



# Shortage of workers in apparel factories

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-Representational image

It is a surprising piece of news that the country's apparel industry is not finding enough workers to run their factories at optimum capacity and meet the surging work orders in recent months. Some export-oriented garment units reportedly are finding it difficult to expand their production because of the shortage of workers, particularly the skilled ones.

The situation is opposite to that prevailed during most of 2020 and almost half of 2021. Many RMG units downsized their workforce, and some even pulled their shutters down for lack of work order when the SARS-CoV-2 virus had been wreaking havoc on life and the economy. As the pandemic

started easing and vaccination picking up in the second half of last year, buy orders started pouring in large numbers to Bangladesh garment units.

The shortage of skilled workers in Bangladesh is a big problem. Almost every sector has been deficient in this particular area. The country has been failing to make inroads in many markets with quality products because of the perennial paucity of skilled workforce. The country could have earned more from exports and remittances if it had abundant skilled workers. Unfortunately, there have not been meaningful efforts to produce enough skilled hands. Lately, some piecemeal initiatives have been launched, but those are not sufficient.

The RMG industry owners are also to blame for the acute shortage of skilled manpower needed to produce high-end products. Most factories have concentrated on the production and export of low-end products that do not require higher skill. Bangladeshi producers have preferred to fill up the vacuum created particularly by China that had moved away from low-end products to bigger revenue-fetching high-end apparel items. Besides, local entrepreneurs have not made the best use of their factories as classrooms to create a skilled workforce.

The RMG factory owners have genuine reasons to be worried if they were facing any shortage of unskilled workers. The supply of such workers has always been abundant in the country. Some say the shortage is due to the unwillingness of a section of workers who had gone to their villages during the peak Covid time. There could be yet another reason. A large part of unskilled workers are employed as helpers. The wages the helpers get are woefully inadequate to manage the soaring living costs. Female workers in particular are now finding it more rewarding to work as housemaids than working as helpers in RMG factories.

Many international buyers are now coming to Bangladesh with work orders because of factory closures in Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar either for Covid or for other issues. This has emerged as an opportunity for the local apparel industry to encourage the buyers to continue procuring goods from Bangladesh over a long time. To achieve these objectives, they might need to expand their production and produce more high-end items. All these, however, will require fresh investment and development of skill level of workers. Besides, the government and the RMG factory owners might consider some hike in workers' wages, considering the ongoing price situation.