

Contemporary status of industrial relations in readymade garments industries: Bangladesh perspective

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Received 03 June 2023
Revised 29 July 2023
Accepted 07 September 2023

Citation: Huda, K. N., Hoque, Md. M., & Khaled, M. C. (2023). Contemporary status of industrial relations in readymade garments industries: Bangladesh perspective. *Journal of Management, Economics, and Industrial Organization*, 7(3), 60-74. <http://doi.org/10.31039/jomeino.2023.7.3.5>



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Abstract

Industrial Relations (IR) or Employment Relations (ER) is a marker of organized industry and organized labour that has evolved since the industrial revolution and mechanized production. Different country has seen the evolution of participatory management in manufacturing and production in different ways at different times where management allowed or was forced to allow democratic norms in labour or employee relations. Readymade Garment (RMG) is one of the most visible organized manufacturing sectors serving as back-office suppliers of global brands of developed countries. This research attempted to measure the effectiveness of IR practices of selected Readymade Garment (RMG) factories to explore the relationships, job security, and empowerment issues. Opinions of 346 workers were collected and analyzed using a one-sample "t-test". The study discovered the effectiveness of IR practices in the area of developing a positive relationship among all the stakeholders, and the sample RMGs were found to be weak in ensuring social security for the workers and establishing trade unions in the factory. This research work is one of the first attempts to measure the IR practice in the RMG sector of Bangladesh. However, its outcome may enrich the existing body of knowledge and facilities in the design of an effective IR program for the development of this sector.

Keywords: Human resource management, Industrial relations, Trade union, Readymade garments.

JEL Classification Codes: J28, M54.

1. Introduction

As the importance of trade unions is decreasing, there is a debate about whether Industrial Relations (IR) is any more a separate field rather than just a routine part of broader human resource management (HRM) (Kaufman, 2004; Banfield & Rebecca, 2008). However, for a large part where employees are yet at an absolute disadvantage in employment bargaining, IR might still be relevant. Industrial relations (IR) practice is the most significant factor in organizational sustainability and social justice at work (Hossain & Semenza, 2017). It forms the core of human resources management regarding employee relationships (Howell & Givan, 2011).

Like all sectors, the RMG also felt the shock of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the supply chain growth potentials and disrupted sustainability (Ali et al., 2021). Bangladesh is ranked second among the finished apparel exporters around the globe (BGMEA, 2020). RMG is the most mentionable sector of its contribution to the national economy and holistic social development (Huda, 2016; Mujeri & Mujeri, 2021; Khan & Milne, 2019), earning roughly 83% of the total export earnings of Bangladesh and employing 4.2 million semi-skilled and low skilled workers supporting 40 million populations.

Practicing IR is very challenging in the labour-intensive manufacturing industries of Bangladesh, both in the public and private sectors (Absar, 2012), notably in RMGs in Bangladesh (Al Faruque, 2009). However, the research work on IR practices with particular reference to the RMG sector of Bangladesh is limited. To fill this research gap, this paper aims to evaluate the effectiveness of IR practices in the readymade garments of Bangladesh.

2. Review of Literature

The genesis of modern Industrial Relations (IR) practice was rooted in the industrial revolution to promote a better employment culture for the wage earners (Müller-Jentsch, 1988). IR became a particular field of study in the United States during the 19th century and thrived as a new discipline of people management at work (Kauffman, 2008). In contemporary times, IR primarily focuses on the trade union movement and getting preference in the business studies in human resource management discipline (Ng & Maki, 1994). However, IR is still regarded in manufacturing-dominated industries as the core function of modern human resource management, which promotes cooperation among the employer, employees, and all the stakeholders of an organization (Rogers & Streeck, 2009; Zajak et al., 2018; Hossain & Islam, 2018) and is a source of harmony and peace in an organization (Rainnie, 2016). According to Kaufman (2003), IR practice is the most effective intervention to minimize

labor-related problems. Also, it depends on the stakeholders whether they are honest and diligent in maintaining peace in the RMG industries of Bangladesh (Ahmad, 2021). In Bangladesh, the Government passed the Export Processing Zone (EPZ) Workers Association and Industrial Relations Act 2004. However, it has not been significantly successful in protecting the workers' rights and power (Al Faruque, 2009).

IR practice emphasizes developing productive relationships between employees and employers (Pyman et al., 2010; Ackers, 2002). It must prove to maximize cooperation (Rogers & Streeck, 2009) and minimize conflict among the stakeholders. An effective IR practice should secure mutual understanding at the highest level (Keller, 2018), which will evade all sorts of strikes and lockouts (Wang & Cooke, 2017), and it will also ensure harmony in the workplace (Makinde, 2013).

3. Hypothesis Development

Hypothesis 1: *H₀ IR practice of the sample RMGs is ineffective in fostering positive relationships among the stakeholders.*

Job security enhances employee performance, which could be ensured by effective IR practices by an organization (Newman et al., 2019). IR practice mostly safeguards the interests of employees (Clarke et al., 2004) by ensuring fair wages (Thorntwaite, 2017), standard working hours (Rubery et al., 2005), and partnership in the organization through a profit-sharing scheme (Shields, 1997; Heywood et al., 1998). However, RMG workers in Bangladesh are deprived of reasonable wages, causing industrial unrest frequently (Bhuiyan, 2013). Labour welfare could be the most effective scope of IR to free the Bangladeshi RMG industries from all sorts of conflict and turmoil (Huda, 2016 a). Shen (2006) conducted qualitative research work on the changing trend of IR in Chinese organizations and emphasized the social security issues of the workers to ensure business sustainability and social stability. IR should govern industrial safety (Oates, 2017; Bakht & Hossain, 2017).

Hypothesis 2: *H₀ IR practice of the sample RMGs is ineffective in ensuring the Job Security of the workers.*

IR practices promote Democracy in the workplace through workers' participation in decision-making and their membership in organizational development (Turner, 2018; Müller-Jentsch, 2008; Windmuller, 1977). An effective IR practice establishes trade union (TU) practice, which ensures the representation of workers to protect their rights (Kaufman, 2003). According to Schnabel and Wagner (1994), trade union positively influences a culture of creativity and innovation in the workplace and makes the workers more committed to their

job. Hence, the impression of TU practice in Bangladesh is very agonizing due to extreme politicization and political interference (Taher, 1999). On the other hand, TU activities are highly discouraged by imposing many restrictive clauses in the Bangladesh Labor Act 2006 (Sharma, 2015), and it is also forbidden inside EPZ (Rahim & Islam, 2020) restricting the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining (Gopalakrishnan, 2007). However, collective bargaining is a strategy to avoid conflict between worker and employer (Comboh, 2014), and the Chinese industries have successfully promoted IR practice through effective engagement of collective bargaining (Lee, 2009). Successful grievance management is one of the most significant factors of quality labour relations (Dastmalchian & Ng, 1990), which helps in maintaining a healthy work environment in the RMGs of Bangladesh (Saha & Mondal, 2012). It has a positive impact on the job satisfaction of the workers (Ali & Islam, 2019).

Hypothesis 3: *H₀* IR practice of the sample RMGs is ineffective in empowering the workers

Three broad constructs of Industrial relations (IR) practices are stated in Table 1, which also represents the variables of each construct.

Table 1: Broad constructs with specific variables of IR and Null Hypotheses

Broad constructs of IR	Variables	Code	Reference
Key variables of IR Construct 1: “Positive Relationship”	1 <i>H₁</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in maximizing cooperation among the stakeholders.	Cooperation	Rogers & Streeck (2009)
	2 <i>H₂</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in minimizing conflict among the stakeholders.	Minimizing Conflict	Bomers & Peterson (2013); Hartley & Kelly (1986)
	3 <i>H₃</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in securing the highest level of mutual understanding.	Understanding	Keller (2018)
	4 <i>H₄</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective to avoid the strike	Strike	Wang & Cooke (2017)
	5 <i>H₅</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in developing a harmonious work environment	Harmonious Relation	Makinde (2013)
Key variables of IR Construct 2: “Job Security”	6 <i>H₆</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in safeguarding the interests of Workers.	Interests	Clarke et al. (2004)
	7 <i>H₇</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in establishing labour partnerships by profit sharing.	Profit Sharing	Shields (1997); Heywood et al. (1998)
	8 <i>H₈</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in determining fair wages for the workers.	Fair Wages	Thornthwaite (2017).
	9 <i>H₉</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in determining standard working hours according to labour law.	Working Hours	Rubery et al. (2005)

	10	<i>H₁₀</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in ensuring Labor Welfare	Labor Welfare	Huda (2018)
	11	<i>H₁₁</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in ensuring social security	Social Security	Ramia & Michelotti (2005)
	12	<i>H₁₂</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in ensuring Industrial Safety	Industrial Safety	Oates (2017); Bakht & Hossain (2017)
Key variables of IR Construct 3: “Empowerment”	13	<i>H₁₃</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in establishing and nursing the growth of an industrial democracy	Democracy	Müller-Jentsch (2008).
	14	<i>H₁₄</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in establishing workers' participation in decision-making	Participation	Aswathappa (2013); Mizrahi (2002)
	15	<i>H₁₅</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in instituting trade union practice	Trade union	Kaufman (2003); Ackers & Wilkinson (2005)
	16	<i>H₁₆</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in practicing collective bargaining	Collective Bargaining	Combh (2014)
	17	<i>H₁₇</i> IR practice of the organization is ineffective in ensuring grievance management	Grievance	Obiekwe & Eke (2019)

Source: Literature Review (Compiled by Authors)

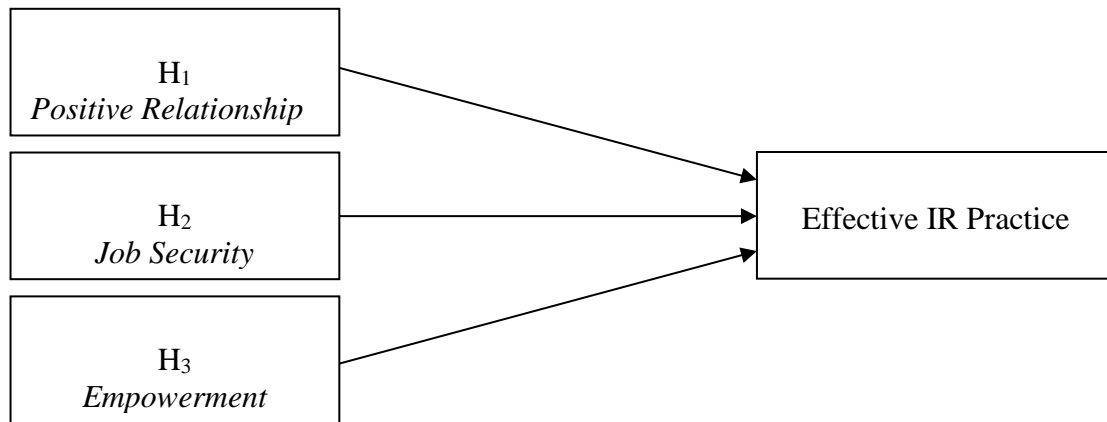


Figure 1: Research Framework of IR Practice

3.1. The research framework of IR

The conceptual framework of the study, which was developed through extensive literature review and expert opinion, is shown in Figure 1. This framework might be appropriate for achieving the objective of the research. The conceptual framework mainly projects three broad constructs of IR, including Positive Relationship issue IR, Job Security issue IR, and Empowerment issue IR. The particulars of the items included in each of the constructs are compiled in Table 1. This study will

try to appraise the effectiveness of IR practices of Bangladeshi RMGs following the objective of the study.

4. Methodology

4.1 Variables Identification and purifications

Authors have expansively reviewed scholarly research articles, statistical reports, Books on IR, Bangladesh Labor Law 2006, and Bangladesh EPZ Act to discover the critical variables of IR. Research Gate, Scopus, ProQuest, Web of Science, and EBSCO host databases were used to collect necessary research materials. Seventeen variables (17) on IR were revealed from the existing literature, and those were discussed with senior IR experts working in the RMG sector. Those variables were grouped into three broad areas of IR, namely the Positive Relationship issue IR, the Job Security issue of IR, and the Empowerment issue of IR (Table 1) to develop the conceptual model (figure 1) of this study.

4.2 Questionnaire Development

The questionnaire was divided into two sections, and all retained 17 variables were used to prepare the research instrument. The first section contained demographic information such as gender, length of experience, and academic qualifications. The second section contains 17 statements relevant to the seventeen items retained in the earlier section. A 5-point Likert scale was used to capture the opinions of the respondents (5 represents 'strongly agree' and 1 represents 'strongly disagree'). Considering the academic qualification and language skills of the RMG workers of Bangladesh, the questionnaire was instrumented in the native language (Bangla) for better understanding and easy assimilation. The respondents were questioned on the present practice of IR and its degree of effectiveness in relationship development, ensuring job security, and promoting empowerment. The survey was carried out from 20 December 2022 to 31 January 2023.

4.3 Sample Profile

Primary data collection was controlled by the length of the work experience of the respondents. Therefore, the sampling technique was Judgmental and workers with over five years of work experience in the RMG industry were selected for data collection. A filter question was used to identify the appropriate sample. The details of the respondents are presented in Table 2. A total of 360 questionnaires were distributed among the workers working in Twenty-one different RMG factories located within the Chattogram Export Processing Zone (CEPZ). Hence, a few questionnaires were discarded from the study due to faulty (ticked multiple options) and missing responses. Three hundred forty-six questionnaires were found to be useable for statistical analysis.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Gender		Frequency	Percentage
1	Female	264	76%
2	Male	82	24%
Education			
1	Studied Class 1- 5	183	53%
2	Passed Primary School Certificate	108	31%
3	Passed Junior School Certificate	55	16%
Experience			
1	5-6 years	267	77%
2	6 years and above	79	23%

Source: Questionnaire Survey (Compiled by authors)

4.4 Statistical method

The study considered RMG factory workers as a single sample for statistical analysis of the primary data. 17 null hypotheses were tested using a one-sample t-test, and their level of significance was considered for accepting and rejecting the hypothesis, which was proposed by Malhotra Das (2016). It is assumed that a p-value lower than 0.05 will be considered as the yardstick to reject the null hypothesis. To test the normality of the data set, Skewness and Kurtosis tests were utilized. The value of skewness of the data was found at 0.08 in this study, which denotes data normality and somewhat positively distributed. Hence, the kurtosis value was found to be 2.93, which is also an acceptable finding.

Table 3: Mean values and the results of hypotheses testing

SL	Variables	H ₀	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig.	H ₀ Decision
Key Variables of “Positive Relationship Construct of IR”							
1	Cooperation	H ₁	4.3422	.60003	33.554	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
2	Minimizing conflict	H ₂	3.9111	.47350	28.863	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
3	Understanding	H ₃	3.9467	.45000	31.556	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
4	Strike	H ₄	3.9733	.50815	28.732	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
5	Harmonious Relation	H ₅	4.1778	.71617	24.668	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
Key Variables of “Job Security Construct of IR”							
6	Interests	H ₆	2.2578	.70410	26.796	0.08	<i>Accepted</i>
7	Profit-sharing	H ₇	2.3022	.49753	9.112	0.07	<i>Accepted</i>
8	Fair wages	H ₈	3.2111	.66219	20.639	0.04	<i>Rejected</i>
9	Working hours	H ₉	4.3200	.54674	36.214	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
10	Labor welfare	H ₁₀	2.3121	.57563	34.166	0.12	<i>Accepted</i>
11	Social security	H ₁₁	3.0178	.64755	4.12	0.18	<i>Accepted</i>
12	Industrial safety	H ₁₂	4.2444	.71200	26.217	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>

Key Variables of “Empowerment Construct of IR”

13	Democracy	H_{13}	2.7956	.68333	-4.488	0.06	<i>Accepted</i>
14	Participation	H_{14}	4.1067	.48844	33.986	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>
15	Trade union	H_{15}	2.2222	.50395	36.379	0.11	<i>Accepted</i>
16	Collective bargaining	H_{16}	2.6778	.54645	-.610	0.09	<i>Accepted</i>
17	Grievance	H_{17}	3.7333	.56695	19.402	0.00	<i>Rejected</i>

Source: Compiled by authors from SPSS 20.

The mean value of each IR variable stated in Table 3 was used to measure the degree of effectiveness of IR practices in the sample RMG industries, and higher mean scores were considered as a higher degree of effectiveness. The standard deviation value was also reported for authentication of the range of opinions of the respondents.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

The study has been tested with 17 null hypotheses sectioned in three broad constructs of IR, which are tabulated in Table 3. Among those null hypotheses, ten have been rejected (sig. < 0.05 with t-value $t > 1.65$ at two-tail tests), and the other seven have been accepted (sig. > 0.05 with t-value < 1.65 at two-tail tests). All the variables of IR broad construct 1 coded as Cooperation (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 33.554$), Minimizing conflict (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 28.863$), Understanding (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 31.556$), Strike (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 28.732$), Harmonious Relation (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 24.668$) were rejected. The mean values of those variables are found to be very high, 4.3422, 3.9111, 3.9467, 3.9733, and 4.1778, respectively. This finding of the study depicts that IR practices of the sample RMGs are highly effective and successful in improving the positive relationship among the stakeholders. Evidence of this finding is also visible in the research conducted by Huda (2018).

Three variables of IR construct 2 (Job Security), namely fair wages (sig. = 0.04 with $t = 20.639$), working hours (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 36.214$), and industrial safety (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 26.217$) were found rejected. Hence, the mean value of working hours (4.3200) and industrial safety (4.2444) is found to be very high. The mean value of the fair wages variable was 3.2111. On the other hand, four variables of the job security construct were found to be accepted. The variables are as follows: Interest (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 26.796$), profit sharing (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 9.112$), labour welfare (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 34.166$), social security (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 4.12$). The mean value of these variables is found to be very low (Interest = 2.2578, profit sharing = 2.3022, labour welfare = 2.3121 and social security = 3.0178). The finding of this study projects that the IR practice of the sample RMGs is somewhat ineffective in the assurance of job security to the workers.

Results of IR Construct 3 (Empowerment) show that two variables, namely Participation (sig. = 0.00 with $t = 33.986$) and Grievance (sig. = 0.04 with $t = 19.402$) are rejected. The mean value of these variables is highly acceptable: 4.1067 for Participation and 3.7333 for Grievance. However,

three variables explicitly Democracy (sig. = 0.06 with $t = -4.488$), Trade union (sig. = 0.11 with $t = 36.379$) and Collective bargaining (sig. = 0.09 with $t = -.610$) were accepted. The mean value of these variables is found to be low (Democracy = 2.7956, Trade union = 2.2222, and Collective bargaining = 2.6778). The IR practice of the sample RMGs is somewhat ineffective in empowering the workers to raise their voices to protect their rights.

6. Discussions

The results of the study endorse that the performance of the IR practice of the sample RMGs is highly effective regarding positive relationship building among all the stakeholders, mainly between management and workers. It may be for the enriched IR culture of the RMGs located inside the EPZ as they have strict law enforcement and remain under regular audit by the EPZ authority and the foreign buyer to maintain the IR programs effectively. Hence, all the RMGs located inside EPZ are fully compliant with the buyers' code of conduct, especially labour compliance. The sample RMGs are also effective in paying a fair wage to the workers. Due to the buyer pressure of labour compliance, most of the RMGs of Bangladesh pay the wage as recommended by the latest pay commission.

For the same reason, the RMGs are maintaining standard working hours for the workers according to Bangladesh Labor Law 2006. Industrial Safety of the RMGs is somewhat maintained after the Rana Plaza and Tazreen tragedy. Most of the RMGs maintain the industrial safety protocol as recommended by the buyers' community, i.e., Accord and Alliance. The higher mean value of all these variables (fair wage 3.311, working hour 4.3200, and industrial safety 4.2444) indicates the degree of effectiveness of the IR practice of the sample RMGs.

IR practice of the sample RMGs is found ineffective in safeguarding the interests of workers. Due to severe inequality between management and workers, most of the workers feel that they are deprived of many basic needs of life, and RMG workers are the most vulnerable during this COVID-19 situation. Evidence of RMG workers' vulnerability is found in research conducted by Sen et al. (2020) and Kabir et al. (2021). According to Bangladesh Labor Law, 2006 section 232, workers should get 5% of the company's profit as the "Workers Profit Participation Fund (WPPF)". Hence, most RMG workers are deprived of this motivational package. Most of the private companies in Bangladesh do not provide this scheme to the worker, which is marked by Chowdhury and Hoque (1998) in their research. However, the lower mean value of these two variables (interest 2.2578 profit sharing 2.3022) does not signify its influence on IR practice.

It is also found in this study that the IR practices of the RMGs have failed to ensure the welfare of the workers, though the lower mean value of this variable (2.3121) is not very significant to support its degree of impact. Hence, the labour law of Bangladesh protects the welfare issues of blue-collar

employees, but most employers try to overrule the law to deprive the workers. On the other hand, the IR practice of the sample RMGs was also found ineffective in ensuring social security for the workers. There are no protection schemes, including provident funds, gratuities, and pensions for them and the injury and death compensation for the workers is a meager amount. Similar findings are also projected by Sharma (2015) in his research paper. The sample RMG also failed to establish Democracy in the industry and was ineffective in institutionalizing trade unions and collective bargaining, which are the most critical components of IR.

A separate law governs all the EPZs of Bangladesh: The Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority Act, 1980, and the Bangladesh EPZ Labor Act, 2019 which restricts freedom of association. However, this law permits workers' participation in management in the form of the Workers Welfare Association, which enjoys a similar status to the CBA. Therefore, the effectiveness of participation is present at a higher degree (mean value of 4.1067) in the findings of this study. Grievance management of the sample RMGs is also in good shape with a higher degree of effectiveness (mean value 3.7333), and this finding is also endorsed by the study conducted by Huda (2018).

7. Limitations and potentials for further research

This survey was carried out amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the realities of IR practices may need to be clarified. On the other hand, the size of the sample needed to be more adequate, which may only represent part of the industry. The sample RMG factories were very selective within the EPZ area, and RMGs outside the EPZ were excluded from the analysis. An effective IR practice is an acute need for the sustainability of the RMGs of Bangladesh, which will facilitate the industries to triumph the global market opportunities competitively. The researchers in the same field are suggested to carry out a comparative analysis of the IR practices of the RMGs located inside and outside of the EPZ area or similar studies to measure the effectiveness of IR on the promising industries of Bangladesh, including pharmaceuticals, steel, residential hotels, and education.

8. Conclusion

Modern HRM has systematically reduced labour unrest and tension in the workplace. However, IR is a distinctive field in itself in organizations, not only in organized labour markets with trade unions but also in the name of Employee Relations (ER) in the overall modern organizational context. IR/ER effective practice may facilitate the industries and nations to achieve Sustainable Development Goal number 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth. RMG industries of Bangladesh are encountering many challenges to staying in the global apparel market competitively. Therefore,

all the stakeholders of this sector should be vigilant to maintain the critical strength of this industry, which is the worker. The core competency of Bangladeshi RMGs is the affordable source of productive labour and their interest to be preserved at any cost. Hence, an effective IR practice could be the best mechanism to keep the workers productive by upholding a decent work environment. Considering the research gap on this significant issue, the study aimed to measure the effectiveness of IR practice through a quantitative analysis.

This study considered the IR practice of the RMGs located inside the EPZ of Chattogram. The results of the study provide a positive impression of the IR practices of the sample RMG firms. However, the sample RMGs are ineffective in some areas of job security, i.e. profit sharing, labour welfare, and social security issues, which could be improved by implementing a total reward system in the organization. However, the Bangladesh EPZ Labor Act 2019 should be revised considering those matters with due diligence and incorporate a provident fund and pension scheme for the workers. There cannot be two labour laws in one state for the same type of industry, and Bangladesh must comply with the founding principles of ILO conventions 87 and 88, which provide the rights to unionize and collective bargaining. Bangladesh EPZ Labor Act 2019 should be revised accordingly to protect the right of trade unions and to establish a collective bargaining agency to promote appropriate Democracy in the RMG industries. More importantly, the management of the RMG should come forward to establish an effective IR practice by being transparent and judicious on workers' welfare and social security issues. This study discovers the critical strength of the sample RMG in the area of maintaining positive relationships among all the stakeholders. However, the practices of the sample RMG are somewhat ineffective in the area of maintaining the job security of the workers and promoting participative Democracy inside the enterprise. This study might be helpful in understanding the effectiveness of IR practices in the RMG industry of Bangladesh in overcoming the contemporary crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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