



# FACTORS AFFECTING INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND THE IMPACT OF IT: A CASE STUDY ON READYMADE GARMENTS SECTOR IN BANGLADESH.

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## Abstract

If the organization is to achieve its institutional objectives then there must exist a harmonious relationship between employers and employees because harmonious relation ensures industrial peace, avoid conflict, strike, lock out and increase company's production. The readymade garment sector of Bangladesh is no exception. Good industrial relations serve the interests of both employers and employees, thereby benefiting society as a whole and the economy of the country as a whole. Good human relations create positive environment in which the worker's work attitude and motivation develop. Such a good relationship must exist between the employer and the group of workers on the one hand and between the employer and individual workers on the other hand.

The main objective of this study was to determine the factors either positively or negatively affecting industrial relations at the readymade garment sector in Bangladesh and how to improve from bad industrial relations. Since the study population was small, case study method was used. The information collected from the respondents in the study was done verbally during the institution visits. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. The results were briefly interpreted and hypotheses were formulated and presented using tables. The purpose of the study was to avoid negative factors and to establish positive factors that affect industrial relations at the readymade garments sector in Bangladesh. The results of the study found that the factor most positively affecting good industrial relations is economic security and satisfaction of workers which is created by the employer and increase productivity and profit for the company caused by worker's efficiency. Other factors included rights of workers, conflict negotiating skills of employers and union representatives, presence of trade union, positive attitude of management and workers, and social and psychological satisfaction of both parties. The result also found that the major factor that negatively affects industrial relation was the absence of good wage structure and job insecurity of the workers and employer psychological dissatisfaction created by worker's inattention and poor performance. Other factors included master-servant relationship, unfavorable working environment, political interference, corruption and nepotism, avoiding industrial laws and policies, and faulty supervision.

**Key Words - Industrial Relations, BGMEA, Trade Union, Conflict, Negotiation.**

## 1 INTRODUCTION

In this modern time, the competition in business has become like a big game in the whole world. Quality is the main improved area where companies can improve their competition and also survive. To gain competitive advantage, a company must make changes in productivity and for this the first thing to do is to make a cooperation and relation between workers and managers who are the main partners in production. Companies that are healthy can survive and have the chance to overcome barriers relating to

competition but unhealthy firms can get knocked out of the competition due to their internal conflict between labor and management (Aswathappa, 2005).

In an industry, all party like employers, employees, workers, managers, government etc. are concerned with each other. If the company wants to remain free from strike, lock out, and such obstacles, and wants to increase production, profit, and establish industrial peace, then there is no alternative to build a good industrial relation. How the relationship will be at work must be defined and settled by the collective bargaining with each other. If the worker is active and works with full attention, then the management will be satisfied. On the other hand, if the management accepts all the demands of the workers, then the workers will be satisfied. For this, it is necessary to treat workers as human being, not as machine.

The modern field of Industrial Relation has been significantly challenged over the last two decades in nearly all countries of the world and has seriously declined in a number because of reducing the severity of labor problems and capital-labor conflict in recent years around the world (Bruce E. Kaufman) but Bangladesh and its readymade garments sector are still suffering from poor industrial relations. So there is no alternative to create good industrial relations to advance the economic prosperity of Bangladesh and create employment by keeping the readymade garment sector healthy.

Industrial relations are the relationship between the organization and the workers or between the employer and the employee. This relationship plays a role in maintaining all personal and collective communication with the owner side and the labor side and keeping the production of the organization regular. The relationship is all the more important because it establishes democracy for the workers in the organization where workers are given the opportunity to express their views openly.

Industrial relations refers to all the rules and practices governing the interaction between management and workers, usually involving collective employee representation and bargaining (Graham & Bennett, 1995). The rules and practices include settling wages and all terms and conditions of workers, resolving disputes and dealing with conflict and implementing a wide range of grievances and disciplinary processes.

Good industrial relations are maintained in the interests of both employers and workers by which the society, the country and the whole world are benefited. Good industrial relations create an environment that creates positive attitudes and work motivation among both workers and employers. As a result, the production of the organization can increase. So such a good relationship must exist between the management and the group of workers on the one hand and between the management and the individual workers on the other hand (Verma, 1999).

No conditions shall be imposed by any organization to develop good industrial relations. Many times, managers have to decide whether to give in to a strike or try to solve the problem by forming a trade union. However, every organization should avoid situations like strikes, work stoppages, lockouts, or boycotts to establish peace in the organization by building good industrial relations (Nzuve, 1997).

Hence the basic objective of the paper is to explore what factors affect industrial relations in the readymade garments sector of Bangladesh as a whole. The case study method was exploited here. The research problem identifies three main questions: (1) how can industrial relations be introduced? (2) What factors affect industrial relations in the readymade garments sector in Bangladesh and how? And (3) how to improve industrial relations in the readymade garments sector in Bangladesh?

## 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Industrial Relations

Industrial relations are the mutual understanding between employers and employees governed by collective behavior through the work of trade unions (Harrison, 1998).

Industrial relations refer to the study of complex relationships in the workplace. On the one hand, it provides guidance on how employees and employers should interact with each other, and on the other hand, it provides guidance on how to resolve conflicts that arise. These interactions are only for a workplace relationships that serve as a contract between the two parties (Nekpen Eoudia Okhawere, 2023).

The term industrial relations refer to employment as a means of regulating the way people behave in the workplace. This relationship is mainly concerned with the development, negotiation and implementation of formal arrangements, including all rules, negotiation procedures, and dispute resolution procedures, systematic management process and the safety and health of the parties involved (Armstrong, 1997).

Industrial relations is also referred to as the interdisciplinary study of employment relations that focuses on the means by which collective bargaining is conducted through trade unions, government agencies and the balance of power between employees and employers (Kaufman, 1993). Collective bargaining allows a group of employees to discuss and negotiate concerned matter with employers to reach an agreement that assumed to be upheld or agreed upon by both parties. Related matters may include working conditions, working salaries, job security and all matters involving workers rights (Obiekwe, Felix, & Izim, 2018).

If a code of discipline is followed by both parties, industrial relations will improve as unilateral and violent actions on both sides can be avoided (Gupta, 1996). Discipline is the action taken by management to enforce the organizations expected standards and rules that regulate human activity by creating controlled performance. The key objective of the disciplinary system is to encourage employees whose performance is unsatisfactory in the organization to make changes to improve their performance (Stewart, 2002).

## 2.2 Factors affecting industrial relations

Social and psychological factors affect industrial relations where as in order to maintain sound industrial relations the management should understand the social and psychological needs of the workers and try to fulfill them appropriately (Saleemi, 1997).

Good leadership is another factor that employees need or wants from the organization can affect industrial relation because it helps to ensure that the organization and their jobs continue to exist (Flippo, 1084).

Existence of strong trade union can affect for maintaining smooth industrial relations because trade unions encourage workers to increase productivity and also forced management to pay higher wages as a reward (Wachira, 2010).

## 3 METHODS

A qualitative research design has deliberated the most important with a view to exploration as it allows using different data sources, which can open a new door to research. The corresponding author of this paper recently visited two garments factories on industrial tours in Bangladesh, one of which is Romo Fashion company located in Gazipur, Dhaka and the other is Mongla EPZ in Bagerhat district and gathered knowledge about working relation in workplace and its process, which has access to important information on many internal aspects of this project. The researcher used the industrial relations development process as the main analysis task to review the employment process in Bangladesh.

The data collection process is designed in such a way that it should capture the entire process related to industrial relations, factor affecting it and the impact of it for all the case organizations in Bangladesh as much as possible and which can perform a comparative analysis of each stage of the employment process. So, a composition of qualitative data collection methods, techniques, and data sources available in the research was exploited during the study. A concise presentation of readymade garments sector in Bangladesh is followed to give an overview of the studied company. The following paper is based on a case study method.

### 3.1 Readymade Garments Sector in Bangladesh

The economic development of Bangladesh depends firstly on agriculture and secondly on industry. Although Bangladesh is not developed in industry, it has been enriched in Garment industries in the recent past years. In the field of Industrialization garment industry is a promising step. It has given the opportunity of employment to millions of unemployed, especially innumerable uneducated women of the country. It is making significant contribution in the field of our export income.

Since the late 1970s, the RMG industry started developing in Bangladesh primarily as an export-oriented industry although; the domestic market for RMG has been increasing fast due to increase in personal disposable income and change in life style. The sector rapidly attained high importance in terms of employment, foreign exchange earnings and its contribution to GDP.

Most importantly, the growth of RMG sector produced a group of entrepreneurs who have created a strong private sector. Of these entrepreneurs, a sizeable number is female. A woman entrepreneur established one of the oldest export-oriented garment factories, the Baishakhi Garment in 1977. Many women hold top executive positions in RMG industry. The hundred percent export-oriented RMG industry experienced phenomenal growth during the last 15 or so years. In 1978, there were only 9 export-oriented garment manufacturing units, which generated export earnings of hardly one million dollar. Some of these units were very small and produced garments for both domestic and export markets. Four such small and old units were Reaz Garments, Paris Garments, Jewel Garments and Baishakhi Garments.

Reaz Garments, the pioneer, was established in 1960 as a small tailoring outfit, named Reaz Store in DHAKA. It served only domestic markets for about 15 years. In 1973 it changed its name to M/s Reaz Garments Ltd. and expanded its operations into export market by selling 10,000 pieces of men's shirts worth French Franc 13 million to a Paris-based firm in 1978. It was the first direct exporter of garments from Bangladesh. Desh Garments Ltd, the first non-equity joint-venture in the garment industry was established in 1979. Desh had technical and marketing collaboration with Daewoo Corporation of South Korea. It was also the first hundred percent export-oriented company. It had about 120 operators including 3 women trained in South Korea, and with these trained workers it started its production in early 1980. Another South Korean Firm, Youngones Corporation formed the first equity joint-venture garment factory with a Bangladeshi firm, Trexim Ltd. in 1980. Bangladeshi partners contributed 51% of the equity of the new firm, named Youngones Bangladesh. It exported its first consignment of padded and non-padded jackets to Sweden in December 1980.

Till the end of 1982, there were only 47 garment manufacturing units. The breakthrough occurred in 1984-85, when the number of garment factories increased to 587. The number of RMG factories shot up to around 2,900 in 1999.

At present there are about 5000 garment industries in the country and 75 percent of them are in Dhaka. The rest are in Chittagong and Khulna. These Industries have employed fifty lacks of people and 85 percent of them are illiterate rural women. About 76 percent of our export earning comes from this sector.

The country's RMG sector, to a creditable level has relieved Bangladesh from over populous unemployment burden through providing the largest employment next to agriculture, transport, and trade and industry sector. This sector has uplifted the neglected section of the population, thus radically transforming the socio-economic condition of the country. Such empowerment

and employment raised awareness regarding children education, health safety, population control disaster management only so for. It is an epoch making event in the history of Bangladesh.

### 3.2 About Romo Fashion Today Ltd.

ROMO Fashion Today Ltd. a leading undergarment supplier of major European/American retailers can supply a wide variety of lingerie products to a high technical standard. The company export to USA and Europe since 2007. It can supply, competitively priced fashion undergarment merchandise offering a complete lingerie solution to meet its customer's needs. The experience of this company in manufacturing and logistics enables to provide a high-quality product and service for Men's, Ladies and Children's underwear. It is a 100% export oriented readymade garment industry. Its main products are Men's/Boys, Ladies/Girls undergarments. It is also producing Sleepwear, Knitted Tee, Kids and Baby dresses. Presently their manufacturing setup got the capacity of producing more than 32, 00,000 pcs of readymade garments per month. Total 32 numbers of sewing lines are allocated for lingerie's. Now they have total 1486 machines.

### 3.3 About Mongla EPZ

Mongla export processing zone is one of the eight EPZs under BEPZA which was established in 1998. It is located at the southern part of Bangladesh and adjacent to the mongla port, the second largest sea port of the country. One of the major reasons of establishing Mongla EPZ was the development of Bagerhat-Khulna region through poverty alleviation by creating massive employment opportunities in the industrial sector to reduce dependency only on fishing and agricultural sector. The vision of this EPZ is to become a significant contributor for economic development of Bangladesh and the mission is strengthen the economic base of Bangladesh through Industrialization, boost up export, promotion of investment and generation of employment in the export processing zone. Core strength of these EPZs are workers-management-owner synergy, collaborative teamwork, peaceful working environment, industry friendly atmosphere and congenial investment climate. The authority of Mongla EPZ ensured workers welfare by setting a milestone in women empowerment, ensures workplace safety plus compliance and welfare, assured medical service and childcare, wages and other benefits increased thrice last 10 years, 5-10% annual increment on basic, 50% tuition fee waiver for the worker's children, 24/7 BEPZA helpline facilities and successfully implement 'Bangladesh EPZ labor act-2019' for EPZs workers. Apart from other industries such as electronics & electrical foods and other related industries, textile chemical & other related industries, Mongla EPZ is also famous for readymade garments & other related industries.

## 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Industrial relations are an important factor in efforts to achieve company goals. Industrial relations itself involves several parties within the scope of the company's work, where labor is one of the parties involved. Manpower plays an important role in achieving company goals; therefore workers have the right to receive compensation for the performance given. But over time did not escape from labor problems, where workers often protest against the employer's place in providing unfair welfare and deviations committed by employers against workers who are not in accordance with the provisions of the applicable law in this country (Rachmawati, 2019).

Cheap labor is the most important factor for the survival of Bangladesh's manufactured garment sector. According to a November 2023 news report, Bangladesh's readymade garment industry is in trouble as thousands of workers take to the streets to demand higher wages. With minimum wage of \$75 per month, workers there are demanding now minimum wages of \$208. However, the industry has offered \$113 on a take-it-or-leave-it-basis. The total labor force of Bangladesh has increased to 73.69 million of which 48.25 million are male while 25.44 million are female, according to the findings of the 1st quarter of the Labor Force Survey 2023. The Bangladesh RMG industry, a leading global apparel sourcing hub, employs more than 4 million workers and contributes 10.35% to the GDP, with a 7% annual growth. In the backdrop of workers grappling with a static BDT 8,000 minimum wage established in 2018, a recent development by the government's wage board turned the workers' anticipation into discontent. As of November 7, 2023, the minimum wage for RMG workers was increased to BDT 12,500. While this adjustment represents a notable improvement, it remains shy of the workers' ambitious call for BDT 23,000. This development led to further protests by RMG workers as they had higher hopes from the government.

Recently, management-worker relations have deteriorated in Bangladesh's readymade garments sector, which has taken programs such as strikes or factory lockouts. Factors that affect industrial relations in the garment sector of Bangladesh are some caused by management and some by workers which can have both positive and negative effects on the organization and the country. Among the factors that generally affect industrial relations in Bangladesh and its readymade garments sector are financial satisfactions of the workers, social and psychological satisfaction of them, educational background of workers, production skills of workers, leadership style, participation opportunity of workers in decision making etc. There are positive factors on both sides of management and labor that are of their own making in creating good industrial relations. The factors that both parties can take to create a good industrial relationship to their satisfaction are shown in figure 1 below.

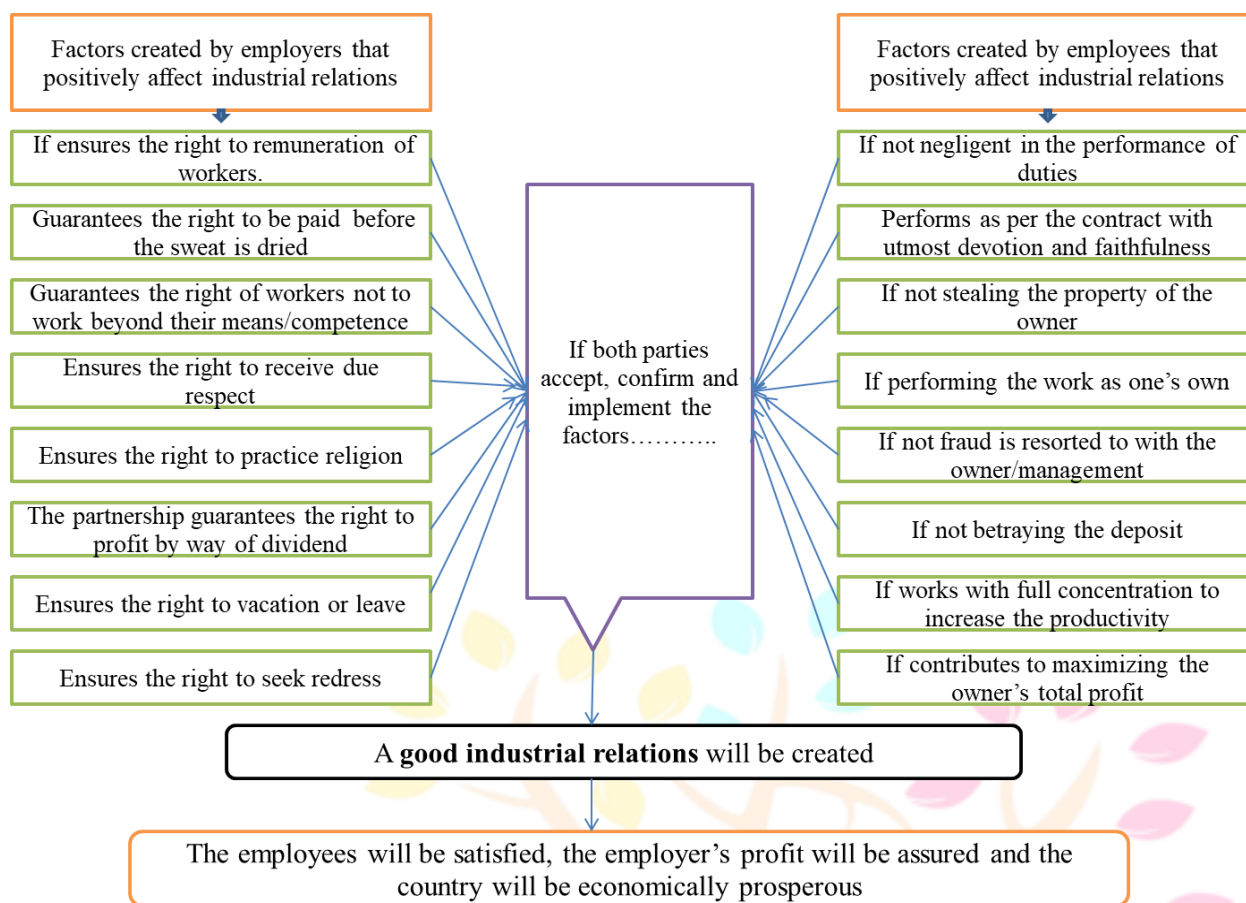


Figure-1: a conceptual framework of factors affecting good industrial relations.

The financial incentives that are associated with the job are one primary ingredient in the process of give and take, and compromise between employers and employees. Such incentives cover primary wages and salaries, various fringe benefits that enter the picture such as overtime pay, bonuses, insurance plans, stock-ownership plans and pension plans.

In order to create and maintain good industrial relations, the organization should create a favorable social and psychological climate for employees who can be implemented by ensuring participative management, grievance redress and two-way communication. Employee participation refers to visual management, communicating with employees through team briefings, their roles in groups such as quality circles and advisory boards (Frank, 1997).

Trade unions can play an important role in building good industrial relations. A trade union is a collective organization of workers that negotiates with employers to establish workers rights, and all the terms and conditions of work. What is impossible by individual bargaining with the employer is possible through collective leadership through trade unions. Workers feel that they have more bargaining power over employers if they bargain as a group, and employers also feel that in the long run it is more convenient to deal with a group or their representatives than to deal with each individual (Monappa, 2004). The power of trade unions should be promoted not only to improve workers wages or other benefits but also to make work more meaningful and ensure workers participation (Holley, Jennings, 1994).

There is no substitute for the skills of employers and employees to build sound industrial relations. Resolving grievances, negotiating decisions, avoiding conflicts and dealing with each other in the organizations, all require strategic skills on both sides which need to be acquired through training and development program. Experience is shared among employees through training and development programs that increase understanding among employees in line with history, integrate employees and increase their commitment which smooth's industrial relations.

When workers are reasonably educated, it becomes very easy for the management to convince them about the corporate goals and motivate the workers towards these goals. Both workers and employers, if properly educated, can easily understand each other's needs, which is important for building good industrial relations.

Employee satisfaction will affect relationships at workplace since it directly affects the sense of well being or belongingness of employees to the organization. As such the behavior pattern of the leaders affects labor relations in an organization. Employees are more likely to leave a job when they are led by a rude and authoritarian supervisor, and if they stay in the job, they report it as poor job quality, job dissatisfaction, and high stress (Dessler, 2005). So, Good leadership helps to ensure that the organization and their jobs continue to exist. People tend to respect persons from whom orders and directions are to be received.

The Bangladesh Labor Act, 2006, consolidates and amends the laws relating to employment of labor, relations between workers and employers, payment of wages and compensation for injuries to workers, and other matters related to labor. After one of the cruelest massacres in history, the collapse of Rana Plaza, including 6 garment factories, in savar on April 24, there was a storm of discussion at home and abroad about the status, safety, quality of life and trade union rights of Bangladeshi workers, especially the 4 million garment workers. A worker's workplace safety, job security, fair living, wages, accident compensation, right to trade

union etc. are all related to the labor laws of the country. Therefore, in order to establish good industrial relations, employers must ensure these rights of workers in the organization.

The wages of workers in the readymade garment industry were first fixed in 1985. It is the first wage board for garment industry. The minimum wage of workers declared by this board was 627 taka. The second wage board for garment workers was formed in 1994, after nine years instead of the prescribed five years. The minimum wage declared by the second wage board was tk. 930, which is 48% more than the wage declared by first wage board. The third board for garment workers was formed in 2006, after 12 years instead of the prescribed five years. The lowest wage declared by the third wage board was taka 1662.50, which is 78% higher than the wage declared by the second wage board. The fourth wage board was constituted in 2010; four years before the stipulated five years had elapsed.

The minimum wage declared by the fourth wage board was taka 3,000, which is more than 80% of the wage declared by third wage board. Like the fourth wage board, the fifth wage board was also constituted in 2013 after three years before five years had elapsed. The minimum wage declared by the fifth wage board was taka 5,300, which is 76% higher than the wage declared by the fourth wage board. The sixth wage board formed in December 2018 increased the previous wage by 51% and set it at taka 8,000. Recently, the government has set a minimum wage of taka 12,500 for garment workers after increasing the basic wages by 56.25%, effective from December 1, 2023. Despite the biggest wage increase for garment workers in the history of Bangladesh, it has not matched the increase in commodity prices, and labor unrest is still ongoing in Bangladesh, which has brought employer-worker relations to an extreme level of hostility.

Most of the workers in the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh are women whose large part comes from the village and a large part of the male workers also come from far-flung villages that are illiterate or less educated and are subjected to mental abuse by the authority in the institution. In most cases, there exist master-servant relations where the owner or management should consider the worker as a human being which negatively affects industrial relations in Bangladesh.

When the workers are not provided with good wages they engaged on the destruction of an industry rather than development. Reviewing past history of garment workers' wages and allowance will show that it has increased at a large rate every time but if it is compared to the wages of the workers of the other sector of Bangladesh and the inflation rate, then the growth will not be favorable to the garment workers at all. Thus, the absence of workers' wage structure in line with inflation negatively affects industrial relations.

Inadequate facilities and unfavorable work environment reduces the working rate of employees. It is the responsibility of the employer to create a favorable working condition for the workers. But after reviewing the past and present scenario of Bangladesh, it is seen that most garment owners are fail to create a favorable working environment. The garments worker's are deprived from getting facilities such as working hours, additional work wages and other benefits that negatively affect industrial relations.

As the job service is the only sources of income of the employees, that's why they always feels insecure and could not give the best of them in the job. The factors for which both employers and employees are responsible that create bad industrial relations are shown in figure 2 below.



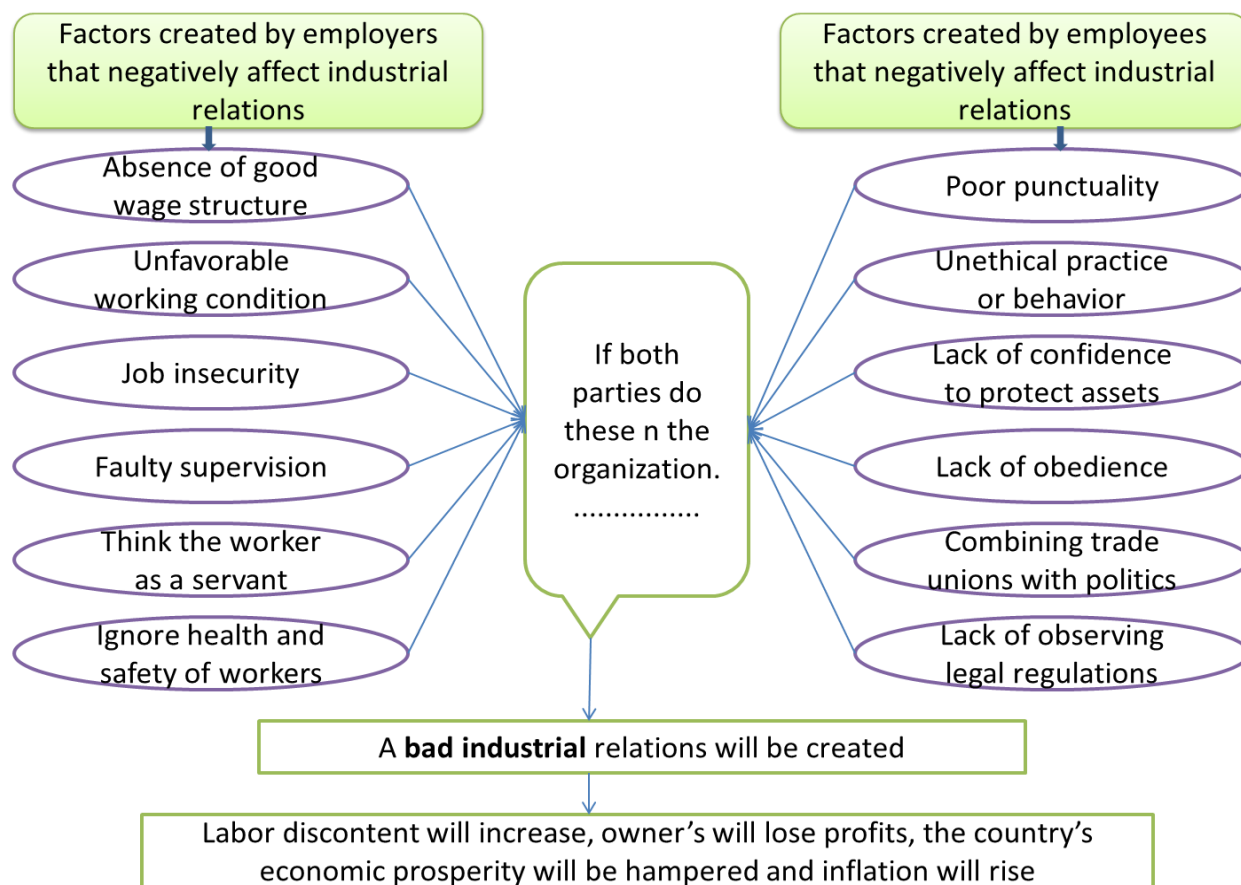


Figure-2: a conceptual framework of factors affecting bad industrial relations

The main problem in Bangladesh is that workers in the garment sector are not actually allowed to form trade unions. In this regard, there may be some kind of link between the owners, government, labor department and administration. Employers and governments are almost always reluctant to accept any legislation regarding trade union rights for workers. Workers are fired, intimidated, falsely used or arrested, and often forced to leave the area as soon as they are informed of unionization initiatives in factories, which are major obstacles to building good industrial relations.

Bangladesh's garment sector is plagued by the influence of political leaders, which hinders the development of good industrial relations. Political leaders interfere with the personal affair of worker or management only for their own interest. Industrial relations are affected as corruption and nepotism prevail along with political interference. In many cases the employer excludes the qualified person and entrusts the leadership of the organization to the close relative which leads to dissatisfaction of the workers and creates bad industrial relations.

Also some factors negatively affect the industrial relations in Bangladesh which are: most of the garment companies in Bangladesh do not follow labor laws or policies properly, do not follow disciplinary action procedures for worker's mistakes, do not properly supervise the work of workers which creates bad industrial relations.

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One important factor in achieving company goal is fostering healthy industrial relations between employees and companies. In reality, employees often protest because they feel their welfare is not appropriate, on the other hand the company also has difficulty realizing employee desire. To overcome these problems and establish good industrial relations, a mediator is needed to bridge the problems faced by both parties. Bangladesh is an emerging economy in the world, a small country in the Southeast Asia with high population density. The readymade garments sector of Bangladesh is the top ambassador as a country in the global market (Rakib and Adnan, 2015). The readymade garments export earning indisputably hold the most effective position in the countries total export after the 90s and one of the major contributor in GDP of Bangladesh (Faruque, 2014). But One after another building collapse, fire, trampling death of thousands of workers in the garment sector, the misrule of Bangladesh's owners, government and related circles, management failure and unfair culture of lawlessness are questioning the effectiveness of the state machinery at home and abroad. On the one hand, instability is increasing in the readymade garment sector due to various reasons, including political, on the other hand, worker's dissatisfaction with various demands, including the establishment of fair rights of workers, is also increasing, which is creating a negative impact on industrial relations. The study found out that the respondents were satisfied with most of the industrial relations processes apart from the dispute handling procedure, the role of government in enhancing industrial relations issues and training of industrial relations issues. From the findings of this study the following recommendations are very crucial; first the management should look at the issue of training, they should carry out an evaluation

of the training policy to assess its relevance, efficiency, and value additions towards improving industrial relations at the readymade garment sector in Bangladesh. Secondly the training and development should be conducted frequently to enhance industrial relations. BGMEA should work with the government and other international organizations to develop the skills and competencies of workers through investment in education and training (Hasan, 2013). Thirdly, the medical cover should be reviewed in accordance with the changes in the economy. Also the management should come up with other means of communication and employee participation such as team talk and use of suggestion box. The government should also fasten the dispute handling procedure. More women should also be elected as both management and union representatives to enhance gender balance. The role of trade union is very important for employees and managers in protecting their rights and obligations. In Bangladesh, the establishment of strong trade unions is the right place for managers to make decisions in the interest of employers and workers where those decisions concern the decent life of their employees.

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