

Effectiveness and Challenges of Plant-level Unions in Ready-made Garments (RMG) in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper aims to analyse how effectively plant-level trade unions are functioning in Bangladesh's readymade garment (RMG) factories. Based on qualitative data collected through focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs), the findings reveal that unions struggle to serve as effective sources of information for workers and to communicate and discuss workplace issues with both members and non-members. Instances of submitting charter of demands (CoD) are infrequent; even when submitted, they seldom lead to agreements. While unions could not report substantial contributions in critical areas such as wage increases, some noted limited achievements in preventing dismissals, ensuring timely payment of wages and overtime, and reducing verbal abuse. The paper identifies several interrelated challenges that limit the effectiveness of the unions. These include the absence of well-defined communication strategies and tools, unfavourable workplace structures, low union density due to persistent fears of job termination, negligible member contributions, and union leaders' inadequate knowledge and skills in collective bargaining. Furthermore, a profound power asymmetry between employers and unions—reinforced by employers' power networks and often-adopted unethical tactics—further constrains union activity and influence at the plant level. Addressing these issues, along with strengthening unions' external alliances, is crucial to enhancing plant-level unions' bargaining power and their ability to influence employers' attitudes and behaviours. This, in turn, will help improve workplace conditions and protect and promote workers' rights in RMG workplaces.

Keywords: Plant-level Union, Readymade Garments (RMG), Trade Union, Union Effectiveness.

Introduction

The practice of trade union (TU) rights in the readymade garments (RMG) industry in Bangladesh is one of the most talked-about issues, yet it remains one of the most neglected rights of RMG workers. According to the ILO Convention No.87, to which Bangladesh is a signatory, workers have the right to form and join an organisation of their own choice (ILO, 1948, art. 176). The Bangladesh Labour Act (2006, art. 176) specifically ensures TU rights, defining its formation process, requirements, and function as a collective bargaining agent. However, the implementation of TU rights in RMG has persistently raised questions mainly because of the non-availability of the unions at workplaces, the capacity of unions to function properly, and the overall environment in which the TU operates. The inadequate enforcement of this entitlement is often considered as a contributing factor to the infringement of several other workplace rights and often tarnishes the image of the country.

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RMG, the most significant industry in Bangladesh, has two opposite images—one is about the glorious development, growth and economic contribution; and the other is about the gloomy side, indicating the exploitative working conditions and poor worker rights situation. Bangladesh's RMG now holds about 7.9 percent of global share in the apparel market, securing 2nd rank among the apparel exporting countries (Zaman, 2023). The economic and social contribution of this industry in Bangladesh is undeniable, contributing 10.35% to the GDP (Bangladesh Bank, 2023), earning 82 % of total export earnings (GoB, 2023), and employing over four million workers of which the majority (58%) are women (BIDA, 2024).

Starting its journey in the late 1970s, the RMG industry has gradually expanded over the past four decades. The first RMG factory, Desh Garments, was established in 1977. There were fifty factories in 1980 (Ahmed, 2015), and at present, more than four thousand factories are there in this export-oriented sector (BIDA, 2024). Various studies have highlighted the underlying factors behind its exponential growth, both external and internal. The external factors include neoliberal policies, Multifiber Agreement (MFA), restructuring of the global economy, and liberalization of trade, while the internal factors are comparative advantages of the country due to its availability of workforce and cheap labour, and the favourable government policies (Ahmed, 2004; Feldman, 2009; Kabeer, 1991; Kabeer and Mahmud 2004a, 2004b; Zaman 2001).

Despite significant contributions, the RMG industry is widely criticised from the worker-rights perspective. The decent work situation in this sector has always been questionable. Workers' deprivation of decent working hours, inadequate wages and overtime allowance, limited maternity and other leaves, and issues regarding occupational safety and health have always attracted the attention of concerned communities, nationally and globally. However, the Rana Plaza disaster, the deadliest industrial accident, which killed more than 1138 workers (Chhachhi, 2014), heightened the overall concerns for workers in this industry, where issues of trade union rights, along with workplace safety issues, remained at the centre. Following the accident, due to multistakeholder initiatives such as the Sustainability Compact, Accord on Fire and Building Safety in Bangladesh, the Alliance for Bangladesh Worker Safety, ensuring trade union rights became a priority area (Hossain, et al. 2018).

In the post-Rana Plaza phase, the RMG industry has witnessed a growth of trade unions at both sectoral and plant levels. At present, sixty sectoral trade union federations exist in the RMG sector, of which twenty-four have been established since the Rana Plaza disaster. In contrast, thirty-six federations were registered in more than three decades before this fatal accident (DoL, 2024). The data make it evident that the rate of sectoral TU federation registration has doubled compared to the pre-Rana Plaza disaster period. The increase of plant-level unions is particularly remarkable. Before this accident, only 149 plant-level unions were registered at the Department of Labour (DoL) over a period of more than three decades. However, the number has skyrocketed in the decade after the disaster, with more than 1100 plant-level unions being registered. In the immediate two years following the disaster, 246 unions obtained their registration certificate. According to the data of the Department of Labour, there are, at present, 1314 plant-level unions in the RMG industry (DoL, 2024), indicating that workers in more than two-thirds of the RMG factories are still deprived of their trade union rights.

In the changing landscape of workers' unions in the RMG industry, understanding the plant-level unions' roles, capacity, effectiveness, and contribution to workplace improvements has been an area of interest. Ordinarily, the goal of a trade union is to ensure workers' well-being by protecting their interests. It works to improve workplace conditions by influencing employers' decisions and behaviour, participating in workplace decision-making process, and engaging in collective

bargaining with employers. However, considering the present decent work and worker rights situation in this sector, several practical questions have emerged, such as: How far are workers' unions at factories achieving their objectives? How have they been gaining workers' and employers' support? How do they communicate and share information with members and workers? What is their power and capacity to influence employers? How effectively are the unions engaging in collective bargaining with employers and achieving agreements to improve workplace conditions? And additionally, what difficulties are these unions facing? Considering these questions and concerns, this paper attempts to analyse the effectiveness of plant-level unions in their workplaces and the challenges they encounter. This paper flows, along with this introduction, according to the following structure: beginning with a conceptual analysis of trade union effectiveness; the next section highlights the methodology of this paper; in the following section, unions' organisational effectiveness and its contribution to workplace improvement are examined; difficulties and challenges of the plant-level unions are discussed in the subsequent section; and finally, the paper draws the conclusion.

Trade Union and its Effectiveness: Conceptual Analysis

A trade union (TU) is a workplace organisation of and for workers to protect their interests and ensure their well-being. By nature, trade unions are voluntary (Baral, 2018) as well as workers' independent organisations for achieving their common goals (Yaacob et al., 2023; Hodder and Edwards, 2015). McDonald and Vandenberg (1996) define a trade union as "an association of workers organised to protect and promote their common interest." To this end, trade unions play diversified functions including addressing workers' and members' problems at workplaces, establishing sound working conditions, ensuring a fair wage and job security, and protecting them from exploitation and injustices committed by employers (Baral, 2018; Rahim, 2017; Trebilcock, 2020). Trade unions operate at several levels—plant or unit, sectoral, and national—and engage in collective bargaining with employers while defending and upholding the rights and mutual interests of the workers.

TUs' effectiveness is a complex concept and involves multifarious factors. Therefore, the effectiveness analysis presents special difficulties (Boxall and Hayness, 1997). Reaching a consensus about what makes a union effective is not an easy task (Satrya and Parasuraman 2011), and it is difficult to determine the effectiveness boundary by a single definition (Rahman, 2023). However, numerous attempts have been made to fix and analyse the TU effectiveness indicators/elements. The available literature provides a wide range of aspects, dimensions, and issues for assessing trade union effectiveness (Annexe 1).

At the organisational level, several factors make the TU effective. Union density, voice, leadership pattern, improved working terms and conditions, and industrial democracy are crucial for effectiveness (Durazzi et al., 2018; Pyman et al., 2010). Bryson and Gomez (2002) argue that when a TU successfully represents the members and can fulfil their needs, it becomes effective. Several other studies have mentioned the issue of representation and argued that a TU's competency in the representation of workers while addressing and safeguarding their rights, indicates its effectiveness (Bednarowicz, 2019; Mzangwa, 2013). According to Rahim (2023), organisational attributes as well as union activities that help achieve employee representation goals are to be considered to define the effectiveness of trade unions.

Satrya and Parasuraman (2011) used a multidimensional approach to analyse union effectiveness which included both the rational model and the natural system model. The first model had four variables including instrumental or economic achievement, audit process, self-rating, and

communication channel; while the second model had three variables incorporating membership growth, resource acquisition, and member-improvement (Satrya and Parasuraman, 2011). Loganathan et al. (2023) argued that union effectiveness depends on two broad aspects—industrial relations climate and trade union characteristics—each incorporating three specific elements. The industrial relations climate encompasses employee voice, management style, and the climate of procedural justice; while the trade union characteristics cover leadership of trade unions, commitment of trade unions, and trade union revitalisation.

A broad classification done by Bryson (2003) categorises the union effectiveness into two broad groups—i) union's organisational effectiveness, and ii) union's ability to improve work and working conditions—each encompassing several dimensions. The organisational effectiveness category highlights the communication and information sharing ability of a union, its usefulness as a source of information and advice, its openness and accountability to members, responsiveness to members' problems and complaints, union power, and management's seriousness to a union. The ability to improve working conditions, on the other hand, primarily reflects unions' role in creating an improved workplace. The areas where union influence is needed include increasing wages, protecting workers against unfair treatment, working with management for improved performance, increasing managerial responsiveness to employees, making a better workplace, and promoting equal opportunities (Bryson 2003).

The indicators used in this paper to examine plant-level union effectiveness in the RMG sector are adapted from Bryson's framework. To assess organisational effectiveness, the analysis considers the availability of communication plans, strategies, and tools; the extent of information sharing among members and non-members; unions' openness and accountability; responsiveness to workers' needs; union strength, as reflected in density and network; and the seriousness with which management engages with the unions. Meanwhile, effectiveness in improving working conditions is evaluated based on unions' contributions to wage increases, protection against unfair treatment and promotion of worker dignity, and influence on managerial responsiveness.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative approach and draws on both primary and secondary information. Primary data was collected through focus group discussions (FGD) and key informant interviews (KII), while secondary information was obtained through document review. Four FGDs—three with plant-level union representatives and one with sectoral-level federation leaders—were conducted. Representatives of the plant-level unions held top positions in the unions' executive committees. A total of twenty representatives from seven unions, all formed after the Rana Plaza disaster, participated in these FGDs. Since the plant-level unions are affiliated with sectoral federations, it was also important to obtain information from the federation-level representatives regarding the plant-level unions' effectiveness. Therefore, one FGD was conducted with the representatives of sectoral-level federations. Six sectoral-level federation representatives, one from each federation, participated in the FGD. Additionally, five interviews were conducted with the key informants, including national-level trade union leaders, labour rights researchers and representatives of civil society organisations (CSO). Key informants were selected purposively considering their expert knowledge about trade union activities and the RMG sector in the country. Field-level data collection was conducted in Dhaka (Mirpur and Ashulia areas) between September 2022 and February 2023. A thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse the qualitative data.

Plant-level Unions' Organisational Effectiveness

Organisational effectiveness of a union greatly relies on the capacity to communicate with and share information among the members (Hossain and Akter, 2022). Communication is essential as it enables members to gain a clear understanding of the union and its activities. Several studies examined the association between effective communication and the performance of union activities. Anyango et al. (2013) discovered that effective communication between unions and their members ensures members' adequate realisation of the union's activities, achievements, and challenges. They further argue that proper communication prevents unions from being perceived as ineffective (Anyango et al. 2013). Another study by Mohamed et al. (2010) identified a strong correlation between internal union communication and the effectiveness of union operations. They argue that an effective and functional communication mechanism is necessary for a union to be effective in its effort to ensure improved and better working conditions. According to them, communication instils a culture and structure of relationships inside the unions, increasing their effectiveness (Mohamed et al. 2010).

Plant-level unions in the RMG sector in Bangladesh are struggling to establish effective communication with their members and other workers at their respective factories. Well-planned communication strategies are absent in these unions. All the union representatives during the FGDs informed that they could not formulate detailed communication plans for their unions, nor had they been able to develop any tools for communication. They further claim that due to the employers' attitude, unions always struggle to communicate with their members at workplaces and to inform other workers about the union's activities (FGD with plant-level unions). It is important to note that despite having a union at the workplace, non-member workers often cannot know about its activities; they only become aware of the union's presence when some unusual incidents, such as a union organisers' expulsion from their job, occur in the factory. (FGD with federation leaders).

Information sharing among union members and non-member workers about the union's mission and activities is crucial for the effectiveness of a union. A union's effectiveness in information sharing depends on some factors, where the employee's perception of power and the role of employers are important. Bryson (2003) argues that unions' information sharing becomes more effective when workers perceive that they have a considerable amount of power to influence employers, and when support is provided by the employers. Plant-level unions' limitation in information sharing is evident, indicating their minimal effectiveness as sources of information and advisors to workers and members. Union-related factors as well as management roles hinder the union from being effective in this regard. A key informant claimed that plant-level unions lack skilled leaders/personnel to provide the required information and advice to support the members. Besides, unions often cannot play this role due to the lack of employer support and a favourable environment at the workplace. Union representatives hardly get the scope to discuss and share information on workplace-related issues with the members as well as non-member workers. Many workers often fear meeting with and talking to union leaders at the workplace. The reason is that they want to avoid the wrath of the employer; fear always exists among not only the workers but also the union representatives. During FGDs, many participants claimed that often employers harass workers when they see them talking to a union leader. It is also important that unions have not received any physical space from the employers from where they can operate.

Union effectiveness requires unions' openness and accountability, which in turn promote trust among members and enhance their commitment to the union. Frege's (2002) study revealed trust and commitment as the vital determinants of union effectiveness. However, union openness and accountability depend on several factors. The extent of the power of the union and employers' attitude/response to union activities are determining factors in this regard. Bryson argued that the

adequate power of the unions and the availability of support from employers make them more open and accountable. Furthermore, the democratic structure of the union ensures that the representative selection process is transparent; and determines the perception of the members about its effectiveness and accountability (Bryson 2003). Openness and accountability of the plant-level union in RMG have been evident in most cases, therefore promoting trust among the members. The union representatives in FGDs claimed that the leader selection process in their respective unions is open and democratic, allowing all members to participate in this process. They further informed that unions hold meetings regularly and preserve the meeting resolutions, which ensure their accountability.

Among many other functions of a trade union, addressing members' problems and dealing with their complaints are important. Therefore, a union's effectiveness depends on to what extent the union is responsive to the workplace issues and problems of the members, and can solve their complaints. Boxall and Haynes (1997) argue that when unions address workers' primary issues at the workplace (e.g., wage and working conditions, and arbitrary actions and decisions of the management that go against workers' interests) and fulfil workers' expectations, they become effective.

RMG workers at their workplaces continuously face problems of different natures including wage and overtime allowance, excessive working hours and irregularity in leave practices, inadequate welfare facilities, and verbal and psychological abuses (Hossain et al., 2018, 2021). Therefore, to be effective, the plant-level unions must be responsive to these workplace issues. It is expected that to address workers' demands and concerns, the unions will initiate discussions with employers, engage in bargaining to address these workplace problems, and more formally, prepare charter of demands (CoD) to place before the employers or management to achieve agreements. However, the FGDs reveal that only three of the seven plant-level unions prepared and submitted CoDs incorporating the typical workplace issues of the RMG workers to their employers. However, the outcomes differed from union to union. One of the unions successfully signed an agreement with the employer, and the other two unions had not been able to engage the employers in bargaining and collective agreement. Union leaders complained:

Employers do not want to sign agreements; rather, they prefer verbal commitments. Even in many cases, employers do not take our demands seriously. (FGD)

Federation-level leaders also admit the limited achievement of plant-level unions regarding collective agreements with employers. A leader of a TU federation, who participated in the FGD, claimed that although seven (07) plant-level unions got registered in 2013 under his federation, just two of them could submit CoD. However, similar outcomes were not produced following the submissions—one union achieved an agreement with the employer and the other union failed since the factory management did not respond to them. Therefore, regarding submitting charter of demands and achieving agreements with employers, the plant-level unions in RMG are showing limited success.

Bryson (2003) has identified several influential factors of union responsiveness where perceived power and union density are important; and argued that perceived power, linked with union density, increases the responsiveness. It has been observed that union density is not high for the plant-level unions. In most cases, unions have not been successful in enlisting membership of the majority of workers, which has remarkable implications for the power of the union. One of the union representatives, a participant of a FGD, informs—

Since a large segment of the workers of our factory is not union members, it impacts our power to influence employers' decisions and solve the problems that we face frequently at the workplace.

The power of the union is crucial for achieving the union's goal and becoming effective. Unions' power, as Bryson (2023) argued, originates from the capacity of a union to disrupt labour supply while pursuing the interests of its members. Freeman and Medoff (1984) consider the union's representative voice in resolving grievances of the workers and workplace disputes as another power source of the union. Besides, the power of a union also depends on union density, union wage-mark-up, and network. Therefore, a varied degree of power is evident among the plant-level unions. In terms of union density, the power of the unions is not significant. Since the unions have fewer members, they can hardly influence employers' decisions. Even it is not possible for them to disrupt the labour supply (FGD, KII). On the other hand, in terms of networks, it could be argued that unions are in a better position. Most of the unions are affiliated with sectoral federations which have linked them with the national-level unions.

The level of seriousness shown by management to the union activities reflects unions' influence and effectiveness. The union's bargaining power, union density, and on-site representation are all determining elements of the management's seriousness. Notably, employers'/management's seriousness to the union is reflected not only in their support, but also in their opposition to union activities. Perception of the union representatives about the management's seriousness regarding the unions is mixed. Many of the union representatives think that the factory authority is not serious about the unions. In their opinion, as employers enjoy immense power and influence, they usually do not bother about unions. Opposite to this view, others think that unions have attracted the attention of the employers, and they have taken it seriously. However, they argue that this seriousness does not necessarily mean that employers are supportive of unions. Many participants of FGDs and KIIs claim that employers' efforts to obstruct union activities, strategies to refrain workers from joining unions, and actions against union leaders indicate how seriously they view the unions.

Unions' Contribution to Improved Working Conditions

Bringing improvement in working conditions is one of the fundamental goals of TU. Highlighting the TU's role in ensuring workers' well-being, Carillon and Sutton (1982) emphasise offering direct services by the unions to their members. This section has particularly focused on how the plant-level unions are impacting the wages, unfair practices at workplaces, and managerial responsiveness.

Increase and regularisation of wages

A union's effectiveness and power are often evaluated by considering whether and to what extent it can increase the wage of workers, known as 'union wage mark-up.' RMG workers' wage has always remained at the centre of overall wage discussion in the country, as well as at the international level. Inadequate wage amount, wage due and wage deduction, ambiguity in overtime allowance calculation by factory management, and infrequent payment are central to the RMG workers' wage-related discussions (Hossain et al., 2018, 2021). Nevertheless, the scope of wage increases by the plant-level unions is limited. In Bangladesh, since the wage for the RMG workers is set at the sectoral level, and is applicable across the country, the unions at the plant level have no contribution to wage increases in their respective factories. However, the plant-level unions have achievements, as claimed by union representatives, in ensuring the time-regularity of wage payment at the factory. Additionally, some other unions have also played the role in ensuring the regularity of overtime allowance payment according to the rate determined in the labour act of the country (FGD).

Protection against unfair treatment and upholding workers' dignity

To be effective, one of the fundamental features of a union is its capability to protect workers from unfair treatment. Bryson's study (2003) revealed that this service is a 'very important' priority for

unions, and they generally perform this task better than the task of bargaining for payment. Although not all of the plant-level unions have been successful in preventing unfair treatment, a few examples were noticed where the unions significantly contributed in this regard. In FGDs, most of the participants claimed that unions have been able to reduce the incidents of verbal abuse at workplaces. They further claim that the supervisors' attitudes towards the workers have changed to some extent. Some even claimed that the frequent use of 'slang words' against workers has reduced after the union formation. There are also greater achievements, preventing workers' unfair dismissal at the workplace (Box 1).

Box 1: Organised protest stopped unfair dismissal

Along with problems of casual leave, maternity leave, and timeliness of wage payment, festival leave was a concern for the workers of a factory in Mirpur. As common in other factories, the employer of this factory also engaged workers on weekly holidays with the promise that they would be provided with a longer festival leave. Consequently, the workers worked on several weekly holidays, entitling them to a 10-day festival leave. However, when the time came, the employer offered them only 8 days of leave instead of 10, citing an urgent shipment. It created resentment among workers, and they protested against the decision. In response, factory authority in a quick move dismissed few workers. The trade union then intervened, talked to the employer and asked them to withdraw the decision. Nevertheless, authority was reluctant to listen to them. Union then mobilized the worker and threatened to stop work if the authority did not change the decision. Finally, the workers won; the authority withdrew their decision. 'Had we not formed a union it would have not been possible to influence the authority to change their decision' – a union leader said.

Source: Hossain and Ahmed (2018)

Influence on managerial responsiveness

To be effective, a union needs to achieve the ability to influence employers' attitudes as well as make employers responsive to worker issues. Boxall and Haynes argue that when a union is unable to bring about changes in employers' behaviours, it is considered ineffective even if it realises workers' needs (Boxall and Haynes 1997). A mixed picture has been observed in this regard. Some of the union leaders interviewed for this study admitted that they could not influence the responsiveness of the management. Union leaders further claim that where the number of union members is few and when the union is not linked with any external network, it is almost impossible to influence the behaviour of employers and make them responsive to workers. In contrast, few other representatives gave examples of how union formation at the workplace changed the behaviour and attitudes of employers, resulting in better working conditions. However, it is important to note that unions having strong external links are more successful than others (FGD, KII). Another important factor is the presence of buyers' pressure. This issue has come out in both FGDs and KIIs. In some factories, employers do not obstruct union activities, not because they welcome unions, but out of fear that if they create obstacles, the union may report it to the buyers and bring the issue internationally, potentially causing an image crisis and loss of work orders. (FGD)

Plant-level Unions' Challenges

It has been observed from the preceding section that plant-level unions' successes are not remarkable, except in a few instances. Multiple factors affect these unions to be effective, both in terms of organisational aspects and improved workplace conditions. The present section has analysed

those factors, classifying them all into several categories – membership issues, communication and power asymmetry, leadership, and bargaining agenda and employers' attitude.

Membership and members' contribution issues

According to Frege (2002), one of the quantitative indicators of union effectiveness evaluation is union density. From the previous section, it is observed that union density tends to be low during their registration period, and unions have generally struggled to collect additional members afterwards. To meet legal requirements, all unions reported having one-third of the workers in their respective factories as members. However, membership typically has not grown since the formation period, except in exceptional cases.

During FGDs, representatives of seven unions were present, and only one union claimed a membership increase since its establishment. A notable point is that some union leaders noticed a decline in membership in their unions. Union leaders claimed that the fear of losing jobs while participating in union activities is high among the workers. According to them, post-Rana Plaza period has had little impact in reducing workers' fear in this regard. A union leader claimed:

Most of the workers do not join unions. Many even fear talking to union representatives at the workplace. Even, many union members do not want to participate actively and deal with the employers, as they think that employers will expel them from their jobs.

In addition to union density, the challenge of membership also involves the proportion of contributing members. The proportion of members who financially contribute to the union is crucial for its effectiveness and proper functioning. Members' regular financial subscription makes the union vibrant and dynamic. Although reliable data on the share of the contributing members in trade unions in Bangladesh is not readily available, it is commonly observed that unions significantly lack such members. During FGDs, representatives from three out of seven unions have claimed that they have members who pay monthly contributions. But not all of their members contribute regularly, except for one union—all of its 150 members are contributors. In two other unions respective proportions of payee members are about two-thirds (200 out of 300) and half (50 out of 100) of all the members. The amount of the monthly contribution is not big, just BDT 10. A different practice is also evident among other newly formed unions. In many unions, some of the members paid a lump sum contribution for once, which is considered as their membership/admission fee. However, they do not contribute monthly.

Communication and power imbalance

Organisational effectiveness relies on robust structures of the workplace, characterized by regular interactions between members and representatives of unions. Power balance, which is necessary to influence the decisions of employers, and employer's endorsement of the union's role are also crucial for effectiveness. However, as identified in the earlier section, opportunities for union representatives to interact with the members frequently are mostly absent at the workplace. A participant of FGD explained the challenge in the following manner:

“We are still facing difficulties in communicating with the members at the workplace. The nature of the job and employers' attitudes, both are creating obstacles. We generally meet the worker members at the community, often at their residence.”

Prevailing asymmetry in power relations is also crucial for unions. Union activities are frequently hindered by unequal power dynamics. Employers generally have strong connections with politically powerful local individuals, with personnel from law enforcement agencies and local administration, and even with local thugs. As union leaders claimed during FGDs, employers often use this power

connection to obstruct the activities of the union, resulting in anti-union discrimination against the representatives of the unions.

Leadership skills and training

One of the aspects of the organisational challenge is the issue of leadership, which the plant-level union are facing severely. Hammer and Wazeter (1992) identify leadership as a crucial and significantly evident factor in union effectiveness. They found a strong correlation between leadership and effectiveness dimensions. Consequently, when union leaders actively and efficiently promote the union's interests, the union is perceived as more robust and healthier (Hammer and Wazeter, 1992). According to the opinion of key informants, many of the union leaders lack adequate leadership skills in organising, which impacts their union activities and effectiveness. The reason for this is the lack of sufficient preparation. Some even complain that many unions have got registration but is at an immature stage. Even the leaders lack knowledge of the bargaining and the dispute resolution process.

“Many of the union leaders still do not understand what a ‘charter of demand’ is.”— informed a participant of FGD with federation representatives.

Representatives from the sectoral federations have also pointed out deficiencies in leadership skills and inadequate training for establishing a union, citing these as organisational challenges. The statement of a federation representative is particularly noteworthy in this context:

In earlier days we had to wait for a long time, after organising ourselves into a union, to get consent from senior leaders to apply for union registration. They used to tell us to know more, before application submission, about labour rights, legal provisions, collective bargaining and dispute resolution process etc. However, we have observed a different trend after Rana Plaza. To capitalize on the changing conditions, many unions have been formed within a very short period. Many of these unions had to form committees with workers having no or inadequate leadership skills and no or limited knowledge about the trade union activities and collective bargaining process. (Hossain and Ahmed, 2018).

Bargaining and employers’ attitudes

Unions’ greater success depends on their capacity to effectively manage a wide range of bargaining issues (Hossain and Akter, 2022). The bargaining outcomes of unions on workers’ key issues, such as wage increases, bonuses, overtime allowances, protection from workplace injustices and discrimination, establishment of equal opportunities, and creation of worker-friendly environments have a significantly positive impact. However, prioritising among these issues is crucial. Regarding the bargaining agenda and outcomes, plant-level unions are encountering significant problems and limitations arising from various interconnected factors. Issues such as the lack of a communication strategy, inadequate contact between workers and union leaders due to inappropriate workplace structures, and power asymmetry, compounded by inadequate skills of union leaders, negatively impact the unions’ bargaining ability. Furthermore, the multifaceted problems and challenges faced by workers, along with their varied consequences, make it difficult for plant-level unions to prioritise their bargaining issues (Hossain and Akter, 2022).

To achieve organisational and bargaining effectiveness, the support and positive attitude of employers are crucial. According to union leaders, most employers generally display indifference towards trade unions and create various hindrances to their activities. The union leaders further have informed that the nature of problems they face from employers has not changed significantly since the post-Rana Plaza incident, as the employers have changed their strategies to obstruct union

activities. In a changing context, employers often allow unions when leaders are selected by them. Following is the experience of a federation leader who formed a union after 2013 (Hossain and Ahmed, 2018):

I submitted a union registration application several times for a particular factory, but leaders were always expelled/discharged from the job. Finally, I talked to the factory authority, and they asked me to select union representatives for the two top positions—president and secretary—according to the choice of factory management. I formed the union in that factory accepting their proposal. However, these leaders are not getting scope to participate in routine activities of the union. Without the permission of the employers, they cannot even talk to me. This is how employers are obstructing the function of unions.

Another strategy of the employers is to offer the leaders of the unions undue benefits. For example, after the union formation, the wages of the two top officials of a union were increased by the factory management. (FGD, representatives of the sectoral federation)

Conclusion and Policy Recommendation

This paper aimed to explore and evaluate the plant-level unions' effectiveness in the Readymade Garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh, particularly focusing on their organisational functioning and contributions to workplace improvements. From an organisational effectiveness perspective, this paper finds that unions struggle to serve as effective sources of information for the workers due to the absence of clear communication strategies, and the union representatives rarely have the opportunity to discuss workplace issues either with members or non-members. Not all unions submit charter of demands (CoD) to management. Even when a CoD is submitted, it does not always result in an agreement—only one out of seven unions successfully reached an agreement with the employer. Furthermore, union density remains low, limiting their influence on employer decisions. Many union representatives believe that management does not take unions seriously. However, the positive thing is that most unions demonstrate openness and accountability. Findings from focus group discussions (FGDs) indicate that leadership elections are inclusive and democratic, meetings are held regularly, and resolutions are documented—practices that help build trust among members.

Regarding the ability to improve workplace conditions, this paper reveals mixed and contested findings. Although most of the representatives could not provide examples of substantial improvement in crucial areas like wage increases, few noted positive outcomes in other areas, such as preventing dismissal, ensuring timely wage and overtime payments, and reducing verbal abuses. Although reaching collective bargaining agreements with employers is one of the fundamental goals of trade unions and a means of protecting workers' interests; unions remain ineffective, as achieving such agreements with employers is rare. However, it is to be noted that unions' connections to external networks and broader organisations can enhance their significance and impact on employers.

Several interrelated challenges contribute to this limited effectiveness. These include a lack of well-defined communication strategies and tools, which hinders information sharing among members and non-members. Unfavourable workplace structures further obstruct interaction between workers and union leaders. Attracting and retaining members is an ongoing challenge, largely due to persistent fears of job loss stemming from union involvement—fears that have persisted even after the Rana Plaza incident. Financial insecurity due to negligible member contributions undermines unions' sustainability. Moreover, union leaders often lack adequate knowledge and skills in collective bargaining. A profound power imbalance between employers and unions, strengthened by employers' power networks and often-adopted unethical tactics, further constrains union activity and influence at the plant-level.

Addressing these challenges is key to strengthening plant-level unions' ability to advocate for workers' rights, influence employer practices, and ultimately improve conditions within the RMG industry. Unions should develop and implement structured communication strategies to better engage with both members and non-members. Capacity-building programs are essential to strengthen the knowledge and skills of union representatives, particularly in negotiation and collective bargaining. Additionally, protecting workers from retaliation for union participation is crucial to overcoming the fear that deters membership. Increasing members' financial contributions or securing alternative sources of funding could improve union sustainability. Finally, fostering alliances with external networks and broader labour organisations is crucial to enhancing plant-level unions' bargaining power and their ability to influence employers' attitudes and behaviours, which ultimately will protect and promote worker rights at RMG workplaces.

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Annexe 1: TU effectiveness dimensions and elements

Authors	Aspects/dimensions	Specific elements
Boxall and Hayness (1997)	Two roles	Addressing workers primary issues at the workplace Fulfilling workers' expectations
Bryson (2003)	Two broad aspects	Organisational effectiveness Ability to improve work and working conditions
Burchielli (2004)	Three dimensions	Administrative Representative Ideology
Loganathan et al.2023)	Two broad aspects	Industrial relations climate (management style, employee voice, procedural justice climate) Trade union characteristic (trade union revitalization, trade union commitment, trade union leadership)
Pyman (2002)	Six dimensions	Improved terms and conditions of employment Growth Internal democracy Organisational stability Activism Social movement unionism
Satrya and Parasuraman (2011)	Two models	Rational model Natural system
SMERU (2002) Sutanto (1998)	Four areas	Defending the worker's rights and interests Negotiating the collective bargaining agreement or disputes Communicating with the members Empowering their member

Source: Authors' compilation.