

## Impact of GSP Cut: The Case of RMG Sector in Bangladesh

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*The GSP program was first introduced in the Trade Act 1974. It was designed to help the developing countries to expand their economies by providing preferential duty-free entry for certain goods to the United States. Bangladesh was a beneficiary of the GSP Program until June 2013. In spite of being in the list of the GSP covered countries, Bangladesh could not enjoy much of its facilities. The reason behind it was Bangladesh mostly concentrates on the exports of apparel items (RMG), which unfortunately do not fall under the GSP program. However, cancellation of GSP benefits from Bangladesh has dented the country's image internationally and its image as a trade partner of the US is tainted. This in turn, is affecting the apparel industry of the country. Some recent reports are clearly carrying the evidence the down turns in the apparel industry. Moreover, this cancellation may discourage both US and other foreign investors from making further investments into the RMG sector of Bangladesh, which consecutively might damage the country's potential as a future exporter to other parts of the world.*

**Field of Research:** International Business

**Keywords:** Ready-Made Garments (RMG), Generalized System of Preferences (GSP), Suspension of GSP, Least Developed Country (LDC).

### 1. Introduction

At present, one of the major concerns of the country is the suspension of Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) and its ongoing effects. Apart from the export of Ready-made garments, Bangladesh had been enjoying GSP for all other exports into the US market. However due to the termination of the GSP program, the country will suffer an export fall of about \$40 million. This \$40 million export loss will indirectly affect the RMG sector and fortunately the direct impact will not be more than 1% of the country's annual export of \$5 Billion (mostly RMG products) to the US which fall under Washington's GSP program (The Wall Street Journal 2013). The burden of this \$40 million export loss will go on the shoulders of some small industries in the country,

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namely ceramic, tobacco etc. As a consequence not only the country is losing her image all over the world but also all its small scale enterprises are being tainted.

Bangladesh should remember that GSP cut hampered the prestige of the country and now it is losing its credibility as a business partner. The image of Bangladesh as a trading partner of the USA has already been questioned. The withdrawal of GSP privileges may discourage US and other investors, both old and new from enhancing trade relations with Bangladesh. This may have a long term effect on the future export growth prospect of the country. Now it is for the country to see when and how the European Union (EU) withdraws similar privileges from Bangladeshi export items to a market of 370 million people that EU controls. It should be noted that the EU has already given a strong stricture to the government of Bangladesh, stating that if the working conditions in the RMG sector are not improved, then the country might lose preferential treatment in the EU market. The EU is the biggest buyer of Bangladeshi garment, purchasing around \$11.37 billion as of June 2012; out of the total export of about \$19 billion in the last fiscal year (Fattah 2013). Therefore restoring the hampered prestige is one of the major problems that Bangladesh is facing today.

Prime objective of this paper is to deal with the reputational crisis that Bangladesh is suffering due to the suspension of GSP by United States which has already become a headache not only for the country but also for her foreign friends.

This study addressed the following research questions:

- a) Does the suspension of GSP by United States impact RMG sector in Bangladesh?
- b) What are the impacts of GSP cancellation on RMG export?

As far as we know, few researches were done focusing this area. However, none of them tried to look into the situation the way this paper did. Especially, no work was done about the image crisis that Bangladesh is already facing as an impact of the GSP cancellation by U.S. The motivation of the study is to fill out the research gap and to advance the knowledge in this area.

The reminder of the paper is organized as follows: Literature review is provided in section 2 while methodology and findings are discussed in sections 3 and 4 respectively. Section 5 deals with conclusion.

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

A number of authors and authorities, both from Bangladesh and United States have dealt with the GSP facilities. As a result, we have a rich crop of literature on this issue of supreme importance to Bangladesh.

Jones (2013) stated that, the United States, the European Union, and other developed countries have implemented special tariff programs since the 1970s in order to support economic growth in developing countries by stimulating their exports. She found that the U.S. GSP program provides non-reciprocal, duty-free tariff treatment to certain products imported from designated beneficiary i.e. developing countries. On June 27, 2013, the US President announced the suspension of benefits under the GSP program for Bangladesh on the grounds that "It has not taken or is not

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taking steps to afford internationally recognized worker rights to workers in the country.” The suspension is effective 60 days after the publication of the proclamation in the Federal Register, or Friday, August 30, 2013.

Haque (2013) pointed out that losing GSP is not all gloom and doom for the RMG sector of Bangladesh as it does not come under the GSP program. Bangladeshi products such as tobacco, plastic bags and articles, golf equipment, sleeping bags, bone China and Porcelain kitchen/tableware, cereal based prepared foods, hand-loomed woven cotton carpets and other textile floor coverings, spectacles and goggles, head gear other than rubber and plastics, etc. are eligible to enter duty free under GSP in the US market. Due to GSP cancellation the producer and exporters of above mentioned products will face problems till its restoration. According to the statistics of the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), the total export of RMG to the USA (as of June 2013) was around \$407.8 million or 69% of the total exports, which is nearly \$584.1 million worth of exports to the USA. However, losing this status in the US does not symbolize the end of the world for the RMG sector as EU nations will have still continued to provide GSP to Bangladesh and there is a chance for the country to regain the status in the US by making improvements. Therefore Government of Bangladesh should try to fulfill some of the conditions to regain GSP facilities by mainly improving the conditions of the RMG workers by the beginning of next year.

Faruque (2013) advocates for the reinstatement of the GSP facilities in Bangladesh. His advocacy is based on the policy position taken by the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think-tank that the cancellation of the GSP facilities in Bangladesh was not wise on the part of the Obama Administration since it was not beneficial for the workers of Bangladesh. Instead, the Heritage Foundation strongly promoted the idea for the removal of any tariff on the garment products of Bangladesh even after the consecutive colossal damages in the industry. Taking a cue from the Heritage Foundation, the author also argues that removal of tariff from garment products as well as reinstatements of GSP were the best ways to help the workers of Bangladesh.

Hossan et al. (2012) have given more attention to their views on the changing attitude of workers. The study shows that there is no healthy industrial relation prevailing in the RMG sector. This study also states that high work load, brutal attitude of line managers, low skills and poor wage rates are the major reasons for the high labour turnover and social unrest. Unhealthy relationship between workers and supervisors and uncontrollable labour due to the absence of trade union are the main causes of conflict. Moreover, poor working conditions cause more conflicts and aggravate them in the RMG sector.

Bhuiyan (2013) investigated the reasons of conflict between workers and management and conflicts in the garment sector in border context. He tried to highlight the main causes of unrest in the ready-made garment sector of Bangladesh and give some suggestions to resolve them. The article dealt with the background on the degree of unrest in the RMG sector, focusing on six major unrests from December 2010 to June 2012 and suggested some measures on conflict resolution processes. The study attempts to highlight that poor and discriminating wages are the underlying factor of unrest in the RMG sector along with wage issues and labour rights.

Bhuiyan (2012) seeks to explore the present socio-economic status of garment workers in Bangladesh. This is an empirical study mainly based on economic and social status of 100

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garments workers in Badda areas of Dhaka city. The study observes that the socio-economic condition of the garment workers is not in a satisfactory stage. About 70% workers are women in this sector who work from dawn to dusk, even up to late night, whereas their wages are below subsistence level. Their income cannot keep pace with their expenditure. So the workers and their families suffer from many socio-economic complexities. Overall, workers' life is miserable even though they are earning a lion share for the country.

The author has pointed out some reasons which may affect our garment industry. Due to the world recession, buyers have already cut off their orders from Bangladesh for which many small factories and buying offices have been shut down. However our Government is completely silent. If the Government does not take any measure, then unemployment will crop up. If the people of the government sector lose their job, then purchasing power of some people who are dependent on the RMG sector will decrease, which will result in more unemployment in the country.

The author has given some suggestions to save this sector and to get rid of the problems within it. Government should try to enhance and ensure timely wages on a regular basis for the workers, reflecting prices of essentials in life. The prevailing irregularities in the factories, such as physical torture, abuse, etc., should be checked by the integrated efforts from both the government and the owners. Holidays and national holidays should be ensured without any random deduction in their salary. BGMEA and BKMEA should be careful regarding the compliance issues for the workers. Moreover, they should be careful regarding child care and schooling system. Bangladesh government should take the responsibility to ensure the education for the garments workers' children up to the mark.

### **3. Methodology of the Study**

The study has been conducted to evaluate the effect of GSP cancellation on the garments sector in Bangladesh. Research area has been selected on the basis of previous research work. Secondary data have been collected to conduct the study. The sources of data are relevant journals, news papers, reports and so on. The study will be helpful for the readers, researchers, owners and executives of the garment sector, labor leaders, and above all, the policy makers of the government of Bangladesh.

### **4. Findings**

GSP is a World Trade Organization (WTO) program that gives poor countries special tariff treatment to select imports (The Wall Street Journal 2013). The GSP program was first adopted internationally by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) at the UNCTAD-II conference in 1968. It was first adopted by the US with the passing of Trade Act of 1974 (Rahman 2013). In course of time, the US GSP program was referred to as a program for providing non-reciprocal, duty free tariff treatment to certain products imported from Developing and Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Through this program, United States in fact wanted to help Developing and LDCs that have no industrial experiences or tradition to achieve competitiveness in international trade, particularly in exports, and thus develop and improve their economics. Since its launch, 122 beneficiary countries and territories have received GSP facilities in exporting up to 5000 products in the US market (Hossain 2014).

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Under GSP scheme over 5000 goods are allowed duty free entry to the US market from LDCs. Hence Bangladesh as a LDC is entitled to be a beneficiary of the US GSP program. In 2011, Bangladesh exports to the USA under the GSP scheme were worth \$26.33 million. Accordingly, the GSP covered only 118 products and \$34.7 million in imports from Bangladesh in 2012 (The Independent 2013). However Bangladesh has lost GSP advantage after getting six years' time. A petition for withdrawal of GSP was filed by the American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organization (AFL-CIO) in 2007 when it called for improving workers' rights (Tasin 2013). Unfortunately there are some Rip Van Winkles in our government departments who do not know that the early bird catches the worm.

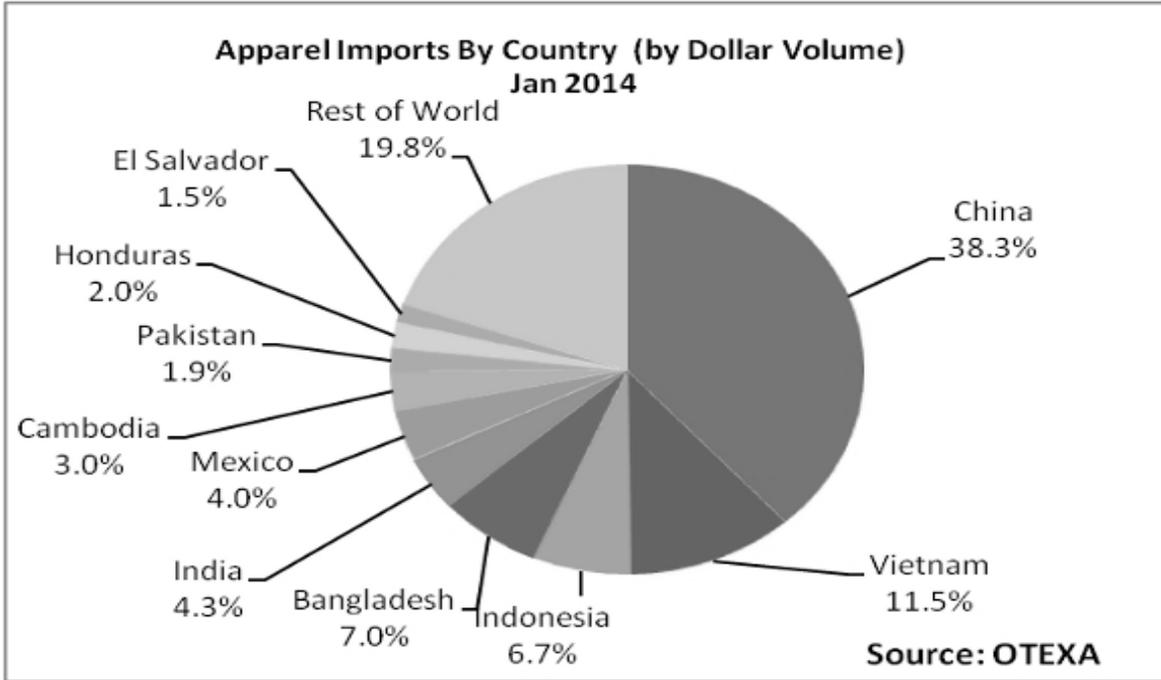
In 2005 Bangladesh had to face another challenge. Abolition of quota system in 2005 had introduced new competition for Bangladesh with the rest of the world, especially with India and China. India and China has an added competitive advantage over Bangladesh since they have skilled labour forces, advanced technology and more importantly backward linkage support. Regardless of all the problems, Bangladesh successfully overcame that challenge.

As a LDC, Bangladesh lost its GSP facility over 5000 goods in mid-2013 as a consequence of two deadly tragedies in the RMG sector. The first one was the fire at Tazreen Fashion Limited in November 2012, wherein 117 workers were mercilessly killed and 200 people were injured (<http://cnn.com>). The second one was the collapse of the Rana Plaza in April 2013 that took the lives of 1,135 innocent people (<http://www.bbc.com>). Both the incidents expedited the withdrawal of GSP benefit for Bangladesh. In both the cases, management and owners were almost directly responsible but they were trying to shrug their responsibility off, but could not do it due to the sensational role that the electronic and print media kept on playing during these two tragedies. These types of indifferent attitudes of management or owners are the reasons for the destruction of Bangladesh's prestige all over the world. Moreover, Government's role was also not positive enough to get hold of these miscreants who should be dealt with a strong hand.

Although RMG was never included within GSP facility, but suspension of GSP facilities left a resilient impact on the export of RMG to the US market. The amount of RMG export to the US markets experienced a notable decrease in last one year. A report from the Office of Textile and Apparel (OTEXA) executes the fall of RMG export of Bangladesh in the US Markets.

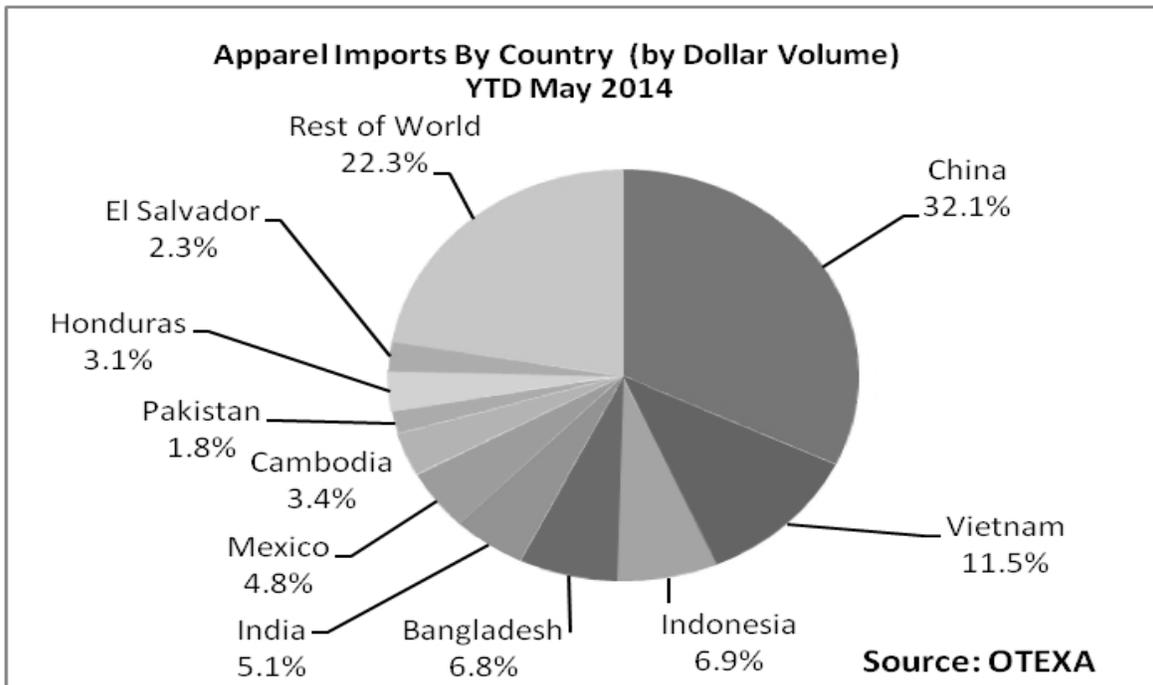
As of the OTEXA report of January 2014, Bangladesh's position as the third largest source of apparel has been challenged by Indonesia. The country's (Indonesia) dollar and unit shipments to the U.S. grew faster, and unit shipments became larger. As a result, in May 2014, Indonesia took over the third position by beating Bangladesh in apparel export to the US market. The recent significant increase of the minimum wage in Bangladesh's RMG sector might begin to considerably alter the country's cost advantage vis-à-vis China and Vietnam, and could slow its growth further more. The recent unrest and unfortunate life threatening occurrences in the RMG sector could slower the growth even further and can make the situation worse. Bangladesh's exports to the U.S. have declined by 1.7% in dollars on a year-to-date basis amid demands by U.S. apparel customers requiring factories there to invest in and improve safety conditions (Russell 2014b).

Figure 1: Apparel Imports by Country in USA Market in January 2014



Source: Russell 2014a.

Figure 2: Apparel Imports by Country in USA Market in May 2014



Source: Russell 2014b.

Bangladesh has an only plus point in that she enjoys cheap labour. This abundance of cheap labour is a source of competitive advantage for Bangladesh as the cost of labour in other garment producing nation, such as China, is higher (Clark & Canter 2011). The Bangladeshi

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garment industry is reliant on cheap labour, almost 85% of whom are women, the majority of whom are 18-35 years old (Clark & Canter 2011). Labour cost is a big factor to the cost of production. In the US, more than 50 per cent of the total cost of production goes for wage and salary (Dunn & Rachel 1972). However Bangladesh has low wage rate in comparison to the rest of the world. For example, Bangladeshi garment sector workers earn some of the lowest wages in this region. As of August 2013, the monthly minimum wage for entry level worker in the garment sector was \$39 per month – about half of the lowest rate in other major garment exporting countries, such as Cambodia (\$80), India (\$71), Pakistan (\$79), Sri Lanka (\$72) and Vietnam (\$78) (<http://www.morningnews24.com>).

The Commerce Minister Tofael Ahmed told a group of businessmen recently that 13 of the 16 conditions for restoration of GSP facility have been met and the other three will be fulfilled soon (Shahriar 2014). Commerce minister Tofael Ahmed on Wednesday, February the 12<sup>th</sup> 2014, said- “Bangladesh would get back duty free trade benefits in the US market under the GSP scheme if politics does not enter the revival process” (The Dhaka Courier 2014).

Whereas, the USA holds a different view on this topic. An influential senator, Menendez was instrumental in getting Bangladesh’s generalized system of preferences status suspended last year. Mr. Menendez urged the United States Trade Representative to suspend GSP benefits to Bangladesh because of the state of workers’ rights and safety. Senator Robert Menendez has called for an immediate end to the harassment and intimidation that trade union organizers and members face in the hands of the factory owners, for the reinstatement of trade benefits to the US. Menendez, who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, went on to cite the four union organizers including two women who were reportedly and severely injured by two dozen attacks last month as they tried to organize workers in a large garment factory. They took the incidents very seriously. In this situation he wrote a letter to Mr. Atiqul Islam, President of the BGMEA on Monday 24<sup>th</sup> march 2014, where he expressed his deep dissatisfaction. In his message, “I cannot support the renewal or expansion of Bangladesh’s GSP benefit as long as union organizers and members are subject to harassment, intimidation and violence from BGMEA factory owners and managers” (The Daily Star 2014a). US senator Menendez urges BGMEA chief, to end union harassment.

In spite of all the signals, Bangladesh could not get workers’ rights improved, rather, it went down. Our arrogant entrepreneurs (i.e. owners) and ruthless administrations did not pay any attention to improve workers’ rights as they are mostly first generation businessmen. They lack entrepreneurial competencies and experiences. Their main motto is to earn profit, but attach little importance to workers’ rights and grievances. Moreover, our government is also not assertive or concerned about this matter. They could not ensure workers’ rights and safety standards by persuading factory management and owners. However the owners must not forget that the golden goose should survive; if they kill the golden goose, then who will give them golden egg.

Without ensuring workers’ rights and better working conditions, there is no way of restoring GSP advantage suspended by the US; rather, there is a fear of losing GSP advantage in the EU. The Rana Plaza tragedy took place over a year ago but its victims and their families have not been properly compensated yet. The Daily Star correspondent reports on the reaction of ILO about the deadly Rana Plaza tragedy under the caption “Shame!”. ILO officials expressed their deep dissatisfaction. A top ILO official Mr. Gilbert Fussoun Hougbo, (Deputy Director General for

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Field Operations and Partnerships of International Labour Organisation) said on 24<sup>th</sup> April 2014, “It is very hard, very difficult to speak here today and say that the victims still cannot be adequately compensated. That will be a shame for all of us” (The Daily Star 2014b).

On the very day of the completion of one year of the Rana Plaza incident, worldwide demonstration had taken place, which further dented the prestige of the country. The Guardian reported that campaigners are planning a big demonstration on the anniversary of Rana Plaza disaster by forming a human chain on London’s biggest shopping place, i.e. Oxford Street. Alongside the formation of a human chain on Oxford Street, Unison union is calling on members to observe a minutes’ silence at 11.38am. Shoppers are being asked to put pressure on stores to be more transparent about supply chains by using social media to ask “Who made my clothes?” (Butler 2014).

William Hanna ambassador and the head of delegation of the EU to Bangladesh said, “We call for rapid and full compensation to the victims under coordinated approach (The Daily Star 2014).” We should remember that EU is the biggest importer of our garment products and they are ready to address the problem, however Bangladesh also has to take its responsibility.

This is an employment generating and foreign currency earning sector. There are about 5,000 garment factories in Bangladesh. 78 per cent foreign currency comes from this garments sector (Bhuiyan 2012). This garment industry has accommodated 4.5 million workers, 80 per cent of whom are women in last fiscal year (Fattah 2013). Though they are 80 percent but they do not get the same wage as their male counterpart. In this regard, Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud (2013) said –

Since the work force in the RMG industry is predominantly female, the low wages in this industry reflects in part the gender differentials in wage rates that are common to most developing countries.

The EU is the largest buyer of this country’s RMG products with a share of 57% (Devnath & Mirdha 2013). The entire garment sector is dependent on workers, so the workers’ rights should be the first priority. Capital approach alone would not be able to produce a single product without labour. Out of the four factors of production, labour is one of the important factors; therefore, labour cannot be undermined.

From the following Table 1, we can assess the number of garment factory, employment, and garment export position of Bangladesh. Moreover, it is clear from the following table that the industry has a checkered (inconsistent) development. So the owners or management should be careful regarding the healthy industrial relations. They should mind that the workers are the backbone of the industry, and thus their overall working conditions must improve.

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**Table 1: Growth of RMG in Bangladesh during 1986-87 to 2011-12**

Year	Number of Garment factories	Employment in Million Workers	Export of RMG in Million US\$	Total Export of Bangladesh in MN US\$	% of RMG's to National Export
1986-87	629	0.283	298.67	1076.61	27.82
1987-88	685	0.306	433.92	1231.20	35.24
1988-89	725	0.317	471.09	1291.56	36.47
1989-90	759	0.335	624.16	1923.70	40.96
1990-91	834	0.402	866.82	1717.55	50.47
1991-92	1163	0.582	1182.57	1993.90	59.31
1992-93	1537	0.804	1445.03	2382.89	60.64
1993-94	1839	0.827	1555.78	2533.90	61.40
1994-95	2182	1.200	2228.35	3472.56	64.17
1995-96	2353	1.290	2547.13	3882.42	65.61
1996-97	2503	1.300	3001.24	4418.28	67.93
1997-98	2726	1.500	3783.63	5161.20	73.31
1998-99	2963	1.500	4020.23	5312.86	75.67
1999-00	3200	1.600	4352.39	5752.20	75.66
2000-01	3480	1.800	4860.12	6467.30	75.15
2001-02	3618	1.800	4583.80	5986.09	76.57
2002-03	3760	2.000	4912.10	6548.44	75.01
2003-04	3957	2.000	5686.09	7602.99	74.79
2004-05	4107	2.100	6417.67	8654.52	74.15
2005-06	4220	2.200	7900.80	10526.16	75.06
2006-07	4490	2.400	9211.23	12177.86	75.64
2007-08	4743	2.800	10699.80	14110.80	75.83
2008-09	4925	3.500	12347.77	15565.19	79.33
2009-10	5063	3.600	12496.72	16204.65	77.12
2010-11	5150	3.600	17914.46	22924.38	78.15
2011-12	5400	4.00	19089.69	24287.66	78.60

Source: GOB 2012.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of the declining growth in the RMG industry in Bangladesh, while evaluating its potential and challenges. It has been shown that Bangladesh's RMG industry has grown rapidly under the umbrella of MFA import quotas and with an abundant supply of low-waged workers, but without strong domestic backward linkages. Too much product and market concentration and imported input dependency have raised questions about the future of this industry in an import quota-free regime after the full implementation of the ATC. In addition, Rana Plaza & Tazreen Fashion tragedies are also the concern for the RMG industry. At the same time, withdrawal of GSP facility negatively affects the RMG industry and also the economy as a whole. In the US market, the future of top Bangladesh RMG products is uncertain as China is facing a safeguard ban for most of those products. When those bans are

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removed, Bangladesh's RMG export to the USA may decline. Duty-free entry in the market is necessary for future growth or even for sustainability of the RMG industry of Bangladesh.

We should remember that development of the garment industry of our country is directly related to the development of the economy and the development of women folk as well, especially in the rural areas. More than 80% garment workers are female, mostly with a rural background. So this industry plays a vital role in poverty alleviation and women's employment and empowerment in rural Bangladesh (Tasin 2013). In this backdrop, USA should reconsider its decision regarding the cancellation of GSP facilities in Bangladesh.

The challenges faced by the RMG industry involve some 10 million people, so success or failure is of great significance. Any shrinking in the industry will throw a large number of people out of work. Domestic problems need immediate attention, as competitiveness in an import quota-free world depends on the quick delivery of quality products at a low price. This requires better infrastructure, more investment and strong backward-linkage industries. To ensure timely delivery, setting up a central bonded house could reduce the inventory cost of Sustaining Ready-made Garment Exports from Bangladesh 615 individual firms. The rights of workers have to be addressed and the associated increase in production costs can be offset by improvements in productivity.

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