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Aleksandra Draganić and Nazmul Arefin

**Social Sustainability Challenges
and the Role of Middle Managers:
Case of the Ready-Made Garment Industry
in Bangladesh**

The International
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and Decent Work

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The views expressed in this working paper are those of the authors and they do not necessarily reflect the official stances of the funding and academic institutions involved in the project.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

BANGLA-TEX	Project Developing a training concept for building sustainability-related capacity among managers in the Bangladeshi garment industry	GED	General Economics Division
BSCI	Business Social Compliance Initiative	GDP	Gross Domestic Product
BGMEA	Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association	GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
BKMEA	Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association	GSC	Global Supply Chains
BMZ	German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development	HEI	Higher Education Institutions
BILS	Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies	HR	Human Resources
CCC	Clean Clothes Campaign	HEST	German-Bangladesh Higher Education Network for Sustainable Textiles
CEBAI	Centre of Excellence for Bangladesh Apparel Industry	ILO	International Labor Organization
CPD	Centre for Policy Dialogue	LDC	Least Developed Countries
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility	MFA	Multifiber Agreement
DOT	Directorate of Textile	NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
EPB	Export Promotion Bureau	OSH	Occupational Safety and Health
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment	PC	Participation Committee
FLA	Fair Labor Association	RMG	Ready-Made Garments
FWF	Fair Wear Foundation	RSC	RMG Sustainability Council
		TIB	Transparency International Bangladesh
		UD	University of Dhaka
		UKS	University of Kassel
		UN	United Nations
		USD	United States Dollar

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Executive Summary

Over the last decades, the ready-made garment (RMG) industry in Bangladesh has experienced a remarkable economic growth becoming the backbone of the country's economy. Nevertheless, the industry is still faced with unsustainable business practices that threaten to hinder the sector's progress in the future. Among others, these include long working hours, unhealthy work environment, restricted ability of workers to organize, gender-based discrimination and shortage of skilled workforce, in particular mid-level managers. Hence, improvement of managerial knowledge and skills is seen as a necessity for the development of Bangladeshi RMG firms and introduction of sustainable business practices.

According to available research, general obstacles like expat hiring, discrepancy in supply and demand between the educational and industrial sectors, stark male to female occupational segregation and limited training opportunities impede the position of mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector. In addition to this, our findings indicate that mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector lack strategic knowledge of social sustainability issues. Furthermore, we perceived that mid-level managers possess underdeveloped soft skills, lack a deeper understanding of gender-related topics and specific needs of the female workers. Lastly, there is a lack of incentives from the side of the top-level management and factory owners in terms of providing mid-level managers further training to acquire the skills necessary for better performance.

To improve conditions, mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector need training programmes to address the specific challenges that they are facing, depending whether they work in the administration side or production sector. Furthermore, we propose to change the perception that "compliance is the need of the buyer, not a need of factory", to foster a female-friendly work environment and enhance the representation of women in mid-level management positions, recognize social dialogue as the enabler of healthy industrial relations climate, arrange regular sustainability training for the managers and reduce over-dependency on the donors for training arrangements and undertake long-term industry-education partnership strategies for developing local semi-mid-level and mid-level managers.

1 Introduction

The garment¹ industry has become an important growth engine for the national economies in South and Southeast Asia. The last decades of the twentieth century marked a significant shift in garment production from Western Europe and North America to Asian developing countries like Bangladesh, China, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam. With the rising costs of production in the former regions, the rationale governing the shift was that a labor-intensive sector needs access to abundant cheap labor to sustain profitability and ensure expansion. This was perceived favorably by the political and economic establishments within the emerging economies, since it provided them with an entry point into global supply chains (GSCs), bringing their industrialization efforts up to speed. In other words, access to GSCs enabled by multinational corporations lowered the entrance threshold to lucrative export markets for entrepreneurs from developing countries. Alas, the industry nowadays is characterized as highly competitive, whereby successful actors depend on the ability to respond quickly to changing customer needs and offer their products at a low price (Oelze, 2017). This provides an incentive to trade between garment retailers and low-cost suppliers in developing countries, who have, more often than not, paid little heed to the enforcement of social and environmental regulations so as to remain competitive.



Figure 1: Sewing machines in a community house dedicated to rehabilitation of Rana Plaza survivors and their families. The picture was taken in Savar, Upazila District of Dhaka.

1 Making clothes from fabric is called garment production. The term ‘garment industry’ or ‘garment sector’, as used in this contribution, refers to the manufacturing process of turning fabric into clothing (Niebank, 2018: 13).

Academic and activist debates revolving around the global garment industry have been underlining the sustainability challenges that the industry faces as one of the world's most polluting industries, which exhibits poor adherence to socially sustainable practices concerning wages, working hours, health and building safety and overall working conditions (Connel and Kozar, 2014; Chang and Wong, 2005; Clean Clothes Campaign, 2012). Although not the first of its kind, the devastating collapse of the Rana Plaza factory in Bangladesh in 2013 opened an ongoing debate and policy reformations addressing the unsustainable and unsafe fast fashion practices. In this unfortunate event, described by Niebank (2018: 6) as the "symbol of human rights abuses in the transnational garment industry and of the governance gap characterizing our globalized economy", 1,134 workers died and more than 2,500 were injured. Presently, more than seven years after the tragedy and following several initiatives undertaken by a wide myriad of stakeholders, many challenges remain. Owing to the notoriety of being a site where one of the world's worst garment factory accidents had occurred, the reputation of being "competitive"² and "sustainable" instead of being the "cheapest" and "hazardous" can only be attained if human and working rights violations are addressed.

By reviewing the current research and reports concerning the Bangladesh RMG industry (Center for Policy Dialogue, 2018; Emran et al., 2019; Fair Labor Association, 2018; Fair Wear Foundation, 2018; Hossain et al. 2018; Kabir et al. 2019; Transparency International Bangladesh, 2018), we have identified four broad categories of social sustainability challenges which include excessive working hours and overtime, unhealthy working environment, restricted ability to organize, as well as workplace discrimination and gender-based harassment. Concerning the introduction of sustainable practices to the Bangladesh garment industry, mid-level managers are identified as important stakeholders, given their central role in the enterprise as communication gateways between the workers and top management, influencers of behavior, and strategy implementers (Arefin and Draganic, 2020: 137). Therefore, the potential for improvement of Bangladesh RMG sector and introduction of sustainable business practices lies in improving managerial knowledge and skills within the factories (Brunn and Scherf, 2017; Islam et al., 2017b; Salvai, 2017; Woodruff, 2014).

² The president of the Bangladesh Garments and Exporting Association (BGMEA) promised to make the Bangladeshi RMG industry famous for being "competitive" rather than the "cheapest" (Human Rights Watch, 2019).

Our research has demonstrated that improving the position of mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector and their response to sustainability challenges requires collaboration across a wide myriad of stakeholders, starting from educational institutions, factory owners, and mid-level managers. This collaboration needs to include upskilling of local mid-level management capacities, better communication among the industry and the educational sector, promotion of women into mid-level positions, as well as provision of training addressing social sustainability challenges of the RMG sector.

Our findings from the field demonstrate that it is necessary to distinguish between the different needs of the production and the administrative sides of mid-level management as the positions in which they work require diverse sets of knowledge and skills. According to our findings, special attention needs to be given to managers working in production as they are in direct contact with the workers. With regard to future training development, the prevailing conviction that sustainability is only the need of the buyer and not of the factory needs to be addressed. Apart from this, mid-level managers must understand the specific needs of female workers and debunk existing gendered stereotypes that separate male and female vocations. Furthermore, mid-level managers should attain training to promote implementation of mechanisms of social dialogue and collective bargaining to establish healthy industrial relations. Lastly, top-level management has a very important role to play in motivating and financially supporting the mid-level managers to attend further training.

Our study builds on existing research while trying to uncover the most prominent social sustainability challenges in the Bangladesh RMG sector, the knowledge and skill gaps prevailing amongst mid-level managers, and the means by which they can be addressed. The paper is structured as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the research methodology, followed by a brief overview of the limitations of this study. Section 3 provides insights into the research context, with special attention given to economic indicators, workforce, and the post-Rana Plaza responses. Section 4 discusses in more detail the identified social sustainability challenges in the Bangladesh RMG sector and followed by Section 5 which focuses on the position of mid-level managers in the sector and the most prominent industry-wide challenges faced by them. Section 6 presents the research findings from the field and concludes with Section 7 listing recommendations for future action.

2 Research methodology

The aim of this research was to identify the skill and knowledge deficiencies of mid-level managers concerning criteria of responsible management which includes social dimension. Aiming to assess the main challenges and needs of mid-level managers in the Bangladeshi garment industry, we conducted a secondary literature review covering the Bangladesh RMG sector to determine the most prominent challenges faced by the sector with regard to social sustainability and in relation to the industry as experienced by mid-level managers. Inferring from the literature review on mid-level managers, it was asserted that mid-level managers lack specialized, generalist, and methodological management capabilities and competencies needed for business operations, leadership, and human resource management. In addition, given the predominantly female workforce, gender-sensitive topics warranted special consideration.

A sample of suitable companies was selected through a hybrid methodology combining theoretical sampling with pragmatic snowballing. Due to the challenging research context where easy access to databases on factories is hindered by inadequate infrastructure, relying on word-of-mouth recommendations was used as an important, additional sampling tool.

Semi-structured interviews and a focus group discussion were held with mid-level managers in 10 RMG factories situated in Dhaka, Narayanganj, and Gazipur in the period between the end of January and mid-March 2019. Interviewed mid-level managers were asked questions related to opinions on training, social sustainability, gender dynamics, and problem-solving procedures within the factories they work. By focusing on adherence to compliance and institutionalization of compliance procedures, interviews were designed to bring forth the challenges faced by individuals working in mid-level management and as well their needs. Additionally, in order to gain a broader perspective of these needs, interviews were held with industry and brand representatives, consultants with expertise in training provision, labor experts, and governmental training providers. Interviewees were asked to share their insights regarding the topic of sustainability of the RMG sector and its future development, what they recognized as skill gaps amongst mid-level managers, how they perceived gender dynamics in the sector, and the challenges faced by the higher education system in Bangladesh, as well as its relation to the industry.

2.1 Limitations of the study

The sample size of the interviews conducted with mid-level managers remained small and did not reach a “saturation point” (Charmaz, 2006: 113). Evident obstacles to enlarging the sample were limited access to smaller and less compliant factories, lack of existing research on key stratifies (e.g., conceptual, educational, demographic), and time constraints. In addition, there are limitations to using the in-depth interview method such as the “researcher’s bias” (Roller and Lavrakas, 2015), which can affect the interpretation and key findings. For this reason, referral to secondary literature was required to place the findings of this research into a broader context. Moreover, the authors made a hard decision to exclude certain data from further analysis, as reduction of data repository was integral to meeting research objectives.

3 Overview of the Bangladesh RMG sector

3.1 Economic context

Integration with an open market-based economy, introduction of the Multifiber Arrangement in 1974³, an abundance of cheap labor force, and low governance altogether had worked as an impetus for the growth of the Bangladesh RMG sector (Belal and Roberts, 2010; Hossain et al., 2018; Raffaelli, 1994). According to the data published in March 2019 by the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB) and compiled by Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), the RMG sector made up approximately 84.27% of the country’s export earnings (more than 32 billion USD) between 2018 and 2019. This figure implies a substantial rise from 3.89% which the country was making in the year 1983–84 (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Share (%) of ready-made garments (RMG) in Bangladesh’s export earnings (1983–2019)

³ For more information, see World Trade Organisation “Textiles: back in the mainstream” https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/agrm5_e.htm

With more than three decades of experience in RMG export and manufacturing, coupled with incentivizing industrial government policies (Yunus and Yamagata, 2012:2), Bangladesh established itself as the second-largest RMG exporting country in 2018, with 6.4% of the global market share (World Trade Organization, 2018). With increasing wages and operation costs in China, which was occupying 31.1% of the global market share in 2018, many companies were instigated to adopt the so-called 'China plus one model'. They started looking for other manufacturing locations for garments in other Asian countries with lower production costs (Hill and Kohpaiboon, 2017). As seen in Table 1, this model was beneficial for the Bangladesh RMG sector, as the global market share of China decreased by 5.3% in the period between 2010 and 2018, while Bangladesh experienced growth by 2.2% in the same period.

Table 1: Ready-made garments (RMG) sector share (%) in world exports (5 top export countries)

	VALUE (\$US)	SHARE IN WORLD EXPORTS (%)				ANNUAL CHANGE (%)			
	2018	2000	2005	2010	2018	2010-18	2016	2017	2018
TOP 5 EXPORTERS									
China	158	18,2	26,6	36,6	31,3	2	-9	-1	0
European Union (28)	143	28,7	31,0	28,4	28,4	5	4	10	11
Extra-EU exports (28)	34	6,4	6,7	6,2	6,8	6	0	12	12
Bangladesh	32	2,6	2,5	4,2	6,4	10	8	2	11
Vietnam	32	0,9	1,7	2,9	6,2	15	5	21	13
India	17	3,0	3,1	3,2	3,3	5	-1	2	-11
Turkey	16	3,3	4,2	3,6	3,1	3	0	0	4

Source: World Trade Organization (2019), Top 10 exporters of clothing, 2018

Growth of the RMG sector in Bangladesh occurred despite heavy reliance on low-end and low-priced items (ILO, 2017). The formula behind this success was to offset the low value of products by increasing the volume of exports (Sadeque, 2018). In other words, its disadvantage in terms of quality was counterbalanced by offering the buyers the lowest production rates and utilizing high capacities in terms of the number of production facilities and workers. According to the BGMEA, the number of its member factories increased from 384 in 1983–84 to 4,621 in 2018–19 (BGMEA, web) with most enterprises concentrated in the four districts of Dhaka, Chittagong, Gazipur, and Narayanganj. Although the number of operating enterprises is potentially much higher, it is hard to provide an exact estimate given the lack of a comprehensive database. Some reports suggest that there might be over 1,000 enterprises that are not registered with any public or private organization, which have been involved in export-orientated apparel manufacturing, mostly under sub-contracting arrangements⁴ (Moazzem and Radia, 2018: 10).

3.2 Workforce

Growth of the RMG sector also provided employment opportunities, especially for women who were admitted into formal employment. Though women constitute the majority of workers in the sector, recent findings show that there was little to no growth in employment in the past 10 years and that the initial high proportion of 80% women in the RMG workforce has declined to approximately 60.1% (Matsuura and Teng, 2020: 7). It has been found that technological upgrades and the introduction of more sophisticated production practices have been detrimental and led to the declining number of women workers in the RMG sector, since these updates were mostly made in production sectors where the employment of low-skilled female labor force was predominant (CPD, 2018; Matsuura and Teng, 2020).

4 Subcontracting refers to a situation where a person or firm are being contracted by a main contractor or employer to carry out work or deliver services, labor, or materials as part of a larger project (OECD, Glossary of Statistical Terms)



Figure 3: Male workers at the ironing department in a RMG factory, Dhaka

According to the Bangladesh labor force survey from 2016, the workforce in the Bangladesh RMG sector is young, with over 70 % of the workers (both male and female) being 29 years of age, or younger (Matsuura and Teng, 2020). Furthermore, it has been recorded that 60 % of the workforce has completed primary education, while 29,1 % of women and 17,9 % of men do not have any formal education (ibid.). What this demonstrates is that in an industry where educational levels are already low, a significantly larger share of the female workers is uneducated, when compared to their male counterparts.

Another demining trait of the Bangladesh RMG sector are high worker turnover rates. According to Heath (2018 as cited in Bossavie et al. 2019: 7), only 62 % of all hired workers in the RMG sector work in the same factory longer than 12 months. A study by Hossain and Mahmood (2018) showed that the turnover rates vary depending on the size of the RMG company, with bigger ones having lower turnover rates than the smaller ones. In addition to this, the study revealed that lower turnover rates were associated with the company's position within the supply chain, whereas sub-contracting companies experienced much higher rates of turnover than the contracting ones (ibid).

3.3 Responses to the Rana Plaza tragedy

In the period from 1990 to 2013, garment factory calamities in Bangladesh occurred with alarming frequency leaving thousands of workers dead and injured (Chowdhury and Tanim, 2016). While most of these incidents sparked attention in the activist and researcher circles in the country, they were largely overlooked by the global public. The event that put the country into the spotlight was the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory on 24 April 2013 that killed 1,134 workers and injured more than 2,500 in the outskirts of the country's capital, Dhaka. As one of the worst industrial accidents ever recorded, it sent shockwaves worldwide and incited criticism and scrutiny of the RMG industry in Bangladesh as well as raising questions about the involvement and responsibilities of the global buyers and brands sourcing garments from Bangladesh.

The rage and revulsion erupting over Rana Plaza disaster forced all stakeholders to act and that involved factory owners, governments, employee groups, and global retailers and buyers. Major stakeholders such as government agencies, International Labor Organization (ILO), Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BKMEA), BGMEA, international retailers, and key retailing country governments, including the United States, European Union, Australia, and Japan, had jointly prepared and implemented a series of long-term international and national initiatives (Carlson and Bitsch, 2018). These responses entailed corporate codes of conduct, policy reforms and legislative changes predominantly focused on the field of occupational health and safety (ibid.).

The post-disaster period gave birth to the two major global agreements, the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh (the Accord)⁵ and Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety (Alliance)⁶, which were signed with key stakeholders in 2013 to improve the situation and to create foundations for a more sustainable industry. While the work of the Alliance ended in December 2018, the Accord continued to work until June 2020, when the in-country operations of the initiative transitioned to the RMG Sustainability Council (RSC) created by the Accord signatory brands, unions and the BGMEA and BKMEA (Accord, web).

5 Legally binding five-year agreement signed by multinational apparel companies and global trade unions to inspect and upgrade factories (Prentice, 2018).

6 Legally binding, five-year commitment of 28 North American brands to improve safety in Bangladeshi RMG factories organized in 2013.

As a response to the Rana Plaza incident, the government of Bangladesh set up the National Initiative with an objective to ensure an integrated approach to the promotion of fire safety and structural integrity (Ministry of Labor and Employment, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2013). Other multi-stakeholder initiatives included the Business Social Compliance Initiative (BSCI), Fair Wear Foundation (FWF), and Clean Clothes Campaign (CCC), organizations that have also helped to define and improve standards, providing additional guidance to businesses and increasing overall transparency within the RMG sector (Kabeer et al., 2019: 11).

4 Identified social sustainability challenges in the Bangladesh RMG sector

While it is apparent that there were some improvements within the Bangladesh RMG sector in the post-Rana Plaza period (Moazzem and Khandker, 2016), these efforts have had a limited impact. Several reports indicate that even though conditions have improved, it cannot be regarded as a practice with an industry-wide presence (Bossavie et al., 2019; Hendriksz, 2018; Hossain et al., 2018; Prentice, 2018). Due to the absence of a well-functioning labor inspection system and appropriate enforcement mechanism, garment manufacturing is still a high-risk industry with respect to almost all human rights and decent work standards (Niebank, 2018; ILO, 2018).

The conversation about socially⁷ sustainable practices in the garment industry places significantly less attention to the supplier's perspective or that of any other stakeholder in the sector, except the buying firm's perspective of implementing practices and standards (Huq and Stevenson, 2020). Given its high reliance on cheap labor force, discussion about the social aspect of sustainability in the garment industry needs to take into consideration both human and labor rights (Annapoorani, 2017). Furthermore, observation of a sector that employs a predominantly female workforce urges to have a specific sensitivity to gender-related issues such as reproductive health rights, discrimination, and harassment at the workplace.

By reviewing current research on the status of the Bangladesh RMG sector (Center for Policy Dialogue, 2018; Emran et al., 2019; Fair Labor Association, 2018; Fair Wear Foundation, 2018; Hossain et al. 2018; Kabir et al. 2019; Transparency International Bangladesh, 2018), we have identified four broad categories which include excessive working hours and overtime, unhealthy working environment, restricted ability to organize, as well as workplace discrimination and gender-based harassment. In the sections that follow we will describe these challenges in more detail.

⁷ Referring to Elkington's Triple Bottom Line (TBL): environmental, economic, and social sustainability (Henriques, A., Richardson 2004).



Figure 4: Road leading to the industrial zone Gazipur, Dhaka

4.1 Long working hours

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) identifies three factors that drive excessive working hours in manufacturing and those are: low wages, poor purchasing practices and flaws in production planning (2018: 135).

The wage paid in Bangladesh's RMG factories is insufficient to meet the workers' basic needs, so they are often forced to work additional hours to supplement their income. According to TIB (2018), small and sub-contract factories in most cases do not pay minimum wage to the workers. Furthermore, findings from Emran et al. (2019: 18) show that 99% of the workers in the Bangladesh RMG sector work overtime, with 55% working more than three hours of overtime regularly. However, this strategy is not without risks as studies suggest that additional working hours significantly increase the risk of physical injury, fatigue, and mental strain, while also making it more difficult for workers to care for their families (FLA, 2018). Different stakeholders, including governmental institutions, employers' organizations, trade unions, national labor NGOs, and international organizations, stated that the 10-hour workday continues to be the norm in garment factories in Bangladesh (FWF, 2018). In light of this finding, it comes as no surprise that the average age of a garment worker in Bangladesh is between 18 and 35 years (ibid.). The intensity of the work takes a significant toll on their physical health, rendering them unable to fulfill the required production quotas after a particular age.

With regards to the purchasing practices of international brands sourcing from Bangladesh RMG sector, issues such as last-minute style changes and expectations of unreasonable lead times⁸ are very much present (Anner, 2020; Emran et al., 2019). Furthermore, the poor purchasing practices directly correlate to the inefficiencies in production planning since the lack of consistency in orders causes suppliers to book orders far above their production capacities in the hope that the production will remain high. The burden of such hazardous behaviour often falls onto the workers since the managers fix production targets arbitrarily, without taking into account the workers' willingness or ability to work overtime (FWF, 2018; Emran et al., 2019: 41).

4.2 Unhealthy working environment

Although the Bangladesh Accord and Alliance contributed to building safety and dealing with occupational health hazards, the industry continues to face endemic and systemic failures related to protecting worker's health (Prentice, 2018). While visible factors such as building, electricity, and structural safety garner more attention, issues such as workers' access to basic health rights and a healthy work environment do not get the same exposure (FWF, 2018). What is more, most changes in the field of occupational health and safety were just implemented in bigger, export-orientated factories, which means that many other factories, especially those working as sub-contractors, still operate out of the sight of inspectors (ibid.).

When discussing workers' health in the Bangladesh RMG sector, it is necessary to consider both the physical and psychological effects that the unhealthy working environment can have on them (Kabir et al. 2019). Physical issues that the workers are facing can be attributed to lack or improper use of protective equipment, suboptimal working conditions such as inadequate ventilation and lighting, as well as insufficient supervision and lack of training opportunities for the workers in production. Therefore, the most common health problems faced by the workers in the RMG sector include hearing and respiratory issues, impaired eyesight, and musculoskeletal pain (Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies, 2015). As for the psychological issues that the workers are having, they can be traced to excessive workload, low wages, abusive language, job insecurity, and sense of being unsafe at the workplace (Kabir et al., 2019).

⁸ Lead time refers to the time needed between the initiation and completion of a production process.

Given the predominantly female workforce, it is crucial to mention that workers in the Bangladesh RMGS sector exert limited reproductive health rights, enduring a lack of daycare and breastfeeding facilities (FWF, 2018). Furthermore, in Oxfam's study that investigated the lives of the workers in the supply chains of Australian brands, Emran et al. (2019: 18) discovered that 66% of the pregnant women are subject to discrimination, which involves cases where they must work additional hours in order to postpone the maternity leave.

4.3 Restricted ability to organize

When it comes to worker's ability to organize within the Bangladesh RMG sector, main issues include low trade union density, unfavorable legislation, the politicization of unions, as well as discrimination and harassment of trade union members.

Following the Rana Plaza tragedy, there has been a rise in the number of registered unions in the factories in the Bangladesh RMG sector (Nawaz, 2019; Hossain et al., 2018). However, this is a rather low figure considering the size of the industry itself, as well as number of factories and workers. The rate of unionization in the RMG sector is still extremely low, with only around 10% factories having an active union (Nawaz, 2019: 2). In addition to this, the Bangladesh Labor Law poses a significant barrier for creation and running of a trade, since it requires 30% of the workers in the factory agree to form a union. This initial requirement is then followed by a complicated registration procedure (Hossain et al., 2018).

Registration of false trade unions is another burning issue of the sector, linked to the process of curbing social dialogue (TIB, 2018: 8). Furthermore, the same study highlights reports of harassment of union leaders by factory management and cites practical barriers to union registration imposed by the state and employers. For example, unions still have the obligation to submit a list of union founders to the owner of the factory, who can then terminate their contracts with impunity (ibid.). In addition to this, rising numbers of court cases and increased job loss by workers active in unions undermine the process of collective bargaining (ibid.).

4.4 Gender-based discrimination and violence

Gender-based discrimination can be defined as any distinction, exclusion, or restriction based on one's gender which, as a result, hinders one's abilities to enjoy basic human rights and fundamental freedoms. In an industry where women constitute most of the workforce, gender-based discrimination presents a persistent feature that underlines all other social sustainability challenges faced by the workers. Manifestations of gender-based discrimination range from barriers to further career advancement, discrimination based on skill, marital status and age, to sexual harassment and gender-based violence (FWF, 2018; Nawaz, 2019).



Figure 5: Female worker sticking labels in a RMG factory, Dhaka

Most of the female workers in the Bangladesh RMG sector come from rural areas with very low literacy rates. In a society with deep-seated patriarchal norms, where women still have limited access to education and further skill development, the garment sector, despite its precarious working conditions, offers a pathway to earning income. Disparities begin with the recruitment processes. Employers prefer younger, non-married women, as they are considered to be more productive and have fewer duties at home, which make them more likely to work for longer hours. Findings from the FWF study underline common night shifts, which are mostly requested from female workers, who are perceived as less rebellious and easier to manage than their male counterparts (FWF, 2018). This results in the compromised safety of female workers, who lack safe transport back home after the late-night shifts (ibid). In addition, such practices reduce the time for leisure and sleep of female workers and adversely affect their physical and mental well-being.



Figure 6: Young job seekers in front of a RMG factory in Gazipur, Dhaka

Unlike managerial and supervisory positions that are usually occupied by men, female employees working in low-skilled positions have been affected by the process of automation (Nawaz, 2019). Results of a study conducted by the Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) demonstrate that the number of women as a percentage of the ready-made garments workforce declined from 64% in 2015 to 61% in 2016, due to job loss caused by automation (CPD, 2018). As one of the causes, Nawaz (2019) pinpoints to the patriarchal assumptions of employers and managers that disregard women as less capable of handling modern machinery than their male counterparts. As a result, women are less likely to receive training that would enable them to acquire skills necessary to fulfil the new requirements of the workplace and thus, they fall out of the workforce.

Workplaces in the Bangladesh RMG sector are not free from gender-based violence, ranging from insults directed at a person's gender, suggestive comments or language, and demeaning remarks to unwelcome touching and grabbing and other physical assaults, all of which are significant sources of workplace and mental stress for female workers (FWF, 2018). According to FWF findings, 75% workers experienced verbal violence at work, 20% succumbed to physical violence, 30% underwent psychological violence, and 60% encountered sexual violence (FWF, 2013). According to Al Mamun et al. (2018), mid- and low-level management staff was identified as the most common perpetrator of workplace violence against female employees.

5 Mid-level management

Mid-level managers have been recognized as important stakeholders in the Bangladesh RMG sector since they are responsible for overseeing factory operations and ensuring compliance with sustainability standards. The potential for improvement in this sector and introduction of sustainable business practices hinges on the process of expanding managerial knowledge and skills within the factories (Brunn and Scherf, 2017; Hearle, 2016; Islam et al., 2017b; Salvai, 2017; Woodruff, 2014). In this context, the Government of Bangladesh highlighted the need for skilled mid-level managers in the National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2010), as well as in the Seventh Five-Year Plan (General Economics Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2015). In addition, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) and the government Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) also addressed the need for training as a means of enhancing middle management's knowledge and skills (BMET, 2015).

5.1 Definition of mid-level manager

While reviewing the literature on mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector, we noticed that there is no exact definition of the mid-level managers and what their task list entails. While some scholars and researchers understand the mid-level as clearly separated from supervisory positions, others include both. Considering the changing nature of their job in the RMG sector, Salvai (2017) outlines them as employees with a range of responsibilities, ranging from HR managers, compliance managers, and the so-called "team leaders" or "chiefs on the floor" to production managers.

By holding an essential position in organizational hierarchies, mid-level managers are responsible for implementing strategies of the senior management and exercising control over the junior staff (Harding et al., 2014). Furthermore, they oversee production lines, disseminating a prevention culture, or work as an ideal link between workers and the management (ibid). On top of all this, mid-level managers are considered to be the tertiary-tier leaders in the industrial hierarchy, who manage the workers by demonstrating both transformational (i.e., reinforcement, monitor, and control) and transactional leadership (i.e., motivation, mediation, making rewards and punishment), and they report to other high-level leaders (Rezvani, 2017: 1-9).

Although we have found it hard to put mid-level managers under a single bottom line definition, our understanding of the mid-level is similar to that of Salvai, although we further distinguish two sides of the role, administrative and production. We will elaborate more on this in Section 6.1.

5.2 Industry-wide challenges faced by mid-level managers in Bangladesh RMG

Informed by secondary literature, we have identified five industry-wide challenges faced by the mid-level management—shortage of skilled workforce in the managerial positions, expat hiring, discrepancy in supply and demand between the educational and industrial sector, occupational segregation, and lack of training opportunities.

5.2.1 Shortage of skilled workforce and expat hiring

Given that the RMG sector in Bangladesh is expected to continue being one of the country's main drivers of economic growth and job creation, an adequate supply of highly skilled laborers is of critical importance for Bangladesh (World Bank, 2018: 14). The rapid growth of the RMG sector in Bangladesh has given rise to an uneven demand-supply scenario, with the lack of skilled labor hindering the country's economic upgrading strategy and slowing its advancement up in the value chain. According to a 2015 report from Government's the Directorate of Textile (DOT), the apparel sector has been suffering a shortage of about 110,000 skilled persons, from floor to executive level, which could well reach 1,820,000 by 2021, if adequate steps are not taken (Ahmed and Parvin, 2018).

Study by Akhter et al. (2019) identified that there is a shortage of adequately trained staff and equipment for monitoring occupational safety and health (OSH) in RMG factories, which hampers the process of data collection essential for evidence-based decision making. Furthermore, they argue that there is a lack of cooperation by employers when it comes to collecting data related to the OSH problems that workers encounter (ibid). Lastly, they state that the government officials have limited resources and power to enforce compliance with the existing regulation (ibid.). When it comes to future skill needs for the managerial positions within the apparel industry, Islam et al. (2017b: 57) indicate that these include foreign language knowledge, team working, problem-solving, presentation skills, adaptability, time management and customer handling.

Owing to the shortage of a qualified workforce and frequent technological changes in production technology, factory owners hire foreign nationals in mid-level management positions in great numbers. Most of them come from India or Sri Lanka (Islam and Islam, 2020). Although there is no concrete data on the exact number of expats employed in the textile and RMG sector, records from different ministries show that around 450,000 foreign nationals currently work in mid-level and executive positions in the sector (Akter, 2019).

According to a study conducted by Islam et al. (2017b: 58) for the Center of Excellence for Bangladesh Apparel Industry (CEBAI), expatriates in the Bangladesh RMG sector possess specialized skills (communication, leadership, decision-making, and operational skills) that give them a competitive advantage over local managers. Consequently, they are remunerated higher and, in some cases, the pay gap between expatriates and locals exceeds 100% (ILO, 2018: 15).

5.2.2 Gap between the needs of the RMG industry and the educational sector

Although efforts have been made by the government to create fashion designing and merchandising departments in private and public universities in Bangladesh, setting up the infrastructure and accomplishing concrete results will take time (Akter, 2019). Young graduates and job seekers do not feel drawn towards the RMG sector given the long working hours, remoteness of the industrial zones and poor transport infrastructure connecting them to the residential areas.

It was remarked that the qualities of being 'educated' and 'skilled' often do not come in one package but rather separately, since many of the university graduates who end up working in the RMG sector do not have the educational background that matches their position within the enterprise. Despite around 50% of the managers having post-graduate degrees and 20% having bachelor's degrees, many managers graduated in fields of little pertinence to the management and operation of industrial enterprises (CPD, 2018). In the case of many professionals and technical and engineering workers, overemphasis on theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical skills during tertiary education can cause significant deficits in their technical competencies (World Bank, 2018: 7) and thus make them unattractive as employees. Furthermore, Akhter et al. (2019) argue that tertiary education institutions offer very few courses on OSH, labor law, or monitoring and evaluation.

5.2.3 Low woman's representation in managerial positions

Although female workers constitute mostly production workers, finding women working in mid-level positions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh is uncommon (CPD, 2018; Naem and Woodruff, 2017). The CPD-RMG Survey 2017-2018 showed that the prevalence of men in managerial positions in comparison to women is 99.5% to 0.5% (CPD, 2018). According to the same resource, the situation is to some extent better in the area of human resource management, where the ratio is 90.7% men and 9.3% women. Similar findings were unearthed in an earlier study by Naeem and Woodruff (2017) where they stated that for every twenty supervisors working in an RMG factory, only one was female.

As one of the chief reasons behind this discrepancy, Islam et al. (2017a) identify low levels of succession planning within companies, flexible working hours and lack of communication skills. On the subject of succession planning, management in the garment factories is less inclined to invest in enhancing the skills of female workers, and this reluctance impedes their ability to occupy future vacancies of mid-level management positions. Another obstacle to female workers climbing up the career ladder is the requirement of flexible working hours, which stands in direct conflict with the expectation that women are responsible for domestic care work (ibid.). Lastly, female workers are believed to lack effective communication skills to successfully engage with different stakeholders such as employees, suppliers, government agencies, and competitors (ibid.). Although this can be also perceived as a general problem among mid-level managers, female workers are more restricted when attempting to develop these skills in the male-dominated cultural context, where obedience and subservience are the main preconditions that women are expected to fulfil (Al Mamun et al., 2018). Publication by the ILO and UN Women, 'Workers' survey, Study on the Ready-made Garment Sector in Bangladesh' from 2018, revealed two important aspects related to the mid-level management positions— "intense workload" and "stress" (Matsuura and Teng, 2020: 17). According to this study, persons working in supervisory positions are required to stay longer at work than those in production without any overtime compensation which leads to increased tension and stress (ibid.).

5.2.4 Lack of training opportunities

When compared to other Asian countries and trade competitors, Bangladesh has a rather low level of literacy and fewer years of schooling of the managerial staff, as well as high levels of workers' turnover, and workers' inability to pay for training courses on their own, which in turn reduces the incentives for the private sector to provide training (General Economics Division, Bangladesh Planning Commission, 2015: 201). For this reason, many mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector usually obtain their practical level skills on the job, which hints at the existence of path-dependent learning practices within the industry that can hinder cultivation and acquisition of new skills.

Middle managers require significant on-the-job and on-line training to understand management techniques (Woodruff, 2014). When it comes to future skill needs for the managerial positions within the apparel industry, Islam et al. (2017b: 57) assert that these include foreign language knowledge, team working, problem-solving, presentation skills, adaptability, time management, and customer handling. Furthermore, Akhter et al. (2019) have found that staff receives OSH training through workshops and online short courses that do not advance the analytical skills of the trainees. In fact, it is noted that more training is needed at the individual level, where gathering, analyzing, and interpreting data holds the key to the enhancement of their skills and abilities and creating long-term strategies rather than instant, on-the-spot solutions. In addition, according to the World Bank development update on Bangladesh (World Bank, 2019: 26) technological advancements have started to make skill requirements less predictable, meaning that workers need to acquire higher cognitive and analytical skills to better adapt to these changes.

6 Research findings from the field

6.1 Two sides of the mid-level management in garment factories

When it comes to understanding the position and function of mid-level managers in the RMG sector in Bangladesh, we have concluded that it has to involve two distinct sides—production side (e.g., supervisors, line managers, section leads, in-chiefs) and administrative side (e.g., HR officers, admin, compliance managers, welfare officers, production officers, fire safety officer, training manager, purchase etc.). The main tasks on the production side involve control and direction of the production process and they are in closest to the workers themselves. From the administrative perspective, they are the actual mediators between the top and production level of management. Here, the responsibilities involve strategic tasks such as financial management, report writing, analysis and strategic communication, strategy-implementation, leadership, and providing training activities for supervisory functions and workers (see Table 2).

Table 2: Positions and tasks of mid-level managers in RMG factories

MID-LEVEL MANAGEMENT	WORK POSITION	MAIN TASKS/RESPONSIBILITIES
Administrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ HR Officers ■ Admin ■ Compliance ■ CSR ■ Welfare Officers ■ Production Officers ■ Fire safety Officer ■ Training Manager ■ Purchasing 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mediators between top and production level ■ Strategic tasks such as financial management, report writing, analysis and strategic comm. ■ Providing training activities for supervisory functions and workers ■ Direct contact with workers in special cases
Production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Supervisors ■ Line managers ■ Section leads ■ In-chiefs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Control and direction of production ■ Direct daily contact with the workers

Figure developed by authors

Most of the interviewed mid-level managers worked in enterprises that could be classified as ‘medium’ sized, with 500–2,500⁹ employees. While nine of the interviewees worked in production, occupying positions such as production manager, cutting manager, sewing in-charge, quality control in-charge, finishing in-charge and supervisor, ten of them held administrative positions like assistant manager, merchandize and marketing manager, HR and compliance manager, production manager, store access admin, and welfare officer. It is relevant to note that in terms of gender, only one of the interviewees was female and working in the capacity of a welfare officer which is a position usually occupied by female workers¹⁰.

According to our findings (Table 3), the average age was higher for persons working on the production side. Concerning the level of education, all individuals working in the administrative positions have university degrees whereas most of those working in the production side have secondary school degrees. In terms of work experience, managers from production have spent more years working in the RMG sector and they were younger when they began their careers. It is evident that the years of experience do not correspond to the previous training opportunities, since only 22.2% of the people working in the production side stated that they had previous training. In contrast, 80% mid-level managers working in administrative positions declared that they had previous training experience.

Table 3: Composition of the interviewed mid-level managers

	NUMBER OF INTERVIEWEES	FEMALE	AVERAGE AGE	EDUCATION LEVEL	AVERAGE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE IN RMG SECTOR	PREVIOUS TRAINING EXPERIENCE (% OF THE SAMPLE)
Administrative	10	1	36 years	University graduate	8 years	90% had previous training
Production	9	–	39 years	Secondary school	14,5 years	22,2% had previous training

Figure developed by authors

9 Moazzem and Radia (2018: 13) classify factories into ‘small’ with less than 500 workers, ‘medium’ with 500–2,500 workers and ‘large’ with more than 2500 workers. In their research, based on a sample of 3,856 factories they argued that most enterprises in the Bangladesh RMG sector are small (48.9%) and only 7.4% large.

10 “A welfare officer works for employees’ welfare to solve worker workplace problems in the garments industry, work under HR and compliance department” (Garments Academy, Library of Textile, Apparel and Fashion, web).

Interviewees working at the production level explained that most of what they had learned about the industry, such as their roles in the factories and the methods used to carry out those roles, was a result of direct experience after joining the enterprise. Most have worked for over five years in the same factory, advancing from trainee to supervisory levels. Therefore, the culture of work that fosters practices of communication, implementation of policies, and positive dynamics among the workers within the factory remained internal and path-dependent, with few changes being brought by external actors.

As their main concern are productivity, quality, and on-time delivery, mid-level managers at the production level mostly gain access to training programs geared towards increasing technical skills in the position they work. Most interviewees voiced that training was undertaken on a regular basis mainly for the purpose of adhering to buyer's requirements. On the other hand, mid-level managers working in the administrative side answered that training added value to their career advancement as well as the efficiency of the employee body. In addition to this, knowledge growth was also mentioned as a factor that motivated trainees to take part in training sessions, which would help them climb up the career ladder within the factory they work as well as improve their opportunities for work in other factories within the RMG industry.

6.2 Expat hiring

Findings from the interviews confirmed that there is a shortage of skilled workers in the administrative side of mid-level management positions and larger enterprises in the Bangladesh RMG sector exhibit an inclination to employ expatriates for these positions since they are regarded as having the skills necessary for optimal performance at their workplace. From the perspective of workers and production-side managers, expat managers enjoy lower level of trust since they often do not speak the local language and rarely engage with workers in the lower ranks in the factory.

With a limited pool of skilled workforce in Bangladesh, there is a notion that hiring an already qualified professional comes with less investment in terms of time and money from the side of the enterprise. Additionally, expats are perceived as being more focused on the work that they do, as well as more flexible in terms of working time since they often come to Bangladesh without their families. One of the interviewees had also expressed that expats working in the Bangladesh RMG sector are usually neither involved in politics nor have strong ties to other competing businesses, which makes them less of a threat and more easily swayed in positions of power.

6.3 Assessed knowledge gaps of mid-level managers

According to our findings, the two sides of the mid-level managers demonstrated different skills and knowledge gaps. This comes as no surprise given that there is a discrepancy in their education levels, as well as their access to further training opportunities. However, we did find that the main skill and knowledge gaps of the mid-level managers can be grouped around three areas that include general lack of knowledge on social sustainability issues, underdeveloped soft skills, and insufficient awareness of gender-related issues and needs of the female workers.

6.3.1 Sustainability means what the buyer wants

Answers we got from both sides of the mid-level management revealed that social compliance issues are widely regarded as necessary to meet the requirements of the buyers so as not to lose their orders. Owing to this, the main intention behind compliance development is to demonstrate to the buyers the ability of the factories to implement and maintain various policies dedicated to OSH, labor rights and gender equality, though preferably rather on paper and without implementing actual changes within the factory environment.

Mid-level managers find themselves “sandwiched” between the conflicting demands of the workers and the top management, which makes their position rather difficult, especially when it comes to providing support to workers’ demands such as wage increase, respecting the agreed working hours, etc. Apart from dealing with the pressure to meet production and shipment deadlines, workers are often the target of coercive management strategies (e.g., shouting, threats, and forced overtime), which mostly originate from the production side of the mid-level management. This situation contributes to low levels of trust between the workers and mid-level managers, since the managers are perceived by workers as only serving the interests of the top management and the owners.

From interviews both with experts as well as the mid-level management, we learnt that trade unions are perceived in a negative light due to their alleged political connections and corruptive practices. Most of the interviewed mid-level managers said that they rely on the work of the Participation Committees (PCs) instead since both workers and managers are involved. What is worrisome is that some interviewees described workers as unable to understand how trade unions work or should work, and that they are prone to abusing this institution to acquire personal gain at the expense of the factory. The answers we obtained in terms of trade unions and labor organizations correspond to the general negative discourse surrounding trade unions in Bangladesh and call for a much-needed change at a higher level of organizing and not merely within the factory itself.

6.3.2 Underdeveloped soft skills

According to our main findings, mid-level managers at both the administrative and the production level possess a clear need to improve their soft skills in terms of communication and conflict resolution, as well as critical thinking and familiarity with problem-solving strategies. As previously mentioned, mid-level managers in the production side mostly learn about their roles and responsibilities directly at the workplace by replicating the work of their senior colleagues. This learning pattern leads to them repeating the same mistakes in terms of strategic planning and management of workers. Additionally, reliance on a centralized decision-making process and low level of independence hinder the prospects of mid-level management, especially on the production side, preventing them from developing independent problem-solving strategies that would enable them to address issues on the spot and curb further conflict escalation.

Apart from this, we have learned that mid-level managers at the production level require access to soft skills training, which would tackle issues such as personal and worker's motivation and nurture an encouraging and productive work environment. Acquisition of such skills is crucial for them because they are the ones in direct contact with the workers and serve as communication pathways between the different levels of management and workers themselves.

Some of the interviewed mid-level managers in the administrative positions emphasized the need for soft skills' training devoted to the improvement of their command of the English language and presentation skills, which would bolster their ability to establish better communication with potential buyers. In addition to this, one of the motivations behind requests for such training was the possibility to acquire further qualifications that would improve their job prospects in the future.

6.3.3 Insensitivity to the needs of the female employees

In accordance with the results of our research, female workers are significantly less involved in the decision-making processes due to their position in the factory's hierarchy and the discriminatory socio-cultural context, where rigid division of roles remains pervasive. Furthermore, our findings confirmed that the main reasons behind low levels of women in supervisory and managerial positions have to do with discriminatory practices governing the processes of recruitment and career advancement.

When asked why there are so few women in supervisory positions, most interviewees replied that female employees, due to their responsibilities at home, are neither able to meet full commitment to the work in the factory nor in a position to work longer hours and instil authority amongst the workers. Moreover, most interviewees agreed that there is no need for women to be in supervisory positions, given that workers are in general comfortable with male supervisors and that there are no issues that they cannot address. On the other hand, their perception differed when it comes to female production works since most of the interviewed mid-level managers reported they considered female and male workers to be the same, referring to them as "manpower" rather than male or female.

Answers of the interviewed mid-level managers suggest a lack of privacy and gender sensitivity regarding complaint procedures within the factories. One practice considered as generally accepted was the submission of complaints by female workers to male supervisors regarding harassment cases, which means that in order to file the complaints, female workers must directly communicate with male supervisors orally or through application letters. What was alarming was that all but one interviewee mentioned that having female supervisors was not necessary, as this situation never caused any issue in the factory. This finding demonstrated a clear lack of understanding of the inroads towards establishing a more female-friendly work environment.

6.4 Obstacles to further training

What we could discern from our interviews is that non-technical training is viewed as task-irrelevant, often expensive, and time-consuming, and does not enjoy the support of the top management.

Most interviewees coming from the production side of the mid-level management demonstrated a low awareness of the benefits of further non-technical training designed to enhance their existing knowledge and skills. It was also perceived that the training they generally received and was mostly revolved around workplace cooperation was not very practical. Therefore, the knowledge they got from training rooms was less applicable in the operations of their daily tasks. Furthermore, mid-level managers have admitted participating in training programs mostly due to the requirements of the buyer. Hence, if there was no incentive from the buyer's side, the top management was reluctant to invest in further training of mid-level managers on their own initiative.

Due to the long working hours, the interviewed mid-level managers found it difficult to attend training during the week, especially if it took place far away from the factory. In addition to this, mid-level managers stated that there was a shortage of private training institutions and opportunities, and even when there were some, they were often not within the mid-level manager's ability to cover the financial costs of the training.

7 Conclusions

By the very dint of their position in the organizational hierarchy in a garment factory, mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector have an important role to play when it comes to addressing social sustainability challenges faced by the industry. In terms of social sustainability, middle managers lead the way forward by enabling strategy implementation, facilitating communication, and providing guidance to both the workers, as well as the top-level managers (Arefin and Draganic, 2020).

It is clear from our research that improvement of the position of mid-level managers in the Bangladesh RMG sector and their response to sustainability challenges requires collaboration across a wide myriad of stakeholders, starting from educational institutions, factory owners, and mid-level managers themselves. When it comes to future training development, we argue that it needs to address the prevailing conviction that sustainability is only the need of the buyer and not of the factory. In addition to this, it is necessary to nurture an enabling environment for female workers in the RMG sector and provide ongoing support for their career advancement. Considering the cultural context of the region in which the factories are located, it is safe to assume that the provision of female supervisors would create a more empowering work environment for female production workers, encourage their participation in decision-making and promote further career advancement. Also, mid-level managers should attain training to promote workers' organizations and social dialogue to enable healthy industrial relations. Lastly, top-level management has an especially important role to play in motivating and financially supporting mid-level managers to attend further training.

It is necessary to distinguish between the different needs of the production and the administrative side of the mid-level management, as the positions in which they work require different sets of knowledge and skills. We deem it important to adjust the language and the content of the trainings to the realities of formal educational levels of the attendees. As for the examined target group, special attention needs to be provided to the production side of the mid-level managers, mainly supervisors, as they have a key role to play in ensuring the implementation of safe and sustainable practices at the workers' level.

We appeal that future research includes small- and medium-scale firms operating in the Bangladesh RMG sector since they have been identified in literature as the hotspots of non-compliant practices.

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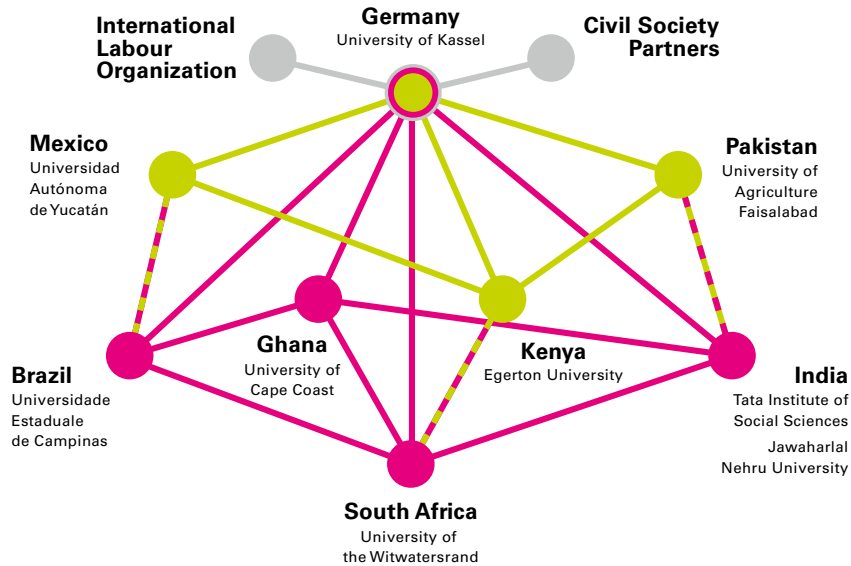
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