

Assessment of the Skill Training Programme for Employment of Retrenched Female Garment Workers

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Abstract

This study assessed the effectiveness of skill training programme of BRAC for re-employment of retrenched female garment workers (RFGW). Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected RFGWs and the review of project records. Findings revealed that almost all women found the overall skill training programme very good and effective. The skill training would be more useful if preference is given to the RFGWs for choosing the training type, and the curriculum of the training could be similar. The duration of the 12 days training may be expanded by a few days and the small business trading module may need to be redesigned or cut down from the training programme. BRAC could play a significant role in marketing the goods produced by the RFGWs. Microcredit services were useful for the trained workers who were self-employed in any kind of economic activity. This study concludes that the skill training programme can be suitably linked with BRAC development activities in raising the employment opportunities for the RFGWs.

Introduction

Ready-made garment (RMG) factories have developed rapidly in Bangladesh during the last two decades. In Bangladesh, more than 76% of the foreign exchange comes from exporting the RMG. The garments are exported mostly to USA and Western European countries. As per report of Bangladesh Garment Manufacturer and Exporters Association (BGMEA), there are more than 3,000 RMG industries (apart from knitwear) in the country. About 1.5 million garment workers are employed in the export oriented RMG factories; and nearly one million of them are working in the RMG factories located in and around the Dhaka metropolitan city. Ninety percent of these workers are female and most of them have migrated from rural areas of Bangladesh.

In July 2000, the US Senate passed the Trade Development Act (TDA) under which the American importers were allowed to import garments without paying duties from the enlisted 72 countries. Unfortunately, Bangladesh was not one of those countries. As a result, the American importers have lost their interest to import garment products from Bangladesh. This difficult situation for the RMG sector became worse after the attack on the twin towers in New York and the Afghan war that forced the American buyers to cancel their previous work orders.

The BGMEA sources disclosed that earning in this sector has already gone down by 6% after 2001. The dwindling business forced the factory owners to close down nearly 1,200 units. More factories are likely to be shut down in the coming months and this downturn is likely to continue till 2004. This will create a major unemployment problem among the poor with women being particularly badly hit. It has been estimated that about 200,000 female workers have already been retrenched and became jobless.

BRAC attempted to understand the plight of their problems and their future needs by conducting a series of focus group discussions (FGD) in different parts of the city in November 2001. The findings indicated clearly that they were not likely to return to their village home. BRAC responded promptly to assist RFGWs by providing counseling skill training, and organising them under its micro-finance programme. Press release and advertisement were circulated in newspapers widely, inviting the RFGWs to register with BRAC Area Offices in the city for getting counseling and assistance. The idea was to bring them under the microcredit programme. Since the response was very low, BRAC decided to provide them skill training. The Australian High Commission in Bangladesh agreed to provide funds for their skill training.

Skill training programme of BRAC

BRAC had been providing the following skill training programme to rehabilitate the RFGWs through a “Special Project”. These skill training are machine embroidery and appliqué, hand embroidery and appliqué, stitching and appliqué, candle making, cooking and food supply, jute and paper bag making, essence stick making, block and boutique printing, skin printing, and security guard.

On the basis of the FGDs, several skill training activities were identified for the RFGWs. The training module was designed to cover business as well as service sector. Market potential and self-employment opportunities of these skills training were also examined. The retrenched workers who were already in serious financial hardships did not seem to welcome the training of longer duration. BRAC, therefore, decided to organise highly focussed training for short duration. The trainees were given honorarium. Trainees not only received technical knowledge but also acquired some marketing knowledge and skill as well.

After completion of skill training, the pilot project was attempted to enrol the ‘willing garment workers’ in the existing Urban Poor Organisations (UPO) of their respective areas so that they would become regular members of BRAC urban micro-finance programme.

Actually, the ultimate goal was to organise the RFGWs in UPO of BRAC. The workers who were not interested in micro-finance were supported to find suitable employment. It was found from the project records that 1,294 RFGWs were provided skill training during July-November 2002. The records also indicated that about half of the total trained RFGWs (50.6%) were employed in any kind of economic activity while the remaining women were unemployed. The project documents also displayed that home-based self-employment was the most popular employment sector among them.

The objectives of this study were to assess the effectiveness of BRAC’s skill training programme for employment of RFGWs and identify the difficulties faced by the trained RFGWs in finding suitable employment.

Methods

The study design was based on the investigator’s experience, visit to a training session, and discussions with RFGWs and the project officials. In-depth interviews with 20 selected RFGWs and the review of project records were sources of data for this study. The purposive sampling technique was used to select the RFGWs as the assessment had to cover various types of workers such as employed, currently

unemployed, trained in such trades as machine embroidery and appliqué, hand embroidery, stitching, candle making, jute and paper bag making, and essence stick making.

A checklist was prepared to guide the in-depth interviews. The interviews covered four BRAC urban programme areas of Dhaka city namely Mirpur, Tejgaon, Baro Maghbazar, and Islam Bagh. Data were collected in November 2002.

Findings

Profile of the study women

In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 trained RFGWs in various sectors. Of them 10 were employed in economic activity while the remaining 10 were unemployed at the time of the study (Table 1). Most of them were quite young with an average age of 25 years. Fifty percent of them were married while the remaining women were either widowed or divorced, or separated. Their level of education was poor with only basic literacy. They were able to read and write. In many cases, they were the sole earning members of their households who were living behind in the villages.

Table 1. Distribution of the sample RFGWs by the employment status and the type of training

Types of training	Current status		Total
	Employed	Unemployed	
Appliqué	2	2	4
Embroidery	2	2	4
Jute and paper bag making	2	2	4
Candle making	1	2	3
Business	1	1	2
Others (tuition, sewing)	2	1	3
N	10	10	20

History as a garment worker

Data showed that most RFGWs migrated to Dhaka within 20 years and the rest were born here. They were in the RMG sector for nearly 6.3 years while the employed RFGWs worked in this sector for 6.7 years and the unemployed worked for 5.9 years. They performed different types of activities, such as, spinning machine, operating, stitching, assisting, checking, button fixing, etc. A large number of them were involved in spinning work. The remuneration they used to get from the garment factory ranged from Tk.400 to Tk.3,000 with an average of Tk.1,400 per month. All the women lost their job nearly 11 months ago, except one. According to them, the main reason for losing job was closure of the factory. Only one woman resigned from the job for sickness.

Coping strategy

After the retrenchment, the women faced several economic crises and coped with in many ways. Most of the RFGWs reported that they tackled the economic constraints by borrowing money from their close relatives or from the non-governmental organizations while the unemployed. The remaining women resolved their economic crisis through selling gold, sewing machine, and television.

Skill training programme of BRAC

Women generally selected the type of skill training by themselves although, in some cases, BRAC influenced them to choose. Of the 11 women for whom the training category was chosen by the project authority, six were unemployed at the time of survey. The skill training programme would be more useful if the preference is given to the RFGWs for choosing their training category. Almost all of them rated the training curriculum as good and useful. They reported that the trainers' competency was good enough.

Those who were economically active supported an extension of the training duration. Most of them put great stress on the extension of time of some specific training packages like machine embroidery and appliqué, hand embroidery and appliqué, and stitching and appliqué.

Some women suggested a shortened schedule of training (9:00 a.m.-1:00 noon), while others were satisfied with the certain schedule (9:00 a.m.-12:00 p.m.).

Most of them had no problem during the training session. Unemployed women raised a range of problems during the training: such as the inadequacy of machinery, transportation problem, sickness, and space in training rooms. Lack of child care was also regarded as a problem during the training session.

Employment of the RFGWs

None of the employed RFGWs was wage-employed, nine of them were self-employed, and only one was re-employed¹. Most of the self-employed RFGWs admitted that the skill training was helpful for self-employment, and a few RFGWs reported that the training was partially helpful. They also pointed out other supporting reasons for self-employment, such as, confidence, family members' help, family tradition, and contacts. The project documents also showed that about half of the trained RFGWs (50.6%) were employed, and almost all of them were home-based self-employed and about all of the self-employed RFGWs were BRAC member. The chance of re-employment is very poor in the RMG sector. After receiving the training they can operate machine very well and the past experience in the RMG sector was also helpful to be re-employed. However, nearly all RFGWs were about to get re-employment in the RMG sector. Some of them reported that it would be better if BRAC would arrange a job for them in the RMG. Other hoped that BRAC would have created the scope for their re-employment.

Unemployment of the RFGWs

The RFGWs reported reasons for remaining unemployed after having skill training. Four women, who got training on small trading, candle making and producing shopping bag, reported that they had no capital for doing the business. The women, who took the training on machine embroidery and appliqué, could not buy the machine due to lack of money and thus remained unemployed. Only one unemployed reported lack of co-operation and lack of contact with the businessmen as a constraint.

Nine unemployed female workers were aware of the sources of loan. Of the unemployed RFGWs, four were not BRAC member. Six unemployed RFGWs, who were BRAC members, tried to take loan, but two of them didn't get loan because of not complying with the 3-month savings, and the rest four took loan for doing business. Two retrenched women spent the borrowed money for their household expenditure and the remaining two also did not invest the money in business. A few of the unemployed women informed that if BRAC had provided more loans they could have been able to market their home-made goods. They sought help from BRAC for marketing their goods. Moreover, they explained that BRAC might have the responsibility in this regard.

Obstacles of employment

Shortage of the working place was one of the main obstacles for the re-entry of the RFGWs. Re-entry in the garment factory for the RFGWs was very limited because this sector is facing uncertainties. Lack of assistance after training from BRAC and the scarcity of capital to operate a small business were also other

¹ Re-employed workers, who got the job in RMG sector after receiving the skill training

obstacles for employment. The inefficiency for marketing the goods was another obstacle of the RFGWs. After the training, the communication was not kept up between the BRAC and the trained RFGWs, specifically who were not attached with the Urban Poor Organizations; and thus the RFGWs became traceless to the BRAC authority.

Discussion and conclusions

The effects of skill training programme for employment of the RFGWs were assessed in this study. The study tried to explore the entry obstacles in the field of employment faced by RFGWs. The results revealed that the skill training would be more useful if the opportunity is given to the RFGWs for choosing the training type, and the curriculum of the training could similar or uniform. The duration of certain training, such as, machine embroidery & appliqué, hand embroidery & appliqué may be expanded by a few days. The small business module may need to be re-designed or cut down from the training programme as most of the RFGWs claimed that such training would be useless, if they do not get loan easily.

The study shows that women could have been employed through re-training. However, the re-employment of RFGWs in the RMG sector was found rare in this study. On the other hand, the employed RFGWs who were involved with credit-based development programme were more likely to be self-employed. The selection of RFGWs for training should be done carefully. During the fieldwork, we found that the women sometimes did not report their employment history correctly.

The RFGWs who had been involved with micro-credit programme had greater opportunities to be employed in any kind of economic activity. The project staff may help them on how to best market their (RFGW) home-made goods. Moreover, the project staff may have a role to play in helping trained RFGWs find suitable employment and marketing outlets for their products. Skill training activities should not only be helping the RFGWs for their employment, but educating them on how to be self dependent during the economic crisis. The study concludes that a carefully designed skill training programme coupled with micro finance assistance can significantly increase employment opportunity among the RFGWs.

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