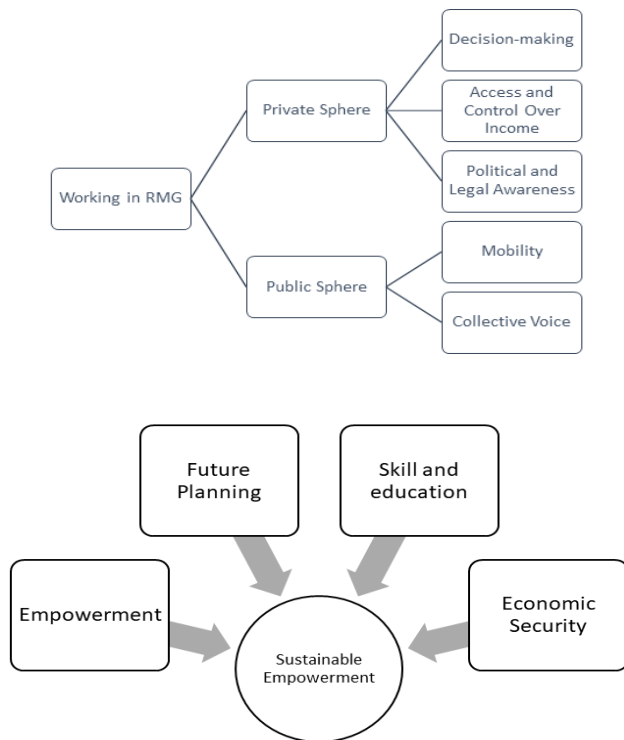
In order to navigate what type of changes the extended monetary benefit

brings in the private lives of female RMG workers, I've decided to focus on their agencies of personal life and how it is exercised. Agency is divided into three following discussions, such as: Pattern of Expenditure, Saving Attitude and Access and Control Over Assets. While asking about the pattern of expenditure, the focus group participants said: "I shall spend the additional amount in my infertility treatment." Other 2 focus group participants varied in their opinion and said that: "We shall try to keep our expenses the same as before as long as it exceeds the increasing cost of daily commodities because we are poor people and we should not be so spend-thrift." One of my key-informant speakers, Flora Sumi Biswas, 21 years' experience in the RMG sector said: "Their (the female workers) expectation management regarding their expenditure is fixed. No matter how much the wage increases their living standard, nutritional awareness will hardly change overnight." While learning about the saving attitude of RMG workers, I found that their saving attitude and awareness is influenced by some factors such as: debt issues, paying instalment, family benefits and future uncertainty, for instance: "When I started working in this factory away from my family, I started saving money for my future security. When I was close to the savings of nearly Tk 1,00,000, my siblings took away all my savings and cut off all the ties with me." (Jui). Ayesha (19) said, "My brother does not give money to my parents. I'm the eldest of all siblings, so I save money so that I can help them when my father gets old." I have converted from Hinduism to Islam to marry my husband. But my husband has abandoned me and married elsewhere. My community has abandoned me for cross religious marriage. With this increased wage I shall save the additional amount for myself, because I have no one to support my at my old age, so I've made a DPS at Islami Bank, said Kona "I started developing the savings tendency soon after I got married. As soon as I started receiving wage in the new scale I cleared all by debts and instalments I've dealt earlier." reported Rabeya. Another participant, Taslima added a new outlook of saving attitude through the creation of tangible income-generating assets, such as: 'I've bought two milking cows in the village and got back a mortgaged cultivable land worth tk 1 lac. I am also planning to save money for my daughter who is only 10 months old." While conducting focus group discussion one participant said that she was saving the additional amount of wage for her son's future. Flora Sumi Biswas in light of her 21 years' experience said regarding the poverty cycle in the lives of female RMG workers, "I know about their saving attitude. But their poverty starts since birth and due to the patriarchal mode of both home and workplace, it perpetuates till death." This part shall focus on the fact how the income and other assets of the female RMG workers are distributed and how much autonomy they enjoy on their own assets. Rahima said, "I've recently given 50,000 takas from my savings to my brother who is trying to migrate to Middle East. "I give all my earnings to my mother and she gives me a portion of pocket money. It's up to her how she shall spend the amount of my wage." said Khadija. "I have multiple health issues but I shall spend the additional amount on my granddaughter's treatment as she is a premature child." said Shamoli, who is worried about her ailing granddaugther.

The findings state that, though the wage increment can fulfil the prerequisites of financial resources of female RMG workers. But it fails to open the windows of social and human development which can give them scopes to exercise their "choice." (Kabeer, 1999), for example: despite increase in wage, the outlook of female RMG workers towards the distribution of money is manipulated by patriarchal, social norms and confined to conventional ways of lives designed for South-Asian grassroot level women. These norms govern their attitude to prioritise the allocation of resources towards family wellbeing, such as: clearing family debts, creating family assets and saving for children's future. Thus, the female RMG workers resource distribution is solely allocative in a trickle-down manner, rather than being authoritative. (Kabeer, 1999). In addition, their life choices are defined in a very linear and orthodox patriarchal manner, for example: most of them had no previous career plans of urban migration and working in the productive sector. Rather, they were driven to this sector as "lesser of evil" to combat poverty without any formal education or skill. As a consequence, their negotiating capacity is often shaped by their savings attitude which is a more cognitive process of the resources being generalised as family assets, with merely any scopes left for bargaining and negotiating. Thus, the outcomes of the wage increment of the female RMG workers are reproduced by the normative practices without any visible exercise of agency, for instance: almost all the workers will relocate to the villages in future, stepping down from the formal economy. This indicates their way of "functioning" and the life choices they refer to as grassroot women for their "being and doing" in a patriarchal, capitalist context of Bangladesh. (Kabeer, 1999). Therefore, the particular financial benefit of wage increment fails to reconstruct their life choices and autonomy of resources and simultaneously unable to unlock the potential capabilities for a sustainable career (Rahman and Sultana, 2020).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The study summarises the contextual perpetuation of female RMG workers' socio-economic subordination which cannot be mitigated solely through their economic empowerment. Their life choices and career sustainability remain unchanged, formed by the societal prescription. Thus, the formal economy of Bangladesh experiences a cyclic order of upcoming and outgoing flows of female RMG workers and a backlash towards women's attachment to the informal economy. In order to ensure the holistic empowerment of female RMG workers, the interconnected indicators should be properly exercised. The following diagram can be manifested as a recommendation for policy making in micro and macro level such as:



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