

THE GLASS CEILING: CAREER BARRIERS FOR FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN THE READY MADE GARMENTS (RMG) INDUSTRY OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of the study is to identify the glass ceiling issues and career barriers for female employees to access into the leadership positions in Ready-Made Garments (RMG) organisations in Bangladesh. This exploratory study used semi-structured face-to-face interview methods for data collection. The study conducted only 10 interviews among with 10 main questions concerning the glass ceiling issues and career barriers with the female employees from 5 biggest RMG organisations. After consecutive analysis to all transcripts of the interviews, three ideological approaches such as organisational culture, social culture and lack of career encouragers are identified as the main barriers for females to get into the leadership positions. The study includes discussion on how organisations can facilitate the process of females' advancement into the leadership positions.

Keywords: Glass Ceiling, Career Barriers, RMG, Females, Leadership Positions.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, participation of women at different workplaces has been increased dramatically specially in the developing countries. Some of the key industries in many regions are mainly dependent on female workers. For example, ready-made garments (RMG) industry of Bangladesh with the worth more than \$34 billion is heavily dependent on the female workers (more than 85%), (Ovi, 2017; BGMEA, 2017). Similar scenario is examined in other key garments producing countries such as Vietnam (80%), India (60%), Philippines (85%), Cambodia (70%), etc. where majority of the workers in the industry are females (Wage Indicator, 2016; ILO, 2017; Varghese, 2017).

However, it is very surprising that there are very few females in the leadership positions such as General Manager, Line Managers, Quality Managers, Production Managers, Head of Merchandisers etc. in the RMG organisations of the countries, which are producing garments in larger scale for both local western buyers (Woodruff & Macchiavello, 2014; Preuss, 2016; Mia, 2016). According to John (2013), the existence of women on the board or in other leading position improves board performance and employees' engagement at work and their enthusiasm to excel at the workplace. This view is supported by the findings from research works of (Mathur-Helm, 2006; Nielsen & Huse, 2010) and in addition, they quoted that female representatives understands better than males in determining the demands of females at workplace, therefore, there should be a rational number of the females in leading positions. On the other hand, Fitch & Agrawal (2015), outlined a female manager can interact with her female subordinates more effectively than a male manager when there are more female workers than

males. These views stress on the necessities of the females' presence in the leading positions in organisations.

Companies from western countries particularly in USA, UK, Canada, French and Germany have decided to improve work experience of women. Their strategy has focused on the breaking glass ceiling (Apkipnar-Spostilo, 2013). The glass ceiling (Unofficially acknowledged barrier to advancement in a profession, especially affecting women) is identified as one of the most powerful images for evaluating the inequalities between the male and female employees in the organisations. The image has been used and highlighted widely in well-renowned media, academic publications and government reports (Catalyst, 1990; U.S Department of Labor, 1991; Scandura, 1992; State of Wickinson Task Force, 1993; Canberra Bulletin of Public Administration, 1994). From their report, it is acknowledged women in most organisations are able to get through the front door of the managerial hierarchies however they face invisible barriers, which create blockades to climb up into the higher positions in the organizations (Apkipnar-Spostilo, 2013).

Barriers identified for female employees to access in leadership positions in the organisations are mainly relating to the western countries and their industrial perspectives. Therefore, there is a lack of data regarding the barriers that are faced by the females in climbing up into leadership positions in the Bangladesh and its corporate organisations. Moreover, despite cultural disparity from the western countries, no study so far, in this regard has been conducted in Bangladesh specially relating to RMG industry, which is the employer of more than 4.2 million females in different positions. Thus, the main objective of this study is to identify barriers faced by female employees in the RMG organisations in Bangladesh. This particular industry is selected because it is the key earner for Bangladesh as well as the biggest employer of females (BGMEA, 2017; Uddin, 2015; ILO, 2017). The researchers of the study conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with 10 main questions concerning glass ceiling syndrome and career background with the 10 female employees from 5 biggest RMG organisations, which are exporting their ready-made garments to the western countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Women in Workforce and their Presence in Leadership Positions

According to Fagenson (1990), career advancement of women in the organisations can be influenced by several factors such as individual, organisational and social factors. However, the extent of problems or factors faced by women to progress in their career varies from job to job and country to country. Many companies in western countries are realising that women should be provided same rights and facilities to remain in their career for longer periods since the women participation at workplace is vital to the both diversity and success of the corporations (George, 2005; Maume, 2011; Mercer, 2015; Kwon & Milgrom, 2017). While women have increased their numbers in different junior or lower-ranking positions, they have made only a few inroads into leadership positions in organizations due to many reasons for example organisational culture with discrimination in case of wages and promotions (Devidson & Burke, 2002; Catalyst, 2009; Qian, 2016). According to Ahmed & Naseer (2015), women are not only discriminated in terms of the leading positions in organisations but also given lower wages that also discourage women to take higher roles, which are complicated with workloads. (Ponnuswamy & Monhar, 2014; Voncent-Lancrin, 2008) found that wage inequalities along with structural constraints i.e. organizational culture are responsible to keep potential female counterparts out of leading roles

in the organizations. According to (Eyring & Stead, 1998; Sahoo & Lenka, 2016) organizational culture where the women are perceived to suitable for specific roles such as caregiver and home-maker is very devastating for females to take leading roles. However, it is common among many people especially among the organizational decision makers in different countries and societies where people do not encourage women to take leading role thinking that women should be doing child caring or other household activities (Bombuwela & Alwis, 2013; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2017).

MSCI (2014), women globally only account for 12% seats in boards of the largest companies and among these companies 64% having at least one women director, 13% have at least three women. In this respect, women account for 13.4% of directors are in developed markets while 8.8% in emerging markets (MSCI, 2014). According to (OECD, 2014; World Bank, 2016), there have been very few percentages of the females in the leadership positions in the developing and poor countries where the number of skilled and educated females have increased remarkably in the last decade. (Mercer, 2015; OECD, 2016) most similarly reported that the female workers make up 41% of the overall representation in global organisations. This figure dramatically decreases at the senior level where women continue to be under-represented. According to (Economist, 2005; Emerald, 2005), none of the 25 highest earning CEOs was female during their research. Furthermore, according to the research performed by Bagues & Esteve-Volart (2007) presented an extreme lower percentage of females in the managerial and supervisory roles in both private and public organisations. Similar trend is examined from the International Business Report of Grant Thornton (2015) that the proportion of leading roles held by women has barely changed over the past decade in the corporate world. Grant Thornton, a pioneer research group of women leadership development, started research on gender diversity in business leadership position in 2004, has found the proportion of top jobs in business held by women has barely changed increasing from 19% in 2004 to 22% 2015 and never reaching more than 24% until 2015 (Grant Thornton, 2015). The report particularly presents that the trend is almost similar in the Argentina with 16%; Botswana, 16%; Brazil, 15% and Germany, 14%. In this respect, the Eastern European Countries are in leading position in case of women leadership positions in their corporate world with Poland 37%; Latvia 36%; Estonia 36%; Lithuania 33%, France 33% and Armenia 29%. In case of Asia Pacific, Grant Thornton (2015) reported there have been some retrenchments with the proportion of leading roles held by women falling from 25% in 2009 to 20% in 2015. In this respect, the proportion of senior management roles held by women in India only 15% while in Japan 8% (Japan has remained steadfastly at the bottom of the table since 2004). However, Grant Thornton (2017) reveals that the proportion of women in leadership roles has hit 25% that is an increase of just 1% since 2016.

In Bangladesh, the majority of the top managers are male that is evidenced by the report of ILO (2015), which found women hold only 5.4% leading positions in the organisations. In this regard, negative socio cultural perception regarding female leadership, lack of management support in organizations, bias performance appraisal, male domination in high management team, lack of flexibility etc. are mainly responsible for the lack of women in leading positions in the Bangladeshi organizations (Afza & Newaz, 2008; Uddin, 2015; ILO, 2017; WB, 2017). Moreover, the qualities such as ambition, confidence, leadership skills like assertiveness and influencing behaviour lack among women compare to men (Terjesen & Singh, 2008; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2016). These are typically identified among the Indian, Sri Lankan and Bangladeshi female employees working different positions in various organizations as the barriers for women to take leading roles (Jain & Mukherji, 2010; Bombuwela & Alwis,

2013; Afza & Newaz, 2008). Thus, lack of confidence, career ambition and assertive leadership skills are identified as the significant barriers for women to climb up into the leading roles in almost all countries (Terjesen & Singh, 2008; Cabeza et al., 2011; Alibeli, 2015). According to (Afza & Newaz, 2008; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2016), lack of confidence, poor organizational and social culture, lack of encouragers are the main forces that are keeping potential women to take leading roles in private and public organizations in Bangladesh. Particularly, RMG industry of Bangladesh with more than 4.2 million workers while 85% of them are females but very few of them are in the leading positions, however, more women in leading position could be effective for the development of the individual and organizational performance in such a valuable industry of the country (Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2016; Mori & Towo, 2017; BGMEA, 2017, Uddin, 2015; WB, 2017).

Theoretical Position

The Gender Organisation System (GOS) presents a holistic approach to study the issues relating to the women's advancement into the leadership positions (Omor & Davidson, 2001; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013). The approach outlines minor existence of females in leadership positions is the result of the simultaneous interaction between the individual, organisation and society (Fagenson, 1993; Yukongdi & Benson, 2005). To examine the gender inequality in the organisations, it is not only the finding of obstacles to the advancement of women into leadership positions but also organisational structures and their culture that are main factors creating female discrimination in the workplaces. This perspective integrates two perspectives, which are gender-centered perspective and organization-structure perspective to interpret women under-representation at in the leadership positions (Fagenson, 1990; Fagenson, 1993; Yukongdi & Benson, 2005; Rowley & Yukongdi, 2009).

GOS perspective of Fagenson (1990), also argues that individuals and their organisations cannot be understood separately from the society where he or she works/lives. Furthermore, it argues to understand gender inequality in the organisation, it is significant to identify the differences between women and men experiences at the workplace as well as how females are discriminated and how society/system discriminates against and treats women (Fagenson, 1990). Thus, to look at advantages and disadvantage of females in leadership positions, GOS perspective is the most suitable theoretical framework for females in management research (Omor & Davidson, 2001; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013). According to Martin et al. (1983), Gendered Organisation System (GOS) approach outlines the interaction between individual, organisation and society is a continuous process. According to the application of the GOS framework to the present study, it outlines the study on how individual, organisational and social factors prohibits females from taking leadership positions in the RMG organisations. Therefore, GOS framework guides the present study to identify the barriers for female employees to climb up into the leadership positions in the selected industry.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to identify the barriers for female employees to get into the leadership positions in the ready-made garments organisations in Bangladesh. The researchers choose a qualitative approach for this exploratory study using semi-structured interviews among 10 employees of 5 ready garments factories located in Dhaka, the capital city of Bangladesh where most of the biggest factories of RMG industry are located. During the interviews, detailed

notes were taken but interviews were not recorded due to the reluctance of participants who are female employees working in different levels and divisions in selected organisations. To ensure anonymity, the names of the participants are not disclosed in the study however they are marked as number 1, 2 and 3. Table 1 outlines the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1 DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS					
Respondents	Marital status	Position	Age	Educational Qualification	Work Experience
(1)	Married	Assistant General Manager	42	Bachelors	14
(2)	Married	Executive Officer in Finance	39	Bachelors	12
(3)	Married	Officer	45	Bachelors	16
(4)	Single	Co-ordinator	36	Masters	9
(5)	Married	Assistant Manager in HRD	40	Masters	11
(6)	Married	Executive Liaison Officer	38	Bachelors	10
(7)	Single	Executive Officer in Marketing	34	Masters	6
(8)	Married	Co-ordinator	41	Bachelors	12
(9)	Married	Assistant Product Manager	46	Masters	17
(10)	Single	Junior Officer in HRD	33	Bachelors	5

The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes and were taken in English since all the participants understand and can speak English competently. The collected data from the respondents were analysed through the use of inductive content analysis (thematic analysis=identify main themes, categories and contents).

RESULTS

After consecutively reading the interview transcripts, we determined some main themes, which have been identified by the respondents regarding the barriers for female employees in taking leadership positions in Ready Made Garments (RMG) organisations in Bangladesh. The details of the identified themes have been presented in Table 2.

Table 2 IDENTIFIED BARRIERS FOR FEMALE EMPLOYEES IN RMG INDUSTRY, BANGLADESH					
Organisational culture	Social culture	Age	Lack of confident	Lack of career encouragers	Stress in leadership positions
10/10	8/10	2/10	5/10	7/10	4/10

According to the data analysis, three main themes emerged from the field study that was most stated by participants and these are also common points of the research. These are:

1. Organisational culture,
2. Social culture and
3. Lack of career encouragers.

Organizational Culture

10 respondents out of 10 opined,

“The existing organisational culture in their companies is the main barrier for female employees to be promoted into the leadership positions”.

All of the participants outlined that the present organisational schedules have hampered their expectation to make a healthy work-life balance. This is evident in the following statement:

“I don’t think the organisation is going to ensure work-life balance for us. Even since I joined in the organisation 14 years ago, my opinion it is run only for the profit rather than worker welfare specially it neglects the females progression into the decision making or leadership positions”. (Respondent-1).

The government of Bangladesh has created Equality Law to ensure that there is no discrimination between the male and female employees in case of salary, working hour, promotion, duties, benefits etc. (BGMEA, 2017; HRPB, 2017). However, very few organisations obtain the rules in considering the promotion and other benefits for the females that is evident in the following statement:

“Our organisation follows the laws in many cases but in case of promotion of the females on the senior level, those laws are not followed in most cases. This is because government agencies do not have direct monitoring regularly in the organisations specially in the Ready-Made Garments organisations”. (Respondent-5).

Lack of the female role model as leader is identified as one of the barriers in the organisation under the organisational cultural theme and Respondent-6 stated,

“There is no role model for us to follow. Should there be more females in the leadership positions? However, if there were more females counterparts in the leading positions, would it be more successful and effective team? My opinion would be ‘Yes’ and we will be able to follow someone and become motivated to take the challenge of the leadership roles”.

This statement is also supported from other respondents of the study. Respondent-10 and 3 said,

“Most of the leadership roles in our organisations are possessed by men thus they have been able to perpetuate the gender imbalance in the organisation”.

In this regard, the Respondent-2 added,

“I would say, hiring and promoting process in our organisations are mainly controlled by male, therefore, they ensure more males in leadership positions than females.

This is confirmed by Respondent-8 that,

“The male leaders in the top positions in my organisation are traditional and somewhat they are also old-fashioned therefore it is very challenging for the females to get leadership roles in my and other RMG organisations”.

Respondent-7 said,

“Women in the organizations probably put off leadership positions not only in RMG organisations but also other organisations in Bangladesh because men have a negative attitude towards female leadership.

Respondent-9 stated,

“If women are in senior positions in the organizations, destructive issues such as controlling and bullying happen unexpectedly that negatively affect their performance and lead to individual failure as a leader”.

Social Culture

8 respondents out of 10 opined,

“Culture of the South Asian Countries specially the Bangladeshi culture has created a trend that the women should stay at the home because women often do not identify their key skills thus they do not believe in their abilities, skills and talent”.

The strong cultural prejudice about female leadership in the organisation is one of the reasons for the lack of females in the leadership positions. According to Respondent-10:

“The main barrier for the females is cultural. This can be identified as a syndrome of legitimacy. In our society and even in our organisation women as the potential leader of the key departments or divisions are not recognised because most of the people believe that women are non-assertive and weak”.

The respondents also outlined that the current society is a male patriarchal society where the men are viewed positively in the leadership roles in everywhere including corporate world. Respondent-7 stated that,

“Our society believes the powerful positions in the social and corporate organisations are much suitable for males than females, therefore, the females as leaders are viewed differently”.

Respondent-6 added,

“When a male become successful or take a leadership role, inhabitants surrounding us take it warmly and welcome the male leaders. However, in terms of females’ progression, their outlook is narrow among both educated and illiterate people”.

On the other hand, Respondent-2 opined that,

“The attitude of most of the males in our country is not very positive towards females and consequently, we can see many occurrences regarding violence against women. However, the attitude of males in the urban areas has been changed in some cases; therefore, some females have been able to access in the organisations and even in the leading roles. However, there are very few women in the top position that is not enough to present as example for the potential female leaders since those women are not highlighted in media and not even in the organisations.”

This view is supported by Respondent-5.

Respondent-6 noted,

“There are numerous gender stereotypes among the female employees and most of us are not fully conscience of taking leadership roles in the organisations. Therefore, I think both female and male employees in the organisations might feel more comfortable and motivated to work effectively under the male leadership”.

This view is also supported from the Respondent 8 and 9.

Lack of Career Encouragers

7 respondents out of 10 identified the lack of the career encouragers in personal and corporate life as one of the key barriers for women progression into the leadership positions in the RMG organisations. Respondent-3 stated,

“The RMG industry of Bangladesh is not very much old industry of the country. The industry started in the late 1970s therefore in the last 50 years we do not see a substantial difference in case of counterparts in leadership positions. Almost all the organisations are governed by male leaders although most of the workers are females in the industry. Therefore, there are no many female counterparts in the organisations to encourage females to take leadership roles”.

On the other hand, Respondent-8 directly stated,

“My husband and members in the father-in-law home do not support to take leadership positions in the organisations because they think I will be busier with work when I will be assigned leadership roles”.

It is also acknowledged by 7/10 interviewed women that their partners i.e. husbands are not supporting to take the opportunity for their career advancement. However, Respondent-4, 7 and 10 opined differently that,

“Their parents encourage them to take career development opportunities, for example, taking leadership roles in the organisations always”.

It could be due to their marital status that parents like their children in leadership positions regardless of the gender.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The study has identified three general categories such as organisation culture, social culture and lack of career encouragers as the significant barrier for the female employees in RMG industry of Bangladesh. The paper has outlined the common views of the respondents regarding the barriers they face to access in the leadership positions in their organisations. In this regard, lack of confidence, stress in leadership positions, age are also categorised as the barriers for females to access in leadership positions in the RMG industry in Bangladesh. According to the Gender Organisation Systems (GOS) framework, women face those barriers because:

1. Organizational culture does not allow females progression into the leadership positions; and/or
2. Social culture is more supportive to male for taking leadership roles than females; and/or
3. There are very few people in society even in family to support women to progress in their career and take leadership roles. (Fagenson, 1990).

Firstly, the issue “negative/poor organisational culture” was the most common point and very significant barrier identified for women to access into the leadership positions in organisations from this study. This reflects the results of (Rapoport et al., 2002; Daft et al., 2010; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Lathabhavan & Balasubramanian, 2016). Thus, to see more women in the leadership positions in RMG industry in Bangladesh, organisations should develop promotional and recruitment processes for female career progression. In this regard, management of the organisations should create recruitment policy and promotional process equally in every

department so that women can climb into leadership roles (Sepehri et al., 2010; Valcour, 2012; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013; Ahmed & Naseer, 2015). Secondly, the cultural issues such as negative perception on women leadership, gender stereotypes, attitude of male leaders in the organisations etc. are identified as major barriers for the females to climb up into the leadership positions that reflect the results of (Anderson, 2005; Ibarra et al., 2013; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013; Ponnuswamy & Manohar, 2014). Thus, it is suggested that the significance of females in leadership positions need to be highlighted so that the perception of people living in society can be changed.

Thirdly, the study presents that there is lack of career development encouragers in both corporate and personal life. For example, the study confirms husbands/partners in most cases do not allow their spouses to take the leadership roles in the selected industry of Bangladesh that mirrors the studies of (Hakim, 2014; Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2011; Sahoo & Lenka, 2016). Thus, the husbands/partners of female employees should be convinced regarding the significance of females' career progression for the individual, organisational and social benefits that will motivate the husband to encourage their spouse to take opportunities for career development.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The current study included results from only 10 interviews that contribute to the limitation of the study. Therefore, the limited number of sample from few RMG organisations urges to view interpretation of findings with caution as it limits the generalisation of the study. Thus, the future research could increase the number of interviewees from more organisations to participate in research so that stronger generalisation could be produced.

CONCLUSION

This paper has identified some key factors that create barriers for women to climb up into the leadership positions. According to the respondents of the study, if the barriers are managed and removed from the organisations, women will be able to take challenges of the leadership roles and contribute to the better outcome for individuals, organisations and societies. The study presents that women mainly face barriers to access in the leadership positions due to the ambiguous social and organisational culture, therefore, it is suggested to the management of the organisations and government officials to create rules and regulations, which would facilitate the process of career progression of females into the leadership positions. In addition, it is significant to improve awareness of husbands/partners of female employees and other people living in society to view the female progression in the leading positions positively so that females are encouraged to take leadership roles in the workplace. According to Terry Di, Russu, a Professor at the University of Connecticut, leading researcher on the glass ceiling issues,

“Great ideas have no background, age, race, gender or ethnic”.

Therefore, females' advancement into the leadership positions in organisations would bring better performance since they possess great ideas and capabilities.

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