



University of  
Nottingham  
Rights Lab

# Modern slavery and child labour in Bangladesh's garment sector:

## Documenting risks and informing solutions



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## About the Rights Lab

The Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham is the world's largest group of modern slavery researchers, and home to many leading modern slavery experts. Through four research programmes, the Rights Lab works to deliver new and cutting-edge research that provides rigorous data, evidence and discoveries for the global antislavery effort. The Lab's impact team provides an interface between the Rights Lab research programmes and civil society, business and government, and the INSPIRE project elevates survivor-informed research as a key part of knowledge production to help end slavery. Find out more: [nottingham.ac.uk/rights-lab](https://nottingham.ac.uk/rights-lab)

## About GoodWeave International

GoodWeave — a nonprofit organization founded in 1994 by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Kailash Satyarthi — is the leading international institution working to stop child labour in global supply chains through a market-based system and holistic approach. GoodWeave partners with companies and local producer communities to bring visibility to hidden supply chains; protect workers' rights; provide assurance that products are free of child, forced and bonded labour; and restore childhoods. Look for the GoodWeave® certification label on rug and home textile products. Learn more at [goodweave.org](https://goodweave.org)

# Authorship and acknowledgements

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## Abbreviations

<b>BDT</b>	Bangladeshi Taka
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>RMG</b>	Ready-made garments
<b>USD</b>	United States Dollars

Read the full report: [Modern slavery and child labour in Bangladesh's garment sector: Documenting risks and informing solutions](#)

# 1. Executive summary

Bangladesh is one of the leading exporters of ready-made garments (RMG) in the world. Around four million Bangladeshis are employed in the RMG industry, the majority of whom are women and girls. Within this critical sector of the Bangladeshi economy and of global markets, exploitation of vulnerable workers remains pervasive. While international attention on the garment industry increased after the Rana Plaza tragedy in 2013, more than ten years later decent working conditions for the millions of people employed in this sector are far from having been secured. The primary aim of this study was to document the existence of modern slavery and child labour within the RMG industry in Bangladesh, with additional focus on hidden and undocumented subcontracted worksites. Documenting the existence of home-based production in the sector was an additional objective.

## 1.1. Key findings

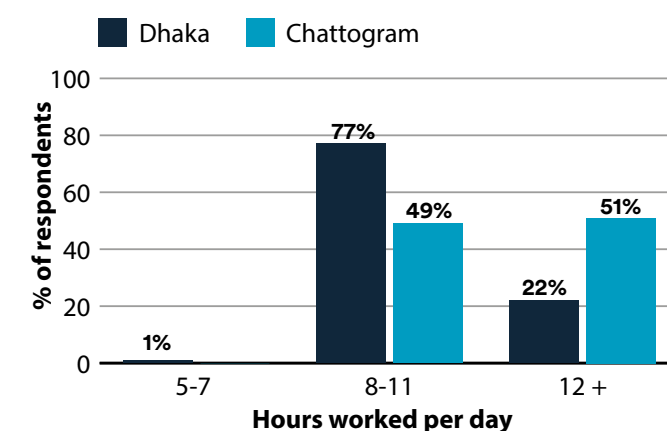
1. Child labour is present in RMG export supply chains in Bangladesh, especially via subcontracted factories. 100% of the minors interviewed were illegally employed as child labourers in RMG factories.
2. Thirty-two per cent of adult RMG workers surveyed are being paid below minimum wage, and 7% of respondents' income leaves them living below the international poverty line.
3. Almost a third of factory-based workers report working more than ten hours per day, six days per week, which exceeds the maximum limit for regular and overtime hours set by international and Bangladeshi law and is an indicator of forced labour.
4. While more women work in the RMG sector, they earn on average 2,000 BDT (18 USD) less per month than their male counterparts.
5. Due to lack of oversight from the government and private sector actors, risks of various kinds—from child labour to underpayments, safety concerns, and abuse—were more common in subcontracted factories linked to export than in those with direct links to international buyers.
6. Fifty-six per cent of factory workers surveyed have experienced threats or abuse at their current job—68% of adult workers and 90% of minors who reported abuse were female.
7. Home-based work is precarious, but workers surveyed feel safer from abuse when they work at home and appreciate flexible work hours.

## 1.2. Key thematic areas of concern

### Child labour

With increased oversight and auditing of factories in the last decade, the presence of child labour in Bangladesh's RMG sector has decreased and is now often referred to as only affecting the informal sector or domestic market. However, this study found one minor (under 18 years old) for every fifteen adults identified as working in the RMG sector. One fifth of these children were working in factories exclusively producing for the export market, while the remaining 80% worked in factories that produced subcontracted or in some cases mixed-contract shipments. All of the minors interviewed were illegally employed on terms violating international or Bangladeshi laws, including 99% of them who worked more than five hours a day (the maximum allowed by law), thus qualifying as child labourers. Children in the RMG sector experience pressure to work long hours, exposure to hazards, disruption to schooling, low wages, and abusive treatment.

Figure 8. Working hours per day – minors



### Wages and livelihoods

Decent wages are among the most important conditions and rights of work, and the main reason people work at all. However, 30% of all adult RMG workers in our sample were earning below the monthly minimum wage of 12,500 BDT (113 USD), implemented from December 2023. Almost all adult factory workers (90%) reported that their wages were insufficient to maintain a decent standard of living, and only 9% indicated they were able to save money. Low wages result in workers' inability to save and leave them with no choice but to accept work under any conditions just to survive. Such circumstances significantly increase their vulnerability to exploitation and forced labour.

### Excessive overtime and production pressure

A range of factors converge to exert pressure on RMG workers to accept exploitative conditions and prevent them from being able to leave their employment. Enduring the mistreatment of managers, paired with a lack of alternative livelihoods, perpetuate abuses at all levels—from more 'minor' infringements of labour law to serious violations of human rights. Many workers reported exhausting working hours, excessive overtime, and underpayment or non-payment of overtime to which they were entitled. Many workers expressed the stress they feel about the hours they work and the pressure to meet their managers' unreasonable or impossible daily production targets in the factory.

### Gender and abuse of vulnerabilities

The garment sector is known to be gendered work, with a large proportion of sewing machine operators in particular being women. In theory, this creates a positive opportunity for women to be in the workforce in terms of global development targets, empowered by having income and access to skill development. However, the sector's conditions put workers at risk of exploitation, which is particularly challenging for women, young workers, those with low education, and those who depend on the work for their livelihood due to poverty, leaving little option for work elsewhere. Discrimination, underpayment, abuse, and exploitative practices are systemic across the sector, and worse for workers employed by subcontracted factories. This study identified a significant gender pay gap of 2,000 BDT (18 USD) in Bangladesh's RMG sector, experiences of gender-based abuse, and the intersectional impact of poverty on individual experiences.

### Subcontracting

RMG exporters rarely produce entire orders themselves and often subcontract work to other factories. In this study, 31% of adults and 80% of minors worked in factories performing subcontracted work. The study revealed that human rights risks—including child labour, underpayments, safety concerns, and abuse—were notably higher in subcontracted factories linked to exporters who in turn sell to international buyers than in the exporting factories themselves. These risks were higher in Chattogram compared to Dhaka, as the RMG sector in Chattogram is characterised by a lack of oversight from both governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which has led to a rise in subcontracted factories.

### Abusive working conditions

The majority of RMG workers experience intimidation, threats, physical punishment, or sexual assault in the workplace. Fifty-six per cent of workers surveyed reported experiencing abuse at work, with the most common experience being verbal abuse. The ILO recognises verbal abuse as a form of psychological coercion and an indicator of forced labour. While experiences of abuse are endemic, the ability of workers to address violations is limited because written agreements, worker representation, and effective grievance mechanisms are lacking, especially in subcontracted factories.

### Home-based work

Home-based work in the apparel sector is informal, subcontracted work where production tasks such as sewing, cut pieces, embroidery, and finishing are carried out in private households or informal workshops rather than factory sites. As workers are home-based, little is known about the conditions of work, safety, hours, and how children may be working alongside parents, posing concerns about labour exploitation. Our study shows that there are home-based workers in Bangladesh who supply garment factories for the export market. While home-based work entails risks associated with lack of oversight and worker protections, as well as the potential for invisible work performed by family members (particularly children), home-based workers in the study were generally positive about the flexibility associated with their work and being insulated from abuse by managers. However, home-based work remains largely off the radar for garment buyers, posing a risk of labour and human rights violations. Workers highlighted the need for increased wage rates for their work and raised concern about working conditions.

### 1.3. Recommendations

The recommendations provided in this report are designed to inform and advance efforts to protect RMG workers from modern slavery and child labour. They speak to specific issues identified in our research, and at the same time take into consideration the current local context and the global regulatory landscape. Detailed recommendations are provided for four key audiences in line with the following six main principles:

#### 1 Map supply chains to understand how lower tier worksites feed into RMG exports

- **Government:** Simplify worksite registration, mandate supplier disclosure, and maintain a transparent factory database. Strengthen oversight in high-risk hubs.
- **International Buyers:** Map supply chains beyond exporters, publish supplier lists, and set subcontracting guidelines. Train stakeholders and reform purchasing practices to reduce pressure on suppliers.
- **Suppliers:** Create, update and share supply chain disclosure documents.
- **NGOs and Trade Unions:** Gather and share data on smaller worksites' contributions and promote transparency through centralised databases.

#### 2 Assess risk of modern slavery and child labour in the RMG sector

- **Government:** Include Export Processing Zones (EPZs) under labour laws, enhance inspections, and increase inspector resources.
- **International Buyers:** Conduct risk assessments for subcontracted worksites and engage stakeholders, including workers and communities. Establish a local presence for monitoring.
- **Suppliers:** Implement risk-based sub-supplier monitoring and provide transparent data on risks.
- **NGOs and Trade Unions:** Share insights and data on risks with stakeholders to improve due diligence strategies.

#### 3 Enforce payment of living wages and overtime compensation

- **Government:** Set minimum wages aligned with living standards, review wages frequently, and enforce laws through inspections. Facilitate collective bargaining and penalise violations.
- **International Buyers:** Support suppliers with systems for wage tracking, conduct audits, and collaborate on closing wage gaps through adjusted pricing.
- **Suppliers:** Ensure digital payroll systems, provide allowances, and guarantee timely payment. Promote gender equity and leadership development.
- **NGOs and Trade Unions:** Advocate for wage reviews, conduct worker awareness campaigns, and offer training on overtime and wage rights.

#### 4 Cease, remediate, and prevent abusive and discriminatory working conditions

- **Government:** Enforce anti-discrimination laws, ratify ILO convention 190, and strengthen referral systems for victims. Train inspectors to identify violations.
- **International Buyers:** Embed abuse prevention in Codes of Conduct and focus on capacity building during inspections. Include climate impact guidelines for health and safety.
- **Suppliers:** Provide written contracts, establish zero-tolerance abuse policies, and improve workplace conditions. Implement gender-sensitive reporting and realistic production targets.
- **NGOs and Trade Unions:** Educate workers about rights, advocate for home-based worker inclusion, and provide legal aid services.

#### 5 Cease, remediate, and prevent child labour

- **Government:** Enforce child labour laws, increase unannounced inspections, and align education age with legal work age. Support education initiatives for children.
- **International Buyers:** Strengthen child labour remediation protocols and conduct inspections of high-risk sites. Partner with NGOs to transition child workers to safe education or work.
- **Suppliers:** Implement rigorous age verification and partner with NGOs for child labour remediation programs.
- **NGOs and Trade Unions:** Offer prevention services, vocational training, and community-based support to reduce poverty-driven child labour.

#### 6 Establish effective grievance mechanisms for workers

- **Government:** Develop robust systems for managing grievances and partner with NGOs to improve worker awareness of them. Learn from independent grievance mechanisms.
- **International Buyers:** Ensure anonymous, transparent reporting mechanisms are in place at the company and supplier-level. Track workers' satisfaction with closed grievances.
- **Suppliers:** Strengthen grievance mechanisms, allow independent trade unions, and ensure subcontractor accountability. Resolve complaints promptly and track outcomes.
- **NGOs and Trade Unions:** Raise awareness about grievance mechanisms and support training for their effective implementation.

### 1.4. Research methods

The study was conducted over the course of almost two years, from early 2023 to late 2024, adopting a mixed methods approach to understand the realities of people's experiences working in Bangladesh's RMG industry. A large-scale survey of 1,974 RMG workers—both adults and minors—was combined with ten in-depth focus group discussions and supported by literature, law and policy reviews to provide insights on the nature of RMG work and assess compliance with domestic and international standards. Data collection was conducted in the Dhaka and Chattogram divisions, as the areas of the country producing a high volume of ready-made garments for the global markets, including the United States and the European Union. Qualitative and quantitative analysis of surveys and focus groups sheds light on the abuses experienced by RMG workers and highlights critical areas in which reform is needed to ensure decent work and protect vulnerable populations from modern slavery and child labour in this important sector.



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