

IMPACT OF EMPOWERMENT, FLEXIBILITY AND TRUST ON WOMEN'S ACCESS TO SENIOR POSITIONS IN RMG INDUSTRY OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

Accessing in senior positions of organisations is always challenging for women especially in developing countries. Although several studies in the past have helped explain the impact of some significant variables for women access to senior positions, not many studies examined the effects of certain factors such as empowerment, flexibility and trust on women's access to senior positions in the Ready Made Garments (RMG) industry. Thus, the aim of the study is to examine the impact of empowerment, flexibility and trust in the RMG industry where more than 90% of workers are women. This study employed a convenience sampling method to select 200 female respondents working in different positions RMG industry in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The finding reveals that empowerment and trust have the significant impact on women's access to the senior positions in RMG organizations in Bangladesh. However, findings shows that flexibility has no significant impact on women' access to senior positions in RMG organizations in Bangladesh. Future researches can be conducted to include more variables and respondents.

Keywords: Ready Made Garments, Industry.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, participation of women at different industries have increased dramatically especially in the developing countries. Some of the key industries in many of these regions are mainly dependent on female workers. For example, the ready-made garments industry of Bangladesh, worth \$25 billion in 2016 is heavily dependent on the female workers, who are 90% of the total workforce in the entire industry (BGMEA, 2017). A similar scenario is observed in other key garments producing countries such as Vietnam (80%), India (60%),

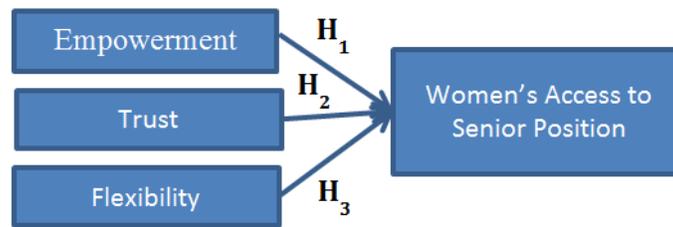
Philippines (85%), Cambodia (70%), etc. where the majority of the workers in the industry are females (Wage Indicator, 2016; ILO, 2017). However, it is very surprising and true that there are very few females in the senior positions such as Senior executives, Middle managers, top-level managers, heads of department, board of directors etc. in almost all the organizations of the RMG industry in Bangladesh (Woodruff and Macchiavello, 2014; Preuss, 2016; Mia, 2016; Islam and Jantan, 2017).

According to John (2013) and Towo (2017), the existence of females in the board or in other leading positions improves board performance and employees' engagement at work and their enthusiasm to excel at the workplace. This view has been supported by Mathur-Helm (2006); Nielsen and Huse (2010) and (Fitch and Agrawal, 2015), who found that women representatives understand better than men in determining the demands of females at the workplace, therefore, there should enough number of females in leading positions. On the other hand, Fitch and Agrawal, (2015); Triana et al. (2017) outline that a female manager can interact with her female subordinates more effectively than a male manager when there are more female workers than male workers. In addition, McKinsey (2010) found that companies with more women on their executive committees have better financial performance. These views stress on the necessities of females in senior or leading positions. Many studies have examined the processes or strategies or factors etc. needed to increase the presence of female counterparts in senior positions in the different companies and their relationship with various organizational variables (Sepehri et al., 2010; Subramaniam, 2011; Gentry et al., 2012; OECD, 2014; Mia, 2016; Ranganathan and Shivaram, 2016; Sanders, 2017). However, almost all the research works on women access to senior or leadership positions have been developed and tested in western countries (Sepehri et al., 2010; Nielsen and Huse, 2010; Powell, 2011; Rawas and Seddawy, 2015; Post and Byron, 2015; Sanders, 2017).

Thus, the objective of the study is to particularly identify the influence of empowerment, flexibility and trust on women's accessing leading positions in the Ready Made Garments (RMG) Industry. By examining the impact of these three variables on women's accessing leading positions in the selected industry of Bangladesh, we hope to increase/improve the manager's/owner's understanding of how these factors can influence the female workers to access leading positions in organizations. Furthermore, the results of the study will lay the groundwork for the further research that may affect organizational practices in the manufacturing or the other industries in today's business world.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES AND FRAMEWORK

The research framework is outlined in Figure 1. The framework includes three independent variables namely empowerment, trust and flexibility and the dependent variable, women's access in senior position. All the hypotheses developed for this study will be explained in the next section.



Source: Authors.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework

Empowerment and Females' Access to Senior Positions

According to Dubrin (1998) and Ford and Fottler (1995) empowerment is the integrated set of functions and organizational practices performed in organizations by managers that give authority, power and control to the subordinates. In this respect, Arneson and Ekberg (2006) outlined empowerment as the delegation of the responsibility and power to make a decision from the top level to the lower level in the organizations. Empowerment facilitates the process of developing employee's performance and potentiality to climb up the organizational levels (Vogt and Kenneth (1990). According to Kruja et al. (2015) empowerment makes employees feel better about their jobs and themselves that motivate them to take the responsibilities to be completed in the organizations. Chien and Ann (2014) argued that when employees are empowered they perceive that they are given autonomy and choice in their workplace. In this respect, Vogt and Kenneth (1990), opined that taking higher responsibilities and accomplishing them make the employees take senior roles. This means when the employees are empowered, they tend to take extra responsibilities and senior roles. This is supported by the findings of Jones (2017), who found empowering employees in the workplace is making them confident to take senior roles. Hence, hypothesize it as:

H₁: Empowerment has a positive relationship with access to senior positions.

Trust and Females' Access to Senior Positions

Mayer et al. (1995) defined trust as the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a certain function significant to respective trusted regardless of the capability to control or monitor that other party. According to Schoorman et al. (2007), trust is an indication of the amount of risk an individual is

willing to take (Mayer et al., 1995). Many authors (Beilke, 2014; Fulmer, 2017; Jacobs, 2014) have similarly sketched trust as a principal driver that is needed to provide responsibilities to the employees to be performed in time. From this perspective, it is clear that trust for the junior employees is urgent to bring them to the senior roles regardless of their gender. According to Glynn (2011), succession planning is a transition of management/role in the organizations that completely depend on the trust of the higher management or owner on the employee, who is about to take the role. If the management or owners do not believe that an employee has the capability to take responsibilities in the senior position, they will not give the senior role to the employee (Conger and Fulmer, 2003; Ulrich, 1998; Jiang and Luo, 2018). Hence, proposed that:

H₂: Trust has a positive relationship with access to senior positions.

Flexibility and Females' Access to Senior Positions

According to Turnbull (2015), flexible senior roles are the key to unlocking the hidden talent of the workforce. According to the Australian Institute of Management (2012), flexibility in the organization creates an opportunity for leadership roles or senior roles within the industry and enhances talent management such as retention of key staffs. Flexible work arrangements give employees greater choice and greater control over how, when and where they work (Worldat Work 2011; DCA, 2012). Global Health Care Company Roche applies flexible working practices to encourage women to access senior positions (Roche, 2016). In this respect, the company has benefited hugely in retaining female workers for the longer time and greater performance. According to Sanders (2016) flexibility leads female workers to take the leading or senior roles in the workplace because it facilitates the process of overcoming barriers to women's progression into leadership or senior roles. For example, it supports men and women to create a balance between the workplace and family (Richman et al., 2011; Young and Schieman, 2018). Flexible working is no longer just a women's issue (Bain and CEW, 2015). Increasingly, men are demanding for the flexible working options, often to play more active roles as caregivers (Bain and CEW, 2015; Richman et al., 2011). From this perspective, the need for the flexible working arrangements in organizations is equally relevant for men. According to Powell (2011); Watkins (2012); European Union (2012); Tuuk (2012); OECD (2016) flexible work schedules enable employees to manage homework conflicts as best suits them while maintaining productivity levels and facilitate them to climb up to the senior positions. Hence, hypothesize it as:

H₃: Flexibility has a positive relationship with access to senior positions.

METHODOLOGY

To collect data for this study an adaptive questionnaire was used. The questionnaire consisted of five sections of which four sections contain questions to measure empowerment, flexibility, trust and women's access to a senior position. A 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from "1=strongly disagree" to "5=strongly agree" was used to measure the responses in these four

sections. The fifth and final section of the questionnaire is about the demographic profile of the respondents. To assess the empowerment, we adapted 5 questions from Niehoff et al. (2001). The reliability of this measurement scale is 0.95 (Niehoff et al., 2001). To assess flexibility, we adapted 10 questions from Foriss (2015). The reliability of this measurement scale is 0.95. To measure trust, we adapted 5 questions from the study of Schoorman and Belinger (2006). In this respect, the reliability of the measurement scale is 0.84 (Schoorman and Belinger, 2006). Finally, to measure the women's access to the senior position, we adapted 2 items from the study of Islam and Jantan (2017) and 3 items from Ismail and Ibrahim (2008). In this respect, the reliability of the measurement scale was 0.85.

The target populations of this study were the female employees in senior positions in the RMG organizations in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The area has been selected because all the RMG companies have factories, head or regional offices in this city (Daily Star, 2018). However, it is very much challenging to include the senior positioned female employees in RMG industry because they are busy with their jobs and other functions. Hence, based on the convenience sampling that we decided to use, the researchers have included 200 participants in the study. All the participants returned the questionnaire with the full answer; therefore, the response rate was 100%.

The questionnaires were also pre-tested among 10 female managers from the RMG industry. All the participants during pre-test were encouraged to ask questions since this facilitates to amend of the questions if there was any mistake. Descriptive statistics were used to present the demographic profile of the participants of the study. On the other hand, to achieve the objectives of the study, multiple regression analysis was used to examine the impact of empowerment, flexibility and trust on women's access to senior positions in the RMG industry of Bangladesh.

RESULTS

Demographic profile of respondents:

Variables	Values	%
Age	25-35	45
	36-45	33
	46-55	2
	56-65	38
	Above 40	17
Marital status	Single	22
	Married	78

Monthly income	Tk. 20000-Tk. 30,000	57
	Tk. 40,000-Tk. 60,000	34
	Above Tk. 60,000	10
Education level	Undergraduate	32
	Masters	68
	DBA/PhD	0
Work experience	2 Year to 5 years	12
	6 Years to 10 years	58
	10 years to 15 years	20
	Above 15 years	10

Reliability Test Results

Cronbach's alpha test of reliability has been used to establish the reliability of the multi-item scales. According to the reliability test results, the reliability of all measurements was more than 0.70. According to George and Mallery (2001) and Nunnally (1978) reliability results of at least 0.70 or above can be considered reliable for the subsequent analysis. They outlined excellent reliability exist at $\alpha > 0.90$, good reliability at $\alpha > 0.80$ and acceptable reliability at $\alpha > 0.70$. The results of the reliability test in Table 2 show that the Cronbach's Alpha value is varied from the 0.740 and 0.95. These results indicate that the scales used in this study are consistent and reliable.

Variables	No. Of items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)
Empowerment	5	0.95
Trust	5	0.95
Flexibility	10	0.95
Women Access in Senior Positions	5	0.856

Pearson's Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents the relationship between the independent variables such as empowerment, trust and flexibility and dependent variable i.e. Women's Access to Senior Positions. However, the use of the Pearson's Correlation Test indicates that there are positive and significant relationships between the independent and dependent variables with regard to the RMG industry in Bangladesh.

Table 3
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Variables	Women's Access to Senior Positions	Empowerment	Trust	Flexibility
Women Access in Senior Positions	1	0.954 (**)	0.950 (**)	0.44
Empowerment	0.954	1		
Trust	0.95		1	
Flexibility	0.44			-1

Hypothesis 1: Empowerment Has a Positive Relationship with Access to Senior Positions

The P value of 0.0001 obtained indicate that empowerment is positively and significantly related to women's access to senior positions in the Ready Made Garments (RMG) industry, since, any p value below 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) outlines the significant and positive relationship between an independent and dependent variable. A positive correlation R-value of 0.954 represent that the empowerment is positively related to women's access into the senior position. Thus, this recommends that the first hypothesis of this study is successfully supported from the Rule of Thumb of Guildford that an R-value of 0.954 is the indication of a very high correlation between the empowerment and women's access to the senior position in the RMG industry of Bangladesh. This result is also backed by the study of Islam and Jantan (2017) that the empowerment of the women can facilitate their access into the senior positions. It is also supported by the research of Chien and Ann (2014) where they presented empowerment is crucial for the women to take senior roles in the organization. Furthermore, these views are also supported by Jounes (2017) and Arneson and Ejberg (2006) that empowerment is very important for women to access senior positions in the RMG industry.

Hypothesis 2: Trust Has a Positive Relationship with Access to Senior Positions.

The results show that the p value of 0.0001 obtained outlines that the service trust is positively and significantly related to women's access to the senior positions in the RMG industry of Bangladesh because any p value below 0.05 ($p < 0.005$) is an indication of the positive and significant relationship between the independent and dependent variable. However, the positive Pearson Correlation R-value of 0.923 indicates that trust is significantly and positively related to women access to the customer loyalty. This recommends that *hypothesis 2* is supported because R-value of 0.923 is the indication of high and strong correlation between trust and women's access to senior positions. This finding is supported by the research works of Beilke (2014); Jacobs (2014) and Fulmer (2017) where they found that trust is the most important factor to bring women into senior positions in the organizations.

Hypothesis 3: Flexibility Has a Positive Relationship with Access to Senior Positions.

The p value of 0.0001 outlines that flexibility is not significantly related to access to senior positions in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, since, any p value more than 0.05 ($0.05 > p$) is an indication of the less significant relationship between independent i.e. flexibility and dependent variable i.e. women's access to senior positions. This is not supported by the previous researches that have been included in the literature review of this study. This could be the reason for a different kind of work environment, processes and the requirement. According to the research work of Maxwell et al. (2007) the flexible working arrangements have disadvantages in terms of operational problems and administrative burdens. On the other hand, according to Clarke and Holdsworth (2017), under the flexible working process, the managers find difficulties to manage employees, problems with communication and team coordination. According to research works of Islam et al. (2017) there is a lack of flexibility in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. According to research work of Wheatley (2017) that flexible working arrangements have negative impacts on some women's job, leisure and life satisfaction. From these perspectives, it is established that the flexibility has a lack of suitability and application in the RMG industry of Bangladesh, therefore, the participants did not find this variable effective for women to access to the senior positions in the industry.

REGRESSION RESULTS

A regression analysis was also applied to identify the most important variable among empowerment, flexibility and trust that have an impact on the women access in senior positions in RMG industry of Bangladesh. The results show that the R-value for empowerment is 0.954, while R-value for trust is 0.950 and R-value for flexibility is 0.440. These results outline that the empowerment and trust have a greater impact on women access to senior positions in the RMG industry than the flexibility. The result implies that women's access to senior positions in the RMG industry is prompted by the empowerment and trust more than by flexibility.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the impact of empowerment, flexibility and trust on women's access to senior positions in the RMG industry of Bangladesh. In this respect, empowerment and trust have a significant impact on the women's access to senior position while the flexibility has a less significant impact. The study also sought to identify which variable among the three variables are more important for women's access to the senior positions in the RMG industry. It has found that empowerment and trust are more important than flexibility. Based on the results, it can be said that in general when the women in the workplace for example in the RMG industry are empowered and trusted they tend to climb up to the senior positions. However, the flexibility in the context of the RMG industry of Bangladesh might not be suitable and applied because of the working nature and operational processes. Overall, the findings of this study are supported by

previous research findings. For example, previous researchers have found the empowerment and trust are needed to make women sit in senior position. There are no negative findings regarding the necessity and importance of empowerment and trust for women's access into the senior positions. Although the flexibility has been identified as an important factor for women to take senior positions in many research works, however, it has also been found as responsible for some problems in some workplace contexts in some previous research works. Therefore, it is recommended for the policymakers associated with the RMG industry of Bangladesh that they should ensure women are more empowered and trusted for their access to senior positions. In this respect, the management of the RMG organizations can make arrangements to find out how the women with experience, qualification and skills working in the different positions can be taken in the senior positions.

LIMITATION OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTION FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has some limitations that could be addressed in the future research. The first limitation is that it just concentrated on three variables. However, there are many other variables such as organizational culture, communication, motivation etc. that could have been included to test their impact on women's access to the senior positions. Based on this limitation, the future researches can include qualitative interviews with the respondents to gain more information those impacts on the women's access to senior positions in RMG industry of Bangladesh. This qualitative research also supports different perspectives and views and perhaps contributes to gain new variables to be tested in the quantitative survey.

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