

Creating a local managerial regime in global context: The case of the Bangladesh ready-made garment sector

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Abstract

This article analyses the strategic construction of a factory management regime as an instrument of local value extraction, set against an intensely competitive global value chain in the apparel sector. The article focuses on Bangladesh where, as elsewhere, work in ready-made garment factories is characterised by long hours, poor pay, hostility to freedom of association and the suppression of independent collective bargaining. This article presents a long-term study of the ways that managers who preside over such environments are identified, recruited and deployed. In the context of the global value chain in garments, this article shines a light on managerial regimes which squeeze labour and perpetuate inequality as part of extracting value at workplace level, in the context of a broader, internationally dispersed, industrial regime of exploitation.

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the decade since 24 April 2013, when the collapse of the Rana Plaza complex killed over a thousand Bangladeshi garment workers and injured more than twice that number, an international spotlight has been trained on the ready-made garment (RMG) sector in Bangladesh.

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The sheer scale of the tragic loss of life attracted intense media attention and led to the establishment of two multi-stakeholder initiatives, first the Bangladesh Accord on Fire and Safety—the Accord¹—and second, the Alliance² (see Bair et al., 2020; Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018). However, while Rana Plaza brought the sector to the forefront of public consciousness, its exploitative and unsafe working conditions and suppression of trade unionism were not new; these factors have long characterised the garment factories of Bangladesh (Rock, 2001, 2003). Thus, Reinecke and Donaghey (2023, p. 14) describe what happened at Rana Plaza as ‘a paradigmatic case of the failure of democratic governance’ in an apparel sector with an infamous record for its poor labour conditions and the neglect of employment rights worldwide (e.g., Anner, 2019, 2020a; Hammer & Plugor, 2019; Jenkins & Blyton, 2017; Mezzadri, 2017; Tartanoglu Bennett et al., 2021).

Today, in no small part directly because of Rana Plaza and the Accord, Bangladesh is one of the most heavily researched settings for global garment production. However, while local employers’ behaviours and owners’ political affiliations have been exposed to scrutiny (e.g., Bair et al., 2020) we know rather less about the line managers who preside over the concrete realities of daily factory life. This article seeks to address this gap.

Ethnographic-style unstructured and semi-structured interviews with managers, employers and their industry associations were conducted at three main intervals over a 10-year period, in 2010, 2011 and 2018–2019. A further period of fieldwork was completed in 2022, with some follow-up interviews in 2023, post-Covid. Interviews were complemented by close study of publicly-available data. The findings offer a distinctive lens on relations between labour and management in factory regimes that enable local employers to capture value from *their* position in an international supply chain that is predicated on value extraction by lead firms.

The article makes two main contributions. Empirically, the findings anatomise local managerial regimes and expose *how* they perpetuate unequal outcomes for labour in the context of an intensely competitive global supply chain. Thus, the long-term approach to data collection reveals trends toward standardisation of technical skills in local managerial regimes while also highlighting reliance on distinct categories of recruits fulfilling different aspects of the managerial role in line with lead firms’ expectations. In addition to an apparent increase in the use of home-grown graduates in junior managerial positions, essential continuities persist in terms of reliance on three further pools of managerial recruits: namely, managers who have risen through the ranks, foreign workers who embody combinations of technical skill and industrial experience, and finally retired armed forces personnel. The function of each category of recruits is distinct, fulfilling the need for technical standardisation of industry-specific skills and knowledge along with the means of value extraction through particular regimes of control. New graduates bring a measure of technical skill but need considerable socialisation into factory life; it is an alien environment for them. In contrast, those who ‘work their way up’ are more attuned to the factory and the mechanics of directly controlling workers on the line. Foreign recruits have additional potential; they are not only technically skilled and knowledgeable but also well-socialised into wider industrial norms and associated factory regimes. Finally, the status of former military personnel in their society is of use to employers in

¹Originally known colloquially as ‘The Accord’ and transformed more recently into the ‘International Accord’ (Tuhin, 2022) with application beyond Bangladesh.

²The ‘Alliance’ was also set up (initially as a US-led alternative to the EU-dominated Accord) after Rana Plaza. Initially it did not include trade unions in its make up but this has changed over time (see e.g., Kabeeer et al., 2020; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023).

managing the broader internal governance of the factory in its external local context. The social relations of the factory are thus constructed to mirror and accommodate the power relations of Bangladesh society while maximising the potential for entrepreneurial capture at workplace level.

Theoretically, the findings illuminate how ‘strategic disconnections’ (Hammer & Plugor, 2019) are inescapable in the gaps between what brands claim for their operational standards and the material conditions that prevail at workplace level. A key aspect of this disconnection is that the social and managerial relations of the workplace are predicated on the imperative to maximise productivity while minimising costs (see Anner, 2019). In this sense, the findings afford insight into ‘the politics of production’ (Burawoy, 1985, p. 122) and the ways in which locally constructed factory regimes *inevitably* disconnect from ethical standards of employment in the local employer’s quest to capture maximum value at their position in the global value chain (Anner, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Baglioni et al., 2020; Hammer & Plugor, 2019; Selwyn, 2017).

The article is divided into four main sections following this introduction. It begins by contextualising ‘garments’ in Bangladesh—as the industry is known colloquially—and explaining the significance of local managerial regimes in relation to the wider international supply chain. The second section explains the research sample, methods and nature of the long-term study. Section three of the article outlines the research findings, beginning with a review of methods of recruitment and formal advertisements, followed by an explanation of the four main sources of management recruits, namely those that rise through the ranks, home grown graduates, foreign experts and military retirees. In the conclusion we comment on what the sourcing of management in Bangladesh garments reveals about labour-management relations and the workplace regime in terms of the disconnection between workplace realities and claims to ethical standards made by brands and buyers, and the way that local politics of production are entangled in the global reproduction of inequality in, and through, work.

2 | MANAGERIAL REGIMES AND VALUE CAPTURE IN THE RMG SECTOR IN BANGLADESH

Throughout its history, and particularly since the ‘great garment war’ of the 1980s and thereafter (Birnbaum, 2010), the garment sector has provided ‘unevenly distributed outcomes for supplier countries, firms and workers’ (Pickles et al., 2015). Its notoriety for exploitation is positioned against low barriers to entry, intense competition, opaque sourcing and a multiplicity of trade agreements and rules including the (now abandoned) Multi-Fibre Arrangement (MFA), Generalised Systems of Preference (GSP) and so on (see, e.g., Hale & Wills, 2005; Hammer & Plugor, 2019; Mezzadri, 2017; Morris et al., 2021; Pickles et al., 2015; Taplin & Winterton, 1997). The location of contemporary garment assembly has thus been fundamentally influenced by a range of regulatory instruments and trade agreements ‘as different geographic realities and related transport time and costs, as well as differential currency exchange rates [have] shape[d] specific sourcing decisions’ (Pickles et al., 2015, p. 386). It is in this context of global shift that Bangladesh grew into a major centre of garment production.

The industry’s growth in Bangladesh was exponential from the late 1970s onwards. In 1979, there were only 22 export-oriented garment factories operating in the country (Rashid, 2006), but by 2020 the RMG sector accounted for no less than 83% of the country’s export earnings (Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Employers Association [BGMEA, 2020]).

Today Bangladesh is among the largest and cheapest garment producers globally, with most of its output destined for markets in the EU and United States (Hossain & Hasan, 2016, pp. 47–48; Kabeer et al., 2020). It employs around four million workers and is a significant employer of female labour in a country where women's participation in the formal labour force is just 3.5% of the working population (Asian Centre for Development [ACD], 2021; Heintza et al., 2018).³

While the Bangladesh RMG sector is of key economic importance to the country, it also has a long-standing, consistent reputation for paying poverty wages in oppressive, unsafe working environments (Alam et al., 2017; Anner, 2020a; Clean Clothes Campaign, Bhattacharya & Rahman, 1999; CCC, 2017; ILO, 2016; Rhee & Belot, 1990; Rock, 2001, 2003; Selwyn, 2017, pp. 59–60). This is a reputation that local employers are keen to cast off, as indicated in material published on the BGMEA website,

The “Made in Bangladesh” tag has [...] brought glory for the country, making it a prestigious brand across the globe. Bangladesh, which was once termed by cynics a “bottomless basket” has now become a “basket full of wonders.” (BGMEA *About Garment Industry of Bangladesh*)

Despite such confidence, business leaders' claims for the industry's new transparency and improved conditions in the post-Rana Plaza era (Berg et al., 2021; BGMEA) are highly contested (Anner, 2020a; Bair et al., 2020; Kabeer et al., 2020; Reinecke & Donaghey, 2023).

Anner's (2020a) meticulous analysis of relations between buyers and suppliers in Bangladesh⁴ reveals how the price squeeze (what is paid by buyers to their suppliers) interacts with the sourcing squeeze (defined in terms of short lead times and intensified production targets) to deliver poor outcomes for labour. Mezzadri (2017) has theorised the outcomes of these material realities for Indian workers as a ‘sweatshop regime of exploitation and oppression’ that is ‘jointly crafted by global, regional and local actors’. This concept of a ‘regime of exploitation’ is pertinent to understanding the dynamics of garment manufacture more broadly. At the local level, no factory floor can be understood in isolation from the wider society in which it is set (see e.g., Cunnison, 1966; Mezzadri, 2017; Phizacklea, 1990). However, in the garments sector, the business model provides an overarching set of supply chain pressures—in particular, what Anner (2019) has termed ‘predatory pricing’ (see also Khan et al., 2019)—which create trends towards what we might call sectoral isomorphism. In other words, it becomes possible to extract surplus value at the workplace *only* if certain conditions, such as minimisation of costs, are met. Thus, while ‘social facts in the workplace ... shape organisational life’ in terms of how coercion and legitimation are expressed in different settings (Wood, 2021, p. 133), the business model itself creates conditions likely to lead to coercive management at the workplace.

Whatever brands claim in their ethical statements of sustainability or responsibility in employment, in practical application the evidence shows that social compliance and cost minimisation are mutually exclusive objectives. As Bartley (2018) argues, in the hierarchy of rules that pertain in the supply chain, labour rights and conditions of employment, especially rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining, have low ranking and are either openly resisted or weakly enforced (see also, Kuruvilla et al., 2021). As will be highlighted in

³Of the 3.5% of women in formal employment, the Bangladesh garment sector employs around one-third.

⁴These supply chain dynamics are not restricted to Bangladesh but rather characterise supply chain relations in the sector worldwide.

the findings, compliance costs money. Thus, in their analysis of the supply chain from a management theory perspective, Baglioni et al (2020) cogently argue, that at the point of production ‘entrepreneurial capture’ of surplus value *depends* upon the ‘active strategy of capitals-in-competition squeezing labour and/or undermining the conditions for working class collectivities’ (Baglioni et al., 2020, p. 921). From this perspective, suppression of wages and labour standards are a direct, necessary and purposeful element in the squeezing of costs—the one is inextricably intertwined with the other. Thus, supply-chain relationships are predictive of coercive workplace regimes, as local firms pass on to workers the unfavourable terms they themselves are forced to accept (Anner, 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Dörflinger et al., 2021; Wood, 2021).

The intense competition between Bangladesh garment firms to supply international buyers is supported by a ready supply of workers largely or entirely dependent on their wage for subsistence. If workers look to the state for protection in this scenario, either for employment rights or adequate social security mechanisms, they are likely to find it neglectful of its duty to protect them. Arguably, two core factors are at play here; the first is the political entanglement of the industry in the political elite—a significant proportion of the industry (35%–40%) is now owned by manufacturers who later turned politicians. The second is the state’s determined courtship of investment in a sector that makes such a large contribution to Bangladesh’s GDP and export earnings. In this context, Anner’s research suggests, for example, that rather than protecting its workers, the government of Bangladesh has accommodated powerful corporate interests and has given way to Bangladesh ‘employers [who] have used their leverage over the state to *suppress* worker efforts to improve conditions’ (Anner, 2020a, p. 339, emphasis added).

At its position in the global value chain, then, the RMG sector in Bangladesh bears many of the hallmarks of what Marx identified as ‘anarchy in the market’ associated with workplace regimes that Burawoy (1985) went on to define as ‘market despotism’. In terms of the workplace regimes in garments, the sector as a whole is characterised by intense ‘firm competition, the real subsumption of labour, worker dependency and weak state regulation [leading] to control through coercion’ (Wood, 2021, p. 120). This is the context for shop-floor workers in Bangladesh, where thus far, Bangladesh garments show little evidence of any appreciable progression to Burawoy’s (1985) further conceptions of *hegemonic* control where gaining forms of worker consent is at least on the managerial agenda. There is little evidence, for example, of managers seeking worker consent through meaningful consultation or joint decision making, nor do workers have any appreciable gains to concede were hegemonic despotism to prevail (see Nichols et al., 2004). This is despite the best efforts of the Accord, which brought trade union representatives in Bangladesh into a very specific bargaining framework with global retailers, international brands and local parliamentarians over factory safety and other issues (Bair et al., 2020; Donaghey & Reinecke, 2018; Kabeer et al., 2020).

While the Accord *has* been significant for the labour movement, it has not led to the establishment of strong independent bargaining structures or worker-driven job controls. Even allowing for its weaknesses (see Alamgir & Banerjee, 2019), Bangladesh employers did not welcome this intervention and the more recent extension of the Accord’s period of operation was fiercely and jointly opposed by representatives of government and industry in Bangladesh. They are said to have

‘resisted the Accord’s efforts to empower workers for fear that improved labour standards would *threaten managerial control over one of the global garment industry’s largest and cheapest labor forces*’ (Bair et al., 2020, p. 969, emphasis added).

Thus, workplace regimes in Bangladesh garments still rest on a foundation of coercion and it remains extremely challenging, nay dangerous, for workers to organise collectively (Begum & Ahmed, 2023).

It is in this broader context that managers enter the garment sector in Bangladesh. Through the productive system, in which we include labour–management relations, managers are tasked with optimising value extraction at the workplace (Baglioni et al., 2020). It is at this point that the disconnect between brand claims for ethical standards of employment and workplace realities occurs, as highlighted by Hammer and Plugor (2019). As a distinctive lens on labour–management relations, there is value in unpicking exactly how a local managerial regime is forged in this international context. In the remainder of this article, we, therefore, answer the question of how Bangladesh employers recruit and deploy distinct categories of managers to promote, construct and maintain workplace regimes that best serve *their* interests in value capture. The findings reveal how such processes are socially, culturally and institutionally embedded in the local context while being driven by international supply chain pressures (see Wood, 2021). The following section explains the research methods employed in the study.

3 | RESEARCH METHODS

This is an exploratory, qualitative study that used ethnographic-style semi-structured interviewing as its main method, supplemented by reference to secondary data from a range of publicly available sources and official public data. Fears of negative publicity generally make Bangladesh garment owners wary of anyone approaching them for the purposes of independent research. They appeared reassured when told that this study was to focus on managers rather than shop-floor conditions, but their nervousness was commonly expressed at the outset of interviews in lengthy and unprompted speeches on the measures they had taken to ensure workers' safety, security and the regular payment of wages.

The research was divided into distinct phases. The first was a small-scale pilot study, conducted early in 2010. Its aim was to identify key sources of information and develop sufficient 'prior knowledge' (Hakim, 2000) to be able ask informed questions of managers (Miller & Glassner, 2004). This initial scoping exercise was important as there is very little independent insider data on garment businesses and their management practices that is openly available to researchers. The pilot phase also laid foundations for later snowball sampling as a means of gaining wider access to more respondents. A further period of qualitative fieldwork in Bangladesh was subsequently conducted from April to August 2011. In 2018 and again in 2019, return visits to Bangladesh were undertaken with the intention of exploring developments post-Rana Plaza, and finally a further period of fieldwork was undertaken in July 2022 with a small number of additional interviews in 2023.

In the 2010 pilot phase a key objective was to try to understand the route into management. Newspaper and online recruitment sources were examined to gain a broad idea of exactly what Bangladesh garment factories advertised 'for', when sourcing shopfloor managers. A quantitative content analysis (see Krippendorff, 2012) was conducted of 704 online advertisements for the RMG sector which appeared on bdjobs.com, which is one of the most popular and widely used jobsites in Bangladesh. Vacancy postings were examined for the period from July to October 2010 inclusive. Advertisements associated with textiles, buying houses and accessories were excluded from the sample; only those which clearly indicated the company to be in the RMG sector were included in the analysis, and repeat advertisements were filtered out.

TABLE 1 Fieldwork 2010 and 2011: Factories employing managerial respondents.

Size of factory unit						
	Location		Products			
	Export processing zone (EPZ)	Non-EPZ	Sweater	Woven	Knitwear	Multiple
Small		2			2	
Medium		4		1	3	
Large	4	12	3	1	2	10
Total	4	18	3	2	7	10

For the 2011 fieldwork, approximately 50 firms were approached for permission to interview owners and managers. Ultimately, 22 garment firms and two related industry organisations (BGMEA and BKMEA) granted access. Firms were initially approached purposively on the basis of size, as this was deemed a factor that might influence the sourcing of different types of managers and managerial functions. Size categories as defined by the industry associations BGMEA and Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturers Employers Association (BKMEA) were used. By their definitions, garment firms with fewer than 1000 employees are categorised as small; those employing more than 1000 but fewer than 2000 employees are classified as medium sized. Companies employing more than 2000 employees are categorised as large. The size and product mix of the 22 firms is shown in Table 1. Larger units dominate the sample. It proved impossible to gain access to many smaller firms.

The majority of the participating firms in the early phase of this study (15 out of 22) had been operating for more than 10 years, with five operating for more than 20 years. Only three firms were relative newcomers to the industry, having less than 5 years of business experience. The total number of interviewees in this early fieldwork phase was 71, with the sample including shop floor production managers, recruiting managers and owners. Just five interviewees were female. There was considerable overlap between those who were described as ‘recruiting managers’ and those who were also owners of the business. Thus, of the 43 ‘recruitment managers’ interviewed at this period, no fewer than 18 were also the factory owner. In the smaller and medium-sized units in the sample, the recruitment manager was invariably the owner.

As a female researcher, travelling to factory areas was challenging, emotionally and physically, especially since many of the factory areas are quite remote and their managerial environments are generally male dominated. Most of the 2011 interviews took place in noisy factories or head office premises but there were some singular exceptions. One interview, for example, took place at the famous Dhaka Club⁵ as the respondent claimed to be too busy to speak in any other venue. In another case, the whole interview took place in the presence of the factory police force. Factory police forces—also called ‘security’—are common in Bangladesh, especially on export processing zones (EPZs). In this case, several of the police officers accompanied the researcher to the manager’s office and not only observed the interview but

⁵The Dhaka Club was founded in 1911 as a feature of colonial life. Today it claims to have shaken off its colonial roots and functions as a members’ club for the “elite in society” in Bangladesh.

also frequently attempted to answer questions on the manager's behalf. In these settings, the taping of interviews would not have been allowed, nor would it have been appropriate. Notes therefore took the form of ethnographic-style field-notes, written up in detail immediately following the interviews.

In 2018/2019, return visits to Bangladesh were undertaken with the intention of exploring whether and how recruitment and managerial roles might be changing in the wake of Rana Plaza. Reluctance to engage with research had increased but it was nevertheless possible to obtain detailed return interviews with 22 of the original respondents from 2010 to 2011 cohort of respondents. In 2022, 10 of the cohort of 22 respondents from 2018/2019 agreed to meet with the researcher again, and nine senior managers plus a senior staff member of one of the main industry associations were interviewed for a third time. All interviews were undertaken in the same ethnographic style across all fieldwork periods.

Burawoy (2003) has written of the value of the 'ethnographic revisit' as a means of evaluating change, both in the site of research and in the researcher. For the present research, revisits were essential to the depth and detail of this study, bearing in mind the potential for change in managerial attitudes and also managerial structures and functions under the impact of the Accord and other developments such as the global pandemic, in intervening years.

The following section outlines the main research findings across all periods of fieldwork. It is divided into five sub-sections, each considering a specific entry route into managerial employment. The first looks at online recruitment and the social standing of garments in Bangladesh, the second considers the sourcing of managers from the ranks of the shop floor through the process of 'working one's way up', the third evaluates the growth of graduate entry into junior managerial positions, the fourth explains the preference for the 'foreign expert' for mid to senior positions, especially in brand-facing roles. The fifth sub-section explores the role of the retired armed forces (the 'military man') as an authoritative figure in the workplace regime.

4 | RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 | Online recruitment: A brand-facing mechanism?

The standard recruitment methods for sewing machinists in Bangladesh garments are likely to be mainly by word of mouth, through agents or in response to recruitment banners displayed in or around the factory. Social networks are clearly important here, and in the early days of the industry so they were for the recruitment of managers, when levels of ownership and management appointments were rather dominated by familial relationships. However, by 2010, this was changing. Open advertisements for managers were becoming more common and the focus on technical skill had strengthened.

As noted, Bangladesh garment employers wish to portray garments as a changed and modern industry. In meeting the increasing demands of brands for technical and product compliance (see Baglioni et al., 2020) it is reasonable to assume the trappings of a professionalised managerial class might seem attractive and useful to employers. Hence, the motivation for more formal recruitment processes and the use of the online advertisement for managerial posts.

The analysis of online advertisements undertaken in 2010 revealed that around 60% were for entry-level managerial posts, a further 24% were targeted at mid-level managers with just

11.5% of the advertisements being for senior positions such as factory managers and chief operating officers. Within these levels of management, around 27% of the advertisements targeted shopfloor production engineers. This reflects the increasing use of formal work measurement, industrial engineering and work study in line with brand demands for standardisation, reliable productivity and increased lead firm control of the circuits of production and capital (Baglioni et al., 2020, p. 921; also, Bartley, 2018).

There was also a significant focus on recruitment for candidates in HRM and administration (12.5%), as well as for ‘compliance’ officers. These functions also conform to the expectations of brands, but respondents said few really understood what ‘compliance’ meant back in those days. A senior HR manager, interviewed in 2011, said,

We heard this big talk going on about ‘compliance’ but we had no idea what this meant. All we knew was that the owners have agreed to it or else they won’t get an order from the buyers ... nobody knew what to do about it. The owners needed people to implement it and anybody who could utter the word ‘compliance’ would get recruited [he chuckled] ...

This situation was to change dramatically after Rana Plaza. In the 2018/2019 fieldwork period, one owner’s comment reflected more general attitudes toward the conflict between brand expectations for compliance and the prices they paid,

... those who strongly enforce compliance, their costs jump by 100% or so... even [as the] price of product is falling [from our buyers] ... it is becoming a struggle for this business to survive as the cost has risen so much.

Firms were also particularly keen to recruit ‘merchandisers’, which featured in around 38% of advertisements. The merchandiser is a key appointment as they are charged with raw material resourcing and costing, as well as monitoring the point of delivery of the product. They are frequently the factory representative most likely to be in regular communication with international brands and buyers. Merchandisers are basically responsible for sourcing materials for production. Large factory owners often employ foreigners in these roles and work closely with them to market their business and negotiate orders with buyers.

After the detailed analysis of advertisements in 2010, a less intensive review of online advertisements continued throughout the research period. Posts advertised generally reflect the job titles that represent ‘standardisation and codified concentrations of knowledge’ expected by lead firms (Baglioni et al., 2020, p. 920). Thus, a range of managerial functions have become more apparent over time. By 2022, interviewees said that large firms had clearly defined structures, comprising production, merchandising, procurement, information systems, HR, marketing, distribution and compliance and these positions were increasingly evident in advertisements.

Arguably, this is the reputational, brand-facing dimension of the role of the advertisement. However, inside the workplace-regime, the online advertisement plays a far more limited role. It takes only cursory examination to identify the poor-quality information advertisements generally provide for any potential applicant. Among the original sample of advertisements analysed in 2010, for example, around 14% of them did not disclose the company name; 21% failed to state how many posts were available; 16% did not reveal where in Bangladesh the job was located; and around 36% did not include any job description. A few declared the job

description “will be provided if you are selected”. Person specifications were generally absent apart from reference to the need for candidates to have the “ability to work under pressure”. Very few (just 3%) specified a definite wage while 67% said salary would be “open to negotiation”. They also overtly discriminated in statements like “women are not allowed to apply”—directly contravening brand commitments to corporate social responsibility.

These deficiencies were contextualised with one interviewee after another explaining that relatively few managers were likely to be appointed as a result of responding to an advertisement. In 2011, it was commonly understood that appointments depended upon informal referral of candidates through personal networks—either those of the owners or their senior departmental managers. Recruiting managers agreed that, as a rule, only between 10% and 30% of their vacant posts were filled as a result of using formal sources of advertisement. One explained,

It is not the case that we *don't* take people through formal ads ... but if we do, we try to find out about that person... his reputation in the previous office... anything bad or bad records... we verify if he really was working in that factory, and why he left. If at the time of application he is employed, we will give a call [anonymously] at his office to see if he really works there ... if he has been [employed] there for some time that means he knows the job ... we want to be sure.

Such networking matters for our broader understanding of the low trust which characterises local competitive relationships in the context of the global value chain. Interviewees said they needed to know first, that a new appointee would not steal their business and second, that they would work hard.

Things had changed little by 2018–2019. A senior production manager explained,

... in case of getting a job, 100% true fact is that if you go to bdjobs. com ... you will find jobs for different industries [where] the highest number of job adverts is for textile and garments ... yet it does not matter if you are highly qualified ... they [the employers] will not even call you [without some prior personal reference] ...

When asked to elaborate, he went on to say,

... they [employers] did not [rely on advertisements] then [in 2011] and they will not now [in 2018]...you may count 2%–3% ... no ... let's say maximum 5% people who may get a call if they apply [through an advertisement]... The organisations who do [advertise] want to be known as having some sophistication in their approach. But [most people are] recruited through networks. ... still [even now] they [employers] do not like to hire through ad.

This explanation was supported by the comments of several other interviewees such as, for example, “ ... [it is] mainly through networks we get people”, and another, “ ... you can count that till now [2019] 90% people get recruited through network/reference”. By 2022, respondents said it was still the case that specific social and industry networks took precedence over open advertisements, especially for middle and senior management positions.

When asked whether advertisements were primarily used to impress brands or alternatively to signal business development and modern working practices to local competitors,

respondents typically replied “it is a bit of both”. There was undoubtedly a perception that the advertisement could promote the company name and image internationally, as well as in the local or regional jobs market. However, its limitations were acknowledged. Recruitment through advertisement would not, for example, be appropriate for recruitment to more senior roles. A senior manager interviewed in 2022 explained,

All concerned business in this trade ... be it buying houses/suppliers/vendor ... they advertise to legitimate or highlight the business reputation ...

... [but] for example, XYZ groups or ABC group, when they hire for mid-level or even top level... they have their own network [and they hire] through word of mouth.

... some [of these] big companies may take 5–7 management trainees for entry level ... they have big production units and have many workers... they advertise most ...

However, the old practices seem to persist, as another respondent said,

Nowadays [in 2022] some people do get call for an interview when they apply based on job circular [advertisement] but [nothing proceeds on this alone because] they all will need that network ...

The role of the advertisement is therefore perhaps best regarded as a showcase for the business—to the buyers and to local competitors—rather than a prime means of sourcing managerial candidates. Beyond the performance element of the advertisement, it was possible to identify four key sources of managerial personnel: first, there are home grown shop floor managers from Bangladesh who have worked their way up through the factory; second, technical graduates, again from Bangladesh who enter the factory on the basis of their learned expertise; next, foreign nationals with expert knowledge and industrial experience gained outside Bangladesh; and finally, former military personnel from the Bangladesh armed forces. The following sub-sections consider each of these categories of managers in turn.

4.2 | ‘Working your way up’—This is no trade for a ‘gentleman’

At the outset of this research, it was apparent that RMG factories still struggled to attract more highly educated Bangladeshi citizens into managerial roles. Although the industry was well established by 2010, the low social standing of the garment trade persisted. Questions over the ‘respectability’ of garment work prevails across time, with historical precedent in a range of its former locations (see e.g., Fishman, 1975; Phizacklea, 1990). Still today, right across Asia, women garment workers are liable to be stigmatised as having ‘loose morals’ and prone to promiscuity (e.g., Lynch, 2007). However, in Bangladesh a *managerial* career in the garment business – dominated by male workers—has also been socially compromising.

In the industry’s early days its rapid expansion outpaced the capacity of local universities to supply appropriately skilled graduates but even as it grew in economic importance the garment sector did not become the destination of choice for Bangladeshi university leavers. It is known for its long hours, irregular wages and punitive conditions—in other words, local knowledge

acted as a deterrent for those with other choices. One senior manager who started his career on the shop floor said,

I had this notion before I joined this trade... is it possible for a respectable human to work in garments at all? Here, people work from morning till late evening—there is hardly any life for these people.

In this context, the majority of long-serving respondents in the 2010/2011 cohort of interviewees had in some way ‘worked their way up’ to senior managerial responsibilities, often from very lowly beginnings. For example, a production manager who began his long career as an errand boy explained that he didn’t even complete his high school phase of education,

I started my job twenty years back as an arranger [errand man]. I was not even an operator. Then I became an operator, then line supervisor, then sample man... I then paid a foreigner to learn to be a pattern master ... I joined then a buying house ... then I joined a factory as the production manager.

Such respondents also recalled that in the early part of their career they had found it difficult to rent a house or get married because they were employed in garments. They said that the perception in Bangladeshi society was that no workers in the RMG sector, including managers, received salary on a regular basis. This gave landlords and families of prospective life-partners concerns about their financial stability. A recruiting manager said plainly that the garment sector was generally regarded as no place for the “highly educated or for gentlemen”.

Several respondents confessed that they did not actually tell their families that they were working in a garment factory. Nor, if they *were* aware, did their families advertise the fact. A senior production manager said,

my father ... still introduces me to his friends [saying only] that I work in a foreign company ... but he does not utter the word ‘garments’

Even by 2018, the social standing of management in garments remained in question, as another respondent explained,

... some change [in the status of the industry] is there due to financial reasons, as the whole of Bangladesh is dependent on garment sector ... but in my opinion, other than that [the] societal view [of the industry] has not changed much ... people do not dare to say that openly due to [the RMG sector's] financial implications ... [as so many] people are earning from a career in garments but it is still not high [in social standing]

Perhaps one reason for this low social status is the very fact that it is possible for workers ‘to become a boss’ (see Cunnison, 1966, p. 6) through industrial experience rather than the costly path of education. Thus, in a very particular manifestation of the ‘interplays between the physical and social materialities of production’ (see Mezzadri, 2017, p. 19; see also Wood, 2021), an individual (typically male) whose family is not wealthy and who begins in a low skill, low paid job can attain a managerial role if they survive the demands of the shop floor. It follows that such managers are likely to have been socialised in the coercive norms of factory life in a

way that young graduates are not. They enter positions of authority in the factory knowing exactly how they will be expected to manage in the workplace regime.

4.3 | The graduate recruit—The limited utility of certificates

While garment employers are keen to emphasise how much the industry has changed and modernised, shop floor attitudes towards direct graduate entrants are instructive. For those who have ‘worked their way up’ and indeed for owners, graduates have little credibility. In 2011, this lack of respect for college learning was very marked. The following comments by an owner reflected more general attitudes,

In this trade ... certificates will not be of any use. A GM [General Manager] would ask a highly qualified textile engineer “what do you know?” ... He may be a graduate but [the GM will know that] there are others [shop floor managers] who are not so educated but are highly expert people ... even though they are not a graduate ... they have long years of experience...

The clear implication is that the worker with experience is better than a person with skills learned outside the factory environment—as the same respondent went on to say,

... no matter how good a degree they have ... they will not have the understanding of the trade unless they have gained some [practical] experience.

In this context, graduates had a reputation for ‘not sticking’ at the job. Interviewees complained that so-called ‘talented’ candidates lacked the required “patience and mindset” to work in the manufacturing sector. One HR manager said:

... fresh graduates have no idea about the manufacturing industry: it is about long hours, a heavy workload and they get a blow when they come here ... those who can absorb [the pressure] they stay back [remain in the factory] ... those who can't... well, they just have to leave ...

These attitudes were particularly strongly expressed by respondents to the first phase of fieldwork in 2010/2011. The reference to the demands of factory life speak to the challenging conditions facing ‘green’ recruits not socialised into the industry’s way of doing things. By 2018, graduate training in textile and garment manufacture was more prevalent. In explaining this trend, respondents referenced the monopsonistic tendencies that are forcing more home-grown graduates into RMG work, as a senior manager explained,

... now many [more] educated people willingly come to this sector ... [2018] ... compared to 2011. Perhaps it is because we do not have any other sector that creates jobs in greater numbers other than garments... [but] now they [factories] want BSc textile background and education for a post in production and merchandising. Such specific academic qualifications were not deemed as necessary in 2011 – previously recruiters would only look for experience but now they want textile background as well ...

Another commented,

...in garments now [2018] you will not find [only] that sort of people who would not get job anywhere else ... people now deliberately choose the kind of degree [in textile and garments] that will help them to start a profession in garment sector...

This said, graduates are still not sought for senior roles. In 2022 a manager explained that graduates are seen as most suitable for entry level work in larger units—“some big companies may take 5–7 management trainees for entry level”. The quest for managerial expertise therefore goes beyond purely technical skill—graduates need to be socialised and tested by the workplace regime. In finding the desired ready-made *combination* of education and experience, Bangladesh employers frequently turn to foreign expertise.

4.4 | The role of foreign experts—Satisfying the ‘second god’

Being regarded as expert in the Bangladesh RMG sector remains very much reliant on shop floor experience, but this does not necessarily need to be gained inside Bangladesh. Foreign workers are seen as more likely to have had training in new technology, merchandising and social compliance *combined with* hands-on experience of the garment shop floor. Official estimates of the numbers of foreign workers employed in garments seem relatively constant. In the first phase of fieldwork, interviewees from the industry associations (BGMEA and BKMEA) estimated that approximately 20,000 expatriates—mainly Indian and Sri Lankan nationals but also Chinese and Korean citizens—were working in the Bangladesh RMG sector. More recently a very similar figure of 22,000 was being reported (Rahaman, *The Business Post* 25 March 2022). The real numbers may reasonably be assumed to be higher. Some of these expatriates are employed by foreign-owned firms but most are working in locally-owned businesses, filling more senior roles such as production managers, technicians, accountants and top-level managers.

Interviews revealed some local resentment as foreign workers are reputedly earning much higher wages than home-grown managers. However, it proved impossible to verify exact figures for salaries. During the fieldwork in 2022, attempts to confirm standard rates for managerial appointments failed. Interviewees said that rates vary from factory to factory, and even within the same factory, for the same jobs. A senior manager explained,

...given the current global crisis and the inflation issue, worker [sewing machinist] salary [is the] same everywhere... [but managerial] staff salary varies and depends on the reputation of the garment [factory] and staff qualifications. Salary difference/discrimination is very common even though it is for the same position and same job but in different garment [factories]... you can't match it ... salary fluctuates a lot from one business to another... it depends on the organization ...there is no recognized amount that you can expect for a given position ...

In comparison with home-grown talent, foreign workers have a reputation for expert knowledge of production processes and are especially prized in key roles in marketing and compliance. These are roles where direct interaction with lead firms is at its highest as they involve managerial activities around product and social compliance where codification seems most important to brands (see Baglioni et al., 2020; Bartley, 2018). In this respect, their combination of technical and

operational skill plus *detachment* from Bangladeshi society appears to have three related but distinct uses for Bangladesh garment employers: first, technical expertise and skilled communication, second, trustworthiness and third, their reputed capacity for hard work.

First, there is a need for technically expert middle and senior managerial staffs to manage direct contact with brands, buyers or their representatives. It is these external actors—collectively referred to as “the buyers” who are perceived as the drivers of technical developments and standardisation. Thus, when asked why managers were expected to have particular sets of technical skills, respondents typically cited the expectations of “buyers, 100%”. As a senior (female) merchandising manager said in 2018,

... after Rana Plaza there is huge change in compliance... they [The Accord or the Alliance] take details of workers' payment... fire alarm, staircase etc.

A further respondent from 2018 pointed to the increasing codification and standardisation of brands' demands,

[most] large factories have now [got] separate HR and compliance sections. Some [smaller] factories run both HR and compliance together ... but a factory with 5,000 workers will have dedicated 10 staffs working on compliance ... compliance is more vital than HR and admin as they have to satisfy the 'second god' [buyers and buying houses]

In 2018, recruiting managers said that the presence of foreign employees gives organisations a multicultural flavour which can attract buyers, especially since Indian and Sri Lankan nationals are seen as having had more experience of dealing with compliance, merchandising and the like. One said, for example,

... buying houses are strict and [they] also employ expats mostly in key positions. [Factory owners] think that if we take local people then they may not be able to sell well to the buying houses—they think of leverage by employing foreigners

The second aspect of the foreign worker's value relates to their perceived trustworthiness. For Bangladesh factory owners, a foreign manager is not only a tangible expression of technical expertise – their *disembeddedness* from Bangladesh society is taken as a proxy for them being at lower risk of locally-based corruption. In this context they have a reputation for being more trustworthy than Bangladeshi-born managerial staffs who, it is assumed, will most likely be offered a ‘commission’ (or bribe) by raw material suppliers when a purchase order is being agreed. One factory owner (interviewed in 2011) started his career as a merchandiser and said,

Trust is an issue ... if you tell someone that people working as [merchandisers] don't take bribes... no one will believe you ... corrupt merchandisers will take bribes to accept a low-quality input material, or they may obtain the right quality material at a higher price than it should be ... or just [unfairly] place the order to a particular [raw material] supplier

Merchandisers interviewed across the research period consistently and studiously avoided talking about any commission they received, with one exception, who said,

... if someone gets a good commission, it does not harm the company; I don't see it to be a real problem. Our employers won't tolerate a single mistake and fire us on the spot—but if we earn some extra then we can make up for any silly mistakes made by us—the company does not need to know about it.

Thus, there is a general perception among owners and senior managers that foreign employees are comparatively better educated, more honest, professional, dependable and hard-working than their local counterparts. For example, the owner of a large group of garment factories interviewed in 2011 said,

We have many Sri Lankans in my company. We take them in due to their efficiency and honesty... I have had a Sri Lankan GM for 12-13 years and he is now the production director. My Head of Merchandising is also a Sri Lankan... so is ... [my] Head of Quality... the 'sample development in charge' is also Sri Lankan.

Equally important is the 'foreigner's' reputation for hard work. The owner of a large garment group, interviewed in 2011, said,

I could always expect my Sri Lankan managers and officers [to be] ready to work if necessary until two o' clock in the morning without complaint ... but I don't expect the local managers to do the same ... and I know they would not do so...

The same themes came through in interviews undertaken in 2018,

To place a foreign CEO or GM in charge may be [done] to impress buyers or to get their order (from buying houses)—on the other hand there are some other plus points ... for example, these expats work day and night—and will be away only once or twice a year on annual leave. Locals are not like that—in specific areas Indians and Sri Lankans still have importance, buyers rely on them ... also when a boss works [long hours] the subordinates will follow.

The foreign worker's technical skill, resistance to corruption and reputation for hard work fits a workplace regime characterised by low trust, intense competition and coercive management. These characteristics are perhaps crystallised in the final category of workers prized by Bangladesh garment employers, namely former defence/military personnel.

4.5 | Command and control—Retired armed service personnel—'The military men'

There is a distinct and persisting tendency in RMG sectors to hire retired defence personnel (mostly former army officers) as senior managers.⁶ It is possible for them to be appointed to a range of roles, including General Manager, HR manager or other administration, but

⁶It should be noted that military personnel occupy senior managerial roles in garments in other locations in addition to Bangladesh.

interviewees spoken to in 2022 confirmed that the position of HR Manager is generally the role most likely to be occupied by former military men.

In contrast to the focus on the industry skills and experience of each of the other categories of managerial recruits, be they home-grown managers, graduates or foreign experts, military men are not expected to have had direct work experience in the garment trade before appointment. Recruiting managers said that such people were considered to be excellent administration employees, even if they lack specific trade knowledge. A past career in the army, navy or air force is enormously attractive for businesses who hire military men not only for their reputation for being able to deal with troublesome workers, difficult politicians or local extortion racketeers, but also for their social networks and access to influence. One respondent said, “they are like celebrities to advertise the business”. They have a reputation for being able to “open doors” to power and influence.

A respondent interviewed in 2018 put this succinctly, by saying that military men have the capacity to inspire “respect and fear” both inside and outside the factory walls. Inside the factory, respondents said that the mere presence of military men are assumed easily to be able to dampen down any “militancy or rebellious tendencies” in workers. The premise is that their “power image” is more effective in controlling the workforce than that of any civilian. In terms of their influence *outside* the factory, because they are generally in receipt of some form of armed service pension, they are deemed less susceptible to bribery and corruption from local politicians or ‘goons’ associated with organised crime. Thus, respondents interviewed in 2018 confirmed,

In admin they still prefer people from ‘armed forces’—owners do it as it their policy—the thing is that in this way, no local hooligan will disturb them [owners] asking for donations or take illegal possession of their property—if you have any army man as director-HR it is to help tackle hooligan elements and to handle local people and administration.

Similarly, another explained,

... you see, these defence people come after retirement and after 25–30 years of service to the armed forces... they are settled [and have a good life] and are not driven by greed or need like working age people ... to them [retired armed forces] reputation is important and they want to be respected... they are honest... you can rely on them like no one else and this is one reason [they are employed]

The high status of former military personnel is typically reinforced by the usefulness to owners of their contacts in the public sector and political circles in Bangladesh.

Defence people after retirement have an open field in garment sector to join in HR/Admin. ... factories have to deal with local authorities and local goons from political parties. To manage them a man with intelligence is not enough ...you need someone [ex-army] who carries some weight so that owners also get some peace.

Thus, a fourth respondent said that the owners’

... preference [for armed service personnel] is there, as they can keep people under control—and that just does not mean workers only. They can better maintain the chain of command [inside the factory hierarchy] and manage discipline better. Big garment factories also have security department now—no civilian people are taken in these departments ...

This final quote references 'security' departments. Such departments may take different forms but will certainly comprise factory police forces, such as the one that monitored one of the research interviews in this study. In terms of the security measures imposed upon workers, this extends from bag searches as workers leave the factory premises all the way to gross intimidation and violence towards workers' leaders. The security forces also act as a form of internal surveillance and intimidation, making collective organisation at workplace level personally dangerous and risk laden. This is a feature of the garment factory that is not restricted to place. Most large factories in South and South-East Asia have similar security functions and the authors of this article have each had direct experience of the intimidation of 'factory security' forces during fieldwork in different international locations. In a highly competitive value chain, it is perhaps in the employment of retired military men when coupled with security people that the true nature of the workplace becomes most apparent. These are working environments which remain characterised by suspicion, lack of trust, intense supervision and the repression of dissent—the epitome of a coercive workplace regime.

5 | CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This article has explored the sourcing and deployment of workplace managers in garment factories in Bangladesh in the context of a labour intensive, highly competitive global value chain. Findings reveal trends in increased formalisation of managerial roles in Bangladesh garments, where technological change in production and the monitoring of social compliance are very much driven by the 'second god'—the international buyers, brands and buying houses who are the lead firms. These are the motivators for the formalisation of managerial functions in industrial engineering, production management, compliance, merchandising and HR in supplier firms (see Baglioni et al., 2020). Meanwhile, in the locally embedded workplace regime, the various networks used by employers to source different managerial functions have not changed fundamentally over the past decade, despite some increase in numbers of Bangladeshi textile graduates.

Insight into supply-chain dynamics places the recruitment and selection of managers in supplier firms into context. In identifying key pools of managerial staff, local employers source and deploy different groups of managerial recruits in distinct functions that allow them to achieve their immediate commercial interests, namely survival and value extraction within the space allowed them by lead firms in the value chain. In this respect, while cadres of (foreign) managers deliver the technical expertise and standardisation demanded by international buyers, those with shop-floor expertise or prior military service ensure that uneven development, poverty and social inequality function as mechanisms of control in the social relations of the workplace. Thus it is, that the extractive imperative of the broader global value chain comes to be experienced in a worker's life, as anarchy in the international and local market enables, may necessitates, a form of workplace despotism.

The study reveals the nature of workplaces whose pressures are understood to be extremely challenging for home-grown graduates, where military retirees and factory security (police forces) are relied on to manage internal relations with workers and external relations with powerful vested interests, and where expatriate workers are prized as much for their capacity to work ‘all day and night’ as for their technical expertise and acceptability to buyers. These are the cohorts who manage labour relations. There exist, in this scenario, all the necessary ingredients for a fundamental disconnection between what international brands claim for ethical standards of employment in the industry and the regime that is constructed at the level of the workplace (see Hammer & Plugor, 2019).

However, the disconnection is neither dysfunctional nor exceptional if judged purely on the effectiveness of value extraction for capital rather than justice for labour. The different functions performed by distinct categories of managerial recruits contribute to workplace regimes which accommodate lead firms’ demands for standardisation while exploiting the power relations of Bangladeshi society in the process of localised value extraction. As Baglioni et al (2020, p. 921) conclude, entrepreneurial capture in the value chain is a process of redistributing value—a ‘class relational dynamic’ between more and less powerful firms—and it is an extremely effective one. The local supplier evolves only within the parameters laid down by the buyer. It is an active strategy of value extraction handed down from international firms, put into effect in workplace regimes and embedded in the local context (Baglioni et al., 2020; see also Selwyn, 2017). Thus, the squeezing of workers’ rights and perpetuation of coercive workplace regimes where freedom of association is suppressed (e.g., Anner, 2020a) are not only predictable, deliberate and inevitable consequences of the garment sector’s business model, they are *integral* to processes of value extraction by local capital (Baglioni et al., 2020; Hammer & Plugor, 2019; Selwyn, 2017; Wood, 2021).

In this article, the example of Bangladesh garments illustrates how different managerial staffs are sourced to construct a workplace environment where despotic regimes rely on labour as their main source of value extraction. Contrary to claims for the wealth creation and upgrading potential of the value chain, this process of redistribution ensures that for labour, inequality and uneven development will continue to be reinforced rather than reduced. Ultimately, as lead firms maximise their extractive potential and their suppliers strive to capture value from *their* position in the chain, labour continues to pay the highest price for the extraction of maximum value at minimum cost.

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