

Labor Unrest in Ashulia Industrial Hub

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Abstract

Bangladesh readymade garments (RMG) industry has qualified with exceptional growth since 1995, contributes 77% to the country's net exports, which is more than 25% of GDP. Bangladesh has got 5,150 export-oriented RMG units and around 95% of the industry is located in 9 different districts, Ashulia is one of among them. Ashulia industrial belt has got more than 300 RMG factories and all these factories were closed from 11th June to 19th June 2012 and loss is more than US \$100 million. The annual RMG export is US \$3.6 billion from Ashulia industrial belt, which is 16% of total exports from Bangladesh. Therefore, an attempt has been made to find out the causes, effects, centralized programs, remedial solutions and precautionary measures to avoid the labor unrest. The research tools used are questionnaire for laborers and interview schedule for factory management. The samples were taken randomly from twenty six laborers, ten managers, three coordinators and six Directors. This study divulges that employee unrest not only the less wages issue, but other primary causes such as union leaders and political leaders' influence, non-garment workers involvement and the secondary reasons are less wages, imbalanced house rent, inflation and illiteracy. Concluding remarks, Government should suspend the function of trade unions outside the factories. Government and BGMEA have to fix the labor wages annually depend upon inflation fluctuation and to ensure that every factory gets nonpolitical labor representatives. Government, BGMEA and factory management should work together and urgently need to provide affordable accommodation for workers. As a result, influencing by outsiders can be condensed and avoid unrest.

Keywords: Readymade Garments (RMG), The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA), The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

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1.0 Introduction

"Not Gold but only men can make a nation great and strong" is a very apt saying, hence, for total development of a nation we need men who are going to shape and design the nation with basic living. Labors are strong pillars of such nations like Bangladesh. The efficacy and strength of any infrastructure largely depends upon the quality and quantity of citizens of that country, and here it deals with the satisfaction of labors. Investment in terms of perks will boost the work psyche of labors. On the contrary, when the basic needs of such labors are not met, then violence emerges as a response to the dissatisfaction of laborers. It is at this juncture man as a laborer retaliates and creates chaos and unrest. Hence it is the need of hour to know the why's and how's of labor unrest and especially in Ashulia. Ashulia is a suburban area near Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. It is very renowned for lake, paddy fields, Theme parks and readymade garment manufacturing units. Bangladesh Textile and RMG industry has got 155,557 units, with 148,000 handlooms units, 3,284 mechanized primary textile units, 5150 export-oriented RMG units, and 273 garments washing-dyeing units. At the end of fiscal year 2011, total export of garments was US \$22.92 billion, which is 43% increase over previous year. The annual RMG export is US \$3.6 billion from Ashulia industrial belt, which is 16% of total exports from Bangladesh (The Daily Star, 2012a). Ashulia industrial belt has got more than 300 garment manufacturing factories and all these factories were closed from 11th June to 19nd June 2012 and loss is almost US \$100 million. The labor department in the Government wasn't taking any step to control the situation and therefore, factories had to close down (Namul, 2012). As per Bangladesh Government Labor minimum wages effective from 1st Nov, 2010, it has been reviewed and raised to 68-108% (Table 1).

Table 1: Current wage structure

	New Amount	Rise In %
Grade-I	Tk 9,300	81
Grade-II	Tk 7,200	87
Grade-III	Tk 4,120	68
Grade-IV	Tk 3,763	67
Grade-V	Tk 3,455	69
Grade-VI	Tk 3,210	77
Grade-VII	Tk 3,000	80
Apprentice	Tk 2,500	108

(Source: Textile Today, June 2012, Bangladesh)

Rahman (2009) (Governor of the Bangladesh Bank) argued that the bank has taken initiatives in respect of formalising CSR in the banking sector of Bangladesh and issued a directive to the banks and, financial institutions on June 01, 2008 in this regard. It defined the strategic objective for CSR engagement, provided some priority areas with a suggestion to foster CSR in their client businesses, and suggested a first time CSR program indicating some likely action plans. The Bangladesh Bank will monitor CSR adoption and the CSR performance of banks and financial institutions as an additional dimension of their management performance. Rahman (2009) also commented that the bank had the opportunity to provide a sense of direction to the CSR agenda of the banking sector when it suggested that banks which are taking measures for rehabilitating, agriculture, fisheries, livestock, and protecting environment will be considered as more compliant of Corporate Social Responsibility through providing relief to the people affected in natural calamities such as 'Sidr' and 'Aila'.

As an under-developed economy, the banking sector in Bangladesh has a lot to do to improve the economy and create employment opportunities, such as through sanctioning loans and advances for productive investment with equitable growth criteria. The banks must be cautious to sanction loans and advances according to whether projects are following environmental reporting systems. Often this criterion is ignored: for instance, ship-breaking is funded yet it causes pollution of the environment and many deaths of workers occur in this industry. The News Today (February 25, 2010) indicated that of about 60,000 ocean-going ships around the world, 700-800 are decommissioned every year. Around half the world's scrap ships head to Bangladesh, being one of the most unregulated zones. The lucrative industry, which meets the need for raw steel in the country, is concentrated along the Sitakunda coast of Chittagong district and is flagged as highly hazardous for the environment and for the workers. A department of environment survey A worker earns 3000 to 5500 per month, which is now US \$37 (1US \$= 81.00 BDT – as of 20th July, 2012). Now, labors demand is 4500 to 7500 per month (US \$55.55). There are seven major factors involved for labor unrest (Mustafa et al., 2010). One of the main objectives was to examine the relationship between labor unrest and the application of Bangladesh Labor Act 2006. It says that Labor law of Bangladesh has not been put into practice appropriately in the RMG industry. It revealed that employees' wages and payment is the most significantly correlated factor to labor unrest. It is not being paid within the stipulated time that is within seven days of the following month. Most of the workers feel that the management doesn't listen to their complaints and problems. Labors have to work more than eight hours a day but are not paid

over time at double the rate of their pay. Most of the workers do not get sick leave as per law. Workers are hired when needed and fired when the need is over (Hossain et al., 2012).

Inflation has taken a steep climb from 8.67 to 10.76 from 2010 to 2012. Workers are spending BDT 0.60 per income for food and BDT 0.25 per income for house rent. House rent is 7% higher than national average in Ashulia industrial area (The Daily Star, 2012b). During the unrest for those 9 days, injured workers, pedestrians and Police are more than 500, tortured vehicles are more than 350 and Ransacked factories are 130 (The Daily Star, 2012c). An extensive research conducted by the War on Want, an international organization committed to global justice, indicates that garments owners cut overtime pay whenever they can for lack of punctuality, failure to meet production targets, unnecessary conversations with co-workers, absence without leave, making mistakes at work or protesting management decisions (Sushmita, 2012). Although, wage is apparently one of the issues, but the situation is actually not as straight forward as that (Akter, 2012). “It might be the local politicians, might be a foreign group or it even might be corrupt factory owners” said Shaiful Islam Mohiuddin, President, BGMEA. “The protests began on June 11, 2012 by the workers under the Ha-meem Group, there were a few internal problems which later on spread throughout Ashulia” said Abdul Salam Murshedy, President of Exporters Association of Bangladesh (Namul, 2012).

The main purpose of the study is to find out the causes, remedial solutions and precautionary measures in Ashulia industrial hub. The specific objectives are: (i) to know the causes of labor unrest in Ashulia industrial hub; (ii) to study the ill-effects of labor unrest in Ashulia industrial hub; (iii) to suggest remedial measures and solutions to overcome labor unrest in Ashulia; (iv) to draft a centralized program for labor unrest in Ashulia and (v) to provide precautionary measures to prevent labor in Ashulia.

2.0 Materials and Methods

Area: Ashulia an Industrial Hub of Bangladesh. Population: The working class of both skilled and unskilled labors and Management in Ashulia.

The following four tools such as: (1) Questionnaire, (2) Interview, (3) Observation and (4) Published data available in economic bulletin, magazine and journals were used for this study.

Limitations make the general topic to a workable size; establish limits of the delineated topic that are to be investigated for the specific research (Sharma and Soti, 2002). Though research studies are unlimited but it has certain boundaries. The following limitations were identified in the present study. Such as, (i) the study was deal with only unrest of laborers in Ashulia; (ii) the study was limited to laborers only; (iii) the study was related to the variable of laborers unrest and solutions for the same; (iv) the political strong hold was not taken into consideration for the present study; and (v) the age limit of laborers was not taken into consideration.

Randomly selected 45 respondents have expressed their opinion with liberty. This study has been followed as descriptive statistics. A structured questionnaire which contains fifty questions was prepared, there are thirteen questions were asked to find out the causes of unrest, twelve questions to study the ill-effects, twelve questions were for remedial solutions, eleven questions were for centralized program and two questions were for precautionary measures. Interview technique was used to collect the primary data. The total number of respondents is forty five (Table 2) and they have been selected from six different garment manufacturing units (Table 3) in Ashulia an Industrial hub of Bangladesh.

Table 2: Type of Respondents

Type of Respondents	No. of Respondents
Unskilled worker	12
Fabric cutting In-charge	2
Finishing/Packing In-charge	2
Store In-charge	2
Merchandiser	8
Manager	10
Coordinator	3
Director	6
Total	45

Table 3: Garment Factories Selected for Research

Serial No	Name of Factory	No of Participants
1	Ha-meem Group	4
2	Greenlife clothing Ltd.	13
3	Shine Embroidery & Printing Ltd.	5
4	Hot Dress Ltd.	7
5	Paragaon Knit composite Ltd.	8
6	Debonair Ltd.	8
Total		45

3.0 Results and Discussions

3.1 Labor Unrest

Out of 45 respondents, 96% don't support the labor unrest, which is very detrimental for RMG industry and for the country as well, 58% respondents don't agree that labor unrest will provide a successful solution, 31% agree and 11% neither agree nor disagree and 82% respondents agree that the labors should look for peaceful objection.

3.2 Sexual Harassment

The unrest starts due to female workers or sex harassment, for which 87% respondents didn't agree either. Therefore, there is no hint for labor unrest because of female workers. To have a separate representative for women workers and form a detached internal union for women workers and 58% respondents agree for the same.

3.3 Police Action

Police action makes labors to increase the unrest, for which 80% don't agree and 60% agree that the Industrial Police should get more power to solve the labor issues.

3.4 Union Leaders

Union leaders are creating chaos, for which 67% respondents strongly agree (Fig. 1) and 73% strongly agree that the labor unrest due to wrong guidance by

labor union. Hence, it clearly states that the union leaders are also one of the causes for the labor unrest.

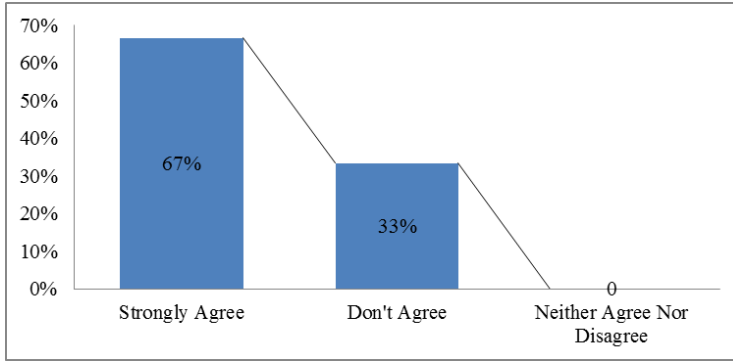


Fig. 1: Union Leaders Create Chaos

3.5 Political Leaders Influence

Political leaders influence creates the labor unrest, for which 60% strongly agree, 36% don't agree and 4% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 2) and 53% respondents agree that the political supported grassroots workers create unrest (Fig. 3). Also, 62% respondents agree that the political leaders should not demand donation from factories and management. In order to increase their voting bank and their personal revenge with factory management, they are too turning into one of the reasons for creating labor unrest.

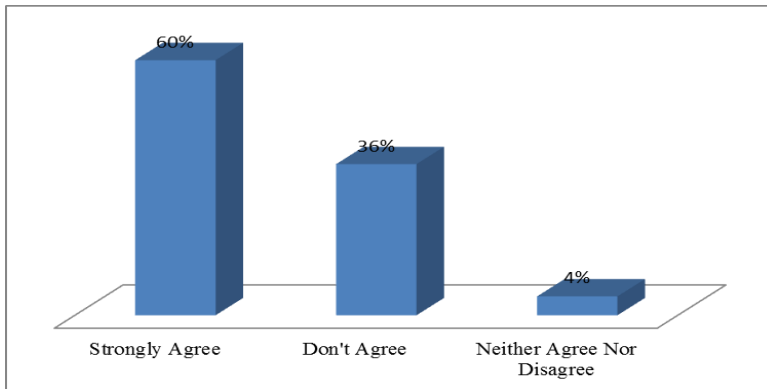


Fig. 2: Political Leaders Create Labor Unrest

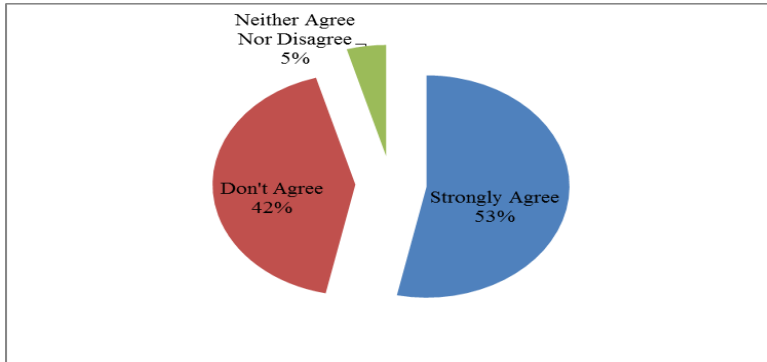


Fig. 3: Political Grassroots Workers Create Unrest

3.6 Vandalism and Ransacking

While labor unrest, many factories and vehicles have been vandalized, ransacked and the common citizens get affected a lot. 87% respondents agree that the middle level workers get suffered in comparing others due to labor unrest. Other industrial sectors and hubs get affected, for which 78% respondents strongly agree. 49% respondents agree that RMG labors vandalize factories, 40% don't agree and 11% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 4). 47% respondents agree that RMG labors vandalize vehicles, 44% don't agree and 9% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 5). Therefore, it is very difficult to make decision whether the garment workers are vandalizing the factories and vehicles. Whereas, 80% respondents believe that the outsiders vandalize factories and 78% believe that the outsiders vandalize vehicles. Hence, it clearly states that the vandalism and ransacking by outsiders. Here, we need to identify the outsiders those who join with the garment workers during protest against the factory management or any foreign agencies are involving and what are their benefits.

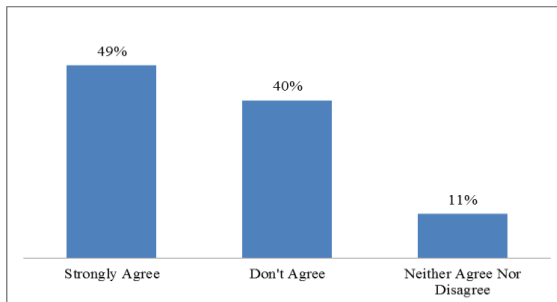


Fig. 4: Vandalize Factories by Labors

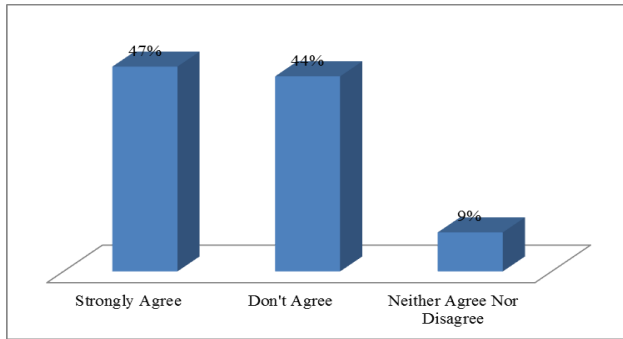


Fig. 5: Vandalize Vehicles by Labors

3.7 House Rent

House rent is an issue for labor unrest, for which 82% respondents strongly agree (Fig. 6), is justified by Hossain (2012) and 91% respondents agree that the Government, BGMEA and factory management should take initiative to reduce the house rent. House rent is being increased twice even thrice in a year especially in Ashulia, therefore, Labor Minister (Hossain, 2012) also marked uncontrolled hikes in house rent as the key reason behind demonstrations by workers. Government increases the labor wages for the workers personal benefit and make better standard of living for the workers, but, concurrently the landlords increase the same ratio of the house rent. Thus, workers are not being benefited by the increased wages. Even, we shall suspicious on the landlords, who may create the unrest, when the wages obtain increased, they raise the house rent and get benefit. It is also recommended to enforce the Rent Regulatory Act strictly in the respective areas, if any landlord hiked rent illegally or unfairly, tenant must run to mobile courts. Respondents were asked, whether Government should provide house rent with subsidies for workers, for which 56% strongly agreed, 29% don't agree and 15% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 7). But, 69% respondents agree that BGMEA should provide house rent with subsidies and 87% respondents' support that the factory management should provide accommodation with minimum rent. The ministry of labor and employment once said, the Government will make three dormitories for garment workers in Narayanganj, Ashulia and Gazipur to reduce the housing problem (Sufian, 2012). As a result, influencing by outsiders can be condensed and avoid unrest.

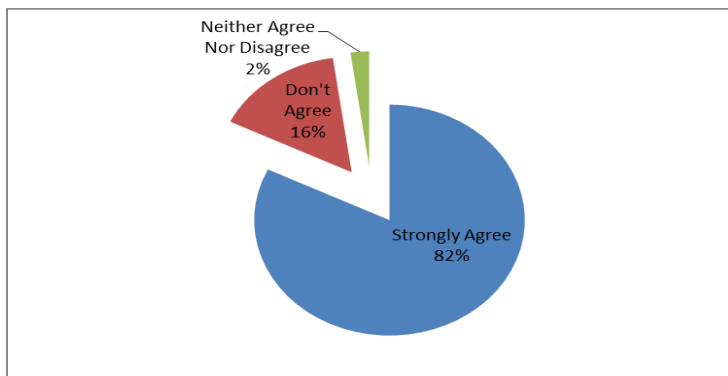


Fig. 6: Unrest due to climb on house rent

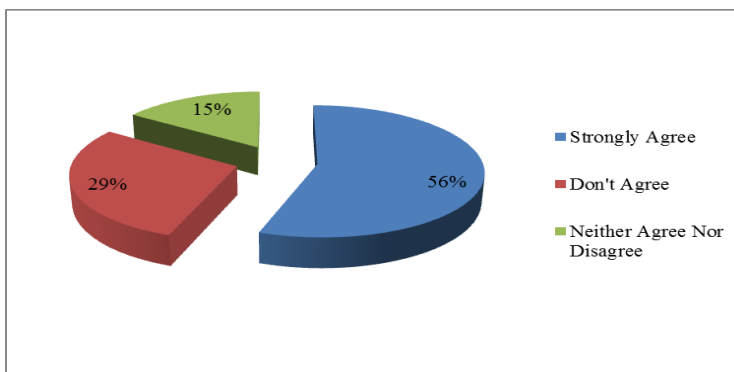


Fig. 7: House Rent with Subsidies by Government

3.8 Outsiders' Impact

Outsiders make entry to factories for left over fabric, wastage of fabric cut-piece and stock garments. They are nominees of politically influenced in Ashulia. When the nominees fail to get their target rate or concession of the left over fabric, cut-piece and stock garments, they start threatening the factory management to create chaos. Whether, Government should create a system for stock garments and left over cut pieces of fabrics, for which 49% respondents strongly agree, 29% disagree and 22% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 8), whereas 60% respondents agree that BGMEA should make a system for stock garments and waste cut pieces of fabric (Fig. 9).

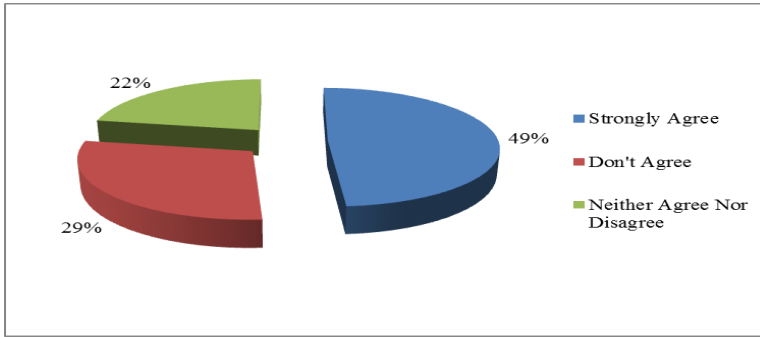


Fig. 8: Government System for Stock Garments and Leftover Fabric

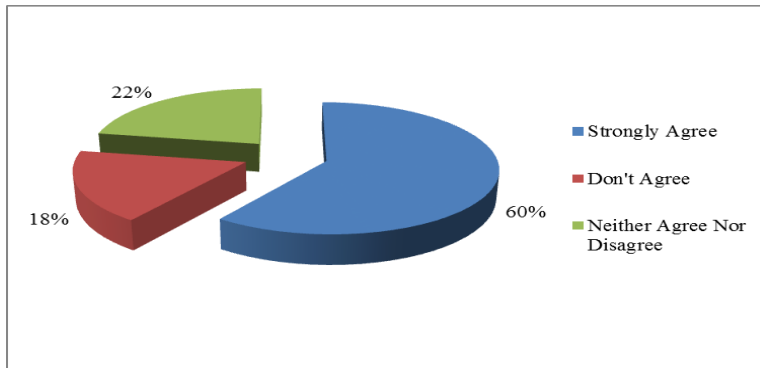


Fig. 9: BGMEA System for Stock Garments and Leftover Fabrics

3.9 Inflation

Inflation is an issue for labor unrest, for which, 89% strongly agree (Fig 10) but 96% respondents strongly agree that the Government should take initiative to control the inflation. Also, whether Government has to fix the wages depend upon inflation, for which 67% respondents agree, 20% don't agree and 13% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 11).

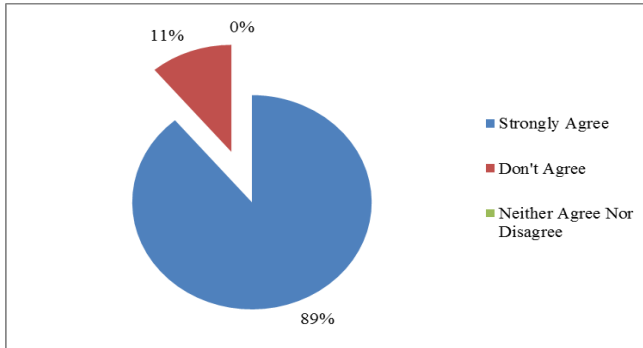


Fig. 10: Labor Unrest Due to Inflation

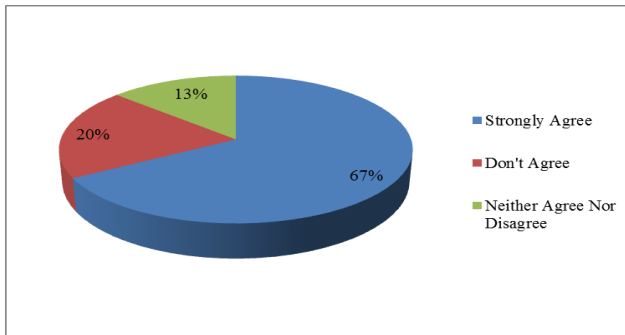


Fig. 11: Wages to be Fixed Based on Inflation

3.10 Low Wage

Low wage is the only issue for labor unrest, for which, 69% respondents don't agree, 27% strongly agree and 4% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 12). But, generally, we learn that low wage is the only issue for labor unrest from media and journalists, which is just a framework. However, from this study, it could be one of the secondary causes.

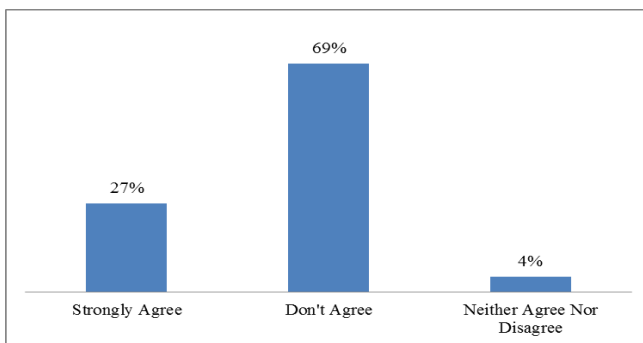


Fig. 12: Unrest Due to Only Low Wage

3.11 Illiteracy

Illiteracy is a reason for labor unrest, for which, 58% respondents strongly agree, 40% disagree and 2% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 13). 89% agree that the unwanted rumor is also a reason for labor unrest. Government, BGMEA and factory management should work together to establish institutes to provide basic education with training for unskilled workers, supervisors and managers. Management should ensure to have a healthy politics environment in the working premise.

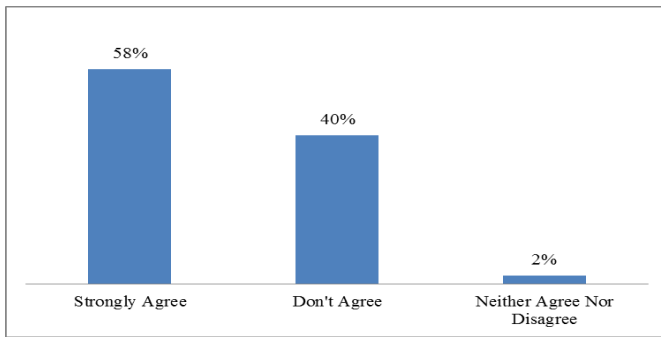


Fig. 13: Labor Unrest Due to Illiteracy

3.12 Production

Production gets loss due to labor unrest, for which, 93% strongly agree and 100% respondents agree that the manufacturing units are facing huge loss due to labor unrest and 80% respondents believe that the labor unrest is a hindrance to foreign customers and their investments (Fig. 14). Customers will start looking for alternative sources, due to which unemployment ratio will go up and 64% respondents strongly agree the same, 24% disagree and 11% neither agree nor disagree. Also, respondents were asked whether country's economy gets affected due to labor unrest, 69% respondents agree, 16% disagree and 16% neither agree nor disagree.

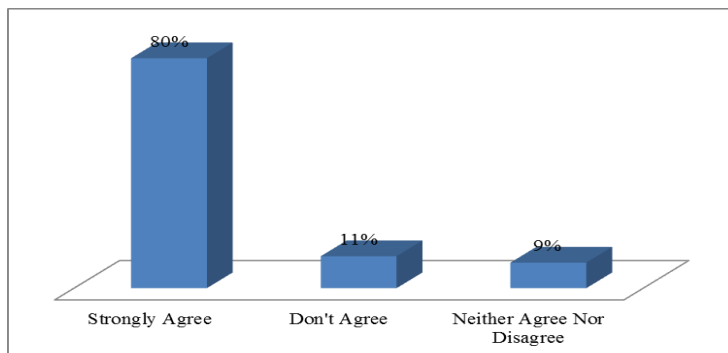


Fig. 14: Hindrance to Foreign Customers and Investments

3.13 Relocate Industry

If the similar unrest is going to be happened, then, there are chances that the investors may shift their factories to other locations, where unrest can be avoided. Whether textile industry will be shifted from Ashulia to other area of Dhaka due to labor unrest, for which, 33% respondents agree, 51% don't agree and 16% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 15). Therefore, it is evident Ashulia is an industrial hub, which can't be transferred easily.

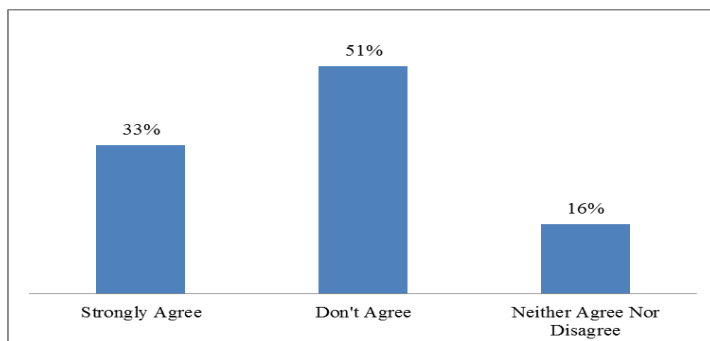


Fig. 15: Possibilities of Industry Relocation

3.14 Workers Demand

Workers can appeal their demands to government instead of factory owners, for which 36% respondents agree, 38% disagree and 27% neither agree nor disagree (Fig. 16) but 78% respondents believe that labors can demand to BGMEA instead of factory owners. Therefore, we can consider, workers trust BGMEA more than the government.

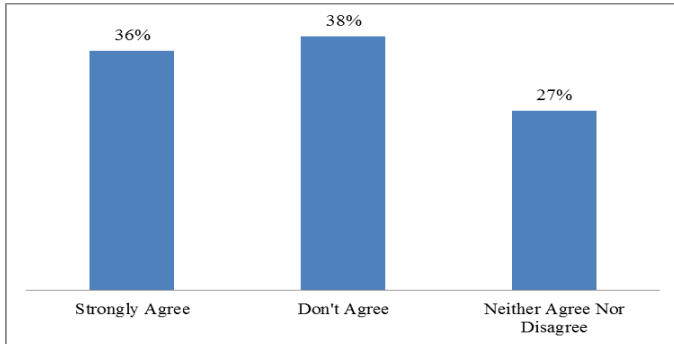


Fig. 16: Appeal to Government

3.15 Labor Representative

Factory should have a labor representative, for which 66% respondents strongly agree (Fig. 17). Also, 73% respondents strongly agree that there should not be any union at outside the factories. 80% respondents believe that there should a separate Court of Justice for workers and owners.

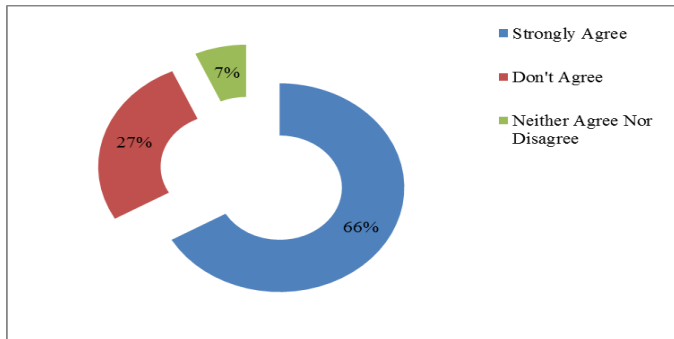


Fig. 17: Required Labor Representative

3.16 Communication Gap:

In this advanced technology world, every organization believes that the successful business is a team work along with hard work and smart work. Management should avoid the communication gap between mid-level managers and workers as well as workers and management. Besides, management should ensure to have an environmentally suitable working atmosphere and good relationship among the employees and workers.

3.17 Workers Participation in Management

Whether factory management should allow the workers to become the participants of the manufacturing units, for which 71% respondents strongly agree and 87% respondents agree that factory management should share the minimum profit with workers. When workers contribute in the management and property of the factories, they will focus to increase the maximum profit rather than vandalizing the factories. The US ambassador to Bangladesh said, strong relationships between workers, owners and the government will help Bangladesh beat China to become the largest apparel exporter worldwide (Mozena, 2012).

3.18 Election for Internal Non-Political Labors Representatives

There should be an election for internal non-political labors representatives, for which 69% respondents strongly agree. Whether there should a separate ministry for readymade garments, for which 91% strongly agree and 84% respondents agree that Government should make a system to get feedback from labors. The Government and BGMEA should provide training and awareness of employees rights to those representatives.

3.19 Interdepartmental

Employers claim that they are crammed between foreign buyers and domestic inflation. On the one hand Labor unrest starts from inter department managers and supervisors. On the other side the experienced tailors who has sounded technical knowledge later promoted as managers. As and when management recruits professionally qualified staffs, the existing technical managers who were promoted on experience don't cooperate, which create havoc and play petty politics out of it resulting labor unrest in Ashulia.

3.20 Management

At times, management also creates such an unhealthy relationship between inter departments. Management can avoid such unwanted activities and may make a healthy relationship among all workers, supervisors and managers. Management makes use of the weak labor law and pays lower wages to labors as they show the workers as apprentice or Grade VII as per the record, but the workers are qualified and promoted to earn the wages as per upper grade.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

The major causes of labor unrest at Ashulia are poor guidance by union leaders, political leaders' influence, non-garment workers' involvement and communication gap between factory management and workers. The secondary reasons are low wages, imbalanced house rent, inflation and illiteracy.

The ill-effects of such unrest are huge loss on production, cancellation of work orders, revising the mode of payment from Free on Board to Cost and Freight, increasing the stock inventory, losing foreign customers and their investments, chances of increasing unemployment ratio, country's economy and other industrial sectors and hubs getting affected, but in comparison to other working classes, the mid-level workers incur more loss.

Annually fixing the labor wages by both Government and BGMEA is needed in relation with inflation fluctuation. Government, BGMEA and factory management must work together to provide accommodation with minimum cost for workers especially labors.

Industrial Police must be delegated with more operational powers; therefore, vandalizing the factories and vehicles by the discrepancy can be controlled. Government must ensure that the political leaders should not bribe donation from factory owners and workers.

Workers can appeal their demands to BGMEA instead of factory owners. If BGMEA fails to take any action against the management, consequently workers shall appeal to the Government. If Government fails too, employees must approach to labor court.

It is urgently needed to make a nonpolitical labor representatives, management committee and workers committee forming from an election in every factory, so that all primary issues can be solved within the factory module. The growing distance between workers and management should be cleared with immediate effect, before any unwanted events and incidents are blown out of profession. Factory management, senior and middle level managers must respect the workers as human being and workers must be given their due importance. Government should suspend the function of trade unions outside the factories.

Government and BGMEA should make regularity for left over fabric, wastage of fabric cut piece and stock garments, so that the variables such as traders, foreign agencies and politically influenced nominees can be avoided in

the factory vicinity. In this study, respondents' reliability level of BGMEA is more than Government; therefore, BGMEA should take the initiative and should ensure to implement the required policies with the help of Government.

Appropriate environmental management in all factories on regards to the corporate social responsibility is urgently needed. Along with Import and Export License, Government and BGMEA should ensure that the manufacturing units meet the social auditing and compliance and obtain the certificate. The charge d' affairs of the German embassy in Dhaka, said Bangladesh should also increase the social activities and compliances at the factory level to continue export growth of garment items (Reusch, 2012). Management should allow the workers to become the participants of the manufacturing units and they should share the minimum profit with workers. Also, management should have a long term benefit plan for workers. Management should encourage the supervisors and middle level managers to refresh them for part time higher education. Government and BGMEA must work together to establish institutions for basic education and training of both skilled and unskilled workers. Those who are not well qualified should not be recruited by any factory management. Government should take necessary measures to ensure that the departments of this industry to get regular feedback from labors at different grade level with honesty and promptly. Government, BGMEA and factory management should provide a regular counseling to the workers.

It is recommended to identify the following issues in near future such as, role of foreign agencies' involvement in creating the labor unrest, real beneficiaries due to labor unrest in Ashulia, ill-effects of labor unrest on national economy growth Bangladesh, fluctuating inflationary measures related to labor unrest, a special ministry of readymade garments, a special team to ensure that the workers get a regular weekly holidays, separate canteen facility within the factory premises during working hours, a model should be drafted for the supervisors and middle level managers for up gradation, a separate court of justice for readymade garment workers and owners, a separate representative for women workers and to adapt Total Quality Management system (TQM) in all factories.

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