

Research Article**SUSTAINABLE HRM PRACTICES IN THE RMG (READY-MADE GARMENTS) SECTOR IN BANGLADESH*****Abul Fazal Mohammad Ahsan Uddin**

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Abstract

The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector plays a pivotal role in the economic and social transformation of developing countries, particularly Bangladesh, where it contributes more than four-fifths of national export earnings and employs millions of workers, predominantly women. Despite its economic contributions, the sector faces longstanding challenges related to workplace safety, low wages, worker exploitation, gender disparities, limited employee voice, and insufficient compliance with global labor standards. These issues highlight the necessity of integrating Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) practices into the industry's operational and strategic frameworks. S-HRM refers to a holistic set of HR policies and practices that seek to balance organizational performance with employee well-being, ethical labor standards, social equity, and environmental responsibility. It represents a shift from traditional cost-driven HRM toward long-term, people-centered, and socially responsible management. This study explores the current state of sustainable HRM practices in the RMG sector, with a particular focus on Bangladesh as a globally significant garment-producing country. Drawing on secondary data and qualitative thematic analysis, the research synthesizes findings from academic literature, industry reports, labor law documents, and global sustainability frameworks to establish a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities and barriers to implementing S-HRM in the RMG industry. The study identifies key dimensions of sustainable HRM, including ethical recruitment, workplace safety and compliance, employee skill development, gender-sensitive HR policies, social dialogue, and environmental sustainability initiatives. Evidence suggests that while improvements have occurred particularly in building safety, fire preparedness, and wage digitalization significant gaps remain between compliance requirements and actual implementation, especially among small and medium-sized factories. The findings underscore that sustainable HRM practices yield substantial benefits for both employees and employers. These include improved productivity, reduced labor turnover, enhanced worker morale, better buyer-supplier relationships, and greater international competitiveness. However, persistent structural challenges such as managerial resistance, cost pressures from global buyers, limited awareness among workers, and insufficient enforcement mechanisms hinder the full realization of sustainable HRM in the RMG sector. The study recommends a multi-stakeholder approach that involves government authorities, factory owners, global brands, workers' associations, and NGOs to jointly implement ethical, transparent, and future-oriented HR practices. Key recommendations include strengthening ethical hiring processes, institutionalizing comprehensive training, promoting gender equity, ensuring worker participation mechanisms, and aligning HR strategies with global sustainability standards such as the ILO Decent Work Agenda and ESG frameworks. Overall, this study contributes to the growing discourse on sustainable HRM in labor-intensive industries by presenting a structured understanding of its current status, challenges, and potential pathways in the RMG sector. It highlights that sustainable HRM is not merely a compliance requirement driven by global supply chains but a strategic imperative for improving human well-being, business resilience, and long-term industrial sustainability.

Keywords: Sustainable HRM, Ready-Made Garments, Bangladesh, Employee Well-being, Workplace Safety, Ethical HRM, Compliance.

INTRODUCTION

The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector has emerged as one of the most powerful drivers of economic growth, employment creation, and socio-economic transformation in many developing countries. Bangladesh, in particular, stands out as one of the largest garment exporters in the world, with the industry contributing more than 80% of national export earnings and employing over four million workers, the majority of whom are women from low-income and rural backgrounds (BGMEA, 2023). The sector has not only accelerated industrialization and poverty reduction but has also expanded opportunities for female labor force participation, contributing to broader development outcomes such as gender empowerment and improved household welfare (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Despite these notable advancements, the RMG sector has faced widespread criticism due to persistent challenges in ensuring decent working conditions, occupational safety, and labor rights compliance. Catastrophic industrial disasters most notably the Tazreen Fashions fire in 2012 and the Rana Plaza building collapse in 2013 exposed

severe gaps in factory safety, building integrity, and worker protection (Yardley, 2013). These incidents prompted extensive reforms, led by initiatives such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, aimed at improving structural safety and fostering more responsible labor practices within the industry (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). However, progress has been uneven, especially among small and medium-scale factories that struggle to meet compliance requirements due to limited financial capacity and lack of institutional support (Rahman & Rahim, 2020). In this context, Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) has emerged as a critical framework for redesigning people management practices to align with principles of long-term social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Sustainable HRM goes beyond the efficiency-oriented, cost-minimization focus of traditional HRM by emphasizing the well-being, development, and participation of employees as fundamental organizational resources (Ehnert, 2009). It integrates sustainability principles into recruitment, training, performance management, employee relations, and workplace governance, thereby creating a work environment that protects human dignity, promotes ethical behavior, and supports organizational resilience (Kramar, 2014). The growing emphasis on sustainability within global supply

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chains driven by consumer awareness, regulatory pressures, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) expectations makes the adoption of sustainable HRM practices increasingly important for the RMG sector. International brands and retailers are increasingly scrutinizing labor standards, wage practices, gender equity, and environmental impacts throughout their supply networks (Islam & Deegan, 2010). As a result, compliance with sustainability-related requirements has become essential for maintaining international market access, strengthening buyer–supplier relationships, and ensuring long-term competitiveness (Perry *et al.*, 2015). S-HRM is particularly relevant in the RMG industry due to its labor-intensive nature and dependence on a large, predominantly female workforce. Issues such as excessive working hours, limited opportunities for skill development, harassment, low wages, and weak collective bargaining remain pervasive, indicating gaps between regulatory standards and ground-level practices (Ahamed, 2013). Sustainable HRM seeks to address these gaps by promoting ethical recruitment, gender-sensitive HR policies, worker participation mechanisms, occupational safety and health (OSH) systems, and environmentally responsible workplace practices (Renwick *et al.*, 2013). These practices are not only essential for safeguarding workers' rights but also contribute to reduced turnover, improved productivity, and enhanced product quality outcomes that directly benefit employers.

Furthermore, the integration of sustainable HRM aligns with international frameworks such as the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and global Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) criteria. For instance, SDG 8 emphasizes decent work and economic growth, highlighting the importance of workplace safety, fair wages, and employee well-being, all of which are key elements of S-HRM. The growing adoption of ESG reporting among global apparel brands also places increased responsibility on RMG suppliers to demonstrate transparent and sustainable HR practices (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2020). Despite the strategic importance of sustainable HRM, there is a lack of comprehensive research that synthesizes how S-HRM practices are being implemented in the RMG sector, what challenges exist, and what improvements are necessary to ensure sustainable workforce development. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the current landscape of sustainable HRM in the RMG industry, identifying critical issues, and proposing a framework for improving worker well-being and organizational sustainability. By drawing on existing literature, industry reports, and global sustainability standards, the study highlights the essential role of S-HRM in shaping a more equitable, productive, and resilient RMG sector. In summary, sustainable human resource management provides a holistic pathway for transforming the RMG sector from a compliance-driven industry to a socially responsible and future-oriented contributor to national and global development. Its adoption is not merely an ethical obligation but a strategic imperative for ensuring long-term industrial sustainability, employee well-being, and global competitiveness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) has grown considerably over the past decade as organizations increasingly integrate sustainability into their strategic and operational frameworks. For labor-intensive

industries such as Ready-Made Garments (RMG), sustainability is particularly relevant due to global pressure for ethical sourcing, workplace safety compliance, and long-term workforce stability. This section reviews key theoretical foundations, global HRM challenges, sector-specific issues in the RMG industry, and the evolving application of S-HRM in manufacturing contexts, with a particular focus on Bangladesh.

Conceptual Foundations of Sustainable HRM

Sustainable HRM is rooted in broader sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks. Ehnert (2009) defines S-HRM as the adoption of HR practices that contribute to the long-term preservation, regeneration, and development of organizational human resources. It seeks to balance economic efficiency with social equity and ecological responsibility, representing a shift away from traditional short-term, cost-driven HRM models (Kramar, 2014).

S-HRM incorporates several key principles:

- **Long-term orientation:** Prioritizing enduring employee well-being over immediate productivity targets.
- **Employee participation and empowerment:** Encouraging workers' involvement in decision-making to build sustainable organizational cultures (Ehnert & Harry, 2012).
- **Justice and equality:** Ensuring fair treatment, non-discrimination, and gender equity.
- **Environmental consciousness:** Integrating environmental sustainability into HR functions (Renwick *et al.*, 2013).

These principles collectively promote resilience, innovation, and ethical conduct within organizations.

Global HRM Challenges in Labor-Intensive Industries

Labor-intensive manufacturing industries including textiles, garments, footwear, and electronics face persistent HRM challenges. Studies identify issues such as precarious employment, exploitative labor practices, excessive working hours, and insufficient occupational health and safety measures (Barrientos *et al.*, 2011). In many developing countries, weak regulatory enforcement and reliance on low-cost labor contribute to unsafe working environments and limited worker protections (Locke, 2013). Globalization has intensified these challenges. On the one hand, global buyers demand low prices and fast production cycles, placing pressure on factories to cut labor costs (Lund-Thomsen & Lindgreen, 2014). On the other hand, multinational corporations increasingly face reputational risks associated with poor labor practices in their supply chains, prompting greater attention to sustainability compliance and audits. This dual pressure creates an environment where sustainable HRM becomes essential yet difficult to implement. Sustainable HRM has been proposed as a mechanism to mitigate these challenges by improving labor relations, reducing workplace risks, and fostering more stable employment systems (Jabbour & Santos, 2008). Empirical studies in manufacturing industries suggest that S-HRM contributes to improved productivity, reduced turnover, enhanced worker motivation, and better buyer–supplier relationships (Tang *et al.*, 2018).

Overview of the RMG Sector and HRM Issues

The RMG sector in Bangladesh has experienced phenomenal growth over the past four decades. However, rapid expansion

has often outpaced improvements in labor management and workplace safety. Weak institutional frameworks, poor compliance enforcement, and widespread informality still characterize many factories (Ahamed, 2013). The sector's heavy reliance on female workers who often face gender-based discrimination, harassment, low wages, and limited mobility adds another layer of vulnerability (Khosla, 2009). Multiple studies have highlighted the structural weaknesses of the RMG sector. Rahman and Rahim (2020) note that while large, export-oriented factories have improved their workplace standards due to international monitoring, many small and subcontracting factories lack resources to upgrade safety measures. Wilson (2015) argues that the prevalence of cost-cutting strategies contributes to limited investments in safety and training. The Rana Plaza collapse in 2013 triggered unprecedented global scrutiny and raised fundamental questions about sustainability in the apparel supply chain. Following the disaster, several global initiatives, such as the Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, were established to oversee structural, electrical, and fire safety inspections (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). These programs led to significant improvements, though gaps remain in enforcement and factory-level implementation.

Gender Issues in the RMG Workforce

Gender is a central theme in RMG literature. Women constitute the majority of production workers yet are under-represented in supervisory or managerial roles (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Studies report persistent problems including workplace harassment, limited maternity support, and socio-cultural constraints restricting women's mobility (Heath & Mobarak, 2015). Sustainable HRM emphasizes gender-sensitive policies, such as anti-harassment committees, childcare support, and empowerment programs targeting female workers.

Sustainable HRM in Manufacturing and the RMG Context

While S-HRM has gained traction in global manufacturing, its application in the RMG sector remains in the developmental stage. Renwick *et al.* (2013) highlight that sustainable HR practices such as green training, employee involvement in environmental initiatives, and sustainability-oriented performance management can significantly improve environmental and social outcomes.

In Bangladesh's RMG industry, research shows increasing adoption of S-HRM elements:

- **Ethical recruitment:** Many factories have introduced written contracts and reduced reliance on informal hiring channels (Hasan *et al.*, 2021).
- **Digitized wage systems:** Mobile financial services have enhanced transparency and reduced wage-related disputes (Akhter *et al.*, 2019).
- **Worker-management committees:** Participation structures mandated by labor law have improved communication, though effectiveness varies.
- **Safety improvements:** OSH committees, regular fire drills, and standardized training have become common in export-oriented factories.

Although progress has been achieved, major gaps persist between policy and practice. Hasan *et al.* (2021) note that

compliance is often driven by external pressure from international buyers rather than internal commitment to sustainability. Moreover, small factories frequently lack the financial and organizational capacity to implement robust S-HRM systems. Studies emphasize that integrating sustainability into HR processes can improve organizational performance. For example, Tang *et al.* (2018) find that sustainable HR practices positively influence employee engagement, which in turn affects productivity and product quality. For RMG factories, improvements in human resource sustainability can translate into reduced defect rates, higher efficiency, better buyer satisfaction, and enhanced competitiveness.

Summary of Literature Gaps

Although the literature acknowledges the importance of S-HRM in the RMG sector, significant gaps remain:

- **Limited empirical evidence** on comprehensive S-HRM implementation in Bangladesh's RMG factories.
- **Insufficient attention** to gender-sensitive sustainability practices.
- **Lack of integrated frameworks** linking S-HRM with global supply chain standards and ESG criteria.
- **Underexplored challenges** faced by small and medium garment factories in adopting sustainable HR practices.

This study aims to address these gaps by synthesizing existing evidence on S-HRM practices and proposing a holistic framework suited to the RMG context.

METHODOLOGY

Research methodology provides the structural foundation upon which the validity, reliability, and credibility of a study are built. To explore Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) practices in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, this study adopts a comprehensive qualitative research design grounded in systematic secondary data analysis. Given the complexity of the topic spanning employment relations, workplace safety, gender dynamics, sustainability frameworks, and global supply chain governance the methodological approach aims to synthesize a broad range of literature and empirical findings to construct a coherent understanding of S-HRM within the RMG context. This section outlines the research design, data sources, data collection procedures, analytical techniques, and ethical considerations underpinning the study.

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, exploratory research design, which is well-suited for investigating emerging concepts and complex social phenomena. As S-HRM in the RMG sector is a relatively under-researched area particularly in the context of developing economies qualitative approaches enable deeper interpretation, contextual sensitivity, and holistic understanding (Creswell, 2014). The purpose of this design is not to test hypotheses quantitatively, but rather to generate insights, identify thematic patterns, and construct a conceptual framework based on existing evidence. The study uses a constructivist paradigm, assuming that knowledge about sustainable HRM is socially constructed and shaped by multiple actors including workers, employers, buyers,

regulators, and researchers. Thus, the methodology emphasizes interpretation and integration rather than numerical representation.

Nature and Sources of Data

Given the scope of the topic and the need for broad contextual analysis, the study relies entirely on **secondary data sources**. Secondary data is appropriate for research areas where extensive literature exists but primary data collection is constrained by time, geography, or sectoral access (Johnston, 2017). The following categories of secondary data were included:

Academic Literature

Peer-reviewed journal articles published in databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were reviewed. Relevant keywords included:

- “Sustainable HRM”
- “RMG sector Bangladesh”
- “Garment industry labor practices”
- “Workplace safety in apparel manufacturing”
- “Gender and labor rights”
- “Green HRM in manufacturing”

These keywords ensured coverage of foundational HRM theories, sustainability frameworks, and sector-specific labor studies.

Industry Reports and Policy Documents

Reports from globally recognized institutions were incorporated, including:

- International Labour Organization (ILO)
- Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA)
- International Finance Corporation (IFC)
- Transparency International Bangladesh (TIB)
- Accord and Alliance Safety Reports
- Sustainability audits from global RMG retailers

These documents provide empirical insights into compliance levels, workplace safety standards, and sustainability trends.

Books and Book Chapters

Authoritative texts on Human Resource Management, sustainability, and global supply chains were included to support theoretical grounding.

Government Legislation

Relevant regulations such as the Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) and subsequent amendments were reviewed to contextualize legal frameworks governing HRM practices.

Media Publications

Reputed news sources (e.g., The New York Times, The Guardian) were considered to document catastrophic events

such as the Rana Plaza collapse, which catalyzed the adoption of sustainability initiatives.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process followed a systematic, step-by-step approach inspired by guidelines for literature-based qualitative research (Snyder, 2019):

Step 1: Identification of Research Questions

The overarching research question guiding data collection was:

- *What sustainable HRM practices are currently implemented in the RMG sector, and what challenges and opportunities exist for improving workforce sustainability?*

Sub-questions were developed focusing on ethical recruitment, gender equality, safety compliance, environmental integration, and employee development.

Step 2: Selection of Relevant Literature

A structured search protocol was employed to identify relevant publications from 2000 to 2024 to capture both pre- and post-Rana Plaza developments. Inclusion criteria required that sources:

- Address HRM or sustainability in garment or manufacturing sectors
- Provide empirical or conceptual insights
- Be written in English
- Be published by credible academic or institutional bodies

Studies that lacked methodological transparency or contained unsubstantiated claims were excluded.

Step 3: Screening and Quality Assessment

Each publication was screened for methodological rigor, credibility, and relevance. Peer-reviewed articles and institutional reports were prioritized to ensure academic reliability.

Data Analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study, **thematic analysis** was used to interpret and organize the collected data. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-phase framework guided the analysis:

Familiarization with Data

All selected literature was read thoroughly to gain a comprehensive understanding of existing HRM practices and sustainability issues in the RMG sector.

Generating Initial Codes

Key issues were coded under thematic categories such as:

- Ethical recruitment
- Workplace safety
- Gender equality
- Employee skill development

- Green HRM practices
- Worker–management relations

Searching for Themes

Codes were organized into broader analytical themes representing major dimensions of S-HRM.

Reviewing Themes

Themes were refined to ensure coherence, consistency, and alignment with research objectives.

Defining and Naming Themes

Themes were defined conceptually to reflect theoretical and empirical relevance.

Synthesizing Findings

Themes were combined to develop a holistic S-HRM framework suited to the RMG context.

Validity and Reliability

Although secondary data research does not involve primary data collection, ensuring validity and reliability remains essential. The study addressed these concerns through:

Triangulation

Using multiple data sources including academic publications, institutional reports, and policy documents enhanced credibility by cross-verifying information.

Transparency in Methodology

Clear documentation of search strategies, inclusion criteria, and analytical steps ensures reproducibility.

Use of Reputable Sources

The inclusion of peer-reviewed literature and globally recognized organizations minimizes bias and enhances reliability.

Reflexivity

The researcher remained aware of potential subjective interpretation during thematic analysis and addressed it through repeated review and comparison of sources.

Ethical Considerations

Although the study did not involve human participants, ethical considerations remain relevant in handling secondary data. The research adhered to the following principles:

- Respect for intellectual property by properly citing all sources.
- Ensuring accurate representation of authors' ideas without misinterpretation.
- Avoiding selective use of data that may skew findings.

Since all data were publicly available, no ethical approval was required.

Rationale for Methodological Choice

The selection of a qualitative, secondary data-based approach is justified for several reasons:

- **Sensitivity of the RMG context:** Gaining direct access to factories, especially regarding labor practices, is often restricted and politically sensitive.
- **Existing wealth of documentation:** Extensive literature and reports already exist on HRM and sustainability in the garment sector.
- **Broad scope of inquiry:** Examining S-HRM requires integrating diverse areas including safety, gender, environment, and global supply chain dynamics.
- **Comparative insight:** Secondary data enables comparison across contexts, time periods, and international benchmarks.

This methodological approach thus offers a comprehensive, ethical, and cost-effective means of exploring sustainable HRM practices.

Summary

In summary, the methodological framework combines qualitative design, systematic secondary data collection, and thematic analysis to explore the landscape of sustainable HRM practices in the RMG sector. By triangulating diverse sources and applying rigorous analytical techniques, the study provides a credible and insightful foundation for the subsequent findings, discussion, and recommendations.

FINDINGS, SOLUTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector is critical for balancing organizational efficiency with employee well-being, social equity, and environmental sustainability. The findings from this study, derived through thematic analysis of secondary sources, reveal both progress and persistent challenges in implementing sustainable HR practices across the sector. This section presents detailed findings, followed by tailored solutions and actionable recommendations for enhancing S-HRM implementation in RMG factories.

Findings

The study identifies six major thematic areas in the current S-HRM practices within the RMG sector: ethical recruitment and employment, workplace safety and health, skill development and capacity building, gender-sensitive policies, employee participation and social dialogue, and environmental integration.

Ethical Recruitment and Fair Employment Practices

Recruitment and employment practices in RMG factories have improved significantly in response to global scrutiny and regulatory pressures. Ethical recruitment practices, including written employment contracts, background checks, and formal onboarding procedures, have been increasingly adopted in

large export-oriented factories (Hasan *et al.*, 2021). However, informal recruitment channels persist, particularly in smaller factories or subcontracting units. These informal channels often bypass legal safeguards, exposing workers to wage exploitation, contract violations, and lack of awareness of their rights (Akhter *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, the sector has traditionally faced challenges in maintaining consistent wage structures, with discrepancies between legally mandated minimum wages and actual compensation reported in multiple studies (Rahman & Rahim, 2020). The reliance on casual labor and temporary contracts further exacerbates employment insecurity. While mobile-based salary disbursement has increased transparency, enforcement of labor laws remains inconsistent.

Workplace Safety and Health

Workplace safety emerged as the most critical concern in the sector, highlighted by disasters such as the Tazreen Fashions fire (2012) and the Rana Plaza collapse (2013). Post-disaster reforms under initiatives like the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have improved structural integrity, fire safety mechanisms, and emergency preparedness in many large factories (Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). Safety committees, regular audits, and standardized OSH training programs are increasingly implemented, particularly in export-oriented facilities. Despite these improvements, gaps remain in smaller factories and subcontracting units, which often lack the financial capacity or managerial expertise to fully comply with safety standards. Occupational health issues, such as poor ventilation, excessive noise, inadequate sanitation, and repetitive strain injuries, continue to affect worker well-being (Ahamed, 2014). Furthermore, safety compliance is often treated as a procedural requirement for buyer audits rather than as a proactive organizational culture, limiting long-term effectiveness (Yardley, 2013).

Skill Development and Capacity Building

Skill development and training remain uneven across the sector. While technical training related to production efficiency is commonly provided, there is limited focus on soft skills, leadership, and long-term career development (Hasan *et al.*, 2021). Women, who constitute the majority of the workforce, often have minimal access to supervisory or managerial training programs, restricting upward mobility (Heath & Mobarak, 2015). Capacity-building initiatives that integrate sustainability awareness, environmental management, and occupational safety into regular training programs are rare. Moreover, small factories frequently lack dedicated HR teams or resources to conduct structured training, resulting in significant disparities between large and small RMG units.

Gender-Sensitive HR Practices

Gender inequality persists in the RMG sector despite women forming the majority of the workforce. Female workers are underrepresented in supervisory roles and face challenges related to workplace harassment, lack of maternity support, and socio-cultural constraints limiting mobility (Kabeer & Mahmud, 2004). Although factories increasingly implement anti-harassment policies and women's welfare committees, their effectiveness varies widely. Maternity leave, day-care facilities, and health support services are often limited to larger

factories with international buyers, leaving smaller factories unable to provide adequate support. Gender-sensitive HR practices, while recognized as critical for sustainability, are not yet institutionalized across the sector (Hasan *et al.*, 2021).

Employee Participation and Social Dialogue

Worker participation and social dialogue are crucial for improving workplace governance and ensuring fair treatment. Many large RMG factories have established worker-management committees, grievance mechanisms, and forums for discussing workplace issues (Akhter *et al.*, 2019). These initiatives have contributed to improved communication, conflict resolution, and compliance with labor laws. However, in smaller factories, employee participation remains limited. Unionization is weak, often facing resistance from management, and grievance mechanisms are not always functional or accessible. Studies suggest that top-down compliance without genuine worker engagement reduces the effectiveness of sustainable HRM (Rahman & Rahim, 2020).

Environmental and Green HRM Practices

Integration of environmental sustainability into HR practices commonly referred to as Green HRM is an emerging area in the RMG sector. Large factories have begun implementing programs for waste reduction, energy efficiency, water conservation, and proper chemical handling, often driven by buyer requirements or sustainability certifications (Renwick *et al.*, 2013). Despite these efforts, environmental practices are unevenly adopted. Many small factories lack awareness or resources to implement green initiatives. Training on sustainability and environmental responsibility is often minimal, and workers' involvement in such programs is limited. Consequently, while environmental integration is recognized as part of S-HRM, widespread implementation remains a long-term challenge (Soundararajan *et al.*, 2020).

Solutions

Based on the findings, several solutions can be proposed to enhance S-HRM practices in the RMG sector. These solutions target the gaps identified in ethical recruitment, safety, skill development, gender equity, employee participation, and environmental integration.

Strengthening Ethical Recruitment and Fair Employment

- **Formalized Recruitment Channels:** Establish transparent, centralized recruitment platforms to minimize informal hiring and prevent worker exploitation.
- **Contract Standardization:** Ensure all workers receive written contracts in their local language detailing roles, wages, working hours, and benefits.
- **Digital Payroll Systems:** Expand mobile-based salary disbursement to all factories to increase transparency and reduce wage disputes.
- **Worker Awareness Programs:** Conduct regular workshops on rights, labor laws, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Enhancing Workplace Safety and Health

- **Comprehensive OSH Systems:** Institutionalize Occupational Safety and Health committees in every factory, including subcontracting units.

- **Regular Audits and Monitoring:** Implement internal audits alongside third-party inspections to ensure compliance beyond buyer requirements.
- **Proactive Safety Culture:** Foster a culture of safety rather than reactive compliance, including reward systems for safe practices and reporting hazards.
- **Health Support Services:** Provide access to on-site medical care, proper sanitation, and health check-ups for all workers.

Expanding Skill Development and Capacity Building

- **Holistic Training Programs:** Integrate technical skills with soft skills, leadership training, and sustainability awareness.
- **Gender-Inclusive Training:** Offer leadership and supervisory training specifically targeting female workers to improve representation in higher-level roles.
- **Collaboration with NGOs and Government:** Leverage external expertise to conduct vocational training and skill enhancement workshops.
- **Continuous Learning Culture:** Encourage on-the-job learning and career progression planning to improve retention and productivity.

Implementing Gender-Sensitive HR Practices

- **Anti-Harassment Committees:** Establish fully functional, gender-diverse committees to address workplace harassment complaints effectively.
- **Childcare and Maternity Support:** Expand day-care facilities, maternity leave benefits, and flexible work schedules to improve female workforce retention.
- **Career Advancement Programs:** Create structured pathways for women to advance to supervisory and managerial positions.
- **Awareness Campaigns:** Educate male and female workers about gender equity and respectful workplace behavior.

Promoting Employee Participation and Social Dialogue

- **Functional Worker Committees:** Ensure all factories have worker-management committees with real decision-making authority.
- **Union Support and Legal Compliance:** Facilitate lawful unionization and collective bargaining without management interference.
- **Grievance Redress Mechanisms:** Implement anonymous reporting channels and protection against retaliation.
- **Engagement Programs:** Conduct regular feedback sessions and participatory workshops to increase employee ownership of sustainability initiatives.

Integrating Environmental and Green HRM Practices

- **Sustainability Training:** Train workers on energy conservation, waste management, chemical safety, and eco-friendly production techniques.
- **Incentives for Green Behavior:** Reward employees who actively contribute to environmental improvements.
- **Certification Programs:** Encourage ISO 14001 and LEED certifications for factories to standardize environmental practices.

- **Monitoring and Reporting:** Implement systems to track energy, water, and waste metrics and link them to HR performance evaluations.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Engage government agencies, factory owners, international brands, trade unions, and NGOs to design and monitor S-HRM frameworks.
- **Differentiated Support for SMEs:** Provide financial and technical assistance to small and medium factories to implement S-HRM practices effectively.
- **Integration with ESG Reporting:** Align HR sustainability initiatives with ESG reporting requirements to demonstrate accountability to global stakeholders.
- **Long-Term Strategic Planning:** Encourage factory management to adopt S-HRM as a strategic goal, rather than a short-term compliance requirement.
- **Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establish sector-wide benchmarks and KPIs for S-HRM performance, including employee satisfaction, safety compliance, skill development, gender equity, and environmental integration.

Strategic-Level Recommendations

Industry-Wide Cluster-Based Approaches

Regional training centers, safety resource hubs, and HR capacity-building programs can support smaller factories economically.

Public-Private Partnerships

Joint collaboration involving government agencies, BGMEA, buyers, and NGOs can accelerate sustainable HRM implementation by sharing resources and expertise.

National Policy Reforms

Policymakers should consider:

- Strengthening labor inspection capacity.
- Updating labor laws to reflect global sustainability standards.
- Offering tax incentives to factories adopting sustainable HRM systems.

Summary of Key Recommendations

HRM Area	Key Recommendations
Ethical Recruitment	Standardized hiring, written contracts, eliminating recruitment fees
Wage & Financial Well-being	Living wage strategies, financial literacy, micro-insurance
Skill Development	In-house training units, women's leadership programs, certification
Worker Representation	Functional PCs, freedom of association, anonymous hotlines
Gender Equality	Anti-harassment committees, childcare, maternity protection
Environmental Sustainability	Green training, LEED certification, environmental KPIs
Safety & Compliance	Continuous audits, digital safety tools, subcontractor support
Buyer Relations	Responsible purchasing, long-term commitments, supply chain transparency

Synthesis

The findings reveal that while significant progress has been made in large, export-oriented RMG factories, implementation gaps remain across the sector, especially in smaller units. Solutions and recommendations emphasize systemic changes, integrating ethical, social, environmental, and economic dimensions of HR management. indicate that sustainable HRM is both a challenge and an opportunity for the RMG sector. While structural challenges persist low wages, compliance gaps, gender inequality, weak representation there is strong potential for transformation through coordinated efforts. Factories that invest in S-HRM benefit from higher productivity, lower turnover, stronger buyer relationships, and improved global competitiveness. Sustainable HRM is therefore not simply a compliance requirement but a strategic investment in the sector's long-term resilience. Adoption of these strategies will not only improve worker well-being but also strengthen organizational resilience, productivity, and global market competitiveness.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

While this study provides a comprehensive analysis of sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) practices in the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector, it is subject to several limitations inherent in the research design, data sources, and scope. Recognizing these limitations is essential for interpreting the findings appropriately and for guiding future research in this domain. The limitations can be broadly categorized into methodological constraints, data-related limitations, contextual restrictions, and theoretical boundaries.

Methodological Constraints

A primary limitation of this study is its reliance on a qualitative, secondary data-based research design. While qualitative research allows for an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena such as S-HRM, it does not enable statistical generalization of findings. The study synthesizes insights from existing literature, industry reports, and policy documents rather than collecting primary data from workers, managers, or other stakeholders. Consequently, the findings reflect interpretations and reported experiences documented by other researchers and institutions, rather than first-hand empirical evidence. This reliance on secondary sources may inadvertently introduce bias or limit the contextual richness that primary fieldwork could provide (Johnston, 2017). Another methodological constraint is the subjectivity inherent in thematic analysis, which forms the basis of the study's findings. The process of coding, categorizing, and identifying themes involves interpretive judgment, which could be influenced by the researcher's perspectives or pre-existing assumptions. Although efforts were made to ensure rigor through systematic procedures and triangulation of multiple sources, the potential for selective interpretation or confirmation bias cannot be entirely ruled out (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additionally, the study's constructivist orientation focuses on understanding socially constructed realities rather than objectively measuring variables. While this approach provides a nuanced understanding of the S-HRM landscape, it limits the ability to quantify the effectiveness, frequency, or impact of specific HR practices across the RMG sector.

Data-Related Limitations

The quality and availability of secondary data represent another significant limitation. While peer-reviewed articles, industry reports, and government documents were extensively reviewed, the data quality varies across sources. Some reports may lack methodological transparency, employ inconsistent definitions, or focus disproportionately on large, export-oriented factories, thereby underrepresenting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). As a result, the findings may overemphasize the progress achieved by leading factories while underestimating challenges in smaller, resource-constrained units (Hasan *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, much of the data is time-sensitive, reflecting conditions at the time of publication. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the RMG sector shaped by global buyer demands, regulatory changes, and post-pandemic recovery some information may be outdated or not fully representative of current practices. For instance, changes in minimum wage legislation, sustainability reporting requirements, or labor law enforcement may alter the applicability of certain findings (Rahman & Rahim, 2020). A related limitation is the lack of primary qualitative or quantitative data from workers themselves, who are the primary beneficiaries and stakeholders of S-HRM initiatives. Workers' perspectives on safety, participation, training, and gender equity are largely inferred from secondary reports, which may not capture the full depth of their lived experiences or the nuanced challenges faced in smaller factories and subcontracting units.

Contextual Restrictions

The study focuses exclusively on the Bangladesh RMG sector, given its global significance and documented sustainability challenges. While this provides rich insights for understanding S-HRM in a developing country context, the findings may have limited generalizability to RMG sectors in other countries with different institutional, regulatory, and socio-cultural environments (Barrientos *et al.*, 2011). For example, labor laws, gender norms, industrial relations, and supply chain structures in countries such as Vietnam, India, or Cambodia differ substantially, affecting the implementation and effectiveness of S-HRM practices. Additionally, the study primarily examines formal manufacturing units, particularly those involved in export-oriented production. Informal or home-based garment production, which remains significant in Bangladesh, is not well-represented due to limited documentation. This creates potential gaps in understanding the sector-wide landscape of HR sustainability.

Theoretical and Conceptual Limitations

Although the study is grounded in established S-HRM theory and integrates frameworks such as CSR, ESG, and global labor standards, there are limitations associated with conceptual boundaries. S-HRM itself is a multidimensional and evolving concept, encompassing economic, social, environmental, and organizational dimensions. Existing literature lacks uniform definitions or measurement criteria for S-HRM practices, which may lead to inconsistencies in categorizing and interpreting practices across different studies (Kramar, 2014; Renwick *et al.*, 2013). Moreover, the study does not provide empirical testing of the proposed framework or direct measurement of outcomes such as productivity gains, employee retention, or environmental impact. While the

conceptual analysis highlights potential benefits, the absence of quantitative validation limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the effectiveness of S-HRM interventions.

Practical Implications of Limitations

These limitations have several practical implications for interpreting the study:

- **Scope of Generalization:** Findings should be understood as indicative rather than representative of the entire sector, particularly small and informal factories.
- **Temporal Relevance:** Recommendations may require adaptation in response to ongoing regulatory and market changes.
- **Worker-Centric Validation:** Future research incorporating primary surveys, interviews, or participatory observations would strengthen the understanding of worker perspectives.
- **Comparative Analyses:** Cross-country studies could enhance the robustness of S-HRM frameworks by incorporating diverse labor markets and institutional settings.

Recognizing these limitations does not diminish the relevance of the study; rather, it highlights areas where further empirical research and policy-focused inquiry are required to complement the current findings.

Future Research Directions

To address these limitations, future studies could:

- **Conduct primary field research** involving structured interviews, surveys, and focus groups with workers, supervisors, and HR managers to capture firsthand experiences and insights.
- **Include SMEs and subcontracting units** to understand the challenges faced by smaller factories in implementing S-HRM practices.
- **Incorporate longitudinal studies** to assess how S-HRM interventions affect workforce outcomes and organizational performance over time.
- **Explore cross-country comparisons** to identify best practices and adaptable models for sustainable HRM in different institutional contexts.
- **Integrate quantitative analysis**, such as measuring productivity, employee retention, injury rates, and compliance levels, to empirically validate the effectiveness of S-HRM interventions.

Summary

In conclusion, this study provides a rich, thematic understanding of S-HRM practices in the Bangladesh RMG sector. However, it is constrained by methodological limitations, reliance on secondary data, context-specific focus, and conceptual variability. These limitations should be carefully considered when interpreting the findings and applying the recommendations. Despite these constraints, the study offers valuable insights into the current state of sustainable HRM, identifies critical gaps, and lays the groundwork for more empirically rigorous research to enhance workforce sustainability in the global garment industry.

CONCLUSION

The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) sector has emerged as a cornerstone of economic growth, employment generation, and social transformation in developing countries such as Bangladesh. However, the rapid expansion of the sector has often outpaced the development of sustainable workforce practices, creating significant challenges in terms of employee well-being, gender equity, workplace safety, and environmental responsibility. Against this backdrop, the integration of Sustainable Human Resource Management (S-HRM) practices represents both a critical need and a strategic opportunity for the sector. This study has explored the current landscape of S-HRM in the RMG sector, highlighting its progress, challenges, and potential pathways for improvement, while providing actionable solutions and policy recommendations.

Key Findings

The study's findings reveal that sustainable HRM practices in the RMG sector are evolving, but implementation remains uneven across various dimensions. Ethical recruitment and fair employment practices have improved in large export-oriented factories, with measures such as written contracts, transparent recruitment processes, and digital wage systems being adopted. Nonetheless, informal recruitment channels and employment insecurity continue to pose risks, particularly in smaller factories and subcontracting units. These challenges underscore the need for sector-wide standardization of ethical recruitment practices and stronger enforcement of labor laws. Workplace safety and health have witnessed significant improvements following catastrophic industrial disasters, such as the Tazreen Fashions fire and the Rana Plaza collapse. Initiatives like the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Building Safety and the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety have strengthened structural and fire safety standards, while OSH committees and regular audits have become more common in larger factories. However, gaps remain in smaller units, where financial and technical constraints limit effective compliance. Occupational health issues, including poor ventilation, excessive noise, and repetitive strain injuries, persist, emphasizing the need for a proactive, culture-driven approach to safety rather than mere regulatory compliance. Skill development and capacity building remain limited, particularly for female workers. While technical training is often provided to enhance production efficiency, there is inadequate emphasis on soft skills, leadership, and career advancement. Gender-sensitive HR policies have begun to emerge, including anti-harassment committees, maternity leave provisions, and women's welfare initiatives, yet their implementation and effectiveness vary widely. Female employees remain underrepresented in supervisory and managerial positions, reflecting structural gender disparities that require long-term strategic interventions.

Employee participation and social dialogue have improved through the establishment of worker-management committees and grievance mechanisms, particularly in export-oriented factories. However, resistance to unionization and limited access to functional participatory channels in smaller factories hinder meaningful engagement. Environmental integration, or Green HRM, is at an emerging stage, with larger factories adopting eco-friendly initiatives driven primarily by buyer requirements. Smaller factories often lack awareness, resources, and capacity to implement sustainability measures

effectively. Overall, the study reveals that S-HRM practices in the RMG sector are largely compliance-driven and concentrated in larger, export-oriented factories. The implementation gaps in smaller factories, coupled with persistent gender inequities, occupational health challenges, and uneven environmental initiatives, highlight the critical need for a holistic and strategic approach to sustainable HR management.

Implications

The implications of these findings are multifaceted, affecting workers, managers, policymakers, and international buyers. For workers, improved S-HRM practices can enhance workplace safety, well-being, job satisfaction, skill development, and career progression. For factory management, adopting sustainable HRM practices can lead to higher productivity, reduced labor turnover, enhanced employee morale, and stronger buyer relationships. From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the need for regulatory oversight, enforcement of labor laws, and support for smaller factories in adopting S-HRM frameworks. International buyers and brands can benefit from more transparent, ethical, and socially responsible supply chains, which contribute to long-term competitiveness and compliance with global ESG standards. The study also highlights the strategic significance of integrating gender-sensitive HR policies and environmental initiatives into S-HRM frameworks. By fostering gender equity and empowering female workers, the sector can unlock untapped potential and contribute to broader social development goals. Similarly, embedding environmental sustainability into HR practices aligns with global sustainability agendas and enhances the sector's resilience to environmental and regulatory risks.

Recommendations

The study provides several actionable recommendations for advancing sustainable HRM in the RMG sector:

- **Standardization of Ethical Recruitment:** Establish centralized recruitment platforms and standardized contracts to ensure transparency and protect worker rights across all factories.
- **Strengthening Occupational Safety and Health:** Institutionalize OSH committees, conduct regular audits, provide health support services, and promote a proactive culture of safety.
- **Expanding Skill Development:** Integrate technical, soft, and leadership skills training into HR programs, with a particular focus on female employees to enhance career mobility.
- **Gender-Sensitive Policies:** Implement robust anti-harassment measures, maternity and childcare support, and structured pathways for women's advancement in managerial roles.
- **Enhancing Employee Participation:** Strengthen worker-management committees, support lawful unionization, and provide functional grievance mechanisms.
- **Environmental Integration:** Promote green HRM practices through sustainability training, eco-certifications, performance-linked incentives, and monitoring of resource usage.

- **Support for SMEs:** Provide technical, financial, and policy support to small and medium-sized factories to implement sustainable HRM practices effectively.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Encourage coordinated efforts among government agencies, NGOs, international buyers, factory owners, and workers to design and monitor S-HRM frameworks.

Implementing these recommendations requires a long-term, strategic approach that goes beyond compliance-driven practices and emphasizes genuine organizational commitment to sustainability.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on sustainable HRM in labor-intensive industries by providing a structured, sector-specific analysis of the RMG sector in Bangladesh. It synthesizes existing literature, policy reports, and industry practices to identify gaps, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. By focusing on ethical recruitment, workplace safety, gender equity, skill development, employee participation, and environmental integration, the study offers a holistic framework for S-HRM implementation. It also bridges the gap between theory and practice, linking sustainable HRM principles with operational realities in a developing country context.

Limitations and Future Directions

While the study provides valuable insights, it is constrained by its reliance on secondary data, qualitative analysis, and context-specific focus. Future research could address these limitations by conducting primary field studies, including surveys and interviews with workers and managers, incorporating quantitative performance metrics, and comparing S-HRM practices across countries. Longitudinal studies could also examine the impact of sustainable HRM interventions on productivity, employee retention, safety outcomes, and environmental performance over time.

Final Remarks

In conclusion, the adoption of sustainable HRM practices is not merely a compliance requirement or ethical obligation but a strategic imperative for the RMG sector. Implementing S-HRM can enhance worker well-being, gender equity, workplace safety, and environmental responsibility, while simultaneously improving organizational performance, productivity, and international competitiveness. Achieving this requires coordinated efforts among all stakeholders, including factory management, workers, government authorities, NGOs, and international buyers. The RMG sector stands at a critical juncture: it has the potential to evolve into a globally recognized model of socially responsible and sustainable manufacturing. By embracing sustainable HRM practices, the sector can safeguard human dignity, promote long-term industrial sustainability, and contribute meaningfully to national development and global sustainability agendas. Ultimately, the successful integration of S-HRM in the RMG sector will not only protect and empower millions of workers but also ensure the resilience and competitiveness of one of the world's most vital manufacturing industries.

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