Exploring the Current Sustainability Practices in the Bangladesh Garment Industry

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Introduction and background. The garment industry in Bangladesh is constituted of more than 4,600 garment factories and is one of the largest producers by volume in the world, contributing 6.5% of the global ready-to-made apparel market share (BGMEA, 2021). The current system of the Bangladesh garment industry is unsustainable, uncontrollable, and disposable, which is far behind sustainable production practices (Hossain, 2020). The collapse of Rana Plaza and the fire at the Tazreen factory in Bangladesh are two examples of negligence in following compliance with international standards to ensure workplace safety and workers' better working conditions. Since consumers' social and environmental awareness has increased (Shen, 2014), sustainability practices have become a pressing concern for the Bangladesh garment industry (Haque & Azmat, 2015). All these movements led European and American companies to respond promptly to upgrade the working conditions and workplace safety through regular auditing and monitoring of factories to ensure that the Bangladesh garment industry meets international standards of social and environmental responsibility (Curran & Nadvi, 2015).

Acquiring comprehensive knowledge about the existing sustainability practices in the Bangladesh garments industry is vital to identifying opportunities for improving sustainability practices and ensuring their long-term viability. According to Kafi and Romeo (2017), the future growth of the Bangladesh garment industry depends on socially responsible and sustainable practices. Previous studies have been conducted on sustainability practices in Bangladesh; naming a few include Parker's (2011) case study of the Bangladesh garments industry, Sarker et al.'s (2020) green business practices within the Bangladesh garment industry, and Kafi and Romeo's (2017) study to evaluate social and environmental practices by collecting data from the industry professionals who were working in 100% export-oriented garment factories. None of the previous studies comprehensively reviewed all dimensions of sustainable practices embraced by the Bangladesh garment industry, which led to the interest of this current study. This study aimed to explore current sustainability practices of the Bangladesh garment industry using Elkington's (1998) triple bottom line (TBL) theory by addressing the following three research questions: (a) how does the Bangladesh garments industry care about the environment?, (b) how do they support their people?, and (c) how do the industry impact on the economy of the country and what are they doing for sustaining their profit?

Method. Using a qualitative method, publicly accessible secondary data were used for this study. A content analysis approach which was widely used for studying and analyzing companies' sustainability and corporate social responsibility reports (Dobbs & Van Staden, 2016; Kamal & Deegan, 2013) was chosen to answer the research questions of this study. The data collection started with identifying the top 50 export-oriented Bangladesh garment factories and the top 20 green Bangladesh garment factories through keyword searching publicly available

online sources in 2021. Only the top garment factories have been purposefully considered for this study. In Bangladesh, the top garment factories have recently started publishing their corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability reports under the pressure of audits and compliance after the 2013 Rana Plaza disaster (Sinkovics et al., 2016); thus, randomly chosen garment factories would not give proper insights regarding the initiatives as only the top factories started, and the top factories may have more impacts of sustainability practices on people and the planet. Several factories were found to be present on both lists.

A total of 50 apparel companies' websites from the aforementioned lists were selected and browsed to find out their recent sustainability reports published during 2020-2021. The criterion for including the reports in the study was whether the company provided publicly accessible documents or websites with extractable text, they were written in English, and they indicated their sustainability-related initiatives. Finally, sustainability reports from 25 renowned Bangladesh garment factories were included in this study. Each company was treated as a case and each item of the report has been observed as a unit of analysis as per the research question.

A priori coding was used to establish categories based on the research questions and theory before the analysis was performed. Three sustainability dimensions from the TBL theory were used for the main categorization. A structured categorization matrix was used to develop codes for this study, where codes were chosen from the data as per the sustainability dimension to fit the categorization frame. Each item of the report was read carefully to extract the codes manually. Then, they were put under the appropriate categorization matrix.

Results and discussion. Most Bangladesh apparel companies have reported their sustainability-related initiatives without following any standard rules; among 25, only three companies reported their sustainability practices as per the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) standard (Calace, 2016). Unexpectedly, some of the top apparel companies did not publish their sustainability reports. The findings demonstrate that the published CSR and sustainability reports published during 2020-2021 are in alignment with the global community's expectations. This can be interpreted as the Bangladesh apparel companies now more care about their workers' safety, infrastructure, and waste management to maintain the company's clean brand image.

Regarding the Bangladesh garment industry's action on the people dimension of sustainability, 80% of the companies reported their initiatives to protect their workers' rights including worker safety, especially commenting on their efforts for employee health by indicating medical facilities. Furthermore, 70% of the companies referred to their workers' welfare initiatives such as facility enhancement and providing bonuses to their employees. In addition, impressive actions regarding equity and inclusion strategies were taken by a few companies, particularly employing senior and/or differently-abled citizens. Social welfare initiatives were also disclosed by 80% of the company's sustainability reports as part of their action for the people.

All 25 companies have explicitly communicated their activities for the environmental dimension of sustainability; 80% of the companies revealed their strategy to reduce energy or resource consumption, recycle, and reuse waste. Around 80% of the companies also disclosed their various green practice initiatives such as employing energy-efficient technologies and

processes as well as using sustainable materials and green chemicals. Although profit is an important dimension of sustainability, only seven companies included this economic activity in their CSR and sustainability reports by citing their annual revenue, growth, and impact on the local economy.

      Conclusion. This study explored current sustainability practices of the Bangladesh garment industry using the CSR and sustainability reports publicly available during 2020-2021. Despite the company's efforts to align with the global sustainability practice movement, the findings demonstrate that the economic dimension of sustainability was not transparently presented in the reports compared to the other two dimensions which are environmental, and social. This study offers important insights into the current sustainable practices in the Bangladesh garment industry. Industry professionals and scholars in academia can use the initial findings of this study to develop strategies for the holistic implementation of sustainability practices in the Bangladesh garment industry.

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