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Hossain, Shanawez

School of Business and Entrepreneurship, Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB)

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Bridging The Divide: Addressing The Skills Gap in Bangladesh's Ready-Made Garment (RMG)

Shanawez Hossain[1], Ahmad Tousif Jami[1]

[1]Department of Global Studies and Governance (GSG), Independent University, Bangladesh, Dhaka, Bangladesh
[1]*shanawez@iub.edu.bd;* [2]*tousifjami47@gmail.com*

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Abstract - **Bangladesh's knitwear sub-sector under the ready-made garments (RMG) industry has expanded rapidly, yet factories report persistent mismatches between job requirements and available skills. Using a structured survey and focused discussions with local and foreign mid- and high-level managers in knitwear factories, we map educational backgrounds, assess the adequacy of qualifications, and document training needs. General and commerce degrees dominate managerial pipelines, while technically trained managers are scarcer at senior levels. Managers consistently rate communication, leadership/time management, industrial rules & regulations, health & safety, and quality management as highly important, alongside core technical competencies. The evidence points to a dual-track response: targeted upskilling in supervisory soft skills and compliance, and pipeline development for technical and IT competencies within mid-level roles. We conclude with actionable recommendations for factory HR units, industry associations, and skills-development programs to align training portfolios with evolving buyer expectations and process automation.**

Keywords - **Bangladesh; knitwear; managers; RMG; skills gap; training; upskilling**

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is the world's second-largest exporter of ready-made garments and a global hub for knitwear production. In 2024, apparel exports totaled about US$38.5 billion, with knitwear contributing roughly US$20.5 billion and woven US$18.0 billion [1], [2]. Long-run series reported by the industry show sustained growth and a high share of RMG in total export earnings [3], while central-bank reviews document recent quarterly dynamics and risks [4]. Against this backdrop, the knitwear sub-sector faces tightening buyer requirements, diffusion of automation, and the need to upgrade workforce capabilities as Bangladesh advances toward Least Developed Countries (LDCs) graduation and higher value-added production [5], [6].

Particularly, executive leadership gap in RMG sector in Bangladesh is a perceived and real problem with

significant impact on industry performance. Currently, in shortage of local professionals this gap is being partly filled with 200,000 foreign workers who reportedly remit approximately $5 billion annually only from the RMG sector.

Researchers observed empirical evidence of linkages of skill enhancement and career progress of students or trainees with establishment of educational infrastructures and conducting academic programs [7], [8], [9]. Therefore, it is crucial to explore the causes and types of skills mismatches of graduate produced by the educational institutions of Bangladesh to take the role of professionals in the RMG sector.

The main aim of this study is to determine the types of skills needed for the mid and high-level managers of RMG sector of Bangladesh. Within the wide range of the RMG sector this research particularly focused on the Knit-ware sector. Particularly, this research focused on understanding the capacity/skills of current mid-and-high-level managers; gaps in capacity compared to their foreign counterparts; and policy options to reduce the gaps.

II. METHODOLOGY

A structured survey was administered among 50 mid- and high-level managers in 20 knitwear factories across Dhaka, Narayanganj, Savar, and Gazipur. The instrument captured: (i) educational background; (ii) perceived importance of qualifications and workplace skills; (iii) adequacy of current expertise; (iv) key deficiencies; and (v) training needs. In selecting participants and factories, a purposive sampling technique was adopted to capture prominent industries with long business experience with exporting and having mid-level and high-level foreign managers working records.

Responses were recorded using categorical and 0–10 rating scales. Descriptive statistics were computed and visualized in Figs. 1–7. To complement survey data, focused group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with industry owners and stakeholders from BGMEA, BKMEA, and training providers. Secondary sources, including policy documents and industry reports, were used for triangulation. No personally identifiable information was collected.

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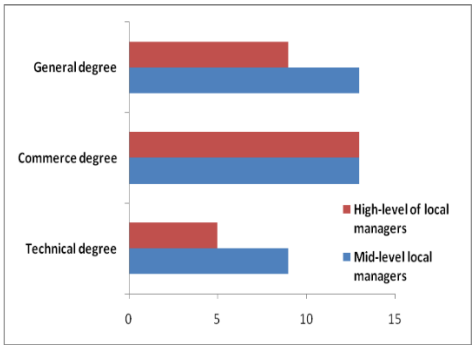
III. RESULTS



. Fig1: Distribution of high-level and mid-level local managers by degree type.

Educational pathways and pipeline risk. Fig. 1 shows that mid-level managers predominantly hold general degrees, while high-level managers are more likely to have commerce backgrounds. Technical degrees are scarce at senior levels, creating a structural bottleneck for leadership succession in an increasingly automated industry. This imbalance suggests that without targeted interventions, factories may continue to depend on foreign professionals for technical oversight, leading to higher operational costs and remittance outflows.

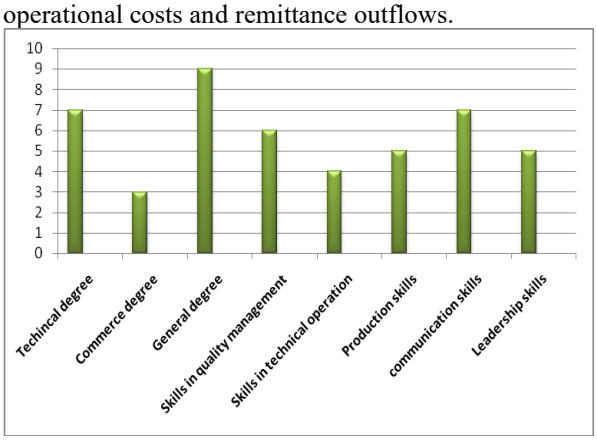


Fig. 2: Importance of educational qualifications and managerial skills in the knitwear sector.

On a 0–10 scale (Fig. 2), respondents rated communication, leadership/time management, and knowledge of industrial rules and regulations as highly important, alongside technical operation and quality management. These priorities reflect the dual challenge of maintaining compliance with global buyer standards while ensuring production efficiency. The emphasis on soft skills indicates that technical expertise alone is insufficient for managerial effectiveness in a compliance-driven environment. At the same time, it also highlights the importance of mixing existing education systems into multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary manners, i.e. introducing soft skills, basic computing and software skills, and ethical skills etc. irrespective of disciplines. Lifelong learning opportunities should be created by continuous online and offline medium so that mid-high-level managers can keep them updated by acquiring required skills to fulfill market demand.

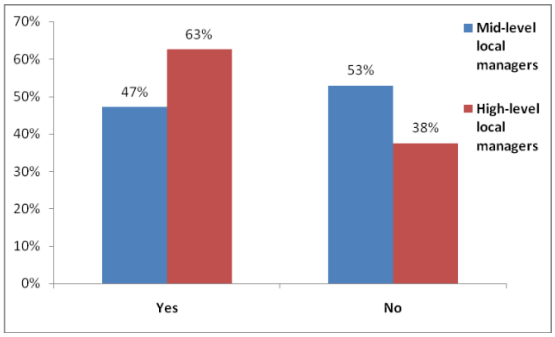


Fig. 3: Comparison of qualification adequacy between mid-level and high-level managers'

As shown in Fig. 3, 63% of high-level managers believe their qualifications are adequate, compared to only 47% of mid-level managers. This disparity highlights a vulnerability at the supervisory tier, where day-to-day operational decisions are made. Inadequate skills at this level can cascade into production inefficiencies, compliance failures, and reputational risks for exporters. At the same time, it also highlighted the importance of continuous learning and upskilling related skills, which cannot be achieved relying only on existing traditional education systems in Bangladesh. This issue was also evident during the FGD with some foreign managers where we have found that they are very highly skilled and earning much higher compared to their Bangladeshi counterparts though they have lower formal education.

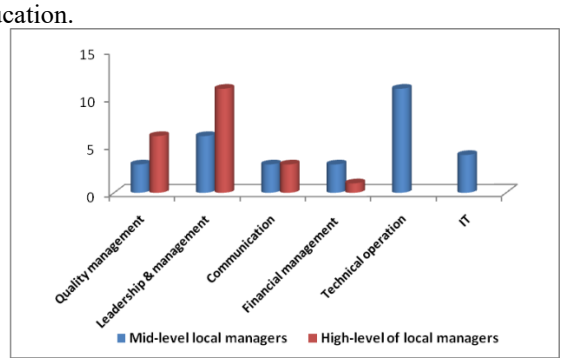


Fig. 4: Distribution of mid-level and high-level managers by key skill categories.

Fig. 4 indicates that high-level managers cluster around leadership and compliance, while mid-level managers dominate technical and IT functions. This segmentation creates a progression barrier: mid-level managers lack exposure to strategic decision-making, while senior managers lack technical operation fluency and IT skills. Bridging this gap requires blended training pathways that combine technical and managerial competencies. It also highlights important facts that both groups of managers significantly lacked communication skills.

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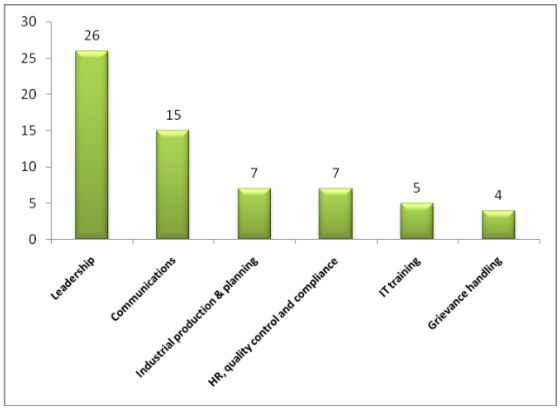

Fig. 5: Reported frequency of training needs across different managerial and operational areas.

Fig. 5 highlights leadership as the single largest training need, followed by communication. Industrial production & planning and HR/quality/compliance follow, with IT training and grievance handling requested by smaller yet non-trivial shares. This pattern reflects the dual challenge facing the knitwear sector: maintaining operational efficiency while meeting compliance and buyer-driven standards. The strong emphasis on leadership and communication suggests that factories recognize the strategic importance of supervisory soft skills in managing large workforces and ensuring adherence to global compliance norms. During the FGD many factory owners also highlighted that superiority in leadership and communication skills is the two major causes for which sometimes they prefer to hire foreign managers instead of relying on local managers.

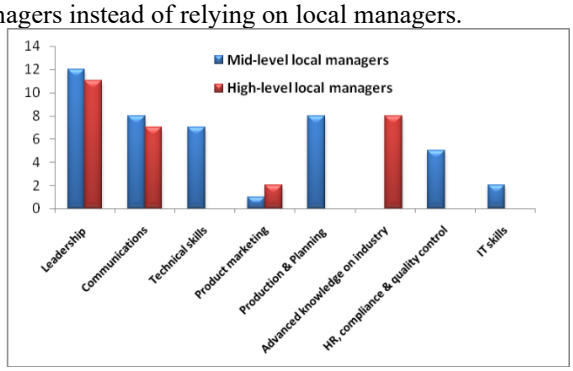

Fig. 6: Importance of workplace skills and knowledge areas as perceived by respondents.

In consistent with the findings of figure 5 while asked both high level and mid-level manager group identified that leadership is the single most important workplace skill followed by communication skills.

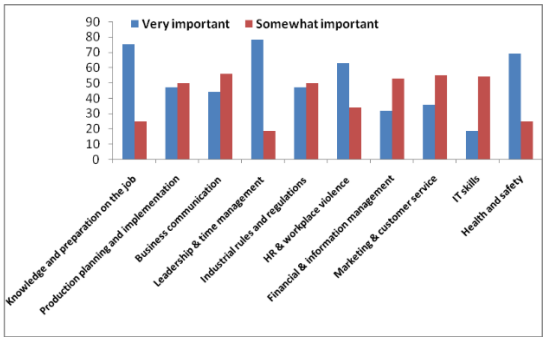

Fig. 7: Perceived importance of workplace skills and knowledge areas among respondents.

Finally, analysis for perceived importance of workplace skills and knowledge areas shows significant difference between two groups. Fig.7 shows that respondents rate knowledge/preparation on the job, industrial rules & regulations, financial & information management, health & safety, and communication as 'very important' at high rates, while some domains are more commonly deemed 'somewhat important.' These findings underscore the compliance-centric nature of the sector, where failure to meet buyer standards can result in order cancellations and reputational risks. The prioritization of health and safety also reflects lessons from past industrial accidents, reinforcing the need for continuous compliance training.

IV. DISCUSSION

The evidence above points to a structural skills gap with two facets. First, leadership, communication, and compliance competencies are strategic bottlenecks, particularly for supervisors and line managers. Second, technical operation and IT capabilities remain concentrated among mid-level roles, posing a pipeline risk for progression to higher-level positions. This segmentation creates a "dual-track" workforce: senior managers lack technical fluency, while mid-level managers lack exposure to strategic decision-making. Without bridging this gap, factories risk stagnation in leadership development and slower adoption of automation technologies.

These findings are consistent with national and international assessments that call for market-responsive training, stronger industry–training-provider linkages, and

certified short courses tailored to factory needs [5]–[9]. The relatively low demand for IT training, despite its critical role in Industry 4.0, suggests a lag in recognizing digital transformation imperatives. A just-transition lens is warranted as automation diffuses across processes, shifting task content and raising the premium on transferable skills [8]. Addressing these gaps is not merely a training issue but a competitiveness imperative. Factories that fail to invest in leadership and compliance risk losing access to premium buyers, while those that neglect technical and IT upskilling may fall behind in productivity and cost efficiency.

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So, for ensuring sustainability of Knitwear sector based on the survey data and FGD findings few feasible and actionable recommendations that can be suggested includes: (i) deploy modular training on supervisory soft skills paired with compliance refreshers on industrial rules and health & safety; (ii) design role-progression pathways blending on-the-job projects with short courses in quality management, data-driven production planning, and IT for manufacturing; (iii) partner with sector platforms (e.g., CEBAI, SEIP, TVET providers) to co-develop curricula and certify completion; and (iv) use routine skills audits to align factory training calendars with evolving buyer requirements [10], [11], [12], [13].

V. CONCLUSION

Bangladesh's knitwear sub-sector has achieved remarkable export growth, yet upgrading to higher-value, more automated production will depend on a workforce that couples supervisory soft skills and regulatory competence with strong technical and IT foundations. The findings of this study reveal that leadership, communication, and compliance skills are strategic bottlenecks, while technical and IT expertise remains concentrated at mid-level roles, creating a progression barrier for future leadership.

Closing these gaps is not only a training priority but a competitiveness imperative. As global buyers increasingly demand compliance, sustainability, and digital integration, factories that fail to invest in skill development risk losing market share and profitability. Conversely, firms that adopt structured upskilling programs can reduce reliance on foreign managers, lower remittance outflows, and strengthen resilience against automation-driven disruptions.

Coordinated action by factories, industry associations, and training programs—supported by policy frameworks such as NSDP and SEIP—can align curricula with market needs, foster industry–academia partnerships, and institutionalize certified short courses. These measures will help safeguard competitiveness in the post-LDC era and position Bangladesh as a leader in sustainable and technologically advanced apparel manufacturing [1], [2], [5], [6].

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